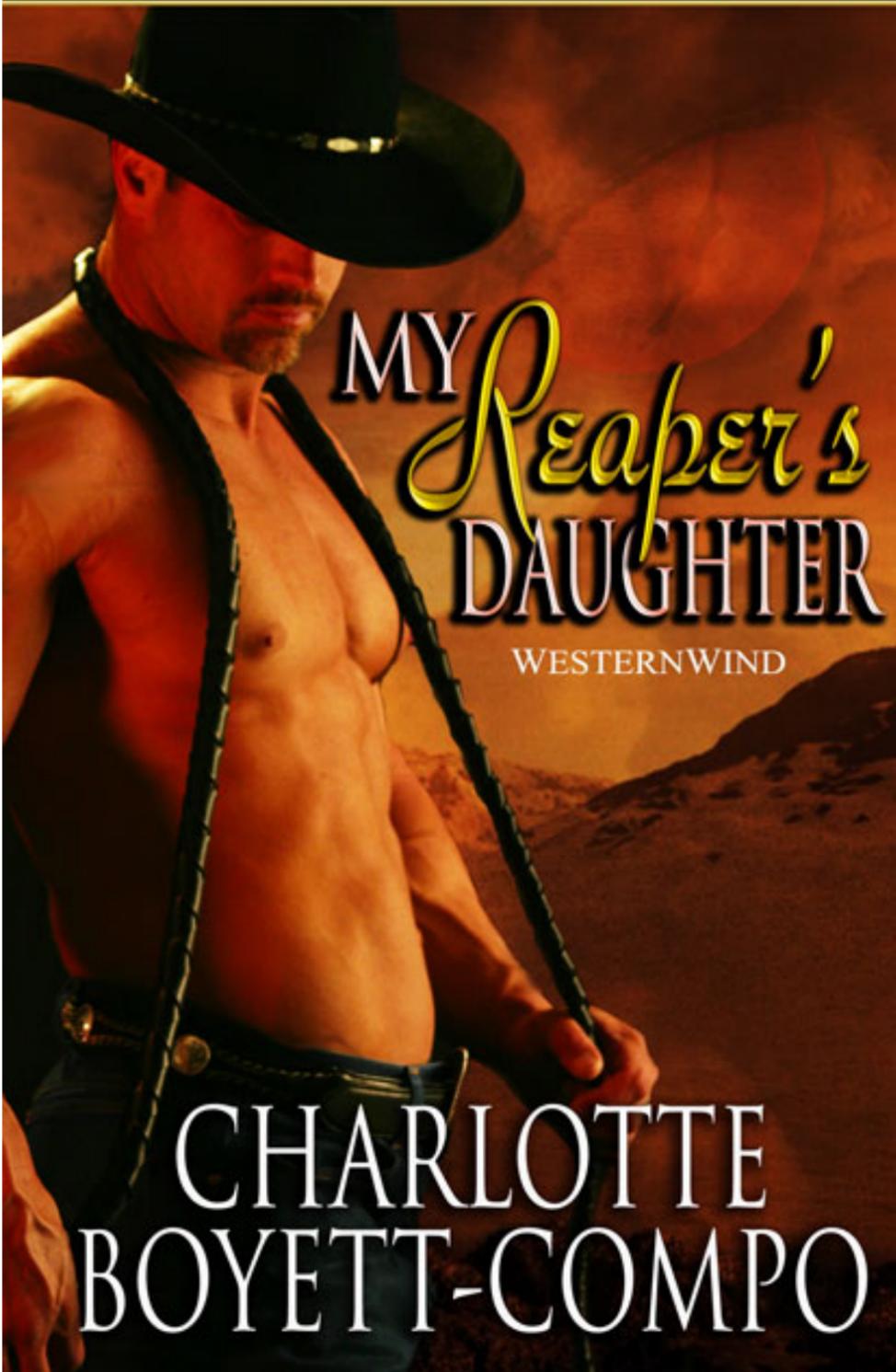


ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



MY *Reaper's*
DAUGHTER

WESTERNWIND

CHARLOTTE
BOYETT-COMPO

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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My Reaper's Daughter

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WESTERNWIND:

MY REAPER'S DAUGHTER

Charlotte Boyett-Compo

Chapter One

Armistenky Territory of Terra

July 10, 3479

Whirls of red dust spiraled in the distance beyond the rise and the ground beneath his booted feet shook from the thunder of pounding hooves eating up the miles. If he listened closely, he could hear with his acute ability the jingle of harness and the creak of leather as reins were snapped, the huff of the horses, the cursing of the drivers. Getting to his feet from the boulder upon which he'd been perched, he grunted wearily, hefting his burden and swinging it up with his left hand. Standing with one hip cocked, his saddle draped over one shoulder and his saddlebags over the other, he was hot and tired and thirsty and had the headache from hell clawing inside his skull. When he ran a dusty black sleeve across his forehead to wipe away the sweat, that headache throbbed wretchedly just over his right eye, the brightness of the day adding misery of its own despite the dark spectacles he wore to cut down on the glare. Tugging his black felt hat lower over his face did little to keep the light from piercing his sensitive eyes. Though it shaded his face, concealed most of his sweaty, dirt-streak features, it couldn't hide who and what he was. The black silk shirt and black leather pants, black boots and the ebony-handled six-gun slung low on his right hip screamed his identity louder than any town crier.

"Reaper," the wind whispered.

Because the midsummer day was blisteringly hot and so humid he felt as though he were drinking the air instead of breathing it, Reaper First Class Glyn Kullen wore the stamp of a man straddling the edge of decent behavior. He was in a pissy mood, that mood growing meaner with each passing minute he stood waiting for the tardy stage. His morning had gone from bad to worse to fucking shitty and if he could have found something to kill, to maim or destroy or completely annihilate, he would have been right on it like white on rice. As it was, he was forced to stand there with a taut muscle grinding away in his lean jaw, his amber eyes narrowed, sweating like a racehorse, cursing every living thing within a fifty-mile radius. Putting up a hand to swipe at a horsefly dive-bombing him, he caught the pest in his gloved hand, thought about squishing it, thought better of the notion and opened his fist to let the lucky creature fly away.

"Now stay the fuck away from me," he snarled at the insect. "Next time, you're toast, bug."

By the time the stage rolled over the rise and the driver and man riding shotgun saw him, Glyn Kullen was ready to tear the two apart with his bare hands. His growl started low in his throat and ended with a snort of disgust as the stage began to slow.

Sawing back on the reins, yelling a shaky “Whoa” to the team pulling his vehicle, the driver’s darkly tanned face seemed to be bleeding of color as the stage creaked to a stop before Kullen. The man riding shotgun was gawking with a mouth open to catch either the blowflies circling the horses’ rumps or the heavy cascade of choking dust settling around the wheels.

“You need a lift, milord?” the driver asked, his voice breaking with fear.

“Now what gave you that notion?” Glyn snapped. “I thought I’d stand out here in the middle of nowhere in one-hundred-and-two-degree heat with a forty-five-pound saddle hitched over my shoulder a little while longer and just take in the view.” He growled again, turned his head and spat, leaving no doubt in the other men’s minds that the stupid question had pushed all the wrong buttons.

“My apologies, m-milord,” the driver babbled. “I didn’t mean no dis—”

“Just hush,” Glyn ordered with a sigh.

Striding angrily to the stage, he hefted the saddle effortlessly over the brass rail on the top of the stage then shrugged off his saddlebags and handed them to the man riding shotgun.

“Be careful with those. There are glass bottles in there,” he admonished.

The man riding shotgun bobbed his head like a marionette then twisted around and scrambled up to secure the expensive black tack, placing the saddlebags carefully beside it.

“We’ve three passengers with us, milord,” the driver called out in warning.

“Fucking great,” Glyn mumbled under his breath, and reached for the door handle, cursing a blue streak as he snatched the portal open and swung up into the interior of the sweltering conveyance. Slamming the door behind him, he slumped in the front-facing seat and cursed brutally again.

“That’s not nice,” a small voice told him.

Coming in from the glaring light, the inside of the stage was darkened by the roll-down leather curtains that kept out the dust. His night vision was excellent however, and those hawklike orbs settled on the speaker, the anger smoothing out his dark face immediately to settle into a frown of guilt. He removed his spectacles, folded them and slid them into the pocket of his shirt.

“Sorry,” he muttered, tipping his hat to the little girl who sat across from him beside a primly dressed young woman he assumed was her mother. He glanced at the third passenger—a dandified gentleman in dark brown linen who was pressed as close to the other side of the stage as he could get. The man was a drummer, a traveling salesman, and there was no doubt in the Reaper’s mind. Deciding no threat lay in that direction, Kullen crossed his booted feet, tugged his hat lower still and laced his arms over his chest, attempting to give the impression he did not want to be bothered.

“You shouldn’t talk like that,” the child—no more than five or six years of age—chastised him.

"Valda!" the woman beside her whispered urgently. She slipped her arm around the girl and gave Glyn an apologetic look. "I'm terribly sorry, milord. She meant no disrespect."

"But he said bad words, Mama," the child protested. "That's naughty."

The woman started to reprimand her charge but Glyn held up a gloved hand, raising his head to look at the woman. "She's right, ma'am, and I apologize for my language."

"You need your mouth washed out with soap," the little girl pronounced.

"That is enough, young lady!" her mother snapped. "You apologize to his lordship this instant!"

"It's not necessary, ma'am," Glyn injected.

"I'm sorry, milord, but it is. She has been raised better than this," the young woman stated. She gave her daughter an arched look. "Valda? What do you say to his lordship?"

The child's bottom lip thrust out and she folded her little arms over her chest, chin tucked down, slumping down in her seat. "I'm sorry," she muttered.

"His lordship didn't hear you."

"Aye, he did," Glyn corrected. "Apology accepted, Valda."

Valda didn't seem mollified. Her mouth twisted to one side. "Didn't your mama ever wash your mouth out when you said a naughty word?"

Glyn's mood was lightening for he was finding himself amused by the precociousness of the little girl. "Well, Valda, I didn't have a mother."

"That's silly," Valda told him firmly. "Everybody has a mother. Even chickens and ducks and frogs have mothers but..." She put a little finger to her lip in contemplation. "Chicky and ducky babies are hatched from eggs." She shot him a curious look. "Are Reapers hatched from eggs?"

"Oh my Lord!" her mother groaned.

Glyn chuckled, wincing as pain shot through his temples. He put a hand to the agony residing there. "We're all hatched from eggs, dearling," he informed her.

Valda looked up at her mother. "Is that true, Mama? Are we all hatched from eggs?"

"Reaper lords don't tell falsehoods, sweetie. Yes, it's true, but not like you picture in your mind," her mother answered. She patted her child's knee. "We'll save that discussion for a few years down the road."

As mercurial as lightning, Valda changed the subject. "What happened to your horsy, Mr. Reaper?"

A bit surprised the child was so persistent, Glyn answered, "I had to put him down."

"Down where?" the child asked.

"He stepped in a gopher hole and broke his leg. He was suffering so I had to shoot him."

"Oh, that's sad," the child whispered, eyes brightening with tears.

"Aye, it is," Glyn agreed, and tugged his hat down again. Losing Seabhac had hurt him deeper than he would have imagined. He'd had the beast for a long time, and next to his best friend Reaper Owen Tohre, the horse was the closest thing to family he had beyond his homeworld of Breathnóir.

"Are you going to get a new horsy?"

"Aye, that I will," he replied. Nausea was encroaching deep in his throat and the sour bile fumes invaded his mouth. He swallowed it down, wincing as the pain gathered behind his right eye.

Looking up through long black eyelashes, the girl tilted her head to one side. "What's that on your face?"

"Oh, for the love of Pete, Valda!" her mother said with a groan. "Stop annoying his lordship."

"It's all right, ma'am. She's not bothering me. It's a tattoo, Valda," Glyn said. He looked pointedly at the mother, silently commanding her to stop correcting the child for he was enjoying the banter.

"What'd you paint it on your face for?"

Deciding her child was beyond help, the young woman hid her face behind a hand, shaking her head in frustration.

"I didn't," Glyn answered. "Someone else did." He glanced out the window. "Rather *something* else did."

"What is it?" Valda wanted to know.

"It's a hawk," he said, pushing his hat back and turning his head so she could see the entire tat that swept across his left temple, a little ways over his forehead and partway down his cheek. The dark blue design of spread talons vanished into the thick black hair of his sideburn.

"Why do you have a hawk on your face?" she asked, and then giggled, showing a missing front tooth. "That's funny! You have a hawk on your face!"

Grinning broadly at the child, he told her it was his family crest and that it stood for clear thinking and bold action. "The hawk is the messenger between this world and the next," he told her, although he didn't think she'd understand what that meant.

"Does it wash off?"

He shook his head. "No, dearling. It's etched into the skin."

"Etched?" she repeated, and looked up at her mother for clarification of the word.

"Scraped," her mother provided, giving Glyn a look that said she knew the drawing must have hurt when applied.

"Actually it was burned into the skin," he said, and wished he hadn't for the little girl's eyes got wide as saucers in her face.

"That's just icky," Valda decided.

"I thought so too, Valda," Glyn admitted.

"Can't you get it off somehow?"

"I'm afraid not."

"Did a bad person do that to you, Mr. Reaper?" she questioned.

"Let's just say She isn't a nice person," he replied.

"Tread carefully, my Reaper," a disembodied voice hissed in his head, and the pain doubled for a moment so that he was forced to put his fingertips to his temples, swallowing hard against the agony that was crippling in its intensity.

"Do you have a bad ache in your head?" Valda asked.

"Why don't you make that brat shut up before she angers his lordship? He's trying to be polite but there's a limit to a man's endurance," the dandified man spoke up. "You ought not to allow her to act up like that."

Glyn didn't cut his eyes toward the man, didn't move a muscle except for the one that flared in his cheek. In a deadly tone he said, "And you ought to apologize to Valda and her mother before I make it impossible for you to insult anyone else ever again. It would be hard to sell anything without the ability to speak, don't you think?"

The man's eyes flared wide and he nearly choked. "I'm s-sorry, lady," he was quick to say. "And little girl. I didn't mean nothing by what I said." He turned his head, peeled back the leather curtain and found something very interesting to look at outside.

"Do you, Mr. Reaper?" Valda pressed, ignoring the man's apology. "Do you got a achy in your head?"

"Like a big dog," he answered.

Valda giggled. "Dogs don't get headaches, silly!" she declared.

"Do too," Glyn countered.

"Do not," Valda returned.

"Young lady!" her mother admonished in vexation.

Glyn regarded the child. "How old are you, Lady Valda? Fifteen? Sixteen?"

Valda giggled. "No, silly goose," she responded, one leg bouncing against the seat. She held up her hands. "I'm this many years."

"Six, huh?" he queried. He gave her mother a slight smile.

"Going on twenty-four," her mother grumbled.

"She's going to give some man a run for his money. I hope whoever he is likes to talk," he said then lowered the brim of his hat once more before laying his head against the seat back.

"He's got a bad ache in his head, Mama," Valda whispered overly loud.

"Yes, so you should be quiet and let him rest," Valda's mother cautioned her daughter.

There were a few moments of relative silence then Valda piped up again.

"What's that metal thingie on your hip?"

Her mother groaned and Glyn chuckled despite his pain. He sat up, knowing he wasn't going to rest anytime soon.

"It's my whip," he answered. "Wanna see it?"

"Is that wise, milord?" her mother asked, worried.

Glyn took the handle from its silver sheath. "It can only be activated by my hand," he said, handing it to Valda.

"What's this?" the child asked, fingering the handle's head.

"That's a dragon's claw," he said.

She looked up from the handle. "What's a dragon?"

"A big flying lizard."

"You're being silly again," she declared. "Lizards can't fly."

"Can too," he said, and put his hand out for the whip.

"I don't think so," Valda said then her eyebrows drew together. "If it's a whip, where's the tail?"

"Inside it," he said.

"Then how do you make it go pop?"

"I flick my wrist like this," he demonstrated, "and a tail of fire shoots out the end."

Valda pursed her lips and heaved a gigantic sigh. "Mama, he's just *so* silly," she declared, and lay her head on her mother's shoulder, yawning widely.

"That's enough now," her mother told her. "Put your head in my lap and go to sleep so his lordship can too. I'm sure your gabbing isn't helping his headache."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Reaper," Valda said as she lay down.

"It's Glyn," he said, surprising himself.

"Hey, Glyn," Valda said, and reached out her little hand to him. "It's nice to meet you."

"Hey, Valda," he replied, gently shaking her hand. "It's nice to meet you too."

"My mama's name is Mystery Butler."

Glyn cocked an eyebrow, glanced at the young woman and then at her daughter. "And just how did she get a name like that?"

Valda yawned again. "My grandpa and grandma had seven sons all in a row. Boom, boom, boom," Valda said in a voice that suggested she had memorized the story.

Glyn pursed his lips to keep from laughing out loud.

"Then Mama came along," Valda continued. "When somebody asked Grandma where Mama had come from, she said, 'It's a mystery to me!'" She yawned a third time,

little eyelids fluttering. "And that's how Mama got her name." Her words trailed off and she fell asleep.

Glyn exchanged an amused look with the child's mother and once more settled down in his seat, pulling the brim of his hat low. Within a matter of moments he too was asleep and — as it always did — the dream came.

Lightning crawled across the heavens, the light flaring so bright the men were blinded for a few moments. Icy shards of hail pelted them as they ran across the clearing, swords gripped tight in hands bruised and bleeding, knuckles scraped raw with myriad cuts already beginning to fester. Everywhere there was thick, dark gray mud, and protruding from the ooze were hundreds of bodies frozen forever in unbelievable positions, uniformed arms raised as though beseeching the gods who had abandoned them.

Glyn Kullen, his brother Dusken and cousins Haynes, Will and Robyn led two other soldiers who had managed to survive the fierce battle that days before had claimed the lives of nearly every man in three regiments. Seven men out of nearly a thousand had survived but two were walking dead, only a few breaths away from taking their last. One of those men was being held back from his final fate by the trembling, tired arm of Glyn Kullen.

"Hang on, Gentry," Glyn urged. The man, who was to have been the best man at Glyn's Joining, had one useless arm draped over his friend's shoulder, the other dangled just as uselessly against a blood-splattered leg as he stumbled along.

"Put me down, Glynnie," Gentry Tarnes pleaded. "I'm not going to make it."

"Shut the fuck up," Glyn hissed. He felt his burden sag even more and knew it was but a matter of moments before he'd be forced to ease Gentry down into the sucking mud and leave him there for the carrion eaters. He tightened his grip around his friend's waist, tugged harder on the hand hanging over his own chest. "Just a few yards more."

Another shrill, piercing shriek of lightning zinged overhead then struck a tree at the edge of the forest to which the men were running, splintering the majestic oak from canopy to root ball, cleaving the ancient trunk in twain. The ground shook as the mighty growth fell. Fire flared and smoke billowed as the two halves of the tree burst into flames. The scent of burning wood filled the night air.

"They'll see us!" Haynes Kullen said.

"They already know where we are," Hayne's brother Robyn reminded. He looked back at the battlefield over which they'd passed and saw the green-clad horsemen bearing down on them. "Glyn?"

"I know," Glyn said. He felt the advancing cavalry, could almost feel cold steel running him through. He tripped over a corpse and the weight of Gentry's dying body pitched them both sideways into the muck. Glyn went facedown into the cloying mud, his arm still around his friend.

So exhausted, so weary of the war that had been going on since he was old enough to hold a sword, he just lay there, all the fight drained away. In his heart, he knew Gentry was gone. He had felt his friend's spirit leave his body even before they had fallen. The others were scrambling toward the forest with the huge destriers of the Cleavton militia racing toward them. Lifting his

head, he saw Haynes fall to a spear, watched Will's head cleft from his body, and could not look away as two warriors hacked at Robyn and Gentry's friend Brent with swords that flashed in the strobing glare of the almost constant lightning. As for Dusken, he did not see him anywhere and hoped with all his heart his younger brother had managed to escape into the woods. He knew it was but a matter of time before one of the warriors wheeled his mount around and came back for him.

He was ready to die. It was his time. Though he wished with all his heart he could be back home in Donetal when he left this world, he was prepared to meet his end here among those with whom he'd served for the last eight years. Prying his arm from around Gentry, Glyn flopped to his back, looking up at the light works stair-stepping across the firmament. The hail had ceased but a steady rain fell onto his upturned face. He opened his mouth to let the water ease his parched throat. He heard the pounding of hooves and knew death was coming.

"Leih doonin nyn beccaghyn," he said to the stormy night sky, asking forgiveness for their sins, hoping the ear of at least one god was cocked his way.

A sharp crack of lightning shook the ground as it struck nearby.

"Livrey shin veih olk," he asked that god to deliver them from any evil lurking in wait for their souls.

Continuous bolts speared from the heavens and lit the forest as bright as day.

The jingle of harness, the muted thud of hooves – he knew those would be the last sounds he heard before the spear or blade was driven into his defenseless body.

"Dty aigney dy row jeant," acknowledging that it was the gods' will that would be done.

He spread his arms wide in willing sacrifice to the warrior coming to take his life. He spoke the one name that held warmth and joy and peace to him but the woman who had been given that sweet name at her christening was long gone, her body given to the flames months before.

A continuous barrage of lightning lit up the heavens, webbed across the blackness, and as the mighty roan stallion came to a prancing halt beside him, Glyn switched his gaze to the shadowed face of his murderer. He could not see the Cleavton warrior's visage but he saw the spear the man lifted high.

"Ta mee dy dty laih er coontey dry voir," Glyn said to his killer, granting the warrior forgiveness for his mother's sake, and then started to close his eyes.

It happened in slow motion so that the image of it would be forever burned into Glyn's mind. A bolt of lightning was flung from the heavens and struck the Cleavton warrior in the back, turning him rigid instantly. The spear in his hand glowed as bright as a taper, sparks shooting from the tip. The force of energy went through the warrior and into Glyn Kullen's chest before stabbing deep into the ground beneath the fallen soldier.

The sizzling, burning pain that pierced his heart was excruciating and Glyn's body shuddered violently under the attack. He met his death in agony, heart burned to a crisp.

Then he heard the flap of giant wings...

Coming awake with a gasp, the Reaper became aware of the sound of rain hitting the roof of the stage. He sat up, dragging off his hat to arm away the sweat that coated his face.

"Bad dream?" Mystery asked softly so as not to awaken her sleeping daughter.

He didn't answer for a moment, putting a hand to his mouth and sinking his teeth into the finger of his right glove to pull it off. "Nightmare," he finally said, aware his hands were shaking as he removed the other glove as well.

"You were moaning in your sleep," she said.

"Reapers do that," he acknowledged. Moving aside the leather curtain, he looked out at the lowered sky and the deluge of rain. "How long has this been going on?"

"About half an hour," she said. "It seemed to come up out of nowhere."

"It does that out here," he said. He couldn't tell exactly where they were but didn't think they were far from the stage station at Barbara Springs. He knew they'd be stopping there for the night and was hoping he'd be able to purchase a horse to tide him over until he could reach the Citadel and the stable of specially trained Reaper mounts.

He settled back in his seat and put his hat on the seat between him and the man who had nodded off. "Where are you headed?" he asked, wanting to take his mind off the dream that haunted him.

"Home to Charlestown," she replied. "I have family there."

"That's Lord Phelan Kiel's neck of the woods."

Mystery nodded. "I saw him once but it's been a long time since I've been home."

"Where were you before?"

"My husband was a clerk in a store in the Moilia Territory," she answered.

His attention went to her left hand, saw the thin gold wedding band circling her finger, and felt a curious pang in the region of his rapidly beating heart. "Your husband already in Charlestown or is he coming later?"

She looked down at her hand too. "I'm a widow, milord," she said quietly. "I just can't bring myself to take off his ring."

"I'm sorry," he said.

He let his gaze wander over her bent head. Both she and her daughter were neatly—though inexpensively—attired. The bonnet she wore was as plain as her soft dark gray gown and as sensible as the boots peeking from beneath the skirt's hem. He studied the slender hands gripped lightly in her lap and was mesmerized by the tint of her flesh, the elegance of the tapering of her long fingers and the delicacy of her wrists.

When she looked up and her chocolate brown gaze met his, he grimaced, annoyed at being caught staring at her.

"You don't have much contact with people of color, do you, milord?" she asked.

That question stunned him and his eyebrows slanted together. "What do you mean?"

"I don't know it for certainty but I believe all your kind are white."

He shook his head. "Not all. Lord Jaborn is dark-skinned."

"But he is not a man of color though, is he?" she pressed.

On his homeworld, the word to describe people of her shade of skin was "colored", as it had been in Terra's far distant past. And like on Terra all those centuries ago, those with flesh dark like hers had been born into the slavery caste. They were ignored, overlooked and traded as a commodity, treated worse than a man would a farm animal. Having come from a rich and powerful family who had owned many slaves of different races, he had not given them much thought. They simply blended into the scenery. Here on Terra, he rarely interacted with people of color for the vast majority of them either lived in the Vircars Territory controlled by Phelan Kiel or Iden Beliel's Flagala Territory.

"No," he said. "Jaborn is considered what you would call white, I guess." He glanced down at Valda's two long pigtails. "But his hair is coarse like hers."

"And as black?"

"Aye," he agreed.

"Perhaps his is a blending of our two races then," she said.

"Could be," he replied, uneasy with the turn of the conversation.

Apparently sensing his reluctance to talk, the young woman lapsed into silence. Beneath the brim of her fashionable hat, she watched the man sitting across from her daughter and when he began to nod off again, her eyes locked on him. By the time she began to succumb to the steady drumming of rain on the roof and the rocking motion of the stage, his image was burning forever in her mind's eye. Her eyes closed and she sank down into sleep, reaching out to the arms of the god of dreams...

It had been a long time since Mystery Faye Butler had lain with a man and her body quaked as she put her hands to the white lace veil that flowed from the high swirl of curls atop her head and cascaded down her back. The billowing skirt of her wedding dress swept the floor and made soft little swishing sounds as she set the veil aside.

"You are the most beautiful woman I've ever seen," he told her.

He looked so handsome standing there in his black uniform, the thin leather tie in a perfectly straight line and just touching the edge of the black belt around his slender waist. His black silk shirt was crisp, the black leather pants hugging his legs like a second skin – almost indecently outlining the thickness at the juncture of his thighs. The black boots he wore had a high shine to them and the silver rowels gleamed in the low light from the candles on the bedside table. Likewise the silver raven insignia on the collar of his shirt caught and reflected the light with every breath he took.

"Would you help me?" she asked, turning shyly to present her back to him.

He came to her and put his hands on her shoulders, drawing her to him so their bodies touched. He rested his chin on the plane of her shoulder and his breath washed over her neck. "What would you have me do, Lady Mystery?" he asked in a voice that sent a trill of spasms through her lower body.

"Unbutton me?" she questioned.

"I would rather rip the dress from you," he whispered wickedly.

"You'd better not!" she warned, twisting her head around to look at him. "I want to see Valda wearing this dress one day!"

"She will," he said with a laugh, and stepped back. He put his hands to the first of many tiny pearl buttons that ranged down the long bodice of the gown. "But I'd still rather tear it off and ravish you."

"Patience, my husband," she replied, and her heart soared at the use of that binding word.

One by one he eased the delicate studs from their tatted lace catches and the bodice parted little by little. The cool flow of air drifted over her back even as his warm breath tickled the hairs at the nape of her neck.

She inhaled the scent of him and the powerful, sensual male pheromones he gave off that combined to make her knees weak.

His rough knuckles touched the small of her back as the last button came undone and he stroked the delicate skin there, leaning in to her, his head lowered so his cheek touched hers.

"Have you any notion how desperately I want you, Myst?" he queried.

Her heart thudded hard in her chest as his calloused palms slid beyond the gown's opening and he gripped her waist with his knowing, well-trained fingers, the pads of his fingertips pressing lightly into her belly. He drew her closer to him. His mouth lowered to the bare area of her neck exposed by the gaping of the bodice's neckline.

"I will spend a lifetime worshipping this body," he growled, lips grazing her flesh as he spoke.

Liquid heat oozed from the very core of her and she laid her head back on his hard, solid chest, tilted her head to offer him the curved column of her neck.

"I have dreamed of tasting you here," he said, and flicked his tongue over her skin.

"What does it taste like?" she asked breathlessly.

"Just as it looks," he answered. "Like sweet, warm caramel."

His tongue swirled along her neck and up to the underside of her jaw where he placed lightning flicks that made her womb clench. Moist warmth cooled to a tingling chill as he kissed his way back down her neck and onto the slope of her shoulder. His fingers tightened on her waist then slid upward to capture her breasts.

"Glyn," she sighed.

"They overflow my grasp," he said.

Her entire body flamed with lust as his thumbs stroked over her nipples again and again until she was breathless with need.

"And these hard little pebbles, I can not wait to savor," he told her before plucking at the taut buds. "I want them in my mouth. I want to nibble. I want to suckle."

She sagged against him and he moved one hand down her body and to the apex of her thighs, sliding his palm between her legs to cup her.

"Glyn!"

"Shush," he whispered in her ear then pierced that tender morsel with his tongue, probing deep even as the middle finger of his supporting hand slid gently into her juicy slit.

One hand cupped her breast – squeezing, rubbing, massaging and worrying the nipple into an erect nubbin that felt as though it would burst. The other hand held her tight as his finger moved in and out. In and out. Going deep and retreating. Stroking the folds to either side before entering again.

And again.

Mystery was lost to the powerful man whose body was rock solid behind her. She could feel the press of his cock as he rubbed it against the cleft of her ass.

"My wife," he claimed her, and stepped back, withdrawing his hands from inside her clothing.

She groaned with frustration, with longing, with a galloping need that made her turn to face him, her hand out in entreaty, but she stilled for he was easing his finger between his lips, drawing the juices – her juices – into his mouth. She drew in a quick breath and held it as she watched his amber eyes turn dark as sin.

"Spiced honey," he pronounced as he licked at his flesh, sweeping away every molecule of her essence.

"Please," she begged him.

"When I'm ready, wench," he responded. "This is our wedding night and I will take my time with the precious gift you are about to render into my keeping."

He put his hands to the shoulders of her opened gown and tugged it down, careful of the long lace sleeves that covered her slender arms. Gently he pulled the fabric – and slowly – until she wanted to scream at him to be done with it and sunder the garment from neck to hem. When it was down to her waist, when her arms were free and she was bare to his hot gaze, she would have put her arms up to cover herself but he would have none of that.

"Nay, milady. What you have is mine and I will look my fill before I taste it."

Every word he said drove the spike of desire deeper into Mystery's womb. She was completely at his mercy and as unable to move away from the ensnarement of his golden eyes as she was to cease breathing. She simply waited, eager for him to take her but enjoying the building suspense as much as he.

She watched him go to his knees in front of her, easing the gown down over her hips, down her thighs and past her knees until it pooled at her feet. He lifted his hand to hers to balance her as she stepped out of the garment and he flung it carelessly aside. She would have protested but all that protected her from complete nakedness before him were the stockings and the lacy garter belt that kept them up, and she could do no more than tuck her bottom lips between her teeth...

"Mine," he said, and pressed his face against the soft curls at the V of her thighs.

She tensed as he inhaled deeply and rubbed his cheek across her mons. Pure hunger for what she knew he could give her shot through her as his breath fanned over her thigh. His kiss on that silky surface before he rose almost made her come.

"Now," he said as he stood there facing her, so close her nipples brushed the silk of his uniform shirt. He rested the palm of his right hand on her left thigh. "Open your legs for me, wench."

She obeyed, unable to do anything else.

His hand moved over until he was cupping her again and she accommodated him by moving her legs farther apart. Her eyes closed as he began to rub her rhythmically – between and above. Between and above. The tip of that wicked middle finger probed at her anal opening each time it slid beneath her.

"Tell me what you want," he commanded.

"You," she was quick to say.

"Nay, wench," he said, shaking his head. "Be specific."

All her life Mystery Faye Butler had been a good girl. A virgin on her wedding night, she had lain like a vestal virgin under the clumsy lovemaking of her first and only lover, the first and only man to touch her in places so intimate she had no name for them then. She had given herself willingly to her husband for she had loved him, but he had invoked no wild desire in her breast. He had not awakened lust in her loins or set her juices to flowing. She had not found pleasure in his awkward embraces or his quick rutting. Instead she had lain wide-eyed in the dark as he snored loudly, staring up at the ceiling, wondering if that was all there was to the act of intercourse. Even the word made her blush hotly and turn her face into the cool protection of her pillow.

Lying on her side as night turned to morning, sleepless, aching for something to which she could put no name nor even explain, she had known there had to be more. There simply had to be.

But she had not found it with her husband, and when he had been taken from her, she thought never to find it.

Now it was there within her grasp, lending itself to her fantastical imaginings, willing to satisfy her as nothing ever had, intending to give her the longed-for pleasure she so ached to find.

"What is it you want?" he repeated, and the tip of his finger insinuated itself into the opening she discovered held as much stimulation – if not more so – than the channel between her legs.

"I want you," she repeated, unable to express in words what she had never experienced.

"You want this?" he asked, and wedged his finger higher inside her.

"Aye!" she gasped, squirming on that invading digit.

He withdrew but before she could complain, he thrust the fingers from his other hand into her sheath.

"How about this?"

One finger. Two. Three.

"Oh yes!" she breathed.

He probed her, pushed into her, went deep and twisted, making her cry out from the sheer delight that was scalding her between her legs.

"Or this?"

He lowered his mouth to her breast and drew her nipple deep between his lips, clenching his teeth around it, working it in counter rhythm to the thrust of his fingers between her legs, stabbing the tip with his hot tongue.

Mystery moaned and threaded her fingers through his dark hair, held his head as he suckled her, nibbled, licked, tasted. She felt something strange building within her but she had no way of knowing what it was for this good girl, this good woman, had never experienced even a wet dream in all her twenty-three years of living. She was but a woman in name only, never having known what it truly meant to be one.

He kissed his way from one breast to the other and began to shower the same pleasure upon it. His hand cupped her. His fingers worked her. When she was on the verge of discovering what it was that was so electric between a man and woman, he withdrew and stepped back.

"Glyn, no!" she protested, but he stepped back even farther, well out of her reach. She started to beg him when she saw that he was reaching for his tie. She stilled, realizing she would now get to see the superb body that was only hinted at beneath the confines of the silk and leather.

With exasperating slowness his hands tugged the knot of his tie down. His eyes were fused with hers, his face so handsome it hurt to look at him. There was no expression on that face but his eyes were smoldering, so hot she felt as though his gaze would incinerate her.

He pulled the tie from its knot then slid it sensuously from around his neck. He dropped it to the floor and in even slower motion began to tug the tail of his shirt from his pants.

She licked her lips in anticipation, her attention drifting down to the thick bulge that strained at the leather then snapping up to stare into his hypnotic eyes. Her breath rate increased and she could feel the blood pounding in her head. By the time the shirt hung free and he put one hand up to work the buttons, she was nearly panting.

Slower still those buttons came undone. Little by little the hard plain of his broad chest was revealed – the crisp hairs of which she had caught only brief glimpses in the opened V of the silk now coming fully into view.

The garment gaped open as he unhurriedly lifted one wrist then the other to undo the buttons at the cuff. She could see the bunching of his pectorals and felt more moisture gathering between her legs.

He put his hands to each side of the front and flexed his fingers gradually around the material of the placket. He moved with the speed of a snail as he eased the shirt up and over his shoulders, down his muscular arms then let it fall from his body, revealing the broad expanse of that chiseled chest – the sight of which made her mouth water.

"Do you want this?" he queried.

Odell Butler had not been a tall man. He was only a fraction of an inch or so taller than his wife. Neither had he been athletic or physically powerful. His chest had been flat, his nipples small and barely protruding from the chest wall. There had been no bulging muscles in his arms or thighs. Though his belly had been flat, his hipbones protruded and his knees were knobby, his

waist beginning to thicken. His hair was thin and he was going bald by the time he reached his twenty-sixth birthday.

He had not been a man endowed with either a handsome face or a sensuous nature. No woman had ever turned on the street to give him a second look. No woman had ever flirted with him or surely none had ever had wicked fantasies about him. He had been – well, plain. Stalwart and reliable but as simple and basic as a man could be.

But he had been a good man, a worthy man, a deeply religious man with unshakeable morals and unbending belief in a perfect world beyond this one. He had been a man Mystery had known she'd marry since childhood and though she had not loved him, she had cared deeply for him. He had been a good husband to her and a wonderful father to a daughter he simply worshipped.

"Think only of me, wench," her new husband said, and there was jealousy in his golden gaze.

Unable to speak, she watched Glyn sit down on the edge of the bed to take off his boots and socks, amazed at how beautiful his feet were, how clean and well-shaped the toenails. Her first husband's toes had been crooked and the nails thick, the soles flat and without a discernible arch.

"Only me, wench," the demand came again.

Mystery nodded and resolutely pushed thoughts of the other man aside.

The Reaper stood, his legs spread – a stance that somehow spoke of ravishment and the inability to do anything but give in to the authority staring back at her.

Here before her was a powerful example of prime manhood – a gloriously handsome man with striking amber eyes and a head full of thick coal black hair, sinfully full lips, broad shoulders, narrow waist and a chest full of dark hair through which she longed to lace her fingers. As he stood there before her – hands lowering to the buckle of his belt – she had the wild urge to rush him, throw him to the floor and rip the leather from his long legs, to impale herself on him.

"Easy, wench," he said with a half smile. "I'll make it worth the wait."

She had no doubt of that.

Leisurely he tugged the belt's tip from the first keeper, the second, and then pulled the strap back to slip the hole from the prong. He pulled the strap free then tugged the strap from the belt loops in one smooth, aching measured movement. Once free of his pants, he let the belt fall to the floor to join his tie and shirt.

Mystery swallowed hard. Her lips parted. She flicked her tongue across them for they were as dry and parched, as devoid of moisture as her mouth and throat had suddenly become. Her eyes crawled from his down to the strong hands that were now at the waistband of his pants, the long, slender fingers taking hold of the first of the five onyx buttons that held his fly together.

One by one he flicked the buttons from their holes and inch by enticing inch the dark hair beneath his deeply inset bellybutton was revealed. If the thin line of hair that ranged from the extensive pelt covering his chest and which dipped downward to disappear into his waistband was any indication, the mysterious triangle that had been so sparse on Odell promised to be thick and as black as pitch on Glyn Kullen.

"Myst?"

Her gaze jerked upward.

"One more thought of him and I'll not be responsible for what I do," he told her.

"Aye, my sweet milord," she agreed.

He arched a brow.

"I swear it!"

He nodded and spread open his fly. The moment the broad head of his cock showed in the opening of his fly, Mystery thought her knees would buckle and she would fall panting to the floor. As he sprang free of the fly – jutting like a battering ram straight out in front of him – she made a low, keening sound deep in her throat and was afraid she would pass out from the mere sight of his size.

"Is this what you want, wench?" he whispered, and pushed the pants down his hips, stepping out of them with an entirely graceful masculine ease that made her heart speed even faster.

He was as naked before her as the day he had come from his mother's womb and he was absolute perfection. There wasn't a spare ounce of fat on his lean, hard body. He was flat in all the right places, muscles bulging in others. He had just the right amount of hair on his chest and belly and his legs were long and beautifully formed. From the thick black hair on his handsome head to the elegant spread of his feet, he was all any woman could want.

And he was hers.

She lifted her arms.

"I want you," she said again, and he came to her.

His arm slid around her, behind her, the other under her knees, and he hefted her high against his chest to carry her to the bed. He placed her there on the white silk coverlet she wished with all her heart and being could be stained with the crimson assurance of her possession by none other than he, but that was not to be.

"It matters not, Myst," he said as he put a knee to the bed. "I have all I want and will ask for no more."

She stared up at him as he straddled her. She felt the drag of his meaty cock sliding over her thigh then stabbing between her legs. She sighed when he laced his fingers through hers, pulled her hands above her head, leaned his weight on them, and with unerring ease positioned himself – that gloriously hard, achingly hot cock – at her entrance.

"Tell me what you want, wench," he ordered one last time.

"I want your cock in me," she said in a brazen voice she did not recognize as her own. "I want every inch of you inside me, Glyn Kullen. I want to feel you sliding in and out of my sheath. I want your essence oozing into my womb. I want all there is of you to be had."

A slow smile spread over his gorgeous face and an errant curl of ebony hair fell over his forehead. "Why didn't you just say so, wench?" he asked.

With one powerful, sure and authoritative stroke, he pushed deep between her legs into that warm, wet channel that longed for him and down into the very core of her, filling her so fully, stretching her so widely she thought she could not take all of him. But he seated himself as far as he could go and held himself there, his eyes fused with hers.

"Tell me once more what you want," he demanded.

"You," she said breathlessly as the first ripple of pleasure began high in her belly and spiraled down like a serpent, spreading fire as it went.

She tensed, ready to experience the joy she knew this man could give her. She held her breath and...

Chapter Two

"Damn!"

Mystery came awake with a start, her face as hot as if she had been staring into a roaring oven. Her heart was hammering and she put a shaking hand to her breast.

"What?" she asked.

The stage was slowing as thunder rolled heavily and a brief flash of light pulsed along the edges of the leather curtains.

Glyn peeled the curtain back, wincing as a streak of lightning webbed across the sky. "Damn," he growled again.

Mystery feared he had somehow entered her illicit dream and was angry at the wild fantasies she had fashioned but then realized it was the bad weather that had brought out his fury. "I don't like storms," she said, seeing the Reaper flinch.

"Neither do I," Glyn admitted with a grim twitch of his full lips as the stage rolled into a rut and jarred its passengers.

"The road must be a quagmire by now," Mystery said just for something to say, wishing the dream would melt away but she was still seeing the image of him—naked and primed—in her mind's eye. She shook her head to clear it but the image remained.

"I imagine so," he responded.

Rolling to a stop, the stage rocked on its twin thorough-braces then settled.

"Barbara Springs, folks!" the driver called out.

The rain was lashing down on the stage so heavily it was hard to hear anything save the thunder rumbles and the ear-splitting hiss of lightning. When the door opened and cool air blew through, it was a welcome relief to the heat filling the interior.

"Barbara Springs," the driver repeated. Rain ran off his hat as he tugged at the brim. "You'll be spending the night here."

Valda sat up, her little fists digging at her eyes. "Mama, where are we?"

"The stage station," her mother answered. She kissed the top of Valda's head, striving for a normalcy she certainly did not feel.

"Want me to carry her in for you?" Glyn asked. He was settling his own hat upon his thick black hair.

Valda didn't give her mother a chance to reply. She slid off the seat and into Glyn's arms, putting hers around his neck and laying her head on his shoulder. "I'm hungry, Glynnie," she told him then lowered her voice. "And I gotta make water."

Glyn couldn't look at the woman across from him. A long-forgotten part of him had awoken the moment the child had pressed against him. His arms clenched around the small body and something twisted insisted his chest.

"Are you sure you want to carry her, milord?" he heard Valda's mother ask.

"Aye, wench, I'm gods-be-damned sure," he said gruffly. It would have taken an army of Ceannus 'bots to pull the little girl out of his arms.

"You're gonna get your mouth washed out for sure, Glynnie," Valda warned, her breath warm against his neck.

He smiled and ducked out through the open door, skirting the driver who was reaching up to offer his hand to the young woman. His long legs sprinted across the muddy ground, his boots splashing in the puddles as he held Valda close to his chest. Thumping heavily onto the wooden porch of the station, he realized his heart was hammering painfully. Consciously he might have been unaware of the mud over which he crossed, the sucking sound his boots made as he ran, but his subconscious had registered the sight and sound and was replaying it. He sure as hell was aware of the zinging lightning cracking above him. For one brief moment his body shook as though with the ague and a strangled sound of grief escaped his lips.

"Glynnie?" Valda asked, lifting her head to look up at him. "Are you all right?"

His stricken gaze fell to the child in his arms and the image of Gentry's face was momentarily superimposed upon hers then the image faded as quickly as it had come. He hugged her to him, plastering his cheek to hers.

"Aye, *babban*. I'm okay," he managed to say.

"What does *babban* mean, Glynnie?"

"Baby doll," he replied absently.

"I like that."

The door to the station opened and a large woman with a girth nearly as wide as she was tall stepped back to allow him to enter. She curtsied clumsily, her small eyes wide in a doughy face as she clutched at the door edge as though her life depended upon the contact.

"Welcome, your lordship," she said, and curtsied again, her knee bumping against the edge of the door.

Glyn nodded his greeting and carried Valda over to a long trestle table where he placed her upon the bench. "The child needs the use of your facilities," he told the woman.

Looking confused, the woman started forward, nearly colliding with the young woman who came hurrying in out of the rain. "Oh, excuse me," she said then got a good look at the female traveler. The fat woman's mouth snapped shut and her piggish eyes narrowed, almost disappearing into the folds of her pale face. She turned her oversized head to a man standing behind a counter. "Judd?" she barked.

The man—as thin and spindly as his wife was round and squat—shrugged helplessly then came from behind the counter, an ingratiating smile on his narrow face.

"It's a pleasure to have you with us again, Lord Glyn," he said as his hands ran over and over one another.

"The child?" Glyn repeated.

"Oh yes, of course!" the stage station manager responded. He turned his attention to the young woman. "We have an outhouse..."

"You have a bathroom," Glyn cut in sharply, and the look he sent to the man was filled with reproach.

"Aye, we do," the man quickly agreed, his head bobbing up and down.

"Through there, ma'am," Glyn said, nudging his chin toward a door through which he passed a time or two when forced to stop at the station.

Mystery Butler made no comment as she went to her daughter and held out her hand to Valda. The child took her mother's hand and slid off the bench, following behind her as she was led to the bathroom.

Once the two were out of sight, Glyn turned on the station man and his wife like an avenging angel.

"Don't you *ever* do that again," he warned.

"No, milord," the man responded, backing away from the fury he saw etched on the Reaper's lean face.

"And don't even think you'll be denying that woman and her child a cot here tonight. Do you understand?"

"No, milord," the husband and wife said at the same time, though the woman's words seemed to have been reluctantly drawn from her throat.

"They are under my personal protection," Glyn said, and his eyes swung to the man who had been riding with them in the stage. "Anyone who insults them insults me. Is that clear?"

"Aye, milord!" the station manager concurred.

The Reaper's angry glare swept past the stage driver and his partner as they came into the common room and swung to the man's wife. "Did you hear me, wench?"

"Aye, milord," she mumbled, and curtsied still again.

"And the child is hungry so set her plate beside mine and be about it double-time, wench," Glyn snapped.

"Alice will be happy to get it, milord," the station man said.

Glyn was about to turn away but the fat woman's thoughts were so powerful, so enraged, that he caught them like a solar blast. Sheer rage shot through every fiber of his being and his shout was loud enough to turn every other person in the room to stone.

"You do that and I swear before the gods it will be the *last* fucking thing you ever do, bitch!" came the thunderous threat.

Alice DePalmer's face went parchment white and she staggered beneath the force of that enraged bellow. She put both hands up as though to ward off the lethal intent being aimed her way and shook her head so hard the pins came from her mop of mousy brown hair. The thin jumble fell to her shoulders in messy strands.

"No, milord! No!" she said, backing away, her numerous chins trembling. "I would not. I would not!"

"You'd best not!" Glyn snarled. His lips were drawn back over his teeth. "Now do what I told you to!"

Every eye in the room was locked on the Reaper as he stood there with his hands clenching and unclenching at his side. No one else save the overweight woman dared move. They barely took a breath for the eyes of the man in black had turned crimson red and were glowing.

"Sweet Merciful Alel," the stage driver whispered, and made the Sign of the Slain One across his chest.

Mystery and her daughter came out of the bathroom slowly, having heard the infuriated shout. The child was clinging to her mother.

"What's wrong?" Mystery asked. She looked from Glyn to the woman who was scurrying into what must be the kitchen as fast as her pudgy legs would carry her.

Glyn had to force the rage down within himself and it took him a moment to answer. He shook his head to clear it, making certain mother and child did not see the blood-red pulsing of his gaze. "Nothing," he answered.

Judd DePalmer took a step forward. His hands were trembling as he pointed to the trestle table. "T-Take a seat, m-ma'am," he offered Mystery. "S-Supper will be up s-shortly."

Glyn was trying desperately to get his anger under control. It had not been a good day for him and it was ending almost as hatefully as it had begun. A part of him wished he were still locked in the containment cell at the Citadel where he had spent three months of living hell the winter past. Anything would be better than this violent urge to pulverize the station manager's hateful wife. Such feelings toward a female were so beyond his normal behavior it scared the hell out of him.

The little girl had stuck her thumb in her mouth but now she pulled it out with a loud popping sound. "Glynnie, why are you shaking?" Valda asked as she and her mother moved toward the table.

"I'm okay, *babban*," Glyn said, and managed to finally swallow his fury. He swept the hat from his head and tossed it on a chair. "I'm okay."

"Swear?" Valda said.

"Aye," the Reaper replied. He came to the table and swung a long leg over the bench. "Sit down now. Everything's all right." He looked over at the men, his expression stern. "Sit."

The three men rushed to do as the lawman ordered, nearly toppling one another as they slammed down onto the bench. The station manager stood where he was, seemingly unable to do anything else. From the kitchen, Alice DePalmer came waddling in with three plates of food on a large tray.

Glyn stared unblinkingly at the obese woman, watching every move she made as she set a plate before him then hurried to place the other two before backing away, the tray held before her like a shield. When he silently cocked his head toward the kitchen, she spun around and hurried away.

"What did the poor woman do?" Mystery asked him quietly.

"Nothing you have to worry about, milady," Glyn replied. He took up his knife and fork and grimly began scoring the ham steak that had been set in front of him.

Mystery frowned before picking up her own knife and fork and then leaning over to cut her daughter's food. As she did, she kept glancing up at the silent Reaper as he ruthlessly shoveled food into his mouth, watching him chew methodically, his amber eyes hard and glinting. She knew he could not possibly be savoring what he ate.

"He's mad, Mama," Valda whispered. "Really mad."

"Eat your supper, sweetie," her mother told her.

The meal continued beneath a heavy pall of silence while outside the rain slammed brutally against the wooden building. The wind howled like a banshee and blasted against the wooden building. Constantly the lightning would crack overhead and each time it did, the Reaper would flinch. Those seated at the table with him and the two who stood close by should they be needed noticed the haunted look in the tall man's eyes as the storm raged. They saw the way his hand shook each time the shriek of lightning came.

After the table had been cleared, Alice DePalmer was quick to disappear from sight. Her husband, the driver, his partner and the man from the stage—who had identified himself as Buford Rourke, a salesman of pharmaceuticals—settled down in one corner with a quiet, expressionless game of five-card stud to pass the time. Mystery took her daughter to the settee at the other end of the room and sat down to tell the little girl a few fairy tales. Glyn unbuckled his gun belt and draped it on a chair close at hand. He went to the fireplace where a fire had been lit to dispel the dampness and stood there staring down into the hearth, his forearm braced on the thick oak mantle. The storm continued unabated all evening, and by the time the cots were brought out and placed about the room and the lanterns turned low, nerves had been chaffed raw by the constant noise. The travelers and the employees of the stage line were more than ready for sleep.

All except Glyn.

He had not moved from the fireplace but was staring intently into the flames. He had barely acknowledged DePalmer telling him that his cot had been prepared, asking if he needed anything from the stage.

"Your saddle and saddlebags are in the stable," the station man assured the Reaper, who only nodded at the information.

With each shriek of lightning, the man in black seemed to grow more edgy. His hair was tousled from the countless times he had plowed a trembling hand through it. Uneasy eyes shifted his way until the anxiety finally pierced his shell and he looked up.

"I'm a week or so away from Transition," he informed them, and the collective sigh of relief was audible even above the roaring storm.

"What's Tran...Tran..."

"Transition," Mystery said. "It's just something Reapers do, sweetie. It's nothing for you to worry about."

"I think he's afraid of the lightning, Mama," Valda told her mother.

Mystery was preparing her daughter for bed, brushing out the little girl's hair. Their cots were side by side with the men's resting places at the other end of the room.

"I don't think Reapers are afraid of anything, sweetie," her mother assured her.

When the child was tucked in, all the men save the lawman stretched out on their cots and the little girl's mother finally crawling beneath the thin blanket provided, DePalmer blew out the lanterns – with Glyn's permission – and hurried to his own bed.

The Reaper's face was lit by the light from the dancing flames, his amber eyes sparking with each leap of the fire. He was strung as tightly as a new bow, unable to relax, so tired he was beyond weariness and his headache was back with a vengeance. He was sick at heart about the loss of his stallion, feeling guilt for having to put the creature down. He was worried about Owen Tohre, his best friend on the Reaper team who was still in a containment cell and would be for another month to come. He was worried about Owen's pregnant wife and a dozen other things that were preying on his mind.

"You need rest, my Reaper."

The voice came at him from far away but it drifted through his mind as intimate and clear as though the speaker were right there beside him.

"I need peace, Mo Regina," he sent back to Her.

"Sleep," She ordered.

His exhaustion seemed to overwhelm him and he yawned. He knew it would be impossible to fight it for She would see Her will done. Reluctantly, he walked to his cot and sat down, bent over to remove his boots. He stood, padded over to the chair where his gun belt was slung across the ladder-back and eased the gun from the holster. He went back to the cot, thrust the six-shooter under the thin pillow then stretched out atop the blanket, lacing his hands behind his head. With one knee crooked, he stared up at the exposed beams of the ceiling while the pulses of light flared at the windows.

At last the pain between his temples eased and his aching eyes closed. He turned to his side—one hand tucked beneath his pillow, his index finger sliding into the trigger ring of his gun, the other hand clutching the pillow to him. A slight rush of sound caught his attention and he tuned in to it.

"Mama?" Valda was whispering to her mother.

"What, sweetie?"

"Glynnie put his gun under his pillow."

"That's so he can protect us," Mystery told her child.

There came the sound of the little girl lifting her head. "You're not afraid of him like that drummer man is, are you, Mama?"

"Valda, lie down," her mother ordered.

"But you aren't, are you, Mama?" Valda persisted, and the cot squeaked again.

"There is nothing *to* fear. Only those with something to hide or who have a guilty conscience fear the Reaper lords." She looked over at Glyn. "No, I'm not afraid of him. He's a good man. I admire and respect him. Now get to sleep, young lady. You're not going to want to get up in the morning and we've a long day of traveling ahead of us."

"I like Glynnie, Mama."

"I like him too, now hush!"

Across the room, Glyn wedged an eye open. His chest felt tight and there was a prickle behind his eyes that both surprised and annoyed him. He was a man accustomed to being shunned, feared, hated and rarely treated with anything even close to admiration or respect. Men stepped out of his way when approached. Women trembled and lowered their eyes. Children ran and hid. Even most animals sensed the dangerous beast within him and shied away. Only a handful liked him and they were either those like himself or humans he had come to know as reluctant friends. Certainly very few would ever call him a good man.

He stared at Mystery. She was turned toward him and thanks to his keen night vision, the faint glow from the dying fire in the hearth lit her face clearly.

She was a beautiful woman with skin the color of the caramel candies Phelan Kiel was never without. He had been surreptitiously watching her when she'd removed her hat in preparation for bed then taken the pins from the chignon that had held her waist-length hair atop her head. The ebony braid had been thick and glossy and he had wanted to lift it in his hand to test the weight and texture. She smelled of columbine and he wondered if her hair held that fragrance as well.

He smiled for her slightly upturned nose twitched as she settled down into sleep once more. Her lips parted and his gaze fell to the bottom one—a pouty curve of dusky fullness from which he had trouble prying his attention.

He let his gaze wander over her high cheekbones and smooth forehead, her delicate eyebrows that arched sensuously over eyes the color of rich, dark chocolate. Her ears

were perfect little shells that framed a face that—even in repose—seemed so alive and animated, so kind and innocent.

She was a little over average height for a woman. He figured she must be five-seven, five-eight. If she weighed a hundred and ten, he'd eat his hat, but her lithe frame was curved in all the right places, her breasts filling out the bodice of her gown perfectly to his way of thinking. They would surely be a weighty handful, the nipples dark and plump from nursing her child. He wondered what they would taste like.

He forcefully tore his rude imaginings from such things as he realized his gaze had strayed to the rise and fall of her chest beneath the lightweight blanket. His face flamed and he swallowed the groan that threatened to escape for it had been a long, long time since he'd had his needs serviced. He kept his attention on her closed eyes and the long lashes that fanned the creamy curve of her cheekbones.

There was no mystery about Mystery Butler. He had delved into her mind as she'd sat telling tales to her child after supper and she was an open book. What was seen was exactly what she was. There was no duplicity in her, no greed or sense of self-importance, no need for self-entitlement. There was only honesty and a driving desire to leave the world a better place when she left it. She loved her child more than life itself and struggled moment by moment to make Valda's life as happy and carefree as she could.

He sighed and felt a pain stab through his heart. He wondered if the mother he had barely known had been the same kind of woman. He doubted it. Any woman who would leave her children and run off with a stranger certainly couldn't care less about the children's happiness. Memories of her—and that memory was beginning to fade for he had been no older than Valda when she'd left them—his father and brother, his older twin sisters and the woman he had intended to make his bride were often all that kept him totally sane.

His headache flared brutally and nausea rushed up his throat. His hand tensed on the pillow. Squeezing his eyes shut, striving to push away the aching loneliness that rode him hard, willing the headache to leave him in peace, he flinched as an echo of thunder rolled beyond the window. He flinched again as another sounded then felt eyes on him and his snapped open.

Valda put a finger to her lips and glanced back to make sure her mother was still asleep. "Hey, Glynnie."

"Hey back at you," he replied, and reached up to rub at his temple. "What are you doing up, *babban*?"

"You still got that bad ache in your head?" she asked.

"'Fraid so, little one."

She surprised him by putting her little hand on his head and smoothing his hair back. "When I get a headache," she said, "this is what Mama does and it always makes me feel all better." She smiled at him as she continued to stroke his hair. "Are you feeling better, Glyn?"

"Aye, I am," he agreed, though his head was splitting. He liked the feel of her hand stroking his brow.

Outside thunder rumbled in the distance and he tensed. The storm was returning.

"My daddy died during a storm," she said, gaining his full attention, but before he could say anything else, she continued. "Bad men killed him at the store but a Reaper lord went after them and punished them for being bad. He brought them to jus...to jus..."

"Justice," he supplied.

"Aye," she said, nodding emphatically. "Justice."

"Do you know which Reaper that was?" he asked, curious to know which of his team members had made things right for the Butler family. He wanted to thank that man.

She shook her head. "Mama knows. You can ask her."

Thunder cracked savagely and he jumped, just managing not to cry out.

"It's all right, Glynnie," Valda said. "It's just lightning. It can't hurt a Reaper."

He flinched again as another shriek pierced the sky and Valda stunned him by crawling onto the cot with him, making him move over to give her room.

"That's okay," she said, putting her little arm around him. "I'll protect you."

Glyn's heart twisted in his chest and tears filled his eyes.

"Do you want me to sing you a song?" Valda asked. "That's what Mama does when I'm scared."

All he could do was nod for his throat was clogged, tears beginning to fall down his cheeks.

"The itsy, bitsy spider..." Valda began singing off-key. Her little fingers danced as she mimicked a spider crawling up a waterspout.

In the semidarkness, Glyn ached to put his arms around the child and hold her to him. He wanted to bury his face against her and stay there like that forever. Staying as still as he could, he listened to one silly song after another until the little voice grew tired then slowly faded away, Valda's body snuggling down beside his, her head on his shoulder, her arm draped over his waist. When she began to snore softly, he no longer heard the thunderous clamor of the storm, the skirl of the lightning. All he heard was the sweet heart nestled in her chest beating slowly, trustingly.

With that reassuring, calming beat-beat-beat echoing in his ears, he fell asleep, his finger slipping off the trigger of his gun.

Mystery woke just after three in the morning and her heart nearly stopped beating as she saw the Reaper bending over Valda's cot. She opened her mouth to ask him what it was he thought he was doing but then she realized he was easing her child onto the cot, covering her then bending down to place a kiss on Valda's head.

"You've a very tender-hearted baby here," he whispered. "She wanted to make my headache better."

Without another word he straightened and moved away, heading toward the door. She watched him until he exited the common room then flung her blanket aside. She checked on Valda, adjusted the child's covers, reached for a shawl she had taken from the portmanteau Mr. DePalmer had retrieved from the stage boot for her and then made her way to the door as well. She opened it and slipped quietly outside, finding Glyn standing at the edge of the porch, leaning against a support.

"She is growing very fond of you," she told him, pulling the shawl close around her for the early morning air was chilled now that the rain had slackened to a steady sprinkle.

"I think I may be falling in love with her," he replied. "I just hope she'll wait for me."

Mystery smiled and came to stand beside him, looking out at the silvery fall of rain. "You might be just a tad old for her by then."

He snorted. "I'm more than a tad old now."

She looked up at him. She was genuinely interested in the men who protected her world and curious to know more about them. "How old are you?"

He shrugged. "If you count the years before I became a Reaper, thirty. If you tack on the years since then and add in the time differential between this world and mine, a smidgen over three hundred."

The young woman blinked. "Three hundred? Truly?" At his nod, she laughed softly. "Well, it's a wonder you can sit up and take nourishment, milord."

He grinned. "So what you're saying is I'm a decrepit old coot?"

"Aye, but you're well preserved for your age," she countered, amusement rife in her velvety voice.

He turned so his back was to the post and he was facing her. Bracing one bare foot on the wooden upright, he crossed his arms and studied her. "Who was the Reaper who took out your husband's killer?"

She too put her back to the post beside her and pulled her shawl even closer. "Lord Owen Tohre," she replied.

"He's a good man."

"You all are," she said.

He shook his head. "I wouldn't go that far, but we have our moments."

"How is Lord Owen?"

Glyn drew in a long breath then exhaled slowly. "As far as I know he's doing okay. The last time I saw him, he was sleeping peacefully enough." A muscle flexed in his jaw. "He is awaiting the birth of his son."

Mystery's eyebrows rose. "I didn't know he was married."

"It happened last winter," Glyn told her. "Her name is Rachel."

"Well, I'm happy for him," she said.

"Aye. Me too."

They were quiet for a moment as the rain fell softly, steadily. Finally she asked what she had been aching to.

"Are you married, Lord Glyn?"

Glyn tore his gaze from the floor at which he'd been staring. "Me? By the gods, no!"

She cocked her head to one side. "Don't you like women?"

"They're the only game in town for me," he responded, and winced at his flippancy. "I mean, aye, I like women."

"But there's no one special," she stated, but it was really a question.

"A Reaper may mate with only one woman," he said, "so he'd better be gods-blessed sure he's making a good match because the Joining is for life."

"Oh," she said, and that news both elated and worried her.

"How 'bout you?" he asked. "You're still young. Are you going to be on the lookout for a new father for Valda?"

