

Book 5 of the Series

SIREN WARRIOR: SAVAGE PURSUIT

MICHELLE MARQUIS
& LINDSEY BAYER

SIREN WARRIOR BOOK 5: SAVAGE PURSUIT

by

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SIREN WARRIOR BOOK 5:
SAVAGE PURSUIT

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Warrior Chronicles keeps on getting better and better.”*
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Dedication

To the fans.

Prologue

Death was everywhere.

From the small huts the villagers lived in to the modest stone village center, bodies littered the streets in the beginning stage of decay. In the cloudy sky above, buzzards lazily circled, waiting for the band of mercenary intruders to leave them to their feast in peace. Desmond rode behind Gavin and Gypsy. As Desmond's hyperia stepped over the carnage, an overwhelming sense of dread filled him. The last thing he wanted to see was Gavin's wife raped and slaughtered, her body tossed like so much discarded trash among the common dead. He didn't know her very well but the effect that she had on his father was nothing short of amazing. Her influence had, unbelievably, driven Gavin to become a better person. Something Desmond would never have thought possible.

Gavin had taken on that grim darkness he was famous for. He didn't speak but took in everything: every rancid corpse; every crushed child; every burned out home. He was like the angel of death taking inventory of his new domain. After what seemed like a lifetime they reached the medical tent. All around it soldiers lay butchered, resting in their own dried blood and gore. The small detail had fought well but was overwhelmed by their attacker's numbers. Desmond knew a couple of the dead personally. The pain that crept through

him was as familiar as an old lover. It was a pain that greeted every soldier on every campaign as they watched their friends fall beside them.

He swallowed the black doom filling his throat. His father dismounted to enter the tent and Desmond caught some motion out of the corner of his eye. Gypsy was starting to dismount as well but Desmond grabbed her forearm and shook his head. She looked upset but nestled back into her saddle as Gavin slipped inside like a ghost returning to the underworld.

Desmond ached to cover his ears from that horrible roar he knew would come from Gavin with the discovery of Harlan's body. Against his will, he was flung back in time to Gavin's killing of his older brother Northe so long ago. He could hear it now in his memory as it echoed through his mind. He *hated* that roar—that bone-jarring battle cry that could only mean one thing—death.

Clenching his teeth, he forced himself back to the present and waited. It was the longest vigil of his life and it felt like he had a noose around his neck waiting for that trapdoor to finally send him to a bottomless hell.

But then Gavin emerged without Harlan's body in his arms and Desmond dared to hope that maybe—just maybe—she was still alive somewhere. He sure hoped so because that was one miracle the world could really use.

Gavin glared at each of them. When he spoke, he sounded like a maniac on the verge of an all-night rampage. "I want all of you to search every square inch of this village. Make certain Harlan is not here. You are to report back to me in ten minutes."

Everyone spread out searching. A few minutes later, Gypsy called out, "I found something!"

Gavin and the troop joined her at a large bush partially obscuring the entrance of a narrow mountain trail. He stalked up and plucked a tiny strip of cloth off a spiky branch. He moved it up to his nose and inhaled it. "Clever girl," he rumbled. Then he turned and addressed all of them. "Harlan is alive. We will ride all night to close the distance between her captors and ourselves. Everyone will keep up the pace or die trying. There is no room for failure here. I *will* have my wife back. I don't care if it kills me or all of you in the process. She *will* be retrieved, dead or alive. Do I make myself clear?"

A chorus of voices rose from the troops and soon they were all following behind Gavin, riding up the trail at a frenzied pace.

Desmond glanced at Scarlet who looked as nervous as a cat in a dog pack. She looked over at him, pale and lost. She was in for some real school now that was for damn sure.

He just wished he'd packed a much larger whiskey flask.

Chapter 1

Terror is a devastating emotion to feel for an extended period of time. It devours hope and forces death scenarios into one's head with breathtaking vividness. But the real desolation isn't so much the prospect of being killed but the possibility of losing a future with loved ones. That, for Doctor Harlan Theron, was a far worse fate than any beatings or torture her kidnappers could inflict.

Harlan estimated that she and her AEssyrian captors had been on this muddy trail for at least twenty-four hours with only a few short stops. They'd ridden through the rainy night and into the balmy day without making camp, passing nameless towns and destitute villages that reeked with the stench of poverty and decay. On and on they rode, through the narrow mountain passes and shallow rivers with only her fear to occupy the time. The abrasive rope that bound her had already rubbed her wrists raw and her legs ached from the continuous riding. The images that played through her mind were made worse by not knowing why they had taken *her* after slaughtering everyone else. The screams and smells of the dying echoed through her memory and twisted her heart.

Nothing could make her understand why an entire town had been destroyed.

There was no war in this area and the town had nothing of value. It was as though they had taken pleasure in the desperate pain of those they murdered. Her quiet mourning then turned to the soldiers who had accompanied her to the satellite clinic. Some of them she'd known for many years and they had lost their lives defending her, had lost a future with their own loved ones. As she felt herself slipping under a blanket of sorrow she knew it was time to focus on surviving long enough to escape or be rescued. Shifting in the saddle, her mouth tightened into a painful wince as she wrung her wrists in the ropes trying to work in a little slack.

Sulla, the criminal leader of this band of thugs, rode up alongside her and she immediately stilled her hands. He was a young male, probably around two hundred years old, but still remarkably large. Harlan guessed him at about two hundred and fifty pounds. He had three diagonal scars marring his face that looked to be trident marks. One ran along his forehead to his jaw, one past his cheekbone and along the rise of his nose, and a shorter one on his chin. His metallic green eyes looked dull from inadequate nutrition as was common in these poor rural parts of the planet.

"We need to stop so I can relieve myself," Harlan complained to him in *AEssyrian*.

Sulla squinted off at the trail ahead. "One more hour," he replied.

"No," she said, making sure to keep her voice firm. "I can't wait another hour. I need to go now."

Sulla barked an order to stop. The males up ahead reined up their mounts, looking back at them with vague curiosity. You'd think they'd be getting used to Harlan's breaks. Although Sulla had resisted the stops at first, Harlan concocted a

story about human female physiology and the necessity of relief every few hours or the potential for illness. She was sure it was much more detailed information than he ever wanted to know and finally he relented.

Grabbing her hyperia's bridle, Sulla escorted her to a small clearing of trees and dismounted. Carefully she slid down the side of her mount and almost fell from the stiffness in her legs. Once she had regained her balance she turned holding her hands out to him. He unbound her wrists laying the short length of rope over the front of his saddle. Then he took a few steps back and watched her. Mild disgust oozed throughout her stomach making her nauseous. *He is not standing here watching me go to the bathroom.*

"Turn around," she said, pointing at him and twirling her finger in a circle.

A full-grown bull male would have been outraged at the way she was speaking to him, but Sulla was still young and apparently inexperienced in hostage taking. He gave a quick snort and turned his back to her. Harlan quickly tended to her business with as much privacy as she could expect. Pulling up her shorts, she buttoned them and pulled a few threads from the cargo pockets dropping them on the ground. Her lips were dry and tacky from the slight dehydration she was experiencing. Her captors were not depriving her of water, she was purposely limiting her intake. Since her bathroom breaks were somewhat infrequent she wanted her urine to be as concentrated as possible to help Gavin track her. Thankfully these criminals were too stupid to realize what she was doing. Any experienced soldier, mercenary or bounty hunter would have caught on to her little trail marking routine immediately and put a stop to it.

While Sulla's back was turned she leaned against one of the trees and wiped the sweat from her palms down the craggy bark before he turned around again. AEssyrians had an outstanding sense of smell; anyone following them would surely pick up the many scent markings she'd been leaving all along her journey. She had also dropped every item contained in her pockets along the way, including a few pens, some bandage strips, a thermometer and a small tube of antiseptic salve. All she had left to mark her trail now were bits of thread from her clothes, strands of hair from her head, and blood, sweat and urine from her body.

There was no doubt in her mind that her husband, General Gavin Theron, was coming for her. He was an obsessively territorial bull male and the kidnapping of his wife would be intolerable to him. She also knew he loved her with a desperation that bordered on madness. For a second she almost felt sorry for these criminals but when she thought about the carnage that they had left in Sanguar the feeling passed quickly.

Sulla mounted back up on his hyperia and roughly grabbed her upper arm. With little regard to how much force he was using he yanked Harlan up off her feet and dropped her into the saddle of the mottled gray hyperia that had been totting her around. Harlan cried out and viciously pulled at his fingers with her other hand until his grip was gone. The hyperia, agitated by the commotion, tried to bite him and got an angry right cross for its trouble. It shook its head a few times and hissed at the AEssyrian. Sulla ignored the beast and picked up the length of rope to tie Harlan's hands again. "Is that really necessary?" she asked. "Where am I going to go? I don't even have any idea where we are."

He seemed to consider this for a moment then left her hands free. It was a minor mercy she greatly appreciated. They rode back to the group and continued their journey. She had given up asking where they were going since, thus far, all her inquiries were met with silence. Harlan's thoughts returned to Gavin. If there was ever a man she wanted on her side, it was her ruthless husband. It gave her comfort to know that he was hunting for her. That realization was made all the more convincing since he'd rescued her from touchy situations in the past. She recalled back when Emperor Megolyth was little more than the leader of a band of wandering marauders. Gavin had risked war to persuade him to release her after she'd foolishly ridden out to their encampment and was taken prisoner.

Gavin was an interesting study in the hidden darkness of a man's soul. Born in a whorehouse to a human prostitute, he'd grown up in the back alleys of AEssyrian society. He trained himself to fight and struggled through the military ranks until he'd achieve what few men in his position could dream of: a generalship. But the very thing that made him such a successful soldier made him a despicable mate. He was a brute and a bully to the women in his life and the military always came first. He was also a notorious drunkard and an unrepentant womanizer. Because of these vices, and so many others, he floundered from one failed relationship to another.

Harlan met him while working a short medical contract on AEssyria. She smiled as she recalled how much she'd hated him. He was everything a sane woman avoided in a man: loud; arrogant; aggressive, and proud to a fault. Not to mention a little bit crazy. He pursued her for two years, forcing

himself into her life to the point where he'd even physically prevented her from leaving the planet to escape him.

But then something extraordinary happened.

Through all his bad manners and annoying meddling he'd shown her the man he really was. Not the hulking evil general everyone else saw, but the man he would have been had it not been for all those demons of his past that haunted his mind. He bared his soul to her and vowed his love, and as much as she didn't want to believe him, she did. That's when he had her. And now, in the company of these ruthless murdering punks, it was clear to her that he was her best hope. Because the only thing that she knew for sure, the only thing that helped her keep her sanity, was the knowledge that her husband was coming for her. And he wouldn't stop until he had her back, dead or alive. And if these scumbags ended up killing her, Harlan knew Gavin would give new meaning to the phrase "a fate worse than death".

Chapter 2

The three moons climbed into the sky above and could just be made out through the treetops as they set up the first camp. After riding through the previous night and day, Gypsy's muscles throbbed as she fed and watered her hyperia, absently watching the mercenaries set up Gavin's tent. In the field the senior officers always had tents. It was where they held meetings, conducted briefings, and slept. The rest of the men and junior officers made camp on the ground among the members of their unit.

Gypsy had never spent any time with mercenaries and just being around them made her bristle. They spoke to each other in low tones, watched everything that was done and listened to everything that was said. These vermin certainly gave her the creeps. She wished they didn't have to rely on them but her mother had been kidnapped across the border and the neighboring king was not about to allow Gavin to march through his lands with an army. The king had granted permission for a rescue party of no more than thirty participants. All but three had to be civilians. Gavin had been furious but knew that they could have been barred from crossing the border entirely. Sometimes Gavin's reputation could be a bit of a liability and despite Megolyth's fondness for Harlan, the emperor wasn't about to risk war for her. So here they were: her fa-

ther, her half-brother, the new doctor and twenty-six probable criminals. She wished Caraculla had come with them. Her heart ached at how much she missed him and despite their argument she could really use his support, even if it was just to cry on his shoulder.

Heaving the saddle off of her mount Gypsy carried it over to a clear spot and dropped it on the ground. She unpacked some of her supplies and piled a few stones in a small circle nearby. Breaking off a chunk of dead wood from an old fallen tree she pulled her minitorch from her supplies and depressed the button several times until the flame ignited. Despite the exhaustion creeping through her body and numbing her senses she was angry that they were making camp at all. Logically she knew it was a necessity but the thought of her mother being assaulted or tortured while they ate and slept was making her crazy. *If we could just ride a little longer maybe we could catch up.* But her father's rage was extremely unpredictable at this point and she couldn't bring herself to question him.

Her campfire had barely begun to smolder when she felt Desmond come up behind her. She looked back at him and smiled. At six foot five he was just a few inches shorter than Gavin and almost as big. For such a large man it was amazing how quick and silent his movements were. His long dirty blonde hair had been divided up into probably a hundred braids and tied back. She knew it was a style of ease that he preferred on campaigns. Gypsy also noted that his handsome face was pale with tension. She wondered if he might be sick. "What's wrong with you?" she asked.

"Nothing. Being around Gavin for too long causes me an enormous amount of stress," Desmond replied, his voice sounding hoarse. "Speaking of which, he wants to see you."

Gypsy got up and walked over toward Gavin's tent. Still somewhat lost in her thoughts her eyes caught sight of a large shadow before her and she stopped just short of smacking into one of the mercenaries. He stared down at her and made no motion to move from in front of her. Gypsy made hard eye contact with him. "Are you lost?"

The mercenary watched her for a second longer than she was comfortable with. She placed her hand on the hilt of her saber. Gypsy kept an unwavering stare on him and he looked past her, probably to see where Desmond was. Then slowly he shuffled off to the side and walked away. She sighed and came to the entrance flap of Gavin's tent as another one of the mercenaries checked the security of the stakes, slowly hammering one of them into the hard dirt. The flap was tied open and she could see her father inside kneeling on the ground studying a map stretched out before him. She cleared her throat and Gavin looked up. There was something grim and sinister about him that made her skin crawl. His features were hard and focused with the intensity of a compulsive lunatic.

"You sent for me, Excellency?" she said, fighting to keep her voice steady.

"Come in," he replied stiffly, getting to his feet.

She entered the tent and stood at attention. A nervous sickness settled in her gut and she was starting to know what her brother was talking about.

Gavin extended a black gloved hand and opened it. His palm held the collar insignia of a lieutenant junior grade. "I am promoting you for this mission," he said. "Because you are in the academy studying to be an officer, you will now see firsthand what that life is all about. From this moment on, you will be my second-in-command and answer only to me. It is

your job to organize the mercenaries and assign them their daily duties. You will develop and rotate a watch bill, coordinate the hunting parties, ensure the canteens are filled when we break camp and that the scout has a full route plotted for each day's ride. Everyone with the exception of me and the doctor will be assigned a watch. I expect you to work with your brother to ensure all these things are taken care of. Do you understand those instructions?"

Gypsy's head was spinning. She swallowed. "Yes, Excellency."

"General?" Doctor Scarlet Jonson said, popping her head in the tent.

"What is it?" Gavin snapped.

"I came by to examine your back," she said. "Would you like me to come back later?"

"No," Gavin said, unbuttoning his tunic. He slipped it off his massive shoulders and sat cross-legged on the ground. Gavin's back was a map of scars padded all over by thick sculptured muscle. With even the most innocent movement, he broadcast strength and power. Scarlet knelt down behind him draping her long red hair behind her ears. The pale skin of her forehead was creased with tension as she nervously sucked her bottom lip. Having only been on *AEssyria* for a short amount of time she had not yet become accustomed to the humid climate and her face was damp and glossy. A few trickles of sweat ran from her hairline. Her mouth sank into a deep frown as she glanced back at Gypsy.

Even knowing little about medicine, Gypsy could see where the doctor's concern was attached. In the middle of Gavin's back, surrounding the wide raised vertebra, there was a pocket of swelling. Gavin didn't say a word but Gypsy knew

he was probably in a lot of pain, which would do little to enhance his already surly personality. She pushed the pointed end of the insignia into her collar and twisted on the backing while watching the doctor work.

Scarlet placed her hand on Gavin's back close to the swelling. Then she took out a quick-ice pack and snapped it in half to activate the cold. She placed it on the angry bulge, her fingers flexing with the pressure she applied. In response a few of the surrounding muscles spasmed after making contact with the ice pack.

"Give me something for the pain," he rumbled.

Gypsy was suddenly aware that she was staring and couldn't look away. It was a weird feeling to know that her father, the man she'd always thought so invincible, actually had a physical weakness. What if he couldn't finish this mission? *Can I find my mother and save her without him?* She just hoped it wouldn't come to that.

Scarlet took out a preloaded injection and ran her thumb along Gavin's back to find the right spot. She hesitated. "General, there is no drinking while on this drug. If you do, it could kill you."

Gavin grunted and Gypsy knew that sound. It was a dismissal, not an agreement to anything like so many mistook it for. It was his way of telling a person to screw off and avoid a confrontation at the same time. Scarlet found the right spot and injected him. Gavin arched his back and let out a chilling hiss. He opened his one good eye and it glowed with pure animal fury. It focused on Gypsy and her heart turned to ice. She immediately knew that she had lingered a moment too long.

"Is there a reason why you're just standing there gawking? Get the fuck to work."

"Yes, Excellency," Gypsy said. She stepped outside and looked down at the mercenary who, she noted, was hammering the same stake as when she entered the tent. "I think it's secure. You need to move on and find something else to do," she said, waving him away from Gavin's tent. The rest of the mercenaries were standing around talking and all the camp equipment was thrown carelessly on the ground. *If Gavin sees this he's going to ream my ass!*

She went over and was about to pick some of it up when Desmond stepped in front of her. He gave one short shake of his head as if she was about to pick up a deadly snake. Silently he approached the mercenaries and walked right into the middle of their conversation. "Do you want to eat or gossip? Because I can easily eat your rations in addition to my own," he said with smooth confidence.

They scattered without incident, each man getting to his assigned task. Desmond returned to Gypsy. He reached out and straightened her collar examining the new insignia. "Congratulations," he said with a humorless smile.

"Thanks. I was afraid you would be mad."

Desmond barked a short laugh and shook his head. "Are you kidding? I wouldn't want to be in your position for all the lands in the empire."

"That makes me feel much better. Thanks a lot," she said watching the mercenaries and feeling incredibly lost. How the hell was she going to get these assholes to listen to her? They weren't like normal soldiers. They had no respect for military rank and they especially had no respect for women.

"Don't worry, I'll help you along," Desmond said, pulling a metal flask from his boot and unscrewing the top. "First of all, keep in mind that there are some key differences between

mercenaries and soldiers. The main point being that a soldier is more afraid of disobeying an order than dying a horrible death. Since we all know soldiers barely make any money they are not motivated by it in the least. A mercenary is only concerned with getting paid and protecting their own skin. Every order you give these bastards needs to contain the underlying threat of losing pay or their life. Those mercenaries who are an asset to your mission rather than a hindrance get more pay and more rations. That's how you control them."

Gypsy nodded trying to absorb everything he was telling her while drawing a mental list of the tasks Gavin had given her. "Alright, what else do I need to know?"

Desmond grinned down at her and she noticed some of the color had returned to his face. "Let's recap first. What are these men?"

"They're mercenaries," she sighed. Sometimes her brother's sense of humor was tiresome.

"Good. And how do you motivate them?"

Gypsy tilted her head to one side and pulled her mouth into a straight line of annoyance. "With money and food. I think I've got it now."

He held up his index finger waving it back and forth for her to wait. "Since they are not soldiers, what else can you do?"

"I don't know, Desmond. What else can I do?" she said, untying her bedroll from her saddle.

"You can fire them if they are not doing their job or they become a hindrance to this mission. Do you know how you fire a mercenary?" He leaned down to her and looked her with his yellow eyes.

Gypsy stared back at him still holding her bedroll but no longer untying it. "No."

"You kill him."

"Really?"

"You bet your ass. These lowlifes are very well paid. They are probably earning three times what you and I are getting. But they will exploit any weakness they perceive in any of us. Especially Nero. He's the biggest fucking prick in the bunch and the most dangerous. If he or any of them step out of line, you deal with them swiftly and painfully. If it's necessary to kill one of them to make a point then do it. Make an example of him or the rest will see you as weak and will mutiny. They can easily devolve into a pack mentality like a bunch of wolves so you need to be sure that you remain alpha at all times. Even to me." He slapped her on the back roughly. "You'll do fine. I know most of these guys so I'll help you figure out what you're going to delegate to whom. There are twenty-seven men on this excursion so you should be doing very little. You just need to be sure that everything is getting done. Let's start with the most important duties: the hunting party and the watch bill."

Gypsy nodded, feeling incredibly grateful for Desmond's help, and pulled a pad and pen out of her saddlebag. "You know I really appreciate you being so helpful. I won't forget it."

"Save your gratitude. I have ulterior motives. I plan on getting you through this with as much success as possible because the way I see it is, if anything happens to you, that cyclopean son of a bitch is going to start casting that evil eye my way and I have no interest in being his second-in-command."

"I'm still grateful," she said while scribbling a list of the mercenaries on her pad.

"Well you enjoy that feeling while it lasts because I'm pretty sure you'll realize what a fucked up position you're in by the time a few days have passed."

* * * *

Desmond had never been the jealous type. Oh sure, he'd had women *try* to make him jealous by flirting with other men in the bars as he watched. But he had never been so emotionally invested in any woman to be upset by another man's attentions. So when he found himself becoming angry when Nero leered at Scarlet, the emotion was completely foreign to him.

This evening it seemed like Nero was doing everything in his power to piss Desmond off. He'd called Scarlet over to a corner of the camp to talk to her in hushed tones, much to the doctor's obvious discomfort. Of course all of it was done under the guise of discussing his latest health concerns but Desmond knew better. In his half-wit way, Nero was attempting to groom Scarlet for a seduction. It would have been laughable had it not been for the fact that Nero thought he actually had a chance with her.

Finally, after the third time Nero beckoned Scarlet to his dark corner of the camp, Desmond had had enough. He came over with his hand on his weapon in case Nero had enough balls to try something violent.

"What's your problem?" Desmond said. Scarlet moved behind Desmond looking relieved.

Nero glared at him. "I don't have a problem. I was just asking the doctor some questions. Is that a crime?"

"If you're sick we'll need to leave you behind," Desmond replied.

"I'm not sick!" Nero snarled angrily.

"Then fuck off and leave the doctor alone. She's not your personal physician."

