



## **Stolen Earth**

Delroi Connection: Book 3

Loribelle Hunt

(c) 2009

## **Stolen Earth**

Delroi Connection: Book 3

Loribelle Hunt

Published 2009

ISBN 978-1-59578-532-9

Published by Liquid Silver Books, imprint of Atlantic Bridge Publishing, 10509 Sedgegrass Dr, Indianapolis, Indiana 46235. Copyright © 2009, Loribelle Hunt. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the author.

Manufactured in the United States of America

Liquid Silver Books  
<http://LSbooks.com>

Email:  
[raven@LSbooks.com](mailto:raven@LSbooks.com)

Editor  
Maria Rogers

Cover Artist  
April Martinez

This is a work of fiction. The characters, incidents and dialogues in this book are of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is completely coincidental.

## **Blurb**

Britt Anderson is retired. Secretive and fiercely independent, she journeys to Delroi to spend time with her two oldest friends. She doesn't expect to be dragged back into the spy business when she gets there. But the lure is impossible to fight for a not-so-reformed adrenalin junkie. Danger. Conspiracy. What's not to love?

Unfortunately, there's always a price and it presents itself as the darkly dangerous Barak Trace. She can't deny the attraction, but has enough sense to steer clear of the possessive glint in his gaze. Until he somehow manages to merge his psychic abilities with hers. When he's captured by rebel forces, she has no choice but to go after him. The question is will she be able to free herself once he's rescued? And will she even want to?

## Chapter One

She'd vacillated between fury and abject terror so much over the past few days she didn't know if she was coming or going anymore. It wasn't fear of being injured or killed herself that worried her. She'd been in worse tight spots. No. It was the loss of half of her soul that terrified her. Damn Barak. When she got her hands on him she might kill him herself for putting her in this position.

Britt Anderson stood back in the shadows of an alley, in the massive Southern city on Delroi that was the seat of the Rebels' power. It was called Saber City, named after the ruling Saber Clan. She watched and waited for a signal from Jaxon and his men. The Overchief's men. And while her old friend Kendall may have mated with the Delroi leader, Britt only trusted them because they worked for Barak, the Delroi Spymaster who'd somehow tied his soul to hers moments before being taken prisoner by these Southern rebels. She had no idea who'd taken him or why, but she'd been looking for him for weeks.

The darkness in front of her shifted the slightest fraction, the barest inch, and her eyes narrowed. Focused. Picked apart the shadows. Not something a regular person—a non-combatant—would have noticed, could have done. She pressed her lips together and bit hard, reminding herself. She'd never been one of them. Never been a civilian. Never been a normal functioning part of the masses.

She sensed the spy moving up to her before she saw him. Didn't tense and give herself away as he approached. Barely managed to not flinch. She gritted her teeth. Where was all her fabled cold, self-control now?

"The informant says he's in there," Jaxon whispered, nodding once towards the building across the street and two doors down. "We have someone inside but you won't have a lot of time. Get in and get out. You have twenty minutes to get to the rendezvous point."

She nodded. "Got it," she replied so softly her words were a whisper of air, the barest current.

She hoped like hell she did. The place was a warren. The streets and lanes and alleys were narrow twisting paths, the five and six story buildings so close they blotted out the sky. It was almost like being back on Earth where she'd done a brief stint in the Moroccan Kasbah, which was not reassuring because she'd never figured it out either.

Jaxon moved closer to her, close enough to brush up against her side, and even though she knew he wasn't interested in her at all, it made her skin crawl. It made her nervous and shifty and want to lash out. She ground her teeth together. This was *not* like her. This was Barak not wanting anyone near her. This was her letting him affect her even though he'd gone quiet. She almost growled, but repressed the urge as Jaxon began whispering instructions in her ear. It could wait—her anger and frustration—until they were sure Barak was free and safe. Then she would make him pay for all her discomfort.

\* \* \* \*

She rapped lightly on the door three times, paused, then rapped twice more in the

prearranged signal. The door was opened by a short, cowed person, but she'd learned in the last few weeks that didn't mean anything. Everyone wore robes in the southern hemisphere on Delroi. Everyone wore hoods. It certainly aided in hiding one's identity, but the main reason was to protect from the unrelenting wind, from the sand that was a constantly moving force against sensitive skin.

"Quickly," the covered person-a man?-said. He led her to a door at the end of a hall. "He's in the third room." A woman. The timbre was definitely a woman's voice. She pressed something into Britt's hand. "The key. Downstairs. Third door and then follow the tunnel out."

She didn't give Britt a chance to respond, instead pushed her through the door and shut it firmly behind her. She stumbled on the steps but quickly found her footing. It was dark but there was enough dim lighting to guide her way. Her hands shook as she found the third door and inserted the key in the lock. Twisted.

She held the battery powered torch up and flicked the switch. Squinted as light suddenly flooded the area. It took a moment for her eyes to adjust, seconds she didn't have, but she was already moving forward. Barak was restrained in the middle of an empty room. Legs tied to the bottom of a chair and arms pulled behind his back. She moved quickly. Cut the ropes at his ankles and wrists fast.

"Barak," she whispered harshly when he didn't move. "Wake up."

One moment he was out like a light and she was afraid she was too late. The next he was in motion. Standing. Propelling himself and her under him, to the wall. He moved so fast. Lips peeled back in a snarl, gaze wild. Like a creature out of nightmare. She stared him in the eyes. Saw madness there and willed him to come back to her. He held her hands over her head and she struggled against him, but it was a useless fight. He was bigger, faster, stronger.

Her only recourse was mental communication. But it made the bond between them stronger so she hated to resort to telepathy. Which was stupid, really, considering how pissed and worried she'd been when he cut his mind off from hers. She almost reconsidered and pulled back, but she couldn't stand to leave him this half-mad creature.

*Barak. Barak! Come back to me.* Something flashed in his eyes. Knowledge. Civilization. *Please, baby. Please.*

He pressed her against the wall, his growing erection insistent against her pelvis and she shuddered in response. Wished it was for her and not just a natural response to adrenalin and survival instinct. This was a man strong enough to take her. Strong enough to claim her. *If* he remained sane after his weeks of captivity. It had probably taken her too long to find him to hope for that.

"We have to go," he whispered harshly, and grabbed her hand, tugging her out of the room.

In the hall he tried to turn to the right, the way she'd come, but she dug in her heels and pulled him the other way. "No. This way."

She found the other exit and they climbed the steep exit, entering the new street just as an explosion rocked the area. "Shit!" she uttered angrily, shielding her eyes from the distant explosion she was certain was their transport back to the Overchief's home. "Now what?"

Barak was in bad shape, battered, bruised, and bloody, but he straightened and looked around. He jerked his head towards the alley. "That way."

She wanted to argue but he let her in his mind. The relief, after days when he'd been blocking the connection, was so great she almost passed out. He caught her, fed her strength he couldn't afford to lose. "We have to move, honey," he whispered.

"I know." Pissed at the connection between them, the way he made her feel weak in the knees, weak in spirit, she shoved his hands away and followed him through the alley, refusing to give into the need to put her shoulder under his. To help him. He was in bad shape. She knew it and he knew it and both were too proud to admit it.

"Where are we going?"

He turned to her, slowed a bit and cocked an eyebrow. "Home, of course. Where else do you go when you're on your own?"

His words were like a barb to the chest and that pissed her off even more. She'd never had a home and he didn't trust her. Why should that matter? She didn't trust him either. But she'd come this far for a mental bond he'd forced on her. "That isn't good enough," she snarled.

His hand snaked out fast to grab her wrist, much faster than a badly injured, maybe mortally injured man should be able to manage. "It's enough for now. Don't fight me, Britt. We need to rest and regroup. Both of us."

He was pushing at her mind, trying to find entrance, and it took her awhile to realize he was also pushing at her shields, encouraging her to relax her guard. She ground her molars together as she followed him through the streets. Sleeping, she couldn't fight him off. Couldn't keep him from her mind. But awake? Awake she was in charge. Her nerve endings sizzled at the thought and she glared at his back, knowing he'd read it and responded as if she were challenging him. A challenge her body wanted to answer in direct opposition to her mind. She kept her groan to herself. She was so screwed.

## Chapter Two

Britt woke all at once, an old Army Special Forces trick, and listened to her surroundings. Cautiously, she let her other senses flare out. Nothing felt bad or dangerous. Barak was near. She felt him close and knew on a deeply instinctive level he would never let anyone harm her. That didn't mean there weren't dangerous undercurrents in the house or that he could control unseen threats. He seemed to be unconsciously warning her to go cautiously. *Shit.*

He'd led them to this house in the middle of the night, to a back door that had been answered to his soft tap. A suspicious man had opened the door, taken one look at Barak and ushered them both in. The man had ushered them down a set of stairs, to this room. Barak had entered and thrown the lock. Days of inadequate sleep and a near non-stop adrenalin rush caught up with her and she'd gone straight for the bed and crashed. He'd thought they were safe here and she found she couldn't help but feel secure when he was around.

But the morning desert glare brought sanity and she rose out of the bed, the bed she'd shared with him, untouched and unsatisfied. Suspicious and angry even in sleep. There was a row of windows at the top of one wall and she saw feet walking by, realized she was in a room mostly below ground. There was no bathroom or closet. Only the bed and a single dresser. She got up and approached it, scooping water out of a bowl on top of it and splashing her face.

She longed for a shower. The sand here in the south was everywhere. The wind blew it with non-stop, unrelenting force. She pulled off the long sleeved shirt she'd been wearing for how many days she refused to remember. Dropping it to the floor, she looked at it with distaste. She refused to put that thing back on ever again. There wasn't a lot of water in the basin, but she used it, hoping it was enough to rinse off the worst of the sand and sweat.

After she'd finished, she stood and faced herself in the mirror. She was wearing black combat pants and a tight tank top. Tattoos covered eighty percent of the skin left exposed below her collarbone. Few people ever saw them. They were private. Her personal, permanent reminder that there were still beautiful things on Earth. Things worth fighting for when everything else seemed hopeless. She wasn't comfortable exposing them, exposing herself to strangers, but it was better than the alternative.

She was a little surprised that the door opened. That she wasn't locked in. Of course, if Barak wasn't why would she be? He was in her mind, maybe not consciously but he was there, and she followed his mental beacon through the basement, up a set of narrow stairs and into a large kitchen. He looked up, somewhat distracted, when she entered, but was on his feet, waiting for her in moments.

"Britt. Come here."

He held his hand out to her as if he expected her to be some obedient lackey. It pissed her right the fuck off. She'd risked her neck coming after him. The least he could do was treat her like she was human, like she was his equal. The crazy thing was she found herself going to him anyway and she desperately checked her mental shields. Made sure he didn't have access he shouldn't. Except that was stupid wasn't it? He'd been in

her head since right before he got captured.

"It's okay," he said, taking her hand.

She shook her head, dread filling her. The loss of control was not acceptable. "No, it isn't."

He bent his head to her neck, right under her ear and whispered. "Trust me."

All of the blood in her body rushed to her pussy as his hot breath blew over her skin, as his intent sunk into her mind. He meant to have her. In more ways than she'd ever tried. More ways than she'd ever imagined.

Someone cleared a throat behind him but she didn't see who it was. He was ushering her out, back downstairs, back to that spare, barren room. He slammed the door behind them. Flicked the lock. Leaning back, blocking her escape he looked her over. Took his time about doing it. The scrutiny made her self-conscious and she crossed her arms over her chest.

"Oh no, baby. No way."

\*

Barak approached her slowly. She was skittish. The last thing he'd expected. He had a hard time controlling the erratic beating of his heart. The euphoria. She'd come. He knew she would. Probably would have even if he hadn't bound her to him before he was captured. And now... Well, now he could make it real.

He'd never really believed he would find his *der'lan*. That there would be a woman for him, only for him. The mate of his heart. He sure as hell knew there were few who could handle him. But if any could, this spy from Earth was the one. The one who was strong enough. The one who could submit enough. The need to touch her, taste her, possess her was all consuming.

She retreated and he followed until her back was against the wall. Her breathing was heavy and her skimpy shirt stretched tight across breasts he wanted to shape, to taste.

*Mine*. He used the mental path between them, growled his intent, before lowering his head, catching her lips. When she refused to open for him, he nipped, tugged her lower lip between his teeth until she groaned and rocked her pelvis against him.

Lifting her hands, she pushed at his chest, but he wouldn't budge. He caught them, laced their fingers together and slammed them against the wall on either side of her face. He ground his cock against her pelvis, felt the whimper of desire in her mind more than heard it.

She let him into her mouth and his tongue thrust in. Setting a fierce, steady rhythm, matching the rocking of his hips. He lifted her arms so he could hold both her wrists in one hand above her head. The change in position pushed her breasts up, made them rub against his chest.

He tugged her shirt out of her pants, slid his palm up under it. Her belly quivered under his touch and he felt the arousal she couldn't hide in her mind as he slid it up. Slowly. Exploring. Absorbing the feel of her. Then he was cupping her breast, squeezing it.

She strained towards him, tried to pull her wrists free, but he couldn't allow her retreat. He'd suffered too many weeks through the uncompleted bond and his primitive side was in charge. Demanding control. Demanding complete surrender. She twisted her head to the side, breaking his kiss, and something ugly, dark and fiercely possessive, rose inside him.



“Not like this,” she whispered.

He felt how the loss of control shook her, how she didn’t trust herself, didn’t trust him to her care. The knowledge enraged the feral beast that seemed to be a living thing inside him. Pleading, fearful eyes met his.

“Barak,” said softly, so softly he almost didn’t hear her but he shook when she opened her mind to him. Just a little. Just enough so he knew her feelings.

He *felt* her fear. The wild, untamed part of him found it satisfying. She should be afraid of denying him what was his. But the civilized thread that was left couldn’t stomach it. Needed her willing, wanting, craving as he did. It was there in her body, but in her heart, her mind, her soul, she still resisted. That enraged all of him. Keeping from him what was by rights his. She’d come looking for him, had rescued him, but only because of the bond. Only because it wouldn’t let her be.

“Submit,” he demanded, voice low and harsh.

She shook her head, eyes wide. Less afraid. More determined.

“I can restrain you. Make you respond. Make you beg.”

“We have a word for that on my planet.” Words with an unmistakable meaning. Words that stabbed at his honor.

His fingers found and plucked at her nipple. It became a hard point under his thumb the moment he touched it. Her eyes slid shut, breathing hitched. “Your body is more than willing, darlin’.”

“I refuse to be owned.” Eyes snapped open with a hard glare.

Leaning forward, he tasted the skin on her nape, sucked it between his teeth hard enough to mark before whispering in her ear. “The ownership is reciprocal.”

He bit again. Sucked her luscious skin into his mouth.

“That’s not,” she panted, “what’s in your mind. You want to own. Possess. Claim. I feel it.”

“Yes,” he hissed, not sure why he was explaining instead of trying to convince her with his hands, his lips, his teeth. “The bond is starving. I need your surrender.”

He kissed her. Softly. Tenderly. “I don’t have the control to walk out of this room, Britt. Surrender.”

Her eyes met his. Searching. Thinking. She bit her bottom lip and he groaned as tiny teeth sunk in. His cock throbbed painfully hard. “What do you expect me to do?” she finally asked.

His heart soared. Still challenging him, but also stepping forward. Taking a risk on him. Cautiously, he released her hands, not quite trusting the shift in mood, but she didn’t move away from him, didn’t bolt. He stepped back and looked her over. High breasts, narrow waist, hips wide enough for a man to grab on to. Took in all the intricate designs of ink left colorfully, permanently on her skin.

“Naked,” he said, low and guttural. “I want you naked.”

Her eyes widened, nostrils flared. She wasn’t nearly as unaffected as she tried to appear to be. He hid his smile by removing his shirt, reaching for the snaps on his trousers. He’d be more than happy to meet her halfway. He paused and tilted his head. She hadn’t moved an inch and her bottom lip was caught between her teeth again. “Well?”

Her spine straightened and she reached for the edge of her shirt, pulled it over her head in one long smooth move. He held his breath, entranced, the animal half of his soul

pacing the cage of his mind as her skin was exposed. Inked. Flowers and vines and birds. Had she covered her whole body? Why?

He left his pants half unzipped and circled her, wanting to see how extensive the tattoos were. If she'd left some part of her skin for him to claim. To mark. Northern warriors had a thing for piercing the nipples of their woman. Marking them. His people had a different approach. Normally a southern warrior's mark would go someplace clearly visible, but it was obvious she'd placed her tattoos so they could be hidden. He wasn't so tradition bound he'd demand more of her, so he searched. And there across her lower back was a bare piece of skin. Creamy white and perfect. He trailed his fingers lightly across it.

"I'll put my mark here," he whispered and she trembled, under the touch or the claim he wasn't sure.

He put his hands on her waist, slid them around her until they closed on the buttons of her black pants. One by one he opened them, kissing his way across her shoulder blades with each pop. He let them fall and walked around her again, knelt and unzipped her boots, lifting each foot to remove them.

He had no idea where this restraint, this stranglehold over the urgency that gripped him, came from, but finally she stood before him. Naked. Glorious. The tattoos twisted around and down her legs to her knees. He'd explore them later. There were more fascinating things to concentrate on for the moment. Her nipples were hard, her sex glistened under his gaze. His cock was a painful, demanding throb.

"On the bed," he ordered. She hesitated.

*I don't have a lot of control left, Britt.*

She responded with a lush surge of arousal in his mind. He started to understand this woman who was his. She didn't like being ordered around, but she liked that he was strong enough to take her on. Lust sank hard, sharp talons into him and he shook with the force of it. The things he wanted to do to her. The things she'd let him do.

She climbed onto the bed, spread herself out in invitation in the center. He fought the urge to strip and mount her. To fuck her with no regard for her own needs. After removing his boots and the rest of his clothing, he joined her, lifted her hands to the iron bars of the headboard.

"Don't let go," he whispered against her ear.

Then he slid down her body, stopping for brief licks, quick bites, before he settled on his elbows where he most wanted to be, between her thighs. He pushed her legs wide and her shields slid a little more as her anticipation rose. Letting him deeper into her mind. It was an incredible rush, almost enough on its own to make him come. He stamped down that urge. He would be inside her when that happened.

He stared at pink folds, barely hidden under soft, black curls. Spreading her pussy lips, he found the two spots of her body he wanted most to explore in this moment. Her channel was wet, inviting, and her clitoris above it a hard nub. He leaned forward to taste her and her hips bucked. He laid an arm over her pelvis to hold her still while he got drunk on her taste, her scent.

Focused on the treasure before him, he soaked up her soft cry as he inserted one, then two fingers into her cunt. It contracted, tightened around him, and she strained to move closer. To hurry him up. That primitive part of his soul reared up again and he snarled. The woman *would* learn. His to pleasure. His to take. When he was ready and not

before. He'd been denied sweet nectar too long to hurry things. "Still. Now."

He moved his fingers inside her, twisted them up to rub against that sensitive spot he knew he would find with just the right angle. Knowledge pillaged from her mind, but he didn't care. He got the response he wanted, her juices quickening, flowing over his fingers. Withdrawing, he sucked them into his mouth, lapped at her unique taste. Shook with the need to thrust his cock into her.

But something more primal moved through him before he could indulge the thought. He wanted to feel her come, taste it on his lips. Wanted to drink in her cries. Make her beg for his cock. Needed her satisfied, satiated in the way only a mate could do.

He was careful as he bent his head to her, flicking his tongue over her. Careful as his mind connected to hers, sunk under the cloud of desire fogging her thinking to get to her desires. To find out what she liked. What she wanted. Nearly combusted at what he saw when he reached that core of her.