"I really haven't given it that much thought," she answered truthfully. "I know she needs a father figure in her life but I guess I just thought her uncles could fill that role. Odell, my husband, had four brothers and I have seven. That's a lot of menfolk."

"What about *your* needs?" he asked, and realized his voice had gone huskier than normal.

Mystery blushed and looked away. "I guess I thought that would work itself out too." When he made no comment to that, she looked back around to find him watching her steadily.

"You're a beautiful woman," he said. "Any man would be proud to call you his own."

She became aware of her heart racing in her chest. Against all reason, all good, common sense, she was deeply attracted to this man, had been from the moment he had sat down across from her on the stage. She had slyly studied him while they traveled, had watched him off and on all evening as he'd brooded by the fire, had dreamt that wicked fantasy of him. Her hands itched to touch him, her body ached to know the weight of his. The very thought made her tremble for it was so unlike her to even contemplate such immoral things.

"There's nothing wrong with what you are feeling," he said, and she knew he'd used his Reaper ability to sense her wayward imaginings. When his eyes widened, she knew he'd discovered the illicit dream hovering in her subconscious.

"I'm a shameless bawd," she said, lowering her head.

Then he was right there in front of her, moving so silently, so quickly it shocked her, but the moment he lifted his hand to cup her chin, she found herself lost in this amber gaze.

"You're nothing of the sort," he said so softly she barely heard him.

"I should be ashamed of myself."

"For what?" he asked. "For being human? For having needs that have gone unattended for some time now?" His thumb caressed her bottom lip. "It's not a sin to dream, Myst."

His use of the nickname made her want to wrap herself around him.

"I like the way you say that," she told him.

The sensation of his flesh moving along hers sent spasms through Mystery's womb. She felt the gathering of heat and moistness between her thighs as she drew the warm, masculine scent of him deep into her lungs. He towered above her, his face tilted toward hers and she longed for the press of his lips to hers, the contact of his body against hers.

"Be careful what you wish for, *mo chróí*," he warned in that gravelly voice. He moved closer still. "Some men can't control themselves around a woman like you."

She tipped her head back, surprised at her own brazenness as she asked, "Are you one of them, milord?"

Their eyes were locked on one another, their bodies not quite touching but so close each could feel the other's heat. His palm slid around her neck and he lowered his head. His mouth was but a breath away...

"Mama?"

The one word snapped them apart and the Reaper stepped back, jamming his hands into the pockets of his leather pants like a little boy caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

"What were you two doing, Mama?"

Valda was standing in the open doorway with one fist grinding into her eye. "I've got to potty."

Mystery could not look at Glyn as she hurried past him and to her daughter. She reached down for Valda's hand. "We were just talking, sweetie," she said, drawing the child back into the common room.

"Is his head better?"

"Yes, I believe it is."

"No, hell it ain't," Glyn mumbled under his breath, feeling the weight of his erection pressing at the front of his pants. He turned his back to the station and stared out at the rain.

The lightning and thunder had ceased, had moved on, but the edginess that had claimed Glyn Kullen was increasing and he knew as long as he was near Mystery Butler, it was only going to get worse.

"I've got to get away from her," he thought. "I sure as hell don't need to get involved. She and the child don't need a man like me."

And he didn't need a woman. He didn't *want* a mate. Women were nothing but trouble and why borrow trouble when it wasn't needed? he questioned.

"Man was not meant to live alone."

The soft, gentle voice slithered through his head and the aching started again. He wished with all his being the goddess would leave him the hell alone. Every time She intruded into his thoughts, the pain came back with a vengeance. He wondered—not for the first time—why it was that way with him but not the other Reapers? Why did She single him out to punish him in such a mean way?

"Because you have a way of not listening, My Reaper. It takes more to garner your attention than it does the others of your kind."

"Lucky me," he growled.

Pain flared in his head and he knew She was issuing a warning he'd best not ignore. The Triune Goddess would accept only so much disrespect from Her Reapers before She retaliated.

"The young woman is perfect for you," She whispered as though to soothe the agony She'd caused.

Suspicion shot through Glyn and he narrowed his golden eyes.

"Are you telling me I should have a mate, *Mo Regina*?" he asked aloud, somewhat belligerently.

"I am merely granting you permission to have one if you so desire."

"What about the Shadowlords?" he countered. "Don't you think they'll have something to say about it? I'm in enough trouble with Lord Kheelan as it is. I don't fancy another prolonged stay in one of his gods-forsaken con cells."

"Kheelan does not have the final say on such matters, My Reaper. Besides, he has troubles of his own at the moment and about to have many more. If you want the woman, go after her."

"And if I don't?"

"You will."

He made no reply and felt Her moving out of his mind as easily as She had entered it.

"Nooo, I *won't*!" he stated. He had every intention of clearing out as soon as it was daylight, hitching his saddle over any nag he decided had enough strength to get him to the Citadel.

Glyn was lonely but he couldn't see how having a woman would really help that situation. To his way of reasoning, his loneliness was actually more homesickness stemming from the fact that he had been taken from life in a painful way and thrust into

another that was so alien, so beyond his experience, he'd had a hard time coping with it at first. He would never see his world again nor what was left of his family, and realizing that had nearly broken him.

It was homesickness, he decided as he headed back inside.

Homesickness and fear that he'd wind up like Cynyr and Arawn, Bev and Owen. All four of his Reaper teammates had moved heaven and hell, had endured agonies worse than the fires of hell to have their mates. He just didn't see any advantages to it in his situation.

"Love 'em and leave 'em," he said as he entered the common room, his gaze automatically going to the cots where Mystery and her daughter were lying. "Just love 'em and leave 'em, Kullen."

It was the mantra of the unattached Reapers, and so far, it had held him, Phelan and Iden—and Kasid, he supposed, although he knew next to nothing about the man from Akhkharu—in good stead. They were free agents, unencumbered by a woman's wiles or at the mercy of her whims. They could go and come and as they pleased.

"With whomever they please," he added nastily as he returned to his cot and lay down.

Aye, he thought as he lay on his side with his knees drawn up, it was best to find a woman to put her hand or mouth around his cock and work out his release than to contemplate going through the same nerve-racking insecurities that the mated Reapers endured. Who needed such travail?

"I can sleep in this place tonight and a hotel tomorrow night," he mumbled to himself. "Spread my blanket at a campsite the next. I can bunk in a jail cell or in somebody's stable if it rains. I can..."

The places where he could lay his head were as varied as the excuses he made to maintain what he thought was his freedom.

Who needed a house with a picket fence like Cynyr's? Who needed a house by a stream like Bev's—although the Reaper and his Lady Lea were rarely there, Lea preferring the comforts of the Citadel? Owen would return north with Rachel when he was released from the con cell and Arawn had his place with Danielle, that saucy wench of his who sure baked a mean cake. But who needed all that shit to tie them down?

But even as he settled down with his hand under the pillow, finger once more on the trigger, back to the wall to keep vigil on the room, he knew he was lying to himself. The loneliness that ate at him so ravenously was beginning to take its toll and in his heart he knew it had gone deeper than homesickness. He was beginning to long for things he knew he should not have.

Like a woman of his own. A real place to call home. A dinner table set at a certain time. A bed where he could rest peacefully at night after making slow, passionate love to his lady.

His eyes swung slowly to Valda.

A child to hold and teach and love.

Tears pricked at his eyes and the dusty feeling that came with deep emotion settled high in his nasal passages.

"Who needs it?" he asked.

"Who indeed?" came the soft voice floating through his head.

Chapter Three

The man in black was in a surly mood when he swung his feet off the cot and snatched up his boot. With his lips pursed tightly together, his amber eyes hard, he stomped into the kitchen and—ignoring a startled Alice DePalmer working at the stove—jerked the coffeepot from the burner, a cup from the rack at the sink, and poured a cup of the scalding brew. Slamming the pot back on the stove, he stomped out again, his stern glare daring anyone to wish him a good morning. He carried his coffee out to the porch and stood there drinking it, eyes narrowed against the rising steam.

“Hey, Glynnie.”

He sighed and looked down. “Hey yourself, Valda.”

“Don’t you want no breakfast?” she inquired, gazing up at him with her doe-like brown eyes that were far too innocent and far too trusting for his peace of mind.

“Don’t you want any breakfast?” he corrected then shook his head. “I’m not hungry. I need...” He stopped, realizing he couldn’t tell the child he needed Sustenance and the painful injection that awaited him in his saddlebags.

“Whatcha need, Glynnie?” the child asked.

“A good morning would do,” he heard himself say.

Her little arms came up. “Okay.”

That annoying dusty feeling attacked his nose again and he hunkered down, heart thumping hard as Valda encircled his neck, hugging him tightly.

“Good morning, Glynnie,” she said, and gave him a sloppy, wet kiss on his bewhiskered cheek.

It was all he could do to get the words out. “Good morning, Valli.”

“Valli?” the child said then grinned so broadly her little brown face looked on the verge of splitting in two. “I like that! Glynnie and Valli! Glynnie and Valli!” She released him. “I’m gonna go tell Mama!”

She was like a tiny whirlwind as she ran back into the common room, calling at the top of her squeaky voice.

“Mama, Glynnie gave me a scratch name!”

“Nickname,” Glyn automatically corrected. He realized he was smiling and the foul mood to which he had awoken was quickly evaporating like the fog rolling back from the corral beside the station.

He looked at the corral where a couple of serviceable-looking horses stood perfectly still in the early morning mist. He looked back to the interior of the common room

where the others were beginning to stir. He inhaled the scent of crisply cooked bacon, the pungent odor of frying eggs and the comforting smell of brewed coffee.

He hesitated, heard Mystery laugh, and then shook his head slowly.

She didn't need the trouble he could bring her. He didn't need the added danger she and the child could bring him. It was best he leave her the hell alone and head out, put distance between them, though he was gods-be-damned sure he'd never get either female out of his mind.

Or heart.

They had wiggled their way in, burrowed beneath the shield of indifference and sarcasm that kept others at bay and made a nest for themselves there.

His gaze returned to the corral. The buckskin looked as if it would be a sturdy ride. When it swiveled its head and looked right at him, he knew that would be the mount he'd haggle for.

He had to get away from what he was beginning to realize could change him forever.

"No," he said. "No, no, no, no, *no!*"

Flicking the remaining contents from the blue enamel cup, he went back inside, refusing to cut his eyes toward the trestle table where every nerve in his body screamed at him was where Mystery and Valda were watching him. He strode up to DePalmer.

"How much for that buck in the corral?" he asked.

It didn't matter if the horse was a prized animal or not, or who it belonged to. When a Reaper took interest in something, it would be his. The station manager didn't hesitate.

"It's yours, milord," DePalmer said. He shifted from one foot to the other. "Consider it my gift to you."

Glyn nodded, thrust a hand into the pocket of his pants and pulled out a wad of folding script. He plunked it down on the counter. "Thanks, but I pay my way." With that, he spun around, went to the cot where he had passed an uncomfortable night and retrieved his gun from beneath the pillow, the holster from the chair. He resolutely ignored the two females across the room as he swung the gun belt around his lean waist and buckled it, bent over to tie the leather thong around his thigh.

"Are you leaving, Glynnie?" Valda asked.

"Aye, darling," he said, refusing to look her way. He jammed his hat atop his head and tugged it into place low over his forehead. "I've a job to do before I make the Citadel."

"What's a city dell?" she queried her mother.

"It's the fortress where he works, sweetie," her mother replied.

Valda looked back at Glyn. "Will you come see us when we get to Charlestown?"

Every fiber of his being screamed at him to say yes but he pushed that answer aside.

"I don't patrol that territory," he said, and then hurried to the door.

"But you can come see us, can't you?" the child questioned, and he could hear the hurt in her tiny voice.

"No," he said, his heart breaking. He was out the door and off the porch before he took another breath—one he was finding hard to drag into his lungs. He made it to the corral before a hand snagged at his shirtsleeve and he spun around, his hand going to the handle of the obsidian dagger that lay in the dual sheath beside his laser whip.

"You didn't have to make her cry," Mystery said, her dark eyes blazing. "She's already lost one man she loves and then you treat her like she's dirt beneath your boot."

"No," he said. "That's not..."

"You didn't even say goodbye to her," she accused.

"I couldn't..."

"It's good that she won't be seeing you again," the young woman interrupted. "Good neither of us will! You're not the kind of man I want around my child!"

She pivoted on her heel and started back across the yard, her boots slapping into the puddles, the hem of her long skirt dragging through the mud.

He caught up with her, shot out a hand to seize her by the arm just as she had grabbed him. "You wait just a gods-be-damned minute, wench," he snapped. "You don't know enough about me to make that kind of judgment."

She tried to shake free of his hold but his fingers tightened around her arm.

"Let go," she hissed from between clenched teeth, and tried to pry him away with her other hand. His grip didn't budge.

"Not until you know..."

"What I know is that you're a cold, heartless bastard who didn't hesitate to step on a little girl's heart and finish breaking it!" She lifted her chin. "Does that make you feel more like a Reaper doing that kind of thing or more of the man you pretend to be?"

No one outside the Shadowlords and Arawn Gehdrin had ever spoken to him in that manner and it surprised him more than it angered him. He stared into her enraged eyes and saw himself mirrored there—a small man whose carelessness had hurt an innocent child.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"Don't tell me that," she grated. "Tell Valda."

"I can't," he said, and slowly released his hard grip on her arm. His need for tenere was becoming overpowering—making his flesh itch and burn—and his hellion was bunching in his back, demanding the relief only Sustenance could give it. Those discomforts only added intensity to the moment.

She snatched free. "Why not?"

"Because she doesn't need something like me in her life," he answered.

"You've got that right," she hissed, leaving him feeling like a worthless prick.

* * * * *

With every mile he rode, his depression deepened until he thought he'd break down and bawl like a baby. As the horse galloped along, Glyn kept an eye on his surroundings, his right hand on the top of his thigh—close to his gun—and his alert ears to any sound that might have given away an enemy tracking him. What he couldn't do was keep his mind off Mystery Butler and her daughter.

The buckskin proved to be a good mount and he was more than satisfied with his purchase. The beast had been well trained by a gentle hand and seemed to anticipate what its rider required. When he stopped at a stream to let the horse drink and to rest his own cramping legs, he thought perhaps he might keep the animal instead of finding one at the Citadel.

"What am I gonna name you, fellow?" he asked, stroking the horse's sleek neck. He patted the stallion. "We need something that is fitting for a fine steed like you."

He racked his brain to find a suitable name for the beast. As one of the infernal horse flies buzzed past his face, he batted it away, touching the side of his face. A slow smile tugged at his lips.

"Stannair," he told the horse. "It means hawk in the language of my homeworld."

The horse twisted its neck and gave him a long assessing look then bobbed its head as though the name suited it just fine. A soft derisive breath sealed the deal.

"If I could only make up my mind as easily about other things," Glyn said on a long sigh. He led the horse from the stream.

Vaulting into the saddle, he swung Stannair north, away from the coach road.

By the time evening fell, he was many miles from the place where he had left the young woman and her child. He was squatting down before a campfire, listlessly stirring a skillet of beans, wishing he had anything else to fill his belly. Coffee bubbled in a pot over the fire and filled the night air with its pleasant aroma. He nibbled on a dry biscuit from time to time—not wanting it but not wanting the beans either. What he truly wanted he knew he couldn't have.

Releasing an irritated breath, he dropped his spoon into the skillet then removed it from the fire, set it aside. The partially eaten biscuit he tossed into the bushes with a flick of his wrist. He stared for a long time at the coffee pot but he didn't want that any more than he did the beans. Removing it, he lay down on his bedroll, propped his head in his hand and stared into the flames. Before too long he was nodding off, jerking awake at the least night sound, opening his eyes wide to keep himself from going under, then finally defeated by weariness sinking down into the arms of *Cadley Trome*, the *Breathnóir* god of deep sleep.

Her breasts cushioned his head, her soft hand stroked his bare shoulder as he lay atop her, his lower body wedged between her silken legs. He toyed with a long strand of her hair, curling it around and around his finger.

"Was that what you wanted, wench?" he asked.

Mystery smiled. "Aye, warrior. It was what I'd waited a lifetime for."

"Happy I could oblige you," he quipped, and tickled his nose with the feathery tips of her hair.

"Teach me, Glyn."

He raised his head and looked up at her. "What would you like to learn?"

She did not hesitate. "How to pleasure you."

His cock throbbed, pulsed against her thigh. "Milady..." he began, but she put her fingertips to his lips.

"I am not a delicate creature you have to protect. I will not break if you're a bit rough with me." She grinned. "As a matter of fact, I would like for you to be a bit rougher, if you please."

He cocked a dark eyebrow. "Rougher, huh?"

She nodded. "Forceful," she stated emphatically. She lowered her voice. "Make me feel like your captive, your spoils of war."

Glyn released her hair and sat up, hunkered down between the spread of her silky thighs. "Is that what you truly want?" he asked.

"It is what I believe I need," she answered truthfully.

"I don't want to hurt you, Myst."

"You won't." She reached out and wrapped her fingers around his cock for it was flexing, begging for attention. "Teach me how to suckle him as the whores do."

Glyn sprang up from his bedroll as though someone had prodded him in the ass with a sharp stick. He was sweating, his skin was clammy, and from nervous habit, shot his hand through his hair to tug at it brutally.

"What the *fuck* was that?" he barked loud enough to startled Stannair who whinnied in protest and stamped an irritated hoof, tossing its head for good measure.

Hands on his hips, head down, the Reaper began pacing, his eyes shifting back and forth as he turned the dream over and over in his mind. So he had borrowed from the scenes he had unwittingly plucked from Mystery's subconscious but he was gods-be-damned sure she would never want him to teach her how to blow him!

"By the gods," he whimpered, and stopped in his tracks, squeezing his eyes tightly shut.

Did she even know what whores did? he asked himself. Hell no was the obvious answer. She was naïve, as innocent in some ways as her little girl, and she would have no idea what wicked, depraved things men and women could do in bed—or on the bare-fucking-ground for that matter—together.

"Not my Mystery," he said then groaned.

She wasn't his and wasn't likely to be.

He opened his eyes and stared unseeingly across the campsite and into the bushes beyond. The weight of his loneliness was suddenly crushing him, wearing him down, but all he had to do was open his hand and let a beautiful woman of color slip hers onto his palm and life would be so much easier to bear. He wouldn't be lonely. He wouldn't be alone. Things would be perfect.

"Maybe for me," he said aloud. "But what about her? What about Valda?"

For over an hour he continued to pace until he was so tired, his feet so sore, he took to his bedroll again. Flinging an arm over his face, his mind continued to worry the problem, to look at it from every conceivable angle until he had expended the last of his reserve of endurance and he plunged gently back into sleep...

"Are you sure?"

She nodded shyly.

He took a deep breath. "All right, then kneel between my legs."

Her breasts swayed as she twisted around in the bed and positioned herself between his spread thighs. He had to resist the urge to reach out and take hold of those beautiful globes, digging his fingers into the sheet beneath him instead.

"Now scoot down and lean forward over me."

She did as he instructed, flinging her long hair over her shoulder when it fell across his thighs. Her head was tilted back so she could look at him. "What now, warrior?" she asked. "Do I put my mouth on him and..."

"No!" he said, and his cock leapt like a fish out of water. "No, baby. Just hold on."

Her words had gone straight to his shaft and it was making demands he had to rein in if he wasn't to frighten her away.

"I'm aroused," he said stupidly – as if she couldn't see that already. "But a man likes to be touched before the action heats up."

"Like this?" she said, and put her hand on his thigh to gently rub it. The pads of her fingers ran lightly over the hair and he sighed.

"Aye, that's nice."

She ran her palm along the outside of his thigh, on the inside, under his knee, over his shin. She arched her hand and used her fingers to graze his flesh, pulling upward, making the hairs stand up, and when he sucked in a breath, she lingered in that sensitive area behind his knees, stroking the soft flesh gently.

"How about that?" she inquired as she leaned to the side to support her head on the curled fist of her other hand.

"Aye," he sighed, closing his eyes to the pleasure.

As though she'd done it a thousand times, she worked her way closer to his cock in spiraling little forays with her nails – dragging them upward over his skin, making lazy figure eights. Goose bumps broke out on his legs and he shivered as sensation wriggled up his sides.

"You like that?" she asked.

"I truly do," he said, swallowing.

Closer and closer her fingers came to his cock and as the tips of her nails came into contact with his sac, he quivered like a leaf in a storm and his eyes popped open.

She stilled for a moment then flicked her nails – one at a time – up the underside of his scrotum.

"Alel!" he gasped, and nearly shot up from the bed. He jerked on the sheet and lifted his head to look at her.

"Lie back down, warrior," she ordered, "or I'll stop."

"No," he said, and slammed his head into the pillow. He stared blindly at the ceiling as she repeated the action. The woman was a fast learner.

Across and around and under his tightening balls her fingers traveled. His cock was at full staff and aching, burning with need. He should have been ashamed of her lying that close to the wretched thing, but all he could do was lie there and shake as she pushed to her knees.

"Can I do this?" she asked, and wrapped the fingers of her left hand around his shaft as she continued to flick her fingernails on his balls.

"By the gods, you can," he whispered. The sheet was bunched in his hands and his heels were digging into the mattress. His legs were shaking.

"But wouldn't this be better?"

She stunned him by replacing her hand with her mouth, her lips closing around the head of his cock in a tight suction that had him groaning, his ass writhing. But then she didn't move and when he lifted his head to see what was wrong, he found her looking up at him.

The sight of her mouth wrapped around him, her chocolate-brown eyes fused with his was a heady sensation.

She arched a brow.

"What?" he asked, his own brows drawn together.

She popped him out of her mouth. "What now, warrior? What do I do with it once it's in my mouth?"

The way that pop felt had been sheer heaven. He was starting to sweat.

"Ah, you should lick him first," he said.

"Oh right," she agreed. "That makes sense."

Her tongue was warm and moist and sent the most glorious sensations through his body. She used it to swirl over the head, to lap at the underside, to flick little sorties up and down the entire length. But when she swept it over his balls, he cried out, rending the sheet in his right hand.

"Oh, my warrior really likes that!" she said, and set to work turning her warrior into a mass of quivering flesh.

He was enjoying the torment far too much to end it. It was torture but it was an exquisite torture he was happy to endure. She peppered the insides of his thighs with hot little kisses, dragged her tongue over his balls, up and down his cock, nibbled at his flesh when she found that particular little bit of foreplay drove him crazy. By the time she took him into her mouth again, he was sure he was but a heartbeat away from complete insanity.

She kept her mouth taut as she ran her tongue into the slit of his cock. The suction alone was enough to drive him over the edge. His legs were shaking and his fingernails had gone past the torn sides of the sheet and were now buried inside the feather mattress.

"Baby?" he asked in a voice that sound like a teenage boy's.

She looked up from her work. "Aye?"

He swallowed hard, dragged air into his lungs through his open mouth. "Wrap your hand around the base of him and..."

"Like this?" she asked, quick learner that she was.

"Aye," he replied in a strangled voice. "Now move your hand up and down him like I do in and out of you."

She began the motion, taking the upward motion just to the ridge of his penis.

"Now slide your palm over the top of him and then down in a twisting motion. Think you can do that?"

She didn't answer but set to the task like an old pro. Before he could tell her what else would pleasure him, her hand moved all the way down his shaft and her mouth was enclosed around him halfway down. Instinct seemed to take over and she moved her lips and hands in unison.

"Sweet Merciful..." He brought his knees up. She was killing him with that sweet mouth, but he would gladly die under her ministrations.

His hands went to her hair. His scrotum tightened, drawing up close to his body. He was coming. He was...

"I thought Mo Regina warned us to never yank on our sticks, Kullen."

The amused voice brought Glyn up in a heartbeat, his gun clutched in hand. He faced the man who had entered his campsite undetected.

"Fuck you, Kiel!" he hissed, arming the sweat from his brow. "I could have shot your sorry ass!"

"With what?" Phelan Kiel asked. "The cock you were rubbing?" The Reaper Third Class laughed. "You really aren't my type, Kullen."

Snarling, Glyn bent down to pick up his gun belt, shoving the six-shooter into the holster with a foul curse.

"You need to find you a whore, Glyn," Phelan suggested. "You can't be doing that unless you want Her on your ass and I don't think you'd like it."

Ashamed he'd been seen masturbating—and that must have been what he'd been doing during the dream—Glyn turned away from his fellow lawman. "What the hell are you doing up here?"

"What the hell are you doing *over* here?" Phelan inquired. "You're in Vircars, bud."

"Oh," Glyn growled. "I didn't realize I'd entered your personal sanctuary. I thought I was still in Bev's bailiwick."

"You're actually right on the edge of your territory, mine and his. I was coming back from the Citadel, inspecting the borders of my lands."

"I did that as soon as they released me from my sentence then Lord Kheelan sent me out to Wismin and Moilia to check on Owen's territory for him," Glyn reported.

"Poor bastard," Phelan said.

"Did you see him while you were at the fortress?"

"Lord Kheelan wouldn't allow it. I guess Tohre's Transitioned to that state where the Shadowlords don't want anyone to see him," Phelan answered.

"Yeah," Glyn said with a wince. "That happens about your sixth month according to Cynyr."

"I don't care to find out."

"He'll be released soon though. How's Rachel?" Glyn inquired.

"Big as a barn," Phelan said with a grin. "She learned last week that she's carrying twins."

"Twins?" Glyn repeated. "Holy shit! Are you kidding me?"

Kiel shrugged. "Owen was a twin so I guess it wasn't altogether a surprise to the healers when they discovered a second heartbeat."

"What about Aingeal and Briton? Has the bantling grown much since I've been gone?"

"The little bugger is walking and talking, calling Cyn 'Papa'. Can you believe it?"

"That the brat can walk and talk by now?" Glyn countered. "I should certainly hope so. After all, in human years the boy would be about eighteen months old wouldn't he?"

Phelan waved a dismissive hand and gave his fellow Reaper a raspberry. "I mean Cyn being a papa, asswipe. The bratling is a cute little shit. Thank the goddess he's sleeping the night," Phelan replied. "To the relief of everyone on their floor, lemme tell you! I don't think they realized those walls weren't soundproofed. Lord Naois said they would be by the time the Tohre twins hatch."

"Hatch," Glyn said, and thought of Valda.

"You know what I mean."

"Aye," Glyn answered.

"Well, I've got to mosey on," Phelan said. "Had to come over and rattle your chain a bit."

"I think I'm gonna head on out too," Glyn told him. "I'm not doing too well in the sleeping department tonight."

"Keep your hands off your cock and you won't have that problem," Phelan suggested with a wink.

"Fuck you," Glyn countered with a mean grin.

"That's the second time you've said that," Phelan observed, folding his arms over his brawny chest. "You really want to?"

The grin slipped from Glyn's face. Kiel's sexual orientation had always been a source of speculation for the other Reapers.

"Hell no!" Glyn snapped.

"Then stop offering." He unfolded his arms. "Else someone might think you bend that way, Kullen."

"I don't!" Glyn was quick to say.

"You never know," Phelan said with a lewd wink then turned to walk away.

"I know!" Glyn called after him. "By the gods, I know, Kiel!"

Laughter drifted back to him then the sound of hooves striking the ground.

"Asshole," Glyn pronounced, and he kicked sand into the campfire. He leaned over and grabbed the cold coffee pot and pan of beans congealed in the fatback grease he'd added for flavor. He stomped over to the stream that ran just beyond where he camped, poured out the coffee and beans, rinsed the pot and scrubbed the frying pan with sand before dredging it through the water. The entire time he cursed Phelan Kiel and wondered if his fellow Reaper were a half man or not.

As he folded his bedroll and readied Stannair for the long ride up to the Citadel, he continued to think about Kiel. The man had never made any overt moves toward him or any of the other Reapers, but neither had they seen him with a woman. When the others were together on R & R, they never failed to hit the brothels.

All except Kiel.

The man was a few months older than Kullen but he was more naïve than even the youngest of them—Iden Belial, who had been in his late twenties when he'd bought it on Othar. Kiel was a good soldier, a powerful warrior, but he was a secretive man who had been with them ten years before he even told them how he'd met his end on his homeworld of Bdathach.

"I was crushed to death," he said simply, and did not elaborate.

Nor did the man have much patience. His family crest was the owl but Kiel had managed to pass up the telling traits of that bird of portent. He had the least patience of any man Glyn knew and was forever asking questions to which the answer led only to another question.

Although Glyn wouldn't have laid down any money on it, he was willing to bet Kiel was taking them all for a ride with the hints of homosexuality he was forever tossing around. He wouldn't put it past the Bdathachian to deliberately mislead everyone.

"Asshole," he said again as he swung into the saddle.

It was a long ride to the Citadel and the sky was threatening again. He looked up uneasily at the gunmetal gray heavens but he saw no lightning, heard no telltale thunder rumbling in the distance. If he were lucky, the lightning would hold off.

As he rode, his thoughts returned again and again to Mystery and the impish little girl who had stolen his heart.

"She could be yours for the asking."

The voice of the Triune Goddess intruded and wound its way through his mind.

"I don't need a woman," he said resolutely, his words making Stannair fling its head to jingle its bit.

"Then why can you not stop thinking of her?"

"Leave me be, *Mo Regina*," he pleaded.

"Stubborn, stubborn man," She told him. *"Your stubbornness is precisely why Dylynda died untouched and unhappy."*

"Don't say her name to me!" he shouted, looking angrily into the boiling sky. "You know why I could not Join with her!"

"I know she died wishing she had known your body," the Triune Goddess whispered.

He shook his head furiously as though to hurl away the hateful words and though he tried to keep the lovely face of Dylynda McGregor from floating across his mind's eye, it did anyway. Along with it came the accusatory pale blue eyes that looked back at him with such infinite sorrow.

"Please don't," he begged the goddess.

"Man was not meant to live alone, Glyn Kullen," She reminded him.

Dylynda's beautiful countenance dissolved into mist and vanished, the halo of her bright blonde hair the last thing to vanish.

A sob caught in the Reaper's throat and his gloved hands tightened around the reins. His heart ached as it had the day he had learned of Dylynda's miserable death at the hands of a squad of Cleavton troopers, her sweet, young body torn apart by their lust and brutality. He had not been there to save her from such degradation or to prevent the troopers from tossing her broken body into the flames to mingle her ashes with those of other murdered women.

"Dylynda," he whispered.

He should have kept to the date they had set to Join. At least he could have given her that much. But he had not wanted to leave her a widow and the war was still raging long past the time they had set aside for their Joining.

The pain of his memories lashed at him and he dug his heels into Stannair's flanks, leaning low over the stallion's neck, trying to outrace the coming storm building above him and the one that would forever be tumbling in his mind.

Chapter Four

Leilani Shoad tied the fifth knot in the pink yarn. "My love will come," she whispered. In her mind, she held the image of the perfect lover—tall, black hair, muscular and virile—and charged each knot with her energy. She tied the sixth knot. "My love will come." Though she could not see his face, she knew he would be as handsome as a man could be. He would be a man every woman in the village would envy her having.

And he would be entirely hers.

The cabin was dark except for the glow of the red candle in the shape of a man that sat upon the altar covered in black cloth. Clove incense filled the air and the string with which she worked had been dressed with the appropriate lover's oil consisting of the oils of cinnamon, olive, patchouli, rose and sandalwood.

"My love will come," she said for the last time. She worked the yarn into a heart shape then put it in the pocket of her gown. "So mote it be!"

For a moment she continued to kneel in front of the altar, staring down at the skull and crossbones that decorated the black altar cover. Her black eyes moved over the chalice and caldron and iron cross, the incense burner and skull candleholder and bowls of dried flowers, the gourd rattle and the ceremonial drum and the copper bell. There were dolls that represented the Seven Powers, statues of saints and photographs of her ancestors. The gris-gris and mojo bags and the boxes filled with colored string and glass beads, the various tins and bottles and saucers of herbs, oils, incense and roots were all intricate to her spellcasting. She watched her pet black snake slither across the altar then drop to the floor.

"Why did you do that, Ayida Weda?" she asked the serpent, following its progress along the grass floorcloth. In her religion—that of her ancestors handed down secretly to the initiated—snakes represented the power of lightning and the judicious deity known as Dumballah. For one to cross the altar bore meaning, held some strong magical purpose.

She listened for the creature to speak to her and when it did not, she rose gracefully, shaking out the skirts of her long white dress. Her bare feet trod silently over the floor cloth as she went to the iron cot against the wall and removed her white tignon head covering then the pristine ceremonial dress. Beneath it she was naked, her pert young breasts capped with taut brown nipples.

Clothing herself in the drab black skirt, binding her small breasts behind a white cloth wound around her slender chest then donning the starched white blouse her employer demanded she wear, she reluctantly slipped her delicate feet into the leather sandals he had provided for her. Had she been allowed, she would have gone barefoot

as was the custom of her people, but in her employer's house, it was prohibited. Expertly wrapping a headscarf of madras fabric around her short black curls, she was prepared to begin her day's work as the housekeeper of Sagewood Plantation. She slid back the bolts on the door locks and quietly left her cabin—careful to padlock the door behind her for it would not do to have an outsider discover the secrets she kept so carefully. With pride, her eyes traveled over the turquoise blue color with which she had painted the shutters. It was a color that spoke volumes to the inhabitants of Sagewood Plantation.

Following the oyster-shell walkway that led from the village to the main house, she ignored those few who dared greet her for she considered the other servants beneath her. Most feared her and that was the way she preferred it. To her, they were nothing more than cattle to be led. Though they came to her for the spells and charms and magic they knew she could provide, they cut a wide berth around her, striving not to garner the mambo's notice.

"Mambo," she whispered, relishing the word, for she was carrying on the tradition of her mother and her mother's mother before her—back into the mists of time when those of her tribe had dwelt in a land across the sea. She was a priestess of a religion more ancient, more powerful than the one her employer insisted she practice in the little clapboard church behind the main house.

John Dirk, the white man who held the coveted position of plantation foreman, was waiting for her beneath a large spreading oak festooned with draping moss. He stood with his back to the tree, one foot propped against the gnarled trunk. In his hand was a sharp knife he used to whittle at a piece of wood.

"*Bonjour, Leilani,*" he called out to her, never looking up from his work.

Though she would have preferred to pass him by without acknowledging his greeting, she dared not, for of all the inhabitants of Sagewood, it was John Dirk she feared. She nodded to him, her eyes wary of his movements, taking in the hard grin on his dark face.

"*Bonjour, Monsieur Jean,*" she said, granting him the correct pronunciation of his name.

"I am watching you, wench," he told her.

She ducked her head and hurried on, refraining from looking back at him even when she felt his cold eyes boring into her back. She knew what he was and feared him as she did no other.

Her heart was thudding hard in her chest when she entered the kitchen and stood just inside the door trembling. She had learned early on that there was great evil in the world and John Dirk was as malevolent as they came. The man was a stone-cold killer who liked to torture those he was about to remove from this world before he finally ended their lives. Pain excited him, drove him, and the only reason he had not come after her, had not forced her to his bed, was because he was leery of what powers she might be able to wield.

Those powers he suspected she might have had not prevented him from forcing the other women of Sagewood to service his needs, and many had come to Leilani to rid themselves of the unwanted outcome of such brutal matings.

"Mr. Simmons says we are to have a guest this evening," Mattie the cook informed Leilani. "He wants everything just right for his lordship."

Leilani looked up at the aging white woman who had worked at Sagewood since she was a young girl. "The Reaper man is coming again?"

Mattie nodded as she continued to ply a rolling pin across a circle of dough.

"I thought he had gone to the fortress," Leilani said.

"Aye, well, he's back."

Leilani sighed. She had no fear of Lord Phelan Kiel but neither did she care for the lawman. His shrewd eyes missed nothing and she was always afraid he would look too closely at her, ask the wrong person questions that might give away Leilani's secret. She stayed out of his way when he came to visit his friend Anthony Simmons.

"I'll see that things are done properly," Leilani told the cook. "What is on the menu?"

"All his lordship's favorites," Mattie said. "Chicken and dumplings, fried okra, corn casserole and sliced tomatoes. I'm making egg pie for dessert." She laughed. "Reaper men have a mighty big sweet tooth."

Leilani thought of the only other Reaper she'd seen — Lord Iden Belial — and nodded absently. His dark good looks had intrigued her but there had been something about the way he'd glanced at her the one time he'd visited Sagewood with Lord Phelan that had put a shiver down her spine.

"Oh, and you might want to know Colton Dupree's baby sister has come home to Charlestown," Mattie said.

"Mystery?" Leilani questioned, her eyes narrowed.

"Ain't got but one sister, does he?" Mattie asked with a snort. She looked around. "She's in the library with Mr. Simmons this very minute."

Leilani dug her fingernails into her palm. "What for?"

"Asking for a job, I imagine," Mattie said with a shrug. "Gotta do something to take care of the brat she dragged home with her."

"Where's Odell?" Leilani snapped.

"Dead and buried."

Shock parted Leilani's lips. "Odell's dead?" she asked. Tears filled her eyes. "How?"

"Rogue got him," Mattie answered as she began cutting squares of dough from the circle.

Leilani reached for a chair at the table beside the window and all but fell into it. "Odell is dead," she repeated. Her shoulders sagged but she refused to give in to the sorrow that was crushing her chest.

Mattie carried the dough squares to a big pot boiling away on the stove. "Work ain't gonna do itself, girl," she reminded Leilani. "Best you get to your duties and forget about Odell Butler."

Leilani lifted her head and gave the cook an angry look, making a mental note to work a little painful magic into the white bitch's already-twisted fingers that evening. She stood and started out of the kitchen, her mouth tight.

And ran right into a woman she had hated since childhood, a woman who had taken the only man Leilani had ever loved away from her. She opened her mouth to curse Mystery Dupree when Mr. Simmons came out of the library behind Mystery.

"Look who's home, Leilani," Anthony Simmons said. The white man was smiling broadly, his deeply tanned face alight with good humor. "And guess who's gonna be helping Miss Laverne up at the kindergarten."

Leilani forced a smile she didn't feel to her taut lips. "I am sorry for your loss," she made herself say.

Mystery's own lips twitched as though she weren't sure whether to smile or frown at the woman standing in front of her. "Thank you, Lani," she acknowledged.

"And she brought home a little girl," Mr. Simmons continued. "What's her name again, Mystery?"

"Valda," Mystery provided.

"Now our little Sara will have someone her own age to play with!" Mr. Simmons stated.

"That will be nice," Leilani said between clenched teeth. Her gaze met Mystery's and she knew the other woman understood there was still abiding hatred in Leilani's heart.

Mr. Simmons walked Mystery to the door, keeping up a running commentary of how his daughter and Mystery's were going to be the best of friends. "You bring her by tomorrow before you go to the school house now, you hear?" he ordered.

"Yes, sir," Mystery agreed, glancing back one last time at Leilani. Her gaze was troubled.

"You'd best fear me, bitch," Leilani said under her breath, "'cause I'm gonna make your life a living hell from this day forward!"

* * * * *

"How is Iden?" Anthony Simmons asked Phelan, offering the Reaper a snifter of brandy Kiel politely turned down.

"I haven't seen him for a while. He and Lords Cree and Coure were sent over to the Oklaks Territory patrolled by our Prime Reaper Lord Gehdrin," Phelan reported. "All four of them may be there a while."

"What's going on over there?" Anthony asked.

"Nothing I can tell you about," Phelan answered.

"Something that would no doubt turn my hair grayer than it is if I were to learn of it, eh?" Anthony inquired. He swept his hand toward the settee.

Phelan smiled as he took a seat. "Anything happening around here I need to know about?"

Anthony cocked a shoulder. "Nothing the local constabulary can't handle, I wouldn't think. Just the usual robberies, attempted extortions and occasional disturbances of the peace. I'm happy to say we haven't had a murder in six months."

"That's good news," Phelan agreed.

"Having you and Iden clean up that last batch of rogues was a relief. Charlestown can get back to the business of becoming the city it was before the War."

A frown shifted over the Reaper's face. "I'm not sure we got them all, Tony," he admitted. "When I was at the Citadel, Lord Naois warned there may be a pocket or two of them holed up around the Flagala outer islands along the west side of the peninsula. When Iden gets back, he'll be looking into it."

"Well, hell, that's not good, now is it?" Anthony asked with a grimace. "And here I thought we were rid of those perverted bastards."

"There are worse things than rogues, Tony," Phelan said, thinking about the Ceannus—the depraved scientists from a distant galaxy who had brought the rogues to Terra in the first place.

Anthony slung an arm on the back of his chair and plucked at a loose string. "Have you ever heard tell of a thing called a zombay?"

Phelan shook his head. "No. What is it?"

"Not exactly sure," Anthony replied. "Has something to do with an old religion that used to be practiced in these parts long before I was a gleam in my daddy's eye."

"You must have had a reason for bringing it up."

"Well, you said there are worse things than rogues and if what I'm hearing from my fellow landowners is true, these zombay things would give the *balgairs* a run for their money in the evil department," Anthony replied.

"Evil in what way?"

Anthony looked chagrined as he continued to pull at the offending loose string. "Evil as in the flesh-eating kind."

Phelan blinked. "I beg your pardon?" He looked up as Simmons' housekeeper came in with a tray of coffee.

Anthony nodded. "You heard me." He pulled his arm down and sat forward, clasping his hands together. "One of my friends—a fellow named Frederic Tolliver, who owns Burnt Pine Plantation just east of me—says zombays are actually the dead that have been brought back to life by some powerful magic." He locked eyes with Phelan. "An evil version of a Reaper is my guess."

"Reapers don't eat human flesh, Tony," Phelan drawled.

"No, but according to Tolliver, zombays do."

Phelan heard the faint breath of derision from the tall, slender woman of color. "You disagree, milady?" he asked.

Leilani's lips were pursed as she set the tray down on a table in front of the settee. "Zombies are nothing more than old wives' tales, milord," she said as she poured the Reaper a cup of coffee.

"Then you know what they are," the Reaper countered.

Leilani straightened then handed him the cup. She nodded but seemed hesitant to continue. When Phelan gently prodded her, she folded her hands at her waist and looked down at the floor.

"Zombies were servants of a brutal master who gave them very powerful drugs to control them, drugs that took away their freewill," she said. "Drugs that made them work without complaining."

"What kind of drugs?" Phelan asked.

"I wouldn't know, milord," Leilani lied. "It is nothing more than a myth, a story told to frighten children into working harder." She bobbed a curtsy then asked if the two men needed anything else.

"No, that will be all, Leilani," Anthony said.

Phelan watched her leave before taking a sip of his coffee. "She knows more than she's telling," he observed.

"All the dark ones do," Anthony told him. He lowered his voice. "They practice their own religions, you know."

Phelan frowned. "I know and *Mo Regina* doesn't like it but says there's nothing She can do about it as long as it does no harm."

"Aye, but what if it does?" Anthony countered, searching the Reaper's eyes.

"All right, Tony. Tell me what's troubling you."

Anthony hesitated then took a deep breath. "Look here, Phelan. There have been some strange things that have happened in the last few months that haven't been easily explained," he said.

"Such as?"

"Such as animals found with their throats cut, blood drained. Mostly black goats but there have been a few black cats and white cockerels as well. Some servants have come up missing for a few days only to return looking dazed and unable to remember

where they'd been or what they'd been doing. A couple of graves have been desecrated and a body stolen from the local mortuary. Some of my fellow businessmen have been suffering streaks of really bad luck and there have been an unusual amount of cows losing their calves, horses losing their colts."

Phelan's eyes narrowed. "I thought you said there wasn't anything going on that I needed to know about?"

"Well, it hasn't been anything I felt was worthy of Reaper attention," Anthony answered. "Constable Locke is looking into it."

"Oh well, with Locke on the job, I can rest easy at night!" Phelan scoffed, making it clear he had little regard for or faith in the local lawman. "Did that stolen body have bite marks on it?"

"It hasn't been found yet," Anthony replied then held up a hand. "And before you ask, no. No one's come up with any nibbles taken out of them either."

"So why mention the flesh-eating shit?" Phelan inquired.

Anthony grinned. "Got your attention, didn't it?" At the Reaper's lowered look, the landowner laughed. "Tolliver says one of his men swears he saw a zombay munching away on a hapless traveler a few nights ago. Said he frightened the creature off then ran back to get help. Fred said he and his men went out looking for said hapless traveler but found nothing at the place the servant swears he saw the ghoul feeding. No remains, no blood, no bones. He chalked it up to the servant having had a bit too much rum and cut back on his rationing."

"Your housekeeper called the thing a zombie," Phelan reminded his friend.

Anthony waved a dismissive hand. "Whatever it is, it doesn't sound like something we need around here."

"I'll contact Lord Dunham and see what he knows about such creatures. Beings of the night are his specialty," Phelan said. He stretched his long legs out in front of him and crossed his booted ankles, changing the subject. "So what's new with your operation?"

"Still providing the Citadel with cotton and hemp," Anthony replied. "Found a helper for Miss Laverne over at the kindergarten my wife set up for the plantation's children."

"As I recall, Miss Laverne is getting on in years," Phelan observed.

"In her late sixties. I'm hoping she can teach Mystery what she needs to..."

"Mystery?" Phelan asked.

"Only sister of the Dupree boys," Anthony informed the Reaper. "Just moved back to the area after becoming widowed." He leaned back. "A very pretty, gentle young woman. She should do very well as a teacher."

"Strange name," Phelan said.

"Well, here's how she got it..."

* * * * *

Leilani's blood was pounding in her ears as she stood eavesdropping outside the door. Any mention of her hated enemy always made her want to kill something. It didn't help that the Reaper seemed intrigued by what Simmons was telling him about the newcomer. With her jaw clamped tightly shut, she spun around on her heel and marched to the back of the house.

"She will regret the day she came back to Sagewood," Leilani mumbled. "I will make her sorry she ever took Odell's seed and corrupted it!"

Thoughts of the little girl who had been created by that union angered Leilani even more. Considering her work done for the day, mindless of whoever would be required to take the coffee service and brandy snifter to the kitchen for cleaning, she slammed out the back door and—with skirts swishing—made her way toward her cabin. Her sandaled feet crunched hard over the oyster-shell paving.

"Who put a burr under your saddle, girl?"

Leilani stopped, jerking around as John Dirk's detestable voice interrupted her grumblings. Her eyes flared as she realized the man was close enough to reach out and touch her if he were so inclined. She backed away.

"Nothing, Monsieur Jean," she said, striving to keep the tremor from her voice.

The right side of the foreman's mouth tugged upward. "Best be careful with your musings, girl," he warned then turned away, sauntering off with his hands jammed into the pockets of his work pants.

Staying where she was until the odious man was out of sight, Leilani hitched her skirts and ran for her cabin. She knew she would not feel safe until she had a locked door between them—and even then, she was not so sure such a thing could keep her safe if he decided to force the issue. Fumbling with the key tucked into her bosom, she poked it at the lock three times before managing to slide the metal into the channel. Once inside the cabin, she quickly shut the door and shot the three bolts she had installed for nighttime security. Leaning her head on the wooden panel, she stood there trembling, heart racing, sweat beading on her upper lip.

"Yemalla, protect me from that man's evil," she whispered to the mother goddess of her people.

When she was calm again, sure John Dirk was not lurking outside her door, she pushed away from the portal and went to her altar, dropping down before it with her head bent. Though to do what she had to required a strict bathing ritual beforehand, she did not have the courage to go back outside for water to fill the copper tub sitting in the corner of her one-room dwelling. She had to hope she would not anger the loa by calling upon them in an unclean state.

With hands that still shook from her encounter with the foreman, she began to prepare a spell for revenge.

A few hundred yards away, Mystery sat upon one of the twin beds Mr. Simmons had provided for her and Valda and watched her little girl playing with her doll. The child was dressed in a soft cotton nightgown, sitting tailor fashion on a blanket, her bare little toes peeking from beneath the hem.

"What are you and Angie talking about?" Mystery asked her daughter.

Valda didn't look around at her mother. "Angie doesn't like it here," the child said, brushing the doll's long black hair, "and I'm telling her she'll get used to it."

Mystery's heart ached. The room was as clean as she and two of her sisters-in-law could make it, but it was depressingly small with two small windows opposite one another for air circulation, a small wood stove, a large porcelain basin for bathing and chamber pot tucked into a small cabinet with a wooden seat. Other than the twin iron beds, there was a small table with two chairs and an empty bookcase. Light came from three oil lamps scattered about the bare-floored room.

"I know it ain't what you're used to, *petite*," Monique, Colton's wife, had told her. "But it is all that is available right now."

"It will do," Mystery had replied. Any roof over their heads was better than none, and since Mr. Simmons wasn't charging her for the room and would pay her a small pittance for a salary, she hoped to save what she could—augment it with monies she could get from sewing—and hopefully buy a small cabin of her own in the village.

But the walls were closing in on her and her heart was breaking as she realized she had even less now than her own mother had when she and Mystery's father had Joined. What furniture and belongings Odell and she had during their marriage had been sold just to pay her and Valda's passage home and to give them a little something for food along the way. She had come home to Charlestown with little more than the clothes on her back and a portmanteau of outfits she'd made for her daughter.

"Mama, why are you crying?"

Mystery looked up, swiping at the tears that she realized were rolling down her cheeks. She tried to smile but there were no smiles left in her.

"You were thinking about Daddy, weren't you?" Valda asked.

Able only to nod, Mystery held her arms out to her child. "Come here, sweetheart," she asked.

Valda lay her doll aside and came to her mother, putting her little arms around Mystery's neck and crawled into her lap. "I wish Glynnie was here, don't you, Mama?"

At the mention of the handsome Reaper, Mystery's heart clenched in her chest.

"Yes," she whispered. "Yes, I really do."

"Maybe he'll come visit," her child said, and lay her head on her mother's shoulder.

"Maybe so," she agreed.

They sat like that for a few moments with Mystery rocking her little girl, humming to her, then Valda raised her head.

"Mama, tell me a story."

Mystery smiled. "Okay." She scooted up in the uncomfortable bed so she could lean against its iron headboard, Valda moving with her then snuggling close under her mother's arm. "What story do you want to hear?"

"About the princess and the prince," Valda said. "Where he kisses her awake after the evil witch put her to sleep."

Reclining there with her daughter beside her, Mystery forced her mind from the cramped little room where there was less than eighteen inches between the two beds. She would not look at the chipped porcelain basin or the scarred table and rickety chairs, the dented coffee pot sitting on the wood heater or the bare floor over which a palmetto bug slowly crawled.

"Once upon a time there was a beautiful princess..." she began.

An hour later, Mystery eased from the bed, lifted Valda and carried the child to her own where she covered her gently then moved away to undress. As she removed her day dress, she looked longingly at the porcelain basin but didn't have the energy to fetch the water from the well though it was only a few feet beyond the cabin's door. Instead, she listlessly put on her own nightgown and blew out the lamp, padding barefoot to her bed, wincing as the creaking springs gave beneath her weight.

With her knees drawn up, one arm flung over her eyes, she lay atop the covers and listened to the soft breathing of her child. Though she was tired from the trip, the cleaning, the interview with Mr. Simmons then the meeting with Miss Laverne, she wasn't sleepy. Her mind was a seething mass of thoughts—each as gloomy as the next. She was discouraged, disheartened, and tears pricked behind her eyes as she thought of all she'd lost when Odell had been killed.

And all she had ached for when she'd met Glyn Kullen.

"Stop it!" she spat, and flipped to her side, curling her body into a fetal position, thrusting her hands under the lumpy pillow.

The Reaper had ridden away without a backward glance and was gone from her life as quickly as he'd entered it. He'd left nothing behind except an insistent longing that was eating Mystery Butler alive and making her womb spasm with a need she could not push away. Her palms itched wanting to touch him. Her lips burned with wanting to feel his upon them. Her body ached wanting to know what it felt like to be weighted down by him.

Tears oozed from her eyes and she buried her face in the pillow. It was not good to want something so desperately, something she knew she could never have. It hurt so deeply, so thoroughly, that she imagined her very soul was bleeding. It was a craving that consumed her and she wanted to throw back her head and scream her defiance to the gods who were so indifferent to her existence.

Sobs shook her slender shoulders and she had to press her mouth deeply into the musty pillow so her daughter would not hear. Her heart breaking, her body on fire with unfulfilled desire, she finally fell asleep with the Reaper's smiling face before her and his name upon her lips.

"Let me touch you," she said.

He turned, his eyes as hot as the embers glowing in the hearth. "Do what you will with me, wench," he offered, and spread his arms wide.

For a moment she just looked at him as he stood there barefoot in his uniform. The top buttons of his shirt were opened, the long sleeves rolled halfway up his powerful forearms. He looked so handsome, so accessible, and she wanted to devour him.

She walked to him and laid her palms upon his chest, feeling the steady rise and fall of his chest behind the black silk of his shirt. She ran her hands up and down the hard plane. The silk whispered as her flesh smoothed over it.

The room in which they stood was breathtakingly beautiful and decorated with expensive furniture, elegant draperies and fabrics and the richest carpet underfoot. Crystal lamps filled the room with a soft golden glow and overhead, an elaborate chandelier gleamed with multifaceted prisms that caught the light and sparked it upon the damask papered walls.

"Your flesh is so solid," she said, looking demurely up at him through her lashes.

"It is flesh that yearns for yours," he replied in a husky voice that made her knees weak.

"May I?" she asked as she moved her fingers to the top unopened button of his shirt.

He nodded but did not speak. His eyes were locked on her face, the steady rise and fall of his broad chest reassuring and oh-so sensuous.

One by one she slipped the black buttons from their holes and when her knuckles touched the waistband of his leather uniform pants, she stilled and raised her head to fuse her gaze with his. She arched a brow in question.

"Do with me what you will," he repeated.

A soft, teasing smile tugged at her lips and she began to ease the tail of his shirt from his pants. When it was out, she spread the shirt's front apart and took in the width of his powerful chest.

"You are a very powerful man, milord," she said, sliding her arms around his lean waist.

"I am what you will make me, milady," he said gently.

Mystery smiled and laid her cheek on that broad expanse of hairy chest. Beneath her ear, she was reassured by the steady, comforting beat of his heart. She held him to her – unwilling to ever let him go – and when he encircled her within the span of his muscular arms, she was at peace for the first time since childhood.

"Where shall we live?" she asked.

He nestled her against him and put his chin atop her head. "Pameny or Michinoh," he answered. "Whichever would suit you. I have a small lodge on Erie Lake near Sandusky in the Michinoh Territory. It's small but we could add on."

"I've always wanted a place by a large lake."

"Then that's where we'll live," he told her. He put a crooked finger under her chin and lifted her face. "Whatever will make you happy."

His lips came down on hers in a soft, gentle blending of flesh that had her bare toes tingling. The kiss was searing and when he nibbled at her bottom lip – commanding her to open to him – he slipped his tongue between her lips so smoothly, so authoritatively, she felt it all the way to her womb. He took possession of her mouth and staked claim to it, going deep and tasting her, swirling over her teeth and along the roof of her mouth until she was grinding herself against him. She heard the low chuckle deep in his throat a moment before his lips released hers and he smiled down at her.

"Tonight I will make you mine," he said.

His arms swept her up and he carried her to the blanket spread before a roaring fire. Going to one knee, he eased her to the floor then knelt there beside her.

"I want to touch you all over," she said.

He shrugged out of his shirt and lay down, flinging his arms wide. "Do with me what you will," he said once again.

She came to her knees and bent over him, reaching for the black belt at his waist. Removing it, she tossed it aside and made quick work of the buttons at his fly. She began to ease the pants down his hips but when his cock sprang free – jutting and demanding with a tiny pearl drop clinging to the broad head – she stopped, giving him an arched brow in question.

"Oops," he said, grin wide and infectiousness.

"Oops indeed," she countered, and continued dragging the pants down his long legs.

"You could give him a tongue lashing for being so presumptuous, you know," he told her.

Mystery pursed her lips as she tugged the pants from his feet and lay them aside. "You are a bad man, Glyn Kullen."

"I'm a hard man, Mystery Butler," he corrected, and his shaft pulsed upward.

"That too," she agreed.

He was completely naked – lying there like a living sacrifice – and she could not look away from the sheer male beauty of him. From the thick, dark hair to the tips of his straight toes, from the wide breadth of his powerful shoulders to the hard expanse of his thighs – he was all man and he was hers.

She stared at the shimmering drop that clung to the slit of his shaft.

Odell had thought such things as she was doing were sinful and would have no part in it. Though he had seemed to enjoy taking her during his once-weekly lapse into lust, he had made no real effort to ensure she had enjoyed the act and certainly would never have countenanced experimentation on her part. The poor man would have been shocked to his foundation and most likely worn a hair shirt for the remainder of his days had she knelt over him and taken his cock into her mouth.

As she did the Reaper's.

"Ah, wench," she heard Glyn whisper and he buried his hand in her hair, threading his fingers through the black silk strands.

His juice was warm upon her tongue and his flesh was hot within her mouth but beyond that, all she felt was intense pleasure that she was giving him enjoyment.

"Suckle him, darling," he instructed, and arched his hips upward as she took him deep into her mouth. "Run your tongue under his head."

She drew hard upon his shaft and he groaned again, his fingers tensing in her hair. Her hand was wrapped at the base of him and when he began urging her to raise and lower her mouth upon him, she accommodated, mimicking the sex act as it had been performed so sparingly on her by her late husband.

"Aye," he sighed, the cadence of his breathing coming faster as he rocked his hips up to meet her downward slides.

She felt powerful as she knelt there controlling this dangerous man, rendering him helpless beneath her ministrations. She possessed him at that moment and knew she would for as long as he drew breath.

"I belong to you," he whispered.

She pulled her lips from his hard, swollen flesh. "As I belong to you," she replied.

He moved with a speed that made her gasp and she was flat upon her back, his hands rough and demanding as he drew her skirt up.

"Mine," he said, and it was a growl of primal male authority. He was poised above her, his eyes as hot as the fires of hell as he stared down into her face. "Mine!"

His hand cupped her between the legs and one finger slid unerringly into her hot channel. He probed deep.

"Glyn!" she cried out, and began shattering into a thousand pieces, her body jerking.

Mystery found herself sitting bolt upright on the bed as the last spasms of delight reverberated through her body. She writhed, feeling her rapidly beating heart pounding in her chest, the rush of her blood thundering through her ears. She shuddered, becoming aware of the wetness between her legs and felt her face burn. Squeezing her legs tightly together, slamming her cupped hands over that part of her that seemed alive and was tingling as it never had before. She bit down hard on her bottom lip to keep from groaning.

It took her a long time to calm her breathing, her racing heart. When she had some semblance of control over her runaway emotions, she lay down again, curled into a ball and cried, heart breaking with hopelessness.

"Glyn," she sobbed, and dragged her lumpy pillow to her, holding it as she wished with all her heart she could hold him.

But he had walked away without a backward glance. He was out of her life, but she knew he had found a home in her aching heart and she also knew she would allow him to stay.

Chapter Five

John Dirk hunkered down inside the circle and stared at the image of Leilani he had painstakingly drawn. The portrait stared back at him from the golden plate on which it lay. Beside the plate burned two black candles upon which the young woman's name had been inscribed over and over again. Above the plate, a golden, empty, wide-mouthed urn sat. His head high, the tall man stood and with athamé—his ceremonial dagger—in his left hand, he lifted his arm high and faced west.

"I entreat you, Lords of Darkness!" he chanted, silently speaking the name of the First Malevolence and fashioning an inverted pentagram in the air. "I call ye forth, Lord of Discord."

Turning counterclockwise, he faced south. "I call ye forth, Lord of Disease!" Once more he mouthed the secret name of the Second Malevolence and drew another upside down pentagram before him.

He pivoted to the east, bidding come to the circle the Third Malevolence. "I call ye forth, Lord of Destruction!"

Around him dark shadows began to form at the three directions. Glowing green eyes pierced the blackness of the room but no creature came near the precisely drawn circle in which John Dirk stood.

At last he faced the north and the black robe he wore over his nakedness billowed as a cold, sharp wind blasted his body.

"I call ye forth, Lord of Death!"

Above him, the ceiling swirled with thick black clouds and the noxious odor of sulfur filled the air.

John Dirk went to his knees and bowed his head. "I am honored you have come and I am here to serve Your needs." He lifted his right arm and drew the thin blade of the athamé across his forearm. Blood gushed and fell into the urn above the drawing of Leilani Shoad. "My life essence, Dark Ones, and a pledge to do your bidding from now until the end of my days!" he swore. "Ask whatever you desire of me and it shall be done!"

The practitioner of the dark arts could not have imagined in his wildest, most depraved dreams what happened next. One moment he was standing in his cabin and the next he shot up through the air—screaming as his earthly body encountered some kind of stinging, burning, agonizing barrier then plunged through into a cold so intense he could not draw breath. His eyes bulged, he clawed at his constricting throat and then he was dropping—down through layers of heat as intense as the cold had been. He felt

as if the flesh on his body were being crisped, his blood boiling, and when he slammed onto a rocky plain, he lay crumpled there, sobbing with terror.

"Arise, John Dirk, and face your Master!"

The terrible voice thundered across the plain and sizzled like the sound of a million insects crawling over one another. It slithered into John Dirk's brain to scald him – an excruciating torment that made him slap his hands to his ears and scream in agony.

"Arise, I command you!"

Jerked to his feet by unseen hands that tore at his flesh, John Dirk stood trembling so violently his teeth clicked together. He stared wide-eyed around him at the desolate, barren plain upon which he'd been thrust and felt such keen evil around him, his flesh had leached of coloring.

"For what you seek, thirteen sacrifices of flesh and blood must be made," the sickening voice demanded. *"Four per night until the full moon has come and the final at the cresting of the moon."*

John Dirk shuddered, unable to speak, so frightened all he could do was whimper. He knew in Whose presence he had been brought and terror oozed through every fiber in his quaking body.

"Four each," the demon continued. *"Four males in their prime. Four females of childbearing age. Four infants yet to be baptized. One of each for the Lords you called forth and then a final one for Me."*

Dirk swallowed hard. "What sacrifice do You ask for Yourself, my Master?"

From out of the swirling mist overhead, the Great Storm God Raphian, the Destroyer of Men's Souls, thrust Its long, leathery neck forward. Scales the color of a dead man's flesh covered a triangular head that resembled that of a pit viper. Row after row of needle-sharp teeth lined the giant maw of a mouth that had stretched into a knowing leer. The elongated pupils of the demon's red eyes glowed brightly, promising horrendous death and eternal damnation. When It spoke, a forked tongue shot out and a thin drool of noxious phosphorescent green fluid dripped onto the ground, hissing as it struck, bubbling and boiling.

"Only a minor thing, human," Raphian hissed.

The tall man felt his bowels loosen and a thin trickle of urine slither down his leg. "N-Name it, Oh Holy One."

Raphian thrust Its hideous visage closer to the magician and the stench of It was suffocating in its intensity.

