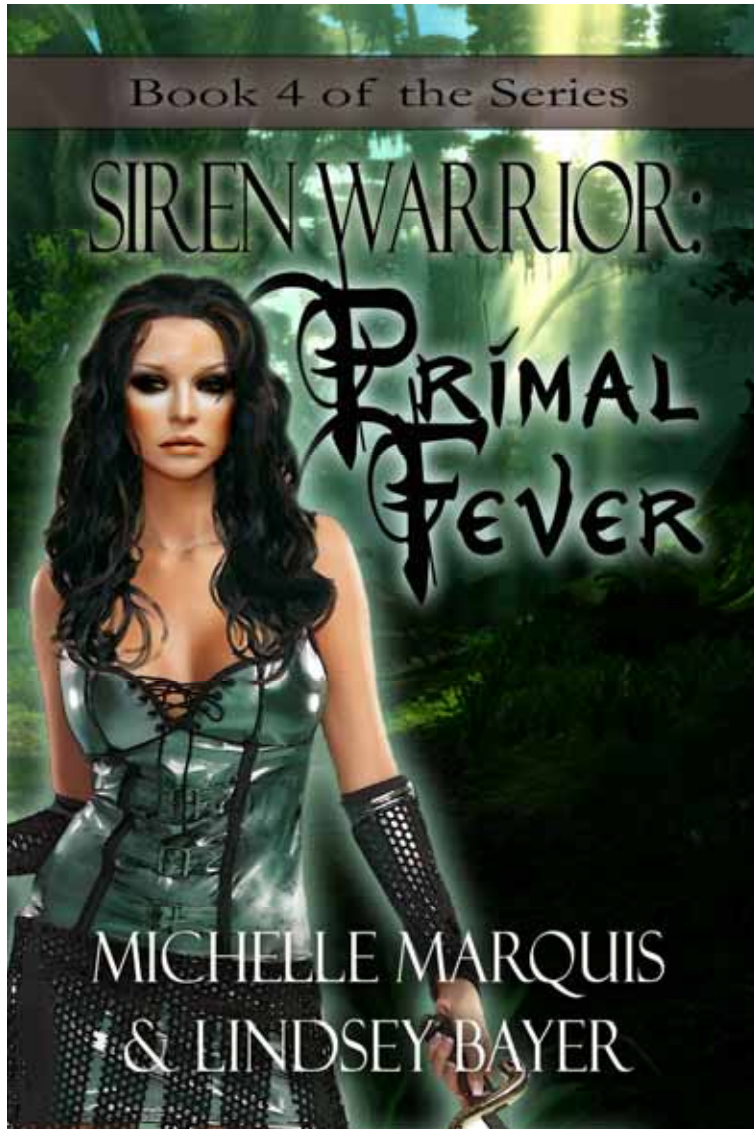


Book 4 of the Series

SIREN WARRIOR: PRIMAL FEVER

MICHELLE MARQUIS
& LINDSEY BAYER



SIREN WARRIOR BOOK 4: PRIMAL FEVER

by

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WHISKEY CREEK PRESS

www.whiskeycreekpress.com

Published by
WHISKEY CREEK PRESS
Whiskey Creek Press
PO Box 51052
Casper, WY 82605-1052
www.whiskeycreekpress.com

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ISBN 978-1-60313-508-5

Credits

Cover Artist: Nancy Donahue
Editor: Sara Kent

Printed in the United States of America

**Other Books by Author Available at
Whiskey Creek Press:
www.whiskeycreekpress.com**

***Siren Warrior Series
Incubus Nights
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Chapter 1

The scent was like a magician's spell weaving through the air and caressing his nose. Strange, since he was pretty sure the practice arena was empty except for him. General Kharon paused from packing his weapons up and lifted his head to draw in a deep breath. The aroma teased him; undeniably there but so faint it was almost a dream. As it worked its magic into his brain, an ancient hunger roared to life within him. It filled his abdomen with heat and his dick with blood. It was a familiar woman's scent and he was suddenly driven to find its source.

Kharon got up off the bench and turned toward the empty bleachers. It was early evening and no one was in the practice arena for a change. He'd arrived from his kingdom a few hours earlier and took advantage of the empty space to practice with the trident, a more challenging weapon than most. As he scanned the seating area, he became certain no one else was here so the source of the scent must be a forgotten item. The wooden steps creaked as he ascended them, his heavy footfalls echoing in the cavernous room.

Then he spotted it.

Lying innocently on a bench seat was a small gray tunic. He reached out and picked it up, holding it high to study it. It was much too small for a man and a little narrow at the waist. Kharon balled the tunic in his fist and moved it up to his face. The scent of Gypsy Theron washed over him in a heady rush. For a second he was transfixed by the sweet perfume of her flesh and sweat. His heart sped up, rushing hot blood into his veins and making every

muscle in his body hard with intense arousal. His reaction was an invading army taking his thoughts hostage and thrusting him into a whirlwind of erotic fantasies and images. Gypsy fueled his blood with fire and all he could think of was finding and fucking her. *Where is she right now? Is she naked in her room at the dormitory washing the day's sweat from her luscious young body?* Without warning his erection became painful and his balls ached.

One of the doors above banged open and Kharon turned to see who'd come in. One look froze his breath in his chest. *It is her.* She must be coming to retrieve what was left behind.

She jolted to a stop at the top of the steps, obviously startled by his presence, and stared down at him with those lovely golden eyes. Her face and throat were framed by long, wild locks of chocolate-colored hair and her features whispered hints of her father's identity. She was slightly taller than most AEssyrian women standing a few inches shy of six feet with lean muscle covering every bit of her athletic frame. Gypsy was a bewitching sight and even at this young age, a formidable combatant. Kharon's heart pounded in his chest like a war drum. He held the tunic out for her to come and get it. He hoped she wouldn't notice how much he was sweating.

"I take it you're here for this?" he said. In the silence of the arena, his voice rumbled off the walls like distant thunder.

Gypsy came down the steps slowly, taking one at a time. She almost seemed afraid of him. Was he that much of a sight in his sexual excitement? He watched her, riveted, completely unable to look away.

"What are you doing here? I thought you went back to your own kingdom," she asked, still taking her time to come down the steps.

Kharon had had enough of her stalling. *She must be acting this way because of the rape she experienced last year in this very arena.* He wanted to be annoyed but he wasn't. Her caution of being alone with him here was understandable. "I'm teaching a class in the

morning,” he said, still holding the tunic out. He shook it. “Come and get this now!” he growled.

Responding to his tone, Gypsy trotted down the steps and grabbed the tunic from him. She slipped it on over her t-shirt, glancing at the trident he’d laid on the bench. Having her this close was pure torture. What he wouldn’t give to ravage her right here but he forced himself to take a breath and calm his mind.

“Next time you’re out of uniform,” he said, “you’ll be disciplined. Do I make myself clear?”

He looked into her eyes and saw a small fire burning there. Her pupils dilated and her nostrils flared. He suspected his primal yearning was arousing her too. He sometimes had that effect on women. Her lips parted to speak and her tongue came out to lick them. “Yes, Excellency,” she said.

He leaned against the railing and folded his arms so he wouldn’t touch her. Every cell within him wanted to make a pass. Gods, what he wouldn’t give to wreck that beautiful little pussy. He’d keep her in his bed for weeks. “Is there anything else you wanted?” he asked with enough inflection to let her know there was an invitation there if she wanted to explore this further.

Gypsy blinked at him as if she’d just found herself sleepwalking. “No, sir,” she said, slowly backing away from him. It took every ounce of self-control not to pursue her. She turned away toward the steps. “I guess I’ll see you around,” she tossed over her shoulder as she took the steps two at a time.

“Yes,” Kharon said as he watched her go. “I’ll be seeing you around.”

Chapter 2

Like most common areas at the Military Academy, the registration hall was old, huge and smelled like mossy stone. The walls were covered in dark wood paneling and the few tables and chairs occupying the space had been ravaged by the spurs and sabers of the thousands of young males who had passed through. It was obvious just from glancing around that everything was designed by males for males. Most Assyrian males averaged six-three and weighed well over two hundred fifty pounds, and that was without their armor on. Given that, it wasn't surprising that the furnishings were made of thick, hardy wood. What Gypsy wouldn't give to be able to sit in one of those behemoth chairs, but no—she was stuck in the back of the registration line waiting for over an hour to sign up for classes. Such was the life of a new student. She sure hoped everything wasn't closed by the time she got to the front.

Makkai, her friend and fellow freshmen, was standing behind her nudging her every time a famous officer walked by. He was having a serious case of celebrity worship and it was annoying the hell out of her. Gypsy would look up, feign interest, and go back to brooding over how long this line was taking. As she stood there, she wondered how her ex-husband Caraculla was doing on campaign. Once her thoughts touched on her love, she felt her throat tighten a little but she quickly chased it off. *Gods, how I miss him.*

Caraculla had been the only one who'd supported her through her struggles to get into the Academy. They had a long history together, and Gypsy had even married him to save his life when his

relatives were threatening to take him off life support after a serious head injury. Although he loved her and appreciated what she'd done, he refused to let her stay married to him. He had told her that she was too young and she needed to sow her wild oats before settling down with one male. And so, with a full heart, Gypsy had set the marriage aside. Even now that she'd achieved her Academy dream, she wondered if she'd done the right thing.

Then she was pulled from her daydream by another annoying poke. Looking back at Makkai, who had nudged her again for the fiftieth time, she saw him toss his head over toward the open double doors to the outside. Gypsy glanced over to see General Kharon talking to a few upper classmen. Her mouth went dry as she remembered their encounter in the arena last night. He had evoked a strange sensation in her that she couldn't identify. It was like lust but so much more. She turned back to Makkai. "Will you knock it off?"

"What?" he said, craning to see over the tops of everyone's heads.

"Stop bumping my arm every time an officer walks past you. I don't care who's here. I just want to get my classes," she said, still staring at Kharon. Even among AEssyrian males, Kharon was a monster. He was a classic example of what her mother would term a *Bull Male*. Like her father Gavin, he was easily over three hundred pounds of pure muscle and stood half a foot taller than most of the men around him. He was dressed in the dark gray and red uniform of his kingdom and it framed him perfectly. As she studied him, she realized he wasn't as handsome as he was roguishly attractive. His green skin was a dusty olive and his face, with its heavy brow and muscled jaw, hinted at a secret savagery. He was everything an AEssyrian male aspired to be: powerful, successful, and deadly.

Kharon glanced up from his conversation and their eyes met. Gypsy stared into his eyes, one a chilling arctic blue and the other a more normal greenish brown. Suddenly she couldn't look away.

She also caught sight of the three link chain tattoo by his right eye indicating he'd once been a slave. A feverish heat crept from her neck to her face and her palms began to sweat. Makkai was saying something to her but she was lost in her awakening desire. Suddenly Makkai gave her a shove.

Gypsy turned and glared at him. "What now?" she barked.

He made a sweeping gesture and frowned at her. "Go! You've been bitching about the line for an hour and now, when it's almost your turn, you're in another place." Gypsy looked in front of her and burned with embarrassment. The line had moved up four spaces while she'd been daydreaming. She walked up and was relieved to find she was next. *Finally.*

Seconds later she reached the registrar who adjusted his glasses and looked across the desk at her like she was a primate. "Give me your list," he said in a pinched tone. Gypsy reached into her pocket and pulled out a tattered and worn piece of paper that had been folded several times into a small square. She meticulously unfolded it and smoothed it out by rubbing it back and forth on the edge of the registration table. The registrar sighed and leaned back in his chair waiting for her to finish. When Gypsy was satisfied the paper could be read, she placed it on the desk in front of him and reverently pushed it toward him.

The registrar glanced at it and immediately crossed off the first class with a thick red pen. "This one's closed," he said, writing down the other two in his ledger. Gypsy grabbed the class listing off the side table and frantically leafed through it. *Shit! Everything's closed.* Makkai reached over her shoulder and tapped his finger in the book next to a special weapons class. "Take that one," he said, still pointing. "We can be in that class together."

Before she could answer, the registrar recorded the change and leaned sideways around Gypsy holding out his hand to Makkai for his selection paper. Gypsy stepped out of line still staring down at the listing and slowly walked away. Something was bothering

her. Getting in that class was too easy. *Why wasn't it closed?* She stopped to study her class list while waiting for Makkai to finish and catch up to her. He moved up next to her and as they began to walk, she turned to him and said, "Who's teaching the special weapons class?"

Makkai beamed like a groom about to walk down the aisle. "General Kharon," he said. "It'll be so cool. I can't wait!"

Gypsy's stomach dropped. There was no way she was taking a class with that colossal asshole. After all, he had almost killed Caraculla last year in their grandmaster's match. Making a sudden about-face, she sprinted back to the registrar's table but he was already closing his books.

"What do you want, young lady?" he asked, tucking his ledgers under his arm. The light green skin around his eyes sagged as if he hadn't slept in weeks.

"I need to switch that last class," she said.

"Too late," he snorted. "All the ledgers are closed, no more changes allowed. And I suggest you hurry to your weapons class," he said, glancing out the window to judge the time. "You're first lesson with General Kharon meets this morning."

"You don't understand. That's the class I want to change. Please, I'll take anything else!" she said, trying not to sound as frantic as she felt.

"No, young lady, you don't understand. Even if I allowed you to change the class, there are no other open classes and you need to pass three courses to advance next year."

Gypsy groaned and turned around to see that Makkai was already gone. She shuffled off toward the door, defeated. Glancing down at the schedule, she was struck by the horror that the class started in five minutes. Gypsy took off at a dead run. The last thing she wanted was to be late and get singled out. Being the only woman in the class would be bad enough.

Chapter 3

Gypsy raced into the special weapons class just as Kharon began his lecture. The room was essentially a small, oval floor with elevated benches built all around. One of the best things about the layout was a student could see and hear everything the instructor was saying. One of the worst things was the instructor never missed a thing in his classroom. Like students arriving late through the side door.

Gypsy held her breath and quietly crept toward a bench seat in the back of the class, but two warriors saw where she was headed, and moved together to cover it up. *Sons of bitches. Would any of these apes ever get used to a woman attending the Academy?* She glared at them and was about ask them to move, when Kharon said, “Cadet Theron. Would you mind coming down here and helping me demonstrate what constitutes a kill with the trident?”

All eyes fixed on her as if she’d just burst into flames. She’d bet every male in the room was delighted she’d been called out to be humiliated. A nervous flutter tickled her belly but she plastered a grin on her face and descended the stairs to be Kharon’s trick monkey. Reaching the bottom, she placed her pack on an empty bench and walked up to Kharon, ready to take her punishment.

But before she could get too close, Kharon held the trident out and pointed it at her chest. “Stop right there,” he said.

Gypsy stopped and stood still as he lectured the class for several minutes about choosing a weapon, best length, and basic maneuvers. She was so happy that she was robbed of the opportunity

to take notes. Maybe Makkai would let her copy his. Then Kharon turned to face her.

“Draw your saber and stand at the ready,” he said. She did as he instructed. “Good. Don’t move.”

Gypsy stood still, hoping beyond logic that this wouldn’t hurt too much. Kharon brought the trident up under her saber and hooked her blade in its prongs. With a twisting, pulling motion, he jerked the saber from her hand sending it sliding across the stone floor. She just stood there stunned at how easily he’d just disarmed her. Taking advantage of her perplexed state, he pushed the trident into her abdomen just far enough to hurt without tearing her clothes or breaking the skin. He then took a step back and said, “I suggest you go retrieve your weapon since we’re not finished yet.”

For the next twenty minutes, Kharon disarmed her then assaulted her with the trident over and over again, poking her in various parts of her body including her neck and knees. His maneuvers with the trident were second nature and he effortlessly continued lecturing during the entire demonstration. It reminded her of sparring with her brother Desmond who could carry on several side conversations and engage her in combat as easily as if he were scratching his head.

After picking her saber up from the floor again, she wandered back over to her position and watched as Kharon paced the floor explaining additional techniques. She wondered if he was going to keep her up here for the entire class.

Then Gypsy made a terrible mistake.

Becoming bored with how long the demonstration was taking, she took her saber and hooked it into one of the trident prongs and gave a slight tug while Kharon was distracted, talking to another student. Then the laws of unintended consequences hit her with full force. Kharon, who had been holding the shaft loosely and at an angle, lost his grip on the weapon. It hit the floor with several loud

clangs and she immediately wanted to run. *Oh shit, I am in so much trouble!*

“*Drop your weapon!*” Kharon roared. Gypsy immediately dropped her saber and was roughly manhandled to her knees by the general. Every part of her wanted to resist him, to throw his big beefy hands off her and fight, but she knew he’d expel her and she needed this class. “Put your hands behind your back and keep your face down!” he commanded.

Gypsy stayed as still as she could while he continued on with the lecture. She knew from watching her father’s men often enough that, innocent as it may have seemed, what she’d done was a challenge to his authority. To test her loyalty and hostile intent, she had to stay in this forced submission until Kharon was satisfied she’d learned her lesson. If her intent had been to really challenge him, she would have refused to drop her weapon, and they would have fought it out right there. For close to an hour, Gypsy remained in that position. Pain shot through her arms and legs, increasing in intensity with each passing minute. She couldn’t even feel her feet anymore. What she wouldn’t give to take back that careless jab.

Finally the lecture was done. Gypsy could hear the shuffling of belongings and the multiple footsteps of her classmates passing by as they left the room. For her part she remained kneeling and staring at the ground. The floor before her eyes darkened as Kharon leaned down and moved his mouth up against her ear. His warm breath caressed her hairline and she could feel the heat coming off his skin. “Get up,” he said with a knife edge to his voice. She painfully struggled to her feet and shifted her weight from one leg to the other trying to chase away the numbness in her knees. He handed her saber back and gave her a savage glare. “What the *fuck* was that all about?” he asked.

Gypsy slid her weapon back into the scabbard but kept her gaze down. She *so* wanted to tell him to fuck off. “I’m sorry, Excel-

lency,” she managed. “It was an accident. I wasn’t expecting you to drop the trident.”

“You weren’t expecting me to drop the *trident*?” he yelled at her so loud she was sure everyone in the Academy could hear. “What exactly *were* you expecting to happen with that little stunt?”

“I didn’t mean it like that. I just meant that...I don’t know what I expected to happen.” Gypsy dropped her head forward not knowing what else to say. She decided this would end sooner if she just gave up trying to explain.

“Does this class *bore* you, Theron?”

“No, sir.”

“Do you think just because your daddy is a general that you have this Academy thing all wrapped up?” he asked.

“No, Excellency.”

“Then you’d better show up on time and soldier along like the rest of the class. No one’s going to cut you any slack because you’re *the girl*. Do you understand me, *cadet*?” he bellowed.

In that moment, Gypsy hated him more than anyone she’d ever known. He was perhaps an even bigger asshole than her father, and that was really saying something. She opened her mouth to tell him off, but for once in her life the *right* words came out instead. “I understand, your Excellency.”

He moved into her personal space and a rush of adrenaline-filled fury coursed through her veins. She looked up and their eyes locked. His vertical pupils narrowed into mere slits. “You want to fight me, Theron?” he said in a soft, dangerous rumble that reminded her of black satin.

Something was happening to her and it had nothing to do with fighting. That erotic sensation had returned and she was suddenly acutely aware of every inch of her body. Her nipples grew erect under her tunic. Her womb fluttered like a bird trying to escape a cage. She had to get away from him *now*.

Gypsy dropped her gaze. "I'm very sorry, Excellency," she said, willing to say anything to get away from him. "It won't happen again."

Kharon snorted and stepped back. "Good," he said. "Then you're dismissed."

Chapter 4

Gypsy emerged from the special weapons class to catcalls and applause. Two upper classmen who *hated* her, Nole Prius and Ortis Maston, had managed to gather a small group of followers to further humiliate her in the hallway. Nole was nothing more than a short male with a big complex, but when he had an audience, he blossomed into his full asshole self. As long as he had someone to watch him misbehave, he was sure to make a scene. Gypsy was like the High Holiday for him and the minute he knew she was a freshman at the Academy, she became his favorite target. Ortis, the obvious follower of the two, was a born half-wit and always had to defer to his master, Nole, before he did or said anything.

Glaring at each of the men surrounding her, Gypsy muscled through the crowd to get to her next class. *Where the hell is Makkai? This fucking class was his idea! He could have at least waited for me.* But just as she was about to clear the group, Nole blocked her path and folded his arms across his chest. He was probably one of the ugliest males Gypsy had ever seen. Not only was he short but he had the unfortunate habit of flinching every so often, an involuntary tick that was quite unnerving. “Nice going in class today, Theron.” He smirked. “Trying to get the teacher’s attention so he’ll fuck you for a pass?”

The pure hatred that had just been directed at Kharon now had a new target. “Get the fuck out of my way, *Mole*. I’ve got classes to attend.”

Nole's face twisted into a nasty frown. It made his features just that much uglier and Gypsy felt a fleeing pity for him. *Be thankful you're a nobleman's son because no one on this planet would want you otherwise.*

"Move me, bitch," he said, unfolding his arms in an obvious threat.

Now this was a problem indeed. She wasn't good enough at hand-to-hand combat to win against him and if she pulled her saber, things could get out of hand quickly. Another problem was he had lots of backup and she had...well, she had none since Makkai had seen something shiny and run off. She glanced around to look for a way out and caught swift movement by her face. Ducking low, Gypsy just narrowly missed Nole's large clumsy fist attempting to make contact with her jaw. Furious now, Gypsy came up and slammed all her weight into the bully sending him sprawling to the floor. Suddenly everyone moved back and gave them a circle to fight in.

Nole wasted no time in getting up and tackling her to the ground. The second she hit that cold floor an insane panic exploded in her brain. Gypsy punched and pounded on Nole with a strength she never knew she had, but just as she suspected, she did little to curb the beating he was giving her. His fists rained down on her like rocks and—although she held her own—there were times during the fight when it was all she could do to block his fists from striking her in the face and neck. The pain was like a rabid fever in her blood making her fight like a cornered animal until he struck a blow close to her ear, causing it to ring and she'd had enough. The horrible pain was a wakeup call that she had to do *something* drastic. Black madness filled her and, reaching behind her back, she pulled the small knife sheathed there and brought it around to cut Nole in the face.

But—only inches from contact with his left eye—someone grabbed her wrist, stopping the blade in mid arc. Within seconds,

the crowd disbursed and that same someone pulled her to her feet. Nole was bent over trying to catch his breath, occasionally shooting her vicious looks. But at least he still had both eyes. He must have realized how close she'd come to ending his military aspirations because the vicious looks were accompanied by something new: Fear. *Today's your lucky day, fuckhead.*

A captain Gypsy didn't recognize had stopped the fight and was now standing over them looking grim. He was tall, with a medium build and sharp cunning features accentuated by the most unusual burnt orange eyes. His black and gold uniform had a nametag that read 'Captain Borong Raith'. The uniform was rumpled and one of the gold wrist cuffs was coming loose with age. His collar was unbuttoned revealing some kind of jagged neck scar that Gypsy could just barely see. "What is this about?" he asked her.

Gypsy shot Nole a look. "Nothing," she said, not wanting to be a snitch. "It was a private matter but I think we're done now."

Captain Raith took a few steps toward Nole and glared down at him. Nole seemed to wither under his gaze. "Is she correct? Is this finished?"

"Yes, sir," Nole said.

"Then you are dismissed," Raith said. Gypsy turned to leave and the captain held her back until Nole was out of earshot. Leaning down, he said, "Don't let them bully you into something stupid that will get you expelled. Stabbing one of them is exactly what they're hoping you'll do. Watch yourself."

Gypsy nodded. She knew he was right but what was she supposed to do? Wait for Nole to kick her brains in? "Yes, sir. Thank you, sir," she said.

Raith gave her a private nod and walked off down the hall. Soon after, Gypsy picked up her stuff and limped off to her next class.

Chapter 5

The planet of AEssyria looked like the mythical Garden of Eden. Scarlet Jonson stared out the window as the shuttle made its descent, marveling at the bright green grassland and huge patches of lush forests. What an interesting place to begin her career. After graduating from medical school and finishing her fellowship, Scarlet had had a slew of offers but none as lucrative as the one she got from the chief of medicine in the AEssyrian Empire. *Doctor Harlan Theron, now there was a woman who probably had interesting stories to tell.* Scarlet knew from her research that Harlan was not only a human like herself, but a groundbreaking physician in the field of AEssyrian medicine. The doctor had also lived here an astonishing twenty years. Interestingly enough, she was also married to the Empire's top general. Scarlet grinned wondering how that odd couple came to be.

The shuttle engines roared as they touched down on the landing pad. A mechanized voice came over the speaker telling her and the other two alien passengers to gather their things, it was time to disembark. She heard what she assumed was the same message repeated in several other languages she didn't understand. Looking out the window Scarlet watched a few mounted soldiers milling around at the base of the landing pad. She knew the lizard-like animals they rode were called hyperia. A quick glance might have someone thinking they were horses but a longer study showed them to be very different. If horses and dinosaurs ever had a missing link it would be the hyperia. Being the primary mode of trans-

portation on the planet Scarlet had read up on them and none of it was good. The animals were highly intelligent, large, strong and very carnivorous. Their relationship with the AEssyrians was more partnership than ownership and they could be extremely aggressive if they sensed weakness or disrespect. Of course the AEssyrians themselves were nothing to sneeze at either. Having only seen a few of them in her life she was unprepared for how large and menacing they were in person.

Scarlet unfastened her harness and rummaged around in her flower-patterned carry-on bag. Buried deep in one of the lead-lined pockets was a high powered blaster. Even though the AEssyrians were very specific about no outside weapons on the planet, there was no way Scarlet was going to part with her Kirillian Decimator, especially around these aggressive predators. The weapon had seen her through many adventures off Earth and even saved her life a few times. If they found it, they were simply going to have to bend the rules.

She flung her bag over her shoulder and filed in behind the other two aliens. As soon as she left the climate-controlled cabin and stepped onto the ramp, she felt as though she had walked into hell itself. The heat from the twin suns seemed to be burning the clothes right off her body and the air was viscous from the humidity. She could have retreated to a sauna just to cool down. *There is no way I'm ever going to get used to this heat.* By the time she reached the bottom of the ramp all the blood rushed into her legs making her feel loose and less cramped. She'd been stuck on that shuttle way too long. As she peered ahead she spotted some soldiers carefully looking through the other passengers' bags. A sudden unease gripped her. If she hadn't already been drenched from the miserable climate, she would have started to sweat. *What if they find that blaster and decide to make a big deal about it?* She shrugged it off. *You're a doctor, what's the worst they can do to you? If they really don't*

want you to have it, they'll just confiscate it. One of the soldiers gestured to her and she moved forward to begin her search.

The soldier who grabbed her stuff was a hulking male who easily stood well over six feet. His hair was long and dark brown with a few narrow braids by the temples, presumably to keep it out of his eyes. His face was something out of a science fiction novel: green, with harsh masculine features, and sharp predatory teeth. He pulled her two suitcases forward and heaved them up onto the reddish wooden table he was standing behind. Unsnapping the latches, he opened them and began carefully looking through every nook and cranny. His thick black nails moved with surprising delicacy over her silk slips and underwear and she wondered if he was enjoying himself. As the soldier worked, another one with more decorations on his uniform stalked up and fixed her with a curious stare. Scarlet was momentarily mesmerized by the unusual color of his eyes. They were burnt orange with a starburst of yellow around the slit pupil.