She didn't want to want him, but in her most secret core, where she hid her real self, she couldn't help herself. Couldn't deny she wanted him, couldn't deny *he* was the one strong enough for her. That *he* was the only one she'd submit for. She would continue to fight him, to challenge him, and they would both enjoy every minute of it.

While working her pussy with two fingers, he sucked her clit between his teeth, seeing in her mind how she liked a bite of pain, and she convulsed. The orgasm ripped through her so quickly it surprised him. Her pleasure flooded his mind with warmth. Acceptance. Surrender.

Gods help him, he wanted to wait. Wanted to draw it out and make her come again and again. He didn't have that kind of restraint. He left a biting trail of kisses up her body, found her eyes glazed with arousal, her fingers clinging to the iron head board, when he reached her lips.

He claimed her with cock and tongue at the same time. Thrusting in roughly, demanding what was his, and she responded with a whimper, with a pleading arch of her back. Leaving her lips, he went straight to her tantalizing breasts. Sucked one nipple into his mouth. Bit down then soothed the sting with his tongue.

### Chapter Three

Britt couldn't name what drove her, couldn't name the need. She'd wished for a man strong enough, not to control her, but to stand up to her. Someone capable of meeting her strength. A man she couldn't walk all over. Even better, someone whose thoughts, whose emotions didn't beat at her twenty-four seven. In the most secret buried place in her heart, she'd wished for that but never imagined she'd find it. And this wasn't it. Wasn't the strong give and take she'd imagined. He gave and he took. He didn't permit her to do anything.

And she was ready, willing, and able to beg for more.

Her body betrayed her with every touch, every stroke, every insidious lick of his tongue. He broke through every barrier she'd ever erected. Laid her defenses at her feet as he took her body, wormed his way into her soul. A small part of her struggled against the claim. Struggled against the capitulation. But she knew it was too late. He was in her mind, buried so deep she'd never be able to cut him loose or cauterize the wound caused by his absence.

*Never. I'll never let you go, der'lan.*

His cock was hard inside her, thrusting almost brutally fast. She opened eyes that had been squeezed tightly shut to meet his gaze. Pure steely determination. She experienced a curious twist in her gut, but didn't examine it. Didn't have time. Something seemed to snap in her mind, that link connecting their minds, when she gave in, when the last part of her quit fighting this new bond. She came and it was so intense, so overwhelming, it felt like jumping off a cliff.

And Barak caught her, cradled her close in tender arms while she shook with the aftermath. When her mind came back together, he started moving again. Slower this time, but deeper, more force behind the strokes. The next orgasm was slower to build and she fought it, wanted more of the exquisite pleasure he gave her, and knew the next time she came, he would come with her.

It built anyway, a pleasure so intense it rose and rose and rose. Until finally she was at its crest, mind splintered, only to fall apart all over again when she felt his cum shooting into her, when he shared the extreme pleasure with his mind. The force of it shook her, that she could do that to him.

He kissed her, withdrawing slowly from her body as he did. She groaned her protest with the loss of each inch, was amazed she already wanted him filling her again.

"Soon, darlin'," he whispered against her ear.

Standing, he approached the stone wall and ran flat palms over it. Searching for what? She propped up on her elbows to watch him, finally taking the time to look at the tattoos that stretched down one side of his body. From his face to his right ankle. She'd wondered how extensive they were. Was pleased at what she saw. Then he found what he was looking for, pressed his hand against the spot, and the wall slid open to reveal a small bathroom.

He entered and she heard the water come on. She hummed her pleasure—finally a shower—but was too spent to move. Maybe by the time he was done. He didn't give her any warning. One minute she was letting herself drift and the next he was scooping her

up. She squeaked a protest, couldn't believe the sound had come from her. Started to demand he put her down, but his lips fused over hers at the same time as he stepped under the water with her in his arms.

Water sluiced down over-sensitive skin and she shivered at its touch. He set her on her feet and reached behind him for a washcloth and bar of soap. She leaned against the wall, watched as he lathered up the cloth, then soaped up his body. Torso, legs, finally the cock that was hard again. Her blood surged, the sound pounding in her own ears, as he stroked himself until a pearly drop of pre-cum appeared on its head.

She had to taste him, touch him. It was a compulsion she couldn't fight and she wasn't sure if it was her desire or his. It didn't matter since it was a desire they shared. But she wasn't starting there. He'd had time to explore. Now it was her turn.

Taking the washcloth from him, she circled him, stared at his broad back a moment before touching him. Tracing the tattoos first with her finger, then her lips, then the soapy cloth. Muscles contracted as he held still and she felt the urging, the demand, in his mind that she move around front. Taste and touch his cock. He didn't voice it though, let her explore without voicing the complaint. A feeling of satisfaction, of well being unfurled inside her. He might meet her halfway after all.

Dropping the cloth onto a built-in shelf, she set her hands on his shoulders, stroked him as she walked around to his front. His eyes were almost feral, wild with need, as she touched him. Down his pecs, over his ribcage, lower and lower until her hand closed over him. His cock jerked in her grip and he growled in her mind.

"Now," he whispered harshly.

Smiling, she dropped to her knees without releasing her grip. Leaned forward for a long slow lick across the head, taking that tantalizing drop of cum into her mouth and humming her pleasure. Salty. Masculine.

She sucked the head into her mouth and he twisted her hair in his hands. He thrust forward, pushing enough of his cock into her mouth that it nudged the back of her throat. Her eyes watered and she fought down the urge to gag. To protest. His mind was wide open to her. He was in the grip of extreme lust, but trying to control it. And suddenly she didn't want him in control. She wanted him giving in to the lust, giving in to her.

She bobbed her head, taking him in and out of her mouth, using her tongue and her teeth when she sensed he liked it. Until finally, his control snapped, his hands twisted painfully in her hair as he took over. Thrusting roughly into her mouth, claiming it as he had her cunt. Once. Twice. The salty taste of his cum filled her mouth as he roared his release and her pussy spasmed, his orgasm pushing her into her own.

She let him slide from her mouth and sat back on her heels. The water pounded down her, a warm wet embrace, as she tried to regulate her breathing, her heart rate. Tried to order her chaotic mind. What the fuck was happening to her? She'd never liked oral sex. Sure as hell never come from getting someone else off. Lifting her, he pulled her into his arms. He sensed her confusion.

"It's the bond," he whispered, stroking her hair in a soothing caress. "Did I hurt you?"

She shook her head. A stupid question and he knew it. He was in her mind. He didn't say anything else, but picked up the washcloth and turned her out of the water to set it against her skin.

"So much ink," he murmured as he cleaned first one arm then the other, before

moving on to her torso, her breasts. She couldn't help but arch her back, lean into the soft touch. He played with her nipples for a disappointing moment before moving down her body. Over her belly to the curls hiding her sex. She held her breath, waiting for him to stroke her, reawaken her, but he only cleaned her. Quickly, efficiently. Before moving on. She bit back a sob of desperate need, but the demand was in her mind, easy for him to read. He ignored it. Washed her and dried her off before taking her back into the bedroom.

Someone had been in while they were distracted and clean clothes waited on the bed. He tossed her a pair of pants while he pulled on the other. Anger and frustration grew in her, and he approached with that quiet stealth that always took her breath, caressed her face.

"Later, baby. It may not be safe here. We need information."

His words were like a bucket of cold water, dousing the ever-present desire. How the hell had she forgotten they were in enemy territory with no way home? Hell, someone had been able to access the room while they'd been in the shower. She was slipping, should have thought of that the second she saw the clothes. She dressed quickly and followed him upstairs back in to the kitchen. She wanted to question him. Ask why he'd been taken captive? Who was behind it? The questions would have to wait for later.

The kitchen had been empty when she found him there earlier, but now a woman and two men were sitting around the table while something that smelled divine bubbled on the stove. She hadn't eaten since the previous afternoon and her stomach grumbled its disapproval.

The woman stood. She was beautiful, tall and svelte with long blonde hair. Her smile was slow to come, but glowing when it did. She walked around the table and hesitated in front of him. "Barak."

He smiled slightly, but Britt felt his pleasure at seeing the woman and had to fight a surge of jealousy. He bent and kissed her on the cheek. "Mother."

She almost sagged against him with relief, felt the talons of envy slip away. "Britt," he said, introducing her to the woman. "My *der'lan*."

That word again. She knew it meant something like wife. His use of it made her stomach clench. She was not wife material. He went sniper still in her mind. It took her a second to sort out the change, but then she realized he was afraid she would deny his claim in front of his family. She slid her hand down his forearm to his hand, laced their fingers together. Immediately felt his relief.

"My mother, Cassandra," he introduced. "And my brothers. Orrin and Falkor."

They stood as he introduced them and she studied the similarities between the three. Orrin appeared to be much younger while Falkor was close to Barak's age. Same height, same build. Same look in the eyes. The stare of an assassin. The stare of hard men accustomed to doing the dirtiest of tasks.

She nodded, said what would be the appropriate words on Earth but her tone held cold restraint, the caution and suspicion inherent to her profession. "Nice to meet you."

The change on all three faces was immediate. The mother's delight. The sons' suspicious contempt. Barak stiffened at her side, but she slid into his mind.

*I can handle this.*

*What's the Earth expression about dangerous waters?*

She laughed mentally. *I'm a spy remember? I like to live dangerously.*

He shifted to glare down at her. "It's a good thing you have me to rein in those instincts."

She rolled her eyes. "Good luck with that."

"Earthling women," one of the brothers, Orrin said with disdain. "Couldn't you have done better, brother?"

She turned to face him, subtly shifting on the balls of her feet, and met his gaze. Let them both see who, what she really was. Spy. Assassin. Killer. Orrin's eyes narrowed, focused on her. Falkor was the one who picked up the tossed gauntlet.

"And what exactly is this Earth woman you picked?"

She grinned, letting the razor sharp side, the cutting deadly edge of her personality show in it. "Nothing you've ever seen before, bubba."

Barak released her hand, moved his to grip the back of her nape. "Enough," he said coldly, not entirely directing the order at his brothers.

*They can't be trusted can they?*

He took a full minute to respond and there was a touch of weary bitterness in the clipped reply.

*No. So don't let your guard down even for a minute.*

*Your mother?*

Another hesitation. This response less sure. *Her either.*

She leaned back against him and some of his tension leaked away at the contact, but he didn't relax his wary stance. Most of the spies she knew had no families, including her. How horrible would be to have that gift and not be able to trust it? Her heart twisted in sympathy, but she was careful to bury it in her mind, knowing he wouldn't appreciate it. It would piss him off.

His mother broke the tension, ordering her sons to prepare the table for lunch. Britt was surprised they complied, but then Cassandra didn't strike her as the kind of woman who let anyone disobey her. It only took minutes before she found herself sitting next to Barak with a bowl of steaming soup and bread.

The four of them chatted and she ate, paying particular attention to Barak's non-answers. Cassandra startled her out of her concentration, but the question made her hackles rise.

"So what did you do on Earth, Britt? Which caste will try to claim you?"

Across from her Falkor and Orrin turned watchful predatory eyes on her. Barak was statue still at her side.

"I'm a painter," she replied with a smile she hoped wasn't patently fake. She was pretty well known for her art on Earth. It had provided a useful cover identity for years. She'd hoped with the end of the wars, first between opposing nations on Earth and then with the Delroi, she'd be able to return to painting full time. But for the moment at least, it looked like that would take second place to the spy business again. "So the Artists, I suppose."

Falkor snorted. Orrin replied, "Sure, you are."

*Careful.*

*Can't blame them for not buying it,* she replied knowing it was her damned fault and pissed over her rashness earlier.

She shrugged, knew it wouldn't deflect their interest. "I was a soldier before the wars ended."

Falkor gave her a disapproving look. "You fought us?"

"Yes," was her curt reply. Not exactly the truth. The whole truth. Like Barak, her job had been to infiltrate the enemy. It turned out to be damned near impossible to do with the Delroi and their outdated ideas about women in combat.

"You have the eyes of an assassin, not a soldier," Orrin said.

Barak growled at her side. "Careful what you say, little brother."

His eyes narrowed. "Unless and until you return, I'm not subject to your orders."

Both brothers and their mother appeared to be waiting for a response, but Barak remained silent. She had the distinct impression she was missing something. Her confusion must have shown. Orrin took great delight in filling her in. His amusement had a malicious undertone and she struggled against the emotions battering her from everyone in the room. Somehow, it was Barak who was able to block them.

"I see my brother hasn't filled you in on your new position, sister. You see, our father is the Saber Clan Chief, and as the oldest, Barak is his heir."

She didn't know much about the Sabers. They were a warrior clan that Daggar and Alrik suspected of being part of the rebellion. She hadn't had a clue of Barak's association with it or the position he was due to inherit. Suspicion crawled through her mind, and like her sympathy earlier, she buried it as deeply as she could.

How loyal was Barak to the Torfas? He occupied a high position among them, but why? She had no interest in getting involved in the brewing civil war on Delroi. She'd only wanted to rescue him, to make sure he was safe, before she fled back to Earth. But this changed things. Her two best friends had married into the Overchief's family. She couldn't abandon them to a threat they weren't aware of.

"Tell me about this new position," she said, making the demand sound only half interested. She broke his gaze and returned to her lunch, waiting for him to respond.

"You can forget the freedom Alrik's mate has. I know Barak hasn't gone that soft."

Interesting. So they didn't know what happened last night or were they choosing to ignore her part in Barak's escape? Or maybe they didn't know there had been an escape to make.

Her grin was feral, her tone biting. "Earth women won't allow themselves to be tethered. I'd suggest you adjust your thinking."

"Get used to it," he snapped and again Barak made a sound of disapproval, hard and dominant. She was surprised when his brother backed down. Hmm, it was clear who was alpha here, whether they liked it or not.

Before she could respond to him, a communicator started beeping, and she smiled when she recognized the unique pattern she'd programmed into hers. Standing, she looked around and saw it on the counter. Laney's name flashed on the screen. Laney was the retired sergeant major who was the liaison between Delroi's rulers and Earth's Ambassador. Britt knew she liked the new job. It challenged her while giving her more freedom than she'd had while she was in the Army. Aside from that, she was Britt's long time friend and former boss.

"Hello?"

"Thank God, y'all were starting to worry me."

"Is everything okay? The baby?" Britt had come to Delroi with Kendall to be with Laney when she had her baby. She was due any day now and Britt had hoped she'd be back at the Overchief's palace by the time Laney was ready to deliver. Privately, she



admitted to a breath of relief when she'd left the palace to search for Barak. Alrik was Daggar's younger brother, and both brothers and their wives lived in the set of secured rooms designated for the royal family. Britt had begun to find the arrangement a little claustrophobic. But her discomfort was less important than being there when Laney went into labor. It didn't look like that was going to happen.

Laney huffed. "Fine. Still pregnant." There was a short pause while she murmured to someone on her end of the line. Britt heard a masculine mumble and assumed she was speaking to Alrik. The Delroi general was Commander of the Army and Barak's boss. He probably wanted an update on the situation. Laney came back on the line. "Well? Got an update?"

"Sorry. We're fine." She hoped Laney would realize the *we* meant she'd freed Barak from his captors without her having to come right out and say it.

"And you can't talk," Laney said with a sigh.

"Something like that," she replied, knowing the non-answer said everything.

"Are you going to be awhile? Want some company?"

"What did you have in mind?"

"Janice is here."

Britt grinned. Janice was one of her best friends. Sexy as hell, sharp as a tack, and as deadly as Britt. "Hold on." She covered the receiver with her hand and met Barak's gaze. "A friend of mine is visiting."

He cocked an eyebrow. *One of yours? You want to bring her here?*

*Yes. And yes.*

He nodded. "Tell Laney we'll pick up your friend at my family's heliport. Alrik knows the coordinates."

Returning to the phone, she relayed his instructions to Laney and ended the call before returning to the table. Cassandra was smiling. "A friend from Earth?"

"Yes," Britt answered with a smile. There was something about Barak's mother that called to her. She wanted to like her. Hoped that was an emotion she didn't regret later.

"Single?" The question was asked with a casual tone, but Britt sensed excitement under it.

"Yep."

"Another soldier?" One of the brothers, Orrin, asked.

Britt's smile grew broader. "Yes."

He looked at his brother. "This isn't Daggar's city. You need to explain the rules."

Barak sighed and moved his hand to her thigh, squeezed in warning before he spoke. "They're much more liberal in Daggar's city than here."

She stared at him in shock. Liberal? Had he lost his mind?

*This is important, Britt.* She knew he meant not only the rules, whatever they were, but that she not argue with him in front of his brothers.

"What rules?"

"Our women don't speak out of turn," Orrin said.

"They don't go anywhere alone," Falkor added.

"Or armed." Orrin again.

She faced Barak, trying to ignore the claws wrapped around her heart. "This city belongs to your clan, right?"

He nodded.

“And by extension to you?”

He nodded again and interrupted before she could go on. “I can’t change a thousand years of tradition, Britt. I’m not sure if I want to.”

But this cold, stubborn, recalcitrant man had tied her to him and she could only bend so far. “I will *not* go unarmed.”

He actually grinned. “I know. I don’t expect you to.” He turned narrowed, fiercely cold eyes on his brothers. “And the Trace family will defend your right to be armed.”

Reluctantly, they nodded and she almost sagged with relief. Restrained herself, because she refused to appear weak before these two. Plus she knew it was only one concession, knew the rest was still an uphill battle. One look at Barak’s stubborn face and she knew she’d have to save it for later.

The noise from the street grew louder and a door slammed in another part of the house. Everyone stood as a new man strolled into the room. He went straight to Cassandra, leaned over and kissed her. Deeply, the claiming unmistakable. The woman’s eyes closed and when he released her and she opened them, were clouded with passion. Britt wondered if that was what she looked like when Barak kissed her.

Wordlessly, he waved them back into their seats, got a bowl of soup, and took the empty chair on the end of the table. He lowered his spoon, but ignored it as he pinned her under his gaze.

“Your mate?” he asked Barak without looking at him. Barak sat back in his chair and crossed his arms over his chest. Clearly confident and at home with the stronger, more dominant man in the room. Actually, Britt wasn’t sure he was more dominant than Barak.

“Yes,” Barak finally answered. “Britt Anderson. My father. Vasin.”

She’d guessed that already, but she took the opportunity to boldly study him. Instead of bristling under the scrutiny as she’d expected, he grinned.

“Strong,” he said then lifted the spoon to his lips. Swallowed. “That’s okay inside these walls.”

“But not outside them?” she couldn’t resist asking though she felt Barak’s desire for her to not engage his father.

The other man’s eyes went hard. Adamantine. “Outside you follow your mate’s lead. You do as you’re told.”

Mirroring Barak, she crossed her arms over her chest and leaned back. “I’m not Delroi.” *And not likely to jump up and follow any man’s orders*, she thought.

“You will be.”

She couldn’t help the angry laugh that bubbled up. “No, I really won’t.” Shaking her head, she stood up, met his gaze with a determined one of her own. “I may bend a bit. For Barak. No one else. And I’m not leaving my brain or my skills at the door either. Y’all are going to have to learn to adjust your thinking. We didn’t ask to be invaded. We didn’t ask for any of this. Most of us would have kept on fighting. The decision to surrender wasn’t ours.”