"I want a Reaper to destroy," the demon whispered.

* * * * *

Phelan Kiel felt the Rift in the Veil and stopped as he was about to enter his home. He looked up into the blackness of the night heavens but not even a single star twinkled

there. The sky was devoid of all light for dark, boiling clouds swirled to hide the moon and planets and stars.

"Mo Regina?" he questioned, made uneasy by the sensations that were crawling like fire ants down his spine.

"I am busy, my Reaper," She answered.

"What's happening?" he asked. *"What was that I felt?"*

But the Triune Goddess did not reply. Though he tried twice more to contact Her, She ignored him and that—in itself—made the Reaper very nervous. Something was happening or about to happen that made his flesh crawl and he had a feeling whatever it was, it didn't bode well for Terra.

* * * * *

Far to the north in the bastion of protection known as the Citadel, Shadowlord Kheelan Ben-Alkazar sat up with a gasp, his heart pounding in his chest. Pain undulated through his entire body and he flung the bedcovers aside, swinging his bare legs to the floor. Hand shaking, he thrust it through his dark curls and sat waiting for his head to stop spinning.

"Mo Regina?" he too questioned, but the goddess did not answer.

Every inch of his flesh tingled as though it were being visited by a million insects and he shook himself like a wet terrier, feeling cold sweat running down his chest and sides.

"Naois? Dunham?"

"I felt it too," Lord Naois Belvoir sent back.

"Aye," Lord Dunham Tarnes agreed.

"Did something go through the Net?" the High Lord questioned his fellow Shadowlords.

"Aye, and it wasn't the goddess," Lord Dunham stated.

"Get dressed and meet me in the Council room!" Lord Kheelan ordered.

* * * * *

Glyn Kullen had just gotten to bed when the heavy pounding came at his door. He shot out of the bed and grabbed his gun a second before the thick oak portal swung open.

"They want you in the Council room on the double, Kullen!" the woman standing framed in the doorway declared.

Being roused in the middle of the night by a warrioress six inches taller than himself carrying a Dóigra clutched in her hand did not set well with the Reaper. He cursed as he snatched his uniform pants from a chair and thrust his long legs into them.

"What the fuck's wrong?" he demanded.

Captain Penthesilea Aracnea's fingers flexed around the handle of her long mahogany spear with its glass-tipped star-shaped laser bulb that she carried. "We don't have time for me to brief you. Get a move on, Reaper!"

Glyn had every Reaper's intense mistrust and dislike of the Amazeen who was chief of security at the Citadel. He'd had rare occasion to interact with her and he preferred it that way. It didn't help his peace of mind to remember the woman was also a Blackwind, the sworn vengeance of her people, and that she had come to Terra to capture Bevyn Coure and bring him back to justice.

"You're beginning to run to flab, Kullen. I'll let the trainer know you'll be coming to see him," Penthe told him.

The Reaper paused in drawing on his black silk shirt. "What?" he asked, staring in the Amazeen's dark green eyes. "What the hell are you talking about, wench? I'm in top shape."

Drawing herself up to her full seven-foot, two-inch height, the warrioress, who could dematerialize into vapor should she need to, gave Kullen a brutal look. "Call me wench again and I'll pound your scrawny ass into the carpet and be done with it!"

Glyn ignored the threat and sat down on the edge of the bed to pull on his boots. He swept a nasty look over the Amazeen from short brown hair to polished brown boots, leaving no doubt in the woman's mind that he didn't consider her a challenge worthy of comment. Standing, he snagged his leather tie from the footboard of the bed and marched past her, looping the tie over his neck as he walked.

"I wasn't joking, Kullen," she told him as she fell into step behind him. "I want you in the gymnasium and —"

"You can take that Dóigra and shove it up that wide, tight ass of yours, Blackwind," he snarled at her. "I don't take orders from you."

That had not been the wisest thing Glyn Kullen had ever said for he found himself flattened against the far wall outside his room door. The deadly spear handle was jammed across his throat and pressing painfully into his Adam's apple. A wickedly hard knee was rammed between his legs and pressed even more painfully against his balls.

"Fuck you, Kullen," Penthe said. She lifted her knee higher and smiled savagely when the Reaper grunted with the agony burning between his legs.

"In. Your. Dreams," he managed to hiss from between tightly clenched teeth.

Penthe leaned in close—her nose almost touching his. "You'd better hope I never have reason to discipline you, Kullen, because I sure as hell will enjoy watching you break rocks in the hot sun for weeks on end!"

"Get the fuck off me!" Glyn growled, his amber eyes narrowing dangerously.

Just as quickly as she'd subdued him, she released him, stepping adroitly back but pointing the Dóigra menacingly toward him, daring him to come at her.

"This isn't over," he snapped as he pushed away from the wall, striving not to wince at the pain throbbing at the juncture of his thighs.

The Amazeen snarled then motioned with her weapon that he was to precede her. "Run along, fat boy."

All the way down the corridor and the stairs leading to the main concourse, Glyn was seething, his fists clenched, and so angry he had forgotten to knot the tie hanging from his neck. He barely acknowledged the three beautiful women who were sitting at their posts outside the Council room, so annoyed that he'd been bested by the Amazeen he didn't even question the women being there at that ungodly time of night.

"Please go on in. They are awaiting you, Lord Kullen," Argent, the silver-haired Primary Gatekeeper told him.

The Amazeen followed the Reaper into the Council room but stopped at the door, shutting it behind her then taking up a defensive posture before it, Dóigra held at an angle over her body.

"We've trouble, Lord Kullen," Lord Kheelan said as he motioned Glyn forward, pointing to one of five chairs before the High Council dais.

There were four Reapers already in attendance. Lord Kasid Jaborn, who had been assigned the Citadel and its surrounding area as his protectorate and three of the four female Reapers who were mated to Glyn's teammates—Lady Aingeal Cree, Lady Danielle Gehdrin, and the newest of the quartet, Lady Lea Walsh. The only other female Reaper not in attendance was Lady Rachel Tohre whose twins were due soon.

Glyn exchanged a look with Kasid but the Akhkharulian-born Reaper only shrugged, obviously as in the dark about what was going on as was Kullen.

"We have had an occurrence this evening that has distressed us," Lord Kheelan, the High Lord of the Shadowlords, began. "Lords Naois and Dunham and I felt a Rift in the Veil and we have all three tried to contact the goddess but She is not responding. We fear something very malevolent has happened somewhere in the Vircars Territory."

"We have likewise been unable to reach Lord Phelan. Something is blocking our contacting him," Lord Dunham spoke up, "so you can imagine we are quite concerned."

"What kind of occurrence?" Aingeal inquired.

Lord Kheelan switched his attention to her. "Something went through the Net then came back again about ten minutes later," he explained, referring to the planet-wide security grid that was an invisible, laser beam protection to keep invaders from entering Terra. Anything that hit the grid would disintegrate upon contact.

"Morrigunia can go and come as She pleases," Aingeal reminded them. "Perhaps it was Her."

"It wasn't," Lord Dunham said. "Since the last time She was here, the grid has been programmed to recognize Her heat signature in both humanoid and dragon form. It wasn't Her."

"Which means someone—or something else—knows how to penetrate the security barrier and return unscathed," Lord Naois stated.

"How do you know whatever or whoever it was made it back without being vaporized?" Kasid inquired.

"The Net would have noted the dispersement of energy particles, the collapse of life within the particles," Lord Dunham replied. "Whatever came back through it—and we have to pray it was the same entity as the one that went out—was not harmed in any significant way by the laser pulses."

"I'm not liking the sound of this," Danielle declared.

"Lord Glyn, we want you and Lord Kasid to get down to Vircars as fast as you can," Lord Kheelan said. "Find out why Phelan isn't answering our summons and assess the situation. I wish we could send our Prime Reaper and Lords Bevyn, Iden and Cynyr with you but they are still tied up with that problem in Oklaks."

"We could go with them," Danielle said, and when Lord Kheelan shot her an annoyed look, she shrugged. "Merely as backup."

"We do not send our women to war," Lord Naois told her.

"And you think that is what this is?" Aingeal asked.

"It could be," Lord Kheelan said.

"What about the warrioress?" Lea asked quietly. "Why not send her with them?"

The eyes of Reapers and Shadowlords alike shot to the Amazeen.

Penthe arched a brow at Lord Kheelan.

"She is not allowed outside the sanction of the Citadel," the High Lord stated.

"As much as you'd like to see me gone and as far from your man as I can get," Penthe said sweetly, her words directed at Lea.

"I'm not worried about you being near my man, you ugly bean stalk," Lea mumbled under her breath.

Aingeal and Danielle heard her and grinned.

"What about Owen?" Glyn asked.

Lord Kheelan's dark eyes bore into the Reaper. "What about him?"

"You could release him a few weeks early from his sentence and allow him to go with us," Glyn replied.

"That isn't going to happen and even if we were to set aside the remainder of his punishment, he would not be in any condition to accompany you on a mission. He has reverted," Lord Kheelan said. "It will take him awhile after his release to return to normal human condition."

Glyn shuddered at that pronouncement and looked down at the floor.

"We've already informed the stable master to have your mounts saddled and sent down to the train station. As soon as you left your rooms, a helper was sent to pack your saddlebags and get your gear together. Your tenerse has been restocked and new

vac-syringes packed. Everything will be ready for you by the time you get to the carriage," Lord Dunham put in.

"The line only goes as far as Charlotte. From there on, the tracks have yet to be replaced," Lord Kheelan reminded them.

"The huge crater that took out half the seaboard has proved to be a major obstacle to reconnecting the lines," Lord Dunham stated.

"But at least by taking the train to Charlotte it will save you some time," Lord Naois said. "And we believe time is of the essence, gentlemen."

Lord Kheelan nodded, indicating the Reapers were to stand. "Lord Glyn, you are primary on this."

Glyn nodded and stood. "Then we'll be on our way."

"Go raibh an choir Ghaoithe I gcónaí leat," Lord Kheelan said, dismissing them.

Glyn and Kasid saluted the Shadowlords then turned to go.

"The Wind be always at your back, Glynnie," Aingeal repeated the High Lord's blessing in her own native tongue and reached for him, hugging him.

Both Danni and Lea followed suit.

"Be safe," Lea whispered.

At the door, the Amazeen stepped smartly aside to let them pass but snaked out a hand to take possession of Glyn's arm. "*Kakos anēr makrobios*," she said.

"Which means what?" Glyn challenged, shaking off her hold.

Penthe gave him a wicked grin. "A bad man lives long." The smile faded and she snapped to attention—eyes straight ahead and chin high. "Be a bad man, Kullen. Be a very bad man as only you can and come back so I can wipe your scrawny ass on the gymnasium floor."

Glyn made a rude sound and snatched the door open but he was chuckling as he and Kasid walked.

"That one is enamored of you, Glynnie," Kasid suggested.

"Yeah," the Reaper replied smugly. "I know. She can't keep her slimy paws off me."

Chapter Six

The train chugged along at a fairly fast clip as Glyn lounged in the uncomfortable seat, wishing for the personal train car that had been assigned to him but was at that moment being refurbished. At least the seats in it were plush and better fit his rangy length.

"This land is so beautiful," Kasid remarked as he stared out the window. "There are so many contrasts." He looked around at Glyn. "Unlike my native world of relentless sand and the occasional oasis. Even our oceans are small compared to the two on Terra."

"Terra actually has seven oceans," Glyn told him, "but, like you, I've only seen two." He folded his arms over his chest. "Do you miss your homeworld?"

Kasid shook his head. "No, I do not. It was a brutal land filled with brutal people. I feel this is my home now."

"I know what you mean, although I find myself wishing I could go back to Breathnóir if only for a visit."

"Yet there would be no one left that you would know or who would know you," Kasid observed.

Glyn turned away, a sad expression settling on his face. "Aye, that's true," he replied softly. He laid his head on the back of the seat and closed his eyes.

"May I tell you something in confidence, Glynnie?"

"Sure," Glyn said, and yawned widely. He was beginning to feel the effects of a sleepless night and he was edging closer to the time of his Transition when sleep would be nearly impossible.

Kasid took a deep breath. "I have received Lord Kheelan's permission to court a young woman who works in the kitchens of the Citadel."

Surprised by that revelation, Glyn opened his eyes and swiveled his head toward his fellow Reaper. "No shit," he remarked.

Kasid's head bobbed up and down. "Her name is Alexis and she is one of the bakers."

"Huh," Glyn commented. "I think Lord Kheelan is starting to mellow in his advancing years."

A smile stretched his companion's dark face. "I believe it is due mainly to the fact that I have been assigned the Citadel as my protectorate. As Lord Naois observed, I can be home most every night and do not have to venture far from my workplace." He frowned. "Well, unless it is a special occasion such as this."

"Well, congratulations," Glyn said, reaching across the aisle to offer Kasid his hand. "I hope you two will be happy together."

"Thank you, Glynnie," Kasid replied. He shook Kullen's hand warrior style then the two men settled back in their seats, both turning to look out the window at the passing scenery.

Kasid's admission depressed Glyn, and the more he dwelt on it, the more depressed he became. The trees and brooks and bridges over and by which they passed became nothing more than blurs as he stared into space. He thought of the woman he had been engaged to marry all those many centuries ago then the lovely face of Mystery Butler rose up to taunt him. He scrubbed a ruthless hand over his face to chase away that haunting visage but the pretty countenance remained, the dark-chocolate eyes looking back at him with accusation.

You just aren't going to leave me alone, are you, wench? he thought.

He didn't know if it was a good thing or a bad that he was headed into the Vircars Territory and that he would be making a trip to Charlestown where Phelan Kiel was stationed. Charlestown was a large city but there was no doubt in his mind that he'd eventually run into Mystery and her adorable little girl. As a matter of fact, he intended to make sure he did. He thought of the disappointment he'd seen on the child's face, remembered the disdain in her mother's voice when last they spoke and the guilt made his heart ache. If for no other reason than to set things right, ask apology for his actions, he had to see them.

"You're so full of it, Kullen," he muttered.

"Beg pardon?" Kasid queried.

"Just talking to myself," Glyn responded.

"I do that," his fellow Reaper admitted.

Over the years Glyn had always been honest with himself if hedging a bit on the truth with others. He knew what he was capable of doing as well as he knew his failings. Lying to himself was not one of his many faults.

You're going to seek her out because you need to, a little voice in his head told him. *You're going to go looking for her because you've made up your mind to court her.*

Glyn shot up in the seat as though he'd been prodded in the ass by barbed wire.

"What's wrong?" Kasid asked, his hand slapping to the leather at his hip.

"Holy motherfucking shit!" Glyn whispered.

"What?" Kasid repeated, and got to his feet with his six-shooter drawn.

Glyn looked up at his teammate. "I'm going to court that gods-be-damned woman," he said in a strangled voice.

Kasid's eyes narrowed. "What woman?" he asked, and his fingers tensed on his weapon. "Not *my* woman you won't!"

"No, no, no, no, no," Glyn said. "My woman."

The words struck deep inside Glyn Kullen and began to take root, to spread out, to fill his heart. He realized he was actually trembling.

"You have a woman?" Kasid inquired as he holstered his gun.

"Aye," Glyn said, awe making his voice unnaturally low. "I believe I do."

"You don't know?"

"Oh, I know, Kasid," Glyn said, and was sure of the matter.

Kasid shrugged then resumed his seat. He cast the Breathnóirian an unsure look before crossing an ankle over his knee to stare out the window again.

"I know," Glyn repeated.

He yawned again and leaned over so the side of his head was against the cool window glass. His gaze moved to the gravel speeding by below, and within a matter of moments, his eyelids were drooping and he was lost in sleep.

"Don't, ben my chree," he whispered to her, gathering her into his arms, calling her woman of his heart. "You shouldn't shed tears for a man like me."

"Then for who? I love you so much," she told him as she clung to him. Her fingers dug into his bare shoulder. "I want to be with you."

"Ta fys ayd c'wooad ta my ghraih ort," he whispered then repeated it in her language. "You know how I love you."

She tilted her head to look up at him. "Do I, Glynnie?" she asked. "Do I know or am I just dreaming that you do?"

He cupped her head in his strong hand – that hand that wielded such deadly power – and brought her lips to his, speaking against the softness.

"I can sense your dreams when I dream," he whispered to her. "Or when I look into your eyes. I know what you are thinking. Just hold on, ben my chree. I am coming to you."

"Hurry, Glyn," she urged him, and her hands began to roam over his back, down his arms and along his waist. "I need you so much."

Glyn groaned. "As I need you."

He swept her away with him, taking her from her narrow bed and into the heavens, soaring with her across the firmament until they came to a soft meadow filled with wildflowers. There he laid her down, and with a sweep of his hand, their clothing was gone and he was lying beside her, his lips tracing a devilish pathway down her neck and onto the lush mounds that beckoned him to sample their fare.

She twisted her fingers in his hair and held his head to her as a mother would her child.

He suckled and licked and nibbled. His hands caressed her and found all the places upon her writhing body that pleased her. He shifted over her, nudging her legs apart to settle between them. His cock stabbed at the entrance to her sheath, begging entry.

"Glyn!" she cried out as he slid deep within her and her entire body shuddered around his shaft, pulling him into her sweet, moist cavern...

"Mystery!"

The one word caused Reaper Kasid Jaborn to bang his head against the window beside him and he snapped his face toward Glyn Kullen, alarmed at the loud shout. "What is it?" he asked then realized his teammate had been sleeping.

Glyn pulled his legs in and bent forward. "Mother of the goddess, I am..."

He didn't finish for Jaborn took another closer look and realized Kullen was going into Transition. His eyes widened and he shot out of his seat, looking wildly around him.

"Too soon," Glyn said, teeth chattering, eyes pulsing red. "It's too soon!"

Kasid didn't question the words. He rushed across the aisle, grabbed Glyn's arm and jerked him out of his seat, propelling him over his shoulder.

"Hang on," was all Jaborn could say, and he sprinted down the aisle, flinging the door at the front of the passenger car open. His long legs took him to one of the sleeping cars and kicked the door open to hurry inside, dropping Glyn to a bunk. Without another word, he backed out of the door then slammed it shut, pulling the handle toward him, bellowing at the top of his lungs for the conductor.

James Gilroy had been a conductor on the Vircar-Flagala line for only six months. He'd never seen a Reaper in his life before the two had climbed aboard his train and he had gone out of his way to keep out of theirs. He was terrified of the lawmen and had spent the last few hours huddled on the open deck between the passenger car and the baggage car, the hot summer wind ruffling what was left of his thinning hair. When he heard the Reaper shout, he nearly pissed his pants but he forced himself to go inside the compartment.

"Come lock this fucking door!" the dark Reaper bellowed. "Hurry!"

A loud howl came from behind the door being held by the Reaper then mighty thumps against the panels, shrieks as something was drawn down the wood.

"Hurry the gods-be-damn it!" the dark Reaper ordered.

James stumbled forward, fumbling for the brace of keys on the large ring attached to his belt. His hands were shaking, and with every hideous noise coming from behind the door, his eyes rolled in terror. He didn't have to ask what was happening. Everyone knew what Reapers did and knowing that one was on his train, yowling in Transition was enough to make James faint.

Which he did before he could isolate the key to the sleeping compartment.

"Fuck!" Kasid barked. His booted feet were planted to either side of the door as he used his full weight and strength to keep Kullen from jerking the portal open and coming outside. When he heard glass break, he knew his teammate had launched himself through the window.

"He did what?" Lord Kheelan shouted.

"He Transitioned, Your Grace," Kasid explained as he psychically communicated the situation to the Citadel. "He said it was too soon."

There was a telling silence then Lord Dunham spoke. *"Don't concern yourself about him, Lord Kasid. He'll follow the train. Unfortunately, this is not unprecedented. It has happened several times now."*

"With Lord Owen last year – though that is understandable – but just within the last week both Lords Cynyr and Bevyn out in Oklaks had it happen to them," Lord Naois added.

"And I want to know why this keeps happening!" Lord Kheelan snarled. "By the goddess, I will find out why too! We can't have you men Transitioning out of cycle!"

Kasid held his breath but no further communication came from the Citadel. He finally released a long sigh then rubbed a hand over his face and plopped down in the seat, a headache lashing the top of his head. He didn't feel all that well himself but it was much, much too soon for him to assume his wolf-like state. His last Transition had been but two weeks prior. Transitions happened roughly every three months but if other Reapers' cycles had been thrown out of whack...

From the corner of his eye, he caught sight of a large black wolf running all out beside the speeding train. He turned in his seat and watched the beast as its body bunched and elongated, its paws digging into the ground.

"Can you hear me, Glyn?" he sent to the beast, but the animal ignored him, never breaking stride. The only thing Kasid heard was the wolf's chuffing and grunts.

* * * * *

As he ran, Glyn Kullen kept pace with the passenger car. He could see Jaborn watching him from the window, could hear his fellow Reaper speaking to him but could not answer no matter how hard he tried. Nothing but grunts formed in his mind. He was all too aware of what he was doing though he couldn't understand why it was happening – it never had before. His tongue lolled out of his mouth as he raced beside the train and the pads of his paws were being ravaged by the sharp edges of the gravel along the tracks. He could smell the blood seeping from them. His insides felt on fire with the need to do just what he was doing and though his heart was pounding dangerously, he could neither slow down nor stop. It was as though he were being compelled. The agitation swirling in his brain was pushing out everything but the compulsion to run. With all his being, he wished the train would slow down, would stop, for if it didn't, he was afraid his heart would burst. He was rapidly losing strength and fading back.

It took every ounce of his power to turn his head and look up at Jaborn. He could not communicate mentally with the man but he hoped Kasid would look into his eyes and see the desperation. He held the other Reaper's gaze for a long moment then he saw Kasid pop out of his seat and run down the aisle.

Glyn dropped back and the passenger car shot ahead of him.

Then the dining car.

Then the observation car until he was running far behind the train, panting savagely, becoming winded as he struggled to catch up.

After what seemed like an eternity, the train began to slow. The brakes squealed brutally and the ground shuddered.

He had almost reached the observation platform when his legs skidded out from beneath him and he fell forward, his muzzle digging into the gravel. He yelped, wounded, and flopped to his side, his paws moving as though he were still running.

He heard the crunch of gravel as boots hit the ground but he couldn't move. His paws were flailing uselessly and he was whimpering, panting so heavily he could barely draw breath into his depleted lungs.

"It's all right," he heard Kasid say, and then strong arms were gently shoved beneath him. "I've got you."

He felt himself being lifted. His head lolled over Kasid's arm. Sweat coated his fur and blood oozed from the abraded pads of his paws as his teammate carried him onto the train and to another sleeping car. He whined when Kasid lowered him to a soft bunk.

"Lord Naois says you need a double dose of tenerse," Kasid said, and left the compartment. When he came back, he had a loaded vac-syringe in hand.

The drug burned a brutal pathway along the artery of Glyn's neck but he no longer had the ability to make a sound. He was so exhausted, so completely drained, all he could do was lie there unmoving as the absolute agony spread through his bloodstream. The double dosage hurt worse than he could have imagined, tearing through him like white-hot lightning. His red eyes stared helplessly at Kasid.

"They don't know, Glynnie," Kasid told him, stroking the damp fur. "It happened to Cyn and Bev too."

Glyn shuddered once then the strong narcotic claimed him. The last thing he heard before the darkness closed around was Lord Kheelan's worried voice.

"Keep him sedated until you reach Charlotte. We'll have a healer take a look at him there."

* * * * *

"This is a new threat," Lord Dunham told his fellow Shadowlords. "One that may prove to be difficult to fight."

Standing at the wide bank of windows that overlooked the roiling sea beyond, High Lord Kheelan remained quiet. His hands were clasped behind his back as he watched the waves crashing upon the broken concrete pylons that had once been a magnificent state building before the Burning War. A severe storm—which they learned from records archived in one of the sub-basements of the Citadel was called a hurricane long ago—was brewing out in the dark green waters and lightning was already flashing on the horizon.

"Fitting," Lord Kheelan said softly, "that a storm should be coming our way even as our Reapers are under attack from unknown forces."

"Still no word from the goddess?" Lord Naois inquired.

Lord Kheelan shook his head. "Not a peep and that worries me more than the off-cycle Transitions." A loud sigh issued from his throat. "She has been our lifeline, gentlemen. Without Her..." He let the words hang in the air as the warning they were.

"This situation in the Oklaks Territory," Lord Dunham said, "obviously started it all."

"I disagree," Lord Kheelan said. He did not look around but continued to watch the approaching storm. "I don't think they are connected." Before Dunham could dispute his position, the High Lord held up a hand to stay him. "Just a gut feeling I have, Dunny, but I don't believe one is the result of the other."

"They stink of Raphian, Kheelan," Lord Dunham argued.

"Oh, I've no doubt whatsoever of that," Lord Kheelan acknowledged. "He has set this shit into motion, but the problems in Kiel's territory are going to prove to be something entirely different than Gehdrin's." He glanced around. "Mark my words."

Lord Dunham thought of the dozens of townspeople who had been mysteriously vanishing in the Oklaks Territory only to turn up dead weeks later missing vital organs such as brains, hearts, kidneys, lungs and livers. The death toll was rising in the west and because the disappearances were so widespread, the territory so large and beginning to encroach into the Exasla Territory patrolled by Reaper Cynyr Cree, it had meant sending four Reapers to cover the situation.

"So what do you believe is the connection between Cynyr and Bevyn Transitioning out of cycle way out there and Glyn doing so over this way?" Lord Naois queried.

"Disruption," Lord Kheelan stated. "It takes the men out of the equation, off-line, and is no doubt meant to show us how far-reaching is Raphian's power."

"And how vulnerable our men are to Him," Lord Dunham said quietly.

"He's found a way to reach out and touch them at will," Lord Kheelan said, "and that is a terrifying thought, gentlemen."

"So what do we do?" Lord Naois asked.

"What *can* we do without the goddess's help?" Lord Dunham challenged.

They two men looked to their leader but the High Lord had no answer.

Chapter Seven

Glyn awoke four days later naked in a strange bed, in a strange room with the curtains drawn over rain-lashed windows behind which a storm raged violently. The thunder had forced him from his slumber but it was the strobe-like pulses of lightning flaring around the edges of the draperies that brought him fully awake. They lit the room in an eerie green burst of illumination that made his eyes hurt.

"It was hailing but a moment ago," Kasid said from a chair across the room.

Pushing up in the bed, Glyn groaned for every muscle in his body ached as though he'd been given the worst beating of his life. He hurt in places he hadn't thought about in years and the headache that pushed between his temples was a torment unto itself, and although he had resumed his human form, he could feel his fangs. He ran a tongue over their sharpness and moaned.

Kasid stood and came over to the bed, rolling his shirtsleeve up as he did. "You need Sustenance before I give you another dose of tenerse. That will retract the fangs." He extended his arm. "Drink, my friend."

Glyn shied away from the offering—not because he did not need what Kasid offered or because it came from the arm of an Akhkharulian, but because of the tattoo on the Reaper's arm. The symbol disgusted him as much as it gave him pause.

"I am sorry. I will..." Kasid started to say, pulling his arm back to offer his right arm in its place but Glyn reached out to stop him.

"It's all right," Glyn said, annoyed that his voice was hoarse and just to speak seemed to sap what little strength he had.

"I did not think," Kasid said as he looked down at the tattoo that had been stamped into his flesh. "It is a vile thing, Glynnie."

Striving not to look at the representation of the coiled ghoret—the deadliest viper known to the megaverse and the one thing all Reapers feared—emblazoned on Jaborn's flesh, Glyn wrapped his hands around Kasid's forearm, sank his fangs into the fleshy underside and drank. As he did, he closed his eyes to the violent pain racking his head.

Kasid stared across the room. There was only a modicum of pain from the bite so that did not concern him. It was the heat pouring off his fellow Reaper's body that worried him. A Reaper's body heat was higher than that of his humanoid counterparts—especially so just before and during a Transition—but it should not be as high as Kasid was experiencing from Glyn Kullen's touch. A surreptitious glance at Kullen's face showed sweat glistening on the man's unnaturally pale flesh.

"Lord Kheelan?" Kasid sent.

"A healer is on his way to you," the High Lord sent in return.

"He still has a very high fever."

"We know."

Glyn's hands slipped from Kasid's arms and the Reaper slid down in the bed. His fangs began to retract. "Were you speaking to the Shadowlords?" he asked.

Kasid rolled down the sleeve of his shirt and buttoned it. "Did you not hear me?"

Glyn put his fingertips to his temples and massaged. "I heard buzzing but couldn't make out the words."

A frown settled on the Akhkharulian's features. "They are sending a healer to examine you," Kasid informed him.

"How long have I been out?"

"Four days in wolf form. You Transitioned about half an hour ago back to your normal form."

"Are we in Charlotte?"

"Aye," Kasid acknowledged.

"By the gods, I hurt."

Kasid nodded and turned away, going over to a table where a prepared vac-syringe lay.

"Hold off until the healer gives you the go-ahead on that, Lord Kasid," Lord Kheelan's voice interrupted.

"He's in pain."

"Understood, but the healer needs to know if there is something else wrong with him that administering the tenerse might compound."

"What did they say?" Glyn queried.

"They want to me to wait on giving you the drug," Kasid said.

Acute disappointment drifted over Glyn's face but he nodded. He thought of Owen Tohre's addiction to the narcotic and certainly didn't want that for himself. He hoped the healer wasn't too long in coming, and when the light knock at the door sounded, he breathed a sigh of relief.

Kasid admitted the healer, who walked straight to the bed and put a hand to Glyn's forehead. The man in the long white robe looked to Jaborn.

"How long has he had this fever?"

"I don't know, milord," Kasid answered. "I was unaware of it until he fed from me."

"Go ask the proprietor to have a cold bath prepared in the bathing room," the healer directed. "As cold as he can get it. When you have seen to that, go to the apothecary across the street and get as many bottles of rubbing alcohol as they have in stock."

"Aye, milord," Kasid agreed.

"I will need iced water for him to drink so have the proprietor provide that as well."

Kasid nodded and hurried out.

"Can I have the tenses now?" Glyn asked. His head was nigh to exploding and the pain was so intense the sound of his own voice reverberating in his ears was excruciating.

"I would like to get your temperature down first but I can see you are in pain, milord," the healer commented. "Perhaps just a little to take the edge off."

"I'd appreciate it," Glyn whispered, and almost smiled at the healer's shocked look. Obviously the man wasn't accustomed to Reapers being polite to him.

"How bad is the pain?" the man inquired as he brought the vac-syringe to the bed.

"The worst I can ever remember having."

"Did anything odd happen before you Transitioned?" the healer inquired as he injected the fiery drug into Glyn's neck.

Glyn winced as the painful payload entered his veins. "I was sleeping and when I woke, it was on me."

"Very strange," was the pronouncement. "As I understand it, Lords Cree and Coure reported the same thing. Both had been sleeping." He smoothed back the wet hair from his patient's forehead. "When we sleep, we are vulnerable, especially when we are dreaming and the mind is already occupied and unable to protect it from outside influences."

"I was dreaming," Glyn admitted.

The healer nodded. "So were your teammates."

"Did they have a fever too?"

"Aye, but it passed quickly enough. I expect yours to do the same but it is sufficiently high enough to warrant a cold bath."

Glyn said nothing to the plan. He was sweating profusely and plunging into cooling water would no doubt relieve some of the pain scraping inside his skull. He was more than ready for Kasid to return with news the bath was ready.

But unprepared to find he had no strength to swing his legs from the bed or stand. His face flamed when told Jaborn would have to carry him.

"I feel like an infant," Glyn said as the healer helped Kasid wrap him in a sheet to cover his nakedness. He groaned in pain as his fellow Reaper hefted him into his arms.

"I wish you were as light as one," Kasid joked as he adjusted his hold on his teammate. "If I have to carry you back up those stairs, I may just loop a noose around you and pull you up."

"And bump my ass on the risers?" Glyn grumbled. "I think not."

"It would be humbling, no?" Kasid asked with a chuckle.

The healer had preceded them down the stairs and was waiting in the bathing room. When Kasid lowered Glyn's feet to the floor, the other man unwound the sheet and instructed Jaborn to lift Glyn into the tub.

"What is your name, milord healer?" Glyn asked as he settled down into the water, getting a small measure of relief from the coolness.

"Braselton," the man replied. "Jonas Braselton."

"I am grateful for your help."

Healer Braselton smiled slightly. "It is my honor to aid you, milord. My wife and daughter were murdered by rogues many years back. Had it not been for Lord Kiel, their killers would have gotten away with what they did."

"Kiel's a good man," Glyn stated.

"Indeed he is. When last I was in Charlestown, I supped with him and his good friend Simmons."

Glyn looked up. "Simmons?"

"Anthony Simmons," the healer supplied. "He is the owner of Sagewood, a very important plantation in these parts. Lord Kiel is often there with Mr. Simmons."

Glyn and Kasid exchanged looks.

"Now just lie back and relax. Hopefully the water will bring that fever down quickly," Braselton said. "I'll come back to check on you in half an hour."

"I'll be a prune by then," Glyn complained.

"But perhaps not a stewed one, eh?" the healer joked. He poured a cup of water and handed it to Glyn. "Drink until you think you'll burst then drink some more."

Once the Reapers were alone, Kasid sat down on a low stool and braced his chin on a closed fist. "Do you think this Simmons and Phelan are more than friends?" he asked.

Glyn shrugged. His head was still aching miserably but he didn't feel as though he were standing at the entrance of a fiery furnace. "With Kiel you never know."

"Makes you wonder though, doesn't it?" Kasid pressed.

"Aye, but he's what he is," Glyn said. "No matter what he is. He's a Reaper and that's truly what defines him."

"You're right," Kasid replied.

"Do me a favor, will you, Jaborn?" Glyn asked. "Will you see if they've got something other than water I can drink? By the gods I hate water."

"Lemonade?" Kasid inquired as he got to his feet.

"Lemonade would be perfect."

While Kasid was gone, Glyn laid his head on the curved back of the copper tub and closed his eyes. His body still felt as though he'd served as some bastard's punching bag and despite the coolness of the water, he was sweating like a racehorse. His head throbbed and a low, crackling, buzzing sound filled his ears from time to time. He put a hand up to scrub at his face and tried to contact the Shadowlords.

"Your Grace?" he sent. When there was no reply, he tried again and again but no one answered. He tried his luck with the goddess but She too seemed to either be ignoring him or unable to hear his entreaties. He tried calling Kiel with the same lack of response but when he also tried Jaborn—who couldn't be very far away—and received no reply, he began to worry.

"They sent one pitcher and said..." Kasid stopped as he came through the door, the look on Kullen's face the cause. "What's wrong?"

"Did you not hear me, Jaborn?" Glyn asked.

"About the lemonade? Aye, I heard you. What—?"

"When I called you psychically," Glyn said, cutting him off.

Kasid shook his head. "No, my friend, I did not."

Putting a hand to the side of his head, Glyn felt the pain increase and knew Kasid was trying to send words to him. All he heard was the drone of insects and the noise added to the agony already pulsing in his head. "Don't," he asked. "I can't hear you and it hurts when you try."

Kasid's forehead crinkled with concern. "Do you want me to contact Lord Kheelan?"

"Something is wrong," Glyn said as though he hadn't heard the question. He lifted his head and stared at Kasid. "Something is really, really wrong."

* * * * *

Over one hundred and sixty miles away, Reaper Phelan Kiel was thinking the same thing. He had been trying for days now to reach one of the Shadowlords, a fellow Reaper, the Triune Goddess, and each time he had failed.

He had also Transitioned out of cycle—coming to himself on a beach in the Flagala Territory with the carcass of a half-eaten steer lying beside him. How long he'd been there, he didn't know, but the stench of the dead animal was overpowering and clung to him even after he'd plunged into the ocean and scrubbed himself vigorously with sand.

That hadn't been the only problem either, he thought. Fashioning clothing for himself—something as easy to do as wiping his butt after a satisfying dump—had proved to be a bit of a challenge. It had taken him three tries before he managed to form a shirt and pair of black jeans. Taking to the air to wing his way home had been just as difficult. It had taken five tries that time before he could hold the image of an owl and soar into the heavens. Though he'd managed to get things back to normal as far as shape-shifting and creating objects out of thin air, he still could not use his psychic talent to contact anyone. It was almost as though he'd fallen—or been plunged—into some kind of dead zone.

Getting up from his kitchen table, he walked over to the opened back door and braced his hands on the header, staring out into the rain. The storm had hit earlier that

morning, saturating the day with whipping rain and howling wind. Even though he had a deep porch running the length of his cabin, mist from the rain washed across the span to pebble his face and chest. It felt good, for ever since his off-cycle Transition, his body temperature seemed higher than normal.

Sighing heavily, he lowered his hands and left the kitchen, going into the living area where he'd been forced to light a lantern to dispel the gloom of the day. He plopped down on the davenport and swung his bare feet onto the cushion, crooking his knees as he braced his hands behind his head. With the weather as inclement as it was—and seemingly getting worse—there wasn't much he could do outside.

"Until my mental powers come back, I couldn't sense a fucking rogue if he were standing in the room with me," Phelan grumbled aloud.

And that was a worry that refused to go away.

* * * * *

In the Oklaks Territory, Prime Reaper Arawn Gehdrin, 2-I-C Bevyn Coure, Cynyr Cree and Iden Belial shared a different kind of worry. Two had gone through Transition out of cycle with Cree's lasting twice its normal duration, pissing the Reaper off more than normal. Each had a brutal headache and suffered still with a low-grade fever. Each had experienced difficulty in transmitting psychic thoughts and receiving them, and each had gone through a few moments of fear when shape-shifting and manipulation of molecules had proven to be difficult. But now that all their powers had returned and seemed as good as new, their primary concern was their inability to find the culprits who were harvesting vital organs and murdering citizens at will.

"Someone is fucking with us," Bevyn grumbled. "I don't like to be fucked with."

"Aye, and when I get my hands on the one doing it..." Cynyr made a twisting motion with his clenched fists.

"But there's not a trace of the bastards," Arawn hissed as he sat down at the breakfast table with his teammates. "Not a single, solitary clue to who they are or where they are!"

"They don't leave behind clues," Cynyr reminded his leader. "It's hard to trace a criminal who doesn't even have a heat signature."

"Which begs the question if what we're chasing isn't some new kind of cybot," Iden suggested. "One we haven't encountered before."

"That got here how, Belial?" Bevyn challenged. "Anything coming through the Net would be detected."

"They could have been here before the Net closed. It didn't blanket the whole of Terra until a few months back," Iden answered. "The Ceannus could have stored them somewhere before they left that last time. The 'bots could have been in stasis until now."

"And just how could they have activated them?" Bevyn persisted.

"Time delay," Arawn put in. When his second-in-command gave him a disbelieving look, he cocked a shoulder. "It's possible, Bev."

"All right," Bevyn said. "For the sake of argument, let's say those deranged scientists left the things behind and at a prearranged time the 'bots woke up. The questions are why can't we detect them and just what the hell are they using human organs for?"

"The 'bots could have been made in some way that makes it impossible for us to track them," Arawn ventured. "As to what a 'bot would want with human organs, I'm at a loss to explain."

"To make some kind of super human?" Iden asked.

"Oh, now there's a cheery thought, Belial!" Arawn scoffed.

"Think about it, Ari," Iden said, leaning forward over the table as they waited for the waitress to bring their food. "What better way to fight us than to create beings we can't distinguish between a regular Terran and one with enhanced abilities like a *balgair*? Beings whose bodies have been improved so they are stronger, smarter, can live longer and blend in with the populace so effortlessly we would walk right past one and not even know what he is."

"Obviously you've been thinking about this," Cynyr said.

"He's got a hell of an imagination," Bevyn snapped, "I'll give you that. Why the hell would they need organs if they were making a super human? Why not just create a better organ to begin with?"

"Perhaps they don't have that ability yet," Cynyr suggested. "Maybe they need those organs as a template of some kind or they've found a way to utilize it in a more efficient manner."

"But a human organ needs blood to sustain it," Bevyn argued. "Without blood, it will deteriorate and cease to function."

"Well, maybe the Ceannus have developed some kind of preserving fluid. Maybe that fluid acts like oil running through an engine to make it work," Iden put forth.

"That's all a bunch of hooey," Bevyn snapped. It was obvious the Reaper had awoken in a sour mood that morning.

"As much as I hate to admit it, what he's saying makes sense though, Bev," Arawn told them, his eyes mirroring his worry. "I can't think of anything more unnerving than to be standing beside a rogue and not know what he is."

"This whole situation has been so far beyond the norm that we should be open to any viable suggestions here," Cynyr agreed.

"Say he's on to something," Bevyn reluctantly admitted. "That still doesn't give us any hint on how to find the killers."

"What do all the victims have in common?" Iden queried.

"They're missing organs," Bevyn snapped, "and they're dead as a doornail."

Iden rolled his eyes. "Just think about it a moment, Coure. What common thread connects them?"

"They've all been adult males in the prime of their lives," Arawn answered.

"All were healthy, fit and vigorous," Cynyr added. "All men who worked as laborers of some sort."

"Strong men," Bevyn grumbled.

"They weren't men of social importance within their communities," Arawn contributed.

"Men who were for all purposes expendable," Cynyr put in.

"Aye, and they were ordinary-looking individuals," Bevyn said grudgingly. "People you wouldn't necessarily take note of as you passed them."

"Precisely and not a single one was over the age of forty," Iden stated. "The average age was thirty-five."

"Just everyday, working men without any particularly outstanding features," Cynyr concluded.

"Men at whom you'd never take a second look," Arawn agreed.

"So how do we track such people?" Bevyn demanded. "If we can't even detect their murderers, how the hell are we to track super beings we don't even know how to find in the first place?"

The waitress appeared with a tray balanced on her upraised hand so the lawmen ceased talking. She placed the tray on a stand a waiter opened beside the Reapers' table then began to set out the dishes, smiling coyly at Iden, the youngest of the four men. When she left, Arawn looked over at the huge mound of eggs, grits, hash browns, bacon, sausage patties, thick slice of ham steak and the side order of flapjacks that had been placed in front of Bevyn.

"It's a wonder you don't have a stroke, Coure," the Prime Reaper complained. "All that grease is not good for you. If we ever need to find you, all we have to do is look for the greasy smear you leave behind. You..." He stopped with a blink of his amber eyes.

"I'm a growing boy, Ari," Bevyn snapped.

"You thought of something, didn't you, Ari?" Cynyr asked.

"How did you, Glyn and Owen find the graves of the *Drochtái* victims up in the Northlands, Iden?" Arawn asked.

"The Shadowlords sent one of their drones up to seek out graves around which all the surrounding grasses had been destroyed and could no longer grow," Iden answered then relaxed in his chair with a grin. "That's what we should do! Lord Naois can send a drone out to look for heat sigs different than that of normal humans. The drone could detect what we aren't able to and take them out like that!" The young Reaper snapped his fingers.

"Take out what we are being blocked from detecting," Cynyr said, and when his fellow Reapers looked at him, he nodded. "Whatever screwed with our abilities might also have screwed with our powers of detection."

"Altered them in some way," Bevyn suggested.

"Makes sense," Iden said.

"Makes perfect sense," Arawn agreed.

Iden looked to Arawn. "What did Lord Kheelan call the stuff inside us that makes us human?"

"DNA," Arawn replied then grinned broadly at Iden. "Every living organism has DNA. The drone could run a program to detect human DNA and if anything that looks like a human is moving on this world but doesn't have DNA we will know it's a 'bot."

"If the drone can take out ghorets and graves from up there," Cynyr said, "why can't it take out a gods-be-damned 'bot?"

"It can," Arawn replied.

"That's all well and good but that doesn't tell us how we would find these so-called super humans if that's what the 'bots are creating," Bevyn reminded them.

"We can gather samples of tissue from the bodies of the dead men for the drone to catalogue," Arawn suggested.

"We'd have to dig the dead men up to do that," Bevyn put in.

"Aye, that we would," Arawn agreed.

"Oh, this just gets better and better," Bevyn complained.

"Could the drone do a search for anyone with that DNA and home in on him?" Cynyr asked.

"Wouldn't it have to somehow take a sample?" Bevyn countered. "How could it do that from up there?" He cut his gaze toward the ceiling.

"We won't know until we ask Lord Naois," Iden replied. "That's his bailiwick. But if the drone has that kind of capability or can be programmed to have it, it can find and take out the super human then and there."

"The sooner the better," Cynyr quipped.

"Finish your meal, gentlemen," Arawn said, pushing his chair back. "I'm going to take a walk outside and contact our friendly Shadowlord Lord Naois!"

Chapter Eight

Glyn struggled to get up the stairs but with Kasid's help, he was determined to make it on his own without having to be carried like a child. His legs were wobbly but made it to his bed without falling flat on his face. Collapsing onto the cool sheets, he buried the side of his face in the pillow and gave in to his weakness.

"How's your head?" Kasid inquired.

"Better," Glyn replied.

Kasid put a hand to the other man's forehead. "Temperature is down, thank the goddess."

"The buzzing has stopped in my ears too," Glyn said.

"Try to speak to me," Kasid told him.

Although Glyn's head still hurt, it was with nowhere near the intensity that it had been and he closed his eyes, concentrating on sending a mental thought to Jaborn.

"I'm hungry."

"So am I," Kasid said with a broad grin, and laughed when his teammate sighed with relief.

"I was beginning to worry."

"I'll go down and get us some lunch since we missed breakfast," Kasid said. "How hungry are you?"

"I could eat a horse."

Kasid frowned. "I hope that isn't on the menu," he said, and headed for the door.

Once Kasid was gone, Glyn tried contacting Phelan but there was still no answer. He tried the Shadowlords.

"You sound weak, Lord Glyn," the High Lord answered.

"I am, Your Grace," Glyn said, even more relieved that he could get in touch with his masters. *"Has there been any word from Phelan? I can't seem to reach him."*

There was a slight pause. *"Neither can we nor can we raise the goddess. Get down to Charlestown as quickly as you can. Something is very wrong."*

"We'll leave first thing in the morning, if it's all right with you," Glyn sent. *"I'm still feeling a bit under the weather."*

"Understood and please be careful, Glyn. Things are afoot that has my fellow Shadowlords and me concerned."

* * * * *

Phelan stared at the constable. "How many?"

"Six in the Sewell Township and four in Beaumont," Constable Vernon Locke answered. He stood with his wet hat clutched in his hand, rolling the brim around and around as rainwater dripped upon the porch floor. He flinched as lightning stitched across the heavens. "That makes a total of fifteen in the last two days, milord. Now we're missing a newborn what arrived just last evening. His mama and daddy are frantic."

Phelan shot a hand through his tousled hair, distressed by the news. "Come on in, Vern," he said, and turned his back on the pot-bellied man. "I need a strong cup of coffee."

Dawn had just stretched its fingers over the horizon when Locke had pounded on the Reaper's door, rousing Phelan from the first decent sleep he'd had in weeks. There were dark circles under the shape-shifter's eyes and a haunted look in his amber gaze as he went to the stove and lit a burner.

"I hate to tell you this, milord, but I got word from Constable Hartman two counties over that he's been finding the carcasses of steers scattered all about the countryside and he's missing three young men."

Phelan was pouring coffee into the pot's strainer when that news struck him like a bolt out of the blue. "Steers?" he said, thinking of the dead animal beside which he'd awakened a few days earlier.

"According to Hank, the meat had been stripped clean down to the bone but them bones had gnaw marks on them like a big grizzly got to them."

"When was the last time there was a grizzly seen around these parts?" Phelan queried.

"Ain't been none in many years as I remember it," Locke answered. "Big cats, aye, but from what Hank told me, it weren't no cat what got them steers. It was something bigger and..." He looked down at his hat. "More than one of 'em."

That news staggered Phelan and he nearly dropped the pot as he placed it on the burner. "He thinks it was rogues gone rabid then?"

"That's what he suggested, but if that's the case, milord, we got some real trouble." The constable took the seat Phelan offered him at the table and asked the question that had been on his and Hank Hartman's minds. "You reckon you could handle a couple of rabid rogues all by your lonesome, milord?"

Phelan knew he was in no condition to handle one rogue much less two and if the bastards were rabid, he was in deep shit. He also knew he had to find a way to contact the Citadel, hoping they'd tried to get in touch with him and when he hadn't replied, was sending Glyn or Kasid or both his way. He didn't think Locke needed to know how concerned he was with his own ability to handle the situation on his own.

"As soon as I get some coffee in me, we'll head out to cabins where all these people have come up missing, the child's home first. The steers I'm not worried as much about right now but I'll look into that too. With any luck at all, the Shadowlords will send me

some help but we can't count on that. For the time being, call in every deputy and volunteer you have and ask Hartman to do the same. You might as well have Constable Tolbert over at Danton come too. I want to meet with them in the church at Ellis Corners at two o'clock today, rain or shine."

"By the looks of this storm, it ain't gonna let up no time soon," Locke told him. "Old Lady Wilson says this is like them hurricanes what used to batter the coast back when she was knee-high to a grasshopper."

"Didn't she just celebrate her hundred and fourth birthday last month?" Phelan asked.

"Oldest woman in the territory to hear her tell it," Locke answered, "though Aunt Zettie, that woman of color who used to be Mr. Simmons' mammy, says she's older than Missus Wilson by six months."

"Those two are a pair," Phelan said, staring at his coffee pot, wishing the thing would perk. He desperately needed the caffeine but he needed something else even more.

"That they are," Locke agreed. His eyes widened as the Reaper reached into the icebox that sat beside the back door and took out a bottle of red liquid. The overweight lawman swallowed hard, nearly gagged and looked away as Phelan Kiel drank his morning ration of Sustenance.

Wiping his lips on the back of his arm when he'd finished, Phelan barely glanced at Locke as he picked up his vac-syringe and prepared it. Thankfully, the coffee pot took that time to begin chugging away.

"Pour us a cup, will ya?" Phelan asked as he put the needle to the thick column of his neck.

"Aye, milord," Locke said, studiously avoiding looking to see what else the Reaper was doing.

Pain radiated from the fiery drug and filled Phelan with spreading warmth as he shuddered once then put the vac-syringe aside. He rubbed the injection site, grimacing at how it never got any easier to take the drug his kind had to have in order to live as a human. Without the tenses he had to take every morning of his life, he would revert to the wolf-like creature that instilled terror in the heart of almost all Terrans.

"Thanks," Phelan said as Locke brought him a cup of the strong brew and handed it to him. He wrapped his hands around the tin vessel and took a sip of the scalding liquid. He looked over the rim, blinking against the steam, and asked Locke to tell him everything he knew about the disappearances that had been taking place in the last week or so.

Locke scratched the side of his pudgy face. "Well, it started when Mr. Simmons asked me if I'd ever heard of a thing called a zombay."

"Zombie," Phelan corrected.

"Ah, aye, right," Locke agreed, nodding. "Zombie. He said one of the other planters—the gentleman what owns Burnt Pine—told him there had been a rash of flesh-eating ghouls digging up out of their graves and wandering about at night. Didn't make no sense to me and when we went looking, we didn't find nothing."

"No blood or evidence of someone being killed?" Phelan pressed. "No desecrated graves?"

"No, milord. None of that. If a corpse got up and staggered around during the night, he went back to his hidey-hole and pulled the dirt in over him. Did talk to a guy named Richardson who swears on the Cross of the Slain One he saw one of these undead things chewing away on a corpse. The dead don't up and move about like that, do they?"

Phelan thought of the *Drochtáis* Glyn, Owen and Iden had encountered in the Northlands but he had no intention of telling Locke that such things existed. "I can't imagine what it was the man thought he saw," he said.

"Me neither," Locke admitted.

"According to Tony's housekeeper, these zombie things are men who are being controlled by some kind of strong drug," Phelan told the constable. "She says it was used to make the one given it a better, more focused worker. We're talking living, breathing men here, Locke. Not a rotting corpse. As to the flesh-eating part of it, that seems a bit farfetched to me. Why would something dead need to feed in the first place?"

"You got a point, milord," Locke replied.

"Well, let's get a move on," Phelan said. "As much as I hate venturing out in this bad weather, we've missing folk to find."

"Let's hope they're alive when we find 'em, milord," Locke commented. "Especially that little baby."

"Aye," Phelan said, thinking of Cyn and Aingeal's son, the twins due any day from the union of Owen and Rachel. "By the grace of the gods, I pray so."

* * * * *

From the window of the schoolroom, Mystery watched the driving rain sheeting down the pane. The only two children in the one-room building were a little boy who was cowering in the corner with every flash of lightning and Valda, who was trying valiantly to talk the child into playing with her.

"You've got yourself a little diplomat over there," Miss Laverne said from beside Mystery. "That one is going to be a stateswoman one day."

"Poor Philippe. He wouldn't let me anywhere near him and he's trembling so hard with all this noise and bright light," Mystery said.

"Valda will handle the situation," Miss Laverne stated. "Since I don't believe we'll be getting any more students today, let's go into the kitchen and make us a spot of tea. What do you say?"

Mystery smiled at the middle-aged woman. "That would be nice."

"So how are you faring now that you're home?" Miss Laverne asked. "I know it must be hard once you've been out on your own and all."

"My brothers and their wives have been wonderful to me," Mystery said, "but they treat me like I'm still a child."

"And always will, dear," Miss Laverne said with a laugh as she put the kettle on. "That's the nature of having older siblings." She sat down with Mystery at the little table reserved for the teachers.

"I suppose so," Mystery said with a sigh.

"What about the Shoad girl?" the older woman inquired. "Have you run into her yet?"

"Up at Sagewood," Mystery answered. "She gave me the evil-eye and —"

"Watch yourself around that one, Mystery," Miss Laverne interrupted. "She's not altogether playing with a full deck of cards — if you get my meaning."

"We've never been on friendly terms so I doubt I'll be coming into contact with her that often," Mystery said. "Leastways, I hope not. I don't think she's ever forgiven me for marrying Odell."

Miss Laverne frowned sharply. "You be careful with any new beau in whom you might show interest, Mystery. That little viper might get it in her mind to do you or him harm."

The teapot began to whistle and Mystery got up to fix the tea for them, dropping bags into the cups then bringing sugar and cream to the table. "She isn't still playing around with that black magic stuff her mama used to practice, is she?"

"She is and from what some of the other girls tell me, more than a few go to her for charms and spells and the like." Miss Laverne pursed her wrinkled lips. "Of course it's all a bunch of hooey but there are those who believe in that drivel."

"Well, I don't," Mystery stated as she turned back to get the steaming-hot cups.

"Is there a young man looming on your horizon?" Miss Laverne inquired.

Mystery sat down, her eyes going dreamy as the image of Glyn Kullen drifted across her mind's eye. "No one interested in a woman with a young child to care for," she replied.

"But one whose boots you wouldn't mind finding under your bed come one fine morning?" the older woman teased.

Blushing, Mystery ducked her head. She stared into her cup. "No, ma'am, I certainly wouldn't mind, but like I said, he's not interested in someone like me."

Lightning forked across the sky and the little boy in the schoolroom cried out. Both women got to their feet and hurried to him, finding the small child locked in Valda's arms.

"He don't like bad weather, Mama," Valda said as she hugged the tearful six-year-old boy.

"He doesn't like bad weather," Miss Laverne corrected. She squatted down and put a soothing hand on little Philippe's head. "Why don't all four of us go in the kitchen? I do believe there might be some apple juice in the icebox."

Phillip scrambled out of Valda's arms and into Miss Laverne's, pressing his dark face against the bodice of her starched white blouse. She grunted as she got to her feet with the little boy's legs wrapped around her waist and his arms tight around her neck.

"Let's go see about that apple juice, shall we?" she said.

Valda got to her feet and looked up at her mother. "Philippe is 'fraid like Glynnie, huh, Mama?" She took her mother's hand. "If Glynnie was here, Philippe wouldn't feel so bad 'bout being 'fraid. I told him even Reapers get scared sometimes but he didn't believe me."

Mystery smiled at her daughter, laughing as Valda began swinging their clasped hands as they walked toward the kitchen.

* * * * *

Miserable, wet beneath his slicker and hating the lightning zapping around them, Glyn watched the rainwater pouring off the brim of his hat. Kasid rode only a horse-length ahead of him as they crossed the swollen creek near Chesterville but he could barely make out his teammate in the heavy rain. It would take them over a week to reach Charlestown and he hoped the rain would end long before that. Although from what Lord Kheelan had told them when they'd set out at the crack of dawn this morning, the storm was at that time slamming into the Citadel and was expected to travel southward along the coast, dumping inordinate amounts of rain on the already saturated land.

"*We need to take shelter, Glyn!*" Kasid sent to him.

Glyn looked up and could just see Kasid twisted around in the saddle, motioning toward a ramshackle building off to their left.

"*Fine by me,*" he returned.

The Reapers urged their horses toward the building, grateful to see a low overhang under which they could stable their mounts. By the time they had the beasts taken care of and were inside the musty, less-than-appealing shack, the rain was coming down even harder.

"It's a gods-be-damned monsoon!" Kasid grumbled as he looked around for a lantern.

"We aren't going to find anything in here," Glyn told him. "This place has been picked clean."

"And smells of rodents and serpents," Kasid said with a lift of his lip. He pulled off his slicker and shook it.

"Better than being stuck out in the deluge," Glyn replied as he too removed his rainwear.

There wasn't even a box or broken-down crate to use for sitting. They made a quick circuit of the odorous room, decided no snakes were lurking about and took a seat on the dirty floor.

"I sure as hell have no intention of spending the entire day here," Glyn said as he brought his knees into the perimeter of his clasped arms. "I'd rather take my chances in the storm."

"We could look for better accommodations," Kasid agreed.

Glyn's thoughts went to the stage station where he had spent an evening with a woman whose memory haunted him like a will-o'-the-wisp.

"What's her name?" Kasid asked softly.

Realizing he was broadcasting his thoughts instead of keeping them to himself, Glyn released a long breath. "Mystery," he replied. "Mystery Butler. I met her on the stage."

"I got a glimpse of her in your mind," Kasid said, and when Glyn turned a frown upon him, the Akhkharulian Reaper arched a shoulder. "I wasn't trying to spy on you. The thought was just that strong."

"And one I can't seem to push aside no matter how hard I try," Glyn said.

Kasid smiled gently. "Something tells me you haven't really tried all that hard, my friend."

"I want her," Glyn surprised himself by saying then once that admission had been made aloud he gave in to the need to talk about her. "I want her as much as I want my next breath."

"But you have not broached the subject with Lord Kheelan," Kasid observed.

"I have Her permission," Glyn said, referring to the Triune Goddess. "She told me not to worry about him."

"Not exactly a healthy thing to do," Kasid reminded him.

"Oh, I'll ask his okay when the time comes, but for now, I'm going to hold off telling him about it. As I left things with her, she wasn't exactly happy with me."

"Oh," Kasid said, nodding. "All was not well in paradise."

"I made an ass of myself because she scared the shit out of me," Glyn admitted. "I'm not used to having feelings for a woman and then there's her little girl."

"Oh." That time Kasid's word dropped like a hot rock.

"I think I'm as much enamored of her as I am her mother," Glyn stated. "She's a precious little thing. You just want to pick her up and nibble on her."

"So her having a child is not a deterrent," Kasid queried.

"Not at all, and it seems the Fates are pushing me toward her. She was headed to Charlestown, so once we get there, I'll be looking her up."

"Then it is good, my friend," Kasid declared. "A man was not meant to live his life alone."

"That's what She said," Glyn said then clarified by naming the speaker. "*Mo Regina*."

"So what is your mystery woman like?" Kasid asked with a grin.

"You said you saw her in my thoughts," Glyn said, "so you know she is beautiful."

"A woman of color," Kasid said with a nod. "The loveliest of the lovelies."

"Her eyes are like warm chocolate and she has a soft voice that makes the hair stir on my arms." He sighed. "And elsewhere."

"She stirs your pool of lust," Kasid remarked.

"Until it is a maelstrom," Glyn agreed. "I've never wanted a woman as badly as I want her." He lowered his voice. "And when I dream, I enter her dreams. When I look into her eyes, I see the dreams she's had in the past."

Kasid nodded. "A sure sign a man and woman should be together," he declared. "It was so with my grandmother and grandfather and equally so with my parents. I am told when you share a woman's dreams, you are a fortunate man."

"I dream we are about to make love and when we do, it is as though the earth is moving beneath me."

"Another auspicious sign," Kasid said. "My people believe in signs."

"I've never had the desire to have a mate," Glyn confided. "I've always maintained that I didn't to anyone who'd listen but now..."

"Now things have changed," Kasid said.

"I'm being drawn to her, Jaborn, like iron filings to a magnet." He gave Kasid a worried look. "Could the goddess be doing this, do you think?"

Kasid folded his legs tailor fashion to get more comfortable. "Iden and I had a long talk about it a day or so before he and the others went out to the Oklaks Territory. We were discussing the punishments Cynyr, Bevyn and now Owen were given for taking a woman without permission."

"Owen's punishment wasn't exactly for that reason," Glyn reminded him.

"Not technically but we both know it was because of Rachel."

Glyn nodded. "Aye, you're right and that punishment would have been more severe had it not been for Aingeal's intervention."

"Thank the goddess Lord Kheelan values the lady's opinion."

"It goes deeper than that and we both know it," Glyn said quietly.

"Aye, that too, but it isn't right that because the Shadowlords have no mates that we must remain alone as well," Kasid complained.

"The Shadowlords don't wish for us to mate for security reasons as well as the division of loyalty that might arise, yet I strongly suspect if they were allowed, our masters would take mates."

"It makes you wonder if they are truly celibate or just want us to believe they are."

"I have always thought the Gatekeepers are daughters of the Shadowlords," Glyn suggested. "They have the same last names as the Shadowlords."

"You are not alone in thinking that but who are their mothers and *where* are they?" Kasid inquired.

"In the lands from which each Shadowlord came is my guess," Glyn said. "Lord Kheelan came from Rysalia. Lord Naois from Serenia and Lord Dunham from Oceania. Perhaps Argent, Corallin and Aureolin were orphaned or —"

"They are our sisters so stay your discussion of us. We are no concern of yours!"

The sharp reprimand came from the High Lord and the words were hard and cold.

"The longer you sit, the longer it will take you to reach your destination. A little rain never hurt anyone. Be about your mission, Reapers!"

Both men scrambled to their feet, feeling the harshness of the command to the depths of their being. They snatched on their slickers and though it was still pouring and the lightning hadn't lessened any, ventured once more onto the trail heading south.

* * * * *

To the north in the solarium of the Citadel where they were having their midafternoon tea, Lord Naois put a restraining hand on his fellow Shadowlord's shoulder. "Don't let it annoy you, Khee. You know they talk about us all the time. We are a source of mystery to them."

"What we do, who we are, from where we hail is none of their business!" Lord Kheelan snapped. "It galls me that they discuss us at all."

"We know all there is to know of them but they know little of us, Khee," Lord Dunham reminded the High Lord. "It's only natural there should be speculation."

