

Romance Fantasy Erotica

The Dove Queen

By Mara Lee



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Dedication

To C. You are my heart, always.

Chapter One

Adair Salomar was an Aviante shifter and a Princess Royal. She was Princess Royal of the Aviante doves, and as such, Adair was expected to marry and marry well. She was expected to produce a fine heir of the royal dove line and act as a princess of the doves should act—meek.

She had been groomed since childhood to be the perfect princess, and to someday assume the crown, as queen. Unbeknownst to most of the dove Aviante council, Adair had been training in combat and weaponry as well as air attack techniques. The Council would never have approved. The doves, in fully shifted form, had few defenses in the air, and Adair knew that one day the battle techniques she had learned might very well save her life.

The doves needed to know defense and combat skills, for the discord between the doves and the hawks had escalated over the years into full-fledged war. The Aviante hawk shifters and Aviante dove shifters had been warring for a century and a half, ever since Warlord Dominion of the hawks had murdered the peace-loving dove queen, Marisee.

Queen Marisee had wanted peace between the Aviante nations, but Warlord Dominion had wanted nothing more than Queen Marisee. His need and lust for the queen grew into a full obsession. He had abducted the lovely queen one night and ultimately killed her. The two Aviante nations had been at war ever since.

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The hawks in flight were deadly. They possessed razor-sharp talons and frightening speed. The doves could not compete with the hawks in speed, but had agility and quick minds. Often it was only this that saved them.

Adair would not be a dove who waited for someone to save her; she would save herself. She was Princess Royal and she would command the sky as Queen. Oh, Adair knew what the Council wanted, but she was not about to give in without a fight. Since she had reached marriageable age, life at court had become intolerable. The Council wished to mate her to Lord Oreck, a mealy mouthed, small-framed dove whom the Council called their lackey. Adair knew that the Council only wanted him so that they could control him and through him, the crown. This was unacceptable to Adair, and as Princess Royal she would not have it. She would be the best queen to her people, and that meant finding a mate that could match her in spirit, tenacity, and power. Until Adair met such a mate she would not ceremonially bond herself to anyone. The Council could wait until their feathers fell off; she would not give in.

* * * *

Today, Adair had slipped away from her guards. She needed some peace and a soothing flight. The weather was perfect for flying, the sky was periwinkle blue, and the air brisk and invigorating.

Adair tested her wings and extended them to full capacity. She had chosen full dove form for today's flight. The Aviante royals had the power to partially shift. They could choose to

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remain in human form, merely morphing wings, or they could choose full form. This gift was bestowed only on the royals; all others could only fly in fully shifted form.

Adair felt the wind ruffle through her feathers, signaling readiness. She pushed off and cut through the sky.

* * * *

Prince Royal Dom Weathermead was furious. Two of his guard had taken off into dove territory. He knew that the hawks favored blitz attacks on the doves, but such attacks were not sanctioned by Dom.

Dom Weathermead was Prince Royal of the hawks, and someday he would be king. He would not allow himself or his people to go down in history as those who had made extinct an entire race. He wished peace between the Aviante nations, peace that had existed only before the first Aviante war. If Dom was to succeed with his plan of peace he could not have rogue guards hunting down and killing doves.

Dom was quickly catching up to his two rogue guards. He was the best tracker amongst his people and nothing got past him. The fact that two of his people, his guard no less, had dared to defy him incited rage that could not be quelled. No, these two traitor hawks would be dealt with harshly.

Dom spotted activity up ahead. The distant fluttering of great brown wings alerted him to the presence of hawks. But he was alarmed; something was tumbling out of the sky, falling quickly toward earth.

With a great rush, Dom lunged for the figure. He caught the slight dove in his talons, and gently brought it to solid

ground. Within moments he had shifted to human form, standing gloriously naked and frighteningly fierce. The two hawk guards landed several feet away. They, too, shifted into human form and swallowed nervously, for it was obvious that their prince was enraged.

Dom spoke, "You will spend a fortnight in the racking chamber for your actions here this morn. What *did* you hope to accomplish with this foolishness?"

The first hawk guard swallowed heavily.

"Your highness, we only hoped to rid our land of one more dove. They are useless, they serve no purpose, and they defy us."

"And you defy me," Dom said harshly, "You betray my trust and you betray the royal guard. This is not *our* land, or have you lost your sight as well as your mind? We are in the dove's territory and we are trespassing." Dom looked down at the unconscious dove. "If this dove dies, your lives will be forfeit."

The second hawk guard protested. "Your Highness that isn't..."

Dom squared his shoulders, "What? It isn't what? Fair? Is that what you were going to say? I am your prince and you will do as I say. Leave now and take yourselves to the racking chamber. I shall arrive shortly."

The two hawk guards nodded. They knew better than to argue with their prince. He was stronger and certainly more powerful than they. If they wished to keep their heads attached to their bodies they would do as he bade them. They

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shifted into hawk form and pushed off before their prince could change his mind and kill them now where they stood.

Dom knelt down by the fallen dove and checked it for wounds. The dove was bleeding heavily on its right side. There were two large gashes on its body and one wicked-looking tear through its left wing. Dom reached over to move the dove to its other side when it began to shimmer. Knowing exactly what was happening, he moved back. It was not wise to disturb an Aviante shifter when it was transforming. It took less than a minute for the dove to shift into human form. Once the wounded dove shifted, Dom realized two things; she was female and absolutely perfectly formed.

* * * *

Adair felt pain tearing through her body. God, how could she have been so stupid? She had been so absorbed with the beauty of the day and the pleasure of freedom that she hadn't seen the two hawks who had come crashing through the sky. They were on her before she could even think to defend herself. Their talons had ripped through her soft flesh and damaged her wing. She hadn't been able to remain in the air after her wing was torn and felt herself falling through the sky toward the earth below. She couldn't remember much more.

"By Avar..." Adair muttered, trying to clear her head, she hurt so badly. She tried to move but found that nothing was working as it should. She opened her eyes fully and then wished that she hadn't. Standing in front of her was a giant of a man, and he was naked. The man in front of her stood at

least two lengths taller than she at standing height and had tree trunks for legs. He was a combination of smooth bronze skin and tightly corded muscles. In truth, he was quite perfect, though he obviously did not have a drop of dove blood within that beautiful body of his. When her eyes reached his face she blushed furiously, realizing that she had been staring shamelessly. Doves did not stare.

"Do you like what you see, little dove?" Dom was conducting his own slow perusal of the woman in front of him. She was naked as the day she was born, save for the brightly colored ribbons tied around her ankles. His little wounded dove was stunning. She had skin the color of cream, eyes that were a startling shade of silver, hair so blond it appeared white in the streaming sunlight, and a body so luscious he felt himself hardening instantly.

Adair felt fear prickling through her body. Now that she had finished looking at the nude man she knew exactly what he was—hawk. She was wounded, vulnerable, and very naked in front of her mortal enemy. She could almost forget her pain in lieu of the fear that was crawling through her body.

"We must get you some help, little dove."

Adair protested when the giant hawk man lifted her easily within his arms. What would he do with her? Was his claim of help merely a ruse? Once ensconced within hawk territory, would he tear her limb from limb? She knew that he could not know who she truly was; else he would have killed her immediately. It was a blessing that she had taken full dove form this morning or he would have known that she was of royal blood from her half-shifted form.

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Adair felt herself slipping into unconsciousness. The pain was so terrible and she couldn't hold out much longer. She did not want to pass out though; she did not want to be murdered in her sleep.

As if reading her mind, Dom ran a large hand over her downy soft hair and murmured into her ear, "Do not worry my little dove, no harm will befall you. I vow it."

Adair knew that there was nothing more that she could do and so she allowed herself to slip slowly into blackness.

Chapter Two

Adair awoke slowly. Her body felt bruised and battered and her senses were not as keen as they should be. She let her eyes adjust to the darkness and took in her surroundings.

She was in a lushly furnished room, presently lying on the most uncomfortable bed she had ever felt in her entire life. She shifted to her side and winced. That had been a bad idea. Adair desperately tried to remember what had happened, but her memory was still terribly fuzzy. She had been attacked by hawks and downed. Once on the ground, she had been approached by a large man with tawny-colored hair and brilliantly golden eyes. He had been beautiful and imposing. He was also ... a *hawk*.

Adair sat upright in the bed and groaned, quickly falling back to her prone position. She remembered now. She had been taken away by a large hawk. Where was she?

"I am glad to see that you live, little dove. There was a moment there that I wasn't sure if you were going to make it. It is good to see that you have a will to live. You have strength and determination, both traits that I admire." The voice was deep and melodic.

Adair was enraptured. The voice was so different from the higher frequency dove speak that she was used to. She craned her neck, but couldn't see anything. The person was cloaked in shadows.

"Where am I?" Adair asked quietly.

"You are at Weathermead palace in Hawkhaven."

Adair blanched. Hawkhaven. She was in the city of hawks. She was doomed for sure.

"Do not worry, little dove, you are safe. No harm will befall you here."

Adair couldn't stifle the snort that erupted and she blushed. She was baffled when the person laughed, a rich and hearty laugh. What was going on here?

"Weathermead?" Adair's brow furrowed as she tried to remember where she had heard of the Weathermeads before. When it came to her she almost fainted—again. *Oh by Avar*, she was prisoner of the Weathermeads, the royals of Hawkhaven.

Every dove knew of *Dominion Weathermead*, the prince royal of the hawks. Every dove also knew to equate Dominion Weathermead with death, for that was what he surely brought to the doves. The prince royal of the hawks was feared and despised, for he brought nothing but the pestilence of death and ruin in his wake. And here she was Princess Royal of the doves, caught in the hawk's lair. What if she was confronted by the prince royal himself? Years of hatred, pain, and fear threatened to burst through her body and spill over the surface.

"Do not distress yourself, little dove. You only bring yourself more pain. I gave you my word that no harm would befall you and none shall."

Adair was grim. "And who are you to make such a promise to me?"

The figure stepped out of the shadows into the lamplight. Adair recognized him instantly as the man who had brought

her here, the man whose body and voice she would never forget.

He was clothed now in a loose linen top and pants made out of flax. His tawny multi-colored hair was pulled back at the nape with a cord and his feet were bare. He looked no less intimidating, masculine, and gorgeous as he had when she had first laid eyes on him.

"I am Dominion Weathermead and my word is my bond. If I say you are under my protection—you are under my protection." His golden eyes flashed as if daring her to question him.

Adair couldn't breathe. Her body had gone instantly cold and clammy. She felt a great roaring in her head and desperately fought for control. She was trapped in the palace of the hawks; wounded, alone, and facing the dove's greatest enemy himself, Dominion Weathermead.

"You brought me here." She managed to force out through dry lips.

Dominion smiled. "I saved you, my little dove. My men were planning to make a meal out of you." Dominion watched as what little color the dove had in her cheeks disappeared. He felt instant remorse, as he hadn't meant to frighten her so. He was unaccustomed to speaking with such a delicate creature. The hawks were fierce, boisterous, hot tempered, and rowdy. Dominion had studied the doves and knew that their temperaments were the exact opposite of the hawks. Doves were diplomatic, gentile, quiet, and reserved. In Dom's opinion, this was one of the reasons that they were slaughtered so easily. Their nature was unsuited for war. The

fact that they had lasted so long against the hawks continued to amaze him.

"If you wait for a thank-you, you shall wait a very long time, hawk." Adair stuck out her chin and forced herself not to quiver.

Dom was shocked. The dove had spoken back at him; what's more she had not addressed him as his station demanded. He should have been furious, but he wasn't. Indeed, Dom was pleased with the dove's spirit. Her face was no longer white with fear; it was now suffused with color as anger overrode her initial terror.

Dom stepped closer to the bed. He took in the dove's appearance from her bare feet to her cascading hair and was once again struck dumb by her beauty. He remembered how her hair had felt like it had been spun from clouds. And he would never forget how her luscious body had felt against his own. Even wounded, the dove's beauty outshone that of a hawk maiden.

"Am I a prisoner here, then?" Adair snapped. She didn't like the way the prince royal was staring at her, as if she was something particularly tasty on his plate. She felt vulnerable and terribly frightened, but she would be damned if she would let Dominion Weathermead see her fear. She would show him what a true dove was made of.

"You are a treasured guest," was Dominion's vague response.

Adair scoffed. "Guest. Then if I choose to leave, will you let me go?"

Dominion smiled and Adair swallowed heavily. His smile raised the hairs on her neck. She didn't like it, she didn't like it one bit.

"You are in no condition to go anywhere, my little dove. You are grounded, at least for the time being." Dominion motioned to her bandaged side and arm. "Your wing would not even last the first leg of the flight back home, if you were to try to fly. You must stay here until you are healed."

Adair shook her head. "If I am not a prisoner, I wish to go home." She ignored the pain stabbing through her body.

Dominion sighed. "I am afraid that I must insist that you stay. You would only hurt yourself; possibly get yourself killed, if you were to leave. I will not have the hawks blamed if you are found dead."

Adair opened her mouth to protest but Dominion shushed her with a slash of his hand.

"This discussion is over, little dove. You will remain here until your wing and side are healed and you are able to take off on your own. Until that time you remain my most honored guest. I believe you will be much surprised by the hawk's hospitality."

Adair was certain that the hawk's hospitality would be the death of her—literally.

"Now, tell me your name, little dove." Dominion was still studying her intently.

"Ad ... Adina," Adair stuttered out, lowering her eyes.

"Adina, yes I believe that it suits you." Dominion reached down and smoothed a lock of hair away from the dove's face. "You have such large eyes." Dominion murmured.

Adair swallowed. "They are only eyes."

Dominion felt he could lose himself in those eyes. Two huge silver pools dominated the dove's exquisite face. Her eyes were unlike any he had ever seen. He felt as if he could see into her soul through those guileless eyes of hers.

Dominion quickly shook his head to clear it of distracting thought. This dove was driving him mad.

"I must go and see to an important matter." Dom resisted the urge to reach out and stroke her hair once again. "I will come to you later." He turned and quickly strode out of the room.

Adair, baffled, stared after him.

* * * *

Adair tested her weight. She knew that standing right now would be foolish, but she had been foolish before. She gingerly checked her bandages and nodded, satisfied. Even she had to admit that the hawks had done a fine job with the binding. The bandage was secure and had been placed over a poultice that seemed to be quite effective.

Adair took hold of the bedpost and then slowly released it. She wanted to try to rest on both feet without the aid of any support. When her knees didn't give way underneath her, she took a small step. She smiled when she realized she was standing on her own and hadn't fallen flat on her face.

Making her way over to the barred window, she looked out. She bit her lower lip nervously. The fortification was better than good. Weathermead palace was well guarded and an excellent structure. She was in a tower that was at least

one hundred and fifty lengths off of the ground and it was surrounded by viewing towers that allowed the hawk guards to take in every movement made within the distance of the palace.

Adair was annoyed. Weathermead palace even put Salomar palace to shame. How was she to escape such a monstrous structure? Even if she were to make it through the bars that shielded the window, how would she flee without first being spotted and then shot from the sky? It was a quandary, one that she had to solve before the prince royal of the hawks learned her true identity.

"You should not be out of bed."

Adair spun around and found herself face to face with a young girl.

"The prince would be very upset to learn that you are out of bed."

"Well, we need not tell the prince," Adair said.

The young girl cracked a small smile, which she quickly suppressed. "Please, come back to bed. If you reopen the wounds it shall be my head."

Adair did not want to cause this innocent young girl any harm and so she slowly made her way back to the bed. Once she was ensconced in the hard bed, she surveyed the slight girl in front of her. She really was a lovely thing with her chestnut hair and large honey-colored eyes, which dominated a heart-shaped face. She was plainly dressed in a simple white gown and apron and she, too, was barefoot.

"What is your name?" Adair asked.

"Solange."

"And your formal family name?"

The young girl shook her head. "I do not have one, I am a merely a *minuet*."

Adair was puzzled, "A what?"

"A *minuet*—one born and bred to serve," Solange cast her eyes downward. "Do you not have *minuets* among the doves?"

Adair shook her head. "We have the serving class, yes, but we do not call them as you do. Do you mean to say that your only function is to serve?"

Solange nodded, her curls bobbing, "Yes, I was born for servitude. The Aviante hawk who gave birth to me was also a *minuet*; she bore me so that I could continue to serve."

"That's barbaric." Adair was shocked. How could the hawks breed for servitude?

"You are a dove. You do not understand."

Adair shook her head. Solange was right, she didn't understand. And by the look on Solange's face nothing Adair said would make a difference.

Solange stepped closer to the bed. "Here, please drink this." She handed Adair a steaming bowl of soup.

"It smells wonderful, thank you."

"Barley soup with willow bark. It will help with the pains as well as provide nourishment." Solange tilted her head to one side. "I have never seen skin as pale as yours."

Adair grinned. "And I have never seen anyone with such beautiful honey-colored eyes."

Solange flushed a delightful pink. "All hawks have eyes like mine."

Adair shook her head, "I doubt that is true. However the same can be said of doves, we all have milk white complexions."

"Well, it is truly beautiful. I have never seen a dove in human form before."

"But you have seen doves, right?" Adair asked.

Solange cast her eyes to the ground and said nothing.

The answer to her question came suddenly, and Adair stiffened. "The doves were dead. The doves that you saw were dead, and thus they couldn't shift." Her voice was cold. Solange's silence could only mean that she was correct.

"I have only just met you, and I know that this will mean little," Solange whispered, "but I am truly sorry."

Because she felt moved to do so, Adair reached out and took Solange's small hand in hers. It was not this small hawk's fault that they were at war. Indeed, if not for this war perhaps they would have met sooner. Perhaps they would have been friends.

"You are not at fault, Solange."

"Neither are you, lady."

Adair sighed, "There are no winners in this battle, and we all just wait our turn to die." Adair turned her troubled eyes on Solange. "Do you know what the prince wants with me?"

Solange blushed and quickly looked away.

Adair blanched. "Will he kill me then?"

Solange turned back to Adair and shook her head adamantly. "Oh no, lady, he does not mean to kill you. I believe that he finds you fascinating."

"Fascinating?" Adair wrinkled her nose. She had to admit she was more than surprised. She and the hawk prince were mortal enemies. She was shocked that he hadn't disposed of her already.

"I just know that he does not want you dead. He has given strict instructions that you are to be treated with the utmost care and attention and that no one is to try to harm you or they shall answer to him."

What the hawk prince was planning for her remained a mystery to Adair. She knew that if she had the hawk prince in her care she probably wouldn't have been so merciful. It was truly unsettling. She was happy to be alive but most anxious to know what her fate was to be.

"Did you bind my wounds?" Adair asked.

Solange shook her head. "No lady, I did not. That honor was given to our healer; we have the finest in all Hawkhaven residing at the palace.

"Your healer did a wonderful job."

"Yes, you should be feeling better in a matter of days. I will come to you daily to help with your exercise. You should try a little movement each day so that your body and wings do not become too stiff." Solange took the bowl from Adair and placed it back on the tray.

Adair was baffled by Solange's lack of fear in her presence. "I must ask you why you treat me with such care and respect? We are enemies you and I, at the core. And yet you sit and speak with me and offer me aid. Do you not fear me?"

Solange smiled a sweet smile. "And why should I? You are not my enemy. I know that most hawks would sooner kill a

dove than sit with one and yet you are not so fearsome. Perhaps my lack of fear stems from the fact that I am no one important, I am merely a *minuet*, and my life means little in the scheme of things. If you should kill me you would find that few would mourn my passing. In light of these facts, I have little to fear from you."

Adair's mouth opened and closed. She couldn't believe how Solange thought so little of herself. And yet there was some truth to her words. She was not a noble or a royal and she knew her exact worth. She felt little fear because she knew that killing her or harming her would accomplish nothing.

"Do you ever wish for more, Solange?"

"More what, lady?" Solange asked.

"More of everything," Adair answered.

"I have all that I could wish for here. Our prince is good to me. I am lucky to have a position at the palace. If I were out there," she pointed out of the window, "I would be reduced to selling myself at one of the court houses' brothels. Those who enter into such establishments rarely live a long life." Solange finished with a deep breath.

Adair knew what Solange spoke of. Dove society had such establishments, too. They were notorious for selling everything, but flesh was what they sold most. A dove who sold his or her body into flesh servitude did not usually live long. Hard work, long hours, depression, anger, and violent clientele usually cut their lives short. Adair knew that when she took the throne, one of the first things that she wanted to look at were the working and living conditions of the flesh

houses. If she thought she would have a prayer of accomplishing it, she would dismantle them completely.

"So you see, lady, my life is good."

Adair sighed; she supposed that for someone who was unaccustomed to anything else, being a servant in the hawk palace would be a place of honor.

"Do you know if the prince means to come again this eve?"

Solange nodded. "He means to come after he has finished in the racking chambers."

"What?"

"The racking chambers. He is punishing those who meant to harm you."

Adair shuddered at the memory of the two hawks who had attacked and nearly killed her.

"What is the racking chamber?"

It was Solange's turn to shudder.

"A horrible, small, closed-in room, dark and damp, where you are strung up and stretched out. Once you have been stretched to full capacity, your feathers are plucked out one by one. Depending on your crime, you could lose all your feathers."

"Horrible, that's horrible." Adair swallowed down the bile that threatened to come up. To lose your wings, to be forever grounded, it was too horrible to even imagine.

"Yes, it is a terrible fate, but a popular punishment amongst the nobles."

Adair shivered, her back was aching where her wing had been damaged. She was glad that those who had meant her harm were being punished, but to lose one's wings, they

might as well lose their lives. Grounding an Aviante shifter was as good as a death sentence.

"If you worry about our prince's actions this eve, do not." Solange said, misreading Adair's troubled expression.

"You do realize that I must be returned home, Solange." Adair said. She was hoping to befriend this pretty hawk. Perhaps Solange would help her to escape.

Solange shook her head. "You cannot leave yet, lady."

"My friends, family, they will be worried." Adair knew that this was an understatement. She was frightened what her guard and the Council would do when they learned of her absence and abduction. What if they thought her already dead at the hawks' hands? She blanched. This could mean outright war.

"It must be nice to have those who care that you are gone." Solange's face was sad.

Adair did not know what to say. She had mentioned friends and family, trying to play off of Solange's sympathies, and yet she knew that her actions had backfired, for pain assailed her. She had lost her immediate family when she was a young dove and knew that the only people who would be worried for her safety were those who would try to control the throne. She had to look away, lest Solange see the sadness mirrored in her own eyes.

Adair's mother, father, and younger sister had been murdered by hawks early in her life. She had held her dying sister in her arms and murmured words of comfort in her ear, trying to ease her pain. The young dove princess, Yismine, had died soon after from her wounds. Adair learned to shut

her heart off. She learned that everyone she loved died. Better not to love at all.

"Lady, are you all right?" Solange stepped forward.

Adair shook her head. "I am fine. Please do not be alarmed."

"I must leave. I have other duties." Solange looked as if she did not want to leave Adair in such a state.

"Please, go. I shall be fine." Adair smiled slightly. "It is not as if I could go anywhere."

Solange bit her lower lip and nodded. "I will be back this evening to bring you some nourishment." Solange smiled and began to walk to the door, then she turned back. "Please do not attempt to get out of bed, lady, and do not attempt to leave the room." She opened the door, stepped out and locked it behind her.

Adair frowned. How did Solange expect her to leave anyway? She had locked the door and there were bars on the window. She was well and truly a prisoner of the hawks.

Chapter Three

Dom was weary and saddened. He abhorred the racking chamber, and yet he knew that such punishment was necessary. He could not have any challenging his rule and authority.

Dom did not understand this hatred that the hawks had for the doves. The war that had been raging between the doves and the hawks for centuries had taken so many lives and had produced nothing but pain and anger.

Yes, it was true, the doves and hawks were fundamentally different. The hawks were a free-spirited Aviante nation. They felt tied to mother earth and sister sky and thus were earthier, and grounded to the flesh. They wore simple clothes, when they wore clothes at all. The hawks found their bodies to be beautiful and believed their wings a gift from the gods, thus why hide what was given to them with love? They openly admired one another and there was no shame in nudity.

Dom knew that this was not the case with the doves. The doves were a more repressed society. Genteel and refined, they preferred the ways of earth-bound men and women to the ways of the birds. They often covered their bodies, except when they were in flight and then they were quick to cover up. Doves did not gawk and gape. It was considered truly impolite and manners always ruled.

With such differences in their nature, Dom was not surprised that misunderstanding and fear often clouded the judgment of the hawks and doves.

Dom ran a hand through his hair and swore. It did not help that he bore the name of the warlord that the doves claimed had begun the war.

Dom strode up the winding staircase toward the north tower and thought on his beautiful pale-haired dove. He had not been able to get her out of his mind since their first tragic meeting; even now his body reacted at the mere thought of her lying so naked, pale and shining in front of him.

Dom reached the north tower and the door that stood as the only barrier between himself and his stunning captive. He unlocked it and strode through.

* * * *

Adair stiffened when she heard the door unlock. She knew that prince royal Dominion Weathermead was entering her room. Solange had come and gone an hour earlier, bringing supper, cold compresses and another blanket; thus Adair knew that her guest could only be the hawk prince himself.

Adair blinked when the room was suddenly illuminated by light.

"If you craved light, you should have said so, little dove."

Adair said nothing.

"You hurt only yourself by your stubbornness."

Adair would not let the arrogant hawk prince see her discomfort. Yes, she disliked the darkness. Doves were accustomed to light, their eyes did not see as well as their

Aviante counterparts, the hawks, in the dark. But she would not let the hawk prince know this.

"I know that the sensitive eyes of the doves need more light. I apologize for not leaving candles before I left you earlier; my only excuse was that I was harried. You should have told Solange that you wished for some light. She would have provided you with candles immediately."

Adair still remained silent. What did he wish her to say?

Dom looked annoyed. "Why do you not speak, little dove?"