She and Laney had argued hard and long over it. Not that it had mattered. Earth’s leadership listened to her. Her intelligence, her instincts, her advice. But ultimately, they did what they wanted. She didn’t wait for him or anyone else to respond to her outburst. Shaking with rage, she left the room, going in the direction he had come from. She was stuck in the house for the time being. It was time to explore it.

## Chapter Four

“Thanks, Dad,” Barak said dryly.

“You should have more control over your woman. There are some rules that can’t be bent. Better she knows that now.”

He felt his mother grow glacially cold at her end of the table.

“Yeah, because that’s made you so happy hasn’t it?” he asked, rubbing salt in an open wound.

Not that he was happy with her defiance or her antagonizing his father. Especially antagonizing his father. Britt knew the Overchief suspected Vasin of organizing the rebels—he’d found the knowledge in her mind, and still she’d let her pride goad her into saying things better left alone. She couldn’t change thousands of years of tradition, couldn’t change an old warrior’s mind about what place their women should hold outside of their homes. She knew that, yet she’d still spoken without thinking ahead, raising his father’s tension level when Barak needed him calm, willing to share information on the clan, willing to tell him how deep the rebellion was in his clan and the city.

And the question still remained, who’d captured him? His father? His father’s enemies? He hadn’t recognized any of the warriors back at Daggar’s palace, but once they had him in Saber City no one had been in his presence without wearing a hood. What were the chances he’d get a straight answer if he just came out and asked his father? The idea of making such a foolhardy step angered him.

Without consciously realizing he’d done it, he’d shared his thoughts with Britt. She mentally muttered a few choice curse words. She was exploring the house, which made him nervous because he didn’t know who might be inside with them. His father was bound to have some of his warriors around. He didn’t seriously fear for her safety inside the house, but he still wanted her back. At his side. Where he could be certain she was safe.

*Come back, Britt.*

*I don’t think so.*

He experienced a bright, brief flare of anger and almost smiled, proud in spite of himself. Prickly. She’d never let any of the males in his family walk all over her, never allow them a dominant role. She’d only bend for him. Was his alone to tame.

“So are you back?” his father asked. “That fostering was only supposed to last a couple years you know.”

Barak considered the question, tried to untangle all the possible undercurrents, all the possible conspiracies. The best course of action. He was the son of the second most powerful warrior clan chief on the planet, his father’s strength second only to Daggar.

As a young man, he’d been sent north to Daggar’s house. To train. To foster an allegiance between the two great houses. His father had intended him to come home with an advantage over Daggar, with the Torfas lulled into a false sense of security. Instead, he’d never returned home.

Rebel leanings were one thing—the Trace family had been known for them long before Barak went north. But actually organizing them into a cohesive, effective group was another thing entirely. It made Barak fear for his people. For his clan. He knew the

Torfas better than most. There might be a way to defeat them, but in the end it would be a bloody, protracted war. A senseless waste of life.

He could stay and try to discover his father's plans. Try to sway the course of his people. Or he could return north. To the place he'd reluctantly learned to call home. Britt would hate it here in the Southern territory. He wasn't sure if he could deal with her being that unhappy. She became a whisper in his mind.

*We'll find a way.* Her mental touch was like an aphrodisiac and he was hard as soon as he felt it.

*I thought you were pissed at me.*

*Now is probably not the best time to remind me.* He'd assuage her anger later.

*I ... need to stay.* Why did he hesitate? She knew already.

*I know.*

"Barak?" his father's voice was hard as he reminded him of the question. He met his gaze. Remembered the hard but affectionate man from his childhood.

He nodded his acceptance. "I'm home."

Vasin smiled, a broad open smile Barak hadn't seen in years. "Good. We'll start in the morning. Maybe I can finally retire."

"Fine."

"Now you better find your mate. Explain things to her."

He struggled to hide his anger at the presumption. His mate was his business. No one else's. His mother spoke, distracting him.

"I had the Gold Suite cleaned for you." Smiling, she stood and brushed her hands off on her legs. "And I better get a room ready for Britt's friend."

It was clear she was happy to have female company in the house and he paused before he left in search of Britt. Pulled his mother into a quick hug and kissed her cheek again. "Thanks, mother," he whispered before leaving the room.

He found Britt on the fourth floor, on the shaded balcony off the suite that had been assigned to them. She didn't react as he approached, leaning back against him when he fit himself against her hips.

"I know you didn't want me to engage him." The apology was there even if she didn't voice it. "It just pissed me off so bad."

He bent his head to nibble a line up her throat. She groaned. "I can't be who y'all want me to be."

"We'll find a compromise," he said gruffly, his cock reminding him painfully of more important matters to discuss. He wondered how well equipped the master bedroom of this suite was. He slid his hands around her body, up to her chest, squeezed her nipples through her shirt.

"Harder." Her demand was enough to restore his control. He stepped away.

"Inside. Take your clothes off and get in bed."

She gave him a look that was full of refusal, but surprised him and turned, went inside. He felt her frustration and anger, but knew she was complying with his wishes. Was goading him into acting. He gripped the balcony's railing hard as she used the mental connection between them to show him what she was doing. Stripping slowly. Stroking her own skin as she went.

She wanted him out of control. Didn't know how dangerous that could be. But he knew if any woman could handle it, it was her. One day he might feel secure enough to

test that theory. That day wasn't today.

When he came in, she was waiting, completely nude and spread out on the bed. He dragged his gaze from her offering and examined the bedposts, exhilaration pulsing through him when he found what he wanted. He pressed the appropriate buttons and panels slid open to reveal the restraints. One by one, he secured her on her back.

She was breathing heavily when he finished with her last limb and stood back to admire his handiwork.

"So fucking beautiful," he murmured as he removed his clothes.

He started on the underside of one foot and slowly trailed his finger up her body. Calf, thigh, hipbone, navel. He felt her confusion, her doubt. Her need for this thing between them to be real. To be permanent. He wasn't sure if she was even aware of it, but he saw it, buried deep, the fear he'd tire of her. Cast her aside.

"Shall we do one of your Earth marriage ceremonies?"

He flicked her nipple with his thumb, watched it harden into a tight point.

"Wh-what?" she stuttered.

He sat on the bed next to her, leaned over to suck her breast into his mouth for a long pull. Despite the bindings, she was able to arch her back. Meeting him. Something in him broke free. *His* woman. Responding as only he could make her.

He rolled over, between her spread legs, halfway down her body. His ribs pushed against her pelvis, against her pussy. Looking up the length of her body, he slowly bent his head for a long lick before meeting her gaze.

"You're *mine*, Britt. There *is* no leaving the other. This is forever. The bond insures it."

"The words ... before they took you."

"Yes. Though that shouldn't have been enough. We already had a connection, you and I."

Britt knew he was talking about their psychic abilities and those abilities had chosen each other whether she liked it or not. The problem was a secret, hidden part of her did like it, craved it. Wanted to drown in it.

"The words?"

"A binding prayer. We use it when we find our *der'lan*."

"What does that mean?"

"Mate of my heart. Quit fretting over it, darlin'. It can't be changed," he whispered against her navel, before slowly kissing his way down.

He didn't stop where she most wanted him, at the juncture between her thighs where her pussy wept its need. Hands slid over her. Lips, tongue. Teeth. Each little nip brought a new wave of desire crashing through her.

"Why flowers?" he asked pressing a kiss to her inner thigh. "And birds. Pretty things," followed by a kiss on the other leg.

She couldn't answer until he moved, vocal cords strangled by his touch. "To remind me," she gasped. "That there are beautiful things in the world no matter all the ugliness."

His tongue stroked down the sensitive side of her knee, flicking the underside. The touch made her jump, brought begging words to her mind. Since when were knees an erogenous zone?

"Your life was always ugly? Your childhood?"

She froze in the deepest part of her mind, a sense of self-preservation finally coming

fully awake. There were things in her past she didn't discuss with anyone. Ever. Some burdens weren't meant to be shared.

He slid up her body and bit the inside of her thigh. Hard. *How long is it going to take you to accept that you're mine? Your body, your heart, your soul. Your secrets.*

*These aren't the kind of secrets that belong in a bed.* With you licking, stroking me to orgasm she didn't add, but he knew anyway.

\*

He sat back on his heels and released the cuffs around her ankles, then leaned forward to do those on her wrists. She couldn't hide the shaft of disappointment and almost demanded to know why he was stopping, but the words wouldn't come. She'd let him put her in a position of powerlessness and she'd liked it. She knew better than to let her guard down so much. So why the hell did she keep doing it? Where was her anger? Her outrage at him for forcing a mental bond on her?

Shaking his head, he gave a rueful smile. "Roll over." She did as he asked and he leaned down, blew a hot breath over her back. "You'll learn to trust me with everything. Sooner and not later, darlin'."

He started at her nape. Kneading, massaging tense muscles. Lips and teeth followed. Set her body on fire. He paused when he got to her waist and she felt his frown in her as he drew a finger across the rose vine that wrapped around here. Complete with thorns.

"Kills?"

She exhaled a deep breath she hadn't realized was pent up. No censure in his voice. In his mind.

"So many," he murmured, setting his lips to each one.

"I was a soldier," she managed to gasp out between fiery brushes of his lips.

"Hmm. Up," he ordered, hands on her hips to guide her.

When she was on her hands and knees, he covered her pussy with his mouth, tongue flicking over her clit before thrusting inside her. She came with shockingly little effort, screaming his name and his satisfaction that she had filling her mind. He held her still, held her up when she would have collapsed. And he didn't stop for a very, very long time. She was shaking violently by the time he finally gave her what she wanted and thrust his cock into her.

Neither of them lasted long. One stroke. Two. Her muscles clamped down so hard around him, he groaned and she was afraid it might have been painful. He opened his mind to her, shared the pleasure as he drove into her, and came, his cum hot and spurting inside her.

He collapsed on top of her, rolled to his side with an arm around her waist to pull her close. She drifted in a haze of pleasure until her brain was once again able to function normally, until she could find the voice to speak.

"What about your tattoos? They have some kind of significance to the clan, don't they?"

"Yes," he answered. His fingers skimmed up and down her arm, reawakening a lust she hadn't believed could return so quickly. "Each section represents training completed. Particular tasks. Family affiliation and rank."

She squirmed until he let her loose enough to roll over and face him. Study him. "Your brothers' are similar to yours but a little different. Yours is like your father's."

He nodded. "Because I'll be the next clan chief."

*Leader of a clan that may be involved with the rebellion.* It made her fear for him. They'd already kidnapped him, tortured him once. She frowned and looked him over. The bruises were already mostly gone. Cuts and scrapes faded into scars. Impossible. God she was really losing it. She should have wondered about this before.

"We have a rejuvenation tank here. I spent a few hours in it last night." His distaste was clear and he spoke so softly she had to edge closer to hear. She'd seen the tanks at Daggar's palace and shared his revulsion. They looked like large glass boxes and were filled with a green gooey substance when occupied. "Normally, I'd just wait to heal on my own. But I can't take the risk at being less than full strength here."

"When are we going to discuss that? How you got here and what the plan is now?"

*You have to tell the Torfas,* she added mentally, unsure if the room was being monitored.

*I will.* "No plan. Let's just take it day by day."

She almost rolled her eyes. *I hope that's your idea of a bad joke.*

He kissed her neck. *There are probably listening devices in here. My father doesn't trust me.*

She groaned. So they had an audience every time he made her scream? That was just freaking wonderful.

He chuckled mentally. *At least they'll know I'm preoccupied with my new mate. Maybe someone will let their guard down.*

Sharp teeth bit her flesh hard enough to mark, to brand. *What happens if we're right, Barak? What if your father—* She couldn't finish the question. Even to her jaded heart it was too horrible. It was one thing to disagree on political ideology with a parent, but to discover they were active participants in treason?

His mind went still and she was afraid he wouldn't answer. Not sure she wanted an answer. *I don't know. I'll deal with that when I have to.*

She wanted to protest the solitude in the statement, the loneliness in his tone, but he kissed her, covering her mouth with his and her thoughts scattered.

His hand closed over her breast as the explosion rocked the house. They broke apart, both jumping up and dressing quickly, before running to the door. She followed him downstairs and into an office. His father and brothers were there, preparing to go out, and Barak grabbed his cloak from a closet. She reached around him and got hers.

## Chapter Five

“You’re staying here, Britt,” he ordered. Not brooking any argument. Dominant.

“Like hell I am.” She glared back.

“There are ways of dealing with recalcitrant mates,” his father said coldly.

“You leave my mate to me.” His voice was icy cold.

She fastened the cloak around her neck and smiled sweetly at everyone in the room.

“I have skills you might find handy,” she reminded Barak.

*Don’t be an ass about this. I may submit to you in bed, but it isn’t happening anywhere else. And I’m a killer, remember? I can take care of myself.*

He stared down at her, but she couldn’t read his expression or his mind. The others in the room she read loud and clear. They were pissed, impatient to get moving, and wanted Barak to put her in her place. She would never forgive him if he tried.

Suddenly, he spun on his heel and walked to a cabinet that took up one wall. He opened it and took out a rifle. She scowled. “That’s one of ours. Looks just like mine actually,” she said after he handed it to her and she ran her hand over the stock.

“It is yours,” he said, handing her a magazine, voice full of censure. She’d had the rifle smuggled to Delroi with her but when she’d gone to retrieve it, it was gone. Now she knew why. But when and why had he sent it here? She inserted the magazine and chambered a round without it thinking about it, out of habit. She felt the disapproval of the others in the room, Barak’s anger at her and himself. “There’s a good sniper position on the way. I’ll tell you where to peel off.”

“Absolutely not,” his father said.

Barak turned that cold, furious gaze on his father. “It would be stupid not to take advantage of her presence. She goes.”

Oh, but he was going to make her pay later. She saw it in his eyes when he turned back to her. “Don’t kill anyone unless you have to. I need someone alive to question.”

Her heart was beating triple time and she knew her voice would shake if she answered, so she just nodded. He kept her at his side out in the streets. They could see the smoking ruin of a building ahead and quickened the pace. She glanced up as they went. There were warriors on every rooftop, some armed with long rifles, some with the high-tech weapons she’d seen them use on Earth.

Falkor stepped up beside her. She felt his intent to protect his brother’s mate whether Barak or she approved or not. She almost laughed. They really had no idea who they were dealing with. Barak never had her seek a sniper position. The roofs were all well covered. People were pouring out of the building when they arrived.

There was a big chunk of it missing near the top, as if a giant monster had taken a bite from it. “What is this place?”

“Clan headquarters,” Vasin said darkly, fury evident in his eyes and tone.

She looked around. “I see other women here,” she pointed out.

He stepped close enough to hiss in her ear and Barak tensed. “None of them are mated to the next clan chief. Your presence is distracting him.”

She searched Barak’s mind, wondering if his father spoke the truth, and found his determination to keep her safe burning brightly in his mind. *I can take care of myself.*



*You shouldn't have to.*

She nodded at Vasin. "I think we'll have to argue about that another time."

Vasin sent Falkor and Orrin off to deal with the casualties, then walked with her and Barak to the building. They went up several steps to reach the floor of origin. The destruction was extensive.

"Not like the last time," she said to Barak, referring to an Earth bomb that had been used in Daggar's Royal Palace several weeks previously.

"No," he answered curtly, rummaging through a pile of rubble before holding up the detonator. "This one is ours."

"And I do mean *ours*," he added when his father held his hand out for it.

Vasin uttered a Delroi word under his breath that Britt took to be the equivalent of fuck.

Britt picked her way through the rubble to where they stood and took the device when Vasin handed it her way. There was Delroi writing on it, and what was left of a carving of the big cat they called a saber. Barak's clan symbol. She arched an eyebrow when she handed it back to him. "You make your own bombs?"

There was a rustling sound from behind them and she leaned to the side to see what it was. The knife was in her hand without a conscious thought, and remembering Barak's admonishment not to kill anyone, she aimed for the attacking warrior's shoulder at the last split second before release. She was smaller and quicker than Barak and Vasin, and she reached him first. In time to kick the gun out of his grip when he tried to lift it. She squatted down next to him and seeing the pain in his eyes, fingered the hilt of the knife.

"Hurts like a bitch, huh?"

Shock that a woman had attacked him showed clearly on his face and he lifted his hand as if to pull the blade out. She tsked. "Oh, I wouldn't do that without a healer's assistance." She looked up as Orrin and Falkor entered the room. Grinned ferally. "That blade is serrated. You think it's bad now? Try and pull it out on your own."

"Poisoned?" he whispered.

Standing, she shrugged. "Could be." She pretended to think it over. "Funny, I can't remember if I poisoned that one or not."

Then Barak was pulling her back so he could kneel next to the man. "Too bad if it isn't poisoned."

The attacker's eyes narrowed in recognition. "So the son has finally returned."

Barak moved back so he could sit up. Britt crossed her arms over her chest and looked at the others. Falkor and Orrin had that hard look of all Delroi warriors with murder in their eyes, and Vasin's face was one of such fury she had to force herself not to flinch from it. Barak alone appeared outwardly calm, but she felt his hidden emotions. Dark rage. The need to exact vengeance. To protect his people. Her. She scowled as she shifted through his thoughts. He'd only allowed her to come because he believed the worst danger was over.

*We'll discuss that later.* His mental voice was furious with her. *While I hold you over my knee.*

She shut down her mind, the mental images he shared too arousing when they should have pissed her off.

"Falkor, take her home."

She glared up at him. "I want to hear what he has to say."

He wrapped his hand around the nape of her neck and pulled her close, leaned close to whisper in her ear. "If you think I won't spank you for insubordination here in front of everyone, you are sorely mistaken."

She entered his mind like she'd been doing it for years. Found fury, and buried under that, fear. He knew what he was asking went against her instincts. Hurt her pride. A soft sensuous whisper promised to make it up to her later. She pressed a kiss to his chest and stepped back.

"I need to get Janice."

After a brief hesitation, he nodded, met his brother's gaze. "Stop and get her friend. She should be arriving soon. You know where."

Falkor nodded and she picked her way through the rubble to the door. He took her elbow and she looked over her shoulder, met Barak's gaze before leaving. Such anger. Heat. Promise. Shivering, she let Falkor lead her out of the building and back to the street.

They didn't turn back to the house so she presumed they were going to the heliport. He was quiet, his mind a chaotic combination of anger, distrust, confusion.

"You friend is another soldier?" he finally asked.

"Yes."

"Another one we'll have to protect from her own rash behavior."

She almost corrected him. Pointed out she could defend herself and he'd seen the proof of it, but knew it was pointless. "Yes."

The short answer seemed to mollify him. He huffed, but didn't speak again for several seconds. When he did, she knew it was a concession of sorts. "I think I see my brother's fascination with you."

She fell silent, considering the curiosity she felt from him instead of indulging the rash urge to egg him on.

*Don't goad him, Britt.* Barak's voice was commanding enough to set her teeth on edge. Now that she had some space from him she couldn't believe she'd followed his orders with so little fight. What the hell was he doing to her? The voice turned sensual. Invisible fingers seemed to caress her. *Whatever I want and you love every minute of it.*

She gave him a mental shrug, one meant to discourage his teasing without being bitchy. She changed the subject. *How's it going there?*

*Strange. This looks like a rebel attack on my clan using our own arms.*

*So there are factions inside the clan. Where does that leave your family?*

*I don't know yet. That's a conversation that will have to wait for privacy.*

They rounded a corner and she saw the shuttle sweeping low in between buildings to land in the clear area before them. *Shuttle's here.*

A fleeting sensation of fingers on her cheek. *I'll see you back at the house.*

Falkor was giving her an odd look. "Barak?"

