

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

# *Siren Singing*

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Siren Singing

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# ***SIREN SINGING***

**Isabo Kelly**

## Chapter One

Sonia Karishja took a deep breath and straightened her shoulders. She'd known for years this day would come. Even before her father announced his decision, Sonia began to prepare. From the moment the seer revealed the future to her, she'd studied and trained, learning everything she could to guarantee success.

Because this one day could ensure the future of her entire planet.

Her wedding day.

"Sonia, stop fidgeting," her lady-in-waiting scolded. "The jewels will be crooked if you don't stop moving."

She glanced down at Nina where she knelt, affixing small rubies to the skin around Sonia's navel. "Sorry." Standing here, getting ready to meet her groom for the first time, nerves plagued Sonia. She'd been so positive this marriage was the right thing. Now her future seemed less certain.

Vander Ulneric was the oldest son of one of the most powerful families, both militarily and politically, on Callisea. This marriage would form a bond between his family and hers, a powerful Ishari family, creating a treaty between their planets that couldn't fail like so many had in the past. Sonia would bring the superior technology of her planet to the superior armies of his. The tie would force their two governments to deal with each other, and together they could survive as independent worlds against the onslaught of their mutual enemy, the Selmorahn Empire.

So she'd learned everything there was to know about Vander to ensure the success of their marriage, even to the point of becoming fluent in his native language. And all that knowledge had produced an unexpected side effect.

She'd fallen in love with him.

"This seduction plan of yours will go a lot smoother if you aren't worried about crooked body art," Nina said.

She tried to grin but her stomach fluttered. Nina was her best friend and the only person she'd trusted with this particular secret. "I'm starting to worry about my plan." She glanced over her friend's head to her reflection in the floor-length mirror. Cool spring light streamed into the room through giant windows, making the white silk of her dress glow. "I've never tried to seduce a man before. Not like a normal woman."

"Then use your song. I don't understand why you won't. If I had the talent, I'd use it."

Sonia shook her head and watched the tiny bells in her hair sparkle as the jingling sound danced through the quiet room. "I want him to want *me*. I don't want him tricked into lusting after me."

Nina sighed but didn't look up from her work. "Sonia, you want him to love you. But..."

When Nina didn't finish, Sonia glanced down. "What?"

"But you know that might never happen," she finished and finally met Sonia's gaze. "You better than anyone know you're facing an uphill battle."

Sonia bit her bottom lip and glanced back at the mirror so she wouldn't have to see the compassion in her friend's eyes. Nina was right. She understood only too well her quest to make Vander fall in love with her might be hopeless. He was already in love with someone else. A ghost. A woman who'd been killed in a Selmorahn raid only four months before this marriage was arranged.

A woman who was opposite in every way to Sonia. Anya had been petite, fair-haired, light-eyed, quiet, shy, biddable, sweet, caring and giving. Sonia was dark—black hair, black eyes, olive-colored skin. She was tall, curvy, forward and brazen. She considered herself caring and would do anything for her family and her people. But she wasn't quiet, sweet was questionable, and biddable wasn't a term often used in the same sentence as her name.

Not that she hadn't considered changing for Vander. But as Nina pointed out, she made a terrible blonde. Half smiling, she shrugged. "If I have any hope of winning his heart, I have to earn it for who and what I am. You said as much already."

"I didn't mean for you to avoid using the one sure-fire talent you have to seduce men. Besides, that's part of who you are. Would you hide that from him?"

"No. But I'm not using it against him either." She looked up at her reflection again. "I'm just going to have to seduce him the old-fashioned way." She ran a hand over her gown.

The dress was cut to reveal more skin than it covered, despite the full-length skirt and long sleeves. She wasn't even supposed to wear undergarments, but after some debate had opted for small, lacy panties. While her own people wouldn't think twice about her provocative attire, Calliseans were much more conservative. Undergarments weren't the only adjustment she'd had to make to accommodate a wedding on Vander's home world, including having to forgo the typical four to five day weddings of her home city, Holiabad. But she'd kept a few of her own customs. She would remain barefoot on her wedding day and for the following four days. And her hands and feet were decorated with red body paint, her hands covered with flower and vine designs specific to her family clan.

In the bright sunlight filling the room, the contrast between red paint, white silk and her dark skin was striking. She grinned. "If he isn't seduced by this fine work of yours, I have no hope. With or without my song."

Nina grinned back. "If he doesn't want you on first sight, he's made of stone and doesn't deserve you. You're going to have every man in that room drooling."

Sonia pressed a hand to her stomach, above the swirls of rubies. There was only one man she wanted to notice her. And he was the one man she was worried might not.

Nina patted her hip and stood. "I have an early wedding present for you." She crossed to the stacks of trunks that made up their luggage.

Sonia had been given a lavish suite next to Vander's in the family wing of the palace. But to prepare for the ceremony, she'd stayed in Nina's cozier room in the guest wing. At least here, she could stand on thick rugs. Most of the palace had marble floors which were freezing against her bare feet. One of the maids told her the palace remained cool even in the height of summer. But it wasn't summer yet, so she found it hard to appreciate the cold floors. Part of her missed the dry heat of her own home. Even in the approaching winter, she'd still have been able to spend time in her sun-drenched gardens. Though as she remembered the heat of summer, she couldn't help but appreciate the cooler climate here.

After digging through her case for a few moments, Nina rose with a large box wrapped in gold paper. She grinned as she handed Sonia the present. "If this doesn't get his engines revving, the man's a eunuch."

Sonia raised an eyebrow. When she removed the wrapping and saw the present, she laughed. "Thank you, Nina. I think you just tipped the scales in my favor."

\* \* \* \* \*

Vander Ulneric tapped his fist against his thigh, his mind far away from his current surroundings, working out next week's deployment schedule for his armies. The Selmorahn had been quiet lately. That meant they were up to something. And he was on high alert, trying to outthink them. He barely registered the significance of the day.

His wedding day.

An instant of trepidation snuck in past his preoccupation. He was actually going to marry a woman he'd never met. Not something he'd have agreed to before Anya died. After that, only the war mattered. He hadn't even bothered finding out what his future wife looked like. As he waited for the formal introduction, he regretted that decision. But Rico assured him the woman was suitable.

"Do you have the..." He snapped his fingers, turned in his chair and held out a hand to his youngest brother.

"Your groom's gift?" Rico shook his head. "Right here."

He handed Vander a purple box wrapped with a gold ribbon. "What did you get?"

"A diamond and ruby necklace. Her lady-in-waiting said those are her favorite stones."

Vander nodded. "Good." Then he frowned. "What's this woman's name again?"

"Gods, Vander, you can't even remember your future bride's name? It's Sonia. Don't forget again. You'll be married to the woman in a few hours."

"I doubt she'll care any more than I do."

"She's a woman," William Vi'Sans, Vander's second-in-command, said from his place on the couch. "She'll expect you to at least remember her name."

Vander scowled at William's unrepentant grin. "This is politics, not romance." But he made an effort to remember her name.

By the time he was called from his apartment to the Ceremonial Hall, his thoughts had returned to the war. His boot heels echoed on the pale marble floors as he strode down ornately decorated, high-ceilinged corridors lined with soldiers in their formal uniforms. He studied their formation, approving the heightened palace security.

Seeing his soldiers reminded him of the new Ishari technology he could now integrate into his armies. Until this treaty, Callisea had relied entirely on its own resources to fight off the Selmorahn. They got no help from the Consortium, who considered both Callisea and Ishar too distant to waste resources on. With the combined specialties of the two planets, though, they had a chance at retaining their autonomy, and he was eager to put the new technology to good use.

When he entered the Ceremonial Hall and saw the assembly of waiting delegates, his thoughts returned to palace security. If he'd been a Selmorahn commander, he'd have attacked during this event, maybe tried to assassinate the bride or groom so the treaty fell apart. Despite the precautions he'd taken to prevent just that, Vander ran through his security measures again as he waited for the formal speeches to conclude, making sure he hadn't missed anything.

"May I present my daughter, Sonia Karishja."

Hearing the name he'd memorized earlier, Vander blinked his surroundings into focus. He glanced at Admiral Karishja and the woman on his arm. And then he forgot to breathe.

This was his future wife?

She was the most stunning creature he'd ever seen. Long black hair hung in thick coils down her back and was decorated with little silver bells that jingled when she moved. Her eyes were almond-shaped and black. Her olive complexion was smooth and silky. Her face was all angles—high cheekbones, a pointed chin, a thin, sharp nose. But her lips were lush and red.

An image flashed across his mind of those full lips sliding down the length of his cock, leaving a hint of lipstick at the base near his balls. The fantasy was so clear and visceral he had to suppress a groan. Swallowing, he forced his mind away from her mouth. His formal uniform left no room for inconvenient erections.

He tried to keep his gaze on her face, but her barely-there dress drew his attention. Her breasts were full and round, only just covered by swathes of white silk. The diamond cut in the front of the dress showed off her gently curved stomach and the design of rubies decorating the area around her navel. He fisted his hands to keep from reaching out and touching those winking red stones. The line of precious jewels led his gaze down farther, to where the lower edge of the diamond pointed toward her sex, revealing her hipbones and part of the crease between her hip and thigh. His mouth watered and his cock twitched. But he couldn't stop his gaze from moving lower.

Her shapely legs were fully displayed between the folds of more white silk, leaving nothing to his imagination. Her feet were bare but for the red paint covering her soles. He was so caught up in a fantasy of having those shapely legs wrapped around his hips, he startled when she stepped close and took his hand.

"It's a pleasure to finally meet you, Vander," she said.

Her husky, deep voice made him think of dark, sweaty nights filled with erotic smells and flavors. She spoke his language, her accent curling the words into something lush and provocative. Her scent washed over him now that she stood so close. Spicy and sweet. Would she taste like that? The thought made his pulse pound. Her hand felt delicate in his and looked exotic covered in intricate red designs, but her grip was firm and confident.

And it was that confidence and the hint of wicked knowledge in her smile that caught his full attention. This was no biddable pawn doing her family's will without any say in her life. His future wife knew full well what she was getting into, and she came to this marriage willingly. Would that willingness extend to the bedroom? As he stared at the quirk of her mouth, he found himself quite unexpectedly hoping to the gods it would.

The warmth of her palm seeped into his skin, even through the thick, formal gloves he wore. He knew he had to let go of her hand, but his muscles twitched to pull her close instead. Blood surged through his veins, rushing toward his groin. Dangerous. He dropped her hand and nodded in greeting.

His reactions shocked him. He hadn't had such an immediate physical response to any woman, not even Anya. The fact that it took all his willpower to keep from embarrassing himself with a full-blown hard-on in front of the hall full of dignitaries was both disturbing and unprecedented.

Since he couldn't find his voice, he held his hand out to Rico who placed the groom's gift in his palm. He presented the small box to her but had to clear his throat before saying, "It's our custom to give a gift to our brides on our wedding day."

She smiled. "I know. Thank you. Should I open it now?"

"Please."

When she lifted the top off the box, her eyes widened. She glanced past Vander to Rico, then looked back at the necklace. With a slight smile, she said, "This is beautiful. Thank you."

"May I?" He gestured to her neck, offering to help her with the clasp.

"Of course."

At her acceptance, he removed his gloves, handing them to Rico, so his fingers were free to work the small links. Then he took the necklace from her outstretched hands, careful not to touch her skin for fear that even a brief contact would stretch his wavering control too far.



She turned, lifting her thick hair to one side so he could fit the chain around her throat, and he got his first view of the back of her gown. Held together with only very thin straps, the bottom dipped so low that from his angle he could see the top of the crease between her ass cheeks. He found himself wondering if she had anything on under the gown and the thought that she might not made his mouth dry. More rubies curved down her spine from the base of her neck to just beneath the material of the gown. Their red glow caught the light of overhead chandeliers, teasing him with possibilities.

His hands shook for just an instant before he steeled himself so he could hook the clasp and secure the chain in place. He couldn't help touching her this time. And when his fingers brushed her skin, she was warm and as silky-soft as she looked. A tiny shiver shook her shoulders, making the bells in her hair jingle. That show of reaction made him smile. Maybe he wasn't the only one affected by this strange chemistry. As a test, he let his hands linger on the base of her neck longer than was strictly necessary, then he ran one fingertip down the curve of her spine. Her sharply indrawn breath had his pulse surging and another fantasy of bending her forward and thrusting into her from behind filled his imagination.

She broke the spell, dropping her hair and turning to face him. But her cheeks were flushed a lovely pink against her dark skin.

"Thank you," she murmured and touched a dangling ruby where it hung in the hollow of her throat.

"My pleasure." And to his surprise, it was.

The ceremony was tedious and long, giving Vander too much thinking time. To avoid erotic fantasies of his bride, and an obvious erection which would *not* endear him to his new father-in-law, he turned his thoughts back to troop deployments and palace security. When the final vows were said, the contracts signed, the songs sung and the cheers shouted, Vander was ready to get back to the war room.

But social duty dictated he stay for the celebratory feast. His sister, who's specialty was logistics, had organized an elaborate meal for the dignitaries gathered from both planets for this wedding. Marta would consider it a grave insult to her skills if he left without making an appearance at an event she'd gone through so much trouble to arrange. Since she rarely got to use her skills on anything but the war effort, she'd adopted this wedding as if it were her own. And he'd cut off his foot before disappointing his sister.

The party proved as glorious as Marta had promised, but Vander was too distracted by the possibility of a Selmorahn attack to truly enjoy it. And while he couldn't object to spending a little more time with his new wife, his preoccupation kept him from savoring the occasional brush of his thigh against Sonia's. Now that the contracts were signed, even an assassination wouldn't break the treaties. But without both he and Sonia's influence on their families, the treaties could still fall apart before the ties were solidified.

He checked in with his commanders regularly during the dinner service and discussed ways to shore up a vulnerable sector of the planet's defenses with William. As the night progressed and the commanders continued to call in the "all's clear", Vander finally relaxed enough to have a glass of wine. He still worried at the silence of the Selmorahn. Why waste this opportunity to attack? Especially when this wedding represented a strengthening of two territories they were trying to take over. But so far, they seemed to be safe.

He glanced to his left at his new wife. She was smiling and looking around the room as Rico entertained her with some story or another. His youngest brother's gaze never left Sonia's face. Vander could understand the difficulty in turning away from a woman so beautiful. But the look in his brother's eyes was a little too...attentive. Rico was known for his charm. And he'd met Sonia before, when he'd gone to Ishar with their parents to negotiate the marriage contract. Rico's genetically enhanced talent was for negotiation, so their father had insisted he go. How well had Rico and Sonia gotten to know each other? She seemed at ease with him, laughing and talking without hesitation.

Vander frowned and turned away. He hadn't considered the relationship he would want with his contracted wife. In fact, he'd assumed they'd have separate lives. He hadn't been interested in anyone since Anya's death, so he'd never thought about having an affair outside this marriage, but he had assumed his future bride would have her own discrete affairs. Now the thought of Sonia being with another man disturbed him. He wasn't entirely sure why, but for the moment at least, he wanted to keep her to himself. She *was* his after all.

That thought was as disturbing as the idea of Sonia with another man. He didn't even know the woman. He was probably just reacting out of lust and some misplaced sense of possessiveness. No doubt that would wear off soon enough.

But for now, it would be best if he kept Rico away from Sonia.

He was about to distract her with a little conversation of his own when William tapped his arm. "We've had a strange report from one of the planetary sentinels. They found the wreckage of a Selmorahn ship off the Guenar coast, deep in the jungles. At first they thought it was old wreckage from a previous battle, but on closer inspection, they discovered it looks new."

"New?"

"They estimate it crashed sometime within the last week."

"How the hells did it get through perimeter defenses without our knowing about it? Were there survivors?"

"Two bodies were found. But the ship was large enough to hold at least ten more. And I don't know how it got through. The colonel of the Guenar regiment doesn't have an explanation."

"Well tell him to find one. Soon. Or I'm going down there myself."

William smiled ruefully. "That'll put the fear of the gods into him."

"I also want teams combing the jungle looking for any evidence of survivors. The last thing we want is a group of Selmorahns entrenched on the planet's surface doing who knows what damage."

William pressed the finger-sized comm-link in his ear and relayed the orders while Vander scowled out at the crowd without seeing it. So much for relaxing enough to enjoy his wedding night. What the hells was a Selmorahn craft doing on the surface of the planet? Without their even knowing about it?

He thought about making his excuses and leaving the party. But he had to consider the diplomatic niceties. Until he got a report back from Colonel Batist, there wasn't much he could do. For all he knew, the two bodies found onboard were the only two on the craft. Vander couldn't risk offending his new in-laws or his new wife for a situation that wasn't an emergency. But he was no longer feeling quite so relaxed.

He was still discussing the situation with William when his father-in-law's voice boomed through the noisy room, quieting the chatter.

"You must sing for them, Sonia," the admiral said.

Vander glanced at her. He suspected by the stubborn look on Sonia's face this wasn't the first time the admiral had made the request. He was also speaking in Callisea's primary language, Jorm, so the entire room would know what he was asking of his daughter.

"Now is not the time, father," she said.

"I disagree. They should know what a treasure they're getting."

A look passed between father and daughter, hinting at some unspoken argument.

"Go ahead, Sonia," her mother urged.

"Yes. You really should sing for...them," her lady-in-waiting said from farther down the table.

"We'd be greatly honored," Vander's father added.

Vander scowled at his father. Sonia obviously didn't want to entertain the hall on her wedding day. Why push the situation and make her uncomfortable? He was about to tell them all to leave her alone, but she stilled his protest by rising to her feet.

With a slight tilt of her head toward her family, she glided around the table and out into the open center of the huge room. Passing under the dripping crystal chandeliers, her white gown glowed, giving her a luminous quality that drew the gazes of everyone in the room. Her graceful movements held Vander enthralled. The rubies decorating her bare skin sparkled and winked at him as she moved. Teasing. He could barely turn away.

He was so caught up in Sonia's presence he almost missed seeing the members of her family putting something in their ears. Frowning, he took a closer look. They seemed to be plugging their ears. But why would they block their hearing after urging Sonia to sing?

He barely had time to consider their strange behavior when the sweetest, purest sound he'd ever heard filled the room.

## Chapter Two

Vander turned to Sonia as her voice twined through his mind, ensnaring him. He stopped breathing for a heartbeat and couldn't move as sound so perfect it was torture to hear whispered over his skin. His nerves caught fire, everything in him straining toward her. Her song called him, filling him with a need to get closer to the source of that voice. His body exploded with lust and longing so bone deep it was wrenched from his soul.

She met his gaze as she sang, and he felt the look like a stroke along his spine. His cock hardened as her voice danced along its length like tiny kisses, teasing him to the point of pain. His hands fisted, but he didn't notice crushing the delicate stem of his wineglass until liquid spilled over his fingers. Even then, he couldn't look away. His heart beat erratically as his breathing deepened. All he could think about was burying his cock in her wet, welcoming heat and fucking her for hours.

He could picture her naked, her jewel-decorated body glistening with sweat, her long hair tumbling over her shoulders, down her spine. Red-painted fingers pinched her nipples as she swayed toward him. Heat simmered in her dark eyes, promising sex so hot he'd burn for sure. His cock pulsed with anticipation as he watched her stroke her own breasts. When she slid one hand across her ribs, down her waist toward the dark thatch of hair between her legs, he groaned and dropped to his knees before her. He had to taste her. The music coursing through his blood would allow nothing less. He reached out to grip her hips. The scent of her sex assaulted him, heightening an appetite that was already beyond his control. But when his hands would have caught her and pulled her to his mouth, she slid backward, just out of reach. He crawled toward her, intent on reaching her, having her, but she continued to sway just beyond his grasp as her melodious voice clutched at his soul.

And then the sound of her song changed and her gaze shifted away. Suddenly Vander felt released from the spell. He blinked as the intense fantasy vanished. He was still in the ballroom, Sonia was still singing, his body was hard and tense with lust. He wanted her just as he had during that strange hallucination. But he could just about think beyond the raging need. He no longer felt like his very existence would cease if he didn't reach her.

Sucking in a deep, stuttering breath, he glanced around the hall to see how others reacted to the sound of Sonia's voice.

Rico strained against the edge of the table as if he would crawl over the obstacle to reach her. He crushed the delicate cream tablecloth in his fists, pulling it toward him as he panted and groaned.

Stoic William sat motionless, his full attention on the beautiful singer. His large body shivered and his muscles spasmed at intervals, as if he were trying not to move. He gripped the armrests on his chair so tightly, Vander heard the metal decorated to look like wood crumple like aluminum. William's jaw clenched so hard, the muscles in his neck looked about to burst.

All around the room, people seemed frozen by the music, their bodies tensed and straining toward Sonia. Time seemed to stop as she held the crowd enraptured. Sonia's family, on the other hand, smiled but seemed oblivious to her voice, and he knew then why they'd used earplugs.

As the music spun out, Vander watched the men and women around the room begin to move. Like sleepwalkers, their hands reached up to cup breasts, or down to stroke hardened cocks. At a nearby table, a woman moaned loud enough to be heard above Sonia's song. Vander turned to see her pulling the top of her dress down, exposing her large, white breasts. The man next to her shuddered and, without looking away from Sonia, cupped one of the woman's breasts and plucked desperately at her swollen nipple. The woman pressed herself into his palm as her hand dropped to his lap and began stroking his cock through the barrier of his trousers.

Vander felt a groan escape as he imagined Sonia's hand fondling his cock in the same way. A part of Vander, the part that could think beyond the music, realized he knew the woman. She was a conservative congresswoman from one of the southern cities. Her husband wasn't next to her, having moved across the room to talk with several men at one of the other tables before Sonia began to sing. The man the congresswoman was fondling was a stranger to Vander. But he was definitely not the woman's husband. Even as he considered the implications of this fact, the congresswoman stood, her gaze still on Sonia, and lifted the long skirt of her gown up to her waist. The man beside her hastily stood, unfastening his trousers and freeing his cock as he positioned himself behind the woman. She leaned across the table, her peaked nipples just brushing against the tablecloth as the man pulled down her panties. He fingered her pussy without actually looking down, then gripped her hips and thrust into her. She arched her back, moaning as the man fucked her hard. And still neither of them looked away from Sonia.

Despite the voyeuristic lust coursing through his blood, Vander still found the public display shocking. Calliseans didn't fuck in public. Especially married women. He forced his gaze away from the couple, toward the woman's husband. Only to see the man in question on his knees in front of another man, sucking his cock while staring at Sonia. Vander gulped in a breath. What was happening to his people? He glanced back at Sonia, but her gaze moved around the room, never touching his. And for some reason, he was grateful for that small kindness. Because if she'd looked into his eyes again, he wasn't sure what he'd do. His body pulsed with lust, and a part of him didn't want to control his instinct to take and possess. Around the room, others were giving in to the power of her music. The slap of skin against skin marked a counter melody to Sonia's singing.

He dragged his gaze from his wife and watched in growing horror and fascination as the room devolved into a writhing orgy. To his left, a woman knelt on all fours, sucking the cock of one man while another fucked her from behind. A second woman stroked the first woman's breasts as she fingered her pussy and stared at Sonia. Beyond them, a tangle of limbs sprawled across three chairs pushed together. From his angle, Vander couldn't even tell how many people were involved in the pile of thrusting bodies. But the few faces he could see were still turned toward the singer. On the opposite side of the room, the congresswoman's husband had moved from sucking one man's cock to bending across the back of a chair as a new man fucked him. From his angle, Vander could only see the congresswoman's husband jerking forward and back as the other man thrust into him—he couldn't see the actual penetration, but the sight was enough to send a shudder through his body. Beside the men, two women and a man who looked to be one of the servers had arranged themselves so each was licking another's sex while still being able to stare at Sonia.

With some effort, Vander kept his gaze from shifting to the members of his own family. The part of him that could think knew that was one sight he wouldn't be able to take. The thrusts and groans filling the hall were enough. What he'd already witnessed left little doubt that everyone, save Sonia's family, was affected by the power of her song. Around the hall, beneath the sweet tone of her powerful voice, the sounds of sex set a subtle background to the music.

The rampant coupling, the heat and lust filling the air pushed Vander's own arousal nearly beyond his control. His erection pulsed painfully in the tight confines of his uniform trousers. Despite the shiver of shock that crept in past the power of Sonia's music, he was overcome with need so primal it robbed him of sense. He turned back to Sonia. Flashes of his earlier hallucination swam through his mind, and his cock jerked. Unlike the rest of the room, Vander didn't want to make do with the nearest willing fuck. He wanted only her. His wife. His. No one else would satisfy him. No other woman could answer the desire surging through his veins. He needed her mouth, her breasts, her ass, her pussy. He wanted to plunge into her heat and never emerge.

Next to him, William groaned, but Vander could no longer turn away from Sonia. She became his world, his focus, his entire reason for living. Even the bare ounce of rational thought he had left began to slip away under the obsession to possess her. But the single word that William had muttered slowly sank in past Vander's haze of lust. And as his ravaged mind grasped the implications of that word, he blinked.

"Siren."

Dear gods, his wife was a Siren.

From the smirk on her father's face, Sonia knew he'd gotten the reaction he wanted. Calliseans were much more sexually conservative than Ishari. Only the power of a Siren could drive them to a public orgy. And she had no doubt some of the people in the room were engaging in sexual escapades they wouldn't normally indulge in. Her song brought out their deepest, most hidden desires and left them helpless to do anything

but carry out those impulses. If she continued to sing this particular melody, they would fuck and fuck until too exhausted to move, and still they would try to fuck, never satisfied, never satiated. If she didn't pull them out of the song, they would forget to eat, forget to drink, forget everything but the lust coursing through their blood and the need to be near her. This was a classic Siren song, a powerful combination of music and words that could push her listeners to their doom.

Her father was making a point by urging her to sing, to sing this song in particular. The admiral hadn't dared reveal her nature to anyone outside the immediate family previously. Having a Siren born into one's family was considered a profound honor. But with the war raging on, he'd feared the Selmorahns would attempt to take her or even kill her. So her gift had been kept a secret from everyone outside the family and her mentor, the seer. Then the negotiations for her marriage contract had begun and her father, perceiving himself at a disadvantage, had told Vander's father of her gift. Major General Ulneric hadn't believed.

When she glanced toward her new father-in-law and saw his wife kneeling before him, her head bobbing up and down over his cock, she knew he believed now.

A part of her couldn't help the slight disgust she felt at the susceptibility of people to her song. She'd never been able to understand her own reaction, though. She was a Siren. People were supposed to behave like this under the influence of her melody. They couldn't help themselves. That was her supposed gift. But the animal lust of the orgy around her still left a slightly bad taste in her mouth. The Ishari might be more sexually open than the Calliseans, but they honored the art and beauty of passion and seduction. Her people sought to increase pleasure and heighten sensation during lovemaking, striving to push the passion between lovers into pure ecstasy. She'd always considered the Ishari approach to sex to be incredibly sensual and provocative. And that eroticism was lost when she forced people to fuck against their wills. If the group around her had known what was about to happen and wanted her music to fuel their passions, that would have been one thing. But this show made her stomach queasy.

Unlike Sirens of the past, this control she had over other people didn't make Sonia feel powerful. She didn't even feel very useful. Mostly, she just felt tired.