Adair narrowed her eyes. "What is it that you wish for me to say, prince?" She looked away, "You hold me prisoner. I do not expect comfort from you."

Dom strode forward and Adair flinched at the anger she saw burning in his eyes. "You are the most damnable female I have ever encountered."

Adair controlled her shivers. It was not acceptable to show fear in the face of your enemy. "Am I supposed to be grateful that you hold me prisoner?"

Dom reached down but caught himself before he touched her. He could not let her tempt him this way. He was a prince royal and had more control than this. "I would expect you to be grateful that you live, little dove."

"And how am I to live, prince? Will you keep me here in my dark, gilded cage until I fade? Or perhaps you shall suffocate me in my sleep. I would expect no less from the hawks." Adair swallowed heavily. Had she gone too far? The hawk prince's golden eyes had turned molten, color suffused his face, and his body stiffened.

Dom felt anger spread through his entire body. He had never in his entire life had anyone question or insult him. "I promised that no harm would befall you and I meant it."

"I must be returned home," Adair said. She was desperate. When the Council learned that she was gone ... well the consequences were too horrible to imagine.

Dom nodded. "You think poorly of me, little dove." His voice lowered seductively. "Adina. You think me a barbarian. Trust me when I tell you that you will eventually be released to your home. I cannot in good faith let you leave now when you are so wounded. I will not have your possible death on my conscience."

Adair leaned back on her pillow. She knew that it was hopeless. The hawk prince would not listen to her. He would ignore her plight. "If I cannot go home will I at least be able to leave this room?"

"Of course, I know how any Aviante will get if they do not have the freedom to roam. I know you must stretch those broken wings of yours. In a day or two you will be allowed to walk the courtyard or take to the garden for some fresh air and sun."

The sky and sun, oh how Adair missed them. She couldn't wait until she was allowed to walk and fly.

Dom could no longer resist. He reached down and ran his large hand over the length of her downy soft hair. It was silky and smooth to the touch and felt softer than any Aviante feathers. How could anyone have hair such as this?

Adair stiffened but made no move. What was this hawk about? What did he truly mean to do with her? She felt his

rough hands running down her hair and they were surprisingly gentle. He seemed content merely to touch her hair; to feel it sift through his fingers. She was shocked to find that her body was beginning to tingle. How could she have such a reaction to his simple touch? What was wrong with her?

"Your hair is like the finest of silks," Dom said, still stroking her head. He looked down and saw his little dove's silver eyes go wide. He felt his body tighten at the expression held within those beautiful eyes of hers. There was no fear held there, merely wonder, surprise and curiosity. "You know what I am to do now, little dove?"

Adair could only shake her head. She still could not speak.

He smiled a brilliant smile. "I am going to kiss you, my little dove. I am going to kiss those full and rich lips of yours." Before Adair could utter a protest, Dom swooped down and pressed his lips to hers.

Dom felt exhilarated from the moment his lips met those of his dove captive. She had the softest, most exquisite lips he had ever felt. They were smooth as cream and had texture unlike anything he had ever sampled before. When Dom felt no resistance, he queried further, parting her lips with his tongue and moving forward. If her lips were the fruit, the inside of her silky mouth was the nectar. She tasted unbelievably of cherries and fine wine. He was triumphant when he felt the first slow testing of her tongue against his. With a groan he took her head within his hands and plundered her sweet mouth. She was delicious.

Adair did not know how it had happened. One moment she feared for her mortal life and the next her hawk captor was kissing her—and oh, how he was kissing her.

As Princess Royal of the doves Adair had been held in high esteem, even revered. No man, save her guard, was allowed access to her person. She had walked with Lord Oreck and he had tried to kiss her, but she had turned her head so he got her cheek. She had never felt the stirrings that a woman should with a man, but she had only ever been exposed to the lowest forms. There had never been a man who could master her. She was Princess Royal and had the duty of her people's lives. She could not afford to give her heart to someone who was not worthy of it. She had to think of her people.

Adair began to struggle against the hawk prince's hold. It was difficult to do since he was stronger than her and yes, if she admitted it to herself, she didn't quite want to get away. His lips were so warm and appealing and the sensations that were bombarding her body were foreign and yet, not unwelcome. She felt need unlike anything she had felt before spreading through her and making it increasingly hard to think. She had to keep some control, she was no *minuet* taught merely to serve. She was to someday rule as queen over all of the doves.

"You are a temptation too great to resist, my beautiful dove," Dom murmured against her lips.

Adair took that moment to twist her head to the side and disengage the hawk's mouth from hers. She took a deep breath, trying to calm her erratic heartbeat. "Please, stop."

Dom felt his own heart pounding. His body was throbbing with need and desperate want. He reached down to touch her again and frowned when she twisted away. Dom had had many women, beautiful, desirable women who had stirred him and yet he had never felt pushed to madness before. All he had to do was look at this delicate dove woman in front of him and he was hard and ready. "What is wrong? You felt the need as did I."

She shook her head. "I felt nothing." She bit her lip against the lie.

His eyes flashed fire. "You lie."

She could not meet his eyes, as they were filled with accusation.

"Your lips and your body do not lie even if your words do." Dom moved his large frame down and knelt by her bed. "You felt every caress of my tongue, little dove." He cupped her cold cheek in his hand and ignored the twinge of pain that ran through him when he saw that she still turned away from him.

"I cannot tell you what you wish to hear," Adair said quietly, still not meeting his probing gaze. How could she tell him what she was feeling when she didn't know herself?

Dom forced her head around. "Tell me that you felt my need"

"I..." Adair swallowed.

"Perhaps you are not ready to admit it to yourself, little dove, but what you are feeling is desire. Desire for me." Dom smiled, a genuine smile, a smile that said he knew his appeal.

"But do not worry. I am prepared to wait." He stood, confidently. "I am a patient man."

Somehow, Adair sincerely doubted that. She watched him watching her and felt shivers run down her already chilled body. These shivers had nothing to do with the cold, and everything to do with the look that the hawk prince was sending her direction. He was beautiful, of that there was no doubt. He was also a threat. Not only as an enemy, but also as a distraction and a temptation that she didn't need.

"I will leave you to your sleep now, Adina." His lips curved up into a slow sensual smile. "Dream of me," he said.

And she would.

She watched his retreat wondering what she should be more afraid of—being murdered as an enemy of the hawk people, or being ravished.

She slept fitfully.

* * * *

Adair paced nervously back and forth across her room. She was sick and tired of being cooped up in this lavishly furnished cell of hers. She needed sunlight, sky, and wind. She needed her freedom. For three days she had maintained bed rest, letting her broken and bruised body heal from its trauma. Now she was ready to breathe in some fresh air.

Prince Dominion Weathermead had promised to let her walk the courtyard. As of today he had yet to fulfill his promise. She was still waiting and becoming impatient.

The door was unlocked, and opened to reveal Solange. Solange frowned when she saw Adair out of bed. She strode

briskly into the room, "What do you think you are doing?" She asked. She was no longer intimidated by the lovely dove. Three days of caring for the dove had made her sympathetic to her plight and more than a little awed by her beauty and obvious sweet nature.

"I can no longer stand my confinement, Solange. I must take in the sun."

"I understand that you are feeling..."

Adair shook her head. "No you do not understand," she sighed, "I must be allowed to see the sky."

Now Solange understood. Every Aviante, be they a hawk or a dove, began to wither without the earth and sky to comfort them. It was the price that you paid for being an Aviante shifter. No bird could withstand the isolation from mother earth and sister sky for long. "I shall see what I can do, lady."

Adair swore under her breath. "Can you not just call me Adina?"

Solange's eyes grew wide. "It would not be proper."

"By Avar, must you be proper?"

Solange found herself smiling. "Well, perhaps in private I could call you by your name."

"Please do," Adair said.

"Very well then, Adina, I shall see what I can do. Perhaps this afternoon you will be permitted a walk."

Adair hated the sound of that. She hated the fact that she had to be permitted to do anything. She hated captivity. No bird wished to be caged.

"I cannot see how it would be a problem," Solange continued, oblivious to Adair's furiously raging thoughts. "You are almost completely healed. It is quite remarkable how quickly you recovered."

Adair nodded in agreement. She was rather surprised at how quickly she mended.

"Please, drink some tea." Solange placed the cup near the bed. "Perhaps you may even be allowed access to the royal gardens. They are truly magnificent."

Adair sighed. She looked into Solange's honey-colored eyes and asked, "Solange, do others know that I am here?"

Solange nodded.

"And how do they feel about ... the situation?"

Solange looked as if she were unsure of whether to tell Adair the truth or not.

"It is alright. Please tell me."

Solange relented. "They are not pleased, Adina. I believe their anger stems more from fear than from anything else; although how they could fear you I shall never know."

"You are kind, Solange."

"Nay, merely truthful. You are a sweet, lovely person; it matters not to me if you are a dove. You are not our enemy."

Adair wondered what Solange would say if she knew her true identity. Would she at that time be as caring and kind as she was now? "They do not know me as you do, Solange."

"No, they do not. And they will not attempt to get to know you." Solange sighed and took a seat at the edge of the bed. "No one said anything when I was given the task of tending to you but I know what they were thinking. They were thinking

that the task was well placed on me because I am even lower than a servant. And they themselves did not want to tend a dove shifter."

"You are telling me that my life is in peril." Adair nodded, she had known this.

"I am telling you that people fear you, Adina. Fear breeds hatred and hatred, yes—hatred can get you killed."

Adair knew all about hatred. She had been battling it all her life.

"I shall go now and see what I can do about getting you out this afternoon," Solange said with a small smile.

Adair bade her goodbye and sank against the window once the lock on her door clicked.

* * * *

Adair was certain that the wind in her hair had never felt so good. Lying on her back in the Weathermead gardens was heaven. The sun was out in full force this afternoon and bathed Adair in a warm blanket of light.

Solange had found a plain white shift for Adair to wear and a pair of soft slippers that were only a little too big for her small feet.

Adair felt woefully underdressed, but Solange had claimed that there were no other articles of clothing available for her to wear. When Adair had stepped into the gardens the sight that met her eyes confirmed Solange's words. Aviante hawk servants roamed freely about, naked as the day they were born.

The Aviante hawk men and women were exotically beautiful to Adair's unaccustomed eyes. They all had bronze-to toffee-colored skin and eyes like molten honey. Their hair ranged from tawny gold to nighttime black, but each tress held a myriad of impossible colors. Adair was shocked at their lack of modesty, but intrigued by their unabashed nakedness. She began to flush and to feel warmth spread through her and she had to look away, lest she lose all reserve.

Adair shifted to her side and was pleased when she didn't even feel a twinge of pain. She closed her eyes and imagined that she was lying among the flowers in her own gardens. She felt her body relax. Her breathing softened as she began to slip into a contented slumber.

"If there were angels among us, you would reign as their queen."

Adair's eyes shot open but before she could stand, a hand to her forearm restrained her.

Dominion Weathermead was staring at her with a familiar look on his handsome face. There was a feral light in his eyes and the grip he had on her forearm had changed into a caress.

"Then it is a good thing that angels reside far from this place," Adair murmured.

Dom sat beside her. "Would you not like to be a queen?"

Adair held her tongue.

"You are fair enough for the position."

"I believe one should strive to be the best person that they can be, before they try to obtain such a lofty position." Adair thought that was a sufficiently vague response.

Dom smiled. "You are a strange thing, little dove." Dom ran a strand of her long, silken hair through his fingers. "How do you like our gardens?"

"They suit."

Dom's eyes went wide just before he burst out laughing. "You will not give an inch, will you?"

Adair lifted her head to perch at an arrogant angle.

Dom pressed closer to her and felt heat suffuse his body. "You are beautiful like this, do you know?" Dom ran his eyes over her scantily clad body, his gaze taking in everything. Her breasts were straining against the thin fabric of her shift, her skin glowing, as if there were an invisible light shining just beneath the surface, and her hair was a waterfall of brilliant strands, each softer than the last.

Dom took a breath. He had to gain some control. He had never felt this way. He had never felt such need spread through his body, not even as a hawk youth discovering the wiles of his first hawk maiden. What was it about this dove female that had him acting like an untried youth?

Adair saw the look in Dom's eyes and shook her head wildly. "No ... please..." It was all that she managed to get out before his mouth descended upon hers.

Adair moaned. She could not help herself. His kiss was better this morn than it had been yesterday. She could feel every stroke of his tongue, every press of his lips against hers.

She began to quiver uncontrollably.

"Those shivers are not caused by the cold," Dom murmured against her mouth. He dug his hands within her

hair and twisted the silken cords around his fingers, deftly holding her in place.

Dom felt his little dove's breasts swell against his chest and groaned when he felt her nipples harden. Releasing her hair, he moved to press his hand against the soft swell of her breast. He was rewarded by a soft moan emitted from her delectable mouth. He had to have more.

Adair's head was spinning. She felt free, as if her heart were to soar out of her body.

Her lips were tingling and she could not resist pressing her body closer to his. It mattered little to her that he was her enemy. Right now, all that mattered were the sensations that he produced in her. She needed him just as her lungs needed air to survive.

Adair squeaked when she felt his hot hand against her naked breasts. When had he pulled down the bodice to her shift?

Her eyes widened and then went liquid silver the moment his mouth closed over one hardened peak. She arched her body, silently begging for more.

Dom did not disappoint. He suckled the distended peak and curled his tongue around it, reveling in the texture that was both silk and satin. Never in his life had he ever wanted a woman more.

He continued to suck and pull at her nipples, alternating between both plump breasts.

He ran one hand down her front, lingering a moment at her belly. He caressed her through the fabric, becoming frustrated by the barrier. Reaching down for the hem of the

shift, he began to pull it up slowly, touching each patch of skin that was revealed by the disappearing material. Dom needed to feel her naked body pressed against his. He needed this as much as he needed the sun and sky to survive.

Adair felt as she felt when she had flown for miles. Her body strummed and her breath came out in short, staccato pants. Her body ached, yearning for something that she had no name for. "Oh Avar..." She murmured out the god's name reverently. She felt liquid heat pooling at her thighs and she had the unbelievable urge to bare herself to the sun and this man before her. She wrapped her arms around Dominion's strong back and pressed herself against him.

Dom had left Adair's breast to press kisses to her neck.

He licked the delicate skin behind her ear and smiled when she shivered. So, his little dove had sensitive ears. "Your scent is intoxicating." Dom shifted so that he was pressed completely against his delectable dove. He entwined her legs with his and with the utmost care rolled her over until she lay on top of him, and his body lay pressed against the fragrant flowers.

Adair was vaguely aware that what she was doing was wrong, but why was it wrong? She could barely remember why she had protested in the first place.

She was an Aviante dove shifter and Dominion Weathermead was her sworn enemy. Adair gasped when the hawk prince plucked at her nipple. If she let her guard down he would betray her; possibly kill her. She could not risk the harm to her people. She began to pant and felt pleasure

shoot through her when the plucks turned to caresses and the soft pressure against her body turned demanding.

"Ah, yes, my little dove, you are so passionate." Dom's body was hard and taut and his cock was throbbing with need. He looked at her face, and if possible, became harder still. His little dove's milky white complexion was now flushed with desire and want. Her eyes were glazed over and heavy lidded and her lips parted and glistening. She was truly an earth bound angel. And he wished to taste paradise.

"Highness..."

Dom stiffened and Adair let out a small shriek.

Dom tightened his grip on his dove and ignored her struggles and attempts to free herself from her compromising position. He twisted his head to look behind her and glared at the red-faced guard who stood at the gateway of the garden. "Was there something that you needed?" Dom was barely holding onto his rage and frustration. His heart was pounding and his cock was screaming for release. Of course his dove's squirming did nothing to help calm the desire coursing through his body.

"I beg your apologies, your royal highness, but there is a courier here."

Dom was not amused. "Yes?" Dom could not believe he had been interrupted for this.

"The courier is dove." The guard's eyes had gone flint.

Shocked, Dom quickly dumped his dove to the side. She squeaked. "What? There is a dove courier here, in the palace?"

"Yes, your highness. I am afraid that he says it is most urgent."

Dom saw the look in the guard's eyes and stood. All thoughts of passion were gone, replaced instead by the heart and mind of a leader, a soon-to-be king. "What are you not telling me?" Dom's jaw clenched when the guard could not meet his eyes. "Is he unharmed?"

The guard swallowed. "He is alive."

Dom narrowed his eyes. "For every pain inflicted on his person you or those who harmed him shall suffer threefold, do you understand?"

The guard's jaw tensed and fear flashed in his eyes. He nodded curtly.

Dom finally turned to look down at Adair who was glaring at him. She had managed to right her shift, pulling the bodice up and the hem down. "You shall stay here. I will send Solange to tend to you immediately." He strode off without even a backward glance in her direction.

Chapter Four

Adair was furious. How dare he! How dare he incite such passion and then douse it in one moment. She was a fool. No—worse than a fool. She had allowed him liberties that no dove maiden would allow. And she was a princess no less.

Suddenly Adair remembered why he had gone. There was a dove courier in the hawk's stronghold and he was hurt, possibly dead at the hawk hands.

She jumped up and swore in a very un-dove like manner when Solange entered the garden. Not now, if only Solange had waited but a moment more to answer her master's call.

"Where do you think to go, lady?" Solange asked.

Adair was frantic, "I heard that there is a dove courier here. I must see him."

Solange shook her head sadly. "I am sorry. I was given strict instructions to take you back to the north tower."

"No. Don't you see, I must see him."

"I cannot disobey the prince, lady."

Adair screamed, "Do you not understand? Can you not just help me, Solange, please?"

Solange was at turmoil with herself. She was a *minuet*, and she served the prince. Compliance was instinctive within her. She had never questioned the orders given to her or the people who gave them before. She was a *minuet* and it was not their way. But now, in one moment, everything had changed. This beautiful dove maiden had come into her life

and had shown her that perhaps she deserved more from her own life.

She had never thought to be friends with a dove; indeed, she had never thought to be friends with anyone. But she felt a kinship with the dove who had shown her kindness. They were both prisoners of a sort, both trapped in cages that they did not know how to free themselves from. She knew that she had to obey her prince and take the prisoner back to the tower and yet...

Adair saw Solange weakening. "Please, Solange let me go to the courier."

Solange bit her lip. "I know of a way that you may see the courier. Come." Solange led Adair out of the garden.

* * * *

Dom knelt down by the fallen dove courier. He did not seem wounded too greatly. "How do you fare?" Dom helped the courier to his feet.

The dove courier pushed his hair out of his face and glared at the prince of the hawks. "I do not fear you," He ground out.

Dom smiled slightly. "It seems that we are meeting an inordinate amount of strong-willed doves of late. I had thought that your people were weak and unsuited to confrontation."

The dove courier straitened his back and squared his shoulders. "We may be the softer of the Aviante shifters but we are not weak, nor are we all intimidated by you and your kind."

Dom liked this courier. He had spirit. "And your name would be?"

"I am called Vinos, Vinos Aerean, and I bring a message from the doves."

Dom smiled. "Yes, you would, wouldn't you?"

Vinos ignored the sarcasm. "I would speak to you in private."

Dom swept his gaze around the room. The dove courier was correct. There were too many people in this room. There were too many prying eyes; too many wagging tongues. "Leave." Dom did not take his eyes off of the courier, but he heard the room empty. When the room was still and quiet, Dom turned to the dove in front of him. "So, now we talk."

* * * *

Adair followed Solange up a winding staircase. When they reached a long, narrow corridor they veered off steeply to the right until they reached a small beam no wider than the length of a foot.

Solange beckoned Adair forward with a sweep of her hand.

Adair swallowed deeply and bit her lower lip. "You wish me to cross *that*?"

Solange grinned. "What? Are you afraid? You are a dove, the most agile and graceful of the Aviante. Do not tell me you fear a small beam."

That did it. Adair jerked her chin up and stepped up to the beam.

Solange nodded. "You must be very silent and when we reach the middle you must not move, not an inch."

Adair looked at the narrow beam once again and gave a nervous chuckle. "Do not worry, I will not move, not even an inch."

"Good, now come." Solange took three agile steps and was on the beam.

Adair took a deep breath and followed.

* * * *

Dom clenched his hands. He was fast losing his good will and his patience. The dove courier had done naught but insult him. "You dare threaten me? You are in my lands now, dove, under my hospitality and you dare to threaten me?"

Vinos snorted and ran a hand over the bruise that was forming on his forehead. "This is how you show your hospitality?" He narrowed his eyes, "But then, I would expect no less from a hawk."

Dom was enraged. He had never wished ill upon the doves. He had been striving toward peace, wishing only harmony between his people and the doves. But this—this he would not tolerate. He would not have some upstart dove speak back to him. He was a hawk and a prince and deserved respect.

In a rush of incredible speed, Dom had the dove under his hand and pressed against the cold stone wall. "You try my patience, dove. I have done nothing to you, and yet you insult and question me. I am prince here, and you—you are less than nothing."

Vinos found it difficult to swallow. The hawk prince had a firm grasp on his throat and was effectively cutting off his air

supply. He knew that he had perhaps gone too far taunting the prince, but he could not seem to help himself. He was in the presence of his enemy and was unarmed. He was afraid and knew that the only way to hide that fear from his enemy was to taunt and boast. Perhaps it had been a bad idea.

"I do not wish to damage you permanently, dove, but you seem to need a lesson in manners." Dom watched the dove's face go a sick shade of red and at that moment released him.

Vinos dropped to the floor with a thud. He took deep, fortifying breaths, filling his starving lungs with much needed air. "I ... I meant no disrespect."

Dom smiled. "Now that is a blatant lie."

Vinos looked up sharply and when he saw the hawk prince's expression he could not help but crack a small smile of his own. "All right, I meant a little disrespect."

Dom nodded. "Now we understand one another."

Vinos got back on his feet steadily. He still did not trust this hawk. How could he? Generations of hatred, animosity and fear dictated his actions and yet the hawk could have killed him for his insolence, and he hadn't. "You could have killed me. I was impudent." Vinos needed to know why he was still alive. Did the hawk prince taunt him? Did he spare him merely to torture and kill him later?

"And that would have accomplished what?" Dom asked. He moved over to a long banquet table by the far left of the room and beckoned Vinos to follow him.

Vinos did so, hesitantly. He was truly confused.

Dom, ignoring the benches placed on either side of the large table, hopped up on top of the table and let his feet fall

over the side. He laughed at Vinos' shocked expression. He knew that the dove's manners would never have them sitting on top of a table. The doves were the epitome of politeness. They lived their life with order, structure and impeccable manners. In short, they could be very dull birds. "Come, sit."

Vinos cleared his throat and took a seat on the bench furthest from the hawk prince.

"So, before we became *distracted*, what message brought you here to my holdings?"

Vinos' expression became very serious. "We wish the return of our Princess Royal, living or..." He looked away, "dead."

Dom was confused. "What? What is this nonsense you speak of?"

Vinos handed the hawk prince a scroll. "These are the Dove Council's terms. They are more than generous."

Dom read the scroll and his brow furrowed. It still did not make any sense. What did the doves accuse him of—stealing their queen? "You wish to ransom your princess' *body*?"

"We wish to have her return, yes."

Dom scoffed at this. "And what makes you believe that I have your princess?"

"Who else would?" Vinos asked matter of fact.

Dom took a deep breath and looked at the scroll once again. "So, you would be willing to pay for the return of your princess's body, even if she no longer breathes?"

Vinos stood abruptly. "Do you say that she is dead?"

Dom shook his head. "I say nothing of the sort, dove. I am merely asking if your Council is so ... desperate that they

would actually pay for a dead princess. Or perhaps you think me stupid." Dom narrowed his eyes. "You accuse me of kidnapping and murdering your Princess Royal so that you may start a war between our people."

Vinos shook his head quickly. "We do not wish to begin anything, your highness, especially a war. We merely want our princess back." Vinos continued, "We have no ulterior motives. Our Council, our people, need our princess."

Dom tossed the scroll on the table and stood. "You may go back to the council and tell them this; I do not have their princess. If I did, believe me they would be the first to hear my demands."

Vinos nodded his head curtly. "You maintain your innocence in this matter?"

"I do," Dom said blandly.

"Then I will relay your message to the Council. I must warn you, your highness, they will not be pleased." Vinos took a deep breath before continuing. "I am afraid that there are those amongst us that would begin the confrontation now, with or without proven cause."

Dom looked at the dove courier with blatant curiosity. "I think you must be a rarity amongst the doves, Vinos Aerean."

"How so, Your Highness?" Vinos asked.

"You said that there are some amongst you that wish this war. Are you one of them?"

Vinos didn't hesitate. "No."

Dom nodded. "I didn't think so."

Vinos' jaw clenched. "I have lost my father, my brother, and my bond mate to this war. There is hardly one amongst

the doves that can claim no injury; we have all been affected. The cause may have been the kidnapping of Queen Marisee, but it was far before my time. I might be selfish, but I believe that those who live this life now are more important than those who are long buried and gone. I wish harmony, but I am not part of the Council, nor am I royalty. I serve as I must."

Dom found himself increasingly impressed by this dove courier. He had courage of conviction and was not afraid to stand up to him. His spirit seemed more hawk than dove. "I, too, do not wish war, dove."

Vinos took a moment to study the hawk prince before speaking. "You truly do not, do you?"

Dom laughed. "Did I not say as much?"

Vinos hated the blush that crept up his cheeks. "It is just hard for me to believe that the hawk prince does not wish war. We have been brought up to believe that Dominion Weathermead is the most fearsome and terrible of the hawks. That he would come into our homes while we slept and slaughter us all, women and children included."

Dom held his anger in check. These stories only incited his wrath. Imagine telling children that he would come and kill them while they slept. He was a hawk, not a monster. "My people too, have heard stories of the doves."

Vinos laughed. "What? We are not nearly as fearsome as the hawks."

Dom shook his head. "You do not have to be fearsome to incite fear, dove. The doves have killed many hawks in this war, or do you dispute my claim?"

