

# Naked Venom

Michelle O'Neil & Lindsey Bayer



Naked Venom [Book One]  
*by Michelle O'Neil, Lindsey Bayer*

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## CHAPTER ONE

"Excellency?"

General Gavin Theron growled and rolled away from the voice intruding into his sleep.

"Excellency, you asked me to wake you this morning so you wouldn't be late for the wedding," the young corporal said, rushing to the other side of the bed and leaning down to peer at the general in earnest.

"What wedding?" Gavin mumbled. His voice was obscured by a pillow covering his face.

The corporal frowned and rested his hip on the edge of the mattress. "The Royal Wedding of the Princess Shatara and Grand Duke Savion, Excellency. The queen says if you're late again for a Royal function, she'll—"

"She'll do what?"

The soldier shrugged. "She didn't finish her thought."

Gavin squinted, shielding his eyes from the morning light spilling through his bedroom window. *Oh yes*, he thought, *that wedding*. He snarled and waved the young man away impatiently. "I'm up, Corporal. You've done your duty, now get out."

The young soldier bowed and quickly rushed from the room.

Alone now, Gavin dragged himself out of bed and into the shower. He stood motionless, letting the hot, rushing water scald away his fatigue. Closing his eyes, he gave himself over to this simple pleasure.

Running his hands down his body, he could feel how the centuries of battle had taken their toll on his chiseled, green physique. His old wounds whispered the mournful testament of combat in the collection of rough scars that marred his otherwise faultless flesh.

He was grateful though, despite his age and wear, he retained much of his youthful vitality. His long, black hair was thick with no sign of grey. Unfortunately, his face, with its fierce golden eyes and muscled jaw, had turned very hard. But that didn't seem to put off the many women who came eagerly to his bed, most of whom said they adored him specifically for his rugged, savage beauty.

Standing naked before the mirror, he dressed slowly, taking extra care with the neatness of his attire. With meticulous attention, he attached an impressive class of service medals and the bronze collar insignia of his rank. The gold piping and buttons of his double-breasted tunic were a striking contrast to the black expanse of his uniform, and he ran his hands down the fabric to smooth away any creases.

What a career he'd had in his time, he marveled. Last night had been his landmark eight hundredth birthday, a quiet, drunken event that was the official mark of middle age. For an AEssiryan man, it was the pinnacle of his virility; a brand of veneration for those lucky enough to attain it. For Gavin, there really was no secret to his longevity, only the random and fortuitous tumble of genetics that left him a colossus among his breed.

\* \* \* \*

Gavin strode into the armory and was annoyed to see many of the men meandering about, laughing and talking as if they were enjoying a long overdue day of leave.

Obviously, no one was expecting a surprise inspection this morning and it took a few moments for anyone to notice he was there.

"Command, attention!" called the captain of the guard, finally spotting him standing in the doorway.

The room exploded with noise as the men hopped to their feet. Each took his place in line, standing ramrod straight with their eyes fixed forward.

"Carry on," Gavin said.

The men resumed their duties, a few slipping past him to get in place for the wedding.

He turned to the young captain of the guard. "Where's the watch bill, Captain Derick?"

The captain lifted a worn clipboard off the wall and handed it to him. Gavin read it for a moment, then handed it back.

"Did you put Sergeant Logan on the king?"

"Yes, Excellency," the captain said. Then, rubbing the back of his neck, he added, "I understand the king is kind of ill."

Gavin moved deeper into the room, stepping over some discarded armor. He glanced briefly into two side rooms and noted some empty cups and plates pasted with grime.

"Are you a doctor, Captain?"

"No, Excellency."

"Then you shouldn't concern yourself with the sovereign's health," he said, turning to leave. Pausing at the door, he added, "Have some men clean these rooms, they're a mess."

"At once, Excellency," Derick said, picking up a discarded cuirass from the floor.

\* \* \* \*

Continuing his rounds, Gavin stalked through the sandstone halls of the royal temple, quickening his stride. He had just a few more postings left to check before the ceremony, and midmorning was rapidly approaching.

Neatly uniformed soldiers snapped to attention as he passed.

Rounding a corner, he descended the stone steps to the small courtyard below. He moved through the flowered path and spotted two figures huddling in a small alcove murmuring lover's words. As he approached, he recognized them as the bride-to-be, Princess Shatara, and her groom, Razorback Grand Duke Savion.

"Are you not supposed to wait for your wedding night to indulge, Lord?" Gavin said, teasing the grand duke as he passed.

Savion only smiled, shielding his naked bride from Gavin's view.

Gavin shook his head. He despised weddings and today's was no exception. He liked women, of course, but the ceremonies that often accompanied them were another matter. Unfortunately, he seemed to be in the minority. Every noble and monarch he had ever known felt that marriage was the ultimate bonus for months and years of plotting. They used marriages to get rid of unwanted daughters,



troublesome widows and, of course, to forge political and military alliances.

He, however, found wives an unnecessary burden. The marriage noose had been tied around his neck five times in as many centuries and that had been quite enough.

As he strolled toward the great hall, his thoughts turned to the king. The captain had been right. The aged sovereign had not been well and hadn't made a public appearance in a long time. He was surprised the king had the will to attend such a lengthy affair.

The great hall of the Royal Temple yawned before him in dazzling splendor. Ten thousand years of art and architecture were housed here and he always found it inspiring. Huge, ornate pillars carried the burden of a smoky glass ceiling that weighed over a ton. The wedding decorations complimented the hall exquisitely, filling the room with vibrant hues of red and gold.

As the twin suns rose higher, bringing with them their relentless heat, Gavin took a break, stopping by a balcony to have a smoke. Reaching into his boot, he pulled out a fresh Cusano 18, clipped the end and lit it. He dragged hard, letting the smoke billow in the air above him. Far below, he watched the royal band rehearsing. They played a tune for a few moments, broke the rhythm for some adjustments, and began again. Everything sounded off-key.

He also spotted Doctor Harlan Ambrose, a young human from Earth, watching the band play. She looked lovely, her dark hair pulled back in a ponytail from her gentle features.

She wore snug-fitting jeans, a blue blouse, and a long white lab coat.

He estimated she had been here for about half of her four year contract. Those who had visited her said she was good, albeit too serious for such a young woman.

They were lucky to have her, most AEssyrian men avoided medicine, regarding it as a soft profession. Gavin himself had not been to see her yet, making it a habit to avoid doctors. Unless he was bleeding on a battlefield, he felt doctors were best left to tend to children, women and the elderly.

She was attractive though, despite her frail humanness. Chewing the cigar to the other side of his mouth, he lazily rolled sexual images of her around in his mind. Seizing the pictures, he pushed further, imagining her lusty whine in his ear and the sweet taste of her body on his tongue. *Splendid*, he thought, feeling his hunger purr and rub inside him.

As he watched, he sensed an innocence in her. Not a literal, virginal one, but rather, a pure lushness of her sexuality that tortured him with longing. Burning lust heated and quickened his Human-AEssyrian blood and he struggled to remember the last time he'd slept with a human woman. *Too long*, he thought. *Much too long*. He'd need to ask her out one night soon, if only to sample the pleasing seduction of her exotic sex.

Intent on completing his tour, he crushed out his smoke, tore off the end, and slipped it back into his boot.

He turned the corner of his last checkpoint and passed the restroom entrance, his mind touching on a hundred different things.

Looking up, he started.

There before him lay the body of the king. Cautiously, he approached the fallen monarch and knelt in the pool of blood surrounding the body. The blood saturated his trouser leg as he reached out to check the wrist for a pulse. The king's eyes were open and vacant, small pools of blood had collected around the tear ducts. Gavin's heart sank; they were certainly the eyes of a dead man.

He probed under the king's clothes looking for a wound. His glove came away from the body crimson and sticky. Such a copious amount of blood must surely warrant some form of visible trauma.

Gavin pulled the high collar down and inspected the neck. Seeing nothing, he continued his examination. He unbuttoned the double-breasted jacket, rolling the king toward him, and searched the back for any elusive wounds. He found nothing. *Damn*, he thought. Then he noticed the smell. Acidic with a burnt citrus undertone. The scent was familiar but he couldn't place it.

Rising, he wiped his glove on his tunic. As he struggled to arrange his thoughts, he heard running and screaming wash over the halls. The noise was high and shrill, so fitting the woman making it. He took a few steps back to allow her to approach the body.

As the scene unfolded before him, Gavin searched the hallway for the sergeant he had posted on the king.

The queen fell to her knees, clutching her husband to her breast, drenching the front of her cleft gown in blood. Tears streaked her face, smearing her makeup. Gavin impatiently

watched her play her scene. *What a performance.* She reminded him of a novice stage actress. He knew she was only capable of one true emotion: voracity.

The kings' young royals rushed in next, followed by the grand duke. They slowed to a walk as they approached the corpse.

The princess looked rumpled and breathy. Her veil was missing and her long black locks hung loosely down her back. He noticed the healthy glow of her viridian skin, so beautiful next to the whiteness of her dress.

The soldiers moved in and awaited Gavin's orders. Scanning them, he spotted the man he had assigned to the king before leaving to make his rounds. Gavin pushed through the crowd and tore the man from its ranks.

"Where were you?" he snarled at the sergeant.

"Prince Hector ordered me to—" he said, flustered.

"Where were you?" the prince interrupted, shouting at Gavin.

Gavin turned to face him. "I was making my rounds, my Prince."

"You should have known better than to leave such an inexperienced soldier guarding the king!"

"He's a veteran sergeant, Highness. He's guarded the king in the past."

Everyone moved back, allowing the infirmary staff to remove the body.

"Take care there!" Prince Hector yelled, stabbing his finger in the direction of his father as they lifted the monarch onto a

stretcher. Specks of foam were coating the corners of his mouth.

Racing over, he placed the back of his hand on his father's bloody face in a gesture of farewell. His mother handed him her handkerchief and he wiped his hand clean.

Turning again to Gavin, he said, "You should have been guarding him yourself!"

"Who would then oversee security, my liege?"

"Who cares? Nothing is more important than your king. And I'll thank you to drop the sarcasm."

"By all means," Gavin said, making no effort to diffuse the prince's anger. "I promise you, we'll find out what happened and give you a complete report."

"You'll find out?" the queen said. "I think we all know what happened here."

Gavin entertained the thought of slapping her. He had so hoped she would stay out of this.

The prince looked at his mother, confused for a moment. Gavin watched his mouth open and close like a landed fish, and then a small light shone in his insipid eyes.

"Well, Lady, why don't you enlighten everyone to what happened here?" Gavin said, trying to be agreeable.

"It's obvious, isn't it?" she said, turning to address everyone present. "He's trying to stage a coup."

Gavin fought to keep his temper in check and addressed her in a measured tone. "I hardly feel this is an appropriate time to indulge us in your quick-witted sense of humor."

"Please don't play the neophyte with me, General. Everyone here knows of your less than stellar past. You have

the worst reputation of any officer in the service, son of a human whore and an insane magician, the ruin of any woman foolish enough to show you attention. This could easily be your handiwork."

Gavin seized her arm and pulled her close, talking to her through clenched teeth. "Keep your tongue, woman," he said.

"Unhand my mother, you savage. How dare you speak to your queen that way!"

The prince's body was shaking as he sputtered to get the words out. "You will be detained and tried for the murder of your king. I pray the Gods take pity on you for your miserable life. I hereby relieve you of command and order you to submit to arrest!"

## CHAPTER TWO

Gavin had not planned on a mutiny today, but as the situation progressed, it now looked inevitable. With the fluid grace of a practiced swordsman, he moved a few steps back from the group pulling his saber from its scabbard. "I'm not really inclined to be arrested today, my Prince," he said, watching his men.

He was well aware of what would happen if they took him prisoner. Countless times, he'd witnessed loyal subjects fall prey to political maneuvering. If he went peacefully, he'd rot away in some feculent jail cell on the edge of the AEssyrian desert, and would most certainly meet with a horrible end. Oh yes, he knew the king's justice well. He understood it well enough to know that he was not going to jail on this day, or any other.

The soldiers stood motionless looking confused and indecisive. Warily, they eyed Gavin, no one willing to make the first move on their commander.

The prince shouted as if volume alone could convey authority, "What are you all standing there for, you half-wits? Your future king has given you direction. Take the general prisoner now!"

Finally, Derick stepped forward from the crowd and drew his saber. The assembly moved back from the combatants forming a large half circle around them.

*Poor bastard,* Gavin thought, *he thinks it's his duty. He's so hungry for the privilege of taking me down.* He felt a twinge of regret. He had mentored Derick through the

younger man's military career. He was a good officer and a friend. His death would be a miserable waste.

Princess Shatara remained on the outside of the circle. "This makes no sense," the princess complained to Savion. "They have no proof. Gavin would have the least to gain of anyone from my father's death." The Razorback Lord listened saying nothing, his face stoic as the battle unfolded.

"Quiet you!" the queen hissed turning to face her. "Do not speak of things of which you have no knowledge." The princess glared at her step-mother and drew closer to her groom falling silent.

Derick advanced with his saber on guard. Moving boldly, he attacked Gavin with a rapid downward chop designed to cleave a man's head and neck in two. Gavin responded with a horizontal parry and pushed the fight back on Derick. Riposting, Gavin swiped a vicious cut across Derick's neckline. The other man dodged backward, his arm outstretched to prevent a fall. A few long brown locks of Derick's hair drifted to the tile. Gavin pressed his advantage, not allowing his opponent time to regain his composure. Derick was driven back, continually on the defensive, deflecting blow after blow. Every attempt he made to attack Gavin was swiftly minimized.

The battle moved into the octagonal sanctuary, Derick stumbling down the shallow stairs. Turning his back on Gavin, Derick raced down the remaining stairs to regroup his attack. Derick turned at the bottom to face his opponent pulling a knife from the sheath behind his back. He stood at the ready,



his saber in his right hand and a knife in his left. His chest was heaving.

Gavin carefully eyed both the knife and the saber as they circled the sacred dais.

With his gaze still firmly fixed on the fight, the prince leaned down to his personal guard. "Find the doctor and escort her here at once. Have her bring a tranquilizer, hurry!" Two guards disengaged from the crowd and hastily exited the sanctuary.

Launching a new attack, Gavin charged forward displacing Derick's knife and stepped into his opponent for a devastating torso cut. Derick parried the blow awkwardly with his knife, and managed to deliver a nasty cut to Gavin's forearm. Gavin snarled from the pain, blood pouring from the wound.

Both men joined in battle again, fighting their way back up the hall. Gavin's attacks were punishing, exhausting Derick visibility. Faltering, Derick missed a parry and Gavin finished the fight with a murderous downward blow, snapping his opponent's saber in two. Derick looked down at his blade in surprise.

Moving in, Gavin carved through the meat of his opponent's cheek. It was a warning.

"Drop the knife," he growled, "or I'll open your throat."

Derick dropped the knife and staggered slightly as the blood poured from his fresh laceration. No one spoke. Gavin turned to look at his men watching him like a pack of hungry cannibals. Blood surged freely from his wounded arm running rivulets down his lowered saber blade. An unmistakable

electric current flowed through the room. Everyone was charged with its spark.

Then all the men converged on Gavin struggling to force him to the ground. They kept his saber arm down and brawled with him to release the blade. Despite their attempts, Gavin remained on his knees with his weapon grasped firmly in his hand. As the attack continued, he systematically threw men off. Fresh men scrambled on him to help the ones who remained.

"Where is the blasted doctor?" the prince screeched over the melee to no one in particular. His fists were clenched at his sides in frustration.

Almost on cue, Harlan came running in flanked by two panting guards. Nimbly, she sidestepped a soldier who Gavin threw off in her direction. He slid along the floor and slammed into a pillar landing like a broken doll. The body came within inches of her.

Harlan turned to help the battered soldier.

"Drug Gavin first," the prince said.

"I beg your pardon, Your Majesty but I can't just drug him," she said stressed and out of breath.

"What do you mean you can't?"

"I have no idea what the status of his health is. I don't have a baseline for his heart rate, respirations and narcotic tolerance. For all I know, he could have allergies to anesthesia."

"What is she talking about?" the prince said, turning to his mother.

The queen looked pained and pursed her lips.

The prince gazed back at Harlan angrily. "My dear, he's soon to be a dead man. Don't worry if you poison him. I'll take the responsibility. Drug him."

"Lord, I don't even know how much he weighs, so I have no idea what an effective dose would be." Harlan looked at the prince unwaveringly. The prince looked forward and called into the crowd irritably. "Does anyone know how much he weighs?"

"He's probably about three hundred and seventy pounds," one soldier offered, wiping blood from his temple.

The prince turned back to Harlan and made an agitated gesture. "There, you have your answer, now drug him. I am losing patience with your absurdities."

Although still on his knees, Gavin was gaining the upper hand. Bringing his saber up, he was inches from eviscerating a nearby soldier. The soldier glowered at him and growled.

Harlan hurriedly removed a brown bottle from her medical bag and gently shook it back and forth. With trembling hands, she extracted a syringe and uncapped the needle. She turned the bottle upside down and punctured it. As she pulled back on the plunger, a bright pink viscous fluid began to fill the syringe. Her brow knitted, a faint veil of sweat shone on her forehead. She stopped the plunger at one cubic centimeter, hesitated, and then pulled some more filling the syringe to the next marking. She apprehensively took a step toward Gavin. Gavin turned his blazing golden eyes on her. "Touch me with that and I'll cave in your skull," he warned in English.

Harlan stopped and stared at him. Gavin knew that would unsettle her, not many AEssyrians spoke English and his

command of her native language was far better than her AEssyrian.

More soldiers came dashing in to reinforce the three men still struggling to hold Gavin.

The prince pushed Harlan forward roughly. "Do it now," he said.

Carefully, she approached Gavin. He was pinned now by the extra men, the thick muscles in his left arm bulging through his uniform with the effort of his resistance. She stabbed the needle into his bicep and pushed the plunger. Removing it, she swiftly backed away.

Gavin fell heavily on the brown tile floor trying to stay conscious.

Harlan moved forward and checked his breathing. Gavin's vision of her was muted through his closed inner lid. He could smell the freshness of her flesh next him, her voice sounding muffled in his ear.

"Something is not right," she said. "He shouldn't have gone down that fast. I need to give him some of the antidote to bring him part of the way out."

"He'll be fine. Prepare him for transport to the jail," the prince said.

"No!" she said, probably louder than she had meant to. Everyone turned their full attention on her. "He should not be moved until I can be sure he's stable. He's at severe risk for vomiting and choking, respiratory distress, and positional asphyxia."

"Now what is she talking about? There she goes again!" the prince said. He moved closer, boring into her with his

eyes. "Harlan," he said in a sinister tone, "in a moment, you are going to join him in jail. Would you like that? Then you can administer to him all you like. I'm sure he wouldn't mind a little company."

Recoiling from his leer, she said, "You can't do that. I have diplomatic immunity here."

"I am soon to be king. I can do anything I want. Furthermore, if you open your mouth one more time, I will have you beaten, sodomized and then jailed."

Harlan had just opened her mouth to protest when the full meaning of his words registered on her face. She closed her mouth and silently walked away from him.

### CHAPTER THREE

A wave of vertigo flowed over him bringing with it a flood of nausea. Gavin vomited and wiped his mouth with his sleeve scraping his lips on the gold cuffed insignia. He couldn't remember ever feeling so sick. From the floor of the coach, he could see the glaring brightness of the afternoon through the window bars. The occasional pitch and roll of the conveyance fused every sensation with agony.

The coach stopped suddenly, throwing him forward. The door opened and daylight flooded the cramped compartment. He felt rough hands clutch and heave him out, casting him onto the sandy ground. His captors stepped back and grimaced as he dry heaved.

"It must be the High Holiday for me," a deep male voice said. "Look what the Gods have given me."

Gavin struggled to clear his vision. The miasma bathing his mind prevented his body from responding. The voice didn't spur any recognition.

"My name is Lieutenant Harrow. I don't expect you'll remember me, Excellency. But you will in time. I certainly remember you, though. It'd be hard to forget the flogging you once ordered as my punishment. I also got the privilege of being sent to this magnificent duty station. I'm so glad we have a chance to meet again."

Gavin was pulled up and dragged into the jail. He didn't remember the man and the effort of trying brought on a new wave of sickness.

The jail was set in a small desert outpost and it was old, probably built at the time of the Sambien Wars. The brick walls had aged into a murky brown and all the bars were encased with rust. A rancid heat clung to everything and made his uniform feel painted on.

The door creaked loudly as it opened and Gavin was dragged through the main entrance. Inside, the jail was dark and cool. The soldiers dropped him abruptly on his side and moved to a scarred desk to finish the paperwork. His arms had been bound behind his back for hours and excruciating pain radiated from his shoulders to his back.

A fresh wave of dizzying nausea washed over him. His mouth began to water and he fought the impulse to vomit.

As the sickness faded, the men grabbed him, stripped off his tunic and bound him to a whipping post. Gavin struggled with the strength of a small child.

Although he was unable to see the weapon of choice, the first blow told him exactly what was used. The eight foot viper whip struck his lumbar region with a sharp snap sending pain charging throughout his entire body. He struggled to focus on his breathing and control the pain but it savaged him, despite his efforts. After the fifth strike, he could feel his skin splitting, blood running down the inside of his trousers and boots.

The whipping felt like it lasted for hours, even though he knew only minutes had passed. Soon, numbness spread and he felt little hurt, only the violence of the whip's impact against his back. He prayed to the Gods to pass out but the

effects of the drug kept him in a state of limbo. He couldn't completely wake up, nor could he lose consciousness.

When they were finished, they brought him before the lieutenant again; a man holding him up on each side.

"I do remember you, Lieutenant," Gavin said as his memory spit out vague images. "As I recall, you abandoned your post to pursue a card game."

"I never even had the chance to explain myself. You had me stripped of my rank in minutes."

"Your exemplary record provided an explanation for you," Gavin said.

The lieutenant's face contorted into an ugly mask. In a second, he blasted into violence, punching and kicking Gavin in a frenzied fit. All his men eagerly joined him.

The beating went on for some time. Gavin's body absorbed the abuse. He had suffered worse inflictions by worthier hands. When the punishment ceased, he was taken to his cell and dumped. The stench of old urine and rat feces permeated his clouded senses. He lay on the ground, his body one large amplifier of pain.

Eventually, he managed to crawl over to a soiled mattress in a corner. Through the hours that followed, his only companion was the faint sounds of moaning and coughing. The drug the doctor had used stubbornly refused to dissipate. The adverse effects came and went at will.

He was finished. This was how a carefully crafted military career would end. His death would be an arid footnote to an extraordinary life. He could care less that he would soon be dead, only that it wasn't going to be in battle as he always



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wanted. That really infuriated him. Of all the admirable enemies he had faced, his end would be here, trapped in a noxious, filthy hole, poisoned by a woman.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Harlan watched the jail apprehensively as her carriage drew closer to it. With the king dead and his son less than amicable toward her, she didn't feel protected here anymore. It would cost her quite a bit to break her contract, but her well-being was more important than an employment commitment. Fortunately, there was a transport leaving in a few days for the intergalactic crono-teleporter. If she could reach the main station, she could be scanned, archived, and headed for home by the start of next week. Just the thought of leaving this sweltering hellhole made her smile. Her only real obstacle was money.

It was late afternoon when they finally pulled up to the jail. Sporadic gusts of wind kicked up the tawny sand and Harlan was glad that, despite the oppressive heat, she had decided to wear jeans, heavy boots and long sleeves. She took a measured sip of water before climbing down. She was thrilled she had the opportunity to visit the AEssyrian desert because obviously, her innards had not been cooked enough in the past two years. She had been warned by the driver that the desert averaged at least twenty degrees hotter than anywhere else. Of course, this was a conservative estimate.

She turned to the driver and said, "I'll pay you extra to wait."

The grizzled AEssyrian woman looked pensively at her and then toward the jail. "You pay me now to wait," she replied firmly.

"No, I'll pay you extra when I come out," Harlan repeated slowly for emphasis.

Squinting, the woman locked her amber eyes on the jail again as if it spoke a language only she could understand. She fixed her gaze on Harlan. "You'll probably not come out." she stated. "I may wait a long time and you are dead. Pay me now."

Harlan took a deep breath and exhaled slowly as she spoke. "I will only pay you extra when I come out. If I take a long time, I will pay you even more, Okay?"

The woman looked away. It didn't appear as if she made a decision one way or the other and Harlan really didn't want to waste time arguing.

As Harlan turned again to the jail, two soldiers emerged from under a torn canopy. Four more men remained seated in chairs at what appeared to be a card game. The two soldiers stopped in front of her, blocking her path to the jail. She noticed fresh blood speckling the front of their battered chest armor. The smaller of the two had a cleft palate. His name, Zeno, was stitched on a faded silver arm patch, along with his rank.

Although she was not well acquainted with rank insignias, she was pretty sure he was a corporal. Harlan steadied her voice and spoke confidently. "I'm here to see the general. The crown prince sent me."

"You have ID?" he grunted while absently playing with a small silver chain looped on his belt.

Harlan pulled out her medical identification. Her mouth was dry and her throat burned as he scrutinized her. She

thought about leaving, but didn't want to give them a reason to question her further.

Corporal Zeno looked at her ID, then his companion. They appeared uncertain but let her pass and returned to their game.

As she approached the entrance, the stench of the place grew stronger. Passing through the front door, the entire building reeked like a musty manure pile. *This is not going to be good*, she thought.

Harlan approached the desk, where a dirty nameplate read Lieutenant Harrow. Behind the desk in a wooden rolling chair, the lieutenant sat with his boot propped up on the edge. He was tall for an AEssyrian, probably close to Gavin's height, which stretched well past six foot. His uniform was also spattered with fresh blood and dusted with desert sand. He had an angry, brutal look to him and Harlan disliked him immediately.

She began to worry that Gavin may already be dead.

"Who the hell are you?" he asked, eyeing her with a carnal leer.

Harlan opened her medical bag showing her medical instruments. "The prince sent me to see the general. He doesn't want the prisoner to die yet."

"Maybe there's a fee," he said, smiling down at her breasts.

Harlan regarded him with an innocent lack of comprehension. "A fee? What kind of a fee?"

"A twenty minute fee." His smile grew wider as his men snickered.

Harlan's eyes widened as his intentions sank in. She steadied her speech. "I am most certainly not paying a twenty minute fee, or any other type of fee."

"What if I insisted?"

Harlan swallowed and stayed calm. "I'm sure the crown prince will be merciful toward you if the general dies while I'm wasting time discussing your tolls." For a tense moment, he glared at her. Harlan held her breath, not sure if her bluff would pay off.

He considered her for a few long moments. Then he finally said, "Take her to him." He waved her on with a dismissing gesture.

One of the soldiers led her down the slushy hall to Gavin's cell. She was glad she had her boots on as thick clumps of mud caked their surface. The smell was grueling.

The soldier stopped in front of a heavy steel door and selected a key. The door gave an angry shriek as the soldier yanked it open with small, quick jerks. The darkness inside was palpable and tasted of decay. She slowly stepped in and immediately, the door slammed behind her. The soldier walked off with a happy gait whistling grimly.