Nero shook his head and sulked off to brood. Desmond turned to Scarlet and said, "I don't think it's a good idea you sleeping in a tent by yourself so I'm going to share yours from now on."

Scarlet blinked at him in surprise. She'd had her tent pitched right next to Gavin's in case he needed anything during the night, which she was sure he often would.

"Okay," she replied. "Should we move my tent further away from the general's?"

"Let's not bother. When we set up camp again we can add some distance, but it's fine for now."

Noticing the disruption, Gypsy came over to them. "What going on?"

"Nero's being his usual asshole self and harassing the doctor, so I'm going to stay in her tent at night from now on," he said, annoyed by how angry he sounded.

Gypsy cast a nasty look in the direction Nero had gone. He was out of sight, hiding in the cluster that was the mercenary section. She returned her attention to Scarlet. "Is that okay with you?"

Scarlet looked up at Desmond. "Sure. I'm fine with that. We pretty much live together anyway."

* * * *

Torturous lust was robbing him of sleep and Scarlet, only a few inches away, was to blame. She looked like a sleeping goddess. Her long red hair framed her pale face and rested

carelessly across the large swell of her breasts. Her plump lips were an inviting dark pink and he longed to kiss her. He was sure he'd never seen a more beautiful woman.

Watching her doze was killing him, making his cock heavy and hard, like a piece of steel between his legs. It throbbed hungrily as his brain picked up the soft undercurrent of her female scent. In his fever, he almost forgave Nero for wanting her. She had a lush, innocent sensuality and he found her unbearably sexy.

Lying on his side he reached out to her, pulling her against him. Scarlet smiled lazily and wrapped her arms around him. She yawned and nuzzled his neck. Running his fingers into her hair, he kissed her deeply. Her scent grew sweeter, richer, like blossoming flowers in spring and a carnal fever tore through his body. She kissed him back, pushing her breasts against his chest, and he nearly lost his mind.

Desmond's fingertips moved up under her shirt skimming the landscape of her flesh. She uttered a delicate sigh, not unlike the sound an angel might make, and wriggled her body to tease him. He found a plump nipple and pinched it, massaging its ripe fullness under thumb and forefinger. Then his hand wandered, palming the fleshy mound of Scarlet's breast and kneading it like firm morning dough. Each bold exploration brought new sounds from his lover; light, intoxicating notes that sent pure fire into his blood. The feel of her warm skin against his hand was the most natural thing in the world. It brought him a pure and unblemished joy that his wounded heart had only known with her.

His cock, which had been dormant most of this mission, was alive and pulsing with its insistent need for Scarlet's wet

heat. Did she know what she did to him with her lustful touches and gentle sighs? How could she not?

Boldly touching her yielding center he was overwhelmed by the slick hunger he found there. Animal lust twisted his gut, rebelling against his demand for kindness. A deeper expedition into her center brought a catch in the cadence of her breath spilling her witchcraft into his heart. By the Gods, how he loved her.

Desmond removed his fingers, inhaling the perfume of her succulent pussy. He slid his tongue along his fingers savoring the salty-sweetness of her cream until all remnants of her were gone. Then he seized the shaft of his cock and, pushing her panties aside, rubbed the swollen tip against her plump lips. A rush of clutching pleasure filled his cock and balls forcing him to stop moving for a minute or risk a climax too soon. Scarlet squirmed restlessly as she waited, as desperate as he was to begin their lovemaking again.

Fumbling under the blanket, he stripped her cotton panties off. With his hands on her hips, he guided her closer, lifting her leg up to rest on his hip. Then, in a moment of pure bliss, he found her soft wet heat and his cock was swallowed whole. The pleasure of her pussy around him was so intense, he moaned louder than he'd intended.

Scarlet giggled and kissed him. "Shhh," she whispered.

He pumped his cock inside her, pausing here and there to savor the feel of her. Scarlet's gentle groans drove him to move harder, faster, until he felt the slick walls of her sex squeezing him as she climaxed. Clutching her buttocks, he drove up into her. Every inch of liquid friction brought more and more ecstasy until he simply couldn't hold his passion in

any longer. Burying his face between her breasts, he moaned out his climax hoping her flesh would muffle his cry.

Then they lay with their arms around each other. They stayed that way, connected in silence, until his erection faded and slipped out. Scarlet was captured by sleep first, leaving Desmond to wrestle with his conflicted emotions.

Chapter 3

Finally the night—but it held no comfort of sleep for Gavin. Outside the mercenaries slumbered without a care for the person they were searching for. Was the general's wife alive or dead, or being tortured just for the sadistic joy of it? None of the sleeping swine outside gave those possibilities a thought. All they gave a shit about, all they lived for was their pay. If they only knew how much their lives depended on her safe rescue, they wouldn't dare be so carefree with their rest.

Harlan, where have they taken you, my beloved? General Gavin Theron paced his tent, his mind savaging him with rage and worry. Every few minutes he would stop, run his fingers through his hair and fight off the urge to wake the camp. *It's too early yet.* The mercenaries weren't like him; they wouldn't push themselves beyond reason to find his wife. No—Gavin was forced to wait at least one more hour or risk the pigs rebelling.

Gavin covered his face with his hands and sank down into his bedding. Every passing second was a lifetime of agony. Closing his eyes he could hear her warm, velvet voice like delicate kisses on his ears. He wanted her back with a passion that was pure madness and fever, and it took every ounce of restraint he had not to just ride off alone. But this was where his experience took over, for he knew trying to find her with-

out the mercenaries was close to impossible. He needed them to hunt and scout, and when the time came to catch the criminals who had taken his wife and slaughtered his soldiers, he needed them to die.

His got to his feet and his back kinked sending out shock waves of horrible pain. Gavin doubled over, gritting his teeth so he wouldn't cry out. The last thing he needed was those bloodthirsty vultures knowing how vulnerable he was. Charges of sharp white suffering rocketed down every nerve in his spine. With a trembling hand, he reached out and grabbed the silver, oblong pill box next to his bedding and popped it open. Measuring out three in his palm, he tossed them into his mouth and washed them down with a long gulp from his whiskey flask. His stomach turned in a second of resistance but soon settled again.

Gingerly he lay down on his side and waited for the drugs and alcohol to take effect. He only wished it would ease the anguish in his heart.

In his eight hundred and twenty years, Gavin had known a lot of women. He even thought he'd been in love a few times, but no woman, human or otherwise had ever come close to what he felt for his wife Harlan. She was light and happiness in his otherwise dark existence. His devotion to her went beyond love; she was an essential part of him, like the cornerstone of a fortress. She had shown him not only the true meaning of love, but how it could make him stronger. His wife was as brave as any soldier in his army and as noble as any monarch. Even if she'd never agreed to marry him, he still would have worshipped her. And now she was lost and he was to blame for not providing her with enough protection.

Gavin picked up his flask again and downed a few more gulps. Getting up was now easier, the emerging buzz was finally taking the edge off his back pain. He couldn't take another minute of waiting. They needed to get back on Harlan's trail *now*.

He marched out of his tent and walked over to where Gypsy was crouched poking at the campfire embers with a stick, probably engulfed in her own anguish. She looked back hearing him approach and immediately stood, turning to face him. "Is there something wrong, Excellency?"

Gavin glared at the mercenaries shifting in their bedrolls. "Get the mercenaries up and break camp. We ride in half an hour."

Gypsy scanned the sleeping mercenaries then looked back at him. "But, sir, the scout hasn't returned with the new route yet."

He leaned forward speaking through his teeth. "Then I suggest you bloody well find him!"

"Yes, sir," she said. "I'll find him." Gypsy quickly packed up her stuff onto her hyperia and rode off up the trail. Gavin kicked one mercenary in the ribs who had dared not to stir. "Get your lazy fucking asses up! If one of you bastards isn't ready to ride when I am, I'll carve your fucking head off! Is that understood?"

The camp exploded with activity. Satisfied, Gavin stalked back to his tent. The flames of his fury were growing hotter, wilder, more out of control. He rolled up his bedding, packed up his gear, and prepared his hyperia for travel while a few mercenaries frantically broke down his tent.

Chapter 4

The spotty shade provided by the trees lining the trail did little to alleviate the punishment inflicted by the twin suns. Doctor Scarlet Jonson swatted angrily at a large flying insect that buzzed over her forehead. She was sure it was stalking her and probably poisonous. When she wasn't defending herself from the native fauna she was folded forward wiping her sweat-drenched face on the bottom of her t-shirt. They had been riding for hours and she knew that if the travel was difficult and grueling for her, it must be murder on Gavin's back. She was riding several rows back from Gavin's lead alongside Desmond when finally she decided to say something to the general. She spurred her hyperia and was just pulling ahead of Desmond's mount when he grabbed her bridle. Her mount hissed and tossed its head but he didn't take his hand away. Desmond stared questioningly at her. His eyes were puffy with a tinge of redness. That was her fault. She had woken him up many times last night forcing him to identify the scary sounds that were keeping her up. He'd been a good sport, listening to the sound, identifying it, telling her she was safe and falling back asleep.

"He's going to need to rest soon," she said, explaining herself. Scarlet was momentarily distracted as Gypsy rejoined

them. The other woman was starting to look as haggard as the general.

“Leave him be,” Desmond replied with the sullenness of a condemned prisoner. Scarlet had never heard him sound that way before and it gave her a chill.

“He’s my patient, Desmond,” she said angrily. “His health is my responsibility. I need to examine him and make sure he’s doing okay.”

Desmond shook his head slowly. “What you fail to realize is that you are nothing more than a servant with a syringe to him. When he wants your assistance he’ll let you know.”

Scarlet yanked on the reins trying to break his grip on the bridle. Then she leaned forward and lowered her voice so no one but Desmond could hear her. “I *am* going to check on him because we also need to discuss his drinking while on his medication. He could accidentally kill himself mixing his booze with these narcotics. He’s on a very high dosage.”

“That’s a very bad idea, Scarlet,” Desmond whispered back, hissing the *s* in her name. “You need to wait until he summons you and if you’re smart you’ll keep his drinking out of it. Gavin doesn’t respond well to lectures, especially from women. He’s been warned before and if he dies it’ll be his own fault. We’ll find Harlan without him.”

Scarlet searched Desmond’s face wondering if he was serious. Surely Gavin wouldn’t harm his doctor while she was trying to help him. Desmond was just overreacting. “Let go of my animal,” she snapped.

Desmond released her bridle and tossed his hand in the air in a flamboyant gesture of surrender.

Scarlet hesitated.

Up ahead, riding alone, Gavin was a study in grim determination. Steeling her courage, she rode up next to him and gave him a warm smile. He exuded cool detachment and didn't acknowledge her.

"We should stop and take a look at your back," she said.

A dark energy flowed from the general, poisoning the air around her with black rage. Scarlet swallowed, hearing her heart beat faster in her ears. She decided now was not the time to press the issue. She was about to ride back to where Desmond was, when Gavin took out his whiskey flask and unscrewed the cap.

"We'll not stop yet," Gavin said.

She stared at the flask unable to believe he had the nerve to drink in front of her. Hadn't he heard a word she said about the danger of mixing alcohol and the pain medication?

In a flash of temper, Scarlet snatched the flask from him and tossed it in the bushes. Then suddenly the world slowed down to a crawl. Gavin raised his right hand and brought it down backhanding her in the cheek with such force she flew sideways off her mount hitting the hard dirt with a thud. Scarlet tasted blood in her mouth and for a second she thought she was dead. The realization that she was lucky that she wasn't was an epiphany to her current situation.

Desmond, Gypsy, and a few mercenaries were just getting ready to dismount when Scarlet got to her feet and lifted her hands up to ward them off. She wiped some blood from her mouth where her lip had been crushed between his hand and her teeth and brushed the dirt from her pants.

"I'm okay," she said.

She limped over to her hyperia and glared up to see Gavin pointing his saber at her face. Ice froze in her chest. *He's*

going to make an example of me. I should have listened to Desmond and left this enormous fucker alone. She pulled in a deep breath and let it out slowly, staying quiet.

Gavin stared down at her, his one good eye glowing with demonic wrath. "Go get it," he said.

Scarlet folded her arms and stared at him defiantly. Without removing her gaze from his, she turned her head slightly and spit a wad of blood on the ground. She didn't take a step to retrieve his liquor.

He caressed the tip of the saber along the flesh of her reddening face. For several tense seconds Scarlet was certain he was going to cut her, maybe even kill her. It was obvious that he was pretty unbalanced. A strong instinct to run nagged at her thoughts but she refused to let it win. She knew Gavin's kind and she was determined not to show him weakness.

Without taking his eyes off Scarlet, he said to Gypsy, "Lieutenant, could you please get me the flask the doctor threw in the brushes?" Gypsy dismounted and hunted around until she found his flask. She returned it to him and Gavin sheathed his weapon.

Scarlet mounted up and locked her eyes on the road ahead. She was *not* going to be slapped around by this colossal asshole. The high and mighty Gavin Theron was dependent on her because of his injured back. The longer this mission went on the worse his back was going to get, and sooner or later he was going to have to follow her instructions. And Scarlet couldn't wait because the next time he needed her help, she'd be the one in the catbird seat.

Chapter 5

Gypsy entered the clearing anxious for a travel route but there was no scout. A low fog obscured the ground blanketing the smaller plants and clinging to the base of the towering trees. She stared down at her mount's neck, listening intently for anyone on approach and trying to keep her fury in check. The mercenary scout, Rhem, who had been assigned to stay on her mother's trail, was proving to be a complete idiot and Gypsy was beginning to seriously doubt his abilities. Apparently he had boasted to Gavin about his vast experience tracking scents and had been hired on the spot at more than double what the other mercenaries were making. Every time she met with this moron he handed her a barely legible map and a pile of excuses.

Earlier this morning when Gavin ordered her to get the new route, she went to Rhem and asked for the maps. But as was his habit, he didn't have them yet. He said he needed just a few more hours. It was always a few more hours with Rhem. So, not having a choice, she'd given him the time he asked for. And now here she was at their rendezvous point and he wasn't here. No scout, no route, as usual.

The anxiety in the pit of her stomach morphed into black dread. If Gavin didn't have a clear direction by the time the last route ended, he was going to rage at someone and that

someone was definitely going to be her. Worse than her father's fury was the realization she was letting her mother down. With every passing hour they didn't find her, possibilities grew worse. Were her kidnappers beating her, raping her, had they already killed her... Gypsy's stomach flip-flopped. *Please don't be dead, please don't be dead.* She had to get that route map from that bungling asshole.

After what seemed like an hour, Rhem finally appeared. Seeing his pale green face covered in a light sheen of fear-sweat fired her anger. "You'd better have that fucking route plotted," she said in an ugly tone, riding over to him.

He nodded like his neck was broken. "I do, I do."

Gypsy snatched it from him and unfolded it. She'd grown accustomed to reading his crappy scribbling so she studied the twisting trail indicated by a red ink line and the half-assed notes jotted in the margins. "This is only about a four-hour ride. Where's the rest of the route?"

Rhem held up his hands pressing them forward and back for patience. That action was a mistake because Gypsy had none. Just as Rhem opened his mouth to speak, she launched herself from her saddle knocking him off his mount onto his back. Going down with him she landed in the dirt and scrambled on top of him, sitting on his chest. Grabbing the collar of his filthy tunic she pulled his head forward and snarled, "I told you I wanted an eight-hour route! Do you understand how long eight hours is? What you have here is a pleasure ride of four! You need to do your fucking job the way I told you!"

Gypsy twisted his collar in her fist and banged his head on the ground several times. Then shaking the half-crumpled map in his face, she said, "That's my mother out there and if she dies because of all the time you've spent jerking off in the

forest instead of doing what you've been paid to do, I'm going to kill you slowly. Do you understand what I am saying, you fucking idiot?"

Rhem stared at her like she was crazy. "Yes, Lieutenant."

Gypsy got off of him with the crumpled parchment still clutched in her hand, resisting the urge to plant her boot in his rib cage. Straightening the feral creases she'd just made in her rage she traced the red ink line with her finger and glared back at him. "Are you sure about this route?"

"Yes, Lieutenant. Of course I'm sure," he whined as though insulted at the question.

Gypsy scowled and studied the map. There was something about the plotted route that didn't look right but she couldn't say specifically. He tried to take the map back but Gypsy snatched it away from him. "What are you doing?"

"I was going to add to the map," he said helplessly.

Gypsy leaned forward and spoke to him slowly so he wouldn't misunderstand her. "I am taking this one. Now get out there and do another one that finishes the route!"

A noise startled them. Trajan, a middle-aged mercenary with three gold hoops in his left ear, rode up. He had an impressive bundle of dried scalps on his saddle indicating he made some of his money as a bounty hunter. "The general is getting upset," he said in a cool, neutral tone. "He would like that map now."

Gypsy mounted up and was about to take the map to Gavin when Trajan suddenly rode over to a patch of trees. She held her mount still and watched him. "Something wrong?"

Trajan glanced back at her. "You smell that?"

She rode over to where he was and thought she caught the faint scent of...something. Then she lost it. She shook her head.

Trajan dismounted and took a few cautious steps toward a large rock. He crouched and Gypsy dismounted to join him. She walked up quietly so as not to disturb his concentration. "What is it?" she asked.

He closed his eyes. "It's human and definitely female," he said. "Let me see that map."

Gypsy handed it to him and he studied it for a long time. She could tell from the knit in his brow that he shared her skepticism about the directions. "Do you think it's right?"

Trajan met her gaze. "I think it's close enough."

"Okay, I'm taking this back to Gavin."

Trajan looked at Rhem. "Where's the rest of it?"

The scout mounted up looking sheepish. "I'm going to finish it now."

"You'd better work fast," Gypsy said, "because I wouldn't want to be you if you fuck me over."

* * * *

Gypsy rode up to Gavin, her heart pounding. He was not going to be happy about half a route but that was all she had. She rode next to him waiting for him to acknowledge her. As she waited, she noticed the dark circle under his right eye and the deep frown lines on the sides of his mouth. His left eye, or lack thereof, was covered by a black leather patch but she was sure the skin beneath it was just as dark as the right one. He looked exhausted but determined and she was thankful he was so devoted to finding her mother.

"Do you have the route?" he asked without looking at her.

"I have half the route, Excellency," she decided to get the bad news out of the way first. "The scout is working on the other half right now."

Gavin reined up his mount and took the map from her. He moved with tense, quick movements and she found herself flinching often. She wouldn't be surprised if he hit her in frustration, in fact she expected it. But Gavin didn't. He just read the map. After several long minutes studying the route and glancing up at the trail, Gavin handed it back to her. He glared off down a narrow path. "Do you feel confident he knows where he's going?"

A million responses came into her head. She decided to stick to the facts. "I believe he's been right this far," she said, remembering Trajan picking up her mother's scent.

Gavin looked at her for the first time since she'd ridden up. His one golden eye blazed with silent anger. "How do you know?"

"Because one of the other mercenaries picked up her scent on the side of the road where I was *conversing* with Rhem. I think she's trying everything she can to help us track her," she said.

Gavin nodded. "I expect the rest of that route *soon*. Do you understand?" The emphasis on the word *soon* broadcast the threat with no misunderstanding.

"Yes, Excellency."

Chapter 6

The pace was punishing and everyone was feeling the strain, but no one dared object. Desmond shifted in his saddle trying to find a more comfortable position. They'd been riding straight through for hours, each one blending into another until he couldn't even remember when he last ate, drank or slept. Just ahead of him was Gavin. His fury and desperation to find Harlan was a darkness in his soul that enshrouded everyone. It was so overwhelming that no one felt they had the right to speak. There was only the mission. And until Harlan was found, there was nothing else.

Desmond looked over at Gypsy. She was stronger than he'd given her credit for. She was taking the pressure well but tiny signs of stress were there for someone who knew what to look for. Her pretty face had taken on a pale chalkiness and those golden eyes held a tense, sorrowful look. But she rode with the same grim determination as Gavin, gripping the reins so tight her knuckles were white. Desmond knew she hadn't yet slept since they'd left the empire and he couldn't recall seeing her eat anything. She would probably be coping a little better if it weren't *her* mother that they were trying to rescue. What miserable circumstances to get field experience.

Scarlet too was holding up better than expected. She also had not slept much since their departure, which he mostly at-

tributed to her lack of acclimatization and the anxiety of having to deal with Gavin and his *problem* several times a day. Her usually plump lips were set in a narrow line as she occasionally shot wicked looks at his father. She was pleasant enough when the general spoke to her but she was nursing a potent grudge for the slap he'd given her earlier. Desmond only hoped she didn't do anything else to tempt Gavin's wrath. He was bad enough as it was.

"Excellency?" Rhem called from somewhere behind Desmond. Rhem's voice had taken on a whiny quality which could only mean he had bad news.

Gavin ignored him and continued riding even though Desmond knew he'd heard the scout.

Rhem became more nervous, crowding past Desmond to try and reach Gavin at the front of the formation. "Excellency?" he repeated. "Could I speak to you for a moment?"

Gavin forged on, riding hard up a narrow mountain trail. He disappeared over the top with Desmond close behind. Just as Desmond reached the summit, he saw it. There before him was the reason the scout had been trying to get Gavin's attention so badly.

Twenty feet from the top of the mountain the trail ended in an abrupt drop. This route was a dead end.

Gavin sat on his hyperia as the animal pranced nervously along the cliff edge staring down into the deep ravine below. On instinct, Desmond grabbed Scarlet's mount as it came up over the top and pulled them both off to the side of the trail. Gypsy was next, her eyes widening in horror at the trail ahead. She shot a vicious look over at Rhem who was already babbling excuses at Gavin. Behind them the rest of the mercenaries came to a stop, crowding the trail.

Desmond scanned the group looking for any signs of malicious intent. There was no comfort in being lodged between a fifty-foot drop and a group of unpredictable mercenaries with questionable integrity. He didn't see or sense anything. All eyes seemed to be focused on Gavin and the impending repercussions of the scout's error.

"I'm so sorry," Rhem said. "I must have gotten turned around last night. Just give me a few more—"

Rhem was out of time. Gavin slid his saber out of its scabbard with lightning grace. In a flash of silver, it moved through the air, almost invisible to the eye, and sliced Rhem's head off in mid-sentence. Scarlet uttered a frightened cry but Desmond wrapped his arm around her head and covered her mouth before Gavin even heard it.

The body sat mounted for a few seconds as blood sprayed on anyone unlucky enough to be nearby. Then it leaned to one side and fell to the ground. Rhem's hyperia pranced nervously and trotted away from the crowd, now free of his burden.