Scarlet looked away as sweat trickled down her back. She didn't want to give him any indication that she was interested in him sexually. *Ugh.* These AEssyrians scared the shit out of her. All she wanted to do was get her stuff and get out of this merciless heat. Then the soldier closed the latches on her suitcase and roughly pushed it on to the ground gesturing to the bag over her shoulder. With growing dread, Scarlet handed it over. He found the blaster two seconds after he started his search. Removing it from her bag by the muzzle, he handed it over to the officer as if it were a dead rat.

The AEssyrian officer came into her space and glared down at her. Then he uttered a series of quick snarls and grunts that Scarlet was sure meant nothing. She stood there helpless, not having a clue what he'd just said.

"He wants to know why you have that," one of the aliens said, still skillfully putting his clothes back into his suitcase with his four

arms. He was short, much shorter than her or the AEssyrians, and looked something like a bird. *Interesting.*

"It's for protection," she replied, addressing the officer. The bird alien walked over and translated what she said.

The AEssyrian barked at her so loud it made her flinch. Then he grabbed her and bound her hands behind her back with manacles. Pushing on her shoulders, he forced Scarlet onto her knees. Wild terror filled her as she realized they were probably going to kill her for this infraction.

The bird alien was hopping from one foot to the other excitedly. "He says no! No outside weapons of any kind. You are under arrest!"

Scarlet knew she had to diffuse this situation and fast. "Tell him I'm sorry! I'll get rid of it!"

The bird alien was now in a blind panic with his arms waving in the air. He threw his bags into a nearby coach, shouting her response to the officer who was holding Scarlet down on her knees. A heated exchange went on between them, and then the bird man said, "He says too late. Blaster is a deadly illegal weapon. You ignored landing instructions. Now you die." The bird man jumped in the coach and it pulled away, taking all of Scarlet's hope with it. She was as good as dead if she couldn't communicate with this horrible beast.

The officer pulled her to her feet and dragged her toward a wooded area off to their left. She tried talking to him and fought him with all the strength she had, but in the end, it wasn't nearly enough.

Chapter 6

Kharon rode his hyperia up to Devon's Tavern fully expecting to find Gypsy there. It was a common enough hangout for cadets and he needed to blow off a little steam too. But he had to admit that the real reason he was here was to see *her*. Never before in his life had he experienced a passion like what he felt for Gypsy Theron. This morning in class had been its strongest manifestation yet. Even now, as he closed his eyes he could see her before him on her knees, offering him her submission for making him drop the trident.

She'd been nothing less than...*stunning*.

A carnal hunger roared through him and he clenched his fists trying to control it. What he wouldn't give to have that lovely young woman in his bed, even if only for one night.

The stable groom touched his leg. "Take your mount for you, sir?"

Kharon dismounted and handed the reins over to the young man who quickly rushed the hyperia over to the stable.

Inside, the tavern was smoky and held the heavy scent of old sweat and raw meat. Kharon scanned the patrons and was surprised to see it wasn't as crowded as he expected. For a moment he didn't see her and was annoyed that it mattered. But then he spotted her at a corner table with two male friends, one he didn't recognize and the other a fellow student named Makkai. They were talking and drinking, looking relaxed and happy. An irrational jealousy filled him and he stalked over to join them. Everyone looked up at

him startled. It wasn't every day a general came over to sit with them. "Gentlemen," Kharon said, baring his teeth in a smile. "Do you mind if I join you?"

Makkai glanced at Gypsy and winked. "Actually, Excellency, we were just leaving." They grabbed their drinks and downed them fast. "See you tomorrow, Gypsy," Makkai said with a mischievous grin. Gypsy returned his grin with an angry glare. And then they were gone and it was just the two of them.

"I'm sorry I frightened your friends away," Kharon said.

Gypsy sat there drumming her fingertips on the table. "I should probably leave too," she said. "I've got a long day tomorrow and—"

"Not yet," Kharon said. "Please stay a few minutes."

Gypsy chewed her lip looking like she was thinking it over. "Was there something you wanted to talk to me about, sir?"

"Yes," Kharon said, pausing to order a drink from the barmaid. "I wanted to talk to you about your future plans."

"I really didn't have any," she said, before sipping her drink. "I'm just in my first year."

He leaned forward to speak and caught her scent. It was mild and earthy like sun-baked flowers and a maddening desire possessed him. He was sweating and painfully aware of the ferocious erection straining the front of his pants. She was sweet agony to him and in his lust, he forgot what he was going to say.

The barmaid brought him his drink and he pulled a deep mouthful. It helped to clear his head. "I would like you to consider coming to work for me after you graduate," he said.

"Even if I wanted to, I don't think I could. I swore loyalty to my father when he agreed to train me."

"You can if he releases you," Kharon countered. He watched her lift her right hand off the table and a heat impression remained on the shiny surface. Searching her face, he found her attraction to him carefully buried under a calm exterior. She was coming into

her first reproductive season because of him, which was interesting since she appeared to have very little AEssyrian blood.

If he was careful to see her as often as possible over the next few days, she'd come into season even if she'd taken something to prevent pregnancy, which he was sure she had. There was no way she could attend the Academy if there was a risk of ovulating. Her classmates would go nuts. *I can smell your body changing, my beauty. Any day now you'll be climbing the walls to fuck me and by the Gods, I can't wait.*

Gypsy licked her lips. A tiny trickle of sweat ran down the side of her face. She took a few sips of her drink. "What if I don't want him to release me?"

"Surely you don't want to be under your father's thumb all your adult life? I thought you were more ambitious than that."

"What makes you think I want to trade his thumb for yours?" she asked, shifting in her chair. She was looking more uncomfortable by the moment. Based on the absence of any other intense interest in her around the bar, he was sure this season was an exclusive reaction to him and his scent.

Kharon ordered her another drink. Then he leaned over the table and said, "I'd be willing to give you almost anything you wanted," he said in a smooth sexy tone. "Even if you don't stay in my kingdom, think of what the experience alone can do for your career."

Her drink came and Gypsy didn't touch it. "I'm pretty sure most of my *experience* will end up coming from the time I spend in your bed."

Kharon smiled. He loved her. She was the perfect mix of male and female. "I won't insult your intelligence by saying I don't want to bed you. You know I do. But my offer has nothing to do with my dick. I believe in your ability, Gypsy. All I'm asking is that you think about it."

Suddenly she stood up. "I have to go," she said. "Thanks for the drink. I'll see you in class."

He gently grabbed her forearm as she passed him. The heat radiating from her skin passed easily through the sleeve of her uniform. "Think about my offer," he said.

"I promise. I will."

Chapter 7

Doctor Harlan Theron stood outside the medical clinic with her arms folded waiting for her husband, General Gavin Theron, to stop ignoring her. She had been waving him over for the past ten minutes and although he'd glanced up and waved back, he had yet to stop his conversation with his son Desmond. She wanted to be angry but she couldn't. This was Gavin's idea of funny. He had a very odd sense of humor and often enjoyed angering her for no reason. Well it wasn't for *no* reason. He claimed their sex was better when she was pissed off at him.

Finally he and Desmond came over looking amused. "Yes, my love?" Gavin asked.

"You need to find out what happened to my doctor," she replied.

Gavin leaned against the clinic wall and watched a few hyperia-drawn coaches clatter by as if he was expecting the missing doctor to be on one. When they passed without stopping, he pulled out a long cigar from his tunic pocket and lit it. "Is she missing?"

"Yes, Gavin, she is missing. She should have been here hours ago. A soldier who rode in from the landing site told me she was detained for having a Kirillian blaster," Harlan said.

That got Desmond's attention. "Is she Kirillian?"

"No," Harlan replied, "but she did do some resident work there. She's human." Turning her attention back to Gavin, she said, "You need to find out what they're doing to her."

Gavin blew out a stream of smoke, obviously not concerned. "Perhaps she's in jail."

"She's not in jail," Harlan said, getting angrier by the moment. "I checked."

"Maybe she went to the hotel," Gavin ventured.

"Gavin," Harlan said in a tone that meant business, "go find my doctor *now* or I'll find a reason to work late tonight. *Please*."

Gavin gazed at Desmond with his one good eye. His other eye was covered by a black patch, a souvenir from a nasty fight with a Diamondback AEssyrian years ago. "Sergeant," Gavin said to Desmond, "go to the landing site and see what's become of the other doctor. When you find her, bring her to the clinic right away." Desmond made a face like he'd just stepped in dung. He obviously didn't want to be on the human doctor search party.

Desmond mounted up and reined his hyperia around. "Yes, Excellency." When he was gone, Gavin turned to Harlan and said, "There, you see? I've taken care of it."

"No, you haven't taken care of it. When we find her safe and sound, then you'll have taken care of it," Harlan corrected, going back inside the clinic to wait.

* * * *

Desmond reached the landing site and spotted two of Captain Raith's men standing around waiting. He sure hoped he wasn't too late to prevent the doctor from being raped. Rape wasn't seen as a crime here as much as a *claiming* of an unattached female. Females of any race could be claimed and if this doctor had done something stupid like smuggle in a blaster, she was now a criminal too. Desmond rode over to the two soldiers who immediately snapped to attention.

"Where's the new human doctor?" he said angrily, realizing he didn't even know her name.

Both of them pointed to a small group of trees. Desmond rode into the brush fearing the woman might already be dead, or worse. He came upon them in a small clearing.

The new doctor had to be the sexiest thing he'd ever seen. Her thick, wavy, red hair hung down over her shoulders and cascaded between her huge ample breasts. She was tied to a large tree stump with her hands behind her and the rope looped around her rib cage. Her shirt was unbuttoned showing a generous amount of cleavage and her hips were moving in a seductive wriggle that cleared a trail of lust from his brain right down to his groin. She looked bewitched, as if some unseen hand was pleasing her. The only problem was no one *was* touching her.

Captain Raith sat on the ground near her like a snake charmer with his eyes riveted to her. He was so enthralled, he didn't even hear Desmond ride up.

"Captain Raith!" Desmond shouted, distracting the officer from the strange scene. "What the hell is going on here?"

The captain stood up and smiled wickedly. He gestured to the doctor and the spell was broken. Her head fell forward and she moaned softly. "Isn't she beautiful?"

"Yeah, she's great, but the general is waiting for her at the medical clinic. I don't think he'd be happy about your detention methods. I need to take her back with me," Desmond said, trying to quell the creepy feeling in his gut.

"Would you like to have her, sergeant? We could both enjoy her and she wouldn't remember a thing," Raith offered.

Desmond was surprised he actually entertained the offer for a moment. Then the creepy feeling returned as he watched Raith. "Uh, thanks for the offer but I prefer my women conscious and willing. Now can we wake her up and turn her loose? I've got shit to do today. "

Raith untied her and she immediately lunged at him, slapping and clawing at his face. "Son of a bitch!" she screamed.

Desmond dismounted and grabbed her before Raith tore her face off. "It's over!" he shouted, trying to get her to calm down. "He won't hurt you anymore!"

The doctor continued to struggle and spit at Raith. Luckily she was too far to land any saliva. "Oh he didn't *hurt me*, did you, Captain? But he got his jollies just the same! I don't want that *thing* ever touching me again!"

Desmond had to take her out of here before she got herself killed. Manhandling her, he dragged her to his hyperia. The creature pranced away in fear of the wild woman. Grabbing her by the jaw, he forced her to look at him and said, "Stop!"

She did, but glared a few daggers at Raith.

"What's your name?" Desmond asked, trying to confirm her identity. He felt her relax a little.

"Doctor Scarlet Jonson," she replied. Raith had crept out of the clearing and his absence seemed to calm her. She draped a few locks of hair behind her ears, still breathing hard. "I'm the new clinic doctor hired by Doctor Harlan Theron."

He mounted up and pulled her on in front of him. "I'm Master Sergeant Desmond Theron. Welcome to Aessyria, Doctor."

"Wait," she said, twisting in the saddle. "What about the rest of my stuff?"

"I'll send some men back for it," he said. "It would be best to get you out of here before you make any more friends."

Chapter 8

As if she wasn't sore enough from fighting Nole yesterday, today in Kharon's class they had to spar with a partner. Gypsy and Makkai teamed up but the general broke them up saying Makkai, being her friend, would be too easy on her. So Gypsy got Boris.

Fucking Boris.

Boris was one of the largest males in the class and didn't have the best personal hygiene. He smelled like the bottom of a dirty laundry basket and there were spots on him that Gypsy could swear were caked in dirt. Boris was simply disgusting.

The group stood side by side in the small classroom arena as Kharon went over the merit of each specialty weapon in turn. After he was done, each student would choose a weapon to become proficient at. The final for the class would be to wield that weapon with enough skill to pass a test that the general devised.

Kharon was lecturing on the advantages of his own specialty weapon, the meteor hammer, when Gypsy raised her hand.

"Yes, Theron, what is it?" he said.

"Why would anyone intentionally choose a meteor hammer for an arena competition? There are others much better suited for arena fighting," she said.

Every eye in the room was on her, and she glared back at them mouthing a silent *what?* Kharon put his hands behind his back and stalked up to her. He towered over her getting into her personal space. "What would you consider a better weapon, General Theron?" he asked in a mocking tone.

Gypsy glared at him but was undaunted. "I would think the saber is a more controllable weapon and better suited to close, confined combat."

Kharon's pupils dilated. "Really?"

"Really," she said sincerely. "After all, you were left open a number of times when you battled Colonel Caraculla in the grand-master's tournament last year. As I recall, you were almost killed."

"But so was he."

Gypsy shrugged. "True. But I think you got off a lucky shot."

Kharon took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "And how many weapons have you mastered since you started here, cadet?"

Gypsy frowned. "Well...none, except the saber."

"Have you truly *mastered* the saber, Theron? Could you best every male in this room? Or are you simply *very good* at it?"

"I probably could best every male in this room with the exception of you. So I guess in that context, I am simply very good at it."

Makkai frantically nodded his head in agreement having almost been killed by her last year during a training session.

"So now you'll get very good at the meteor hammer. That will be your specialty weapon for this class. And when you're done learning it, then maybe you'll actually know what you're talking about. Any complaints?"

She puffed her cheeks and blew a stream of air out of her lips.

"No, sir," she brooded. *Great! Everyone gets to choose what weapon they want to learn and my big mouth had to get mine assigned. Nice going, Gypsy.*

"I will share this bit of knowledge with you. One of the greatest advantages of the meteor hammer is that it keeps your assailant far away from you at all times. Is there anything else from *your* vast experience you'd like to share with the class?"

"No, sir."

"Excellent. Then after class, I'd like you to come and see me in my office."

“Yes, Excellency,” she said, slumping a little.

Kharon went down the line either accepting or rejecting all the other students’ choices until he came to Nole. Now Gypsy wasn’t sure if Nole was just old-fashioned stupid or was testing Kharon to see how far he could go, but when Kharon assigned him the trident, he said, “I don’t want that one.” *Finally someone else is going to get hammered and it couldn’t happen to a nicer guy.*

No *sir* or *Excellency*. Just a *no*, like this was a democracy and he actually had a choice. All eyes fixed on Nole who stood there in idiot defiance.

Kharon stiffened. “Do you have a physical disability that would preclude you from using a trident?”

Nole shook his head. “I just want to use the spear instead.”

The room filled with an arcing current as all the other students moved back from Nole. For his part, Nole was escalating the conflict by maintaining an unhealthy eye contact with Kharon. This was going to be very nasty and Gypsy could hardly wait. If Nole had backed off this nonsense and knelt as Gypsy had, he might have diffused this conflict, but he didn’t. Instead he did the unthinkable.

He placed his hand on his saber preparing to draw it.

Kharon smiled savagely and in a blur of speed, knocked Nole’s hand away from his saber and, stepping into him, slammed his fist into the cadet’s face. Gypsy watched as some of Nole’s teeth flew out of his head. The cadet literally flew through the air and hit the ground hard, coughing out blood.

Kharon roared and descended on him in a flash, attacking him with the ferocity of a hungry beast tearing up its prey. It was a terrifying thing to watch and Gypsy actually found herself hoping Nole didn’t end up dead. Then, as suddenly as it happened, Kharon got off the cadet. His uniform was smeared with blood.

Nole lay on the ground curled in a tight ball, trembling like a small child. Ortis and two other friends went over and helped him

to his feet. They were about to take him out when Kharon blocked their way.

“We’re not finished,” he said in a thunderous growl.

Nole fell to his knees and kept his face down. He stayed that way for the next hour until Kharon dismissed the class. Gypsy was passing by when she overheard Kharon say to Nole, “You’re lucky I don’t piss on you, you dirty little punk. Next time you stand up to me, I’ll kill you on the spot. I don’t give a fuck who you’re related to. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, Excellency,” Nole said in a voice so filled with panic she scarcely recognized it. “Please forgive me.”

Kharon took a step back from the cadet. “Get out,” he barked. Nole scrambled to his feet and rushed out as fast as his legs would carry him.

Chapter 9

Gypsy went into Kharon's office not sure what kind of mood he'd be in. Would he be the big pissed-off asshole general who humiliated and mauled cadets, or the nice general who'd flirted with her at the bar the other night? If he was in a foul mood, she was sure to get another ass chewing because of her meteor hammer comment.

Because he was a guest at the empire, his office was on the bottom floor of the military complex and had only the most necessary furniture: a large desk, two chairs, and some ancient-looking artwork. As she entered, he was removing his soiled tunic and switching into a fresh one that was slung over the back of his chair.

Gypsy stood at attention. "You asked to see me, sir?" she said, trying to keep the flat sound of dread out of her voice.

"Yes," he said, leaving the new tunic open to reveal his massive chest. He stalked over to her slowly. "You may stand at ease."

Gypsy tried to relax and placed her hands behind her back. As Kharon drew closer, a strange tension twisted in her belly, and try as she might, she couldn't ignore it. There was that erotic sensation again, only this time it hit her in an instant and was much stronger than before. She didn't understand why he was having this effect on her.

"I realize your comment was an innocent one," Kharon said, moving up close to her. "But I want you to reserve your more opinionated comments to discuss with me in private."

Her palms were starting to sweat and suddenly it was *way* too hot in here. Gypsy wondered if she was coming down with something. “Why?”

“Because the other cadets are watching you, and anything you do or say that they perceive as a challenge, is an open call for others to test me.” Kharon’s gaze moved from her eyes to her lips and lingered there. “I appreciate your opinion about the meteor hammer, and in some regard, I agree with you. But you must keep in mind that although it seems like a difficult and awkward weapon, it is also a terrifying one to most opponents because they don’t know how to fight it. To his credit, I have never seen Caraculla intimidated by any weapon. He is an exceptional soldier and fearless in the arena. If he’d been a lesser male, I would have killed him and suffered no injury myself. Now do you have anything else to say on the matter?”

“No, Excellency,” she said as her breath quickened. His presence was changing her and she was losing control by the moment. All she could think of was touching her lips to him and running her hands over those enormous muscles.

“I will be helping you become proficient at the meteor hammer so you will stay an extra twenty minutes after each class,” he said.

“Why are you helping me with *my* weapon?” she said almost panting now.

“Unlike the other weapons, if the hammer is wielded incorrectly it can recoil back unexpectedly and kill its handler. I need to show you some key maneuvers before I leave you to practice on your own.”

Gypsy’s womb thrilled and she looked up into his mismatched eyes. Her heart pounded in her chest and her pussy grew uncomfortably wet. Kharon’s nostrils flared as he smelled her uncontrolled arousal. *He’s doing this to me and he knows it.* “What’s happening to me?” she whispered.

"You're coming into your first season," he said, leaning down and touching his lips to her cheek.

Fever spread from the point of contact throughout her body. She closed her eyes and pulled in a deep breath of his scent. It was pure heaven: hot and masculine, with a slight hormonal undercurrent. The sensation within her was like going to a banquet when she hadn't eaten in days. All she could think about was having him inside her.

"How can this be happening?" she said. "I'm on an ovulation suppressing drug."

A deep rumbling laugh tumbled from his chest. "Then you won't get pregnant, but that drug won't help your other symptoms. Only fucking me can do that."

Gypsy shook her head unable to believe how powerful this sensation was. "I don't want to fuck you," she managed in a voice so weak, she didn't believe it herself.

Kharon took her face in his hands and claimed her mouth with his. His tongue moved over hers in a seductive caress. The kiss was possessive and carnal and melted all her will to resist. He pulled back from her and gave her a wicked smile. She was lost—nothing in her wanted to stop him.

"Of course you do," he said.

Suddenly her blood was replaced by liquid fire. Never in her life had she known a desire so feral or decadent. Her hands reached out without her willing them to and touched the heavy muscles of his pecs. She stroked up his chest and marveled at the tremendous power caged within. Gypsy was so transfixed by his masculine beauty that she barely noticed when he wrapped his mighty arms around her waist and pulled her into him. His scent filled her senses, exciting her, and making her more desperate for him by the second. His touch was invigorating and it fueled her desire with an unrestrained madness. Kharon buried his face in her neck and groaned her name. "*Gypsy*."

Gypsy's hands rushed up his neck and grabbed his face. Pulling his face away from her neck, she kissed him with an animal passion all her own. Then she stopped kissing him and grabbed the lapels of his uniform. Sinking to her knees, Gypsy pulled him down over her as she lay down on the floor. Kharon moved over her on all fours and unbuttoned her tunic while she kicked off her boots and clawed at her pants. She had them off in moments, pulling on his shoulders to take her.

But Kharon was a slow and patient lover. Resisting her efforts to rush him, he slid his thick fingers past her plump nether lips and touched the swollen source of her agony. Gypsy arched her back and was about to cry out when he covered her mouth with a sizzling kiss. Then he said in a voice thick with want, "You must be quiet, love. If we are caught, the rumors will spread and it won't go well for either of us."

She nodded. Kharon continued his work and dragged mauling kisses down her belly to the mound of trim dark hair over her mound. His long forked tongue dipped into her wet center and found the swollen nub of her clit. Gypsy was overcome with the most extreme pleasure she'd ever known. With three strokes of his talented tongue, she was fighting to stay quiet, bucking out several orgasms one right after the other.

Moving his great bulk back over her twisting body, he pulled her right breast into his mouth and gently sucked at the taut nipple. His powerful thighs pushed her legs apart, opening her as wide as he could for his entry. Gypsy groaned, running her hands up and down the twisting muscles of his back and whispering his name. Then he was working his cock into her pussy, rotating his hips from side to side to help him gain entry into her tight channel. He was possessing her, stretching her so wide she thought he might not be able to get his cock all the way in. For a second his penetration hurt and she became anxious, clamping down her vaginal muscles and making him grunt.

Kharon nuzzled her cheek. "Don't be nervous. Just let your instinct take over," he whispered in her ear.

Gypsy forced herself to relax, and soon the pleasure took over and drowned out all the doubt. Kharon pushed his cock home and stopped, waiting for her tight muscles to accept him. Then he made a few short thrusts that sent her mind reeling with lust. "Better?" he asked.

Arching her back, she pushed her hips up to him and said, "Yesss."

Careful to keep as much weight off her as he could, he began a slow pumping rhythm. Shock waves of ecstasy roared through her and her whole mind was consumed with the pleasures within her sex. He felt like pure heaven inside her and Gypsy never wanted it to end. With each stroke of his cock, she was owned, devoured, and destroyed until she was seized by another climax and this one the most intense orgasm yet.

And the best part was that there were plenty more on the horizon.

Chapter 10

“I’m sorry, Doctor Theron, but I can’t honor the contract. There is just no way in hell I am staying here,” Scarlet said as she took a seat in Harlan’s office. “I obviously am not safe here and I’m taking the next transport off.”

Harlan was expecting this, just not so soon. After all, the woman had not even been here *one day*. After her rescue, Harlan had let her go to her villa and get settled hoping it would help her unwind. Unfortunately the time alone had only made the wheels in the new doctor’s head turn faster. Harlan tried to keep her voice even when she replied, “We discussed bringing weapons on this planet. I *told* you the AEssyrians do not tolerate outside weapons of *any kind*, especially guns and blasters. I’m sure I was pretty clear about the stiff penalties for such an infraction. You said you understood. I can appreciate you’re upset over what happened but I have no intention of letting you out of your contract.”

“Are you planning to keep me here as a prisoner?” Scarlet seethed.

“Don’t be ridiculous. Of course not,” Harlan said calmly but getting angrier by the moment. “I’m simply saying that you will not be allowed to leave the planet until you repay the money that was fronted to you.”

Scarlet stood up throwing her hands in the air. “I don’t have three-hundred thousand dollars on hand!”

“Well you did a month ago when I wired it to you. I can assure you that the emperor is not going to allow you to just waltz off the

planet and assume you're good for the debt. Plus the fact that it is hardly fair to abandon your obligation when your whole situation was precipitated by your inability to follow some pretty simple laws."

Scarlet tried a different track. "What the hell am I supposed to do here? Wait for the next hulking green monster to *rape* me! And—by the way—that *captain* of yours violated me yesterday and I want him punished!"

"You should have said something yesterday and we could have prepared a rape kit—"

Scarlet waved the statement off shaking her head. "He never actually *touched me* but he crossed the line, nevertheless."

Harlan sighed. *Perfect. My new doctor is nuts.* This was going nowhere and Harlan was getting aggravated. She needed Gavin to fix this. It was his officer who caused this mess after all. Harlan stood up. "Will you excuse me for a moment?" Scarlet flopped into her chair again and glared at the wall. "Sure, sure."

* * * *

Stepping out into the hall, Harlan spotted Gavin by the pharmacy refilling the prescription for his persistent back pain. He really needed more than pills but he was still stubbornly refusing to see a surgeon. *Men. One pain in the ass at a time.* Harlan marched up to him. "I need you to apologize to my new doctor for whatever weirdness your captain did to her yesterday during her *detainment*."

Gavin squinted down at her with his one good eye as he popped open the medication bottle and poured the triangular pills into an oblong silver container which he then placed in his breast pocket. "What the fuck's wrong with her?"

"I don't know what she's talking about, but she is threatening to leave. Do you know how long it took me to find a doctor with her qualifications willing to come here?" Harlan pointed to her office door. "You need to help me fix this."

Gavin followed Harlan to her office and entered it. The minute Scarlet saw him, she leapt from her chair and raced to the furthest corner of the room. Harlan was so used to him, she'd forgotten how dangerous he looked to someone who didn't know him. Standing a towering six foot seven, General Gavin Theron was an impressive bull male AEssyrian with over three hundred pounds of thick, hard muscle on his frame. His impressive black and gold double-breasted uniform only accentuated his size. His green skin was a pleasing olive tone but his features were the most striking part of him. He was not only savagely handsome but he gave off an air of primal sexuality that struck a chord in everyone who met him, no matter what their planet of origin.

If he wanted to be nice, Gavin was very good with women. All he had to do was turn on the charm. "There's no need to be frightened, young woman," he said in his proper British accent. "Please sit down. I understand you had a fright yesterday?"

Scarlet stared at him, obviously amazed at his accent and the fluency of his English. He sounded like an Oxford graduate. Harlan knew how she had felt, he'd shocked her too when he'd first spoken to her. Of course, as she recalled he was threatening to crush her skull at the time if she tranquilized him. It was less than charming.

"Where did you get that accent?" Scarlet said, eyeing him with suspicion.

"My mother was an Englishwoman from Earth."

"I don't get it. I heard somewhere that your mother was a prostitute," Scarlet said oblivious to how her statement sounded. Harlan cringed.