"They don't need to know anything about us in order to do their job!" Lord Kheelan protested. "And I'll not have them speculating—as you label it—about my feelings toward..." He snarled beneath his breath. "Toward *anything*!"

"A blind man could see the feelings you have for Lord Cree's lady-wife, Kheelan," Lord Dunham said quietly. "You are not hiding those feelings very well."

Lord Kheelan shot the Oceanian a nasty look. "I admire the woman, Dunham. Is that not permissible?"

Lord Naois sat back in the large wicker fan chair, braced his elbows on the wide curved arms and steepled his fingers. "What bargain did you make with the lady in

regard to Tohre's punishment?" He stared intently at his fellow Shadowlord and when Lord Kheelan did not answer, Lord Naois shook his head. "You're playing with fire."

"Lord Naois?"

The voice of the Prime Reaper intruded on the conversation.

"Aye, Lord Arawn?" Lord Naois replied.

"Did you arrange for the drone, Your Grace?" Gehdrin inquired.

"It will be on its way to you within the next few hours. We had to program it to recognize human DNA. Actually your suggestion met with hardy approval here and my fellow Shadowlords and I commend you for giving us a way to perform a census of sorts of the inhabitants of this part of our world."

"I don't understand, Your Grace," the Prime Reaper said.

It was Lord Kheelan who explained.

"The question of how to collect DNA samples from the air caused Lord Naois a sleepless night but he came up with a way to give the drone the capability to extract that DNA with a flash probe completely undetected by human tactile response. Not to get too technical here, but all the flash probe needs to do is touch human flesh and it sucks up a loose skin cell from which it can extract the DNA sample we need. The probe can pass through any kind of obstruction – wood, concrete, iron, steel – so it can find the human wherever he or she is. By using the drone to map the DNA of the inhabitants of your territory, we will be able to catalogue each individual and enter that person into a data bank located here in the vaults beneath the Citadel. We will extend the drone's mission to include the whole of the territories and send it out once a quarter to scan for new inhabitants born. And if one of those people already mapped has gone on to the arms of the Gatherer, we will know that as well. It will be a very efficient way to keep track of our people."

"And a surreptitious way of locating non-human visitors who will be scanned and then eliminated if need be," Lord Dunham put in. "If there are 'bots out there as you suspect, they won't know we're coming."

"May I make a suggestion to you, Your Graces?" Gehdrin queried.

"By all means," Lord Naois agreed.

"My men and I have been discussing this. Wouldn't it be better if the super rogues or 'bots didn't know we had the capability to scan the populace from the skies? If the drone discovers such a being, wouldn't it be best to give us its location and let us handle it so the drone remains secret?"

"He's got a valid point," Dunham told his fellow Shadowlords.

"Your suggestion is sound, Lord Arawn," Lord Kheelan said. "As soon as the drone gathers intel on the rogues or 'bots or whatever this new threat is, you and your men will be informed."

"Thank you, Your Grace." There was a moment of silence then Gehdrin asked if there'd been any news of Phelan.

"I'm afraid not. Have you tried?"

"We all have," Arawn admitted.

"Lords Kullen and Jaborn are on their way down there," the High Lord told him. "Let's hope we don't lose contact with them as well."

Chapter Nine

"Are you in my dream or am I in yours this time?"

He smiled. "We may be somewhere in between, wench."

Night had fallen with the rain continuing to drench the landscape in torrents. A howling wind pushed at the windowpanes and skirled beneath the eaves. Timbers and floor joists creaked and popped. The door rattled in its hinges.

"Where is this place, Glynnie?"

His fingers were tracing a pattern on her bare arm as they lay together in the big brass bed with its silky down comforter beneath them.

"I've no idea," he told her. "Never been here before."

The room smelled of pomegranates – a delicious scent. A single lantern lent its golden glow to the walls that were papered in primrose and meandering ivy.

"Me neither," she admitted, and snuggled closer to his warm body.

"Cold?" he asked, his fingertips pausing in their wandering.

"A little."

He pushed up in the bed and leaned over her. "Then let's warm you up."

His lips were like velvet as he slanted them over hers. He nibbled at her bottom lip until she opened her mouth to his tongue. Her arms went around his neck as he thrust that warm, wet organ between her lips.

Lying beside her so his cock was hard and erect along her thigh, he ground himself against her, heard her light moan and slipped a hand to the side of her high, rounded breast.

Mystery quivered as his thumb brushed over her nipple – fanning back and forth.

His kiss deepened and he moved over her, nudging her legs apart with his knees, pressing his steely shaft to the junction of her thighs. His tongue drove deep into the moist recess of her mouth as he slid his hands around her hips, beneath her ass, and lifted her toward him.

She lifted one slender leg and hooked it over his calf, arching her lower body in sacrifice to the fleshy blade paused at the entrance to her sheath. Looking into his beautiful amber eyes, she pressed her palms to his cheeks and eased his lips from hers.

"I am waiting for you," she said, searching his eyes.

"And I am on my way to you, milady," he replied. "Just a while longer."

"Hurry," she whispered, and his mouth returned to hers.

He slid into her hot channel and began to thrust slowly – in and out, almost withdrawing, going as deep as his shaft would allow. He arched his hips in a lazy circle so his cock circumnavigated the opening into which he pressed. Each slow circuit brought him in contact with her clit and each time she sucked in a breath.

With his tongue buried deep between her lips, his cock seated tight within her folds, his rhythm increased, his thrusts became harder, more intense. His withdrawals were slow. He pushed into her fast and powerful.

Slowly – in and out, in and out, circle and push, withdraw and thrust. Press deep and hold. Pull out almost completely then shove hard, and with each thrust, her breath quickened even more.

She broke the contact of their mouths, swirling a tongue over her swollen lips. "Glyn," she sighed as the tremors began high in her cunt then flowed like molten lava through her channel to set her body afire.

"Myst," he whispered back, increasing the speed of his movements.

Hard in. Soft out. Harder in. Less soft coming out. Harder still as he went deep and held.

"Glyn," she breathed.

Her back arched and her hips shot toward him.

He reached down and grabbed her other leg, draping it over his waist. The one hooked over his calf he pulled up and crooked so her knee was touching her shoulder. He turned her slightly and pushed deep, rocking his body against hers, his toes digging into the mattress for leverage.

He kissed her lips, her cheeks, each eyelid and her nose. He nibbled his way to her chin and down her neck as he continued to rock against her, his cock as far inside her velvety sheath as it could go.

"Glyn!" she cried out, her fingernails clawing into his back, his shoulders, dragging down to his waist.

"Aye, Myst?" he said against her lips.

Then he slammed his body into her and held himself perfectly still as her release shot through her body to pulse around his hard cock. He blinked lazily as she screamed and bucked beneath him, her orgasm so powerful it shook the bed beneath them.

"That's what I'm talking about, wench," he said, and withdrew to slam into her again. Once more his lady screamed and her fingers arched into claws as she held him to her, the last spasms of her enjoyment squeezing around him.

And then his pleasure took over. He poured himself into her hotly, filling her with his seed. He tensed as wave after wave after wave of pure pleasure rocked him and he gasped...

"I don't think you'd like falling off that saddle, Kullen," Kasid told him.

Glyn sat up straight, his hands clenching the reins. He had obviously nodded off for it was pitch black where they rode. The rain was still pelting him with heavy drops that stung as they met his flesh. His hands were cold through his wet gloves and water was running down his neck to press his shirt clammily to his back.

"Where the hell are we?" he asked.

"I'm not sure but I think we're halfway to the old capitol of Columbia. It's been awhile since I saw a sign." Kasid yawned. "I'm about done in, Kullen. We've ridden a lot of miles since dawn."

"Find shelter and rest for a while."

The order came from the Citadel but Kasid was so tired he didn't try to recognize which of the Shadowlords had spoken. "Let's look for some place to get in out of this muck," he told Glyn.

"I heard buzzing. What did they say?"

"He told us to rest a while."

"Damned white of them," Glyn grumbled as he ran his arm under his dripping nose.

"You're not hearing them again?"

"Not a fucking word," Glyn replied. "Just that gods-be-damned clicking sound like a beetle." He shook his head, rainwater flying off the brim of his black hat. "Fucking beetle crap just snick, snick, snicking in my gods-be-damned ears." He looked over at Jaborn. "What the fuck are they saying now?"

Kasid shot his teammate a worried look. Kullen was wobbling in the saddle as though he would tumble off any moment. They had to find a lean-to or a cave, something into which they could go to get out of the rain. The constant barrage was sapping their energies and their mounts were lagging, plodding along so slowly it would take them a week at that pace to reach Charlestown.

"Nothing," Kasid said. "They aren't saying anything."

"Well, somebody is!" Glyn snapped. "Else a fucking insect crawled into my ear while I was snoozing! All I hear is that infernal click, click, click!"

Kasid's forehead creased. There was silence from the Citadel. Whatever Kullen was hearing, he alone was hearing it. The rain all but drowned any other sounds around them and he couldn't help but wonder if it was simply the noise of the water hitting the crown and brim of Glyn's hat that he was taking for a clicking sound.

In the flare of lightning, the men saw the cabin at the same time. Kicking their mounts toward it, they were relieved to see smoke drifting up from the chimney, the smell of burning wood drifting back to them. One of the windows showed a faint light behind the shutters.

"Sense anything out of the ordinary?" Glyn asked Kasid as they rode up to the cabin.

"No. You?"

"No."

They dismounted, and as they were tying their horses to the hitching post, the door opened and a man came out, cradling a shotgun in his arms.

"Bad night to be out riding, gents," the man called out to them. "Just stay right where you are and introduce yourselves."

"I'm Lord Glyn Kullen and this is Lord Kasid Jaborn. We are on official business from the Citadel."

"This ain't your territory, gents," the man reminded them, and the sound of the gun being cocked was loud even over the pounding rain.

Glyn's hand moved like lightning as he flicked the laser whip from his left hip. The handle pulsed in his hand and a lash of white fire shot from the weapon to curl around the barrel of the shotgun, snapping it out of the man's hands as easily as taking candy from a baby.

"Milords!" the man gasped, going down on one knee. "My apologies."

The deadly laser whips wielded by the men of the Reaper force could only be activated by the hand of the one whose whip it was. That was common knowledge. The fiery display could only have come from one of the shape-shifting lawmen.

"You can't be faulted for being cautious," Kasid said as he and Glyn stepped up on the porch, Glyn retracting the tail of his whip and sheathing it with one hand while he used his other hand to pluck the man's shotgun from the air.

"We've had rogues in the area too many times," the man said, getting to his feet as Kasid motioned him up. "I've got a family to protect. I meant no disrespect."

"None was taken," Glyn said. "We're just looking for shelter from the storm."

"Please come in, milords," the man offered eagerly. "May we offer you something to eat?"

A tall, rawboned woman with two tow-headed children clinging to her skirt was standing by the fireplace. She bobbed the Reapers a clumsy curtsy, hampered by the clutching arms of her sons.

Kasid and Glyn removed their hats, nodded respectively at the woman.

"If it wouldn't be too much trouble," Glyn said. "We haven't eaten since noontime and that was a few soggy biscuits and jerky."

"I can ladle you out some beef barley soup and fix you a sandwich or two if it would please you, milords," the man's wife suggested. "I've chocolate pie too."

"Best chocolate pie in three counties," her husband bragged.

"I'm all for that then," Glyn laughed.

"That would be just fine, milady," Kasid agreed. "A cup of strong coffee would most assuredly hit the spot."

"I'll put on a pot," the woman said, and shooed her children toward their father, wiping her hands on her apron as she set about preparing food for her guests.

The children hid behind their father and peeked at Glyn who was standing the closest to them. When the Reaper smiled at them and winked, they giggled and moved over to sit on the bottom bunk of their bed.

"You going down to see Lord Phelan then?" their father asked.

Glyn nodded. "Has he been around in the last few days?"

The man—who introduced himself as John Carver and his wife as Lola—shook his head. “Haven’t seen him in a month of Sundays. Heard tell there was some trouble down that way. I guess you’re here to help out, eh?”

“Who told you there was trouble?” Kasid asked.

“A peddler man came by yesterday,” Lola Carver spoke up. “Johnny was over helping Butch DeLyle with his roof when the man came by.”

“Tree went plumb through Butch’s roof and tore the biggest hole you’ve ever seen,” John told them. “Near flooded his cabin it did.”

“What did the peddler tell you, milady?” Kasid pressed, not interested in Butch’s problems.

“That there was folks turning up missing down that way and that there was a murderer on the loose. Said Lord Phelan had his hands full trying to figure out where the folk had gotten off to,” Lola answered.

“Didn’t he say something about animals being butchered?” her husband asked as she set two bowls of soup on the table and motioned for the Reapers to sit.

“Aye, he did,” she agreed, wiping her hands on her apron. “Been finding cows and sheep skinned right down to the bone he said.”

Kasid and Glyn exchanged a look as they took up their spoons and began ladling soup into their mouths.

“Hope that don’t start happening around here,” John said. “It’s been darn quiet since Lord Phelan took out that last bunch of rogues what passed through a summer ago.”

“You think its rogues?” Glyn asked as he tore off a chunk of his sandwich and dipped it into the bowl of hot soup.

“Don’t know what else to think, milord,” John replied. “Heard tell they go rabid sometimes.”

“That has happened but it’s rare,” Kasid stated. “And rogues don’t strip the flesh off their victims—animal or otherwise.”

“Have you had rabies around these parts?” Glyn questioned.

“Not in a good many years,” John answered.

“Then I don’t think you have anything to worry about. Just watch any strays very carefully until you know for sure they aren’t infected. Keep your boys close to home.”

“I don’t let them out of my sight,” their mother stated.

Thunder boomed loudly and John reached for his slicker.

“I’m gonna go see to your horses, milords,” John said. “I’ll be putting them out in the barn.”

“We would appreciate it,” Kasid said.

After Glyn and Kasid had eaten, the Carvers offered the lawmen the beds of their sons to sleep in but the Reapers declined, preferring to spread their own bedrolls the

farmer had brought in to them on the floor. They would be leaving at first light and didn't want to put their hosts out any more than they had to.

"I'll fix you a big breakfast in the morning," the wife said.

"No need to go to all the trouble, milady," Glyn told her.

"It's no trouble at all, milord. You do so much for us," Lola Carver said. "It's the least we can do for you."

When the lantern had been turned down and the Carvers in bed, the Reapers unbuckled their six-shooters and laid them close at hand.

"Have you noticed that the attitudes of the people are starting to change toward us of late?" Glyn asked Kasid as they settled down for the night.

"I've not been a Reaper that long, Glynnie," Kasid said. "Were you treated so very badly before?"

"Not badly, just differently. Women ran from us and men went out of their way to walk across to the other side of the street when they saw us coming. Children hid like we were boogiemen. We rode into a town and you could hear knees shaking. It just seems like we're being tolerated more. Used to, people wouldn't even speak to us much less carry on a conversation like these folks did while we ate."

"Don't fool yourself. The Carvers fear us, Glynnie," Kasid said. "They are just striving not to let that fear show."

Glyn sighed. "You're probably right."

As he turned over on his side away from Jaborn, Glyn watched the light that still flared at the windows. Though he was tired and his body ached from a day spent in the saddle, he wasn't sleepy. His active mind tumbled with thoughts ranging from the misery of the wet weather to the trouble brewing in Kiel's territory. It concerned him that no one could reach Phelan.

But what had him the most troubled was the strange buzzing sounds he kept hearing. Try as hard as he might, he could not distinguish anything other than the odd clicking. It filled his head with an unpleasant fullness that was more annoying than uncomfortable and it grated on his nerves.

"Lord Kheelan?" he sent softly.

There was no answer.

"Mo Regina?"

That call was not acknowledged either.

"Kiel?"

He hadn't expected an answer and did not get one. He turned over, listening to Jaborn snoring softly.

"Kasid?"

It was a strong, emphatic mental transmission but even with his teammate lying less than two feet away, the communication went unacknowledged. He tried twice

more, growing more alarmed with every slow, rhythmic breath his fellow Reaper took. Even when he shouted Jaborn's name as loudly as he could within his own mind, there was absolutely no response.

"What's happening to me?" Glyn whispered. His chest lurched with the confusion and apprehension he was beginning to feel.

He sank beneath thick layers of an oppressive black mist that clung disturbingly to his flesh as he waded knee-high through its shifting waves. The smell of sulfur was strong in his nostrils and the vapors seemed to suck at his feet, striving to trap them in muck.

All around him was ebon darkness that shifted and flowed about him as he trudged, but in the distance, he could see a pulsing reddish glow and toward that light he made his way. The closer he came to it, the hotter he felt until salty sweat was dripping into his eyes.

"I'm in hell," he said aloud, and his voice sounded hollow.

He became aware of the strange metallic sounds, the heavy thumps and the low scraping noises at the same moment he heard the keening and groans of what he knew to be lost souls.

"Aye," he said. "I am surely in hell."

The stench was nearly unbearable the closer he came to the shifting, strobe-like red light. Above him, the black mist was tinged with dark crimson undulations that resembled dull flame. The images danced, writhed, intertwined upon the low, wavering ceiling of whatever abode it was into which he'd been thrust and the shrieks of the damned grew louder with every slow, laborious step he took.

"I'm scared, Glynnie."

She was standing in the shadows – almost hidden behind the surging arms of black mist that swirled around her. Shivering, her eyes wide, lips trembling, tears were falling down her cheeks.

"What are you doing here, milady?" he asked, his heart thudding painfully in his chest. "You don't belong in this evil place." He put his hand out to her.

"I belong wherever you are, my love," she said. Hand shaking, she reached for him.

From out of the depths of the soggy muck dragging at his boots, pithy tendrils shot up and wrapped around his arm, drawing him back so his fingers only grazed hers, tingled at the brief touch.

"No!" he cried out, and struggled to break free but the cloying vine was cutting off his circulation, sinking into his flesh, working its way to the bone. It pulled him farther back from his lady's reach.

"Glyn!" she sobbed as the mist swirled around and around her, turning the white gown she wore to gray where it touched.

"Go, milady!" Glyn ordered her. "Leave this vileness and don't look back!"

Her arms were outstretched toward him, her hands questing, fingers arching. Around her shapes flitted like demonic will-o'-the-wisps and her sobbing grew louder, more wretched.

"I need you!" she shouted at him over the moaning of condemned souls and the eerie clank of chains, the stamp of listless feet.

"Leave me," he told her. "I belong here."

The creeper that was twining around and around his arm spread to his chest, his waist and lapped at his legs. One insidious shoot dipped between his legs to caress him obscenely, stroking him through the leather of his pants.

"Does that please you, Reaper?" a low, grating voice whispered in his ears.

Glyn shook his head to rid it of the sickeningly vulgar thoughts that suddenly invaded his brain. The images brought hot bile to his throat and he gagged, stumbling within the unrelenting hold of whatever was keeping him hostage.

"Would you prefer to have the woman's tongue licking along your cock, slipping into that sweet orifice that even now tingles at the thought of such pleasures?"

Every nerve ending in his body strummed as those words wound their way into his libido.

"She's there, Reaper," the insidious voice whispered.

Glyn felt an unseen hand grip his chin and force his head around. He saw her standing only inches away, her soft brown eyes glazed with terror.

"She is yours for the taking," the voice tempted. "Put your hands upon her. Drag her down and rip into her body with all the lust building within you."

He wanted to so badly he ached from the need. His palms became slick with sweat. His cock twitched and oozed.

"Take her roughly," the voice demanded. "Hurt her with the dark desires you yearn to set free."

His mouth watered from the sheer intensity of the need growing inside him. His cock stirred, flexed, strained at his pants. The hardness was a hot craving that burned.

"Look at her breasts."

Gone was the white gown. She stood there naked before him with her arms crossed protectively over the lush mounds that drew his gaze like magnets.

"Look to the valley between her legs."

One of her hands was pressed over the soft curls at the juncture of her thighs as she made soft, keening sounds of fright and humiliation.

"You want to bite her, claw her," the voice cooed hotly against his cheek. "You want to sink your teeth into those tender globes, run your nails down her flawless flesh. You want to stab your shaft deep into her sheath until she screams in agony."

"No!" he swore, shaking his head savagely. "I don't want that!"

"Aye, but you do, Reaper," the voice disagreed. "You want to rape her, ravish her, bend her to your will."

Glyn threw back his head and bellowed, "I love her!"

The vines holding him trembled and then shattered, broke apart and fell into the muck at his feet so he stumbled forward, barely keeping himself from crashing to the ground.

"Beloved!" she cried out to him, and he swept her into his arms, her quivering body pressed tightly to his.

He held her to him – protectively, gently, guarding her with his life. Around them the keening grew louder and the heat spiraled higher. The suffocating fumes of the sulfur made it hard to draw breath.

"You came for me," she said, clinging to him.

"I will always come for you," he swore.

"I was so frightened."

"I'm here now. I will take you from this..." he started to say.

Intense, crippling hunger suddenly blasted its way through Glyn Kullen and his knees buckled, driving him downward, carrying her with him. His veins itched with pure, unadulterated lust that spread quickly through his cock. His body craved hers so brutally he fell on her, over her, thrusting her legs wide as he positioned himself between them. His hands molded around her bare breasts and he lowered his head, his mouth taking a nipple so brutally she cried out and grabbed handfuls of his hair to stay his assault.

"Glyn, please don't!" she begged, but he was mindless to her protest.

He writhed atop her, his straining cock trying to burst through the supple leather to enter her. His teeth nipped her sensitive flesh and he drew that hard little pebble deep into his mouth, suckling hard, dragging his tongue over and over it.

"She is yours," that hateful voice told him. "Take her. Hurt her!"

His hand shot down between them and he fumbled at the buttons that kept his fly closed. All he could think of was freeing his rod and slamming into her soft, wet, hot sheath. He ached to grab her legs, bend them against her chest and enter her to the depths of her being, to touch her womb, to plant himself firmly inside her silken flesh.

"I love you," she said softly, and the hands in his hair smoothed over his head, no longer attempting to keep him from suckling her.

The mist in which they lay peeled back like a curtain to reveal soft green grass and bright pink wildflowers, crimson clover and yellow daffodils. The sulfuric stench evaporated to be replaced with the enticing clean scent of honeysuckle and jasmine. A soft breeze chased the remaining wisps of black fog away and the darkness vanished to become a bright and sunny afternoon with no sound of tormented souls in the background but rather the strains of a babbling brook accentuating the peacefulness of the meadow.

He pushed away from her and stared down into her lovely face, into eyes that held his with such devotion and caring it brought tears to his cheeks. When she put a soft, gently hand to his cheek, a sob caught in his throat.

"Look what I almost did," he whimpered, ashamed of the lust that had nearly destroyed the fragile, budding relationship he hoped to build.

"Love me, Glynnie," she said, and her arms went around his neck to pull him down to her, his lips to hers.

The leather disappeared from his long legs. The black silk shirt vanished. He lay atop her – naked body to naked body – and felt the cradle of her arms around him. He tasted the sweetness of her mouth. He looked into the tranquility of her chocolate gaze.

And felt at peace.

Gently, reverently, he slid the heated rigidity of his shaft into the silky, warm recesses of her beautiful body and worshipped her for what she truly was – the redemption of his very soul.

He sat up, shoving a hand through his hair. Dreams, he thought, were telling and the one he'd just endured had spoken volumes to him. He understood—as he had not before—the reasons he had stayed away from commitment to a mate in the past. Subconsciously, he realized he believed himself unworthy of a good woman's love but he knew that was not the case. If a woman such as Mystery could look at him with respect, could invite his touch, he could learn respect for himself. Perhaps he was not the demon he thought himself to be.

"Can't sleep?" Kasid asked softly so as not to wake the Carvers.

Glyn scrubbed at his face. "I was dreaming."

Jaborn nodded sagely. "I do that as well. They say dreams are your conscience talking to you."

"Aye, well, this one was an eye-opener," Glyn told him. He sighed deeply. "I'm not going to get any more sleep. What do you say we head on out?"

"I've had all the rest I need," Kasid replied, and sat up as well.

As quietly as they could, the Reapers strapped on their guns and gathered their belongings together. They each left a twenty-dollar gold piece on the table for their hosts before leaving. After saddling their mounts, they rode out into a bitter rain that seemed to have no end.

"I've never seen it rain this long and hard," Glyn said loudly when they were well away from the Carver farm. His slicker was doing little to ward off the barrage. He had tugged the brim of his hat low to keep the slanting water from blinding him for they were riding into a deluge where the rain was coming at them sideways.

"The roads will soon be impassable at this rate," Kasid responded.

Though the men were hungry, they were comfortable enough. Before setting out, they'd injected themselves with tenses and had finished up the last of the Sustenance they had in their saddlebags. It would be necessary to find another source before the following morning.

The creeks over which they passed were swollen almost all the way to the undersides of their bridges. One bridge had washed away completely and they'd been forced to go several miles out of their way to find a way to cross the tumbling, roaring waterway. Mud ran in thick slides down banks and went swirling away in the rapid currents. The only good thing was the lightning and thunder had dwindled down to an occasional burst of light in the distance and a brief, rumbling echo.

Still it looked to be another day or two of miserable riding before they reached their destination.

Chapter Ten

Vircars Territory

Three days later

"Lord Jaborn?"

Kasid sawed on the reins of his mount. "Aye, Lord Kheelan?" he answered aloud, casting a look to see Glyn, who reined in his own horse.

"There was a threat in the Oklaks Territory that has been remedied but my fellow Shadowlords and I believe you and Kullen should hear of it." There was a momentary pause. *"He is not hearing us, is he?"*

"No, Your Grace, he is not," Kasid answered.

"We thought not. How is he feeling?"

Kasid asked.

"Tell them I feel feverish but otherwise I'm okay. All I'm hearing is this infernal clicking between my ears," Glyn replied.

Kasid relayed the information to Lord Kheelan.

"Can he use his powers?"

"He killed a moccasin with his whip about an hour ago," Kasid reported. He gave Glyn a shrug. "As to his ability to change..."

Glyn sighed heavily and handed his reins to Kasid. He closed his eyes and before another breath could be taken, shape-shifted into a black hawk and soared into the heavens.

"He doesn't seem to have a problem with that," Kasid told his master. He kept his gaze on Glyn until his fellow Reaper landed on the ground and resumed his human shape with ease. He sent a mental message to Glyn but Kullen didn't appear to hear. "It's the telepathy he's having trouble with."

"Lord Kiel as well apparently," Lord Kheelan said. *"We have still not been able to raise him or the goddess."*

"Ask him how Owen is," Glyn bid Kasid.

"How is Tohre, Your Grace?"

"As well as can be expected. We will be giving him his first dose of tenerse next week so that should help to relieve Kullen's mind."

When Kasid told him what the Shadowlord said, Glyn asked after Rachel's health and that of her twin sons.

"She is well but growing anxious," came the amused reply from the Citadel.

Glyn nodded at the news and vaulted into his saddle. "Tell him I have a headache too, but nothing I can't handle."

"And what of you, Lord Jaborn?" Lord Kheelan inquired when given that information. "Do you have a headache also? Do you feel overly warm?"

"Aye, Your Grace, but it's not so bad."

"It seems this headache and fever is a Reaper-wide phenomenon," Lord Kheelan reported. "Cree, Belial, Coure and your Prime Reaper are suffering the same symptoms. We believe it is due to the threat that was discovered in Gehdrin's territory."

"What kind of threat, Your Grace?" Kasid asked.

"It seems before the Ceannus left us in Calizonia, they put into place several sleeper cells of cybots programmed to go online at a given time. When that time was or how many of these creations are out there, we don't know. Those we were able to detect via heat signature in the Oklaks Territory have been eliminated via drone as the ghoret threat was terminated. It will be necessary to send the drones over all the territories so we can locate and eradicate 'bots that may be already operational and discover others as they come online. In and of themselves, the 'bots do not pose that great a threat. It is what those creations are capable of doing that has us greatly concerned."

Kasid repeated to Glyn what the High Lord was saying.

"You believe they've found a way to cause us harm?" Glyn had Kasid ask.

"We don't believe the inability to hear us or the Transitioning out of cycle is something the 'bots can cause, Lord Kullen. That, we believe, may be coming from Raphian in some new form we have yet to understand or be able to stop."

A chill went down Glyn's spine when Kasid gave him that bit of disconcerting news. To know the Destroyer of Men's Souls could somehow reach out and touch the Reapers was unsettling.

"And that He can may be because we have not been able to contact the goddess," Lord Kheelan suggested. "It is not like Her not to answer us, to ignore our entreaties."

"You don't think Raphian has found a way to neutralize Her, do you?" Glyn asked when given that response.

"We hope not, but we honestly don't know what to think," Lord Kheelan answered. "We are working on it and for now, all we can do is take every precaution with your safety and do our best to find and destroy the creatures the 'bots are fashioning so they do not or will not pose a threat to your mission."

"What creatures?" Glyn asked, feeling another trill of unease wiggle down his spine.

"Out in the Oklaks Territory, citizens were coming up missing and when their bodies were found, they were absent vital organs. The 'bots were harvesting these organs and transplanting them into a new form of cybot – a plastiform body that is so real-looking, so human-like, it is impossible to detect with the naked eye the difference between it and an actual human. If one of these creatures walked right by you, you would not know it was a cybot. It would be so nondescript, so unremarkable you wouldn't give it a second look. You would hear it breathe,

detect a heartbeat, even hear the peristalsis as its ingested food traveled through its digestive tract. But in order to maintain the illusion of a living being, the organs the 'bots harvested had to be hard-wired into the new plastiforms and because those organs were being preserved by some kind of preservative fluid instead of blood, the drone was able to zero in on them even easier than having to extract DNA samples. All the drone has to do is look for beings whose bodies are not pulsing with heated blood as yours and ours are."

"And I always thought Lord Kheelan was a cold blooded S.O.B.," Glyn observed when Kasid gave him that explanation.

"Another mistake the Ceannus made was in reusing the facial features of its ordinary-looking victims when they fashioned their plastiforms. Their laziness in reusing a dead man's looks aided your fellow Reapers in finding the plastiforms."

"So you believe this same thing may be happening here in Vircars?" Glyn questioned.

"It seems likely and we are recalibrating the drone and sending it that way," Lord Kheelan replied to Kasid's repeat of the question. *"As soon as you get in touch with Lord Kiel, we want to be contacted. Is that clear?"*

"As a bell," Glyn agreed.

"To get a leg up on this, get photographs or drawings of the missing and dead and start looking for people who look like them. We'll take it from there."

"What if we lose contact with you?" Glyn had Kasid ask.

There was no answer for a long moment then a muscle in Kasid's jaw tightened. "Acknowledged, Your Grace," he said.

"What did he say?" Glyn prodded.

Kasid squared his shoulders. "He said if that were to happen, we would be on our own and for us to do as we saw fit. He said if he did not hear from us within twenty-four hours, our teammates would be sent to our aid."

"Let's just hope you can stay in contact with them," Glyn declared.

* * * * *

Because the weather continued to throw miserable conditions at the inhabitants of Charlestown, the schools were temporarily closed and the children kept at home. Leaking roofs, impassable roads, downed trees and flooding were major concerns. The swamps were beginning to overflow and the threat of disease all too likely. Adding to that the disappearances that continued to plague the populace, and conditions were beginning to rub nerves raw.

Concern for his people sent Anthony Simmons out to the cabins of his plantation's workers to make sure the elderly and infirm were being cared for and had plenty of food and medicine. He took along his personal healer just in case the man was needed. When he arrived at Mystery's door, he was soaked through but smiling cheerfully.

"Mr. Simmons!" Mystery exclaimed, stepping back to let the drenched man into her dwelling. "What on earth are you doing out in the storm?"

"I came to see if you needed anything," Anthony said. He had removed his hat at the door and was now clutching it against his leg with one hand while he reached inside his slicker with the other. "And I brought a small treat for our little lady over there who I hear has had a bad old cold." He brought out a small brown paper bag and held it out to Valda.

Valda laid her dolly aside and came over to take the offering. She smiled shyly then opened the bag. Her eyes grew wide. "Peppermint sticks, Mama!" she exclaimed, extracting one of the red and white confections. "Mama, look!"

"What do you say?" Mystery prompted.

"Thank you, Mr. Tony!"

"My pleasure, milady," Anthony responded.

"May I offer something to warm you up, Mr. Simmons?" Mystery asked.

For a brief moment Anthony Simmons' eyes turned molten gray but he shook his head. "As much as I'd like to, I can't stay, Mystery. I want to check on Aunt Zettie. I've got my healer with me."

Mystery's smile slipped. "She's fading fast, I'm afraid. I sat with her last evening and I'm making a pot of chicken soup to take over later this morning."

"You are an angel, milady," Anthony said. He gave her a look that no woman could have misinterpreted and when she blushed and looked away, he cleared his throat and reached for the door handle. "If you need anything, just send word."

Mystery nodded unable to look up at him. "I appreciate it, sir."

"Tony," he said softly.

A quiver ran through Mystery and she lifted her head to look right into her visitor's pale gray eyes. What she saw there brought her hand to her bodice. "Mr. Simmons, I..."

"Tony," he repeated. "And if it would not be too presumptuous of me, I would like the honor of calling upon you once this foul weather passes over."

"C-Calling upon *me*?" she whispered, her fingers plucking at her high-buttoned collar.

Anthony straightened his shoulders. "Milady, I have never entertained bigotry or dwelt overly long on class or race distinction if that is a deterrent to you regarding me as a possible suitor," he stated.

Mystery's eyes widened. "Suitor?" she repeated with a slight gasp. At his emphatic nod, a crease formed along her forehead. "But we've only just met a few days ago."

His hand on the handle, he took a step closer to her. "When I see something I want, Mystery, I let nothing stand in my way of obtaining it. The moment you walked into my home, I knew I wanted you to be its mistress and to share my life with me." He started to put his free hand to her cheek but stopped, glancing at Valda for a moment before

lowering it. "Forgive me if I am bolder than the gentlemen to whom you are accustomed but I have been a bachelor too long."

With that, he nodded formally to her, cast Valda a parting smile and left, closing the door gently behind him.

Valda pulled the peppermint stick from her mouth with a loud slurp. "What's a suitor, Mama?" she inquired.

"What?" Mystery asked, stunned by the turn of events.

"What's a suitor?"

"A gentleman who comes calling on a lady he wants to marry," her mother replied.

"Oh pooh!" Valda rolled her eyes. "Well, that's just plain silly, Mama. Mr. Tony can't do that."

"Why not?"

"Because you and Glynnie are gonna get married," Valda stated, and went back to her dolly.

"Sweetie," her mother began, and came over to squat down in front of her daughter, taking Valda by the arms. "You have to forget about Lord Kullen. He is hundreds of miles away and we're not likely to see him again for a long while. If ever."

"He'll be here," Valda declared. "You just watch and see. He will."

As much as she wished her fanciful, heated dreams could come true, Mystery was—if nothing else—a practical woman. Though her erotic imaginings were filled with the handsome Reaper suddenly appearing on her doorstep to take her and Valda away from their cramped and lonely life, it wasn't likely to happen. Dreams were one thing. Reality was another.

Valda sneezed and ran her arm under her drippy nose.

"Valda Butler, don't you dare do that again!" her mother warned, reaching for a handkerchief that she held to her daughter's nose.

* * * * *

Walking beside Healer Atmore who had climbed down out of the buggy to visit with the elderly woman of color whose cabin was next door to Mystery's, Anthony thought of the beautiful woman he had just left. From the moment she had entered his life he had been unable to get her luscious sensuality from his mind. Her graceful and refined movements, her ladylike qualities and soft, gentle voice had stayed with him long after their meeting. Her untimely widowhood had not turned her despondent or morbid and neither had it caused her to throw herself and her child on the aid of strangers. Obviously intelligent, the young woman had impressed him with her desire not to live off the charity of her relatives but to make her own way in the world and provide for her child. She was a strong, independent woman with a good head on her shoulders.

"And what a pretty head it is," Anthony muttered as he stepped up on Aunt Zettie's porch.

"Beg pardon, milord?" Healer Atmore inquired.

"Nothing," Anthony said. He lifted a hand to the door to knock. He smiled politely at the young man of color who answered, inquiring, "How's she doing?"

While Healer Atmore did all he could to make the last hours of the old woman's life as comfortable as possible, Anthony stood off to one side, lost in his own musings.

He had every intention of making Mystery Butler his although he knew his fellow plantation owners might balk at having a woman such as her as legal mate to a wealthy white man. There would be many a naysayer and bigot to overcome but he had waited too long for the right woman to come along to ignore the chance for happiness. He prided himself in being able to see beyond color to the heart and soul of the man and woman with whom he interacted, and he had seen in Mystery a kindly soul with a giving nature and an intellect to compliment his own. He had known she was the right one the moment he had shaken her hand.

"Can I get you something, Mr. Tony?" one of Aunt Zettie's many daughters asked.

"No, thank you, Adele, but you can tell me what you know of your mother's new neighbor," he replied.

"Mystery?" Adele questioned. "I'll tell you what I know."

Anthony smiled. "Would you happen to know her favorite flower?"

* * * * *

It was into a quiet, subdued town that Glyn Kullen and Kasid Jaborn rode that late Friday afternoon. The sky was boiling dark, the rain slashing, thunder rumbling ominously, and despite the oppressive heat, every door was shut and shutter drawn with only slivers of lantern light showing through the cracks. The main thoroughfare of Charlestown village was deserted. No horses were tied to the hitching posts.

"Now this is the welcome I'm used to," Glyn commented as they made their way to the darkened hotel.

"I hope there is room for us," Kasid replied.

"There always will be even if they have to put somebody else out in the rain." The remark was made bitterly as the Reaper reined in before the Beverly House Hotel.

Kasid nodded, dismounted, his boots sinking ankle deep in the mud. He grimaced. "I will never accustom myself to this infernal sludge."

"Don't they have mud where you're from, Jaborn?" Glyn quipped, lips twitching.

"Mud, aye, but not muck!" Kasid grouched. He shook his foot as he stepped up on the boardwalk then scraped the sole on the edge of a wooden plank.

Surprised to find the door to the hotel locked, Glyn rattled the doorknob then knocked loudly. From inside came the shuffle of furtive footsteps then the curtain was drawn back surreptitiously from the side light beside the door.

"Reapers!" someone gasped, and then the sound of the lock disengaging.

The door was jerked open so quickly, the glass shuttered in its frame.

"Come in, milords! Come in!"

For a reason he couldn't explain, Glyn's hand went to the butt of his six-shooter and he stepped into the hotel carefully, his hawklike gaze moving quickly from side to side within the perimeter. There was little light but what there was of it showed two men hovering in a doorway with shotguns cradled in their arms.

"It's bad times, milords, bad times," the man who had opened the door hastened to explain. "People go out and they don't come back."

"So we've heard," Glyn acknowledged, only marginally appeased as the men holding the weapons lowered them. He felt better when they set the guns aside altogether.

"Lord Kiel is up to Beaumont," the man, who was obviously the hotel manager, told them. "He and the constable rode up last night with one of the deputies from up that way."

"Something happen up there?" Glyn inquired.

"Found some kind of burial ground they did," the hotel man said as he lit another lantern. "It was a bad place I hear tell. A real bad place."

"How far is Beaumont from here?" Kasid questioned.

"Ten miles as the crow flies," the hotel owner answered. "Will you be needing rooms then?"

"Two if you have them," Glyn replied, and introduced himself and Jaborn to the owner.

"Max Bowles," the hotel man said, jerking a thumb to his chest. "That's my son Chet and his friend Tray Reynolds." He hurried behind the counter to get the guest register. "There's nobody here but us. People hear about the troubles 'round these parts and stay away."

"What's the count now on missing people?" Glyn queried.

"Near to twenty that we know about," Bowles told him. "That doesn't include the ones who have been murdered."

"Murdered?"

"Four men were found with their hearts cut out," Bowles said. "Two more were found split four from Sunday with everything inside them gone. Another three had their throats cut and all the blood drained out of them." His voice cracked and tears filled his eyes behind the thick spectacles he wore. "And they were little babies."

"Their mamas went out of their minds when them kids were found. Just like them who ain't right in the head no more," Reynolds piped up.

"What do you mean?" Glyn inquired.

Reynolds shrugged. "People who've lost their minds, milord." He glanced at Chet. "I guess there's about a dozen or so who are just plain addled. Don't know how else to say it."

"They'll walk right by you like they don't see you," Chet said, eager to join in the conversation with the infamous lawmen. "Don't talk no more, don't recognize their kinfolk or have sense enough to come in out of the rain."

"You'll see them walking out there without benefit of coat or hat," Bowles injected. "Just staring straight ahead of them. Gives you the willy-creeps, you know?"

"They walk stiff like a corpse would," Chet stated.

"Their eyes are dead anyway," Reynolds said with a shudder. "Dead, dead eyes that look right through a man."

Glyn and Kasid frowned at one another before Glyn asked if the hotel man thought Phelan would be back that night.

"I don't know, milord. I guess it depends on what he found up that way."

After getting the keys to their rooms, the Reapers asked for something to tide them over to supper and a warm bath. After riding all day in the rain, a bath was sorely needed.

"Just go on up and I'll call you when we get the tubs filled for you. I've got some baked ham I can stick together with bread and cheese, if that'll do you?" Bowles recommended. "I have a girl who comes in to fix our supper, so if you don't mind plain fare, we can accommodate you."

"That'll do just fine," Glyn said. "We don't want to put you out."

"You're like Lord Phelan in that regard," Bowles said with a grin. "Not that we get to see him all that much here. He has a place outside town but he spends his free time at Sagewood with Mr. Tony."

"That's what we've heard," Glyn mumbled. "How far is Sagewood?"

"About three miles east of here on the river. Best plantation in these parts."

"We might head up that way if Lord Kiel isn't back come morning," Glyn observed. He turned to go then stopped and looked around. "Do you know a woman named Mystery Butler?"

Bowles scratched his chin. "Can't say that I do. Is she from 'round here?"

"That's Dawson Dupree's baby sister, isn't it?" Reynolds asked. "Just came back from out west somewheres?"

"Has a little girl with her?" Glyn asked.

"That's the one," Reynolds acknowledged.

"I know who you mean," Chet ventured. "She's working with Miss Laverne out at the school. We used to go hunting with Odell. You remember him, Pa. Got himself killed by a rogue. That was her husband."

"Oh aye," Bowles said, smacking a hand to his forehead. "Now you mention it, I do know the girl. Haven't seen her since she's been back, but you'd think with a name like that I would have remembered her."

"Do you know where I can find her?" Glyn asked. "Does she live here in town?"

"No, milord," Reynolds answered, shaking his head. "The Duprees all live out at Sagewood."

"There's where they work," Chet put in.

"So I can find her there?"

"School's closed because of this weather so I imagine that's where she'll be. Out in one of the cabins at the village. Can't tell you which one, but anyone out there can direct you to her place."

"Can't be much," Reynolds observed. "None of them places are much."

That news didn't set well with Glyn but he nodded his thanks, asked directions to the plantation's village. Come morning—Phelan Kiel having returned or not—he would be on his way to Sagewood and the woman whose siren call would not leave him be.

* * * * *

Leilani stopped on her way to the main house and stared at the riders coming toward her. Rain hammered atop the umbrella she carried and wind whipped stinging droplets into her face but she could not move. Her attention was riveted on the men, both of whom tipped their hats to her as they drew near.

"Morning, milady," the white one said in a voice that was as warm as honey and as spicy as cinnamon. "Could you direct us to Mystery Butler's cabin?"

"Mystery?" she asked. Of their own accord her eyes drifted to the darker of the two men but then snapped back immediately to the one who had spoken.

"We were told she lives here in the village," the handsome man in the black slicker said.

Her heart thudding dangerously fast in her chest, Leilani took a step forward until she could put a trembling hand on the man's leg. She knew this man although she'd never met him. She had dreamt of this man, although she had never seen him. She knew his face as well as she knew her own and she knew his body though she had yet to writhe beneath it. This was the mate she had begged for, prayed for, sacrificed to obtain and here he was at last before her.

"You came," she said softly, and caressed his leg through the wet fabric.

Thinking Mystery must have told this woman of him, Glyn smiled. "I did," he replied.

"I knew you would," she said, and stroked his leg.

"Lord Glyn?" Kasid spoke up.

"So where may I find her?" Unconsciously his legs tightened upon his mount, urging the animal back and away from the hand.

"Who?" the woman asked, and her smile wavered as the contact between them was broken.

"Lord Glyn." Kasid was firmer with his words, louder in his intent to gain his fellow Reaper's attention.

"Aye?" Glyn irritably replied, looking away from the woman.

"We should not let the wench stand here in such terrible weather," Kasid stated as he held Glyn's gaze.

"Best get your rump to work, girl, and leave the gentlemen be!"

Glyn looked away from his teammate and toward the sharp, angry voice that had spoken. He saw a tall man with a dark complexion, dressed in work clothes, standing a few feet away. There was a heavy scowl on the newcomer's face and the stony stare aimed his way made Glyn's hackles lift. "Who might you be?" he asked.

"John Dirk," the man replied. "Foreman of Sagewood." He cocked his head toward the main house. "Get on with you, wench." His dark eyes narrowed beneath the brim of his floppy gray felt hat. "Now."

Leilani wanted nothing more than to stay, to put her hand on the handsome one's body—all over his body for that matter—but her fear of John Dirk made her hurry away, her feet slapping through the mud puddles as she ran.

"Girl ain't got the sense the gods gave a goat," John Dirk commented. Despite the rain washing down on him, he stood where he was with his arms folded, his attention locked on Glyn. "I'm guessing you was sent from the Citadel to help out Kiel."

Not *Lord* Kiel, Glyn noticed, but simply Kiel. The name had been spoken with no hint at respect or deference, almost with disdain but not quite.

"I'm looking for Mystery Butler," Glyn said.

The tall man blinked. "Is that so?" he asked and took a step closer. "And why is that?"

"It's personal," Glyn snapped. Something about the man was bringing out the anger in the Reaper.

A nasty smirk pulled at John Dirk's thin lips. He nudged his chin toward a small cabin set back from the others. "She's over there with her bantling."

Not bothering to thank the man, Glyn tugged on his mount's reins and made a clicking sound with his tongue to urge the horse toward the cabin.

"That is the one I want!"

The hissing words came down from the teeming heavens to settle like a heavy mantle on John Dirk's broad shoulders. The foreman nodded very slowly in agreement.

He stood where he was and watched the Reapers dismount at the Butler woman's door. His steady gaze was on the taller of the two, boring into the lawman's back like a steel bit. So intense was that stare that the man receiving it felt it and turned to look back.

"You're going to get what you deserve," John Dirk said beneath his breath. "Hell is about to open up for you, pretty boy."

* * * * *

Mystery tensed when the knock came. She'd been expecting news of Aunt Zettie's passing all morning and was reluctant to hear of it. Her feet dragged as she walked to the door. Her heart felt heavy and unshed tears stung behind her eyes. She had to take a deep breath to calm herself before she could pull open the portal. When she did – when she saw who was standing on her little porch – her heart broke its rhythm.

"Hello, milady," he said in that soft voice she had heard so often in her fevered dreams.

She could not believe he was actually standing there with his hat in his hand, his dark hair plastered back from his forehead, his handsome face peppered with rain. He was rolling the hat around and around by its brim like an unsure teenage boy and there was quiet desperation in his amber gaze.

"What are you doing here, milord?" she asked, barely noticing the other man in black standing at his side.

"I came to see you."

Just five innocent little words that made her knees go weak and that jump-started her heart so it thudded painfully against her rib cage. Unable to speak, she simply stepped back to allow him to enter, her eyes searching the floor under his booted feet as he crossed the threshold. So stunned by this turn of events, she realized the man accompanying him had not entered the cabin and looked up slowly at him.

"Milady," the other Reaper said, removing his hat in respect. "I am Lord Kasid."

A hesitant smile trembled on Mystery's lips. "Won't you come in, milord?" she offered.

"Thank you, milady."

Mystery shut the door and turned to see Glyn staring at Valda as the little girl slept. He glanced around – forehead creased, eyes concerned.

"I gave her a few drops of paregoric," Mystery said quietly. "She has a very bad cold and was coughing so hard she couldn't catch her breath. She needed to sleep."

Glyn nodded and Mystery heard a low release of breath that told her he was relieved it was nothing more serious. "Is she feverish?" he asked.

"A little."

She moved toward him. "Let me take your coats, milords," she said.

Glyn lay aside his hat and put his hands to the steel buttons of his slicker. He peeled out of the wet garment and handed it to her, his eyes moving over her so hotly she felt the heat. She was grateful for the coolness of the rain on the slicker and clutched it to her.

"Careful, Myst," Glyn said. "You'll get all wet."

She couldn't answer that and turned to the man who had come in with him. He too had removed his slicker and gave it into her keeping.

"Bad day," Lord Kasid observed.

"It has been a bad week," Mystery acknowledged. Her gaze slid addictively to Glyn and the breath stopped in her throat as she took in the black silk of his shirt clinging wetly to his broad shoulders and muscular chest. She swallowed hard, every ounce of willpower she possessed being held in check for she longed to run to him and plaster herself to that lean, enticing body. "Are you here about the disappearances?"

Glyn nodded. "We've been sent to help Lord Kiel."

Mystery's heart sank. She should have known he hadn't come just to see her. She pointed to the small table. "Please sit. I'll tell you what I know but it isn't much." Her bottom lip quivered and she tucked it between her teeth.

"I didn't come to see you for that reason but anything you can tell us would be helpful," Glyn was quick to tell her.

"Glynnie!"

The little voice turned the heads of the adults as Valda tossed her covers aside and scrambled out of bed, propelling her little body at the Reaper like shot from a cannon. Her thin arms went around his neck and she rained kisses on his bewhiskered cheek.

"I knew you'd come," Valda said in between loud smacks. "I knew you would!" She looked around at her mother. "Didn't I tell you he'd come for us, Mama?"

Mystery's cheeks burned and she put out a hand to pry her child from Glyn's lap. She wasn't prepared for the fierce look he gave her as he wrapped his brawny arms around the little girl and kissed the top of her head.

"You knew better than your mama, huh, Valli?" he asked, holding Mystery's surprised gaze.

"Uh-huh!" the child said, nodding emphatically. She turned her attention to Kasid. "My name is Valda. What's your name, Mr. Reaper?"

Kasid grinned and came over to hunker down beside the child. He offered her his hand. "I am Kasid," he said. When she slipped her little hand into his without hesitation, he brought it to his lips. "It is an honor to meet you, Lady Valda."

"That tickled," Valda pronounced with a giggle when he released her hand. She craned her head back so she could look up at Glyn. "Where you been, Glynnie?"

"Working," he replied.

She laid her head on his shoulder. "I got a bad cold," she said.

"So I heard." He put a hand to her forehead. "Are you feeling better?"

"I do now," she stated, and plucked at one of the black pearl buttons on the front of his shirt.

There was a knock at the door and Mystery tensed. She glanced toward it but didn't move to answer.

"What's wrong?" Glyn queried.

"My neighbor is dying and..." Mystery shrugged helplessly. "I thought you were one of her children come to tell me she'd left us."

"It's Aunt Zettie," Valda whispered loudly. "She's nice but she's real old."

The knock came again and Kasid pushed to his feet, telling Mystery he would get it. He walked to the portal and opened it. He grinned when he recognized the visitor standing on the porch.

"Taking up majordomo duties now, Jaborn?" Phelan Kiel quipped with a wink.

Kasid shot out a hand to grip Kiel's—warrior to warrior—then pulled the younger man into a brief embrace. "Someone must do your job for you."

Phelan released a derisive breath and pushed past Kasid, jostling him in a good-natured way. "I knew that was Nathair tied to the porch rail but I didn't recognize the other mount. Where's Seabhac?" he asked Glyn.

"I had to put him down," Glyn answered. He stood with Valda still clutched in his arms, her scrawny legs locking around his hips as he extended a hand in greeting to his fellow Reaper.

"Man, I'm sorry to hear that," Phelan said, his face mirroring his unhappiness. "That's always rough duty." He turned to Mystery, swept off his hat and nodded to her. "How are you, milady?"

"I am well, Lord Phelan," she responded.

"I'm Valda. 'Member me?" Valda asked.

"How could I forget such a beautiful young woman?" Phelan asked. He reached out to tweak her nose then crossed his eyes at her.

"You're silly like Glynnie," Valda stated.

Phelan's eyebrows shot up. "Glynnie is silly?" He gave his teammate a steady look. "Now who would have thought that?"

"Mama knows he's silly, don't you, Mama?" Valda asked.

Mystery wished the floor would open up and swallow her. She held her arms out to Valda. "Sweetie, I think the lords would like to talk together. Why don't you and I go sit down on the bed and give them some privacy?"

"Ain't no privacy in these here places," Valda repeated what she'd heard Aunt Zettie said, but went into her mother's arms.

"Valda!" her mother chastised then looked at Phelan with apology in her dark eyes. "Would you like me to take your coat, milord?"

"I can't stay. Just needed to speak with these two gents for a moment."

Mystery smiled at him and hoisted Valda farther up her hip.

Glyn watched the young mother walk across to the bed then turned his full attention on Phelan. "What did you find in Beaumont?" he asked in a low voice.

"A bone yard the likes of which I hope I never see again," Phelan answered in the same quiet tone. "That set no better with me than my ability to contact the Shadowlords or any of the rest of you."

"I'm having the same problem," Glyn admitted. "Right now it seems it's only you and me who are burdened by that though."

"What of the goddess?" Phelan asked. "I can't raise her."

"None of us can, not even the Shadowlords," Kasid joined in.

"Have you Transitioned out of cycle?" Glyn queried.

"Twice," Phelan replied. "You?" At Glyn's nod, he turned to Kasid, who shook his head.

"No, but some of the others have."

Kiel ran a hand through his hair. "What the hell is happening here? Has it got something to do with the murders and disappearances?"

"Lord Kheelan believes so. We'll talk about it later," Glyn answered, cutting a meaningful glance toward Mystery and her daughter. "We have help coming our way from the same source that took out the threat up in the Northlands."

Phelan silently whistled. "That should prove to be fun. You bunking at the hotel in town? I've got room so we'll go by and get your things then head out there. We can discuss what I've found out so far and I can tell you about the bone yard."

"You two go on ahead. I'll meet you at the hotel," Glyn said. "I have some unfinished business here."

Phelan's left eyebrow quirked but he made no comment to that statement. He bid Kasid put on his slicker then replaced his hat, tipped it to Mystery and Valda before turning to the door. "See you in town, Kullen," he remarked, holding the door open as Kasid joined him.

Mystery was quiet as Glyn walked over to the bed and stood there with a hand on the iron footboard. His presence in the small confines of the cabin was overpowering and the raw animal magnetism pouring from him in dizzying waves evaporated every droplet of moisture from her mouth.

"I wanted to explain why I left the stage station so abruptly," he began, and she saw his fingers tighten on the iron rail, the knuckles turning white from the exertion of pressure he was applying.

"There's no need," she said softly. "You don't owe me an explanation."

"Yes he does, Mama," Valda insisted. She folded her arms over her chest and tilted her head to one side. "And make it good, Glynnie."

"Valda!" Mystery groaned, feeling the blush heating her cheeks but the Reaper laughed and dropped down to a squat in front of them.

"Aye, milady," he agreed. "I'll do my best."

"You really don't—"

"I was scared, Myst," he said, interrupting her. "I really didn't think myself worthy of you or Valda but, the goddess knows, I wanted you two like I've never wanted anything else in my life." He shot his free hand through his thick curls. "I wasn't looking for a mate, but when I met you, I realized just how lonely my life had been. I began to miss you two less than a mile down the road." He took a deep breath. "I need you in my life. I *want* you in my life. I am asking you to be in my life."

"And now we get Joined, right?" Valda asked with all the impatience of youth.

Mystery was so embarrassed by her daughter's words she couldn't make a sound. She covered her face with her hands—unable to look at Glyn's face—but his words shocked her so badly, her head snapped up and her eyes grew round.

"Aye, Lady Valda," Glyn said. "Now we get Joined."

"Me and you and Mama, right?" the child wanted clarified.

"Aye, milady. You and me and your mama," he answered, and there was a slight catch in his throat as he spoke.

Mystery was staring openmouthed at him and when he took her hand in his, she could feel his shaking as badly as her own.

"Mystery Butler, would you do me the honor of becoming my wife?" he asked, his gaze searching hers.

"Are you sure?" she asked as tears invaded her vision.

"I've had plenty of time to think on it and I'm gods-be-damned sure," he said then winched when Valda shot out a little finger and pointed it at him.

"You're gonna get your mouth washed out, Glynnie!" the child warned.

"Forgive me, sweeting," he said.

"Milord," Mystery said, her fingers tightening on his. "Isn't this too soon? Aren't we rushing things? I mean we only knew one another a day before we... I mean when we..." She put her free hand up to swipe at a tear rolling down her cheek. "We don't know..."

"Do you want to be with me?" he asked, and when she nodded, he asked if she believed he would make her a good husband.

"Aye, I do," she said. She placed her palm on his cheek.

"Do you believe I'll do my best to be a good father to your child?"

She caressed him, capable only of nodding.

"Do you believe I will provide for you and care for you and share all that I have with you?"

Mystery bit her bottom lip. "Aye, milord."

"Then there is no problem as I see it," he said. He released her hand and got to his feet, leaned over and kissed her on the forehead, the nose, then finally placed a fleeting kiss on her lips to seal the bargain.

"Oh, that's just nasty," Valda proclaimed, fanning her hand in front of her face as though to wipe away the sight.

The two adults laughed and Glyn stepped back, reluctant to go, but duty called. He could almost feel the weight of the Shadowlords' disapproval weighing him down for daring to bind himself to a mate without their express approval but it didn't matter. He had no way to contact them and he was fairly sure he wouldn't have asked their permission if he'd been able. He knew he'd pay for his insubordination, but that didn't concern him overly much. All that was important was that Mystery had agreed to be his.

"What's your answer, milady?" he asked.

Mystery's lips trembled. "Yes," she whispered. "Yes a thousand times."

Glyn pumped his fist into the air. "All right!"

"I think he's happy, Mama."

"When we've completed our mission here, you and I will say the words before a priest," he suggested. "Until then..." He reached into his pocket and withdrew a handful of folded bills. He handed the money to Mystery. "Get yourself a better place to live." His eyes turned molten gold. "One with two bedrooms."

Mystery's womb clenched and she felt her knees go weak—a condition that seemed to perpetuate itself whenever she was near this man. All she could do was nod at his order. Images of the two of them lying naked in that bedroom brought heat and moisture to her most private of places.

"And get a pretty dress or two for you and our daughter for the Joining," he stated.

"Our daughter," Mystery repeated, and her heart melted completely.

"Can I call you Daddy Glyn, now?" Valda asked.

"May I," her mother corrected.

"Aye," Glyn said, his voice breaking. He plucked his slicker from the chair where Mystery had laid it and swung it around his shoulders before he finish his words. "Aye, Valli, you surely may."

He hesitated a moment—the look on his face making it obvious he wanted to grab Mystery and kiss her senseless—but he couldn't. Not yet. He turned away but not before she realized his hands were shaking.

Mystery got up from the bed—too excited to do more than stand there and tremble as the man with whom she wanted to spend the rest of her life with moved to the door. Her eyes drank him in like an intoxicating wine as he paused there with his heart open for her to see.

"Take care, milady," he said.

"And you, milord," she whispered in reply.

"Feel better, *babban*," he told Valda.

And with that he was gone, the sound of his boot heels thumping over the sodden wood planks of the porch as the low roll of thunder shook the small cabin.

"See, I told you he'd come for us, Mama," Valda said.

Mystery turned to her child and hugged her, so happy she wanted to shout, so proud she wanted to tell the world. She swung Valda from the bed and whirled around with her, the two of them giggling wildly.

Chapter Eleven

"The bones had teeth marks on them," Phelan said as he and his fellow Reapers sat on the back porch and watched the rain falling. "Not fang marks but teeth marks. The marrow had been sucked out and there wasn't one scrap of flesh left to be found in the mass grave."

"How many victims?" Glyn asked as he took a sip of the piping-hot coffee in his cup.

"Between sixty and seventy."

"Mother of the goddess," Kasid said with a whistle. "How long have these disappearances been going on?"

"Years it seems," Phelan answered.

"Then this isn't just something that's been started since the Ceannus left," Glyn observed. "Maybe we're dealing with two different issues."

"Since I can't do it, I need you to contact Lord Dunham and ask him what he knows about an entity called a zombie," Phelan told Kasid.

"Zombie?" Kasid repeated. "What is that?"

"Well, depending on who you ask, it's either a person who has had his or her soul removed and is used to wreak havoc on a sorcerer's enemies or it's a person under the influence of a very strong hypnotic drug. Those affected by the drug apparently have no will of their own and will do whatever they're told, working from sunup to sundown until they drop."

"The purpose for that being what?" Glyn inquired.

"Providing complete slave labor for a planter. We're talking about workers who don't stop to rest and who won't balk at an order."

"Men who will walk right past you and not even see you," Kasid repeated what the hotel man had told them.

"According to one of the planters I talked to over in Eastover, the ones controlled by a sorcerer are flesh-eaters with a particular penchant for internal organs."

"Delightful," Glyn commented.

"Good news though," Phelan added, "is those who aren't under the influence of a magic-sayer and are just controlled by the drug are harmless."

"I'm assuming those kinds of zombies are daywalkers but the other kind are nightwalkers?" Kasid asked.

"Not necessarily. Those who come up out of the grave can walk the day at the bokor's command."

"Maybe we're dealing with three different issues here then," Glyn said. "Daywalkers, grave-jumpers and the new super rogues."

"Not to mention the 'bots," Kasid reminded him.

"This just keeps getting better and better," Phelan said with a snort. He looked to Kasid. "See if you can get hold of Lord Dunham."

Kasid cleared his throat then sent the mental call. It was answered immediately.

"Aye, Lord Kasid?"

"What can you tell us of zombies, Your Grace?" Kasid said aloud so the other two Reapers would be involved in the conversation. When there was a long moment of silence, he spoke the Shadowlord's name again.

"I heard you," came the irritable reply. "Just hold on."

It seemed to take forever and when Lord Dunham spoke again, the other two men could tell whatever he was saying to Kasid was making the Reaper very uneasy for he kept shifting in his chair, squirming like a schoolboy.

"We are speaking of entities from long before the Burning War," Lord Dunham told Kasid. "It was believed the sect that created them was wiped out but apparently it is thriving there in Vircars. Here is what we know..."