Having Vander in the room during this demonstration made everything worse. She didn't want him seduced by the spell of her voice. She needed him to want her for her own sake. During their initial meeting, his appreciation had been obvious, and a tiny thrill curled through her belly, knowing he reacted to her physically. With time and care, she could turn that desire into deeper feelings.

But after this show...

She should have refused her father's demand. The man had a talent for goading her into doing things she otherwise would not. And with the prodding of her mother and even Vander's father, her pride had gotten the better of her.



Though she tried to block Vander from some of the spell by subtly modulating her voice whenever directing her music toward him, insulating him entirely was impossible without special sound filters. She could tell every time she glanced at him that he felt the lust her song inspired. And she cringed inwardly. Whatever interest he'd shown earlier might be tainted with the thought that she'd tricked him into desiring her.

But that damn prideful part of her had wanted to tempt Vander beyond his outward cool. As soon as the wedding ceremony began, his interest waned. That first spark of desire faded until he was as distracted as the moment he'd walked into the Ceremonial Hall. Rico had been the one to keep her entertained during dinner. Vander had barely glanced at her again until she stood to sing.

His ability to so easily forget her existence stung. And that hurt, more even than the influence of her family, had pushed her into accepting her father's challenge. She regretted the decision now. More than she'd ever regretted using her song. She'd forced these people into doing things in public they'd never normally consider. And these would be her people soon. She was to live in this palace, on this planet. They'd never be able to face her, knowing she'd brought out a side of them they tried to suppress.

And Vander. Had she sacrificed any chance of earning his trust? He was a strong man, used to being in total control. He'd resent her ability to usurp that control with only the sound of her voice.

She couldn't take back the song now. She'd taken them all too far. But she could ensure the crowd didn't suffer for it. She eased her music into a softer lilt, the words urging those listening to feel relaxed and sated. Her song wove the belief that secret dreams remained secret. No one would remember what had happened. They'd recognize her powerful talent but would assume their erotic thoughts had been nothing more than daydreams. Their bodies would feel the effects of the sex, but they'd assume that was part of the spell too, a visceral reaction to a hallucination. They wouldn't remember actually fucking the person nearest them. They'd only feel a lingering, naughty delight in the imagined fantasy.

When she was sure her music's new suggestion had taken root, when the crowd had all settled back in their seats, their clothing back in order, and the room looked almost as it had before she started singing, she let her voice fade. A heartbeat passed, then two. And the crowd erupted in applause. She smiled, dipping her head in thanks, immensely relieved they didn't remember enough to hate her.

But when she glanced at Vander, he was frowning. Wine stained the white cloth in front of him and the shattered remains of his glass lay unnoticed around his clenched fists. Sonia swallowed and returned to the table, worried he might remember more than she wanted. She'd never had cause to doubt the power of suggestion in her music, but if any man could overcome even a little of the influence of her song, Vander could.

By the time she took her seat, their fathers were deep in an animated discussion. Vander's father kept casting strange looks her way. There was a gleam in his eyes she wasn't entirely sure she liked. It wasn't lust, not the kind she inspired when singing. It was something more covetous and infinitely more dangerous. She'd have to tread

carefully around her new father-in-law. The diplomatic situation was delicate at best, but she would not be forced to do anything she wasn't willing to do. Despite the gleefully cocky smirk of her own father.

She turned away from the older men. She had more important things to worry about at the moment. Like the reaction of her new husband to the fact that he'd married a Siren. He wouldn't look at her when she sat, instead keeping his attention on the renewed celebrations. Her throat tightened at the distance between them that was somehow more personal now. Taking a deep breath, she forced herself to break the silence. "You didn't enjoy the music?"

"Actually, I did very much," he said.

But his words belied his scowl. She looked back over the crowd. Everyone seemed content. No lingering embarrassment haunted the party. At least she'd managed that much.

"You're a Siren."

Vander's voice startled her. She hadn't expected further conversation.

"We thought Sirens were a myth."

"Most people do. Even on Ishar."

"You've a powerful gift."

She shrugged. The word "gift" didn't always feel like the appropriate term for her skills. Especially at that moment.

"You could control armies with your voice."

Something in his tone drew her attention. She turned to find him staring at her. But she didn't see distrust or even desire in his expression. Nor did she see the strange covetous light she'd glimpsed in his father's gaze. In Vander's deep blue eyes she saw only calculating consideration. For an instant, Sonia was speechless as realization sunk in past her trepidation. Vander led armies, after all. He'd been genetically engineered to excel at tactics. Of course he'd immediately consider the strategic impact of her skill. He wasn't angry with her. He was recognizing a possible weapon.

Because he wasn't condemning her, the band around her chest loosened and an involuntary laugh escaped. At his deepening frown, she smiled and explained the limits of her gift. "In ancient times, maybe I could have controlled an army. But with modern technology, no. My voice doesn't carry any power through communicators or over links. I can't penetrate a metallic hull with my compulsions."

He nodded but didn't turn away. She studied the deep blue of his eyes, the handsome plains of his face. He was a gorgeous man without being pretty. Nina considered him too hard-edged. Her friend preferred the more refined male beauty of his brother Rico. But Sonia liked Vander's face infinitely better.

The thick, short waves of his light brown hair drew her attention. What would it feel like crushed between her fingers or brushing against her inner thigh? His hands were large, covered now in gloves, but she knew his fingertips were roughened. The

moment he'd brushed those fingers against her neck while fastening his groom's gift around her throat, she'd imagined his hands slipping around to her breasts and kneading her nipples with the rough skin of his fingertips. She practically felt his large palm sliding across her bare stomach, slipping beneath the band of her panties, teasing her clit with a callused touch until her body hummed on the edge of climax. The fantasy left her wet and very glad she'd decided to wear panties so the telltale moisture didn't drip down her legs.

Shifting in her seat, she tried to force her mind back to the conversation. But being this close to him overwhelmed her senses. She'd wanted him for so long. She never imagined the impact he would have on her when they were finally face-to-face. All her study hadn't prepared her for his delicious scent or the heat of his body when he leaned close. She'd imagined how she might seduce him to win his heart. She never realized how thoroughly she'd be seduced.

"In person, though," he said, breaking into her thoughts, "you could control anyone near enough to hear you sing?"

Back to battlefields and the best way to use a new weapon. "If they weren't prepared." Not exactly the conversation she'd planned to have with her new husband on their wedding night. But at least he was talking to *her* now instead of William.

"Prepared?"

She nodded toward her family. "They use ear inserts that filter the sound of my voice. They can hear the song without being affected."

"Ah," he said as if this cleared up something. "And are these...filters easily available on Ishar?"

"No. They're expensive and have to be specially tuned to a specific Siren's voice, even her specific song. You'd need my cooperation to fashion one."

"So your voice, in person, is more powerful than you let on, even if the enemy is aware of your skill."

"If you knew about me, and you were my enemy, would you spare any expense to develop a filter resistant to my lure?"

"I'd have you killed before you could be used against me."

She didn't even flinch. "That's because you're a true and merciless tactician. But I'm not so easy to kill."

He raised a brow and leaned closer. "I'd like to hear more, but I don't think this is the place to discuss such matters."

"At your convenience, then." And she leaned closer too because she couldn't resist his heat.

He surprised her by rising and extending a hand. She hesitated only a moment before placing her palm in his. Murmurs and a few muffled giggles followed their exit. Given what had just happened in that ballroom, the smirks at newlyweds seeking a bit

of privacy seemed silly. Although, since no one besides her family *knew* exactly what happened only minutes ago, Sonia supposed it was hard to blame them.

Now that she and Vander were to be alone, her stomach danced with nerves. Despite all her plans and fantasies, she was afraid she might not be capable of seducing him like a normal woman. Oh she'd read a thousand books and talked to several specialized tutors. But she'd never put those lessons to practice before. She'd never had to. Before this moment, all she'd ever needed to do was sing.

## Chapter Three

Though they'd been given separate, adjoining suites, Vander led her directly to his apartment. They had a door connecting their two living rooms, giving them as much privacy and autonomy as they might want. But Sonia hoped the door would stay open permanently. The fact that he didn't hesitate to bring her into his space gave her hope.

Inside, he left her to study the minimalist living room while he disappeared through a side door. The center of the large space held one long black couch and two large chairs around a glass topped table. In the middle of the table sat a vase of purple and red flowers that looked completely out of place in the otherwise Spartan room. A pale gray rug placed beneath the chairs and couch was the only break in the solid black marble floor. She hurried to the rug to warm her bare feet. There was a fireplace against the wall that connected with her apartments, but there was no fire lit. Four tall windows took up most of the wall opposite her and were covered with thick gray and black velvet curtains, pulled closed against the night.

The remaining walls all the way up to the arched ceiling were decorated with maps—maps of the surrounding city, detailed topographical and geographical maps of the planet, charts of the local system as well as the neighboring systems and one extensive map showing most of the E'lukim Consortium of Planets. On that map, Callisea and Ishar were marked with yellow flags. The two planets looked tiny and far removed from the whole. On the map of the neighboring systems, again Callisea and Ishar were marked in yellow. And a line of blue delineated the fluctuating border between E'lukim and Selmorahn space.

As she stared at that map, she shivered. They were so close to that blue line. And so far away from the central systems. Another reminder of how important this union between her family and Vander's was to both their people.

When Vander rejoined her, he carried a decanter of burgundy wine and two crystal glasses.

"Please, have a seat." He motioned to the couch.

To her pleasure, he sat beside her. He poured the wine and handed her a glass before settling back in the cushions.

"The border line is...telling, isn't it?"

"Frightening, more like. You live with that reminder every day? In your sanctuary? When do you take time away from the war?"

"I don't. I can't afford to."

She nodded because she understood his devotion to duty and his people. But everyone needed a break. Even genetically engineered tactical geniuses. Maybe she

could help him with that. She took a sip of wine, studying him over the rim of her glass. He was frowning down into his drink, deep in thought. Not exactly a good mood for encouraging seduction. Setting her wine aside, she stood. "I have a surprise for you," she said. "I'll be right back."

He looked up, his eyebrows arched. "A surprise?"

"You'll like it. I promise." She grinned.

He grabbed her hand before she could move away. The contact sent a thrill of sensation up her arm.

"I want to discuss your...talent."

"After you've seen my present. Actually, it's a gift from Nina to us both."

Despite wanting to maintain the physical connection, she pulled away and hurried to her own apartment. Nina had guaranteed the game would be in place by the time she and Vander retired for the evening. She was extremely grateful for her friend's thoughtfulness now, as she needed Vander in a more relaxed mood, thinking about sex not war.

When she returned, she laid the box on the table and removed a large rectangle of marble and wood.

"A chess set?"

He smiled, but his gaze narrowed as if he were confused. She grinned, unfolding the board to its full size. The single-level set was classical and considered by all connoisseurs to be the only *real* way to play. This particular set, however, did have one special difference.

"You enjoy chess, right?" she asked as she pushed a switch along the side of the board to activate the holographic pieces. Realistic-looking humans flickered into being on their respective squares. One side of the board was dressed in solid black with beautiful silver detailing. The other was dressed in white and gold. The two queens wore gowns as revealing as Sonia's wedding dress. The two kings sported enormous, exaggerated erections.

He lifted a brow. "I love chess. But how did you know?"

"I know a lot about you." When his gaze narrowed again, she smiled and nodded to the set. "Black or white?" She settled onto the couch close enough for their thighs to touch.

He glanced at her gown, a fleeting look, but his eyes darkened as he gazed at her breasts. "Black." He looked up. "White suits you."

Excitement trembled through her stomach. She held his gaze for a moment longer, hoping he could read the heat in her eyes, then she turned her attention to the board. Instead of the vocal cues possible for the holographic game, she moved her pieces by hand, touching the top of a pawn and nudging the image toward its new square. All of the pawns were small but well-formed men and women. They wore little more than

loincloths the color of their suits. She smiled as the pawn she'd moved stood straighter to puff up his chest. When she glanced at Vander, he was studying the board.

"The pieces are...interesting," he murmured as he moved a pawn. The female figure struck a sexy pose and blew a kiss to the piece opposite her.

Laughing, Sonia said, "They get even more interesting as the game progresses."

"Have you always enjoyed chess?"

Though he was obviously interested in her answer, his gaze never left the board or her hand as she made her next move. "No. I learned recently." She'd learned because she knew he adored the game. And after some practice, she discovered she quite enjoyed it too.

He moved another pawn then settled back in the couch. "What else do you know about me?"

"A lot." She studied the board a moment, then moved her knight. The little horse whinnied as it trotted into place and the knight brandished a sword.

Vander's attention was diverted long enough to make another move. "For example?"

"I know you're the oldest of six children—four brothers, including you, and two sisters, all genetically engineered to have specialized traits useful to the war effort. Your skill is tactics." She made her move. "I know you prefer your estate in the warmer climates to the south but live here in Ter'am most of the time because it's the central hub of the military. You've been commander-in-chief of the Callisean armed forces since your seventeenth birthday. You've never been married. You have no children. You prefer paper books and maps to electronic or holographic alternatives. You're an excellent pilot, but since your main skill is planning and executing battles, you rarely fly in one."

He raised a hand to stop her recitation. "You've done your research. But stats and public information can't tell you everything there is to know about a man."

"I learned enough."

"You can't know me that well."

She smiled. "I know you hate oranges but love grapes and carrots. You forget to eat when you're planning an offensive. Your favorite color is dark blue, like your uniform jacket. And you didn't bother to find out anything about me before we married."

He scowled at her last sentence. "Why would you assume that?"

"I'm not assuming. I know. Did you even remember my name before my father introduced us?"

"Of course."

She chuckled and studied the chessboard. "Because Rico reminded you in the hour before we met."

"Did he tell you that?"

The heat in his voice had her grin widening. "He didn't have to." She faced him. "You just confirmed my suspicions."

"Very clever." He frowned. "You have me at a disadvantage."

"Yes," she agreed. "And whose fault is that?"

He flashed a self-mocking smile. "So tell me something about you."

"What would you like to know?"

"Why did you agree to move to Callisea instead of insisting I move to Ishar?"

"You've wondered that for awhile, haven't you?"

"It crossed my mind once or twice after I read the final contract."

She shrugged. "You control the armies here. This wedding was designed to utilize Callisean military might with Ishari technology. Who better to integrate that new technology into the Callisean military than Commander Vander Ulneric?"

"I could have moved to Ishar and trained your military."

"But you wouldn't have."

"You're so sure?"

She nodded, and he scowled which made her smile. "You're needed here, Vander. And I'm...more flexible in where I live."

He turned back to the board. "Will you miss your planet? Your customs?"

"Yes." She watched him study the pieces. His forehead creased as he considered his next move. "But I accepted this outcome a long time ago. I'm looking forward to getting to know Callisean customs firsthand."

"What customs are you most interested in?"

He made his move, and she waited to comment so she could watch his reaction. When his bishop took one of her female pawns, the black-clad figure opened its robes to reveal an erection not quite as impressive as the king's but still significant. The bishop turned the female pawn so her ass faced him and bent her forward while pushing her little loincloth down her legs. Then he thrust into her, fucking her in a noisy but short-lived tableau. When the bishop came, the pawn squealed in delight and disappeared. The bishop closed his robe, straightened his shoulders and resumed his pose.

Vander coughed. "You're right. The game does get interesting. What happens if my king takes your queen?"

"Try to take her and see."

When he turned, the look in his eyes made her pulse pound. She was wet and achy with wanting him. She'd been anticipating this night for longer than she cared to consider. But she had to draw this out, to make him as desperate as she felt. This first night together had to be memorable. It had to have the power to overcome the memory of Anya. Or at least keep him interested in her long enough to develop strong feelings for her. Instead of giving in to the heat simmering between them, Sonia turned back to the board and made her next move.



From that moment, his game turned aggressive, an all-out attack to take her queen. She realized he'd only been toying with her before. Her months of lessons and practice were nothing to his tactical skills. And watching his mastery of the game was nothing short of awe-inspiring. Something about his single-mindedness made her pulse race. Would he bring that degree of concentration and determination to bed? *Vati*, Goddess of lust and love, she hoped so.

As each black piece took another of her white pieces, the sexual acts taking place on the board grew more frantic and explicit. Sonia watched Vander's reaction to each scene carefully, hoping for a sign that the game's eroticism was getting to him. At a glance, she could see he was fully erect, and his breathing was deep and not quite even. But that didn't seem to prevent him from taking yet another one of her pieces. She resisted the urge to reach out and stroke his cock through the barrier of his trousers and instead set up one of her pawns to be taken by his male castle.

He smirked a little as he made his move. "That was your first real mistake," he commented. His smirk fell away when his castle shoved her pawn to the ground.

The castle was one of the strangest pieces on the board with its naked human body formed of what looked like stone bricks the color of the suit. There was one male castle and one female castle in each suit and their bodies were blocky to accommodate the bricks. As Sonia and Vander watched, his castle stretched out on top of her pawn, his stone limbs grinding like rocks. The castle stuck his cliff-like face between the pawn's spread thighs and licked her while he pumped his stone cock into her mouth. The pawn fondled the castle's rock balls, rolling them between her hand which added a sound like water over stones to the grunts and moans of the pieces. The two writhed on the square for several moments longer than any of the other previous scenes. And despite all the sexual acts before this one, Sonia still felt her cheeks heating. Mostly because the thought of having Vander stretched out on top of her that way made her nerve endings hum. The castle's orgasm sounded like an earthquake and the pawn shattered beneath him into a thousand shards of light. When the flash cleared, the castle had resumed its ramrod straight pose, facing the opposing suit.

Vander's hand fisted against his thigh. He still wore his gloves and Sonia couldn't help but wonder what it would feel like to have him touch her with his gloves on. Oh she wanted the sensation of his roughened fingers against her skin. But the leather would add a wicked element of sensation.

To avoid launching herself at him, Sonia leaned forward and made another move. She didn't attempt to lose another piece on purpose after that, but Vander still continued to outplay her. When his knight took her bishop, Sonia had to swallow a mixture of amusement and embarrassment as the knight pulled the bishop across his lap, lifted his robes and spanked his bare ass with his sword flat while the bishop squirmed in obvious sexual enjoyment. The bishop pumped his erection against the knight's thigh in between each slap of the sword, finally arching his back in orgasm before dissolving into a sparkling confetti of stars and disappearing.

The look on Vander's face tipped the balance of Sonia's emotions toward amusement. It was the first time one of his male pieces had taken one of her males and he obviously hadn't anticipated that particular scene. Though why he assumed anything less, given what had been happening during the rest of the game, she wasn't sure. When she chuckled, he glared at her.

"You expected that," he accused.

She shook her head. "I've never actually played on this kind of board. Only heard stories. But it's living up to its reputation." She glanced at him. "Too much for you?"

"Just grateful I'm not a bishop."

The comment surprised a laugh from her. "You'd prefer to be the knight?"

He grinned. "Actually, I'd rather be the king."

The grin animated his face in a way she'd never seen before. His expression in most public appearances was serious and when he did smile, it was slight and controlled. Even during their game, his occasional smiles were tight-lipped. This grin was so spontaneous and genuine, Sonia found herself falling a little deeper in love. Her gaze settled on his mouth. So tempting to close the distance between them and brush her lips against his. One quick taste. But she feared if she started, she wouldn't stop.

Vander's grin fell away and he leaned closer. Her breath caught. She wanted him so much. The game had left her even more hot and bothered, painfully aware of him sitting so close. She'd pulled out the chessboard in an attempt to entice Vander, but she wasn't immune to the teasing scenes either. Maybe just one kiss. One taste to satisfy her curiosity.

He reached out and cupped her cheek, tracing his thumb over her cheekbone. The feel of leather against her skin made her shiver. To her surprise, he pulled back and removed his gloves, tossing them over his shoulder. Then his bare palm was on her cheek and she could hardly breathe.

"You're a very beautiful woman, Sonia," he murmured. "You could have your choice of men. Why did you agree to an arranged marriage?"

"Why did you?"

He hesitated only a moment. "It was good for my people."

She knew he was just being honest. She'd wanted this marriage for the same reason, at first. But she couldn't stop the sharp stab of pain in her heart at being confronted with this truth. "The marriage is good for my people too," she finally said.

"And you don't object to any aspect of this arrangement?"

She edged close enough to place their lips a breath apart. "I'm eager to embrace all aspects of this marriage, Vander. The question is, are you?"

## Chapter Four

Sonia held her breath as he made his decision. His hand slid into her hair, making the tiny silver bells jingle.

"So soft," he murmured.

As he spoke, his lips brushed hers, a tantalizing hint of what could be. Exerting willpower she didn't know she had, Sonia remained perfectly still. She'd made her intentions clear. The next move was his. She needed him to want her, not feel obligated to fulfill some required role as husband.

Her heart thumped. She tried to convince herself that a negative answer wouldn't end all hope. They had time. She could still win his heart. But she knew his rejection now would tear a little hole in her soul.

His palm shifted to cup the back of her head, and he lifted his other hand to her neck. "Do you want me, Sonia? Do you really want me, or do you feel obligated because of our marriage?"

She smiled hearing his concerns mirroring her own. She smoothed her hand along his thigh, watching his pupils dilate. Without hesitating, she pressed her palm to his erection, applying gentle pressure. "I would want you even if we weren't married by arrangement, Vander."

He sucked in a breath and the hand in her hair fisted. Then he closed the last centimeter of space between them and pressed his mouth against hers. Almost the instant their lips touched, Sonia felt her body clench with so much pent-up desire she thought she might explode. He ran his tongue across her lips and she opened to him, eager for the invasion. She angled her head to better taste him, moaning softly as his hands moved from her face to her waist and he pressed her close.

Her hand was trapped between their bodies, still cupping his cock. Because she could feel him pulsing in her palm, she squeezed and he groaned into her mouth. The sound thrilled her, so she squeezed him again. A moment later, she found herself sprawled on the couch, Vander's weight covering hers, his mouth traveling across her jaw to her neck, igniting sparks of heat.

"You taste so sweet," he said against her skin.

She arched as his hands moved down her arms to her waist then up to cover her breasts. Her nipples pebbled at the first brush of his fingers.

"You feel even better."

With a deft tug, he freed one breast from the swath of white silk. The brush of cool air had her sucking in a breath. Then his hand found her bare skin, his fingers pinching her aching nipple until she gasped. The rough texture of his fingertips, a feeling she'd

been anticipating all evening, overwhelmed her senses. And her hand, still trapped between their bodies, clenched convulsively.

Vander groaned and dropped his head back. "Gods, Sonia, what you do to me." Then he dipped his lips to her breast, sucking her nipple into the wet heat of his mouth.

"Vander!" The sensation of his mouth on her, this man she'd wanted for so long, left her trembling. As he suckled and teased, flicking her nipple with his tongue before pulling the peak back into his mouth, she writhed beneath him. She'd never felt so lost, so completely out of control. She hardly believed Vander's mouth was on her breast, Vander's hands caressed her skin, Vander's cock pulsed in her palm. She'd dreamed of this moment for so many years. But the reality was more powerful than she could have hoped.

He pushed the other strap of her gown beneath her breast so that both were pushed up by the material. He moved his mouth to her newly freed nipple while he toyed with her breast. Sonia could barely think beyond the heat pulsing beneath her skin. She wanted to do more, to tease him the way he tormented her, but her arms were trapped under his weight.

Then he shifted to one side and slid his hand over the bare skin of her stomach, fingering the ruby design. His movement forced her hand away from his cock. When she tried to reach him again, he grabbed her wrist and pinned it over her head.

"Vander," she protested. "Let me."

But he ignored her. With his free hand he went back to the stones on her stomach. "Will these fall off?"

"They have to be taken off." Her breath caught when one of his fingers dipped low on her abdomen, near the border of her dress. The cut of the gown meant his finger was mere centimeters above her curls. Her stomach muscles contracted in anticipation of him moving lower. "There's a solution that will...loosen the glue." He ran his palms over the rubies and the feeling made her hips buck.

"They won't interfere? You won't be uncomfortable?"

His concern made her grin. "They're designed to heighten erotic sensation. Not hinder."

His gaze moved across her stomach as he continued to play with the pattern of jewels. First he traced the stones themselves, then the skin in between the design. And where the design dipped low, just edging under her gown, he lingered. She moaned, her stomach quivering, but when she tried to urge his touch lower, he resisted.

"Are you wearing anything under this dress?" His fingers dipped just beneath the material then slipped back up and across her hipbone. "I've been wondering all day."

That surprised her. She hadn't realized he thought about her much after their first meeting. "I am. But not much."

His growl raised goose bumps on her skin. Edging lower, he pressed his lips against her stomach just above the design. Then he flicked one of the rubies with his

tongue. When she gasped, he repeated the move, tracing a teasing trail along the pattern until he stopped just at the edge of her dress.

She shifted restlessly, again trying to urge him lower. Rather than touch her pulsing mons, his hand stroked her inner thigh. The skirt had fallen back so nothing covered her legs. Without thought, she widened them, opening herself fully to his touch.

"I love the way your skin feels."

His voice was harsh and thick, the sound making her pulse pound. No matter how often she'd imagined this moment, how many times she'd fantasized and brought herself to climax in anticipation, nothing compared to the feel of his fingers on her sensitive skin. "I love the way your hands feel on me," she murmured.

As he reached the apex of her thighs, he brushed her panties. Pushing the dress aside, he tugged at the material stretched across her hip. "Lace."

She swallowed. "Is that bad?" She knew for a fact he liked lace. But the slight catch in his voice had her hesitating.

Then his fingers edged under the material to brush across her curls and a desperate gasp escaped before she could stop the sound.

"Lace is good." He finally dipped a finger into her slick cleft. "Naked is better."

Before she realized his intent, he released her captive hand and shifted to settle between her thighs. With a rough tug, he pulled her panties off and tossed them aside. They landed across the chessboard, disrupting the hologram. In response to the break, one of the pieces shifted to a new square and was immediately taken by the black king. Vander's gaze was diverted momentarily to the king fucking the little white pawn with a cock too big to be realistic. When he turned back, his eyes sparkled with amusement as well as heat.

"We'll have to finish that game. I still intend to take your queen."

"Try to take her," she corrected, but her gaze moved to the clear bulge of his erection. She wanted him naked, she wanted to see his cock and feel it hot in her hand. He made a strained sound that caught her attention. When she looked up, he was staring at her pussy. Her sensitive skin pulsed under his gaze and more moisture dripped out.

"But first," he muttered, "I intend to take you."

With his hands clenching her thighs, he leaned down and settled his mouth across her heat. Sensation screamed through Sonia and she bucked beneath the onslaught of his lips and tongue. After a few teasing dips into her with the very tip of his tongue, he pulled her throbbing clit between his lips and suckled hard. A squeal, close to a scream burst from her dry throat. She'd been waiting for him for too long. Now that she had his mouth on her, she couldn't stop the maelstrom of pressure building, winding tighter and tighter. She wanted to resist; she didn't want to come yet. But he was merciless and she was helpless against him. When he tongued her clit, pressing it against the back of his teeth, the pressure broke and she came with a startled cry.

For long moments, she couldn't think. Sensation swamped her, leaving her weak and limp. She blinked and returned to her surroundings when Vander rose from the couch. An instant of panic clenched around her throat. Would he leave now, before she'd had a chance to taste him, to feel his cock inside her?

