

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



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Blue Apples

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# ***BLUE APPLES***

**Katalina Leon**

## *Dedication*

I dedicate *Blue Apples* to my romantic mentor and love of my life, JAA. I also sincerely thank editorial goddess Helen Woodall for dredging me from the slush pile and helping me better myself.

## **Chapter One**

### *The Dunes of Tunistan*

“Choose your next step carefully.” Lord Veren scowled as he jerked the toe of his heavy boot away from the sun-brittle skull, knowing that the skull undoubtedly marked the perimeter of a sand trap.

As far as the eye could see parching winds sculpted the endless orange sand dunes of Tunistan, robbing human eyes of moisture before one could even blink. At any given moment at least two dim red suns baked the Tunistanian landscape. In the harshest season, unfortunate travelers had to deal with a third.

Tunistan was a hostile and desolate place to any living creature but it was especially deadly to men guarding treasury convoys. Aside from the exhausting heat and booby-trapped sand pits, the dunes of Tunistan were rife with nomadic pirates eager to rob, kill and abandon their victims in this arid wasteland. It was a brutal fact this sea of sand hid a graveyard of bleached bones inches beneath their feet.

The two massively built warriors, wearing ornately tooled leather body armor, trudged beside a caravan of ill-tempered dromules. Their boots sank deeper into the fine coral-colored sand with every step they took. Sweat trickled profusely beneath their armor and immediately evaporated into the dry air. Their lips were flecked with sand. They both knew this was going to be an exceptionally torturous journey and it had only just begun.

They were Vertanian Knights, swords for hire, an army of two. Some might call them ruthless mercenaries who lived by their own strict ethics. Some called them noble souls of a dying race. The flatterers were usually the same cowards who desperately needed hired soldiers like the Vertanians to do their dirty work. Those who were more sensible simply stayed out of the Vertanians' way.

As ambassadors of Vertania, the knights gave each assignment their all and expected to be paid generously for the duties they performed so perfectly, which was to work without distraction, kill without compunction and go home in one piece—much wealthier.

The warriors worked as a team. It was said that it was impossible to sneak up on a Vertanian. One slept while one watched the horizon. One ate while the other paced the edges of the camp like a lion sniffing the breeze. Vertanians were hyper-predatory creatures, bred to hunt and fight and it was extremely unwise for clumsy fellow travelers to inadvertently encroach on a Vertanian campsite.

The Vertanian race was special. They were bigger, stronger, braver and brighter than their enemies and unbeatable in hand-to-hand combat. Their only drawback was there were so few of them. Their own foggy, mountainous planet was nearly empty except for the royal family and the loyal few that used Vertania as a home base.

The Vertanians spawned only male children, which meant they were at the mercy of other cultures to find mates and always on the move because that much maleness simply couldn't be concentrated on one planet and not implode. So they watched with regret as their sons drifted away to distant corners of the galaxy and the traits that were uniquely Vertanian were absorbed into foreign groups.

Lord Veren of Vertania was the last of his kind. He was a direct descendent of the ancient house of Kaloram and he was ancient himself. His exact number of life-years had long been forgotten, though his body remained as robust and strong as it had been at the age of thirty-five. He wore his long silvery hair with arrogant pride because it had turned platinum over a century ago and it was well known that only the craftiest souls managed to stay alive long enough to go platinum.

His loyal warrior-at-arms, Markeen, walked at his side. Markeen was half a head taller, a big man even by Vertanian standards. He was also much younger and his large green eyes still held a faint trace of innocence, despite the combat he had seen. His hair

was an iridescent black. Like the wings of a crow it shimmered in bright sunlight with dark hints of peacock green and deep violet.

Lord Veren looked at Markeen with loving eyes. "Do you agree to this mission? If not, this is the time to speak up."

Markeen wrapped his black cape around his elegantly tapered nose and wide mouth, leaving only his mossy green eyes exposed. "I agree."

Lord Veren unsnapped the sheath of his sword so if needed, the blade could slide easily free at the speed of instinct. "Good."

Markeen did the same with his weapon.

The warriors began to escort their caravan of dromules off the common road, reasoning that their chance of colliding with pirates would be greatly lessened in the untrod wilderness of the dunes. They left the well-marked path for the windblown vastness of the wastelands, the steep dunes challenging them with the first steps they took. Their heavy frames instantly sank into the fine sand.

As they trudged up the dune, treacherous sand traps dug by pirates immediately revealed themselves. They sidestepped the shifting traps that exposed the bleached skeletons of the unlucky.

One secret quality which helped the Vertanians earn their reputation for being indestructible was their telepathic abilities. Another secret was their use of the androgenic fruit, known as azurpomia, or blue apples, which gave them unquenchable strength. But the men kept those secrets quietly to themselves as they began their slow, torturous march up the mountainous dune, sliding back a step for every two steps up they took.

Markeen's greater size worked against him in this terrain. The larger man had to fight twice as hard to drag his body up the steep slope.

Dromules are stupid but observant animals. When they noticed that the caravan had veered away from the easily trod hard-packed road and were now heading into the

sandy wilderness, they dug their heels into the dunes and came to an abrupt halt, tossing their heads in protest.

Markeen rushed forward to berate the loitering animals. His eyes flashed with rage. "Damn it! Not again! These creatures are divas! I thought dromules loved dune walking."

Lord Veren laughed and wrapped his black cape across his face, leaving only his pale violet eyes exposed to the pounding twin suns. He grabbed a stubborn dromule by its tasseled reins and began dragging the reluctant creature up the sand dune.

The dromule rudely brayed in Lord Veren's face. Its wide, flexible toes spread like giant dinner plates across the flowing sand, allowing it to glide effortlessly up the steep slope. The angry dromule hissed, spat and acted out its every resentment at being led away from the comforts of civilization with such a heavy pack strapped to its humped back but in the end, it did follow dutifully behind the older warrior.

"See." Lord Veren tucked a stray strand of platinum hair beneath his makeshift turban. "They'll respect you if you dominate them. I don't blame these creatures, they don't want to walk into the wilderness with someone they can't trust."

Markeen's eyes focused sharply on his companion. "It's always an honor to follow a trusted master."

The edge of Lord Veren's lip curled with appreciation. "Tonight, I'll give you a chance to prove your devotion."

A subdued gleam lit Markeen's emerald eyes. He whispered gratefully, "Thank you, sir."

"Don't thank me yet." Lord Veren's broad hand harshly swatted the rump of a slow-paced dromule. The startled animal brayed and leapt forward. "Tomorrow, you'll be grateful we are walking and not riding."

The warriors fought their way up the sandy slope, coaxing, dragging or being pulled forward by the irritable caravan of dromules as they scaled the massive dune.



Tunistan was a very ancient planet, clearly in decline, which had once been covered in life-filled shallow lakes. Over countless millennia those dry lakebeds had blown into towering mountains of sand. Its trio of suns had dimmed to a dull red and its water had filtered underground, or evaporated away, exposing Tunistan's true riches, pure blue sapphires of enormous proportions.

The overburdened dromules swayed under the heavy weight of the gems.

Markeen reached into one of the dromule's packs and picked out one of the smaller sapphires, which was as wide as his palm. He held the gem to the light. The red glow of the suns lent the sapphire a deep purple hue. "This stone is a monster!" He tossed the stone into the air, watching it sparkle, caught it with one hand and popped it back into the saddlebag.

Lord Veren glared at Markeen. "Don't flash those around!"

Markeen hung his head in apology.

The dune got steeper as they climbed. Soon a blinding wind was sandblasting their eyes. They wrapped their capes tighter around their faces but the fine, irritating grains drifted into their mouths, ears and eyes despite the improvised masks. These nearly vertical dunes could easily grind lesser men down.

Lord Veren tugged at the reins of the lead dromule. "Come on!"

The stubborn creature rebelled and buckled forward onto its forelegs. Its bulging saddlebags struck Markeen and knocked him off balance.

Markeen tumbled backward head over heels, his boots filled with sand as he slid down the steep dune, erasing twenty minutes of uphill struggle in seconds. "Damn!" He rolled to his feet and began running up the dune to catch up to Lord Veren.

"Stop!" Lord Veren held up a preemptive palm. "Do not exhaust yourself. I order you to empty the sand from your boots and drink some water."

"Yes, sir." Markeen stared up at his master. He immediately emptied the abrasive sand from his boots and took a drink from a leather canteen.

The stern angle of Lord Veren's jaw proved he would brook no argument. "And chew some dried azurpomia."

Markeen balked. "Sir, we should conserve it."

Lord Veren's hand dismissively swept the air. "Just do it."

Markeen did as he was told, knowing it would absolutely do no good to argue with Lord Veren. He reached into his hip pouch and tore off a small piece of chewy blue apple. The fleshy apples were so juicy when fresh that they never truly dried to a hardened state, they always retained some of their sweet stickiness. He consumed the minimum amount of azurpomia, which was barely enough to sweeten his tongue. He didn't really need it now, feeling it would be better to save it for a true emergency if either of them became injured or exhausted. He didn't want to waste this precious resource, which was the secret to their success but he dare not refuse his master, so he ate a tiny bite of blue fruit.

This was the Vertanian warriors' code. Stay strong for each other. Look after your companion by looking out for yourself. If anything were to happen to one of them the other would surely perish. Devoted teamwork was how Vertanians survived and thrived in strange lands and harsh conditions.

The azurpomia began to work its magic. Markeen's breath caught in his throat. The bit of blue apple fizzed on the tip of his tongue. His skin tingled and his heart pounded as a rush of lust propelled his legs up the slippery sand. He took off at a sprint. His heavily muscled thighs powered up the dune with ease. He was able to cover the same distance of twenty minutes of struggle in a few minutes' swift strides.

"Take your time," Lord Veren mocked. "It's not as if we're sitting ducks out here in the middle of the wilderness."

Markeen laughed as he bounded up the sand dune. "Get moving, old man, and we might climb to the top of this thing by sunset!"

Startled dromules darted out of Markeen's way as he rushed past them, laughing.

Markeen's mind wandered back to a time when he would have been too in awe of his master to joke with him, or call him old man. He loved Lord Veren with a deep abiding respect and hoped that one day he would be as sage and gloriously platinum as he. Lord Veren had a gift for seduction and the ability to inspire trust. The greatest thrill in Markeen's adult life had been the day he turned himself over body and soul to Lord Veren's capable hands and allowed the older man to initiate him into the world of a warrior's pleasures. There was no one else he would have trusted so completely on this path. He needed a master to take him past the point of trepidation, that invisible line where pleasure, pain and devotion became blurred. He knew Lord Veren lifted his lovers up, allowed them their dignity and individuality. He never ran his lovers down, or left them in despair. Life with Lord Veren was always focused on the present and lived with an edge of gratitude. He remembered the day Lord Veren had claimed him as a lover and marked him with the royal Vertanian tattoo. Indeed, it had been the most joyous life-changing day of his life!

Lord Veren had taken him aside, and asked if he wished to become his vassal and private man-at-arms. He didn't need to give the matter a moment's thought before falling to his knees at the great honor. He lovingly bowed and kissed his master's boots as a sign of assent.

Lord Veren's long fingers tangled in his long dark hair and he spoke softly and seriously at that moment. "Markeen, I've been a widower for a long time, and I no longer wish to travel the world alone. I should like to make you my man-at-arms, my lover and my companion. If you'll agree to wear my mark and be my man, my heart, and my wealth shall be shared equally with you."

Of course Markeen agreed to wear his mark. He wanted nothing more in life than to be claimed by this fine man. "Mark me," he begged, eagerly lifting his face to Lord Veren's. He would proudly wear the Vertanian royal wolf paw on his cheek, knowing the deep blue mark would bind him to his master forever.

"Love me first." Lord Veren stepped closer and stood over Markeen until he took the hint to unlace his britches and tug them down his muscular thighs. His impressive cock hovered in front of Markeen's face, demanding his direct attention. "Show me how devoted you are."

Markeen's cock pressed tight inside his britches until it ached but he tried to ignore his great need as he took Lord Veren's thick cock into his hands and stroked its silky length. "May I?" He firmly struck the shaft with a series of sharp taps until it stiffened in his hold and filled with warm blood. The head bloomed in Markeen's grip and spilled a single pearly drop of liquid onto his fingers.

Lord Veren's fingertips gently lifted Markeen's chin. "Take it." He held the swollen cock to my lips. "Suck hard."

Markeen took the cock between his lips as if it were his first cock. He took no sensation for granted and treated every moment as completely new because it was. He had never belonged to another before.

Markeen fell in love with Lord Veren at that moment. In his mind Lord Veren's life became more important to him than his own. His heart tuned to the rhythm of Lord Vern's heart. His sounds of intense pleasure as Markeen sucked his cock were addictive. Markeen longed to hear more so he sucked harder, drew him to the back of his throat and rimmed his big balls with his tongue.

Lord Veren pressed deeper into Markeen's throat and Markeen felt honored. He wanted to be drenched in his cum, so he firmly squeezed Lord Veren's balls and encouraged him to pump against his cushioning lips. Lord Veren's hips bucked as he enjoyed pushing deeper into the warm mouth but he refused to be rushed. He slowly filled Markeen's throat. The slowness of his movements was almost agonizing.

Lord Veren's fingers locked like talons in Markeen's hair. He tried to groan, "Come, sir," but Lord Veren seemed insensible to the meaning. He took his time and came when he was ready. That was how matters remained between them. He was always the master. He was always in control. When he finally gushed hot cum deep into Markeen's

throat it felt like a personal victory. Markeen felt vindicated, honored. He had pleased his master. Markeen's cock still ached as he laved him clean with his tongue. Then he sat silently before him, with his knees shaking as Lord Veren prepared the thick indigo blue paste that would be used to tattoo the royal wolf's paw to his cheek and bind them together forever.

The exhausting climb to the top of the dune took the rest of the day. The dromules fought them every foot of the way and the dune got steeper as they climbed but they did manage to reach the dune's crest by sunset. The view from the roof of the desert was breathtaking. The sky was scarlet and the rippled sands glowed a deep shade of amber as far as the eye could see.

Markeen clamped his broad hand over Lord Veren's shoulder. "We did it! We conquered the dune!"

Lord Veren glared at the endless wasteland of sand that rolled uninterrupted toward the horizon. "And we only have to do it a thousand more times!"

Markeen's dark brows drooped. "Do you sense water? Is there any water out there?"

Lord Veren was an accomplished dowser. He raised his arm into the air and watched as his fingertips, entirely of their own accord, floated to the left. "Yes, over there," he pointed to base of the massive dune they were standing on, "I sense a cave and an underground river."

Markeen joyfully slid down the dune on his hip, eager to reach the spot where Lord Veren was pointing.

For once the dromules were keen to follow. They trotted enthusiastically down the backside of the dune.

At double sunset, the wind stopped howling, the shadows deepened and a peaceful calm settled over the dunes. Minus the wind and the baking twin suns the steep dunes of Tunistan became a sculptured wonderland tinted in shades of soft purple.