For several anxious minutes no one spoke. The mercenaries sat on their mounts, barely breathing. Everyone was afraid to incur the general's violent temper. As for Gavin, he remained where he was, bright red arterial spray running down the front of his armor. He made no motion to wipe it off; instead he just glared down at the scout's corpse like he was daring it to get up again. The head lay nearby wearing the same expression it had only seconds before it was removed. Under his hand, Desmond could feel Scarlet trembling.

"Lieutenant," Gavin said, fixing his golden eye on Gypsy.

Trajan placed his hand on the handle of his saber to defend her if need be. Gavin looked up and stared at him.

Gypsy spurred her hyperia and rode over to her father, ignoring the tense exchange. "Yes, Excellency?"

Gavin tore his gaze from the mercenary and looked at her. For a few fleeting seconds, Desmond was afraid Gypsy was dead. He tried to calculate the distance he'd have to cover to stop Gavin from cutting her down, but knew he'd never make it. He took his hand from Scarlet's mouth and felt his guts drop.

Then a sudden clarity took over. If Gavin turned on Gypsy, Desmond was going to kill him. It wasn't a threat, just a fact. He looked up at Trajan and there was a moment of understanding. The two men glanced back at Gavin who seemed oblivious to the deadly alliance that had just taken place.

"We are going to break for one hour," Gavin said to her. "In that time, I want you to find us a new scout. He is to get us back on Harlan's trail immediately. When you are done, report back to me."

"Yes, Excellency," Gypsy said. She turned from her father and faced the assembled mercenaries. "You heard the general!" she shouted. "You have one hour."

The men immediately dismounted and began to disperse along the narrow trail tending to their mounts and breaking into their rations. Nero strolled over and crouched by Rhem's body. He squinted up at Gypsy. "What do you want us to do with him?"

Gypsy rode over to the head and pulled her saber. She pierced it through the eye and brought it over. As she lowered her blade the head slid easily off the end and dropped onto the dead man's chest. "Bury him, burn him or throw him into the ravine. I don't really care what you do with him," she said as she rode off toward Rhem's mount.

* * * *

Gavin sat on a large rock with his legs crossed. All of his attention was focused on the ravine. Scarlet swallowed and tried to relax. "You asked for me, Excellency?"

"I need more pain medication," he said, pulling out his pill box. To emphasize the fact that it was empty he shook it a few times and held it out to her.

Scarlet took it and reached into her shoulder bag pulling out a red glass bottle of pills. She measured out three into her shaking palm and held them out to him. Pulling a flask out of his pocket, he took the medication from her and downed them with a swig of whiskey. Scarlet didn't say a word and shook the bottle over the opening of the pill box until it was filled. Keeping her expression neutral she snapped the top closed and handed it back to him.

"What? No argument?" he asked after a tense moment had passed.

"No," she replied.

Gavin fixed her with his golden eye. "I'm disappointed."

"Disappointed there's no argument or that you don't have a reason to hit me?" she asked.

He let his gaze roam up and down her. It wasn't a sexual look, more like how he'd size up an enemy. "You need not be frightened of me, young lady. I have no intention of doing you any more harm as long as you understand your place."

"You mean as long as I do as I'm told," she finished for him.

"That's correct."

"Will there be anything else, General?" she asked.

"Yes," he said. "Did you disclose *everything* about your past jobs when you applied to my wife's clinic?"

Scarlet felt the blood drain from her face. He couldn't know about that horrible Doctor Ross internship. Those records had been sealed. "I disclosed everything that was relevant."

"I've heard otherwise," he said.

She folded her arms. "What have you heard?"

A small evil grin played at the corner of his mouth. "Never mind," he said. "It's not important right now. When we make camp again for the evening, I'll need more injections in my back." He jumped down from the rock, pausing to tower over her.

"Of course you will," she said pleasantly. "The back is a very complex part of the anatomy. There are so many nerves that can become inflamed and tender. Don't worry, General. I'll make sure you're well cared for."

"You be sure I am, Doctor," he said, glaring at her. "I'd hate to see a promising career cut short because of a spot of carelessness."

Chapter 7

As the suns were swallowed by the dusky horizon Harlan and her captors finally stopped to make camp. She was beyond exhausted and her legs were so numb she could barely stand. Sitting on the ground by the fire Harlan unlaced her boots and pulled them off. Once she'd peeled her socks off, she stretched her legs out in front of her and frowned. From the bottom of her shorts to the top of where her socks had been her legs were decorated with cuts and bruises that were the result of fast riding through heavy brush. She took some comfort in the fact that at least she'd been able to leave her scent and a variety of other clues along their route. She did everything she could think of, including cutting herself and leaving blood smeared on branches and trees as they rode by. Lucky for her, her kidnappers still weren't paying much attention, confident in the fact that she couldn't escape. Most of the journey they were drunk and talking to each other, rarely casting a glance at Harlan. What a difference from the soldiers she was used to dealing with.

As for herself, she didn't know how much more of the hard riding her body could tolerate. In her normal life her hyperia rides were limited to short trips to and from home and the clinic, and an occasional pleasure ride with Gavin.

Gavin.

Every time she thought about him the sadness and longing constricted her emotions. She missed him so much it was like being flayed alive. It was amusing now to think that he was the last man in the galaxy she ever wanted to end up with. He pursued her relentlessly after their first encounter, and things got so intense, she was about to petition the council to have him restrained.

But then he'd somehow found his way into her heart and given her Gypsy. His love for her burned with an intensity that bordered on obsession and she'd not only fallen in love with him too, but thrived in his consuming desire for her. It was hard not to adore a man who worshipped everything about her. They were so intertwined that sometimes she didn't know where she began and Gavin ended.

In the long span of their marriage, he'd never once lost interest in her. Of course Harlan knew there were his occasional infidelities, but that was part of the culture of being an AEssyrian male, and even more so for a warlord. But she also knew that Gavin was completely devoted to her. There was nothing she could request of him that he wouldn't do. Their sex life was more than just a fulfillment of lust; it was an affirmation of his love for her, the only way he'd allow himself to let his guard down.

The sense of loss consumed her and Harlan had to fight hard not to cry. She missed Gavin and Gypsy with every fiber of her being. What she wouldn't give just to see them and hold them again. Her stomach twisted into a tight knot that crawled up her throat and settled there. Harlan rubbed her face trying not to lose faith that she'd be rescued before these thugs killed her.

No. Don't you dare cry. You know Gavin. He's coming. He'll get here soon. Just hang on.

Sulla came over and placed a stick with some raw meat over the fire. He moved up next to her and crouched. "Hungry?" he asked.

"Not really," she replied.

He sat down next to her and she mentally recoiled. "They want me to kill you," he said, glancing at his men playing cards a few yards away.

Harlan remained silent.

"But I told them no," he continued. "We still need you."

"For what?"

"My brother is very ill," he said, turning the stick over in the fire.

"What's wrong with him?" she said not caring.

"I'm not sure. I think it's an infection. He was injured on a raid and has not been able to recover." He reached out and took the stick off the flames. He examined the meat to see how cooked it was and seemed satisfied. "You need it cooked more?" he said, holding it out to her.

Harlan scooted a few inches away from him. "No," she said, reaching out and taking the food. "That will be fine. Why did you kill everyone in Sanguar? You could have just taken me without harming any of the residents."

Her captor shook his head and laughed. "In case you didn't notice my appearance is somewhat distinctive and it wouldn't have taken long for anyone to figure out who I am or where I was going. It's pretty obvious if I kill everyone, I remain anonymous."

"Don't you think the towns we've passed through have noticed that you're traveling with a human?"

He shrugged. "It doesn't matter. No one is coming for you. You're mine now, and as soon as my brother is healed you'll learn how much you are mine. Now eat."

Sulla watched her as she made a show of taking a bite. She chewed and swallowed, staring into the flames.

"Some of the men are afraid of your husband," he said.

"I'm not surprised."

"I'm not though," he said.

"Good for you."

"He'll never find you in these mountains."

Harlan looked around. "No, he probably won't." *You don't know Gavin. He could find the last ounce of meat in a famine.* It was impossible to eat anymore even though she knew she should to keep her strength up. The all-meat diet she was getting was starting to make her a little ill. But not as ill as the vile beast sitting next to her. Sulla not only had bad breath from his rotting teeth, his entire body smelled like stale sweat. She wondered if he'd ever taken a bath.

"That would make you my property," Sulla said.

Harlan tossed the rest of the meat on the fire. It crackled and hissed as it burned. "I'm tired. May I rest?"

"Give me a kiss first," he replied.

Harlan met his gaze. "No, I won't."

"I could take you by force."

"Then I'll refuse to help your brother and he'll die," she said. She expected him to be angry but he only laughed.

"You're quite spirited, I'll give you that. When you finally realize that your husband is out of the picture for good, you'll come around. It is fortunate for you that I don't like to share so you don't have to worry about enduring my attentions while on the ride back," he said. Getting up he dragged

the back of his hand up her cheek as he stood. "You've got four hours to sleep, and then we ride again. Good night, Doctor."

Sulla walked off and Harlan felt the tension in her shoulders melt. Wiping her face with her shirt, she shuddered. God, she hated that man. She caught a few hostile glances from some of the men playing cards and immediately looked down into the fire. *Please, Gavin, hurry up. I don't know how much longer these people are going to keep me alive.*

Chapter 8

Gypsy already knew who she wanted as the new scout. The problem was convincing him to take the job. As she studied Rhem's last map rehearsing what she was going to say, a few of the mercenaries gathered around her. Everyone knew they needed a new scout and because the pay was substantially more a few were more than happy to risk Gavin's wrath for it. For a few moments she ignored the small group, continuing to scrutinize the map trying to figure out where Rhem lost the trail. Looking up she made eye contact with each one of them and said, "I assume you're all clustered around me because you want the scouting position."

"I'll do it for triple the pay and an hour with you," Nero broke in, gathering a few dry chuckles from the assembled group.

Gypsy grinned and placed her palm on the handle of her saber. "You're not qualified," she said icily. "For either job." Nero recoiled from her. It was a small subtle movement that few others around him caught but her. Gypsy scanned the crowd looking for Trajan. "Besides I already know who I want as the new scout."

Trajan was standing off to the side of the crowd with his arms folded across his chest. He'd be the best choice out of all

of them. There must be some way of convincing him to take the job.

"You're all dismissed and I suggest you take full advantage of this break," she said.

The mercenaries wandered off grumbling. Everyone except Trajan. He remained standing where he was. Gypsy made her way over to him. "You're the most qualified," she said.

"But the least willing," he replied.

"I was afraid you'd say that. There must be something you want if the pay isn't enough to motivate you," she said.

"What I want isn't in your power to give."

"Try me. Maybe the general can find a way to get it for you."

Trajan glanced around to make sure no one was within earshot. "I want my sister released from the emperor's harem."

Gypsy stood there shocked. It wasn't that his request was so outrageous; it was that the request was the last thing she expected him to ask for. "How long has she been in the harem?"

"Two years," Trajan replied.

"Let's go talk to the general and see what he says."

"He'd promise me anything to find his wife. You expect me to take his word for it?"

Gypsy arched her back working the kinks out. "If you really want to win your sister's release, what have you got to lose? Besides if Gavin can't secure her release I know my mother can...if we find her in time." She felt pain build in her sinuses, the precursor to tears, and she quickly rubbed it

away. But she was confident that if anyone in this motley band of misfits could track her mother, it was Trajan.

* * * *

Gavin was silent for a full minute after Trajan presented his offer. He looked down into the ravine and then he said to Gypsy, "You think this is the best man for the job?"

"I know he is, Excellency," Gypsy said. She hoped she was right.

Gavin eyed Trajan up and down. "Which is your primary profession? Bounty hunter or mercenary?"

"Bounty hunter, sir," Trajan replied.

"How many bounties have you recovered?"

"Twenty-one."

"How fast can you plot a route?" Gavin asked.

"I can't *plot* one. I never learned to write, Excellency."

Gypsy and Gavin exchanged looks. Trajan's revelation wasn't too surprising since most males in the lower classes never attended school. "I can meet with him after his rounds," Gypsy offered, "and sketch the route myself."

Gavin's frown deepened. "That's an extra duty for you, Gypsy."

"I know, sir. But I don't trust anyone else to do it. You know as well as I do that we're probably going to have to backtrack and we need to pick up the trail again as soon as possible," she said.

"Alright," Gavin said, nodding impatiently to Trajan. "The position is yours. I need a route in half an hour."

"And my sister?" Trajan asked.

"I promise you I'll get her out of the harem," Gavin said. "I don't know how yet, but I'll see to it that I get her out. But that's *only* if I get my wife back alive. Do we have a deal?"

"Yes, General," Trajan said. "We have a deal."

Gypsy approached Gavin's hyperia and began to rummage through the saddlebags.

"What the bloody hell are you doing in my things?" Gavin grumbled.

"I need your territory map. Where is it?" she called back over her shoulder.

"On the other side. Why?"

"I told you I need it," she said as she pulled it out and came back over to the large boulder that her father was leaning against. Unfolding it she laid it on top and placed Rhem's crudely drawn map next to it. She made a motion to Trajan who came to stand next to her.

"I've been doing some thinking and my thought is this: The outlaws killed everyone else and took her, probably because she's a doctor. This wasn't a random attack. She was targeted. That tells me that they need her to treat someone. We've already passed all of these towns," she said, gesturing to some names on the map. "The next group of towns is still a few days' ride. I'm guessing that their destination is one of these three towns. Mannus, Rathara or Slytok. If Trajan can grab her trail again we should be able to figure out within the next day or two which one they're headed to."

Gavin seemed to consider this for a moment then nodded. "That makes good sense."

Trajan rubbed his chin while looking down at the map, "How can you be sure they're not taking her somewhere else? Maybe to a town beyond these three."

"Because the next town is another six days' ride and then you get into the larger cities. If they needed a doctor they would go to the closest place to get one where they have the

least risk of getting caught, and Sanguar is only a four-day ride at most. She ran her index finger along a blue line on the territory map. “I think this is where you last caught her scent, when I met with Rhem. We need to backtrack toward there and try and find more markings along the way. Hopefully we won’t have to backtrack the entire way.”

Chapter 9

Scarlet wished she'd never met a man like General Gavin Theron, but the sad truth was she had. Three decades ago on Earth she'd grown up with a stepfather who had more in common with the general than anyone else she'd met since. Both men shared quick, violent tempers and loved only their alcohol. Scarlet had taken her share of beatings from that horrible man until she'd finally run away at seventeen. Long buried feelings of fear and rage bubbled to life in her heart. *What the hell does Harlan see in this monster?* At any rate she was glad they had finally made camp. They'd been all over this place riding for almost six hours with only two breaks to eat and rest. She hoped they found Harlan soon because she didn't know how much more of this she could take.

Summoning her coolest demeanor, she grabbed the kit with the pain medication and made her way over to Gavin's tent. He was just finishing up with Gypsy so Scarlet took a few extra minutes outside to try and calm her nerves. Images of the scout's head cutting clean from his body flashed into her mind and she squeezed her eyes shut to push the memory out. She'd never seen *anyone* killed that fast.

Gypsy ducked out of the tent. Without her armor, Scarlet noticed that she was thinner than when they'd started and Scarlet wondered if she'd been eating enough. Losing weight

for an AEssyrian warrior was not good. They needed to maintain enough muscle mass to fight on a moment's notice. It wouldn't surprise her if Gypsy was too stressed to eat. Having to deal with Gavin, the sleazy mercenaries and worry about her mother was probably taking its toll.

"He's ready for you," Gypsy said wearily.

Scarlet touched Gypsy's arm before she could rush off.

"Are you okay? You look a little underweight."

Gypsy nodded stiffly. "I'm okay," she said as a ribbon of tension ran through her voice. "I'll try to eat more."

Scarlet watched her go then entered Gavin's tent. He was sitting with his back to her on a reed floor mat, his legs crossed under him. His uniform tunic was off and Scarlet could easily see the swollen tissue surrounding each vertebra. She crept around in front of him and handed him a few pain pills. A half empty bottle of Sawjack Whiskey sat next to him. He grabbed the whiskey, tossed the pills in his mouth and swallowed several gulps.

"You're going to kill yourself doing that and then Harlan will have no one but Gypsy to help her," she said softly.

Gavin trained his golden eye on her, its pupil narrowing to a sharp sliver. Scarlet examined her previous notes taking slow, measured breaths, wondering if he was going to strike her again. The very air around them seemed to be electric with the general's demonic energy.

"I thought we covered this ground already?" he growled.

"I'm just telling you a fact. If you keep drinking while on that medication, you will die. It's not a matter of *if* only a matter of *when*. You can do what you want with the information." She opened the case and took out one of the injections, wishing her hand wasn't trembling so hard.

Gavin glared at her. "Rumor has it you've been seeing my son Desmond and he is more to you than just a bodyguard."

Scarlet blinked and forced herself to relax. It was now time to screw with the doctor. She lowered the injection. "I'm not seeing him, I'm fucking him."

"Are you in love with him?"

"No. He's just a good lover, that's all," she replied, trying to keep her voice deadpan.

"Do you think he has feelings for you?"

"Nothing that lasts beyond his orgasm."

Gavin chuckled deep in his chest. "Why not take an *AEs*-syrian lover? Perhaps someone with more honorable intentions."

She squinted at him. "Like who? A warm, nurturing *AEs*-syrian male like you? No thanks. I don't date *AEs*syrians."

"And why is that?"

Scarlet didn't let her guard down as she maneuvered around behind him with the injection. She ran her fingers gently down his swollen spine and felt him stiffen. "Because," she said preoccupied, "I find them too aggressive." She slipped the needle into a gap between two vertebrae and injected a small amount of anti-inflammatory. Gavin grunted but didn't move. She was surprised by his restraint. That first shot must have hurt a lot. She did a few more then stopped.

"That's all I can do for now." Scarlet placed the used syringe in a small black case with a few others. Gavin arched his back and let out a long, quiet hiss. "Do you mind if I ask you a personal question?" she asked.

"What?" he barked.

"Do you really love Harlan or are you just pissed off that someone took your property?"

"That's an insulting and idiotic question. Of course I love her. Why do you ask?"

"Just because I can't imagine you loving very much of anything in your life," she said.

"I love three things and three things only. My wife, my daughter, and my job. Everything else is disposable," he said, taking great care to lie down on his bedroll.

"You didn't mention your son Desmond," she said, feeling her gut tighten.

Gavin grinned wickedly. "He and I tolerate each other. Besides, he doesn't need nor does he want me to love him. He has you."

"I told you," she said, grabbing the kit and snapping it closed. "I'm not in love with him. We're just having sex with each other."

He let his eye flutter closed. "Liar," he croaked. "If he meant nothing to you but sex, he would have been the last person to come to your mind. But interestingly enough, he was the first. Good night, Doctor."

Scarlet stood there as a seeping dread oozed through her body. She'd given away too much and now he knew. Or at least, he *thought* he knew. She'd just have to be extra careful talking to him in the future. Now that she was spending so much time with this savage asshole she was beginning to understand Desmond a little bit better. Prior to this journey he often said very little and usually expressed his feelings physically, but now whenever he finished dealing with Gavin he became absolutely sullen and uncommunicative. She could barely get any conversation out of him and that was adding to her loneliness on this mission. Of course she didn't blame him. Having a conversation with that evil bastard was an op-

portunity for him to verbally assault you and one never knew when an attack was coming. The thought of having to grow up with him made her cringe and she was amazed at how well adjusted Gypsy seemed to be. Well one thing was for sure, she was not going to let him damage her and Desmond's already fragile relationship.

Chapter 10

Gavin was pleased.

Trajan had turned out to be a much better scout than Gavin would have thought. The sometime bounty hunter was cunning and had an excellent eye for detail, and Gavin credited Gypsy for choosing him.

In fact, in all her duties, his daughter was turning out to be a talented soldier. She kept the camp running smoothly and so far had kept the mercenaries in line, which was no small feat. But the most impressive thing about it was that she did all this while under the enormous pressure of not knowing what had become of her mother.

The moment his thoughts touched on Harlan he was destroyed. Vivid memories of her scent, her eyes and her warm skin became agony in his heart. What he wouldn't give to have her back in his arms again. *We'll find her. You need to believe it or you'll never get through this.*

Trajan had ridden up to a tall tree and was scanning the ground. He dismounted, picked something up, and examined it in his palm. Gavin rode up with Gypsy close behind him. "Did you find something?" Gavin asked.

Trajan held his hand out to Gavin.

A few wispy strands of long black hair rested in Trajan's green palm. Gavin leaned in close and caught the scent of

Harlan's white tea shampoo. His guts tightened into a hard knot. "Yes," he said, fighting not to show any emotion. "That's her."

"She's a smart woman, your wife. She's done a great job leaving me plenty of markers to find."

"How much longer until we catch up to them?" Gavin asked.

"A few more days. They rode hard when they first took her but they've slowed down since," Trajan said. A small devilish grin curved his mouth. "I guess they don't think you're coming."

A loud snapping erupted through the quiet forest and everyone started and turned around. One of the mercenaries had backed his hyperia into a rotting stump and it broke free of the ground. The mercenary swore as his mount struggled to get out of a hole that opened up from the tangled decaying roots under the center of the stump. But just as he had maneuvered the beast out of the hole a new problem emerged. Small black beetles no larger than the length of a little finger were spilling from the broken stump.

Within seconds, they were swarming up the hyperia and onto the unfortunate mercenary. His voice broke with hysterical screaming as they began eating him. His mount fought to escape but the beetles had already eaten through the flesh of his feet. Unable to stand the hyperia screeched as it fell on its side. Then there was silence.

Gavin scowled. "Sarcophagi beetles," he said. He turned to Gypsy. "Lead the men down to the river below. We're going to have to cross it to escape them."

"Yes, Excellency," she nodded as she reined her mount around. It reared up, hissing in panic. "Down to the river,"

she ordered. A group of mercenaries on the far side of the beetles raced over to join her. They all grouped around her like she was their last hope for survival, which indeed she was. With some of the mercenaries in tow, Gypsy rode down a steep embankment straight for the river.

The rest of the mercenaries unlucky enough to be closest to the beetles were being covered and devoured at a startling rate. Gavin knew from prior campaigns that they could strip an army in minutes. The only protection was to get into the fast-running water of a river. Anything calmer than that, they'd swim out and finish the job they'd started.

A woman's scream pierced the air. Scarlet was struggling with her panicked hyperia who had decided to try and dislodge her so it could escape faster. It reared and jumped in the air, fighting to get her off. She looked up at Gavin with more anger than fear in her eyes. "I can't get this damned thing to go!"