Harlan moved forward. The smell in here was making her ill.

"Gavin?" she called softly. She heard a groan from the far corner. Her vision adjusted to the murky darkness. Just ahead, she saw a figure lying on a mattress. Looking over her shoulder, she risked pulling out a small flashlight. She silently ran the beam up and down his beaten body. His long black hair was filthy and matted in spots with drying sweat and

blood. His thickly muscled torso was bruised and cut, the wounds already starting to scab. The ghastly red lines were a striking contrast to his green skin.

She knew from experience that AEssyrian men could take a lot of damage and still keep going. Military men like Gavin were always fighting for some reason or another. Their constant battling fortified their muscular and skeletal systems.

Although she was sure he was feeling horrible, his injuries didn't look life threatening. She was sympathetic, but inwardly, she was sure he probably deserved this for a million reasons, if not this one.

Gavin groaned and rolled on his back. Turning his head, he fixed her with golden eyes and snarled. Like all AEssyrian's, his face was furrowed and rugged with an appealing sculpture of facial bones and a mouthful of sharp, carnivorous teeth. He exalted the savage handsomeness of a rapacious warlord.

She watched him carefully.

"I'm going to give you an injection to make you feel better." She reached into her bag and pulled out a loaded syringe. She approached him, watching for any signs that he might attack. Deliberately swabbing a spot clean, she injected him and began dressing his wounds. He was in relative good health, so he should heal fast enough.

Harlan stood over his bed waiting for the initial drug to recede. He blinked a few times, the inner lids of his eyes moving back into place. Slowly, he sat up holding his head.

Harlan turned away from him and began putting her materials back in her bag. She sure hoped that stupid coach driver didn't leave her here.

She was so absorbed, she didn't hear him get up until he was on her. With shocking speed, he snatched her by the hair and pulled her close to him.

"Bitch," he hissed through clenched teeth.

Harlan pressed a scalpel high against his pant leg. It glistened with reflected light. "If you don't let me go, right now, I will open your femoral artery and you'll bleed to death."

Gavin released her and leaned back against the wall folding his arms.

Harlan frantically grabbed her things and backed quickly to the cell door calling for the soldier.

"Wait," he said.

"For what, you to attack me again? I think I'll pass."

"It was instinct. I'll behave."

Harlan snorted. Turning, she hopped a few times straining to look out the cell door for someone to let her out.

"I didn't kill him, you know," he said.

"No, I don't know that and honestly, I don't care. That's between you and the royal family; it has nothing to do with me," she said, turning to face him again.

Gavin moved toward her. She held up her hand and he stopped.

"Think about it, if I were staging a coup, wouldn't I have had some men on hand to prevent my arrest?"

"I don't know what you'd do. I am not exactly familiar with the methodology involved in staging a coup. Besides, you have a pretty vile reputation."

Gavin paused for a moment. "That's fair enough, but before you go, I need something from you. I'm sure you probably have it."

"What?"

"A dose of A14R."

"Why? You'll heal fast enough."

Gavin gave her a hard look. "They are not going to wait for my wounds to heal to start beating me again."

Harlan frowned. "You know this is usually only given to pregnant women."

Gavin squinted at her. "Are you insulting me?"

Harlan smirked. "No. I just don't see the purpose—"

"Please."

*What harm could it do? It's only a vitamin supplement,* she thought.

He unbuttoned his sleeve and rolled it up, tearing some of the embroidered stitching as he did so.

Fishing into her bag, Harlan pulled out the bottle. "By the way, how much do you weigh?" she said, swabbing his arm and administering the injection.

"Three hundred and twenty-three pounds."

Harlan made a face. "Some idiot told me three seventy," she said, replacing the syringe in her bag. "I'll stay for a few more minutes. Let me know how you feel."

Gavin leaned his head back inhaling deeply through his nose. "I'm fine," he said faintly. He seemed to be enjoying



the effects of the mild euphoria. "I'm surprised you came here. You risked your career and your life for it."

"My career is not a huge concern right now. I plan on getting off this oven as soon as possible."

Gavin rubbed his arm where she had injected him. "Won't the royal family object to you not fulfilling your time commitment? They can file a complaint with the Interstellar Medical Association; accuse you of being unprofessional."

"Threatening to have me beaten, sodomized and jailed is not professional either."

He smiled amused. "Who said that?"

"The prince."

Gavin smiled wickedly. "Ah yes, I vaguely remember that. Have you ever been sodomized?" he said. "How do you know you wouldn't like it?"

His attempt at humor annoyed her and it was time to go. "Goodbye, Gavin, it hasn't been a pleasure." She marched over to the door and began yelling for the soldier again. After a few moments, he appeared to let her out.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

Although not yet light, Gavin knew it was morning. He could smell the early dew perfuming the air. The vitamin complex Harlan gave him worked better than he anticipated; he felt stronger, and his mind was clear and focused. His wounds had partially healed and he was ready for a fight. Getting out of here would be no easy feat.

As the suns rose, they brought with them some hazy morning light. Sitting on the mattress cross-legged, he concentrated on the difficult task ahead. He visualized his escape and ran through different scenarios that might lead to his freedom. He also recalled the various weapons he had seen since arriving. Most of the men carried standard issue cutlasses, an inferior weapon. He knew from experience they were cheap and somewhat fragile for a military weapon.

He had also seen the posted soldiers carrying bastard swords slung on their backs. Now they would be a formidable weapon to seize. Unfortunately, he had seen little else that would be of any use to him. Expensive, high-end weaponry was not necessary to run a jail. Most of what kept these prisoners in line was starvation and brutality. Feed them just enough to keep them alive and beat them daily. It was a simple and effective strategy.

Gavin heard the jingle of keys as two soldiers trudged down the hall for the morning feed. The smell of old meat filled his senses turning off his hunger like a switch. Looking out, he watched them walk from cell to cell offering trays to those still alive from the day before. Those cells with

deceased residents were marked for a later clean-up. Sometimes, the clean-up was several days later, when the soldiers could no longer stand the smell of the decomposing flesh.

Quietly, he rose from the mattress. If he didn't succeed, he would be recaptured and probably beaten to death or worse, crippled and left to live in the pit but it wasn't in him not to try. His timing had to be just right.

The soldiers stopped at his cell. They swore and struggled to position the cart properly in the thick mud. Gavin chose the darkest corner and crouched down. He emitted a violent cough followed by a piteous moan. The metal gate whined on its hinges and swung inward. One of the soldiers pulled a tray from the cart and entered the cell with his companion close behind. The first soldier hesitated for a moment as his eyes adjusted to the darkness. He spotted Gavin in the corner and grinned back at his counterpart. "Doesn't look like the doctor did him much good," he said.

"Maybe she wore him out," the other cackled in response.

As the soldier approached with the food tray, Gavin stood to his full height and smashed a powerful left hook into the lead soldier's face. He felt bone give under his fist and pain surge up his arm from the power of the blow. The soldier's hands flew to his face, dropping the tray and he cried out in pain and surprise.

Gavin grabbed the man, twisting him around to use as a shield against the other. The second soldier stood motionless, unsure what to do, then clumsily drew his cutlass and followed as Gavin backed out of the cell.

With his hostage out in front, Gavin forced his way into the outer hall. The narrow passage prevented the second soldier from circling around behind him. Gavin advanced on the second soldier as he exited the cell and having no other way to go, the soldier was forced to back up as Gavin moved forward. Nearing the reception area, he could see the other men in the open space spread out to form a capture circle.

Gavin's hostage was fighting hard now, probably fearing he'd be killed by one of the men in a fumbled attempt to free him.

Gavin tightened his grip on the man's throat, pushing him closer to the threshold of the reception hall.

On his right, a soldier rushed them. Reacting, he shoved the hostage forward causing the two men to collide. Taking advantage of their momentary confusion, Gavin pivoted around and behind them, pulling the bastard sword from one's sheath. He backed up holding the sword at the ready.

Two ambitious men charged him, coming toward him at a full run. Gavin dropped into a low crouch and swung the sword at knee level severing one man's leg and deeply wounding the other's. Blood splashed onto the dirt floor from the amputated leg and the room filled with high-pitched screams.

Gavin stood ready holding his gory blade. Cautiously, he continued to back toward the exit. As he emerged from the doorway, he saw a shadow move at the edge of his peripheral vision. He reacted instinctively, blocking the chopping blow just before it connected with his head. It was Lieutenant Harrow.

Gavin stumbled backward, struggling to regain his footing. Harrow advanced, relentless. He lunged at Gavin again in a wild frenzy. All his strikes were meant to kill. Gavin rolled out of the way of his attack, needing to put some distance between them. *Something is wrong with this man*, he thought. Harrow's attacks were brutish and unfocused, the hopeless flailing of a madman. His efforts seemed to do little but make him tired.

His lack of strategy was to Gavin's advantage. Harrow kept up his advance, becoming more and more careless with each step. Gavin was forced back retreating under the maniacal onslaught.

Harrow's men were also advancing, each one desperate to deliver the killing blow. They raced around chaotically shouting like children at a school fight. A spray of blood hit Gavin in the face and he was sure he'd been cut, but there was no impact. He looked over and saw Harrow falling, his face cleaved in two from eye to jaw. As Harrow's body fell, his men stood completely still as if turned to stone.

In the chaos, it appeared someone had accidentally struck down their lieutenant. Perhaps it wasn't an accident. Whatever the reason, Gavin didn't have time to dwell on it. Immediately, he recovered his momentum and broke into a run.

A group of saddled hyperia stood nearby, tied to a line. Gavin quickly made his way to the brown one on the end. He released its reins, mounted up with sword in hand and spurred it forward. It leaped with explosive power into a

gallop, quickly putting distance between him and his jailers. The animal was fresh and seemed grateful for the run.

Gavin gave it its head and let it charge forward over the red-rocked slopes. Some of the men made a show of pursuit but soon gave up and turned back. Gavin was sure they had more important problems now.

Of course, his immediate dilemma was where to go. Crossing the border into the Razorback queendom was out of the question; it was definitely too far from here. There was someone though who might help hide him for a while. All he had to do was find her.

## CHAPTER SIX

Harlan waited in front of the throne staring at the dreary landscape painting behind it, shifting impatiently from one foot to the other. She guessed she had been standing here for about fifteen minutes. Like all royal areas, Prince Hector's private throne room was elaborately dressed in the finest accoutrements. The ornate tapestries erupted with lime greens and astral blues. The intricate detail of the finely carved furnishings seemed to display the entire history of the AEssyrian people.

Crossing her arms, she sighed softly. This was ridiculous. Surely she warranted a little bit more respect than this. Harlan couldn't decide if his disdain was because she was a human, a woman, or that he just disliked her. Perhaps, it was a combination of all three.

She really hadn't had any prior dealings with the prince, only his father, whom she had loved and respected. The king had most definitely been an intellectual, which she found refreshing on a planet inhabited by macho schoolyard bullies. Unfortunately, his son didn't appear to have inherited any of his father's admirable qualities. It also surprised her that the king had any admiration for someone like Gavin. Now, there was an interesting character.

Despite the fact that he probably deserved to be in jail for a dozen different reasons, she did feel guilty about leaving him in such a horrific place. She hadn't told him, but she did doubt his involvement in the death of the king. From the little she saw of the body, something else was going on. She

suspected his death was caused by a disease or a toxin. An autopsy would answer a lot of questions. And if Gavin was truly innocent, it would clear him.

The prince finally stopped rubbing the smelly custard yellow cream on his hand. Knowing AEssyrian witch doctors, she wondered what type of animal had excreted it. It struck her as odd the number of AEssyrians who insisted on retaining a strong faith in folk remedies and witchcraft. Harlan couldn't reconcile how a culture could evolve to develop space travel and still believe in wizards and demons.

The prince cleared his throat but continued to massage the rash on his hand. From what Harlan could see, the irritation seemed mild. His constant attention to it, however, concerned her. Harlan took a chance and spoke up.

"Your Highness, if you would allow me to examine that, I may be able to provide you some relief."

"Maybe later," he said. "Anyway, that's not why I brought you here."

The prince shifted around in his throne trying to get comfortable. Like the rest of the room, the throne was stunning, ornately decorated with golden animal carvings and plump, inviting cushions upholstered in blue velvet.

The prince himself was dressed from head to toe in white robes. *A strange color choice*, she thought. AEssyrian's usually opted for darker colors to blend with their environment, a leftover habit from a more primitive past.

"I have declined your request to do an autopsy on the body of my father. It's clear to us he was murdered and we



already have the villain in custody. I see no need to mutilate his remains."

Harlan looked at him stunned. "Lord, an autopsy is standard procedure in any suspicious death. I can't make a ruling on the cause and manner unless I examine his body. Please reconsider this. His death may not be what you think."

The prince's green eyes flashed and he started rubbing his rash again, clearly agitated. "I am not going to reconsider this. We have witnesses who saw Gavin bent over my father. I myself saw all the blood." Harlan's tried to speak. He held up his hand stopping her before she could. "I'm also getting really tired of you arguing with me. I'm going to be king soon you know, Harlan, and I demand your obedience and respect."

"May I at least do an external examination of the body and take a few samples?"

"No, you may not. The funeral pyre will be ready soon and my father will be returned to the Gods. I don't want to get any reports that you have been tampering with him. Do I make myself clear?"

"Very," she said, trying to hide her annoyance. His ignorance was astounding. Did he really think the amount of blood seen directly related to the manner of the king's death?

"May I discuss another matter with you, Lord?"

The prince tightened his lips. "What is it?" he grunted.

"Since my contract was with your father, I feel it best if I paid out the rest of my obligation and returned to Earth."

The prince stared down at her and leaned forward, his eyes laughing. "I see no reason for you to break your contract, your request is denied."

*It wasn't a god damn request*, Harlan thought. She selected her words with care. "My contract clearly states that I have the right to exercise this option at anytime." Harlan fought diligently to keep her voice from rising.

The prince leaned back and smiled. "As you said yourself, your contract was with my father. You now have no contract and will stay here as long as I say."

Harlan felt the blood leeching from her cheeks and she quelled the panic saturating her emotions. This planet was run by children. She desperately wanted to unravel, but she knew a tantrum would only coax more punishment. She'd have to find another way.

"Very well then, may I go?" The placidity in her own voice surprised her.

"No, you may not go," he said. "I need you to see to my mother."

\* \* \* \*

Harlan entered the queen's bedchamber still fuming from her exchange with the prince. The bedchamber was a confusing mess of clothes and there was a faint odor of burnt citrus. Harlan looked to the rumpled bed but saw no sign of the queen. She stopped and listened. There was melancholic humming coming from somewhere in the large room. Harlan slowly walked forward trying to follow it. As she walked around the extravagant canopy bed, she spotted the queen in

a corner sitting veiled in a cloth blanket, softly rocking back and forth.

"You're Highness?" Harlan said, moving closer.

The woman looked up at her suddenly; her eyes wide and round. She had been weeping and her face was blotchy and wet.

Harlan stopped. "It's all right, Highness, it's Harlan. I'm your doctor. I'm going to examine you, is that all right?"

The queen nodded slightly and stood keeping some distance between them. In one exaggerated move, she peeled back the blanket revealing her bare chest. There were long, angry cuts carved into her flesh. Crimson smudges dappled the light pink blanket.

Harlan approached her noting the dried blood caked on the queen's fingernails. "Why did you do this?"

The queen began crying again placing her hands over her face. "The itching, I just couldn't stand it. It was so bad. All night, it never stopped. Before I realized it, I had done this." She gestured pitifully at her bloody chest. "There were horrible headaches, too!"

"You should have summoned me," Harlan said, helping her to bed. "I'm going to take some samples for testing. Then I am going to dress your wounds and give you something to help you sleep. Don't worry, I'll do everything I can for you." Harlan squeezed the queen's hand affectionately and opened her medical bag.

## **CHAPTER SEVEN**

Low, somber clouds hung over the royal fair threatening to burst with torrential rain. Hector strolled slowly with his mother feeling the weather influence his mood. The temperature had dropped a little below ninety degrees and he felt chilly. He pulled his red cloak tighter around him and pouted. His health was suffering from all this drama. The stress of his father's death caused some worrying headaches of late. Another one lay just beneath the surface threatening to break open into his mind like a pox. He wished he could go see Harlan, but they were unofficially not speaking.

The impertinent disrespect she had shown him when she announced her resignation still enraged him. Besides, her presence on the planet was necessary.

AEssyria, being a planet of men who loved war, suffered from a shortage of doctors. Most young males sought military careers because that was the surest route to plentitude and power. Naturally, this contributed to their high mortality rate. Ironically, it was viewed as unseemly for their women to seek medical careers, a definite solution to the problem. AEssyrian women were considered valuable property, to be cared for and used by their men. It was also a prevailing custom that most of them were not interested in pursuing careers. Any disruption that removed them from the center of their families was seen as undesirable. After all, they had their own alliances to construct and ranks to climb.

AEssyrian women were sometimes more important to political networks than the men they were wedded to. Foreign

women, however, had little value to the social structure. Therefore, they were provided generous incentives for coming here to practice their profession. Unfortunately, there were not many takers. AEssyria had the intergalactic reputation for being dangerous and chauvinistic.

Harlan had been a good catch, though. She had come with an impressive medical pedigree and so far, had proven herself to be quite competent. She only had one drawback; she spoke her mind too much. Hector was not used to such brazenness and it often infuriated him. His stepfather had found it to be a charming quality. What an insipid fool he had been. She also had the inconvenience of being young and attractive, quite a nuisance. He suspected a lot of recent medical complaints were due more to desire than malaise. She had seemed oblivious to the attention, and why not? She had felt safe enough with his stepfather as king.

Harlan's recent attempt to get out of her contract was so typical of her sex. Any sign of danger and women were always the first to abandon their responsibilities. His mother was a vibrant example as well. For months, she cajoled and harassed, "We must get rid of the king; he's planning to divorce me and disinherit you." On and on she went, badgering him at every opportunity. Not that he doubted her, after all, he was only the adopted stepson of the king and his mother was not a trouble-free wife.

So here they were with a dead king and his impending coronation precarious at best. Since his stepfather's death, his mother had taken to hiding in her room most of the time with mysterious ailments that required narcotics. This entire

undertaking had burned a trail from one screwup to the next. It would be a marvel if the nobles didn't murder them in their beds just for entertainment. His thoughts were suddenly broken by a familiar hiss.

"Will you stop that?" his mother said, speaking through her teeth.

He followed her gaze to his hand. He'd been scratching it so relentlessly, that it bled.

"It's so itchy," he said irritated.

Some merchants trotted in front of them as they strolled trying to interest the pair in their sparkling strands of jewelry. Their hands were heavily adorned as they held them outstretched hopeful for a sale. The queen dismissed them with a cool, impatient smile and a wave.

"Why don't you go see Harlan about that?" she said as they continued on past some food vendors.

The rich, decadent smell of bloody, fresh meat filled his nose making his mouth water. "I can't."

A shopkeeper, seeing his hungry stare, offered him a sample and he boorishly stumbled in front of his mother to accept it.

She shot him a reproachful stare. "Why not?" She continued, "The medication she gave me has really helped lessen the irritation. I really like her; she's an excellent doctor."

"That's wonderful, Mother. I'm happy you're feeling better." Hector let his tone drop the conversation like a rock. If they got on the subject of Harlan's request to leave, they

would surely quarrel. She'd insist that he apologize, and he had no intention of doing so.

"Since you're in a bad mood anyway, I may as well tell you," she said, her right eye starting to twitch. She impatiently tugged at the flesh trying to stop it.

"Now what?" he said, turning to face her.

They halted near a fabric stand and her yellow eyes darted back and forth ensuring no one was within hearing range. She leaned close to her son's ear, "Gavin escaped."

"What?" he said, pulling back from her. "He's supposed to be publicly executed tomorrow!"

"Lower your voice," she warned, absently scratching her chest through her dress.

"The nobles are going to laugh me right off the throne. What am I going to tell them?"

"Don't say anything to them yet."

"Where is that clown Harrow?" he barked. "I want to know exactly what happened."

"I'm sorry, dear, he's dead."

"Dead? How? Who told you about all this?"

"The sergeant-at-arms reported that Gavin escaped yesterday afternoon and killed Harrow on his way out."

"We have to get him back or we're dead!"

"Don't worry. I've already taken care of it," she said. Her smile was strange and unfriendly.

"Mother, please tell me you haven't made any arrangements for Gavin's capture."

The queen appeared not to have heard him. "We have a few mercenaries leftover from the Sambien Wars. They can find and handle Gavin."

He looked at his mother trying to stay calm. He must make sure she didn't try to help him in the future. Hector needed some more privacy, so he grabbed her and escorted her over to the empty picnic area. "You need to let me handle these things!" he said.

Patrons of the fair passed nearby calling out friendly greetings and waving. Hector waved back trying to look as natural as he could.

"Let go of me," she said, angrily fighting his grip.

Trying to keep her quiet, he let her go and gave her a hard stare. Something was definitely still wrong with her. She was too raw and edgy.

"What if he should tell them what he knows?" he said.

She sneered at him rubbing her arm. "He knows nothing. Besides, I don't imagine they will be stopping for dinner and conversation."

Hector couldn't believe what she was saying. "No, Mother, he knows some things. Like he knows what he saw the day the king died and definitely that he didn't kill the king, that's quite a lot to know. Do you think he's just going to yield his career and his life without a struggle?"

The festival band had begun to play again after a short break. Patrons walked over occupying the benches around them their hands full of paper plates piled high with the sweet smell of shaved pork, an imported favorite.



Naked Venom [Book One]  
*by Michelle O'Neil, Lindsey Bayer*

"You're being paranoid," she said, ceasing to scratch her chest in favor of pinching it.

"No, I'm not. He knows them, Mother. They've worked for him in the past. They all play poker and drink in the taverns every weekend. You should have consulted me before you did this!"

The queen frowned and fell into a sullen silence. A ruby stain of blood steadily seeped through the fabric of her dress.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Gavin leaned back against the saddle he had removed from the hyperia. He sullenly stared into the flames and listened to the steady crackle and pop of the fire. The ground was uncomfortable, but preferable to his prior accommodations. As he rolled awkwardly, his stomach complained. The prey he'd caught earlier had done little to ebb his hunger. His portion was reduced even further by his obligation to the hyperia. Relying on a carnivorous mount did have its disadvantages. The large, powerful animal now lay curled up sleeping near him.

The night's inky darkness devoured him, bringing with it a sense of mournful loss. How futile was his life's work if it could be destroyed in only one short day? Of course, he knew something like this could happen. How many friends and colleagues had been destroyed by some sudden change of command or twist of fate? His only folly was to believe his countless accomplishments and military honors would somehow offer him immunity from this fate.

Now it was all finished, all his plotting and political maneuvering and probably his life, too. Gods he wished he had a drink. Drinking had become a refuge from this hard, uncertain life, a passage to amnesia, a gateway to debauchery. He had begun to rely too heavily on its numbing charms, but in the absence of a suitable new vice, it would have to do.

Gavin reached behind him and pulled a tattered map from the saddlebag. He hadn't had to navigate his way anywhere

since he was at the military academy. Plotting his passage around military outposts to Harlan's villa was slow and laborious, but not getting caught was his highest priority. All of his tedious work was dependent on the accuracy of past gossip. He vaguely recalled listening to a noblewoman complain that the king had housed Harlan at Fossix by the Sea. The noblewoman was indignant that a foreign-born human deserved such elaborate quarters.

Gavin reached for a bone resting on the edge of the fire pit. He gnawed at it cleaning off any last morsel he could feel with his tongue. When it offered no more pickings, he snapped it open and sucked the dark grainy marrow. Finished, he tossed it back into the fire pit and folded up his map.

If Harlan was there, he doubted he'd get a warm welcome. But she had a tendency to be good-hearted beyond reason and so he decided to take the gamble. He had some regrets about putting her in danger, but few choices if he wanted to survive. And he was determined to survive. She would help him because she felt compelled to and if she threatened to turn him in, he'd remind her of her help at the prison. What would the prince have to say to that? It was a feeble plan but the best one he had.

Unsheathing his saber, he pulled out a fine whetstone sharpener from the saddlebag. Meticulously, he began stroking the blade along it in long, smooth passes. Then with a soft cloth, he wiped the dried blood off the blade. Frowning, he ran his fingertips along the knife edge, feeling spots where the sword was nicked or chipped.

When an opportunity arose, he would have to risk getting to his home before they sold off all his equipment. If he was going to have to fight constantly to keep his freedom, he would need better weapons than this.

The fire was dying and he let it. Nestling back against the saddle, he reached into his boot and found what was left of his cigar. He lit it with a twig from the pit and puffed keenly, tasting its hardy flavor.

He tried to remain vigilant but sleep soon overtook him in a velvet blanket of oblivion. His dreams filled with memories of loose women and noisy bars. Then through his mind crept another sound. He heard a tree branch brushing metal, gravel subtly crunching under a shifted boot.

In an instant, he and the hyperia were both on their feet. The creature, realizing it was unrestrained and in danger, bolted into the woods, the hair of its tail swishing wildly behind it. Gavin's presence was loudly announced by the panicked footfalls of the fleeing hyperia. He cursed himself for not securing the beast and reached for his weapon mumbling profanities.

Backing against a tree to protect his rear, he struggled to fight off the lasting effects of fatigue. They were soldiers for certain. He could smell their sweat and the raw metal of their armor. How many? He couldn't tell.

He reached deep inside his heart and fueled his rage. Adrenaline pulsed through him like boiling water and he stood fixed, determined to at least make the first kill.

## CHAPTER NINE

Grand Duke Molitov von Goth lay in his bed listening to the soft rhythmic breathing beside him. He could smell the saliferous sweat of her skin and the balmy musk of her sex. He shifted slowly so as not to wake her and felt the bite of delicious pain searing his back. He grinned realizing he had sustained more damage last night than he remembered. Delicately, he crept to the side of the bed and slid off, taking care not to shift the mattress. Smiling, he looked down at his housekeeper, Nira, as she slept. How soft and rumpled she looked as she slumbered in an exhausted heap. She had done her best for him but no one was as ferocious as Lila, his one true love. He would be glad when she came back from her travels.

Stepping over their discarded clothes, Molitov found his robe draped over an armchair in the corner and slipped it on. Opening his bedroom door, he stalked into the hall. A young serving girl rose from her chair by the door.

"How can I serve, Lord?" she said demurely, hanging her head.

"Have the hyperia fed an extra ration and saddled for a ride this morning. Tell the cook to put out the best plates and load the table with pork and lamb. The prince is coming for breakfast." The girl bowed respectfully and scurried off to follow his directions. He looked down the hallway until his gaze found his wife's room. The door was shut, as usual. He really hoped she was away for the morning. She had a

propensity to infuse herself into his conversations and he did not want her privy to his exchange with the prince.

Descending the grand staircase, he wondered what the prince would offer in exchange for his support in the young man's bid for the crown. He was rather surprised at the visit. After all, Molitov was not an officer on the Council of Nobles, although he was one of the longest serving members. The young prince needed as much support as he could muster, no matter where it came from.

