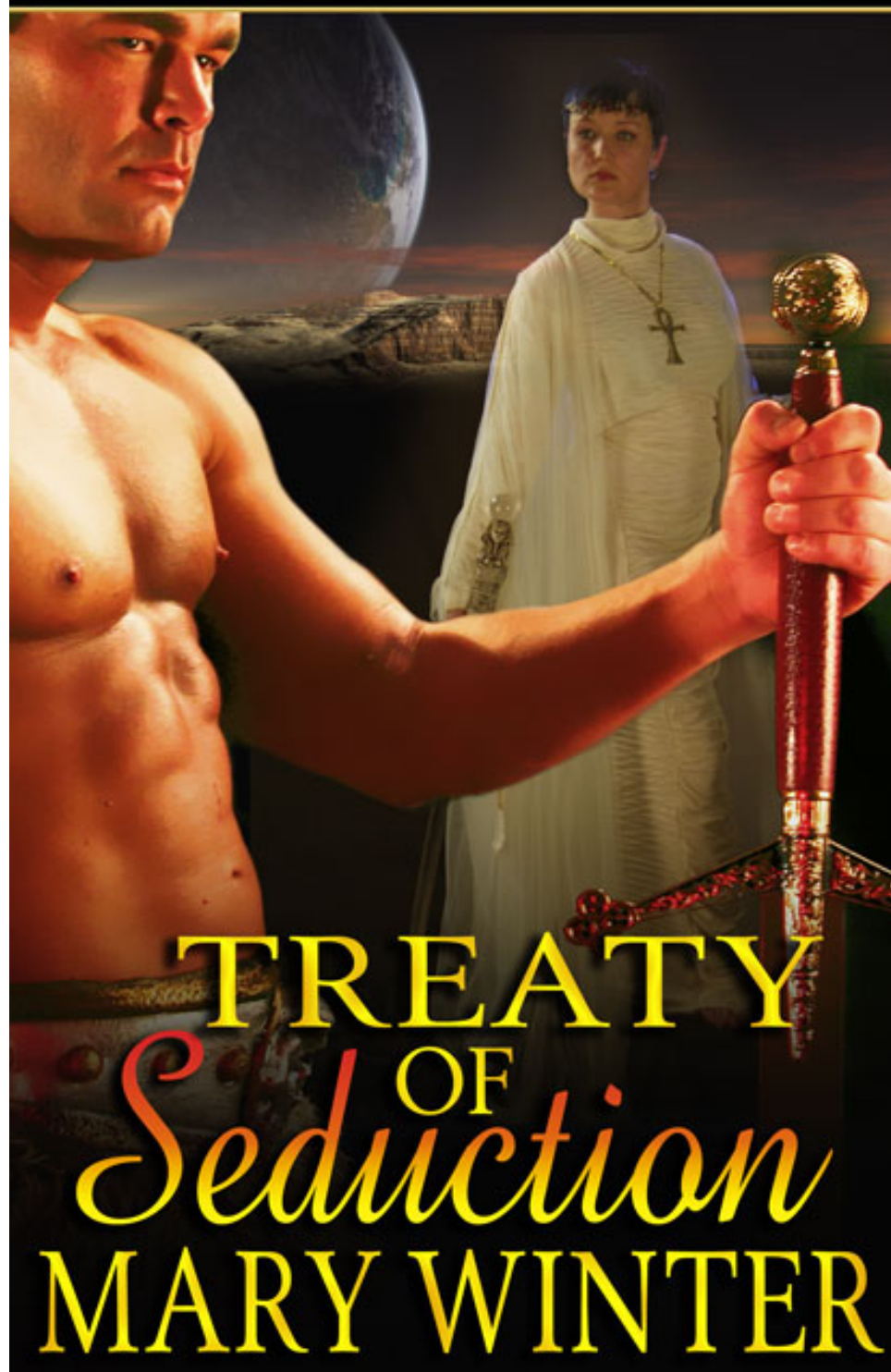


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Treaty of Seduction

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TREATY OF SEDUCTION

Mary Winter

Chapter One

The tranquil bubbling of the fountain and melodic flute music contrasted sharply with High Priestess Tyranna Eairstar's jangled nerves. Tyranna sat on a plush lounge across from her queen. She struggled to keep her anger from showing, though she vibrated with its force. The queen asked the unspeakable. A High Priestess of the one goddess who is all goddesses marrying a Concordance military officer profaned all that was good and right in the world. And to have the priestess be *her* – why, if it weren't for the love of her monarch she'd fling more than an angry glance.

A little over a year ago, the Concordance, an overreaching governing body ruling several planetary systems, came to Zaldivar, Corella's largest planet, with an offer – join the Concordance and, in exchange, receive new technologies. The queen accepted, though a small faction of Zaldivar citizens fought against the spread of foreign technology and Concordance rule. The insurgents worked in small pockets, mostly among the rural towns where they had more support. Several outlying Zaldivarian cities and provinces suffered heavy fighting, even as the mostly urban and more technologically advanced capital city of Kerivarn remained peaceful.

Although the fighting was contained in remote areas of the planet, plasma rifles and energy bolts felled good citizens of Zaldivar and Concordance military men alike. On both sides of the conflict, young men died.

If only the Concordance hadn't taken aim on the Corella system. An uprising on one of the remote planets had brought the entire system to the Concordance's attention, and it desired to pacify *all* of Corella's planets. Never mind that Zaldivar traded peacefully with its neighbors and bothered no one.

Tyranna expelled a harsh breath. She stared at Queen Mariana, her longtime friend, and focused on meditations to calm the mind. Her queen sat on a matching lounge,

wearing a white sleeveless shirt and shorts that molded to her trim body and contrasted with her firm, tanned skin. In the traditional robe of a priestess, Tyranna felt absolutely shapeless and frumpy. Mariana sipped from her glass, some fruity concoction brought by one of the servants. Tyranna's glass sat untouched beside her.

"You can see my dilemma," the queen said. "The wedding must take place immediately. And while a marriage between two high-ranking members of the Concordance and Zaldivar seems like the perfect way to end the conflict, we have no one to offer. Except you." Sadness filled her eyes. "You know I wouldn't do this but for the good of the planet."

"I know. But I don't have to like it," Tyranna admitted. In truth, she saw the wisdom in the queen's words. As the queen had no royal siblings, the High Priestess stood closest to the throne. Still, the thought of joining with a man for any purpose outside of her sacred duties chilled her. Her calling to the goddess overrode any physical pleasures. She needed to mediate between the deities and the people, to share advice, to counsel the queen. Entwining herself in a marriage would take time away from her work, time she could ill afford at the moment.

Mariana set her drink down beside her and reached across the space separating them. "I know this is difficult for you. But you're our only hope." She laughed, a self-mocking kind of sound rarely heard from the queen's mouth. "That sounds so horrible, doesn't it? But it's true." She stared out the open patio doors where the breeze carried the sound of the waterfall in the garden. "My people are dying because a few fanatics don't want us to ally with the Concordance. They left us alone for so long, but now they offer more than I can refuse." She grew silent and a sheen of tears glistened in her eyes.

Tyranna battled the selfish feelings deep inside her. Compared to the people's misery, her own worries over secular and spiritual duties paled. They died for their freedoms. Giving up her autonomy and submitting to a state marriage was the least she could do. "I'll do it." Rising to her feet, Tyranna closed the space and placed a hand on Mariana's shoulder. "Don't worry about me. I'll do my part to ensure the peace. I just

hope that he will do his as well." A grin curved her mouth. "So what do you know about this officer I'm supposed to marry?"

A huge smile crossed the queen's face. "Well, if I weren't the monarch I'd be vying for his attentions myself." She chuckled and sipped her drink. "Suffice to say, I don't think you'll have anything to worry about. Tall, rich hair the color of mink, broad shoulders, a hard body. Yeah, I'd take Major Drakkal myself if I could." The queen licked her lips and smiled a feline smile.

Major Drakkal. Tyranna suppressed a shudder of pleasure. It had been so long since she'd been with a man. Not that her calling required her to be celibate, but her duties kept her busy. She worked to keep herself free from entanglements, and she wasn't the kind of woman for one-night stands. Even if all acts of love and pleasure were in worship of the goddess. To have his cock filling her, to lose herself in the glorious union between male and female—she hungered for it yet feared it. "But he belongs to the Concordance. Their offer of technology comes from more than the goodness of their hearts—if their hearts even contain goodness. It's distasteful, as I'm sure this officer will be." She frowned.

"You're not backing out, are you?" Mariana asked.

Tyranna shook her head.

"Good, because distasteful or not, you already said you would. I'm your queen, and I could command you if necessary. I don't want to, but don't think for a moment that I'll put our friendship before the good of the planet. I'm sorry, but I won't." She rose to her feet.

"I know. And I guess I'll have to endure this tall, dark and oh-so-handsome Concordance officer. But if he interferes with my duties, you'll have to find someone else. I gave the goddess my life seventeen years ago. I won't take it back now."

"Not even if your queen orders you to take it back?" Mariana strode through the open doors to the balcony adjacent her solarium. At the railing, she looked over the royal gardens.

Tyranna went to her side feeling like a giantess next to the petite, blonde-haired monarch. Tyranna's short cap of cinnamon-colored hair blew around her face and with her long, slender limbs she felt like a newborn colt. The thought that she might be beautiful enough to sway a Concordance officer into a marriage alliance had her biting back laughter. She doubted her monarch would appreciate Tyranna laughing at her plans. Curling her fingers around the railing, she stared down at the lush green plants and stone walkways that never failed to soothe her. Overhead, personal shuttlecraft flew, ferrying passengers, and the drone of life around the castle drifted on the air. She inhaled the scents of lush tropical flowers in full bloom and closed her eyes.

Mariana rested her hand on Tyranna's arm. "You're making a great sacrifice for the good of the planet. I won't forget."

Tyranna kept her gaze focused on the garden. "Thank you." The need for solitude pressed in on her and, releasing her hold on the railing, she stepped back. "If you'll excuse me, I think I need to be alone."

"Go on. And best of luck. You know I wouldn't do anything that might hurt you, right?"

Tyranna nodded, then turned and left. She strolled through the halls opulent with tapestries of years gone by. Images of the rulers and important events adorned the walls, from the time Zaldivar had been a series of feudal colonies to its technological rise and current status. Normally she'd take time to savor them, remembering the times of Empress Ivia III, or the arrival of the first spacefarers who had brought with them technology and medicine, raising the planet from its dark ages. Though the planet lacked the ability to replicate the technology—something the Concordance offered them. The only catch? A simple peace treaty. Tyranna feared nothing would ever be simple with the Concordance, not when her own people rose against them. Thoughts of an unknown Concordance officer and her vows to the goddess filled her mind.

She stepped outside and tilted her head back to let the sun bathe her face in warming rays. A maze occupied one corner of the gardens and it called to her with its

twisting paths and turns, where she could lose herself and perhaps gather her thoughts. Bright flowers bobbed in raised beds. Vines trailed over the edges of the stone barriers and the perfume of nearly a thousand floral varieties filled the air, making her nose itch. Her training had taught her that the goddess brought bounty to those who gave it in return.

The deity's original name had been changed by the mists of time, transformed by each succeeding generation until now the people simply knew her as the goddess. Some thought the large temple next to the castle complex a silly old relic. In this age of technology and flying ships, worship seemed old-fashioned, superstitious even. Yet Tyranna relished giving her life in the service of the divine. At the age of twelve she'd climbed the twenty steps to the temple, knelt for two days and nights to pledge her devotion and took her vows.

And now the queen asked Tyranna to divide her loyalties. A marriage. She harrumphed and stopped at the entrance to the maze. Turning left, she followed her favorite, most circuitous route to the center. The smell of evergreens blocked out the floral scents and she filled her nostrils with the crisp fragrance. Closing her eyes, she let her nose and feet slowly carry her deeper into the maze. From memory, she made the twists and turns leading to the center, and when she knew she neared the maze's heart, she stopped and opened her eyes.

She gasped at the sight of the man standing before the marker in the center of the maze. His back was to her, but there was no mistaking the dark navy blue of a Concordance uniform. Thick, dark brown hair curled nearly to his collar and his broad shoulders tapered to a narrow waist and lean hips. From the back, his ass looked hard and his long, muscled legs held power. Her mouth went dry.

Holy mother, could this be the officer she was supposed to marry? Her clit throbbed and Mariana's description rang in her ears. Licking her lips, she stepped forward. "Excuse me. I didn't expect anyone to be in the maze," she said.

The stranger turned. His sharp profile appeared chiseled from stone and his vivid blue gaze scanned the area and landed on her. From head to toe he surveyed her, pausing on the curve of her breasts. Pips and insignia hung on his collar, his left sleeve and down the left side of the chest. "It looked like a place to gather thoughts." He gestured to the plaque and the statue of the first king. "I've seen many statues of Zaldev and Kerivar, the planet's founders, but never one of Kerivar by himself. Is there some significance to this one?"

Tyranna stepped forward, thankful to have something other than the handsome stranger on which to focus. She skimmed her fingers over the plaque bearing the founder's name and two dates. "This is his tomb," she said. "Some say magic encased him inside his tomb and others believe that at one time our people possessed technology even greater than we do now. All we know is one minute he gave his final speech to his people, the next there was a great flash of light and this statue appeared." She shrugged. "I doubt we'll ever know the truth."

His hard mouth softened into a smile. "I didn't think magic existed anymore." His grin widened, revealing a dimple in his right cheek.

Tyranna feared her knees would weaken. She flushed. "Tyranna Eairstar, High Priestess of the goddess." She offered her hand.

He curled his fingers around hers, his warm touch radiating up her arm and making her tingle all over. As if raised in the courts, he brought her hand to his mouth to place a kiss on the back—but before his lips met flesh, he turned her hand and brushed a kiss across her palm.

Tyranna held her breath.

A soft plume of warm breath caressed her skin a moment before his lips connected with her flesh, causing her clit to zing to life and her nipples to peak. He slipped his tongue from between his lips, caressing her palm and making her shiver, before lifting his head. Heat filled his eyes, darkened now to nearly the same color as his uniform. "Then the pleasure is mine. I'm Major Trace Drakkal."

She pulled her hand back as if he'd stung her, clenching her fist around the sensation of his mouth still on her skin.

"I'm sorry if I startled you," he said.

"No. No, it's all right." Flustered, she worked not to babble. "The uniform, I should have guessed." She stepped back. Swallowing gulps of air, she resisted the urge to press her hand over her heart to still its rapid beating. Her queen hadn't lied in her description. She swallowed hard and closed her mouth, lest she say something else silly.

"I haven't made it to the castle yet to introduce myself." He grinned at the big building. "A castle. On a Concordance planet. How quaint."

Tyranna's back stiffened. She glared at this man who dared to insult her home. If he believed a union between the two of them would end the violence against the Concordance, he lived in a dream. She hated the idea of more people dying, but had to face reality. The anti-Concordance faction of her people wouldn't be appeased easily, if at all. A simple marriage wouldn't cease the hostilities.

"Quaint?" She tamped down her rising anger. "You truly have no idea about my people, do you?" She crossed her arms over her chest and glared at him.

* * * * *

When Trace had proposed a marriage alliance, he had expected someone from the royal family to take the bride's place. Learning the queen was an only child, as were everyone of her line, had thrown a crimp in his plans. But when the monarch proposed the High Priestess, he resigned himself to being wed to a dour old woman. The nubile creature before him far surpassed his expectations.

She appeared a few years younger than his thirty-four, her short brown hair trimmed to a pixie cut that emphasized her high cheekbones and willowy build. Her dark brown eyes missed nothing, and a flush added color to her pale cheeks. Each

breath raised and lowered her breasts, which although small, looked as if they'd be a perfect handful. A head shorter than he, she'd fit against his body perfectly.

Trace stepped forward. The loose fit of his trousers concealed his growing arousal. He worked to bring himself under control and comport himself as befit a Concordance military officer, not some randy young recruit out on leave. His priestess stood with her back against a stone wall, her hand reaching behind her as if to steady herself. Striding forward, he stopped in front of her and rested one hand on the wall.

"I'm sure you can teach me about your world." He inhaled her scent, a rich mixture reminiscent of dark woods. He pegged it as temple incense. "After all, that's why this union was proposed. So that our two societies can get to know one another more intimately." His voice dropped a notch. Looking down at her, he saw the twin points of her nipples pressing against her gown. His little priestess wasn't immune to his charms.

"I'm sure we can get to know each other without...intimacy," she said. Her lips parted.

A fierce need to find out how she tasted consumed him. He dipped his head. "Oh, I think it's quite necessary." Before she could protest, he captured her lips with his.

The quick taste he'd intended turned into something more the instant his mouth touched hers. She stiffened against him, her lips unyielding. She tasted like a sweet, fruity concoction that tantalized the taste buds, and he simply had to get more. Tracing her lower lip with his tongue, he teased her into a sigh of surrender.

Tyranna melted against him. Her long, slender fingers clamped onto his biceps. Her breasts brushed against his chest and as he splayed his hand on her back, he felt certain she didn't wear a bra. The knowledge hardened his cock even more. Her lips opened under his questing tongue and she deepened the kiss with a tiny whimper of need.

Fire blazed in his veins. He pinned her to the wall with his body, letting her feel the extent of his need. Her fingers clenched and released on his biceps, her lips slanting across his. The need for air parted them but only for a moment before his lips captured hers once more.

When Tyranna's tongue hesitantly brushed against his, his cock throbbed. His priestess might be shy, but she knew how to wrap a man around her and never let go. Marry her? Hell yeah. If anyone asked him at this moment, he'd say he'd walk through hell and back for one more taste of her lips. The shrapnel wound in his leg ceased its aching as his world narrowed down to her willowy curves pressed to his hard, unyielding body. He settled for the feel of her through his uniform and her vestments.

Trace released her mouth to gulp in much-needed air. Mere centimeters separated them and it took all his will power not to slant his lips across hers once more. Her panting breaths brought her chest in closer contact with his and his leg had slid between hers without his notice.

Tyranna blinked as if coming out of a dream and slowly released his arm. "Do you greet everyone you meet this way?" she asked, looking a bit unsteady on her feet.

He grinned, flashing the dimple he knew the ladies loved so well. "Only the ones I'm about to marry." He stepped back and turned toward the exit. "I'll be seeing you." With a nod of his head, he stepped back into the maze. Luckily for him he had a photographic memory and his long strides carried him confidently into the maze. He inhaled the floral-scented air, wishing for the incense fragrance of his priestess.

Moments later he exited the maze and crossed the garden to enter the castle. A brief inquiry told him the queen reclined in her solar, and a servant led the way. In spite of his many visits to the royal palace, the sheer opulence never failed to bother him. After a lifetime spent within the Concordance's crisp, military, no-frills environment, the tapestries and statues seemed like an ostentatious display of wealth.

He paused by the marble statue of a peacock standing in the corner of the hallway. Above it, a tapestry showed a lady astride a horse, a hooded falcon perched before her. Other women, presumably her ladies-in-waiting, rode just behind her. The rich blue-green color of the statue brought out the colors in the tapestry and he shook his head. Such things had existed on his home planet until the Concordance brought it under their dominion. Seeing them here served as a reminder of his mission. The alliance

didn't have to be as difficult as it had been for his planet. It could be peaceful. He'd seen such mergers, and he wanted it for the people of Zaldivar.

He paused outside the room where the queen resided. He quickly explained the reason for his visit to the guard, who announced him and moments later admitted him into the room. He stopped just inside, noticing the lounging couches. No needlework or women's crafts, though in times past he felt certain such skills had been practiced here.

The queen lounged on one of the couches, her long legs revealed by tight shorts and an equally tight top molding her breasts. Blonde hair fell over her shoulders, cosmetics making her lips appear full and red. Trace focused his attention on her bright blue eyes. Many called her beautiful. She paled in comparison to his priestess.

"Your Majesty," he said with a slight bow before striding forward. "You wished to speak with me regarding the mission?"

She gestured to a couch across from her. Trace sat. Right now the monarch looked as if she considered this a social visit, not an instrumental one for the safety of her people. Having met her before, he refused to be lulled by her sense of complacency. A shrewd negotiator, she'd cowed lesser men.

The queen tucked her legs beneath her. "You understand how serious things are right now. I'll not bore you by reiterating reports you see as often as I do. I've advised the candidate of the arrangement you proposed. The High Priestess is a very good friend of mine. I trust you know that should you do anything to hurt her, I will use every resource at my disposal to ensure you are punished."

Her words chilled him, almost as if she expected him to be as brutal as the soldiers fighting for their lives. Though he didn't expect love, he desired a real relationship, not a name-only arrangement. "I'm sorry you hold me in such low esteem, Your Majesty," he said, his voice lowering. "I have no intentions of hurting anyone. The whole purpose of this marriage is to ally the Concordance and your planet to prevent further bloodshed."

"I know." She waved her hand dismissively. "But Tyranna is my friend. She was chosen because of her position as High Priestess. I know neither you, nor she, want this arrangement. But by your government and mine you're bound to it."

"I honor my word." He clipped his words, realizing she didn't know he'd been the one to propose the idea to his government. Of course, he had never expected to be chosen, but his superiors had their reasons and as the man in charge of soldiers on the ground, it was expected the troops would obey Trace. "If your sole reason for calling me here was to warn me, then I'll consider myself warned." Suddenly unable to sit for the queen's accusations, he rose to his feet and turned toward the door.

"Wait!"

The queen's order stopped him. He swiveled to face her.

"Sit down. This meeting isn't over." She spoke like a woman who expected to be obeyed.

Trace did so, resuming his seat on the lounge. "I trust you won't waste my time or yours by further accusing me of things I have no intention of doing." He rested his hands on his thighs in an attempt to keep from clenching them. With just a few words, the queen had raised his anger. He was thankful he hadn't been asked to wed the queen. Frankly, he would have expected not to survive that experience. He believed the High Priestess would prove to be a more delightful challenge.

"There were no accusations, Major. Simply a statement of fact." She shifted position, crossing her legs and resting her hands primly on her knee. "The reason I called you here, in addition to my warning, was to let you know that while I have informed Tyranna of our intentions, she may not be as amicable as you might hope."

The memory of her body flush against his, her breasts crushed against his chest, had him fighting back an erection. Trace toyed with telling the queen exactly how amicable Tyranna had been. A grin quirked the corner of his mouth. "I'm sure we can come to some sort of mutual agreement." Yeah, like his cock filling her mouth, her pussy, her ass...all in the name of good relations. He shoved aside the images, focusing

on the queen's stern demeanor to help hold his randy thoughts at bay. "After all, we both want the same thing. Peace between Zaldivar and the Concordance."