But her fears were laid to rest when he started unbuttoning his uniform jacket. She watched, unable to look away as first his jacket, then the white shirt beneath dropped to the floor. His torso was magnificent. Hard muscles sculpted his chest and stomach, bulged along his arms and rounded his shoulders. Hair a little darker than that on his head covered his chest, and his skin glistened with sweat.

Rising on her knees, she ran her hands over him. He felt as wonderful as he looked. The contrast of his lighter skin against her darker coloring fascinated her. And the painted designs on her hands were an erotic, feminine contrast to the unadulterated maleness of his chest.

In a hurry to see him fully naked, she started unfastening his trousers. He didn't stop her, as she'd half feared. Instead, he pushed the straps of her gown down her shoulders, but the material caught around her upper arms and wouldn't go lower.

"How do you get this dress off?"

With a smile, she turned to show him the clasp that held the top strap closed. "Undo that first strap and the rest will loosen."

He didn't waste any time and his hurry had her blood humming. The orgasm he'd just given her hadn't come close to satisfying her need for him. She wanted more. She wanted his cock, hot and hard, sliding into her, his hips slamming against hers. She wanted to taste every inch of him at once and could barely contain the impulse while he removed the last of her clothes and then his own.

Once naked, he held her at arms length, studying her. His gaze was like a caress, tantalizing her already sensitive skin. Her nerves hummed for the feel of his hands. Her breathing came in deep pants, drawing his attention to the rapid rise and fall of her breasts. She reached out and cupped his thick cock, sliding her palm up and down the steely length.

"I want you in my mouth," she said, gripping him in quick, firm intervals that she knew would tempt but not satisfy.

Before she could follow through with her intentions, he took her wrist and pulled her hand away from his pulsing need. "Not in here." Without another word, he led her to his bedroom.

That simple gesture thrilled her more than anything before.

This room was like the other, bare of decoration, colored mostly in blacks, grays and whites, the marble floor smooth and glossy but cold on her bare feet. Before the chill could set in, however, Vander lifted her off the ground and swung her onto the giant bed taking up most of the room. His sheets were black and indigo silk, softly sensual against her naked skin. When he joined her, she didn't give him a chance to divert her attention. She eased him back so he was braced against the pile of pillows

stacked against the solid steel headboard. Then she dropped low enough to bring the tip of his cock close to her mouth. He watched her through hooded lids that couldn't hide the heat in his eyes.

She flicked her tongue out once, tasting the liquid that beaded on the tip of his cock. His body jerked. Encouraged, she sucked the bulbous head into her mouth. Then she released him and fluttered little kisses along the underside of his length, down to the base. He shifted, his hips lifting almost involuntarily. She ran her tongue back up to his tip, drawing a groan from between his clenched teeth. She locked their gazes then took his full length into her mouth, humming in satisfaction. For so long she'd wanted this, wanted him just this way. His hands clenched in her hair, making the bells tinkle as she sucked him.

She didn't want him to come in her mouth, not yet, so she was careful to ease the pressure of her lips when his breathing grew ragged and sharp. He didn't object when she lifted her mouth, which was a surprise. He hadn't seemed inclined to stop her. When she looked up, though, she caught the hunger in his eyes and knew he wanted to be inside her as much as she wanted him there.

But she wasn't finished teasing yet. Knowing the sensation would be new to him, she rubbed her jewel-covered stomach up his cock, gently but deliberately caressing him with the smooth stone bumps. He groaned, his head fell back and his eyes closed.

"Does that feel good?" she asked.

"Gods, yes. Too good."

She smiled, then gasped as he gripped her shoulders and flipped her onto her back. He was on her, his cock poised at her entrance before she recovered from the sudden move.

"You could drive a man insane," he muttered.

Her heart thumped in a sudden panic. For an instant, the haze of desire cleared. Did he know how true his statement was?

But before she could worry, he thrust into her, hard and fast, and her thoughts scattered. The thick length of him filled her wet passage completely, easily. Perfect. Framing her face with his palms, he stared at her as his hips jerked forward. She moaned and he drove into her harder.

"Do you like the feel of me, Sonia? Do you like having me inside you?"

"Yes. Oh yes. Vander. Please." She wasn't sure what she was begging for, but somehow he knew. He moved faster, harder, the coarse hair of his groin rubbing against her overly tender clit even as his cock slammed against the top wall of her pussy. He connected with that hard-to-find spot and her entire body spasmed in reaction.

Noting the response, he nodded. "There? You want me there?"

She nodded, beyond the ability to speak. She gripped his shoulders and wrapped her legs around his narrow hips, pumping her hips to meet his strokes, grounding

against him. She held his gaze as long as she could. The intensity in his light eyes did more to rob her breath than his passionate thrusts. Then sensation overtook her and she closed her eyes, arching back as her climax broke. His mouth dropped over hers, swallowing her cries as she came. A moment later, his body stiffened and she felt his cock pulse, spilling his hot seed deep into her womb.

She held him close as her body and breathing slowly steadied, rubbing her palm softly along his spine. There wouldn't be a baby, not yet. She'd entered this marriage protected against pregnancy because she wanted them to know each other first. She wanted him to fall in love with her before they brought a baby into their lives. But in those heady moments after his orgasm, when he settled heavily across her and his ragged breathing brushed hotly against her neck, she almost wished she hadn't taken the precaution.

Her plan to seduce him had succeeded better than she'd hoped. And without having to use her song! She knew he'd wanted her before she sang. Even after, he'd been more concerned with how her voice could be used in the war effort. Her song hadn't gotten him to this point. With some chagrin, she admitted that the sexy chess game Nina had provided probably went farther to bring them to this moment than anything Sonia had done directly. But that was how regular women seduced men, wasn't it? With games and teasing, hot looks and erotic suggestions. The game had been a distraction for him, a way to focus his tactical mind on something besides war. And the results had been exactly what she wanted.

She was in his bed, sated from their lovemaking, holding his heaving body in her arms. To her utter delight, he held her in return, hugging her tight. He wasn't rushing away. He wanted to be in his bed with her.

There was hope for this arranged marriage. She just had to make him see how good they could be together, out of bed as well as in.

\* \* \* \* \*

Vander awoke alone in bed the next morning and was surprised by how disappointed he felt when he rolled over and Sonia wasn't there. He could still smell her—that faintly spicy, exotic scent he'd never encountered before. Running his hand along the sheets, he realized the patch where she'd been was still a little warm. So. She hadn't been gone for long.

Then he heard the shower in his bathroom go on and he smiled. She hadn't gone that far either. Sitting up against the headboard, he stared at the closed bathroom door. The fact that she was still in his apartment pleased him immensely.

As he listened to the running water, his eyes narrowed and his grin grew. He could always join her, rather than waiting here for her to return. The thought made his heart start to beat a little faster. He could practically picture her, water sluicing over her lush body, down the rise of her breasts, across her dark nipples. He would catch a drop of water on one of those peaks before sucking her nipple into his mouth until she moaned.



His cock twitched, making him aware of his morning erection. Reaching down to slowly stroke himself, he let his imagination continue to roam over Sonia's wet body. Water flowing down her stomach, bumping across those wicked little rubies, then catching in the curls covering her pussy. A flash of her rubbing the stones on her stomach along his cock made him groan. The sensation had been unlike anything he'd felt before, erotic to the point of pain. His fist tightened around his swollen shaft as it pulsed in sudden urgency.

She had more of those stones on her spine, but in the shower her long, dark hair would cover them. He could see the water flowing from her hair, down the curve of her lower back and across her beautifully rounded ass. Moving her hair across her shoulders would give him access to the rubies on her spine. If he ran his hand along the stones, would she react? He pictured her looking over her shoulder at him, her dark eyes narrowed and full of heat, daring him to lean her forward and fuck her.

He was half out of the bed before he paused to consider his actions. Would she welcome him? Or would she find his presence an intrusion? She'd been so eager and willing last night. Hells, the erotic chess game had been her idea. She hadn't hesitated to consummate their marriage. But what about today?

He settled back against the headboard and frowned at the closed bathroom door. He knew so little about Sonia. She'd learned a lot about him. And he hadn't bothered to learn enough to know whether she'd welcome him in her shower or not.

This marriage was proving to be much more than he expected. He never anticipated his wife being so sexy and impossible to resist. He never would have guessed he'd have this reaction to her. He wanted her so badly, he ached. And before the moment he'd laid eyes on her yesterday, he hadn't wanted any woman with such desperation since Anya. He hadn't wanted any woman period since Anya. He'd assumed his arranged marriage would be a passionless union. Now, all he could think about was making love to his wife again.

He felt a twinge of guilt at that as thoughts of Anya brought back the same pain he'd been trying to suppress since her death. If that attack hadn't happened, if Anya hadn't been killed, he'd be married to her right now. He'd be considering joining her in the shower. He'd sure as hells know whether or not she'd welcome him there.

Rubbing a hand over the tightness in his chest, he sighed. He liked Sonia. He definitely wanted her. But she wasn't Anya.

And he didn't know how to feel about that.

He heard the shower click off, bringing his attention back to the present. So much for joining her.

He continued to stare at the bathroom door as his imagination returned to picturing Sonia climbing out of the shower, her body glistening wet as she reached for a towel. Gods, he was hard as a rock with just the thought. How did she do this to him? They barely knew each other, yet the very idea of her triggered some deep visceral reaction he couldn't control.

A part of him was grateful—grateful to be feeling again, to feel anything at all. This heady lust rolling through his bloodstream reminded him he was alive. He hadn't felt like a human being in months. He hadn't allowed himself to feel much of anything besides a cold determination to get revenge. He'd even suppressed much of his guilt after Anya was killed. Now, he wanted and needed again. His heart beat faster, his blood pumped, his body burned for something other than battle. For that, he'd always be grateful to Sonia, even if he didn't know how she did it.

And while this wasn't the marriage, or the wife, he'd planned on, he decided his arranged marriage could have been a lot worse.

That was, if Sonia still wanted him this morning. Now that he'd been inside her, he knew he'd never be able to settle for a platonic marriage. He had no intention of settling when the attraction between them was so strong. And he'd do whatever it took to make sure she understood that.

When the bathroom door opened, he held his breath. She stepped out wearing only a black towel. Her hair hung thick and wet down her back, no longer decorated with bells. The skin on her shoulders and across her chest was still damp, drawing his attention to the swell of her full breasts over the top of the towel. Fleeting, he noticed she'd removed her necklace, which caused him a twinge of disappointment. But the sight of her dark, wet skin pushed that feeling aside.

He let his gaze wander down to the base of the towel where it settled high on her thighs. Breathing again, hard now, he stared at the length of her legs in the early morning light filling the room. Her feet were still red. He glanced back at her hands, pleased to see the red designs there as well. Finally, he looked up to her face.

A slight smile lifted her full lips. "Good morning," she murmured, her voice husky and a little breathless.

He smiled back. "Good morning." He watched as her gaze dropped to his body and his fully erect cock where it jutted unabashedly into the air. Her tongue flicked out to moisten her lips and his cock jerked in response.

"Is that for me?" she asked, her gaze still focused on his erection.

"Are you still wearing those rubies?" he countered.

She grinned and dropped her towel. The red stones winked against her tanned skin. Vander groaned. Without a word, he rose from the mattress and closed the distance between them.

"You should leave these on as long as possible," he commented as he ran his fingers around the design. She sucked in a breath and her stomach muscles contracted, filling him with satisfaction. He slid his other hand around behind her to trace the rubies along her lower spine. She arched forward, a movement which thrust her breasts out so they nearly brushed against his chest. Her nipples hardened into tight little peaks as he stared.

Unable to resist, he smoothed his hand from her stomach, across her ribs to cup her breast. He pinched her nipple lightly between thumb and forefinger. When she gasped,

he increased the pressure until she moaned. "One day," he whispered, leaning in to lick a drop of water from her shoulder, "we will have to affix some of these rubies to your breasts. I'm very curious to see what sensations we can devise."

She nodded, her breathing heavy now. "I have more. That can be arranged."

He chuckled against her neck as his kissed his way from her shoulder, along her throat to the base of her jaw. Her hands clenched at his waist as she tried to pull him closer, but he resisted. She'd been driving him insane since they first met. It was her turn to suffer a little.

"What would you like for breakfast?" he asked, as if he had no greater concern. As he spoke, however, his hands cupped both of her breasts and his mouth nuzzled the sensitive skin beneath her ear. She squirmed and tried to get closer, but he continued to keep their bodies separate, except where he chose to touch her.

"You," she answered his question with a frustrated huff of breath.

He grinned. "After me." He brushed his cheek against hers and kissed her temple. "We'll have something brought up. I'd rather you didn't get dressed just yet."

"You want the staff to see me naked?"

A funny note of confusion colored her voice. "Not under any circumstances," he assured her. "No one but me gets to see you naked ever again. Except maybe your doctor and then I think she should be a woman."

She chuckled as he'd hoped she would. His new wife had a wicked sense of humor. He would enjoy exploring it more fully.

"I have a robe you can borrow," he told her as he moved his mouth to the other side of her neck. "But while you're in this apartment, you should wear as little as possible. It's a crime to cover this luscious body of yours."

"The same...goes for you."

The hitch in her breathing caused his cock to jerk again, and he wanted nothing more than to lift her up and bury himself deep inside her wet heat. "I think that can be arranged. Especially since with you naked, I'll be walking around with an erection so often, I'll never be comfortable in my trousers."

A laugh erupted from her, as if his comment surprised her. Good. She was too confident in her knowledge of him. He liked that he still had the ability to surprise her.

He slid his hands from her breasts to her waist, settling in the deep curve as he lifted his mouth to hers. She tasted of mint. Again she tried to squeeze closer but he held her at bay. When she attempted to raise her arms to his neck, he took hold of her wrists and settled her arms back at her sides. Then he gripped her waist again in a gentle hold that neither drew her closer nor moved her father away. She let her hands hang at her sides for less than a minute, then she reached out to his cock.

Taking her wrists in both hands again, he broke the kiss and looked down into her passion-glazed eyes. The question there mingling with the desire made his pulse surge. He couldn't doubt that she still wanted him and his relief was palpable. But while the

idea of her hands on him had his body pulsing, he wasn't quite finished playing yet. Gently, he wrapped her arms behind her back, holding both her wrists in one hand. The position arched her back and pushed her breasts high and forward. "Beautiful," he murmured as he studied her.

"Vander?"

"Your people are schooled in sensuality? They study sex?"

Color actually rose in her cheeks, surprising him. For such an unrepressed culture, he wouldn't have thought the simple question could embarrass her.

"We...don't hide from sexuality."

He nodded. "Then you understand. Sometimes the anticipation of a touch is as important as the actual touch."

She shivered and nodded, but her arms jerked against his hold. To prove his point, he ran his free hand over her shoulder without actually touching her. He let his palm pass millimeters away from her breast, across her stomach to hover above the ruby design. She moistened her lips again, tempting him nearly beyond his control. But he still didn't touch her. Instead, he caressed the air just above her hipbone, low across her stomach, stirring the air close to her curls. Then he let his ghostly caress move lower, almost but not quite covering her mound. She widened her stance, but he didn't accept the invitation. Instead, he continued as he'd started, letting his hand brush just above the skin of her inner thigh and back across her hips, behind to linger above her ass, then back up her arm.

She strained forward, groaning when he refused to touch her. "This is torture, Vander," she murmured. "It's rude to torture your wife."

He chuckled and shook his head. "I never would have guessed you were prone to such exaggeration, Sonia."

"I'm not. I promise."

"We'll have to test that, then."

"Please don't," she groaned, arching her back as his hand passed along the side of her spine, still not actually touching her.

"What do you want me to do?" he couldn't resist asking. He wanted to hear her say it, wanted the words spilling from those full, red lips.

"Touch me. Please, Vander, touch me."

Her plea broke his carefully held restraint; he released her wrists and wrapped his arms around her, settling her tightly against him. He was just tall enough that their position pressed his cock against the stone design on her lower abdomen. The sensation robbed him of all sense. He dropped his hands to her ass and squeezed her closer, grinding his hips tighter against her as he savored the contrasting textures of her hot skin and those cold rubies.

Everything in him pulsed with lust. He needed to push his cock inside her heat more than he needed his next breath. He didn't fully understand this passion between

them, but he wasn't about to deny it. Wrapping his arms low around her waist, he lifted her off her feet and carried her to the bed. She wrapped one leg around his hips and rubbed her dripping wet pussy against his abdomen. When he reached the bed, he swung her around and tumbled them onto the mattress, her on bottom with one leg still around his hips and the other trapped between his thighs.

Smoothing the dark hair away from her face, he studied her. She was so beautiful, so exotic he was still startled by the reality of her. "Leave your legs as they are," he ordered.

She nodded as he shifted enough to position the tip of his cock against her nether lips. He pushed forward, testing. From this angle, she was stretched tight, but her excitement provided more than enough moisture to ease his entrance and he slipped into her with a groan.

"Oh," she breathed as her hips bucked under him and her neck arched back.

"Does that feel good?"

"Yes. Oh yes."

His hips flexed forward, a small stroke that moved him as deep as he could get in this position. Watching her face, he continued a steady, even rhythm of gentle, shallow thrusts. Her passage clamped around him, squeezing tighter with each slight movement.

"Where did you...did you learn this?" she asked. "I thought... Oh! I thought Calliseans were too repressed to...to..." Her voice trailed off on a long moan.

Hearing her breathing hitch made his cock swell further. He leaned over so her breasts were pressed against his chest and he nuzzled her earlobe. "Repression breeds curiosity," he murmured. "Remind me to show you my book collection one day. There are a few books in there I'm sure you'd find interesting."

She laughed, a carefree chuckle that vibrated through his body. The sound sparked a deep burn of happiness in his gut. She should laugh often, he decided, and kissed her so he could swallow the sound. Then he flexed his hips again and her laugh turned to a cry of pleasure.

He continued his slow, gentle stroking even when her nails bit into his shoulders and she urged him faster. She was so tight around his cock he was afraid he wouldn't last long enough to make her come if he fucked her any harder. But his position ensured he could hit just the right spot in her and slowly, inexorably push her pleasure to breaking point. She writhed and shifted beneath him, trying to force him to move faster, but he kept her pinned and continued building her orgasm. This was for her. Her pleasure first. He intended to ensure she enjoyed her time in his bed so much she kept coming back.

Her body began to tremble as a warm, rosy flush bloomed across her golden skin. He watched, fascinated by the changes in her as her orgasm neared. His cock pulsed in answer to each tight grip of her inner muscles, increasing the pleasure for both of them. Blood pounded in his temples and his body shook with his efforts to maintain this pace.

She cried out, her hips flexing, her pussy squeezing him like a fist. And then she arched, her breasts rubbing against his chest as her body jerked. She screamed his name as she came, clamping around him in shuddering waves of pleasure. When the tension holding her eased, she relaxed, her breathing harsh and ragged.

And he couldn't wait any longer. Shifting, he lifted the leg he'd kept pinned beneath him and draped it over his hip, then he rose slightly. The new position gave him better leverage and he took advantage, pumping into her hard and fast. His hips slammed down against hers. He heard her cry out again, but he was too lost now in the feel of her heat, the grip of her pussy, the pulse of his cock, the spiraling need he'd been holding firmly in check for too long. Her scent filled his nostrils, mingling with sweat and sex, and the combination sent him over the edge, shaking him with an orgasm so strong it felt a little like death.

He collapsed onto her, trembling in the aftermath of such an intense release. She chuckled wearily under him and wrapped her arms loosely around his shoulders. "I need another shower now," she murmured against his cheek.

Smiling, he said, "When I can move, I'll let you up for that shower."

After a quiet pause, she asked, "Do you want to join me?"

Vander's smile turned to a grin. He had his answer. "Absolutely," he said. "I just need one more minute to get up."

"Only a minute? Wow, I'm impressed. After that orgasm, most men would need another hour."

That made him laugh. Gods, it felt good to laugh. He levered himself up on his elbows and framed her face with his hands. Her lips were swollen from his kisses, adding to their already lush fullness, and her beautiful olive skin was flushed. Brushing her lips lightly with his, he finally forced himself to stand, thinking that with a woman like this in his shower, he'd probably only need a half hour to be ready again.

He took her hand and helped her to her feet. She wobbled a little and giggled. "Shaky legs," she said.

Her comment filled him with a completely overblown sense of pride. That he could do this to her thrilled him almost as much as the sensations she sparked in him. "I was thinking of you in the shower earlier. I considered joining you."

"Why didn't you?"

She looked up at him with such sincerity he felt like kicking himself for his earlier hesitation. "I will next time," he promised, vowing then and there that he'd get to know his new wife better, so he never passed up that kind of opportunity again. He gave her a pat on the bottom to start her moving. She sucked in a breath at his touch and he felt his pulse jump. He ushered her into the bathroom, eager to live out his earlier fantasy of watching hot water sluicing over her body.

Fifteen minutes. At this rate, he was only going to need fifteen minutes before he'd be hard again.

And in the meantime, he could think of plenty of things to do to keep them both entertained.

## Chapter Five

Rico knocked on Vander's door minutes after they'd finished breakfast. Vander opened the door with a scowl, irritated by the disturbance.

His youngest brother gaped at him for a moment before schooling his features and saying, "What are you doing here?"

"I live here," Vander replied in an even tone.

Rico rolled his eyes. "It's nearly noon, Vander. You're usually in the war room by the time the sun rises."

"What are you doing here, Rico?" Vander didn't feel like dealing with his brother. He wanted to get back to Sonia. He had plans for the next hour or so, involving that chessboard and Sonia naked. He glanced over his shoulder to where she sat on the couch, finishing a cup of hot herbal tea. She was wrapped up in one of his robes, a deep emerald silk, which was much too big for her. But something about the way it wrapped around her curves, almost slipping off one shoulder, made the garment look like it was made for her to wear just for him.

Rico cleared his throat, drawing Vander's attention away from Sonia. When he looked back at his brother, he realized the younger man was also staring at her. Vander moved to block his view and crossed his arms over his chest, glaring. Rico didn't acknowledge the glare, but he did return his attention to Vander.

"I came to see if Sonia wanted a tour of the palace. I figured she'd be alone and in need of company."

"As you can see, she's not alone and has just the right amount of company."

"But you'll be leaving soon." Neatly sidestepping Vander, Rico edged just inside the room. "Would you like a tour this afternoon, Sonia? We have beautiful gardens and several courtyards I know you'd love."

Sonia glanced between the two brothers, her almond-shaped eyes narrowing. "Well, I would like to see more of the palace. The gardens and some fresh air sound lovely, but..."

"Excellent," Rico said. "It's settled. I'll —"

"Tell William I won't be down today," Vander interrupted. At Rico's frown, he said, "As Sonia's husband, it's my duty to show her around her new home. I wouldn't want to put you to any inconvenience. I'll keep in touch with the generals via the comm-link." Something he'd been doing all morning anyway. "William can contact me if anything happens." He'd fully intended to make his way to the war room at some point today. There was still that downed Selmorahn ship in Guenar to worry about, a couple of strange scanner readings being sent back from a patrol at the system's edge



and any number of daily details to coordinate. But the very idea of his brother spending the afternoon with Sonia irritated him, and he wasn't sure why. He only knew he couldn't abide the thought. Something about the way Rico kept looking at her... Vander did not want the two of them alone together.

He didn't even try to analyze his reasons for this reaction, just went with his instincts. As often as not, his instinct functioned as accurately as most people's logic, so he wasn't about to second-guess it now.

Rico opened his mouth, paused, then closed it again and nodded curtly. "I'll leave you, then." He faced Sonia and smiled warmly. "Enjoy your day. If you need anything, please feel free to call on me."

She smiled back and nodded. But as soon as Rico was gone, she blew out a breath and shook her head. "Your brother is a very nice man," she commented, "but he really shouldn't go out of his way for me."

"I'll be sure to tell him." Vander walked back to the couch and settled next to her, close enough to feel the warmth of her body.

She met his gaze and tilted her head to one side. The ruby and diamond necklace glinted at her throat again, beautiful against her dark skin. He wrapped his palm around the back of her neck so he could savor the contrast between her warm skin and the cold stones. "I'm glad you have this on again," he said, fingering the necklace. "It suits you."

She ducked her head a little and her cheeks turned pink. "Thank you." After a pause, she said, "You don't have to give me a tour. I know you're very busy."

"William can reach me anytime by comm, so you won't be keeping me from my work." He brushed a finger down her cheek. "Besides, I'd like to show you around. I'd very much enjoy spending the rest of the day with you."

She smiled, a big, shy grin that left Vander a little breathless. "But before we get dressed, you still owe me game." He nodded to the board and watched her grin grow wicked. He leaned close enough to feel her breath on his lips and murmured, "I still intend to take your queen."

\* \* \* \* \*

Sonia thrilled at her first view of the beautiful, multi-level palace gardens. She stood on the sun-warmed, springy grass at the top of a small rise and admired the view spreading out below her. Still barefoot, she wiggled her toes into the grass and soil, savoring the feel. As she'd told Vander, while she might be willing to give up a five-day wedding, there were a few customs she intended to stick with. One was keeping her feet bare for the week following the wedding ceremony. Another was keeping her feet and hands painted. She would also wear white, or white and gold, for the days she remained barefoot. After that, she'd go back to her normal wardrobe and start wearing shoes again—especially with all those marble floors to traverse! For now, though, she was determined to honor these few customs.

"Are you sure you wish to walk through the gardens in your bare feet?" Vander asked again.

She grinned. "I have tough soles. Besides, I like the feel of the grass between my toes. Reminds me the world isn't all artificial."

"Except that this garden is. It was designed down to the last detail by one of my great-grandmothers."

"But she didn't use fake grass or flowers. This is real enough, Vander. And I need a bit of that reality against my skin." She started down the hill, savoring the new spring heat of the sun.

When they reached the bottom of the hill, Vander indicated one path to their right and they turned to follow the winding line of smooth stones. "There are other paths, but the gravel would probably be harder on your feet than the stones," he commented without looking at her.

She glanced up at the side of his face. He was studying the gardens, taking them in as if he hadn't been here in awhile. "When was the last time you made it out here?"

He flashed her a half smile before returning his gaze to the surrounding shrubbery. "Before my mother died. Fifteen years, maybe."

"So long. I wouldn't have been able to stay away."

"I've had other things to do."

She nodded and fell silent as she studied the flowering bushes shaped like animals and the blossom-covered trees arching over the path ahead.

"You had a garden at home?" he asked.

"I did. A personal one. I spent a lot of time there."

"We can arrange that if you like. A garden exclusively for your use."

She raised her brows. "That's thoughtful, but not necessary. This one is so large, I'm sure I can find some privacy here. In fact..." She glanced around, hearing only birds and bugs and the quiet ruffle of leaves in the trees. If she listened carefully, she could hear the buzz and drone of the city noise just beyond the palace gates, but in this spot, circled and sheltered by enormous walls and a translucent security field, she could almost believe they were in the country. "Does anyone use the garden? It's so empty."

"There are gatherings held here. Special ceremonies. Parties. When my father was remarried, they held the dinner here."

