

ELLORA'S CAVE **AEON**



AN UNWANTED
Hunger
CIANA STONE

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An Unwanted Hunger

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AN UNWANTED HUNGER

Ciana Stone

*For all my creature of the night friends.
Meet you at the witching hour. Bring wine.*

To Fred Alan Wolf, whose books *Taking the Quantum Leap* and *Parallel Universes* opened up a new universe of ideas for me to explore and have fun with. And to my honey-man, who listens as I build my new worlds and populate them with people from my dreams. Without you none of this would have been possible.

Prologue

Journal Entry

I saw the initial rush of fear as I seized you. I've seen that look countless thousands of times—the blackness of the pupil contracting in upon itself to become a pinprick of darkness in a shimmering island of blue on a widening white sea. Yours is not the first heart to pound like hooves in a stampede, or the first breath to catch like a rabbit in a snare. No, you are not the first at all in ways too numerous to mention.

Yet you are different from all others, for never has the terror transformed without my willing it so. Never has a woman looked at me with such rage, such curiosity, wonder, infatuation, courage and pity. It is the pity that amazes me. How could you, frail human, pity me?

Now, I sit and watch as you go about the task of cleaning the tools of your abominable trade. Your excitement is a palpable thing. I can taste you in the air. It excites me and repels me. Soon you will leave for the hunt, and once more we will be adversaries, pitted against one another in a battle that cannot end until one of us is no more.

Unless, of course, you fall victim to my considerable powers of persuasion. I've yet to unleash the full power of my charm on you. I find the dance we engage in far too stimulating to sway the balance in my favor.

"How many chances to live have I granted you?" I asked as we stood there beside your rumpled bed, your slender throat easily held in one hand.

"That's not what this is about and you know it," you replied, brave in your fear and ignorance.

I must say that your answer surprised me. True, I've been aware of your efforts for some time. You haven't exactly made a secret of your attempts to find me, or to destroy

me. In fact, you've made something of a name for yourself in certain circles. Unfortunately, you would not approve of the name you are sometimes referred to behind your back.

Perhaps you are demented by the standards of this world. I will not fall into the trap of presuming that I understand humanity, even after all the years I have walked among you. They are and ever will be a species unlike my own.

I have known men and women considered mad, insane by their human counterparts, and you could well count in this number, but until I take you I will not know for certain all that is within you. Your thoughts are known to me as words on a page, but the cause of your emotions from one moment to another is as a fogged window.

It's a curious pleasure, contemplating the idea of delaying the moment when I take you, and know all there is to know of your body and mind. Actually, this entire moment is an odd pleasure. I sit here, watching you hurry about, making your preparations to capture yet another of my kind and bend them to the will of those you call master.

I sense the longing inside you. The need to know, the questions you yearn to ask. Alongside longing there exists conflict, deep and intense. It tears at the fabric of your soul. There is a kernel inside you that rebels at the role you play. I find a certain amusement in the dichotomy of your nature—the need to know warring with the need to fulfill your duty. Which, I wonder, will win out in the end? Will you succumb to the dictates of the master who drives you, and continue blindly in your quest, or will you give in to the questions that haunt you and open your mind to possibility beyond what you have been taught to accept as truth?

And if you ask, will I give you truth or will I perpetuate the myth that grows about me and the rumors that abound about you? That you truly are insane, a demented woman, infatuated and possessed with the notion of me, hiding from your own sanity in order to preserve your illusions. Hiding from your own true nature.

You cast a glance at me and I sense your thoughts. You wonder if I will speak true or if this is merely a ruse to entertain myself until I take you and end your chance to know.

To know. Your thirst for the truth is as vast as my thirst for you, for that which nourishes me. Your thirst drives you as relentlessly as does my own. It gives you courage and makes you reckless and it isolates you as effectively as my own does.

"If you value your life you will not seek me again." I projected a whisper of my power along with my words as we stood there, locked eye-to-eye in those first moments.

"I'm not going to hurt you. For now," you replied through growing fear, for your mind accepted my suggestion readily enough. "First, I want to understand."

Your words stunned me. You answered as if you wore the shoes of the predator. How curious. Why did I not know your answer before you spoke it?

"What shall I make clear to you before I take you?" I was thrown off-guard enough to resort to tried-and-true tactics—increase the fear, make sure the victim understands they are the prey and their lives are mine.

"Where you fit in the pattern," you said, giving me yet another surprise.

"The pattern." Even as the words slid across my lips, I saw it in your mind.

"Yes, the pattern. There's a pattern, a rhythm to everything. We're all part of it. If you're here then you must be part of the pattern. But what? Are you and your kind designed to be our natural predator and if so does that make you a step up the evolutionary ladder, superior to mankind? And if you are superior, then why aren't you using that superiority to help prevent humans from destroying the world that is home to us all?"

What an interesting woman you are and how your mind delights me. You refuse your fear, shove it back from you like an unwanted suitor, impatient that it interferes with what you want.

And what you want most is me. You are not ready to admit it, but I know it for the truth. That gives me pause.

"Either speak or leave, I have work to do and the night is wasting." Your voice is low yet vibrant with excitement and dread.

Because I am a vain and arrogant being, derived from centuries of habit, I stare into your eyes, sending clouds of doubt into your mind.

"Please." You are as irritated as afraid which pleases me for some inexplicable reason, resorting to the annoying human tendency to stretch that one syllable word into two so that it becomes an insult.

The hunger pulls at me, spiking like a solar flare at the soft insult. Before your mind can register the images your eyes send, I am on my feet, towering above you. You are taken aback, your heart rate accelerates. Will I attack? Am I brave enough not to?

Brave enough? That you should think such a thing is unprecedented, and enough to cool the fire that burns within me. Like the grand showman you think me to be, I rip the dark cloak and clothing aside, baring the upper half of my body.

Fear recedes from your mind as your eyes travel up the length of me, taking in the smooth, unblemished skin. Wonder and, yes, longing, wash away the last of the fear leaving me powerless over you by fact of what I am, but more in control than ever because of what I am *to you*. Here is your dream, about to become real. The truth is so close. You hunger so for it, regardless of the fact that it is an unwanted hunger.

Your breath catches in your throat as you find yourself moving to me, your body pressing against mine, your head tilted back so that your eyes remain my prisoner. Hunger rumbles through me and you are so inviting. I could take you now. I want to take you, in all the ways a man can take a woman, in all the ways *I* can take a woman.

But no, this experience should not be rushed. It means too much to you. I suspect it means too much to me. I will wait, but I will give you a hint of what can be. Your lips are pliant and willing beneath mine and you do not hesitate to move your hands up and tangle them in my long hair, pulling my mouth more firmly against yours.

Your taste is sweet, of coffee beans and chocolate, of the sweet smoke of the glass pipe you favor and of something unique to you. Your breasts are warm and firm against the coolness of my skin, your hand strong on my bare shoulder. I smell you, your desire. I feel the heat within you growing hotter. It fuels the need inside me and sparks a new hunger, one I have not felt in so long that it has been all but forgotten.

It is a need that is forbidden to me. It is the need every male of every species feels when he finds a female suited to him. But you are not of my species and nothing can come from such a union.

Yet the need persists enough to unsettle me. With regret I end the kiss, projecting a beautiful lie to ease the rejection you feel.

Your eyes narrow slightly and lock with mine. You don't believe me. How is that possible? Humans cannot resist me—or any of my kind.

Chapter One

Resa cursed as the shadowy figure merged with the swirling fog. Damned fog. It was a Vampyre favorite. The bastards were adept at becoming one with it, using it as a shield to get in close, which was how they liked to fight. Up close and personal.

She'd prefer the battle to be waged at a distance. Her crossbow was useless up close, forcing her to rely on hand-to-hand fighting. Not that she wasn't adept with a dagger, she just preferred to keep some distance between her and the blood suckers until she'd at least winged them. Then she didn't mind getting in tight to finish the job.

She slipped the bow into the harness on her back and snapped her forearms out straight, releasing the specially designed blades that slid neatly into her hands.

If he wanted to bring it to her, then so be it. She's been tracking this bastard all night and until now he'd managed to evade her. He was good. She'd give him that. It normally took far less time to track and dispense of one of his kind. But the grudging admiration was fleeting. She had a job to do and it was time. He wouldn't get away.

A slight movement of air to her right had her turning to peer into the fog. Darkness moved within, pinpointing his location. She smiled and pivoted slowly, the move reminiscent of a dancer executing a graceful turn.

Her arms moved in an intricate pattern, slicing the air as she turned. A hiss from her opponent turned her smile into that of a predator. He'd made his first mistake, given away his position.

"Vânător," he whispered, circling her. "You should have heeded my warning."

The voice brought a flare of heat to her loins. How could she not have known it was him?

"Vampyre," she returned the whisper, putting as much scorn into the word as he had into her name, trying to ignore the passion that burned in her belly. "You should have stayed out of my city."

A chuckle had her slicing the air again, but he'd anticipated her move, and before she could turn was behind her, his hands like iron claws on her upper arms and his breath hot on her neck as he whispered to her. "You beg to be taken, Resa. How long must this continue, this dance? How long must you battle the beast that hungers inside you, the lust for knowledge, for truth? How long will you deny your true hunger? How long must you play the role of seductress? Night upon night you prowl the darkness, searching for me, tempting me."

Despite the hard bolt of truth in his words, she would not give him the satisfaction of acknowledgement or agreement. They were of two different breeds. Each a predator. Enemies. Not even the unholy desire he inspired in her would sway her from her duty.

She'd already taken too many chances, been sanctioned and reprimanded far too many times because of him. The last time she'd stood in audience before the Alliance, they'd made their position clear. He had no truth to impart to her. She was misguided in assuming he did. And her role was not that of Inquisitor. She was a Dhampir, a hunter, sworn to uphold the vow she'd made. No more delays would be accepted. She would find him and kill him.

She rammed one elbow back, feeling the satisfaction of connecting with hard flesh. "Tempt this," she growled and whirled, both knives at the ready.

A distortion in the air marred her sight, air swimming as if suddenly liquefied and imbued with dancing lights. Her skin prickled as it enveloped her. She blinked, trying to clear her vision.

And found herself face-to-face with a woman from the dreams of childhood, a woman of ethereal beauty. "Who the fuck are you?" Resa's eyes moved over her surroundings, her knives ready for an attack. "Where is he?"

The woman laughed, a sound that made Resa wince, it was so pure and beautiful. "You may call me Pandora, and we are the only ones here."

"Another trick, Vampyre?" Resa growled. "Shape-shifting? Nice try, but I'm not falling for it." She attacked, the knife in her right hand arcing up as the left stabbed in a vertical line toward the woman's heart.

And met with nothing. Resa pivoted, seeing the woman now seated on a divan, a smile on her face and her eyes twinkling.

Resa was a little disconcerted. She'd never heard anything about him having such advanced shape-shifting abilities, and certainly nothing about him having such advanced mind-control or telepathy but it had to be some form of extrasensory perception for him to have pulled the memory of her "fairy godmother" from the recesses of her mind.

"'Tis neither," the woman said and patted the divan beside her. "Come, sit with me."

"Lady, I don't even know what you are."

"Then allow me to explain."

Resa's eyes narrowed suspiciously but she braced herself, legs apart, arms crossed with knives in hand and nodded. "Okay, explain."

"As I said, my name is Pandora."

"As in Pandora's box?"

Suspicion turned to disbelief as Resa listened to Pandora's tale. Curiosity overcame suspicion and questions poured forth. Minutes turned to hours and hours melted away as Pandora explained and answered every question put to her.

"And so the bottom line is, you expect me to go back and spend my time trying to find this...man and protect him from...whatever comes up?"

"Essentially yes."

"Well, excuse me for throwing a monkey wrench into your plan, but that's a shitty idea."

"Really?"

"Yeah, really. First of all, I have a job and it's kind of an important one."

"Yes, I know all about that, Resa Vânător. Just as I know about Bram and how he raised you, trained you to become a Vânător, a hunter, and named you accordingly, Vampiresa Vânător. I know that you are a Dhampir, born of a Vampyre father and witch mother who was gifted with the Sight. I know that you detest the name Vampiresa and had it legally changed when you were twenty-one to simply Resa. I know that you possess the Vampyric abilities of your father and the Sight of your mother even though you try to deny both except when it aids you in locating and destroying Vampyres.

"I know all this and more because you are correct. I am no stranger to you. I was with you when you were but a frightened, lonely child. The hands that pulled you from the fire were mine, and had not Bram wrested you from me, your training in life would have been far different.

"But you were destined to walk a path other than that I would have chosen. A path that ultimately led you back here, to me, so that for the first time in your life, you can hear words of truth."

Resa glared at Pandora. She didn't like the idea that Pandora knew so much about her. She'd worked hard to keep her past a secret, and to carve a place for herself in the world where she could be anonymous and unnoticed. The idea that Pandora was real scared her. She'd always thought her memories of the beautiful woman with the kind smile and soft hands, who pulled her from the fire that consumed her parents, was just a figment of her imagination. To think that what she remembered was real meant that Bram had lied to her every time she'd ever asked about the way her parents had died and who had saved her.

In a hidden place in her heart that she kept tightly locked, she believed Pandora. But that small space was one that could not be set free into the light of day because with it came pain, betrayal and loss. Better to convince herself that Pandora spoke lies than allow that tiny space to explode and envelop her reality.

"You know a lot of facts, I'll give you that, but about me, you know nothing."

"I respectfully disagree, my dear. And if you would be so bold as to take my hand, I can prove it to you beyond all doubt."

"So bold?" Resa scoffed. She'd fought and vanquished Vampyres as old as time and lived to fight another day. One slight woman, however quick, was not enough to scare her.

She marched over to the divan, sat and extended her hand to Pandora. And fell out of reality as she knew it into a vortex of time.

When Pandora released her hand, Resa blinked, feeling slightly dizzy and a little nauseous. She had no words. What she'd seen did indeed prove that this woman, Pandora, knew her. Knew her rage, her grief, her fear and even her desire. Pandora was real. The woman from her past, the memory she'd clung to all those years when affection was a fleeting thing, doled out infrequently, and only when she'd met certain expectations.

Pandora knew all that and more. The insane passion and longing Resa fought every day for the Vampyre who had eluded her for so long, haunted her dreams and threatened her life and her position with the Alliance.

"There is much we must discuss," Pandora said, but Resa shook her head and rose from the divan.

"No, not now," she said as she walked to the door of the balcony and looked out at the deserted beach that sat almost beneath the feet of the lavish house. "I need time to digest this, sort it out."

"Take all the time you need, my dear."

Resa nodded, keeping her eyes on the beach, watching the waves wash in and recede, listening to the pound of the surf as the tide rose. Yes, she had a lot to consider.

In the end it took her far longer than she imagined. For days on end she and Pandora debated, argued and discussed. Each day Pandora's influence grew stronger and Bram's receded. It scared Resa. She was losing part of herself.

And for what? she asked herself. A Vampyre?

"He is not what you imagine," Pandora said softly from behind her, eliciting a scoff from Resa.

She turned from her place on the balcony to look at Pandora. "Oh yes he is. He's as bad as the rest of them, feeding off the weak, taking what he wants whether it's offered freely or not. He's a monster."

"Which would make you at least half a monster yourself," Pandora pointed out.

"I don't need to be reminded of that! I know my father was one of those damned things. I'd change that if I could, but since I can't, I do like Bram trained me to do. I find them and get rid of them."

"You take life, just as those you condemn as being killers, Resa. Call it what you want and justify it in any way that allows you to live with your conscience, but you are what you claim to despise. A murderer, a taker of life."

"Then why the fuck do you want me to be part of your bloody quest to save humanity if I'm so fucking bad?" It was an old argument, one Resa resorted to when she could not come up with a better point of contention.

Pandora smiled. "Because I know that you have the power to do great good. If only you can let go of your hatred. It binds you as surely as the strongest chains, imprisoning you in a dungeon of hate and pain that if you do not escape, will destroy you."

Resa blinked back tears that threatened at Pandora's words. What was wrong with her? She didn't cry. Not ever. But something about Pandora got to her. The things she'd

seen and that damned certainty that had taken root inside her that Pandora spoke true and wise.

"I've sworn to find him," she said. "I can't go back on my word."

"And find him you must," Pandora agreed. "But not to kill."

"How can you say that? Don't you know what he's done?"

Pandora looked out to sea with a slight sigh. For a few moments she was silent, and then she softly spoke. "You must find Constantine Belenus and safeguard him from the storm that is approaching."

"Why? Give me one good reason I'd want to protect that bastard."

"To prevent a war."

"What war?"

"One that will be waged between those of his kind and those of your Alliance unless Constantine can find a way to bring peace so that all may live in harmony. One that will find humanity caught in the crossfire and will exact a high price in the loss of innocent life."

"Then I might as well just take a fucking vacation because there's no way in the seven levels of hell that we're ever going to be at peace with those...life suckers."

"Correct. It cannot happen if Constantine is defeated."

"Defeated by who?"

"I can say only that Constantine and his kind are not what they are purported to be. There is far more to the story than you can imagine. And as a member of both the human race and what you call the Vampyre, you owe it to yourself to discover the truth of your heritage."

Resa had to admit that Pandora made sense, but the idea of protecting a Vampyre when she'd spent her entire life tracking and eliminating them seemed disloyal to Bram.

"All is not as it seems in that quarter, my dear," Pandora said. "You would be well served to seek out the truth of whom and what supports the Alliance you've sworn allegiance to."

"You're saying I should betray Bram and all he's done for me?"

"I am suggesting that for the first time in your life, you stop letting others make decisions for you. That you seek out the truth behind both factions and then, when you have the knowledge, decide which, if either, side deserves your allegiance."

"But in the meantime, find and protect Constantine."

Pandora gave her a mysterious smile. "Call it research. If there are answers to be had, he is the one who holds them. Use your skills as a hunter and find him. When you have the truth about him, then the choice is yours to make. Destroy him or safeguard him."

"And you won't interfere?"

"This task is for you alone. But hear me well, Resa Vânător, there is a price to be paid for the taking of life. You yet have time to find redemption for your transgressions. But another kill will damn you as surely as you breathe."

Resa wouldn't have admitted it in a million years, but a cold chill skittered down her spine at Pandora's words. She'd suffered the insomnia brought on by guilt, agonized over every kill and prayed that Bram was right and she was doing the work of the Holy in destroying the Vampyres.

But alone in the dark with the memory of their screams in her mind and the smell of their death in her nose, she wondered if there could be anything holy about killing.

Still, it was all she knew. She'd been a Hunter since she was ten years old. She didn't know how to be anything else. Her trust had always rested in Bram. He'd cared for her, provided for her, seen to her education and training. He'd loved her. At least she thought he had.

Now Pandora had shown her things that raised questions she didn't want to ask. Questions she'd already tried to ask and felt filled with remorse for even considering. But now it was different. Something new had been introduced to the mix, new knowledge had come to light though Pandora.

Now the questions she'd wanted to ask that night when he came to her pressed at her, crying to be asked. Memories of that night tore at her. How she'd wanted him. How she'd tried to hide it and how she'd failed. How his kiss had branded her in a way she'd never imagined possible, destroying any hope that she could find solace in the arms or touch of another.

No, now it was all different. She had to know the truth. If Bram was not true to his word and her work was that of evil, then she had been betrayed in the worst possible way. But if he spoke true and hers was the hand that wielded the weapon of the Holy, then she had work yet to do.

The question was, how was she to discover the truth?

"Constantine," Pandora said softly.

Another warm flush washed over Resa at the sound of his name. Fighting with a crossbow, sword or knife was far easier than battling the attraction she felt for him, the power he had to make her yearn for him. She'd not forgotten their encounters, his taunts and temptations, the erotic images he projected into her mind. It was part of her, something that tormented her every day.

Whether she ended up killing him or protecting him, Pandora was right about one thing. The answers she sought lay with Constantine Belenus.

"Fine," she said, her mind made up. "Then count me in. I'll be your hunter. I'll find Belenus. But I'm not promising to save him from anything. Not even myself."

"So be it," Pandora agreed. "Be safe, my young hunter. And peace be with you."

Resa opened her mouth to respond and in the same instant found herself back in the fog beside the old cathedral, with Constantine's whisper in her ear.

"The truth awaits," he whispered with a slight chuckle.

Resa whirled, knives flashing. But he was already gone. She checked the time on the belfry clock of the cathedral. It was close to dawn. How was that possible? She'd spent days on end with Pandora to be returned here only moments later?

It was all a bit much, and Resa felt the weight of what lay ahead like a tangible force on her soul. But she had to pursue the truth, no matter the cost. That, as Pandora had convinced her, was something she owed herself.

However, the night was drawing to an end and she was tired. So the quest for truth could wait a bit. Right now she wanted food, a shower and sleep, in that order. She'd tackle the mystery of Constantine Belenus and what answers he might hold for her when the sun rose.

Chapter Two

Journal Entry

As foretold, the beginning of the end came swift as a heartbeat, striking from a position and at a target no one thought to guard or protect.

It was the fifth rotation of the thirty-seventh orbit after the fall of the Goddess. From the deep it came, streaking through endless space, soaring majestically through the heavens. How many of my people stood and watched the wondrous sight in the star-filled night sky? How many expressions of delight and amazement turned to horror and grief at what followed?

The faint scratching of the old-fashioned pen on the fine linen paper of the journal ceased. Constantine blew gently on the page to dry the ink then closed the journal. There were those who found his predilection for the outdated quill and ink to be humorous or eccentric. He gave no care to their opinions. The act of putting pen to paper, letting his thoughts flow from mind to page, was salubrious, providing a pristine bailiwick where there was no need to couch his words in Delphic phrases. This was his one measure of true privacy. There was no fear in his words being discovered and used as weapons against him. When he closed the book the pages would become, to all appearances, void and empty. Only the touch of his hand would activate the special ink, a unique formula that responded only to his specific genetic code.

As was more often than not the case, when his thoughts turned to the history of his people, his mood darkened. So many centuries had passed since the great Darkness befell V'Kar. So many battles and still no victor to the quest for V'Kar.

How many centuries had he walked this foreign world, an expatriate, separated from all he loved and held dear? How many more centuries would he suffer exile here?

A growl of frustration rumbled in his throat. He pushed the questions and thoughts away like a bitter wine, seeking sweetness to ease the acidity. An image of Resa appeared in his mind, bringing with it a wash of hunger stronger than any he'd known in his long life.

His lust for her was not merely unwise, it was dangerous. To him and all his kind. She was sworn to one of their oldest Terran enemies. The Alliance. A group of humans who'd discovered the true nature of his people centuries ago and had lusted after the powers of his kind. When they finally realized that the powers could not be taken or harnessed, that not even forced breeding with humans could re-create what Constantine's people were, the war changed to one of annihilation. If the Alliance could not harness and use the powers of the V'Kar for their own means then they intended to destroy them.

Were it not for that lust, that craving for power and dominion, beings such as Resa Vânător would not exist, a hybrid brought about by the seduction of a male of his kind by a human female. Dhampir, the humans called them. Children bred for one purpose. To seek out and destroy the V'Kar or Vampyres as the Alliance had labeled them.

Constantine had overcome, destroyed and vanquished many Dhampir during his time, and had no doubt that he would do so again. But Resa Vânător struck a chord within him that he could not deny, a passion that burned so hot that it deterred him from a course of wise action and led him down a dangerous path.

Would she destroy him if given the chance? Perhaps it was his vanity but he thought not. He knew her longing for him, her lust for not just what pleasures of the flesh he could provide, but her hunger for truth. Answers only he could provide, truths only he could reveal.