Lord Veren herded the tired dromules down the sandy slope. "Let's walk as far we can during the night and stop when we find water."

Markeen nodded his head.

A soft whisper of a song floated over a distant rise.

The hairs on Markeen's arms bristled. "What was that?"

Both men stopped walking so they could listen. The dromules snorted and brayed as their dish-like feet coasted down the slope.

"Shut those creatures up!" Lord Veren focused intently on the distant dune, tilting his ear toward the faint song. "It sounds like a woman."

Markeen's nostrils flared. "Out here?" He had not seen anything female in months. His body stirred.

The Vertanians' ancient reputation for helping themselves to the locals always preceded them. Any sane population hid their womenfolk before the Vertanians came to town.

"Don't get your hopes up." Lord Veren lip curled. "It's probably a sand rat." His eyes fell on the rising bulge in Markeen's leather trousers. "Now I'm sorry I ordered you to eat the azurpomia."

Markeen's jaw tightened. "I'm not distracted."

Lord Vern's silvery brows arched in contempt. "Good, let's make some headway." His gloved hand yanked the reins of the lead dromule. He dragged the cranky animal farther down the slippery dune as the other dromules hurried to catch up to their matriarch.

Markeen grabbed the reins of the same dromule and walked on the opposite side of the animal, staring across her heavily laden back at Lord Veren's sharp profile. "Master?"

Lord Veren's attitude softened now that they were moving again. "What is it, my love?"

Markeen's voice hesitated. "Have you ever loved a woman?"

"Many." Lord Veren scowled. "I've outlived seven wives! It's heartbreaking. Some human species only live seventy or eighty years." His eyes squinted intently at Markeen. "Being a Vertanian, I do hope you'll last longer."

Markeen dared to ask more. "In your travels, have you ever met a female Vertanian?"

Lord Veren laughed, "There's no such creature, I assure you!" He rolled up his sleeve to reveal a deep, time-weathered gash. "See this scar..."

Of course, Markeen had seen the scar. He had kissed it in reverence many times.

"This dagger strike was from a vicious little Dianndran." Lord Veren's face warmed at the memory. "Dianndrans are a society of female warriors. There is an ancient myth that we were once one people but warfare broke us apart many millennia ago. I literally ran into my first Dianndran when I was too young and dumb to be guarding a Federation outpost, yet I was stationed there anyway. She was escorting a Federation convoy. The Dianndrans are swords for hire also." His lip curled. "You've got to appreciate that irony. I thought she was the most gorgeous exaggeration of femininity that I had ever seen in all my travels. She was hyper-female, as regal as a lioness. Without thinking I approached her without permission, or papers. She was on me in a flash. She knocked me across a corridor and drew blood before I even knew what hit me!"

Markeen's eyes widened in shock. He reached over to gently touch the indigo blue wolf's paw tattoo that hovered above Lord Veren's silver brows. "Did she not recognize, or respect, the royal mark?"

Lord Veren blared, "Dianndrans don't care about things like that. She probably struck me harder because I wore the royal mark. Dianndrans and Vertanians have always been rivals and direct competition to each other. There's been bad blood between us for millennia. Perhaps it's better that we never cross paths."

Markeen gulped a deep breath. "Still, they sound very exciting."

“Forget it.” Lord Veren’s gloved hand swept that statement from the air. “There are treaties galore prohibiting such a thing. The Federation wants to spare everyone war by keeping us separate.”

A sweet alluring tune drifted over the dunes.

“Hush!” Markeen raised his hand. “I hear it again.”

Lord Veren halted and held his breath. “I hear it too. Over there, where I sensed water.”

They crept quietly down the dune, hoping the unpredictable dromules would not give their exact position away. The shadows within the dunes had deepened to blackest blue. Since Tunistan had no moons to light the night, both visibility and the temperature dropped sharply.

A warning shiver ran up Markeen’s spine. He drew his sword.

Lord Veren flicked his thumb to the left, silently signaling to Markeen that he sensed a trap.

Markeen gritted his teeth. He had feared this. There were only two of them, while pirates often traveled in well-armed packs. Their ascent up the face of the great dune had left them visible to most of the southern desert. Anyone watching them knew their small number and the exact size of their caravan. He signaled to Lord Veren to stop.

Lord Veren came to a halt.

Markeen grabbed a knotted tether and hobbled the caravan of dromules together, hoping the tired creatures would hang their heads and lie down quietly on the sand to rest.

Once the animals were secured, the warriors crept down the dune with their swords drawn.

Where the great dune ended, a rocky crevasse began. Fine sand trickled over the edge of the crevasse like an arid waterfall. The sand cascaded to a subterranean cave



below in a soft, gritty whisper. They hunkered down on their bellies, crawled to the edge of the crevasse and looked down.

Markeen made the hand sign for water. It was obvious that water was near because he could smell it. For the first time in a long while, moist air reached his nose, making his nostrils flare. His nose crinkled in repugnance as he sniffed himself and Lord Veren, realizing how truly rank they smelled.

"Ya, ya, ya, ya, ya!" A war cry erupted around them. Six black-shrouded figures bolted up from the sand and raced toward them with their crescent-shaped sabers slashing the air.

Markeen leapt to his feet, with his sword swinging. He threw himself between Lord Veren and the rushing attackers, knowing Lord Veren must be saved at all cost. He hacked mercilessly at anything that came within blade's reach. Several of the pirates screamed in agony and fell back but his rage drove him to continue hacking at them until he was certain they were dead.

Lord Veren drove the pirates back with his high arching blade. He sliced two of the pirates nearly in half, before noticing that a third attacker was running away. He ordered Markeen to pursue. "Stop him!"

Markeen dragged his blade free from the belly of a dead pirate and chased after the fleeing man. He easily ran the poor creature down and grabbed his papery body by the scruff of his neck.

The unarmed pirate thrashed like a lizard in Markeen's grip. His shroud fell away from his head, exposing his huge black eyes and odd face that resembled a dried fish. The man's mouth gaped open in terror.

Markeen recoiled at the man's hideousness. This sand pirate was clearly the most pathetic creature he had ever seen.

Lord Veren demanded, "Kill him!"

Markeen shouted back, "He's unarmed!"

Lord Veren strode up to Markeen, grabbed the wriggling pirate from his hands and thrust a blade into his throat, pushing the blade deeper until the body stopped gurgling, before tossing the slight body aside. "Come." He held out his hand to Markeen. "I wouldn't ask you to do anything that I wouldn't do myself."

Markeen stared at the six crumpled bodies around them. "They look so fragile. Was this necessary?"

Lord Veren sneered in disgust, "Completely. They're sand rats and they would have done worse to you. They would have poisoned you and flayed you alive under a burning sun just for a laugh."

Markeen's skin crawled at that image. He stooped down to wipe his blood-soaked fingers in the sand. Sometimes his vocation revolted him. Someday, it would be good to stay home, in the green, dripping-wet mountains of Vertania and build something, or do something constructive – anything that didn't involve killing.

Lord Veren loomed over him. "I know what you're thinking."

Markeen glanced up at his master as he ran his crimson fingers through the sand. "Do you?"

Lord Veren's pale eyes reflected the glow of the stars. "I do and I'm sorry but our lives can't be that way."

## **Chapter Two**

The warriors left the pirates where they lay, without even bothering to kick sand over the dead bodies. They woke the slumbering dromules and led the irritable caravan down a rocky ledge that ran deep into the crevasse.

The sleepy dromules snorted, blinked their big eyes and bumped into each other as they stumbled forward, eager to follow the scent of water.

The night sky was inky blue and thick with stars but even the glow of the pale green stars disappeared as they climbed lower into the crevasse and sand trickled down from above.

Markeen wrapped his cape tightly around nose and mouth to avoid breathing in the fine grit. "I'm going to light a phosphor-torch."

Lord Veren chuckled, "Good idea. I can't see you in the dark but I can definitely smell you."

Markeen struck the phosphor-torch against a jagged rock. The torch roared to life with a burst of pungent blue smoke that stung the nose and flooded the underground cave with a blazing flash of turquoise-blue light. The startled dromules squinted their eyes and brayed crazily at the torch.

"Look!" Markeen pointed to a sandy bank at the bottom of the crevasse. The soft rippling tide of a slow-moving underground river lapped at the edges of the bank.

Lord Veren's pale eyes glowed from between a swath of black cloth, his senses heightened. "Watch out for quicksand."

A thirsty, impatient dromule broke from the pack and loped full speed toward the riverbank.

Markeen tossed the phosphor-torch to Lord Veren and chased after the errant creature as she raced toward the water.

“Grrrackk!” the loping dromule screamed piteously as its legs buckled forward and its feet sank into a pit of quicksand. The frightened animal thrashed wildly as it slipped deeper into the juicy muck.

Markeen leapt onto a flat rock and tried to reach the dromule with his sword. “That heavy pack is making her sink.”

“Cut the pack free!” Lord Veren carefully sensed his way around the pit. “Push her toward me. The ground is solid over here.”

Markeen’s blade sliced through the straps of the saddle pack. He reached forward to lift the heavy pack off the trapped dromule’s back.

When the panicked animal felt the great weight lifted from her, she reared up and kicked Markeen in the ribs. His body armor prevented the blow from being anything more disastrous than a horrendous bruise but the kick knocked him off balance, pitching him into the pit of quicksand.

Markeen gasped for breath as his body hit the surface of the gritty liquid. The quicksand grabbed his heavy body and immediately sucked him down.

“No!” Lord Veren’s eyes widened in horror. He thrust the phosphor-torch into the sand. “Don’t struggle! I can get you out!” The toes of his boots tapped cautiously along the edge the pit, trying desperately to negotiate solid footing.

Markeen felt his thickly muscled legs sinking downward. The dromule’s churning feet were making things worse. River water was mixing with the sand, making them sink even faster. The frantic animal brayed hysterically in his ear and tried to keep its head afloat by kicking its hooves onto his shoulders. He could do nothing but remain still and endure the frightened animal’s bruising punishment.

Lord Veren mumbled encouragement as he crept closer to Markeen and the thrashing dromule. “I’m almost there.”

Markeen managed to smile. "Don't hurry, there's no rush."

Lord Veren secured a foothold on a slab of a rock and tossed a tasseled rein to Markeen. "Take hold of it. I'll pull you out."

Markeen grabbed the rein and tied it around the dromule's shoulders.

Lord Veren shook his head in dismay. "Markeen, you first!"

Markeen resisted. "Without the animals we're dead."

Lord Veren scowled. "I knew you'd do this." He didn't bother to argue and immediately began to tug the trapped dromule from the pit but the more of the dromule that he freed from the sand the deeper Markeen sank. He pulled harder, fearing that saving this stupid animal would cost him his lover. The conflict etched a deep crease between his brows. The breath hissed out of him as he pulled with all his might. "Are you happy now?"

The quicksand rose to Markeen's chin. "Not especially."

"Arrrgh!" Lord Veren howled as he made a gargantuan effort to pull the kicking dromule free. The creature's front legs popped out of the quicksand with a sucking slurp.

Once the dromule felt solid ground beneath her feet, she hauled herself onto the rocky slab, tossed her head in the air and shivered the wet sand off her back. In her joy to be free she excitedly pranced in a circle, nearly trampling Lord Veren.

The top of Markeen's head disappeared beneath the quicksand, leaving only a murky air bubble behind.

"Great Kaloram, no!" Lord Veren thrust his arm into the wet sand and flailed wildly in search of Markeen but his hand felt nothing. Where was he? The sand had become a thick liquid. Perhaps the flow of the river had dragged Markeen's body downstream? He moved over a few yards and poked blindly at the liquidy sand, muttering frantically, "Where are you?"

He screamed as real fear gripped his heart and precious seconds ticked past. His eyes desperately scanned the quicksand. How deep was the pit? How fast was the river? His hand grabbed blindly at the wet sand. He knew Markeen was near but he couldn't tell exactly where because his sense of Markeen was fading. His arm flailed in the quicksand, unable to feel anything but liquid grit.

An air bubble surfaced on the wet muck and popped.

Markeen's last breath? Lord Veren's hand dived toward the spot. His fingers struck Markeen's armor and began to frantically claw the limp body to the surface.

Markeen's long black hair was the first part of him to return.

Lord Veren pulled Markeen toward him. Markeen's body was still and his face ashen. Fine sand frosted the tips of his black eyelashes. There were no signs of life. "No!" He held Markeen to his chest and bellowed so loudly the dromules threw their ears back and brayed.

Lord Vern's long fingers cleared some damp sand from Markeen's mouth. He pressed his mouth against Markeen's blue lips and began to breathe warm air into lungs. He took a second deep breath, hoping this breath would bring Markeen back to life but nothing happened. He held Markeen to his chest like a precious child, doing all the breathing for him and beginning to feel lightheaded from his efforts, but Markeen's face remained alarmingly pale.

Minutes passed and Markeen's lips parted but said nothing. His body remained silent and still.

Lord Veren began to shake as every last speck of energy fled his body. He felt cold, as if a vacuum of regret had swamped him and ripped away his soul. This feeling was sickeningly familiar. He had faced this horrible moment many times before. He had lost too many lovers and buried too many mates to not recognize a tragedy when he saw one. He had let his heart take a risk and had fallen in love with Markeen because he never intended to outlive Markeen. A healthy Vertanian was made to walk the world for centuries.

Lord Veren stared down at his companion. The phosphor-torch underlit Markeen's broad cheekbones with a ghostly blue glow. Markeen was easily the most beautiful man he had ever loved, also the toughest and the best tempered. Markeen had always submitted to his dominance, though he suspected Markeen had his own dominant drive. Their journey together felt far from finished. There was so much more they could share. He brushed the sand from Markeen's lips and whispered cautiously, "If you come back to me I'll grant you anything." He knew he was making a futile and devilish bargain.

Markeen's body violently convulsed. He curled onto his side and began to hack up mouthfuls of grit. "Fuck!" he roared. "I hate Tunistan! I hate sand! I hate dromules!" He glanced around frantically. "Is she okay?"

Lord Veren felt his heart lurch out of his chest. "That moronic creature is dancing over there." He pointed to the rescued dromule who was prancing recklessly about and in imminent danger of toppling into another pit of quicksand.

Markeen's eyes widened. "The pack!"

Lord Veren tugged Markeen against his chest and kissed the top of his sandy head. "Forget the pack, it's gone." He glared at the quicksand, silently making a bargain that the mucky pit could keep the sapphires if he could keep Markeen. Suddenly it felt unsafe to sit so near the fickle pit, so he pulled Markeen to his feet and walked him toward the river. "Let's get you cleaned up." His usually cool violet eyes lit with joy. "You really need a bath."

Markeen followed complacently as they climbed onto a rocky slab that overlooked the river. The phosphor-torch made the cavern glow like a blue-green grotto. The crystal clear river ran beneath the slab of rock, steady and slowly.