The queen nodded. "Very well then, but let me give you some information that may help your cause. You know, I just want Tyranna to be happy. Being forced into a marriage against her will is hardly easy." The queen looked out the open patio doors for a long moment, her words most likely meant for herself as well as her friend.

"Tell me everything." He settled himself against the lounge and waited for any advice that would get him into Tyranna's bed and her heart.

Chapter Two

Fresh from his meeting with the queen, Trace strolled across the castle complex. Liveried servants mingled with those wearing more modern clothing, a clash of cultures and times that sent his head reeling. Those same differences made the planet difficult to subdue under Concordance jurisdiction. The temple rose in front of him, tall spires reaching toward the cerulean sky. Gold leaf reflected light off the many domes, and on a walkway, he saw white-robed priestesses standing with their arms raised to the sky. A bell rang seven times, marking prayer time, and he watched as people stopped to turn toward the temple and nod their heads before making their way through the crowded streets. The stuttering flow of pedestrians impeded him, and taking a deep breath, he waited for the path to clear.

Personal craft, in organized lanes of airborne traffic, zoomed overhead. Streets wide enough for motorized traffic stood empty of vehicles, as none were allowed near the castle complex. Instead, bicycle traffic provided the quickest means of transportation on the ground, and even that yielded to the unceasing flow of people on foot. He reached the stone archway marking the edge of the temple grounds. Passing underneath it, he beheld the true extent of the temple's beauty.

The gold leaf on the domes and the sweeping spires visible over the wall barely revealed the true scope of the design. Balconies, each topped by awnings in primary colors, jutted from the sides of the building. Priestesses in varying styles of robes occupied the balconies, and the drone of a multitude of voices rising in prayer filled the air. Silver bells hung in the highest tower.

Trace stopped, suddenly humbled by the sight. The Concordance's military had no need for the spiritual. Deities didn't win wars. People did. Being caught invoking the name of a god or goddess labeled someone as superstitious and old-fashioned—and

usually saw them passed over for promotions. He battled a sudden urge to drop to his knees.

The breath whooshed from his lungs. Scanning the robed figures, he searched for Tyranna. The very idea of taking her away from this place, her calling, screamed of blasphemy, yet Trace knew the arrangement was for the good of the planet. He hoped she'd be able to forgive him.

He strode forward, wrapping an air of command around himself. One thing he could say about Kerivarn citizens, they respected authority more than the average Zaldivarian. Several individuals moved out of his way, and in spite of the chants heard from the courtyard behind the temple walls—clearly indicating the hour of prayer—no one stopped him from entering the temple. He ascended the twenty steps leading to the main entrance.

He blinked as his eyes adjusted to the dim lighting inside the temple. The main entranceway boasted a large statue of the goddess worn smooth by the touch of worshipers over the years. She stood there, a bundle of grain cradled in her arm, the other hand outstretched as if to coax worshipers closer. Her long gown pooled around her feet where a scythe and a hare waited. The base of the dais on which she stood held the carved figures of horses and dogs. In front of the statue, several worshipers knelt, among them two green-robed priestesses. None bore the short cap of hair or the inherent grace by which he knew Tyranna.

An older priestess sat at a desk in a corner, next to a closed door. He walked over to her. Not knowing the woman's title, Trace chose none rather than risk offending her.

She raised her rheumy-eyed gaze to him. "Yes, my son? How may the goddess help you?"

He flinched at being called "son". No one had done that since his parents, who had died when the Concordance had taken over his home world. Blinking away the memories of terrified screams, the smell of blood and burnt entrails, he glanced at the door. "Where can I find the High Priestess?"

The woman pointed to a vast hallway behind the statue. "If you follow that path to its end, you'll find the courtyard where prayers are being held. Wait until they're over, and if the High Priestess wishes to speak with you, she'll find you." As if she hadn't noticed before, the woman's eyes took in his Concordance uniform, the bored compassion in her eyes turning to hate. "You're lucky the goddess forgives all. Your people have killed my son and my grandsons. Whatever your business with the High Priestess, do not think to harm her. Our fury and retribution will know no bounds."

Trace held back his impatient sigh. Did everyone on this cursed planet expect him to harm the woman to whom he'd been pledged to marry? "Rest assured, I do not seek to harm the High Priestess. I hope a peaceful resolution can be found to our conflict."

The old woman cackled. "The Concordance has no need for peace."

Trace leaned forward and planted his hand on her desk. "I believe you are wrong. Peace is good for the Concordance. Trade can flourish between our cultures, bringing with it more than goods and services. The Concordance has every interest in peace with your people. I hope you're wise enough to take the peace when it's offered." With a nod of his head, he straightened and turned toward the hallway. Without giving the woman a chance to respond, he strode away.

If only such a peace had been offered to his people...

Or maybe it had, and as a young child he knew only of his parents' hatred for the Concordance. He looked around at the Zaldivarians—he feared too many of them felt exactly like the old woman—like his parents. Tyranna hadn't said how she felt, but then again, he'd never asked. As soon as he saw her, he'd remedy that, for he couldn't work toward peace with someone who didn't want it. Listening to the rise and fall of the prayer cadence, he doubted she felt the same as the old woman.

Trace emerged into a courtyard with a smattering of people. Temple walls rose on all four sides, marked by various arches and doorways for the petitioners and the clergy. From the voices he'd heard when entering the temple, he'd assumed there'd be more worshipers, perhaps even standing-room-only. Instead, large expanses of empty

space occupied most of the courtyard. Here and there small groups of people knelt, while others prayed by themselves. Tyranna stood on a raised platform. Above her, another statue of the goddess had been carved out of the wall. Trace waited with his arms by his sides and listened to her musical voice.

* * * * *

As soon as Trace entered the courtyard, Tyranna saw him. He stood close to the door, arms hanging at his sides. Though he looked around the area he stared mostly at her, and only the familiar words of the liturgy steadied her. She struggled to find that place inside her where she lost herself to the beauty of the words and the goddess. Jarred out of it by Trace's appearance, she failed to find it again. Though she doubted the worshippers noticed, she certainly did. Already his appearance in her life interfered with her duties, and she didn't like it one bit.

Raising her arms to the sky, she finished the prayer. She made direct eye contact with Trace and nodded once.

He stepped forward.

Taking it as a sign he'd follow her, she stepped to a doorway. "Stay here and send him back to me," she said to the blue-robed priestess waiting there. She stepped through the open door and heard it close behind her. Her steps slowed and she turned to wait for the priestess outside to send him through to her. She heard the door open then close again.

He stopped as soon as he saw her.

His overwhelming presence in the narrow corridor forced her to step back. Still wearing his uniform, he looked imposing, especially in her house of worship. "Follow me," she said, then turned and walked to her office, his footsteps echoing behind her.

Tyranna steadied her pounding heart. Her lips tingled with the memory of his kiss, her body acutely aware of what it felt like to be pressed against his. Goddess help her, she drowned in his presence. His cologne filled her nostrils, driving away the soothing

scent of the temple incense. She opened the door to her office and as soon as he stepped inside, closed it behind them. Inside her sanctuary, they wouldn't be disturbed.

She motioned him to the chair by her desk but instead of seating herself, she leaned against the desk, standing before him. "Why did you come here?" Fear tore the soft question from her throat. Before she'd met him in the maze, before her queen had told her of her plans, she'd been secure in her work. She embodied the spiritual. To her, being a High Priestess was more than leading prayers. She'd chosen to lead today's in the hopes that it might clear her mind. She shook her head and closed her eyes.

A rustle of cloth preceded his hand resting on her shoulder. "Here to the temple or to Zaldivar?"

She opened her eyes and found herself immersed in his blue gaze. "Both. Neither..." His question caught her off-guard. He scrambled her senses, and for a woman who always knew exactly what was in her heart and mind, it scared her. She released a tired sigh.

His attention dropped to her mouth.

Tyranna held her breath. She swayed against him, the layers of her ceremonial gown suddenly too much between them. Bracing her hand against his chest, she intended to push away and retreat behind the sanctuary of her desk. Instead, she swayed closer.

Trace rested his hand on the edge of her desk, bringing her into even closer contact with his body. "I wanted to discuss our marriage. But now I think I'll kiss you."

Her eyelids fluttered closed as his words kindled heat low in her stomach. Rising on tiptoes, she offered her lips to him. Why should kissing Trace be so different from fertility rituals she'd performed? The goddess provided fruitful harvests and bounty. Courting those gifts, Tyranna had lain in the fields with those given charge to represent the god. She'd kissed before. Had sex before. Yet thinking about Trace fulfilling that ritual role had a whimper rising in her throat.

Trace slanted his lips across hers. His mouth moved, tasting, teasing until she reached up and curled her fingers around his shoulders to hold him to her. Pressing her body against his, she stroked his lower lip with her tongue and the groan rumbling in his chest rewarded her bold action. Goddess help her, she wanted this man. Right now. On her desk. In the holy sanctuary.

He thrust his tongue into her mouth. Nestled against her stomach, his erect cock throbbed, and she spread her legs as heat blossomed in her core. The pressure of his chest crushing her breasts hardened her nipples, and when he threaded his fingers into her hair, her pussy clenched.

He pulled his lips from hers with a ragged breath. Her panting breaths matched his. "Trace," she whispered, clenching her fingers against his broad shoulders.

He claimed her mouth once more, his hand trailing over her back, clutching at the outer layer of her vestments as he caressed the length of her spine and cupped her ass.

The need to touch skin drove her to slide her hand to the fastenings on his shirt. Made to look like buttons, the snaps popped open with a swipe of her hand. Reaching inside the open flap of his shirt, she caressed his hair-roughened skin.

"Tyranna." He rained kisses over her jaw, her neck, down to the high collar of her outer gown. "How can I get you out of these things?" He grabbed a handful of fabric and pulled.

"Wait," she said. Leaning back as far as she could, pinned between him and the desk as she was, she released the hook-and-eye enclosures that ran nearly to her stomach. Then she pulled off the outer layer and did the same with the two layers beneath, allowing them to flutter to the ground by her feet. Now clad only in her thin underdress, she raised her fingers to the dark brown curls on his chest. "There."

Trace's nostrils flared as he looked down at her. Tyranna shuddered and followed his gaze down the front of her body. Her breasts pressed against the thin material. Her wide, cherry-colored nipples poked against the bodice, the dark areolas outlined in stark detail. Her flat stomach led to the light brown curls between her legs, which

offered a tantalizing glimpse of her secrets, and although the knee-length gown still covered her, she might as well have been naked.

Trace bunched up the garment in his hands. Shoving it up, he circled her waist, his big hands radiating heat throughout her body. Her breath caught in her throat as he raised the gown higher, toward her head. Grabbing the obstruction, she removed it herself, letting it join her other vestments on the ground. She leaned back on the desk, hands braced behind her, and offered him her body.

"Beautiful," he whispered, dipping his head to one breast. He swirled his tongue around her breast, licking and sucking with tiny love bites.

Tyranna squirmed against him. Her pussy pulsed in an ageless rhythm and her clit throbbed for his touch. She tangled her fingers in his silken hair, the only thing soft about him. His stubbled cheek rasped across her skin and she welcomed the harsh contact as she hung onto his shoulders, his strength keeping her upright.

He tongued her nipple.

She gasped as pleasure shot from her breast to her clit and back again. He laved the tight bead, using his other hand to caress the other. Her cream dripped down her thigh and she spread her legs, craving closer contact.

Releasing her breast, Trace grabbed her ass. A quick lift placed her on the desk, knees spread wide. He turned his attention to her other breast, his fingers drifting over her stomach to the curls between her legs. Tyranna whimpered. Head thrown back, eyes closed, lips parted in a silent cry of ecstasy, she rode the waves of pleasure coursing through her veins.

His featherlight touch caressed her damp labia. She gasped, her hips jerking forward to drive his digits deeper. He caressed her clit with a fleeting touch that left her breathless and she bit back a moan of pleasure. Alternating at her breasts, he suckled and licked her flesh, the hot, wet suction pulling straight to her cunt, and she wriggled, trying to get closer to him.

"Please," she whimpered, needing the thick invasion of his fingers in her channel.

Against her skin, Trace smiled. He slipped two fingers inside her, thrusting to the first knuckle. In and out. In and out. The quick, shallow pumps had her teetering on the edge of orgasm. He rubbed her clit with his thumb. Clenching her fingers on his shoulder, she moaned low in her throat as the first contractions of release rippled through her.

His teeth grazed her nipple.

Her breath caught in her throat. Close, so damn close to orgasm, and with his fingers shallowly penetrating her and his teeth and tongue toying with her nipples, he kept her on edge. She curled her fingers into his skin, so hard her nails left furrows. Widening her thighs, she lifted her hips into each thrust.

Trace pumped his fingers all the way into her. Bending them, he slid along her channel walls, finding her G-spot and working it with his fingertips.

Tyranna exploded, biting her lip to keep from screaming as her body spasmed. She milked his fingers as wave after wave of pleasure rolled through her, nipples tingling. Her short, panting breaths filled the room and Trace gave a low groan.

He pulled his fingers from her and fumbled with the fastenings on his trousers. With his uniform shirt hanging partially off his shoulder and his hair mussed from her fingers, he looked like a man ready for action. His cock surged against the open vee of his pants, pointing straight at her. Tyranna stared at the magnificent specimen of manhood. Passion flushed the head purple. Blue veins roped around the shaft, creating ridges she knew would feel heavenly inside her pussy. She wondered whether her fingers would even fit around his penis—it was almost as big around as her wrist.

She reached for him, stroking from base to tip, her touch soft against his steely hardness. Hints of his musky aroma teased her nostrils. Holding him in her palm, she tested his heft and her pussy hummed to think of that thick shaft thrusting deep inside her. She wrapped her fingers around him and smiled when they barely touched.

Tyranna leaned forward. Closing her eyes, she nuzzled the whorls of hair on his chest, licking, tracing a path down to his navel. Below it, an arrow of hair led to the riot of curls surrounding his staff. Her mouth watered as she imagined his piquant taste.

She pulled her gaze back to his eyes. Rubbing her thumb over the tip of his cock, she watched the way his head tilted back and the corded muscles in his neck stood out. Spreading her thighs wider, she encouraged him to step forward.

"Are you protected?" she asked, knowing the Concordance forced most of their military members to take sterility shots.

He nodded and rubbed his fingers across her lips. "Are you ready?"

"Yeah," she said and wrapped her arms around his neck. In the back of her mind, she realized she'd intended to make him stop. Just a kiss, a taste, something with which to remember him after she buried herself in her work as a priestess. But once he'd pressed his lips to hers and thrust his fingers deep inside her fisting channel, she'd been lost. She couldn't marry this man without feeling his body inside her, and from the way her office fell away and the two of them moved in their own tiny world, she knew by doing so, she'd seal her fate. "No. Wait."

Trace blinked. He looked down at her, the head of his cock brushing against her inner thigh. "Wait?"

Tyranna closed her eyes "I'm sorry. I can't. Not yet."

Trace stepped back. He reached for his pants, pulling them back into place. He looked uncomfortable as he tucked his cock back into his trousers. "Hell," he cursed.

Opening her eyes, she looked at him, imploring him to understand. "You make me forget my calling...who I am." She rubbed her eyes and slid from the desk to get her underdress, suddenly unable to sit there naked any longer.

"Sex isn't a crime," he said, stepping forward to scoop up her vestments. "Even your religion values it." He shoved her clothing at her.

"I know. This has all happened too quickly. Give me some time, please?" She took the clothing from him with shaking hands.

He cupped her cheek, brushing his thumb across her lower lip. "Okay. But we'll be married sooner than you think. I'll respect your wishes but I *will* have you, and when I do, I don't think you'll object." He kissed her, a light and fleeting brush of his lips across hers that had her swaying toward him. He turned and walked out the door.

Tyranna exhaled, staring at the rumpled clothing. Quickly she donned her vestments, washing up as best she could at the pitcher of water sitting in the corner. She hurried out the door, not to follow Trace but to speak with the queen. There had to be another way to make this peace work. Because if she succumbed to the marriage, she feared she'd lose herself.

Queen Mariana paced in the nearly empty throne room. Two guards stood on either side of the throne and Tyranna kneeled before it, Queen Mariana circling them all with long, angry strides. She whirled to face her friend. "What do you mean get someone else to marry Trace? The wedding is to take place tomorrow!" She braced her hands on her hips. Her blue eyes sparked with anger.

"Exactly that, Your Majesty." Tyranna kept her head bowed. The bonds of friendship wouldn't help her now, not when she sought to defy her queen's orders. "I cannot marry Trace."

"Cannot or will not?" Mariana shook her head. "An opportunity for peace with the Concordance and you're going to pass it up because you want to fuck your husband?"

Tyranna flinched. "Not exactly," she said. Her sexual attraction to Traced weighed heavily on her decision. She wouldn't deny it, but she wouldn't cite it as the sole reason either. "I fear I'll be unable to perform my duties as the High Priestess. I will not abandon my calling for the sake of a man."

"Will you abandon it for peace?" Mariana stopped directly before her. She frowned, looking regal in her long silk dress that molded to her curves before sweeping the floor. High heels added to her height.

Always one to know when she'd been bested, Tyranna exhaled. "I won't stand in the way of peace." Deliberately, she didn't answer the question. Peace for her people came before everything, including her calling, though in her heart she wondered if she could forgive her queen or the Concordance officer for coming between her and her vocation. She closed her eyes and sent a silent prayer to the deity whom she had worshipped since she was a child. "If it is your wish, I will marry Trace."

"Well at least he isn't 'that damn Concordance officer' anymore." Mariana grinned and offered a hand to help her High Priestess up.

"Oh, and one more thing. I want you and Trace to move into the royal apartments I've set aside for you. Tonight." Her words didn't invite any argument.

Tyranna's mouth went dry. "Move into the apartments?" She wrapped her arms around herself. "I don't suppose there are two bedrooms."

The queen laughed. Great, boisterous chuckles that filled the room and made even the stoic guards look askance. "Two bedrooms? That's rich, honey." She shook her head. "Shoo. Off with you. You have to move in now." She turned and headed for the door.

Tyranna watched her friend leave via the door behind the throne, accompanied by her guards. Moments later she stood alone in the huge room. Royal apartments. With Trace. She shuddered with the memory of his lips on hers, his cock so close to penetrating her. Slowly, she turned and walked out of the throne room. She knew the apartments the queen mentioned. Usually reserved for visiting dignitaries, they occupied one entire wing of the castle. Just a few rooms, but large, open spaces fit for holding parties.

Uncertain whether Trace had received the orders yet, Tyranna hurried back to the temple to pack her bags. She wanted to claim some space for her own, and perhaps find a way to devise a second bedroom.

Chapter Three

Early morning sunlight slanted across the polished hardwood floors. Tyranna knelt on her woven bamboo mat, arms stretched over her head, palms flat to the floor. With her back straight and her face pressed to the thin mat, she inhaled the lemon floor polish. Curtains rustled, the already warm breeze tickling the bottoms of her bare feet. Tyranna rose into a seated position, her hands still stretched over her head. Buttocks on heels, she stared out the eastern windows and closed her eyes as the breeze caressed her naked skin.

Windows faced three directions, leaving the north side open to the rest of their apartment. She'd slept on a low couch in the smaller room that functioned as a study. Trace occupied the grand bed in the master bedroom. Last night she'd slipped in and watched him sleeping, the blankets tangled around his hips. He lay with one arm shoved across the bed as if reaching for someone in his sleep. Hair tousled, his magnificent chest bare, he'd looked tempting. She'd backed out of the room, her heart hammering a thousand beats a minute and her breath catching in her throat. Just thinking about him now brought a hitch to her breathing and made her clit and labia throb.

As far as she was concerned, her reaction to him last night cemented her belief that her marriage to Trace would interrupt her sacred duties. Tyranna forced him from her mind with a whooshed exhalation. She leaned back until her upper body arched and the tops of her hands touched the wooden floor. Sacred words poured from her mouth, a blessing to the day, thanks for her life of service, and as she rose once again into a seated position, she stood and stretched her arms out to the sides. She moved fluidly into the warrior's pose, with one leg bent and the other straight behind her. Turning, she stretched her arms overhead and saluted the day.

Tyranna cultivated a state of mindfulness. Her muscles moved into the familiar positions. Stretching and bending, she worked through the series of poses she performed every morning. A meditation, part movement, part prayer, the exercises had been her daybreak ritual since entering the goddess' service. She breathed deeply. The scent of flowers rose from the gardens below and filled her lungs with the promise of beauty and life. Outside, birds twittered and the drone of personal craft provided a muted backdrop to her breathing. She turned, her back to the windows, and stared into the room.

Trace watched her. He stood, legs shoulder-width apart, arms loose at his sides, yet nothing about his relaxed stance made her calm. Hunger blazed in the blue gaze raking her from head to toe. His erection pressed against his black silk lounging trousers and the formidable bulge made her mouth water.

Instead of focusing on it, she swept her hands down to the floor, bending to show him the long line of her back. She forced her body to continue the movements in spite of her hardened nipples and the juices wetting her cunt. She reached her fingertips as far behind her as she could, touching them to the floor behind her heels, and could smell her own arousal. Just a flick of her fingers over her labia would ease her torment, provide some measure of relief, but to do so would break the sacred forms. Forcing air into her lungs, she reached for the sky again before stretching to the side, grabbing her ankle and sliding into a spread-legged position on the floor.

He had to see her pussy, lips pink and swollen with her desire. Yet he remained standing just on the other side of the threshold, his attention focused on her sex, then up to her breasts and her face. He said nothing, simply watched.

She gave him points for not trying to distract her by talking. As a warrior, she expected him to have his own rituals, but perhaps the Concordance dismissed the spiritual and mental, preferring instead to focus on the physical. Her hands wavered over her foot, her forehead pressed to her knee. She hated her unkind thoughts. She

knew little about Trace except her body's powerful reaction to him. She looked up and her gaze locked with his.

Heat jolted through her body. Lips parted, she stilled, the flowing movements of her meditation forgotten. Her pussy tightened and behind his silk pants, she swore his cock jerked. Her stomach fluttered and the breeze teased the peaks of her nipples. She shook her head, half afraid she'd be unable to finish the movements. Just a few more to go and then she'd be done. She forced herself to lie back and flatten her body on the mat.

Aware of the picture she presented, Tyranna resisted the urge to press her legs closed. Let him see her body. In just a few days they'd be wed, and he'd have his use of it, not that she minded...much. Exhaling, she let her navel sink toward her backbone as she slowly brought her legs together. She rose, balancing on her tailbone, her legs thrust in front of her and her hands stretched overhead. Slowly, she lowered them until they hovered over her knees. Bending her legs, she brought them under her body and moved into a seated position.