It was a delicious, if at times vexing, game, and one he was loath to let come to an end. Wise or not, he would continue on his course. And in the end, she would bend to his will. Once that was accomplished, the matter of whether she lived or died would be decided. He could not procrastinate, however. The time to make a move had come.

Forces were amassing against him and soon his focus would have to turn to the battle for V'Kar.

And in that battle, she could prove beneficial. But only if she fought by his side. With her at his side, he held an advantage over his opponents and the Alliance. For locked within her mind were the secrets of that damnable group. He had only to breach the barrier that prevented her from accessing those memories and he would have the key to their demise in his grasp.

With that thought in mind, he rose and hurried from the room. Twilight was upon the world, and soon she would go out to hunt. Tonight, he would make sure that she found him. And before dawn, fate would be decided.

* * * * *

Resa woke with a start, hearing his voice whisper in her mind. *Come to me, Dhampir. I await you.*

She threw the covers off and climbed out of bed, "Oh I'll come to you, you miserable life-sucker," she grouched as she headed for the shower. "And when I find you, you will give me answers."

Getting answers was what fueled her now. She'd gone to see Bram and had posed the questions to him. He'd responded with a dressing-down that'd left her feeling emotionally abraded, racked with guilt at doubting the motives of the Alliance.

By the time she was back home, however, guilt had turned to ire. Once again Bram had played her, used her devotion and gratitude to him as a weapon to bend her to his will.

And that eroded her confidence in him and the Alliance in a way nothing else could. It was clear that she'd not get answers from Bram. His agenda was in strict adherence to the dictates of the Alliance. Like a zealot to his god, he would not deter from the path they prescribed, and he expected her to demonstrate the same unswerving and unquestioning loyalty.

She'd spent her life trying to do just that. But something had always gnawed at the edges of her mind, questions rising in the silence when she was alone. And now Pandora's appearance in her life had added fuel to the fire that burned for truth.

Pandora had said that Constantine held the answers. Resa frowned as she remembered what else Pandora had said. That Constantine had to be protected. She groaned in frustration and confusion as she stepped under the spray of the shower. What was she to do? Forego all she'd been taught to believe, cut herself off from those who'd schooled and cared for her to follow the words of a woman who might be nothing more than a manifestation of a Vampyre, trying to trick her mind?

Resa didn't know what to do. Except find Constantine and force the answers from him.

That thought brought a thrill of fear and excitement. Constantine was reputed to be the oldest and strongest of his kind. Were her skills and weapons strong enough to defeat someone of his strength and knowledge? More importantly, could she shield herself from the hunger he inspired, the fire his voice ignited in her belly? Was she strong enough to resist the temptation he offered?

She was about to find out. Hurriedly she finished her shower and dressed, choosing her customary tight, black leather pants and vest and a matching overcoat that hid the sword sheathed at her side and the dagger strapped to her thigh.

The crossbow was impossible to hide, but she had enough of the ability inherited from her mother, a witch, to cast a charm of concealment. Humans would not notice the weapon. It didn't matter if Vampyres saw her weapon. She wanted them to know she was armed and ready for battle.

Grabbing a bottle of water from the refrigerator on her way, she stepped out into the fading light. Time to hunt.

Chapter Three

Constantine sensed her long before he smelled or saw her, felt her unique vibration in the air. He did not move or turn from his position, standing at the iron railing of the decorative fence that bordered the ornamental lake in the center of the city, bent forward casually with his forearms propped on the railing, hands hanging loose and relaxed.

He smiled at the knowledge of the image he projected, completely relaxed and at ease, not in the least concerned or intimidated by the approach of a Dhampir. That always unsettled them, that he was so unafraid. And an unsettled mind was far easier to manipulate. He needed her to be unsettled.

Her footsteps were light and sure, her stride long and confident as she approached from behind.

"You're either the cockiest fucker on the planet or the most stupid. I could have easily killed you." She stepped up beside him, her eyes on the water instead of him.

Her voice was pitched low, its natural husky tone full of false confidence. He turned his head to regard her. "You flatter yourself, Dhampir. I sensed you a block away."

She shrugged and pivoted to lean back against the railing, regarding him with an unmistakable mixture of fear and fascination. He smiled up at her, a slow, sexy smile that had her pupils expanding even more than the fading light required, giving him visual proof of his effect on her.

"Odd meeting place," she commented.

He shrugged, knowing the gesture, however common, would appear elegant. "It suits my needs."

"Hmm, yes, I can see why."

He'd chosen the location because of its close proximity to a number of trendy night spots for what popular culture had labeled the Goth crowd. People who pretended to be that which they were not, creatures of the night who shunned the light of day. Their pasty skin, overly darkened hair and black clothing were comical to him, but did provide excellent camouflage. A stylish man in dark clothing could go unnoticed in such surroundings if he so chose. But his interest was not on their surroundings.

"Word has it that the Alliance is displeased with you, Vânător."

"Word is wrong," she lied with remarkable ease, giving no hint at all to her deception.

Constantine chuckled. "You're good. I'll give you that. But lying is unnecessary. We both know that Bram was highly displeased with you and gave you implicit orders to eliminate me posthaste."

"It's hardly news that my job is to destroy you."

Another chuckle brought a hard glint to her eyes, a slight creasing of the skin between her elegant brows. "You spar well, Vânător, but will not find it so easy to deflect my attention. Let us speak of the questions that have placed you in such disfavor with the unholy Alliance you are sworn to."

"Unholy?" Her question was a scoff. "How completely unbelievable that the likes of you could label anything unholy."

Constantine straightened so that she was forced to tilt her head back to look up at him. "The likes of me? How you flaunt your ignorance with such a statement. You know nothing of me, Resa Vânător."

"Then correct me." She straightened, the movement putting her closer, close enough that he could feel the heat from her body.

He pushed back the sudden stab of lust, the need to seize her, take her. Hear her cry his name as passion overcame her. "So now we come to it."

"It?"

"The reason you've sought me. The reason our encounters have been so...anticlimactic. The reason we both live, facing one another now. You want something from me."

Resa's first reaction was to lie and deny it, but she suppressed it and met his eyes, locking with and holding his gaze despite the near staggering force that hit her, making her body burn, her heart race and her sex grow moist with desire.

"Yes, I do."

Constantine's smile was knowing. Knowing enough that heat rose to her face. She refused, however, to look away. What was the point? He knew as well as she that the chemistry between them was potent. Denying it would be pointless.

"Then ask, Dhampir. What it is you want from me?"

"Answers."

"Words?" He chuckled. "We stand here, our bodies straining to contain the energy that arcs between us and our minds screaming for us to give in to the hunger we feel, and you want only words?"

"I need answers." She grimaced at the need that crept into her voice, wanting to show no vulnerability to him.

"And what of my needs, Resa Vânător?" He reached up to place one finger beneath her chin and tilt her head a bit more.

"Don't do this," she whispered before she could stop herself, and then hated herself for the weakness.

"Don't do this?" His finger traced down her throat slowly, sensually. "Or this?" His words registered in her brain a moment before he lowered his head and kissed her.

She would not have been able to summon anger or indignation at his bold move if the kiss had been brutal or demanding. That she could have accepted, relished and later dismissed as a momentary insanity. But such was not the case. His kiss was one of

tenderness. His lips brushed hers, the touch as light as the wings of a dragonfly. Ever so slowly his lips caressed, the pressure never increasing as his tongue snaked out to trace her bottom lip.

It was the kiss of a lover. And that scared her enough to have her putting her palm on his chest to push away. But he did not budge. She turned her head to the side, denying him access to her lips and letting anger swell. It was her best defense against the pull of the forbidden feelings.

"Afraid, Vânător?" His whisper against the side of her face forced her into deception.

"Hardly," she scoffed, and used both hand to push against him.

He barely budged, just a slight sway backward. His hands moved to cover hers at the same time he stepped closer, pressing her back against the rail, his hard lean form molding to her.

"You lie," he said with a smile.

"You play dirty," she replied, secretly exulting in the feel of him against her, all hard muscle. Including one that was pressing against her belly, making her acutely aware of his arousal.

"And you don't?"

She looked up in surprise at the sincerity in his voice. "I came here for answers, not sex, Vampyre."

"And what are you willing to pay for the answers you seek, Resa?"

Her name rolled off his lips, sounding exotic and sensual, evoking images of tangled sheets, damp skin, long breathy moans and flesh meeting flesh.

"How do I know I can trust you to tell me the truth?"

His eyes glittered in the low light, sending a shiver skittering down her spine. "There is one way you can be sure."

"What?"

"Take me home with you, submit to me, and you can know my thoughts."

Resa's insides turned to liquid when he said the words "submit to me". A primitive, completely female need sparked to life and flared much hotter than was comfortable.

God, how she wanted to say yes. To feel his hands and mouth on her, to feel and taste every inch of him. To feel him inside her. To submit to him. It was her every fantasy rolled up into one tempting package. And it was forbidden. Which made it all the more appealing.

But taking him home with her was out of the question. She'd long been aware that the Alliance kept surveillance on her comings and goings. Bram always knew when she was home, and when she had a visitor. There was no way in the seventh level of hell she was taking Constantine home with her. She might as well slice her own throat because the end result would be the same.

"I can't."

"Can't or won't?"

She shook her head, as much to clear it as in argument. "You know they watch me. If I take you home with me, neither of us will live the night."

He chuckled. "I have no doubt that our coupling will be memorable, but I doubt it will kill either of us."

She snorted at his tease. "Joke if you want, but the minute you step foot inside my house they'll know you're there and they'll dispatch a team."

"I'm much harder to kill than you imagine."

"Iridium kills all of your kind. And the Alliance has special weapons constructed with an iridium blend, as you well know."

Constantine regarded her in silence for a long moment. "Are you then concerned for my safety, Resa?"

She literally jumped at the question. What was wrong with her? She was supposed to be making sure he didn't draw another breath and here she was warning him of possible danger? Why?

The answer was already in her mind. Pandora had promised that the answers she sought lay with Constantine. Until she had those answers, she could not let him die.

What she didn't want to acknowledge was that the thought of him dying filled her with a pain unlike any she'd known. She didn't understand it. Didn't want to. He was the last man she wanted to have feelings for. But as it went in the song Bram was fond of quoting, "you can't always get what you want".

She briefly wondered why he never finished the verse and if it could be applicable to her now. She would forsake want in favor of need. What she needed was answers and her best source was making an offer. She couldn't take him home, but that didn't mean she couldn't be alone with him.

"What about taking me home with you?"

He threw back his head and laughed, a rich deep sound that was about the sexiest thing she'd ever heard. "Ah yes," he said at length. "I'm sure you'd receive a royal welcome."

She shrugged in understanding. His kind hated her. More than a few had tried to kill her. Some had come close. She was as hated to them as they were to the Alliance.

"Then neutral ground," she proposed. "There are plenty of hotels around."

"I have a better idea," he said. "A place that is private where we will be undisturbed."

"Where?"

"Come with me and find out." He offered her his hand.

She considered it for a moment. What she was about to do went against everything she'd been taught, everything she'd been trained to believe. Was she strong enough to

go against a lifetime of training? And was all that she'd been made to believe nothing more than lies, invented in some sick power struggle?

"You are more than strong enough," he whispered. "For this one night, let us agree to set aside all preconceived notions of one another. Forget all we've been told. Disregard all rumor and myth. For this one night, let us agree to share only the truth. And when the night has ended, then you can decide what to do with the knowledge you've gained. You have only to submit to me once and all you seek will be yours."

"Okay," she agreed and took his hand. It might be the most stupid thing she'd ever done but she had to do it. Win or lose, live or die, she wanted to know.

Constantine's eyes narrowed dangerously a split second before she sensed them. Dhampirs. Three of them. And they were close.

Resa did not stop to consider her actions. She snatched her sword from its scabbard and offered it to Constantine. "I assume you know how to use this?"

"I'll manage," he replied as he took the sword from her. "They seek to box us in."

"You think?" she countered, snapping her blades into her hands. With the lake to their backs, the hunters could close in on them from all three sides.

Resa opened her mind to their presence. "I know them," she spoke low.

"There is yet time to escape," Constantine replied.

She shook her head. She'd already read what was in the minds of the hunters. They were not just there to ensure that Constantine died. They'd been given orders to eliminate her as well.

She'd been betrayed.

She cut him a quick look. "They're not just here for you."

His eyes glittered like hard jewels at her words. "Then let them come."

She saw the first one. A tall, muscular man she'd known all her life, Ethan. He approached from her left, his pace slow and measured. She knew the drill. Give the others time to move in, coordinate the attack.

"You don't want to do this, Ethan," she said as she felt Constantine shift slightly beside her, angling to the right.

She sensed another approaching from the direction in which Constantine watched. Amilee, a woman older than herself, hardened and bitter from years of killing, who had few friends and many enemies.

"You betrayed the Alliance," Ethan answered.

"Worse than that, you betrayed Bram." A new voice came from in front of them.

Resa's eyes moved to see the man move toward them, shoving one side of his long coat aside to free him to draw his sword. Joseph was the most deadly of the three. Older than all of them, he'd fought at Bram's side since she was a child. Had helped in her training.

"It appears that I am the one betrayed," she commented.

All three stopped a few yards away. "I come bearing a reprieve, Resa Vânător," Joseph announced. "Kill this abomination. Now. With we three standing witness to your loyalty and all will be forgiven."

Resa heard the lie in his voice, knew that no matter what she did, she was marked and the Alliance would not let her live. Pandora was right. Nothing was as it seemed. Bram, the man who'd raised her, had been like a father to her, had betrayed her. Signed the order for her execution.

All because she wanted answers. That told her that the Alliance was not what it purported to be. They harbored secrets that, if revealed, would destroy them, have their followers turn away from them and their lies.

And the answers to discovering those secrets stood beside her, facing what were once her compatriots and friends.

She took one step forward. "Tell Bram," she cut Constantine a quick smile before finishing, "fuck you."

Constantine was surprised at the speed of her attack. Before the man she called Ethan could react, Resa had flown at him, knives flashing. Constantine saw him counter with his sword as the woman to his right attacked, her sword slashing at him.

Her speed was nothing compared to his and he dispatched her with one swift blow. Her body fell with a weighted thud as her head thumped against the metal railing and fell to the sidewalk.

Constantine heard a scream from across the street but had no time to focus on what attention they might be attracting. Joseph moved in with remarkable speed and skill considering his age. Constantine whirled on him to see Resa dive at him from behind. Her arms reached around his neck then withdrew in a slashing motion. Blood spurted from his throat, his head all but severed from his body. He managed to take one more step before he collapsed.

Constantine saw the crowd of people on the street across from them. Many of them had cell phones to their ears and the number of onlookers was growing. Soon law enforcement would arrive. It was time for him and Resa to make their departure.

Resa snapped her arms to retract the bloodied blades back into their harnesses on her forearms. Her chest, neck and face were splattered with blood. She started toward him, staggered and stopped, a look of shock coming on her face.

Constantine tossed the sword aside and ran to her, catching her as she crumpled. He saw the cut in her vest and ripped it open, revealing the gash in her chest.

"I guess we're more alike than I realized," she whispered a second before her eyes rolled back.

He'd not considered it. Being a breed, a Dhampir was susceptible to the effects of iridium. The cut from Ethan's blade had poisoned her.

Never could he have imagined such pain as what tore through him when her eyes closed. Grief and rage as black and thick as the dark waters that formed the marshes populating the area enveloped him.

Heedless of the onlookers, he gathered her up, using his ability to transform so that mighty wings sprouted from his back, ripping through the silk of his jacket. With one downward beat of his wings he took to the air, her limp form cradled protectively in his arms.

Chapter Four

Journal Entry

How does one explain in a few words an entire history? What words can be used to make another understand the subtle nuances of a civilization eons older than any they know?

And why do I find myself wanting this half-breed woman to understand the history of my peoples and how I came to be exiled here on her world, labeled an unholy creature of myth, when in fact I am not? Why is it important to gain her acceptance? She is of the enemy, a creature bred and trained to hunt and kill those of my kind.

Why does she inspire such passion? And even more disconcerting, why do I feel such depth of emotion for her? It is illogical and unwise and yet my heart seems deaf to the warnings of my mind when it relates to her.

Now, however, I face the task of divulging great truths to her, truths that are powerful and could prove deadly to those of my kind on this world. Can I trust her with such truth? Where shall I start my tale?

Shall I speak of the many years it took for the survivors to rebuild some semblance of society? Each world developed according to its environment and its resources. Shadallah remained as it was, the center of our system. Hoarding what resources we possessed, the inhabitants of Shadallah became greedy and self-centered. If it meant that the people of the planets of Nuria and Valia must perish for us to survive, then so be it. Our duty was to the people of Shadallah.

Of course, the peoples of Valia and Nuria were less than appreciative at the attitude of the inhabitants of Shadallah. They were all V'Karian and should share what resources existed. The people of Shadallah did not agree.

Soon there were armies, borders to be guarded. But a world cannot stay cut off indefinitely if there are not people within its borders who are seeing to the needs of the many. No one wanted to tend to the task of raising food or powering the stations that fed the cities with power. Soon shortages began to cause worry. We would either have to trade for what we needed with the other two worlds or learn to grow our own food and supply our own raw materials. But the people of Shadallah were not of the worker class. We had always been people of politics and science. Our technological achievements were closely guarded, giving us supremacy over the other two, more backward races.

With a climate that was not severe, and the gifts bequeathed to us from our union with the symbiotic race, the Vox Narr, the people of Shadallah remained as we had always been—clear skin possessed of a sun-kissed tint, glorious dark hair, strong physical bodies, and eyes the color of the flowers that grew in the gardens of the great temples, a shade of violet that could only be rivaled by occasional streaks of color in the sunset sky. Due to the constancy in appearance over generations, the people of Shadallah came to be known as the Pureblood, the D’Harahn.

* * * * *

A faint scratching sound brought Resa up through the fog clouding her mind and she blinked. Unfamiliar surroundings met her eyes. A brief stab of panic had her lying very still, her eyes darting rapidly around the room.

The last thing she remembered was Constantine holding her in his arms. Was her memory faulty, her mind playing tricks on her, or had she really seen fear and concern in the depths of his violet eyes?

Her hands moved beneath the sheets along her bare skin. A bandage covered a large square on her chest. Well, she’d been wounded before. Wounds would heal. What concerned her was the way the metal of Ethan’s sword had affected her. Bram and all of the trainers had always assured the Dhampir that they would not be greatly affected by

the iridium in the weapons, that their diluted Vampyre blood would prevent the fatal effects of the metal.

Was that just another of Bram's lies? Tears threatened, making her squint her eyes tightly to fight them back. How could he have ordered her death? He, who claimed to love her like a daughter? What kind of sick, twisted love was that?

Or was it love at all? Had it ever been? Perhaps she'd never been anything more than a weapon for him to hurl at his enemies. As expendable as any of the many blades and arrows the Alliance had manufactured for their hunters.

Apparently her instincts about Pandora were right. She had spoken the truth. Nothing was what it seemed. And that meant that everything she'd ever believed in or held to be true was a lie.

She pushed back the pain that sought to overwhelm her. She would not grieve for Bram, for any of them. The Alliance was little more than a lot of liars, an organization founded on greed and deception. They might try to hide the truth but she'd discover it despite their efforts. She didn't want or need them. She could make it on her own

And suddenly the enormity of it hit her. Without Bram and the Alliance, she was completely alone. They'd clean out her house, her bank accounts. Probably even erase her identity. Make it impossible for her to survive. That way she'd be easier to dispose of.

There was no way to stop them. She'd have to find a way to survive. To stay one step ahead of them.

But right now she needed to discover where she was. She sat up and saw him. Sitting in a chair by the window, writing in a small journal, occasionally dipping his old-fashioned quill pen into an inkwell that sat on the window ledge. Shafts of moonlight from the window slanted across his face, giving sharp contrast to the lines and angles, the strong patrician nose and chiseled jaw.

Had he any idea how utterly beautiful he was? Even from across the room, his magnetism pulled her, flooded her with longing.

"Where am I?" she asked, wrapping the sheet around her as she stood.

"My home," he answered simply, closing the book and laying aside the pen. He rose to walk to her, placing the book on the chair he vacated. "You should rest," he said, placing his hands on her upper arms.

"I'm fine," she replied, the heat from his touch making her body flush. "How long was I unconscious?"

"Three days."

Three days? His answer stunned her. "That's impossible!" Her eyes moved to her forearm and saw a bandage covering it just below the crease of the elbow. "You found the tracking device the Alliance implanted."

"Yes, it was removed before you were brought here."

"I hope whatever place you used to have it done was abandoned, because the Alliance will be all over it like white on rice."

"I assure you I did not place any of my people in harm's way."

She nodded and looked around. "Nice place. You live here alone?"

"Hardly."

"Then I better go." She looked around for her clothing. "Where're my clothes?"

"It would be wise if you waited until you've fully recovered. You'll be happy to know that you were correct in your statement, Resa. Apparently you are far more like me than anyone imagined."

"Meaning what?" she asked, letting him guide her back to the bed.

He pushed her down gently on the bed and sat beside her. "Your mother may have been human, but you are far more like your father than your mother. Remarkably so. My physicians and scientists find it quite...intriguing."

"Your physicians and scientists?" She slung her legs off the bed and stood to face him, clutching the sheet to her chest. "What, you had me...studied while I was unconscious?"

"Had I not, you would have died."

"I've been wounded before."

"But not with an iridium-tainted weapon."

She blew out her breath in frustration and sat back down. "Okay, sorry. So what's the deal with doctors and scientists? Why does a Vampyre need people like that?"

"I am not a Vampyre."

"Yes you are."

"No, I am most definitely not. That is a heinous word invented by humans to try to label something they do not understand."

Resa's eyes narrowed fractionally at the ire in his voice. "And it pisses you off."

Constantine's frown vanished and a chuckle escaped his lips. "In a manner of speaking."

"Well, I'm sorry. But if you're not a Vampyre then what are you?"

"I am Constantine Belenus of the D'Harahn, Heir Apparent to the Throne of Shadallah, and the crown prince of V'Kar."

"Say what?"

"I am Constantine Bel –"

"Yeah, I heard you, but what the heck is the Dah – Dah..."

"D'Harahn."

"Yeah, the dah-ha-rahn, and what's the throne of Sha-dall-ah and...crown prince of..."

"V'Kar."

"Right. Vah-car."

"It is a rather lengthy tale."

Resa scooted back, propping pillows against the thick, carved headboard so that she could recline in comfort. "Well, since I don't have a job—or probably a home or bank account or car or, shit, maybe even an identity anymore—I guess I have plenty of time."

The corner of Constantine's mouth moved up in a humorous smirk. "For someone who has just been robbed of all they knew, you are remarkably calm."

"It is what it is," she said, refusing to give in to the panic that lurked in the dark recesses of her mind. "So, you were saying?"

Constantine made himself comfortable, lying on his side, propped on one arm. "It is difficult to know where to begin."

"How about what exactly the D'Harahn are and where you're from?"

Constantine told her of the star system of V'Kar and the catastrophe that had befallen it. He spoke of the three surviving worlds and their people and how his people had come to be known as the Pureblood or D'Harahn. He told her of the sickness that threatened to wipe out the entire population of the star system, a sickness caused by residual radiation from the cosmic cataclysm.

He omitted telling her of the Vox Narr, saying only that the scientists had discovered a cure for the radiation sickness and that the cure had wrought unexpected benefits.