Gavin didn't seem to care. After a lifetime of having his mother's profession thrown in his face, he certainly wasn't sensitive to it. "She was an adventurous human woman who fell on hard times here. She made her living the only way she could."

Scarlet relaxed and cautiously moved toward her chair. Gavin's candid remarks seemed to soothe her. "I was attacked," she finally managed.

"So my wife tells me," Gavin said, leaning against Harlan's desk. "What exactly did the captain do?"

"I'm not sure," she confessed. "He never touched me physically, but he *did* touch me."

"I apologize for any ill treatment you received and he will be punished. Is there anything else I can do to make you feel more comfortable while you're here?" Gavin asked.

Harlan forced herself not to smile. Poor Scarlet had no idea that every silky word out of Gavin's mouth was lip service and mockery. One had to know him to catch his patronizing tones. Harlan couldn't complain though, at least it was working. He instinctively knew exactly what Scarlet wanted to hear and he fed it to her like a baby getting a midnight bottle.

"I want a full-time bodyguard," Scarlet said. "And I don't want an AEssyrian. I want a human."

"I'm afraid there aren't many humans on this planet. Certainly none who could fend off a full-grown AEssyrian male. What about a Kirillian?" Gavin offered.

"That's fine," she said.

"Then you'll stay?" Harlan asked.

"Yes," Scarlet said. "I'll stay."

Gavin grinned at Harlan. "There you see? Now everyone is happy. Why don't you stop by my office in half an hour where you can express your gratitude to me?"

"Half an hour," Harlan said, shaking her head after him as Gavin stalked out.

Chapter 11

Gypsy sat in her afternoon Military Theory class trying to digest what had just happened to her. Just as Kharon had predicted, her season had come over her like a fever, making her ache to stay and have sex with him all day. But she'd fought the urge and forced herself to leave for her next class, much to his dismay. The sex between them had been one of the most fulfilling experiences of her life. The only exception was when she made love to Caraculla, but even though that wonderful experience was mind-blowing in its own right, being with Kharon was—well, different. Caraculla was love, comfort and safety; Kharon was all fire, risk and lust. It wasn't that she didn't find Kharon attractive, she did, but the powerful pull that he had on her was both confusing and disturbing. All she knew was that she had to put a stop to this *season* thing or she might end up risking her career. The only person who might be able to help her was her mother. Maybe there was another shot or something her mother could give her to stop this torment. There had to be.

Even as her instructor was giving them the cue for dismissal, Gypsy was out the door and running down the hall. She didn't even bother saddling her hyperia before she tore out of the paddock gate and down the road toward her mother's clinic. As the animal galloped down the road, she could feel the hunger building within, pushing images into her mind of Kharon's magnificent body and huge cock. Beyond reason, she could feel him somewhere out there wanting her, *summoning* her. Every cell in her being wanted to turn

around and return to him. Resisting was anguish, but she had to. This needed to end *now*.

Finally reaching the clinic, she put her mount away and raced into the white stone two-story building past the receptionist, who barely noticed her. She trotted down the hall toward her mother's office; she knew from working here as a teen that in the late afternoon Harlan usually just updated charts at her desk. The bulk of her patients usually came in the mornings.

She knocked once and entered. Harlan and Gavin had been talking by the window and looked up in surprise as Gypsy slammed the door behind her.

"What the *fuck*?" Gavin snarled in his usual diplomatic way.

Gypsy ignored him. "I need to talk to you," she said to Harlan between gasps as she tried to catch her breath. Then she gave her father a hard stare. "Alone."

Gavin scowled, instantly furious. He hated being talked to like that but this was an emergency and she didn't have time for his crap. "Now listen here—" Gavin roared, launching into a lecture.

Harlan touched his arm and he glared down at her. "Please, Gavin," Harlan said in a gentle tone that always defused her father's anger. "It must be important if she came all the way over here in such a hurry."

Gavin snorted and stalked out, showing his displeasure by bumping Gypsy with his shoulder as he passed. Then, in a grand show of defiance, he slammed the door hard behind him. Gypsy winced.

Harlan leaned against her desk and folded her arms. "What could possibly be so important as to blatantly piss off your father?"

"There's something wrong with me! I'm in some sort of *season*!" Gypsy said as she paced the room.

Her mother knitted her brow. "That's funny," she said. "Your father didn't notice anything. Besides, most *AEssyrian* women don't go through that anymore."

“Well, I’m going through it right now and Kharon did it to me!”

“Did you two have sex?” Harlan asked in a tone that was much too technical for Gypsy’s taste.

“Yes. I couldn’t stop myself.”

“Let me draw some blood and I’ll check your hormone levels,” Harlan said, opening up a cabinet. “But even if you’re right—which I’m sure you are—there isn’t much I can do. At least he can’t make you pregnant.”

Gypsy was about to protest that there must be *something* that could be done, when Harlan grabbed her arm and swabbed it. After drawing a syringe full of blood, Harlan expelled it into a rubber-topped vial and walked out, telling Gypsy to wait. Almost twenty minutes went by when Harlan came back in with Krull, the Kiril-lian doctor. He closed the door behind him. Gypsy was less than thrilled that Krull was involved but if he could help, she’d take it.

“Stand up, lift your shirt and unbutton your pants,” Krull said as Harlan watched.

Gypsy did as he told her, frowning at her mother. Krull moved in close and placed his hands over her lower abdomen, pushing firmly on it. Up close, he was more handsome than Gypsy remembered and his skin and hair smelled good, like fresh soap. His long, dark blonde hair was pulled back into a loose ponytail and there were tiny wrinkles around his mouth and eyes hinting that he’d once known a life of sorrow.

After a few minutes of feeling around her gut, he stepped back. “Intriguing,” he said, stepping back. “Her womb is large and ripe for pregnancy but her scent is subdued indicating a male has already mated her. I would say she’s correct about coming into her season. But none of the AEssyrian males nearby seem to notice or they’d be beating down your door. That tells me this is exclusive to whichever male caused it.”

Gypsy stood there sulking and pulled her tunic back over her t-shirt. She hated feeling like prize breeding stock at the country fair. This was humiliating.

"Her hormone levels are off the charts but I thought AEssyrian women didn't go through this anymore," Harlan said to Krull.

"For the most part, they don't," Krull admitted. "But there are still cases—just like this one—where a very dominant male will *click* with a young female. Most of the literature refers to such a pairing as a *primal mating*. It's quite serious and it's often for life. What's even more interesting is that she is not a pure AEssyrian."

Harlan nodded. "That's why I wanted you to examine her because I wasn't sure that this was what I was seeing. It's just so strange that it would happen to her out of all the women that Kharon comes in contact with. I mean if this had happened to him before, he certainly wouldn't have three wives."

"That's true enough. He's probably just as taken aback by this as she is. It would be intriguing to know what his hormone levels are," Krull added.

"Hello? Excuse me for interrupting your diagnostic dialogue but there is only one thing I want to know. Is there any way to stop it?" Gypsy asked miserably.

Krull watched her for a moment like he couldn't believe she could speak. "I'm afraid not. You'll have to continue having sex with him throughout your season or you'll become sick."

"How long will it last?" Harlan asked.

"About a solid week, maybe two. From now on, she'll experience this twice a year, but she might skip a season if the male is not around."

"Sick? What do you mean by sick?" Gypsy asked, waving her arms at them. *I can't believe how fast this has gone from just sucking to a total disaster.*

Krull shrugged and slipped his hands into the pockets of his lab coat. Gypsy wanted to punch him in the face so bad it hurt. *Fucking smug bastard. I know he's enjoying my misery.*

"If you don't have sex with him at least once a day, you'll experience extreme cramping and violent nausea. You see, your womb will respond to the hormones in his semen. As long as your body thinks there's a chance at pregnancy, it will hold off your discomfort. But every time your body figures out that it's not pregnant, it will rebel and make you suffer until you're mated again. The only solution is frequent intercourse until the season is over."

Gypsy ran her fingers through her hair. "I can't believe this is happening to me," she groaned.

Krull opened the office door and looked back at her. "It's not the end of the world. At least he can't make you pregnant while you're on the suppression drug. Just," he glanced at Harlan and grinned, "get your shots and...enjoy it."

"That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard. You mean to tell me that with your vast combined medical experience, neither one of you can offer me any relief from this bullshit? Well I am not some sort of wild animal that can't control my mating urges and I am certainly not going to sit here and be Kharon's little bitch in heat!" Gypsy caught herself yelling and immediately lowered her voice.

Harlan sighed. "I understand you're upset and that this is a very inconvenient time for this to happen, but there is nothing we can do. Unfortunately in this case, nature prevails."

Chapter 12

The primal fever was killing her.

It started at ten that evening as a mild discomfort—a little cramping and restlessness that's all—but now it was full-blown agony. She twisted in the sheets, running her fingers through her hair and trying in vain to will the hurt away. When she left her mother's office that afternoon she'd dismissed Krull's instructions as pure shit. She wasn't some throwback to AEssyrian prehistory! She had no intention of crawling off to Kharon and begging him to fuck her.

But now things were different. Now she'd give anything just to be able to get up off the bed.

The fever was more than just an urge—it was a *need*—as essential as the breath she drew into her lungs. Her hunger plagued her, filling her mind with images of Kharon's striking body and intoxicating scent. She was no longer the woman she knew; she was something feral and aggressive, a beast in her own skin.

A sickening wave of nausea rolled through her and Gypsy twisted to one side of the bed and reached out, grabbing the trash can next to her small work desk. She leaned over the side of the bed digging her nails into the mattress edge and wretched violently. Then her stomach convulsed again and she dry heaved into the empty can a few times. Finally her stomach relaxed a bit. But close on the heels of one misery was the other. Sharp, stabbing cramps twisted her uterus until she thought it was going to tear itself loose

and leave her body entirely. *By the Gods, this nightmare is going to kill me.* She hated when Krull was right.

She had to get out of here and get to Kharon. If she didn't satisfy this tonight, she would be too sick to attend class.

With both feet Gypsy pushed on the adjacent wall, rolling herself over and off the bed, landing on her hands and knees with a painful thump. Luckily the occupants of the room below her consisted of mops, brooms and cleaning supplies. Clawing her way to her feet via her bedside table, she caught sight of her clock.

Now it's midnight.

She sure hoped he hadn't gone out drinking with the boys or she'd be screwed. Gypsy grabbed her uniform and, pausing several times to adjust to the pain, got dressed. She popped her head out her dorm room and scanned the dark hallway. *Empty.* What a relief. *At least something is going my way.* She slipped down the back stairwell and into the cool night air. A wayward breeze stroked her damp skin but did little to alleviate the internal heat that was making her sweat. Gypsy knew she was going to have to walk to the villa where he was staying. She couldn't risk anyone seeing her hyperia there. Thankfully it wasn't too far and she could save some time by crossing through the hunting trails.

The three moons were high and provided enough light to contrast the stones and thick tree roots that littered the trail. Without the celestial illuminations this journey would be quite treacherous. Gypsy hiked the half-mile up the hill and over the top stopping every few minutes to listen for company. The occasional screech of night raptors and rustling bushes was unnerving but at least their noisy activities meant that there were no larger predators nearby. As she trotted to the bottom of the trail she was struck by a debilitating cramp that brought her to her knees. She doubled over and hugged her waist waiting for the pain to pass.

Kharon's villa was just in sight and she began catching traces of his faded scent. Dragging herself to her feet she stumbled forward.

The closer she got, the stronger the scent, the better she felt. *Please be home. Please, please be home, Kharon. I need you.*

* * * *

Kharon sat in the courtyard of his villa watching the three moons illuminate the inky sky. He should be preparing his lesson notes for tomorrow but he was much too distracted, all he could think about was *her. Gypsy—his first real love*. Lighting up a short cigar, he puffed hard on it and closed his eyes, catching the fading scent of her sweat on his skin. What he wouldn't give to have her here with him. The thought brought on another fierce erection and he absently reached into his pants, pulled out his cock and stroked it. In his mind she was licking the swollen tip and teasing his balls with her lips.

He thought too about his three wives back home in his own kingdom. Like most men, he'd married for status but not love. All of his wives were the most beautiful he could find with good families and solid bloodlines. There was only one problem; he didn't love them nor did they care for him much. It was a mutually beneficial relationship. He had the money and power, and they were his trophies and bore his children.

Everyone was happy, right?

But today was the first time he'd known *true* happiness with a woman and there was no turning back. He wanted Gypsy like he'd never wanted anything else, and someday he would have her.

Memories of her lusty whines filled him with unbearable hunger. His cock ached in his hand, and he pumped it harder remembering how much enjoyment she'd given him. But he knew he had to allow her as much freedom as he could stand or risk losing her. Like him, she was a warrior, and her first love would always be the military. He understood that, even if his more primal urges wanted him to kidnap her and keep her his captive forever.

As his need consumed him, his thoughts were torn from everything but his rising passion. Focusing on her rugged beauty, he let

his mind remember how blissful her sweet pussy was wrapped around his throbbing cock. Grabbing a nearby cloth, Kharon covered the head of his penis with the fabric as the orgasm exploded out of him. He caught his seed, shuddering out his need with a deep, hardy growl. Why hadn't she come to him this evening? Did she think what had happened between them was a mistake?

When his cock had softened again, he stuffed it back into his pants. Then he heard a knock on the front door. Tossing the soiled fabric into the trash, he straightened himself and quickly washed his hands. He walked to the door certain it was Gavin coming to ask him out to the bar for a late-night drink.

Instead Gypsy stood on the doorstep.

She was achingly beautiful but she looked as miserable as he felt. "I am so completely screwed up and I hate you for doing this to me," she said.

Kharon hid his delight and stepped back to let her in. He was hot and hungry, desperate to be with her again. "I know," he said.

Gypsy came in but stood in the foyer. "I can't stay long."

Kharon pushed the door closed and it hit with a thunderous bang. Gypsy turned around and stared at him with those stunning golden eyes.

"You'll stay as long as I need you to," he said.

She grinned slightly. "No. I'll stay as long as I need to because my early morning class is taught by this big asshole who will humiliate me if I'm late," she whispered.

With that statement his desire boiled over and he pulled her into his arms. His lips claimed hers in an impassioned, frenzied kiss. Picking her up, he carried her toward his bedroom determined to make this the best night of their lives.

But Gypsy was in full estrus now and fought wildly to be put down. He lowered her to the ground confused at her struggle and she was all over him. Her mouth claimed his, kissing him with such passion he was overcome with desire. Reason and tenderness es-

caped him as she undressed him as fast as her hands could work. Then she stripped and pushed him down to the floor right there in the hallway. He'd never seen a woman so possessed and it was changing him, making him more aggressive than he was comfortable with. He was losing control and he didn't want to hurt her. Kharon snarled at her, trying to warn her off but it only seemed to make her lustier.

Then she was on him, straddling his hips and grabbing his cock to work it into her tight channel. To his surprise, she was much wetter than before and he slipped right in. He orgasmed immediately as did she, while he filled her up with his seed. She froze for a moment, her body stiff and her eyes closed. Then she grinned and—knowing he could stay erect through several more—began rotating her hips from side to side.

He could no longer hold back his untamed longing. Grabbing her, he rolled on top of her and thrust into her like a wild brute. She was moaning now, pumping her hips to meet his punishing thrusts, and he confirmed in his heart what he'd suspected all along. This was *much more* than just sex and desire. This was a mating. She was *his*. Now all he had to do was find a way to hold onto her.

Chapter 13

By the time she was finished unpacking all of her stuff at her villa, the bodyguard had arrived. Scarlet didn't know what she'd been expecting but Desmond certainly wasn't it. In fact, he was quite a pleasant surprise, having rescued her from the clutches of that slimy captain. Now that she wasn't hysterical, she was much more appreciative of her savior.

At first glance, Master Sergeant Desmond Theron could pass for human but he was much too large, and subtle differences in his features ensured that he would not be confused with one. With a towering, muscular frame, alluring golden eyes, and hard, no-nonsense features, she found him more attractive than she thought was prudent. His black uniform showed a slight fade and his fixed scowl and tight jaw also made no secret that he was anything but happy to be guarding her.

Leaning in the frame of her doorway, he said, "Do I get to stay inside or should I just pitch a tent right here?" His tone was caustic but she chose to ignore it for now.

"Please come in," she said, stepping back into the villa. He stepped through the doorway carrying a leather pack with a long braided strap. After surveying his surroundings he wandered into the living room. He dropped his pack on the floor next to a chaise lounge situated under the window.

Scarlet sighed and walked in after him. "I have spare bedrooms. You can set yourself up in one of those."

“No. I can see and hear better from this room,” he said, settling into a large brown recliner. Scarlet couldn’t get over how big all of the furniture was in this place. But seeing how Desmond fit in the chair perfectly, it now made sense. Without another word or any additional eye contact, he hooked his boot on the strap of his pack and pulled it over. Reaching inside he pulled out a book. He opened it, flipped to a half-folded page and began to read as though she had evaporated. *I’ll be damned if he thinks he’s just going to sit there and ignore me.* Scarlet decided to turn on the charm. In a voice that would melt a frozen block of chocolate, she said, “Would you mind moving a few of my heavier belongings upstairs?”

Without looking at her, he snapped the book closed and got up. Dropping the book on the end table as he passed, he came to stand in front of her. He looked down at her, nodded and waited. His size and presence were very intimidating, in fact the top of her head barely reached the bottom of his collar bone and at five-eight, she was considered tall among her friends.

Assuming he would follow, she walked outside and over to the attached storage shed. She pointed at the large black wooden door that would have been better suited for the entrance of a dungeon. “Inside there are two large crates full of things I need upstairs in my bedroom. They’re too heavy for me to lift and I really don’t want to unpack them here and make fifteen trips upstairs,” she said. Then she gave him a warm smile.

Desmond opened it and the door let out a long drawn-out creak. “How long have these crates been in here?” he said, squinting into the dark room.

Scarlet pursed her lips. “Probably half the day. I would have had the couriers take them upstairs but they arrived while I was at the clinic. So they just left them.”

Desmond wedged the door open by pushing a mound of dirt against the bottom. Shuffling inside he nonchalantly pulled his saber and walked over to the two wooden crates stacked one on top of

the other. Although his English sounded very good, he did have a mild accent and she wasn't sure he understood everything she said. "I don't want to open them down here. I want you to take them upstairs," she said very slowly while gesturing up at the ceiling.

In response, he grinned and shook his head but didn't put his saber away. With several swift motions he banged the hilt of his saber against the side of each crate. He was making so much racket she was sure he was going to break them open. "What the hell are you doing? I don't want to—" The rest of her complaint jammed in her throat as several small fuzzy creatures leapt from under the lid of the top crate and retreated into the darkness that filled the back of the shed. The scurrying was accompanied by some weird hissing and clicking noises.

"Yuck! Do I even want to know what those are?" she said, jumping back.

"Loctos," he mumbled as he lifted both crates and carried them out of the shed. Scarlet instinctively backed up and followed Desmond up the front steps eyeing the crates suspiciously. She was waiting for some more of them to crawl out onto his shoulder.

"Are you sure there aren't any more of them in there?"

He shook his head. "They don't like light. I wasn't so much scaring them off as warning them to vacate if they didn't want to be subjected to the suns."

"Are they dangerous?" she asked, seriously praying for the answer to be no.

"Not really. But they can give you a nasty bite or spray you with some nonlethal venom if you piss them off. The venom is mostly an irritant."

Scarlet shuddered as she followed him back inside the villa and up the stairs. "Great. Venom-spitting rats."

"Actually they're more like spiders except their legs aren't segmented and their bodies are divided into three parts instead of two," he said, placing the crates on the floor across from her bed.

"They sure moved in fast considering there's no food in there," she said, nudging the crate with her foot.

"They're not looking for food just a new place to take up residence. Off-world odors seem to attract them. They are extremely curious and a fucking nuisance at the import storage sites near the landing facilities. If they don't move in, they'll just rob you blind."

Since his mood had lightened a little, she said, "Listen, why don't we go get a drink? I'll buy." That thawed him but he seemed to be hesitant.

"Before we go," he said, "there are a few ground rules."

Scarlet put on her most neutral expression and blinked at him. Who the hell did he think he was talking to, anyway? She'd lived on foreign worlds before. She *knew* how to conduct herself in a bar for heaven's sake. "Okay," she said pleasantly.

"No making heavy eye contact with anyone, no talking to any men but me, and no mouthing off to anyone who pisses you off," he said. "Got all that?"

She gave him an acidic smile and tapped her temple. "It's ingrained in my mind. Now can we go?"

He grunted something unintelligible and she just attributed it to his limited English.

* * * *

Desmond and Scarlet arrived at a bar of his choosing and he instantly knew this was a mistake. She was a very attractive woman, which was made worse by her choice to wear a loose fitting blouse, snug skirt, and pumps. Her hair was a deep, rich red that attracted even more unwanted stares. Although an innocent enough outfit by most world's standards, on Aessyria, it was like hanging out a shingle begging for unwanted male attention. Scarlet, for her part, seemed not to notice the open leers of the soldiers as she sashayed up to the bar and ordered them drinks. And once she'd chosen a table by the back door, he knew they were stuck here for a while. *I hate my father for doing this to me.*

Desmond sat down making sure to make hard eye contact with every AEssyrian male still watching them. He was really not in the mood to fight. They all looked away and went back to drinking. "Did you have to wear that?" He brooded sipping his drink. It scorched a trail down his throat and made him feel only slightly better.

Scarlet looked down at herself. "Why? What's wrong with it?"

Desmond didn't look at her. He kept his gaze on one soldier at the bar who kept glancing over at them. "You just don't have a clue, do you? It's very provocative. The only thing more provocative would be if you had walked in here naked."

"You have *got* to be kidding me," she said annoyed. "How is *this* provocative?"

The soldier at the bar had finally turned away. To make his point, Desmond reached under the table and slid his hand boldly up the inside of her thigh, bypassing the hem of her skirt, and moved quickly toward her crotch. She glared at him and slammed her hand over his to stop his advance. A nagging desire began in the back of his mind.

"Easy access," he said. "That's why. AEssyrians don't think like humans. Many of them will see what you're wearing as an invitation for sex."

"Take your hand out from under my skirt please," she commanded coolly. There was a veiled threat in her tone that he found incredibly sexy. The instant their eyes met, he became fiercely erect. *Fucking great*. He let his hand linger for a few more seconds then took it away, slowly running it down her leg. Her whole body had stiffened and now she was wary of him.

"You might want to talk to Harlan about what's appropriate to wear and other stuff to keep you off the radar," he said.

She sipped her drink, relaxing. "I understand General Theron is your father."

Desmond leaned back in his chair and put his boot up on the opposite one. "That's right," he said with a sigh. "That's why I'm here."

"I'm sorry this is such a burden for you."

"It's not your fault you're a pain in the ass. Probably just bad parenting," he said, enjoying the perfume she'd chosen to wear. It was interesting to be with a woman who knew how to play up her assets.

She ignored the insult and pressed further. "Harlan isn't your mother though, is she?"

"No she's not," he said without elaborating.

"Is your mother still alive?" she continued.

"Yes."

"Was she married to General Theron?"

"No," he said, before downing the rest of his drink.

"So he was just a boyfriend?" she continued questioning, obviously undaunted by his short, curt answers.

"Look, my mother had a lot of boyfriends. Can we talk about something else?"

Heavy boots approached them and Desmond was almost relieved at the distraction until he looked up. One of the most lethal and notorious mercenaries in the empire was coming right for them. Desmond guessed he'd finally gotten up the nerve to try his luck with the new lady. *This should be interesting.*

Nero strolled up to the table staring straight at Scarlet. There was no mistaking why he'd come over and it irritated the fuck out of Desmond. He was a tall, lean male with a pronounced scar disfiguring the right side of his mouth that gave him the appearance of an evil half-grin. He glared at Desmond and his pupils narrowed showing more of his pale green eyes. "I thought you were stationed on *Loss*?"

Desmond took his feet off the chair and readied himself for a fight. "My father couldn't stand to be without me," he said icily.

Nero tossed his head at Scarlet, who was being mercifully quiet. "Who's your new friend?"

"Your assessment is correct, she is *my* new friend and that's all you need to know about her."

"Did you bring enough to share with the rest of the class?" Nero said with a wicked smile. He glanced back at his buddies who were chuckling like adolescent schoolboys.

"I was an only child. I never learned to share," Desmond said, standing and placing his hand on the handle of his saber. "So why don't you slither back over to the other kids and go buy your own girlfriend?"

Nero was undaunted. "Such a pretty woman," he said wistfully. "What's your name, lovely?" he asked Scarlet.

Desmond was relieved she didn't understand a word. To her credit, Scarlet kept her gaze down just as he'd directed her to. "She doesn't speak asshole, now kindly fuck off."

Nero's nostrils flared, and for a moment, Desmond thought this was going to get nasty. He gave Nero an inviting grin, daring him to make a move. Then the mercenary nodded to Scarlet and stalked off to join his friends at the card table.

Desmond grabbed Scarlet's arm and pulled her to her feet. "Come on, Doctor. It's time to go."

"You are spending the night at my villa, right?" she asked, casting a nervous look at the table of mercenaries as they rushed past them.

Desmond sighed. He hadn't been planning on it, but now that everyone within a mile knew she existed, he guessed he'd better. "Yeah," he said. "Lucky me."

Chapter 14

Desmond awoke to the luxurious scent of a woman's heavy arousal. Although he frequented the local whorehouses and knew the perfume of a woman's essence well, this was different. This wasn't marginal interest or chemically induced, this was full-blown sexual craving and it electrified every nerve in his body. He was immediately awake, erect and painfully aroused. Sitting up on Scarlet's couch, he heard a sexy, tortured moan come from her bedroom. He sat for a moment reveling in the carnal sounds, allowing them to titillate him.

Getting up as quietly as he could, Desmond followed the sound down the hallway to Scarlet's partially open bedroom door. As he approached he heard the faint, unmistakable hum of a vibrator. Placing his hand on the door, he pushed it open and leaned against the frame. He grinned lazily, absorbing the aroma, sound and sight playing out before him.

There, bathed in the silver glow of the three moons spilling their light through her windows, was Scarlet, twisting and sweating on top of the sheets. She had placed two pillows under her hips and had her legs open wide. In her right hand was a small plastic vibrator that she massaged along her clit as she arched her back and groaned softly. She teased herself, running the little sex toy along her labia, then bringing it up to tickle her fully erect nipples. From the look of her pleasure, Desmond was sure she still didn't know he was there.

Of all the women he'd bedded over the years, he had never seen anyone so beautiful. Her body was a man's wet dream, with round full breasts, wide hips and he knew right then he had to have her. He moved into the room silently until he was only a few feet from the bed.

Scarlet sat up and gasped, pulling the sheets up over her as best she could. Her long, shapely legs still showed from where the sheet didn't cover her completely. Her eyes widened in shock. "Get out," she said in a velvet tone still husky from her lust.

Desmond was lost, confounded by her beauty. He couldn't have left even if a part of him wanted to, which it didn't. All he could feel was the beast within him driving him forward, no matter what the risk.

Desmond had to have her. It was as simple as that. He couldn't think beyond that basic need. He leaned over to touch her glowing flesh and pull the sheet away, but she scrambled to the other side of the bed. Before she could get off on the other side, he grabbed her ankle and pulled her toward him. She cried out in protest and fought, but not hard enough to convince him she meant it.

Pulling her underneath him, he wrapped his arms around her and placed a fevered kiss on those plump, full lips. At first she pushed on his chest, squirming against his body until he thought he would lose his mind if she didn't stop. She turned her head to the side breaking the kiss, her breath coming hard against his cheek. "Get off me," she whispered.