The beetles, feeling the vibrations from her struggling mount, were starting to swarm the ground around her.

Gavin spurred his mount forward, when Desmond came thundering past him out of nowhere. He rode through the pooling mess of beetles so fast, only a few of them were able to grab on but it didn't stop them from snacking on him. Making it to the other side where Scarlet was, he grabbed her hyperia's bridle and tore off down the embankment so fast, Gavin was sure they were both going to break their necks. To his amazement, Desmond plunged into the water below and managed to wash off the few beetles that were attached to him.

Not to be outdone by his son's bravado, Gavin turned his mount toward the river and charged off after him.

Chapter 11

Scarlet, still mounted on her hyperia, gasped as she hit the cold water. White foam splashed up from the rushing river and she could feel the beast beneath her thighs struggling to get its footing. Desmond got a better grip on her bridle as the terrified hyperia continued fighting all restraint. Blood ran down his forearm into his glove from where the animal had already bitten him several times. The hyperia was beyond wild, fighting and thrashing so hard Scarlet was sure he not only wanted to kill himself but drown everyone near him. Desmond tried to climb up on the creature's back behind her but it fell beneath the water taking Scarlet with it.

Immersed in the coldest water she'd ever felt, Scarlet hung on for her life. She knew if she let go, she would be pulled downriver by the strong current. *This is it. I'm going to be killed on this God-forsaken planet without ever seeing Earth again.* Then, just like being reborn from the dead, the hyperia emerged from the water and Scarlet took a deep, frantic breath of air.

Images flashed before her eyes and her ears exploded with the roar of the rushing water. Gavin forced his hyperia up alongside her swearing angrily in English. The black shiny beetles swarmed along the shore looking like an oil spill. A sudden sensation of falling and she was down in the water

again. Scarlet wasn't ready to be submerged and she took in a mouthful of water. Panic exploded in her brain as she realized she'd inhaled liquid. *Help me someone, please! I'm drowning! I'm drowning!*

A large, powerful hand reached down, grabbed her by the back of her shirt, and hauled her from the depths of the rushing current. Scarlet came to the surface, coughing and choking on the water in her lungs. With all the strength she had left, she clutched at the person pulling her up. Her savior tossed her on the back of his hyperia.

It was the man she hated most in the world. It was Gavin.

Before them, Desmond was delivering a death blow to her crazed mount. He plunged his saber under the creature's jaw and into its brain. It stopped fighting and slipped ever so gently off the blade into the water. Within seconds, the current pushed it onto the bank where the beetles stripped it to bare bones.

Scarlet was coughing violently but kept her arms around Gavin as he and Desmond spurred their hyperia up onto the opposite bank. All the mercenaries were there watching in stunned silence. Scarlet guessed her, Gavin and Desmond were the last ones to make it. Gavin lowered her to the ground and she collapsed onto her hands and knees still coughing out river water. Desmond crouched down by her and put a blanket around her shoulders.

"Are you okay?" he said.

Scarlet nodded and fell onto her back closing her eyes and pulling the blanket closer around her. The world was still spinning. "How's your arm?" she asked when she could breathe again.

"It'll heal," he said.

She opened her eyes and shielded them from the sun with her hand. "I should look at those wounds."

"I'm alright. You need to rest before we start moving again," he said, shaking his head.

She sat up, raking her wet hair back from her face. Only a few yards away, Gavin was talking to Gypsy, gesturing to the river. Gypsy looked stressed and drained from her many duties and responsibilities but he didn't. He looked fresh and full of energy like he'd just come out here for a pleasure ride.

That was when she knew. There wasn't going to be any rest. Not for her, and not for any of them. Not until the general achieved his goal of finding his wife. And strangely enough she yearned for him to succeed in his rescue, now more than ever. Because any man who was that dedicated to a woman deserved a little happiness. So she decided that she would work that much harder to help him. After all, the evil bastard had just saved her life and even though she still hated him, she owed him.

So if he wanted her to stay up all night sticking needles in his back so he could travel five more miles, she would do it.

And this time she wouldn't even complain.

Chapter 12

Gavin stalked along the riverbank watching Desmond and Scarlet talk out of the corner of his eye. They looked casual, just as friends should, but Gavin knew in his gut they were much more than that. He could read that sultry look in Scarlet's eyes when she watched his son. Her relationship with Desmond was much more than casual lust. As for his son, he appeared relaxed around the new doctor and genuinely seemed to enjoy her company.

It confounded him why they were trying so hard to hide their relationship from him as anyone with half a brain could see that they were in love. Was his son so distrustful of him that he couldn't let his guard down for even a moment? The thought stung, but Gavin knew it was true. The roots of Desmond's pain reached back many, many years to the death of his brother Northe. Renewed shame and regret tore at his gut. He shouldn't have pushed Northe so hard to be a warlord like himself. Perhaps if he'd let the boy have more freedom growing up he might not have betrayed Gavin the first chance he got.

But a new truth reared its ugly head. A truth he could barely face even now after all these years.

Gavin had bedded Northe's wife only one month after her marriage to his son. And worst of all—despite all Gavin's

vows to the contrary—Desmond knew it. Desmond knew that was the *real* reason why Northe had turned on Gavin and gone to join another kingdom. That was also the reason Gavin had been forced to kill his son in self-defense all those years ago.

The memory of Northe's death sickened him. He sat down on a nearby rock and a bolt of pain shot up from his back. Gavin held his breath until it passed.

Of course all this happened long before he met his wife, Harlan. Gavin had a million regrets but he never regretted taking that wonderful woman for his bride. Harlan was much more than the love of his life, she was his heart and soul; the one reason he had for fighting to be a better man. Without her there was only darkness.

A moment of crushing despair filled his heart until it ached like it was going to burst. He would have given his own life happily in exchange for Harlan's safe return. The last twenty-two years of his life have given him more satisfaction and happiness than the eight hundred previous years. But blast it all, here they were delayed again. How much longer did his beloved have? Days? Hours? Thinking about what they might be doing to her sent him to the brink of madness.

Desmond came over, his lips set in a thin line. "We've had a desertion."

Gavin ran the back of his hand over his mouth. He needed a drink bad but he decided against it. "I'm not surprised. How is the doctor?"

"She's shaken but fine."

"Where's Gypsy?"

"She's around. I just saw her a few minutes ago," Desmond replied.

“Find her and have her ensure everyone is equipped and ready to ride. We need to make up for lost time,” Gavin said.

“Yes, Excellency.”

* * * *

Desmond found Gypsy sitting under a large water tree about fifteen feet from the riverbank. Her elbows were resting on her knees and her head bowed forward causing her long, dark chocolate hair to spill on the ground between her boots. She was surrounded by empty canteens and most definitely asleep. She reminded him of a drunk surrounded by whiskey bottles after a bender.

Desmond glanced over his shoulder. No one had spotted her yet and he breathed a sigh of relief. If the mercenaries saw her like this, they’d see her fatigue as a sign of weakness and probably start challenging her more. Crouching down, he quietly picked up the canteens and moved down the bank to fill them. He knew she had been far too stressed to sleep and decided to give her a few more minutes before waking her. As he crouched letting the water fill each canteen, his mind wandered over to the possibility that Scarlet would leave the planet at her first opportunity. If she managed to survive this mission or for that matter if any of them survived, she would probably be on the first shuttle to anywhere, her contract be damned. The idea of her leaving left him with a strange feeling of loss, even if he didn’t blame her. This entire situation was a lot to ask of a civilian, especially an alien foreigner who’d only been on AEssyria a few weeks.

Just then Gavin rode up. “What’s going on? Are those canteens still empty?”

Desmond stood and squinted up at him. “I’m almost done with them.”

Gavin looked past Desmond and his eye narrowed. "What the fuck is the matter with her? Is she taking a nap?" He urged his hyperia toward Gypsy but Desmond made no motion to move out of the way and the animal pawed the ground in agitation.

Desmond stayed out of biting range and glared at Gavin. "Let her be."

"Are you going to fight with me?" he snarled, squaring his shoulders and locking that evil eye on his son.

"I'm not trying to pick a fight with you, Gavin, but you *are* going to leave her alone. I'll wake her when I'm finished and she'll be ready to ride."

"Who the hell do you think you are? You don't give me orders, especially when it comes to my lieutenant and my daughter."

Desmond glanced back at Gypsy who hadn't stirred. "Keep your voice down. I've got a few things to say to you before this goes any further and then you can do what you want. Let's go over there." He mounted up and gestured to a cluster of fallen trees that could have served as a small pier out to the center of the river.

"Alright, Desmond. Since you speak so infrequently, I can hardly wait to hear what *you've* got to say," Gavin said, watching Gypsy with a blade of sarcasm in his tone.

They rode downstream to the fallen trees and Desmond took a position closer to Gavin than he was comfortable with. He needed to keep his voice as low as possible. Gavin studied him cautiously.

"You're pushing Gypsy too hard," Desmond said. "She's at the point of collapse because she doesn't have the experience to know how to delegate her responsibilities."

"You think I should coddle her? It is her desire to have a military career and this is what a soldier's life is all about. If she can't handle it that's her failure," Gavin said, stabbing his gloved finger in the air at Desmond with each word he spoke.

"You crazy old bastard. I wish you could hear yourself. You can't even see what you're doing to her. That's *her* mother out there not just your wife, but you are so engaged in your pity party that you don't even notice how much she's struggling. All she wants is to find her mother and please you, but you're so ignorant of anybody's pain but your own that you aren't even aware that she hasn't slept nor eaten since we left the empire. She is going to crack under the strain unless you do something."

"So what are you suggesting? Do you want me to switch the two of you?" Gavin asked.

"Not on your life," Desmond recoiled. "I want *you* to be her commanding officer and help her succeed. So far the only support and direction that she's gotten during her first commission is from Trajan, a mercenary, and myself, an enlisted, when she should be getting it from you. No one, yourself included, would have ever given a new officer the kind of responsibilities you've charged her with. She would have had to serve under and be mentored by a senior officer for at least a *year* before taking the second-in-command slot. You've stuck her with all the responsibility of running this outfit and given her no guidance at all. Despite that fact she is doing a damn good job, it's not sustainable if she doesn't take care of herself. She's doing everything and suffering the same as you are, only she doesn't have a tent to hide in so her emotions have to stay locked up at all times and the pressure is building. Now I've said my piece. You do what you want."

To his astonishment, Gavin nodded and placed his hand on Desmond's shoulder. "You're right, Desmond," he said. "Distribute the canteens and I'll go wake her. We'll be along shortly."

Chapter 13

Gypsy couldn't remember where she was or what she was doing. Her mind a miasma of violent, sad images weaving their way through a dense fog. She tried to follow the images because she was looking for something but a force was holding her back. Struggling to gain her freedom she jerked and was pulled into the afternoon sun feeling a grip on her shoulder. As she fought to associate with her surroundings she slowly looked up at the offending force and saw Gavin crouching near her. Dread washed over her and she jumped to her feet. Her eyes burned like someone had set them on fire and left them to smolder. Who would have thought a ten-minute nap would leave her more tired than when she'd first closed her eyes. Boy was he going to be pissed at her for sleeping on duty. She braced herself for his angry tirade.

"I'm sorry, Excellency. I just meant to sit for a moment," she said, looking around for the canteens. She was sure she brought them down here. Had she been so tired that she forgot them? "I came down here to get water and now I don't know—"

"Your brother took care of it. Come. Walk with me," he said. Gavin gestured to the river trail, only they were heading away from the others.

Oh I must be in big trouble now. She jogged up alongside and joined her father. They strolled into the woods until they were out of listening distance of any unwanted ears. Gavin turned to her and said, "I've put a terrible strain on you, Gypsy, at this very difficult time, but I want you to know I couldn't be prouder of how you've handled it."

Gypsy was stunned. "Thank you, sir."

"Selfishly I have been so stricken with my own grief that I have barely given yours a thought. You know my love for your mother is all-consuming. I brought you on this mission because I knew I could depend on you to stay focused and see this through should anything happen to me. Your distress is apparent on your face and I realize that you have had no opportunity to deal with the sorrow of your mother's abduction, and for that I am sorry."

At the mention of her mother Gypsy felt her emotions wave just below the surface of her skin, threatening to break through. She couldn't speak. She couldn't even look at him because the wall was cracking. So she just stood there staring at the ground, too petrified to move. Her body trembled ever so slightly. Without warning Gavin reached out grabbing her behind the neck. He pulled her forward against him and wrapped his huge arms around her.

An ocean of tears broke free of Gypsy's eyes and she just let them fall silently onto his armor. Feeling his chin rest on top of her head she squeezed him tightly and felt a little bit of relief. For a brief moment she and her father shared their common anguish before getting back to business. Gypsy pulled up the bottom of her tunic and patted it against her eyes as Gavin launched into his instructions.

“The first thing I want you to do is delegate more. It’s not necessary for you to do everything. In fact, you should be doing very little yourself except reporting to me and keeping everyone in line. Before we continue on, I want you to assign the duties you’re currently doing to the mercenaries. If any one of them gives you so much as a strained look, you punish them on the spot. Is that understood?”

“Yes, sir,” she said, hoping she wasn’t going to have to kick someone’s ass in her current condition.

“I also wanted to compliment you on your choice of scouts. Trajan is an excellent tracker, but the maps are horrible. I want you to assign someone else other than you to do them. Surely there must be another mercenary who can read and write in this sorry band of misfits. If not, have Desmond do it,” Gavin said.

“And speaking of your brother,” he continued, “I want you to consult and use him more. He has a lot of valuable experience and he can be a great help to you.” Gavin winced and arched his back. A furious darkness crossed his face and he clenched his fists under the agony of his failing back. Seeing him like this resurrected the fear that he might not be able to complete this mission. Gypsy held her breath and waited for the spell to subside. After several minutes, Gavin relaxed a little. He focused his golden eye on her and said, “I need the doctor so send her out here and have her bring the kit. Inform the rest of the group we’ll resume travel in thirty minutes. You are to eat something during that time. When we break for camp this evening I’m ordering you to put Desmond in charge and get some sleep.”

“Yes, sir.” Gypsy hesitated. She wanted to help him but knew there was nothing she could do. He glared at her and she took her cue, quickly rushing off to get Doctor Jonson.

Chapter 14

Scarlet clutched the medical kit to her chest and approached the small clearing cautiously. As Gypsy had told her, the general was there leaning his back against a tree with his thumbs tucked into his belt. The black eyepatch over his right eye made him look even more devilish than he usually did. A hard wind whipped past them blowing his thick black locks away from his handsome face. Scarlet approached from his blind side and could read in the iron set of his jaw the enormous pain he was in.

“General?” she said softly so as not to startle him.

“Doctor Jonson,” he said.

She paused for a second. Then she said, “Are you alright?”

“I am managing, Doctor,” he replied coolly.

“Let me give you your pain medication,” she said, putting the kit on the ground and popping it open. Gavin came over and sat down on the ground near her. He unfastened his cuirass and placed it in front of him. Then he peeled off his tunic so she could access his back. The moment she came around behind him she was amazed he could still stand. The tissue covering the four lowest vertebrae was badly swollen and even showed some dark bruising in the surrounding area.

If he had been any other patient, she would have forced him to stop for a few days to let the swelling subside. But this

was Gavin and he didn't take medical advice well. That she'd learned the hard way. She grabbed a loaded syringe and administered several small injections along his spine. Even though she knew he'd resent it, she felt compelled to tell him the truth about his condition. "Your condition is getting much worse, General," she said as tactfully as she could. "You're risking permanent nerve damage here."

"Be more specific please," he said.

"If this gets worse, you might not be able to walk again." She swallowed and continued with the injections, smoothing her hand along the swelling as if she could cure it with sheer will. "You also may not have full use of your...manhood."

Gavin was silent for a long time. Then he said, "I don't care what happens to me. All I care about is finding Harlan. She has contributed more to this empire than anyone other than the emperor himself, and I will not rest until she is returned safely." He rubbed his face hard, letting out an angry hiss through his teeth. Scarlet knew he was having a hard time with the pain. He was starting to build up a tolerance to the drugs she had.

After a brooding silence he continued, "If I were to die tomorrow, a new warlord would take my place. The foundation of my work is built upon brute force and conquest. But Harlan is a true heroine of the empire, for she has done more for my people with her research than anyone before or since. Where I have destroyed families, she has restored them. I owe her the lives of my men, my best friend Caraculla, and myself on numerous occasions. Mark my words, I will not stop until I find her and make the men who took her pay dearly. She is irreplaceable to me and I would gladly lay my life and the lives

of all of you down for her safe return. So finish sticking that blasted needle in my back and let's get the fuck out of here."

Scarlet felt a little guilty. "I'm sorry. I just thought you should know." She finished the last injection and closed the kit. "You're done."

Gavin struggled to his feet and dressed stiffly. "There is something else I need you to do," he said.

"Yes, General?"

"I need you to fake your rape," he said.

Scarlet's mouth went completely dry and her heart started racing. *I sure hope he's kidding.* "What?"

Gavin squinted off in the direction of the mercenaries. "The mercenaries know something is wrong with me. They've been watching me carefully, whispering amongst themselves, trying to judge how strong I am."

"What does that have to do with me?"

"Raping you makes me look stronger—more unpredictable in their eyes. Especially since they've guessed at your relationship with my son."

Scarlet was dumbfounded. "That's the dumbest thing that I've heard," she snapped. Surely this would cause a huge fight with Desmond. "Won't Desmond react?"

"I didn't ask your opinion. And as for your boyfriend's reaction I'm counting on it. He will attack me and one of the mercenaries will try and take advantage of the situation to kill us both. Then they can steal everything, leave, and report we were accidentally killed on the mission."

"I'm very uncomfortable with this, General," she said. "Things may not go the way you're expecting them to and you could end up dead."

Gavin nodded grimly. "Then tell Desmond when you're sure that the two of you can't be overhead. Tell him the next time you and I are alone together, that's when we will stage the rape and for him to be ready. Understood?"

"What if he doesn't want to go along with this plan?" she asked.

"He will. We're in trouble with these dogs and he knows it. Gypsy and he have done a good job of keeping them under control, but with me obviously ailing, they're getting ready to strike. We're just going to push their hand a little."

"Okay," she said, feeling like her guts were made of jelly. "I'll tell Desmond, but I still think this is a horrible idea."

Chapter 15

Harlan and her kidnappers rode into their home village of Rathara at nightfall. Although she'd lived on AEssyria a long time and was used to riding hyperias, she had never ridden days and days at a time and it was murder. She jumped off her mount and collapsed to one knee. Her legs were cramped and hurting. Sulla came over, grabbed her by the arm and pulled her to a small run-down shack on the edge of what looked like the village center. "My brother's in here," he said, thrusting her inside.

Harlan walked into the shack and blinked for a few moments trying to adjust to the poor light. The only illumination in the room was a thick yellow candle on the bedside table. Next to the bed were two women, an older female and another quite young. Their resemblance made Harlan believe they were mother and daughter. The older female wore a ragged peasant dress with a soiled blue shawl over her shoulders and the younger one wore a simple tan dress. Sulla pushed past Harlan with two more candles in his hand. He placed one on a battered dresser and the other on a table by the door. It helped, but not much.

"Who is this?" the older female said, staring hard at Harlan.

"A doctor," Sulla answered.

“But she’s human,” the older female persisted.

“That’s right. What of it?”

“Where did you find her?”

Sulla pushed Harlan toward the bed and turned on the woman. “Stop with your questions. It’s enough that I found her,” he snarled at her.

The females moved away from the bed so Harlan could examine the patient. The foul stench of infection had struck her the moment she was pushed into the shack but as she moved closer it increased exponentially. Harlan removed the blanket covering the patient and almost gagged. He was a young male, probably close to Sulla’s two hundred years. He was naked and his dark green skin was ashen and covered in a thick sheen of sweat. Harlan spotted a deep, pus filled stab wound in the man’s abdomen. The smell of necrotic flesh sent her salivary glands into overtime and she suppressed the urge to dry heave. *What the hell am I going to do? There’s no way I can save this man in such an advanced stage of infection.*

“Well?” Sulla said.

Harlan took a deep breath in but didn’t look at him. “I’ll need my bag,” she said. She’d do the only thing she could; she’d keep him alive as long as she could and make him as comfortable as possible until he died, and he was most definitely going to die. She didn’t need a thermometer to feel the intense fever ravaging him. He was septic for sure, and even if they were in a hospital she didn’t know if she could save him.

Sulla left the shack and came back in with her bag. He was about to close the door when she said, “No. Please leave it open.” The stench of the wound coupled with the heat of the windowless dwelling was almost too much for her. Sulla opened the door wide and made a gesture for the two females

to leave. They scurried out casting nervous looks at Harlan. Sulla came over and dropped Harlan's medical bag at her feet.

"You didn't answer my question," he said in a dangerous tone.

"What was your question?"

"Is he going to live?" Sulla said.

"I'll do everything I can," she replied. "I need some water and towels or cloth or whatever you have access to."

Sulla's face darkened in rage. "Is he going to live?"

"I don't know," she said, trying not to seal her fate too quickly.

"If he dies, so will you," he growled at her.

Harlan had had enough of his threats. "Look, either you are going to help me or be in the way. Which is it? Because standing here threatening me is being in the way and does not help your brother's situation. Now if you want me to try and save him then get me what I've asked for!"

Sulla left only to return with some tattered towels, and a wooden bucket of water. He placed them next to the bed. "What else?"

Harlan rolled up her sleeves and rummaged through her bag, finally pulling out a bottle of disinfectant. "I need you to hold him down," she said as she poured some of the contents of the bottle into the water and washed her hands. "This is going to hurt like hell and he just might get violent."

It took Harlan over two hours to clean out the wound with Sulla going out every few minutes to fetch her clean water. The worst sign of all was that, despite her fear that his brother might get violent, he didn't so much as utter a groan. The poor man was already in a coma but Harlan kept up the illusion of hope. She fashioned a makeshift drain for the

wound and shot him up with some antibiotics. He really needed intravenous fluids but these morons weren't smart enough to steal any medical supplies when they took her. All they brought was her bag.

She stepped back and wiped some sweat off her forehead with her sleeve. "Now the only thing I can do is wait and see if he responds to the medication."

Sulla didn't utter a word. All he did was stare at her. And Harlan prayed for this guy to live long enough for Gavin to find her.

Chapter 16

It was late into the night when they finally stopped to make camp. A light mist drifted from the sky and the moons could barely be made out through the thick cloud cover. The mercenaries were docile compared to their normally boisterous selves, and Scarlet guessed they knew they were catching up to the kidnappers. She watched with building anxiety as some of the mercenaries put up Gavin's tent. Soon the general would need his medication and she would have to be alone with him, a prospect that made her cringe.