Lord Veren began to remove Markeen's leather armor. His hands glided across the curved expanse of his chest. He tsked, "This leather will have to be oiled and cleaned."

Markeen pressed a lazy kiss to his master's lips. "Who cares?"

Lord Veren quickly stripped the boots and leather armor from his solid body and threw them in a heaping pile and stood naked in front of Markeen. "I care. I'm your master. You must take good care of our gear and you must take good care of me."

Markeen grinned, recognizing the signal that Lord Veren expected to be seduced and served this evening.

Lord Veren turned his back to Markeen and plunged into the river. "Holy Kaloram!" The shocked words rushed out of his mouth when he surfaced. "It's freezing!"

Markeen leapt in after him. The water was so cold he thought his heart might stop. "If you say so, sir. I think the water's very nice." His teeth chattered as he lied. He swam alongside Lord Veren and brushed his slick body against his master's. He submerged his head in the river and rinsed the grit free of his wavy locks. He resurfaced, dark and sleek, to look longingly at his master. "If you'd be willing to get out of this chilly water, I'd be willing to show you how much I love you."

Lord Veren's eyes crinkled at the corners with amusement. There was worry and a sense of vulnerability buried deep in his words. "Don't ever die again."

Markeen gently treaded water, rinsing the sand from mouth and skin. "I won't, sir."

After a few moments the river did not feel so cold. They swam side by side, washing the sweat and grit of Tunistan from their skin.

Markeen wrapped his arms around Lord Veren's waist and pressed against his lover's body, which was a solid wall of muscle and self-resolve. Lord Veren was built like an oak tree—tall, strong and prepared to weather the centuries with dignity. He reveled in this rare moment of relaxed contact with his master, feeling so very honored to serve at his side. As a young man he had schemed, manipulated, begged and bargained to throw himself in Lord Veren's path. He had always dreamed of serving this regal man but being Lord Vern's companion was often lonely. There were fewer Vertanians on Vertania every season. The demand for Vertanian skills and their natural wanderlust had scattered their breed across the galaxy. A home base, some female



companionship and children would have been a welcome addition to his life but he said nothing for that was not the way things were done in the royal house of Kaloram.

They paddled toward the rocky beach, laughing. The dromules had all strolled to the river's edge to drink. Several drowsy animals had already folded their legs beneath them and fallen asleep.

Lord Veren scanned the herd for his pack animal. He grabbed a roll of bed furs off its back, along with a small leather pouch.

Markeen eyed the pouch warily. "Are you sure about that? What if we're interrupted?"

Lord Veren opened the pouch with a smile on his face. "We'll stop and kill whoever interrupts us, then continue fucking like rabbits." He opened the pouch and removed a crescent-shaped slice of inky blue fruit. "Open wide..."

Markeen parted his lips and accepted the dried fruit on the tip of his tongue as though he was taking communion. His body involuntarily shivered from the cold and anticipation at the first whiff of the fruit's sugary perfume. He had been consuming azurpomia in carefully calculated doses ever since he was a young man. This androgenic fruit was responsible for making a strong race nearly indestructible. Azurpomia was the Vertanians' secret weapon. It greatly amplified the masculine qualities they already possessed and it was not to be treated lightly.

The azurpomia fizzed and quickly dissolved on Markeen's tongue. A tingling sensation rushed into his head. The first moments always felt like inhaling a meadow full of the sweetest lilies while a swarm of bees invaded his brain. His skin felt tight as his blood rushed faster and his heart pounded. His jaw tensed as if a roar might burst out of his mouth. His cock twitched, filled and rose toward his belly. His balls felt incredibly heavy. He wanted to mount or be mounted—now! His eyes fixed lustily on Lord Veren in anticipation. Whoa! Even that single crescent-shaped slice of blue apple, which was only twice as thick as the piece he had eaten earlier on the dune was almost too much to handle.

Lord Veren dropped a thin slice of fruit onto his tongue. His chin slowly lolled forward, his eyelids fell to half-mast and his silvery brows knitted together. A look of coldness, almost cruelty passed over his pale violet eyes. That look gave everything away. He was obviously in the mood to dominate. It was clear he would do the mounting and he would be rough.

"I understand." Markeen trembled. He knew he was in for a hard fuck. His fist grabbed for the swollen bulb of his cock, to milk off a few drops. When Lord Veren was in this mood, his first climax was always selfish and harsh. He would only become gentler and more generous later, after the first wave of lust had been slaked.

"Kneel." Lord Veren pushed down on Markeen's shoulders, until his knees sank into the sand. He pressed his thick cock against Markeen's lush mouth, spilling a pearl of opalescent liquid across Markeen's parted lips. "Take it," he growled impatiently. "Get me slick!"

Markeen groaned in excitement and despair. Saliva alone was never enough. If Lord Veren took his ass in this mood he knew that first stroke would burn like hell. He ran a wet pointed tongue along the base of Lord Veren's cock, struggling to get him as slick as possible. The cock leapt and swelled even larger when his warm tongue glided under the heavy balls. He loved his master's scent and flavor. Even the gnarl-veined texture of his cock was rough, even intimidating and perfectly reflected the personality of its owner. He stretched his lips wide to swallow the reddened tip as his tongue flicked at a salty drop of fluid.

Lord Veren moaned, tangled his fingers in Markeen's jet hair and thrust firmly to the back of his throat and lingered there with a slow, barely perceptible pulsing motion.

Markeen swallowed hard, his lips and tongue gently caressed Lord Veren and tried to take him deeper, even as his eyes shed tears at the edges.

Lord Veren's hips began to pump aggressively against Markeen's mouth.

Markeen tried futilely to gulp a breath between thrusts, finally surrendering to the idea that he was going to be swallowing more cum than oxygen.

Lord Veren thrust deeper into Markeen's throat. His cock twitched, threatening to spill, before he abruptly pulled it away. "I'd rather fuck!"

Markeen gasped for breath. His head reeled as he rubbed his damp cheek against Lord Veren's solid thigh. The look in Lord Veren's eyes was so intense it almost alarmed him. "Yes, sir."

Lord Veren grasped Markeen around the waist and spun him around. "Bend over that rock."

Markeen's heart pounded as he followed Lord Veren's brusque order. His hands braced against the jagged surface of the stone. The sharp bits of grit pressed a harsh imprint into his palms. He locked his arms in the straightened position to avoid having his aching cock crushed against the rough surface of the rock.

Lord Veren fiddled with the leather pouch behind Markeen's back. "Spread your ankles."

Markeen tried to glance over his shoulder to see what was going on.

"Look straight ahead!" Lord Veren snapped at Markeen. "Get your ankles farther apart and lift your buttocks."

Markeen's knees started to shake. He spread his ankles, feeling his exposed balls tighten and rise.

Lord Veren's broad hand stroked the scooped curves of Markeen's muscular buttocks. "Very nice. Raise your butt higher."

The breath caught in Markeen's throat.

Lord Veren's voice was a low whisper. "Do you love me?"

Markeen slowly nodded his head. "You know I do."

Lord Veren moved closer. His thick cock rubbed against the deep cleft of Markeen's buttocks.

Markeen held his breath, waiting for that first hellish stab.

Lord Veren's fingers glided across Markeen's hardened balls.

Markeen gasped when he realized Lord Veren's fingers were slick with oil.

Lord Veren's oiled hand gently squeezed and tugged on Markeen's heavy balls, then his slippery hand reached forward to stroke Markeen's swollen shaft.

Markeen groaned in pleasure and surprise.

Lord Veren's palm oiled Markeen's balls, reveling in their size and heaviness. His thumb carefully slid along the crepey skin that ran toward Markeen's tight ring. He leaned forward and reverently slipped a pointed tongue between Markeen's buttocks and stroked his tongue in warm, wet circles around Markeen's tight opening.

Markeen jolted from the slick, teasing sensation.

Lord Veren pressed an oiled thumb against the muscular ring and breached the opening. His thumb slid deep inside Markeen, searching for that magic spot.

Markeen tensed and rolled his hips higher, allowing Lord Veren to stretch him as a short spurt of hot cum shot out of him.

Lord Veren loomed behind Markeen as he oiled the shaft of his cock. "You put yourself between me and danger," he pressed his lips close to Markeen's ear, "and you came back from the dead when I asked you to." His voice shook from a rare burst of emotion. "Do you know how much that means to me?"

Markeen bowed his head, knowing he had no choice in this life but to love this man and do as he asked.

Lord Veren took hold of Markeen's hips, trapping Markeen's buttocks against him. "Don't struggle." He pressed the blunt head of his cock against Markeen's tight ring and slowly began to thrust.

Markeen whimpered. He struggled not to thrash at the first harsh burn of penetration as Lord Veren insistently drove his cock deep inside him with a single swift stroke. Lord Veren was large and he liked his partners to moan, so Markeen was careful not to hold back.

One of Lord Veren's hands lovingly caressed the back of Markeen's neck.

Markeen's ass burned from the depth of the stroke, yet Lord Veren's whisper-light touch on the back of his neck soothed him and held him perfectly still while Lord Veren pulled the blunt head of his cock all the way out and rammed into him a second time.

"Great Kaloram, you feel good!" Lord Veren wrapped one arm around Markeen's waist with a viselike grip and buried his cock deep inside him.

Markeen's eyes closed and his jaw dropped. His cock reared into the air and nearly exploded.

Lord Veren's thrusts sped up, until his hips were smacking against Markeen's solid ass. He glanced over Markeen's shoulder and saw Markeen's thick cock bouncing in the air. "Milk it," he whispered through tensed lips.

Markeen grabbed the head of his cock in a stranglehold, squeezed it and stroked downward. His jaw clenched as hot cum immediately shot out of him.

The sight of the milky shower set Lord Veren off. He panted and bit down on his bottom lip as he hammered into Markeen relentlessly until a heavy load of cum pumped out of him. Even after he came he held tightly to Markeen, swaying on his feet as his slick cock sawed back and forth inside Markeen. He slumped forward in exhaustion, using Markeen's back as a prop to stay upright. His long platinum hair spread across Markeen's shoulders. "You know I'm not done with you."

Markeen smiled, "I know."

Lord Veren's hands reached out to stroke Markeen's side. "I love you so much. Is there anything I can do for you?"

Markeen wet his lips. He loved Lord Veren, he was his partner of choice and he knew a Vertanian life did not get better than this, but he also wanted another life. He knew he could love a woman as well and maybe some children too.

Lord Veren studied Markeen's silent face. His pale eyes had learned over the centuries to accurately read hearts. "Never feel ashamed in front of me. I of all people know what it feels like to have your heart pulled in several directions."

“I want to go home to Vertania,” Markeen mumbled. “I want to see green orchards and fog once more. I don’t want to die in a desert.”

Lord Veren kissed the frown from Markeen’s lips. “I promise. I’ll take you home.”

## **Chapter Three**

### *The Royal Garden of Vertania*

Gala lurked on the slate outcropping, like a predator waiting for the perfect conditions to arrive. She lay motionless on the damp ground as dense fog settled over the heathery landscape of Vertania. Her muscles tensed from struggling to control the sharp impulse to charge. She lay perfectly still, flattened to the ground, yet her heart raced frantically and the hairs on the back of her neck prickled with anticipation. Her keen green eyes scanned the hillside for any sign of activity but, suspiciously, she saw nothing. An obsessive recurring thought looped through her mind — *I was born to hunt*.

She drew a calming breath of moist air into her lungs. The mountains of Vertania were new to her and far more scintillating than expected. All her life she had heard guilty whispers about Vertania and the infamous male warriors who stalked it, but myth and superstitious gossip had left her unprepared for the landscape's seductive power. This land made her feel strong. It felt good to be in Vertania and she loved it. Unfortunately, time here was limited. She was on a brief but important mission, a once-in-a-lifetime challenge, and it was unlikely she would ever be allowed to return here.

She served her people as a captain of Diandra's Guard, a deadly order of warrior women dedicated to the service of the Goddess Diandra. Every morning she proudly strapped her razor-sharp kriss to her rounded hip. Her kriss, or dagger of Diandra, marked her as a warrioress of merit, who had proven time and again she was willing to lay down her life for others. After years of harsh service in the Diandran Guard, she had earned the golden kriss, the highest rank of captain, plus a stable of sleek, gentle-tempered male concubines to enjoy as lovers, yet she had ambitions to rise even higher.

Her eyes tipped upward. The chalk-white palace of Vertania loomed above her on the ridge. She had come here on an unlikely quest, seeking fabled treasure in the royal gardens. She waited patiently while clouds of mist obscured the palace ramparts,

knowing that any guardsmen walking atop the ramparts would soon have only a wall of fog to look at.

She patiently waited until rising fog from the valley floor made her invisible before cautiously slithering forward on her belly across the mossy terrain. Her bare hands and knees bore the imprint of shattered slate and damp lichens. She was careful to stay out of sight of the palace ramparts, knowing she couldn't afford to be seen, not now, not with the stakes so high.

She crept forward, blessing the blanket of fog for working in her favor. The mists grew so heavy that visibility from the ramparts was nearly zero. She rationalized that with a little more fog and some luck the guards who patrolled the battlements would never see her crime.

She crested a boulder, coming within yards of the wall that protected the royal orchard. The faint tang of blossoms sweetened the moist air. She breathed in the unfamiliar but lovely scent of azurpomia, which filled her with a curious sense of agitation.

It grew harder to be patient. Her heart hammered a frantic beat, knowing she was only moments away from reaping the rewards of weeks of meticulous planning. Her hand rested on her kriss as she waited like a stone sentinel beside the palace wall, ever fearful that someone might hear her heart pounding in the mist.

As she crouched beside the wall, sniffing the breeze like a predatory creature, mounting excitement tingled up her spine until it reached her scalp, yet she refused to betray herself with the slightest movement. She remained low to the ground like a badger, allowing the protective mist to enfold her and cloak her secrets before daring to creep forward a few more paces on her elbows.

Her scalp smarted when a lock of her auburn hair tangled beneath the leather bandolier strapped to her back. She tried to creep forward but the tangled hair tugged painfully. She paused to free the trapped strands of hair from the leather strap but the long hairs were so knotted they didn't give. Without hesitation, she unsheathed her



kriss, sawed the russet curl away and tossed the discarded lock of hair to the ground. She slowly inched forward on her belly, knowing that on a mission of this kind, tangled hair, hampered motion or distractions of any kind could prove fatal.

She had to practice extreme caution. It was rumored that the males of Vertania were brutal, inexhaustible warriors who fought to the death. No females were born to their clan. Traditionally the warriors of Vertania captured their mates from other tribes. It was said to be kidnapped by the Vertanians was a one-way trip into the realm of the dark one, or so the priestesses of Dianndra had warned her, for Gala had never heard of a captured woman ever returning to her own tribe to tell her tale.