Vinos said nothing.

Dom continued. "The doves are clever, and agile. And must I remind you that your people have an uncanny knack at discovering new battle techniques, not to mention weaponry."

Vinos could not dispute the hawk prince's claim; indeed he was proud of his people. The doves had discovered a new metal and had created arrowheads that could pierce the toughest of armor. They had experimented with tree bark and plant roots until they had made an extremely potent poison that could kill with but a nick. They had also created the antidote, an antidote that only the doves knew. Vinos could not help but be proud of the doves. They had fewer defenses in the air and thus they had created high defenses on land. It had become one of the only ways to survive over the many years.

We do what we must, Your Highness," Vinos said calmly.

Dom nodded. "As do we, dove. As do we." He continued, "I am urging my people to stop attacking the doves. But it is hard to erase centuries of pain and rage. My people do not trust your people and they feel threatened. Most feel they must attack before they are attacked."

"The doves feel the same, your highness."

Dom laughed, he couldn't help it. "It is funny, isn't it dove?"

Vinos frowned. "What is funny, your highness?"

"That we feel the same, and yet we still kill one another."

Vinos swallowed. He had run out of words, and as a courier, an ambassador, that was unlike him.

"Go back to the doves; tell them that I do not have their princess. Tell them if they are willing to listen to a *mere* hawk prince I would be willing to talk peace with them."

Vinos' eyes went wide but he nodded.

"Now you should leave while there is still light to fly."

"Thank you for meeting with me, Your Highness," Vinos said, never forgetting his manners. Just because he was face to face with his supposed enemy didn't mean that he must forget the dove ethics and protocol.

"It was my pleasure, dove, truly." Dom smiled. "It is nice to know that the doves have a spine."

Vinos cleared his throat, "I believe I should be insulted by that statement, however, I believe I will choose to overlook it."

Dom nodded. "That is a wise idea."

Vinos dropped to a half bow. "Good day to you, your highness. I shall be speaking with you again, I am sure."

"As am I, dove," Dom said. Indeed, Dom was rather looking forward to the dove courier's return. It was rare that Dom had a good verbal sparring match. No one spoke back to him.

Chapter Five

Adair felt her heart stop when she saw Vinos Aerean speaking to the hawk prince, the same hawk prince she had allowed to take liberties not an hour before.

Vinos Aerean was a good, kind Aviante shifter. His father had been a lord but his mother a peasant. It had been a scandal unlike any other when Lord Aerean had proclaimed that he loved Emerelda, a weaver's daughter. The argument for or against their marriage had made it all the way to the Dove Council. In the end, the Council had allowed Lord Aerean to marry Emerelda but had confiscated twenty percent of his holdings.

Adair had been but a babe when Lord Aerean and Emerelda had married but she had grown up with the story of their love. She had also grown up with Vinos, who had been born but a year after his parents' marriage. Because Vinos' mother had been a peasant, he had never been able to rise above a certain station but was still considered an important member of the court.

Adair liked Vinos. What was more, she respected him. He had risen to the appointment of court courier and sometimes ambassador and he had done it alone, never losing his kind heart and impetuous spirit.

Adair opened her mouth to speak, forgetting for a moment that she was perched thirty or so lengths above the hall on a very narrow beam. A hand to her arm stopped her.

Solange shook her head, silently willing Adair not to make a move or a sound.

Adair heeded Solange's silent warning but it was difficult. Every muscle in her body was straining and her mind was screaming for her to yell out to Vinos.

Adair watched as Vinos left the room. Soon after Dominion Weathermead followed suit. Adair swallowed and let her breath out slowly. She turned her head slowly and saw Solange nodding, beckoning her to follow her.

Solange and Adair made their way across the beam. Both let out a giant sigh of relief when they made it to the other side unscathed.

Adair turned to Solange, eyes wide and voice filled with urgency. "Please Solange you must stop that courier. I must..."

Solange didn't wait for Adair to finish before she began to shake her head. "No, absolutely not, Adina," she said firmly.

"Please, oh Solange, please."

"You cannot understand, Adina, you are not a *minuet* as I am. I have broken over a dozen servant-class rules by helping you get this far. I have disobeyed my prince. That alone could send me to the racking chamber, or worse." Solange ignored Adair's protest and continued, "I cannot do as you ask."

Adair felt hysteria bubbling up within her. She could not let Vinos leave without somehow getting a message to him. "If you will not help me, Solange, I will have to go to him myself."

Solange grabbed her shoulder. "Adina, you must not go. If you are caught..." her voice trailed off.

"I know what could happen if I am caught, but I have no other choice. I must either speak to the courier or somehow get a message to him."

Solange shook her head. "No, I will not let you entertain this foolishness."

Adair straightened her shoulders. "And will you stop me?"

Solange swallowed. "If I must."

Adair turned to the steps. "Then you will do what you must, as shall I."

* * * *

Solange watched as Adina made her way down the steps. She knew what the little dove was doing was tantamount to suicide. She could not let her friend kill herself. But could she truly defy her prince, her people, and her station?

Solange swallowed. Yes, yes she could. "Wait, Adina, wait."

Adina turned round. She remained silent. Her eyes said it all.

Solange nodded. There was determination written all over her face. "Give me the message and I shall deliver it."

"Are you certain?" Adair asked.

"Yes." Solange sighed. "I can do this for you, Adina."

"Solange..."

Solange silenced Adair with a slash of her hand. "No, I will do this." She smiled slightly. "Do you not understand? You are the first friend I have ever had. I can do this for you."

Adair nodded. She held out her arms and Solange silently fell into her embrace.

* * * *

Vinos Aerean stopped when he heard his name being called. He turned just in time to see a young hawk maiden running toward him.

She stopped in front of him. "Vinos Aerean?" she asked.

Vinos narrowed his eyes. "Who would be asking?"

She frowned. "I don't have time for this," she muttered.

"Who are you?" Vinos asked.

"We are attracting undue attention. Please follow me." She began to walk away.

Vinos stared at her stupidly before following her lead. His curiosity was biting, how could he not follow?

* * * *

Solange led the dove courier deep into the maze that lay at the center of Weathermead gardens. It was a complex labyrinth of hedges and trees that few knew how to navigate. Solange knew the secrets of the labyrinth; she had spent many afternoons wandering with only her thoughts to keep her company.

"Now, will you tell me what this is about?" Vinos asked, a curious look on his handsome face.

Solange turned to the dove courier. "I was instructed to give you a message."

Vinos nodded. "Yes?"

Solange took a deep breath and spoke. "All is well. Do not attack. I will send word as soon as possible." She finished in a rush of breath.

Vinos opened his mouth to speak; already his brows were creased with confusion.

Solange shook her head and said, "I was told to give you this." She handed the dove courier two streaming ribbons. He snatched them up immediately.

Vinos grabbed the hawk by her forearm. "Where did you get these?"

Solange shook herself free, and glared at him. "I told you, I was sent to give you a message and the ribbons."

One of the ribbons was cream, the other gold; the colors belonged to the house of Salomar.

Vinos' voice shook when he asked the next question. "Who gave these to you, hawk?"

Solange shook her head.

Vinos swore. He knew who wore these ribbons. Each member of the court when shifted to true bird form had to wear the colors of their house; it was a way to identify them. The dove women, especially, had to wear their house colors so that men knew not to approach them due to their station. Vinos knew that these ribbons, cream and gold, belonged to Princess Royal Adair. "Do you hold someone captive, hawk?"

Solange swallowed back the fear that was building within her body. "Do I look like I could hold anyone captive, dove?" With her wide eyes and small frame she knew that she looked nothing if not meek and inoffensive.

Vinos swallowed and calmed his racing heartbeat. The princess was here; he knew she was. And this little hawk held the key to her release. He had to convince this hawk to let him see the princess.

For a moment Vinos allowed himself to take the little hawk maiden in. She was lovely. He had never seen an Aviante who was so exotic before. She had amazing honey-gold eyes and similarly-hued skin. Her mouth was perfection, lush and pink and perfectly ripe. She was slight of build and had cascading brown hair. Vinos had never before beheld anyone like her. He had the urge to reach out and touch that honeyed hair to see if it was as soft as it looked. His cock became hard at the mere thought of how she would feel; how she would taste under his tongue.

Solange shifted nervously on her feet. Why was he staring at her so? "I must go." She turned to leave and found that the hawk had grabbed her arm in a tight grip. "Please, let me go."

"These ribbons, who gave them to you?" Vinos asked again.

Solange clenched her hands but couldn't suppress the shudder that ran through her body. "Let me go. I have done everything that was asked of me. I must go." Her eyes were wide, filled with fear and tension.

"Please." Vinos knew that he sounded desperate, but he was.

Solange's eyes widened in shock. She swallowed and said quietly, "The ribbons were given to me by a friend. This same

friend asked me to relay a message to you. That is truly all I can say. If I do not get back quickly, I will be missed."

Vinos felt this hawk maiden trembling under his hand and desire coursed through his body. She was shivering deliciously from his slight touch and he wanted more. How else would she shiver for him?

Solange felt as taut as a bow. There was no denying that she was afraid. She had never been touched so before. But greater than her fear was the heat that spread quickly through her body at his touch—heat that made it decidedly hard to think. The dove courier looked soft and delicate, with his milky white skin, pale hair and finely carved features. But there was nothing soft about the way he held her upper arm or the way he stared at her with those penetrating eyes.

Solange whimpered when she felt herself getting wet from his mere touch. The strength of his body and the harshness in which he held her arm imprisoned brought desire crashing down. Her mind began to fog with the thoughts of what he could do with those large, strong hands of his. Of what she wanted him to do. "I..." Solange looked away; she could not meet those clear eyes of his less he knew her heart's desire. "Let me go, now." She forced steel into her voice. She could not let him know her desires, she could not let anyone know.

Vinos clenched his teeth. He knew with one more look that he was to get no more out of this exquisite hawk. He nodded. "Would you tell this friend that I shall send word soon?"

Solange frowned. What did he think she was—a courier? She let out a beleaguered sigh. "All right, now please, I must go." She ran a hand through her hair. "Take this to the very

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end, and then turn right. When you reach the blooming hedge, go right through." When he opened his mouth to speak she shushed him and continued, "I know, it is a full hedge, but please, go right through it. When you reach the other side, turn right, go to the end and you'll be at the beginning of the labyrinth." When Solange was done she ran as quickly as her feet would take her. She did not look back.

Vinos called out but his mystery girl was already gone. "Exquisite," Vinos murmured under his breath. He was not likely to forget the fine quivering of the hawk maiden's flesh under his hand. It had been a long time, too long, since he had beheld such a delectable flush, such supple skin, and most of all the tell-tale signs of one who longed to call him master.

Chapter Six

Adair had just rounded the corner when she ran into a brick wall. She fell unceremoniously to the ground and let out a groan.

"And where would our *minuet* be?"

Adair bit her lip. By Avar, she knew that voice. She looked up and found herself staring into the deep gold eyes of Prince Dominion. How to explain this one?

Dominion had been thinking since the dove courier had left. No one had ever accused him of being foolish or of being stupid. The Dove Council had sent a courier to the hawk lands in search of their princess. It could all be an elaborate hoax, but Dom didn't think it was. He knew the Dove Council was all about politics but he didn't think that the dove courier who had come to him this day was lying.

Vinos Aerean had seemed remarkably determined. Dom appreciated his spirit in light of the situation. He had looked into the dove courier's eyes and had seen nothing but genuine concern and worry. Yes, Vinos Aerean believed his princess to be missing and possibly dead.

Dom stared down at the young dove maiden at his feet and his mind could not stop churning. Could it be? Could he have the dove princess in his palace?

"Are you going to give me a hand, or are you just going to stand there?" She asked.

He found his mouth curving into a smile. Well, she certainly had the attitude of a princess. "Allow me." Dom offered her a hand and pulled her to her feet.

Adair quickly released his hand and stepped back. She needed some distance between them. She did not trust the feelings that he evoked in her. They were most unsettling. "Thank you."

He nodded. "Where is Solange?"

Adair cleared her throat. "Well, I believe she went out to get some air."

Dom laughed. "Did she?"

"I believe, yes." Adair tried to calm her heartbeat. She was certain that the prince could hear it from where he stood.

"And she left you to wander alone?" Dom asked.

Adair frowned. She knew what he wasn't saying, had Solange left her alone to wander *unguarded*? "She did nothing wrong." She wouldn't have him punish Solange for something that was her own doing.

Dom's eyebrows rose in surprise. "Would you care what happened to Solange?"

Adair was indignant. "Of course I would care."

"Why?" he asked simply.

Adair swallowed. "I would care because she is my friend."

He let that response sink in and moved closer to Adair.

"What have you been up to, little dove?"

She moved back. "Nothing," she muttered.

He grinned. "Why do I not believe you?"

"I don't care what you believe," Adair stammered out. She moved back some more and gasped when her back met cold stone.

Dom smiled. "It seems you are stuck between a rock..." he let his words trail off.

Adair squirmed under his intense scrutiny.

"Well, little princess..."

She gasped. "What did you call me?"

He smiled slyly. "Do you not like my little endearment?"

Adair forced a smile. "No, I do not think I like it." She bit her lip and noticed that Dom was following each and every movement.

"Did you find what you were looking for?" Dom asked.

"What do you mean?"

"You were looking for something, weren't you?"

Adair shook her head. "No, of course not, I just needed to get some ... air."

Dom moved forward, placing both hands on either side of her, effectively trapping her in place. "You are a delectable shade of rose, did you know that?"

She said nothing. She hoped that she wasn't blushing too badly. A dove's complexion, once flushed, was quite terrible.

"I think that I cannot resist you. You are too adorable. I must have a kiss," Dom whispered. He blew gently in her ear, loving how she shivered.

She shook her head.

Dom laughed. "One kiss. I promise it won't hurt." He placed his lips over hers before she could utter another

protest. It was paradise. She tasted like peaches and cherries. How was that possible?

Adair didn't know how it kept happening. She had every intention of telling this arrogant hawk that she wanted nothing to do with him. She wanted him to ransom her so that she could return home, and yet—yet she also wanted this.

She moaned deep in her throat. His tongue was caressing her lips, begging entrance; she could do nothing but submit. Adair parted her lips and allowed him to forage deeper. It was paradise. He tasted like wine and sweets. How was that possible?

Dom had dropped his arms from the wall so that he could wrap his little dove within them. She was all soft skin and sweet smells. "You taste so sweet." Dom easily swept her up in his arms, and began to stride up the stairs. He traced her ear with the tip of his tongue, nipping gently on the lobe.

"What do you do?" Adair tried to keep her mind clear but it was increasingly difficult to think now that the hawk prince was nibbling at her throat and lapping at her earlobes.

Adair gasped when his tongue licked the delicate skin around and under her ear and her head fell back in abandon. Her body began to quiver and she bit her lip to keep from crying out.

Dom kicked open the door to the north tower and with three giant strides had made way to the bed. "I must touch you." Dom ran a hand under her shift and began to knead the soft skin of her thigh.

She intoxicated him. The consequences be damned, he had to have her.

Adair's head was spinning and her body arched off the bed to meet his. She felt need coursing through her and her heart was all but pounding out of her chest. Her mouth was dry and she managed only to murmur the word, "Yes." Liquid heat was pooling between her thighs and she ached for his hands upon her flesh.

It was enough for Dom. With deft fingers, he unlaced and divested her of her shift. Her hair cascaded down her body, covering her in a blanket of pale golden strands. Dom could only stare in wonderment; he had never seen anything as beautiful as she. Her milky white skin glimmered behind a curtain of silken hair and her silver eyes were shining with want and pleasure. She was an Aviante angel brought to earth for him. His sweet dove.

He smoothed back a lock of her hair that covered her generous breasts and bent down to suckle. Her nipple puckered instantly under his warm breath and hardened in his mouth.

Dom quickly removed his shirt and pressed his bare chest against hers. Both moaned in delight. "You were made for pleasure, my little dove." Dom murmured against her breast. "So soft."

Adair's eyes opened slowly. The hawk prince's bronze skin seemed to meld with hers. His multi-hued hair lay soft and inviting down his back and his head bent at her breast was beautiful. She felt his hand, hard and warm at her thigh and she instinctively parted her legs. She was rewarded by his

murmur of approval and the caress of his hand. Her body was on fire.

Dom gently sought out the honey that was gathering between his little dove's thighs. He needed to feel her against his hand, taste her. He was not disappointed. She was scalding hot and dripping wet. He penetrated her slit with two fingers and slowly began to rotate them. "Ahhh little dove; you clench my hand like a vise. I cannot wait to see what you shall you do when you accept my body?" He pulled gently at her hardened nipple and quickly rid himself of his breeches to free himself. Once naked, he spread his body over hers and wrapped her legs around his waist.

Adair arched her body upward to meet his and wrapped her arms around his neck. Her body was screaming for something she had never had before, something she needed to be complete. "Oh Avar..." Adair murmured the God's name as her body swam in forbidden pleasure. He was hard and warm against her and his cock was straining against her thigh. It was growing with each press of their bodies against one another.

She raked her nails down Dom's back and pushed herself up to meet his still questing fingers. Suddenly, it was not enough—she needed more. She needed him. "Please, oh please." She could barely manage the words.

"Yes, my little one, yes, you shall have me." Dom was hard and aching. He wanted nothing more than to plunge into her and bathe himself in her slick wet body, but he controlled himself. The pleasure would be made more intense by the

wait. When Adair reached down and caressed his hard cock he groaned. *By Avar, forget the wait.*

Dom lifted her hips up to meet him and smiled down at her. Her eyes were glazed over and a fine sheen of glimmering sweat lay over her luscious body. He tested the waters one more time, easily slipping three fingers into her soft decadent slit.

When Adair tossed her head back and let out a keening cry, Dom knew that it was time to have her.

With one sure thrust, Dom breached her and slid in.

"Yes," he said, stilling himself within her.

Adair's entire body stiffened when Dom had fused his body with hers. She felt a sharp ache spreading through her and she already felt sore. Her breathing quickened and she tried to shift to find a more comfortable position. She stilled completely when Dom groaned and grew larger.

"Oh, little dove, do not do that ... one more moment to lessen the pain." Dom was aware that he had taken his little dove's innocence and felt a rush of pleasure and pure masculine pride. He was also aware of the pain that she must have felt at his breaching. He was trying not to move, to allow her time to adjust to his size and his presence, but it was becoming increasingly difficult.

He softly swore under his breath when she shifted once again. He was throbbing. Gripping her hips, he thrust forward and thrilled at her gasp, this time from pleasure, not pain.

"Oh yes, feel me my dove."

Adair certainly felt him. He was hard and velvet warmth within her. The ache she had felt when he first entered her

was now replaced with intense pleasure. Her whole body shook and her insides pulsed.

She grasped Dom's head and slanted her mouth over his, tasting everything that he had to offer. She met each of his thrusts with her own, entwining her legs with his. "Oh ... oh..." Adair felt her heart screaming and her body went suddenly tense. Bubbles of sensation overwhelmed her body and began to build and build until they could do nothing but burst the dam. She screamed long and hard, scoring his back with her nails.

Dom threw back his head and met her at the peak. With one last thrust, Dom released himself, spilling over to mingle their juices. He lay slack and still against her—trying to regain some control. He smiled when he felt their hearts beating in time with one another.

Adair felt as if her heart were to fly out of her chest. Her arms had fallen to their sides and her hair lay wet and in disarray against her forehead and body. She could still feel Dom within her, he was still pulsing and she took a deep breath to calm herself. She had given herself to a man—by Avar, she had given herself to a hawk. She knew she should feel ashamed, or at least guilty, but she felt none of these emotions. Instead she felt elated. Her body was still singing and her mind was deliciously filled with wicked thoughts.

"Now my little princess, we talk," Dom said, his breath warm against her neck.

Adair stiffened. "I told you I did not like that endearment." He smiled. "Did I say it was an endearment?"

She suddenly felt icy cold. In one moment her world turned upside down and her stomach churned and clenched. "I don't understand," she said, still playing it cool.

He propped himself up on his elbows and regarded her through now solemn eyes. "My little dove princess." Dom's lips curved into a smile. "Because that is what you are, isn't it?"

Adair could not speak. Her throat had closed up.

"Did you think me a fool, little princess? Did you not think that I would put the pieces together?" His smile widened. "I find you, bring you here and then I have dove couriers knocking on my door demanding the return of their princess." Dom ran his hot gaze over Adair's very naked body, his eyes burning. "And then there is this..." He caressed her thigh and smiled when she whimpered. "You are truly too wondrous to be anything but a royal princess of the dove line."

Adair could not hear her own thoughts under the weight and pounding of her heart.

"So will you look me in the eyes and claim otherwise?" Dom asked quietly.

She opened her mouth to lie and quickly closed it. She couldn't lie. Forget for a moment that she would flush a horrible red if she even attempted to, could she truly give him so little credit? She knew that Dom was no fool. He had figured her out and there was nothing left to be done. "I am Adair, Princess Royal of the dove line." Adair lifted her chin to a haughty angle and flashed him her most defiant look, which was difficult under the circumstances. She was stark naked, vulnerable, and had just finished coupling with him.

"Adair," Dom tested the name on his tongue and smiled. "I like it."

Adair held back a roll of her eyes. "I am so glad that you approve of my name."

He ignored the sarcasm. "So my little dove has now become my little princess."

She began to struggle against his embrace. "I am not *your* anything."

He flexed within her and laughed when she stilled. "You most certainly are my something."

She blushed. *Blast him.*

He nuzzled her neck. "Now what to do with you?"

Adair bit her tongue. She had since stopped trying to struggle against his embrace. He felt warm and right.

He couldn't stop smiling. He knew what had to be done now. "You realize that we are bonded now, little princess."

She cringed at the name. She hated it. "You must be mad. We have had no ceremony. We are not tied to one another."

Dom pulled from her warmth and shifted to his side so that he lay facing her. "We need no words to know the truth. You and I shared our bodies. We came together. We bonded."

She waved that away. "I am sure that you have 'shared' yourself with other women before, hawk. Do not tell me that you bonded with them all."

Dom laughed and hugged her close. "No, just with one," he said.

Adair scoffed at his words and pulled away. She sat on the edge of the bed and looked around for something to cover herself with. Locating her shift, she quickly pulled it on and

walked to the window. "You are speaking nonsense," she gasped when she felt Dom's naked body press against her back.

"I could always speak of the fact that you lied to me, little princess."

She shook her head, still not turning to face him. "I didn't lie. I merely withheld the truth."

Dom grinned at her back. "Ah, I see. You withheld the truth. Do you know the potential consequences of your actions?"

She remained silent.

He continued, "I shall tell you. then. You have begun a possible war, little princess. You have disappeared off of the dove radar and have the Dove Council convinced that I have somehow abducted and murdered you, much as my ancestor supposedly did with your Queen Marisee."

Adair stiffened, but still said nothing.

"Do you want war, little princess?" he had to ask.

At that she spun around and squeaked when Dom pulled her into an embrace. "Of course I do not want war, hawk."

"Dom, call me Dom, little princess."

She frowned. "I shall call *you* Dom if you call *me* Adair, *not* little princess."

He grinned. "So shall it be, Adair."

She nodded. "Thank you. As I said before, I do not want war, Dom, but I fear that there is little to be done now."

Now it was his turn to frown. He thrust her away from him. "Do you not care about your people?"

Adair's mouth opened in shock. "In that I would give my life for them?"

He nodded. "Then hear me. I have lost too much to this ridiculous feud. We all have. We now have a chance to right all the wrongs and possibly start afresh. Or would you rather have our peoples suffer through more death and pain?"

She ran a hand through her disheveled hair and sighed. "You cannot know what I have lost, hawk ... Dom."

"Yes, yes I can. I, too, have lost much, Adair. I wish to keep my people safe. I wish to live in peace."

"Would that I could believe you," she murmured.

He nuzzled her hair. "You can."

Adair felt everything all at once. Memories, pain, joy, pleasure and need swept through her body. She had never felt this way in her entire life. She could not contain the hope that spilled from her. Oh Avar, if only she could trust this man, trust this hawk. If she could trust him, the world would be open to them. To possibly stop the war that had raged between their people, Adair would do anything. But could she trust this hawk to give his all?

"What are you thinking, Adair?" Dom asked, using her name.

"I am thinking of all the young who have perished before reaching their maturity." Adair felt a tear slide down her cheek. "I am thinking of a free sky where dove and hawk may roam without fear of falling. I am thinking of..." her voice broke.

Dom gently folded her into his arms and held her. He urged her without words to continue.

"I am thinking of my family, the family I lost." She buried her head in his chest and used it to muffle her soft sobs.

Dom rested his head on top of Adair's and ran a hand down her soft hair. "All that you have said, I want too, Adair. I want an open sky, open to all Aviante shifters. I want hawk children to grow to maturity. I want them to feel safe and warm in the knowledge that we shall protect them. I, too, wish that my family were here. I could dearly use their wisdom. Alas, they are not here. Only we are. Only we have the chance to make things right, Adair."

She looked up. "How?" she whispered.

He smiled. "Be my bond mate."

Adair swallowed. "It isn't possible."

Dom chuckled. "I think we proved just moments ago just how possible it is."

She blushed and shook her head. "That isn't what I meant, and you know it. We may fit together, but we cannot bond. You are a hawk and I am a dove."

He inclined his head. "Where does it say that hawk and dove may not mate?"

"We just can't," she said firmly.

He sighed. "Do you agree that our people follow our example, and that they look to us to set the standard?"

Adair nodded hesitantly.

"Then will you not agree that if we bond, our people will follow our example? Do you not think that they too may understand that they can live and love together?"

She pondered these words and felt lead sink into her body. Was it true? Could it be as easy as this? By Avar, this was not easy. How could she possibly bond herself to a hawk?

She instantly felt contrite. She could share her body with a hawk but she couldn't conceive of sharing her life with one.