She came over to where Desmond had set up their tent and ran her fingers down the side seam. Glancing around, she didn't spot anyone nearby. Everyone was busy getting themselves comfortable for the night. "I need to tell you something," she whispered.

Desmond looked up at her, his mouth twisting into a tense frown. "What's wrong now?"

"Gavin is convinced the mercenaries are preparing for a rebellion. He's going to cause a fight with you to give them an opening to try," she said. "While you are both occupied, Gypsy is supposed to *eliminate* one of troublemakers."

"What kind of distraction does he have in mind?"

"He's going to stage raping me," she said, hoping the fear she felt didn't come through in her voice.

Desmond shook his head, obviously furious. He glared off into the woods as if a hidden enemy lay in wait there. She'd never seen him so openly upset.

"You think I'm in any danger of him really doing it?" she asked afraid of the answer.

"You've said yourself he's probably not in any condition. But that doesn't mean he won't terrorize you." He stared at the mercenaries who seemed to be paying a lot of attention to Gavin's tent. Gavin had been withdrawn lately and hadn't emerged from the tent since they'd erected it. Scarlet knew he was desperately waiting inside for his next dose of narcotics. She wished she'd never agreed to come here.

"Are you mad?" she asked.

"Does it make a difference? He's going to do what he wants anyway," Desmond replied.

"I can refuse to go along," she offered.

Desmond coughed out a bitter laugh. "He doesn't take no for an answer. If you refuse, he'll really rape you to get the reaction he wants."

Scarlet glanced around nervously. "I really don't think he *can*."

"Then he'll find some other way to get you to react. Either way it won't be pleasant," he said without missing a beat. The fact that Gavin's penis might not be working did little to calm Desmond's fears.

Scarlet grabbed her bag. "I'd better get in there," she said.

"Yeah," Desmond said, unsheathing his saber as he sat down. He laid the blade across his lap. "Be careful, Scarlet."

* * * *

Any man who'd been in prison always carried the demon of that place within him. He might have served ten years ago or a day, it was always the same. The demon inside was a fractured mixture of fear and rage. It wasn't on the surface of their personality but buried under layers of fragile self-control that they showed the world in the hopes that they would be allowed to stay free just one more day. Then, when something upset them or their world turned on them, it broke loose and collided with their humanity until there was nothing left of the man but a frothing wild animal without any restraints.

General Gavin Theron reminded Scarlet of such a man. Under the best of circumstance, he masqueraded as a charming, civilized military professional but when things went wrong, his true savage nature came bursting to the surface. Tonight he was in horrific pain from the long day's ride. The push to make up for lost time had taken its toll. He sat on a mat in his tent, his legs crossed underneath him, visibly trembling from the pain. He was naked to the waist and every muscle in his torso bulged and twitched with his silent agony.

This was when she hated him the most, when he was like a loaded gun pointed at her temple.

As cautiously as she could, she came in and placed the medical kit on the ground next to him. She crept around behind him and stared at the swollen mess that was his back. *I can't believe how much worse this is getting.* Grabbing several cold compresses she broke them, activating the cooling agent, and secured them to his back by wrapping a bandage around his chest. "This should reduce the swelling so I can do the injections," she said, her voice shaking.

Gavin didn't move and didn't speak. After twenty minutes, some of the more serious swelling had gone down enough so she could administer the pain medication. Scarlet injected a double dose into his back and was relieved to see him relax a little. She was about to pack the kit up again when he grabbed her hand to stop her.

"Two more," he croaked.

Scarlet stared at him. She wanted to tell him how dangerous that was but all she could think of was the slap he'd given her the last time they'd had a disagreement. "That's not advisable, General," she said.

"I don't give a fuck!" he roared. "Do it *now*!"

Scarlet loaded up two more syringes and injected him, fully expecting him to collapse from an overdose. To her amazement, he got up and put his armor back on.

"What are you doing?" she asked confused.

"I'm sorry about this, Doctor, but it must be done."

His face was a mask of grim purpose and Scarlet felt a bolt of fright hit the inside her chest. She backed up and held her hands up to ward him off. "Oh no, no, no," she said. What if this *fake* rape turned out to be the real thing? The prospect made her queasy.

Gavin grabbed her by the upper arms and pulled her against his colossal chest. Scarlet screamed and struggled but, even with a wounded back, he was impossibly strong. Grabbing her under the jaw, he forced her face up to his and planted a ferocious kiss on her mouth. It was a mean, dominating kiss that forecast the trauma of an impending rape. Her immediate reaction was blind terror. Twisting her face to the side, she clenched her teeth and screamed, "Get your fucking hands off me!"

But the general wasn't done with her yet. Tearing the front of her shirt open to expose the top of her breasts, he mauled painful kisses up and down her throat. Scarlet fought with every ounce of fury she could muster. Then the impossible happened.

Gavin let her go.

Not bothering to grab the medical kit, Scarlet scrambled for the tent entrance and burst out through the flap running.

Chapter 17

Scarlet ran from Gavin's tent like her feet were on fire. The look on her lovely face was pure terror and the front of her shirt was torn revealing the generous mounds of her breasts. Her pale skin revealed some red blotches that marked the trail of Gavin's savage kisses. Desmond clenched his jaw as a furious rage consumed him. This time his father had gone too far.

Unsheathing his weapon, he advanced on Gavin's tent only to have the treacherous bastard emerge. But something was definitely wrong with him. Even though he wore the smug expression of a beast that had eaten its fill, he didn't have the murderous edge he was famous for. Desmond couldn't stand that evil, satisfied grin. All he could think of was carving that glee off Gavin's face. Operating on instinct alone, Desmond launched himself at Gavin, striking blow after blow with his saber searching for an opening. Gavin deflected them, but Desmond could tell right away he wasn't at the top of his game. The injury to his back coupled with the enormous amount of narcotics he was taking had made his reactions too slow, and for the first time in his life, Desmond realized he had him.

The old man's life was his for the taking.

He stopped his attack and took a few paces back to regroup as the realization came over him. Gavin *was* vulnerable. Desmond never thought he'd see the day. He could kill him, he was certain of it. A cauldron of old pain came to a boil inside him but no matter how much Gavin deserved to die, Desmond couldn't bring himself to be the one to destroy him. It would be too much like Northe's death: senseless and painful. Besides, Gavin was right about the mercenaries, they were watching him like a pride of lions waiting for their turn at the kill. They couldn't wait for Gavin and Desmond to turn on each other. Then in the chaos, they could assassinate both of them, rape the women, and escape with whatever was left in the camp to steal. When they returned to the empire, they would just make up some story to account for the deaths and go on to the next assignment.

Then Gavin moved in, taking full advantage of his hesitation and battered him with several punishing saber strikes. Desmond focused his mind and let his experience take over. Once again, he was playing Gavin's game by Gavin's rules, and he hated every minute of it.

* * * *

Gypsy watched her father fighting her brother with a dark and mounting anticipation. She could read Gavin's pain in every saber strike he launched. Compared to his usual combat style, he was slow and clumsy, and she grew worried he wouldn't even be able to finish the contest between himself and Desmond. She also wondered if her brother would seize the opportunity to kill him. The thought made her insides twist with many painful realizations.

Gavin's condition was a shock to her. They were in more trouble with these mercenaries than she had realized. Gypsy

knew she had to act fast. Desmond had told her of Gavin's plan, and it was up to her to find the boldest of the mercenary rebels and take him out. The kill should scare the others back in line, but there was no guarantee.

Ignoring the fight, she moved up behind the group of mercenaries watching them. As she suspected, Nero, the ring-leader, was signaling one of the larger males to stab Desmond the next time he circled near them.

The plan was clever enough. Kill Desmond and Gavin would be easy to destroy, worn out from his enemy and his injury. She didn't know what they had planned for her but, as good as she was, she was no match for the whole pack of them at once.

Gypsy pulled a dagger from her boot and crept up behind the large male. Everyone was so intent upon the fight that they didn't even notice her. The rebel was tense, jumping forward every few seconds in anticipation of his attack. Desmond came around with his back to the group, pounding his saber against Gavin's, and the rebel took several quick steps forward, his knife at the ready. He pulled his arm back to strike her brother in the lower back and Gypsy made her move. Jumping up on his back like a wildcat, she wrapped her arm around his throat and drove her blade up through the base of his skull, twisting it. Blood splashed back onto her and the man went to his knees. A moment later he fell on his face.

Pulling her saber, she turned to face the other mercenaries who were making some threatening moves toward her. Gavin and Desmond stopped their fight and moved up behind her. The mercenaries cast their eyes to the ground and shuffled off, Nero being the first one to depart.

Gavin looked down at Gypsy. "Good job." He nudged the body with his boot. "Make sure none of the mercenaries get rations tonight. Except the scout. Give him and your brother double."

"Yes, sir," Gypsy said. There were so many things she wanted to say to him but this was not the place. She sure hoped he could hold together long enough to save her mother.

Gavin glanced at Desmond. "Come with me," he said. The two of them disappeared into his tent.

* * * *

Desmond stood by the entrance of Gavin's tent and folded his arms. His anger at his father had faded but not disappeared completely. "What?"

Gavin sank down on the floor and sat with his legs crossed under him. He gestured at his armor. "Help me with this, will you?"

Desmond hesitated. His father had never allowed himself to sit lower than his son. It was strange to see Gavin on the ground. Desmond stepped forward and unbuckled the chest plate, lifting it off Gavin. He tossed it on the ground in front of him. For a fleeting moment, he imagined pulling his blade and taking off this bastard's head. The image made him grin.

"Are you planning to kill me?" Gavin asked.

"Then I would run the risk of someone worse taking over the military. If there is someone worse," Desmond replied. It was nice having this kind of power over his father.

"You know you have every right," Gavin said. "I terrorized your girlfriend and murdered your brother. You'll never have an opportunity like now, Desmond. If I was in your position, I would."

“That’s the fundamental difference between us,” he said, crouching a few feet from Gavin, shifting his scabbard. Lowering his voice, he said, “I will tell you this: if you ever exile me again you had better leave me there because the next time you ship me off to some fucking hellhole and then bring me back to help your rotten ass, I will kill you the first chance I get.”

“I really don’t care what you do to me, just promise me one thing,” Gavin said, his voice slurred from the pain meds.

“What’s that?”

“If I should die on this campaign, promise me you and Gypsy will find my wife and bring her home.”

“Don’t worry, we’ll find Harlan with or without you,” Desmond said, suddenly very tired. Then he stood up and stepped outside the tent.

Chapter 18

Gavin was no stranger to pain and hardship. As a young officer, he'd volunteered for some of the worst battles of his time. A career in the military *was* hardship. It was the most grueling profession an AEssyrian male could undertake and the one most likely to end his life early. But Gavin had beaten the odds. He had survived wars, famine, assassins, rebellions and life-threatening injuries. He had risen through the ranks despite his tainted background and close calls with death. But never in all those years had his body betrayed him like it was doing now. At the peak of AEssyrian middle age—an impressive eight hundred and twenty-two—he was falling apart fast. His back was more than painful; it was a reminder that he was no longer able to push himself beyond his limits as he once did. But, through all his agony, he couldn't allow himself to rest. Every second that they stopped meant Harlan must endure another second in captivity, and that was unbearable to him. She had begged him for years to have the injury to his back surgically repaired but he didn't want to go off-world and had ignored her pleas. Now as if the gods were slapping him down for his obstinance, his back was the very thing preventing him from saving her life.

He rode at the head of the group, fighting with every step not to show how uncomfortable he was. Even with the medi-

cation Scarlet gave him the soreness in his spine persisted, tearing at his thoughts like an unforgiving sin. Sickness welled up from his gut and he dismounted, crouching in the bushes like a hopeless drunkard vomiting out his breakfast. He rubbed the back of his black gloved hand across his lips.

Gypsy was next to him in an instant, blocking the mercenaries' view of him as best she could. She crouched down to talk to him. "Excellency?"

"I'm alright," he reassured her. "I just had too much to drink this morning."

Gypsy knew he was lying but what else could he tell her? Everyone close to him knew it was the high dosage of pain medication making him ill. Scarlet rushed to join them and Gavin saw Desmond and Trajan turn their mounts to keep an eye on the men. He *had* to get up or he'd bring destruction on them all. This was just the thing the mercenaries were watching for.

"We need to get you to your feet, sir," Gypsy whispered. She placed her arm under his to give him some leverage but it was no use. Gavin tried to get up but he was in just too much pain. Then the nausea came and his stomach twisted and tried to empty again.

Scarlet secretly flashed Gavin an injection of a powerful stimulant, as if to say *do you need this now?* The doctor had only a few of them and she and Gavin had agreed to save them for just such an emergency.

Without waiting for Gavin to say anything, Gypsy reached down and pulled the hem of his tunic up so Scarlet could inject him in the belly without anyone seeing.

Another crushing wave of illness rushed over him as Scarlet swabbed the area clean and jabbed the needle into his flesh.

The effects of the stimulant were welcome and immediate. Liquid rage burned through his blood pushing the misery of his back to some forgotten place in his brain. His muscles filled with youthful power and his heart pounded so fast it felt like it was going to tear out of his chest. In a second he was on his feet, his hands balled into tight fists.

Nero had ventured up, watching him with predatory curiosity. "Are you feeling okay, Excellency?" he asked. "I could take over the lead for a while if you like." The mercenary gave him an evil, cunning smile that was pure mockery.

Gavin responded by slamming his fist into the mercenary's jaw. The blow knocked Nero's face to the side, tossing him back three feet. Nero lay on the ground blinking and stunned. Gavin glared up and met the stares of all the other mercenaries; every one of them averted their gaze.

He still had some control, but if he kept getting weaker this mission and these mercenary dogs would fall onto Gypsy's shoulders. It was probably only a matter of when.

Gavin just hoped his young daughter was ready.

Chapter 19

Gypsy sat by the riverbank wiping the grime off her new armor with a damp rag. The late afternoon was pleasantly dry and the temperature was beginning to ebb as evening approached. Only a few feet away from her, Scarlet was bathing nude in knee-deep water. Gypsy had tried to dissuade the doctor from stripping naked but Scarlet had responded that she was caked with dirt and insect bites from head to toe and just couldn't take it anymore. Gypsy understood. She'd do it herself if she wasn't so sure they would be interrupted by one of the mercenaries at any moment.

Casually watching Scarlet, Gypsy wasn't surprised her brother was so attracted to the new doctor. She was very appealing with long, wavy, red hair, smooth pale skin with soft blushes of pink, and the kind of curvy body most men went nuts for. Gypsy's own body was very different; it was long and lean like an athlete, with much smaller breasts than Scarlet's. But she didn't envy the other woman. Being that pretty attracted a lot of unwanted attention.

"Do you mind if I ask you a question?" she called out to the doctor.

"Of course not. Ask me anything," Scarlet smiled back. Kneeling in the water she scrubbed her arms with a soapy cloth.

“Do you have any feelings for Desmond or do you keep him content for your protection?”

Scarlet scowled at her and gave a sort of snort. “That’s a pretty insulting thing to ask.”

Now it was Gypsy’s turn to make a face. “I don’t understand. It wasn’t meant to be insulting. Why do you think it is?”

“You basically asked me if I was having sex with your brother so he would keep protecting me. In other words am I just using him? The answer to that question is no,” Scarlet replied, seeming genuinely upset at Gypsy’s question.

“I still don’t understand why you’re mad. There’s nothing wrong with keeping company with someone for protection. In fact it’s very common here for unattached females, especially if you’re not *AEssyrian*. It would be the smart thing to do.”

“Oh. Well where I come from using sex as a bargaining tool is looked down on, even more so if you don’t give a shit about the person you’re having sex with. So I guess I’m sorry I got mad. Like a lot of things here, it’s just a cultural difference.”

Gypsy nodded. “So you do have some feelings for him.”

“I do. But I’m not really sure if he has any for me. It hasn’t really come up in the short time we’ve been with each other. He’s very hard to read, and in case you didn’t notice, he doesn’t talk a whole lot.”

“A lot of women would consider that a blessing,” Gypsy said before laughing.

Scarlet smiled and shook her head. “Yeah, I know, and that’s all fine when you know where you stand with someone.

Unfortunately I have absolutely no idea whether he cares about me or just likes to sleep with me.”

“I’m guessing both. He just has difficulty defining his emotions. I know he cares a lot about you; he told me so. But I think he has a hard time expressing it.”

“Well that makes me feel a little better,” Scarlet said as she worked some soap into her wet hair.

“Desmond’s got a lot of unresolved issues in his life and he can be really hard to get to know. Even more so when he feels the need to be on guard which is most of the time.”

“I can’t even imagine what it would have been like growing up under your father. It amazes me that either one of you turned out as well as you did. You would’ve had to put me in a mental institution by the time I reached adulthood,” she said then immediately leaned forward and submerged her head completely under the water.

Gypsy watched the water turn milky around Scarlet’s head as the soap was pulled from her hair and carried downstream. Pulling her head up out of the water she flipped her hair back and Gypsy waited for her to take a few breaths before saying, “Actually Desmond never lived with Gavin. He was sent to AEssyria by his mother when he was thirteen and lived with Gavin’s older son, Northe. I personally think he was pretty damaged before he even got here.”

“Really? From what?” Scarlet pulled her hair back and began wringing the water out of it.

“I can’t answer that. I don’t know anything about his life on Kirillian. It was way before my time and he won’t talk about. Whenever I press he just shuts down and starts answering everything with yes, no or silence.” Gypsy frowned. “So I usually just drop it.”

"Yeah I know what you mean. I asked him about his mother once and he got pretty grouchy and withdrawn. Do you know anything about her?"

Gypsy leaned forward and soaked the dirty rag in the water. "All I know is that she is some sort of Kirillian equivalent of a noblewoman. She was my father's consort for a brief time and that's how Desmond came about. From what sparse gossip I can get from some of the older women, he was no accident. He, of course, could fill in any other details but he won't."

"Hmm...that's interesting." Scarlet seemed to consider this for a moment then continued. "What about you? You grew up with Gavin and seem to be okay."

Fidgeting with one of the straps on her boot, she replied, "It was tough and we had our share of volatile encounters, which was pretty much all of our encounters once I hit my teens. But my mother exercises remarkable control over him and always made everything alright." Suddenly being struck with the possibility of never seeing her mother again was almost too much for her as a hundred memories, both happy and sad, weaved their way through her thoughts. Not wanting to cry she bit down hard on the inside of her cheek and rubbed her forehead. She stopped almost immediately when a light crunching noise found her ears. Someone was approaching and Gypsy jumped up with her saber. She wasn't surprised to see Nero creeping up. "You'd better have business here," she said, pointing her weapon at him.

He glanced past her trying to get a better view of Scarlet. Gypsy stepped in his way. He grinned. "I was just coming by to see how you girls were doing."

"You have three seconds to get back to the camp before I slice your dick off," she replied.

Nero looked unfazed. "How's your dad doing?"

"One," Gypsy said coolly and advanced a step.

"He's been looking a little done in by all this hard riding. Good thing he has the doctor there to look after him, right? He'd be in a pretty bad spot if he didn't have all those drugs she's been feeding him."

"Two," Gypsy said, taking another threatening step closer.

"Then again he *does* have you and your brother to protect him. Thank the Gods for the kiddies," he said with a nasty smile. "Fruit of his loins, so to speak. But you both can't breast feed him all the time, now can you? No, daddy is starting to show his age and that can be a very frightening thing. I *know* I'm all broken up about it."

"Three." Gypsy thrust her blade at Nero's groin and he jumped back staring at her like she'd gone insane. "Next time," she warned, "it's coming off."

"Okay," he said with his hands in the air. "Okay. I'm going. But even with all your fancy training, you can't take all of us on, Gypsy. Maybe it's time to consider your options. Just let me have the doctor for a few minutes and you can save yourself a lot of headaches. Why would you protect her anyway? She's no one to you."

Gypsy had had enough. She stabbed forward cutting Nero in the thigh and coming within an inch of his penis. He jumped back and pulled his own saber. Gypsy kept advancing quickly.

"Let's go, you fucking piece of filth," she taunted. "Surely even you can best a girl."

Nero glared at her and continued to back up. She let him go, making a mental note to deal with him later. She didn't want to leave Scarlet unattended, even if it was for a good cause. He disappeared back up the trail toward the camp.

Scarlet came up behind her. "What did he want?"

Gypsy turned around. Scarlet had dressed so quickly her clothes were sticking to her damp skin. "You."

Scarlet stared off up the trail and frowned. "I'm sorry, Gypsy. I didn't realize anyone was keeping tabs on us."

"Don't be sorry. Those animals are always watching us," Gypsy said, collecting her stuff. "Even worse, they're watching Gavin."

"He's in really bad shape," Scarlet confessed in a soft whisper. "I don't know how much longer he can keep this up. He's headed for a complete collapse."

"Well," Gypsy said thoughtfully. "He's not going to listen to anyone and if he keeps spiraling down we're going to have to consider some other options. I need you to give some thought as to what those options are going to be."

Chapter 20

The general was getting worse by the hour. Despite her best efforts to keep him in the saddle, his back simply wouldn't stand for anymore riding. Scarlet did the best she could to control his pain but nothing worked despite the high doses of drugs he was taking. He'd be fine for the first couple hours of riding and then the agony would overwhelm him and he would order them to camp again. Scarlet wanted desperately to help him but she was running out of ideas. Reflecting on Gypsy's request for options she knew there was only one thing she could do that might buy him a few days of normalcy but that involved putting him in hibernation and she doubted he'd agree to that.

Outside his tent, she mentally prepared herself for the vicious mood he'd be in. As much as she despised him, she had to admit she was a little jealous of his selfless devotion to Harlan. He was such an interesting contradiction; a man capable of such intense love for a woman who was a complete and unrepentant ass to everyone else. Being alone with him had become an exercise in patience. Often she felt like she was entering a boxing match, lucky for her all his attacks were verbal. But she never knew when one was coming and, as his discomfort and weakness grew, he became even more combative.

She ducked inside and knelt down to where he was sitting on the ground. The confines of the large tent trapped the scents of stale sweat and old, uneaten meat. His rations sat on a plate behind him, untouched and covered in flies. The general was so ill that she didn't think he'd even had a drink in two days. He had removed his patch and she could see the pale, shocking scar that remained in place of his left eye. The damaged eye itself no longer existed, only a scarred and sunken hole where it had once been. He rubbed his forehead slowly, like a man trying to solve all the problems of the world. There were dark circles around his orbits and a cruel hardening to his mouth. He was obviously quite exhausted and could have benefited from some sleep.

