



**For the Emperor**  
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**Hard Shell Word Factory**

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## Chapter 1

"You're not here for the view, Jameelah dear. You're here to plant a bomb."

Jameelah stiffened at Rami's words, then forced herself to ignore him. Her field experience was limited, but she resented Rami's condescending attitude. The longer they worked together, the more disrespectful he became.

She turned and met the gaze of a Triden officer who saluted her from across the room. Scores of people milled between them, filling the space station ballroom with swirling colors. The officer's eyes glittered above his raised glass.

Before she could return his salute, Rami, disguised as a waiter, cleared his throat and glowered at her.

She returned the fluted glass to Rami's tray without lifting it to her lips. The amber wine smelled like her father's gardens --heady, sweet, and intoxicating. Unlike the Tridens who surrounded her, Jameelah couldn't afford to become intoxicated.

She tugged at her gown, too tight as current custom on Triden-Prime dictated, and watched the Triden officer turn his attention to the golden-haired girl at his side. Her beryl-green dress with its frills and high collar made Jameelah's crimson gown look cheap. Jameelah's blond wig, selected to hide her

shiny black hair, made her head itch.

How odd that the Triden didn't dance, but hovered by the girl in green who never left the wall. Did some rule of etiquette prevent him from dancing? Disappointment made her stomach flip. *You are not a school girl pining after the most handsome man in the room. You are on a mission.*

They knew little about the Tridens, and hoped the Tridens knew little about them. Jameelah would have preferred to study their new enemy longer before carrying out such a bold attack, but time was something her people did not have.

Jameelah stole another glance at the handsome officer. According to what little she knew, he wore the standard uniform for Triden officers at a public function. His black leathers--Triden dress uniform--carried no rank insignia, but he worked the room like a diplomat. A senior officer, at least.

Black-haired, with a slender, muscular build, he had the well-developed chest and arms required of a fighter pilot, and if they danced, her head would fit under his chin. The thought startled her. *You really have been alone too long, girl.*

A tinkling of crystal returned Jameelah's attention to Rami.

"The Triden dog likes his women young," Rami growled under his breath while he rearranged the glasses on his tray.

Jameelah had to agree. The girl looked about sixteen, a decade younger than Jameelah.

"If he treats you with disrespect, I'll slit his throat."

Jameelah shuddered at the gruesome image, but Rami left before she could reply. He maintained his cover as a waiter with difficulty, striding past grasping hands instead of nodding over his tray while officers selected their drinks.

When the music started again, guests returned to the dance floor. Delay would endanger the mission. Jameelah approached the buffet table.

The Tridens were obscenely extravagant; the display of food and drink filled half the room. According to Imsada intelligence, the Emperor had ordered twelve space stations prepared for his wedding reception, and according to party chatter, he had ordered them all holographically enhanced to resemble his palace--a reproduction of an Old Earth Scottish castle.

The uneven floor felt real beneath her feet. Torches spattered light against gray stone walls, and intricate tapestries and colorful flags hung from the rafters. Jameelah could almost forget she stood on a space station light years from the Emperor's home world of New Glasgow. But was she on the station that held Emperor Thane and his bride?

Jameelah's hand hovered over a punch-filled cup. A slice of lemon floated on its sugary surface amid a sea of cups topped with lime. An explosive disk waited on the bottom of one of them, programmed to activate at her touch.

"Don't touch that! It would be a crime."

Fear rippled through her. Caught. She froze, her hand flexed to take the punch. A hand clad in

black circled her wrist like a cuff.

She spun from the table and into a waiting pair of arms. When she forced herself to look up, she knew the answer to the question she'd not allowed herself to ask, not even silently. The Triden officer's eyes were green.

His ready smile vanished, his brow wrinkled and his eyes clouded over with concern. "You shouldn't bother with synthetic punch. Not when the Emperor has gone to the trouble of providing wine."

The Triden seemed to be taking her pulse now, not restraining her. What did he make of her racing heart and sweaty palms? She knew so little about these Tridens. He wore gloves in a sealed space station. Why? The smooth, black leather matched the rest of his uniform, and the ends were cut away to reveal his fingers past the first knuckle. Bare flesh brushed her cheek.

She forced a teasing smile and spoke with a lightness she didn't feel. "I was warned to remain sober while dancing with officers of the Triden fleet, or pay the price."

"I'm a bargain, I assure you." With a laugh, the Triden officer drew her onto the dance floor and began to hum the Emperor's favorite waltz in her ear.

Evidently, he was allowed to dance, and did so with great skill. Jameelah couldn't suppress the shivers he sent down her back. He had delayed the inevitable for a few moments longer. Until the music stopped, she would not be able to return to the rows of punch. For now, dancing with this man was her duty.

When she sighed against his cheek, he gave a low laugh and slid his hands from her waist to her hips. He laughed again when she returned his roving hands to their proper place. How long had it been since she'd laughed?

*Four years.*

It seemed she spoke the words aloud. Four years since Khay's death. Four years the widow of the Imsada's most famous martyr.

While her hands caressed the Triden's shoulders, Jameelah imagined how Khay would have looked in such a uniform. Shorter. Two inches, three? She couldn't remember. The realization hit her like a fist. Every Imsada school boy could recite Khay's heroic deeds, and his widow couldn't remember how he'd felt in her arms. Jameelah blinked back tears.

"Are you all right?" the Triden asked.

She saw concern again in her enemy's eyes, felt it in his hands, which brushed her bare shoulders and sent threatening sparks down her back. They stood in the center of the dance floor, couples swirling around them. How easy it would be to lose herself in this man's arms, to lose herself on any one of hundreds of glittering planets that offered a future brighter than her own.

"Just thinking." Jameelah forced another smile. "Are you glad the war's over?"

The officer began to dance again, moving out of time with the others, slow enough so they could talk. "It's hard to say. I haven't had twenty-four consecutive hours free in years. But--"

"You don't know what you'll do without battles to plan and fight." She finished his sentence. That's how Rami felt. Jameelah couldn't imagine him without his war. She turned in the Triden's arms to look for Rami. His station at the buffet table stood empty. She forced herself to keep dancing, and not run off to search for him. "Now that you've bested the New Alliance, you'll be going after the non-aligned cartels, I suppose."

"You've been listening to New Alliance propaganda, my dear." Those brilliant green eyes examined her again.

He had a kind face, angular lines temporarily softened by drink. She couldn't quite picture him killing thousand of innocents with a casual squeeze of his hand, but he had. At least he'd been trained to. She knew that much about the Tridens.

Jameelah looked down, forcing herself not to pull away. She should act sympathetic--a patriot celebrating the Emperor's marriage to Tamboria, the only daughter of the New Alliance President. Their union would unite two great empires and put a permanent end to the fighting. For everyone except the Imsada.

Jameelah allowed him to pull her a fraction closer than custom allowed. A spicy scent radiated through his uniform. Without conscious thought, she tugged on the damp, dark rings of hair that slipped beneath his collar. He groaned in response and bent to kiss her ear.

She turned her head to avoid his touch, but managed not to jerk away when he bent lower and kissed



her shoulder. How could she think with this man's hot mouth on her neck? Jameelah took a deep breath and tried to remember her Imsada training.

She knew this much. You didn't ask a Triden officer about his work, and you never, ever, asked his name. Was her dance partner a pilot? Triden pilots fought to stay on the front lines. This man could be security. Her knees started to buckle.

He didn't seem to notice her weakness, but spun her into the circle of dancers. Under the influence of the swirling colors, she reentered the conversation. For almost an hour she allowed him to lead her through a discussion of politics and the latest thermo-vid release. For almost an hour, he made her forget.

Then a glimpse of Rami glowering at her returned her to reality.

The Imsada knew almost nothing about the Triden Empire, less about their new emperor. She had to learn more about the man who would soon control three-fourths of the galaxy.

Nodding toward the blond girl who watched them from a corner of the room, she asked, "Does she know the Emperor?"

"Just someone's sister." The Triden shrugged. "I would introduce you, but she doesn't enjoy meeting strangers. The evening has been a strain. First formal dance. She's shy...."

"Shouldn't you return to her then?"

"She absolutely insists I dance with you." He tried to pull Jameelah closer. She resisted, stepping back to see his face.

"She insists, does she?" Jameelah smiled at his obvious lie. "Most definitely. She says you are very beautiful, and I must dance with only you. For the entire evening."

Jameelah sighed with relief. An escort, that's what he was. Assigned to squire some official's sister, and determined to enjoy himself in spite of it. But she couldn't enjoy her assignment, not with the lives of so many at stake. Besides, as much as she wanted to stay in his arms, she wouldn't be safe there if he found out who she was. Her stomach knotted at the thought.

He wrapped his arms around her again and whispered in her ear. "The problem is I don't have time to seduce you properly, my dear. I have to leave tomorrow."

His hot breath sent chills down her back and weakened her knees as thoroughly as her earlier fear. The Triden touched his forefinger to her chin and raised her head. "I'm expected to spend my leave at home. You know mothers."

Jameelah shook off his touch and lowered her head. She didn't want to think of home--bleak and joyless. Enjoying this man's caress made her feel like a traitor.

"Perhaps you could meet me at my ship?" he asked.

How senior must he be to have his own ship? Her first instinct was to make some excuse and find a new dance partner, but she wanted to blend in with the crowd. Besides, he might have valuable information. Did he know if this was the site of the Emperor's wedding or one of the eleven decoys?

"At *your* ship?"

"An inconvenience, I know," he continued. "A suite would be more comfortable, but my coming here was spur of the moment. I have to share quarters with my crew. But we'll be alone on the ship, and I can promise you all the comforts of home. The bed is big enough for two." He purred the last in her ear.

Even as her body responded to his seductive words, her mind screamed traitor. She pushed against his chest with her hands to regain a breath of space between them.

"Meet me in emergency lock five, after?" His fingers tightened around her arms. "What do you say?"

Jameelah realized with relief there would be no "after." When the festivities ended in an unwelcome flurry of smoke, she would leave the station with Rami and his men. The explosion would leave her dance partner inconvenienced, no doubt, and angry, most definitely, but unharmed.

Rami and the others had agreed to try things her way, her late husband's way, one last time. But if this demonstration of Imsada determination failed to gain the Emperor's attention, blood would flow. Without Khay's influence, she wasn't strong enough to stop it.

Jameelah avoided answering the Triden's question by asking her own. "So you're looking forward to peace? New duties?"

He shrugged and smiled again. "I haven't decided what I'll do now that the war's over. How about you?"

Jameelah bit her lip to keep from answering. How could she look forward to peace? Martyrs like

her dead husband found peace in the grave. Men like Rami, who knew no life other than seeking revenge for their murdered fathers and brothers, didn't know what it meant.

Her dance partner stared at her with that puzzled expression again, losing track of the steps when he bent to look into her eyes. Jameelah realized she'd waited too long to answer.

He touched her cheek and she shivered. Then he traced the outline of her mouth with his bare thumb. The soft leather of his glove grazed her chin. As if out of her control, her head tilted toward him and her lips parted. She closed her eyes when he lowered his mouth to hers. His lips, velvet soft compared to his rough fingers, teased her mouth more fully open. He tasted cool and fruity, like the wine she had refused to drink.

Like the wine, she should refuse him now. Tridens evidently expected public displays, but Rami might be watching. He wouldn't understand this act was necessary to maintain her cover. Necessary, she thought, as she pressed her mouth firmly against the hungry lips that tasted hers. When the Triden pulled away, she felt empty. She shivered before she opened her eyes.

He sounded formal when he spoke again. "Don't worry about business dropping off now that our Emperor has promised peace. I'm certain you'll find something. There's always a lull for companions at first, but for someone as engaging as yourself...."

Jameelah realized with a start that the man was calling her a whore. Surely the Tridens weren't so different that she misunderstood. The room seemed to tilt as she fought to control her anger. "I can take

care of myself, war or not."

She tried to twist away, but he folded her more tightly in his arms. Using her Imsada training, she could have this man on the floor in seconds. How dare he insult the widow of Khay-Alva? She imagined the scene--the tipsy, arrogant fool sprawled on his back at her feet.

Before Jameelah could compose an angry retort, a bearded man towered over her dance partner's shoulder. Jameelah jumped at the intrusion. The stranger's beefy hand descended and locked around the Triden's arm, which still held her.

Instead of "snapping to" as Jameelah expected, her escort gave her ear a teasing nip. "What is it, Gunny?"

"Sorry to disturb you, *Lieutenant*."

Did she detect sarcasm in the giant's tone? And how could the Triden be a lieutenant? He was far too old. She guessed captain, at least. Fear replaced Jameelah's anger. She studied him again when he turned toward Gunny.

Streaks of white marred the lieutenant's curly black hair, fine lines creased his mouth and eyes. Well over thirty years old. An aging lieutenant with his own ship and enough influence to attend the Emperor's wedding reception? Who was this man?

"Spit it out," the Triden barked.

"We've got company," Gunny replied, apparently unruffled by his lieutenant's impatience. "You'd

best get back to the young lady. If you're not too drunk."

The Triden growled an acknowledgment to Gunny.

Jameelah twisted in the Triden's arms to see five khaki-clad New Alliance officers swagger across the room. As always, her stomach clenched at the sight of the Imsada's long-time foe.

For five hundred years the Imsada had fought for the land these soldiers had taken from her people. After defeating them, the Tridens might make peace with the New Alliance; the Imsada never would. The Imsada couldn't afford peace. It would kill them.

"Will there be trouble?" she asked.

"Of course not." The Triden's hands tightened almost unbearably on her arms. "Thanks to our Emperor's taste in brides, these New Alliance fellows are our very dear friends."

He looked sober and concerned. "I have to get back to work."

Loosening his grip on Jameelah's arms, he resumed dancing. He held her stiffly, maintaining the precise distance between them dictated by etiquette, as he steered them toward the girl.

Jameelah tried to relax in the Triden's embrace while she reminded herself of her duties. She forced her fear and anger down deep inside her. They must both get back to business now.

"Emergency lock five," he reminded when he released her. "Don't forget. Wait for me." He squeezed her hand, and was gone.

She stood alone on the dance floor a moment, uncertain her legs still worked. Then she threaded her

way to the buffet table, watching the Triden greet the New Alliance officers. The young girl, half hidden behind the Triden, clung to his arm.

Her fingers curled into fists, Jameelah strode toward the rows of punch. Despite her body's inappropriate reactions to this man, she had not forgotten her duty. For the second time that evening, her hand hovered over the cup topped with the lemon.

Rami had chosen the hiding place well. The punch stood undisturbed. Everyone drank wine. Find the one with lemon. Three to the right, one down. Jameelah lifted the cup and palmed the explosive disk that clung to its base. The unyielding surface came to life when its sensors tasted her fingers.

Again, Jameelah looked across the room at the Triden officer. She tingled with the remembered warmth of his embrace and the promise of his hard body pressing urgently against hers. Despite his good intentions, circumstances would detain her eager dance partner, and she could not wait for him at emergency lock five.

She nervously sipped the sour punch, taking one last look at the swirling couples before fading toward the back of the room.

Jameelah didn't have time to admire the view. She was here to plant a bomb.

Alec walked away from the New Alliance officers, every muscle tensed with the strain of turning his

back on them. Lorna stood clutching Gunny's arm. Alec forced himself to smile.

His half-sister looked so fragile, so vulnerable. Squaring his shoulders, he nodded to Gunny, signaling he should entertain their guests. Left alone, Lorna retreated to the back wall.

Before going to her, Alec turned to check on Gunny, the man who had cared for him since the day he was born. Gunny joked with the New Alliance officers as if, two months ago, they all hadn't been trying to kill each other.

Taking another moment, Alec scanned the room for his dance partner. He hadn't expected to find someone so fascinating at his brother's wedding reception. It wasn't often he had the chance to meet what his mother would call "an independent woman."

Unable to spot her in the throng, Alec resigned himself to his duties as Lorna's escort. He would find the woman later, and if things worked out as he hoped...well, it wouldn't be the first time he missed an appointment with his mother.

He crossed the toe of his right boot behind the heel of his left to make a well-practiced about face. A flash stopped him.

Before he could react, a roaring blast picked him up and sent him flying backward.

He didn't hear his own scream when he slammed into the wall. For a moment he was aware of only one thing--he couldn't breathe.

"Lorna." He felt his lips form the word and suddenly his lungs began to work. He choked on dust-



filled air.

Alec called again. "Lorna!" He struggled to lift his head off the floor to see over the scattered debris. He knew he yelled because his throat was raw with the effort, but he couldn't hear anything above the roar that surrounded him.

In the glow of the emergency lights, Alec could see a man-sized hole in the wall and injured guests scattered over the floor. The hologram of his family's estate had disappeared with the power failure, revealing utilitarian off-white walls and floor.

He and Lorna had stood no more than twenty feet apart when the explosion ripped through the bulkhead, but with the castle hologram gone, he'd lost his bearings. He struggled to remember precisely where they'd stood in relation to the punch table, the only landmark he could see.

Dammit. He should have been paying attention. Lorna was his responsibility. Then he saw it--a patch of green fluttering behind an overturned table.

Alec dragged himself forward. A steady rain of dust and debris clogged his throat. When he pushed aside the fallen table, he began to shake. Golden hair spilled over a green dress.

After taking a deep breath, he forced his body to cross the final inches to where Lorna lay in a crumpled mass of chiffon. Instinct took over as he felt for signs of life.

"Lorna, talk to me." Alec touched the pulse point on his sister's neck. She stirred. He dropped his head, resting briefly on her arm. A shudder wracked his body as he forced himself to believe what his

senses told him. She was alive. When he turned to look for Gunny, Alec realized the roaring didn't come from the carnage before him, but from inside his own head. Lorna's chest heaved and her eyelids fluttered, but he couldn't hear anything above the unrelenting noise in his ears. He pushed aside the thought that his deafness might be permanent.

A blast of compressed air shooting from a broken pipe and the rubble in its path kept Alec and Lorna isolated--trapped in a corner, thirty feet from a maintenance exit. At least the air was blowing in, not being sucked out into space.

"Gunny!" Alec squinted through the smoke and dust. He could see flashing red lights, but couldn't hear sirens. If alarms intermittently blasted the call to emergency stations, they were safe for now. If the long wail sounded evacuation, they could measure their lives in minutes.

Finally, Alec saw Gunny. He stood on the other side of the rubble, his weapon drawn. Alec reached for his own sidearm, but came up empty. Damn! The stunner he'd clipped inside his jacket sleeve had disappeared.

Great. Unarmed, separated from Lorna's guard, and no idea what was going on.

Gunny shouted. Alec could see his mouth move. *How many deaf pilots do you know?* He fought down a new surge of panic.

Apparently no follow-up attack was coming. The cowards who set the bomb must have left the station. Before he could run down the list of likely suspects, Alec remembered the blond woman he'd

danced with all evening. She was nowhere in sight. Their rendezvous might have saved her. If she left before the explosion hit, she would be near the escape pods. God, he hoped so.

He tried to stand, but pain shot down his spine and sent him gasping to the floor. When Lorna moved, hope welled in his chest. She opened her eyes and clutched at his arm.

"Don't move, baby. I'm right here." Alec felt for her wrist again. Steady pulse, responsive pupils. He ripped off his gloves to search for broken bones and shrapnel. Familiar heat rushed through his palms when he passed them over her body. He shook too badly to be certain, but except for his sore back, they appeared to have escaped unscathed.

Lorna's blue eyes were wide and filled with fear. She was trying to tell him something, and he couldn't hear a word. Lorna had always come to him with her troubles. She always said he was the only one who would listen to her. Now he could only pull her onto his lap and rock her in his arms.

He felt her shake, felt her tears wet his hands. Someone was going to pay for hurting his sister. Anger surged through him, but he forced it down. When help came and he no longer had to take care of Lorna, he would allow himself to feel again. Then he would make whoever committed this vile act of terrorism pay.

"Everything's fine. They'll get to us soon." Alec spoke with confidence he didn't feel, not certain Lorna could hear him.

Why the hell did his brother Thane have to get married on some space station instead of on New

Glasgow? Damn him for getting himself named Emperor and damn him for having too many enemies to count.

Apparently, someone didn't like the idea of the Emperor marrying Tamboria, daughter of the most powerful man in the New Alliance. Alec certainly didn't, but he had contented himself with getting half-drunk. Someone else had resorted to violence.

Movement across the room caught his attention. It would take time for emergency personnel to clear a path. Lorna's survival depended on his ability to get them out of this mess.

Alec looked over his shoulder at the door. The corridor on the other side led to the secondary emergency locks where he'd docked his ship. He sagged against the floor. He would never make it that far, not carrying Lorna. If not for his miserable back, they could have left the station by now.

Lorna shook him and pointed. Gunny waved, their four-man crew crowded around him. They appeared ruffled and agitated, but whole. Dammit, he had to hear what they were saying.

A puff of cool air hit Alec's back. The door behind him had opened, and by the look on Gunny's face, the news was bad.

Before Alec could turn, someone tore Lorna from his arms. He grabbed her legs, and after a pull that sent a screaming pain down the length of his back, he held her again. For a moment she rested in his arms as if nothing had happened.

Gunny aimed his weapon. Alec watched with horror. Was Gunny crazy enough to fire that thing on

a space station?

A shaft of blue death whizzed past Alec's ear, and an explosion rocked the room. The Triden Council had ordered the Emperor's brother not be taken alive by an enemy of the state again, but the shot could have just as easily hit Lorna. Surely, the same rule didn't apply to her. Who was Gunny trying to hit? Alec prayed it was the men he sensed standing behind him.

While Lorna continued to cling to him, Alec felt those men grab his arms and drag him toward the door. Every instinct told him to resist, but he couldn't fight without letting go of Lorna.

A man dressed as a waiter slammed the door shut and swung the safety lock into place. Three others, similarly dressed, joined him. One man caught the torn edge of Lorna's gown and rubbed it against his face. Despite the cool air in the corridor, Alec broke into a sweat.

Swallowing hard, he tried to assess their situation. The corridor was empty, apparently isolated from the rest of the station. He was Lorna's only chance. Alec pried her arms from his neck, lifted her off his lap, and shoved her behind him. He slid backward until he felt her meet the wall. One of the men moved toward Lorna but their leader waved him away.

The leader knelt in front of them, speaking to Lorna, gesturing as if to lure her from behind Alec's back.

When the man reached out to her, Alec kicked at his boot, biting down the pain the motion sent surging up his back. That's when Alec recognized him. The minute his head stopped spinning, he would

remember the man's name. He was definitely an Imsada operative. Alec remembered that much.

When the Imsada leader stood and held his hand out to Lorna again, she tried to push Alec aside. What could the man have possibly said to make her want to go willingly? She was slipping away. He was losing her. God, where was Gunny?

Alec lunged, feeling satisfaction at the startled look on the man's face when he fell on his back. That look changed to red-faced anger. The other men moved forward and grabbed Alec's flailing arms and legs.

The first kick to his ribs turned Alec's world gray, and the pain made him regret every breath he drew. The men tore at his uniform, using knives to cut it from him when it wouldn't give way under their hands. Alec managed to rise to his knees in his struggle toward Lorna.

He tried to reassure her--"Gunny won't let these bastards off the station. Thane will have them disemboweled on Patriot's Day." When his captors brought a club down across his backside, pain choked off his words.

Lorna clawed at her captor's arms.

Finally, Alec heard her voice--a far off whisper that pierced the roar in his head and called, "Save me."

## Chapter 2

Up and down became meaningless words. Metal shrieked in protest, covering Jameelah's cries. Her body slammed first into one side of the corridor, then into the other. When she stopped rolling, she counted to ten before leaving her protective posture.

Shivering in the sudden quiet, she expected the space station to crumble around her. When the lights flickered, she scrambled into her flight suit, ignoring protests from her bruised body. The lights stabilized, but the ventilation stayed off.

*It's your fault*--the thought thundered through her. But she had set a harmless smoke bomb.

The floor tilted again. Short, jarring vibrations threw her to the floor. This time she didn't wait for the motion to stop. She scrambled to her feet and lurched toward the escape pods.

Flashing red lights on the directional panels pointed the way. The way to the *secondary* escape pods, Jameelah reminded herself. Blocking off this corridor didn't affect station safety. The pods docked on the main concourse could hold everyone. For now, the lilting voice of the control center computer ordered personnel to emergency stations, not evacuation. Not yet.

How had her bomb rocked the entire station? What did the second explosion mean? Was the Triden officer hurt or the girl? Jameelah fought the urge to return to the ballroom. Her people were counting on

her, but she couldn't stop worrying.

She opened the hatch of emergency pod seven and stepped through the airlock. The circular control room was fifteen feet across with fold-down benches lining the outer walls. Black straps used to secure passengers hung limp from their locking rings. A red number seven stenciled inside the door confirmed she'd entered the correct pod.

Jameelah had practiced this part of their mission for weeks, but before she finished today, her fingers were slick with sweat. The launch would serve as a distraction for the watch, enough to keep them from accurately tracking the next pod to launch--the one she would take with Rami and the others.

When she reentered the corridor, Jameelah shook her head to drive away the image of the Triden officer's lifeless body floating in space. Rami had promised no one would get hurt. This demonstration of Imsada power would result in nothing more than smoke and confusion. A message to persuade the Emperor to include them in peace negotiations.

She hurried toward the pre-arranged meeting place, pod three, but Rami waited at the next lock, number five. The hatch stood half open. His waiter's uniform was no longer white. Food and wine stained his apron and he gave off a sour smell.

"What's wrong?" Rami would explain the strength of the first explosion and the explosion that followed. He had to.

"Everything is fine, Jameelah. The station backup systems are operational." Rami sounded



unperturbed, but his eyes were unnaturally bright and his breathing rapid. He wiped his hands on his apron and glanced over his shoulder.

Everything was fine? Was the man crazy? "The explosion threw me to the floor. What went wrong?"

Still rubbing his hands on his apron, Rami returned his attention to her. His voice went from condescending to impatient. "We don't have time to conduct a mission evaluation."

Jameelah continued to press. "What was the second explosion? I distinctly felt two."

Rami staggered forward a step before steadying himself on the pod hatch. He sagged against the support and shielded his eyes with the hand that still clutched the apron.

The explosion had obviously injured Rami, and here she was grilling him. "Are you all right?"

Rami's closely cropped black hair and sharp features stood out against the once-white uniform. She put a hand on his shoulder, but he drew away, backing against the half-open hatch. When he spoke, the condescending tone returned.

"A slight disorientation," he said. "I hit my head when some Triden fool discharged his weapon--the action responsible for the explosion you felt. They have only themselves to blame."

She knew it. Something had gone wrong.

"An air main ruptured and a primary junction was damaged. They are operating on their emergency system."

Jameelah knew she should believe him--he had no reason to lie--but something seemed different about Rami.

She traced the number next to his shoulder with her right hand. Escape Pod Five. It meant something, but she couldn't remember what. "I thought we were taking pod three?"

"There has been a change in plans."

Jameelah stared at Rami's hands. He kept them wrapped in the apron. He was hiding something, and not just his hands. Suddenly, Rami seemed more threatening than a squadron of Triden fighters.

"What change? Why?" she demanded.

"This wasn't the right station. Emperor Thane is not here." But the comms, the last minute priority traffic--"

"Do not blame yourself, Jameelah." But she did blame herself. She drove her clenched fist against her thigh. This should have been the right station. Emperor Thane should be here. Messages sent from many locations, including the Emperor's home, all using high priority, imperial codes, pointed to this being the real reception.

"The Imsada Council planned for this contingency. Triden officials may cover up the breach of their security, but if we take a member of the Triden military hostage, his superiors must notify the Emperor. This is standard procedure. News of our daring will reach his ears. The only other change to our plan is taking two pods instead of one. Station sensors are more advanced than we anticipated. The added

confusion will ease our escape."

Rami stepped away from the airlock and pushed the hatch fully open. He helped her over the threshold and into the pod. She started to release her breath, then she remembered the hostage.

Jameelah didn't like taking hostages. She knew the pain of sleepless nights, waiting. Her husband Khay had not returned. Neither had her brother. "Who did you take?"

"We found two persons accessible. A Triden officer and a woman. The officer is in this pod. You have four days to learn his identity. I'll arrange for a hostage broker to handle his return. I'm set to launch pod three." Jameelah wanted to believe Rami, needed to believe they would gain the Emperor's attention without harming anyone. That's what she had promised the Imsada Council.

"What about the woman?"

"We left her tied in the corridor. Station personnel will find her soon. Very soon. We must leave now." Rami glanced over his shoulder again.

Jameelah nodded. No time to argue, but they shouldn't have had to take a hostage. This was her fault.

Rami squeezed her arm. "We meet at rendezvous. If your hostage doesn't cooperate, we can interrogate him together. You can resupply one of your relocation camps with the ransom. I must go now. We have no more time."

When Rami moved the hatch into place, he dropped his apron. Streaks of dried blood, dark brown

over burgundy wine stains, stood out on the white surface stretched between his thighs. Scratches covered his forearms. Before she could challenge him, the hatch closed and echoed hollowly through the pod.

*No one was hurt. No one was hurt.* Jameelah repeated the phrase she no longer believed and broke the connection between the pod and the station.

When she finished the launch procedure, she looked up to check the pod number--nothing more than a reflex. She froze in the control seat. Where she expected to see a number five blazed in red on the airlock door, she saw freshly polished metal, no trace of a designation. This was not escape pod five.

Then she realized Rami had taken all the men with him. She was alone, or was she? When she heard a groan, she turned to find the source--her hostage, in an evac bag.

"No one was hurt," she whispered, startled at the smallness of her voice. Another groan sounded. She stood and crossed the control room.

She didn't recognize his voice, his cries were too weak and muffled by the heavy plastic, but she knew Rami and she knew Imsada honor.

With one motion she ripped the head piece from the bag.

She had imagined the Triden lieutenant on his back at her feet, chastised for insulting her, but not like this. A bruise covered the left side of his face and blood traced the same lips that had tasted hers.

"Let me out now, dammit," he yelled while he twisted against his bonds, ignoring the pain of plastic straps cutting his wrists. "Are you going to face me, you Imsada scum? Or have you only enough courage to attack little girls?"

He rocked from his back to his left side, looking for his captor. His wrists remained firmly joined. Alec fought down his gut reaction--panic. The last time he'd found himself tied like this, he'd ended up in a New Alliance prison camp.

The bastards must be to his right. Alec tried to rock in the other direction, but got stuck. This silence frightened him. Now that he could hear, he needed answers. What had happened to Lorna? To Gunny? The space station held over a thousand people.

A boot tapped lightly against the bulkhead behind him. Vibrations careened through his already swimming head. He couldn't stay like this--bound and helpless. He had to save Lorna.

The toe of the boot hooked his elbow through the evac suit and pulled him onto his back. He cried out when his fingers bent under him. The owner of the boot retreated. He saw only a blur.

"Let me the hell out," he demanded again. He struggled to turn and face his silent captor. Pain stabbed behind his eyes and blocked the dull aches coming from the rest of his body. Alec braced himself for the beating to resume."I'm sorry. I can't do that." A woman's voice.

Alec froze at the sound. The Imsada allowed their women few roles other than providing "comfort"

for their men. This low, sultry voice transmitted enough steel to let Alec know that whoever this woman was, she was in charge. He knew what to expect from the Imsada, but from a woman?

"I am an officer in the service of the Triden Emperor, and I demand to know who you are and where you're taking me. If you release me now, I may be able to arrange an easy death for you."

"And I may be able to arrange your release if you cooperate." That voice again--rich, sonorous, and wavering, but with what? She stood, or sat, behind him. How close he couldn't tell. Alec struggled to roll toward her.

Suddenly, she was towering over him, then bending so close her hair brushed his face. He jerked away, expecting a slap. Instead, he heard the external release clamp on the evacuation bag snap open. He still hadn't gotten a good look at her face.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

"All right? That's a damned foolish question. You just blew a space station to hell out from under me. How stupid are you Imsada, anyway?"

"Ask the survivors of the Palmer station how they felt when you destroyed their home, Triden, then get back to me." The ambivalent waver vanished from her voice. Her cool, haughty tone sent fear rippling through him.

*You've survived capture before.* He had to keep his thoughts rational. Then he thought of Lorna. Rational thought fled.

"You Imsada just can't leave any accident or imagined insult unanswered, can you? What were you trying to say this time, and how many people did you kill trying to say it?"

"Now this is funny." She moved closer.

If she would just kneel down again, if he could get his hands free, he would strangle her. To hell with a trial.

"A Triden officer questioning the morals of the Imsada is a humorous concept. We fight for freedom and justice." Her voice was cold steel, not even close to losing control. "Your Emperor pays by the head, doesn't he? Pays for every person you kill. Do you get extra if your victim is armed or the other way around?"

"Speaking of victims," he shouted back, "what did your men do with the girl." He didn't dare say more, didn't dare mention Lorna's name. He couldn't risk the Imsada discovering who they were. Much more was at stake than the lives of two people.

"Unlike the Tridens, Imsada do not endanger innocent civilians. You can claim neither civilian status nor innocence. You are the hostage we want. We left the woman on the station."

Alec wanted to believe his captor, but what he'd seen pointed to a more sinister plot. The man in charge of the bogus waiters had gone out of his way not to hurt Lorna. At one point he'd seemed to try to reassure her.

If Lorna was the target of the attack, the man took her off the station. She was safe for now. If they

wanted a Triden officer to serve as hostage and not Lorna, as this woman claimed, their attentions could be a prelude to rape. Alec's stomach heaved at the thought.

"Tell me your name, rank, and duty station so I may inform the Emperor of your capture." The woman moved closer, and Alec's scorching reply died on his lips.

When he looked into her face, memories of the last few hours flooded him with amazing clarity. His face flushed hot with embarrassment. His blonde dance partner had shown up after all, without her wig, but those brown eyes were the same. No doubt, her plans for the evening had differed significantly from his.

"Why, Legate Jameelah, what a surprise."

The Imsada Legate's eyebrows arched with alarm. He should pretend he didn't recognize her. Only a handful of Tridens could. He'd made enough mistakes for one day. But what difference could one more make? So, he recognized the Imsada Council's emissary. More important she not recognize him. If she did, millions of lives would be in danger, including Legate "Brown Eyes" Jameelah's.

Alec had no options. His duty to the Emperor bound his life more tightly than the plastic straps bound his wrists. If Jameelah discovered his identity as the Emperor's brother, Alec would have to make certain that knowledge died with her.



Jameelah retreated to the command seat, grabbed her knees, and propped her chin on them. She didn't know which shocked her more--the sight of the lieutenant's bruised face or the sound of her name spoken through his swollen lips.

She couldn't pretend any longer. The bomb had injured at least one person--the lieutenant. Others might be dead. Rami must have lied about the strength of the bomb. How many more mistakes had she made, how many lies had Rami told?

At least one other. This was not Escape Pod Five. The number designation was missing from the inside hatch.

The lieutenant stopped struggling. "I really would like to get out of this thing."

He was tiring; she could hear it in his voice. She resisted the urge to free him. If only she could make him understand.

"This wasn't what we planned. The Imsada Council must gain the Emperor's attention--"

"Well, congratulations. In that, you have succeeded." His voice was thick with sarcasm and pain. Jameelah winced at the sound. "New Alliance officials lied, told Thane the Imsada were neutralized. He must know the truth. We must be included in the peace talks."

"Oh, you did that all right. The Imsada question will be right up there on his agenda now. Item number one. Round up everyone remotely connected with the Imsada and shoot them out the nearest airlock." The Triden sounded deadly serious, and might be in a position to know. She didn't know who he

was or what he was doing at the reception. How could their plans have gone so terribly wrong?

Jameelah closed her eyes to gather strength. "Please, you don't understand. I planted a smoke bomb. We left a message--"

He snorted in reply and turned away from her.

How ridiculous she must sound, especially now that it had all gone wrong, but she couldn't give up. Her people needed to be included in the peace talks and she would see that they were, or die trying. The latter seemed the more likely outcome.

Converting a Triden officer wasn't her top priority, and he couldn't get out of the evac suit unless she released him. The safest course was to leave him where he was. Rami had programmed the pod to take them to rendezvous. She had no duties other than to learn her hostage's identity--and four days to do it.

The lieutenant began to struggle again, twisting his body toward her. He gave up with a sigh, and his head hit the deck with a thud. "I *have* to get out of here. Your inept friends neglected to hook up the facilities, and it's been a long day."

Just what she needed--a Triden officer, member of the most highly trained killing machine in the universe, and he had to use the sanitary.

With a shake of her head, she reminded herself that her mission had taken an unexpected turn, but she must master this new role. She had to show this man she was in control.

The lieutenant winced at every clang of her boots on the deck while she paced and then stomped

across the room to stand over him. She grabbed the crotch of the evac suit and yanked.

He hadn't lied to her. Not about this anyway. If Rami's men had connected the catheter, the lieutenant would have screamed.

His eyes changed from pleading to ice green, and he smiled, a cruel caricature of the ones he'd given her when they danced. "Now that we're so much better acquainted, why don't you let me out, Jamie dear?"

Jamie was too close to her birth name Jemma, a name she hadn't heard since she married Khay. Hearing it spoken, even by a voice thick with sarcasm, made her feel like a little girl. She was Jameelah, Legate Jameelah. Jemma no longer existed.

"You know my name. Use it." She barked the order to hide her reaction. How did he know who she was? If he'd recognized her earlier, he would have notified security and she'd be sitting in a Triden cell awaiting her trial instead of on her way home. The lieutenant said nothing, but rocked onto his side again, facing the wall.

"It's only four days, Triden. You'll survive."

"I'm not so certain, Jamie. Your boys were a little rough, but it won't be unpleasant for only me."

Jamie. Why did he call her Jamie? She could not afford to reveal weakness. She forced herself to sound impatient.

"What do you mean unpleasant?"

"They ripped the suit. I can't get out, but the smell will. An unhygienic situation for two people in close quarters."

Jameelah retreated out of the lieutenant's line of sight. Had Rami been present when his men put their hostage into the evac suit? He might have some injury Rami didn't know about. But how could she maneuver him back in the bag after she let him out?

The straps at the passenger station hung on the wall opposite the command chair. She could secure him there, but she would need some other means of control. Securing her prisoner to the bulkhead didn't solve their problem. He needed a certain amount of freedom to take care of himself.

Once she made her decision, Jameelah grabbed the emergency inhaler from under the command console, clipped the tube to her right nostril, and wrapped the tiny canister behind her ear. The device would supply her with fifteen minutes of oxygen.

"You are going to do exactly what I say." Jameelah sounded more confident than she felt.

The lieutenant jerked when she spoke. "Yes, anything you say." The lieutenant no longer sounded belligerent, but sleepy.

That wasn't a good sign, was it? Jameelah tried to remember her first aid. She fought to keep her voice steady while she continued her instructions. "Do you know what I'm going to do to you if you don't follow orders?"

He jerked again. "No, Jamie, do tell."

"Computer, emergency alpha five." The ship flooded the cabin with anesthetic. The effect on the lieutenant was immediate.

When she knelt at his side, he clutched at her arm and insulted her mother before he passed out. She pulled the evac suit to his waist before she realized he was naked. An ugly bruise darkened his right side and dried blood peppered his chest.

Her hand flew to her mouth, smothering her cry. "Computer, normal condition, force air." Jameelah staggered back, and dropped into the command seat when her knees buckled. She watched with relief when the lieutenant's eyes fluttered open. He would have to get out of the evac suit on his own.

Panting and cursing, he shimmied out of the bag. With color returning to his face, he looked as handsome as she remembered. Aristocratic cheeks and chin as smooth as if he'd just shaved, brilliant green eyes veiled by thick lashes, black hair curling down his neck.

Jameelah could see the hard, conditioned body she'd felt and smelled through the expensive leather uniform. Matted hair and flecks of blood covered the well-muscled chest she'd rested her head against hours before. She didn't notice his bound hands until he struggled to his knees. Then she saw his legs.

Evenly spaced bruises covered his legs from buttocks to ankles. Not caused by any explosion, but by a systematic beating. Jameelah sank farther into the chair and closed her eyes.

Her voice erupted in a harsh whisper. "Who did this to you?"

The lieutenant stopped his awkward shuffle on his knees. His chest heaved unevenly with the

exertion. He shook his head. Jameelah read the confusion in his eyes.

"Your legs. The bruises. What happened?"

The lieutenant sat back on his heels and made a sound that resembled a laugh. She almost rushed to him then.

"A present from your waiter friend, Jamie dear."

She remembered Rami's clothes, stained with blood and wine, and the scratches on his arms. The lieutenant might have resisted, but it wouldn't have taken much force to subdue him. He'd been unsteady with drink when she'd left, and well-practiced hands had delivered methodical blows.

"Rami wouldn't hit anyone." Her denial sounded childish. All the evidence pointed to Rami.

The lieutenant twisted his neck to face her. His hands strained against their bonds.

"You're right about that, Jamie dear. Rami wouldn't hit anyone. He doesn't have to. Your Rami enjoys watching, and he's trained his men to put on a good show. If they'd had more time, we would have become intimately acquainted, I'm sure."

Jameelah tried not to wince at the meaning of his words. He had to be lying. Rami would never permit his men to commit such a vile act. Jameelah swallowed the hard lump blocking her throat and straightened in the chair.

Triden officers were experienced liars as well as killers. The bruises were no doubt the result of some punishment he received before the reception. Probably reduced a rank or two besides. He was too

old to be a lieutenant. Jameelah almost smiled at the thought. She had seen through his lies.

Then she looked again at the man with the bloodied body and the angry green eyes. Loyalty said he was lying, common sense said he was not. Jameelah had faith in her common sense.

Officers in disgrace did not receive invitations to the Emperor's wedding, not even to a phony reception. His bruises were fresh, still red around the edges. The stains would turn uniformly purple in a few hours. Certainly, he'd done nothing to deserve this. Rami singled out the lieutenant for punishment because he'd danced with her.

The lieutenant twisted his body again, thrusting his hands in her direction. Rivulets of blood ran down his long fingers, a steady rain of red staining the upturned soles of his feet.

"Are you a watcher, too, Jamie, or will you untie my hands?"

Alec clutched the side of the sink. He wasn't certain how, but he'd managed to get to his feet and stagger to the head. He ignored the impulse to look in the mirror, afraid of what he would see. Afraid that, like everything else, the sight of his bruised face would remind him of how he'd failed everyone.

Familiar vibrations radiated through the deck--frantic, slightly irregular vibrations--providing him with his first clue to where he was. His second clue was the air. It wasn't fresh like at home or on the space station. Here, someplace small, they recycled the air often. A look in the supply locker confirmed his suspicion. He was on his own ship, and she was underway.

He was underway, headed God knows where, a captive of the Imsada. Lorna, too? He couldn't just ask. He might reveal information the Imsada didn't already have.

Lorna in the arms of that monster Rami. Alec shuddered at the thought. He rinsed his mouth, then tried to swallow. He choked and grunted, "I'm fine," before Legate Jameelah could check on him. After being trapped in that evac suit, he wanted only to wash and be left alone.

Alec had spent entirely too much time in evac suits lately. He clutched the shower rail with one hand, keeping the other on the sink. Common sense said he should be on his back, not standing on a wet deck, but he needed that shower now. At full blast. He turned on the water before Jameelah had time to ask what he was doing.

Alec mumbled curses while he washed away ghosts--hands that ripped away his clothes, sweat from arms that flayed at him. He manually cranked the water temperature higher. His ship no longer responded to his voice commands.

"It's your fault, you jackass." Alec finally spoke aloud the words he'd been thinking and knew they were true. If he'd been alert at the reception, he would have recognized Rami and Jameelah and had them both arrested. Instead, like a schoolboy hoping for a quick grope, he'd spent the evening chasing her.

She must have found that amusing, pretending to respond to his advances while she prepared to destroy the space station. Then off with Rami and the others to celebrate their victory.

Alec would have expected her to leave the dirty job of hostage tending to someone else. Why would



Khay-Alva's widow choose to confine herself in an escape pod with a Triden officer who had proven to be a complete idiot?

He could imagine Rami gleefully sending hundreds of party-goers to their deaths. But Legate Jameelah? As ridiculous as her story about a smoke bomb sounded, something wasn't right. Her presence might not match her husband Khay-Alva's, but she had a flair for organizing and motivating. Single-handedly, she had led efforts to bring food and medical supplies to a dozen isolated enclaves of refugees. While the Imsada Council played up the suffering, Legate Jameelah strove to alleviate it.

This bombing did not carry her distinctive stamp. This was not how she would gain the attention of the Triden Emperor a few weeks before he decided the Imsada's fate. So what was she doing playing these dangerous games?

She hadn't planned this mission. She wasn't familiar with the operation of the ship. Alec would assume that much. Beneath the hum of the ship, during the regular beat of silence in the engine cycle, he could hear what didn't belong--an Imsada-installed rescue beacon.

If he could get her to lock him in the bedroom, he could disarm her homing signal and trigger his own. Gunny would be looking for him. Alec could count on that. The whole Triden fleet was looking.

Still damp from his shower, Alec leaned against the door and studied Jameelah. The magnitude of his mistake hit him full force and almost sent him to his knees. How stupid, how drunk, had he been not to recognize her?

But more than wine had clouded his mind last night. Rami could have had Imsada written on his forehead and Alec wouldn't have noticed. Jameelah had so captivated him, he would never have given a mere waiter a second glance.

Intelligent, articulate, and evidently as starved for conversation as he, his dance partner had appeared as out of place in the social-climbing Triden crowd as her blond hair appeared with those brooding brown eyes. Those eyes had cried out for black tresses hanging over her shoulders, hiding her breasts, tempting him to brush aside the hair and....

If he continued this way, he'd forget why he wanted to regain control of the ship. What was she thinking while she gripped the arm of the command seat with one hand and dragged her fingers through her curtain of ebony hair with the other?

From this angle Alec could read nothing in her deep brown eyes. All evening he had tried to make those eyes laugh. The harder he tried, the more troubled they became. He didn't feel up to delving their depths anytime soon.

Alec's captor looked up. "Are you ready to talk?"

Alec ignored her question. He was too angry at his own thoughts to trust himself to speak. Now was not the time for anger, but for thinking. Then action.

He understood how she mistook his ship for an escape pod. The simple design accommodated lower docking fees, an important consideration in a private vessel. She was a present from his mother, a bribe

to keep him home while giving him the illusion of freedom. Mother knew the importance of maintaining illusions. After ten years as Lord Mackenzie's widow, she could do so with great skill.

Jameelah had disposed of his evac suit and wiped the deck. No sign remained of the mess. Alec turned his back on her and whispered "chair." The ship didn't respond to his command.

If whoever tampered with his ship assumed she was an escape pod, they might not have noticed her more complicated, and more sensitive, systems. If he didn't gain control of the ship soon, consequences could be serious. Life support could shut down. Safety programs on the jump sequence could fail. They would be in less danger on the damaged space station.

Alec's new toy should be in dry-dock, not running around with her insides screwed up and her captain shivering on the deck naked, except for a towel. Suddenly, Alec couldn't stop shaking. He shook his head to bring Legate Jameelah into focus. *I'm going into shock. God, what a mess I've made of things.*

"I could use some clothes, Jamie."

With an impatient gesture, the Legate tucked a tendril of hair behind her ear. She blushed when he continued to stare. He hadn't expected the organized, independent Imsada Legate to have a soft side. She had melted in his arms when he breathed in her ear. Would she now?

She turned from him. "Don't call me Jamie. You know my name. It's Jameelah. Now, you will tell me yours."

Alec's chill deepened at the words spoken with a harshness for which he was not prepared. To what lengths would she go to make him talk? In his fantasy, Jameelah had not been in charge; she had willingly put herself in his control. With considerable discomfort, Alec realized their positions were reversed.

"You didn't seem eager to learn my name last night, Legate. I must apologize for not greeting you properly when you arrived. Poor manners, considering you were so prompt. I admit I doubted you would accept my invitation."

She shook her head again, shrugging her black hair out of her eyes. "What invitation?"

If things had gone differently, he would be waking up now with all that lovely hair beside him on the pillow. Would it feel as silky smooth as it looked?

"My invitation to meet at emergency lock five, of course. You do realize this is my vessel?"

Her eyes widened, but only for a moment.

Alec continued to goad. "That *is* why you're here? Our rendezvous? Last night, you seemed most eager to share my bed."

Jameelah's face hardened into an unbecoming scowl.

"Will you undress too, Jamie, or is this some obscure Imsada ritual? Am I required to remove your clothing with my teeth?"

The Legate curled her hands into fists. So the lady didn't appreciate his humor. Convincing her to

lock him in the bedroom might be easier than he thought, but more enjoyable if she joined him. Her neck looked so inviting with wisps of hair tucked behind her ears.

Alec allowed his towel to slip an inch lower on his hips. "I'm certain you have many vices, Jamie, but I thought we'd established voyeurism wasn't one of them."

"I didn't bring any clothes for you, Lieutenant. You are an unexpected guest of the Imsada."

So she hadn't planned this. One suspicion confirmed. But it remained to be seen if the Imsada knew what they had accomplished. Had Rami chosen him as a hostage because of his convenient location after the explosion, or was there a leak in the Triden High Command? Did the Imsada know who he was? Did Jameelah?

God, where was Lorna? Had Rami taken her? Had Gunny gotten her off the station? The deck bucked under Alec's feet.

Until help arrived, he would have to deal calmly and rationally with the Legate. He tried to take a deep breath, but the pain in his side caused him to gasp instead.

With a hand pressed against his side, he began again. "Changing the voice command ID on a ship constitutes an act of piracy. I can't promise to be a pleasant guest, but I am prepared to be a gracious host. If you say 'Open' when I pull on the handle two feet to your right, I'll have some clothes."

"Stay put. I'll do it." Jameelah pulled an exercise suit out of the bin and threw it at him.

Alec dropped the towel to catch his clothes and chuckled when she averted her eyes. Shy. Modest.

The Legate had several attractive attributes besides those she hid beneath her jump suit.

Smiling made his face hurt. He rubbed his swollen jaw, wondering if the bone had cracked. "Would you care to join me in the next room? I'm in no condition to do anything but sleep, and the bed is large enough for two. But then I've already told you that. Haven't I, Jamie?"

"Sit on the floor, Lieutenant, and don't call me Jamie."

Alec sat. He would have to put on his pants anyway. His equilibrium grew more uncertain by the minute. Unable to raise his arms to put on the shirt, he folded it to use as a pillow. He lay on his back, his feet braced against the wall.

Slowly, he passed his hands over his chest. The effort required to diagnose himself was too great. His palms barely warmed. One rib cracked, maybe two. If he could manage to wrap them, they wouldn't hurt so much. He sensed Jameelah sitting in the command chair ten feet behind him.

"Four days is a long time, and lieutenant is so formal." The Legate's voice softened, her husky, sensuous tones threatening to create an immediate, and false, intimacy between them. "Why don't we start with your first name?"

Alec shook his head. A few hours ago he'd been kissing this woman, wondering if he could lure her to his bed, or if he would have to make a more businesslike arrangement. Now, he was not so easily seduced.

"Why don't we start with *your* name, Jamie dear? You say it's not Jamie, and we both know your

parents didn't name you Jameelah." Alec heard her reaction this time, her gasp of surprise that he knew so much about the Imsada.

The Imsada practice of taking a new identity to shield their relatives from reprisals by the New Alliance was similar to the security measures his own military took. The Triden fleet was the perfect place for someone like Alec to hide.

"Or don't you feel like sharing such personal information with your prisoner? Should I address you as your honor and spend the next four days kowtowing?" His teasing tone slipped, the last coming out more harshly than he intended. He wanted to shout, to scream. He wanted to put his hands around her neck and force her to tell him what she'd done with Lorna. But anger would reveal his weakness. Besides, shouting made his head pound.

"I left my birth name behind when I joined the Imsada, Triden." She spit out the last word as a curse.

Alec tried not to flinch but failed. From the sound of her voice, she was standing again, no more than two feet away.

"Tell me your name or I will stop the oxygen flow to the cabin. You will suffocate." Is that what she had done? Alec remembered feeling too tired to keep his eyes open. Then, when he woke, he was free of the evac bag. He felt close to blacking out again.

"Tell me. Your first name will do, for now."

Did the Imsada know he existed? They might. Imsada intelligence was spotty, but occasionally they got lucky. The Triden High Council knew the Emperor had a brother, and Thane informed the New Alliance higher-ups during the last round of negotiations that he had an heir of legal age.

*The Legate wants a name, so pick a name.* He could always give his last alias if he could think what it was. But Alec couldn't think at all. The walls came in and out of focus, and his stomach churned as if going through a variable-Gee exercise.

He heard Jameelah open a cabinet behind him, but didn't turn to look. Even with his feet elevated and propped against the wall, he felt light-headed. All that blood pooling in the bruises on his legs. If he escaped the dangers of internal bleeding, simple care should pull him through--liquids, blankets, rest.

Suddenly, Jameelah was kneeling beside him. Alec tried to rip the tube of oxygen from behind her ear, but he could only watch with fascination as his hand wobbled slowly toward her. He couldn't even make a fist. She steadied his shaking hand when his fingers brushed her lips. So soft, so full. Alec stared at her mouth, and tried to concentrate on what she was saying.

"I'll call you Mac. Now that your General Thane Mackenzie is Emperor, you're all changing your name to Mac-something." Her voice had returned to normal--not threatening or falsely seductive. She fixed a drinking straw into a container of water. Her fingers felt hot against his still-damp skin.

It was too late to pretend any name he gave wasn't a lie, and for some reason he didn't want to lie to her. But he couldn't tell her who he was, what he was. The New Alliance knew Alec existed, and they



might decide to look for him. They might even have planned all this.

The thought sent tremors through Alec's already weakened body. Every day that passed before Thane signed the peace treaty was another day of death. Alec couldn't be responsible for one more minute of it.

Her fingers burned his face when she brushed his hair back and helped him drink the water. "You're cold, Mac, very cold."

"Keep me warm, Jamie dear," was all he could manage to say. The woman he might soon have to kill was saving his life.

### Chapter 3

"Has she launched?" Rami asked. He stopped pacing behind his navigator, Abbass, the only man in his crew intelligent enough to do more than squat on the deck. Rami missed his usual comrades, but this mission required men too loyal or too stupid to ask questions. Abbass was loyal. Abbass would die for the Imsada. More importantly, he would die for Rami.

"She launched just now, sir. No other pods have left the station, and the Triden fighters remain in their launch bays."

"Good." Rami began to rub his hands, his usual gesture of satisfaction, but he scratches the Triden

witch had left on his right hand stopped him. "When you've confirmed Legate Jameelah's heading, proceed to rendezvous."

So many things could go wrong, but the possibility of success made any risk worth taking. Rami retreated to the far side of the room and stood at the door that lead to the crews quarters, feeling strangely uncertain. The Emperor's sister was much younger than he'd anticipated.

He didn't know why he'd given the order that no one should touch her. No one had questioned him; the men settled into a game of cards before they launched. Only Abbass raised his eyebrows to wonder why they had taken the Triden woman if not to enjoy her. Rami knew why he had taken the girl. He just hadn't realized until now that he wanted her for himself.

"Course change on the Legate's pod confirmed," Abbass announced. "The trip to Bradley-Five will take nine months in that escape pod. The Legate won't be happy if she misses the peace conference."

Rami grunted in reply. Not happy? Jameelah would be furious. He returned to look over Abbass' shoulder at the fading blip that marked the Legate's position. She faced several possibilities on her trip. Rami didn't know which outcome he would find most satisfying.

If New Alliance captured her, they would order her executed as a member of the Imsada Council. A satisfactory outcome, surely, but not as enjoyable as what would transpire if the Tridens intercepted her first.

Rami could imagine the scene. Legate Jameelah captured in the act of kidnaping a Triden officer, a

badly beaten Triden officer. And more than kidnaping. That had been a stroke of luck. No, a sign from God. Rami mumbled a prayer of thanks under his breath and began to pace again.

God had most definitely blessed his mission. Why else would He have placed the tipsy, strutting Triden dog in his path? Why else would that Triden have left his ship docked at the escape lock one door away from the very pod Rami and Jameelah planned to take?

Kidnaping was a minor crime committed often for politics and money. Taking a vessel with its owner onboard? That was piracy. Tridens hated nothing so much as having their vehicles tampered with. Touch a man's ship and you might as well have slept with his wife. Yes, the Tridens would deal with Legate Jameelah quite harshly.

If, by misplaced fortune, Khay-Alva's widow reached Bradley-Five safely, she would miss the peace conference. That would be something, at least. Abbass had programmed the small ship for a long, slow trip to Bradley-Five.

Should Rami come up with some other use for Jameelah, he knew where to find her. Rami didn't realize he'd laughed aloud until Abbass turned in his chair and stared.

The navigator almost asked his questions. Rami sensed them hanging in the air between them. *Why did you leave the widow of Khay-Alva alone on an escape pod with a foreign man? Did she agree to this breach of custom? Does she know you are sending her through space patrolled by the New Alliance?*

Abbas's questions remained at the back of his throat. The three men playing cards on the deck didn't

look up. Stupid was more reliable than loyal, but Rami needed one man competent enough to pilot the ship. He couldn't let mundane tasks distract him. Rami had to attend to his guest.

Her knees pulled tight against her chest and her arms wrapped around her ankles, Lorna sat studying the room. She recognized her surroundings--the crew quarters of a station escape pod. Gunny gave her a tour of the evacuation system when she arrived for the wedding reception. He meant to reassure her by explaining the safety measures, but Gunny didn't understand.

She wasn't afraid of hull breaches. She wasn't afraid of dying. She was afraid of all those people at the reception.

Lorna hugged her knees tighter when the door opened and a man entered the room. It was him. The one who had rescued her.

The explosion had seemed like magic--an answer to her prayer that the evening would end. She never would have dared pray for what happened next. It still seemed like one of Mother's stories. The handsome prince riding to her rescue.

The prince spoke. "You will stand when I enter a room, woman. You will show respect."

Lorna slowly straightened her legs and slipped from the bed to the floor. Her legs wobbled under her, and the man reached for her arm. When he lowered her to the bed, he stood close, his feet touching

hers.

"Now you will sit." A slight smile accompanied the order, giving Lorna courage.

"What are your names?" she asked.

The man looked surprised at her question, then angry. "You will call me Rami. You need not know any other names."

Lorna fought the urge to tuck her knees under her chin again. She kept her legs dangling over the side of the bed, her hands clutching the bed clothes. "You may call me Lorna. I don't have a last name either."

The slap knocked her to the side, slamming her face against the wall. Her head still ringing, she pulled herself upright. What had she said wrong? She couldn't think. His hand, fingers spread, pressed against her chest and pushed her against the wall.

"How dare you call me a bastard," he shouted in her ear.

She closed her eyes, willing the man to disappear. Alec said it didn't matter that Mother wasn't married to her father. Marriage was a silly social custom. Besides, even Alec thought her father was much nicer than Lord Mackenzie, Thane and Alec's father.

With her eyes closed, she couldn't see the man, but he continued to shout. "You will treat me with respect, sister of the Emperor. I am not one of your servants to be insulted and ordered to kiss your feet."

She could see this prince was more dangerous than handsome. His face was all angles, and a scar

ran from the point of his cheek to disappear into the closely cropped hair at his temple. Like Alex, he had black hair, but Alex never hit her. No one ever had.

His angry voice frightened her, but his hand no longer pressed her into the wall. His fingers, still splayed across her chest, gently massaged. She arched her back in response. Her body seemed to want more. But what?

Lorna had no idea where she found the courage to speak. "I...I don't want you to kiss my feet."

Rami stepped away when she spoke, as if her flesh had burned him, and stood rubbing his hand. They both looked at the scratches she'd made. She couldn't tear her eyes from the sight of those fingers--strong hands, workman's hands, like her father's.

Rami straightened and hid his injured hand behind his back. "You will tell me what I want to know."

\* \* \*

Lorna felt as if fear were drawing her into an ever-shrinking ball. She found the strength to nod, but her arms wound around her knees again.

"You are Lorna, sister to the Triden Emperor," he said, as if daring her to dispute him. She nodded again, too afraid to correct him. She was only a half-sister. Thane tolerated her presence for Mother's sake. She hadn't even attended the wedding. But she had to attend a reception. Mother said Thane

planned more receptions than there were relatives to go around. "Lorna, you must start living up to your responsibilities."

She knew she couldn't do it, not alone, not without Alec.

Attending the actual wedding ceremony was out of the question for Alec too, of course, but he had met the bridal party earlier in the year. Alec had mentioned it to her in his offhand way, mocking his status as the invisible younger brother. "An unexpected honor for a mere second son to be introduced to the bride."

"Who was the man taken with you?" Rami demanded.

Lorna began to rock, banging her head against the wall. She counted each time her head met the wall, but it was no use. She couldn't generate enough pain to block out the memory of Alec's bloodied body. She had pleaded with Alec, asking him, please, what did he want her to do. He had to tell her what to do. Why hadn't he answered?

She rocked harder, hot tears started down her cheeks. Behind closed eyes, she watched again as Rami's men stripped and beat Alec. How long had she watched, horrified and fascinated, as the beating continued? Her brother's beautiful body, bent and bloody. Had she unknowingly willed that to happen too? Was she that wicked?

"Who is the man?" The voice again, more angry, threatened to break through her pain.

She continued to rock. When she begged him to make the men stop, Rami had given the order. She

didn't understand their protests or what remained left to do to Alec, but she did understand Rami made them stop. The three men carried Alec to his ship. Had they let him return home to Mother? Was he there now?

Rami's injured hand cradled her head, keeping her from banging it against the wall. His voice, soft and seductive now, broke through her defenses. "Who is the man?"

Without the pain she could think clearly. Protecting Alec's identity was more important than anything, more important than her life. "He is my bodyguard, Elliott. Please don't hurt him."

"What is the man to you? Has this Elliott touched you?" "Touched me?" Lorna echoed, not knowing what he meant. Rami placed his open hand against her chest again. Stretched to their full expanse, his fingers captured her nipples and squeezed. "Has he touched you, like this?"

His bloodied hand moved to her knees and slid upward. "Or like this?"

She stopped him before his fingers reached between her legs. Now she understood. Rami couldn't know Alec was her brother; his secret was safe.

"Elliott is my bodyguard. Nothing more. Rami leaned her back onto the bed and covered her with a blanket. After wiping the tears from her cheeks with the back of his hand, he bent low to deliver a chaste kiss on her forehead. "Has anyone touched you in this way?"

"Only you," she whispered.



Alec didn't know what woke him. He only knew that the struggle to emerge from the nightmare he could not remember took longer than it had the day before. He wiped a trembling hand over his face, and he looked for Jameelah. She was asleep in the command chair.

He looked away, not wanting to focus on her body. Asleep, she appeared so soft, so vulnerable, and, as always, out of his reach. After the past eleven days, he didn't know if he wanted to kiss her or strangle her. Alec rubbed his ankle, chaffed from the tether that secured him to the wall. He didn't remember tugging at the straps, but his ankle was bleeding.

As a second son, Alec often found he was left to fend for himself, but until recently, he'd always managed to land on his feet. Painfully aware of ending up flat on his back this time, Alec spread his blanket beneath him and began to exercise. Since he regained his strength, his routine hadn't changed. The clasp of the tether attached to his leg clanged on the deck.

Jameelah started at the sound, then yawned before she curled into a tighter ball. "Must you do that now?"

Alec wondered again how he failed to recognize the famous Imsada Legate. He probably knew as much about the Imsada as anyone in the Triden military. When he'd crashed his plane into the side of a mountain, his brother Thane had assigned him a desk job. Contemplating the Imsada question filled the six weeks Alec spent in the hospital. What do you do with a hundred thousand people who refuse to stop

fighting for a cause they lost over five hundred years ago?

Instead of thinking of some way out of this mess, he kept returning to that evening--standing with Jameelah in the swirling, mad colors of the dancing couples, tracing the line of her jaw with his forefinger. Such soft skin, such changeable eyes. Coolly intelligent one minute, hot with passion the next, and periodically overwhelmed with sadness.

He remembered so little about the day of the explosion, but he remembered those eyes. He had tried to make those brown eyes laugh, but the harder he tried, the more troubled they became. Now he was the troubled one. His strength was returning, but his mind remained in a fog.

"Rise and shine, Jamie. It's day eleven. Rami's seven days late. Time to give back my ship so we can go home."

"It's time for you to tell me your name, Mac. And don't call me Jamie."

The exchange was as routine as Alec's push-ups. He called her Jamie to remind her she wasn't really in charge, and she called him Mac because he refused to give her another. If only he didn't want to know how his name would sound on her lips.