"Adair Salomar, Princess Royal, would you take me to be your bond mate?" Dom asked formally, dropping to one knee and pressing a kiss to her knuckles as ceremony dictated.

Adair tried not to hyperventilate. Oh Avar, oh god, please help her now. She took a deep breath and calmed her nerves. Suddenly she remembered something her mother had once told her, *happiness lies only in the hands of those who are daring enough to close their fingers fast*. Adair had forgotten those words over time. Years of responsibility, pressure, pain and death had taken their toll and left her weary and aged. She had left her own personal happiness behind to seek out that happiness of her people. Somewhere along the line she had lost sight of the objective. Her happiness *was* her people's happiness. Her example set the standard. If she wished to stop the bloodshed she would step up and offer herself first. She looked into his eyes and slowly nodded. "Yes, Dominion Weathermead, I accept your bond proposal." The moment the words were spoken, Adair let out a deep breath. She had done it. She had accepted.

Dom let a small, satisfied smile curve his lips. "Then it is done. The proposal has been met and accepted." He ran a hand across her shoulder. "So, let us celebrate this new beginning." He gently rubbed her shoulder and bent to nip the soft lobe of her ear.

She shivered. "What?" Her eyes widened. "Again ... we can do it again?"

He laughed and turned her around in his embrace. "Let me show you how well we can do it again."

She nodded, eyes still wide. There was a keen sense of anticipation building within her body. She tried to move toward the bed but Dom had her shoulders firmly held within his hands. "The bed?" She asked.

He grinned. Before she could protest, he lifted her within his arms and placed her on the cold window ledge. His smile widened when she yelped in surprise.

Adair was shocked. What was he doing? The stone of the window ledge was frigid against her bare buttocks. She felt goosebumps break out over her body.

She swallowed. She was naked and spread open on a window ledge—what was his intent?

His cock was already hard. It had hardened the moment he had placed his delicious bride-to-be on the ledge. Her thighs were spread open and he could see the beautiful folds of her femininity—shiny and perfectly pink. There was a dab of moisture on the glistening folds and, unable to resist any longer, he buried his head between her legs and lapped her up like cream.

Adair let out a little screech. She wriggled, but only succeeded in moving him closer to her. The sensation of his tongue against her slit was inconceivable. She became, incredibly, more wet. Liquid began to pool from between her legs. She could feel it dripping down her thighs. Moments later, she felt his tongue follow the path of her wetness,

licking and lapping up every drop, kissing the exposed skin beneath the cooling liquid.

She grabbed bunches of Dom's hair to keep him in place. It was heavenly, this feeling, and it was producing a fine tension within her hot body.

Dom licked her slit slowly, enjoying each little shiver from her delectable body. He winced slightly and then smiled at her actions. Adair was alternating between tugging at his hair and releasing it to clench her hands in pleasure. She had probably taken some of the tawny strands of his hair with her.

He crushed Adair to him and kissed her, thrusting his tongue into her warm mouth, forcing her to taste herself on his tongue.

Adair was beside herself. She could taste her own fluids on his tongue, salty and sweet. She had to have him. Her body was on fire and she could no longer control the wetness that was flowing freely from her slit. She grabbed at him with her legs and arms, aching to have him fill her to the brim.

He could stand it no longer. He cupped her beautiful round buttocks within his hands and lifted her off the window ledge, impaling her with one single fluid motion onto his stiff cock. They both moaned at the incredible pleasure.

Dom locked Adair's legs around his waist and pressed her against the cold, stone wall. He began to thrust wildly, enjoying the fact that she bucked against him, meeting each thrust with vigor.

She gasped and lolled her head back, groaning when she hit the wall. She could feel the hard, cold, stone digging into her back and her nipples tightened at the sensation. The

stone at her back and the cock within her receptive body were too much, the pressure was building, ready to explode. "I'm there, oh Avar, I'm there..." She screamed.

He urged her on. "Yes, yes, feel all of me. You love it, you love how hard and hot I am."

Adair nodded jerkily. She felt her legs spasm and clench. Her heart was pounding furiously and she felt heat overtake every inch of her body.

Dom dug his fingers into her soft flesh and bit her nipple. He thrilled when Adair screamed and bucked and he felt scalding hot liquid pour over his cock. It was too much for him; he joined her a moment later. His cock pulsed and spurted out hot seed into her warm, lush body.

Adair dropped her head to Dom's shoulder. She couldn't speak or see past the pounding in her brain and chest. She felt vibrant and alive and yet also lethargic and sleepy. She swallowed and nuzzled her head into the crook of his large shoulder.

Dom carried her effortlessly to the bed. He deposited her gently in the center, loving her sleepy-eyed look, and her golden, white hair that lay in damp clumps on and around her body.

"Is this how you celebrate?" her voice was drowsy.

"What?" he asked, leaning in to hear her better.

"Celebrate? Is this how you celebrate?" Adair repeated her question; her eyes were now completely shut and she had buried her head within one side of the pillow.

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He grinned and ran his hand down the entire length of her body. "Yes, my little dove princess, this is how we shall celebrate."

She nodded slowly, already half asleep. "We must celebrate often."

Dom's laughter rang through the halls and echoed off the thick stone walls.

Chapter Seven

Dominion and Adair had both agreed that the bond ceremony would have to take place quickly and in secret. Once they were bond-mated, they would break the news to their respective peoples. They would present a united front and be the stronger for it.

Adair was alone, pondering her thoughts. Dominion had said that he had much to prepare and had left her. He said that he would send Solange to her immediately to help her with her ministrations and preparations.

She plopped down on the bed. So like a man not to understand such things. How did he think she could find the time and material to whip up a bond dress? She could not marry without one. In dove society, bond dresses took months to craft. Painstaking needlework and hundreds of hours went into creating the bird bond dress. When you found your mate it was forever, thus the dress you were bonded in would signify a moment in your life that symbolically would last for eternity.

She frowned. And Dominion wanted her to just magically conjure a bond dress to wear on a moment's notice. She thought back to the accepted nakedness of the Aviante hawk people and sighed. Perhaps bond dresses were not that important to a people who considered clothing restrictive and unnecessary. Did Dominion mean for her to marry in the nude? He would probably prefer it. Well, he would wait

forever then. Adair Salomar, Princess Royal of the Aviante Doves did not get married naked.

"Is it true?" The voice asked from the doorway.

Adair spun around and smiled when she saw Solange.

"What?"

Solange swallowed. "Are you to bond with our prince?"

Adair's mouth dropped open. "What? Where did you hear such a thing?"

"From our prince, of course." Solange stepped into the room and with one sweeping gaze took in everything. Her mouth curved up in a knowing smile.

Adair blushed.

Solange came to stand beside the princess and then dropped down to her knees. She brought her head to rest on Adair's hands. "I didn't know."

Adair pulled her hands free. "Solange, you are acting so strange. What is wrong?"

Solange looked into Adair's silver eyes and swallowed.

"The way I have behaved, the things that I have said. I didn't realize that you were the dove princess. I should have known. Please beg my pardon."

Adair grunted. "Don't be ridiculous. You have been a good, loyal friend, Solange. In the short time that I have known you, you have been more to me than the people who surround me in my own court. You have risked your own person to help me; do you realize what that means to me? I am glad that you didn't know I was a princess. It gave me the opportunity to see you at your most honest self." Adair took Solange's hands within hers and squeezed. "I will never forget

your kindness, Solange. I will never forget what you have done for me."

Solange felt a tear run down her cheek and swiped it away. She laughed. "Please, you will make me cry. Hawks do not cry."

Adair laughed. "They don't? Well little hawk, perhaps they should."

Solange stood. "When is the ceremony to take place?" She asked, changing the subject.

Adair sighed. "Soon. We both feel that we must bond quickly. When news of our arrangement, our bonding, hits, the consequences will be great. We must be united to face them."

"You take a great risk," Solange said.

Adair nodded. "Anything worth having requires great risk, Solange." Adair saw the question in Solange's eyes and finished, "Peace everlasting, it is the greatest treasure we could have and I am willing to risk everything for it."

* * * *

Dominion paced back and forth. He couldn't recall ever being this nervous. He had faced off against assassins, soldiers, and numerous other foes and yet here he was, waiting for a slip of a girl, and feeling as if his heart were to fall to his feet.

Dominion had told Adair Salomar that the only reason for their bond was to secure peace between their two nations. But he was aware that there was much more to it than that.

He had feelings for Adair, feelings that he wished time to explore.

Dominion had never met anyone like her. She was beautiful, that was for sure, but she was also vivacious, spirited, and brought him to heaven when he was in her arms. She also *moved* him. When he looked into her liquid silver eyes he saw worlds of knowledge, wisdom, and understanding and he couldn't help but be *moved*. He wanted Adair Salomar. He wanted to learn what secrets lay behind those remarkable eyes of hers. And now ... now he would have her.

* * * *

Adair's bond dress was simple—white flax with flowered embroidery around the hem, bodice, and sleeves. Solange had loaned Adair the dress and the embroidery had come from another dress, a castoff that had been given to Solange from one of the court ladies. Solange had stitched the two dresses together and the product was simple but lovely. Adair was more than pleased. It may not be a dove's traditional bond dress but it meant more to her than any gown she had ever owned. "It is lovely, thank you Solange."

Solange smiled. "You could not be bonded in a shift, could you?"

Adair shook her head.

"And I assume you would have protested to being bonded in the nude," Solange said with a giggle.

Adair blushed.

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Solange laughed. The doves were so sensitive. "Now, we must go. The high priest is waiting for us." Solange took Adair by the hand and led her out of the room.

* * * *

Adair tried not to faint through the ceremony. When the Hawks' high priest had used cream, gold, black, and red ribbons to tie her hands together with Dom's, she almost hyperventilated. It was all so *real* now. She was moments away from being bond-mated with Dominion Weathermead, the most feared enemy of the Dove people.

"And so your union shall bring heart, soul, and spirit together as one." The high priest's voice was melodious and smooth as cream. Once he had finished saying the words, he removed a small, jeweled dagger from his belt and cut the ribbons, releasing both Adair and Dom's hands.

The high priest turned smiling eyes to the nervous couple. "So shall it be. You are now bond mated. Meet now, as one." He urged Dom forward with his eyes.

Dominion swallowed. Why in Avar's name was he so nervous? He closed the small gap between Adair and himself and placed a gentle kiss on her cold lips. "Mate," he whispered out. It was true; he was now mated with Princess Adair Salomar of the royal dove line.

Adair felt the press of Dominion's warm lips upon hers and froze. She was now bond mated with this fearsome hawk. For better or for worse, for the length of their natural lives, they were tied together.

She took a deep breath. She had done it for her people. She looked into his golden eyes and tried not to forget that fact. For her people, no other reason. Adair groaned inwardly—whom was she kidding? When she had been in his arms, when he had been inside her, she had felt as close to the heavens as she did when she flew. He had made her forget everything ... her people, her responsibilities, her own fear and pain. He had taken her over, completely. And she had begged him for it.

Adair frowned. The council would not accept this—especially Lord Bacchas. Lord Argent Bacchas had been climbing the political ladder for years. He had always set his sights on the throne, even though he had no claim to it. He had no royal blood flowing through his veins. And although he came from a noble line, the people would not follow him without the blood of the royals flowing through him.

Lord Bacchas had always struck Adair as a scheming, manipulative weasel. She had never warmed to him, although he had tried to win her confidence many a time. She knew that the only person Lord Bacchas loved, supported, and fought for was himself. He would see himself King, if possible.

Adair clenched her hands. Lord Bacchas would be a problem. He always had been. But now he had ammunition to use against her, or at least he would think so. Her bonding with a hawk would give him the perfect opportunity to try to strike down her rule. He would claim her incompetent and foolish. She knew this as surely as she knew that the Aviante could fly.

"You are deep in thought, wife." Dom's face registered nothing.

By Avar, he was right. She was now his wife. Adair swallowed before saying, "I am merely thinking of my return to my people."

He nodded. "Let us retire someplace more comfortable and we shall discuss things." He took her cold hand within his and led her slowly away.

* * * *

Adair's mouth had gone slack with shock.

Dom laughed. "Do you like our chamber?"

She tried to take everything in, but it was difficult. The room was huge. It was dominated by an enormous circular bed, piled high with pillows. Adair swallowed. It was a very large bed.

"What do you think?" Dom found that he did hope that Adair liked his chamber, as she would be sharing it from now on.

"It is lovely." She meant it. There were several large tapestries on the wall and two area rugs that seemed to be similarly woven. On the far left wall there was a dresser made from dark wood; a matching chest was placed on the opposite wall along with a massive armoire. The room was surprisingly tasteful. Adair wasn't sure what she had expected, but this wasn't it.

He pulled her over to the bed and quickly, before she could protest, swept her into his arms and dropped her onto it. She

landed in the center of the enormous bed and it sank under her weight.

She moaned in delight. The bed was wonderful. It was soft and cushioned and perfect. A far cry from that nightmare she had been sleeping on for days. "Ohhhh..."

Dom smiled at her delighted expression. "Like it?"

"Of course," Adair frowned. "What was that *horrible* contraption you had me sleeping on?"

He laughed. "A bed."

She shook her head vehemently. "That monstrosity was not a bed. It was awful." She shook her head and muttered under her breath, "I felt as if I were sleeping on wood."

He grinned. "Right on the mark, wife. It was oak."

Her eyes popped open. "What? You had me sleeping on a piece of wood?"

He sighed. "We do not use mattresses, as you know ... we find the stuffing of such an item offensive."

She understood perfectly. As Aviante shifters it was considered quite inappropriate to use any feathers for stuffing. She knew that other shifters such as the cats and reptilia used goose down all the time, they had no problem 'stuffing away', but the Aviante shifters considered such action mutilation.

She sighed. The Doves had, however, found alternative methods to creating comfortable sleep environments. They used triple woven flax. It worked remarkably well. Adair sank deeper into the bed and, unfortunately, had to admit that this hawk bed far surpassed the Doves' craftsmanship. "How did

you accomplish this, then?" she asked from her place on the bed.

He smiled and joined her. "This bed is stuffed with cotton, lilac and freshly sifted reeds."

Adair had to admit it was brilliant. The cotton would give it its buoyancy, the reeds helped its structure, and the lilac offset the reeds by giving the bed a fresh scent. She had to tell the Dove weavers to start incorporating cotton and lilac.

She gasped when Dom suddenly covered her body with his.

"You are thinking much too hard on unimportant matters, wife." Dom nipped at her ear.

She swallowed. She could not let her thoughts get hazy so quickly. "I ... I just find the craftsmanship brilliant."

Dom molded his hand around Adair's breast and plucked at the already hardened nipple. "Ah, yes, the craftsmanship is remarkable."

Somehow she didn't think he was speaking of the bed. She tried to shift out of his embrace but somehow only fell more deeply into his arms. Her legs were now entwined with his and his hands were coiled in her long hair.

"You smell like Jasmine..." Dom said, breathing in her scent.

Adair licked her dry lips. "N ... n ... no, it's rosewater. Solange found it for me."

"We will have to give you an ample supply of it." Dom murmured from her neck. He gently suckled at the sensitive skin between her shoulder blades. He smiled when he heard her moan quietly and rub against him. His beautiful dove was

just as hot as he was. "I believe it is our wedding night, wife." He unlaced the strings on the back of Adair's bond dress and quickly removed it from her body. When she lay covered only by the fine sheen of her lustrous locks he ran a hand from her neck to her hipbone, thrilling in the smoothness and perfection that was the woman beneath him. "There is no one more exquisite than you anywhere."

Adair blushed under his hot perusal. His hand was rubbing in a soft, circular motion at her hip and was very soothing and yet stirred un-sated passions within her. She shifted and gasped when she found herself pressed against his very aroused body.

Dom quickly divested himself of his clothes, all the while keeping his eyes on his beautiful Dove wife. She watched him with those remarkable silver eyes of hers and her face was flushed. "Beautiful." He said only the one word before bending down to circle her nipple with his hot, wet tongue.

She gasped and arched up to meet his mouth.

He obliged and took the entire fleshy, pebbled stone into his mouth, alternately sucking and licking.

When she cried out, Dom ran his hand down her leg and urged her without words to open for him. She did. He dipped one finger into her scalding wetness and was rewarded when she fully parted her legs. He added another finger to her hot slit.

She felt as if her entire body were on fire. She felt pressure intruding itself on her and she knew that she must obtain relief, and soon. She arched her body up to meet

Dom's and kissed him thoroughly, reveling in the feel of his tongue against hers.

Adair reached down hesitantly to caress her husband's cock; it was like hot steel in her hands, smoothly textured. She stopped her actions immediately when he stiffened and groaned. Had she hurt him? "I'm sorry..." She managed to get out.

He shook his head and smiled tightly. "You did nothing wrong, indeed, it was too right." Dom took her small hand in his and led her back to his aching and now throbbing cock. "I want you to touch me, to learn me. It just felt so good I was afraid that I would take you without first watching you peak."

Her eyebrows knitted in confusion. "So it isn't wrong?"

He smiled and kissed her lightly on the forehead. "Nothing between a man and his wife is wrong, my little dove. You will soon learn that. It will be my pleasure to teach you." Dom reached down and around to grasp her buttocks in his large hands. She was perfect, soft yet firm and beautifully shaped. "Open for me, my little dove." He murmured against the side of her mouth, using his tongue to slide against her full lips.

Adair parted her legs further and her head lolled to the side the moment Dom traced her sensitive earlobe with his mouth. Delightful shivers ran up and down her spine.

Dom probed Adair's moist entrance. He gently inserted himself into her and stilled for a moment to gauge her reaction. When she moaned and shifted herself closer he was triumphant. Taking a deep breath, he plunged to the hilt and began to pump furiously within her. He took each one of her cries into his mouth and met each one of her thrusts with his

own. They rocked and pumped and scored one another's backs.

Adair screamed. She could no longer keep the pleasure contained. Her heart felt as if it were going to drop to her toes and her head was so light it felt as if it were going to fly away. She locked her legs around him and keened when he pushed further into her. By Avar, the pleasure was so intense.

Her head arched back and her toes curled. She brought her head down to his sweaty shoulder, placed her teeth firmly around his flesh, and bit down, hard.

Dom groaned when he felt his little dove's teeth ravage his shoulder. So his dove had claws, he loved that; she was acting more like a hawk maiden than a shy retreating dove maiden.

He could not help but return the favor. He bit his beautiful wife's shoulder, but he was careful not to leave marks. He wouldn't damage that lovely, unblemished and perfectly milky skin of hers.

"By Avar, I feel, I feel..." Adair began to pant furiously.

Dom nodded, thrusting his hips wildly against hers. "Don't stop ... don't stop my little one, yes..." He gave two more shallow pumps and when he felt her clench around him like a vise he penetrated deeper and bit her neck gently. He felt each one of her tiny inner muscles spasm and he could no longer hold himself back. He pushed forward, arched back and roared out his pleasure. In one long, perfect moment they met together in climax.

Adair was exhausted. Her body was aching and sore but she felt alive. She pushed a strand of wet hair away from her face and studied her new hawk husband.

He was truly magnificent. His bronze skin was glowing with sweat and his heart was racing against her. His multi-hued hair was damp and clung to him carelessly. His cock, still sheathed within her, flexed and caused her already damp skin to rise up in goosebumps. He affected her as no one ever had.

His eyes were heavy with passion. Suddenly, he remembered how heavy he must be and moved his frame off of his slight wife. She made a sound of protest and he gathered her against his side to spoon with her. She instinctively cuddled into his embrace and burrowed against him. "You are perfection," Dom murmured into her hair.

"Hmm?" Adair asked sleepily.

He shook his head. "Nothing. Sleep now. We shall talk later."

Adair yawned; it seemed as if she remembered that they had many important matters to discuss. But she was so very tired and completely sated. "We should talk now I..." her voice began to trail off.

He smiled. "Sleep now, talk later," he said.

She felt her eyes drift close and nodded jerkily. "Yes ... just a little sleep."

* * * *

Adair blinked. It was dark and she was alone, that she knew. She fumbled around in the bed to find something to

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cover her body with. When she found nothing, she pulled the sheet around her body and stood up. She took two steps forward and let out a small shriek of pain when she stubbed her foot against something sharp.

She tried to remain calm. She hated the dark. Doves had remarkably poor eyesight when compared to the other Aviante shifters. Hawks could see almost anything in the dark, especially their prey. Adair knew that many a dove had lost his life while trying to hide from the hawks at night.

Doves could live three lifetimes and still never acquire the keen eyesight that the hawks had.

Adair swallowed back her fear. She was a Princess Royal and she was not afraid of the dark.

The shadows seemed to swallow her whole and she dropped to her knees. She looked around desperately trying to make something, anything, out, but found that her eyes just couldn't adjust to the supreme blackness that cloaked her.

She stiffened. "Who is there?" Her eyesight might be poor but her sense of hearing was impeccable. She turned and looked up. "Who is there?"

Only silence met her.

She had but one moment to open her mouth to scream before strong hands grasped her neck and began to squeeze.

She felt her throat closing up and her head was getting lighter and lighter. No, she wouldn't die, she wouldn't let someone do this to her. She had just wed a hawk prince; her life was just beginning to get interesting. Adair valiantly strove to keep conscious. She kicked back from her kneeling

position, catching her attacker unawares, and was rewarded when her attacker let out a groan and dropped his hands. She swept her foot out and heard the resounding thump as the would-be assassin hit the floor. She jumped up and rushed forward to finish him off when she tripped over her sheet and fell unceremoniously to the floor. Damn.

Adair screamed when a punch hit her squarely in the face. The punch, however, was nothing compared to the searing pain that hit her shoulder.

Her eyes began to water and her heart pounded furiously. The pain was so intense she could hardly breathe.

She knew that she was going to die. She could no longer move and she could barely see. The assassin could take her out this moment and she could do nothing to stop him. By Avar, and she had so wanted to live.

Chapter Eight

Dom ran a cool compress over Adair's sweat-slick brow. She moaned. He grasped her two small hands in his and caressed the smooth skin. He was willing her to live. "I cannot lose you. I cannot."

"Your highness, I can do that." Solange's voice was small from the doorway.

He turned to her. "No, but my thanks to you for all that you have done. Let me tend my lady wife."

Solange nodded, but felt so helpless. "Please call me if there is anything I can do, anything that you or Princess Adair might need."

He nodded.

Solange hesitantly left.

Dom looked down at his sick wife and felt fury unlike he had ever known possess him. He would find who had done this and he would destroy that person. He would tear out that person's heart and pluck each feather from their body until they were grounded and in terrible pain. And then he would leave them where they lay to die a torturous death. It was no less than that person deserved for what they had done to his beautiful dove. "I will find who did this to you," he murmured under his breath, all the while caressing Adair's soft, damp skin.

He knew that part of his anger stemmed from overwhelming feelings of guilt. He had left his new wife to attend matters of state. He had been heading back to their

shared chamber when he heard her cries and had rushed to her defense, but it had been too late. He found Adair lying on the floor unconscious, a sharp blade protruding from her shoulder. The wound was not deadly, but the poison on the blade was.

Dom had summoned the healer who had done her best to remove the poison from Adair's system, but she was not responding as well as she should. The healer had assured him of the fact that since Adair was still alive, she had a strong will to live. It was this that would help her in the days to come. Dom held onto this fact with all of his might. He could not lose her now, not when he had just found her.

* * * *

Adair felt as if her entire body was on fire. As if someone had hit her over the head with a brick. She was aching and sore and felt completely nauseous.

"It is good to see you awake, my lady."

Adair strained her eyes to see Solange. Her hazy vision began to clear. "Solange, it is good to see you, and what did I tell you before about my name..." Adair's voice was low and hoarse but still clear.

Solange smiled. "You told me to call you Adair."

Adair nodded. "So please do."

Solange swallowed. "It is good to see you awake, Adair."

"It is good to be awake, Solange. What happened?" Adair's memory was hazy. She remembered waking up alone, in the dark. She remembered her fear of the shadows and the sudden pain that had assailed her, but not much else.

"You were attacked." Solange's eyes were cold and angry. She couldn't believe that someone had tried to kill Adair.

"Yes, I remember something along those lines," Adair said. "I see that the attempt on my life failed, as I am still alive."

Solange let her breath out. "The attack was almost successful. You have been unconscious and feverish for three days. We thought you would die, Adair. You were in a very bad way."

Adair nodded. "But I didn't die."

"Thank Avar for that."

"Yes." Adair swallowed. Someone had tried to kill her. They had almost succeeded in their plan. "Where is Dominion?"

Solange's expression softened. "The prince has not left your bedside since the attack. When your fever broke I sent him to get some sleep. He hasn't slept in days."

"He stayed here? With me?" Adair asked stupidly.

Solange nodded. "Of course. You are his wife. He loves you."

Adair felt blood rush to her head. "No, no, he doesn't love me. Solange, he feels something, yes, but it isn't love."

"Adair, I have never seen our prince behave with *anyone* the way he behaves with you." Solange smiled. "The love is naked in his eyes."

"No." Adair wouldn't believe it. They obtained pleasure with one another, and they had united two warring nations, but it couldn't be love. How could a dove and hawk love?

Solange sighed. If Adair did not wish to believe that Prince Dominion loved her, then there was nothing she could do. Adair would just have to come to that conclusion herself.

Solange felt a grin spread over her face. Adair would learn soon enough that Prince Dominion loved her, loved her with a passion that was rare and magical. Solange hoped that someday soon she would be able to find such love. She frowned, but who would dare to love a *minuet*?

Solange swallowed at the unbridled memory that suddenly assailed her; the handsome dove courier whose hand had scalded her with its rough tenderness. She had felt both warmth and fear and it had been a shockingly desirable sensation. Solange knew that if she had been born anything but a *minuet* she would have been able to obtain the pleasures of her heart. She would have been free to explore her secret desires.