Desmond wasn't a rapist. He'd never forced a woman to do *anything* against her will, but the thought of letting her go was simply impossible. Instead, he mauled kisses down her neck letting his tongue play along the tender flesh of her hairline.

She didn't fight him this time.

Holding her tight against his chest, he dragged his lips up to her ear and whispered, "Who were you thinking of just now?"

Scarlet gave him a private grin and said, "I was thinking about you."

His heart sped up pounding a furious rhythm in his chest and something rigid in his mind was bending, threatening to snap. No woman had ever made him feel this sexually charged before. "Why play with toys when you can have the real thing?" he said, breaking into a feverish sweat.

She wriggled her body, teasing his chest with her nipples. "Then give me the real thing," she purred.

Without thinking, he stripped, throwing his clothes on the floor, and manhandled her hips onto the double pillows for penetration. Bracing her thighs open with his forearms, he guided his engorged penis into the liquid fire of her pussy. Pleasure roared up his cock, through his balls and roamed deep into his abdomen.

She cried out, rubbing her breasts and pinching her nipples, riding the furious tide of his thrusts. He released her legs and she wrapped them around his hips, locking her ankles together. Then she reached down to where they were connected and opened her labia so the thick ridges on his penis would rub directly against her clit.

He was possessed by lust, taking her in a frenzy he hadn't known in years. She was loud, crying out her need with such enthusiasm he had to smile. *I always get the crazy ones.*

Over the next hour, he lost track of how many climaxes she had but he easily matched her. As he lay in the dark, with his arms wrapped around her waist listening to her deep exhausted sleep, he couldn't help but wonder why he felt so disoriented and confused. Usually his thoughts of women ended with the last orgasm. This time his thoughts of her continued and not just in the realm of sex. Could it be he was getting some feelings for her? *Impossible.* He'd never been in love. In fact he didn't even believe it existed. *She's just a good lay. Don't worry about it. Everything will be back to normal in the morning.*

Chapter 15

Gypsy entered Kharon's class that morning and was immediately assaulted by Makkai. "Where have you been?" he said a little too loud for her taste. "I've been knocking on your door since two this morning."

"I was ignoring you and sleeping," Gypsy lied. She wasn't about to tell him in front of an audience that she'd been in Kharon's bed most of the night. "What the hell do you want with me at two o'clock in morning? Don't you have a wife that you can harass?"

Makkai dragged her over to an assignment list. On it, there were three activities that must be taken to pass the mid-term. One was a boar hunt, the second a tour to patrol the border, and the last was some hardcore arena exercises. Gypsy frowned. She was sick to death of arena exercises. She glanced at Makkai. "Which one did you pick?"

"The boar hunt, of course. That's the one General Kharon is teaching."

Gypsy scanned the room and spotted Kharon in the middle of a few cadets answering questions. He looked tired and bored. He glanced up, their eyes meeting for a brief moment and she felt heat rush into her cheeks. He was so damn sexy she was getting turned on all over again.

Turning back to stare at the list, she thought about taking the border patrol assignment. It wasn't as glamorous as the boar hunt but she desperately needed to get away from Kharon and the po-

werful pull he had on her. Then she remembered her damned *season*. She *had to* pick the fucking boar hunt or she'd be sick like a dog by nightfall. *When is this damn thing going to be over?*

Gypsy grabbed the pencil and was about to write when Kharon came up behind her. She sensed him so completely, he was like a part of her soul. "What are you choosing?" he asked with a note of concern to his voice. The deep tone rumbled through her, making her feel excited and awake.

She turned around and smirked. "What do you think I should pick?" she asked amused. He needed her just as much as she needed him.

Kharon stared down at her and Gypsy ached to kiss him and feel those huge, powerful hands on her body. "You should pick the boar hunt," he said, his forked tongue playing over his top lip. "That would help you prove yourself in a crisis situation."

For a moment, Gypsy was surprised that he'd told her the truth. She guessed a big part of her expected him to suggest something less dangerous like the arena exercises. A sense of relief moved through her as she realized that, despite what had happened between them, he still saw her as a soldier with a career to forge. It was a good feeling.

She wrote her name under the boar hunt and turned around again. "Okay, I've chosen the boar hunt. When do we go?" she asked.

Kharon gave her a chilling smile. "Now," he said. "Go outside and wait with the others."

* * * *

The hyperia they used to go into battle and hunt weren't the normal, docile mounts that one used every day to pull coaches and ride around. First off, they were all alpha-dominant males bred to be hyperaggressive, and second, they weren't fed the day before a hunt to make them edgier and fiercer. Gypsy approached her mount warily eyeing the cage muzzle over its mouth. Razor-sharp

teeth flashed inside the silver guard. It was a dark gray animal and raised its head in a chilling snarl as she mounted up.

Trying to subdue her nerves, Gypsy grabbed the reins and pushed her feet into the stirrups. Kharon rode up to her and pulled the guard off her animal's mouth. It turned its head trying to bite her leg but she smacked it in the face hard enough to discourage it from any more attempts at dominance.

Kharon, leading the pack of hunters, took off over some rolling hills with everyone falling in directly behind him. Gypsy had been out hunting with Gavin plenty of times but never for boar. Because she was a child, Gavin had felt it was too dangerous, and big boar hunting parties were carefully planned events. So she and Gavin usually stuck to small game and occasionally some elk they ran across.

As a teenager she would seethe with jealousy when he would leave to go on boar hunts with Caraculla. At times she was so furious that in protest she wouldn't even eat any of the meat they brought back. Well, now it was her turn, and the rush was phenomenal.

All the hyperia were fresh and itching for a kill so they could share in the meal and everywhere she looked were young warriors ready for a fight. And *she* was one of them. Pure joy filled her heart and this time she would relish every bite of the boar they brought down.

From somewhere deep in her soul, the hunger for Kharon all but faded away and was replaced by something harder and deadlier. She smiled and embraced it, letting it take over her mind and body so every movement became second nature. Spurring her animal, she moved up to the center of the thundering pack, feeling the adrenaline surge through her senses.

Then they rode deep into the forest and the harsh suns disappeared from the sky except for the sporadic dappling of their light

through the trees. The ride was fantastic, made even more wonderful by the warm conversation the other men engaged in with her.

"This your first hunt, Theron?" one of them asked.

She thought about lying but didn't. "Yeah."

"Keep your instincts sharp," he said, smiling. "These boars can come out of nowhere."

"I will," she said. "Thanks."

The rest of the ride they teased her just as they did each other, and that's when she felt a great deal of gratitude to Kharon for suggesting she come. Of all the assignments, this would be the most dangerous and the hardest and she'd already gained major points with the other men just for choosing it. For his part, Kharon ignored her, spending his time talking and joking with two of the more senior cadets, which made her feel even more at ease. He was still treating her like everyone else, and she loved him for it.

The boars they were hunting were not native to AEssyria. A few thousand years ago an influential nobleman came across them while hunting off world. He was so impressed by their aggressive intelligence and their large size that he imported several breeding pairs and kept them on his lands. The nobleman made a fortune charging others to come and hunt the beasts on his property. Eventually wars and conquests put an end to the beasts' captivity and most of them escaped and adapted to the planet. They prospered in the AEssyrian wilderness and now anyone who was brave enough could hunt them. Unfortunately, the fatalities associated with boar hunts closely rivaled those associated with arena fights. Without a doubt, this was a very dangerous sport.

Gypsy heard the boars before she saw them. Then, with a loud snort, one huge tusked male came out of the scrub and tried to attack Nole. His mount was ready for the attack however, and sidestepped a bite, delivering one of its own. The whole scene quickly turned to chaos as riders rushed around trying to get a boar on their own. Gypsy pulled out her spear and maneuvered her hyperia

through a narrow trail that one of the boars had followed. The trail all but disappeared and Gypsy found herself stopping her mount trying to get oriented.

Without warning, two males charged her from some underbrush, one of which cut her right leg with his tusk. Gypsy slammed her spear down but missed the one who'd cut her, and watched with disappointment as he disappeared through some bushes.

The other boar wasn't so easily driven off. He stayed, snapping and rearing at her hyperia until her mount took a bad step and went down on top of her. The impact was pure anguish, and for a moment, she thought the hyperia had broken her back. Angry and panicked, the hyperia stomped her several times getting back on its feet, then casually trotted off to a safer spot. Gypsy forced herself to get up despite the horrible pain she was in. Bent over, she struggled to catch her breath when she suddenly realized that the boar was still there watching her. She glanced at her spear which had been kicked several yards away by her mount in his desperation to abandon her.

Turning her complete attention back to the boar she wondered if she could make it to her spear before he was on her. *Probably not.* Despite their enormous bulk these things were pretty fast.

This particular creature was the ugliest animal she'd ever seen. His back came up to her rib cage and from his black, glistening snout were several long strings of saliva. He smelled even worse, somewhere between a rotting corpse and garbage dump. Gypsy was convinced the only reason he didn't just leap on her right there was because he was confused by her feminine scent. But his confusion didn't last long. Showing his long, yellow tusks, he lunged at her. Pulling a deep breath, Gypsy stepped to the side and pulled out the small knife she kept in the small of her back. With a wide arc, she slashed the beast along the snout making it roar in pain and fury. It came around for another pass, enraged, and that was when

Gypsy heard it. A thunderous sound bearing down on her so hard and fast she thought she would be trampled.

Kharon tore through the clearing, reaching down and grabbing her in mid-gallop. He pulled her onto the back of his mount and handed her a spear. The boar was even more enraged now, openly fighting with Kharon's hyperia as Gypsy readied herself for a killing blow.

"Don't miss," Kharon said, "or the animal will bring us both down." Wincing from the pounding agony in her back, Gypsy slammed the spear into the back of the boar's neck. The creature collapsed under the injury and fell, pinned to the ground.

Kharon stared down at the beast waiting to see if it was truly dead. It exhaled, kicking up a small dust cloud by its snout but didn't draw another breath. He eased Gypsy down and jumped down himself.

Many of the others in the class had seen the whole thing and were staring at Gypsy as if she just materialized out of thin air. Makkai came over and slapped her affectionately on the shoulder. She closed her eyes for a second trying to ignore the excruciating pain he'd just caused her and the urge to sucker punch him.

Kharon placed his boot on the boar's head, reached down and tore one of the large tusks loose from its jaw. Then, removing his leather gloves, he dipped his fingers in the blood. He walked over to Gypsy and tore her tunic back from the top of her chest. Then he took the tusk and cut a deep gash into her flesh. It hurt so bad her eyes watered. After that, he marked both her cheeks with the boar's blood, indicating that this was her kill.

Kharon leaned his head back and let out a terrifying bellow. It was a traditional call that would have brought the rest of the hunting party back to this area to help take back the feast. All the other cadets soon followed his example. Their combined cries made the birds in the trees take flight.

It was terrible and wonderful all at once. Gypsy only wished she didn't hurt so badly, then maybe she could enjoy it. And to make matters worse, she'd have the *honor* of cutting the damn five-hundred-pound boar all by herself. *Well I wanted to be one of the boys.* She grabbed her knife and got started.

Chapter 16

Gypsy lay on her bed in her tiny dorm room fighting the urge to go to her lover Kharon. She was desperate for sleep but that didn't help her. She was also exhausted and her back ached but that didn't matter either. Her libido controlled all of her thoughts. Desperately she tried to resist but she was losing ground fast. As the evening wore on, it became impossible to deny her hunger for Kharon's heated lovemaking. So—defeated and in pain—she trekked over to his villa under the cover of darkness.

It was even more irritating that he was expecting her. He let her in without saying a word and led her by the hand upstairs and into the huge bathroom. Silently he stripped her and lowered her into a waiting tub filled with warm water. Removing the only thing he'd been wearing, a pair of black pants, he climbed in behind her. She still didn't speak, as she nestled back against his powerful chest, she didn't have to; he seemed to know exactly what she needed. He washed and caressed her entire body, running kisses over her moist skin. After they'd soaked for almost an hour, he lifted her out of the water, dried her off, and lowered her naked body into his bed. Rolling her on to her side, he lay down behind her and placed his large rough hands against her back kneading the muscles until she melted under his touch.

"You did well today, Gypsy," he said, his voice a rich rumbling baritone in her ear. "I was proud of you."

She grinned and closed her eyes. His hands were working magic on her sore back. "Thanks. I'm glad you suggested the boar hunt. It was a hell of an experience."

"Have you thought about what you're going to tell Caraculla?"

Gypsy opened her eyes and stared at the wall in front of her. *Uh oh, not the words I want to hear right now.* "What do you mean?"

"I mean about us."

"Of course I'll tell him, but I don't think he'll care. He let me put aside our marriage because he wanted me to have as much freedom as possible," she said. She turned around and studied his face, immediately feeling herself bristle at his expression. "Why? Do you care about my relationship with him?"

"Do you still intend to have sex with him?" Kharon asked, growing tense.

"Yes I do," she replied. *I should have seen this coming. It's time for the big asshole to get possessive.*

"You want to continue *our* relationship while still sleeping with Caraculla?" Kharon asked angrily. He shook his head. "I'm sorry, Gypsy, but I just don't see how that can work."

Now she was pissed. Gypsy sat up on the bed scowling. "First of all, I'm not just *sleeping* with Caraculla. I have a relationship with him that is just as important to me as my relationship with you is. You had better understand that I am not sacrificing one relationship for the other."

"Do you love me?" he said, staring hard at her.

"I guess I won't honestly know until this *season* thing is over."

"And if the answer is yes, you're just going to go back and forth, as you please, between two men?"

"Maybe more," she snapped back at him.

Now it was Kharon's turn to sit up. He angrily pointed at her. "Don't say things to deliberately piss me off. This is a serious conversation. What makes you think you can love two men and maintain a commitment to them?"

"I didn't realize I was born with a finite amount of love to give. Besides, I can't even believe that I'm hearing this from you of all people. What with your *three* wives and all. You obviously go back and forth among them as you please. I think it's even worse for you, because at least I'm not *married* to Caraculla!"

"It's different for me," he said. "I'm a male. My wives understand."

"Do they *really*? Or do they just put up with each other and your extracurricular activities because they have no choice."

"I never loved them," he said, searching for something to say.

"So your situation of multiple lovers is okay for you but not for me? That," Gypsy said, "is bullshit. No amount of good sex is worth this. You are *not* going to start putting restrictions on me regarding who I can and cannot sleep with!" she shouted, jumping out of bed and hunting for her clothes.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"Back to my room," she replied, grabbing her panties and hopping on one foot to put them on. "I don't have time for this crap. I have bigger problems right now than your petty jealousy."

"You'll get sick."

"I don't care. So I'll miss class tomorrow."

Kharon leapt off the bed and grabbed her before she could put any more clothes on. "Stay," he said.

Gypsy stopped and looked up into his pale blue eye. The three link chain tattoo just under it like a trail of teardrops. "Is that a request or a command?"

"It's a request from a male who loves you," he said, before taking her face in his hands and kissing her deeply.

Whatever she was expecting him to say, that wasn't it. The feel of his body against her was a potent aphrodisiac that made her blood sing. She was reduced to a quivering mass of lust before he'd even stopped the kiss.

"That's just the hormones talking," she said breathlessly.

"I don't care. It feels very real to me right now," he whispered back.

Picking her up, he placed her on the bed again and nuzzled her face and neck. "Let me give you what you need," he said in a voice rich with lust. "Then you can go back to your room rested and satisfied. Tomorrow, your season should be over and you'll be free."

Gypsy suddenly felt a deep sense of loss. She didn't want to be free of him, not now or ever. "But I'll never truly be free of you, will I?"

"Not unless you choose to be, my love," he said.

Chapter 17

Harlan was delighted when Scarlet showed up for work bright and early. She showed the new doctor around the clinic, introduced her to the two *AEssyrian* medics Harlan was training, and finally ended up by introducing Scarlet to the only Kirillian doctor assigned to the clinic, Krull. Krull, for his part, disliked open displays of emotion and was clearly uncomfortable meeting Scarlet. He probably thought the new doctor was a troublemaker because she'd tried to smuggle a blaster on the world. Harlan was starting to think so too.

Krull was about to walk back to the waiting room and get a new patient when Scarlet stepped in his path blocking him. He gave her an impatient frown.

"Did you bring any special equipment with you when you came, Doctor?" Scarlet asked him.

Krull glanced at Harlan who stood there perplexed. "Like what, Doctor Jonson?" he asked.

Scarlet was undaunted by his attitude. Harlan could tell she was very accustomed to dealing with Kirillians. "Like a Kirillian Mindbender."

"What would you need something like that for?" Harlan asked.

"I want a brain dump of *AEssyrian*," she said, addressing both of them. "I'll need to become fluent if I'm going to be effective here."

"You could suffer permanent brain damage from such a heavy data encroachment," Krull said.

"I'm not worried," she said. "I have complete confidence in you. I've read your dossier on the data nets. You have quite the impressive medical pedigree," she said. Then she paused for a moment and chewed her lip. "I'm so sorry about what happened to your wife."

Krull frowned deeply and for a moment, Harlan thought he was going to storm off. She'd never seen him react that strongly to anything. A quiet, private agony came over his features, but it was unmistakably there. At first Harlan was angry and going to talk to Scarlet in private, but then something strange happened. Krull looked at Scarlet and a curiously intimate moment passed between them. Then as suddenly as it appeared, it was gone.

"Do you have any objection to the procedure?" Krull said to Harlan. Scarlet and Krull watched her expectantly.

"No," Harlan said hesitantly, "as long as you understand the risks." Inwardly Harlan was furious. She hated being put on the spot like that, but what could she say? Scarlet was a doctor herself; she knew the risks. Worse yet, there was a ruthless practicality to what she was asking Krull to do. Harlan reminded herself that if there was anyone she would allow to do such a procedure, it would be Krull.

"Meet me back in my office when you're done," she said to Scarlet.

"Will do," Scarlet replied as she followed Krull into a treatment room.

* * * *

Desmond hadn't been this emotionally confused since he was a teenager. Scarlet had awoken him in the morning as she dressed for work and he'd never seen any woman as beautiful as her, freshly showered and parading around naked. Then he'd escorted her to the clinic and went off to run some errands. The first of which was to get someone else to baby-sit the attractive new doctor. She'd probably be upset but it was better this way. He didn't want her

getting too attached to him and he didn't join the army to be some woman's bodyguard.

He stalked alongside Gavin as the general inspected a new arms shipment from a local craftsman. Gavin was clearly pleased. He gingerly picked up one standard issue saber and sliced the air with it.

"What fucking metalwork," he rumbled, sounding more like he was talking about a woman than a weapon.

"It's great," Desmond said. "I need a favor." He needed Gavin to assign someone else and he couldn't think of any other way his father might do it unless it was a *favor*. Gavin loved to feel a person was indebted to him.

Gavin lowered the saber and stared at Desmond. "What?"

"Assign someone else to the new doctor."

"Why? She's quite attractive. I wouldn't think it was a *difficult* assignment."

"It's not but it's boring and I didn't join the military to be a babysitter."

Gavin gave Desmond a look of mock surprise. "Actually I have always wondered why you joined the military. It certainly wasn't for any type of advancement or aspirations of greatness."

Desmond threw up his hands in frustration. "You just can't let this go, can you? It fucking kills you that your only living son doesn't want to be anything like you. With the exception of dodging the occasional daggers thrown at me by my loving and accepting father, I am *very* satisfied with my life and my career. So fuck off."

"Alright what's the real reason you want to dump this easy assignment?" Gavin asked, grinning. He had gotten the rise out of Desmond that he'd wanted and now he would leave his son alone for awhile. It was a game they played.

"We slept together last night and I think she's getting too attached," Desmond said.

Gavin's one good eye narrowed suspiciously. "*She's* getting, or *you're* getting?"

Desmond shook his head and smiled bitterly. "My meaningful relationships are waiting for me in the brothel."

Gavin replaced the saber and frowned. "You shouldn't be too proud of that, Desmond. Why don't you want to explore a relationship with this woman?"

"I don't want to explore a relationship with *any* woman. Why can't it be that simple? Besides, you're one to play matchmaker with me," Desmond said unable to stop himself. "The cities and villages are littered with the broken hearts of women you walked away from."

Gavin fell into a brooding silence. Then he said, "Do you think I used your mother?"

Desmond sighed and rubbed his temples. "I don't know what kind of internal journey you're on in your twilight years but just because I get pissed at you doesn't mean that it's a reflection of the wrongs I suffered as a child. Can't you just accept that you're an asshole? Anyway she never talked about you much," Desmond said. Old feelings of hurt were coming to the surface and he hated how sore it made him.

"Just to set the record straight, your mother and I used *each other*," Gavin said.

"Okay, that's fine. Everything's all better. Thanks. What about the assignment?" Desmond said desperate to get away from his father.

"I'll send a guard to her tonight. Satisfied?"

"Over-fucking-joyed," Desmond retorted.

Chapter 18

Gypsy entered Gavin's office wondering if she was making the right decision to tell him about her little problem. *This shouldn't even be happening to me.* She'd worked so hard to get this far it hardly seemed fair that it was all going to be for nothing, and because of what? Something basic like biology. Try as she might, she simply couldn't see any way out of this problem. How was she supposed to work as a soldier and go on campaign when she might have to deal with her *season* at a most inappropriate time?

If it came on her while she was in the field, she would be faced with abandoning her duty or becoming violently ill. *What a choice.* She was even more nervous about what the man sitting before her was going to say about this. After all, he said he supported her but she sometimes wondered if he had just given up fighting and was waiting for a serious injury or something else to derail her. She never could tell. Gavin was the king of ulterior motives.

Gavin sat at his desk nursing a whiskey and enjoying a cigar. His boots rested up on the scarred edge giving him a benign, relaxed look. The white smoke was thick and the only thing that made the air breathable in here was the open window. Sounds of Master Sergeant Rakon drilling new recruits in the yard below drifted up and made her gut twist with envy. At least none of them had to worry about the misery she now faced.

"I have a serious problem," Gypsy finally said.

"Would you like a drink?" Gavin asked, chewing the end of his cigar to the other side of his mouth. "Whiskey always seems to take the edge off all problems."

Great, he's buzzed. Maybe that's a good thing. "Yeah," Gypsy said, getting up and pouring herself a shot. She tossed it back and took her seat again. Gavin refilled a glass and slowly pushed it across his desk so she could reach it. She stared at the amber liquid but didn't take it yet.

"What is your problem?" Gavin asked.

"Do you remember when I rushed into Mom's office the other day and asked you to leave?" she said.

"As I recall, you ordered me to leave," he said. "But yes, I remember."

"Well, I went to see her because I have apparently come in to some sort of *season*. Do you know what that is?"

Gavin snorted. "Yes, dear," he said in a patronizing tone. "I know what that is. Who brought it on?"

Gypsy swallowed. "General Kharon."

"And I take it the two of you consummated this primal yearning?" Gavin said annoyed.

"I *had* to. It wasn't like I had a choice, I was really sick—"

Gavin held up his hand to stop her. "You don't need to explain and I prefer you didn't. Tell me this. Do you want to be his fourth wife, his *mate*, his private and exclusive fuck for however long he wants you? Do you want to go back to his kingdom and have his babies and forget all this military nonsense?"

"No!" Gypsy said, jumping to her feet. "You know I don't! I can't believe you're even saying this to me. I came here for your *help and advice* but all I've gotten instead is your colossal bullshit! Well, thanks for nothing, Gavin. I'll figure it out on my own. I don't need or *want* your fucking help!" She stormed for the door but Gavin was up in a flash grabbing her before she could escape.

She glared at him with all the fury in her soul. "Sometimes I really hate you."

Gavin chuckled darkly. "That's what I hoped you'd say. Come back and sit down," he said.

Gypsy reluctantly sat but continued to glare at him. She always had to stay alert with Gavin. She never knew when he might exploit her weakness to his own advantage.

"I'm sorry I baited you but I had to know where your thoughts were," he continued after settling back behind his desk. "If any part of you had doubts about what you wanted, there'd be no point in struggling on at the Academy."

"Of course I want to continue, but I don't see how I can. Doctor Krull said this will probably happen twice a year. I can't go through that on the field," she said, feeling miserable.

"I know, dear. This is very unfortunate and we need to find a solution. Let's go back to the clinic and talk to your mother and the other doctors. Perhaps together we can come up with an acceptable way to fix this problem," Gavin said.

Chapter 19

"I only see one way to address Gypsy's reproductive problem," Harlan said, pacing her office. Gavin and Gypsy had arrived only a few minutes ago tense and agitated. Harlan knew immediately that her daughter must have gone to Gavin worrying that her career was in jeopardy, which it probably was. "I might be able to synthesize a close facsimile of the hormone in his semen. If I can trick your body into thinking that it's been with Kharon, your discomfort will be kept at bay until your season is over. The problem is that I need a semen sample from him."

Gypsy threw up her hands. "That's just great! I seriously doubt that General Kharon is going to come in to the clinic and voluntarily jerk off in a cup so he *cannot* have wild animal sex with me," she said, dropping down into the brown leather rolling chair behind Harlan's desk. Gavin twitched ever so slightly at the last part of their daughter's statement.

Harlan nodded. "You are probably correct in that assumption. But you will be happy to know that I don't need him to come to the clinic or even know what we're doing. I can get what I need from you."

"I don't understand."

"You're going to have to make your way to the clinic fairly soon after having sex with him so that I can get the sample from you. I don't need much. Then I can isolate the hormone and work on making a synthetic version of it. Once I've done that, it shouldn't be too hard to develop a cocktail that you can take to re-

lieve your symptoms.” She frowned at Gypsy who was slowly spinning an office chair in circles with her arms folded, looking sullen. “Unfortunately, the cocktail will probably have to be administered by abdominal injection. At least until I can develop something a little more user friendly.”

Gypsy looked up in shock.

Gavin snorted angrily and stared out the window. “So basically she’ll have to carry a kit with her at all times.”

“Probably not at all times, although that would be advisable in the beginning. Once she gets comfortable with her seasonal cycle, she might only have to take it with her around the time she’s due to go into season. It shouldn’t be that big of a deal. You have quite a few soldiers who have to carry medications for chronic conditions or shots to stave off allergic reactions.”

“What does this mean to her long-term?” Gavin asked.

“I don’t know what you mean?” Harlan said.

“What I mean is,” Gavin said, adopting that tone he used when things weren’t going his way. “Will she go *soft*?”

“Gavin, I have no idea what you’re asking me,” she snapped back at him.

Gypsy glanced at him, and then stared at her mother. “He means will it affect my ability to fight? Will I lose my desire to go into battle?”

Harlan shrugged. “I don’t know why it would. If anything I would think your season would make you more... *aggressive*. Have you noticed any emotional changes during this time?”

“Actually, yeah I have, especially when I’m having sex with him. I’m like some kind of vicious beast and even when he gets pissed off, I’m not the least bit afraid of him. I like the way it makes me feel. I feel charged and ready to fight with him.”

Gavin rubbed the bridge of his nose, obviously uncomfortable with the direction that their conversation had taken. “Thank you,” he said. “My question has been answered with much more informa-

tion than was necessary. I think I'll leave you both to your fascinating discussion," he said, turning around and opening the door.

Harlan found it intensely amusing that her husband, the rough, seasoned, seen-it-all soldier was squeamish at the thought of someone having sex with his little girl, especially a male like Kharon.

Gypsy unfolded her arms and relaxed a little. "So...now what?"