He looked at her, his one intact pupil narrowing to a sliver. "You will quadruple the dose."

Scarlet, who had started rummaging in the drug case froze and stared at him. "That will kill you. I won't do it."

Gavin glared at her and she'd never seen such naked hatred. A chill crawled down her neck. "You'll do as you're told," he snarled.

She stood up and took a few steps back from him. "I want to help you, General, but what you're asking for is suicide. I won't do it."

Gavin tensed. "Funny," he said in a mocking tone. "You weren't always this scrupulous. As I recall from a report I recently became privy to, you were involved in a certain freshman internship with a man named Doctor Nathaniel Ross."

Scarlet's stomach dropped. *Oh my God! How the hell did he find out about that?* "I don't know what you're talking about," she stammered.

“Oh, but you do. What do you think Harlan would say if she knew the *truth* about your work there? Such fine, upstanding humanitarian work. I’m sure you neglected to put it on your resume. Do you think she would keep you on, or turn you over to the authorities? What about your boyfriend, Desmond? Would he still be interested in *dating* a woman who participated in the abduction and torture of dozens of Assyrian peasants?”

Her throat tightened but she kept her tone even. “I *never* participated! I was just an intern, a student. I didn’t know what was going on in those labs until it was too late!”

“I’m sure the emperor would find this information as enlightening as I did. You’d probably find yourself rotting in an Assyrian prison somewhere in the stinking jungle,” he mused.

“I hate you,” she said, glaring at him. “I really do. You are the vilest son of a bitch I have ever met and I can’t believe Harlan, or anyone for that matter, married you.”

“Give me the fucking medication!” he barked.

Scarlet’s stomach tightened into a sickening knot. “I’ll give you three doses.”

“You’ll give me four!”

“I’ll give you three and we’ll wait an hour. If you still need another one after that, I’ll give it to you.”

Gavin nodded defeated. “I’m done arguing with you. Do as you wish.”

Scarlet was wary. He’d given up too easy. She knew the moment she got too close to him, he’d be all over her forcing her to do as he demanded. No, she needed someone to keep an eye on him. Clutching the medical kit close to her chest she poked her head out of the tent. She knew Desmond was on

watch and felt a warm relief fill her when she spotted him just across the camp crouching by one of the fires. “Desmond?” she called. “Could you come in here for a moment?”

Desmond stood and quickly came over to her. “What do you need?”

Scarlet smiled at him. “Since you are my assigned body-guard I think I may be in need of some protection,” she said. “The general and I are having a disagreement and I’m afraid he might force the issue. Would you please stay and keep an eye on him while I give him his medication?”

“I’d be happy to,” Desmond said.

Gavin seethed with hatred. “Maybe I should tell my son a story about your early career to keep him entertained.”

She took her place behind Gavin and prepared the first of three injections. “You go right ahead, sir. Just take care not to move while you’re talking. And I’ll do *my* best not to hit too many tender nerves while I’m back here. Of course my professional recommendation is that you not talk and remain perfectly still, that way I have less of a chance of hurting you unnecessarily.”

Chapter 21

As much as Gypsy hated to admit it, killing one of the mercenaries earned her a tense measure of respect among the rest of them. Now, instead of questioning every little thing she told them to do, most of them just did it. This evening, two of the most successful hunters in the group had even given her some extra rations. That's when she knew she'd moved up in their eyes.

Her biggest problem was Gavin. There was no denying her father was hurt and getting sick from all the meds he was taking. Nothing could hide that fact now. He often had to stop several times on the trail so Scarlet could put cold compresses on his back. And Gypsy could see the mercenaries watching him like vultures waiting for a wounded beast to take his last step. Nero, the ringleader of the worst ones, was getting bolder by the day, challenging her in subtle ways. Soon she would have to kill him, too, or risk him trying to seize power.

Gypsy came into Gavin's tent to give him the evening report. He lay on his belly on top of the reed mat, twitching from the pain. His spine was a purple, swollen mess and Gypsy winced just looking at it. How he could even get up anymore baffled her.

As was their routine, she delivered her report and waited for him to ask any questions. There was a long silence. Finally he said, "I'm slowing us down."

She didn't reply. It wasn't a question.

"You should leave me behind and continue on with your brother," he said.

Nero and his cronies would just love that. Gypsy wasn't about to leave her father behind to be murdered by one of these criminal thugs. The thought of him being left out there vulnerable like this was unthinkable. Besides, she needed his experience. "No," she said, shaking her head. "I'll talk to Scarlet and see what our options are."

"And if I order you to leave me?"

"I'll be forced to disobey you. I'm not going to lose both you and Mom," she replied.

He fell into a brooding silence. "I have failed your mother," he said miserably. "She's counting on me and I cannot save her." For a horrifying moment Gypsy thought he was going to weep. But he didn't. Gavin may have been a lot of things but he was always in control of his despair.

"You're doing everything you can, considering the circumstances," she said. She felt awkward. She'd never seen Gavin this broken and it was scaring the shit out of her.

"Come here to me," he said.

She came over and knelt down. His yellow eye seemed to peer right into her soul. "Yes, sir," she whispered.

"Promise me you'll continue on to find your mother no matter what happens to me," he said. That's when she grew concerned he was planning to take off by himself. Gavin was too egotistical for suicide but he would remove himself from

the mission if he felt like her mother's life depended on it. She'd have to keep a closer eye on him.

"Of course I will," she said. "But nothing's going to happen to you. We'll figure something out. I promise."

"You're a good daughter and an outstanding soldier. I know you will be a tremendous success someday."

"Thank you, sir. Now why don't you get some rest before we march again? I'm going to go talk to the doctor about your treatment options," she said, standing up.

Gavin's inner lids closed over and he drifted off into an uncomfortable slumber. *He keeps getting worse and worse and I don't know what to do to help him. What the hell am I going to do with you, Dad?*

Chapter 22

“We have to do something drastic about your father,” Scarlet said to Desmond and Gypsy as they met in her tent later that evening. Gypsy, who had just come in after checking on Gavin, paced with her hands behind her back. Her pretty face was pale and grim. Desmond watched her, wondering what she was thinking, and mused on how much her mannerism reminded him of their father.

“I’m open to anything at this point,” Gypsy said.

Scarlet glanced at Desmond then stared at the ground as she rubbed the back of her neck. “I have an idea but he’ll never agree.”

“What?” Gypsy asked.

Scarlet went over and pulled her tent flaps closed as if that could prevent anyone from hearing what she had to say. “We have to put him in hibernation for a minimum of six hours. That should give his back enough time to heal. It’s not a permanent fix, but it should last him a few days. I’m just hoping that’s all the time we need.”

Desmond couldn’t help it, he smiled. That cantankerous old bastard would *never* allow them to put him under for five minutes, let alone six hours. If this was to be done, it would have to be by force.

Gypsy chewed her bottom lip. "Maybe I can talk him into it. If I told him how important this was to him continuing..."

Desmond rubbed his face and chuckled.

"What the hell is so funny?" Scarlet asked, scowling at him.

"You can talk to him until your hyperia grows wings. I can guarantee he won't say yes."

"Not even to save Harlan?" Scarlet asked surprised.

"It has nothing to do with saving Harlan. He just *can't* give up that kind of control," Desmond said, picking up a twig and bending it around his finger.

Gypsy paced the tent frustrated. "So what do we do?"

Desmond shrugged. "We don't ask him."

Gypsy stopped pacing and stared at him with a lack of comprehension. Desmond smirked and waited for it to sink in. Suddenly Gypsy's eyes sparked with clarity. "You mean—"

Desmond nodded and Scarlet picked up her medical kit. Her fingers squeezed the handle so tight her knuckles turned white. "It's going to take me a little while to calculate and mix the correct dosage. Which one of you is going to hold him down while I give him the shot?"

Desmond stood up, and tossed the twig on the ground. He dusted his hands off on his pants. He could feel Gypsy watching him. "I'm the only one strong enough to do it," he said, rolling his shoulders and feeling a rush of happiness flood his gut. It was the first time in his life he'd be able to beat the shit out of Gavin and he was looking forward to exorcising a lot of old, bad feelings.

"Won't he hold a grudge?" Gypsy asked worriedly.

“Oh, I’m sure he will,” he said. “But it won’t damage our relationship any. In fact, I’m kind of looking forward to it.” He went to the tent flap and lifted it up for Gypsy and Scarlet.

Scarlet gave him a grim look. “Don’t enjoy this too much. He will be feeling better afterward and we don’t need him taking out his revenge on you.”

“He and I have a *long* history,” Desmond said playfully. “Besides it’s better if he’s pissed off at me and not Gypsy. I don’t have much of a career for him to crash. Anyway I know how far I can push him.”

Scarlet shook her head. “That’s what worries me.”

Desmond rested an arm across her shoulders. “Don’t worry, everything will go okay. Now let’s get something to eat. We’re going to need plenty of strength for our upcoming scrap.”

Chapter 23

Harlan was awakened by a pair of rough hands grasping her upper arms and dragging her up from the floor where she slept. She was pulled through the darkness and thrust outside into the cold night. Stumbling in her bare feet, she struggled to realize what was happening. Overhead, the three moons were low in the sky indicating it was almost dawn. Looking back she saw two young AEssyrian males she recognized from Sulla's followers. One of them grabbed her, wrapping his arm around her neck and covering her mouth with his hand. Forcing her down a narrow trail they led her away from the village and into the woods. When they reached a small clearing, they pushed her to her knees and one of them pulled his saber. It made a chilling hiss as it cleared the scabbard.

White terror filled her heart. She'd expected this just not so soon. One of them approached her with a canvas hood and she held up her hands to stop him. "Wait! Wait! Does Sulla know you're going to kill me?" she said in her best AEssyrian.

The male with the hood hesitated. "He's an ignorant fool," he snarled at her. "Sulla may be too stupid to know who you are, but we aren't. You're General Theron's wife and he's going to kill us all if he finds you here. We have to get rid of you before he discovers where you are." The other male lifted his sword high in the air.

“Stop!” she shouted, holding her hands over her head in a hopeless attempt at protection. “I’m treating Sulla’s injured brother. If I die, so does he.”

The two males shrugged. “He’s of no interest to us. He’s as good as dead right now anyway.”

Harlan tried another tactic. “If you know who I am then surely you must be aware of my husband’s reputation. You know that my husband will torture and kill everyone until he finds me... dead or alive. As it stands everyone in this town is as good as dead. You need me to stay alive because I am the only one who can convince him to spare you and your families.” That seemed to give them pause.

Harlan pushed her luck. “If you let me go and point me in the right direction I may be able to reach him first and tell him how kind and merciful you both were. He *will* listen to me. But if I’m dead, so are you.”

The males looked at each other. The one sheathed his saber and tossed her a canteen. The other male left the clearing for a few minutes then returned with her boots. He threw the boots and a small package of rations at her. Harlan was so stunned she fumbled catching one of the boots and it fell to the ground with the rations. She picked the rations and the boot up and nodded her thanks.

“I can’t give you a mount,” the one with the sword said, “because we’re poor and don’t have many. But you have some time before they’ll discover you’re gone. Good luck. This trail will take you to the river. Follow it downstream and it will eventually take you back to Sanguar.”

Then the two males turned their backs on her and walked off toward the town. Harlan sat back on the ground, quickly pulling her boots on and lacing them up. Stuffing the rations

into her pockets and tying the canteen to her waist she began to run down the trail as fast as her legs would carry her.

Chapter 24

It was almost dawn when Scarlet, Gypsy, and Desmond came into Gavin's tent to enforce his treatment. As expected, he was laying on his belly in agony, his spine swollen and discolored from the constant abuse it had been taking. The tent held the stale stench of old liquor and Scarlet just knew he'd starting drinking with his medication again. A fireball ignited in her gut. *This man is the biggest asshole I've ever met.*

Angry now, Scarlet stepped forward and Gavin turned and sat up quickly, glaring at her. He was no fool; he knew something big was happening. She cast a nervous glance at Desmond who nodded to urge her on. "We have an idea that might help you," she said to Gavin.

The general made a sudden lunge for his saber resting nearby but Desmond was expecting the maneuver. In a blur of motion, he slid his boot under the handle and kicked the weapon into the air catching it effortlessly.

Gavin got to his feet. "Fucking swine!" he raged at his son.

"Did you hear what I said?" Scarlet shouted.

Gavin ignored her. All his attention was focused on Desmond who was pointing his own sword at him. "Give me my weapon, you fucking whore's son, or I'll take it from you and shove it up your ass."

"It's right here. Come and get it," Desmond replied coolly.

Gavin whirled on Gypsy. "I suppose you've thrown in with these two hopeless idiots."

"Gavin, just listen to what she has to say," Gypsy said.

The general stared at Scarlet. "Well?" he barked. "What is your *brilliant* idea to cure me?"

"I didn't say it would cure you," Scarlet said. "But I think it will make you close to normal for a few days anyway." She reached into her kit and took out a large syringe filled with a black viscous fluid. "We're going to put you into hibernation for six hours."

"*What?*" Gavin roared, clenching his fists. "You must be completely out of your fucking head!" He pointed out of the tent, stabbing a curved black nail toward the dawn. "My *wife* is out there somewhere enduring who knows what and *you* want to make *me* helpless for *six hours*? There's no way I'm going to agree to that! Now why don't the lot of you get the bloody hell out and pack up the camp?"

"We're not asking you, Gavin," Desmond said, obviously suppressing a smile.

An evil darkness came over the general. He straightened up to his six foot seven height and fixed his one good eye on his son.

Scarlet suddenly felt a rush of fear. "Be careful, Desmond," she said softly.

Now Desmond did smile. "What's he going to do? Fight me? He's as weak as a kitten."

Gypsy took a step forward but stopped under her father's withering glare. "Gavin, we *have* to do this. You just can't go on in this crippling pain. We're not making any progress be-

cause you have to stop every half-hour to rest like an old woman. Please let Doctor Jonson try this. Please.”

Gavin didn’t appear to have heard a word she said. His attention was riveted on Desmond who kept inching closer. “You’ve probably been waiting decades for this moment, haven’t you?”

Desmond didn’t reply. He just focused his intent, waiting for the right moment. The air crackled with the energy each man gave off.

Gavin tilted his head up in defiance and took a few steps back. “Even wounded, you’re no match for me, boy. Come and fucking get *me*.”

Desmond flew at Gavin landing a full body tackle and knocking his father to the ground. If Gavin had been feeling well, he would have been up in seconds with a counterattack, but instead he laid pinned under Desmond uttering a blistering series of cuss words that Scarlet was sure even the seasoned soldier hadn’t heard before. Then, fueled by the renewed suffering in his back, Gavin erupted into ferocious violence. He tried everything to get Desmond off him, but just as his son had predicted, he was very weak.

Gavin fought like a bound lion, roaring and twisting to get out from under Desmond. “If you don’t get the fuck off of me I will find the filthiest rathole in the universe and exile you in solitude until you cut your own throat from boredom!” Gavin pulled his legs up trying to gain some leverage and snarled from the pain it caused him.

“Gavin, please stop fighting this! Let us help you!” Gypsy said, rushing around the brawlers and shouting at the top of her lungs to be heard. “You’re only making things worse!”

"It's okay," Desmond said, obviously enjoying this. "Let him fight."

Scarlet moved in close to inject Gavin in the neck and came within inches of getting mauled. Desmond responded by punching Gavin in the face several times which only enraged his father more.

"Desmond! You stop that!" Gypsy screamed, pointing her finger angrily at him.

Empowered in his frenzy, Gavin managed to toss Desmond off for a few seconds. But the maneuver had cost him, for he was immediately seized by a severe back spasm. Gavin fell to his knees hard, engulfed in suffering. Desmond threw himself on the general again, immobilizing him with a sleeper hold. "Get him now," he said to Scarlet.

Grabbing the waist of Gavin's black pants, she pulled them down just enough to inject him in the top part of his buttocks. The general growled his outrage but it was already softer than before.

Desmond loosened his grip and lowered Gavin to the ground. He would have just dropped the son of a bitch but he didn't want to upset Gypsy any more than she already was. The general was fading fast, his inner lid closing over his golden eye. Scarlet collapsed on her butt and frowned at Desmond. "I think you enjoyed that a little too much."

Desmond nodded and checked the time. "You will never have any idea how much," he said distractedly, calculating the hours before Gavin would be awake up again.

Gypsy shook her head. "I'm going to take a nap. Wake me before you wake him. Desmond, you're in charge." Then she walked out just as the first golden rays of sunlight peeked out over the horizon.

Chapter 25

Gypsy emerged from Gavin's tent and was immediately greeted by Nero and his supporters. It didn't take a genius to know what their intentions were; each of them was decked out in full battle armor. Gypsy heard Desmond pull his weapon behind her and she did the same. She hadn't even heard him come out of the tent. Scarlet must have been right behind him because she heard her gasp.

Nero gave them a wicked smile. "We couldn't help but overhear your father's been ailing. We just came by to offer our condolences."

"He's not dead, asshole," Scarlet said. "He's just resting."

"They know," Gypsy said icily. "Nero's just trying to be funny."

Nero rested his hand on his saber handle. "Come on now, Gypsy. This doesn't have to come to violence. We'll just take what we want from the camp and go."

"So let me get this straight," Gypsy said in a mocking tone. "We let you steal all our supplies and you and your men will go away and leave us in peace?"

Nero nodded slowly, glaring at her. "That's right."

"Hmmm," she said not taking her eyes off Nero. "What do you think about that idea, Desmond?"

"I think it sucks."

Gypsy nodded as if that had confirmed her thoughts on the matter. "Yeah, I think that sucks, too. So I have a better idea." She blossomed into a bright smile. "How about I kill you and keep everything that's mine?"

Nero shifted uncomfortably. He opened his mouth to speak when suddenly someone behind his group shouted out, "Back off!" Nero's group parted and Trajan passed through followed by about ten mercenaries who had stayed loyal. They jostled their way through and came over to stand behind Gypsy and Desmond. Everyone who hadn't done so already pulled their sabers out with a collective metallic scrape. Desmond nudged Scarlet and tossed his head to a place away from the conflict. She actually looked disappointed not to be part of the fight but she walked off to a spot where she could still see.

Nero didn't waste any time launching his attack. Lunging forward, he tried to plunge his saber into Gypsy's belly but he was a second too slow. Gypsy easily sidestepped the cut and danced back, bringing her weapon down across the flesh of his right arm. Nero roared in pain but kept coming, attacking her with surprising clumsiness.

Gypsy let go and let her fury and training take over. A rush of pure adrenaline pumped energy into her blood and she was disappointed to find Nero not as good an opponent as she'd thought he would be. Countless times he left himself open and she'd let him live, almost feeling guilty if she killed him too fast. All around her the camp was in violent chaos and she knew if she took Nero out, the other rebels would soon lose heart.

Desperate and losing, Nero found the cunning to deliver a nasty cut under her right ear. That's when Gypsy realized the error she'd made in holding back. She'd let him make her

soft and it could have cost her life. This had gone on long enough.

Ducking under a horizontal chop, Gypsy came up fast and drove her saber into a gap between Nero's armor, puncturing his gut and pushing her blade all the way through him. Her enemy sank to the ground, blood running down his legs and pooling onto the soil around him. She ripped her sword from his flesh and then, to take him out of his misery, she swung her saber in a wide arc, taking his head off.

Nero's body collapsed on the ground and the fighting all around them stopped.

The rebel mercenaries, realizing their leader had fallen, dropped their weapons and sank to their knees. Desmond came over and glanced down at Nero's body. "What the hell took you so long?" he said.

Gypsy frowned. "I was tired," she said. Scarlet rushed over and looked at the cut under Gypsy's ear but Gypsy swatted her away. "I'm okay, stop it." Scarlet backed off with a scowl.

Desmond pointed at the kneeling men. "What do we do with them?"

Normally such disloyalty would be punishable by death, but they were going to need these men when they finally caught up with her mother's kidnappers. "Bind them," Gypsy said. "Gavin will be awake in a few hours. We'll let him deal with them. After all, they are his mercenaries."

Chapter 26

After Nero's death, the camp returned to a more relaxed normal. The rebel mercenaries seemed to have a new sense of respect for Gypsy and they now ran to her for every instruction. Canteens were filled without anyone having to prompt them for it; a hunting party went out without anyone having to assign anyone; hyperia were fed and watered without anyone having to order them to do it. In fact, as barbaric as it sounded, the entire camp seemed relieved to be rid of Nero. The AEssyrians reminded Scarlet of a wolf pack in that way, if there was a clear leader, everything ran smoother.

Tired and frayed from the ordeal with Gavin and the brawl that ensued, Scarlet sat by the river's edge washing her face and hands. She heard footsteps behind her and turned around to see Desmond coming down the embankment. He came over next to her and sat on a nearby boulder. "I thought I told you not to separate yourself from the camp like this," he said annoyed.

"I'm sorry," she said, knowing he was right. "I just get so sick of being crowded in all the time." She glanced around. "Besides I didn't think I was *that* far away."

"You're far enough to be dragged off and raped without anyone hearing a thing."

She gave him a devilish smile. "Is that a threat or a promise?"

His eyes swept up and down her body. She could almost feel the lust in his gaze like a caress on her skin. Grabbing her by the back of the neck, he pulled her into a scorching kiss. Scarlet was surprised by his passion, and before she knew it, he'd picked her up around the waist and carried her to a thick clump of trees.

Unlike the many other times they'd been together, this time Desmond was a little rougher and more demanding. The subtle change was feverish and exciting and Scarlet felt hot moisture pool between her legs. He must still be charged from the fight. Unbuttoning her pants, he pulled them and her panties down to her lower thighs, then pushed her against the trunk of a tree.

Desmond moved up behind her placing one of his hands over her mouth. His other hand slid down her belly to her heated center as he roughly kissed the back of her neck. A deep groan rumbled through his chest when his fingers became immersed in her wetness and she felt the vibration against her back. Then he slid his thick cock deep inside her with embarrassing ease. How was it he could make her this hot all the time? Closing her eyes, she fantasized she'd just been captured by him and he was enjoying her in front of all of his men. In her mind they were shouting encouragements to him as they watched, some even growing bold enough to caress her legs as Desmond pounded her pussy relentlessly.