At last he came to the farthest and most secluded area of his villa where his bathing room was located. The room was partially open to the outside and provided a marvelous view of his lands. The open shower glowed in crystal giving the bather a feel of washing inside carved ice. Two young maids were eagerly waiting for him with fresh soaps and clean, white towels.

Molitov stood passively as they removed his robe and undressed themselves. They all entered the shower together, and the women began lathering up his body. They attentively ran their hands over his penis, buttocks and thighs massaging each as they went. Their hands caressed their way down his chest and along the severe scratches on his back. The woman behind him pushed her soapy fingers deep into the wounds, roughly kneading their jagged surfaces.

Molitov felt hungry lust burn into his loins like hot lead, and leaning his head back, he growled warmly. In response to his arousal, eager fingers kneaded his testicles and probed his anus. Consciously, he slowed his breathing and successfully fought the urge to orgasm, savoring the throbbing

consequence of his self-denial. When they were done, the women dried him, and combed out his long, ebony hair. Then they worked two forward locks on each side into small, tight braids.

Clean and dressed, he entered the breakfast room to the smell of wine and freshly cut meats. To his delight, the prince had already arrived and sat eating, his lips smacking noisily.

"I apologize, my Prince, no one told me you were here," he said. His demeanor was confident but guarded.

The prince stopped chewing. "I told them not to disturb you."

Molotov joined the prince at the table. He lowered himself smoothly into a chair directly across from his guest. "May I offer you some pleasure? I have two young courtesans with extremely malleable talents."

"No, thank you, Lord," the Prince said, his words muffled by the enormous amount of meat he had stuffed into his mouth. "I have some business to discuss, but we can get to it later."

\* \* \* \*

After breakfast and some benign conversation, they emerged outside to a brilliant morning. The twin suns had risen, beginning their merciless assault on the landscape. Molotov's villa sat imposingly on a vast clearing surrounded by mammoth Botana trees. The hardwood trees stood tall enough to provide extensive shade to the surrounding property. The villa itself was carved from one solid piece of rock that had always dominated the site.

The two men rode for hours gossiping about the follies of mutual friends. Stopping by a stream, they watered their animals and dismounted for a break. They sat on some large stones shaded by a long dead tree.

Molotov glanced down at the prince's hand as he settled into his seat. "What's the matter with your hand, my Prince?"

The prince followed his gaze. Bloody smears streaked his wrist just at the glove line. "I don't know. It's some sort of rash, and it's driving me insane. Before you say it, I'm not going to see the doctor."

Molotov raised his brow in inquiry. He had heard only good things about their female doctor.

"We are currently not speaking."

"I see," Molotov said. The prince was still such a child, certainly not ready to be king.

"May I see it?" he said, moving closer and gently taking the prince's hand. He removed the leather glove and it made a tacky sound as it pulled away from the skin. Molotov examined the cavernous, festering wound. It smelled musty and rank like old, rotting meat.

"Despite your reluctance, my Prince, the doctor really should see this," he said.

As he stared into the prince's face, Molotov could read the prince's concern and decided to change the subject.

He didn't know why he was feigning alarm, for all he cared, the rash could be fatal. "So what was it that you wanted to speak to me about?"



The prince paused for a moment. "The first item is that there will be a banquet tomorrow night and of course, you are invited."

Molotov gave the prince a reverent nod. "My attendance at your festivities can always be counted on."

The prince strode over to his animal and pulled a document from the saddlebag. "There is another matter in which I need your cooperation." He handed the parchment to Molotov.

He took it and read a few lines. "This is Gavin's execution order," Molotov said with surprise.

"That's right. Your signature will provide a validation for the other nobles."

"Has Harlan completed the autopsy on the king?"

"I decided an autopsy was unnecessary. We know he was murdered and that Gavin committed the crime."

Molotov scrutinized the document for few moments. He regarded the prince with some trepidation. He didn't like putting his signature on anything he didn't initiate.

"Why do you need this? You have him in custody, just kill him."

"I want to make his execution public and I need the nobles' support for that. You have no love of Gavin, why the hesitation?"

Molotov sat thoughtfully for a moment as the prince stared off. "I think I'd like to see the results of an autopsy before I sign anything."

The prince's face darkened as he spoke. His words were strong and deliberate. "There isn't going to be an autopsy;

the body has been destroyed. You will sign this order now, or I'll work to have you stripped and exiled for defiance."

Molotov took the document and signed it. "I am, of course, your allegiant vassal in this and all things, my Prince," he reassured him icily. "When will the happy event take place?"

The prince scowled looking irritable.

"As soon as I can arrange it."

## CHAPTER TEN

A heavy voice rolled out from the night. "Gavin?"

Gavin got to his feet. "Yes, Fallon, it's me," he said.

Three mercenaries stalked out of the woods keeping pace with each other. The darkness obscured any details but Gavin could hear them move in unison, each about four feet apart. The light jingle of their spurs quieted as they stopped their advance.

Major Fallon, the leader of the three and an old acquaintance of Gavin's, moved a little closer to the cornered general.

"The prince wants you alive," he called as his fingers absently played with some long, black-haired scalps hanging on his belt.

"I expect he's been getting used to disappointment."

Fallon folded his arms and rested his weight on his heels. "Don't make me do this, Gavin. If you're innocent, you'll be able to plead your case to the nobles."

"You don't honestly believe I'd entrust my life to them? They'll have me back if only to walk swiftly to the gallows. They don't give a damn about guilt or innocence."

"Did you do it?"

"Does that matter?"

Fallon broke into a sly smile. "No, but I'm curious."

"If I was going to kill the king, I would have engineered it so I'd be ruling as regent now." Gavin pushed off from the tree trunk and advanced a small step, provoking. "All this talk is putting me to sleep, are you coming for me, or not?"

"I'm always happy to accommodate an old friend," Fallon said. Still no one moved. The group seemed to be at an impasse.

The three crescent moons emerged from behind some clouds and illuminated the scene below. Gavin let his eyes adjust and studied the weaponry of each man. Gavin knew he had an advantage. He knew Fallon's fighting style and inherent weaknesses.

"One could retire on the bounty being offered for you," Fallon said.

"Come fetch it then."

Gavin had known Fallon a long time, and the mercenary life was showing hard on his rival. They had fought in the Sambien Wars together, often side-by-side against the inhabitants of the shade jungles. After fighting thirty years on and off against those creatures, Gavin's skin crawled at the mention of them. He greatly preferred an enemy who stood upright and didn't drag its belly on the ground.

Fallon's battle-scarred frame bore the evidence of his grueling life's work. His long brown hair was streaked with grey and his eyes were bloodshot and watery. His movements, too, no longer carried the molten dexterity of youth. His once long, confident stride was now accompanied by a profound limp which made him grimace when he walked. Although still a formidable opponent, his time was abating with the inevitable march of age.

The red-haired man on Fallon's right fidgeted greedily as he spoke. Gavin knew he was quite a prize for an ambitious young mercenary.

"Come on then, what are you waiting for? Do you men need to stop and take a nap?"

The red-haired man suddenly moved in for an attack. Gavin knew he'd be the first; Red was easy to read, a trait that would make him easy to kill. Red sheathed his saber and detached a titanium trident from a carrier on his back. Gavin estimated it to be about six feet long, a nice reach for any weapon. It was a masterfully built instrument, reflecting frosted moonlight off its metallic surface. The center barb was longer than the other two, armed with a sharper, more menacing tip. The shaft directly beneath the tip housed three small clawed razors designed to inflict maximum damage.

Gavin groaned inwardly. He hated fighting mercenaries. They usually had a specialty weapon to help boost their price. They also tended to choose unusual arms to stress and confuse their opponent and give them an added advantage in battle.

Young Red moved forward confidently, his trident poised at the ready. Gavin knew his battered bastard sword was no match for the weapon, so he focused on defense, waiting for a mistake.

The other man was jumpy, goading Gavin, trying to coax him to engage and leave the base of the tree. Gavin calmly waited. His sword was at the ready. *Come and get me, brave little man, just a little closer.*

The younger man decided to take the initiative, raising his trident to Gavin's chest level. With a ferocious roar, he charged, his trident poised to puncture his enemy's chest.

As Red moved closer, Gavin's opportunity manifested and he took it. He ducked down and swiftly bobbed to the left dragging the blade of his sword into the soft abdominal gap in the other man's armor. Blood and gore splashed onto the grass with a sickening splat, saturating it. Young Red fell to his knees holding his open belly with his free hand, trying in vain to collect his spilling entrails. Effortlessly, Gavin plucked the trident from his other hand.

"Why not just call it a night, gentlemen?" Gavin suggested, knowing they wouldn't.

In response, the second young soldier advanced, his battle axe swiping the air menacingly. Gavin moved up to engage him. Their weapons clashed back and forth in a savage song of steel. *The man was good*, he thought. The man was taking care to guard himself well, having seen his companion fall. Gavin struggled to find an opportunity to land a crippling blow.

Watching Fallon from the corner of his eye, Gavin looked for signs he was planning to join them.

"If you go, I'll match their pay," Gavin said to Fallon, holding off his opponent.

"What of my reputation?"

"It's finished, just like your youth."

"So you want me to go on your word you'll pay me when you can for my loss?"

"Better than dying today, isn't it?"

Fallon shrugged and went back to his animal, mounting up. "You'd better not cheat me, you bawdy bastard, or I'll tell you about the time I bedded your mother."

"You're a swine."

"I have no doubt I'll see you again," Fallon said and rode off as if the battle was already decided. A quiet act of friendship and solidarity without the crime of treason, Gavin was grateful for it.

Turning his attention back to his assailant, the distraction of Fallon's departure proved to be too long. The man landed a savage blow, slamming the blade of the axe into the meat of Gavin's pectoral. He snarled and let the agony of his injury fuel his rage. The young warrior was trapped by a moment of vulnerability pulling the axe from Gavin's chest to prepare for a second killing blow. But Gavin was faster still and drove his sword up under the other man's armor and deep into his ribcage piercing his heart. The mercenary froze, his knees buckling, then he collapsed at Gavin's feet quiet and still.

Gavin swayed from the burning pain that engulfed him. He heard his sword drop to the ground with a muted clank, bouncing off the fallen youth's chest armor. Leaning down, he pulled the youth's saber from his scabbard, putting his boot on the man to pry it free.

With slow, deliberate steps, he made his way to the dead man's hyperia and mounted up, snarling in pain from the effort.

He wouldn't be able to heal from this on his own. What he needed was a doctor, and he knew just the one. Hopefully, he would stay conscious long enough to get to her.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Harlan pulled back her black hair and secured it with a leather tie. She crossed her legs under her and comfortably nestled into her favorite plush chair. It was still dark this morning and there was a slight chill in the air. She reveled in it. Finally, a small break from the heat.

Reaching over to the side table, she grabbed a medical file and read the queen's full name labeled on the tab. Fishing around her lab reports, she located the toxicology report on the blood sample she had taken. She frowned as she read the results. None of the queen's results made any sense. There were still some unidentified compounds.

Harlan had spent the better part of a year adapting basic lab tests to search out and qualify common substances found on AEssyria. Although the results seemed strange to her, it didn't mean they were out of the ordinary for an AEssyrian. Harlan clipped a note to the file cover requesting a message be sent to the queen for a follow-up appointment. She was going to need to run more tests to find out what was going on.

Getting up, she crept on bare feet to the kitchen for some hot coffee. Taking the percolator off the stove, she poured herself a generous cup and inhaled the hearty, warm smell. Just like home, she mused. Thankfully, coffee was one of the popular imports here. She had given up a lot of Earth comforts, but she drew the line at losing her morning cup.

For a moment, her mind wandered and she thought of Earth. A profound sense of loss rushed over her as she



missed the things so familiar on her home world. Things like coffee at every supermarket. This planet had tons of imports from all over the universe. Anything a person could want was brought in by traders and merchants for a price. Nothing, however, ever tasted as good here as it had on Earth.

She leaned against the counter and sipped from her cup again. The hot liquid warmed and cheered her. It wasn't so much that she didn't like it here, on the contrary, she was very happy, but living on AEssyria presented unique challenges for a woman. One annoyance was she had become a novelty conquest to some of the men. She was forever fending off sexual advances, some subtle and others, downright unnerving. It was no small effort to discourage the amorous attentions of a three hundred plus pound man.

Turning back toward the library, she glimpsed a shadow in the courtyard outside and started. Harlan put down her mug and crept in a low crouch to the entrance hall. She pushed a wall panel open to reveal a cloak room. Pulling a duffel bag from the corner, she upturned it and shook out its contents. That last object to fall out was an ornately detailed two shot 9mm Derringer, a gift from her father. She quickly snatched up the weapon and slinked over to the light switch by the open archway leading outside. The courtyard blossomed into full light.

Harlan advanced and raised her pistol looking for a target. "I'm armed," she yelled, creeping through the archway. The morning was crisp and easily penetrated her thin pajamas. She felt exposed and cold, the thin fabric leaching in the morning dampness.

Rounding a large planter, she made her way to the rear of the alcove where the exterior entrance was. The ornate, iron gate was open and marked by a bloody handprint on its opposite wall. Her gaze followed the bloody path and then she spotted him. Inhaling, she held her breath in dread.

Gavin stood before her, his filthy uniform caked with blood. His tunic was torn and ragged, the buttons torn off and missing. It hung loosely exposing his broad, wounded chest covered in gore. Towering over her, he leaned against the pillar for support.

"What are you doing here?" she said and slipped her pistol into her pocket. She rushed to the iron gate, closed and lock it. He made no reply but staggered forward and fell to one knee. He was in serious danger of passing out. Harlan knew if he went down, she'd be unable to drag his massive bulk to a hiding place, so she reluctantly helped him inside. At least the floor would be easier to clean if she put him in the kitchen.

She examined his wound and whistled through her teeth. It was ugly, deep, and definitely needed stitches. "I can clean and stitch this but then you have to go," she said, firmly peeling the remains of his uniform off and dropping it in a nearby bucket.

"Well, do we have an understanding?" she asked, walking over to the hallway to get her medical bag. Hearing no reply, she came back over and stared at him.

"No, we do not," he rumbled. His voice was weak.

"You can't stay here. I am not going to be executed for housing a murderer. I can patch you up in about fifteen minutes and then bye, bye."

Gavin looked tired and she almost felt guilty for being rude to him. Almost.

"Harlan, can we discuss this later?"

"There is nothing to discuss, nor is there a later," she said, cleaning his wound. He grimaced under her attentions and closed his eyes. "Fine", she said. "You can rest for a few hours and then you have to go."

She finished sewing his stitches in brooding silence. When she was finished, she helped him to a spare bedroom. He staggered like a drunk down the hall. Once he hit the bed, he immediately fell asleep. She hoped he'd clean up when he woke. He was soiling everything he touched.

She returned to the kitchen and cleaned up every trace of his presence. For the first time, she was thankful she had refused the king's offer of servants. As she worked, she fretted over what might happen if the prince's men found him here. She tried to push the thoughts from her mind but they lingered, haunting her. His presence here also brought other dangers.

AEssyrian men could be sexually aggressive and felt it was their right to mate with any unattached women they saw fit. Here, rape was not really a crime against women; it was more of a violation of someone's property, which was considered a more heinous offense. With the king's protection now lost, he could cause her real problems when he started feeling better. She had to get rid of him soon.

Moving to her now cold coffee, she dumped it in the sink and went into her bedroom to dress for work. Feeling

vulnerable, she locked her door for the first time since she moved here.

She'd also need to stop and get more meat. She didn't keep nearly enough to make a dent in his waking hunger. To add to her aggravation, how was she going to explain all the meat she would need to purchase if anyone should ask?

Finally ready for work, she grabbed the files she'd been looking over when he arrived. The note clipped to the queen's folder fell off in her rush and she decided to leave it, she'd just tell the nurse when she got there. She knew it was probably too much to hope that he be gone before she got home. Even she realized that this was the perfect hiding place, even if just for a short time. Harlan grabbed her keys and locked him in.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

The pain in his chest was excruciating and throbbed with every move. He tried to fall back asleep several times but the searing pain kept all hope of rest at bay. Hunger gnawed at his stomach like a small animal. At least that discomfort he could alleviate without any intervention from his unwilling host.

Strenuously, he shuffled down the hall until he found the kitchen. He opened the cooler, it's fan kicked on with a soft hum as he rummaged inside. He opened several cartons finding only herbage. Scowling, he tossed them to the back and continued his search. Finally, he found a promising package wrapped in white butcher paper. Tearing it open, he was elated to find it contained several different cuts of raw meat. He tossed the package on the table and sat down to eat. As a general rule, he disliked cold food but he was ravenous.

Still chewing the last piece, he rose and threw the papers away. He turned to the sink and filled a large mug with water. He drank greedily draining it in one long draw. At long last, he was beginning to feel better.

Curious now, he wandered through her villa intent on intruding into her personal life. The first thing that struck him was her lack of photographs. Most women he knew loved to surround themselves with photos of those they loved. They usually had pictures of pets, children, friends, and husbands. Harlan had none of these, nothing to remind her of anything back home.

Another thing was the lack of any other scent here but hers. She obviously was not one to entertain and he felt certain his presence here was driving her crazy. Making his way into her bedroom, he spotted a full-length mirror near the window and went to inspect the damage. The gash in his chest, a dark scarlet line with some swelling and stitches, didn't look nearly as bad as it felt. The stitches were clean and close together to prevent scarring; she did nice work.

Noticing her discarded night clothes, he picked them up off the bed and rubbed the soft, cottony fabric between his fingers. He drew them close to his nose and took a deep breath of her scent. A rush of searing lust fired his loins once again and filled his mind with images of her squirming beneath his hungry rage. The intensity of his desire took some of the edge off his pain and he reveled in it.

Making his way to her bathroom, he took a shower, leaving the wet towels on the floor to soak up the water overflow. He located the laundry and found what was left of his uniform. His pants, neatly folded on the dryer, were fine but his tunic was finished. He pulled on his pants and boots and continued his explorations of the villa. Finally, his snooping paid off and he found the bar.

\* \* \* \*

Gavin lounged comfortably in the courtyard enjoying the silky edges of his inebriation. He had quickly finished off the first bottle of Sawjack Whiskey an hour ago and was now nursing the second when he heard the key in the lock. He took another swig straight from the bottle and prepared

himself for her umbrage. As he expected, she marched straight to him and picked up the empty bottle by his chair. She flung it into a nearby trash bin.

"Care to join me for a drink?" he said.

Harlan looked around nervously. "Could you come inside please, Gavin?" she said her voice jagged.

He rose from his chair and sauntered into the living room holding his bottle by the neck. When they were inside, she pushed past him and pulled the curtains by the doorway closed. "You appear to be feeling much better. Now you need to go. You have already stayed longer than I agreed to."

Gavin prowled up to her stopping a few inches away, intimidating her to move back. She stared up at him defiantly but backed up to maintain her distance. Triumphant, he swaggered past her and plopped heavily on the couch.

"Are you listening to me?" she said her voice harder now.

"Yes, dear, I heard you. Unfortunately, I have no clothes."

She pulled a neatly folded uniform out of a leather bag resting on the coffee table and tossed it to him. "I stole a uniform for you," she said. "Here. Your insignias are in the bag, too. Now get dressed and leave."

He laid it across his lap and took another drink.

"Why are you just sitting there? I've been more than generous. Now get your things and get out before you get me killed."

Staring at her, he took a long draw on the bottle emptying it. He tossed it at the trash bin but missed and it bounced a few times on the tile floor, clanking loudly. The noise made her grimace.

"I can't go right now, Harlan. The kingdom is crawling with troops. Be patient, I'll be gone soon."

"So what you really mean is that you won't go."

"What did I tell you?" he said, adopting a tone he used for small children.

Harlan brusquely walked toward the front door. "I'll go then because I'm not staying here alone with you."

Gavin got up, tossing the uniform aside, and seized her by the arm. "You can't go, someone will realize there's something wrong here and you'll get us both killed."

"Let go of me," she said, glaring at his hand.

He released her. He was so close, he could imagine the salty taste of her skin and his hunger burned high again. The thought crossed his mind to take her by force, but he released it, letting it flutter away like a bird. She quickly moved to the other side of the room as if she could read his thoughts.

"I can't believe you don't have some relative or friend who can hide you so you don't have to ruin my life."

He stared at her feeling the fatigue creeping up on him.

"For someone with your advanced schooling, you're a bit dim-witted. It should be obvious to you that those are the first places the prince's men will search."

Harlan's eyes flashed for a moment. When she finally spoke, her voice was calm and exacting. "Fine, but you stay away from me. Do you understand? If you try anything, I'm leaving."

He strolled toward the bar to get another bottle. "I understand you," he said.



Harlan marched into the kitchen to make a sandwich, her heels tapping on the stone tiles. She muttered to herself as she pulled sandwich ingredients from the cooler.

When he returned, he joined her in the kitchen and cracked the cap. "Where did you get the firearm?"

Harlan turned from the counter to face him. "I smuggled it in."

"They're strictly forbidden here, you know. If they catch you with it, they'll kill you on the spot."

"I know. I figured I would take my chances, rather than be completely helpless here. And since you're not really in any position to turn me in, I'm not too worried."

He shook his head and stalked off to get quietly drunker.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The banquet hall was alive with the din of celebration, its vaulted ceilings awash with dazzling white lights.

Hector sat at the head of the grandiose dining table smiling and acting the jovial heir when that was far from how he felt. Everyone here was an enemy, watching him, waiting for any sign of weakness. He could feel the brand of the nobles' stares upon him, murderous and calculating. They thought him a weakling and he knew it. Their feelings showed in how they spoke to him, every word colored by a slight inflection of sarcasm.

Grand Duke Molitov was an unexpected liability. Since he had made Molitov sign Gavin's execution order, Hector could feel the grand duke's gaze on him, studying him and waiting. He'd been so sure that Molitov was the right place to start. Molitov notoriously hated Gavin and even opposed his appointment as general all those years ago. But he balked at the signing, as had others, for reasons Hector could not begin to understand.

His mother, too, had become a strange problem. She sat by the south entrance where she had clumsily dragged her throne, sometimes speaking to the nobles' wives in a voice too loud and shrill; others, staring off in a catatonic trance suddenly breaking out into mindless laughter. She had been to see Harlan half a dozen times but nothing seemed to be helping her anymore. The itchy rash on her chest now regularly broke out in angry, pus-filled boils and troubling fevers came and went without warning.

He knew what the agent of her illness must be, although he inwardly denied it. There was only one thing it could be. The exotic poison they had bought one windy night that was so alluring. That mesmerizing vial of liquid purple called Naked Venom.

They were seduced by it, told of its consummate lethal and untraceable attributes. Only a few drops a day and the king's decline would be seen as a normal but unfortunate byproduct of the aging process. Everything had gone exactly as planned, except in those instances when his mother had played a part.

First, in an inexplicable rush to kill the king, she overdosed him, which exaggerated what should have been a minimal amount of bleeding. Once done, there was nothing natural looking about the king's death. Second, there was the Gavin problem. Hector knew his mother must have panicked seeing all that blood and in a breath decided to throw blame on the closest person she could find. That person just happened to be Gavin. The entire affair ensured disaster.

Naked Venom, as he later found out, was so named for its insidious ability to be absorbed through the skin. His mother had inadvertently bathed herself in the king's mephitic blood when her chest and hands were soaked during her woeful display over his corpse. Now he, too, suffered some ill effects from what had at first seemed to be a minor amount of the king's blood on his hand. The blemish had quickly transformed into an ugly, itchy rash that only added to his misery.

No one had mentioned anything about the victim's blood being deadly, so Hector decided to hold his panic in check for

now. Before he could contemplate any more of his ruined life, the food arrived and he smiled cheerfully at the server.

Springing from his chair, he raised his goblet in salute to the nobles. "To your health, gentlemen!" he shouted.

"And to yours, Lord," they all replied in unison.

Hector, a smile plastered on his face, watched the nobles carefully as he handed the goblet back to the taster behind his chair, a formality the dead king had thankfully, not engaged in. The man moved forward, sipping wine and sampling food. After several minutes passed with no ill effects, Hector began to eat.

When everyone had finished, the prince rose from his chair and surveyed the room. The crowd quieted respectfully, the only sound in the great hall was the soft murmurings of his mother in her corner. "I have an announcement that will no doubt please all of you," he said. Large rumbles of approval rose from the group. "I have set the date for my coronation," he said, pausing for effect. "Two weeks from today on the High Holiday of Darona."

The silence that followed was so deafening, the hall seemed to have been extinguished of all life.

Then, grudgingly, a few nobles came forward. Hector noted that the first to offer his allegiance was Colonel Mythos, a young ambitious military man. He would make a useful ally in this dangerous game. Soon after, others came, offering themselves on bended knee with whispered oaths of loyalty.

In time, almost all the guests in the great hall had come before him. All except two, his sister Shatara, who stood by the queen's chair, and Grand Duke Molitov von Goth, who

Naked Venom [Book One]  
*by Michelle O'Neil, Lindsey Bayer*

quietly slipped out the back door.

## **CHAPTER FOURTEEN**

The heat was intense, baking into the skin on his back, warming his bones and calming his mind. It was late morning and the sunroom was the perfect retreat for Molotov to think. So the young prince wanted to be king? He of all people should know what a difficult and enduring pursuit that was. Despite the loyalties that were pledged the night before, everyone knew it was only the prelude. Now the true plotting would start.

AEssyrian royalty didn't usually follow the traditional rules of succession as did other sovereign families in the galaxy. Kingship was a hard-earned position gained from months and sometimes years of fighting and successfully defeating all challengers. Sometimes a royal son prevailed, often, they didn't. As the king aged, if he proved competent, his leadership continued out of respect until he could no longer rule. Then the process began all over again.

There were those, however, (all of royal blood) who believed in the divine right of kings. They felt it was the Gods' will they rule and the traditional system should be replaced with one of appointed heirs. No one on the Noble Council supported it, of course, for each of them could potentially become the future king.

It was now obvious to him that the prince had a hand in his father's death. His adamant refusal to allow Harlan to autopsy the king made that clear. Molotov only wished he knew the details of the scheme and all of its participants. He couldn't bring such serious charges without offering the

council some hard evidence. The prince had a few ambitious supporters on the council, powerful men who defended their future king with everything they had, if only to enrich themselves.

"Hello, darling," Lila said, entering and putting some fragrant oils on a nearby massage table.

Molotov purred a greeting at her.

"You've been here all morning, is something troubling you?"

"Nothing to worry yourself about, my love," he said warmly, now turning over to look at her.

"I heard you walked out of the prince's banquet. Everyone is buzzing with the assumption that you're planning to challenge the prince for the throne."

"There is only one problem with that theory," he said.

Lila emptied the contents of one oil container into her open palm and began rubbing his chest. "And what is that?" Her eyes smiled with amusement.

"I don't want the throne. It's far too problematic of a post."

Lila was thoughtful, kneading his intercostal muscles as he groaned in appreciation. "Your wife will be disappointed then. She is one of the chief gossipers."