She flicked him a look. "And yet you haven't been here in fifteen years." She knew he hadn't attended his father's wedding. He'd already been in charge of the armies for seven years and had been in the middle of a campaign against Selmorahn raiders who'd set up a strike base on one of the system's outer planets. He'd missed his father's wedding, but he'd successfully driven off the Selmorahns.

"I don't go to parties or gatherings and only attend the ceremonies I have to."

"I know," she said with a sigh. His life needed more fun and color. Genetically engineered for war did not mean his entire life should be nothing but battles.

"So tell me, what else did you do at home besides spend time in your garden? And sing of course."

She shrugged, letting him change the subject. "I studied music and trained my voice."

"Does a Siren need to train her voice?"

"Of course. One wrong note could be a disaster." Since he'd broached the subject, she thought he'd ask more about her abilities, but his next question surprised her.

"And when you weren't studying? What did you do for fun?"

"Nina and I used to go dancing. There are clubs just for women, when all we want to do is dance. And I like to paint, although I'm not very good at it. Mostly I like color."

He nodded, frowning a little. After a quiet moment, when she thought he'd say something more on her hobbies, he changed the subject again.

"Do you have siblings?"

She nodded. "Two sisters. One older, one younger."

"And do you get along with them?"

"My younger sister and I get along well enough. We're only two years apart, so there were as many fights as there were fun moments. My oldest sister and I... Let's just say living in different systems can only help our relationship."

"Bad?"

"Not close. A lot of resentment."

"From her or you?"

She met his gaze. "Her. She's not married yet."

He stopped and turned to face her. "Why is that a problem?"

"She thought she should be the one to have this marriage. She was bypassed in favor of me."

"Why would she want an arranged marriage?"

"Prestige."

"And why were you chosen instead?"

"My father felt he'd have a better negotiating position if he offered me."

Vander cupped her cheek, surprising her. "Why did *you* agree?"

She wasn't close to being ready to tell him the truth—that she'd known they would be married for long enough to fall in love with him, even before her father proposed the idea. Instead, she said, "I wanted to do something for my world that would matter. My father is an admiral. My mother runs the largest research and development lab on the planet. In fact, many of the technologies we brought were a direct result of my mother's work. They both contributed to the war effort in indispensable ways. I wanted to do the same." Which was true. Her initial reason for embracing this destiny was to fulfill that desire. But her wish to contribute had been eclipsed by her love for this man well before the day of her wedding.

"Your talent as a Siren wasn't enough?"

"Now you sound like Ollia. She said the same thing, or close to it. But my father had made his decision."

He caressed her cheekbone with his thumb and fell silent, a slight frown creasing his forehead. She was afraid to ask what he was thinking. Yesterday, he could have married Ollia as easily as he married Sonia. She didn't want to hear that either one of them would have been fine. She sure as *ichos* didn't want to know that he might have preferred her sister. Fortunately for her heart, she knew he didn't know anything about Ollia. He barely knew anything about *her*. His indifference to which sister he married worked in her favor since she was the sister. But she didn't need to hear him voice his ambivalence.

The silence between them stretched, and Sonia was on the verge of saying something, anything to change the subject when a loud hail broke the moment.

"Vander, Sonia. I've been looking for you," Major General Jared Ulneric called as he approached from the direction of the palace.

Vander dropped his hand and turned to face his father, standing at attention. Sonia wasn't sure whether to be grateful for the interruption or not but turned to face her new father-in-law with a smile she hoped didn't look too forced.

"How are you enjoying the gardens, my dear?" Jared said.

He took her hand and brought it to his lips, a gesture that startled her enough she nearly jerked her hand away. Only at the last minute did she check the impulse. Jared smiled, holding her gaze while his lips brushed her knuckles. Disconcerted by the intensity in his pale blue eyes, she darted a glance at Vander. Her husband was scowling at his father. But he didn't comment, even after Jared stood to his full height and held her hand a few seconds longer than was polite before dropping his arms back to his sides.

"Father." Vander's tone was both deferential and challenging. "What can we do for you?"

"I wanted to make sure my daughter-in-law was being made comfortable in her new home."

First Rico, now Vander's father? They obviously hadn't trusted Vander to make her comfortable. And knowing him as she did, Sonia could understand their concern. Still, it was strange to have his family falling over themselves to welcome her. At least the members of his family she'd met so far. She wondered if they'd be this accommodating if they remembered everything that had happened during the wedding dinner last night.

Something told her they wouldn't.

"As you can see," Vander said in that same clipped tone, "I'm taking good care of my wife. No need to worry."

Jared smiled, but he kept his gaze on Sonia. She found it hard not to fidget and so kept her gaze on Vander, only darting glances at Jared to gauge his mood.

"Just see that you do," Jared said. "We want her to be happy here with us. We're very pleased to have you join the family, Sonia."

"Thank you." She hoped her tone sounded gracious. This whole exchange made her uncomfortable.

"Vander," Jared said, finally turning his attention to his son. "Can I speak with you in private for a moment? My apologies, my dear. It's a military matter."

She nodded, glad to let the two men wander back down the path out of earshot. The look in her father-in-law's eyes left a slightly bad taste in her mouth. It wasn't lust, or at least not sexual lust. But there was greed there. And possessiveness.

For the first time since agreeing to this marriage, she wondered what she might have gotten herself into.

She watched father and son talk. Jared insistent and intense, Vander immovable and stern. Vander barely spoke. His father talked at length. Their body language hinted that Jared was trying to persuade or force Vander to do something and Vander was resisting. Though she was glad to be rid of Jared's close attention, she'd love to know what the two men were saying. Jared shot a glance and a slight nod in her direction, and Sonia was afraid they were talking about her.

Damn her father's pride and her own. She should never have sung to the assembly last night. Better if she'd been able to reveal her talent to Vander under more private circumstances.

After several lengthy minutes passed, while the sun warmed her shoulders and the cool breeze fluttered her sheer sleeves, the two men finally separated. Jared sketched a deep bow in her direction but didn't follow Vander when he rejoined her. She let out a relieved breath as she watched her father-in-law walk away.

"What was that all about?" she asked Vander, studying his broody expression. She'd seen that look on his face in more than one vid-stream, especially just after the consequences of another Selmorahn attack were being reported. "Is everything okay?"

He stared out over the gardens, not meeting her gaze for a long moment. Then he faced her. "Do you like the palace, the gardens?"

Her eyebrows popped up at the change of subject. Slowly, she said, "Yes. Everything is lovely. The marble floors are a bit cold." She tried a smile but the expression felt more like a grimace.

"Would it bother you, then, if I suggested we get our own home? Away from the palace?"

The suggestion of a home of their own had her stomach dancing. The fact that he'd referred to it as "our" home made her want to squeal in delight. She sucked back her thrill, though, afraid her enthusiasm for the idea might make him suspicious, and said,

"I wouldn't object at all. I'd be surprised. I thought you preferred to be close to military headquarters."

The palace was more than just his family residence. Most of the military and several segments of the planetary government were housed in the building. She'd worried that living in such a busy, almost public place would be difficult. Sonia loved her privacy. But so far, the residential wing had proven quiet and comfortable. Although, she'd only been there a couple of days, and she'd spent most of that time with Nina in one of the most remote sections of the palace.

The idea of a more private residence was almost as much of a relief as it was a thrill. But Vander had always lived here. Sonia knew through her spies that he'd intended to move Anya into the palace at some point. So she'd just assumed she would live there as well after the marriage.

Vander turned back down the path and she fell into step next to him. He stared at the ground as they walked beneath fruit trees dropping little pink flowers at their feet. Finally, he said, "We could find a home near enough to the palace that it wouldn't matter. One with a garden. It might take a few months to find something suitable. And I'd have to implement full security measures before we could move in." He finally glanced at her. "But you wouldn't mind? A private residence would be much less prestigious than the palace."

"I'd enjoy having a place of our own," she insisted. "Even if we couldn't find one with a garden."

"No. I'd make sure you had a garden. It would probably have to have a security field over it, but you'd have your garden."

She smiled, touched that he wanted to make her so comfortable. "Why the decision to move?" She suspected it had to do with the conversation he'd just had with his father, but for the life of her, she couldn't imagine what could have passed between the two men that would drive Vander to this.

"I think it would be best," he said simply.

"This is because of something your father said."

He looked away, studying the trees lining their path.

"You can talk to me about it. All our conversation will remain between us. I promise."

He nodded sharply but didn't face her. After another longer silence, he stopped and turned to her, taking her shoulders in his hands. "My father... Don't trust him, Sonia. He uses people. My mother for her willingness to have her children genetically manipulated. His own children to increase his power base in the government and military. When my mother died, he barely waited a year before remarrying a woman fourteen years his junior. And he didn't marry her because of her looks, though those helped. She was the only daughter of the president at the time. Her connections increased his influence exponentially."

She opened her mouth to say something, but his grip tightened, cutting her off.

"He uses everyone, Sonia. Anyone he can, to increase his own position. His children are nothing more than pawns. And he revels in the accolades he receives for the sacrifices he made to have us...formed. *He's* considered a hero because we're such good little soldiers." Snarling, Vander dropped his hands and started back down the path.

Sonia jogged to catch up, more than a little shocked by his explosion. She knew relations between Vander and his father were strained. But the depths of the resentment were deeper than she guessed, deeper than anyone had suspected. "You've sacrificed too," she said.

"And yet he's the one to be praised for our sacrifices. He's received the benefits of our accomplishments. And he would continue to reap those benefits for as long as he possibly could."

She had to stretch her stride to keep up with him. "I understand why you don't get along with him very well, but what does this have to do with me avoiding him?"

"Outside of the fact that he wishes he were a widower again?"

"Vander! What an awful thing to say."

"True, though." He raised a brow. "Don't you believe me?"

She clamped her lips shut, afraid any answer she might give now would just aggravate the situation.

He snorted. "You've seen the look in his eyes. You know what I'm talking about."

She started to shake her head, but he cut her off with a sharp hand gesture. "He will use you if he can, Sonia. Just like he uses all of us. He will manipulate you, he will charm you, he will make sure everyone knows what you can do and he will use that to increase his own power. Nothing is sacred. No one is safe. The only person he could never use was..." Vander pressed his lips together and his jaw muscles flexed.

"Who?" Sonia whispered, afraid to hear the answer.

He shook his head and said, "It doesn't matter. Just know that you can't trust him, no matter how charming he may seem."

She nodded even as she frowned. He still hadn't told her exactly what he'd been discussing with Jared. His desire to move made a little more sense. Yet he'd lived with Jared for the last thirty-three years, feeling this resentment toward him, and never moved out of the palace. Why now? What did Jared want from her that would push Vander to this point?

As she pondered the convoluted family situation she'd married into, she fell behind Vander's longer strides. Short of running, she couldn't keep up with him, so she slowed her pace to think.

Despite Vander's innuendo, Sonia was pretty sure her father-in-law wasn't lusting after her. He wanted something from her, she knew that. Her own father had made sure Jared understood exactly what he was getting by goading her into singing last night. But Jared couldn't want anything more from her than she was sure Vander wanted when it came to her Siren skills. Both men would use her talent in the war effort if they

could. And she would willingly contribute her voice in any way possible to help in keeping the Selmorahn at bay. Why would that anger Vander so much?

She stopped walking for a moment and took in a deep breath of the flower-scented air. Sun dappled the path in front of her, filtering through the tree leaves. The air was much cooler in the shade. During the summertime, she imagined this spot would be very pleasant. At the moment, though, she wanted to feel the sun's heat on her skin.

Vander was too far down the path for her to easily call out to him. He obviously wanted a few moments alone. So she stepped through the trees, across the rough soil and out into the grass. Shrubs cut to look like animals were scattered across the expanse of lawn before her. Momentarily distracted by the designs, she wandered between them, letting their charming tableaux ease her tension.

There was little she could do about Vander's father. She was forewarned and would spend as little time with the man as possible. But she didn't see how they could avoid him completely, even if they moved out of the palace. And if he chose to claim credit for whatever benefits Sonia brought to the war effort, well, there was little they could do about that either. In fact, she didn't really care. She wasn't here to earn accolades as a war hero. Oh, she wanted to do what she could for her people, and for Vander's. But she was here because she'd fallen in love with her husband.

Her mind jumped back to his comment about the one person Jared hadn't been able to use. Curiosity had her tempted to push him for an explanation. But the look in his eyes when he'd said it didn't matter made her pause. Did she really want to know the answer?



## Chapter Six

In the middle of mulling over that question, Sonia heard Vander call her name. "I'm here," she shouted and trotted back toward the path.

He stepped through the trees onto the grass, looking big and powerful and handsome, and for an instant, Sonia lost her breath. The moment of distraction caused her to misstep and her bare foot landed squarely on a sharp rock buried in the grass.

She bounced onto her good foot, hissing at the sting. Balancing on one foot, her other in the air, she mentally cursed her inattention and waited for the ache to ease. She'd no doubt have a bruise on the ball of her foot for the next day.

Before she fully recovered from the shock of her misstep, Vander had closed the distance between them. "Are you all right? What did you step on?"

"Just a rock," she said between her teeth. "I'll be okay in a minute." But in the next instant, Vander swept her up into his arms. She gasped and clung to his neck. "What are you doing?"

"You shouldn't have been out here with bare feet." He started back toward the path.

"I'm fine," she tried to assure him. "I just wasn't watching where I was going."

"You're lucky it was just a rock." He scowled as he turned back toward the palace. "There are snakes in this garden."

"Snakes!" She squeaked and wrapped her arms tighter around his neck. "You never said anything about snakes."

"Don't like snakes I take it?"

"No." She could swear she heard amusement in his tone, but she was too busy scanning the ground around them to look at his expression. She hated snakes.

"They're harmless and will leave people alone. Even the ones that bite make themselves scarce when there are people nearby."

She practically crawled up onto his shoulders. "There are biting snakes in this garden? Why didn't you warn me?"

"I didn't expect you to go wandering off the path into the lawns in your bare feet," he snapped.

She glared but didn't take her attention from the path. "You should have told me."

"Now you know."

She shivered. "I really hate snakes."

He let out a breath that sounded suspiciously like a chuckle. She finally loosened her hold on his neck and looked up at his expression.

"I may have exaggerated a little," he said.

"About the snakes?"

"We've only ever found one in this garden in the last thirty years."

"Vander!" Now she was sure he was chuckling. "That was rude."

Grinning, he said, "But it was a good excuse to get you into my arms."

She rolled her eyes and shook her head. His grin widened. Despite her intention to remain irritated, his expression was impossible to resist. She found herself reluctantly smiling. The fact that he was teasing her and not brooding about his father made it easier to forgive him for the snake joke. Although she was going to have to get him back for that in some way. She really did hate snakes.

They were nearly to the palace when she realized Vander wasn't even breathing hard from carrying her so far. She turned to study the side of his face. She hated to bring up a topic that would remind him of his father again, but she was really curious. "Can I ask you something?"

"Of course."

"Why did your parents bother giving you superior strength when your skill is tactics? You don't need to be this strong to plan battles. For that matter, you don't need to be as good a pilot as you are, yet they made sure you had some talent for that as well. Why bother?"

A frown touched the corners of his mouth. "I was the first, my father's first son. He wanted to make me the perfect soldier. An ideal reflection of himself."

"You look more like your mother, though, except for the eyes."

"I think she had something to do with that. I'm not sure how she got around him to make sure my coloring matched hers. But I doubt that was his idea. He would have wanted a son who looked like him."

"The twins do."

"But they weren't supposed to be twins." Now Vander actually smiled. "They were supposed to be one boy. Haley was a surprise."

She chuckled. She knew quite a bit about his sister Haley's exploits. She was the best fighter pilot on the planet. Her only equal was her twin brother Justin. Sonia imagined being born wasn't the only surprise Haley had provided her father.

"Given how superior Callisean genetic work is, how did the scientists not know there would be twins?" she asked, because this seemed a safer topic than either his father or her bruised foot. Or snakes!

"The story they told my father was that the first embryo they implanted in my mother didn't take. They had to insert a second embryo. But apparently the first embryo really had embedded in the placenta and so two babies developed."

Sonia would bet half her jewelry box that little mistake had really pissed off Vander's father. But since she was trying to avoid that topic, she asked, "Why a boy and a girl? Why weren't they both boys?"

"Another of my mother's ideas. She convinced my father the smaller frame of a girl would suit the pilot skills better than a boy. I'm still not sure how she managed to bring him around to that idea, but I do know she wanted another girl badly enough to make the effort. So the first embryo was a girl. When the girl didn't take, though, my father insisted on the second embryo being reengineered to be male."

"What did your mother think when she found out she was carrying twins?"

Vander smiled, a gentle lifting of lips that softened the hard edge of his expression. "She was thrilled. She said she didn't even mind the more difficult birth because the twins were worth it." He glanced at Sonia as the magnetic field covering the entrance back into the palace disengaged. "I think the fact that they drove my father insane endeared them even more to my mother."

Sonia chuckled as he carried her through the door back into the cool interior. Vander nodded to the guard on duty at the entrance, then continued on toward the family wing. After a few moments, Sonia said, "You can put me down now. I don't think there are any more rocks here for me to stub my foot on."

"But the marble is cold."

"I walked on that very same cold marble all the way around the palace on my tour."

"Not with an injured foot."

She couldn't argue with him there. And since carrying her didn't seem to be causing him much effort, she shrugged. Although the smirks and giggles of the people they passed in the corridors was a bit embarrassing. Her cheeks were warm from more than just the sun.

"Why don't you have more carpets or rugs in the halls?" she asked to avoid thinking about the expression on the faces of the soldiers they'd just passed.

"Marble doesn't conduct the charge from a disrupter blast. Rugs scorch and burn. Currents can be run through carpets."

"Oh." She wasn't sure why she was surprised. From his very conception, Vander's life had been dictated by the war. Most people's lives were on Callisea and Ishar. Yet there was something so sad about living in a home where basic comforts were set aside in favor of this military practicality. Despite the constant threat of invasion, most people she knew tried to live as normally, and as comfortably, as possible to remind themselves why they resisted the Selmorahn.

When they were nearly back to their apartments, she asked, "Would you mind if I put down rugs in my own rooms? I was given quite a few as wedding presents."

"Of course not. Feel free to do whatever you want to make your space comfortable. We can have rugs when we get a house of our own too if you like. The lack of them here is mainly because the military hubs are located in the same building."

"You have the one rug in your room. Would you mind more?"

"No. I just never thought to put more down."

She smiled as they walked into his apartment with all its grays, blacks and whites. He needed some color in here. Something besides the yellow flags marking their planets and the blue line marking Selmorahn territory on the maps circling his living room. Something more permanent than the flowers on his coffee table, flowers she was sure he hadn't put there to begin with.

Vander finally put her down on the single rug in his living room. "Sit," he ordered. "I'll get something for your foot."

"Vander, it's fine. Just a little bruise."

But he wasn't listening. He'd already disappeared into the bedroom. Shaking her head, she settled onto the couch and crossed her ankle over her knee so she could look at the bottom of her foot. To her surprise, there was actually a little cut on the ball of her foot, the caked blood a darker maroon against the light red body paint. A purple bruise already showed through the paint. Her feet needed to be washed too. But before she could get up to wash them, Vander returned with a basin of water, two towels and a small med-scanner.

Without a word, he crouched before her and took her injured foot into his hands, studying the cut. "Not too bad," he murmured.

"Exactly what I've been saying." But she didn't stop him from washing her foot clean and running the scanner over her small wound.

"Better?"

"Much. But you shouldn't have wasted the med-scanner's power cell on healing the bruise. That would have gone away eventually."

"The one thing we have plenty of here is replacement power cells for med-scanners." He placed the small, flat rectangle aside, set down her now-healed foot and lifted her other into his lap.

"That foot is fine," she murmured. The feel of his hands caressing her calf through the material of her pants sent a sharp shiver of heat straight to her sex.

"But dirty," he said with a grin. And he took up the wet towel and gently rubbed her sole.

Sonia's toes curled in reaction. The rough caress of the towel contrasted with the firm touch of his fingers to make her increasingly aware of her body and his position crouched before her. Her breathing sped with each pass of the towel until she thought she might crawl out of her own skin from so much sensation.

When he leaned forward and kissed the top of her foot, she sucked in a breath and held it. He set the towel aside, then placed another kiss on her foot, this time on the ball. Sonia gasped.

"Does that feel good?" he asked.

"Yes."

"I love this paint," he murmured as he kissed her sole again. Then he moved his lips to her toes.

From her toes, he slowly made his way up to her ankle, his mouth soft as a whisper against her skin. When he reached the cuff of her pants, he pushed the loose material to her knee to expose the skin of her calf, then he continued his slow, leisurely path.

"I love the way your skin tastes."

She wanted to say something, like she liked the way his skin tasted too, but she was too caught up in what he was doing to her leg. The brush of his fingers against the sensitive skin under her knee was torturous. When he reached her knee with his mouth, he stopped, sitting back on his haunches to study her face. The heat in his eyes pulled at her like a magnet. Leaning forward, she touched her lips to his.

"So sweet," he murmured against her mouth, then deepened the kiss.

Rising up on his knees, he wrapped her in his arms, his hands spanning her back and pressing her tight to his chest. She spread her knees to get closer to him, sliding to the edge of the couch so she could feel as much of him as possible. Through his pants and hers, she felt the pulse of his cock, hard and thick and ready. But for long moments, all he did was kiss her and all she wanted was to kiss him in return.

When he pulled away, Sonia's heart was pounding.

"Are you hungry?" he asked. When she raised a brow, he grinned. "For dinner."

"Maybe later," she said, rubbing against his erection. "For now, I'd prefer to get my fill of you."

"I was hoping you'd say that."

He had her stripped so fast, Sonia barely had time to catch her breath. She chuckled as Vander rose and made short work of his own clothing. While watching him bare his gorgeous body, she cupped her breasts, massaging gently. Vander's gaze locked with her hands and he groaned. She pinched her nipples, rolling them between her thumbs and forefingers, enjoying his response. Because she knew he'd react, she dropped her gaze to his cock and licked her lips. His body jerked. She wasn't even touching him and she affected him this way. The thought filled her with delight.

For several moments, he stared at her, then he covered the short space between them and pulled her to her feet. His kiss was deep, demanding and hard, matching the tension in his hands as he kneaded her ass.

He lifted his mouth enough to say, "Turn around and kneel on the couch."

Heart racing, she followed his instructions, arching her back. He settled behind her, between her legs, and fingered her wet pussy. She glanced over her shoulder so she could watch him as he positioned his cock at her entrance. Holding her gaze, he slammed into her. Sonia groaned and closed her eyes.

"Good?" he asked, his voice strained.

"Yes. Oh, yes." She gripped the back of the couch for support as he fucked her hard and fast, his hips slamming against her butt. She arched to pull him deeper and his grip on her waist tightened.

Would she ever be satisfied? Would she ever get used to this feeling of having Vander inside her? Even now, a full day after their wedding, this still felt like a dream. She moaned and rocked back against him.

He cupped one of her breasts with one hand and braced the other against her shoulder. "I want to feel you come from this angle," he ordered. The sound of skin slapping against skin twined with the deep, harsh growl of his voice.

Unable to answer aloud, she reached between her legs and fingered her clit, adding the necessary stimulation to push her over the edge. Her gesture seemed to excite him further because she felt his cock swelling even as he pumped faster. She couldn't resist looking back at him again, watching him fuck her even as her body tightened. He held her gaze, his blue eyes dark with passion and possession. And more than the sensation of his thrusting cock or the play of her finger against her clit, the look in his eyes broke her. She came with a shudder, her body jerking against his. She felt him follow her, slamming one last time as he groaned.

Sonia dropped her head forward, struggling to catch her breath. An instant later, Vander's arms closed around her waist as he pulled her limp body back against his chest.

He nuzzled her neck. "You smell like sunshine," he murmured.

Without opening her eyes, she chuckled and reached back to squeeze his waist. "If this is the response I get, I'll be sure to spend more time outside."

His laugh sounded tired but pleased. "We'll wear ourselves out."

"Do you mind?"

"Not really."

"Me neither." And she decided their marriage was off to a very good start.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sonia fully expected Vander to go back to the war room the day after he'd shown her the garden. Instead, they had an unexpected honeymoon. For another five days, they barely left the room, even to take meals. They ate almost exclusively in their rooms. They were required to dine one evening with both families, the night before her family went back to Ishar. And she did see her family off when they left. Vander spent time on the link discussing military issues several times a day. And one afternoon, he left for an hour to meet with William. Otherwise, they were in each other's constant company.

Sonia couldn't have been happier.

The fact that they rarely wore more than robes only added to her delight. Beyond the sex, he seemed genuinely interested in learning more about her too. He asked questions and listened to her answers, probing further into the subjects he'd touched on that first day in the garden. They debated politics and discussed the future of both their

people. He asked about her childhood and her family. He even asked to see some of her very bad paintings.

There were only two topics they completely avoided—her Siren skills and Anya. Both subjects she was happy to avoid. Unfortunately, she knew neither topic could be ignored indefinitely.

After dinner on the sixth day, they sat down to another game of naughty chess. Sonia studied the chessboard after Vander took her last remaining knight with his king. The sexual tableau of the king pushing the knight onto his knees to suck the king's enormous cock had left Sonia a little too distracted to consider her next move.

Vander, on the other hand, seemed indifferent to the antics of the game. After seven days of sex, she still hadn't had enough of him. In sixty years, she wouldn't have her fill. And he hadn't lost interest in making love to her—much to her relief—but during their chess games, he ignored the sexual play of the pieces. Since their wedding night, she'd only come close to winning one game. And he was getting overly confident in his skills.

That imbalance had to end.

Before making her move, still keeping her gaze on the board, Sonia stood and removed her robe. Because he enjoyed them as much as she did, she'd left the rubies in place and the paint on her hands and feet was still beautifully red, despite being past the period when tradition dictated she leave the paint in place. She stood naked but for the stones and body paint, and she felt Vander's gaze on her ass as soon as the robe hit the floor. Good start. But it wasn't his move yet. She wanted him distracted when he was supposed to be concentrating.

Keeping her back to him, she straddled his lap, nestling her bottom up tight against his cock. To her immense pleasure, he was fully erect. She reached back and moved his robe aside so she could stroke him. His approving groan made her grin.

Finally, she leaned forward and made her move. Then she rose up enough to position his cock at her entrance and sank down fully onto him. She sighed at the feel of his hard length stretching her. She was tight from this angle, so she could feel every rigid centimeter. Bracing her hands on his knees, she wiggled her butt and made sure to bump against his hips.

His hands landed on her waist. "How am I supposed to play like this?"

"I'm not stopping you from making your next move," she said as she rose up to the tip of his cock, then dropped down again. "I'm just making myself more comfortable."

"*Hmm.*" He wrapped an arm around her waist and leaned forward to move a piece. "Well, so long as you're comfortable."

His move was good but not the best strategically. Smiling, she continued to ride him, savoring the feel of his hands squeezing her hips and the sound of his deep breathing. Her little game made it harder for her to concentrate too, but she managed to position her castle to exploit his queen's vulnerability.

"Good move," he said.

His voice was harsh and ragged, nearly an octave deeper now. "Thank you." Then because it felt good, she squeezed his cock with her inner muscles. The hands on her hips clenched hard enough to bruise.