The D'Harahn were gifted with the powers of telepathy including varying degrees of mind control and telekinetic abilities. Along with that came the ability to physically transform or shape-shift.

The Valians also developed the ability to shape-shift and their telepathic abilities were strong, as strong as that of the D'Harahn. They did not possess telekinetic powers but were capable of moving at incredible speed.

Telepathic abilities were greatly enhanced in the Nurians. Their powers of mind control far exceeded those of the other races of V'Kar, as did their telekinetic abilities. They could not shape-shift but could move at incredible speeds.

No one had ever been able to determine why the abilities were not equal. Perhaps it had to do with the environment in which the three races lived, or the genetic mutation caused by the sickness.

When, hours later, he paused, she stared at him in amazement and disbelief.

"This is...a little unbelievable, to be honest. If you really are some...alien, then why are you here? Seems to me you'd still be on Shadallah if you're a crown prince. Why would you or any of the V'Kar be here on Earth?"

Constantine smiled and opened his mouth to answer but a knock sounded at the door. He turned to look in that direction. "Enter."

A handsome, dark-haired man stepped into the room. "Your attention is required, Your Majesty."

Constantine nodded. "I will join you momentarily."

The man bowed his head respectfully and left, but not before casting a curious glance in Resa's direction.

"Your Majesty?" she asked with a bit of derision.

"A title of respect," he said in a somewhat harsh tone that had her sitting up a bit straighter. "Do not doubt what I have revealed to you to be the truth, Resa. I am of royal blood and command the respect and allegiance of many. And with my position comes responsibility that you do not, as yet, understand. But in time you will. That I promise you.

"However," he added as he stood and bent over with his hands propped on the bed. "For now, you will remain here and rest. Upon my return we will speak more of the truth you seek."

"You mean I'm a prisoner?" she asked, not liking the idea in the least.

"A guest," he corrected. "Albeit a rather unwelcome one at the moment. Do not suppose for an instant that you are not known to my people, or have not earned great animosity. Even a crown prince finds it a challenge to change such ingrained hatred."

Resa hadn't considered what a precarious position she was in. How could she not have realized that she was as much in enemy territory here as he would be in an Alliance stronghold?

"Is your rule sure enough that you can guarantee my safety? If not, then give me my weapons so I can at least defend myself if the need arises."

He smiled and leaned down lower to graze her lips with his. "You have my word, Resa Vânător. No harm will come to you as long as you are in my domain."

The soft kiss was enough to ignite a fire inside her. She reached up to take his face in her hands, initiating a kiss that was not gentle or shy. She heard a groan in his throat a moment before one hand moved to the back of her head, fisting in her hair to pull her head back. She may have initiated the kiss, but he quickly became the dominant, plundering her mouth then moving down her neck, leaving a trail of fire in the wake of his lips and tongue.

When he reached the crook of her neck, he paused, nipping lightly at the skin. "You tempt me so," he whispered against her skin.

"Not tempt," she whispered in return, wanting more. "Invite."

He pulled back, releasing her. "Then rest well, my huntress, for when I return your invitation will be accepted."

She smiled and lay back. "Are you saying I'll need my energy, Vamp—sorry, Prince Constantine Belenus?"

"Indeed," he said with a smile sexy enough to fan the flames of desire higher.

"Then hurry back," she urged.

He gave her another smile, and passed his hand from her forehead, over her eyes. "Sleep, my huntress."

Resa fought the sudden lassitude that claimed her, making her eyelids heavy, too heavy to keep open. With a sigh of surrender she gave in to the pull and slept.

Chapter Five

Everyone stood when Constantine entered the room. Twenty-seven heads bowed in respect as he strode through the room to take his place at the head of the massive conference table.

Once he was seated, his consul, Madron, addressed him. "Your Majesty, there are matters of grave importance that require your attention. We have received word that Leonidas' encampment in Madagascar was attacked by the Alliance. Thirty were killed and a dozen taken prisoner."

Constantine's eyes narrowed at the news. Leonidas, the exiled Heir and firstborn son of the Praetor of Nuria, the desert world of V'Kar, was not an ally to the D'Harahn. But the idea of the Alliance killing any of the V'Kar on this planet filled Constantine with a cold anger.

"Why take them prisoner?"

Madron looked to a man across the table. Dark of hair but older than most of the assembly, Azarth was the leading scientific authority of the D'Harahn. He'd volunteered to go into exile on Earth when the Emperor decreed that his firstborn son would suffer exile as a demonstration of the Emperor's determination to end the war between the worlds of V'Kar and discover a solution to the plague that threatened their entire star system.

A select few knew that imperial edict had far more to do with the Emperor's fear than making peace. He and his contemporaries, the leaders of the other two worlds, had held power for a long time. It was well known that the people favored their Heirs, looked upon them as new hope for peace and finding a solution to the problems that threatened the lives of all their people. Perhaps they could succeed where their fathers had failed.

But the Emperor would not allow his power to be usurped, not even by the Crown Prince. Sending the Heirs of the three worlds into exile was a means of protecting himself, while outwardly appearing to the people as a sacrifice. He was so eager to end the war between the worlds that he would remove those who promoted it, even if it meant sending his beloved son into exile.

"It has long been known that the Alliance seeks a means of accessing the abilities the races of V'Kar possess. They have recently recruited new minds to their cause, men and women who profess to be able to unravel the genetic code and replicate it in humans."

"And your stance on such claims?" Constantine asked.

"They will fail."

Constantine considered the news for a moment. "Leonidas' reaction to the attack?"

Madron referred to another man farther down the table. Gaius, general of Constantine's security force on Earth. "According to latest intelligence, his people are poised to move on a stronghold of the Alliance within days. A remote but strategically important fortification in the Bavarian Alps."

Constantine nodded. "And what of the priest? Any word from him?"

Madron nodded. "A communiqué was received this morning, disavowing any knowledge of the impending attack and offering assistance to the Nurians in terms of resources, not manpower."

"Ever the peace seeker," Constantine commented and earned more than one chuckle from the assembly. Octavian Vazanti, successor to the throne of Ishban Shamurz Burahn, the Monarch of Valia, was not a warrior the likes of Leonidas. His people favored battles fought with subterfuge and intrigue, but they were every bit as deadly as the Nurians.

As High Priest and sole male member of the Order of the Sisterhood, the Sybelle De'Fane V'Kar, Octavian wielded much power and posed a considerable threat to all of the D'Harahn. While Constantine's people and the Nurians might make scornful

comments on the virility and battle skills of the Valians, all secretly feared the stealthy Valians and their leader here on earth, Octavian Vazanti.

“Finally...” Madron turned Constantine from private thoughts. “There is the matter of the Dhampir.”

More than one person held their breath as Constantine turned his eyes on Madron, the dangerous glitter making Madron blanch.

“There is no matter to be discussed,” Constantine announced, trying to stem the sudden pang of need that lanced through him at the mention of her name. Even now, separated by numerous walls, he could feel her like a fire in his veins. “Resa Vânător is under my protection.”

“Forgive me, Sire, but is that wise?” Madron asked. “How many of us has she killed or tried to kill? She’s one of the foremost hunters of the Alliance and to take her into our midst—”

“She risked her life to save mine,” Constantine cut him off. “Killed her own to save me. Do you suggest that I should reward such an act of courage and sacrifice with deception or death? Do you dare suggest that I dishonor one who has sacrificed all that I might live?”

Madron looked away, seeking support from the others at the table. But no voice was raised. Constantine looked around at the assembly. “Resa Vânător is, as you have stated, one of the most skilled of the hunters of the Alliance. And having been trained by Bram himself possesses much knowledge of our enemy. Turning her, gaining her loyalty would be of enormous benefit to us in defeating this age-old enemy.”

Azarth spoke up. “I must add a word here. According to the genetic tests I’ve conducted, Resa Vânător is also unique among the Dhampir. Her genetic code not only proves that she carries the blood of the D’Harahn, but she carries a Vox Narr within her.”

“How is that possible?” Madron asked.

“A question I am waiting to hear answered,” Constantine added.

"I have no answer," Azarth replied. "What human code she possesses is diluted and small in comparison to her V'Karian makeup. She could hold an important part of the puzzle we've been trying to piece together for a millennium. I've never encountered a mutant bearing the Vox Narr."

There was a moment of silence. Constantine knew the news would unnerve as well as intrigue everyone assembled. It was unprecedented. And something Azarth and the scientific minds beneath him were eager to study.

"You think she holds the key to our infertility problems?" a woman across from him asked.

"Possibly," Azarth replied. "And that above all is paramount to the survival of all V'Kar. If there is a way to breed with humans and produce beings with dominant D'Harahn genetic codes that can host the Vox Narr, then there may be a possibility of altering that code to erase the human portions. And if we can do that, we can then create a new race of breeders and repopulate our world. Unless," he paused and looked around, "you'd prefer that we relegate ourselves to breeding with humans and diluting what we are forever."

A chorus rose at the comment. No one of V'Kar wanted to lose what made them unique in the Universe. Their inability to reproduce had plagued them for longer than humans had walked their world, and they were still unable to find a remedy. If there was a chance, any chance that Resa held a key then her value to all of them was increased exponentially.

Constantine stood, his hands on the glossy surface of the table. "Azarth speaks true. We need her. So hear me and hear me well. Any hand that is raised against her will incur my wrath. She will be treated as an honored guest."

Azarth gestured to get his attention and Constantine nodded in his direction. "It is vital that we know if a Dhampir can be successfully impregnated."

Constantine felt a chill wash over him and spoke before Azarth could say more. "Then," he said with a sly smile, "I shall put that to the test."

There was laughter. Everyone assumed he would take Resa as they had all taken human females. Mesmerized them, coupled with them, taken life force from them and left them, moving on to another, caring not if a seed was planted.

Constantine chuckled with them then sobered. "She bears information we need and will have. She is under my protection. When the time comes that I am confident of her loyalty, she will be welcomed into our midst as one of us."

He did not wait for agreement. He would be obeyed. Pushing aside thoughts of enemies, plots and strategies, he hurried toward his bedchamber.

* * * * *

Resa's sleep was troubled. She could feel Bram reaching out mentally for her, trying to find her. The part of her that had been a child at his feet, hanging on his every word and idolizing him, wanted to reach out to him. But the woman who'd been betrayed fought the child within, erecting a barrier of darkness, shielding herself from his questing mind.

She tossed and turned, coming out of sleep feeling angry and out of sorts. In the kind of mood that could only be dispelled by one of two things. Battle or sex.

As if in answer to her thought the door opened. Constantine stepped inside, closing and locking the door behind him. Something in the way he moved, the tension in his body and hard glint in his eyes, made the hair on the back of her neck stand up and her nipples tighten.

He stalked over to the bed, stripping off his silk jacket and tossing it carelessly to the floor. "You should be sleeping."

"I'm not sleepy," she replied as casually as possible considering the tension pouring off him in waves and the hot need that burned inside her.

His brow furrowed and suddenly it dawned on her. He'd used his ability to make her sleep. "Oh I get it. I shouldn't have been able to overcome your sleep suggestion?"

Sorry, I guess the Vamp – oops, D’Harahn powers aren’t one hundred percent effective on me.”

His jaw tightened at the taunt but he smiled coldly. “We have unfinished business, Dhampir.”

Annoyance flared at the scorn he placed in the word. “Careful, Vampyre. As your own people said, we’re more alike than not.”

“You enjoy inciting anger, don’t you, huntress?” He reached out and grabbed her by the hair, hauling her to her knees on the bed.

She paid no mind to the sheets sliding down her body, revealing her nudity. Her rage broke through the surface, fueling her with energy. “Hands off!” She grabbed his wrist, digging her fingertips into the vulnerable pressure points hard enough to break his grip, and rolling away to come to a standing position on the opposite side of the bed as he made another grab for her.

“As I told you, there’s a price for knowledge,” he said in a voice that was a heady mixture of seduction and danger.

“And as I recall, I saved your hide, so I’d say I’m paid in full,” she taunted. “So why don’t we get back to where you left off in your story before we were interrupted.”

He started around the bed toward her, his steps smooth and sure, like a great cat on the prowl, stalking its prey. “I think not. First you submit then you learn the truths you seek.”

Resa despised the burst of hunger his words precipitated inside her. Hated the way she longed to give in to him, submit to whatever he wanted from her. She did not submit. To anyone. No matter how much she might want it. It just wasn’t in her nature.

“Sorry, baby,” she crooned in a seductive tone, watching him move around the corner of the bed. “Submission isn’t my style.”

“You lie,” he said with a knowing smile. “You long for it, Resa. Even now your body burns for it. See how your nipples pucker with anticipation and your sex weeps?”

She snorted and dove across the bed as he suddenly lunged at her. "Like I said, submission isn't my style."

Constantine growled. Actually growled as she backed away from the bed. He leapt across it as easily as a child playing hopscotch, landing lightly on his feet in front of her. "Then perhaps it is time you were taught a new style."

She laughed in his face, thrilling to the danger that shimmered around him. "You think you're man enough? Then bring it on."

One quick hiss was all the warning she received before he attacked, the back of his hand impacting the side of her face hard enough to send her reeling sideways.

She recovered faster than he anticipated, based on the surprised look in his eyes when she came at him, pivoting into a kick that caught him dead center of his chest.

It had less effect than she would have wanted, but it did force him to take a step back. He grinned and for a moment she felt a shimmer of fear. Suddenly his eye teeth were elongated, like the canines of a great wolf, and his eyes shone with an unearthly red hue as if awash with diluted blood.

"Nice try," she panted out the words between blows. "But I can do that too."

She grinned at him, knowing he'd see the same sharp teeth and red eyes he'd tried to intimidate her with. It was an ability she'd received more than one beating for displaying as a child. Bram had warned her that any resemblance to the Vampyres had to be suppressed or the Alliance might have cause to fear and mistrust her.

Constantine didn't seem particularly surprised. He grinned and came at her. She laughed in the delight of battle, a wild sound that had nothing to do with humor and everything to do with passion and hunger, kinetic energy that had to be released or destroy her.

Here was the beast she knew, one like all the others she'd tracked and battled. Now she was in her element. Furniture was knocked over and broken, window shattered and priceless *objets d'art* obliterated. Around the room they fought, their breath coming hard and fast, sweat making her body slick and his clothing cling to him.

Time went unnoticed. All that existed for her was the fight. She'd never met an opponent so strong or so skilled. Most of her attacks were outmaneuvered, her blows absorbed. But still she pressed, forcing him to defend against her unending assault.

On and on they battled until finally he slammed her against a wall, pinning her hands over her head, his legs securely between hers so that his erection ground against her wet sex through the damp fabric of his slacks.

"You can't win," he breathed in her face.

"Neither can you," she gasped and wound her legs around him, beating at the backs of his knees with her heels to try to make him fall.

"I already have," he whispered and lowered his mouth to hers, pressing that hard mass of maleness against her sex and shattering what little control was left to her.

With a groan deep in her throat she worked her hand between their bodies and into his pants to fist him.

Constantine continued his assault on her mouth but released her hands to unfasten his pants. They pooled around his ankles, leaving him bare and hot against her sex.

His chest pressed against her, pinning her more firmly to the wall. Resa knew what was coming and welcomed it. The fight had stirred her blood to damn near boiling point.

Constantine's hand moved down to pry her hand away from his erection. Winding both hands with hers, he spread her arms out wide, holding them locked against the wall.

Resa's legs tightened around his waist, her sex grinding against the length of that glorious hard shaft pressing against her.

His mouth closed on hers again in a kiss that was as savage as it was passionate.

"In me," she moaned against his mouth. "Get in me."

He freed one hand to guide himself to her wet opening. One hard push and he was fully seated inside her. Resa gasped at the size of him but even that moment of pain couldn't stop her from rocking her pelvis against him.

Constantine growled and pounded against her, in and out, fast and hard, reclaiming his grip on her hand to keep her pinned against the wall. Resa burned for all he could give and that burn only got hotter and more intense. And with the increasing heat came more speed.

The groan that rumbled up from deep in his chest had her banging her head back against the wall, her hands tensing into claws that longed to rake the length of his back.

"Oh fuck," she panted as the first wave began to crest. "Oh!"

His voice was like sandpaper, hot and raspy. "Say it. Say my name. Tell me how much you want me."

"I—want—it!" As much as she longed to comply, she could not bring herself to cry his name. It was more surrender than she could muster. "Oh now. Now, now, now!"

A cry of protest was ripped from her when he suddenly stopped and his grip on her released. "Noooo!"

He gave her a smile sexy enough to spike her blood pressure and pinned her hard against the wall again. She tilted her pelvis against him, the rocking motion providing an erotic scrape of the thick hair at the base of his shaft against her clit.

She wound her arms around his neck, fisting his hair to pull him to her. The moment their lips met, he curled his spine, the motion tilting her higher against the wall so that his pelvis was firmly beneath her.

She moaned into his mouth as he rammed fully inside her. His muscular chest crushed against hers, plastering her against the wall in near breath-stopping pressure, signaling that he had her just where he wanted her. And that was fine with her.

Resa wrapped her legs more firmly around his waist and rode him, meeting his thrusts eagerly. Her breath came shallow and quick as he pumped inside her. Every

nerve in her body was tingling and her sex was about to burst into flames at the heat building inside her. The angle of entry and his generously endowed manhood had her stretched to the limit.

There was no way for her to stem her groans or stop the vibration in her belly from radiating out to take control of her body.

“Oh god...oh god...don’t...stop.”

Her gasped plea seemed to have the same effect as a red flag to a bull because he pounded so hard that her body slapped the wall in a rapid rhythm.

“Yes. Yes, yes, yes!” she screamed and reared her head back, pulling his head against her.

When she felt his mouth fasten on her neck, licking then sucking, she moaned, not caring what came next. Let him leave a hickey as dark as night for all she cared. Release was so close, orgasm pressing in ever nearer, making her oblivious to all but the sublime sensation.

Constantine growled, grabbed her ass in both hands, lifting and spreading her more, his stance widening to allow him to ram harder and faster inside her.

“Resa,” he whispered against her skin a moment before she felt a stab of pain in her neck. For a moment she wondered if he was going to leave a permanent bruise. Then the pain vanished, replaced with the most exquisite pleasure she’d ever known that spread through her body like a drug.

“Yes. Constantine, yes.” There was no more doubt, no question. She was his, being carried on a wave of pleasure, heedless to all else but the sensations he evoked. “More, more.”

Her gasps provoked him to push deeper and harder and she took it, welcomed it, exulted in it as it carried her ever closer to that precipice. And then she fell into that chasm where nothing else mattered, where everything else faded and exquisite pleasure reigned.

His body twitched and tightened. Sweat-slicked skin met in slaps, rapid and hard, her body slamming into the wall in a quick cadence. Breath came in harsh gasps. Resa's fingers tightened into claws in his long hair as his fingers dug into the flesh of her ass.

A groan rumbled up from his chest as he climaxed. His mouth tightened on her neck, the pain intensifying into an unbelievable sensation of pleasure she'd never imagined.

She clung to him, sensing him with her in that endless vortex of pleasure. At length his tempo slowed, his strokes lengthening to take her slow and steady. Her sex clenched around him as the climax diminished. She drew in a long shuddering breath and another orgasm hit.

"Oh god..." Her hands moved to his shoulders, digging into the firm flesh. "Constant—"

His mouth drowned out the rest as he abandoned her neck and took her lips prisoner, searing her with a kiss that had her lips throbbing and burning in equal measure to the burn of her nether lips.

When at last the climax abated, he drew back, his eyes hooded and dark. She moved one hand up to trace the side of his face, feeling a swell of emotion when his eyes closed at her touch and he leaned into it, an expression of longing and tenderness on his face that had tears threatening her eyes.

Her thumb stroked down over his lips. And that's when she noticed the stain. She lifted her hand to see better in the darkness. Her eyes widened and went from her hand to his eyes.

"Blood?" she whispered.

He did not respond and a heat rose in her that had nothing to do with lust. She grabbed his wrists and pried them from her as she unwound her legs and slid down the wall to a standing position. Her hand moved to her neck and withdrew.

She took one look, balled up her fist and slugged him in the jaw. "You fucking Vampyre! You bit me!"

Chapter Six

Journal Entry

As time passed, the societies on all three of our worlds reached a measure of stability. An uneasy treaty was formed between the three peoples. The Nurians controlled the flow of pyrithium, the Valians, the supply of oltuck and lirma, and the D'Harahn controlled all of the old knowledge—knowledge of machines and technology that was forgotten over time to the worlds of Nuria and Valia.

Being Pureblood, un-mutated V'Karian, the D'Harahn ruled the central government of the star system. Headed by the Emperor, the day-to-day governing was left much in the hands of the Tribunal, a body composed of twelve men. The Emperor and his heir claimed the first two chairs, followed by eight men of D'Harahn, the most powerful of the continent, each the ruler of a kinship or city, controlling some aspect of science or technology. Of the remaining two members, one came from Nuria and one from Valia, ambassadors with the power to speak for their people. This body was known as the J'Zhan. In time it became the most feared force in our star system. The Nurian and Valian people did not support the percentage of D'Harahn as opposed to Nurian and Valian, but could not voice too strident a complaint. For there was one other thing that the D'Harahn controlled—they controlled the most devastating weapons in our system.

For a time Shadallah was an opulent jewel. There the wealthy and powerful were pampered and indulged. They guarded their indulgences jealously. Only those Nurian and Valian who worked as slaves to the D'Harahn ever saw the grandeur of the great capital of Shadallah, the great coliseums and museums, the theaters and libraries and temples, gleaming like works of white marble art.

The Nurian people were the first to complain of the D'Harahn yoke. It was one of the most radical changes in the evolution of that race. From a passive, non-aggressive people, they evolved into a race of warriors. Those who ruled did so by fear and

strength. They were the strongest, the most brutal. Nuria was ruled by a Praetor, who selected a Council from the most loyal and most lethal of the other families or regions. The Praetor recalled their ambassador from Shadallah, demanding that he voice strong demands in exchange for an uninterrupted flow of pyrithium. Nuria wanted what Shadallah had. The D'Harahn were withholding technology that would enable the Nurians to make great strides in conquering the harsh, arid climate of their continent.

The Valians were just as unhappy with the balance of power, but they were a non-aggressive people, preferring the bargaining table to the battlefield. They urged their ambassador to negotiate for the relaxation of export laws so that Valia could buy the necessary equipment, tools and technology from Shadallah. Valia was ruled by a Chieftain, the head of the oldest and largest kinship, with his son as second in power who presided over a cabinet of eleven elected representatives from all of Valia.

What neither the Nurian nor Valian people could have anticipated was how seduced by luxury their ambassadors would become. But the life of power and wealth was too seductive and the ambassadors switched loyalty from their own people to the J'Zhan.

Then, in the midst of the uproar over lack of representation came the realization—where were the children? How long had it been since a child was born on any of the worlds of V'Kar? For a time all energy was focused on the answer to that question. It was Azarth, Prime Minister of Science and Medicine, who verified what all feared. Not only had all the remaining worlds of V'Kar been stricken with a form of radiation sickness that was systematically decreasing the population, but V'Kar had lost its ability to reproduce. In the time that had passed, three generations should have been born.

The D'Harahn set all their energy to discovering a way to correct the problem. If they could find a way to cure the sickness caused by the cosmic radiation and also find a way to reproduce, then eventually V'Kar would be inhabited by the Pureblood again. In time all Nurian and Valian would die off and the system could be set to right again.

And so all communication stopped. The mood was ripe for revolution.