Molotov opened his eyes and gave her a reproachful look. "Then she can fight him herself." Lila smiled. He knew that was what she wanted to hear.

Unfortunately, the truth was he might yet have to battle for the throne if it proved necessary. Although the last thing he wanted, he couldn't sit by and watch a corrupt pretender

steal the crown. AEssyria had a long and complex history, including a brief flirtation with dynastic rule. The system almost ruined the kingdom, shielding incestuous and stupid kings who were more intent on hosting orgies than holding court. Noble titles were handed out to favorites like carnival prizes, instead of being earned in battle as was tradition. Then the civil wars started and the Black Years took hold.

A young serving maid knocked on the door frame to announce herself. "Excuse me, Lord, but the Princess Shatara is here to see you."

"Take her to the library; I'll be right there," he said, sliding off the table.

Lila pouted playfully as he kissed and fondled her. "Don't worry darling, I'll be back soon," he said.

\* \* \* \*

The princess was more agitated than he could remember ever seeing her. They had been in here together quite a while and she had yet to say a word to him. She paced like a tethered animal, taking generous sips of her bourbon as she went.

"Something very strange is going on with the queen and I know my half-brother is somehow involved."

Molotov studied her carefully as he sat in his favorite burgundy wing chair near the fireplace. "What do you think is going on, Highness?"

"I'm not exactly sure, but something has happened to the two of them because they are both ill and acting weird."

"Define weird."



"Do I need to? You've seen them."

"So why voice your concerns to me? I'm not a physician."

"I want you to join with me in opposing Hector's coronation."

Molotov swirled his drink studying its amber liquid. "Are you still to be married to the Razorback Lord Savion?"

The princess paused, her face growing somber. She spoke softly and sadness permeated her words.

"No, the wedding is off for now. His high queen discouraged the match saying our kingdom had become unstable."

He nodded his understanding. "How do you gain if I oppose your brother? If I fight him and win, I become king."

"Yes, but you don't want the crown and I do. You've never made a secret of that. I am my father's eldest child from his first marriage; technically, I am next in line."

"Only if you are married," he corrected.

"Or if I have a man to champion me."

Molotov tossed back his drink and got up for another. "So you want me to be your champion?"

"Please, I can't do this without you."

"I can't commit to anything right now," he said, returning to his chair.

"I understand, but I should warn you. The prince says the Gods have sanctioned his coronation and there are those who believe him. If he crowns himself, he will surely get rid of all you troublesome nobles in favor of selecting a more agreeable council. So your decision needs to be soon." The princess regarded him a moment longer and then with a

Naked Venom [Book One]  
*by Michelle O'Neil, Lindsey Bayer*

slight bow, showed herself out of the library leaving him to finish his drink alone.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The rhythmic sounds of the courtyard waterfall seduced him and lulled him to sleep again. He had been napping on and off all day when he sensed her approaching. She cast her small shadow across him.

"You have been drunk here for three days. I think the local tavern would be more equipped to hide you than me," Harlan said. Her voice was a blade of anger. He squinted up at her. Her arms were folded across her chest tightly as she stood over him.

"I'm coming up with a plan," he said, quickly downing the shot in his hand.

"What kind of a plan? A plan on how you can eat, sleep and drink more? My plan is that you need to go somewhere else. My bar is empty and you are healed. You need to get out."

Gavin lapsed into silence as he watched her pick up two empty bottles by the base of his chair. Carefully, she placed them with the other collected debris in a burlap trash bag. He found her beautiful. Looking at her, he looked into her green eyes and soft feminine features, her mouth was slightly twisted in a worried frown as she worked. In that moment, he burned with lust for her and wondered how she would respond to an overture. He grinned; he knew exactly how she would react and musing about her rage aroused him further.

Then she was gone to the kitchen, her shoes clicking sharply on the tile floor. After a few moments, she returned, clutching a hand full of papers.

"Have you been going through my patient files?"

"Only the queen's," he said. Foraging into a wooden box on the table, he plucked out a cigar and lit it. He was certain she had no idea these were stashed in the bar, probably a long forgotten housewarming gift. Sticking out his forked tongue, he removed a small fragment of loose tobacco from its tip.

"These are personal medical documents and I don't want you nosing through them." Harlan tossed the papers down on the patio table and gave him a pointed stare. "When are you leaving?"

"I think I can decipher from the queen's file that she has taken ill. Am I right?"

"Yes, but what does that have to do with you?"

"Were you allowed to autopsy the king?" He already knew the answer but allowed her response.

Harlan hesitated for a moment, appearing to be caught off-guard by his question. "No, I was ordered not to touch him."

"What would cause several quarts of blood to leak from a body with no injuries?"

"I don't get your meaning."

"The king was covered in blood, it even pooled over his eyelids, yet there was not a mark on him."

"I don't know offhand, besides, I don't think this is an appropriate conversation for me to be having with his accused murderer."

Gavin cracked open another whiskey bottle and poured himself a generous glass. "Very well, I have a better topic of conversation," he said, his gaze evil. "Why is it that a young,

attractive doctor from Earth has no pictures of her loved ones? Surely you must have left some people behind? Perhaps you don't want to be reminded of them, which I think odd."

Harlan's eyes narrowed. "Let me think. Oh, that's right. It's none of your business. Now here's a question for you. If you're such a great, gifted general, why would they accuse you of murdering the king?"

"I was convenient," he said.

"They have an execution order out for you."

"I'm not surprised. I'm the only one, other than them, who knows I didn't do it."

"I'm not so convinced you didn't do it."

Gavin puffed hard on his cigar driving up great billows of smoke and stood up. He fixed her with an iron stare. "Why did you leave Earth to come here?"

Harlan turned her back on him to leave. "I am not going to sit here and discuss my personal life with you. I already told you it's none of your business."

Gavin got up and circled her, blocking her escape. "Come now, surely you had your reasons for coming here. There are certainly more hospitable cultures you could have chosen to practice in."

Harlan took a step back and regarded him coolly. "The pay was better here and I wanted some adventure."

"Not only is that a weak explanation, but I can tell you're lying."

"What do you want to hear? What will get you out of my way?"

"Tell me the truth."

"I already did," she said, avoiding eye contact. Her eyes were glassy like finely cut emeralds.

He knew he was close to the truth; he could read it in the lines of her mouth and the shift of her body. Ripping it from her would be cruel and although he didn't want to hurt her, he had to know. It would be a small and but significant show of surrender. His lust for her was waning now that he had found a new distraction.

"Was it a lover who left you?" he persisted, his voice silky and low.

"It wasn't him, it was me."

"Explain that please."

"No! I don't want to talk about this with you."

"Did you love him?" He was searching and so close, just like a big cat tracking prey.

Harlan said nothing and stared off toward the waterfall, sulking. "Did you love him?"

"Of course I did, I was going to marry him—"

"But you left instead, and came to the one place he was not allowed to follow," he said, finishing her thought.

"You don't understand what happened, so don't make assumptions about my life," she replied, closing up again. She was gathering her strength.

"Did you tell him you were leaving?"

Harlan remained defiantly silent.

"I see," Gavin said, finally withdrawing from in front of her, his heavy boots scraping the stone as he took his seat.

Harlan faced him, still visibly ruffled from his intrusion into her emotions.

"Have you ever been married?"

"Numerous times," he said, pouring himself another drink and crushing out his cigar. He was done with her, spent.

"Are you married now?"

Gavin waited a few moments to reply, moving around to get comfortable in his chair. "No, I am not."

"Another mystery solved," she said and disappeared inside the villa.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Harlan stared out at the panoramic view from her office window wondering where the morning had gone. Already it was noon and she felt she had accomplished nothing.

It was hard to concentrate with that criminal in her home eating and drinking everything in sight. He seemed to revel in making her uncomfortable, constantly strolling around half dressed and drunk. When she complained, he smirked and replied that if she didn't like what she saw, she shouldn't look. She really needed to find some way to get him to leave.

Trying to think of more work to be done, she stood and stretched. She had been working later and later doing her best to have as little contact with Gavin as possible. The more time she spent at home, the further his presence annoyed her. The more aggravated she got, the more it delighted him.

"Excuse me, Doctor Ambrose," Karla, her receptionist, called out as Harlan sat at her desk updating files. Harlan didn't understand why she yelled. She had shown her how to work the intercom several times. *She's deliberately being obstinate because she doesn't like working for a woman.*

Harlan walked out to Karla's desk. The girl had pulled her long red hair back in a thick bun, a style that really didn't suit her. "Yes, Karla?"

"We have a walk-in, ma'am. He said he had some back pain he wanted you to look at."

"Did you have him fill out a new patient form?" Harlan said, checking the patient waiting list. Only one more today and he hadn't arrived yet. Karla gave her a vacant, confused



stare that she used when she wanted to pretend she didn't understand Harlan's AEssyrian. Harlan repeated the question slower and with more enunciation.

"Oh," she said. "I didn't know you wanted me to do that for walk-ins, too."

"Please make sure he fills one out before he leaves, okay?"

Karla nodded and returned her attention back to her magazine.

Harlan had never liked Karla. She was always making Harlan repeat herself, hoping to get out of work by frustrating her. She was also a little too eager to help the men who came into the clinic, while barely giving the women a glance. She generally found Karla unprofessional and gossipy and the flirting was almost unbearable. She guessed Razorbacks weren't on her eligibility list because she seemed to have no interest in this man.

Harlan came out to the young Razorback officer sitting on a brown leather couch in the waiting room.

"Captain?" she said, guessing his rank.

"Colonel," he corrected. "And it's Caraculla. Colonel Caraculla."

He rose from his seat and strode over to her. She estimated his height somewhere around six two. His long auburn hair had two cherry red streaks at the temples, a characteristic feature of all Razorbacks. With his pale green eyes, he was strikingly handsome.

Except for the markings and their lethal venom spitting abilities, they looked similar to AEssyrians in every way.

She gestured to an open exam room and he stalked in.

"I understand you've been having some back pain?" she said, following him into the room with her blank chart.

"Yes, little mother."

Harlan grinned. "You can just call me Doctor Ambrose. Will you please take off your tunic and sit up on the examining table?"

He peeled off his uniform and lifted himself onto the table.

Small hairs stood on the nape of her neck as she placed her hand on his lower back. She studied the raised spine projecting between his shoulder blades like a shallow mountain range and the thick, black stripes branching across his back from the center of it. Probing down the length of his vertebrae, she checked for signs of soreness.

"Is there any pain when I touch it?"

"No."

Harlan took an x-ray and examined the results. She could feel his gaze on her, following her around the room, exploring her. She was beginning to believe there was nothing wrong with him at all.

"I don't see anything," she said as he pulled his tunic back on. "It's probably just a strained muscle. I'll prescribe something for the pain. You can pick it up at the pharmacy on your way out." She tore off the prescription and handed it to him.

Jumping off the table, he sauntered up to her and took the paper she held out for him. He read it briefly, then looked up and locked his gaze with hers. "Many thanks, little mother," he said in a husky whisper. With a smile, he strode out of the room.

Harlan closed the door after him and ran her fingers through her hair. *What a day*, she thought, smiling to herself. *Never a dull moment here.*

When she had collected herself, she came out to see if her last appointment of the day had arrived.

"Grand Duke Molitov von Goth is here, doctor," Karla said, grabbing her purse to leave.

"Of course, send him into room two and let him know I'll be right in," she said, washing her hands.

"I took him there already," Karla said. She appeared eager to go.

"Did you get that information from the colonel?"

Karla was at the opaque glass door, one hand stretched out to open it. "What information, ma'am?"

"The patient information for Colonel Caraculla," Harlan said a little too loudly.

"I'm sorry, I didn't understand what you wanted. May I go now?"

Harlan dried her hands and picked up the grand duke's chart. "Never mind, I guess you can go. Have a good afternoon," she said. As Karla bolted out the door, Harlan marveled at how well she was understood whenever she allowed Karla to leave early.

\* \* \* \*

Grand Duke Molitov Von Goth was an impressive AEssiryan towering six foot six and weighing just about three hundred pounds. He was attractive in a roguish sort of way and usually sported a monocle, but not today. His black uniform was

impeccably clean and adorned with a chest full of medals. As she entered, he sat waiting in a chair by the examining table reading a book.

Harlan smiled a welcome. "What can I do for you, sir?" She hated using royal titles and avoided them whenever she thought she could get away with it. Although she hadn't formally met him before, she knew from others he was a rather unpretentious nobleman.

"I have a chest wound bothering me, I was wondering if you would be kind enough to take a look," he said.

"I'd be happy to. Please remove your uniform," she said, gesturing to the table.

Molotov obediently unbuttoned his tunic and climbed up on the table for her. Harlan put on some latex gloves and moved up to him. The injury was a deep puncture wound, swollen and angry. She palpated the area and he shook slightly and closed his eyes. Harlan got the impression he was enjoying it. "That's pretty nasty," she said. "How'd you get it?"

"Playing games," he said, his voice light with amusement.

"Games?"

His smile broadened. "Yes, games."

He didn't offer any further explanation. Harlan felt intensely uncomfortable. She had heard rumors about his "games." She decided not to ask for an explanation and was somewhat thankful he didn't offer one. Still, she couldn't imagine what kind of instrument would cause this injury.

"It's a bit irritated, so I'm going to give you some salve. Would you like an analgesic for the pain?"

"No, that won't be necessary," he said. "Now, I have a question to ask you. I'll understand if you choose not to answer."

Harlan cleaned and dressed his wound. "Okay," she said, feeling uneasy.

"How much have you heard about General Theron's escape?"

Her mouth went dry and her heart pounded. "Not much."

He regarded her curiously and continued, "I just wanted to warn you, he doesn't have many places he can go. I have known him for many years and I wouldn't be surprised if he tried to make it to your home. Yours would be the last place they would think to look for him and he'd know it."

Harlan replaced the cap of the antiseptic cream with slow deliberation. She avoided looking Molotov in the eye. *Don't say a word.*

He watched her in silence for a few minutes as she gave him instructions for the care of his injury.

"Unless he's already there," he said, dragging her off the subject of his health. His gaze was inquisitive, like a cat's.

She gave him a weak smile and shook her head 'no' but she knew she was lost. She was the worst liar she knew. As a child, she had tried to lie her way out of trouble several times but she always got caught. One day, she decided to just always tell the truth and her life became simpler, until now. Her philosophy had held firm until Gavin came into her life. Since his intrusion, lying had become a daily routine to avoid the chopping block. For the fiftieth time today, she wished she could just grab a shuttle and go home.

"You can tell me the truth, Harlan. I'll not tell the prince but he might figure it out on his own. After all, if it occurred to me, it might occur to him as well."

Harlan exhaled, feeling a little relieved. "I don't know what to do; he refuses to leave."

"He really can't leave. He's stuck for now," he said. His voice was sympathetic.

She felt grateful for his kindness. "You don't think he killed the king either, do you?"

"No, I don't. The method was too sloppy and random for him. Gavin is capable of many horrible things and he has deposed rulers in the past, but he doesn't often skulk in the shadows. More often, he will use the tools of war to take down a monarch. Anyway, if he had murdered the king, he would have planned it so he stayed free. He would have taken care that no one considered him a suspect. I have other suspicions about the king's death."

"Can you tell me?"

"We'll talk about it later. Please tell Gavin I'll try to arrange a meeting with him when I feel it's safe."

Harlan nodded as he replaced his uniform and jumped down. "Be careful, Harlan, the prince has people watching you now. He told them to make sure you don't try to leave."

*Great*, she thought as Molotov left the room, *bad to worse*.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

It was late evening with an indigo night peaking coyly through the Doric pillars in the Temple of Exalted Bata Nox, the Great God of Blood. The floor was cold against his bare skin as he lay before the red marble altar. He lost track of how long he had been here drifting through the sea of his turbulent thoughts. He knew if he was quiet and still, the voice of the God would come through again, so he waited.

The great God's voice spoke to him more frequently now, telling him things no other mortal could know. Hector had told the God of his anger at Gavin's defiance and the Exalted One had generously pledged his support for Hector's coronation. This revelation made him so happy, he laughed for hours upon hearing it.

To Hector's great relief, the God hated General Gavin Theron just as much as Hector himself did and suggested ways of hunting down and killing the general. When the God was done imparting his wisdom to Hector, he would show mercy by relieving his mind of the splitting headaches and plunge him into blessed unconsciousness.

Hector had also dared ask the God about the grand duke. He told the God he was afraid the noble might be trying to take the crown by force. The God assured Hector, however, such a thing would not happen. Hector was deeply grateful.

"Highness?" a guard called, escorting Harlan into the temple. The voice broke Hector's wandering thoughts. The captain of the guard standing nearby started at the greeting and watched them as they approached.

Hector rolled on his back, putting his hands behind his head. "What?"

"You asked for Doctor Ambrose to be brought to you, Lord."

"Ah yes, bring her in," he said.

Harlan entered escorted by soldiers on either side of her. She averted her eyes when she realized his nakedness. He smiled at her. "Come now, Harlan, I would think being a doctor, you would have seen many naked men."

She avoided the question. "What can I do for you, Your Highness?"

The prince was quiet for a moment absently rubbing his chest to try and draw her attention to it. "What are you doing about my mother?"

Harlan's brow knitted and she shifted her feet. "I've been doing everything I can. I have to admit I'm stumped. I've never seen anything like this. It almost looks like it's caused by some kind of toxin but I can't seem to get any lab results to identify it."

"Really?" he said with a distant smile on his lips. He rolled his hips lazily from side to side amusing himself by flopping his penis back and forth.

"When I went to see her this morning," she continued, "she had a little blood running from her eyes. Didn't your father have that as well?"

\* \* \* \*

Harlan regretted it the minute it left her mouth. *Shit.*



"Now how would you know that?" he said. "You never saw him."

Harlan felt ice seize her chest with fear. She had slipped up and he caught it. Maybe she could talk her way out, she reasoned. "I'm not sure, I must have heard it in passing," she said.

"Oh, I think not," he said. Rolling off the floor, he quickly got to his feet. "Someone told you all right, and I can just guess who that might be. That bastard Gavin is such slime. I should have guessed he'd show up at your villa. It's the perfect hiding place."

An acolyte brought him a robe and he ambled up to Harlan. It hung loosely off his shoulders, open and exposing. "I must admit I am surprised by your choice in men. You seem like such a wholesome girl," he said and shook his head. "Women do seem to like the bad boy though."

Harlan stood motionless, barely breathing.

Hector turned to the captain of the guard leaning against a pillar waiting for his orders. "Take her to the dungeon for holding and send a platoon out to her villa to round up the general. Plan his capture carefully; he's a crafty devil and he won't go quietly. You can put them in together so they can have one last night. It's only fitting since they'll be dying together."

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Gavin scuffled slowly toward the entrance of the royal banquet hall, his movements hampered by the wrist and leg irons. The two soldiers escorting him pushed hard on his back to hasten his advance but it only served to make him move slower. The throbbing hangover was mild but tiring and his mouth was paper-dry with thirst.

The captain of the guard had been pleased. They captured Gavin without casualty. Of course, they caught him still drunk and asleep in the bedroom a few hours after midnight. No one even needed to pull a saber. He inwardly cursed himself all the way here for being so careless. Once again, he had robbed himself of an opportunity to die fighting.

With a soldier on each arm, they positioned him standing before the prince at the main table. A moment later, Harlan was placed next to him.

"Is this your screwup?" he said.

"Shut up! This is your fault, so don't say another word to me," she said, staring straight ahead.

The prince stood and Gavin was surprised by how gaunt and ashen he was. Gavin could smell the prince's illness, the acrid sweat and fetid breath moved his stomach in revulsion. The prince's right hand was cocooned in layers of gauze that made it resemble a miniature beehive. He toyed with it constantly, rubbing it on his hip in agitated strokes as if trying to scratch an incessant itch.

Behind the prince sitting on the floor was a small figure veiled in red. Gavin squinted trying to make out its identity,

thinking it must be someone's child. Then in a rush of startling recognition, he realized it was the queen.

Her hands were pallid and gnarled into arthritic claws opening and closing onto nothing. As she sat and rocked, she hummed ancient nursery rhymes. She had gone completely mad. *What will her poor little prince do now without his mommy there to guide his life?* he thought with dark amusement.

The prince stood and began his victory speech to the nobles and Gavin shut him out. He looked down at Harlan standing to his left, her jaw set in a hard line and her gaze unwaveringly forward. But he could see the slight tremble in each of her breaths. He was sure the soldiers had cheerfully regaled her with the particulars of her impending torture.

Turning his attention back to the prince, he caught the tail end of the homily. "...And pollute himself with his human harlot, who surrendered her body to him for his pleasure, along with her home." The prince paused, sipping his wine. Harlan visibly stiffened. Gavin looked to the queen, who had now crept on all fours under the table by his feet. Her ladies-in-waiting tried silently to coax her out. The prince showed no knowledge of his mother's activities.

Harlan shifted next to him and Gavin could feel her terror. The prince was determined to work up indignant anger against her. Gavin felt sure she was doomed. Indeed, she would probably get a worse death than him if he didn't speak up.

The prince took a breath, ready to continue his speech. Silently, Gavin knelt and lowered his head in servility. The hall

filled with a roar of emotion, and then slowly drained to a whisper.

"Your Most Royal Highness, may I speak?" His voice projected its deep baritone throughout the hall. It was the strong, masculine voice that commanded armies and the nobles in the room were captivated by it.

The prince glanced at him as if he'd never met him before. "You may speak."

Gavin stood and faced the nobles, pausing to meet each one's gaze. "The doctor is an innocent in all this. It was I who breeched her home and through force, made her swear an oath to me not to reveal my whereabouts to anyone. It was also I, without encouragement from her, who took her by force to satisfy my perverse lusting."

The noise of the crowd rose again and the prince held up his hand for silence. "Let him finish," he said.

Gavin continued, "She has done nothing wrong and is simply a victim, my Prince. I beg you to spare her life." A rush of noise filled the hall. He felt Harlan's eyes boring a hole into his skull but he avoided looking at her.

The prince looked at Harlan for the first time since she was brought before him. "Indeed, you must be innocent if a nefarious bastard like this will vouch for you," he said. "I have decided to show you mercy and allow you to live. Gavin, you, of course, will die as a sacrifice to the Great God Nox on my coronation day."

The crowd erupted in applause. "Free the doctor and take Gavin back to his cell," the prince said with a gesture of dismissal.

Gavin turned to leave when the prince's voice abruptly cut through the clamor of nobles. "Mother, what are you doing?" he shrieked, his voice cracking with emotion.

From under the table, the queen had taken a piece of meat from his plate but it was not going down well. She stood and gasped, clutching her throat with bloodstained, ragged nails. As she fought for breath, she clutched the prince wildly, tearing at his clothes with her withered hands. In her struggle, her veil came away and the crowd hissed and recoiled in panic. Her face, once a beautiful sculpture of flesh and bone, was now a bloody, pulpy mess.

"Get me out of these things, I need to help her!" Harlan said, struggling. She fought her captor as he stood entranced by the unfolding scene.

The prince melted into hysteria as he fought to get his mother to release his clothes. "Get off, get off!" he screamed.

Harlan's soldier fumbled with the keys to her manacles. "Don't release her, you fool, can't you see what she's done to my mother!" the prince said, flinging his dying mother to the ground. His hands were covered in her blood. Horror shone in the prince's face as he stared at his hands. Frantically, he pulled a pitcher of water from a serving tray and plunged his hands into it. He scrubbed them clean and dried them off on the tablecloth.

"Please, Your Highness, I'm begging you to let me help her," Harlan said.

The soldier stalled, unsure whom to listen to.

Gavin took that moment of confusion and lunged for the man looping the chain from his wrist manacles around the astonished soldier's neck.

"The keys, Harlan, get the keys," he said as he fought her soldier and his own.

Harlan reached out, but just as her fingertips touched the cold metal of the ring, she was slammed to the ground under a tackle of soldiers. Gavin soon hit the floor near her, and was brutally subdued. His angry roar filled the room with the weight of sound.

The queen continued her convulsions, her ladies trying desperately to clear the unseen blockage from her throat. Her last breath was a guttural, jagged one that echoed through the hall and penetrated deep into the bones of the now silent witnesses.

The prince straightened out his robes, brushing a cloth napkin hastily down them to remove as much blood and gore as he could. He giggled like a little girl as he worked. Then he stopped and fell into in his chair.

There was a moment of stillness and then he said, "I can't wait to kill those two."

Lowering his head to the table, he covered his face with his hands and wept.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

The stink of decaying flesh and old urine permeated their cell as Gavin reclined on a soiled cot crammed in the corner. Walkway lanterns outside illuminated just enough of their enclosure to make out the years of mire and grime blanketing the walls. It was early morning but none of the prisoners could tell, so entombed were they in this place. Another grand accommodation, he thought.

Harlan leaned forward miserably against the cell door, her head resting on the bars. She had been standing there since they'd been brought here almost an hour ago.

She turned her head and looked over at him, breaking her silence. "Why did you lie to them about raping me?"

"I've been with every whore, wife and daughter in this kingdom. They all know me. They would never believe I didn't have you. Besides, I knew it would better your chance at freedom," he said.

"I appreciate that." Her voice was flat and low. "Are they going to torture us?"

"I have no doubt," he said, moving around on the bed to place his boots flat on the wall.

"What kinds of things do they do, exactly?"

Gavin glanced over at her reading her grim expression. "Don't worry, dear. It probably won't be too bad, they'll want you to walk to the sacrificial altar on your own power. It's more dramatic that way."

Harlan bit her lower lip, casting her eyes down the hall again. She took a deep breath and exhaled slowly.

"I have a message from Molotov," she said.

"What is it?"

"He said he'll try to meet with you when he can. He thinks you're innocent, too. That must make you feel somewhat better."

Gavin grunted. "He'll not do us much good, I'm afraid. He'll be lucky to stay out of jail himself."

"Where did you learn to speak English?"

He closed his eyes and went back in time to a small, scarlet room in a loud, smoky brothel. He was a boy with a human teacher who all the women were trying to seduce. "I took private lessons so I could speak to my mother without her madam and the other whores understanding our conversations. She taught me some as well. Like you, her AEssyrian was horrible."

She gave a short, tense laugh, then lapsed into silence again. He heard her begin to cry.

He sat up, the rickety cot giving off a metallic groan under his weight. "Come here," he said in a velvety purr.

She shook her head and pulled her forearm across her eyes wiping away the tears. Gavin slowly stood, his boots thudding against the coarse, stone floor as he crossed the room to her. He moved up behind her and gently slid his arms around her. She didn't resist, so he pulled her back against him and embraced her hard, relishing the smooth feel and sweet scent of her.

Harlan closed her eyes and seemed to calm. She allowed him to guide her back to the cot and pull her into his lap. She relaxed and let her head lay back against his chest. The beast



in him was waking now, ravenous and sly. He easily held it in check through years of practice. Then he leaned close, whispering in her ear, "I think I've come up with a plan that could free us."

Harlan sighed. "I hope this is better than your last plan."