Pleasure roared to life inside her womb, growing so intense, she thought every stroke of his penis would be her undoing. Delirious from lust, she pushed her hips back to meet him, moaning into the flesh of his hand. Her pussy, rippling

ecstasy with every punishing stroke, clamped down on his rod as the orgasm overtook her. A moment later he took his hand off her mouth and climaxed as well.

* * * *

Desmond was just about to escort Scarlet back to camp when she said, "There's something important I have to tell you."

The words hung in the air making him feel tense and edgy, like a condemned man told he had a day to live. Perhaps she'd decided to end their relationship. He had to admit, they didn't have much in common but sex, he wouldn't be surprised if she decided to trade up. "What?" he said flatly.

"Gavin has something on me and when we get back he's going to tell Harlan. She'll fire me for sure," Scarlet said. Her voice had taken on a strange haunted quality he'd never heard before.

"What could *he* possibly have on you?"

Scarlet took a deep breath and blinked up at him. His guts twisted thinking she might actually leave *AEssyria*.

"While in medical school, I worked for a man who did experiments on *AEssyrians*. I swear to you, I didn't know about it until I'd already been there a few months. But, by the time I got out of there, my reputation was damaged. I paid a hacker to expunge the internship from my school record, but Gavin found out anyway."

Desmond nodded. "He's got a lot of connections. So that's it? That's all he has on you?"

"What do you mean that's it? It's bad enough, don't you think? All the emperor has to do is get wind of it and he'd probably execute me."

“Listen,” Desmond said relieved. “Gavin’s not going to expose you no matter what he said. If he did, he wouldn’t have anything to hold over your head later when he needs drugs Harlan won’t give him. No, you’re safe there. And as far as him taking the high ground and looking down on you, I can guarantee he’s tortured and killed hundreds of *A*Essyrians for every one that doctor did. So don’t pay a whole lot of attention to Gavin’s false moral outrage. He’s not going to say a word to anyone, especially his wife. That little bit of information is much too valuable to him to *waste* telling Harlan. And even if he did tell her, she never takes anything at face value. She would listen to your explanation, and if you’re telling the truth, she’ll believe you. Besides, you wouldn’t know it to talk to him, but he’s grateful for your help. Now let’s get everything ready to go. If he wakes up from his nap and the camp’s not ready to ride he’ll be an even bigger son of a bitch than before.”

Chapter 27

Harlan was fortunate that she'd never experienced physical abuse in her life. Never, that was, until now. Despite her best efforts to escape, Sulla had caught up with her only an hour after she'd left. She tried to run but his mount quickly closed the distance between them and he threw himself at her, tackling her to the ground. As she lay pinned beneath him trying to catch the breath he had knocked from her she thought he was finally going to rape her which, in retrospect, would have been preferable to his actual plan. Climbing to his feet he grabbed her left ankle and pulled her along the ground toward a cluster of cantaloupe-size stones near the river's edge. The dragging friction caused her shirt to ride up and the gravel rubbed abrasions into the skin of her belly. Sulla was snarling something at her the whole time but she could barely understand him through his frothing fury.

When they reached the stones he twisted her leg until she rolled onto her back, then he dropped it so her foot landed on top of the stones. Before she realized what was happening he raised his knee and brought his boot down in the center of her shin. In a surreal episode of neuronal transmissions Harlan heard both her tibia and fibula snap. Then she heard an ear-splitting scream that seemed to go on forever. As the tragic noise exploded from her throat she lost all control of her

senses. There was only pain and all she could do was scream. Her captor becoming obviously irritated by the relentless shriek, kicked her in the stomach and then the chest, robbing the noise of its precious fuel.

Harlan was sure she was going to die.

As she coughed and gagged on her own saliva she felt him pull her up with him as he mounted his hyperia. The pain was excruciating but she forced the screams to remain in her head and contented herself with letting her tears fall. To compound her punishment Sulla rode back to the town at a full gallop, her battered leg bouncing mercilessly against the saddle.

Once they returned he threw her to the ground, dismounted and dragged her into the shack where his brother lay dying. He flung her toward the dying man and she caught herself on the bedpost before she fell to the ground again. "You're damn lucky he's still alive," he spat at her. "You're also lucky to be alive yourself. If you try to leave again I'll break your other leg and then share you with every man in this village." He stared at her for a few long seconds as though daring her to say something. Harlan painfully pivoted toward his brother and began to wipe his forehead with a wet cloth she retrieved from the water bucket. Hearing Sulla walk out of the shack she dropped the rag and felt more hopeless tears flood her eyes.

Her leg hurt so bad she was unable to form coherent thoughts in her head. The world swirled around her for a second and she was sure she was going to pass out. Standing was a torturous act of balance where any weight she had to put on her bad leg sent shock waves of suffering into her brain causing her to cry out. Unable to stand much more pain, Harlan hobbled over to the rickety wooden table where she'd left

her medical bag. Bracing herself against the table she emptied the contents and with shaking hands rummaged through the remaining vials. All she had left was a mild muscle relaxant but she didn't care. It was better than nothing. Fumbling with the syringe she pulled as much as she dared from the bottle and pulled her sleeve up exposing her upper arm. As she aimed the syringe at her bicep, one of the table legs collapsed and Harlan, her medical bag contents and the table came crashing down. She cried out in horrific agony as her bad leg hit the floor. Through the blinding pain Harlan watched the syringe roll under the bed far from her reach. Then her mind blinked out and everything went black.

* * * *

Gypsy stared amazed at what only six hours had done to heal her father's back. Instead of purple, puffy tissue surrounding his spine, it actually looked normal. Scarlet prepared the antidote to bring him out of hibernation and came over frowning. She was delighted her plan had worked. Now maybe they could find Harlan and she could get back to something of a normal life. There was only one thing left to check and she sure as hell wasn't doing it while the general was awake.

Scarlet injected a small portion of the antidote to bring him to a relaxed unconsciousness. Gavin was resting on his side naked except for a blanket wrapped around his hips. She ran her hand down the thick bony ridges of his spine, massaging the sexual glands at the base. "You might want to look away for this," she said to Gypsy.

"What are you doing?" Gypsy asked, folding her arms.

"Well," Scarlet said, feeling the glands swell slowly. "Your father's been impotent for the past few days from nerve damage. The hibernation should have healed him for now but

I'm not sure. I've got to check and see if his body will respond to sexual stimulation. Then we'll know how bad he really is."

"So what does that mean?" Gypsy said, cocking her head to one side.

Scarlet grinned. Reaching into the blanket she wrapped her hand around the huge shaft of his penis but he was still soft. Even flaccid, the size of his cock surprised her and was much larger than she thought it would be. How on earth did Harlan get this monstrous thing inside her? "Come on, big boy," she whispered, stroking the length of his penis, "I know you can do this."

Gypsy's eyes expanded to the size of ostrich eggs and her mouth fell open. "Oh yeah...well you...um...don't need me here for this and I really have some things that I need to see to," she stammered as she backed out of the tent.

Then she was gone and Scarlet smiled. She guessed all children shared the common ground of not wanting too much information about their parents' sexuality.

Reaching her other hand under the blankets, she cupped his balls and massaged them. She felt like she was fondling a bull. A faint grunt escaped his lips and Scarlet shook her head. *At least one of us is enjoying this.* Impatient for any kind of reaction, she took her hand out, spit in her palm and stroked the shaft of his penis faster. After several minutes, she was just about to give up when suddenly his cock began to respond. The thick veins of the shaft bulged and the muscle expanded, growing hard in her palm. Scarlet took her hand off his balls and grabbed a nearby rag. She placed it over the head of his penis and massaged the length until he climaxed. *There you go, you jerk, don't say I never gave you anything.*

Cleaning him and her hands off, she reflected that it took him a little longer than normal to get hard. That wasn't a good sign. Another relentless round of hard riding could render him impotent forever. Should she tell him? She decided to hold off. He wasn't going to stop his obsessive drive to find his wife and this added information would only upset him. Better let it rest for now.

Grabbing the syringe, she administered the rest of the medication and watched as Gavin eased back into the real world. "How are you feeling?" she asked.

He looked calm and relaxed. "Better," he croaked.

"Great. I know we have a lot more riding to do so I don't know how long this cure is going to last. You're almost back to normal for now."

Gavin shifted groggily and looked puzzled. He lifted up the blanket and looked at his penis. "I had the strangest dream..."

Chapter 28

Gavin emerged from his tent armored up and ready to go. Gypsy cautiously watched her father, marveling at how robust and healthy he looked. Amazing what a few hours in hibernation could do. He adjusted the patch over his blind eye and scanned the mercenaries. "Where are the rest of them?" he asked as he approached her.

Gypsy took a deep breath. "Some are dead and others are restrained for attempting a rebellion. I wasn't sure what you wanted to do with them."

Gavin nodded grimly. "Under normal circumstances I'd have them flogged but we don't have time for that now. Cut them loose and tell them their future depends on how bravely they fight when the time comes. I take it you, Scarlet, and your brother did fine without me."

"Yes, sir."

Gavin gave her a hard stare. "I'm not going to say you did the right thing, Gypsy, but you did what you felt you had to, so we'll leave it at that." His golden eye swept the men saddling up their mounts. He spotted Desmond and took off toward him. Some of the men nearby gave a warning call and Desmond turned around and braced himself for Gavin's wrath.

But then something extraordinary happened.

Gavin reached Desmond and, instead of punching him in the jaw like everyone expected, he pulled him into a full body embrace. Gypsy stood there stunned for a second then rushed over to stop *whatever* it was Gavin was doing.

Like a giant python with an animal in its grip, Gavin squeezed Desmond hard. Her brother, realizing this was a new form of revenge, started fighting like a cat dipped in water.

“Excellency!” Gypsy said, rushing up to them. “We don’t have *time* for this!”

Gavin just ignored her keeping his attention focused squarely on her brother.

“Get your fucking hands off me, you bastard!” Desmond shouted, struggling hard to get free. To make his confinement worse, Gavin had caught him around the upper arms pinning them to his sides. In this position, coupled with Gavin’s new-found strength, it was almost impossible to fight the general off.

Gavin leaned his mouth close to Desmond’s ear. “I just want you to know how *grateful* I am for all your help and kindness while I was injured. Your loyalty to me won’t be forgotten. I’ll see to it personally that you are rewarded in a manner fitting the hero that you are.” Then with a wicked laugh, Gavin released him. His son stumbled back obviously shaken.

One of the mercenaries brought Gavin his hyperia and the general mounted up. Gavin stood up in his stirrups. “I hope you’ve all had a nice little rest!” he roared at them. “Because from now until we find my wife, no one sleeps.” Then he spurred his mount and took off at a full gallop leaving everyone scrambling to keep up.

It was early afternoon and Sulla, who'd been hovering around inside the shack all morning, finally left Harlan alone to get them something to eat. Harlan had no doubt in her mind she was minutes from being killed. Sulla's brother, already on death's doorstep when she got here, was dying slowly in front of her and there was nothing she could do to stop it. Thankfully Sulla was rather squeamish and didn't venture too close so it was easy to lie to him. But when his brother finally did die and that was minutes from now, it wasn't going to take him long to figure it out and that's when Harlan's life wouldn't be worth spit.

As she sat on the floor she stared down at the twisted mess that was her leg. The dark purple tissue on her leg showed the unmistakable tread design of Sulla's boot. She was thankful that the fracture was closed but not by much. One of the jagged ends of her tibia was outlined under her skin threatening to tear through if she moved the wrong way. The constant pain was leaving her exhausted and sick. Nausea accompanied all of her encounters with food and she had started spiking low grade fevers periodically throughout the day. Her body was beginning to crash and if Sulla didn't kill her first, his brother wouldn't be the only the one dying from an untreated injury.

Harlan struggled to her feet using the broken table leg that she had fashioned into a makeshift crutch and went over to the wounded man's bedside. His green skin was a sickly pale shade and as she watched, he took one raspy breath in and never exhaled.

Seconds ticked by.

Harlan checked his neck pulse.

Nothing.

Shit. I've got to get out of here now! Hobbling to the door, she peered out to see if Sulla was on his way back. He was a little more relaxed with her now that he'd broken her leg. After all, not only did she have no place to run to but she was also badly hurt. Sulla was standing with another man talking by the central fire pit. Neither man seemed to be in a hurry to go anywhere. This was the only chance she was going to get.

As carefully as she could, she limped out the door and quickly slipped behind the shack taking care to stay in the shadows. In quiet agony she made her way into the woods a few measured limps at a time. There was only one place where she might be able to put some distance between her and Sulla: the river. If she could make it into the water she would be difficult to see, even more so once the suns set. She'd have to ride the current as best she could and try not to drown or get eaten by something. She only hoped she got there before Sulla found out she was gone.

Chapter 29

Gypsy had joined Trajan on his scouting run because the mercenary was certain they were getting close. It felt good to know that her father was feeling better but the fate of her mother still weighed heavily on her. Had she cost her mother valuable time by forcing her father into hibernation? No, she felt certain she did the right thing. Gavin had been so bad it would have taken them weeks to find her.

Riding up a worn local trail, their hyperias were suddenly startled by a middle-aged woman rushing out to stop them. Gypsy's mount reared up and she almost fell over backward. "Get out of the road!" she barked at the woman.

"You are General Theron's daughter, Gypsy," she said pointing at her.

Gypsy and Trajan exchanged glances. "Yes, that's right."

A cool wind swept by them and the woman pulled her worn gray shawl tighter around her bony shoulders. "I know where your mother has been taken," she said.

Gypsy dismounted and was on the woman in seconds. She grabbed her by the front of her tattered dress. "Where?"

The woman trembled but kept her gaze calm. "First I want your word you won't hurt my kin."

Before Gypsy could answer, Trajan replied, "You have it."

The woman signaled to the hut she lived in for someone to come out. Two young males appeared. They were skinny and wore swords but didn't make a motion to draw them. "We've seen your mother. We've spoken to her. She promised us your father would spare our lives if we didn't kill her, so we let her live and helped her escape. Unfortunately Sulla recaptured her." The two looked at each other and then back at her.

Gypsy wanted to cut them into tiny little pieces but she held her rage in check. "Where is she? Who the fuck is Sulla?"

The two men looked at each other then pointed up the road. "Two hours' ride from here up this very road, in Rathara. Sulla is the village enforcer. You'll know him when you see him because he has three scars down the center of his face," the man said, using his fingers to make a raking gesture over his face. "But you'd better hurry. The doctor was kidnapped to care for Sulla's injured brother and he's not going to live much longer despite her efforts. When he dies, she dies."

* * * *

Gypsy intercepted Gavin as he led the mercenaries up the trail. He reined his hyperia up and squinted at her. "Well?" he asked. "What have you found out?"

"We have encountered two men who say they've seen her recently. They say she's being held in Rathara which is two hours' ride from here."

Gavin turned to face the group pulling up behind him. "We have a lead that says my wife is two hours' ride from here," he said. "We will make it there in one." Then Gavin spurred his mount and took off up the trail at a full gallop.

* * * *

Harlan hit the river water with a clumsy splash. The cool water was sweet mercy on her sore damaged leg. She passed out for a moment but quickly came to again. This was going to be much harder than she thought. Her injury was almost two days old and a constant drain on her strength. Navigating as best she could, she held her crutch for flotation and let the current take her like a crystal green chariot downriver. Every so often her leg would strike something and she would have to muffle her scream on her forearm. For all she knew Sulla was riding along the banks looking for her. The cold water swept her past cliffs and rocks, hanging her up here and there on boulders and broken trees sticking up out of the water. The occasional fish nibbled at her fingers thinking them something good to eat. It was the least of her worries, because Harlan was having a very hard time staying awake and afloat. She was so cold that it felt like her extremities weren't even attached anymore. Her thoughts turned to her husband, Gavin, and daughter, Gypsy. A deep sorrow squeezed her heart. *I love you both so much. I'm so tired and weak and I just don't think I can hang on anymore. I'm sorry I couldn't make it, but I want you both to know I did my best.* Darkness surrounded her and she couldn't even see the riverbank anymore. Then a quiet calm engulfed the rest of her senses and blackness overtook her.

Chapter 30

They arrived about a mile away from Rathara just as the twin suns began melting into the horizon. Gypsy sat in a clearing with Gavin, Desmond and Trajan going over the last-minute attack plans and she had to admit, she was nervous. It wasn't the fear of death or injury that made her jumpy but the awful knowledge that they were minutes away from finding out the fate of her mother. Their own numbers had also dwindled since they had embarked on the rescue mission. When they surveyed the destruction at Sanguar, Desmond had given Gavin an estimate that forty to forty-five men had participated in the attack. With their initial party of twenty-nine seasoned fighters they were pretty evenly matched. Now they were down to only nineteen and that gave her pause, even more so because they were on foreign soil. This being her first real field fight she really wasn't sure what to expect. For his part, her father was calmer than she'd seen him in days and seemed to know the outcome of the battle already. In fact he acted as though the impending fight was nothing more than a minor inconvenience that distracted him from his true purpose. At least he was feeling better and that gave her an immeasurable amount of comfort. It was the first time since they'd left the empire that she felt as though she didn't have to worry about him.

Gavin squinted at her through the building darkness. "Repeat your attack plan," he said. He'd been making her go over it and over it to make sure everyone not only knew what they were supposed to do, but what the other combatants were going to be doing. There was a time a few short years ago when she would have given him some sarcastic answer thinking he didn't trust her to remember. But now she knew *why* he did things and it made all the difference. She repeated the plan and listened one more time as Desmond repeated his and then Trajan his.

Satisfied that everyone knew their place, Gavin mounted up. Scarlet came over and stood by his hyperia, absently stroking the soft black flesh of its muzzle. "What am I supposed to do?" she said.

"You, my dear doctor, will stay here until we come back and get you. Harlan may very well be hurt and I can't risk you getting killed," he said.

Scarlet nodded, clearly unhappy with the idea of staying behind. She walked over to the small campfire and sat down cross-legged on the ground, staring into the flames. Gavin dismounted and came over to her. She looked up at him and draped a lock of red hair behind her ear. "I have something for you," he said in a low confidential tone that only Gypsy could hear. He crouched down by her and handed her Harlan's gun.

"But I thought..." she said awkwardly.

"I know," Gavin said, returning to his mount. "But these are difficult times and you need some protection. I can't afford to leave anyone here with you as we are already outnumbered." He stared off into the forest as if he could see the future and didn't like it one bit. "I never gave that to you."

Scarlet nodded and pushed the weapon down into her pants pocket and out of sight. "Good luck, General."

"Thank you, my dear, but I don't need luck," he said in a voice laced with cold doom. "I have experience, lots of experience in carnage."

Chapter 31

Just outside the village, Gypsy raised her hand to halt the six mercenaries who accompanied her. The town was relatively quiet with a central fire pit and several smaller ones in the distance. About sixty dwellings of various sizes and in different states of repair spotted the hilly landscape above the river. Waiting for the signal, she chewed her bottom lip and rubbed her thumbs back and forth along the braids in her reins. As she watched the opposing terrain she noticed a few armed men wander around the village center exchanging some conversation. Although they carried swords, she didn't get the impression that they were on any kind of watch. Her eyes strained through the darkness searching for any sign of her mother. Watching as the village men shared a laugh, the cauldron of fury that had been simmering in her mind began to boil over. It took every ounce of self-control that she had left not to tear in there and cut them down. Then across the way a beam of light flashed twice and the time had come.

Gypsy pulled her saber and tore into the village at a full gallop with her father's mercenaries close behind. The evening air was mercifully cool and chilled the building sweat on her skin beneath her armor. The scent of blossoming flowers caressed her nose as she thundered past a small cottage with a

garden out back. The serenity it evoked was in stark contrast to the destruction that was about to unfold.

As Gavin had predicted, no one was expecting them. Gypsy galloped over to the men she'd been watching and separated the first one from his head before he even knew she was on him. Jumping from her mount she engaged the other two men killing them with such ease that it surprised her. Then another male attacked her from behind and as soon as she dispatched him another came. Apparently being the only female made her a desirable target for the males who *were* willing to fight, and she happily went through them like a buzzsaw until she stood in the town center surrounded by dead enemies.

It was very purging and Gypsy's blood was ignited with a newfound source of energy. The desire to kill rushed through her being as though each dead body contributed to a wall of protection around her emotions in case the unthinkable had happened to her mother.

Gavin and her brother, Desmond, quickly destroyed what little resistance they encountered, killing their enemies even before the villains had time to pull their sabers. The rest of the villagers raced for shelter, some of them searching in vain for weapons, but there was no need. They were hopelessly outmatched and the battle was all over in minutes.

Gypsy approached a group of village males standing in a circle with their hands in the air and their weapons at their feet. They watched her approach as though she was engulfed in flames. The fear etched permanently into their features. "Where is the doctor you bastards kidnapped?" she growled, gripping her saber and pointing it at them. They all gestured over to a broken down shack where another male with three

disfiguring scars knelt before her father. Desmond was binding his hands behind his back and hobbling him.

Before she knew what she was doing, she raced over and slammed her boot into the prisoner's gut. He gave a satisfying grunt of pain and shot her a nasty look.

"Where the fuck is she?" Gypsy spat at him then pulled her fist back to punch him. Gavin seized her by the arm before she could attack the prisoner again.

"Lieutenant," he said grimly. "Go and secure the other men of the village and bring them here. If this piece of filth doesn't tell me where she is, we'll just start torturing the rest of them in front of him until he does."

"My *name* is Sulla and I already told you!" the man screamed. "I don't know where she is! If she's not in the shack, she must have escaped again!"

Gypsy had never seen her father so furious. His eye blazed with potent hate and his anger carried an infernal heat that radiated outward and burned everyone present. Without warning, Gavin pounded his fist into Sulla's face and a distinguishing crack filled everyone's ears. The prisoner spat a tooth onto the ground and blood seeped from his nose and mouth. Gypsy walked away stiffly to get some other males for Gavin to torture. She returned to the circle of village males, lined them up, and marched them over to where her father was interrogating Sulla. Then, out of the corner of her eye, she spotted Desmond mounting up. She came over and blocked his way before he could ride off.

"Where are you going?" she asked curious.

"I think he's telling the truth about Harlan being gone. There's a dead man in the shack who looks remarkably like Sulla, minus the three beauty marks. I'm guessing that's his

brother. He doesn't appear to have been dead more than a few hours. If Harlan knew her life would end when his did, she would have nothing to lose by attempting another escape. I'm going to take Trajan and see if we can pick up a trail," he said. "You stay here and keep an eye on Gavin. I'll be back soon if I find something."

Gypsy wanted to join him but she was afraid of what Desmond might find. She couldn't face finding her mother's body in a shallow grave somewhere. She decided just to stay here and enjoy the show.