Constantine lay the pen aside and closed the journal. Occupying himself with a recount of the history of his people was not freeing his mind from what troubled him. Resa.

Nothing could stop her from leaving when she discovered he'd bitten her. Nothing could convince her that he had not lied, that Vampyres were nothing more than a label invented by man to try to explain his kind.

He'd almost admitted the truth to her. That he'd lost control and committed an act that was as deadly to him as to her. When he bit her, tasted her essence, he released something of himself into her. It was an act of binding, a ritual of mating as old as V'Kar, and something that stemmed from the most primitive parts of his race.

That he'd committed such an act horrified him. She was a mutant, a half-breed that would never be accepted by the Royal Family. He could not take her as consort or wife for her blood was not pure. And yet, in his passion, in his need for her, he'd bound himself irrevocably to her.

Why then could he not sense her?

Constantine was unaccustomed to worry and certainly had never fretted over a woman. The fact that his people had been unable to locate her for the last three days and he could not sense her filled him with a sensation he'd never before experienced. Anxiety. He did not like it. Didn't like the gnawing in his gut, or not being able to sleep or food lacking taste.

Was this what it meant to bind yourself to someone? That you could not find peace if you were unsure of their safety and well-being? That concern for them overcame all else?

If so, then he sorely regretted his rash action, committed in the heat of passion.

"Madron!" he shouted as he bounded up from his chair. "Madron!"

His Consul appeared at the door. "Sire?"

"Is there word?"

"No, Sire. She has not been located."

With a snarl, Constantine snatched up his jacket and stalked from the room. He would find her himself.

* * * * *

Resa walked out onto the pier overlooking Tampa Bay. She'd stayed in the rental house in Tierra Verde before, always paying cash and registering under the name of Sandy Myers, the name of a young woman who'd been killed by the Vampyre a few years ago. They were alike enough in appearance that Resa could get away with using her identity and had even kept Sandy's credit cards active.

At the moment she was glad she had. As suspected, the Alliance had effectively erased Resa Vânător. Had it not been for the bank account in Sandy's name and her credit cards, Resa would have been in a real fix. She knew the funds would deplete quickly, but right now her financial standing was at the bottom of her list of concerns.

At the top was Constantine, and what he'd done to her when he bit her. She had no physical ill effects. She was not weakened by it physically. Emotionally, it was another matter. She could feel him. Every moment. It was as if he'd put something of himself inside her, making every cell in her body tuned to him.

And it was driving her mad. She could feel him seeking her and it was taking every ounce of mental strength she possessed to keep a barrier raised against his questing mind. She was afraid to sleep, to let her guard down. She couldn't afford for him to find her. Not until she'd come to terms with what had happened.

"You never mentioned this," she whispered to herself, thinking of Pandora.

"You never asked," came a reply from behind her.

Resa whirled to find Pandora smiling at her. "This is lovely," Pandora said as she stepped up beside Resa. "Quiet. Peaceful."

"He bit me," Resa said in a flat tone, fixing her eyes on the water again. When Pandora didn't respond, she turned toward her. "Did you hear me?"

"Yes." Pandora didn't turn her eyes from the water and sky.

"He fucking bit me!"

"Yes."

"And now he's...he's inside me. I can feel him and I know if I let my guard down for a minute —"

"Yes, he will find you."

"In other words I'm totally fucked."

Pandora finally looked at her. "In your vernacular, he is just as fucked."

Her answer surprised Resa. "Excuse me?"

"Had you stayed you would have discovered the answer for yourself. What happened between you and Constantine is unprecedented."

"Unprecedented?"

Pandora smiled slightly. "You were correct, in a manner of speaking, about him being inside you. While he may have taken from you, he also gave in return. What happened between you is as old as our people. It is an act of binding, of mating."

Resa's eyes widened and her heart gave a funny jolt in her chest. "What do you mean?" she whispered.

"Exactly what I said. Whether either of you asked for or wanted it, you are mated, irrevocably linked."

Suddenly Resa wanted to sit down. "Then I really am fucked. Pandora, I can't be mated to him. I've...I've killed so many of his people. They hate me. As much as the Alliance hates them, they hate me. If he really is some crown prince..."

"That he is," Pandora said. "Heir to the Throne...unless..."

"Unless what?"

“Unless the Emperor dies while the crown prince is in exile, then succession will go to his younger brother.”

Resa frowned at the answer and rubbed her hands over her face, closing her eyes and pressing her fingertips over her tired eyes. “Just exactly why is he in exile anyway?”

A split second before she heard his voice, she felt him close by. “That is a long tale.” Constantine’s voice made her jump, her hands flying away from her face. She looked around for Pandora. There was no sign of her.

“Why’re you here?” She steeled herself, resisting the inclination to throw herself on him.

“Why did you run away?”

“You bit me!”

Constantine looked away briefly. “Resa, I vow to you upon my life that I had no intention of that happening. Believe me when I say to you that binding myself to you is by far the single most foolish act of my life.”

“Well thanks a fucking lot!” She stomped past him and headed for the house. Nothing like being told that you’re a horrible mistake in someone’s life. That you’re not good enough for them and they see what was probably the most significant night of your life as their supreme act of foolishness.

Humiliation was too painful to bear. Easy to let that unwanted emotion mutate into anger. Anger she could deal with. By the time she stomped into the house she was halfway to a full-blown case of rage.

Constantine followed and stuck his hand out to stop the door as she slammed it behind her.

“Go away,” she snarled and marched to the kitchen.

“Resa, we must talk.”

She whirled on him, eyes flashing and fists clenched at her sides, her body tight with tension. "I think you've said plenty, your Highness." She felt the pang of shame that stabbed him and took small satisfaction in it, refusing to allow herself to weaken at the contrite expression on his face.

Constantine approached her slowly, his hands palm out to his sides. "I will not retract my words, Resa. Binding myself to you was rash and foolish. Politically. Once discovered it will erode my position, cost me support, and that could cost my people more than I care to consider."

Resa leaned back against the counter, unwilling to bend even though she knew he spoke the truth. It was political suicide for him to be with her. They were enemies and none of either of their people would ever support such a union. Look what it'd cost her. She was an outcast, shunned and hunted by her people.

She couldn't wish that for him and found herself amazed that she would feel that way. Until recently they were mortal enemies. No...now she couldn't look at him without feeling that she was seeing the man who completed her.

It scared the living shit out of her. If she was smart, she'd do everything she could to drive him away. It wouldn't save her skin, but it might save his.

"I see your point and completely understand." She modulated her voice with power she'd learned to control long ago, projecting the image of what she wanted him to see and feel as she spoke. She had no idea if it would work on him, but it was worth a try.

"What happened was...well, it was just one of those things. There's some kind of chemistry between us and we let it take control and it was a mistake. So for all our sakes, Constantine, just turn around and leave. Forget about me and what happened. I'll find a way to disappear, go somewhere neither your people nor the Alliance can find me."

"No!" He'd traversed the distance between them and had his arms wrapped around her before she could move. "Resa, no," he said more softly. "That is not the answer. Not for either of us."

"Yes it is," she argued, trying to staunch the painful swell of emotion that threatened her shaky control.

"No." His hands moved up to cup her face. "I need you."

"Don't," she whispered. "Please, don't make this harder than it has to be. I'm a liability to you, Constantine. A danger. You have to walk away."

"You're wrong." He followed when she pulled away and hurried from the room.

She went outside onto the deck, staring out across the bay. Constantine came up behind her and turned her to face him. "Listen to me. Setting aside all emotion, I say to you in complete honesty that you are of great value to me and all my kind. Think, Resa. Inside you are secrets of the Alliance, information that can be used to destroy them."

"You think too highly of me," she argued. "Bram never let me get close enough to the ruling Council for me to know their plans or strategies. I'm a foot-soldier. Just another weapon in their arsenal."

Constantine opened his mouth as if to respond then closed it and tilted his head back slightly. His eyes closed briefly then abruptly he opened his eyes and leveled them on her.

"There are things you don't know about yourself, Vânător."

Resa stiffened at his choice of words and something sharp and fearful slid down her spine. "Like what?"

"Like who your parents really were and what you really are," Pandora's voice came from the doorway, making Resa jump. Even Constantine started and pivoted to face Pandora.

"I should have recognized your hand at play," Constantine said.

Resa looked from him to Pandora. "You two know each other?"

"Indeed," Pandora replied.

When the silence grew too thick for Resa to bear, with Constantine and Pandora locked eye-to-eye and neither even batting an eyelash, she stepped up beside Constantine.

"Someone want to tell me what the hell's going on? Pandora?"

Constantine responded without breaking eye contact with Pandora. "Resa, meet Panzh DreeAnn Fehr Adahalla Birahn, SyFeth la Sybelle De'Fane V'Kar."

Resa's eyebrows rose then fell into a frown. "You want to run that by me one more time?"

He looked at her then at Pandora, with one elegant brow arched. "More trickery, SyFeth?"

Pandora's eyes narrowed fractionally and Constantine smirked. "As I suspected. Resa, this woman you know as Pandora is, in reality, Mother Superior of the Sybelle De'Fane V'Kar, the Sisterhood."

"You're a...a nun?" Resa asked Pandora, eliciting a laugh from Constantine.

"What?" Resa asked. "You said she was the Mother Superior."

"Indeed she is," Constantine replied. "But they are far from nuns. The woman you see standing before you is not only the oldest of all V'Kar, but the mother of our race in a manner of speaking."

Resa looked at Pandora. "And you're in exile too?"

That provoked another laugh from Constantine, earning him a sharp look from Pandora. "She comes and goes at will, Resa. You see, the Sisterhood controls the Gate, enabling SyFeth to travel between galaxies at her discretion."

Resa held up her hands. "Okay, this is getting really out there. I think we should take this inside, if you don't mind. I could use a drink, or smoke, or handful of pills or...something."

She didn't wait for agreement, but headed to the house.

Constantine watched her go then turned to Pandora. "Has your meddling not cost our people enough, SyFeth? What game do you play here and of what interest is this woman to your aims?"

Pandora regarded him without comment and after a moment his eyes brightened. "Ah yes, now I see. She is another of your experiments. Which explains the presence of the Vox Narr within her. Azarth has been vexed trying to figure that out. She is not simply a creation of the Alliance, is she?"

"Tread carefully, Prince," Pandora finally spoke. "You do not want to cross swords with me on this. And there is no need in this instance for antagonism. In this we stand united for a common goal."

"And that is?"

"The propagation of our race."

Constantine's eyes narrowed marginally. "And for such an accomplishment you are choosing to promote the D'Harahn?"

"Pureblood," she said simply. "Wise it would be for you to accept this honor without question. It would be an easy matter for my allegiance to shift if the cooperation I require is not given."

Constantine did not comment. He knew all too well the power wielded by the Sisterhood. Even the J'Zhan would not cross swords with the Sybelle De'Fane V'Kar. He inclined his head a fraction and she nodded in acknowledgement. Pulling a small device from the pocket of her flowing skirt, she keyed in a code.

A swirling eddy of air with the quality of liquid appeared between them. Raising her hand in farewell, she took a step toward him. And vanished, along with the distortion in the air.

Constantine blew out his breath and looked in the direction of the house. Suddenly it was more imperative than ever that he gain Resa's trust.

Chapter Seven

Resa stood in front of the window. Her eyes took in the landscape but her mind was occupied elsewhere. Her original assessment of nothing being as it seemed was mild compared to the reality of things. Exactly what was going on and how was she involved?

"I will attempt to explain," Constantine's voice came from behind her.

She turned to face him. "So, are we finally back to those truths you promised?"

"Yes. But first..." He approached her slowly and with infinite gentleness ran one hand along the side of her face and behind her head, pulling her into his kiss.

It was the thing she wanted the least and the most. Least because she had no power to resist him. Her need for him was a fire in her blood, making her deaf, dumb and blind to all else. It frightened her, the way her need for him eclipsed all else.

"Beloved," he whispered against her lips.

Those whispered words breached the last of her defenses. Her lips parted beneath his, welcoming his questing tongue.

It was a kiss that promised everything she'd ever dreamed of and more. Passion, tenderness, love. Union. Her arms moved of their own accord to loop around his neck, fingers tangling in his silken hair as her body pressed into his.

The kiss deepened, his lips slanting across hers as his tongue explored her mouth. Time ceased to matter. She had no thought to end the kiss, or take things a step further. For now this was all that mattered, being pressed against him, feeling his heart beating against her as they lost themselves in the kiss.

His body moved, swaying as if to an inner beat, and she moved with him. Still locked in the kiss, they danced. Resa was scarcely aware of her feet on the floor. Nothing mattered. Here was completeness.

Constantine drew back, cupping her face to stare into her eyes. "I know you want answers, and I vow to you that I will disclose all information I possess to you. But not now. Let it wait. For now, simply be mine and let me love you."

"Love?" The word blurted out of her mouth before she could stop it.

Constantine smiled gently. "Here is a truth you can count on, Resa. No matter how foolish our binding may be on a political level, I could never bind myself to a woman I did not love."

"You...love me?" She shook her head. "Want me? Yes, I can feel the truth of that. But love? How could you possibly love me?"

"Your words are those of a woman who has no real love for herself," he replied.

Resa broke away from him. He'd hit too close to the mark. How could she love herself? She was a murderer. She'd been fooled and tricked every step of the way through her life, bought into a lie and paid homage to a group whose motives were based upon self-interest and greed. What she'd thought was a holy charge had been nothing but a fragile façade, constructed to cover the true goals of the Alliance. The unholy Alliance. A group bent upon the genocide of the V'Kar.

Constantine pulled her back to him when she tried to turn away. "No, you will not turn away from me, Resa. You will face me. Face yourself and what you've done. And we will put that past to rest where it belongs, for as surely as I stand before you, you are as much a victim of the Alliance as any of my kind who have lost their lives to this war. You will not assume responsibility for their motives or their deceptions."

"I should have seen the truth," she argued. "How could I not have seen it, Constantine? How could I go through life so blindly, believing in something so strongly that I was willing to kill for it?"

"Your actions were those of a dutiful daughter. We are all victims of our societies and families, Resa. We live what we are taught to believe as truth, and act to preserve what we've been made to believe is the just and true way. Having been so duped, you are relieved of responsibility. The burden of guilt belongs to the Alliance. Not you. Only if you persist in your role as killer for them, knowing that they speak false, will you bear guilt for the life you take."

Resa searched his eyes, needing to see in their violet depths that he believed what he said. That he didn't hold her accountable. That she was worthy of forgiveness.

She found it. That and more. In his eyes and his words was truth.

"I'll help you destroy them," she whispered with determination.

He nodded and stroked her face gently. "In time. But for now we are safe and alone. Let us not waste this moment. Be mine, Resa. My mate, my beloved."

Resa sighed in surrender when he lowered his head and grazed her lips with his, then trailed his lips along her face, down to her throat where her pulse pounded. His hands slid slowly across her shoulders then down to her waist where they tightened, pulling her firmly against him.

His lips sought hers and she eagerly accepted the kiss, lifting her arms to encircle his neck, pressing against him and deepening the kiss. At length she pulled away, her breath coming quicker and her skin flushed. "I want you."

He smiled at her, running his hands around to cup her ass and pull her against him, his erection pressing against her belly. "And you shall have me. But this time without the hurry. Take off your clothes, darling. I want to look at you."

He released her and moved to take a seat on the sofa. Resa saw the hunger in his eyes and it worked to restore her, freeing her to be who she was. With him she didn't have to pretend. She smiled and sauntered to the stereo, selecting a sexy, slow track.

He watched with growing hunger. When music filled the room, she turned to face him and began to dance, her lithe body swaying and grinding to the beat. She inched her tank top up to the bottom of her breasts, and as she pulled it up over her breasts she pivoted, presenting him with her back. Holding the top over her breasts, she turned again, executing a seductive roll of her hips that had her sinking almost to the floor, knees bent and splayed out to the sides. He felt his erection straining at the fabric of his slacks, imagining her performing that same move, naked and with him beneath her.

As she rose, she peeled the top away to bare her breasts and dropped it with a flourish. Her hands moved to her breasts, cupping and caressing, thumbs circling her nipples as her hips continued to grind and roll. His eyes moved from her breasts to her hips, her movements driving the hunger higher.

Resa slowly unfastened the button of her jeans then equally as slowly unzipped them. Whirling so that her back was to him again, she began to peel the jeans down, revealing a narrow strip of black material that circled her hips. An adjoining strip disappeared into the cleft of her ass. His eyes followed the path of the jeans, passion expanding with each new inch of skin revealed to him.

When the jeans slithered down her legs to puddle at her feet, she bent forward, the movement presenting him with a view of her luscious ass, the thin strip of the thong cutting across her anus and joining with a narrow triangle of lace that did little to cover her sex. Need that was already burning within him developed sharp claws, cutting into him with razor sharpness.

She straightened and stepped out of the jeans, turning to cross the room to him. Her eyes locked with his and she leaned over, her luscious breasts hanging full and inviting as she deftly worked the buttons on his shirt. The moment she parted the material to bare his chest, she lowered her mouth to his skin. Wet and warm, her tongue traced a trail of fire from his neck to his waist. All the while her hands worked at his belt and the zipper of his pants.

Resa sank to her knees on the floor in front of him as she freed his erection. Her mouth closed on him, electrifying every nerve in his body. Her tongue circled the head of his shaft, creating a burn that spread down its length, into his testicles and radiated out, prompting him to peel off his shirt, toe off his shoes and work his legs free of his pants.

Silken wetness enveloped him as she deep-throated him, each stroke driving the need higher.

She felt his need spike and knew that his control was eroding. He was close to climax. His hands tangled in her hair, pulling her up to meet his lips. One touch and the need to devour him overwhelmed her. She gripped his face, plundering his mouth as their bodies strained against one another, need bringing perspiration bursting through their pores to slicken their skin.

Resa's world narrowed to the confines of the room, then smaller. All that existed was him. Nothing mattered but the feel of his body pressed against hers, the taste of him as his tongue filled her mouth, and the fire that burned within her at the touch of his hands roaming down her back to cup her ass and press her firmly against his erection.

She ended the kiss and started another slow trek down his body, her lips and tongue working slowly toward their destination. As she knelt in front of him she felt his hands working onto her hair.

His grip tightened when she took him in her hand, running her tongue around the head of his penis, probing the tiny opening. Pre-cum gave him an exotic spicy flavor that was intoxicating. She licked at the tiny droplets, using her tongue to smooth the lubricant over the engorged head.

When she ran her tongue down the length of his shaft and back up, a low groan came from him that had the fire of her desire flaming higher. It was exhilarating to

know that her touch affected him and she wanted to give him more. Take him higher and further than he'd ever gone.

His body was like a drug, one she'd formed an instant addiction to and had no desire to break. The only measurement of time she was aware of was the reactions of his body as she took him close to the edge, time after time. Every time she felt that slight vibration sing in his body, felt his muscles tighten, she would slow, pulling back to circle the head of his penis with her tongue. And each time she felt that tension in him release she would start again.

Finally he stopped her, pushing her away.

He'd never experienced anything like the sensations Resa could evoke in him, and he knew the same was true for her. But knowing wasn't enough. He needed to demonstrate. Pulling her to the sofa, he pushed her back, working his way up from her navel to her breasts and suckling them until she gasped, that curious sound that signaled a mixture of pain and pleasure that drove her to grind against him and small moans to come from her lips.

Constantine had never felt this kind of need. The hunger to brand her with his love, his touch. To give her what she could not hope to find with another. No matter that she was his. The need to stake his claim could not be denied.

He captured her lips with his, tasting himself on her tongue. She groaned into his mouth, her hands moving down his sides to pull him more firmly on her. He could taste her desire and it inflamed him almost to the point of breaking. Of forgetting the pleasure he wanted to show her and spreading her legs to sink into her delicious warmth and sate his hunger.

But the desire to pleasure her was stronger. He lingered on her lips a moment longer then released her from the kiss, his lips traveling down her neck to nip at the tender skin.

Had the need possessed him, he knew she would not have stopped him from tasting her, taking her blood and her essence. But the time was not right. Saving the taste of her on his tongue, he moved lower, capturing one nipple in his mouth and flicking his tongue over the taut nub.

She pressed against his mouth, her hands tangling in his hair to pull him more firmly to her breast.

He flicked his tongue over the peaked nub, letting his hand drift down her body and over her mound. His fingers slid between the wet folds. She moved against his hand then gasped when his finger eased over her hard clit.

Constantine felt her desire flame higher and it fueled the fire in his mind and body, spurring him to trap her arms over her head and tease her nipple, his tongue circling and flicking over it before finally sucking it into his mouth.

She pressed up into the sensation, her breath coming faster as his fingers worked over her clit, pinching and stroking. When he felt a ripple run through her body and heard her breathy gasp, he knew she was about to come.

Easing back, he spread her legs and knelt between them. Her heavy-lidded eyes watched as he spread her sex wide and bent forward to lave her from perineum to clit in one slow stroke.

Her throaty groan preceded her arching against his mouth. He raised his head to see her hands moving to her breasts, pinching her reddened nipples.

She was sensuality personified. Gloriously uninhibited. Strong yet submissive to his every need. He wanted to dominate her, possess her and yet the need to pleasure her outranked his own desire. He needed to give her what no other could aspire to. Ecstasy that was complete. And in the doing know that it was him she wanted and needed. Only him.

His finger stroked between the lips of her labia then spread them to circle the silky wet flesh. When he pushed one finger inside her, she moaned and pressed into the feeling. He inserted another finger, gently probing the vaginal walls, pressing deeper.

When her body arched he knew he'd found that one spot that delivered the most intense pleasure.

Resa's hips moved in time to the strokes of his hand, her own hands tracing down her body to her inner thighs to spread them wider. The bond between them enabled him to feel her need almost as strongly as his own. It was an intoxicating blend, almost overwhelming in its intensity. He bent forward to lave slowly over her clit and she moaned, moving faster against his fingers. He felt the vibration that raced through her and stroked faster and deeper inside her, sucking her clit into his mouth and flicking his tongue rapidly over it.

"Now, Constantine. In me. Now!" Her panted words came a moment before her pussy started to spasm around his fingers and wetness streamed from inside her.

Before her climax could end, he straightened and pushed the head of his cock against her wet opening. She pushed against him, her body yielding to him.

The way her pussy clenched on him and her undulating movements beneath him threatened his control almost to the breaking point. She smiled up at him, that expression of sex and lust that said clearly she knew the effect she had on him. He nearly came before he was fully seated inside her.

Running his hands up her luscious body, he gently squeezed her swollen nipple. A prolonged breath preceded her smile. She lifted one hand from her breast and raised it to her mouth, sucking one finger then two. The sight of her sucking the juice from her pussy from his fingers made his dick throb, threatening his control.

She gave him that sultry smile as she moved his hand back to her breast. "Take me."

Her words were an explosion of sensation in his mind and body, a siren's call that could not be denied. He started to stroke, slow and steady, fighting to maintain control and keep the impending orgasm at bay. Her tight pussy pulsed on him, tightening then releasing. Her hips rose and fell, meeting each thrust and matching his pace.

It was not long before they both were breathing hard, trying to hold back the dam of sensation that threatened to burst. She was the first to succumb. "I...I can't...stop," she gasped and arched her body, stretching her arms back over her head in a gesture of surrender. "Please...Constantine...please."

The sight of her submissively offering herself and the husky plea of her words was more than he could resist. He released the bonds holding his lust intact and let the full force of his need be free from all restraints.