Adair saw Solange's sad face, and asked, "What is wrong?"

Solange shook Adair's concern away. "It is nothing, really. I am so very glad you are all right." She placed another cold compress on Adair's forehead. She couldn't take any chances with the fever returning. "I must go tell His Highness that you are awake." Solange hurried away. She couldn't stay and let Adair look at her with those inquisitive silver eyes. She knew that eventually Adair would see inside of her and discover that her desires ran deep and dark, and then ... then all would be lost. For *minuets* served, they themselves could never be served.

Adair watched Solange speed away and bit her lower lip. Something was wrong with her friend. She was hiding

something. Adair was determined to discover what was wrong with Solange.

She sank back into the pillows with a wince of pain. She would find out what was wrong with Solange, just not right now. Right now, she needed rest.

She sighed and said a little prayer of thanks for her survival. Avar had been watching out for her.

* * * *

Dom felt a small part of the cold and fear that had been gripping his heart fade when he saw his wife sitting up in their bed.

Adair was pale and gaunt but otherwise, she was alive.

"My wife." He came to her side.

She smiled slightly. "It seems that you will not be ridding yourself of me quite so easily."

He said nothing but his jaw twitched.

Adair patted his cold hand. "It was a joke, Dom, a joke."

Dom sighed. "It was not so funny."

She winced. The pain in her shoulder was particularly sharp right now. "Did you find him?"

Dom knew whom she was asking after. "No, we are still looking. But do not worry, we will find the person who did this to you, Adair." Dom's eyes narrowed. "How do you know the person that attacked you was male?"

She sighed. "I don't know, truly. It is just a gut feeling."

Dom smiled. "Gut feeling?" he asked lightly.

She ignored the sarcasm in his voice. "Yes, just a gut feeling."

He nodded. "Well, in this case I do not think that your gut has failed you. I, too, believe that it was a man who attacked you. We are still looking." His eyes narrowed. "He escaped through the window."

Adair nodded. "Yes, I assumed as much." She cleared her throat. "I didn't see bars on your window."

He laughed. He knew that it irked Adair that the chamber she had inhabited before moving into his room had bars on the window to prevent her from flying away.

He frowned suddenly. Perhaps he should reconsider putting bars on his windows. The assassin would not have been able to escape if there had been bars. He just hated being caged. Bars on windows bespoke of being caged. The Aviante were shifters—not animals or monsters to be locked away.

Adair squeezed his hand. "It is alright. I am alright."

He nodded. "Thank Avar for that. I have placed guards at the door for your protection."

She protested.

Dom shook his head. "This is a necessity. I am to be crowned in two days; did you realize this, Adair?"

Adair was shocked. Dom was to be crowned king in two days? She had no idea that the crowning ceremony was scheduled for so soon. She shot an accusing look in his direction. Why hadn't he told her sooner?

As if anticipating her question, Dom spoke quickly. "The hawks have need of a strong king. They have made do with a strong prince," he smiled, "but it is time for them to have their king back." He sighed. "I needed us to wed quickly, so

that we were one when I took the crown and the throne. This way no one could say or do anything about our union. I was going to tell you about the crowning ceremony but there wasn't time."

Adair wasn't sure if she completely trusted what he said.

"Once I have the throne I will announce our union to my people..." he looked into her eyes, "and you will have to announce it to your people."

Adair winced. Oh yes ... *that* was not something that she was looking forward to. However, Dom was right; speed was of the essence when dealing with such a tricky and potentially volatile situation. "I am to have the crown in less than a month," Adair announced.

Dom's eyes widened. Though he had heard from his spies that Adair was to be crowned queen soon, he had no idea that it was quite as soon as she had just said. It just went to show that all sources were tainted. "Less than a month," he said quietly.

Adair nodded. "But I am worried about the Dove Council and their reaction to our union."

Dom laughed. "I am not, lady wife."

"How can you not be concerned? The Dove Council will not accept this union."

Dom shrugged. "There is nothing that they can do now that we are wed, Adair. They might fight it, but the fact remains that we *are* wed." He grinned. "And we have consummated the union well and truly. There is nothing that the Dove Council can do."

Adair frowned. Perhaps what her husband said was true. The Council may not be able to do anything about their union, politically, but they could do something, and perhaps they already had.

Dom saw the wheels in Adair's head turning and he knew what she was thinking. "You believe a dove breached my fortress and tried to kill you, wife?"

Her mouth dropped open and he laughed. "You are not so difficult to read, Adair."

Adair frowned. She was going to have to work on her facial expressions.

He continued. "Your people love you, Adair. They may not agree with all of your decisions, but they respect and they adore you. I do not believe a dove would have done this." He clenched his jaw. "The poison was strong, strong enough to kill, and it would have if the hawks did not have the best healer in residence. I do not believe any dove would have risked your death."

Adair nodded. What Dom said was true. And yet the hatred of the hawks was just as strong, if not stronger, than the poison used on her. Adair narrowed her eyes. "If what you say is true, if no dove committed this crime, then you are saying..." She couldn't finish her sentence.

Dom's grip on her hands became tight and painful. When he heard her gasp he instantly released her. "Yes, if it was not a dove that did this, then a hawk must be the guilty party." He was baffled. No one but Solange and the high priest knew of his union to the Dove Princess Adair Salomar. He had told no one. And yet, only a hawk would have been

able to get past his defenses. Only a hawk would have been able to make it to his chamber and attack his wife.

He ran a hand through his hair. Frustration pounded through him, frustration and absolute anger.

Adair sat up a little straighter. "Dom?" She smiled when he finally looked at her. "We will get through this. We will find out who did this and they will be brought to justice. In the meantime we must prepare for your crowning."

Dom was moved beyond words. His dove wife lay hurt and in pain and yet she thought of him. She did not look at him with hatred or anger in those silver eyes of hers and she did not accuse him of causing her injury. How was such kindness and understanding possible?

Adair suddenly thought of something. "How will you explain the guards at your door?"

He smiled. "I am to be crowned king in two days; I do not need to explain anything."

She rolled her eyes. Well her husband sure did not lack cockiness. "So I am once again a prisoner."

He shook his head. "Do not think of it in that way. You are wounded and need a little time to heal." He smiled. "And is this chamber not an improvement over the north tower?"

"That is not the point," Adair said.

"That is exactly the point." Dom sighed. "I must attend a meeting now. I will be back shortly."

She nodded. "Will you send Solange?"

"You have formed an attachment with the *minuet*?"

She frowned. "Please do not call her that."

Confused, he asked, "Call her what?"

"She has a name."

Dom nodded. "Of course she does. But it is a fact of the hawks, we have *minuets* and Solange is one of them." His eyes widened. "It truly bothers you?"

She nodded. "Yes it truly does. Solange is an Aviante just as you and I. She is not a thing to be used and forgotten. You think them less than an Aviante but they are not. Solange has been a true friend to me. She deserves to have status; you do not give *minuets* any status."

Dom thought on her words. He agreed with his lady wife that a *minuet* in hawk society had no status, no true worth. They were born and bred to serve and nothing else. How could the hawks give status to a *thing*? Yet Solange was a good, kind being. She had always served him well and faithfully. She deserved happiness in life, and he had never thought about her personal happiness. "I am sorry, Adair. You are right. Solange is a good Aviante. I did not mean to lessen who she is."

Adair smiled. Perhaps there was hope for her husband after all.

* * * *

"You cheated." Adair stomped her foot angrily. She stared over the board at Solange.

Solange laughed. "I did not need to cheat, Adair, you are truly awful at this game."

Adair chuckled. "I take offense to that remark."

Solange shrugged her shoulders. "You may take offense to it, but it is still true. You are really bad at this game."

Adair sighed. She had a particular fondness for Aviante chess but Solange was right, she never won a game. Perhaps she was really bad at this. "I have lost count of how many times I have lost."

Solange smiled. "This game makes seven."

Adair pushed back from her chair and stood. "I am sick and tired of being cooped up in this room, Solange. This is the second time that I have been confined to a room and kept from the sun and sky."

"I know, but it won't be much longer. Indeed, do you know what today is?"

Adair shook her head. "How would I know, I've lost track of everything, including days and time."

Solange grinned. "Our prince will be crowned king this day."

Adair was shocked. "What?"

"Today is the coronation."

"By Avar, I must..." Adair rushed toward the door and suddenly stopped. She began to laugh hysterically while Solange looked on, confused. "What? What do I think to do?" Adair fell to the floor. "What can I do locked in here?"

Solange finally understood the source of Adair's frustration. She came to sit beside Adair. "Our prince can care for himself, Adair. And once the coronation is complete, he can introduce you to our people."

Adair nodded. She was still frustrated. She wasn't used to being something that had to be hidden and kept secret. She was proud of her heritage and of her Aviante roots. She hated

being someone's dirty little secret. But would she have done any differently if she had been in Dom's position?

She let out a deep breath. The hatred between the hawks and doves ran deep and Adair knew that her people would be wary and hesitant, if not outright outraged, at Adair's union with Dom. She would have to be very careful how she introduced Dom to her people. She understood that Dom had to be particularly careful of how he brought her into his world. "It is so different," Adair said quietly.

"What?" Solange asked.

"Your world, your society," Adair said.

Solange nodded. "Yes, I believe that is some of the reason for this war."

Adair looked at her questioningly.

Solange sighed. "Do we not kill that which we do not understand? When we are in pain do we not strike out rather than look inside of us? The hawks and the doves do not understand one another. Oh, the beginning of this war may have been the abduction of your Queen Marisee but the continuation of this war is solely the product of fear and lack of understanding."

Solange kept amazing Adair. Her wisdom and understanding was great in someone so young. How was it possible that someone so lovely and bright was kept in bondage? Adair was learning more and more about the hawk society and found herself adapting and still she could not accept the notion of *minuets*.

Adair calmed herself. There was nothing she could do about Dom now. She would just have to wait and be patient,

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by Mara Lee

one of her least favorite things to do. Adair turned with a smile. "Should we play again?" She stood and made her way back to the chessboard with its intricately carved pieces.

Solange grinned. "Are you prepared to lose again?"

Adair laughed out loud and nodded. "I believe I am, shall we?"

Chapter Nine

Adair jumped up from her perch on the bed the moment she heard the door open. Dom's face was obscured by shadows but she could still make out those exceptionally brilliant golden eyes. He had left two candles for Adair this evening and she was grateful for the light. "King." She said only the one word and waited.

Dom let out a slow breath.

Adair was frantic. "Well?" She couldn't deal with his silence. She watched a slow smile curve his lips and she let out a whoop of delight and rushed into his arms. "You are? It happened?"

Dom basked in his wife's approval and happiness. "Yes, you are now looking at the King of the Aviante Hawks." He could not contain his laughter any longer. He was elated. He had the most beautiful dove princess for a wife and now he was crowned king of the hawks. It was all coming together. Soon there would be peace between the doves and the hawks and he and his wife could raise a family without fear.

Adair's relief and happiness was bubbling over. She couldn't believe it. Dom was now king and she was now queen consort of the hawks. It was almost too much to take in. "And the crowning ceremony went well?"

Dom shrugged his massive shoulders nonchalantly just before he swept Adair into his arms. He deposited her on the bed and followed. "It was tedious. Full of pomp and those who enjoy hearing themselves speak." He removed his finely

brocaded shirt and lay beside his beautiful wife in nothing but his soft breeches.

Adair smiled. Almost every member of the Dove Council fit that description. She knew those who would prolong a ceremony just so they could have more crowd time. In her mind such machinations had always been ridiculous and unnecessary. She provided for her people and they in turn showered her with love. She had never been one for long speeches and she was no orator. Her people knew what was in her heart.

"You are thinking particularly hard, my wife."

She sighed. "I have never enjoyed politics."

He laughed heartily.

"What is so funny?" She shot him a dirty look.

Dom could not help smiling. "You, my dove, you do not like politics. Politics, however likes you. The dove society is one of structure and diplomacy. You are a Princess Royal and have no say to the matter. But you are a romantic and it seems that the doves have not been able to keep that from you."

Adair knew better than anyone how little say she had. Had she not escaped from her guards to gain just one moment of freedom? Had she not been fighting an arranged marriage for years? Her life was about dedication, duty, loyalty, and war. And in such a life, there was no room for love. "I do not need you to tell me what the dove society is about."

He frowned. "You are upset now—why?"

She sighed. "You know as I, what duty demands of you. I have acted accordingly. But just because I was born into this

life does not mean that I must always accept it as scripture. I believe I am a good leader, a strong Aviante, but you could not understand the demands my society puts on me. You have no Council. You are the ultimate authority. It is not that way for us ... for me."

He nodded. "Yes, I know. I have often wondered how you have survived so, caged as you are."

Her jaw clenched. "I am not caged."

He shrugged. "We are all caged; some cages are just smaller than others."

Adair frowned. "Are you a philosopher now?"

Dom smiled slightly. "I do not claim that distinction. I do however know what it is like to be watched." He ran a hand down Adair's hair and brought her closer to him. He needed to feel her, to have her near. These feelings that he had for his wife were very unnerving. She had come to mean so much to him in such a short time. She had come to mean everything. "We do not choose our lives, but we can forge our futures." He looked into her troubled eyes and continued. "You are a born leader, Adair. You have withstood much. Together we will do great things for our people."

"Our people," Adair said quietly. It sounded so strange on her tongue.

He nodded. "Yes, *our* people. For we are united now and we will stand united."

"I have not been crowned queen."

He laughed. "But you will be."

Adair shared his smile. "Yes, I will be." She had no doubt that she would be crowned queen, and soon. Her people

needed her—they needed their queen. The Council would always demand things from her, but they were not the power in the dove society that she was. Her smile was brilliant.

Dom pulled her close. "Are you healed?"

"What?"

He swallowed. Her body was so soft and pliant beneath his. She smelled sweet, like roses and honeydew. His body was tight with need and it was taking all his willpower not to have her now. "Are you healed from your wounds?"

Adair felt her husband hard and warm against her and smiled a slow womanly smile. Now she understood. She nodded. "I am healed, husband. Would you like to see for yourself?"

He let out a breath when she began to unlace her dress. Her movements were slow and calculated and they were driving him crazy.

She finished removing her last stitch of clothing and lay naked in front of her husband, save her lustrous hair. She bit her lip and found herself trembling with anticipation.

Dom couldn't speak. Her beauty was incomparable. His eyes traveled from her ten perfect toes up her slender and smooth legs, past her belly with its soft roundness up to her breasts with their tender peaks, hardening with desire, and to her shoulder now scarred from her recent wound.

He reached out and slowly traced the scar with his finger. He watched her eyes, unblinking. "It truly does not pain you?"

Adair shook her head. "I am fully healed." She smiled. "You know how well the Aviante heal."

He nodded. The Aviante shifters were known for their quick healing abilities. They were remarkably resilient. Dom often forgot this fact when faced with his wife's gentleness and apparent fragility. He continued to trace the scar and shook his head in wonder. His dove princess was stronger than she appeared. She was silk, satin and steel, wrapped in a milky package of complete perfection.

He continued his exploration of his dove wife's body, trailing his fingers downward, toward the apex of her thighs. He smiled when she went completely still under his caresses and her head fell slowly back. "I am more than pleased to learn of your fast recovery." Dom's lips followed his fingers. He lingered at her breasts, his hot breath fanning her flesh and her desire. He licked her belly button and grinned when she shivered, her nipples going instantly hard. "You have the smoothest skin." Slowly, Dom he parted her legs. He gave her a hot look just before he dipped his head and kissed her between her thighs.

Adair gasped and began to quiver. Such actions had to be sinful. It was just too good. She felt every stroke of his tongue on her most tender flesh and she couldn't help but lock her legs around his head. She arched against him, silently willing him to continue with his wonderful torture.

Dom had no intention of stopping. His wife smelled sweet but she tasted even better. She was like honeyed cream with just a dash of tang against him and he wanted to bathe in her essence forever.

His body was on fire. Adair was panting and beginning to thrash against him. She let out a long keening cry and exploded.

Dom quickly divested himself of his breeches; he was long, hard, and aching. His wife was completely still except for the rise and fall of her chest from her heavy breathing. He gave her one smoldering look before he sheathed his cock completely within her.

Adair moaned deeply from her throat. She had felt pleasure before, but the feeling of her husband within her was unlike any pleasure she had ever known. She could feel him pulsing within her. He moved not an inch and yet she could feel every cord, every muscle of his cock stretched within her.

She clenched her hips against her husband's thighs. She raked her fingers down his back urging him to continue, urging him to give her what she needed so desperately. Adair began to rock her hips back and forth, beginning a rhythm as old as time.

Dom groaned, locking his hands on his wife's hips, and followed her movements. Each gyration brought him closer to the edge. He could feel the tightness building and knew that he could not hold out much longer. "My wife, my love," he ground out. He quickened his thrusting, rolled her sideways, and wrapped her around him by both limbs and hair.

Dom grunted when his back hit the hard floor. This didn't deter him. His movements were now frantic and he delighted in Adair's short pants and gasps of pleasure. He forced his eyes open; he wanted to see her move against him. He wanted to see everything.

Adair's breath was coming out short and quick. Sweat beaded on her brow and her thick hair was plastered to her face. Her husband was long, thick and hard and her body was holding his as if it would never let him go. She was climbing and soaring. She was climbing and clawing and felt as if her heart was going to explode. She threw back her head, clenched her thighs till they cramped, and screamed her pleasure to the heavens. Her body was shattering.

Dom knew the moment his wife came. Her entire body quivered and shook and tears streamed down from her tightly closed eyes. He let himself bask in her warmth and melting wetness for just a moment before he felt himself tighten and shiver uncontrollably. He echoed her with a roar of pleasure and spilled his seed within her.

His head hit the floor with a thud and his body went slack with release.

Adair collapsed on top of her husband still panting and short of breath. She felt wonderful. "Am I healed to your satisfaction, husband?" she murmured against his warm and sweaty shoulder.

He grinned. His eyes were closed and his body was still reliving his release. "Yes, to our satisfaction, wife," he answered slowly, with a Cheshire grin.

She smiled. "You realize that we cannot spend all of our time in bed."

He cracked one eye open. "We do not seem to be in bed, wife."

Adair rolled her eyes.

He laughed. "I understand what you say, my love, but for a start this shall do." He flexed within her and delighted in her shivers.

She shook her head. "Stop that."

"Stop what?"

She narrowed her eyes. "Do not play that innocent routine with me. I am exhausted."

Dom let out a mock sigh. He withdrew himself from her warm wetness with reluctance and brought them both back to the bed. "We are going to have to build up your stamina."

Adair curled up against his side. "I look forward to it, husband." She wiggled her backside against him and laughed at his moan of pleasure.

He nipped her ear. "You are a witch," he said.

She smiled. "I am a dove."

Dom curled his hand possessively around her waist and nodded into the soft pillow of her hair. "Yes, you are *my* dove."

* * * *

"You realize that you still must remain on guard, and keep Solange with you at all times." Dom couldn't help but smile at his wife's exuberance.

Adair nodded. She would agree to anything that would get her outside. Now that Dom was crowned king, her freedom was imminent. She was elated over the prospect of smelling the sweet scent of fresh air and feeling the wind and sun caress her. She had spent too much time indoors and felt as if

her feathers were becoming rusty. She longed to take to the sky. "Yes, yes, anything. May we go now?"

Dom laughed. "All right, try not to overdo it. You are still recovering, remember?"

She nodded. She was going to fly.

* * * *

Adair felt the hot sun beating down on her face. Usually she worried about the damage the sun caused to her fair skin but today ... today it didn't matter. She had longed for this moment. She was not going to let it pass her by.

"You must be careful; your skin is so fair." Solange placed a gentle hand on her arm.

"Yes, I know, but it feels wonderful." Adair spread her arms wide and twirled around. She felt carefree and marvelous. "I wish to shift," she said quietly.

Solange stiffened. "I do not know if you are well enough to..."

Adair cut her off. "I am perfectly well. I haven't changed since..." her voice broke, "since the attack. I need to see that everything is all right. I must know that my wings are working." She implored Solange with her eyes. "Do you understand?"

Solange sighed. She did. But she didn't like it. "Yes, all right. But be careful."

Adair laughed out her delight. "Yes, of course." Quickly she stripped off her clothing. She began to turn around and then stopped. "Will you be all right with this?"

"What?" Solange asked.

"Have you ever seen a dove shift before?" Adair asked. She was already quite certain of Solange's answer.

"No, I haven't. But it cannot be too different from a hawk." Solange said, in a matter-of-fact tone of voice.

Adair said nothing but slowly turned around. Each Aviante race shifted differently. The fact that Solange did not know this spoke volumes. She hoped that Solange wouldn't be too shocked. "Stand back," she asked.

Solange obeyed immediately.

Adair shut her eyes and began to concentrate. Shifting required an enormous amount of energy and focus. She let out a breath of air and calmed her nerves. She still had her wings and they would work. They had to. She concentrated on imagining her shifted form and slowly she felt her body begin to tingle. Energy poured through her body and heat suffused her. Soon she felt the telltale ache in her back and the moment her wings appeared she knew instinctively that they were all right and had not been damaged by the hawk attack.

Solange could not speak. Her body was frozen in shock. She knew that her eyes were wide as saucers and that her mouth had to be gaping open but she could not help herself. Adair stood in front of her, naked, gloriously naked, wrapped in strands of her white gold hair. She was stunningly beautiful, but it was not her beauty that had Solange gaping like a schoolchild.

Solange could not believe it. Stretching behind her friend were large, pure white wings. The soft feathers fluttered in the cool breeze and appeared downy soft. They were

miraculous and absolutely beautiful. She had never seen a partly shifted Aviante before. Non-royals could not partially shift and had to assume full bird form. Solange knew that partial shifting was possible but had never beheld the sight with her own two eyes before. It was remarkable. She had thought Adair beautiful before, but now—now her beauty was incomparable. She had the appearance of a grounded Aviante angel and Solange was awestruck.

Adair tested her wings gingerly. They moved with agility and grace, gently fluttering in the breeze. She slowly extended them fully, shaking them out to test their capacity for flight. She was not disappointed. There was no soreness or aching in her wings. They appeared to have healed perfectly, not a feather out of place. "I am going to test them."

Solange nodded. She was still mute with shock.

Adair swallowed and pushed a heavy lock of hair over her shoulder. She let out several deep breaths and quickly, lest she should lose her nerve, pushed off from the ground.

The air seemed to swell and pulse and the sky seemed to welcome her back into its arms. Adair felt tears course down her cheeks as she flew with ease and grace. She executed a perfect somersault and laughed with joy. She looked down and saw Solange staring up at her. "I am all right, I am better than all right," she said.

Solange nodded and yelled. "You look as if you belong to the sky."

Adair smiled at the heavens and whispered, "I do." She was well and truly home.

* * * *

Dom read the missive and frowned. He looked up and scowled. "I do believe I am getting tired of threats."

Vinos Aerean sighed. He had not wanted to come back to this place under such circumstances but had no choice. "I fear that they are no longer threats, Your Highness..." he cleared his throat and corrected himself, "Your Majesty. If our sources are to be believed, you were crowned king."

Dom nodded curtly but said nothing.

Vinos continued. "As I was saying, Your Majesty, they are no longer threats. The Dove Council, in our princess's absence, has become ruling Council and majority. They are in charge." Vinos sighed. "I fear that some on the Council are more than ready to attack."

Dom flung the missive down and began to pace. "Are they crazy? They will be destroyed."

Vinos' jaw clenched. It was his turn to remain silent.

Dom rubbed his forehead. "I realize that you have a strong army, that your strategy is impeccable, and your weapons and military tactics are perhaps even better than the hawks. But the simple fact remains that the hawks are stronger in flight and on land than the doves. We are bred warriors. An attack now would be suicidal for your people."

Vinos frowned. He knew that what the hawk king said was true, but he still didn't like hearing it. The doves had survived through the centuries by their wits, not their brawn. They were not considered fierce Aviante, but they would fight for what they believed in. They were not afraid to die for their

land or for their princess. "Even if what you say is true, Your Majesty, the Council has spoken."

"Damn the Council," Dom swore. "The Council would let innocent people die for their own selfish purposes?" He shook his head. "I must prepare, then. You will stay here for the night, Vinos Aerean."

Vinos protested.

Dom flung away his protests. "No, listen, dusk will fall fast and you have traveled a long way. Stay with us the night and break bread with us. We will all travel to the dove lands tomorrow."

Vinos' eyes widened. "All of us?"

Dom smiled. "Yes, I believe it is time that I made a trip to your lands, dove."

Vinos swallowed. "You are the crazy one, hawk. You will be killed for sure."

"I do not believe so," Dom said assuredly. "I have something that will guarantee my safety."

Vinos couldn't imagine what the hawk king had that would guarantee his safety in dove lands. But he was willing to stay the night if it meant that he would find out.

* * * *

Adair took in her appearance in the glass and fidgeted nervously. She was unused to such finery. She had not had the opportunity in many days to wear such garments and primp so. It made her uncomfortable. Even in her own lands, Adair preferred the comfort of breeches and men's shirts to

the restrictive garments that a princess must wear. "I look ridiculous," she muttered to herself.

"You look beautiful." The voice at the door answered.

Adair turned and frowned at Solange. "This dress weighs more than ten stones, Solange."

Solange laughed and moved forward. She handed Adair a small box.

Adair accepted the box and opened it. Her mouth dropped open in surprise. "It is beautiful." Nestled within the folds of the box was a crown made from delicate flowers.

Solange smiled shyly. "*I made it.*"

Adair nodded. "It is truly a work of art." She placed the crown on her head and smiled. "I love it, thank you."

Solange's nimble little fingers quickly moved up Adair's back, pulling the ties of her dress into place.