Trace curled his hands into fists. Action hummed in every line of his body, the tension of restraint the only thing keeping him from crossing the space between them. She never thought a man standing still could be so active, yet in the rise and fall of his chest, the way his muscles prepared for action, he echoed the stillness in the center of a whirlwind.

Tyranna knelt. She leaned forward, ending the meditation as she began it, though the calmness that usually filled her fled under Trace's heated gaze. Forehead pressed to the mat, fingers resisting the urge to curl into the bamboo and the breeze cooling the sweat along her spine, she said a silent prayer to the goddess for the strength to be both a priestess and a wife and then she sat back on her heels.

"Blessings of the morning to you," she said, choosing the ritual greeting with much deliberation. She sat, pressing her legs together and curling them to her right side. On

the bench beneath one of the windows lay her robe, yet she made no move to get it. The goddess taught of the beauty in the human body. Let him see her.

Trace nodded. "Good morning. Your forms are beautiful. They look like a variant of the ones performed by the Yoginishi on Lenexia."

"You've visited the monastery?" Tyranna rose to her feet and shrugged into her robe.

"Yes, I've been there several times. They're very hospitable and it's a wonderful place to just relax," Trace explained, stepping forward. He moved easily into warrior's position. "They start here."

Tyranna went to him. Curling her fingers around his, she flattened his hand and made minute adjustments to his position. "There, that's better."

He looked down at her and grinned. "Yes, it is."

His smile washed her body in heat. Suddenly aware she stood pressed next to him, minimal material between her naked body and him, she stepped back.

Trace reached out and snagged her wrist. "You didn't come to bed last night. What were you afraid of?" His thumb caressed the pulse point in her wrist. Back and forth. The gentle movement sent frissons of heat straight to her clit and she tugged her lower lip between her teeth just thinking about his finger moving on her nub.

"I..." Tyranna swallowed hard. The intimacy of sharing a bed with Trace scared her. She started to shake her head, needing to deny the gut-deep knowledge that Trace scared her. His presence shattered the calm she cultivated, and that scared her as well. How strong could her calling really be if his mere presence swayed her away? A shiver snaked its way down her spine. She licked her lips and tried again. "I didn't want to disturb you."

He grinned and his dimple peeked out from hiding. "I waited up for you. But you must have had stuff to do at the temple. We'll have to remedy that tonight." He stroked her arm, wrist to shoulder and back again.

"I don't know." Tyranna shook her head. She rocked her weight back, preparing to step away, but Trace circled his arm around her and flattened his palm on her lower back, keeping her in place.

"You don't know? C'mon, I think we've proved I'm not an ogre." He grinned again and brushed his lips across her forehead.

"No, you're not an ogre. It's just too much too soon."

He softened his hold, though his hands lingered. He cradled her against his body, the hard ridge of his erection pressing into her stomach. The twin layers of silk created a smooth barrier between them and his gentle strokes along the fabric made her skin ultra-sensitive. The softest touch caressed every nerve ending.

"I know, but we have to make this work. Our marriage is going to stop a war."

"So long as it doesn't start one." The sarcastic retort escaped her lips before she could censor it.

"What?" Trace cupped her chin and tilted her head up to face him. "Why would it start a war?"

"Between us. I have my calling, my service to the goddess. You're a Concordance officer with no use for religion. No matter how much we may want it to work, I doubt it's going to." She shook her head and extracted herself from his embrace. Wrapping her arms about her, she whirled and faced the windows. Her heart hammered in her chest.

Strong hands rested on her shoulders. "Tyranna, don't damn us before we even have a chance to begin. I know this is sudden, but it's for the good of your planet."

"A planet you called 'quaint'," she snapped back. Anger rose in her, churning her stomach, and she regretted not even breaking her fast with a cup of tea. "You know the Concordance rolls over planets and doesn't even blink an eye. And that's why some of my people are fighting back and not welcoming the new technology that the Concordance offers. Because the Concordance cares only about what we can offer them." She sighed.

Tension filled the man behind her. His breathing remained even, his hands gentle on her shoulders. "Why don't we make a new start?"

"A new start?" Tyranna trembled at his words.

Trace nuzzled her ear. "You're a priestess of the goddess. It's your job to mediate between the gods and the people. I'm a Concordance officer. Our joining shows the people that the priestess is willing to make a new start. That she's not bound by past or convention. You lend a spiritual weight to our peace."

He lipped her earlobe, drawing the fleshy pad into his mouth. Sucking gently, he curved his fingers around her arms and to her breasts, cupping their weight in his palms as she stared out the window at the beautiful gardens below. Pressing his lips to the sensitive skin behind her earlobe, he licked it before suckling the lobe again.

Each pull of Trace's lips tugged straight to her pussy, causing her clit to throb. Her nipples hardened, the thin silk robe no barrier to his touch. Leaning against him, she closed her eyes. The goddess preached that all acts of love and pleasure were rituals. Denying the lust coursing through her veins would be denying the goddess herself. She sighed, half-acceptance, half-defeat, as she relaxed fully against him.

His cock pressed into her back. A tiny mewl of need rippled from her throat as he palmed her breasts. "See. Your body likes me, even if your mind doesn't." He fondled her breasts, his lips trailing along the column of her neck.

The memory of their interrupted coupling in her office flushed heat to her cheeks. Trace drew her like a moth to a flame, and her queen's words about Tyranna objecting to the marriage solely because she wanted to fuck him filled her mind. Her body wanted him. *She* wanted him. Fear of losing her connection with the divine, of setting aside her duties in favor of Trace, kept her from answering him with words.

She rubbed her ass against him, the clench and release of her channel pulsing in tune with her heartbeat. The ridge of his cock poked her back and when he flattened his palm against her stomach and untied the sash on her robe, her breath caught in her throat. The material parted.

Trace drew the robe from her shoulders. It slid to the ground in a swish of fabric. Leaning against him, Tyranna shuddered, the contrast between the hard planes of his chest with its whorls of springy hair and the soft silk of his trousers intoxicating her. The fabric chilled her skin, though beneath it his cock pounded hot and hard. Heat radiated from his body and as he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her even tighter against him, her womb tightened.

“Turn around. I want to worship my goddess.” He turned her in his arms.

Tyranna shivered at his words. She wound her arms around his shoulders, flattening her breasts against his chest and rubbing against him like a cat in heat. “All acts of love and pleasure are her rituals,” she whispered before lowering her lips to his chest and kissing him.

He tasted like sunlight. She licked his skin, rained kisses over his clavicle, between his pectorals and over the flat muscles of his chest. She closed her eyes and inhaled his scent, warm and rich like temple incense. A scrape of her teeth had his breath hissing between his clenched jaws, his fingers tangled in her hair. She tongued his nipples and wondered how she ever thought she could resist him.

His presence pulled her into a maelstrom of desire. Needs long buried flared to life. Her pussy creamed, her nipples hard buds against his chest. Her breath came in tiny pants. With her eyes closed, she licked and nibbled his skin. His hands moved down to cup her ass, hauling her against him, and the dichotomy of male and female, hard and soft, reminded her of the dual nature of the universe.

Trace curled his fingers into her hair once more. Tilting her face upward, he slanted his mouth across hers. His tongue stroked the seam of her lips, demanding she open to him. He thrust his tongue inside and she welcomed the invasion as surely as she would welcome his cock into her body. She stroked his tongue with hers, coaxing it deeper.

Tyranna moaned against his mouth. His fingers slipped deeply between the globes of her buttocks, finding her slit and stroking her wet, swollen lips. Back and forth, the

lazy journey of his digit had her writhing in his arms. She sucked on his tongue, her fingers curling into his scalp. Lifting her thigh, she wrapped it around his hips.

He pulled his lips from hers and dragged a shaky breath into his lungs. "We have all day," he whispered.

The thought of fucking Trace all day had her knees weak. His hands slid to her hips, holding her upright as he trailed kisses to her breasts. Wrapping his lips around one turgid nipple, he pulled the tight bud into his mouth and sucked.

Pleasure radiated from the tips of her breasts down to her pussy and back again. Head tilted back, Tyranna moaned. Her channel clenched, the need for his tongue, his cock, anything inside her, fucking her, making her voice rise and fall in a needy chant. His hands on her hips warmed her skin. The breeze through the open windows cooled the sweat drying on her back. Rough stubble on his cheeks abraded her tender skin and she welcomed the roughness.

Eyes closed, she rode the waves of sensation coursing through her veins. The pull at her nipple tugged on her clit once again. His hands held her steady, the strength evident in his digits, reminding her of the solid elements. The goddess offered nurturing fertility for the land, and the drive of Trace's cock would grant those things. She moaned.

How had she ever thought he would pull her from her duties? Right now, as he turned his attention to her other nipple and tugged it deep into his mouth, he invoked the god's worshipful attention so well she thought about nothing except the spirituality inherent in this sexual act.

Her fingers clenched and released on the back of his head. The silky strands of his hair caressed her palm and made her wonder what they'd feel like between her thighs as he tongued her into orgasm. Male. Female. In this room, right now, they personified the divinity she worshipped. Her mouth went dry as her body coiled in on itself. Her lower spine tingled, her hips thrusting against his silk-covered cock, seeking a relief that he wouldn't give her.

Trace pulled his lips away slowly. He looked at her, desire burning in his deep blue eyes. She drowned in them, vertigo making her clamp her hand onto his shoulder to keep upright. He nuzzled the valley between her breasts and bent as he moved lower, over her stomach. Curling his hand around her thigh, he lowered her foot to the ground and spread her legs.

Watching him go down on her had to be the most erotic thing she'd ever seen. His hair dark against her pale skin, the feel of his lips and tongue along her flesh. She forced her eyes to remain open as he paused above the thatch of cinnamon-colored hair between her thighs. His warm breath teased her wet slit.

Trace hovered. His breath heated her already burning skin, his fingers gripping her hips as if he expected her to bolt.

"What are you waiting for?" she asked. His hesitation strung her tight. She tilted her hips toward him, offering him the ripe bud of her clit and her dripping channel. If he didn't place his lips on her pussy and lick her, she would grab the back of his head and make him.

Trace smiled. "You, honey. Just waiting for you." With those words, he lowered his mouth to her and licked along her labia.

His words melted her like hot fudge over ice cream. She sucked in a breath, her heart hammering in her chest as he swirled his tongue around her clit.

"Trace," she moaned. She spread her legs wider in a blatant invitation for him to go deeper.

He tongued her clit with gentle flicks. Unable to keep her eyes open any longer, Tyranna let her lashes flutter closed and gave herself over to the pleasure. He slid his fingers through her juices, coating them, before reaching around to the puckered bud of her anus. Pressing against the tight ring of muscles, he ignited something deep inside her. His finger slid inside her to the first knuckle. She gasped as a spasm of pleasure rocked her and when he pulled her clit into his mouth and sucked, she screamed with pleasure.

He thrust his tongue into her channel, and Tyranna lost it. Whimpering, she came. Spasms of pleasure roared through her body. Her channel clenched, her release thundering through her veins. She dug her fingers into his shoulders, the delicious swirl of his lips and tongue in her pussy not letting her catch her breath, but instead hurtling her toward another release.

"Goddess, goddess," she moaned, her breathy voice barely recognizable as her own. Beneath her feet the bamboo mat on which she'd done her exercises beckoned her to lower her body and take Trace inside her.

He thrust a second finger inside her anus, stretching her and preparing her. Did he really mean to take her there? Just thinking about his big cock breaching her sent another shudder of pleasure through her.

Trace released her, his fingers sliding from her body. Lifting his head, he looked up over her glistening skin before lowering her to the mat. He bent her knees, legs stretching out on either side of him, and crawled over her body until he braced his weight on his arms, his cock nestled against her wet curls.

Oh goddess, he really was going to do it. He really was going to fuck her. She clenched her hands on his biceps, his solid body above her making her yearn to have him deep inside. She wrapped her legs around his waist and his shaft plowed through her slit, bumping against her clit and wringing another cry from her throat.

"Easy," he crooned. He kissed her, giving her a taste of her honeyed juices on his lips.

She traced her fingers over his biceps and down between their bodies.

Trace grabbed her wrist and pressed her hand to the mat above her head. A quick shift of his hips had his cock sliding into her entrance. "This what you want?"

"Yes!" She arched her hips.

His broad head stretched her channel. A long, slow thrust filled her, the head of his cock coming to rest high and deep inside her. She keened her pleasure. Trace's husky moan surrounded her. His scent wrapped around her, his warmth enveloping her in a

cocoon. Though he didn't move, his penetrating cock held her pinned to the floor, and she welcomed it like the newly turned ground to the plow.

Her channel clenched around him in an attempt to hold him there forever. Trace looked down at her. For long moments he drank in the sight of her before kissing her, his lips plundering, a hot and hungry kiss that bespoke of ravishment. His tongue thrust into her mouth...and then he began to move.

He pulled his cock from her in a long, slow stroke that left his head just breaching her opening. She rose toward him, needing his thick shaft filling her. Tiny whimpers emerged from her throat. She clung to him, her nails leaving tiny furrows in his back.

With a flex of his hips, Trace buried his cock balls-deep inside her. She screamed with pleasure. Never before had any of her couplings been like this. Something shifted inside, a spark of light as pure and bright as the love she received from the goddesses. Over and over again he pumped into her.

She matched his thrusts. Each stroke drove her higher until her body clenched around him and her world shattered. She screamed her pleasure, her thighs tightening on his hips. Her body convulsed, wave after wave of desire rolling through her, a release so hard and profound she saw stars behind her closed eyelids. The top of her head burned with energy.

Her breath caught in her throat. Her channel contracted around him, his masculine grunts and moans telling her how good it felt to be buried deep inside her. He crashed his lips to hers, a hard, bruising kiss of possession, and Tyranna took everything he had. Tongue and teeth, cock and body. He thrust through her orgasm, his strokes growing more frantic.

Never before had she come so many times. Her heart pounded in her chest. Her breath billowed out of her lungs and yet she needed to go harder, further, until he shattered her into a million pieces. And then Trace stiffened above her.

With a roar he came, his cock jerking deep inside her. The rush of his warm seed triggered another round of spasms deep inside her. Clinging to him, she let the warm waves of pleasure course through her body.

Trace slumped against her.

Though she supposed she should have been crushed by his weight, she wasn't. Instead it warmed her, the feel of his sweat-slicked skin against hers, his cock twitching deep inside her. Licking her lips, she pressed a kiss to his chest. Beneath her mouth, his heart pounded.

The queen had it all wrong. It wasn't just a matter of *wanting* to fuck Trace. She *needed* to fuck him. Now that she had him inside her body, she knew their marriage had to be real. Her breath caught in her throat.

Trace levered himself off her, rolling to his side and pulling her against his body.

Beyond the window bells tolled, calling worshippers to prayers she wouldn't lead. Snuggling next to her husband-to-be, Tyranna tried to shake off the feeling that she'd never lead them again, that once the wedding took place, her calling would be lost to her forever.

Chapter Four

A bevy of maids helped Tyranna dress in the fall of earthy green lace that constituted her wedding gown. With a fitted bodice and her shoulders and arms left bare, the green silk molded to her body before flaring out in layer after layer of frothy green lace. Her strappy sandals were dyed to match, and she held perfectly still as one of the maids artfully applied cosmetics.

Tyranna didn't recognize the woman in the mirror. Small green *uchi* flowers circled her head, and when she closed her eyes she inhaled their sweet aroma. Sitting here, she felt like the goddess, like the earth that she represented. In a traditional Zaldivarian wedding the groom wore yellow, symbolizing the sun. She doubted Trace would be clothed as one of her countrymen might.

And that, in her opinion, symbolized the many things wrong with this wedding. Fucking the groom earlier this morning meant she'd consummated a partnership that hadn't been made official, starting off her wedding morning on the wrong foot. Couples had sex all the time without the bonds of matrimony. Except, as the High Priestess, she should be above her baser urges. Or at least *she* thought so. But oh, those urges were too good to resist, too strong.

She frowned, earning a disapproving cluck from one of the maids. Schooling her expression into a smile that didn't reach her eyes, she let the woman finish applying the cosmetics. The High Priestess married no one. She stood alone, a symbol of the goddess. She'd performed countless ceremonies, joined more couples than she could count, but never had she anticipated being on the other side of the altar. The thought made her mouth dry.

"You'll be fine, my lady," one of the maids, an older woman, said. She bowed deeply. "You're a beautiful bride."

"Thank you," Tyranna replied.

"We do what we must for peace. Your sacrifice will save many lives," she said. A discreet gesture sent the other maids scurrying from the room.

Tyranna nodded. "Yes, we do what we must." She closed her eyes and inhaled deeply. Never mind that she did what her queen ordered her to do. Never mind that, were she not a High Priestess, Trace would be exactly the kind of man for whom she'd yearn. She exhaled. "Thank you. I'm ready."

Outside the chamber, festive decorations covered the gardens. Dignitaries sat, royals and city officials and Concordance officers sent to oversee that the union actually took place. From her position in a small garden house off to one side, she observed the milling crowd.

And in front of them all stood Trace. He wore his military finest, a dark blue suit strewn with medals and accommodations. Pips decorated his collar. He scanned the crowd, his gaze lingering on the small garden house.

Tyranna ducked away from the window, not wanting him to see her. Not yet. Give herself a few more moments of peace before she became Mrs. Trace Drakkal, wife of a Concordance Major. She shivered and glanced at the door.

The maid opened the door and gestured to the garden. "It's time, my lady. Goddess be with you."

"Blessings. Thank you for your help." She rose to her feet, surprised to find her steps sure in the high-heeled sandals she wore. Placing one foot in front of the other, she emerged into the sunlit garden.

A hush settled over the crowd. From behind a screen of flowers a band picked up the queen's march.

The matriarch, dressed in a glimmering gold gown, swept down the aisle. A smile crossed her face. She glanced neither left nor right, instead focusing on the podium behind which she'd stand. She moved into position, her honor guards stopping along the aisle, swords raised. Beneath the canopy of steel, Tyranna would walk to her groom.

Her knees shook. Her heart fluttered. Sweat beaded on her palms and she gripped her bouquet of lilies tighter. Overhead, hovercraft traveled around the no-fly zone above the palace grounds. The queen's march faded. A moment of silence filled the air, followed by the rustling of clothes as everyone turned to watch her walk down the aisle.

Tyranna focused her attention on Trace. Oh goddess, she really was going through with it. Behind the podium, her queen stood ready to give the blessing to the union. She resisted the urge to glance over her own shoulder. Her fingers clenched the flowers so hard that her knuckles turned white.

The first notes of "Caer De Luna Sol" filled the air. The ancient folk song spoke of summer days and the first blush of love. The haunting flute notes that began the song drifted into the air, and then the drum began, a steady, pulsing beat evoking images of dancers writhing in the firelight.

Tyranna's first step carried her even with the last row of chairs, and from there, she let the force of Trace's gaze pull her forward.

For my people. For my people. She repeated the mantra as she passed officials and government officers, many of whom she'd never seen inside the temple. She worked the goddess's will on the planet's surface. If the goddess didn't wish her to marry, then another would have been chosen.

Her breath caught in her throat. Closer now, she saw the heat flare in Trace's gaze as he took in her naked shoulders and the plunging neckline of the gown. Tyranna held her chin high. The strains of the song drifted into silence as she took her place beside him.

Trace reached across the space separating them and tangled his fingers with hers. He squeezed gently and smiled at her.

Instantly she relaxed. Their coupling this morning had reinforced how good they'd be together, and as she looked at her monarch, she saw the queen smiling at her.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we are here to bind not only these two people in holy matrimony, but to bring peace to Zaldivar and her people. I sanction this union by the power I hold as monarch. By joining Concordance Major Trace Drakkal and High Priestess Tyranna Eairstar, I join more than two people. I join our planet to the Concordance.”

Complete silence met the queen’s words.

Tyranna’s stomach fell. She doubted the marriage would make her people cheer. The deadly silence boded ill. The power of the goddess rolled through her. Embracing it, she turned toward Trace.

“As the High Priestess of Zaldivar, I offer myself as your wife. I willingly seek the bonds of holy matrimony to ensure peace between my people and yours. As the goddess’s holy vessel, I bind myself to you, and place myself into your care and keeping.” The ritual words rolled from her tongue. Though she’d heard them said countless times before, with her title, in this place, their importance magnified.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw the crowd rustle. Murmurs surrounded her. The queen smiled and nodded.

Trace’s unwavering gaze focused on her. “On my world, when a man and a woman join in matrimony, few words are spoken. The couple makes their intentions clear and official blessing is given. In the Concordance, words and tokens are exchanged. Regardless of the culture, marriage vows are sacred. As I am joining with the High Priestess, they become more sacred. I am honored, High Priestess, that you consent to be my wife, and I offer myself as your husband. I willingly seek the bonds of holy matrimony to ensure peace between our people. As an officer of the Concordance, and as a man, I bond myself to you and place myself in your care and keeping. I accept all you have to give, and offer the same in return.” Trace lifted her hand to his mouth and brushed his lips across it.

His words deviated from the ritual script, but in them Tyranna heard sincerity. From the touch of his lips against her skin, heat flared. "Thank you," she whispered to him, and saw the queen nod in response.

"By the powers vested in me as the Queen of Zaldivar, I pronounce you man and wife." She turned and, with a wink, smiled at Tyranna. "You may kiss the groom."

Tyranna sucked in a breath. The teasing glint in her queen's eyes taunted her. Rising onto her tiptoes, she kissed Trace.

He met her halfway, his lips slanting across hers. He reached up and cupped the back of her head, holding her still. His tongue stroked the seam of her mouth and, when she opened with a sigh, slipped inside.

All her intentions to make the kiss chaste, a quick meeting of lips, fled. Heat spiraled through her body. She clutched at his biceps, the stems of her bouquet crushed in her hands. Opening to him, she arched against him, a tiny, needy moan emerging from her lips.

Applause erupted in the crowd. Cheers and yells managed to penetrate the haze of desire Trace's kiss wrapped around her. She pulled her lips from his and drew a shaky breath.

"Traitor!" The scream rose from the back of the crowd.

Gasps filled the air and Tyranna whirled to stare down the aisle at the crowd of four men there. Each held energy weapons trained on the crowd. They wore civilian clothes.

Her queen! She looked behind her to see the monarch standing surrounded by palace guards who looked ready to spirit her away once fighting erupted. "See to the queen," Tyranna ordered.

Trace stepped forward.

Tyranna curled her fingers around his arm. "Trace, no!"

He looked at her and moved away. "I must."

Tyranna glanced at her monarch and her husband then stepped forward. "In the name of the goddess, put down your weapons! Do not fight this sacred day." She held up her hand.