Loosening his hold, he skimmed his palms up her waist to cup her breasts. "Maybe we should put the game on hold," he muttered.

"You're just saying that because you're losing."

"I'm not losing."

"Then we'll keep playing." She leaned farther forward so she could take him deeper. He slid down in the couch, his hands still on her breasts, and his hips jerked up to meet hers on her next thrust. "It's your move," she reminded him when he didn't attempt to continue with the game.

"I'm thinking."

She laughed and dropped her hips hard against his, then glanced back over her shoulder. His gaze was intent on her bottom. She rose and fell and his attention stayed fixed on the area where their bodies joined. "I don't think you'll find your next move there," she pointed out.

He grunted. Chuckling, she faced the board again and continued to ride him in a slow, easy movement that left her insides humming. His fingers toyed with her nipples, pinching and soothing in intervals.

After a few more moments, she said, "Your move..."

With a hiss, he leaned forward and pushed a random piece across the board. Since his king was boxed in, the move lost him the game. Her bishop took his queen, throwing her on the board and fucking her hard until all of the pieces disappeared in the final climax. "Checkmate," Sonia said, laughing. Then she stood.

Vander grabbed her wrist. "Where the hell's do you think you're going?"

Grinning, she turned and straddled him again, this time face-to-face. "I'm going here." And she slid onto him.

"You did this on purpose."

"I never agreed to play fair."

He smiled, a wicked lifting of lips that made her stomach dance and her muscles clench. His cock jumped inside her but his smile never wavered. "I'll remember that in the future."

Burying his fingers in her hair, he pulled her mouth to his and kissed her deeply as she rode him, her hips flexing as the pressure she'd worked to contain spun out of her control. When her orgasm hit, her body jerked and she ripped her mouth from his to gasp. Even as she tried to catch her breath, he slammed into her and stiffened, his muscles taut as his cock pulsed. A long groan pushed passed his clenched teeth. He continued to stroke into her even after his climax eased.

She framed his face with her hands and watched him return to earth. When his gaze focused on her, she couldn't read his emotions. But there were emotions. She was sure



of that. Smiling, she kissed him gently on the mouth. In response, he pulled her close and hugged her. Her heart thumped hard in her chest, turning over with feelings she could barely contain. They could be so good together. So perfect. Clenching her arms around his neck, she resisted the urge to worry about their future. He would fall in love with her eventually. For now, this closeness was a very good start.

His arms tightened around her waist and under her bottom and he abruptly stood, startling a grunt from her. The move pulled his now limp cock from inside her and she missed the heat, but the show of strength made her giddy. She loved how strong he was. Wrapping her legs around his waist and her arms more firmly around his neck to keep her balance, she said, "What are you doing?"

"Taking us to a more comfortable spot," he said as he walked toward the bedroom.

She ducked her head and smiled. "You can be very considerate, Vander."

"You're my wife. I have to take care of you."

That made her chuckle. "You just took care of me very well, thank you."

"I think that was you taking care of me."

"Actually, that was me finally winning a game of chess."

"Very cunning move. I should have seen it coming."

"You may be the tactical expert, but the rest of us do have a few tricks up our sleeves."

"Or beneath your robe, in your case."

She laughed and kissed his cheek. He knelt on the bed and gently tumbled her onto the mattress then spooned up next to her so his body wrapped her in warmth. She sighed and snuggled against him, tucking her head under his chin. She loved these moments, just lying in his arms. His hand absently stroked up and down her back until she wanted to purr in pleasure. This is what she wanted between them for the rest of their lives, this closeness. And love. She wanted his love. Time, she reminded herself, there was time.

After a few quiet moments, Vander cleared his throat. "I want to discuss something with you, something I've been avoiding," he said.

"Oh?" But she already knew what he meant. She'd expected his questions a lot sooner than this.

"You claimed you were hard to kill, the night of our wedding. I'd like to hear your explanation."

Not exactly the place she'd thought he'd start. But this topic would lead them around to the same information in the end. She savored his heat for a moment as she thought about what to say. She intended to tell him everything. She wanted his love and that wasn't possible without trust and honesty. But no one outside the seer and her immediate family knew the full extend of a Siren's powers. And even her family didn't know the full truth.

"I was trained by the woman who holds the Book of Siren. She's a seer who keeps the book in trust for each new Siren. She's lived a very long time, longer than anyone knows, and she trains us to our skills, making sure we learn and memorize every song in the book."

"How many Sirens are there?"

"One in a generation. Two at most. And sometimes a generation is passed over."

"Is there another besides you?"

"I'm the only one this generation. And there was a gap between me and the last two. The seer says there's a reason for the scarcity. If three were ever born in one generation, their power would be too great. So nature interferes and guarantees no more than two exist at once."

"There's never been more than two? Ever?"

"No. Not according to the seer."

He fell silent for a moment, obviously thinking. Sonia remained quiet as well, waiting for his next question. As she watched his frown, she wanted to ask a few questions of her own.

"And these songs you learn? What do they do?"

"Each one invokes a particular physical and emotional reaction."

"Lust."

She pursed her lips, considering him a moment before answering. "How much do you remember about that first night, when I sang?"

"Enough," he said.

"But not clearly? Not everything?"

After a heartbeat, he frowned. "No. Not everything. I remember the feeling, the sensation of wanting you so badly I thought I might die if I couldn't have you. And then I remember the sensation easing enough for me to think. But only barely. I can't remember what I thought about."

Nodding, she said, "I tried to soften the effects on you, but without the sound filters it's impossible to protect you fully. Do you remember what you saw?"

He shook his head.

"No one else does either. They assume they had a wonderful, erotic fantasy brought on by the power of my song. But the experience was nothing more than a fantasy."

"It was more?"

"Much. But I know the Calliseans are more reserved than Ishari, so I made sure they didn't remember their actual activities."

"You can control people's memories."

"To an extent."

He ran a fingertip along her cheek. "But?"

"No but." She smiled. "There is an 'and'. Some of the songs are dangerous. We learn them so we won't stumble across the tones and rhythms on accident. But once learned, Sirens don't use them unless absolutely necessary."

"How dangerous?"

"I can break a human brain, destroy a psyche, leave a man little more than a husk."

"Have you?"

"No. But once, when I thought no one was around, I sang one of the songs out loud. I was young and I wanted to hear the music. There was power in it that was hard to resist." She sucked in a breath and glanced away, focusing on the steel headboard. This was a painful memory. She had to brace herself before continuing. Finally she said, "I killed a bird, two feral *vishin* dogs and all four of their pups. They were hiding in my garden. It was horrible. Their deaths weren't pleasant."

"But they were an accident."

She shook her head. "I should have known better. The seer warned me. And I wasn't even trying." She shivered. "I swore I'd never sing that song again. Or any of the others like it."

With a hand on her cheek, he turned her face until she was forced to meet his gaze. "To protect yourself, you might have to one day. To protect your people."

"I know." And she hated that knowledge. "But I don't want to. My family doesn't know about the death of the animals. I never told anyone but the seer. And you."

At her admission, his gaze softened. He brushed a gentle kiss over her lips. "Thank you for your trust."

"You've told me things in confidence about your family. I owe you equal honesty." Taking a deep breath, she continued. "My family kept my abilities a secret until I was older. I think they might have continued to keep my status a secret if not for this marriage. My father knew it was the only way to stabilize a relationship between our worlds. So he used my talent in an attempt to improve his negotiating position."

"I'd have, too. I can understand why he did. But now you're vulnerable because all the Callisean Heads of State know your secret. And I'm sure my father's been talking up this new skill he's brought to the family."

"I bring an advantage to Callisea. Why would anyone here be a threat?"

"Do you have spies in our government?"

She grinned and nodded as heat rose in her cheeks. "And you have spies in ours." Then she realized what he meant. "You know for certain there are Selmorahn spies here?"

"I even know who some of them are. I make sure the information they have access to works for us rather than against us. That's not the point. By now, the Selmorahn have heard of you. Your life is in danger. You need to be prepared to use whatever advantage you have to protect yourself."

"You're in danger too. They know you lead the armies and your marriage is what binds our two worlds together."

"They've tried and failed on many occasions to assassinate me. They've learned not to bother."

She narrowed her eyes. "That's not entirely true, is it? You're still worried they'll make an attempt on you."

"Not now. On our wedding day maybe. But now, I'm more worried they'll go after you."

"The treaty is sealed. Killing me won't dissolve the agreement."

His hand tightened on her waist. "I'm not worried about the fucking treaty, Sonia. I'm worried about your life."

His honesty made her throat clench. That he cared even that much thrilled her. "I'll be careful then."

"And you'll use whatever you have to if you're attacked?"

"I won't risk your life."

"Sonia..."

"No. You can't ask me to. Those songs are powerful and I won't use them while there are innocents around."

"I'm not so innocent."

The cocky lift of his brow belied the serious tone of his voice. She let loose a halfhearted chuckle. "No, you're not. But I won't risk killing you to save my own life. You need to understand that."

He frowned as his hand slid up and down her waist. He didn't look happy, but she could tell he wasn't sure how to change her mind. Since that wasn't possible, she let him brood in silence. Snuggling close, she tucked her head under his chin and drifted into a troubled sleep.

## Chapter Seven

When Sonia woke the next morning, Vander was already out of bed. She didn't hear him in the bathroom but the door to the living room was open, so she assumed he was there. Stretching, she pushed off the blanket and climbed out of bed. Her robe was still in the living room where she'd dropped it the night before. With a grin, she sauntered out to collect it, half hoping to inspire Vander to keep her naked for a little bit longer.

But he wasn't in the living room. Frowning, she pulled on her borrowed robe. Despite it not being white, she hadn't been able to resist wearing the borrowed garment he'd loaned her. Even after seven days, the robe still held his scent.

She looked into her own apartment to see if he'd gone in there for some reason, but there was no sign of him. *She'd* barely been in these rooms since their wedding. Most of her luggage was still packed. Eventually, she needed to deal with all those trunks, but with Vander talking about getting a house outside the palace, she was hesitant to unpack fully.

Wandering back into his apartment, she looked around the living room. Her gaze landed on the one door she hadn't been through before. His office. He never specifically asked her not to go in, but he hadn't left the room open to her either. She stared at the closed door for a long moment before crossing the living room. Tapping lightly, she called to him. If he didn't want her inside that room, he'd come out.

After a few moments passed and she didn't hear a response, she knocked harder. Still nothing. Finally, she eased the door open and poked her head inside. The room was empty. "Well, where did he go?" she wondered out loud as she stepped fully into his office.

Like every other room in his suite, the floors were black marble, the walls white, the curtains gray. Even the computer consol, holo-link, desk and chairs were all black. Her husband needed more color in his life. Shaking her head, she started to turn back to the living room, but a glint of light caught her attention. Moving closer, she realized the flash came from sunlight reflecting off the polished surface of an old-fashioned picture frame sitting on the edge of his desk. A part of her hesitated to look at that picture and she wasn't sure why.

Until she picked up the frame and turned it so she could see the image.

A beautiful, petite blonde woman smiled out from the picture. Her blue eyes sparkled and her expression was all warmth and joy. She looked so happy and lovely. The background looked like a cityscape from a balcony view. The bright sunlight behind the woman shown across the rooftops, giving the scene a light, airy feel. Like spring or early summertime. Green vines and flowers decorated the space immediately

next to her, surrounding her in nature and adding to the sense of springtime warmth. The view wasn't Ter'am, so it must be somewhere else on Callisea.

"That's Anya."

Vander's voice made Sonia jerk in surprise. She faced him with the picture still in her hand. He stood so close she was surprised she hadn't heard him come in. "I know. I recognized her from the vid-streams."

He nodded. "Of course." Gently, he took the frame from her hands and stared down at the image.

"She was beautiful," Sonia murmured.

"Yes, she was."

Sonia's heart clenched at the loss and longing in his voice. His expression was soft and distant. As she stood there, he ran a thumb over the picture. She expected him to say more, but he just kept staring at the image. Finally, she said, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to intrude on your privacy. I couldn't find you when I woke up."

"Don't worry about it." He took a deep breath and set the frame back on his desk, turning Anya's picture so it faced the chair. Sitting behind the desk, he'd be able to stare at her image all he liked.

Sonia swallowed hard and sucked in her bottom lip when it started to tremble. Watching him as he stared at Anya made her chest tighten and tore at her heart. As she followed him silently back into the living room, she tried to tell herself not to get so upset. He obviously wouldn't get over his feelings for Anya quickly. She knew that, she'd known when she married him. She couldn't expect him to just forget about his past love. But that didn't mean he wouldn't love her at some point in the future. She still had hope.

Her breaking heart wasn't listening to logic, though. And it took a great deal of willpower not to cry.

*Stop being a ninny, Sonia.* They hadn't been together long enough for her to give up hope. She never expected him to fall in love with her overnight. There was still time.

"I didn't mean to leave without letting you know I was going," Vander said when they were back in the living room. "But there was an emergency."

That caught her attention. "Emergency?" Thoughts of heartbreak set aside, she said, "Another attack? Is anyone hurt?"

"No, not an attack. You may have overheard me talking about the wreckage of a Selmorahn ship we found in the southern jungles in Guenar?"

She nodded.

"The search teams found survivors."

"Then there were more on the ship?"

"Five to eight additional soldiers. We aren't sure of the numbers. They've had enough time to barricade themselves into an area of the jungle not easy to access. There's a barren stone cliff at their backs so we can't scale down without being easy

targets, the jungle is too thick overhead for aerial images, there's a species of tree in that part of the planet that makes thermal imaging unreliable and the soldiers have set traps and a sensor grid around their location, so we can't get close enough to gather accurate information."

"Have you tried a sweep-stunner? I brought two new models with increased range."

"We tried." He flashed a sardonic smile that held no humor. "The jungle's too thick. It interferes with the pulse spray. We didn't stun all of them and two of my soldiers were killed when they went in to make sure the enemy was disabled."

Sonia sucked in a breath and dropped onto the couch. "*Ichos*."

"That's what I was dealing with this morning. When the stunners failed to work, Colonel Batist called to request permission to blast the entire area."

"Kill them all? Wouldn't it be better to take prisoners? Just starve them out. They can't stay were they are indefinitely."

Vander sighed and started pacing behind the couch. "But they can do a lot of harm. They might have already. The only reason we found them is because we intercepted a comm-transmission they were sending. And we don't know if it was the only one sent before we could scramble their communications. The wavelength of the signal indicates they were broadcasting to a ship just beyond the system."

"Did you decode the signal?"

"My brother's working on it."

"Benjamin?" Ben was the closest in age to Vander and the sibling with a talent for cryptography. He created all the Callisean codes and had managed to decipher some of the most difficult Selmorahn messaging systems.

Vander nodded. "But it'll take him time. The encryption is new, nothing he's seen them use before. And if they're communicating with a Selmorahn warship just beyond the edge of the system, we could be on the verge of a major attack."

Sonia's heartbeat quickened at the news. They all lived under this threat, but every attack terrified her.

"So you understand why we can't afford to wait them out." Vander ran a hand through his hair and stopped pacing to stare out his windows.

"But if you captured them alive, you could interrogate them. Discover what message they sent, what they've planned. If you kill them, you'll lose that opportunity."

"Yes. But we can't get through their sensor array. They've positioned themselves to make an air or ground attack impossible without losing more of my soldiers. And even then, there's no guarantee we can take any of them alive. Especially if the information they have is significant. They may choose to die rather than be taken prisoner." He shook his head. "I don't want to throw away the lives of Callisean soldiers on a pointless assault. But I can't afford to waste any more time. Not if an attack is imminent."

"You'll order a strike then?"

He faced her. "I'm on my way there now. I'll assess the situation in person and decide if there are any other options." He stared at her for a long, silent moment, then shook his head. "I came back to let you know I was leaving."

"I can sing them out," she murmured, holding his gaze. "Take me. I can bring them to you. Alive."

He frowned. "I thought of that, but..."

"But?"

"What if they shoot you before you get close enough? What if they have shelters that block your voice?"

"They crashed before the wedding?"

He nodded.

"And they left the cover of their ship. Even if they have shelters made of something more substantial than bypep canvas, which is unlikely given the size of their ship, chances are good at least one or two will be on guard duty. Right?"

"Yes."

"And if the others see their comrades moving off into the jungle for no reason, what do you think they'll do?"

"Come out to see what's going on?"

"And get caught in my song."

"If they shoot you before you get close enough?"

She rose and circled the couch to stand in front of him. "My voice carries. Trees and vines can't disrupt my song the way they disrupted the stunners. They'll be caught before I'm close enough to shoot."

He reached up and cupped her cheek. "I...I don't want you to think I'm using you. I'm not my father."

She tilted her head to one side. "I don't think you're anything like your father, Vander. And the Selmorahn are my enemy too. I want to contribute to the war effort if I can, in any way I can."

His gaze traveled over her face for a long moment before he said, "I know. Or you wouldn't have agreed to this marriage."

Those words were like a disruptor bolt to her heart. Did he still think that was the only reason she'd married him? After the last seven days, she'd hoped he'd realize there was more to her decision than just duty.

He dropped his hand from her cheek. "Get dressed. We leave in thirty minutes. I'll send someone to get you." As he turned toward the door, he paused, looking back over his shoulder. "Thank you."

"For helping with the Selmorahn? You don't have to thank me for that."

"No. For not... For knowing my father and I aren't alike."



He left before she could respond.

\* \* \* \* \*

As the transport ship landed at the edge of the staging area, Vander unfastened his harness and turned to face Sonia. He'd never seen her wearing anything that wasn't soft and bright, outside of his robe, so the image of her in green combat pants, boots and a tank top left him a little disoriented. He hadn't guessed she owned anything so...practical. She'd even removed her ruby and diamond necklace, something she'd only done when bathing since their wedding.

The fact that her curvy figure still looked incredibly sexy in such rough clothing wasn't lost on him. For the first time in his memory, he actually found it difficult to concentrate on a battlefield crisis. Only the thought of her walking into that dense jungle on her own kept his mind on his job.

"Here," he said, handing her a small disrupter in a belt holster. "You know how to use this?" She flashed him a condescending look that almost made him smile.

"You think my father would let his daughters go without weapons training?" She took the disruptor and stood to wrap the belt around her waist. "We're at war."

He watched her quick, efficient movements and was struck yet again by how much he didn't know about his own wife, even now. They'd spent days talking, and he knew her much better than he'd ever thought to before they'd met. But there was so much more to learn. "Don't hesitate to use it if something goes wrong."

She pulled the weapon from its holster and examined it, checking the power cell and settings with a comfortable knowledge and confidence. Vander found himself letting out a small breath. She hadn't exaggerated—she did know how to handle the gun. He still had trouble with the thought of sending her after the Selmorahns without any backup. But any soldier he sent with her would also get caught in her song. "We need a small number of those sound filters made, to block your voice. I hate sending you into that jungle alone."

"It's the only way and we both know it. You're going to have to make sure to keep your soldiers inside the ships until I stop singing. I was serious when I said my voice carries. When I'm projecting, the song can easily travel two kilometers. I don't want to risk the Calliseans being caught in it."

"I'll make sure everyone stays inside." They left the ship, Vander leading the way, to find Colonel Batist. The heat of the jungle thickened the air in the clearing and sweat beaded on Vander's forehead before he'd gone three meters. He'd left his uniform jacket behind—everyone knew who he was on sight, he didn't need insignia to announce his rank—but the heat was so pervasive, even his thin tank top felt too warm. He glanced at Sonia. Beads of sweat dripped down her neck, across her chest and dampened a triangle of material between her breasts.

"Take a water flask with you," he said without stopping. "I know it's not a long walk from here, but I don't want you passing out from the heat."

She nodded but didn't look at him when she said, "I already have a flask in my thigh pocket. I'm used to the heat, remember?"

He nodded as he took in the moisture covering her bare arms. She'd pulled her hair back into a single braid and was wrapping the braid into a bun as they walked. The movement drew his gaze to the elegant curve of her neck where little tendrils of escaped hair stuck to her dusky skin.

"Make sure to drink the water, then," he grunted and forced his attention away from her. Gods, she didn't even need to sing to seduce him.

As they crossed to Colonel Batist's command shuttle, Vander noticed he wasn't the only one drawn to the sight of Sonia. Most of these soldiers wouldn't have seen her before since they'd been involved in the hunt for the Selmorahn survivors since the wedding. And although her current outfit was ordinary compared to what she'd been wearing on their wedding day, Sonia still managed to hold the gazes of most of the people in the clearing. A low whistle drew Vander's scowl. The soldier snapped to attention, carefully keeping his gaze straight ahead.

"I don't think you're going to need to sing," Vander murmured so only his wife would hear.

She glanced at him with a raised brow.

"All you have to do is walk to command attention."

She shrugged. "They're just curious. They know why I'm here, and I bet most of them are wondering if I can really do what I'm here to do."

"That's not why they're staring at you," he said with feeling.

She looked around the camp. "Why else would they be staring? I look like everyone else here."

He nearly stopped in his tracks. "Are you serious?"

"Well I know my pants are more Ishari military style, but essentially the same. Is that what it is? That I'm not Callisean?"

Her complete obliviousness to her own appeal left Vander speechless. Before he could answer her question, however, Colonel Batist joined them.

"Commander." The colonel saluted Vander with a quick hand to opposite shoulder, then turned to the holo-map he had set up on a portable table. The surrounding terrain spread out in miniature before them. "This is the enemy's current position. We had men stationed here and here." He indicated locations bracketing the Selmorahn. "But I pulled them back at your order an hour ago. The spybots left in place confirm the Selmorahn aren't moving position. From the sporadic audio we're receiving, I don't think they realize we've pulled back yet."

"Good." He turned to his wife and introduced her to the colonel.

"Honored, my lady," Batist said. "We have an additional aerial spybot set up to accompany you to the Selmorahn camp, in case something goes wrong. Are you sure you don't want a contingent to go with you?"

She shook her head. "They'll get caught in my song, Colonel. It's much safer for me to travel alone."

He frowned and glanced between Sonia and Vander. Finally, he said, "Are you quite sure this plan will work, Commander? I..." He shook his head and faced Sonia. "Not that I doubt you, my lady. Stories of your talent have reached us even here in this backward part of Callisea. But... Can you capture them quickly enough to avoid being killed?"

Sonia smiled, a charming, almost sweet expression that Vander found both endearing and at complete odds with their situation and Batist's comment. He also felt an unexpected pang of jealousy because Sonia was bestowing that beautiful smile on the colonel. She'd been quiet on the journey here, rarely meeting his gaze, only speaking when he initiated conversation. And she hadn't smiled since he'd discovered her in his office that morning.

"The Selmorahn will be easy, Colonel," Sonia said. "The difficult part will be keeping your men inside the shuttles until I signal."

"They'll obey their orders, my lady. Don't worry about that. But once you stop singing, won't the Selmorahn start shooting?"

"I'll take care of that. They won't have any weapons to use by the time I stop singing."

The man still looked doubtful and Vander could hardly blame him. Batist hadn't been present in the hall when Sonia sang on their wedding night. Vander still couldn't remember clearly what had happened, even though he'd tried often since Sonia had pointed out to him that she'd affected his memories. The fact that he couldn't dig up the exact images of what had occurred that night while she sang proved to him just how significant her talent was.

"Colonel," Vander assured Batist, "my wife will be able to bring the Selmorahn in unarmed. Just be ready to take them as soon as she signals."

Sonia turned to stare at him, a strange, questioning expression in her dark eyes. Then she nodded and turned back to study the holo-map. She'd looked surprised and appreciative, but he wasn't entirely sure why. Did she think he doubted her?

The colonel showed her the path to follow to reach the enemy camp, gave her a wrist unit with positional sensors so she could keep track of her location in the thick jungle and wished her luck before turning to order his men to ready the spybot that would follow her.

After making sure the soldiers obeyed their orders, Vander followed Sonia to the edge of the tree line. She stood staring into the dense jungle as she wrapped the positional sensor pad around her wrist. "Are you okay?" he asked, stopping close to her to draw in the scent of her hair.

She nodded without glancing away from the trees. "But do you think there are many snakes in there?"

Vander glanced at the side of her face. She was frowning, nibbling on her bottom lip as she studied the path. He couldn't help his slight smile. "With all the human activity in this area over the last day, I doubt there are any wild animals within twenty clicks of us. Do you hear any birds?"

She shook her head and took a deep breath. Against his will, her movement drew his gaze down to her breasts where they pressed tightly against the thin material of her tank top. He averted his attention quickly to keep from embarrassing himself and frowned. They'd made love so often in the last week he was surprised he still had any interest in sex. When it came to Sonia, obviously a week wasn't enough. The thought that he might never get enough of her struck him with a tiny shiver of a sensation he was tempted to call fear. Though why wanting the woman he was married to should cause him fear, he couldn't say.

"Are you ready?" he asked finally, to pull his mind back to the situation at hand.

"Yes." She faced him, meeting his gaze for a longer moment than she had all day. "No snakes. You're sure?"

He smiled and ran a finger across her cheek. "No snakes." The spybot whirled overhead, hovering just to the right of her shoulder. He glanced at the little round machine, then back at his wife. "Be careful. And remember to use that disruptor if you need to. If anything goes wrong, take cover. I'll come in and get you back out."

Her lips lifted, almost a smile. "Get into the ships. I intend to start singing well before I reach their sensor array."

He nodded, but he stood at the edge of the jungle, watching her and the spybot quietly shadowing her until they'd both disappeared into the trees. Then he turned back to Colonel Batist's ship where he could watch Sonia's progress on the holo-feed.

## Chapter Eight

Vander studied Sonia as she walked through the jungle, her hips swaying gently. With or without her song, there was an innate seductive quality to her that he found hard to resist. He forced himself to study the rest of the image the spybot was sending back. She was halfway to the enemy camp now. Around her, thick vines and huge tree trunks hugged the path that had been hacked out of the jungle by his soldiers. He watched as Sonia stepped over a fallen trunk, walked a few more meters then checked her position on her wrist unit.

A moment later, her voice filled the open, central compartment of the shuttle. Colonel Batist raised a brow. His second in command, Major Gormen, let out a soft whistle. And the soldiers crowded into the shuttle gathered closer to the holo-emitter.

"She has a beautiful voice," Major Gormen commented, leaning closer to the image. "I've never heard such pure tone before. And perfect pitch. There's not a single off note."

Vander raised his brows.

The major blushed. "I studied music at university," she mumbled, focusing on the image again.

With a nod, Vander resumed watching his wife. Sonia had stopped moving, though she was still half a kilometer from the Selmorahn sensor array. She'd said her voice would carry up to two kilometers, but he hadn't realized she intended to sing from such a distance.

"Will they hear her from there?" Colonel Batist said, echoing Vander's concerns.

He didn't comment. He was too focused on studying the jungle surrounding her. The spybot sent back 360 degree images, but nothing moved among the trees. He thought of Sonia's fear of snakes and was glad all the human activity would have driven them away. He hadn't wanted to tell her there were constrictors in this area that were longer than their shuttle.

"Look," Major Gormen murmured.

Vander focused on the part of the holo-image Gormen pointed to, the path in front of Sonia. She'd only been singing for ten minutes, but already there was movement in the trees. In the next instant, the first Selmorahn stumbled out of cover.