She nodded, not seeing a point in denying his supposition. She shifted on her feet while the ramp lowered, anticipation at seeing her old friend making her impatient, and bit back a laugh when she appeared. Three hulking warriors trailed her, carrying her bags, and looking shell-shocked. Falkor looked sucker-punched for a brief moment, but covered it quickly with a scowl when the group stopped in front of them.

Janice gave him her patented brilliant smile. Britt doubted anyone noticed the flash of annoyance in her eyes when it didn't work on him. He took the bags from the other

warriors and glared until they left, while Janice linked her arm through Britt's. She turned towards the house.

"What are you doing here?" Britt asked. "Not that I'm not thrilled to see you, but you know, not exactly your kind of place."

An elegant one-shouldered shrug. "Can't a girl travel the galaxy and visit her friends?"

*What's the real reason?* Like most of the spies Britt had worked with over the years, Janice had some psychic abilities. Unlike most of the others, hers were extremely strong.

*I dunno.* There was a mental shrug in the reply. *It was just one of those gut instincts I followed.*

Britt nearly groaned aloud. Shit. Janice was drawn to danger like a bee to honey, and was infamous for following the instincts that landed her smack in the middle of it. Normally, Britt or Laney would cheerfully follow her into it, but there was nothing normal about Delroi or the current situation.

*Our escort is a sensitive.* Janice stated.

Startled at the observation, wondering why the hell she hadn't realized that, Britt looked over her shoulder and met Falkor's gaze. He couldn't eavesdrop on their private conversation but it was obvious from his calculating expression he knew it was taking place. Damn.

*Is everyone in your family psychic?* She reached out and asked Barak.

A put upon mental sigh as he moved through her mind. *You should have warned me about your friend, then I could have warned you.*

*Hell, I've never even heard of a family of psychics. You should have warned me anyway.*

*It's not all of us. Just me and Falkor.*

*And he's the one you sent with me?* She couldn't hide the suspicion in her mind and he snapped back.

*Don't even think it. If there's a chance I can trust any of them, it's probably him.*

He receded from her mind, but left a stamp of anger behind. She pressed her lips together, her own anger bubbling up.

"Well?" Janice asked innocently.

"Don't trust anyone," she responded softly, knowing Falkor would hear her. Wanting him to hear the warning in her tone. She wouldn't trust them and they shouldn't trust her. She looked at him again and his eyes were narrowed, glittering with emotion she couldn't define. Then he nodded.

"Good advice," he said softly, so low she thought she might have mistaken his words.

Okay, things were just getting weird now. She was relieved when they reached the house and Cassandra ushered them in and up to the suite she'd assigned Janice on the floor below hers and Barak's. The two women seemed to immediately hit it off and why not? They were both tall and beautiful with an understated elegance Britt had always found mystifying.

She settled in a chair and watched the two chat as they unpacked Janice's bags. The door creaked open and she and Janice both went on alert, though an observer probably wouldn't have noticed. Falkor was not an average witness, however, and his smile was sardonic as he entered.

“There’s some kind of problem in the kitchen,” he told his mother.

“Oh, well.” She wiped her palms against her thighs. Britt remembered she’d done that earlier and wondered if it was just habit or a sign of nerves. Cassandra included both women in her smile. “I’ll leave you two to finish.”

Falkor stepped out of the way so she could pass and softly shut the door behind her. Britt’s alert status went to high and she slowly stood, shifted so she had room to maneuver if necessary. He didn’t miss the action, gave her look full of disdain.

“I’d never harm my brother’s woman.”

She arched an eyebrow. Right now he sure looked like he wanted to. But his focus shifted, his eyes a little less cold, to look at Janice. He approached her slowly, like a big hunting cat. When he stopped in front of her he reached out with one hand to finger the ends of her sleek chin length bob. The back of his hand brushed her cheek. “Beautiful,” he murmured.

Janice looked at her and hid her astonishment almost before Britt saw it. Britt knew it wasn’t the admiration that surprised Janice. She heard that often enough, had men twisted around her little finger with no work at all. It made her damned good at gathering information. The touch had done something to her, though. Britt gave Falkor a sharp look, studied his face. He was not wearing the besotted expression Britt was used to seeing on men around Janice. He was in complete, total control of himself. And for some reason that control was focused on Janice. She had a sinking suspicion she knew why.

“Stay near me tonight,” he ordered before turning on his heel and slamming the door behind him.

When they were alone, Janice let the social butterfly mask fall. She held her hand to her face where he’d touched her. “Why do I feel like I’ve just been marked?”

Britt groaned, wondered how to explain. She wasn’t leaving her friend out to dry with no information the way Laney and Kendall had done to her.

“The men on this planet have a way of binding women to them.” She frowned. “I need to find out how that works. Anyway, they say some words. And there’s the sex.” She met Janice’s incredulous gaze. “I’m not joking. Be *very* careful around him.”

“When his skin touched mine, I felt him brush against my mind. He shouldn’t be able to get access to my thoughts unless I grant it.”

Britt didn’t have an answer for the unvoiced question. “The normal rules don’t seem to apply here. With them.”

“Well, fuck. I should have stayed where I was.”

Britt wanted to laugh and did when the other woman grinned. “Course, there’d be no fun in that would there?”

She sensed Barak’s return and had to fight the urge to go to him. It wasn’t that difficult. Anger was a black cloud in his mind and a great deal of it was directed at her. Not only did that not make sense, it pissed her off. A sigh blew through her mind. *I’m sorry. I know none of this has to do with you.*

She didn’t respond, didn’t let him feel her pleasure at his apology, the stroke of his voice in her mind. If Janice sensed the exchange, she didn’t let on.

“What’s with their tattoos?”

“Rite of passage thing as near as I can tell. It’s only the southern warriors that have them.”

Janice nodded. “I figured. Didn’t see many at Laney’s.”

Barak didn't bother knocking any more than his brother had. Not that it mattered. She'd felt him moving towards her, known the moment his hand touched the door handle, and turned to face him when he entered. He walked right up to her, wrapped a hand around the back of her neck, hauled up against his chest, and kissed the hell out of her. She was panting when he finally released her, knew she must look as dazed as she felt. *Not fair*, she whispered in his mind.

He gave her a sexy grin. Images tumbled from his mind into hers. Her bound. Panting. Screaming for him to fuck her already. Her body responded against her will, nipples tight and aching, pussy wet and wanting.

"Your friend?" he reminded her softly they weren't alone in the room just as the idea of flinging all her clothes off and jumping him rose.

She blushed and was mortified, met Janice's gaze and read her without needing to use a mental connection. These Delroi men were dangerous. With the right one, you forgot all about caution, all about the horrors of the past that had turned you into the cynical, cautious creature in the first place.

"Janice Hawkins," she introduced her, glad her voice didn't match the erratic beating of her heart. "This is Barak Trace. My..." What the hell was he? Lover? Ally? He growled in her mind. "Friend," she finished.

She knew he was more than that, but wasn't ready to acknowledge that so publicly yet. His hand squeezed on the back of her neck, but he didn't correct her or add to her statement.

"There will be several people here tonight." He glanced at the clock on the wall. "You have about an hour to get ready."

Janice looked down at her long sleeved silk blouse and tailored pants, and arched an eyebrow when she looked up. "What's appropriate?"

Pressing his lips together, he shook his head. "You should be fine. Stay near us tonight," he warned.

Then taking Britt's hand, he pulled her towards the door. *Hey, she just got here. I can't abandon her now.*

*She'll be okay for an hour. I need you.*

That need gripped her, shook her. Became her own. Looking over her shoulder, she met Janice's amused expression. "See you in an hour."

## Chapter Six

Falkor waited until his brother left the room with Britt before moving back into position as its guard. He made sure he wasn't seen, but he doubted he'd been able to hide his presence from Barak. His mental abilities were similar, cursed or blessed depending on how you saw it, with the ability to sense when psychics were using their powers nearby.

Mating seemed to have strengthened Barak's abilities and Falkor was stunned that he could reach out to touch Janice's mind. It made sense though. The bond would forge a strong mental path between them. And she was his. He'd known the moment she exited the shuttle and her secretive grey eyes met his eyes.

He stood outside her door and struggled to keep his control, his composure. As second born, he was the third most powerful warrior in the city. Letting anyone see him this affected by a woman would erode the image of strength he'd cultivated so long. In the north it might not have mattered so much, but in the south, life was full of danger and intrigue. Conspiracy

He leaned back against the wall and crossed his arms over his chest. He'd hoped to get a few minutes with Barak, to feel him out, but hadn't had the chance. When he'd opened the door last night, wondering who the hell was out there so late at night, he'd been shocked at Barak's appearance and bullied him into the rejuvenation tank.

It was a measure of how bad off he was that he'd allowed it. The woman had been dead on her feet and so was he, but Barak refused to budge until she'd been secured and asleep, and he had the key to the room. No one else. Whatever his brother was up to, it almost got him killed and the woman was obviously his.

Barak hadn't said a word about who'd beat him so badly or how they got their hands on him. Falkor could guess but this was the absolute worst time for guessing games. The war was escalating. Where did Barak stand? Was he a rebel? Or still loyal to the House of Torfa, the Overchief? And where did his loyalties as far as the clan went go?

He glanced at the time display on his communicator. He'd give it another fifteen minutes before he went up and tried to feel him out. Barak said he was back, but Falkor needed to know why. If Barak didn't share his beliefs, he might try to approach the Overchief on his own. He didn't want to do that. Didn't want to share his suspicions of his own family with Daggar and his people. But he also couldn't stand by and watch his clan destroyed because of his father's greed for power. He clenched his fists. There was the possibility that even if Barak and Britt believed him, they wouldn't act. He had no proof.

The door opened, jerking him out of his thoughts, and she poked her head out the door frowning. "Would you quit thinking so loud?"

Slowly, he straightened and stepped over, setting one hand on the doorframe and reaching up to finger the ends of her hair again with the other. He couldn't say why the fine blonde hair was so fascinating, but it was. It took a moment for her words to register and he answered carefully, cautiously.

"Was I?"

"Yes." Still scowling but her grey eyes went dark with awareness of him.

“And what was I thinking?”

Sighing, she let her grip on the door go so it opened wide and moving away from him, leaned on the other side of the frame. “It doesn’t work that way. It’s like this loud buzzing in my head, and emotion. Worry, mostly.”

He couldn’t help but stare at her. She was tall, sleekly muscled. The most beautiful woman he’d ever seen. And she was *his*. His cock grew hard. He wanted her under him, moving with him, crying out as she came.

Her hand went to her throat and she blushed. “I *saw* that. That shouldn’t be possible. I haven’t invited you into my mind.”

He smiled, reached out mentally, and imagined stroking her breasts, sucking her nipples. She gasped and they tightened into hard points visible through her thin shirt.

“Stop that,” she snapped, but there was only heat and no bite in it.

He stepped closer, close enough that her chest brushed his. Bracing his hands on the doorframe above her, he bent his head just as the pre-set alarm on his communicator beeped. Damn. He had to speak to Barak alone. But first...

“Just a taste to hold me over,” he whispered before his lips brushed hers.

She didn’t open her mouth for him and the part of him that refused to be denied anything by this woman rose up to take over. He tugged her bottom lip between his teeth until she opened for him, let him sweep his tongue inside her mouth and take her over. Sweet. Yet tangy. He felt, tasted, the fierce woman heat of her. Remembered Britt had said she was a solidier also. As if the kiss opened her mind to give him full access, he slid in and knew that claim for a lie. She was like his new sister-in-law. Spy. Assassin. Trained killer with lethal beauty. Lethal grace. It made him even harder to possess such a woman. She gasped and he knew he’d shared the thought. He felt the need to escape in her mind and tensed, the primitive heart in him ready to give chase. To pounce. To take.

She glared but didn’t try to move away from him and he breathed a sigh of relief. “No one owns me,” she said sharply.

His communicator beeped again and he pushed the button to acknowledge the alarm before reaching out to brush her hair off her face. “That’s where you’re wrong, sweetheart. You’re mine.” He remembered the warriors panting over her earlier. “And I don’t share.”

“We’ll see about that.”

“You’re not on Earth.” He gently gripped her upper arms to emphasize his point, was almost distracted by the soft woman heat of her. “Behave. Or I’ll be forced to prove it before you’re ready.”

Instead of responding to the promise, she stepped backwards into her room and slammed the door in his face. He laughed rather than give into the urge to batter the door down and turn of over his knees. *Life just got a lot more interesting*, he thought to himself. Something soft thudded against the door. *And maybe more dangerous*. But it was with a sharp grin that he set off for his brother’s room. She was more pissed at her response to him than his claim.

He knocked on his brother’s door and stepped back to wait. They’d had twenty minutes and judging by Barak’s mood when he returned the bond was demanding a quick coupling. After several minutes, he opened it wearing only pants. Maybe Falkor had miscalculated.

“We need to talk.”

Barak hesitated, but finally nodded and ushered him in. It was the heir's suite and no one had stayed in it in years. He looked around and remembered it was called the Gold Suite because of the preponderance of muted yellows and beiges in the rooms. It was ugly and he was glad it wasn't his.

"I need to redecorate," Britt said as she entered and seeing the same distaste on her face that he felt, he nodded.

"Yes. Soon."

She gave him a sunny smile that took him aback and put up his guard. "The view from the balcony is incredible though. Have you seen it?" She motioned with her head to follow him and he looked to Barak for guidance. She was his woman after all. His brother was grinning and shaking his head.

"She's right. You should see it."

Falkor was just as shocked at Barak's behavior as hers. Where had his hardass, rough-as-stone brother gone? One look at him, and the Barak he knew was back. No longer open. All cold killer. Falkor actually breathed a sigh of relief when he saw it. It was one thing if the woman softened him privately, but he couldn't put his guard down for a minute in front of others. He stepped around him to follow Britt outside and said softly as he passed, "Be more careful, brother."

Britt was leaning in the back corner of the balcony, wall behind her and one arm propped on the railing. The smiling woman from earlier was gone. In her place stood the assassin he'd glimpsed earlier. His brother had found himself a dangerous mate and while earlier he'd felt nothing but contempt that Barak couldn't control her, he now realized that might be impossible. Not to mention Britt was a serious asset, one other warriors would be completely unaware of.

Barak shut the door behind him and reluctantly Falkor turned to face him, not sure who was the more dangerous to have at his back. It was damned strange to look at a woman as a threat and he resented the hell out of it. Barak cocked an eyebrow and crossed his arms over his chest. He knew exactly what Falkor was thinking.

"It's a bit unnerving, isn't it?"

He nodded his acknowledgement.

"Why are you here?" Barak asked.

"You never explained what happened last night."

Barak's expression completely closed, glacier cold.

"You haven't earned that kind of trust," Britt drawled behind him.

He spun around to face her, and only managed to keep his posture non-aggressive because he felt his brother's anger and resolve behind him. "I might be the only one you can trust here."

"Dad?" Barak asked, the question quiet and unyielding.

"Is playing with fire he should stay the hell away from," he snapped before thinking. Instantly regretted it. Barak could be just as sympathetic to the rebel cause as their father. Or he could be more loyal to the Overchief than the Saber clan. Both were unacceptable.

"You're sure?" Britt asked. He saw something dark and predatory move in her eyes. Knew without a doubt this was the wrong woman to cross.

He was silent a long time and they waited him out. A team. Would he and Janice be like that? He thrust the thought from his mind. He wouldn't drag her into this.

"I'm not," he finally answered.



"That doesn't help us much," she replied but she was looking over his shoulder, not talking to him.

He faced his brother. "Why did you return? Why now?"

"Did you expect to get my place?"

Falkor laughed. It had become a stronger possibility with each passing year, but he sure as hell didn't want it. "If you'd delayed much longer I would have dragged you home myself."

He felt Britt's relief. Either the emotion was very strong or the connection with Janice was enhancing his abilities. He saved it to mull over later and decided to take a big risk.

"I was born to be your man. Your right hand. I need to know how much being up north, with the Torfas, changed the brother I knew."

"You're asking for a lot of trust."

"Trust takes time," Britt added.

"We don't have time," he responded to them both, turning to meet her gaze also. "If we did, I would tell *you* the same. A woman from Earth. An assassin."

Her lips curved in the slightest smile and she nodded. "Conceded."

He looked back at Barak. "The needs of the clan come first. Before all the petty political garbage."

"Agreed."

"You're really staying?" He hadn't been sure earlier. It had sounded like Barak gave his father the answer he wanted for other reasons, alternative reasons.

"I am." He looked at Britt and Falkor knew there were a lot of things being kept from him. "The clan's loyalty will always be to the Torfas."

She responded with a curt nod and didn't speak.

"Who's going to be here tonight? Who do you trust?"

It was an odd question. They'd been raised to trust no one.

"Oh, you can do better than that," Britt said as she walked around him to stand in front of Barak, as if she'd read his confusion.

Barak circled her waist with his arms and she leaned back into him. Falkor experienced a powerful hunger. He wanted that. Wanted all that trusting gesture implied. He shared the image with Janice. Felt her startle at the mental touch, maybe soften a bit towards him. It settled the primitive part of his soul. It was enough for now.

"The minor clan leaders, their *der'lans*, some of their top men. The usual crowd."

"Yeah, but I haven't seen most of these people in twenty years."

Falkor saw the meaning under his words. So he wouldn't remember them, wouldn't know them or remember their loyalties or beliefs. "I'll stick close."

"What about Orrin?" It was the question he'd been dreading. He could prove Orrin was active in the rebellion.

"Don't trust him." It was a horrible thing not being able to trust your brother, did funny and uncomfortable things to his heart. Janice reached out to him, soothing mental fingers brushing against his brow that brought his cock back to aching hardness. He struggled for control. Of his breathing. Of the overwhelming lust.

"Proof?" Britt asked and he reluctantly nodded. Her eyes changed, the assassin receding for a moment and she spoke almost too softly to hear, "I'm sorry."

There was a knock on the inner door, loud enough they could all hear it outside.

Barak set his hand on the outside handle. “You remember the secret tunnel?”

They’d played here as kids, he and Barak, and discovered all its secrets. Secrets they’d shared with no one else. Orrin was the annoying younger brother they often hid from, along with their father, mother, and a string of trainers.

“Go,” Barak said, opening the door and Falkor preceded him, went straight to the hidden panel in the master bedroom and left.

## Chapter Seven

“Can he be trusted?” Britt asked and he looked down into that perfect face. The one that fueled every single fantasy he’d ever had. Not just sex, but family. Home. Peace. He’d do anything to preserve the safety of the woman at his side.

“I think so.”

The knock came again, louder this time, and he motioned her to stay back as he opened the door.

“Finally,” was the grumbled reply from a man who was vaguely familiar. Someone he should *know*. He walked around Barak, came into the room, and nudged the door shut. Then he broke out in a wide grin. “‘Bout damned time you came home.”

And then he knew, recognizing the boy in the name. “Roarr. All grown up, I see,” he joked. They were the same age. Like Barak, he was a clan heir. He, Falkor, and Barak were close as kids, closer as teenagers when warrior training got seriously brutal. Barak couldn’t remember when they’d lost touch, but it was years ago.

The other man immediately sobered. “Unfortunately.”

“That bad?”

Roarr shrugged. “Things were always intense here. Now they’re more so.”

He looked around the room, his glance skimming over Britt, before mouthing, “safe to talk?”

Barak shook his head and led the way to the balcony. Britt followed and he pulled her close, loved the way she snuggled into his arms as if finally understanding his need to be in constant contact with her, to protect her.