Resa groaned when he grabbed her hips and roughly pulled her to him, impaling her on his full length. Her body quaked as he rode her, soft cries urging him on. When he felt her muscles tighten around him, he lowered down, propped on one elbow so that his free hand could pin her arms above her head securely.

His thrusts became more urgent and forceful and her cries deeper but he would not gentle his movements. Nor did she encourage him to do so. This was mating at its most primitive. Here was the moment he'd waited for. Her complete surrender. Now she would become inextricably his.

"Now," she moaned, and a moment later bared her teeth to him, displaying the elongated incisors. "I want all of you."

Constantine could not have refused her demand had he wanted to. His mouth fastened on one side of her neck. As his teeth broke her skin, he felt her mouth on him. One sharp spike of pain that was too sublime to be labeled as such, swept through him.

Her body began to quake in orgasm, ending his control. With a hard thrust, he hilted himself in her and surrendered.

His sense of self grew indistinct and blurred. There was no way to differentiate between the riot of feeling that racked his body and those that tossed Resa in a maelstrom of ecstatic sensation. There was no way to tell whether the overpowering realization of love was his own or belonged to the woman who owned his heart.

Their essence was shared in a way unknown to humans, genetics mingling to change each of them into new beings. Beings with the strength and knowledge of the

other. Beings who would forever be more than a singularity. For with their mating, the symbiotes within them joined. They were now a collective, united in blood and emotion.

It was nothing like he'd ever imagined and more than he'd dare hope for. For the first time in his long life, he was complete.

When at last reality returned, he sank down on her, listening to the sound of their breaths, their hearts pounding against one another, and feeling their sweat-slicked skin gradually cooling.

He rolled off her onto his side and she shifted to face him, reaching up to stroke along the side of his face. The depth of love he saw in her eyes was as breathtaking as the nirvana he'd just experienced.

"My beloved," he whispered, reaching up to cover her hand with his. "My mate."

"Always." She smiled and closed her eyes. A few moments later, with a smile on his face, sleep claimed him.

* * * * *

Resa's eyes flew open. Her heart hammered in her chest. They were not alone. She could sense the presence of others nearby. The Alliance had found them. She sat up and started to ease off the bed but Constantine's hand closed on her wrist like a steel trap.

"Have you weapons here?" he whispered.

"Yes." She slid off the bed to hurry on silent feet to the closet. Call it old habits dying hard, but she'd brought every weapon she owned. She dressed quickly in her hunting garb, the leather pants, vest and boots. By the time she was strapping her dagger harnesses to her forearms, Constantine was dressed and beside her.

She offered him a sword but he shook his head and selected instead a double-bladed fighting dagger.

"Why did you not wake me sooner?" she asked.

He smiled, testing the balance of the weapon. "Are these blades poisoned?"

"Yes."

"I sense at least thirty," Constantine remarked.

"More on the way," she said, and gave him a dark smile when he looked at her in question. "It's what I'd do if it was my hunting party," she added. "You're not an easy mark and neither am I. And they'll expect you to have bodyguards. As would I."

"We are not alone."

"How many?"

"Enough."

"I hope you're right. If the Alliance senses your people, they'll ramp up their efforts, call in more troops. If your people are here then they'll wait until their backup arrives before they move in."

"I will not."

"You won't what?"

"Wait."

With that, he strode from the room, across the living area and to the front door. She followed quickly. He threw it open, stepped outside and announced, "Come if you dare."

Resa had to admire him. There was not even a hint of fear or uncertainty in him. He stood tall and confident, like a dark god, his hair lifting in the wind to form a black halo around his head.

A split second later hell broke loose. A bolt from a crossbow slammed into the side of the house, its poisoned barb passing within inches of Constantine. Another passed a breath from her own face, shattering the window behind her.

She and Constantine worked as one, dodging and whirling. The rain of arrows was short-lived but followed closely by another assault. Hunters vaulted the deck railing and rushed the steps, swords drawn and slicing the air.

Resa's mind blanked to everything but battle. They would not kill Constantine. She was like a machine, mowing down all who crossed her path. And at her side, Constantine fought with the skill of a true master, felling one opponent after the next.

"Valians," Constantine yelled in her direction as a surge of new warriors joined the battle.

Resa did not respond. Reinforcements were welcome. Anything to protect Constantine. The smell of blood and death rose in the air, the sounds of screams and moans mixing with the clash of metal against metal. Alliance hunters found themselves boxed in. Constantine and Resa before them, and Constantine's forces and the Valians behind them.

Resa lost track of time. It seemed that each time the numbers would dwindle, more would appear. The Alliance must have dispatched several battalions against them. On and on the battle raged. Her arms grew tired and heavy, her lungs heaving and sweat marring her vision.

Suddenly a surge of hunters came at them. There were too many. She screamed at the V'Karian fighting beside her. "Get the Prince to safety. Now!"

To his credit, he did not hesitate to follow her order. Within seconds Constantine was surrounded by V'Karians. His men cleared a path in the battle, forcing him along it. He bellowed in rage, fighting against them but to no avail.

Resa heard him shout her name and it distracted her. For only a moment but long enough for her defenses to slip. The hiss of air was all that alerted her. She dove, escaping the deadly blade that would have separated her head from her body. When she rolled and bounded to her feet, it was to face the one Alliance warrior she'd hoped to never meet in battle. Bram.

With his sword raised over his head and blood in his eyes, "Die," he growled and swung his sword.

Resa saw death coming for her. But before his blade could reach its mark she was snatched off her feet and carried at breakneck speed through the carnage. She couldn't

see the face of her savior. Couldn't really see much but a blur, they moved so fast. And whoever her rescuer was, he kept up the pace until they were clear of the battle, headed inland.

When they finally stopped, the man released her and stepped back. One look at him and she was stunned speechless. Silken black hair framed a face that belonged in a dream. Eyes of such a light blue they were like ice, and skin that was so pale, had it not been kissed with a bare tint of gold it would have appeared bloodless. Here was the face the romances spoke of. The ethereal vampire of such beauty that to set your eyes upon him robbed you of coherent thought.

And most definitely V'Karian. That much she could sense. "Who are you?" she asked.

"My name is Octavian Vazanti, heir to the throne of Ishban Shamurz Burahn, Resch Patahn SoFelh, de the Sybelle De'Fane V'Kar."

"That was a mouthful. Care to translate?"

"Crown Prince of Valia and High Priest of the Order of the Sisterhood."

"And you saved me because?"

"Because you carry a Vox Narr."

"Which is?"

He regarded her in silence for a long time then offered her his hand. "Come with me and I shall explain."

"I must find Constantine."

"He is safe."

"And will be looking for me."

"No harm will come to you. You have my word."

Resa hesitated. If he was in fact a priest in the Sisterhood then he held answers. Answers she wanted. But was it a betrayal to Constantine to obtain answers from a man who might be his enemy?

“Do you seek to harm Constantine?”

“I seek to harm none, Resa Vânător.”

It was not his words, but the way he opened his mind and let her see the truth behind them that had her placing her hand in his. Hoping that Constantine would forgive her, she ran with him into the night.

Chapter Eight

Across the globe, in a lavish mansion on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea, a large, muscular man sat alone in the well-stocked library, the only light that of the fading day coming in through the opened doors to the balcony overlooking the sparkling water of the sea.

Another man entered quietly and stopped before the desk.

"Are you quite sure Azarth has made contact?" the man seated spoke without looking up from the document he was reading.

"Positive, sir," the man in front of the desk replied. "It would seem that Azarth has a hidden agenda we did not suspect. Information indicates that he has switched camps. While outwardly he maintains the appearance of being a loyal follower of the Heir, there is reason to believe that his allegiance may have changed."

"Are you saying that he now supports the Priest?"

"No, sir. Not entirely. He has had contact with the Priest and their liaisons appear amicable, but thus far no overt actions have been taken."

"Then what you are saying is that it is nothing but speculation."

"Not exactly, sir."

The seated man looked up at the other, pinning him with a stare hard enough to make the man shift uncomfortably from one foot to the other. Leonidas Kahan Branueesh, Primus Nuria, was not a patient man. Or a forgiving one. As the eldest son of the Praetor of Nuria, the desert world of the system of V'Kar, Leonidas commanded respect and obedience. Even in exile. "I suggest you be exact. My patience is wearing thin."

"Two visitors have been observed with Azarth. The Priest, who was at Azarth's home during the time the Dhampir was ensconced in Constantine's stronghold, and another, unidentified male at a separate time. Our analysts agree that this warrants attention since the Priest's factions have begun relocation."

"You have confirmation of that?"

"No, sir," the subordinate replied with a downcast look. "But I can see no other reason why he —"

"Did I ask for your opinion, Donar?"

"No, sir, you did not."

"Then please refrain from giving what has not been requested. What word is there from the latest Alliance skirmish?"

"An attack was led upon an abode in which Constantine was alone with the Dhampir. The attack was led by Bram."

"Bram himself led the attack?" Leonidas was surprised by the news. Bram tended to sequester himself behind the battle lines unless it was a matter of the highest priority, for leading the battle himself put him in the position of being vulnerable to capture. And whoever captured Bram, if lucky enough to break him, would hold the secrets of the Alliance.

"The outcome?"

"Constantine's forces were in danger of being overrun when reinforcements arrived. Valian reinforcements. Together they overwhelmed the Alliance. The Crown Prince was extracted and taken to safety. Bram escaped with less than a dozen of his warriors."

"And the Dhampir?"

"That is a mystery. She was not extracted with Constantine. In fact, it was she who gave the order for his extraction. After that, it is unclear what happened. Her body is not among the dead and there have been no reports of her."

"If she is not with Constantine," Leonidas murmured, "then the most probable explanation is that the Priest has her."

He considered it for a few moments before continuing. "I want you to have Daevas and Pavor assigned to Azarth. They are to keep him under constant surveillance and report directly to you. You, in turn, will report to me immediately upon receiving any information."

"Yes, sir. At once." Donar nodded and started to back away.

"That is not all." Leonidas stopped him with his words. "I want you to contact Orcus. He is to insinuate another informant within the Priest's organization. I must know every move the Priest makes and if he does indeed hold the Dhampir."

"I will contact Orcus at once." Donar bowed his head. "Is there anything else, sir?"

"No." Leonidas dismissed him. "You may go."

Donar turned and left the room. For a few moments Leonidas stared across the room, lost in thought. Abruptly he picked up the phone and dialed a two-digit extension.

"I want a meeting with Constantine and the Priest. Make it happen. Now."

He hung up the phone and leaned back in his seat. Perhaps it was time to forge a new treaty with the other factions of the V'Kar. Albeit a temporary one, but one that would benefit them all. Unite and rid themselves of the Alliance once and for all. And then...then all their attention could turn to the battle for V'Kar.

* * * * *

Constantine hurled the crystal glass across the room, watching it shatter into thousands of glittering shards as it hit the wall. It'd been over six hours and still there was no word from Resa. Had he been able to establish a mental link with her he would have been merely angry that she had not contacted him. But to not be able to sense her had "angry" pushed aside in favor of a more difficult emotion. Fear.

A tap on the door had him snarling, "Come!"

The door opened and one of his aides stepped timidly inside. "Sire, Leonidas has requested a meeting."

"For?"

"A truce."

Constantine's laugh was a bark that lacked humor. His aide hesitated for a moment then continued, "For the elimination of the Alliance."

That Constantine could believe. The Alliance plagued them all. And perhaps a truce between the three factions could serve to rid them of that old thorn. But trusting Leonidas was no easy task. The animosity between their worlds was deep and long-lived.

"Has the Priest been invited to this peace conference?"

"Yes."

Constantine considered it for a few moments, pacing the room with his hands clasped behind his back. Finally he stopped. "Inform the Nurian that we shall agree to the conference. Providing that a neutral location is selected. One not under the control of either power."

"Sire," the aide nodded and left, closing the door softly behind him.

Constantine went to his desk for his journal and pen and took a seat in front of the window. For a moment he stared unblinkingly, blind to the landscape that lay beyond the glass.

Despite his intentions to capture his feelings on the current situation and the proposed truce, when he opened the journal and began to write, the words that took shape came from a memory lodged deep in his mind. A scene from long ago...

Sunlight glinted in bright sparks from the golden domes of the Imperial Palace in the distance. Heat shimmered from the street and the ancient stone of the Imperial Hippodrome, creating visual distortions. The wide avenue leading to the Hippodrome

had been cleared of all traffic, vehicles being replaced by bodies. Imperial troopers spaced equidistantly along the avenue guarded the barriers, keeping the populace from the street.

All streets leading to the Hippodrome were packed with people. Those without a clear view of the avenue itself turned to watch enormous vid-screens that decorated the sides of buildings.

Sleek fighter craft streaked in formation overhead, performing an elaborate aerial ballet. Small, one-man security pods cruised above the heads of the people, scanners sweeping the crowd.

A transport ship appeared at the far end of the avenue, high above the buildings. The thunder of its twin engines competed with the roar of the crowd as it slowed and hovered.

A hatch opened in the belly of the ship and a smaller craft dropped from its bowels to descend to street level.

A hush fell over the throng as a hatch opened in the side of the small craft and a landing ramp slid forward. Two of the Emperor's Imperial Sentinels stepped from the craft to take up positions on either side of the hatch. A low murmur rippled down the avenue like a wave as Leonidas and Octavian stepped into view.

Four additional Sentinels emerged behind them, taking mirror positions to each side of them, one fore and aft.

A deafening cheer went up as horns blared and the processions commenced. Leonidas' contempt was clear on his face as he beheld the spectacle.

Watching from the comfort of the Imperial box in the Hippodrome, I studied the scene displayed on the vid-screen. It was surreal. Almost as if we had stepped backward in time. As if ten million years of history had vanished. Once more the Imperial Troops were arrayed in golden armor and plumed helmets, the modern armament and communication glasses incongruous to the billowing capes, plaited

loincloths and gem-encrusted gauntlets. Banners fluttered, horns trumpeted and armored war horses snorted and pranced as they led the procession.

To Leonidas' credit, no sign of weakness was evident on his face as obscenities and curses were shouted at him. His face showed nothing but disdain for those who hurled denunciations toward him.

I understood and even admired him. He did this as much for his people as for himself. Never would they see him humbled or defeated. He had to have been thinking the same thoughts as I. That at this moment every person on all three of our worlds watched. This was a media spectacle. I doubted there was a person alive on any of the three worlds who was not glued to the broadcast.

Leonidas walked with shoulders square and head high. I found myself wondering what emotions boiled within his heart, within the heart of his people. Were they overcome with defeat and hopelessness or did there burn the fire of vengeance within them? I suspect the latter held true for Leonidas.

The procession slowed as they neared the massive tunneled entrance of the Hippodrome, the dim interior a welcome respite from the stares and taunts.

The riders split at the far opening to circle the Hippodrome. Riders fought to still the nervous mounts in place as they took positions rimming the floor. Leonidas stepped from shadow to sun and stopped to cast a challenging look around.

The stands were filled to overflowing, tier after tier packed with screaming, shouting people. The Emperor's box was open to the elements, the protective shield having been lowered for the event. Royal banners whipped and snapped from the railings.

I felt I could read his thoughts as his challenging gaze lifted to the Emperor's box where we sat. In some respects I agreed with what he must have been thinking. Never one to miss a media opportunity, the Emperor had staged a media circus, a dramatic, symbolic and lavish spectacle to mark his victory.

Leonidas started forward, his head held high. My father the Emperor watched him and Octavian approach with a satisfied smile. Illustrious in the traditional yet outdated royal vestments, he was the perfect picture of sovereignty. The glittering crown circling his brow and the shining lamé of his golden cloak seemed to bathe him in a glow.

As Heir Apparent, I sat to the left of the Emperor. Out of respect to the men standing in the dirt below, I kept all expression from my face. My brother, RaJahn, second-in-line to the throne, seated beside me, paid no such respects to the men, or made no effort to conceal a conceited smile, his delight at the sight before him evident.

To the Emperor's right sat Azarth Vahn L'Par Dahl Azoz, Minister of Science and longtime advisor and friend of the Emperor. Seated beside Azarth was the Eldest of the Order of the Sisterhood, her black-robed figure a stark contrast to the colored finery that surrounded her.

On either side of the Emperor's box were seated the members of the J'Zhan. Among them was Leonidas' own father, Branueesh Kahnn, Praetor of Nuria. As always, his father's face was stoic, his bearing proud. He did not bat an eye as his son was led across the floor of the Hippodrome to gaze upward at the Emperor.

The guards halted and motioned for Leonidas and Octavian to step forward. Leonidas scowled at the slender, pale-skinned man who moved beside him.

Octavian had to look up to meet Leonidas' eyes, but there was no fear in the blue depths. Vazanti, Heir to the throne of Valia, Octavian had been Leonidas' enemy as long as I could remember. Intelligent in that covert, secretive manner so common to a physically weaker race, Octavian had been a constant thorn in Leonidas' side.

Leonidas should have known better than to allow himself to be talked into an alliance with the Valians. Particularly this one. Octavian's ties to the SyFeth De'Fane V'Kar were tight.

The most ancient order of their peoples, the Order had always kept well hidden in secrecy and sorcery. Unmarried but not celibate, they drew their members from all three of the V'Karian worlds, and insinuated their own into every circle of power.

Abominable creatures, they wielded power without ever lifting a weapon. While none of the ruling powers would ever admit to fearing them, in truth they lived in perpetual fear of what would become of them should the Sisterhood decide to take a stance against them.

And Octavian was one of them. In an Order historically forbidden to men, he held the rank of High Priest, making him the second male in their history to occupy such a position. Considering his current situation, this would cause one to assume that the power carried far less weight than anyone had imagined, for Octavian stood on the executioner's block beside Leonidas while the true instigators of the doomed coalition, the Order, remained out of reach and untouchable.

Leonidas' eyes wandered and I saw that his resolve almost faltered when he saw Riana, his wife, and his council of advisors seated on the front rows along one side. Well guarded, they were not shackled. Riana's eyes sought his. I watched with fascination at the change in his expression when their eyes met. He would display courage no matter what he faced. For her, his would be a noble death. She would remember him with pride.

"Leonidas Kahan Branueesh, Primus Nuria," a voice came over the speakers.

Silence fell. Leonidas stared squarely at the Emperor as the herald continued. "Octavian Ishban, Vazanti Valia. For the crime of treason, the Alfas J'Zhan has agreed and has been granted Imperial license by Shah D'Harahn V'Kar, Atohl Vox TraaNur to issue sentence upon you and all those who have been found guilty of aiding and abetting the crime of treason.

"The sentence is death."

A roar went up from the crowd. At last the moment all had awaited.

"However..." The herald's voice brought quiet. "In deference to your honorable houses and lords, who had no foreknowledge of your intent, Shah D'Harahn V'Kar, Atohl Vox TraaNur, in his infinite compassion, has agreed to rescind the sentence of

death in favor of exile," he paused again for effect, "if there is any present here today who will accept the sentence of death in your stead."

There would be and could be no offers from the councilors, advisors or troops of either side. They too had been found guilty and would die with their leaders.

Before anyone could stop her, Leonidas' wife Riana shrugged off her guards and lightly vaulted the wall to the Hippodrome floor. "I volunteer."

"No!" Leonidas bellowed and moved toward her, only to be covered by four of the Imperial troopers.

The Emperor rose from his throne, a smile on his face. "Let it be done."

And so began Leonidas' descent into hell. Riana would die and he would be sent into exile. But not before he saw her staked out in the harsh sands of his home, in the midst of the Nurian wasteland, dying a breath at a time.

* * * * *

Resa took a look around the well-appointed room. Tasteful and elegant, it held a distinctly European appeal. Ironically, so did the man seated across from her. The cut of his clothes and fine Italian leather of his shoes spoke of culture and refinement. And sensuality.

Had it not been for her bond to Constantine, she had no doubt that she would have been far more affected by him. Even with that bond, she could not deny the power of his attraction. He was, by any standards, beautiful. Tall, slim but with obvious firm and developed musculature, he exuded an air of sexuality, a promise of satisfaction unparalleled.

And he fit the image of a Vampyre to the letter.

"Would you care for something to drink?" he asked.

"No. All I want is answers. Answers you promised."

"Yes, of course."

"Well?" she asked when he said no more.

He smiled and once more she was struck with the power of his appeal. How could any woman, unprotected with a bond such as she had with Constantine, resist him?

"Thank you," he said, giving her a shock.

"You can read me?"

"A bit. Most of your thoughts are denied me. I can only assume the reason is one that is, to be honest, rather unbelievable."

"Oh? What's that?"

"That you've bonded with Constantine."

"What would make that so unbelievable?"

Octavian chuckled. "Dear woman, Constantine is the Crown Prince of V'Kar. To mate with a woman outside of his rank, not to mention a woman of less than pure lineage, would be unthinkable. Should the Emperor discover such an act has occurred, Constantine would be passed over in favor of his younger brother RaJahn."

Resa felt her gut tighten. It was true. In binding himself to her, Constantine had endangered his chance of succeeding to the throne. The enormity of it brought a swell of emotion that had tears threatening.

"Which makes it even more important that I get the answers I need," she said, trying to ignore the emotions that sought to overwhelm her. "You said the Vox..."

"Narr," he supplied the missing word.

"Yes, you said I carry a Vox Narr. What is that? A disease?"

"Hardly."

"Then what is it?" She was getting a little frustrated.

"Do you know of the cataclysm that nearly destroyed our system?"

"Yes. Some."

"Very well. When this cataclysm occurred, dormant symbiote life forms were awakened, left there by those who came before us. They were discovered by SyFeth, the woman you know as Pandora, and her confidante, Amara.

"Our people were dying by the thousands and despite all the efforts of our scientists, no cure could be found to stop it. Our worlds were in peril of extinction. Until SyFeth found the Vox Narr.

"A peaceful race, these symbiotes were, for lack of a better description, archives. In merging with hosts, they gained knowledge of the universe and its inhabitants. Contained within each of them is, literally, the knowledge of the known universe.

"SyFeth discovered that a union between a V'Kar host and Vox Narr symbiote not only cured the radiation poisoning but blessed the host with powerful immunity and dramatically increased longevity. And as an added benefit, the union bestowed considerable new abilities upon the host, some of them psychic in nature as the Vox Narr are an entirely telepathic race."

"Hold on," Resa said. "Exactly how does this symbiosis take place?"

"The Vox Narr enters through the ear canal and attaches to the base of the brain along the spinal column, integrating themselves into the central nervous system."

Resa tried, rather unsuccessfully, to suppress a shudder. "Okay, so if you're not born with them inside you, then how could I possibly have one in me?"

"That, my dear, is part of the mystery. I can think of only two possibilities. Azarth or the Sisterhood."

"But you said you're a priest in the sisterhood, so if they did it, wouldn't you know?"

"Not necessarily."

Resa mulled it over, chewing on her bottom lip in silence. Finally she looked up at him. "That doesn't explain how I would be some solution to your sterility problems."

"Perhaps more than you imagine. Consider, if you will, the Vox Narr propagate by means of asexual reproduction. Something relatively rare among multicellular organisms. Let us suppose that what we have learned from the Vox Narr is correct in regards to our dilemma. If a union between a V'Karian and earthling can produce life

that contains more genetic material of the V'Kar than the Terran, and that being can be mated to another V'Kar, the result would be a being with little of human genetics in their makeup."

"Which has nothing to do with the Vox Narr," she pointed out.

"Except that the Vox Narr have declined to use humans as hosts."

"What? Why? Are they prejudiced or something?"