Their morning ritual of exchanging insults complete, Alec rattled his tether to remind her it was time to lengthen his leash for the day. Until she did, he couldn't move his left foot more than two inches from the wall. He pretended not to watch when she stretched in her makeshift bed to reach for the tiny air supply she clipped behind her ear during the day. Her breasts molded against her flight suit, making him

more breathless than fifty push-ups warranted.

"I'm releasing you now," Jameelah announced, letting out the slack in his tether.

Now he could move more freely, but Jameelah remained out of reach. So did the ship's control panels. Twice a day she released him completely so he could visit the sanitary, but no controls of consequence were kept there and the computer continued to ignore his voice commands. She had to order the cabin flooded with a sedative only once to convince him her threats were real. After that he reattached the tether himself when she gave the order.

The ease with which she controlled him would have distressed Alec if the questions she asked made any sense. The whole thing was just too damned confusing. When she questioned him, he understood her at first, but then she started to speak some strange language he couldn't understand. If she continued to press, he couldn't focus his eyes or his thoughts on anything. His mind began to wander, and eventually he could only nod dumbly to all her questions.

Free to move away from the wall, Alec rolled onto his back and started his sit-ups. His mind seemed to clear sometime after their fifth day together, but by then, she'd stopped interrogating him. *It doesn't matter*, he reminded himself, shaking off the feeling he was overlooking something important. *Nothing matters as long as she doesn't find out who I am.*

Jameelah stood to stretch her legs, and paced while she watched him force his body through his daily routine.

He didn't like an audience for this sort of thing. He felt self-conscious in the skimpy shorts that revealed the yellowed bruises that covered his legs, and she made him feel like he should explain his actions. *Hey, lady, I'm not doing this to show off or to brighten your day. If I don't keep moving, I'll get stiff and won't be able to move when we make landfall.*

And he needed to be ready, mentally and physically, for the moment his chance came. He had to find a way to save Lorna. He couldn't count on Thane to lift a finger.

"So, Jamie dear, what should we discuss today? Governmental systems best suited to an agrarian society? The futility of an armed struggle against a superior force? How much food we've got left?"

"Food is the limiting factor," she said. "But I calculate we have a sixty-day supply, a hundred and twenty if I jettison a certain Triden officer who won't let me sleep."

Alec swallowed an angry retort. She was probably right about the food, but altering the ship's computer to respond to her voice and touch had jammed most of the ship systems. The only computer files he'd seen her access contained environmental and piloting controls. The Legate seemed content to wait for Rami to rescue her, no matter how long it took.

"It's that chair, Jamie. Not a comfortable place to sleep. You should join me here on the floor, or in the next room. You can always tie me to the bedposts if you think I might misbehave. No telling how long we'll have to stay here, Imsada efficiency being what it is."

Somewhere along the line, their verbal confrontations had evolved into playful banter. Jameelah no

longer took the bait by getting angry. As long as they didn't discuss politics.

She returned to her seat and crossed her legs in a half-lotus. Alec took the same position on the floor across the room, then leaned forward to take the bowl of rations she pushed toward him with her boot.

When he looked at the food, some unknown fear knotted in his stomach, something akin to what chased him out of sleep every morning. If he didn't notice the food, it went down smoothly, but if he tried to eat, his throat closed up. Had he reacted this way at the New Alliance prison camp? He couldn't remember. Alec returned his bowl to the floor.

To make matters worse, Jameelah seemed to know he couldn't eat if she didn't talk. That made him feel more helpless than the tether around his ankle. What the hell was wrong with him?

He swallowed hard and forced himself to relax. *You're home, sitting down for breakfast. Nothing to worry about.*

"How did you burn your legs?" She gestured to his crossed ankles, and her gaze followed the length of his legs to the hem of his shorts.

Being trapped that first night had brought it all back--the trip two months ago from the crash site to triage encased in plastic, Gunny talking him through the four hours to the hospital, the shocked looks exchanged when they peeled off the plastic.

Alec picked up his bowl and crossed his ankles. Thin lines of scar tissue traced a jagged map on his legs. "My plane had a disagreement with a mountain. She thought the mountain should get out of our

way. We both lost the argument. That was about two months ago."

"Only two months? It's a shame the Tridens aren't as eager to share their medical knowledge as they are their politics. Children scarred by New Alliance justice fill our streets and relocation camps."

By unspoken agreement, they didn't discuss politics while they ate, but Jameelah had a way of making even the plight of innocent children sound political. No, he wasn't at home spending time with a friend. Under normal circumstances, the good Legate wouldn't be caught dead sharing a meal with a Triden officer. Alec's attention returned to his food and he lowered his bowl to the floor.

"Have you recovered from your accident?" Jameelah seemed to hold her breath, then released it when he returned his bowl to his lap.

"Yes, you intercepted me on a quick stop between hospital and home." Alec flexed his shoulders to test his muscles. "Your little bomb didn't do my back any good."

Alec leaned against the bulkhead and took his first bite before he continued. "I suppose I should thank you for this detour. My sadistic superiors released me in time to help Mother with the harvest. If it weren't for your charming company, I'd be surrounded by swarms of screaming women all telling me how pale I look and not giving me a moment of rest."

"So your people are farmers, Mac?"

Alec thought about the question, hardly noticing he ate until he caught her ticking off the number of spoonfuls he managed to swallow. Did she really care what happened to him, or was she afraid her

hostage might die before she could collect a ransom?

"Yes, simple farmers," he said. The truth, but hardly valuable information. The term farmer applied to half the population on most planets, including Jameelah's. But his interests went far beyond putting bread on the table for one family or for one planet. "When it comes to interplanetary trade, information, not farming, is where the money is. Shipping food pays if your customer stays on the edge of starvation. Find out what he can grow himself, provide the technology, and he'll be in your debt for centuries. Your people were farmers too before this disagreement started."

"That was five hundred years ago." Jameelah protested. "When the Calopians obtained a fraudulent colonization permit and seized land that we had designated...."

Tired of hearing the same old argument, Alec broke in. "Farming's in the blood, Jamie. What does it matter where you find the soil? Given the right planet and incentives, the Imsada can redirect their energy productively. Land is land."

When Jameelah sighed instead of answering, Alec shook his head. How could one group of people be so incredibly stubborn? And this woman? How could such an incredibly beautiful and intelligent woman have gotten involved with the Imsada?

She was born into it, of course, but she was also Khay-Alva's widow. Had the politics come before she chose her husband or after? Alec shrugged off the question. It probably didn't matter to her anymore, and it shouldn't matter to him. Then why did he want to think she married her husband because she

shared Khay's politics instead of his love?

"Are you married, Mac?" she asked, one eye still on his bowl.

Where had that question come from? Evidently, his captor considered him to be in poor shape indeed if she thought he needed this much distracting. Alec looked up from his food to examine her.

Her cheeks flushed red and she rushed on to explain. "I'm only asking so I can tell the hostage broker who he must deal with once I learn your identity."

*She can't be jealous*, he thought. *She just wants to keep me talking in hopes I'll say something useful*. How much information would a hostage broker need to make a positive identification?

"No wife. No children." Alec shrugged and returned to his food. His marital status wasn't important to his identity. Service records didn't include such personal information. "I'm surprised. Isn't it the duty of every Triden warrior to leave a son or two behind in case he's killed in battle?"

Alec finished his food and shoved his empty bowl toward her with his foot. "I intend to return home in one piece, thank you. Besides, I haven't had the time to find a wife. Mother could come up with some distant cousin, I suppose, but too many of those marriages don't end well unless the husband does die in battle. If he manages to make it home, he is too often greeted at the door by a wife he hasn't seen in years who's been shacking up with the gardener."

He moved back against the wall while Jameelah took his dish and stowed it along with hers. She returned to her cross-legged position, looking as if she didn't want the conversation to end.



"It must be difficult to wait for someone who might not return." Jameelah's voice shook noticeably.

He felt the need to comfort her suddenly. He moved toward her until the clanging of his loosened tether reminded him of his position, and of hers. She flinched at the sound and slid farther away.

That she wanted someone to hold her could only be the wishful thinking of a man forced to share close quarters with a beautiful woman for much too long. But she didn't shorten his tether or turn away. Instead, she asked another question. "Is it fair to blame the unfaithful party?"

"Blame? There's no question of blame. That's one of the reasons why I've avoided the situation. It's perfectly understandable behavior." Alec searched for the right thing to say, but he couldn't make sense of this conversation. And he wanted to. He still hadn't given up on making her eyes laugh. "That was my mother's solution to the absent husband, by the way."

"What was?" she asked.

"The gardener. My mother had an affair with the gardener."

Seeing the look of disbelief, then a slight smile on her face, he continued. "She was so taken with our gardener, in fact, that he fathered one of her children. Not me, unfortunately. I imagine they still meet in the fields on hot summer nights."

Alec found himself laughing and wondering why he hadn't seen the humor in the situation before.

"You are teasing, Mac. No woman would be so brazen."

"Ah, you underestimate my mother. I spied on them in their secret trysting place more than once.

Quite an education for a young boy. Besides, the gardener is a good man. I suspect the universe would be a better place if more gardeners than warriors left sons to take their place."

"Who will I be dealing with then? Your mother, a brother?"

Alec felt his smile fade, and he felt incredibly tired suddenly. He had almost forgotten that the woman who sat across the room was not Jamie dear, but Legate Jameelah. "Stop with the questions. I have no intention of telling you anything that would be of use to...."

Then, his stomach lurched and he could almost hear the blood drain from his face. With his hands pressed flat, palms down on the deck, he felt the ship shimmy. They had entered hyperspace, and if Jamie hadn't initiated it, that meant the ship was jumping on its own.

Rami would never find them under these conditions, neither would Gunny nor anyone else. They were more than just lost. Only incredibly good luck or a guardian angle would save them now, and Alec didn't believe in either.

As the consequences flooded Alec, one image from the half-forgotten evening eleven days ago came back with unpleasant clarity--the silent carnage, dust swirling in the artificial wind, people rising slowly, Gunny's raised weapon, and Lorna's face distorted in a scream he could not hear.

Jameelah watched Alec turn an unhealthy gray. Concern almost made her miss the change in

rhythm of the ship's engine that signaled a hyperspace jump. "What was that, Mac?"

"I don't know what you mean." his face remained blank, almost blank. His forehead wrinkled when another vibration ran through the ship.

Jameelah stood and drove her clenched fist against her thigh. Why couldn't the man answer a simple question? She was in danger of violating one of the Imsada's basic rules. If Rami didn't come soon, she would strangle her prisoner before she received a ransom. "We're jumping through hyperspace. What did you do?"

"What can I do?" Mac kicked at the tether that had circled his leg. It didn't reach the command seat.

"But you're not surprised. This isn't the first jump, is it? I thought I felt something before. I'm such an idiot. This is why Rami hasn't come." "Don't blame yourself. It takes experience to tell when a ship of this mass jumps a short distance," Mac said. "If we've jumped before, I haven't noticed. A certain Imsada Legate has kept me rather distracted for the last eleven days."

Jameelah felt her cheeks flush. She was supposed to be interrogating, not distracted by, her prisoner.

Mac stood, his posture mirroring hers with his feet planted wide and his fists on his hips. "Your Rami is late because the rescue beacon stopped working. It was out of synch with ship vibrations, and made a distinctive hum while transmitting. The Imsada should steal a better class of goods."

Did she believe Mac? Did she want to? A faulty beacon would explain why Rami hadn't picked them up; she didn't want to believe he'd abandoned her.

"Escape pods don't jump through hyperspace," she snapped, sounding angrier than she felt. Having to depend on Mac made her feel helpless. Mac glared at her and snarled his reply. "I thought we'd established your status as a pirate. This is my ship, not a station pod."

His ship. Not a shuttle to get him from the planet's surface to the space station, but a craft equipped to jump between stars. How rich was Mac? Who the hell was he?

"How long have you known Rami wasn't coming, Mac? How long have you known about the beacon?" Shouting at Mac felt good. She should be angry--angry with the Tridens for not including the Imsada in their peace plans, angry at Mac for not telling her about the beacon.

Mac took a step toward her and shouted back. "I told you to return control of the ship if you wanted rescuing. Don't blame me for the actions of the incompetent bunglers you employ. How foolish do people have to be to waste their entire life arguing over something that was settled five-hundred years ago?"

Jameelah felt her entire body stiffen. Her brother had not died for a foolish cause. Neither had Khay. When she touched the cylinder of air behind her ear Mac backed away and returned to his place in the corner. She sat in the control seat facing him, not ready to turn her back on him.

He took a few deep breaths before he spoke again. The tremor in his voice told her Mac had to struggle to speak softly. "I believe we're making randomly programmed jumps, but I can't tell without accessing the controls. Rescue under these conditions in a vessel this size...odds are infinitesimal."

Maybe Mac was ready to give up, but she wasn't. She was going to get to the peace conference. Jameelah turned in her seat to face the controls.

Mac inched forward, his arms extended and his hands open. His tether kept him from reaching her. "Show me the main screen and the jump console. I'll tell you what I can."

She moved to the side so Mac could see the necessary panels. Rami had altered the ship's programs to answer to only her voice and to recognize only her finger tips on the controls. Mac needed her to operate his ship; she needed him to find out what had happened.

His forehead wrinkled while he studied readouts that meant nothing to her. "This is a long jump. I can't tell where to. Most of the systems locked down when you tampered with the voice command controls. Even if you released the ship to me, I couldn't bring her out of this jump cycle. After the jump, the ship won't schedule another for several hours. It's a safety feature. If you want Rami to find us, you'd better let me reboot your rescue beacon before we make the next jump. It's in the sleeping quarters."

"You'd do that?" She didn't dare hope that he would.

"Listen, I don't want to starve out here, or serve as your last meal. There are worse fates than being picked up by the Imsada. Besides, my people may stumble across us first."

"The Tridens." The thought frightened her, but not as much as the next. "Or the New Alliance."

"Worried about them catching up with you before you can claim Emperor Thane's offer of clemency, Legate?" He backed away from the controls.

"I intend to land safe in the arms of the Imsada," she said, with more bravado than she felt. "Safe in Rami's arms?" Mac's sneer sounded almost jealous.

Did she want to believe he cared just a little? For a moment the image of his black-clad body with dancing green eyes filled her head. She saw herself walking toward him, not dressed as an Imsada Legate, but as a widow--swirling skirts of blue, purple and orange, her late-husband's wealth reduced to the turquoise and silver, hung around her neck. Wishful thinking, nothing more.

Mac might not talk like a war-weary soldier, but the hard, hot body she had held eleven days ago, that body pampered with the soothing oils whose scent had filled her head, belonged to a mercenary, a tempered sword, owned by the Triden Emperor. He must be trying to distract her, to get her to make a mistake.

"Go to your corner while I open the door," Jameelah said and waited while Mac moved to the opposite side of the cabin. She released the tether clamp around his ankle and unlocked the door to the other room.

Mac remained where he was and gestured for her to enter. The sight made her catch her breath. Like the ballroom at the wedding reception, this room left Jameelah feeling like a little girl pretending to be grown up.

Unlike a standard escape pod, which slept six and included a sick station and supply lockers, these crew quarters were designed for one, or more precisely for one and a guest. The bed, big enough for two

as Mac had promised ages ago, dominated the room.

Topped with a light blue, satin cover, the bed seemed to float on the thick white carpet and pulse against the contrasting navy blue walls. She walked around the bed and found unmarked panels recessed into the far wall. Running her hand over the half-hidden handles, she realized the beacon control might be behind one of the panels, but she had no idea which one. She didn't even know what a rescue beacon looked like.

Mac leaned against the open door, keeping his distance. She recognized something familiar about the way he leaned against the door staring at her--ankles crossed, arms folded over his chest, head cocked to one side. Or was it the way his eyes sparkled that made her think of Khay?

At that moment Jameelah understood the difference between her dead husband and the man she'd held in her arms eleven days ago. Unlike Mac, her faithful dance partner, Khay would have danced with every woman at the Emperor's reception, and more than one of them would have received his invitation for a late night rendezvous. A heavy weight seemed to press on her chest.

An unreasoning fear shook her--Mac would somehow read her thoughts if their eyes met. She turned her attention to a small box secured to a shelf behind the bed. On its lid, the relief of a woman's face was carved in white. Wondering if the image held some significance, she released the box from its holding clamps.

"Still looking for clues, Jamie? Surely, you know who I am by now. Haven't I given you enough

hints?"

Mac's question stopped her hand. "You've told me nothing."

"Come now. Don't be cross. Just find a woman who sleeps with her gardener. That narrows it down to a few million."

She didn't need Mac to tell her how she'd failed the Imsada. The sick pulsing in her stomach reminded her. All she had to do was find out who Mac was, and yet she couldn't complete even that simple assignment. But she didn't have to put up with Mac looking so smug either.

She turned to face him again, holding the box in front of her. "Rami will no doubt have better luck with you than I."

Mac frowned and the amused glint fled from his eyes. He refolded his arms and deliberately examined her from top to bottom, allowing his gaze to linger at her breasts. "That depends on what sort of luck you're talking about, Jamie."

Jameelah turned away. She'd spent the last eleven days trying to erase the image of Mac's bruised legs and side. Now she'd reminded them both. Rami would force Mac to talk, and he would not be gentle. She felt her eyes tear at the thought.

Examining the small box again, she raised the lid. It was empty, no clues here. Before she could close it, music flooded the room.

When she spun on her heel to locate Mac, the box flew from her hand and shattered on the floor.



The music didn't stop.

After ten nights of sleeping sitting up, the bed looked like heaven, especially now that Mac lay on it. His shirt rode up revealing his stomach, kept flat by all that exercising. Swirls of dark hair covered his exposed skin and drew her eye to the band of his shorts that rode low on his hips.

"You shouldn't have done that." Mac scolded with a smile on his lips and his eyes closed. "It was one of Mother's favorites. You're going to get me into all sorts of trouble."

Jameelah knelt to pick up the pieces of the broken box, grateful that Mac's tone was playfully chiding. The box evidently meant nothing to him. But the music did. His hands, encased in the open-fingered leather gloves he always wore, moved in time with the beat that accelerated slowly to match the soaring melody he hummed.

"God, that woman hates me." Mac groaned. When he rolled onto his stomach, the view of his back was no less tantalizing.

"Who hates you? Where's the music coming from?"

"The ship was a present from my mother. She no doubt outfitted it to embarrass me. I'm not certain what triggered the music; perhaps pressure on the bed." Mac rolled onto his back again, hugging a pillow to his chest and peering at her over its blue, satin surface. "You are being treated to a recording of an obnoxious, technocratic twelve-year old. Music preserved for much too long by a sadistic mother."

"That's you playing?" The thought stunned her. Mac, Triden officer, assassin for hire, could make

this beautiful music? "So what are you doing crashing planes into mountains when you can play like that?"

"I can't play like that, not any more."

Jameelah moved to the foot of the bed to watch him. He turned his head and drew an arm up over his eyes.

"I caught my left hand in a wine press two weeks after I made that recording. They repaired it well enough for me to function as a pilot, but the agility no longer matches the right. It lags behind on fast pieces."

"So? Play the slow ones. Most people don't even know what a piano looks like."

"It doesn't matter now. It happened a long time ago." Mac lowered his arm from his eyes slowly. The music might be from his past, but she could see he felt the pain now. "Mother sent this music along to remind me how I always mess up. My hand and the wine press, my plane and the mountain, now this."

"This wasn't your fault," she said.

Mac looked up sharply. His face darkened.

Of course it wasn't his fault; this was hers. Mac blamed her. She could see it in those devastatingly green eyes of his. He didn't know what had happened to his young friend from the dance, and his family must be worried to death. They didn't know if he was alive or dead.

Mac fumbled with a panel beside the bed. She braced herself for some trick, but the music softened

and the lights dimmed.

Then it occurred to her that his mother might be the answer. Regulations required owners to register privately owned vessels. Once they docked, Jameelah could learn his mother's identity by tracing the identification markings burned into the outer hull. She could find out who Mac was without any cooperation from him, and without hurting him. Tension flowed out of her body at the thought.

His good spirits evidently restored, Mac rolled onto his side, his back to her, and held out his hands. "Come lie with me, Jamie. The bed is heaven. You can tie me up."

Jameelah's sympathetic mood shattered under the grin he threw over his shoulder. The hair block the hospital must have used on his beard had worn off. Mac's smile looked more like a leer surrounded by three day's growth on his chin.

"I let you in here to fix the beacon." She took a step back and fingered the air cylinder behind her ear.

"I can't fix anything during a jump."

"Why didn't you say so before I opened the door?" Jameelah asked, but she knew the answer. Mac had been after her to get in this room from day one, and the reason was obvious. The bed.

On his back again, Mac's eye lashes fluttered on his cheeks. He yawned and he shifted on the bed, fluffing the pillow under his head. "Come, join me, Jamie." He patted the bed next to him.

She eased onto the bed, sitting in the corner farthest from him. That night when he'd stopped her

from picking up the punch, he had seemed to take her pulse. As it had that night, her heart raced now and Jameelah wondered if he somehow knew. Pulse racing, blood pounding at the mere sight of Mac in bed, his gloved hand on the bed stretched toward her.

Mac was a Triden officer, she reminded herself, a member of a group known for ruthlessly, mindlessly enforcing Triden edicts. Given the chance, he wouldn't hesitate to hand her over to the authorities. Tridens always followed orders. If only Mac would follow hers.

What did she want him to do? What did she see when they looked into each other's eyes over breakfast? What did he hide behind his facade of casual self-assurance, and why was she so desperate to find out?

Jameelah leaned forward and slowly reached for Mac's hand. He didn't move when she slipped her fingers around his wrist and felt for his pulse. Slow, steady. Mac was sleeping.

## Chapter 4

Jameelah didn't remember falling asleep, but she woke with a start on the floor. With the deck bucking beneath her, she became a dizzy mass of flesh clinging to the side of the bed. For one terrifying moment, she was back on the space station, fighting to get to the escape pod.

When she fought her way to her knees, the bed was empty. "Mac," she screamed. It seemed an eternity before he answered.

"I'm fine, Jamie, but I'm not sure about our friend." Mac rose slowly from the other side of the bed and stood, precariously balanced on the heaving deck. "We'll need to work together to stabilize the ship."

They lurched their way to the control room as the ship tumbled out of control.

Why did it have to feel so damned right--Jamie dear shifting deliciously on his lap. That's how Alec thought of her now, Jamie dear, almost one word. "Relax, Jameelah. Let me do the work."

His hands rested on top of hers, guiding them to the controls. Her body rested on his thighs, taking him places he had no business going. "You're fighting me. I need your fingers loose."

He whispered the next command in her ear. When he spoke aloud, the ship asked who he was,

hesitated like an amnesiac trying to remember, then announced he lacked authorization to give orders. Alec wanted to beat his fists against the panels to let them both, Jamie and the ship, know how angry he was, but whispering saved time.

Jameelah leaned forward and ordered the jump screen on. Her hair parted to reveal a rare glimpse of skin--the back of her neck. If the situation weren't so critical...but it was and he didn't have time to take advantage. Why did the woman have to be so damned attractive? He tried to ignore what her restless hips did to his lower body while he focused on the controls.

His ship no longer tumbled wildly, but he couldn't take credit for putting things right. They had jumped close to a gravity source, what he hoped was a Triden-controlled space station or planet. The ship compensated on her own.

Alec yawned in Jamie's ear and dropped his left hand to pull her against him, pretending he needed to look over her shoulder. The immediate danger had passed, but he didn't want to release his captor, not yet. He'd managed to trigger his rescue beacon before the ship began its tumble, and he wanted to program their next jump in case Gunny didn't arrive before Rami.

"Why do you need the jump console?" Jamie asked. She questioned his every move. If she knew more about this class vessel, she'd be a threat.

"Because I have no idea what you and your friends have messed up. I have to make sure safety programs are functioning. If the ship jumps before she has a chance to power up, we could get lost

between destinations. We wouldn't want that now, would we, trapped together in hyperspace for all eternity?"

Jamie didn't reply, just wiggled, forcing him to bite back a groan. She removed his left hand from her waist while he used her right to search for a path around the locked-up controls. When he yawned again, Jamie shifted her weight off his legs so he could stretch them under the console.

Did she realize how being stuck on this tiny ship drove him thoroughly crazy? The New Alliance prison camp had never seemed this confining. But then the New Alliance hadn't forced him to watch the body of Khay-Alva's surprisingly young and lithe widow move beneath that pesky flight suit she refused to shed. Now she was rubbing herself against him. The New Alliance had never been this cruel.

Some days she seemed very much the Legate. Then, he would notice the way her compact body moved beneath her flight suit. Combat-ready, thanks to Imsada training, but a feminine figure. Hips made for having babies, his mother would say.

His first assessment of her had been correct. She was bright, dedicated, and even charming when she forgot he was a Triden officer. He admired her devotion to her people and to her cause. She had a purpose; something he'd lost long ago. Duty was all that remained for him, and duty said he should not enjoy her company.

When he pulled her arm forward to reach the jump controls, Jamie ground her hips against him. He fought to keep from answering her restless movements with purposeful thrusts of his own. Now was not

the time for such games. He needed to delay the next jump to give Gunny time to find them, and to choose a favorable destination for the next jump in case Gunny didn't come riding to the rescue.

"Rami wouldn't have programmed these jumps. He wanted to find us. So what do you think is going on?" she asked.

"I don't share your trust in Rami's good intentions, but your man's tinkering could have triggered something I was playing with. If I didn't give any commands after so many hours, I wanted the ship to take evasive action and head for home. Unfortunately, I haven't told the ship where home is. Default is a series of locations chosen at random by the computer. I can't remember how many jumps she'll make before stopping, or if she'll stop at all."

"That was rather careless of you."

Careless? Anger surged through him like liquid fire. The accusation cut deep, and much too close to the truth. As a musician, a student, a pilot--Alec had always aimed for perfection, and fallen short. He certainly hadn't been the perfect escort for Lorna, and he wasn't doing a good job of rescuing her.

"I'm careless? This ship is brand new--I haven't even named her yet--and you've messed her up so badly she won't speak to me. Just shut up while I try to figure out where we are."

When Jamie froze in his lap, he felt more tired and impatient than angry--tired of this endless tension, impatient for his life to return to normal, in need of several days of uninterrupted sleep. Not to mention relief from the delicious ache his captor had triggered between his legs.



Where did he want to go in a day or two when the ship had powered up for a jump? The scene of the crime, the space station? Crawling with Triden and New Alliance investigators. They'd have Jameelah tried and executed two minutes after he opened the airlock. Is that what he wanted?

Of course, he assured himself. He pushed her off his lap and balanced her on one knee. Jameelah had to pay for what she'd done, but not right away. He had to find Lorna first, and Jameelah was his best lead. New Glasgow was another logical destination. He could take Jamie home.

*That's it. Take the young lady home and introduce her to the family.* Alec grimaced at the thought, remembering how his relationship with his fiancée had unraveled after their brief visit to New Glasgow. The irony was almost too painful. Besides, Mother would strangle them both for losing Lorna. Alec hesitated a moment before punching in coordinates. He had to choose among the few destination codes he'd memorized.

"Computer, display our location." Jamie called up the viewing screen and turned to grin at him. She'd given the right command without his help.

"I would have thought of that, eventually." Alec stifled another groan when her elbow dug into his chest, then he squinted at the screen. That explained why the ship had stopped tumbling. They'd settled into a low orbit around a planet.

Calling up the viewing screen freed several controls. Now might be the perfect time to take over the ship and head for home, or it would be if he covered Jameelah's mouth and removed the oxygen tube

from around her ear. But he hadn't been lying about the jump. They had to power up first, and he couldn't be certain the ship would function as ordered. The ship had locked him out of too many files for him to be certain about anything. He still needed Jamie's cooperation.

With the rescue beacon transmitting, he should stay put. Gunny was on the way, moving around would only make his job more difficult. For once he would play it safe. That should please Thane. For once, his little brother had considered the options rationally and made the sane decision. He would only trigger the jump if a New Alliance vessel stumbled across them before Gunny.

"Let's see if we can pin a name on this place." Alec passed Jamie's hand over the panel.

The name "Bradley-Five" flashed on the screen, blinking and sputtering. His arm tightened around Jamie's waist.

Triden-Prime he would have considered a happy coincidence, New Glasgow divine intervention, but this...someone had planned this. Bradley-five was the same Imsada relocation camp Jameelah had visited less than a month before.

*She's fooled you again.* The thought rocked him. Why did he continue to misread Jamie's motives? No, he hadn't read her wrong. Jamie dear wouldn't have done this. He just kept forgetting that Legate Jameelah would. Not everyone was as bad a liar as he was. Evidently the Imsada Emissary lied very well indeed.

"Not so tight, Mac." Jamie squirmed, then clawed at his hand. "Let me go, Mac. You're hurting

me."

He automatically loosened his grip. After giving him the bad news, the ship's controls froze. All of them. He twisted Jamie to the side, balancing her on his knee while he jabbed at the panel with his own useless fingers. It couldn't be right, couldn't be unless she had lied about everything.

He had to admit she was consistent--pretending they'd missed the rendezvous with Rami, pretending she didn't detect the ship's jumps, pretending they were in danger, pretending she didn't know which planet they orbited, pretending....

The controls remained frozen even with Jamie's finger under his. Vacillating between embarrassment and anger, he swung Jamie around to face him. She sat on his lap, her thighs tightening around his legs, her mouth inches from his.

"It's all right, Mac. I know this place," she said, evidently seeking to reassure him.

"What have you done?" he demanded, grabbing her arms and shaking her. He expected to see fear in her eyes, but he saw pity instead. A growl sounded deep in his throat.

She pushed against his chest with her open hands. "We'll be safe here. I won't let Rami hurt you."

He dug his fingers more deeply into her arms. The image that followed lasted only a split second, but it felt more real than the last eleven days. And if he did hit her, what then? He would be no better than Rami. The image of Lorna, frightened and helpless, rose up to meet him. Alec's fingers shook and convulsed around Jamie's wrists.

Then he realized Jameelah hadn't given the order to sedate him. Why not? Her hesitation confused him. He released her, afraid of her suddenly, and of the desire for her that welled up inside him. She appeared to waver in his arms, waver between Legate Jameelah and Jamie dear.

So he wouldn't hit her, but he would hit someone and hit them hard. The very next person he saw. He could only pray Rami came charging through that airlock before anyone else.

The ship lurched and the engines revved beneath Alec, marking the ship's descent. When Jamie fell hard against his chest, the body he had lusted after for eleven days and nights lay in his arms.

He should take the air cylinder from her now. And do what? He couldn't stop the ship's descent, couldn't keep the hatch from being opened from the outside. He tried to think, a difficult proposition with Jamie's head buried in his chest and his arms wrapped around her.

With Jamie's warm body pulsing against his, Alec's fists unclenched and hitting someone slipped several notches on his list of priorities. He tangled his fingers in her black, satin hair and pulled her mouth roughly to meet his. He realized his mistake the instant he slipped his tongue between her teeth.

She did not recoil from his touch, did not remind him they would soon be captor and captive again. Instead, her lips opened to him, as hot and urgent as his.

In the same way he couldn't release Lorna to defend himself against Rami's men, he couldn't release Jamie now to defend himself. Her thighs gripped his legs when she leaned against him, putting her full weight into the kiss. She responded to each thrust of his hips with ones of her own, threatening to push

him over the edge.

How he wanted to go over that cliff of passion and take Jamie with him. He had wanted that since the first time he held her on the dance floor. No, before that--in the hospital when he took her picture from the Imsada brief book and slipped it under his pillow. A foolish, romantic act. An act of infatuation, just as this act, now, was an act of lust. It could be nothing more.

He couldn't love this woman who wanted to destroy everything he and his family believed in. He couldn't.

Mac said nothing after they kissed. He pulled her to her feet and he stood, still holding her in his arms. When he returned her to the command seat, she reached for him, her eyes closed. He moved away, taking the warmth of the room with him.

When she opened her eyes, she found him squatting across the room as if she had tethered him there.

"You don't need to pretend anymore, Legate." He growled the words.

Jameelah shivered, cold and exposed without Mac's arms around her. His green eyes chilled like ice. He hadn't called her Legate in days, not since he started eating again. Why was he acting this way? One minute kissing her, the next treating her like the enemy?

"What do you mean pretend? What's happening, Mac?" He had done something to the ship. She

hated not knowing, hated feeling helpless. She had been stupid to trust him and more stupid to let him kiss her.

Mac closed his eyes and ran his fingers through his hair with both hands. "So you still want to play, Jameelah. Well, I'm not certain I do, not anymore."

"Mac, tell me what you've done, or I swear I'll have you unconscious on the floor." When he stood, she held her breath and prayed he'd tell her what he'd done to the ship. She couldn't bear to see him suffer that way again, not while the taste of his lips lingered on hers and the ghostly sensation of his arms clung to her.

"Let's stop with the lies, okay, Legate? If you wanted me unconscious, I would be." Mac spat out his words with ill-contained fury, fists clenching and unclenching, but he didn't move from his spot in the corner. "Having me awake evidently serves some perverse purpose. I apologize if I have proved a disappointment in the entertainment department. I was under the mistaken impression you were enjoying yourself."

No, Mac hadn't disappointed her, except, perhaps, in being slow to act. Their journey at an end, she would never know what might have happened. She would have only the memory of that one amazing kiss when the ship broke their stalemate and hurled them into each other's arms.

The intensity of her response to Mac guiding her mouth to his left Jameelah limp. Khay's youthful touch faded, a dim memory blotted out by Mac's demanding mouth and hands and hips. And now Mac

was angry. He believed she had somehow orchestrated all this.

Her world tilted. When her head cleared, they were captor and captive again. "Enjoying myself? Don't flatter yourself, Triden. I have more important things to do than play with the Emperor's underlings."

And she hadn't enjoyed it. Not really. The suddenness of the contact had surprised her, that's all. Did he think a kiss, a dozen kisses, could buy her? That she would give him control of the ship now that they had arrived among friends?

Either Mac had a high opinion of his charms, or he put a low price on hers. If only she didn't still feel his mouth against her lips, his hips thrusting against hers in rhythm with the ship.

"I just want to confirm my suspicions." Mac took a small step forward as he spoke. "You visited this camp three weeks ago. This was your plan--bringing me to Bradley-Five and taking eleven days to do it. You went to a great deal of trouble to set this up. I want to know why."

How would Mac know her itinerary? Her visit to Bradley-Five wasn't a secret, but it wasn't public knowledge either. How could a mere lieutenant follow her movements? Why would he want to? Jamie put her hand to the air cylinder behind her ear to ensure it remained firmly in place.

She tried to keep her voice level and calm. "I'm not the one telling lies, Mac. I learned of our location the same time you did. I'm not apologizing for the good fortune of landing among friends."

Mac looked truly murderous now; his green eyes flashed. She sank further into the command chair

to increase the distance between them. The roar of the engines drowned out the sound of his fist slamming against the bulkhead. The ship completed the final descent.

"This is your last chance to tell me who you are, Mac. Once I locate Rami, the questioning won't be civilized. I want to spare you that." The image of Rami's men beating Mac made her want to close her eyes, but she didn't dare, not with Mac so close and looking so murderous.

"You really expect me to believe your precious Rami isn't going to walk through that hatch when it opens?"

"Why would he? We missed rendezvous by seven days, three sectors away. He couldn't know your ship would jump all over the galaxy. He didn't even know this was your ship."

"Didn't he?" Mac leaned against the wall and folded his arms across his chest. He was in control again. "I'm an unlucky man, Jameelah, but a ship making purely random jumps lands on the enemy's doorstep? Even I'm not that unlucky. If you are telling the truth and know nothing about this, why did Rami program your supposed escape pod to land here? It's a long way from Bradley-Five to the peace conference on Triden-Prime. Think about it, Jamie. That's all I ask. Your Rami went to a lot of trouble to get us here. Maybe you should be wondering why."

Jameelah shivered and rubbed her arms. Was Mac right? Had Rami planned this? Maybe she should worry not only about Mac's safety, but her own as well.

Mac stood braced against the bulkhead when the ship touched down. The hard pop of air pressure



equalizing and the hollow clang of the airlock sliding open brought Jameelah to her feet. She panicked when she realized Mac stood next to the hatch, angry enough, and strong enough, to do bodily harm to whoever entered.

Before she could act, a gray-haired figure darted through the door waving his arms and chattering his greeting. "Halim," was all she managed to blurt out.

"Jameelah, my dear, we worried so when you didn't arrive on time."

Relief at seeing a friendly face flooded her. Halim, one of her father's old friends, served as leader of Bradley-Five, a relocation camp for Imsada sympathizers. Then Jameelah realized Halim expected her. Mac was right. Chance had nothing to do with their arrival. But what did it mean? And where was Rami?

Jameelah watched Mac over Halim's shoulder while Halim continued to fuss. Recovered from his initial shock, Mac looked relieved, almost amused. He really had expected Rami, and seemed to relax when no one else entered the ship.

When Halim released her and helped her through the airlock, Mac followed them into the corridor. It looked like any other space dock--gray walls, high ceilings--but dustier than most and more dimly lit. Halim took her arm and pulled her down the hall, gushing his greetings.

"Khay-Alva's widow, such an honor for us to have you visit again so soon. How is my old friend Borak?" Halim didn't pause for an answer, and Jameelah didn't have one. Father hadn't spoken to her

since the day she chose the Imsada over a life in her father's house mourning her dead husband.

"If only circumstances were more pleasant," Halim continued. "Rami was here at the appointed time, of course, but had to leave to avoid a scheduled monitoring session by the New Alliance."

So Rami knew they would end up here. Only their timing was off. Why would he have programmed the pod to come to Bradley-five? Jameelah couldn't ask now, not with Mac following two feet behind. What possessed Rami to do this? She should be on her way to the peace conference, not languishing in a relocation camp.

When they rounded the final corner, Halim paused to watch the pressure doors close behind them. "We will let Rami know you have arrived safely, Legate. I'm certain he will make every effort to retrieve you soon. Now, who is your friend?"

Halim turned to offer his hand to Mac, his smile fading when Mac's arms remained crossed over his chest.

"He is an officer of the Triden Empire, Halim."

Halim's smile returned and he pried Mac's gloved hand away from his chest to pump it. "One of our Triden friends. Here to see first hand how our enemies keep us in this unjust and unhealthy prison, I trust. I am Prefect Halim of Bradley-Five. We can't offer you much in the way of hospitality. Delivery of food is most unreliable--"

"No, Halim." Jameelah's face grew hot, but Halim continued to fuss. She grabbed his arm to stop

the embarrassing flood of words. Mac grinned while Halim continued to shake his hand, obviously enjoying her discomfort.

"Mac is my, is our, prisoner. He refuses to give proper identification. Perhaps you will have better luck convincing him to talk than I."

"A prisoner? One of our Triden friends? Surely not. Rami never proved the case, Jameelah, and personally I don't believe the Triden High Council ordered your beloved husband's death or that of Rami's brother. A New Alliance plot, I'm certain. We must look to the Triden Empire for hope now that they have so thoroughly chastened the New Alliance. Our Triden friends will force a peace with the Calopian government, and we will return home. Isn't that true, friend?"

Mac gave an official bow with his reply. "I can assure you, Prefect Halim, the Triden Empire does not detain persons, regardless of their crimes, in nonproductive relocation camps. We employ more efficient methods."

Mac's words sent more chills up her spine. She had no doubt Mac told the truth. The Triden Empire would not waste resources on relocation camps. They favored more immediate, and more final, solutions to dispose of their enemies, giving no special consideration to women and children.

Halim didn't seem to notice that Mac's answer was less than reassuring, and led them into a cargo bay. Bradley-Five was an abandoned mining complex, self-contained under an enviro-bubble, and the only structure on the planet. Large cargo bays and docking areas provided a marginal habitat for the nine

thousand plus souls housed here. Families of Imsada members tried and sentenced in absentia. The New Alliance registered each person on their sensors, and made regular visits to guard against escapes and intrusions. Outside the bubble, an escapee could survive five minutes to five hours, depending on the time of day.

Jameelah was grateful Halim didn't announce their arrival. She followed the two men, who walked side-by-side past rows of makeshift shelters, ignored by people practiced in creating privacy by refusing to acknowledge intruders.

Only the children appeared unaffected by the oppressive environment. They ran in and out of wobbly rooms constructed of discarded sheet metal, playing the same games their parents had played under the Calopian sun. The men squatted around the room trading greetings over breakfast; the women retreated to their tents, not to emerge until the strange man passed.

The rooms were cavernous with ceilings that stretched out of sight in the dim, dusty light. Everything an unrelenting gray. Only the floor contained some color. The women had tried to soften it with rugs woven from clothes too ragged even for the children to wear, but even these turned to a hopeless gray under the unrelenting fall of dust and the tread of bare feet.

Bradley-Five looked drearier than it had on her last visit, but in Jameelah's experience, these camps went one of two ways--a gradual downhill slide or a quick descent into chaos. Bradley-Five descended gradually, but inevitably.

She had raised enough funds to keep the people fed and clothed for another half year and Halim's steady hand kept the peace. Even if Mac's people paid a fortune for his return, it would not help. The people had no purpose, nothing to do all day except wait for release.

A group of ragged, shrieking children tore around a circle of squatting men and into their path. Mac scooped up a boy who went flying past and tossed him playfully in the air before returning him safely to the ground.

For a moment the boy and his friends studied the smiling stranger with the green eyes and the short beard. When the boy giggled and stretched out his arms for another ride, the children quickly swamped Mac, each calling for a turn. At Halim's gentle command, they dispersed back into the maze of shelters.

"How long have you been held here, Prefect Halim? How many of you are there?" Mac asked.

Mac again became the practiced diplomat he had appeared at the reception--his voice so full of concern that Jameelah could not perceive the deception. It shamed her to have him see her people like this.

She stopped Halim before he could answer. "The lieutenant is my prisoner, Halim. You and I will ask the questions."

Jameelah's chest tightened when the light of interest faded from Mac's eyes. He snapped to attention, no longer watching the children who followed at a distance. She hated to remind Mac of his status, it seemed unnecessarily cruel, but he was her prisoner, not a visiting dignitary or a favorite uncle.

If she didn't keep him in his place, Mac would have Halim following orders as smartly as any Triden lackey.

Halim stopped at the entrance of a corridor that led to the cluster of small cells that had served as crew's quarters when the mines were active.

"You may consider our Triden friend your prisoner if you wish, Legate Jameelah," Halim said. "But this planet makes prisoners of us all. With your vessel guarded, you need not restrict our guest's movements. There is no other means of escape."

Halim gave a diplomatic bow, vague enough in direction to be meant for her or for Mac. "Let me offer you a place to wash and rest, then I would be honored to offer you a tour of the camp. Questions can wait until tomorrow."

With a sigh, Jameelah wove her way through the narrow passageway after Halim. He seemed determined to view Mac as a visiting diplomat. But Halim was right about one thing. For now, she was as much a prisoner as Mac.

## Chapter 5

Jameelah spent her first day on Bradley-Five trying to contact Rami, her second day wondering why his aides blocked her every request, and her third sorting through Halim's records. How long could Bradley-Five last without a fresh infusion of supplies? How long before the death rate began its final climb?

When she didn't keep herself frantic with activity, the impression returned--Mac's body, hard and demanding, trapped beneath hers. But Mac seemed to have forgotten her completely. Instead of pestering her with questions and demands, he remained out of sight.

She ordered his meals and directed his guard to return him to his cell for six hours of rest every night, but their paths hadn't crossed since they arrived and she didn't go looking for him. Until today.

She didn't need to see Mac, she assured herself, or want to have another ugly confrontation, but after four days, Jameelah grew suspicious. Halim would do no more than politely ask their prisoner for his name, and after living with Mac's infernal exercise routine for eleven days, Jameelah knew he wouldn't remain idle long. And if he wasn't idle, he was getting into trouble. If not now, then soon.

When Halim took her to Mac, she expected to find him working on some scheme to escape. Instead, she found her captive Triden officer soothing a young boy with a hypnotic song.

She noticed his hands first. They were bare. His previously omnipresent gloves nowhere in sight. Mac had traded in his revealing shorts for standard camp issue. The drab gray jumpsuit hid his healthy, well-conditioned body, and the hair sprouting on his face aided his disguise. Bradley-Five inhabitants would find the similarity of his dress and his untrimmed beard reassuring. Did he realize that or did he have some other reason for wanting to blend in?

He didn't seem aware of her as he worked in the makeshift surgery. Metal storage boxes filled with medical supplies lined two walls. A flap of tattered cloth served as the door. A boy sat in his mother's lap on a lumpy mattress covered with a sheet grayed from washing. Mac knelt on the floor to treat his patient.

Her heart constricted at the sight of Mac stroking the boy's hair, his lilting tones captivating and distracting the child. When Mac snapped the bones in the boy's arm into place, she jumped at the sudden, violent act. The boy merely whimpered, clinging to Mac for a brief moment before he turned to his mother.

"Your Doc Mac is tireless. So many have benefitted from his arrival. We have waited for a doctor for so long. Why didn't you tell me you'd brought such a prize?"

A doctor? She knew she should feel gratitude for what Mac was doing, but all she could feel was anger. Eleven days, and he hadn't told her? Three days on Bradley-Five and everyone knew except her?

Why did Mac want her to think of him as a hired killer in the Emperor's employ instead of a caring,



capable physician? Why couldn't he trust her with even that much insight into his life? Jameelah spoke through clenched teeth. "I didn't tell you because I didn't know."

Jameelah felt tangible shock seeing Mac like this. He had taken on yet another persona. How many more people could he become? Which one was he really and could she trust any of them?

When the mother carried her son from the room, Mac glanced up. "Little Rayac is now free to die of dehydration or exposure or malnutrition with a straight arm."

He made the comment without bitterness or despair. *I've done what I can and that will have to be enough*, his expression seemed to say. A smile, albeit a small one, graced his lips. He ran his fingers through his hair before scrubbing his hands and arms with disinfectant.

If Mac were planning some treacherous act, Jameelah would never know, for in that moment her suspicion vanished. She didn't know why he had kept his identity as a doctor from her, maybe he feared it would make him easier to identify, but when he saw the need--her people's need--he acted.

He was a doctor now because these people needed one. She lost the ability to see him with any objectivity when he held the injured child in his arms. All differences between them vanished. She and Mac had one goal--caring for her people.

When two men helped a woman in labor into the room, Halim dragged Jameelah away. She lingered, watching Mac quiet the woman--one hand on her forehead, the other on her distended belly, all the while talking to her in the same hypnotic sing-song tone that had soothed the boy. When the woman

cried out, Jameelah followed Halim into the empty corridor.

"What else have you learned from my prisoner?" she asked.

"I have failed to learn anything of value, Legate Jameelah. I can only offer my apologies. When I question him, Doc Mac becomes most unhappy. The sadness confuses him. I cannot bear to treat a kind man so. Such pain and sorrow behind his eyes when I ask questions, and nonsense comes from his mouth."

A milder reaction than Mac's response to her questioning, but Halim hadn't left him gasping on the deck like a fish out of water. She felt her face flush at the memory of how she treated him those first few days when she'd tried to get him to talk.

Halim gestured to the curtain that served as a door. "Doc Mac's coming is most providential. My first assistant's beloved wife. He is most fond of her."

Jameelah nodded, lost in her own thoughts. Something, some conditioning or training, was keeping Mac from revealing his identity. Halim's men found identification markings burned into the side of Mac's ship, but Imsada intelligence couldn't break through the security barriers that protected the registered owner. If she didn't discover who Mac was soon, she would lose her chance to return him quietly to his people. According to Halim, Rami would arrive tomorrow.

Some time later the door opened and Halim's assistant stumbled through, sobbing the news that his son was dead. Jameelah stood aside while Halim to lead him away. Questions could wait. Jameelah

slipped into the makeshift surgery, adjusting slowly to the dim light. And adjusting to the silence--an unnatural silence.

The woman slept and Mac no longer sang.

Tears stood out clearly on his face. Jameelah had never seen a man cry before, not even her father at her brother's funeral. Mac's gaze held hers for a brief moment, his wet, green eyes cloudy with weariness and sorrow, then he shook his head.

She wanted to tell him how she felt, how she loved him for what was trying to do, but the words died on her lips. After what she had done to him, how could she tell Mac anything and expect him to believe her?

Mac pried the dead infant from its mother's arms, and reverently washed the frail body in precious, rationed water while he chanted the words of the ancient rite. Before the men carried the woman from the room, Mac wrapped the still-born baby in a bit of torn sheet--saving the special warming blanket for one who would need it--and returned the bundle to its mother.

The room empty of patients, Mac knelt over a ration bowl of water and scrubbed the blood from his hands and arms. Jameelah tried to think of something appropriate to say. She was, after all, the Emissary to the Imsada Council, and Mac was doing them a great service. She'd spent the past four days in futile activity, while Mac....

"This would never have happened if we Tridens were in charge." The lilt had vanished from Mac's

voice. "Women allowed to become pregnant in these appalling conditions. The New Alliance is totally incompetent. When we take over, things will change." He complained in harsh tones as if she personally were responsible for the child's death.

Jameelah had wanted to thank him for his efforts, gifts given freely without demands for his own freedom, but now Mac spouted party line, defending the Triden's practice of forcing sterility on populations they determined to be unproductive. Why could they do nothing but argue? Well, she could complain, too.

"When your precious Triden Emperor takes charge, there will be no babies." Jameelah left her place by the door and crossed the room to squat on the floor.

"Food and water rationed," Mac snapped. "Heating and sanitation marginal. Medical care nonexistent. Are you suggesting these women want to become pregnant, Legate?"

"So you Tridens choose for them. Is that your solution to the so-called Imsada problem? Sterilize a generation and watch as they age and die? Less violent than most solutions the Triden Council puts forth, I admit, but genocide still."

"You could choose less violent solutions yourself. Blowing up a space station hardly qualifies you as pacifist of the year."

There it was, the anger that shone so brightly in Mac's eyes and kept them apart. Jameelah felt her face flush again, this time with anger of her own.

"For five hundred years we have petitioned for freedom, for autonomy, and finally, for the right to exist. Five hundred years of strikes and counterstrikes. Five hundred bloody, hate-filled years. How much longer would you suggest we wait?"

Mac shook his hands dry. On the ship, his bath water, treated with scented oil, kept his skin silky. Now, from the elbows down, his arms were dry and bleeding. Bradley-Five had run out of protective gloves weeks ago. Mac grimaced when he sprayed disinfectant on his arms and hands. From the pocket of his jumpsuit he pulled a pair of rumpled leather gloves, which he eased over his hands, his fingers extending through the open holes.

Standing in the middle of the room, he closed his eyes and wrapped his arms around himself. "I'm not mad at you, Jamie. I'm tired."

Jameelah resisted the urge to go to him where he stood swaying. She didn't know if he would accept her comfort. When he opened his eyes, he squatted next to her on the infirmary floor. Jameelah watched his anger dissipate. He sighed and sagged against the wall--shoulders drooping, hands resting slack on his knees.

"I don't like losing patients," he said. "Especially young ones. There's no reason for it."

"Do you get much chance to deliver babies in the Triden fleet?" she asked, unable to keep her questions to herself any longer.

"It's been a few years, but I haven't forgotten how. I tried, really I did, but it was too soon. The baby

was too small."

She wanted to take Mac in her arms and let him know that sometimes trying had to be enough, but fear held her back. Fear that, like Khay, Mac saw her as nothing more than a tool to use when appropriate and otherwise ignore. She sat stiffly beside him, unable to move, as he continued.

"If we'd gotten here sooner, I could have delayed delivery.... Dammit, Jamie, when we're responsible for the Imsada, when we sign that peace treaty, I promise, things will change. We won't stick your people on rocks like this. There will be enough food, properly trained personnel--"

"Don't make promises you can't keep, Mac. People might believe you, and it would be cruel to raise their hopes. Besides, it's not your responsibility. Not the baby, not this place. You did what you could. Without you, the mother might have died, too. As for this camp, it was five hundred years in the making, and there's nothing you or I can do about it."

But Mac had tried, and she could love him for that. She loved him even if nothing came of his good intentions, and that realization seemed too hard to bear. She turned, inching away so their hips no longer touched.

They could only stay together as long as they kept running, as long as neither one of them reached their goals. Jameelah knew serving the Triden Emperor was more important to Mac than being with her. He would return to the fleet, or die trying. And having a moderate from the Imsada Council represent them at the peace conference was too important to her people to let her own happiness interfere.

Mac stood and drew aside the canvas that served as a door. No patients waited. He dragged a metal packing crate from the corner and opened it, sorting through the contents and adding each item to the scant medical supply inventory.

Who was this man? she wondered again while she watched him work. On the voyage here, the image of the playboy Triden officer Jameelah had formed at the wedding reception had cracked. She learned about his family through his thinly veiled stories, learned about his love for making things grow and solving food shortage problems on a scale she never considered, learned about the music he played with such pain and passion that it hurt him to listen years later.

Today, Jameelah watched him sing an eight-year-old boy to sleep before resetting his broken arm, talk a frantic woman through a premature labor, and mourn the death of a baby he couldn't save. All three strangers. Her image of Mac shattered.

Now, watching his shaggy head bent over the crate in concentration, Jameelah knew this was what Mac was born to do.

His hands weren't meant to move indolently to tempt her with a glass of wine as they had on the space station. They weren't meant to nervously finger the hair-trigger on his weapon while he waited for the enemy to cross his path. They were not even meant to dance over the keyboard of a piano as she imagined they could with elegance and grace. His hands, cracked and bleeding, as they were now, could heal and comfort. This was Mac's destiny.

"What are you thinking?" Mac's forefinger pushing up on her chin forced her attention back to the room. She hadn't noticed him leave his work. He knelt in front of her now, his probing green eyes searching hers.

What was she thinking? Her rash acts had gotten Mac hopelessly caught up in this mess, and she didn't know how to untangle him. She felt as defeated as Mac must have after losing his tiny patient.

"Rami will arrive tomorrow, Mac."

"I know. Halim told me."

"Halim isn't trying to find out who you are, is he?" Mac smiled in reply. "Haven't you heard my screams for mercy?" He grimaced when he stretched his arms overhead and yawned. "Next time I'll have to complain more loudly about his painful inquisitions."

Mac moved to sit beside her on the deck, cushioning her back from the cold wall with his arm. Cradled in his arms. She couldn't help thinking this was her destiny. Or would be if politics of an empire, an alliance, and a five hundred year old war didn't stand in their way.

She tilted her head to the side and rested it on his shoulder while he continued to talk. The lilt returned to his voice, comforting and relaxing her.

"Prefect Halim calls me to his quarters twice a day for questioning. I would not betray a confidence by telling you what we discuss, but why didn't you tell me your father grows roses? My mother specializes in orchids. We have much in common." Mac's arm tightened around her; his lips brushed the



top of her head.

She wanted to give in to his soothing tones, to raise her chin and feel his lips against hers, but the thought of Rami questioning Mac made her pull away.

"Rami will make you tell him who you are," she said.

"I know what Rami can do. And I know what I must do. But, that's tomorrow. We have time."

Finally, Mac did seem to have time. He stroked her arm with his rough finger tips and Jameelah shivered with a frisson of passion.

He whispered seductively in her ear. "My Triden friends could arrive first. Promise me, Jamie, promise me if Gunny gets here first, you'll come with me, willingly. I can't leave without you."

He moved to straddle her, kneeling over her on the cold floor, her face between his healing, comforting hands. Mac combed her hair back from her face with his fingers. He tilted her face to look in her eyes.

Jameelah licked her lips while she looked at his, willing him to come closer.

He held back, whispering, "Promise me."

Unable to meet his gaze a moment longer, she turned her head. Mac's mouth moved a fraction closer. Would it be so wrong? Running away with Mac? He would be safe with his friends, but what about her? Did Mac have any idea what the Tridens would do to her? Would he plead her case, visit her in prison? Would he attend her execution?

"How can I run away with you and leave my people, Mac? You know how much they need me. They need us."

"How can we run away?" Mac leaned back, putting more painful inches between them. "Don't you mean why? We run to stay alive. To continue the fight tomorrow. I'm not asking you to betray anyone."

Mac sounded almost angry again, but he continued to comb his fingers through her hair, massaging her scalp in lazy circles. Jameelah opened her mouth while he untangled one hand from her hair and traced the outline of her lower lip with his thumb. His fingers smelled of disinfectant.

Such an honest, clean smell. It washed away the stench of politics. She glanced up to see his eyes hungrily devouring her; he wouldn't let her to look away. Suddenly, a day seemed like an eternity. An entire day to spend in Mac's arms before Rami arrived, and with him, reality.

"Rami could be delayed, or even captured," he continued, evidently encouraged by what she could only guess he saw in her eyes. "The New Alliance will incarcerate as many Imsada as possible before they sign the treaty. You will be safer with me, safer in Triden hands. Promise me, Jamie, promise me." Mac seemed determined to make her agree by sheer force of will, but he needn't have bothered. At this moment, she would have promised him anything for a kiss.

"I promise, Mac. With you, if your Triden friends come first. But Rami will arrive tomorrow. Your friends won't find you before--"

Mac ended her sentence with his lips pressed hard against hers, his tongue exploring her mouth.

Jameelah wrapped her arms around his waist and pulled. Their bodies rocked together as they had when the ship had thrown them into each others' arms.

He pushed aside the boxes standing next to them. The coarse hair on his face burned her skin when he broke free from her mouth to lower her onto the deck. For a moment she thought he was removing his gloves; instead, he tugged them more firmly in place.

"If Gunny doesn't get here in the next twenty-four hours, I'm going to make him very sorry." Mac bent to plant kisses on her neck and shoulders, his hands serving as a cushion for her head.

His teeth closed over the top fastener of her jumpsuit, and he tugged downward to remove her clothing with his teeth. Instead of the tearing sound of clothing giving way, they heard a rattle shake the door frame.

"The doctor is busy," Mac mumbled without releasing his hold on her zipper.

He looked so funny with her jumpsuit between his teeth, impatiently waiting for the intruder to go away. Jameelah clamped her hand over her mouth to keep from laughing aloud. Mac let the material fall, and brushed her hand aside to cover her mouth with his. His answering chuckles tickled her throat.

When the rattle at the door continued, Mac moaned and removed his lips from hers. "What is it?" he barked, all the frustration he must be feeling, coming out in his voice.

"A ship, Doc Mac. A ship has come."

"A ship is docking," the voice repeated.

Someone had incredibly poor timing. For four days Alec had lied to himself, told himself he didn't care if he ever saw Jamie again. For four days he'd kept himself too busy to think about any woman. But he saw her in every patient he treated.

The Imsada were different from what he expected, at least these Imsada were. Their dreams were simple ones, like those of the people who worked the land on New Glasgow, like those Alec had abandoned so long ago. And they would follow Jameelah anywhere.

Now Gunny had arrived. Alec would be home in a few hours, the crisis of the lost Imperial heir averted, and he couldn't tear himself away from Jamie. After these last painful hours, he seemed to need her more than before.

Death and sex. Alec had noticed the connection before. He found the most unlikely couples grappling in corners at family funerals. He'd recognized but never experienced the connection. Until now.

He was tired of facing death stoically, tired of being angry, tired of blaming Jamie for his untenable situation. Comforting the boy, watching the baby lose its battle to breathe--he wanted to blot out those memories with the few moments of unthinking bliss that would follow if he allowed himself to take Jameelah in his arms. Legate Jameelah or Jamie dear? It didn't matter which, not now. For him, the result would be the same.

Or could have been if he'd managed to spend a few minutes alone with her. Alec wasn't greedy. He

didn't need days or even hours, just minutes. He grumbled about his aching back when he rose to answer the door, stealing kisses from Jamie as he did so.

She scrambled to her feet, pulling herself up on the arm Alec offered, seconds before Halim entered the room.

"Rami?" Jameelah asked.

When she said the name, Alec felt he'd received a blow to the stomach. She wanted Rami to come riding to her rescue. He'd been a fool to think she would leave on a Triden ship willingly.

If Rami had arrived, Alec sure as hell wasn't going to stand around waiting for the Imsada to lead him away. The anger he had so recently shaken off returned in full force. He barely heard Halim's reply.

"Not Rami. It's the New Alliance. They've come for you, Jameelah. They know you're here."

Alec staggered back. The worst possible news for both of them. Jameelah remained stiffly at attention, betraying no fear, but Alec didn't mind admitting he was afraid. They were in a great deal of trouble. He had to act quickly. He couldn't allow the New Alliance to take him alive, and capture now would mean death for Jameelah.

Alec grabbed Halim's arm. "Is it a survey ship? How big?"

"A cruiser, Doc Mac. Not the ship they bring when they monitor."

Finally, a bit of good luck. "Without the sensors, they can't isolate unregistered people, but they must expect you to hand her over. Who knows the Legate is here?"

"Outside Bradley-Five? Well, Rami, of course, and his people, I assume. The Imsada Council most likely."

"So, just about everyone. The infamous Imsada security machine at work."

Jameelah intertwined her fingers with his. The intimate gesture in Halim's presence startled Alec.

"Mac, it doesn't matter how they found out," she said.

"Of course, it matters." *More than you could know.* The existence of an Imsada traitor had significant implications, especially for him. The Imsada knew Jameelah traveled with a Triden hostage. Did the New Alliance know as well? More importantly, did they know the Imsada had managed to capture the Emperor's brother?

*Jamie can't be my first concern,* Alec reminded himself. He had to find Lorna. But he couldn't let the New Alliance take Jamie. Rami was the enemy, not the innocent people on Bradley-Five and the other relocation camps. These people needed Jamie alive and working for their freedom. A small, hidden voice whispered *You need Jamie too.*

"Maybe it's time the New Alliance brought Legate Jameelah to justice," she said.

Jamie was shaking when Alec wrapped his arm around her waist. The New Alliance would have her tried and executed within the week. He had to keep her out of New Alliance hands until his brother signed the peace treaty.

Halim answered her offer to turn herself in with wide eyes and clenched fists. "Justice from the New

Alliance? Don't be foolish, Jameelah dear. Your father would never forgive me. I had your escape pod moved to the launch site farthest from where the New Alliance vessel will dock. You *must* leave now."

At least Halim was thinking positively. If the New Alliance mistook Alec's ship for a defenseless escape pod, he had a chance to surprise them if nothing else. Alec didn't want to go down without at least surprising someone.

"How far away are they?" Alec asked Halim.

"They will complete docking in half an hour."

"We'll wait until they land and let their engines cool before we launch."

Jameelah dropped his hand, propping her fists on her hips. "We? Mac, you're not coming with me. It's too dangerous."

"Is that an order, Legate? Do you wish to remand me permanently to Halim's custody?"

"Yes, Mac, anything. Just stay here. The New Alliance will arrange for your transport home. You can tell your mates twelve armed bandits, not a woman, kidnaped you."

Jamie must think he was a strutting, pride-filled fool who cared more for his reputation than for her safety. Hiding how her words hurt, Alec smiled, aware it likely looked no better than a grimace. Well, he didn't need her permission to take his own ship, and his ship needed him to pilot her now. No time remained to reprogram the controls, and Halim hadn't powered the engines for a jump.

Alec wished he could leave Jamie behind while he drew the New Alliance vessel away, but he

needed her to work command functions. The possibility existed--he could destroy the less agile cruiser. This didn't have to be a suicide mission.

He grabbed a shaving kit and scissors from the box he'd just searched. His beard would have to go and his hair.

"Prefect Halim." Alec bowed, enjoying the game now that adrenaline rushed through his veins and he considered the prospect of testing the fighting capabilities of his ship. "I assume my new master wishes me to serve as escort for the Imsada Legate. I cannot promise to bring her safely home, but I can promise to keep her out of the hands of the New Alliance."

"Yes, please, take Jameelah away. They mustn't find her here." Halim seemed relieved to have someone take charge.

Alec could make reckless choices with death being the preferable alternative to capture by the New Alliance. Preferable if not for Jamie.



## Chapter 6

Jameelah followed Mac, close enough to touch him when he rounded the final turn to his ship. He held his right arm close to his side, puffing while he ran. She could out-sprint him, but she paced herself, remaining a foot behind. He should have spent his stay on Bradley-Five resting instead of wearing himself out.

Now he was risking his life to keep her out of New Alliance hands. She only wished she could trust him. He would turn her in eventually--she didn't doubt that. But why didn't he turn her over to the New Alliance now? Why risk Rami catching up with them before the Tridens? Why was he so eager to avoid a New Alliance craft, anyway?

Jameelah pictured Mac as he had been, waltzing with drunken self-assurance at the Emperor's reception. That was the man she must remember. She couldn't let his behavior of the last few days cloud her judgment. In the operating room, he had barely time to touch her, but she still felt deliciously warm and wet.