"Can they even understand her?" the major whispered. "She's singing in a language I don't recognize, and I'm familiar with most Ishari dialects."

"They don't need to know the words," Vander said, passing on knowledge Sonia had given him on the flight from Ter'am. "The tone and melody work together at a subconscious level."

Gormen whistled again. "That's some powerful talent."

Yes, Vander thought, as he watched another four Selmorahn emerge from the trees to stand before Sonia. His wife was definitely talented. "Just be thankful you're in here and not subject to her music," Vander said aloud. That comment pulled a number of reluctant murmurs of agreement from the other soldiers.

A final Selmorahn fell on his knees at Sonia's feet. That made six altogether. She continued to sing to them, holding still as they stared at her. The entire Callisean army could descend on them and the Selmorahn wouldn't even notice. Sonia reached out and touched the cheek of the man kneeling at her feet, her voice never faltering. The man shuddered and moaned.

"Gods," Batist muttered. "Do they know what's happening to them?"

"Yes," Vander said, remembering his own experience with Sonia's voice. "And no. They'll only know what she wants them to." He noted that the song she was using was different from the one she'd used on their wedding night. He'd have to ask her about that later. But it was obvious this song still induced a level of sexual need that bordered on insanity. The four male and two female Selmorahn soldiers stumbled over each other to get closer to Sonia, and the males were sporting very obvious erections.

After another few moments, Sonia turned her back on her admirers and started toward the shuttles. Vander felt a moment of panic, an instinctive response to her vulnerable position. She wasn't even watching the enemy! But his logic kicked in and registered the enraptured expressions on the Selmorahn faces. Sonia didn't have to be facing them to hold them enthralled. They eagerly followed her, tripping across the uneven ground in their haste to stay as close to her as they could.

Her voice never faltered.

"If I wasn't watching this," Colonel Batist said, "I'm not sure I'd have believed it. She's amazing."

An unexpected sense of pride filled Vander at the colonel's words. His wife was doing something that no one else on Callisea could have done. And she was *his*. The pride came with an equal sense of guilt. Was this what his father felt whenever Vander and his siblings accomplished something rare, won another battle, cracked an unbreakable code, moved half the planet to make sure of victory, blew more Selmorahn fighter ships out of the air than any other five pilots? Vander wasn't responsible for Sonia's talent, though. Not the way Jared could take credit for the Ulneric children's battle skills. Vander had even less call to feel such pride.

And yet he did. But his wasn't a selfish emotion, he realized as he watched Sonia effortlessly leading the enemy back to camp. He was proud because she *was* amazing, and she'd married him. She'd even known him pretty well before they'd actually met. Better than he liked to admit. And she'd still wanted to marry him. This talented, beautiful, sexy, smart, brave woman had chosen him.

As he took in the awe and admiration on the faces of the soldiers around him, he felt like the luckiest man in the system.

When Sonia reentered the clearing, she sauntered slowly toward the center of the staging area. In that position, Callisean shuttles circled her and her captives. They'd have the Selmorahn surrounded before they had a chance to recover from Sonia's song. Vander took a moment to study the six enemies for weapons, but Sonia had been true to her word. There wasn't a single obvious weapon in sight. They might have a hidden knife or blaster hidden somewhere on their person, but nothing large enough to cause much trouble.

Vander switched from watching the holo produced by the spybot to simply looking out one of the shuttles view ports. Sonia had turned to face the enemy again, still singing. The sound of her beautiful voice filled Vander's senses. Even inside the safety of the shuttle, her music held power.

"Colonel, ready your men." He listened as Batist conveyed the order over the link even as the soldiers in the command shuttle took up their positions near the rear exit hatch. Vander kept his gaze on Sonia, waiting for her signal.

She raised a hand in the air. The Selmorahn dropped to their knees.

And to Vander's utter horror, one of the shuttle hatches opened prematurely and Callisean soldiers poured into the clearing. Almost instantly they were caught in Sonia's song. Weapons clattered to the ground as the twenty men and women pushed and shoved at each other to get to Sonia.

Vander cursed and punched the hull. Damn fools. Rather than stopping, Sonia continued to sing, her hand still in the air. When all twenty Callisean soldiers and the shuttles four-man flight crew were in the clearing, enraptured by her spell, Sonia finally dropped her hand.

"Now!" Vander ordered in the same instant as she fell silent.

The Selmorahn were circled instantly. They blinked, focusing for the first time on their surroundings, and then slowly all six put their hands in the air. The Callisean soldiers and crew who'd been caught in Sonia's spell showed an equal level of disorientation. They stared at each other as if trying to comprehend what had happened.

Vander wanted an answer to that too. But first he joined Sonia. "Are you okay?"

"Fine," she said. Then sighed. "Unfortunately, the soldiers who jumped my signal are not."

"No harm done. They weren't affected long."

"You don't understand." She sighed again and faced him. "The song I was using? I have to sing them out of its effects. I used this particular song because even after I stop, those listening remain...preoccupied with me. They become obsessed."

That explained the different music. "Why?"

"It will make the Selmorahn easier to interrogate. Even if they won't talk to you, after a few hours, they'll be very susceptible to me. And until I release them, they'll remain obsessed."

"You're right, I can't have my soldiers suffering from that."

"More than the distraction from their duty, remaining in this state over the long term can result in irrational, dangerous behavior. I wasn't worried about the Selmorahn. I'll sing them out of the spell once they've talked. But I don't want to risk the moral rationale of your soldiers."

"What do you need to do?"

"Have them all go back into the shuttle. I'll seal the hatch and sing them out of the obsession inside where no one else will be exposed."

"Good enough." Sonia turned toward the shuttle, but Vander caught her arm. "You did a very impressive job. We couldn't have done this without you."

That earned him a slight smile. "Except that I enthralled some of your men too."

"That was their fault, not yours. And I intend to get to the bottom of that near disaster. But none of that has anything to do with what a fine job you did. Thank you."

Her smile grew, which pleased him more than it should have.

"I was happy to help," she murmured.

He watched her walk toward the shuttle for a moment before turning to order those Calliseans affected by her song to join her. Every gaze in the camp followed her—even those who'd been protected from her voice watched her as she disappeared through the hatch. A moment after, Vander felt like everyone in the clearing took a deep breath. And then activity resumed. The Selmorahn were secured and taken to a transport shuttle, the area was cleared and the soldiers who'd been caught in Sonia's music followed her into the shuttle as they were ordered.

Colonel Batist joined Vander as he stood overseeing their departure. "We're lucky her family was willing to let her leave Ishar," Batist said, his gaze on the sealed shuttle where Sonia was no doubt singing as they spoke. "She could prove a valuable asset in the war. But you'll have to keep a close eye on her."

Vander turned to stare at the colonel.

"If the Selmorahn high command doesn't know about her already," he explained quickly, "this incident is sure to catch their attention. She'll be an assassination target for sure. Even without the distinction of being your wife."

"I've already taken that into consideration," Vander said. His even tone hid the punch of fear that hit his gut at Batist's words. He'd known from the moment she'd sung on their wedding night that Sonia's life would be in constant danger from the Selmorahn. But now, the thought of her capture—or worse, her death—was intolerable.

He watched for her to reemerge from the shuttle, catching her gaze the instant she stepped back into the clearing. Just the sight of her started his heart beating a little faster. As she crossed the clearing, he swore to the gods he'd do whatever it took to keep her safe from any enemy. And not just because she was valuable to the war effort.

\* \* \* \* \*



Vander didn't return to his apartment until nearly sunrise. He'd spent the day grilling their captives—three of which were surprisingly easy to interrogate. He was sure he had Sonia to thank for that. As a consequence, the Selmorahn's planned surprise assault on Callisea had been averted. Four squadrons of fighters, led by his recalcitrant twin siblings, launched from the military base hidden on one of the system's outer planets, surprising the single, unprepared enemy warship and forcing the ship to jump away. The Selmorahn had been outnumbered and counting on surprise for a successful strike. The captives had been a scouting party, but they'd experienced shuttle problems and crashed. They'd relayed enough information back to their warship, though, that the battle could have gone very differently. If the enemy soldiers hadn't been taken alive for interrogation, Vander wouldn't have been able to plan such an effective counterattack.

A lot of Calliseans could have been killed.

And he had Sonia to thank for the successful day, a day that could have been a disaster.

He was grinning by the time he stumbled through his bedroom door, looking forward to crawling beneath the covers and snuggling up next to the lush, warm body of his wife. But his bed was neatly made with no sign of Sonia. He listened but didn't hear the shower running. Could she have gotten up this early? The sun hadn't risen yet. Just to be sure, he checked the bathroom, but it was neat and tidy. And no Sonia.

Walking back into the living room, he stared for several seconds at the open door between their apartments before he realized where she must be. And for some reason, the fact that she'd gone to her own bed really pissed him off. She was his wife. She should have been in his bed.

Even as he stalked into her apartment, he realized he was being ridiculous. The reason she had her own bed was because he'd never intended for theirs to be a proper marriage. He hadn't guessed how much he'd want her, or how important it would become to have her beside him each night.

When he reached her bedroom door, he pushed it open slowly. The room was quiet and dark, the thick red curtains pulled mostly shut. There was just enough light that he could see the shape of Sonia beneath the blankets piled on her bed. He noticed immediately that she had unrolled at least half a dozen rugs and scattered them across the green marble floor. Her bed was covered with blankets of red and purple and the frame was made of simulated wood rather than metal like his.

Crossing the short distance to the huge bed, he realized how much warmer and cozier her room felt. There were still unpacked trunks everywhere and clothes piled in a corner on a chair. The rugs were laid out haphazardly and frequently overlapped. And yet the room didn't feel messy. It felt...comfortable.

Frowning, he looked down at his wife. He'd left the bedroom door open enough to let in some light. He wanted to see her. Her dark hair was pulled into a thick braid that lay across the red pillow. Her skin looked warm and golden in the dim light. He

watched her slow, steady breathing for a long moment. Then he left the room and headed back to his bedroom.

He needed a shower before he climbed beneath her clean bed sheets. After spending the first part of the day in the sticky jungle heat and the last part of the day between the interrogation rooms and the battle staging holo room, Vander could only imagine how bad he smelled. He needed to wash away the day. Then he could join his wife in her bed. And if she didn't wake up right away, he might just get a little sleep himself.

He returned to her room clean and more tired than he realized. He dropped his towel on the floor and crawled beneath the covers nude. Sonia murmured in her sleep. When his arm snaked around her and he spooned up behind her, she snuggled her bottom against his hips. She was wearing something thin and silky and the material felt like paradise against his skin. He took a deep breath, drawing in her clean soap-and-spice scent.

He'd been awake for a full day and night, nearly twenty-seven hours, but despite his exhaustion his body still hardened in response to Sonia's nearness. He rubbed his cheek against her hair and wondered if he'd ever get over this reaction. Would he feel this insatiable lust for weeks, months, years? Would he ever be able to share a bed with her and not want her?

A part of him was afraid he wouldn't. The fear surprised him. He didn't feel it often. And he certainly didn't understand why he'd be worried about wanting his wife. What could be more convenient than to actually *want* to fuck your own wife? Especially given their start. But a part of him he didn't want to acknowledge was warning that this was more than just fucking. And for reasons he didn't dare examine just yet, that was absolutely terrifying.

She mumbled again and before he registered the change in her breathing, she rolled over to face him. Her eyes were narrowed and heavy with sleep. She didn't smile, but she reached up and touched his damp hair.

"What time is it?"

"Late," he murmured. "Early, actually. The sun will be rising any minute now."

"You showered."

He smiled. "I stank. I didn't want to wake you with my smell."

That brought a grin to her lips and Vander let out a breath he hadn't realized he was holding. "Why are you in here?" he asked, keeping his tone quiet in the hopes that she wouldn't hear the bite.

She shrugged one shoulder. "I wasn't sure if you'd want me to sleep in your room when you weren't there. And I was too tired to wait up for you. I can't stay awake for three days without needing sleep like some people."

Her mild sarcasm both surprised and amused him. She was a clever woman, his wife.

"Are you tired?" she asked as her fingers trailed from his hair, down his neck to rest on his shoulder.

"A little. Not so tired now that I'm in bed with you."

She raised a brow. "Why's that?"

He pulled her hips close to his and let her feel his erection against her lower belly. She shivered, causing a ripple of sensation to heat his blood further.

"Oh." She dropped her gaze, though, and said, "What happened? With the Selmorahn?"

He told her the story, skimming over some of the more brutal details of the interrogations and ended with their successful counterattack against the warship. "And you made all that possible."

"Me?"

"You got the Selmorahn out of the jungle alive. I'm sure you're responsible for the ease of interrogating them. Without you, a lot of lives could have been lost."

She shrugged, but a shy smile lifted her lips. "I'm just glad I could help."

Running a hand through the loose strands of hair near her cheek, he said, "Did it bother you? Using your song that way?"

"I helped save lives. How could that bother me?"

"But the Selmorahn will know about you now, if they hadn't already, and they'll realize what a threat you are."

"You think they'll still try to kill me?"

He nodded, surprised by the sharp jab of pain brought on by the thought of Sonia dying. "I won't let them," he promised before he realized what he was going to say. "Not like—" He cut himself off before making the comparison to Anya. He didn't want to think about failing Sonia the way he'd failed Anya.

"Thank you," she said, holding his gaze. "I won't let them either."

She fell silent and for a long moment, Vander just watched her. Emotions he couldn't read played across her face. Finally, he said, "You've been quiet since yesterday morning, even before the mission to the jungle."

She raised a brow, but her gaze was focused on his chin. "Have I?"

"Quieter than usual. Are you okay?"

Sonia nibbled the inside of her cheek. What could she tell him? She was upset because he still obviously loved Anya? The look in his eyes when he'd stared at the dead woman's picture had haunted Sonia all day. Every time she thought she'd pushed aside her hurt, she'd remember the expression of longing and tenderness that filled his face when he'd stared at Anya, and the pain would pierce her again. She knew her reaction was unwarranted. They hadn't been together long enough for her to expect his love. But she thought he at least cared for her.

Yet he hadn't put Anya's picture away. He'd left it on his desk, facing his chair.

She sighed and glanced up at the ceiling. Morning light was filtering in through a crack in the curtains, and where Vander had left the door to the bedroom open, more light slipped in from the living room.

"Sonia?"

His voice was quiet, his breath brushing hotly against her cheek. She shivered again. Despite her hurt feelings, she didn't want to give up hope. She'd wanted him for so long, loved him for so long, she had to make this work. From the beginning, she knew he'd need time to fall in love with her. But she wasn't sure how much longer her heart could take this, loving him so much, knowing he was still in love with someone else. Knowing he wasn't prepared to give up his former love yet.

When he touched her cheek and turned her toward him, she met his gaze. He was so handsome, so strong. She'd studied his face until she knew every detail, every plane. And still the reality of him lying next to her in bed took her breath away. The feel of his hot, naked skin made her pulse pound. He smelled of soap and some masculine spice that was unique to Vander. And despite the ache in her belly and heart, she wanted him.

"You never answered my question," he said.

His fingers moved across her jaw, cupping her cheek as he held her gaze. Could he see her heart in her eyes? "I'm fine," she said.

"Then why didn't you think I'd want you in my bed? Why sleep in here?"

How could she answer that? "Your bed felt empty without you," she said, not mentioning that it had also felt haunted by another woman's presence. She didn't even know if Vander had slept with Anya in that bed. In fact, according to the information she'd gathered on their relationship, they usually spent the night at Anya's small apartment. She was pretty sure Anya hadn't stayed the night in the palace, ever. But that didn't mean he hadn't taken her to his bed. And after seeing how Vander looked at Anya still, Sonia couldn't face crawling into that bed on her own.

"It looked empty without you," he murmured. "I've gotten used to seeing you there."

His quiet words touched that little spark of hope still valiantly pulsing in her heart. "So you wouldn't have minded?"

"Of course not." He scowled, then mumbled, "Was damn disappointing not to find you there."

For the first time since yesterday morning, she felt a genuine grin pull her cheeks up.

"Although, I have to admit, your bedroom is...warmer than mine. I can see why you'd prefer it in here."

"No. I love your room." When he raised a disbelieving brow, she relented. "Okay, it is warmer in here. But all you need is a few rugs on that cold floor and your room would be just as cozy."

"You have my permission to put down whatever rugs you like in there. So long as you're comfortable." He brushed his fingers into her hair, loosening the base of the braid. "I'm surprised you haven't already. You were talking about rugs the day after our wedding."

"You've kept me a little busy since then."

A slow, wicked smile touched his mouth. Cupping the back of her head, he pulled her closer. "How sleepy are you?" he asked as he studied her lips.

"Not as tired as you must be. I've slept a little."

The hand at her neck moved down her spine and across her hips. "Funny. I'm feeling revived." He cupped her bottom and pulled her tight against his cock. "And not really interested in sleeping at the moment."

Her breathing sped as heat seeped through her bloodstream. "You are feeling...up."

He chuckled and rolled her onto her back. Settling over her, he brushed her hair back from her cheeks. "So beautiful," he murmured. His gaze traveled from her face to the silky top of her nightgown where it covered her breasts. "But overdressed."

Sonia laughed as he stripped off her nightgown in record time. "Better?"

"Oh, definitely." He fingered her necklace and smiled. "I'm glad you put this back on." Then he shifted to the side and ran his palm down her stomach. "You removed the rubies."

"Before we left for the jungle," she said even as her voice hitched when his fingers dipped low. Warm moisture pooled between her legs and any hurt she'd been feeling was set aside. She wanted him. He wanted her. For the moment, that was enough.

"Probably a good idea," he murmured as his hand skimmed lower on her abdomen. "I love the color of your skin."

"Do you?"

He nodded. "So warm and rich." Running his hand back up her belly, he whispered. "So smooth." He leaned over and kissed her stomach, just above her navel. "And you taste so damn good."

His tongue swirled over her skin as he moved lower, pressing kisses across her stomach until his breath brushed her curls. He slid down the bed, pushing the blankets down as well so there was nothing in his way. When his lips skimmed low across her inner thigh, Sonia sucked in a sharp breath and moaned.

In the dim light, she watched him settle between her legs, but when his mouth closed over her pussy and his tongue flicked against her clit, she closed her eyes and dropped her head against the pillows. He licked and sucked until her body trembled and she could barely catch her breath. Her hips bucked with each swipe of his tongue.

He held her in a gentle grip that belied the surging heat in her blood. She let her thoughts go, let her worries and fears float away. For this moment, he was all hers. As the first tremors of climax shook her thighs and clenched her womb, she called his name. He responded by sucking harder, and she came with a loud groan.

As her body tingled and pulsed in the afterglow, Vander crawled up the bed and settled on top of her, kissing her lightly on her parted lips. He framed her face with his palms, holding her gaze for a long moment. The heat in his light eyes stole what little breath she had left. And again she saw emotion there. Emotion she couldn't quite name. But something more than passion and lust. Something that could develop and deepen. Something that made her heart pound with hope.

"Sonia," he whispered her name and slid inside her in the same moment.

And Sonia had never felt anything so exquisite. They'd made love so many times before. Yet something about the way he held her, cradled her as he stroked into her in a gentle, even rhythm made this feel new. Special. As if they were making love for the very first time. He kissed her cheeks, her lips, her temples. He whispered in her ear, telling her how good she felt, how much he loved being inside her. And she murmured back as her hips rose and fell to meet his, as her hands explored the strong, flexing muscles of his back and shoulders. She told him how much she wanted him, how he filled her, how she loved the feel and taste of him too. And when he held her gaze as she teetered on the edge of her second climax, the words "I love you" trembled on her lips. But her orgasm took her by surprise. She cried out as she came and closed her eyes while her body burst apart.

Moments later, she opened her eyes to watch as Vander's orgasm tensed his muscles, rolling through him with a power that stopped his breath for that single instant of ecstasy. And then slowly he settled over her, hugging her tight as he breathed against her cheek and kissed her temple. Even as she savored his weight and heat, she wondered what he might have done if she'd told him she loved him. He wouldn't return the sentiment yet. She understood it was too soon. But would he still be here in her bed, cuddling her close, petting and holding her with such tenderness?

He rolled to the side, pulling her with him and tugged a thin sheet up to cover their bodies. His heat kept her warm, even without the other blankets, so she snuggled closer, ducking her head beneath his chin.

"Sleep," he murmured. "You've had a long day."

"So have you," she pointed out.

Even without seeing him, she sensed his smile as he brushed his lips against her hair. "True. Which is why I intend to sleep now too."

She nodded and scooted as close to him as she could, wanting to absorb this moment into her very cells.

"I'm glad you agreed to this marriage, Sonia."

His voice was so quiet, she wasn't sure she heard him. She pulled back to look at his face, but his eyes were closed and his breathing evened as the rest of his muscles

relaxed. Her pulse kicked as she considered the implications of his words. It wasn't exactly a declaration of love, but he wasn't regretting their marriage. He was pleased to have her as his wife. In those quiet moments of dawn, he was grateful to have her lying beside him. Not Anya, not another woman, but Sonia.

She might not have his heart yet. But she had him. And for the first time since yesterday morning, Sonia could truly believe that one day he would love her.

## Chapter Nine

They slept most of the day and to Sonia's surprise, no one disturbed them. She expected Vander to be called away. They still had the Selmorahn prisoners to deal with. And though they'd averted the planned attack, she was sure the six enemy soldiers carried more useful information.

But when she woke and saw the bright light coming from the living room, she knew it must be well into the afternoon. Vander was still beside her, his arm thrown across his face as he slept, snoring softly. She grinned. He looked so male.

She brushed a gentle finger over his jaw, careful not to wake him, then crawled out of bed. He'd be hungry when he woke. He probably hadn't eaten yesterday even though he'd insisted she eat at least an energy bar before going into the jungle after the Selmorahn. Slipping into her robe—his robe, actually; she hadn't been able to give that up even when she couldn't bring herself to sleep in his bed alone—she made a quick stop in the bathroom, then crept out to the living room so she could order them some food. Using the internal house-link, she requested a meal big enough to feed four people, thinking Vander would need the energy. Once finished, she hunted up a clothing trunk that was still stacked in her living room and unearthed something to wear.

The loose turquoise trousers and purple tunic she slid into were typical of her wardrobe, casual and comfortable but with plenty of color. Once dressed, she sat by the huge window in her living room, unbraided her hair and pulled a brush through it as she stared out. Beyond her window was a courtyard where soldiers were running through weapons drills. She sighed. A view of the garden would have been too much to hope for. Beyond the courtyard, the palace wall blocked half the city view, but she could still see stretches of buildings and houses, parks and traffic. It was past time she got out into the city and explored her new home. Maybe tomorrow she'd get up early and take a tour.

She felt Vander's presence behind her even before his hands closed over her shoulders. He brushed her hair aside and placed a soft kiss on her neck.

"Good morning."

She glanced up in time to see him studying the day outside her window.

"Actually, good afternoon."

Grinning, she said, "I requested some food be brought up. I thought you'd be hungry."

His stomach chose that moment to rumble and he laughed in response. "There's your answer." With another soft kiss, this one dropped onto her shoulder, he said, "I'd



better get dressed then." He rubbed his cheek against her shoulder, catching the material of her tunic. "And shave," he joked. "Back in a few minutes."

She turned to watch him go, admiring his naked butt as he walked through the door between their apartments. She loved that he wasn't self-conscious about his body. So many stories of Callisean prudishness had been reported back to her, she'd worried he wouldn't feel comfortable walking around naked in front of her. Fortunately, she'd been wrong because she did so love watching him without the barrier of his clothing.

A knock sounded on her door before Vander had returned. Thinking it was the food, she hurried to answer. Instead of a member of the kitchen staff, however, Rico stood in the corridor holding the food tray. She raised her eyebrows and gestured him in. "What are you doing here? And why are you carrying our food?"

"I wanted to talk to you." He grinned over his shoulder as he set the tray down on a trunk near the three big chairs that were the extent of her living room furniture so far. "Where's Vander?"

"Getting dressed. Why do you have our food?"

"I intercepted your lunch on my way up and told the poor, overworked girl I'd take the tray the rest of the way."

"That was nice of you," she said, trying not to frown. Of all the siblings, Rico was the least likely to do a favor for the palace staff. But maybe she wasn't being fair to him. He was busy with his duty as the top-ranking negotiator on the planet. She'd hardly expect Vander to carry food trays either given his military responsibilities. And Rico had always been quite courteous to her. Courtesy toward the staff shouldn't surprise her. "What did you want to talk about?" she asked as she took a seat in the overstuffed chair closest to the food.

Rico followed suit, taking the seat nearest her. "I wanted to congratulate you on yesterday."

"Me? I wasn't the one who turned back the Selmorahn warship."

"But you were responsible for making sure we could get the information we needed to do that. My father can't say enough good things about his daughter-in-law. He keeps singing your praises – no pun intended – to anyone who will listen."

Sonia ducked her head. "He shouldn't. I really didn't do that much."

"He's not the only one. Those soldiers fortunate enough to be present when you brought the Selmorahn out of the jungle are regaling the entire citadel with stories of your song. I think most of them are half in love with you."

Sonia snorted. "Don't even joke about that. Not given my particular talent."

Rico raised his brows. "Why? They were safe inside the shelter of the ships. They just recognize a treasure when they see one."

She flicked a glance up and caught Rico's stare. The intensity in his light eyes set off warning bells. But an instant later, he looked normal again, smiling as if they were exchanging just so much friendly banter.

"My father considers you a great treasure as well," he continued casually. He reached forward and plucked a grape from the tray, plopping it into his mouth as he settled back into his seat. "You've won his admiration."

"As I keep saying, I'm just glad I could help."

"Be careful, though. You're likely to get sucked into Callisean politics whether you like it or not. Everyone will want to control that voice."

"I control my voice," she said firmly, holding his gaze. "And I'll willingly use it for the war effort. But I'm nobody's pawn."

He tilted his head to one side and opened his mouth to speak. Then he shook his head and closed his mouth, seemingly changing his mind. Finally, after a quiet moment, he said, "Of course. But your will alone won't stop others from trying to use you. My own father has made an art of using people. Just be careful."

Rico's warning reminded her of Vander's. "I'll be careful," she said, even as a little skitter of unease tickled her belly.

"I don't mean to scare you," he said. "It's just that Callisean politics are...complex. We all get used for one reason or another."

Sonia didn't miss the hint of bitterness that tinged his voice.

"But we all have a duty, don't we? A responsibility to serve our worlds."

She nodded agreement.

He took a deep breath. "I think Anya was the only person I've ever met who my father couldn't use," he murmured as if talking to himself. Then he shook his shoulders and met her gaze again. "But that's of no interest to you, I'm sure." He gestured to the tray. "Eat. You must be starving after sleeping away most of the day. Don't let me interrupt."

She took a warm roll from the tray and tore it in half, stuffing a soft bite into her mouth without tasting it. "Why couldn't Jared use Anya?" The question was out before she realized she was going to ask it. She was afraid to hear the explanation but still felt compelled to find out. And she didn't have to explain to Rico that she knew who Anya was. Even if she hadn't been studying Vander for years before the marriage was proposed, Rico had made sure she was aware of the existence of Vander's former lover during the negotiations on Ishar.