Adair frowned. The dress was beautiful but the color—the colors had her clenching her teeth. She was wearing the hawk colors. She had protested but Dom had absolutely refused to listen to reason. He said for the first meeting she had to be dressed accordingly. Dom knew that the hawks would accept her more easily if they saw that she was trying to adapt to their culture. She had accepted his reasoning but had in the end made him concede one point; she would twine her hair with her family colors. In that way both Adair and Dom could be true to their people. The result was quite splendid. The heavy gown was gold and green and the colors worked remarkably well with Adair's fair complexion. The bodice was encrusted with small pearls and the hem and sleeves were similarly done with semiprecious jewels. Her hair had been

split into three sections and braided with ribbons in her family colors. It had been twisted up into two ornate coronets and fastened with pearl combs. The wreath of flowers rested perfectly over the coronets of hair. "I hope the diners do not throw their food at me," Adair said with a small smile.

Solange was outraged. "They would not dare."

Adair laughed. "Who knows what they would dare when faced with their king's union to a dove."

Solange smoothed down the ties to Adair's dress. "It will be fine. Do you remember what you told me the other day?"

Adair sighed. "Sacrifice is necessary to bring about peace."

Solange nodded. "And are you prepared for this possibility?"

"Yes."

Solange smiled. "So you see, you have your answer. You can do anything, and with our king by your side, you will."

Adair's face broke into a smile and she hugged Solange to her. "Thank you."

Solange inclined her head. "Now, let us get something to eat. I am starving."

* * * *

Adair met Dom at the bottom of the staircase. She calmed her nerves and gave Dom a serene smile.

Dom smiled broadly. His wife was a vision.

"I believe we have a dinner to attend," she said quietly.

He nodded. "I believe we do."

* * * *

A hush fell over the crowd when King Dominion and his guest walked into the main dining area. The hawk king was resplendent in an ornate brocade shirt and a fine sheen pair of breeches. On his golden head the crown rested proudly, proclaiming his status and authority to the world.

On the king's arm was the most stunning young woman the hawks had ever seen. With her fair, flawless skin and strange silver eyes there was little doubt of her heritage. What was the king doing with a dove woman?

Adair swallowed her fear but kept her head tilted up proudly. She would not show her fear to the hawks; she was a dove princess and now a queen. She would act accordingly. "Now, isn't this fun?" she murmured under her breath.

"I am glad you're enjoying yourself," Dom answered back with a smile.

She shot him an annoyed look before quickly resuming her placid stare forward, and followed her husband's lead. When they were seated at the dais the rest of the room sat, still and silent.

Dom patted her hand before standing. "My people, may I present a very special guest." He gently tugged Adair up until she stood stiffly by his side. "This is Adair Salomar. She is, as you can see, a dove." Dom remained smiling while the entire room broke out into shouts. He held up his hand for silence. "She is also my wife."

Adair felt her heart stop as she waited for reaction from the hawks. She scanned the room; no one moved or said anything. She was surprised, and the silence was deafening.

Sudden movement from the back of the room startled Adair. She craned her neck and her face broke into a wreath of smiles when Vinos Aerean came into view. She turned to her husband. "What is Vinos doing here?"

Dom smiled. "Under the circumstances I thought it more than fitting that Vinos be here when I introduce you to my people."

Her eyes narrowed. "Don't give me that—what is he doing here?"

Vinos rushed forward. "My princess, you are alive."

Adair made a motion to move forward but Dom's hand on her arm restrained her. She tried to shake herself free but his grip was tight. She turned angry eyes on her husband and found that his eyes were filled with warning and caution. She calmed herself. She understood now. This was not the place to cause a scene. She nodded her understanding and instantly Dom released his grip on her arm. She smiled at Vinos. "Vinos, it is so good to see you, my friend."

Vinos felt conflicting emotions sail through him. His princess was alive and from the looks of her, she was well. She was also standing beside the hawk king. "Our people feared you dead."

Adair nodded. "I know. I am sorry for the pain that I have caused." She forced a smile. "But I am glad to see you here, Vinos. I am glad to see you looking so well."

"I will not pretend to understand any of this, Your Highness." Vinos gave Adair a small smile. "But I trust you, as our leader and as our princess."

Adair would not let herself cry. "Thank you Vinos." She turned to Dominion. "I take it you have met my," her voice quivered a little, "my husband?"

Vinos found it hard to swallow past the lump in his throat. "Yes."

Dom swept his gaze over the still silent crowd. "Yes, you heard me correctly, my people—this is my wife, Adair Salomar. She is a dove, but more than that she is a good, decent person. Adair Salomar accepted my proposal of marriage, much to my relief." He took a breath before continuing. "We were officially bond mated by the high priest of the hawks. There can be no dispute that she is legally my Queen Consort." He swept his gaze across the room; his golden eyes took in everything. "She is your queen."

"She is a dove. She will betray you, she will betray us all." A voice from the back of the room stated.

Dom laughed. "Ingus, you have long stirred up trouble amongst us." He narrowed his eyes. "Be careful of what you say." His expression was fierce when he looked away from Ingus. "Adair is my wife and your queen. She will have your loyalty. I am your king. Do you trust me?" He watched as the occupants of the room nodded. "And I trust, with my life, my wife."

Adair felt a great happiness sweep through her at her husband's words. He had confidence in her. He trusted her. She couldn't seem to stop smiling. She knew that from this moment on she and Dom could accomplish anything together.

Adair put her hand on her husband's arm. When Dom looked down at her she smiled. "May I say something, please?"

He nodded. "Of course you may."

Adair turned to face the crowd. "I am as your king has said, Adair Salomar, Princess Royal of the Aviante doves. I am also the bond mate of Dominion Weathermead, your king. I understand that you would be distrustful of me and of my people but I beg you to give me a chance to earn your trust. You are now my people, too. I wish only to learn to live in peace. This war has raged for longer than we can remember and has claimed so many innocent victims." Adair took a calming breath before continuing. "Your king and I wish for nothing more than to forge a future of peace everlasting. Please give me the chance to prove my words to you." When Adair was finished she turned to Dom, who nodded his approval.

Dom turned to his people. "This is my queen; a more remarkable one does not exist." He leaned down and placed a passionate kiss on her lips. There were distinct mutters in the crowd, but they now were not so negative. He knew that his people respected and loved him. He had been touting peace for a long while now and knew that eventually his people would see that this, in his wisdom, had been for the best. He knew his people would learn to love Adair as he did.

Dom blanched.

Adair looked at her now white-faced husband. "Are you all right?"

He swallowed and forced a tight smile to his face. "Yes, yes of course."

"You went so pale suddenly," she murmured.

Dom felt his chest constrict. He loved her. Looking down at her beautifully earnest face he could deny it no longer, he loved Adair Salomar. His dove princess, in so short a time, had begun to occupy his every thought. He could not imagine a life without her. She brought beauty, passion, serenity and peace into his life and he loved her for it. How had it happened? How had he let her into his heart?

"Husband, you are still pale." She reached out and caressed the white face. She was worried. He didn't look well.

He shook her concern away. "It is nothing." Dom looked out to the crowd. "Let us dine. We can always argue later." He joined his people in their laughter. Dom motioned to Vinos Aerean who was still kneeling on the floor at his princess' feet. "Vinos Aerean, please come and join us for our meal. We have much to speak about."

Vinos inclined his head and came forward. He took his seat to his princess' left and tried to calm his jitters. He was in hawk territory—alone and vulnerable—and he was seated next to his princess who had just proclaimed her loyalty to the hawks. It felt like a dream, and yet, strangely right.

He shook his head to clear it of jumbled thoughts. He had to remain focused. He had to remember his purpose for coming here.

"Wine?" A voice asked from behind him.

Vinos turned around and found that he was now staring at the same hawk maiden who had delivered the message to him some days ago. "You are here," he said stupidly.

Solange smiled impishly. "Yes, it would seem so." She pushed the pitcher forward. "Would you like some wine?"

"Yes. Yes, thank you."

Solange poured gracefully. When she was done, she backed up and out of sight instantly.

Vinos was completely befuddled. Where had she gone?

"Who are you looking for with such intent, Vinos?" Adair asked with a smile.

Vinos scowled. "No one, I mean someone, I mean, I don't know ... she just keeps disappearing."

"Who?" Adair was curious.

Vinos shook his head. "Some hawk." He waved it away. "It doesn't matter."

Adair saw the look on Vinos' face and couldn't help smiling. Vinos was obviously intrigued. Whoever had caught Vinos Aerean's attention was now getting under his skin and she liked that. It had been too long since Vinos had shown any attention for a maiden. She thought it perfect irony that it would be a hawk maiden who would catch his eye. "If you say so," she said quietly. She turned to Dominion. "Well, no one is throwing their food at me."

Dominion was curious. "What are you talking about?"

Adair laughed at the inside joke. "Nothing, it is just that I am glad that I have not been attacked as of yet."

He shook his head. "My people are already on their way to accepting you, Adair."

She nodded. From the back of the room she caught the eye of the man called Ingus and shivered. By the look on his face, he was far from accepting her. She swallowed. She would have to keep an eye out for him. It only took one person to destroy tentative peace.

* * * *

After dinner Adair, Dominion and Vinos Aerean retired to the king's private meeting chamber. Once ensconced within the comfortable room, Vinos could hold back no longer and rushed to his princess. He knelt at her feet and kissed her slippers.

Adair went brilliantly red and reached down to pull him up. She cast embarrassed eyes on her husband, who was looking on with mild amusement. "Please Vinos, no, get up." She pulled him to his feet. "It is not necessary to kneel."

Vinos opened his mouth to protest and Adair hushed him.

"Vinos, you and I have known one another for a long time. Such formality is not necessary among friends."

Vinos nodded slowly. He turned accusing eyes on Dominion. "You kept this from me; you kept it from me even though you knew what was happening in dove lands."

Dom held out his hands in supplication. "I did not know that I held the dove princess on my lands until just recently."

Vinos turned to Adair for confirmation. She nodded.

Dom continued. "Regardless, this union was a necessary first step toward peace."

Adair didn't know if she liked being thought of as an object merely to be used toward uniting two kingdoms. Although she

understood what her husband was saying and why, she didn't like the lack of emotion in his voice. Adair blanched. Oh Avar she loved him. She loved Dom. How had it happened?

Adair felt light headed and dizzy. How had she let him into her heart, and when had he taken it over so completely? Adair could not imagine her life without Dom. She couldn't imagine not having his arms around her and his body nestled against her when they fell into slumber. But Dom had only married her to unite their two realms and to fortify peace between the hawks and the doves. She was only a means to an end in his mind.

Dom placed an arm around Adair's shoulder. "You are pale, wife, are you all right?"

She shook away the unsettling thoughts that were besieging her and nodded slowly. "Of course, why would anything be the matter?"

"You are pale," he said again.

Adair cleared her throat. "I am always pale. I am a dove."

Vinos chuckled and Dom shot him a dirty look. "I am merely concerned for your welfare," he said.

She smiled. "I assure you that I am fine. Thank you for your concern, husband."

Dom knew that there was something stewing in his wife's beautiful head. He could almost see the wheels turning. He would have to persuade her later to tell him what was bothering her. He found himself smiling. He would enjoy the methods of persuasion immensely. Turning back to Adair, he said "We will have to leave for dove lands immediately."

Adair was surprised; she had expected some resistance from her new husband. After all he was a hawk. "You would travel with me to the dove lands?"

Dom laughed. "Of course. Did you think I would stay here?"

She shrugged. "Well, I didn't know you would be so agreeable."

Dom took her delicate hands in his. "Vinos Aerean has informed me of the dove's resolve to attack the hawks. I fear that we cannot wait any longer to make the trip to the dove lands. We must announce our union to the dove people and settle the unrest in the Dove Council."

Adair was shocked. She turned, stunned, to Vinos. "Is what Dom says true? Has the Dove Council proclaimed that they will attack the hawks?"

Vinos nodded. "They sent the missive this morning."

Adair was fuming. "You knew," she said to Dom. "You knew this morning that the doves were planning to attack and you didn't tell me."

He sighed. "I knew that such matters had to be discussed between us all in private. I wanted to introduce you to my people first; I wanted to establish your link to them before we tackled the problem with the doves."

Adair narrowed her eyes. "Problem with the doves," she ground out.

Dom laughed. "You are overly sensitive my dear."

"When you keep important secrets from me, *husband*, of course I am sensitive. We are in this marriage together, are we not? Your people are my people and my people yours, I

believe. I will not have such matters kept from me," she finished sweetly.

Dom was taken aback. His wife's words were sharp and accusing but her expression couldn't be more serene and kind. His wife had talons. How wonderful. He grinned; she was becoming more hawk than dove.

Vinos could not help but be intrigued by what he was witnessing. His princess had feelings for her hawk husband. She was trying to shield her emotions, but Vinos knew her too well. He knew that she cared for Dominion Weathermead. What fascinated him more was the hawk king's naked feelings. The fierce hawk king had strong emotions for his dove wife. He knew little about the hawk king, and what he did know sent shivers down his spine, but watching him now as he was with his wife it was difficult to believe that this man would slaughter defenseless dove children in their beds. Dominion Weathermead looked on Adair Salomar with such tenderness and adoration that even Vinos could not help but see. He wondered if Adair could see the blatant need and want on her husband's face.

He looked at Adair. Her face was contorted with anger and frustration. He sighed; Adair had always been a little dense when it came to matters of love. Vinos couldn't stifle his laughter. It was going to be wonderful to see these two people discover their feelings for one another.

Both of them turned to Vinos. The dove courier was laughing uncontrollably.

Dominion cleared his throat. "Would you like a glass of water, Vinos Aerean?" he asked. "It may help with that ... cough."

Vinos cleared his throat and his expression went quickly blank. "No, I'm fine."

Adair found Vinos' behavior odd. "Yes, are you all right?"

Vinos chuckled. He couldn't help himself. These two seemingly different people had found one another and were more alike than even they knew. Who would ever have imagined the dove princess and the hawk prince? Suddenly Vinos became somber. "Princess..."

She cut him off. "Adair, please call me Adair. You and I are past formalities."

He nodded. "Adair, the Council is intent on war."

She settled herself on a cushy chair and nodded. "Because of my absence?"

Vinos ran a hand through his hair and shook his head. "Perhaps the first reason was your disappearance, but now the Council is fueled by more than that."

Adair waited.

Vinos' expression was fierce. "Lord Bacchas."

She stiffened. "Lord Bacchas has been stirring up trouble." She should have known.

Vinos nodded. "Lord Bacchas has been very vocal on the subject of your disappearance. He is certain that you are dead, murdered at the hands of the hawks. He wishes the doves to retaliate and launch a full-scale attack. He has fueled the Council with a ferocious need for violence. I have never seen the likes of it before."

Adair was furious. *Lord Bacchas*. She had given him much too much freedom. She had always loathed punishing the nobles; she needed their endorsement and their help, especially in the past when the doves were feuding with the hawks. But now she knew that her kindness may have been a disservice to her people. She needed an iron hand when dealing with the difficult Dove Council. She needed to show them that she, not they, ruled the doves.

She would not allow this attack to take place. And she would deal with Lord Bacchas. It was time. "I agree. We must make haste to the dove lands, husband," Adair stated firmly.

Dom nodded. "We leave tomorrow at first light."

"Will you travel with an entourage, Your Majesty?" Vinos asked of Dominion.

Dominion turned. "I will bring some of my guards with me, of course. I will not, however, travel with a full entourage. I wish my wife's people to know that I am not invading their lands. I want them to know that I am coming into them as a guest."

Vinos nodded. "You must be careful," he turned to Adair, "You both must be careful. Lord Bacchas ... I fear that he is not sane."

"I understand, my friend, and I thank you for your warning. I will deal with Lord Bacchas."

"He truly despises you, Adair." Vinos said hesitantly. He did not understand the Lord's anger and malice against their princess. She was a kind and gentle soul and had led their people well. Lord Bacchas could pretend in front of the Council that he cared what happened to their princess, but

when he was not in the presence of the Council, he was not so mellow in his opinions. He had heard Bacchas' ravings against the princess many times when the Lord was in his cups. He knew, even if no one else did, that Lord Bacchas was an evil man, intent on wicked doings.

Adair turned to Vinos with kind eyes. "Will you fly with us, Vinos?"

Vinos understood that this was a time of reckoning. If he stood with his princess, he declared to the entirety that he approved of her union to the hawk king. Yes, this was a moment of reckoning, a moment of history. He graced Adair and Dominion with a brilliant smile. "I would be honored to fly with you, my Princess." Turning to Dom, he added, "And you, my King."

Adair felt tears gathering and wiped them away. She turned to her husband and there was a fierce light in her somber silver eyes. "So, we fly, and we will rule the day."

He nodded. There was an equal amount of furor in his eyes. He was so proud of his beautiful dove wife. They would show the world that hawks and doves could proudly unite and rule the Aviante skies.

Chapter Ten

The sky was burnt orange, crystal pink and brilliant at the meridian. The colors swirled together in a vortex of crisp winds and white clouds. It was a perfect dawn, a perfect day to fly.

Adair took a deep breath and cast a last look around. The high walls of the Weathermead palace stood in front of her like a stark reminder of what failure would mean. The walls of the fortress would be her prison for all her days if she and Dom failed to bring peace to the hawks and the doves. She refused to consider bringing life into a world of imprisonment, for that was what life would be. There would be nothing but continual death, fear, and pain if Lord Bacchas succeeded in persuading the Council to attack the hawks. There was no room for failure.

"Are you ready?" Dom asked.

She lifted her head proudly. "Yes, I am ready. Are you ready, husband?"

Dom flashed his wife a devilish smile. "Oh yes wife, I am ready."

She focused her energy and let the warm sensation of shifting flow through her body. She imagined her body stretching, pulling and taking its natural dove form. The heat started low in her belly and moved upward. Soon her body began to shimmer and pulsate and within moments long, graceful white wings formed on her smooth, perfect back.

Dom found his wife's transformation miraculous. Shifting to hawk or dove was as natural to an Aviante as the legs they wore in human form. He had never seen a dove royal shift before. It was a revelation. "You are beautiful," He whispered.

She smiled shyly, and inclined her head, "It is now your turn, husband. Let us see those fine wings of yours."

He laughed at the implied challenge. His shifting took on a slightly different form than his dove wife. He began to glow so brilliantly that Adair had to shield her eyes from the light. Dom's back literally stretched out and the skin separated seamlessly to allow for the absolutely huge golden brown wings that sprouted from his back within seconds.

Adair's mouth dropped open. It was amazing. Her husband's shifting took less time than her own. His wings were large and very imposing and the light that he radiated still pulsed from his body. He was truly magnificent. "I have never seen a hawk shift before," she admitted.

Dom laughed. "I wouldn't think so." He sidled over to his wife's side and ran a hand possessively down her very naked side. "I am glad that I am the only hawk you will ever see this way." He placed a gentle kiss behind Adair's small shell-shaped ear. He smiled when she shivered deliciously. "It is time."

Adair closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She found herself in need of a little comfort and reached out for Dom's strong hand. She let out a sigh of relief when Dom squeezed her hand reassuringly. "Let's fly."

* * * *

The travel to the dove lands took less than half a day. The terrain changed remarkably within a span of two hours. The mountains disappeared and long dry plains stretched out in front of the traveling party. Soon there were brooks and streams and rock formations that signaled the fact that they were closing in on the Salomar palace.

Adair felt her heart beat faster and her breath catch as familiar sights flew past her eyes. She bit her lip in excitement when they flew over the amazing rocks of Toria. The rocks of Toria were a landmark of the dove lands; three towering rocks with jagged edges stretching up toward the sky and banking the land impressively.

She had played in the nooks and crannies of the rocks as a child. Some of her happiest memories were of the time spent at Toria. When her nursemaid had learned of her passion for the rocks, she had immediately informed the royal family, which had put a stop to her visits to the rocks. No one believed that she was safe so far from the dove palace, and they were afraid of possible falling debris killing their only heir. It had been a sad day for Adair when she had been confined to the palace, her freedom curtailed so greatly. "We are not far now," Adair said. "It is over the next horizon."

Salomar Palace was an impressive sight. Whitewashed stone, large turrets, and a massive circular moat made up the dove palace.

Dom thought the palace was beautiful; much like this beautiful wife, but it was not a palace that would stand attack well. The dove palace was delicate, lovely, an architectural masterpiece, but it was far from a fortress. The walls would

be easy to scale and the turrets had no lookout towers. Intruders could easily fly into the palace before the dove guards could mount an attack. He scowled. How could the doves have kept their prized princess within such a flimsy structure, especially in time of war?

"Vinos has heralded our coming," Adair shouted. Her face was glowing with joy and excitement.

Dom saw the activity below and braced himself. He followed his wife's lead and went in for the landing. They landed in the Salomar courtyard with much fanfare.

Dom didn't wait. He shifted immediately. He did not want wings if he had to fight the doves.

Adair did not have a moment to breathe before she was swept up in a pair of strong arms and swung around in dizzying circles. She started laughing; she knew whose arms she was in. "Pintos, Pintos put me down."

Pintos Throy, the captain of the dove guards, quickly released his princess. "You have had us up in arms, child," Pintos said. His eyes were censuring but his tone friendly.

Adair nodded. "I am sorry Pintos, more sorry than I can say. I did not mean for this to happen. I was attacked and..." She stopped immediately when she realized how public their forum was. She put a reassuring hand on Pintos' arm. "I will tell you a little later; now tell me, what has been happening."

Pintos' jovial face was now all frowns and somber lines. "It has been ... difficult, Princess." For the first time Pintos looked beyond his beloved princess to see the imposing hawk standing possessively at her back. His eyes narrowed. "And who would this be?"

Adair took a deep breath. Oh Avar, how was she going to deal with this? She plastered a large false smile onto her face and brought Dom close to her. She turned to the glowering Pintos. "Pintos, this is Dom. Dom, I would like to introduce you to Pintos Throy, the captain of the guard."

Dom took the measure of the overly large dove. He did not like what he saw. The captain of the dove guard stood at his wife's side. He was tall and broad-shouldered, and wore his sword and a pair of knives at his waist. He wore his long silver hair tied back into a ponytail and his eyes were a remarkable shade of clear blue. They were also frighteningly intelligent and probing. He might have been able to overlook all of this if not for the fact that the captain of the dove guard still had his hand on his wife's waist. This he could not overlook. He gently pulled Adair away from the guard. "I am Dominion Weathermead, I am also..." He didn't get to finish what he was saying before there was a sword at his throat.

Adair screamed and made a move forward when her husband's hand stopped her. He shook his head.

"Adair, if you move—he will slit my throat, will you not reassure my overanxious friend?" Dom was studying the dove guard intently.

Pintos nodded curtly, his hand steady on the sword. "Do not move, Princess. I will kill our enemy now."

Adair shook her head; her eyes were wide and full of fear. "You would be a traitor to our cause, Pintos, if you did so."

Pintos turned his head to look at Adair. He did not remove the sword from Dom's neck. "What nonsense is this?"

She took a deep breath before speaking. "We are at peace, Pintos. At peace. What Dom was trying to tell you, before you went caveman on us and pulled out that sword, is that we're married." Adair let her words sink in and watched Pintos' expression. It was stormy.

Pintos clenched his jaw. It was not possible. His princess could not have bond-mated with this monster, this atrocity. She had been abducted and held against her will and obviously they had done something to her mind. She would never have willingly married this hawk. He smiled, calmer now. "You are distraught, my Princess. You are not thinking correctly."

Adair had had enough. She was Princess Royal and this behavior would not be tolerated. She fell to one knee and executed a perfect drop sweep. Her move caught Pintos unawares and he fell with a thud to his back, releasing his weapon. Adair easily picked up the heavy sword and stood above the fallen Guard Captain. "Now, are you ready to listen?"

He nodded jerkily. "I see lack of use has not dulled your technique," Pintos murmured.

She smiled slightly. "One can always practice in one's mind. The mind is the most powerful weapon of all; you taught me that, Pintos."

Pintos graced Adair with a smile of his own. "Yes, yes I did, Princess. Now, tell me what is going on."

Adair held out her hand and waited until Pintos accepted it to help him to his feet. Once Pintos was back on his feet, and away from her husband, she turned to them both. "I suggest

that we find a more private setting for this conversation, Pintos."

He nodded and made a sweeping motion with his arm. "After you."

Adair gave Dom her hand and they both began to stride toward the palace.

Pintos watched the couple with an expression of absolute hatred on his handsome face.

* * * *

Pintos paced back and forth. "How could you be so reckless?" he demanded of Adair.

She smiled. "When have I been anything but reckless, Pintos?" she inquired cheekily.

Pintos chose not to answer.

Dom laughed. His wife was charming.

Adair sighed. "Pintos, you more than anyone should understand." Pintos had been there for Adair when she had lost all her family. He had held her and comforted her and promised her a better tomorrow. She had thought that he would understand the necessity of her actions.

Pintos slammed his fist down on the nearest table, making Adair jump. "Of course I want peace, Adair, but not at this cost."

Adair laughed. "What cost, my marriage to Dom? Pintos, this is not a hardship for me." Adair found that she was thinking of Dom and the nights in his arms and was suddenly blushing. She quickly controlled herself. "Dominion is a good man. Why do you insist on comparing him to one long dead?"

Pintos turned away. The very thought of his Adair in this hawk's arms made him ill. How could she bear to let him touch her, for they must have consummated the union to make it legal? His beautiful Adair had let this filthy monster have her, and by the blush on her soft cheeks she had enjoyed herself. "What you have done cannot be undone," Pintos ground out. He forced his voice to come out calm and controlled. He was the captain of the dove guards and he could control his temper better than this.

Adair rushed forward and wrapped her arms around Pintos desperately. "Oh please, Pintos, do not be upset. Please. I need your support in this matter. We go up against formidable adversaries and I need you in my corner. We have always been the best of friends; say you understand what I have done."

Pintos nodded. "Yes, yes I understand. You are our princess and you know best. If you claim that this hawk is instrumental in peace between our nations then I believe you and will back your claim. You will never lose me or my support, Adair." He smiled down at her and kissed her forehead gently.