Gavin turned back toward her and fixed her with his one good eye. "Now," he said, standing in the doorway, "you go get laid and hurry back. Understand?" Without waiting for an acknowledgment, he was gone pulling the door closed behind him.

"Do you think he's mad at me?" Gypsy said, placing her boots flat on the floor to stop the chair from turning.

"No not you...just the situation. I believe that he shares your frustration and wishes there was an easy fix for this. But I'm pretty sure the injections will work. At least it's only an inconvenience twice a year and not all of the time. Oh and you don't have to rush off to sleep with Kharon. Just pick the right time when you can finish up with him and leave without arousing his suspicion. It's probably better if he doesn't know what you're up to."

"Yeah I agree with you there. I have a feeling he would be pretty pissed. Anyhow I'd better get going. I have some practicing to do. Thanks for everything, Mom, and tell Gavin I appreciate his help too," Gypsy said as she stood up.

"Gypsy." Harlan paused, squeezing her daughter's shoulder. "Before you go, I am going to impart some unsolicited motherly advice. Be careful with Kharon. This primal mating has probably caused him to develop some very deep feelings for you that he can't control. Keep in mind that he is more like Gavin than Caraculla, which makes him very dangerous. Just because his emotions are genuine doesn't mean that he knows how to act appropriately in response to them. He is significantly older than you and like your father, he has a lot of demons. I'm pretty sure he is used to

getting his way in all things and if he's going to be part of your life, you need to listen, observe and learn how to handle him for your own safety."

"I know," she said, nodding as she left.

Harlan hoped her daughter would listen. If Kharon was even the slightest bit like Gavin, Gypsy had no idea what she was in for. Unfortunately Gypsy was a lot like her father and those strong personality traits could be disastrous for this situation.

* * * *

After leaving the clinic, Gypsy spent the better part of the late afternoon looking for her half-brother, Desmond. She needed to practice using the stupid meteor hammer with someone other than Kharon. Even during her private lessons after class, she was incapable of concentrating and although he said she was doing well, his continuous distraction made it impossible for her to tell. She knew Desmond had been out on border patrol and even though the patrol had returned for the day, he was nowhere to be found. *It's almost like he doesn't want to be found.*

On a tip from Master Sergeant Rakon, she made her way over to the weapons storage building. The building was actually an old border guard fortress that had been abandoned centuries ago when additional land had been annexed or rather conquered by the crown. Since the structure didn't sit anywhere near a border, it had become obsolete. The dark stone building had been refurbished and secured around the time Gypsy was born and was now used to store excess combat weapons for the army. As she approached, the twin suns had begun to set, backlighting the old fort. With relief she saw Desmond's hyperia spiked in a grassy area on the side. *At least he's here. I would've been really mad if I'd come all the way out here for nothing.* She looped her hyperia's reins through one of the large metal O-rings protruding from the building's stone wall. Her boots crunched along the gravel walkway into the entrance. The building was so archaic that it didn't have a power source. The walls were

sparsely lined with torches that threw creepy shadows on the walls as they flickered. When Gypsy entered the large building, she spotted Desmond standing by a stack of long narrow wooden boxes holding a clipboard and squinting at the writing on the sides.

"You'll ruin your eyes if you keep trying to read in poorly lit areas. After all you're not as young as you used to be," she called out.

Desmond smiled but didn't look up. "Aren't you going to miss your Academy curfew, little girl?"

"Very funny. What are you doing out here?" she said as she approached.

"Inventory for Rakon. I owed him a favor."

"It must be a pretty substantial favor. If I didn't know better, I might think you were hiding from Gavin," she said, pulling the clipboard from his hand and glancing down at it.

"Am I that transparent?" He sighed, peeling Gypsy's fingers from the clipboard and taking it back.

"Come on, Desmond, nobody comes out here except soldiers stocking up before a campaign. Certainly nobody comes out here just to do inventory. That shit job has been ignored by everyone for years. Why are you hiding?"

"Because Gavin is going to ask me to go back to guarding the new doctor and I don't want to. Why are you here? Did he send you out to find me?"

"No. Nothing like that. I need you to come to the practice arena and spar with me while I use the meteor hammer," she said, tugging on his arm.

"A meteor hammer? How did you get stuck learning that fucked up weapon?"

"It's a long story. I'll tell you about it on the way to the arena. Please. I won't get another chance to practice because I have to drill all week."

"Sure I'll go. I doubt he would look for me there either," he said, dropping the clipboard on top of a box and grabbing his gear.

* * * *

Gypsy was thrilled that the arena was empty. She was almost afraid they would run into Gavin, or worse Kharon. But no. They had the whole place to themselves so she and Desmond meandered out across the black sand until they were positioned right in the center under the main octagonal light.

"So I'm still confused as to why you don't just practice with Kharon; after all he's the expert with this thing. I don't know what you expect to accomplish by sparring with me," he said, drawing his saber.

"I have a problem with Kharon," she half-mumbled as she pulled the practice weapon from the tattered cloth sack. The chain and rope had become entangled and she picked at the knot with her nails while the rubber ball waited on the ground.

"You're not still sore about him almost killing Caraculla last year, are you?"

"No it's much worse than that. Kharon has brought me into *season*." She frowned, hoping she wouldn't have to explain what it was.

"Are you kidding me? I thought women didn't go through that anymore," he said, making a failed effort not to laugh.

"By the Gods, if one more person says to me, '*I didn't think women went through that anymore*' I am going to go on a killing rampage!" Frustrated she gripped the arch of the knot with her teeth and pulled, finally loosening it. Unraveling the rope she choked up on it and began to swing the rubber ball over her head.

"Wow. So you must be fucking him like a bunny. I can see how your *season* would make it difficult to spar with him," he said, easily deflecting the first launch she had attempted toward him.

"Yeah. This whole thing is completely screwing my life up. So what about you? What's so bad about this new doctor? I mean aside

from the fact that I've heard she's a fucking lunatic." Gypsy attempted another throw but she hesitated and the launched ball wobbled toward Desmond so clumsily that he half-heartedly sidestepped it. Because of the lack of force the ball fell to the ground on the recoil and Gypsy had to reel it in along the sand and start her overhead swing all over again.

"Well to be honest, I kind of like her. She makes me feel some weird things that I've never really experienced before. It's just not a good situation for me to be in. I'll just screw it up and end up hurting her or maybe even vice versa." He tried to sidestep another attack but this time she tagged him in the bicep. "Nice shot." He grinned.

"I'm starting to get the hang of the piece of crap. So you don't want a relationship with this woman because it might *fail*? That's kind of living your life in a hole, isn't it?" she asked, perplexed.

Desmond scowled and easily deflected another launch. "That's not the main reason."

"So what is? I've never actually seen her but I've heard she's pretty cute," Gypsy said still trying to understand her brother's reluctance.

"I think she's the most beautiful woman I've ever seen. As lame as that sounds. I can't take my eyes off of her. But it's more than just sex. I just like being in her presence. I feel like...everything is good. The way it's supposed to be. Does this make any sense or am I rambling insanely?"

"Not at all. It makes perfect sense. So tell me again why you don't want a normal relationship with her? Have you ever actually had a normal relationship with a woman? And I don't mean your brothel girlfriends either. I mean a regular grown-up, cohabitation, build a life together relationship," she said, dropping her arms and letting the ball drop to the ground again. She was intrigued now and didn't want the sparring to interfere with her conversation.

Desmond sheathed his saber and folded his arms, clearly uncomfortable with the direction this was going. "The truth is that I don't want to ever be in a position where Gavin has something to hold over my head."

"Are you kidding me? *Fuck* Gavin. You can't keep your whole personal life on hold because of him. What are you afraid he's going to do?" Gypsy couldn't believe he was going to forsake a chance at happiness because of *their father*.

"You barely know Gavin at all. And you definitely have no idea what he's capable of when he wants something or feels like he's been wronged. Our father is an evil, vicious bastard. I don't know what kind of power your mother has over him, but the real Gavin is still under there somewhere and you will meet him someday. Only then will you understand my position."

Desmond pulled his saber back out, standing at the ready. Then he gestured for her to attack and said, "I would lose my mind if he ever did anything to Scarlet to punish me. And make no mistake, he would if he knew I had feelings for her. If that ever happens, you can be assured that one of us will end up in the pretty garden with Northe and the others."

Gypsy scratched her chin then gripped the soft braided rope to swing the hammer again. Trying something different, she launched the ball at Desmond's lower legs but he was too fast and jumped up as the ball traveled underneath him then recoiled back to Gypsy.

He grinned at her. "That was a really good use of your brain. Always break patterns before your opponent can learn them."

"Would you ever go against a meteor hammer in the arena?" she questioned as the hammer swung in lazy circles over her head waiting for another opening.

"Sure. All weapons are basically the same. Kharon likes to use the exotic ones because of the instability they cause in one's focus. If you take away all of the fancy movements, a weapon still has to make contact with you in order to hurt you. I go into all fights fo-

cusing on how to keep my opponent and their weapon from touching me. Once you've got that figured out, you can go for the kill."

Gypsy gritted her teeth and launched the hammer at Desmond as hard as she could. He in turn twisted back and with both hands gripping his saber, he swung his blade at the ball with all of his strength. When the hard rubber connected with the opposing force of his steel, it launched back and struck Gypsy right in the sternum. She didn't even realize she was falling until the ground hit her in the ass. She fought to inhale as she doubled over. As soon as she convinced her lungs to reinflate she laid back onto the sand and stared up at the ceiling. *Holy crap that hurt.* Desmond walked over and crouched next to her.

"Keep in mind that a true fighter will also learn to use their opponent's weapon to their advantage." He extended his hand down and pulled her up to her feet. Gypsy leaned forward with her palms on her knees taking deep breaths. Desmond looked off and snickered.

"What's so funny?"

"At least your hormones have their sights set high," he said still grinning.

"What's that suppose to mean?" He was starting to annoy her.

"I mean at least you're not mated with one of your classmates or worse, some sleazy mercenary or even a servant." His laughter was now getting loud enough to reverberate off of the arena walls.

"Thanks, Desmond. I can always count on you to find the flicker of light in complete darkness. You bastard."

Chapter 20

Scarlet left the clinic that evening to find a new AEssyrian bodyguard waiting for her. Desmond's obvious defection didn't hurt as much as it annoyed her. Couldn't he just have told her to her face that he wasn't going to be her bodyguard anymore? Oh no, she had to find out this way. Taking a deep breath to control her temper, Scarlet marched up to the soldier holding his mount and hers. She eyed him up and down.

"What's your name?" she said, trying out her perfect AEssyrian.

He was a young male, certainly handsome by anyone's standards, but there was a hint of ruthlessness around his eyes she found unsettling. "Falken, lady," he replied, looking surprised by her command of his language.

Scarlet folded her arms across her chest. She was going to have to discuss this with the general in the morning. There was no way this AEssyrian male was living in her home. *No way*. "You are not coming into my home," she said. "You can camp outside."

Falken stared down at her and frowned but Scarlet held her ground. "I don't understand why that's necessary. I'm no threat to you."

"All male AEssyrians are a threat to me," she said coolly. "I don't feel safe with you in my house. Is that understood?"

Falken mounted up. "Yes," he said icily.

Scarlet went over to the hyperia he held for her and tried to mount up but the animal snarled and pranced back. After a few at-

tempts and almost getting bitten once she stepped back and put her hands on her hips. "Could you help me please?"

"Sorry," he said. "Since I have to remain outside tonight I need to save my strength to fight off all the hordes of AEssyrian males coming to break down your door. You know everything. Figure it out yourself."

Scarlet seethed. "Okay! Fine!" she said, glaring at him with all the fury in her heart. "You can come *inside* the house. But you stay in the living room at all times. How's that?"

Falken dismounted and held her hyperia. "Better," he said. "But just understand that I'm putting in for a transfer first thing in the morning. I don't need all this crap from a foreigner who speaks AEssyrian like a grammar school teacher."

Scarlet mounted up and struggled with the hyperia for a moment before the animal settled down. She glared back at the soldier. "There's nothing wrong with my AEssyrian," she insisted.

Falken mounted up and spurred his mount. Scarlet rode up alongside him, or rather *her mount* decided to ride up alongside him. *Damn willful animal.*

"Your language is horrible, lady. Just like your attitude," he said.

"What happened to Master Sergeant Theron?"

"Surprisingly he requested a duty transfer," he said, smirking.

"How do I get him back?"

Falken looked thoughtful for a moment. "He has a mercenary's heart. Perhaps his Excellency can offer him more money to guard you. If there is enough money," he said.

"When did you say you were asking for a transfer?"

"First thing in the morning."

"I can hardly wait," Scarlet said.

Falken glanced at her. "Neither can I."

Chapter 21

Gypsy glanced at the red square wall clock and groaned. She needed to get moving or she was definitely going to be late. Rushing around, she dragged a comb through her wet hair and grabbed a notebook off her dresser, shoving it into her canvas shoulder bag. Grasping the handle to her door she attempted to charge out into the hall but instead bumped into the heavy dark wood when it failed to open. She twisted the knob around and pushed against the door but it didn't budge.

She tried again but the hinge was frozen solid. A seeping panic ran down her spine. *Oh, no, no, no...* Dropping her stuff on the floor, Gypsy grabbed the knob again and threw all of her weight against the door several times. The door didn't move an inch. It was like someone had welded it in place. Now she was really panicked.

Pounding her fists on the door she tried to call for help but no one seemed to hear her. Looking at the clock again, she realized it was three minutes before the first morning class sessions and most students probably wouldn't be milling around in the hall. She was going to be in *so* much trouble with Kharon if she didn't show up for class. Because of their relationship, he usually singled her out for rougher treatment than everyone else, which annoyed the hell out of her even if she did understand it.

Quickly scanning the room she saw her saber hanging on her bedpost and pulled it from the scabbard. She worked the heavy blade into the door seam and pulled hoping to overpower whatever

they had used to jam her door. Yes “*they*”. This little prank reeked of Nole and his cronies. She pulled and pushed on the handle of her saber until it snapped back almost cutting her in the face. *Okay that was a bad idea. Maybe I can climb down from the window.* She went over to the window, opened it and looked down.

The drop was an easy four stories but she spied a stone ledge just under her window about a foot wide. Leaning out, she noticed that the window to the storage room directly next door was open. All she had to do was shimmy over to the other room and she’d be home free. Being late wouldn’t go nearly as bad for her as not showing up at all.

Pulling the bag strap over her shoulder, she climbed onto the windowsill and looked down, hesitating for a moment. The ground looked very far down indeed. *Maybe I should just wait for class to get out. Then someone is bound to hear my calls for help.* But she didn’t want to look like the feeble *girl* who couldn’t figure her way out of a locked room. Summoning all her courage, she climbed carefully out the window and, facing the building, clung onto the protruding stones that made up the external walls. A strong wind moved across her shoulders unbalancing her slightly and a sensation of complete terror filled her.

She froze.

Come on, you can do this. It’s not that far. When she calmed a little, she continued her journey one agonizing inch at a time.

But the going was harder than she’d imagined, and there were several times when she had to stop and rest. This was much scarier than she thought it would be. Her hands were red and cramping from her vice-like grip on the stones. *Almost there. Just a little bit further.* Finally, after what felt like a million years, she reached the ledge just under the open storage room window. She exhaled the breath she’d been holding the whole time and grabbed the window frame. Nothing could have prepared her for the mind-twisting horror that gripped her as the portion of stone ledge she was standing

on, old and weakened from the elements, crumbled beneath her feet.

Losing her grip on the frame, she just barely grabbed the ledge remnants before falling to her death. A few seconds later she heard the thud of her shoulder bag hitting the ground below. A few passing cadets called out for her to hang on and that help was coming. The only problem was that her hands were cramped and stiff from gripping what little handholds she could. Try as she might, she just didn't feel she had a strong enough hold to pull herself completely up.

A strange, chilling calm came over her. *This is it. I'm going to fall to my death.*

Well, she wasn't going down without a fight. Digging her nails into the rough stone, she strained to pull herself up. Her muscles screamed in protest as she just cleared her head and managed to get one elbow over the lip. But this position was almost more awkward than the other and she fought hard to maintain it. For the first time since coming to the Academy, she wanted to cry.

Someone's iron hand seized her arm and helped her get her other elbow up on the ledge. The hands grabbed her, trying in vain to get her inside but she was so tired now that she could barely help. She and her helper grappled together to gain some ground but Gypsy could feel herself slipping back down.

Then something extraordinary happened.

Something else seized her. It felt like huge tentacles wrapping around her legs, waist and torso, and when her grip on the ledge finally gave out, those tentacles squeezed her tight and pulled her in the window dumping her on the floor. Looking down at herself, she saw that there was nothing there.

Captain Raith knelt down next to her. "Are you alright?" he asked.

What could she say? She was amazed to be alive and more grateful than she'd ever been in her whole life, even if she didn't

know how he'd done it. "Yeah, I think so," she said, barely able to get the words out.

He looked down at her raw, bleeding hands and held them. Then he glanced toward the hall where running boots and panicked shouts were quickly closing in on them. "Don't tell anyone about what I did," he said.

Gypsy was still too overwhelmed to know what he was talking about. *What? The tentacle thing?* "Okay." Pulling her hands from his, she got up, staggering a bit. "I'm fine. Really. Thanks for your help, *again*." She smiled.

The captain nodded and studied her. "What were you doing out there?"

"Someone locked me in my room," she said. "I was just trying to get out and get to class. It was a bit harder than I thought it would be."

"If you find out who did it," he said with a devilish leer, "I strongly suggest you get revenge. You need to make a point or they'll never stop screwing with you until you drop out."

She was about to say she knew exactly who it was and she'd take care of it when Kharon and a few other senior officers pushed open the door so hard that it banged loudly on the wall behind it. They all froze in the oversized doorway as if they couldn't believe she was alive.

Gypsy took a deep breath to keep her voice steady and stared at them. "What?" she said.

Chapter 22

“By the Gods!” Kharon bellowed. “Have you completely lost your mind, woman? What the hell were you doing out there?”

Gypsy tried to stay calm but he was embarrassing her. His anger was much too raw and she knew it was because he had feelings for her. “The door of my room was jammed so I got out the only way I could,” she said, still panting a little. Kharon would want her to name who she thought was responsible but there was no way. She knew Raith was right. She’d have to deal with this herself if she was going to salvage her reputation.

“Come with me,” Kharon said, storming over to her door with the other officers in tow. Gypsy trailed behind them, shuffling along with her hands in her pockets wishing this would all just be over. Kharon scanned the length of the door in close examination then his eyes narrowed and his face darkened in rage. Gypsy had never seen him so angry. “It’s been deliberately jammed from the outside,” he said. Then without warning, he grabbed the doorknob and tore the whole thing off the hinges. All the other officers stepped back but didn’t seem surprised by the general’s strength, but Gypsy sure was. That door must have weighed well over a hundred pounds and he’d torn it out of the wall like it was made of silk. *Impressive and oh so sexy.* Of course she couldn’t resist aggravating him some more so she said, “That’s just great, Excellency, now everyone can watch me undress.”

Kharon turned around and glared at her. “We’ll get it fixed,” he growled. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

Gypsy nodded. "I'm good. Really. It's not that big a deal."

Then the sound she'd dreaded the most came. Heavy boots with spurs. Her father's distinctive stalking gait joined them in the hall. He looked cool and calm but completely pissed off. Gavin ran his gaze up and down her, and deciding she was in good health, stepped back from the group and waited. Kharon joined him and they spoke in tense low tones for several minutes before Gavin stalked off.

Kharon returned from his private conversation and told one of the senior cadets to have the maintenance man fix her door. Dismissing the other officers with a nod, he then turned to her and said, "You come with me."

Gypsy fell into step beside him, saying nothing.

"Who did this?" he asked, barely keeping the anger out of his voice.

"You wouldn't be asking me that if I had a penis. I'll handle it myself," she replied calmly.

"This has nothing to do with your sex and that's not what I asked you."

Gypsy stopped walking and he turned around to face her. She pointed her finger at him. "I don't need you as a babysitter. I will take care of my own problems without your interference or his." She gestured back to where Gavin had been.

Kharon quickly moved into her personal space and she dropped her gaze but stood her ground. The closeness of his body coupled with his anger was arousing her in so many ways but she resisted the urge to continue goading him. He leaned in close as he spoke through gritted teeth. "What you fail to understand is that this has nothing to do with the fact that you're female. The prank was stupid and dangerous. I need to make sure this doesn't happen again to anyone. Now who is responsible?"

Gypsy shrugged belligerently. "I have no idea who did it."

Kharon seized her upper arm and roughly escorted her forward. "Then perhaps the rest of the class can help us figure it out."

* * * *

The whole class stood at attention with their sabers held out horizontally and chest high. They'd been like this for fifteen minutes but it might as well have been an hour for all the hurt it caused. Gypsy was stoic through the pain. Her arms were already sore from her ordeal on the ledge but at least she was still alive. She didn't know how much longer she could hold up her saber but she was determined not to be the first one to break.

"I'm going to ask the class one more time," Kharon thundered as he paced along the row of cadets. "Who is responsible for tampering with Cadet Theron's door!"

Out of the corner of her eye, Gypsy saw Nole step out. "I did it, Excellency, but I never intended her any harm. It was just a harmless prank."

Kharon approached him like he was going to chew off his whole head. "You didn't mean any harm?" he said sarcastically. "You will stay behind. The rest of the class is dismissed!"

Chapter 23

It had been only a few days since Gavin had relieved Desmond of guarding Scarlet, but he'd already heard rumblings from the other men that he might have to go back. Apparently the temperamental doctor was a difficult woman to guard and much too opinionated for most males to handle. *Tell me about it.*

So, to avoid wrangling with Gavin, he'd been going to great lengths to avoid his father. He had spent the last two days on border patrol and this morning he sequestered himself in Rakon's office finishing the master sergeant's duty rosters in exchange for the hiding place. Now that it was late in the day he was particularly proud of taking his lunch at three o'clock. Who would think to look for him in the cafeteria this late in the afternoon? *Not many.* He grinned.

But no sooner had he lifted the fork to his lips when none other than Gavin came stalking through the benches headed right for him. *That fucking bastard must have spies everywhere. Now what the hell am I going to do?*

Gavin sat across from Desmond as if he was an invited guest. Desmond ignored him and took a bite of his lunch. They sat in silence for a few minutes, and then Gavin said, "I need you to go back and guard the new doctor."

"No," Desmond said.

"She doesn't trust AEssyrian men and wants a human. You're the closest thing I've got."

"No," Desmond said, keeping his anger in check. Nothing made Gavin turn on anyone faster than getting aggressive with him, but this was ridiculous.

Gavin unscrewed the top of a salt shaker and dumped the contents on the table. Taking his index finger, he put it in the center and made random designs in the grain. "I could order you back."

"You could."

"I will," Gavin said, distracted by his artwork.

Desmond picked up the tan cloth napkin, wiped his mouth then tossed it back on the table. "Is that what you're planning to do? If so, just do it and get it over with."

"I'd rather you go back voluntarily."

"Well, I'm not going back voluntarily. It's a shit assignment and I have better things to do with my time."

Gavin fixed him with his striking golden eye. "Like what? Work on advancing your military career? That's a fucking joke. Honestly, Desmond, I don't understand why you joined the military. What, to be a common foot soldier? There are scores of men who would give anything to have the gifts and opportunities you've had and squandered."

Desmond dropped his fork and leaned back. "I'm really not interested in listening to you lament over my wasted career choice. Are you ordering me back or not?"

Gavin snorted. "I don't mourn you as much as you think I do. Your sister Gypsy is twice the warrior you could ever hope to be."

"Only because she was lucky enough to have been ignored by you until she was an adult. Besides, she'll probably end up getting knocked up by Kharon or Caraculla," Desmond said, feeling evil.

Gavin leaned back as if Desmond had spit on him. "Who told you about her affair with Kharon?"

"She did." He smirked.

"When?"

"Last time we sparred. A few days ago I think. You know, Gavin, we are siblings and do try to maintain a friendship, as hard as that may be for you to understand."

"Isn't that sweet?" Gavin sneered. "You two can trade stories about how I screwed up your childhoods."

"Don't flatter yourself. You're not often the topic of our conversations."

His father brooded. Then he went on the attack again saying, "I think you might have feelings for this woman. Perhaps that's the real reason why you don't want to go back. Would it kill you to have a decent woman in your life instead of the endless train of whores that strut in and out of your bedroom?"

Desmond shifted in his seat feeling his temper rise. *Who the hell is he talking to anyway? Before Harlan, he was the biggest whore chaser in the empire.* His father had now pissed him off in ways he didn't even think possible. "First off, stay out of my personal life. Just because you've found somebody who will put up with your crap on a daily basis doesn't make you an expert on relationships, and second, fuck you're babysitting job," he growled. "Find someone else to keep your wife off your back."

"I'll pay you double what you're making," Gavin said with an evil glint in his eye.

Desmond had to admit, Gavin knew how to rope him in. "No."

"Triple," Gavin said.

Boy, he must need someone bad. Harlan must be riding his ass. "Triple and a small villa instead of the barracks," Desmond countered.

Gavin frowned deeply and brushed all the salt into a small pile on the edge of the table. He scraped it over the edge with his hand and carefully put in back in the shaker. "I don't know about the villa. I'll have to see what's available, but if I can find a vacant one, it's yours."

“Are you just going to put that back in there after you’ve been playing with it?”

“Yes I am. Do you have a comment to make about it?” Gavin snapped at him.

Desmond shook his head smirking, “Harlan must be riding you pretty hard.”

“The woman is fucking relentless. She continuously rants about how she doesn’t understand how soldiers accustomed to the hardships of war can’t care for one small woman,” Gavin said, replacing the salt shaker and standing up. “So you’ll do it then?”

Desmond nodded. “For now.” *Or until she pisses me off so much I quit too.*

“You’re to report after lunch. I think she has plans to go to some peasant house and Harlan doesn’t want her going alone. Apparently her *AEssyrian* is atrocious.”

Desmond speared his meat on the end of a fork and paused before biting into it. “So I’ve heard.”

Chapter 24

Scarlet had just finished packing her medical bag and was about to leave when Desmond came into the clinic. The sliding glass doors snapped closed behind him and he filled the room with a power and energy she found fascinating. An untamed hunger began in her sex and brought heat to her cheeks as she remembered what a thrilling lover he'd been. Passion surged into her veins but she forced herself to stay cool. What she really wanted to do was give him a piece of her mind. "What are you doing here?"

He smiled. "Well you wanted me back, so here I am."

"I never asked for you back. In fact, I asked the general to get me *anyone* but you."

"Come on, you can admit you missed me," Desmond said.

"What's he paying you?" she asked.

"Triple," he said.

Scarlet shook her head slowly. *What a total lowlife. Well, at least he can help me on my house calls.* She grabbed her bag and walked past him. "Come on," she said. "I have a house call to make."

"Where?"

Scarlet glanced down at the paper attached to the front of the chart she was holding. "Golthyn."

"Why?" he continued without making any move to follow her. Now he was really pissing her off.

"What does it matter? Can we just go?"

"Certain towns are...well...less than friendly to representatives of the crown. If I'm going to adequately protect your trouble-

some ass, I need to know where we're going and what we're doing there," he said in a patronizingly deadpan way as he moved forward.

"Is Golphyn an *unfriendly* town?" she asked, happy that at least now he was following her outside.

"No, just poor. What are we doing there?"

"Delivering a baby, probably breach. Satisfied?"