Roarr reached into his pocket and Barak tensed, immediately on alert. The other man smiled slightly, shook his head, but only pulled out a communicator. He handed it over. “From Alrik.” Daggar’s brother and second in command. “Untraceable, but don’t use it near here. We don’t know what kind of surveillance equipment is in or around the house.”

Barak stared. He vetted all of his people personally and Roarr wasn’t one of them. This was either a very complicated game or Alrik had sources he didn’t know about. Neither sat well with him.

Roarr looked at Britt with a quizzical expression. “I’m supposed to tell you to walk softly but stick with a rifle. What the hell does that *mean*?”

She relaxed in his arms and laughed. “Old Army joke. A couple of centuries ago there was a politician on Earth who said walk softly and carry a big stick. It means Laney trusts you.”

“Weird way of saying it,” he grumbled but Barak could tell he wasn’t stupid. He’d known it was some kind of code. He gave Barak a sharp look. “And I’m supposed to tell you, and I quote, ‘I hope you know what the fuck you’re doing.’”

He snorted. “That’ll be Alrik.”

As the Overchief’s Spymaster he reported to both Daggar and Alrik, who ran the armies, but mostly Alrik. He was one of the few men Barak considered a friend and was aware of his reluctance to return home. His reticence at taking over the clan one day. Word had spread very quickly if they’d already heard he was here.

Of course, Daggar wouldn't have sent her down here alone. He frowned at the top of her head. "Who came to the city with you?" And why had they left her unprotected when she came in after him?

"Jaxon. He was going to meet us at the shuttle."

He felt sorrow in her mind. She was certain he'd been on it when it exploded. Barak had his doubts. Jaxon was one of his best men. He'd probably covered their rear and gone in search of shelter when he saw them enter the house. She twisted her head to look up at him.

"You think so?"

He nodded.

"Good. I'd hate to think we got him killed."

His arms tightened around her. *He's a warrior. He knew the risks.*

Roarr was watching her with interest. "She's Earthling."

"Yes, she is," Britt snapped. "She also has a name and can speak for herself."

Roarr arched an eyebrow, his expression clearly asking if Barak was going to put up with a sarcastic, prickly woman. But he liked her thorns. Didn't think he could curb her even if he tried. He bent his head and bit her neck. *Behave.*

*Make me.*

He felt a surge of such *life* at the challenge. He knew he was the only man in the universe who could take her on, who could tame her. He heard her outraged mental gasp and grinned.

"Britt is my *der'lan*. Earthling, and yes, mouthy."

"I'll get you for that," she whispered.

"I look forward to it." *I like your mouth. I have these fantasies about it.*

He imagined her kissing him, leaving a teasing trail down his body to his cock. Imagining thrusting inside her mouth, the wet warmth of it, the maddening suction of her lips. She went very quiet in his arms then blew out a long shaky breath.

"Is there anything else that can't wait? We have to get ready for this dinner thing."

Roarr studied them both for a long moment before grinning. He knew he was being kicked out, suspected why. He stepped around them and grabbed the door handle.

"Nothing that can't wait. I'll see myself out."

\*

Britt waited until she heard the inner door shut before turning in Barak's arms. She stared at his face, wondering why she couldn't figure him out. He may be Delroi, but he was still a man. He shouldn't be that complicated.

He was exactly the type she stayed away from. Dominant. Commanding. Bossy. Pure alpha. Why then did he incite this wild sexual craving? He'd just insulted her, then imagined her servicing him, and she still wanted him. She must have lost her damned mind.

"But you like it," he whispered against her ear.

He was in her mind again. No, that wasn't right. He never left her mind. She slid her hands under his shirt, up his back, and then dragged her nails down in punishment. It backfired. She'd known it would. His body shuddered.

"Again," he demanded. "Harder."

She gave him what he wanted, told herself it was only because she wanted the same thing. She scratched him harder and when she reached his lower back, gripped the bottom

of his shirt and pulled it up. He lifted his arms, allowed her to pull it over his head.

Setting her palms on his chest, she leaned forward and licked him. His skin was hot. Salty. She couldn't seem to get enough of the feel him, the taste of him. Groaning, she moved closer, pressing her belly against his erection and grinding against him. It wasn't nearly enough to assuage the ache in her core. She needed him so powerfully she shook with the force of it. It scared the hell out of her, but she couldn't seem to stop.

He picked her up. "C'mon, baby. Inside."

In the bedroom, he set her on her feet and took off his clothes while her fingers fumbled on hers. She could only stare at him. His hard tattooed body fascinating, his jutting cock making her mouth water.

He pushed a hidden pressure plate on the wall and panels slid back to reveal more restraints and her pussy clenched. These people took hedonistic pleasure seriously. She tried to search his mind, figure out what he was planning, but he'd blocked her some way. It pissed her off, but she was too caught up in the lust to get worked up over it.

"Off," he said with a tug on her shirt and she was standing before him naked before she knew it.

His kiss was rough, plundering, over too quick before he had her pressed back against the wall, fastening the cuffs.

"We don't have time for this," she whispered, desperately hoping he didn't care.

He grinned. "We're newly mated. No one expects us to show up on time."

He stood in front of her, his face turning thoughtful. "I wonder how you respond to pain?"

She sucked in a deep breath, alarm spiking in her mind, and buried her dirty little secret as deep as she could. Unlike her friend Kendall, she wasn't a submissive, so she'd never understood where her dark needs had come from. Where or when she'd started to associate pain with sexual pleasure. And not just a little pain. That would be one thing. But she'd been trained as a spy, as an assassin, and to withstand torture. She could take a lot before breaking.

He walked to a cabinet she hadn't explored yet and keyed in a security code. It was far enough across the room she couldn't get a good look at its contents. But when he returned to her he had a cane in his hands. Her groan was one of pure need. He bent over her and pushed two fingers into her pussy.

"It excites you," he breathed.

She didn't respond. It wasn't as if she could deny the evidence he was licking off his fingers. He set the tip of the cane on the inside of her foot and slowly dragged it up her leg. She shivered, nothing but lust and anticipation in her mind.

He seemed to take forever to get started, but finally, finally he snapped the cane against her inner thigh. Not hard, barely a tap. There wasn't even a biting sting to it, but it made her tremble.

"Should I stop?"

"No," she ordered harshly. "Harder."

He held her gaze, watched her face, as he brought the cane down hard enough to sting. Smiled at the pleasure that flushed her face. Leaning forward, he bit her bottom lip.

"I'm going to enjoy marking you."

Then he stepped back and really got started. Concentrating first on her thighs, he brought the cane down hard several times before moving up her body, over her belly, the

undersides of her breasts. She trembled at the deliciously painful strokes. Cried out with one particularly hard slap, her body convulsing with the orgasm, cunt clenching in response. She almost wept at being unfilled.

And then he was against her, penetrating her so deeply, with so much possession and tenderness that she did cry. The tears didn't stop through her next orgasm or when his roar of release filled her mind. He stayed pressed against her for a long time, kissing the wetness off her cheeks. Then he was releasing her, caught her when she stumbled and carried her into the bathroom.

"Do you always respond like that?" he asked, sitting on the side of the tub and adjusting the water.

She nodded. Embarrassed. "They try to break you during training. It didn't affect me in quite the way anyone expected."

He helped her step into the water, moved into position behind her so she could lean back against his broad chest. The water was hot. Soothing. She closed her eyes and tried to ignore the shame crawling through her now that the session was over.

"Don't do that," he said softly. "There's nothing shameful in what we do together."

She nodded, not trusting her voice to respond. His hands were on her breasts, kneading, squeezing to emphasize his point. "Don't punish yourself for liking what I do to you. I'm the only one who gets to punish you," he sucked the skin on her neck between his teeth. "And baby, it will never be for finding pleasure between us."

His cock was hard again, pressing insistently at her ass and she wondered what it would feel like to have him there. Would it hurt? If it did she knew she'd like it. He groaned, lifted her and turned her so she straddled him. Entered her smoothly, a long slow stroke.

"I will take your ass. You'll love it. Maybe later tonight."

Damn it, she kept forgetting he was in her head. He laughed softly, thrust slowly. She was already tightening around him, the orgasm already building inside her.

"You have full access to my mind too."

She found it hard to keep the complaint out of her voice as the speed of his thrusts increased, as the pleasure grew. "You blocked me earlier."

"Only because it was about giving you pleasure and wanting to keep it a surprise. After you saw the cane, my mind was open."

He was right. She'd felt his arousal during the caning along with her own, but she was having a hard time concentrating on the thought, on the conversation. She leaned in, put her mouth on his. Gaspd her pleasure when he opened for her, tongue pushing into her mouth, and took over. One hand tightly gripped her hip, the other the nape of her neck, as he pushed her higher, farther, hurtling her towards an orgasm she wanted to delay, to drag out.

*No. Come for me now.*

The whispered mental command was all it took and her body took over, trembling with the explosion of pleasure, his mouth on hers swallowing her cries. He was still hard inside her and stood easily. She moaned in complaint when he withdrew, but he simply slapped her ass and positioned her against the countertop. Hands braced in its edge, she held her breath and waited for him to enter her.

"Don't move." Another slap to emphasize the order. Another spike of lust. He left the room and she fought the urge to follow him, order him to fuck her *now damn it*. He

wouldn't leave her like this. Still wet and needy.

She almost protested when he returned and she saw what he had, but bit it back. She tried to lie to herself by saying she'd brought it on by imagining anal sex. But she knew better. The curiosity was too great to not indulge.

The size of the anal plug made her nervous though. Weren't you supposed to work up to anal play? It was several inches long, the narrow tip progressively widening to a fat bulbous base. Then again it was much smaller than his cock and if he planned to put it in her ass any time soon... She cut off the thought when she caught his reflection in the mirror. The smug grin.

He set his hand on her back, gently pushed her down. "Forward. Slide up on your elbows."

She obeyed. Held her breath as he opened the tube of lubrication and squirted some on his fingers. Pushed one, then two in. She felt filled, stretched. He moved them back and forth a moment, and the friction was so good she whimpered and tried to move with him. It was over too soon.

She watched in the mirror as he lubed up the toy then squirted some around her hole, spread it around with his finger. Then the hard toy was pushing against her. Sliding in. Meeting resistance. He was slow, but insistent and the toy slid passed the muscle ringing her anus. Pain bloomed in her mind, flooding her pussy with arousal. She tried to move into it, but he held her still.

"Slowly. Relax, baby."

She tried and then it was all the way inside, the pain receding but the pleasure still there. So intense it was painful. "Fuck me, Barak," she tried to make it an order. Knew it came out a plea.

His cock brushed her entrance and he met her gaze in the mirror before pushing inside. She was so damned filled up that it was almost enough to make her come.

*Not yet*, he whispered in her mind.

Then he started to move, fast, furious thrusts. God, he was killing her with pleasure. She tried to fight the orgasm, like he'd demanded, but he moved one hand around her body, fingers plucked her clit. She came so hard her vision went black and she struggled to remain conscious.

It took several minutes to realize he'd stopped moving, that his cum was jetting into her. He pulled out and spun her around, fused his mouth over hers, but it wasn't the same dominant kiss as before. It was sweet, tender, and caused a curious fluttering sensation in her stomach, in her chest.

He broke away and cleaned them both quickly, gently before ushering her into the bedroom. Each step reminded her of the plug he'd left inside her. He stepped into a walk-in closet and returned with clothes.

"We need to get downstairs."

"Um, the toy?"

He gave her a sinful smile. "It stays right where it is, baby."

She shook her head. No way in hell. "Too dangerous."

He knew she meant with all the unknowns, but they also both knew it for the lie it was. It would keep her unbearably turned on, but it wouldn't distract her focus from the job at hand. It also gave her a wicked thrill, knowing he meant to torment her with it. Knowing what he meant to do even later that night.

“Dress.” He tossed her a pair of black combat pants and watched as she pulled them on. The shirt was next and she raised her eyebrows when she saw it. The shirt she’d worn all day was long sleeved and covered all of her body art. This was a white tank top she didn’t think would cover her belly. She pulled it on. It just covered her navel and left one long red welt visible.

“Too much skin,” she muttered, feeling exposed.

He caught her from behind around the waist, nibbled her throat. “You’re perfect.” He slapped her ass. “Boots.”

She sat on the edge of the bed and winced. Sitting pushed the plug deeper inside her. And then it started vibrating.

“Get your boots on before someone comes looking for us.”

She knew her eyes were a little wild when she met his gaze. “Not like this,” she whispered.

She didn’t have this kind of control. The vibrating increased, and he leaned down, caught her bottom lip, and bit hard. The pain combined with the pleasure almost pushed her over the edge and suddenly the vibrating stopped.

“No time for that right now. Later. I promise.”

Getting angry at the high-handed sex games, she yanked her boots on and stood to face him. “Don’t you dare to do that me downstairs. Not in front of all those strangers.”

He caressed her cheek and she couldn’t help but turn into it. “Ah, but you’re mine to pleasure, Britt. Any way and anywhere I see fit.”

*Not like that.* She didn’t even care that she was begging. He hugged her tightly.

*You have to trust me to catch you when you fall, baby. I’ll be right beside you. Every step of the way.*

Part of her did trust him, over the loudly protesting inner voice wanting to protect her against him. She sighed, knew she was going to regret giving in on this.

“Let’s go,” she said, fighting an uncharacteristic attack of nerves. She was always in control. Always. Except with this enigmatic man who seemed to be taking over her life.

It took her a few steps to learn how to walk normally while wearing an anal plug, but she figured it out by the time they reached the stairs and began their descent. He took her hand as they started down to the long center hall, following voices to a front room she hadn’t seen yet.

“Stay by me,” he said softly. Looking at his profile, she saw he’d completely shut down, regretted that it was necessary but followed suit.



## Chapter Eight

Barak felt her withdraw from him as they entered the crowded room. She simply slid away, the professional operator replacing the woman who came screaming for him every time he touched her. It pissed him off, but he couldn't deny a certain amount of pride either. She could hold her own anywhere, even in the murky waters of clan allegiance in Saber City.

Speaking of which, there were things he'd meant to tell her before they came down.

*A little late now.*

He almost smiled at the acerbic tone.

*You know that Daggar is the Overchief. Every warrior clan on Delroi is sworn to him. But there are four other major clans around the planet and all the minor clans in those areas swear allegiance to them also.*

*And here?*

*There are six minor clans in Saber City. All are sworn to us.*

He led her to the tables where the food was laid out without anyone stopping them, though several nodded as they passed. Releasing her, he handed her two plates and started piling food on them as Falkor and Janice joined them. The Earthling woman smiled prettily enough but there was murder in her eyes. He wondered if his newly expanding mental abilities would allow him private communication with his brother.

*Worth a try, Britt said.*

*You could ask your friend.*

*She's got a mental barrier like I've never seen slammed up right now.*

He gave it a shot.

*What did you do to her?*

He felt Falkor's surprise at the contact but he quickly hid it, shrugged one shoulder.

*She doesn't like the idea of being guarded.*

He narrowed his eyes. Why had Falkor decided that was his task?

*Britt or I can handle that.*

*A surge of anger. No. Don't interfere, Barak. She's mine to protect.*

*She isn't going to like that,* Britt added to the conversation. Falkor shared his shock that she could speak to him and had heard everything. She shrugged.

*I could always speak to him.*

"God, would y'all stop it? You're giving me headache," Janice snapped, but she kept her words low, careful that no one overheard.

*And I am not your anything,* she added with a mental huff they all heard.

With all four plates full, Barak led them to an out of the way table in the darkened back corner of the room. He smiled when he saw how carefully Britt sat down. She glared in return.

"So what? No more private conversations?" he asked Janice. He could see Britt hearing it because she was always in his mind, but how had Janice got in?

She shrugged, jabbed a finger at Falkor who'd sat next to her. "He won't stay out of my head. I hear what he does."

She narrowed her eyes and gave Britt a questioning look. "They're new to this. How

is that possible?"

He held his breath wondering how she would reply. They hadn't explained to the Earthlings about *der'lans* and mating bonds, unless it was necessary. Meaning the woman in question found herself in one.

"I already told you. The males on this planet can forge a mental bond with women."

He lifted her fingers to his lips, nibbled on her knuckles. "Only *one* woman, Britt."

She nodded, but he couldn't read her mind right now. Didn't know what she was thinking. "Okay. One woman." She turned her attention back to Janice. "I think these two were already sensitives. Not full abilities but close. The bond strengthens that. In non-sensitives, the bond doesn't do any more than deepen awareness of each other."

Janice thought it over a long moment, then nodded, a look of distaste on her face. "They'll have to be taught. There are natural psychics on this world who might take advantage."

"I'll leave him to you then. I'm already shielding the group."

*What the hell did that mean?* Janice pressed her lips together and nodded. "Stop. I can cover him and myself."

"Good." He felt the relief in Britt's mind and that just pissed him off. He hadn't been aware she was doing anything, much less that it had been a strain. His *der'lan* had a few things to answer for. She gave him a wry smile that twisted his gut.

"Tell us," Falkor said. He looked across the table at his brother, leaning protectively closer to Janice, he ran a finger up her arm. She shivered, didn't move closer to him, but didn't pull away either.

"You're not directing your conversation enough. It has to be totally focused on the person you want. And you're not shielding either. Non-sensitives aren't going to know the difference, but the rest of us can eavesdrop. You have to shield and you have to do it all the time. Eventually it'll be instinctive. You won't have to think about it."

Barak felt Britt's agreement with Janice's statement in his mind and wondered why he hadn't known that before.

*You didn't need to. You were a sensitive. Not totally psychic.* She paused. *You're sure it's only you and your brother in the family?*

*Yes. We're twins.*

"Excuse me?" He didn't need his abilities to feel her shock.

"What?" Janice asked.

"Twins." Britt looked back and forth between the two of them. "Not identical."

"No. Fraternal," Falkor answered.

"Same gifts, though," Janice said to Britt.

"Hmm. Weird."

"Why is that weird?" asked Barak.

She shrugged. "It's just unusual. We'd expect the same abilities in identical twins. Fraternal twins tend to be very different."

*We were never very different.* He was careful to focus the thought only to Britt.

She smiled. *Nicely done. And I hope not. He's apparently fixated on Janice. I'd hate it if he turned out to be one of the bad guys.*

*What is it your people say? That would suck?*

She shared a mental laugh. *Yeah, that about sums it up.*

"People won't stay away much longer," Falkor warned and everyone went quiet,

picked at their food.

He was right, but Barak wasn't put on alert by the first to approach. He stood to greet Roarr, smiled a slight social smile and clasped arms.

"Old friend," he greeted.

Roarr bowed his head before pulling up a chair. "Falkor filled you in yet?" he asked, like it was old times, the three of them.

He shook his head. "Hasn't been time."

"Stick near one of us then." His grin was the bad side of feral.

"Roarr's clan chief now. Did he tell you?" Falkor asked.

He cocked an eyebrow. "No." And why hadn't he?

"No time," he said with a shrug. "Your father is ready. He wants you two up there with him." His gaze took in Falkor, but not Britt. It was the way of the south.

He nodded, trying to hide his reluctance. He'd spent most his adult life in the shadows and was starting a new phase that would be anything but.

"Stay with them," he ordered Roarr. He was one of Alrik's men. Barak had no doubt he could be trusted.

Roarr nodded acceptance. "Let's move closer, though."

Yes, Barak wanted her where he could see her if she wasn't right by his side. Roarr led them towards the front of the room, finding a place near the wall right near the small dais where Vasin waited for Barak. His old friend curtly ordered the group of warriors leaning there to move. Barak was surprised when they did. He recognized their facial tattoos as being from a rival, stronger clan than Roarr's. Apparently power had shifted in interesting ways in his absence.