Adair was grateful beyond words. "Oh, thank you."

Pintos gently ran a hand down Adair's soft hair. He would never love anyone as he loved Adair Salomar. He could never cause her pain or hurt. He would soothe her feelings now and let her feel safe in his support until the time came to rid himself of her hawk protector. Adair did not understand the wiles of the hawks, but he did. Pintos knew that Dominion Weathermead would only use Adair for his own greedy, selfish

purposes and in the end would destroy her along with all of the doves. If she did not have the strength to rid herself of the hawk warrior then he would. "I will always be here for you, Adair."

She nodded against his chest. Pintos had been her oldest and greatest friend, not to mention her ally. She did not know how she would have borne her childhood years without him.

Dom watched the play between his wife and her captain with mounting anger and growing concern. The captain watched his wife with singular intent, and that intent was not as paternal as his wife would expect. He did not like the gleam in Pintos Throy's eyes. He would have to keep a close eye out for the dove guard. He got up and took his wife's hand gently. He was triumphant when she quickly extricated herself from the dove guard to come to him. There was no question in his mind that Adair thought of Pintos Throy as a friend and mentor. There were no romantic feelings there. His eyes narrowed when they came to rest on Pintos. However, the dove guard was another matter altogether. "Would you show me our home, wife?" he asked quietly.

Adair smiled. "Of course." She turned to Pintos. "We will speak more on this later."

Pintos nodded. "Of course, Princess." He watched as Adair and her hawk left the room. He had much to think about. And even more to do.

* * * *

Adair enjoyed the expressions that filtered over her husband's face as they took in the Salomar palace. Adair was

proud of her home. It was not the fortress that Weathermead palace was but it was a home, a place of beauty and grace that had made living so sheltered a life a little easier. If one is going to be confined, it is easier to be confined within a padded cell.

They walked slowly amongst the trees and fragrant flowers. The Salomar gardens were truly magnificent. Adair settled herself on a large stone bench. She took a deep breath and inhaled the sweet scent that surrounded her. Dom followed her down on the bench and took her cold hand within his.

He pulled her close. "Are you worried?"

She cleared her throat. "Worried about what?"

He laughed. "If you wish to play it that way, we will." Dom looked around. "I cannot believe you have gardens *inside* the palace."

It was her turn to laugh. "Why not?" she asked. She snuggled more deeply into her husband's side.

Dom felt his chest tighten. His wife's nearness was like a drug. His senses were instantly sharp and aware. He needed her now. He stood up and pulled Adair to her feet. Giving gave her a sensuous smile, he announced, "I do not believe I have seen the entirety of the gardens." He gently led her over to the brush they had bypassed when first entering the gardens. It was thick and dense, with small trees and a heavy growth of tangled flowers. "I believe this will become my favorite part of the Salomar gardens."

She laughed. "There is nothing to see here, it is mostly weeds, husband." Adair let out a small yelp when Dom tugged

her down by the ties of her dress. She had one moment to protest before her dress was pulled down to her waist to bare her full breasts to the fragrant air and her husband's avid eyes.

"Oh but I believe that there is much to see here, wife," he said with a leer.

She blushed and felt heat suffuse her body. "Now?" She asked shyly.

He laughed and lowered his head. He gently blew on her nipple watching it grow tight and hard. "Yes, now."

Adair reached out and slowly stroked him. She bit her lip when she heard him growl low in his throat. She felt hot and cold simultaneously. Small goosebumps ran up and down her arms and she was already beginning to tingle. She gasped, not able to stifle the moan that emitted from her throat when he took her nipple within his warm, wet mouth and caressed it with his tongue. She pulled his head close and began to undulate her hips, begging for more. "Please, oh Dom, please I need..."

He smiled against her breast. "I know what you need, sweet. I need it too." He pulled off his breeches and shirt, quickly divested Adair of her dress, and joined her on the soft ground. When Dom's naked body made contact with Adair they both moaned in relief. He reached down to stroke his wife and found her already wet and hot to his touch. He smiled. "Do you want me?"

Adair gasped at her husband's shallow touch. She tossed her head back but couldn't manage to laugh through her dry throat. "Yes, yes of course I want you." She pushed her hips

forward, desperate for more intimate contact. She grabbed his hair and tried to pull him down.

Dom resisted. His entire body was pulsing and screaming for release but he would not hurry this. He kept himself propped over his beautiful dove wife and teased her with his long hair. She was moving so delightfully under him, begging him with her body and hot words to take her. He dipped his hand between her thighs and bit her nipples gently. She bucked and he chuckled low in his throat.

Adair could bear it no longer. She had to have him. She reached out with her hand and enclosed his shaft. He stilled and she began to run her hand lightly up and down his cock. He grew larger and harder within her hand and she could feel him pulsing with life. She was in awe.

Dom parted her legs and caressed her belly with the palm of his hand. He was so full; he needed his wife around him. She was so wet he could see her glistening and slowly beginning to drip. It was time. With one sure thrust he imbedded himself within his beautiful, passionate wife. He thrilled to the cries that she made from the back of her throat and the way that she arched immediately up toward him. She wrapped her legs around his waist and met his thrust with abandon.

Adair felt her husband hard and full within her body. His chest was already slick with sweat and his beautiful golden eyes were watching every move that she made. She licked her lips slowly and felt a blush spread over her body as her husband's hot gaze followed the movement of her tongue against her lips. Why she was blushing just *now* was beyond

her. She let out a small scream when he pressed more deeply into her and molded her breasts with his large hands.

He took up a slow rhythmic motion with his hips, pressing into his wife gently; letting her feel every movement, every thrust.

She would have none of it. She raked his back with her nails and pulled him to her with her thighs, urging him on with every motion of her hips. Her breath came out in short gasps when Dom's thrusts became faster and more impatient.

He grabbed her legs with his hands and locked them about his waist. He thrust into her hot, wet, willing body, ferociously taking in every moan, every gasp she made. He felt himself tauten and pulse, he was so close. Sweat poured off of his brow and his pace quickened. He waited a split second more, took in his wife's accelerated breathing and questing movements and let go. He poured every inch of himself out, meeting Adair breath for breath, beat for beat. They came together—as one.

Adair panted, her heart pounding furiously. She could feel energy building within her body, great tidal waves of warm energy pulsing and building within her. She arched, the energy broke through her and she screamed out her pleasure. White lights and arches of color swam in front of her eyes. She felt both alive and spent at the same time. She let her arms fall to her sides. Her body was aching and sore, but it felt wonderful. She tried to shift to her side but found she couldn't with her husband's heavy, sated form lying fully on top of her. She giggled.

Dom lifted his head a little, his eyes were still partially closed and his brow sweaty and warm. "Are you laughing at me, madam?" he asked good-naturedly.

She nodded. "Yes, that would be a yes."

He began to tickle her side, delighting in her gasps and protests. "Laugh at me, will you?"

She wriggled uncontrollably, trying to get away from her husband's nimble fingers. "No, no, stop. Please stop, oh please." She couldn't stop laughing, her sides beginning to hurt.

"Do you surrender?"

She nodded. "Yes, yes, I surrender."

Dom let out a great shout of triumph and stopped tickling her. "Ah ha, I win again." He was smiling and crowing.

Adair let out a giant harrumph and rolled to her side. "You only win because you cheat, husband."

He was indignant. "I have no need to cheat. I am clearly better at this game than you."

She pulled on her dress and nodded. "If that is what you want to believe, fine." She stood up and gingerly began to walk away from him. She counted to ten, waiting. When he ran after her she laughed inwardly. Men were so predictable.

She plastered an innocent look on her face when he spun her around. "Yes?" She asked without guile.

Dom looked down at his wife's earnest face and couldn't help himself. He burst out laughing. Pulling her into his arms, and nuzzled her hair. She smelled like sweet cream and roses, an intoxicating combination. "Will you show me the rest of the palace, Adair?"

Adair felt her heart skip a beat. She nodded. "We haven't seen the master chamber yet." She gasped, realizing what she had said and the implied message, and began to stammer. "I mean ... I haven't shown you ... we haven't seen..." She broke off helplessly.

He framed her face with his hands and looked into her eyes. "Do not be nervous, wife. Nothing has changed except now *I* am a guest in *your* home." He kissed the tip of her adorable nose. "Now, show me."

* * * *

Adair and Dom had just rounded the corner when they heard screams. Both rushed forward to find Solange cornered by three dove guards who were taunting and trying to grab her. She was fending them off as best she could without any weapons.

"Desist!" Adair roared. Her voice carried across the room and echoed off of the stone walls.

The guards stopped immediately and moved back. Solange fell against the stone helplessly. She pulled the straps of her torn dress together and tried to regain some control. Large, fat tears rolled down her dirty cheeks. She wiped them away with her sleeve.

Adair advanced on the guards with fury in her eyes. A great red haze of anger had swept through her. She could barely see through the film that had covered her eyes. "You all dishonor yourselves and the doves. How dare you—how dare you attack this woman..." Adair broke off. She could hardly speak, she was so furious.

"Princess, she is only a hawk," one of the guards said.

Adair was shocked. "Only a hawk? You wonder why we are at war, why so many of us perish, why so many of our loved ones die? Look to yourselves this day for the answer. This is unacceptable; this woman is a *guest* in my home. She is my *friend*. You and your villainous behavior will not be tolerated."

"What happens here?" A voice called out.

Adair turned to see Pintos striding towards them. She let out a breath. Thank goodness he was here. "Pintos, these men were attacking my guest."

Pintos looked to where Solange was struggling to set herself to rights. He felt a wave of disgust roll through him but he masked his contempt with false concern. He turned to Adair. "I am sorry, Princess. I made my men aware of our ... unusual guests and told them that no harm was to come to them, and that we are at peace. I take full responsibility for their traitorous actions."

She shook her head. "Don't be foolish, Pintos. I do not blame you for their actions. You told them. You fulfilled your duties. What they do is not your fault. They must take responsibility for their actions." Her eyes were hard as flint. "Take them to the dungeons; I must think on what is to be done with them."

Pintos nodded. He confiscated his men's weapons and led them away.

Adair rushed to Solange. "Oh Avar, are you all right?"

Solange smiled tentatively at her. "I am fine. They did little harm. You stopped them before..." her voice quivered and broke.

Adair pulled Solange into an embrace and held her close, stroking her hair.

Dom held back. When he had seen the dove guards attacking Solange he wanted to run forward and rip their hearts out. He would have liked nothing better than to tear them limb from limb, but he had to restrain himself. He knew that he was in dove lands and that it was his wife's responsibility to punish and to take control of her men. Her people had hardly begun to accept him and they would never accept him if he attacked the guards. He could not undermine his wife's authority in her lands either. She was Princess Royal and she was the ultimate power here—not him.

Adair tied the remains of Solange's dress straps to her shoulder to keep it from falling. "Come now, let me help you." She put an arm around Solange's shoulder and helped her to walk. She turned to Dom, "I am going to take Solange to her chamber. Could you find Vinos? I need to speak with him."

Dom nodded. "Where?"

"He keeps a house not too far from the palace. It has lovely orange shutters;" Adair smiled slightly. "Vinos can be adorably domestic."

"I will see to it," Dom said.

"Thank you. I will meet you both in the meeting chamber." Adair ushered Solange through the door. Avar save them all, this attack could only be the beginning.

* * * *

Dom found Vinos Aerean's house easily. It was a lovely structure. Four stories sectioned off with sloping rooftops.

There were large windows and yes indeed, the shutters were orange. Surrounding the house were blooming flowers and fragrant trees.

"What are you doing here?"

Dom turned and saw Vinos walking toward him. "Vinos, Adair has need of you in the meeting chamber."

Vinos came instantly alert. "Is everything alright?"

Dom was still tense with anger over Solange's attack. "There was an incident with one of my people. Your guards attacked one of my entourage."

Vinos clenched his hands. Did not one of them understand? All spoke of peace but no one was willing to sacrifice anything for it. No one except their princess and her new consort, the hawk king. This attack would only fuel their anger and make the possibility of peace more difficult. "Let us go now," Vinos said and quickly began to stride back to the palace.

* * * *

Adair wiped Solange's face with a damp cloth. It was already beginning to bruise and her lip was split and caked with dry blood. "Oh, I am so sorry, Solange."

Solange shook her head. "Do not be sorry. It is not your fault."

Adair could not get over Solange's goodness. "Do not let me off the hook, Solange. It is my fault. These are my people, my lands, and I should have protected you from those men."

"You cannot watch over me all of the time, Adair. This attack was not your fault, it was the fault of those who planned and attacked me. Did you blame me when you were attacked by the hawk guards, the guards who wounded you so badly?"

Adair shook her head mutely.

Solange smiled. "Exactly. We can only do so much, Adair. Do me a favor, please."

"Anything, my friend," Adair said.

"Make this peace happen." Solange's eyes were fervent. "You and our king can make this dream a reality. Do not let any other child be born to a world where warfare rules. Please, forge this peace."

Adair kissed Solange's bruised cheek. "I promise. I promise you, Solange, that we will have peace." Adair nodded. "At any cost, I promise it."

* * * *

"I will call an assembly meeting and we will announce our intentions to the Dove Council." Adair said proudly.

Vinos and Dom shared a mutually dubious look. Vinos spoke. "Do you think that the wisest idea, Princess?"

Adair flung out her hands. "Adair, Adair, Adair, call me *Adair*."

Vinos stifled a grin. "Adair, do you think this is the wisest course of action?"

Adair nodded. "The people follow me, but the nobles follow the Council, at least in intention. The Dove Council is so steeped in our tradition that we must break through them to

break through anything. We must win over the Council, do you understand?"

Vinos sighed. "I understand Adair, but the problem of Lord Bacchas still persists."

She narrowed her eyes. "He will not be a problem. I will deal with Lord Bacchas."

Dom watched the change pass over his wife's face. If this Lord Bacchas was truly as evil and as problematic as Vinos said, then *he* would be the one dealing with this Lord Bacchas.

"When do you wish to make your announcement, Adair?" Vinos asked.

She cleared her throat. "The crowning ceremony would be the ideal time."

Vinos' eyes widened and his mouth dropped open in shock. "You wish to announce your peace intentions and your unity plans with the Council during your crowning ceremony?"

Adair nodded. "What is so strange about that, Vinos? I will be crowned queen; it is the ideal time to show my authority."

Vinos' jaw worked up and down slowly. "It is also the ideal time for an assassination attempt, Adair. You will cause an absolute uproar with your announcement. Do you truly think that such a public arena is the best place to state your intentions?"

"I wish all my people to be aware of what I intend to do with our nation once I am queen. I will not slink away to tell the Council in private. I will share everything with my people. They are the most important part of this; none of our plans will be possible without the backing of the people."

Dom and Vinos knew by the look on Adair's face that there was no changing her mind. Personally Dom thought she made perfect sense. However, what Vinos said was also true—assassins would have a clear shot of his wife in such an open field. "When are you to be crowned, my love?"

Adair's eyes popped open. Had he called her *my love*? She had never heard him call her *my love* before. Did it mean something? Did it mean *anything*? "In a fortnight," she said quietly.

Dom nodded. He was oblivious to his wife's raging thoughts. "So, we will have enough time to plan the security measures." Dom shared another look with Vinos. Vinos understood what he was saying. There could be no taking chances with Adair's safety.

"I will be fine. Both of you stop worrying, please." Adair let out a nervous giggle. "You are both acting like overanxious parents."

Dom placed a kiss on her forehead. Her skin was cool to the touch. Yes, she was definitely nervous. "We are just concerned for your safety."

She frowned and pulled away. "Well, don't be. I can take care of myself."

Dom and Vinos began to laugh while Adair looked on, shocked.

"What are you laughing at?" Adair demanded.

Vinos couldn't stop laughing. Adair had been getting into mischief since the ripe old age of three. Growing up hadn't tamed her need for mischief.

Dom knew his dove wife perhaps better than she knew herself. She was bright and intelligent, that was for sure, but she was also a magnet for trouble. Trouble had a way of following her.

Adair was incensed. "You don't think I'm capable of taking care of myself?" she demanded of the two men.

Dom wiped a tear away from his eye and held up his hand. "You are quite capable my love in many things, but not in all." He smiled. "If you remember how I found you."

Adair turned her back on him. "That was not my fault."

"I know, I know, but admit that without my help you would have been left quite defenseless." His blood still ran cold at the memory of how he found his beautiful wife. If he had not arrived just at that moment the consequences ... well the consequences were too terrible to imagine.

"But you were there," Adair said gently, running a reassuring hand up her husband's strong arm.

He pulled her into his side. "Yes and I always will be there for you. So let me and Vinos do this, please. Let us not worry so for your safety."

Adair sighed. She would never win this argument, not entirely. She would have to allow Dom and Vinos to take over the security measures. That way all parties would be satisfied and Adair and Dom and Vinos could have what they wanted. "Fine, fine, you may have all the security you wish." She let out a breath in a giant rush. She rolled her eyes when both men smiled widely. Oh Avar,—men.

Chapter Eleven

The tension in the Salomar palace was beyond measure, but Adair was pleased that everyone seemed to be behaving themselves. There were no more threats or taunts and the doves seemed, overall, to be ignoring the few hawks on the premises. She would have preferred the doves to include the hawks, but she guessed that would be asking for too much at this point.

"Is this lace too much?" Solange asked, holding up a delicate layer of lace for Adair's inspection.

Solange's voice woke Adair out of her reverie. Her eyes misted over and she smiled. "No, it is beautiful."

Solange sighed. "Adair, please, do not cry, really."

Adair laughed. "I can't help it, it is beautiful."

Solange had to admit that the dress for Adair's crowning was incredible. The gown was heavy, weighing at least ten stones. It was luxurious velvet with dripping lace and semi-precious gems. The shade of royal purple was extraordinary and very rare. Solange was preparing to add a long strand of lace to the hem of the gown and wanted Adair's opinion on its necessity.

Adair loved the gown, she loved the lace, and she loved the gems. She had been waiting to wear this gown for her entire life. She would be crowned queen in less than a fortnight. "Will you stand with me, Solange?"

"What?"

"At the crowning ceremony, will you stand with me?"

Solange was wide-eyed. "You wish me to be there ... with you?"

Adair nodded. "Of course, I would be honored if you stood with me."

Solange felt joy spear through her. She had never imagined to have a friend like Adair, and to be as happy as she was right now. "I would love to stand with you."

Adair grinned happily. All was right with the world, or it would be soon.

* * * *

"I can do this." Adair studied her reflection in the glass, she saw a stranger staring back at her. This stranger was dressed impressively in velvet, silk, and lace and her hair was twisted up in a loose chignon. Her skin was glowing with health and happiness and her eyes were bright with anticipation.

"You are beautiful beyond words," Dom said from the doorway.

She spun around, or she tried to in the heavy dress that was weighing her down. "Dom," her voice caught in her throat. By Avar, she was nervous. "I'm being crowned today."

He laughed. "And you will make a superb queen, my love."

His words calmed her slightly, but she was still jittery.

"Dom, I ... I'm not prepared."

"Yes, you are."

"But..."

"No 'buts' my love, you have been prepared for this your entire life. You will rule the doves and we will rule the Aviante together, as one. Destiny, Adair—this is our shared destiny."

The Dove Queen
by Mara Lee

"Destiny," she echoed. Adair took a deep breath and nodded, raising her chin. She was prepared to meet her destiny head on.

* * * *

Adair heard nothing. Not the shouts, nor the cheers and trumpets, that heralded her arrival. She saw nothing ... not the women, men, and children who smiled and threw flowers in her direction. She was focused on only one thing, one certainty—the crown; she was going to wear the crown.

"Adair Salomar, come and greet me, child." The dove high priest held out his arms.

She moved forward and dropped into a graceful curtsy in front of the high priest.

"Come, child; wear the crown as you were meant to." The high priest led Adair into the chapel while the crowd cheered.

It was a day for destiny.

* * * *

Adair couldn't help but smile. The crowning ceremony had gone off without a hitch and she was now sitting at the center of a large banquet table as queen. To Adair's right sat Dom, his own crown sitting proudly atop his head. They had done it. They had kept their promise; they would rule jointly over two peaceful Aviante nations. Adair had made her announcement following the crowning ceremony, and all things considered, it had gone better than she had expected. Her people had reacted much as Dom's had when they had learned that she was his wife. There was a mixture of

disbelief, anger, and pure shock, but Adair was queen and no one spoke against the queen. She had promised peace and peace they would have.

"Well, it seems that no one is throwing food at me," Dom said jovially by Adair's side.

She laughed. Her husband had remembered her words when she had been introduced to the hawk people. "No, they are just *thinking* of throwing food at you."

Dom let his eyes settle around the room. All had gone relatively well. The dove guards had protected and surrounded the parameter in force and had done a good job. He hated to admit it, but Pintos Throy was efficient and a very good Captain of the Guard. He had been certain that there would be some problem at the coronation ceremony but he was happy to be proved wrong. "Now, to bring our people together," he said.

Adair sighed. "Together without killing one another," she countered.

A nod. "It can happen."

She smiled. "It will happen."

"Next, you will have our enemies dine with us." A voice shouted from the back of the room.

Adair let out a breath. Would it have been too much to ask for a day without incident? "Who spoke?" Adair's lips curled when she spotted who had spoken, Lady Lore Whitmore. "If they would like to dine with us, yes, and they are *not* our enemies."

Lady Whitmore laughed. It was a grating laugh. "Of course, I had almost forgotten you married a hawk. It seems that you have a fondness for the enemy."

Adair sighed. Lady Lore Whitmore was not much older than she herself. But she was a sad, bitter dove who had never bond-mated and lived alone. Adair knew that Lore had her eyes set on Lord Bacchas and thought that the union would be more than fitting, if not truly scary. The two of them were like cyanide, bitter and poisonous.

She had guards looking for Lord Bacchas; thus far they had found no trace of him. His home was vacant and the Dove Council claimed no knowledge of his whereabouts. She had her suspicions that Lady Whitmore knew of Lord Bacchas' disappearance and was aiding him, but she had no proof and thus could not accuse her of treachery. "What part of my speech did you not understand, Lore?" Adair asked. She smiled when Lore blushed. She knew it was petty but she did not care for Lady Lore Whitmore, she never had.

"Ah yes, your speech, you wish us to live in peace with the hawks. You want us to open our doors to them, let our children play with theirs and let them into our lives." Lore narrowed her beady eyes. "And what shall we do when they murder us in our beds? What will you do when the hawks slaughter your people, Your Highness, oh, I mean Your Majesty? The hawks bring nothing but trouble."

Adair tilted her head to one side. "The only one I see 'bringing' trouble is you, Lore."

Lore opened her mouth to speak.

Adair silenced her with a swift slash of her hand. "No, you have said your piece, Lady Whitmore, now I shall say mine. We have lived centuries with pain, death and fear. We have closed our hearts and minds and have let anger rule our souls for so long we do not know how to let love and peace enter us. But I tell you now—I will not have us live under such fear any longer. *I* have placed *my* faith, trust, and yes, my people in the hands of Dominion Weathermead, the king of the hawks. In turn, Dominion Weathermead has entrusted *me* with *his* people, his lands, and yes, his very self. We are linked now and there is no going back. Can any of you truly tell me that you would choose a life of fear over a life of peace and serenity?" She waited. Silence met her words. She nodded. "I thought not." Adair let out a deep sigh. "Can you not see what happens here? We have a choice, let fear rule us, or we rule ourselves. I for one will not live in shadows any longer. We were all born under the same Aviante sky and by Avar we will all live free." She finished her speech and waited for the uproar. There was none. She nodded slowly. "I am pleased to see that we all understand one another." She smiled. "Let us dine now. Let us look forward to a bright future, together." She sat and turned to Dominion, who nodded at her approvingly.

Adair was pleased. She caught Lady Lore Whitmore's angered face and sighed. Yes, there was always seemed to be one bad apple among the bunch.

* * * *

Solange was settling into an easy routine. She was adapting well, *minuets* always did. It was part of their makeup.

She reached down and clipped a rose, placing it in her basket. She liked to keep fresh flowers in the master bedchamber. She knew that many of the dove palace servants resented her presence in their queen's life. They resented that it was a hawk that served their queen as a maidservant. Few spoke to her, but it didn't bother Solange, for few had spoken to her in the Weathermead household. She was a *minuet*. She did not make friends easily.

"Do you know you are very hard to find?" Vinos had looked everywhere for the hawk maiden who had been haunting his thoughts. Finally, he had to speak to his queen to ask if she knew the whereabouts of the difficult to find hawk woman. He had felt ridiculous asking his queen for something so trivial. But desperate times called for desperate measures.

Solange felt her heart jump. "Am I?" She asked quietly, going back to clipping flowers.

Vinos frowned. She was paying him almost no attention. He was unused to such indifference. "Why did you not tell me who you were?" He asked.

"Who I was? What do you mean?" Solange placed the basket on the ground and turned to Vinos.

"You cared for our queen when she was injured; you kept her safe in hawk lands."

Solange blushed. "You are grossly overstating my part in all of this. Our king kept Adair safe. I ... I merely was there to

help her adjust. Adair is quite self-sufficient. My part was relatively small. I am only a *minuet* after all."

"A *minuet*?" Vinos asked curiously.

Solange laughed. She was not going to explain this again.

"A *servant*. I am only a servant, my lord."

"Call me Vinos, please."

She shook her head. "It is not proper, my lord."

He came forward and clasped Solange's hands to his chest.

"Damn proper, my name is Vinos, Vinos Aerean."

She pulled her hands free. "I know what your name is my lord. I must go." She picked up the basket and turned to go. Her path was blocked by Vinos' imposing form. She sighed.

"What ... what do you want of me?"

He stepped closer, and smiled when he saw her eyes brighten. He was not alone in his feelings. He knew he wasn't.