He paused outside the pod to allow her to catch up. She shivered when he brushed past through the airlock, and shed his clothes as he continued on toward the head. Jameelah stood frozen just inside the hatch, trying to decide why he had this dangerous effect on her.

The first time they'd kissed didn't count. Mac was drunk at the reception, too drunk. The second time they kissed she hadn't given him a choice. When the motion of the ship threw them together, Mac couldn't have gotten away if he'd tried. She was sitting on his chest.

The first time too drunk to know what he was doing, the second, too short of breath to refuse. She crossed the room to the command seat, and ran her fingers over the chair. Would she have to sit in his lap again to make the ship work? The thought sent shivers up her back and threatened to buckle her knees.

"I need you." Mac's voice froze her fingers in mid-caress.

She whirled toward him, her face burning, embarrassed he'd caught her stroking the spot where he'd rested his head while accepting her kisses.

Mac had stripped to his shorts, his gloves still firmly in place. Half his beard was gone, his face nicked and bleeding. "I don't use a shaver much. We use growth block mostly."

A tipsy aristocrat, a cold-blooded killer, a gifted musician, a compassionate physician. Mac had more layers than an onion, more turns than her father's garden. He appeared helpless and vulnerable now-naked except for shorts and gloves, hands trembling, eyes lowered. Jameelah knew she would lose all control if she touched him.

Jameelah took a step away, toward the airlock. "You shouldn't be able to cut yourself with one of those."

He looked up, almost shyly, through his full black lashes, eyes glinting. "I have a special talent,

Jamie."

"Do we have time for this personal grooming?" Jameelah asked lightly as she stepped back again. She couldn't let him know how devastated his touch had left her.

He took another step forward. "We don't have a choice. I have to manually pilot the ship this time. It's too late to program anything."

The night of the reception she would have welcomed the news he was a pilot. She'd been so afraid he was with security. Now she didn't know what to think. Even with their limited knowledge of Triden military command, Imsada intelligence identified their pilots as being the most skilled and ruthless killers in the galaxy. And they always followed the Emperor's orders.

Besides, if Mac piloted the ship, that would leave her very much at his mercy. Her stomach twisted at the thought.

"I really am a qualified pilot, Jamie, and my hair will interfere with the controls."

Like that explained everything, or anything. Jameelah forced herself to move toward him and took the shaver. While she removed his beard, she noted her hands shook less than his. But she knew his hands shook with excitement, eager to get them on his ship. Her hands were already where she wanted them--caressing Mac's cheek, maneuvering around his tempting mouth.

"You have to do the chest, too."

Was he serious? She stepped back. He wasn't smiling, not with humor, anyway. Just that grim,

determined smile men get when they're about to do something they shouldn't enjoy but will.

The third time they'd kissed, on Bradley-Five, a sober Mac had made the first move. They could have just as easily continued their running political argument, but Mac changed the subject. He'd kissed her.

Jameelah found the broad expanse of Mac's chest easier to shave than his face. His flat, brown nipples came to attention under her fingers. He closed his eyes, lost in gleeful thoughts of battle, no doubt.

Before a mission, she had always known where to find her husband, entangled in the most convenient pair of female legs. He surrounded himself with earnest young women, eager to please the famous Khay-Alva. But why think of Khay now? Why torture herself with his betrayals?

Mac's stomach tightened when she bent to remove the line of hair that ran from his chest to disappear beneath the band of his shorts. Wedding vows had meant nothing to Khay. Kisses meant nothing to Mac. Losing his patient upset him. Hurt his pride. He turned to her for comfort. Nothing more. She couldn't expect Mac to give her what Khay had not. Jameelah's fingers slid along the border of Mac's shorts.

"I don't fly below the belt, Jamie."

Jameelah jerked at his voice, snapping the band that kept his shorts against his flat, and now hairless, stomach. "Mac, I have no idea how you fly, other than half naked, and I'm not sure I want to know."

Mac's green eyes clouded over at her angry words. Why did he have this ridiculous effect on her? He could make her angry with seemingly no effort. Or was she angry with herself because Khay's long-ago betrayals still hurt.

"Legate, we don't have time to return ship's controls to me. Even if we did, I'm not sure I could without a complete memory wipe. That requires a fully equipped dry-dock." Mac ran his fingers through his hair, betraying his concern.

"My ship accommodates a three-person crew. With a few words from you, the computer should accept me as pilot. It's not a command position. That leaves you with control and navigation. After I hook up, I can tell you what to do. You do realize your people powered the ship down? We're in the same situation as when we arrived. Almost two days before we can attempt a jump."

The sick pulsing in her stomach said she had counted on Mac to get her out of this. How could they get away if they couldn't jump? She had faced death before, but for the first time, she felt as if she had something to lose.

"How far do you want me to go, Legate?" Mac's hands, still shaking, brushed her shoulders and traced the length of her arms before caressing her finger tips. Those hands threatened to drive every coherent thought from her head. The warmth of his fingers contradicted his now distant green eyes and his return to addressing her as legate. "How serious are you about staying out of New Alliance hands?"

"That's why I don't want you to come, Mac. It's not fair for you to risk your life this way." It wasn't

fair. None of it. Finally alone with the man she wanted, and it wasn't right. Mac would be better off on his mother's farm, and Jameelah had no business falling in love with a Triden officer.

"You should stay on Bradley-Five, Mac. You're safe here. and I'm...well...I'm willing to take my chances. A trial would be difficult for my family, and the Imsada...."

"We both serve hard masters, Legate. Your Imsada is not so different from my Triden Empire. They both prefer dead martyrs to live prisoners who might talk." Jameelah could only nod. Mac was right about the Imsada. They would gain more from a dead martyr than from the show trial the New Alliance was certain to stage. But why was Mac so eager to risk his life. Was the ignominy of capture enough to drive him to this extreme?

"Then, we agree?" he asked. "Anything it takes to avoid capture?"

Jameelah nodded and turned away, unable to meet his gaze. Something cold and hard nudged at her shoulder.

She turned to find Mac sitting, facing away from the control panel, and took the ornate silver scissors he held out to her. Before she could ask what she was supposed to do with them, a respectful cough sounded at the airlock.

The man Halim assigned to follow Mac on his rounds of the camp stood just outside. "The New Alliance monitors all communications. Runners will bring news. When I left Prefect Halim, only the commander of the enemy vessel had exited his ship, but all was quiet."

"Quiet doesn't necessarily mean they've powered down, but we should get ready to leave." Mac dismissed Halim's messenger and returned to the command chair. He looked up at Jameelah expectantly. "Well, go ahead, Legate. It won't hurt. Just cut it off here." Mac grabbed his hair, showed her where to cut along the nape of his neck.

Jameelah steadied herself with a few deep breaths before snipping his locks at the back and trimming the top and sides. He turned to face her when she finished. She knew he had reached some decision by the way his brow furrowed in contrast to the smile he bravely wore. She braced herself for what he was about to say, but the arrival of a runner interrupted him.

"Doc Mac, Prefect Halim bids you farewell. Ten New Alliance troopers have joined the search for Legate Jameelah. They demand he turn her over immediately. If you could make your escape obvious and immediate, we might avoid bloodshed."

Mac moved to close the airlock before Jameelah could reply. He looked so different now. The beard, the long hair--they had softened him. Now, all angles, Mac didn't need a uniform to look the part of a Triden officer. He appeared capable of any deed to meet his objectives.

The hatch secured, Mac returned to the command seat. "Legate, I need a few words from you and the touch of your magic fingers, then we can proceed." He pulled her onto his lap and guided her fingers over the controls while he whispered the proper commands in her ear. Back on her feet in minutes, she watched the command seat become a pilot's sling.

The transformation took less than a minute and froze her to the deck. Like Mac, his ship was capable of surprising, frightening changes. The upright chair they had shared became a slick, black hammock long enough to accommodate his six-foot-two frame.

Flopping on his stomach, Mac wriggled on the slick surface for a moment before stretching out his arms. For the second time that day, she thought he was going to remove his gloves. For a second time, he tugged them more firmly in place. He gripped the multi-levered controls at the front of the sling, and slipped his toes into the pockets at the other end. The helmet Mac placed over his newly shorn head released a row of shiny metal contacts that attached themselves to his face, neck, and shoulders.

Covered only by the skimpy shorts, Mac appeared to float against the black. The bruises on his legs had faded. No visible signs of injuries remained, only the place on his back he rubbed when he got tired. A knotted muscle stood out there. Another muscle below the spot twitched. Jameelah wanted to smooth it away, but she didn't dare distract him while he settled into the sling, straining, every muscle pulled taut. Then he went limp.

"Sit, Legate."

Jameelah felt disoriented. The escape pod had changed into some wild, dangerous beast only Mac could control, and she didn't know what he planned to do with it. "Sit where?"

"At my right, about where my foot is. Strap in." Mac waited while she found the chair that hadn't been there moments before.



Jameelah fumbled with the strap. Once she locked herself in place, she felt the ship tilt, then the nausea of variable gravity hit. When her stomach stopped lurching, she realized the groaning she heard came from her own mouth and not from the ship.

"What's your problem?" Mac asked. "I'm told I make the smoothest takeoffs in the fleet."

Jameelah matched Mac's teasing tone, wondering that he could be so calm. "If that's a smooth takeoff, I don't expect I'll live through one of your rough landings."

Mac laughed in reply, a short, hard laugh. "I don't expect we will either."

Mac's good humor would have been reassuring if he hadn't sounded dead serious.

"So, if we can't jump, where are we going?" She half expected him to shrug and say nowhere. Leaving had served a purpose--to ward off New Alliance retaliation against Halim and Bradley-Five for harboring fugitives.

"This used to be a mining colony. There's a flock of asteroids around here someplace. They don't destroy them, just take what's worth the freight and leave the rest. Mostly in small pieces. We can take hits by the micro-bits, deflect larger ones. I'll try to dodge the rest."

Jameelah divided her attention between fore and aft views while Mac explained his plan. The New Alliance vessel remained docked.

"I don't imagine the New Alliance will risk a cruiser in an asteroid belt, not even for the famous Legate Jameelah. Activating our shields and all that maneuvering will drain the power we need to get

ready for a jump, but once we find a rock large enough, we can lock into orbit. After we've powered up, we'll lose them when we jump to hyperspace."

She let out a sigh of what felt like long-held air--Mac had a plan. But this mode of travel unnerved her more than the trip in the runaway pod. At least the random jumps through hyperspace were just that, random. Whatever Mac chose to do would have a purpose. He could pick any destination for the jump. Would he take her to the peace conference or straight to a Triden jail? Jameelah studied his naked back and legs for some clue, but saw only a well-conditioned body responding to training.

She located the asteroid belt a few moments after watching the cruiser leave Bradley-Five. Their pursuers followed sluggishly--a sign they'd shut down before detecting their launch or they didn't expect an escape pod to go far?

"Activate weapons control." Mac whispered the command.

She couldn't have heard him correctly. Weapons on a private vessel? That would make him a pirate, not a lieutenant on his way home in the toy provided by his overindulgent mother. Another surprise, another twist. Her stomach tried to convince her they were in the middle of another jump.

"Activate weapons control." Mac repeated the order, more loudly this time. When the ship said he had no authority to give orders, he swore and half-turned his head toward her.

"Dammit, Legate, I expect you to follow orders."

And follow his orders without question, no doubt. Well, she wasn't a little girl easily impressed by

his big guns. If Mac wanted to start shooting, she would put a stop to this now.

"What weapons do we have, Mac?"

"Fewer than our friends, who, if you need reminding, will be on our collective tail and ready to shoot up our ass in less than thirty minutes."

"Just what do you intend to do with these weapons if I release them to you?"

"If? We don't have time for a debate. Without weapons, I might just as well turn you in myself. The reward for your capture is sizable." His reply led Jameelah's stomach through another painful maneuver. Just what she'd feared--he'd taken her from Bradley-Five to turn her in for the reward. He could go home a hero instead of a ransomed hostage captured by a woman. She was his ticket to fame and fortune.

"Maybe that's what you should do, Mac. Turn me in."

Mac shook his head, the muscles in his neck and shoulders bunching beneath the silver contact points. His body shuddered on the sling when he stretched to release the tension.

"Mac, I can't justify killing others so I can remain free a few days longer. I'm only one person. That cruiser carries a crew of over a fifty men and women. I will not help you destroy them."

"This from the widow of an Imsada martyr? The same Imsada that claimed credit for half-a-million acts of terrorism?"

"Trying to win our freedom--," she broke in.

Mac ignored her. "The same Imsada that tried to kill the Triden Emperor and his bride on their wedding day? If you had chosen the right reception, I'd have wrung your neck myself. As it is, I'll let a Triden court decide your fate."

Mac released the controls and pulled his helmet off his head. He didn't turn to look at her. Jameelah expected the ship to stop, but they continued toward the ragged line of asteroids. He shoved the hand grips out of his way, and got on his knees. Still balanced on the pilot's sling, he turned to face her.

Without leaving the sling, Mac plucked her from her seat and swung her onto her back in front of him. Even through her jumpsuit, the sling felt hot and moist. She lay where his bare chest had rested, the metal contacts sending sparks, imagined or real, up her back.

Mac straddled her, his body inches above hers, his green eyes flashing with anger. She was afraid suddenly, afraid of what he meant to do, what he could do while she lay beneath him. Or was she really afraid that if he kissed her again, she wouldn't want him to stop. Curling her hands into fists, she pushed against him. Mac didn't budge.

"Stay. We'll stop if you get up. I'm going to the head." Mac stood and pushed her down. His hand splayed across her chest, he pressed against her until she stopped struggling. The impression of his hand lingered on her breasts when he left. The ship accommodated her shape and tried to bring the shiny metal squares into contact with bare skin. She shuddered in the sling's metal caress. "I wasn't trying to kill anyone on the space station," she called after him. She needed him to believe her. "Rami said the

explosion would result in noise and smoke. I don't know what went wrong."

Mac stopped at the door to the head and looked directly at her. Jameelah wished he hadn't. His eyes didn't flash as they had on Bradley-Five when they studied her, sweeping from her head to her feet, lingering on her breasts. His eyes were a flat metallic green, dead and cold.

"What went wrong is you and your kind don't think. Don't think or care what happens to innocent young girls once you set the timer. Or does your definition of innocent include only those personally acquainted with the late, great Khay-Alva?"

With that, Mac left. That he believed her capable of hurting anyone cut deep. That he would so casually invoke Khay's name hurt more. Her tears fell unimpeded from her cheeks to her clutched hands until she heard the rush of water in the next room. She couldn't let him know his words hurt so much. Who was he that his opinion of her, or of her late husband, should matter?

Jameelah wiped away her tears before Mac returned. His words had hurt; now, she would return the favor. He slid gingerly onto the sling on his hands and knees, straddling her again, his head above her bent knees. She slipped out from under him. They managed not to touch. She hoped they never touched again.

The time had come to return to their original roles, and if captor and captive were no longer appropriate, then enemy would do.

"So the Triden lackey considers actions to gain publicity for the Imsada cause as criminal. Well,

how do you judge a government that withholds food to force compliance to its unjust laws, enslaves thousands to meet its appetite for troops, and murders civilians to make a point? Should I go on, or are you going to tell me it didn't happen on your watch? You just follow orders? Your Triden Empire is a terrorist organization on a scale the Imsada never aspired to."

Mac remained balanced on his hands and knees, his eyes closed. She wanted to see tears fall from those eyes, tears to match her own. Jameelah continued.

"Someday, I will take responsibility for the actions of the Imsada in a New Alliance or a Triden court. Responsibility for all of our actions, wise and ill-considered. Will you take a similar stand for your masters in the Triden fleet?"

Mac settled into the sling, replaced his helmet, and reached for the hand grips. The New Alliance vessel was closing, the asteroids minutes away. If this was the end, she was going to get an answer. A lieutenant of the Triden fleet had no right to lecture her on morals. She would not let him turn away in silence.

"And if my actions are thoughtless, yours are so very responsible, aren't they, Mac? Such a responsible, sober individual. You recognized me a few hours after the reception. Why didn't you recognize me in time to stop the bombing? Were you planning to take me to bed first and arrest me after? I dare you to answer." Jameelah's throat was raw with anger. Her voice reverberated in the tiny room.

She knew he couldn't resist a dare. He was only a man. A man with a name--a real name--and a

family and a home. A life about which she knew so little while Mac knew so much about her. She didn't even know his real name.

"I was drunk." Mac growled from under the helmet and shifted uneasily in the sling.

An honest answer, finally. A few days ago, a few hours ago, she would have felt regret at his obvious discomfort. Now, she wanted to pull another painful admission from his lips, and then another.

"Why so drunk, Mac, at such a joyous event? I didn't see anyone else stagger at the reception. You were so damned determined to have a good time despite having to baby-sit your young friend. Why did you have to be so drunk to celebrate Emperor Thane's wedding?"

Jameelah didn't expect him to answer. She didn't mean to cause so much pain. Her stomach flip-flopped when Mac gripped the controls and hurled them into the belt of circling asteroids.

His voice echoed hollowly from beneath his helmet. "Because it wasn't fair. It should have been my wedding. Mine and Tam's."

Joined to the ship through the pilot's sling, Alec entered the gray, metallic world of muted color and muted emotion. Holding on to strong emotions made controlling the ship difficult. His anger flared when he entered the stream of flying rocks, but by the time the ship's tentacles made their way completely into his system, embarrassment was all that remained of his response to Jameelah's question. He must have

sounded like a whining child claiming the party should have been his.

And it wasn't true. He and Tam shouldn't have married, didn't marry because Tam had the common sense to realize that. His dream of life together on a new colony--her as administrator, him as physician--had been just that, a dream.

After a few months of deprivation, he would have resented Tam, blamed her for the lack of luxuries and freedom necessary in a colony struggling to survive. At least that's what Tam told him all those years ago when he proposed. Who knows? She was probably right. He had kept his pleasures close at hand since she left.

When Thane introduced him to his bride as "my younger brother Alec," Tam had gone quite white. Until that moment, she'd believed Alec to be the pampered son of Lord Mackenzie's head gardener. Finding out she'd slept with her future brother-in-law had come as a shock.

He couldn't ignore the irony in their situation. When he knew Tam at the university, she was daughter of the chair of the political science department. A few years later her father was President of the New Alliance. Now, as wife of the Triden Emperor, Tam couldn't escape the luxuries she accused Alec of not being able to live without. He could only hope she would somehow find happiness with Thane.

Jamie was quiet now. Considering what he'd said? What did she make of a lowly lieutenant claiming to have lost the love of his life to the Triden Emperor? With luck, she would dismiss his remark as boasting. If he let slip too many clues, she might realize who the Imsada had managed to capture.



Rami didn't know who he was. Rami wouldn't have put him in the pod with Jamie if he had. Alec switched to the interior view. Jameelah looked gray like the rest of the ship.

"Are you all right?" he said.

"Yes." She sounded lost, and more than a little frightened.

He wanted to hold her, nothing more. Hold her, keep her safe, take her home. But that was the calming effect of the pilot's sling.

"What do you think our chances are?" she asked.

"The chances I'll avoid turning us into space junk? Pretty good. I'm the best pilot in the fleet, even coming off bed rest." Boasting, it sounded like boasting. "I piloted the Angel Class my last time out. Ever heard of her?"

"Your newest generation of fighter. Two pilots have flown an Angel fighter. Both died during trial flights."

"Imsada intelligence *is* improving. But I did fly one." Of course, she had no way of knowing he was the second pilot, reported dead over two months ago from injuries sustained when his ship collided with a mountain. Jameelah must think him a hopeless braggart.

"This ship is much simpler than an Angel, and she's a little clumsy, but I can guide her through safely into the asteroid belt." No need to mention that was the easy part. Alec didn't expect the New Alliance cruiser to give up and go home.

The ship shuddered when Alec settled deeper into the pilot's sling. Joined with the ship, his nerve endings registered the collisions with the hull as they slid into the stream of rock. Particles too small to waste energy deflecting left a trail of imagined burns across his back. Measurable pain, predictable, of finite duration. God, how he'd missed flying.

Despite reassurances he'd given Jamie, he would feel safer if he were flying Angel-Two through this field of rocks. Angel-Two, now there was a ship. Angel-One's pilot didn't survive his honeymoon flight. Alec survived two weeks of testing Angel-Two.

The fighter required a delicate touch. She wanted a pilot who would control her and demanded proof he could handle the job. Alec made the tactical decisions, including the one that sent them crashing into the mountain.

He should have escaped unscathed. Would have if he had released the controls in time. When he'd determined the crash was inevitable, he'd had two long seconds to trigger ejection. Instead, he had stayed with Angel-Two. Sometimes Alec thought they made these ships too damned human. Good when you wanted a smart ship, bad when you lost one.

As her last act, Angel-Two ejected him. By then, overheated circuits had burned his legs. He'd failed to assume the proper position when the escape plastic wrapped around him, and had broken his back on the first bounce.

You'd think he'd committed treason the way they questioned him. Hours of grilling. Alec lost

patience and told Thane to get them off his back. While Alec waited undisturbed in a private ward, the Fleet received word that Angel-Two's pilot had died of injuries.

During his hospital stay, Alec followed his brother's orders and studied the Imsada question. Only two percent of ethnic Calopians actively participated in the terrorist Imsada organization, but the remaining ninety-eight percent provided the new generation of fighters. Most of the troublemakers died without offspring--in accidents or retaliatory raids by the Calopian government. The cycle continued when their cousins, brothers, and friends saw them as martyrs to be avenged.

Alec had studied the faces of that two percent, a distraction while his back mended and the skin grafts took. If he'd remained sober at the reception, if he'd followed doctors' orders instead of dancing and swilling wine, he would have spotted Rami and alerted security. It was his fault, all of it.

If he'd recognized Jamie before she planted the bomb, she would be in a Triden prison now, not minutes away from being blow to bits by a New Alliance cruiser. And his sister Lorna would be safe at home.

Through the ship's eyes, Alec sought Jamie again. She looked flat and gray, dozing in the chair. Her dark veil of hair covered half her face and separated into narrow plaits where it met the curve of her breast. Her half-open mouth looked wet and inviting even viewed through the filter of the ship. Asleep, she looked peaceful.

A deceptive pose. Awake, she would argue. Why did she always have to argue? Why couldn't she

trust him to know the best course for her and for her people?

Alec looked outward, searching for a place to land. With adrenaline no longer pumping, he felt every hour without sleep. Burying himself in the ship became more difficult while the New Alliance cruiser remained outside the stream of rock, her pilots unscathed and working in shifts. The quick turns and hard shocks were wearing him out. Time to wake Jamie.

Jameelah jerked at the sound of her name and looked around the cabin, confused.

Realizing he'd spoken though the ship, Alec released his mouthpiece. "I'm falling asleep, Jamie. Talk to me. Keep me awake."

"Where are we? How long have I been asleep?"

"We're close to the middle of the belt. The cruiser is staying clear of the asteroids, but she'll catch us if I try to slip out the other side. I'm hoping they'll wait for reinforcements."

"I'm sorry I said those things to you, Mac, before," she said.

Alec shrugged, remembered his helmet hid his gestures, and yawned what he hoped sounded like an affirmative reply.

He *had* been drinking at the reception. Feelings of rejection had flooded him anew after the wedding, but that didn't excuse his irresponsible behavior.

The image of Lorna loomed before him--Lorna, terrified, screaming his name. With his senses tangled in his ship, Alec could see the trail he'd left--Tam's letter breaking off their engagement, his

decision not to practice medicine, joining the Triden fleet on impulse.

His mother had questioned the timing, Thane hadn't. Thane arranged time away from his duties, and the two brothers drank themselves senseless before Alec left for his first assignment. Carefully spaced, one-day passes followed. All spent drinking in some stranger's arms, any stranger and too many of them. Duty hours spent challenging superiors, daring them to execute him for insubordination.

When did he stop pretending the endless, passionless rendezvous meant something? That he lived for the moments he could lose himself in this union between ship and man? When had he stopped hiding from the truth, that the disobeyed orders were nothing but a thinly veiled death wish?

Alec twisted in his sling. He'd sent Angel-Two slamming into a mountain three days after learning the identity of Thane's bride.

Now, Jamie had made her choice. She wanted Rami to save her, and Alec went flying off through an asteroid field. The ship shuddered beneath him.

The doctors had couched the news he must never pilot again in incoherent niceties reserved for Triden royalty. Gunny had swiped the official report, but Alec found it no less confusing. What had they meant--tendency to become inappropriately attached, unable to distinguish reality, insufficient sense of self-interest to put safety above that of bonded mechanical?

No danger of that with this ship. He couldn't even name her. He'd tried whispering "Angel" after inserting the proper codes, but naming a ship required access to command functions. Their connection

remained incomplete. A shame considering she might be space junk in a few hours. Which was worse? Making a connection that could last only a few short hours or remaining cut off?

Jamie, evidently giving up on getting a coherent reply to her apology, changed the subject. "So you know Tamboria, Emperor Thane's bride?"

Alec had lived among women long enough to recognize jealousy when he heard it, and this wasn't the first time he'd detected that tone in Jamie's voice. But why would his past affairs bother Khay-Alva's widow?

"Pick another topic. Discussing adolescent fantasies won't keep me awake. Let's argue about something."

Just then Lorna reappeared, standing untouched among the asteroids. Alec reset his view, but she remained, leading the way through the flying rocks. Alec followed.

"How long can you keep this up?" Jamie asked.

"Half an hour is optimum, but that's for combat flying." "You been at it for almost six hours. I'd better look for that rock you talked about."

Through the filter of the ship's ears, Alec heard concern in her voice even as the ship tugged his attention away from Jamie. The ship tried to force him to rest. Alec felt himself sink into sleep.

More of his infamous luck--most of the systems down, but the routine designed to pamper the pilot still functioned. Alec shook himself again. He wouldn't relinquish control to a forgetful pleasure craft.

A warning alarm snapped him fully awake. A sliver of rock breached his defenses, and he didn't even feel it deflect harmlessly off the right plane. His reactions were slowing. He needed all of his senses. With impatient snaps, he removed his gloves and let them drop. When the ship's sensors moved to claim his palms, they both shuddered with pleasure.

"Politics is an acceptable subject under the circumstances. One of your lively discussions should keep me going."

"What does your government plan to do with us once the peace treaty is signed? With the Imsada, I mean." Well, that was direct. Alec reminded himself he'd asked for it. He gave a wide berth to a string of fist-sized rocks and accepted a blow to the tail by a larger one. He and the ship were one again.

Alec followed Lorna deeper into the belt while he fought to maintain contact with Jamie and reality. "Assuming Calopia is on our side of the ledger when the dust settles, the Triden Empire will force a peaceful solution."

"How arrogant can one group of people be? Others have tried. I personally presented twenty proposals to the Imsada council. Khay presented a dozen before that. Every solution with a remote possibility of acceptance by the Calopian government resulted in a split in the Imsada Council. A split would create a new group, more militant and more violent. That has never been acceptable."

Her answer didn't surprise Alec; she was feeding him Imsada party line, but a solution did exist, a very final solution. One Khay-Alva himself proposed the day he died. To admit he knew Khay's plan

would reveal Alec knew the details of Khay's death. It would reveal too much. Besides, Jameelah believed the Tridens killed Khay. Alec didn't want to tell her he knew better. The explosion had almost killed him, as well.

"Our overabundance of arrogance is what qualifies us Tridens to solve this unique problem," he replied. "Treaties, charters, and agreements hamper the New Alliance. They mean nothing to us. We Tridens do what is expedient.

"Calopia produces crystals we need for our short-range weapons. The current Calopia government manages production efficiently when Imsada terrorists aren't blowing them up. You native Calopians, you Imsada, have never taken an interest in mining techniques."

"Never taken an interest?" Jamie exploded with indignation. "The Calopian government bars us from getting within a hundred miles of a crystal mine. They don't allow us to hold a job remotely related to the mining. They've locked us out of gaining any benefit from the resources of our own planet." Jameelah had a point, of course, but there came a time when justice lost its relevancy. A principle with which Alec was personally familiar. Whether he and Tam would have been happy together was no longer relevant. She was Thane's wife now. Besides, to concede the argument would not keep him awake. Arguing seemed to be what he and Jamie did best.

He growled his reply. "The Calopians, backed by the New Alliance, say it's not your planet. They offered compensation for your land five centuries ago. Your consortium sold the rights--"



"Stole them, you mean. My people deserve that planet. We colonized it first. Our sponsors had no right to sell colonization rights to someone else."

They hadn't that right, Alec knew, but five hundred years ago, interplanetary courts didn't fully realize the tragic results of such slipshod decisions. "At the time, the New Alliance judged in their favor. Tridens were just small time bullies back then."

Alec couldn't keep the note of sarcasm from his voice. The thought rankled. Despite their alliance with the Calopian government, the New Alliance ranked as morally superior to the Tridens in Jameelah's mind. Besides, five hundred years ago, the Triden's hadn't even thought of invading his home planet.

Alec guided the ship through another set of tricky maneuvers, partly to avoid a dangerous collision, partly to stay awake. Jameelah gripped the sides of her chair to remain upright.

"As I've been trying to tell you, Legate Jameelah, what is right is not always relevant. The second wave of colonists, fairly or not, made more effective use of Calopia's resources, and the Triden Empire needs people they can relocate without disrupting local economies. The Imsada and your people fit the bill."

"The Imsada will not accept relocation. You can move groups of us around, but eventually we will return, or die trying. You just don't understand."

"Maybe I do. I admit my people didn't put up much of a fight, but when the Tridens decided our little rock would make a perfect greenhouse, my great-grandfather didn't like being told what to grow and

how to grow it. He died making futile gestures. Despite his objections, the Tridens transformed our planet of genteel family farms into a technological marvel of productivity in two generations. Those who protested ended up as fertilizer."

"Your people gave up just like that? Let someone take your land?" She sounded startled.

"Some like my great-grandfather resisted, but we're warriors at heart, not farmers. All that Triden military hardware proved too great a temptation. We joined our conquerors to get our hands on it, and we were ruthless and mercenary enough to succeed as Tridens, even take advantage. When Father joined the Triden fleet, Grandfather disinherited him. Father's reward for service included more land than Grandfather ever dreamed of owning."

The Imsada could make a peace that would prove just as profitable for them as it had for the natives of New Glasgow. Once they got out of this mess, he would persuade Jamie to return him to Triden-Prime for the scheduled peace conference, and not just because it was best for him and for the Triden Empire. He had to convince her that it was best for her people, too.

The Imsada might not believe it, but the Triden victory was the best thing to happen to them in five hundred years. The Tridens could end the Imsada's cycle of killing and death. Alec knew how. He had a plan, one not nearly as painful or as drastic as Khay-Alva's.

"So you followed your father into the Triden fleet?" she said.

"It seemed the right decision at the time. The war. I was at loose ends." Alec gasped when the ship

took another hit and he felt fire burn across his legs. Lorna disappeared. He decided now was the time to lock into orbit.

"Pick your rock, Legate. I can't fly forever. Touch your choice on the screen. I'll decide if it meets criteria."

Jamie unstrapped herself from the chair and leaned over the console. She identified the closest reasonably-sized asteroid.

"Spinning too fast. My reaction time has slowed." Alec spoke to her through the ship's voice, this time without startling her. "These two are slower, and the right size." she said.

"Check the tumble. Will either spin axis shield us from the cruiser for two days?" Alec watched her check the console readings. She was getting good at this. A few more weeks and he could return a trained navigator to the Imsada fold, he thought, with little regret. God, how these past few days had changed him.

How would Thane react to having an Imsada sympathizer in his family?

Alec waited while Jamie strapped herself in, then focused on slipping into orbit around the spinning rock. The challenge of a difficult maneuver usually invigorated him, but this ride felt strangely unsatisfying.

He craved more than a good night's sleep. He was tired of being either hurt or numb, tired of looking through the gray, flat eyes of the ship. He had traveled in a closed box for too many years,

looking only through the eyes and feeling only through the skin of his metallic mistresses.

On Bradley-Five he'd been tired too, but there he accomplished something and when he stopped working, Jameelah appeared, soft and willing. Alec tried to picture Jamie on New Glasgow, sitting across the table from him. Could hot nights make up for the inevitable fights that would erupt over breakfast?

When he tucked his ship safely between two flying rocks of discarded ore, Alec felt overcome with fear. Not fear of the New Alliance cruiser and what capture would mean. Jamie frightened him. The thought of her froze him at his station.

Once he took off his helmet, he would do what he had sworn so many years ago he would never do again. He would look into Jamie's deep, brown eyes, and he would fall in love. He wasn't a child this time. It would take more than a few bottles of wine to make him forget.

Then Lorna reappeared in his view. He tightened his grip on the controls. His palms burned. He and the ship were one. Maybe he wouldn't have to face Jamie after all. Maybe he could fly forever.

## Chapter 7

Rami gathered his captive's silken hair in his fist, and almost wept at her beauty. Lorna's eyes hid beneath translucent lids tipped with pale brown lashes that fluttered on her cheeks. Releasing his grip, he thrilled to see the golden strands slip between his fingers and settle over her face.

The gold of her hair matched the flecks that would sparkle in her pale green eyes when they opened. How soundly she slept. Rami, who slept in half-hour snatches, could watch her for hours. And he did.

Their first days together had been most difficult. Three days in the escape pod--five men and one girl. Lorna shook like a fragile flower in a spring breeze. Rami had held his breath, praying she wouldn't break. So terrified of him, so loyal to her bodyguard. Rami had almost hated her for that--she cared for someone else. Then he reconsidered.

He had only to redirect her loyalty. She was grateful when he shielded her from the attentions of his men, and surprised when he didn't press the advantage. She was a girl, a child. He must move slowly.

With his forefinger, Rami trapped the strands of blond hair that obscured her features and gathered them to the side. Lorna didn't stir. Her jumpsuit was open at the neck to just above her waist. Resting his head on her right shoulder, he could see the nipple of her left breast. He snaked his hand through the opening, thumb and forefinger pinching the pale brown circle of flesh. The nipple hardened at his touch;

its mate came alive near his mouth. A moan sounded from her lips and her tongue flicked across them, but she did not wake. Such an innocent young thing, yet she burned in her sleep.

Awake, she cried still, after over a week, and he had to threaten to get her to eat. She grew thinner every day. Now that they had arrived on Cestar-Two, a safe haven for pirates and military deserters, Rami took her for short walks on the safer decks.

Among the hothouse plants that lined the exclusive restaurants, Lorna came alive briefly, tempted by the rich aromas of dishes Rami couldn't pronounce. Rami indulged her. She took several bites before drifting back into lethargy. There was time enough to adjust her palate to proper Imsada rations.

When they registered with what passed for the governor in this place of lost souls, Rami declared Lorna to be his property. That she did not call for help or try to enlist the assistance of others, puzzled him. Did she realize that here among the pirates and rejects of the galaxy no one would lift a finger to help? Perhaps.

More likely, Lorna believed she need do nothing but wait for help to arrive. As a royal of the Triden Empire, she'd spent her life waiting for others to take care of her. Rami would use this inbred deficiency to his advantage. After this brief despondency, she would turn to him for what she needed. Rami had only to be patient.

Soon she would know him awake as she did when asleep. Then, when she wanted him, when she begged for him, Rami would take her. It would be most amusing to have for wife the Emperor's sister.

Rami's power could only grow once she gave him sons.

This plan was so much better than the protest the Imsada Council had approved. What good came from protests other than reminding everyone you lacked the power to take what you wanted? The only difficulty was in the waiting, especially now that he and Lorna shared private quarters on Cestar-Two.

No, he would wait. Rami straightened the bodice of Lorna's jumpsuit. He would not have his wife sullied before the wedding, not even by himself. He should wake her, she slept almost constantly now, but he did so enjoy watching. And she didn't give him any trouble when she slept.

Rami did hate it when Lorna made him loose his temper. He was a patient man about most things. But yesterday, she had forced him to slap her. Not a hard slap, only a small bruise marred her cheek, but she'd kept asking what he'd done with her bodyguard, Elliott something. Rami hadn't bothered to learn more. Jameelah would discover anything that might be of value.

Well, Lorna would see her bodyguard soon. Then she would believe he told the truth. Jameelah would have taken good care of this Elliott, and Lorna would see she could trust him. Rami would make Lorna trust him. Then, when she was his wife, they would force the Triden Empire to turn Calopia over to the Imsada.

Who better to lead the Imsada than the man who single-handedly shattered the peace between the Triden Empire and the New Alliance? Who better than the man who held the power to force Emperor Thane to do his bidding? Who better than Rami?

"Lorna," Rami whispered, enjoying the soft sound of her name. It suited her. A pity he would have to change it. The sweet thing would have so many things to which she must become accustomed. Rami smiled at the thought of acquainting her with all of them. A virgin, an innocent, but in a few weeks she would be a warrior's wife. He would choose a strong Imsada name for her, as Khay-Alva had done for his bride, on their wedding day. Thinking of gullible, loyal, dead Khay only made the moment sweeter.

Whoever killed Khay had done Rami an enormous favor. The hand of fate, a sign from above. At first Rami thought it had directed him to take Khay's widow as payment for the loss of his brother--fate showing him the way to his rightful seat on the Imsada Council as Legate. Now he knew a greater destiny awaited him.

He would make the peace. He would dictate the terms. Next to Rami, Khay would look like a beggar with his message of conciliation and compromise.

Now, Rami needed a cruiser, communications, and enough credits to operate unchecked. To get them Rami had promised a New Alliance traitor on Cestar-Two exactly what he'd requested. Promises came easily when the Triden Emperor would soon be yours to command. Deals quickly struck when you had Khay-Alva's widow to offer in trade.

Jameelah had time to think after she pried Mac's hands from the controls and dragged him onto the



bed. He was no longer her hostage. While she watched him sleep, that much became obvious. And whatever else was going on in his head, he didn't think of her as the enemy. He proved that when he risked his life to keep her out of New Alliance hands. She could not demand a ransom. Rami would make a fuss about the lost funds, but Mac would go free.

Persuading Mac to jump the ship to the peace conference shouldn't be difficult. Even in his most stubborn mood, how could he disagree? With her cooperation, he could contact Triden forces, get the coordinates, and take them there. He would have the honor of turning Legate Jameelah over to the Triden High Command, and she would claim the Emperor Thane's offer of clemency and attend the conference. They would both win.

If he would just open his eyes, those luminous green eyes, she could make everything right. Suddenly, Jameelah realized she wasn't afraid of finding out who Mac was, not anymore. Not afraid of what they would become now they were no longer captive and captor.

Mac was not a simple man, but no matter how complicated, Jameelah knew he was worth knowing well.

*I'm dead.* Alec found the thought comforting.

After days of waiting, Mother would be relieved to have him home again, even if he arrived in a

body bag. Not that there would be a touching scene of familial mourning. Mother was too sensible. She would plant him where the soil needed something extra to help the roses grow. But Thane would make a fuss, demand retribution, cut his honeymoon short. He'd already proved himself unreliable in that regard.

Three years ago when Alec had returned from the New Alliance POW camp, his mother quite sensibly waited at home. Thane waited at the airlock for two hours while Alec finished decontamination. When he finished the exhausting process, Alec prayed he could stagger to temporary quarters and a bottle of wine before falling apart. That prayer, like so many others, had gone unanswered.

Instead, he'd run smack into Thane--Commander-in-Chief of the United Forces of the Triden Empire, soon to be Emperor. He'd bruised Alec's then-fragile body with a series of bear hugs and slaps on the back before straightening to reveal his tears. After that, anyone at Triden Central Command who hadn't guessed they were related, believed they were lovers. Alec had taken a new identity two days later.

When Thane discovered the Imsada had kidnaped his brother, he would follow one ill-advised, guilt-driven decision with another. His legates would line up with ideas on how to avenge the death of the Emperor's brother.

On New Glasgow, Mother's common sense would prevail. She wouldn't delay a day of harvest to weep over her officially nonexistent son. If only Tam could temper Thane's grief, Alec's passing would cause a ripple, nothing more. Life would continue as if he had never existed, because he hadn't, not officially.

But why, if he was dead, did he continue to think so furiously? Alec had hoped for something more, and less. More sensory input, less thinking. Few regrets, great satisfaction. If this was death, he might as well be alive again.

The last thing Alec remembered clearly was the impact. The wedding reception, the explosion, hitting the wall, the fleeting thought that he had to live--he hurt too much to die. And Lorna.

God, Lorna. Alec struggled to regain contact with his lost limbs. Nothing happened.

"Open your eyes." Good advice, Alec thought. But whose?

After what seemed like hours of sweating effort, Alec saw light trying to pry open his drooping lids. Before they shut again, Alec caught a glimpse of an angel--a dark-haired, brown-eyed, anxious angel--who patted his face.

Angel-Two, of course. She was dead also, killed by his reckless decision to fly too close to the mountain. But why did she call him Mac?

He was Alexander Thornton Mackenzie with several fancy titles that meant he would inherit the family estate from his mother, Lady Seana, and until further developments in the procreation department, he was Emperor Thane's heir.

Few people outside the Triden High Council knew who Thane's heir was. A long-standing tradition on New Glasgow dictated that families with enemies, families with property to protect, fostered out their second sons and kept their identity secret.

How had Mother felt when she discovered she couldn't keep her second son? She wasn't from New Glasgow. Had she been familiar with all its customs before she wed? She'd kept Alec for six months. Father had been generous, or foolish. They had bonded by then, so Mother said. When Alec's foster mother died, his foster father brought him to live on the estate. Another foolish indulgence on Lord Mackenzie's part. One that eventually tore his family apart.

When he was four or five years old, Alec had moved to the gardener's cottage with Head Gardener Millard. Lady Seana visited that first night and, finding him frightened in strange surroundings, she'd sung him to sleep. To Alec it seemed he'd never left her, that his mother had sung him to sleep every night.

Lady Seana spent so much time at their cottage, it seemed the three of them were a family. Yet everyone had known Lady Seana belonged at the manor house and Millard in the head gardener's cottage.

When Alec visited the manor, Lord Mackenzie had treated him like some exotic pet, ordering him to recite his lessons and patting him on the head as a precursor to waving him from the room. Later, Alec learned that Thane, Mackenzie's oldest son, received the same treatment.

When Lorna was born and Lord Mackenzie made it clear to everyone he wasn't her father, Alec became even more confused about his paternity. The troubling months that preceded his sister's birth etched themselves in his mind--Lord Mackenzie's rages seemed to darken the scientifically-regulated New Glasgow skies, Lady Seana's withdrawal to her private rooms that Alec couldn't enter, and in his

foster father's eyes, fear.

So much fear that Alec had hid for days after his sister's birth. Not until Lorna's naming day had Alec trusted his mother's words--Millard had been banished to another estate, Alec would stay.

Alec faced the painful realization that Millard was not his father when he was twelve and Thane forced the issue. They had both faced the truth that day when Thane tried to stop his brother from using the front entrance to the manor. Alec hadn't been conscious that he knew Lord Mackenzie was his father until he screamed his lineage in his older brother's face.

They'd gotten on well after that. Thane appeared relieved to have Alec as back-up heir. The inheritance had grown beyond the manor house and the farm that covered half of New Glasgow. Lord Mackenzie ruled as Commander-in-Chief of all Triden forces, and the Triden Council considered Thane his successor. No one had expected he would have to take his father's place so soon.

*Now, Thane will have to get his own heirs.* Alec grinned with a mouth he could no longer feel. The backup had just quit the job. Alec could tell his angel who he was now that he was dead. He could tell everyone.

"Mac, you have to wake up. Please, open your eyes." The angel's dulcet tones made Alec's nonexistent body shiver, then he felt something. Hair brushed across his face like static, sparking his nerve endings to life. His eyes opened for a moment before slamming shut.

The angel who hovered over him was not Angel-Two or any ship he'd ever flown. Those cold and

demanding ladies had flat voices and dead eyes. This angel's eyes were deep brown and they pleaded with him to answer.

"My name is not Mac." His words came out in a rusty whisper.

"I know." The angel descended and kissed his cheek, sending a riot of messages down his damaged synapses. "Can you move?"

Alec found he did have a body, movement sent a thousand points of pain sparking across it. Pulling himself upright, he swung his legs over the side of the bed and closed his eyes to shut out the rapidly spinning room. The angel steadied him when he gripped the edge to keep from falling. He turned to face her and the pain changed to heat--soothing, surging, urgent heat.

*You shouldn't be doing this.* Alec brushed aside the nagging thought. He was so hot and his beautiful angel was so deliciously cool. He buried himself in her enveloping eyes, and sank onto the bed taking her with him.

When Mac opened his eyes and pulled her onto the bed, he released a part of her she had guarded all her life. That part was all woman, and she needed him to touch her. Jameelah wanted to scream or kick or bite--anything to make Mac move more quickly. Instead she lay mute where he'd placed her, face down on the bed, while he pulled on a pair of gloves, covering his palms.

Kneeling over her, he kneaded her back and soothed bunched muscles through the shirt and shorts she'd taken from his locker. Then, he slipped his hands under her shirt, stroking, feeling like a blind man. The tension that had built while she cared for Mac oozed from her, leaving her unable to do more than quietly quiver and wait for him to make the next move.

She tensed again when he shifted his weight. His hot thighs, which had gripped her hips so tightly, relaxed and then left, leaving her cold and exposed. She moaned and fought not to wag her hips and grind her pelvis into the bed. Please, please, she moaned into the pillow so he couldn't hear. She hadn't believed Mac could make her feel this way, hadn't believed any man could.

With his hands on her shoulders, Mac teased her onto her back, moving to keep a distance between them. When she brought her hands up to shield her breasts, he pulled her arms to her sides. He gently rubbed her palms with his thumbs while he gazed hungrily at her heaving chest. Jameelah almost said "no," opened her mouth to do so.

Mac knelt above her, green eyes open and glittering, but it wasn't too late. She could stop this. He hesitated, releasing her hands and running a sleepy finger over her open lips.

"Does the Legate have some order she wishes her lowly lieutenant to carry out? Does she wish him to retreat?" She let out a series of quick gasps as relief flooded her. Mac was willing to call a halt to this, ready to stop. She could see in his eyes that he half expected her to order the ship flooded with anesthetic and throw him off the bed. But Jameelah didn't want Mac to stop, and could think of no reason why he

should. That was how far she had let this come--she had relinquished control to Mac. She was a traitor.

In a few hours, they would be on their way to different worlds with little chance their paths would cross again. For now, reality shrank to this tiny cube of space. And in this reality, no reason existed--not Khay's memory or Imsada propriety--why she should stop Mac. She would have the man she loved. Just once.

"Tell me your name, lieutenant." She left Mac to wonder what she meant. She sat up and drew his shirt slowly over his head. While the shirt temporarily blinded him, she licked each hard brown nipple in turn, ignoring his guttural pleas for her to stop and the more urgent ones for her to hurry. After an ineffectual struggle to escape, he knelt quietly while she took her time setting him free.

When she breathed in the spicy oil she'd worked into his damaged skin, it untied yet another knot inside her and she rubbed her face against the smooth chest she'd so recently shaved. She freed his head from the shirt, and when his face emerged, she took it in both hands. While he struggled to free his arms, she kissed him hard on the mouth, biting lightly on his lower lip before he could untangle his hands.

Still, she could not rush him. With somnolent movements, he broke away and pushed her against the pillows. His emerald eyes hooded beneath lowered lashes, he removed her clothing one piece at a time, folded and tucked each away in the drawer near the bed. When she lay naked, he stretched out next to her and pressed lightly against her side, one layer, his shorts, separating them.

"Tell me your name, lieutenant." Jameelah repeated her order. To tease him into a reply was a



lover's game now. She no longer cared who he was. He could be in charge of the entire Triden fleet and it would make no difference.

"The Legate can try to make me talk," he drawled, "but Jamie dear will have to call me Mac." He gathered her hair over her shoulder to expose her breasts. His other hand rested at her side. Unwilling, still, to share his name, even as their game of love turned earnest. Jameelah hadn't the willpower to insist.

"Yes, Mac, anything you like, just please...."

She felt her back arch toward him. She couldn't have stopped if she'd tried, and she'd given up trying to stay away from Mac. She clutched his shorts and gave a none-to-gentle tug before he stopped her.

"Slow down. It will be over too soon," he whispered, returning her hands to her sides.

"Then we'll just have to start again. We have time."

"Do we, Jamie?" Mac looked over his shoulder toward the control room. Jameelah took his head between her hands and forced him to face her. There was time. There had to be. And if the enemy chose this moment to enter the asteroid field, she and Mac could do nothing to prevent it.

"Trust me, Mac. We have time." At this moment she didn't care if the Emperor himself walked in on them. She would know what it was like to hold the man she loved and be held in return. Mac released her hands. He rolled on top of her and slid down on the bed to put his shorts out of her reach. Resting lightly on her legs, his mouth closed over each nipple in turn as he plumped her breasts with his fingers

and teased the rosy peaks with his teeth.

A hot rush flowed instantly between her legs when his flat, hard stomach rubbed against her core and her knees flared out, begging to receive him.

She gripped his hair while he continued to enjoy her breasts, licking, sucking, thumbing her nipples while she helplessly rocked her hips hoping for more. But he would not let her rush him. She'd given up hope when finally he slid still farther downward, leaving a trail of sucking, wet kisses on her stomach and then rested his cheek on her thigh.

She had forgotten how heavenly it was--feeling wanted, desired, and the growing tension that led...to where? No, if being with Khay was ever like this, she'd forgotten. Long before his death, he'd stopped feigning interest in her body. After their final tepid attempts, he had left her with the feeling there must be something more.

Now, that something more was about to happen with Mac. She found herself clutching his head while he made lazy circles first with his forefinger and then with his tongue along the insides of her thighs. He slid to the bottom of the bed, reaching up to pinch her nipples gently. He parted her nether lips with his other hand.

A long, slender finger, then two, teased and stretched her open. She gripped a pillow and brought it to her face. While he continued to stroke rhythmically upward, she bit down to keep from crying out. His hot breath sent another wave of tremors rippling through her.

When his rough thumb brushed across her most sensitive spot, she tossed the pillow aside, no longer concerned if she called out or not. His tongue began to lap around his working fingers, adding to the fire. She wanted more--the weight of his body on her chest, his legs tangled with hers, his sweaty hips locked against hers, his pulsing phallus deep inside her.

Thrusting her hips in rhythm with his fingers, Jameelah silently begged for what she now knew she wanted, but Mac continued his exquisite torture. She spiraled slowly upward, cresting finally when he gripped her swollen member between his lips and, with his tongue, sent her gasping over the top.

When she opened her eyes, Mac stood beside the bed watching her. She had never seen his eyes a deeper shade of green. The metallic connections to the pilot sling had left round, white marks on his chest, shoulders, and legs. *Do they hurt?* she wondered. *Is the damage permanent?*

Before she could ask, he hitched his thumbs on the band of his shorts and shrugged them to the floor, revealing the only part of his body left untouched by the ship. She reached out to touch his pulsing member, which rose gracefully out of the rich, black nest of hair between his legs.

Mac took a step back. "Do we still have time, Jamie?"

Jameelah didn't bother with words. She knew exactly what she wanted, and exactly how she wanted it done. With a triumphant cry and a perfectly indecent wag of her hips, she got on her knees and threw her arms around Mac's waist.

Mac, laughing and out of breath, allowed her to drag him onto the bed and on top of her. "You leave

me no choice, Legate. I'm hopelessly outranked."

Jameelah brushed Mac's cheek with her lips and pulled the blanket over his shoulders. His eyelids fluttered, heavy with sleep. She would never regret their time together, she vowed, never. With the memory of these last few hours, Jameelah felt she could withstand any hardship.

But no matter how many times he kissed away the worry lines that grew on her forehead, no matter how many times he made her cry out in incoherent bliss, their destinies had not changed. They would return to their respective homes, to their respective lives, once the ship jumped them to safety.

Eyes still closed, Mac groaned and threw back the blankets. Jameelah tried to soothe him to sleep by drawing the covers up to his chin and massaging his scalp. He took her hand and brought it to his mouth. His lips felt warm and tense against her palm. He threw off the covers again and ran his fingers through his hair several times before getting up to retrieve his shorts and shirt.

His silence seemed ominous when he returned to her side, unsmiling, looking around the room as if for the first time. Then he squeezed her hand, and lifted it to his lips again.

"Where is she?" he whispered. "Where did Rami take the girl I was with at the reception?" His hot breath traveled down her arm in waves, leaving her limp and breathless before she could collect herself enough to think. She shook her head--a sign of disbelief and denial. Disbelief that he'd chosen these as

the first words to speak after making love to her. Denying that he wanted to spend their last moments together asking the same old questions.

She didn't know what had happened to his friend. Mac didn't believe her.

"Where has Rami taken her?" This time Mac didn't whisper or drawl or plea. His flinty voice expressed the cold fury that shown in his eyes, and his grip on her arms tightened.

Before she could reply, an alarm in the control room screeched.

"What's that?" Mac released her and swung off the bed. Jameelah knew the significance of the warning--she'd set the alarm to sound if a new vessel entered the area or if the distance between their asteroid and the New Alliance cruiser began to close. She decided to let Mac find out for himself. His sudden change of mood had left her shaken.

*Did you make love to me because you thought I could tell you about your friend? Why can't you believe me? Why can't you trust me? Why can't you love me?* These were the questions she wanted to ask. Instead, she followed Mac to the control room. Her Imsada training had taught her this much--the tactical situation always took precedence over personal feelings.

Jameelah had become intimately acquainted with every line on Mac's face. Some force she didn't understand drew the lines taut. Was this the man who had so recently murmured "Jamie dear" in her ear while he covered her breasts with kisses?

After stowing the pilot's sling, Mac sat in the command seat. His hands shook as he ran them

through his cropped hair. In bed, he had seemed strong, now so fragile.

"What are they doing?" She leaned over his shoulder, tapping the screen devoted to the New Alliance cruiser.

"Looks like they're coming after us, Legate." His grim voice shook the confining cabin. Dread threatened to overpower her. Mac had already tried his last trick. He couldn't get them out of this. "I thought you said they wouldn't do that."

"Well, I didn't expect them to, but I'm no mind reader. If they mistook us for an escape pod, her captain should have called for help and maintained a patrol pattern instead of blasting the holes himself. She could take some pretty big hits if they try to rush things. At her present rate, we'll have company in forty-four minutes."

"But why, Mac? Why risk her hull and waste her weapons on such a crude assignment? Why don't they just wait?"

"Why?" Mac gave a short, hard laugh, and turned in the chair to face her. "We can assume they want one of us badly. We can also assume they suspect we will jump soon and they can no longer afford to wait." *And if they don't want me, they want you, Mac. But why?*

"I don't believe that," she protested. "There has to be another reason."

Mac began to explain. "A jump-capable escape pod is a rare configuration, too expensive to be common, but it's not unheard of. If they took thorough sensor readings before we reached the asteroids--"

"What I don't believe is that I'm this important to the New Alliance. After all these years of fighting, they can't afford to risk a cruiser just to capture me. If they wait a few weeks, you Tridens will hunt down the Imsada for them."

"You underestimate your reputation, Legate. With Khay gone, your recognition level with Imsada troops is unique. You can use your influence to bring them in line and cooperate with my government. I don't think the New Alliance wants that part of our agreement to go well. They hope dealing with the Imsada will drain our resources, as it did theirs, and keep our ambitions small."

Jameelah clenched her fists--the New Alliance, the Triden Empire, they thought of the Imsada as something to be traded away and bargained over, a drain on resources. But they were people, just as precious and valuable as any other. After watching Mac on Bradley-Five, she had believed he thought so too. Now she wasn't sure.

Mac drew her attention to the backward counting clock again, fifty-three minutes until they could jump safely. The cruiser wouldn't take that long to reach them. His hand caressed the controls, betraying his thoughts when he stood. He was saying good-bye to his ship. Was he saying good-bye to her, too?

She'd been a fool to convince herself she could make love to this man and then walk away, but alternatives were impossible and Mac was prepared to walk.

Before he spoke, he directed her to take his place at the controls and knelt beside her. "I agree, Legate. They wouldn't risk a cruiser for you. You're not that important. The Imsada's not that

important."

What did he mean, not important? And if the New Alliance wasn't chasing the Imsada....

"Certainly not you. A Triden lieutenant, no matter how talented--"

"I'm not a lieutenant, Jamie." Jameelah's heart leapt, then froze. He had called her Jamie, not Legate. He was hers again and he was willing to tell her who he was. But from the sound of his voice and the way the corners of his mouth turned downward, she would not like what she heard.

His eyes glazed to a subdued green when he examined her, top to bottom, ever so slowly, as if memorizing her every feature. She felt like a corpse at final viewing. She shivered and wrapped her arms around her middle to keep from shaking.

He put his hands on her shoulders and forced her to look at him while he spoke. "We met only a short time ago, but except for Lorna, your welfare, your happiness, means more to me than anything."

Jameelah felt tears spring to her eyes at his confession. He was saying good-bye. It was as if he'd already left. He took her hand in his and passed it over the control panel. She blinked to clear her vision, waiting for him to whisper some command he wanted her to repeat. Mac's hand went slack and dropped away from the controls.

"Your safety, and that of the Imsada, depends on Emperor Thane's success at this peace conference." Mac looked down as he continued, as if he could no longer bear to look at her. "I have to do this, Jamie, absolutely have to, for the Emperor. If the New Alliance gets their hands on me before signing the treaty,



they could drag out negotiations for years. Your people on Bradley-Five, others like them, people you've never heard of on a hundred other planets, can't wait for peace. People die every day because of this war. The Emperor has the power to stop it. I can't risk getting in his way."

Jameelah held her breath through his entire speech. If she didn't breathe, he wouldn't tell her. Somehow she knew once he told her who he was, things could never be the same between them again. "Who are you, Mac?"

Mac smiled, a sad smile. "I am not at liberty to say. That's the standard line, isn't it, Legate? What you would have told me if I hadn't recognized you?" Mac didn't pause for an answer. "The truth is I lack the courage to tell you."

Bitter taste rose on her tongue. She had tasted the same when Rami told her Khay was dead. A matter of trust had been involved then, too. Khay's plan for peace had died with him because he'd deemed her unworthy to share it. Mac obviously agreed. She was good enough to share a man's bed, but not his secrets.

"Why tell me this much? You obviously don't trust me."

"I'm telling you that I am the most sought after man in the Triden Empire, because, as you're so fond of pointing out, I'm a braggart. Soon, you may tell the New Alliance anything you wish. You told me not long ago that a good Triden officer follows orders, and I have mine. I cannot allow them to take me alive. It would put the Emperor in an untenable position."

Jameelah straightened in the control seat. What did he plan to do? How could she stop him? She glanced into the bedroom. Her emergency air supply lay at the foot of the bed. Mac held both her hands, his thumbs tracing lazy in her palms.

"I remember what you said on Bradley-Five, Jamie, about doing anything to avoid capture, but you didn't mean it. The odds of arriving anywhere safely if we jumped now aren't good. At best, we'd become trapped in hyperspace. The food would go first. At worst...well, a very large explosion and very small pieces. The New Alliance might hand you over to my government after they sign the treaty. You would receive humane treatment there."

So he was turning her in after all, even if he wasn't sticking around to do it himself. Whatever he was planning, she had to change his mind. Mac's demeanor shouted defeat, from his off-kilter smile to his sloped shoulders. As if reading her thoughts, he shook himself and stood at attention.

She choked out her words. "Is that what you plan to do? To give up, commit suicide?"

"Death is an honorable and acceptable risk for a Triden. My mother sang her dirge the day I left home. But I won't let you risk a jump. I'll find another way. I just want you to know why I have to follow orders. It's not just because they're orders, but because it's right." Mac knelt beside her again facing the console, but made no move to touch it. They both stared at the monitor--the New Alliance cruiser moving closer. He stood and started across the room.

"I'm going to put on a maintenance suit and meet the cruiser ten minutes out. You wait here. With

twenty minutes of air, I can do some damage with a laser torch. If I delay them long enough.... Well, just keep your eye on the counter. If it reaches zero, jump. If not, stay put."

"My name's not Jamie."

Mac turned in response to her whisper, his eyes alight with an expectant glow. When she didn't continue, he turned away.

Why couldn't she tell him her name? Was it a betrayal to Khay's memory, one she was not willing to make? No, even if she couldn't admit it to Mac, she must admit it to herself. She had never felt this way about Khay, and Khay never admitted to the depth of emotion Mac just had.

She couldn't tell Mac her name because if he called her Jemma, she would be totally, completely his, and it would break her heart to lose him. He wouldn't last five minutes before a flying rock pierced his suit.

Mac returned to where she sat and shook her shoulders gently. "Tell them anything you like when they come. If they find out who I am...well, Mother would like to know I didn't completely screw up this mission. Can you do that for me, Jamie? Stay here, be safe?"

She wouldn't let him do this, not to himself, not to her. Through her tears she looked to the bed and the air cylinder. She had to reach it, then give the order to render him unconscious.

Mac pulled her from the command seat, and led her away from the bedroom door to the airlock. He pressed her palm against a panel beside the hatch, and whispered a command in her ear.

When she shook her head to refuse, he jerked her around to face him. He kissed her hard on the mouth--lips firmly shut, hips locked against hers. This was what she wanted, this was worth dying for--no, worth living for. She wanted to raise her arms, to hold him, to remind him why he should not go off so eagerly to meet his death. But Mac pinned her arms against the wall.

When he pulled away, when she could breathe again, he swung her around and slapped her hand against the panel. He pressed urgently, angrily against her back. If circumstances were different, she would have become excited. Mac was hard and ready to take her.

"You will repeat the words I tell you, Legate." Mac growled her title, breaking the intimacy between them. "If you do not open the maintenance locker, I will take these fingers of yours and, with or without your consent, I will finish setting the emergency lockout on the door. I started the process at the control panel. I need only your touch to activate it. The blast will destroy us and the cruiser. You don't want more deaths on your conscience, do you, Legate?"

Jameelah went limp in his arms. While he'd distracted her with his declaration of how much she meant to him, he'd done this terrible thing. If only he believed she wouldn't betray him to the New Alliance, maybe he wouldn't feel compelled to throw his life away.

When her knees gave out, Mac shifted his weight off her back and supported her with an arm around her waist. His arm felt like unyielding metal, and he didn't release her hand.

"Open." There had never been a word harder for her to say. Mac lowered her to the floor and kissed

her ear. "Thank you, Jamie."

When another alarm beeped on the control panel, Mac paid no attention. Jameelah's legs threatened to buckle, but she wobbled toward the sound.

"It's the cruiser trying to make contact. Ignore it." Mac's voice froze her mid-step. While he pulled on the maintenance suit, Jameelah measured the distances between herself, the console, and the bedroom.

She forced her voice to sound calm. "I want to know what they have to say. Maybe I can negotiate a deal." A deal, any deal, to keep Mac alive.

"Wait until I'm outside, then you can talk to them all you like."

Mac worked on the helmet now, checking the connections to the air supply.

"Are you afraid to hear what your enemy has to say, Mac?" she taunted, willing to say anything, to do anything to stop him.

"My name is not...," he growled from beneath the helmet. Mac fumbled to free his head and respond to her gibe, tangling his hands in the connections. "...and I'm not afraid of...."

Jameelah had hoped for this response, had prayed for it. She sprinted forward and slammed her fist on the communications panel.

"This is Legate Jameelah of the Holy Army of the Imsada." Before Mac could reach her, the reply came from the cruiser.

"Jameelah, thank God, you're alive."

"Rami." Jameelah spoke the name as an answer to a prayer.  
Mac shrieked a curse.

## Chapter 8

Even while he cursed Rami and pounded his fists against the console, Alec became aware of the pain that stabbed at his gut. The cause, not fear of capture or of facing Rami, but the thought that Jamie still wanted Rami to rescue her.

When Rami broke the commlink, Alec looked up to find Jamie diving for the bed. Too late he saw her slip the air cylinder behind her ear and bring the tube to her nose.

He froze for an instant, then located his helmet. It lay on the floor where he'd tossed it, a few steps away. Too many steps.

The anesthetic brought him to his knees. The cabin spun around him before his head hit the deck. He watched with disbelief while his fingers twitched inches from the helmet and air. Then he lay still, stunned by Jamie's betrayal, while Jamie reestablished communications with Rami.

He remained conscious long enough to grit his teeth when his ship squealed in protest as grappling hooks lifted her from the asteroid's surface and guided her into the cruiser's belly. He blacked out when the cruiser swallowed them whole.

Jamie returned the air to normal before the cruiser jumped, taking them along for the ride. Alec came to in time to twist onto his stomach, too weak to fight off the nausea that accompanied what must be

a long jump. His stomach was empty or he would have messed the deck when the two ships entered hyperspace.

Her face devoid of expression, Jamie studied him from her place at the command console. Alec rubbed the bump on the back of his head. While he lay unconscious, she must have attached the manacle to his left leg. She'd left two feet of slack; the Legate wasn't taking chances. They were captive and captor again.