Certain Britt was near if she needed him, he stepped up onto the small stand next to his father's right. Falkor fell on his right.

Vasin was brief. His gaze swept the room with a frigid glare that Barak remembered all too well. "Thank you for coming tonight. I've brought you together for more than just welcoming Barak home."

He almost laughed. His father knew he'd get few such welcomes. His return changed too many power dynamics.

"Now that Barak has returned and accepted his place as my heir, I'll be stepping down."

What the fuck? *Did you know about this?* He risked the question to Falkor, knowing Britt and Janice would shield the communication.

*No.* A curt, angry, but not totally unsurprised reply. He realized their father had probably been leaving Falkor out of the loop more and more often as his suspicions grew.

"Allegiances will be sworn tonight," Vasin continued. There was angry murmuring from the crowd until Vasin's men—Barak's men now—very visibly took up position in front of all the doors.

*This could get ugly,* Britt whispered in his mind.

He wasn't opposed to a good brawl on principle, but not with his *der'lan* in the room. Widening his stance, he crossed his arms over his chest. Eyes icy cold, he met the gazes of the loudest agitators. One by one they fell silent. Then Roarr stepped forward. Barak's gaze went immediately to Britt. She and Janice were flanked by warriors from his clan.

Roarr dropped to one knee and in a daze, a sense of unreality roaring in his mind, he

heard his old friend say the ancient fealty oath. He responded in the appropriate place, with the right words, without conscious memory of saying them. Then Roarr was standing, moving back to guard the women and one by one the rest of the warriors repeated his actions.

Last was Falkor, stepping off the dais, and kneeling before him. He wanted to reach out. Pull him to his feet.

*This isn't necessary.*

*It is. United front. The entire clan will be doing the same in the coming days.*

Falkor spoke before he could stop him, he said the words he must, and then Barak broke tradition. Stepping down to face him, he clasped his arm, forearm to forearm, in the greeting shared between warriors who were equal. Their eyes met and Falkor gave him one slow nod. The action couldn't be mistaken by anyone in the room. His brother spoke for him. Acted for him. Anyone who disobeyed would be treated as if he'd ignored an order directly from his clan chief.

They separated and he looked over to meet Britt's gaze. *Oh, I know you don't expect me to do that.*

*No.* He chuckled mentally. *But I do expect you to stand at my side.* Another break in tradition. Maybe it was long past time the south got a little shaking up. His *der'lan* was certainly the one to do it.

She moved forward and he pulled her into the circle of his arms, facing the crowd. "Britt. My *der'lan*." His message was crystal clear. *Protect her as your own or deal with me.* There were several nods of acknowledgment. No one wanted to deal with a furious Saber Clan chief.

His father stepped down off the small stage and the mood in the room was broken. People began to approach and music started to play. It was like the dozens of state parties he'd attended at Daggar's palace except here he was the highest ranking warrior.

Britt tugged his arm to be released and he let her go, watching warily as she went to stand with her friend. Falkor stayed by his side, but he could see his brother was just as unhappy with the women not at their sides. There were other women, *der'lans* and even the occasional older daughter, in the room who approached the newcomers as soon as their guard faded back.

Barak kept an eye on them, his time on Earth had taught him not to underestimate women the way most of his people did, while the clan leaders began to seek him out. After several minutes he could see Britt begin to relax her guard a bit. She and Janice began to charm the women around them as naturally as if they'd always done so. She smiled and he experienced a fierce rush of lust. His. All his.

Judging the worst of the danger passed for the evening and remembering the small controller in his pocket, he decided to play with his mate. He kept the knob turned to the lowest setting, but her back stiffened when it came to life. Smiling, he turned back to the conversation in front of him.

But the words barely registered. He was too affected, too wrapped up in the heat growing in Britt. He adjusted the knob higher and she turned to glare at him. He felt invisible fingers wrap around and stroke his cock, and just managed to repress a gasp.

*You'll pay for that.*

She gave him a sultry smile and turned back to her audience. *I certainly hope so.*

He grinned sharply. She was like a wild cat, her arousal only heightened by the

dangerous currents in the room and the sexual play. He wanted to tame her. Stroke and pet her into submission. He knew even that would be an illusion. His woman would always have sharp teeth.

## Chapter Nine

Britt was going crazy, her brain a fever of lust, as the crowd ebbed and flowed around her. Always aware of Barak at her back. Watching her. Guarding over her. Tormenting her. The damned toy was an incessant vibration in her ass. Sometimes fast. Sometimes slow. Occasionally stopping altogether. But even then the edge of arousal never receded, never dimmed.

It was a clawing need she fought against. Desperate to stay in control. Desperate to not show any weakness in this room full of people who were probably her enemy. And finally Barak was at her side, whispering in her ear as he led her away from a mixed group of warriors and women. "Let's go. I need you."

She didn't argue. Couldn't even if she'd wanted to. She had a passing thought that she should make sure Janice was okay before she disappeared, but she saw Falkor hovering over her, knew he'd keep her safe. She followed Barak upstairs to their rooms, watched him undress as she did the same. He retrieved the bottle of lubrication, nudged her until she lay on her stomach on the bed.

The toy was turned off and slowly, inch by inch, removed. She groaned as it slid from her ass, pain and pleasure unbearably mingled, but he didn't give her time to miss the loss. Hands on her hips, he lifted her.

"On your knees." The order gruff, voice guttural with repressed lust.

No time to think. No time to reconsider or change her mind. She heard squeaking from the tube, then he was pushing inside her ass. Thick and hard. Insistent. Past resisting muscle, strained tissue, but oh so carefully. Cautiously. He groaned when he was fully inside her while she panted, need raging through her. She'd never felt so full.

Desire was a dark bloom in her mind. She tried to move against him, to get the delicious painful friction going that she knew would send her into orbit but he held her still, leaning over her back and biting her neck.

Lightning shot through her body at the primal possession of the act and she knew she would beg, would plead. Would give him anything he wanted if he just fucked her.

"About time," he whispered harshly against her neck, kissing his way to her back as he began a slow careful thrusting. It wasn't enough. She wasn't sure if it would ever be enough.

She entered his mind, opened hers. Let him see her darkest desires, her darkest needs. She wanted him to be the one who could possess her, who could give her the combination of pain and tenderness she craved. The dominant male who could handle her aggressive, independent nature. Instinct had been telling her for weeks that he was the one. It was more than the bond. What did that do other than tie two people together? She needed more than great sex, needed him to be the one who could give it to her.

She let him see it all, held nothing back, and he rewarded her. Both hands on her hips, his thrusts increased, faster and harder. Then he slid a hand to her pussy, shoved two fingers in and fucked her both ways. She came screaming, gave him everything knowing he'd catch her, never let her fall. But he wasn't finished. He kept her coming, again and again, until finally he succumbed, his groan filling her ears as they both collapsed to the bed.

It was a long time before she could move, before he tugged her out of bed and to the shower. His hands were soft on her and she felt the stirrings of lust but this time he didn't let it fully rise.

"Shh," he murmured, putting her back in bed. "Sleep."

She wanted to protest, tell him she was an insomniac who slept little, but his hands were soothing her, coaxing her to relax and the words didn't come. She drifted off, her last thought that it was safe enough to close her eyes and rest with the alien warrior at her back.

\* \* \* \*

Falkor woke instantly at the soft rap on the door and glanced at the bed, assuring the woman in it was still asleep, before going to see who was knocking so early. Barak stood on the other side and he stepped into the hall, not quite pulling the door shut all the way behind him. His brother took in his rumpled, slept-in appearance without a word.

"Something up?"

"I'm going to meet Roarr."

Falkor pulled the door fully closed with a soft click. "Give me a few minutes."

Barak shook his head. "I need you here."

He pressed his lips together in disapproval. He didn't like it, but he understood why. "The women."

Barak nodded. "Do yourself a favor and don't tell Britt you're here to protect her."

Falkor barked a laugh. "Neither one of them, actually. You definitely found us an interesting pair, Barak. I'm not sure I'm so grateful."

His brother grinned and said over his shoulder as he walked down the hall, "You will be."

He waited until Barak disappeared down the stairs then reentered the suite. A small sitting room led into the bedroom, and he went back to the chair he'd sat in all night across from the bed. Where Janice slept deeply, peacefully. His *der'lan*. He got the impression she was rarely so restful, wondered if there was a part of her that gave into it because she knew someone she could trust was watching over her. His heart contracted painfully.

She was no simple woman. Would be hard to control, hard to rein in. He'd watched her during the gathering last night. Watched as she charmed everyone around her, watched her move with a smooth feline grace that belied the sharp, deadly watchfulness in her mind. If she were a warrior, or even someone else's woman, he'd be wary as hell. Dangerous didn't even begin to describe the woman she kept hidden under the surface. Good thing she was his.

She didn't move, but he felt her wake, all at once like a warrior, and let his gaze travel up the length of her body to meet her eyes. They burned with fury and an interest she couldn't hide. Not from him.

"Why are you here?" she asked acerbically.

He'd left her the previous night, then came back in when he was sure she was asleep. He shrugged, enjoying the way her eyes focused on the breadth, the movement of his shoulders. "I told you I wouldn't leave you unguarded."

"You could have done that from the hall," she said with false sweetness.

She rose, pulling the sheet around her and his nostrils flared. The woman slept in the

nude. The knowledge had damned near driven him insane as he'd sat beside her all night. Hard and wanting. Instead of doing the smart thing, the sensible thing, like getting her clothes and going into the bathroom to change, she approached him. He held himself still, knowing if she ventured too close he'd reach for her. Knowing she wasn't ready for that yet.

She stopped in front of him. Close enough to pull her down on his lap. Tested his restraint. He repressed a groan, desire a building inferno inside him.

"Well?"

"Well what?"

She let the sheet drop and his mouth went dry.

"Don't you know an offer when you see one?"

Grabbing her hips, he pulled her forward so she straddled him on the chair. He kept one arm around her waist, felt the damp heat of her rubbing against his cock, and buried the other through her hair to hold the back of her head. He pulled her face down to lightly brush her lips before turning her head to speak softly in her ear.

"I'm not one of those men you find it so easy to control. When I take you, I'll be the dominant one and it will be forever. Get ready, Janice. I don't have a lot of restraint where you're involved. I won't wait long to make you mine."

She gasped and he let her jerk away, watched with avaricious greed as she stalked into the bathroom. The woman had the most perfect ass he'd ever seen. What would it look like rosy red from his hand?

*Don't even about think it.* The mental voice was more a snarl, but she couldn't hide the tinge of sensual curiosity in her mind. He smiled. Very soon. He'd take her, and keep her.

She exited in minutes dressed in the same kind of no-nonsense slacks and blouse from yesterday and somehow made it look sexy as hell. She scowled.

"Don't look at me like that."

He got the feeling he'd insulted her when he turned down her offer. He smiled, knew when she jumped a fraction that it was dark and dangerous. He didn't care. She woke something primitive in him. Something that wouldn't be denied.

"I'm going to see Britt."

She brushed by him in a huff, the sweet woman scent of her filling his senses, but her mind was closed to him. He stopped her at the door, hand wrapped around the nape of her neck, and it was like a floodgate opening. Touch. He needed to touch her to get full access to her mind until the bond was complete. Otherwise she could block him. The words of the ancient binding prayer filled his mind. Like a compulsion. But he swallowed them down. Not yet.

"Let me go," she whispered and he felt her confusion. Her fear. Her arousal.

"Never," he answered just as softly, but released his hold and let her precede him out.



## Chapter Ten

Britt woke all at once, with a soldier's alertness, and stretched her arms over her head. Wincing at the ache of muscles long unused, she reached out for Barak. Unable to help or repress the need to touch him. He wasn't there. She let her senses flare out, was surprised to find the suite empty. Considered and discarded the idea of scanning the entire house. She hadn't gauged the abilities of the rest of its occupants yet and she'd prefer not to give herself away unless it became necessary.

She grabbed clean clothes from the closet, assumed it was Barak's mother who'd filled it with clothes for them both, and entered the bathroom. One look at her reflection and she knew she was in trouble. She set about rebuilding the protective walls that had seen her through years of intelligence work. It was one thing for Barak to see this new, weaker side of her—for some reason, she couldn't escape him—but everyone else? No way.

She set the water hot, almost scalding, and let it pound into her sore back, her aching legs, while she brought herself back together. She didn't step out until she was sure she'd accomplished the task, sure she could hide herself from anyone who had no business seeing into her soul. That she'd accepted Barak had that right, was already there, she ignored.

She dressed quickly, was zipping up her boots, when the knock came on the door, and knew she hadn't succeeded when she opened it without scanning, having assumed it would be Janice on the other side.

Vasin walked in without invitation. "Where is Barak?"

"Not here," she answered curtly. She didn't trust Vasin. Sure as hell wasn't going to tell him where Barak was. He'd mentioned a meeting with Roarr before he fell asleep last night. He had to find some place secure to contact Alrik and Daggar and he was positive the entire house had monitoring equipment.

Vasin's eyes narrowed. "It's not safe for either of you to go wandering around this city."

She arched an eyebrow. Wasn't that the point of that whole chief switch-over thing last night? "And why is that?"

He glared. "You're not stupid. You've been in the north, staying with the Torfas. You know there's a rebellion coming on Delroi."

"And its home is here." Oh yes. She knew that. And Barak wouldn't countenance it. They'd gone so far as to kidnap him. Torture him. A cold rage moved through her.

Vasin nodded and paced, but didn't speak again.

She took a big risk. "What do you know about it?"

He stilled, his expression unreadable when he looked at her. "No more than you do."

She laughed bitterly. Yeah right.

*Don't antagonize him, Britt.*

*Why not? He antagonizes me.*

"I'm confused though." She crossed her arms over her chest. "Why go through so much trouble to get him here and keep him hidden and then make him chief? You gave him all the power, and Barak's will is nothing if not absolute."

"I wasn't responsible for that," he practically snarled. "I'd never order my own son tortured."

Barak went still in her mind and she wondered if Vasin realized he'd just betrayed knowledge he shouldn't possess. Saw the moment he realized it.

"You're good," he said grudgingly.

She shrugged. "Not really. People tend to slip up when they don't have a firm grip on their emotions."

"Where is he?" he tried again.

She shook her head. "I wouldn't tell you even if I did know."

She knew all right. He was coming back to her, hurrying to reach her before things escalated. She didn't think they were going to. Didn't feel any ill intent from his father.

Falkor and Janice walked in just as the explosion rocked the world outside. She stumbled from the shock wave, quickly righted herself.

"I'm getting really fucking sick of this shit," she snapped at Vasin. "It was just as safe to live in the middle of a war zone on Earth."

"I told you it wasn't safe here," he answered, already moving towards the door. "Falkor, keep them inside."

She and Janice answered together.

"Like hell I will."

"Get out of my way, Falkor."

He was prepared to argue and she watched Janice shift so subtly no one who hadn't worked with her a dozen times over the years would have notice it, ready to remove him from the equation if necessary. His face darkened with fury and he grabbed her hand.

"Don't. Let's go before I change my mind."

*Damned mental connection*, Janice grumbled.

Britt could sympathize, was trying to tune out Barak's swearing in her mind. He was pissed at her, but if she was stuck here she refused to be treated like a civilian. She wasn't. Never had been.

Downstairs Vasin stopped to talk to several warriors and the three of them entered the room with the arms cabinet. It didn't open when Britt tried the handle.

"Falkor."

His expression was mutinous and for a moment she thought he'd ignore the order. He reached around her, typed a code on the keypad and it swung open. She reached in and withdrew a pistol and magazine similar to those used on Earth and handed it to Janice, who inserted the magazine and chambered a round. Britt found one for herself and did the same thing, then grabbed the rifle she'd had the previous day.

"Knives?" she asked Janice, her preferred weapon of choice.

"No, I'm good," she answered.

Britt tilted her head to the side in question. She didn't see how Janice could have the usual assortment hidden with the clothes she was wearing. With a grin, she lifted the hem on her shirt to expose a harness holding blades of various shapes and sizes across her torso.

"I want one of those," Britt admired the contraption.

"Made to my specifications on Earth. I can probably get you one."

"Good." She nodded and noticed Falkor looked a little shell-shocked. Janice noticed too and her smile widened. It was not the patented cover girl smile most people were

used to seeing. It was the smile of an assassin on the hunt. Britt just shook her head, adrenalin beginning to pump as shots were exchanged out on the street.

She and Janice moved together, with the skill of old partners, leaving Falkor no choice but to follow. She felt Barak moving closer. He was trying to keep his shields up, but he couldn't hide his anger from her. He filled her head with retribution. Canes. Whips. Floggers. She shivered and shut her mind down. She couldn't afford that kind of distraction now.

They pushed the door open, crouching near the ground as they went out separate sides. Falkor was clearly conflicted. He wanted to go with Janice, knew Barak wanted him with Britt. She smiled when he chose to cover Janice, but felt the other woman's annoyance at him.

The street was a mess of rubble, big chunks of stone, formerly road, blocking it. She scowled and cautiously moved up what used to be the sidewalk. The bomb had been right in the middle of the street. Why not in the house? Unless whoever'd left it didn't have access. Always a possibility.

The shots had gone quiet and she carefully, cautiously edged through shadows, around boulders that had no place in a city street. And right into an ambush. She lifted her weapon as she rolled, fired three shots in quick succession when she was clear. Senses in overdrive, she pulled her knife, turned to face a fourth man she hadn't seen creep up behind her. He fired as she dropped to the ground and shots rang out behind her. There was an oomph behind her, a sense of movement, falling, and she came up on one knee, threw the knife in her grip, and watched it pierce the throat of the man in front of her before spinning to meet the threat behind.

Vasin was kneeling behind her, gun still pointed at the other man, and she moved carefully forward, pushed the muzzle of the weapon so it pointed down at the ground. Blood covered his shirt and she knew it was bad.

"Lay down," she ordered, amazed when he did. She pressed her hands over his chest and called to Barak.

*I need a medic.*

A frantic search of her mind then a sense of relief. *You aren't hurt.*

*Your father.*

*I'm almost there.*

*Hurry.*

"You shouldn't have done that," she told Vasin, putting pressure on the wound and covering his body with hers when there was another round of fire. She sat up a little when it stopped, staying low enough to keep her head below the cover of the boulders.

He laughed, blood dripping from the side of his mouth when he did. "And I was afraid you might not be tough enough for my son."

"I can take care of myself."

He nodded. "See that. And him. You got him out."

"Yes." No point denying it. "Shh," she said when he tried to speak again. He was wasting energy he didn't have trying to talk and she could already feel Barak's sorrow weighing on her.

He ignored her and continued. "I didn't order the kidnapping. They thought if they held my son, they could control me. Force me to escalate the rebellion."

She was happy to hear that for Barak's sake. "You can tell him later."

“No time,” he whispered. “Tell him for me. This was not my way. Change is necessary or we atrophy. The Torfas stopped a war that would have destroyed us all one hundred years ago, but their way is stifling the Southern clans now.”

He broke into a fit of coughing, his palm covered in blood when he moved it to keep talking. “No permission to bomb the Overchief’s palace. Or take Barak.”

She leaned closer, knew she shouldn’t keep him talking but this was too important. “There are factions inside the rebellion?”

His eyes were dimming. She’d been on too many battlefields not to recognize impending death when she saw it. “Vasin! We need to know.”

He lifted a hand to cup her face. “Worthy,” he said trying to force a smile. She ruthlessly suppressed a feeling of pride in the statement.