"Concordance whore!" shouted one of the men. "You don't love him."

The truth in his words hit Tyranna like a falling brick. She married a man she didn't love.

Trace snarled. He stepped forward and pulled Tyranna behind him. "Do not insult my wife!" he roared. "You heard her. Put down your weapons."

"Make us, Concordance scum." The man raised his weapon and fired into the crowd.

Screams drowned out the crackle of energy blasts.

Trace pushed Tyranna toward the queen. "Take her," he ordered. He reached for his wrist, an automatic movement, and scowled when he realized whatever he'd gone for wasn't there. "We need backup," he yelled to the generals nearest the front row.

Tyranna grabbed his sleeve. "Keep my people safe," she said.

A city minister, she didn't know his name, lay on the ground near the back rows, an angry burn mark on his shirt. His fingers rested near the burn, as if he didn't quite believe he'd been shot. His unfocused gaze stared at the sky. Spittle dripped from his slack jaw.

How many more would die? Tyranna resisted the urging of the queen's guards, though several of them already herded the monarch into the castle and to safety. More energy blasts filled the air, all of them from the insurgents. In a gesture of peace, none of the attending Concordance officers wore weapons.

Blue bursts of energy flew close by Trace.

Tyranna stumbled backward as the queen's guards pulled her toward the palace after the monarch. She watched as Trace faltered. The sight of a burn mark on his sleeve forced her heart into her throat. He rushed forward, grabbing one of the insurgents and

knocking him to the stone walkway. The crowd closed around them and then Tyranna hurried through the door leading to the palace.

The queen stood pale but calm in the hallway. "You're unharmed," she said. Fury simmered below the surface. "Those bastards dare to destroy our peace!" She turned to her nearest guard. "Send for the head of the palace guards and the head of the city guards. I want to know how these men got into my capital and into this garden!"

Tyranna leaned against the wall, suddenly unsure if her legs would support her. While her queen gave orders and raged at the insurgents, Tyranna stared toward the door, worried about her new husband. "Goddess keep him safe," she whispered, and knew that while she may not love him right now, it would follow – and follow soon.

* * * * *

His arm burned like Vandebia's volcanoes as an energy burst singed the sleeve of his uniform. He cursed as the force of the blow sent him stumbling. Around him, the crush of the crowd propelled him forward and onto his feet.

As soon as Trace knew the queen's guards had taken Tyranna into the castle, he focused on keeping everyone else safe. Damn the insurgents. Deep inside him, the little boy who watched his home planet fall under the Concordance's dominion ached for the Zaldivarians who witnessed the attack. The military officer in him detested the guerilla warfare tactics the insurgents employed. Firing on an unarmed wedding, even one as high profile as this, smacked of cowardice.

Trace snagged a wooden pole twined with flowers. He cleared the area around him, using the long weapon like a quarterstaff. A quick thump sent one of the insurgents dropping to the ground. He spun, inserting himself between the citizens and the fighters.

"Traitor," the leader hissed.

Trace stiffened. He recognized the man as a lower-ranking Concordance officer gone AWOL who had sided with the anti-technology groups. He'd been an anomaly

and frankly, before he had gone AWOL, Trace wondered how he'd lasted so long in the Concordance military. Stripped of his uniform and rank, the man, with his dirty brown hair and torn clothing, looked like any number of malcontents Trace had seen in his line of work. Not wasting time on words, he swung the staff.

It connected with the man's wrist. His fingers opened, the gun clattering to the paving stones. Hissing in pain, he launched himself at Trace.

Trace gave him no chance to attack. With quick jabs and raps of the stick he drove the man back and to the ground. "Call off your men," he growled. "I bring peace."

"The hell you do," the man croaked. With Trace's staff at his throat he couldn't spring upright.

In his peripheral vision Trace saw the other wedding guests scurrying for cover, though too many lay on the ground, wounded or worse. A quick boot to the chin knocked the man unconscious, and with two of the insurgents down, he sprang for the man's gun and came up firing.

One insurgent fell. The remaining man whirled to face him, raising his weapon and firing several quick bursts. Balls of light flew past Trace, several missing him by mere inches. He lacked the time to worry about the civilians as he aimed and fired.

Bursts of light caught the insurgent in the chest and sent him flying backward. "You bastard!" he snarled and fired his gun blindly from his position on the ground before gasping his last breath.

Behind Trace, someone screamed.

A bolt of energy caught Trace in the thigh. He grunted, twisting with the blow and going to the ground. Pain seared his leg and the scent of burning flesh filled the air. Trace flattened his palm on the seat of a chair and levered himself into a standing position. Shoving the pain from his mind, he checked for more insurgents. The fallen Concordance traitor was nowhere in sight. Trace saw no other hostiles.

Four men had created chaos. Hesitant to call the all clear, Trace hobbled forward to the bodies of the men. Palace guards herded lingering civilians toward the garden gates while a single city guard stood in the back, eyes wide.

"Sir...you all right, sir?" he stammered.

Trace nodded, conscious of the need to present a strong front to the younger, less-experienced guard. "I'm fine. Make sure no one takes these bodies until my men have had a chance to examine them." His vision darkened then lightened again.

"Yes, sir. Pardon me, sir, but you don't look well."

"I'll be fine. Thank you." Trace opened his mouth to say something more but the pounding of booted feet on the ground silenced him.

Concordance soldiers.

Finally the backup he'd ordered had arrived, too late for the civilians or for his battered body. With all the officials herded to safety, Trace realized he outranked everyone. He watched two dozen men—all from a highly specialized SWAT unit—pour into the garden. The leader looked around, dispatched two men to each of the fallen insurgents and strode up to Trace. "Sir, Delta Squadron leader Taggart, sir." He saluted sharply.

Trace returned the salute. "At ease. Situation contained. What the hell took you so long?"

"Fighting in another village, sir."

Trace swore. "Why the hell didn't you come in by air? And don't tell me it's because of the no-fly zone."

"Not authorized, sir."

Trace exhaled. His damn leg throbbed. The ground threatened to tilt up and meet him. His arm ached and he dimly remembered getting hit at the start of the skirmish. Taking his frustrations out on this soldier wouldn't accomplish anything. "I want our

staff to examine those bodies. One of the attackers looked like one of ours, but he's disappeared. And then I want to meet with the generals, ASAP!"

The man saluted. "Yes, sir." He turned and hurried back to his men.

Trace closed his fingers around the back of a chair in a futile attempt to steady himself. Inhaling, he scanned the area behind the podium in an attempt to see in which direction the queen's guards might have gone. He half-expected Tyranna to race into the garden now that the danger appeared gone. His lips quirked into a smile in spite of his pain. If he'd let her, she would have been out here, guns blazing. To her, it wouldn't matter that she knew next to nothing about weapons. She protected her own.

He stumbled forward and caught himself on yet another chair. He waited for one of the guards to pass then stood, squared his shoulders and walked into the castle. Shot on his wedding day. Of all the stupid things to have happened. These bastards cost him more than a chance to have Tyranna naked and in a real bed—they threatened the peace. He'd be damned before he showed weakness.

The castle rose before him, a large and imposing building. His heart hammered in his chest, the adrenaline from the battle ebbing, making it more difficult for him to ignore the pain. He swept beneath the flowered arch, hating the way the hedges and raised beds provided ample hiding places for insurgents. The attack had been badly managed and without any real aim. He frowned and hoped this didn't indicate the insurgents had turned to random, blind violence.

Just inside the door he leaned on the wall, clammy sweat covering his skin. The energy bursts instantly cauterized the wounds, keeping him from worrying about blood loss, but pain and shock were beginning to set in, making him scramble to stay upright. The white flashes behind his eyes intensified and he slid down the wall.

"Hell," he cursed as his butt hit the floor. Trace blinked, his lids suddenly too heavy to open. The need to ensure his wife's and the queen's safety had him struggling to stand. Then the room tilted. He fell, his head smacking against the stone floor. Rolling to his side, he swallowed hard against a wave of nausea. Being hit with an energy bolt

had never hurt like this before. He groaned and reached for the wall to pull himself back upright.

“Stay where you are. We’ve got you,” a male voice said.

“Trace!” Tyranna called. Footsteps echoed in the hall, intensifying the pain behind his eyes.

“Tyranna,” he breathed. Strong hands closed on his shoulders then lifted him onto a gurney. The unknown people rolled him down the hall. A restorative drip and some energy pills and he’d be back on his feet in no time. Countless battles, more injuries than he cared to admit and it’d worked before. On this planet, stuck with one foot in the dark ages as it was, he wondered if they had such things. If they didn’t, the Concordance did.

A cold, small hand closed around his own. He wrenched open his eyes to see the blurry outline of Tyranna running beside his cart. “The generals have brought in their medics,” she said. “They tell me you’ll be in good hands.”

“I will be.” He struggled to form the words. He hoped he’d actually spoken them aloud.

Someone pulled a protesting Tyranna away from his side.

A medical bay door opened with a swish and the medics wheeled him inside. He’d be okay. They had a marriage to consummate and a peace to create.

Chapter Five

Being pulled away from Trace as the Concordance medical staff put him into the restorative bay had to be the hardest thing Tyranna had ever gone through. The silver doors closed, concealing him from view. She swallowed hard. Sending up what had to be the thousandth prayer to the goddess, she beseeched the deity for Trace's health and wellbeing. A part of her wanted to beg solely on behalf of the cause of peace, but the woman in her made her wishes known. After meeting Trace, having sex with him, she wanted a chance to get to know her husband better. To fall in love with him.

Tyranna shook her head. Someone, she belatedly realized it was the queen, pulled her down the hall and toward a waiting room. "We have to let the Concordance treat him."

"Why? Because he's not one of us?" She chafed at not having her own physician look at him. Though he'd probably never seen a battle wound, surely he could do better than those impersonal military medical officers. "He's my husband."

"I know, and I thank the goddess that the marriage ceremony was completed before those terrorists ruined everything." The queen clasped both of Tyranna's hands in her own. "But you're married now, and that's all that counts."

"Not if my husband dies!" Tyranna's voice grew shrill. She blinked back the sting of tears. Emotion lodged a ball in her throat and she swallowed hard, pulling her hands from the queen's and rising to her feet. She paced, the click of her heels harsh against the stone floor. She fisted her hands in the frothy lace of her skirt.

"He won't die," the queen said.

Tyranna whirled to face her. "How do you know? He was shot!" She pressed her fist to her lips. A sob broke free, first one, then another. She sank to a bench, her hands clenched together so hard the knuckles turned white. All her fear, all her worry

coalesced into this moment. When Trace shoved her toward the queen's guards, she'd feared for his safety. She saw him stumble. Saw the angry burn mark on his arm. On the gurney, he had a wound on his thigh and blood on his head. Wounds *her* people put on his body.

Strong arms wrapped around her, holding her tight. Tyranna cared little if they belonged to the queen or one of her priestesses or someone off the street. She leaned into the strength, suddenly, painfully aware of the conundrum in which her marriage put her. She sucked in a ragged breath, her sobs degenerating into hiccups. She looked toward the ceiling. When the goddess handed out callings, she apparently had saved the most difficult one for her.

"Are you going to be all right?" the queen asked. "I'm so sorry this happened. I wanted your wedding day to be joyful. From the kiss Trace gave you, I think he had the same plans."

Tyranna nodded with a sniff. A heated flush covered her cheeks as she remembered her carnal coupling with him this morning. Her body tightened and she prayed that she'd have a chance to repeat the experience.

The queen looked at her quizzically. "Did you decide to sample his considerable charms before you married him?"

Tyranna nodded. "This morning," she whispered. "I thought my meditations might calm my mind and provide focus. He saw me." She swallowed hard, struggling to contain the heat pooling low in her womb from the memory of his touch. Her nipples tightened. Fear mingled with desire. Images of his body, of his sensual attentions mingled with those of him falling, of the wounds on his arm and leg. She bit her lip.

"I'm sorry." The queen rested her hand on Tyranna's arm. "That just makes it harder for you, doesn't it?"

She nodded.

"I'll wait with you. The rebels' actions jeopardize the fragile peace we've created. I may not like the Concordance. I may not want them interfering with my rulership of the

planet, but bringing ourselves into their planetary alliance will help Zaldivar in the long run. We can't fight such a big military machine. Better to give in gracefully than be stubborn and cost lives." The queen released Tyranna and folded her hands in her lap.

Tyranna clenched her hands to still their trembling as a Concordance medic stepped into the room. He looked young, too young to be in charge of her husband's care. Wearing a white uniform, his dark hair clipped close to his skull, he looked like any number of Concordance soldiers and officers that she'd seen on the city streets and in the garden. "High Priestess?"

Tyranna bolted to her feet. "Is Trace all right? Can I see him now?" Uncertain whether the grim look on the medic's face was his normal countenance, she didn't bother to restrain her worry.

"He's unconscious and probably will be for some time. Follow me, please." The medic turned with military precision and strode away.

Tyranna started to follow before looking back at her queen.

"Go," her friend said. "I have to meet with my ministers and determine an appropriate course of action. I have four dead terrorists and unknown others hiding out. They must know that we won't be cowed by their actions."

Tyranna paused. "Wait please," she told the medic, before turning to the queen. "The goddess doesn't ask for retribution or violence, but please make it known to those who seek to undermine our efforts that if my husband, or anyone else, is harmed by them, that which can nurture also can destroy. I'll see to it." With those chilling words, she turned and followed the medic.

Hours later, still in her wedding gown, Tyranna sat by Trace's bedside. He'd been moved into their shared rooms, and the medic assured her that he would awaken. Trace had been given hefty doses of medication, he explained, and sometimes the body took a while to assimilate it. Afraid to leave lest he need her and find her gone, she sat,

sometimes cradling his hand in hers, other times simply staring out the window. Now, as the sun dipped toward the horizon, she prayed.

She closed her eyes, a familiar calm settling through her. Trace's fate, though supposedly sealed by those Concordance medics, lay in the goddess's hands. Dropping to her knees and clasping her hands, she rested her elbows on the bed, bent her head and beseeched the goddess for her husband's life.

Uncertain tears ran unchecked down her cheeks. She'd fought against the marriage. Only the power wielded by the queen and the prospect of peace compelled her to it. She took her duties seriously, and now with her husband threatened, the peace their marriage was to create would be threatened too. She entreated the goddess to look favorably upon Trace.

Breathing deeply, she sank into the trace-like state in which she preferred to pray. The outside world receded. Even Trace, lying on the bed, faded away until there was only her. Tyranna floated in darkness, surrounded by stars that were pinpoints of light flashing against an inky background. The universe swirled, each piece in its own time, each item on its own course. The goddess directed all of it. Great and powerful, the deity kept everything moving as it should.

My child, do not fear. The voice came from nowhere and everywhere at the same time. Things set in motion will not falter. And the path on which you walk is as certain as the cosmos itself. Go with the knowledge that you are my High Priestess. I will not abandon you.

The starry cosmos faded away until the hard floor pressed into her knees. A warm hand cupped her cheek, a gentle touch brushing away her tears.

"Tyranna?" Trace asked. "Don't cry, honey. I'm all right."

She sucked in a breath and looked up. Turned toward her, bracing his weight on his elbow, Trace smiled at her. Color had returned to his skin. A twinkle in his eyes made him look like the healthy man she'd married. "Trace?" She tangled her fingers with his. "You're all right!"

"Of course I am." He brought her hand to his mouth and kissed her fingers, one by one. Turning her hand over, he pressed his lips to her palm. "I'm sorry I worried you."

Tyranna cupped his cheek, running her fingertips over the still-smooth surface. "You were shot. How could I not be worried? Promise me you'll never do that again!"

"What, get shot? I don't intend to." He chuckled then quickly grew serious. "Or do you mean send you to safety while I go into harm's way?"

"That too." She brushed her finger across his lips. "I don't want you in danger."

Trace's tongue slipped from between his lips to lick her finger. He sucked on it, the gentle tugs going straight to her pussy. Cream gathered between her thighs as her breathing grew rapid. After he'd nearly died, having him here in the bed now, and so obviously wanting her, made her burn to have his naked skin beneath her fingers and his thick cock filling her. He pulled his lips from her finger.

"I'm a military officer. I'll always be in danger. But everything I do will be to protect you and ensure I come back to you."

His words stole her breath.

"You're my wife. Together, we will forge the peace that will bring your planet and the Concordance together." He leaned forward and speared his fingers into the flowers still in her hair. Petals scattered. Cupping the back of her head, he pulled her to him for a long, hard kiss. Trace's tongue swept the seam of her mouth, plunging inside with a possessive thrust.

Tyranna clung to him, sliding her hand over his uniform shirt. Her fingers caressed his metals and pips, the edges of the metals pressing into her palm as she searched for, and found, the concealed snaps. One by one she unfastened them, until she splayed her hand on his bare chest.

His lips devoured her. His hand on the back of her head held her in place as the other reached around to the back of her dress, found the tab and pulled down the zipper. Her moan of pleasure drowned out the zipper's rasp. Her dress gaped open and Trace shoved the bodice to her waist.

His hand curled over her breast, squeezing and kneading her flesh. The tight bud of her nipple pressed into his palm, and if he didn't caress it right now she feared she'd go up in a burst of flame. That one man could make her so hot so quickly boggled the mind, and with his tongue thrusting rhythmically into her mouth and his fingers on her soft flesh, she lacked the mental facilities to contemplate the situation. Instead, she felt.

And oh, did she feel. Her veins turned into lanes ferrying pleasure throughout her entire body. Her muscles relaxed, her body swaying against his. He wrapped his arm around her waist and hauled her into the bed. Sprawled on top of him, she wriggled against the hard cock pressing against her through his uniform trousers. A quick flip pulled her beneath him and he settled himself between her thighs.

Dear goddess, he scrambled her senses and stole her breath. She moaned as the need for air parted them, then shoved at his shirt until he removed his arms long enough to pull it off and toss it on the floor beside them. She whimpered at the loss of contact. The thick skirt of her dress hampered her in wrapping her legs around his slim hips.

"Trace, please," she pleaded.

With his hips he pinned her to the bed. Desire stormed like a tempest in his dark blue eyes. Lowering his head, he licked her nipple, one long swipe of his tongue that sent shudders racing down her spine. She curled her fingers into the hair at the back of his head and held him there.

"Oh goddess, yes," she moaned. Her legs moved restlessly. Her breath caught in her throat. Her body strained, yearning toward something only Trace could provide. In this moment, with his lips on her flesh and his fingers skimming her side, she wanted him. The goddess had given her permission, told her she was on the right track, and with his lips pulling on her breasts she knew she wanted nothing more than to be in this moment, right now.

Warm heat flooded her pussy. Her channel clenched and released, seeking something that wasn't there. Tilting her hips toward him, she delighted in the friction of

their bodies rubbing together. Too many layers of her skirt separated them and she half-expected Trace to simply tear the fabric from her body. The thought sent a fresh flood of moisture into her sopping wet cunt.

Trace pressed open-mouthed kisses against her collarbone. He laved the skin between her breasts, inch by seductive inch wriggling her out of her dress.

The door opened. A startled squeak announced the presence of the maid. "I'm sorry," she said as she started to back out.

Trace stopped. He turned, looking over the rise of her bare breast. "Wait!" he ordered.

The maid halted.

Tyranna watched as the servant glanced from her to Trace then back again. Heat burned in her cheeks, though they were husband and wife and today was their wedding day. The bud of her nipple ached, so hard she figured the maid could see it from where she stood at the entrance to the room.

"Who sent you?" Trace asked. His eyes narrowed.

"The queen." The maid curtsied deeply. "She wanted to be sure you were all right, as did one of the Concordance officers. Sorry to interrupt you." She dipped her head again.

"Tell them that I'm all right and the peace will stand," Trace ordered. "And tell the queen the next person to interrupt my wedding night will not be treated so kindly." Trace softened his words with a wink. His stern, masculine voice made Tyranna warm and liquid inside. His masterful order, the way he expected it to be obeyed, made everything inside her sit up and take notice. And oh her body liked what she heard.

"Yes, sir," the maid said, bobbing her head again. Moments later the door closed behind them.

Trace turned his attention back to her. "I'm sorry for the interruption," he said, brushing his lips across her neck.

"It's all right. I think it's sweet the queen wanted to make sure you're all right," Tyranna replied. She tried to control her ragged breathing.

"This may have been a marriage neither one of us wanted, but I intend to make it work—and make the peace it brokered work. I won't speak of love. Not yet. But I respect your position and I hope, in time, you'll respect mine."

"Oh Trace." Unable to say anything more, she lifted her lips to his and offered her body in supplication.

Trace tasted her lips before raining hot, open-mouthed kisses against her skin. Licking and tasting, he followed a path between her breasts, down over her stomach to just above her mons. He licked and nibbled, using his tongue to swirl patterns on her skin. Reaching down, Tyranna curled her fingers into his hair. So close his warm breath teased her pussy lips, yet so far away, he tormented her. She knew begging would do no good, not when he kissed a leisurely path from hipbone to hipbone.

Hot mouth met oversensitive skin in a blaze of need. Behind her knee he found an erogenous spot. Focusing his attention on it, his tiny bites and long, lingering kisses curled her toes. Oh yes, joining should feel like this, all light and heat and need and desire. Like the stars orbiting inside her, ready to go supernova. The goddess's grace and majesty never felt this good. Deep down, it scared her.

She stiffened as he kissed her inner thigh on his journey back to her pussy. Licking his tongue along her swollen labial lips, he wrung moans from her throat. She clenched her fingers against his head, her other hand splayed on the coverlet. Juices flowed from her pussy. As currents connected her cunt to her nipples and radiated throughout her body, she lifted her hips, arching her back, anything to get closer to his seeking tongue.

And then he found her clit. Quick lashes of his tongue against the sensitive nub left her breathless and panting. Their marriage freed something. Not the hunger she felt this morning. No, something far different, far deeper. He seemed to revere her body, savor it with every breath he took. He flattened his tongue against her nub and she cried out at the pleasure racing through her body.

"Please. Oh goddess, please." Her cunt throbbed. The need to have something, anything inside her had her driving her hips. His hands cupped her ass, stilling her, and she whimpered and wriggled in frustration.

"Shhh," he soothed. "Just let go."

Lying there, his lips against her pussy, his tongue on her clit, his hands on her ass, she felt as if she were spiraling out of control. For someone so used to letting the goddess work her will through her, she hesitated at releasing the tight hold she had on her body's responses. But oh, the way her channel tightened, the throbbing in her pussy, the way her nipples ached to be touched...just a little more and she'd come.

He thrust his tongue into her pussy.