A slim chance remained. He could talk his way to the console and trigger the emergency lockout charge. The explosion would tear them apart. Alec would not regret taking Rami and his comrades with him, but Jamie...Jamie would be safe with Rami. Maybe he should leave it at that.

But would she be safe? She should prepare some defense, at least consider the possibility that Rami was not the paragon she believed.

"Aren't you worried about Rami, Legate? About his plans?" Jamie shook her head, sending her ebony hair shimmering over her shoulders. Was she disagreeing or confused? She tightened her hold on the control chair, obviously determined to keep him from doing anything foolish. "Whatever Rami has done, he would never betray our cause. He is a loyal Imsada."

A few, short hours ago she had trembled at his every touch, and now? She treated him like the Triden hostage he'd always been. It didn't matter what feelings she had for him. The cause came first.

They were very alike, he and Jamie, Alec realized, as he tested the tether she'd strapped to his ankle.



He had always put the needs of the Triden Empire above his own. How could he expect her to do any less?

"But you have to see, Legate. No semblance remains of your original plan." Reduced to calling her Legate. It hurt more than he would have thought possible.

"As a member of the Imsada, I have often received a change in orders. Haven't you?" she replied.

"I've read the reports, and unlike its Imsada counterpart, Triden intelligence is damned good. You may be a brilliant motivator and logistician, but until now you've never participated in any Imsada military operation. One day you were planning refugee relief, the next running off to blow up the Emperor. Your precious Rami set you up. You have no idea what his plans are."

Jamie pursed her lips. One look in her eyes and Alec knew she would admit nothing. He had never met a more stubborn, determined woman. He could love her for that, if nothing else.

Her voice didn't betray the fear he saw in her trembling hands. "Rami's plans are to further the cause of the Imsada. Khay's cause, and mine. That is all I need to know. I will follow my orders. I will remain loyal to my people."

"Then why won't you let me carry out my orders, be loyal to my people? Why can't you understand?" Alec pleaded. Even now, there was time if she would help. He could think of several quick, if painful, ways to die before the cruiser came out of hyperspace and Rami opened the hatch. Jamie turned away as if no longer able to look at him.

"I won't let you throw your life away, Mac. As soon as we find out who you are, I will send you home. Rami will listen to me. Everything will turn out for the best. I will make it so. All you have to do is tell me your name."

Alec gave one last futile tug on his chain. He would have to cut off his foot to remove it and he didn't have time for that. The need to escape rose in him, hot and urgent.

*Tell me your name.* Jamie's words sent his adrenaline pumping. He jerked at the chain, ignoring the pain that shot through his leg. He could hear the words, see Rami standing over him, demanding to know who he was. And Alec didn't remember. Why was he here? What was he doing? Who was he?

Alec dug his fingernails into the nearest access panel. Some part of him tried to stop--this was crazy--but the overpowering need to die filled him. If he exposed an active circuit and disabled the safety guards, the resulting charge would kill him.

Not until Jamie screamed at him to stop did he regain control. The memory of who and where he was returned, and he found himself squatting on the deck, studying his bleeding fingernails. He continued to stare until the sound of the cruiser settling into a docking bay echoed through the cabin.

Jameelah willed Mac to look at her, to understand, to forgive. She silently repeated the command, then the plea. His gaze never wavered from the airlock hatch. When the seal on the hatch broke, they

both jumped to their feet.

She expected Rami, but the sound of his voice startled her.

"Legate Jameelah, we were beginning to think you did not wish to be rescued." Rami spoke to her, but he looked at Mac. He walked toward her, detouring out of Mac's reach. Rami wore ceremonial garb, a brightly-colored, split caftan tucked into black boots.

Jameelah took a step back. "You almost got us killed, Rami. Why didn't you identify yourself on Bradley-Five?"

She hadn't dared ask herself that question before this moment. And what was Rami doing in a New Alliance cruiser?

"All of your questions will be answered, Jameelah. Now is not the time. Not in front of this dog. I see you find it necessary to keep him on a leash." Mac flushed red at Rami's words, but stood his ground, erect, fists clenched at his sides.

She should have removed the tether before Rami came onboard. Rami would get the wrong idea about Mac, and Mac must feel backed in a corner.

"Down on your knees, Triden dog," Rami growled. Rami was in a dangerous mood. She stepped between the two men and into Mac's reach. Mac didn't react, but continued to stare down Rami.

"Rami, this man is my responsibility. You will not touch him. And I will have the answer to my question now. Why didn't you identify yourself on Bradley-Five?"

Rami scowled at her. "So, Khay-Alva's widow gives orders, and the Triden cur hides behind her skirts."

Fear rippled through her when Mac growled in response. She fought to keep her voice steady. "I will explain myself to the Imsada Council," she replied. "I don't answer to you. Now tell me what is going on?"

"This is none of your business, woman," Rami said, all pretense of respect gone. "I am in command here. The Imsada Council is full of old men and far away. You have clearly formed an unnatural attachment to this thing." Rami's mouth twisted into a snarl. He pulled her out of Mac's reach, then shoved hard against her chest. She staggered back from the force of Rami's hand, and fell at the entrance to the bedroom.

She heard Mac call "Jamie" and then cry out when his tether slammed him back against the wall. Her only thought was to defend him. When she scrambled to her feet, Rami blocked her path.

Rami looked past her to the unmade bed and scattered pillows, and his eyes widened. He spat at her feet. "The Imsada Council does not listen to whores who give their favors to the enemy."

Jameelah flinched at Rami's words. Her face flushed with first shame, then anger, but Rami didn't see. He turned to face Mac.

Rami pulled a weapon from his robe, a weapon the Imsada could not fabricate and had not managed to steal as of two weeks ago. A cruiser, a weapon, so many riches in such a short time. What had Rami

traded to get them?

Rami raised his weapon, first pointing it at Mac, then at her. With a quick motion of the wrist, Rami directed her to sit on the floor. She obeyed, her mouth dry with fear.

"Now, my Triden friend," Rami said, his mouth transformed into a beatific smile. He trained his weapon on Mac. "On your hands and knees or I will remove them." Mac spat on Rami's boots. While Rami looked down in amazement, Mac's bare right foot made a graceful arc in the air. He grimaced even before his foot connected with Rami's jaw. The chain on Mac's left leg hampered him, making his movements slow and graceless. Rami avoided Mac's fist, which jabbed the air where his stomach had been a moment before.

Before Jameelah could get to her feet, Rami kicked the back of Mac's knees and sent him crashing. For a second time that day, Mac lay dazed on the deck.

Fighting panic, Jameelah scrambled to her feet and stepped between the two men. She couldn't allow Mac to suffer because of her mistakes, not again.

Before Rami could push her aside, a figure clad in khaki stepped through the airlock. Behind the man, two more stood with weapons drawn. Rami froze when the New Alliance officer offered Mac a hand. Jameelah could only stare in amazement.

The officer had a pleasant, boyish face, red-blond hair, bright blue eyes, and a ready smile. His rumpled uniform once marked him as a member of the New Alliance, but he had torn off the insignia. A

deserter, dismissed for cause? Renewed fear gripped her. Only pirates traded out of Cestar-Two.

"No need to insult our Triden friend," the officer said while he pulled Mac to his feet. The officer's hand clasped Mac's, and they stood facing each other for a moment before Mac broke contact. They were the same height, but the other was more slightly built than Mac and looked ten years younger.

Mac stepped back panting, his shoulders resting against the wall. He had looked ready to kill before. When Rami retreated with a demure, "Yes, sir," leaving no doubt who was in charge, Mac looked ready to die.

The officer addressed Mac formally, clicking his heels together before he spoke. "I am Captain Freeman. Welcome to Cestar-Two. What is your rank, sir? The New Alliance does not wish to offend by offering an officer of the Triden fleet substandard accommodations."

What was Rami up to dealing with these people? And what were they doing on Cestar-Two? Mac worked his jaw, and looked at Jameelah. He hadn't spoken since Rami had come on board.

"My prisoner is a lieutenant," she said, flinching at Alec's immediate glare. He had evidently intended to keep even that information secret.

The New Alliance officer slapped Rami on the back. "Ah, less than you'd hoped, but you should make some profit, boy."

Rami flushed, clearly angry at his disrespectful manner.

"Lieutenant," Freeman addressed Mac again. "Rami here has sold rights to your ransom to a hostage

broker. I suggest you discard your military ethics and reveal your identity. Civilians can be so impatient when it comes to gaining a return on their investment, and Broker Zelat's overhead is quite high, I understand. So many gadgets purchased from you Tridens. So many delightful ways to extract information if you choose not to cooperate."

More afraid than ever for him, Jameelah took another step toward Mac. His chest warmed her back. Mac appeared unmoved by Freeman's speech. Was he familiar with ransom brokers' interrogation methods? Could he withstand them? She resisted the urge to throw herself into his arms, aware she could accomplish more if Freeman believed her interest in Mac was impersonal.

Captain Freeman seemed to notice her for the first time. "Legate Jameelah, now we will find out if you are worth the price of a cruiser."

She almost doubled over at the answer to her unspoken question. Rami had traded *her* to the New Alliance for his toys.

When Freeman stepped forward to take Jameelah's hand, Mac batted it away, growling at him to back off. Freeman retreated, but Rami grabbed Jameelah's shoulders and pulled her toward him.

She fell forward, choking on the musk of Rami's body. When she fell against him, his silk robes enveloped her face. While she struggled to breathe, she reached behind her, but felt only empty air. Rami's left arm pinned her to him, his right arm outstretched. Aware his weapon was now trained on Mac, she fought to break free from his crushing grip.

She grabbed his raised arm too late. The faint smell of ozone filled the cabin and she heard a soft thud behind her. Her throat locked, trapping her breath inside. She listened for some sign that would tell her Mac was alive.

"That was unnecessary, my Imsada friend. You will remember what I said and not injure the Triden," Freeman scolded.

"Yes, sir." Rami hardly sounded chastened. He held Jameelah tight against his side while he bent to place two fingers across Mac's neck. Mac lay in a crumpled mass at her feet. With her free hand, Jameelah reached for his chest to feel its reassuring, but erratic, rise and fall. She gasped when her throat finally loosened. The men ignored her.

"Now, as agreed?" Freeman said. "Your Legate with me, the Triden to Broker Zelat. Alive."

Rami nodded. He pushed her toward Freeman with such fury she lost her balance and had to cling to the New Alliance captain to remain upright. When she regained her balance, he stepped back. The officer seemed no more eager for the contact than she. He held her at arm's length with a hand on her shoulder while he turned for a final glance at Mac, who lay on the floor semi-conscious now and moaning.

The sound sent a wrenching ache through her chest and her legs trembled with the effort to keep from running to him.

"After you, Legate." Freeman pointed to the open hatch. Jameelah had no choice but to leave.



Doubtless, Rami would take his fury out on Mac if she resisted.

With as much dignity as she could muster, Jameelah preceded Captain Freeman out of the ship and onto Cestar-Two. Freeman steadied her briefly with a hand on her elbow when she stepped over the threshold, and made the civilized gesture for her to go first. He winced when they heard the crack of Rami's boot connecting with Mac's ribs.

Inside, she cried in protest at leaving Mac. Outside, she held her back straight, her head high. She could only hope that somehow Mac knew she would never willingly desert him.

It was time for the Legate to earn her pay. She had learned more than one lesson watching the great Khay-Alva work his diplomatic magic. And if words didn't work, seduction might. And if not seduction, Jameelah would fight to the death for Mac.

Lorna watched for Rami from a place high in the superstructure of Cestar-Two. She sat on a beam, her cheek pressed against a guide wire she held with one hand. Balanced thirty feet above the deck, she had a clear view of the space station's docking ports.

The builders of the station had left the interior only partially completed, but the jumble of uncovered superstructure suited Lorna's purpose. She moved unseen, scrabbling across the thin beams and wires above everyone's head while she waited for Rami to return.

He had promised to rescue the man she called Elliott, but she had to see for herself if Rami kept that promise.

When they first arrived on Cestar-Two and Rami made it clear she was his woman, Lorna didn't protest. To have someone claim her for their own gave her a strange sense of power. For the first time in her life, the attention of a man revolved totally around her. Also, Rami knew she was a bastard and he didn't seem to mind--this made his attentions even more miraculous.

At the wedding reception with Alec at her side, the others didn't dare say anything, but the minute he left, the whispers began. The words wove themselves into the music. "Emperor Thane's bastard half-sister."

If only she could be the invisible one, instead of Alec. Alec would have welcomed his existence being validated if only by petty gossip, but Alec didn't understand. He wasn't the one they all gossiped about. No matter how many times her mother, Lady Seana, said that on her home world, she was free to choose any man to father her daughters, Lorna still felt the shame. She could no longer bear to live on New Glasgow with the echo of Lord Mackenzie's disapproving bellow and Thane's angry glare.

When the station computer announced the arrive of a cruiser, Lorna scrambled over the crossbeams toward the docking site. A New Alliance cruiser disgorged the tiny ship held under her belly. Lorna recognized the smaller ship as her brother's by the identifying hash marks scrubbed into its outer hull. The ship looked tiny and fragile when the grappling hooks swung it into position and the docking arm

connected with its airlock hatch.

Rami entered her brother's ship first. She recognized him immediately from his regal bearing, colorful clothes, and manly swagger. If not for Alec, Rami's rescue would have seemed romantic. If only Mother had sent her away, she might have found happiness in that quiet little house with Alec and the man who had fathered her. But it was too late for happiness, despite the pretty promises Rami made. Too late for her, but not too late for Alec.

Captain Freeman entered Alec's ship next. He was also easy to spot. Even from a distance, his reddish-blond hair shone in the harsh light, standing out from the black-haired bodyguards who surrounded him.

Freeman's escort stopped every few feet to check above and behind. They must sense mutiny in the air, as Lorna did. The artificial planet seethed with suppressed rage against Freeman's tight rein. Trouble would erupt soon, and the chaotic forces holding the station together would cleanse themselves of Freeman's stabilizing presence.

A sharply spoken order, indistinguishable from this height, roused Lorna. She had almost fallen asleep while she squatted thirty feet off the floor, wedged between two poles.

She watched Freeman and a woman exit the concourse. Lorna didn't recognize her. Freeman didn't treat her like a prisoner, but held the woman's arm as he led her toward his quarters. She might be a member of the New Alliance, as Freeman was, or used to be.

The woman and Freeman--enemies, both of them, Lorna decided. If not enemies of Emperor Thane, then enemies of her brother Alec. She wouldn't talk to either of them. She would find help for Alec elsewhere.

Returning to her place above the station entrance, Lorna waited for Rami. She crept closer, almost directly above the concourse exit. Rami had kept his first promise and not exposed the secret of her birth to the others. Now, she watched to see that he carried out his second promise--to protect the man she said was her bodyguard.

Finally, Rami emerged from Alec's ship, shouting and waving his arms. Two men followed, dragging a third man between them. The man in the middle shuffled and tripped when he walked. His feet became tangled when they forced him forward at too rapid a pace. His head hung limp to one side.

Lorna put her hand to her mouth to still the scream that filled her throat. Had Freeman done this to Alec, or had Rami?

Rami said his people would rescue her bodyguard. He would join her soon, unharmed. Alec could barely walk.

Lorna shimmied down the jungle of metal and dropped the last two feet to the deck. Running the obstacle course of half-closed hatches and unfinished walls, Lorna rushed back to the room she shared with Rami. If he suspected she'd gone exploring, he might lock her in their rooms and she had to see Alec.

That was Lorna's goal. The last thing she had to do before help arrived and Gunny rescued her brother--she had to see Alec and tell him that in this she had been strong. She had remembered her duty. She had protected her family.

The unhappiness Alec would feel when she did not return home with him would not last, and she would not be there to see it. Mother, Thane, and Millard would comfort him. Alec would regale some other girl with tales of adventure when he returned home on leave. The picture puzzled her--a person, not herself, sitting with Alec in the Mackenzie Manor kitchen.

But as impossible as it was to return home, Lorna knew she could not stay with Rami. No matter how tempting life with him might be, she could not do what he asked. He talked of going to Emperor Thane when they wed as if that were an easy thing. Rami didn't know what he asked. Seeing him, even with Rami at her side, was too frightening to contemplate.

This left her with few choices, all of them confusing. Her mother would know what to do, but New Glasgow was far away. Alec would surely know what to do, but she couldn't talk to him now. Alec was a prisoner. That much seemed clear.

Only one other thought did not waver in Lorna's mind--she would die rather than tell Rami that the man he knew as Elliott was really her brother Alec, Emperor Thane's heir.

Jameelah hugged her arms to her chest and looked into the room. A table heavy with food and wine stood just inside the door. She could only hope Mac's quarters were as luxurious. Freeman had said he didn't wish to offend a Triden officer.

"Make yourself at home." Captain Freeman ushered her through the last maze of guards and locked doors. He hadn't said anything to her since they'd left Mac and Rami. Freeman's boyish face didn't match his voice. He barked orders to the guards they passed, and now, when speaking to her, his voice took on a cloying, sophisticated tone.

"I apologize for the clutter," he said, crossing the room to open the door to the bath. "I've been using the room for storage. We rearranged things, but we are short of secure storage space." In direct contrast to his spare, blond frame, Freeman furnished his opulent quarters with every conceivable luxury. Tokens of wealth from art work to engine parts, all of them no doubt stolen, haphazardly filled the room. An enormous golden bed covered with white lace and satin pillows stood in one corner. Jameelah backed away from it.

"So you've been expecting me?" she asked, stalling for time while she collected her wits.

"For some days." He hesitated and then walked toward the door to leave. She had to say something, she couldn't let him leave without telling her anything. Even without the guards and the locks on the doors, it would take days to find her way through the maze of passageways she'd taken here, and she had no idea where Rami had taken Mac. She had to find Mac.

"What do you plan to do with me? I have a right to know."

"Do you now?" Freeman's eyebrows arched in mock surprise. "I have no plans to seduce you if that's what you're worried about. Or were you looking forward to some recreation after your long flight?" He pointedly turned to face the bed.

Jameelah felt her face flush. How far was she willing to go for Mac? The captain was certainly handsome, but the thought of him touching her turned her stomach.

"You needn't worry," Freeman said, turning toward the door again. "All I require is your presence at the peace conference on Triden-Prime, and your promise to cooperate once we get there."

She nodded slowly, not certain she should agree. She could promise Freeman anything, of course, and say what she wished once out of his control. But why did he want to take her to the conference? What would he gain? The more immediate question--could she persuade Freeman to take Mac with them?

"I don't know what use I would be to you there," she said. "Wouldn't a Triden officer serve as a better hostage than I?"

"And what Triden officer would that be?" A teasing smile flashed over his face, then vanished. "Oh, the Triden officer Rami sold to the hostage broker. I have no need for hostages, Legate Jameelah. And if you're worried about the welfare of your former hostage, I can assure you that Broker Zelat can protect him from the station rabble far better than I can protect you here."

Jameelah hugged her arms more tightly, fighting to keep from shaking. "I would like to see for myself."

Freeman shrugged, "I have no objection. Someone will come for you." Then he turned on his heel and left.

When the door closed behind her, Jameelah sank to the floor with relief. After a few minutes, she staggered to the door. Finding it locked from the outside, she walked into the next room.

The bath, as large as the sleeping area, contained as much clutter and as many conveniences. Freeman had locked her in a suite of rooms with nothing to do but eat rich food, sip expensive wine, and sleep in a soft, warm bed. This was not what she expected from a New Alliance officer, even from one turned pirate.

Ignoring the huge, steaming bath that stood waiting for her, she stripped and stepped into the shower. After enduring the deprivations of life on Bradley-Five, the hot, perfumed water seemed nothing short of miraculous. Only the thought of Mac and what Rami might do to him kept her from succumbing to the temptation to slip into the tub of churning water a few feet away.

When she finished washing, Jameelah found a large white towel where she'd left her clothes. She gasped at the realization that someone had entered the room, and quickly covered herself. Had Freeman returned, had he watched her through the transparent glass?

With the towel pulled up tight around her neck, she inched into the bedroom. A man leaned against



the wall, standing in the shadows near the table that held her supper. She could see immediately it wasn't Freeman. His coloring was similar to Freeman's and he wore the same uniform, but this man was several inches shorter and several pounds lighter.

"What do you want?" she demanded, pleased that her voice didn't waver.

"That's what I want to know." He stepped into the light. The man, no, the boy, much younger than Freeman, was pouting. He hooked his thumbs in his belt and rocked on his heels in an obvious effort to look tough.

"You will address me as Lieutenant Telleg. I am Captain Freeman's first officer."

"Lieutenant Telleg, for now, I want some clothes." She cringed at the thought that Mac had made the same request from her under similar circumstances. Now she was the one shivering naked on the deck with only a towel.

"Over there," Telleg said, pointing to the bed. Then he turned his back on her and poured himself a glass of wine.

Keeping an eye on him, she backed toward the bed. She fingered the lacy undergarments that lay on top of a red silk dress. Telleg downed a glass of wine and turned back to her. He held onto the table for support and his eyes glazed over while he stared at the floor.

"I can't wear this," she said. "It's much too conspicuous. I'm certain Captain Freeman wouldn't want me to draw attention when I visit the Triden prisoner."

"When you what?" Telleg stammered.

"I want to visit the Triden prisoner. Your captain told me I could find him with a hostage broker named Zelat."

"But I thought you and Captain Freeman...", his voice drifted off in confusion.

"Did Freeman tell you to keep me here?"

"No, he said you could go where you wish on the station, but I--"

"But what?" she asked.

Lieutenant Telleg looked at his shoes and blushed. "The Captain has entertained guests here before."

"Well, he is not entertaining me." Jameelah smiled at the look of relief that flooded Telleg's face. "Now, if you'll help me find some decent clothes, I'll be on my way."

After her strange meeting with Captain Freeman and the boy who claimed to be his first lieutenant, Jameelah walked, dazed but determined, through the corridors of Cestar-Two, following the directions that should lead her to the hostage broker.

Questions and answers chased each other in her head while she strode down the corridor to the next ladder. Personnel lifts remained open shafts, their guts left to rust for lack of will to install them. Cestar-

Two was not a safe place for an unarmed, unescorted woman. Even dressed in uniform castoffs--Triden black leather pants, baggy New Alliance shirt repaired with several colorful patches, and boots of indeterminable origin--she drew stares and cat-calls from station residents as she passed. It took forty minutes to get from Freeman's quarters to her destination.

She hadn't expected Freeman to grant her this much freedom, but she didn't question her good fortune. She *would* rescue Mac. Diplomacy first, feminine wiles if the opportunity arose, and force, if necessary.

Jameelah found the hostage broker off a shabby corridor far from the heavily guarded docking bays. Two young male toughs lounged on his doorstep. They looked her up and down with threatening leers, but let her pass.

Despite the layers of dust, the broker's office was warm and comfortably lit. Sweet smoke emanated from a brazier in the corner. She hoped the narcotic wouldn't affect her too quickly. Diplomacy and flattery were her most effective weapons.

In other surroundings, she would have mistaken the hostage broker for a Calopian rug merchant. A well-fed merchant who obviously enjoyed his pleasures, he outweighed her four times over. She would need her wits to bargain with this one. Despite appearances, he might be a more shrewd judge of character than Freeman. Jameelah shook her head, setting her curtain of hair over her shoulders, and prepared to be charming.

The broker rose from behind his desk and shook a threatening finger at her.

"Captain Freeman said I could expect you to come storming down here demanding your prisoner. Well, young lady, that Rami person signed the papers. I have a receipt."

"You misunderstand me. Mister?"

"Zelat. Broker Zelat. I am legally registered. I have my papers posted. You can check them." She smiled, hoping to reassure him. She could forget Rami and Freeman. This man now controlled Mac's fate.

"Broker Zelat, I am here to discuss a mutually profitable matter. If we could be alone?" Jameelah gestured toward the men who had followed her. She sat in the dusty, overstuffed chair next to Zelat's antique wood desk and rested her hands, open and palm up, on its arms.

Zelat relaxed noticeably and waved at his men to leave. "Good boys, all of them, but not to be trusted. Not with important matters. I must constantly watch them. If we talk too long, they will wander to the recreation areas. Such trouble they get into."

"I will come to the point then, so you can return to your business."

"Well, no reason to be rude. Wine? Smoke? Or tea perhaps?" Zelat licked his lips and looked her over, hoping to discern her particular vice, no doubt.

Jameelah fought to hide her impatience and agreed to take tea from one of the cracked cups he kept on the cluttered shelf above his head.

"Now, about your prisoner," she said when Zelat returned to his chair.

"Oh, we don't call them prisoners. Clients, really, that's what they are. I only wish to return them safely home, and recover my expenses plus a modest fee. People don't pay much for bodies these days. No market for them."

Bodies? She swallowed hard and tried to keep a smile on her face. "Well, this particular client, the one I brought--"

"He is mine now."

"Yes. I'm not disputing your claim, Broker Zelat."

Zelat put down his tea. He appeared puzzled, but no longer defensive.

Surely, she could reason with the man. "You see, I believe this client can pay you much more to let him go now, than you paid Rami."

"Yes, dear. I'm betting the young man's family will do just that. I haven't had time to thoroughly examine my client, but I do have an eye for these things. Fine breeding, good bones, clear eyes. More telling, the faint scarring on his legs suggests his people can afford skilled medical care. Something of a rarity these days."

"Yes, I'm certain you're right. So if you would let him go, and help us find passage on a ship--"

"Young lady, I don't mean to be rude, but you don't understand how a broker does business. First, I arrange for a transfer of credits with the young man's family, *then* I send him on his way. As long as

Captain Freeman approves."

Jameelah stood. The dingy office made her nervous. In the swirling smoke, it grew smaller and closer with every breath. She listened for some sound, looked for some clue that Mac was behind one of the two doors on the other side of Zelat's desk.

"What does Freeman have to do with this? I thought brokers were independent."

"Captain Freeman controls all transport and communication in and out of Cestar-Two. A nuisance, but there it is. I should have no trouble with this one though. Your man, Rami, said he is only a lieutenant. The captain is looking for high-ranking officers--generals, admirals--people with royal or political connections. What a fine ransom someone like that would bring." Zelat rubbed the side of his nose with a dusty thumb to show his regret.

"I'll buy your client."

"Legate Jameelah," Zelat straightened in his chair, dismissing the intimate air between them with a wave. "I am not a fool. The Imsada came to *me* for money. You have none. Besides, Captain Freeman owns you."

Jameelah flinched at his words. Zelat spoke so easily of owning another. He finished his tea with a gulp and stood.

"Legate Jameelah, you are one of those people with political connections. Someone who can keep this war going. I would not dream of interfering with Freeman's plans for you. Business falls off in peace

time." Zelat maneuvered her toward the door now, shooing her out with his flabby hands. "There is something about a war that opens purse strings. Patriotism. Wanting to bring the boys home. I can't understand why Freeman lets you wander unless it's because he knows you do not wish to leave."

He was going to throw her out of his office, set his men back at their posts by the door. Jameelah had to stop him.

"Broker Zelat, would I be permitted...would you permit me to see your client? He was my prisoner for some time and--"

A smile broke over Zelat's face and he backed away from the door. "Of course, my dear. You should have told me from the start your interest is personal. I'm certain your presence would greatly cheer my client. He seems most depressed, and has not even been questioned yet."

Startled that such a simple request worked, relief flowed through her, making her knees quake. Zelat was going to let her see Mac. Then, concern. She expected to hear Mac was angry. Angry with Rami, Freeman, Zelat. Angry with her. But depressed?

Zelat returned to his seat and refilled her cup with tea. Jameelah took the requisite two sips to be polite and stood. When she looked to him expectantly, Zelat grumbled about young people never having time to chat and dragged himself out of his chair.

He placed his palm next to the door on the right, and mumbled. The door swung open.

Jameelah caught her first whiff of cold, dead air, and forced herself to take those first steps forward.

The corridor before her sent chills of dread up her back. Everything was white, silent, and cold. Ten solid doors, no windows or bars, alternated sides down the narrow hall.

"When will you question your client?" she asked. "If it is permitted, I would like to be present."

"So would Captain Freeman. In fact, he insists on it. The interrogation is not to take place without his permission. But that may not be necessary. Your man Rami just left with his young friend. She gave me enough information to make an identification. My contacts should have confirmation in a few days. Zelat motioned for her to precede him. "Such a pretty little thing, his young lady. Not at all what I would expect, considering she's Imsada. No offense intended, of course. Are you acquainted? Can you tell me who she is?"

Who Rami kept in his bed was the last thing on Jameelah's mind. Did one of Rami's girls know Mac? "What does she look like?"

"Very young, very shy, long blonde hair, delicate features. Rami is a lucky man. She appears most devoted to him."

Rami's girl friend sounded suspiciously like Mac's friend from the dance. Should she tell Mac? Should she try to break Mac out of here, or help the broker discovered Mac's identity so he would send him home unharmed?

Jameelah didn't have enough information to make a decision. "I don't keep track of Rami's friends, but I am curious. Unskilled in your means of discovering these things, I was unable to learn my ex-



prisoner's identity. Do you mind telling me what you have learned?"

"Of course not, my dear, as long as you don't go running to Captain Freeman with the news. It would delay things for your friend. My concern is only to get my money as soon as possible, and of course to return my client to the comforts of his home. I would have thought Rami had told you, you both being Imsada."

Zelat turned to give her a paternal pat on the arm when they arrived at the last cell. "He's not a lieutenant at all. The young lady was most definite about that."

"Not a lieutenant?" What should she do? Mac seemed definite about not wanting anyone in the New Alliance finding out who he was. What would she tell him?

"Not a lieutenant, but a captain and a doctor. Physicians are in great demand. If Captain Freeman knew, he might choose to keep him here. "Elliott is his first name. Rami's friend didn't know his family name or planet of origin. That will slow things down, but he has a half-inch indentation on the back of his right hand. Very significant. The four-year-old scar tissue matches the cast mark the New Alliance uses to identify officers they take prisoner. Your friend was one of those famous prisoners. You know the ones?"

Jameelah shook her head.

"Emperor Thane negotiated for the release of a group of officers before the cease-fire. Quite a departure from the customary, I understand. Negotiating for their release, I mean. And certainly bad for

my business. Just handing them over. No money changing hands."

So Mac had reason to worry. Even without his cooperation, someone could discover who he was, and the New Alliance had held him before. An experience he preferred not to repeat. An experience he would rather die than repeat. Torn between wanting to find out who he was and fearing the consequences, Jameelah couldn't hide her impatience while Zelat prattled on, his back to the closed door.

Zelat's gaze shifted to take in her fingers tapping nervously against her leg. "Well, I'll leave you two alone. Just let me turn up the heat. Don't want you to freeze. I'll be back in an hour, but call if you want out sooner. I'll hear you." Zelat pressed his hand against the door panel, releasing the latch, and turned to go. Then he hesitated.

"Do you want one of my boys to restraint my client for your interview?"

Jameelah pushed passed Zelat, holding her breath against the sweet smell of smoke that clung to his clothes. "That won't be necessary. We're friends."

When she entered the dark room, a blast of cold air cleared her head. Were they friends? After what she'd done? When the solid door clanged shut behind her and the lights flared, Jameelah was no longer certain.

## Chapter 9

Jameelah squinted at Mac through the glare of lights. Even when she shut her eyes, the lights burned. How could Mac sleep in this place? The thought of Freeman's opulent suite made her squirm.

Mac danced in the corner--flapping his arms to keep warm, balancing on one bare foot then the other. The temperature was above freezing, but dressed in shorts and a shirt, his hands bare for once, he had to keep moving to stay warm.

Until a moment ago she had convinced herself that Mac had a room like hers--a soft bed, hot bath, and plenty of food. The walls, floor, and ceiling of Mac's ten-foot square cell were a stark, unrelenting white. The only distinguishable feature was a bare slab that hung from the wall, wide enough for him to lie on.

"Come to join the party, Legate?" Mac's voice sounded tense and harsh.

"I told Broker Zelat we were friends. He said a visitor might cheer you up."

"Good old Zelat. Such a pal." Mac emphasized the point by banging the wall above his head with his fist.

Surveillance, of course. How was she going to find out what Mac wanted her to do if they couldn't talk freely?

She shielded her eyes with a hand. Mac looked haggard after only a day, and the questioning hadn't even begun. This was what she had brought him to, what she and the Imsada had done. Tears filled her eyes. She must choose her words carefully.

Jameelah covered her eyes with both hands. How could Mac stand being in this place? "Are the lights always like this?"

"Only when the door is shut. The lights go out when they open the door. Great fun."

The lights dimmed to a comfortable level. Zelat must be listening. Jameelah dropped her hands from her eyes. Mac still flapped his arms on the other side of the cell.

"Zelat said he would turn up the heat," she said.

"Well, you have friends in high places, Legate. How are they treating you?"

She shook her head at his accusing tone, and took a step toward him. When she reached out her hand to touch him, he flinched, then scowled. She stepped back against the door, feeling for the handle. There was none. "Freeman wants me to attend the peace conference with him."

"Zelat. Freeman. You do make friends quickly." Alec's voice, thick with sarcasm, did not match the concern in his eyes when he looked her up and down. He stopped dancing and sat on the narrow cot, motioning for her to join him.

When she sat next to him, Mac began to shake, his fists clenched to his sides. Without thinking, she began rubbing his arms. He leaned against her, resting his head on her shoulder while she warmed his back with her hands.

Knowing he could not see, she let her tears fall. From the moment she stepped through the door, she had wanted Mac to wrap her in his arms. Now, she held him, and his arms remained rigid at his sides.

She was so afraid he would hate her, so certain he wouldn't understand. "Mac, I had no idea Rami would do this. Please, believe me."

"No regrets...Legate." Mac hesitated over the word. Did he long to call her Jamie as much as she longed to hear him say the word? But Zelat was watching and listening. They must proceed with care.

Mac continued. "I can't say I'm sorry to be breathing, even if I am a might cold. I'll just have to decide what to do from here. This is a big place with plenty of options."

Jameelah shook with relief at his reassuring words. His breath felt deliciously warm against her neck. It would be so easy to forget more urgent matters, so easy to stay with Mac. She wanted to warm him with her hands and with her mouth.

"Can he hear us like this?" she whispered. Mac's cold ear pressed against her lips and sent shivers up her back.

"Equipment I saw looked old. Can't be certain. He is watching, so hands above the waist, please."

Jameelah pulled back. Yes, Mac was trying to make a joke. His smile was broad, but his eyes looked tight. He was trying too hard to be cheery.

When she shifted her warming hands from his back and began to rub his sides, he gasped and pulled away. "Maybe I should have said keep your hands above the neck."

With a sense of dread, Jameelah drew his arm aside and lifted his shirt to reveal dried blood and a hard, black bruise where Rami had kicked him. The same place he'd injured at the wedding reception.

Now she was the one shaking, and not from the cold. It was her fault. Every bump and bruise, every pain and ache he felt--her fault.

"Do you need a doctor?" Her tears flowed against her will. She wiped them away with the back of her hand.

Mac shook his head. "Zelat has a vested interest in my welfare. He looked over the merchandise thoroughly. Wish I hadn't come to during the examination." Mac grimaced and lowered his shirt. "If I were in immediate danger, he would call someone. How long have I been here? I lost track of time."

"Less than a day. After my talk with Freeman, he said I could look you up. For some reason, he wants me to come to the peace conference with him."

"A free ride to the conference? Just what you've been looking for. Can you trust him?"

Mac closed his eyes when Jameelah slipped to the floor to kneel before him and rubbed his legs. The room had warmed, but he responded slowly. A hot bath, that's what he needed, with lots of towels so she could rub him dry, and then.... If only she could take him back to her room in Freeman's quarters.

"I trust Freeman as much as I trust Rami," she replied, hoping he would catch the significance of her statement.

Mac opened one eye and raised an eyebrow.

If only they could speak freely. She wanted to tell Mac he'd been right about Rami. She didn't trust him. Or the Imsada Council, she realized suddenly. What did that leave her? Who could she still believe

in? Who but Mac, and she didn't know who he was.

Suddenly, Mac listed to one side and sagged against the wall. He looked more pale than he had a moment ago, and he held his hands, loosely closed, against his chest. Jameelah guided him down, laying him on his side against the wall. She knelt beside the cot to hear his whispered words.

"You can't know which side either of them are on." Mac coughed, holding his side. "Do you know what Zelat plans to do with me, Jamie. He hasn't even asked my name."

How to tell him without giving them both away.

"That's because he doesn't have to ask. He knows." Mac stiffened and opened his eyes. She slid in beside him on the narrow cot, facing him. He crossed his arms over his chest creating a safe space between them. He didn't seem to want to touch her.

She rested her hand lightly on his shoulder. "After all that fuss you made about keeping your name a secret, and someone knew all along. Elliott is a nice name."

"Elliott," Mac repeated. His breath sent shivers down her back. He hadn't stopped shaking. She wrapped her arms around him again, ignoring his forearms, which pressed painfully against her breasts. Keeping him warm was the least she could do, the very least, after all the harm she'd caused. She had to stop this awful shaking, and tell him what she knew.

She had to assume Zelat could hear. She hoped Mac remained alert enough to understand. "You didn't have to lie about having a friend in the Imsada, Elliott. I'm not jealous. She knew you when you

were a doctor. Zelat says she's a pretty young girl with blonde hair, and such good friends with Rami."

He seemed to warm suddenly, tangling his legs in hers, rubbing his cold, bare feet on her calves. Jameelah finger-combed Mac's hair out of his eyes. What did she hope to see in their emerald depths? Forgiveness? Understanding? What she saw was comprehension. She would settle for that.

"I don't know who you could possibly mean, Jamie. There was no one before you." Was he trying to tell her his name wasn't Elliott?

Mac uncrossed his arms and pulled her close. His palms felt strangely hot against her back. When he nuzzled her neck, Mac whispered, "Did you see her?"

Jameelah shook her head, pretending to shake her hair back. Mac stroked her cheek with the back of his hand. The silence between them grew uncomfortably long while they lay together. His breath came out in little shudders, his muscles twitching with the strain of being cold for so long.

If only Zelat weren't watching. Jameelah wanted to feel Mac's firm, hungry mouth pressed against hers. He licked his lips and glanced at the surveillance cameras. If Zelat didn't lower the temperature again, Mac could sleep. Maybe, if she stayed here...but, no. As much as she enjoyed this exquisite torture--holding Mac--she had to leave.

She couldn't get him out of this mess from in here. If she convinced Freeman she was an ally, he might take her and Mac to the conference. How many days, how many hours before Zelat figured out Mac was not Elliott? "Why didn't you want to tell me who you are? Don't you like your name?"



"I didn't think anyone would pay to free someone named Elliott. Certainly not my mother."

Mac didn't expect this alias to stand up for long. Jameelah had to act quickly. When the identification proved false, Zelat would contact Freeman and start interrogating Mac. She might persuade him to release a Triden captain at the peace conference as a gesture of good faith. She might even persuade him to send a Triden doctor to Bradley-Five to convince the Imsada of his sincerity, but not someone as important as Mac hinted at being.

"What name would your mother pay to hear?" she asked.

Mac must know he was running out of time. The questions would begin soon. His brilliant green eyes darkened with panic. "You'll just have to call me Mac. Someone with that name might have a chance if his friends knew where to find him."

Her fingers convulsed on his still-cool skin. Caught up in the feel of his body straining against hers, she stroked his thighs to warm them.

Suddenly, Mac sat up, his violent reaction throwing her off the cot. "I told you not to touch me. He's watching. The bastard's watching." Mac grabbed her by the shoulders, and began to shake her.

Jameelah pushed against him and broke free. He groaned when he sagged onto the cot, clutching his injured side.

Just as quickly, he stood and returned to the far side of the cell where he pounded on the wall. "Do you hear me, Zelat. I will not perform for your amusement. I will not tell this Imsada witch who I am."

Mac looked more than a little crazy when he turned to face her. "Is that why you've come, Legate? To seduce my name out of me? Is that your game?"

She had seen anger in Mac's eyes before, but always under tight control. Now she saw unsuppressed rage. His eyes glowed a brilliant green against his flaming cheeks. His civilized veneer vanished, and this new Mac frightened her more than any of the others. She feared for her own safety, and for Mac's sanity.

With Zelat apparently forgotten, Mac turned his attention to her. "So Rami succeeded in turning Khay-Alva's widow into a whore. How much does that bastard Zelat pay you to seduce his prisoners? How many men do you see an hour?"

Jameelah took a step toward the door. Mac matched her step with one of his own, maintaining the distance of a few feet that separated them. His voice, harsh and rasping, filled the room while he continued to rant.

"Just what is this pleasure we have yet to share that's worth sacrificing my honor and betraying my emperor? Are we supposed to do it while your friend Zelat watches? Is Rami watching, too?"

She pressed frantically at the door behind her. Was this an act, or was Mac no longer in control? This was going too far to convince Zelat she didn't know who he was.

Mac crossed the room in an instant and stood before her, eyes blazing, chest heaving erratically, fists clenching and unclenching.

"Do you understand, you bitch? Do you finally understand? I would rather rip out my throat with my own bare hands than tell you who I am." Mac's right fist opened and, with the back of his hand, he slapped her face. She fell against the door, her head swimming with the motion, but not with pain. The slap only stung, and Mac's hand behind her head cushioned it from the hard surface of the door.

She trembled when Mac pressed against her, reacting to the hard length of him pressing between her thighs and his harsh breath in her ear. "Run, Jamie, run away."

A moment later, the lights went out and a hand jerked Jameelah back. The door slammed on the sound of Mac's screams and his fists pounding against the door.

Jameelah made her way slowly to her room from Zelat's office. The fading sting on her cheek reminded her that, despite her intimate knowledge of Mac's body, she didn't know how his mind worked.

Was this how Mac reacted to stress? By falling apart? Or was his erratic behavior an act? If so, Broker Zelat had fallen for it. He seemed pleased by his hostage's lack of control, and invited Jameelah to return if, and when, he started his interrogation. She had struggled to hide her distaste and allowed Zelat to assume she would enjoy watching. After soaking for an hour in a hot bath, Jameelah still felt unclean.

At the knock on the door, she started to reach for a towel, but slid into the tub of bubbles when the door swung open.

"How's the face, Legate?" Captain Freeman strode into her bath with that swagger Jameelah so hated in men. The boys must all learn that arrogant strut in soldier school. Grateful for the cover the bubbles provided, Jameelah slid down in the tub until the water came to her neck.

Freeman leaned over her and played for a moment with the bubbles that covered her breasts. Then, with a languid forefinger on her chin, he turned her face to examine it. She forced herself to remain still.

For some reason she didn't understand, Freeman didn't frighten her. From a distance, he appeared young, in his early twenties. Standing close, his hot breath brushing her cheek, he looked older. She couldn't quite pin it down, but it was something about his eyes. He was older than he looked, and possibly not who he claimed to be. He seemed not to see her, only the small patch of red left by the back of Mac's hand.

Freeman was a difficult man to manipulate. More disturbing, his interest in her, and in the peace conference, had waned.

"I'm relieved to see your Triden lieutenant didn't leave a bruise. Zelat should be more careful with his visitors." Freeman stood abruptly and walked toward the door. As the ruling force on Cestar-Two, Freeman was her best chance of getting out of here alive. He was Mac's best chance. She wanted, needed, him to stay. What questions could she ask without drawing the wrong kind of attention?

"How is your prisoner, Captain Freeman?"

"Don't you mean Rami's prisoner?" Freeman turned back, his eyebrows lifted in sarcastic surprise.

"Well, perhaps, it is the same thing. Zelat had him sedated. Doing the job, his men garnered bruises darker and in more sensitive places than yours." Freeman gave a half-hearted leer, but didn't take his hand off the door. Jameelah smiled in reply. She wanted his attention on getting her, and hopefully Mac, to the peace conference. But even naked in a pile of bubbles, she couldn't keep his interest.

"Shouldn't we leave for the peace conference soon? Cruisers are expensive; you have paid a lot for my company. You must be eager to profit from your investment." Freeman shrugged and half-turned away.

Jameelah straightened in the tub, encouraged when his eyes returned to the bubbles sliding from her breasts. "I'm surprised you aren't keeping the lieutenant for yourself, Captain. A Triden hostage would give you added security at the peace conference. An additional bargaining chip."

"What is your interest in the hostage, Legate? Afraid you'll find the trip with me to Triden-Prime a bore? Is your Mac so very entertaining? Perhaps I should see for myself?"

Jameelah felt her face grow hot at his questions. She hadn't considered it before, but if the Imsada Council learned of her relationship with Mac, she would lose her standing with the council and quite possibly her influence at the relocation camps.

"The Triden officer means nothing to me." The denial hurt, but she dismissed the feeling with an impatient shake. She would tell as many lies as necessary to free Mac.

Freeman gave a lazy shrug. "Well, no need to worry about your lieutenant. I'll see to his safety. As

for the peace conference, I haven't worked out the details. I think I'll wait and discover who your mysterious hostage is before we leave."

Jameelah's heart pounded at the thought. She might not understand what was going on with Mac, but she did know Freeman would only make matters worse if he stayed on Cestar-Two.

"Why would you stay? I thought you were serious about wanting my help. I will assist you in any way I can once we reach Triden-Prime."

Jameelah lifted her hand out of the water. The bubbles ran down her arm, leaving her shoulder bare. Not a flicker of interest. Her charms were insufficient to tempt him.

Jameelah felt like shouting at her stony-faced captor. *What do you want, Captain Freeman?*

"I'm certain you will cooperate, Legate Jameelah." Freeman replied with an indifferent shrug. Then he left, closing the door softly behind him.

With the flat of her hand, Jameelah sent a spray of perfumed water across the room. It had been a stupid idea. What made her think she could seduce Freeman, or any man? She hadn't held Khay's interest for more than a handful of days. Now that talking had failed, she would have to fight her way out of this.

"Wait." Captain Freeman gasped as he followed Lorna through the tangle of misplaced pylons. Too old for this work, he thought, struggling to keep up. Old enough to retire, and now he could afford it.

Emperor Thane would no doubt lavish rewards on the man who rescued his beloved brother, and Captain Freeman was that man.

Freeman received word of the kidnaping of the Emperor's siblings three days after the event. From recordings taken of the ruined reception, Triden security identified five Imsada members, Rami and Jameelah among them. If he hadn't learned of the kidnaping, Freeman would have thrown Rami off the station as a trouble maker and handed the girl over to one of the brothels.

Every pirate and petty thief in the place knew the New Alliance would pay an impressive reward for Legate Jameelah, so when Rami made the rounds on Cestar-Two looking to trade the Imsada Legate for a ship, Freeman took an interest. If Rami didn't have the Emperor's brother, than Legate Jameelah might.

Since the day Rami swaggered onto Cestar-Two with the girl, Freeman had wanted to get word back to Triden-Prime, but the risk had always been too great until now. When Rami brought Legate Jameelah and Alec Mackenzie to him, Freeman had to take that risk. He couldn't keep Alec Mackenzie safe on Cestar-Two for long.

Zelat's quarters, though uncomfortable, were the safest place for the Emperor's brother. As long as Zelat didn't question him. Freeman had to make certain that didn't happen. Now that Freeman had sent word to Thane, he should return to his behemoth companions whose sole occupation was to keep him out of the hands of assassins. Instead, Freeman paused to listen.

"Lorna," he called, hoping to shock her into stopping by calling her name. Lorna gained ground.

"Lorna," he called again, wondering why he bothered. Everyone knew Emperor Thane shared his father's opinion of Lady Seana's daughter. Her birth was an affront to Mackenzie honor, a stain time could not erase. So why was he chasing after the Emperor's bastard half-sister? The Emperor would most likely thank him to leave her here.

Wiping the sweat from his face, he stumbled on. Hell, he couldn't stop. If Lorna were his daughter, he wouldn't want her left in this place. Certainly not with that sadist Rami.

Freeman grinned when he thought of Rami. Such a pompous bastard. Freeman would give anything to see Rami's face when he learned having the Emperor's half-sister would gain him nothing, while the Triden officer he'd sold to Zelat held the Emperor's heart in his hand.

But besides feeling pity for Lorna, Freeman was curious. She appeared in the scaffolding overhead just as he left the pod. Had she gotten close enough to discover what he was doing? Getting caught sending messages to the Triden High Command would earn Freeman a messy, painful death. He had to find out what Lorna knew and who she planned to tell.

Finally, Lorna stopped, resting to catch her breath. She looked like a frightened animal waiting for the predator to pounce.

"It's all right. I'm not going to hurt you." Freeman called in soothing tones, wondering if he would have to go back on his word. Keeping Alec safe was his first, and only, priority.

After losing sight of her, Freeman sprinted twenty feet and rounded the corner where he'd last seen



her. Lorna squatted directly in front of him, three feet up. He could hear nothing over his pounding heart and labored breaths.

Freeman realized how winded he was when he tried to speak again. "Don't...run. Want to...talk." Damn, he was out of shape.

She dropped something--a coin or a button. He followed its progress to the deck, noticing for the first time the silver plates that lined the wall ahead.

Then, he saw the fractured reflection of someone behind him. Too late, Freeman turned. The shape behind him raised its arm.

Alec absolutely hated being in Zelat's observation room, even if the lighting and temperature were more comfortable here than in his cell. In his ten-foot square, windowless cell, Alec knew where the cameras were, and the small blind spots. Here, he had no place to hide.

He ran his hand first through his hair, then along the edge of the giant one-way mirror that covered one wall. He didn't look at his reflection, not wanting to see what Jameelah saw when she visited. Whatever it was, it frightened her.

Was he going crazy? Alec wasn't certain any more. After three days, what had started as an act to convince Zelat he couldn't answer questions, seemed only too real.

"Going crazy. Going crazy." When he realized he'd spoken aloud, he started pacing. When Rami first brought him here, Alec hadn't paid attention to the observation room. He'd been too busy taunting Rami, trying to get him to strike a fatal blow, but Rami followed his New Alliance master's orders to the letter. Aside from the nasty kick to the ribs, Rami hadn't touched him.

Alec kept imagining Jamie on the other side of the mirror, talking to them--Rami, Freeman, Zelat. Sometimes Alec saw her the same way he'd seen Lorna in the asteroid field--floating in the air before him no matter which way he turned. He drove away the afterimages with both fists, rubbing them hard against his eyes until he could see only red blurs.

Shivering in the warm room, Alec stopped pacing. If Jamie was right, Lorna had been here with Rami, watching him. Watching him the same way someone watched him now. At least, Alec assumed Lorna was the woman with Rami. It was better than believing she was dead, killed on the failing space station or by Rami's hand. What would happen to Lorna when they figured out he wasn't Elliott? Would Rami punish her?

Alec pounded the mirror with his fists at the point where he imagined Broker Zelat standing. Damn him, what was the man waiting for?

Unfortunately, Alec knew. Zelat waited for the same thing the New Alliance guards had waited for in the POW camp--for the prisoner to become too tired, too sick, or too crazy to resist.

As the only certified physician taken prisoner, Alec hadn't been able to do anything for the men the

New Alliance questioned. Most drifted away, dying without a word. A few went raving mad and had to be restrained. One drowned himself in a slop pail. Alec had no idea what the New Alliance did to the prisoners they questioned, and he didn't want to find out.

He had worked hard these past years to shake those images of death--so many impossible missions, so many bottles of wine, so many frantic matings with women he didn't know and couldn't remember. All futile. The fear of becoming one of those mindless men terrified him every time he saw a New Alliance uniform. The sight of Captain Freeman had frozen him to the deck.

Well, this time, Alec couldn't play the waiting game. Jamie needed him, Lorna needed him, and he couldn't help either one from in here. When the pain in Alec's hands finally registered, he stopped pounding the mirror. He sat on the bench that was bolted to the floor, and tightened the strips of fabric he'd torn from his shirt and wrapped around his palms. When he finished, he rocked back and forth.

"So what if I'm acting a little crazy. It doesn't mean a thing." Alec bit down hard on his tongue to keep from talking aloud again. The observation area was jury-rigged, like the rest of the station. Alec could hear people come and go outside of what should be a sound-proof room. At the muffled scrape of a door closing, Alec stopped rocking. Someone coming in or going out? He'd lost track. Probably Zelat to ask his questions.

Zelat could learn something about interrogation from Jamie. She had been more intimidating on the escape pod--ladling soup down his throat one minute, demanding answers the next.

But Zelat made no demands, no threats. He simply asked if Alec wouldn't be more comfortable somewhere else. Then hinted the only way to get somewhere else was to reveal his next of kin, preferably one who would pay a fee for his return. A fee the man called it.

*When I get out of here, Zelat won't have a purse to put his fees in or a belt to hang it on, because I will personally take that belt and--*

The door swung open, interrupting Alec's silent ranting. At least, he hoped he hadn't spoken aloud. When Jamie entered the observation room, Alec jumped to his feet. He couldn't let Zelat see how much she meant to him. Zelat would use it against him. To have to choose between Jamie and Thane would tear him apart.

"So nice of you to visit me in my confinement, Legate." Against his will, he found himself bowing as he'd been taught at the New Alliance POW camp. "I promise I'll return the favor when your past catches up with you." Jameelah flinched behind her smile. Alec bowed again, not knowing why.

If anyone was watching this by-play, Alec hoped it was Zelat. Of the three, he seemed the most harmless. Rami was a rabid dog. Freeman coolly detached, seemingly capable of anything. He and Jamie had to convince Zelat they were no more than captor and captive. If Zelat found who he was, Alec didn't want Jamie involved. He accepted that his own death was inevitable, but not Jamie or Lorna's.

Jamie sat on the bench and pulled him beside her. "I wish I had better news for you, Mac."

Alec clenched his fists until the impulse to scream "My name is not Mac" passed. Then he braced

himself for the worse. "I gathered the news was bad. Your eyebrows sort of scrunch up in the middle when you worry. Things not going your way? How is your New Alliance friend?"

"Freeman is too busy to see me. Rami is not."

"Speaking to Rami again, are we? What does it do to discipline when you forgive a traitor so easily?" Feels like a kick in the teeth, Alec thought, rubbing his broken ribs. The ends of the bones slid under instead of meeting at the break. Every breath reminded him of how easily Rami had put him down. Not that giving Rami a pounding would have done any good with Freeman standing there with armed guards, but, damn, it would have felt good.

"Yes, I am speaking to Rami. I thought I'd check out the competition."

What did she mean? She'd lost him again. What he wouldn't do for five minutes alone with her, really alone. But if some angel with jurisdiction over wayward fighter pilots granted him five minutes, Alec wouldn't spend it talking. Even wearing clothes she'd apparently mugged a color-blind boy to get, she managed to make his arms ache for her.

If Zelat hadn't been watching, Alec would have taken her that first time she visited his cell despite being so cold he couldn't move. At least, he would have tried.

Made love to her, that's what he should have done. Made love to her--hot and slow--chased the lines of dread and worry from her face, make her deep brown eyes catch fire. Damn, they should have jumped the ship while they had the chance, jumped into oblivion. At least they would have died together, not in

this cold prison--afraid to touch, afraid to speak.

Jamie inched closer, but she seemed to be afraid of him. Alec clutched his aching middle and turned away. Then he sat and began to rock again.

"Do you remember, Mac?" Jamie touched Alec's shoulder and ducked her head so he could see her eyes. Such warm brown eyes to match her velvety voice. He could die happy listening to that voice, staring into those eyes. His shoulder burned under her hand. Why was she torturing him this way? Why was she asking these questions? If she cared for him, she wouldn't ask any questions.

"My competition, Mac. Rami's girl, the one who identified you. Do you remember? I wanted to see if I remembered her from the university. That's where Rami meets all his friends."

Alec tried to focus. Jamie was telling him something about Lorna, and he couldn't hold a coherent thought. "Oh, yes, her."

He wanted to let her know that he was all right, but his smile felt like a grimace and he couldn't stop rocking.

She moved closer, grasping his shoulders. "Rami is jealous. He won't let me see her. But we did talk about another matter. Rami wants me to attend the peace conference with him. His agreement with Freeman included bringing me here to talk. Nothing more. If I don't wish to cooperate with Freeman, I can go with Rami instead. As soon as Freeman gives permission, Rami is leaving with his friend."

Which man would most likely get her to Triden-Prime in one piece? If Lorna was with Rami...but

that couldn't be the main consideration. No matter how Rami explained his handing over Jamie to Captain Freeman, Rami couldn't be trusted.

"Two suitors now. Both offering presents. I thought you'd decided to go with Freeman?"

"I haven't decided which will offer the best accommodations. I want to go on the least crowded ship. We might pick up a passenger on the way."

Alec nodded understanding. Jameelah still believed she could persuade one of them to take him along. Alec had no such faith, not in Rami, anyway. No telling about this Freeman character.

"Don't worry about passengers, just take the first safe ride out," Alec said. "You'll find plenty of Triden officers at the conference to keep you amused. I can give you some names. Fix you up." He doubled up as a harsh laugh shook him and the pain in his side grew. Suddenly, he could see Thane and Tam--Tam standing in the Emperor's throne room in Thane's arms. Then Jameelah joined them and her image superimposed itself over Tam's. Now Jamie stood in Thane's embrace. Jamie looked at Alec, a faint smile on her lips and pity in her eyes, while Thane announced their engagement. Thane and Jamie. Alec knew he was going crazy, absolutely mad.

The room snapped back into focus, and Alec looked down to find Jamie shaking his arm.

"Mac, I think I should stay with you until Zelat contacts your mother."

*I am not on Triden-Prime*, he told himself, praying he hadn't spoken aloud. He drove his fists into his eyes again to convince himself of his present reality. He was not standing in his brother's presence,

heart-sick, more than slightly nauseous, choking out words of congratulations on the Emperor's engagement. That had happened months ago, before his accident, before he met Jamie. He was on Cestar-Two and there was only one way for him to save Jamie. He had to persuade her to leave without him.

Alec relented to Jamie's persistent tugs on his arms and lowered his hands, blinking away the dark images. "You will not wait. It could take quite some time for Mother to arrive, and I don't want you here when that happens. She will be angry and I won't be able to protect you."

Alec turned away, and found the strength to stop rocking. *Damn it, Jamie, go away. I can't take much more of this.*

Jamie tried to turn him to face her. "But Zelat expects to hear from his sources today. If your ID doesn't checkout, he will notify us. Freeman and I will witness your interrogation."

Not that. Cold panic cut through Alec's heart. He couldn't bear to have Jamie watch while they broke him, and they would eventually. Alec had never doubted that. "You will not come."

"You're not in a position to make demands, Mac, or whoever you are." Jamie stood and stomped to the other side of the room. She was playing to the observers, wasn't she? She had given up trying to get him to talk, hadn't she? She must have told Zelat she had a stake in finding out who he was, and needed to back up her story.

Alec forced himself to stand and crossed his arms over his chest. "You will leave for the conference



as soon as possible."

"Is that an order, Mac?"

She really did sound angry. He could tell by the way she snarled his name like she was addressing a, well, like she was addressing a Triden officer. Dammit, that's what he was. A Triden officer. If Jamie didn't like it, that was just too damned bad. When Alec ignored her question, she crossed the room and shook her fist under his nose. He backed away until he felt the bench behind him.

"Who are you to decide what I do?" she demanded. "If I want to take up permanent residence on Cestar-Two, I will, and without your permission, Lieutenant."

That confirmed it. She wasn't acting. Jamie wouldn't rest until he told her who he was. Alec sighed and held his head with both hands. Suddenly, the pain at his temples was worse than from his broken ribs. Couldn't she see he wanted what was best for her? Why did she keep shrieking at him?

Jamie appeared ready to make a fight of it. "More people have tried to run my life than I'd like to remember. All of them men. I didn't like Khay doing it, or Rami, and I don't want you to do it. I won't let you. Mac, look at me."

Her shrill voice raised the ache in his head to an unbearable level. Had he really hit her before? It seemed like a dream--a nightmare--their meeting in that cold, tiny cell. At first he thought she wanted to comfort him, then she had turned into someone, something else. The enemy. She'd wanted to know his name. He'd realized what he was about to do just as he'd thrown out his hand to strike her.

Alec buried his head deeper into his hands, shaking off her attempt to remove them. He wanted her home and safe. That's all he'd ever wanted. Soon, that's where they both would be. Gunny would show up at the last minute, like always, and make everything right.

Behind his clenched fists, Alec could see the view from his apartment on New Glasgow--oceans of crops stretching to the horizon, rain clouds breaking up on cue at dawn, Jamie asleep in his arms.

He felt his knees cave beneath him and he sagged onto the bench. "There is no way around it, Jamie. We will have to eat breakfast separately."

"Breakfast?" Her boots beat an impatient tattoo on the sheet metal floor. "Mac, what are you talking about?"

He dropped his hands from his face and smiled. "You know breakfast, Jamie dear. That meal you eat when you climb out of bed. There's no way we can eat it together. I just can't face these arguments every morning."

Jameelah stood next to Zelat and stared at Mac. She had persuaded the broker to move him to a larger room and adjust the lighting to the station day-night cycle, but nothing helped. Mac was getting worse.

He sat in the observation room with his head in his hands, unaware that she watched. When he

jumped up and started yelling again, she couldn't hear what he said. Zelat had turned off the sound when she entered the room. She hadn't spoken to Mac in two days, her presence seemed to upset him, but she made the trip twice a day to Zelat's shop.

All the men in her life had gone off the deep end. Jameelah fought to maintain her disinterested smile when Zelat offered her a cup of tea. According to his guards, Freeman was refusing all callers. Rami sent messages to arrange for secret meetings, then canceled each one. If something didn't happen soon, she'd start acting as loony as Mac.

Zelat was the only one around who still made sense. "So the girl's story didn't check out? Mac's not this Elliott person?" she asked.

"As far as it went, the girl's story is accurate. There was a doctor, first name Elliott, at the places and times she mentioned. But that Triden officer died two days after the New Alliance released him from the POW camp. Extremely poor luck. Or convenient." Zelat obviously enjoyed his work. He leaned forward to stab a ring-encrusted finger at the monitor where Mac continued to pace and shout. "This Elliott was rumored to have been acquainted with Emperor Thane. Intimately acquainted if you know what I mean. Quite interesting."

"Really?" She only half listening while she ran through her options, estimating how much time she had left.

"I also traced the hull numbers on the escape pod you arrived on. As it turns out, it's not a station

pod after all, but a private vessel, and someone has removed the hull identification from the official registry, quite recently. You won't tell Captain Freeman, will you, my dear? It seems your Mac might be someone important after all."

Jameelah tried to factor this new information into what she knew about Mac, but it was getting too confusing. "Of course I won't tell Freeman. I appreciate your candor, Broker Zelat. Perhaps you would enlighten me on another subject. Your client was with me for almost two weeks without revealing his identity. How will you force him to talk?"

"I have already begun the interrogation process."

Jameelah was fighting panic now. Mac didn't want her to witness his interrogation. He didn't want her to remain on Cestar-Two. But she had to think her presence would have a mitigating influence on Zelat. Somehow, she had to make things right. "You said Captain Freeman would be present, and I asked you to inform me first."

"Without Freeman's cooperation, I had difficulty locating you. You haven't seen the good Captain have you?"

Jameelah shook her head. Freeman might just as well have left the station for all the luck she was having gaining an audience. And without Freeman, Rami was the only way off the station. For her, and for Mac.

Zelat continued. "I suspect Captain Freeman does not want me to learn the identity of your

lieutenant. A delay, an excuse. One follows the other. Even his guards no longer answer my calls. Freeman's taste usually runs to younger, more delicate men, but perhaps he desires the Triden for himself."

Jameelah shrugged. As far as she could tell, Freeman hadn't shown any interest in Mac. Of more immediate concern, Freeman showed no interest in protecting Mac and, if Zelat was right about Freeman's preference in companions, she wouldn't have any luck using what feminine charms she could muster to gain his cooperation.

"So you've begun the interrogation without Freeman's permission?"

Zelat smiled and put down his tea. "I can't let the lack of a curious witness stand in the way of commerce. I've asked a few direct questions to weaken the client's resistance, but I'm afraid I will have to resort to drastic means. Your lieutenant isn't going to just tell me who he is, you know."

Through the one-way glass, Zelat stared at Mac with a predatory gleam in his pale gray eyes. Mac stopped pacing again and knelt to pound the floor with his fists. Zelat sucked on his pipe deeply, closing his eyes when he inhaled.

Jameelah swallowed hard, and turned her back on the monitor. Did she have the stomach to watch without giving them both away? She would have to, or find a way to stop this. "What are you going to do?"

"Oh, you don't have to worry, Jameelah. I won't hurt your lieutenant. Torture doesn't work, not on

Triden officers." Zelat put down his pipe and cheerfully launched into his explanation.