The legends claimed the warriors of Vertania were frightful beings, overwrought in their maleness. Their solid bodies were towering columns of iron-hard muscle and bone. Their angular faces were scarred and tattooed and—she hoped this wasn't true—their square jaws were whiskered and had to be scraped clean every day with a knife! Her stomach clenched. Beard stubble—yuck! Their pronounced eyeteeth were pointed fangs and it was rumored that they exposed their bull-like genitalia to horrified foes on the battlefield. Disgusting creatures indeed.

If these stories were true, the warriors of Vertania were nothing like the gentle male concubines of Dianndra. Her concubines were petite, doe-eyed, narrow-shouldered, smooth-skinned and she loved them all dearly but it was sad that after all these years, the Goddess had not blessed her with a single child.

She wasn't the only one. Throughout the entire Queendom, no warrioress had conceived a child in more than a year. It was alarming. The priestesses claimed that the Goddess had turned her back on the people of Dianndra but other more practical arguments were made. It was suggested the problem might lie with the concubines. The planet of Dianndra had been a closed matriarchy for many generations and common sense warnings that this was no longer a good idea began to take hold.

It was at this time the old ones began to recite the ancient legends. Tales of strapping warriors were told. The males of Vertania were frequently mentioned at

public meetings but no self-respecting warrioress of Diannandra would consent to becoming a sacrificial lamb to one of these brutes. As the situation grew more desperate, more detailed stories began to circulate.

It was said that the males of Vertania owed their considerable masculine strength to the exclusive use of an intoxicating fruit known as azurpomia, or blue apples. The royalty of Vertania strictly controlled the cultivation and consumption of this body- and mind-altering fruit. It was rumored that blue apples made the males of Vertania the formidable creatures that they were.

After much debate, it was decided at a council meeting that it might be in everyone's best interests to introduce the infertile male concubines of Diannandra to a little of this magical blue fruit.

Gala immediately raised her kriss into the air and shouted, "I shall journey to Vertania and return with the flesh and seeds of this rare blue fruit!"

Then the council arguments began in earnest. A burst of dissent rang through the hall. There was concern that azurpomia would not benefit adult Dianndran males at all, in fact it was feared it might poison them.

After much frustration and many highly agitated council meetings, Gala finally succeeded in convincing the Dianndran Council to lend her a ship, so she could travel to Vertania to collect samples of the infamous fruit and test them for toxins. She was both surprised and saddened when no other warrioress raised her hand to accompany her on this extremely treacherous mission. She was forced to train and plan for this journey on her own.

As she crept up the cracked slate of the Vertanian mountainside, she realized the glory and the risk were hers alone and this was as it should be. Those other girls lacked a sense of adventure and ambition. Her fingernails clung to the lichens. A cloud of mist rolled over her head, leaving diamondlike droplets of moisture in her hair. At this moment, she wasn't at all sorry she had come to Vertania alone. This felt right. She needed to do this and if the azurpomia was all it was rumored to be it might prove to be

a delightful addition to her life as well. Azurpomia was said to be a powerful aphrodisiac, an item which she had genuine need of because these days, she didn't find her sweet-tempered concubines very exciting. As lovers her concubines lacked fire. A little stab of guilt shot through her for being so ungrateful for their gentle love and care.

She remembered balmy nights on Diandra when the moon was full and the air was still, how she loved choosing two or three of her favorite concubines to share her private pool. No matter how challenging her day had been the warm bubbling water of the pool and her concubines' soft hands always left her feeling at peace.

She loved being caressed, massaged, shampooed and kissed by several pairs of adoring hands at once. It was pure decadence to slide between the sleek hairless bodies of her concubines and absorb their loving attention. Her concubines campaigned for the right to stroke and nuzzle her breasts. She loved it when two or more of her concubines took turns kissing and sucking her clit while two more pleased her breasts. She found she could come so hard that way her back arched completely off the edge of the pool. Four concubines in the pool was her latest favorite erotic combination but tomorrow she could change her mind.

All this decadence aside, she had to admit she was a bit bored with her harem. It wasn't really her concubines' fault. Her concubines' greatest pride in life was in pleasing her, even if it sometimes did get a bit competitive. Her concubines spoiled her by showing limitless devotion without any coaxing or bargaining on her part, which meant there was never any suspense or sense of challenge. She knew they loved her because she was a good mistress who gave each concubine his special time alone with her. She cuddled them, listened to their troubles and let them fall asleep resting their heads on her soft breasts.

Some of the unorthodox practices within her harem were unheard of among the other mistresses. She preferred to call a man before her and ask, "What do you desire?" She always asked the question, hoping to be surprised, but she never was. Most of the

time the concubine would fall to his knees and beg to lick her pussy, which she always allowed. She enjoyed watching a concubine crawl on his hands and knees toward her and beg to bury his tongue between her thighs. Sometimes she pretended he was a dangerous feline or some fierce creature beyond her control just to work up a little extra excitement for this game which had become largely predictable. She never had to lift a finger to please her concubines though she often did so to keep the peace.

She knew of many mistresses who would deny their concubines any pleasure at all. She could never be that cruel to such loving creatures but she clearly remembered the days of long ago when the concubines, when offered their choice of desires, boldly demanded a hard fuck, or at least asked to have their cocks sucked. Sadly, those days were gone. The concubines had changed. Old-fashioned male lust had been replaced with jealous looks behind her back, moodiness, pouting or childish pushiness to get her attention.

The foggy sky grew darker. The bright trio of Vertanian moons had yet to rise. Soon it would be safe enough to hoist herself over the palace wall. She adjusted the pack on her back and quietly crept forward on her elbows.

## **Chapter Four**

Lord Veren paced in front of a blazing stone hearth, which was wide enough to roast an ox. Two handsome gray wolves yelped happily at his side while he impatiently strode back and forth in front of the orange glow of the fire with his long platinum hair floating behind him. His silvery brows drew together in agitation, creasing his forehead and nearly obscuring the blue wolf's paw tattooed above his brow. He irritably pounded his palm against the stone hearth while complaining to Markeen, "Is she still outside the palace?"

Markeen kneeled humbly at his master's feet. "Yes, Lord Veren, she has yet to crest the wall."

Lord Veren made a gruff sound low in his throat and smoothed his thick hair away from his heavy brow. "Great Kaloram, that woman is slow! How long does it take to climb a shallow cliff?" His broad hand sliced demonstratively through the air. "For Kaloram's sake, there's a paved road a thousand yards to her left. Why doesn't she use it? Is her mind addled? We had better bring the wolves inside. It will be night soon, I don't want her getting hurt in the dark."

Markeen dared to comment, "She's well-armed, sir. She looks quite competent."

"Ha!" Lord Veren snorted. "She allowed herself to be spotted, she brought all the wrong gear and she climbs at a snail's pace. I'm not impressed!"

Markeen laughed, exposing a row of even, white teeth that contained only the slightest hint of fangs. "With respect, sir, if you had seen her bare backside beneath her little leather kilt you would've been favorably impressed."

A sarcastic grin lit Lord Veren's pale violet eyes from within.

Markeen handed Lord Veren a lock of red hair. "I found this on the ground, sir."

Lord Veren's acquisitive fingers reached for the glossy lock of hair. He absently smoothed the wayward strands flat and held the russet waves to his nose. His proudly angled nostrils flared wide as he inhaled the scent of the hair. "Redhead, my favorite flavor."

Both men laughed.

Markeen lifted his chin, adding quietly, "She's absolutely beautiful."

Lord Veren frowned. "She's not some scrawny girl?"

Markeen shook his head, "Not at all. She's fully a woman."

Lord Veren's fingers toyed with the discarded lock of hair. "How fortunate."

Markeen's eyes glowed hopefully. "May I have her, sir?"

Lord Veren's stern lips tightened. "No." He tucked the russet lock of hair under his leather breastplate and motioned for his vassal to rise. "Markeen, we both know where she's headed. Bring me my sword and wait for me in the orchard."

Markeen rose to his full height, his jewel green eyes gleaming with excitement. "Will we be hunting together, sir?"

"Yes, my love. We have a little redheaded thief in our garden and I'd like to have some fun with her."

The side of Markeen's jaw twitched with repressed tension. He strode off to fetch his lord's sword. "Yes, sir."

\* \* \* \* \*

Gala blinked the dewdrops from her eyelashes. An opaque blanket of cool dampness had settled over the landscape, bringing the visibility to zero. The Vertanians could have stationed a palace guard every ten paces along the ramparts and it wouldn't have done them a bit of good, not under these conditions. She was certain no one could possibly see her in this dense fog. She threw her leather climbing rope over the palace wall, feeling a wave of confidence. This was going to be much easier than she had dared hope.

A wolf howled in the distance. The creature's sad cry pierced the fog.

Her body froze in terror as the blood pounded in her ears. A wolf was one opponent that wouldn't be the least bit handicapped by fog. Wolves were the mythical children of the Goddess Dianndra. To wantonly kill a wolf was an unspeakable crime. She squeezed her eyes shut and prayed silently she wouldn't have to defend herself against the fanged ones and commit an act of violence that would forever offend the Goddess. She muttered a fervent prayer, pulled her kriss from its sheath and held it in her teeth while climbing the leather rope hand over hand.

She pulled herself over the wall. To her relief, no gnashing wolves were there to greet her. As it turned out it wasn't much of a wall. The stone barrier was so easy to climb junior priestesses could easily breach this garden. She concluded the warriors of Vertania must be overly confident in their combat skills or else they were fools to build such slight walls around their treasure gardens.

She carefully wound the leather climbing rope around her arm, knowing she would need it later and gently sniffed the moist air, which carried the distinct scent of sugary fruit. She knew with certainty the orchard lay dead ahead. She tiptoed down a slate path with her leather loot bag at the ready. She planned on plundering the orchard, grabbing as much ripe fruit as she could carry, before escaping into the foggy night—mission accomplished plain and simple!

The first of Vertania's three moons rose above the palace wall, spilling a sliver of diffused moonlight across her path. She clearly saw how lovely the dripping-wet royal gardens of Vertania were. The path was lined with elegantly wrought stone fountains and crystal clear pools stocked with glittering fish. This fact surprised her. She had not expected these fierce barbarians to possess a sense of aesthetics. She even saw a flowerbed of purple thistles delicately planted in the filigree silhouette of the crown of Kaloram. The crown's outline was precise and absolutely beautiful.

She knew that King Kaloram had once been the mythical lover of the Goddess Dianndra until the divine couple's mutually foul tempers caused them to separate. In

her rage, Diannandra crushed her lover's crown into a sprinkling of stars and flung the stars into space but obviously the Vertanians had retrieved the crown because here it was hearty and whole, growing in the mist-shrouded royal garden. It was clear these brutes still worshipped the banished God of Kaloram.

She cautiously passed between a labyrinth-hedge of fragrant but spiky thornbushes, which opened onto a seemingly endless orchard of azurpomia. The purple bark of the azurpomia trees looked almost black in the dim light. Clouds of delicate blue blossoms billowed on the tip of each branch.

She sighed as the scent of sugary fruit filled her nostrils. Azurpomia was unlike anything she had ever encountered. The fruit itself was stunning to look at, hanging heavily on the trees like perfumed, sapphire jewels, softly reflecting the moonlight. The sight of it filled her entire being with a restless sensuality.

She inhaled the rich fragrance of the orchard, enjoying her moment of victory. This was the scent of mystery and just standing beneath the trees was intoxicating. Her head was already spinning and she hadn't even tasted the fruit. Her curious hand reached toward a heavily weighted branch but as she leaned forward, her boot crushed a ripe fruit that had fallen to the ground. When the skin of the fruit burst, it sent a wave of thick perfume into the air that stopped her in her tracks. In a single blast of fragrance, the scent of ripe azurpomia rushed through her nostrils, pierced her brain and hijacked her senses. Her lips parted in surprise. Her body buzzed from the fruit's pleasant stimulation that triggered a cascade of excitement that started with a tingle on her scalp and raced down her spine to caress the soles of her feet. The entire effect was sensually stunning—her heart raced, her mouth watered and her knees wobbled. She got goose bumps from the sensation of phantom hands gently stroking her bare thighs. *This was crazy.*

She squeezed her eyes shut and stood trembling beneath the blossomed boughs. If this is what happened by merely breaking the skin of the fruit and inhaling the fragrance what would happen if she actually took a bite?



Her slender fingers grabbed one of the ripe blue jewels and plucked it from the branch. The fruit parted from the tree with ease. She patted herself on the back for that, knowing she had perfectly calculated the Vertanian harvest. She was not a day too early, nor a day too late to reap the lush rewards of the royal orchard. She polished the inky blue fruit against her leather kilt, until the skin of the fruit gleamed like a clear midnight sky.

She bit into the fruit. Her teeth penetrated the bittersweet skin of the azurpomia with the slightest crunch. Perfume filled the air as a trickle of dark juice flooded her mouth. She was jolted by the enveloping sensation. The juice was an aromatic vapor as much as it was a sweet liquid that evaporated on her tongue. Her head gently tipped back as the juice warmed in her mouth. The fruit's fragrance wisped deeply into her brain, overloading her senses with information. Her brain struggled to record accurately each nuance of sensation as it rolled in. She swayed precariously on her feet, her hand frantically clutched at a tree branch for support. Holy Dianndra! What was happening to her? She gasped as the azurpomia went straight to her head.

The sun's heat had long disappeared, so she thought it odd that her skin grew ever warmer as she stood still in this cool, damp orchard, the warm sensations drowning out her capacity to be rational. A throbbing roar howled between her thighs. She pressed her knees together to get some relief from this unexpected and demanding feeling. Her eyes opened wide. This was not good. She could not ignore overpowering feelings this strong. This should not be happening now! Her nipples felt overly sensitive and swollen. She furtively glanced down her tunic and saw that the prominent tips of her breasts had flushed a deep rose. Dear Goddess! What had she done to herself?

She stared down at the bitten piece of fruit in her hand. She had inadvertently crushed the ripe azurpomia in her palm, sending a rivulet of blue juice trickling down her wrist. Impulsively, she pressed her wrist to her mouth and lapped up the juice with the tip of her tongue. The juice was so sweet and so fragrant it almost melted on her tongue like spun sugar.

Now her head was really spinning. She struggled to stand on her own but her knees buckled. She wiped her fruit-sticky fingers against her tunic and accidentally brushed against the curves of her breasts with the softest whisper of a touch that left her inflamed with desire. The fine yarn of her woven tunic suddenly felt coarse and rasping against her overstimulated skin. She wanted to tug it over her head, fling the scratchy tunic away from her and stand naked in the cool night air. She noticed the colors and scents of the orchard had intensified. They made her head swim from the simulation. It was overwhelming but it felt so good to unleash her usual strict self-control.

Against her better judgment, she took another bite of fruit. A stronger rush of sensation stormed through her. Her head tipped back in ecstasy, loving the amazingly intense sensations that raced forward. She pressed her thighs together, allowing the heat to pool there, wondering if a single focused touch could push her to climax.