Rico pursed his lips. "She didn't have any useful talent that could be brought to the war effort. She was from a family with no ties or significant connections that my father considered important. She wasn't wealthy. And she was barren."

Hearing his last sentence, Sonia nearly choked on the chunk of bread she'd just swallowed. "Barren?"

"Yes." He sighed sadly. "She wanted children, of course, but she contracted a virus at a very young age that made her womb useless and her eggs no longer viable for reproduction. A cure for that particular virus was discovered only a year after she'd contracted the disease, but too late for Anya."

"That's very sad."

"By the time she and Vander met, she'd gotten used to the idea."

"Vander knew, obviously." Her voice sounded funny, even to her own ears.

"Oh yes. It never seemed to matter to him. My father, on the other hand, thought it a waste that Vander would give up children for a woman of no consequence."

Sonia found she disliked Jared more in that moment than she ever thought to, even as her heart was splintering under the weight of this new knowledge. Vander had been willing to sacrifice children to be with Anya. He'd been willing to suffer the displeasure of his father. Vander had loved Anya that much.

And once again, Sonia found herself unable to compete with a ghost. Strange that the fact that she could conceive children would somehow make her feel less than Anya. It should have given her an advantage. It didn't, though. Vander didn't need to sacrifice children to be with Sonia. He had barely given up anything to marry her, not even his world. Yet he'd loved Anya so much, he'd been willing to make sacrifices. Sonia could never expect him to make those same sacrifices for her and that shouldn't have mattered. It was ridiculous for this particular revelation to knock her so off balance. And yet she was.

"I never knew," she murmured when the silence stretched out a little too long. "But why would Anya's ability to have children have anything to do with Jared?"

Rico stared at her for a long, quiet moment before answering. "Do you honestly think my father would pass up the opportunity to create genetically enhanced grandchildren? All of us know our children won't be safe from his meddling. And he'll use them the way he's always used us. There's no avoiding it." He tilted his head and said, "Although Vander nearly did."

Sonia thought she might be ill. Vander had found a woman who could thwart his father's ambitions, and she'd been killed. Now Vander was married to a woman whose talent and ability to bear children played right into Jared's hands. How was Vander ever going to love her when she represented the very thing he'd been able to avoid with Anya?

"Rico."

Vander's voice made Sonia jump.

"You're scaring my wife," he said as he stepped into the room and loomed over his younger brother. "We haven't even discussed children yet."

Rico reclined back in his chair and stared up at Vander without a hint of remorse. "We were just talking. And I think Sonia should know that father will expect her to have her children...enhanced."

"No." Sonia stood because she couldn't stay seated any longer. The bread she'd been holding dropped unnoticed onto the food tray. "No," she said again. "My children will develop naturally. I won't allow any tampering."

Vander faced her, his expression unreadable. Rico gave her a look somewhere between pity and sympathy.

"No," she insisted. "And your father can take the matter up with me if he disagrees." She crossed her arms over her chest and met their gazes, defying them to argue.

As she watched, something moved through Vander's expression and his lips lifted in the faintest of smiles. He nodded slightly, a barely discernible tilt of his head. But she knew in that moment he approved her decision. The giddy relief that filled Sonia also surprised her. Until that instant, she hadn't realized how worried she was that she'd have to fight Vander on this point. If he wanted their children to develop without genetic tampering, then together they could ensure that happened.

She let out a small breath and dropped her defiant stance.

"Well," Rico said, rising to his feet. "I didn't mean to bring up a sore subject. I just wanted to congratulate Sonia on her success yesterday. Enjoy your meal."

Rico brushed past her on his way out, a gesture that could have been an accident if they'd been standing in another part of the living room where the boxes and trunks were crowded together. As it was, she suspected the contact was on purpose. She turned to watch him leave, frowning at the door when it closed behind him. For the life of her, she couldn't understand Rico's behavior toward her.

"I'm sorry if he offended you," Vander said quietly, breaking into her thoughts.

She faced him again. "He didn't offend me. Did you know Jared would want to tamper with any children we had?"

He nodded but held her gaze. "We hadn't even discussed children yet. I didn't know if you wanted them, if you could have them. Bringing up my father's...interest in the matter seemed premature."

"So he's expressed his interest in our children already?"

"That day in the garden."

He closed the space between them, took her hands in his and settled her back into her chair. He knelt on the floor in front of her, still holding her hands.

"He wants more Sirens," Vander said.

He kept his gaze locked with hers as he spoke the stark words. Sonia felt like she'd taken a blow to the stomach. "No," she breathed. "He can't... We can't allow..."

His grip tightened. "I know. I had no intention of letting him manipulate our children—if you wanted children. And when I found out multiple Sirens would be dangerous, I knew we couldn't allow him his way. But... But we haven't been married that long. I wanted to talk to you about whether or not you even wanted children before we started discussing my father's ambitions."

She could see his point. She'd been avoiding the subject of children because she wanted him to love her before they took steps toward having a family. "Do *you* want children?" she asked, curious now that the subject had come up.

He frowned and looked away. "I hadn't thought about it. Until my father brought it up." He met her gaze. "Do you?"

Nibbling her lip, she remained silent for a long moment. She did want children. But only with Vander. And not until he'd had a chance to fall in love with her. She wasn't about to tell him that, though. "Yes," she said after awhile. "I do. Someday. But not right away. I think we should... We should have time to get to know each other first."

His lips quirked. "I thought you already knew everything about me."

She couldn't help her quick grin. "But you don't know nearly enough about me yet."

He chuckled. "I intend to rectify that."

"You never answered my question."

"Children? I... I had resigned myself a long time ago to not having any. I hadn't considered our marriage would change that at all. I never... I didn't think we'd have the kind of marriage we have."

"Anya couldn't have kids." She said it starkly, trying not to let her pain creep into her voice.

"No." He took a breath.

She thought he might say more, but instead he shook his head and rose.

"You can have children?" he asked with his back to her.

"I can. As far as I know. It hasn't come up in the past."

He nodded, still not looking at her. Sonia swallowed the lump in her throat and watched him closely. His shoulders were stiff and his head bowed slightly. She'd give a lot to know what he was thinking. And yet, she wasn't sure she really wanted to know. Because if he was thinking about how much he missed Anya, she'd have to cry.

After the silence held for an uncomfortably long time, Vander faced her again and said, "We're probably being premature in this conversation anyway."

"Probably." But she noticed he still hadn't answered her question. Maybe he didn't want children. Or maybe he was just regretting that he'd have children with a woman who wasn't Anya.

"You must be hungry. Let's eat."

The thought of food made her stomach roll, but she ate because she didn't want Vander to know just how upset she was. He'd probably assume Rico's comments about Jared were the cause. And they were, partly. But it was her newfound knowledge of Anya that was poking holes in her heart.

"Will you keep questioning the prisoners?" she asked to change the subject. The silence that filled the room while they ate made her ears ring. She already knew he would, but she needed something, anything to discuss that didn't involve their future together.

"They're still being interrogated. Three of them were very cooperative yesterday."

She took a bite of bread and cheese, saying nothing.

"The other three... They seem almost normal."

His tone turned the statement into a question. "People react differently," she said after swallowing. "Some will show obvious signs of the thrall they're under. Others will hide it, seeming like themselves. For the most part. But if they aren't allowed access to me, they'll start to become agitated, violent, desperate."

"And if they are allowed access to you?" He picked up his cup of warm tea but held her gaze as he sipped.

"They'll be able to maintain the façade longer. Eventually, even that won't help and the obsession will break them."

He nodded. "Does that mean they'll tell me everything I want to know? Or does that mean they'll go crazy and be useless to me?"

She set her plate back on the food tray before answering. This part of the conversation wasn't making her feel much better than the earlier discussion of children. "First, they'll tell you everything. Then they'll go crazy. If I leave them too long, that is. I can still sing them out of their obsession. After a certain point, though, they'll be lost. Their reason will be permanently impaired and they'll be dangerous."

"Too dangerous to live?"

She shrugged, strangely reluctant to confirm his assumption. She didn't care if the Selmorahn were killed. They were the enemy, responsible for more deaths than she cared to think about. They'd kept Ishar and Callisea under siege for forty years now. She had no sympathy for them. But still, the thought of her song driving someone to their death made her a little queasy.

"How long?" Vander asked.

She didn't have to ask what he meant. "If you want them to stay sane, no more than five days. After that, I won't be able to release them."

"I'll make sure you have access to them day after tomorrow then. They're more useful to me alive and sane than dead."

She had to agree with that.

"Are the Callisean soldiers who were caught in your spell still in any danger? You sang them out of the obsession. Are they more vulnerable to your song now?"

She tilted her head to the side and watched him. No one had thought to ask her that before. Vander was a very smart man. "Yes, they're more vulnerable now. They'll be more susceptible to any of my songs, and affected more strongly."

"That's useful. And makes you even more dangerous."

She raised a brow. "All they have to do is avoid hearing me sing."

"I meant to the Selmorahn. Does anyone else know this part of your skill?"

"Just you," she murmured. "And the seer, of course."

"Then let's keep this between us. I don't want others to know any more about your talent than is necessary."

"Especially Jared?"

"I'm more worried about the Selmorahn." He leaned across the food tray and took her hands in his. "I have no doubt now that you can deal with my father."

That little compliment made her smile. Her smile fell away, though, when she said, "You're not more vulnerable to my voice now. The particular song I sang on our wedding night, it doesn't carry that same side effect." She squeezed his hand, wanting him to understand this part. She didn't want him to think she still had some sort of Siren control over him.

His lips lifted, a barely there half smile. "I wondered about that."

"Are you...?" She paused and turned her gaze toward the windows. "Did it make you mad that I sang that night?"

"No. Why would it?"

"I didn't want you to think...that the only reason..." She let out a frustrated breath and shook her head. "It doesn't matter. Outside of manipulating everyone's memories of the events, that song didn't leave any permanent effect. I just want to make sure you know that. You're safe. I didn't leave you, any of you, in a spell."

He nodded. "I believe you."

She allowed a tremulous smile to slip through as she relaxed. Funny, she was still worried about his reaction to her song that night. Worried that he might think his attraction to her was a lingering effect of her music. But if all she could count on at the moment was his physical attraction to her, she needed him to know that was real.

They fell silent for a long moment, Vander's large hand still covering hers. Then abruptly he stood. "Come with me. I want to show you something."

She followed him through the family wing into a section of the palace she hadn't been to before. He ushered her into a lift and requested the roof.

"The roof?" she asked, giving him a sideways glance.

He smiled and took her hand. "It's a surprise."

Dubious but intrigued, she watched the panel of lights over the lift doors as they reached the last colored line. When the doors parted, Vander led her out into the warm afternoon air. From this height, a cool breeze brushed over her cheeks.

The area appeared to be a landing pad for small shuttles, the kind of transport family members might use to travel easily between the city and the palace. It was ringed by a waist-high wall of white stone and lined with unpolished white marble. The area looked out across a section of the city toward green, tree-covered hills dotted with huge houses.

"What's this?" she asked, turning to stare at Vander.

"No one has used this balcony as a landing pad in years. It's too far away from most things to be convenient. I thought, if you wanted, we could turn it into a garden for you." He grinned. "No snakes. And you'd have some privacy."

For a very long moment, Sonia couldn't move. Then she murmured, "I don't know what to say. That's so thoughtful of you." She glanced around the empty space, picturing it filled with plants and flowers. "But... You said you wanted to move out of the palace. Wouldn't a private garden be a waste of time?"

"I won't be able to move us to our own home for several months. Maybe even a year, though I intended to be out sooner than that. I didn't want you to go without a garden for that long. And I was afraid my snake story would keep you from using the main gardens."

She smiled even as she felt tears pooling in her eyes. "I have to admit, I was having trouble with the idea of going back out into that garden. I'm not sure I could have fully relaxed."

He grimaced and pulled her into his arms. "I thought that might be the case. I shouldn't have mentioned snakes."

"I would have been really angry, though, if I'd discovered one myself without any warning."

Chuckling, he dropped a kiss onto the top of her head. "Then I don't regret telling you about them. But I do want you to have a place you'll be comfortable. This won't be quite the same. It'll be small, and more tile than soil and grass. But at least you'd have a green place to go and walk around barefoot without worry."

"Thank you," she murmured. The lump in her throat made it hard to say more, so she rose up on her toes to place a light kiss on his mouth.

His arms tightened around her, pressing her against the full length of him. And she deepened the kiss, telling him with her lips how grateful she was for his thoughtfulness.

When they finally broke from the kiss, he stared down into her eyes, his hands stroking up and down her spine. "I want you to be happy here, Sonia," he said.

"I am." Which was nothing less than the truth, despite her worries for their future. In that moment, she was the happiest woman alive because she was in the arms of the man she loved.



## Chapter Ten

Two days after Sonia and Vander's evening on the roof, in what would soon be Sonia's private garden, she went to the Selmorahn prisoners and sang them out of their obsession.

They reacted as she thought they would, with terror, confusion and an anger that made her flinch even though she couldn't regret her actions.

She watched through a two-way mirror, standing beside Vander while the Callisean guards subdued the prisoners. All six had been brought into the single interrogation room, a steel, gray, overly bright, empty space. When she'd been closed into the room with them, they'd been passive and eager to be near her. Now they were thrashing out at their guards, shouting in a Selmorahn dialect she didn't know. One of the men curled up in a corner and cried.

"Will they calm down?" Vander asked without taking his gaze from the activities in the other room.

"Eventually. They know what happened to them. What was done and what they said." She watched silently for another moment. "Can you understand what they're saying?"

"They're mostly cursing. And saying some uncomplimentary things about Calliseans."

"Maybe they should stick to their own territory, then," she muttered, "instead of trying to take over other people's homes."

He turned to stare at the side of her face. "I couldn't agree more."

She met his gaze and a silent understanding passed between them. The scene in the other room wasn't pretty. And the compassionate part of Sonia felt a little sick by what she'd had to do. But she would do it again to protect her world. And she'd do it to protect Vander's world too.

Without another word, he took her arm and led her back to their apartments.

They were stopped just outside their door by Jared. "Have you seen your brother?" he asked Vander.

Sonia acknowledged his nod of greeting, but other than that, Jared's full attention remained on Vander. He seemed preoccupied, not even trying to charm her, which was a first in an encounter with her father-in-law.

"Which brother?" Vander asked, his tone droll.

"Rico. I've been looking for him for the last two hours. We had a meeting this morning with an envoy from the E'lukim Senate."

That was news to Sonia. She hadn't realized the Consortium still sent envoys to Callisea. They were rarely honored with a personal visit from Consortium diplomats on Ishar. The most they ever got was a holo-conference when the Ishari government insisted on a meeting. The Senators from the central systems considered Ishar too distant and too insignificant (and, she suspected, too near Selmorahn territory) to bother with personal visits.

Vander scowled at the news. "Rico missed a meeting with a Senate emissary? That doesn't sound like him."

"I know. And I'm worried. He's been...distracted lately."

"If I see him, I'll tell him you're looking for him."

"Do." Jared walked off without a backward glance.

"Strange," Vander muttered.

"That Rico is missing?"

He nodded as he opened the door to his apartment.

"Could he be hurt or in trouble with one of those Selmorahn spies?"

Vander led her to the couch and sat down with her, frowning as he stared at nothing. "He's too clever for that. There's one thing Rico has always been good at and that's looking out for Rico."

"You don't like him very much. Do you?"

He lifted one shoulder in a tired shrug. "He's my brother. But we've never been particularly close. I don't dislike him. To be honest, I've never spent a lot of time with him. By the time he was old enough to be interesting, I was too busy running the military."

"Do you think he'll be okay?"

"He probably just found a woman. He was always the ladies man of the family. Charming. He takes after our father that way."

Sonia leaned close to Vander, her lips a breath from his. "I prefer your charm." The comment earned her one of his slow, sexy smiles, and Sonia's heartbeat thumped.

"I'm glad to hear that," he murmured.

When his lips settled against hers, his kiss was languorous and drugging, lulling her into a warm place where she didn't have to think about war, prisoners or even Vander's family. All she had to think about, all she could think about was him and the feel of his mouth on hers, the heat of his palm against her thigh, the scent and the taste of him. If she could just stay that way for the rest of her life, she'd be a happy woman.

"You can't stay for a little while, can you? Do they need you back right away?" She said the words against his neck as her hands sneaked up under his shirt. She loved the feel of his muscles against her palms and the way he sucked in a breath when she ran her fingernails across his skin.

"I don't have to get back yet." He pulled away enough to undo the buttons on his uniform jacket.

Sonia pushed the jacket down his arms then set to work on his shirt while he worked the ties holding her top together. What had started as a slow burn quickly turned to urgent need. She wanted him hot and hard and heavy on top of her. Immediately. Because she didn't want to think about anything else. She didn't want to think about the future. She didn't want to think about Anya. She didn't want to think period. She wanted to feel and taste and smell and soak him into her bones.

"Gods, Sonia, how do you do this to me?" he muttered as he kicked off his boots without lifting his mouth far from hers.

"I want you, Vander. Now. Please. I need you. So much." In their haste to remove clothes, Sonia thought she heard something rip, but she didn't care. So much had happened in the last few days. Emotions churned through her, feelings she couldn't separate. And she didn't way to try.

Her clothes had barely hit the floor before he was pressing her back into the couch cushions. "I should take you to the bed, I know, but I can't," he groaned. "Sonia."

And in a single thrust he entered her, fast and hard, his cock throbbing against the walls of her passage, filling her perfectly. She arched up to meet his thrust, her head thrown back as she savored every inch of him, every ounce of friction created between their bodies. Her mouth found his, desperate to swallow his groans. Her hands flew across his skin, impatient to touch him everywhere all at once. And she moaned as he did the same, driving her to desperation as he gripped her hips, her waist, cupped her breasts. And it still wasn't enough. She wanted more. All.

Desire burned in her blood. So fast, so sudden and so needed. She couldn't have slowed down if she wanted to. The rough hair of his groin rubbed against her swollen clit even as the head of his cock pounded against the upper wall of her pussy. The two sensations were almost too intense, driving her to orgasm too fast. But she didn't care. She wanted this, wanted him so much nothing else mattered. "Vander."

He kissed her again and Sonia's body broke, splintered apart, shattering and convulsing. Vander swallowed her cries before ripping his mouth from hers and slamming one last time into her as he came.

He cursed under his breath as he settled slowly on top of her, and Sonia felt a giggle bubble up in her throat.

"What's so funny?" he muttered, his face buried against her neck.

His disgruntled tone made her laugh harder. "I'm just happy," she said through her smile.

He hugged her. "Me too." Lifting his head just enough to meet her gaze, he said, "I don't know what you do to me, why I need you so much or so often."

She started to shake her head, denying that she did anything to him, but he touched his lips to hers to silence her. When he lifted his mouth, he murmured, "I don't care what you've done to me either. I'm just glad you're mine."

Sonia hugged him to hide the tears starting to fill her eyes. "I am yours," she whispered, though she wasn't sure he could hear her. Inside, her heart sang with hope. Soon. He might not love her yet, but he would soon. She could feel it.

They lay on the couch until Vander finally groaned and sat up, his hands still lingering on her. "I have to go back. I hadn't intended to stay so long."

"Do you mind that I kept you here?"

He chuckled. "Did it seem liked I minded?"

"No." She grinned. "I kind of thought you were enjoying yourself."

"Thoroughly." He leaned over and kissed her quickly before sitting up again. "And to be honest, I'd rather stay here. But I have a meeting with the generals in less than half an hour. I don't think they'd appreciate me being late because I had to make love to my wife. They'd be jealous, but they wouldn't be pleased."

Laughing, she dragged herself upright. "Guess that means I should get dressed too."

"You're going to need a new shirt. Sorry."

He handed her the remains of her bright blue tunic. "So that's what ripped. I wasn't sure."

"Not mad at me?"

She snorted and stood to retrieve her trousers and underwear. "I'll just make you buy me another."

"Deal."

He dressed quickly, but his gaze stayed on Sonia as he did, and the feel of his stare warmed her skin. Before she'd had a chance to do more than pull on her panties, he'd donned his uniform pants and shirt and was shrugging on his jacket. He was definitely in a hurry now. But she didn't feel even a little guilty.

She was standing, debating whether or not to put on her trousers or take a shower before getting fully dressed when Vander pulled her close. Sonia wanted to purr at the sinfully sexy feel of being naked in his arms while he was dressed. The material of his uniform rubbed against her still-tingling nerves. And she realized with no little embarrassment that she could easily fuck him again. His meeting be damned.

He cupped her ass in both his hands and squeezed. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

She nodded, forcing herself not to beg him to stay.

"I have a meeting," he said, his voice hoarse.

"You've said. In less than half an hour."

"I'll come back right after."

"Okay."

"Don't go anywhere."

"I won't."

"I'll be back as soon as the meeting ends."

She smiled. "Okay."

He kissed her, his mouth thrillingly demanding. Then he let her go so abruptly she had to step back to balance herself.

"Don't go anywhere."

"I won't." She laughed. "You're going to be late."

"I know." With a grunt of annoyance, he stalked past her to the door. He paused and looked at her over his shoulder. "Just...be here when I get back."

She grinned. "I will."

He gave her one quick nod and left the room, and Sonia stopped fighting the giddy giggle tickling her throat. *Vati* but she loved him. And she loved that he wanted her so much.

Feeling ridiculously pleased, she went to her bedroom to shower and dig up a new shirt. She was still grinning ten minutes later as she pulled on a pair of loose orange trousers and a thigh-length yellow tunic.

Pausing in the middle of her living room, she studied the small pile of rugs still rolled up against one wall. She'd been meaning to set some of them down in Vander's room but somehow hadn't had the time to yet. Now seemed as good a time as any. She had several lovely rugs that would really suit his bedroom. She could surprise him with the splashes of color, making his room warmer and cozier, the way he wanted her to.

She was on her way back to his apartment to make sure everything would fit when someone knocked at her door. Frowning, she changed directions. She wasn't expecting anyone this afternoon.

Opening the door, she found Rico waiting in the hall, a pleasant grin on his face and a disruptor in his hand.

"Rico." She swallowed as her gaze darted down to the gun. "Your father's looking for you." She flicked another look at the disruptor. "Is there a problem?"

He pointed his weapon at her chest. "Don't pretend you don't understand why I'm here."

Her heart pounded hard against her ribs. His voice sounded different, choked and hard. But his gaze was intent. And avarice gleamed in his blue eyes. She'd seen that look before. Most recently on the faces of the Selmorahn prisoners. But Rico hadn't even been there in the jungle. How...? "Why are you pointing a disruptor at me?" she asked as calmly as her racing pulse allowed.

This wasn't possible. She'd never sang to him in private, she'd never cast a spell that she didn't immediately break. Except for her wedding night, Rico had never heard her sing. He hadn't been in the jungle or among the Calliseans accidentally caught in her song. There was never a time when he could have been caught in her spell. Unless...

She sucked in a breath. "You spied on me. When you came with your father to Ishar for the negotiations." It was the only explanation. The only time when he could have

heard her singing, practicing when she thought she was alone and safe from hurting anyone.

"You were in your gardens," he said, his voice deep and hoarse. "Father didn't believe the admiral's story. I had to see for myself. You were singing for me."

She shook her head and tried to back away. He grabbed her arm and held the disruptor to her throat. "Don't fight it, my love. You've known from the beginning this moment would come. We're meant to be together. Everything will be perfect."

\* \* \* \* \*

Vander cursed as he stepped back into his apartment. Sonia had him so tied up in knots, he'd forgotten his blasted link. He was going to be late for his meeting now. Fuck it, the generals would just have to wait. And if he happened to come across Sonia still only half dressed, the generals might have to wait a while longer.

He hadn't anticipated how distracting a wife could be. And maybe most wives weren't, but all he seemed to think about these days was Sonia and getting inside her. Hells, he'd only just made love to her and he wanted her again already.

Voices from her apartment stopped him halfway across the room and he frowned. Who would she be talking to? The other voice was male and a completely irrational jealousy caught at his throat. It was probably just a member of the staff. But still...

On silent feet, he crossed to the open door between their suites. When he heard his brother's voice, his frown deepened. Where had Rico been for the last few hours? And why had he come to see Sonia? The last thing Vander wanted was Rico spending time alone with his wife. But more importantly, his brother had missed an important meeting this morning, which meant something else was wrong. So why was he here with Sonia instead of in the military wing meeting with their father?

Then Vander heard the words. "Don't fight it, my love."

His fists clenched until his nails bit into his palms. But when he heard Sonia's voice, his anger morphed to terror.

"Rico, please. You don't know what you're doing. Please move the disruptor."

Without thought, Vander drew his weapon and swung through the door into her living room. "Rico!" he roared, his voice barely recognizable. The sight of Sonia with a weapon pushed against the pulse in her neck made him sick to his stomach. "Let her go. Now."

"Vander," Sonia held up her hand, "he doesn't know what he's doing."

Rico smiled over her shoulder, his gaze on Vander's. "Yes I do. I'm taking what should have been mine all along. What do you care about a wife? Since Anya died, you've been a waste of space outside the war room. And even with your vaunted skills, you never saw this coming, did you?" He backed out the door, one arm wrapped around Sonia's waist, the other holding the disruptor firmly against her throat.

Vander couldn't shoot without killing his wife, so he followed, his weapon trained on the two. "You're my brother," he said, more to keep Rico talking. There was a strange light in the younger man's eyes, an unhealthy glow that added to the oily sickness in Vander's gut.

"And barely worth your notice until now," Rico snarled. "But I couldn't care less about that. My future is all arranged." He pressed a kiss against Sonia's cheek.

She flinched, her lip lifting in disgust, and Vander's hand clenched around the cold metal of his weapon. "Let her go, Rico. Your fight is with me."

Rico laughed. "No, it's not. You don't even matter anymore."

"Sonia, sing." Vander needed Rico to move his disrupter away from her. If she sang, she could make him drop the weapon. He knew he'd be caught in her spell too, but in that moment, he didn't care. The sight of that gun against her throat was pure torture. He *needed* her safe.

But she shook her head. "No. Vander, I can't. Not with you here. I'll have to—"

"She only sings for me, now," Rico interrupted with a snarl. "She's mine. All of her."

"Sing for him, Sonia."

"She'll sing when I tell her to." Rico spoke even as Sonia shook her head again. "For me and only me. You don't get to hear her voice anymore, Vander."

Vander watched in horror as the disrupter pressed further into her skin, making her tilt her head to the side to ease the pressure. "Sonia..."

"No! You'll be caught too."

"I don't care. Sing."

"You don't understand—"

"He never has," Rico broke in again. "But I do. I understand you well, my love. Don't worry. We'll be together very soon." He reached an airlock that led to a loading bay. The bay provided easy access for the palace staff to move food, laundry and personnel into the family wing. Without moving the disruptor from Sonia's throat, Rico reached back and opened the inner seal.

"Rico," Vander warned, but the man slipped inside the bay and closed the door. Vander charged forward and tried the panel, but his brother had locked him out.

Through a view hatch, he could see Rico talking to Sonia. She shook her head, but her eyes were wide and he could see her terror as she met his gaze through the clear screen. The rear bay door was still closed and no ship hovered outside. But Vander knew Rico had an escape plan. He reached up to his ear to press his link and realized he still didn't have it. He'd left it behind in the room again. Cursing, he slapped on the communicator between the corridor and the bay.