"Well, I could try to force him to talk, but it wouldn't do any good. They're programmed that way, you see. All Triden officers are. With powerful psyche programming. Your friend most likely doesn't realize it was done. And you needn't pretend with me, young lady. If you had tried to force my client to talk for any appreciable length of time, he would have begun acting like this, and eventually gone quite mad."

Jameelah winced when she remembered their first days on the escape pod. When she'd pressed him for his name, Mac had stopped eating and begun all that bowing.

Zelat continued. "If I challenge Mac directly, threaten him or threaten someone he knows, like yourself, with bodily harm, his thoughts become muddled. This confusion becomes permanent if questioning continues. Quite interesting to watch. Some just curl up and die, some become violent, others turn self-destructive. I must work around his programming before his brain becomes so damaged that he cannot offer useful information."

Jameelah rubbed her cheek, where only a trace of a bruise remained. Mac had become enraged when he accused her of trying to discover his name. She had wanted to believe it was an act, a ploy to make Zelat believe they were enemies. Had this mental conditioning by the Tridens caused Mac to believe his own ruse? Did he believe she worked for Zelat? If so, staying away from him was the right decision. Seeing her would cause more damage to Mac's obviously fragile mental state.

Still sucking lustily on his pipe, Zelat continued. "There is a flaw in the Triden programming. There's always a flaw. It took me years to discover it. The Tridens are arrogant, you see. They assume loyalty in their troops and don't make an allowance for willing disclosure of information."

Jameelah shook her head. "Mac wouldn't disobey orders."

"No, of course not, dear, but that's not the trick. The trick is not to persuade Mac to betray his Emperor, but to persuade him no betrayal is involved."

Zelat rubbed his chubby hands together while he held his pipe tightly between his teeth. "I force the subject to believe he is in a social situation--an urgent, uncomfortable, social situation --where revealing his identity is crucial, but not a military matter. That will bypass the programming entirely. Your Mac will reveal his identity voluntarily. It takes a delicate touch."

Jameelah clenched the arms of Zelat's chair to keep her hands from shaking. "You can do this? Without hurting him?" *Please, without hurting him.* She left the word unspoken, but chanted it to herself.

Please, please make it true. Make Zelat find out who Mac is without doing any more damage. Mac said his family had enough money to pay a ransom. She would stay until he was safely on his way home, even if it meant missing the peace conference.

"With the help of the equipment I bought from an enterprising Triden supply officer, I can learn what I need without causing any physical damage. I will have your friend begging to tell me who he is.

Do you want to watch?" Zelat peered at her through the smoke from his pipe, a leer curling his upper lip. Jameelah took a deep breath and gulped her tea. This would not be easy. She looked into the observation room again.

Mac had stopped pounding the floor. When Zelat reached across Jameelah and flicked the sound on, her head filled with the mild narcotic from Zelat's pipe. She stifled a cough and noticed Mac no longer shouted obscenities.

"How long will the questioning take?" she asked, pleased her voice didn't shake.

"Your Mac is a stubborn man. I must experiment with several scenarios. As a personal favor to you, dear lady, I will start with the most mild of settings. Perhaps I can spare your friend an ordeal." Zelat smiled and patted her arm. Jameelah fought the nausea that his closeness brought.

Zelat continued. "It should take a day, perhaps two. As for Freeman, I cannot afford to wait while he plays these games of hide-and-seek. I should call you? You want to watch at the end?"

She forced her smile wider. "Yes, I would enjoy that."



## Chapter 10

"Lorna," Gunny called, relieved to find her on Cestar-Two. But why did she remain perched ten feet above his head instead of flying into his arms? "Thank God, you're alive, but what are you doing here? Freeman's message said--"

Gunny reacted instantly to Lorna's signal for silence, and dropped to a crouch. With a jerk of her head, she signaled for him to follow and leaped for the next cross-beam. What had happened to shy, little Lorna?

With three men at his heels, Gunny followed her weaving path through the superstructure of Cestar-Two, cursing Freeman the entire way. He should have met them, not Lorna.

Before leaving the docking area, Gunny spared a glance over his shoulder at the escape hatch. On the other side was their only way out--a fighter ready to jump. Turning away, Gunny watched open-mouthed to see Lorna navigate the maze of cables and T-bars as if she'd been born here instead of on Lord Mackenzie's estate.

Plans must be belly up for Freeman to send Lorna. If Alec were running things, he'd have Lorna locked up tight. Was he out of the picture permanently, or just out of the planning loop?

Not for the first time since Lorna and Alec were dragged from the ballroom, Gunny felt a cold stab

of fear in his gut. Alec would die rather than reveal his identity, and every day that passed without a ransom demand made that outcome more likely.

Fear pushed aside, Gunny fought his way through a tangle of disconnected wires. Alec had a way of getting into scrapes and out of them again, but he'd never managed to piss off so many people before. Getting off Cestar-Two in one piece would solve only half his problems.

Gunny didn't want to think about the hell that would break loose when they got home, and it wouldn't be just Lady Seana, his mother, Alec had to face. The entire Triden Council wanted his head, and this time he couldn't hide behind some false identity. Emperor Thane had made that impossible.

It was Prince Alec now, crowned in absentia. Gunny chuckled when he imagined Alec's reaction to that. After a lifetime as the black sheep of the family in private, Thane would force him to go public. The minute Alec returned to Triden-Prime, everything he did, everything he had done, would become very public.

After viewing the tapes from the ruined wedding reception, half the Triden Council wanted Prince Alec charged with treason for consorting with a known Imsada terrorist and planning to assassinate his brother. The other half wanted him charged with incompetence and drunkenness on duty.

Thane and Tam, the royal couple, remained neutral in public, but Gunny witnessed their private shouting matches when he conveyed messages between Thane and his mother. Tamboria didn't shrink from berating her husband in front of servants. Thane was so distraught over his brother's disappearance

and his wife's reaction to it that he was reduced to slamming his fist into walls and kicking the furniture. They hadn't even made it to their marriage bed before news of the kidnaping interrupted their honeymoon.

Some interpreted Alec's behavior at the reception as a sign he disapproved of the match--a treasonous position for any Triden officer to take. Rumors flew between the New Alliance and the Triden Councils concerning Tamboria's past relationship with the Emperor's newly-revealed younger brother. Yes, Alec would have to do some fancy fence mending when he got home.

Thane knew as well as Gunny that Alec wasn't guilty of treason, but outside the family, questions were inevitable. Many thought fostering younger siblings to ensure the genetic continuance of a family resulted in sibling rivalry raised to a deadly level. But Gunny had guarded Alec from the day Lord Mackenzie delivered him to his foster father. Treason would never enter Alec's mind.

And even if he didn't love his brother, which he did, Alec abhorred personal power. He watched his brother shoulder the responsibilities of ruling the empire with ill-concealed relief.

Alec was the family peacemaker, or he had been until he'd returned from the New Alliance prison camp. Gunny had watched, helpless, when Alec withdrew--stopped making the effort, started drinking too much. Once Alec no longer served as arbiter between his mother and brother, relations between the New Glasgow farm and the Emperor's palace became strained. Without Alec's conciliatory presence, Lorna seemed to wither between their unchecked wrath.

Each time Alec returned to the farm, they'd found Lorna less able to deal with the world beyond her

mother's kitchen. At harvest when the room filled with relatives, she fled to the cottage where Alec grew up. When it was time for Alec to return to his duties off world, Gunny would find brother and sister there--Alec apologetic but eager to leave, Lorna convinced more than ever that she couldn't function without her half-brother.

As for the charges of incompetence and drunkenness at the wedding reception, Thane laughed in the Council's collective face. "Why shouldn't my brother get drunk at my reception? I was. Prince Alec was on medical leave with no official duties other than escort to his sister, which he did."

Gunny testified that Alec had risked his life, possibly sacrificed it, trying to rescue Lorna. The blame should rest squarely on the shoulders of security. They had let known terrorists into the place, and then out again. But Gunny had to admit it looked bad--Alec dancing all evening with the woman intelligence said was Imsada.

While he struggled to keep up with Lorna, Gunny smiled. He admitted, if only to himself, to being a hopeless romantic. In a hologram of the same ballroom Lord Mackenzie had built to woo Lady Seana fifty years before, their son waltzed with a beautiful young woman. Gunny couldn't help hoping that under the influence of the occasion, Alec might find someone to take Tam's place. Eight years was a long time to nurse a broken heart.

Now, Gunny had to turn all this attention on Alec--having to answer for his behavior at the reception, his past relationship with Tam--would drive him deeper into the bottle and away from any

long-term relationship. And Lorna. What was all this doing to her?

Lorna crouched ten feet in front of Gunny. She pointed down. Gunny groaned before he started the twenty-foot descent. Thirty years was a long time to follow one boy around the galaxy. When all this started, Gunny had been better at climbing trees.

With his feet again on the deck, he sent his men to scout the corridors on either side. He could hear and see activity ahead. But when he turned to ask Lorna which way to go, she was gone.

"Do you see him yet?" Zelat asked Jameelah. He tapped a spoon against his glass to draw attention to its empty state. Then he stroked his mustache with brightly enameled nails while the steward splashed vermilion wine into his glass.

"No, not yet." Jameelah remained at attention in her chair, head angled to afford an unobstructed view of the corridor. They sat in a restaurant not far from Zelat's office. If Zelat's assistant didn't come soon, she would have to leave. Rami insisted they talk in private about some mysterious plan he'd concocted. With Freeman remaining out of sight, Rami looked more and more like her only way out of this.

"Don't worry, my dear Jameelah, soon my assistants will finish with Mac, and then he will talk."

Zelat hadn't allowed her to attend this morning's session, or the two the day before. Preliminary,

he'd called them, and boring. He would ensure she was present for the "unveiling."

"The morning session? How did it go?" she asked.

"Most mysterious, your Mac. He seems to prefer to be anyone but who he really is."

"What do you mean by mysterious?"

"Well, as I explained before, the way to get around Triden programming is to make the subject want to tell you who he is while experiencing a nonmilitary environment. The admission must be voluntary." Broker Zelat spread his napkin over his massive stomach to accommodate his wine glass. Discussing his technique was thirsty work he obviously enjoyed.

"I create an illusion in the subject's mind, a convincing illusion that he is someone else. A criminal scheduled for execution, a young woman trapped in a failing escape pod, a boy being punished for misbehavior. Some such thing. Then I offer the subject the opportunity to leave this persona, and the danger or embarrassment. All he must do is deny the illusion and proclaim his own reality."

"And Mac won't do this?"

"No, stubborn man. When he recovered from my earlier questioning, he was tired, weak, disoriented. He should have accepted the illusions I presented."

"What makes you think he didn't."

"Well, either he has the mental strength to see through my little bag of tricks or he prefers...well, to go into detail would be indelicate. Let me say that your friend seems not to mind becoming some very

unfortunate people in some very uncomfortable circumstances. Most Tridens are so proud that merely suggesting they are a young girl at her first dance is enough to set them furiously declaring their true identity. I went ten levels past that scenario with your friend yesterday. He has to see through it, or else--"

"Or else what?" Jameelah leaned out into the street again to look for Zelat's assistant. He would come when Mac was ready for his next session with Broker Zelat. Jameelah tried not to think about what getting Mac ready might entail

"No, to resist my illusions is not possible. I don't believe you understand the depth of your friend's experience. During a few minutes under my care, he experiences a lifetime of feelings, intense feelings. He will carry those experiences forever in his unconscious mind. One lifetime, two--this a man can bear, but they will haunt his nights.

"This Triden has lived a dozen lives, each more painful than the last, and each time he appears to break, your Mac gives me a different name. Five so far, six if I count the one Rami's girl gave me. Either the man is deeply disturbed and has no identity of his own, or the answer is more simple." Deep in thought, Zelat paused to rub his finger against his nose. "Each name your Mac reveals matches that of a Triden officer. Each one died. One after the other."

"There is a war on, Zelat. Four out of every ten Triden who has put on a uniform is dead."

"If I may say, wishful thinking on the Imsada's part, Legate. One in twenty, I would believe. No,

each of the men your Mac claims to be has died in a too-convenient accident or was executed by order of Emperor Thane. Very curious."

Zelat's sinister words sent chills cruising up and down her spine. He was getting close, but close to what, Jameelah couldn't guess. Mac grew more mysterious by the minute. Was he someone she should try to save? What monster hid inside the man she'd grown to love, or had he merely seduced her?

Jameelah shook Zelat's arm to get his attention. "How are you going to get Mac to talk?"

"I so hate to use violent means. Especially after I promised you that I would not. Besides, scars can lower the ransom price and I do have to be careful not to cause fatal damage. We have no real doctors here, you know, and I wasn't lying when I said there was no market for bodies. Although, if permanent memory loss occurs, there are many who will buy a strong body paired to an open mind. Such a handsome slave would bring a good price."

Jameelah choked on her tea. Mac had only feared Zelat would discover who he was. She hadn't realized so many other frightful things could happen to him. Torn between running to Mac or finding Rami to plead for his help, Jameelah dabbed at her mouth with her napkin.

She had options. She just had to think. Trying to overpower Zelat and his assistants wasn't a practical solution. Neither was trying to fight her way into Freeman's quarters. That left Rami.

That's what she would do. She would talk to Rami. He had hinted more than once that a marriage between them would allow him to take her place on the Imsada Council, a place he clearly thought he



deserved. Would her pledge be enough to persuade Rami to save Mac from Zelat?

Jameelah coughed again, unable to swallow. She wouldn't have considered such a move a few weeks ago, but to save Mac, she could give up her freedom. Anything rather than watch Mac sent mindlessly shuffling off as slave labor. "But you would prefer to collect a ransom from the family?"

"Collecting ransom from the family is more profitable, especially if another sale is in the preliminary stages. The threat serves as an incentive to the family and, if the worst happens, I have an alternate buyer in place. Yes, I really should make some calls. Your Mac is a strong, handsome man. He would be a desirable property on the open market, even with a damaged mind. Well worth taking to auction. Three more days of questioning, and then we'll see."

Jameelah stood. She could wait no longer. She must meet with Rami. He might get impatient and disappear again. Zelat put down his wine glass and gripped her hand. When Zelat stroked her arm with his fat, ring-encrusted hand, Jameelah ground her teeth and fought to keep from pulling away.

"Have you lost interest in your friend so quickly?" he asked.

Jameelah had to force the words out. "What will you do differently today?"

"Today, I will make the lieutenant's situation more real. Using real-time mental input, I will use a scenario the subject is familiar with. The last lifetime he experienced will do. I believe he rather enjoyed that one. He never raised a single objection. This time, to ensure he believes the pictures I create in his mind are real, my boys will provide sensory input to match the mental images. Mental input slowed to

real-time and reinforced with physical stimulation should convince him of their reality."

God, what had she gotten Mac into. "What is Mac's reality, Zelat?" The words left Jameelah's mouth in a whisper.

Zelat first licked his lips, then the side of Jameelah's hand.

Jameelah jerked away, unable to bear his touch. A grimace formed on her lips before her determined smile replaced it.

"Reality, Jameelah, is that your Mac is under my control. I can do anything I want to him. Absolutely anything. When Freeman has finished playing with you, you may also be mine. Rumors are flying that Freeman has left the station and doesn't plan to return. I have sent inquiries to his rivals concerning your disposition. It is unfortunate no information needs dredging up from your inner thoughts. Unlike Captain Freeman, I would find that process most stimulating."

Jameelah gripped the edge of the table to steady herself. Zelat stood, digging his painted nails into her arm, and pointed to where his assistant waved to gain his attention.

"I must leave. My client awaits. His reality for the next several hours is that of the Gathian cloister on Agathocles, an unpleasant place for a boy of fifteen. Such a pretty boy, too. I'm afraid he will be most clumsy today--dropping his books, forgetting his lessons, and finally, and most unforgivably, spilling hot tea in his tutor's lap. The consequences will be most humiliating and extremely painful, and my boys will make it real. They will take great pleasure in doing so.

"And if your Mac doesn't beg me to listen to his protests that he does not belong there, I have an endless variety of places to send him. So many places I want to send him. Would you care to watch, Legate?"

Jameelah turned away, stung by the sharp laugh that followed, only to face the young assistant who hopped from foot to foot unable to contain his eagerness to begin.

"I don't know where your woman is, now let me go," Captain Freeman's body guard shouted as he shoved Rami aside. The man was so eager to get away that he didn't break stride.

Rami picked himself up off the deck and cursed, wondering again how he'd let Lorna talk him into capturing Freeman. Sometimes Rami thought the Emperor's sister was a witch with powers to cloud his mind. When Lorna said the captain had tried to force his attentions on her, all wise thoughts fled in the face of Rami's need to avenge his honor.

Only when Freeman's men began their quiet search for their leader did the consequences of eliminating the captain become clear. Without Freeman, the struggle for power grew violent. Rami must find Lorna before leaving Cestar-Two became impossible.

The cafe near the hostage broker's shop--that's where he'd found her last time. Lorna had to be there;

he couldn't leave without her.

He sprinted off, cursing the piles of discarded rubble that blocked his way. Dodging runners headed off station, Rami whispered a prayer of thanks that he and Lorna would not have to join that desperate crowd. No one was likely to welcome them onboard their vessel, and trying to claim the cruiser Freeman promised would be futile. Besides, the cruiser was too high-profile. Rami planned a more discreet means of escape. Elliott's ship, the one he and Jameelah had arrived in, was primed and ready to jump.

Skidding into the corridor usually filled with the swank lunch crowd, Rami found empty tables, overturned chairs, and a floor littered with spilled food, but no Lorna. Where could she be? Where would she go? Rami suddenly realized he had no idea who Lorna was.

Six days before, fresh from taking his revenge on Jameelah's despoiler, Elliott, Rami had ached to bed his Lorna, but he'd held back, sticking to his plan to wait until he legally joined with her before the Imsada Council. But after identifying Elliott for the hostage broker, Lorna dragged him to their room. Her bold behavior had shocked him, but he hadn't the will to protest.

Unwilling to wait for the marriage he promised, the Emperor's sister had undressed for his pleasure and begged for instructions on how to please him. Never had he experienced such erotic desires and had them so thoroughly fulfilled. This innocent flower had fulfilled his every fantasy and, after too brief a respite, she'd awakened to demand more.

The sweet sport did more to soothe Rami's thirst for revenge than beating a Triden officer ever

could. A woman with the same blood as the Triden Emperor had knelt between his legs and begged permission to touch him.

Spending his nights and days locked with Lorna in bed, Rami had time and energy for little else. He canceled meeting after meeting with Jameelah, unwilling to waste his time arguing with her when he could play with Lorna. Now Rami was the one who woke after hours of undisturbed sleep to find Lorna watching him.

In exchange for Lorna's cooperation when they appeared before the Emperor as husband and wife, Rami agreed to bring her bodyguard Elliott along. Lorna had begged at the most inopportune time, when he could hardly refuse.

The woman must be a witch, Rami decided. She had bewitched him with her hands and with her mouth, but the opportunity to rescue Elliott had passed. Rami hadn't time to go back for the man now, not with the station falling apart. In time, Lorna would forget this Elliott. Rami would make her forget with the body upon which she lavished so much of her attention.

To fulfill his dreams, all Rami had to do was find his bride.

When the time for her meeting with Rami arrived and then two minutes passed, Jameelah realized she couldn't wait for him. Zelat had promised to delay Mac's interrogation until she returned, but she

didn't trust him to keep his hands off Mac for long. Diplomacy had failed. What she needed now was a weapon. If she couldn't get one from Rami, that left Freeman.

Fighting heavy foot traffic, she followed the convoluted path to Freeman's quarters. Unlike her previous attempts to gain access to his office, this one proved successful. The door stood open and unguarded. She slipped in, hugging the wall, and looked around the dimly lit room. Someone had ripped the door off the now-empty weapons locker.

Almost empty, she realized when she turned up the lights. A small tazer, a weapon Freeman's guards most likely considered too benign to be of use, lay on the floor. Jameelah tucked it into her belt.

Zelat trusted her, or at least, he wasn't afraid of her. She could get close enough to use a tazer. Set on high, it would render him unconscious for several minutes--more than enough time for her and Mac to lose themselves in the fleeing mob.

When she reentered the corridor, men pushed past, carrying loot she recognized as taken from her quarters. With Freeman missing, the station was descending into chaos quickly. Jameelah's panic rose when she realized Zelat might be part of the fleeing mob, and she ran faster.

Zelat's questioning was threat enough, but what would he do with Mac if forced to leave the station? Bring Mac along? Dispose of him as excess stock? He must have arranged for some way off Cestar-Two.

If Zelat took Mac off the station, there was no telling where they would end up, considering Zelat's

particular tastes and contacts, but even if it meant traveling with Zelat, Jameelah would stay with Mac. Nothing else mattered. Not even the peace conference.

She reached the corridor where Zelat kept his little shop of horrors to find most of the stores smoldering. Flames sputtered under the erratic rain coming from the poorly installed fire control system.

She wasn't too late. She couldn't be. She ran faster.

The fleeing mob had thinned. Only occasionally did someone brush past her, usually without a word. When she reached Zelat's shop, she noticed his assistants weren't standing guard at the door. Her heart pounded in her throat.

After throwing open the door, she paused over the tipped brazier that smoldered on the floor. Soon Zelat's suite would be in flames. She turned the brazier upright and smothered the embers with the rug, then she noticed someone had closed the observation room window. Mac must be inside.

Leaping over Zelat's up-ended desk, Jameelah leveled her tazer and reached for the door. A hard knot formed in her stomach. She slid forward, her arm outstretched.

Someone had left the door ajar. It swung open at her touch. Had that someone already left? Silence was her only answer.

Then, in the flickering light, she saw it--a body twisting on the floor. With a cry, she rushed forward, but before she took two steps, someone wrenched her weapon from her hand and swung her around. Her weapon clattered across the floor and out of reach.

She was conscious of brief contact with a hard male chest, too narrow to be Mac's. Before she could complete the thought, a well-practiced foot swept her off balance and she lay on her back on the floor. If not for the gloved hand clamped over her mouth and the weight of the man pushing against her chest, she would have screamed, and not just from the suddenness of the attack. The body beside her on the floor was Zelat.

His face lay inches from hers. She could smell the smoke that clung to his clothes. She could see his fingernails, painted the same red as the blood that now covered his hands. He clawed at his neck, a gurgling sound erupting from his throat. Then the sound stopped.

Jameelah tore her gaze from the grisly sight, and struggled to break free. *Are all of them dead? Please, not Mac.*

The man above her rose to his knees, flipped her onto her stomach, and pulled her wrists tight against her back. He straddled her, sitting on her legs while he pressed her face against the floor.

Unable to push the man off, Jameelah forced herself to go limp. When the man removed his hand from her head, she looked up. Across the room, a muscular young man with a shaved head delivered a death blow to one of Zelat's assistants. Her tazer lay between his feet.

Then, she saw Mac. He knelt in an almost prayerful pose--blindfolded, bent forward at the waist, his bound wrists pulled sharply out behind him and suspended from the ceiling by a rope.

A much bulkier figure moved into her line of sight. From his movements and the sound of his gruff



voice, he was older than the other two. "Come on, lad. Cut it while I hold him."

The weight left Jameelah's back and a frightened voice rasped in her ear. "Move and my friend over there will kill you."

When he moved away from her, Jameelah felt her jaw drop at the sight of the man who had attacked her. She expected to see one of Freeman's guards. Instead, a fresh-faced boy with freckles and shocking red hair gave her a warning shove.

She didn't stop to think when he removed the small laser from his belt. She rose to her knees and tried to grab the weapon before he could reach Mac. But she had forgotten the bald-headed killer. He crossed the room in an instant, and slammed her onto the floor.

The air left her lungs in one quick breath when he pressed her down, but nothing mattered now but Mac. Jameelah couldn't let them hurt him any more. Before she could struggle to her knees again, an elbow caught her in the face and a foot slammed into her back, pinning her to the deck. Her burning cheek pressed against the cold metal floor felt oddly comforting, as if her pain might atone for failing Mac.

Jameelah listened for some clue--a word, a cough. The ache in her stomach warned that she'd arrived too late.

"Mac," she called, praying he would answer.

When he heard Jamie cry "Mac," Alec twisted toward her voice. He screamed when the motion sent pain surging through his right shoulder. At least he tried to scream. A harsh, rasping noise came from his throat. He arched his back to lessen the unbearable pressure on his arms.

He was grateful for the pain that dragged him from the nightmare he couldn't remember and returned him to Zelat's observation room. Zelat was close. Alec could smell the smoke on his robes.

How long before reality melted and the nightmares swallowed him again? Alec braced for the sound of Zelat's voice and for his torture to continue.

"Careful, lads." The gruff voice spoke behind Alec, and an arm circled his waist, lifting him off the deck and taking the pressure off his shoulders. The voice sounded familiar, but it lacked the clarity of Jamie's, which had cut through his mental fog. The pain in his arms prevented him from doing anything but lay on the deck, unable to lift his head.

The gruff voice sounded again. "Medic, ya got two minutes to get the captain on his feet."

Alec was aware of motion around him, and then a sensation of cold metal on his neck before he felt a rush of heat. Not until the pain in his shoulder faded, leaving only a residual ache in his arms and chest, did he recognize Gunny. Alec looked up into his worried face, and then at a young kid with red hair and a pneumatic syringe in his hand.

Alec began to shake with relief. He wasn't alone in this any more. Gunny was here, and Jamie.

They could all leave this hell hole. He just had to find Lorna.

Before Alec could pull himself to his feet, Gunny stopped him. "Better use both of those minutes, Captain."

Alec sagged back on the floor and closed his eyes. Long years of working with Gunny taught him to trust the older man. When Lord Mackenzie had banished Head Gardener Millard from the family estate, he appointed Gunny as Alec's new guardian, but whatever allegiance Gunny felt he owed the older Mackenzie died with his employer. Alec trusted Gunny with his life, often enough not to question him now.

Gunny sounded far away when he spoke again. "Now, let's see what you caught here. Another of this bastard's assistants?" An ominous silence preceded Gunny's gasp. "Lord Almighty."

At the sound of Gunny's startled cry, Alec fought to open his eyes. He looked up to see Gunny holding Jamie by her hair. Her wide brown eyes showed no fear, only defiance. The pain in Alec's chest intensified when he struggled to his feet. He tried to reach her, but his knees felt like water and the room began to spin. "Gunny, let her go. She's a friend." His declaration ended in a fit of coughing.

"Call her off then, Captain. Your friend isn't in a cooperative mood."

Alec finally noticed Paul, Gunny's man on communications and the backup pilot, holding Jamie's arms. His face showed the strain of keeping her still.

"Jamie, I'm fine. They're friends." Alec waited until she relaxed before he allowed his knees to

buckle under him. The medic, who helped him to his feet, just as quickly lowered him to the floor.

"Help me with his shoulder, Gun. The bastards pulled it out."

Gunny stuffed a piece of torn shirt into his mouth and grabbed hold of his arm. Alec tried to ignore him, choosing instead to concentrate on Jamie. She trembled in Paul's grasp, but Alec could see the relief in her eyes when he tried to smile. He bit down hard while the two men wrestled his shoulder back in place, but the injection kept the pain at a manageable level.

Alec tried to clear the hair out of his eyes to get a better view of Jamie, but Gunny dragged him to his feet, holding his left arm. When he tried to move his right arm, Alec groaned with the effort and let it drop to his side.

Jamie started forward him, but Paul snapped her back into his arms. Alec took a deep shuddering breath, despite the pain, to clear his head. Somehow, he had to make his men understand. Jamie wasn't a prisoner. "It's all right. She's a friend."

Paul seemed reluctant, but he loosened his grip and Jamie sagged against Paul's chest. When Paul cupped her elbows to keep her from falling, a pang of jealousy made Alec take a step forward. He stopped when he realized he was too weak to help. Jamie was safer in Paul's arms for now.

"I take it she's coming with us, lad?" Gunny asked.

Alec nodded, unable to catch his breath. His chest heaved as he took in great gulps of smoky air. Aside from the dent Rami had put in his ribs and the dislocated shoulder, he felt whole but couldn't seem

to draw a full breath. He looked out the observation room door. Zelat's office was beginning to fill with smoke.

"They've bled him, Gun, from the veins in his feet. I don't want to keep the Captain up too long." The medic's words barely registered with Alec. What he could remember of the last few days rapidly faded when he turned his attention to the present.

"Time to move out, Captain," Gunny said. "If I may suggest--"

"I assume you know the way out of here, Gunny. Just help me find Lorna, then get us home."

"Home is where I plan to take you, Captain, and I've sent Jerit after Lorna."

"Lorna? She is here then?" Relief flooded Alec when Gunny nodded. He would have sobbed if he could have found the breath. He closed his eyes and took a few more painful breaths before taking a second look at Gunny's grim face. Something was wrong, but whatever it was, he would deal with it later. Lorna was alive, Jamie was alive, he was taking them both home. That was all that mattered.

Gunny dragged him from the hostage broker's shop, forcing Alec to fight to keep his legs under him. When he stumbled, Jamie ducked under his injured arm and wrapped her arm around his right side. He tried to keep most of his weight shifted to the left, on Gunny, but they soon had him balanced equally on their shoulders. Jamie felt warm and steady at his side.

Alec remembered little of the last few days, but he knew Jamie had stayed with him instead of leaving with Rami. His heart sang at the thought--his head resting against Jamie's soft hair, breathing in

her scent. With every step, Alec felt his strength returning.

Paul took the lead when they joined the exodus to the docking bays. The medic brought up the rear, his weapon drawn. Gunny and Jamie supported Alec. Everyone evidently concentrated so hard on keeping him safe that Alec saw Lorna first. He dug in his heels when they tried to force him on.

"Lorna," he whispered. He watched his sister swing from one beam to the next to intercept them. She looked like an angel flying toward him.

Alec tried to shake off his drug haze and, with it, Gunny and Jamie's hold. He felt Paul pull Jamie aside, but Gunny continued to cling to him. Alec saw Rami next. He followed Lorna but moved more slowly. No sign of Jerit.

"Lorna," Alec called louder this time, and broke free from Gunny. He staggered, then ran forward. He had found her. Alec couldn't believe his good luck. But he wouldn't believe she was really alive, really safe, until he touched her.

Lorna's voice rose above the noise of boots clanking down the next corridor. "I didn't tell them. I didn't tell."

Alec let out a shuddering breath of relief at hearing her voice. But as they moved toward each other, his jaw locked with anger at the sight of her torn jumpsuit and blood-smeared face. What had that monster Rami done to his sister?

Now that they stood on the same level, Alec sensed a change in Lorna. This was not the little girl he

escorted off New Glasgow. Her movements were no longer shy and halting, but decisive. She veered to the side, no longer coming toward him. Rami, still a story above them, put a finger to his lips signaling to Alec to be quiet while he crept toward her.

What made Rami think he would cooperate with him? Alec stopped, puzzled by them both. He signaled to Gunny to keep the others back, and continued toward Lorna. With a quick glance, Alec noted Paul's gloved hand over Jamie's mouth.

When he had Lorna safe in his arms, he would explain to the others about Jamie. He would explain to Thane, to the entire Triden Council if necessary. He would make them understand that no matter what Rami and the Imsada had done, Jamie was not the enemy. Alec only hoped she would forgive him for the way his people were treating her now.

He changed his direction to match Lorna's, but she backed away. He stopped again. What was wrong? She had never been afraid of him before. He took a few steps forward. "Lorna, I've come to take you home."

Lorna backed quickly and stopped at the lip of an open personnel shaft. Her toes curled around a thin, round beam and her hands on an over-head wire were all that kept her from plunging to her death.

Alec froze, trying to ignore the panic that tightened his chest. "Lorna, stop playing games. Come to me."

While he pleaded with Lorna, Alec noticed Rami standing some fifty feet away and several feet off

the main deck. Maintaining his distance, Alec slowly circled Lorna to the right to cut Rami off.

"I'm not playing games. I just have to tell you something before I go. Just you." Lorna pointed to Gunny, who had crept up behind Alec. Gunny retreated when Alec waved him off.

The distant shouts and sounds of metal against metal as the fragile society of the station dismembered itself exaggerated the silence that surrounded the little group. Their personal drama drowned out all other sounds when Alec stopped circling.

He couldn't take the chance that she might jump before he could reach her, but she didn't seem aware that Rami had followed her. As much as Alec hated the man, Rami apparently didn't want Lorna dead or he would have killed her before now.

Reluctantly, Alec signaled to Rami, who began to inch toward Lorna from behind. Alec stood before her, arms outstretched, when he spoke. "I'm listening, baby. What do you have to tell me?"

"I didn't tell them who you are. Please, believe me. I didn't tell anyone. You'll let Mother know, won't you? You'll tell her I kept your secret?"

It must have been too much for her--the trauma of the bombing, the kidnaping, the fear Rami would learn their identity. "Of course, I'll tell Mother, but you can tell her yourself. Gunny's come to take us home. Step over here. Come to me."

"I can't. You don't know what I've done."

"It's not your fault, baby. Whatever it is. We'll talk about it on the way home. I'll make it all right."



And he would make it right. He would leave the fleet, leave Thane's service, and return to New Glasgow and farming for good. Millard could stay with them at the old cottage. Lorna would feel safe there. He would make her feel safe.

Lorna kept only one foot on the beam now. The other flirted with the open air beneath her. "Didn't you ever want to be someone else? Didn't you ever wonder how it would be? To be no one special? I've been that other person. I can't go back to who I was."

Rami's belt clanged on the beam over Lorna's head. Alec held his breath when Lorna twisted to look at him.

"I'm sorry, Rami, but I can't be Lord Mackenzie's bastard any longer, not even for you. You understand, Alec. Explain it to Rami. Tell them how it is for us."

Alec clenched his hands to keep them from shaking. He did understand, he knew first hand the pain of Lord Mackenzie's rejection. The man had rejected them both before their birth. How easy it would be to lay this disaster at Father's feet, but Alec couldn't forget he was the one who had let Lorna slip through his fingers at the reception.

Alec felt on the verge of tears. "God, Lorna, don't do this to me. Please don't."

Rami dropped the last few feet to the deck but, instead of sneaking up behind her and pulling her to safety, the idiot started yelling. "Alec? You told me his name was Elliott. How dare you lie to me?"

Lorna pivoted on her narrow perch to face Rami. Rami's red-faced rage faded when Lorna uncurled

the fingers of her left hand from the wire. Alec watched in horror.

"Damn it, don't do this, Lorna." Alec yelled. Her fingers slowly uncurled from around the bar over her head.

With instinctive accuracy, Alec threw himself over the edge of the shaft the instant Lorna let herself fall. He grabbed her left hand just as she dropped below the shaft opening.

Pain seared through his shoulder. Her weight dragged him toward the open hole. Flailing his legs, he searched for a toe hold, anything to stop his slow slide toward oblivion.

Alec hung over the hole, his hips leaving the safety of the deck. Rami grabbed his legs and pulled him back. Alec continued to cling to Lorna, trying to swing his injured arm close enough to reinforce his hold, but his arm remained dead at his side.

Before Alec could adjust his grip on her hand, Rami climbed over Alec and grabbed Lorna's sleeve. Alec lay off to the side, pinned between Rami's foot and a column while Rami pulled Lorna upward.

When Rami pulled her head level with the deck, Lorna looked directly at Alec. "Keep him safe for me. Promise." A ferocious, wild look filled her normally placid blue eyes, and she twisted in Rami's grasp and bit his hand.

Fear pulsing through him, Alec pushed past Rami and lunged forward. He managed to grab the tips of her fingers, but he couldn't hold her.

Arms circled Alec's waist when he tried to follow her down the shaft.



## Chapter 11

Jameelah twisted wildly in her captor's arms, she had to help Mac, but Paul stolidly ignored her pleas for release.

When Lorna called "Alec," Jameelah realized this must be Mac's real name, but she felt no victory hearing it spoken now. She had wanted him to tell her, shared because he trusted her.

If Lorna was Lord Mackenzie's bastard, that meant she was the Emperor's sister. But who was Alec?

In response to Alec's heart wrenching cry, Gunny ran to his side, relieving Rami of his burden by grabbing Alec around the waist. Still, she couldn't break free from Paul's iron grip.

The medic joined the men looking into the hole where Lorna disappeared. Rami followed Lorna, lowering himself hand-over-hand down the ladder.

Slowly, the medic sank to his knees and threw up on the deck. Jameelah held her breath while she waited for someone to speak.

Gunny dragged Alec away from the open shaft. "Leave her, boy. There's nothing you can do."

"She might be...."

"She's dead, Captain." Gunny shook Alec and forced him to look up. "She's dead and we haven't time to go after the body."

Hearing the news, Jameelah gave up her struggle. Alec had said no one was more important to him than Lorna, and now she was dead.

"I have to see for myself." Alec continued to fight Gunny, trying to remove the large man's hands from around his waist and reach the edge of the hole.

Gunny pulled him to his feet and signaled to the others to move on. "Damn it, man, a cable cut her clean in half. You don't want to see her this way. Besides, I have to answer to the Emperor, and my orders are to bring his heir out alive no matter what the cost. We have to leave now."

They started down the corridor, Jameelah and Alec exchanging glances over Paul's head before Paul slapped her face and growled at her to face the front. Alec didn't interfere. The glazed look left Alec's eyes, and for a moment, utter despair filled his haunted green eyes. Then they glittered.

Jameelah shuddered at what she saw. She had seen that look a hundred times before. She had seen it in the eyes of every Imsada recruit who stumbled from the ruins of his home with only one thought--revenge.

*Two short jumps, one long. Here were go again. Who the hell are we running from now?* Alec had only moments to consider before the ship started a new jump cycle and he doubled up. His stomach never reacted well to hyperspace jumps, but this trip felt worse than any hangover he'd had the misfortune to

live through.

From his bunk in the recovery station, he kept his eye on the control room through the open door. The *Moireach*, no larger than Alec's private ship, had crew quarters for six instead of the one, luxurious bedroom. He clung to the bunk, grateful his stomach was finally empty.

Gunny sat at the control station. Paul, his head freshly shaved for duty, lounged in Alec's usual place, the pilot's sling. Jerit, who Gunny had sent to find Lorna, manned navigation. Perva, a skinny, red-haired kid, was new--Alec's replacement as medic. The standard four-man crew, and Alec wasn't part of it. He felt utterly useless.

His mood matched that of the crew. The men busied themselves with monitoring controls and double-checking backups. Anything to keep from meeting their captain's gaze. Their somber faces reflected what must be on everyone's mind. He had had her, safe in his outstretched hand, then he'd lost her. Every time Alec closed his eyes, he followed Lorna down the shaft.

After the jump, Gunny swung away from his station. "If you keep that up, I'm closing the door, Captain."

Alec realized then he'd been holding his stomach and groaning. His mouth snapped shut, and he tried to sit a little straighter.

The medic left his secondary station at Comms and slipped a straw into Alec's mouth. "It's just the blood pressure, Gun. I'm trying to get it up."

Alec obediently drank, and felt better. When he looked down, another wave of nausea, as strong as any he'd felt during the jumps, hit his stomach. Streaks of dried blood stained the tops of his feet. Who had sliced his veins and neatly sealed them shut? Alec couldn't remember. The thought sent his heart racing.

He looked up, waiting for the room to stop swaying. "Where are we?" he asked.

Where they were, where they were going--they seemed safe enough topics. Alec didn't want to admit he wasn't certain where they'd been. Holes cut through his memory of the last few days. Even the last hour was hazy. He didn't remember reaching the ship or leaving the station. All he remembered about this trip were the gut-wrenching tilts he was too weak to fight off.

What Alec did remember was Lorna--the sight of her clawing like an animal at Rami's hand, the horrible sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach when her fingers had slipped from his almost-dead hand, the calm that entered her eyes the instant she fell. Why had she done it? And why had she said "Keep him safe for me. Promise." Why would she ask him to take care of Rami? She couldn't care for that terrorist thug.

"We're nowhere particular at the moment, Captain. I just wanted to get away from Cestar-Two. The Triden fleet was moving in. If we'd stuck around, they'd have picked us up. They're probably shitting their pants right now looking for us."

Alec didn't doubt that. In his grief over Lorna, Alec had allowed himself to put off thinking about

what was ahead. Damn it, he didn't want to think--not about the peace conference, not about the Triden fleet, not about his brother Thane. Alec just wanted to go home and hide.

But as witness to his sister's death, duty required he recite the events to his family and start the official mourning. That would be difficult enough, but he had another duty. One that took precedence over familial responsibilities.

Alec was a Triden officer--his duty to the Emperor came first. He had to turn Jameelah over to him.

Alec allowed Perva to wipe his face with a towel, then stared at the glass the medic pressed into his hand. Alec didn't think he could ever lift his arms again. He tried willing the glass to rise somehow of its own accord.

Gunny distracted him from this mental exercise by crossing the control room and leaning against the open door. He waved Perva away and spoke in a harsh whisper too low for the others to hear. "Your brother would have had you taken into protective custody. I thought coming home on your own was more dignified. Do we head for Triden-Prime? The peace conference will start up now that we've found you. Or do you want to face your mother first on New Glasgow? We could head for the nearest medical facility and avoid them both."

Before Alec could sort through his choices, a muffled rattle came from the locker opposite his bunk. Jamie. Already overloaded, his mind had blocked out her existence. But she did exist. He would have to face her, and all those emotions he had managed to keep at bay. Like Pandora's box, someone would



eventually open that door. He just wanted someone else to do it. He continued to stare at the door, unable to decide.

"I thought it best to secure your friend, if that's who she is." Gunny gestured toward the door. "You said you wanted to bring her along. The Triden Council has taped evidence of her presence at the reception before the bomb was detonated."

Gunny walked up to the locker and spoke loudly enough for Jamie to hear. "We can always shoot her out an airlock. Save the state some expense." The rattling stopped.

Alec shook his head, as much a sign of confusion as a signal to Gunny that he didn't want Jamie harmed. He would have to tell her who he was now. She would hate him. She would have to. The same way he must hate her.

The solution to the Imsada question had seemed so easy, Khay's plan so unnecessarily cruel. But that was before Alec felt the gut-wrenching need to make someone pay. Lorna was dead. Now, Alec understood. Easy solutions were no longer possible.

Once Alec put Khay's plan into motion, nothing could stop it. Jamie would be out of his reach forever. Part of Alec wanted Jamie--to stroke her hair, to feel her hands exploring his chest, to lose himself in her eyes. The rest of him plotted revenge against Legate Jameelah--cold, calculated revenge.

The next time their lips met, Alec would make certain she felt the same searing pain that leapt through him every time he imagined her soft, yielding body against his. The love, the hate, the longing--

all mixed hopelessly together with the pain.

"The Legate is important to my plans, Gunny. I need her unharmed." Unharmed and reputation unsullied. A useful tool in the hands of the Triden Empire. No matter how great the need for revenge, Thane would insist the Imsada be put to some useful purpose. "Did the Triden High Council pass sentence on the Legate without a trial?"

"No, they were waiting for you, or for your body, to be found. Now, they'll wait till they sign the peace treaty before they settle the Imsada question. Your new sister-in-law has been pushing to have the whole Imsada mess returned to New Alliance hands. Rumor has it she wants to deliver their heads to her bridegroom as a wedding present."

"That doesn't sound like Tam. More like a rumor the Triden Council would start to justify their actions. I can persuade Thane to allow me to dispose of the Imsada personally." Dispose of. It sounded callused, especially when applied to a hundred thousand plus people. And Jamie was one of those people. Could he really go through with Khay's plan?

"You'll have questions to answer yourself, Captain. Things got a bit complicated while you were away. Certain council members have suggested you're not entirely blameless, might even have planted a bomb or two yourself, and Thane can't make unilateral decisions at the moment. Too many people are waiting for him to make a mistake. A military coup at this point would nullify the cease-fire and any preliminary peace negotiations."

*And would nullify Thane and Tam's marriage.* The thought came unbidden. Aware the thought no longer pleased him as it would have a few weeks earlier, Alec pushed it aside.

Gunny continued. "You might want to give yourself some time to sort things out before you let the High Council lay hands on you."

"I can straighten out any questions in a few minutes talking to Thane, but I'm glad I'm finally having some good luck. Since the High Council failed to pass sentence on the Imsada terrorists, I can insist on a trial. I can persuade them to see things my way." Alec ignored the skeptical expression on Gunny's face.

The locker rattled again. Alec ran his fingers through his hair several times before giving Gunny the signal to open it. If Gunny was right, he was facing several unpleasant situations. He might as well start with the Legate.

Alec gave her a moment to blink in the sudden light. A bruise marred her swollen left cheek. Had he done that? A brief flash, a scrap of memory. Panic. Anger. His open hand, as if controlled by some outside force, slapping her face.

"You will remain standing and not move until I tell you," Alec commanded in a voice that sounded strangely breathless. Jamie immediately sat cross-legged on the bunk opposite him. Obviously, she had decided to play the part of Imsada Legate to the end.

When he tried to stand, Alec returned to the bunk with a thud. The medic had reduced the pain in his arms to a dull ache, but his knees felt watery and the room began a slow spin when he stood. Perva

returned to hover protectively at his side.

He knew how things should be--him giving orders, Jamie following them. Legate Jameelah, despite her title and her husband's connections, had no business giving anyone orders, certainly not the Emperor's brother. But if that were true, why had it felt so much better with their roles reversed? He didn't like giving orders to Jamie. He didn't like the frightened, hostile look in her eyes.

On Bradley-Five, things had felt so good, so right--taking care of people, making a difference. Playing the doctor was satisfying, and made more so by Jamie. Not that she'd hovered around him. Those first days he'd hardly seen her, but her presence was everywhere--in the surly guard who appeared three times a day with a tray of hot food and orders from the Legate to eat, in the respectful Halim who took Alec to his quarters to sleep when he couldn't keep his eyes open a moment longer.

Why was Alec so certain that now he was in charge, Jamie would get hurt? And this time the wound would be deeper and more long lasting than the bruise that stained her cheek.

But then there wasn't much chance of Jamie following his orders. Neither the Legate nor Jamie dear was much good at that. They had been together for how long, and she hadn't the decency to end his misery concerning Lorna's fate? Gunny had made that point very clear. Lorna had been the Imsada's target all along--a cruel, heartless plan to use an innocent young girl as leverage in the peace negotiations.

Jameelah must have known. Alec's head felt too heavy suddenly. He propped it up with his hands, elbows on his knees. The medic caught him before he slid off the bunk, and leaned him against the wall.

Alec would gain some control now, if not of the situation, then at least control of his own body. He had decisions to make, and little time to make them. "I need your report, medic. What did you give me?"

"Just something to cut the pain, sir." The boy's voice wavered. "Your shoulder's back in place. You have hairline fractures in both arms. All knitted nicely thanks to me. The three broken ribs are an old injury. You'll need a real doctor to fix those. It's cutting into your breathing some. I wouldn't delay too long, but it's not life threatening. If you can manage not to throw up again, I'll have the blood loss compensated for in a half hour."

Then why couldn't he remember things? Why did the thought of closing his eyes terrify him? "Are you sure? You didn't give me anything else?"

The medic exchanged looks with Gunny. Gunny gave an opened-armed shrug. "I picked Perva myself, Captain. He's a certified medic."

"Then why can't I remember the last few days?"

Gunny looked at the floor and Perva poured Alec another drink. Alec recognized a dodge when he saw one. He didn't normally put Gunny on the spot in front of his men, but he didn't have time to play the diplomat now.

"Gunny, you know something. Spit it out."

Gunny nodded slowly. "When you joined up, you said you wanted to be treated like any other Triden officer. The Triden fleet programs their officers to blank out when questioned. If someone

questioned you, asked you to reveal your identity under duress, then you are suffering from the effects of that conditioning."

Alec felt like he was slipping into shock again. He had never guessed. No one had questioned him at the New Alliance prison camp. But on the ship with Jamie, on Cestar-Two....

What had he done that he could no longer remember? What had he done to Jamie while this implant in his subconscious drove him crazy?

Jameelah spoke for the first time. "Broker Zelat told me about the programming and said he had a way to get around it. A way to persuade Mac...Alec...to reveal his identity voluntarily."

Alec glanced at her. Seeing the ugly bruise on her cheek turned his stomach. He looked away while she continued.

"Zelat said he bought some equipment from a Triden supply officer. He started interrogations two days ago. When Mac didn't break, Zelat said he'd use more forceful means. He was eager to get his hands on the ransom money. I tried to talk him out of it, but I ran out of ways to stall him."

"Two days?"

The medic Perva went pale, reached for the medscanner, and started another sweep of Alec's body. Alec knocked the scanner out of Perva's hands, sending it to the floor. Alec immediately recognized he'd overreacted, but nothing was wrong with him. Zelat had asked a few polite questions. That was all. His cell had been cold, the food no good. That's all he needed--food and a warm bed.

Perva bent to retrieve the scanner. "I don't know much about it, Gunny. Intelligence keeps these things under wraps. The captain shouldn't remember that kind of questioning, but there will be subconscious residual. Depending on how bad it was...well, the captain should see a psyche when he gets the ribs looked at. He'll need something to help him sleep till then."

Alec looked to Gunny, still avoiding Jamie's pointed stare. "So what does that mean for now?"

Gunny appeared thoughtful, resting his chin on the tips of his raised fingers. "I'll remain at the command station, with your permission. Paul stays in the pilot's seat, Jerit gets navigation, and Perva takes comms when he's not looking after you. You, Captain, will tell us where to go. Consider us the genie in the lamp. Your wish is our command. You've got thirty minutes to decide. Then we jump or become guests of the Triden Emperor."

Jameelah followed Alec into the control room. No one tried to stop her, but the crew looked like they'd wanted to put her out that airlock Gunny mentioned. They obviously held her responsible for their captain's injuries and for Lorna's death.

She couldn't see any option to going where Alec decided to take her. The ship controls were similar enough to Alec's vessel that she could handle them, but she didn't have any way to control the crew. Five men, counting Alec, and she wasn't foolish enough not to count Alec. Whatever Zelat had done to him,

he seemed to have recovered. At least, physically.

He'd changed into a flight suit since coming onboard, so she couldn't see his injuries, but his arms no longer hung limp at his sides and he wore a new pair of open-fingered gloves. When he studied the control panels, he crossed his arms over his chest, and his face, dark with the beginnings of a beard, hardened into unmoving granite.

Gunny offered Alec his seat at the command station, but Alec declined, taking Jerit's place at navigation. Jameelah squatted on the floor, her back against the door to the head, trying to stay out of the way. The last thing she wanted was for someone to decide she should go back in the locker.

While she watched the crew work, it occurred to her that Gunny hadn't followed orders when he jumped the ship to evade the Triden vessels. He had anticipated Alec's wishes. They must have worked together for a long time to have developed such trust.

She watched and listened from her place on the floor while Alec and Gunny continued their debate on where to go next.

"I want four days," Alec said. "I absolutely need three."

"On the farm?" Gunny asked.

"With Mother? Heavens, no! She'll interfere--slap me in a hospital, let Thane's men take the Legate. Besides, I don't want my physical condition to become a matter of official record. Have Perva destroy all his data if it looks like we might be boarded. And I want to keep Jameelah with me."



With him? Jameelah's mind raced along with her heart. Why? More important, who the hell was he? She assumed from what Lorna said that Alec had some relationship with Emperor Thane, but no one had bothered to spell it out for her. In fact, everyone including Alec seemed content to ignore her.

She opened her mouth to speak, she should have some say what happened to her, but at that moment, Alec made his decision.

He nodded as he spoke. "Take me to my New Glasgow apartment. We can skip under the security net. We've done it before."

"That was so you could have a few hours privacy before seeing the family," protested Gunny "But this... you're not home on leave this time looking for some fun. The Triden Council has leveled serious charges--"

"So this time I need a few days to myself instead of a few hours. Your man Perva said my condition isn't life threatening, and Silvia can look after me. I need to go someplace where I can claim official protection from Triden troops. Once I've got the Legate and myself safely locked up, I'll invoke sanctuary. They'll need at least three days to break in if they follow procedures, and Thane will make certain they do."

"What about her?" Gunny pointed at Jameelah as if she were a poisonous snake. She wanted to ask who this Silvia was, but decided now was not the time. It was bad enough they discussed her fate as if she hadn't a mind of her own; she didn't want to sound like a jealous female as well.

Alec seemed to notice her sitting on the floor for the first time. He looked like a man in need of comfort, a man who would not accept it. His green eyes swept her up in their icy glance, then he turned back to Gunny. "I told you I have plans for her. I'll contact Thane and explain. I need time to arrange things. After you drop us off, you can see Mother."

Gunny began to sputter. "If you think I'm going to straighten out this mess with Lady Seana, boy, you've got...."

The look on Alec's face stopped Gunny's protests dead. "Gunny, she deserves to be told about Lorna. In person, not on link. Besides, Mother doesn't like to wait, and I'm not ready to face her. When I am ready, I'll see her at the farm. Tell her exactly that--when I've fulfilled my obligations to the Emperor, we'll sit together at the kitchen table. Until then I've got too much to do. I can't afford the distraction."

"Aye, Captain. But I'm going to put in for hazard pay on this one." Despite the snickers from the young crew, Gunny looked exceedingly grim, and their smiles died under his withering scowl.

"Just get me home, Gunny, and you'd better hurry. We've got company." Alec pointed to the monitor at navigation and moved aside to let Jerit take his seat. Gunny was all business now. "Thirty seconds to jump. Programming now, Captain. I suggest you secure yourself and your passenger. We'll have to do some fancy flying."

The crew concentrated on their stations and on the Triden vessel that had appeared on the navigation screen. Why were Gunny and Mac so eager to avoid them? They were also on a Triden ship, weren't

they? They were all friends.

But not her friends. Jameelah realized with a start that she had none. Alec couldn't stand to look at her, Rami had betrayed her, the Imsada Council abandoned her, the New Alliance wanted her dead. She had never felt so alone. Before she had time to think, Alec pulled her to her feet, and with an arm around her waist, drew her into crew quarters and locked the door.

Her head swam when he spun her around to face him. Standing beside the recovery station bunk, too stunned to speak, she felt her knees buckle. Alec tangled his hand in her hair and pulled her forward until their lips met. The kiss, long and bruising, threatened to drive all coherent thought from her head.

If she wasn't so confused, she would melt against him. Instead, she held back, her hands thrust out behind her, reaching for the bunk for support. She gasped when his hand drifted downward to knead her right breast.

When she removed her hands from the bunk and wrapped them around his waist, Alec's moans filled her mouth. Suddenly realizing she was pressing against his injured side, she pulled away, but he returned her hand to his dented ribs and pressed down. He forced her to hurt him as if he wanted the pain, needed it.

As suddenly as his passion flared, it died. Alec released her, leaving her trembling beside the bunk while he stepped back. She felt cold and exposed at being abandoned just as her body had begun to respond to his.

He reached for the drink Perva had left and sat on the bunk, patting the empty space at his side. "Have a seat, Legate."

Where else for her to go? The invalid station was the only open bay. She refused his invitation with a shrug, preferring discomfort to blindly following his orders, and squatted on the floor.

Now, as she leaned against the wall, her head turned away while he stared at her, Alec seemed a stranger to her, a dangerous man, no longer worth taking risks to know. He might turn on her at any moment and rip out her throat as Paul had done to Zelat.

Thinking of Zelat's shop and how helpless she'd felt brought tears dangerously close. With Alec safe and free, she should be happy. Soon he would take her in his arms and tell her nothing could change how he felt about her--nothing she had done, nothing Rami had done. But that was a romantic fantasy. Things could never be the same between them.

He took another drink before he spoke. "My name is Alec Mackenzie. Emperor Thane is my older brother. I'm his heir."

Jameelah surprised herself by laughing. Her hand flew to her mouth. A thousand thoughts, a thousand repercussions, occurred to her. The one that had made her laugh was Rami. He had pulled off the most daring, most successful, kidnaping in Imsada history and he hadn't realized it.

Alec raised an eyebrow, and smiled slightly.

"I'm sorry. I wasn't laughing at you. I'm just...." She stopped in confusion.

Alec's smile faded, but he looked sad, not angry.

What were they going to do? What was she going to do? How could she love the brother of the Triden Emperor, head of an empire so vast and so corrupt that she couldn't comprehend?

One day the Triden High Council might call Alec to take his brother's place. No, not Alec, not her Mac. He was lying again, he had to be.

"The Emperor doesn't have a brother."

"Not officially. It's a tradition of ruling families of New Glasgow. The second son, that's me, is fostered out at infancy. Only a few know his identity. The practice makes it difficult to eliminate an entire family by assassination."

She didn't want to believe him. Who would do such a cruel thing to their own child?

"They took you away from your mother?"

"That is the custom. My foster parents would have informed me of my true identity only if my family needed me to take my brother's place. My mother had other ideas."

"She wouldn't let them take you?"

"Well, yes, she had to. Father insisted. But she brought me back a few years later. I lived with the head gardener on our estate as his son, but I soon learned who I was."

"You really do know Tamboria, the Emperor's bride." Jameelah felt her face flush when she realized how jealous she sounded.

"Yes, I met Tam at the university years ago. She met my brother when I brought her home for a visit. I guess Thane never forgot her. When this business of cementing the peace process with a marriage came up, well, she seemed the logical choice."

"Then you were upset at the wedding reception when we met."

Alec stared at the ceiling. "Maybe, a little."

"And Lorna?" She didn't have to ask, she already knew. Jameelah braced herself for Alec's reply.

Sadness and pain overcame his features for a moment. Then his body tensed, growing visibly rigid with barely contained anger. "Can't you let up for even a minute?" He paced a path inches from her place on the floor.

"I don't understand, Alec."

"You can stop with the lies, Legate. Rami told Captain Freeman everything. Freeman is a Triden operative, by the way. He got word to Gunny. Your bombs at the reception were a diversion to get Lorna off the station. Rami planned to use her to force concessions from the Emperor."

Jameelah bit back her denial. Alec wasn't in the mood to hear Rami acted without her knowledge.

"The sad part is," Alec continued, "if you'd planted a smoke bomb like you'd told me, you would have succeeded. Thane would have realized the New Alliance was lying about having wiped out the Imsada. He would have included you in the peace talks. But now...."

Alec continued his pacing. "Lorna is my half-sister. My mother's only daughter. She was the one

you were after all along."

"I...I don't know what to say. I didn't know about Rami's plans. Oh, Alec, I'm so sorry about your sister. I understand how you must be feeling. My own brother--"

"No, you don't understand." Alec barked. He finally stopped pacing.

Jameelah felt almost relief at seeing him express his anger. His passionate kiss, his sad smile--they had all seemed so perversely out of place. Raised voice, blood infused cheeks, clenched fists--this was natural.

His anger unleashed when he looked down at her. "Lorna was sixteen years old. She was an innocent young girl at her first dance. Rami kidnaped and killed her. Your brother died running weapons across a Triden blockade."

Jameelah choked back a sob at the blunt statement of Rami's guilt. And she had to share in that guilt. She tried to swallow past her sore, raw throat. How had she felt when Rami brought news of her brother's death? "How do you know about my brother?"

"Oh, I know a lot of things about you, Legate. I've studied the Imsada question. Even proposed a solution to the High Council at my brother's request. I'll be making changes to that proposal now that I've become more intimately acquainted with the situation."

The threat in Alec's voice made Jameelah blanch. By trying to save her people, she had made things infinitely worse.

Alec returned to the bunk and took another drink Perva had left on the table. "A Triden fighter attacked your brother's freighter, and it imploded killing everyone aboard. I was in the sector at the time. I fired on several freighters. It's quite possible you've slept with the man who killed your brother."

She stiffened her spine against the wall, wiping away the last of her tears. Why was Alec doing this? Did he want her to hate him? Would that make it easier for both of them?

Gazing at her over his glass, Alec looked curious, waiting to gauge her reaction. What did he expect her to say? What could she say to change his mind? When men were angry, they didn't listen to explanations, they retaliated. Jameelah had lived with that simple truth all her life.

"No opinions, no arguments, Legate?" he asked. "Now that you know I can influence the Emperor's decision concerning the Imsada, aren't you going to tell me what I should do? This situation provides more potential for change than threatening the lives of a few hundred people at a wedding reception."

He was right, but could she do it? Could she plead and bargain with this man as if he meant nothing to her. And if she had any influence over him, could she prostitute herself this way? Jameelah buried her head in her hands and rubbed her eyes. When she opened them, she looked into his calm, green ones. They were no longer glazed or filled with hate or even with lust. It seemed Alec dispassionately waited for her to make the next move.

And she had no more moves to make. "Do what you want. I have no way of stopping you, but if there is an open trial, I will speak the truth."



"And say what, Legate? That you put hundreds of lives at risk and kidnaped the Emperor's brother and sister? That your men tortured a young girl until she jumped to her death?"

"You don't know that's what happened."

Alec finished his drink and stretched out on the bunk. He unzipped his flight suit to his waist. Beneath the wrapping that held his ribs steady, his chest heaved and he began to cough.

One minute Jameelah was sitting on the floor, the next pulling Alec upright. He stopped her when she started to go for Perva, and motioned for water instead. Alec drank while she steadied him with an arm behind his back. She could hear and feel the rattle in his chest.

When he could speak again, he straightened and scowled at her, but the anger seemed forced. Beneath his ragged beard, he looked pale and drawn. "Now you will listen to me, Legate. You will not tell the High Council you injured the Emperor's only heir. I forbid it. They'll spend five minutes deciding you're guilty and five days discussing interesting ways to kill you."

Jameelah took the empty glass from him and moved the resume her place on the floor, but Alec's apparent weakness was a deception. With his good arm around her wrist, he pulled her onto the bunk.

She didn't move, afraid of him now as she had been in Zelat's cell. Her skin burned where their hips and shoulders met, and her breath became as ragged as his.

Sitting side-by-side, they locked hands like young lovers. His fingers felt cool and steady wrapped around hers, the rest of his hand safely encased in black leather. Slowly, he raised her hand to his mouth

and brushed it across his open lips. What would it have been like if they'd met at university? Stolen moments between classes, ill-conceived lies told to cover up school holidays spent together? But Alec had met Tam, and worlds away, she had met Khay.

Now, like everyone else, Alec was trying to tell her what she had to do.

"Why do you care what happens to me now?" she asked.

Alec returned her hand to her side. "I care very much what happens. I have plans for you, Legate. I need you alive, and with me...for the time being. I'll tell you what to say at the trial when the time comes."

Turning on the bunk to face him, she tried to get him to look at her. She wanted him to understand. This wasn't a struggle for power between two people, there were principles involved, principles she lived her life by.

"This is not the time for more lies, Alec. This is a time for settling things once and for all. I told you before, the device I planted was intended as a disruption, not to harm anyone. Rami told me you were our only hostage. I knew nothing about Lorna. I didn't even know the Emperor had a brother and sister. But I will face the consequences of my actions, and take responsibility for Rami's actions, as well. I think it would be for the best."

"I don't care what you think, Legate." That cold, hard edge returned to Alec's voice, and the expectant green in his eyes deepened when he turned to face her. She had seen that look before. They

had been in a bed at the time.

"And I don't care what you feel," Alec whispered, breathless now. He pushed her onto the bunk. His touch was steel. He knelt over her and pushed her borrowed jacket off her shoulders. Her boots and pants followed the jacket to the floor. As if in a dream, Jameelah reached up to stroke his chest through his open flight suit. It was a dream, wasn't it? This couldn't be happening. He hated her. Bandages bound him from above his diaphragm to his waist. She stroked his chest, fascinated again to see how quickly his nipples formed hard, brown peaks in the forest of black hair.

"You will do what I tell you." Alec removed her hands from his chest and wrapped them in his large one while he pulled her plain brown shift over her head with the other.

Then, he laughed, and it was not a pleasant sound.

Suddenly feeling vulnerable, Jameelah moved to cover herself, but Alec kept her hands locked in his. She didn't understand his reaction until she remembered what she wore under her borrowed clothes-- a silky one-piece undergarment she'd found in Captain Freeman's quarters made of white satin and trimmed with lace. Totally inappropriate for a Legate. Totally disgraceful for the widow of an Imsada martyr.

No excuses came to mind, but Alec didn't seem to want one. He pushed her closer to the wall to make room for himself and balanced on his side facing her, resting his head on his arm. His fingers playing with the strap on her shoulder relaxed her. Her eyelids seemed too heavy to remain open, but she

stole a glance at the control room door. "Shouldn't we lock the door? Someone might come."

"You don't have to worry about the crew. The medic is new, but I've known the rest of the men for ages. Gunny since I was born. My men are loyal. I can do anything I want with you, Legate. Anything."