She stared gratefully at the half-eaten fruit in her hand, knowing she hadn't felt this sexual in a long time. Blue apples were no disappointment, they really lived up to their reputation. She crossed her knees, letting her body buckle forward with a sigh and greedily licked the blue juice from her fingertips. She savored the dark drops of liquid on the tip of her tongue, allowing another wave of fiery desire to take her. She wished she had brought a few of her concubines along on this trip, feeling convinced that she could exhaust all her lovers as easily as she could consume half a bottle of good Diann dran wine.

She dreamily sucked the dark juice from her fingertips, realizing that her concubines were pleasant enough companions but she had to admit she had grown weary of their delicate nature and tearful outbursts. Her little harem had become a nest of petty complaints and jealousies. She was so tired of being the consoler and the possessor. Her mind mulled over how exciting it would be to mate with a fiercer creature, someone or something more challenging and dangerous.

Foolishly, she took another bite of the juicy blue fruit. Her eyelids fell to half-mast and her lips parted with a longing sigh. The fruit dragged her into an erotic dreamlike

state filled with fantasies of fierce creatures—muscular giants built like bulls. She wondered if the Vertanians could possibly live up to their wicked reputation.

She casually stroked her fingertips across her throat. Dear Goddess, the lightest touch felt so good! The azurpomia magnified every physical sensation tenfold. Her highly sensitized fingertips took intense delight in creeping up her throat and tangling in the thick mass of her soft hair. It felt so good to run her fingers through her wild head of red hair. Her mind wandered to thoughts of fierce, demanding bull-like warriors and how much she'd love to straddle one right now.

A moment of unexpected clarity interrupted her revelry. Her eyes blinked open in surprise and she looked down at the empty leather sack at her side. Wasn't she supposed be performing an important task? Hadn't she come to Vertania at great risk for something? She gulped down a moment of shame over her unprofessional attitude and cleared her mind of all sensual thoughts as she suddenly remembered she was here to collect azurpomia, not wallow in it.

She rolled her shoulders and took a deep breath, trying to shake off the effects of the fruit. Knowing she had better accomplish what she came for, she picked up her leather sack and sloppily plucked some ripe azurpomia from the branches, instantly collapsing into a fit of giggles. She tried to pick some more fruit but started giggling again, finding it too difficult to focus on the task at hand.

The blue apples released their thick perfume into the air just from being snapped off the branch. The faster she picked fruit, the worse the effect got. It was difficult to think, let alone work. The fragrance of the plucked fruit left her woozy, making it impossible to concentrate. The glistening blue apples mesmerized her. She stopped to stare at the slick blue fruit skin, actually bringing the glossy fruit to her cheek and rubbing it against her face, reveling in its cool smoothness. The thought crossed her mind, "What harm is there in taking one last bite?"

She took one last bite of azurpomia, letting the effervescent juice evaporate on her tongue. The next moment she was slowly circling her hips in a graceful serpentine

motion. "Ah!" She hadn't felt this alive in a long time. Her hands snaked gracefully into the air, tracing imaginary pictures in the mist. She danced in place to an inaudible tune that played only in the back of her mind, while plucking blue jewels from the boughs. She lost track of time and despite her sensual stupor, she somehow managed to fill her leather sack with fruit. She hoisted the weighty bag over her shoulder, struggling not to topple over as she turned around.

The menacing tip of a sword pressed against her heart.

She gasped and looked into the squinting green eyes of a glowering, dark-haired warrior. Her gaze traveled upward in horrified awe. This guy was huge, nothing like her concubines at home. His wide shoulders blotted out the view. Her heart pounded from excitement and terror. She staggered backward.

The warrior leveled his sword at her and backed her against a tree.

Her hand blindly grabbed for her kriss and she let the bag of ripe fruit fall to the ground with a juicy "Splot!"

The warrior moved closer. His smug smile crinkled the blue wolf paw's tattoo on his cheek. His ropy arm raised the tip of his sword to her jaw, gently pressing the blade against her throat. "Drop your kriss!"

Her fingers clung protectively to her kriss. She would rather die than give it up. Her shaking voice croaked her blackest oath, "Go to the dark one!"

"I am the dark one!"

The warrior's eyes gleamed with eager anticipation. The tip of his sword traced its way from the tender skin of her throat to the top of her tunic. He flicked the sword's tip against her tunic, deftly cutting away a broad swath of fabric.

Her lips snarled in horror as a large piece of cloth ripped away, exposing her breasts.

The sight of his handiwork intensified the warrior's smirk. His eyes roved slowly over her smooth curves, taking in every detail. He stopped smiling and moved closer, a

vein throbbed below his jaw, making his excitement all the more palpable. "I've never seen your like. What tribe are you?"

She wanted to shout, "Diannandra is a civilization not a tribe!" but she remained silent, assuming the barbarian wouldn't know the difference.

He held the edge of his sword against her throat as his fingertips grazed the outer curve of her breast. "Who are your folks?"

She struggled to concentrate on what he was saying. His dialect was so strong he was nearly incomprehensible but as she strained to listen she realized he was speaking some archaic form of Dianndran. She recognized the word "folks". He was asking about her kinship. She shouted the word, "Dianndran!" as if she were dashing a bucket of ice water in his face.

His eyes widened at the word "Dianndran". A smile flared across his lips. "I've heard legends about your tribe." He warily eyed the kriss clutched nervously in her hand. He held his sword in front of her kriss, ready to whack the dagger from her hand if she made the slightest move. Outrage burned in her eyes. His voice dropped to a husky whisper, "Set the kriss down."

She had no intention of doing that. She struggled not to flinch as she waited for an opportunity to attack.

He expertly twirled his heavy sword in his hand, causing the muscles of his broad chest to ripple. He used his massive body to thoroughly pin her against a tree trunk. His lips whispered an odd reassurance in her ear, "I'd rather not harm you."

She shuddered when his warm breath spread across her cheek.

His cock was already hard from watching her lush body dancing and seeing the indignant fire in her eyes. His weight settled against her, feeling her softness beneath his strength. He parted her thighs with an invasive knee, letting his stiff cock rub against her belly.

Her chin tipped upward and her eyes betrayed her fear and excitement.

His nostrils flared from the exotic scent of excited woman. Feeling completely confident she would not strike at him, he brushed his lips against her hair. "Drop the kriss now."

She held the kriss so tightly her fingernails pierced her palm. The heat rolling off his body alarmed her senses. She had never been this close to such a masculine creature. It left her mortified that this living tower of brawn felt exciting and smelled right. This warrior had a dark, warm scent that her nose loved and recognized on some primitive level and, Goddess help her, he felt good to be near. Her eyelids drooped from inhaling his intoxicating scent, which was so primal, so male and so unlike the refined men of home. She wanted him to touch her so badly, she felt betrayed by her libido. For the sake of adventure, she seriously considered the possibility of just giving in to this brute.

His fingers tangled in her hair. "I've been watching you for hours. I can't wait to fuck you." He pulled her against him and that self-assured smile returned to his handsome face.

She stared into the warrior's blazing green eyes and a moment of truth cleared her mind. Her senses rallied. She was a captain in Diannndra's Guard, she wouldn't be taken so easily. This was fight or die! She growled before lunging at him with her kriss pointed at his femur, hoping he would not be on guard for such an unobvious target.

The warrior sensed her target. He dodged the strike with the speed of a viper.

Her kriss skittered ineffectually off the thick leather plating strapped to his thigh.

He grabbed her lunging hand and smacked her wrist against the tree trunk. "Be careful," he bellowed, "or someone will get hurt."

Her arm stung! It took at all her strength to not drop the kriss.

The warrior pressed against her with his now-crushing weight. "That was a mistake."

In self-defense, she gulped a deep breath and drove her knee into his groin.

They both howled in pain.

He groaned from having his leather armor strike his hard cock.

She moaned from having her bare knee hit the hardened body armor.

Both whimpered and took a moment to recover.

But she recovered faster and struck him on the back of the neck with the heavy hilt of her kriss.

The warrior's eyes flickered shut as his limp body buckled forward and slid down the tree trunk.

She picked up the heavy sack filled with blue apples and swung the sack with all her might into his slumping body.

The air hissed out of him on contact, he toppled unconscious to the ground, making no further efforts to move or protect himself.

She stared incredulously at the immobile warrior, at first believing it was a trick.

His only movement was the erratic flutter of his thick black eyelashes.

She had to get out of here! Her eyes frantically searched the mist. Was there anyone else near? She listened for the sounds of others but heard nothing. The fog was so thick, she couldn't see farther than five paces in any direction.

She looked down at her leather sack, saddened to see the fruit was beaten to mush. It gave off a heavy scent that distracted her mind and made her body tingle. Holy Dianndra, she had to be careful. Finding her way out of this mist-shrouded garden might take longer than she hoped. She feared intoxication and confusion in the fog would be her undoing.

She needed to buy herself some time. She needed to plan her escape. She needed a moment to think. She glanced at the leather rope coiled around her arm, instantly deciding the safest solution was to tie the unconscious warrior to the tree.

She quickly unfurled the leather climbing rope from her around her arm while staring down at the sleeping giant's face. She hovered over the warrior, prepared to subdue him but found herself studying him instead. She saw that he was an

intimidating but beautiful man, with distinct bone structure and a proud, wide mouth. A sweep of glossy black hair covered half his lean face, making him look like a dark angel. In his unconscious state, his broad chest rose and fell slowly, tempting her to trace her fingertips down the silky black trail of hair that ran from the top of his chest to some mysterious destination beneath his leather armor. His silky body hair truly fascinated her. She had never seen anything like it on the smooth-skinned men of Dianndra.

The warrior's arched lips muttered a garbled oath.

Oh Goddess, he was waking up! Unwilling to waste another moment, she hurried to lash him to the tree, knotting the leather rope to the purple trunk. She slipped the rope around the tree, deftly binding his thick wrists together but strong as she was, she could barely lift his weight. Just raising his heavy arms left her panting from exertion. She struggled to hoist his arms above his head. Great Dianndra, this man was heavy! What was this guy made of? Before she finished tying his wrists to the tree, he came to.

His green eyes blinked open and flicked nervously from side to side, becoming gradually aware of his predicament. When he realized his wrists were bound, he gulped an enraged breath, arched his back off the ground and bellowed, "Kaloram damn you!" He tugged frantically against the leather restraints, causing the entire fruit tree to tremble violently. His eyes burned with indignation and his heavy legs furiously pounded the ground. "Cut me loose, woman, or you'll pay!"

She leapt over his kicking feet, picked up her leather sack and fled.

"Damn you!" He struggled to break free of his bonds, thrashing so wildly the brittle tree trunk creaked and threatened to snap.

She glanced over her shoulder, in fear that he might uproot the tree and charge after her. This warrior was so unlike her gentle concubines. This man was most definitely a dangerous creature, completely unaccommodating and untrustworthy. Her eyes fixed with horrified fascination on his violently tensing body.



He strained to topple the tree, causing a flurry of baby blue blossoms to float to the ground.

She was shocked to realize he actually was uprooting the tree. The ground beneath the tree cracked and crumbled, exposing a ball of hairlike roots. This man was a bull, damn him! She'd never seen anything like it.

The warrior's irate green eyes bulged in their sockets as a dusting of blossoms sifted down on his head. "Get over here, woman, this second and untie me!"

My Goddess, he was an arrogant creature. She stopped dead in her tracks. "Are you yelling at me?" She couldn't believe this man's rude tone. "If my concubines ever spoke to me in such a violent tone I would —"

The warrior interrupted her, "You would what?" His upper lip sneered. "Take their favorite bathrobe away? Stomp their flowerbeds flat? Tell me exactly how you would punish those poor things you call men?"

She turned away from him. "You're not worthy to hear my answer."

He gnashed his sharp teeth at her.

"Be silent!" She caught a glimpse of those fabled Vertanian white fangs, which on this man were subtle and actually quite interesting. She decided he was an intriguing creature, which she wasn't quite ready to walk away from. She stepped over his prone body and reached into the tree for a few undamaged pieces of fruit. Her fingers quickly snapped a few ripe azurpomia off the branches. The fruit's perfume filled her nostrils, making her feel slightly dizzy.

The warrior stared up her kilt, saying nothing.

She was suspicious of his sudden silent calm. She leaned over him to get closer to a fruit-laden bough. She plucked a ripe sapphire-blue azurpomia from the branch. She noticed he was staring longingly at her bare thighs. She gloated over her victory. "Shut up."

He smiled quietly, his eyes twinkling as if he knew a secret. "I didn't say anything."

She glared at him. "You were getting ready to."

He stretched his long body out beneath the tree, slightly tilting his hips upward.

She couldn't help but notice his massive erection straining against his body armor. His impressively proportioned package was barely contained within his snug leather codpiece, making him look painfully uncomfortable.

When he noticed she was staring a pleased look spread across his face. His sexuality was so enticing she couldn't look away. His eyes lit with challenge, splaying his muscular legs apart. "I'll bet you're a selfish and unskilled lover."

She ignored his comment and continued picking fruit. "I should have tied you to an anthill."

His unexpected smile made his eyes sparkle.

She saw the sparkle in his green eyes and sensed it was a trick. She immediately looked away before he could lock his emerald eyes on to her and hypnotize her with their depths. Her nostrils flared as she became subtly aware of the masculine scent rolling off his skin. She was alarmed to realize this man was giving off some sort of pheromone, which was disarming and made her want to be touched. Her skin tingled. She took another breath. Yes, something was wrong. She wouldn't want that bullish creature touching her. His scent was rich and warm like polished wood.

*Umm, interesting.* The more she inhaled of his scent, the better she felt about him. Her eyes focused on his lean hips and bulging crotch. She wondered what it would feel like to mount a cock that size. *Whoa.* She stopped that thought cold in its tracks. *Don't go there!* The little voice in her head warned her to stop thinking along those lines. She shook her head to sober her thoughts, knowing it was long past time to get out of here when an oversized beast like this started looking good.

He groaned helplessly. "Untie me."

She stared down at the warrior's strapping body, laid out like a sensual buffet, feeling her eyelids growing heavy.

"Please loosen my armor." His eyes drifted toward the confining codpiece. "I can't stand much more."

Despite the fact that his seductive scent was working its way into her brain, she managed to slowly shake her head. "No."

His full lips parted. "Please."

Her heart lurched. She was such a softy, she couldn't stand it when men begged. She moved to his side. "I'll help you if you promise you won't harm me."

He stared at her with starry eyes. "I give you my word on the crown of Kaloram I won't kick you."

Kicking was the least of her worries. She carefully moved to his side where he couldn't reach her with his thrashing legs. Her hands grazed his hips while her fingers tried to figure out the ornate fasteners on his leather armor. She noticed the curved leather cup that acted as a codpiece looked overly full.

He lifted his hips with a pained expression. "Hurry!"