"There was in the island countries to the south a secret society of priests called the Bizango. These men were called *houngan* and they were greatly feared by the populace. Their magic was very powerful. One of their rituals was called *zombification*. During the ritual, a victim was chosen and given a powder distilled from the poison of a blowfish. The powder would render the victim unconscious, plunging him into a deathlike trance. While under the influence of this drug, the *houngan* would make the victim believe he was truly dead. To do this, they would bury him in a coffin for a few hours and they would bring him back to life. To control the victim who is now reportedly soulless and unable to think for himself, the priests would give him a variety of mind-controlling drugs to which he would become highly addicted. Without the drugs and continual control of the priest, the zombie would not be able to function and would ultimately waste away and die. The ritual was supposedly used for various reasons and depending upon which *houngan* applied it, it was either a punishment for those who defied the Bizango or for the personal intention of the priest. The victims were never randomly chosen nor were they used for personal vendettas. They were used to maintain control and order within the society.

"However, there was another darker society whose rituals were far more evil. If that society had a name, it has long since been lost in the annals of time but we strongly suspect it was directly related in some way to Raphian or one of his minions such as Apollyon or Abaddon. This society had what were called *egregors* or conglomerates composed of dark-matter entities that demanded human and animal sacrifice, the offerings of flesh and blood. The entities were called *Zandor*. Their priests would offer up slave masters, innocents such as newborns, women of childbearing age and men in the prime of their sexual lives. It was believed such sacrifices held the most power. That society of *houngans* practiced their religion for personal gain and to annihilate their enemies."

Kasid heaved a long sigh as he finished relating Lord Dunham's words to Glyn and Phelan. "I believe we have found the why of the evil you found in the bone yard if not the who."

"Ask among the people of color," Lord Dunham suggested. "They most likely will not tell you anything for the society is greatly feared but one just might step forward if he or she has lost a loved one to the sacrificial altar."

"How do we destroy these things, Your Grace?" Glyn asked.

"The only way to make sure it does not survive is to cut off its head and then incinerate the body," Lord Dunham instructed.

"We may be dealing with something beyond that which your Prime and his men went up against in Oklaks," Lord Kheelan injected. "But this is just as important – if not more so – to put a stop to as the threat of the Ceannus. See to it!"

With that, the Shadowlords were gone.

"And be quick about it," Glyn grumbled. He tossed the rest of the coffee in his cup over the porch rail then set the cup aside. Getting to his feet, he walked to the edge of the overhang and reached up to hook his hands around the beam that ran the length of the porch. He stared out into the rain. "They don't ask much of us, do they?"

"I believe they are beginning to feel the weight of not having the goddess's guidance," Kasid said.

"So what do you suggest, Kiel? You're the boss of this mission," Glyn stated.

"Well, first things first, I guess. We should do as His Grace ordered and interview the people of color on the plantations. I need to head up to Burnt Pine Plantation and have a talk with the owner Fred Tolliver. He's had the most people come up missing." He turned to Kasid. "The next plantation over is Fox Hill. It belongs to the Copley family. If you'll go over there, Glyn can ride back to Sagewood." Kiel winked. "That is if he doesn't mind returning to that pretty little mystery he has over there."

"Fuck you, Kiel," Glyn said sweetly.

"You keep offering but you never do anything about it, Kullen. Why is that?" Phelan queried. When Glyn twisted his head around and gave his interrogator a narrowed look, Kiel grinned. "Think I'm more man than you can handle, maybe?"

With a snort, Glyn dropped his hands and stomped back into the house, slamming the screen door behind him.

"Why do you do that?" Kasid inquired.

"Because it pisses him off," Phelan said with a chuckle.

"No, I mean pretend to be something you are not."

Phelan was sitting with his long legs stretched out in front of him and crossed at the ankle. He laid his head on the back of the rocking chair then swiveled his face toward Jaborn. "What makes you think I'm pretending?"

"Aren't you?" Kasid challenged, holding the other Reaper's steady gaze.

Phelan smiled. "Jaborn, I have known many women in my day but I've also had relationships with a few men. I enjoyed them both." He uncrossed his legs, drew them up and pushed to his feet. He looked down at Kasid. "What I am, how I take my pleasures is my business and mine alone. It's no one else's concern."

Kasid said nothing as his teammate opened the door and went inside.

"Lord Kasid?"

"Aye, Your Grace?" Kasid answered Lord Naois' call.

"We thought you men would like to know Lady Rachel has given birth to her sons. All are hail and hardy."

Kasid closed his eyes and gave a silent prayer of thanksgiving to Alel. "And Lord Owen?" he asked.

"Was released in time to attend the births," Lord Naois replied. *"Also, the goddess arrived at the Citadel just before Lord Owen's release."*

"Glyn will be relieved to know Tohre is out of confinement."

"We thought he would be."

Kasid hurried into the house to tell Glyn the news only to find both he and Phelan had already left. Through the front window, he saw them riding out. Since he had no way to contact them mentally, he shrugged and reached for his slicker, grimacing as he draped the heavy garment over his shoulders.

He was beginning to hate the rain.

* * * * *

The Citadel

Owen Tohre looked down at his baby son and could barely see the beautiful infant for the tears that were clouding his vision. He had never felt so humbled in his life. He was trembling all over, feeling weaker than the child nestled in his arms. His heart was bursting with pride and when the little one opened his eyes to look up at his father, the Reaper groaned from the vast amount of emotion tumbling through his being.

"Hey there, little guy," Owen whispered. "I'm your papa."

Though Aingeal Cree had warned him how devastating it was to have a child smile for the first time, Owen was not prepared for the intensity of the sensation that rocked through him like dynamite when the baby's perfect bow lips pulled back.

"Ah, Merciful Alel," the Reaper whispered, his voice breaking. "He's smiling."

"It's just gas," Lord Kheelan insisted.

"Why don't you go do something useful like lie down on the tracks and let the train run over you," Aingeal snapped, pushing the Shadowlord aside. "Who invited you here anyway?"

Glancing at his wife who lay on the bed with their other son cradled against her, Owen tried not to laugh. If he hadn't been so tired, feeling so drained from his recent eight months of sheer hell, he would have whooped with hilarity.

"I second that," Danielle Gehdrin said, giving Lord Kheelan her own peevish glance. "If you can't say something helpful, don't speak at all."

"That would be a first," Lea Walsh, consort and mate of Lord Bevyn Coure, mumbled.

Besides Lady Aingeal, Lady Lea and Lady Danni, the room was filled to overflowing with people—mother and father and twins, the three Shadowlords, the Amazeen Penthe Aracnea, Sir Giles D'Brickashaw, who was the Primary Guide at the Citadel, Healer Desden, who had delivered the twins, and Harold Washington, the prim and bossy steward assigned to Lady Aingeal and her husband Lord Cynyr. The three Gatekeepers had come and gone already after giving their congratulations and blessings to the Tohres.

And sitting where no one could see her, the Triune Goddess Morrigunia looked on with ill-disguised contempt, the man at her side as mute and invisible as was She.

"Were I so inclined, I could snatch the breaths from those mewling little turds and squash them like the worms they are," Morrigunia snapped, Her words heard only by the weak, despondent and thoroughly chastened man at her side. She looked down at him. "If it would not cripple your brother, I would."

Eanan Tohre—Owen's twin—stayed silent for he was too ill to do otherwise. He had just been rudely snatched from the cell where he spent eight months of ungodly torment and thrust into a world he did not know nor understand. As he stood slumped beside the goddess, all he could do was stare morosely at his twin. He needed more Sustenance and a stronger dose of tenerse, but the bitch hovering next to him was withholding it for the time being.

"I've yet to decide what I want to do with you, my Reaper," Morrigunia had told him when she'd replaced him in the cell with a sleeping Owen. "Perhaps I'll keep you here on Terra for a while."

Though he wanted to go back to his own world, he knew the goddess would not accommodate him. Not that he had anything there to go back to and the hellish existence he'd been living on the last worn-torn world where she'd dropped him wasn't a place he cared to revisit.

"For the love of Alel, say something, you moron!" the Triune Goddess commanded him.

"What would you have me say, *Mo Regina*?" he asked tiredly. He watched his twin lowering his head to kiss the precious bundle he carried and felt a moment of unadulterated, unforgivable guilt.

"Had you not killed Owen, he would not be here today," Morrigunia stated, and snaked out a hand to cup Eanan's chin. Roughly she jerked his head so he was looking at Her. "He is better off for what you did whether you can accept that or not."

"I killed him because I wanted his woman," Eanan said. "What does that say of me?"

"That you were a love-sick fool," the goddess hissed.

"And because I wanted his woman, because I thought to take his place with her none the wiser, she killed herself," Eanan reminded Her. "I have two deaths on my conscience, milady."

"Believe me, you have more than paid for what you did, don't you think?"

He stared into Her angry green eyes and felt again every terrifying moment of the months-long Transition that had turned him from man to beast and kept him there in the throes of a hunger, thirst and need so great, he had prayed for his life to end.

"Aye, *Mo Regina*, I paid for it, but I imagine Owen's sentence was far worse than mine," he answered unwisely.

Her fingers tightened brutally, painfully on his chin until the long nails drew blood. She lowered Her face to his and bared Her fangs. "Careful, little man," She growled. "Unless you want to exchanges places with him for a few long, long nights. Is that what you want?"

Eanan shuddered. The image of lying beneath the goddess as She impaled Herself upon him sapped his energy, raping him was enough to lower his eyes to the threat She posed.

"I thought not," She said then turned Her attention to the one man in all the megaverse who held Her love. The stormy green eyes turned soft as She gazed on Owen Tohre. "He is proud of those mewling little worms, isn't he?"

Eanan almost smiled. "Aye, he is. I am happy for him."

Morrigunia waved Her hand and disappeared, taking Eanan Tohre with her.

Owen felt the ripple of air around him and knew who had been watching. He would always know when She was near him. He was connected to Her now in ways that would bind him to Her forever. He had always been Hers to command. Now he would be at Her beck and call no matter the hour or the day. When She called, when She came for him, he would have no choice but to obey. It had been his bargain with Her—one that had saved Rachel's life but effectively ended his freedom.

The moment he had awakened in the con cell—Transitioned to his wolf-like state—he knew his reprieve had come. He had begun to think it never would—that he would spend eternity servicing the sexual needs of a goddess whose insatiable demands had all but destroyed him during the eight months he'd been her captive on whatever world She'd flown him. Day and night, night and day She had Her hands on him, Her body plastered to his. Her taste was in his mouth, the feel of Her cunt even at that very moment wrapped around his cock.

"What are you going to name them?" Harold asked.

Rachel held out her hand to her husband and Owen reached to take it. "Have you decided, my Owen?" she asked.

Owen squared his shoulders. "Thielan and Sheelan," he announced. "The names mean home and peace in the old language."

"Wise choices, milord," Giles D'Brickshaw said. "What greater things for a man to have than a home and peace."

Rachel smiled her acceptance of her husband's decision and turned her gaze to the boy child whose little face was rubbing against her breast. "I believe Sheelan is hungry," she said softly.

That was the cue for everyone save her husband to leave and the others did so with many words of congratulations and offers to help. Even Lord Kheelan coughed discreetly and asked to be called should the need arise. The High Lord came to stand beside Owen and surprised everyone by putting a hand on the Reaper's shoulder.

"Welcome home, Lord Owen. You were missed," Lord Kheelan said then spun around and marched to the door.

"Are you growing a heart, Kheelan?" Aingeal asked as she followed him from the room.

"Get bent, Cree," the High Lord snapped, refusing to look her way.

"You are!" Aingeal stated with a chuckle. She ran to catch up with him, punching the stately sorcerer on the arm. "There may be hope for you yet, Khee!"

Owen watched his lady uncover her breast and offer the nipple to their son. His face was already wet with tears and fresh ones sprang to life as Sheelan greedily took the offering and began to draw strongly on Rachel's flesh.

"I still can't believe this," he said, jiggling Thielan who had suddenly realized he was missing out on the action and began whining.

"We're going to have to have a wet nurse," Rachel told him. "I don't think I'll have enough milk for both of them."

He nodded, unable to speak for the lump in his throat was all but choking him.

Rachel had not seen her husband in many months—had not been with him that long before he'd been taken from her—but she knew him as well as she knew the back of her hand. She knew he was hiding something from her.

"Owen?" she asked gently. "What is it you need to tell me?"

Owen's gaze jumped from his son to his wife. He had made a vow to never lie to her, to be honest with her, and the burden of the knowledge hanging over him would have to be shared if he was to truly know peace. But he wasn't sure right then was the best time to tell her of his bargain with the goddess.

"I wasn't in the con cell all those months, *y chree*."

Rachel's brows drew together. "You weren't?" When he shook his head asked, "Then where were you?"

"I honestly don't know." He forced himself to hold her gaze. "I was with the goddess."

"With Morrigunia?"

He nodded.

"Then who...?" Her eyes widened. "Who *was* in that cell?"

"My twin Eanan," he told her.

Rachel stared at him, remembering the confession he had made last year concerning the goddess and the vile demands She had made on him...

"What did She ask of you?"

He closed his eyes for a moment. "I am to be Her consort," he said then looked away. "Her lover. Available at Her command when She wishes."

"I must share you with her?"

He nodded, flinching at her words.

"For how long?" she insisted.

He could not look at her. "For as long as She desires."

Cold fury had been sown that day. For the first time in her life, hatred had blossomed in Rachel Tohre. It was hatred so virulent that dwelling on it even now had the power to stun her. The bitch who had demanded Owen's body and soul in exchange for Rachel's life was an evil thing, a thing to be vanquished, and there was but one way she knew to do that...

"You have paid a high price for my life, milord, and I will not forget it nor who is responsible for the misery I see on your face," she told her husband.

"Not that there is anything you can do about it," Morrigunia bragged.

"You may have forced him into this, but you do not own his heart nor will you ever!" Rachel vowed.

She did not feel any anger toward Owen. She put no blame on his broad shoulders. He was but a pawn in this game. He had no more say over his life than any of the other Reapers—perhaps even less. The animosity, the rage she felt toward Morrigunia was aimed entirely at the redheaded viper who had forced this upon Rachel's husband. She felt no pity for herself—only for Owen who must endure the wretched embraces of a creature he would forever be forced to service.

"I hated it, Rachel," he whispered.

"I know and we'll not discuss it again. It is over."

He shook his head. "I wish it was but you know it isn't."

Rachel refused to think about that and changed the subject to take his mind from the knowledge Morrigunia would call him again. "Where is your brother now?" she asked.

Owen shrugged. "I don't know," he said. He put a hand behind Thielan's head and lifted the infant to his shoulder, jiggling him as the baby's displeasure mounted. "When She first brought him into the cell, I believe I could have killed him with my bare hands but I had many months to rethink that. I knew what he was suffering in my stead and as bad as I had it, I knew he had it far worse."

"And now?" she asked. "How do you feel toward him now, my Owen?"

He shrugged again. "I don't know. One part of me wants to make mincemeat of the bastard but another part wants to grab him and hug him." He looked up at the ceiling then let out a long, wavering sigh. "The gods know the man is a part of me and always will be. It would be like pulverizing myself."

"He killed you," she reminded him.

"Aye, and because of him the woman to whom I would have been Joined killed herself. Morrigunia told me she leapt to her death and Eanan—unable to bear the burden of his guilt—dove over the cliff after her. She made it a point to tell me he killed for love and I died for love and that love was an emotion men could well do without."

Rachel adjusted her nipple in Sheelan's little mouth. "Do you believe that?"

He locked eyes with her. "No, I don't believe that. I couldn't live without you, Rachel. I would have done anything to keep you with me."

"And did," she said quietly. Gently she removed Sheelan from her breast for the little one was sound asleep, his sweet lips still drawing upon a phantom nipple. She laid him on her belly and reached up for Thielan.

Thielan let out a single cry of protest but as soon as his mother had him positioned at her other nipple, he latched on greedily and began to make loud sucking and grunting noises.

"Oh, here we go. He's going to be our badass," Owen said of his eldest then picked up Sheelan for the first time to cradle him in his arms.

"You know what you need to do," Rachel said as she watched her oldest son feed. She didn't look up at her husband though she felt his gaze on her. "You need to tell the witch that you want to meet with your brother."

"And then what?" he asked.

She raised her head to give her husband a steady look. "You need to forgive him."

Chapter Twelve

He walked past her and into the cabin, his scrutiny running over the small room before he turned back to face her. "Where's the bantling?"

Mystery closed the door and slid the bolt into place before facing him, her back against the portal. "She was getting fussy with no one to play with so I sent her to her friend's house."

Glyn lay his hat aside and put his hands to the buttons of his slicker. "So we're alone?"

"All alone," Mystery replied in a husky voice. She watched him peel out of the slicker and unconsciously licked her lips as he hung it up. In that moment she decided upon a course so unlike any she'd ever trod. Uncharacteristically, totally outside her realm of comfort, she ran a hand across her breasts and down her side.

"Wench, don't do that," he warned as he reached down to undo the holster strap tied to his thigh. "I'm likely to do something before we're ready."

She felt brazen and worldly but—more importantly—she felt free. "What would you like to do?" she asked breathlessly.

A shiver ran through the Reaper's big body. "Everything, *y chree*. I'm a bad man."

She pushed away from the door and came slowly toward him. "That's good because today I'm a bad woman, milord."

He paused with his hands on the buckle of his gun belt. Desire turned his amber eyes dark. "Must be the rain."

"Could be," she agreed as she reached him. She pushed aside his hands and made quick work of taking off his weapon. She wrapped the belt around the holster and set it down on the table before putting her fingers to the belt at his waist. That she stripped from him with ease then slid her hands up his chest to the top button of his shirt. "Or it could be that I want you so badly I can't stand it."

Heat flared in Glyn's veins and it was all he could do to stand there as she worked her way down the buttons, tugged the shirt's tail from his pants then unbuttoned his cuffs. When her hands smoothed over his pectorals to push the shirt from his shoulders, he felt his cock turn stone-hard. Her palms sliding over the points of his shoulders as the shirt fell down his arms brought a low growl from his throat.

"Big, bad wolf," she whispered, the shirt sliding to the floor at their feet.

He shot out an arm and encircled her, dragging her to him roughly, his head lowering so he could slant his lips over hers, prying them apart to thrust his tongue between. He kissed her long and hard as their tongues did a mating dance of their own

then he dipped his knees, slipped an arm beneath hers and lifted her high against his hard chest. It only took three strides to reach her bed.

Dipping a knee to the mattress, he laid her down and was over her before either could take another breath. His fingers entwined hers and he drew her arms above her head as he trailed hot kisses along her neck.

Mystery turned her head to the side and blissfully closed her eyes while his lips roamed her neck, nibbled at her ear lobe for a moment. His tongue swept into the sensitive spiral of flesh and robbed her of a soft gasp.

"You like that, milady?" he whispered, his warm breath fanning over her cheek and winding its way down the responsive channel of her ear.

"Yes," she breathed, and shuddered as he flicked his tongue beneath the curve of her earlobe.

He moved farther down her body until his lips were at the hollow of her throat—placing lightning-quick licks along the pulsing flesh. He kissed her there then unthreaded the fingers of his right hand from hers and dragged his palm down her arm and onto the soft mound of her breast.

Mystery drew in a quick breath, feeling his touch all the way to her womb. Her insides clenched and began to coil tighter with each pass of his thumb over her straining nipple. She could feel that little nub hardening against the fabric of her bodice. When he raised his head and looked up at her, she felt the ache growing to dangerous heights.

"Do you want to wait until our Joining night?" he asked, the look in his hot eyes saying he would if she desired it.

"No," she said, shaking her head.

"You're sure?" he pressed.

"I am sure."

The look in those amber orbs changed like quicksilver, telling her there would be no turning back. She was about to go farther than she'd ever been—handing her heart into a man's keeping—and he would be the one to take her on that journey of discovery.

She would later wonder if what happened next had been because she willed it, wanted it—no, demanded it of him—or if he had simply lost control of the iron will she knew he possessed. It didn't matter, because the moment he released her other hand, reared up on his knees and snagged his fingers in her bodice, all rational thought fled them both.

The dress ripped from neckline to waist and he jerked her up to snap the torn bodice behind her and down her back to expose her soft chemise to his view. But that garment was no protection for he made quick work of rending it, baring her breasts to his hot hands and eager lips.

Mystery arched off the bed as his mouth closed around one hard little pebble. Her arms were trapped by the rent bodice of the gown gathered at her waist. He was

crouched between her legs, which were held fast by the weight of his lower body as he knelt on the skirt of her gown.

His tongue swirled around her nipple, lapped at it. He teased it with his teeth then suckled strongly before moving to its mate to lavish his attention upon it as well. His hand roamed down her side then one came up to capture her breast so he could feast deeper, harder, longer upon one rosy crest.

Moisture was gathering between Mystery's legs and she ached in a way she had never experienced. She wanted his shaft deep within her. She wanted to know the width of it, the length and the strength. She wanted to feel him weighing her down as he thrust over and over into her sheath. She wanted to dig her fingernails into his back and lash her legs around his waist.

"Glyn, please!" she begged, and when he lifted his head, their eyes met and in his was a desire that rocked her to her foundation.

He shifted to one side—levering his body over hers—then reached down and dragged her skirt up until it was at her waist. He tore the panties from her and his hand fumbled at the fly of his uniform pants.

She could hear him panting, could see a muscle bunching in his cheek and he ground his teeth. His eyes were blazing embers filled with lust and need.

"My arms," she said. "Free my arms so I can hold you."

She felt his cock slide over her thigh and heard him groan. He seemed reluctant to move off her so he could pull the gown all the way down her body. But when she lifted her hips to accommodate him, the groan became a growl and he ripped the garment from waist to hem off her.

Mystery wasted no time in circling his shoulders within the span of her arms the moment those arms were free. She dragged him down to her and covered his mouth with hers, thrusting her tongue deep inside. A part of her rejoiced at the sharp intake of his breath at her bold action and she dug her fingernails into the flesh of his shoulders. Once more she heard him groan but had little time to experience the heady feel of her power over him for he was slamming his cock inside her.

He was grinding his mouth to hers, grinding his body to hers. He shoved his hands beneath her hips and lifted her for deeper penetration. A grunt came from low in his chest when she lifted her legs and locked them around his hips.

She reveled in the raw, hard power of his rod as he rammed it into her. There was no gentleness in what he was doing and that was exactly what she wanted, what she needed, how she had dreamed he would one day take her. Where her husband had performed the act by the numbers, her Reaper was taking her completely off the chart. His body was doing things to hers she had not known existed and it was sheer bliss. The power of him, the forcefulness and the mastery was what she had longed for in many a fevered dream. She was no simpering miss, no untried virgin, no precious porcelain vase to be handled with care. What she had craved, he was providing.

His lips left hers to press against the column of her throat. "I don't want to hurt you," he said, and a tremor shot through his body.

"You are not hurting me," she assured him, and raked her nails down his back in an instinctive goad. He reacted as she'd hope he would.

Glyn pushed hard into her velvety, wet channel, seating himself deep within her sweet folds. The fire was building in him, lapping at his self-control, burning him to a cinder, and he was an addict before whom an intoxicating menu of mind-altering drugs had been placed. He wanted this woman with every atom in his body and nothing could have stopped him from withdrawing then slamming into her again with enough force to move her upward in the bed.

"Yes!" she hissed, and her nails drove into his back. Her legs tightened painfully around his middle.

He was sliding in and out of her so fast he could barely catch his breath. His teeth ground together and his fingers dug into her soft rump as he hiked her farther up from the mattress. The toes of his boots were stabbing into the mattress and the constriction pissed him off. With a blink of his mind, his boots and clothing were gone and he was flesh to flesh with her, his sweaty skin sliding over hers.

"Now that was some trick," she said with a laugh, lifting her head to look down at the beautiful, brawny body that covered her.

"You ain't seen nothing yet," he mumbled through clenched teeth.

And he took her higher still into an erotic, sensual realm where they were grunting and panting, sweating and oozing, clenching and thrusting. Heated waves of intense pleasure spiraled out of control and centered in their loins. The itch was so powerful it drove them to a frenzy of mindless movement. With flesh slapping against flesh and the bed beneath them rocking, the Reaper came with a roar of possession at the same moment his lady found the heaven for which she had always yearned.

"Mine!" Glyn Kullen shouted as pulse after pulse of his seed shot into Mystery's hot body. He stilled as the last spurt erupted and held it as he gloried in the feel of her vaginal walls squeezing around him, milking him, draining him, taking all there was of him.

Mystery clasped him to her, her arms imprisoning him, holding him to her with every ounce of her strength. Her legs were wound around his waist, caging him in. She could feel his lips against her neck and knew he had sunk his fangs into her but it didn't matter. There was no pain, no discomfort at all, and as his tongue lapped over her perspiring flesh, she began to quiver in his arms, feeling him shuddering in hers.

"By the gods," she heard him whisper as he collapsed atop her. His heart was racing in his chest and she could feel its thunder in the vein that throbbed wildly at his throat. He was gasping shallow breaths.

"My husband," she named him, and brushed her lips along his damp forehead.

"Yours," he agreed. His head was on her shoulder, his lips against her neck. "Always."

Mystery smiled for all was — at last — right in her world.

She must have slept for a short while for when she opened her eyes, he was standing at the window looking out, his uniform in place. Silently she watched him, admiring the striking masculine figure he presented with his broad shoulders and powerful arms straining beneath the sleeves of the black silk shirt.

He didn't look around when he spoke. "I don't believe it will ever stop raining," he said quietly.

Naked as the day she'd come into the world but as unself-conscious about it as she'd been as a toddler, she swung her legs from the bed and padded over to him, slipping her arms around his waist and pressing her cheek to his back. When he covered her clasped hands with one of his, she smiled contentedly.

"Are you going now?" she asked.

He sighed. "I have to interview Simmons about the disappearances." He turned, breaking her hold on him and gathered her into his arms, placing his chin atop her head. "I still have a job whether I'm inclined to do it or not."

"You'd have it no other way," she said, instinctively knowing that about this man.

"I guess not." He put a kiss on her hair then eased her back so he could tip her chin up with a crooked finger. "But I'd rather stay here in bed with you all day and listen to the rain rather than stomp around in it."

She searched his eyes, smiling tenderly at him. "When will you be back?"

"As soon as I can but it might not be until tomorrow." He lowered his head and kissed her gently, releasing her reluctantly and twisting sideways to retrieve his slicker from the hook where he'd hung it.

"You'll be careful?"

"As careful as I know how to be," he replied. He hesitated — wanting to kiss her again but realizing if he did, he might never leave. He picked up his hat, rocked it atop his head and opened the door.

Mystery watched from the window — her nakedness concealed by the curtain — as he dug his foot into his mount's stirrup and flung a long leg over the horse's back. Her heart did a funny little squeeze of pride for this was a man in whom any woman would delight. Tall and lean but rippling with muscles, he sat straight in the saddle as the heavy rain pelted him. There was no slouching for this warrior. Keeping her attention on him while he maneuvered the animal through the growing mud puddles, she felt a deep satisfaction knowing she had won his heart.

* * * * *

Leilani's face broke into a warm, sensual smile when she opened the door to find the handsome Reaper standing on the porch of the main house. When he swept off his hat, she felt heat rushing between her legs.

"Good day, milady. Is Mr. Simmons in?" he asked the woman he took to be the housekeeper.

"Aye, milord," she replied, and stepped back to allow him entrance. Once he was inside the foyer, she closed the door and turned to him. "Let me have your hat and coat, Lord Glyn."

Glyn was stunned by the opulence of the entryway into which he'd stepped. There was expensive marble on the floor and he knew the wallpaper had to have cost the plantation owner a pretty penny. He knew it had to be watered silk from Chrystallus, and just one of the fancy throw rugs that lay like rich islands on the highly polished floor most likely cost more than a month of his pay. As he shrugged out of his slicker, he stared at the copper and glass chandelier hanging overhead. He wasn't even aware of the woman's hands on his shoulders as she helped him out of the wet garment.

"I'll show you to the library then fetch Mr. Simmons for you," he heard the woman say, and jumped as she ran a hand down his arm. He glanced around at her, surprised at her brazenness. She smiled seductively at him. "Through there."

The Reaper nodded curtly and headed through the archway she had indicated. Once again he was taken aback by the richness surrounding him. Overstuffed, soft leather chairs and dual settees flanked an enormous fieldstone fireplace, the arrangement sitting on a plush wool rug. The floors were dark pine and gleamed from a recent waxing. Tall bookcases ranged ceiling to floor all the way around the room and the large array of casement windows with flowing damask draperies sat behind an ornate desk that was nearly as big as Glyn's bed at the Citadel.

"Fancy place he has here," Kullen mumbled.

"Mr. Simmons is a very wealthy man," the woman informed him. "He owns five plantations other than this one. Please take a seat. I won't be long."

Glyn sank down into the lush softness of one of the leather chairs and whistled silently. He ran his calloused palm along the buttery yellow arm, thinking it was as soft to the touch as the small of Mystery's back. He smiled at his wayward thought and resumed his inspection of the library, mentally calculating how many books were contained on the shelves.

"Lord Glyn, at last we meet!"

The man who entered the library was a complete surprise to the Reaper. He had not known what to expect, but Anthony Simmons was definitely nothing as he had imagined.

Tall—at least seven feet worth of tall—with hulking, broad shoulders that strained the white lawn shirt he wore and upper arms the size of small trees, the planter had a ruddy complexion that gave evidence of many hours spent in the hot southern sun. Large, wide hands and thickly corded forearms said he was no stranger to hard work. His chiseled features—hawkish nose and high cheekbones—were not classically handsome but he had a certain look that told Glyn women would find this man more than attractive. White teeth and pale gray eyes sparkled with health and vitality but it

was the thick lips that caught—and held—Glyn’s attention. He’d never seen lips that large on anyone and the sight was disconcerting. He found it hard to look away from them.

Simmons reached him and shot out a hospitable hand. “Welcome to Sagewood,” he greeted the Reaper.

The grip that engulfed Glyn’s hand was enough to make the lawman wince but there was friendliness in the gaze that held his own and he surmised the man was unaware his grasp was so punishing.

“You have a very productive-looking plantation,” Glyn complimented.

“Our people strive to make Sagewood the best in Vircars,” Simmons responded. “Please, come and sit. What’s your poison of choice?”

Glyn frowned. “Beg pardon?”

Simmons threw back his head and laughed. He clapped a heavy hand to Glyn’s shoulder, nearly staggering the Reaper. “Your libation, my good man,” he corrected. “Coffee? Hot tea?” He lowered his voice and wagged his thick brows. “Something stronger perhaps? How ’bout coffee laced with a spike or two of fine whiskey?”

“It’s a mite early for me but black coffee would hit the spot. This rain is starting to make my joints creak.”

“Ah, well don’t I know it!” Simmons agreed, pointing to a set of oversized leather wingback chairs. “Take a load off, Glyn.”

Not sure he liked the easy familiarity, Glyn took a seat as Simmons turned to the woman of color who stood primly in the doorway of the library.

“Two coffees, Leilani. Fix mine as usual,” the plantation owner ordered. He sat down in the chair beside Glyn’s. “What brings you to my bailiwick on such a brutal morning?”

Glyn was chomping at the bit to tell someone his good news. “The reason was two-fold,” he said, unaware the young woman had yet to leave the room. He did not feel her hot stare wandering over him. “Officially, I need to ask you some questions about the disappearances but on a personal note, I came to ask Mystery Butler to be my wife.”

Simmons’ eyes widened and his mouth dropped open. “You what?” he asked in a near-whisper. When Glyn repeated his words, the plantation owner let out a wavering breath and asked, “How is it you know Mystery?”

Leilani backed out of the library, her fury building like a fire upon which an accelerant had been poured. Digging her fingernails into the palms of her hand, she strode angrily into the dining room and to the bar where the liquor was kept. With her vision red-tinged and her jaw clamped tight, she poured a small amount of whiskey into a cup for Simmons then added coffee from the expensive silver pot. Before she poured the Reaper’s, she stared long and hard into the cup then a hateful smirk eased over her pursed lips.

"You think you want that nappy-headed bitch? Well, we'll see about that, Mr. Reaper Man."

That said, she spun around and walked hurriedly to the front hall and jerked open the door. Without bothering to grab an umbrella, she bolted into the deluge, her slippers sinking into the mud as she ran.

"Well," Simmons said as Glyn finished his tale of how he'd first met Mystery, "that is very romantic, I must say." He was staring at the Reaper, the friendliness gone from his gaze. Placing his elbows on the chair arms, he steeped his fingers. "You must allow me to make the arrangements with the local priest for you."

"We've time for that," Glyn said, feeling a bit uneasy beneath the stony stare that was aimed his way. "Until this business with the disappearances is settled, I won't have time to spare."

"Aye," Simmons said with a slow nod. "And women want a man's full attention when she jumps the broom with him."

The Reaper frowned. "I'm sorry. I don't understand what that means."

Simmons waved a dismissive hand. "It's an old southern tradition dating back to slave times."

Glyn didn't like the reference and his frown deepened. He decided a change of subject was in order. "What can you tell me about any magic-sayers who might be practicing at Sagewood?"

The plantation owner cocked a thick left brow. "Magic-sayers?" he repeated. He cut his eyes to the door where his housekeeper had suddenly appeared. His eyes narrowed. "Leilani, have you been out in that blasted rain?"

Ducking her head, the woman of color ventured into the room with a tray that held two cups of coffee. "I remembered I had not banked the fire in my stove, sir," she said. "After what happened at Aunt Bertha's cabin, I didn't want to take any chances."

Simmons gave her a hard look as she set the Reaper's cup on the table beside him. Briefly the gaze of the plantation owner and his employee met then both looked quickly away.

"Smart thinking," Simmons mumbled as he accepted his cup from Leilani.

Bobbing a brusque curtsy, Leilani turned and left the room, a hard gleam in her eyes and a tight grin on her lips.

Glyn took a sip of his coffee and then another, nodding his approval of the rich, robust taste. "Now that's a cup of coffee," he pronounced.

Simmons' lips twitched. "Unlike any you've ever had I'd venture to say," he agreed as he took a sip of his own beverage.

"Fresh ground?"

Simmons acknowledged that it was. He sat back in his chair with his cup balanced on one large thigh. "Tell me, Glyn. Why are you asking about magic-sayers?"

Resisting the urge to gulp the delicious brew and ask for more, Glyn told his host what the consensus among the Shadowlords had been.

"Zombies?" There was laughter in Simmons' gray gaze. "And I thought Freddie Tolliver over at Burnt Pine was full of shite with his talk of the living dead."

"The victims aren't dead," Glyn explained. "Just under the influence of drugs and a very strong magician."

"Aye, but even so, you must admit it seems so gods-be-damned farfetched, don't you think?" Simmons asked.

"I've seen a lot of things that would astound you, Mr. Simmons," Glyn replied.

"Tony," Simmons corrected. "My friends call me Tony."

Feeling uneasy calling the man by his given name, Glyn remained silent. He finished off the last of his coffee and set the cup on the table between the two chairs.

"Would you like a refill?" Simmons asked, his eyes glittering.

"I don't mind if I do," Glyn said, and flinched as the housekeeper suddenly appeared with pot in hand. "Thank you, milady."

"My pleasure," she said in a throaty voice, and shifted her gaze to Simmons for a brief moment.

"I wish I could help you, Glyn," Simmons said. "But I know nothing about the religious practices of my people. Perhaps if you ask around, you might learn something that will be of help, but I've not heard of there being any magic-sayers at Sagewood." He got to his feet. "I hate to run but I was on my way to the barn when you arrived. I've a new foal about to pop out and I'd like to be there."

"Of course," Glyn said. He took a hasty sip of his coffee, loathe to let the rest of it go to waste.

"No, don't rush!" Simmons said, reaching out to put a heavy hand on the Reaper's shoulder. "Stay and enjoy your coffee. Perhaps you and your fellow Reapers will join us for supper this evening?"

"I'll have to ask Kiel and Jaborn." He got to his feet, politely shrugging away the hand on his shoulder. "Thank you for the invitation."

"Oh, I'm always delighted when Phelan can join me and I look forward to a companionable evening with you and the gentleman who accompanied you to our fair territory." He put out his hand to grip Glyn's. "May the Wind be at your back."

"And at yours," Glyn responded, shaking the planter's massive paw of a hand.

"Take good care of him, Leilani," Simmons ordered, giving his housekeeper a steady look.

"I will, sir," Leilani replied. "I most certainly will."

Glyn felt uncomfortable staying any longer as the plantation owner strode smartly from the room. He looked longingly at the remaining coffee in his cup then headed for the door.

"Lord Kullen?" the housekeeper whispered, reaching out to put a tentative hand on his sleeve.

"Aye?"

Leilani moved closer to him. "If you want to know about magic-sayers at Sagewood, I..." She looked about as though they were being watched then lowered her voice. "If you'll come to my cabin in half an hour, I might be able to point you in the right direction." She plucked at his sleeve. "But don't tell no one where you're going. Please?"

He nodded. His kind were used to people telling them things on the sly—things they wanted others not to know they'd told. He asked directions to her cabin then followed her to the foyer, waiting for her to fetch his hat and slicker.

"Please don't tell anyone, milord," she said again as she held his coat for him.

"You have my word," he told her.

Once outside, the Reaper stared into the pouring rain, hating having to get back out in it. He swung his head to the left—searching for the cabin with the blue shutters—and found himself looking into the brutal eyes of the man he knew to be Sagewood's foreman—John Dirk. Dirk was only a few feet away on the porch, leaning against a column, a glowing cheroot at his lips.

"Stay away from my woman," Dirk snarled as he exhaled a long plume of smoke.

Glyn bristled at the gravelly command. "And what woman is that?" he ground out.

"Leilani is mine," the tall man stated, and flicked the cheroot into the rain. "I'll slit the throat of any bastard who tries to take her from me."

"Mystery Butler is my intended," Glyn told the rugged foreman. "She's the only woman I want."

Dirk blinked. "You shitting me, lawman?" he demanded, taking a step closer, his spurs clanking on the wooden floor.

Glyn made no reply. He simply stared the foreman down until Dirk ran the back of his hand over his mouth and gave one short nod.

"I guess we understand one another," the tall man said.

Silent still, Glyn tugged the brim of his hat down and stepped off the porch, swung into the saddle and kicked his mount into motion. He could feel Dirk's heated gaze on his back and rode past the row of cabins, angry that he'd have to double back and sneak into the housekeeper's cabin to keep unwanted trouble from tagging along behind him. He cursed heatedly, hating the rain even more.

* * * * *

Confiding in the cook that she wasn't feeling well, Leilani feigned a migraine and left the main house, hurrying out the kitchen door because she'd heard John Dirk speaking to the Reaper on the porch. Though she hadn't been able to make out what the

foreman said, she hadn't missed the tone of voice he'd used. As uneasy as he made her at the best of times, she didn't want to encounter him when he was in what the inhabitants of Sagewood called one of his moods.

Hurrying through the rain, needing to have things ready for when her visitor arrived, she was nevertheless soaked through by the time she unlocked her door and slipped inside. Though she wanted to light a lantern, she didn't want Dirk seeing the glow and coming to investigate. Instead, she made sure the curtains were tight over the windows and added a blanket to each to capture any errant beam that might find its way from the hastily lit candles to which she struck a match.

Working as quickly as she could, she had just finished her preparations when she heard the scrape of a boot on the shallow porch. When the light rap came at her door, she ran her hands down her gown, over her hair. She picked up a small bowl from the table and held it behind her back as she hastened to let her visitor in.

"Hurry!" she said, reaching out to grab the Reaper's arm with her free hand and pull him into the murky interior of her cabin.

"No one is about, wench," he told her. "I made sure of that."

"There are eyes out there even one of your kind can't sense," she said as she shut the door.

Glyn felt a slight nudge of apprehension shift through him but he cast it aside. He'd been on edge ever since he'd left the main house and was getting antsy by the moment. He blamed too much coffee on his nervous condition.

"What did you want to tell me?" he asked. For whatever reason, he felt acutely claustrophobic closed in the small cabin with the woman of color. The aversion to confinement was a condition shared by all his kind and he wondered what was causing it so strongly in him at that moment. He could almost feel the walls moving toward him, squeezing the air out of the limited space.

Leilani came toward him—a smile on her dark face. She brought her hand from behind her and held the bowl out to him. "Do you know what this is?" she asked.

Glyn looked down at the bowl but in the low light could see nothing but darkness in the small white china bowl. His brows drew together. "Should I?"

"Smell it," she ordered.

He didn't hesitate, bending bent forward over her offering. The moment he did, she blew a hard breath over the bowl and a shower of powder flew into his face, blinding him. He sucked in a shocked breath, drawing the fine particles into his mouth and nose. He staggered back, rubbing both hands vigorously over his face to rid himself of the stinging, cloying feel. He gasped, the dust invading his entire body, and then he went down hard, his knees striking the wooden floor loudly. The last thing he saw through watering eyes was the woman grinning.

* * * * *

Standing over his scrying glass, John Dirk roared with unbridled rage at the picture he saw materializing across the slick surface. He shot up from the table—overturning it and all the accoutrements of his evil trade. Staggering to the door, he tried to open it but the portal would not budge.

"No."

The one word of denial was a mighty echo in his brain, so loud it nearly drove him to his knees.

"She's mine!" John Dirk bellowed.

"Let her have him."

"No! She's mine! He can not touch her!"

"Let her have him," the voice thundered.

John Dirk crashed to his knees, rocking back and forth in his agony. *"She's mine,"* he whimpered. *"He must not touch her."*

"He will not lay a hand upon her," the voice cooed to him. *"It is she who does the deed."*

Tears rolled unheeded down the tall man's weathered cheeks. *"But why?"* he moaned, and his tone was that of a lost child.

"To make him suffer," was the reply.

Pulling at his hair, John Dirk fell to his side and drew his legs up. *"I want him to suffer,"* he cried.

"He will," Raphian, the Destroyer of Men's Souls replied. *"And when his seed is sown, you will take it from her and sacrifice it to me. Then I will own Glyn Kullen!"*

The tall man didn't question the order. The thought of another man's child growing inside Leilani filled him with such bleak despair and boiling fury that he tore chunks of hair from his scalp.

* * * * *

Mystery was surprised to find Leilani at her door as the sun was setting. The two women had never been friends and for the housekeeper to show up uninvited did not bode well.

"What's wrong?" Mystery asked. *"Is it Aunt Zettie?"*

Leilani pushed her way into Mystery's cabin. *"Where is your brat?"* she asked.

"She's playing with a friend. I was about to get her. What...?"

Leilani turned and fixed Mystery with a haughty sneer. *"Do you really think the Reaper will take you to wife?"* She raised her chin. *"Fuck you, aye. That he will do—mayhap any man would—but he will not bind himself to you."*

Mystery's own chin went up. *"You don't know what you're talking about,"* she said, wondering how the housekeeper had found out. *"He has asked me to Join with him. He loves me!"*

Leilani smiled hatefully. "Then why is it he is lying asleep in my bed – tired from fucking me? Even now his juices run from my cunt."

Fury lashed through Mystery. "You lie!" she accused.

The housekeeper took a step toward Mystery. "Care to make a bet that I do?" She laughed cruelly. "Go see for yourself if you do not believe me."

Mystery spun around and snatched open the door, rushing out into the lowering light, running as fast as her legs would carry her toward the cabin with the blue shutters. Rain slammed against her face and soaked her clothing as muddy water splashed her legs and saturated the hem of her gown.

The door to Leilani's cabin stood partially open and when Mystery pushed through, the first thing she saw – the only thing – was the naked white man lying sprawled in the center of the bed like a sacrifice, his arms and legs flung wide. Though his face was turned away, she knew who lay there.

Mystery stumbled to the bed with hurt and anguish flooding her tearful face. She had to make sure he was breathing, that he was alive. The sheets beneath him were twisted, the covers tossed aside.

"Do you believe me now, whore?" Leilani asked behind her.

"Glyn?" Mystery called, and put out a shaking hand to touch his leg.

His eyelids fluttered open and he stared at her – past her – and he smiled. "Milady," he mumbled, holding his hand out. "Come to me, milady."

Mystery looked on in horror as Leilani shed her clothing in the bat of an eye and slithered onto the bed, sliding her naked body over the Reaper's. His arms enfolded her, his hips arched to meet her.

"No," Mystery whispered, shaking her head in disbelief. She backed away from the bed with her hand still out.

"Tell her to go away, Glynnie," Leilani said against his lips.

"Go away," he repeated.

Leilani twisted her head around and looked at Mystery with a gloating smirk. "You heard him, slut. Go away so he can fuck me."

Mystery did not see the glazed look in the Reaper's eyes or hear the expressionless way he spoke. She did not notice that his movements were jerky – controlled. All she saw was the man she loved embracing her worst enemy and slanting his mouth over Leilani's. When he reared up and flipped Leilani to her back, shoving the whore's legs wide with his knees, Mystery let out a strangled cry and fled the cabin, running blindly into the pelting rain.

Chapter Thirteen

Glyn woke with a horrible taste in his mouth. He sat up to thrust a trembling hand through his damp hair. Looking about him, he had no idea at all where he was but the overpowering smell of rat droppings and dust told him wherever he was, the place hadn't been inhabited by humanoids in quite some time. Groaning for his muscles were cramping, his body aching from lying on the hard, dirty floor, he drew his knees up, trying to make sense out of where he was and how he'd gotten there. It was pitch black inside the hovel but his Reaper night vision revealed a broken chair, a table missing a leg, assorted debris that told him whoever had lived in the structure had long since abandoned it.

"Where the fuck am I?" he asked aloud, and became aware of the drumming rain upon a metal roof.

He couldn't remember anything. Try as hard as he might, he had absolutely no idea what had happened to him. The last thing he remembered was having coffee with Anthony Simmons. Everything after that was a complete blank.

Getting to his feet, he stumbled for his head spun crazily for a moment. He had to reach out and brace himself against the wall to keep from pitching forward. His stomach roiled and sour bile rushed up his throat. He turned his head and puked, the smell of his vomit so vile he could barely stand it. Over and over he wretched until there was nothing left inside and he thought he might well have strained something. His head was filled with a blinding pain that sent slivers of agony down his neck and into his back. Leaning his head on the wall, he clung to the weathered boards as though his life depended upon it, his fingernails digging into the wood.

"What the hell happened to me?" he whispered.

Quivering as though he were standing encased in ice, he turned his back to the wall and slumped there with his head down and his hands clasped above his knees, hoping the pain and the trembling would pass. His vision was skewed as well, and that didn't help the nausea that refused to go away even if there was nothing left within him to dredge up. Throat burning, eyes watering and refusing to stay still—vision skittering like an eel, head pounding, he was afraid whatever had ailed him a week or so past had returned.

Pushing away from the wall, he stumbled to the door, and with some difficulty, managed to pull it open. The darkness of the night greeted him amidst the silver streaks of pouring rain.

"Won't this fucking shit ever stop?" he yelled, and wished he hadn't for his head felt as though it might well explode. Slapping his hands to his ears, he gagged, the nausea racing up his throat once more.

At least his mount was standing stoically in the rain, though the poor beast gave him a mean look when he staggered to it and missed getting his boot in the stirrup three times before he was able at last to mount. Sitting astride the steed, he realized he was not only hatless he was slickerless as well.

"Bloody fucking hell!" he hissed, and after five tries was able to fashion a hat, though it appeared backward on his head. The slicker took more doing. By the time he had the garment on, he was soaked through to his skin and shivering uncontrollably.

"I could gods-be-damned shoot somebody," he mumbled then gasped.

He put a hand to his hip and was relieved to find his gun in place, though the strap was not tied around his thigh as it should have been. The handle to his laser whip and the dagger that was sheathed beside it were where they were supposed to be and he heaved a thankful sigh.

Nudging the horse into motion, he hung on to the reins and saddle horn for dear life for he feared he'd fall off if he didn't. With every hard step the animal made, the Reaper ground his teeth as the agony flared between his temples and the nausea kept burning a hole in his esophagus.

By the time he reached Phelan Kiel's house, his teeth were chattering and he was so ill he simply slid off the horse's back and into a waiting mud puddle.

* * * * *

"Hey."

Glyn had trouble focusing his eyes when he woke to find Phelan leaning over him. He grunted.

"You know my beds aren't that hard, Reaper, that you need to wallow in the fucking mud in the middle of a downpour," Phelan told him. "And we really didn't appreciate having to clean you off before we brought you in the house."

"What happened?" Glyn mumbled.

"You passed out," Kasid informed him, and Glyn's gaze shifted to another head that suddenly appeared in his line of vision.

"From two cups of coffee?"

Kasid and Phelan looked away from him and at one another then down at him again.

"What was in the coffee, Kullen?" Phelan inquired.

"Not a gods-be-damned thing," Glyn said, struggling to sit up in the bed. He plowed a hand through his wet hair. "At least I didn't think there was at any rate."

"What's the last thing you remember?" Kasid asked.

"Leaving Simmons' house."

Phelan frowned. "And this was when exactly?"

"This morning."

Once again his fellow teammates exchanged perplexed looks then lowered their attention to him.

"Do you realize it was after midnight when we found you snoozing in the mud?" Phelan questioned.

"I stopped somewhere," Glyn muttered.

"Obviously." Phelan folded his arms over his chest. "Where might that have been?"

Glyn remembered waking in the musty cabin but he had no idea where it was located. He remembered climbing atop his horse but he couldn't for the life of him picture the route he'd taken to arrive back at Phelan's house.

"Did you go see your lady?" Kasid queried.

Glyn nodded. "Aye, but that was before I went to Simmons'." He swung his legs off the bed, glancing up at Phelan as he got to his feet. "I've no fucking idea where I was from midmorning until just now. It was a cabin but I don't know how I got there or where the fuck it was." When his teammates looked at one another, he hissed. "Stop swapping those gods-be-damned looks. I'm not losing my mind here." He waved a hand to fashion a pair of leather pants to cover his nakedness.

"The people who have come up missing and lived to tell the tale couldn't tell me where they'd been either, Glyn," Phelan said softly.

That sent a chill down Glyn's spine as he plodded wearily over to the washbasin and dug his hands into the water to splash his face. He felt detached, numb, out of it, and though his head no longer ached and the nausea was gone, he ached all over. Drying his face on a towel Kasid politely handed him, he scrubbed vigorously at his face.

"You want your tenerse now?" Phelan asked, and at Glyn's nod, produced a vac-syringe. "Can you do it or you want me to?"

"I'm not a fucking invalid, Kiel," Glyn grumbled as he held his hand out for the injection of tenerse.

"Mayhap we should ride over to Sagewood and see what we can find out," Kasid suggested.

"Did you find out anything at Fox Hill?" Glyn countered.

"There is an old woman who the workers go to for spells and medicines and the like. I spoke with her at length about the zombie beings and she assured me such things really exist. She tells me there are none at Fox Hill but swears both Burnt Pine and Sagewood have more than their share."

Glyn's eyebrows shot up. "Sagewood?"

Phelan hooked a leg over the arm of an overstuffed chair that sat by the window. "It's amazing what you can learn when you ask the right questions," he said. "I've been friends with Tony Simmons for years but up until a few days ago, he'd not mentioned the creatures to me." He narrowed his eyes. "Then out of the blue he asks if I'd ever heard of them. According to him, Tolliver over at Burnt Pine brought them to his

attention, yet from what I learned from Tolliver's people, both plantations have always had zombie workers."

"And now all of a sudden Simmons is bringing this to your attention," Glyn said. "Why would he do that?"

"Because before now, there was no problem," Phelan surmised. "One man I spoke with said the plantation owners have used the ceremony for making slave workers from long before the Burning War, as far back as the Terran fifteenth century. It wasn't considered truly evil until bokors or dark sorcerers—priests who practiced black magic—began to use it for their personal gain or to punish someone they didn't like."

"And by punishing, it is meant for the one they turned into a zombie or someone upon whom they set the zombie," Kasid added. "Such creatures ruled by a bokor are truly evil and have been cursed to eat flesh because that is a grave sin among the people of color."

"So somewhere out there is a bokor who is responsible for the bone yard you found," Glyn stated.

"Aye, and from what I also learned at Burnt Pine, there is at least one houngan and one mambo practicing their magic at Sagewood," Phelan told him.

"Houngan being a male practitioner of the art and the mambo being a female," Kasid explained. "The old lady at Fox Hill is a tenth-generation mambo and proud of her heritage. She says the one at Sagewood—whom she would not name—is from a long line of magic-sayers."

"Something else I learned that sure as hell didn't set well with me is that whoever this bokor is," Phelan said, "he's one of Raphian's minions."

"Which means he has unlimited power at his disposal," Kasid stated.

"And has to be stopped before he makes more of these zombie things and the territory is overrun with mindless killing machines," Phelan declared.

Glyn glanced in the mirror, frowned at his beard but didn't have the energy to shave. "Well, since I don't have the urge to snack on either of you, I don't guess it was the bokor who had me." Once more the Reaper waved his hand to create socks, boots and a shirt.

"He might have, Kullen, but then found you resistant to whatever drug he gave you."

Turning his head to give Phelan a steady look, Glyn felt another chill go down his body. He thought about how his body ached and how sick he'd been the day before. "You think someone gave me something?"

"I believe it's highly possible," was the reply. "I also think we need to do as Kasid suggested and go over to Sagewood." A muscle clenched in Phelan's jaw. "Together and not separately from now on."

"There is safety in numbers, you mean?" Glyn asked.

"If we're alone, we might conceivably be vulnerable. Something we don't understand happened to you. I'd just as soon we stick together."

"Simmons did invite us to return so we have an excuse for going back this evening," Glyn remarked.

"We'll make a day of it instead," Phelan said. "Have him take us around to the elders among the workers and see if we can glean any impressions when they are around him."

Kasid started to speak then stopped, holding up a hand for the other men to be quiet. "Aye, Lord Naois?" he said.

"Two drones have finished their recalibrations and are on their way to you. One drone has been programmed to seek out the possible locations of cybots and destroy them. The other drone will be searching for super beings those 'bots might have created and marking their location for you men to go after and take out. That drone will also begin taking DNA samples from the populace," said the Shadowlord. *"Do you have anything to report on the disappearances?"*

As Glyn and Phelan listened, Kasid explained what had transpired the day before.

"We concur," Lord Kheelan interrupted. *"You should stay together. Keep us informed. If we need to send reinforcements, we will."*

"Ask him how Owen is doing," Glyn said.

"How is Tohre, Your Grace?"

"He and his lady-wife and sons are well," Lord Kheelan snapped, and then the connection from the Citadel was broken.

"I don't think Lord Kheelan likes us to have friendships within the team," Phelan observed.

"That's because *he* doesn't have any friends outside the other Shadowlords," Glyn stated.

"I too have noticed that," Kasid agreed.

"Let's get on over to Sagewood and see what we can find out," Phelan suggested. He unhooked his leg from the chair and stood. "I don't think we need to let Tony know what we learned from Copley and Tolliver yesterday though."

"I agree," Glyn said. "Something's odd there. I might not remember what happened after I left there but I distinctly remember him telling me he knew of no magic-sayers at Sagewood."

"Which means he's hiding something," Phelan said of his friend. "Tony knows everything that happens on his plantation."

* * * * *

At that moment Anthony Simmons was pacing his office, scowling deeply as his housekeeper relayed to him what had transpired between her and the Reaper. He stopped moving to give her a stony stare.

"You are sure he will remember nothing of what took place after he left here?" he probed.

"The coffee was laced with a powerful drug that wiped clean his memory when it was digested," Leilani explained. "He will not remember coming to my cabin nor will he remember what I did to him while he was there."

"And Mystery saw him in your bed?"

Leilani sighed heavily. She had already explained this to her employer twice before. "Aye, sir. She saw him."

"I don't want any harm to come to him," Simmons said, reaching up to run a finger beneath the collar of his shirt. "To have harm come to a Reaper would be to bring hell down on us from the Citadel and that we do not want!"

"No harm will come to him, Mr. Tony," Leilani replied. "I have merely severed the bond between him and the woman you want." She smiled coyly. "Leaving Mystery available for you."

Simmons' scowl deepened. "I might need help in that department."

Leilani reached into the pocket of her apron and withdrew a small green vial. "This added to a glass of juice will ensure her interest in you." When he seemed reluctant to take the vial, she boldly reached out to take his hand and lay the glass container in his palm, closing his fingers over it. "She will not be able to deny you."

The planter looked down at his closed fist for a long moment then lifted his gaze to hers. "You lay with him?"

"I did," Leilani lied. She had tried but the unconscious man's shaft would not stiffen no matter what she did nor could she push his flaccid flesh inside her cunt. After an hour of trying, she had finally given up.

"You are sure?" he pressed. "For once a Reaper takes a woman, he can not take another. That is common knowledge."

"He is mine," she stated, her chin high. "He will never again put his hands to another."

Simmons wiped his free hand across his sweaty brow. "There's the other matter," he said. "I got the impression Kullen wasn't buying my disavowal of any knowledge concerning magic-sayers on Sagewood. Go fetch John Dirk for me."

Distaste and fear shot through Leilani at having to confront the foreman but she was too relieved to finally be allowed out from under her employer's questioning to do anything but bob a quick curtsy and hurry to do his bidding. Going to the foyer, she picked up an umbrella and went out on the porch, calling for Dirk.

He startled her by appearing almost instantly behind her. "Did you fuck him?" he growled.

She knew better than to try her lies on this man. Not only was she terrified of him, she was forced to respect him for the commanding magic-sayer he was. She understood he had more power in the very tip of his little finger than she possessed in her entire

body and it was an all-encompassing deadly power totally without sympathy, pity or mercy. His Master was one she feared beyond all the loa at her command.

"No, Monsieur Jean," she said.

"You have something that belongs to him?"

It was a sly question that filled her with absolute terror for — again — she could not, dare not lie to him.

"I have his hat and slicker," she confessed.

"And?"

"Monsieur Jean..." she began, but his hand shot out and he wrapped his fingers tightly around the back of her neck, pulling her toward him as he knocked the umbrella out of her hands.

"Make no mistake about that one, wench," the tall man snarled. "He will not be yours no matter what feeble magic you attempt to wield. He has been chosen by the Master." He shook her roughly. "Now I will ask you again—do you have something that belongs to him?"

Her knees shaking, her bowels feeling loose at his vile touch, she managed to nod. "I have fingernail clippings, hair and a few drops of his blood," she admitted.

"All of which you will render into my care," John Dirk instructed. He released her, shoving her from him. "Get them now and bring them to me."

She nodded miserably as all hope of the love she had sought to acquire began to dwindle away, but as she bent to retrieve the umbrella, she reasoned that if she could not have the handsome Reaper, at least Mystery Butler would not get him either. She stepped out in the rain but the gruff voice stopped her.

"Why were you calling for me?"

"Mr. Tony is looking for you."

A rude snort of derision came from the foreman. "And we both know why, eh?" he asked.

Leilani knew an answer wasn't required so she hurried through the downpour, thinking of what might have been had she been allowed to keep the Reaper as her own.

Chapter Fourteen

"I'm mad at you, Glynnie!"

The little girl stood in the doorway with her thin arms crossed and a brutal pout on her lips. Her eyes were narrowed into thin slits and the numerous pigtails jutting out from her small head quivered with what could only be described as outrage.

"What did I do?" Glyn asked. He dropped to one knee on the porch as his fellow Reapers sat astride their horses behind him.

"You made my mama cry and that wasn't nice!" Valda stated. "You ought to be horsewhipped!"

Overhead lightning pulsed across the heavens and a loud shriek punctuated the child's words.

"Valli, I don't—"

"You go away, Glynnie Kullen!" Valda snapped. "You just go on away!"

With that, Mystery's daughter stepped back and slammed the door. The sound of the lock sliding into its hasp stamped finality to the conversation.

"Mystery?" Glyn called out as he got to his feet. "Open the door and tell me what's going on." When there was no reply, he called her name again.

"She ain't gonna open that there door, milord."

Glyn turned to see an elderly woman of color standing at the end of the porch. Where she stood, the rain did not reach and her white gown was dry as it fluttered against her scrawny legs.

"Why not, milady?" Glyn asked. He took a few steps closer to her. "What is it I am supposed to have done?"

The old woman shrugged. "Ain't nothing you did, milord," the old woman said. "It was what was done to you that Mystery saw."

Once more the terrible cold shiver wriggled down Glyn's spine. "And what was done to me, milady?" he asked, but when he took another step, the aged woman held up a staying hand.

"Look to the evil in this, Glynwood Kullen," she said. "Look to the evil."

"Glynwood?" he questioned. He hadn't been called that in hundreds of years. No one this side of the megaverse should have even known that name. When he opened his mouth to ask her how she'd known his given name, she simply vanished.

"Shite!" he heard Phelan curse, and looked around to see his teammate making the Sign of the Slain one. "That was a fucking ghostling, Kullen!"

Glyn spun around and raised a fist to slam it hard against Mystery's door. "Woman, open this door or, by the gods, I swear I'll kick it down!"

The door was jerked open to reveal Mystery standing there with tears running down her cheeks. "This is a house of mourning, milord," she informed him. "Show some respect."

Realizing the elderly woman next door must have been the apparition to whom he'd just spoken, Glyn removed his hat but held his ground. "I'm sorry for your loss, Myst, but I need to know what it is you think I did."

"What I *think* you did?" she asked, eyes wide. "I don't think anything, milord. I know! I *saw* you!"

"Saw me do what?" he countered, unaware he was rolling the hat brim around and around in his gloved hands.

"You," she spat, and her eyes flashed sable fire. She lowered her voice so Valda would not hear. "You stretched out on that whore's bed!"

"Oh *hell* no!" he stated. "You didn't..."

Mystery's voice was a low, threatening hiss meant only for his ears. "I know what I saw, Glyn! You were naked as the day your mother birthed you!" Fresh tears cascaded down Mystery's dark cheeks.

Glyn blinked and his mouth dropped open. His own eyes flared with shock. He was so astounded by those words all he could do was look behind him to Phelan. "Tell her," he asked.

Phelan dismounted and stepped up on the porch, doffing his hat as he did. "Milady, he doesn't know what happened to him yesterday and —"

"Milord, I am not an idiot!" Mystery cut him off, her voice louder. She forced the tone to a grating whisper. "I know what transpired in that woman's bed even if he says he doesn't!"

"We found him last evening passed out facedown in the mud. He was unconscious until morning," Phelan told her. "He didn't fake that and Reapers don't lie. He says he doesn't know what happened after he left Simmons' house and he is telling you the truth of it. He is as incapable of lying as he is of taking another woman to his flesh after he mated with you."

Mystery's face turned dark with embarrassment and she looked accusingly at Glyn, but before she could berate him for revealing such intimate information about their relationship, Phelan shook his head.

"He didn't have to tell me. You have the scent of him on you." He ducked his head. "In you. You are his mate."

Mystery looked at Kasid, who nodded his agreement.

"Who was I supposed to have slept with, Mystery?" Glyn whispered.

"I saw you!" she snapped at him.

"Who?" he insisted.

"Leilani," she said, practically spitting the word out as though it were bitter on her tongue.

Glyn's forehead creased. "Who?"

"Mr. Tony's housekeeper!"

Memory supplied a picture of the woman in his mind and he gawked at her. "You thought I would find her attractive?"