Tyranna screamed. Unable to contain herself any longer, she hurled herself off the cliff. She flew. Pleasure buffeted her body. Her orgasm left her breathless and wanting more. From the rippling in her channel to the rise and fall of her breasts, her desire for him had yet to be satisfied.

"Mmm, just like that, honey," Trace murmured against her skin, teasing her with his warm breath. "I'd meant to get a few things especially for tonight," he teased.

"You," she said, startled that she wasn't offended that he'd obviously been planning this night long before he'd met her. "I only need you."

Trace crawled over her body. He kissed her, letting her taste her juices on his lips, his chin. Wrapping his arms around her, he rolled over, letting her be on top. "And now," he said, tangling his fingers in her hair and holding her lips to his, "you have me."

"As the goddess wishes," she whispered. With him beneath her, she took her time exploring his body. This morning, he'd flipped her over and they'd coupled in a quick, heated burst of passion. Now, with the edge taken off, she had all the time in the world to take her pleasure. She supported her weight on her thighs and looked down at his hard, sculpted body. Pure masculine perfection. From his broad shoulders down across his flat pecs and the arrow of hair leading to his navel, each ridge and line of muscle

pronounced him as all man. She reached forward, unable to stop herself from tracing the lines of his eight-pack abs, then down to the hair that disappeared beneath his uniform pants.

She shimmied lower, unfastening and pulling them out of the way, mindful of his wound. At his boots, she stopped to remove them and then finished stripping him until he lay gloriously bare. His lightly furred legs held muscle definition that made her mouth water. His thick shaft rising from a nest of curls drew her attention, sending a burst of heat to her womb. Her mouth watered to think of taking his pole into her mouth and sucking him until he came against the back of her throat. She bit back a moan.

“As the goddess wishes,” he said, echoing her words.

That he called her a goddess sent a flush of heat along her skin. Her duty was to offer worship to the deity, not become one herself. Yet he made her feel like a goddess—all-powerful and sensual. She curled her fingers around his shaft, his quick intake of breath telling her she held power over him. With featherlight touches she stroked him from base to tip, fluttering her fingers over his head and down again. She watched the ecstasy play across his face. A muscle ticked in his jaw.

Tyranna curled her fingers around his base and squeezed gently. Her wet cunt ached to have his cock filling her, and yet she held off on gratifying her own pleasure. Not until she gave Trace his.

She leaned forward. His musky aroma tantalized her nostrils and she inhaled deeply. So much better than the temple incense. Where one aroma promised absolution, the other promised seduction. *As the goddess commands...* She lowered her lips to his cock and pressed a kiss to the head.

Trace gasped.

Tyranna smiled, swirling her tongue over the broad head. His unique flavor burst on her tongue and she slipped her lips around his girth, licking the complete length of his shaft. When her nose nestled against his curls she paused to savor the weight of his

cock in her mouth. Reaching between his legs, she stroked and fondled his balls. His husky groans encouraged her.

Giving supplication never felt this good. Slowly, oh-so slowly his hips strained toward her mouth and she pulled back until the head of his cock rested on her tongue. Then she licked and nibbled her way back down his shaft once more. Over and over again, the stroke and slide of him on lips and tongue made her cream. She wanted him in her cunt. Now.

She swirled her tongue around his head. As a priestess she'd fucked many men in the name of religion. Fertility rites, even on a planet with flying personal craft and technology and computers, albeit cleverly disguised so as not to take over their lives, demanded they be performed. With Trace, her sacred actions held a deeper meaning. In front of the goddess and her queen she'd bound herself to this man and his pleasure. Denying either of them seemed abhorrent to her.

His fingers fisted in her hair as he thrust gently into her mouth. She tightened her fingers around his base, wanting to hold him on edge as long as he'd held her. She caressed his uninjured thigh and tried to keep from touching herself. Tyranna hummed in the back of her throat.

"Fuck yeah," Trace groaned.

Taking his words as encouragement, she deep-throated him. He slipped so far, so deep she nearly felt him in her cunt. Breathing through her nose, she worked him in and out of her throat. Harder. Faster. Exactly the way she wanted him in her pussy.

With a long, lingering lick she released him from her mouth. For long moments she sat there. Saliva glistened on his cock, mixing with the milky drop of precum emerging from the single eye. His chest rose and fell in ragged breaths. With a sultry smile, she crawled over his body and poised over his shaft, curling her fingers around it and gently, oh-so gently, sliding the head inside her.

Tyranna moaned. Her head fell back, the exquisite pleasure of being penetrated driving the breath from her lungs. Trace reached for her and she tangled her fingers

with his, bracing her weight against his hands. Tiny thrusts drove him deeper inside her until their bodies rested flush together.

She closed her eyes and savored the moment. Her channel stuffed, the head of his cock resting against her cervix, she rocked her hips. Pressure built inside her, the need to move and feel him moving inside her. She rose up until his head just pressed against her opening before lowering onto him again.

She mewled. Rapture filled her veins, traveling from her throbbing clit to her nipples then back again, over and over until her skin hummed with the sensation. She lost herself in the movement, the glide of flesh against flesh. The thrust of his cock deep inside her drove her higher and higher. Her muscles convulsed around him.

She forced herself to open her eyes, to stare at the man beneath her, her husband. She had *married* him this morning. His wounds forgotten, the fact she'd almost lost him forgotten, they came together, consummating their marriage with almost religious reverence.

The power of the goddess moved through her. Giving liturgy in front of an audience, feeling the mindfulness sweep through them as she thanked the goddess, none of it had ever felt as good as this. She moaned. Fingers laced with his, she leaned forward into Trace's strong arms. Close, so close, her impending orgasm rode the edge of her awareness, making her channel flutter along the length of his shaft.

They'd come together to create peace. Though desire brewed a tempest inside her, it felt controlled, directed, and clamping down on his cock, she screamed as her release slammed into her. Eyes closed, she focused on the radiating waves of pleasure coming from her pussy. The hard buds of her nipples throbbed. Her breath caught in her throat and she squeezed Trace's hands in a white-knuckled grip.

Nothing had ever felt this good before.

Struggling to catch her breath, she opened her eyes to see Trace watching her. Desire etched onto his face, his jaw tight with the need to hold back.

Something shifted inside her.

That he thought so much of her pleasure instead of his own had her rocking gently then harder, determined to bring him to the same explosive climax. Over and over she sheathed him with her body. The act became spiritual, much like the rituals in which she invoked fertility, for Trace thrust into her like the plow into a well-turned field. Divinity swirled around them until stars burst behind her eyelids. Then she couldn't watch anymore, could only close her eyes and hang on as his cock surged into her.

Spasms darted through her and again she found release, just as glorious and as beautiful as the first. Her body vibrated, drawn taut by the fulfillment in her veins. Warm seed bathed her cervix as Trace joined her, his cock twitching deeply inside.

Sated, she slumped forward and snuggled on her husband's chest. Trace wrapped his arms around her. He'd told the maid that the peace would stand, and Tyranna knew Trace would uphold his word with every fiber of his being.

It was everyone else who worried her.

Chapter Six

Zaldivarian tradition required the married couple immerse themselves in one another for three days before resuming their duties. Stretching the time into three weeks wouldn't have hurt Tyranna's feelings. Not when she and Trace spent every minute of the required time in bed together. But three days had indeed passed and with word on the street carrying more news of insurgents, and Trace's statement to the maid having made the rounds, the queen insisted they sit in on her meetings with her military advisors and high-ranking Concordance officials. Tyranna tried to get out of the meetings. After all, they were affairs for royals and military officers, not priestesses. However, it appeared that marrying Trace suddenly made her some kind of ambassador and the queen told her in no uncertain terms she was to attend.

She sat to the queen's left, between the monarch and Trace. Next to him sat two dowdy old Concordance generals she didn't know. On the queen's right sat the defense minister, a sour man with a perpetual frown. The head of palace security sat on the minister's right. None of the men looked happy. Instead, they focused on the holographic map in the middle of the table. Red dots—and outside of the capital city there were quite a few—marked insurgent attacks and indicated where Concordance troops were currently deployed.

"Your marriage is well and good, but the only way we're going to stop these insurgents is with more boots on the ground. I want to move our air command here," the general next to Trace said, pointing to a large city at the base of the mountains, "and then bring in the Fifth Regiment and station them here. Major Drakkal, your company needs to remain within the capital walls. If I had my way I'd deploy you farther out, but the queen doesn't want you to leave." He frowned and glared at the queen as if daring her to countermand his orders.

"Give the marriage a chance," the queen said. "It's been only a few days. We had an attack on the wedding, yes, but let my men and yours step up their work in the capital and on the palace grounds. We have several leads on the perpetrators of the attack, and if you go after them with Concordance guns blazing, I'm afraid it'll do nothing but reaffirm to the people that the Concordance wishes to conquer us." She pointed to several areas on the map. "I'd like these forces to withdraw."

"Withdraw?" the general bellowed.

"Yes, withdraw." The queen's cool voice carried over the table, and watching her interact with these stodgy old men, Tyranna gained even more respect for her friend.

"The queen is right. As the High Priestess, I wouldn't ally myself with anyone who would harm Zaldivar. Give this alliance a chance to work before you give up on it," she said.

"I don't think you believe we both have the same goal in mind," the second Concordance general said, turning toward Tyranna. A quick gesture silenced the sputtering man next to him. The speaker's salt-and-pepper hair placed him as younger, though possibly by only a few years, than the general next to Trace. "General Vothbag has a point. Neither the Concordance nor Zaldivar want more people to die—your men or ours. Stepping up the forces will simply show that we are serious about protecting the peace. I don't think withdrawing at this point is a prudent idea, Your Majesty."

"Increasing the troops only proves you are conquering overlords. Zaldivar entered into the Concordance with the belief and the promise that I would retain my sovereignty. If you do not wish to let me handle this as I see fit, then you're breaking that promise, sirs, and it doesn't matter how much technology you throw at us. The people will not stand by and let that happen." Anger flashed in the queen's eyes. She frowned at the two generals. "My defense minister has provided you with the plan he drafted. If you do not find it sufficient, then I suggest you come up with a better measure, one that doesn't involve more troops." She tapped the control panel in front of her and the dots on the map grew sparse.

Trace looked at the map. He frowned, and Tyranna resisted the urge to lean over and ask him what was the matter. Pointing to an area near the Concordance base, he shook his head. "You leave us no support here."

"Do you need our help, Major? I was under the impression that the Concordance had an ample supply of men and weapons," the queen's soft reply cut through the silence.

The younger general visibly flinched.

A sick feeling settled in Tyranna's stomach. Listening to the men and the queen argue back and forth, she realized the tenuous nature of their peace. Her marriage to Trace, while looking good on paper and at official functions, did little practical good to ensure Zaldivar didn't go to war with the Concordance. And if the queen couldn't get her people, including the insurgents, under control, then they'd have a war. Expansion and colonization sounded good when it came with friendly terms. Tyranna learned quickly that the Concordance rarely did anything in a friendly manner.

"No, Your Majesty, but the presence of a Zaldivar battalion would show your support for our efforts. It might provide goodwill."

The queen frowned. She glanced at her defense minister who shook his head. "I don't think that will be possible. We do not have a battalion to spare. I could perhaps find a company or two. I suggest we adjourn to discuss the options. I'll send my information to you," the queen said.

Tyranna wondered about the truth of the queen's words. Surely if they withdrew troops from another area it would give them soldiers to spare? Perhaps the queen was merely playing a negotiation game or perhaps the Zaldivarian forces really were spread more thinly than anyone realized. She remained silent, not wanting to dissent.

Nods went around the table, though the Concordance generals did not look happy. From her vantage point, Tyranna believed the two sides to be at a stalemate. Putting more troops on the ground would indeed anger Zaldivar's citizens, and Tyranna didn't

blame them. She frowned as everyone stood and waited for the queen to excuse herself, followed by the generals.

Trace put a hand on her arm. "We should probably head back to our rooms and rest. I'm sure I'll be called for briefings later."

She nodded. "All right."

She followed him out, not liking that they were on opposing sides. Then again, when she agreed to the marriage, she'd known the risks. Her vocation was worlds apart from his work as a military officer. She waited until they were once again inside their rooms before speaking.

"You don't believe more troops are the answer, do you?" she asked.

Trace frowned. Tiny lines formed just above his nose and he sighed. Striding to the window, he flattened his palms on the sill and looked through the glass at the view of the wall and the street beyond. Civilians went about their business. In the sky, personal crafts flew about and the blink of lights and billboards made the castle look even more like an anachronism. "Something has to be done," he said, obviously choosing his words carefully. "More men might create bad feelings among the civilians, but frankly, the insurgency isn't going away on its own. We have a problem, Tyranna. And there's no easy way to solve it."

She crossed the room and stood beside him. When she looked out the window, she saw her people. "You have to give the alliance a chance. We've only been married three days and acceptance and healing need to take place. It's going to take time." She reached across the windowsill and covered his hand with her own. Tangling her fingers with his, she brought his hand to her mouth, pressing a kiss into his palm.

Closing her eyes, she inhaled his warm, spicy scent. She swirled her tongue around his palm. From the way his fingers clenched and his breath caught, she knew he battled the same arousal that filled her veins every time she touched him. "Give *us* a chance," she said.

"I fear we don't have time." Trace pulled his hand back. "My men are dying out there every day because a small fraction of your people don't like the fact that we're here." He curled his hand into a fist and dropped it to his side. "There are a lot of worlds that don't like the fact that the Concordance is bigger and stronger than they are. But your people have to understand their queen gives them a gift in her acceptance of the Concordance. The alliance *can* happen peacefully. I've seen it on other worlds. The citizens don't have to watch their loved ones die, their homes burned to the ground, the plundering of their worlds for what few resources they might hold. Children don't have to be orphaned...but that is what will happen if the fighting continues."

"Is that what happened to you?" Tyranna laid her hand on his chest.

Trace flinched away from her touch. "Yeah. So pardon me if I'm not sympathetic to the fact that a few more boots on the ground will hurt some feelings. The insurgency is like a noxious weed. If it isn't removed, roots and all, immediately, with quick, decisive action, then it'll spread. And when it does, your civilians will have far more troublesome things than a few too many Concordance soldiers."

"I'm not saying you're wrong about the possible outcome, but I don't think more soldiers are the answer. You have to give the people a reason to want the Concordance here. We need no protection. Your technology may be greater, but we've gotten along just fine without it. To my people, the Concordance is this behemoth intent on conquering everything in its path. You've swayed their queen over to your side. Now you've married their High Priestess. If you send out more men, then they're going to wonder if the Concordance will ever stop, or if they'll just keep taking and taking and taking until there's nothing left." Tyranna's hands shook. She drew a shuddering breath, hating the sting of tears in her eyes. "If you send out more soldiers you're going to crush my people's spirit. I don't want to see that happen."

"Then do what it takes to remove those damn rebels. You have police and military forces, just like the Concordance. Tell me, High Priestess, why aren't you using them? Does the queen want the insurgents to win?" Trace shook his head. Tension vibrated

from every cell in his body. Back stiff, head high and shoulders squared, he stared at the portrait of the queen that hung above the altar present in every living quarter on Zaldivar.

The altar hanging on the wall beneath the portrait consisted of a wooden shelf, on which lay a statue of the goddess, an incense burner and a candleholder. Tyranna had burned sticks of fragrant temple incense there, and just the sight of it had her walking across the floor. She placed a stick in the holder and, grasping the small lighter, lit it. She inhaled deeply of the aroma, hoping it would calm and center her.

“The queen is doing what she can,” Tyranna said, turning back to her husband. “I don’t think you understand the gravity of the situation. We’ve been at peace for centuries. Our military and police forces maintain a subtle presence—”

“Non-existent is more like it,” Trace snarled. “Make all the excuses for your queen, your friend, that you want. We both know it’s going to take precise military action to stop the insurgency.”

“You made a promise to keep the peace. Have you forgotten?” Her stomach churned. She needed the temple, the calm surroundings, the sounds of the priestesses chanting their prayers. Her heart ached for it. She rushed past her husband in a swish of skirts.

Trace snagged her arm. “I haven’t forgotten, wife. But if you think prayers are going to bring about peace, you’re deluding yourself. Insurgents don’t kill men with wishes and prayers.”

Tyranna flinched. “You keep the peace your way. I’ll keep it in mine.” Yanking her arm away, she stormed out the door and down the hall. Her agitation carried her beyond the castle and to the heart of her calling—the temple.

The instant Tyranna stepped into the temple, calmness descended over her. She stood there in the entryway inhaling the faint aroma of incense. Around her swarmed people looking for absolution or some sort of confidant. Petitioners from all walks of life entered and exited the temple. Priestesses in multicolored robes mingled among them.

Tyranna stepped into the comforting throng, wading through it to make her way to her office. Undoubtedly in the time she'd been away work had piled up, and the thought of what duties had gone undone only reminded her that her marriage couldn't interrupt her calling—no matter what Trace thought about her people's abilities to govern themselves.

Luckily no one called out to her as she made her way down the narrow hallway and into her office. She closed the door behind her, lit a stick of incense, changed into a spare set of robes and sank into the comfortable chair behind her desk. A press of a button revealed a holographic screen, and a few keystrokes brought her up to date on the temple activities. Nothing new to report. She authorized invoices for supplies and leaned back in the chair.

Her thoughts returned to Trace. Just looking at her desk reminded her of their meeting, when he nearly took her here. Behind the layers of clothing her nipples pebbled. Her breath caught in her throat. Damn him.

She swallowed hard, trying to stop the feelings that she really didn't know Trace at all. She bit back a harsh chuckle. Of course she didn't know him. She married a man she'd met just a day before, ordered to move in with him the very day of their acquaintance. Neither one of them really took much time over the past three days to talk. Baser, more pleasurable urges kept them plenty busy. Her cheeks heated to think just how busy.

She folded her hands and stared at the mosaic containing the image of the goddess on the wall. The serene visage of the woman, her head bent in a nurturing pose over various animals and a child, brought calm. No wonder Trace thought the way he did. He didn't know Zaldivar, hadn't grown up with the stories and tales she had.

Show him the way, daughter. Show him the light. The words echoed in her mind.

Eyes wide, Tyranna stared at the mosaic. The goddess looked just as she had before. A glint of knowledge shone in her eyes. Blinking, Tyranna looked again and the glint was gone. She swallowed hard. Rising to her feet, she stepped through a door into the

attached walled garden. In the center, a statue of the goddess, her urns pouring water into a pool filled with vibrantly colored fish, held court. Tyranna sat amid the fragrant blooms.

She breathed deeply, feeling as if roots grew out of the base of her spine and penetrated deep into the ground beneath her. Energy channeled from deep in the ground beneath her, rising along her spine until it reached her crown and burst out in rays of glorious light. Hands resting on her thighs, legs crossed in front of her, she closed her eyes and allowed herself to slip into a meditative state.

Here, she conversed with the goddess. Unlike the moving meditations meant to invigorate the body, these seated ones were meant to soothe. In her mind she sat in a plush glade, the grass thick and soft beneath her. The goddess sat across from her.

Tyranna opened her mouth, ready to spill her fears and worries to the deity she'd worshipped since childhood. Yet, as she did so, she sensed that in truth, she already knew the answers. The goddess smiled. *Show him the way, daughter. Teach him what he needs to know.* With those words the goddess's image faded.

Tyranna's breath whooshed from her lungs. The goddess gave her a tall order, made more difficult, Tyranna feared, by her disagreements with Trace. She sat there, awed by the goddess's presence and her words. Deep in her gut, she knew Trace to be a good man. An honorable man. Inside her walled garden the sounds of the city faded away and she heard only the trickle of the fountain. Opening her eyes, she looked up at the statue of the goddess. She could have sworn the marble face smiled at her.

Balance her duties. Priestess and wife. Divine channel and woman. The road she walked required balance, precarious balance she might never have learned if she hadn't been wedded. She glanced once more at the statute then started to rise.

"It occurs to me that I may have been too hasty in my judgment of your people." Trace spoke from behind her.

She halted, balanced on one hand and knee, her other leg stretched straight out in front of her. She sat back down and looked up at her husband.

He stood in the entryway to the gardens, holding a single flower still wrapped in the protective film that would keep it fresh for weeks. A smile crossed his lips as he stepped forward.

She started to stand once again.

"No, sit." He stopped in front of her and offered her the bloom.

She took it, her fingers brushing against his. Tiny sparks danced from his touch. *A good man. Show him the way.* The goddess's words echoed in her mind.

"Sit, please." She gestured to the ground beside her. "Thank you for the flower, it's beautiful." She inhaled the soft aroma and closed her eyes. No one had ever brought her flowers before.

"I saw it, and it was beautiful, just like you." He reached out and skimmed his fingers over her cheek. "Look...I'm a military officer. I'm trained to think in terms of soldiers and wars, but you're right. We *do* have to give your people a chance. And our marriage." He grinned. "It would look kind of foolish if the person who proposed a marriage alliance actually lacked faith in it."

Tyranna gasped. "Proposed the alliance? This was your idea?" She glanced down at the flower and then at the man who'd given it to her. "Did you pick me?"

"It was my idea. I thought if the Concordance and someone from your world joined then perhaps it would send a message of peace. I didn't pick you, the queen did, though if I were doing the choosing I would have made the same choice." He cupped her cheek and extended his fingers to caress her hair. Brushing his thumb across her lower lip, he pulled her closer. "You're a strong, vibrant woman, and I can't seem to get enough of you." He ended his sentence with a kiss.

Tyranna's eyelids fluttered closed. First the flower, then the knowledge he had proposed the alliance and his words that he wanted to give their marriage time to work, it all stoked the fires deep inside her. Her passion flared to life, a flame banked no longer, and she swayed against him. The flower fell from her fingers as she cupped the back of his neck, holding his lips to hers. A gentle push had her falling onto her back,

Trace's hard body shielding her from the sun. She parted her lips with a gentle sigh and invited him inside.

His fingers rested just beneath her breast. She arched into his touch, her legs parting to allow him to settle more fully into the cradle of her thighs. Through her robes and the uniform the ridge of his cock pressed against her pussy. Moisture filled her channel and here, in the sacred garden, was the perfect place to make love with her husband.

She stilled at her choice of mental words. *Make love*. She'd known her husband for mere days. Surely she couldn't love him. He rose enough to start unfastening her vestments. She helped him, sliding the material off layer by layer until she lay naked on the grass.

She pushed off Trace's shirt, tracing the lines of his pectorals, his abs, his obliques, down to his hips. Unfastening his trousers, she shoved them down his lean hips until he lay as naked as she. Goddess, he had a magnificent body! Rock-hard muscles and sculpted in the right places, he made her mouth water and her pussy cream just to look at him.