She leaned over him, becoming acutely aware of the mysterious scent wafting off his skin, which made her want to rub her body against him like a cat. At that moment rubbing against him sounded absolutely heavenly. Sexual thoughts dominated her judgment as her fingers fumbled unsuccessfully to unlatch his armor.

He writhed as if he were in tremendous agony. "Tell me your name."

The struggle in his voice cut right through her. Involuntarily her heart opened to him, causing a wave of shock to flow over her. At any other time she would never be foolish enough to let this happen. This was the work of pheromones, or sorcery. She jerked her hands away from his armor.

"Don't stop!" he pleaded. "Please loosen my armor. I just wanted to know your name."

Her lip curled with suspicion. "Why?"

Admiration shone brightly in his eyes. "You're so beautiful. I see so few women."

Her nose caught another whiff of his warm musk. Uh oh. This guy was definitely up to something. A lump rose in her throat, melting her willpower. Her fingers longed to trace across his broad chest and feel his heart beating beneath those silky strands of black hair. Her nose warned her she was being manipulated but his draw was so strong she wanted to ignore the warning signs and straddle his hips anyway. Her pussy fluttered with longing at the mere thought. She knelt on the ground beside him and lowered her face to his. Her lips hovered an inch above his beautiful mouth. Imprudently, she inhaled more of his rich scent, the accusing words rolling softly off her tongue. "What are you trying to do to me?"

"My name is Markeen. Untie me," he pleaded.

"I don't care what your name is." Heat blazed between her thighs. She thought his elegant face looked so beautiful when he begged. "I didn't ask your name. I asked what you were doing." She closed her eyes to prevent herself from staring at his handsome face. His scent coupled with the heady fragrance of the azurpomia and the throbbing heat in her clit was too much to ignore. *What the hell!* She decided to give in to her impulses. Her hands wandered to his waist, she threw her leg over his hip and slid on top of him, letting her pussy grind against his leather codpiece. His frame was so wide she had to will her thigh muscles to relax while she straddled him. Her leather kilt rode high on her thighs, yet she tugged it even higher, letting her hips gyrate in tight circles against his rounded leather codpiece. *Oooo!* The blinding sharp sensations that arose struck her like fever. Holy Diandra, this man felt good!

His teeth dragged across the plush cushion of his bottom lip. His hips arched high off the ground, desperately trying to make contact with her. His voice crackled with agitation. "Take off my armor, please."

"No." She ground her warm pussy against his body armor and tugged the shredded tunic over her head. As the fabric passed over her face, obscuring her eyes, she knew he was staring at her and holding his breath, anxiously waiting for the hem of the garment to lift above her breasts.

He sighed with gratification when her rosy nipples appeared from beneath her tunic.

She raised her arms above her head, allowing her full breasts to sweep upward from her rib cage. The effects of the azurpomia had definitely strengthened. She looked down at herself, her nipples were dark, almost wine colored and her breasts were swollen larger than she had ever seen them. Her hands reached for her heavy breasts with fascination. Her fingertips slowly toyed with her stiffening nipples, flicking each sensitive tip to a hard peak and sending jolts of pleasure rippling through her. She gently cupped her soft breasts and squeezed them together.

Markeen's body stirred wildly beneath her, his eyes lit with the look of a lustful satyr. "Untie me!"

Her breath caught when she saw his heated expression. It infused her with a fresh sense of power. She rubbed her wet pussy against his armor, reveling in the increased sensation that centered in her clit. She closed her eyes, letting the sensation of complete arousal wash over her. It would so easy to come, the lightest touch could push her over the edge. She wanted to take her time and wallow in the lusty reaction she got from him. She let her pointed nipples hover above his lips.

He lifted his face to her breasts.

She pulled away from him, remaining just out of reach, not allowing him touch to her.

He hissed in frustration.

She shushed him, "Be nice, or I'll leave."

He glared at her.

She fondled her plump breasts inches in front of his nose. "When my concubines behave, I reward them by allowing two of them to suck me to sleep. I love it, they love it, everyone feels so comforted." She licked her fingertip and slowly drew a wet circle around a puffy nipple that looked as tender as if it had already been sucked. She stared down at his frowning face. "I wouldn't dare trust you. You'd bite."

He grimaced. "I won't harm you. I promise." His green eyes flashed with a touch of malice. "It might get a bit rough..."

"You wish!" She reached for another blue apple, once again feeling the desire for the fruit's heated rush. She held the ripe fruit to her lips and bit into it with a juicy crunch, carelessly letting a trickle of inky juice dribble onto his chest.

"Be careful," he growled at her. "How much of that have you already eaten?"

She stopped chewing the bite of sweet fruit. "I don't know." She heard genuine concern in his voice and that worried her.

His brows sank. "Put the fruit down."

The worried crease between his brows made her want to toss the fruit away, "Why?"

"Too much azurpomia will make a man violent and a woman wanton."

Wanton? Was that all? "I guess they'll be no blue apples for you." She took another bite of fruit.

His eyes telegraphed a stricken warning. "Don't do it! Set the fruit down! Too much will make you insatiable and leave you unable to climax."

She wasn't sure why she should believe him but his words held the ring of truth. She spat out the un-chewed bite of fruit.

The tension in his face softened. "Good girl." His wrists twisted impatiently in the leather rope. "I want us to come together."

*Hah!* She glared down at him. This guy was drenched in sexuality and arrogant attitude. "What makes you think you'll come at all?" Her pride screamed for her to get up and leave but her pussy kept her glued to the spot.

His eyes trained intensely on her and his voice hummed with self-assurance. "I'd do anything to slide my cock inside you. Take off my armor and mount me."

Her eyes scanned the length of his lean torso as her body urged her to take advantage of this gorgeous man. She couldn't remember a time in her life when she had

wanted to fuck a man so badly and that frightened her. Her sarcastic tongue tried to rescue her. "Forget it. You've got nothing to bargain with."

A slight smile curled the edges of his lips. "Actually I do. You need me."

His arrogance shocked her. Her concubines wouldn't dream of talking back to her.

He lifted his head off the ground. "Azurpomia takes a while to completely work its way into your bloodstream. I don't know how much fruit you've already eaten but I do know a few minutes from now you'll be so lustfully intoxicated that you'll be clawing the bark off the trees if you don't accept the inevitable and get some relief from a hard cock thrusting inside you."

She sneered at him, "Then I had better leave now before it's too late." She picked up her tunic and stepped back, allowing him one last glimpse of her swelling breasts before tugging the torn garment over her head.

"Don't go!" His heavy legs pounded the ground. "Don't leave me like this!"

She noted the despair on his face while smoothing the ragged tunic over her hips. She picked up her bag of stolen fruit and walked into the foggy night. "Goodbye, sweetie."

"Come back," he snarled. "You won't get far."

She shouted over her shoulder, "Neither will you."

His legs exploded in a tantrum of frantic kicks that shook the ground. "Damn you to the dark one!"

"Same to you!" She sprinted down the garden path with the sack of fruit bouncing on her back. The smushed fruit released its potent scent into the air and she tried valiantly to ignore its overpowering effects as she jogged away from the orchard.

Soon, Markeen's enraged but fog-muffled curses faded in the distance.

As she ran down the path, the thick fog obscured her vision. She realized she dare not deviate from the path she had come in on, or else she might never escape this forbidden garden.

She fled through the labyrinth of fragrant thornbushes with her thoughts fixed on Markeen. She could think of nothing but him, his pheromones had left an indelible imprint on her senses. She could easily bring every detail of him vividly to mind and this shocked her. He was so gorgeous, completely dangerous and everything her concubines were not. Her mind orbited around the sexual possibilities of such a man. Her nostrils still obsessed on his warm scent and the mental image of his thick cock straining against his leather armor. She began to question her judgment. Maybe she should have stayed? Her pussy clenched violently at the thought of returning to him. Perhaps he had enchanted her, placed an erotic spell on her? Everything below her waist agreed. Markeen would have been a delicious adventure. In a moment of despair she decided she probably should have stayed and fucked him.

Suddenly, she felt lightheaded, her knees buckled and she crumpled onto the slate path. She discovered she couldn't stand up to save her life and rolled helplessly onto her side, her pussy roaring with fire at the thought of fucking Markeen. She tried to stand up but a wave of erotic desire turned her limbs to jelly and immobilized her. Dear Goddess, she was in trouble now. She could think of nothing but fucking the warrior. She writhed on the flagstone path, unable to sit up. What was this about? These overwhelming feelings snuck up on her and knocked her flat. They were ten times more intense than before. This was beyond pleasurable—this was unbearable! Her breasts swelled further, aching to be sucked. Her fingers clumsily lifted her kilt to stroke her wet clit. She needed to be penetrated so badly it hurt. A wave of lust washed over her. All she could think of was sex. Her eyes flew open in horror. "Holy Dianndra," she groaned miserably. Markeen had been telling the truth!



## **Chapter Five**

Lord Veren stepped out of the orchard mist. His platinum hair shimmered in the moonlight, his violet eyes shone with starlit excitement. He stared down at the agonized, bound warrior at his feet. "You look beautiful, my love." His eyes narrowed in cruel approval of Markeen's dilemma. "I should have tied you to a tree long ago."

"Cut me loose," Markeen raved. "How long have you been standing there?"

"The whole time." A gloating smile floated across Lord Veren's lips. "I was enjoying the show. She's quite a little vixen. She certainly made short work of you." Lord Veren's face tilted to the side as he studied the tensing muscles of Markeen's bound arms and massive erection. "I'm inclined to believe the Vertanians have been mistaken in excluding ourselves from Dianndran culture. That lovely young woman seemed absolutely delightful. What do you think, Markeen? Do you have an opinion on this subject?"

The enraged words roared out of Markeen's mouth, "Fuck her!"

"Yes!" Lord Veren's face lit with joy. "That's exactly what I was thinking!" He drew his sword and quickly sawed through the leather restraint. "Stand up." He solemnly offered his gloved hand to Markeen. "Let's go hunting..."

\* \* \* \* \*

"I'm on fire." Gala lay on her side, listening to herself aimless repeating those hopeless words over and over again. She continued to stroke herself and squeeze her nipples but there was no relief, not even a slim hope of climax. Her actions only forced her inner bonfire to rage hotter. Pleasure had turned to pain. No matter what she did, there was only more agony, she couldn't make herself come and she needed to so badly. This was hell. If she could have pulled herself to her feet, she would have tossed her

pride aside, staggered back to the orchard, thrown herself on Markeen's mercy and begged him to fuck her.

She writhed on the slate path, hating the despicable fact the smug man had been right. She did need him. She burned for him. He had branded her senses with his scent and now the thought of his cock sliding inside her was driving her mad. She had been reduced to such wantonness that if that dark-haired man chose to get a bit rough with her she would bless him for it. At this point a little rough sex sounded like a delight she would happily beg for. She rolled onto her back, groaning in misery, "Damn all Vertanians and damn their blue apples!"

"Hello."

Her eyes flew open in horror. A tall muscular man stood over her with his sword pointed at her heart. His pale violet eyes and platinum hair coupled with the metallic threads on his brocade coat made him look like the silvery personification of moonlight.

"Holy Dianndra!" She flung her arms around herself in despair and rolled into a trembling ball.

The man gently prodded her with the tip of his sword. "Look at me." The demand was made with a velvety voice.

She struggled to compose herself and looked up at him, mentally measuring his broad build and the swelling bulge at his crotch. An overwhelming wave of longing to be touched by this man and an involuntary whimper escaped her lips.

The man kneeled beside her helpless body. He cautiously slipped her kriss from its sheath and tossed it into the thornbushes far beyond her reach.

Her kriss was gone! She heard its metallic clatter as it struck the slate path and bounced into the surrounding brush. A panicked feeling of vulnerability raced through her—he might as well have tossed her soul aside.

He took her face between his palms and forced her to look at him.

She squeezed her eyes shut to blot out his intense gaze. Her nerves screamed from the overstimulation of his casual touch. Her lips pressed tightly together for fear she would beg for more.

"Open your eyes, I want to see your reaction." The calloused tips of his fingers carefully caressed and examined her face. He seemed intensely interested in her.

She stared into his pale eyes, holding her breath in terror when his long fingers tangled in her wavy hair.

He aggressively cupped the sides of her head.

For a moment she feared he might crush her skull between his massive hands.

He lowered his face to hers and spoke in a slow deliberate voice that guaranteed she understood every word. "You've trespassed on my land. You've stolen fruit from the royal orchard. You've tied up and humiliated my lover. Do you know what I think of you?" His face remained an icy blank.

She quaked, waiting to feel his hands crushing her bones.

His eyes narrowed. "I'm impressed."

What? Her heart pounded frantically. Her eyes searched his face for a clue to what was happening.

He smoothed a lock of hair away from her face. "What is your name?"

The lightest touch of his fingertips made her squirm with desire. She was so startled by the strength of her reaction she could barely speak. "Gala."

He knelt over her and spoke with quiet authority. "Gala, I am Lord Veren. You are in my realm. I expect retribution for the damage you've caused. Put your arms around my neck."

She was the one used to giving the orders, so it shocked her that she obediently did as she was told without resistance. She slowly lifted her arms and twined them around his heavy shoulders.

He effortlessly scooped her off the ground.

She was too overcome to fight and too highly aroused by the presence of this mature, domineering man. She quieted her conflicted feelings, fully surrendering to him.

He lifted her into his arms and carried her away.

She pressed her cheek against the curve of his armored chest, inhaling the scent of polished leather and male skin. *Ah!* This man also had a wonderful scent.

His heavy arms radiated warmth as they wrapped tightly around her.

She wriggled in his grasp.

He tightened his grip 'til she could barely move. His fingertips tenderly stroked the outer curve of her breast. He whispered in her ear, "I am lord here and I'll be the first to take you."

She swallowed a lump in her throat. First implied multiple men. This couldn't be happening. His words coursed through her, causing heat and panic. She twisted in his arms, her skin burning from his touch.

"Settle down." His arms locked around her. His long strides whisked her through the moonlit orchard. He marched under the billowing blue azurpomia trees, taking a shortcut toward the private entrance of his palace.

She glanced over the lord's shoulder and was struck by a vision of rage. Markeen strode directly toward her with a determined scowl on his handsome face. Holy Diandra, not him! Her heart hammered against her chest. After the way she had treated him, she was certain he would be in a vengeful mood.

Markeen glowered at her like a hungry tiger, stalking ten paces behind them with his sword drawn and his irate green eyes trained on her.

She clutched pathetically to the neck of her captor.

Lord Veren didn't even look behind him. He instinctively knew why she was cowering. He delivered a stern warning. "I'll share you with Markeen. I think he's earned a good fuck, don't you?"

"No!" She thrashed wildly in Lord Veren's arms. "Don't share me with him, he'll kill me!"

Lord Veren's long legs bounded up the palace steps with Gala writhing hysterically in his arms. His lips curled in amusement. "He may, or he may not. Markeen likes to keep everyone guessing."

Markeen caught up with them by leaping two steps at a time.