* * * *

Desmond and Trajan had been searching through the village for about twenty minutes when they decided to check down by the river. If she did escape, it must have been recent because Sulla didn't even know she was gone and he'd probably been keeping close tabs on her since her last escape.

After only a few minutes Trajan called out that he'd found something. Desmond rode over to where the other man was crouching on the ground a few feet from the water's edge. The halo from his light illuminated a portion of tracks in the damp ground.

"I'd bet your soul that these are hers," the other man said while pointing at the strange looking tracks.

"Why are the footprints single file?"

Trajan shook his head. "Not single file. She's only got the use of one leg. This other circular indentation is parallel to each print. Some kind of crutch would be my guess. Also the tracks are going into the river and none are coming out."

"How old are they?" Desmond asked as his hyperia sides-tepped nervously.

"It's hard to say exactly," he said, tracing the footprint with his fingertip and pressing on the ridges left by the sole of a boot. "Probably made not too long after the brother died. So a few hours at most."

Desmond frowned. *Great.* The river could have carried her twenty miles away by now. "Well we better start making our way downstream. This may take awhile. I'm going to cross and search the north bank. You ride back and let the lieutenant know what we're doing and see if you can confirm the leg injury with any of the prisoners...if the general hasn't killed them all by now. When you're done, start working your way down the south bank."

Trajan nodded and mounted up. His hyperia took off at a dead run up the trail and back toward the village. Desmond's own hyperia had no desire to cross a wide, rushing river in the dark and began stomping his feet and hissing as Desmond urged him forward. *Come on, idiot, not now.* He firmly pressed his spurs into the animal's sides and said, "If you don't cross, you don't eat. In fact I'll just turn your worthless ass loose and maybe the remaining villagers can eat you." His mount stood rigidly for a moment then plunged into the cold river and began to frantically swim to the other side. They made it in about ten minutes. "See? Was that so hard?" Desmond said, patting the animal's neck.

The moons weren't high enough to provide any light so Desmond pulled a microlight from his saddlebag and shone it along the bank. Not wanting to miss her if she'd washed ashore. He moved painstakingly slow checking every bush, pile of logs and cluster of trees.

For over an hour he rode feeling the hope he'd been carrying begin to fade. If she had drowned it could be awhile be-

fore she floated to the surface. Not wanting to venture into *that* territory he focused all of his energy on scanning the banks for disturbances, tracks, clothing or anything that gave an indication that she was still alive.

As he approached the two hour mark the waters were getting much more treacherous, much less survivable. Then he spotted a dark shadow up ahead on the bank. He had, of course, seen a lot of dark shadows along this river and they usually turned out to be boulders or broken logs that had washed ashore. Nudging his hyperia into a trot he rode over and swept his light over the dark mass. The first thing that registered was the radiant color of ivory flesh. He'd found her. There, lying in a tight ball with one leg stretched out at an odd angle was Harlan. Desmond held his breath as he dismounted and knelt down by her, praying to any gods who would listen that she wasn't dead. Pulling his glove off, he placed his fingertips against her neck and felt the strong steady rhythm of her pulse.

He exhaled the breath he'd been holding and carefully uncurled her.

The worn, tattered clothes she was wearing were fairly dry so she'd been lying here awhile, but her face was hot, damp and very pale. She was definitely sick and hurt and they were almost two hours away from the camp and Scarlet. Desmond retrieved a blanket from his saddlebag laying it out next to her. Sliding his arms under her shoulders and thighs he gingerly lifted her a few inches off the ground and moved her onto the blanket, wrapping her in it. Now he just needed to get her back across the river where he could meet up with Trajan and send him for Scarlet. Bringing his mount right up

next to her he knelt down to pick her up again. He hated having to move her but what else could he do?

"I'm sorry if this hurts you, Harlan, but I don't have a lot of choices," he whispered into her ear. Her long lashes fluttered open and her mouth twisted into a painful grimace as he mounted up with her. Those dazzling emerald eyes blinked a few times in recognition and then she gave him a weak smile.

"Hello, Desmond," she whispered in a raspy voice. "You'll never know how happy I am to see you."

Desmond grinned back down at her and brushing her long black locks away, softly kissed her on the forehead. "Not nearly as happy as I am to see you."

Chapter 32

Harlan awoke in the pitch black to stiffness and a horrible pain in her leg. She had no idea where she was and the only thought that occurred to her was amazement that she was still alive. Wondering if Sulla had recaptured her, she shifted slightly and a bolt of agony shot up her leg right into her hip, making her cry out. In the darkness someone knelt down by her, moving her with powerful hands to a more comfortable position. The scent of her companion was rich, warm and familiar—it was Gavin. *Please don't let me be hallucinating.*

Without a word, she reached out with a trembling hand and touched the hard lines and rough skin of her husband's face. She could hardly believe what she was experiencing. A desperate joy filled her heart at the realization that it *must* be him. "*Gavin,*" she whispered, hoping beyond reason that it was true.

He took her hand away from his face, kissed her palm, and squeezed it. "Yes, my darling." His voice carried a note of deep sorrow and boundless love. Gavin had found her at last. After all the fear and mistreatment it was almost too much for her brain to absorb. *I waited so long for you to find me and now finally you're here.*

Harlan tried to sit up but the pain in her leg made her dizzy. "Be still, Harlan," Gavin said in the darkness. "You've been badly hurt and you're ill."

"What happened?" she said when the pain had subsided a little.

"We located the village where Sulla took you and luckily Desmond found you on the bank of the river after your escape attempt. Scarlet has tended to your leg and given you medication but she says you will need surgery. You've been in and out of a delirious consciousness for three days but we're close to the empire now. I'll have you back to the clinic by evening."

"What time is it now?"

"A few hours from dawn. Try to sleep some more," he said, wrapping his powerful arms around her and burying his face in her neck. The warmth of his body was a comfort Harlan had been longing for.

"Where's Gypsy?" she asked.

"She's with us."

"Is she alright?" Harlan pressed, hoping she hadn't gotten hurt.

"She's fine but worried," he said. "She's been very brave. Your heart would have burst with pride if you'd seen her in battle. She was fearless. What a fucking marvel."

Gavin's lips touched the tender flesh of her throat and Harlan felt a few tears of relief escape her eyes. She sniffled. "I'd like to see her," Harlan said.

Without a word of argument, Gavin got up and stalked out of the tent. Harlan's eyes were growing accustomed to the dark and beyond the tent's raised flap she could see the three moons high in the sky. Because of their distances from

AEssyria they were all different sizes: one large; another smaller, and a tiny one half a million miles farther than the other two. She tried to remember their names but drew a blank.

Gypsy ducked into the tent and rushed into her mother's arms. They stayed that way for a few minutes, hugging tightly. "I was so worried about you. Are you doing okay?" Gypsy asked, leaning back to eye Harlan up and down.

Harlan nodded. "Better I think."

"Don't worry, Mom," Gypsy said with that cocky smile of hers. "We'll have you back home soon. We've been making great time." Gypsy glanced back at Gavin who'd come in. Gypsy and her father exchanged a strange look that piqued Harlan's curiosity. *I can't wait to hear the stories that surrounded this rescue mission. There must be quite a few of them.*

"I'll see you in a few hours, Mom," Gypsy said as she stood up. Then she slipped past Gavin and disappeared into the dark.

Gavin helped Harlan sit up and gave her some dried meat and a cup of water. At first, Harlan was going to refuse, thinking she wasn't that hungry, but once the food touched her tongue, her appetite tore into her and she gulped down everything in seconds. The fog that had been muddying her thoughts lifted. Suddenly she was very tired and let herself sink back into the inviting comfort of the blankets. Gavin's rich scent was everywhere and it reminded her of home and safety.

"I knew you'd come for me," she whispered as the velvet blanket of sleep wrapped itself around her.

A deep, rumbling chuckle drummed lightly in her ears. "As if there was any doubt. I love you like my life, Harlan," he said, curling up next to her.

Harlan smiled and patted his cheek sleepily. “I know, Gavin. I tried to tell them you would come for me but they wouldn’t listen.”

Chapter 33

When they reached the city gates, Scarlet thought she was going to weep for joy. They rode up to the posted guards who stared at Gavin with Harlan sitting across the front of his hyperia like they'd finally seen a miracle. Falling all over themselves, they opened the huge metal doors and stood back, their heads bowed in respect. Gavin reached behind his saddle and tossed a canvas bag to Gypsy. With a sadistic grin, she caught it, rode over to a wooden pike sticking up out of the ground and removed the bag's grisly contents. Pulling Sulla's decomposing head from the bag, Gypsy slammed it down onto the pike as both a symbol of triumph and a warning to anyone else planning to kidnap the general's wife. Scarlet found the whole thing barbarically gruesome, she even saw Harlan crinkle her nose as they passed.

They rode through the city toward the clinic at a leisurely pace. It would seem to anyone watching that Gavin was gloating, showing off, but Scarlet knew different. Not only had the ride back exhausted what little strength Harlan had left, but Gavin's back was deteriorating again and he was miserable. But, despite his pain, he dismounted gracefully and carried Harlan into the clinic to a waiting Doctor Krull.

Scarlet gave Krull a quick summary of all that Harlan had been through, but halfway through her rambling story he

touched her arm and said, "You're very tired, Doctor Jonson. Why don't you go home and get some sleep? I'll take care of Harlan."

Without another word, Scarlet stepped out to the reception desk and headed toward the front doors where Desmond was waiting for her. He had told her that he was so exhausted that if he dismounted he wasn't sure if he would be able to get back on so he elected just to stay put and wait for her. As her hand pushed on the exterior door to freedom one of the field medics who'd been helping Krull intercepted her. "I'm sorry, Doctor Jonson, but the general has gone into room one and will only see you," he said.

* * * *

Harlan lay back on the bed while Krull examined her. She watched as he ran the handheld scanner up and down her lower leg, occasionally glancing back at the wall monitor that displayed an internal picture of all the damage. With his free hand he was methodically writing notes in her chart that was laid out on the free standing tray. Gypsy came into the room, ducked under Krull's arm and climbed on the edge of Harlan's bed, scowling at the picture on the monitor. Krull glared at the intrusion. "Stop moving the bed. You are disrupting the signal."

As was her daughter's usual reaction to his admonishments she ignored him and turned toward Harlan. "I'm no doctor but that looks pretty damn awful." She grinned. "At least you look happily medicated."

Harlan stroked Gypsy's forearm and nodded. "I'm not in any pain. Just really tired. Where's Gavin?"

Gypsy looked down, shrugged and stiffened, her hands finding a loose thread on the bottom of her tunic that she be-

gan wrapping around her index finger. A sure sign that they were approaching an uncomfortable subject. Harlan sighed and placed her hands on Gypsy's to still the nervous laboring of her fingers. Gypsy frowned deeply and looked back up at her.

"Oh, Mom. He'll kill me for this. But his back is really, really bad. He's been a total wreck, forcing Doctor Jonson to give him huge quantities of pain meds. She even had to put him in hibernation because he couldn't ride anymore without stopping to vomit. I saw his back myself, it was black and purple and the swelling was so bad you could barely see the vertebrae. I think he's in pretty bad shape from the ride home because I heard a medic tell Doctor Jonson that he's waiting for her in room one."

The corners of Harlan's mouth twitched into a painful line and her eyes squished shut as she pushed herself into a sitting position. Waving Krull away from her, she said, "Get me a brace and some crutches."

Gypsy and Krull exchanged glances. "Harlan, I don't need to tell you how important it is for you to stay immobile. I will check on your husband."

"No. I don't need you to tell me anything. I've been moving around since I got this damn injury and a few more minutes of mobility is not going to make a shit of difference. Gavin is not going to listen to anyone but me because I still have the element of guilt to hold over his head. Now get me the damn brace and crutches before he weasels anymore pain medication out of Scarlet."

* * * *

Warily Scarlet came into room one and closed the door behind her.

“Lock it,” Gavin ordered.

Turning back toward the door she twisted the metal latch and threw her hands up. She resented his attempt to guard his injury. He was in a medical facility for heaven’s sake. No one was going to judge him here.

Gavin was lying on the exam table on his belly, his back so purple and swollen she almost ordered him to stay overnight. Too bad he’d never agree. She ran a filthy hand across the drying sweat on her forehead. “What do you want me to do for you?” she asked.

“Put me in hibernation again,” he said. He sounded grim and harsh, the agony twisting his voice into something she barely recognized.

“I can’t do that, General,” she said. “It’s too soon.”

“Give me some fucking pain meds then,” he barked.

Scarlet went over to the sink and washed her hands carefully. She was so tired she thought she was going to pass out. Someone tried the room’s handle, then, finding it locked, knocked several times.

“Open up,” Harlan said through the door.

Gavin twisted on the table and gritted his teeth from the sudden pain. “Don’t let her in!”

“Scarlet?” Harlan said with the no-nonsense tone of a suspicious parent. “Open this door right now. I don’t care what Gavin says. This is my clinic and if I have to hobble down the hall to my office for the key I’m really going to be pissed.”

Scarlet shrugged at Gavin like she was helpless in this matter and quickly went to the door and let Harlan in. Harlan limped in with a lightweight, hinged brace on her leg, followed by Krull. They both froze when they saw Gavin’s back.

Gavin glared at Scarlet but she just grinned at him. *Take that, you fucking asshole. Now your wife knows all about your dirty little secret.*

Harlan approached Gavin and he laid back on the table in a gesture of surrender. "Holy crap," Harlan gasped as she gingerly touched the swollen areas. "How long has he been like this?" she asked, looking toward Scarlet.

"He started having problems five minutes after we left the empire," Scarlet said.

"Stop fucking exaggerating," Gavin said.

"I'm sure she's right because that's what everyone else has been telling me," Harlan said to Gavin.

Harlan turned to Krull. "Is there anything we can do here?"

Krull shook his head and moved over to Gavin. He pointed at two vertebra that were bruised so badly they were colored red and black. "These are ruptured. It will require surgery. It's a very intricate procedure and should only be attempted by a specialist. The Kirillian medical tender has an orthopedic surgeon on staff. I know him and he's the best."

"I'm not going on any Kirillian medical tender," Gavin grumbled.

"Stop talking," Harlan said to him. "This has gone on long enough. You're going to have surgery, Gavin, or you'll lose the ability to walk, among other things." She glanced down at his groin for emphasis.

Gavin brooded silently.

"Can you make an appointment for him?" Harlan asked Krull.

"I'd be happy to," he replied. "I'll make one for you as well. I can do preliminary repairs to your leg here. But since

the tender will be making the trip for him you may as well have the surgeon restructure your leg on the same pass. By the time he's finished your leg won't show any signs of ever having been injured."

"When all of you are done chatting, can someone please give me something for my fucking back?" Gavin roared.

Krull gently touched the puffy tissue around the damaged disks. "We'll have to drain this fluid before we give him an anti-inflammatory." After washing his hands and putting on gloves, he came over with an empty syringe and uncapped the needle.

"What the fuck is he going to do with that?" Gavin tried to turn over but the pain stopped him and he laid still. As Krull inserted the needle into Gavin's back he went rigid, ground his teeth together, and promptly passed out.

Krull continued to pull a huge vial of serosanguineous fluid from the vertebral pockets. Harlan frowned and shook her head.

Scarlet shook her head in unison then headed for the door. "You both don't need me here for this. I'm going home to pass out."

Harlan looked up as if she'd forgotten Scarlet was in the room. "Thanks, Scarlet, thanks for everything. I'm sorry you got stuck taking care of him. He can be a difficult patient under the best of circumstances and I am truly grateful."

Scarlet smiled at her. She opened the door and paused, staring down at Gavin. Tilting her head to the side, she said, "I like him so much better like this. Can't we keep him passed out until the surgery?"

Harlan grinned and rubbed the back of her neck. "I wish."

Chapter 34

Scarlet lay in bed curled up in Desmond's arms grateful to be clean, warm and in her own bed. There was just one thing troubling her: the thought that Gavin was telling Harlan about her past, working for that horrible Kirillian doctor. Studying Desmond's face, she wondered if he'd be sorry to see her go if she got fired. She ran her fingers through his thick mane and her heart ached with passion. Unable to sleep, she nudged him awake.

"Desmond," she said, sitting up in bed and looking down at him. "Do you think Gavin's going to tell Harlan about my past like he threatened?"

Desmond frowned and rubbed his face. He stared at her. "What?" he said, annoyed.

"Do you think Gavin is going to get me fired?"

He stared at her for a long time. Then he twisted a lock of her red hair around his index finger, curling it, and then almost as a punishment for disturbing him gave it a gentle tug. "No."

"But he said—"

"Gavin says a lot of things. In fact, he rarely shuts up. Forget it. You're fine," Desmond said, closing his eyes again.

"If he did, would you be sorry to see me go?" she asked. Her mouth went paper dry. A sudden terror filled her with what he might say.

Desmond squinted at her as if something was paining him. "What?"

"Would you be upset if I left here forever?" she slowly enunciated each word.

"Sure," he said and closed his eyes again, pulling her back down.

"That's it," she said, feeling slighted. "Sure?"

"Yes."

"Do you have any feelings for me, or am I just a good fuck?" she asked.

"Yes."

Scarlet sat up again and pushed him off her. "Stop that!"

Desmond sat up propping himself up on the headboard. "Stop what? I'm saying yes. What do you want me to say instead?"

Scarlet was miserable. *Why do I keep thinking this is something more than just sex? I'm just banging my head against a wall here.* "I don't know," she said truthfully.

"Well then can we go back to sleep?"

"In a minute," she said. "There's something I have to tell you because I have to get it out."

"Okay," he said guarded.

Scarlet took a deep breath. "I am madly in love with you, Desmond. Now I know what you're going to say, that we haven't been together long enough for me to be in love with you. But I want you to know that I've given this a lot of thought, especially after that *horrible* mission with Gavin, and I know exactly how I feel. I'm definitely in love with you and I

hope we can have a future together, but if you don't want that maybe you should stop seeing me." She sat there stiffly as if she'd just confessed to a multiple murder. The shadows in the room grew slightly longer as the three moons rose higher in the night sky.

Desmond reached for her in the inky darkness and pulled her closer to him. He kissed her with a warm intensity, his big, warm hands roaming all over her body. She wanted to ask him what he thought about what she just said but he didn't let her come up for air. Instead he used his weight to push her down on the mattress, his mouth mauling kisses along her throat until she whimpered with pleasure. He was bolder this time than others, peeling off her t-shirt and panties and tossing them to the floor. Scarlet was drugged by his lust, losing herself in the decadent luxury of his masculine weight. Desperate, she opened her legs and invited him inside her pussy.

He penetrated her, claiming her with a wild, demanding passion that left her more confused than ever, and even after they'd both climaxed, he kept his cock buried inside her until she heard the soft rhythmic breaths of sleep coming from him. But just before she drifted off herself, he whispered, "I love you too, baby."

Epilogue

Harlan walked into her bedroom only to see her husband's suitcase lying empty on the king-size bed. She clenched her teeth and took a deep, calming breath. "Gavin?" she called, poking her head into the bathroom. "Where are you?" The bathroom was empty but his dark blue towel was lying on the sink still wet. He was somewhere nearby. She rehearsed a lecture in her head on how his stalling was going to make them late to the Kirillian shuttle. Harlan stopped her search in the middle of the living room. "Gavin, where are you? We're going to be late."

"I'm here, darling," he said. His rich baritone came from the courtyard.

She came out and spotted her husband pacing in circles slowly and smoking a cigar. He was dressed only in his black uniform pants and heavy black boots, his long black hair hung loose over his shoulders and back. His spine looked sore and swollen. She felt a moment of pity for him. It couldn't be easy for a general to deal with such a weakness.

"I thought you were packing," she said.

"I was. I just needed a smoke."

"Well, I hate to rush you but we need to be ready in twenty minutes. If you don't finish packing, I'll have to do it for you."

Gavin crushed out his cigar and came over to her. Towering over her, he placed a hand under her chin and gave her a gentle kiss. He didn't need to tell her how worried he was that this surgery might not work, she knew. But they were out of options, he had to have it or he would end up a cripple in the next few years.

"Do you love me?" he asked.

Harlan stroked his face and stared up into his beautiful golden eyes. Love didn't even do justice to what she felt for him. "You know I do."

"Would you love me even if I couldn't walk anymore?"

"I would love you no matter what," she said as her stomach tightened. She hated to see him this upset.

"I'd never allow myself to live like that," he said grimly. "If it came down to it, I'd...I'm not sure what I would do."

Harlan took a step back from him. "I'm not going to listen to anymore of this nonsense. Doctor Krull recommended this surgeon by name and I'm confident he'll be able to help you. I know you're used to being in charge but you have to let go this time and trust that everything will be alright. Just promise me you'll try."

A loud knock sounded on the front door and they heard Gypsy calling to them. Gavin stroked Harlan's hair. "I'll do my best."

"We're in here," Harlan called to her daughter.

Gypsy came out to join them. She looked fit and lean in her black uniform. Gavin eyed her up and down. "Feeling better I trust?" he asked.

Gypsy nodded. "Yeah."

"You did a fine job on campaign. You'll be a great officer someday."

“Enough with the chatting,” Harlan said impatiently. “Go finish packing.”

Gavin grunted and stalked out. Harlan gave Gypsy a warm smile and hugged her. To Harlan’s surprise, Gypsy held on much longer than she usually did. “Is everything okay?” she asked.

Gypsy let go and stared at the ground. “Everything’s fine, Mom. I just really missed you. How’s Dad doing?”

Harlan glanced off through the house to see if he’d done what she asked him to do. She thought she saw him moving in the bedroom. Maybe they wouldn’t have to keep the transport pilot waiting after all. “He’s okay but understandably worried. Actually he’s kind of morbid, but taking the surgery better than I thought. I just hope he gets along with his doctor.”

They both laughed. Gavin appeared in the archway. “I’m done,” he announced.

Gypsy came over to shake his hand goodbye and he pulled her into a loving embrace. He squeezed her for a moment then let her go. His daughter looked stunned. Gavin wasn’t much for displays of affection. “I love you, dear,” he said to her. “Just behave yourself.”

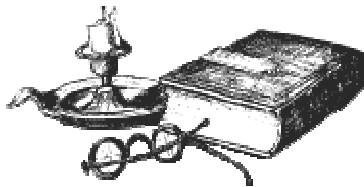
A coach rode up and Harlan gave her daughter an apologetic smile. “We have to go.”

Gypsy took a step back. “I know. Good luck with the surgery. I know everything will turn out fine. See you both when you get back.”

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