"Can I read the file?" he pressed.

She handed it to him and walked over to the waiting coach. *I know he's deliberately trying to irritate me, but it's not going to work.*

Desmond continued smiling as he moved up beside her and made a sweeping gesture to the step. "After you, lady."

* * * *

They rode in the coach in silence.

Desmond read the file and Scarlet occupied her time staring out the window. She was furious at herself for feeling betrayed by a man she barely knew. What the hell was wrong with her anyway? She'd had one-night stands before. She knew what to expect—or more accurately—what not to expect. But the truth was she was hurt he'd wanted to dump the assignment so fast because she'd been sure they had shared something. Obviously, it was just her imagination running away with her. He wanted sex and she'd given it to him. End of story. She needed to get a grip on her emotions or this place was going to gut her.

"Let me get this straight," Desmond said, breaking the silence. "You're going to deliver a baby for a destitute family so they can be blessed with another mouth they can't afford to feed. Is that right?"

Scarlet turned in her seat to face him. "I suppose I should just forget this whole trip and let the baby, and possibly the mother, die?"

"You'd be doing them a favor. Your blind heroics are only going to place additional hardship on these people. The mother's

Æssyrian so most likely won't die from a breech birth. Let nature take its course." He shrugged, tossing the file back to her.

"That...is one of the most horrific, insensitive statements I have ever heard. In the future, I would prefer you not give me any more of your stupid opinions. In fact, I forbid you to speak to me for the rest of this trip." With that she turned back in her seat and stared out at the changing landscape.

Desmond leaned back placing his well worn black boots on the opposite seat and closed his eyes grinning.

They arrived at the village less than an hour later and Scarlet was appalled by the poverty here. Everyone lived in the most basic huts, with only a small plot of land to keep animals they would later use for eating. All of the villagers were dressed in rags and rushed to the coach begging for money. Desmond pushed them back to allow Scarlet to get out without being mobbed.

The villager who'd requested her assistance came over and fell to his knees in gratitude. He wore a tattered dark blue robe bound at the waist with coarse rope. There were no shoes on his feet, nor had he ever worn any as was evident by the thick black calluses built up on his soles over the years. He was desperately thin and already showed signs of premature aging. His skin was dark green and so dry it was split in places like his knuckles and elbows. The flesh around his light green eyes was sagging and he gave off the stench of old sweat and filth. He was not as tall as most of his breed and at least one hundred pounds lighter than he should be.

Scarlet attributed his poor appearance to malnutrition. A full-grown Æssyrian needed quite a bit of meat to develop normally, and it was clear from the looks of these people, none of them had ever had enough to eat.

Taking her hand in his, the villager placed her palm against his cheek and wept openly. "Lady, thank you so much for coming. I express all the thanks in my heart."

Scarlet knelt down and smiled at him. "Take me to your wife."

The villager struggled to his feet and led her into his hut with Desmond close behind them. The hut was small with a dirt floor and a straw mattress on the ground. Despite its meager offerings, it was also surprisingly clean. The wife lay on the mattress moaning, her thighs covered in blood and amniotic fluid.

Scarlet rolled up her sleeves and turned to Desmond. "Could you please get me a bucket of water?"

Desmond nodded and disappeared. Scarlet approached the woman slowly, talking to her in AEssyrian the whole time. The poor thing was exhausted from her ordeal and Scarlet estimated she'd probably been in labor since yesterday.

"What's your name?" she asked, stroking the woman's hair to sooth her.

"Nema," the woman replied in a voice barely loud enough to hear.

"I'm going to help you, Nema," Scarlet said. "But in order to help you, I'll need to touch you. Is that alright?"

"You do what you need to do, Doctor," she said.

Scarlet knelt between the woman's legs and reached up into her uterus. She immediately encountered the baby's feet, and working as gently as she could, she turned it around so the head was pointed toward the birthing canal. Scarlet sat back on her haunches and watched with relief as the baby's head crowned normally and slipped right out.

Scarlet picked it up and washed it off with the water Desmond had brought in. She looked up at him. "Give me your cloak," she said.

He frowned but took it off and handed it to her without hesitation. She wrapped the baby in it and placed it on the mother's chest so it could suckle.

After cleaning and feeding mother and baby, Scarlet came out just as the three moons were rising. The villager thanked her sever-

al times and tried to pay her with what little he had but she refused him. He had enough to worry about feeding this new baby.

“Ready to go?” she asked Desmond.

“I’ve been ready since we got here.” He walked with her over to the coach. “How did you learn AEssyrian so fast?”

Scarlet climbed in. “I had Doctor Krull give me a brain dump.”

Desmond stared at her. “That explains the strange dialect. Weren’t you afraid you might end up crazier than you are now?”

She scowled at the insult. “You’re *very* funny. At any rate it was a risk I was willing to take. These people need me and in order to help them, I need to speak their language. Learning it the old-fashioned way was just going to take too long.” She frowned as he stood outside the coach looking around. “Aren’t you coming? I thought you couldn’t wait to get out of here.”

Desmond climbed in and thumped the roof to signal the driver. A few moments later, they were on their way back to the creature comforts of the Imperial City.

Chapter 25

Scarlet undressed and climbed into the shower, bone weary from the long day. As she let the warm water run over her body her thoughts turned to Desmond bedding down in her living room. She remembered the thick, hard muscles of his arms and chest and the sweet softness of his mouth on hers. His long, dark blonde hair was usually pulled back in a loose ponytail, and much like the AEs-syrians, he had a few temple braids to keep it out of his face. She hated that she was so attracted to him. It infuriated her that a man she wasn't even involved with could have such a powerful effect on her.

Leaning back against the tiles, she slid her hand down between her legs and touched her throbbing clit. A few soft strokes were all it took to bring her to a shuddering climax and she had to bite her lip not to cry out her pleasure. Taking a moment to collect herself, she emerged from the shower and draped a towel around herself. She walked into her bedroom and was aggravated to see him sitting on her bed.

"Get out," she said, glaring at him.

Desmond didn't reply. Instead he got up off the bed and advanced until he was only a few inches from her. He glanced back at her open bedroom door and looked back at her. *He knows I left it open to tease him. Smart boy.*

Scarlet squared her shoulders. She loved aggressive sex, and Desmond seemed to know that her nasty remarks were all a game to taunt him into a heated lovemaking session. "I said get out." He

leaned down to kiss her and she slapped him across the face. She tried to hit him again and he grabbed her hand in mid-swing. She violently yanked her hand away and he let her.

A smoldering anger moved across his eyes and he took a step back. He was just turning to leave when she dropped the towel. He stared at her with such raw passion she almost orgasmed right there. She smiled up at him and whispered, "I'm so hot for you, Desmond." Placing her hands on his shoulders, she stood up on her toes and moved her lips right up to his, stopping just short of kissing him. She exhaled and said, "Please fuck me."

Desmond snatched her face and kissed her like a wolf devours prey. His kisses were hard and dangerous, firing her lust like no man she'd ever known. She wrapped her arms around him and kissed him back with a scorching passion all her own. Pushing her back against the wall, he continued kissing her until she couldn't keep up with his fierce desire. Mauling kisses along her breasts, he unfastened his pants and dropped them to the floor. Bracing her against the wall, he lifted her legs and wrapped them around his hips.

Then he was inside her, pushing his huge cock into her pussy until she yelped from the hot mixture of pain and pleasure. She whined and squealed, luxuriating in the violent pounding of his hips until the orgasm came over her in a wave of ecstasy.

But Desmond wasn't finished with her yet. He took her all over the villa, ravishing her over and over again until all she could do was lay there and let him do as he pleased. When he was finally spent, he lay next to her breathing like a marathon swimmer and covered in a sexy sheen of sweat. Scarlet watched him as his chest rose and fell, feeling wonderfully used and sore.

"Desmond?" she whispered.

He licked his dry lips but kept his gaze at the ceiling. "What?" he managed between pants.

“When the morning comes,” she asked, “will you be gone?” It was an innocent enough question, one that she wouldn’t hold against him no matter how he answered it. She just wanted to know.

“No,” he said, rolling onto his side and pulling her back against his chest. “I’ve made a devil’s bargain so you’re stuck with me.” Then he closed his eyes and went to sleep with his face pressed between her shoulder blades.

Chapter 26

The next day Gypsy awoke a bit earlier than usual and made her way over to the military complex. She decided that she needed to stop by Captain Raith's office to thank him for helping her off the ledge. She wasn't sure exactly *how* he'd helped her off, but she knew that if he hadn't been there she'd be crippled, in a coma, or dead. In light of that, she couldn't go on with her day without stopping to by to express her gratitude.

His office was kind of strange to say the least. Unique paintings with murderous themes decorated his walls and his shelves had an array of sculptures and trinkets that looked ancient and definitely foreign. Gypsy was no expert on weird stuff but most of his junk looked occult to her. It kind of reminded her of some of the items she'd seen at her grandfather's castle.

The shape of his office was odd too. It was a long, narrow room situated on the first subterranean floor of the military complex. At the top of the wall behind his desk were long rectangular windows that only extended down about two feet from the ceiling. They were too high to see out of, but at least they let in some natural light. To add to the creepy museum-like ambiance, the walls were painted a dark green which gave the entire room a cavernous feeling.

As was the custom of most instructors, he had an open door policy which meant that he was available anytime he wasn't with someone else. Raith was just preparing for a class when she knocked on his open door and stepped inside.

He fastened the buckles on his satchel and looked up. His burnt orange eyes were a striking contrast to the rest of the room. "Come in, Cadet," he said.

Gypsy stepped forward and stood just inside the doorway. She felt a little foolish for climbing out on the ledge yesterday but there simply hadn't been any other way to get out of that room. "I just wanted to thank you for your help yesterday, sir."

"I'm glad I was there. Things might have been different if I hadn't been," he said sternly.

"Yes, sir. I know. It was a pretty stupid thing for me to do."

"I don't want to know, but do *you* know who jammed the lock on your door?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. I have no doubt."

"What are you planning to do about it?"

Gypsy frowned and let her gaze wander up toward the windows. She hadn't really given it a lot of thought yet. "I don't know. I'm still working on it."

Raith sat down, interlocked his fingers and grinned. "Don't wait too long. You need to address this, Gypsy. Make sure you don't let it go. If you do, these bullies will only escalate their pranks to get you to quit."

"What kind of retaliation do *you* suggest?" she ventured.

"Something aggressive and very public. Everyone watching should have no confusion about what is going on. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes sir, I think that gives me an idea," she said.

Chapter 27

Since the majority of class time was spent training with a specialty weapon, it was now held in one of the practice arenas. The twin suns had barely broken free of the horizon when Gypsy arrived. Kharon had just started dividing everyone up into practice groups of two. Because Gypsy was working with the meteor hammer she practiced alone, mainly because none of the other cadets knew how to engage it. Her daily, twenty-minute training sessions with Kharon were the only times she got to actually practice with another person, although she had conned Desmond into practicing with her once.

As soon as Kharon spotted her, he gestured to a corner of the arena where the swinging rubber ball was less likely to hit anyone. Even though her practice weapon wasn't lethal to an adult, the ball was made of hard, solid rubber and could still deliver a nasty blow if it connected with anyone. Kharon knew she was already skilled with the weapon and had quite a bit of control, so he simply gave her a few reminder instructions and moved across to the other end of the arena to help Boris with his flail.

Gypsy did her warm up exercises, scanning the floor to keep Nole in sight. Not only was Nole unattractive in so many ways, he was also one of the most uncoordinated warriors Gypsy had ever seen. After three weeks with the trident, he still didn't get it and whined constantly that the weapon—not his lack of skill—was to blame. As she practiced, she noticed that he avoided eye contact with her. The only exception was when he paused from screwing

around long enough to give her an evil glare. *That's right, Nole, keep looking this way because I've got something for you.*

As everyone practiced, Nole fumbled around lazily thrusting the trident in the air and sparring with his buddy Ortis. It was while Nole was joking and chatting with Ortis that Gypsy seized her chance. Swinging the hard grapefruit-sized ball high over her head, she took aim and waited. The next time he shot her another nasty look she let it fly.

Nole's response time was a second too late and the look on his face was priceless. His mouth gaped open like a fish and he started to step back, but the ball was too fast for him. It slammed into his forehead, right between his eyes, with a terrible clunk. Nole flew backwards landing hard on the black sand floor with an even louder thud. Everyone turned around to stare at Gypsy who was already in motion. Before Kharon could assess what had happened and react, she jogged forward and kicked Nole in the side as hard as she could. "How do you like me *now*, fuckhead?" she snarled and then spit on him. Nole held his bleeding head and curled up groaning.

Kharon's furious bellow echoed through the arena and Gypsy immediately fell to her knees with her head down. He was going to beat the snot out of her for this but it was well worth it.

Kharon stormed over and stood over her. He was so mad, he didn't even speak. Out of the corner of her eye, she spied Ortis and another cadet helping Nole over to one of the benches, still holding his head. It was bleeding quite a bit but he'd be okay. She resisted the urge to smile by biting her lip instead.

"What the *fuck* was that?" Kharon growled, his breath coming hard and fast.

Gypsy felt a guilty thrill. Kharon was unbearably sexy when he was angry. *Sooo bull male. Uh oh, I think he's making me hot.* Instead of lying to him, she said nothing. She was too good with the meteor hammer. No one would believe it wasn't done on purpose especially after she trotted over and planted her boot in Nole's rib cage.

"I don't think that was an accident," one of the cadets nearby said. He obviously thought Gypsy was guilty of *something*.

"Shut up!" Kharon barked, turning on the cadet. He turned back to the bench where Nole was sitting. The bleeding had slowed down. "How is he?"

Nole held up one of his hands, nodding as Ortis glared at Gypsy. "I think he's okay."

Kharon crouched by her. "Damn lucky for you," he rumbled.

Gypsy didn't look him in the eyes. She just kept her head bowed and her gaze down. Things were bad enough without provoking him. "I'm sorry, Excellency. The ball just got away from me."

"If you hope to pass this class, you'd better get control of your weapon, Cadet," he said. "Or I will fail you."

"Yes, Excellency. It won't happen again," she said.

"You'll stay after for punishment," he said to Gypsy. He turned to Ortis, "Even though Nole appears fine, take him to the medical clinic and have the doctor look at him."

"Yes, Excellency," Ortis said.

"The rest of you are dismissed," Kharon said, glaring at Gypsy.

Gypsy stayed where she was, a lusty hunger tightening her belly. When everyone was gone, Kharon leaned in close and said quietly, "What was that all about?"

She met his gaze. "It was a private matter. It's done now."

"You've forced my hand in this," he said, glancing up at the open doors. "The other students are watching me to see what I'm going to do. I have to punish you."

"I expect you to treat me as you would any other cadet," she said.

Kharon stood up and went to a storage area under the stairs. There he took out a small coiled whip and returned to her. She could feel his apprehension, and knew he was really uncomfortable with the prospect of whipping her. Unbuttoning his tunic, he

stripped it off his massive shoulders. A trickle of sweat ran down the side of his face and he wiped it away with the back of his fist. His sexual hunger was a force unto itself and she could feel it in every move he made. "Take your jacket off, Cadet," he said.

Gypsy partially sat up and unbuttoned her jacket slowly, popping out one button at a time. Peeling it off she let it fall to the sandy floor and put her head back down. She too had started to sweat along the small of her back. She heard the length of whip fall to the ground nearby, unraveled to strike. She clenched her jaw and braced herself.

Then the first blow came.

It bit into her shirt and the pain screamed through her senses but she knew Kharon was holding back. If he'd used the force he should have, each blow would have torn great strips into her shirt and the flesh beneath it. By the third blow Gypsy had to struggle not to cry. The pain was intense and she couldn't even fathom how much worse it would be if he used all of his strength.

After six blows, Kharon stopped and crouched down in front of her. She wished he hadn't, it was much too intimate a gesture for a cadet undergoing a punishment.

"Are you alright?" he said softly.

"Yes," she whispered, sitting up and forcing herself to her feet, her legs shaking slightly. "Are we done?"

"We're done," he said, coiling the whip and replacing it under the stairs. He seemed more disturbed by the beating than she did. "But I have a request of you."

"What's that?"

"I want you to consider visiting my kingdom during the upcoming break," he said.

"For business or pleasure?" she asked.

"A little bit of both. I've made no secret of trying to recruit you for my army. Why not come and see my kingdom for yourself? At least then you can make an informed decision."

“I’ll think about it,” she said, painfully pulling her jacket back on and gathering up her stuff.

Kharon’s eyes sparkled with evil intent. “You do that.”

Chapter 28

Gypsy was burning up and even though her season was over, her passion for Kharon raged as fierce as ever. She went to her second class tense and lusty when she ran into her buddy Makkai. He had just come out of the classroom with his notebooks under his arm.

“Why weren’t you at the weapons class this morning?” she inquired.

“General Kharon excused me so I could get some extra tutoring for the military theory final. Not my best subject, as you know.”

“So where are you going now?” Gypsy asked, painfully aware of some students in the hall staring at her. By now she was sure the whole Academy had heard about her beaming Nole.

“This class is cancelled,” Makkai said. “The bathrooms above are leaking through the floor. Maintenance suspects the seniors clogged the pipes as a prank. Hey, I heard you tried to kill Nole this morning. I *always* miss all the good stuff.”

“I did *not* try to kill Nole. I was just trying to get him to see things my way.”

“Oh,” he said with an exaggerated nod. “It didn’t have anything to do with your door getting jammed.”

Gypsy smiled. “Or the beating he gave me after the first weapons class. Of course not. That could be perceived as some kind of petty revenge. So what are you going to do?”

Makkai shrugged. "I'll just stop by the library and study. Want to come?"

"No, I have to go talk to Gavin about something," she said, knowing Makkai wouldn't want to come with her if she were going anywhere near her father. Being one of his trainees, Makkai knew that if Gavin thought a person had some free time, he would find them a shit job to do for him.

"I'll catch you later." Gypsy turned and took off down the hall, her panties growing wetter by the second. The simple thought of Kharon's huge dick pumping inside her made her so hot she almost broke into a run.

Taking the steps two at a time, she descended to the first floor and approached his office. To her delight, his door was open and he was inside alone. She walked in, closed the door behind her, and locked it.

Kharon looked up at her surprised. His pale blue eye cut right through her soul. "Don't you have class?" He sounded annoyed.

Gypsy dropped her bag and walked toward him. "Cancelled." She grinned. He stood up from behind his desk taking on that authoritative air that she found so erotic. "I thought your *season* was over with."

"It is," she whispered as she unbuttoned her jacket.

"This is too risky," he said angrily. "We could get caught."

But Gypsy wasn't listening. She walked to him and placed her hands on each side of his face, planting a demanding kiss on his mouth that completely shut him up. All she could think of was getting him inside her as swiftly as possible. With trembling fingers, she unbuttoned his tunic and pulled it off him. Then she stepped back to admire his body. He was nothing less than magnificent. Feverish for him, she stripped off her jacket and unbuttoned her shirt, leaving it on.

His torso was a daunting wall of muscles: huge pectorals, massive shoulders, and knotted abdominals. His face was dangerous

and savage, with flared nostrils, piercing mismatched eyes and a wide muscled jaw. He was the epitome of a warlord, big, deadly, and strong, and he made her hotter than hell.

She placed her hands on his chest and ran her palms down his body, tracing the thick abdominal scar Caraculla had left him with during the tournament. He leaned his head back and a deep moan escaped his chest. Frantic to have him, Gypsy raked her arm across the dark wood desk clearing it, and pushed him down on top. He lay on his back obediently as she clawed at his pants, finally freeing his enormous cock. She ran her hand down the shaft and was pleased at how hard he was.

By now, her pussy was throbbing and she was wetter than she could ever remember being. She stripped off her boots, pants, and panties, and climbed over him like a predatory cat. Then she eased herself on top of him, guiding his thick cock into her. At first there was a little resistance because of his size, but soon she was able to work her body down on him filling her pussy up. The pleasure that gripped her was so intense and unrelenting that Gypsy froze to savor it.

Kharon slid his hands up her back and hesitated when his fingers fell on the long angry welts that striped it. Pulling his hands out from under her shirt he instead ran his fingers into her hair, sitting up to maul hot kisses along her throat.

Gypsy ignored his affection. All she wanted was her climax.

Bracing herself, she lifted her hips up and down reveling in the ecstasy of the friction. Her clit grew very sensitive and fed her desire like fuel on a bonfire. Without warning, an explosive orgasm took her, ravaging her mind and sending her to new heights of bliss. She opened her mouth to cry out but he muffled it with a kiss. Gypsy grabbed his shoulders, digging her nails into his flesh as her pussy rippled along his cock, massaging the seed from him. Then, once she was completely spent, she lay on top of him, her knees bent on either side of his hips.

She relaxed for a moment, enjoying the warmth and scent of his skin, trying to understand the emotions swirling in her mind. Slowly, reluctantly, she climbed off him and picked up her panties. *I wonder if I can talk him into leaving early and going back to his villa?*

Kharon got off the desk covered in her scent and sulked. "We can't keep having sex in my office," he said, handing her clothes as she took her time getting dressed. "Someone is going to catch us. You make a lot of noise."

Gypsy squinted at him. "*Me?*" she scoffed. "I'm not the only one who makes a lot of noise." Something was wrong. Kharon seemed much more nervous than usual. She watched him pull his tunic on and then proceed to put the items that she had swiped to the floor back on his desk. *I wonder what his problem is?*

She finished dressing in tense silence and just as she fastened the last buckle on her boot, someone tried the door. Kharon quickly stalked across the room and unlocked it. A lovely AEssyrian woman entered dressed in expensive clothes. The amber color of her thick wavy hair reminded Gypsy of the whiskey that she now desperately needed. She gave Kharon a strange look and he stepped back from her. The woman's dark green eyes glided across the room and stopped on Gypsy.

The woman smiled but there was nothing warm in her expression. Gypsy wondered if this was going to turn into a wicked fight. "Who's this?" the woman asked, her voice a sheet of ice.

Kharon folded his arms, clearly uncomfortable. "Gypsy Theron," he said. Then he took a deep breath and let it out slowly. He stared at Gypsy and said, "Gypsy, this is one of my wives, Belinda."

Belinda's eyes fumed with hidden rage. "I've heard of you. The famous—or rather infamous—General Theron's daughter. How much like your father you are. It's such a pleasure to meet you, Gypsy."

The room suddenly became too small for all three of them. *Time to go, time to go.* "Nice meeting you too," Gypsy said coolly,

and hastily made her way out the door. Now would be an excellent time to go to the clinic and give her mother the sample that she needed.

* * * *

Gypsy walked away from Kharon's office knowing she had to get to the clinic so they could begin work on her shots. She just couldn't go through another painful *season* like the last one she'd had. She also couldn't live her life under Kharon's sexual spell twice a year. Although her mother had wanted her to go days ago, Gypsy had been putting it off. Doing this behind Kharon's back—even though it was necessary for her to function—seemed like betrayal. It was interesting that she felt such loyalty to a man she was only lovers with. But in her heart she knew that the sex between them ran much deeper than physical attraction. There was a bond there that would probably linger for the rest of their lives. *Just what I need, more complications in my life.*

She arrived at the clinic and bounded through the door. Doctor Krull was at the front desk writing in charts and she groaned inwardly. He was such a cold fish to her and she knew he didn't like her much. It wasn't personal; he just thought she was a spoiled brat. "Is my mom here?" she asked.

He stopped writing in the chart and tapped the end of his pen against it. "No."

"Do you know when she'll be back?" Gypsy looked around and leaned in closer to him. "I have to give her something. I have the sample," she said, gesturing to her lower abdomen. "You know, the *sample* so she can make my *shots*."

Krull stared at her for a full minute before responding. "Oh yes." He pointed at one of the exam rooms with the end of his pen. "Just go into exam room three and I'll be right with you."

Gypsy felt a moment of panic take hold. Krull was the last man in the universe she wanted digging in her pelvic region. "And my mom is..."

Krull fixed her with a cool stare. "Gone for the day with your father."

"Is Doctor Johnson here?"

"No. She has also gone for the day. She's with your brother. I was the only doctor here not spending the day with a member of the Theron family...at least until now."

Gypsy scowled. "That's just great."

"Is there a problem? I've never known you to be self-conscious around men."

She smiled and fidgeted. *Jerk*. "No...no...no problem," she said in a sing-song voice. "Exam room three you said?"

"That's right."

"Okay, super."

Krull flipped a page up and started writing on the next one. He didn't even glance up when he said, "You only need to undress from the waist down."

Gypsy frowned. "I guessed that." Just as Krull had said, Gypsy went into exam room three and stripped off her boots, pants, and panties. As she sat there waiting with a sheet over her hips, she thought this was probably the most humiliating experience of her whole life. She was half tempted to just leave. Not only was she going to be medically violated by Krull but she was still sweaty, slimy and covered in Kharon's scent. What she wouldn't give to be able to take a shower right now.

Then the dreaded knock came and Krull strolled in. He snapped some blue rubber gloves on and took a small glass bottle with a swab from the pocket of his lab coat. "Assume the position and relax," he said, standing between her legs. After about thirty seconds of discomfort, and a few unwanted comments on how generous an amount of specimen there was, he was finally done.

She sat up miserable. "So are we dating now?" she joked.

Krull held the glass bottle up to the light and she thought she saw him grin. "You'd have to add me to your roster of boyfriends."

Gypsy grinned, surprised he was showing his sense of humor. "I might be able to pencil you in."

"This is a good sample," he said pleased. "Your mother and I should be able to come up with something to ease the symptoms of your season in the future." Then he studied her. "Are you planning to have children some day?"

The question caught Gypsy completely by surprise. "Sure, I guess so."

"Well, you should be aware that you might have a very hard time conceiving with anyone but Kharon," he said.

Gypsy felt like he'd just punched her in the chest. "Because of this primal mating thing?"

"That's right."

"So what am I going to do?" she asked, feeling trapped.

"Why don't we wait and deal with that when the time comes?" he said, leaving her alone so she could dress. Gypsy put her clothes on, suddenly feeling like a ton of bricks was on her shoulders. Was it possible she might not be able to have kids with Caraculla? What the heck was she going to tell him? He had made no secret about how important a family was to him and she wondered if this would be too much for their relationship to take.

Chapter 29

That evening after practice Gypsy went to seek her father's advice about going to Kharon's kingdom. As she walked up the stone pathway toward the black double doors of the senior officers' complex, she looked up and could see the light emanating from her father's large office windows. She also noticed the reflection of several men in the angled glass of the open ones. *Great, he's not alone.*

Deciding to wait, she sat down on the wide front steps trying to organize the million thoughts that bombarded her mind. The most pressing one was that she had gone to see Kharon for sex and she hadn't even been in season. *Was it really just for sex or do I have feelings for the man?* By the Gods, she hoped not. Kharon was married to *three* women and she'd always known about them. It had been easy to forget in the heat of their relationship, but when one of them showed up, it made the problem painfully clear.

The second problem was that if she had feelings for Kharon, what would that do to her relationship with Caraculla? He'd been very open and understanding about her exploring her sexuality but she was sure he didn't want her to find someone else. Just thinking about Caraculla made her miss him so bad she stopped for a moment to regain control of her fragile emotions.

Caraculla was more than her lover and ex-husband, he was the foundation of her life. He was *home* to her in every way that word had meaning and she loved him so much it hurt. No male, not even

Kharon, could ever take his place in her heart. At least that was the one thing she *was* certain about.