Jameelah knew she should feel threatened by his words--Why didn't he call her Jamie?--but she didn't. Coherent thought fled when he finished playing with her right shoulder and moved to the left. If only he would call her Jamie.

This was the same man--her Mac--who had made love to her in an asteroid field while an enemy cruiser threatened. He wouldn't hurt her, she had to believe that. In the escape pod, he had made her believe he could do anything--defeat the New Alliance Fleet, defy fate, stop time.

He had only delayed the inevitable, but Jameelah was willing to settle for that again. She closed her eyes, and felt the air next to her skin warm when he leaned closer. Her back arched when Alec slipped both straps from her arms and tugged down on the camisole.

His fingers slipped beneath the material, barely brushing her breasts. She reached for him but his fingers stopped their hypnotic stroking, then resumed when she returned her arms to her sides. Why didn't he take off his clothes? She wanted to feel his skin against hers, feel his response to her growing need. She wanted to stroke the backs of his hands. Why did he keep his hands covered? Why did he need to protect them from her?

"Yes, Legate, my men will do anything I say." He was whispering now. A harsh, throaty sound.

"Gunny was trying to frighten you when he suggested shooting you out the airlock, but he would do it at my command. Any of them would." Alec lazily traced the line above her camisole with his tongue.

She caught her breath, not at what he said, but at the pulsing heat he'd unleashed between her thighs. She couldn't focus on his words, let alone decipher their meaning. "What do you plan to do with me?"

He didn't answer, but cupped her breasts with his hands. The material that had covered them lay bunched at her waist. He knelt over her again, his thighs gripping hers, resting lightly on her legs.

She closed her eyes and shuddered when he bent and took each peaked nipple in turn into his mouth. He bit gently, then licked, teasing her until she arched her back. She must have misread the look in his eyes. He did believe her. He did want her.

Again Jameelah tried to undress him. She was almost naked. A thin layer of satin remained between her damp thighs. But Alec returned her hands to her sides when she tried to push his flight suit off his shoulders.

She wanted to feel his strong eager body, feel his silky skin and sleek muscles, not shrouded in the dread black of a Triden officer, but naked and free. The hair she'd shaved off his chest and belly had grown back. It would be like exploring his body anew. Was he remembering, too? He had almost driven her mad then with his deliberate pace, but Jameelah wanted him, wanted Mac inside her now.

In answer to her thrusting hips, Alec eased off her legs and knelt on the floor beside the bunk. Her eyes closed, she felt his breath blow across her belly in warm puffs. His fingers slid along her inner thigh

working their way upward ever so slowly. She groaned in response. Finally, he delved beneath the last scrap of the white satin that covered her, and she couldn't disguise that she wanted him. The satin was wet and, beneath it, she was hot and throbbing.

Across the wall of passion, Alec's voice came to her. "You will tell the council that you knew nothing of Rami's plans to bomb the station and to take a hostage. You attended the reception at my personal invitation. After the explosion, Rami put you in what you thought was an escape pod. Thinking the station was in danger of losing structural integrity, you launched, not realizing I was onboard. I overpowered you and held you captive until Gunny arrived. If the subject comes up, I never touched you. The reputation of Khay-Alva's widow is more important to me than my own."

Alec's words echoed through the room--unreal. She didn't want to hear them. She arched her back again when Alec parted her lips beneath the wet satin and began to stroke her in earnest.

She wanted to feel his weight. She wanted to relive that night when Alec taught her what Khay had never had time to teach--that her cries could match his, her passion burn as hot. The fingers of Alec's injured arm pulled and stretched her nipples in time with those that now thrust between her legs. Jameelah braced her feet on the wall to force his hand more closely against her.

It was if the days between had never happened. They still lay in that gigantic bed, music pouring from beneath the pillows while he brought her gasping, screaming to fulfillment. Then, she bit his shoulder as he lay on top of her, thrusting his hips against hers to a beat that at first only he could hear.

That beat had filled and overcome her.

He had called her his tiger and she'd playfully answered by nipping his ears while she waited for him to recover. He'd begin again, pressing her body to him, making them one, as if the entire world wasn't waiting to pull them apart.

That beat filled her now. When his hand moved from her swollen breasts to her mouth, she tumbled over the edge of passion. Biting lightly on the outer edge of his gloved hand, Jameelah opened her eyes.

His arousal was clear, even shrouded in black leather. The evidence rose hard between his legs and pressed against her thighs. But this time he spoke no playful words, and hers was the only flushed face cooling after release.

Someone knocked on the door, and she jumped.

Alec stood beside the bunk, his fingers drumming lightly between her thighs under the now-soaked fabric of her camisole. It was not her Mac who looked down at her--not the Triden officer or the doctor or the pilot. She had never seen this man before.

The Emperor's brother, green glinting dangerously in his eyes, fixed her to the bunk with a flinty whisper. "Don't move." Then in a perfectly normal voice he said, "Come."

Jameelah flinched when he spoke. His hand rested on her thigh. She wanted to cover herself with her hands, but his eyes told her no.

"Captain?" It was Perva. He stopped just inside the door, his eyes growing wide. Without warning,

hot tears flooded Jameelah's burning face, and her entire body began to shake.

With a languid forefinger, Alec gathered tears from her cheeks one at a time. "Spit it out, man."

"I...I just wanted to see if you finished drinking everything, Captain."

Leaving Jameelah's side, Alec turned to the table, cluttered with glasses. Perva's eyes met hers before he dropped his gaze to the floor. His face flamed red. Alec finished the last drink and passed the empty glass to the medic. "All gone. Anything else?"

"Gunny says we make the final jump in five." Perva's voice was a whisper.

Jameelah continued to shake while she struggled to understand what had just happened.

When the door closed, Alec growled, "Get dressed," and began to pace again.

Jameelah felt her body jerk at his order, but she didn't move. She had to remember she was not the one who should feel shamed. She had done nothing but respond out of love. Love she believed Alec returned. He was the one who had behaved in a beastly manner. Like the beast he accused Rami of being.

She forced herself to speak in a calm, steady voice. "You haven't told me what you plan to do yet."

She thought he would ignore her question. He appeared eager to leave her and return to his crew. Instead, he spoke words that could not have surprised her more. "I will convince the Triden Council to carry out your late husband's peace proposal. And you, Legate, will persuade your people to accept it."

How? Why? Dozens of questions and Jameelah could only stare, too stunned to ask any of them.



Did Alec really know what Khay had planned? Would he really help her bring peace to the Imsada?

"I'm going to open the door now," he said.

This time Jameelah heeded Alec's warning and scrambled into the flight suit Perva had left for her.

For some unknown reason, Alec planned to carry out Khay's plan. Hastily, Jameelah wiped the tears from her bruised cheek. She needed to believe Alec was telling the truth.

## Chapter 12

Alec sat on the floor, his back against the invalid station, his arms and chin resting on his raised knees while he waited out the proverbial calm before the storm. This jump would take him home, but to a very different home from the one he'd left--a home without Lorna.

The ship shimmied beneath him when it started the jump. He'd recovered enough to endure without complaint the disorienting effects of their trip through hyperspace, but he stayed out of the way, letting his crew do their work. Jamie drew his gaze like flowering crops drew bees.

She had changed into Perva's spare uniform and looked no less attractive in the ill-fitting flight suit with her hair pulled away from her face. She stood behind Jerit at navigation, asking questions like a crew member in training. Alec couldn't stop staring at her.

He endured that little scene in the back to prove to her --no, prove to himself--that he was the one in charge, the one in control. Instead, he'd proved the opposite. When she closed her eyes and reached for him, his body had responded to her call with every cell. And it hadn't been just lust. This thing with Jamie had gone beyond that, and it took all his strength to keep her from knowing how much he needed her.

The moment he'd touched her, reason fled and his anger at Rami and Thane and the whole damnable

situation had grown until he could no longer bear to touch her. Somehow, Alec realized, during their weeks together, he had grown to love Jamie with an intensity he'd thought life had beaten out of him.

Now, a realization more devastating, more soul piercing than a sunrise on New Glasgow dawned when he watched Jamie push a stray tendril of hair off her forehead--he loved not only Jamie dear, but Legate Jameelah as well.

Alec shifted on the floor, moving to stare at Paul, the pilot's sling, Gunny, anything but Jamie. The last thing he needed was to start things up with her again, especially now that he must send her away forever. And he had to.

He slammed his fist against the bulkhead, dimly aware that Gunny turned from the control console to check on him. Everything--Lorna's death, the state of relocation camps like the one on Bradley-Five, Jamie's influence with the Imsada leadership and rank-and-file members--all supported his decision.

But being right didn't make losing Jamie any easier. The worst of it was, Alec couldn't even blame her for Lorna's death. Blame Rami, yes. The plan had obviously been his. But even then, neither Jamie nor Rami could have anticipated Lorna's reaction to her situation. Alec should have. He should have stayed home instead of running around the galaxy playing soldier. He should have insisted Lorna get help.

Alec slammed his fist against the wall again to counteract the pain that swelled in his chest, not caused by hate for Jamie or the need for revenge. That had died the moment his lips touched hers. The

pain he felt was personal, private, and had nothing to do with her. He was desperately afraid that only she could make it go away.

Lorna had struggled her entire life to bear what she called her "unfortunate circumstance" on New Glasgow. More than once she'd tried to end her life, more than once Alec had wept, unable to help. That pain threatened to strangle him now. He had failed Lorna.

Before he returned to take up his service for the emperor, he wanted a few hours, a few days, lost in Jamie's arms. The tempting thought that, if followed through, would only make things worse, but it was exactly what Alec knew he would do.

For the first time in his life, he could see his path clearly stretched out before him--no rationalizing, no excuses, no fanciful stories to tell Mother. After all his failures, Alec would crawl home to hide. Only this time Lorna wouldn't be there.

The result would be the same--one day, at Gunny's gentle urgings, he would wake amid empty wine bottles to face a problem only he could solve, a fight between Thane and Mother only he could arbitrate. Somehow he would find the energy to begin and, once more, he would throw himself into some pointless activity. God, this was getting old.

Hypnotized by the sight of Jamie's firm, young behind shifting from side-to-side beneath regulation black, Alec felt too lethargic to move. She was on that path he saw himself walking down--hers was the body in which he would find comfort before the final slide. But this time the body wouldn't belong to

some nameless person chosen for the sake of convenience. This time the body belonged to the woman he loved.

What comfort would he find in making love to her, knowing he must send her out of his reach forever? Was it laziness, this inability to turn from the path? Alec didn't know. He did know that a normal life with Jamie was not possible. Keeping her with him would hurt too many people. How could he tell his mother he loved a member of the Imsada, the people responsible for Lorna's death? How could he tell Lorna's father? And Thane, how could he possibly explain this to Thane?

"Captain?" Alec jerked his head off his knees, waking from his daydream to total silence. The entire crew, Jamie included, stared at him. Gunny squatted at Alec's side, a hand on his shoulder.

"Sir, we've come out of our last jump. Last because we're in orbit around New Glasgow, and last because we can't jump again without powering up."

Gunny extended Alec a hand and helped him off the floor. Since Alec had earned his right to command, Gunny had called him captain in front of the crew, addressed him as boy when he did something incredibly stupid, and sir when doom threatened. Alec shook off his lethargy, alert to trouble.

Gunny continued. "We've got a squadron of fighters on our tail and a cruiser off the port bow. What we don't have is the access code to the planet's shields. I can't get us through to the planet without them."

"Any comms yet?"

"No, sir. The cruiser hailed us, but we haven't replied. I'm not certain who we are this week." The

crew guffawed at Gunny's remark. He constantly complained about the need to change identities. After granting Alec ceremonial permission to come aboard, his standard greeting was "Who are we this week?" This time the question was not rhetorical.

Alec decided to use Thane's idiotic decision to reveal his identity after all these years to his advantage. "Paul, contact the fighter squadron. Tell their commander Prince Alec Mackenzie is onboard. Then order him to back off. Gunny, get on the horn to the cruiser. Give the same ID and ask for an escort to the family estate."

Alec stood between the two men, listening to both conversations. When he moved to navigation to watch the fighters retreat, Alec found himself looking down at Jamie. She didn't look up, but gave him a rundown on the number and class of fighters arrayed to welcome him home. She would make a good navigator if she didn't spend the rest of her life in a Triden prison.

When the fighters moved off, Gunny reported his discussion with the cruiser. "We are expected. Admiral Swahala would be pleased to escort Prince Alec to his mother's residence."

Prince Alec. Alec was definitely going to have to get back at Thane for this. He didn't deserve such a pretentious title.

"They're pretty jumpy at the moment. Some Imsada fanatic stole your ship from Cestar-Two and made a run at the shields using old codes--family codes. They won't be happy until they find out how the Imsada got them."

Alec backed away from Jamie, his hands forming fists. *Rami. If he's dead, I can forget Lorna's ridiculous request to take care of him.*

Gunny finished his report. "They know we have the Imsada Legate onboard. The message I sent after we left Cestar-Two included a complete roster. The admiral is prepared to accept our prisoner before we breach planetary shields. As I said, they're pretty jumpy."

Instinctively, Alec returned to Jamie's side and put an arm around her waist. He shook his head to drive away the image of Thane's troops tearing her from his arms. That wouldn't happen, not while he could still stand.

"What should I tell the Admiral, Captain?" Gunny asked. Captain. That was better. If Gunny wasn't concerned about the admiral, neither was Alec. They could handle a mere admiral.

"Tell him Prince Alec does not wish to be inconvenienced. We shall land immediately. The admiral can have his prisoner later. Once we pass the break-through point, we're going to have to do some fancy flying to get to town."

"You certain you don't want to see Lady Seana first?"

"What's the worst my mother can do to you?"

"When she finds out I took you to your apartment with a friend, instead of straight home?" Gunny didn't sound like he wanted to find out.

"You make it sound like I'm sixteen and planning to spend the night with a wild woman."

"Well," Gunny raised an eyebrow in Jamie's direction. "That wouldn't be far off. It seems unwise with only Silvia there...."

Alec felt his eyes narrow and he bit his lower lip to keep his angry words inside. He never gave Gunny orders. How could he? He was like a father. Lord Mackenzie had left, Lorna's father had left, through everything Gunny had stayed.

Everyday orders, Alec gave those without thinking, but decisions that affected the entire crew, these they discussed. This time, however, he didn't have that luxury. Explanations would have to wait. "Damn it, Gunny."

Alec loosened his grip on Jamie and felt her slip away to stand behind Jerit. Was everyone leaving him? It felt that way. Now Gunny needed persuading. Alec tried to ignore Jamie's distracting presence while he concentrated on persuading Gunny. "Isn't your new pilot up to the job? I thought Paul was certified."

*Unfair, Alec, unfair, Alec thought. Attacking Gunny where it hurts, his hand-picked crew.*

"He'll do the job better than you, Captain. You can't lie to me. Fool trick--piloting that cow of a ship of yours after what the doctors told us, without gloves no less. Perva says you've got dead contact points. How long were you in the sling anyway?"

Alec winced at the question. The dead spots on his face and shoulders registered when he ran his hands across them, pretending to rub his eyes and sore muscles. He didn't need Perva or Gunny to tell



him. Even if he chose to ignore the doctors' warnings a second time, even if he managed to get his hands on another ship, he couldn't pilot again. One more means of escape gone.

Until now, he'd avoided thinking about it. Watching Paul strip, prepared to take his place in the pilot's sling, Alec couldn't avoid it any longer. More thoroughly than getting drunk, flying had provided him a means of escape. It had created the illusion at least, and apparently, illusion was all he ever had.

When Thane reviewed the medical records, he would order the pilot's sling ripped out of any private ship he boarded. Like clipping a bird's wings, or worse. That would leave him with wine as his only means of escape, and Alec wasn't certain enough wine existed on New Glasgow to keep reality at bay.

He ran his hands over his face again, feeling tired and trapped. His options were dwindling down to a few, all of them bad. "Just your report, Gunny. Save the lecture for later."

"The admiral invited us to follow her in, Captain. This is our usual run. Just faster and with a few more twists, in case there's trouble. Paul can handle it. They won't use offensive weapons, not with you onboard. We can outrun the cruiser, but we can't hide once we land." In answer, Paul squirmed in the sling to ensure better contact with his bare skin. Alec looked away, pretending to concentrate on the navigation controls.

"Do you want to take navigation, Captain?" Gunny asked.

Alec shook his head and rubbed his stomach. He never got sick in the sling, and navigation wasn't the best place for someone with a delicate stomach. He reached for the door to crews' quarters, but

thought better of it. Now was not the time to lock himself in a room with Jamie. She stood behind Perva.

Perva jumped up from his seat, offering Jamie his place at comms. "You're going to need to strap in. Things are going to get bumpy in a minute."

Alec grabbed Jamie's arm and pulled her away. "No," he barked, feeling like a jealous fool while he pulled out two passenger seats at the rear of the control room and strapped her in beside him.

Once he'd secured them both, Alec realized he should have left an empty seat between them. The seat restraints kept her pressed against his side, and he became aware of the tremors that shook his arms caused by the stimulants Perva had pumped into him.

Closing his eyes, Alec tried block the sensations Jamie's warm body sent shooting down his thighs and concentrated instead on the static coming through the open channel to the cruiser.

It would take several minutes for the admiral to realize they didn't plan to land as ordered. Many possible landing sites existed on the Mackenzie estate. Gunny would change their trajectory several times, then head for a touchdown point too small for the cruiser. When Gunny gave the order, Paul would fly them over the fields and head for town.

It was a game they'd played before. Mother was always changing the shield codes. It was only prudent--a good, one-word description of Mother. She also liked to have security inform her when her second son returned to New Glasgow. Changing the codes meant he couldn't sneak in unannounced. Alec and Gunny would arrive to find they had to wait while someone opened New Glasgow's celestial

gates for them. Their escort's orders never changed, and Gunny always ignored them at Alec's insistence.

The Mackenzie manor with its hundreds of rooms lacked the one thing Alec craved after months in the field--privacy. A few hours alone at his apartment made the stay more bearable. Mother would expect his disappearing act. Would she let him get away with it this time?

While he listened to Gunny and the admiral's deck officer argue over landing sites, Alec felt Jamie's hand slip into his. His grip tightened in response. Assuming they reached his apartment, he would need hours to arrange things before he was free to sink into her arms. How much time? How much time could he buy before the Triden High Council's thugs could legally break down his door and drag her from his bed?

No, he couldn't put Jamie through a scene like that, not Khay-Alva's widow, not the soon-to-be leader of the Imsada. He must protect her reputation. She could not be seen as the consort of the Emperor's brother.

Damn Thane. Being publicly declared Prince Alec, heir to the throne, complicated matters. Alec didn't remember lifting Jamie's hand to his lips, but he suddenly became aware of her fingers warm against his mouth and her hot thigh pressing against his. "I'm sorry," he whispered.

She didn't look at him. "I know," was all she said.

Voices came through the static more clearly now. Raised voices--Gunny's conciliatory, the Admiral's full of accusations. Then, Paul made his move.

Alec could see the flight path in his mind. He shifted in his seat to anticipate the turns, but knowing where they were going didn't help his stomach. He swallowed hard when Jamie buried her head in his chest.

Whispering reassuring words, he stroked her hair and closed his eyes when the control room blurred around him. A jag right instead of left surprised him. Two dips and a hard bump followed.

When they skittered off to the left, Gunny yelled, "Damn, there's another one." The ship spun around before righting itself.

The second time they rolled, Alec lost track of where they were. When they came to a stop, he was too sick to care.

To Jameelah it seemed to take hours for Jerit and Perva to strong-arm the door open. Gunny worked to revive Paul, who lay unconscious on the deck next to the sling. Alec looked a little green, but the minute the door opened, he was on his feet and pulling her outside.

The gentleman farmer, that's who he became this time. Ignoring the turmoil around him, he expected everyone to wait while he checked the wheat. He smiled that slow, dreamy smile of his when he finally turned to see if she was there.

He was enormously pleased with himself. "This is the new strain I'm trying. It's a good two weeks

ahead of the last one and has twice as many heads." Alec rolled the wheat between his fingers, scattering seeds at his feet.

The breadbasket of the galaxy. She should have guessed. New Glasgow grew crops to fit the needs of any planet that had the money to buy them.

The *Moireach* lay on her side, nose buried in a field of eight-foot tall wheat. Everything looked the same no matter which way she looked. They might as well sit down and wait for the Triden cruiser to find them.

Alec took one step into the golden stalks and disappeared. His arm reappeared and motioned for her to follow.

Jameelah crossed her arms over her chest and dug her heels into the dirt. "I think I would rather take my chances with the Triden cruiser."

"Don't be silly. We're almost there." Alec returned to the flattened circle of wheat and spun on his heels, staring at the sky.

"How can you tell?" she asked, skeptical.

"Simple. I'm testing a strain for a colony the Triden High Council plans to establish on a planet with coarse, rocky soil. Just like here." He kicked at the dirt, sending pebbles flying against her boots. "That puts us on a narrow strip of land that runs parallel to the city on the north side. The clouds roll in from the East, so the rain should hit in about...,"

Alec stopped and squinted at the dark, rolling wall of clouds to their left, "...ten minutes. We schedule our rain with great accuracy on New Glasgow. What's local time, Gunny?" Alec shouted the last toward the crippled ship.

A mumbled reply came from the ship before the crew joined them in the field. Once outside the door, Paul sank to the ground.

"That landing was almost as rough as one of mine," Alec said. Paul looked up and beamed. Evidently, Alec had paid him the ultimate compliment.

Gunny nodded glumly in agreement. "Might as well have let you drive, Captain. Your mother's going to have to pay for a new one." Gunny grumbled, kicking the crippled ship's side. "This one's not going anywhere either," Gunny gave Paul a gentle tap on the leg.

The news didn't seem to bother Alec. "You four stay here. Provide a diversion. The Legate and I will continue on foot."

Jameelah looked to Gunny, asking a silent question. *Is Alec insane?* She was in the middle of nowhere with a man who wheezed like a broken bellows and they didn't need help?

Alec caught her look and scowled. "I do know what I'm doing, Jameelah. Feel free to voice objections, but you're coming with me if I have to carry you. My place is a mile or two in that direction."

Alec squinted at the tops of the waving wheat and adjusted his estimate twenty degrees to the right. Not reassuring. "If we don't leave now, we'll get caught in the rain. Gunny, you lot wait for the cruiser to

pick you up. Make them cut open the door. Give us half an hour."

With no warning, Alec took Jameelah's hand and pulled her into the wheat field. She held back, forcing him to drag her forward while they ran single file, Alec in the lead. This was so like Alec, so like Khay, so like a man.

He decided what to do and off they went. It hardly seemed worth the effort to think for herself. No one listened anyway. After two minutes in this wheat, she couldn't tell one direction for another.

Five minutes out, Jameelah ducked when the cruiser passed over head. Alec didn't have to drag her any more. Instinct told her to run from the Triden cruiser even if she didn't know what Alec had planned for her. He didn't pause when the ship rumbled overhead.

What would they do to Gunny and the crew when they broke into the ship? Could Alec protect them from the Tridens?

That one man could have so much power, that this particular man could, didn't seem plausible. For all Alec's male arrogance, he didn't seem to enjoy wielding a stick. Certainly with his crew, he wasn't heavy handed. The man she had come to know and love these past weeks didn't act like he'd lived a life where people catered to his every whim.

But practically-speaking, Alec was the Emperor's brother and this was his planet. He probably knew best, and he had said he would help her carry out Khay's plan. That was what she wanted, wasn't it? What she'd worked for all these years--to get the Imsada Council to agree to a permanent solution--her

people living productive lives, making plans, having babies, dying of old age instead of committing futile acts of terrorism.

That dream could come true with Alec's help. But why did he want to help them? He blamed her and the Imsada for Lorna's death. Why would he scrap his own plan and push for Khay's? Unless he thought she wouldn't like Khay's plan. The thought brought her to a skidding halt.

Unable to pull her further, Alec stopped. "Tired?"

He'd unzipped his black jump suit to the waist. Kernels of grain clung to the hair on his head and his chest like golden snow. Sunlight glinted off the silver captain's wings on his shoulders. It must be twenty degrees hotter here than on the ship. Flushed face, easy smile despite his panting--Alec looked like a school boy let out for summer vacation.

"How would you know what plan Khay proposed to the Triden High Command?" she demanded. "Someone killed him before...."

Alec's smile faded. He brushed the wheat from his hair and stole a glance at the advancing clouds. "There's no time for this now. We'll get caught in the rain."

"Not another step." Jameelah planted her feet firmly in the rocky ground. How could anything grow in soil like this? Alec amazed her. She didn't mind admitting that. Now he could amaze her again. Convince her Khay told the Tridens what he wouldn't tell his comrades, or tell her, his own wife.

Alec looked at the sky and shrugged. "Thane named me to the delegation assigned to evaluate



Khay's proposal. We held two preliminary meetings before his death." Alec paused as if to see how she would react to the revelation.

*It shouldn't surprise me, Jameelah told herself, knowing who he is. The Emperor took a personal interest in the Imsada and sent his brother to get a first-hand report.*

"I didn't have the honor of meeting your husband face-to-face," Alec continued, looking solemn now. "Thane considered that too dangerous, and he was right. Khay wasn't the only one who died that day, you know. The explosion blew five Triden officers to bits. I'd known one of them since basic." A note of bitterness crept into Alec's voice.

Bitter at his brother's restrictions, his comrades' deaths, both? Jameelah had her own reasons for feeling bitter. Her face grew hot, and she shouted her accusations over the wind that started to blow.

"If Khay told your delegation about his proposal, why haven't we heard? I've tried to get the Imsada to approve a peace plan for years. Why didn't you tell us? Why haven't you carried it out before now?"

Alec looked nervously at the sky again. "You really don't want to get caught in this rain, Jamie."

Jameelah shook off his arm. She had said not another step and that's what she meant. He couldn't scare her with a little water.

Alec shrugged again, and continued. "It wasn't in our best interest to stop the fighting on Calopia before we defeated the New Alliance. You kept them busy. By listening sympathetically to Khay's proposal, we hoped to encourage sabotage against New Alliance targets. You were an effective

distraction."

Jameelah stamped her feet. A distraction? That's all they'd been? The killing had continued years after the Triden Council knew a workable solution existed. People died during those years, people who shouldn't have. Her brother had died. She fought back her tears, her clenched fists shaking with the effort. It was all a game to them--a game she must end.

"As for Khay's plan," Alec said, "we didn't think much of it. It had to be implemented over several years. We were looking for an immediate solution. When Khay was killed, the point became mute. The Imsada didn't have anyone who could dictate a solution and, without Khay's leadership, we didn't think the Imsada Council would accept the plan. Khay's plan depends on the willing participation of all Imsada and their families. Until now, the Imsada hasn't had a leader who could inspire such cooperation."

Her mouth dropped open in surprise. "Who do you expect...."

Alec said nothing but pointed at her, his eyebrows arched in reply to her unfinished question.

"You expect me to take Khay's place?"

Alec nodded. She couldn't believe what he was saying. That he had so much faith in her, that he believed she could take Khay's place, shocked her. But he hadn't said what the plan was.

It was a strange kind of rain that fell. A soft rain that barely disturbed the wheat even when it poured down in sheets. Moisture supersaturated the air, a choking combination with the heat. The sheet of shimmering gray cloaked anything more than a foot in front of her. Alec reached through the curtain

and grabbed her hand.

Her mouth filled with water the instant she opened it. Talk became impossible. She could do nothing but cling to Alec and let him lead the way.

## Chapter 13

Alec strained to hear sounds of pursuit, but nothing penetrated the roar of the rain. They should have reached the city by now. He must be drawing to the right, leaning away from the pain in his side. If he led them too far from perpendicular, they would miss the city entirely.

Luckily, Jameelah couldn't question his sense of direction. When she tried, she choked, her mouth full of water. For a few anxious moments, he wondered if he would have to carry her, but while he debated, they broke through the wall of wheat and stumbled onto the pedestrian walk made of inlaid stone, smooth and slippery with water.

When he stopped to get his bearings, Jamie slid against him and threw her arms around his waist to keep from falling. Her breasts throbbed softly against his back, wet but warm. The rain fell according to schedule and at a comfortable seventy-five degrees.

With few exceptions, the city's population stayed indoors when it rained. He and Jameelah ran little risk of being spotted from the ground, but the cruiser would easily pick them out once the admiral figured out their destination.

Which way to go? All the buildings looked alike--tall monoliths with small footprints. The only city on the planet took a scant 100 acres out of production. One of the buildings in this tightly packed

metropolis offered sanctuary, but only one.

New Glasgow hadn't always looked like this--almost every acre of land cultivated, fields broken by a half dozen estates like Lord Mackenzie's and the City, which needed no other name. Over three hundred million men, women, and children had lived on New Glasgow two generations ago, less than a hundred thousand did so now. Millard, Head Gardener to the Mackenzie estate and Lorna's father, said it was the difference between farming and gardening--farming required machine power, gardening was labor intensive.

New Glasgow was a farm, the Mackenzie estate a garden. It took as many men to run the family garden as it did to run all the farms on New Glasgow. The farms produced cash crops--income used to buy power and planets. The gardens produced food, wine, clothing, and shelter for the family and its employees. Lady Seana had always acknowledged she would lose her first son to the Triden fleet. She'd raised her second to be a farmer.

Alec squeezed Jameelah's hand to let her know they must continue. Considering the methodical layout of the City, finding the Mackenzie building was only a matter of time. A commodity in short supply.

He led her two blocks south, perpendicular to the fields, hugging the west side of the buildings as they ran. The shelter offered little relief as the rain fell almost straight down, but their footing was more sure, now that cement replaced the stones.

Although Alec's building was the tallest in the city, he hadn't the perspective to locate it from street level. They all looked alike in the rain. East or west? Time to choose.

Alec ducked into a tram stop. If he pressed his palm on the map, he would know where they were, but he would also announce their presence. Security didn't like to come out in the rain, but they would if the order came from Lady Seana.

"Is it much farther?" Jamie said. Alec looked down, startled when she spoke. He had grown so accustomed to having his hand locked around hers that he'd almost forgotten she clung there.

She gripped him more tightly and leaned her head against his arm. The pressure weighed it down, causing the dull ache to intensify. He looked at his fingers curled around hers. His hands appeared as they always had--strong hands, sensitive, his had tutors told him. How could he have let Lorna slip through his fingers?

The tram shelter fell away and, once again, he lay on Cestar-Two's hard deck with one hand gripping Lorna's. Only her fingers, really. When she'd tried to break away, Alec had struggled to move his other arm. He'd tried to swing it toward her to get a better grip, but the arm lay dead at his side.

Alec felt himself slip over the edge. He tried to follow Lorna, but something held him back--Jamie.

He became aware that he now stood on New Glasgow, and he faced a new danger--hesitating in this place with this woman. The sense of danger increased when his vision narrowed on her. Nothing existed but his hand gripping hers as if someone were trying to rip them apart. She pulled him away from the

abyss as Rami had. Why had Rami saved him? Alec lowered his head, resting it on her hair, so smooth and cool beneath his hot lips.

Jamie had stopped shaking and leaned against his side as if she belonged there. Damn it, she did belong there. "It's not much farther. Just a bit to the east, I think. I'd let you rest if I could, but I want to get in before the rain stops. The streets empty ten minutes or so before it hits, but people come out as soon it's over." Speaking of mundane matters seemed to bring him back to reality.

Despite his words that they should continue, Alec hung back, gritting his teeth against the growing pain in his arm while he enjoyed the smell of Jameelah's damp hair and the feel of her warm body. Only two thin layers of wet fabric kept them apart.

The material molded to her small, high breasts, her hard nipples pressing against the fabric. Alec cupped one breast in his hand, forgetting for the moment they stood in a public street. When he bent to kiss her, her lips, firm and trembling, opened to him.

His hands moved of their own accord, slipping into the back pockets of her flight suit and pulling her hard against him. Wet. So deliciously wet, and there seemed to be nothing between them now as he pressed against her, tasting her mouth and kneading her sweet behind with his hands.

Jamie led them from the shelter. She smiled when she tugged him into the rain that no longer fell in torments. With the rain slacking off, he would be able to see the tell-tale cornerstone in the building with a stylized "M" to set it apart from the others. Alec felt almost light-hearted--he was taking Jamie home.

"Here we are," he said when he found the building. It looked like all the rest, but marked by the bold "M" that emblazoned his father's coat-of-arms. They walked casually now, hand-in-hand.

Alec's stomach tightened when he rounded the corner. The Mackenzie banner hung over the main entrance. He had seen it last at the wedding reception, part of the holographic projection of the family estate, a lifetime ago. That's how long he'd been gone--a lifetime.

When the doorman stepped out of the sheltered entrance, Alec wheeled them around and headed in the opposite direction. It could be nothing. Twenty or so businesses had offices in his building and most would soon close for the day, but people seldom ventured out before the rain stopped completely. When they reached the cornerstone where they had started and rounded the corner, Alec gripped Jamie's hand more tightly and ran.

A moment of panic gripped him when they reached the side door and he slid his fingers into the lock. They couldn't change the codes, not on his own building. He sobered suddenly at the thought that they could.

Mother would have anticipated trouble, but she didn't have the authority to lock him out of his own building. Thane, the Triden High Command--they had the authority, but they expected cooperation. They probably expected him to hand his kidnappers over for trial and scream for their blood. If rumors were true, even Tam looked for revenge.

Alec knew he would have to be careful. He walked a perilously narrow line. Go too far in one



direction and Thane would believe his act. As much as he loved and trusted his little brother, Thane would order Alec's execution if he believed him guilty of treason. Too far in the other direction and Jamie would be dead before the ink on the peace treaty dried.

He accepted that some level of self-incrimination was unavoidable to carry out his plan, but Alec couldn't help anyone if the Council held him totally in disgrace. He shuddered at the thought he might fail--just as Jamie had visited him in Zelat's cell, he would visit her in prison soon.

No, Thane would have to listen to reason. After miscuing the entrance sequence on the door lock, Alec pushed away the image of Jamie sitting in a Triden cell waiting for her execution. This time, he keyed the combination more slowly.

The streets were empty when the panel slid open and they slipped inside. Alec spoke only one word, "dry," and the lift began to move.

"Spread your legs," he ordered.

For once Jamie didn't question his command, probably because he assumed the position first. She followed his example and stood with feet apart and arms raised. Under the burst of hot air, Jameelah's flight suit dried. The alluring curves of her breast and thighs disappeared when the fabric returned to its original baggy shape. He wanted to explore those drying curves again, but too many things needed doing.

"Silvia, are you there?" he called.

"Where else would I be, Alec?" The house computer replied through hidden speakers. He'd

programmed her with a deep and sultry voice--one he'd taken from a working girl on Triden-Prime, along with her name. No matter how sharp his orders, no matter how rude his replies, both Silvias had always spoken in even, soothing tones, and did anything he asked.

"Evacuate the building. Don't let anyone in without my okay. Arrange temporary quarters for my tenants, and compensate at triple rate. I want to keep them quiet. Register my request for sanctuary with the governor immediately. If I still have an identity under commission, tender my resignation to the Triden fleet."

"Yes, Alec," Silvia said. "You have messages. Do you want them now?"

"Only the important ones."

"The only message that warrants your immediate attention is from Lady Seana. Your mother wants to know what the hell you think you are doing. She will arrive shortly to break down your door if you do not return home immediately."

Alec laughed at Silvia's literal rendition of his mother's message, and laughed again at Jamie's startled expression. He considered filling her in on family politics, but decided a full explanation would take more time than the lift ride allowed.

"We don't have to worry about my mother dropping by unexpectedly. She has no intention of coming here. Besides she can't gain entrance to the building without my permission. I own this building and controlling interest in the Mackenzie estate, which is the same as owning New Glasgow."

"You were Lord Mackenzie's heir?"

Alec hesitated before he answered. Jamie looked distressed at the possibility. Didn't she know that the more power and wealth he possessed, the more he could do for her and her people? "Not his sole heir, but Father was especially angry with Mother before he died and he voided his original will and left no other. The court divided his property equally between Mother, Thane, and myself. To avoid the appearance of a conflict of interest, Thane disposed of his holdings on New Glasgow. I think giving it to me was his way of siding with Father one last time.

"So, I own two-thirds of the family estate, which amounts to a little less than three-quarters of New Glasgow and a couple of planets we use to test crops in growing conditions we can't duplicate here. Mother runs everything, I'm usually too busy, but when I decide to settle down, this will be mine." Alec swept his arm in front of him.

They were almost at the top of the building, a hundred stories high, looking over the city and toward the main space port. Buildings blocked the view of the fields.

Her back straight and hands clasped formally behind her, Jamie stepped toward the outer wall to peer at the city that glowed in the rosy sunset made more brilliant by dissipating clouds. "I never realized."

A chill ran through him at her words and he hastily ran his hands through his hair, sending a shower of wheat kernels over his shoulders. He wanted to call her Jamie, to feel her lean against his side again,

but something had changed between them. Staring at her stiffened body, Alec felt her disapproval.

He couldn't fight off the growing dread. "You never realized what?"

"That you had so much to lose, Prince Alec. You have already angered Lady Seana. Perhaps you should turn me over to the authorities before you anger the Emperor and put your holdings in danger." Jamie's voice took on an official tone, as if she was his prisoner or he was hers. He felt totally at her mercy again.

*I can't let all this change things, not like it did with Tam.* Suddenly hating his wealth and his blasted high connections, Alec pulled Jamie from the window and forced her to face him. Instantly, he regretted his move.

One look in those liquid brown eyes, so distant, so pained, and he knew a few days together would not be enough. He must change the world, change the galaxy, to make things right between them.

When the lift stopped and the wall behind them opened, Jamie's eyes widened. The anteroom was modest by Mackenzie standards. This entire apartment could fit into the Mackenzie estate ballroom. A dozen chairs, a couple of tables, paintings--a place to make people comfortable when he kept them waiting.

"Silvia, seal the floor." He didn't wait to hear the metal panels slide into place. "This way, Legate Jameelah." He bowed to indicate the way to the door. *If Jamie can be so damned formal, so can I.*

"There's more?" She backed away from him.

If they had still been on the street, he had no doubt she would have run for the fields of wheat. Someone else had reacted this way to this room. Alec had been much younger then, and showing off, when he ushered his classmate Tam through his apartment, hoping he could impress her enough to persuade her to spend the night.

His wealth and his taste and his charm had impressed Tam and she said so. Then she said the same thing Jamie just said--"I never realized how much you had to lose."

Tam didn't believe he could trade his life on New Glasgow for one on a new colony, not without regretting it later, and Jamie didn't think any better of him. She stood in the same room, telling him he didn't have the courage to risk everything for her.

But maybe he asked too much, expecting her to see him in a heroic light. After all, her husband, Khay-Alva, had been the hope for peace of his generation. A moderate with enough support in the Imsada to force concessions and enough charisma to catch the imagination of the public. Khay had gone behind the collective back of the New Alliance and had been days away from negotiating a separate agreement with the Triden Empire when assassins had ended his mission, and his life. To Alec, he had seemed the idyllic warrior, statesman, scholar, saint. He had also been this woman's husband.

Jamie's husband was a man of principle and purpose. *And who are you, except a prince by your brother's decree and man made rich by the death of his father.*

Alec threw open the final door to his private rooms with a flourish.

Already intimidated by the waiting room, Jameelah tip-toed through the second door where two throne-like chairs stood guard on either side to reveal a room large enough to accommodate an army of Tridens. Entering Alec's apartment was like entering a shrine. What Alec called an apartment felt like a palace, or a tomb. She stood in the entrance, waiting.

When Alec sat with a thud on a chair and pulled off his boots, oblivious to the water that poured on the floor, Jameelah followed suit and sank her bare feet into the ankle-deep carpet. After the roar of the rain, the silence was absolute heaven.

Alec continued to undress, shedding his flight suit and peeling the crumbled wrapping off his ribs. Leaving the mess at his feet, Alec crossed the room to the windows that filled the opposite wall. His damp shorts clung to his legs, and she could see the strained muscles in his calves and thighs twitch.

He called over his shoulder, "You're fine the way you are. I just needed to get comfortable." Then, he leaned against one of the slanted floor-to-ceiling columns that framed the view--fields, almost endless fields, a range of mountains at the horizon, rain clouds rolling west.

Jameelah would have liked to get comfortable too. The blast of hot air in the lift had dried her borrowed jumpsuit, but pieces of wheat had made their way past her collar and lodged in the most inconvenient places. She itched all over but resisted the urge to strip and join him. She wasn't wearing

anything under her borrowed flight suit.

Soft lights came on when Alec left the doorway, and music--male voices, a soothing almost monotone chant. The room held little furniture--one large sofa in front of the window, a low table, and an armchair. In the far corner to the right, a grand piano stood--shiny, black, and waiting. He must still play. Music lay in jumbled stacks on a nearby table. Several paintings decorated the walls, an abstract sculpture stood on a lighted stand. They all blended in a single piece with the music--music that seemed to draw her onto the sofa behind Alec.

She watched him stretch his arms gingerly over his head, the muscles in his back and legs rippling when he flexed. He rubbed the shoulder Gunny and Perva had snapped back into place and rotated it slowly.

This was Alec's home, where he chose to live. It must say something about the man. A need for space, for solitude, for luxury. The carpet was a grayed rose, stolen from the sunset. The pile came up between her toes when she walked to the sofa.

Other tones in the room were richer--burgundy velvet, burnished pewter, honey-colored wood. Real wood, she realized when she caressed the table in front of her and examined a gouge that marred the surface. How dear must wood be on a planet dedicated to growing food?

How could she have thought she had something to offer this man? Oh, maybe when he was a disillusioned lieutenant wasting his talents and in need of direction. Then there was some hope, but not

now. She offered a life of scrounging and making do, of rations and sacrifice, too little of everything. Alec owned planets, and called this palace an apartment.

Now that Lorna was dead, he had one more reason not to become personally involved with the plight of Imsada refugees. The question she must concentrate on was whether he could persuade the Emperor to let her return to one of the relocation camps instead of leaving her to waste away in some prison cell. Bradley-Five and places like it needed her. That's where she belonged. The refugees also needed Alec, or rather Doc Mac, but she wouldn't ask for what he couldn't give. And who would willingly leave this place?

With a sigh, she realized she must give up any hope of Alec joining her cause.

Alec turned, looking surprised to see her standing there. "Have a seat." He pointed to the sofa behind her.

Jameelah sat gingerly on the edge of the closest cushion, feeling like a prisoner waiting to hear her sentence.

Alec opened his mouth, but the unseen Silvia had evidently followed them from the lift and interrupted him. "Your medic has authorized medication. You should take it now."

Irrational jealousy threatened at the sound of the female voice. The same jealousy Jameelah had felt before she knew Lorna was Alec's sister. Realizing she was leaving fingerprints on the table, Jameelah sat on her hands and tried not to shed seeds on the carpet. It seemed the only safe thing to do while Alec



and Silvia spoke.

"Give us a bottle of wine with that. Two glasses," he said.

"The wine or the medication, Alec. Not both." So Silvia could talk back. Jameelah had begun to think that Alec had chosen this mystery woman solely for her willingness to agree without question to everything he said.

Alec seemed unperturbed by Silvia's rebuff. He stepped away from the window and walked to what Jameelah thought must be a kitchen. "Wine for my guest then."

He scooped up and swallowed a pill that appeared from a recess in the counter, and opened a door to reveal an etched crystal glass filled with burgundy wine.

"I'm ready for the rest of my messages now." Alec carried the glass to her. He sipped the wine until the glass was half full. When she didn't reach to take it from him, he bent to place the glass in her hand. Jameelah inhaled the heady smell of New Glasgow's finest on his breath while they stared into each other's eyes for one long moment. When he reduced the distance between them to mere inches, Jameelah closed her eyes, but instead of warm lips against her mouth, she felt cold glass. She opened her eyes to find he'd returned to his place by the window to listen to Silvia's disembodied voice.

"Delia called when you did not arrive home as scheduled. She has inquired twelve times since concerning your plans. Do you wish to schedule a meeting?"

"Tell her I'm not interested this trip. Send my apologies and the usual payment," Alec replied.

"Your mother scheduled a meeting here tomorrow with Head Gardener Millard. The estate called and canceled before you arrived. If Mr. Millard arrives, what shall I tell him?"

"Show him to the waiting room and announce him. Anything from Thane?"

"Nothing, Alec. Do you wish to speak to your brother?"

"Give me half an hour, then try to raise him." Alec paced the room. "Has the governor's office confirmed my request for sanctuary?" Alec talked through Silvia's replies now, asking his next question, giving his next order before she had time to answer. She never lost patience with him, never raised her voice. Only her polite suggestion that he might wish to dress stopped his torrent of words.

He hesitated before leaving the room, looked as if he were about to say something. Instead, he mumbled he'd be back in a minute, walked passed the kitchen and disappeared. The light seemed to disappear with him.

Jameelah left the sofa and approached the window. The flat wood column Alec had leaned against was still warm. Taking his place, she watched the last of the pink fade from the clouds. Such a peaceful world. Jameelah couldn't imagine anyone being unhappy here.

When the sky finally turned black and the fields disappeared in the night, Silvia startled her by speaking. "Do you wish more light?"

"Yes, please." The lights came up to a comfortable level, and Jameelah looked for her glass of wine. It had been a long day, but she couldn't imagine sleeping. She hoped to find a book to read, anything to

keep from thinking of Alec and what he was doing--stripping off his shorts, stepping into the shower, washing his hair, his shoulders, his chest.... If Alec had books, he kept them in another room, and Jameelah didn't recognize anything as being a computer terminal.

"Does Alec's guest desire anything?" Silvia said.

"Please, call me Jameelah."

"Jameelah." The voice repeated as if digesting the sound. The following silence seemed to engulf her. Could she trust this Silvia? "Do you know who I am?"

"You are Alec's guest. Do you require anything?"

Whoever this Silvia person was, she sounded agreeable and she was used to answering questions. Maybe Jameelah could get a few of her own answered. "Is there a place where I can clean up?"

"Alec sometimes entertains guests in the bath. Should I inform him you wish to join him there?"

"No! I mean I wouldn't care to disturb him. I can wait. Can Alec hear us?"

"Conversations between Silvia and guests are not monitored unless I am directed otherwise. Alec has not made such a request."

"Good. I mean, do you know if someone is looking for us?"

"The security forces of New Glasgow and the Triden Fleet were conducting a search for Prince Alec and Legate Jameelah. When Alec requested sanctuary, I notified officials that he was in residence with a female guest. Are you this Legate Jameelah? If so, I should report your presence."

What had she done now? Messed in something she knew nothing about, like going on Imsada raids, and again botching things. "Please, don't do that Silvia. Not without asking Alec first. I only wanted to ask about an incident that occurred before we arrived. A craft tried to break through New Glasgow's protective shields. Do you know who the pilot was? Did he survive?"

"I'll answer that, Silvia." Jameelah jumped at Alec's voice.

His shiny black boots made no sound on the carpet. The color had deepened in the artificial light, or had it actually turned blood red? He was a picture of the perfect Triden officer, straight back, stiff black uniform, every hair in place. "Get me that line to Thane, Silvia. He should be sitting down to supper about now. I owe him indigestion, at least."

"I was asking Silvia if Rami was on that ship," Jameelah said.

Alec's composure broke for a moment and he ran his fingers through his hair. Had it always been this gray? His beard, which had grown unchecked since they arrived on Cestar-Two, showed spots of silver below his mouth. He closed his eyes.

"Silvia, you will answer only those questions the Legate asks that relate to the household. Refer all others to me."

He continued toward Jameelah and stopped in front of the window. She stepped off the window sill, thinking he wanted to return to his place.

"Seal the windows." Alec barked the order.

When the metal plates banged shut on the lights of the city, Jameelah flinched and wrapped her arms around her middle. The internal lamps brightened to compensate.

Alec didn't react to the sound of metal meeting metal. "I spoke to planet security. Rami took my ship from Cestar-Two. Why he decided to come here, what he planned to do, I can't imagine, but New Glasgow was the location I programmed for our next jump. He made a run at the planet, and when the outdated codes didn't work, he took a bad bounce off the security field. He gave everyone quite a scare when the ship started to break up. They thought I was on it."

Jameelah shivered at the thought of the pain his family must have gone through these past weeks. First, not knowing if he was alive or dead, then believing he'd returned only to fear they'd lost him again. "Did he--"

"He'll live. Rami's on his way to Triden-Prime. You'll see him soon enough. Most likely at the trial. I can get you adjoining cells, if you wish." Alec's eyes sparkled dangerously. He ran his fingers through his damp hair again, never taking his eyes from her.

When she didn't respond, he pushed past her and flopped down on the sofa. A deep green sofa. Hadn't it been burgundy just moments before? Before he could get settled, Alec sat up, choking down a cough. Jameelah managed to take one step toward him before he held out his arm to ward her off.

"Jameelah, the bedroom's through there, and the bath. Sorry, there's only one, but I'm used to bachelor quarters." Alec pointed the way past the kitchen to an open arch. "You'll find some dresses in the small closet to the right of the bath." Silvia's dresses, Jameelah wondered? Or things he kept for those "other guests" Silvia mentioned who shared his bath? Was Delia one of them?

Alec had already turned away. He paced in front of the sofa and rubbing his bruised ribs. What she really wanted to know, what she didn't dare ask, made her lips tremble and tears threaten to escape down her cheeks.

Why had he pulled away? Why hadn't he kissed her? Huddled in the tiny shelter in the rain, he had pressed her to him with all the hunger she herself had felt. Alec wanted her, but something had changed now that they had entered his domain.

Did returning to New Glasgow remind him of the social gulf between them--the emperor's heir and the outlaw, the owner of planets and the penniless daughter of a gardener?

Well, Jameelah could live without his kisses, live without his arms pressing her urgently against his ready body, live without.... Yes, she was going to have to learn to live without many things, but not without first discovering what Alec planned to do with the Imsada. She turned her back on him. Questions would have to wait.

The first room past the arch was Alec's bedroom--as Spartan as the rest of the apartment. Spartan if you ignored the size and the quality of the furnishings. Jameelah entered the bath. With a longing glance

at the enormous tub Silvia offered to fill, Jameelah settled for a hot shower and a towel with pile as deep as the carpet and big enough to serve as a tent.

The closet near the bath did contain women's clothing, but only fancy underwear and nightgowns. Alec's uniforms, exercise suits, books, and cases of wine filled the other closets. Returning to the first closet, she sorted through the gowns, which bore a disturbing resemblance to the wardrobe Captain Freeman kept in his guest quarters on Cestar-Two.

Jameelah's fashion sense said the shimmering pink would look most becoming against the now deep red carpet and green sofa. But she had no desire to look like some objet d'art chosen to complement the decor. She would not blend into Alec's world and his schizophrenic color scheme that seemed to change with his mood. She chose the one-piece underwear with the least amount of lace, and a full-length gown that offered the most coverage. Both were white.

Once dressed, Jameelah strode into the living area with more bravado than she felt, silently rehearsing her demands. She must use her unfortunate circumstances to her best advantage. And she did have an advantage. She was already under a sentence of death, and the Triden High Council would most likely pass another. They could only kill her once.

Alec missed her dramatic entrance. He sat huddled on the sofa with his legs folded under him. The soothing chanting, which flowed from the walls, had stopped. He sat in the silence rhythmically twirling her empty wine glass between his hands.

The sofa, now a formal navy blue, rested on highly polished pale wood--pine that matched the tables. The rug, decorated with a geometric design, stretched from the sofa to the window. The only thing that remained unchanged was the piano. It crouched in the corner, shiny and black, waiting for Alec to bring it to life.

"It's not like that." Alec spoke to the air, but a small button clung to his ear. She could hear only Alec's side of the conversation. Was he talking to Thane, or had his mother gotten through? Jameelah stood waiting while he spoke.

"I understand the situation more fully now. You always said there was no substitute for actual experience. Well, I'm offering you my experience, and my experience says we should--"

Two softly spoken no's followed. Alec looked up. When he motioned for Jameelah to sit, she curled up on the nearby chair--now plush blue to match the sofa. She realized with dismay that the elegant white sheath she wore went perfectly with this setting.

Alec mouthed "You look gorgeous," before he returned the wine glass to its place between his knees and frowned. "I don't care what my medic says. That's not the way it was.... No, of course, Gunny wouldn't lie, but.... No, I'm not backing down."

Alec reached for the empty wine glass again, but he continued to murmur yes and no to the air as if at random. This was her fate being decided, the fate of her people. She had to know what was going on.

Leaving her place on the chair, Jameelah slipped onto the sofa beside Alec. He lifted his arm to



make room for her against his side. When she tried to pull away, afraid of hurting his ribs, he tugged her closer, grunting softly when she pressed against him. He buried his face in her hair, kissing her head, tangling his fingers in her damp locks. She was afraid he'd forgotten his conversation completely. Sitting this close, she still couldn't hear the other voice.

"I'll tell you everything when I see you.... No, not before then.... Mother will have to wait, but I will tell you everything face to face.... No, there's no question. She's dead." Jameelah stole a peek from under his arm. A tear slid down his cheek. The first she'd seen him shed. She wanted to wipe it away, but didn't dare.

"Of course, you care," he said, seeming to speak to the air. "That's why this is important.... I don't think the proper way to remember our sister is by killing tens of thousands of people."

Jameelah stiffened with fear. So that's what the Emperor wanted to do. His wife Tam, too, according to Gunny. Alec's arm tightened around her shoulder, and he kissed the top of her head sending shivers down her arms.

"Her last words to me were to keep Rami safe."

Jameelah looked up in surprise. She had thought Lorna spoke those words over Alec's head to her, or possibly to Gunny--Lorna asking them to take care of Alec.

Alec stared at some far-off point, concentrating on his conversation. "I intend to carry out Lorna's last request, and I can think of no better way to do that than to give his life and the lives of his people a

purpose."

A long pause followed. Long enough for Alec to untangle himself from her embrace and try to wring wine from the empty glass. She stared at its etched surface--an ornate letter em on one side and a fierce dragon ridden by a tiny man on the other.

Alec shifted on the sofa to face her. "Yes, it can be done.... No, I won't attend. Neither will she.... In four days, when my time runs out, not before.... Yes, we can use her.... At the trial, yes...."

He let the glass fall to the floor and cupped her chin in his hands. He didn't stop her when she wiped the tear from his face, but he continued to talk to the air. "After I've spoken to her advisor, not before. He'll get me at least two days, or he'll find himself without a retainer.... I can't go telling a member of the prosecution my plans. You'll have to wait until the trial like all the rest."

Two no's and a yes followed. Then a good-bye and a smile, a slight, weary smile, but a smile.

"That was my brother," Alec said, his tenuous smile still in place.

"So I gathered."

"Did you now? Did you also gather there's some good news?" Jameelah held her breath. Alec reached for the glass again and shook it, apparently surprised to find it empty. He sat at the end of the sofa. A cushion separated them.

"No one was killed at the wedding reception, and repairs to the station are within my ability to pay. Gunny caused most of the damage when he tried to blast Rami. That makes things easier. I'll talk to your

legal advisor tomorrow." Jameelah released her breath, relieved to learn her bomb hadn't led to any deaths. No deaths, that is, except Lorna's.

"What will you tell this lawyer of mine? Shouldn't I speak with him first?"

"No, I'll handle it."

Jameelah felt her sympathy slip and her hands tighten into fists. So he would handle it, would he? Handle her life, handle everything if she let him. That was not a mistake she could afford to make. "What about the peace conference?"

"Peace negotiations have resumed with my return to New Glasgow. We will not attend."

Not attend? The peace conference had been her goal for years. Next to seeing Alec safely home, getting there had pulled her through this whole mess. And now she wasn't going? "But... but why not? The Imsada will...."

"The Imsada will do nothing." Alec made an angry gesture and stood. "For their part in the attack on his wedding reception, the Emperor has banned the Imsada from participation in all talks. But it doesn't matter."

It doesn't matter? With three words he'd dismissed her goals and dreams. Alec sat again and turned to face her, his palms turned up as if to offer a truce.

"I will talk to my brother and to the High Council about the disposition of your people. This situation has made things easier. We won't have to get approval from the New Alliance on any of this.

They won't dare ask for conditions now that they believe Emperor Thane views the Imsada question as a private vendetta."

"You have no right to make these decisions. Only a member of the Imsada can represent--"

Alec reached for her arms. His touch, even partially masked by leather, sent sparks skittering down her back. He ran his hands from her shoulders to her fingertips. "Can't you trust me on this, Jamie? I'm too tired for anything else."

She gave in to Alec's pleading green eyes. He did look tired, though talking to Thane seemed to have released some tension. Besides, he had called her Jamie again. "It can wait until tomorrow," she agreed.

Alec seemed to melt against the sofa, drawing her in after him. He held her tight against his chest, and rested his chin on her head.

This silent touching was too intimate. She pushed gently against him until he released his hold on her shoulders. Serious talk could wait until tomorrow. Changing the subject seemed the safe thing to do for now. "Who do I have to thank for my clothes? Do you always keep an assortment of sleepwear ready for young ladies who drop by?"

To Jameelah's dismay, Alec's weary smile, which had so heartened her before, grew into a mischievous grin. Then he threw back his head and laughed. He laughed until the empty wine glass dropped from his lap and he held his sore ribs with both hands as if he were about to fall apart.

"I don't believe it," Alec gasped between what had tapered off to chuckles. "You're jealous. Is it Dee or Silvia?"

Jameelah hit him on the shoulder, ignoring the pained wince that didn't diminish his good humor. "I am not jealous," she said. "You have a perfect right to entertain as many young ladies as you wish. I couldn't care less."

Alec's laughter died as suddenly as it erupted. Jameelah pulled away. The abrupt change frightened her. The sparkle left his green eyes and the color deepened with interest.

"There's nothing wrong with a little jealousy," Alec said softly. "But if you can't tell me the truth about this, Jamie, why should I believe anything you say?" His lips inched closer to hers, cool and inviting. Jameelah smelled the wine on his breath, felt his warm thigh press against hers, and began to tremble.

"To spare you the necessity of asking further embarrassing questions, Delia schedules companion visits for officers on leave. On New Glasgow, we consider the profession honorable. I'm a wealthy customer, and Dee has learned to be persistent. Sometimes, when I'm home on leave...."

Jameelah put her hands over her ears. This was crazy, silly. But she didn't want to hear another word. Why did the thought of Alec sitting on this sofa with another woman make her nauseous? Alec pried her hands away from her head and forced her to listen.

"I did sleep with a woman or two before we met, Jamie. I'm not an inexperienced boy. Surely you

realized that. Why is this important to you? Why do you need to think of me as having lived like some monk before we met?"

Jameelah returned her hands to her ears, then, feeling foolish, busied them with straightening her hair. She didn't want to hear his questions, didn't want to think. Alec untangled her fingers from her hair and pulled her closer. With her head in his hands, he forced her to meet his gaze.

When she turned away, breaking free from his grasp, he seemed to lose patience. Pacing the floor in front of her, he continued. "No wonder Khay spent his time bouncing between secret meetings. Living with you must have been pure hell, Legate. How did your husband put up with you?"

Panic hidden deep within rose in Jameelah's throat and threatened to choke her. Before she could think, tears rolled down her cheeks and sobs shook her shoulders. She felt so embarrassed, so ashamed, then afraid Alec might guess her secret. "How dare you insinuate that Khay would violate his marriage vows?"

She sounded hysterical, she knew. She struggled to bring her crumbling emotions under control. When she looked up, Alec's face crumpled with concern and panic.

He knelt before her, taking her hands in his, unwilling, it seemed, to let her go. "I wasn't talking about Khay. I was talking about you and me, and what we mean to each other. I was talking about the both of us getting around to telling the truth."

She struggled for a moment before his words penetrated her panic. He wanted to talk about them--

Alec, Emperor Thane's heir and Jameelah, the outlaw. Was it possible she meant something to him?

Suddenly there seemed no other place for her to go, no other place she wanted to be than in Alec's arms. She wanted him to understand, needed him to understand what she hadn't allowed herself to admit, not even to herself.

Alec pulled her against his chest and they knelt together on the floor while he stroked her hair. "What did he do, Jamie? What did Khay do that hurt so much?" A tightness filled his voice now--protective, strong, and controlled.

"He was never faithful to me, never." The words came out in a small frightened voice from a hidden place Jameelah never thought to open, never wanted to see. The pain was new and raw. She had never allowed herself to feel it before. Now, in Alec's arms, it poured out. "He would stand there, naked, some other woman lying in my bed, and tell me it meant nothing. I was the wife of the great Khay-Alva. What more could I want."

Alec tried to hold her closer, but she needed room to breathe. She pushed him away while she wiped her tears on the backs of her hands.

He held her face again forcing her to meet his gaze. "God, how could the man be such a fool? How could he possibly look at another woman when he had you?"

When she leaned against the sofa, she realized it had changed to a deep green, green like his eyes. Jameelah sank into those passionate pools, watching them dart back and forth while he debated. Didn't he

For the Emperor

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want her? His eyes said yes.



## Chapter 14

For a moment his lips hovered scant inches above hers, his breath warm and rapid against her face. His eyes said yes, his body said yes, but the words coming from his mouth said no.

He turned to cough and gently pushed her away. "We both could use some sleep."

Jameelah fussed with the strap of her gown to hide her embarrassment. Was that what he hoped? That when he woke he wouldn't want her any more? And he did want her. She could feel the evidence, hard and throbbing against her thigh. "Of course."

Unable to meet his gaze, she pretended to examine the plush green sofa. How could she have possibly told Alec about Khay? How could she have shared something so intimate? What must he think of her now? What could he think?

She was a weak and foolish woman, a failure as a wife, and not fit to lead her people. He would realize his mistake and see that she couldn't possibly help carry out Khay's plan. Finding out what that plan was would have to wait for another day.

"I'll sleep here. I can't remember having slept on anything this comfortable before," she said, giving him a chance to retreat. Alec stood and drew her to her feet. "I've got more calls to make. You take the bed. Silvia will get you some food and tuck you in." This time he didn't just point the way. He walked

her to the bedroom, but remained on the other side of the open arch.

Silvia was efficient. A tray of food already rested on a table beside the bed. When Jameelah turned to ask if he would stay to eat, Alec was already on his way back to the living area.

This time Jameelah couldn't avoid the bed. The large platform was twice the size of the bed on Alec's ship. Turning back the pristine white comforter, Jameelah stroked the cool, white cotton sheets underneath, half expecting them to change color at her touch. The bed remained white even after she sat gingerly on the edge to eat the sandwich. She left the unfamiliar fruit untouched, but greedily gulped the warm milk--a luxury she hadn't enjoyed since childhood.

After finishing the milk, Jameelah struggled for a few minutes to keep her eyes open. She considered the possibility that the milk contained some drug, but she felt too good. Warm and drowsy. Alec was right. They both needed to sleep. Tomorrow they could face the situation without the intense emotionalism that kept them from carrying on a civilized conversation and drew them into each other's arms.

When Jameelah woke six hours later, her embarrassment had faded. Lack of sleep, that's all it had been--the tears, the confession, the overwhelming desire to hold Alec. Feeling rested, she could face him, and this time take charge.

He might know how the Triden legal system worked and she might profit from his advice, but that

didn't mean he could dictate what happened to the entire Imsada people. Once she knew Alec's plans, she would petition the Emperor for permission to call the Imsada Council to make a counter proposal.

When she left the bedroom, lights appeared at her feet to guide her path, but the apartment remained dark. Metal plates still covered the giant window. The main room looked ordinary now. Had the colorful changes been a figment of her imagination?

The dim light cast everything in gray, but the room appeared to be as when they first entered--the thick carpet beneath her feet a dusty rose, the sofa a plush green. Alec sat sleeping in a corner of the sofa, a blanket around his feet, a half-filled wine glass at his side.

Perva warned Alec would have trouble sleeping, but evidently the wine was sufficient. Did he dream about those lives Zelat had made him live on Cestar-Two--those stolen lifetimes Zelat forced him through five, six times a day? Would Alec remember his dreams when he woke? Jameelah bent to examine his face, almost expecting to see his dreams reflected there.

His face was rough with the half-grown beard, bruised by dark circles under his eyes, but she could see no trace of emotion. The faint smell of the spicy oil he used to treat his burned legs tickled her nose. Innocent--that's how he looked asleep in the dim gray light.

If Lorna or Rami or Zelat haunted his dreams, Alec's face didn't betray them. He had removed his boots and jacket, and pulled his shirt up above his bruised ribs. He'd removed his gloves, and his bare palms pressed against his ribs. When she leaned close to pull the blanket over his shoulders, she heard

hoarse, ragged breaths rattling in his chest.

"Don't wake him." Silvia's whisper in the dark startled her. Suddenly, Jameelah realized who Silvia was, why she never lost patience with Alec, why she hadn't covered him when the blanket slipped to the floor. His computerized apartment could feed him, clean him, do a thousand chores, but it couldn't tuck him in at night.