They marched down a broad stone corridor lined with the ancient weapons of long-dead ancestors. The corridor opened onto a cathedral-like room, which was dominated by a massive stone hearth.

Her eyes scanned the semidarkness. This fortress palace was elegant but stark and distinctly masculine in design. The towering stone walls were white and free of embellishment. The pale stone perfectly reflected the orange glow of the roaring fire. Two slender gray wolves leapt up to greet their master.

She flinched when the wolves ran toward her.

Lord Veren soothed her, "Don't worry, I won't feed you to the wolves." He laid her down gently on a thick fur rug in front of the hearth.

She stretched out on the rug, digging her fingers deeply into the fur. Its softness beneath her skin was hypnotic. The wolves ran forward to snuffle her hands. She reached out and dared to pet the largest wolf's moist muzzle.

The wolf stretched its body forward to be petted and whimpered meekly in appreciation of her affection.

Lord Veren's eyes flashed approval as he loomed over her. "Good girl." He started to peel away his regal clothing. "I'm glad you're not afraid of us."

Her eyes trained on Lord Veren's broad chest, which was adorned with a stripe of silky platinum hair that ended at his flat stomach.

Lord Veren noticed she was staring at the hair on his chest. "Your men are hairless, are they not?"

She was so mesmerized by the novel sight of wispy straight body hair on a man that she barely managed to nod her head.

Lord Veren slipped the britches off his slim hips, his thick, purpled cock stabbing high into the air. "What about this? Are your men built like this?" He slowly stroked the swollen shaft and lifted the head of his cock so she could see his large ball sac.

Her eyes bulged. Holy Goddess! Dianndran men were not built like that. This was going to hurt. She inched backward on the rug like a retreating crab.

Lord Veren smiled at her reaction. "It's too late to be coy. You got caught trespassing and now you'll have to pay my fine. Markeen, come over here and hold her down."

Her face blanched. She tried to scramble out of Markeen's reach but he was on her in a flash, holding her shoulders flat to the fur rug with his heavy arms.

"Hush," Markeen whispered in her ear as his hand calmly stroked her arm. "I won't let him hurt you."

She was startled by the kindness in Markeen's voice. She had expected much worse from him. She lay stunned on the rug as he tenderly kissed the side of her face. Even the gentle stimulation of a kiss left her burning for more. She stretched beneath him on the fur, her resistance fading. Soon, only heated anticipation took its place.

"Don't bolt away", Markeen gazed at her as he stripped the leather plating from his body, revealing a rolling landscape of muscle. He took his time removing his codpiece and allowing his hard cock to swell forward. His fist gripped his heavy cock by the shaft.

He grinned with pride. "Welcome to Vertania!"

She smiled involuntarily. This was not part of the plan. This situation was ridiculous. Inappropriate laughter bubbled up inside her. She was a respected captain of Dianndra's Guard, she had allowed herself to become intoxicated and trapped in enemy territory – and she was grateful for it. She burst out laughing.

Her eyes widened in shock, Markeen was even bigger than Lord Veren.

Lord Veren's pale eyes searched Markeen's face for answers. "Why is she laughing?"

Markeen's brows drooped. "She ate a lot of fruit, sir, more than she should have."

Lord Veren's eyes blazed with rage. "Well, that's a damn shame. Now we'll have to let her sleep it off."

*Sleep it off? No!* A wave of lust shot through her. She sat upright, her hands reaching for Lord Veren's solid thigh and pulled him toward her. She rubbed her face against his well-muscled leg, feeling the prickle of the silvery hairs against her cheek. "Please, sir, don't send me away." She couldn't believe those beseeching words were pouring out of her usually defiant mouth.

Lord Veren stared down at her. The light from the hearth lent a metallic sheen to his platinum hair. "Do you mean that?" His thumb stroked the slight stubble on his chin. "Prove it by stripping your clothes off."

"Yes, sir." It felt natural to address this dominant man in that fashion. She desperately needed to be touched and know the pleasures of these two gorgeous men. She stood cautiously on trembling legs, feeling the heat of the fire on the back of her bare thighs. She gripped the hem of her tunic and slowly pulled it over her head.

Lord Veren's throat tightened at the sight of her wine-hued nipples. "And the kilt."

She quickly unbuckled her leather kilt and slid it over her round hips, revealing a neatly trimmed auburn pussy. Unbridled excitement made her sway on her feet.

Markeen grabbed her securely from behind to prevent her from toppling.

She felt Markeen's firm grip on her arms and the stab of his cock against the curve of her buttocks.

Markeen softly whispered, "I'm next."

Markeen's warm breath on the back of her neck caused gooseflesh to race up her arms.

Lord Veren reached down and dragged his fingertips appreciatively across her pussy. "Very pretty." His fingertips strayed a bit lower. "And very wet. Part your legs and lie back." He pressed her onto the fur rug, burying his face between her thighs.

She arched back on the fur. The first stroke of Lord Veren's pointed tongue across her pussy made her writhe. She wanted to cry out. She was so sensitive to touch she nearly screamed. Her back arched so wildly from the building tension that she had to anchor herself by wrapping her legs over Lord Veren's shoulders.

Lord Veren stroked her with the flat of his tongue like a hungry animal, leaving her absolutely slick.

She whimpered when his scratchy chin stubble rasped her tender inner thigh.

Lord Veren's lips found her hard little clit and began to suck on that until her body thrashed on the fur.

She pressed herself against his face, sliding her hips up and down, hoping she could find that magic spot. "Please, I need more." She sounded pathetic.

Lord Veren slowly slid a blunt finger inside her as his fingertip gently coaxed her to come.

Her body clutched onto him, feeling the sweet spot that can only be reached by a curled finger but it wasn't enough. She rocked her hips against Lord Veren's hand, trying desperately to come.

Lord Veren slid a second wet finger inside her and just held it there, letting her get used to his hand's gentle stretch. "You're close, aren't you?"

Her teeth bit down on her bottom lip, leaving her unable to answer.

Lord Veren's broad thumb pressed firmly against her clit, circling its slick hardness.

Her hips gyrated, trying to draw his fingers deeper inside her. Her body rippled with pleasurable contractions, aching from the tension but there was no release from the extreme excitement.



Lord Veren's fingers plunged deeper. "You would do anything I'd ask, wouldn't you?"

Desperate tears gathered at the edges of her eyes. She nodded her head. "Yes."

"That's a good girl. I'll give you a chance to prove that." Lord Veren leaned over her arching body and took a swollen nipple into his mouth. His wet mouth covered the soft mound of her breast, tugging her nipple between his lips and gently swirling his tongue across the tip.

Her nipple swelled in the warm depths of Lord Veren's hungry mouth. Intense sensation pooled in her breasts, a tiny moan escaped her lips.

Markeen bent over her, his mouth covered her moaning lips, almost robbing her of breath and filling her with the most demanding kisses. His fingers gently stroked her arching rib cage, possessively covering her other breast with a gentle squeeze. "Relax," he urged her. "Give Lord Veren his pleasure."

She melted on Markeen's words, took a deep breath and tried to relax, feeling the intense need to surrender to both men. She shifted her shoulders, offering her other breast to Lord Veren's lips.

Lord Veren sucked the offered nipple into his mouth with ecstatic pleasure. He rewarded her by sliding his thumb across her wet clit.

Her body jolted from the overwhelming pleasure of having Lord Veren rooting at her breast, while Markeen kissed her with an exploring tongue. Everything these two exotic men did only made her burn hotter, without giving her a climax. She needed to come so badly she nearly cried.

Lord Veren used the edges of his teeth to bring her nipples to sharp points that stabbed into the air.

She rocked her head from side to side in agony.

Markeen sensed her frustration. "Help her." He nudged Lord Veren away from her breast. "She needs a hard fuck."

Lord Veren reluctantly let a glistening nipple pop from his mouth. He looked down at Gala for confirmation.

She answered by reaching out to Lord Veren and wrapping her arms around his neck. She pulled him on top of her, knowing this handsome aristocratic man was entitled to have her first. Her body was absolutely desperate for penetration and release. "Please." Her hand dipped down to guide the reddened tip of Lord Veren's cock to her slick pussy. She rubbed his thick cock against her, wondering how the hell she could get all of this man inside her. Her fingers reached further to firmly squeeze his heavy balls.

Lord Veren winced slightly from her rough handling. "Lie back."

She stretched her arms above her head.

Markeen's hands gently pinned her wrists to the fur rug.

Lord Veren lifted her ankle to his shoulder. His cock pointed directly at her wet pussy. He took hold of her hips, rubbed some of her moisture against him and slowly worked the thick head of his cock inside her.

*Ah!* The searing sensation of being stretched burned through her. She listened to the sound of her own frantic panting as he slowly sank into her. She wanted to thrash free of Lord Veren and scramble to safety but the burn soon became hypnotic and irresistible and she was powerless to save herself from it.

Lord Veren's eyes filled with concern. "Am I hurting you?"

She answered Lord Veren by grasping his thick shaft and pulling him deeper inside her.

The breath hissed out of Lord Veren as he sank to the hilt inside her. He struggled to compose himself and hold still within her. One broad hand reached down to stroke a strand of auburn hair away from her face. His breathing was strained as he lifted his weight onto his elbows. "It won't hurt anymore."

Her body clenched tightly around Lord Veren, knowing he was telling the truth. The feeling of him inside her quickly became one of exquisite fullness. She was ready to surrender to him and gently rocked her hips back and forth beneath him, tempting him to let loose and really fuck her the way her delicate concubines never could.

Lord Veren gently pressed himself inside her. "Great Kaloram, you feel good!" He plunged deeper and slowly pulled out.

She arched her back and raised her hips, inviting him to take her again.

Lord Veren slowly slid the entire length of his cock into her, making himself shudder from the prolonged exertion.

She shifted her hips, giving in to the satisfaction of being filled.

Markeen knelt behind her, gently cupping her breasts in his hands. He rolled her stiff nipples between his fingers and gave each a firm pinch while whispering, "Tell him you want more."

"More," she pleaded. The twin sensations of pleasure and pain pooled in her swollen nipples and clit. She braced herself for Lord Veren's accelerated pace.

Lord Veren's breathing sped up as his cock began to piston furiously back and forth inside her.

Her mind centered on the greedy thought of having Markeen fuck her next. She was dying to have the dark warrior inside her too. Her eyes rolled upward to view Markeen's entranced face.

Markeen's excited eyes were riveted on the spot where Lord Veren's cock disappeared inside her body. His breath caught every time Lord Veren's cock plunged deep or pulled back, taking them both closer to the edge.

Her body twisted helplessly on the fur rug. She wrapped her hands around Markeen's thick wrists and held on to him for dear life.

Lord Veren's face reddened. "This was a good idea." He plunged into her, throwing his head back and pumping harder.

Markeen's fingertips stroked the sides of her face. "Come," he urged her.

Lord Veren was about to climax.

She gritted her teeth, unable to comply. She had never been this excited, or this close to climax in her entire life, yet so unable to let go.

Lord Veren's body pounded on top of her. He slid deep inside her, suddenly his body stilled and his jaw tightened as he struggled to eke out one last moment of self-control. "Great Kaloram!" The dam broke as his body stroked frantically on top of her.

She felt Lord Veren coming and knew there was no turning back. She wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him against her. "Please," she whimpered as if pleading would grant her relief and carry her over the threshold with him. She wanted to come so badly it hurt.

Lord Veren collapsed on top of her with a lustful bellow, drenching her with a long hot burst of cum that took an eternity to pump into her.

She rocked beneath Lord Veren's slumping body, feeling absolutely desperate to catch up to him but she couldn't.

Lord Veren lay on top of her, panting for breath. He finally remembered to shift his weight and pull out of her.

"No!" She grabbed the back of Lord Veren's neck and held him on top of her, futilely grinding her hips against him.

Lord Veren signaled to Markeen. "Take over, she needs a fresh rider." He pulled out, leaving her dripping wet.

As Markeen hurried to take his place between her thighs, he brushed a light kiss across Lord Veren's lips. "Thank you, master."

Lord Veren casually dismissed his lover's gratitude, with a slight wave of his hand. He sat down on the fur rug beside them, straying no farther than an arm's length away. He turned his massive back to the fire. In the dim light he became merely a dark silhouette watching over them in pleased silence.

She looked up at Markeen.

Markeen's emerald eyes gleamed in the firelight.

She had been eagerly awaiting this. She parted her thighs and laid back.

Markeen became brusque with her, "On your knees, woman."

Some deeply buried but thrilled part of her hurried to do as she was told. She rolled onto her knees and arched her back like a cat. Her round buttocks faced Markeen's rigid cock.

Markeen reached out to stroke the small of her back and pull her toward him. His big hands took firm possession of her hips.

She glanced over her shoulder to enjoy the look of power on this handsome warrior's face. Certainly, this man could get her off! Her eyes dropped appreciatively to Markeen's slim hips and his thick cock that jutted slightly upward. She bowed deeper, offering her lifted hips higher into the air and braced herself by digging her fingernails into the fur rug. She waited for him to take her while staring into the hearth's orange glow. She blinked when a smoldering log snapped under tension, sending a shower of red embers to the stone floor.

Markeen's broad hand spanked her butt with a loud swat.

"Ouch!" She jumped. She hadn't expected that.

"That's for being a tease." Markeen grabbed her and positioned himself against the mouth of her wet pussy. With a single smooth stroke he dragged her onto the head of his cock.

She wiggled her hips and leaned into his stroke, willing herself to take him deeper. She was grateful Lord Veren's cock had stretched her and drenched her, or else Markeen would have been a very uncomfortable fit. As it was she felt overly full to bursting. This fullness was foreign to her—the Vertanians were much larger than her concubines. She struggled to adjust to Markeen's size. Just as she was warming to the

luxury of being completely filled, he pulled out of her, leaving her feeling frantically empty. Her chin snapped around to see what was going on behind her back.

Markeen's glittering eyes reflected the hearth's orange embers. "Touch yourself," he commanded. "I want to watch you get off with those long, slender fingers of yours!"

Her brows sank in disappointment. She didn't want to touch herself, she wanted him to do all the work. "I can't."

"But you will." Markeen smacked the round curve of her ass with another loud swat. "Stroke your pussy, or you won't get fucked."

Desire and a shiver of rage simmered through her. Her male concubines at home would never dare order her around in that tone of voice. She snarled at Markeen in frustration.

"Do it." Markeen palmed the thick shaft of his cock until its purple head glistened. "I'm waiting."

Lord Veren leaned over and kissed her mouth. He took her face in his hands and pressed the tip of his tongue between her lips. He teased her lips apart, before plunging his tongue deeper.

She felt like she was drowning in sensation as Lord Veren's tongue slid against hers. She tipped her chin up and opened for him.

As Lord Veren kissed her, he gently locked his fingers around her reluctant hand and guided it downward. "You must do as Markeen asks." His thick fingers were the first to reach her stiff clit and begin slowly stroking the overly sensitive spot. "Touch yourself."