If only everyone else could see him as she did. She closed her eyes as his lips wrapped around a nipple and drew it into his mouth. Warm, wet suction sent shivers of pleasure straight to her pussy. His fingers skimmed the curve of her hips, featherlight touches that had her skin sensitive and waiting for more.

His fingers found her soaking wet cunt and he gathered her juices on the digits. He stroked her, back and forth, a slow, steady rhythm that had her rocking her hips and going out of her mind. His fingers slid farther back, across her perineum. He circled her round, puckered hole and slipped a single finger inside.

Tyranna gasped. The invasion startled her. She relished his thick finger inside her, gently probing and stretching. He released her nipple with a pop and kissed and nibbled a path to her pussy. She lifted her hips, offering him her cunt.

Trace thrust his finger a little farther inside her. "I want to fuck you back here," he said. "Do you want me to do that?"

Tyranna found herself nodding, working her body against his finger, even as his words penetrated her lust-fogged mind. To have him filling her, his big cock spearing her, yes, she wanted that – and she wanted it right now.

“Yes!” she cried, not caring if her voice carried beyond the walls.

Trace lowered his head to her pussy. He licked her slit, his tongue dancing across her clit before retreating. “Turn around,” he said, sitting back on his heels.

She whimpered at the loss of contact but obeyed his orders. Drawing her knees beneath her, Tyranna turned until she was on all fours. She looked over her shoulder at him, the naked lust in his gaze driving the breath from her lungs. She wiggled her ass at him and grinned. “Like this?”

“Yeah, like that.” He flattened his hand on her lower back, his thumb curving over one of her buttocks. With his other hand he spread her thighs even wider then bent low and pulled her labia between his lips, sucking gently.

Tyranna dropped her head between her arms. The feel of Trace’s tongue flat against her clit had her forgetting to breathe. She gulped air, her entire body pulsating to the rhythm of his tongue and lips against her pussy. Rub, retreat. Rub, retreat...he flicked his tongue over her clit until she thrust her hips at him and begged for more. Then he slid his tongue into her channel.

Whimpers bubbled from her throat like water from the fountain. His fingers, slick with saliva and juices, stroked her clit, his tongue plunging in and out of her waiting cunt. If they were this good together, then surely they could make the peace work as well. She hoped so, and wondered how they could not if her goddess said it would be so. Show him the beauty of her people. It all sounded well and good, but as his fingers stroked her clit, she feared her passion would compromise her people. And then he flicked his fingers once more against her clit, and she thought of nothing but how good he made her feel.

Chapter Seven

So sweet, so responsive. Trace meant every word he'd said to Tyranna. Though he hadn't chosen her personally, if he'd had the opportunity he most definitely would have taken the High Priestess as his wife. Now that she was, well...it was a perk he hadn't anticipated. Spreading her labia, he tongued her honeyed channel, lapping at her juices and making her squirm with need. Her muscles fluttered and as her moans built, he knew he had her right where he wanted her — on the edge of an orgasm.

He focused his attention on the sensitive skin of her perineum, then higher, until he swirled his tongue around the puckered ring of muscles he wanted to penetrate. His cock jerked just thinking about being inside her tight little hole. Even here she tasted good, the spicy scent of temple incense clinging to her skin. He reached between her legs and thrust two fingers inside her cunt, snaking his other arm around her to rub her clit.

Tyranna screamed. Her muscles fluttered around his fingers, her body milking his digits. His cock jerked so hard it nearly touched his navel. Her release tore through her body. He felt it in her tightening muscles, in the cream dripping off his fingers. Her ragged breathing echoed in his ears and though he let her down gently, he didn't let up in his relentless sensual assault.

Two fingers led to three, and then a fourth, his digits filling her cunt, stretching it. His dick ached to be inside her, balls tight anticipating the slap against flesh. And then, curling his fingers, he tucked his thumb beneath them and gently fisted her.

Slowly, he leaned back to watch his hand disappear into her body. Her muscles fluttered around him, her slick juices making it easy for him to penetrate her.

"So full! Goddess, so full..." she moaned, rocking her hips back to take even more of him.

The trust inherent in such an act awed and humbled him. Her pulsing sheath contracted and rippled...so tight, so good. In and out, he slowly worked her. Thoughts of the military, of the insurgency, even of peace, fled as his attention concentrated on the woman in front of him. Leaning forward, he pressed a kiss along the dimples at the base of her spine.

He reached with his other hand to caress her clit once more.

Tyranna screamed. Her body erupted, cunt rippling, juices dripping. Withdrawing his hand, he wrapped his arms around her waist, holding her until the spasms subsided. "Too much. Too much," she chanted. He positioned his cock at her entrance as he reached forward to caress her breasts.

"Easy," he crooned, licking at the salty sweat on the back of her neck. "I've got you." He palmed her breasts and slid into her with one slick stroke.

Her cunt wrapped around his cock and squeezed so hard he saw stars behind his eyelids. From behind he penetrated her deeply, his head brushing against her cervix, and the gentle friction drew his balls tight against his body. Slowly, oh-so slowly he suspected it was just as excruciating for her as for him, he pulled out until he rested just inside. A flex of his hips had him sliding home once more.

Flesh slapped against flesh. Both hands on her breasts, he fondled and massaged them while his hips pumped in and out of her. Raw, natural, they made love in the sacred garden with vines and latticework protecting them from prying eyes. The thought of anyone else seeing Tyranna like this, her face flushed with passion, her breasts surging into his hands, had him seeing red while simultaneously filling him with an unexpected surge of pride. He pumped harder, burying himself so deep his balls slapping against her clit.

If only there was some way for her to see the Concordance as he did. If only there was —

Oh heavens! Tyranna twisted her hips and drove rational thought from his mind. The slick wetness of her cunt, her breathy moans, his tight balls...he lived in the

moment. His skin hummed, his world narrowing down to the nerves surrounding his cock and balls.

One. More. Stroke.

He surged inside her, his entire body going rigid as his orgasm slammed into him. He pinched Tyranna's nipples before sliding his hand down to her cunt and stroking her clit. She came screaming. Her sheath rippled around him, drawing his come from his balls. He felt it, welling in his sacs, flowing forth until it splashed against her hot flesh. Trace groaned, his knees weakening, and he slumped forward onto her. Not wanting to crush her, he pulled her down onto her side with him tucked behind. His cock still twitched inside her body.

He lay there with the woman he'd married in his arms. His breath bellowed in and out of his lungs, and hers did the same. Take away her planet, the Concordance, all the military and priestess stuff, and when it came down to it, man and woman, they were damn good. He hoped he'd convince her of that before this war tore them, and their people, apart.

Trace waited until his breathing returned to normal. He nuzzled her neck and tasted her salty skin. A light breeze blew through the garden, cooling their overheated flesh. Slowly, he became aware of the trickling of the fountain and the sounds outside the temple walls.

Just holding her filled the empty spot he'd held inside him since the Concordance's takeover of his home planet. He nuzzled her hair, his hand making soft, leisurely sweeps down her side. The garden appeared private, with the only entrance being her office, so he doubted they'd be disturbed. And even if they were, he remembered her saying something about acts of pleasure being worshipful to the goddess. Certainly what they'd just done counted as pleasurable acts. Especially since he wouldn't mind repeating them once he regained his breath.

There had to be a way to bridge the gap between them. The Concordance saw the systems under its rule as bastions of trade and peace—though it might use strong tactics

to maintain that peace. For all its faults, and Trace knew the Concordance wasn't perfect, it really did try to work for a greater good. His home planet heavily resisted the Concordance, and the ensuing wars were immense and long-lasting, ultimately ravaging his planet. Now, with Zaldivar's civilians resisting, Trace knew his marriage had to create a peace, or military action would escalate. Neither he, his superiors nor the citizens of Zaldivar wanted that.

Tyranna stirred in his arms. She turned her head, looking back at him with a soft smile on her lips. "You make me forget all about being a priestess. And I don't think I mind," she whispered, stroking the backs of her knuckles along his jaw. She sighed.

"You'll always be my priestess." He pressed a kiss to the top of her head. "Isn't there something you can do, some act of the priestesshood or whatever term you use, that can help spread the word about our marriage? I want to fight for peace with every weapon at my disposal."

She stiffened in his arms and for a moment he feared he'd used the wrong terms. He lived in a military world. Talk of weapons and battles, whether on a real battlefield or simply in life, came naturally. "I'm going to talk to the generals as soon as I can garner an audience with them and try to make them see that more men will cause more problems than it solves. I'm willing to give your ideas a chance. To do that though, I'll need to know what they are."

Trace propped himself up on an elbow and looked down at her. The sight of her naked breasts with their wide cherry nipples and the flare of her hips sent a renewed flow of blood to his cock. Ignoring his throbbing organ, he brushed a strand of hair from her face.

Tyranna's silence worried him. She looked thoughtful, pensive even. Discussions like this were never his strong suit. Hell, he was a man, his cock reminding him of that very fact, as if he needed reminding. Military strategies and swapping stories in the mess were more his style. He knew neither of those things would work with the woman in his arms.

"I don't know a lot about your world. I want to know more. What do you think we can do to get word of our marriage, and hopefully word of the peace, to the people? I'm just a soldier."

"You're not 'just' anything," Tyranna replied with a soft smile. "But I can hardly stand before the worshippers and proclaim that there will be peace. Announce our marriage, yes. Proclaim our intentions, I can do that too. But creating peace comes from the people, not from those who claim to rule them." She frowned.

He leaned forward, slanting his lips across hers in an attempt to kiss the scowl from her face. The urge to deepen the kiss surged through him and it took all his willpower to keep it light. Right now, they needed to discuss strategy, not fuck. Though sinking his cock into her hot, wet body would erase his worries about Zaldivar turning into his home world. Different scenarios, different reasons for Concordance presence, however, the possible end result could be the same.

"There's a ritual. I'll have to talk to the queen to get approval, but it is said that before the days of temples and officials, when a couple desired to let their union be known, they made love and slept in the city square. It could be a way for the union between us to be seen as valid and binding by the people. I know the ritual hasn't been enacted in at least a century, but it's the only thing I can think of. I'm not sure if it's something you want to do." She lowered her lashes and a hint of color covered her cheeks. Lying there beside him, she looked like a temptress, one he wanted to keep to himself.

The thought of another man—the entire city—seeing her naked and vulnerable twisted something deep inside him. He exhaled. "If you think it's something we have to do..." he began.

"We don't have to do it, but it's the only thing I know to do." She licked her lips.

His groin tightened. The sight of her small pink tongue filled his mind with images of her mouth wrapped around his cock. Stifling a groan, he rolled away from her. If he continued to lie naked beside her, neither one of them would get any talking done.

Tyranna followed him. She wrapped her arms around his waist and smoothed her hands over his torso. "Let me talk to the queen and see what she says," she whispered against his back.

Trace stopped. "You don't want to do the ritual?"

"I didn't say that. I want you to see my people the way I do. The ritual may help you to do that. I just need the queen's permission first." She kissed the center of his back, licking his salty skin. "Go talk to the generals, if you can. With the goddess's help we'll create lasting bonds with the Concordance." She released him before bending to pick up her robes.

Trace watched her for a moment and nodded. He scooped up his own clothing, dressed then halted at the doorway. "You know how to reach me, right?"

She nodded. "Yes. When our business is over, we can pick up where we left off." In her bare feet, she crossed the grass to him, stood on her tiptoes and brushed her lips across his. "Now go. Before I drag you back down to the ground."

He wrapped his arms around her and hauled her against him for a quick, hard kiss. When he released her, they both were breathless. "I'll hold you to that." And before he could prolong their time together, he turned and left the garden. He'd need every trick in the book to convince the generals to hold off on sending more troops, but if Tyranna thought it would make a difference he'd do it. For her.

The thought humbled and scared him.

* * * * *

Tyranna watched Trace leave, her body humming with the aftereffects of his lovemaking. Her talk of the ritual worried him. She sensed it in the stiff lines of his body, the way he suddenly turned and got dressed. It worried her too. Being naked in public wasn't something she did at all, and the thought of everyone watching her and Trace making love frightened her. Yet if it meant peace, a lasting peace, the kind she

desired for her world, then it would be worth it. She just had to convince the queen of the ritual's worth.

She let her boots dangle from her fingers as she returned to her office. Once inside on the cool stone floor, she stepped into her low boots and adjusted her vestments. A few moments to tidy her hair and she pronounced herself presentable enough to see the queen. She checked her messages, left a few instructions for her staff then hurried back to the castle.

She found the queen in her war room. Maps of the planet covered the walls along with screens full of data from the various military installations. Of all the rooms in the castle, Tyranna had only been in this one a few times, all of them after the Concordance's arrival. Her friend sat behind a large desk, several holoscreens full of data before her. She frowned, her hair tied back behind her head, her normally flawless appearance looking mussed. She looked up.

"Tyranna, so good to see you." She pasted a public smile on her face.

Tyranna halted just inside the door. "I wanted to talk to you. I have an idea that might help the people accept the Concordance, and my marriage."

"The ritual." The queen keyed in commands and the screens faded away. She turned her attention fully to Tyranna, her public smile a softer one of friendship. "I figured you'd get around to it eventually."

"You know? You thought of it and you didn't tell me?" Without waiting to be invited, she strolled forward and sat down in the chair on the other side of the desk. "You know I want to do everything possible."

"I know. The ritual is so public, and you're...well, you're so private. I wasn't sure if that was something you were willing to do. Seeing a Concordance major and the High Priestess complete the marriage ceremonies, well...it would send quite the impression." The queen shook her head. "I still believe I'm doing the right thing for the planet by joining with the Concordance. They left us alone before. It wasn't until Corella 9-C that

they even took notice of us. We stay to ourselves so we pretty much didn't exist. Those damn centaurs."

"You can't blame them for wanting to maintain control of their own planet. And it's a complicated situation. Corella 9-C is different from Zaldivar, and I think the ritual, coupled with some speeches from you, should help bring things under control. Most of the populace isn't against the Concordance. It's just a very vocal minority." Tyranna leaned forward. "Are you okay with everything?"

Her friend released a sigh that told Tyranna everything she needed to know. "I could be better," she said.

"I know." Reaching across the table, Tyranna laid her hand on her friend's and squeezed gently. "Is there anything I can do?"

"Aside from wrangle pissed-off generals and convince the people that I'm not selling them out? No. Thanks for asking though. I saw the way you were when Trace was shot. He protected you, and you worried about him. If two people can make a marriage work, you can. And by making the marriage work, you can help convince the people that Zaldivar and the Concordance can work together in peace." The queen rose to her feet. "If you'll excuse me, I have an appearance before the people to plan. And I think you need to talk to your husband about the ritual. Tomorrow night isn't too soon, is it?"

Tyranna's stomach fell. Next year would be too soon, though they simply didn't have that kind of time. "That'll be fine," she said. "We'll be there. Main square in the capital."

If the location shocked the queen, she said nothing. She merely held open the door and followed Tyranna into the hallway. The two women went their separate directions, each working toward the same goal.

Tomorrow night, the ritual. Tyranna knew she needed to be prepared, and so did Trace. She doubted he would ever be prepared to have sex in public. For the sake of peace, she hoped it would be making love.

* * * * *

Where the marriage had followed rules of ceremony and order, the ritual provided them with a large plush bed with sheer curtains in a cordoned area of the city square. A vid screen hung high on a building, large enough to be seen from several blocks away. Right now the screen showed the canopied bed, and looking at it, realizing their acts would be broadcast over a large part of the business district downtown, had cold sweat trickling between Tyranna's breasts.

She wore her public robes, flowing garments of sky blue covered with a fall of light green silk. Beneath it, she wore her best underwear—thong panties and a bra of sheer ivory lace. At least if she were to be partially naked in public, she'd look damn good doing it. Taking a deep breath, she repeated the mantra in her mind that she'd recited most of the day. *The goddess considers all acts of love her rituals. Think of it like a public ritual.* Somehow, her mental words failed to reassure her.

She stood just inside the barrier and watched Trace stride through the crowd. He wore his full military uniform complete with medals and insignia. On either side of him marched a small honor guard of only two men, one carrying the Concordance flag of crossed swords on a star field, the other carrying Zaldivar's flag of a gold crown circling a rearing stag. The crowd hushed and parted for the three men.

Tyranna only had eyes for her husband. His jaw set, he looked determined, sunlight glinting from the medals on his chest. His long, powerful strides carried him across the courtyard, his attention focused on her. He stepped through the roped barrier and went to her. Clasp ing her hands, he pulled her to him.

"Are you okay with this?" he whispered a moment before his lips touched hers. If he had any doubts about the ritual, they weren't apparent as his mouth moved over hers in a hard, possessive kiss.

The crowd cheered.

Tyranna's heart fluttered along with her stomach. The honor guard stood just inside the roped dividers, taking up space where the entrance had been. Standing at attention,

flags resting by their sides, they stared expressionlessly at the crowd. What they thought of standing watch over the sexual rites, she didn't know. One Concordance officer, one Zaldivar cadet, the young men looked ready to do their jobs.

Tyranna stepped back. "I'm ready," she said. As if her words were a cue, the screen above them flared to life. An image of the queen replaced the image of the bed.

Tyranna knelt, as did the Zaldivar citizens in the plaza. Trace dropped to his knees beside her. The few Concordance officers placed strategically outside the ritual area stood attentively.

"Greetings, citizens. I invite you to witness this joyous occasion. In times past, before we sealed marriages with officials and paperwork, the intended couple spent the night in the village square as a way to publicly declare their commitment and intentions toward one another. They were guarded by two individuals who witnessed the consummation, thus sealing the marriage. I bring to you High Priestess Tyranna Eairstar and Concordance Major Trace Drakkal. They were wed six days ago in the royal gardens. However, as proof of their commitment and to seal the union between Zaldivar and the Concordance, they have agreed to the Joining Ritual. Before you, they will pledge their love and devotion to each other. I ask that you give them your respect, as well as see this union as symbolic of the union between the Concordance and Zaldivar. Two equals coming together in harmonious partnership."

The queen's short speech ended and the screen once again returned to the bed and the couple beside it.

Showtime, Tyranna thought, her mouth suddenly dry. Both she and Trace stood. Turning to her husband, she saw he looked determined, certain and not as apprehensive as she felt. Taking a deep breath, she sent a mental plea to the goddess and felt strength fill her limbs. Her faith would guide her.

"All acts of love and pleasure are her rituals," Tyranna said, her voice projecting into the crowd. She stepped forward. "As the High Priestess of the goddess I know this to be true. What transpires here with my husband is a sacred duty of the highest order,

one I will fulfill with joy in my heart. Embrace the love of the goddess. Embrace this union." Her voice fell silent amid the cheers of the crowd. Their jubilation eased her fears that this would be nothing more than a sexual freak show. Behind her, she felt Trace's presence. His hands rested on her shoulders, his strength her own.

She turned, emotion rising within her. Cupping his cheek, she rose on tiptoes. "My husband," she breathed, a moment before she settled her lips on his.

She meant the kiss to be chaste, a quick acknowledgement of his presence and the power of her words. Instead, heat flared to life within them. Her tongue swept the seal of his lips.

With a groan, he opened his mouth. His hands slid down her back, from her shoulders to her buttocks. Cupping her ass, he hauled her against his body, his cock pressing into her stomach.

Tyranna returned Trace's possessive actions. She grabbed his ass and squeezed, determined not to let him go until the morning light rose over their naked bodies.

Chapter Eight

A gentle nudge had him walking backward, Tyranna leading them to the large, canopied bed, far larger than the one in their suite. Drapes surrounded the bed on all sides, creating a room solely for their pleasure. She stopped just short of it, not quite wanting to hide—even partially so—behind the sheer curtains just yet. Let the people see them clearly. Let the people know she truly lusted after her husband and was not simply doing her duty.

The hoots and catcalls faded from her consciousness as she tugged his uniform shirt free of his pants. She unfastened it, careful of his decorations. His big hand closed over hers.

“Let me.” His husky voice rippled across her senses, and soon he had the shirt folded, the medals and decorations facing outward, and placed on the ground.

“Much better,” she murmured, reaching for him. The whorls of hair across his pectorals drew her attention and she feathered her fingers through them. Just touching him had her hot and aching. Warmth from his skin seeped into her pores. His woodsy scent filled her nose and she leaned forward, inhaling deeply. With her tongue, she licked his flesh.

The muscles of his pecs jumped beneath her kiss.

She licked him again.

His swift inhalation filled her with feminine pride. She swiped her tongue across his nipple, the tight male bud drawing her lips like a moth to flame. She licked and nibbled it, her other hand kneading his other pectoral. Her husband. Her major. Goddess, she could do nothing but make love to him for the rest of her life and she’d be a very happy woman. The fact that onlookers crowded around the barrier, an occasional cough or shuffle penetrating the fog of desire surrounding them, bothered

her little. Let them see her husband, the magnificent specimen of a man. He belonged to her, and she would use him as she, and the goddess, willed.

She nibbled a trail between his pectorals before turning her attention to his other nipple. The ridge of his cock pressed against her stomach and she imagined herself going to her knees, taking him in her mouth. Wouldn't that give the crowd an eyeful?

Her wanton urges surprised her. She sucked in a breath and sank to her knees to nuzzle the arrow of hair that led down to his navel. She paused and swirled her tongue around the tiny indentation. The ridges of his abs called to her, and she took her time, paying homage to each defined muscle. Beneath her tongue, his muscles fluttered. His breathing grew ragged, a counterpoint to her own.

She reached the waistband of his pants. She quickly unfastened them before sitting back on her heels to look up at him.

Desire smoldered in his blue eyes. Restraint held his jaw rigid.

She licked her lips and he swallowed a moan.

"You're killing me," he whispered.

"The people wanted a ritual. We'll give them a ritual." With those words, she rose onto her knees and shoved his pants off his hips. They fell to his knees.

The crowd gasped.

She tried to see it from their viewpoint, a Concordance officer standing in their plaza, his trousers around his knees. His cock rising from brown curls, thick and hard. Veins roping his shaft, the head flushed purple. Though she doubted the people could see, a tiny drop of fluid beaded from the eye.

Tyranna licked her lips.

Trace groaned.

She curled her fingers into the muscles of his thighs and leaned in close. Inhaling deeply, she drew his musky aroma into her lungs. Then, steadying him with her fingers, she lowered her lips.

Slowly, each movement deliberate as if she'd choreographed this passionate dance for the benefit of those watching, she licked his head. Wrapping her mouth around his shaft, she swirled her tongue around the eye, lapping at his precum. Her cunt tightened. Her cream soaked her panties and she tightened her channel, wishing she'd thought to remove her clothing so she could slide her fingers between her legs and finger herself. With the layers of vestments between them, she couldn't do anything but press her thighs together in a pitiful attempt to ease the ache.