Jameelah checked to make sure the blanket wouldn't fall again, then returned to the bedroom knowing Silvia continued to watch over him even as she followed her to the bedroom. "Has Alec been sleeping long, Silvia?"

"Two hours. He requires more rest."

"I agree. Where are you located?"

"My mainframe is on the same level of the building you now occupy. Do you require an exact location?"

"No. I was only concerned for your safety."

"The only people in the building are Alec and Legate Jameelah," Silvia said. "Triden troops and New Glasgow security forces surround the building, but they have made no move to enter. We are safe."

For the moment, maybe, but not forever, Jameelah knew. "How long I will I be a guest here? How long does Alec plan to stay?"

"The duration of your stay is a matter of some debate. Alec has scheduled several calls to resolve

this issue. He has scheduled his departure to take place in eighty-four hours."

Three plus days. He couldn't avoid her for that long. Eventually, he would have to tell her Khay's plans.

"Where will Prince Alec go?"

"I cannot answer that question. Alec's time of departure is a household matter, his destination is not. Would the Legate care for breakfast?"

Jameelah sank back under the comforter and waited for her breakfast to appear. After filling her stomach, she drifted back to sleep. Although her dream faded too quickly for her to remember, the voices she woke to seemed to be a part of it. Moments passed before she realized the voices came from the main room--Alec and another man.

Following the sounds out of the bedroom, the first thing Jameelah noticed was the remains of a meal on the kitchen table. Alec was eating--a good sign.

He had also opened the large window in the living area. Clear blue skies over waving, golden fields. A cheery, cloudless day half-gone. The room had transformed again--wood floors to match the tables, rug of primitive design in earth-tones, sofa a deep gold, a brown chair. A soothing, comfortable arrangement. But designed in whose honor?

Wearing his black boots and jacket again, Alec stood with his back to her, half turned toward the window, surveying his kingdom. He stood with his shoulders slightly hunched, one knee bent to kick at

the rug. He spoke in low, even tones--too low for Jameelah to make out the words.

The stranger faced Alec, looked right at Jameelah, but he didn't notice her. He wore comfortable work clothes, like those her father might wear to tend to his roses. Brilliant blue eyes gleamed above a full, blond beard. Hair of a lighter shade fell over his shoulders, all untouched by gray. But an older man, older than Alec by more than ten years. Fine wrinkles weathered his face.

When Alec touched the man's shoulder, Jameelah realized the stranger didn't see her because his eyes had filled with tears. She moved closer.

"She's not angry, boy, not at you. She just doesn't like to be kept waiting. You know that." The man spoke slowly, enunciating each word with care. His voice never wavered, but his shoulders shook with each breath.

"I will tell her, Father. Just not now. It's going to be hard for the family, but the official mourning must wait. I can't afford the distraction now."

"She doesn't blame you, you know. We know it wasn't your fault. I should have insisted your mother do something about Lorna long ago. She should have been living with me. Then none of this...." The stranger saw Jameelah suddenly, blinked as if she'd appeared out of nowhere and wiped his sleeve across his wet face. "Is this the young lady?"

Alec whirled around. He looked puzzled at first, then pleased to see her. "Silvia should have announced you. Jameelah, may I present my foster father, Head Gardener Millard of the Mackenzie

estate."

Millard bowed stiffly from the waist touching his hand to his head and then to his heart in greeting. Uncertain what to do, Jameelah nodded.

"Don't worry about formal introductions with me, son," Millard replied. "It was time I was leaving. Your brother's men will hold me for several hours with their questions, and now I will have something to say during my debrief. Legate Jameelah looks delightful in Lady Seana's gown." Jameelah blushed at the compliment Millard delivered with solemn sincerity.

"And sleeps alone in my bedroom while I rest here." Alec added, pointing to the blanket that lay draped over the sofa. "I would appreciate you making that clear."

"As you wish, Prince Alec." Millard chuckled at Alec's exasperated protests to his title before showing himself out. So, Alec was worried about his personal reputation. Jameelah bristled at his concern, but decided not to make an issue of it. They needed to discuss more important matters.

An awkward silence followed the hum of the lift as it carried Millard to street level. Casual conversation would be best. Something light to carry them into the subject of the hour--what did Alec tell Thane to do about the Imsada.

"Your mother's clothes?" Jameelah pretended dismay.

"Yes, Millard buys them for her. For their afternoon trysts. Mother doesn't see him at the farm. Some nonsense about mixing business with pleasure, I suppose."

"So you weren't lying when you said your mother took up with the gardener. And they never married?"

"No, Lorna was their only child. A pregnancy after Lord Mackenzie's death would have caused a scandal. Mother wished to avoid that for Thane's sake. Funny customs my people have. She could bear another man's daughter while her husband lived, but not after his death. To remarry is out of the question on New Glasgow, but taking a lover is acceptable"

"He expected to find your mother here?"

Alec stepped aside to make room for Jameelah to pass him and take a seat on the sofa. After folding his rumpled blanket, Alec took his place at the opposite end. They spoke over three feet of empty cushions. "No, they spoke earlier. He came to fill me in on this season's crops--that was his excuse. I've already read Mother's report. She pretends she needs me here for harvest, but she does fine on her own. We're having a profitable year. I'll be able to buy that moon in the Sherwood System I've been wanting.

"He wanted to make sure I have supplies from the farm, that I'm eating properly. Millard never got over thinking of me as his little boy. He brought fresh salmon. You should try some."

"All this must have upset your foster father very much."

"It hasn't sunk in yet, that Lorna's dead," Alec's voice suddenly lost all expression.

Alec could be talking about himself. It hadn't sunk in. His dispassionate statement of fact hardly fit his reaction when Gunny told him Lorna was dead. "Mother told Millard to stay away, but he needs to



talk to someone. It's our custom to meet as a family when there's a death. Witnesses of the event share the experience with family members who did not. A six-day mourning ceremony follows the disclosure, but I don't have time for that now."

"You didn't seem to want to talk about it before. If you would like, I can--"

As quickly and unexpectedly as the decor, Alec changed. No longer appearing wilted, he stiffened, stood, and stalked away to drum his fingers on the kitchen counter. "I don't intend to talk about Lorna's death. I intend to do something about it." Alec curled his glove-clad hands into fists. Angry? Or like a wounded animal, trying to keep her at a distance? Alec's wounds were raw and Jameelah's presence irritated. "I spoke to your legal advisor while you slept. You will meet him on Triden-Prime. That's where Thane will hold the trial."

"And the peace conference?" she asked.

"I told you, neither of us will attend. The trial starts when the treaty is signed. Whatever the High Council and the Emperor decide to do with you and Rami, it will not affect our agreement with the New Alliance."

"My advisor has agreed to that venue? Certainly a more neutral site than Triden-Prime would--"

Alec's lip curled into an ugly snarl. "Don't confuse your trial with anything remotely related to an orderly course of justice, Legate. If I hadn't intervened, Gunny would have left you on Zelat's floor with a broken neck. There will be no judge, no jury, no defense. My brother will call those witnesses he wishes

to hear, kill or imprison those he doesn't, and in his own good time pass judgment.

"Thane decided to make the entire mess public for his own reasons. If he hadn't, you would be dead and I would be at the Mackenzie estate too drugged to put together a coherent sentence. Instead, we have less than a week to prepare to face him, and he will be the Emperor then, not my brother. Also invited to this public debacle, and waiting to be convinced of your innocence and my incompetence, will be the Triden High Council and the Emperor's bride."

Jameelah opened her mouth to reply. In his foster father's presence, he'd appeared calm. But that veneer had unraveled. While he spoke, she pressed herself deep into the sofa, wanting to put as much distance as possible between her and his fists, which clenched and unclenched at his sides. She didn't remember retreating to the large brown chair next to the sofa, but she was there, her feet tucked under her.

The carpet flamed a deep red under Alec's pacing feet. "And don't you dare say being found guilty might be for the best. Legate Jameelah, the martyr. I'm tired of hearing it. I'm tired of being the only one who cares what happens to you. The Imsada doesn't need another martyr."

His face gaunt, his brilliant green eyes haunted, Alec dropped to his knees on the swirling blood-red sea of carpet and pounded his fists on the arms of her chair. The color leapt from the floor to the chair, and Jameelah sat shivering, a single white flame in a raging red fire.

Alec reached for her hands and didn't let go. "I need you, Jameelah...for the Imsada. The Imsada needs someone to tell them that it might be impossible to forgive or to forget, but they can leave this

killing behind and move on."

"What was Khay's plan?" Jameelah's question came out in a strangled whisper."

A forced relocation of all Imsada--their families, sympathizers, anyone with any connection to the movement no matter how remote--to a single, isolated colony. That will include anyone on Calopia descended from the first wave of colonists, all relocation camp residents and their relatives, prisoners, suspects. Everyone."

Jameelah shook her head. She had expected something more, something new. "That's been tried before. On a smaller scale, yes, but tried. Someone hijacks a ship, a previously unidentified sympathizer or a paid agent smuggles people in and out. There are just too many jump-capable ships in the galaxy."

"That's why I need you. You must convince your people that Khay's plan will work. This time there will be no escapes, no loosening of controls over time."

"A blockade? Is that what Khay had in mind?"

"Not by the usual means." Alec sounded evasive now. He dropped her hands and stared out the window.

"But there would be traffic in and out? Triden officials would come and go? And there would be supplies until we could provide for ourselves?"

"Yes, of course, Jamie." Alec turned back to her, pleading with her to believe, to trust even as his eyes deepened to a darker shade of green. "This won't be like the relocation camps. I wouldn't let them

do that to you. Your new colony will have the highest priority, receive the best equipment, the finest seed stock--all selected to meet the requirements of your new home. It's important you become self-sufficient quickly. I'll see to the farming supplies myself after the trial."

Jameelah sighed with relief. They weren't saying good-bye, not for forever. There would be a separation, certainly. Alec might have difficulty obtaining permission to visit the colony, but he would need to supervise the planting, check the progress of the crops, test new strains. She lost track of her thoughts when he lifted her hands to his lips and covered them with kisses.

His eyes filled with tears before he could blink them away. "I never intended for this to happen, Jamie. Never. I want you to know that no matter how things started out, no matter how things look now, no matter how things end--I didn't bring you here to hurt you. I didn't bring you here with anything but good intentions."

It broke her heart to see Alec so distraught. The separation would be difficult, for both of them she realized, but she must convince him that they could survive this. Their love could survive this obstacle, this separation, if love was what he felt for her. Jameelah knew she loved Alec--this complex man she had worked so hard to know.

She slipped from the chair and into his arms, no longer afraid of the pulsing red floor, no longer afraid of Alec. He rose in one fluid motion, lifting her, holding her against his trembling body.

"My name is Jemma." She hadn't planned to tell him. Her name, like the girl she had once been,

had disappeared when she married Khay. She had hope then, and trust. Now, she wanted that innocent girl back to start a new life with Alec.

"God, Jemma, it's too late for good intentions." He tangled his fingers in her hair.

His mouth slanted and locked over hers before he carried her toward the bedroom. Jameelah closed her eyes to the kaleidoscope colors that madly swirled around them.

Jameelah kept her eyes closed when Alec lowered her to the bed, his mouth pressed against hers. She clung to him when he pulled away, not willing to endure another moment without his arms around her.

After gently freeing himself, Alec ordered Silvia to turn out the lights and whispered, "Back in a minute."

A minute passed, and another, then another. Had Alec changed his mind? What could he possibly be doing that couldn't wait? She couldn't see anything in the dark.

Jameelah was ready to give up when the bed vibrated. He finally returned and sat on its edge. After what sounded like a brief struggle, both boots hit the wall and dropped to the floor with a muffled thud. The bed responded as he stood and began to pace.

"I just can't do it, Jamie," he said, sounding oddly muffled.

A lump formed in her throat. She pictured him pacing in the dark, trying to think of a way to tell her he didn't want her. "If that's how you feel--"

"You could help, you know. Lights, Silvia."

Jameelah scrambled under the covers to escape the glare. Everything had seemed so perfect. Now he was having second thoughts. Peeking out from under the quilt, she fought to keep from laughing with relief as the meaning of Alec's words became clear.

He stood struggling with his shirt tangled halfway up his chest. "Damn it, Silvia, this isn't an operating room. Dim the lights. Jamie, are you going to help me out of this thing, or not? I can't lift my arm high enough."

Jameelah tried to make sympathetic noises, but giggles came out. He looked so helpless, and frustrated. Besides, to have a problem with a simple, direct solution was a relief. "Come sit on the bed."

"Aye, Legate Jameelah. Anything you say." Alec answered with a pained half salute.

She guided him to the bed, and stood in front of him, arms crossed over her chest. "First, put both arms down. Then, I'll pull the left one out of the sleeve."

"You do enjoy giving orders, don't you, little Jemma?"

"Does it bother you?" She helped ease his shirt over his sore arm.

"I don't mind if you give orders in bed, as long as you promise to listen to me after. In fact, I quite enjoyed your orders on our private little rock outside Bradley-Five. You were quite masterful, and

demanding. Do you remember?"

When her face flushed, Jameelah pulled the shirt over his head, but her reaction didn't stop at her face. The sudden rush of heat coursed through her entire body until she felt hot and eager. The pleasure he had allowed her to feel was addictive, and she would need the memory of his body against hers to keep her company through the lonely weeks ahead. His cool, teasing facade made her impatient. She wanted to feel him urgent and panting, as eager as she to make love.

Alec waited patiently, allowing her to free him from the shirt. When his tousled head reappeared, she captured his mouth with hers. His scratchy beard gone, she explored the smooth planes of his face before she broke away.

"You shaved," she said, finally realizing why he'd left her alone.

"Just for you. I wouldn't want to irritate you any more than I already have. And I didn't cut myself once."

"But I thought you didn't know how. On the ship you said--"

"I started shaving when I got my first look at a pilot's sling. I was only ten at the time. No hair to shave, of course, but I've had a great deal of practice."

"Then, why--"

Alec gave her a wicked smile. "To give you an excuse to get your lovely hands on me, of course. You know you wanted to. I've always looked after your interests, Jemma."

He had played such games while they fled for their lives from the New Alliance cruiser? Jameelah wanted to pound some sense into that flighty head of his. Instead, she leaned forward to kiss him. He held her with his mouth and tongue, sucking, probing, demanding. His hands remained at his sides. Not what Jameelah had in mind.

"You do remember, don't you Jemma? All those orders," he whispered. She didn't answer, but slid the shirt carefully down his sore arm and past his bruised ribs. "You should see a doctor."

"There will be time. After." His whisper sent shivers of anticipation down her back. She brushed her fingers past the purple blotches on his side, noting the strain in his eyes when she gently probed the swelling. "Does it hurt."

"No," he answered quickly. "Silvia gave me something. And if anyone asks, I broke my ribs when I slipped in the shower."

"What's wrong with the truth?" she asked, her suspicion growing. "And who's going to ask?"

Taking her hands in his, he said, "The truth will complicate matters no end, and I don't need any more complications. Gunny will erase any evidence of my injuries from official military records, and Silvia has already recorded my fall. A physician will detect the deception, of course, but for a few thousand credits, I can have my civilian medical records say anything I want. There is no rush. Really. I feel fine."

Jameelah hesitated. He really should see the doctor, but his pleading green eyes broke down her



resistance and she hadn't the willpower to insist. His fingers brushed her bare thigh and she gasped at the sensation. His mouth curled in a triumphant smile when she reached for him and he realized he'd won the argument.

Still smiling, he drew her onto his lap facing him, spreading her legs wide on his thighs while he tried to kiss her. "Let me show you how fine I'm feeling."

His breath came as rapidly as hers. She pushed against his chest to keep him at a distance. He felt firm and strong beneath the hands she used to keep him at bay, too distant to kiss her.

Her fingers tangled themselves in the curly black hair that surrounded his erect nipples and she watched while he closed his eyes and grasped her legs just above the knees. He made slow, lazy circles on her outer thighs with his thumbs, kneading her flesh between his fingers. As if beyond her control, her hands made their way downward, slipping beneath the waistband of his pants. Eyes still closed, he groaned and he made another futile lunge for her mouth.

"What do you say, Jamie?" he said, giving her thigh a playful slap. "Since neither one of us is good at sharing, you can be in charge now, then I will be later."

Jameelah pretended to consider his offer. "So I can give you orders in bed as long as I follow yours when we leave it?"

"I think it's a fair exchange. You have so many more delightful options than I." Alec pressed forward for another kiss and got one this time. His tongue lapping at her quivering lips, she struggled to

remember her duty. Loving Alec didn't erase her responsibility to the Imsada.

"What happens in the morning?"

"I tried to warn you." Alec whispered in her ear, tracing the bumps he raised on her arms with a languid finger. "It truly is too late for good intentions. All I can say is I'd rather we eat our morning meal separately. Arguments over breakfast aren't good for digestion, and I don't want to waste any of our time together fighting over what neither of us can change."

So this was only a truce. A truce that would end at his word. But why did he want her? Why not just ask Delia to send someone? When Alec's mouth, hot and moist, followed his fingers down her neck and shoulder, it no longer mattered.

She rose on his lap to help him lift the silky white sheath over her head. When she sat straddling his legs again, the rough edge of his thumb traced the outline of her lips and sent shivers careening down her back. Avoiding his glove, she bit down on the fleshy part of his thumb, and then more lightly on the fingers that followed. He played with the straps of her one-piece undergarment with his other hand.

After he freed her breasts, Alec tugged the fabric to her waist and rolled her bared nipples into taut, hard peaks with his wet fingers. She closed her eyes and arched her back when he lowered his head and began to kiss her breasts and tease them with his tongue.

She opened her eyes when he spread his knees, forcing her legs even farther apart. When he bent to look at her wide-spread thighs and stroke the thin layer of damp fabric between them, another rush of heat

coursed through her. The rising flood of pleasure made it difficult to speak, and her breathing became as harsh as Alec's.

"Do you need help getting your pants off, too?" she asked between shuddering breaths.

She pushed on his shoulders to guide him to the bed, but he resisted and remained upright.

"Just waiting for orders, Legate. Do you want me to undress for you? Is that an order?"

She shuddered again at his seductive words and his gentle touch. "I'm not sure. There seems to be a whole lot of strings attached if I say yes."

Alec had to stretch to kiss her neck and whisper in her ear. "We don't have to leave this bed for some time. Not for days if we're lucky. I can promise that I'll follow your orders without question. I'll do anything you say, Jemma, anything."

"Call me Jamie."

"Yes, Jamie. You can call me Mac if you like. The name has fond memories for me. Any further orders?"

"Yes, Mac, take off your pants."

A slow smile spread across his face. He slid her off his lap and onto the bed. "Yes, Ma'am," he whispered. Then he shrugged off his pants.

Naked, he stood beside the bed, one eyebrow raised in question. She didn't need coaxing. Jameelah took his hand and pulled him onto the bed beside her.

Despite his promise to carry out her every wish, he couldn't lie on his back without coughing. They worked out a compromise--on their sides, facing each other--with Alec resting on his good side while she avoided pressing on the other.

Did he realize how much restraint she must exercise to keep from hurting him? Hours seemed to pass before her mind stopped whirling with worry under his reassuring, stroking fingers.

The heated frenzy that had rushed upon her at Alec's first caress built slowly while they took their time exploring each other's body with their mouths and hands. When he finally guided her leg over his hip and entered her with gentle, shallow thrusts, she climaxed, burying her cries in his chest as he stroked her hair.

Supporting his weight on one arm, he maneuvered her onto her back and teased her ear with his tongue, murmuring "Jamie dear" between nibbles. His hips snapped to a more urgent rhythm. With surprising swiftness he made time stand still for her again and, this time, he joined her in release.

Again murmuring "Jamie," Alec rolled onto his stomach, his eyes closed. She followed him, her head resting on his back. Not until her body cooled and her heart stopped pounding did she realized Alec had fallen asleep.

Rising up on one elbow, she stared at him in disbelief. How could he sleep at a time like this? She wanted to beat on his broad, hard back and demand to know how he could sleep when they could count the time left to them in hours. Instead, she pushed his hair off his face, wondering at how vulnerable he

looked. She lightly ran her fingers over his lips. He smiled in his sleep before rolling onto his side and presenting his back.

Jameelah covered him with a blanket and slipped on the white gown Alec had tossed onto the floor. After whispering the command to turn out the lights, she went to the kitchen for salmon and a talk with Silvia. A single chair stood next to the food laid out on the counter. Silvia expected her. A steaming cup of tea sat next to the plate.

Looking into the main room, Jameelah noted with disappointment that the carpet had faded to a dusty rose as quickly as Alec's desire. Was his lovemaking a pretense? Did he avenge Lorna's death by bedding Khay-Alva's widow, pleasuring her as Khay never had?

That didn't make any sense. If it became known that she'd slept with a Triden officer, the Emperor's brother no less, the Imsada council would throw her out. All those people Alec expected her to influence would no longer listen to her. He risked their plans by making love to her. So why had Alec brought her here? Despite his protest of good intentions, he must have know what would happen if they stayed alone in his apartment.

Jameelah knew why she had made love with Alec, and it wasn't only her body wanting him so badly that made reason evaporate. Tears filled her eyes and spilled onto her cheeks before she could brush them away. She loved him, needed him, and he obviously didn't feel the same. He slept, snoring in the other room, while she cried, wondering how to go on without him.

Jameelah shook herself. She was being totally unreasonable. Alec could, and should, sleep for days. That he had enough strength to make love after what he'd been through seemed a miracle and a tribute to Triden standards.

The man had ruined his military career, watched his sister plunge to her death, and belonged in hospital. What did she do? Eat his food, plot to pump his computer for information, and grump because he hadn't been more exciting in bed. What did she want from him?

Alec knew exactly how to pleasure her. Exactly how, precisely how. He had a lot of practice, and it showed. So why was she sitting here stuffing her face and complaining? *What do you want, Jemma?*

Pushing the food aside, she crossed the room to the piano. She felt like a thief, pressing the ivory keys too softly to make a sound. Silvia responded with music, Alec's music. Jameelah recognized the piece as the same she'd heard on his ship. Almost as if he sat striking the keys himself.

She whispered in the half-dark room, "What do I want?" When Silvia asked for clarification, one word reverberated, unspoken, through Jameelah's mind--*passion*.

Safe in his bed, the dreamer struggled, clawed his way toward consciousness even as he stroked the empty space beside him. Someone had left. But who? It would come to him in a moment--where he was, who he was--but before that moment came, sleep dragged him down again.

The dream--the same as the others, and different. An ordinary person doing ordinary things, he walked through his day in the certain knowledge that something dreadful waited, something he had no power to prevent.

This time a Triden officer, the time before a crystal miner, the time before that a school boy. His past lives blurred for a moment. No one identity seemed more true than the last. The present one was more real only because he lived it now, and because the others faded from his mind when the hardness of the floor registered beneath his boots.

The words murmured by those around him made sense when he bothered to listen. He stood in a large hall full of men dressed like himself in Triden dress leathers. The breeze that blew through the courtyard ruffled his hair. It was spring and some task, some duty, remained undone.

He pushed aside the remnants of that other dream, the impression that he peacefully slept in bed waiting for his lover to return. The Imperial courtyard on Triden-Prime lay before him, solid under his feet. He pushed his way closer to the window to allow the cool spring air to clear his head. The closeness of the crowd clouded his thinking. Another minute and he would remember who had called the assembly and why.

At the sound of the drum roll, every pair of boots in the room snapped to attention. The dreamer found himself pushing through the crowd, certain he belonged on the dais at the front of the room. Even the presence of Emperor Thane didn't stop him. The purpose of the gathering became clear when the

dreamer mounted the stairs. An execution. A matter of treason for the Emperor to attend.

The executioner's place stood empty and the dreamer knew his place. He stepped into the circle drawn in red on the floor and lifted the sword that appeared in his hand. Trembling at the thought of what he must do, he waited. What if there had been some mistake? What if the accused didn't deserve the sentence? But a Triden must do his duty. He must do this for the Emperor.

The drum roll sounded again and the prisoner stumbled into the room. The dreamer felt his heart pound at the sight. Surely, he knew this woman veiled in black. He tried to lower the sword, but his arms remained rigidly in place. He didn't want to kill her, he couldn't. But he had no choice.

The Emperor and the condemned woman stepped forward to stand side-by-side before the dreamer. The red circle closed around his legs, fixing him to the spot. The sword hilt swelled and molded around his wrists until the blade and his arms were one. The power behind his sword came not from him, but from the blade itself. The direction of his thrust wavered, his intent no longer clear.

With both hands clasped around the sword, the dreamer fought to control its power. Pain tore through his chest. He deflected the intended thrust and guided the blade between the woman and the Emperor.

The dreamer tried to sigh with relief, both had escaped unharmed, but he couldn't draw a breath. When the Emperor and the woman stepped aside, the dreamer came face-to-face with an ashen figure, impaled on a sword thrust cleanly through his chest. In a moment, he would remember who this man



was.

The moment passed. Alec remembered.  
He stared into his own dying face.

The cry from the bedroom was hoarse and incoherent. Jameelah didn't stop to make out the words. She ran to the bedroom and found Alec sitting bolt upright in the bed, his eyes glazed with sleep. He was panting, his hand on his chest as if to slow his heart. Jameelah tried to push him down on the pillow, but he resisted, pushing her away as if she were a stranger.

"What's wrong?" One of Zelat's dreams, one of his nightmares? *What did that bastard do to you, Alec? What have I done?*

Alec shook his head. "It was nothing. Just a dream."

He gave in to her persistent tugging and leaned back on the pillows facing her. Despite the reassuring smile on his lips, fear shone in his eyes, and he wrapped his arms around her. They were surprisingly strong. *I can't break free.* Why did the thought please her so?

A cough grew in his throat threatening to choke him. He rose to his knees, and they knelt facing each other on the middle of the bed. Alec's hungry, frantic touch sent resonating tremors through her body. Then he froze and lightly stroked her face.

"God, Jamie, did I do that?" Fear and pain in his startlingly green eyes as his thumb brushed the fading bruise on her cheek. "I never meant to hurt--"

"No, Alec. Paul hit me during the confusion of our escape from Cestar-Two. He thought I was working for Zelat." Jameelah pushed aside the memory of Alec slapping her in Zelat's holding cell. That had been a mistake. Alec hadn't meant to hurt her.

Alec passed his hands over her breasts and her stomach as if looking for some hidden wound. His hands shook. "Are you sure? I didn't hurt you?"

"No, Alec, you would never hurt me." Or would he? During the next few days, Alec would have to choose between her and his brother. It wasn't unfair. No matter what decision he made, Alec would have to live with the pain of betraying one of them. Jameelah tried to reassure him again. "I'm fine. Really, I am, but I don't think you are. You should get some more sleep."

"I don't want to sleep." Sounding angry now, Alec pulled away and ran his fingers over his face and through his hair. He sagged back on his heels, but remained kneeling on the bed.

"Perva said you would need something to help you sleep. Can't Silvia get you anything? I'll go to the kitchen and--" Jameelah began to back off the bed.

"Damn it, Jamie, I said I don't want to sleep." Alec grabbed her arms and his face seemed to crumble. "Don't leave me."

His whispered plea sent shock waves through her already-shaking limbs. He wanted her, needed

her. He wouldn't let her go.

Crushed in his arms, Jameelah fought to breathe while he ravaged her mouth with his. When she returned his kisses, his fear that she would go didn't seem to lessen. With swift, jerking motions, he removed his gloves and threw them from the bed.

When he gripped her shoulders, a strange warmth and strength filled her. She forgot his hands when his hot mouth followed the path down her neck to tongue her nipples to hard, straining peaks through the wet satin of her gown. She arched her back, and his arm slipped behind her and held her there suspended. He pulled her gown to her knees, ripping it in his haste.

His mouth returned to her swollen breasts, then to her mouth. His kisses deepening, he explored her with his tongue, tasting every inch as he made his way slowly downward. Jameelah's hands become tangled in his hair as two impulses warred within her-- wanting him to stop, wanting him to go on.

Fire leaped instantly between her thighs where Alec pressed his mouth. She jerked upward, and he steadied her, arms around her waist. Pleasure ripped through her before she could prepare for the intensity, and she cried out "Mac" in the dimly lit room.

Time stopped its forward motion while the pleasure ebbed and began to build excruciatingly soon.

"Don't leave me," he pleaded again, and lowered her to the bed. He entered with quick, urgent thrusts--his eyes squeezed shut, panting, repeating that she mustn't leave while he cradled her head in his hands. His open palms sent waves of warmth and comfort through her.

He explored every inch of her face and neck with his mouth as if to memorize the taste and feel, and rested his hips against hers between thrusts, holding nothing back. She joined him when pleasure coursed through him, and they shuddered in each other's arms at the release.

Safe in Jameelah's embrace, Alec slept. His sleep seemed deep and dreamless, but she didn't tiptoe from the room. She stayed and watched until he woke, ready to make love again. More slowly this time, but with no less urgency, no less desire.

This was what she wanted. Not a passionless crusader like Khay or a perfect lover like Mac, but this man--the one she held in her arms now--the man who needed and desired her, and no other. The man who wanted her in spite of who she was and what she'd done. She couldn't imagine life without him, and he had a plan. She had to believe that their staying together was part of it.

## Chapter 15

When the lights came on, she was half asleep. Jameelah ran her hand over the hollow spot beside her. She opened her mouth to call Alec to bed, but something stopped her. She sensed movement in the room, and a silent presence, familiar, yet strange.

She jumped when a brown bundle landed on the bed beside her.

"Put these on." Alec's voice was low and hoarse.

She lifted her head from the pillow, and looked for him. He sat across the room, his face in a shadow, but she felt him watching her.

Her hands shook while she worked to untie the bundle. Her apprehension grew with Alec's continued silence. When she finally broke through the outer layer of the bundle, she found a blue-fringed brown shawl and, wrapped inside, traditional Imsada garb.

Her heart pounding, she looked at Alec again. Why would he want to see her dressed like this--a widow in her last year of mourning? She couldn't see his face clearly.

When he spoke, she got her answer. "Gunny brought these for you."

Cold panic hit when she realized reality had entered their life again. Her stomach pulsed with sickening regularity. "I thought we had four days?"

Panic faded, questions bombarded her--which planet would be the Imsada's new home, how soon would the Emperor order them sent away, when would Alec join her? She foolishly assumed she would have more time.

Alec walked to the foot of the bed, his stern features betraying no emotion. He wore a pair of exercise shorts low on his hips. "We are no longer in bed. You follow my orders now. No questions."

The time had come. Alec's tone left no room for bargaining.

Jameelah took deep, steady breaths. He couldn't avoid her questions forever. The trip to Triden-Prime would take several hours. Flight protocol demanded lengthy delays before entering airspace of the Triden Empire's home world. During the trip, she would persuade him to talk. For now, she complied with his order, unnerved by his stern, unwavering stare.

She shouldn't feel shy dressing in front of Alec. They had spent the last two days blissfully naked, or almost so, and in bed as he'd promised. Silvia dispensed his pain medication in measured doses to keep him comfortable without spoiling their fun.

They ventured into the main room when he got restless, but only the venue changed. He followed her orders as if they were still in bed, only balking when she asked him to play the piano.

"If you don't want to play, Mac, why do you keep the thing?"

"To remind myself of what a complete idiot I am. Can't I do something else?" He had sat on the bench looking uncomfortable for several minutes before she'd rescued him. Later that night, she'd found

him at the piano playing scales with his left hand. He looked so forlorn sitting there, the fingers of his right hand poised to strike the keys. They never did.

She'd tiptoed back to bedroom, and made a more noisy entrance along with new demands that required his immediate attention. He'd forgotten whatever troubled him in the enormous bath filled with water and bubbles and her.

They'd managed to make love on the slippery tiles that threatened to send them splashing into the tub before they were ready. Standing naked in the bath while he washed and explored her body hadn't embarrassed Jameelah, but she felt embarrassed now while he watched her dress. Gunny had brought reality with him, and now she must fulfill her part of the bargain. Alec would give the orders.

His green eyes didn't sparkle with amusement, pleasure, or desire when she pulled the pink satin gown over her head. She trembled when she stripped off the bit of lace she wore underneath and methodically began to put on the costume her ancestors wore--heavy leggings, four skirts, each a different color to symbolize the four elements, white under a bodice that bound too tightly across her chest, and a white blouse with black lacing up the front.

Jameelah transformed herself into the Imsada, the enemy, while Alec watched from his place at the foot of the bed. She wore the colors of the sister and the widow of Imsada martyrs. She wore the colors of the people responsible for Lorna's death and for all Alec's pain. Jameelah would rather have been naked under his hard stare.

Her stomach pulsing with nerves, she tried to ignore Alec's silent presence. She walked to the mirror and tugged at her skirts to ensure each layer fell at the proper length.

Picking up a bundle of ribbons--orange, blue, green, brown--she separated the one-inch-wide strands. Braiding her hair in the traditional manner had always made her arms ache; for now, she would leave her hair down. Besides, she couldn't stop her hands from shaking. She returned the ribbons to the bed and picked up a turquoise necklace, heavy with silver and blue-green stone, that lay on the brown shawl--the last piece to her costume.

Necklace in her hands, Jameelah raised her eyes to the mirror and found Alec standing behind her. She gave a little start. She hadn't heard him rise and cross the room.

He took the ends of the necklace from her, and she gathered her hair to one side while he worked the clasp. When he raised his head, she saw in the mirror what she hadn't since their first night here when he woke from his nightmare. His eyes revealed his fear. He looked away.

Taking a brush from beside the bed, Alec prepared her hair. For half an hour, he patiently made the proper separations and braids, adding the ribbons where custom dictated. As if he were performing some solemn rite, he carried out his task to perfection. She watched in the mirror, but he never looked up.

The depth of his knowledge of Imsada practices startled Jameelah. Few men she knew would have included such details in their studies, but she didn't need to ask where he'd learned to braid woman's hair. She could imagine him sitting with Lorna, braiding her long, blond hair.



When he finished, Alec backed away. She watched him through the mirror. He shrugged off his pants.

She caught her breath, not daring to speak. What was he doing? Letting her see him one last time? Out of compassion or spite? She turned to face him. He stood naked and unmoving before her, clearly aroused.

Surely Gunny and reality could wait. Under the layers of ceremonial clothing, Jameelah felt hot and moist, ready for him instantly when he walked toward her.

She had coaxed him to eat enough so that he no longer looked gaunt, and he could move his arm without difficulty now. After he saw a doctor about his ribs, no trace would remain of his ordeal--except for the haunted look that possessed his deep green eyes and the tendency to wake with a cry after two hours sleep.

She gasped when he brushed past her, refusing to meet her gaze. Jameelah knew every corner of his apartment by now. They'd searched the closets for books on roses to send to her father and pictures of Tam and Alec at university.

With fists clenched, Jameelah refused to turn. She listened to him open the closet filled with uniforms that carried insignia of every rank from ensign through admiral. Tears threatened a few minutes later when he crossed the room and stood before her, stiff and pale in the black dress uniform of a Triden captain, gloves firmly in place. She bit back her tears with the hopeful thought that wherever she was

going, he had dressed to go with her.

"Legate Jameelah." Alec clicked the heels of his shiny black boots and gestured for her to precede him out of the room. Her heart pounded in her throat. Legate. He'd called her Legate. Her legs refused to carry her forward.

Alec took her by the elbow and propelled her out of the room without a word.

She didn't dare breathe until they reached the main room and found Gunny looking out the window, as glum as the rain clouds that had started their daily trek from east to west.

Alec resisted the urge to pound his fist against the wall. Did Gunny have to be so damned prompt? So much remained unsaid, so much he wanted to tell Jamie. But maybe this was for the best, he reminded himself again, as he had continually since Silvia announced Gunny's arrival.

Nothing he said could adequately prepare her for what would happen and, if he didn't turn her over to Thane's representative within the hour, his brother's troops would politely, and with sincere apologies, drag her from the building.

"The men are ready, Captain." Gunny threw him a snappy salute. "We've got a new bird, compliments of your brother, and clearance to Triden-Prime."

"Very well, Gunny. Wine for my guest, Silvia." Alec knew he was stalling, but he had to prepare

himself for the look on Jamie's face when she learned the truth. He took the glass that appeared for Gunny and sipped the wine himself. Gunny limited his disapproval to a raised eyebrow while he stood waiting at attention. Alec took a deep breath and closed his eyes. "Gunny will escort you to Triden-Prime, Legate. I have business to finish here."

"No. Please, no." Jameelah's plea slammed into Alec's chest, leaving him breathless and wanting nothing more than to take her in his arms and grant her every wish. He turned his back on her and walked to the window.

She asked her next question in anger. "Why are you doing this?"

Alec sighed with relief. If she continued with her pleas, he couldn't send her away. He knew how to deal with anger. "The Legate obviously suffers from the delusion she has the power to give the order here. I will leave it to you to convince her otherwise."

Unable to look at her, Alec continued to stare out the window. Fighter planes assigned to escort the famous Imsada Legate to Triden-Prime danced above the wheat fields. It had taken all his strength and self-control to prepare her for the journey. She had to leave now, quickly, or he'd change his mind.

The temptation to take her and run from the Triden High Council and his brother almost overwhelmed him at times. Knowing he might succeed made his choice even more cruel. With Gunny's help and his own vast resources, they could have found a safe and comfortable hiding place. If they changed locations and identities often enough, they might have remained undetected. The High Council

wouldn't launch an all-out effort unless they needed him to fulfill his function as Thane's heir.

But Alec had let the time for running pass. He'd spent it making love to Jamie. For her benefit, Alec gave Gunny instructions he didn't need. "The Legate's advisor will meet her at the dock along with a large contingent of burly guards. Provided by the Emperor, for her own protection, of course. The Imsada has many enemies on Triden-Prime. I squeezed out two extra days of sanctuary for myself. The High Council is eager to support New Glasgow's independent status. Still kowtowing to their new emperor, on this issue, at least."

Alec raised the glass to his lips again, but his body refused to obey his command to sip the wine. He finished the drink in one hasty gulp.

Jamie's skirts raised sparks when they rubbed against the carpet. The swishing, crackling sounded ended with a gasp, and Alec turned to find she had started toward him.

His hand tightened around the glass at what he saw--Gunny standing behind her, a hand clasped firmly around each of her arms. This was how things would be from now on. Someone always between them, someone to keep them apart. When Jamie began to struggle, Alec nodded and Gunny released her. She stumbled forward. It took all of his strength to remain impassively aloof instead of rushing to catch her.

Jamie steadied herself on Gunny's arm. "Alec, you haven't told me what you plan to do about the Imsada. I need to know."

And there it was--one of the two reasons why they couldn't run away. Jamie would never abandon her people. They were her prime consideration. She had to risk a trial if she wished to rejoin them, and Alec knew she did.

It had hurt so much to watch her don the traditional Imsada garb. Only plaiting her hair, as he had so often Lorna's, had temporarily soothed him. Doubts crowded his head. Alec ordered Gunny's glass refilled and began to sip the dry, burgundy wine made on the Mackenzie estate. Letting her go seemed too great a risk--he would lose her forever. How could he have deluded himself into thinking he could make this work?

He didn't trust himself to speak to her directly. He turned to look out the window again, and spoke to Gunny.

"The Legate will be told what to say at the trial when the time comes. I'll brief her advisor. As for the fate of the Imsada, this rests in the hands of the Emperor." Even when she grabbed his arm and all but begged him to look at her, Alec stared out the window at the fighters. If only he could hate her, if only she could hate him. With their history, with all the differences between them, it shouldn't be difficult. "The Legate's accomplice occupies a cell in the complex where she will be held, but the High Council has ruled they may not speak. Their reunion will have to wait."

"I don't want to talk with Rami. I want to talk with you, Mac." Like so many times before, that one word from her goaded him to anger and Alec felt his body come to attention. His sweat-soaked collar and

the tremor in his hand when he lifted the glass to his lips betrayed him. His teeth clinked on the crystal when he swallowed the wine. Pretending to be the cool, unfeeling Triden officer was a part he could no longer play.

He wanted to kiss her one last time, had to kiss her. But then he would lose control, beg her to run away with him. Besides, Gunny stood waiting at attention. If Alec needed reminding, Gunny could recite the duties Alec still had to perform for the Emperor. They did not include abandoning his post to bed an enemy of the state.

Damn them both to hell--the Emperor and the second reason running was out of the question. Alec and Thane had pledged long ago never to put their children through the hell of being fostered out to strangers for the family's sake. But if Thane wished to keep his family together, he had to maintain a second heir in a separate household. That second heir was Alec.

Alec knew what Thane would decide to do if given the choice between tearing a newborn from his wife's arms and holding his brother to his promise. Even if Thane were heartless enough to tear his family apart just to follow some outdated tradition, Alec wouldn't let him do such a thing to Tam.

And Tam added a complication that could keep Alec at his brother's beck and call forever. She took it into her head to treat her marriage to Thane as political. Purely political. Alec heard Thane's frustration through the scrambled commlines. She strained his patience past their generous limits. No amount of pleading persuaded her to come to his bed, and unless she did, Alec would remain Emperor Thane's sole

heir forever.

Alec could see his future all too clearly. After lying through his teeth at Jamie's trial and paying everyone he could buy to back him up, Alec could look forward to explaining to his mother how he'd let his sister slip through his fingers and fall to her death. Then he must persuade his old girlfriend to go to bed with his brother and make babies.

If he failed in this last task, if Tam and Thane did not have children, the consequences would trap Alec on New Glasgow with the occasional trip to Triden-Prime when his brother deemed it appropriate and safe. No more daring exploits or reckless adventures with Gunny and the boys. Stuck at home with nothing to occupy his time but the farm and family. Empty years stretched before him in an endless string. Empty, endless without Jamie.

The thought that he might be forced to bed some woman selected by his family for the purpose of having a child was a future reality he refused to acknowledge.

Now Jamie's petty questions about details threatened to push Alec past his limited patience. With everything he had to cope with, why couldn't she just shut up and follow orders? Why couldn't she trust him to do what was right for the Imsada and for her? Why did she insist on calling him by that god awful name?

"My name is not Mac." Alec's shouted reply left him feeling lightheaded. He pushed past Jamie to reach the sofa.

Gunny caught her arms and pulled her toward the door. "In the future, you will address the captain as Prince Alec. You'd best remember your place if you wish a pleasant trip to your new prison, Legate."

Was it the threatening tone or the words themselves that sobered Alec? Suddenly, he angrier with Gunny than he had been with Jamie. How could he protect her if he sent her away? How could he make certain she was safe? "You are to offer the Legate every comfort, every courtesy. No one is to touch her, no one. Anyone who, anyone...." Alec stopped in confusion. The room was spinning, and not just from the wine.

With a practiced swoop, Gunny took the glass from Alec's hand before it slipped from his fingers. "No one will touch her. You have my word on that, boy."

What felt like the last of his breath left him. Of course, Gunny would take care of everything, as usual. That's when all this trouble started--at the wedding reception with Gunny stuck across the room after the blast. None of this would have happened if Gunny had been there.

The realization made Alec feel like a little boy, dependent on his ever-present nanny to bail him out of trouble. Impatiently, he shook off the feeling. Thirty was too old to need a wet nurse. He stood and ushered Jamie and Gunny to the door.

"I'll join you in two days." Alec looked at both of them. Only Gunny replied with a nod. Jamie looked mad enough to take them both on.

"You should see that doctor Perva suggested, sir," Gunny said, before the lift doors closed Sir from



Gunny. Warning. Danger. But seeing a doctor was exactly what Alec couldn't do. A quick pass of his bare hands over his chest that morning had confirmed it. A doctor would certify him unfit, and confine him to bed for days. Alec couldn't risk losing control. Who would help Jamie then?

So Alec would tell her what to say at the trial, would he? Well, he could try, but Jameelah didn't plan to listen. Angry thoughts consumed her. When the lift stopped and Gunny guided her from the building, she snapped, "Get out of my way," and shoved aside her Triden escort.

Dimly aware of dropping jaws, she stormed her way past a dozen guards and entered the waiting shuttle. She and Gunny were the only passengers. She ignored the two-man crew, and took the nearest seat.

Avoiding Gunny's questioning look, she pulled off the first of her four skirts and threw it across the room. Prince Alec and his Triden thugs might be able to take her to Triden-Prime against her wishes, but she wasn't going to let him get away with dressing her as if she were a doll instead of a human being with a mind of her own.

"What are you doing?" Gunny demanded. He raced to pick up her discarded clothing. Her second skirt landed on his head. After tearing it off with an enraged roar, he scowled at her. A snicker from the crew drew his attention forward. "Keep your eyes front," he snapped. "Have you forgotten who we work

for? You get me to the cruiser in record time or you'll find yourselves sweeping dust in an Orgon crystal mine tomorrow. The Emperor wants to take delivery on this baggage today."

Baggage, was she? Jameelah almost threw another skirt at him, but the meaning of his words sunk in before she could raise his arm. Gunny, these men, they all worked for Emperor Thane, not for Alec. Alec had turned her over to the Emperor.

Evidently satisfied at having yelled at someone, Gunny sat down, strapping Jameelah and himself in before the shuttle took off. His face still red, he quietly asked again, "What are you doing, Legate?"

She tore out the ribbons Alec had so carefully braided in her hair. "I'm changing my clothes. The man on the right looks about my size. Tell him to give me his pants."

"I will not," Gunny said, looking genuinely shocked. "I went to a great deal of trouble getting your clothes, and I don't appreciate what you're doing to them. My Imsada contacts assured me this outfit was appropriate for--"

"For a Calopian widow in her last year of official mourning." Jameelah completed his sentence, shaking her head. "You forget I'm not a civilian. The Imsada does not have time for mourning. We have time only to fight. Now get me some pants." Jameelah shouted over the whine of the waiting cruiser that took the shuttle onboard. Their ride had lasted less than five minutes.

Gunny flung off his restraints and ordered the shuttle crew from the cabin. "No pants," he said, crossing his arms over his chest. "As you are no longer properly attired, we will stay in the shuttle until

we reach Triden-Prime."

"That's fine with me." Jameelah puffed out her reply while she strained to rip the seams on her discarded skirts. "But I'll be dressed like the Legate to the Imsada Council when I see the Emperor, not like some helpless female known only as her late-husband's wife."

"As you wish, but I don't think your attire will amuse the Emperor." Gunny turned his back and ignored her for the rest of the trip.

Jameelah used the time to put together her make-shift uniform. Her leggings served as pants once she fashioned a tunic out of one of her skirts, and she tamed the billowing arms of her blouse by tying them down with the hair ribbons.

By the time they reached Triden-Prime, she looked like, if not an Imsada Legate, then at least not like a widow. She left the cruiser with her head held high, eager to see this Emperor Thane. Maybe he would tell her what Alec had not--what he planned for the Imsada.

She told herself her shaking knees were the result of the three, closely-spaced jumps that had brought them here. When they left the cruiser, a half-dozen guards fell in step behind them.

Gunny led them through curiously empty corridors. For the capital of the most powerful political entity in the galaxy, Triden-Prime's space port appeared to have little business. They met only armed men who unlocked doors to let them pass.

After walking several miles, she thought this door with the three locks and extra guards must lead to

the Emperor's quarters or meeting room or wherever he had arranged to see her. Instead, she entered a large, empty room and only Gunny came with her.

When door swung closed with a hollow ring behind her, Jameelah's knees almost gave out. This place reminded her of Mac's prison cell, except that it was larger and didn't even have a hard pallet to lie on.

"You'll wait here until you're needed," Gunny said. "I have other duties to perform."

Those words more than anything else made her stomach churn with the realization she was alone, really alone. Alec was light years away, Gunny was leaving, and evidently, the Emperor didn't plan to see her immediately. The insane impulse to laugh sent her hand up to cover her mouth.

Why had she thought the Emperor would drop everything to speak to her the minute she arrived? Alec had told her often enough that the Imsada problem never ranked high on the Triden Empire's list of priorities.

"I know it looks a bit grim," Gunny continued, his voice softening. He kept his hands clasped behind his back while he rocked back and forth on his heels. "I'll see to getting you some furniture. The boy said to make you comfortable."

Jameelah crossed to the far side of the room and turned to face him. "But you don't work for the boy, do you, Gunny? You work for the Emperor, no matter what you tell Alec."

Gunny flushed an uncomfortable shade of red. "We all have our duties to perform. Myself

included, and so does Alec."

"Well, I don't."

Gunny shook his head as if too sad to continue. "Not duties, lass, not exactly, but you owe the Emperor something for the past few weeks and it's Alec who'll pay if you let him."

Alec would pay? How? Why? Alec wasn't responsible for what she and Rami had done. "What do you want me to do? What does Alec want me to do? I don't understand."

"No, I don't suppose you do."

"Then tell me," she demanded. She stamped her foot on the cold, unyielding floor. After five minutes in this room, she felt like she was going crazy. "Or let me speak to the Emperor and I'll explain everything to him before Alec gets here."

Gunny shook his head again and smiled weakly. "What makes you think they'd let you speak to the Emperor, lass?"

"But you said--"

"I said the Emperor would see you, and he has. He observed part of your trip from the cruiser. Until you're called to testify, you'll stay in this prison cell."

Jameelah began to shake at the words--prison cell. Alec had always said she would end up in a Triden or New Alliance prison. He had also promised to visit her there. With her arms wrapped tightly about her waist, she leaned against the wall. Slowly, her legs gave out beneath her, and she slid to the

floor.

Above her, Gunny's voice sounded far away. "If it pleases the Emperor, he will allow you to see him at your trial. Until then, I will carry out my other master's orders and try to make you comfortable."

## Chapter 16

Alec staggered into the space port terminal of Triden-Prime. He preferred to slink off to his quarters unobserved, but now that Thane had publicly recognized him as his brother, Alec had protocol to follow.

Governor Kasai, representative of the civilian government on Triden-Prime, rushed forward to greet Alec, who cursed aloud as the toe of his boot caught on a floor plate. Kasai steadied him with a hand under his elbow, and dismissed the waiting guards.

Staying sober for the last two days had been the hardest thing Alec had ever done. Two days of pretending he was sane, that he knew what he was doing. The days of endless calls--talking to witnesses, double checking evidence, making certain everyone was paid off.

If only he could walk the line between sobriety and drunkenness without falling off. If only he could drink and still remember what the hell he had to do but not remember why. But Alec didn't dare take that risk, too much was at stake. He hadn't had a drink since Jamie left for Triden-Prime.

He couldn't breathe, he couldn't sleep, and the thought of food made him nauseous. He would like nothing better than to turn himself into the nearest medical facility. Any competent physician would throw him in bed and keep him there. If not for Jamie, that would have suited Alec just fine.

Alec was in no mood to play the diplomat, especially with Kasai, who treated farmers from New

Glasgow with ill-concealed disdain. Now that he knew Alec was heir to the Triden throne, the governor rushed to make amends.

Kasai scurried to match Alec's longer strides. "We may continue unaccompanied, Prince Alec. The Emperor's brother has no enemies here."

"Don't lie to me, Governor. The Emperor's brother has as many enemies as the Emperor, and that's too damned many. What makes you think this place is any safer than--"

"Yes, a most unfortunate incident. But the Prince must remember the citizens of Triden-Prime are loyal to their Emperor." Kasai stopped in the corridor and pulled Alec out of traffic. "Please, accept my personal condolences on your terrible loss, my Prince. I know how much your sister meant to you and to the Emperor."

Alec flinched. He had tried to prepare himself for gestures of pity, but without success. Now that he was in public, he would have to learn to accept them graciously. Kasai gripped his shoulder. Alec shook him off. "I am not here for condolences. I'm here to make the bastard pay."

"Rami?"

"Him, and the others. I won't rest while one of their kind remains alive in this galaxy. Take me to him now."

When Alec raised his voice, the guards who followed them approached, but Kasai waved them back. "As you wish, of course, my prince, but I was told you wished to consult a physician."



"You were misinformed. Must I guess by whom?" Alec didn't need to fake sarcasm. Everyone knew the Emperor was blessed with an overprotective mother, and now they knew she was Alec's mother as well.

"Lady Seana returned to New Glasgow today. How unfortunate you missed her." Kasai's eyebrow arched.

Alec refused to respond. Avoiding his mother took a great deal of planning. He couldn't talk to her, couldn't start the official period of mourning, not yet. When the time came he would tell her everything, but until then he would do anything to avoid her.

And do anything to avoid Jamie. When they reached the corridor that led to her cell, Alec didn't wait for the lift. He saw the monitoring station just ahead--the blinking lights, the shadows moving across screens. She sat a few feet away, behind triple-locked, explosion-proof doors. Before they reached the station, Alec yanked open the nearest exit and started down the stairs to Rami's cell.

Kasai panted after him. "I should have mentioned it earlier. My apologies. The legal advisors consulted with Rami this morning. I thought you might like to visit Legate Jameelah now."

At Kasai's words, Alec came to a halt mid-step. His indecision seemed centered in his right leg. He didn't know whether hate or longing finally grabbed him by the neck and dragged him up the stairs.

*Just one look. I don't have to talk to her, just see for myself that she's all right.*

Remembering how the constant presence of observers had worn him down on Cestar-Two, Alec had

ordered that Jameelah only be observed at announced intervals. The screen assigned to her cell displayed static.

Standing there--surrounded by all those little screens, the staff milling about to catch a glimpse of the famous, or infamous, Prince Alec--he decided to view her from the private observation room.

When he entered, the wall to Jamie's cell became transparent. The door with three locks marked her only way in or out. A lighting panel with ventilation hung a claustrophobic six inches below the six-and-a-half-foot ceiling, but there was plenty of room within those six feet. Alec could imagine her telling the guards she could fit three, no four, refugee families in with her.

Alec would have to duck to avoid hitting the light if he chose to enter the room. For now he watched through the one-way mirror. Jamie sat writing at a small table. The narrow bed behind her was bare.

He had hoped viewing her in private would make seeing her easier; instead, watching her felt illicit. His heart pounding in his throat, Alec leaned against the transparent wall, resting his palms on the smooth surface for support. The smooth leather of his gloves protected him from the glass that would warm if exposed to his healing touch. His special gift never felt so useless.

She looked rested after two days of incarceration. When he spoke her name, she looked up, but she couldn't hear him through the wall. He'd made certain of that. She brushed her hair off her face with a pen and chewed on the tip. The hard rock that had once been his heart seemed to soften.

It hardened instantly when he realized what she'd done.

Her hair hung straight down her back. Faint ripples remained where he'd plaited the traditional braids in her hair. Her leggings served as trousers now, her skirts torn into strips to reshape the blowzy top of her costume. No telling what she'd done with the jewelry. Jamie was playing the Legate again.

Damned, infuriating woman. Why couldn't she follow his orders for once? Didn't she know what would happen if Thane decided to hold her responsible? If the High Council decided to make an example of her? Alec slapped both hands against the wall.

Jamie stretched her arms over her head and yawned while Alec rubbed his burning palms against his thighs. God, how he wanted to walk through that door and tear off his gloves. To touch her again like he had touched no other woman. To feel his palms warm with the healer's touch, and join with her, not as a physician with a patient or a pilot with a ship, but as a lover joined with the mate to his soul.

He would undo every one of the colorful ties that bound her arms and upper torso so tightly, freeing all her lovely curves, her high, firm breasts. The blouse would follow, over her head, slowly, while he kneaded her breasts and pressed his lips on their succulent peaks. The leggings would go next when he lay her on the floor and let his mouth follow his hands lower and lower. What was she wearing underneath?

Damn, why was he doing this to himself? Alec forgot to unclench his fist when he took another swing at the wall. Something cracked.

The door behind him banged open and Kasai returned to his side, nervously suggesting the Prince might care to rest after his long trip. Alec pushed rudely past him, sending the governor scrambling to maintain his footing, and his dignity. Whether he managed to hold on to either didn't interest Alec.

"You were watching," Alec snarled. He stomped past the gaping mouths in the outer room. The instant he made the accusation, Alec realized his mistake. He had left orders for the guards not to watch Jameelah unless they informed her first, but the observation room had its own observers. Emperor Thane would no doubt receive a full report.

"It will not happen again, Prince Alec. You have my word." Kasai rushed to reassure him.

"See that it doesn't. I will visit the man responsible for my sister's death now without a barrier between us." Alec kicked the nearest wall to emphasize his point and save his rapidly swelling fist.

Jameelah stood her ground while Alec prowled her cell. It had seemed spacious when she arrived five days ago. With Alec pacing, his shoulders hunched in response to the low ceiling, she felt positively claustrophobic. His hoarse breathing filled the room.

After five days, not even allowed to attend her own trial except to watch through one-way vid, she had no patience left. She had learned nothing of Alec's plans or the Emperor's, and now Rami had lied about her part in the bombing, taking all the responsibility on himself. Rami had no reason to concern

himself with her welfare, so why was he adding perjury to his crimes?

She would make Alec talk. "What did you do to Rami?"

"Why would I do anything to your precious Rami? He only kidnaped an innocent young girl and did something so beastly to her that she threw herself into a pit rather than return to her loving family. Do you think he looked pale on the vid?"

Alec's harsh sneer cut deep. "You know what I mean. Rami lied on the stand. Officially, I was in charge of the attack on the space station."

Alec continued to pace, his hands clenched behind his back. "Regretfully, Rami did not require force to convince him to change his story. He said exactly what I told him to say to save his own neck, and he did precious little lying."

"So you believe I didn't plan to hurt anyone at the reception?" It wasn't much, but it was something. She could face her trial with some serenity if Alec believed her.

Alec continued to sneer. "That's what I want the High Council to believe. What I believe is irrelevant. Rami planted two bombs in the kitchen. His punishment won't increase for taking credit for the one you placed in the ballroom. And I do have proof that you did, Legate."

She swallowed hard when Alec stopped pacing. "What do you plan to do with that proof?"

"Do?" Suddenly he lunged toward her.

Jameelah backed into the only chair in the room and sat. He leaned forward and gripped the arms of

the chair, effectively pinning her to the spot.

Scant inches from her quivering lips, he whispered seductively, daring her to answer. "What do you want me to do, Legate?"

His sharp green eyes made her shiver. The question his eyes asked differed significantly from the one coming from his mouth.

"It doesn't matter what you do with the proof, Alec. You have the mistaken notion you can force me to lie. You are wrong. I've told you before, I will face the consequences of what I've done. What I will not do is perjure myself before the Imsada nation."

"Damn it, woman, I'm not asking you to lie." Alec stood and ran his fingers threw his hair, which was as long now as when they first met, with much more gray. "Not exactly," he added, closing his eyes.

He retreated to the tiny bed and stretched out on his back, his ankles crossed and resting on the foot rail. She preferred the clothes he was wearing now to his usual Triden uniform. Soft, velvety blue boots covered his legs to mid-calf. Matching blue pants molded to his firm calves. A loose, green tunic came halfway down his thighs, and he wore a long, soft brown coat. All that remained of his Triden uniform were his black gloves.

If not for the long tunic, she would know if he asked himself the same question that spun in her head. How would they possibly manage to make love on such a narrow bed?

"If you're not asking me to lie, what exactly are you asking me to do, Alec?"

When Alec opened his mouth to answer, a cough came out. He rolled onto his side, supporting his head on his arm.

*More than enough room for two if he slides over.*

He straightened the folds of his coat, which hid his tunic and those distracting thighs. That was good, wasn't it? She shouldn't be looking at him this way, shouldn't be having these thoughts. If she stared at him long enough, he would notice. But, she wanted him to notice. Why couldn't he look at her the way he had at his apartment? She hadn't changed. She was still his Jamie.

When he looked at her, she realized how tired he was. "My brother will call me as the next witness. You know, you're not the only member of the Imsada watching the trial?"

Jameelah nodded. "My advisor told me. Your identity will remain shielded, but the Emperor wants everything else public. Even the remote internment camps will get vid."

"If they believe even half of what they hear, it should be enough."

Until now, she imagined Alec would have a private talk with his brother and the Emperor would excuse him from appearing in court at all. "What is it they're going to hear, Alec? What am I going to hear?"

"Tomorrow, the Emperor's brother will make a complete fool of himself in public. I don't have to tell too many lies to do that. And neither do you. Just a few. That's our strategy. Stick to the truth even when it hurts. Lie just enough to meet our objectives."

*Keeping us together, somehow, some way. Please, Alec.* "What objectives? What are you trying to do?"

"I'm trying to convince the Imsada Council and your people to agree to a peaceful resettlement. I need you to do that. Your name carries a great deal of weight with them. There isn't a refugee camp you haven't planned, stocked, and visited. The people trust you."

Jameelah nodded again. "I earned that trust. I'm not going to betray them now."

When Alec coughed, Jameelah finally believed what Alec told her when he arrived. If the guards were watching, they would have rushed in. He sat on the edge of the bed trying to catch his breath while she brought a glass of water from her dinner tray.

The tips of their fingers met when their hands curled around the glass. Alec seemed as startled by the contact as she. They both let go, and the glass fell to the floor. The contents splashed, staining his plush boots with water. When she bent to pick up the glass, he took her hands and pulled her toward him. The pressure of his knees as they captured her legs set her trembling.

"I'm not asking you to betray anyone." His voice grew more hoarse with every word. "If Thane didn't insist on making this whole mess public, we wouldn't have to worry about it. But he has, so we do. How much influence do you think you'll have if your people find out that you've taken the Emperor's brother to your bed?"

Alec dropped her hands and reached for her breasts, stroking them through the soft cotton of her



shirt until they felt swollen and hot. *This is insane*, she thought, *crazy*. She arched her back involuntarily in response.

Alec's hands and words continued to stroke her. "We must make the Imsada Council believe we spent weeks alone together and never touched. Your period of mourning is almost over but, before you can allow a man to touch you, a wedding ceremony is required and the permission of Khay's Father. Dead, isn't he? My sources say your husband deeded that honor to Rami."

Jameelah fought to think through the distracting rush of blood through her veins. "That's the conservative view. They make up only a small portion--"

"Ten percent isn't small." Alec took her hands, squeezing them while he spoke in an urgent, harsh whisper, his voice almost gone. "More than a handful of dissenters, and I mean five, will result in a costly delay. Violence, even the most benign protest, and Thane will postpone the relocation. You know what a delay can mean to people in places like Bradley-Five. If the Imsada prove too troublesome, the New Alliance will insist on the ultimate solution now that they wouldn't have to carry it out themselves. They would enjoy seeing Thane play the butcher."

Jameelah staggered out of Alec's hold and returned to her desk. How could she have forgotten the stakes were so high? How could she weigh the happiness of two people against so many?

The New Alliance handed the fate of the Imsada over to the Triden Empire. The Tridens would dispassionately follow the most expeditious path. Alec had taught her that much. So many innocents

would be caught in the slaughter.

"What do you want me to do?"

"Nothing for the next few days. Listen to what I say on the stand. You'll hear it on vid. All I ask is that, when your turn comes, don't contradict me."

She looked away, unwilling to let his pleading gaze sway her. "What about my part in the bombing? My people won't think any less of me for that. I need to take responsibility for my actions."

"You can't, damn it. You have to be innocent of any violent act." Alec slammed his fist into his open palm, wincing at the blow. "Anyone convicted of violence will be sent into exile in the first wave. You don't want that. The first years of any colony require long hours, Spartan conditions, no privacy, little freedom. Building a new home for the Imsada will require all these sacrifices."

"I don't expect life to be easy, Alec. I can take it."

Alec stopped his pacing and turned to face her. For the first time since he'd entered her cell, he looked her full in the face. "Well, I can't take it, damn it! I can't take staying here, pretending to get on with my life while they take you away."

Jameelah flinched at his raised voice and his open palms slapping the desk where she sat.

His voice dropped again to a whisper. He pleaded with her to agree. "I need more time. There will be eight years from the time the first wave of colonists leaves until the last. Eight years, Jamie. Eight years before you have to go. By then, I will have worked something out. Hell, after eight years, if you

don't blow anything else up, the Triden High Council will have forgotten you entirely."

The pressure on her chest told her Alec wanted the impossible. "You're asking me to stay here with you, to abandon my people." She held her breath while he swayed over her, his hands gripping the desk firmly, eyes closed, face contorted with some unknown pain.

"I'm not asking you to abandon anyone. You can direct the Imsada relocation from this end, make all the plans. We can do it together, Jamie. Think about it. Please. Give yourself some time. Give us some time. Damn it, the trip takes five years each way. I can't go running after you."

What was Alec talking about? A jump-ready ship didn't take five weeks to get from one end of the galaxy to the other. "Five years? How...?"