"Hardly. It is simply that humans have, as yet, relatively little to add to the repository of knowledge housed within the Vox Narr."

"Well that's a little elitist, don't you think? I mean we've...we've...well, we discovered penicillin and electricity and...and..." She trailed off as it occurred to her that in the greater scheme of things, maybe humans were a little behind other races. Particularly races that had mastered intergalactic travel.

"Okay, forget that. So, humans are the dumb asses of the Universe. I get it."

"There is nothing stupid about the human race, Resa. You are merely children on a Universal scale and as such have much to learn before you take your place with more advanced races."

"Unless we prove to be good breeders," she corrected, and was pleased to see him avert his eyes for a moment.

"There is that," he admitted.

"And I'm what? Test subject ground zero?"

"Believe me, there have been many attempts over the last ten thousand years. As is evidenced by your brother and sister Dhampirs. All products of cross-breeding."

"Then what makes me different?"

"That is what everyone is so eager to discover."

"And what puts me in everyone's crosshairs?"

"You are in no danger of losing your life to a V'Karian. Capture and imprisonment? That is a likely outcome, as all three worlds would go to great lengths to uncover the

secret that lies within you. But harm you? No. You are the first key to hope for our people since we came to this world."

"And yet even with that, I'm not good enough for Constantine."

"Even advanced societies have their prejudices, my dear."

Resa opened her mouth to comment, but a knock at the door had her holding her words.

"Come," Octavian called softly.

"Forgive the intrusion," a lovely, dark-haired woman said as she entered. "We have received a communiqué." She paused and looked at Resa.

"You may speak freely," Octavian instructed

The woman inclined her head respectfully. "The communiqué is from Leonidas, requesting a summit. The Crown Prince has agreed and with your approval a time and place has been selected."

"The purpose of this proposed summit?" he asked.

The woman cut her eyes at Resa before answering. "The elimination of the Alliance."

Octavian nodded. "Have the location checked and if it proves secure, respond with my acceptance."

The woman nodded and left. Octavian turned his attention to Resa. "This will be difficult for you."

"It would have been. Once. But not anymore. I swore to help Constantine destroy them and if he aligns with you in that goal, I'll do all I can to help you succeed."

"That surprises me," he commented.

"Why?"

Octavian sighed. "While war may be necessary, it is, nonetheless, heinous. The taking of life does no one honor."

Resa nodded. She agreed. But what Octavian didn't know was that if what she suspected was true, stopping the Alliance was not a matter of killing every one of their members. They were like a hydra. Cut off the heads and the bodies withered. And the one thing she did know about the Alliance was which heads had to be lopped off.

"I need to get back to Constantine," she said and stood.

"Of course," he agreed. "I shall provide—"

Another knock on the door interrupted him. The dark-haired woman had returned. "The location is secure. Your plane is standing ready."

Octavian turned to Resa. "It appears that the most expedient manner of reuniting you with Constantine is for you to accompany me."

"Then let's go." If Constantine was going to be meeting with people who might turn out to want his head on a plate then she wanted to be there. Armed and ready.

Chapter Nine

Azarth stepped from beneath the shelter of the old oak to look up at the sprinkling of stars dusting the twilight sky. "Your plane awaits."

Constantine nodded. "Yes, I know."

"I still advise against this. Whether we admit it or not, a line has been drawn in the sand. The opposing forces are preparing to move against one another. Leonidas prepares to move against Octavian and will soon turn toward you."

"As we knew he would."

"And what of your brother? Rumors whisper that his hand is at work here." Azarth paid close attention to Constantine for a reaction to the news. Constantine's reaction was one of surprise, which pleased Azarth. That meant that Constantine's network had not detected RaJahn's activity, which meant their intelligence was weak and therefore their position as well. And meant that his secret alliances had not been discovered.

"You have known all along that he has been tracking the events that take place here." An accusatory tone came into Constantine's voice

"It is wise to know the location of one's enemies as well as one's allies." Azarth's reply was a phrase favored by the Heir Apparent.

"Are you mocking me, Azarth?"

"Not at all. But your reactions prove a point. You may hide your true feelings from the J'Zhan, but not from me. I know this runs much deeper than loyalty to the cause. RaJahn, Leonidas and the Priest are old adversaries. RaJahn relishes the thought of defeating them and taking that which they seek to possess. If he destroys you in the process, so much the better. The sooner he is eliminated, the sooner he ceases to be a threat to you."

"His power base is weak. I will crush him — after he sees me victorious."

"Ah yes, I can see it now. A grand parade through the Imperial City with throngs of people showering you with loci petals and screaming undying loyalty to you for delivering them."

"A grand spectacle to be sure, but not the motivation behind my actions. I seek only to serve the common good."

"And what of Octavian? Does he strive for the common good or is he as greedy as Leonidas and your brother?"

"He believes he fights for the many. In truth, he fights for something entirely different."

"And that is?"

"He fights for the idea of love. That is his weakness and will be his destruction."

Azarth did not turn or move his gaze from the night sky. "Is there no other way? Why is this confrontation inevitable? After all these years, surely there is some way we can —"

"You know as well as I that there is no other way." Constantine stepped up beside him. "The rift that has formed in the J'Zhan cannot be sealed until this chapter is closed. And need I remind you that you pledged your support? After all, were it not for your ambitions, this confrontation would never have come to be. You did set this in motion, after all."

"My ambitions?" Azarth turned in anger. "This has never had anything to do with ambition, as you well know. This is and always was a matter of survival. Survival of our race. How soon you forget that it was your manipulations that swayed the J'Zhan to decide in my favor. Or have the years clouded your memory?"

Constantine reached out to lay his hand on Azarth's shoulder. "No, old friend. Time has not yet begun to dim my faculties. As always, I support you. But there have

always been those who viewed your little experiment as a means of more than mere survival. Some see it as a means to much more selfish ends."

"You mean they see it as a way of eventually gaining control." Azarth's voice was bitter.

"There is always darkness, my friend. The light cannot exist without it. But..." His face took on an expression of intense determination. "I vow to you that neither side will find victory over us in this."

"Then I was right. You seek to become the Aegis of the V'Kar Sha'Dahn."

"Yes. The firstborn will be mine."

"And will you share that child with your people should it prove to be the Sha'Dahn? Will you accept the role of Aegis and officiate in an objective manner, fulfilling all the position implies?"

"All."

"Have you considered how you will gain the support of the Order? Without them, you are doomed."

Constantine gritted his teeth, his eyes flashing. "Those damnable black-robed witches have held sway over the J'Zhan and the Emperor's throne for far too long."

"Might I remind you that without them all of our peoples would have joined the ranks of the extinct eons ago? Surely you do not seek to destroy the power that has given rise to your lofty position?"

Constantine locked eyes with Azarth. "By all the gods, I will gain supremacy over that order of sibyls and all will see them bow to me."

"I fear that your ambition holds sway over your mind, Constantine. The Order will be far harder to defeat than you imagine. They'll not stand idly by while you force your way into a position of power over them."

"I did not imagine they would."

"Then you have a plan."

Constantine smiled. "Let us just say that I will depend heavily upon my dear brother to ensure their support."

"Implying that your plan is one that will make him such an unappealing candidate for succession and the position of Aegis that they will have no choice but to support you."

"That, old friend, is an excellent idea. And one we must discuss at length. But for now, we have a summit to attend."

"Resa will be there."

"Yes." Constantine smiled. "I spoke with her a short time ago."

"And you have no problem with her traveling with the Priest?"

"He would not harm her."

"True. But his powers of persuasion are considerable. He might try to sway her to his cause."

Constantine's voice took on the unmistakable edge of command, making it clear he would brook no argument on that front. "She is mine, Azarth. As I am hers. And one day she will sit by my side as Empress."

"And how, may I ask, do you hope to accomplish that?"

Constantine sighed. "I have no idea."

"Then may the Universe guide us all," Azarth prayed. "Come, it is time to go."

* * * * *

Resa's eyes were glued to the door. She and Octavian had arrived at the airport to be met by one of Leonidas' representatives and escorted to a large estate.

After being offered food and drink, they were left alone in an enormous library outfitted with deep leather chairs that circled a low, highly polished table of wood inlaid with what appeared to be an elaborate gold carving.

Leonidas had shown up just a few minutes ago. One look at him had Resa certain that the legends of barbarians had to have stemmed from his people. Much larger in stature and musculature than any of the other V'Karian she'd seen, his was the face of a warrior.

Had they not been meeting in an accord of peace she would have longed for a weapon, for this was a man she was certain would rather take someone's head than bother with negotiation.

The door opened and two of Constantine's people entered. After a look around, one of them exited the room. A few moments later Constantine strode through the door.

She wanted to jump up and run to him, but suspected that would prove embarrassing for him. So instead she rose and tried to walk slowly toward him, meeting him halfway across the room.

"You and I have much to discuss," he said softly, lifting her hand to his lips to kiss her knuckles.

"Like?" She was surprised at the gesture then realized its intent. He was letting everyone there know that he'd staked a claim on her.

The idea both annoyed and excited her. She wasn't keen on being labeled anyone's property but certainly had no qualms about letting anyone know that he held her heart.

"Such as issuing orders to my people during battle. And sacrificing your own safety to ensure mine."

"Goes with the territory, Sire."

She knew he got the intent of her words and said no more. He released her hand and she watched him cross the room, inclining his head to the occupants. Once he'd taken a seat, everyone else found a place to sit. She chose to stay in the background, out of the circle of chairs, and claimed a place for herself in a seat along the back wall where she could see not only the men seated around the table but the door.

Once discussions started, she paid close attention to not only what was being said, but the looks on the faces of the people, trying to read them. It wasn't easy. The people of V'Kar knew how to erect mental barriers. And their faces gave away nothing.

Hours passed and it appeared no headway was being made. From the proposed plans she'd heard tossed out, none had been agreed upon. In her mind, none of them were workable anyway. They assumed they could both outmaneuver and out-power the Alliance. She didn't think it would be that easy.

Suddenly it came to her. She knew how they could do it. And with a minimum of bloodshed.

"Excuse me," she said as she stood. "Might I speak?"

Every set of eyes in the room turned to her. Leonidas was the first to object. "Your opinions are not called for, Dhampir. Leave strategy and war to those best suited to devise a workable plan."

"I disagree," Octavian said quietly. "I would like to hear what she has to say."

"As would I," Constantine added.

"Very well. Speak, woman," Leonidas growled.

She ignored him and stepped up beside Constantine. "From what I understand, you people control a stable wormhole that allows you to travel between galaxies."

"The Sisterhood controls the Gate," Leonidas barked. "They do not share such power."

"Whatever." Resa dismissed his complaint. "The point is, some faction of your people do control this technology. So, what if a plan could be devised to gather the leaders of the Alliance in one location, and they could be transported somewhere else?"

"Kill their leaders and new ones will rise to fill their shoes," Leonidas argued.

"Not necessarily," Resa argued. "Think about it. If you extend an offer to them to meet, with the implication that you've something of value to them, they'll be tempted. If you challenge them and make the offer one of 'if you dare' you'll goad them into acting

on their ego. And they'll immediately go into gear trying to devise a way to trap you at the meeting and destroy you. And to do that they know they'll need troops."

She smiled coldly at the men seated at the table. "No one knows better than I that you are not easy foes to vanquish. No, the Alliance will amass an army to stand ready to move against you. And you? You can simply find a place to send them where they won't be a threat."

"Into empty space," Leonidas said with an evil laugh.

"Or without loss of life," she argued, and met his angry eyes without flinching. "If you want to sink to the level of your enemy, then yes, kill every one of them. But is there not more honor in a victory that comes without the loss of life?"

"Yes," Constantine said. "There is."

"I agree," Octavian said. "And I will volunteer to make a proposal to the Sisterhood."

"What a surprise," Leonidas said hatefully.

"This is neither the time nor place to allow old animosity to taint our judgment," Constantine commented. "Let us deal with our common enemy, and then we can turn our attention back to how to outmaneuver one another."

Leonidas barked a humorless laugh. "As you wish, Prince."

"Then let us adjourn for the evening," Constantine suggested. "We will reconvene in the morning."

He stood, signaling an end to the meeting. Extending his hand to Resa, he waited for her to take it then allowed his bodyguards to escort him from the room.

"Are we staying here?" she asked as they made their way down the long corridor.

"No. I have a secure domain."

She didn't ask where and didn't have to ask why. She wouldn't have chosen to spend a night on the estate. While the different factions might be able to maintain a level of civility and cooperation to achieve a common goal, there was no doubt in her

mind that given the opportunity, any of them would make a move against the other. Including Constantine.

Keeping those thoughts to herself, she allowed him to escort her outside to the waiting limousine.

* * * * *

Constantine rose from the bed and padded across the room to the antique writing desk by the window. Dim though the light was from only moonlight that streamed through the panes of glass, it was enough. Dipping his pen into the inkwell, he opened his journal and started to write.

It is interesting, the thoughts that cross one's mind while in the midst of negotiation. While my mind should have been focused on discerning the intricacies of the plans suggested by my adversaries and what benefits it would reap them, I found myself thinking more of the people behind the titles.

Perhaps it is Resa's effect upon me. Tonight while we were clutched in the talons of the bloodlust, she reminded me that while I may have accepted her less than pure lineage, most of my people would not. And that I had to consider the impact of my decision on the welfare of my people. As did the leaders of the other worlds. Was our goal not to save our worlds? And if it truly was, why then did we of V'Kar contend so stridently against one another?

That brought an old memory to mind. The Day of Judgment. Whilst I sat in the Emperor's box watching the spectacle as Leonidas and Octavian were sentenced, I was struck with a curious feeling of sympathy for the men.

Pandemonium broke out at the Emperor's decree, some screaming for Leonidas' blood while others shouted support for the Emperor and screamed for the head of his wife, Riana. It took several minutes to quiet the rabble. When there was again silence, the Emperor looked to Octavian.

"And what of you, Octavian Ishban? Is there none here who will stand in your place?"

"I will," a quiet voice replied from behind Octavian.

"No!" Octavian protested at the same moment his father, TrayMore Shamurz, jumped to his feet and screamed his defiance.

"Silence!" the Emperor's amplified voice boomed.

Like an edict from God, all sound ceased. The Emperor gestured to the Imperial Guard surrounding Octavian and Leonidas. They allowed the lithe, dark-haired girl to step up beside Octavian.

"FaTeesh, no," Octavian pleaded.

"Yes," she agreed quietly.

Emperor Atohl regarded the girl for a moment then turned his attention to Octavian. Fear filled Octavian's eyes. Here, I knew, was the victory my father Atohl sought.

"Let it be done," he decreed. "FaTeesh Bijian, daughter of TrayMore Shamurz Burahn of Valia, will take on the sentence of her brother. Sentence to be carried out immediately."

Never in all my imaginings had I thought I would find myself wanting to jump to my feet and countermand the order, save FaTeesh. Save Octavian from the despair that had him struggling not to weep.

"Constantine?"

Resa's voice had him laying aside his pen and journal to return to the bed. "What's wrong?" she asked.

"Merely a mind cluttered with too many memories and too many decisions, my darling. Nothing out of the ordinary for someone of my position. Please, go back to sleep."

She pulled the covers back. "Come back to bed. Talk to me, Constantine. Tell me more of your people."

"I'm weary of talk, but eager to love."

"Then what are you waiting for?"

Without another word he got back into bed and turned her so that he could spoon his naked body around hers. She smiled at the sparkle of energy that danced over her skin when he moved her hair aside to kiss her shoulder. When his hand glided across her back and over the curve of her hip, the energy intensified to a low-grade burn.

By the time his hand had crested her hip and moved over her belly to the vee of her thighs, he was hot and stiff against her lower back. She reached back to position his erection between her legs, exulting in the feel of his hard length pressing against her from anus to clit as she wiggled against him.

His arms moved around her to cup her breasts and thumb her hardening nipples. His touch was electric, turning a slow burn into a raging inferno. No matter that he'd taken her into ecstasy time and again before they succumbed to sleep. Every time was as thrilling as the first. There was no way she would ever get enough of him.

Constantine felt the call of her body like liquid fire in his blood. Her tight ass moved in circles, her thighs squeezing him as the moist warmth of her pussy pressed against the length of him, sending tendrils of electricity through his body.

"Forget everything else," she whispered. "Tonight there's only us. Let me be your fantasy, Constantine. Make me into the desires you've never spoken aloud."

Her words transformed those creeping electric tendrils of sensation into spikes of stabbing need. It wasn't until she reached up to guide his hands from her breasts to her sex that he realized he was grinding against her, sliding along the cleft of her ass and pussy as her thighs clamped around him.

She was so warm, so seductive. And so willing to fulfill all his desires. His hand moved slowly down her wet folds and back up to her clit, feeling the wetness slick his fingers. A moan, throaty and low, escaped her lips as he stroked her. She rocked her hips more forcefully, sliding over his dick in faster strokes.

Spreading her labia, he penetrated her wet center with his fingers. She moaned softly as he stroked her. It wasn't long before he felt a tremor run through her and knew she was close to the edge.

She apparently was not ready to take the dive into release. She pulled his hand from her and raised it to her face, tracing her lips with his fingers then sucking them into her mouth.

Constantine could have come at that moment. Even the feel of her tongue on his fingers, trapped in the wet warmth of her mouth, was erotic enough to have his testicles tightening. He moved his hand back down her body, grazing her clit, and she arched against him, pressing against his fingers.

"I need more," she moaned and turned over, pushing him onto his back then climbing atop him. Her legs straddled him, her ass positioned just below his cock which stood at attention in front of her pussy.

When she reached down and fisted his dick he couldn't stop his body from arching. Resa rose onto her knees and rubbed the head against her wet sex, creating a burn that ran down his length into his balls and spread like wildfire throughout his body.

There was no question. Watching her was a fantasy come to life. And it was far more than sex. That was what threatened to overwhelm him.

"Tell me what you want," she whispered huskily, continuing to rub the head of his dick up and down her sex. "Your most erotic fantasy. Let me be that for you."

He smiled up at her. She knew his fantasy as well as he. Their bond allowed for only that privacy they demanded and he had hidden nothing of his desires from her. But speaking it was part of the game. It was as much an act of submission as what she would do to fulfill his desire.

"Anything you want, my lord," she promised in a sexy whisper that danced along his nerves like a drug. "Anything."

That last sentence seemed to echo in his mind like the call of a forbidden drug. His balls ached with desire.

"I want to own you. Body and soul. I want you to submit completely to me without question or hesitation."

His words sparked a thrill inside her that was unfamiliar. She'd asked to fulfill his fantasy, but his reply was a promise of the fulfillment of her own. She'd never admitted it because until she met him she'd never realized it. But she wanted to be dominated by Constantine. The thought of it made her pussy burn.

"I'm yours."

Constantine pulled a pillow from the head of the bed and tossed it beside his feet. "I want to look at you."

As she maneuvered into position he piled pillows against the headboard and lay back. "Spread your legs wide and bend your knees. I want you fully exposed."

Resa kept her eyes on him as she bent her knees and spread her legs. His eyes were like glittering jewels in the dim light and his face wore an expression of intense lust.

"Shall I tell you what is going to happen next? What I will have you do?"

Resa felt her pussy clench at his words, the quiet tone of command in his voice. She slowly traced her hands up to cup her breasts and run her thumbs lightly over the nipples. Slowly she teased the hardening peaks, feeling an answering wetness in her sex.

Constantine's eyes were focused between her legs but his hand was moving slowly on his cock, stroking himself.

"Yes," she whispered.

The smile he gave her was sexy enough to make her clit throb. She reached down with one hand to stroke herself but his voice stopped her.

"You will not touch yourself again until I instruct you to do so. Is that clear?"

She nodded, willing to play the game and see where it would lead.

"Excellent," he said, continuing to stroke himself slowly as he spoke. "Tonight you are going to submit. In every way. And we will begin your submission with a spanking."

Resa fought to keep from smiling. A couple of smacks on the ass could be stimulating.

"No, I'm suggesting something far more personal and intimate than that." He stopped stroking himself and rose from the bed. She watched him go into the adjoining bathroom. When he returned he carried what looked like a thick briefcase and had several towels draped over his arm.

He tossed the towels onto the bed and placed the case on the floor beside it before he resumed his position. "Now, where were we?"

"I thought we were supposed to be fulfilling your fantasy," she whispered back.

"We are. You may masturbate for me now."

His reply sent blood rushing to her pussy. Her clit literally throbbed. She'd never experienced this kind of thrill. The look of desire in his eyes and his hand sliding up and down his hard cock made her hunger deepen.

Slowly, she moved her arms up above her head, arching up so that her breasts thrust high. Equally as slowly she lowered her hands, trailing lightly over her breasts, down the center of her body to her pussy.

She spread her legs wider, caressing her sex and up her inner thighs, then down to spread her pussy. Her fingers moved slowly along the labia, stroking and teasing, then up to circle the hard nub of her clit.

"Tell me what you think of when you touch yourself." Constantine's voice was rough and low.

"I think of you."

"Before we mated? During our time as enemies?"

"You," she admitted, not allowing herself to think or censor herself in word or action. "Of that night you came to my house. The way you looked when you tore your shirt open. The feel of your skin beneath my hands, the taste of you. How much I wanted you and how much I hated that I did. How I wished I could step away from the hatred and give in to the desire. How I wished it was your hands touching me." Her fingers worked to spread her pussy more, dipping into the wet heat and then out, glistening with wetness.

"Show me." The rough croon of Constantine's voice made her slit throb almost painfully, she was so aroused.

If his voice hadn't been enough to create a sizzling bolt of need rocketing through her, the look on his face was enough to have the first vibration of a climax threaten as she stroked her aching clit.

Arching up at the impending release, she closed her eyes. At the feel of his fingers teasing the lips of her pussy, her eyes opened. He'd moved to kneel between her legs.

"Come for me, Resa."

He plunged two fingers inside her, going immediately to the spot that sent sparks rocketing through her. Her pussy clenched, wanting more, and her fingers moved once more to her swollen clit.

"Come for me now," he whispered, stroking her fast and hard.

She exploded, her body quivering as the climax drove her to arch up. "Now," she gasped. "Constantine."

Wetness poured from her as she cried his name and spurred him to grab her legs and pull her forward, impaling her in one slick stroke.

“Yes, yes,” she moaned as the orgasm intensified.

Constantine gritted his teeth. Sweat poured from him in his struggle to maintain control. He rode her until her body went limp.

She smiled up at him like a cat about to swallow a canary, and ran one hand down his body to circle the base of his cock. “Have you ever considered anal sex?”

The question alone was enough to bring a fresh sheen of perspiration to his skin. When she wiggled free and rolled over onto hands and knees, lowering her shoulders to the bed, he nearly came then and there.

“Arch your back,” he growled, gripping his dick in one hand as he pressed on her back to force her into the position. “Spread your ass for me.”

He saw her literally shiver, but she complied. The position was one of complete submission. She was his however he wanted.

“Don’t move.”

He got up and went to the bathroom for a tube of lubricant and a wet towel. When he returned to find her still in the ass-up position he stopped. By the Universe she was an erotic dream come to life.

Climbing onto the bed, he lubricated two fingers and squeezed a generous portion onto her anus.

Constantine circled her anus slowly then worked two fingers into her. “Have you experience in this?”

“Once,” she panted. “Never wanted to give it another try until –” Her words ended in a soft gasp as he sank his fingers deeper, past the first knuckle.

“Until what?”

“Until I met you,” she moaned as he pressed deeper.