"You were naked," Mystery insisted. "In her bed! What else was I to think but that you found her desirable?"

He leaned toward her, towering over her shorter frame. "What did you do when you saw me like that, wench?"

Her lips quivered. "You told me to go away," she said then sniffed. "So I did."

"I spoke to you?" he asked, stunned.

"You did. You told me to go away and I had enough pride left to know that if you didn't want me, I would not fight to hold on to you."

A little head popped up beside Mystery's leg and Valda's accusing eyes were two black holes of accusation as she stared at Glyn.

"What did you do to my mama, Glynnie?"

His face softened at the sight of the child and when he spoke, his words were gentle. "Valli, get your coat."

The child looked up at her mother for clarification of the command.

"Do as he says, sweeting," Mystery said, bending down to kiss her daughter's head. "Glyn and I have some things to discuss."

When Valda disappeared into the cabin, Glyn turned his attention to the man beside him. "Phelan, you and Kasid take my daughter with you to the main house."

If Phelan was surprised by the claiming of the child, he didn't show it. He simply nodded and rocked his hat back on his head.

Valda came out on the porch in her little slicker and floppy hat. She took Phelan's hand. "Come along, Mr. Reaper," she insisted, tugging him behind her. "Mama needs to box Glynnie's ears big time! He's been a bad, bad boy."

Phelan chuckled then scooped the child in his arms and carried her out into the rain, sat her atop his mount then swung behind her, leaning forward to shield her body with his. Neither he nor Kasid spoke but turned their horses to urge them toward the main house.

"Inside," Glyn said, and his voice was stern as he put a hand to Mystery's chest to push her back gently.

Mystery bit her bottom lip, her eyes worried as the Reaper kicked the door shut behind him and tossed his hat to the table, never looking to see if it landed where he'd aimed. Her gaze dipped to his hands where he was slowly removing his gloves then leapt back to his face.

"I..." she began, but he shook his head firmly.

The gloves came off and unerringly followed the hat. Next he untied the strap at his thigh and began unbuckling his gun belt.

"Glyn..."

"Hush, Myst," he ordered.

She took a step back, suddenly fearful and intimidated by the hard glint in his amber eyes. His jaw was set and a muscle flexed at the jawline as he swung the gun belt from his waist and then laid it with more care atop the table.

"A Reaper will mate with only one woman in his lifetime," he said through clenched teeth. "He will love but one woman for as long as he draws breath." He began tugging the shirt from his pants. "Those were two of the *geis* the goddess laid upon us when She made us."

"The what?" she asked.

"Law," he answered. "Command, demand, order—call it what you will. She made it clear that we are to have but one woman and one woman alone. We can have only one mate and we'd best pick wisely for once we put our flesh inside that woman, that flesh can not enter the flesh of a woman who is not our mate. A Reaper's cock won't accept a substitute once it has been sheathed. That cock will not harden."

Mystery took another step back as his fingers ran the buttons of his shirtfront and cuff, peeling the garment from his broad chest. She unconsciously licked her upper lip when those strong hands went to the belt at the waistband of his uniform pants.

"I pledged my love to you, Mystery Butler," he said, eyes hard. "I promised myself to you." He snapped the belt from its loops and tossed it angrily aside. "I *gave* myself to you."

With a flick of his fingers, his boots went flying across the room and landed with a dull thud against the wall, making Mystery jump and cry out.

"To you, Mystery," he stressed. "I gave myself to you."

She couldn't move as he peeled out of his pants and stood there with his legs apart, the evidence of his arousal jutting like a battering ram before him.

"To you," he repeated. "And only to you. Do you hear what I'm telling you?"

She nodded and licked her lips again, unable to look away from the powerful shaft that was straining toward her.

"This piece of meat between my legs is only for you. It will not awaken to another woman's touch ever again. Do you understand?"

"Aye," she whispered.

"Then come here."

With feet that felt encased in mud, she walked toward him, fearful of the temper she saw revealed in his stern eyes. She hung her head.

"I'm sorry," she said.

He put a finger under her chin and lifted her face so he could see her. He searched her eyes then tilted his head to one side.

"Mystery, I don't know how I came to be in the housekeeper's bed. I certainly did not go there of my own freewill. If she tried to mate with me, she failed for my cock would have spurned her. It would not have risen. Whatever her intent, it was not successful."

"She wanted to hurt me," Mystery said, and a single tear slid down her face.

Glyn caught the tear with the pad of his thumb then brought it to his mouth, spreading it over his lips. "And because she hurt you," he said, his face hard, "because she made you cry, she will pay a very dear price."

She caught his hand and pressed his palm to her cheek. "No, beloved," she denied. "Leave her be. There has always been bad blood between us but I'll not have hers on my hands or yours."

He put his other hand to her face as well. "Are you sure?" he asked. "Say the word and I will make her rue the day she ever brought her mischief to our door."

"Leave her be," she repeated. "She's not worth it." She turned her lips into his palm and kissed the calloused plane. "Will you forgive me for doubting you?"

"I hold no blame toward you," he told her. "The evidence was damning but now you know it was false, staged, and had no more substance than dandelion fluff."

He gathered her into his arms and bent his head to place his lips to her neck.

"Aunt Zettie died," she said against his chest.

"Aye, I know," he replied, wondering if he would ever tell her of his conversation with the dead woman. He doubted he would.

She slipped her arms around his waist. "I was there when she passed on."

"When her spirit left her body," he said, and felt her nod.

"I went to sit with her after Leilani... After I saw..." She took a ragged breath then lifted her head to look up at him. "Glyn, I don't ever want to be apart from you again. I died inside thinking I'd lost you."

"I'm here, *ben my chree*," he said, calling her the woman of his heart. "I will be here for all time."

She searched his gaze. "But can I?"

Glyn's brows drew together. "What are you asking?"

She took a deep breath then let it out raggedly. Took another then in a rush said, "Make me like you."

Nothing she could have said would have shocked the Reaper more. He stared at her. Previously he had taken only one drop of her blood. Not to make her one of his kind but so he would forever be able to find her, to read her mind, to know the thoughts in her head that might cause her hurt or pain so he could ease that hurt, eliminate that pain. He wanted to know her soul so he could care for her as she should

always have been cared for. He wanted to keep her safe, but the thought of her undergoing the pain of Transition turned his black blood cold.

"Mystery..." he began.

"It's what I want," she whispered.

"You don't know what you're asking, wench," he said, shaking his head. "It is not an easy life and the initial Transition is rough. It's very painful. You won't be able to exist without taking blood, enduring the pain of the tenses injections."

"I would not be able to exist without you," she said, and when he would have protested that statement, she cut him off. "Glyn, I have already lost one husband and though he and I were not close, did not have this overpowering love between us that I have found for you, he was the father of my child and I respected him. I missed him when he was killed and I mourned for his passing. I want to be with you, I want you with me for as long as the Fates will allow but that time will be longer if I become like you."

His eyes turned tender. "Before you make that decision, you should speak with the other Lady Reapers—to Aingeal and Danni and Rachel and Lea." He thought of Bevy Couré's mate and winced. "They will be able to give you female insight into this that I never could. Lea didn't want to be a Reaper. It was forced on her. Danni too. Even Rachel wasn't..."

She put her fingers over his lips to shush him. "It is what I want," she told him. "I don't need to ask anyone anything. I believe I loved you at first sight—though I was a bit afraid of you—and I know you might think this rushed, but I know what I want. I want you and I want to be with you for as long as I can be."

For a long moment he looked at her and then he sighed, gently pulled her fingers from his lips. "If you are sure, then once we are Joined, we will see that it happens."

"You promise?" she asked.

He drew in a long breath, held it for a moment then exhaled slowly. "Against my better judgment. Aye, I promise."

She smiled and though the rain was slamming savagely against the tin roof, the day became bright and cheerful for him. He found himself grinning boyishly back at her.

"You do forgive me?" she obviously wanted to clarify. "For doubting you? Thinking bad of you?"

"You were tricked and you were hurt," he replied. "Had the tables been reversed and I'd found you naked in another man's bed, I'd gone on a rampage the likes of which I hope you never see."

"Would you have fought for me?" she asked, staring up into his hooded eyes.

"Wench, I would have taken the bastard apart piece by bloody piece and sucked the marrow from his broken bones," he answered. "There wouldn't have been anything left of him when I was finished."

She laid her cheek to his chest and wrapped her arms around him. "I take it you have some feeling for me too."

Glyn chuckled. "As if you didn't already know," he said, and dipped his knees to sweep her up from the floor. "Let's just see how much, shall we?"

He carried her to the bed and before she even realized what he was about, he waved his hand over her and the clothes vanished from her body.

"Glyn!" she gasped, surprised by the action.

Once more his hand flashed through the air and his own clothing was gone.

"I'll teach you how to do that," he said as he stretched out atop her, nudging her legs apart with his knees so he lay between her thighs. "Between that and teaching you to fly, we're gonna have a good old time."

Mystery's eyes grew huge in her face. "I'll be able to fly?" she whispered. "Through the air?"

"Where else would you fly, wench?" he laughed, and ducked his head to press his lips first against the hollow at the base of her throat and then over one dark nipple, drawing the puckered little bud deep into his mouth.

"Fly," she said with awe. "Like a bird?"

"Umm," he said as he suckled her, sweeping his tongue over and around her nipple.

"Can I choose what kind of bird?"

He lifted his eyes and looked at her, speaking around the possession of her nipple, his teeth clamped lightly around the swelling bud. "What kind of bird would you like to be?"

His words were slightly garbled and his warm breath as he spoke fanned over her breast to send shivers down her spine.

"What kind of bird do you become?" she asked then giggled, her attention going to the dark blue tattoo of a hawk that swept down the left side of his face. "I'll be a lady hawk. A red-tailed lady hawk like we used to see out in the Moilia territory. They are so graceful and pretty."

"Huh," he agreed, and resumed his firm suckling.

"But how can I do that, Glynnie?" she asked. "How do you —"

He stopped, released his hold on her nipple and gave her a stern look.

"Wench, I am having trouble concentrating on my job here. I'll answer that one question and no more. Deal?"

She nodded, smiling.

"To change into a bird—or any creature for that matter—all you need do is hold that image in your mind and will your body to transform itself into that creature. Okay?"

"Okay," she agreed, and ran the fingers of both hands through his dark hair and urged his mouth back to her breast.

"No more talking," he ordered, and took her nipple between his lips again.

Mystery gave herself up to the pure ecstasy this man was capable of giving her. The heat from his mouth, the wetness of his tongue as he swept it around the areola of her breast, the weight of him pressing her to the mattress was such glorious pleasure it brought tears to her eyes. As he shifted his weight and slid a hand down her leg and over to her aching sex, she drew in a quick breath.

He eased the folds of her vagina apart with his index and ring fingers and stroked gently, very slowly along the opening of her sheath with his middle finger until she became moist. He pressed his palm to her wetness and rubbed gently as he slipped a finger inside her. A light grunt of appreciation came from him as the muscles of her sheath tightened around his tender invasion.

Moving his lips from one breast to the other, he suckled her in rhythm to the slow thrusting of his fingers within her as his cock hardened against her thigh.

Mystery's fingers raked through his thick curls, holding him to her as she had Valda when an infant. Her eyes were closed as she soaked in the delight his lips and teeth and fingers were having on her body. His cock flexed against her leg, a drop of pre-cum fell on her flesh, causing her belly to clench with anticipation.

"I love you with all my heart," she whispered. "I never thought I could ever love this deeply or so quickly."

Easing his mouth from her breast, he scooted up on the bed until he was wedged between her thighs and he was paused over her, one finger still deep inside her.

"I never thought I would find a woman I wanted to spend my life with," he said. "I was lonely but content enough until I began to experience you in my dreams. Once that happened, I was lost, milady."

"Lost?" she questioned, her forehead creased with doubt. "You make it sound as though I took something from you, Reaper. Is that how you see it? That you've lost your freedom because of me?"

"No," he said firmly. "That isn't what I meant at all. I lost my heart to you, Myst. Not my freedom. Perhaps I should have said I found myself with you. I know now what I've been missing all these years. It wasn't just the companionship of a beautiful woman or the love and pleasure that woman could give me, but the sense of peace I feel when I see myself reflected in her eyes."

Mystery pulled his head down, brought his lips to hers and acknowledged that statement with a gentle kiss. She put her entire being—soul and body—into that kiss, making it clear to him that she had handed her own heart into his keeping. Her tongue slipped possessively past his lips and into his mouth, mimicking the in and out movement of his finger in her sex.

Glyn groaned and ground his mouth to hers, dueling with his own tongue—tasting her, taking her, thrusting as deep as he could then slithering down her body until his mouth was at the wet, hot core of her.

“Glyn!” she cried out, her fingers tightening in his hair.

He licked her juicy folds, pierced her with his tongue, shocked her as he slid his hand beneath her and impaled her puckered opening with his thumb. She jerked against him and her legs fell wide open as she welcomed this erotic intrusion. She squirmed as he pressed deeper, his teeth nibbling on her clit.

“Please!” she gasped, and her hips began to arch in enticement for her mate to take her.

But Glyn was in no hurry to do so. He lapped at her center, dragged the tip of his tongue up one fold and down the other—over and over until she was panting. With each circuit his teeth grazed the engorged button at the apex of her channel.

“Glyn, please!” she begged.

Yet still he consumed her, branded her, gave her an immense amount of pleasure as he continued his assault on her senses. One hand was on her breast—his thumb passing back and forth over the swollen nipple. The other was beneath her—the thumb doing such deliciously wicked things to her body she began to sweat.

When she could stand it no longer, Mystery tugged viciously on his hair and growled low in her throat—letting him know in no uncertain terms she was ready for him, needed him and had to have his stiff shaft.

With slow, cocky ease he withdrew his thumb and moved sinuously up in the bed, dragging his engorged cock along her leg until he had that thick tool paused at her sheath.

“You want me, wench?” he asked in a throaty rasp.

“Aye, Reaper!” she hissed, and brought her legs up to trap him, tightening them as hard as she could around his hips. “Do it!”

He laughed wickedly and put a hand to that massive shaft, placing it at her opening. “You’re sure now?”

She didn’t answer but levered her hips up to impale herself on his rod, pressing against him as hard as she could until he was well seated within her.

“Aye, I believe so,” she told him.

His hands went under her ass and lifted her, bounced her to him, and then began a slow, measured thrusting that had her dragging her nails down his back.

“Faster, Reaper,” she ordered. “Faster and harder!”

“Harder?” he echoed.

“Yes, Kullen,” she growled. “Harder!”

She clawed at him until she drew blood—unaware that she had—and it was like a goad that flicked straight to his cock for he bucked against her and began to pummel her with that huge rod.

In and out, going as deep as her body would allow. In and out, filling her and stretching her. In and out, taking her to a place she wanted to journey.

When she came, she came hard and cried out fiercely—her inner muscles rippling around him so forcefully his eyes flew wide in shock. He increased the speed of his thrusts until his own release shot like bolts of lightning through him and he bellowed as hot cum spurted hard and copiously. His fingers dug into her ass and he hefted her up higher until his cock was pressed against her womb.

He knew the moment he did it that he had impregnated her this time. He knew it as surely as he knew his own heart. With another bellow he lowered his head and sank his fangs into her neck.

Mystery stiffened at the shock of the sting and tried at first to push him away but the pain was fleeting—giving way to an exquisite pleasure that caused her eyes to roll back in her head.

“You’re mine, Myst,” he said. “Completely and totally mine now.”

A soft smile hovered over her dusky lips. “I have been from the moment I laid eyes on you,” she told him.

He locked his gaze on hers. “I will never touch another woman for as long as I draw breath. You will never touch another man. If you do, I’ll destroy him in ways you can’t even begin to imagine.”

She put a palm to his cheek. “I won’t ever want another man, Glyn Kullen. You are all I’ve ever wanted.”

He took a deep breath. “This time we made a child.”

If he had expected surprise from her, he didn’t get it. She simply nodded.

“Then,” she said, caressing his cheek, “I believe we’d better see a priest sooner than you’d planned.”

“Today,” he stated, as sure of it as anything he’d ever known. “I’ll get us a priest today!”

* * * * *

Neither Phelan nor Kasid had informed the housekeeper why they appeared at her employer’s door with Mystery Butler’s daughter in tow. They simply pushed past her without giving her any explanation and Phelan led them into the parlor, knowing the young woman would let Simmons know they were there.

“Do you think she’s pretty?” Valda whispered to Kasid, who sat beside her on the loveseat.

“Not as pretty as your mother,” the Reaper replied with a gentle smile.

"Did she try to take Glynnie away from Mama? Is that why Mama was crying?"

Kasid looked over the child's head to Phelan before answering. "I think she flirted with him, dearling, but then many women have flirted with Lord Glyn."

"They'd better not or my mama will scratch their eyes out," Valda stated emphatically. "They better leave my papa alone!"

Kasid grinned. "I don't think you have anything to worry about, little one. Lord Glyn has chosen your mother as his lady and no one will ever be able to break them apart."

Anthony Simmons appeared in the parlor doorway, his brows drawn together. "Has something happened to Mystery?" he asked, his gaze locked on the little girl.

Valda started to speak but Kasid put a restraining hand on her leg and shook his head slightly. The little girl clamped her mouth shut.

"Lord Glyn is with her," Phelan answered.

A flash of fury shot through the plantation owner's gray gaze but then a weak, forced smile pulled at his mouth. "Then I won't have to worry about her safety," Simmons said. "When I saw Valda, I thought something amiss."

"Nothing is amiss," Phelan stated, watching Simmons closely. "They just needed some time alone so we brought this lovely young lady with us."

The housekeeper was standing behind Simmons and from the look on her face, it was evident she feared what the Reapers might say or do.

"Where are my manners? Would you gentlemen like some refreshments?" Simmons asked.

"No, but some information would be helpful," Phelan said.

"What kind of information?" Simmons inquired as he moved into the parlor and took a seat in his favorite chair by a tall window. "You may go, Leilani."

"We'd prefer she stay," Kasid insisted.

Simmons frowned. "May I ask why?"

"You have a magic-sayer at Sagewood and we want to know who he is," Phelan answered.

"I'm sorry but I..." Simmons began.

"Cut the crap, Tony," Phelan growled. "Nothing happens here that you aren't privy to. We want the name of the sorcerer working at Sagewood."

Simmons turned his gaze to Leilani. "My housekeeper dabbles in potions and the like if that's what you mean."

The Reapers turned to look at the young woman who was clutching her hands in front of her. She was trembling now, any hint of bravery gone from her face. Her eyes were downcast and her breathing clearly audible in the still room.

"We know about her and we know what she tried to do," Phelan said, "but the one we want can do more than weave a simple spell that accomplishes nothing more than

hateful mischief. Who is he, Tony? Who is the powerful magic-sayer who can turn men into zombies?"

Simmons' eyes turned hard. "Phelan, you and I have been friends for a long, long time. How can you possibly think I'd lied to you? Haven't I been doing everything I can to help you find out about who's behind the disappearances in the territory?"

A knock at the door saved Kiel from having to answer. After a quick look to her employer, Leilani hurried to answer, apparently glad to be away from the Reapers and their questions, but when she opened the door, the housekeeper jumped back, terror flickering over her dark face.

"I came for our daughter," Glyn Kullen said, his amber eyes as cold as ice.

Leilani backed away from the stony, lethal anger in those deadly orbs and rushed to the parlor.

"Lord Glyn is here, Mr. Simmons," she said, wringing her hands. "He wants the child."

Valda scooted off the loveseat without a backward look at Kasid and ran out of the room.

"See if he needs us," Phelan ordered Kasid.

The Akhkharulian nodded and left, giving the housekeeper a nasty look as he passed.

"You didn't answer me, Phelan," Simmons pressed. "Do you honestly believe I'd play false with you?"

Phelan was sitting on another loveseat with his ankle crossed over the knee of his opposite foot. He was at ease in the chair—his body language speaking volumes for his restraint though his eyes were flint hard.

"Who is he?"

"Phelan, I am not lying to you. I don't know who this man is you're talking about!"

The Reaper smiled nastily. "Aye, you do."

Simmons stood. "I would like you to leave, Lord Kiel. I have nothing more to say to you at this time."

Phelan nodded. "As you will, Mr. Simmons," he said, and got leisurely to his feet. Both he and Kasid had removed their hats and slickers when they'd entered the parlor and now he gathered their belongings from a leather side chair. He cast Simmons one last penetrating look then sauntered from the room. He met Kasid in the foyer.

"Glyn is taking care of some business," Kasid said. "He and his lady took the child to a relative's." He glanced past Phelan. "Did Simmons give you a name?"

"No," Phelan responded. "But he will." He handed Kasid his things then shrugged into his own slicker. "We'll give him time to realize he's made a very dangerous mistake."

When the Reapers departed, Leilani hurried to the parlor to find her employer slugging down a tall glass of whiskey.

"What are we going to do?" she asked, eyes wide. "They'll be back."

"Let them," Simmons said as he refilled his glass. "If I gave them his name, he'd turn me into one of his undead." He took a long swallow of the fiery brew then shot her a knowing look. "If you want to tell them, go ahead."

"No," Leilani said. "You know I can't."

"Where was Kullen going with Mystery?" he demanded.

"He didn't say anything to me," she replied with a shudder. "He looked at me like he could kill me."

"And most likely will before it's over," Simmons said with a snort.

"I thought he was the one. I thought..."

"Well, what did he say to the other Reaper?" Simmons snapped.

"That he and the bitch had business to see to and that they were taking the brattling to Mystery's brother's house. That's all he said other than to say he should be back to Lord Phelan's in an hour or so but not to worry if he ran late."

Simmons' narrowed his eyes. "What is that bastard up to with my woman?" he growled. He brought the glass up and drained it, his words already beginning to slur as he ordered Leilani to fetch John Dirk.

"And tell him to be quick about it this time!"

* * * * *

The words were spoken over them quietly and quickly for the priest feared the tall man in black and disapproved of the woman of color the Reaper had chosen to be his mate. He did not however disdain the three twenty-dollar gold pieces the lawman pressed into his trembling palm.

"There will be those who might give you trouble about this, milord," the religious warned as he pocketed the gold.

Glyn gave the priest a steady look. "They'd better not," he said.

"From your people and hers," the nervous man insisted.

"My people are Reapers, priest, and they'll not say a gods-be-damned word to me about who I have chosen to spend my life with."

"I mean other white people," the priest clarified. "There is bigotry still in this part of the country. Prejudice can be an ugly thing."

"If anyone—*anyone*—dares to insult my lady or gives her a moment of grief over her choice of husband, they will answer to me," Glyn ground out. "And I really don't think any of them would be stupid enough to do it."

"But behind your backs, milord, they will—"

"It had *best* be behind my back for if they say it to my face or where I can hear it, I'll wipe the floor up with *their* faces!"

The priest's lips pursed. "Violence never solved anything, milord."

"What occurred here today is between the three of us, holy man," Glyn declared. "It had best remain that way until I tell you differently. Is that clear?"

"Aye, milord."

"Not a word from you."

"No, milord," the priest said, trembling visibly.

Mystery kept silent. Her happiness was dampened by the priest's words but she was determined not to let his pessimism and predictions run her Joining day. She was now the legal bride of the man she loved and not just his lover. They were united for all time and she was proud to be Lady Mystery Kullen.

Glyn reached for her hand. "Come, milady."

He had not sealed their Joining with a kiss but once outside the priest's rectory, he pulled her into his arms and kissed her soundly. It was a kiss of promise that made her toes curl. When he released her, her lips were swollen from the fierceness of that possessive kiss.

"I'll take you back to your cabin then I have to get back to Phelan's." His hands were on her shoulders as he looked down into her beautiful face. "Will you be all right?"

"I'll be fine," she assured him. "So will Valda. My sisters-in-law will spoil her so rotten salt won't even help."

Glyn laughed. "I intend to spoil the bantling even worse than that."

Tears gathered in Mystery's eyes. "You really do love her, don't you?"

He gave her an incredulous look. "Did you think I didn't?"

"Of course not, but she can be a little brat sometimes," she said of her child.

"You didn't know me as a boy," Glyn chuckled. "You have no idea what the word really means!"

Reluctantly he led her to the horse and picked her up, swung her onto the saddle then climbed behind her. With his arm circling her waist, he kicked the steed into motion, feeling all was finally right in his dark world.

* * * * *

Enraged black eyes watched the Reaper as he dismounted and held his arms up to the young woman sitting astride his horse. A low growl came from the sentinel when the lawman let the woman slide down his body then encircled her within his arms and lowered his mouth to hers.

"*Le bâtard blanc, vous paierez pour vos actions!*" the watcher hissed, calling the Reaper a white bastard and warning he would pay for what he was daring to do.

John Dirk heard the man of color cursing Glyn Kullen and made no move to follow when the lawman rode away. Smiling hatefully, the foreman knew there was his own brand of vengeance and then there was that of the priest whose dark gaze flicked disdainfully to his own. The white man held up his hands and shook his head, silently letting the other magic-sayer know he had no intention of interfering.

"Mon maître est plus puissant que le vôtre!"

The foreman could have argued the point, believing his own master more powerful than the man of color's, but he said nothing. With two commanding demons going after the Reaper, Kullen didn't stand a snowball's chance in hell of surviving the attack.

"Ne mêlez pas-vous de ma voie, Jean Dirk," the priest spat before disappearing behind the cabin where Aunt Zettie's body still lay upon its cooling board.

John Dirk had every intention of staying out of the priest's way. Let the mighty Kalfu send His minion after the Reaper. He'd simply tell Simmons a more dangerous adversary had entered the fray.

Chapter Fifteen

"He's burning up with fever," Phelan said as he adjusted the quilt around Glyn.

"We need to get him into a tub of cold water to bring the temperature down."

"There is something terribly wrong about this," Phelan remarked. "He was fine when he left here this morning. Now he shows up at the door with dirt all over him, barely breathing."

"Whatever is happening here is unnatural, Phelan. His hellion should be able to throw off the illness. The queen doesn't seem to be healing him."

"You think?" Phelan sneered.

Kasid wet a cloth in the water basin beside the bed then began to gently Glyn's face. "Lord Kheelan?" he asked softly.

"We are aware of the situation," was the reply. "His hellion seems to be in a state of suspended animation, under whatever magic has claimed Kullen."

"Have you any notion what caused it?"

"None at all." That came from Lord Naois. "But Healer Desden is looking into the matter. Your fellow Reapers are here at the Citadel. Should we send them down to you?"

Kasid knew Phelan couldn't hear the conversation and relayed to him Lord Naois' question.

"I don't think so – yet," Phelan replied. "Tell him to give us a few more days."

"Rest assured, we are monitoring Lord Glyn and trying to contact the goddess – who seems to have come up missing again – regarding his situation. As soon as we know anything, I will be in contact with you."

"That would be greatly appreciated, Your Grace."

"One other thing, Lord Kasid," Lord Naois said. "Rather a good news-bad news situation, I'm afraid. The good news is the drones have been able to catalogue every inhabitant of Vircars and are now moving into Flagala." There was a slight pause. "The bad news is the primary drone was not able to detect any cybots or super beings in that territory."

"Begging your pardon, Your Grace, but that's good news, isn't it?" Kasid questioned.

"Not if those cybots have not been brought online and are still somewhere within territory waiting to be activated," Lord Naois responded. "And that means the disappearances are not related to the Ceannus situation but something equally as sinister – the reason behind which we have yet to discover."

"We believe a bokor is at work here for his own nefarious reasons," Kasid stated. "And if he is in league with Raphian, wouldn't those reasons have something to do with subjugating the Terrans of this territory?"

"Possibly," Lord Naois admitted. *"Keep us informed. At least your psychic ability to converse with us hasn't been altered as Lords Phelan and Glyn's have."*

There was a light knock at the door and Phelan went to answer. When he returned, Mystery was with him.

"Milady has come to care for Glyn," Phelan announced.

"How did you know he was ill, milady?" Kasid inquired.

"I felt it," Mystery said as Phelan helped her off with her rain gear. "I could not rest until I came to see if he was all right. The closer I got to Lord Phelan's house, the stronger the feeling became that something was wrong."

"Ah," Kasid said with a slight smile. "He's taken your blood."

Mystery blushed and went quickly to the bed. "Aye." Her face softened as she looked down at her mate. "He's unconscious?"

"With a very high fever," Phelan replied. "No injuries that we could find though." He cleared his throat. "He's...ah...naked beneath the sheets, milady."

"I've seen him naked, milord," Mystery said, and her blush deepened.

Kasid ducked his head. "We were discussing laying him in a tub of cold water."

"That would be a very good idea," Mystery agreed, and began unbuttoning the cuffs of her gown and rolling up the sleeves. She looked to Phelan. "Do you have eggs?"

Phelan blinked. "Eggs?" he repeated.

"At least a dozen?"

The Reaper nodded, his brows drawn together. "Aye."

"Then will you please go break them into a bowl, carefully extracting the white from the yolk. Put the yolks in one bowl and the whites in another. The yolks I can make an omelet with for your lunches but it's the whites I really need."

"You're going to make a meringue?" Kasid inquired, a perplexed look on his face as well.

"I know this is going to sound silly to both of you but I am going to use those whites to get his fever down. I want you to fetch two clean white cloths and soak them in the eggs whites. Find me a pair of clean socks for him as well."

The two Reapers exchanged a baffled look but they didn't question her instructions. Phelan went for the eggs and cloth, Kasid the socks. When they returned with their objectives, they watched in amazement as Mystery wrapped Glyn's feet with the slimy, egg-white-coated cloths then worked a sock over each foot.

"This is an old mountain remedy from long before either of you ever came to Terra," she said. "The egg whites will draw the fever down from the brain to the feet."

She smiled. "It doesn't smell good and it makes a mess on the sheets but it really works." She straightened. "I don't suppose you have any willow bark laying about."

"No, but whatever you need, I can get it," Phelan assured her.

"What I'd like are linden and chamomile flowers and dried thyme. There is an old lady at Fox Hill..."

"Aunt Bernice," Kasid said. "I know her."

"She will have what you need, including the willow bark. Tell her you need whatever else she suggests for high fever."

"I'm on it," Kasid snapped, and hurried away.

"What do you need willow bark for?" Phelan asked.

"To make a tea," she told him. "It is nature's fever medication."

"Huh," Phelan grunted. "Well, that tub isn't going to fill itself, milady. Call out if you need me."

Mystery used the cloth in the basin to wash Glyn's face as she waited for Phelan to fill the tub. When it was ready, she peeled the covers back and the Reaper lifted Glyn from the bed. Mystery held his feet as Phelan eased him into the water then braced them on the rim of the tub to keep them out of the water.

Glyn didn't make a sound or movement as he was placed into the cold liquid. Phelan knelt on the floor, keeping his arm behind Kullen's head so he would not slip beneath the surface.

"I don't think he's as hot as he was," Phelan observed. "Those eggs must be doing their thing."

"I hope so. Between them and the cold water, he should be getting some relief."

Even as she spoke, Glyn's eyelids fluttered open and both Mystery and Phelan were shocked to see the strange look in his amber eyes, a red glint hovering deep in the golden depths. The gaze was not focused—a blank stare that seemed to look right through them.

"Glyn?" Mystery asked, touching his cheek but the Reaper did not move.

"I don't like that," Phelan said. He moved directly into Glyn's line of sight. "Glyn, can you hear me?"

There was no reaction from their patient at all. He continued to stare straight ahead without blinking.

"Glyn?"

"He's been hexed," Mystery said, her voice quivering.

"More like hypnotized," Phelan said, and used his free hand to firmly grasp Glyn's chin. "Glyn? Look at me, Glyn."

Mystery put her hand on Glyn's bare chest and her eyes widened. "Milord, I can't feel his heart beating!"

"Nor could we, but he's alive. Don't be alarmed." Phelan shook Glyn but gained no response. He looked up at her. "Do you know anything about zombies, milady?"

"Only the old legends told to frighten children into behaving," she replied then drew in a breath. "Is that what you think has happened to him?"

"I believe he's run afoul of a bokor and it's not the first time."

Mystery shook her head firmly. "No, milord, no. Leilani doesn't have that kind of power."

"It wouldn't be her but a male magic-sayer," Phelan told her. "One with powers he is channeling from a very powerful demon. Remember he told you he remembered nothing from when he left Sagewood? The housekeeper might have given him a drug to render him unconscious but I doubt she had the ability to carry him to a cabin out in the middle of nowhere. He's a heavy weight when he's out of it and it would have taken a man to carry him."

"You think she had a hand in this?" Mystery asked, her eyes narrowing to dangerous slits.

"Perhaps or she could have sent Glyn on his way and someone else got hold of him that night. They might have tried then to do what they seem to have accomplished this time."

"So the potency of anything that person gave him might have been lessened by whatever else was already in his system," she said.

"Very likely," Phelan agreed. He tried again to bring Glyn out of his inactive state but the Reaper was as still as a statue.

"But how would this unknown man gain such power over Glyn to force the *coupe poudre* on him?" she asked.

"The what?"

"It is what the old ones call zombie powder. I have no idea what's in it but it supposedly turns a victim into a zombie." Her lovely face turned infinitely sad. "I thought it all an old wives' tale. Never would I have imagined there could be truth in such things."

"We need to know what's in the mixture and if it is indeed in Glyn's bloodstream," Phelan said. "And I think I know a way to do that." He cursed beneath his breath. "If only I could contact the Shadowlords but we'll have to wait until Jaborn returns."

"Did this person attack Glyn on the road back from Sagewood? Knock him out?" Mystery questioned. "Shoot him with a dart or something like that to render him unconscious?"

"We looked all over him for wounds or puncture marks," Phelan replied. "Kasid thought perhaps he'd been bitten by a viper or a poisonous insect. What would kill an ordinary human in the twitch of an eye might only make a Reaper sick as the proverbial dog." He shook his head. "We found no marks on him at all. No lumps on his head to indicate he'd been knocked out. Nothing."

She stroked the hair back from Glyn's forehead then laid her palm on his flesh. "He's cooler now. We should get him out of the water and into bed." Moving to the foot of the tub, she lifted the Reaper's feet as Phelan scooped him out of the water. "Hold still and I'll dry him."

Phelan looked down into the glassy eyes of his teammate as he waited patiently for the young woman to towel the water from her mate. Glyn's head was draped over Phelan's arm and his wide, blank stare was unnerving.

"Milady, what did the old ones say about how he might be awakened from this paralyzed state?" he asked when Mystery was finished, and he carried Glyn back to bed.

"Only the bokor can bring him out of it," she replied. "How he does that, I've no idea." She smoothed the covers, the pillow, then stepped back to allow Phelan to gently place Glyn on the bed and cover him, tucking the sheet and spread carefully around his chest.

Phelan cocked his head to one side. "I think I hear Kasid." He moved to the window. "At least someone is galloping like the hounds of hell are after him or her."

It was indeed Kasid, and he rushed into the room with his saddlebag, thrusting it at Mystery. "Aunt Bernice sent leaves and flowers and the like. She said use them first. Put them in a mug and pour boiling water over them. Let the brew steep for a minute or two then trickle it down his throat. She says he will instinctively swallow."

"I hope she's right," Phelan mumbled.

"Once the fever is gone, she says he may become delirious. She says feed him some salt and once the nausea starts, he will begin to throw off whatever has got a hold on him."

"Did she say how long that might take?" Mystery queried.

"The fever? Half an hour or less. At least an hour or two of the delirium will follow and another hour of sickness," Kasid answered. "She said it depends on how much of the powder he was given and what other drugs might have been included in the mix."

"Then you told her we suspect a bokor at work here?" Phelan asked.

Kasid shook his head of thick curls then wiped an arm over his sweaty forehead. "I did not need to. She knew I was coming and already had everything I needed prepared." He nudged his chin toward the saddlebags. "There is willow bark and some other herbs in there with instructions on how they should be used."

"News travels fast among the people of color on the plantations," Mystery said. "What one knows, they will all know before the day is over."

"Aye, but how did they find out in the first place?" Phelan asked.

"Mayhap someone saw him on his way here and suspected what had happened to him," Kasid replied.

"Or saw the bokor following him and knew what the bastard was about," Phelan snapped.

"I hope the bokor doesn't take his anger out on Aunt Bernice," Mystery said. "It is widely known that they do not like interference with their magic."

"She didn't seem worried and there were five men guarding her cabin when I got there. Not a one of them looked like a man with whom I'd like to tangle," Kasid remarked.

"Once you have the tea in him, I think Jaborn and I will ride over to Sagewood and have a talk with the housekeeper. She might not have done this to him or even had a hand in it, but I'm wagering she knows who did," Phelan stated, a muscle grinding in his taut jaw.

"I hate to suggest this but perhaps we should bind Glyn's wrists and ankles. I doubt his lady will be able to handle him if he starts violently thrashing."

Mystery moaned lightly. "I don't like the thought of tying him."

"Kasid is right, milady, and it is for his own welfare as well as yours. A delirious Reaper is not something you could deal with safely and especially so when we don't know how he's going to react to coming out from under the influence of whatever is ailing him."

Reluctantly, Mystery agreed. After she had prepared the tea and the two Reapers helped her administer the brew to her patient, she stood aside as the two men began securing their teammate to the bed. Though it hurt her to see them lashing Glyn's wrists and ankles to the head and footboards, she understood the wisdom of it. When they had left her alone with him, she bowed her head and sobbed. Seeing her man so vulnerable and helpless broke her heart.

* * * * *

Leilani had been expecting the Reapers, and when they arrived at the door of the main house, she stepped back, fear racing through her.

Phelan Kiel wasted no time in questioning her. "Who took Kullen from your house the day you drugged him?"

"No one," she said. "He left on his own."

He crowded her, glaring down at her with such hatred she felt a trickle of piss running down her leg.

"Who took him today?"

Leilani's eyes grew wide. "I don't know." She looked from one hard face to the other. "I swear! I don't know!"

"If you're lying to us, bitch, by the goddess, I'll rip your heart out and eat it before your eyes!"

The other Reaper's face was equally enraged and—if anything—even more dangerous-looking than Lord Kiel's.

"I am not lying!" Leilani said. "He was groggy when he left my cabin but he rode out alone."

"Who followed him that day?" the Reaper she knew to be named Jaborn demanded.

Terror drove straight through Leilani's soul but she feared these men even more than she did John Dirk and gave the foreman's name to them.

"Why?"

"Because he fancies I am his woman," Leilani said, lifting her chin. "He wanted to warn the Reaper to stay away from me."

"This Dirk? He's the bokor?" Lord Kiel queried.

Leilani's brows drew together. "Bokor?" she repeated. "No, milord. John Dirk is a powerful magic-sayer but he could never be a bokor."

"Why not?"

"Because he is a white man," she stated.

"Then who is the bokor here at Sagewood?" Lord Kiel asked.

"There is no bokor here. The one you seek is at Burnt Pine."

The Reapers looked at one another then Lord Jaborn asked the name of the bokor.

"I don't know," she replied, and when the men growled at her, she took a step back, her hands up for protection. "I swear to you, I don't know who he is! I don't truck with the likes of men like him! I cannot give you a name for it is not spoken among the workers. He is known only as Papa Croisement." Her knees were shaking so badly, the front of her gown was quivering.

"Then who would know?"

"What's going on here?" It was Anthony Simmons who came into the foyer. "I thought I asked you to leave..."

"Lord Glyn has been attacked and we suspect he has been given drugs that have rendered him paralyzed," Phelan explained.

Simmons' eyebrows shot up. "He's been turned into a zombie?"

"We did not say that," Kasid stated, his face hard. "Why would you think it?"

The planter shot a look to his housekeeper. "Well, after the incident with the supposed love potion..." He shrugged. "It was a logical conclusion." He turned his full attention on Leilani. "Have you done something else to Lord Kullen, wench, to punish him for spurning you?"

"No, sir!" Leilani said. "I've not even seen him since he came to fetch the child."

"We'll find out who's behind this and—the gods help him—because when we do, he will be infinitely sorry he ever dared harm one of us," Phelan said.

Simmons flinched. "I don't doubt it for a minute."

"Where can we find the foreman?"

"I sent him into Charlestown. He's most likely still there," Simmons replied.

"When he comes back, tell him to stay put. We will be back," Phelan snapped, and pivoted on his heel, leaving planter and housekeeper staring after the Reapers.

"What have you done?" Leilani whispered, fear making her lips tremble as she stared at her employer. She looked past him to see John Dirk lounging against the doorframe.

Anthony Simmons grabbed the young woman's arm in a punishing grip and twisted savagely, causing the housekeeper to groan. "Nothing the bastard didn't deserve," he said. "And you'd best keep your mouth shut unless you want to wind up in the same predicament!"

* * * * *

As Phelan vaulted into the saddle, his amber gaze shifted around the front yard where workers were busy tending to the immaculate flowerbeds. Though the workers seemed engrossed in their work, he knew they were surreptitiously watching him and Kasid.

"Should we question them?" Kasid asked.

"No. They aren't likely to tell us anything but Tony damned sure knows more than he's saying. Did you see the color flee his face when I made that threat?"

"Aye."

Nudging his mount into motion, he shot Jaborn a worried look. "Why do I have this nagging feeling Glyn's problems have been caused by his love for Mystery?"

"Perhaps because I have the same feeling, my brother," Kasid replied.

"Loving a woman can certainly bring a man all kinds of hell, can't it?" Phelan growled.

* * * * *

Eanan Tohre sat where the Triune Goddess had left him—in one of the con cells, awaiting his fate. With his elbows on his knees, his head down, he listened to the sound of approaching boot heels tapping against the stone floor and drew in a long breath, releasing it on a wavering exhalation as the cell door opened. Schooling his face into careful blankness, he raised his head. "Hello, Owen," he said softly.

"Eanan," his twin replied.

His gaze traveled quickly over his brother's tall frame and though he saw no weapon strapped to Owen's thigh, he did not miss the tightly clenched fists that were held stiffly at his twin's sides.

"If you came to beat the shit out of me, I won't stop you," Eanan said, and a fleeting tug of the right side of his mouth indicated a brief, hesitant smile. "Though I will draw the line at you trying to kill me."

"A fate you deserve or have you forgotten it was you who killed me?" Owen questioned in a harsh tone.

"No," Eanan said, hanging his head once more. "I have not forgotten. I've lived with it every day of my life since."

For a long time Owen said nothing then he folded his arms over his chest and leaned against the cell wall. "I won't ask you why you did it. I know all too well why. What I'd like to know is if you regret having done it?"

Eanan raised his head. "Aye, Owen. On our mother's grave and on—"

"Siobhan's?" Owen growled, amber eyes flashing.

Pain flitted across Eanan's face. "Aye, as well as Siobhan's. I regret it more than you will ever know and although I realize you will never forgive me for what I did—"

"Oh, I forgive you, Eanan," Owen snapped.

"What?" Eanan whispered. "How could you? I don't deserve your forgiveness."

"No, you do not, but my lady asked it of me and for her I would do anything—even forgive the bastard who took my life, tried to take my woman and who condemned me to this hellish existence that I am truly grateful he has been forced to share!" Owen narrowed his intent stare. "I forgive you, Eanan, but I will never forget what you did."

Having said that, Owen pushed away from the wall and started out the door.

"Owen, wait!" Eanan said, shooting to his feet. He took a hesitant step toward his twin, a hand out in entreaty.

Owen looked disdainfully at that hand then up into his brother's eyes. "The Shadowlords have sent for you. Needless to say they weren't happy that you served my sentence for me or that you were even in the Citadel without their knowledge, but when they learned where I'd been and what I'd been forced to do, I think they believe you had the easier punishment."

"I've no doubt I did," Eanan agreed, wincing at the thought of his brother in Morrigunia's clutches.

"Follow me and I'll take you to them," Owen ordered.

"Will you just wait a minute?" Eanan pleaded.

With a harsh rush of breath, Owen halted. "What?"

Eanan took a steadying breath of his own. "I am sorry for what I did, Owen. I truly am. Though you may not believe me, I swear to you I mourned you and said a *padjer er son ny merriu* for you every day since I took your life," he said, letting his brother know he had offered up prayers for the dead for Owen.

"You're right," Owen said, "I don't believe you. If you sent up a *padjer er son ny merriu*, it was for Siobhan or for your own lost soul, Eanan Tohre."

"They were for you, Owen," Eanan said. "Only for you. I went to the *Thie Baaish* for Mama and Papa and Siobhan but I prayed for you."

Owen thought of his brother prostrating himself at the *Thie Baaish*, the house of mourning, for Siobhan and felt again the fury that had he'd known throughout the long centuries since his death.

"You'd best say nothing more to me about it, Eanan," he warned. "Not *ever* again. I don't want to hear how you mourned me or Siobhan, or your lies about praying for my soul. Never again. Do you understand?"

Eanan nodded. "Aye, Owen. I do."

Without another word Owen started off down the corridor, not caring one way or another if his twin followed.

Silent all the way to the High Council chambers, Owen's back was ramrod straight. He barely acknowledged the greetings of the people he passed but managed to thank those who congratulated him on the birth of his sons.

Eanan tried smiling at those same people but they ignored him, and he realized what he had done to his obviously beloved and respected twin was now common knowledge among the residents of the Citadel. Accustomed to having people like him, treat him with respect because of his Reaper status, he felt the censure like a hot branding iron laid to his flesh and felt it even keener the moment he was ushered into the presence of the Shadowlords and the four Reapers who stood at attention before the High Bench. He glanced briefly at the tall woman he knew to be an Amazeen Blackwind and frowned. He had the same unshakeable dislike of the female as did most of his kind.

"Lord Eanan Tohre," the High Lord greeted him, but the words were spoken as though they left a bad taste in the Shadowlord's mouth. "Approach the Bench."

Eanan was aware of his twin going to stand with his teammates as he moved toward the dais upon which the Bench sat.

There was no preamble from the High Lord. The man glared angrily at Eanan—as did the two Shadowlords flanking him—and there was no warmth or welcome in his tone as he spoke.

"We were not aware the goddess had brought you among us and though we are annoyed with her for having done so without informing us, She has bid us to accept you as a member of the Reaper squad and we have no choice but to do as She commands. She has ordered us to make use of your skills and talents as one of Her Reapers and we must do as She says though it goes against our grain."

The High Lord sat back in his chair and regarded Eanan much as he would have an insect. "We know of the evil you perpetrated against your brother and will have you know such actions are anathema to this Council. In order for you have even a modicum of respect from us, you must earn that respect. Is that clear?"

"Aye, Your Grace," Eanan replied. "It is."

"And you would do well to garner the respect and trust of your fellow teammates else you might find yourself needing their assistance one day and that assistance will be denied. Is that clear as well?"

"Aye, Your Grace."

"Prime Reaper Arawn Gehdrin has asked to be retired from service but the goddess has denied his request. She has, however, agreed to allow you to patrol his territory for him so he can stay more often with his lady-wife and son. Though you will be riding his circuit, he is still in charge and will remain in charge as the leader of the squad."

"I understand, Your Grace."

"Do your job. Toe the line. Keep your nose clean and perhaps one day you will obtain the right to stand alongside the men behind you." The High Lord leaned forward again, pinning Eanan with a hot glower that would have turned a lesser man's gut to mush. "Fuck with us, cause us even a moment's concern that you are unworthy to wear that uniform and I promise you, we will make those eight months in a con cell seem like child's play. Do you read me, Tohre?"

Eanan swallowed hard. "I do, Your Grace, and I pledge you will not regret giving me this opportunity."

"If you are a tenth the man your brother is, you might prove to be of some value to us," Lord Kheelan snapped, and with that said, rose and left the dais, his counterparts following in his wake.

Eanan exhaled slowly then straightened his shoulders, turned to face the five men at his back.

"This is our Prime, Lord Arawn Gehdrin," Owen stated with a nod toward the oldest of the five. "To his right is his 2-I-C, Lord Bevyn Coure. To his left is 3-I-C, Lord Cynyr Cree and to his left is Lord Iden Belial. Lords Glyn Kullen, Phelan Kiel and Kasid Jaborn are on assignment in Vircars."

Though Eanan put out his hand toward Gehdrin, the Prime Reaper did not take it. He slowly lowered it, hurt by the rebuff.

"Captain Aracnea," Lord Arawn said, "show this man to his quarters and go over his duties with him. He will be under your jurisdiction until further notice."

"Aye, milord," the Amazeen agreed and motioned for Eanan to follow her.

Eanan made no move to do so. He looked from Gehdrin to each of the other Reapers — his gaze finally settling on his twin.

"I know I will have to prove myself to you men, but I promise you will not find my loyalty or my abilities lacking," he said.

"It isn't your loyalty or your abilities that concern us, Tohre," the Prime Reaper said. "It is your past sin toward a man for whom we have the highest regard. Prove to us you will stand at his back and be willing to lay down your life for his, for ours, and then we'll talk. Until then, stay the fuck out of our way."

Chapter Sixteen

Glyn Kullen could hear every word Mystery whispered to him as she bathed his face and chest. Though he could not move—not even his eyes—he could see what was happening around him even if it was through a drug-induced red haze. His mind might be trapped, his body encased in a fiery torment of agonizing itching and heat, his soul plundered, but he was aware of his surroundings and aching to break free of his inertia. Inwardly he was screaming savagely—his screams bouncing off the walls of his brain.

The first time this had happened to him, it hadn't lasted this long. From out of the dark recesses of his mind he saw the foreman standing at the crossroads and he'd drawn up, thinking the man wanted to talk.

"I've something to show you over there," Dirk had said, pointing to the bushes by the side of the road.

The Reaper had dismounted and as he passed the foreman, the man had grabbed his arm and spun him around. He'd flinched as the powder was blown into his eyes but for whatever reason, it hadn't worked that long. There had been a few moments of paralysis but more sickness than anything else. Now he remembered being slung over his saddle and taken to the cabin, dropped in the smelly, ramshackle building and having John Dirk kick him viciously in the ribs, apparently angry the powder had not worked as the magic-sayer had wanted it to.

Dirk had bent over him. "Leave my woman the fuck alone, Reaper. The Master wants your soul but I'll take your worthless life if you don't!"

The aura of Raphian's stench was sharp around the foreman but as soon as he was out the door, Glyn had forgotten all about him—no doubt the doing of the demon. But this time it was different.

Memory had not been taken from him and he could not help but dwell on the image of the crying child standing in the middle of the road. Her little fists were digging into her eyes, her bare feet muddy and too-small dress dripping wet, ragged and torn. She looked starved, abandoned, and he had reined in his mount and hurried to her, going to one knee, his heart breaking at her pitiful crying.

"Are you lost, sweeting?" he had asked. When he touched her bony shoulder, he had flinched at the iciness of the touch.

And then she had lowered her fists and looked at him with eyes far older than any normal child's should have been. The stare aimed his way was pure evil. When she smiled, her teeth were rotten to the pulp—jagged lichen-covered tombstones staggered in a pulpy dark gray landscape.

Before he could react to that hideous sight, she had puckered her sunken cheeks and blown her cold breath in his face. That breath had been fetid, as vile as any charnel house, and the fumes had coalesced into a powdery dust that had stolen his breath, choked him, flowing unstopped down his clogging throat and into his lungs like the tendrils of some poisonous plant.

As he lay struggling to drag breath into his body, the child had turned into a hulking man of color, the features of his ebony face hidden by the lowered shadows of the rainy day. The giant leaned over him—huge hands reaching toward Glyn.

“Your day of reckoning is at hand, Reaper,” the man said in a heavily accented voice, showing teeth so white they gleamed in his dark face.

Thick fingers snagged in Glyn’s shirt and ripped it open, exposing the Reaper’s chest to the pounding rain. Rough, calloused hands smoothed firmly over Glyn’s cheeks and forehead, down his neck, over his chest and along his sides, across his belly, dipped obscenely beneath the waistband of his pants and onto his cock. Where those hands touched, Glyn could feel the skin breaking open and the flesh beginning to itch unbearably. Whatever was on the man’s hands was cold and slimy and it seeped through the Reaper’s skin and passed into his bloodstream.

Torment such as he had never known gripped his body in a crushing hold. He itched violently and could not relieve that sensation. His flesh burned and he could not soothe it. His head hurt brutally and he could do nothing to ease the pain.

He remembered being picked up and carried away from the crossroads and into the greensward of the forest. He had heard running water but all he could see was the canopy of the trees under which they passed. His captor seemed to walk forever, deeper into what smelled like marshy, swampy land. When at last he stopped, he dropped to his knees then leaned forward to deposit Glyn in a pine box that had its lid thrown back. To Glyn’s horror, the Reaper realized the box was beneath ground level and to one side of the length of it the dirt was piled high.

He knew where he was but was unable to move. His body was on fire—the itching so intense he wished he could die. As the lid was lowered—shutting out the rain and the light—and the thud of a hammer striking the wood vibrated through the close confines of the coffin, Glyn Kullen screamed as loud as he could, but the sound was only in his mind. When the first shovelful of dirt hit the lid, he nearly lost his mind.

He would never know how long he lay in the coffin. He did know the air was becoming thin and though his breathing was shallow to begin with—his lungs partially paralyzed—he could feel suffocation close at hand.

Tears rolled down his widely opened eyes and fell into the hair at his temples. Sweat coated him and soaked the remains of his black silk shirt.

And then there was the scrape of metal on wood and he knew a moment of pure relief. He knew he would not have died even had the air been depleted in the box but he did not want to spend eternity within those tight, claustrophobic confines. That—to him and all of his kind—would have been a fate far worse than the most hellish death.

The continuous scrape as the dirt was removed from the coffin was unnerving and it grated, but freedom was only a few more shovelfuls away. At last the lid was pried open with a mighty shriek and cool air flooded the narrow box, washing over him to give some respite from the maddening itching and burning that plagued his flesh.

He had expected it to be Phelan and Kasid who had come to his rescue and a part of him cringed when he saw the tall man of color bending over the grave.

“Arise, slave, and do your master’s bidding!”

As though his body was attached to strings, Glyn sat up. His head swam miserably. His hands came up of their own accord and gripped the muddy sides of the coffin. As though he were a child learning to pull himself up in a crib, he lurched to his feet and stood there wavering in the rain. His vision was distorted by the first drug. His body was on fire from the second. He scrambled out of the pine box—clawing his way across the grave dirt—until he was on all fours before the man who had brought him back from the grave.

“Stand up, you white bastard.”

He could not place the accent. It was not one he had ever heard before but he could do no other than obey the harsh command and wobbled to his feet, dirt caked beneath his nails as his arms hung uselessly at his side.

“Go until I summon you.” The tall man pointed to the Reaper’s horse standing a few feet away.

Like a puppet, Glyn stumbled toward his horse. The animal shied away from him, its eyes rolling in fear. He fell into the mud trying to capture the reins but still the beast sidestepped his attempts—whinnying with fear—until the dark man bellowed an order for the horse to cease its movements.

Dragging himself into the saddle, the Reaper slumped forward over the horse’s neck with a heavy grunt as though all the bones in his body had dissolved, all the muscles shut down. It was all he could do to lace his fingers through the horse’s mane and hold on as the animal plunged into the rain.

By the time he reached Phelan’s house, he was completely paralyzed again. He had slid off the mount and onto his back, the rain slamming into his opened eyes for he could not close them.

“Sleep.”

The command had come from far away but slithered through his brain and his eyes had closed.

He remembered nothing else until he awoke in the tub of cold water, Mystery’s worried face before him. Since that time, he’d kept her in his sight as well as he could. Just looking at her face gave him a small amount of relief from the ungodly pain in which he was steeped.

"I'm here, my beloved," Mystery told him as she wrung out the cloth and folded it, laid it on his forehead. Her fingers trailed down his hot cheek. "You're going to be all right."

He felt his body jerk as though he'd been prodded.

"Glyn?" Mystery questioned. She'd been sitting on the bed beside him and now she was on her feet, her eyes filled with worry.

He jerked again and then he stiffened, his head going back—neck and chest arching upward—as he began to shake violently.

And he began to hallucinate.

They were all around him—ghorets of every size from hatchling to full-grown silver and green vipers. Their mouths opened and closed to reveal vicious fangs dripping with fluorescent blue venom. They sprang at him to bury those deadly fangs into his thighs, his arms and his chest. Where the venom struck, his flesh bubbled and blackened, broke open to reveal sickeningly green boils pulsing with alien life. A horrible stench rose up to choke him and the taste of it seemed to fill his gaping mouth. When he tried to run, the three-foot-long adult serpents wound around his ankles to lash his legs together and bring him down. He fell into the writhing, slithering, undulating mass of slick bodies that whipped at his face with forked tails. They coiled around his wrists to pin him to the ground.

"Glyn, hold on," he heard someone say from a great distance. "This will pass."

He struggled to free himself, to cast off the wriggling vipers, screeching like a madman, though no sound seemed willing to escape his throat. His flesh crawled as the slimy scales dragged over it, and where those scales touched, the skin on his bones bubbled with noxious eruptions. The pain was horrendous and was driving him insane with the burning, itching, stinging agony.

"I know, Glyn," that sweet, gentle voice said, and a cool hand smoothed over his brow. "I know."

He could feel the flesh at his wrists and ankles breaking open as he strove to break free. The smell of his own black blood filled his nostrils and he howled in agitation, enraged that he was restrained and being made to endure such torment. Savagely he twisted his body from side to side and bucked—his hips leaving the mattress, his struggles causing the bed to jump upon the floor. Beneath his head, the pillow was saturated with sour sweat and the smell made worse the nausea bubbling up his throat.

For over an hour he silently raged against his bonds—the only sounds coming from him grunts and hisses and gasps for he was incapable of speech. His eyes were wide, unblinking, and his lips were peeled back from his tightly clenched teeth, the snarl frozen on his face.

Her beautiful face moved into his line of vision and he saw tears streaking down that lovely countenance, understood the pain in the worried black eyes. He ached to put his arms around her and comfort her but the vipers had him shackled so that all he could do was hiss like them. He writhed on the bed as they slithered all around him.

They were crawling up the walls and across the ceiling and dropping down on his chest in handfuls of squiggling, squirming mustiness. They struck out at him and drove their fangs deep.

“Hold on, my love. Just hold on.”

From out of the nightmare of his world he saw something moving in the deeper shadows and instinct warned him whatever It was, It was much worse than the ghorets that were making a meal of him. The stench of Its coming was unbearable and the feeling that was slowly flowing over him was one of absolute dread. His skin became clammy and his heart began to race. This new threat was worse than any he’d ever experienced and It was moving with slow, steady, unimpeded energy right toward him.

He fought against this latest peril, this overpowering menace, but try as hard as he might, he could not keep It at bay. He could not hold It back nor turn It away. It moved like an unstoppable wave—building in strength and sweeping all obstacles from Its path as It moved without any barriers to slow down Its approach.

He knew whatever this new danger was, It was much worse than anything he or his fellow Reapers had ever encountered and he knew It was moving into his part of the megaverse, into his dimension because he was too weak to fight It.

“No!” he pleaded with the gods, begging Them not to allow whatever malevolent force was gathering into his world but still It came—unstoppable, unbeatable, unrelenting.

For another hour he fought the steady approach of that brutal evil but in the end he lost his battle. The blackness of It, the wrath of It moved over him like a massive boulder—squeezing the air from his lungs and nearly crushing the life from him. It rolled up until It found a large basin of brackish water and there It entered the stagnant pond and sank beneath the oily waves.

Utter despair filled the Reaper, but with the hopelessness he felt at having lost his battle with whatever wickedness had arrived on Terra, insight came with that depression. He understood things that had eluded them all.

His thrashing began to wind down until he was doing little more than making small keening sounds deep in his throat and quivering from time to time. He was grateful for the cool cloth she passed over his body. It helped the pain and the heat that felt as though it were baking him from the inside out. When he could finally blink, close his eyes, he lay listening to the thunder of his heart, the ragged rasp of his breathing, and at last managed to swallow.

She put her hand under his neck and lifted his head. “Drink.”

The water pressed against his lips and he opened them, let the cooling liquid flow down his throat, gulping as quickly as he could, not even noticing the wetness overflowing his mouth and dripping down his neck.

“Not too much.”

She took the blessed water away and he groaned, wanting more, needing more, able at last to lick his swollen tongue across his parched lips. When she lowered his head and removed her hand, he moaned, wanting that contact, needing it.

"You're not going to like this but Aunt Bernice says you need it."

He felt her fingers on his mouth and opened his lips obediently, not realizing until it was too late that she was putting harsh, stinging salt crystals on his tongue. She was right—he didn't like it—and he tried to spit it out, but she braced his chin in her hand and would not allow him to do so.

"You must swallow it, Glyn. You have to."

As weak as he was, he could not shake off her hand. The salt had dissolved and mixed with his saliva and was trickling down his throat. He grimaced.

Then he lost the inability to move and shot up from the bed, twisting violently to the side as wave after wave of pure hell erupted from the very core of him, and with it, the remnants of whatever sinister potion had held him in thrall.

* * * * *

"How's he doing?" Phelan asked softly.

"He's sleeping, thank Alel," Mystery whispered, and motioned the Reaper from Glyn's room.

"When I emptied that chamber pot," Phelan told her, "where it landed on the ground, the grass immediately withered and died. I've a notion I'll have to replant, if anything will grow there at all."

"It was vile," Kasid agreed as he handed Mystery a cup of tea. "I thought you could use this, milady."

"Thank you, Lord Kasid. I surely can."

"It is just Kasid," the Reaper said with a gentle smile.

Mystery curled up on the sofa and released a long breath. "He should sleep for a while."

"And be a very unhappy Reaper when he wakes," Phelan prophesied. He stretched out his long legs as he reclined in his favorite chair. "He's going to want to go with us to question the foreman."

"He's too weak," Mystery said. "Perhaps you shouldn't even let him know what you're planning."

"You've got a point, milady."

"The salt will have dredged the poisons from his system but until the bokor is dead, Glyn will be susceptible to his influence. I agree we should not take him with us," Kasid reminded them. "The sooner we find this Papa Croisement and eliminate him, the better from Glyn."

"Croiement," Mystery repeated. "That means crossroads in the native patois."

"Does that have special meaning?" Kasid inquired.

Mystery shrugged as she took a sip of the hot tea. "Only in that such places are considered abodes of the more powerful loa or spirits. When a bad person dies, he or she is buried at a crossroads with the head removed so they won't know which way to go should they ever be resurrected."

Phelan started to speak then held up his hand.

They heard Glyn mumbling and both Kasid and Mystery started to get up but Phelan motioned them to stay seated. "I'll check on him."

Glyn was tossing and turning in the bed, the sheets kicked partway down his body, but he was clutching handfuls of the linen tightly in his fists. His chest was gleaming with sweat again and he was pivoting his head back and forth on the pillow as he kicked out with his feet.

"Easy, brother," Phelan said as he sat down on the bed and put a restraining hand on his fellow Reaper's shoulder. "Everything's all right now."