Alec, his eyes open now, must have seen her shock. He pounced. "Yes, think of it, Jamie. Five years on a transport, more arduous than the colony itself. Gut wrenching jumps every few weeks. A Triden crew to deal with, a government to build from scratch, planning for life in a new planet. And after those five years, you'll have two more of hard labor getting ready for the second wave. Then the third, the fourth. You'll live in little more than huts while you prepare the first season's crops, and construct roads and buildings for the people to follow."

Five years on a transport? It didn't make any sense. "Where are you sending us? What was Khay's plan?"

Alec hesitated, drumming his fingers on her desk and then ran them through his hair again.

*Tell me, damn it. I have a right to know.*

Before she lost control and screamed in his face, Alec relented. "Imsada intelligence actually got something right five years ago. We made our first successful trip to another galaxy the year before. Some wanted to expand immediately, but the Triden High Council thought it best to wait until the New Alliance was no longer a distraction. Sending the Imsada to establish a beach-head colony didn't occur to us until Khay approached us.

"Your husband chose the easy way out when he devised his plan. He ignored the hard task of forgiveness and starting over--a plan attractive to the Triden Empire. The High Council is disinclined to take on difficult tasks. Long after the state disposes of the Imsada, the people involved will still have to deal with their individual pain. With the distances involved in this case, the Empire wouldn't even have to watch."

Jameelah could only stare at Alec. Khay wanted to exile them not only from their rightful home on Calopia, but to a place so far away that all hope of returning would die?

"Khay wanted to send us out of the galaxy?"

"For a cut of the profits. You would have become a wealthy woman had his scheme succeeded. Someone in the Imsada didn't like the idea of Khay gaining that much power, or they wanted it for themselves. An Imsada bomb killed your husband."

Jameelah didn't know how to react, didn't know what to think. That Khay proposed such a plan

hardly seemed possible. That a member of the Imsada plotted his death was unthinkable. "You're accusing a member of the Imsada of murdering my husband?"

"We kept that tidbit secret. A strong Imsada united against the New Alliance suited our purposes. We didn't want you fighting among yourselves, not then."

Jameelah's hands tightened into fists on the small desk that separated her from Alec. Pawns. Used by the Tridens and the New Alliance. Dead four years and still used--Khay and his plan. Maybe they would be better off out of the galaxy. Here, squeezed between the New Alliance and the Triden Empire, her people stood little chance of surviving intact. The best they could hope for was a series of relocation camps that would eventually crush their spirits.

If word got out about Khay's possible assassins, the Imsada would erupt in a frenzy of violence the Tridens would swiftly crush. Revenge was not worth that price. Jameelah knew somehow Khay would agree.

Alec's hand on her face forced her to leave her shocked silence and listen to him.

"With the war over and resources available, Khay's plan meets our requirements now. We have military equipment and personnel to invest in commercial vessels. The Imsada can't cause trouble that far away, and the return trip requires our specially equipped ships. Only four exist. Any Imsada sympathizer who slips through our net isn't likely to waste ten years of his life to pop over to see you, even if he could find transportation."

And Alec, heir to the Triden throne, wouldn't either. He couldn't. He had to stay just as she had to go.

"The planet we've picked has enough jump-grade crystals to run our ships for two centuries. A handful of Tridens will control transportation and supervise the mines. Thane has another group in mind to harvest the crystals. Before that source runs out, we will have found another planet. Your people will provide food for the Triden contingent and the miners to pay for your colonization rights." Alec seemed more in control, but much too pale under the beginnings of a new beard.

He spoke in reassuring tones, his hands palm down on the desk, not touching hers. "After two hundred years, the planet will belong to the Imsada free and clear. We'll set you up pre-industrial except for medical and seed stocks. Those will be the best we've got. I'll see to it."

"Yes, I'm sure you intend to, Mac." Jameelah braced herself for Alec's angry response.

Instead, he straightened, a crooked smile on his face, and with no anger whatsoever, said, "My name isn't Mac."

She answered his smile, determined to be as brave as he. "Creating a new world sounds like a lot of work requiring a great deal of organizing. I'm very good at what I do."

"I know that, Jamie." His voice was a whisper now. He continued to lean over the desk, palms down, his hair in his eyes.

It took all her strength not to brush the hair aside and draw his mouth to hers. Instead, she whispered

her reply, knowing her decision would separate them forever. "The colonists are going to need me on that first wave."

Alec stood before the Triden High Council, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. He let his mind wander while he studied the tile floor. The room seemed oddly familiar, like something from a dream, but in the dream he only half-remembered, soldiers had filled the room.

Now, alone, he faced the royal couple, who sat on the dais behind the council members. Thane wore the Triden colors, purple with gold trim on his official robes. Tam wore a blue gown with touches of red and white symbolizing the New Alliance flag. They clashed dreadfully, and hadn't spoken a word to each other since Alec entered the room.

The Council Speaker, the man charged with asking the High Council's questions, impatiently rattled the sheaf of papers he held.

Thankfully, Jamie wasn't present but Alec was painfully aware she listened to every minute of his ordeal. What would she make of this madness? Well, she didn't have to understand, just remember to tell the court she didn't know about Rami's plan.

To keep his gaze from returning to the distracting patterns of tile, Alec raised his chin and stared at his brother's feet. Alec knew of no way to admit gracefully that he hadn't heard a word the Speaker said.

"Would you repeat the question?"

With an angry shrug of his shoulders, the Council Speaker turned to appeal to the Emperor's legal advisor, a tall, mustachioed man in flowing black robe who stood behind the Emperor. "I mean no disrespect toward a member of the royal family, but this witness has requested that I repeat every question asked by the Council."

The legal advisor signaled a halt to the proceedings, and bent to whisper in the Emperor's ear. Alec didn't know the man personally, but he knew of him. Thane surrounded himself with especially vicious advisors. Alec wondered if his brother wished to seem benevolent by comparison.

Until now, it had never seemed unfair to Alec that only the Emperor had the benefit of legal council during a trial. It seemed dreadfully unfair now. Alec stood painfully at attention for hours while the royal couple sat ensconced in comfort on a dais at the head of the room. Servants took advantage of the break in proceedings to scurry back and forth with messages and food, giving the impression the royal couple had more important things to do than pay attention to what was happening twenty feet away.

The High Council, ten expressionless men, sat below and in front of the Emperor's platform. Their collective disapproving glare never strayed from their Emperor's brother. Unlike Thane, all Council members wore Triden uniforms. Standing in front of precise lines of black leather, Alec felt rumpled.

"The witness will remain awake during his questioning," the Advisor intoned, apparently bored. He directed the Speaker to continue. Thane muffled a laugh from behind a raised hand, but Tam's gaze never



wavered. She appeared to study the backs of High Council's heads.

Through the long hours of his questioning, Alec tried to focus on the council members, ignoring the royal presence after making his initial obeisance. But his attention continued to wander past the men in black, past his brother, to the woman who could decide his fate if she wished to interfere.

Alec had memorized every word and gesture he planned to make at the trial. So obliging of Thane to provide the list of questions in advance. For Alec the trial was over, his fate sealed. He made the tough decision when he decided he could not keep Jamie with him. What was not decided was the unofficial sentence Thane would pronounce on his brother after the trial--the one he and Tam would agree on in their bedroom.

Since arriving on Triden-Prime, Alec had met with his brother and sister-in-law only briefly, not long enough to be certain of what that outcome might be. When they'd spoken over the light years that separated New Glasgow and Triden-Prime, Thane had seemed his old self --guarded about state secrets, defensive about Lorna and Mother, but laughing at times and, in general, treating Alec like the younger brother he was.

But in Tam's presence, Thane became a jealous husband. Even in their private rooms, Thane kept Alec standing awkwardly at attention while making pronouncements. Alec felt like the garden's son again, challenged when he tried to use the manor house front stairs. Tam's solicitous attention didn't help. She asked after his health and offered him a seat. When Thane scowled and Alec remained standing, she

stormed out of the room.

Did his past relationship with Tam threaten Thane enough to want him out of the way? And how far out of the way? Fertilizing Mother's roses, or just banished to New Glasgow?

As to how Tam felt, Alec had no idea. He couldn't tell if she genuinely felt some affection for him, or if she was using his presence to gain concessions from her new husband. Would she help convince Thane to allow the royal heir to return to his anonymous wanderings in freedom? Or did she, like Thane, want Alec safely ensconced on New Glasgow?

The Council Speaker cleared his throat to draw Alec's attention. "To repeat the question a final time, Prince Alec, do you remember saying in a negative tone--'These New Alliance fellows are our very dear friends now. Thanks to our Emperor's taste in brides.' "

Alec shifted his feet again, his patience at an end. "Do you have a witness to that statement?"

"Several. The first--"

"Don't wake anyone on my account. You've put enough witnesses asleep already. If you have a witness, I remember saying precisely those words. I also believe I said something personally insulting about the New Alliance commander in charge of the Orgon debacle. I hardly see the relevance."

"Not your concern, sir." The Speaker smiled and folded his list of questions. "Does the witness realize he has contradicted himself a number of times?"

Alec smiled in return. He could afford to be generous. The Speaker had finally reached the end of

his list. "As I told you, some details are hazy. I was drinking on the night in question. Celebrating my brother's marriage." Alec waved a hand in the direction of the royal couple. Thane acknowledged him with a nod; Tam continued to stare straight ahead.

"But not celebrating the spirit of that marriage, I understand," the Speaker said.

Alec felt the last of his patience slip away. "Will the Emperor's Advisor instruct the Speaker to word his question in such a way that a simple farmer can understand them?"

The Advisor didn't respond, neither did Thane. The Speaker set aside the list of questions he'd already asked, and drew another from the pocket in his sleeve. Alec felt his heart freeze in his chest.

The Speaker cleared his throat before he spoke. "Do you favor peace between the Triden Empire and the New Alliance?"

"Yes," Alec answered automatically while he forced his brain, numbed by hours of droning questions, back into action. His head snapped up from studying the tiles to look at his brother. Had Thane approved this line of questioning? Apparently Thane had no objection. He could stop the entire mess with a flick of his finger.

The Speaker seemed to enjoy himself, delivering his next question with a flourish. "On hearing the news of the Emperor's engagement, did you not tell a fellow officer that you would rather serve in a brothel on Vantor than eat with a New Alliance officer?"

Someone in the fleet had worked overtime following him around, taking down his every word.

Maybe that was how they missed the Imsada infiltration at the reception. They'd been too busy framing the Emperor's brother for treason. "I don't know...I can't remember everything--"

"Drunk again, were you?"

Alec took a step forward at the remark. Behind him a dozen guards raised their arms, weapons ready to fire if he approached the Emperor uninvited. Forcing himself to return to his assigned place, Alec satisfied himself with raising his voice. "Why don't you call a witness, and we can both find out."

Shouting was a mistake. Surprised by the shooting pain in his side, Alec gasped. The Speaker caught his arm to steady him.

Alec bowed his head and whispered, "End it now," their prearranged signal, approved by Thane. Alec had had enough.

Instead, the Speaker raised his voice and asked another question. "You reported an injury ten days ago, a fall on wet tile. Were you drunk then also?"

Ignoring the pain in his side, Alec let loose a roar of anger, "Enough."

Thane raised his hand in agreement. The Speaker responded, "One last question?"

After a brief consultation with Thane, the Advisor nodded, and Alec steeled himself.

"You spent several months in a New Alliance prison camp. Were you mistreated in any way during your stay?"

Alec looked to Thane to object. What could this possibly have to do with the Imsada? Thane knew

how painful talking about the POW camp was. Besides, the question was irrelevant. What point did the speaker want to make? The Emperor nodded solemnly while his legal advisor whispered in his ear. Tam studied her shoes.

When Thane's Advisor gave the signal for Alec to answer, he struggled for breath. The persistent pressure grew in his chest and his throat hurt, making it difficult to swallow. He had no real choice. The Council could order the use of force to make him talk. Thane and Tam didn't need a scene like that. Neither did he.

Suddenly, Alec remembered Jamie. She was listening to his testimony from her cell. He had to end this now, just answer a few more questions. If the Council wanted to hear about the prison camp, he'd tell them about the prison camp. The matter was totally irrelevant. Nothing he said could hurt Jamie. "No, I was not mistreated."

"Were you given preferential treatment?"

Where was the man going with these questions? Alec felt his face grow hot. "Definitely not--"

"But you were allowed your freedom within the confines of the camp, weren't you? The only POW given such freedom."

Thane knew all this. Why did he want this to come out now, in front of Tam and the Council? Alec took a shallow breath and continued. "I was the only trained physician in the group. They allowed me the freedom I needed to help the others."

"How many of your fellow prisoners were injured or tortured while under your care."

Alec couldn't speak for a moment. His mouth had gone dry with disgust. They were accusing him of treason, and worse, of betraying his oath as a doctor. "I filed a full report."

"Yes. I have your report here. You documented the ordeal of several of your comrades in great detail, but made no mention of yourself. You received no ill-treatment by the New Alliance?"

"That's right. Most of the prisoners--"

The Speaker cut Alec off with a raised hand. "Members of the New Alliance contacted you again at your brother's wedding reception, did they not?"

Alec struggled to remember. So much of that night was a blur. Four representatives of the New Alliance Council attended the reception. They frightened Lorna. Right before the explosion. "I wouldn't exactly say contacted--"

"You spoke with New Alliance Officers. Yes or no."

"Yes, but--"

"When you were fifteen years old, you chose to study at a university attended by members of the New Alliance."

Thane should have warned him about this. Why was the man questioning him about his childhood? What was the right answer? Alec couldn't think, and that left him only with the truth. "The instructors were renowned for their expertise in low-technology medicine needed on new colonies. My interest--"

The Speaker didn't let him finish. "You made friends at the university with students whose families are now prominent members of the New Alliance, did you not? Friends who would rise to positions of power."

Of course he had. He'd met Tam there. Thane knew all this, so did the High Council. What did his brother want him to say?

Apparently, the Speaker hadn't finished. "Isn't it a fact that, since the age of fifteen, you have plotted to engage the assistance of the New Alliance in a conspiracy to depose your brother and take his place as head of the Mackenzie clan? And when your brother became Emperor, did you not then conspire to take his place as ruler of the Triden Empire as well?"

Alec hadn't expected it to come to this. Insubordination, yes, incompetence, maybe, but conspiracy and treason? "I did not."

Only a whisper remained of Alec's voice. It seemed his heart stopped beating in his chest and he couldn't draw a full breath.

"On the night of your brother's wedding, did Legate Jameelah, directly or indirectly, cause you any bodily harm?"

Finally a question he knew the answer to. If he said yes, they would sentence her to death. "No, she did not."

"Your injuries?" the Speaker asked.

"We've already covered this. I fell in the shower on New Glasgow."

"Yes," the Speaker drawled. "But let us return to the night of the attack on your brother. You left the space station with a known member of the Imsada while that station was under attack." The speaker was reading statements now, not asking questions. "You disobeyed a direct order by failing to report to New Glasgow after the wedding reception. You voluntarily gave aid and comfort to Imsada members on Bradley-Five." The speaker held up a paper, showing it to the Triden High Council. More statements, more accusations.

It seemed that like Jamie, Alec had no choice. He could only hope his plans for her remained intact. Alec kept his arms at his sides, careful not to make any threatening moves. "Yes. Yes, to all of it. I'm guilty of whatever you like."

Silence followed. Alec met his brother's gaze. Thane looked formidable from his throne ten feet above the level where Alec stood. Before Alec could wonder about the significance of Tam's now empty chair, the Advisor spoke. "Prince Alec is excused. He may resume his regular duties until such time as the court reaches its decision."

Jameelah missed the last of Alec's testimony. Her guards came before he'd finished to escort her through the long corridors to the Emperor's courtroom. From what she could tell by listening to Alec's



voice, his testimony had gone well--the Speaker's questions had offered no surprises and Alec had given his answers with bored indifference.

By the time she arrived, Alec was coming through the massive door to the courtroom. He seemed to hide behind Gunny and two men who could only be bodyguards. Her escort stopped her with a slight pressure on her elbow and the guards parted. Finally, Gunny stepped aside, and she stood facing Alec.

She didn't know what to say to him in front of the guards and Gunny. When she forced herself to raise her head, she brushed back her hair from her face. Alec reached out with his long, graceful fingers. To sweep the loose strands from her shoulder, she thought, a trill of anticipation rippling through her. Before he could touch her, the guards stepped between them and pushed Alec against the wall.

Alec curled his fingers into a tight fist, then folded both hands firmly behind his back. His green eyes were dull and ringed with bruises from lack of sleep, his skin almost gray, his breath rattling in his throat. The guards returned to their places--to either side and slightly behind him.

Jameelah looked to Gunny, hoping he would explain away her confusion. When he pursed his lips more tightly and stared at the floor, the warm expectant glow that had flowed through her changed to ice.

She'd lost track of time in her windowless cell, but the corridor, speckled with light, announced midday. Alec shielded his eyes with a clumsily raised arm when the shifting shadows fled and left him blinking in the sun. Gunny appeared to be holding Alec up. What had this trial done to him? What she had done?

"I see my brother will have the honor of meeting the famous Legate Jameelah today." Even Alec's voice sounded odd--hoarse, and harsh, as if he'd given up caring whether anyone heard.

She shrugged. The Emperor would indeed have to deal with the Legate. She'd refused to put on the new costume Alec sent. No one could mistake her for a widow in mourning. They both knew what that meant. She would tell no lies.

Alec spoke again, softer this time. "I'm leaving for New Glasgow this afternoon."

"When will I see you again?" She bit her lip when the question broke from her.

"At the sentencing. That should be in two days. They won't spend more than a day questioning you. I intend to return before then." Alec emphasized the word intend. The rhythm of the sentence felt odd. Something was wrong.

She could see Gunny squeeze Alec's arm. He started to turn away, then appeared to change his mind. Pulling away from the wall, he straightened and stepped toward her. Gunny put a restraining hand on Alec's shoulder and both guards stepped between them again. Did they expect her to attack him? Or did she need protecting? The air crackled with tension as a dozen Triden boots clicked to attention.

Alec didn't seem to notice. He pulled his glove from his right hand, and slowly, reached through the foot-wide space that remained open between them. Instead of taking her hand, he presented his palm to her. She hesitated only a moment, then pressed her palm to his.

His eye lids fluttered closed and at first all she felt was the warmth of his hand. Then heat and a jolt

of recognition. For a moment they were joined, his strength flooding through her, and hers, it seemed, flooding through him.

Then he was gone, tugging his glove back in place. "I would stay if I could, but I've kept my mother waiting far too long. It wasn't fair of me, but I think she'll understand. Sometimes, I know, I must make her sound like an overbearing ogre, but she's not. I've just disappointed her so many times. My family needs me to sort things out. They can't seem to do without me."

Jameelah nodded, her head down. When he started to turn away, her whole body trembled and her escort tightened his grip. Alec reached through the barrier of arms again and raised her chin with his gloved hand.

"I fully intend to see you again." He spoke in a stern voice as if delivering a threat. She wanted so much to believe him. His eyes flashed a muted smile before the dullness returned and he jerked his hand back. They let her watch him walk away--hands clasped behind his back, head tilted to listen to whatever Gunny whispered in his ear. Then, the guards closed around him and he vanished in a sea of black uniforms.



## Chapter 17

Alec arrived early for the sentencing, trying to appear at ease while he waited for Gunny to finish questioning the master-at-arms about procedures. More than two dozen of Thane's private guards lined the perimeter of the courtroom, standing at attention with their weapons concealed. Alec gave up his pretense of calm and began to pace.

His trip to New Glasgow to share the details of Lorna's death had drained him, emotionally and physically. When asked, he insisted he'd fully recovered from his reported fall, but every breath felt like he was breathing through water. Seeing a doctor now would mean taking the chance he wouldn't see Jamie again. Thane wouldn't delay her sentence of exile just so they could exchange farewells.

Alec promised Jamie he would return for the sentencing, and he had. He hugged his aching side in recognition of the price he paid. At least only those present in the room would hear this final session. He didn't feel like performing in public on an interplanetary scale today. When he heard people entering the room behind him, Alec straightened.

Amid the crowd, he saw few familiar faces. Governor Kasai, for one, and the infamous pirate, Captain Freeman, now out of costume and wearing traditional Triden dress leathers. He had emerged from covert operations to testify for Jamie. Most of the spectators at sentencing were New Alliance

officials equal in rank to the Triden High Council. Appropriate, since Thane was putting on this show for the New Alliance. The Triden Council didn't bother to attend.

Unarmed and dressed in civilian clothes, Alec felt vulnerable standing close to his old enemies.

Gunny saved him from the embarrassment of appearing to retreat from the sea of khaki uniforms "We should stand over here until the Emperor has dealt with the others."

Gunny took Alec's elbow and guided him to the side of the room, across from where the accused would hear their sentence read.

In a few moments, Jamie would stand there on the small raised platform, twenty feet from the stairs that lead to the dais and the Emperor's throne. Alec clasped his hands behind his back and concentrated on keeping his feet still.

"How is she?" Alec whispered while he looked around the room. Before Gunny could answer, the Advisor announced the royal couple, and Thane and Tam appeared on the dais, both dressed in their official robes. Tam looked like she'd been crying, but Thane appeared relaxed. He smiled and nodded at Alec.

Alec nodded in return, wishing his brother hadn't singled him out. The crowd seemed to tighten around him. Thane turned his attention to the back of the room and nodded permission for the guards to bring the Imsada prisoners forward.

*Everything is going as planned. Everything is all right.*

The instant he saw Jamie, Alec knew things would never be all right again. Even seeing her at this distance in a room full of people, his body ached for her. A moan sounded low in his throat. She marched, head held high, to take her place at the defendants' platform. Still dressed in her makeshift Imsada uniform, Jamie played the part of Imsada Legate to the end. Alec could only love her for it.

His rationalizations of the past two days dissolved while he watched her--the proud leader of a defeated people, prepared to receive her punishment. He'd made a dreadful mistake. He couldn't let it end like this. He had to tell her the truth and live with the decisions he'd made for both of them.

While Jameelah watched, a smile flickered across Alec's face and died. So, he had kept his promise and come to see her one last time. She didn't know whether to be happy because he'd come or angry because he hadn't let her know sooner. Knowing he waited in the courtroom would have made her walk here more bearable.

Torn between joy and anger, she followed his gaze when he turned to look behind her. Guards dragged Rami forward, his hands bound and his face distorted by a leather gag. He shrieked behind the gag, straining against his bonds.

The sight of the impotent rage of an entire people focused in one man sent waves of hopelessness washing over her. The job was too big, the obstacles too great. What could one woman do?

When he passed her, Rami's eyes betrayed no recognition, but shone with wild anger. His guards hoisted him onto the platform. Not wanting to see what remained of the proud man who had once stood beside her husband, she turned away, and looked directly into Alec's eyes.

His gaze held her captive and new energy surged through her. Alec crossed the room, striding toward her and looking no less dangerous for wearing New Glasgow farmer's garb instead of Triden leathers. Alec believed in her, believed she could do this.

Ignoring orders from the master-at-arms to return to his assigned place, Alec continued to close the distance between them. He looked directly into her eyes, his forehead furrowed beneath his salt-and-pepper hair, his mouth bowed downward. His soft brown boots didn't make a sound. For once, she was grateful for his stubbornness when he took his place beside her.

Less than a foot from her, he stopped, his velvet brown cape brushing her side when he turned to face the court. She could see from his haggard expression and bloodshot eyes that he most likely disobeyed other orders, such as seeing a doctor and getting some sleep. He looked more tired than the last time she'd seen him.

*The last time I saw Alec*--the image had so consumed Jameelah during her trial that she barely remembered her day of questions before the Emperor. She wondered if Alec had listened to her testimony from his apartment or from the Mackenzie estate. Had he seen for himself that she carried out her promise to tell the truth about her part in planting the bomb at the reception? Or had he forgotten the



entire mess and returned to his life as the gentleman farmer?

The High Council Speaker had kept returning to Alec's part in the conspiracy--how Alec had contacted her, how long he'd worked with the Imsada, when had he met her husband Khay-Alva, how had they planned to rendezvous in the escape pod.

The conspiracy theory was nonsense, and she'd told them so, but, on the surface, the evidence had seemed damning. The most harmful testimony had come from Bradley-Five. Recorded statements told how Alec had assisted members of the Imsada, even saved lives, and then fled with Jameelah when the New Alliance vessel arrived.

None of that would make any difference in her sentence as far as Jameelah could see. Her legal advisor said that unless the High Council proved she'd intentionally injured the emperor or his heir, she would receive a sentence of exile.

Now, the Emperor's legal advisor called for order and the respectful hum that filled the room fell silent. Her hands didn't begin to shake until the Imperial staff pounded on the tile floor calling the room to attention.

Alec curled his hand around hers. She warmed at the touch of his bare palm against hers. Her nerves calmed as if by magic. A moment passed before she realized the trembling she felt came from Alec's hand.

The Emperor's Advisor read Rami's sentence. "The man known as Rami is hereby found guilty of

the crimes of piracy, kidnaping, and acts of terrorism. For these crimes, the High Triden Council does sentence the prisoner to permanent exile from the Emperor's presence and from the presence of all his citizens. This sentence is to be carried out immediately and, without reprieve or delay, the prisoner is to be transported to a place of the Emperor's choosing."

With a nod of assent from the Emperor, Rami's guards led him away. He continued to struggle, demanding to be heard from behind his gag.

Jameelah felt her stomach lurch when the Advisor motioned for her to take her place at the defendants' platform. For a moment, she feared the guards would have to drag her to the spot. Her legs refused to follow her order to move.

At the clicking of metal soles on the tile floor behind her, her arms went rigid as well. Suddenly, Alec moved from her side to stand behind her to hold off the waiting guard. His ragged breathing accelerated. When he grunted with pain, she ran forward and took Rami's place at the platform.

The next few moments passed in a blur. The High Council found her guilty of an act of terrorism, planting a bomb at the Emperor's reception. The sentence read was the same as Rami's, the sentence Alec had promised she would receive if she didn't deny her part in the bombing.

*This is what you wanted.* Now, she would fulfill her dreams, and Khay-Alva's, to bring peace to the Imsada people.

Alec had proved himself to her by helping her fulfill her late-husband's plan. *It's worth the sacrifice,*

she told herself, her hands becoming fists that pounded on the wooden bar before her. *Alec will be all right. He'll fulfill his own destiny, fulfill his own dreams, and return to medicine.*

When Alec took her arm and helped her down, he lifted her hand to his lips. Her head spun with the spicy smell that would always remind her of him. He stopped short of kissing her. Bent over her hand, a muscle in his tightly-clenched jaw twitched and he turned his head. She felt him shudder under the soft velvet of his clothes.

Jameelah looked up to find him staring at Tam. She watched them both. Standing rigidly at attention, Emperor Thane looked like a New Glasgow storm cloud ready to burst forth with rain.

Before Jameelah could decide what had passed between them, Alec dropped her hand and Gunny took her arm, steering her toward the exit. In a minute, the door would close and she would never see Alec again. She couldn't let that happen. The realization hit her stomach with the force of a blow. She couldn't leave Alec like this, not without a word of farewell.

"Gunny, let me go." She tried to pull away.

"The show's over, Jameelah," Gunny whispered, glancing over his shoulder.

Gunny obviously didn't want to make a scene. She would use that to her advantage. Emperor Thane might think he could dispose of her this easily, but she had a thing or two left to say to Prince Alec before he returned to his life of high adventure and politics.

"I will wait here until the Advisor dismisses the court," she said. When Gunny opened his mouth to

protest, she added, "If you try to make me leave, I will demand permission to stay from the Emperor himself."

Clearly nervous, Gunny looked over his shoulder again at the assembled court, "The boy wants you to leave now."

Jameelah stared him down, letting him know what she thought of "the boy's" orders. With a sigh, Gunny threw up his hands and released her arm. "He's not going to like this."

Relieved that she'd gained a few extra moments, she pushed her way through the spectators to where she'd left Alec, near the defendants' platform. A half dozen guards blocked her way, forcing her to circle to the right before she broke through the crowd on the far side of the room.

Frantically, she searched for Alec. She stood on tip-toe to view the back of the dais, thinking he might have joined Thane and Tam. Finally, only one place remained where she hadn't searched. With growing dread, she turned her attention to the platform she'd just left.

Her heart jumped in her chest when she saw him standing there, back ramrod straight, jaw clenched, hands balled into fists at his sides, both gloves now in place. The room began a dizzying spin and a lump grew in her throat until she couldn't swallow. Then she realized what an idiot she'd been.

The questions asked during the trial were clues if only she'd paid attention. The Speaker for the High Council had referred to her once as a witness before correcting himself and naming her a defendant. He'd seemed interested only in those acts she committed while in Prince Alec's presence, never

mentioning her past work with the Imsada.

Jameelah would have said anything to save Alec. If only she'd realized he was on trial. Now it was too late. The Emperor's Advisor was passing sentence.

"The man known as Alec Mackenzie is hereby found guilty of the crimes of high treason against the Emperor of Triden, desertion of his post in time of war, and disobeying a direct order made by a lawfully-appointed superior."

The lump in her throat finally loosened enough for her to breath and Jameelah found herself gasping, held up by the crowd that pressed around her. The New Alliance officials murmured approval at the sentence, and before the Advisor said the words, Jameelah knew what that sentence must be.

There could be only one punishment for treason.

"For these crimes the High Triden council does sentence the prisoner, Alexander Thornton Mackenzie, to death by hanging in the Emperor's presence. The sentence is to be carried out at the Emperor's convenience, the prisoner to be transported to a place of the Emperor's choosing." With a bang of the royal staff on the floor, the Advisor ended the court session.

Her eyes streaming with tears, her heart pounding in her throat, Jameelah waited. Surely, someone would step forward and say this was a mistake. Alec had been willing to give his life for the Emperor. Thane couldn't do this to his own brother.

The Emperor rose to his feet, ignoring his suddenly-pale wife, who tugged at his arm.

Pushing aside those around her, Jameelah made her way toward Alec. The New Alliance officials began to leave by the back door, the armed guards pushing back the crowd that lingered near Alec.

He appeared to take his sentence calmly. After making a ceremonial bow in the direction of Emperor Thane, he stood waiting, apparently for the room to clear.

Her heart still pounding in her throat, she knew she had to do something. She couldn't let him be the martyr he'd always accused her of being.

Looking to the dais, she saw Thane take Tam's arms to lead her from the room. It was hard to tell at this distance, but they appeared to be arguing. In another minute, the Emperor would leave and she'd have missed her chance to plead her case. She couldn't wait any longer. She had to make her move now.

Stepping toward the dais, she raised her voice. "Wait. You have to listen to me. I want to change my testimony."

Sudden silence was quickly followed by the cracking of weapons charging. Too many of them pointed at Alec.

Jameelah tore her attention from the guards. "It was my fault. I didn't receive an invitation to attend the reception from Alec. I gained entrance to the reception on my own."

"No, Jamie stop."

She heard Alec's order, but she ignored it. She walked toward the Emperor, praying she could complete her statement before the guards shot her.

"The bombing was an Imsada operation from start to finish, and I was in charge. Alec knew nothing about it. He was unconscious when I took him off the station. My men beat him so badly, he couldn't walk. Even an empire as corrupt and evil as yours can't find a man guilty of deserting his post and disobeying orders under those circumstances."

"Jamie!"

Something in Alec's voice made her stop. She turned to find the room behind her empty except for Alec, Gunny, and two dozen Triden guards. The guards had returned their weapons to their sides, but Gunny stood ten feet to Alec's right with his weapon drawn and pointed at her head.

Alec stood with his arms stretched toward her. Jameelah wanted to go, she wanted to run to the safety of his arms, but if she ran now, she wouldn't be safe and neither would Alec. Only the Emperor could save him.

She turned toward the dais again to address the Emperor. He stood at the top of the stairs, staring down at her, his purple robe flared around his impressive frame. A corner of Tam's gown and the top of her head peaked around his shoulder.

"You can't kill him. He hasn't done anything wrong. Sentence me to death instead. You have to understand."

When her foot touched the bottom step of the dais, Gunny's voice barked behind her. "Don't make me shoot."

Looking at Thane's towering figure, Jameelah wished she'd accepted the clothes Alec sent her. Maybe dressed as a widow, she could have wept and begged for mercy. As the Imsada Legate, all she knew how to do was plead her case.

Taking a deep shuddering breath, she climbed the stairs. If only she could make it to the top. If only she could reach the Emperor. She would persuade him to spare Alec's life even if it meant groveling at his feet.

At the sound of Gunny's weapon firing behind her, Jameelah cried out. A weight slammed against the back of her knees, bringing her down hard on the stone steps.

With her breath painfully trapped in her lungs, time remained suspended. A shouted cry for a medic sounded behind her, and she felt a rush of fabric brush pass her head.

She was still fighting for her first breath when Gunny pulled her upright and slapped her on the back. The violent act forced her lungs to work. She gasped when air drove away the icy black that threatened to engulf her.

Slowly, she became aware of the man who stood next to her, the same man she'd tried so hard to reach just moments before. Emperor Thane's purple robe draped the step beside her.

Before she could gather enough breath to make another plea, a high-pitched wail cut through the air.

Over Gunny's shoulder she could see Alec sprawled face down on the floor, his head resting on the bottom step, his arms and legs akimbo. Smoke rose from a hole in the back of his cape. Alec didn't



move.

She gagged on the bile that rose in her throat at the sight of Alec's still body.

Gunny shook her shoulders. "I had to draw my weapon to let the guards know I would handle things. I couldn't trust them not to shoot you. It was only a warning shot, I swear. I thought the boy understood. He jumped in the way just as I...I didn't mean to...."

Gunny clung to her, pinning her to the stairs, his body shielding her from the guards who surrounded them.

"It wasn't your fault, Gunny." The Emperor choked out the words. He moved back, retreating up the stairs. His long velvet cloak brushed against Jameelah's face.

What was Thane doing? Why didn't he help Alec? Jameelah looked down the stairs and saw her answer.

Alec lay on his back now, and Tam, the Emperor's wife, sat on the floor cradling his head in her lap.

"You stupid men." Tam turned accusing eyes on her husband, her soft blond curls covering Alec's face. "Both of the Mackenzie brothers are stupid men. See where your games have led you. See what you have done. You should have told her the truth. You should have told her from the beginning. You should have told us both."

*The last time I saw Alec*--the phrase echoed ominously in Jameelah's mind again. She paced while

she waited for her final day in the Triden prison cell to end.

During the past three days, she had done all she could to concentrate on the details of the Imsada relocation, directing the operation from her prison cell. Now, even her best efforts at distraction failed. She kept returning to the scene forever etched in her mind--medics rushing into the room, Thane dragging his wife up the stairs, and Alec. Alec, unconscious on the floor, a cut above his left eye where he'd hit the stair, Gunny trying to put on his gloves, as if such a thing mattered now.

Miraculously, the guards hadn't returned Jameelah to her cell immediately. She'd comforted Gunny while they sat side-by-side on the stairs watching the medics treat Alec's injuries. When they'd been ready to take Alec away, Gunny had exchanged whispers with the medic and the master-at-arms, and then helped her to her feet.

"The boy will be laid up for a while, but he'll be all right. I know he intended to speak to you before you left, but...." Gunny had shrugged, and hurried off after the stretcher.

Jameelah had found herself alone in the courtroom, alone except for two dozen armed Triden guards. They'd refused to answer her questions or respond to her demand to speak with the Emperor. Tam had intimated secrets she wished to share, but the mention of the Empress's name had elicited blank stares from the guards.

Three days later the only information she could discover concerning Alec was that his wounds had healed and he waited on New Glasgow for the Emperor to carry out his sentence.

During those three days, Jameelah had sat at her prison cell desk where she spent her time torn between calmly planning for exile and going silently crazy with worry. Thane couldn't go through with it. He had to pardon Alec.

When the time came for her to leave, Gunny came for her. Jameelah felt her heart drop with disappointment.

Gunny laid a large bundle on her narrow bed, and turned to go. Go without a word, without a single word. Anger rose in her throat, so raw and so powerful, she began to shake. Her voice quivered with anger as she fought for control.

"Prince Alec hasn't the time to visit prisoners, I see. So much for his good intentions."

At her bitter words, Gunny spun around to face her. "You know nothing about Alec Mackenzie, lass. If it had been humanly possible, he would have been here."

"Thane didn't...I mean, he wouldn't really...."

"You needn't worry. Alec has received more death sentences than I can count. The hanging was a private matter. A legal formality he survived like the rest. Only this time, he didn't lose some temporary identity. They executed Alec Mackenzie, if only symbolically. 'Twas his own name and his own property the boy lost."

Jameelah let out a shaky breath, relieved beyond words that Thane didn't intend to kill Alec, but aware of the anger behind Gunny's words.

"So don't you go talking, or you'll tempt the Emperor to make the boy's demise permanent. Even Empress Tamboria wouldn't know he was alive if Alec's mother hadn't persuaded Thane to tell her. They planned to keep it a secret from everyone except the top men in the High Council. I'm only telling you because Empress Tamboria insisted and the Emperor gave his permission."

She should have felt relieved, grateful, and she did in a hidden part of her soul. But after three days of anguish, the anger bubbled out to match that which so clearly seethed in Gunny.

Her fist slammed on the desk, scattering papers across the room with an intensity that startled Gunny. The tears that rolled down her cheeks startled them both. "Then why isn't Alec here?"

Gunny's bulldog expression softened and he joined the bundle he'd dropped on her bed. "They won't let him go, lass. He's too ill. You see, he wanted nothing in the record about his injuries until after the trial. Reporting a fall in the shower only got him enough pain medication to get by. He knew his story wouldn't hold up if a doctor got a good look at him. And not even Alec could have saved you if the High Council found you guilty of harming the Emperor's heir. He should have been in hospital days ago. If the council had taken much longer making up their mind about what to do with the two of you, they really would have passed a death sentence."

A lump returned to her throat when she realized again what Alec had risked for her. He lost his name, his title, his lands. Did he have to lose his life as well? "But you said--"

"He'll survive. Always was a scrapper. An infection of the lungs. Close to the heart." Gunny

grimaced. Jameelah felt her knees turn to water for the second time that day.

Gunny continued. "The boy might have made it here to see you before you left, but his mother took some liberties. Easy to do when a man's officially dead. They're not likely to give him a new identity soon, not while they've got him where they want him--in bed. The doctors reset his ribs and fused some cracks in his spine. It's slowed him down a mite."

When Gunny stopped talking, Jameelah realized the snuffling noise came from her. She buried her eyes beneath her fists. She didn't want to subject anyone to the sight--Legate Jameelah crying.

Gunny crossed the room to stand beside her, his beefy hand resting on her shoulder. "They won't harm the boy if that's what you're sniffing about. Emperor Thane has informed the populace that Lord Mackenzie fostered out another son who stands ready to take up the throne if necessary. But the Triden High Council knows Alec is alive. He'll keep a low profile, but he's still the Emperor's only heir.

"The trial didn't get the boy out of his duties any more than Thane's wedding did. Thane never should have chosen Tamboria. Has a mind of her own, that one. Insists the marriage is political, nothing more. If things don't improve, Thane may never have a legal heir to take Alec's place. Alec will have to produce the next generation of Triden rulers. They'll marry the boy to some suitable girl on the quiet so he can turn out lads and lassies in his brother's place. Not a bad life."

If Gunny meant to reassure Jameelah, he failed utterly. She knew of no torture designed for the purpose that could more effectively break Alec. Forced into hiding by his brother, stripped of his name

and his property, living a life of idleness--it would kill him.

Gunny dropped a handkerchief in her lap. "You can stop crying. He'll be fine. The boy asked me to drop off some new clothes. Something suitable for the director of the Imsada's new home land, he said." Gunny was all gruff and bluster again, looking panicked and ready to leave.

"Yes, he'll be fine." Jameelah repeated, but with no conviction. She would be fine; she could believe that. Alec had given back her purpose in life. Thousands of frightened people relied on her to lead them to a new home in an unexplored galaxy. After twenty years, she might find time to breathe, let alone mourn what she and Alec had lost. But she would find time long before then to miss him.

Long before that twenty years passed, she would find too much time to think of Alec. Every night before catching a few hours of sleep on some narrow bunk, she would remember how it felt to lie in Alec's arms. She would feel his breath on her neck, smell the spicy oil on his skin, hear him whisper "Jamie dear" in her ear. And she would hate him for sending her away, hate herself for doing the right thing.

What would he do with those twenty years? With all those nights, all those dreams? Would this "suitable" girl his family chose to fill his bed only give him children? Would she love him? Would she protect him from the demons Zelat planted in his mind that would surely come in the night?

"What will Alec do?" Jameelah had to know. "Once he's forced his family to make peace. When Lady Seana and Millard are talking again, and Emperor Thane and his wife make peace and start their

own family, what will Alec do? What will the great mediator do when they no longer need him?"

Gunny stared. The man had to know what would happen, Jameelah prayed. He'd spent his life taking care of Alec. He had to know how dangerous this was. Had devotion to his charge so blinded Gunny that he couldn't see Alec's flaws, couldn't see the pattern of self-destruction he'd followed all these years? Alec had so much talent, and he'd spent his life turning his back on it. Running too fast for anything to catch him. He wouldn't remain content when his brother ordered him put out to stud on some farm.

"What will it be this time, Gunny? The last time a woman went off to start a new colony without him, Alec joined the Triden fleet. A dangerous, even reckless, career for the Emperor's heir. If it had been up to him, Alec would have gone up in flames with the ship. The piano, again? Oh, I forgot his hand. Anything is out of the question if Prince Alec can't perform to perfection. The gentleman farmer? Too tame now, I imagine, and his holdings turned over to his mother. Do you think he'll be content as a hired hand on the estate Thane has taken from him along with his name? Do you think fathering children to fill Thane's court will fill his days?" Jameelah shook with anger. *Why isn't Alec here?* She wanted to yell at Alec, to beat against his hard chest with her fists and know he could withstand her onslaught.

But Alec wasn't here. He was far away, and from Gunny's report, unable to withstand a strong breeze. *Damn it, Alec, I have to know you can survive without me.*

"Or does Emperor Thane's brother intend to take up crashing fighters into mountains again?" Gunny

wincing at her words. Was there anything she could say to make him understand, to make him see what he must do?

"No danger of that." Gunny sounded angry and defensive. "They won't let him pilot again. Too much nerve damage on the face and shoulders. And they found out he flew without his gloves. That's okay for a regular pilot, but he's a healer you know. Only one in ten million has the gift. He doesn't like to talk about that, his hands. Besides," Gunny added with a shrug, "he'd never pass the psyche test."

The defiant look of a mother lion defending her cubs faded from Gunny's face, and he gave a defeated shrug.

Jameelah clenched her fists and fought the impulse to take Gunny by the shoulders and shake him. Alec didn't need this. He needed a friend who had faith in him, not someone who had given up. In the dark while he slept, they would come to him, those other lives he'd lived in Zelat's torture chamber. Which one would break through his dreams and swallow him whole now that he was no longer Alec?

"It's different this time. You know it is, Gunny. This time he can't go back to being Alec between adventures. Alec is a traitor. Alec is dead. They've taken his name, his property, his self-respect. Who will he be now? What will he do?"

Gunny looked tortured now.

Good. This was what Jameelah wanted--someone scared, someone who recognized the danger.

He walked slowly toward the door. "The boy can't sleep without help. He wakes screaming.



During the day, all he thinks about is making things right for everyone but himself, going through the mourning ritual with the family."

Bile rose bitter in Jameelah's throat. How could his family be so heartless? "What happens after he's solved their problems? What happens when his mother and brother don't need him any longer? Does Alec have plans?"

"Alec said..." He continued on in a shaky voice, so unlike the confident Gunny. "I don't think the boy has decided. Right before they put him under to fix his ribs, he said he'd find something new to fail at. I've no doubt that he will." Gunny finally made a break for the door.

"Give him a message for me, Gunny?"

"Yes, Legate." Gunny's heels came together in a loud clap. He turned and saluted. The first sign of respect he'd shown her.

"Tell Mac that Jamie dear says it's never too late for good intentions."

"Mac, Jamie dear said it's never too late for good intentions." Gunny repeated, matching her emphasis on never and good. With a final, regret-filled look, he nodded and left.

Jameelah remembered Alec the way she saw him before she entered Thane's court for the first time, surrounded by his Triden escort, and those words he spoke before he left--*I fully intend to see you again*. Maybe, as Alec had so often said, the time for good intentions had passed.

Jameelah sank onto her narrow bed and hugged the bundle of clothes he'd brought. The tears

For the Emperor

Christine W. Murphy

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wouldn't come.

## Chapter 18

If only he could sleep, but the constant rumble of engines and tramping feet on the transport made sleep impossible. When Rami's shift took their rest period, the noise continued in his head.

Even the lights conspired against him--glaring bright during the day, a muted glow at night to allow for safe passage to and from one's bunk. No safe, black place in which to hide. When had it started, this need for sleep?

He had slept so little before. Now, he struggled to keep his eyes open long enough to answer the next question. He used to be good at this--making decisions, giving orders--but everything had changed.

Even the clothes people wore had changed. Civilian dress now, with the exception of those Triden troops who felt the need to distinguish themselves from the throng. This new place failed to provide him any definition. He had become a nameless face.

The trial had almost faded from his memory, not that he'd been clear about the proceedings while he gave evidence. He'd walked through the process as if asleep, retreating into whatever medication he could entice out of the prison doctors. It hadn't really mattered what he said. No one listened. At best, his fate would be an uninteresting footnote in the history books.

Head cradled on his arm, he almost managed to drift off. A soft hand on his shoulder brought him

fully awake. He jerked upright and pushed the woman aside.

The woman wore civilian clothes, but she was a Triden. He could smell it. He almost reached for her, his longing for human comfort stronger than his pride for a moment.

"Why don't you lie down, Rami? There's no hurry, you know. We have five years to finish our work." She stroked his hair back from his face. "Let me take you to bed. I'll get you something to help you sleep. You haven't recovered from your accident."

Accident? What was the woman talking about? His flight to New Glasgow had been no accident. That memory remained painfully clear.

Hurling toward the planet. Closer. Closer. Lorna's mangled body beside him.

He'd expected death, longed for it--to lie in the same ground, to sleep the same sleep as his beloved. He'd never intended to kill Lorna, had never intended to love her.

How it had happened still confused him. It had never happened before, not with the dozens of women he'd bedded. Their bodies had always left him sated and numb. Their spirits and minds had left his belief in the superiority of his sex smugly intact. This girl. This insignificant slip of a girl had undone him.

A month of rest or five years--not enough time to recover, never enough time. His only hope lay in that final ride and, in that, he'd failed. A tribute to her, he'd thought--a burning star in the sky. The smell of scorched circuits had filled the cabin and the contacts in the pilot's sling had melted on his skin. But,

instead of burning up in the atmosphere, he'd bounced off New Glasgow's shields, skittering along the surface.

Rami had begged them not to save him, begged them to let him die. He had never begged for anything before. Every scrap of self-respect had vanished when he lost Lorna.

"Rami? Do you remember me?" The gentle hand shook Rami's shoulder again. "My name is Teela. We work on the same shift. I'm here to help with habitat construction." Soft gray eyes, rimmed in green, dusted with flecks of gold. They couldn't be gray. Lorna's eyes were blue. Innocent eyes he'd filled with tears, innocent body he'd taken and betrayed.

And she'd made just one request of him. *Keep him safe for me.* Rami had to protect someone. Protect for her. Protect because she no longer could.

The hand again, this time on his arm.

"Let go of me, Triden bitch." He spat out the words, grinning when her smile turned into a grimace and she stepped aside. She despised him. Good. He was not the one needing care, not the one deserving it. The woman didn't follow when Rami stalked away. He had work to do, had to find the one who needed help.

The very structure of this place confused and confounded his search. The deck danced beneath his feet. The walls swayed in close and away again. Even the ladders swayed and twisted like snakes when he grabbed hold and began his ascent. Lorna would have felt at home among the tangle of metal. Where

he clawed to keep his balance, Lorna would have been sure-footed. Was this her revenge, giving him an impossible task?

It was impossible to find one person among so many. His breath caught in his throat when he realized he would fail at this too. "Forgive me, Lorna." He ignored the stares and continued to stumble along.

He knew where he was going now. He had seen the place when he first arrived. They thought he hadn't noticed. They'd blindfolded him and bound his hands to keep him from escaping, but he'd seen the way out through his closed eyes.

Desperation gave wings to his feet, and he scrambled up the final ladder. He teetered on the edge, granting himself one last memory of his love.

He tried to conjure up a tender moment of yielding, of shared affection. Had bliss ever lit her perfect face? Had he ever opened his eyes wide enough to see anything other than his own fulfillment?

The pit gaped wide before him. No comforting vision came to save him. No comforting thought sped him on his way. Only the task left undone, and regret.

Then screams from his lips. Lorna's hand slipped from his fingers and he followed her down the shaft.

Jameelah didn't stop working when Halim staggered into her office. Why couldn't the man remember to use a communicator, or at least send someone younger running when he felt the need to interrupt her for the umpteenth time?

Halim was red-faced and panting, out of shape and too old for the first wave, but the Triden Emperor had made up the passenger list without consulting her. That list included everyone on Bradley-Five, everyone who had met the Emperor's brother.

"There's been an accident."

Jameelah didn't look up. She needed just one minute more to finish her calculations.

They'd been underway for five days, and she'd expected at least a minor disaster before this. Too many people in too little space with too little time to prepare. None of her people knew the ship, which meant working closely with the sometimes-hostile Triden crew. The situation had threatened to snow her under from the minute she stepped on board. At least they hadn't left her time to think.

A few more days and they would reach the edge of the galaxy. After that, there would be no turning back until they reached their destination. In five years.

"At least, it could have been an accident. That's what I'll put in the log," Halim added.

"What are you talking about?" Jameelah looked up to find Halim inking the incident in his book of records. She'd decided to stick to paper and pen. In five years, they would have no computers. They

might as well get used to it now.

"I'm sorry, Legate Jameelah."

She frowned at his use of her former title. The old guard couldn't seem to grasp that the Imsada no longer existed as a political entity. She used her birth name now, and encouraged others to do the same.

Halim stuttered his correction. "I'm sorry, Director Jemma. The man was your former associate. I don't mean to be unfeeling, but I believe it quite likely he jumped. If he does not survive, there is no reason to subject his family to the shame, which is why I choose to record his fall as accidental."

Jemma fought not to snap at Halim. It would be like yelling at her father. She would feel guilty and ungrateful, and it wouldn't do any good.

Before she asked the obvious question, she realized she already knew the answer. She asked anyway, certain of his reply. "Who jumped, Halim?"

"The poor boy never did recover from that crash on New Glasgow. Rami looked quite dreadful at the trial. We all commented on it."

"Take me to him." Jameelah set aside her stack of papers. She'd been dreading this--their first casualty. She could only wonder that it had taken so long. Triden guards had brought him aboard bound and broken.

She'd assigned Rami to the habitat construction group for three reasons--he had trained as an architect before the Imsada recruited him, the group had five years to prepare before landfall, and Teela.



Teela specialized in architecture and in child psychology. If Rami had ever experienced a childhood, he'd left it far behind, but he did need help. Jameelah had hoped Teela could give it to him.

Jameelah followed Halim through the crowded corridors, grateful for the clothes Gunny had brought her. Alec's choices still surprised her. Along with one uniform, which she'd quickly discarded, he'd sent clothing that was neither traditional Imsada garb nor the confining skirts of an Imsada widow.

The lines of the pants and tunics were spare, colored in the traditional earth tones her people favored with no loose ends to catch on the occasional screw or hamper her when she scrambled up ladders. Layers allowed her to strip down in hot areas while maintaining her modesty and to cover up when she curled on her office couch for a nap.

She hadn't worked up her courage to join the others in the communal sleeping room for single women. Eventually she would, but not until she had to wash the shawl she wrapped herself in at night and it no longer smelled of New Glasgow and Alec.

When no trace of Alec remained, she would join the others. Until then, she clung to the faint scent of him that lingered in the fibers.

Halim slowed, winded by the sloping passageway. The transport taking them to their new home reminded her of Cestar-Two --half-finished and not entirely under anyone's control. The Emperor must have been eager to get rid of them. But they had five years to put things right.

By the time this ship and its crew returned to Triden Prime in ten years, not one member of the

Im sada or their descendants would remain in their home galaxy. The last transport would have left two years earlier. In ten years when these walls, this deck, returned home, would Alec note its passing? Would he pause to remember?

"Rami fell from up there." Halim indicated an open shaft very like the one that had claimed Lorna. A six-foot wire mesh surrounded the opening. So much for the accident theory. Rami must have climbed the access ladder to get over the barrier.

"And landed below." Halim pointed down. Fortunately, no cables or pipes had barred his path. Only the unyielding deck. There was no sign of blood.

"What do our doctors say?" she asked.

"There is no hope. The fall broke his back." Halim shrugged. "But Rami has a reputation. Some still look up to him." Jameelah conceded with a nod. Rami could cause trouble, plenty of it, if he wished. But he also had in him the potential for greatness, and they would need great men and women to build their new world.

"The woman Teela took him to the Triden doctor. Perhaps, he has some magic." Halim led the way down another ladder. Jameelah grimaced. If Halim's thinking prevailed, before they made landfall, her people would consider anything more complicated than a hammer to be magic.

She tried not to sigh too loudly at her fate. Alec had kept his promise. They had ample medical supplies and the latest equipment their people knew how to use. But the Calopians had kept them in the

dark concerning medical developments for centuries. Jameelah's people were trained to handle only the most rudimentary medical equipment. Modern medical miracles remained, just as Halim said, Triden magic.

"Quetra will do nothing," she said. "He's made his position clear. Tridens reserve their medical equipment for their own. We have to make do with what the Emperor has provided."

"Teela didn't take Rami to Quetra," he said.

Jameelah realized that now. Halim wasn't leading her toward the main medical station, or even to one of the tertiary outlets. The grain storage area filled this part of the transport. She'd visited here only once, when workers from New Glasgow had stored the supplies for their first planting. She'd felt close to Alec then, and even allowed herself to hope he would oversee the transfer himself.

"If not Quetra, then who?" She didn't expect Halim to answer. A half-dozen Triden doctors filled billets on the transport, but Quetra held jealous sway over the Triden medical personnel and supplies. What Triden would dare disobey his orders?

They approached an open area--a break in the towering crates, bright lights, filled with hushed voices. Jameelah tied her shawl closely about her shoulders. The smell of spiced oil and New Glasgow wine filling her head.

Halim ushered her forward. "This Triden serves as doctor in his secondary billet."

Jameelah ran down the list in her mind. Triden officers served two billets, a common Triden

practice she admired and had established in their own hierarchy. Alec had served as pilot and medic on his ship. Along with serving as director of the new colony, Jameelah lead the team to design and make clothing suitable for their new home.

She'd met all the Triden officers she dealt with on a daily basis, but that left dozens more in lesser positions, and political ones. Someone with advanced medical training would hold the rank of an officer. Any one of them might also be a physician.

"Their political officer?" she guessed. The Triden captain excluded him from their planning sessions. The captain considered the political officer a creature of the Emperor sent to spy on the crew and send back reports. After making landfall, he would remain at the mines to represent the Emperor's interests. The Emperor's creature, a doctor?

"Their political officer is also advisor to our own physicians," Halim said, confirming her suspicion. "No one has dared approach him until now. He spends his time here in the agricultural area. His name is Mac something. But that's what they're all called these days, aren't they?"

Could it be her Mac? No. He would have made himself known before now. He would not have tortured her this way.

When Jameelah reached the edge of the crowd, people stepped aside and made a path for her. Rami lay on a floor, pale but conscious. The man kneeling at Rami's side, his back to Jameelah, slowly raised and lowered Rami's leg. The crowd shifted restlessly in response.

Something about the scene was familiar. Jameelah joined them on the floor, kneeling beside and slightly behind the man who passed his bare hands methodically over Rami's body.

Strips of cloth--Imsada colors--kept the doctor's long black hair, peppered with gray, tied back, but strands of loose hair in front kept her from seeing his face. It took all of her strength not to put out her hand and brush the hair aside.

Afraid to believe the doctor might be Alec, she took Rami's hand. She started when he opened his eyes and spoke to her.

"I've found him, Jameelah. Now I can take care of him like Lorna asked." Rami remained lucid for only a moment. He closed his eyes and his face went slack.

She realized with a start that still another had taken up Lorna's last request. Jameelah, Alec, and now Rami all thought Lorna spoke her last words to them. Maybe she had. Maybe Lorna had asked them all to take care of each other.

Her eyes filling with tears, Jameelah noticed Teela kneeling across from her. She looked up with alarm when Rami closed his eyes.

The doctor spoke in a reassuring tone, his hands glowing a faint blue above the patient's chest. "I can feel damage to his spine, but I've brought his vital signs to near normal. He'll live. Most likely even walk again."

That voice, that wonderful New Glasgow lilt. Jameelah felt her entire body begin to shake when

Alec spoke.

"Regenerating broken spinal cords is something we've almost perfected. I was in worse shape less than a year ago. Three, maybe four months, and we'll know for certain. His mind will take longer to heal."

Then Alec turned toward her. His face shone with sweat from working in the tight circle of people. He hastily ran a hand across his face as if afraid to lose sight of her for a moment. So many emotions played across his face, but fear flickered deep in his eyes.

He pulled on his gloves first, then took her by the shoulders and lifted her to her feet. By the time they left the crowd, she trembled so badly he had to support her.

"Alec," she started, still not convinced he held her.

His response was immediate and firm. "No, not Alec. Prince Alec died on New Glasgow."

As if to ensure her silence, his mouth descended on hers. When she responded to the gentle pressure of his lips by opening her mouth, he deepened the kiss, his tongue lazily searching for hers.

She gasped for breath and he pulled away, still offering her support.

"I'm Mac Millard now, and it looks to me like you could use another doctor on this trip."

"But Quetra said he will only authorize the use of Triden technology to benefit the crew."

"I'm the political officer. Or didn't you know? I can take what I want, and do what I want. Not even the Commanding Officer dares cross me. I suspect the Imsada Director in charge of the new colony,

however, will give me no end of trouble."

This is crazy, Jameelah thought, even as she continued to cling to him, her hands caressing his chest. Quetra was the least of their worries. What would Thane do when he found out?

As if sensing her thoughts, he shook his head. "You don't have to worry. I didn't run away. No one's going to come and drag me off. Thane sent me."

Jameelah tried to assimilate his words. Had he come to check on things for his brother? Would he leave in two days when the last shuttle returned to Triden-Prime? He would have to leave or become trapped on the transport when it started its five-year series of jumps.

But he had fulfilled his promise, he'd come to her one more time before she left. She buried her head in his chest, breathing deeply and wrapping her arms around his back. Alec smelled exactly as she remembered, but with a hint of disinfectant, not wine. The Emperor would pull him off before he left the galaxy.

His hand on her chin, Alec forced her to look up. His fearful green eyes deepened with passion. He took hold of both her arms and held them out between them.

Forced to stand painful inches from him, she noted the dark circles that stained his cheeks below each eye. She knew his dreams still woke him in the night and he called for her only to find himself alone. She could see the pain on his face, hear him begging her not to leave even while he held her at a distance.

If he couldn't say the words, then she would. "I want you to stay with us. We need you here."

"Of course, you do." His voice was full of false bravado. "I control all this medical equipment and have only five years to train someone to use it. Then there's maintenance and repair. And I really need to be on site to see which of my seeds is best for the soil. Survey reports don't tell the whole story. Yearly temperature variations can make the difference, and your farmers will need to be able to respond quickly to problems. A major crop failure during the first decade could be disastrous." He swallowed hard as if choking back the words he wanted to say instead of the easy banter that flowed from his mouth. She stopped him with one finger pressed against his lower lip.

"I want you to stay with me, Mac. Now that I have you here, I don't plan to let you go."

A smile threatened to light his face, but he pulled her farther into the corridor that ran behind the storage bin. "We have to talk." Serious talk from the look on his face. "The Emperor let me leave New Glasgow, but with certain conditions."

Of course, how could she forget, the fake execution had taken away only his identity, not his duties. He was still the Emperor's only heir. "You have to leave. I understand. How long can you stay? Until we make landfall?"

Mac, still solemn, shook his head, his lower lip firmly clenched between his teeth.

"Two days? One?" Mac's expression didn't change. "You don't have to leave now do you? We've wasted all this time. You should have come to me sooner." Jameelah found herself pounding on his



chest. He captured her hands again and forced her to remain still.

"I had purely selfish reasons for not making my presence known. I wanted to wait until it was too late for you to tell me to leave. I wanted to wait until you had no choice but to listen to me and I had five years to convince you."

"Convince me of what?" Suddenly wary, Jameelah drew away. His last round of negotiations had landed her, and the rest of her people, on this one-way trip out of the galaxy.

"Time is not our problem, Jamie. My duty is. I need your cooperation to stay."

Jameelah shook her head in confusion. His duty? Her cooperation?

"Gunny said he told you about Thane and Tam. Unless Tam agrees to provide Thane with children, I remain Thane's sole heir."

Jameelah nodded. Alec had an obligation to fulfill. She understood that. Alec had to have children. Had he brought along that suitable girl Gunny had mentioned? Had he come all this way to tell her he'd married? She lifted her chin and stiffened her spine, prepared to be brave.

"Tam agreed to do her part to produce royal heirs if Thane agreed to give me my freedom, but with one important condition." Alec cleared his throat and forced himself to continue.

"My brother and I refuse to foster out any of our children. We've seen what that can do to a family. Having blood heirs, myself and my children, living in another household will allow Thane to keep his family together without fear of assassins eliminating his line. So, if I want to stay with the colony, I must

complete one more duty for the Emperor."

Jameelah's hands curled into fists, her heart continued to pound in her throat. She had guessed correctly. Babies. The man was talking about babies. Did he expect to get her blessing?

"If I haven't produced an heir before we make landfall, the Triden Commander has orders to put me on the next transport back to New Glasgow. Bound and gagged if necessary."

Alec gripped her arms again, then he let his hands trace a lazy path down to play with her fingers. "What do you say, Jamie?"

She blinked rapidly, pushing back her tears. "What do you want me to say, Mac?"

"I can hardly lock the director of the colony in my bedroom and force her to conceive my children. It would be undignified, for both of us. Not to mention exhausting. You're in much better shape than I, Jamie."

Jameelah felt her mouth drop open.

He raised his hand, and in a gesture that had become familiar, brushed her hair from her eyes. "Say you'll have my children, Jamie. Say you'll share my bed."

Jameelah couldn't think what to say after such a frank request, but her body knew what to do. Flinging herself into his arms, she let her lips tell him that he would have his children, and her enthusiasm had nothing to do with producing heirs for the Emperor.

A low chuckle filled Mac's throat as he fought for balance. "We have five years, Jamie. There's

time. We don't have to start this minute."

"But we could. I intend to see that you complete this mission for the Emperor." Jameelah untangled herself. "We can use my office."

Alec changed direction, leading her aft. The corridors blurred. She followed, enjoying the view from behind while he pulled her after him.

"Good intentions, I'm sure, but I'm not up to gymnastics on your desk. Besides, I'd rather you stay with me. As political officer, I claimed the best room with the biggest bed for myself. Space enough for two, three families, at least. I expect to endure years of scolding for my extravagant quarters. And I brought my piano."

He shivered in his damp clothes. Alec needed a hot shower, dry clothes, and sleep. She would see that he got the first two immediately, but sleep could wait. She could tell by the way his forefinger made lazy circles in her palm that he had no intention of sleeping in that big bed. And if he had the ill-manners to doze, she didn't doubt she could rouse him.

He stopped at a door with *Mac Millard--Political Officer* engraved gold letters. With one hand on the door, he pulled her to him, kissing her full on the mouth, teasing it open with his tongue. She put out her hand and stopped him from opening the door. He groaned in protest.

"What now, Jamie? I've told you my real name. I've changed it to Mac just to please you. What more do you want?" He pulled her closer, bumping his hips against hers so she could feel how ready he

was to take her inside.

"Empress Tam, Emperor Thane--they both made conditions. I also have a condition, Mac. A demand, if you want to look at it that way."

Alec hesitated, something flickering across his face she didn't recognize. Not fear, not any more. He looked happy and fulfilled, like he knew what he wanted to do with the rest of his life. "I thought asking for your hand could wait a day or two. Rami is in no condition to give his blessing today."

"I have quite a different demand in mind. Although, you can persuade me to marry you if you're persistent." Alec gave her another playful bump with his hips, and opened the door. "Oh, I can be very persistent, Jamie."

"You took up precious living space to bring that piano of yours along. Such a waste of space. My condition for cooperation--you will play for me once a day."

"Anything you say, Jamie dear, anything." He closed her mouth with his and carried her over the threshold.

\* THE END \*