“Barak?”

He shook his head. “Not my orders.”

“Whose?”

But it was too late. His eyes had that far away stare she’d seen too often. He was gone.

Whoever was attacking them chose that moment to renew hostilities. She ducked her head under her arm as a mortar round hit too close for comfort. Then strong arms were grabbing her, pulling her back and towards the front door of the Trace house. Falkor and Janice were there, laying down covering fire. As soon as the door closed behind them, Barak was on his communicator calling in a counterattack.

It was over in moments.

She couldn’t believe she wasn’t shaking from the aftermath, but that was training, experience. Still. Barak’s expression was so cold, so black, filled with so much rage, she couldn’t believe no one was shrinking away from him in terror. She narrowed her eyes, leaned against the wall and watched. That wasn’t entirely true. There were a lot of warriors around and it was clear they didn’t want to answer his curt, coldly furious questions. He wasn’t something they were accustomed to. He was enraged yes, but in control of it. It told her more about how Vasin had ruled than anything else could.

Finally, he sent them all off on one errand or the other and turned to her, gesturing her to follow him into his father’s former office. The one with the arms cabinet. She walked in, trying to ignore her unease, and went right to it, unloaded and replaced her weapons. He was leaning back against the desk when she turned to face him, arms over his chest, expression a black cloud.

“You’re okay?”

She nodded. “Fine.”

“Good. Strip.”

Shock coursed through her. Not only at the order but at her body’s eagerness to comply. That enthusiasm unnerved her enough that she almost refused, but his terror was so strong in her mind she could almost taste it. The fear was for her and she found she couldn’t deny his need to see for himself that she was unharmed. She reached for the hem of her shirt but paused. “The door?”

“Locked. Do it before I lose the last of my patience, Britt.”

For some reason that just excited her more. She pulled off her shirt and her bra, edged close enough for him to grab. He skimmed his hands over her.

“You’re not hurt.” There was a tinge of relief in his voice.

"I told you I wasn't," she whispered.

"I don't know if I can trust you to tell me the truth in the heat of battle, baby."

His hands gripped her hips hard, tugged her closer. When his mouth closed over her nipple, he slid his hands around to mold her ass. She moaned, tried to move closer, tried to demand more.

*If you're going to take me, do it,* she whispered in his mind. *We don't have a lot of time.*

"Mmm," he murmured against her neck, fingers teasing her nipples in a way designed to drive her to insanity. "This will have to wait."

She wanted to growl and maul. He was turning her on and then turning her down. What the hell was that about?

"We don't know what's going on right now," he answered her mental question. She pulled her top back on but in a huff threw her bra at him, blamed it on the arousal he'd raised but left unfulfilled. He grinned and stuffed it into a drawer.

"Your dad," she said hesitantly. She felt Barak's sorrow at not only the loss of his father but knowing his father was a leader in the rebellion. "We have to find out how deep it runs."

He nodded. "I know. It's impossible to know who to trust."

She felt a deep, unbearable loneliness in him. She couldn't stand it and moved closer to him, pressed her body against his until he was forced to meet her gaze.

"Well, there's me," she said, wrapping her arms around him, pushing her hands up under his shirt to touch his skin. "And the Torfas. Laney. Kendall. Janice and Falkor. All of us, all of us Barak, will stand by you."

He gave her the oddest look and she knew she was right, knew her instincts hadn't failed her. He knew he was a competent soldier, a good mission leader. He was damned good on solo missions and he knew it. He wasn't so sure he could lead a clan. There was no doubt in her mind.

Something snapped in her mind and the bond between them pulsed with power. It took her a moment to recognize what had happened, that she'd finally fully accepted it. Fully accepted him. He breathed a jagged breath of relief and crushed her to him. Hard enough that she feared for her ribs, but she didn't try to push away. He finally let up, twisted one hand in her hair and tugged until she tilted her head back to meet his gaze.

"I'm never letting you go."

"Who said I wanted you to?"

"Glad we finally got that settled," he said as his lips descended on hers. This kiss was different than all the others. A promise. To cherish. To protect. To love. She felt it all as his lips moved over hers, as his teeth bit her bottom lip and his tongue swept into her mouth. She was panting when he pulled away, desperate for more. For him. She wanted to be taken with that promise, with that calm determination he had to prove she was his world.

"Later," he said with his sexy, sinful grin.

Then he opened the door and ushered the others inside. He took the seat behind the desk and she went to stand by him, but he pulled her into his lap instead. He kept one hand on her hip and the other on her knee. The position made her nervous, left her feeling exposed.

And that was exactly why he'd placed her there. Not to risk her. He'd never do that.

But as a display of power to the warriors who entered. It was like waving a big red sign that said *I'm the meanest bastard in the room. I know there's no threat to me or my woman here.*

"I hope you're right about that," she whispered as the last two people, Falkor and Janice, came in and shut the door behind them.

"Trust me?" he asked just as softly.

*Implicitly.* She wasn't sure when that had happened, but couldn't pretend otherwise.

"Orrin?" he asked Falkor, who just shook his head. Now that she thought about, she hadn't seen the youngest brother since the first bombing. Barak didn't pursue it.

"The Overchief will be here tomorrow."

She felt more than heard the collective gasp and let her senses open to the emotion in the room. They ran the gamut—curiosity, alarm, fear. Anticipation. Eyes narrowed, she studied their faces, tried to filter out the emotions of who felt which. Physically, they were like every Delroi warrior she'd met. Big, strong men who gave nothing away on their faces about what they felt. She didn't sense any other psychics in the room, as she felt Janice scanning with her, but she realized some of them had very good shields. She wasn't feeling their emotions, but she knew instinctively they were the most dangerous.

*Anything?* Barak asked.

*No. You should have told me Daggar was coming. What about Kendall?*

*I'll fill you in later.*

One of the warriors she couldn't read stepped forward. "When is the Overchief arriving?"

Barak's smile could have frozen hell. "I'll deal with those details." His gaze swept the group. "You're here for another reason."

There was a feeling of expectation as he paused for effect. Oh, her warrior was going to make a very, very good politician.

*Bite your tongue, woman.*

*I'd rather bite you.*

A deep intake of breath. Hand tightening on her knee. *Behave.*

*Make me,* she whispered the challenge to his mind, felt his acceptance of it. A feeling of such unadulterated elation crashed through her she thought she might combust with its ferocity.

"The Saber Clan is out of the business of rebellion. We go forward from here." In other words he wasn't going to hunt down and punish anyone for their past leanings. "Except for those responsible for the bombings. Here, at Daggar's palace, and the one on Earth."

"And what will happen to them?" the one who'd already spoken asked.

"They're traitors. They'll be treated accordingly." In other words, executed. "You'll bring them to me."

"If we don't?" A different man asking this time. Testing the strength of his new leader.

Barak's smile was nothing short of evil. "You'll be banished."

Shock was so deep it seemed to color the room black. Even Falkor was horrified. No one spoke for several minutes and then the first speaker stepped up and saluted, banging his fist over his heart.

"Yes, my lord." He bowed and left the room. One by one the others followed suit

until Falkor and Janice were the only two left in the room with them.

"I don't get it," Janice said. "Why is banishment so bad?"

"Only those with no honor are banished."

"A living death," Britt continued, explaining to Janice. "Since honor is at the core of what a warrior is."

"Yes," Falkor said. "And since they have no honor, no other clan will ever take them in. Execution is kinder."

"I'm not in the business of being kind," Barak said with no inflection. After a moment Falkor nodded.

"Aren't you afraid one of the ones you just sent out will have to turn himself in?"

"No. Those were some of the strongest leaders in the clan, yet Dad kept them far from the center."

Britt nodded. "No rebel leanings."

"I hope."

"Some of them were here before the street explosion."

"I called them in before I left this morning. Sent Dad's men away."

She lay her head against his shoulder, breathed his masculine scent deep. "It's going to take a long time to sort this mess out."

He slid the hand on her hip up, pushing under her shirt to stroke her skin.

"Probably."

Her stomach grumbled and she realized they'd not only missed breakfast, it was actually past lunch.

"Kitchen." He set her on her feet and slapped her ass when she didn't move fast enough. It went without saying she liked it.

*Oh, don't worry, baby. I'm still furious with you. You'll get your punishment after I feed you.*

She wanted to protest but the knot of need in her belly was too tight to try.

They made sandwiches and ate quietly. As soon as she finished the last bite, Barak took her hand.

"We'll see you later," he told Falkor before leading her out of the room.

## Chapter Eleven

Barak hustled her up to their rooms, but she didn't wonder at his urgency. It was riding her too. Inside, he slammed the door shut. Locked it. Stalked her to the side of the bed. She could feel his anger now that he'd let his grip on it go, now that he wasn't concentrating on other things.

She pulled her clothes off without being told. Unsure of his mood. Unsure of her feelings other than she *needed* him. Needed release from all the built up adrenalin of the day. Frowning, he slowly stripped.

"Restrained," he muttered and she looked hopefully towards the wall. She craved a release only pain would give her now and that was easier to achieve if she was standing. He shook his head. "On the bed," he ordered.

Trembling a little, she arranged herself in the center, limbs stretched out so he could secure her. He was getting the hang of how to hide his thoughts from her, how to surprise her, but she still had the sense she wasn't going to like what was coming. He went to the cabinet and returned with a flogger. She shivered. Or she could be wrong. She could like it too much.

The ends trailed over her skin, up her legs, over her belly, across her nipples. She shook, the anticipation was so great, but he never struck.

"Barak," she begged.

He sat on the bed next to her, fingers stroking her abdomen, making the fire in her burn even hotter. "Ah, baby. I only want to pleasure you. To protect you."

She glared at him. What the hell was he up to now? "Then touch me."

"Mmm." He bent over and his tongue touched her nipple, swirled over it. No biting pain. No rush of arousal. "I am. Can't I caress you in peace?"

If she survived this night without an orgasm, she was going to kill him. He heard the thought, jerked up to meet her gaze with a hard one of his own.

"You disobeyed an order, Britt. Put yourself in danger. For what?"

She looked at him in wonder. He really didn't get it. "What did you do to me? Back in Daggar's palace that last day? The words you said?"

She'd gone to the Earth Ambassador's office to ask questions about a bomb that had gone off in Daggar's council room. A bomb of Earth origin but planted by a southern Delroi rebel. Barak and her old friend Kendall had rescued her, but it was a trap. A trap that had caught Barak and eventually brought her south to rescue him. Before he'd been taken, though, he'd whispered words to her, in his own language. Words that tied her to him.

"You know what I said. The binding prayer."

"So you were sure? I was the one for you? And you gave me no choice?"

He shook his head, close enough the strands of his hair brushed over her chest. Fire licked through her at the contact.

"I knew that day was going to end badly. I was acting on instinct. The bond shouldn't have snapped together like it did."

"It brought me here. To you. And my instinct is based on years of experience. I wasn't disobeying you. I was doing what I do."



“Not anymore,” he growled.

She shook her head. “You’re never going to tame me, Barak. I don’t think you really want to.”

She was careful to stay out of his mind, wanted him to reach that conclusion on his own. So many emotions flashed over his face she couldn’t keep up with them and then he shut down. He touched her. Soft, gentle caresses that interested her, that made her feel desired, but weren’t enough. Soft and gentle had never done it for her.

Anger pulsed through her at the realization. “You’re punishing me? Like this?”

“I need you to be safe.” The words seemed to be wrenched out of him from some dark, deep place he hadn’t let her see yet.

That just pissed her off more.

She had skills even her handlers back home didn’t know about it and she used the tiny bit of telekinetic power she had to release all the locks on the restraints, to give her a boost of strength when she pushed him away and jumped free of the bed. He looked between her and the cuffs, shock clearly etched on his face.

“I *chose* not to escape before. I trusted you.”

She moved across the room, putting distance between them as she finally let herself feel the pain of not having that trust returned.

“Don’t,” he ordered. “Get back here, Britt.”

God, she wanted to go to him. She felt something in him, sensed it. Complete and total devotion to his family. To his clan. She thought that extended to her. And she’d made that leap. Made that assumption before she even knew what she was doing. But what if he could never accept who she was? What if he kept trying to change who she was?

It hurt. And she *knew* it was wrong. Mates should accept each other as they were. She was just as much a warrior as his men. Worse than that, the knowledge that he would never accept her as an equal, was a deeper hurt, an older ache. She’d never had anyone who was hers. Hers alone. She’d never belonged to anyone either. Had no family who would mourn her loss when her days finally ended. Badly, more than likely, considering the kind of life she led. She’d thought maybe he was the one.

The bond was one thing. She’d had time to study it, thought it was mostly sexual in nature. But what she felt for him ... it wasn’t just sex. She’d thought they’d explore it, see where it took them. The idea that there could be more to her life than being an adrenalin junkie was intoxicating. Now she realized she had to find a way to sever it, then get away quick. He was never going to love her the way she loved him.

That realization almost brought her to her knees and a deep buried part of her protested. *No no no*. She struggled to breathe and sought the only escape left to her. The balcony. She clung to the rails, sucking in deep breaths, trying to order her mind and figure out how the fuck she was going to get out of this mess.

Then his hands were on her shoulders, firm and strong, and she had to fight to not sink back into his warmth. She was desperate to save herself. To save what was left of her heart.

“I’ll never let you go,” he said softly.

How did she hold in the sob?

She shook her head, was amazed her voice was steady. “You will never accept me as I am. You want me to be ... something I can’t be. How do you expect that to work?”

“Britt,” he said softly but with purpose. “You didn’t think. You didn’t scan. You just went out, only thinking about the rush. You can’t do that anymore.”

His face was against her neck. His lips. His teeth.

“I can live with what you are. I knew that weeks ago. But I won’t let you throw yourself headlong into danger for no reason. Without thinking.”

She shuddered. Had she done that? Probably. She was used to walking on her own.

“And I shouldn’t have tried to use sex against you. To punish you,” he said, turning her around to face him. “What we have together is too much to cheapen like that. I’m sorry, baby.”

She buried her face in his chest, not quite ready to forgive him yet but unable to stop herself, and he held her nape in one big palm. “You’re mine,” he whispered against her ear. “Always mine.”

Her body couldn’t resist him. His heat called to her and she pressed close. Now, now after all the harsh thoughts, dark worries, she could maybe use some of that soft and gentle. He chuckled in her mind.

“No,” he said, swinging her up in his arms. “You need a firm hand, baby. Always have.”

He laid her down on the bed and fell on top of her. “You need to be claimed,” he said just before his lips descended on hers. His kiss was claiming. Plundering. His tongue swept forcefully into her mouth, teeth nipped. Her body came alive, nipples pebbling into hard points as her pussy filled with liquid fire. She raked her nails down his back and he shuddered. Her mind filled with desperate need, hers and his, but he didn’t give her what she wanted. Didn’t plunge into her. Didn’t take her. He pulled back.

“Can you get those restraints back on the same way you got them off?”

She shook her head. “I have very little of that ability. Not enough to do something that complex. Picking a lock is much easier.”

He gave her a narrow eyed gaze, mind fully connected with hers. “And that little bit taxed you, didn’t it?”

She shrugged. “I was pissed off. That helped.”

“Speaking of pissed off. You’re still in trouble.”

She sighed. Hadn’t they moved passed this?

*No. You didn’t think. You put yourself in unnecessary danger because of it.*

“We’ll deal with that later,” he answered out loud, moving to refasten the restraints. “You still haven’t quite come down from the battle. I know just what you need.”

She shivered. He was right.

He picked up the flogger, but trailed his fingers over the tattoo around her waist. “I suppose you’ll be adding thorns.”

It took her a mind to think past his touch, past the promise of the flogger in his hands. “Yes. Three more.”

He nodded. “The tattooist can do it when she’s here this evening.”

“Why is a tattooist coming this evening?” And why hadn’t he told her?

His smile made her heart skip a beat. “To put my mark on you, baby. I was thinking on your lower back, but maybe the back of your neck would be better.”

She trembled and wasn’t sure if it was because his teeth closed around her nipple or the promise of the tattoo needle. An addiction she’d never been able to break. Either way it promised to be a deliciously painful afternoon.

One that was going to start sooner rather than later. He set her nipple free and stood, towering at her side, flogger swishing back and forth in his grip.

“Hmm. So I’ll have to bring you down from that high too.”

Her mind threatened to shut down and then the flogger gently slapped her belly. Every nerve ending in her body came to screaming life and she squeezed her eyes shut against the sensation.

“No,” he ordered. “Watch.”

It was hard to force her eyes open, but impossible to ignore the command in his voice, the wonder in his mind. He lifted his arm and the flogger glanced over her thighs. Once. Twice. She was panting when he moved back to her belly. Up over her ribs. Kissing the curve under her breasts. His strokes were just under sharp, just below that biting level of pain that was an aphrodisiac for her.

He shifted south again and this time the flogger brushed over her pussy, her clit. She tightened. Need a pulsing, living thing in her. He thrust his fingers inside her, lifted them to his lips to suck clean.

“You like that.”

He didn’t have to ask. He was in her mind. Felt her pleasure. And the flogger came down hard, until his strikes were fast and furious. Until she screamed with her orgasm. Trembling and begging in her mind. Begging him to take her. To fuck her.

He thrust inside her at the same time he gave the mental command. *Let your ankles free.*

She didn’t need instruction, knew exactly what he wanted, and wrapped her legs around his waist. He released her wrists but held them high above her head. His thrusts were deep, forceful, but maddeningly slow.

“You need pain, baby,” he whispered. “But I need this. I need surrender.”

And she surrendered. How could she not? He was stoking a fire that was already blazing hot, already threatening to take her over and leave her nothing but ash. He never increased his speed, but she felt him. His dark carnal need for mastery over her body. Felt how much it meant to him, how much it moved his soul for her to submit. For her to just take what he gave her. It was impossible to deny, to fight, the tight spiraling desire. She didn’t even want to. She had a fleeting thought as she came that she was giving him *everything*. Trusting him with it. With her. She thought to pull back but it was already too late. He was burned into her whether she liked it or not.

## Chapter Twelve

Two hours later, lingering alone in the shower, she sensed the tattooist arrive and Barak let her in. Usually when a new mind entered her space it was like a discordant clash. This woman was different. Her mind was unshielded but quiet. Calm.

She dressed and entered the outer room. Barak stood talking quietly to a warrior she hadn't met before while the woman set up her equipment on a large round table. He looked up when she entered, and she gave him a distracted smile, her attention focused on the tattoo gun. The secret thrill she always got with new ink.

"I'm Ciara," the other woman said with a smile, gaze traveling over Britt's arms.

Britt couldn't help but do the same, admire the other woman's body art. She was the first Delroi woman Britt had seen with tattoos. Well, that wasn't true. At the dinner the other night she'd noticed that many of the women present had one, usually on their necks or shoulders.

Barak was an expectant force in her mind and she suddenly understood why. He'd talked of marking her, as those women were marked. Branded by the symbol of their men. He'd spoken of putting it on her lower back because he saw hers were placed so that they could be hidden. Maybe on the back of her neck because she could cover it with her hair. But he really didn't want his mark hidden. She smiled at him. He was leaving that choice to her. She sat in one of the two chairs.

"The Chief said on your lower back?" It was a question, asked while Ciara opened several packets of alcohol wipes and pulled on plastic gloves.

Britt shook her head. "On my neck." She tilted her head to study the other woman. "Like yours is placed."

Ciara's tattoo started under her ear and swept down and forward. Britt glanced at the other warrior and saw he had the same mark.