Glyn opened his eyes and stared at Phelan then shot out a hand to grip Kiel's arm. "The gods forgive me, Phelan. I brought Him through the Veil. He's here. He's on Terra!"

"Who?" Phelan asked, frowning. "Who are you talking about?"

"He was trying to find the weakest link," Glyn said, his voice hoarse, grating. "Not even His minion knew what He was about."

"I'm not understanding you, Glyn," Phelan responded. "I..."

"He tested each of us, Phelan!" Glyn insisted, his eyes wide. His grip on Kiel's arm was punishing. "He tried with each of us but I was the weakest. I'm the one who's set him loose on us!"

It took all of Phelan's strength to pry Glyn's hand from his arm, wincing at the painful bruise that was already on his flesh. Though the wound wouldn't be there long, it hurt nevertheless.

"You're not making any sense, Kullen," he said sternly.

"He's out there, Phelan!" Glyn choked out. "I made it so He could come into this dimension. He's in the water. He's in the..."

"Calm down before your temp goes up again," Phelan warned. He forced Glyn's arm to the mattress and caught his other when the Reaper would have pushed him away. "Calm down, damn it, and make some sense with what you're trying to tell me! Who are you talking about? Raphian?"

Glyn's head swung angrily from side to side. "No, not *Him*! I don't know who this one is but He's evil, Phelan. He's far more evil than Raphian will ever be and He's loose on this world! Because of me. Because of *me*!"

Kasid came into the room at that moment. He put a hand on the headboard and leaned over Glyn. "Is this entity the one who has been attacking us, Glyn? Is He the one making it impossible for you and Phelan to contact the Shadowlords?"

"Aye," Glyn hissed. His agitated gaze leapt to Kasid. "Aye, Kasid, and He is the one who went after Arawn and the others. I sensed He was trying to neutralize them but couldn't maintain control because they were so far away."

"Then why not me? Why am I able to maintain contact with the Citadel?"

"Because He thinks you are one of us," Mystery said from the doorway. "He believes you are a man of color so he's left you alone."

The Reaper looked around at her. "But I am not."

"He believes you are," she insisted. "So you are safe from His attack."

"She's probably right," Phelan agreed.

Glyn settled down, his muscles going lax so Phelan released him. "I was the weakest link," he said gruffly. "I let this happen."

"As if you could have stopped it considering the condition you were in," Phelan scoffed. "Get real, Reaper."

"We have to find Him, Phelan," Glyn stated. "I've a feeling He's going to wreak hell on Terra."

"We will, but first we're going to find who did this shit to you then we're going to put *him* down. Permanently!" Kiel insisted.

Glyn started to throw the covers back but Phelan stopped him. "You aren't going anywhere today so get that right out of your feeble mind, Kullen." He tucked the sheets around Glyn's waist. "What you need to do is rest and get your strength back."

"I'm well enough," Glyn protested.

"Like hell you are. You'd be a liability to us and right now I don't think we need to take any chances that the bokor will latch on to you again."

"But..."

"And turn you against us," Kasid stated.

Glyn slumped down in the bed, no doubt realizing the truth in that statement. "So what are you going to do?"

"We're going to question the foreman and see what he knows."

Glyn nodded. "He tried that zombie shit on me first and it didn't work."

"It wouldn't have," Kasid said. "He is not the bokor."

"I know. I saw that one but I can't tell you what he looks like. I never saw his face."

"What can you tell us of him?" Phelan asked.

"Tall, big like an oak tree," Glyn said. "Much bigger than the foreman and dark, very dark. His flesh was so black it glistened." He gave Phelan a worried look. "Be careful, Phelan. This one is dangerous. He isn't what he seems. He came to me as a little girl and I fell for his trap."

"We won't," Phelan declared. "Now rest and don't leave this bed until we get back. You hear me?"

"Aye."

Mystery stepped aside as Phelan and Kasid left the bedroom. She cast Glyn a quick look then followed the men. "There are precautions you should make," she told them.

"What kind of precautions?" Phelan asked.

"Do you have any cotton swabs or small pieces of cloth with which you can plug your nostrils?"

Phelan blinked. "Why would we want to, milady?"

"To keep from breathing in any powder or fumes the bokor may direct at you," she answered. "If you get it in your mouth, you can spit it out but if you breathe that stuff into your lungs, you're infected with it."

"I see the wisdom in that," Kasid said. "I have cotton batting I use to clean my weapon. I'll get it."

"And you will need this," Mystery said, reaching up to her neck to undo a necklace. She brought it to him. "Aunt Zettie gave it to me when she was dying. She said I would know who to give it to when the time came and I believe that is you."

Phelan looked down at the small medallion—the Sign of the Slain One—and leaned forward for her to put it around his neck. "I have heard there is great power in this symbol," he said.

"There is."

Kasid came back with four small pieces of batting and handed two of them to Phelan. He asked what it was that Mystery had clasped around his partner's neck. When she told him and then said she was sorry she didn't have one for him, he shrugged.

"I would not have worn it anyway. That religion is not mine." He reached inside his black shirt and pulled out a medallion he always wore. He fingered the crescent moon and star. "This is the symbol of my faith."

"Anything else you believe we need, milady?" Phelan inquired, tucking the crucifix into the collar of his shirt.

"Nothing I can think of," she replied. "Just be careful and come back soon." She glanced at the bedroom. "If you don't, he's liable to come looking for you."

"He..." Phelan began, but an unexpected voice in his ear made him jump.

"Lord Kasid?" It was Lord Naois hailing Jaborn.

"I heard that!" Phelan said. "I can hear you, Your Grace!"

"Then the medallion worked its magic against the evil surrounding you," Kasid observed.

"It is good you can hear us now, Lord Phelan. How is Lord Glyn?"

"Better," Phelan reported. "In all the excitement of his illness I forgot to have Kasid call on you to get a sample of his blood. We..."

"That was done earlier – actually on all three of you to be on the safe side – and we know precisely which ingredients are in the powder that infected Lord Glyn." There was a slight pause. *"The problem is we can find no antidote for the poison used to turn him. We are still working on it though."*

"What does the goddess say regarding it?" Kasid inquired.

The sound of a mental snort drifted down to Kasid and Phelan. *"Once again, She is not in attendance and does not answer our summons. We are fearful something very bad is happening to claim Her attention."*

"Glyn believes he brought something over into our dimension that is much worse than Raphian," Kasid said. "Perhaps that is what has Her occupied."

"Very possible. We won't know until She finally answers our call."

"We're on our way to find the bokor who attacked Glyn. We'll keep you informed of what we learn," Phelan put in.

"Go raibh an choir Ghaoithe I gcónaí leat," Lord Naois said, giving the blessing of the Wind being at the Reapers' backs.

"Thank you, Your Grace. I've a feeling we're going to need it," Phelan mumbled.

Chapter Seventeen

The Reapers weren't prepared for what they encountered at the crossroads. Standing right smack dab in the middle of where the muddy lanes intersected, blocking their path, were four of the ugliest, most brutish and dangerous-looking bastards the lawmen had seen in a long time. With bare forearms resembling gnarled tree limbs and hands that were doubled into oversized meaty fists, the men of color made an effective roadblock.

But the one thing that caught Phelan and Kasid's immediate attention was the fact the men had no pupils. All that could be seen in the dark, dark faces were the whites of their wide-open eyes.

"Ah, that just ain't right," Phelan muttered. He shuddered. "Them are some ugly ass bastards."

"Do you smell the corruption?" Kasid asked, barely controlling the animal beneath him for the beast had caught the whiff of the grave. "I am not detecting life in any of them."

"Neither am I so I suggest we stick the batting up our noses now," Phelan replied, reaching into the pocket of his slicker. "If we want to get rid of these pricks, it ain't gonna be with bullets."

"I agree," Kasid said.

"Take their heads then burn 'em to a crisp, Jaborn," Phelan growled, his voice sounding strangely hollow with his nostrils blocked.

The two Reapers dismounted, peeled off their slickers and hung them over the saddles—the better to wield the laser whips that lay strapped to their left thighs. Upon drawing the dragon handle from their sheaths, twin tails of fire shot from the business end of the whips and flickered in the rain.

"You take ugly ass one and two on the left and I'll get revolting shits three and four on the right," Phelan quipped, and laid out the hissing tail in front of him before snapping it back over his shoulder. With a roar, he ran at the two who were lumbering toward him, flicking the whip with a twist of his wrist.

The fiery train of Kiel's whip sliced clean through the first zombie's neck and its head went rolling. Pulling back on the sizzling extension, he flicked it forward again to dispatch the second zombie as Jaborn lopped the heads from the two staggering, lurching dead men who had been ambling toward him. By retracting the tail of the whip and using the incineration button they rarely had to employ, the Reapers concentrated scorching blasts at the bodies, rendering them to ash.

As the rain fell in a hiss around them, the lawmen looked about them. They were alone at the crossroads but that aloneness didn't feel right.

"It can't be that easy," Phelan remarked.

From out of the woods, a small army of sightless, stiff-legged, stumbling zombies began to emerge. The only difference between the newcomers and the ones already destroyed were the snapping jaws of the new threat. Teeth grinding and clicking, the dead men came shambling toward them.

Phelan sighed.

"What if they bite us?" Kasid inquired, bracing himself to take on these latest foes.

"Well, shit, Jaborn. Do I have to lead you by the fucking hand? Bite them back!" Phelan replied.

* * * * *

Mystery smiled softly as he wrapped his arms around her. "You should be in bed," she reminded him even as she laid her head on his bare chest.

"I got tired of lying there." He looked past her out the window at the gray, rainy day. "And I am beginning to feel waterlogged, you know?"

She laughed. "Yes, I do, and I'm sure the parents on the plantation wish we'd start the school up again. It's hard for them to work with the little ones at home with an older brother or sister or elderly neighbor."

"Will there be someone for Valli to play with?" he asked.

"My brother has four little girls and I'll bet you right now they are all giggling and driving my sister-in-law quietly insane."

Glyn's arms tightened around her. "Have you thought about what it will be like having a brother for her?" He ran his palm over her flat belly.

"Things have happened so quickly that I haven't," she replied. "I wanted to tell my brother about our Joining but since you asked me not to, I held my tongue. More than anything, I wanted to tell Valda."

"She'll make a good big sister to him," he commented. "He's going to need that calming influence."

Laughing at her daughter being considered a calming influence on anyone, Mystery turned in his arms and looked up into his handsome face. He seemed so pale to her and she put a hand to his cheek, hoping she would not feel heat and was relieved that his high temperature was down.

"You're sure it will be a boy?" she queried.

He nodded solemnly. "It will always be a boy, Myst. Reapers can only have males."

He explained to her how his hellion would destroy any female zygotes in her womb.

"So we will have sons," she said, accepting the situation.

"And I have a name picked for our firstborn," Glyn said, and swiveled his leather-clad hips against hers.

She arched a brow. "Oh you do, do you?"

"Aeryn," he said softly. "It means peace and that is what you've given to me."

Mystery's eyes welled with tears. "Then Aeryn it will be. Aeryn Kullen. I like the sound of it."

"Aeryn Owen Kullen," he suggested.

"Ah no," she said. "His initials would be A.O.K. He'd have to fight every day of his life with a moniker like that."

"Owen Aeryn Kullen then, but we'd call him Aeryn," he said. "That way he'd be a mighty O.A.K. and no one would dare slam a fist against an oak."

She grinned at his manly assertion. "Lord Owen is your best friend, isn't he?" she asked.

"Aye and it means a lot to me to honor that friendship," he replied.

"I am sure he will be pleased."

"I wish I could speak to Lord Kheelan and see how he's doing. Too bad you don't have another of those medallions like the one you gave Phelan."

"When you are feeling strong, we can ride to Sagewood. I'm sure we can find one among my brothers and their wives."

"I should be with Phelan and Kasid," he said, tucking his chin atop her head.

"You are right where you are meant to be," she said, sensing his weakness though not wanting to call attention to it.

But Glyn didn't feel that way. He was antsy and his nerves rubbed raw. Though he knew his teammates could look after themselves, he was anxious, edgy not riding with them into what he knew was a dangerous situation.

"They'll be careful," she told him.

"By the goddess, I hope so," he said, and closed his eyes to say a prayer for the Reapers' safety.

* * * * *

Anthony Simmons threw the empty brandy snifter across the room, getting some small measure of satisfaction from hearing the delicate crystal shatter against the wall. He was incensed that Mystery was at Kiel's house, tending the ailing Kullen, and his lips were skinned back from teeth that were being gnashed in anger. His gray eyes were narrowed into thin slits of menace as he glared at his foreman.

"You are all but useless, Dirk!" Simmons threw at the burley man.

"My Master has things under control," John Dirk stated. "The Reaper belongs to him."

"Right now, the Reaper belongs to the bokor and *his* master!" Simmons shouted. "Or have you forgotten that?"

"My Master is stronger. He but bides His time in the matter."

Simmons let out a stream of vicious curses and plopped down behind his desk, kicking over the wastebasket that sat beside it. "I wanted Kullen out of the way, out of Mystery's life, not lying in a bed for her to comfort!"

"Have faith that my Master will punish the Reaper and hand into your keeping the female—if that is your desire," John Dirk told him.

"He'd damned well better give me what I desire!" Simmons said, and outside a loud shriek of lightning split the heavens and the house shook, the windows rattling as though they would implode at any moment.

"Be careful what you say!" the foreman gasped, his face ashen. "Lord Raphian does not allow insults!"

Simmons waved a dismissive hand. "Mystery had best be in my hands before the end of the day as you promised, or I just might be forced to take a ride over to Burnt Pine and consult with Papa Croisement. At least *he* gets things done! That tells me who the more powerful demon is!"

Once more thunder rattled the plantation house, hail hit the windows and a succession of lightning bolts struck in the forest beyond. John Dirk backed away from the man behind the desk. "You should be very careful what you say," he warned.

"Oh, get the hell out of my house, Dirk!" Simmons snapped, fingering the vial of aphrodisiac Leilani had given him earlier. "Bring Mystery to me or don't bother coming back. Do you hear?"

John Dirk saw something dark moving behind Simmons. It was just a shadow but it was growing, the inky blob gathering, crawling up the wall as an ebony stain. He drew in a harsh breath and shook his head, took several more steps back with a hasty prayer of protection trembling on his lips. Whatever was ominously building in the shadows behind the planter was nothing with which he wanted to truck. He could *feel* the evil of it, *smell* the corruption of the grave coalescing into a choking mist that burned his lungs.

"Did you hear me, you stupid bastard?" Simmons bellowed. "Get the fuck out of my house!"

Eyes wide as the gloominess behind Simmons towered up the wall until it was bent along the ceiling as well, the foreman dared not turn his back on the ungodly apparition for fear it might attack him. He backed out of the room, his face as white as a new sheet.

"And close the fucking door behind you!"

John Dirk was all too happy to put a barrier between him and whatever was beginning to descend upon the planter from the ceiling. He fumbled with the door handles—his gaze still on the dusky thing looming over Simmons—and pulled the portals shut. As soon as the door edges met, the piercing, skin-crawling bleat of a man who has just been introduced to a beast from hell shattered the stillness.

"Raphian, have mercy!" John Dirk whispered, and felt a trickle of urine run down his quivering leg.

Another unearthly scream of agony erupted from the room beyond and the foreman turned and ran as fast as he could, needing to put distance between him and the pitiless monster that had come for Anthony Simmons.

Leilani and the other servants heard the screams and the gurgling sounds coming from Simmons' office and knew something vile had entered their world. Each of them made a hasty retreat from the house, tearing into the rain, striving to get as far away from the source of the malevolence that was making the air around them thick and brittle. The cook had Simmons' daughter by the hand, the little girl screaming with fear. The smell of brimstone was intense.

"Come with me!" John Dirk shouted at Leilani as the young woman ran past him. He shot out a hand and grabbed her arm. "Unless you want it to come after you too!"

Terrified by the shrill shrieks coming from the house, Leilani didn't question the tall man's words. She stumbled along in his wake, her head turned toward the house as bolt after bolt of lightning struck the magnificent plantation house.

"Oh my God!" she breathed, skidding to a stop as the mansion began to come apart at the seams, flames lapping up from the foundation with greedy fingers.

"God ain't got nothing to do with that, wench," John Dirk snapped, and tugged brutally on her hand.

One last undulating scream came from the house then Sagewood imploded, folding in on itself in a fiery rush that not even the heavy downpour could quench for all who watched the destruction knew the flames had been hell-spawned.

* * * * *

One after another, the zombies came plodding out of the forest—dozens of them stumbling forward with their stiff-legged gait, arms out, fingers hooked into claws. The stench of the grave was overpowering and each time the laser whips struck the head from a body, the fumes made the Reapers' eyes burn. The decomposing bodies dropped all around the lawmen even as the decapitations rolled and the rest of the body put out clawing hands in search of their heads.

"Oh shit, that ain't right!" Phelan growled as one of the creatures picked up its head and stuck it back on its shoulders. He cursed when the zombie wobbled to its feet and started forward again.

The Reapers were surrounded by the living dead. Both men were wielding whips with arms that were slowly losing their strength. By Kasid's count, he had taken the heads of twenty zombies and he knew Phelan had sliced off even more. Yet the monstrous things were getting up and coming at them again.

"Lord Naois?" Kasid bellowed. "We need the drones! We need to burn these things to a crisp!"

"They are on their way!"

A zombie lurched against Phelan from behind and the Reaper stumbled, going to one knee in the slippery mud. He put up an arm to ward off his graveyard attacker and felt the sting of teeth burying themselves into his forearm.

"Get it off me!" he shouted. "Jaborn, get it off!"

Kasid spun around, shocked to see his partner being bitten. He was too close to Phelan to use his whip and there were too many of the creatures lumbering toward them for him to try to pull the one off Phelan. All he could do was yell at Phelan to hold on.

"Hold on?" Phelan shrieked, trying to jerk his arm free of the creature. "Fuck holding on, Jaborn. Get this fucker off my gods-be-damned arm!" He fell to his back in the oozing mud and kicked out at the zombie, hitting it as hard as he could, battering the creature's legs and groin to no effect.

Kasid swung his whip wildly at three oncoming horrors—taking one head-on with the forward pass and curling the laser lash around two on the drawback. Then he did something their Prime had told them he'd tried once. Flicking out the lash, Jaborn mentally bent it into a hook and slipped the fiery noose over the zombie's head and jerked, cleanly slicing the head from the body. Phelan's attacker dropped to its knees but the thing's teeth were still clamped in Phelan's arm.

Dropping his whip, Phelan grabbed the jaws of the headless monstrosity and wedged them open, gagging at the feel of the mushy flesh on the decaying cheeks. Though he couldn't smell the decomposition due to the cotton stuffed into his nostrils, he could feel the corruption of it in his eyes for they were tearing brutally.

Swinging his own whip left and right, forward and back, Kasid was rapidly tiring and more of the plodding creatures were pouring out of the woods. He cast one bewildered, discouraged look to the stand of trees, and when he did, he saw the tall man dressed in black who stood watching.

"The bokor's here!" he told Phelan, pointing to the forest.

Having rid himself of the slimy head, Phelan briefly glanced that way, saw the magic-sayer, took in the dozens of corpses coming toward him and snatched up his whip. He pushed from the ground and put his back to his partner. "Where the fuck is that drone?" he spat.

No sooner had the words left his mouth than the air became charged and zombies began to incinerate around them—bodies popping open then flaming to ash. Too quick for even a Reaper eye to see, the laser pulses zapping down from the heavens struck in rapid succession and the threats stumbling toward the lawmen diminished swiftly.

"Like fish in a barrel," Phelan chuckled. He took three heads with expert flicks of his weapon even as Kasid took out two more. Only four creatures were now close enough to them for them to worry about. The others flamed into nothingness and the line of fire was moving toward the forest from where more of the plodding dead came.

The bokor was no longer hovering at the perimeter. He had vanished into the thick foliage.

"Can the drone take him out, Lord Naois?" Kasid called out.

"There is no other living being near you, Lord Kasid."

"We saw him!" Phelan snapped.

"Then what you saw was most likely his astral projection."

"Shit," Phelan snarled at hearing that.

"We know he's at Burnt Pine," Kasid said, taking the head of the last zombie. "We'll go there."

"Find him, Lord Kasid. Lord Glyn won't be safe until you do," Lord Naois warned.

* * * * *

Mystery had urged her husband back to bed. His flesh still felt more feverish than she thought safe and there was a line of sweat on his upper lip. She slipped off her shoes, lay down beside him and stroked his forehead, crooning to him as she did Valda when the child was ill. Their bare toes played against one another.

"Are you sure you're going to like living up north?" Glyn asked her. His fingers ran up and down her arm.

"I'll be content anywhere you want to live," she answered.

He continued to stroke her arm. "But it gets really cold and snows there in the winter."

"Valda would like snow," she said.

"We'll go take a look when..." He released a long breath. "When things are normal again."

"There is going to be a problem for you because we Joined, isn't there?" she asked.

"I'll handle it," he said firmly, and in a way she knew he didn't wish to discuss what might happen once they got to the Citadel. He turned so he was facing her. "I want to make love to you, Myst." His eyes held an emotion she didn't quite understand. "I need to make love to you."

She slid her hand from his forehead to his chest and caressed him. "I am here, my love."

His kiss was soft at first—almost hesitant—but it deepened until it was a searing press of his mouth to hers. His tongue was hot as it penetrated her lips, slipping past her teeth to plunder. His body was hard as he slid over hers and nudged her legs apart, his fingers dragging the hem of her gown upward so he could touch her very core. The slickness of his leather-clad knee pressed her bared thigh farther apart as the tips of his fingers slid beneath the leg band of her panties.

Mystery sucked in a deep breath through her nose as he eased a digit inside her. His tongue was dueling with hers—sliding in and out—and mimicked the action of his

finger. Her womb clenched and her vaginal lips tightened around his tender invasion. She heard him chuckle low in his throat and then there was a change in the air around her and she knew without having to look down that he had used his powers to rid himself of his pants.

And then he replaced his questing finger with the stiff, hard probe of his erection—going deep and filling her so fully she felt stretched to the point of pain. He pushed as far as his thick cock would go then held it there.

“Umm?” he growled as he continued to kiss her.

“Aye, you know I like it,” she spoke around the pleasure of his lips.

He pushed harder then wiggled his hips and when she laughed, he slid out just a little before going deeper again.

Mystery's arms were around him already so she dug her nails into his back to spur him on. She wanted him pumping into her with that hot, slick shaft he wielded so well. Her body was itching for him to thrust hard and quick, to claim her. She brought her legs up—frowning a little as she heard her gown rip.

“Don't worry about it. I'll buy you dozens more,” he said against her mouth then the gown peeled from her body as though it had never clothed it.

“I don't think I'll ever get used to that,” she told him.

“Then stop insisting on wearing clothes when you're around me, wench,” he teased.

She giggled and clenched him tighter to her, her legs hooked around his hips to draw him into her even deeper, her hips arched in invitation. She thrust her tongue into his mouth and it was like prodding a bear for his growl came from deep down inside his broad chest.

Glyn slid his fingers beneath her rump and lifted her toward him, beginning a rhythmic stroke that made the bed creak under them.

“That's more like it, Reaper,” she stated.

Her words spurred him on and his thrusts increased in speed until he was slapping his body savagely against hers and she was raking him with her nails in an attempt to pull him into her as far as he would go. She strained at him as though she could absorb his flesh into hers, his body into hers. Sweat trickled down their sides, from under the creases of her breasts, in the center of his chest. His arms were tight around her and he used his brawny shoulders to press her thighs higher and tighter to her chest as he pumped vigorously into her wet slit, opening her for his lusty probing.

She came hard and cried out loudly as her sheath quivered around his stony length. The minute vibrations, the tiny tugs that flowed over him seemed as though they were trying to draw him up inside her, to pack him away within her pulsing channel. Her fingernails were clenched into his back, her thighs so tight around him he could barely draw breath, and when at last he ceased to pump furiously and released his seed into her, he howled like a demon.

He shook his head like a wet spaniel—sweat flinging from the damp tendrils of his black hair and his entire body shuddered upon hers. Once. Twice. Three times his cock spurted and then he stilled with his eyes glazed and his body rigid before his arms gave out and he collapsed atop her, dragging gasping breaths into his depleted lungs.

She wrapped her arms around him, kept her ankles locked over his bare rump and held him. His heart was thundering in his chest and she could feel it against her own—where it should always be.

“I love you with all my heart,” he whispered.

“I know,” she replied with a soft smile, and tears invaded her dark eyes.

“No matter what.”

“No matter what,” she echoed.

He fell into a heavy sleep atop her with his cheek pressed against her breast, his lips just touching the dusky color of her areola.

Chapter Eighteen

Surveying the destruction surrounding Her, the Triune Goddess wept bitter tears. Blood was everywhere and bodies lay facedown. Women and children and old ones had not been spared the ravaging of Lesh Spiosyn's troops. Everywhere She looked the land had been burned to a blackened crisp and the wells salted. The rivers and streams were befouled with the carcasses of slain animals and had no doubt been strewn with poison. No building stood. No holy place remained. No living thing existed here.

All was gone.

All was death.

Pushing to Her feet beside the body of a young priestess for whom She had cared deeply, Morrigunia raised Her beautiful face to the heavens and cursed Her enemy – one of many for a certainty but the most powerful She had fought to date.

"I will defeat you, Yn Drogh Spyrryd!" She shouted to the heaving gray skies that bubbled and swirled above Her. "You are no match for my Reapers."

A cackle of maniacal laughter shrieked from the firmament but She knew the source of that hideous sound came from far away. The evil She had come to stop, to fight, had fled this land of beauty and plenty where man had lived in peace and prosperity for tens of thousands of years.

That evil had come here to Cochiaull and had leveled every village and town, every hut and manor house alike. It had left nothing standing. It had brought its vile demon troopers – the *Flaiee* – here to ravish and rape and slaughter. Under the command of the infamous General Lesh Spiosyn, the *Flaiee* had shed enough blood, taken enough innocent lives to fulfill the *Fadeyrys*, the Prophecy...

"Amid the days of *Jerrey Souree* innocent blood will flow,
In the Land of the Chosen where life will be no more;
Sacrificed flesh will be offered up this fateful day.

Chants spoken in the ancient tongue shall find the ear,
Of the greatest Evil mankind has reason to fear;
And the Path shall be opened to show Him the way.

A warrior tried through no fault of his own shall fall,
His weakness shining like a beacon, his cry a siren's call;
To lure the *Nikkeson* unleashed from His cell into the fray.

Unto a new world and to new blood shall the demon fly,
And drink His fill while tears gather in every eye;
Where the innocent can not hold His fury at bay."

The Triune Goddess hung Her head. Because one of Her Reapers had failed, Yn Drogh Spyrryd's master evil, the *Nikkesson*, was loose from the frigid depths of Its lightless megaversial prison.

There was no doubt in Her mind to where the demon had flown.

She raised Her head and turned Her green eyes toward Terra.

It would slip undetected through the Net as a single – almost infinitesimal – drop of rain falling from the heavens. From there It would descend into a body of water somewhere in the vastness where humankind did not swell and there it would take on Its malevolent form.

* * * * *

Yves St. Germaine—known to those who feared him as Papa Croisement—had failed and he knew all too well what the demon would do to him for that failure. As he sat before the divining bowl where he had watched the dead attacking the white lawman, he stared into the now-still waters and realized where he had made his fatal mistake.

"Not a single white man but two," he muttered, understanding now that the second Reaper was not a man of color as he had surmised but a dark-skinned warrior from the hated white race.

That was where he had gone wrong and he knew he would pay dearly for the mistake.

But St. Germaine was not a stupid man. As he had watched his controlled dead fall to the ground in flames and ash, he began to realize there was a greater god than Kalfu, the loa to whom he had chanted and whom he had brought forth from the Abyss.

Though Kalfu was a master of charms and sorceries of the blackest of magic, the controller of the goings and comings of evil spirits, the Lord of the Crossroads, it appeared as though He was not as powerful as the One the Reapers had brought from the rainy skies. Kalfu's magic had been easily set aside, defeated by this unknown god or goddess, this unnamed spirit of the heavens.

Knowing that did not make St. Germaine feel any better. Already he could feel the darkness gathering around him and knew Kalfu was on His way to enact the punishment He would mete out for His servant's weakness.

Long before—when Yves St. Germaine had been a young man—he had been initiated into the secret society of the bokor. He had risen swiftly in the ranks because

he had no fear, no hesitation to destroy or kill, did not falter when given an assignment, was loyal and trustworthy and kept secrets. He had worked his magic and when Kalfu had shown Himself on a moon-bright night, had eagerly given his flesh and blood to the loa in exchange for even greater powers in the dark arts. He had believed in Kalfu's primary mission on Terra.

"Together we will rid this land of the blight of the Reapers and their impotent goddess!" Kalfu had stated. "Together we will turn their strengths to weaknesses then suck the life from their worthless bodies! When the Reapers are no more, our race will rise up and prevail!"

It had seemed a good plan, St. Germaine reasoned, but he had soon found the magic he wielded upon Lord Phelan Kiel was not strong enough to bring the white man to his knees. Befuddle him, aye. Cut him off from the source of his command. Perhaps even distract him, but it could not foil Kiel for long and had not destroyed him as Kalfu had predicted.

Perhaps the magic he had sown had been too widespread. He had, after all, sent it after all the Reapers and not just the one who patrolled Vircars. He had told the demon what he suspected and Kalfu had seemed to agree, deciding instead to concentrate the magic upon the single white man who had garnered the demon's notice. The white man who had dared to corrupt one of their own.

"He will rue the day he touched one of our women!" Kalfu had sworn.

It did not hurt that another demon—Raphian—was also after Lord Kullen for some purpose of His own. Together the combined powers of the two demons had weakened the Reaper and made him vulnerable to attack.

Yet St. Germaine knew had he not shown himself as a lost little girl crying in the rain, Kullen might never have taken the bait. The white man had deep feelings for the child Valda and that could conceivably be used against him.

"Fool!"

The roar of the demon's voice rushed through St. Germaine's hut and knocked the conjurer from his feet. Welts streaked down his prone body and boils formed, broke open and ran, unearthly pain shooting through every vein and muscle in his body. He writhed on the floor in agony, moaning.

"Wretched excuse for a magician!"

More pain was heaped upon St. Germaine's body and the magic-sayer screamed as the torment rose, eyes bulging from his head.

"Bring the Reaper to me. Now!"

With arms that felt like rubber, St. Germaine pushed his chest from the floor and crawled on all fours. He was in so much pain he could barely breathe let alone stand, but he made his way to his altar, pulling himself along like an animal. Spittle slung from his open mouth as he hissed at the horrible pain that engulfed him. While the boils broke open and ran—forming new blisters and boils where they landed—the bokor strove to gain a single clear thought to begin the summons.

"Arise and come to me," the magic-sayer whimpered, dragging himself up to a kneeling position before the altar. "Come to your master, slave!"

The candles were lit. The oils and salts and herbs and leaves were scattered. The wax effigy containing the Reaper's nail clippings and hair that had been stolen from John Dirk were taken up and a coffin nail driven deep into the figure's head.

The demon manifested Itself in a corner of the room, Its glowing eyes as piercing as the fires of hell. Its voice harshly instructed the bokor about what next to do, and with trembling hands, the servant of evil did as he was instructed, calling forth, summoning another to aid him in his conjuring.

Six miles away, Glyn Kullen sat bolt upright in bed, his amber eyes wide, his hands reaching to the brutal pain that lanced through his temples.

"What's wrong?" Mystery asked as she reached out to touch her lover's bare back.

"Cover yourself and come to your master!"

Completely beneath the spell of the bokor, Glyn swung his long legs from the mattress and looked down at his nakedness. In his controlled condition, he was unable to mentally fashion the clothing he needed and in some numbed part of his brain he seemed to grasp that knowledge. Instead, he walked stiffly to the closet and jerked open the door.

"Glyn?" Mystery questioned, sitting up. Her lovely face was creased with unease. "What are you doing?"

No clothing hung in the empty guest room closet and the Reaper turned away, his head swiveling slowly from side to side until he saw his saddlebags slung across a chair back. He moved toward them.

"Glyn, you're scaring me," Mystery said, and got out of the bed. She snatched the coverlet from the bed and wrapped herself in it for her clothing had vanished by her mate's power.

He paid no attention to his lady-wife. He did not hear her voice. He opened the saddlebags and pulled out a pair of black jeans and a badly wrinkled black T-shirt.

"Glyn, answer me."

Mystery stood at the foot of the bed and watched him stepping into the jeans, pulling the T-shirt over his head, bending down to retrieve his boots, and still he did not look at her, made no sound at all as he went about dressing. When he turned toward her and she saw the glazed, vacant look in his eyes, she knew he was once more under the bokor's spell.

And she knew there was nothing she could do to stop him as he made his way from the room. Dropping the coverlet, she ran to Lord Phelan's room in search of something to wear just as the front door slammed shut behind Glyn.

* * * * *

Having dispensed with all the rotting bodies on the field around Phelan and Kasid and taking care of any concealed in the forest, the drone continued to hover overhead even though the Reapers could not see it. The air was still thick and charged with energy, letting the lawmen know the craft was there.

Phelan put his hand over the savage bite on his left arm, more annoyed that the silk of his uniform shirt had been torn than from the stinging indentions that were slowly healing.

"Son of a bitch ruined my fucking shirt," he complained.

"Then change it," Kasid suggested. He sheathed the dragon handle of his laser whip and pulled the cotton batting from his nostrils, his nose crinkling at the strange smell that permeated the air.

Waving his hand, Phelan clothed himself with a fresh shirt, cursing as the garment became soaked from the continuing rain. He cursed again and lifted his hand to retrieve his slicker. The rain gear flew to him from the back of his horse and he shrugged into it, grimacing at the wet feel of the shirt plastered to his chest and back.

"I am starting to really hate this gods-be-damned rain!" he grumbled as he took the batting from his nose.

"Shall we go after the bokor or go back to check on Glyn?" Kasid asked. He too was now dressed in his slicker, for what little good the clothing did.

"Maybe we should go check on Kullen," Phelan replied. "Make sure he's healing okay. Then we'll go after the magic-sayer."

"Lord Naois?" Kasid inquired.

"I'm here."

"Any word from the goddess?"

"Nothing."

"We're going to check on Lord Glyn then go after the man responsible for the havoc here today. Perhaps the drone should stay close by."

"That had already been decided, Lord Kasid," came the reply.

Plodding through the slippery mud, the Reapers mounted up and headed back to Phelan's house. Overhead, the sky alternated between brilliant white flashes of stinging light and the rolling darkness of rain-saturated skies. The wind had picked up and was now cold and howling like a dying banshee.

"What's with this fucking weather?" Phelan demanded, shouting above the thunder.

"It surely isn't natural," Kasid said, but not loud enough for his partner to hear. He tipped his head back to survey the heavens—wincing as rain struck at his eyes. "Not natural at all."

* * * * *

Leilani hovered under the lean-to beneath which John Dirk had led her. She was shivering for her dress and shawl were soaked through and water filled her shoes. She ran the back of her hand beneath her nose, watching her companion trying futilely to start a fire by which they could warm.

"What was in his office?" she asked. "What killed him?"

"Nothing you need to worry yourself about," the former foreman told her. "Just know it was power the likes of which you'll never wield."

The housekeeper stared at the white man's stony profile and her upper lip cocked with disdain. He was trying to give her the impression he could exert that kind of power and she knew better. She'd seen the terror on his face when he'd run from the office. She had felt his fear. Whatever had slaughtered Anthony Simmons had been something that frightened the tall man.

"What do we do now?" she asked.

John Dirk shrugged, tossing the wet matches aside. He flexed his broad shoulders. "I do whatever Lord Raphian wishes me to do," he replied.

"You're still going after the Reaper man?"

"Lord Raphian wants the bastard."

Leilani looked away, turning her gaze into the wild afternoon where the rain was streaming. She contemplated her choices. A part of her wanted revenge on him for choosing Mystery over her, but another part couldn't have cared less what happened to Glyn Kullen now that she knew he was not the one destined for her.

"You are going to stay with me so get him off your mind, wench," John Dirk warned.

She turned her eyes to him. "What makes you think I'll stay with you?" she asked, dredging up courage she didn't know she possessed where this man was concerned.

John Dirk actually smiled although that smile was a deadly parody of one that made her flesh crawl. "Because between us, we have power and we can make a damned fine living from those of your kind who might seek out our services." He locked stares with her. "The Reapers will go after the bokor and take him out. Once he's gone, we'll be the only game in town. I'll turn Kullen over to Lord Raphian and that'll be that."

Leilani drew in a slow, deep breath. She could see the flaw in such a plan. Even if Kullen met his fate with the Destroyer of Men's Souls, the other Reapers would avenge him. They'd not rest until they'd punished the one responsible. Letting them know it was John Dirk was the only way she'd be free of the dangerous man's hold.

"That sounds like a plan," she said, smiling sensually at her companion.

She barely flinched when he dragged her into his arms and slathered his thick lips over hers. Though his eyes were squeezed shut as he thrust his slimy tongue into her mouth, hers were wide open, and within them the fire of revenge burned bright.

* * * * *

Mystery was trudging through the rain, intent on reaching the only two men she knew might keep the man she loved from harm's way. Having found no horses in the stable, she had simply begun walking in a pair of oversized pants, shirt and an old slicker—the hem of which dragged the ground behind her as she put one foot ahead of the other. Upon her head was one of Lord Phelan's castoff black hats, keeping the rain out of her determined face. Around her waist she had strapped a spare gun belt that holstered a loaded six-shooter. With her were two things she had gathered from the house and were now concealed within the dry confines of the slicker. One of those things was a rifle and it too was loaded with spare shells jingling in the pocket of the rain gear.

In his cabin, Yves St. Germaine was busy controlling two souls locked within the perimeters of his magic. One was the white man. The other was a man of color. Now and again he would turn his fearful eyes to the demon then look hastily away for he had seen his agonizing fate should he dare to fail Kalfu yet again.

* * * * *

Under the rickety lean-to where he had taken shelter with the woman after whom he lusted, John Dirk listened to the insistent, whispered voice of the Destroyer of Men's Souls—nodding calmly to the instructions he was being given. When the buzzing, clicking voice of Raphian faded, the tall man grabbed Leilani's arm and dragged her with him to his horse. Tossing her upon the nag's back, he joined her then kicked the beast brutally in the ribs to set out for an isolated cabin on Burnt Pine plantation where he intended to lend his support to a brother magic-sayer.

Her arms reluctantly gripping the waist of the former foreman, Leilani Shoad put her cheek to the white man's broad back to keep the rain from pelting her face. Her gaze strayed to the gun at his hip and stayed there as the horse galloped across the sodden ground.

* * * * *

With a fury greater than it had been in many millennia, the Triune Goddess in dragon form dove through the Net—that deadly security barrier spread over Terra to protect it from extraterrestrial invasion—and unleashed a bellow of rage as Her great copper wings beat once, twice against the driving rain. The scaled wings stretched wide and then stilled. In a downward glide She bared Her foot-long fangs as a stream of fire shot from Her gaping maw. Her two-inch-thick claws curved inward toward the rough skin of Her paw as She soared. Her scales rippled in the rushing wind. Her haunches tensed. Her great beastly heart beat with a slow, steady intent as bloodlust settled in the elliptical green eyes. Morrigunia was primed for a fight and only gruesome death would satiate Her now.

* * * * *

As Glyn Kullen rode toward the hypnotic voice summoning him, his horse balked beneath the tight rein its rider had on the bit. Flinging its head from side to side, up and down, the beast tried valiantly to let the human know the grip was painful. When after a few miles the man did not get the message, Stannair decided it had had enough and came to a stiff-legged halt and bucked, sending its rider over its head into the mud.

The Reaper landed facedown on the ground, grunting as the wind was knocked out of his sails. He flipped to his back, gasping as rain hammered cruelly at his face, and that was a mistake. Groaning, he twisted to the side to avoid the stinging invasion. He lay there until he could breath normally again. The unrelenting summoning voice of the bokor prodded him until he was sitting up, swiping a trembling hand through his dripping hair, his hat having been dislodged and nowhere in sight.

Drawn by the insistent command, he stumbled through the sucking sludge. The heavy rain soon washed the mud away in mere minutes but his feet squelched ankle-deep in the muck as he walked. The black denim jeans clung tightly to his legs and the black T-shirt stuck to his broad chest.

By the time he saw the cabin's lights, he was trembling violently from the cold, harsh wind whipping the lancing rain over his body. His lips quivered yet his eyes were fever-bright if vacant—homing in on the call he could not deny.

* * * * *

"Isn't that Mystery?" Phelan shouted, pointing toward the figure trekking toward them. "By the goddess, it is!"

The Reapers urged their mounts to a faster clip, and when they reached the sodden woman, they reined in quickly.

Mystery pulled the rifle from beneath her coat.

"What happened?" Phelan asked, thrusting his hand toward her, demanding the rifle she carried. When she handed it to him, he didn't wait for her answer but swung her up behind him.

"He's under the bokor's spell again. He left half an hour ago," Mystery answered as she took the rifle back from him.

Phelan glanced at Kasid and both men swung their horses around, whipping them into a hard gallop.

"How will you be able to find him?" Mystery yelled to Phelan, her words whipping past her cheek in the wind. She clutched the rifle tight against her.

"We have our ways!" Phelan responded.

Kasid had not heard the exchange but he had plucked the worry from Mystery's mind. Each of the Reapers had exchanged blood for just such a reason as this. It would

be easy to home in on Glyn's whereabouts. He and Kiel would find him by the blood scent.

"Lord Naois, the bokor has Kullen again," Kasid sent mentally.

"We are with you, Lord Kasid. The drone is tracking you," was the reply.

The lightning strikes increased—the ear-splitting, eye-blinding flashes raw on the nerves—and the wind became a buffeting wall through which they rode. Its breath was as frigid as the Northland climes, twice as brutal. Thunder boomed and the ground beneath the pounding horses rumbled. Rain came down in a solid sheet of misery to obscure the road but the Reapers had Kullen's scent in their nostrils and they sped toward him with teeth gritted and eyes hard.

* * * * *

John Dirk spied the Reaper as he tramped through the cloying mud and laughed. He thrust his chin toward the struggling man.

"He is walking to his doom," the former foreman scoffed. He urged the horse carrying him and Leilani past the lawman—who didn't even look up as they rode by.

Leilani looked back at Glyn Kullen and felt a momentary qualm of regret that the handsome white man was about to meet his death or—worse yet—have his soul stolen by the bokor. When John Dirk halted the horse, flung a leg over the beast's head and dropped to the ground, he had to hiss to gain her attention. He stood on the ground with his arms held out to her. She hooked a leg over the saddle and slid into his waiting arms, bracing her hands on his hard biceps, avoiding his lusty gaze as he settled her almost gently on the muddy ground.

"St. Germaine is waiting," the tall man told her.

The former housekeeper of Sagewood turned her head and saw the bokor standing on the porch of his cabin. She frowned for the man looked none too steady. He was leaning against an upright, his hands curled around the post.

"Didn't need to bring the woman here," Papa Croisement complained to John Dirk as the white man and the woman of color stepped under the porch's overhand. "Didn't need the peckerwood neither!"

"My Master sent me," John Dirk said. "A part of that one's soul belongs to Lord Raphian."

The black man snorted, gave Leilani a penetrating look that had it been a flame would have incinerated her where she stood then returned his attention to the man plodding toward the cabin.

"That's right," the bokor said. "Come to your master, slave."

"Are you going to kill him?" Leilani asked then tucked her bottom lip between her teeth for the enraged glance the magic-sayer gave her was like a physical blow.

"Do not speak to me, woman!" Papa Croisement sneered. "You are lower than the low to me!"

Leilani backed away from the fury she saw on the bokor's face and when John Dirk said nothing to the insult, she dug her fingernails into her palms.

The closer the Reaper came to the cabin, the more intense the storm beat against the cabin. Lightning was flaring constantly and the wind howled so fiercely it was necessary to shout to be heard. The air began to have a decided sulfurous stink to it.

"Lord Raphian is coming," John Dirk yelled.

"Baron Kalfu is already here," the bokor said in a voice so low the white man could not hear.

Overhead, the heavens took on a greenish cast amid the dark black and blue bruises that discolored its surface. Here and there crimson streaks veined savagely across the tumbling, boiling, rumbling clouds. A low rumble began then the air became filled with a loud buzzing, clicking cacophony that vied with the skirling wind to batter the hearing.

"There!" John Dirk cried out, pointing at the two fiery elliptical eyes that had formed amid one midnight black patch of sky. "My Master has arrived!"

The bokor paid no heed to the white man or his alien demon-god; the woman was completely forgotten. He was listening to the harsh, angry voice of his own Master as Kalfu instructed him to make haste in bringing the Reaper to the altar. The ceremonial knife awaited the white man's throat and the chalice sat empty, eager for the flow of blood. He barely paid any attention to the two other riders bearing down on his cabin.

"Be quick, slave!" he bellowed.

From her place pressed between two rockers, Leilani narrowed her eyes, trying to make out who was arriving. As soon as she recognized the Reapers and Mystery, she opened her mouth to speak but thought better of it. Clamping her lips shut, she decided to see how this drama would play out. Death hovered in the air and she sensed it. She did not want that death to be her own.

"Glyn!" Phelan shouted, but his voice was picked up and flung away by the howling wind.

Kasid's mount was a few lengths ahead of his partner's. His hand was on the gun strapped to his leg. His stare was locked on the white man who stood beneath the overhang. He turned to look back at Phelan, sending a mental declaration that he would take care of John Dirk.

Phelan nodded as that psychic warning came to him. "*I'll take out the bokor,*" he sent back then he looked from Glyn to the huge black man standing on the porch and back again. His right hand left the reins and closed around the butt of his six-shooter.

Mystery lifted the rifle and pointed it straight at Leilani, her lips drawn back.

Realizing that rifle was aimed at her, Leilani raised her hands and shook her head violently from side to side.

Glyn continued his mindless, unseeing trek toward the cabin.

The bokor ignored the men riding toward him and was beckoning the Reaper forward with a wave of his meaty hand.

John Dirk was keeping his attention on the boiling clouds where Raphian's eel-like head was beginning to protrude from the sodden heavens. A wide, merciless grin to match the gaping maw of the demon was stretched across the tall man's beefy face.

Mystery closed one eye, rocked a cartridge into the chamber, and sighted the other woman down the length of the barrel.

Phelan raced his horse to within three feet of Glyn and hauled back on the reins. His gun cleared leather. He trained the weapon on the bokor and started to pull the trigger.

Kasid's gun was out as well and the Reaper had a bead directly on John Dirk's heart.

From out of the glooming came a small, piteous cry for help. Every head swung toward the sound except the bokor's and Glyn's. Those two men were staring at one another, an invisible chain locking them in place.

"It can't be!" Mystery protested, for she knew the sound of her own child's voice even in the pouring rain and blustering wind. She snapped around in the saddle and the look on her face turned ghastly.

Struggling in the arms of one of her uncles—one of Mystery's brothers—the little girl was beating frantically against her captor's shoulders but the man holding her seemed unaware of the child's actions. Though her little hands raked fingernails down his cheeks, he did not appear to feel it. His eyes were as vacant as Glyn's and his plodding walk told everyone there he was one of the bokor's mental slaves.

"LaVon, no," Mystery cried out. "No!"

"Take him out, Jaborn," Phelan yelled at Kasid then fired his own weapon. For the first time in his unnatural life, the Reaper missed his target, the bullet performing a forty-five degree arc in the air and striking the wall just above Leilani's head.

Eyes fearful, mouth sagging open, Leilani let out a horrified shriek as Kasid fired and she dropped to a rigid squat with her arms over her head. A small puddle of urine appeared at her feet. She shrieked again when John Dirk's body hit the wooden planking just in front of her—his surprised eyes staring at her.

Kasid's bullet had not missed.

A roar of enraged sound filled the heavens with the white magic-sayer's death but the flashing red eyes and fang-filled maw of the demon Raphian was sucked back into the tumbling clouds.

Oblivious to everything happening around them, Glyn and Mystery's brother continued toward the cabin. The child in LaVon's arms had gone still as gruesome death had struck only a yard away from her. Her little body was no longer struggling within her uncle's hold but trembling violently.

Ignoring Phelan's shout to stay where she was, Mystery scrambled down from his horse and ran toward her child, dropping her rifle in the process.

Kasid quickly dismounted, and with gun in hand, started toward her, obviously intending to cut her off. He yelled her name as he ran, warning her to stay away from her brother.

Having missed his shot, Phelan hissed with fury and started to take another but the bokor was no longer standing on the porch. In the split second it had taken Phelan to glance at Mystery throwing herself from his mount, the black man had simply disappeared.

"Where the fuck did he go?" Phelan yelled at Leilani, who had raised her head and was staring at him from beneath her crossed arms. When the terrified woman only shook her head, the Reaper cursed vilely, threw a leg over his horse's head and slid to the ground, his fingers tightening on his weapon.

Kasid managed to snake an arm around Mystery's waist and lift her free of the muddy ground, swiveling her around on his hip as he struggled to confine her.

"Be still, wench. He might hurt the child!" he told her.

"Valda!" Mystery shouted, her arms out to her daughter.

"Mama?" It was a tiny little squeak that was nearly lost in the rampage of the storm but Glyn faltered at that sound and he stopped, swaying. He blinked. Blinked again then began to turn his head slowly toward the child behind him.

"Come, slave!" the bokor's angry voice rang out from the interior of the cabin. An eerie greenish glow came from the opened doorway and from behind the simple cotton curtains on the windows.

Phelan was streaking toward the porch when a bullet came from the cabin, whizzing past him close enough to pluck at his shirt. Before another could follow, he dove for the ground, tucking and rolling and coming to rest at the corner of the building.

Dragging Mystery with him as bullets started flying at them next, Kasid manhandled Glyn's mate out of harm's way, shielding her behind his horse and Phelan's. He got her to the other side of the cabin, barely noticing Leilani scrambling toward them on all fours.

Valda's uncle passed Glyn whose vacant eyes tracked the little girl holding her arms out to him.

"Daddy Glyn!" Valda whimpered, tears running down her cheeks. "Daddy Glyn!"

Glyn's entire body quivered as the rain beat down on him. He continued to watch the child as she was being carried toward the porch. His strangely glazed eyes swung to Phelan who was plastered against the cabin wall, ducking beneath the window and making his way to the open door.

"Slave!" the bokor bellowed.

Glyn flinched as though he'd been struck and he took a few lurching steps forward then stopped again.

"Glyn, help our baby!" Mystery pleaded with him as she tried her best to break free of Kasid's hold.

Phelan was only four feet away from the man holding the child. He knew if he shot the poor bastard anywhere save his head, he most likely wouldn't feel it and would keep right on walking. Other than blowing out both knee caps to fell Mystery's brother and cripple him for life, he saw no other way to stop the lumbering man. Making a decision he would regret the rest of his life, he leapt toward LaVon, throwing his body against the mesmerized tool of the bokor to knock him down.

From the interior of the cabin, a single shot rang out to hit – not the intended mark, not the Reaper – but the little girl clutched in her uncle's arms.

Unaware the child had been hit, Phelan twisted around and fired his weapon into the sickening green glow inside the cabin. This time his bullet did not miss and the bokor's head exploded in a mist of red. Almost instantly the green glow vanished in a spiraling, serpentine wisp of smoke that poured from the cabin's roof, leaving in its wake the stench of brimstone.

In the heavens a mighty clash suddenly rang out as though two massive bodies had collided and the sky turned as black as pitch. Two beings were locked in immortal combat amidst the churning firmament. One had armor-plated copper scales and raking talons, a breath of liquid fire. The other had but its darkness with fading greenish veins running along its malodorous length. The hideous shrieks and ululating hisses, vicious growls and straining grunts from the two combatants blew the glass out of every window in the cabin.

"Valda!" Mystery screamed, seeing her child slumped against LaVon. She twisted savagely away from Kasid and went to one knee on the planking before scrambling up and rushing toward her daughter.

With the death of the bokor, both Glyn and LaVon came out of their stupor. Lying flat on his back, LaVon pushed himself up with his elbows, his dazed eyes lowering to the child in his lap. Standing where he was, Glyn shook his head, striving to regain his senses. The moment he saw the tableau on the porch, he knew.

With a roar of pain and sorrow the Reaper raced forward, falling to his knees beside the bleeding child. He shoved Phelan aside and gathered the little girl against him, rocking back and forth as he howled in grief.

Mystery came to an abrupt halt as she reached her child. The bullet had struck Valda in the center of her chest and the gray cotton of her bodice had blossomed with blood. All she could do was stare at the spreading crimson flower, unable to stoop down or make another sound.

"Valli," she heard Glyn say over and over again as he sobbed as though his heart had broken.

Phelan stood and put a hand out to help the child's uncle to his feet. He shook his head slowly when the big man of color would have questioned what had happened. The Reaper was aware of Kasid and Leilani approaching, of Leilani reaching out to touch Mystery only to have Jaborn knock her hand away.

Glyn slowly looked up, staring disbelievingly into Mystery's stricken face. His lips were trembling, his body quivering as he held Valda. He cocked his head to one side like a hurt animal that did not understand. His chest heaved raggedly, he closed his lips and swallowed then he lowered his eyes to the little girl's still body.

"Glyn?" Phelan questioned softly. "Why don't you let me take her?"

Glyn's arms tightened around the child. He slung his head from side to side brutally then pushed to his feet. Valda's head was draped over his left arm, her little legs over his right. Her blood glistened on the front of his wet black T-shirt. He gave Phelan a long, hard look, their amber gazes fusing.

"Don't," Phelan whispered.

Kullen did not so much as bat an eye. He moved past Phelan Kiel and into the interior of the cabin. When Mystery would have followed him, Phelan shot out a hand and grabbed her arm.

"No," Phelan insisted, and pulled her back as his teammate entered the cabin and kicked the door shut behind him.

"Let go of me!" Mystery snarled, but Kiel kept a hard, tight grip on her arm.

"You can't see this."

Kasid stepped forward. "Phelan, we can't let him..." he started to say, but Kiel growled like a wounded bear.

"Stay out of it, Jaborn," was the order.

"What is he going to do?" Mystery asked, fear showing on her drawn features. "What is he going to do?" When neither man answered, she called Glyn's name, yelling for him like a woman possessed.

Kiel and Jaborn flinched in tandem as Lord Kheelan's voice ripped through their brains.

"Don't you dare!" came the violent hiss from the Citadel. *"Kullen, no!"*

Chapter Nineteen

Phelan left the relatively dry comfort of the shed where Mystery cradled her daughter in her lap. The rain had slackened, the thunder had stopped and now only a faint, distant thread of lightning lit up the eastern sky as the storm settled down to a gentle drizzle. He glanced at the cabin that was burning briskly despite the rain, wrinkled his nose to the smell of charring flesh but relieved the bodies of the two magic-sayers were being consumed by the flames. As the wood snapped and popped, sent flickering embers up in a refreshingly warm wind, he picked his way across the muddy yard. His destination was a large spreading oak tree under which Kullen sat—back against the tree, shoulders slumped, knees crooked with his wrists resting on them, head down.

The Reaper jumped when a roof timber fell but kept walking until he was standing beneath the canopy of the oak, a few feet from his teammate. There, under the thick awning of the leaves, he hunkered down and pushed his hat back, turning his head to study the cabin's destruction.

"I sent Kasid and LaVon over to the plantation house to bring back a carriage," he said then was quiet for a long moment before continuing. "Your lady is singing softly to the child." He looked back around, his attention settling on Glyn. "She has a truly lovely voice."

Glyn's eyes were open and he was staring at the ground between his spread thighs. He did not acknowledge Phelan's words, did not even blink. His chest barely rose and fell with his slow, measured breathing. In the dwindling light of day, his face was a ghostly color, the dark tan seeming to have faded in the span of a few hours time.

"I don't know where the housekeeper hiked off to," Phelan went on. His voice was low, expressionless. "She just up and disappeared after we set fire to the cabin." He reached down to pluck a small twig from the dirt and began twirling it idly between his fingers. "It's just as well I suppose."

For a few minutes there was only the sound of the rain falling into the leaves. The wind picked up but only marginally, ruffling a lock of dark hair at Glyn's temple, blowing it into his eyes. Warily he lifted a hand to thread his fingers through the drying locks, combing them back from his forehead.

"Morrigunia was here," Phelan said softly.

Slowly Glyn raised his head until his wounded gaze fused with Phelan's. "Are you sure?" Kullen asked.

"I saw Her dragon form soaring through the skies. It was Her."

The anguish that settled in those amber orbs was difficult to witness so Kiel looked away.

"I had to do it, Phelan," Glyn said so quietly Phelan had to strain to hear.

Phelan drew in a long, slow breath then exhaled even slower before answering. "I know." He was once more watching the inferno that had been the bokor's cabin.

"She could have stopped me but She didn't."

Kiel nodded silently.

Another minute or so passed before Glyn spoke again.

"They are going to fucking crucify me," he said, his voice infinitely tired.

Phelan knew his fellow Reaper was speaking of the High Council and no words of denial could be uttered. Both he and Kasid had heard the direct order that had come from the lips of the High Lord himself. They had continued to hear the denials, the warnings and threats, the undeniable orders that had been blasted at Kullen.

Then they had been unnerved by the utter silence when the Shadowlords' voices had stopped.

There had been no further communication from the Citadel.

"What they're gonna do to me will make what they did to Owen look like a cakewalk."

"Don't say that," Phelan mumbled.

"You know it's true. I disobeyed a direct order and they're going to make mincemeat out of my ass." Glyn let out a harsh breath. "If they don't stand me before a firing squad, Mystery will be an old, old woman before they ever let me out of a con cell or they'll..." His voice caught and he squeezed his eyes shut and hung his head, grief crinkling his face, his hands doubling into fists on his knees.

Phelan looked around at the hitch of sound that had escaped his fellow Reaper. "They won't take her away from you if that's what you're worried about, Glyn."

"You think not?"

"I know not. Your teammates would not allow it. We will fight for you, Kullen. We'll not let your woman be taken from you."

"You realize they'll probably punish you and Kasid for not having intervened," Glyn reminded him.

"Fuck it. Let them," Phelan said from between clenched teeth. "I've always wondered what it would be like to spend time in a con cell."

Glyn shook his head despairingly at his teammate's bravado. Not a single one of his kind wanted to be locked in one of those hellholes. They were all claustrophobic and hated closed-in places. They all knew what torments lay behind the titanium doors of the con cells, the agony that awaited them.

"Look," Phelan said, bouncing a bit on his haunches for his legs were beginning to cramp. "It's like you said. The goddess knew what you were about to do and She made

no move to stop you. She might not have condoned it, but She didn't stop it. There isn't a man among your team who doesn't understand why you acted as you did."

Glyn looked up. "You've spoken with the others?"

Phelan shrugged. "I tried calling on Lord Dunham." He flung the twig away. "I figured he was the lesser of the evil trio but he wouldn't answer me. When I called out to Arawn, the first thing out of his mouth was 'Tell Glyn we're behind him and we'll see him in Charlotte'."

"We?"

Phelan's handsome face clouded with apology. "He and Bevyn are on their way to bring you in."

Glyn flinched "They didn't trust me to come in on my own? For you and Kasid to bring me back?"

Kiel had to look away from the hurt on his teammate's face. "I guess not."

Kullen stared at Kiel until Phelan turned from his contemplation of the fire to lock gazes with him.

"That means I'm under arrest, doesn't it?" When Phelan didn't answer, he pressed the issue. "Doesn't it, Phelan? They're afraid I might run." His eyes narrowed with sorrow. "Are you going to shackle me to make sure I don't?"

Phelan remained silent, unable to respond, to actually say the words. He felt Glyn slip into his mind and pull out the answer. He saw tears gathering in Kullen's eyes. "I'm sorry, Glyn. I really am," he whispered.

* * * * *

Mystery stood in the doorway of the shed, looking past the burning rubble, and watched as her brother drove a closed carriage toward her. Behind him, Lord Kasid sat astride his mighty black stallion, leading Glyn's horse.

"Where'd you find him?" she heard Lord Phelan inquire as he got to his feet, walking away from where her husband still sat beneath the spreading live oak.

"He was back at your cabin, standing by the stable." Kasid answered. "I hope I got everything and we don't have to make a trip back there." He looked up at the sky. "We need to get on the road as soon as we get milady's things and make it into Charlestown before full dark. Storm's coming back."

"I feel it," Phelan agreed.

Although the carriage had pulled up, blocking her view of the Reapers, she heard Lord Kasid ask, "How is he?"

There was a slight pause then the answer made Mystery want to scream. "Not good. He knows he's under arrest."

Motioning LaVon to stay where he was on the carriage seat, Mystery turned from the door and looked at her daughter. The child was still but her little chest rose and fell normally.

"She'll most likely sleep a good long time," Lord Phelan had told Mystery. "Her body is having to cope with the..." He cleared his throat. "With what was done."

Her lips trembling, Mystery walked over to her child and bent down to pick her up. She grunted with the effort and half smiled, thinking her daughter was getting to be a big girl and it wouldn't be long before she'd be too heavy to lift.

Valda moaned in her deep sleep but a faint smile creased her little lips for just a moment before her face went still again.

Staring down at that sweet, innocent face, Mystery felt again the disbelief she'd experienced when Glyn had stumbled from the cabin—ignoring her calls to him—and walked through the rain to the tree. She's watched him slide to the ground and bury his head in his hands. It had taken every ounce of her courage to enter the cabin. She thought she knew what awaited her.

She had been wrong.

"He gave her one of his hellions," Lord Phelan had explained. "He couldn't let her go."

At first Mystery had stared up at the Reaper, his words not registering in her grieving mind.

"You don't have to worry about her Transitioning any time soon," he went on. "Had the transference been to you, you would have Transitioned right away but with a child, she won't go through it until she reaches puberty. By then, we'll have taught her what to expect, how to handle it, and we'll all be there for her."

"What?" Mystery had asked, her face puckered with confusion.

"Glyn brought her back," Phelan said. "From death. He put a revenant worm inside her little body and..."

That was when Mystery's eyes had rolled up in her head and she'd fainted, the knowledge too much for her mind to process. When she came to, she was lying in the shed on a stack of blankets with Valda snuggled close beside her, the little girl's sweet breath fanning across her mother's neck.

"Oh my god!" Mystery had cried out and gathered her child close, kissing the still face and smoothing the braided hair, touching the place over her breast where the little heart was beating slowly and strong.

Lord Phelan stood inside the doorway and told her again not to worry about the deep slumber that had claimed her child. He also told her the dress in which Valda was now clothed had been a mental gift from Glyn.

"He didn't want you or her to see the blood," he said softly.

Now as she carried her child from the shed, she was not in the least surprised to find her husband right outside. Their eyes met—held—then she released Valda into his outstretched arms.