Gavin rose, dropping her onto the squalid cot. He stood over her playfully pointing a finger at her. "All I need is for you to pay attention and react accordingly when the time comes. Do you think you can manage that?"

The corners of Harlan's mouth tightened. She nodded in agreement.

Gavin leaned against the cell door and bellowed for the soldier on guard to come.

When he arrived, Gavin said, "We need to see the prince at once. I have something very important to tell him and it can't wait."

## **CHAPTER TWENTY**

The throne room was the longest chamber in the palace, a four hundred foot triangular area filled with aged chairs and tables. Long mustard drapes covered the two-story windows and the walls were papered in an olive and gold paisley. The late morning light crawled through the curtain gaps, casting sunlight anywhere it could. The room was simple, reflecting its primarily purpose; to hold court for the citizenry and handle affairs of state.

Gavin and Harlan sat chained to each other at the back of the room waiting for the prince to arrive. The scarred wooden bench had just enough room for both of them, causing their bodies to warm each other at the hip and thigh. The closeness was difficult for him, it implied an intimacy that didn't exist and aroused his more primal instincts. He had noticed himself changing the more he was with her. A dull, tireless lust badgered him; an emotion that couldn't be satisfied. The only purpose it served here was to annoy and distract him.

The voice of Princess Shatara danced into the room, light and friendly, gossiping with her ladies. She entered through the rear, and passed Gavin's seat.

In a flash of speed, Gavin leaped up and snatched her, looping his forearm over her head and around her neck. The princess screamed and struggled like a small animal caught in a trap. Her ladies scattered.

"Back away," Gavin warned the stunned soldiers, their hands on the hilts of their sabers. They blinked as if they

didn't understand what language he spoke. "I mean it. I'll twist her fucking head off."

Harlan, still chained to him, stood close by trying as best she could to keep her balance. The force and power of his attack had propelled her off her seat and she looked shaken.

Gavin growled deeply and leaned his mouth down to the princess' neck. He tightened his manacled embrace on her, moving his arms down to her waist. His gaze stayed fixed on the soldiers, who stood perplexed and unmoving.

Boldly, he reached under her skirts. She fought him and snarled in frustration. Groping, he found his prize, an eight inch dagger strapped to her leg. Pulling it out, he moved his arms back up, and put it to her throat.

With the princess as a shield, he turned to the sergeant. The man stood ready, waiting for an opening so he could attack. "Take the chains off now," he ordered. The soldiers surrounding Gavin looked at the sergeant for permission. The man locked eyes with Gavin and gave an almost imperceptible shake of his head, no. With a quick nick, Gavin cut the princess. A small scarlet line began to ooze blood down her neck. She cried out in fear and pain.

The sergeant tossed Gavin's soldier the keys.

The man worked fast under Gavin's careful gaze. "Release the human woman, too."

Without hesitation, the soldier unlocked Harlan's chains. She tossed them to the ground with a loud clatter and moved behind him.

A flurry of noise by the side entrance claimed everyone's attention. The prince ambled in. His robes, normally clean and

pressed, were soiled with smudges of dirt and blood. Sensing something wrong, he whirled and looked to the back of the throne room where Gavin held the princess hostage.

"Let go of her!" he shouted, his voice cracking with rage. "I thought you were here to beg my forgiveness? Gods, I despise you!"

The prince then turned his anger on the soldiers. "Why is he always escaping from you? Do I have to guard him myself, you imbeciles?"

Gavin turned to Harlan, gesturing to an open window. "Jump," he said.

Peering down, she knit her eyebrows and looked back at him. "It's a five-story drop."

He glanced out, and then pointed to a narrow stone stairwell hugging the side of the palace. "Can you make it to the service stairs there?"

Harlan nodded. She scrambled out the window, making the stairwell by hanging and dropping to it. Once there, she watched the open window waiting for him.

Gavin sat on the windowsill preparing for his jump. Shoving the princess forward, he launched out the window landing awkwardly on the stone steps. Harlan grabbed his arm to steady him and they raced down from the clamor of pursuing soldiers.

At the bottom, a young mounted soldier blocked their path. He was nervous, his gaze shifty. Gavin thought him barely old enough for the military. The soldier studied Harlan for a moment recognizing her.

Harlan touched Gavin's arm. "Please don't kill him, I know him," she said.

He glanced at her. "From where?"

"He's a patient of mine."

Gavin looked from her to the soldier. The young man was maneuvering his mount around for an attack. Gavin watched him as he put too much force and swing into his blow. The move sent him slightly off balance.

Gavin used his trajectory to pull the man off completely, tossing him to the ground. The soldier landed hard with a grunt.

For a moment, Gavin struggled with the startled hyperia. It pulled wildly, trying to escape from the conflict until he soothed it enough to mount up. He pulled Harlan on behind him.

Harlan gripped him tight as he spurred the animal toward the city gates. She glanced back hearing the frustrated shouts of the palace soldiers in their wake.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The night was growing late and Molitov began to feel nothing would get resolved. Besides himself, his guests were the three most influential nobles in the kingdom. Dakon Tannus Ford, Kirus Younger, and Mannus Loc Daun. The men sat at a polished gaming table in Molitov's library smoking and drinking AEssiryan Bra

Mannus, the oldest of the group marked by his thick mane of grey hair, gulped down his drink and eagerly poured himself another. "One thing is for certain, gentlemen, something must be done about the prince. His behavior is becoming more unbalanced. Everyone is petrified."

Murmurs of agreement erupted around the table.

Molitov, seated at the table, adjusted his monocle and casually swirled his brandy, regarding its golden copper color. "Not all the nobles are in agreement. Many would be content to hang on and lap up the prince's drippings as they get measured out."

"Indeed, how I wish that were not true," Kirus said, walking to the shelves and slowly running the thick black nail of his index finger across the leather spines. He examined the embossed titles until finally selecting a book on the laws governing concubines. Kirus was the youngest of the men with dark mahogany hair and jade eyes. His medium frame was thick but he was not particularly tall. The Younger family had come from a long line of kings, until like many lines, it was broken two generations ago.

"The time to challenge his rule will be at the coronation," said Mannus.

"What if we remove him sooner?" Molotov said.

"What do you propose, Lord?" Dakon said, leaning back in his chair and folding his arms.

With the exception of himself, Dakon was the highest ranking noble in the room. Once a fierce and successful warrior, he sustained a grievous injury that promptly ended his military career. His face now carried a thick scar that ran from his right temple, over his eye, and to the middle of his cheek. Although he didn't lose the eye, he did become partially blind and never fought as well again.

"I could challenge the legality of his claim to the throne. I am the king's cousin and with the exception of the princess, I am the only blood relative eligible for the throne. If we allowed a successor," Molotov said.

"Never," snapped Mannus. "We would be better off dealing with a mad king than returning to the taxing old ways of succession."

Molotov turned his attention to Dakon and Kirus. They appeared tense and suspicious. "What do you say, Lords?"

Kirus crossed the room with his book and plopped down in a large leather chair. "So why not just wait for the ceremony? Anyone can challenge him then. Someone is bound to best him in the condition he's in."

Molotov got up and strolled over to the window. Peering out at the darkness, he was silent for a few moments. "Two reasons, Lord. First, we are not exactly certain when the coronation ceremony will take place. He has yet to secure a

date. Second, he is becoming profoundly unstable, as we have already discussed. How long can we stand to wait?"

"He's right, Lords," Dakon said, lighting his pipe and puffing hard. "Our scouts are reporting Razorback troops amassing on the border. The prince's behavior is no doubt a concern for the queendom. His foolishness could start a war."

"Do they mean to invade?" Mannus shouted in alarm.

"That's unlikely, but who knows what the queen will do if she fears us coming apart."

Kirus stood up and returned the book to its home. He turned to face the others and said, "Any word on Gavin?"

Molotov walked to the bar and refreshed his drink. "The prince has caught and lost him twice now," he said amused as he returned to his spot at the window.

Dakon and Kirus burst into in hearty laughter. "Fool," Kirus said, shaking his head.

Shifting in his chair, Mannus glanced at Kirus annoyed. "I don't see what's so funny about an assassin on the loose."

Dakon surveyed him as if he were the local idiot. He shook his head slowly. "Gavin didn't murder the king, Lord. That assassination, if indeed that's what it was, was done by an amateur."

Mannus bristled. "I don't find it so far-fetched that whore's son would have fumbled his coup attempt."

Kirus returned to his seat and collapsed heavily, closing his eyes and leaning his head back in fatigue. "Then you've never served with him. You can say a lot of things about our general; his whoring, drinking and fighting, but no one can



accuse him of being stupid. You don't achieve what he has by being an idiot."

"I guess I just don't think as highly of him as you gentlemen do," Mannus said.

Molotov turned to face his guests, anxious to get back to their more pressing issue. "So, Lords, what is it then?"

"I say we wait for the coronation," Mannus said.

Kirus and Dakon nodded their agreement.

Molotov hadn't really needed to ask, he knew they wouldn't support him. He suppressed his annoyance and vowed not to argue the point again tonight.

"As you wish then, Lords, until the coronation, or until things get worse, whichever comes first." His three guests didn't seem to find his comment amusing as they rose to leave the room.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Finding a suitable clearing far enough from the main road, Harlan and Gavin dismounted the hyperia. She stretched, arching her back and bending to loosen the stiff soreness of her muscles. They had been riding for almost two days with minimal stops to eat and rest. She felt wasted and only cared about getting some sleep.

"Are we close to the Razorback border?" she said, testing Gavin's humor. They had barely spoken the entire ride and an early argument over Gavin's purchase of some whiskey from a traveling peddler didn't help matters. She was really angry that he would waste money on booze and risk being recognized. He, of course, completely dismissed her logic with a condescending remark so typical of him.

He unsaddled the hyperia and secured its reins to a tree. "Yes," he said. "I need to hunt. Will you be all right here for an hour or so?"

She nodded. "I'll get a fire started."

Harlan got busy collecting some kindling as he crept off into the woods. The only equipment he took with him was a snare he had fashioned from some twine and his saber. Harlan hoped that hunting would improve his mood. AEssyrians were amazing hunters, a trait that had remained strong, despite some modern advancement in their culture. She hoped he caught something big; she was ravenous.

Cautiously walking up near the hyperia, she removed the camping kit hanging from the back of its saddle. His brown fur was still damp and smelled like wet dog. Not the smell she

expected from a beast of burden. But then these animals were not exactly slaves, more like prostitutes. Harlan didn't care for them in the least as they made her intensely uncomfortable. She had seen what they could do to a carcass, picking it clean in minutes. She also didn't like how deceptive they looked. From a short distance, they looked like a horse, but as one drew closer, they realized they were mistaken. Although similar in appearance, the hyperia possessed a mouthful of razor-sharp teeth, serpentine eyes, and cloven hooves. They implied a warm furry mammal, however, they were anything but. If AEssyrians were the ultimate predator, then the hyperia were the ultimate scavengers. They were a little too lazy and cowardly to hunt effectively, but oddly enough, they were so territorial, that they made excellent battle mounts.

The kit contained just a few crude lumps of coal and some matches, but it would be enough. In a few moments, she had a small fire started. All she really needed now was some food and sleep. Since Gavin hadn't returned yet, she decided to settle for sleep. She took the blanket from the saddle pack, unrolled it and laid it on the rocky ground a few feet from the fire. Nestling on the blanket, she closed her eyes and darkness enveloped her.

\* \* \* \*

By the time Harlan awoke, the suns had gone and only a few embers still burned in the fire. She had been dreaming of home. Pinching her eyes, she fought down the rush of sorrow that threatened to consume her. She sat up feeling a little

disoriented and then remembered where she was. It fueled her misery all over again. God, she hoped she'd be able to raise enough money in the queendom to get a ticket home.

The queendom was adjacent to a huge spaceport with frequent traffic. She might even be able to barter a ride on a trade freighter or galactic destroyer.

The hyperia snarled and Harlan stood up in alarm. Gavin entered the camp carrying a large, tan ruminant over his shoulder.

He strode past her, bumping her with the dead animal, and dropped it next to the fire pit. He pulled his gloves off and gutted it with his hand, breaking it into smaller pieces. His silence was dark like the forest around them; his face unreadable. Harlan ignored his rudeness and set to building the fire again and setting up the spit.

When the animal had been broken apart into pieces, he brought over several large chunks and set them down near the fire. He then took a few smaller pieces and skewered them over the fire for her. He picked up the rest of the carcass and tossed it over to the straining, hungry hyperia. Sitting down next to her, he devoured his prize raw.

She could smell the stench of blood and whiskey on his clothes and it made her uneasy. He must have taken the liquor with him when he left. The last thing they needed was him drunk again.

The fire began to die and Harlan stood to gather more kindling for the night. She always seemed to be finding excuses to put some distance between them. He seemed

broody and dangerous tonight and she actually preferred the company of the hyperia.

Reaching up, he took her arm and gently pulled her back down to him. Harlan felt her heart speed up and a nervous flutter in her stomach. His uniform was unbuttoned and hanging open, exposing his muscular chest. His eyes smoldered with sin and lust. He drew her closer to him and her mind convulsed in a frenzied fit trying to think of how to escape. She struggled making her feelings clear. Ignoring her protest, he pressed his lips against hers engulfing her in a long, lascivious kiss.

She could taste the sweet residue of whiskey on his tongue and for a moment, Harlan was lost in his kiss, its seduction arousing and lulling her. Its heady spell awoke long-denied intimacy and whispered of hungry pleasures to come. How easy it would be to just let go and surrender to it, but she couldn't. Gavin was the last man with whom she wanted to be intimate. His current position in her life had already brought nothing but peril. "Please let go of me. I don't want this," she said, trying to smash the mood.

Reaching under her shirt, he pushed up her bra and massaged her breasts salaciously. "Why not?" he breathed into her neck, pulling her into his lap.

She could feel his arousal building as he pressed his erection against her, his hands roaming liberally over her body, playing at the waistband of her pants.

"Gavin," she said, pushing him. "I'm asking you to please stop."

His response was aggressive, rolling her onto her back and pinning her with his chest. He moved down to steal another kiss and she whipped her head to the side to avoid him.

"Are you going to rape me?" she asked. She felt him tense.

"Would you like that?"

"I'm not kidding. Get off me."

Gavin continued to engulf her with kisses. His hot mouth danced over her cheek, throat and breasts. "You are lovely, my dear," he said, his voice thick with desire.

Harlan struggled to push him off. "Gavin," she said in frustration. "I will never forgive you if do this."

He considered for a moment, then abruptly rolled off and lay next to her, staring up at the night sky. She could sense his seething drunken anger wrapped in his oppressive silence.

"You're a tease, Harlan."

"I never gave you any indication I was interested in you. You barged your way into my life, remember? I think you've just had too much to drink and are looking for a little recreation."

His expression was indignant. "It would take a lot more than two cheap bottles of rotgut to make me drunk, little girl."

"Really? I don't think you even realize how much or how often you drink."

Gavin sat up and pierced her with a savage gaze. "You need to mind your own damn business and not worry about the amount or frequency of my drinking," he said.

"Well, it does concern me because your alcoholism is going to get us killed."

"I am not going to continue this discussion with you. Why don't you shut your mouth and go to sleep?"

"Fine, that's what I'll do." She angrily rolled away from him and pulled the only blanket over her.

"Don't sleep too deeply," he said. "You wouldn't want the hyperia to mistake you as dead."

Gavin closed his eyes and went to sleep.

Harlan couldn't sleep all night.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Guinn was a small border town with one seedy tavern and an antiquated inn, but it was a welcome sight after these hard days of travel. The late afternoon suns had begun their descent but the heat was still punishing. Gavin guided the hyperia over to the inn and helped Harlan dismount, sliding off after her. He stroked the animal's neck and took what was left of their money out of the saddlebags.

The innkeeper came out, a withered old AEssiryan man with several missing teeth.

"Take your animal, Lord?" he said. "Five kenar per day, if you please."

"We'll only be staying a day, father," Gavin said and paid the man in advance.

The man bowed his head in obedience. "As is your pleasure, Lord," he said, leading the hyperia away. Passing her, he gave Harlan a curious look.

Harlan turned to enter the inn.

"I'm going to get a drink first," Gavin called after her.

Turning around, she gave him a dubious look. "You mean get drunk first. I really don't think you should be spending our money on liquor."

"Actually, dear, I'm not spending *our* money, I'm using my own. I removed it from the saddlebag of the hyperia *I* stole. And now that I have relieved you of the burden of financial advisor, you can concentrate on getting us a room," he said, irritably portioning out some cash for her.



"Gavin, I'm not trying to start a fight. I just don't think this is a good time for you to get drunk."

"Harlan, after four days with you, the Razorback queen herself would get catatonically inebriated. I feel like I've spent a week in a nunnery. Please bugger off and I'll be up shortly." Gavin handed her the saddlebags and started off toward the bar.

"Isn't someone going to recognize you?" she called after him.

He stopped and looked back at her, unable to believe she was still questioning him.

"We're right on the border. These people don't get much news here. To them, I'm just another soldier passing through."

"I'm sure you'll be recognized," she said.

Gavin brought his index finger to his lips in a hushing motion and then pointed at the inn. Harlan rolled her eyes and shook her head. Still glaring at him, she stomped up the wooden steps to the inn and entered, slamming the door behind her.

*Gods, she was almost as bad as being married again,* he thought, turning back toward the saloon.

The heavy doors creaked as Gavin pushed them open and entered. Passing an active card game, he took a seat close to a side door facing the main entrance. He sat back in the chair and took in the clientele, mostly all traders and farmers.

The barmaid came over, a young girl with shoulder-length hair and bright violet eyes. She flashed him a dazzling smile.

"What can I get for you, Lord?"

"Sawjack Whiskey and bring the bottle."

The girl nodded and reappeared a moment later with a dark amber bottle and a large tumbler. He paid her, tipping her generously. Pouring himself a triple shot, he coolly surveyed the men at the bar. None had any interest in him.

The girl was back again. She was handsome, just on the edge of breeding age. "What's your name?"

"Nadyia," she said. "May I interest you in anything else, Lord?"

Gavin felt the beast awaken and stretch. He looked into her eyes and saw the invitation there. His desire came alive, stronger now, surprising him with its sudden ferocity.

"What I want I'm sure your employer wouldn't approve of."

"My employer is my father and he's upstairs drunk on Numbrian wine," she said. "Come, I'll show you, maybe you can assist me with him."

Gavin polished off another stiff drink and got up, grabbing up the bottle by the neck. "Anything to help a lady."

\* \* \* \*

The dark storage room was hot and stuffy. Large wooden boxes lined the walls smelling like dust and old linens. The windows were dirty and stained, partially covered with boards to discourage theft.

"I know who you are," she said, smiling.

"Who am I then?"

"You're General Gavin Theron, everyone knows about you. You have quite the reputation," she said.

Gavin wasn't sure which reputation she was referring to, but he didn't want to talk. He pushed her up against the wall, kissing her soft mouth and lifting her ivory skirt. She squirmed under his touch so eagerly, he thought he might hurt her in his infernal yearning. Gavin's mouth roamed her throat blindly, licking her ear as his hands busied themselves tearing off her undergarments.

Her hands, trembling and unsure, fumbled with the fastening of his pants. He brushed her hands aside and freed his painful erection. Lifting one of her legs around his waist, Gavin entered her body, pushing deeply inside her. She groaned and moved her hips, catching the movement of his rhythm.

He took her over and over again until she breathlessly begged him to stop and when he looked at his hands, they were smeared with her blood.

During their couplings, he finished off his bottle and broke open two more he had liberated from one of the wooden boxes. The night melted into a blurry mix of sex and drinking until he left her, rumped and sleeping in a corner of the storage room.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

"Good morning, all," the prince said, his voice slithering over the gathering of nobles. He smiled inwardly. He'd summoned the five highest ranking nobles in the kingdom and brought them here to his bedchamber for a meeting. He was delighted that the informality of this meeting would affront the small group of bluebloods. Even worse, he remained in his night clothes, lounging on the aureate canopy bed as he addressed them. Gods, he was looking forward to executing the lot of them.

As he studied each nobleman, savoring their peeved expressions, he noticed that Molitov was missing. He felt a tantrum brewing. The prince had overlooked Molitov's snub at the banquet, but he was not going to tolerate having his summons ignored. Lifting a candelabra, he flung it across the room at no one in particular. A few nobles in its path ducked. Everyone waited for him to speak.

"Thank you all for coming. Where is the grand duke?" he said.

"His wife was ill this morning, my Prince. He said he will be along as soon as he can break away," Mannus offered.

"Fine, we can get along without him. I'm just waiting for one more," he said, craning to see the doorway. "Ah, here she is now."

Two royal bodyguards escorted Princess Shatara into the room. "What's going on?" she snapped.

"In a moment, you will know. Please be quiet for now," he said, grabbing the headboard and kicking the red velvet duvet

off his legs. He struggled to his feet and stood in the middle of the bed, his legs slightly apart. The sheer bed curtains were drawn back and fastened to the tall bedposts, giving the nobles a clear view of him.

Normally a talkative bunch, they had all fallen into a dead silence. The prince had no idea what they were so nervous about; he was recovering from his recent illness and feeling much better. Of course, his hand still carried its pathos but the swelling had gone down enough so he was able to cover it with a black glove so as not to cause alarm.

"As you all know, the Great One Nox has chosen me as his humble vessel to tell you all his divine will."

Everyone exchanged nervous glances.

Hector paused inspecting the audience. He shifted his footing on the bed for better balance. "He has shared with me his pleasure at my coronation plans and now he has imparted the most wonderful news of all!"

With a theatrical wave of his arm, the prince signaled the soldiers to bring his sister forward. Reaching down, he helped her up onto the bed and put his arm around her small waist. "The God has given his blessing to a marital union joining myself and Princess Shatara."

The princess pushed his arm off her and slapped his face. "I'm engaged, you fool, and I want nothing to do with you. Have you gone completely mad?" She jumped from the bed and moved toward the circle of nobles.

"Take her out of here," the prince said, gesturing to the soldiers.

Lunging, they grabbed her just as she reached Mannus and dragged her out of the room. No one spoke as her enraged curses echoed down the hallway. When it was silent, everyone turned their attention back to the bed.

"Women," the prince said with a shrug. "I offer her the throne and immortality and this is how she reacts. But no matter, she'll come around."

Mannus moved forward and stood by the bedside looking up him. "My Prince, you cannot be serious about this. It's unlawful and an abomination. She is your sister, Lord!"

Leaping down from the bed, the prince put his hand on Mannus' shoulder. "My step-sister," he corrected. "Are you saying that the Great One would encourage me to sin? Blasphemy! It is you, sir, who is the abomination."

Mannus frowned. "No, my Prince, I just—"

"Silence!" he said. "Anyone else want to voice their concerns?"

Dakon stepped forward yanking his saber free. "Mannus is right. It's abhorrent and I'll not stand for it."

The prince smiled as the voice of the God filled his head. Following its direction, he pulled his cutlass from its scabbard hanging on the bedpost. All the nobles moved back. The prince rushed at Dakon with a shriek, swinging his saber wildly.

Dakon sidestepped the attack, and in a rage, the prince plunged his saber into Mannus' chest, who just happened to be standing nearby. The room fell into shocked silence. The prince saw a quick movement behind him, and was certain it was death, when a level-headed soldier threw himself behind

his leader and blocked a murderous blow from Dakon. That had been an obvious assassination attempt and Dakon would pay for it with his life.

"Arrest Duke Dakon and take him to the temple. He'll make an impressive offering to the God!" the prince ordered.

Mannus had sunk to the floor, heaving and holding his chest, the remaining two nobles bent to try and help him. Blood flowed from the ugly open wound and he rolled onto his side coughing and spattering blood on the lush green carpet.

Dakon erupted into violent protest trying to make a break for the door, but the soldiers blocked his path and brought him down.

The prince walked over to Mannus and leaned down. The man was breathing in jagged gasps. "How dare you question me, do you know what I have become?" he said and kicked what life remained to Dakon out of him.

## **CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE**

Made of stone and wood, the barn was airy and spacious with large open windows at the top to allow cooling winds to circulate in the stifling afternoon heat. Molitov had designed it himself for his private collection of specially bred hyperia and they seemed to thrive here. Unfortunately, his favorite, a steel grey male, had been injured in a riding accident and he'd had to call a vet to examine it. Like all hyperia, his pain threshold was low, thus making him quarrelsome.

The creature hissed at the vet as Molitov held its halter. The vet, an older Kerillian man, ran his aged hands expertly down the animal's powerful left hind leg, pursing his lips in thought. The hyperia's eyes blazed and he curled his lips back to display his razor-sharp teeth. Molitov gently caressed the animal's throat, plying him with soothing words. The vet appeared unfazed and gave the animal several firm slaps on the rump. The hyperia struggled to get away from the good-natured assault, but Molitov held him in place.

"I don't think it's anything serious," the vet said finally, stepping back and standing upright. "Just wrap it for the next few days and keep him stabled to limit his activity."

Molitov nodded, his attention drawn to a distant movement. Over the vet's shoulder, he could make out a rider approaching from the east. He squinted in an attempt to identify the rider, but was unable to because of the distance. He looked back at the vet and groped in his pocket for some payment. Glancing up again, he recognized the advancing rider. Wanting to hasten the vet's departure, Molitov pulled



out some bills and peeled off a generous tip for him. The vet handed him a bottle of large blue pills.

"Just give him one if the leg begins to swell," the vet said, mounting his own animal. "Good day, your Lordship."

"Thank you for coming out today," Molitov said.

The vet trotted off down the grass road, passing Kirus on his way out.

Molitov led the hyperia to a stall closing and bolting the door. Making his way back outside, he waited for his guest to arrive.

Kirus rode up and dismounted looking tired and grim. Molitov was surprised at his unkempt appearance and the haunted expression etched on his face.

"What's happened?" Molitov said.

"You have not heard then?" Kirus hesitated for a moment trying to catch his breath. "Things have become much worse, as you predicted they might. The prince killed Mannus in a rage at yesterday's meeting and Dakon was slain on Nox's altar late last night."

Molitov couldn't believe what he was hearing. He ran his hands through his hair. "Why wasn't I told earlier? If I had been at the meeting, I could have intervened."

Kirus lowered himself onto a wooden bench and hung his head rubbing the back of his neck. "There is nothing you could have done. He's not listening to anyone. Mannus was killed trying to reason with the prince and Dakon was sacrificed due to an assassination attempt."

Their conversation was interrupted by two hyperia stable mates growling and hissing at each other over the partition.

Molotov emitted a loud throaty growl in their direction and they fell silent again.

"Has no one else tried to stop him?" Molotov said.

Kirus shook his head. "The other nobles are afraid. They don't know who's allegiant to him. No one will even speak of what has happened. The prince has surrounded himself with an elite royal guard and has nearly bankrupt the coffers paying them exorbitant salaries. He is also handing out choice positions to his loyalist supporters. He's even appointed a new general."

Molotov felt stricken. He sat down next to the younger man. "Who?"

"Barius, Gavin's western commander."

Letting out a hissing breath, Molotov rose from his seat. This was terrible news. Barius, the Butcher of Arrione, was one of the most vicious and cunning of Gavin's men and he would know how to manipulate a feeble prince.