Constantine felt like he was close to climax at simply the feel of his fingers sliding into her tight ass. His testicles were on fire and his mind was enflamed with the thought of sinking his dick into that tight hole.

"And then?"

"And then I wanted it. Wanted you inside me in every way imaginable."

"Spread your ass more for me. Show me you want it. Tell me."

"I want it," she moaned as his finger started to stroke in a slow rhythm.

"Want what?"

"I want your dick up my ass and your fingers on my clit."

Constantine wanted to prolong but his own need was too great. Sliding his fingers free, he cleaned his hands and generously lubricated his dick.

When he rubbed the head of his cock against her anus, she grabbed her ass cheeks to spread herself wide, raising her ass higher. He pushed and the head of his cock slid slowly past the tight ring of her sphincter. Her wordless groan sent a stab of electric fire shooting through him that took residence in his testicles.

She rocked back against him, taking him deeper. He couldn't hold back the groan. It was too delicious. The feel of her tight ass gripping his dick, and the breathy moans coming from her mouth were too erotic to resist. He drove into her hard, stroking fast to try to stay ahead of the orgasm that tingled in his balls.

"Oh fuck!" She gasped as he pressed the length of his dick into her ass. "Constantine...oh...oh fuck."

"Take it," he rasped. "All of it."

"Yes," she moaned. "Oh god, yes. Now."

Her surrender stripped away the last of his control. He gripped her hips, riding her with increasingly faster strokes. She moaned and reached between her legs to play with her clit. Within seconds she was crossing the threshold, crying his name as her ass started to clench around him and her body quaked.

He succumbed, a long drawn-out groan signaling the onslaught of a pulsing orgasm that had every nerve in his body throbbing. He lost himself in the sensation, swimming in a sea of ecstasy.

Resa went limp beneath him, flattening out on her stomach on the bed. He lowered to the bed beside her, pulling her up against him. For a long time they lay there, floating in a silent sea of satisfaction. Finally she lifted her head to look at him.

"I love you, Constantine. Forever."

He smiled and leaned to kiss her gently. "My beloved. I shall worship you beyond all time."

She smiled and closed her eyes. Moments later her breathing slowed. He watched as she drifted off to sleep then closed his eyes. At long last he was complete.

* * * * *

Resa bolted upright at the knock on the door. Constantine was awake and put his hand out to prevent her from rising. "Come," he called.

"Alliance forces advance upon our position, Sire," his Consul, Madron, announced. "We must leave immediately."

"Is the plane readied?"

"The airfield is currently under heavy guard by Alliance forces. We must seek sanctuary at the estate where the peace accord is scheduled. Between our forces and those of the other V'Kar factions our chances of repelling an attack until reinforcements can arrive are greatly increased."

"Have our people leave now. We will be down momentarily."

The moment the door closed he was out of the bed. Resa jumped up and started dressing, thanking her lucky stars that she'd arrived with her weapons.

Neither of them spoke until they were dressed. Constantine opened the door but put his hand on her shoulder as she started to exit the room. "There is only one way the Alliance could have discovered our location," he whispered.

"You have a traitor in your midst," she replied in a low voice.

He nodded and she reached up to cover his hand with hers. "We'll find who it is, Constantine. But now, your safety is paramount."

"Our safety," he corrected.

She smiled and preceded him to the lower level. Madron was waiting with six bodyguards at the door. Outside a limousine was parked. Constantine nodded and they hurried to the car. In moments they were speeding their way to the estate where the rest of the V'Kar were housed.

No one had anything to say on the ride. When they arrived they were met by Leonidas at the door.

"Where is Octavian?" Constantine asked as Leonidas led them into a massive study.

"He left after you last night."

"Is there word from him?" Resa asked. "Do you know if he's safe?"

"Why should that matter to you?" Leonidas sneered.

"Fuck you," she snapped and stuck her chin out as he glowered at her. "He's one of your people and he commands many. If the Alliance knows of this summit, it's a pretty sure bet that when they don't find Constantine where they thought they would, they'll come here. And we'll need as many V'Kar as possible to repel their assault. So where Octavian is and whether he can lend assistance is of prime importance to all of us."

"She speaks true." Constantine spoke in a quiet tone that nonetheless carried the weight of command. He turned to Madron. "Try to contact the Priest."

Madron nodded and pulled out his cell phone, crossing to the other side of the massive foyer.

Leonidas gave Resa another hate-filled look then turned his attention to Madron. "Excuse me, Sire." Madron addressed Constantine. "The Priest cannot be located. However it appears as if he has dispatched people to flank the Alliance from the west as

they approach from the south and north. Our only means of escape is to the east, via the sea."

Constantine's brow furrowed. He turned to Leonidas. "Fight or flee?"

"Fight."

Resa noticed there was no hesitation in Leonidas' response. His eagerness to do battle was almost palpable, it was so strong. Constantine, on the other hand, was less eager to wage war. She did not take it as a lack of courage on his part for she could read his concerns. His fears were for his people.

Constantine looked at her and she shook her head. "The sea will not be a viable means of escape. They will have the coastline guarded, depending on us to try to make an escape by water. However, if we create a diversion and appear to be attempting to escape to the west, they will draw the bulk of their troops from the shore."

"That would be foolish," Leonidas argued.

"Not if they believe your people and Constantine's are trying to get you to safety. You are of far more value than the rest of your people combined. The Alliance knows if they can capture you, your people will capitulate to any demand they make to ensure your continued existence."

Leonidas shook his head. "No, we stand and fight."

"I didn't say not fight. Just make it appear as if you are fleeing. Divert their attention and split their forces."

He glared at her for a long time then nodded. "Very well. I will have my —"

He never got a chance to finish. The window on the outside wall of the library exploded in a storm of glass. At the same moment an explosion rocked the estate from the direction of the front entrance.

Resa snatched her sword from its sheath and tossed it to Constantine. Leonidas' people were flooding into the room, amassing around him. He bellowed, snatched an enormous battle axe from its mount on the wall and made for the door.

Before he reached it the Alliance was upon them. Resa had no time to think. The attack from the door was matched by warriors pouring in from the shattered window. She backed up against Constantine, both blades from her arm harness in hand, slashing every opponent who got close as Constantine fought behind her.

Leonidas was like a killing machine, cutting a path through the attackers with his axe. Screams and grunts mixed with the clang of steel on steel and the thuds of bodies and body parts hitting the floor and all the while the sound of explosions and gunfire came from outside the manor and from within.

Resa had no time for fear until the Alliance sent a new wave. Their numbers were too many. Many of Constantine's and Leonidas' men had fallen. It was time to get Constantine to safety.

"Protect the Prince!" she screamed, drawing the attention of the V'Karians loyal to Constantine. Within a moment a ring of protection had formed around him, leaving Resa on the outside of the circle.

"To the tower," she hissed to Madron who fought behind her.

She did not wait for a reply but fought her way to the door. Constantine and his men followed. It took them nearly half an hour to reach the tower, but once there they barricaded themselves inside.

Resa turned to Constantine. "From here you can fly to safety. Go now."

"You'll come with me."

"I can't."

"You must."

"Constantine, listen to me. Everyone in this room is expendable but you. You must leave. But we must stay. It has to be seen that your people fought with and for Leonidas. He can't transform, but he can fool people into believing he's someone else. If we can get him away from that mob, he can walk out of here making them think he's one of them."

"No."

"Yes. You know I'm right. We have to save him. For V'Kar's sake. For your sake. If you save him you gain politically. And you make him indebted to you. That's in your favor and can be used for the advantage of your people. But you have to go."

"I will not leave you."

Resa looked at Madron who stepped forward. "Sire, she is right."

"I will not leave her behind."

The moment his attention turned to Madron, she acted. Raising her right hand, she nicked him on the wrist with her blade. His head whipped around, shock clear in his eyes.

"I'm sorry. You left me no choice. I love you and will not let you die." She turned to Madron. "Have you the strength to transport him to safety?"

"I do."

"Then take wing. Now. There is time to save him."

Madron asked no questions and offered no argument. In moments he had transformed into an enormous hawk. Resa turned her attention to Constantine. Already the iridium was working on him. His face was pale and covered in sheen of sweat.

"Resa, no."

"Go," she whispered and kissed him.

His eyes fluttered and closed and his body went limp. His men strapped him to Madron's back then knocked the glass out of the massive tower window. Madron stepped up on the ledge and lifted off.

Resa turned to look around at the men. "Now we save the Nurians."

* * * * *

It was a scene from a nightmare. The dead and dying littered the stairway, the corridors and the foyer of the manor. Resa and the D'Harahn fought their way to the study where Leonidas still battled the seemingly endless horde.

Resa had never seen so many battalions of the Alliance forces dispatched at one time. They must have thought they would corner the leaders of V'Kar in one location and either eliminate them all or take them captive. Either way, one thing was clear. There was a traitor among the V'Kar.

Resa fought her way to Leonidas. "We have a plan," she panted as she dispatched an opponent with both blades to his gut and an upward cut. "We need to talk."

"Talk later. Fight now!"

She admired his endurance, strength and warrior spirit. Even after all the time that had elapsed since the battle began, he and his followers fought like Berserkers, those Norse warriors of legend who were thought to have battled in an uncontrolled trance of fury, lusting for the thrill of battle.

Seeing that she would get nowhere arguing with him, she made her way across the room to where two of his men were slicing and hacking at the wave of enemy fighters still pouring in from the window.

"We must save Leonidas," she said as she assisted their efforts, slicing through the neck of an enemy then delivering a kick to his chest that sent him flailing backward through the window. "The D'Harahn fight for his survival."

"Then fight," one of them shouted.

"The numbers are too many. We must get Leonidas to a more secure location."

The men spared a moment to glance at one another, then the larger of the two nodded. "We are with you."

Leaving a trail of carnage in their wake, they sliced and hacked their way to Leonidas, gaining more to their number as they fought.

"We must gain a superior position to slay our enemy," one of the Nurians shouted to Leonidas. "The Dhampir woman and the D'Harahn are with us."

Leonidas cut a hard look at Resa then nodded. She yelled to the D'Harahn, and as a unit they banded with the Nurians and bullied their way out of the room. The corridor was no less dangerous. Inch by inch they pushed their way through the enemy's ranks to the rear of the manor.

The enormous kitchen was littered with bodies and dying warriors, but there was no fighting. Resa yelled to the men to barricade the door and focused her attention on Leonidas.

"I know you can't transform, but you can fool the Alliance. You and your men must make them believe you're part of the Alliance forces and escape."

"We will not run!"

"Then you lose!"

"Never!"

"Leonidas, listen to me. If you die, your people here on earth are without a leader and your world without a successor to power. If you die here today you die for nothing. Your world holds no hope of regaining its former greatness and no hope to right wrongs of the past. Would you throw the future of your people away for one battle that will gain you no glory or advantage?"

"Woman, do not counsel me on my position!"

"Then stop acting like a fool!"

Resa heard more than one murmur or intake of breath at her words and knew she trod a dangerous path. Leonidas was not a man to be challenged. His temper was hair-trigger and his rage a force that knew no limits. But she had to get through to him.

He stepped up close to her, glaring down at her with enough malice that her skin prickled. She could not show fear. Only strength would win his cooperation. So she

matched his glare, refusing to retreat even when his body was an inch away and he towered over her like an angry god.

“You dare to call me a fool?”

“I’d dare to call you a jackass if I thought it’d get through to you. Think. Just think about it, Leonidas. The Alliance has launched an attack unlike any in your long history of contention. They are throwing the bulk of their forces against us. Have you asked yourself why?”

His glare diminished fractionally and she saw she’d hit her mark so she pressed forward. “There is a traitor among the V’Kar.”

A collective murmur arose from those assembled, the D’Harahn and the Nurian eyeing one another suspiciously.

“None of my people would dare to betray me.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. All I know is that there is a traitor. It’s the only explanation. There’s no other way the Alliance could have known about this summit. That all three leaders of the races of V’Kar would be present. Someone leaked the information and location to the Alliance. And in time for them to mount an all-out assault with the bulk of their army. It’s no small feat to move that many troops in so short an amount of time. Therefore it follows that they received the news at the same time Constantine and Octavian were informed.

“You can stay and fight and yes, you can kill a great many of their warriors. But the heads of the hydra remain hidden, and until you can deal with those of power in the Alliance, you cannot win.”

She played her final card, hoping it would be the nail that struck home. “A warrior’s death must count for something. Do not risk dying without cause. It dishonors your family name and your race.”

He stared at her for a long time and she started to think she’d missed her target. But then he nodded and looked over her head at his men. “We will appear as Alliance warriors and make our way to the nearest safe house. Spread the word among our

people. I want to know the name of the man...or woman," he added and cut a look at Resa, "who betrayed us."

With that he turned to face the door, issuing an order for the barricade to be removed. Resa turned her attention to one of the D'Harahn. "Can you establish mental contact with the rest of your people?"

"Yes."

"Then do so. They are to retreat now, in whatever form will take them to safety."

"Stay by my side. I will transport you."

She nodded and they all turned their attention to the door. The moment the barricade was lifted, the enemy poured in.

Resa had no more time to think. Now it was a matter of surviving and hoping they could discover who had betrayed them.

"Die, you bitch!"

The snarl behind her had her whirling, blades coming together in a crossed position to stop the blade that sliced at her heart. "Stephan!"

The eyes that stared into hers were no longer those of the boy she'd grown up with, loved like a brother, helped train and enjoyed getting into trouble with as a child. There was no love or compassion in the eyes of the man who faced her. Only hatred.

"Look around you, bitch, at what you've done. These are your brothers and sisters. Your family. Your betrayal has killed them and for that you must die."

Resa fought against the push he gave, trying to slide his sword past her defense. "You're a fool, Stephen. The Alliance has lied to us. All of us."

"Liar!" he screamed in rage and lunged.

Resa raised her blades enough to keep the sword from piercing her heart. But not high enough to prevent it from slicing into the deltoid muscle on her left arm. An intense burning preceded a feeling of numbness that worked down her arm.

She didn't have much time before the arm would be useless. Before she would be useless. But she wasn't going to go down without a fight.

She let her left arm drop and saw Stephen's grin of victory as he pushed in closer, trying to angle his blade against her throat. Just as she saw the shock that came on his face when the blade in her left hand plunged into his diaphragm and angled up into his heart.

He was dead before he hit the floor. Resa staggered. Two more fighters were coming at her. She was running out of strength. Weakly she lifted her arms in defense. *Constantine, I love you*, she thought as she saw two swords raised in unison.

She felt a coolness waft across her sweat-drenched body, saw a distortion in the air around her, air that swam with light and color. Thinking that at last death had found her, she closed her eyes and let the light take her.

Chapter Ten

Warm hands moved up his torso and across his chest, soft and gentle, moving ever upward until they cupped his face. The feel of full lips brushing his and the smell of her scent accompanied the whisper in his ear. "I love you. Always."

Constantine's eyes flew open. His hands moved to his chest, almost surprised to meet with the fabric of his shirt. Was it a dream? He closed his eyes, concentrating on establishing a connection, but there was no one to connect with.

Was she gone from his life? Had he lost her before their lives together could begin?

Claws dug into his mind and heart, threatening to choke him with grief and longing. Days had passed since the Alliance attack and still there was no word of Resa. Her body had not been found and despite the combined efforts of all three factions of the V'Kar, no information could be uncovered to let him know what had happened to her after she'd convinced Leonidas and his people, as well as the D'Harahn, to flee the battle with the Alliance. After she'd risked her own to save them. And him.

It was too much, this pain. He wanted to cast it away like an unwanted suitor, be done with it and escape its power. But escape was not possible. He was bound to her. In life or death and nothing could release him from the pain her loss brought.

Rising from the chair at his desk, he walked over to the window and stared blindly through the panes. How did one move forward when that which mattered the most had been ripped from them?

No one had that answer. Azarth had tried to counsel him, speaking of how her sacrifice had worked to form a bond between the three factions that had not existed in a millennium. A tenuous bond, but a bond nonetheless.

Constantine knew he should take heart in that. She had accomplished much. But that could not outweigh his grief. It was too deep, too dark. For the first time in his long

life he had no control over his emotions, could not shove them into a dark corner in his mind and cover them from his consciousness.

He had to know. If she no longer lived then he wanted to see her body. Wanted to know how she'd died and by whose hands so that he could exact vengeance upon them.

* * * * *

The dream began to fade, leaving behind an ache of aloneness. She struggled to rise up through the fog that shrouded her mind. After some time her eyes opened. Her vision swam, making it impossible to determine her surroundings. Closing her eyes, she sought to stem the panic rising inside her, breathing deeply and slowly. When she opened her eyes next, her vision was still distorted, but with time it began to normalize.

Where was she? She turned her head to look around. She was in a white room, with gauzy curtains that swayed, filtering the light that came from the window. Two women sat across the room from her, talking too softly to be understood. Resa tried to sit. That's when she realized she couldn't move. Her wrists and ankles were restrained. She was shackled to a bed.

"Hey!" Fear had her jerking her arms and kicking her legs, trying to break free. "Release me! Hey! Did you hear me? I said get this shit off me!"

One of the women hurried from the room as the other crossed to the bedside. "Please remain calm. There is nothing to fear. You are safe."

"Well you're not gonna be. Let me out of this shit!"

"I'm sorry, I do not have the authority —"

"Then get someone who does!" Resa continued to thrash around, making the bed shake and bang against the wall with a rapid thud.

"Please," the woman pleaded. "I assure you that you are in no danger here. If you would only —"

"Let. Me. Go." Resa yelled loud enough that the woman winced at the volume. She increased her efforts to break free.

Suddenly the woman moved away, bowing her head. It was an odd enough gesture to have Resa stilling to see what was going on. Pandora approached her bed and looked down at her. "My, you are loud."

"Let me go," Resa snarled.

"Of course," Pandora gestured and the woman attending Resa quickly unfastened the restraints.

Resa bounded out of the bed to face Pandora. "Where am I? Is Constantine safe? What happened? Did Leonidas and his people escape?"

Pandora raised her hand and Resa fell silent, looking at the other woman in the room who had her eyes downcast. "You may go," Pandora said quietly.

The woman immediately left the room and Pandora gestured to the chairs across the room. "Come, let us sit."

Resa wasn't much inclined to do anything Pandora suggested after being restrained, but she needed answers so she complied.

"Well?" she asked as soon as Pandora had taken a seat.

"Constantine is safe. As is Leonidas."

"Where am I? How did I get here? I remember—" She jerked back the neck of the soft tunic she wore and looked at her shoulder. "I was cut."

"You are quite healed."

Resa breathed a sigh of relief that was short-lived when Pandora spoke her next words. "And pregnant."

"Pregnant?"

"Yes."

"I'm...I'm pregnant? With — It's Constantine's! I'm carrying his child."

"Yes."

"And this means?"

"Hope," Pandora said. "The Vox Narr within you reproduced. Whether it survives in the fetus only time will tell."

"And if it does?"

"Then our race is saved."

Resa nodded. She understood the enormity of it for the V'Kar. And for Constantine. For herself she could only feel a sense of wonder that was becoming increasingly decorated with excitement.

"I'm going to have a baby," she whispered, putting both hands over her belly. She'd never even considered having a child. Never had any urge at all in that direction yet now it seemed the most marvelous thing in the world.

"There are complications."

"With the pregnancy?" Fear stabbed at her.

"No, politically."

"Is Constantine in danger?"

"Possibly."

"What does that mean? Exactly."

"Specifically it means that Constantine's brother RaJahn has successfully maneuvered into a position of popularity on Shadallah. His campaign to discredit Constantine has met with some measure of success. Enough that the Emperor is now considering RaJahn's proposal that he be stationed on Earth to oversee the D'Harahn efforts here, to monitor Azarth's progress and to deal with his brother, who has betrayed the empire by taking a half-breed as a mate."

Resa felt the fingers of dread tickle her spine and cold sweat break out on her forehead. "Can Constantine stand against him at this point?"

"No. RaJahn has made preemptive moves and has insinuated himself within the major intelligence networks on this world. He has created a clandestine group that is fed from all these networks to act as his eyes and ears on Earth."

"Does this group have a name?"

"Sirocco."

"A wind?"

"Far more destructive and powerful. Sirocco is an acronym for the Synaptic Integration of Real-time Robotic Orientation on Corporeal Organisms, and it promises to be the next step in global control."

Resa suppressed a shudder to ask, "Okay, do this the science for dummies way and explain what that means."

Pandora repositioned herself in her chair, leaning lightly with one elbow propped on the arm of the seat, her hands clasped in her lap. "Essentially, a nanobot or microscopic robot is introduced into the brain of a human via the sinus cavity. The programming is activated and instructs the nanobot to travel to a preprogrammed location within the brain. Once there it secures itself and begins to grow biomechanical tentacles that branch throughout the central nervous system to form a type of neural net.

"When the net is complete and activated, in theory, every thought, experience and perception can be collected and transmitted as data to a central command center."

"Which would allow someone to access the knowledge and memories of anyone who had the nanobot inside them."

"Precisely. But not simply access. The transmission is bi-directional. Commands can also be uploaded to the nanobot, theoretically altering perceptions and memories or even issuing commands that the host does not realize are originating outside himself."

"That's...monstrous," Resa replied, thinking that the people of V'Kar sure might be more advanced and intelligent but that didn't make them any less corrupt.

"And brilliant," Pandora commented with a smile that Resa interpreted as malicious. She wasn't sure Pandora was to be completely trusted. Used as an ally to protect and defend Constantine? Absolutely. But trusted? Not by a long shot. Her words rang true, but there was a glitter in her eyes that Resa didn't trust.

"What do you suggest we should do to protect Constantine?"

"Go into seclusion."

"He'd never do that. He won't run from a fight with his brother."

"I think he will."

"You're wrong. Nothing would make him turn his back on his people."

"Except the life you carry within you."

"What?"

"Constantine seeks to become Aegis to the Sha'Dahn V'Kar."

"Which translates as?"

"Official guardian of the Firstborn."

"I'm going to need more than that."

"The firstborn female of D'Harahn genetics carrying a living Vox Narr and capable of reproduction."

"Fe— I'm going to have a daughter?"

"Yes."

The excitement that swelled inside was dampened with concerns. "Are you saying that my child has one of the Vox Narr inside it? How is that possible?"

"The Vox Narr within you underwent asexual reproduction."

"So this makes my child the Sha'Dahn? Which is what, exactly?"

"If the Vox Narr survives and the child is capable of reproducing with another of full D'Harahn blood, she will be the Sha'Dahn V'Kar. The new mother of our race."

"Why D'Harahn? Why not someone from Nuria or Valia?"

Pandora laughed at the question, which annoyed Resa. "Because the D'Harahn rule and they are Pureblood."

"You know you're starting to sound a little like someone expounding on Aryan purity."

"That sounded suspiciously like an insult."

"Take it however you want. But back to Constantine and our child. As the father, he's already the child's guardian. Correct?"

"Not entirely. If your child proves to be the Sha'Dahn, then technically, whoever sits on the throne is the Aegis and decides who the child breeds with when the time comes."

Resa didn't like that at all. That sounded like some medieval fiefdom who still thought people were property. "Hold the deal, Lucille. No one is going to tell any child of mine who he or she can or can't have kids with."

Pandora laughed. "You have much to learn about our ways."

Resa chose to ignore the comment. The more Pandora said, the more convinced Resa was she didn't like the V'Karian way. But she did like one V'Karian very much and was going to do everything she could to protect him and help him take his rightful place on the throne because she honestly believed he would make things change for the better.

"I'll do all I can to convince Constantine to go into seclusion. But to do that I have to be taken back to him."