"My *der'lan*. Tindor. Imagine my surprise when my man turned out to be a warrior," she said in a light teasing voice.

"And you're an artist."

"Yes." She smiled. "I was born into the only non-warrior clan on Delroi who routinely covers their bodies in ink."

"Their skills are in great demand in Saber City," Tindor said.

And he was Ciara's personal bodyguard. Britt got the impression that was a point of contention and bit back a smile.

"Have you been together long?"

Ciara shook her head as she tested the gun. At the buzzing sound, Britt almost groaned her eagerness. There was something about needle and ink, something more than pain. Deeper. It called to her.

"I came here from our village six months ago to replace my brother. He got to go to Earth. Study there."

A spark of envy, quickly repressed. Britt liked her. She'd wanted to go in her brother's place, but was happy for him despite being the one left on Delroi.

She pulled a rubber band out of her pocket and used it to twist her hair up out of the way. Ciara leaned forward, used a razor and the wipes to prepare the area. With a glance

at Barak, she dipped the needle.

"It'll be your symbol, but with some flourishes at the ends," Ciara said to Barak.

He nodded and came to stand by her side. "Do those with some color."

Britt tilted her head to angle requested and it started. She held herself still as the needle touched her skin, dug in, pushing ink with it. But inside she was a mass of jumbled emotions. Anticipation. Fear. Joy. Perhaps the reason she loved getting tattooed so much was it made her feel so much.

*Interesting theory.*

*Mmm.* She was only able to hum her response, endorphins beginning to kick in.

Ciara paused for more ink and Britt was afraid her groan of disappointment was audible. The other woman's lips twisted up slightly.

"You do it for the joy of it," she said softly, almost in reverence.

"Yes." Britt couldn't deny it.

"Usually when I tattoo a *der'lan* it's a family event."

"Falkor and Janice will be here soon," Barak said.

*Your mother?*

Hesitation. *I don't know.*

*How is she? We should go see her when this is done.*

*She's talking about going to stay with her sister for awhile.*

Britt didn't blame her. Wouldn't want to stay in a house that was a reminder. If she lost Barak it would rip her to shreds. She couldn't imagine how Cassandra was coping, even knowing how acrimonious her relationship with Vasin had been. She hoped that never happened to her and Barak. He squeezed her hand.

*It won't. We won't let it.*

She smiled, almost forgetting the needle when she looked in his eyes. Could he actually be more addicting than tattoos?

*Of course I am.*

She almost laughed. He was determined, her Delroi warrior. Falkor and Janice walked in, but she couldn't greet them verbally with the needle tracing the drawn on a line forward down her neck. She couldn't miss the gleam in Janice's mind.

*Are you getting another one?*

Janice shook her head and there was amusement, good-natured teasing in her mental tone. *I can't believe you're letting a man brand you, Britt.*

*Any excuse for new ink right?* She joked back then switched her attention to Falkor, kept her next thought to herself. Janice's wild single days were about to come to a close. That man had a hunter's glint in his eyes and it was focused on Janice.

"Almost done," Ciara said. "Just a little color. Red okay?"

"Yes," she replied, disappointed it was almost finished.

"Barak said you might want something else?" Ciara asked as if sensing her reluctance to end the session so soon.

"You can come back in a few days for that."

*You're sure, baby?*

*Yes.*

It was important to keep track, but didn't seem as urgent as it once had. She no longer felt like those killings were black marks on her soul and she had to find a way to exorcize them.

And then it was over. Ciara cleaned it and let her go look in the mirror. It looked like a black winding ribbon trailing down her neck with highlights of red on the tips.

"Lovely," she told the other woman allowing her to tape a large piece of gauze over it.

"I'm assuming you know how to take care of this."

Britt grinned. "Yes." But she already wanted to remove the bandage, wanted to admire the work and the hell with waiting the requisite two hours.

"Good." She nodded, quickly and efficiently repacking her supplies and then Barak was herding everyone out.

His hands were on her pants, unsnapping, tugging. "Off," he practically growled the order and she was glad she hadn't put her boots on. They slid to the ground in a heap. He ripped away her panties, shoved his fingers inside her and groaned when he found her wet, wanting.

"Can't wait," he grunted, lifting her, bracing her against the wall as he freed his cock. Thrust inside her. She almost screamed with the pleasure, but he didn't give her the chance. Gripping the back of her neck, he kissed the hell out of her, careful of the new tattoo, as his cock rammed in and out of her. A fast, furious retreat and invasion.

She was shaking with the power of her building orgasm, all those endorphins from early now poured into this. Into sex. Into Barak taking her. Her fingernails dug into his shoulders as it broke over her like a wave, the force of it taking her under. She couldn't have screamed if she wanted to. Her vision dimmed, mind threatened to shut down. It was engulfing pleasure, wrung her dry. Then she felt his cum jetting into her and it started all over again.

He set her down long enough to get out of his boots and pants, then carried her to bed. Lay down carefully next to her as she tried desperately to catch her breath. His fingers brushed softly up the inside of her arm and her body protested. There was no way she was ready to do that again so soon.

"Soon though," he whispered. "Gods, I can't get enough of you."

She smiled, rolled her head on the pillow to meet his gaze. "I know the feeling."

"Good." Fingers brushing over the bandage now. "It was so damned sexy seeing you get tattooed. Seeing my mark put into your skin."

She grinned. "Ready to do it again? Do I get to put my mark on your skin?"

He went very still. "Do you want to?"

"It only seems fair. Something no one else has to see." She frowned, recalling the number of warriors she'd seen shirtless since she arrived. "Probably have to go on your leg."

"No," he said. "I'll do it someplace it can seen."

That surprised her and he gave her a lazy grin before rolling over on top of her. "I don't care if everyone knows I belong to you."

His words were a shocking, wonderful surprise. This thing went both ways. She wanted to talk about that, to explore it, but it was impossible. His cock slid into her. Hands firm. Strokes sure. Winding her up to that high she was beginning to expect, beginning to realize it was hers to demand. And then there was no thought. Only sensation. Only pleasure. Only ecstasy.

## Chapter Thirteen

Barak walked out of the bathroom after his shower to find Britt still huddled under the blankets, face buried in her pillow. Grinning, he shook his head and pulled the covers down. She grumbled a protest and he slapped her ass. Not hard. Not nearly as hard as she would prefer, but enough to get her attention.

“Up, baby. Unless you want me to go get Daggar and Kendall by myself.”

She rolled over and glared at him, eyes alert as she instantly threw off the vestiges of sleep.

“I thought you said Kendall wasn’t coming.”

“No,” he corrected her. “I said Daggar said he wasn’t bringing her.”

She sat up on the edge of the bed. His gaze was drawn to the tattoo on her neck that marked her as his.

“He’s a big strong Delroi warrior,” she said sarcastically. “Surely he can keep one woman from boarding a shuttle.”

He grinned, loving the way she was letting all her walls fall with him. “Don’t do mornings, huh?”

She threw the pillow at him, but he easily dodged it.

“Daggar said no, but she was nagging in the background. You know, that woman thing.”

He knew he was egging her on, saw the spark of temper in her eyes. And loved it. Loved her. The admission cut him off at the knees. She stood and walked slowly towards him.

“That woman thing?” she asked in a deceptively soft voice. There wasn’t much soft about her and he knew it. He grabbed her hand and pulled her close.

“I’m finding that women, especially women from Earth, are a protective lot.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. Kendall won’t let Daggar walk into danger alone any more than you will.”

Her smile was slow to come, but it lit up his world. Made him think they could deal with the rebellion once and for all, make his city safe. Made him more determined than ever to make that a reality. She wrapped her arms around his neck and rubbed against him.

“Sometimes,” she said, pressing her lips against his neck. “You say the sweetest things.”

“Mmm,” he hummed, hands moving to mold her ass. “We don’t have time for this right now.”

“Later then,” she whispered and it was a promise he felt to his soul.

He forced himself to let her go, to not follow her into the shower even though he felt her invitation. That kind of contact and he wouldn’t have a hope in hell of keeping her out of his mind. She wouldn’t like what she found.

He didn’t want to take her along to the shuttlepad, but he couldn’t shake the bad feeling, the sense of foreboding that almost consumed him. Something bad was going to happen today and she would be right in the middle of it. His need to protect her overrode everything else. He wasn’t about to leave her alone.

Falkor and Roarr were coming with them, and instead of walking, he'd actually decided to use one of the hovers. It was like one of Earth's wheeled cars in shape, but was propelled over the ground by a system of magnetics. He doubted Britt had ever been in one, and suspected she'd like it. Then she was back in the room, pulling on her clothes, and he cleared his mind. Didn't want to deal with her worry on top of his own. Couldn't and remain effective.

"If Kendall came," she said as they left the room to meet the others, "I'll beat her ass myself."

Her statement surprised him and he cocked his head to one side, studied her. "She's one of your best friends. A fellow soldier. Just like you, baby."

She pressed her lips together and he had the urge to nibble at them until she opened for him. "She's nothing like me. She may be a soldier, but she's a doctor first."

He didn't respond to that, felt her fear that her friend had made a foolish mistake in coming to check on her.

"We like her that way. Laney and I." She sighed. "Protected her from the worst of the harshness, of the horror when we could. The world needs people like Kendall. People who can still see goodness in others."

He stopped her at the bottom of the steps and pulled her into his arms. *There's goodness in you too, baby.*

She held herself very still and he knew she didn't believe that. Didn't believe him.

*I wouldn't love you if it wasn't there, Britt.*

She rubbed her nose against his chest, a gesture he found oddly tender. *Do you really?*

His arms tightened around her and he knew he was probably crushing her. She didn't complain. What had happened to make her feel she was unlovable? Who had done that to her? She was exquisite. Perfect. His. And completely, totally lovable. He shouldn't be feeling this. It shook him to his bones. He was a powerful warlord, second only to Daggar. Weakness was unacceptable. But was it weak to love her? He'd expected her to give him everything, but had thought he could hold something back of himself. He knew better now. Exhaling a long breath of relief, he accepted. Accepted what she meant to him. Accepted that it didn't lessen him as a warrior. And finally she relaxed in his embrace, as if she felt his struggle, felt him conquer it.

They left without speaking, but he knew that would come later. In the hover it was a fast trip. The shuttle was there when they arrived, but the ramp didn't lower until Barak stepped out of the vehicle. Daggar walked out with Kendall beside him. Beside him, Britt tensed.

"She wouldn't have stayed behind any more than you, baby. Remember that," he said softly.

She relaxed a little bit. When Kendall stopped in front her, the other woman sighed. "Don't start. I got enough of it on the flight down."

"You should have stayed with Alrik and Laney. It's safer there."

"Maybe." She shrugged. "New tat."

Barak was fascinated by the way she colored at the statement. "Don't change the subject."

"While I appreciate your need to harangue her," Daggar said dryly, "Perhaps we could do it someplace with more cover."



He felt Britt scan the area and she nodded. "Let's go."

*You feel something?* He asked as they herded everyone back into the hover.

*No.* The answer was curt, guarded. *But something isn't right.*

*I agree.*

He started the vehicle and drove them back to his home, to the back entrance.

Breathed a sigh of relief as everyone entered the house, with him bringing up the rear.

*Maybe you were worried for nothing.*

So he hadn't been able to keep his earlier sense that something was wrong from her.

He didn't respond.

*I can't imagine why you bothered to try to hide it.*

*Baby, you can't deter a Delroi warrior bent on protecting his mate. Don't even try.*

"Y'all want something to drink?" she asked Kendall.

"Sure," the other woman answered.

Apparently she'd decided to play hostess. It was the sort of the thing a clan chief's *der'lan* would do, but it wasn't a role he expected to his soldier mate to take to. He wondered if it should make him nervous that she was. She flashed him a grin as she opened the cooler door. He didn't like how it blocked his view of her.

"Water and juice," she called out. "We really need Laney to get us some diet colas."

Kendall laughed. "You're addicted."

"So?" came the muffled reply.

The conversation was innocuous enough, but his senses were screaming at him now. It happened so fast he didn't see it. One minute she was rummaging for drinks and the next Orrin had her around the neck, knife pressed to her throat. He saw her roll to the balls of her feet, knew she was acting on instinct.

*No! Stay still.*

\*

That split second of hesitation sealed her fate and she glared at Barak as his brother's grip tightened.

*Damn it. What happened to you trusting me to take care of myself?*

*The blade is black.*

Britt felt her first inkling of fear. *Poisoned?*

*Yes. One nick and ... don't move, baby.*

Janice stepped into the room and took the situation in in a glance. *Is there a reason you aren't killing him?* She asked Britt.

*Poison.*

Falkor set his hand on Janice's shoulder and then all three of them were in her mind again.

*Can you use that little trick of yours to get free?* Barak asked.

*What trick?* Janice asked.

Britt met her gaze. *The telekinesis.*

Her nod was so slight no one else noticed. *Quick. And stay with me when you do it.*

*Do what? What are you planning?* Falkor's voice this time.

But she didn't answer, didn't have time. The blade pressed harder and she knew any moment it would cut, would pierce her skin. She focused all of her feeble ability on the blade, on his arm, and shoved. He hesitated in his shock and she ducked her head just as Janice threw the knife.

"Thank you," she said, saw one of her oldest friends shrug.

"You would have done the same for me."

"Yes."

Then she was in Barak's arms, shaking with the aftermath. Now that it was over she felt the brothers' fury that one of their own had tried to kill her. There was no regret over Orrin's death, only disappointment that they hadn't been the ones to deal it. She thought remorse might come later.

No, Falkor said.

*He was a traitor, Barak added. To attack your brother's der'lan... I can't imagine a worse crime.*

There was no sympathy or understanding in either one's mind and letting the subject drop, she glanced around the room. Daggar was squatting down next to the body. The knife handle still quivered from its propulsion, buried dead center in Orrin's forehead.

He shook his head, but she heard the approval in his voice. "You are a dangerous group of women, you Earthlings."

"We do try," Janice answered, and though Britt couldn't see her, she heard the cover girl smile in her voice, sensed the innocent party girl façade sliding back into place.

There was a short stunned silence and then Daggar chuckled. "I'm not buying that act at all."

Britt turned her head just in time to see Janice shrug. "I wouldn't if I were you."

He grinned at her candor. "Laney thought you might want to fly back with us tonight."

"No," Falkor said, no room for argument in his tone.

Daggar watched him for several long seconds before nodding. "I see. You're Falkor?"

"Yes." He stepped forward and Janice moved with him, so mad it showed on her face. It was a surprise.

*Watch out. She's pissed,* Britt sent to Falkor.

*She'll get over it.*

Janice glared at all of them, slapped Falkor in the chest with the back of her hand.

"You don't get to make decisions for me."

"Would you like to bet on that, sweetheart?"

She stepped in front of him and was forced to tilt her head back to meet his gaze.

Britt felt anger rolling off her. "I'm not built like them," she said jerking her thumb to indicate her and Kendall. "You really need to get over that."

His arm swept around her waist and he gripped the back of her neck with his other hand. Britt held her breath, afraid Janice might really hurt him, amazed when he bent his head it wasn't to kiss her. Whatever he said to her shocked her so badly she reared back.

"Like hell," she hissed.

"Don't push me, Janice. I can make you stay and you know it."

*Just for a few days,* she whispered to Janice, unable to fathom why she was helping Falkor.

"Because you want her to have what you have," Barak whispered.

Maybe.

*I don't want what you have.* It was almost a wail. Definitely desperate. But under it was the faintest hint of longing.

*Are you sure about that? Something, someone who is all yours? Only, ever yours?  
You don't want that even a little?*

Her look was filled with bewilderment. *How do you trust it?*

*I don't know. You learn to. You accept it. That it's yours to have. That you're good enough.*

She spoke to the heart of Janice's dilemma, because she'd felt it herself. She watched her friend consider her words, watched emotions that were usually so carefully hidden cross her face.

"A few more days," she said softly and Britt smiled.

"Good. We're glad to have you here."

"Some are a little too glad," she grouched.

Britt laughed, snuggled back into Barak's arms. Her world was good. Right. "You get used to it," she said with a wide grin.

\* \* \* \*

Several hours later she woke alone and instinctively sought Barak with her mind. Rising, she put on a robe and found the pressure point on the wall that forced a section to slide back and reveal a set of stairs. When her foot rested on the first one, they all lit up and she grinned as she moved forward. If nothing else, she'd seen some of the coolest gadgetry in Delroi homes.

At the top of the stairs another door stood open and she stepped out onto the roof. A wall stretched around the entire thing, about the height of her chest, and Barak leaned against one corner, facing the city. He turned as she approached, wrapped an arm around her waist as they took in the view together. She could see everything, her view unimpeded all the way to the desert.

"The house is built on the tallest hill in Saber City. It's ancient, most of the city is, and there's an old ordinance that forbids anything be built over five stories."

She got it immediately. "No one is more than the clan chief then."

He nodded his head. She wondered if he was ready to speak of more important things.

"Not yet," he whispered.

She'd come to see if he was ready to talk about what they'd discovered after Janice killed Orrin. That his younger brother was heavily involved in the rebellion and acting against his father's orders. Had ordered the kidnapping and torture of his own brother. Barak was going to have to talk about it eventually.

He turned his back against the wall and pulled her to stand between his spread legs. His cock was hard, throbbing against the silk of her robe and he unbelted it, opened the sides to stroke her breasts. She groaned when he stopped and picked her up and carried her to a small covered patio area, lowered her onto a chaise wide enough for them to share. Then the robe was spread wide and her nipple was in his mouth and she struggled to remember why she'd sought him out.

*I'm not letting you out of this conversation.* She used the mental connection because she couldn't speak. Because he was doing electric, sinful things to her with his mouth.

*Not tonight. Tonight is for loving my der'lan. Completely. Thoroughly.*

She trembled at the promise and he set about proving his mastery of her body. His devotion to her needs. She was limp, languid, feeling utterly loved and content when the

sun rose.

“I don’t want this to ever end,” she said softly.

Bracing himself over her, he smiled. “It won’t.”

And she knew it wouldn’t. She would never let allow them to be separated. He was in her heart, her soul. He chuckled as he drove into her, spoke to her mentally as he kissed her.

*That goes both ways. You’re mine. I love you, baby.*

*I know*, she replied smugly, squealed when he rolled them over and slapped her ass.

When she came it was as if the world, their future opened to her senses flooding her with dark desire, unending joy, and more nights of pleasure than could possibly be counted.

“I love you too,” she whispered before he finally let her drift off to sleep.

## **The End**

### **About the Author:**

As a native of the South, is it any wonder Loribelle has a love of storytelling? She started writing seriously as a teenager and finished her first manuscript, a mystery, when she was nineteen. After a few bumps along the way and stints as an Army MP, a waitress, a book store manager, a student, and a wedding photographer, she turned to writing full time. Now she divides her time among a husband, three kids, writing, and a part-time photography gig.

**Meet Lsb Authors At The House Of Sin**  
**Lsbooks.Net**

**We invite you to visit Liquid Silver Books**

LSbooks.com  
for other exciting erotic romances.

**2007: Terran Realm**

Urban fantasy world: TerranRealm.com

**Featured Series:**

**The Zodiac Series: 12 books, 24 stories and authors**  
Two hot stories for each sign, 12 signs

**The Coven of the Wolf by Rae Morgan**  
Benevolent lusty witches keep evil forces at bay

**Fallen: by Tiffany Aaron**  
Fallen angels in hot flight to redeem their wings

**The Max Series by JB Skully**  
Meet Max, her not-absent dead husband, sexy detective Witt, his mother...

And many, many more!