"We'll spend the night at the hotel in Charlestown and then leave for Charlotte at first light," Lord Phelan told her as he helped her up the steps and into the carriage. "My guess is the *babban* will be awake by then and full of all kinds of questions."

"She won't remember what happened here," Glyn denied. "I erased all those thoughts from her mind."

"You want to ride with your lady and the bantling?" Phelan queried.

"Aye," Kullen replied then leaned into the carriage to place Valda in her mother's lap then pulled back and turned to his teammate.

Mystery saw the shackles and loudly protested but it did no good. The iron bands were locked around her husband's wrists before he was allowed to climb into the carriage. When she opened her mouth to berate his fellow Reapers for the indignity, he shook his head.

"They're only doing their job, Myst."

She stared at the heavy manacles weighing down his arms and tears slipped from her eyes. Her heart was breaking. Her soul was being ravaged by the sight. She ached so desperately she wanted to scream.

"This isn't right," she said, shaking her head from side to side. "Glyn, this isn't right."

He leaned forward, wincing for he was still feeling the effects of the poison that had permeated his system. "I want you to listen to me," he said, holding her. "Without speaking, all right? Just hear me out."

Her lips trembled as she drew them together, tucking the bottom one between her teeth.

"Are you listening?" he asked softly, and at her silent nod, let out a long breath. "What I did was wrong, *ben my chree*." As she started to speak, he raised his eyebrows and the words never came so he continued. "It was wrong. I knew it was wrong, I knew I'd be punished but that didn't matter. I couldn't let her leave us, Myst. There was no way in hell I was going to allow that to happen and so I transferred one of my hellions to her. While I was doing it, the Shadowlords were screaming at me not to, warning me, threatening everything under the sun, but I didn't care. I wasn't listening. Our daughter was the only thing that had meaning for me at that moment and I wasn't about to let the Gatherer take her from us."

A small whimper came from Mystery. The love this man had for her child was glowing in his teary eyes.

"At first I thought it wasn't going to work," he said, and brought his bound hands up to swipe at a lock of hair that had tumbled into his eyes. The clank of the chains was loud in the confines of the carriage. "The hellion was small and barely moving. I wasn't

sure if it wasn't dying because of whatever was in my system. I prayed harder than I've ever prayed and made promises I hope to the gods They didn't hear. I pleaded with the Gatherer to bring her back to me but when I dropped the revenant into..." He stopped as though he realized she didn't need to know how it had happened. "When I gave it to her, it just lay there for a moment then it..." He held his bound hands palm up to her. "All of a sudden it claimed her. She took one deep breath and I knew then she'd be all right."

He slumped back against the seat, his energy seemingly exhausted along with his words and closed his eyes for a moment, breathing raggedly.

"You're still sick," she said. She reached a hand out to him over the sleeping body of her child but he did not take it.

"My head hurts," was all he admitted to, but she could see the fever pulsing in his eyes and he was sweating a little.

"I wish I could hold you," she said, drawing her hand back.

"I wish you could too," he said, his gaze fused with hers. "But not like this. Not with manacles on my wrists."

"It doesn't matter."

"It does to me," he said.

She watched his eyelids flutter and knew the rolling, rocking motion of the carriage was lulling him. But there was something she needed desperately to know.

"Will they allow us to spend the night in the same room tonight?"

Glyn forced his eyes open and looked at her. "I doubt it, *my chree*. If they did, I'd be chained to the gods-be-damned bed and I..."

"Let them," she said. "I don't care. I just want to lie beside you. I want to hold you. I want you to..." She lifted her chin. "I want you to do to me what you did to our child." As he began shaking his head, she demanded to know why not.

"Because, I wouldn't be able to help you through the Transition. You would change and I couldn't hold you, comfort you." His eyes narrowed with misery. "I couldn't help you through the pain of it."

"Then when?" she asked.

He gave her a helpless look. "After the punishment."

"What kind of punishment? What will they do to you?" She angrily batted away the tears.

"I can't tell you because I honestly don't know. Owen got nearly a year for doing what he knew he shouldn't. Chances are I'll get at least that and most likely much longer."

"A year of what? Prison?"

"Aye," he said, tiredly. He laid his head on the back of the seat.

"But I'll be able to see you, won't I?"

"No."

"Glyn!" she whined. "That's not fair!"

He swiveled his head so he could look out the window, making it clear to her he didn't want to discuss it anymore. When she persisted, he slowly closed his eyes and willed her to be silent, shutting out her protests until she began to calm.

* * * * *

"No."

"Lord Phelan, please!" Mystery pleaded. Normally she would not have dared to touch the Reaper but her hands were gripping his forearm tightly, preventing him from going into the hotel. "Where can he go if you have him shackled?"

Kasid coughed discreetly to gain Phelan's attention and when the lawman's exasperated look met his own, Jaborn shrugged.

"They'll have our hide if he escapes!" Phelan protested.

"He won't," Mystery and Kasid said at the same time—one voice eager and the other firm.

Kiel dragged his hat from his head and arched the sweat from his brow. "I don't know..."

"It will be the last time we'll have any privacy, Lord Phelan," Mystery told him. "There won't be any on the trail."

"There won't be any with the child in the room with you either," Phelan snapped, giving Kasid a beseeching glance but his fellow Reaper merely grinned.

"Please?" Mystery begged.

Phelan snapped his hat against his leg and cursed beneath his breath. "Let me see what Kullen wants," he grumbled, and spun around to stomp over to the carriage where they'd left both Glyn and the child sleeping.

"As if there is any doubt," Kasid said with a chuckle. He winked at Mystery then held his arm out to her. "Milady, let's go inside."

"But my daughter..."

"I'll come back for her once we have you a room. She's too heavy for you to be carrying," he replied as she slipped her arm through his.

"Thank you, Lord Kasid," she said.

"It's just Kasid," he said. "Or Kasi as my grandmother used to call me."

"Kasi it is then," she said with a grateful smile.

Phelan snatched open the carriage door and wasn't in the least surprised to see Glyn staring at him, the light from a lamppost illuminating the interior of the vehicle. "Milady wants the two of you to share a room this night," he growled, but his voice was low so as not to wake the child. He rocked his hat onto his head then tugged the brim sharply.

"I heard."

"If I let you do it, will you swear you won't try to...?" Phelan cut off the question, no doubt realizing what he'd almost insinuated. He finished the thought with, "Get her pregnant."

Glyn's eyes had narrowed dangerously when Kiel had started his sentence. When those last words were spoken instead of the affront he'd been expecting, his lips twitched. He drew his brows together in an effort to contain his amusement but it was impossible. He made a strange snorting sound as he tried to hold it in then laughed silently, his shoulders shaking, the motion rattling the shackles.

"You think that's funny, Kullen?" Phelan demanded.

"I think it's a matter of shutting the barn door after the horse has run off," Glyn replied with a wide grin.

Phelan frowned—his forehead crinkling—then his eyebrows jumped into the tumble of his dark hair. "By the gods, you didn't!"

"Fraid so," Glyn replied with a careless upsweep of his shoulders.

"The gods damn it, Kullen!" Kiel snapped. "Now you've gone and done it!"

"Done what?" Kasid asked as he came to stand beside Phelan whose head snapped around so quickly, the Akhkharulian took a step back.

"The prick got her pregnant!" Phelan hissed at Jaborn

"Aye," Glyn agreed with a chuckle. "That was exactly what did it."

"This isn't funny, you asshole!" Phelan exclaimed, spinning back around, "Do you realize your lady is going to go through what Rachel did while Owen was locked up?"

That sobered Glyn and the smile vanished quickly from his handsome face. He shook his head. "No, I didn't."

"Step back and let me get the child before you two wake her," Kasid said sternly, and pushed Phelan out of the way. He gently swept the sleeping girl into his brawny arms and eased out of the carriage, giving Phelan a cautionary look as he went.

"Take her to our room," Phelan called out softly.

"That's what I intended to do," Kasid replied just as quietly.

Phelan turned back to Glyn. "I'll give you this one night, Kullen, so you'd best make the most of it. Now get the hell out of there. This shit has given me a fucking headache."

Glyn climbed down from the carriage, steadied by Kiel's hand. He shot his teammate a thankful look but seemed to know better than to voice the gratitude. Squaring his shoulders, he preceded Phelan into the hotel, feeling the shame of his prisoner status as the night clerk tried not to stare at him.

"Room five, milord, is the lady's room. Room seven is yours and Lord Jaborn's," the night clerk replied to Phelan's curt question.

With Phelan right behind him, Glyn climbed the stairs to the second floor. His head was throbbing unmercifully and he was sweating bullets, his black T-shirt drenched under the arms and in the center of his back and chest.

"You feel as bad as you look?" Phelan inquired begrudgingly.

"Worse."

"Don't see how that's possible 'cause you're an ugly son of a bitch to begin with," Kiel insulted.

"Fuck you, Phelan," Glyn muttered.

"Cockteaser," Phelan spoke out of the corner of his mouth. "You keep offering but you just don't deliver."

Glyn snorted.

When they had reached the landing, Kiel snaked a hard hand around the nape of Glyn's neck and halted him, leaning forward to put his lips against Kullen's ear.

"If I were to tell you that you're really a very pretty boy, would you hold it against me, Glynnie?" he whispered.

Glyn jerked out of Kiel's grip and turned his head to shoot the man an arched brow. "I wouldn't hold anything against you, Phelan. I'd be afraid you'd impale yourself on it."

Phelan's slow, nasty grin and wagging brows brought back the easy camaraderie the two men had always shared. "Can't blame a brother for trying," he said. "Now get your ass moving before I do something you might not fully enjoy but I would."

Glyn ignored the threat.

They reached Mystery's door and Phelan rapped lightly.

"You know I'll have to shackle you to the bed."

"I know you think you have to."

Phelan blushed, stung by the implied reprimand. When Mystery opened the door, he took Glyn's arm and ushered him into the room. "You got to...you know...before you lie down?" he asked his prisoner.

"Aye."

Mystery ducked her head then slipped quietly from the room after pointing to the chamber pot beneath the side of the bed. She waited in the hall until Phelan came out of the room.

"He's lying down. I think the fever's back," the Reaper announced, and kept on walking. He never turned around as he headed for the stairs. "We leave at sunup whether he's sick or not."

"We'll be ready," she replied, and started to close the door.

"And, milady?"

She poked her out to see Lord Phelan standing at the door to his room. "Aye, milord?"

"Congratulations on the impending birth of your son."

"Thank you, Lord Phelan."

"Phelan," he corrected with a smile then tugged on the brim of his hat before opening the door and walking through.

Mystery shut and locked the door. When she turned, she was dismayed to see her husband stretched out on the bed with his arms over his head, the chain of the manacles looped through one of the curlicues of the elaborate brass headboard.

Glyn flexed his hands and the chain clanked against the brass. "Please be gentle with me, wench. I'm at your mercy."

She knew his flippant remark was meant to calm and distract her so she decided if that was the way he wanted to play it, that would be the way she'd handle it.

"At long last," she said with a lift on one dark brow. "I have you right where I want you."

Obviously Phelan had allowed him to take off his T-shirt, boots and socks but he was still wearing the black denim jeans that were streaked with mud.

"Perhaps you can fashion a clean pair of pants when I've had my fill of you," she said in a light tone as she moved toward the bed, unbuttoning the bodice of her gown as she came.

The Reaper's amber eyes took on a heated gleam but then he shrugged.

"Wish I could but I can't." He rattled the chain. "The gods-be-damned thing must have been sent down from one of the drones. It's made from lead overlaid with iron."

She stopped as she was about to push the gown from her shoulders. "Drone?" she questioned.

"Not important," he said, and was unaware he had licked his lips at the sight of her soft white chemise.

"Then what about the shackles? Why does it matter what they're made from?" She pushed the bodice down her arms and allowed the dress to fall to the floor. She stepped out of it then in the hip-length chemise and panties came to sit on the edge of the bed beside him.

"Huh?" he grunted, staring at the lush swell of her breasts above the neckline of the chemise.

"Lead?" she prompted as she leaned forward to take off her shoes.

His gaze turned to molten gold as her breasts nearly fell from the confines of the chemise when she bent over. He lifted his head to get a better view.

"Glyn?" she encouraged.

"Oh right. The lead," he responded, his gaze roaming down her slender back and rump. "It inhibits the use of my powers, blocks them so I can't break the chain or pop open the cuffs or make the shackles simply disappear."

"I see," she said. With shoes and stockings removed, she eased up from the mattress just enough to pull the bottom of the chemise from under her then crossed her arms and peeled off the garment, her breasts jiggling free of the restriction, her nipples already hard and standing erect. She twisted around to face him then cupped one breast to knead the dusky mound. All that hid her completely from his view were the white silk panties that cupped her hips so lovingly.

"Great Merciful Alel," he whispered. He swallowed hard. "You've no idea what you're doing to me here, woman!"

Mystery's gaze dropped to the front of his denims where a very prominent bulge had developed. "Oh I think I do," she said.

She pushed to her knees on the bed then put her hands on the fly of his jeans, popping free each button slowly as she held his gaze. Her fingers slid into the opening and she cupped him, running her thumb over the engorged head of his ready cock.

"You are so evil," he said in a low, throaty voice.

Her slow, knowing grin said it all as she began to tug the jeans down his lean hips and long legs, tossing them aside before placing herself in the V of his spread legs, pushing his thighs wider apart.

She leaned forward with her hands to either side of his broad chest until her face was hovering above his.

"I am going to have my wicked way with you, Reaper," she vowed, "and there's nothing you can do to stop me." She cocked her head to one side. "Are you ticklish?"

Glyn squirmed for in truth he was, but the last thing he wanted was to be tickled. The pain between his temples made his head feel as though it were splitting but he would rather have had his fingernails pulled out with hot pinchers than tell her he was hurting.

"Why don't you sit on me and we'll discuss it," he countered, his eyes glowing like jewels.

Mystery batted her eyes. "But then I'd have to bare myself to you, milord. You'd see my sugar and all that."

Glyn strained against the shackles lashing him to the bed. "Woman, if I was free..."

She braced her weight on her left hand and put the fingers of her right over his mouth, her womb twisting as he nibbled at the dusky pads and swept his tongue over them. When he drew her index finger into the wet warmth of his mouth, she trembled.

"I need you, Glynnie," she whispered.

And with just those four words, their world erupted in a torrent of dark passion that swept over them like the lightning playing in the distance. She sat up and quickly dispensed with the panties, falling on him and slithering her body over his as she took his mouth in a heady kiss that had him gyrating wildly beneath her.

They put all the pent-up anxiety and fear for the future into their lovemaking. She slid down his shaft—impaling her wet heat upon him. Her lower body rocked

gracefully against him while her head was thrown back and her lush breasts gently rose and fell with the rhythm. Her eyes were closed but his were open for he was staring with awe at the beautiful woman who was taking him so thoroughly.

The Reaper's hands curled into fists around the headboard post, his chains clanking against the metal with each lunge forward of her hips. He lifted his own from the mattress so he could penetrate her more deeply, and at her groan of pleasure, he had to clamp his jaw tightly closed to keep from coming too soon. His balls were tight, his cock throbbing and burning with the need for release. His thighs quivered as he kept his lower body elevated from the bed.

Her hands went to his pecs and her fingers grasped both of his hard-as-pebble nipples and lightly pinched, sending tremors of erotic thunder down his chest. She twisted those dark rose paps and her husband writhed deliciously beneath her.

"Aye, wench," he growled. "Aye!"

She twisted a bit harder, putting the weight of her upper body on the wall of his chest as her lower body ground upon his cock. The swirling, bucking motion was driving him insane and the rush of his climax was bearing down on him with the speed of a runaway train.

"Come for me, baby," he hissed at her. "Come for your man!"

Mystery made a low, grunting sound deep in her throat and she slammed her cunt down on him with enough force to bring a groan from him. His cock was as far up inside her as it could get and at that moment her release came in a burst of liquid heat that had her riding him as though he were a recalcitrant mustang.

Glyn stared up at the underside of her firm jaw, and at the precise moment the tight little pulses signaled to him she was coming, he released his tight hold on his body. A hot jet of cum shot out of him so thick and hard he nearly passed out from the power of it. He literally saw stars behind his eyes as he strained to push inside her even deeper. The rhythmic undulations quivering around him drove him over the edge and he opened his mouth and howled, his entire body shaking as though with the ague.

Lowering her head as the last of the spasms died away inside her, Mystery looked into the sweaty face of her mate and felt a piercing pain go through her heart. She whimpered and fell atop him, her arms folded against her body as she lay atop his.

"I love you, Glyn," she said, her voice breaking. "I love you so much."

He ached to put his arms around her. He wanted so badly to hold her. Frustrated almost beyond reason that his hands were shackled above him where he could not touch her, stroke her, wrap her in his embrace, he ground his teeth in useless rage. He squeezed his eyes shut as tears stung.

"I would die for you," he told her. "As the gods are my witness, I would die for you or Valda."

She knew that was no exaggeration. This stalwart warrior would do just that without a second's thought. In that moment she knew her love for him could go no deeper. Her respect for him could be no greater.

"We'll get through this," he said.

"It isn't fair," she said, her voice breaking.

When she began to cry, he felt as though his heart were being ripped from his chest.

"*Ben my chree*, please don't cry. You are killing me here," he pleaded with her.

Long into the night they lay wide awake. Her tears had dried upon her cheeks but she had not moved from where she'd collapsed atop him.

She would protect him for as long she could.

* * * * *

Prime Reaper Arawn Gehdrin lifted his head and tipped the black hat from its position low on his forehead to a point where he could see clearly the arriving carriage and horsemen destined for the train depot. He was leaning against the depot wall in a straight-backed chair with the heels of his boots hooked on the crosspiece of the raised front legs. 2-I-C Bevyn Coure was likewise relaxing in the heat of the early morning but he was sitting on the platform with his legs dangling over the side, whittling on a stick. Both men had been cooling their heels in Charlotte for two days awaiting the arrival of their teammates and the two females those men had in tow.

"I'm not looking forward to this," Bevyn commented as he tossed the stick away and closed his pocketknife, dropping it into the breast pocket of his shirt. "It sucks."

"You got that right," Arawn replied as he set the front legs of his chair down on the wooden flooring. He stood and walked over to stand beside his second-in-command as a soft, gentle rain fell on the train engine that was puffing steam already. He braced a tanned hand on the platform upright and leaned his weight against it, his other hand dug into the pockets of his leather uniform pants.

Knowing from mental transmissions from Phelan Kiel the identity of the man of color driving the carriage, the Prime Reaper greeted him by name as did Bevyn as the carriage came to a stop beside the platform.

"Milords," LaVon returned the Reapers' greetings respectfully.

"Any trouble on the trail, Phelan?" Arawn asked the man the Shadowlords had designated as the primary operative on this mission.

"Nothing to speak of," Phelan said as he slung a leg over his steed's rump and dismounted. "We had a bridge washout that gave us a three-hour delay."

Arawn nodded. He'd figured as much when the Reapers hadn't shown up on time. He glanced toward the carriage. "How is our boy?"

"Calm and quiet," Phelan reported. "He hasn't given us a moment's trouble."

"Didn't think he would," Arawn stated. "And the little girl? How is she?"

Phelan smiled. "Couldn't be better. You'd never know anything untoward had happened to the sweet bratling. She's taking the whole thing in stride."

The Prime Reaper breathed a sigh of relief. No one—not even the Shadowlords—knew what to expect in a situation like this. None of them had experience with a child Reaper that young. Only Arawn had actually spoken to a fledgling Reaper—a boy he knew to be his own son—but that had been brief and no real interaction had taken place.

Kasid had dismounted and came up to Phelan to take his horse's reins. "I'll put Nathair and Ulchabhán onboard. LaVon, would you bring Stannair along?" he asked, referring to his own, Phelan's and Glyn's mounts.

"Aye, milord," LaVon agreed, and tied the carriage's reins to the wagon brake and got down.

"Are Corr and Préachán already onboard?" Kasid asked of Arawn's and Bevyn's steeds as he began walking toward the cattle car.

"Aye. When you've got them all settled, we'll be in the dining car," Arawn answered. "My belly is rumbling."

Phelan went over to the carriage and opened the door, stuck his hand inside and said, "Let me help you, milady."

Arawn saw a tiny brown hand take Phelan's and then a scrawny little arm hooked around his neck as the Reaper swung her out of the carriage and up onto the platform, barely giving the gentle rain a chance to touch her.

Valda smoothed down her dress, tilted her head back and gazed up at the tall, handsome man whose gun was strapped to his left hip instead of his right.

"Well met, milord," she greeted him, and thrust out her hand.

Arawn grinned before dropping down to one knee as he clasped that fragile hand and brought it to his lips. "Well met indeed, Milady Valda," he responded.

Valda took a deep breath and rattled off the blessing she had practiced tirelessly, "*Go raibh an choir Ghaoithe I gcónaí leat.*"

Both Arawn and Bevyn were impressed and exchanged a look that caused moisture to form in their eyes.

"*Go raibh an choir Ghaoithe I gcónaí leat, Lady Valda,*" Arawn replied, granting her the traditional sanction the Reaper force gave one another.

"What does that mean?" LaVon whispered to Kasid.

"May the Wind be always at your back," Kasid answered.

Valda struck a thumb to her pint-sized breast. "I'm a Reaper too, you know."

"Indeed we do," Arawn acknowledged. "And if there is anything your fellow Reapers can do for you, all you need do is ask."

Valda put the pad of her index finger on her lip and thought about that. After a brief moment, she nodded emphatically. "Two things, milord." The thumb on her right hand popped up. "I would like you to inter...inter..." She turned her head. "What's the word, Mama?"

"Intercede," came a soft voice from inside the carriage.

"Aye," Valda said with another firm nod of her little head. "I would like you to intercede on behalf of my daddy." She lowered her voice, looked about her as though expecting someone to be eavesdropping. "So them mean old men won't treat him so bad."

Arawn nodded gravely. "Consider it done, milady. What else?"

Valda grinned. "And I want a puppy!"

"Valda!" This time the voice from the carriage was followed by a beautiful woman of color who stood framed in the doorway. "You know what your father said."

The little girl's lip thrust out in a pout and she folded her arms over her thin chest. "But I want a pet, Mama."

"Not at the Citadel," her mother stated. She took Phelan's hand as she descended the carriage steps then hurried up the cement ones to the platform alongside him. She put a hand out to Arawn. "I am Mystery Kullen, milord."

"Arawn Gehdrin, milady," the Prime Reaper replied, sweeping his hat from his head. He took her hand and brought it to his lips before releasing it and turning to the man beside him. "My second-in-command Bevyn Coure."

Mystery took Bevyn's hand and smiled softly as he too kissed the back of hers.

"A pleasure, milady," Bevyn welcomed her.

A prim little man appeared behind Lord Arawn and coughed discreetly, signaling his arrival.

"And this is Harold Warrington," Arawn introduced the thin, short man. "Harry volunteered to take care of you and Lady Valda on the trip to the Citadel."

"Are you a butler?" Valda asked.

Harold regarded the child solemnly. "I am the assigned valet to Lord Cynyr Cree and the Lady Aingeal," he said, clicking his heels together. His pencil-thin mustache quivered. "It is not a particularly pleasing job but it does suffice."

Valda gave him a long, hard look. It wasn't often she met an adult who wasn't that much taller than she. Despite his stiffly held posture and unsmiling face, the child took an instant liking to him and went over to loop her arm through his.

"Will you do me the honor of escorting me to yon train, Valet Warrington?" she asked in a very proper tone.

Harold blinked. His lips tightened then flexed into what might pass for a smile. "It would be my great honor, Lady Valda," he responded, and led the child toward the train.

"I've never ridden on a train before," she informed him. "I bet it's lots of fun."

"Oh it is!" Harold agreed with the most enthusiasm anyone had ever seen him express. "I do so love the infrequent trips I get to make. Once when we were on our way to Pameny..."

"I think she's made a conquest of that old stick in the mud," Bevyn quipped.

"She never meets a stranger and she'll have Harry doting on her every word."

Arawn looked around as Glyn came down the carriage steps. He winced when he saw the shackles, though he'd known the Shadowlords had ordered the indignity for his teammate. He put his hat back on as a muscle worked in his lean jaw.

"I am deeply sorry about this, Glyn," the Prime Reaper said for the record.

"So am I," Glyn said.

Bevyn stepped forward to take Glyn's arm as his friend made his way up the slippery cement steps to the platform. "We are planning on speaking up for you, Glynnie."

"I appreciate that but I'm ready to stand whatever punishment they intend to give me," Glyn told them.

"*Má throideann túm gi dtriude tú i leith do bhráthar,*" Bevyn reminded him of the Reaper creed of "If you fight may you fight for a brother". "You are our brother."

Arawn turned to Mystery. "Milady, we need to speak privately with Glyn. Would you mind if Phelan took you on to the dining car?"

Mystery gave Glyn a questioning look but at his nod, she agreed and preceded Phelan to the steps of the chuffing, huffing train.

"So how bad is it?" Glyn asked once she was out of earshot.

"The High Council knows about your Joining," Arawn warned Glyn. "And the pregnancy."

"The list of my transgressions is no doubt a mile long by now," Glyn said on a long sigh. "I told Phelan they would crucify me and I've no doubt they will."

"I couldn't get Lord Kheelan to tell me what their plans for you are so that in itself is not a good sign," Arawn continued. "Owen is worried they'll throw the book at you and dismiss you from the force."

Glyn flinched. "Oh gods I hope not."

"Phelan tells me the goddess was there when you transferred the hellion. Since She didn't try to stop you, it could be argued you had Her permission to do what you did," the Prime Reaper said. "I don't think She'll allow you to be drummed out of the corps."

"That's something I guess," Glyn said quietly.

"You didn't do anything the rest of us wouldn't have done if we'd been in your boots, Glyn, so if you've been worried how the rest of the team feels, now you know," Arawn stated. He put a heavy hand on Glyn's shoulder. "We will be there for you."

Glyn gave the Prime Reaper a fleeting smile. When Arawn removed his hand, Kullen squared his shoulders. "Have I been put on bread and water or can I have lunch with the rest of you?"

The corner of Arawn's mouth quirked. "Oh, I think we can allow you a drumstick if you promise to be a good little prisoner."

"Harold's garlic-fried drumsticks?" Glyn asked, brows elevated.

"With mac and cheese, baked beans and at last count, four or five kinds of pie since he didn't know what Lady Valda would like."

Glyn had to look away for his eyes filled with tears. "He's really a softie at heart, isn't he?" he asked.

"He loves children," Arawn said, and motioned for Glyn to precede him to the train steps. "Although he'd rather take a beating from our resident Amazeen than admit it." He snorted. "He dotes on Cyn's boy and Owen's twins, but if you were to ask him, he'd say they're nothing more than a pesky, smelly trio." He slapped Glyn on the back. "He's already putty with Lady Valda and I imagine he'll be that way with the one growing in your lady as we speak."

Glyn turned before putting his foot on the first step and locked eyes with Arawn. "There's only one thing I would ask of you, Lord Arawn," he said, putting the request into a formal appeal. "If I am not there for the birth of my son, that you will allow Owen to stand in my stead. I would like him to be godfather to the boy."

Arawn smoothed a hand on Glyn's back. "Consider it done, Lord Glyn."

Chapter Twenty

Valda's eyes were wide as she stared out of the carriage window as the vehicle neared the Citadel. Ahead of the carriage in which she, her mother and new father rode was another identical carriage carrying the four other Reapers. Her uncle LaVon had insisted on sitting with the driver, apparently too nervous to sit with the Reapers though he'd been invited.

"Look at it, Mama," Valda whispered. "Have you ever seen anything so big?"

"No, sweeting, I haven't," Mystery said, even though she had yet to get a glimpse of the fortress. She was distracted as she sat beside Glyn, his manacled hand in hers.

"It's gonna be all right, *ben my chree*," he said softly, and squeezed her hand.

"I feel as though I'm riding with you to your execution," she said, her lips trembling and red eyes puffy from having cried most of the morning.

"That isn't an option," he reminded her—as he and the others had several times already. "A long prison sentence is the most likely."

Hearing those words caused Mystery to whimper. She laid her head on her husband's shoulder, hiding her face against the soft silk of the shirt. He'd been allowed to fashion the garment that morning when he'd been unshackled long enough to take a bath on the train.

"I can't go before the High Council in a dirty T-shirt and torn jeans," he'd complained to Lord Arawn. "And I smell."

"There are people lined up on the steps, Mama!" Valda said, her high excitement making her voice go up an octave. "I see ladies in black uniforms like Daddy Glyn's and three pretty ladies in long gray gowns!" She looked at Glyn. "Who are they?"

"The women in black are Lady Reapers. The ones in gray are the Gatekeepers, Valli," Glyn told the child. "You'll like them. They are sweet like you."

Valda giggled and hugged her dolly tighter. She made a low, whistling sound. "Daddy Glyn! There's a woman with a spear!"

"That's Penthe. She's an Amazeen."

"I don't see no children," Valda complained.

"Any children," her mother automatically corrected.

"There's only a few who live at the Citadel," Glyn told her. "Don't worry. You'll meet them."

The child twisted around on the seat. "Do they got puppies or kitties, Daddy Glynnie?"

"Valda," her mother said in a stern voice. "You know your father told you there are no animals at the Citadel. The Shadowlords don't allow it."

"Mean old men," Valda grumbled, and flounced down in the seat.

When the carriage stopped and the door opened, there was a Reaper standing there Mystery had met once before. He had been the one to find and remove the rogue who had killed Mystery's first husband. She clutched Glyn's arm tighter.

"Milady," the lawman said, and held his hand out to Valda. "I am Owen. Do you remember me?"

Valda took the man's hand without a second thought. "You got that rogue who killed my other daddy," she said. "Yeppers, I 'member you." She looked up at him with a wide smile. "I'm a Reaper too, do you know that, Owen?"

"I surely do know that and I look forward to working with you in a few years," Owen replied, glancing at Glyn.

Valda giggled and stepped aside so Lord Owen could help her mother out of the carriage. "Come on, Mama! Hurry up!" she encouraged.

"Glyn..." Mystery said, clutching at her husband.

Glyn had difficulty removing his hand from her trembling grip. He reached up to cup her chin and looked deeply into her eyes. "You are a Reaper's mate," he said in a firm voice. "You are made from sterner stuff than other females. I want you to hold your head high, step out of this carriage and meet the future at my side and not hiding behind me." He tugged on her chin. "Do you hear me, Myst?"

She took a long, deep breath. "Aye, beloved. I hear you."

He released her. "Now give Owen your hand."

She got up from the seat and moved to the door, placed her hand in the Reaper's and stepped down from the carriage. From the moment her foot touched the marble pathway that led to the fortress, everything passed in a blur.

She was introduced to Lord Iden Belial, Lord Cynyr Cree and Lord Owen's twin Lord Eanan, the Lady Reapers—Aingeal, Danielle, Lea and Rachel. The imposing female warrior, Penthe. The Gatekeepers—Argent, Corallin and Aureolin. The healers Desden and another named Benjamin something or other, to a smiling man named Giles D'Brickashaw, who was the Primary Guide at the Citadel, and a couple more whose names and titles she completely missed.

But it was the three unsmiling, stern-visaged men to whom she was introduced last that snapped her from her self-imposed vacuum and she faced them with growing anxiety.

"Lord Dunham Tarnes and Lord Naois Belvoir," Lord Owen named them and the two Shadowlords bowed slightly.

Mystery sensed the man who was the last to be introduced was the one who was the most important. He would surely be the High Lord and the man who held her

husband's fate in his hands. Unable to control the urge that gripped her, she went to her knees before him though she heard him hiss like a viper at her temerity.

"Please don't take him away from me," she pleaded, putting a hand on the man's highly polished boot. "Please, I beg you."

The area around the steps of the Citadel was as quiet as the grave. Not a single sound broke the silence. Tears stung the eyes of most of those gathered—even the man whose foot she touched and whose jaw was clenched so tightly.

"You'd better not take my daddy away from us," Valda spoke up. She came to stand beside her mother and glared up into the face of the man with whom her mother pleaded. "You hear me, you mean old man?"

Breaths were drawn in but not one of the adults dared speak. Mystery was too terrified to do so and Glyn—who had been hurrying toward his wife to order her to her feet—came to a stumbling halt, his eyes wide as he stared in fear of what the High Lord would do.

Lord Kheelan Ben-Alkazar switched his hard brown stare from mother to child and then he blinked.

"I am not a mean man, Lady Valda."

Valda tucked her dolly under her arm and put her hands on her hips. "Can I have a puppy then?"

The silence got even deeper as breaths were held to hear the answer.

"No," the Shadowlord said. "You may not have a puppy but neither will I take your new father from you."

Mystery's head snapped up. "You won't put him in prison?"

Lord Kheelan ignored her question and hunkered down until he was nearly at eye level with Valda.

"Lady Valda," he said, "As a future Reaper, you must learn to obey the rules and regulations of the High Council. Are you prepared to do that?"

Valda considered his question for a moment. "I guess so," she said.

The High Lord shook his head. "That's not good enough. You must know without a doubt, Lady Valda."

"If I do, will you let me have a puppy?"

To those who did not know the High Lord, the movement of his lips might well have been a hard grimace he struggled to refrain from allowing. To those who knew and understood the man, they realized he was striving to keep a smile in check.

"No puppy, Lady Valda," he said firmly. "Not now and not in the future." He arched a thick brow. "Are we clear on that issue?"

Valda sighed deeply. "I 'pose so," she agreed.

"And as to the rules and regulations?" he prompted.

The little girl puckered her lips and rolled her eyes. "If Daddy Glyn says I have to follow them rules and regulations, I will."

"Those rules and the word is regulations," the High Lord clarified.

Valda nodded. "Whatever."

"Then let us seal the deal between Shadowlord and Reaper," he said, and held out his hand.

For a long moment Valda didn't move but then she slipped her delicate fingers into his palm for a split second before withdrawing them and wiping them down her skirt.

"I still think you're a mean old man," she told him, spun around on her heel and went to wrap her arms around Glyn's leg. She looked up and when he met her gaze, the little girl winked.

Lord Owen stepped forward to help Mystery to her feet, speaking softly to her as he drew her a few feet back from the High Lord.

"Giles," Lord Kheelan said as he got to his feet, "show Lady Mystery and her daughter to their new quarters and make sure they are comfortable." He flicked his gaze over Glyn. "Lord Arawn, bring your prisoner to the High Council chambers."

"May he have a few moments alone with his lady before he is sentenced, Your Grace?" a beautiful woman spoke up from beside Lord Cynyr.

"No, Lady Aingeal, he may not," the High Lord snapped. "He's been with her on the journey from Vircars here. What had to be said has already been said." He turned on his heel, and with his fellow Shadowlords behind him, climbed the steps into the fortress.

Mystery whipped around. She put a hand out to Glyn but he wasn't allowed to come to her. Her shoulders began to quake as he was led away and she buried her face in her hands. She barely felt the soft, gentle hands of Aingeal Cree gathering her into a commiserating embrace.

* * * * *

"Go on ahead to the Council chambers," Lord Kheelan told Lord Naois and Lord Dunham. "I'll meet you there." He alone among all those gathered had seen the arrival of a visitor he had been eagerly awaiting.

Taking a turn down the corridor that led to a small, private study, he went inside. The moment his visitor came through the door, he pounced.

"Where the fuck were You?" Lord Kheelan snarled. "How could You –?"

"Don't use that tone with me, Shadowlord," the Triune goddess Morrigunia hissed, Her green eyes flashing vibrant fire. "You will show Me the respect I am due!"

The Shadowlord ignored Her warning, coming toe to toe with Her in his outrage. "Your Reapers were in danger and You were nowhere to be found!"

The Triune Goddess' face turned hard as stone. "My Reapers were never in danger, Ben-Alkazar. I knew precisely what was happening with them. They were trained to do exactly what they did. Not once did I worry for their safety."

"What of the little girl?" the High Lord questioned. "Were You aware of what was happening to her?"

"Aye, I was."

Lord Kheelan's expression changed from anger to astonishment. "And You let one of Your precious warriors implant a hellion into an innocent child? How could You do that, Morrigunia? How can You justify...?"

"Did it ever occur to you that I allowed it to happen for a reason, Ben-Alkazar?" Morrigunia interrupted him. "That perhaps the child has a destiny far beyond anything you can conceive with your puny humanoid brain? That there might be somewhere in the megaverse a young male Reaper chosen to be her mate and that between them they might one day save this world from total annihilation?"

"She is a child!" he protested. "A guiltless child who did not deserve this evil visited upon her!"

"The sins of the father, Kheelan," Morrigunia reminded him with a steady look. "The sins of the father."

Lord Kheelan stumbled back, his face white, tears gathering in his eyes. "How long are you going to punish me, *Mo Regina*?" he asked, his voice trembling.

"Until you have atoned for those sins, My Shadowlord," She stated.

The High Lord trembled with the force of his hurt and anger. "I know you put the temptation in my path. You were the cause of everything that happened to me on Rysalia Prime." He clenched his hands into fists he dared not use against his tormentress. "Just as you caused the temptation here."

She smiled nastily at him. "It hurts to want something you know you will never have, doesn't it, Khee?"

With a flick of the long copper gown that fit Her like a second skin, the Triune Goddess tossed Her head and vanished in a plume of violet smoke, leaving Kheelan Ben-Alkazar with tears running treacherously down his ashen cheeks.

* * * * *

"We await your pleasure, Your Grace," Prime Reaper Arawn Gehdrin spoke for him and his fellow Reapers as the High Lord took his seat.

They were all assembled—the male and female Reapers standing side by side rigidly at attention, the lone Amazeen standing off to one side with her arms crossed over her chest, the Gatekeepers seated at an angle to the High Bench from which the Shadowlords reigned.

The judgment of Glyn Kullen was at hand.

Lord Kheelan sat between Lords Naois and Lord Dunham. He flicked an uneasy glance over Glyn Kullen then cleared his throat. "Lord Kullen, step forward," he commanded.

"With all due respect, Your Grace," Arawn interrupted. "My men and I would like to speak on Lord Kullen's behalf."

"No."

Arawn stepped out of line though he still held himself straight as an arrow. "Begging your pardon, Your Grace, but there is not a man here who would not have done what Lord Kullen did."

"I wouldn't have," Lord Kheelan snapped. "Now step back and —"

"That's only because you have no heart," Arawn accused. His hands were clenching and unclenching at his sides. "There might be an organ beating in your chest but it's for sure it isn't a gods-be-damned heart! You have no heart, Kheelan Ben-Alkazar!"

"You know nothing at all about me so I suggest you be careful what you say, Gehdrin," the High Lord warned.

"Or what?" Arawn snarled. "You want to send me to a con cell for speaking the truth, then do it!"

"Oh, he did *not* say that," Danielle Gehdrin groaned, giving her husband's back a heated stare.

"Arawn, please," Glyn whispered. "Don't give him reason to punish you."

"Let him!" Arawn spat. "He enjoys tormenting us. He thrives on it! Ask Owen if that isn't true!"

"I did not make Glyn Kullen break the rules he swore to uphold, Gehdrin!" the High Lord snapped. "He did that all on his own. He disobeyed a direct order not to transfer one of his hellions to that child and he did it anyway. Under normal circumstances the penalty for his crime would be dishonorable discharge, forfeiture of all pay and allowances and confinement in a con cell for two years."

"Is that what you have planned for him, Kheelan?" Lady Aingeal spoke up. She was staring daggers at the High Lord though she stayed where she was in line.

"No, *Aingeal*, it isn't," Lord Kheelan snapped — putting emphasis on her name — and then flicked his eyes to the female Reaper's mate 3-I-C Cynyr Cree.

"If you intend to make his jail time longer —" Aingeal began, but was shocked into silence when the High Lord shot to his feet.

"Captain Aracnea!" he bellowed. "Step forward!"

The Amazeen dropped her arms from her chest. "Aye, Your Grace!" She cut her attention over to Glyn as she came to stand before the High Bench.

"You will escort Lord Kullen to the quad where his punishment will be meted out!" Lord Kheelan snarled. "With only my fellow Shadowlords and I and the males of his team in attendance."

"Why can't we women be there?" Aingeal dared to ask.

"Because I said so and if you open your mouth one more time, your husband will accompany Lord Glyn and stand the same punishment he is to receive. Is that clear to you, wench?"

Absolute silence met the High Lord's demand.

"His punishment is not my doing but rather at the bequest of the goddess Herself. I want you to understand that and remember it. This is none of my doing."

"That can't be good," Owen mumbled beneath his breath.

"What is going to happen to him?" Arawn boldly asked, his forehead creased with concern.

The Shadowlord ignored the question. "Despite refusing to obey a direct order, Lord Kullen will not be discharged from the Reaper Corp nor will he be required to spend time in the con cell. He will pay for his offense and that will be the end of it," Lord Kheelan pronounced. "Dismissed!"

As the Gatekeepers preceded the Shadowlords in leaving the room, the Reapers looked to the Amazeen who could do no more than shrug. For the first time since making the warrioress's acquaintance, the Reapers and their ladies saw uncertainty and disquiet on the tall woman's smooth features.

"What do you think the punishment will be, Penthe?" Bevyn asked.

"How the fuck would I know, Coure?" the Amazeen head of security barked in reply.

"You're a Blackwind," Arawn stated. "You have as much psychic ability as do my Reapers."

"Aye, but I am not high on the list of people the Triune Goddess likes," Penthe snapped. "Whatever is planned is being hidden from me."

"Not good," Iden said.

Glyn squared his shoulders. "Well, whatever it is, let's get it over with." He met the Amazeen's worried eyes. "And stop looking like you're about to stick me with that gods-be-damned Dóigra of yours."

"Do you see it in my fucking hand, Kullen?" Penthe growled. "I was told not to bring it so I sincerely doubt it will be part of your punishment." She put out a hand and shoved him none too gently. "Get a move on, will ya?"

With Glyn in the lead, the others fell in behind him as he left the room and turned right down the long corridor that led to the door to the courtyard around which the five-sided building of the Citadel had been built. He pushed open the two wide doors to the outside and stepped out on the portico, feeling the rush of cool breeze flowing in from the ocean just beyond the southeastern and southwestern sections of the structure. Grateful it had finally stopped raining, he left the portico and descended the ten wide steps to the flagstone walkway.

"Mother of the goddess," he heard someone—he thought it was Phelan—say just as his gaze fell on the same thing the others were seeing and he felt his knees grow weak.

He would later tell Owen that from the moment Lord Kheelan had ordered Penthe to take him to the quad he had feared this was to be the punishment Morrigunia had chosen for him. And though he had thought himself prepared should that be the case, the sight that greeted him turned his stomach and he felt a cold shudder ripple down his body. He had stopped walking—could not seem to go another step—as he stared at the hideous apparatus.

It was a horrible thing standing there stretching toward the heavens, its rough bark glistening with what had to be tar. From where it had been brought, Glyn didn't know nor at that moment did he care. The sight of it was enough to take the starch out of any man's sails and it looked so out of place, so evil placed there in the courtyard of the Citadel where a pristine fountain flowed and marble benches sat among cherry trees and immaculately groomed shrubs. The vile thing was a blight, a pestilence upon the beautiful landscape.

Towering ten feet from the ground, the apparatus was a foot thick and dangling from the top were two long, thick chains upon which twin wrists clamps were attached. From the midpoint of the heavy wooden beam were two sections of a wide belt—without doubt meant to secure the one being punished securely to the upright.

"Flogging," Arawn spat as though the word were a bitter brew. "By all that's holy this isn't right."

"If this is *Mo Regina's* idea of punishment, I hope I never get on her bad side," Iden muttered.

"Where is She?" Cynyr asked, flexing his shoulders as though he were reliving similar punishments from long ago. "Why isn't She here to witness this?"

Glyn knew the Triune Goddess was there though hiding Her presence. She would not order one of Her Reapers hurt without making sure She was there to prevent any permanent damage being wrought. They were—after all—Hers to do with as She would.

"Who's going to wield the cat in Kheelan's hand?" Phelan asked.

"Me," Penthe said softly.

The Shadowlords were standing off to one side, their faces grave. Lord Kheelan was motioning the Amazeen forward and Penthe went reluctantly, twisting her head around to give Glyn a sorrowful look.

"I don't want to do this," she said.

"I don't want you to do this either," Glyn replied.

"Lord Arawn. Lord Bevyn," the High Lord called out. "Escort Lord Glyn to the post and prepare him."

"Damn," Arawn snapped, but it was his duty as Prime Reaper and Bevyn's as second-in-command of the team.

Owen moved over to where his twin was standing. His hands thrust deeply into the pockets of his black leather uniform pants, Eanan was staring intently at the whipping post. He cut his eyes to Owen.

"I've felt the pass of the cat," Eanan said. "I feel for him."

"He'll heal," Owen said. "We always do."

"Still," Eanan said, hunching his shoulders.

"Every man here is feeling the same thing, brother," Owen told him. He put a hand on his twin's back for just a brief moment. "I am glad She is going to allow you to join us."

Eanan gave him a surprised look. "So am I, Owen."

"You ready?" Arawn asked as he and Bevyn walked over to Glyn.

"No," Glyn admitted. He was finding it harder and harder to lift his feet, to go any closer to the ugly device hunched there like a demon awaiting a taste of his blood.

"You are a Reaper," Arawn said. "Remember that."

Glyn took a deep breath, closed his eyes for a brief moment and then swallowed hard, releasing his breath in a wavering exhalation. "I hope to the goddess the womenfolk don't see this."

"The steel storm shutters have all been lowered on the windows looking down into the courtyard," Bevyn said. "No one will see what happens here except us."

"When it's done, I don't want Mystery or Valda anywhere near me until I've healed," Glyn said, finally finding the courage to begin walking toward the whipping post.

"I'll see to it," Arawn assured him.

* * * * *

Lord Kheelan's head was down as he walked aimlessly down the long corridor. He was bone-weary, sick at heart and plagued by memories he wished would go away so he could have a modicum of peace. He barely noticed that he had arrived at the staircase leading up to his private apartments but as he climbed the first few risers, every muscle in his body began to ache.

"You're a mean old man and I really, really don't like you."

The High Lord looked up to find himself staring into the angry eyes of the little girl whose life had been so drastically altered by a man who loved her more than he loved life.

Valda was sitting halfway up the stairs, her pretty dress tucked around her knees and held in place by the circle of her arms. Beside her was her dolly.

"I'm really not a bad man, Valda," Lord Kheelan said tiredly. "I just have a job to do and —"

"You're a very bad man because you were mean to my papa!" Valda snapped. "And you won't let me have a puppy."

Putting his right foot on the next riser, Lord Kheelan bent forward with his arm on his raised knee and studied the child. She would be a beautiful woman one day, but at that moment in time, she was all arms and legs and pouting lips, and her anger was a sentient life form glaring back at him with lethal intent.

He smiled indulgently. "This isn't a good place for pets, Valda."

"It's Lady Valda," the child said, her little pointed chin lifted. "I am a Reaper, I'll have you know!"

Lord Kheelan's lips twitched with humor. "I stand corrected, milady," he said, bowing his head. "I won't make that mistake again."

"See that you don't," she stated.

"Did you know Sir Giles and Harry put together a playroom for you?" he asked, wanting desperately for the child to ease up on her disdain for him.

Valda sat up. "A playroom? Where?"

"I believe it's on the lower floor near the kitchens. You might want to go check it out."

The child got to her feet, tossing her head. "I might," she agreed, and started down the stairs. As she reached the step over which he was leaning, she gave him a narrowed look. "I still don't like you." Childlike, she stuck her tongue out at him then continued on down the stairs.

Lord Kheelan sighed heavily and his head dropped to his chest.

"The child is not the only one who doesn't like you right now."

The High Lord sighed again. "Don't start with me, Aingeal," he warned. "I'm in no mood for it."

Lady Aingeal Cree stood at the foot of the stairs, a hand on the newel post. "He could not let the little one die. Surely you can understand that if not condone it."

Lord Kheelan straightened but did not turn around. "It wasn't only that transferring a hellion to the child was morally wrong, Aingeal. He disobeyed a direct order. Had it been left up to me, I'd have discharged him, slapped his ass in a con cell for two years and let it go at that. It wasn't me who ordered the flogging." He winced for he hadn't meant to say that.

"You flogged him?" Aingeal questioned with a gasp. "Kheelan, how could you?"

"It was Morrigunia's decision, not mine. Why don't you take it up with Her and ask her why She chose that particular punishment for him."

"Is he all right?"

"He's fine and he'll heal. The lashes were closing even before he was taken down from the whipping post. He took the punishment well and has paid dearly for his momentary lapse of judgment."

"Momentary lapse of judgment? Will you get your head out of your ass just this once, Kheelan? He loves that child and she loves him," Aingeal told him. "Do you understand what that means? Do you have any conception of what love is? Have you *ever* loved anything in your life?"

The Shadowlord never looked around as he started up the stairs again, his normally rigid shoulders slumped. "I love you," Kheelan admitted softly.

* * * * *

Valda sat her dolly in one of the four little chairs that were ranged around the table. "Now, Angie, you be good while I make us a cup of tea," she said.

"Knock-knock."

The little girl glanced around to see a very pretty lady with bright red hair standing in the doorway of the playroom.

"May I come in, Lady Valda?" the lady asked.

Valda nodded, unable to speak for her visitor was the most beautiful thing the child had ever seen.

"Oh, you're having tea!" the lady said, green eyes dancing, palms coming together in a silent clap. "May I join you?"

Recovering from her surprise, the little girl lifted her chin. "Please do," she said, and indicated a chair. "You can sit with Angie."

"I would be ever so delighted," the lady responded, and pulled out a chair. "Good afternoon, Angie." With infinite care, she took the dolly's hand and shook it. "So pleased to make your acquaintance."

Valda was intrigued by her guest and when she brought the small china tea service Harold had given her over to the table and set it down, she asked the lady's name.

"My dear, dear friends call me Morri," the lady said, and put out her hand.

Valda shook hands with the lady, smiling broadly. "Would you like one lump or two, Morri?"

"Two please," Morri replied. "And lemon if you have it." She lowered her voice. "I do so love lemon in my tea. Don't you?"

"Oh yes," Valda agreed. She dropped two pretend lumps of sugar into Morri's cup, a hard squeeze of make-believe lemon then the imaginary tea. "Be careful. It's hot."

Morri took up her cup delicately, blew across the rim then took a sip, rolling her eyes before declaring the tea the very best she'd ever drank.

"Would you like a scone?" Valda inquired. "With jam?"

"Oh please."

For the next half hour, the little girl and her visitor chatted politely, partook of their make-believe tea and then retired to the small loveseat Sir Giles had provided for Valda's reading and coloring activities.

"This is a most pleasant abode, Lady Valda," Morri complimented her.

"Yes, I am quite content here," Valda acknowledged. "I have everything except..." She frowned.

"Except?" Morri encouraged.

Valda sighed loudly. "A puppy." She gave Morri a sad little expression. "I really wanted a puppy but that mean old man wouldn't let me have one."

Morri leaned over and in a very low voice said, "We mustn't call him a mean old man, but you know what we could call him?"

"What?"

"Mom," Morri said.

"He's not a mama," Valda disagreed. "He's a boy. You're being silly, Morri."

Morri's eyes sparkled. "Can you spell mom?"

"M.O.M," Valda pronounced proudly.

"Well, now. Those appear to be the same letters of the words mean old man. Aren't they?" Morri queried, gently putting the thought into Valda's very active brain.

Valda perked up. "Yes, they are!" She giggled. "I'm going to call him mom from now on!"

Morri laughed. "That would be fitting, I think." She lowered her voice again. "And I think I can do something about getting you a pet."

"A puppy!?" Valda gasped.

"Well no, because he was right about this not being a good place for a puppy. I have something even better in mind." She laid a soft hand on the child's shoulder. "Close your eyes."

"Why?"

"Just close your eyes and I'll give you a *big* surprise!"

Valda closed her eyes.

The Triune Goddess got to Her feet and tenderly lay the child down on the loveseat, willing Valda into a deep slumber that would last until She returned. Then with the twinkle of an eye, the goddess was gone.

Through time and space and the blackness of the megaverse She flew until She arrived on Cengus, a place far, far away from Terra. It did not take Her long to find the abode of Rory Quinn and his lady-wife Kendall.

"Lady Munchkin?" She called softly at the window. "May I have an audience?"

The Elfinish hopped up on the windowsill and stared at the goddess. "*Mo Regina*," she acknowledged regally. "How kind of you to visit us."

"Might I intrude with a moment of your time?" Morrigunia inquired.

"Of course."

Morrigunia slipped through the wall and into the small house where the Phantom and his mate had settled.

Munchkin's overly large, overly pointed ears twitched, and the sparse tuft of hair on her head quivered. "What brings you to this humble residence, *Mo Regina*?" the Elfinish asked.

"A favor I would ask of you."

The Elfinish inclined her little head. "Go on."

"All is well with you and Dasher?" Morrigunia inquired, referring to the lanky cat's sometimes mate.

"We share pleasurable things at times though not my litter box," Munchkin said with a sniff. "No one shares my litter box."

"As it should be," the goddess agreed. "Where is the Dashing Romeo now?"

"Back on Theristes with the one he owns," the Elfinish answered. "You know we must watch them every moment lest they do something stupid."

"And that is as it should be as well. Humans need the guidance of Worldly Ones else they do not live up to their full potentials."

"Is that why you are here, *Mo Regina*?" Munchkin asked.

"There is a child on Terra who needs such direction and I believe one of your progeny might provide just the right kind of assistance for her."

"I see," Munchkin said, and patted over to the sofa and hopped up. She preened for a moment, licking the balls of fur that grew in clumps on her side and back legs.

Morrigunia waited patiently for the Elfinish for She knew such creatures could not be rushed. They disdained humans and allowed only grudging companionship to those they considered worthy. They only spoke to humans who met certain criteria and could be very acerbic to those they considered fools.

"Is this child special then?" Munchkin questioned then began hacking, finally coughing up a reddish brown fur ball, which she calmly deposited on the sofa. After a close inspection of the matted evacuation, the Elfinish moved away from it. Either Rory or Kendall would get rid of it.

"The child is six Terran years and was given a hellion by one of my Reapers. She is indeed very special and her destiny is such that she will be spoken of in history tomes yet to be written."

"Ah," Munchkin said. "Then I believe I have just the teacher for her." She padded toward a door leading deeper into the house.

* * * * *

Valda felt the scrape of something wet and rough against her cheek and opened her eyes – which widened as she gazed at the diminutive creature perched upon her chest.

"I am Bumble Bee, though I find that name utterly detestable," the cat declared. "I am of course an Elfinish from the lineage of Lady Munchkin and Lord Dasher. You may call me Precious if you are so inclined. I rather like that name."

"You're a cat!" Valda whispered. "You're not supposed to be able to talk!"

"Well, of course I can talk, silly human child!" Bumble Bee stated. She cocked her small, furless head with its single spiky tuft to one side. "And I would appreciate it if you would not refer to me as a cat or a feline. Those are such boring, inadequate terms to classify a being of my splendor."

That said, Bumble Bee jumped down and with the strangest walk Valda had ever seen began inspecting the playroom, sniffing everything in her path, her tiny little mouth open as she sucked smells into her Jacobsen's gland. The Elfinish's back feet made little quirky kicks as she moved.

"Where *is* my bed and where *is* my litter box?" Bumble Bee queried. "I must have both here in this room and in your sleeping chambers as well. One on every floor would not be amiss either." She turned her very small little head from side to side. "And my feed and water bowls? Where are *they*?"

It was at that moment that Penthesilea Aracnea stuck her head in the door, curious about the playroom of which Sir Giles had spoken and eager to let the child – the future Reaper – know she bore no ill will toward the little girl's new father. Upon seeing the Elfinish, Penthe let out a shriek and rushed into the room.

"Oh Worldly One! Greetings!" the Amazeen went to one knee before the little creature, head bowed with deep respect. "I am honored to be in your august presence." She extended her hand, palm up, eyes down.

"Well, of course you are," Bumble Bee grumbled as she lightly touched her paw to the warrioress's palm. "Now get up. You look silly on the floor."

Valda giggled although she was a bit afraid of the tall woman who towered above her and who was nearly as big as her new papa.

"Sit, warrioress," Bumble Bee ordered with a flick of her hairless tail. "I have been informed of you and together we must train this young one for her destiny. We shall discuss her preparation."

Penthe's eyes shown with unshed tears. "Worldly One, I am not worthy of such an honor."

"Most likely not but if the goddess believes you are, I must accept the possibility – farfetched as it may seem – that you could be."

"I will strive to earn your respect, Worldly One," Penthe swore.

"Humpf," was the Elfinish's reply.

Valda sat on the loveseat and her little eyes moved back and forth between the warrior woman and the tiny creature who paced about the room with that weird, jerky gait. A talking cat was such a shock and she couldn't wait to tell her mother and father.

"By the gods, an Elfinish!"

Three sets of eyes zeroed in on the door where the High Lord stood, his face as white as chalk.

"Oh yes, I believe you are the one called mom," Bumble Bee growled. "Go away. We do not wish your company."

"Mom?" Lord Kheelan repeated, forehead creased. "No, Worldly One, I am—"

"Proving to be an utter nuisance. Go away, I say!" Bumble Bee hissed. "Warriorress, close that door. His very presence offends me."

The Shadowlord was still standing in the doorway when Penthe stood and shut the door in his face.

Lord Kheelan's lips parted for no one—no one—had ever dared to slam a door in his face. That it was his head of security was without doubt an added insult.

"An Elfinish," he repeated then winced. "I hate cats." His curled into his palms. "I hate cats!"

"Then you should have let her have a puppy," an amused voice whispered in his head.

* * * * *

The pain had proven to be more than Glyn had bargained for and as he lay upon the cot in sickbay, he thought of that first lash and how unprepared he'd been for the agony of it. Though the discomfort had left him, he felt weak and laid low by the punishment.

As he was being flogged and straining valiantly to keep his head up and not to make a sound, he was acutely reminded of the lightning strike that had killed him. His fellow Reapers were standing side by side at his back watching, and when the last stroke was delivered, the Amazeen had come up to him to whisper, "It's over, Reaper. Well done."

Arawn and Bevyn had stepped forward to unshackle him. Neither of them spoke to him and he realized they most likely didn't know what to say. They supported him until he was able to stand upright, using his waning strength to walk unaided. It had almost cost him his consciousness to square his shoulders and take that first step but the moment he turned, his fellow Reapers snapped to attention and saluted him. Owen had winked at him.

That had been all the comfort and support he had needed to march from the courtyard. His steps might have been slow, measured, but he was keenly aware of his teammates behind him and knew if he faltered, any one of them would step forward to lend him aid.

All the way up the portico steps, he had been forced to bite his lip to keep from moaning. The pain lancing his back, the blood dripping from the slowly closing wounds was taking its toll on him. With every pull of his back muscles, he felt again the sting of the lash, the gouge of the small metal barbs that had dragged down his tearing flesh.

Down the corridor and to sickbay where he would spend the time it took for him to heal, he held on to his iron will, pushing the agony aside. He walked with his head high, shoulders back but once he was inside the cell, once the door closed and he'd made sure the peephole was shut, he had dropped to the floor on his knees with a grunt. He could go no farther – not even the few steps it would take to reach the cot. His eyes had rolled back in his head and he'd pitched forward to land on his stomach, cheek pressed to the floor, his arms beside him.

When he woke, it was to find the goddess kneeling beside him as he lay upon the cot, Her cool hand smoothing the hair back from his forehead.

"Forgive me, *Mo Regina*," he said, "but I'm afraid I can't get up."

"There is no need. I could not aid you in this for what you did was wrong, My Reaper. Understandable and admirable but wrong. I could not make your punishment any less harsh."

"I understand," he said with a sigh. He looked into Her vivid green eyes. "I had no choice, *Mo Regina*."

"It is not the choice you made that concerns me, my Reaper. Neither is it the woman you took as your own. I grieve for the little girl for it is she who will bear the brunt of the situation. And when the child of your union is born, he will straddle a fine line between two very dissimilar cultures. It will be his burden to prove himself to both."

"I will be there for him, milady," he swore.

"As will I, but his will be a very trying life despite our help. Now you need to sleep, Glyn Kullen. Long and deeply."

With the stroke of Her hand, he slipped down into the sweet arms of unfeeling slumber.

Epilogue

A day later as the hurricane moved inland—its winds and force diminishing hourly—the inhabitants of the Citadel finally settled down for the night. The rain had at last stopped.

The Prime Reaper held his wife gently to him as Danni snored softly and Arawn listened with a gentle smile on his rugged face.

Lea Walsh lay spooned behind 2-I-C Bevyn Coure, both sound asleep, each lost in a dream about the other.

Cynyr Cree was on his side, his head propped on his fist as he waited for his lady to return from tucking their son Briton into bed. As soon as Aingeal turned out the light in the nursery and came through their bedroom door, his gaze turned hot and heavy-lidded. He peeled back the cover on her side of the bed and patted the mattress in invitation.

While Rachel nursed their firstborn, Owen Tohre gently rocked his younger son as the little one waved a tiny fist and made satisfied cooing sounds. The infant showed no sign of turning in for the night and the knowing look in his tiny amber eyes gave his father fair warning that it might always be so.

Glyn Kullen and his lady-wife Mystery lay back to back as their little daughter sat in a chair beside their bed and watched over them. On the child's sweet, dark face, there was a light of quiet peace and a sense of having come home at last. Curled in her lap was the strangest-looking feline most of the Citadel's inhabitants had ever seen.

The four bachelor Reapers—Kasid Jaborn, Eanan Tohre, Phelan Kiel and Iden Belial—sat in the parlor playing cards with Giles D'Brickashaw and Healer Desden.

Penthe, the Amazeen, tossed and turned in her lonely bed and cried out from time to time—fighting and losing a battle about which she would never speak to another living soul.

All three Gatekeepers were abed—each dreaming of the new Reaper Eanan, who had joined them and who had captured their attention as no man ever had.

Two of the Shadowlords slept peacefully and guilt-free while the third paced his room and stared out into the night, his heart as heavy as the lowering clouds.

And far to the south, in the dark, dank, dismal swamplands at the base of the Flagala Territory, a single bubble broke the surface of the brackish black waters. After a long moment, another bubble rose to send a ripple spreading across the oily plane. That bubble was followed by a third and then up from the wretched depths a mighty claw was thrust toward the heavens. Long, jagged yellow talons arched from thickly scaled, green-tinted flesh and far beneath the murky waves, twin crimson orbs began to glow.

About the Author

Charlee is the author of over thirty books. Married 40 years to her high school sweetheart, Tom, she is the mother of two grown sons, Pete and Mike, and the proud grandmother of Preston Alexander and Victoria Ashley. She is the willing house slave to five demanding felines who are holding her hostage in her home and only allowing her to leave in order to purchase food for them. A native of Sarasota, Florida, she grew up in Colquitt and Albany, Georgia and now lives in the Midwest.

Charlee welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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