The army was a delicate balancing act for both the royals and the nobles. It took a strong leader to hold the soldiers in check. Too often, weak leadership resulted in a failure of discipline and promotions were bought with murder, rather than attained through triumph. All the qualities needed for a successful military were difficult to come by in one man. Gavin was just lucky enough to have been born with the right amount of strength, aggression, and diplomacy.

Barius had only one of these qualities, aggression. He thrived in war as an exceptional soldier, but in times of peace, he was little more than a vicious thug. His leadership skills were questionable at best.

"I haven't told you the worst part yet," Kirus said.

Molotov groaned and rubbed his temple. "What could possibly be worse?"

"The prince has announced his plans to wed his sister and make her his queen. He says Nox has blessed their union."

Molotov summoned his servant to take Kirus' animal and escorted the exhausted man into his house. They had a lot to talk about and it was going to be a long night.

## **CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX**

Harlan awoke, not certain if she was really awake or still asleep. The voice, a whispering raspy thing, filled her head as it had in deeper sleep and she tried in vain to push it out. It wasn't an internal voice, nothing of her own origin. It was an invader who spilled into her mind making her both love and hate it. It was diabolical corruption disguised as sexual seduction; a rapist who drugs his victim.

She couldn't help but listen to its intoxicating music. It didn't tell her to do anything, rather, it told her stories of her life long past. Then it shocked her with a new sensation; the gentle, elusive smell of her mother's shampoo. With this new scent, she was back in her childhood home with her parents as a girl of ten.

It was Thanksgiving, her mother preparing a banquet for family and friends. Harlan smiled as the memory washed happy feelings into her soul like a tidal wave stroking the beach. But then she remembered where she was, far from home on an alien world with her hope of escape back to Earth fleeing by the day. Wrenching sorrow filled her and dragged her into harsh wakefulness.

She opened her eyes and was filled by the room's black emptiness. Then she realized she was not alone. For a moment, she thought it was Gavin sitting in the dark corner chair watching her sleep. Then she realized her intruder didn't have Gavin's bulk and fear gripped her mind.

Terrified, she scrambled for the princess' knife she placed by the bed for defense, but when she touched it, it moved in her hand, turning into a bright yellow snake.

Harlan screamed.

To her grateful ear, footsteps pounded down the hall toward her room. The door flung open, casting light from the hallway onto the figure in the chair, which had not moved.

Harlan noted her intruder to be a tall AEssiryan boasting a sinister handsomeness women usually adore. He was dressed completely in black, even down to his cloak and boots. He gave the appearance of being a warlock. His long sable hair gleamed with health and grooming and his bright yellow eyes shone with malevolent intelligence. If the AEssyrians had a Satan, this man would surely be it.

As Gavin entered, she studied his reaction to the man. He was unresponsive and stoic, unusual for him.

Gavin closed the door behind him, plunging all three into inky darkness, then turned on a small bedside lamp. Harlan closed and rubbed her eyes against the light for a moment to let them adjust. *He must know this man*, she thought, or Gavin would have already attacked the intruder.

Ignoring both of them, Gavin sat on the bed unfastening the top buckles of his boots, and putting toe to heel, shoved one off. Breathing heavily through his nose, he produced a flask and took another shot. He gingerly placed the flask on the nightstand and ran his fingers through his long, dark hair, pulling it away from his face. He reeked of liquor, tobacco, and sex.

"Gavin, do you know this man?" Harlan said.

"I know him," he said, kicking off his other boot and laying back down onto the bed. "You should have come with me, I had quite an evening."

"I can tell," Harlan said. "Do you mind telling me who this is?"

"That?" Gavin said his voice fading. "That, my dear, is my father, Titan."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

The dining hall rang with the sound of silverware scraping plates and low, inaudible conversations. The wooden tables scattered around were old and scarred with the record of a thousand meals served and just as many deals made. Gavin sat at one such table near the kitchen, nursing an ugly hangover. Across from him sat Harlan, eating her breakfast and on his left, Titan with his meal.

Gavin looked down at his untouched plate. Although he was savagely hungry, he didn't yet trust his stomach not to turn if he filled it. His eyes felt like ground glass had been sprinkled into them. Since awakening, they constantly itched and burned from lack of sleep. Harlan woke him too early this morning, impatient to reach the Razorback queendom and her hope of freedom. He, of course, was in no such rush. His career was finished and his only real plan was to stay out of prison or off the gallows until something happened in the kingdom. Something he could take advantage of to regain his position.

Gavin slumped in his chair watching Harlan hungrily gulp down her food. The morning light from a side window illuminated her radiant skin and shone on her glossy black hair. He could smell her freshness and wondered how he was going to get her to bed him before they were captured and killed or she left. He would have to be a little softer next time and give her a little more time to warm up.

"A kingdom for your thoughts," Titan said. His voice oozed over Gavin slick and murky as crude oil.

"Screw off, bastard, you know them," Gavin said, shooting a hostile glance at his father.

Harlan started from her breakfast surprised by his boiling anger, but then she didn't know his father.

Titan seemed unfazed as usual, sipping his hot spiced water and finishing off the last of his own meal.

Gavin picked up his fork and sampled a piece of meat chewing slowly. "Why are you here, Titan? What do you want?"

"I've simply come to offer my assistance," he said. The serving maid refilled his drink with a smile.

"Your assistance?" Gavin said, his voice muffled by a mouthful of food. "That's a bloody laugh. What's wrong, did you run out of villagers to terrorize?"

"That's not very charitable of you, Gavin, in front of your girlfriend."

Harlan looked up as if she had been kicked under the table. "I am not his girlfriend."

Titan looked over at her, amusement dancing in his eyes. "Really? Why Gavin was just thinking—"

"All right, that's enough. Leave her out of this," Gavin said, heading Titan off. "You love every minute of this unfortunate turn in my life."

"Don't be ridiculous."

Picking up his water glass, Gavin drained it and signaled the server across the room for another. "You probably engineered the whole thing to amuse yourself."

"I have no reason to spark these events and certainly wouldn't do it merely for my amusement." The serving maid



handed Gavin his water. Titan handed her his empty plate. Gavin slipped back into a moody silence and finished his breakfast.

Titan downed the last of his drink and stood to leave. "Last chance, do you want my help or not?"

Leaning back in his chair, Gavin fished out the remaining length of a cigar from last night and lit it, puffing greedily. He gave Titan a belligerent stare. "I'd rather rest my ass on a pike till dawn."

Titan threw his cloak over his arm and turned to leave.

"Please wait," Harlan said. "Can he help me get off this planet?"

"Yes, I can," Titan said.

"Harlan," Gavin said. "You need to leave this to me. You don't want what he has to offer."

"But if he can help...?"

"It is not free help he is offering," Gavin said, leaning across the table and stabbing his finger on it for emphasis. He tried to will Harlan to listen to him. "There is always a horrible price to be paid and you won't know what it is until the deal is struck and he comes looking for payment."

"Are you finished?" she said, her eyes a storm of rage.

"Yes. Why?"

"You dragged me into this. We've been doing everything your way and we're no better off than when we left the kingdom. Forgive me if I don't want to embark on anymore of your idiotic plans. I don't care what the price is. I want to go home. So suck up your miserable attitude and let's go with

him so I can get the hell off this planet before you succeed in finally getting me killed."

Harlan stood up and fixed a steely gaze onto Gavin. "Are you coming?"

Clouds of smoke billowed from Gavin's cigar as he puffed on it.

Titan graced them with a devilish smile. "I guess the lady wins."

Gavin rose from his chair to follow them out, knocking it over loudly as he went.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Titan's castle was a marvel of planning and craftsmanship. Its tallest spires reached one hundred and twenty-five feet into the sky and the granite walls were carved from the very foundation stones this fine stronghold was made from. The castle had been constructed on a separate landmass, an island divorced from the main body, but by a short distance. Because of this peculiarity, it was surrounded by a terrifying foggy moat of emptiness that dropped four hundred feet down to the ground below. The only way to gain access to the castle was by a precarious land bridge that connected the two.

At first, Gavin thought Harlan would balk at the perilous crossing and start yet another argument. She found it such good sport to squabble about anything she found distasteful and he was sure this would be a prime subject of contention. She surprised him, however, and took the hazardous journey across in stride and without complaint.

Once across, they followed Titan into what looked like a museum of statuary but was in reality, a cemetery for the living. Gavin felt his loathing for Titan build in his stomach like bile.

"What is this place?" Harlan said, turning in a circle to take it all in.

Titan turned to face her, a soft wind tossing his hair. "It's a sanctuary, a memorial to lost souls."

"Why are we here?"

Titan gave Gavin a private look. "Gavin knows why."

Gavin folded his arms and leaned against an engraved black tablet. "What's your price, old man?" he said, feeling Harlan's questioning gaze on him.

"Harlan," Titan said, strolling around some of the statues. "Did you know that this section of my garden is special? It contains twenty-one of Gavin's greatest sons. This one," Titan said, gesturing to the figure of a young handsome man in the throes of death with a saber in his chest, "his son, Northe, by a young chambermaid was one of the most promising. One who actually might have been as great a general as Gavin is now. Sadly, it was not meant to be."

Harlan walked around the dark carving transfixed by the gruesome artistry. "What happened to him?"

"I killed him," Gavin said. "He was ambitious, a young man hungry for glory. He led a rebel band against the kingdom trying to destabilize the crown and I cut him down on the field."

Harlan fixed Gavin with a sober look. "How many others here did you have to kill?"

"All of them."

Harlan held her mouth in a straight line and studied the statue again.

"The terms you asked for are these; you will battle Northe again, an even match of armor and weapons," Titan said. "If you are victorious, I will provide you safe passage to the queendom. If you lose, you will stay here as my prisoners."

"Can I speak to Gavin alone for a moment?" Harlan asked.

Gavin looked up at the statue of his fallen son. How young he was when he died. What a waste. "Don't bother, he can

read your thoughts as easily as if you spoke them aloud," he said.

Harlan walked over and touched Gavin's arm. He looked down at her as if he had been scorched. "You don't have to do this. I can find another way," she said softly.

"Yes, Harlan, I do. He'll not release us unless I accept his terms," he said, keeping his voice neutral.

"Do you plan to keep us prisoners here?" she said, turning to Titan.

"Yes, if he fails or refuses."

"I don't want him to pay the price for my decision," Harlan said.

"He's not, dear. He's paying the price for his decision to stay with you. If he loses the contest, you will pay yours," Titan said with a villainous smile.

## **CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE**

Harlan stepped away from the statue of Northe as Titan moved in closer. She surveyed the rest of the garden noting the parities of Gavin's offspring. All of the men were in their prime, wearing battle armor and bearing a fatal wound. Each had a distinct support, some rested on pedestals and others on stone piles. But all the displays were adorned with an overgrowth of vibrant greenery, a purposeful contrast to their placement. There were other exhibits as well.

Harlan felt terror tickle the nape of her neck and decided to focus on Gavin. She could hear the apprehension in his bleak and frosty silence as he stood waiting. Trying not to hold her breath, she watched nervously as Titan place his hand on the handle of the saber buried deep in Northe's chest. He gave a hard pull dislodging it as if the man was once again flesh. In a liquid splash, blood rushed from the wound onto the cement pedestal and then stopped, its remnants dripping to the hungry soil below. The wound closed in on itself and the brilliant colors of life began to spread throughout the sculpture.

Northe was alive, and like a sleeper rising from a dream, he stretched his body reaching his powerful arms into the sky. Moving his hands flatly over his stomach, he searched for the wound that had disfigured him for so long. Harlan studied the ghost of Gavin in the younger man's features and admired his supple beauty. Not as rugged as his sire, he had the perfect proportion of muscle and facial bones, universally pleasing to the eye. The only hint of his new origin was his

eyes that glowed a luminous glacial blue. His handsomeness complimented the diabolical hum of his dark energy and his lost life made her profoundly sad.

Titan turned with saber in hand and tossed it to Gavin, who stepped forward and caught the weapon in flight. His touch on the hilt transformed him, his torso now encased in dull black battle armor. The cuirass was detailed in gold and etched with an image of the war God Dargannon. Gavin whirled the saber easily from side to side, testing its balance and weight.

Northe fixed his gaze on his father and gracefully jumped from his ornate perch to the ground with a dull thud. A sinister smile bled onto his lips as he prowled in closer to engage Gavin.

The night felt colder now and as the two men joined each other, Harlan fought off the edges of dread. What if Gavin lost? How would she ever get home then? She couldn't stand the possibility of being stuck here as Titan's prisoner for the rest of her life. She would lose her mind.

Northe charged Gavin fighting with relentless speed and power, driving him back on the first attack. Harlan could read Gavin's fatigue from last night's drunken escapade and now wished she had allowed him more sleep. In spite of how he must have felt, Gavin was tremendously strong and although he didn't have the younger man's speed, his blows were far more punitive.

Harlan crept around some monuments to see the battle from a better angle when she spotted something glistening deeper in the garden. Despite the scene playing out before

her, she felt drawn to it as if it willed her to come and see what mysterious secrets were waiting to be revealed. The draw of it was strong and without specifically wanting to, she turned and followed a winding path overgrown by ivy.

As she drew closer to the object, the first thing that struck her was a feeling of familiarity here in a foreign land. It was a large oval full-length mirror, not so different from any one would find on Earth.

Looking into it, she saw her reflection and then much more. Images rippled before her, heedless of time or place. Visions of her fiancé so rumpled and warm sleeping in her bed years ago; her father's hearty good-natured laugh as he won money at a family friend's poker game; the sharp smell of tomato sauce and baking bread from her local Italian eatery. Next was an image of herself at the AEssiryan spaceport, her bags in hand. There before her was the great ship *Moon Dancer*, its loading bridge down and her stepping up to it elated. She reached out and stroked the glass trying to return to the comforting images of home. Then there was nothing, as blackness swallowed her whole.



## CHAPTER THIRTY

Northe paused for a moment, slicing his weapon through the air. The saber he'd brandished in death appeared alive now, too, glowing with unnatural radiance. Its blade glistened as he twisted it in his hand.

"Father," he said, allowing Gavin to catch his breath. "I've waited so long for you to come." His voice was raspy and hollow.

Gavin was stricken to his very core. How magnificent the boy was, even here in this nightmarish place. How could he bring himself to do the deed again? How did he find the courage to have done it so many years ago? He barely found the strength to lift his weapon.

"I loved you," he said. "Why did you turn from me?"

"You don't know how to love," Northe said, advancing. He tossed the saber tip in the air playfully. A game Gavin taught him to unnerve an enemy. "You had no interest in me until I was a man."

Gavin swallowed the lump of his grief. "Is that why you turned on me and your king?"

"He was your king, old man, not mine."

"You swore an oath of loyalty to him!" Gavin said. He tried to steel himself against his bottomless mourning.

"You butchered me like an animal on a hunt," Northe said with a humorless smile.

Gavin shook his head trying to drive off the memory. Northe's life was Titan's trick, nothing more. "That's not the way it happened."

"You had no intention of taking me prisoner," Northe said, moving in for his attack. "You wanted me dead so I could never threaten you again."

The scream sliced through the night like a siren, its pitch colored in hysteria. Gavin's heart froze in his chest as he turned from Northe to look toward its direction.

The distraction was all his son needed, as he sliced a vicious gash into the flesh of Gavin's neck. Blood surged from the wound in streaks down his neck and cuirass.

North held his saber at Gavin's throat, a cruel smile on his lips as he advanced for a kill.

"Do you forfeit?" Titan asked as if he were at a late night chess game.

"I do," Gavin said, wanting the fight over so he could find Harlan.

Titan gave a slight nod and Northe stalked back and climbed atop his perch. With a forceful stab, Titan replaced the saber in Northe's gut and the spell was broken. Everything was as it had been, except for Gavin's bleeding wound.

Gavin rushed along the narrow path Harlan had taken just before her scream. He found her on her knees before an oval mirror weeping in her hands. Glancing at the mirror, Gavin saw it ripple and, reaching out, rolled it around so it faced the opposite side.

Kneeling by her, he searched for any sign of injury and then saw her eyes. The spell had turned her irises a pale and ghostly white.

"What happened?" he asked, putting his arm around her.

"I don't know. I was watching things in the mirror and then everything went black," she said, tears streaming from her sightless eyes.

Ignoring the savage pain in his neck, Gavin embraced her. "It's a spell. It's not permanent. We just have to find the key to reversing it."

Harlan was desolate. "Are you sure? What if we can't reverse it?"

Gavin squeezed her and buried his face in the sweetness of her neck. "I swear to you, Harlan, I'll get your sight back."

He lifted her into his arms and retraced the winding path back to Northe. Titan, already having lost interest in them, was nowhere to be found.

"Where do we go now?" Harlan sniffled.

"Up to the castle, I have a room in the tower that isn't too unpleasant."

Harlan slid out of his arms, her feet lightly touching the grass. She grasped Gavin's arm for balance.

"Why don't we just go?" Harlan said, standing a little straighter.

He looked through the stone arbor past the iron gates to where they had entered. The land bridge was gone. He knew all too well they couldn't leave. He took Harlan's free hand and carefully led her toward the cracked steps of the castle entrance.

"Because he won't allow it, he's not finished with us yet."

## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

In the weeks that followed, Gavin healed and stayed close to Harlan. At first, she was so despondent, that he was afraid to leave her alone in case she chose a more permanent solution to her problem. Now, she had just fallen into a silent despair.

Because of her affliction, he tried to empower her by helping her learn their tower bedroom until she could make her way around it without his help. Other times, he just stayed close, his body making contact with hers as he rested so she would know he was near if she needed him. Then one day, her mood lifted. She reached for him as he lay close and wrapped her arms around him and he knew she had chosen to live.

"Why is he taking so long to tell us what he wants?" Harlan said.

"For all the reasons you might expect; he's spiteful, he gets pleasure out of our discomfort and he sees no reason to rush for us."

Harlan sighed and closed her eyes.

"I know what you're feeling," he said, stroking her back in lazy circles. "I, too, have been afflicted with my father's blasted wizardry in the past."

Harlan nestled a little closer to him. "What happened?"

Gavin smiled. "You'll find this a shock. It was over a woman."

She laughed in spite of herself. "Go on," she said.

"Her name was Aurora and I was crazy in love with her. She had no such affection for me, so she toyed with me relentlessly. She was the daughter of a lower noble and local businessman and was astonishingly beautiful. My pursuit of her consumed every waking breath until finally, I convinced her to marry me. Naturally, the marriage was an unhappy one, a swirling cauldron of my jealousy and her infidelity. I hung on to her despite the fighting, until one day, she became ill with a fever and died.

"I'm sure I never knew such pain and loneliness before that day. It was the only time in my life I can remember preparing to end it."

Harlan sat up and gently ran her hands over his face to read his expression. "Obviously you didn't, so what happened next?"

"After days of drunken binging, I went to see my father, who was more than amenable to offer his help. No price would be too high and I thought I was prepared for anything. I told him I wanted Aurora returned to me from the grave. He gave me an incantation and some instructions. So, I went to her tomb and set about the grim task."

Harlan nestled against his chest again. "Did it work?"

Gavin felt his muscles tense as the painful memory savaged him.

"Oh yes, Titan's sorcery is peerless. In fact, she was restored to her former beauty before my eyes. But her contempt for me had grown. You see, she hated me all the more for stealing her from her peaceful grave. She pleaded for her release. She took to wandering the cemetery at night

weeping. Nothing consoled her. Then in despair, I released her. I broke the spell and watched death claim her a second time."

There was a knock on the door and Gavin got up to retrieve their dinner.

"What was Titan's price?" Harlan asked, sitting up.

"Twenty years to roam the forests as a Kerillian Karzu. A beast similar to your lions, that feeds off whatever prey they can find."

Gavin brought the tray over and placed it in her outstretched hands. Harlan delicately placed it on the burgundy sheets in front of her. "Why did he punish you for wanting your wife back?"

He got back in bed next to her and began to eat. "It wasn't the spell to wake her that cost me. It was the spell to put her back."

She was thoughtful for a moment as she gnawed a piece of bread. "Why was I blinded?"

"It was an accident. This place is a minefield of spells and enchantments. You just happened upon a hidden trap."

"Why won't Titan just take it off?"

"It's not his way," Gavin said. "He'll want me to champion you in some way and I am prepared to do so." He leaned forward and kissed her on the cheek.

"I'm sorry I didn't listen to your warning," she said miserably, her fingers playing with some dried meat.

"Don't dwell on it. The only good thing about being Titan's son is that he is not inclined to kill me. My life provides him with far too much entertainment."

Gavin gulped down the bounty of his dinner and hoped he was right.

## **CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO**

Molotov stepped back as busy shoppers jostled past him. He found the crowded marketplace dirty and unpleasant but it was necessary for anonymity.

The nervous courier stroked his mount and scanned the crowds, searching for anyone who might be watching their activities. Satisfied, he nodded to Molotov, who shook his hand, pressing a folded note into it.

The message to Gavin was a deadly risk but Molotov knew they were running out of options. If the message was intercepted by one of the prince's agents, Molotov, too, would be executed for treason. Even if the note made it safely out of the kingdom, the success of it finding Gavin was not high. But he had to make an attempt. It was unsettling that his own survival was now linked to Gavin's.

Rumor traveled back that the general was holed up at his father's castle in the Dead Lands. He had been recognized by a border town serving maid who had eavesdropped on his breakfast conversation hoping to score some cash for the sale of information. She had indeed been well rewarded by Molotov's men and told to keep her ears open for anything else she might hear. He always believed one could never have too many eyes and ears.

He sank into the shadows as his plain-clothed messenger mounted up and thundered off through the narrow streets startling some pedestrians out of his way as he went. When the messenger disappeared from view, Molotov emerged and turned toward the well planted gaiety of Province Row. This



exclusive section of town was opulently lined with expensive, private town homes for visits to the inner city by the kingdom's most privileged. Strolling prudently up the street, Molitov made his way to the one with the simple grey entrance and mounted the stairs to the outside door. He had sought an audience with the prince earlier today at the palace, but had been informed the royal was in town for the weekend. As he knocked, he wondered if the prince would even see him.

To Molitov's surprise, it took an inordinate amount of time for someone to answer the door, and when it opened, he was greeted not by a manservant, but by one of the prince's private secretaries. The man appeared tousled as he opened the door for him.

"Where is he?" Molitov said, handing the man his cloak and gloves.

"Up in his private chamber, Lord. He hasn't spoken all day; he's ill."

He ascended the stairs quickly, apprehensive of what he would find. Reaching the chamber door, he knocked and waited. After a few moments with no reply, he opened the door and peered in.

The prince was seated in a simple desk chair staring out the window.

"It's a lovely day for a walk, my Prince," Molitov said.

The prince sat ramrod still, his lips in a tight line. "You never come when I summon the nobles for a meeting. Why is that?"

This was a dangerous road that Molitov didn't want to travel. "I apologize, Lord. I have had some troubles lately."

"Not troubles like mine, I'll wager," the prince said.

"Lord, we must discuss your illness. These remedies from the soothsayers and shamans are not helping you. You need to see a real doctor."

The prince waved his hand in an impatient gesture. "I have spoken with Nox. There is a plan to heal me. My coronation will be a wondrous event and herald the coming of a new age for AEssyria."

"As you wish, Lord," Molitov said, letting the subject drop and taking a seat on the edge of the prince's bed. The sharp stench of bile filled his nose but he ignored it. "There is another matter, and there is no delicate way to bring up the subject. You must abandon your plans to marry your sister. It's a grievous sin to the Gods and they will bring destruction on us if you persist."

Twisting in his chair, the prince fixed a wild look on the grand duke. "You miserable sycophant! How dare you question the will of the mighty Nox!"

Molitov stood and took a few steps toward the prince. "It's not his will. It's your twisted invention."

The prince rose from his chair and closed the rest of the distance between them, his face contorted in fury. "You dare to label me as twisted? You, who's filthy desire no brothel can adequately serve!"

He stared into the prince's eyes and saw the building sickness there. "You," he said, "are unfit to rule."

"And who would be audacious enough to rip the scepter from my hand? You? Was that your plan? Then you came a little unprepared." Rushing to the door, the prince flung it open and screamed for his royal guard.

Molotov pulled his saber to resist his arrest as the soldiers rushed in.

"Put down your saber, Lord," the prince said with a maniacal smile. "Or I'll burn Lila alive in the city square at dawn."

With little chance of escape, Molotov laid down his saber and submitted to his arrest on charges of treason.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

The mausoleum was cool and quiet, a place devoid of time. Hector had hoped sleeping in here last night would ease the agony in his head but it hadn't worked. Nothing worked anymore. The skull-piercing headaches came more frequently now, and as he stumbled along the dim marble passageway of the royal catacombs, voices came and went, some real, and he suspected, others not so real. It was becoming more difficult to tell them all apart.

As he strolled dragging his fingertips along the marker surfaces, General Barius followed him with the tight eagerness of a hungry orphan.

"Lord, we must speak," Barius said, trying to get his attention.

Hector stopped and turned to the general with a sigh. "I'm busy, can't this wait?"

Barius lowered his brow and set his jaw. "No, it can't wait."  
"What then?"

"You are paying the royal guard three times what a regular soldier makes for a fraction of the work and the troops know it. Worse yet, they have not been paid in over three weeks. I'm having every kind of discipline problem. I cannot hold the army together under these circumstances. If things don't change, we could face a mass desertion or worse, a revolt. You cannot rule without an army."

"You're their general, deal with it," the prince growled, gritting his teeth. He was having some trouble discerning the general's voice from the others.

"They're not going to work for free. I can't keep them in line offering only the pleasure of serving you."

"I can't deal with this right now, I'm praying." The prince turned around continuing his walk. With remarkable force, Barius grabbed his arm and spun the prince around to face him. His fingers dug in like talons and Hector emitted a sharp mewl.

"There is another problem. The Razorbacks are amassing at the border in what I can only hope is a defensive move. They know something is going on and if they feel threatened enough, they could invade."

The prince mutely shook his head trying to will his troubles away by denying them. Could no one deal with these things but him? Couldn't this ape see he was trying to speak to the Gods?

Barius scowled. "Lord, you cannot ignore this."

Prying the general's hand off his arm, the prince said, "I'll get you the money you need to pay your men."

"Soon," Barius said. "And you'll buy them a night at the brothels for making them wait for their pay."

"Yes, yes, now please leave me alone."

As he turned to walk away, Hector heard Nox speaking to him and he held up his hand to Barius for silence. The God told him for all to go well at the crowning, he needed to provide a superior sacrifice. This victim would fuel the God's power and prove that Hector was indeed a mighty king.

The prince looked over at Barius, who stared back at him coolly. Hector knew everyone thought he was insane but they would soon change their minds. He would show them and

they would beg for his forgiveness. On their knees if need be. The prince licked his dry lips. "Find Gavin. Find him anyway you can. Nox has demanded a strong and worthy sacrifice and we don't want to disappoint him."