She squirmed from Lord Veren's unbearably delicate touch, loving the sensation of wet, sliding fingers and the spectacle that her naked body was creating in the firelight.

Lord Veren gripped her hand, encouraging her fingertips to slide back forth across her wet flesh. "That's right." He spoke gently to her. A rush of moist heat encompassed his hand.

Her fingertips floated in lazy circles over her clit, causing the fire inside her to leap higher. She glanced over her shoulder at Markeen, who was kneeling behind her with his cock bobbing in the air. She wanted to feel the pleasure of Markeen's thick flesh sliding inside her. "Please." Her fingers frantically circled her clit but she wasn't any closer to climax.

Markeen gloated, "Please what?"

She had never begged before. She was not a beggar! The words flew out of her mouth without shame and somehow they felt right. "Please fuck me!"

Markeen grinned, his hands grabbing on to the sides of her hips and pulling her against him, rubbing his hardness along her wet cleft.

When she felt the insistent head of his cock pressing against her pussy, her body leapt in anticipation of being mounted like an animal.

Markeen bowed over her and gently nipped the back of her neck.

She closed her eyes and let her head loll forward, savoring the feel of his teeth on the nape of her neck.

With a roar Markeen clutched onto her hips and plunged inside her.

The jolt made her whimper. Holy Diandra! She lowered her forehead to the fur and let Markeen slide inside, filling her completely. This time he felt different. Now she was accustomed to the stretch. His thickness provided pure stimulation to every part of her pussy, which was exactly what she craved.

Markeen pressed deeper inside her and held himself still, giving her a chance to grow accustomed to him.

The hot, burning stretch felt beautiful. She rocked her hips against him, giving him permission to ride her harder.

Markeen groaned struggling for self-control as his cock slid back and forth at an escalating pace. "Keep stroking yourself." The words rumbled out of him. "I want us to come together."

Her fingertips stroked her sensitive clit beside the base of his cock. The doubled sensations of a pumping cock and a circling finger was almost painful, yet brought her bliss.

Markeen dragged her a little closer and lifted her higher until his thighs and his big balls slapped the back of her ass. He muttered in Lord Veren's direction, "This was a good idea." He slowly sank deep inside her and pulled out so far that the head of his cock completely left her body with a wet, sucking slurp.

Lord Veren's eyes narrowed with interest as he stared at her sleek body arching beneath Markeen's wild thrusts. He reached over to fondle her swaying breasts and roll her stiff nipples between his calloused fingers, casually milking them with a gentle downward tug. His words quietly floated toward Markeen, who was paying no attention to him at that moment. "She really is lovely, we could take turns fucking her all night."

She groaned, feeling unable to take any more stimulation. All night? The thought was frightening and exciting. She needed to come now. Her body burned for release and she knew how she could get it. She looked over her shoulder at Markeen's enraptured face. "Let me get on top." She was desperate to straddle his thick shaft and press her clit against him at the perfect angle, in the hope she would finally come.

Markeen glared at her omission. "Aren't you forgetting something?"

She stared into his cool green eyes, realizing that he wanted her to beg. Her body was so needy she was more than ready to beg. She had already imagined herself on top of him, digging her fingernails into the soft hair of his chest and she didn't want to lose that opportunity, so she took a deep breath and amended her request, "Please, sir, may I ride you?"

"That's better." Barely breaking contact with her, Markeen lay back on the fur rug and pulled Gala's lithe body on top of him.

She straddled Markeen's lean hips and guided his slippery cock inside her, until she was completely filled. She closed her eyes and shuddered. It was as good as she had



imagined. She stared down at the gorgeous warrior beneath her, feeling a moment of possessive pride. At this moment Markeen was hers. This man was special. He was a lover to cherish and never treat lightly. She sank down on his cock with a muffled howl.

Markeen's hands gripped her waist and his hips rose to meet her. "Give me a hard ride." He gritted his teeth, looking unconvinced that he could hold out much longer.

She rocked slowly back and forth on top of Markeen, reveling in the sensation of her hard clit sliding against his wet shaft. Part of her wanted to just close her eyes and drift far away on the sensations and part of her wanted to keep her eyes wide open and watch the beautiful agony on Markeen's face as he fought to hold off his climax.

She arched backward, lifting her rib cage high and caressing the tips of her breasts with her fingertips. She squeezed her breasts together, leaned over Markeen's broad chest and offered his parted lips a pink nipple.

Markeen flicked his wet tongue across the plump roundness of her breast and tugged the stiffened nipple into his mouth.

The sucking made her body contract deep in her core. She felt lightheaded, knowing for certain she would come. The rhythmic pulse that preceded climax began to ripple up her spine. Her hips rolled against Markeen with a quickened pace. She jiggled her plump breast against his lips, feeling her climax rising.

Suddenly, an oiled finger slid across the muscular ring of her anus. The teasing sensation jolted her. She looked over her shoulder and saw Lord Veren standing behind her, oiling the shaft of his straining cock. Her eyes fixed on the glossy shaft with trepidation. It took a moment for her mind to register what was happening.

Lord Veren's eyes gleamed in the firelight. "Lean forward." He gently pressed her flat against Markeen's chest and lifted her hips higher in the air.

Markeen shifted beneath her, struggling to keep his cock buried inside her while she wriggled around. He wrapped his heavy arms around her, trapping her against his chest in a snug embrace.

Lord Veren's oiled finger slowly circled her rim.

A tingle of fear and excitement raced through her. She rubbed against Lord Veren's finger while he continued to oil and explore her ass. The gentle probing felt forbidden. She had never allowed her concubines this privilege. It had never even occurred to her.

Markeen's hands tangled in her hair. He drew her ear to his lips and whispered, "Relax, love. There will be some pain."

Lord Veren's oiled thumb glided easily inside her, slightly stretching her muscular ring.

"Ooo!" The warm burn made her whimper and feel invaded by the touch. The probing was so foreign and alarming, she instantly wanted to thrash to freedom, or dig her fingernails into Markeen's shoulders and bury her face against his chest.

"Don't move!" Lord Veren knelt behind her and slowly but insistently pressed the blunt head of his cock against her ass, demanding that the tight ring open for him.

The persistent invasion began to burn. She raised her hips and bit down on Markeen's shoulder.

"Push out," Markeen whispered. "Breathe out and push out." His hands smoothed her hair.

She gasped from the searing burn of dual penetration, uncertain she was capable of taking a fraction more.

Lord Veren moved very slowly and tenderly, being careful not to hurt her. He pulled back and trickled a bit more oil on his shaft. He struggled to work the thick head of his cock past her tight opening. Once he penetrated her the rest of his oiled shaft slid easily inside.

She whimpered and tensed, clutching onto Markeen's shoulders, afraid that the deeper penetration would burn unbearably but it didn't.

"Ah!" Lord Veren moaned with pleasure. His legs trembled as he sank so deeply inside her that his heavy balls smacked against the base of Markeen's shaft.

She didn't dare move an inch. She allowed her tight ring of muscle to stretch and accommodate Lord Veren's width, leaving her feeling skewered by two thick cocks. It took a moment for her body to even begin to relax but as the burning sensation faded another feeling of sensitive fullness took over. Surprisingly, this feeling was one she liked.

Markeen began to slowly piston up and down inside her crowded pussy.

She struggled to orient herself to the slew of new sensations. She realized she could feel Lord Veren's cock gliding against Markeen's. Only a whisper-thin membrane separated the two. The feeling was shocking and exciting as both cocks began to gently stimulate her.

Markeen bit down on his full lip, allowing himself to pump slowly inside her. His hands gently cupped her face. "I don't want to hurt you. Let me do the moving."

She closed her eyes and nodded her head that she understood.

Lord Veren's hands locked on to her hips. He pressed down on her, preventing her body from straying sideways. "Gala," his voice was a hoarse whisper, "you're giving us tremendous pleasure." He pumped himself slowly against her round ass. When his cock thumped against Markeen's, he groaned and his pumping sped up.

Markeen lifted his hips and tensed beneath her as he fought to restrain himself.

A sensitive spot buried deep inside her got pummeled and stimulated beyond control. Her body wrenched forward and fought to climax but she was afraid to move.

Markeen locked eyes with her. "I've got you." He began to slide and grind his cock against her.

The stimulation came at exactly the right spot at the perfect pressure and speed. "Oh!" A desperate cry roared out of her mouth. She risked a jolt of pain by thrusting her hips against Markeen as her body screamed over the edge of climax. She writhed and her mouth howled as the harshest, hottest climax of her life rippled up her spine. She was shocked at the strength of her reaction. Her body vibrated at its core and her

hips pumped madly, greedy for one last rush of pleasure even after the climax began to fade. Even the soles of her feet felt hot.

Markeen and Lord Veren closed around her.

She was cocooned in a warm wall of muscle and musk as the two men took themselves to climax. She felt extra joy in the fact that they were getting so much pleasure from each other. She felt their bodies sliding against one another and almost touching deep inside her. She grazed her fingernails across Markeen's stiff nipples and plucked at them.

Markeen's cock twitched, his lips curling in a silent snarl as he released a hot flood of cum deep inside her.

A moment later Lord Veren bellowed as he pumped cum into her ass.

It took all her self-control not to thrash ecstatically and rend herself in two.

Markeen held her close to his chest, his cock still pulsing inside her. "Be careful!"

She took a deep breath, realizing she had completely surrendered to this intense experience and her soul had crossed some sort of invisible boundary. She knew in her heart that after this, there would be no going back to the delicate submissive men of Dianndra.

After everyone caught their breath, Markeen and Lord Veren carried her into a stone chamber that contained a grotto-like pool filled with bubbling warm water. They bathed in the dimly lit pool, while kissing and brushing curious hands against one another. For hours they casually took turns making love together as a threesome, or one on one, while one lover rested and looked on in admiration.

Later that night, while she lay exhausted between the two men. She overheard her two lovers whispering and realized they both believed she was lost in an azurpomia-induced sleep.

Markeen lay on his side with his heavy arm wrapped around her. He whispered to Lord Veren whose limbs tangled with her own, "I want to keep her."

"We can't," Lord Veren gently refused him. "We can't afford war with the Dianndrans. You saw her kriss. She's a captain. We face massive retaliation if we keep a captain of Dianndra's Guard hostage."

She lay still on the fur blanket with her eyes closed, expertly feigning sleep as she had done as a mischievous child.

Markeen pulled her closer. He rubbed himself against the round swell of her buttocks until his cock stiffened. "She's the female mate I've always wanted."

"I'm sorry, Markeen." Lord Veren tenderly stroked the side of Markeen's face. "We have to let her go home."

Markeen pulled her unresisting body beneath him. He parted her thighs and sank his stiff cock inside her, making slow, lazy love to her while she pretended to be half asleep.

Her fingertips stealthily reached for Lord Veren's hand. In the dark she softly brushed her fingertips against his palms and he alone knew that she was not completely asleep.

## **Chapter Six**

The next morning she awoke near her ship, the mist had cleared and golden sunshine warmed the sky. She sat up and blinked the sleepy sand from her eyes. Her body ached in a pleasant satisfied way, which she had never experienced before.

She noticed she was wearing a man's tunic. The cut of the tunic was far too large for her, the opening at the collar hung halfway over her shoulder. The tunic carried the sensual and familiar scent of wood resins and male musk. She slowly brought the fabric to her nose, inhaling the rich scent of a memorable lover and realized the tunic smelled of Markeen. Her heartbeat fluttered for a moment at the thought of being wrapped like a second skin in his scent.

She saw her precious kriss lying on top of her leather sack, which was now filled to the brim with freshly picked azurpomia. The fragrant blue fruit was warming in the morning sun. She pulled herself to her feet, knowing that the fresh fruit must be safely stowed away in the cold storage compartment of her ship.

She prepared to return to Dianntra with her bag of sapphire-blue treasure. How would she explain her experience here to the skeptics at home? A single odd speech began to loop obsessively through her mind. "Noblewomen of Dianntra, I come to you with great news. The warriors of Vertania are not our enemies. They are noble creatures, who have much to teach us. As a selfless sacrifice to the council of Dianntra I volunteer myself as a liaison between our peoples. Sisters, I alone am willing to immediately return to Vertania and engage the male barbarians with courage and conviction..."

Her ass still ached and she started laughing when she realized she would never be able to say all this with a straight face.

She carefully picked up the leather sack of azurpomia, cautious not to bruise or puncture the delicate skin of the fruit, knowing she couldn't afford to get herself into any more trouble. As she hoisted the sack of fruit over her shoulder, she spotted a parchment scroll lying beneath. She bent down to pick up the scroll, which was sealed with a puddle of royal blue wax and stamped with the imprint of the Crown of Kaloram. She broke the wax seal with her thumbnail and unfurled the scroll. The scroll looked as if it had been written hastily but neatly in deep blue ink by a scrawling and confident hand. The scroll read –

*Greetings to the exalted members of the Dianndran Council,*

*It is the wish of the warriors of Vertania that our people make peace. We believe we have much to offer you, and as we now know, your people have much to offer us. We are sending the first shipment of azurpomia home with your emissary, Captain Gala. At your request more azurpomia will follow but I must caution you the fruit is part of a lifestyle that may disrupt or alter your culture. Strict supervision is strongly advised. Captain Gala can further enlighten you on azurpomia's physical effects. I sincerely hope this will be the first of many successful exchanges between our people.*

*Sincerely, Lord Veren of Vertania.*

Gala heard rustling in the bushes and glanced up. "I know you're there!" she shouted into the brush. "Wouldn't it be better if you both returned to Dianndra with me and said all this in person?"

Two towering silhouettes hastily lumbered out of the bushes. Both Markeen and Lord Veren grinned like mischievous boys on their way to play pranks as they jogged toward her.

Lord Veren already had his travel satchel slung over his shoulder. A broad smile lit his elegant face. "We were just dying to be asked."

Markeen reached Gala first. He pressed an azure blue sapphire into her hand, his voice a soft whisper. "I meant to give you this last night."

Gala gaped in awe at the glittering gemstone that filled her palm. "You do understand that in the land of Diannandra I am the boss. I run the harem."

Lord Veren bullied his way past Gala as he boarded the ship. "We shall see about that. I think the people of Diannandra truly need me!"



## About the Author

Writing is a new love of mine. I recently arrived at Ellora's Cave after feeling inspired to share my overblown vision of reality with my friends. I started my life as a fine art painter and illustrator but became frustrated that I couldn't crowd everything I wanted to say onto a canvas. I was forced to put down the paintbrush and pick up the pen to explain myself in greater detail. I've been fortunate to live an adventurous life with the love of my life, and fellow artist, at my side. We share our lives with a wonderful son and a very sweet border collie.

PS. I still paint. Just because I have a new love doesn't mean I'm ready to abandon an old one. One can never collect enough old "loves" or have enough joy in life.

The author welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and e-mail address on her author bio page at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

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