Trace thrust gently into her mouth. Tyranna focused on taking all of him in, relaxing her throat until his head slipped deep and her lips met the base of his shaft. His springy hairs teased her nose. He cupped the back of her head.

Tyranna breathed through her nose, laving the underside of his shaft with her tongue, drawing strength from her goddess and from the man standing in front of her. Making love to him—and yes, she conceded that was exactly what she was doing, making love to her husband in public—turned her on. She opened her eyes and looked up to see Trace staring down at her. Desire, lust and something else filled his gaze. She chose not to dwell on it, instead drawing her lips along his shaft until she balanced the head of his cock on her tongue. She pulled him into her mouth once more, fucking him with lips and tongue in slow motion.

She savored his taste, the feel and heft of him in her mouth. With one hand cupping his ass, the other braced against the side of his thigh, she felt each tiny shift in his stance, the contract and release of his muscles. His big hand on the back of her head held her close, not demanding she fuck him harder, faster. Instead he steadied her, a reminder that she wasn't in this alone. Her fingers slid from his thigh to his balls. She cupped them in her hands, her fingers reaching behind to stroke his sensitive skin.

"Tyranna," he moaned. "I have to touch you."

His husky pleas made her hum in the back of her throat, vibrating the head of his cock.

His fingers contracted. "Stop. I don't want to come."

She pulled back and grinned at him. "Oh, but I want you to." With those words, she drew him hard and deep into her mouth. Closing her eyes, she focused her entire being on giving him pleasure. She rolled his balls in her hand, fingers stroking. Reaching behind him, she caressed his ass, her finger dancing across the puckered ring of muscles. For a moment she thought of breaching him there the way he had her. Maybe later. They had all night, and right now she wanted to give him the best blowjob he'd ever had. She tongued the knot of nerves just behind his head. Gentle pressure from her teeth had his hips bucking toward her mouth.

Just a little more and he'd be lost. The need to taste his salty essence drove her. Hollowing her cheeks, she sucked harder and drew him deeper into her throat. She liked him like this, penetrating her mouth as far as he could go, her pussy aching for the same treatment. Pressing her finger against his sphincter, she drew her teeth along his shaft.

Trace stiffened. His cock jerked in her mouth, and in her hands she felt his cum rising from his balls. He ejaculated, his hot seed washing the back of her throat. She swallowed and took all he had to give, tremors racing through his body as she licked his shaft clean then pulled her lips away to sit back on her heels once more. She trailed her fingers over his body. Folding her hands demurely in her lap, she favored him with a coquettish look.

"Your turn," Trace said, his voice little more than a husky rasp. Bending down, he grabbed her arm and hauled her to her feet. He turned her in his arms and began unhooking her vestments.

Tyranna stared wide-eyed at the crowd. More people pressed against the barriers, and without looking behind her she knew the screen above her head would show her clothed body shielding Trace's naked one. With skillful fingers he removed her vestments, dropping them to the side until she stood only in her underdress. A quick tug pulled it up and over her head, and she faced the crowd in her ivory underwear.

Behind her, Trace drew a quick breath. "You're fucking gorgeous," he said, his lips brushing against her earlobe. He took the fleshy pad in his mouth and sucked.

A bolt of pleasure shot straight to her clit and she cried out. Leaning against him, she reached her arms back, clasping onto his hard ass to hold herself upright.

He reached between her breasts and unhooked her bra. "Let them see your beauty." The catch released. Her breasts surged forward, the tiny scraps of lace having been all that kept her nipples from the crowd's gaze. He left her thong alone for now, though her juices dripped down the insides of her thighs.

She should be ashamed. Eyes open, she caught the hungry gazes of the men and women in the audience. As a woman, she might have been offended at being paraded naked in front of the people. Yet, as the High Priestess, she understood the potential the ritual held. She kept her chin high, defiant, as Trace slipped the lace bra from her breasts and bared her pebbled nipples.

He cupped her breasts, lifting them, offering them to the ravenous attention of the crowd. "You're wet, aren't you? You want my cock inside you, don't you?"

Tyranna whimpered as he arched his hips, pressing his hardening staff into her buttocks. Heat flamed her cheeks when she thought of how she had admitted wanting to be taken in the ass.

"Tell me," he insisted.

"Yes," Tyranna said. "I want your cock in my pussy. Fuck me."

"Good." Against her neck she felt his smile, and then he covered her breasts with his hands and kneaded her flesh. He placed open-mouthed kisses along the side of her neck, sucking hard enough on her skin to leave red marks. She wanted his marks. Wanted others to see them and remember what transpired in this plaza long after the ritual ended.

He pinched her nipples. Her body hummed with the need to be fucked hard. Her pussy clenched, her channel dripping. Her breath came in ragged pants and she ground her buttocks against his erection.

He nipped her.

She cried out, the wanton sound of pleasure echoing off the buildings surrounding the courtyard. His rough hands possessed her, the heat from his skin branding her as his. She, the High Priestess of the goddess, belonged to this Concordance officer, and damned if she didn't want the whole planet to know. She spread her legs wider and lifted her hips in invitation.

Against her neck, Trace chuckled. "Impatient, aren't you?" He ignored her silent request that he stroke her cunt, instead focusing his attention on her breasts. His big hands covered her flesh. Already horny from the erotic ritual and sucking Trace's cock, she was frustrated by his slow pace.

Tyranna whimpered. She rubbed her ass harder against his cock. "Please," she pleaded.

"If you insist," he said, though a grin filled his voice when he spoke. He slid his hand over her stomach, pausing just above the neatly trimmed cinnamon-colored thatch at the juncture of her thighs. He stroked her pelt, just barely reaching her labia.

Tyranna closed her eyes and drew in a steadying breath. Channeling strength from the goddess, she remained rooted in place. Breathing deeply, she opened her eyes to focus on the crowd watching her. Several men boasted erections, one or two had their hands reaching into a pocket and she knew that they touched themselves. The knowledge that she aroused strangers made her pussy cream.

If Trace felt jealous over showing her nudity to strangers, he didn't show it. Instead, he inched his fingers lower, coating them with her juices.

Tyranna moaned. Lips parted, she drew panting breaths. One hand on her breast and his fingers on her labia created a closed circuit of pleasure that arced between her nipples and her clit. He slid his finger between her swollen lips and stroked back and forth. Grabbing the thin band of material covering her pussy, he shoved her panties down past her hips and they fell to her ankles. He swiped his fingers through her slit, covering them with her cream before bringing them to her mouth.

"Lick," he ordered, smearing her juices on her lips.

She opened her mouth, taking his fingers exactly as she had his cock. Swirling her tongue around his digits, she tasted herself on his skin. She moaned. When she'd licked the last traces of her juices, she pulled her lips away.

Trace's gentle hand on her shoulder sent her to her knees. She kicked off her underwear and kneeled before the crowd. Behind her, Trace did the same. She widened her legs, his cock sliding between her thighs and along her slick labia. He reached around her and cupped her mound, his fingers sliding between her lips to stroke her clit. His ragged breathing echoed in her ear and the tense line of his body flush against hers told her how much it cost him to take it slow. His cock probed the entrance to her channel. Spreading her legs wider, she thrust her buttocks at him.

"Now," she breathed. "Take me now."

Trace surged forward. He buried his cock into her, the head brushing against her cervix. Balls-deep, he filled her.

"Oh yes," she moaned. She fisted her muscles around him, wanting to hold him inside her forever.

And then he began to move. Like a sacred dance, the joining of two halves to make a whole, they moved together. She closed her eyes to better concentrate on the pleasure coursing through her veins. The broad head of his cock plowed through her channel and she arched back against it, her muffled cries filling the plaza. The city, the people watching, they all faded to the background.

Trace's strong arm around her waist held her pinned against him and kept her from falling to all fours. The muscles in his thighs bunched as he surged into her over and over again.

Her body tightened. Her nipples, hardened into tight peaks, ached with each slight breeze that fluttered over them. His fingers on her clit, stroking and circling, drove her higher and higher until she couldn't take it anymore. Her orgasm peaked, her release sending wave after wave of pleasure through her. If it weren't for Trace's strong arms

she would have toppled to the ground. As it was she hung there, limp, as her channel convulsed around his cock, and oh dear goddess, she wanted more.

She wriggled against him, that first orgasm only whetting her appetite. Clenching her muscles around him, she tried not to imagine what kind of a picture she made with her hips thrusting and her breasts bouncing. Biting her lip, she arched her back and drove him even deeper inside her.

She was the goddess. She accepted his cock into her body, milked it and gave both of them pleasure. Her skin vibrated with energy, the divine power of the goddess surrounding her, filling her. If the insurgents couldn't see what she and Trace created, then they deserved the darkness in which they lived. He pumped his hips once more and the silken slide of his cock inside her cunt drove thoughts from her mind.

She only felt. His balls slapped against her flesh. Sweat covered their skin. Trace's grunts grew rougher, his thrusts harder. Flesh collided with flesh, each stroke sending spirals of pleasure through her body. She arched her neck, nuzzling Trace's flesh. She reached up, cupping his head and bringing his lips to hers in a soul-stealing kiss. His tongue tangled with hers, a rough claiming that matched his cock inside her body. Twined together, they joined in body and in spirit.

Behind her eyelids stars burst, flashes of light tuned to the spasms firing at the mouth of her womb. Trace swallowed her whimpers and moans. Her pussy tightened and then she flew again, another orgasm sending her soaring into the heavens. Trace thrust harder. And then, his arm clenching around her middle, he tore his lips from hers. His body stiffened and he came with a triumphant shout. Warm seed splashed her insides, the mere knowledge of his orgasm wringing another from her.

Trace sat back, pulling her with him so she sprawled partially in his lap. He nuzzled her hair, his arm coming up to shield her breasts. For long moments they sat there, bodies twined together. She rested her forehead against his shoulder.

"The bed would be more comfortable," she said when at last she could catch her breath.

He nodded and shifted. His cock slid from her and she couldn't help but look at it, at the mingled juices glistening on his skin. He stood, helped her to her feet and together they went to the bed. She pulled the curtains closed, though the sheer fabric did little to hide them. Snuggling beneath the plush blankets sounded good but her overheated skin had her sprawling on top of the comforter.

Beyond the curtains the crowd cheered. Claps at first, then raucous shouts and yells. Her name, praises to the goddess, even some male voices cheering Trace, filled the air. She grinned against his chest. Though the afternoon had barely started, she suspected their actions had already done much to win over the populace.

Peace. Flattening her palm over Trace's heart, she felt the steady beat beneath her hand. He pulled her into the curve of his body. Snuggled against his warmth, she listened to the still-cheering crowd outside the curtains.

"Do you think we did it?" she asked.

"Yeah." Trace grinned. "You were so good, honey. Give me a moment to rest and we'll make sure your people have a ritual they'll never forget." He palmed her breast.

She lay there, letting the lazy arousal rebuild inside her. A ritual her people would never forget. She grinned and for the moment, thought her priestess duties balanced quite nicely with those of a wife.

* * * * *

Sunlight streamed through the gossamer curtains, piercing through Tyranna's closed eyelids. She snuggled closer to Trace, pressing her face against his strong, warm male chest and tugging the blankets a little closer to her chin. His arm curled around her, pulling her against his side. Beyond the haven of their canopied bed, the sounds of a plaza waking up intruded.

Sellers hawking their wares walked their regular routes, their singsong voices rising over the roar of personal-craft traffic overhead. Commuters and shoppers jostled on the sidewalk, their hushed whispers and conversations creating a dappled counterpoint to

the street vendors. Close by, bells over a store front jingled, and slowly it came back to Tyranna that she lay in the city plaza after having made love to her husband all night long.

Her pussy ached, pleasantly sore from the overuse. Doggie style, missionary style, against the post of the bed, over and over again Trace had taken her, each time bringing her higher than the time before. Opening her eyes, she looked at him. In sleep, his dark lashes fanning tiny shadows across his chiseled cheeks, he looked softer. She caressed his cheek and stroked his short hair. His lips parted and he rolled closer to her, his hard cock pressing against her thigh.

Even now, after being thoroughly used, she wanted him again. The power of the goddess resided in her, reminding her of her calling and her duty. Yet now, in the morning light, after hours spent in ritual, the two seemed irrevocably intertwined. Her breath caught in her throat.

She loved Major Trace Drakkal. She'd known that before she'd even started the ritual, had known, really, from the moment she'd said her marriage vows. After feeling his hands on her skin, his lips, his tongue and dear goddess, his cock thrusting into her pussy, she had no doubts he loved her too. A smile curved her lips.

The peace had to hold. Selfishly, she wanted to keep Trace all to herself. The thought of him going out on missions while she stayed home and worried left her cold. He was a solider. Putting himself in harm's way was what he did, yet now she found it inconceivable. She brushed her lips across his.

Trace murmured sleepily.

Tyranna pulled the covers back. Kissing him again, she followed the line of his jaw. His stubble-roughened cheek against her lips made her think of them between her thighs. Cream filled her pussy imagining his lips on her clit, sucking, nibbling. She slid down in the blankets, dipping her head to trail kisses over his chest.

"Good morning," Trace rumbled.

Tyranna skimmed her fingers over his abs, down to his eager cock. She circled it with her fingers and stroked from base to tip. Her palm slid over the head, eliciting a groan from him.

Trace reached down and stilled her hand. "Are you sure, honey? You've got to be sore."

Tyranna shoved aside the rest of the blankets. "I'm sure," she said, releasing his cock and straddling his legs. "I've never been surer about anything in my life." Looking down into his blue eyes, she meant it. She pressed a hard, fast kiss to his lips.

Already wet, she needed no foreplay. Instead, she circled his shaft with her fingers and guided it to her cunt. She slid onto him, bit by bit until his head pressed against the entrance to her womb. She tightened her muscles around him.

Trace moaned. His hands cupped her breasts, his fingers kneading and squeezing her flesh.

She rocked her hips and leaned into his touch. She loved him. Looking into the vivid blue of his eyes while she sheathed his cock inside her pussy, she felt the love pouring through her veins. A slow coupling, each stroke reaffirmed her love. Taking him inside her body was a sacred act, one that joined her with him, and both of them to the goddess.

Slowly, the need built. She felt no hurry, not after their acrobatic sexual activities of last night. This morning, with the world coming to life around them, any anxiety she felt at being seen dissipated. The people of Zaldivar had seen quite a bit last night. Two people coming together, very much in love, paled in comparison.

Her body tightened around his. Lifting his hips, Trace surged into her. Their movements grew more frantic, more driven as her desire and his built to a crescendo. She moaned, not caring if her passionate sounds could be heard outside the canopy. Let them hear the sounds of her pleasure. Let them know what transpired here. The screen above them probably showed them making love in all their glory.

"Yes, yes," she chanted. "Trace, yes!"

His fingers slipped between her legs and found her swollen bud. A few caresses and the soft waves of her release, like a gentle spring rain, washed over her. Soft convulsions rippled through her body. She savored every moment, every twitch, every caress.

Trace thrust, hitting a place high and deep inside. Oh yes, this was exactly how it was supposed to be, each stroke finding that place that made her fly apart. His big hand covered a breast, the other continuing to stroke her clit. His husky sounds only drove her on.

"Trace!" she screamed, feeling herself come apart once more. Her orgasm tore through her body. The force of it threw her forward onto Trace. He wrapped his arms around her, holding her tight to his body as he continued to thrust. One more powerful surge and he erupted inside her.

They lay twined together and Tyranna listened to their breathing slow. She opened her mouth to tell Trace she loved him then pressed her lips together. He hadn't said anything like that to her. She snuggled closer to him and hoped that the ritual had done what they'd hoped. That it had helped create peace.

Chapter Nine

Later in the afternoon, Tyranna sat at the queen's right hand around the table brimming with Concordance generals, military officers and defense officials. Trace sat next to her. He'd done nothing but support her and the queen's position. The Concordance generals looked like thunderclouds ready to blow.

"I don't know what you thought your little display would accomplish," General Vothbag waved his hand dismissively, "but my men report minimally decreased insurgence activity."

"But the activity *has* decreased and the ritual only recently ended," Trace insisted. "Baby steps here. The ritual worked. I have no doubt that it did, but it's going to take time for the insurgency activity to go away."

"I still think we need more troops," the general said.

"We have discussed this," the queen said, her voice cutting through the growing murmur around the table. "We will give the ritual time to work."

Tyranna's stomach churned. Though she was the High Priestess, no one asked her about the ritual, no one discussed with her how they felt it went. Not that she minded. She'd had little time from the moment she and Trace dressed and hurried back to the castle before being herded into the room for this meeting.

A discreet knock interrupted them.

One of the guards stationed by the door opened it. He turned back to the queen. "Excuse me, Your Majesty, but I think you're going to want to see this." He opened the door wide.

Two men walked in, dragging a bound man between them. The captors wore brown shirts and pants, their face stubbled, their clothing and demeanor the mark of the working class. The man between them wore black, his face bruised.

"What is the meaning of this?" The queen rose to her feet.

Around the table, others did the same. Tyranna glanced at Trace. The tense set of his jaw and the anger sparking in his gaze made her wonder if he knew the man bound between them.

"I think you've been looking for him," the man on the left said. He shoved the bound man forward into the waiting arms of the guards.

"I recognize him from the attack on the wedding," Trace said. "He led the insurgents."

Tyranna swallowed against the bile rising in her throat. This man had fired on her husband. Anger, white-hot, surged to life inside her. She reached out and grabbed Trace's arm. The goddess gave life, taught fertility—but she also sent storms that flattened buildings. Nature could be beautiful but also deadly. "I think we know now that the ritual worked," she said, her words deadly cold.

Trace looked down at her and she nodded.

"Yes," the man said. "We saw your ritual. You come from different worlds, and yet you came together like two halves of a whole. When this man sought us out for supplies, we could do no less than bring him to you."

"Supplies? What kind of supplies?" Tyranna rose and stepped forward.

Trace held her back. She wanted to charge forward and throttle the man who thought he could harm her husband.

"Just food and provisions, Priestess. Nothing dangerous."

"Nothing dangerous?" The queen stepped forward and no one moved to stop her. She strode around the table like a lioness stalking prey. "Nothing dangerous! By providing provisions to these people you aided in attacking civilians. You aided in their attack on a member of the royal house and a priestess. I hardly think feeding these cretins counts as nothing dangerous."

Both men swept to the floor, foreheads bowed low. "Pardon, Your Majesty. We didn't know," one of them replied. "They threatened to kill my wife and children. I thought—"

"If you received a threat then why didn't you summon a royal guard for protection? Why didn't you petition my throne? I cannot help you if I don't know you need help." She turned to her guards. "Make sure these men are cared for." The queen swept back to her position at the head of the table.

Tyranna wanted to cheer. Her ritual had succeeded in bringing in one of the ring leaders of the insurgency. Surely that had to be a sign.

The queen fixed everyone still standing around the table with a harsh look. "Now, I ask you, has the ritual not worked? We have convinced these men to bring in a leader of the guerrilla fighters. I have no doubt there will be more. I shall publicly sentence this man tomorrow and beseech the people for further assistance. I anticipate that others will come forward. I want hourly reports of any activity that could be construed as rebellion, and I want members of the guard to visit those men's families. They must be protected. Perhaps they can also provide us with more information."

"Yes, Your Majesty," the leader of the city guard said. He rose from the table and left.

"Now, does anyone have any questions?" the queen asked.

Around the table, heads shook.

"Good. Major Drakkal and Tyranna, I want to see you after the meeting. Everyone else, dismissed." She remained standing while everyone filed out, then took her chair and gestured for Trace and Tyranna to sit as well. "Now, since it was *your* wedding that these bastards crashed, what punishment do you see fit?"

Tyranna's mouth went dry.

Trace looked at her expectantly.

She pressed her lips together. Punishment never fell within the realm of the High Priestess, and she wondered why it would now. "I trust your wisdom in this matter, though I will say, that which is destroyed also provides a path for the new." She bowed her head.

"And you, Major Drakkal? How do you feel about it?"

"That man used to serve in the Concordance military. He has been AWOL for some time now, though we'd been unable to track him down. Normally, I would ask that he be turned over to the Concordance for punishment, but in this case, I believe the Concordance will cede to your authority. He incited your own people against you." He paused. "And I believe my wife speaks with wisdom—her own and the goddess's. Selective pruning of a tree makes it grow stronger. Were he in the Concordance, we would execute him."

Just hearing Trace approve of her words sent relief through her. Not that she expected nor needed his approval, but knowing she attained it eased the burden from her shoulders. The captive's actions incited treason, the price for which would be his life. She agreed and knew her queen would sentence him fairly.

"Thank you. This can't have been easy on you. A marriage to someone you never knew, then the alliance and the ritual in the square. I saw what transpired there, and I have to say that though you may not have said the words, there is, if not love, then affection between you. I hope the Concordance and the citizens of Zaldivar can find the same affection. If you'll excuse me."

"Of course." Tyranna rose to her feet and gave a deep curtsy to her queen. Beside her, Trace rose and bowed. Then, his hand twined with hers, the two of them left the chamber.

They said nothing as they walked to their apartments. The queen had been right. They hadn't said they loved each other. Not yet. And Tyranna wondered if, perhaps after all of this was done, they could make that declaration. They'd done so much. Surely three little words wouldn't matter.

* * * * *

Dressed in his military finest, Trace sat next to his wife and the queen. Next to her sat a token Concordance witness to the proceedings. Trace agreed with his superiors' decision to let the execution happen as the queen ordered and without Concordance interference. Frankly, after word got out that the man about to be executed had worked with the Concordance, Trace doubted nothing short of a miracle would keep the peace between them. And what would happen to him and Tyranna then? He glanced at her, wondering how she would take the impending execution.

Since the men had brought in the insurgent leader, five more men had either voluntarily turned themselves in or been brought in forcibly. Below the raised grandstand in which they sat, three men awaited execution. Separated from them, the two men who had brought in the AWOL Concordance soldier stood with three other men.

A hush settled over the crowd.

The queen stood. "Greetings, citizens of Zaldivar and of the Concordance. We come here today not for a celebration, but to show what would happen to those who wish to tear unions asunder. The Concordance came to us with an offer, a generous offer by all standards, and I accepted. Not only for the good of Zaldivar, but to preserve the peace that we've enjoyed for the last five hundred years. There are those who seek to ruin that peace. I say to them that their efforts are futile. Guards, bring forward the first prisoners."

In the arena, the guards brought forward five of the men.

"You are charged with aiding and abetting the enemy. Your actions provided food, supplies and succor to the enemy. You wielded no weapons. You killed no one directly. Your families were threatened, yet you did not seek out the authorities. You are sentenced to serve the orphans, those who lost parents, siblings, loved ones in this conflict. You are sentenced to give them aid, shelter, whatever they require, for a period of one year." The queen sat back down.