Barius bowed slightly and strode out into the daylight.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Titan's audience room was grim, despite its colorful, rich décor of gothic carvings and paintings. Its somber mood was reinforced by the theme of his chosen artwork. Each one was the illustration of an AEssiryan tragic myth. Gavin approached the center of the room ready for anything. As he moved under the shimmer of central light, he stood before a triangular staircase. It sprawled elegantly at the base and narrowed at the tip with a throne mounted on its pinnacle. Not the ornate, bejeweled throne of a monarch, but the imposing carved wooden seat of a ju

The whispering was faint at first, so it was difficult to hear. But soon, the sound grew louder. It filled the room with menace and terror, setting his mind on edge. It was an unnerving sound, seductive and sensuous at first, but once the words seeped into the soul, they rang with rapacious sadism. They whispered of sinful temptations and lustful abominations and Gavin hated how it titillated him.

Watching in the direction of the sound, he saw his father emerge from a door on the right side of the elevated throne. His robes were long and crimson and he seemed ageless as always. Titan moved to his throne and seated himself. The whisperings seemed to fade into the air. Then there was silence. Gavin knelt down on one knee, bowed his head and waited.

"Yes, my son," Titan said in greeting, signaling Gavin to rise.

"I need your help with Harlan."

"You have more pressing matters," Titan said, rising from his throne and descending the stairs. "The prince is too ill to rule and the kingdom is becoming fragmented. This disaster will soon affect us all. You cannot continue to run from it."

"I haven't exactly been in a position to do anything about it. If you're so bloody concerned, why don't you stop it? You certainly have the power," Gavin said.

"You know I cannot interfere. My power demands great accountability and even if I did use it for this, then what? Who would dare to challenge me?" he said. "No man. I would be hailed as monarch, a position neither you nor I want me to have."

Gavin laughed contemptuously. "I would hardly call your use of power accountable."

Titan smiled at him. "I never forced myself on you."

"The hell you didn't. You deceived Harlan and let her fall into that trap. Now I'm at your fucking mercy."

"Only because you choose to be, your desire for her has bound you. It's interesting that it's always lust with you," Titan said thoughtfully.

"All right then, what's the price to restore her sight?" Gavin said, barely containing his anger.

In reply, Titan took a bronze goblet from a nearby pedestal and spilled its contents on the floor by Gavin's feet. Colorful images erupted onto the stone floor. Images of the prince in the throes of his sickness; images of platoons raiding nearby towns, raping and pillaging as they went; images of public altars running scarlet with rivers of noble blood. "You have five days. Meet with the Razorbacks and see if they will join



with you in removing the prince. If you are successful and return within the five days, I will tell you how to restore your lover's sight."

"What if I'm not successful?"

"Then she will make a lovely new display in my garden. So I suggest you get started, it's getting late," Titan said as he rose. Without another word, he strolled out leaving Gavin alone again with the whisperings.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

The library was by far the most cheerful room in the Titan's castle. Its dark wood paneled walls were complimented by rows of bookshelves and brightly colored books on any subject one could want. In its airy center were placed three spacious green wing chairs and two table and chair groups that served as study centers.

As Gavin entered, Harlan was seated curled up in one of the wing chairs dozing. Even in sleep, she looked desperate and sorrowful. She stirred as he entered and he touched her face with the back of his hand to orient her. She reached out for it and squeezed.

"So?" she said hopefully.

"You're not going to like what I have to tell you," he said.

Harlan bit her lower lip and tears began to swallow her eyes.

He reached over and moved one of the small chairs in front of her. When his eyes found hers, they were shocking; faded opals that pierced him. He took her hands in his. "I have to go for five days and when I return, Titan has promised to give me the solution."

The tears now flowed freely down her face. "Please don't leave me here," she said, her words tearing at his heart.

"He's given us no other options. It's the only hope of regaining your sight."

The strain of everything was charging through her. "Take me with you then."

Gavin stroked her face. "Harlan, you know I can't. Your affliction would only slow us down."

Harlan nodded stiffly. "I know," she conceded as she collected herself. She touched his face running her fingers down his features in light, exploratory strokes. Her fingertips paused at his lips and she leaned forward to kiss him.

The kiss was soft and delicate at first like an evening breeze. He remained still, letting her do as she pleased, as if one wrong move might frighten her away taking this enchantment with her. He allowed himself a lost moment and in that moment, he changed.

An uncoiling began in his soul, the beast wakening to the kiss' sweet flavor. Harlan was leaning into him, her kiss succulently rolling his palate into a smokier, meaty taste that the beast knew well. His senses came alive with her desire and he struggled to keep his hands off her, not out of fear she would reject him, but because he feared she would not. As much as he wanted her, he didn't want her this way, broken and frightened. The beast, however, wanted her anyway he could get her.

Harlan broke contact and leaned back licking her lips. But the beast was awake now, and it moved forward to claim her mouth again in a ravenous, rapacious kiss. She melted into him, yielding to the power of his desire as he pulled her into his lap. His mouth scalded savage longing down her throat and he felt her begin to resist. The beast was wild, an aggressive hungry thing, and he struggled to fight it back, his loins aching with feral need.

Slowly, she rose from his lap peeling her body away from him.

He forced his hands away, releasing her. He watched her sit back in her chair tentatively, as if it were alive and might attack her at any minute.

Gavin rose and crossed the room to a small alcove housing a wooden, marble top bar. Taking a cigar from a box on the counter, he lit it and poured himself a whiskey. He tossed it back and grabbed an ashtray, returning to his seat.

"Why do you play these games with me?" he said. "Is it because of my race?"

Harlan was tense. "No, that's not it. I don't care about your race. It's you. I don't want to become one of your many interesting conquests."

"Would it help if I told you I was desperately in love with you?" he said.

"That's not funny. It's not sex I want and you know it. So don't pretend you thought I was overcome with lust and unable to control myself. I shouldn't have kissed you, so let's just drop it."

"Whatever suits you," he said.

Harlan got up and began making her way carefully to the door. "I'm going to bed."

Gavin watched her puffing on his smoke but didn't offer his help. His erection was still stiff and painful and he enjoyed her clumsy struggle to find her way to the door. "I'll be gone by morning. But don't worry, darling, I'll not leave you here for long."

Harlan ignored him and groped her way out of the room.

## **CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX**

Gavin had sent a message to Grand Duke Savion just before he left for the meeting place and could do little but hope it would arrive on time. In it, he requested Savion meet him at Rhea's Oak, the sight of a historic battle between the male and female Razorbacks that changed the course of their history forever and marked the birth of the queendom over five thousand years ago.

Early morning fog hung in the air as Gavin rode up to the meeting place. The rocky clearing was surrounded by tall, heavily branched lanton trees. He dismounted, tied his reins to a low branch, and tossed the hyperia some dried meat. It greedily gulped the food down.

The soft morning sounds of the forest sent his mind drifting to thoughts of Harlan. She evoked so many conflicting emotions in him he didn't know how he felt about her. The only thing he knew for certain was that he hotly wanted to bed her and he was certain that would come soon. She was always so close to surrender.

His thoughts were interrupted by a rider's approach and Gavin drew his saber and stepped behind a nearby tree for cover. Grand Duke Savion rode fearlessly into the clearing. Seeing him, Gavin sheathed his saber and came out.

Savion dismounted and secured his animal. The two men strode forward and shook hands.

"I hope you came alone," Gavin said, glancing over the grand duke's shoulder.

"I did," Savion said with a relaxed smile. "You're quite a catch. The prince has a hefty bounty on your head. How is it no one has captured you yet?"

Gavin folded his arms. "So I've heard. It's not from lack of trying, Lord. I'm just a little more desperate than they are."

"I've heard Doctor Ambrose is traveling with you."

"She is and she's fine."

Savion nodded grimly. "I like her; she's a good woman. You tell her she is most welcome here, per the high queen."

"She'll be delighted," Gavin said with a short bitter laugh. "But no invitation for me?"

"The queen does not want a war with our brother AEssyrians and you, Gavin, are a bringer of war." Savion shrugged. "If it's any comfort to you, no one believes you killed the king. Everyone knew how much he loved you."

Gavin searched the forest for a moment. "And I loved him."

Savion shifted his weight and studied Gavin. "Why did you ask me here?"

"I need men."

"How many?"

"A legion at least."

"That would be hard to manage."

"But not impossible," Gavin said, riveting his gaze to the grand duke.

"And if you got them, what would become of the prince?"

"That would be for the nobles to decide," Gavin said, scanning the forest again.

"I don't want that. I want him publicly executed for taking my bride to his incestuous bed."

Gavin gave Savion a sober glance. "I can't promise that. By law, the nobles have the final say in his disposition."

"What do you care about their laws after the way they so eagerly turned on you?" Savion said. "I've heard you're a cunning and dangerous man. I'm sure you can find a way to get rid of the prince without anyone suspecting a thing."

"Are you suggesting I murder him?" Gavin said, folding his arms across his chest.

The two men fell into an edgy silence.

"No, of course not," Savion said, walking back to his mount.

Gavin knew he had lost him. "They'll certainly not let him go free," he said, trying to persuade the grand duke to continue the negotiations.

"I'm sorry, Gavin. I can't help you if you won't ensure his death."

"Why? What difference does it make as long as he suffers in some way for his crimes?"

But Savion was no longer listening. He turned his animal around, hesitated, and then rode back over to Gavin.

"I intercepted a message from Molitov to you. I was fortunate enough to pluck it from the dead messenger's body before anyone else found it. Poor man was probably done in by highwaymen."

Gavin took the note. "Thank you," he said as Savion turned his mount and spurred it off into the lifting mist.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

The vomiting and headaches had stopped just after midnight but Hector stayed in the bathroom anyway. He lay on the cool tile floor by the toilet with a purple towel folded neatly under his head. He knew his illness was worsening, but he also realized it was a test by the God to see how much punishment he could take. So far, he felt he was making an outstanding show. But all of his suffering would be pointless if he didn't recapture Gavin. Nox had told Hector the only way to secure the throne and regain his health would be through an exquisite sacrifice. And even though he didn't specifically name Gavin, who else could it be? After all, Gavin's continued success at evading the executioner was making Hector look inept. He had to prove to his God and his subjects that he was stronger and more resourceful than that filthy whore's son.

He had become so desperate for Gavin's capture that he sent no less than twenty messages to Barius daily asking if he had Gavin in custody yet. The taciturn general had yet to answer a one.

A loud knock on the bathroom door reverberated in his head.

"What?" he mumbled. The knocking came again, louder and more insistent.

"I said what?" he yelled.

"May I come in, my Prince?" Barius said, his voice muffled by the door.

"Yes, come in. It's open."



Barius pushed the door in and entered looking grungy and fatigued. His icy eyes pierced Hector lying naked on the bathroom floor.

Hector twisted onto his side and tilted his head upward to get a better view of the general. "You had better have some good news for me."

"I do, Lord. Gavin has been located near the Razorback border. I expect we will have him in custody soon."

Rage tore its way through Hector's serene mood. "You call that news? I want to know when you actually have him, not when you expect to!"

Barius sighed. "He can't hide much longer, my Prince. Everyone in the kingdom is on alert and looking for him. I promise it will be soon."

"What about his human whore?"

"I wasn't aware that I was supposed to be looking for her. Is she also a priority?"

Hector rubbed his temples. "No, I guess not. I'm sure he's finished with her by now. He probably discarded her somewhere along the way."

Barius nodded to appease him. "Probably, Lord."

"Increase the bounty again."

"Yes, my Prince."

"Is that all?" Hector asked as he adjusted his towel.

Barius nodded mutely and Hector glanced at his silence catching the nod.

"Good. Then go tell my secretary to send out the coronation announcements. I might as well make this thing

official. I'm counting on you, Barius, don't screw up." He lay back down and waved Barius off in dismissal.

Barius hesitated for a moment. His pupils widened menacingly and his tongue touched his lips. Hector saw him touch the hilt of his saber, his fingers caressing the wrapped handle. Then he turned and left the room.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Gavin began his ride back to Titan's castle two days ahead of schedule. Had Savion agreed to provide him with men and supplies, his deadline would have been more difficult to meet. Although he had been successful in arranging the meeting, it did not result in the outcome he needed. He was rather puzzled by Savion's imposed condition regarding the prince, since the man knew as a noble himself that Gavin didn't have the authority to execute the sovereign. No matter how unruly the prince had become, he would be dealt with by his own once order was restored.

Reaching into his tunic, he pulled out Molitov's note.

Dear Gavin,

It is my most desperate hope this letter finds you somewhere near the border. Since you departed, the prince has fallen victim to a wretched illness that has made him mad. The kingdom is in chaos.

He is planning a coronation ceremony and we must do everything to stop it. A group will be meeting at the ruins of Hadrian's Forde on Samus Day nine. Unfortunately, I will not be able to join you because my absence would be suspect. I hope this can be resolved before things deteriorate even further.

I pray the Gods give you strength in your fight to remain free.

Molitov von Goth

He replaced the note and reined his hyperia to a stop. Up ahead were the sparkling lights of a small roadside tavern.

Gavin guessed it to be just inside the Razorback border and his chances of recognition would be remote. Probably safe enough for a quick drink and a hot meal.

Riding up, he tied his animal in back and slipped in through the rear kitchen entrance, garnering some curious looks from the staff. Once inside, he found the tavern full and loud and Gavin immediately wondered about the wisdom of stopping here. Spotting a dark corner at the end of the bar, he took a seat and waited for service. A hand snaked around to his crotch and gently squeezed, flaming his arousal.

Gavin glanced at the prostitute who had wedged herself next to him. She was just a little past middle age but the wear on her face chronicled the tribulations of her life's work.

"Not today, dear," Gavin said, raising his voice over the noise.

"Just some service out back, Lord. Won't cost you much," she said.

"No, thank you for the offer," he said, giving her some coins to move on.

She graced him with a smile full of rotting teeth and sashayed off.

"What for you, Lord?" the bartender asked in a gravelly voice. He eyed Gavin as he wiped the bar in long, laborious strokes with a soiled rag.

"A cigar, if you have them, and a triple shot of whiskey."

Gavin noted the bartender was AEssiryan like the harlot. He knew then that he had screwed up. Without realizing it, he had managed to cross the border back into AEssyria. If any bounty hunters or greedy citizens spotted him, he would have

to fight his way out. He knew the best thing to do was leave, but no one seemed to be paying him much attention, so he decided to stay for a while.

When the bartender returned with his cigar and drink, Gavin ordered his meal. After some inquiry, he learned he was in the town of Parrant. Not only had he accidentally crossed back into AEssyria, but he was only about ten miles from the Dead Lands.

\* \* \* \*

The night had aged before he knew it. A good-natured older man bought him a drink and pulled him into a chess game. After beating the man, Gavin had spent the rest of the evening defeating a line of enthusiastic drunken challengers. Each victory brought with it another drink, paid for by the loser. As he played, the shrill laugh of the tavern whores filled his head dulling his senses. He really should leave now, as he was much drunker than what he liked.

He looked down at the chess game through the haze of smoke. His mouth was dry and cottony and he could feel his concentration wandering. Greedily, he reached for the glass of whiskey and downed the final ounce. The entire bar of spectators held their breaths and watched the board. Gavin studied the concern on his opponent's face. Marin was apparently a famous player in the tavern and would probably not take losing well.

"Checkmate," Gavin said, moving the final piece of his game into place. Leaning back, he lit another cigar.

Marin, roaring with rage, rose and flipped the table on its side. The board, pieces and drinks went flying, then crashed to the floor with a thunderous bang. Reaching for his saber, he drew it and lunged at Gavin.

Although drunk, Gavin let instinct take over and in a flash of speed, he blocked the oncoming rush of Marin's saber. The two men locked together, weapons crossed and eye-to-eye.

"I'll kill you," Gavin said darkly.

"Or I'll kill you, bastard!" Marin's words were slurred by drink and spittle sprayed from his lips as he spoke.

The bartender, Barrock, pushed his way through the crowd toward the two men.

"Marin, this man is an old soldier, he's not likely to lose and you have a family..."

Marin, however, was not listening. Pushing off from Gavin, he turned and brought his saber around for a furious blow.

Gavin parried it and cut him deeply down the chin, sending the other man reeling. Marin stumbled backward, held up by those behind him in the crowd.

Barrock came between the two men again.

Marin rushed forward, viciously pushing the bartender to one side. Gavin again parried his opponent's clumsy blows and struck another cut across the other man's shoulder.

Barrock recovered his footing long enough to try to stop the fight again. Pushing through the crowd, he seized Marin from behind pinning his arms to his side. Marin screamed in rage, whipping back and forth wildly.

Gavin moved forward to mark him again, but Marin shook Barrock free, grabbing the man to shield Gavin's blow.

"Stop!" a voice boomed from the crowd. "That's General Theron. My son was murdered by him during his prison escape!"

The room clouded into silence and Gavin felt his gut turn to ice. He was certainly a dead man now. The mob moved in on him.

The bodies were so dense, he could no longer wield his saber with any effectiveness. Numerous hands grabbed and held him and he was soon relieved of his weapon. They all set upon him, beating him with savage inebriated glee. The attack fell out into the street and someone said, "There's a huge bounty on his head. We could hang him and take his insignias as proof of his capture. We'll all be rich."

A core group of assailants roared their approval.

Sober now, Gavin fought like a netted raptor as they dragged him behind the bar to find a lynching tree. Breaking one hand free, he reached out and tore the throat of the nearest man, blood splashing everyone nearby. The man produced a short liquid screech before he fell. No one stopped to help him.

The remaining men, now fueled by outrage and fear, beat him with anything they could find in an effort to subdue him. Their renewed attack only made Gavin fight harder, seizing another man with his teeth and mauling the side of his face into raw meat. Some men broke off and left, leaving only the most determined behind to finish the deed.

In the chaos, Gavin spotted some of the men securing a rope to a thick tree limb. With desperate rage, he freed one of his arms and grabbed a nearby woman by the neck as she

yelled encouragement to the lynchers. He snapped it with a revolting pop and flung her body into some other bystanders.

Then they were upon him again, fighting and pulling him to the noose, hanging open and ready.

Gavin filled with regret for Harlan, knowing his carelessness would condemn her to a life of darkness. Perhaps Titan would take pity on her and lift the spell without him.

His hands were roughly bound behind his back and he was blindfolded. He fought their efforts to lift him up but they were too many now. He felt the noose around his neck and then they released him to the crushing pain and desperation of a slow death by hanging.



## CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

Molotov reclined on his lumpy cot staring out at the night through the bars of his tiny cell window. The accommodations were uncomfortable, but at least they were somewhat clean. He didn't think the prince would be so brazen as to attack the nobles but now he realized how wrong he had been. With that barrier broken, the prince would now begin cleansing his courts and destroying anyone who might oppose him.

His thoughts were interrupted by the sound of two pairs of footsteps approaching. The heavy stride of a soldier's boots was coupled with a lighter, softer gait that was definitely feminine. The steps halted outside his cell door and the bolt slid back with a metallic hiss.

"You have a visitor, Lord," the soldier said as Lila came in. Her amber eyes were moist from weeping. She wore a simple brown hood and cloak concealing her clothes beneath.

He felt his mood lift as he pulled her to him for an embrace. "How are you?"

"I'm fine, but I'm afraid for you. I've brought you news."

"Let's have it," he said, guiding her to sit on the cot with him.

"There are sketchy rumors that Gavin has been captured and or killed in a border town by the mountains of Corth."

Rising from the cot, he began pacing nervously. "That's not good news," he said.

"The prince was incensed. Gavin was supposed to be brought in alive. He has sent Barius to investigate and collect

the body if there is one," she said. "They say he cried for hours when he heard the news. Don't you find that strange?"

He shook his head and pinched the bridge of his nose as he paced. "All of his behavior is strange. He has all kinds of deranged ideas in his head and an absurd obsession with Gavin."

Lila lowered her head and sobbed. "I don't know what to do to help you, Lord. I'm so frightened."

Molotov joined her on the bed again and enveloped her in his arms. "You have done a lot already and I'm grateful for your loyalty."

The heavy steel door creaked open and Master Sergeant Rakon entered with two armed soldiers behind him. He was a Razorback AEssyrian but had few traits of his more elegant brethren. Where most Razorbacks were tall and refined, Rakon was short and stocky with a coarse, savage look. His hair was long and black with two shocks of bright red hair streaked from each temple, nature's warning of his venomous abilities. He had been one of Gavin's favorite soldiers, a man Gavin could count on to get a job done without the burden of conscience.

"I have orders to come and fetch you for a session," he said, lowering his head to Molotov out of respect.

"A torture session you mean?" Molotov asked with a slight smile on his lips. Lila gave a short, sad laugh and gave her Lord a final kiss.

"I'll come see you tomorrow," she said and rose to leave.

"Good, I'll tell you all about it," Molotov said, watching her leave with an amused twinkle in his eye.

Molotov got up to accompany Master Sergeant Rakon.

"When do they have my execution scheduled?"

Rakon stared up at the grand duke and folded his arms across his massive chest. "The night of the coronation."

Molotov nodded and walked out the door followed by his escort. "I've heard General Theron is dead," he said, testing the information.

Rakon closed the cell door behind him as they entered the hallway. He fell in behind the grand duke as they made their way to the torture chambers. "I doubt it. The general is a hard man to kill. I know, I've tried."

## CHAPTER FORTY

As the noose bit tight, it tore open the tender wound left by his dead son, adding to his agony. He gritted his teeth as the rough braided fibers rubbed the open flesh. The men who hung him were salivating with greed for his bounty, so once they stripped him of his insignias, they fled seeking their reward. No one had even bothered to stay and watch him die.

Gavin fought to remain conscious with the small amount of air still pulling down into his hungry lungs. With his hands bound behind his back, he grappled to pull a tiny dagger sheathed in the small of his back. After a few maddeningly fumbled attempts, he yanked it free and cut the ropes binding his hands. With his arms now free, he swung forward causing what little air there was to choke off and wild, rancid panic attacked his mind. Reaching up, he grasped the rope and lifted some of his weight off the noose. However, the rope clung tight around his neck and he couldn't take his hands off it to loosen it without his weight tightening it again.

"Hold on, Lord. I'll get you down," said a young man's voice.

Gavin felt darkness blanketing his vision and must have passed out for a few moments because his next sensation was the abrupt impact of the ground under him. The man removed the noose and Gavin took a labored, raspy breath. The sudden shock of air sent him into a fit of coughing and gasping as he rubbed his ravaged throat.

"Easy, Lord," the young man said, and then, "We need to get out of here as soon as you can manage it."

Although his legs felt weak and heavy, Gavin forced himself to his feet, stumbling to follow his rescuer. The man was short, only about to Gavin's chest, and had the hackneyed dialect of a rural peasant. His clothes were rustic and simple, slightly dusty from a day of field work.

They moved through the thick brush as Gavin struggled to keep up, until finally, they reached a cream-colored cottage.

Once inside, Gavin sank to the floor by the lifeless fireplace.

"What's your name?" Gavin managed to croak out. It was misery to talk.

"My name's Malcolm," he said, rushing over to start a fire.

"I am—"

"No need, Lord, I know who you are. I might say I'm delighted to have you here in my humble home," Malcolm said, preparing some meat and putting a kettle over the fire.

"Actually, I was going to say that I am grateful for your assistance," Gavin said.

"I might say too, Lord, I am a huge fan of yours."

"Is that right?" Gavin said with an inward groan.

"That's right, Lord," he said, nodding enthusiastically. Then seeing Gavin lean toward the fire, Malcolm interrupted his food preparation to offer Gavin a blanket.

"I'm fine, thank you," Gavin said hoarsely, holding up a hand to halt the blanket's advance. "Do you have anything to drink?"

Malcolm beamed at him. "I've got some tea brewing, Lord."

"No, I mean liquor."

"Sorry, no spirits here, Lord. Should I run off and fetch you some? I know how you military types like your drink."

"No need, I was just wondering," Gavin said, rubbing his forehead in an effort to ignore the beginnings of a hangover.

Malcolm scurried over with a heaping plate of bloody meat. "I can't tell you what a real honor this is," he gushed. "I've followed your fantastic career for years."

Gavin grunted and hungrily took the plate. He wolfed down its contents in a matter of seconds surprised by the keenness of his appetite.

"Do you have any hyperia here?" Gavin said as his thoughts rushed to Harlan. He didn't have much time left and he had to get out of here. Titan's castle was still a few hours' ride and troops would be searching the woods for him.

"Not here, Lord. We have no use for those nasty things. Might be some in town though, but you shouldn't go there. I spotted some of the king's men arriving to collect you just before I cut you down." Malcolm poured Gavin some tea. It burned a lively trail down Gavin's throat as he drank it. The hot liquid sent him into another coughing jag.

"He's not a king, only a prince, and I'm not a Lord," Gavin said when he had recovered enough to talk.

"Sorry, Lord, about the hyperia."

"Never mind," Gavin said. He rose to leave. "Again, I am thankful for your help and hospitality and you will be rewarded."

"Thank you, Lord," Malcolm said, picking up the dirty plates.

"There is one more thing I want you to do for me, if you would. I want the names of the men who were responsible for hanging me. Can you have that by the next time we meet?"

"I would be happy to, Lord. Good luck with your escape."

Gavin grunted his thanks and glanced out the window before opening the door to exit. Then he saw the group of five soldiers riding up the muddy road to Malcolm's house.

## **CHAPTER FORTY-ONE**

The castle was home to a host of terrifying sounds and sensations. Among the low growls, cold gusts and occasional smells of decay, there was the ever present whispering. Sometimes, the soft, unintelligible voices were silent, but usually, they traveled around like a wind circulating through the halls. Titan claimed no knowledge of the whisperings origins, but they appeared to coexist with him. Although disturbing, the whispers did let her know when Titan was near by increasing their volume in announcement. Interestingly, the voices were contained within the castle and could not be heard outside, regardless of Titan's presence.

It was morning but the blackness of her infirmity offered no hint of it. The only sign of the approaching day was the fiery heat of the morning suns on her face. Sitting on a plush reclining chair under the battlement's open sky, Harlan felt grateful that Titan had guided her here. She hated him, but he did sporadically offer her small mercies like this. Only two things kept her from the frenzied collapse of mental illness; the hope that Gavin would return as promised and Titan's nightly invasion of her mind carrying with it comforting and familiar visions of home.

It was now the morning of the fourth day and Harlan's hope that Gavin would make the deadline was slowly melting away.

"It's beautiful out here," Titan said, startling her. His words touched her skin, making it crawl.

"I wouldn't know, now would I?" Harlan said.



As if to punish her, he was suddenly in her mind, penetrating against her will as she tried in vain to resist him. Once inside, he spilled mental images of battleship grey clouds moving restlessly across the sky as dappled daylight fell onto the castle walls. Harlan despised his relentless intrusions, no matter how interesting they were.

"How did you come to be Gavin's father?" she asked, trying to distract him from his mental mugging.

Titan's laugh was low and humorless. "He was an accident; a random trip to a brothel; the novelty of a night with a human whore. After the deed, I didn't give it another thought until she told me years later during a chance meeting on the street."

"So you don't know everything?"

"I never claimed that I did."