Finally she decided she couldn't wait any more so she entered the building and climbed the large winding staircase to her father's office. His secretary had already left for the day and the front office was empty. She heard male voices laughing and talking beyond his closed door and she could smell the woody aroma of cigar smoke. She stood outside the door for a moment wondering if she should come back another time.

Hesitation always seemed to accompany her to Gavin's office although he had never chased her away. In the last two years, she had spent more time here and exchanged more words with him than she had in her entire life. *Anyway, this is important and can't wait.*

Gypsy knocked.

The door opened and she stepped inside not venturing in too far in case he told her to come back later. There were three flag officers with her father and everyone was drinking and smoking. The room was a literal gas chamber.

Gavin smiled at her with a cigar in his teeth. "Yes, dear, what is it?"

She glanced at the officers present. "I'd like to talk to you in private, please," she said, feeling awkward.

Gavin shrugged at his men who quickly downed their drinks and left, nodding to her as they passed by. When they were alone, Gypsy closed the door and sat down across from him. Before she could say anything, he spoke. "I understand you assaulted another cadet this morning. I can only assume he had it coming," he said. She nodded not speaking, not really wanting to talk about it.

"Show me your back," he said with mild interest.

Gypsy stood up and turned away from him. Reaching behind her head, she grabbed the loose fabric of her shirt and pulled it up

exposing the six raised, red marks on her back that were now outlined in purple. "Satisfied?" she said.

"Yes. That's interesting. I wondered what he would do if he was faced with punishing you. I'm surprised he had the guts to go through with it. You may sit." He tapped the end of his cigar on the edge of the black marble ashtray and leaned forward as she sat back down. "Now what is it that you want to talk about?"

There was only one way to say anything to her father, straight up. "Kharon has invited me to visit his kingdom over the break," she said.

"Business or pleasure?" Gavin asked, before tossing back his drink.

"He says it's both," she replied, getting up and pouring herself a drink from his minibar. She took her seat again and sipped the whiskey, enjoying its smooth smoky flavor. Her dad sure knew his liquor.

"Are you thinking about leaving me when you graduate?" Gavin asked.

"Not really," she replied truthfully.

"Then why go?"

Gypsy got up and paced, rolling her drink around in the glass. "Just to experience something new, go somewhere I've never been. I think it would be a neat experience."

Gavin puffed on his cigar sending great white clouds into the air above his head. "It would be a neat experience until he tries to keep you there."

"You really think he'd do that?"

"I know he would. That's what I would do if I had an intense connection like that with a woman. I'd want to keep and breed her. Especially if she was as sexually receptive as you apparently are," he said. "That is a rare thing indeed."

"So you're saying I shouldn't go."

"No," Gavin said. "What I'm saying is be prepared. Make sure this trip is business with maybe some pleasure thrown in. Insist upon your own room, especially if you're sleeping together while you're visiting. Get up every morning and practice, act like a professional soldier at all times. Always be aware that if you show him any weakness and allow him to dominate you, he will. You don't want him thinking that you're willing to give up your career to be his mistress. And believe me—he'll be looking for signs."

Gypsy frowned and returned to her seat. "What do I do if he *does* keep me there?"

Gavin riveted her with his golden eye. "Then you act as any prisoner of war would. You do everything in your power to compel him to let you go."

She finished her drink feeling more confused than ever. "You don't like General Kharon very much, do you?"

"On the contrary, I do. But I also know that he's a strong and able warrior and you are still very green to the savage ways of men. I know that you're strongly attracted to him, but always keep in mind that tomorrow he could be your enemy on the battlefield. I honestly hope that day never comes, but if it does, you need to be honest with yourself. If Kharon was at your mercy and I ordered you to put him to death, could you do it? Or would you fail and buckle under the strain of your love for him?"

Gypsy stared out the window as a hard lump formed in her throat. The images her father had placed in her head were horrible, almost unimaginable but brutally truthful. *What would I do? Could I kill Kharon in cold blood if I absolutely had to? I don't know... I honestly don't know.*

Chapter 30

The clinic was busy today and Scarlet was grateful. Any distraction was welcome if it took her mind off of Desmond. Over the past week, he'd consumed her thoughts by day and dominated her body at night. He was the most wonderful and aggressive lover, always eager to play and tease, but there was one thing about him that was very frustrating and that was he didn't speak much. *Perhaps that's a blessing. If you knew how indifferent he was about you, it would probably break your heart.* It was easy to see that he was only hanging around because of the sex—which had been exactly what she'd wanted—at first.

But no matter how many times she repeated it to herself, it was hard for her to believe that all they shared was sex. Despite his lack of conversation skills he was very physically affectionate. He never just orgasmed, rolled off her and went to sleep, like some of her previous "relationships". The sex usually ended with him wrapping his arms around her, kissing her and stroking her back or belly until she fell asleep. More often than not she awoke still in his arms. It confused the hell out of her because physically he was more affectionate than actual boyfriends she'd been with for years. To make matters worse, something happened last night while she lay curled up in his embrace listening to him breathe as he slept. He hadn't changed, nor had the sex. No—it was her—something inside her had changed.

Oh, she had fought it like a prize fighter, and reminded herself over and over again that *she* was the one who'd started this whole

affair, but it didn't make it hurt any less. Pausing to jot some notes down in a medical file, she watched him as he waited to escort her home. He was hanging around the waiting room, just as he usually did, with his big dusty boots propped up on the short table, the heel tearing into the cover of a magazine. She watched him as he casually talked and gestured to another soldier who'd gotten some stitches after a bar fight.

Desmond had probably said more to that soldier in five minutes than he'd spoken to her in days. Scarlet was starting to think he was bored and was just putting up with her because of the money. She needed to get to the bottom of this. So as they were riding home together that evening, she said, "Are you tired of guarding me?"

Desmond squinted at her and frowned. "No."

She twisted sideways in her saddle to face him. His one-word answers drove her insane. If she didn't continue this conversation, it would end at his simple "no". "The reason I ask is because you never talk to me. Oh sure we have lots of sex, but you've barely said ten words to me over the past few days."

"Are you unhappy?" he asked.

"Well, no."

"Then what's there to talk about?"

"You could ask me how my day went," she offered.

"I don't need to. I know how your day went. I was there for most of it, remember? Anyway, if you'd had a shitty day, you would have told me about it already."

Scarlet let out an irritated sigh. "The point I am trying to make is that if you're bored with guard duty and want out, I won't interfere. Okay?"

"Okay," he said, looking at her strangely. The look on her face must have broadcast her exasperation because then he said, "Do you want me out?"

"No, I don't want you out. I was just *saying* if *you* wanted out, I wouldn't stand in your way," she said.

"Oh," Desmond replied, giving her the same look that he did when he pretended not to understand her AEssyrian.

A few minutes of silence passed between them. Finally Scarlet couldn't stand it anymore. "Oh—what? What does that mean? Oh—I want out or, oh—isn't that interesting?"

"*What?*" Desmond asked, obviously caught off-guard. "I don't understand."

"We never resolved our last conversation. Are you staying or not?"

"Did you take your medication this morning?" he asked, the frown lines around his mouth deepening.

Scarlet stiffened. "I don't take any medication, Desmond, and you know it."

"Well maybe you should."

Scarlet reined up her hyperia who hissed at the rough treatment. "Desmond Theron, are you going to keep guarding me or not?"

"Yes," he said, perplexed by her attitude. "Do you need me to write it in blood?"

"Don't be silly. Of course not."

"Are you okay now?"

"Yes, but I don't understand why that answer was so hard to give me."

"It wasn't," he rumbled. "It's just that I had to say it three or four times."

"You did *not* have to say it that many times," she said through her teeth.

He spurred his mount onward and she followed. "Is this what you had in mind when you said you wanted us to talk more? Because frankly, this conversation sucks."

“Fine, then I would be perfectly happy if you would just go back to ignoring me.”

“Oh,” he said, grinning and then after a few seconds passed he said, “That’s oh—as in, okay, works for me.”

Scarlet glared at him not sharing his humor. “I would rather you stayed because you want to not because you’re father tripled your salary.”

“Oh that,” he said, rolling his eyes.

“Yes that,” she snapped.

Desmond sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. “My father is as big a liar as he is an asshole. I haven’t seen any sign of that pay raise and I probably never will. Does that make you feel better?”

“That’s the first thing you’ve said that has made me feel better,” she said, finally smiling.

Chapter 31

Gypsy rode along the narrow trail to Kharon's kingdom with the general in the lead. The scenery was breathtaking with enormous, green, jagged mountains that jutted up from each other's outlines, the taller ones having just a hint of snow on their ridges. Crisp, cool breezes invigorated her senses and she marveled at how different the terrain was from what she was used to. Even with the risk he might try and keep her there, she had decided to go and visit his kingdom anyway. At least for now she was glad she'd come.

And just as Gavin had suggested, she set up the ground rules in advance: her own room and the freedom to come and go as she pleased. She felt confident that when the time came to leave, she could handle Kharon. After all, he wasn't an unreasonable man and she had never led him to believe she wanted anything other than a military career.

Suddenly Kharon pulled up and waited for her to ride up alongside him. "Tired yet?" he asked.

"No," she replied, feeling insulted.

He laughed. "I was hoping you were because I need a break. I'm starving."

Gypsy smiled. Big males like Kharon were always hungry. It took a lot of meat to maintain all that muscle. "That looks like a good spot," she offered, gesturing to a small clearing.

Kharon rode up and dismounted with her close behind. Gathering a few sticks, he made a small fire and started boiling some water for a strong tea the soldiers enjoyed called *Baku*. Then he

took dried meat out of his saddlebag and offered her some. She politely declined and pulled out her own rations. It was hard to refuse his kindness but she had to. She knew Gavin was right in what he'd told her; she couldn't let Kharon feel that she was dependent on him for anything or he might get too possessive. Walking to the edge of the clearing, which sharply dropped off the side of the mountain, she took in the view.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" he said, stirring the contents of the small metal pot.

She nodded. "I can see why one would like living in this region, although it is a bit too chilly for my taste."

He leaned back against a large rock and watched her. "Are you really in love with Caraculla?" he asked.

"Yes, very much so."

"I'm jealous," he said. "I want you all to myself," he said.

"I don't get *you* all to myself," she said.

"No, but you could."

Gypsy let that comment hang. She chewed her meat slowly. "Are you in love with me?"

Kharon grabbed a small tin cup and poured some tea into it. He held it up to her in offering but she shook her head. Nestling back down, he said, "In as much as I know of these things, yes I am."

"And what of your three wives?" she asked.

Kharon put down his cup and leaned forward. His ice blue eye burned with pure ferocity. "They are good women but I would put them all aside if you would agree to become my bride."

A cauldron of emotions churned in her belly. She loved him, she wanted him, and a tiny part of her would love to be his wife, but not at the expense of her career or Caraculla. They were starting to venture into dangerous territory. "I don't see any point to marrying anyone. Marriage is for people who want to fill those tra-

ditional roles which, if you haven't figured out by now, I'm not interested in. There's nothing wrong with just being lovers."

"Don't you see we are more than just lovers? We are a mated pair, destined to be together. A marriage to me wouldn't be just any common union, it would be a joining of like powers."

"And what about Caraculla?" she asked.

"I would expect you to give him up, just as I would give up my wives," he said.

"I see. So I am expected to give up something I love and cherish deeply while you give up something that you, by your own admission, have never loved," she said flatly. "Not exactly a fair exchange."

"It's different for me," he said.

"Why, because you're a male?" she countered.

"No because I don't love anyone except for you. I can't help it if there is nothing for me to give up that means as much to me as you say Caraculla does to you."

"Oh you think not? Then here is a hypothetical counteroffer. I'll give up Caraculla if you resign your commission and return with me to the empire where I'm sure a high ranking military position would be made available to you. It would be a minor demotion, but we'd be able to be together."

Kharon was quiet for a long time. Then he finished his tea and dumped out the pot. He helped her up and held her hand a little longer than she was comfortable with. His pale blue eye bit deep into her soul. "Are you in love with *me*?" he asked.

Gypsy took a deep breath. "It's irrelevant," she said, shaking her head. "My emotional attachment to you makes no difference and is not going to change anything."

"I disagree. If you love me, why not be with me? You can finish your training here and assume a role in my army."

"First of all, I don't believe that when my training is done, you'll willingly send me into battle to get killed."

“That’s nonsense. Of course I’ll allow you to pursue your career. I *am* trying to recruit you, remember?”

“Pursuing a military career and actually going onto a battlefield are not always the same thing. Believe me I have no intention of forging my career from behind a desk. In fact, I don’t even know how much resistance I’m going to get from Caraculla when the time comes to *really* let me go to war. And speaking of Caraculla—just because I am not *mated* to him doesn’t make our feelings for each other any less real. I am not giving him up for you or anyone and nothing will make me hate you faster than if you try to interfere with us.”

“You can’t be in love with two men!” he said, raising his voice.

“Who says I can’t? I refuse to believe that there is a limit to how much love one person has to give. If you want to continue to be part of my life, you had better realize that you will never be the only one.”

The lines around his eyes deepened and he looked like he’d been struck in the face. Suddenly Gypsy was aware of how much she’d hurt him and it drove a bolt of pain into her heart. How she hated having to throw this in his face. But she felt confident Gavin was right about how to handle this. She couldn’t give Kharon any reason to fight to keep her here.

They packed up their gear in silence and mounted up. When Kharon spoke to her, the tenderness was gone from his tone. “We need to ride hard if we’re going to get there before nightfall. I’ll expect you to keep up.”

Then he was gone, galloping up the trail like his enemy was just around the next mountain. Gypsy felt rage boil up from her core and spurred her hyperia. Being less than half his weight she caught up to him quickly. Reaching over she grabbed one of the reins down by his mount’s mouth and jerked the animal to a stop. It growled, hissed and attempted to take a bite out of her. Letting

go she sat back and glared at him. He gripped the leather reins tightly trying to regain control of his now very pissed off hyperia.

“Are you insane? He could have bitten your arm off!”

“You listen to me,” she snarled through gritted teeth. “I’ll be damned if I’m going to spend a week at your kingdom and have you be an asshole to me the entire time. So you tell me now if I need to turn back and return to the Empire.”

Kharon sat for a moment brooding. His hard, masculine face set in angry concentration. Then his shoulders relaxed in surrender. “That won’t be necessary,” he rumbled and looked off. “This whole situation is very difficult for me and I’m having trouble coming to terms with it. Please don’t leave. Give me a chance to get used to this. I promise to make your visit enjoyable.”

Gypsy reached over and squeezed his wrist. “I do love you, Kharon, but my life always has been and always will be very complicated. When it comes to my wants and desires I am not going to play by anyone’s rules but my own. If we are going to continue, you need to at least try and accept these things about me. There are no traditional relationships in my future.”

Chapter 32

Kharon's home was a massive fortress at the top of a steep pointed mountain. It took them two hours to ride up to the draw-bridge and another good amount of time waiting for his men to lower it so they could go inside. Gypsy had to admit though, it was impressive. From the fortress' towering windows she could see the seemingly endless array of other mountain peaks that made up the landscape of this region. Interestingly enough, the royal palace where the king and his family lived was not adjacent. Instead it was situated in the capitol city of Myth Gate, only a few short miles to the north. Gypsy guessed that if the king was ever in danger, this would be where he'd come to keep safe while the war raged on around him.

As Gypsy followed Kharon through the fortress, she marveled at the amount of men and weapons he had here. Everywhere she looked there were small arenas where soldiers were practicing with different weapons. There were even shopkeepers, butchers, and tailors who'd set up small shops within the walls. The fortress was a virtual city unto itself. As she walked, she became aware of the many stares she was gathering and she didn't know whether to be flattered or afraid. She just settled on cautious indifference.

Once inside the main structure, she jogged to keep up with Kharon as he ascended several flights of an open stairwell to the internal balcony. She looked over the railing and saw the balcony encircled a large sitting area. Below that was a library and stone fireplace. They continued walking along the balcony, passing several

identical doors until they came to the one at the end. Pushing it open Kharon stepped inside and Gypsy followed. It was a modest room but very nice. There was a large open window with a mountainous view, shelving to store one's things, and a rather large bed with an oval, black, fur rug underneath it.

"Why don't you get settled? I've arranged for us to have a private dinner in my apartment which I think you'll enjoy, and later I have a surprise for you," he said.

"A surprise?" Gypsy asked. "What kind of surprise?"

"You'll see. I'll return shortly." Then he walked out, closing the door behind him and leaving her alone. Gypsy immediately went over and checked to make sure the door wasn't locked. To her great relief, when she turned the knob and pushed, it easily opened.

Being curious about her surroundings she decided just to leave it open. It was then that she realized how very little she knew about Kharon. If someone had asked her to predict his actions in any given scenario, she doubted she could with any keen accuracy. It would just be a guess. That unnerved her quite a bit. She made a mental note to try and get to know him better, just like her mom had suggested.

Gypsy turned toward the bed and tossed her saddlebag on top. Tiny hairs on the back of her neck stood up and she instinctively pulled her saber and whirled around. There, by her open door were three beautiful women. She recognized the one in the middle as Belinda, whom she had just met a few weeks ago. Gypsy could only assume her two companions were Kharon's other wives.

None of them looked happy to see her.

The one on the left was even holding a tiny little knife or possibly a letter opener. Gypsy didn't know or care, she just rolled her eyes and sheathed her weapon. *Oh please. What are you going to do, attack me?* "It's nice to see you again, Belinda. Why don't you introduce me to your, uh, *co-wives*."

Kharon certainly had good taste in women. All of them were strikingly beautiful and extremely different from one another. Although each of them was tall, they didn't quite reach Gypsy's almost six-foot frame and none of them had her lean muscular build.

Belinda spoke first. "I'm sure you can imagine why we're here."

"Have you come to welcome me?" Gypsy asked, wishing they'd all just get lost but unable to resist the urge to bait them.

The one with the knife stepped forward and Gypsy noticed that she had a perfect line of white tips coloring her hair. It must have been expensive and taken a long time to do. Assyrian hair was thick and resistant to artificial dyes. Like all of them, the one with the knife was the kind of woman who liked to look her best. "We want you to leave this place, Theron!" she said with a note of hysteria to her voice.

"Well," Gypsy said bored. "I'm not going to so if you don't mind..." She waved her hand at them in dismissal and started unpacking her bags.

The one with the knife moved closer. "Shameless whore!" she snarled and lunged forward holding the knife out awkwardly.

Gypsy moved forward and they all backed up, including the one with the knife. "Look, ladies, I know you're upset that I'm here and I sympathize, but this is something you need to take up with your *husband*, not me. Okay?"

The one with the knife found her courage again and rushed at Gypsy. Not only was she slow, she was uncoordinated and almost caught her heel on a gap in the stones. Recovering her footing, she stumbled forward and resumed her attack. When the wife was within a foot of her, Gypsy grabbed the wrist with the knife and flipped the woman. She landed so hard on her back even Gypsy winced. The other two women screamed as if Gypsy had gutted her.

"Relax," Gypsy said, relieving the woman of her weapon and helping her up. "She's fine. But you all need to get out now. I'm very tired. Perhaps you can all take me to dinner one evening and we can compare notes."

Her attacker glared at her. "Insolent bitch! It's easy for you to be casual when you have nothing to lose from this affair. Kharon is *our* legal husband and the father of *our* children. He's nothing to you but a good fuck! Why don't you leave him alone?"

"First off, you have nothing to fear from me. I don't need him as my provider and have no intention of usurping his matrimonial commitment to you. He's all yours. I'm only here for a short visit. Second, I also have no intention of giving him up because he *is* such a good fuck."

The partially opened door banged open and Kharon filled the doorway. He gave his wives a scathing look. "What the hell is all the screaming about?"

Gypsy sighed. "Nothing. We were just getting to know each other."

Belinda whirled on him. "What were you *thinking* bringing this *slut* here? Was it not bad enough that I practically walked in on you fucking her in your Academy office?"

Kharon grabbed her arm and spoke to her in a low, dangerous tone. "Gypsy is not a slut. She is my lover and my guest." He scanned all of them coolly. "She is no threat to any of you as she'll be returning to her homeland in the next few days. So go about your normal business and stay out of here."

"And if we don't?" The knife-wielding spouse seethed.

"Then I know some senior officers who'll be inheriting some fine-looking concubines very shortly. Have I made myself clear?" he said.

"Crystal," Belinda said.

And with that they all—finally—left her room.

Chapter 33

By the time early evening arrived she was well rested and starving. She had spent a good portion of the afternoon wandering the fortress and taking in the sights. But now she'd been back in her room for over two hours and was suspicious that it was taking Kharon so long to send for her. Usually he couldn't wait to eat and it was way past dinnertime. Finally, Gypsy called one of the servants in.

The skinny little male bowed in her doorway. "Yes, lady?"

"Where is General Kharon? He was supposed to come back here and get me for dinner. I'm about to pass out from hunger."

"I'm very sorry, lady," he said, bowing over and over again. She wanted to tell him to stop it already. "He'll be sending for you soon. He just had another guest to attend to."

"Okay, okay," she said, impatiently waving him out. After another ten minutes or so of pacing the room an escort appeared and led her to Kharon's private apartment. Gypsy came in dressed in her cadet's uniform. It was the nicest thing she had brought with her. A part of her wished she had a dress to wear but she simply didn't think to bring one. Besides, a dress would probably send the wrong message.

Kharon's apartment was huge and easily the size of a free-standing villa. The black stone floors were patched with enormous animal skin throw rugs and four ornately carved pillars were spaced evenly through the grand living area. She knew from questioning the servants that this was his private dwelling and his wives weren't

allowed here. They each had apartments of their own in another part of the fortress and didn't often venture out after dark.

To the right of the living area situated in front of several pairs of open glass doors was the dining room. From there the glass doors led out to a long stone balcony that wrapped around a corner of the fortress. The three moons illuminated the sky and for the first time since coming here she finally had some directional bearings.

Kharon had set up a wonderful table in the center of the dining room with two full platters of exotic meats and three bottles of wine. Everything rested on a regal-looking purple tablecloth with stitched golden designs. Kharon was dressed in a long dark blue robe loosely tied at the waist. He was obviously naked underneath and looked like he was just about to attend an orgy. Gypsy gestured to the table. "That's an awful lot of food for just the two of us."

Kharon sipped his wine from a silver goblet and moved up to her. "Who says it's just going to be the two of us?" he said, grinning.

Gypsy was suddenly very uncomfortable. "Look," she said in her most no-nonsense tone. "I don't know what you have planned, but I'm not going to go to bed with you and your wives."

Kharon laughed. It was a hardy, rich sound. "Don't worry. Nothing like that." He stroked her cheek and gently kissed her. "I do want you to change though," he said.

"Into what?"

Kharon held up a sheer red robe. It was almost pointless to wear the thing because it was completely see-through. "Into this."

"Why?"

"Because it's part of your surprise. Please don't ruin it by being difficult," he said amused.

Annoyed but curious, she stripped in front of him and put on the robe. It was surprisingly soft to the touch and it made her feel sexy for the first time in a long time. She placed her folded clothes

on one of the empty chairs and turned back to face him. "Now what?" she asked, folding her arms.

Kharon unfolded her arms and pulled her into an embrace. "Now I show you how much I *do* love you," he said. Leaning down, he pulled her body in close to his and gave her a deep, hungry kiss. There was so much raw emotion in it Gypsy was afraid Kharon was planning something drastic. Then he broke the kiss and let her go. Tossing his head back he let out two ferocious roars, one right after the other.

The reply made Gypsy's mouth drop open in shock.

From somewhere close in the apartment, a Razorback's chilling screech sounded its reply. She knew that voice anywhere.

Caraculla.

Caraculla rounded the corner dressed in only his pants and boots. His hair was wet, indicating that he'd just had enough time to wash the dirt off from the trail. He was as achingly handsome as she remembered, with long auburn hair streaked with bright red locks at the temples, a long muscular body, and those perfect high cheekbones. His reptilian green eyes sparkled with carnal delight as he approached her. *He's aging well and definitely gotten bigger.*

Gypsy threw herself into his arms, wrapping her legs around his waist and kissing him with all the passion in her soul. He ran his hands up the sheer fabric covering her back and hugged her tight. He slowly let her down and she took a step back from him unable to believe her eyes. A cool breeze blew in from the open doors plastering the robe to her body. She turned to Kharon. "You did this for me?"

"Yes, Gypsy," he said. "I did."

Caraculla squeezed her and kissed her on the forehead. "I received a message this morning saying he had a surprise; I never thought it would be you."

Kharon slapped Caraculla on the back affectionately. "Why don't we save the talk for later? You two will have some time to

catch up before you have to go back to the field. All of us are hungry; let's eat and see where the evening takes us."

Chapter 34

Kharon had known many women in his time but Gypsy The-ron was definitely unique. Not only was she breathtakingly beautiful, but she had a sexual hunger to rival even the most seasoned warrior. Watching Caraculla make love to her was a rare treat and, even though he was still slightly jealous, he found himself more delighted and aroused than envious. The lieutenant general knew every secret the young woman had and within minutes of taking her into his arms she was moaning and withering against him in a delirium of need.

Her relationship with Caraculla was not quite what Kharon had expected either, although if one had asked him, he couldn't have defined what it was he had anticipated. They didn't stare longingly at each other, nor did they gush about how in love they were. They reminded him of best friends and playmates with the way they had teased and insulted each other during dinner.

But there was no denying their sexual chemistry. It filled the room with the intense heat of an explosion and she was radiant around him. Kharon had to admit, Gypsy had bewitched him. He would have agreed to anything she wanted to make her happy, even if that meant sharing her with another male.

Kharon sank into a plush chair and watched as Caraculla ran his forked tongue over her generous breasts. She twisted her fingers into his hair, lost in her emotion, not knowing or caring who was watching her as she took her pleasure. As the scene unfolded Kharon realized that a woman like this—one who wanted a mili-

tary career so much she had risked everything for it—wasn't the kind of woman a man would marry and keep safe at home. In fact, the very things that confused him the most about her were the same things that turned him on.

Gypsy was *different* in every sense of the word and she was *never* going to be anyone's kept woman. Certainly she would never allow herself to be any male's exclusive property. That was a hard truth but when he reflected on it further, he knew he would probably be disappointed if she *did* want that life. The woman he was in love with—the one who defied every definition of what a “good woman” was—that was the one he wanted, the one he would one day ride into battle with. That truth was also a difficult one to reconcile in the face of all he'd been taught and believed to be true about men and women. But it was the truth of who she was, and if he wanted a future with her, he would have to accept it.

Caraculla was teasing the tender flesh of her pussy with his lips and tongue and Kharon's erection grew so hard he feared he might orgasm just from watching them. He squeezed the base of his penis and leaned his head back as a rush of blinding pleasure surged through his dick and balls. When the pressure had eased off, he got up and approached them.

He moved slowly so as not to arouse aggression in Caraculla and took his place at the front of the bed. Gypsy's body was covered in a light sheen of sweat and her arousal was the most intoxicating scent he'd ever known. Gliding his hands down her breasts and belly, he slid his hands over the thick muscles of her thighs and carefully lifted them. The action opened her pussy up and would allow Caraculla to enter her very deeply. Gypsy slid her hand behind Kharon's neck and pulled him down into a sensuous kiss as her other hand found his massive cock and stroked it.