"Let her go, Rico."

"No. I've earned her. They've promised me I can keep her. And when you fall, I'll return with my new bride to rule this world. They've promised."

"They?" But he already knew who *they* were. Vander felt bile rise in his throat. His brother. His own flesh and blood had struck a deal with the Selmorahn. "Please," he said, barely able to breathe past his rage and the betrayal eating at his insides. "Let Sonia go. Take me if you must."

"No!" Sonia's shout was clear through the link.

Rico jerked her against him, silencing her. "I don't need you," he said, though his gaze stayed on the side of Sonia's face. "She's all I want."

Sonia met Vander's gaze and the look of sorrow in her dark eyes shattered his control. "Open this door, Rico!" He pounded his fists against the unforgiving metal to no avail. He knew it would be useless to try gunfire to open the lock because *he'd* made sure the barriers would withstand multiple shots from handheld weapons. He'd need a laser cannon to slice through quickly enough to help his wife. The knowledge didn't stop him from trying, though. All three shots fizzled around the door's seal but didn't budge the lock. He didn't dare try to take out the hatch because, even if he managed to break through, he might hit Sonia. Cursing, he fired at the door once more, then punched the wall next to it.

When he looked through the hatch again, his muscles flexed against his helplessness. "Sonia..."

She mouthed the words, "I'm sorry."

He shook his head. This was his fault, not hers.

Then she whispered, "Stop trying to get in." And she started to sing.

Through the link, her voice sounded beautiful, haunting, the power of her song enough to break hearts. But it was only music. There was no magic, no spell, no lure to the melody.

Rico heard something else. He jerked backward, letting Sonia go, and his weapon dropped with a clatter to the ground. He mouthed something Vander couldn't hear then dropped to his knees. His eyes widened and his pupils dilated. Sonia faced him, continuing that haunting song even as Rico began to make a high-pitched keening noise. He threw his head back, closed his eyes and screamed. Sonia still sang.

Abruptly, the screaming stopped and Rico dropped to the floor, his body racked by spasms. Finally, he fell still. So did Sonia.

She remained motionless, her head bowed for long moments. When she turned, tears streaked down her cheeks. As soon as she'd managed to get the bay door open, he pulled her into his arms.

"I'm sorry," she sobbed against his shoulder.

"No. Never apologize for doing what you had to do."

"I had to. He was too far gone. And the Selmorahn... But it was my fault. I didn't see, I never thought..."

"Shh," he soothed, rubbing a hand up and down her spine. "It's not your fault."

"You don't understand."



She looked up, met his gaze, and the pain in her eyes nearly brought him to his knees.

"He heard one of my songs. I didn't know. He spied on me back on Ishar. But the song he heard... There was nothing I could do. I couldn't sing him out of it. Too much time has passed. And the only song that would work on him now was the one I just sang. I didn't have a choice."

"That's still not your fault." He pushed her hair away from her face, then cupped her cheeks and tilted her face so that she couldn't turn away from his gaze. "He spied on you when he shouldn't have. He made a deal with the Selmorahn."

She nodded, sniffing. "I know. Which is why I sang." She made a vague gesture toward the loading bay without looking at Rico's crumpled form.

He glanced at the inert body of his youngest brother. "Is he dead?"

She shook her head. "Just...damaged." Her voice broke.

Vander pulled her close again. She buried her face against his shoulder, and her tears wet his neck. "Is that why you wouldn't sing before going into the bay?"

"I had to use that song," she murmured. "And it would have damaged you too. I told you I would never do that. Not even to protect myself."

"I know. But I would have accepted the outcome."

"I'd done enough damage already, Vander. I couldn't hurt you too. I would die first."

The thought sent another shock of fear through his already revved up system. "Your death would have hurt me a lot more than your song ever could."

A soft sob broke from her and her body trembled against his. "You wouldn't have even been in that position if not for my mistake with Rico."

"It wasn't your fault, Sonia."

"He only did this because he was under the spell of my song."

"But he brought that on himself."

"How can you say that? He couldn't have known what would happen when he came to my garden."

"And you couldn't have guessed he'd be there." He stroked a hand up and down her spine. "If you had known, would you have sung him out?"

She rubbed her head against his cheek. "Of course."

"Then it can't be your fault."

"But I should have known!" she wailed. "I should have seen."

"You barely knew Rico. How would you know if he was acting wrong? He's my brother. I should have known. I should have seen."

She started to say something, but he squeezed her in a firm hug and said, "What's done is done. It's over now. Come on. I'll take you back to the room, then I'll get someone to help with him."

He started to pull her away from the bay, but the sound of the outer hatch clanking open stopped him in his tracks. Pushing Sonia against the corridor wall, he held himself just beyond the bay door, waiting. A second later, a warm outside breeze filtered into the corridor. He heard two voices and the sound of a low atmosphere craft. The language the two newcomers spoke was a Selmorahn dialect.

Vander put a finger across his lips for silence, and Sonia nodded. The two were speaking the Selmorahn trade language, which he was fluent in, and what he heard made his blood chill.

"She can't be far if that one is here. There's been no disrupter fire."

"We have to find her. We can't lose this chance to kill her."

Vander's hand flexed on his weapon. To Sonia, he mouthed, "Sing?" Her eyes widened and she shook her head violently. Her panic tore at his heart. After what she'd just had to do, and the choice she'd had to make, he couldn't blame her. Touching her hand, he mouthed, "Stay here."

She grabbed his wrist, her eyes huge as she tried to keep him from going alone. "No," she mouthed. "Call help."

"No time." Selmorahn were in his home, threatening his wife. And there was no one to stop them infiltrating the house and killing Sonia if he didn't act now.

He touched a fingertip to his lips then placed his finger against her mouth, a silent kiss. Then he swung through the inner bay door.

## Chapter Eleven

Sonia barely held back a scream as the sound of weapon's fire screeched through the corridor. A male shout followed by a cry of pain had her gasping as panic squeezed her chest. She didn't even have a weapon of her own to help Vander.

She chanced a glance around the door frame, just in time to see her husband take a hit in the arm. The impact sent him stumbling backward and the Selmorahn aimed his gun to fire again.

"No!" The shout escaped before she could control it. A second later a disruptor bolt arced toward her. She barely ducked back in time to avoid being shot herself. The bolt hissed through the corridor and hit the wall opposite.

Ducking low to avoid another shot, she snuck another look around the door. Vander fired two well-aimed bolts, hitting the enemy square in the chest. The man dropped backward, his weapon falling to the metal floor of the bay with a clang.

She didn't wait another second before charging into the room to check on Vander's injury. He turned toward her, frowning, and Sonia noticed the second man for the first time. He was still moving.

And he was still armed.

She opened her mouth to shout a warning, but the enemy got a shot off before she could speak. In the same instant as she realized the Selmorahn had fired, a heavy weight sent her sprawling to the ground. Before she could reconcile the weight covering her, she heard another three shots fired.

Then the bay fell silent.

For long moments, Sonia remained frozen in place listening for any hint that the two Selmorahn were still alive. She could barely breathe, but it took her a moment to realize more than fear was constricting her lungs. "Vander?" Though his body covered hers completely, his face was turned toward the second Selmorahn. He was so still and quiet, another tendril of fear snaked through her blood. Touching his shoulder she said, "Vander, please, where are you hurt? Your arm..."

Finally, he turned to face her. His movement calmed her panic, but when she looked into his eyes, there was a coldness in the blue depths, a predator's gaze, distant and calculating. He stared at her with that expression for a heartbeat and Sonia could swear he looked right through her. Then he blinked and the man she knew so well reemerged.

"You weren't shot?" He set his disruptor down, still within easy reach, to touch her cheek.

"No. I don't think so. I can't feel much right now though."

"Why? What's wrong?"

The panic in his voice might have made her smile if she weren't still so terrified. "You weigh a lot," she said.

"Oh." He eased off her carefully. "Sorry."

"You just saved my life and risked your own to do it. Don't you dare apologize to me." As he sat back, she got a good look at the wound on his arm for the first time. Launching up, she took hold of his wrist to keep him from hiding his injury from her scrutiny. "That doesn't look good."

"It looks worse than it is," he assured her.

"Well it looks awful." Without thought, she stripped off her tunic and used it as a crude bandage to staunch the flow of blood. "Are you hurt anywhere else? When you knocked me down, did you take a second hit?" Even as she asked, she scanned his back, shoulders and head for more blood.

"Just the arm wound."

She glanced at the Selmorahns. "They're dead?"

He nodded. "Fortunately there were only two."

Sonia shuddered as she tied off the bandage. "Two was enough. How did they get past the palace security?"

"Rico probably gave them access codes."

"I'm surprised they didn't bring more men." She was grateful beyond thought that they hadn't, but she was still surprised.

"Anything larger than that small transport and the palace security would have been alerted."

She glanced quickly at the ship still hovering just beyond the bay's outer door. It was large enough to carry four people at the most. "Since they intended to kill me, I'm surprised they didn't fill the transport with their own men."

Vander gripped her shoulder and forced her gaze back to his. "If there'd been four, I would have killed all four before letting them get anywhere near you."

She stroked his cheek, too touched and terrified to say anything. Thoughts of what might have been would haunt her, she was sure.

"You weren't hurt?" He glanced over her body. "When the shot went out into the corridor..."

"It missed. And I'm not sorry I distracted the Selmorahn either. He would have killed you."

He shook his head, in resignation or anger she couldn't tell. Then he sighed. "We need to get this mess cleaned up. Come on."

He rose to his feet and Sonia scrambled up to catch him if he fell. But he seemed steadier than she was—the adrenaline still coursing through her system left her knees wobbly. Vander stood firmly, placing a hand against the small of her back as she

regained her own balance. Grateful he wasn't more seriously injured, she let him wrap his good arm around her shoulders as they left the bay.

But as they walked down the corridor, she felt his big body waver. The blood loss was finally taking its toll. She tucked her arm around his waist and supported as much of his weight as she could. "You need a doctor."

"Soon. But I need to call in palace security first. And you need a shirt."

She glanced down at her torso. She was wearing a bra which covered her sufficiently, probably more than the top of her wedding dress had. "My shirt can wait. You need help." When he opened his mouth to protest, she squeezed his waist. "Don't argue. I'm not doing anything until I know your injury is being tended." The fact that he was showing her any weakness at all meant his injury was a lot worse than he wanted to let on.

He scowled. "I'm more concerned with my soldiers seeing you half-dressed. I thought we decided I was the only one who got to see you naked anymore."

"I'm not naked. And besides, if the doctor gets here first, we did agree a doctor seeing me naked was okay."

"Better be a woman doctor," he muttered.

Despite her worry, Sonia felt a chuckle bubbling close to escape as they limped up to the nearest internal communications board. Shaking her head, she swatted his hand away from the consol and contacted the medical wing first to ensure a doctor reached them immediately.

When she finished, he raised a brow. "Satisfied?"

"Not yet."

"Will you at least get dressed now?"

"After you see the doctor." She fingered the remains of her tunic, careful not to touch the wound. Blood was already seeping through the material. "I hate that you were shot."

"It will heal. I've had worse."

She grunted in response, not comforted at all by his comment.

He touched her cheek with his fingers. "I'll be fine."

"Well you're stuck with me as nurse until you are."

A half smile lifted his lips. "I've been threatened with worse too. In fact, I think I might like being nursed by you."

She tried not to smile, but the wicked glint in his eyes, despite the pain he must feel, drew a reluctant smirk.

"That's better," he said and leaned in to brush a soft kiss against her mouth.

"You worried me," she said, studying his much-loved face.

"You worried me too."

"Let's try to avoid this in the future."

"Definitely." He tucked a few wisps of hair behind her ear, holding her gaze for a long moment. Then he turned to the communications board to hail the security office.

\* \* \* \* \*

Six weeks passed before Sonia stopped having nightmares. In her dreams, Vander's wound had been fatal and the two Selmorahn were ten, twenty, sometimes too many to count. They poured into the palace and slaughtered everyone in front of Sonia's eyes, saving her for last. All the dying Calliseans blamed her with their final breath. Her fault, for singing to Rico. She brought this to them. She destroyed them all with her song.

But in reality, when Rico's treachery was revealed, no one blamed Sonia for the attack or what happened to Rico. Jared even went out of his way to reassure her that she had done the right thing, protecting herself. He was quieter toward her now, though. Still charming, but less...pushy. And she wasn't sure if it was fear, wariness or simply mourning for his son, now kept in a comfortable but secure hospital cell, which kept him careful around her.

Jared's change of attitude did give her one less thing to worry about. Her greatest concern was Vander's wound. She tended to him throughout the weeks of recovery, making sure his bandage was changed on time, his medication was administered properly and he kept his appointments with the doctor for deep tissue repair.

Despite his soft words after she'd sung to Rico and those desperate moments after he'd killed the two Selmorahn, she'd still expected him to blame her for Rico's behavior. She blamed herself. But he remained insistent that she'd done what she had to do. And after several weeks, she finally allowed herself to believe him.

Sonia woke from her fourth dreamless night in a row and rolled over to smile at Vander, still sleeping soundly beside her. Something had changed between them in the last few weeks, something for the good. There were emotions there before—she knew he'd felt something for her. But while his wound healed and her soul mended, they'd grown even closer, spending as much time together as his work allowed. If not for the nightmares, Sonia would have relished going to bed each night because Vander held her with such tenderness and care.

He'd come in late the night before, and she'd already been asleep. As she studied the handsome planes of his sleeping face, she anticipated his eyes opening, heat filling them as he smiled. They'd made love often since his arm healed. But it never seemed to be enough. Just a look or a touch and she'd be eager, even desperate for him. And he'd been as eager for her.

Since they hadn't made love the night before, she expected him to wake with the same craving that was even now warming her body in anticipation of his touch. But when he blinked his eyes open, instead of smiling, his expression was serious and thoughtful.

He reached up and touched her chin. "No nightmares last night."

He was stating, not asking. She raised her brows. "How can you tell?"

"There aren't any circles under your eyes." His fingers glided softly over her cheekbone, then across her temple. "And no tension lines here." His fingertips smoothed her brow. "Or here."

She nodded and smiled. "Very observant. I slept well. And you?"

"Good." He let out a deep breath, then dropped his hand. "I have an early meeting this morning."

He started to roll away but she stopped him with a hand on his shoulder. "Are you all right? Is your arm...?"

"I'm fine." He turned so she could see the fully healed skin where his injury had been.

"Is anything else wrong?" She couldn't say why, but there was a distance between them that hadn't been there in the last few weeks. Something in his eyes...

He leaned over and placed a heartbreakingly tender kiss on her lips. "Just a lot on my mind this morning."

"Can I help?"

He shook his head, kissed her again, then rolled out of bed. "Have dinner with me tonight. I'll be back early."

She frowned a little at the request. They had dinner together almost every night. Why bother making a special effort? Maybe because he hadn't joined her for dinner the night before?

"Okay," she said, because she wasn't sure how else to respond. "Just let me know what time to expect you."

He nodded and turned toward the bathroom.

"Are you sure you're okay?" she called out. She sat up in bed, pulling the sheets up with her to cover her naked breasts. She suddenly felt shy in his presence.

He glanced back, finally smiling. But the expression looked forced. "I'm fine." Then he disappeared into the bathroom, closing the door behind him. Leaving Sonia with a niggling sense of unease.

That evening, when he didn't arrive back to their rooms at the arranged time, her vague sense of unease turned into full-blown worry. He'd mentioned leaving the palace for dinner but hadn't said where they'd be going. And when she tried his link, he had it off.

An hour after he was supposed to meet her, she gave up waiting and went looking for him.

When she found him, she wished she'd stayed away.

He stood in a small holo-room, staring at the image of a petite, beautiful, blonde woman. Sonia felt her heart squeeze tight. Anya looked lovelier than she did in the picture in his office. She was smiling in the holo-image, just as she'd been in the picture. And Vander was staring at the image with such longing, Sonia thought her heart might

shatter right then and there. As she watched him watching Anya, he reached out and touched the hologram's cheek with the tips of his fingers.

Sonia felt her throat close. After everything she and Vander had shared, everything they'd been through, he was still in love with Anya. And from the look in his eyes as he touched Anya's face, his feelings weren't going to change any time soon.

A part of Sonia's soul cracked. She loved him so much, she could barely contain it. Now more than ever. How could she stand loving him this much while he loved another woman? How could she live with him knowing he would never be fully hers?

She cleared her throat, though it took all her willpower not to slink away.

"Yes?" he said.

He never looked away from the hologram and his voice was quiet and indifferent. Sonia's heart shriveled. "I was worried about you," she murmured. Speaking past the tightness in her throat was almost impossible.

Vander nodded but stayed silent.

"But you're fine, so I'll leave you..." Sucking in a breath, she struggled to keep the tears gathering in her eyes from falling down her cheek.

"I'm sorry I missed dinner," he said over his shoulder. "Tomorrow night?"

She nodded even though he wasn't looking at her.

After another long, protracted silence, he said, "I'll be to bed soon."

But his attention was still on Anya, and Sonia felt the hot tears escape down her cheeks. He hadn't glanced away long enough to acknowledge her presence. And he didn't look as if he planned to move from that spot for some time. She stared at him for a few heartbeats longer, willing him to give her a sign, any sign that he would be able to let Anya go one day. All Sonia needed was one little hint that he would love her someday. But he never turned away from Anya.

"Sleep well," she murmured finally. Then she walked very slowly back to her room.

\* \* \* \* \*

Vander returned to his apartment later than he'd anticipated. He'd been called to a late meeting with William and his father that had run too long. Probably good he'd cancelled dinner with Sonia since he'd have had to leave her to go to the meeting anyway. But the grand plan he'd had for dinner had fallen through an hour before he was supposed to meet her. He'd intended to take her to the roof garden he'd had made for her, so they could have dinner there. The conversion from landing pad to garden had been completed only the day before and he was anxious for Sonia to see it. But a security issue arose, making it unsafe to dine on the terrace. Not impossible—they could have risked it—but Vander shuddered at just the idea of placing Sonia in any more danger.

He thought his life would end when he saw Rico holding a disrupter to her throat. And when she was almost shot by the Selmorahn soldiers, he knew his heart froze for



an instant. If she'd been killed... He didn't think he could survive it. But he'd only just realized this last night when he'd come home late to find her sleeping in his bed. He stared at her from the doorway and realized, with no little surprise, that he loved her. Desperately. An all consuming emotion that would probably kill him one day.

The realization shook him to the core. He'd never expected to lust after his arranged wife, nonetheless love her. And when he'd thought her life might be in danger if he went through with his dinner plans, he'd known, deep in his soul, that he couldn't continue without Sonia in his life.

With that truth came the knowledge that he had to say goodbye to Anya. Finally. Fully. After staring at her hologram for longer than he could remember, he'd been able to let her go knowing she would have approved of Sonia.

Once he'd finished his goodbyes, he'd intended to return to his wife and explain his strange mood. It wasn't every day a man realized he'd married the true love of his life when he hadn't been looking. He needed to tell Sonia how he felt, now that he felt ready.

But then he'd been called to that damn meeting. He forced himself to pay attention to his duty, but he'd been impatient to get back to his wife. When he opened the door to his apartment, though, the living room was dim. Sighing, he realized she'd probably gone to bed. It was late. The meeting had taken too long.

He started toward his bedroom, smiling slightly as he considered waking her. She wouldn't mind. He knew her well enough now to know she'd welcome him. And that made him grin. He knew so much more about her now. Enough to realize he wanted to know more, everything, anything. He loved her. Tonight he would tell her. And then he'd show her.

Anticipating the showing, he nearly missed an unexpected change in the room. He glanced around and realized the door between their apartments was closed. That door had been open since their wedding night. Scowling, he stalked into her apartment without announcing himself. A flash of the last time he'd gone into her rooms looking for her made his gut clench with fear. Then she came out of the bedroom carrying a suitcase. She glanced up and sucked in a breath.

After a moment, she dropped her gaze and carried the suitcase to the door.

"I wasn't expecting to see you tonight," she said without looking at him.

"I was called into a meeting. I thought you'd be in bed."

She didn't answer as she turned back toward her bedroom.

"What are you doing?" he asked, holding himself very still.

"There's an Ishari cargo ship docked in the city. They've agreed to give me a lift home."

A band around his chest tightened painfully. "Has something happened? Your family?"

"No."

"Then why are you leaving?"

"The treaty will stay in place. I'll make sure my father upholds the conditions. I won't try to end the marriage."

"Why would you want to end our marriage?" Anger made his muscles tight. He didn't understand what she was talking about. But the fact that she'd intended to leave him, maybe without even telling him, had him so furious he could barely breathe. Especially after he'd fallen in love with her. Why the hells was she doing this?

Sighing, she pulled off her ruby and diamond necklace. "You can have this back. It's not right for me to keep it now."

She'd barely had that necklace off since their wedding. "I bought it for you."

She faced him, her expression hard. "*You* bought it for me? Did you pick it out yourself? Did you ask Nina my favorite stones then have the jeweler make a necklace just for me, one you knew I'd love?" She paused and her voice dropped. "Or did you send Rico to find something suitable and expensive for the woman you hadn't even troubled to find out about?"

He didn't answer, he couldn't because she was right. But he didn't understand why she was bringing this up now. She let loose a harsh snort. Dropping the necklace on a trunk near her trio of chairs, she turned toward the bedroom.

"We're married. You can't leave." His voice sounded strange to his own ears, distant and hollow.

She paused, her back to him. In a shaky, tired-sounding voice, she said, "I tried, Vander. I tried to be content with this arrangement. To know you might never really... You might never see me as more than a convenience—"

"Is that what you think?" He spoke so low he was surprised she could hear him. But holding in his temper took all his control. After everything they'd been through, everything he'd done for her, this was what she thought of their marriage.

"I think," she spun to face him, "that I can't compete with a ghost!"

Her explosion had him taking a step back.

"And," she continued, "if I weren't in love with you, then what we have would be enough. But I do love you. And I can't stay here, knowing you love someone else, and pretend that everything is all right! I can't live that way. I won't." She paused and looked away, her shoulders drooping. "I thought, with time... I thought I was strong enough and that you'd eventually..."

"I'd eventually what?" he asked, desperate to hear her answer. Gods, she claimed to love him and then said she was leaving him in the same breath. She thought he still loved Anya. Couldn't she see how wrong she was?

She shook her head, straightened and faced him again. "I have no intention of holding you strictly to this marriage, so don't worry. Our worlds will maintain the alliance. You can go on with your life."

He stalked toward her, his pulse pounding in his temples. "And you'll go on with yours?" The thought pushed his temper almost beyond his control. He knew he should tell her he loved her, assure her of his feelings. But anger urged him to act rashly, to lash out and cause pain so she might feel some of the torment storming through his blood.

Frowning, she stepped back. "Eventually."

"You'll take lovers?" The very thought blinded him with fury. She continued to back away and he continued his advance.

"What do you care?"

"Will you take other lovers?"

"Will you?" she nearly shouted.

"Answer me, Sonia."

"You expect me to maintain my vows? Even now?"

He finally closed the distance between them, gripped her shoulders and pulled her flush to his body. "I *expect* you to be faithful to your husband. I *expect* you to live with me for the rest of our lives, to have my children, to share my bed every night and to love me for the rest of your life."

With each declaration her mouth opened farther until she finally pushed out of his hold. "Arrogant man. Why should I? If you won't give up Anya, why should I sacrifice my life to you?" She swung back toward her bedroom.

"Because I love you."

"What?" She stilled.

He watched her, the curve of her neck, the rise and fall of her shoulders. His hands flexed. "I love you. I only just realized how much. I don't regret the destruction of my own brother's mind because he tried to take you from me. I'd have killed him myself if I could have. The thought of you in danger makes me crazy. The sight of you in my bed makes me feel complete. I love you, Sonia."

She spun to face him and the tears on her cheeks nearly brought him to his knees.

"If you love me, why in *ichos* were you staring at her hologram tonight?"

More gently this time, he pulled her into his arms. Her body remained rigid against his. With the edge of his hand, he brushed a tear from her chin. "I was saying goodbye. It was time to let her go. Because of you. The feelings I have for you... I love you so much I killed for you. I'd die for you. If I lost *you*, I wouldn't survive. I won't let you leave, Sonia. You're my wife. And if I have to, I'll spend the rest of our lives making sure you understand how much I love you."

He watched her throat work as she swallowed. Her tears had stopped, but he brushed the remaining wetness from her face. "Do you know what I had planned for this evening?"

A small frown creased her brow. "Dinner."

"In your new terrace garden," he said with a grin, enjoying her surprise.

"That's been started already?"

"The gardener finished the last details yesterday."

"It's done? I didn't..." She sucked in a shaky breath. "I didn't know you'd started." The wariness was back in her voice but no longer so pronounced.

Vander knew she wanted to believe him. He could see it in her eyes. His arms tightened around her. "I had it started the day after Rico... I wanted to surprise you with it. And this morning, I realized that's where I wanted to tell you I loved you."

She shuddered in his arms. "Why didn't you... Why was dinner canceled?"

"A security risk, a report of a possible rogue fighter attack. I didn't—no, I *couldn't* bring myself to put your life in danger again. So I decided to postpone."

"Why didn't you tell me this before? I don't understand why you had to go to her first."

"Sonia," he sighed. "I needed to...finish with her, to put her memory away. I wanted to start our future, and I couldn't without that closure. I love you. I love you more than I ever thought possible, more than I ever loved anyone—"

"Even Anya?"

"Even Anya," he said with no hesitation. "What I had with her was quiet and comfortable. A moment of peace in my chaotic life. With you, I still have all that and more. Passion, understanding, a partner. I could never have had the kind of partnership with Anya that I have with you. You *know* what its like to feel the demands of duty because of the way you were born. She might have understood, but she could never *know*." He shook his head and huffed out a breath. "I don't know how else to explain... What I feel for you, the connection is so much deeper. And I need that. I need you."

Her expression softened, and to Vander's infinite relief, she smiled. "You want to have children with me?"

"Absolutely. But not right away." She quirked a wry brow and Vander had to fight the urge to laugh. "I want you to myself a bit longer," he said.

For a long moment, she remained quiet, holding his gaze steadily. Vander was very aware that she hadn't said she'd stay yet. When the silence stretched out longer than he could stand, he cupped her cheek. "Don't leave me, Sonia," he murmured. "I need you so much. Stay with me. Let me prove I can make you a good husband." He framed her face and pressed his lips gently against hers, tasting the salt left from her tears.

Her breath hitched and her hands came up to grip his wrists.

"Tell me you love me again," he said as he held her dark gaze.

Smiling, a wobbly grin, she said, "I love you. I have since before we met."

"Before we met?" He smiled as the weight on his chest eased, and a giddy feeling of relief and love swept through him.

"I told you, I studied everything about you."

"Then you know when I'm being honest." She nodded and her grin made his heart soar. "I do love you, Sonia."

"Good," she said as she leaned in close. "But I intend to make you prove it."

Laughing, feeling free to laugh for the first time that evening, he lifted her off her feet. "Then you'll need less clothing," he said, and carried her back to his bed where she belonged.

## **About the Author**

Isabo welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

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