The guards ushered the men from the arena. In all, Trace thought the queen's judgment fair. He glanced at Tyranna and found her expression hard and unreadable.

The guards brought forward the three remaining men.

The queen rose to her feet once more. "You are charged with killing Concordance soldiers and Zaldivar citizens alike. Holding no regard for life, you sought to stop the union between Zaldivar and the Concordance for your own purposes. You disobeyed my direct orders and those of your superiors. For that, you are sentenced to death."

The queen remained standing as the guards released the men. They backed away from the prisoners and raised their guns. Chained together, the men couldn't run.

Three quick shots ended their lives.

Trace sat staring into the arena. He'd seen a lot of men killed in his military career and had done some of the killing. Knowing these men betrayed their country, and in at least one of the cases, the Concordance, he mustered little sympathy. A waste of life. A waste of potential. A damn waste, period. He glanced at Tyranna and saw she still held a grim look on her face.

"It had to be done," he whispered to her.

She nodded. "I know. Is it wrong of me to wish I were the one who did it?"

He reached for her hand and clasped it in his. "No, it's not wrong at all."

The queen rose to her feet to give some closing remarks, but Trace listened with only half an ear. His mind was on Tyranna and the fact that he didn't quite know if he was ready to tell her he loved her. The thought of going back out on tour had his gut churning. But now that an insurgent leader was dead, and others being rounded up, there wasn't much left for him to do. He'd married the Priestess. He'd worked to bring peace to Zaldivar. He wondered why the prospect of returning to duty left him feeling so empty.

* * * * *

Silence settled over Tyranna and Trace as they returned to their rooms after the execution. She pressed her lips together, wondering exactly how they'd go on from here. Their mission of bringing peace, while not completed, seemed to have taken a giant leap forward by the ritual in the plaza, and she knew his commanding officers would want him back in the field. He commanded the Concordance's troops here on Zaldivar, after all, and there would be decisions to make and men to move.

She reached for his hand then stopped, letting her own drop back down to her side. He walked with his hands in his pockets. He'd said nothing and she wondered if he was being deliberately callous.

Then again, being a man, he might not know what to say. She glanced at him, following the tense line of his jaw, the worried, uncertain look in his eyes. She suspected the same thoughts swirling in her head also churned in his. They reached their rooms and she followed him inside.

"I think the queen made the right decision. Better to remove the cancer now before it has a chance to spread. And sending those men to work with the orphans was a good move. Let them see what their actions caused, even if they didn't supply weapons or ammunition as they claim." She sat down in a chair and arranged her robes around her legs. "What do you think?"

Trace grunted. He stood in the center of the room. Glancing from her to the door leading to the master bedroom, he looked at a loss.

"Is everything okay?" She rose to her feet and crossed the space between them. She stroked her hands down the sleeves of his uniform, tugging his hands from his pockets and tangling her fingers with his. She squeezed gently. "Are *we* okay?"

"I don't know. Are we?" Trace exhaled.

"I think we are. Why would you think we're not?" She nibbled on her lower lip. Her heart hammered a mile a minute and she feared Trace would announce some grand deployment, whereby she'd never get to see him again.

"You just watched men die, Tyranna. You're not used to scenes like that. And I...oh hell, I'm a solider. I kill people for a living." He shook his head and pulled his hands away. "The queen has her peace."

His words cut like a knife. "You're not a murderer, if that's what you're getting at, and neither is the queen. You fight. Sometimes you kill people trying to kill *you*. I can't say it's good or right, but even in nature it's kill or be killed sometimes. The goddess punishes even as she creates beauty. I'm not going to condemn your calling." She managed a half-smile.

"I'm sorry I dragged you into this marriage," Trace said.

His words startled her. "I'm not. I love you, Trace. I'll admit I was skeptical at first, but I have grown to love you. You're a strong man. A good man." She lifted his hand to her lips and brushed kisses across his knuckles. "I wouldn't have asked for this on my own, but now that I have you, I want you to stay."

As soon as the words left her mouth she felt walls go up around him. She blinked her eyes, hating the sting of tears there because he hadn't confessed his love. He loved her. He had to. His actions the night of the ritual showed it.

"This isn't a fake marriage. I know that's probably what it looks like to outsiders, but I consider it *real*. I hope you do too." She struggled not to plead with him.

"I want this to be a real marriage, but I have to be a realist too. I'm a military officer. I'll be shipped off to some unknown planet. We'll go months, years even without seeing each other. I don't know if there's room for love and happily ever afters in a life like that." He released her hands.

"Don't give up on us." She grabbed his hands and held on tight. "I didn't ask for love and happily ever after. I love you. I hope you love me too. And there will be things to work out once the situation is resolved with the Concordance. But you're stupid if you think I'm just walking away. I've found a way to balance my duties as both a High Priestess and a wife. I'll continue with that balance even if you're not here. But I really hope you will be. I hope you're going to stay."

There. She'd laid it all on the line, and now the ball rested in Trace's court. Sweat beaded on her palms. The hairs on the back of her neck rose and she waited with a swiftly indrawn breath.

Trace looked down at her. Hunger glowed in his gaze, and something else. A feral tenderness that made her think of the way a lion protected his pride. A warrior lived underneath his skin, a warrior she loved as much as the man himself. His nostrils flared.

"As if I'd let you get away." He twisted his wrists, breaking her hold on him before grabbing her arms and propelling her backward. Her back hit the wall and he pinned her there between his hot, hard body and the unyielding stone surface. Heat radiated from his body into hers and his cock pressed demandingly against her stomach.

It wasn't a declaration of love, but it would do. Oh yes, it would do quite nicely.

* * * * *

The words Tyranna wanted to hear stuck in his throat. The little nagging voice in the back of his mind told him he'd never have anything more than a political marriage. They might have come together for the purposes of peace, but once that was achieved...

Trace silenced the voices in his head by kissing Tyranna. The instant his lips touched hers, suddenly everything clicked into place. She moaned, opening for him, her fingers cupping the back of his head. Arching his body against hers, he felt every curve, every valley, and his cock throbbed with the need to be inside her wet heat. He gathered a fistful of material from her vestments and pulled her even closer to him.

Passion. This would keep their marriage from being only political. This would keep them coming back to each other even as the years and the missions took their toll. He thrust his tongue into her mouth, loving the way she accepted it and invited it deeper with strokes of her own. His hand cupped her ass and hauled her hard against him. She lifted a leg, twining it around his hips, and the surge of possessive desire had him

lifting her other leg. He used the wall and his hands on her ass to hold her upright as he thrust against her covered pussy. His balls tightened.

Too many layers separated them, and frankly he didn't have time to remove them all. Shoving her gowns up around her hips into a bulky wad of fabric, he growled his frustration.

"Wait," she said, her breathing as ragged as his own. Her legs slid down his hips and moments later, vestments and underclothes went flying until she stood naked in front of him. He tore open his shirt and his uniform pants, kicking off boots and shoving the clothing away. Naked, he pressed her against the wall once more. She spread her thighs, her slick labia rubbing against the length of his cock.

"Yes," she breathed. "Oh yes." She clenched her fingers on his shoulders and rubbed her hips against him. "Fuck me, Trace."

He reached between their bodies and stroked her wet clit. She cried out and he rubbed harder, wanting her to come at least once before he plunged into her body. She talked about love. He acted upon it. Impatient, the head of his cock slipped into the entrance to her channel and he pumped his hips, sheathing himself inside her.

She cried out, her channel contracting around his shaft. He bent his head and hungrily mouthed her breast, swirling his tongue around her nipple. As if he could eat her from the outside in, he drew the tight bead into his mouth and sucked hard. With the flat of his tongue, he pressed her nipple against the roof of his mouth, eliciting more screams from her. He grinned with masculine pride.

He scraped his teeth across her nipple before leaving a light love bite on the top of her breast, which he laved with his tongue. Goddess, he loved the way her cunt squeezed around him and the way she creamed just for him. He thrust shallowly into her, his finger dancing across her clit.

She shuddered. Her muscles bore down on him and from the escalation in her whimpers and moans, he knew she was about to come. He kissed his way over her collarbone, up her neck until he found her mouth once more. Thrusting his cock and his

tongue inside her, he branded her as his. She belonged to him. When the mission was completed, when peace reigned, she'd still belong to him.

Just as he would belong to her.

He inhaled the woodsy aroma of the temple incense, a scent he'd forever associate with her, and realized he loved the High Priestess. He loved Tyranna.

She came apart around him, her pussy milking his cock, her cream dripping down his shaft. She pulled her lips away from his and drew in panting breaths. "Oh goddess. Yes. Yes. Yes." Her words became a mantra, a chant to his sexual powers. He thrust once more, high and deep inside her, and listened as her words turned into screams. Her fingers curled into his flesh as she shuddered.

He lowered his lips to her shoulder and pressed open-mouthed kisses along her collarbone. *I love you.* The words hovered so close to the surface, yet he couldn't quite get them past his lips. Instead, he slid his hands up her sides, cupped her breasts and thrust into her again. He pushed her through her orgasm, found her on the other side and swept her up again.

He couldn't tell her he loved her, but he could show her. Lips and tongue worshipped her skin, finding the hollow of her collarbone and laving it. He grabbed her wrists, pulled her hands off him and pressed them to the wall above her head. "Mine," he whispered, closing his mouth around the tight peak of one nipple. He licked and suckled it, then moved his attention to the other one. "Mine," he said again before nuzzling the soft skin in between her breasts.

He held his hips still. Inside her, his cock twitched. She might not hear the words, but she could feel them.

"You're mine," he whispered, kissing a trail to where her shoulder met her neck and tasting the sensitive skin there. He covered her torso in kisses, shoulders and neck, clavicle and breasts. "You're all mine."

"Yes," she whimpered. "All yours."

Chapter Ten

The fact that he didn't say the words she longed to hear failed to bother Tyranna. With his cock buried deep inside her, and his hands and mouth on her flesh, she felt the emotion radiating from him. It rolled off his skin, his possession, his need for her. With her wrists above her head, she turned control of her body over to Trace's skillful mastery.

Pleasure rolled through her veins. Tingling in her lower spine, it radiated throughout her entire body, from the mouth of her womb to her aching nipples and up to the top of her head. The sensitive skin behind her ears and along her neck hummed from Trace's attentions and she wriggled her hips, needing him harder, deeper inside her.

The words mattered little when she had the man she loved pleasuring her so thoroughly. She almost wished she could take her own back, not make them an issue between them. But then she wondered if he would have been as driven as this. She forced her eyes open and watched Trace. The muscles in his neck stood out, his face etched with pleasure. She licked her lips with the need to taste him. The sheen of sweat on his skin tormented her with the memory of his salty taste. But with him holding her against the wall, she couldn't reach him.

His mouth came down on hers once more, the insistent thrust of his tongue as eager as his cock. She whimpered and rotated her hips. She'd offered him her body. Given him her love. What more he wanted she didn't know, but she'd give it to him. The goddess told her to follow her heart and showed her the way to balance. She knew she could stand before those who came to the temple and share the goddess's wisdom with a lightness of heart she hadn't felt in a long time. She could be a priestess. And she wanted to show Trace that she held such balance within her.

As did he. Soldier. Husband. His duties were as disparate as the many worlds of the Concordance. Perhaps he'd show her those worlds. He leaned in close and she licked and nibbled along his jaw line. "Let me touch you," she pleaded.

He squeezed his fingers around her wrists then released the pressure, but kept her pinned. "If you touch me I'll come," he said. His tongue darted out and laved the side of her neck. "You taste so good." He licked her again.

She shivered, her world narrowing down to the rasp of her nipples against his chest and his thick cock penetrating her. She wrapped her legs around him and pressed her heels into his buttocks, her thighs open wide. Muscles protested. She ignored them, needing more than anything to feel Trace fucking her into multiple orgasms.

"I want to make you come." *I want to show you how good we are together.* A battle for dominion, his strength against her cunning. Tightening her muscles around him, she drew a gasp from his throat as she massaged his cock with her pussy.

"Oh you will," Trace said, his low voice a caress against her senses. "You will." He closed his eyes then, his hips shifting. The time for words had ended but she didn't mind. Not when he thrust balls-deep inside her. The rhythm of passion took over, the slide of his cock against her engorged labia, the rub of his head against her cervix. His hands fell to her sides and belatedly she realized her wrists were free. She reached around, grabbing his shoulders and pulling him to her.

Yeah, that was it. He found the place high and deep inside that rocked her world, rubbing the head of his shaft over it. Just a little bit more...

Light flashed behind her closed eyelids, the pressure making her feel as if the top of her head would blow. And then she came. Like a riptide pulling her under, her orgasm slammed through her and swept her equilibrium away. She clung to him, counting on Trace having enough strength to keep them both upright. He plowed into her, his husky moans and sighs telling her just how very close he was to coming.

Words ceased to form. She could only moan, whimper, mewl with need as he drove her higher and higher. Her panting breaths barely brought enough oxygen to her

starved lungs, and yet she cared for nothing but finding the bliss that his cock would bring.

Trace stiffened. Muscles locked, he slammed her against the wall. His cock jerked deep inside her and with a low groan, he released his seed into her body.

She closed her eyes, clinging to him as her shuddering orgasm swept her into a place of pure sensation. Swallowing hard, she buried her face against his salty chest, kissing and licking the droplets away. His hands flat on the wall, he held her pinned with the sheer strength of his body.

“Dear goddess,” he moaned.

Against his pectorals, Tyranna smiled. “Dear goddess indeed.” She kissed him.

Gently, he clasped her hips and slowly lowered first one leg, then the other to the floor. His hands around her waist kept her upright for a moment before pulling her to the floor with him. She snuggled on his chest, listening to the pounding of his heart beneath her ear. His breath ruffled her hair.

No, he hadn’t said he loved her. But lying here in his tender embrace, she had no doubt that he did. She smiled and let her eyelids drift closed.

After a short nap and a shower that took even longer because of their lovemaking beneath the spray, she strolled along the street, hand in hand with her husband. In spite of all their physical activity after the sentencing, she needed the walk, the play of thigh and calf muscles propelling her through the streets. With her own eyes she wanted to see the effect her marriage, and the executions, had on the people.

If anything, things looked better than they had. Buildings still bore the scars of fire and anti-Concordance graffiti littered some of the street signs and fence posts. She walked past a large wall concealing a construction project, where a young man was busily painting over the graffiti. She asked him if he were employed to do that, and he said he wasn’t. Just someone not happy with the sign of hatred in his city.

Small actions like that of the painter gave her hope. If one man could step forward and confront the prevailing prejudice, then perhaps others could too. A few steps down a Concordance soldier ate at an outdoor café and she saw no open hostilities. The man saluted Trace, and although several diners looked up, none made any crude remarks. They simply nodded or turned their attention back to their meal.

Her heart pounded with the thought of what would happen now that Zaldivar was part of the Concordance. She'd already grown used to having Trace in her life, in her bed, and the prospect of him leaving again filled her with dread. Now that peace appeared to be growing, she wondered if the queen would turn them out of their apartment in the castle. She assumed the quarters were temporary, as the apartment was one that the queen offered to visiting officials, so surely they couldn't stay. Her tiny rooms in the temple couldn't house them, and she didn't know what kind of accommodations he had, on or off base.

"Look at that," Trace said, drawing her attention to an alley. At a loading dock, two Concordance soldiers helped a shopkeeper unload heavy equipment into the back of his store. "I think we might have done it." He squeezed her hand.

His pride filled her. The proof that peace would be restored, *had* been, plastered a smile onto her face. "Yeah, I think we did."

He looked down at her and brushed his lips across hers, a soft, familiar kiss that had her leaning into him. A soft moan whispered from her throat. He pulled away and led her down the street.

"Do you mind if we stop by the temple? I have some work to do," Tyranna asked.

He shook his head. "Not at all. I thought we were headed in that direction." He turned down the street leading to the temple, the large building dominating the end of the street their destination.

Tyranna looked up at it, with its multicolored balconies, the priestesses doing their work. The building, her calling, drew her forward until she slipped her fingers from Trace's and walked a few steps ahead of him. She looked over her shoulder and saw

him watching her, his gaze clouded. If he thought he'd lose her to her calling, he shouldn't. Not after she'd confessed her love. Even without a return declaration, she knew she'd find some way to keep the balance she'd found.

She rushed up the stairs, her heart light in her chest. Her vestments swished around her legs, and around her petitioners stopped and bowed or lowered their heads in a gesture of respect.

Trace snagged her hand. "Wait," he said.

"I won't be long." Tyranna glanced from their clasped hands to his face. He looked so serious, so grim. Perhaps this was it. Perhaps he'd tell her they had accomplished the mission and he'd return to the Concordance to be sent out into the far reaches of the universe. She swallowed hard.

"I spoke to my commanding officer while you were dressing," he said.

Her stomach fell. All the joy and hope dissipated, leaving only an empty sickness in its wake. "Our work isn't done yet," she said.

"I know, and that's why I spoke with him." Trace hurried up the two steps separating them to stand level with her.

Petitioners scurried out of the way, leaving them in a bubble of empty space. Overhead, the bells chimed and the chant of prayers filled the area. Tyranna closed her eyes and leaned into the rhythmic sounds as if they alone could give her strength. A lump formed in her throat, and she blinked back the sting of tears. So this was how they would part.

"It's not what you think it is," he said.

"Then tell me what it is. We've seen signs of change for the better. The people accept the queen's alliance with the Concordance and are starting to accept the Concordance soldiers amongst us. Soon Zaldivar will enter interplanetary trade. People from other worlds will come here. Do you know I'd never seen anyone from another world until the Concordance came? We were so quiet, kept to ourselves. I don't begrudge those on Corella 9-C their freedom, but why did it have to cost us ours?" She

exhaled and realized the peace might show signs of growing but until people's attitudes changed—until *her* attitude changed—then truly they couldn't have peace. She licked her lips. "I'm sorry. I just..."

"Hey, you're the High Priestess. Next to the queen you're considered the authority on the planet. Do you think I don't know this?" He brushed his thumb across her cheek, and she realized that he'd wiped away a tear.

She dashed them away, not wanting to appear weak in front of him. "If you have to go, I understand. It's your job. It's your duty." She squared her shoulders.

"I don't have to go. My commanding officers agree—the Concordance needs someone here on Zaldivar, an ambassador if you will. I never expected to be chosen, but with my marriage to you, I seemed the likely candidate. I'm not going anywhere. And I don't *want* to go anywhere. I want to stay here. With you."

His words took her breath away. The last thing she expected him to say. Okay, so the very last thing would be an admission of love. Coming from Trace, this was as close as she expected to get. "I see." Two words, so lame, yet they were the only ones she could think of at the moment. Her stomach flip-flopped, her heart pounding a mile a minute, and she clasped her hands together in an attempt to stop their trembling. "You're not going?" *Thank you, goddess.*

"No, I'm not going anywhere." He closed the space between them and drew her into his arms.

Tyranna snuggled against his hard body. With her head against his chest, she heard the steady beating of his heart. His long, powerful muscles pressed against her curves and for a moment the temple fell away until they were simply two people, a man and a woman, bound together. "I'm glad," she whispered.

"Me too." He tilted her chin so she faced him. "You see, there's something I probably should have said to you. I came to this planet looking for a way to keep what happened to my home world from happening here. A marriage of convenience, a treaty

by marriage, sounded like the best way to do it. When I proposed it to my superiors, I never expected it to happen to me.”

“I know,” Tyranna said.

“Shhh.” He tapped her on the nose. “Let me finish. I never expected to meet a priestess and certainly never expected to marry her. When I was told...well, I’ll admit I wasn’t sure about a holy woman. I grew up in the Concordance, a world of fighting and trenches. As a soldier I did what my superiors told me to do. So when they told me to marry you, I did. I never expected to fall in love.”

Tyranna gasped.

“Yes. I love you, my High Priestess. I love you, Tyranna Eairstar. How or when it happened I don’t know. Maybe it was the first time we met, when I kissed you in the maze. Or maybe it happened when you stood by my side and consented to be my wife. On my world we give tokens of love.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small box. He dropped to one knee. “On my world, we have our own rituals.”

Tyranna looked down at him, uncertain at what would happen now. She’d never heard of a man going down on one knee, and the marriage rituals of his home world sounded quite odd indeed. He loved her though, and that was all that mattered. No matter if the trappings were those of her world or his or some conglomeration of both.

Trace offered her the box. “Take it,” he prompted.

She took the small box covered with holographic designs and knew what lay inside. She’d seen boxes like this before, mostly gifts offered to the queen, and they all contained jewelry, very expensive, very elite jewelry. She opened the box. Inside, nestled against bright green silk, lay a ring. Not just any ring. This one held an image of the goddess carved in minute detail out of a dark green stone. The image took her breath away.

“I love you, Tyranna. And I always will.” Gently, he lifted the box from her hands and removed the jewelry. Taking her left hand, he slid the ring onto her third finger, pushing it into place. “There, it fits perfectly.”

"It does." She held out her hand, admiring the sunlight glinting off the stone. "Thank you. It's beautiful."

"Normally one gives the ring and offers marriage first, then goes through the ceremony. I guess we did it a little backward, huh?"

Tyranna grabbed both his hands and pulled him to his feet. "No, we did it just right." She launched herself into his arms. Embracing him, she pressed her lips to his, sealing their love, and their union, with a kiss.

Applause erupted around them. Tyranna started to pull back but Trace's arms kept her firmly pressed against him. A heated flush covered her cheeks.

"Let them see. What's the harm in their High Priestess kissing her husband, even if he is a Concordance officer?" Humor sparkled in his words.

She had to admit he had a very good point. So what if no High Priestess before her had been married. So what if she married a Concordance officer. She loved him. Standing on tiptoes, she let her lips hover over his. "As the goddess wishes." She slanted her mouth across his for a long, deep kiss. She slid her tongue along the seal of his lips and he opened for her. Plunging inside, she rubbed against him, her nipples hard behind the layers of her vestments. Her pussy clenched and released, her cream coating her folds.

The goddess wished for her to find balance—and she had.

The applause faded away, along with the sound of the bells and the chants of prayers. The two of them stood on the steps of the temple, locked in a heated embrace. A symbol of unity between the Concordance and Zaldivar. A symbol of peace.

The High Priestess and the Concordance Major sealed their treaty of seduction. As the goddess wished.

About the Author

Mary Winter began writing when she was 16, using it as an excuse to skip gym class. She currently lives in Iowa with her pets and dreams of writing full-time. Her advice to anyone is: "Persistence pays off. Don't ever give up on your dreams!"

Mary 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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