Caraculla rose from between her legs licking his lips, his metallic green eyes flashed savage desire. Grabbing his cock, he teased her for a moment, and then pushed himself inside her until the only

part of him visible was the root of his cock. Gypsy let out a loud cry of delight. Kharon held her open enjoying the ripple of her breasts as Caraculla's thrusts became more frenzied. Gypsy's orgasmic cries filled the room as Caraculla pounded out the last of his lust into her.

Then it was Kharon's turn.

He waited until Caraculla had moved away and slowly got into position between her legs. Gypsy was feverish with hunger and it was all Kharon could do not to pounce on her and take her in a heated rush. Caraculla took Kharon's old position at the top of the bed, massaging Gypsy's breasts and teasing her nipples until they were bright pink and erect. Kharon entered her and she immediately wrapped her legs around his hips.

The pleasure that raced through him was the purest delight he'd ever experienced and it was a testament to how strongly he felt about her. Without warning, her vaginal muscles clamped down on him and he felt her flutter in orgasm. It milked him into incomparable bliss.

As the night wore on, he and Caraculla took her over and over again in a heated orgy of sex and love. Kharon had never experienced anything like it and was surprised at how much he'd enjoyed it. The only time they stopped having sex was to gorge themselves at the banquet table. Then they all fell asleep in Kharon's bed with Gypsy sandwiched between the two men.

Kharon was astounded he couldn't care less that he was sharing a bed with his lover and her *boyfriend*. Tolerating another male so close was a big step for him. After the devastating rapes he'd endured as a slave so long ago, he'd sworn no male would ever get anywhere near him during sex. But tonight, he'd shared his most cherished lover with another male and hadn't felt the least bit threatened. It felt like...winning his freedom all over again. *By the Gods, how much weirder is my life going to get with this crazy woman?*

Chapter 35

Gypsy woke up tired and sore but incredibly recharged. Groaning, she covered her eyes until she could finally face the sunlight streaming in through the huge windows. She glanced around, taking in the shadows, and guessed that it was probably early afternoon. She was famished and hoped the boys hadn't eaten all of the food while she slept. Rolling onto her back, she looked over and saw Caraculla still sleeping next to her in Kharon's enormous bed. Kharon, however, had already gone to work for the day.

Gypsy grinned as a happy thrill filled her heart. She reveled in the combined scents of both lovers on her skin. Last night had been one of the most wonderful nights of her life. Having two men at once definitely had its advantages. Smiling, she climbed on top of Caraculla and sat on his stomach. He groaned and woke up, blinking several times to adjust to the daylight. He was so tired his inner lids were still partially closed.

"I've been waiting for hours for you to wake up," she teased.

"Bullshit," he croaked. Sitting up he grabbed a tankard of water off the bedside table and gulped it down in one long swallow. Then he squeezed her and gave her a warm kiss. He rolled sideways making her fall onto the soft blankets next to them and turned over onto his belly. "I missed you so much."

"Likewise," she said, putting off eating for a few more minutes of cuddle time.

"Kharon must really love you because he's never shared a woman with me before. In fact I don't think he's shared a woman

with any man," he said. "The whole thing is kind of weird. I don't know whether to be insanely jealous or happy for you."

"I never thought of you as the jealous type," she said.

He laughed and it was the sweetest music she'd heard in months. "I guess I'm not. Maybe it's a good thing that I have someone to share the rigorous duty of keeping you sexually satisfied. How did you two ever end up together anyway? After last year's match, I thought you hated him."

"I did and then he completely screwed up my life."

"How'd he manage that?" he said, caressing her hip with circular strokes.

"That bastard managed to bring me into season. It almost cost me my career. Thankfully my mom is developing some shots for me to take during that time so I won't be forced to seek him out. Believe me, my life has been pretty bizarre since you left."

Caraculla's look was intense as it burned into her eyes. "That is strange. Anyway, he must really have some incredibly strong feelings in order to tolerate sharing you," he said. His tone was strained and held a subtle emotional distance.

Gypsy rolled a lock of Caraculla's hair around her index finger as he rested his head on her breasts. She knew from her father's conversations with other officers that very few prostitutes visited the military camps out in the field because of the dangers. Not only did they have to watch out for the enemy, they also had to watch out for predatory animals, slavers, and robbers. Most working women preferred the lower paying safety of the city brothels, but for those bold enough to venture out, the rewards were enormous.

It was interesting that Kharon was apprehensive of such orgies since it was common practice for warriors to share women while on campaign. Officers often shared one or two women among them while the other prostitutes would entertain the rest of the men. Because they were the only lay for miles, the women charged a hefty price for their amorous encounters. Whores bold enough to

engage in these kind of traveling mercy missions made enough money to retire in just a few short years.

"That's odd about Kharon," she said. "He hardly seems like the squeamish type."

Caraculla sat up and glanced around the room. "Is he still here?"

"No," she said. "He's gone, probably to work."

"Good," Caraculla said, getting up. "Let's go finish off all the food."

Gypsy giggled and jumped up with him. They padded across the cool stone floor to the banquet table, pulled up some chairs and started gorging themselves. The food was so good to her hungry stomach. Gypsy thought it might have been prepared by the Gods themselves.

"Getting back to Kharon," Caraculla said between big mouthfuls, "I understand from the rumor mill that he endured a lot of hardship as a slave. It's not uncommon for rich nobles to force their slaves to endure all kinds of depravities, so it's probably not a big surprise that Kharon doesn't like being around other naked males."

Gypsy tilted her head slightly and squinted at him as she bit into another mouthful of meat. Then her eyes widened and she stopped chewing, finally getting what Caraculla was saying. "You mean he was *raped* by other men?"

Caraculla frowned at her and gave her a stern look. "Keep your voice down," he scolded. "But yes, I'm sure he was raped by other men."

The thought was a shock. Kharon was such a big, aggressive male that she couldn't imagine anyone forcing him to do anything against his will. But then she recalled that he'd been a slave in his early life and wouldn't have grown to his full size until he was around three or four hundred years old. Suddenly his question about her rape when she'd first met him took on a whole new meaning and she felt even more connected to him.

"There's something I need to talk to you about," Caraculla said, pulling her from her thoughts. Gypsy felt her stomach drop. She didn't like the serious mood he'd suddenly adopted so she covered her ears and said, "No. No. No. Damn you. I hate that tone in your voice. You're going to say something that I'm not going to like and it's going to ruin my day."

Caraculla sat quietly waiting for her dramatics to end. "Okay," she said, finally removing her hands from her ears and picking up a mug of water. "What is it?"

Caraculla leaned back in his chair and picked some meat from his teeth with his thumbnail. "I've been seeing a woman in the Razorback Queendom. It's nothing serious but we are sleeping together and we are good friends."

A stabbing pain shot through her gut but Gypsy forced herself to stay calm. *He knows I don't care about him sleeping with other women, but if he's going through the trouble of mentioning one of them, this is not going to make me happy.* "Okay, so what?" she said trying to keep her tone neutral.

"Well," Caraculla said shifting uncomfortably. "She wants me to give her a baby."

Gypsy was stunned. Of course a part of her understood his desire for a family. He'd been clear about that from the beginning but she'd always assumed that it would be with her. But the truth was that she wasn't ready for that kind of responsibility in her life. She was still building a career and having a child now would jeopardize everything she'd worked so hard for. "So have a baby with her," she said, instantly regretting the snotty way her voice had sounded. She hadn't meant it to come out that way, but she was well on her way to losing her grip on her emotions and anger was quickly starting to build within her.

"You're mad," he said flatly.

"Of course I'm mad, you son of a bitch!" she yelled and slammed the mug of water down on the table spilling half of it.

"Why shouldn't I be mad? You want to run off and start a family with someone who's not me," she snarled, roughly pushing her chair back from the table and getting up.

Walking over to one of the open glass doors she looked outside at the mountains, keeping her back to him. Then she took a deep breath. It wasn't fair of her to be upset. She and Caraculla were simply at different points in their lives. She completely understood his desire to build a family. She turned back to face him. "I'm sorry. This just took me by surprise. It's not fair of me to demand that you put your desires on hold while I pursue mine. Face it. I'm just a spoiled brat at heart and I want everything to be my way."

"I won't do it if you find it too upsetting," he said.

She looked into his eyes and knew he meant it.

"No, I want you to be happy. Do what your heart tells you. I'll be fine. It won't change my feelings toward you."

Caraculla got up, pulled her into his arms and kissed her. It was sweet agony and she wondered if choosing her career wasn't the biggest mistake of her life. "I love you, Gypsy," he said.

Gypsy fought the tears that threatened to break, and she swallowed her pain. She ran her fingers into his thick, dark hair and reveled in his warm affection. "I love you too, Caraculla, more than you will ever know."

Chapter 36

After Caraculla returned to the field that evening, Kharon had Gypsy accompany him on a routine night patrol to the capitol city of Myth Gate. It was exhilarating to be out with a squad of soldiers despite the strange glances she attracted from them. But once they had gotten over their initial discomfort with her, they began pelting her with all kinds of questions. They asked her about the Empire and her feelings about being the first female warrior there. Gypsy couldn't remember being so happy and feeling so accepted amidst a bunch of men. She almost regretted the loyalty she owed Gavin. Kharon, for his part, was quite the skilled recruiter and it was hard not to want to join this kingdom after she graduated.

The next morning Gypsy awoke to Kharon's soft kisses meandering along her jawline. The darkness that hid the mountain scenery told her that it was pretty damn early, although he was already dressed except for his unbuttoned tunic. "What are we going to do today?" she asked as she stroked his bare chest.

"I have a meeting this morning that, as I'm sure you understand, you are not able to attend. Captain Bryson will be here in an hour to pick you up and take you for some sparring practice in one of the arenas. You still have finals to pass and I don't want you out of practice."

Gypsy stretched her arms over her head yawning. "I suppose I'm practicing alone."

"Not at all. Most of my men are well versed at using and defending against exotic weapons. The captain is particularly good at

fending off the meteor hammer so it will be good practice for you. When I'm through, I'll get you for lunch, then I would very much like it if you would come along with me while I performed my daily duties. I know it doesn't sound particularly exciting, but I think you'll find it interesting. How does that sound?" he said as he finished dressing.

Climbing to her feet, Gypsy walked across the soft bed and stood in front of him looking down into his mismatched eyes. From up here she was almost a foot taller than him. Leaning down she lightly kissed his lips, tasting traces of sweet meats and breakfast tea. Smiling lazily, she said, "I can't think of anything I would rather do."

Over the next few days she would wake up, eat, dress and follow her escort, usually Captain Bryson, to the arena for several hours of practice. The experience she gained from sparring with different men utilizing different types of weapons was priceless. *I'm actually starting to look like I know what I'm doing.*

Kharon was very close to his men and more often than not they would eat their meals with some of them. She didn't mind because she got to spend plenty of time alone with him. And that was how the rest of her visit went. She shadowed Kharon at work during the day and shared his bed at night. *So much for having my own room to assert my independence.*

Following him around while he performed his duties mesmerized her and she was grateful that he'd given her the opportunity to watch him. She was also getting to know him better now that the interference of her *season* had passed. Of course the more she got to know him the deeper her feelings ran. As her mother had said, in many ways he was very much like Gavin, but Kharon's demons didn't control his life and he had an underlying serenity to his personality that she adored and even envied.

As they ate their last dinner alone together the night before they were scheduled to return to the Empire, she couldn't help but

feel a sense of loss. "You kept your promise." She smiled. "I really enjoyed myself and am a little sad to leave."

"You know you don't have to leave," he said.

"Yes I *do* have to leave."

"Despite my personal feelings for you, this is an attempt at recruitment. I think very highly of you, Gypsy. I know whatever kingdom is lucky enough to snag you will have a cunning officer and a force to be reckoned with," he said soberly as he poured himself some wine.

Gypsy felt her ears turn red and was really uncomfortable with such a generous compliment.

"I've still got a long way to go."

Kharon reached across the table and squeezed her shoulder. "There is no doubt in my mind that your successes will be legendary."

Gypsy laughed out loud. "Boy you *really are* good."

He joined her laughter and sat back in his chair watching her. "There is something I would like to give you if you would honor me by accepting it."

"I'm not sure that I should," she said, looking down as she pushed her meat strips around with her fork.

"It has nothing to do with my recruitment tactics. Just consider it a gift from one warrior to another." With that he took out a large leather bag pulled closed at the top by a silver box chain and handed it across the table to her. It was much heavier than she was expecting and she almost dropped it. Setting the bag in her lap, she then loosened the chain and reached inside. Her fingers fell on a long length of coiled chain and what felt like a chunk of metal. She grabbed a hold of the contents and pulled out a brand new meteor hammer...a real one. Holding up the solid steel ball she noticed some writing engraved around the circumference. It read:

May your steel always find its mark.

“This is amazing,” she said, running her fingertips over the cool spiked metal. “I don’t know what to say.”

Kharon grinned. “There’s no need to say anything, just don’t launch that one at any of the other cadets.”

Chapter 37

It had been a long grueling day and Harlan was glad it was over. Gavin had wanted her to stop these routine visits to the poor outlying villages but Harlan had stuck to her guns. These people needed proper medical care just like the residents of the cities. She knew it could be dangerous but she always traveled with guards and made sure to keep her visits short. Passing her posted guard as she entered her tent, she said, "Sergeant Graynt, please make sure everything is ready to go in the morning. You remember what happened last time we got back late."

The soldier laughed and gave an exaggerated shudder. "Yes, ma'am, I have no intention of angering the general again. We'll be ready."

Her tent was simple but comfortable. It consisted of a folding cot and a small rickety desk and that was all. She lay down on the cot with her feet aching from running around all day and closed her eyes. Before drifting off Harlan thought about Gypsy and hoped her visit to Kharon's kingdom went well...but not too well. She would be heartbroken if Gypsy moved so far away, not to mention having to listen to Gavin rage on about it if she did. She worried a lot about her daughter who had so much on her plate and so many important decisions to make. It didn't help that she had inherited some of her father's less savory personality traits.

But Gypsy was young, smart and emotionally had grown decades in just the past few years. Harlan was very proud of her daughter and knew that even though he didn't always express it, Gavin

was too. He had even confided to her that he was worried Gypsy would leave him when she graduated, especially now that she had Kharon pursuing her professionally as well as personally. Word would spread and by the time she was ready to graduate, she would probably have additional offers thrown her way by other kingdoms.

Harlan knew Gavin wasn't sure yet how he felt about it. He knew he would be irate if she left and even went as far as to say that he would probably feel a bit betrayed. But he acknowledged that she was an adult and had to choose her own path in life.

Blissful sleep was taking her.

Harlan was just starting to fall off the edge of consciousness when she was startled by a commotion outside. It sounded like a battle and Harlan was immediately filled with an icy terror. Reaching under her bed, she grabbed the strongbox that she kept her gun in and sat up. She had just opened it when someone knocked it out of her hand from behind. A blade touched her cheek in a sinister caress.

Harlan slowly turned around with her heart in her throat. There before her was an Assyrian man with three deep scars across his face. All three looked like they'd been made by the same weapon because of how close and evenly spaced they were. One ran from his forehead diagonally to his jaw, another followed the same path but was a little lower, and the last was the shortest. The man was young and looked from his dress to be a local thug.

"You the doctor?" he said in a gravelly voice.

"Yes," she replied. "What do you want?"

He smiled evilly. "You'll see, sweetheart. You'll see."

* * * *

Gypsy rode alongside Kharon silently submerged in her thoughts as they made their way back to the Empire. Since she had been busy and eager to learn new things, her last conversation with Caraculla had been pushed to the back of her mind. But now as they rode in tired silence, her brain graciously charted a hundred

scenarios. Normally she loved gossiping about the different warriors while on a long ride but today she just couldn't think of a thing to say. All she could do was obsess about Caraculla wanting to have a child with someone other than her. She hated that it bothered her so much, but she just couldn't help how hurt she was.

"I hope you don't regret what happened the other night," Kharon said, interrupting the rhythmic monotony of the hyperias' footsteps.

It took her a moment to realize he was referring to their threesome. She almost laughed out loud. "No that was an incredible experience. I would love to do it again sometime. I'm just aggravated about something else."

"You could tell me what's bothering you."

"No. It would be pretty crummy of me to complain to you about my problems with the other man in my life. Don't you think?" she said, forcing a short smile.

"What did Caraculla say?" he asked.

Gypsy sighed and fought down the pain that threatened to break into tears. "He wants to have a child with some woman in the Razorback Queendom."

Kharon grunted and fell into a tense silence.

Gypsy coughed out a bitter laugh. "You agree with him," she said angrily.

He gave her a sober look. "No," he said. "I understand him. He knows it could be centuries before you're ready to have children of your own. You still have a long, hard career to build."

"I know," she said miserably. "But I can't help but feel betrayed. I always thought I would be the one to give him a family, but now..."

"And where do I figure into to all of this?"

"It's different for you. You have *three* families and lots of kids. Do you really feel this pressing need to have more children with me?"

"No," he conceded.

"I'm sorry. I don't mean to be snippy. I just hate being this upset about it. Logically I agree with what you're saying but I can't seem to rein in my anger. The more I think about it the more pissed off I get.

"For most of my life, I've been able to do what I want and not give a crap about what anybody thought. Now with everything I do, it seems like I always have to worry that I'm hurting someone I love," she said, shaking her head. "And, in addition to my mother, I have to consider the two of you."

Kharon grinned in understanding and reaching over, stroked her cheek with the back of his black gloved hand. "I understand you have had to make a lot of sacrifices as well. But Caraculla is much older than you and he's anxious to move on with his life. He knows what lies ahead for you and he could end up waiting for a very long time, only to have you fall in battle or lose interest in him. Not to mention that now he has to contend with me as a rival."

Gypsy nodded grimly.

Kharon pushed a low lying branch out of his way. "But he didn't put an end to your relationship with him, did he?"

"No," Gypsy said. "He even told me that if it were too upsetting for me that he wouldn't do it."

"Interesting," he said with a slight grin.

"Why? What's so interesting?"

"I think he could be testing you. Applying a little pressure to see what you'll do if faced with losing him. So what did you say when he proposed to have this child with another woman?"

Gypsy shrugged. "I was mad but I told him to do what makes him happy."

"Now the next move is his," Kharon said.

"So what do you think he'll do?"

Kharon laughed. "I think he'll do exactly nothing. I think he's bluffing. There probably *is* no other woman."

Gypsy digested this for a moment. *Could Kharon be right? Caraculla has been very busy recently following Gavin's orders. When would he have had time to get to the Queendom? Is Caraculla bluffing?* She sure hoped so, even if it was for her own selfish reasons.

Chapter 38

The moment Gypsy rode onto the military compound, she knew something was wrong. Soldiers were talking in hushed groups while others rushed around gathering supplies. There was an explosive tension in the air and it felt like there was a huge fire-storm coming and no one would be able to get out alive. She and Kharon had parted company when they passed the Academy quarters so she entered the barn alone. The first thing she noticed was a tie line of strange hyperia in the attached paddock. All were fully geared up and being fed and watered by several men she didn't recognize. *Mercenaries I think*. No sooner had she dismounted when she was immediately accosted by Makkai.

"Where the hell have you *been*?" he asked, looking frazzled.

"I was visiting Kharon's kingdom," she said, defensive at his accusatory tone. "Why? What's going on?"

"Your father is coming unglued. He's been looking for you everywhere. He just got out of a meeting with the emperor and I think he's still in his office talking to Caraculla. You'd better get your ass up there or he's going to eat you alive."

* * * *

For one of the first times she could remember Gavin's office wasn't filled with cigar smoke. That small thing in itself filled her with dread. Both Gavin and Caraculla stared at her strangely as if she'd just appeared out of the floor. The mere fact that Caraculla was here at all just tied her stomach in knots, since he was supposed to be on campaign.

From the look on her father's face, she knew something was very wrong. He looked like he hadn't slept all night. His rugged face was worn with deeper lines than she remembered. His movements were quick and tense, like a tightly coiled snake ready to strike. Next to his desk was the equipment that he normally took on campaign minus his black battle armor. Instead he had some battered, dark gray armor he used in the practice arena, still good stuff but not as flashy. *Why isn't he wearing his uniform?*

Gypsy decided to play this by the book. She stood at attention and said, "You were looking for me, Excellency?"

Gavin nodded to Caraculla who left the room. "Yes. You have twenty minutes to pack your gear and be ready to march. You're mother is a day overdue to report back to the clinic from her trip to Sanguar and two messengers sent to contact her have now gone missing. Something has happened and we're riding out there immediately."

"Yes, Excellency," Gypsy said, deciding to try and get more information later. She was sure her mother was fine; Gavin was probably just overreacting. She turned to leave.

"Oh, Gypsy," he said as an afterthought. "Grand Duchess Tannyth Von Goth purchased some new armor and other equipment for you in honor of your passing finals for the year. Everything is at Caraculla's villa so make sure to take what you need. You can thank her later."

"But I haven't passed my finals yet," she said, confused.

"Your instructors have assured me that you've done well. They've passed you in your absence given the circumstances," Gavin said, waving her out.

Gypsy left now suddenly alarmed. It never occurred to her that her mother might ever *actually* be in danger. She always seemed so strong and together. *No one* messed with General Gavin Theron's wife. Gypsy never believed anyone would dare, besides all her mother ever did was help people, she didn't even have any

enemies. But it was true that her father had a lot of them. Could someone have actually done something to her mother to retaliate against him? Gipped by her mounting terror, Gypsy spurred her mount faster. If her mother was in danger, her life would depend on them getting to her as quickly as possible.

She just hoped and prayed they weren't already too late.

* * * *

Scarlet hadn't been in the clinic five minutes when Doctor Krull walked up and handed her a huge green case that contained several rows of glass vials. She took it awkwardly and peered down at the labels. "What the hell is all this for?" she asked, frowning.

"You've been ordered on your first campaign. General Theron has a chronic back condition and requires occasional pain management. An extensive trauma kit has already been included with the general supplies. *This* supply," he said, tapping the case, "is specifically for the general."

Scarlet stared back down at the case. There were enough narcotics here to kill a herd of buffalo. "Where's Harlan?"

"She's been missing since yesterday afternoon. That's your campaign. Accompany the general and his men to find our missing chief of staff. Assist the general with his medical problem and treat any injuries that will undoubtedly occur among the men."

Scarlet didn't even like camping for fun and now she was going into the *A*Essyrian wilderness for who knows how long. *Great*. "For how long?"

Krull grinned but it gave her no comfort. "Until you find her or die trying." Then as an afterthought, he said, "Don't worry, Master Sergeant Theron will be accompanying you and I suggest you do exactly as he says. The general is not the kind of man who takes disappointment gracefully."

Chapter 39

On approach, Caraculla's villa looked deserted but Gypsy knew it wasn't. Although this was still her home away from the Academy and she still felt very welcome here, she was planning to apply for her own quarters once she graduated. It wasn't that she didn't love living with Caraculla but she needed to become more independent so there wouldn't be any misunderstandings later. That would be an argument for another day.

She put her hyperia in the barn and gave it plenty of rations. Her heart was beating so fast she thought it was going to burst out of her chest at any minute. She had to get back fast to help Gavin find her mother and she just *knew* Caraculla was going to try and talk her out of it.

She walked in and immediately headed over to the pile of armor and other equipment the grand duchess had bought for her. *This stuff must have cost a fortune. I wonder what kind of indentured servitude I'm going to have to endure for this?* She heard Caraculla's spurs jingling as he approached but she busied herself rummaging for what she needed. She glanced up at him. He was only in his pants and boots, his muscular chest bare and glistening with a light sheen of sweat from the day's heat.

"She'll want something *substantial* for this you know," he said, staring down at the new armor with contempt.

Gypsy set aside the chest armor, two gauntlets, and a small round shield. She stripped down to her t-shirt and tried them on. "So what if she does?" she said, making sure everything fit right.

“Are you willing to do *anything* she wants for a little glamour at the Academy?”

Gypsy shook her head. What, was he kidding her? Almost every cadet at the Academy had a rich benefactor and had to do *something* for the gifts bestowed on them. “I really don’t think you’re in any position to pass judgment on me,” she said, pushing past him to pack her saddlebag. “You have benefited immensely from Gavin’s generosity, despite the fact that it cost you your morality.”

Caraculla followed close behind her. “You shouldn’t go on this campaign, Gypsy.”

Finally he’s come out with it and here we go. “It’s not open to debate, Caraculla.”

“You’re still too green for this,” he warned. “You can’t imagine how terrifying Gavin can get when he’s in this kind of state. People are going to die. I know she’s your mother but—”

“That’s right,” Gypsy said, turning on him and adopting an arctic edge to her tone. “She’s *my* mother and she’s in danger. Now stay the fuck out of it.”

“That’s your grief talking. You don’t mean that,” he said as if trying to convince himself.

Gypsy walked into their bedroom and went through all of her drawers. She had to get out of here. Caraculla was ruffling her already fragile feathers. She stuffed extra clothes into her saddlebags along with some personal supplies. She slung the saddlebags over her shoulder and bolted for the door. Caraculla grabbed her by the arm and pushed her against the wall. Without thinking, she brought her forearms up knocking his hands away. When his grip had broken she slammed her palms into his chest, violently knocking him away from her.

She froze, stunned by what she’d just done.

He didn’t try grabbing her again, instead he backed up glaring. She knew she hadn’t hurt him as much as wounded him emotional-

ly. The pain in his eyes was agony in her heart. "Caraculla, I'm sorry, I didn't—"

"Don't bother explaining yourself," he said. "Your father never does and you are his daughter through and through."

She reached out to touch his shoulder but he stiffened and she withdrew her hand. Then the tears broke like a flash flood and she slid down the wall into a crouch with her face in her knees. This was all too much. A sob choked out from beneath her covered face. "Why are you doing this to me *now*? She's my mom and I'm not just going to sit here and wait to see what happens. The thought of her being dead or worse is killing me. Why would you even try to stop me?"

He rubbed the back of his neck. "Because I love you and I'm afraid for you. You think I'm just being overprotective but you're wrong. Gavin is a *monster*, Gypsy. That is a fact. I've seen him do things on campaign that still give me nightmares. But I will tell you this, he may be brutal, but he knows what he's doing. Just promise me that you'll do exactly what he says without question." Gypsy wiped her eyes on her sleeve as he pulled her up and into his arms. They hugged for a long time.

"I promise," she said in his ear. Gypsy pushed back from him and glared. "I could just kill you for making me cry right now, you bastard," she said, half-heartedly hitting his chest. "You need to help me get ready while I pull myself together. I can't let Gavin know I've been crying."

He nodded and proceeded to help her put on her armor and gear up her mount. She was thankful for his assistance because she was consumed with drying her eyes and patting the redness from her face. If Gavin thought she was too distraught, he would leave her behind for sure. There was no weakness in Gavin's army.

Caraculla disappeared into the villa as she mounted up. He called back telling her to wait a minute. She was adjusting some of

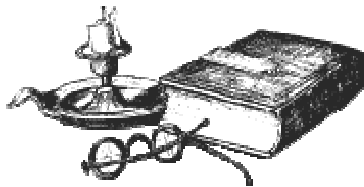
her equipment when he came back out with a double shot of whiskey. Gypsy couldn't help but smile.

"Here. You're a Theron. This will help you calm down before you get back to Gavin," he said, handing the tumbler up to her. She tossed back the amber liquid, dropped the glass back into his hand and took a deep breath, crinkling her nose and gritting her teeth. Then she leaned down, gave him a fierce kiss and rode off to meet Gavin and the mercenaries.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Michelle and Lindsey live in Florida with their families and write constantly. For more information on them and their works, please visit the website at www.michelle-oneill.com

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