"Tell me that you feel what I do, little hawk."

"I don't know what you're talking about." Solange tried to calm her racing heart. She could not have these feelings, not for him, not for anyone.

"*Feelings* little hawk, do you have them?" He brushed a strand of her hair away from her flushed face. "I know you have them and I know you have them for me. From that first meeting, little hawk, you have been in my thoughts." He stepped even closer. "Will you tell me differently?"

Solange couldn't breathe. She had never felt this way before. What were these feelings soaring through her? She couldn't feel for this dove lord. She was a *minuet* and that would never change, her lot in life was set. Why could he not

just let her enjoy what little happiness she had? "Please, my lord, do not do this to me."

"Do what, Solange?" Vinos placed a gentle kiss on her forehead.

She pulled back, shocked. "How did you know?"

"Know?"

"My name, how did you know my name?" She narrowed her eyes. "I never told you my name."

He smiled, "I asked," laughing at Solange's baffled expression. "Did you not think that a possibility my little hawk? I asked our queen."

Solange gasped. "*You didn't.*"

"Why do you look so surprised, Solange. Adair was more than happy to tell me your identity. I do not know why you have kept it hidden for so long."

Solange was mortified. Adair had told Vinos Aerean who she was. Why would she do such a thing? Adair had to know that she was purposely trying to avoid him. Why would she give him the means to find her?

"Solange," Vinos' voice was urgent. "You know you are never far from my thoughts."

She tried to turn away, but he grasped her arm and pulled her to him. "One kiss, Solange, just one kiss."

She shook her head vehemently.

He smiled. "One kiss, to see if this is real." His eyes smiled at her. "If you do not feel it, I will leave you be."

Solange swallowed. "One?" she asked.

"Yes, my shy hawk, one."

She nodded and quickly kissed Vinos' cheek. She made a move to leave and he laughed.

"That was not a kiss." Vinos bent his head; his eyes were sparkling with merriment and intent. "This ... this is a kiss." He claimed her mouth in a searing kiss. Her lips were warm, wet, and soft as down feathers. He explored her depths, loving the texture and feel of her against him. She was a slice of paradise and he wanted to sink into her forever.

Solange knew that she should not be doing this. It was not her place; she was not allowed to feel as she did for such a man. Her heart could never belong to anyone; it was not a free heart. Yet she thrilled at his touch. She wrapped her arms around him and opened her mouth to his questing tongue. He tasted like honey and rich wine and somehow they tasted perfect together. She knew that this might be her only moment to feel such a perfect sensation. She might never have such an opportunity again; she would take this moment then for herself. Solange pressed herself more tightly against Vinos and loved the growl that he emitted.

He had known it would be like this. From the first moment that he had seen her he had known that Solange would be honeyed sweetness in his arms. He knew that her kisses would be paradise and that her soft and supple body would be a piece of heaven on earth. He dug his hands into her lush hair and twisted the thick strands around his fingers. He brought his mouth to her neck and began to suckle gently at the soft skin.

"Oh ... Oh, only one kiss, you said..." Solange managed to stutter out. Her breaths came out short and staccato.

He smiled against her neck. "We are still on our first kiss my love." He ran his tongue up her perfectly curved ear and dipped in ever so gently.

She shivered. "You are cheating," she murmured.

Vinos laughed. "Never," he said hotly against her.

Solange felt her brain fogging up quickly. He felt so wonderful and his mouth was incredible—this was a kiss? She ran her hand up and down his powerful back; she wanted more. More what? What was she doing? Reluctantly, she pulled away. She couldn't be doing this.

Vinos protested immediately. "Solange?"

She shook her head sadly. "I can't do this, Vinos. You could never understand the reasons why I cannot."

He cleared his throat. His body was hot, throbbing and in need. He fought for control. "Try me," he said.

She swallowed. "We cannot be together. I cannot be with anyone."

Vinos was baffled. "What are you talking about?"

Solange dropped her head. "I am a *minuet*, Vinos. I do not belong to myself. I am born to serve. I cannot be served. You wish me to give myself, but you see ... it is not in my possession to give."

Vinos had never heard the likes of it before. "What is this that you say?"

She laughed hysterically. "You see? I knew that you would not understand. You do not have such things in dove society. You must ask your king and queen what I am. They will tell you. If you are still interested in me then, we will talk."

Solange picked up the forgotten basket and hurried out of the gardens. She would not look back. She could not.

He called out, but Solange never once turned back to him. What nonsense was this? A *minuet*, he had never heard of such a thing before. Vinos swore. It was time that he and Adair had a long talk. Vinos was a determined man, and he was determined to have Solange.

* * * *

Adair looked at the healer in disbelief. It couldn't be possible. She and Dom hadn't been together long enough, had they? "You must be mistaken."

Healer Jenkins laughed. "This is not something that I can be mistaken about, child."

She shook her head. "No, it isn't possible, I mean, I would know if I were ... I were..."

"With child?" Healer Jenkins smiled at her queen's baffled expression. "You would not know if it was not something that you had gone through before my queen. You have never had a child before. How would you know the symptoms?"

Adair swallowed. She felt light-headed and short of breath. Of course she knew that Healer Jenkins spoke the truth. But it seemed so unbelievable. A child, oh heavens, she was going to have a baby. She was to bring life into this world.

She bit her lip and forced back tears—her parents, her sister, so many loved ones had she lost to this wretched war. And though she had bonded to Dom there was still part of her that believed that she would never be able to reclaim the love, the *family* that she had lost. But a baby ... her baby—

she would bring new life to the Aviante, and hope for a better tomorrow.

A smile broke out on her face. She was going to be a mother! She was having Dom's baby. "Oh, Avar," she murmured.

Healer Jenkins smiled widely. "Soon there will be a little prince or princess to fuss over. You will have your heir sooner than you thought."

Adair laughed. "That is true." She gasped, "Oh, don't tell Dom."

Healer Jenkins was incensed. "Do you think me mad, my queen? Do you think I would tell our king he is to be a father and rob you of that honor?" She shivered. "Not to mention our king would kill me if I told him what I knew before you did."

Adair nodded. Well, that much was true. "Oh, thank you." Although the news had shocked her, she was overwhelmed and ecstatic at her pregnancy.

"Do not thank *me*, my queen. This is joyful news. Now you make sure to boil all of the herbs that I've left, and then strain them into tea. And call me if you have need of me."

Adair nodded. She hugged her belly. She was going to have a baby.

Chapter Twelve

Dom could not understand his wife's unease. She had been testy all evening. Supper had been a disaster. She had barely touched anything and she had drunk none of her wine. Her mood had deteriorated from there. Currently he was trying to dodge her venomous glances. "Have I done or said something to offend you, wife?" he asked.

Adair glared at Dom and shook her head jerkily. She knew she was being peevish but she couldn't seem to help it. She was uncharacteristically annoyed. "I'm fine, husband."

He cleared his throat. "You are fine?"

She tossed her head. "Obviously."

He turned away so she wouldn't see the laughter in his eyes. His wife was 'obviously' not fine. "Would you like to speak with me, wife, in a more private setting?"

She began to shake her head no, and then changed her mind. "Yes, yes I need to speak with you."

Dom nodded and pulled Adair to her feet.

She gasped. "Now? You mean now?"

He laughed. "There is no better time than the present." He pulled Adair out of the room, ignoring the raucous laughter and leers of the diners. He swept her up into his arms and strode toward their chamber.

"What are you doing?" She tried to wriggle out of his embrace.

His stride didn't break. "I suggest that unless you wish me to stop and take you here, you desist with the movement."

Adair instantly stilled.

Dom kicked their door open and deposited her on the bed. "Now. Now you will tell me what has been bothering you all evening."

She pouted.

Dom came to stand in front of his glowering wife. "Adair." His tone was chiding.

"*Dom*," she parroted.

He sat on the bed and placed his wife to sit on his lap. He arranged her arms around his neck and stroked her hair comfortingly. "Now—tell me."

She sighed dramatically. She didn't know what was wrong with her. Well, yes she did, but she didn't know why it was bothering her so much. "I ... I ... I'm..."

A nod. "Yes?"

"I'm..."

He laughed and kissed her pouting lips. "Tell me, wife."

Adair took a deep breath and spat it out. "I'm with child." She watched Dom blanch and began to struggle. "Of course you wouldn't want this child. Of course you don't want me..." she began to cry.

He instantly pulled her back into his embrace and turned her head toward his. "Stop it. I was shocked. Can you blame me? But this is wonderful news, my love. I couldn't be happier." He was suffused with joy. A child. His child ... his child with Adair. "A baby. Oh, my love."

She was crying and she couldn't seem to stop herself. She had never felt so damn emotional before. "A baby," she began to laugh then, "Will it be hawk or dove?"

Dom smiled and hugged his wife to his side. "It will be a marvelous combination of both, my love." He kissed her fiercely. "We will have an amazing hybrid child."

Adair laughed. She wasn't so sure if that was a good thing, but at this moment she didn't quite care. She and Dom were going to have a baby.

She shivered as he nibbled on her ear. "What are you doing?"

He grinned, and bit down on the soft flesh of her earlobe. "I would think that would be obvious, my little dove princess."

Adair moaned low in her throat as her husband's hand caressed the fullness of her breast. She was already moistening. "Do you think that it is a good idea?" She was becoming breathless.

He pulled up her skirts and rearranged them around his lap. He gently ran his thick finger down her slit, loving the slick, wet feel of it. "I think it is the best of ideas." He pulled her to him and took her mouth in a searing kiss. He was rewarded by a low moan and the parting of her lush lips.

She squirmed; she needed to get closer to Dom. She let their tongues duel and desperately worked to get her husband's tunic off. She wanted to feel him naked against her.

Her head fell back as he began to suck furiously at her neck and throat. The warm, wet suction of his mouth was making the liquid pool quickly between her thighs. She reached down to cup him and felt him grow even harder at her light touch.

He broke away, panting. He needed her now. God, she was so beautiful. He stripped quickly, his eyes never leaving his stunning wife.

He reached for her and began to rip the clothes from her quivering body.

"Dom ... my ... my ... dress ... you'll ruin..." Her protest died upon her lips when he seized them in a passionate kiss.

He was swimming in the scent of her, the feel of her. By Avar, he'd buy her another dress, ten new dresses. His wife's pearl-white skin glistened in the light, making his senses reel. Her breasts were high and full, her nipples already taut, begging for his mouth. Her hair curled softly against her delicate features and fell in graceful lines to her thighs. Her waist was tiny and her hips perfectly curved. She was made for pleasure. His pleasure.

Dom slipped one finger into his wife's wet slit and smiled when her entire body quivered. He could see moisture gathering on the golden curls at the apex of her thighs, she was desperate to have him, almost as desperate as he was to have her. Rotating his finger ever so slightly, he bent to take her hard nipple in his mouth. The texture was delicious, smooth as satin with a slightly raised finish. He laved her nipple with his tongue, and pushed another finger into her warm, soaking body.

Her body was burning, burning and begging for him. She pressed herself against his questing fingers and tried to get closer to him. Dropping her head to his neck she bit the tender skin under his ear. His breathing quickened. She was delighted. She nipped harder and was rewarded by a more

forceful thrust of his fingers. "I want you," she murmured low.

He smiled and bit her nipple, loving the little gasp that emitted from her throat. "Then have me." He leaned back and arranged his wife's legs. He smiled into her curious eyes. "Ride me, princess."

She swallowed. He seemed massive beneath her. She watched as his cock twitched and pulsed under her hot perusal and she felt heat overtake her. She licked her dry lips and smiled. Taking him in her small hand she guided him into her wet, begging body. They both sighed as their bodies melded.

She leaned forward and placed her hands on his shoulders, bracing herself. She gasped when he caught one of her nipples in his mouth, suckling the tender flesh. She began to move, slowly at first, and then with more vigor, loving the way he flexed within her. She was creaming, her whole body melting.

Dom let his beautiful, passionate wife find her rhythm. He took in her flushed face and tightly closed eyes and thought her the most stunning creature he had ever seen. When her movements became too shallow he grabbed her hips and pumped several times, laughing when she moaned and speeded her movement up. He grunted when he felt the first sharp rake of her fingers against his shoulders.

Adair couldn't last much longer. Her heart was racing and her inner muscles were beginning to spasm deliciously. She rotated her hips in a semi-circle and then thrust her pelvis

forward. Her husband's cock inched even further into her body and she let out a short scream. "Oh ... oh Dom, I..."

He nodded jerkily. Sweat was pouring off of his body and he could feel his wife hot and wet against him. "Yes my dove, yes, let me feel you come..." Dom thrust one more time and simultaneously bit into the side of his wife's full, milky white breast. She screamed, arched, and clenched his cock in a viselike grip.

It was too much for Dom. He let out a long bellow. His cock twitched and then poured its seed deep within her waiting body.

He fell back and his lovely, spent wife fell on top of him. He cracked one eye open to watch her chest rise and fall and her rosy mouth open and close with each delicious breath. She was perfection. "You are splendid, my queen," he murmured.

Adair smiled and splayed her hands across her husband's massive chest. "As are you, my king." She nuzzled her head into the crook of his shoulder. She was happier than she had ever imagined she would be. "It is good."

He answered her smile with one of his own. "Yes, it is."

* * * *

"You will not hurt her," The first man said. His voice was low and filled with urgency and desperation. His body was cloaked, his face masked in darkness.

The second man laughed. "She will be safe; did I not promise as much?"

"You have promised much and I have not seen any results," The first man countered gruffly. He was agitated, and it showed.

"It takes much planning."

"Fine, do as you planned but you will not harm her."

The second man laughed and it was set. "Done," he said. The deal was struck, the bargain made.

* * * *

Dom placed his head on Adair's belly.

She laughed. "You cannot hear anything as of yet, husband. Our child is but a spark of life."

He nodded and gently caressed her still taut stomach.

"That I know, but I enjoy the sensation."

She smiled. She enjoyed it too.

He grinned. "We will have a fine warrior and I will teach him..."

Adair cut him off. "*Her*. You will teach her many things."

He laughed. "It does not matter what the sex of the child is, my wife, I will make a warrior out of any child of ours."

Adair nodded, satisfied. "It is happening, husband," she murmured.

"What?"

She smiled. "Peace, we are well on our way to it. It has been nearly a month and there has been no incident. The reports that you receive from the hawk lands are full of good will and positive information. My people are beginning to accept the hawks and Solange has already been taken in amongst the other chamber maids."

Dom nodded. Yes, Adair was right, they were beginning to unite. "We promised peace."

She snuggled into her husband's warm body. "Yes, yes we did. I am so happy to deliver it."

Dom placed a hand over his wife's luscious breast. "How happy are you?"

Her eyes widened. "Again," she giggled, "but we just..."

He laughed and rolled her on top of him. "So we shall do it again. Do you object?" He was already massaging her back gently.

Adair moaned, her head falling back, her long hair tickling Dom's sides. They both shivered. "No, no objections, here." She bent down to kiss her husband and let the sensations slide over her in warm, delicious abandon.

* * * *

Adair groaned. She was getting too big and too impatient for this. "Just reason with her, Vinos," she said. Vinos had been at this for over an hour. He had come to her for information on Solange and was driving her positively crazy. "Life is short; you must take your happiness where you find it. Talk to her."

Vinos ran a hand through his hair. "I have tried to talk to her, Adair. She will not even speak to me."

Adair sighed and massaged her side gently. "Solange is a difficult case, Vinos. She is not just any hawk. She is a *minuet*."

He let out a frustrated growl. "What in Avar?" he swore. "Why am I confronted with this at every turn?"

"A *minuet* is taught to serve. They have no other purpose. Solange has been taught that she has no worth; she has no standing in society. You cannot just expect everything to change automatically because you have feelings for her." Adair sat down. Her feet were killing her.

"I love her!" he shouted.

Adair's mouth dropped open. "You love Solange?"

"Of course I do—why do you think I have been going mad?" He began to pace. "Have you ever seen me so confused? So confused *over a woman*?"

She shrugged. "Lust and love are two different things, Vinos."

A growl. "I know the difference."

She smiled. "Do you?"

"Of course I do." Vinos was frustrated beyond measure. Solange had taken to disappearing every time he was around. She was avoiding him like the plague. He had never had a woman behave so around him. "I have never felt this way before, Adair. You must help me." He was dejected.

Adair sighed. "I will talk to her, Vinos. I cannot promise anything, though. You must just continue to wear her down. Do not give up." She winked. "You are very persuasive. And Solange is worth it."

Vinos smiled sadly. His heart was laid open for all to see and the one he wanted refused to accept his offering. "I know she is. Eventually, hopefully, she will know she is worth it as well."

Chapter Thirteen

Adair was too fat to fly. She felt less like a dove and more like an overstuffed pigeon. "I'm a giant ball of bread with feet," she announced, disgusted.

Dom laughed and placed her crown on her head. "You are beautiful, more so now than ever. You have life growing within you, a life we created together."

She frowned. "A life that had better come out soon, else I pull it out by its stubborn head."

He grinned. His wife grew testier as the days went by.

Today was the annual Dove Fair. The doves looked forward to the fair all year long. There were stalls upon stalls of food and merchants' wares. Children played happily and the guild could ply their trade. It was a day of merriment and joy. This year Adair broke tradition and invited the hawks to the dove fair. She and Dom knew the decision was not a popular one, but they also knew that it was a necessary step toward integrating the two hesitant nations.

She was pleased at the number of hawks who had consented to come to the fair and knew that the numbers were largely in part to her husband's hold on his people. Dom was a great leader, a great king, and his people loved and respected him. They trusted his opinions and actions and followed his lead. Just as Dom had said, his marriage paved the way for acceptance. The hawks were beginning to accept the doves and they had already softened toward their beautiful and kind-natured dove queen.

"Our first combined event," Adair said.

"The first of many." Dom smiled and took his wife's hand in his. "You look beautiful."

She rolled her eyes. "You have to say that."

He grinned. "I say it because it is true."

She groaned. "I'm fat."

"You're with child."

"As I said, I'm fat," she countered.

He laughed. "Come, we do not wish to miss the morning events."

She sighed and nodded. "I would like a vegetable pie."

He grinned. "Then a vegetable pie you shall have."

* * * *

Adair munched on her pie happily. The sun was shining in full force and the air was perfectly crisp and cool. Few clouds marred the brilliantly blue sky and the sounds of laughter and joy filled the air.

She took her place on the outside dais. Her favorite part of the fair had come, the archery contest. Adair would have loved to compete but alas, in her condition it was not possible. "I would have won, too," she murmured under her breath.

"I know you would have," Dom said.

Adair blushed; she hadn't thought anyone had heard her. "The doves are fine archers."

Dom nodded. He was looking forward to the archery contest. He had heard how fine the doves were with a bow and arrow but had never seen one of their contests before.

Their bows were longer than the hawks and their arrows more finely crafted. It would be fascinating to see them compete.

They watched the archers take their places. The targets were set and the archers were marked and ready. Adair leaned forward eagerly.

One by one, each contestant let loose their arrow.

Adair was particularly impressed by contestant number three. A tall man with shorn hair and a remarkably dark complexion. He appeared hawk. She could not see him well from her position but his arrows fell well and true to their marks. He was a fine archer.

It came to be contestant number three's turn once more and he up to take his place.

Adair and Dom awaited his move.

Suddenly he turned from his place and loosed his arrow. Adair saw the intent but too late. It was going to be too late. She instinctively shielded her belly and screamed as a figure fell heavily against her. She fell to her knees. Pintos slumped to the ground in front of her. Blood was spreading across his white tunic and his face was ashen. "Oh Avar, get Jenkins, get her now!" She tore her sleeve and pressed the fabric against the open side of the wound to staunch the flow of blood. She looked up helplessly. "Dom—he's bleeding too badly."

Dom tore open Pintos Throy's shirt and sucked in a breath. The arrow had hit home. "Adair..." He could say no more.

She saw the inevitable in her husband's eyes and shook her head wildly. She would not accept it. "No, no, do you hear me? No you will not leave me, Pintos!" Her hands stilled when

she reached the arrow. She could not remove it in fear of doing more damage. "Oh, Pintos." Adair could not stop the tears.

Pintos Throy opened his eyes. He could barely see through the pain. "Adair," he murmured.

She took his cold hands in hers. He was so cold. "Shhh, please don't speak Pintos, you must save your strength."

He shook his head. His voice was weak when he spoke. "I am so sorry, my queen, my love. I was so foolish. I only wanted..." his voice broke. He swallowed; it was getting more difficult to breathe. "I only wanted you. He promised he wouldn't hurt you. He gave me his word."

"You're not making any sense," Adair said quietly. She shook her head. "Please don't speak."

Pintos was desperate. He would not die with this on his conscience. "Lord Bacchas and I—we planned it together."

Adair was shocked. "What? You planned what together?"

Pintos began to cough up blood. His breaths became shallow. "We planned to kill the hawk king. Lord Bacchas is an archer. His aim is always true. He promised me that he would rid us of your mate; it would accomplish both our goals. You would once again be under the Council's control and I would have you." Pintos swallowed heavily. "You are all that I have ever wanted, Adair."

She shook her head in disbelief. "We have always been friends, Pintos."

"Yes, friends in your eyes. So much more in mine, my queen." Pintos closed his eyes. "Please say that you forgive me. I should have known that Lord Bacchas would betray us

both." he laughed dryly. "Perhaps in my heart of hearts I did. I knew the moment he stepped forth that his aim was not to kill the hawk king; his aim was to kill you. I could not let that happen."

Adair heard the shallow breaths and knew that the end was near. "Oh, Pintos." Her heart was breaking for her old friend.

He licked his dry lips. "Do not weep for me, Adair. I betrayed you, I betrayed our king." Pintos looked suddenly at Dom, who was standing over his wife, his golden eyes somber and sad. "Our king who is a good man," Pintos said. "You two were destined for one another. I was a fool not to see, a fool to try to come between two taken souls. This is my reckoning. I accept it. I welcome it." Pintos squeezed out a small smile. "Avar's blessing to you both." his eyes closed slowly and his breaths were short and shallow. He gasped—and then there was nothing.

Adair felt hot tears coursing down her cheeks. He was gone, her Pintos, her dear beloved friend was gone. He had betrayed her out of love and yet in the end he had saved her for the same reason. She stood, unsteadily. "Dom..." She reached out for her husband.

He took her hand. "It was a noble end," Dom said quietly.

She nodded. "Yes, yes it was. He will have the burial of a warrior. It is not more than he deserves."

"My queen." Vinos' voice was clear and taut.

Adair looked up. She saw Vinos and two other guards holding the man who had loosed the arrow. "Bring him forward."

As the men came close, Adair got a good look at the archer. Her mouth fell open in shock and anger. "*Lord Bacchas*," she ground out. He had changed his appearance much, but the evil in his eyes could not be disguised.

Lord Bacchas narrowed his eyes. "Filthy coward." He directed his comment to the fallen Pintos. "Love, bah, he had a duty and could not fulfill it. *Coward*."

Adair felt anger as she had never known it fly through her. "Lord Bacchas, you have killed a royal guard and have attempted to kill a member of the royal house. The punishment is death."

Lord Bacchas laughed. "Death—not even death will stop this."

Adair clenched her teeth and motioned for her guards to take him away. "No, perhaps not, but it is a start." The moment Lord Bacchas was led away she slumped into Dom's arms. "Please, take me away from here."

Dom did not hesitate. He lifted his wife up as if she weighed no more than a feather and led her away from the field that had taken her beloved friend.

* * * *

The day dawned with perfect clarity. Rays of multi-colored light streamed through the window and cast golden shadows on the room.

Adair sat, rocking her baby gently back and forth. She cooed a sweet lullaby, a lullaby that she remembered from her own childhood.

Dom came forward, smiling. The sight of his wife and child still moved him. He believed it always would. "Our child of peace," Dom said quietly.

She smiled. Yes, their child would now know peace. She was born into an Aviante world where war was no longer a dark ominous shadow. She would play on the soil, uncaged, and fly the skies, free. Her life was one of untold possibilities.

Dom smiled down at the infant. With wisps of golden hair and startlingly intelligent silver eyes, she was an astonishing baby. It was too early to tell what color her wings were, but soon, soon they would know what she had inherited and from whom. Until then, they were both content to discover her, day by day. Dom swallowed. "I love you." The words were calm and clear.

Adair smiled and looked up at her handsome, strong and amazing hawk husband. "I know."

Dom was shocked. "You know?"

She took one of his hands and kissed its knuckles. "I know, but I have waited for the words for so long, my heart may burst from all the love it holds."

Dom knelt by his wife's side. "And you, my dove queen, do you love me?"

Adair was laughing and crying simultaneously. "You know I do, you foolish man."

He kissed his wife's hand with reverence. "It seems we have fulfilled our destiny, my love."

She nodded and kissed one of her daughter's downy soft cheeks. "To Serenity," she said with a brilliant smile.

Dom took his baby's small hand in his and watched her fingers uncurl. "To our daughter, Serenity," he said.

They held their daughter and watched the sun break over the horizon. It was a beautiful dawn. A cleansing one.

The End

About the Author:

Ever since I could pick up a pen, I have been writing. I became fascinated with fantasy at the age of eight, when my mother bought me a copy of "The Hobbit". Not too long after, that I became addicted to anything and everything about vampires. The duality of nature fascinated me.

But it was an event four years later that would shape my future career as an author of erotic romance. At the age of twelve I discovered my grandmother's stash of romance novels, hidden, of course, in her closet. I devoured them. My grandmother kicked me out of the closet. But alas, the damage had been done ... I was a hopeless junkie—a romance junkie.

To this day I keep my love of fantasy, vampires and romance. What's more, I have learned (through much practice) to meld the genres to create, for myself, the perfect environment to pen my erotic romance novels. I live, quite simply, for love, lust and the complex nature of the human heart. And I write to share my love, lusts and complex nature with others.

The Dove Queen
by Mara Lee

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