"I can arrange that."

"Then please do. Now."

Pandora's eyes narrowed fractionally before she smiled and nodded. "Very well." She withdrew a device from the deep pocket of her flowing shift and activated it. A well of swirling air that danced with light and color appeared between the two of them.

Resa stood and nodded to Pandora then stepped into the distortion. A dizzying kaleidoscope of light, shapes and colors assaulted her senses. It lasted only moments and suddenly the sight of Constantine's private chambers met her eyes.

And Constantine. Slumped over in a chair by the window, his journal on his lap and his eyes closed. Resa's heart nearly broke. She's never seen him look unkempt, yet that's exactly how he appeared. His hair was tangled as if from rolling and tossing during sleeplessness and there were shadows marring the skin beneath his eyes.

She ran across the room and knelt down in front of him, putting her hand on the side of his face.

"Constantine?"

His eyelids fluttered.

"Constantine?"

This time his eyes opened. He looked at her and his eyes widened. Then he was on his feet and she was in his arms. And for the moment all was right in her world.

"Resa." His arms tightened around her. "Resa."

"I'm here. I'm okay," she whispered and pulled his face down to cover his lips with hers.

When her lips slanted across his, warm and soft and wet, Constantine's chest swelled with emotion. He'd never experienced anything as horrible as the fear that she had been killed. Now that she was safe in his arms he felt he could breathe fully again. He wanted to know where she'd been, how she'd escaped and why he could not sense her after her disappearance. But the way her body was moving against him and her tongue caressing his robbed him of speech and stripped away all but the primal man within him. Reaffirming his claim on her was all that mattered.

"I need you, Resa. More than I've ever needed anything."

"Then take me."

The fire burned far too hot within Constantine to allow for gentleness. Fisting her hair in both hands, his mouth slanted across hers, his tongue pillaging her mouth. She moaned into his mouth, fueling a hunger that was already out of control. He moved his hands to her breasts then down to her ass to pull her tight against him.

"By the ancients," he breathed as he pulled back from the kiss to bury his face between her breasts. "I want to be gentle but—" He raised his head to look at her. "Never leave me again."

Before she had time to respond, his mouth closed on her nipple. A sharp breath came from her as he nipped the taut flesh. A split second later he felt her hands unfastening his belt then his slacks. In moments they were around his feet. He lifted Resa and she wound her legs around his waist, reaching between them to take his cock and rub it against her wet sex.

Constantine thrust his pelvis forward, trying to penetrate the tantalizing warmth of her sex, but she still had hold of him and moved his cock so that instead of sinking inside her it simply slid along the length of her pussy. "Don't tease me," he rasped, his voice rough with need.

"Teasing is good," she replied, and when his eyes locked with hers, gave him a smile sexy enough that he was tempted to lay her on the floor and pound into her that second.

Her eyes drew him in and he responded to the call. The connection of their minds was as erotic as that of their bodies when she eased his hard length inside her. It was almost overwhelming. So strong that he wavered in place. His entire being was her prisoner. Mind and body, she held him hostage, her power so strong that he had no strength to resist. It was something new and unexpected and completely intoxicating.

He groaned and started to pump into her, but she squeezed her strong legs tight around him, stilling his motions. "Don't move."

Supporting herself with her hands on his shoulders, she stared into his eyes. The muscles of her vagina began to contract and release, a slow steady pulse that had him

fighting to hold back a groan. When her hips joined in the action, swiveling and rolling, he couldn't stop himself from digging his fingers into the flesh of her ass.

Whatever she was doing was new and unexpected. Arcs of sensation danced through his veins, making his skin feel hypersensitive. The feel of her inner muscles squeezing his cock, the taut strong muscles of her legs constricting his waist, even the whisper of her breath on his skin was heightened to the point that it required every ounce of his control not to buck against her.

When it dawned on him that she was asking for an act of surrender, his entire body jerked in surprise. Submission was something foreign to him, something he'd been quite convinced he'd never be capable of. Until this moment.

Resa leaned in, brushing her lips against his. "Say you're mine, Constantine. Only mine."

"Yes, Resa. I am yours. Only yours. Always."

She smiled and moved her lips to his neck, running her tongue along its length from shoulder to earlobe. When he felt the first prick of pain, the dominant male within screamed to be released.

But the wanting was a torture so sublime he kept that part of himself in check. His senses became super-heightened, tuned to every subtle nuance of her. The sound of her breath quickening, the smell of her rising around them, the perspiration that dampened her skin. She'd somehow transformed into a breathing aphrodisiac and he reveled in the feast she provided.

Then she released his neck and whispered into his ear, "Shall I take you higher, my love?"

"If that is possible, then yes."

She put both hands on his face and looked into his eyes. "Step inside my mind's eye." Then she claimed his lips.

Constantine had time to gasp before his mind was sent spiraling into a realm of ecstasy. Pleasure in its most extreme and erotic sizzled through every cell of his body. The sensations washed over him in one pounding wave after another.

If it were possible to have blood turn to fire, then surely his was pure flame. Every nerve in his body became flushed with electricity. His skin tingled, his blood burned and his mind became incapable of coherent thought. He was lost in a sea of sensual bliss.

"Resa," he groaned.

"Yes," she whispered against his lips, riding him harder. "Step further if you dare."

Dare was to the primal male within like the wave of a red cape before an enraged bull. Without hesitation he pushed deeper into her mind.

And his body jerked under the force of sexual energy that coursed through him. Control was stripped from him, leaving him completely vulnerable. Tension streamed through his body. His hands tightened on her and his breath became labored.

He was going to come and there was nothing he could do to stop it. He was poised on the edge of an endless well with nothing to stop his fall. "Ahhh...Resa...I can't..." His harsh whisper spoke testament to his struggle to hold back.

And suddenly she stilled. His cock throbbed inside her, the need to come so intense that he groaned in protest and clenched his eyes closed against the wave that threatened to carry him over the edge.

When his eyes opened, they locked with Resa's and he knew without question that she was totally in tune with his need. She knew that all he needed was one small movement, one word, one kiss and he would come.

Resa leaned close enough that he could feel the sweet warmth of her breath on his face. "Now," she whispered against his lips then pulled back.

He saw it in her eyes at the same moment the word passed her lips. She was going to take him over the edge. And before another thought could register, he plummeted

into a sea of pure sensation, his mind splintering into a kaleidoscope of light. His body quaked under the onslaught of an orgasm so powerful that the pleasure bordered on pain.

How he sensed her joining him was a mystery, lost as he was. But suddenly there she was, her mind joined with his in the spiraling dance.

When reality finally returned she drew her head back to look at him, unwinding her legs to slide down his body.

"That was...indescribable," he whispered.

"And that was just a prelude," she replied with a smile.

"A prelude?"

"Indeed. The best is yet to come."

"If you can better that then you are a sorceress."

Her smile was that of mystery, of magic and of woman. "Then come to bed with me, my love, and I'll show you magic that will curl your toes."

Constantine smiled down at her then swept her up into his arms.

Chapter Eleven

Resa watched him sleep, thinking about what she had to tell him. She'd been concerned that she wouldn't be able to shield her thoughts from him, but the child within her made her stronger, as did the Vox Narr it carried. Her power was greatly magnified and she was grateful she'd been able to put this discussion off and indulge in a night of love with him. But soon it would be dawn and she had no doubt that the moment his eyes opened he would want to know everything.

As if reading that thought, his eyes opened. "I pray to whatever gods exist that I never have to open my eyes again to find you missing from my side," he said in a voice still rough from sleep.

"Amen," she said with a smile and reached over to smooth his hair back from his face. "Constantine, we —"

"Yes," he interrupted. "We must talk. But first there is much you have to say."

"Yes."

"Then tell me."

Resa snuggled up to him, putting her head on his chest. "As I told you last night, after you left and Leonidas safely escaped, I was wounded. Just before I lost consciousness I sensed something out of the ordinary around me. When I came to I was in the Sisterhood's stronghold, in a medical facility. Pandora, excuse me, SyFeth was there. She told me..."

She raised her head to look at him, a sudden stab of emotion swelling inside her, robbing her of speech and prompting tears.

"What? Did she hurt you?" The concern and anger in Constantine's voice matched the look on his face.

"No. No, I'm fine. She told me...god, I can't believe I'm about to say this. I didn't even know how much I wanted it until she told me and now... Now it's like having a wish granted."

"I don't understand."

"I love you, Constantine. More than I ever imagined I was capable of."

"And I you."

She smiled and reached up to place her hand on the side of his face. Would their child have his violet eyes and silky dark hair? Would she one day look into the face of their child and see Constantine? She'd never imagined herself as a mother, yet now she wanted to run away from all the ugliness and wallow in the sheer joy of it.

"Pandora gave me some wonderful news. At least it is for me. I'm pregnant."

"Pregnant?" He rolled her onto her back and looked down at her, a deep scowl on his face. "You carry a child?"

"Your child," she said softly. "Your daughter."

The change that came over his face had tears springing from her eyes. She'd never seen such love, such depth of emotion. He searched her eyes and her mind and saw the truth, and at last a smile came to his face. He drew back the bed covers, his eyes leaving hers to travel down her body.

He placed his hand gently on her belly. "My child," he whispered, then finally looked at her. "You carry my child."

She smiled and placed her hand on top of his. "The child is well. No harm came to her during the battle. And she is host to a Vox Narr. According to Pandora, the Vox Narr within me reproduced and has already taken residence in the baby."

"The Sha'Dahn?"

That question jolted her out of her lovely rosy glow and forced her back to reality. Her smile faded. "That we won't know until the child is born. There's no guarantee that the Vox Narr will survive. But Constantine, there's something else."

"What?"

"Your brother, RaJahn."

"My brother?" Again the dark scowl appeared on his face. "What do you know of my brother?"

"Only what I'm told."

"And that is?"

"The simplified version is this. RaJahn has been plotting against you and has gained much popularity and support. Not only on your home world but here. He has insinuated himself with the major intelligence networks on Earth and is responsible for the formation of a top-secret group called Sirocco, which stands for Synaptic Integration of Real-time Robotic Orientation on Corporeal Organisms."

"I wasn't aware we'd perfected that as yet."

"You know about this...abomination?"

"Only in theory. I was not in favor of its implementation."

"Well thank god for that. But apparently your brother is. And considering his bold moves and his network, now is not the time for you to try to stand against him. The opposition is too strong and there is no guarantee that he won't try to form an alliance with the Valians or the Nurians to usurp your power, or possibly even kill you."

Constantine sat up, his eyes flashing in anger. "I will destroy him."

"Yes, I agree." She sat up and reached out to put her hand on his shoulder. "In time. But that time isn't now."

"Do not let yourself be fooled by that witch's words. Consider if you will this one fact. Intergalactic travel is controlled by the Sisterhood. More specifically, by SyFeth, or Pandora if you are more comfortable with that name. My brother could not have established any foothold at all on this world without her help."

"I know." Resa saw the look of surprise on his face at her words. "I'm not stupid, Constantine. She plays all sides against one another and her agenda is certainly her

own. And she claims to allow RaJahn maneuverability so that he can be the architect of his own demise. She claims to support you as successor to the throne. Whether or not she speaks true is anyone's guess, but the point is, we can't stand against her. So, it's better that we allow her to think that we stand united with her against a common foe."

"And do what?"

"Hide."

"Hide?" He bounded off the bed, staring at her as if she'd lost her mind. Resa couldn't help but admire him, his beauty and his rage. He was like a dark god, all raw power and electrifying sexuality. "I will not hide from anyone!"

"Would you risk the life of our unborn child?"

Her quietly spoken words had far more effect than any shouted argument. His rage faded almost immediately. But the look that replaced it was not of defeat but one of calculation.

"Perhaps there is a way to turn this to our advantage."

Resa laughed and held out her hand to him. "Spoken like the man I love. Come back to bed and tell me your strategy."

"Strategy can wait," he said as he slid into bed and gathered her to him. "For now there are matters of far greater importance that require my immediate and undivided attention."

"Oh yeah," she breathed in excitement as his lips began a slow descent down her neck. "Undivided and extended attention."

His hands moved over her flat belly and then up toward her breasts. Trails of longing followed in the wake of his lips on her skin, moving over her shoulder then down her chest.

Her nipples tightened beneath the touch of his hands then more as he took her breast into his mouth, flicking her nipple with his tongue. Resa pressed against him, eager for more.

Constantine raised his head long enough to give her a smile sexy enough to make even the soles of her feet burn then started a journey down her body with his mouth.

Her skin tingled under his ministrations. When his mouth covered her mound and his tongue raked over her clit, she moaned and spread her legs wider.

He lapped at the wetness that spilled from her, biting lightly on the delicate lips of her labia. Resa squirmed against him, wanting more. He stopped and looked up at her. "This time you're not in control," he said, his eyes glittering in the dim light with a passion that spoke of surrender. Resa shivered in anticipation. There was a time that she would have balked at the idea. Now she welcomed the coming domination.

"Whatever you say," she replied in a husky voice that was the sound of pure sex. The sound of a seductress, confident of her ability to control by submitting.

He moved between her legs and sat back on his heels, feasting his eyes on her, his gaze moving slowly over every inch of her. Even though he knew her body intimately, the sight of her lying naked before him was as erotic now as the first time.

Slowly he bent forward and gently licked her sex, taking his time and working his way along one side of her sex between those pink lips then up to caress her clit before starting the journey down the other side.

Resa groaned and clawed at the sheets covering the bed when his tongue slid inside her. A quiver that was perceptible ran through her when he plunged his tongue deep inside her. With both hands he spread her sex, fully exposing her to his eyes and mouth.

Stroking and licking, he moved aside the fragile hood that covered her clit and slowly traced it with his tongue, breathing in her exotic scent. It was a smell that transformed desire into primitive hunger.

Capturing her clit between his lips, he circled it with his tongue. She arched up, grabbing her inner thighs to spread her legs wider. Breathing fast, her breasts thrust up and her body trembling with excitement, she abandoned all sexual inhibition. Her

abandon incited him to take her to the edge of release then withdraw, earning him a protest when he paused.

“Don’t stop!”

“Would you like more?”

“Oh yes. Definitely. Please.”

Constantine could not imagine anything sexier than the sound of her husky voice and the sight of her, hands playing over her sex. She moaned when he bent and sank his tongue deep in her pussy, then stroked up in a long lick that ended at her clit. Her hands abandoned her thighs to move to her breasts and squeeze her nipples.

“Oh don’t...” she gasped, pressing against his tongue. “Don’t. Stop.”

Doing just the opposite, Constantine paused and slid up her body to focus on her breast, circling the hard nipple then flicking it with his tongue. Resa moved against him, raising her hips to pump against his hard cock.

The temptation to sink inside her silky wet sex was strong, but the urge to drive her to the height of longing was stronger. Only when she was nearly mad with wanting would he take her. He continued to lick her nipple while running one hand between them to part her lips and sink two fingers into her pussy.

Resa bucked as his finger found her secret inner spot. With slow, deliberate strokes, he worked his finger over it, in and out of her hot core.

“Constantine!” She wiggled and bucked against his questing finger. “More, more, more!”

Constantine’s body was all too ready to take advantage of her need, but he suppressed his own hunger and worked his way back down her body, the sweet taste of her sweat on his tongue and the tremble of her body like an aphrodisiac to his senses.

When his tongue slid over her clit and his finger dipped inside her pussy, he felt her start to contract around his finger.

"Not yet." He stopped and stretched out on top of her, capturing her lips for a long kiss and wondering how he'd be able to wait much longer to slake his own thirst at the passion she returned in the kiss.

Her legs wound around his waist, pulling them tighter so that his cock slid along the length of her wet pussy. The sensation sent sparks rocketing through him and even caught up in the delight, he could feel the need clawing at her.

"In me," she breathed against his mouth. "Get in me."

"I will," he replied and slid back down to imprison her clit in his mouth, his tongue darting over the sensitive nub. "In time." She groaned in protest then in pleasure as his finger probed into her wet sex. He withdrew, rubbing the lubrication from her pussy to her ass, and then easing his finger inside her ass.

Her breath hitched and he felt the vibration run through her body a moment before her pussy started to contract. Before the climax could crest he moved into position and slid inside her, feeling the contractions squeeze him.

Resa gasped then moved against him, the inner muscles of her pussy squeezing him at the end of each push inside her, then releasing so her hips could take over, tilting and pumping. Constantine had bedded many women in his long life, but never had he coupled with a woman so totally uninhibited and sensual. A woman capable of evoking a level of passion in him more intense than anything he'd known or imagined.

Resa wound her legs around him and rolled, taking them onto their sides then pushing him over so that she occupied the top position. Rising by the flex of her legs, she slid along his length until only the head of his cock was inside her. Then she sank down until he was fully hilted. Over and over her body rose and fell, each stroke carrying him closer to climax.

Despite her willingness to be dominated, she'd managed to take control. He could not help but marvel at how expertly she'd switched their roles, or how seductive and erotic she was. The expression on her face spoke of her passion and her love.

Constantine couldn't help but marvel at the power of her sexuality. She'd stripped away his reality and transported him into a realm of erotic sensations that erased millions of years of civility and left him reduced to that of a primal male.

A primal male that had reached the limits of his control. Before she had a chance to react, he flipped her over, pulled her legs up over his shoulders and plunged deep inside her.

He heard her short cry but knew it was not simply a sound of pain. Already her body was stretching to accommodate him. He felt the resistance and knew he should take it slow to give her body time to adjust, but he had no control left. His thrusts were hard and fast, the fingers of his hands digging into the flesh of her hips to pull her against him.

He felt her body loosen a moment before she moaned. "Yes. More. Harder. More."

Her lusty plea worked as effectively as throwing gasoline on a fire. His balls tightened almost painfully, his skin tingled and his muscles quivered. He took her hard. Each cry and gasp that came from her drove him deeper into the madness that gripped him.

"Yes," she gasped again and moved against him. He struggled to prolong it but was already past the point of no return.

"Now," she moaned, carrying him over the edge as her pussy started to clench around him. He groaned, his cock pulsing as he came. Resa screamed his name and clung to him, her body caught in the grip of climax.

When the sensations finally abated, they both went limp. Constantine rolled over onto his back, feeling a whisper of air against his wet skin. Resa turned toward him.

Constantine felt something swell inside him and for a few moments pondered the strange sensation. Then he realized what the feeling was. Contentment. For the first time in his life, he was content.

* * * * *

Resa shrugged off the slight feeling of dizziness as the energy field around her faded. Pandora stood waiting, her back to a large picture window that looked out over the vast city stronghold of the Sisterhood and to the sparkling sea beyond.

"Thank you for agreeing to meet me in this manner," Resa said.

"Your terms left no room for negotiation on this point."

"True."

"Then let us get to it."

"Fine." Resa walked over to the window and looked out over the city. It was breathtaking. Ancient yet technologically more advanced than anything she'd ever imagined. She took a few moments then turned to face Pandora.

"First, let's be clear about this. I don't trust you as far as I can spit you. I'm not saying I don't like or admire you because I do. You've been an important factor in my life and for that I'm grateful. But you have an agenda that supersedes all others and the power to make sure that nothing thwarts your plans. Because of that, and this," she said, and paused to put her hand over her belly, "I can't afford to trust you. But trust isn't really necessary for us to succeed in a common goal."

"Am I to infer that you speak for the Crown Prince in this, or are these words yours alone?"

"The words are mine. But yes, as my message stated, Constantine has empowered me to speak for him in this matter. He will agree to your plan. Provisionally."

"Specifically what provisions?"

"First, we will not allow any V'Karian to accompany us. No one can know where we are. Which means we'll need money. A lot of it. Cash. And we'll need a way to communicate with you that cannot be traced back to our source."

"Agreed."

"That's not all."

Pandora's eyes narrowed ever so slightly but that was the only indication of her annoyance. "What more?"

"Today you will leak information to all the V'Kar on Earth, including RaJahn's network, that Constantine is being recalled to Shadallah, to sit at the Emperor's side, in preparation for his eventual succession to the throne. Once we're safely in seclusion, you will not allow RaJahn to communicate with Shadallah, and all V'Karians here on Earth will continue to receive information that makes them believe that Constantine is on his home world and in preparation to take his place as Emperor when the time comes."

Pandora's eyes locked with hers and Resa could feel the tendrils of power trying to breach her barriers. She drew upon the power of the others within her and fought the intrusion. Finally the pressure eased.

"Very well," Pandora said.

"Release the information now, in my presence," Resa demanded.

Pandora hissed in irritation and summoned an aide. "Send a message to all the exiled leaders on Earth and to Prince RaJahn. Emperor Atohl has recalled the Crown Prince, Constantine Belenus to Shadallah, to sit by his side in preparation for his eventual succession to the throne of V'Kar."

"Yes, ma'am. Immediately."

Pandora turned to Resa. "Satisfied?"

"I will be when we receive intelligence that the V'Karians on Earth have received the information and believe it to be true."

"Then we have nothing further to discuss."

"No. Except..." Resa hesitated. This was not part of her and Constantine's plan. "Except to say thank you."

Pandora's eyebrows rose in surprise and Resa smiled. "I won't ever forget the beautiful woman of my dreams as a child. She was the only thing beautiful in my life."

"I have no ill intent for you, Resa."

"Nor I you. But now I have Constantine and our child to consider and I can't afford to let my guard down. With anyone."

"I would expect no less. Take care of them, Dhampir."

"You can count on it," Resa said with a smile. "We'll be talking to you, Pandora."

"Indeed."

Pandora pulled the gate control device from her pocket and activated it. Resa kept her eyes on Pandora as the swimming field of energy enveloped her, until the intensity of the light washed out all sight.

When her sight returned, Constantine was waiting on the balcony of the private estate.

"Well?" he asked.

"We have what we wanted. Have you made all the arrangements?"

"Yes. We will be quite safe and the funds to support us are in place and secured."

"Then I guess now we just wait to act on the information Pandora leaked."

"And while we wait," he said and pulled her to him, "let us occupy ourselves with matters of —"

"Great importance?" she interrupted with a chuckle.

He grinned and claimed her lips.

* * * * *

Three months later

Resa's eyes flew open. Moonlight steamed through the open doors to the balcony, the smell of the sea riding in on the wind. Again came the flutter inside her. Excitement filled her. She grabbed Constantine's hand and moved it to her belly. His head turned toward her and his eyes opened.

"Just wait," she said softly.

When it happened again his eyes widened and a smile lit his face. "The quickening," he whispered. "Our child awakes."

She nodded and put her hand on top of his. He looked into her eyes, his gaze loving. "My beloved," he whispered.

"Forever," she promised.

Her life had not turned out at all the way she'd imagined. That old feared and unwanted hunger had evolved into something of dreams. She'd found love that was deeper and more profound than anything she'd dreamed of. And she'd do anything to protect it. But for now they were safe. And in a universe where the unexpected could change your life in a heartbeat, she'd learned to rejoice in every moment. Tomorrow would bring what it was meant to deliver, but tonight she was the most fortunate of women because tonight she'd sleep in the arms of love.

About the Author

Ciana Stone has been reading since the age of three, and wrote her first story at age five. Since then she has enjoyed writing as a solitary form of entertainment, and has just recently come out of the closet to share her stories with others. She holds several post graduate degrees and has often been referred to as a professional student. Her latest fields of interest are quantum mechanics and Taoism. When she is not writing (or studying) she enjoys painting (canvas, not walls), sculpting, running, hiking and yoga. She lives with her long-time lover in several locations in the United States.

Ciana 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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