"What did you do when you found out?"

"Nothing. He was of little interest to me, only the by-product of an orgasm gone awry."

"That's nice, no wonder he hates you," Harlan said, leaning her head back and relishing the wave of heat that blew over her.

"He hates me for a catalogue of reasons. Some are valid and others, not."

Titan fell into silence for a few minutes. Then he said, "He's not going to make it back, Harlan."

His words cut through her shearing open her delicate emotions. She kept her face still and tried to hide her fear and disappointment. Then he was in her head again, throwing visions of a drunken Gavin and a spirited game of chess.

Harlan's heart shattered. *He's right*, she thought. She knew depending on Gavin was impractical.

"Why don't you let me remove the spell?" Titan said.

"A deal? Are you offering me a deal? No thanks, Gavin told me all about your deals. I'll regain my sight only to be turned into some type of waterfowl."

She heard Titan stand. "It's not a deal, just an easy trade. If you agree to stay as my consort for two weeks, I will not only restore your sight, I will also provide you the means to return home."

Harlan bit her lip to push back her revulsion. "I would like some time to contemplate your offer," she said, her voice trembling.

Then she heard him walk away.

She spent the rest of the day on the battlements brooding over his offer and periodically crying.

He came for her around dinnertime. She stood and felt for his arm. "If Gavin doesn't make it, I'll agree to your terms."

"Excellent," he said his voice sticky sweet like dark molasses. Then he led her off to the dining room.

## **CHAPTER FORTY-TWO**

Malcolm was intensely annoying, but he did prove to be a cunning escape artist. No sooner had they spotted the approaching soldiers, than the little man had Gavin out the back door and down a winding trail that led back to town. One branch of the trail conveniently spilled out just at the rear of the livery stable.

Gavin stayed behind a cluster of trees watching the soldiers unsaddle their animals and put them up for the night. The stable was designed as an open bay with a large opening at the front and rear of the building, and lines of stalls on either side. Each stall was carefully divided by narrow metal bars to prevent fighting.

As the men came and went, busy with their assigned duties, he noticed the mount stalled closest to him was still fully tacked. He recognized it as Barius' animal. He wasn't surprised that Barius was the officer sent to collect him. Gavin reached into his uniform and pulled out a generous piece of dried meat Malcolm had given him for his journey.

When the bustle of soldiers had thinned and no one was around, Gavin crept over to the creature. He moved with quick purpose hoping if anyone did notice him, they might mistake him for their own commander, so similar in height were the two men from a distance. He held the meat out to the grateful animal and as it ate, untied its reins and mounted up.

Turning toward the rear exit, he gently spurred the mount to a swift walk and made his way back out again.

As he passed through the archway to freedom and escape, he spotted Barius emerging from the inn. The two men locked eyes and Barius gave an almost imperceptible sigh.

"You're getting to be a real pain in my ass, Gavin," he said, dropping his hand to the hilt of his cutlass.

"And you are hardly qualified to hold the rank of general," Gavin said, laughing.

He didn't wait around for Barius to reply. Spurring the hyperia, he thundered off down the road in the wake of angry shouts.

It didn't take Barius and his group of men long to fall in behind him. Gavin spurred the creature harder but it was slowed by the heavy armor and a day of hard riding already behind it. His pursuers hadn't bothered to saddle their mounts making them even faster. He could feel them quickly closing behind him.

Gavin felt around the rear of the saddle, remembering Barius usually carried a falchion for carving prey. Finding it, he pulled it from the sheath hoping he wouldn't have to use it. It was a thick-bladed, awkward weapon but it could be deadly if he needed it to be. The narrow forest trails abetted Gavin's escape and helped put some distance between him and the band of soldiers.

The hyperia was exhausted and stumbling by the time he hit the Mists of Five Rivers. This dense, foggy realm was notorious for supernatural danger and signaled the five mile mark to Titan's castle. As Gavin expected, his pursuers dropped off, some from fear, others simply losing him in the eerie mists.

Once he was sure they had gone, he slowed his mount to a walk. By his estimation, he had only a few more hours to make it back on time. All he dared hope for was that the animal stayed alive long enough to get him to the castle before the deadline sealed Harlan's fate.

## CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

The bridge to Titan's castle was there and waiting for him when he arrived. Inwardly, he felt some relief but knew all was not won yet. The hyperia was completely spent, so he took off its saddle and tethered it to a tree to rest and made his way across the bridge on foot.

Gavin reached the massive wooden doors quickly and thrust them open, the force slamming them back with a crash. The main entry hall flowed directly into the throne room and he strode boldly forward, stopping at the base of the stairs. Titan sat on his throne as if he had been waiting there since Gavin had left.

"Where's Harlan?" Gavin said.

"She's here," Titan said, gesturing to a dark corner where she sat.

"You were not successful. Although you made it back on time, you have no alliance to defeat the Prince."

"Yes but I have other prospects," Gavin said, trying to keep his tone neutral. He really would like to avoid an argument if at all possible.

"What other prospects?"

Gavin explained the note he received through Savion from Molitov about the meeting of officers and nobles.

"It may be a trap."

"I doubt it. Savion has no great love for the prince," Gavin said. "Either way, I am going to attend the meeting, so let Harlan go and solve your sight riddle."

"I don't know," Titan mused. "I've grown rather fond of her."

A fireball began to rise in Gavin's chest. He hated few things more than being toyed with by his father. "Release her, damn you, and tell me the solution."

Titan stood up looking suddenly bored with the conversation. "She's yours, as she always has been. The solution is easy and I'm surprised you didn't think of it yourself. The mirror showed her the future. Change the future and you break the spell."

Then he turned and walked out into the entrance hall and up the winding center staircase.

"How does she change the future?" Gavin called after him to no reply.

Harlan got up and walked over following the sound of his voice. "I know what he means," she whispered softly.

Gavin gazed down into her eyes feeling edgy and raw. They had returned to their former brilliant green and a wave of relief flowed over him. Harlan let out a short gasp, and then she laughed. She put her hand over her mouth and tears flowed down her cheeks. She wrapped her arms around Gavin's waist and squeezed, pressing her moist face against his tunic.

"Don't stir me up unless you intend to finish me off," he said. He prowled over to the lonely chair she had just occupied and sat in it. He was completely drained.

"Could you possibly stop being an obnoxious bastard for just a few minutes?" Harlan said.

"Not likely."

Harlan ignored his comment. "Are we still going to the Razorback queendom?"

"Actually, Grand Duke Savion extended an invitation to you from the queen herself."

"I'm so relieved. I've been thinking a lot about the king's death and I have a few ideas." Then she studied him and said, "You're not coming with me, are you?"

"No, I'm not."

For a few long minutes, she was silent. He leaned his head back and ran his fingers through his hair wondering if he should sleep here tonight. He detested the castle but didn't feel up to traveling anymore or setting up camp somewhere in the wilderness.

"I really do appreciate what you did for me," she said, standing close to him as he brooded. Her eyes were warm and affectionate.

Gavin tilted his chair back on the rear two legs and fixed her with a hungry leer. "Prove it then," he said. "Play in my bed tonight." He was mystified by his own hostility. He must be more tired than he thought.

He had hit a mark and he could read it on her face. She wouldn't, of course, but he enjoyed making her angry.

"Are you telling me that the only reason you helped me was so I would be indebted enough to have sex with you?" she asked.

"That's about it."

"If I sleep with you, will that make you happy?"

"Infinitely."



"Well good, then I will revel in your continued unhappiness," she said, turning to leave.

Gavin smiled and leapt up in a flash blocking her exit. "You know that's not why I did it."

"No, I don't know."

## **CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR**

Hadrian's Forde was a large clutter of ruins on an AEssyrian hillside. The natural cover afforded by the immense broken stones was an excellent choice for a clandestine meet

Gavin arrived just after sunrise and lingered on the outskirts of the camp, unsure of his reception. Although he and Molitov had been known to disagree more often than not, he trusted the grand duke and didn't believe the man would knowingly lead him into a trap. He watched the camp's activities as the smell of cooking meat augmented the crisp morning air making him salivate. After tarrying a moment longer, he urged his mount forward and rode in confidently. He was spotted first by some of his flag officers. They rose from where they were sitting around a roasting pit and moved toward him. They greeted him warmly and brought him to the nobles as if he were still their victorious warlord.

After exchanging some good-natured banter about his several escapes, the feast began. They all sat around the smoky pit gorging and drinking, everyone speculating on the best way to unseat the prince. As always in the past, officers and nobles couldn't agree on the best method to accomplish this.

Gavin and his officers argued for an alliance with one of the neighboring kings to get permission to pull an army of mercenaries from their ranks and take the kingdom by force. The nobles, however, wanted a less violent plan. They argued for a challenge, secured by loyal men in the crowd willing to kill anyone in the royal guard who tried to interfere with the

outcome. In the end, it was the nobles' plan which gained momentum.

"The prince is ill. He'll not be able to fight," the Baron Nefar said to the group as he gnawed the last fragment of meat from a bone.

A bottle of gin was making its way around the circle and Gavin held up a hand to let it pass by. "He'll just call General Barius as his champion," he said.

Girth the Wise, a high judge in the royal courts, said, "Wasn't Barius one of your finest commanders, Gavin?"

"Yes he was," he said, reading apprehension in the men's faces. "He's a gifted and lethal warrior, he won't fall easily."

Some of the nobles groaned in disappointment.

"When the time comes for him to take on challengers," Girth said, "you'll have to be the one to fight him as the princess' champion. Will you agree to that?"

Gavin stopped chewing for a moment and wiped the corner of his mouth with the back of his leather glove. He then stared at Girth and grinned.

"My agreement is not an issue. I suspect that my being a hunted fugitive, wanted for the murder of our sovereign, will pose a larger problem. Your fellow nobles, as well as the prince, will not allow an assassin to champion the princess."

There was a murmur of concurrence around the fire.

Girth cleared his throat loudly and the group fell silent. "I have yet to see any proof of your involvement, nor have you been convicted of any crime. I still believe that you are our best choice and should be presented as champion for the princess. Now I ask you again, will you fight?"

Gavin took another piece of meat from the spit. Eyeing the group watching him, he nodded. This was probably going to be another bad idea that may actually succeed in getting him executed.

\* \* \* \*

Night descended slowly like a velvet blanket covering the land. Gavin camped a little distance away from the group, knowing as always, he had lethal enemies hidden everywhere. *Just like on campaign*, he thought with mild amusement.

As he lay on his bedding waiting for sleep to take him, he let his thoughts turn to Harlan. He hoped she made it to the queendom easily, after all, no one was actively pursuing her. His attraction to her was primarily sexual but there were other elements, too. She unnerved and intrigued him with her hidden strength. He had to admit, he admired her fortitude during the difficult time of her blindness.

Someone approached his camp interrupting his thoughts and Gavin grabbed the long bastard sword the judge had given him.

"I'm sleeping," he said. "Bugger off."

He hoped his tone would drive his visitor away.

Colonel Hess ambled into view visibly drunk and smelling of gin. Hess had been a colonel prior to Gavin's own ascent to the rank of general. Because of the older man's inept ministrations on the battlefield, Gavin made sure his rank had stalled at colonel. Now faced with an inevitable confrontation,

he was glad he had opted to decline their drinking party earlier, or he'd probably be drunker than this man was now.

"Pretty soon, you'll get plenty of sleep, Excellency," Hess said, slurring his words.

"Why don't you sleep it off and I'll kill you in the morning?" Gavin said.

"Very comical, but I'm not like some of these simpletons around here," he said with a wave of his hand. "I think you did kill the king. Now all you need is a victory in the arena to take the throne. I know what you're planning."

"An interesting fantasy, Colonel, except that if you knew your canon, you'd know I'm ineligible to take the throne because of my heritage. I have no royal blood or claim to title," Gavin said, laying his sword back down upon noting that Hess wasn't carrying one. "And now that you have been educated on the rules of succession, why don't you toddle off to bed?"

"I think I would rather put you to bed, you sleazy whore chaser," Hess said, pulling a bush knife from his boot and moving forward for an attack.

Gavin leapt up quickly as Hess rushed him holding the knife out for a straight thrust to his chest. As the man came within range, Gavin blocked Hess' fist deflecting the blow off to the outside of his torso. Stepping in, he brought his own arm down and savagely broke his opponent's at the elbow. Hooking the wounded arm with his, he dragged Hess over his hip, flipping his opponent to the ground. Gavin snatched up the fallen knife and placed the tip at the corner of the colonel's right eye.

His opponent lay on the ground with his eyes locked open and still, his teeth clinched in agony. He cradled his wounded arm soundlessly and lay still.

"Are we finished now?" Gavin snarled.

"Yes."

After a few moments, Gavin stepped back and let a small group of spectators help the man away.

"Anyone else have a problem they'd like to settle tonight?" Gavin asked.

The remaining men dispersed quietly.

Gavin slept lightly with the knife firmly in his fist until dawn.

## CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

The plan was laid out by the nobles and all Gavin had to do was follow it. The plan (which Gavin thought weak and argued against to no avail) was to have him hidden at Marselete's Whorehouse until the coronation ceremony took place. Rumor said it would be any day now and the prince had filled the holding cells with citizens for the sacrificial altar. The madam, Marselete, had been paid generously by the nobles for her help in hiding Gavin, a practice he had also argued against. Paying a prostitute in advance for anything but services rendered always became synonymous with being cheated.

After carefully navigating the city streets, being vigilant to conceal his identity with a hood and cloak, Gavin soon found himself knocking at the back door to Marselete's. He was quickly ushered in by a stocky Kerillian whore. Her race was humanoid, similar to Harlan's, just one evolutionary step removed. She had brown eyes and tinted red hair that was dull and lifeless. Like most in her profession, if she had any beauty, it was shadowed by heavy make-up and coarse mannerisms.

"This way," she said. Her voice was thick and heavy.

Gavin followed her down a hallway lined with doors, the muffled sounds of amorous adventures periodically seeping from the rooms. Much to his annoyance, he felt himself grow hard. *Bad habits*, he thought.

"I'm Ruby," the woman tossed back over her shoulder as she led him up a winding staircase to the madam's private chamber.

In a moment, they arrived at an entryway with double doors. The doors stood open and welcoming showing the gaudy bedroom beyond, all decorated in scarlet and pink.

"Thank you, Ruby," he said.

She smiled at him without a show of teeth. "You're welcome, General. Remember me, I do anything," she said, heading off toward the stairs.

Gavin stepped over the threshold knocking on the open door to attract attention. As if on cue, Marselete emerged from a side room pulling the door closed behind her. She was a beautiful AEssiryan woman, tall with an athletic build. Gavin had never bedded her but friends had regaled him with her many talents.

Her long, auburn hair hung loosely around her shoulders in rich glistening locks and her eyes were a soft violet-blue. She was dressed in a sheer red nightdress and graced him with a dazzling smile.

"I don't think I've ever officially met you before," she said, taking his hand and pulling him inside. "Aren't you magnificent?" Moving behind him, she closed and locked her bedroom door.

"Save the sweet talk for your little soldier boys," Gavin said. He felt irritable and jumpy. As much as he enjoyed sleeping with whores, he could never fully relax around them. They were always plotting ways to gain from a man's weaknesses.

Striding across the room to the small bar, he stopped to make himself a stiff drink.



"Will you make me one, too, darling?" she said in a somewhat marital tone that annoyed him.

Opening a carved wooden box on the nightstand, she picked up a Churchill-sized cigar and lit it. Puffing seductively, she sauntered over to the settee to wait for him. Gavin joined her with the drinks and she smoothly placed the cigar in his lips. He puffed hard, then pulled it out to take a drink.

Marselete considered him as he sipped.

"They say you killed the king," she said.

"Do they?" he said, closing his eyes for a moment to enjoy the whiskey's warm pleasure.

"There are also rumors you've taken the royal physician as your newest lover. Is that true?"

"It's just serving maids' gossip. There's nothing between myself and Doctor Ambrose."

"Where is she now?" Marselete asked, unbuttoning his uniform and stroking his broad chest. His nipples came alive under her caress.

Gavin puffed on his cigar. Through with answering questions, he met her eyes and said, "I'm sure you can think of better uses for your mouth than jabbering with it."

"Indeed I can," she said and smiled good-naturedly. "But first, I think you need a bath."

\* \* \* \*

After bathing him for half an hour, she dried him and laid him on her bed. "Be still," she whispered, running her lips down his body.

Gavin lay on the bed giving his body over freely to the carnal luxury of her fellatio. The pleasure was sublime, rippling through his nerve endings in a shallow, easy current.

The fever built in him, formless and brutish in its urgency to achieve, until a rush of orgasm exploded through his loins and reverberated up his spine. As it peaked, he moaned, filling the hush of her room with his baritone roar.

Pulling her off, Gavin rolled out from under her and aggressively pulled her up on all fours, a sexual advantage he enjoyed. She whimpered in protest but complied and he mounted her, relishing the heat that folded over his still stiff erection. Of the many useful things his AEssiryan blood had gifted him with; two of his most prized were a minimal recovery period and the ability to deliver his ejaculate at will.

Without regard for her pleasure, he selfishly pounded her for hours until he finally slid off into an exhausted, restless sleep.

## CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

The royal bedchamber was awash in a murky half-light from a gap in the blue velvet drapes. Hector rolled over, oblivious to the rank dampness of his bedding or the glorious afternoon outside. He could barely tell what part of the day it was, so confused were his thoughts. This was turning out to be his worst spell yet. Tossing and thrashing, he kicked off the satin sheets that clung to his feet like tentacles and swore.

Through his partial delirium, he thought he saw his sister come in and walk to the side of his bed.

She took his hand and said, "I'm sorry for barging in but I'd been knocking for a while. Hector, please let a doctor treat you. Your sweat has a reddish tint to it and it smells ghastly in here."

He was so exhausted, he couldn't bring himself to respond. She began tenderly mopping the sweat from his forehead.

"Shatara," he said. "You must give me an heir."

"What did you say?"

"I must have an heir in case I die."

"You should have thought of that before forcing me to marry you. If you think I'm having marital relations with you, you really are crazy," she said, her voice blistering in anger.

"It is your duty as my wife."

She dropped the hand towel back into the basin with a splat. "Hector," she said. "I am not having sex with you. Not now or ever. Do you understand me? Besides, you're in no condition to give anyone an heir."

He struggled to sit up but the effort was too much for him. "Do you realize I could have you killed for defying the will of your husband?"

"I'm not too concerned about defying your will because I doubt you still have the means to stop me. But know this, if you force this upon me, I'll kill myself." Her pupils were dilated making her eyes appear black.

"Please stop with the melodrama."

"I mean it," she said.

Signaling for her help, he let her sit him up to lean against the mountain of pillows lining his headboard.

"I know you all think this stuff is in my head, but I swear to you, the God Nox really does speak to me. If you don't help me, there will be a curse upon our family for generations."

Shatara lowered herself into a grey wing chair by his bed. "I'm sorry, Hector, I just don't believe it. Your actions are that of a madman, not a prophet."

Hector closed his eyes and licked his dry lips. The simple act of talking to her was wearing him out.

"Leave me now, please," he said, sinking back down to the bed.

She stood up and moved toward the bedroom door. "Hector," she said her voice soft and light. "Did you have anything to do with my father's death?"

"How could you suggest such a thing?"

She watched him with piercing eyes. "Did you?"

"No," he said. "Of course not. I loved him, too, you know," he said, trying to sound clear over the dawning of a new migraine.

"They say Gavin is coming for you. They say he is going to defeat and dethrone you. I want you to know I hope he does and I pray for hours every night for him to succeed."

Turning away from her, he vomited in the trash can. "Isn't that touching?" he said, wiping his mouth on the bedsheet. "Unfortunately, deary, I have some sad news for you. Gavin is already dead."

Shatara stopped and looked back at him over her shoulder. "Even if that's true, someone will bring your lunacy to an end. You're not fit to rule and everyone knows it. Even your loyal followers are just waiting for an opportunity to feed off of your rotting carcass." With that said, she stormed out and slammed the door behind her.

*Bitch*, he thought. *When I become king, you'll be the next meat on the altar.* Then he rolled over and passed out.

## CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

The first indication of danger came from deep within his brain, a small primordial alcove remaining from a primitive ancestry. The intruder's scent was subtle, no more than a soft whiff in the dark, but it sent frantic alarms blaring through Gavin's nervous system. With a fleet movement, he was up and off the bed.

The room was silent and black. Removing his pants and boots from the settee, he pulled them on and made his way over to the drapes. Sliding them open, he was able to see a bit since the city lights cast a glow over the room.

Then he heard it, a sound he'd not heard in over two hundred years and it filled his stomach with dread. It was the quiet, lateral locomotion of smooth scales undulating on a hard surface. His mind tumbled back to the swampy battlefields of the Sambien lands and the belly-crawling serpentine race of warriors that defended them. His memory was torture. It paraded images of gaping, venom-filled wounds and bloody limbs. Panicked roars and earsplitting shrieks tore through his mind and dampened his skin. Gavin could taste his own fright even after all this time, dragging him back to the Sambien Wars.

\* \* \* \*

The Sambien Wars had begun as most battles on AEssyria did, with a push for more territory and an inherent curiosity about the spoils of other lands. Gavin, who had not yet visited some of the more remote parts of AEssyria, listened to the

king's pitch about expansion and heartily agreed with him. It would be in the interest of the kingdom to seek new land and resources. That was the last time he ever agreed to take an army on an expedition into uncharted territory.

Aside from the usual campaign woes, the expedition ran into a litany of other problems. The soil was so swampy, that they had to construct platforms of felled trees to keep the men and supplies dry. In addition, almost all the indigenous plant and animal life were poisonous. Then after weeks of misery, they were attacked by the Sambiens themselves.

The Sambiens reached lengths of fifteen to twenty-five feet and had a circumference that allowed them to easily consume a hyperia and still move with prompt agility. Like their habitat, they too were venomous and carried a pernicious bite. For one of the few times in his career, Gavin had come home defeated with a limping army of half its original compliment.

\* \* \* \*

Gavin scrambled back just before a flash of white fangs snapped near his face. Stunned now by how close it came, he fumbled around blindly near the vanity for the chair.

Following the sound of his movement, the creature lunged again but Gavin managed to ward it off by pushing the chair into its face. Frustrated, it issued an outraged screech that resonated in his ears for seconds to follow.

Again it rushed him, its jaws snapping the air desperately trying for a catch. Gavin kept the chair up to thwart the beast and maneuvered toward the bedpost where his belt hung.

Lacking the time to draw his sword, he opted instead for the bush knife he had taken from Colonel Hess the night before. Pulling the large, single-edged blade, he swiped it across the creature's belly, but inflicted little more than a superficial cut. Luring the Sambien toward the balcony, he backed into the French doors and bashed them open with the bottom of his boot. As he continued to back onto the balcony with the creature following, he kept the chair up and the knife poised. The Sambien slithered forward into the moonlight, pacing him, its long, graceful body stretching high over Gavin's head, its huge fanged mouth gaping open ready to strike.

Outside, he could see the creature better, a fact that didn't warm his feelings for it. Its glossy reptilian skin was a patterned rust and brown crowned by a flat, wide head that housed deep-set crimson eyes. Suddenly, the creature drew back and screeched, louder than before.

Gavin started and the creature drew its lips back in a diabolical smile. It was obvious the Sambien enjoyed the fear it caused. He ignored the creature's smugness and snatched his chance. He brought the legs of the chair down onto its head, the force of the blow driving its head to the floor, allowing him access to a vulnerable spot at the back of its skull. With predatory speed, Gavin drove the knife into the skull gap and twisted it. The serpent shuddered for a moment, and then dropped in a tangled heap.

Exhausted, Gavin sat on the hard floor chasing the bad memories of the war away. The wind gently caressed his long black hair as he thought how the madam probably convinced



Naked Venom [Book One]  
*by Michelle O'Neil, Lindsey Bayer*

the Sambien to assassinate him for a cut of the reward money. Just like he predicted, one could never trust a whore.

## CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

If the AEssiryan Kingdoms were bastions of medieval chauvinism, then the Razorback Queendom was the Renaissance. Harlan entered a city that was awash in a flurry of productivity. She marveled at the well-kept streets enhanced by open, spacious structures and dazzling colors. As she meandered awestruck down the main street, she was intercepted and warmly greeted by a delegation of three female Razorbacks. She was too exhausted to question how they knew she was coming and instead, followed them to her temporary home. Like the surrounding buildings, the apartment they provided was open and airy, with large stone arches and a wraparound balcony. Harlan was also delighted to learn that it was conveniently located near their research facility. They allowed Harlan to clean up and rest before they took her to see the queen.

The queen was the most beautiful creature Harlan had ever seen, adorned in golden robes and a headdress all sequined in precious jewels. She embraced Harlan like a sister and they ended up in her private chambers gossiping about Harlan's experiences working for the AEssyrians. Then their conversation turned to Gavin.

The queen was lying lazily on a mound of plush pillows piled high on the floor. "There are all kinds of rumors about you and General Theron."

"I can only imagine," Harlan said, wondering if he was even still alive.

"He probably saved your life taking you with him when he escaped. Word is the prince has sacrificed a few other foreign physicians since you left. He apparently blames them for his malady. I wonder why Gavin helped you. He never does anything without a reason."

Harlan smiled. "I think it had more to do with sexual conquest than heroism," she said.

"Did you?" the queen asked with a sly smile.

"Did I sleep with him? Oh, no," Harlan said, feeling uncomfortable with the intimacy of the question.

The queen rose from the pillows and poured herself more wine, offering Harlan some with a gesture.

"No, thank you," Harlan said. "I think I've had enough." She was starting to feel the hour and fought off a yawn. She didn't want to appear bored and insult the queen who had been so nice to her.

"Do you mind if I ask you why you didn't sleep with him? Most women find him very attractive."

"Well," Harlan said. "I really didn't want to be fertilizer for his ego."

The queen smiled. "I can certainly understand that. He is notorious for his many love affairs." She sipped her wine and set the goblet down on the floor nearby. "I met his mother once, she was human, too. Did you know?"

"I heard that. But that's all I know. I can't imagine why she would have come all the way out here."

The queen laughed, it was a musical sound. "She told me she was trying to get to the new human colony of Farsis One. Apparently, there were a lot of wealthy contractors there and

she wanted to marry a rich man. She had enough money to make it this far, then was unable to find a job here to continue her journey and fell into prostitution. It's a sad story."

Harlan nodded and shifted on the pillows. Stretching, she could feel the downy fingers of sleep stroking her mind. "I don't get the impression he thinks much of her," she said, beginning to drift off.

"Gavin doesn't have a high opinion of most women," the queen said just before Harlan fell into a quiet, restful sleep.

\* \* \* \*

When Harlan woke up, she was treated to a delicious breakfast banquet at the palace and then whisked off to the research labs.

The facility was modern and well equipped, causing her a pang of envy. Three of the researchers were from Earth, two molecular biologists from India, Doctors Lynda and Nigel Singh and a young toxicologist by the name of Sam Nichols. Harlan and Sam hit it off right away being closer in age and both coming from the U.S. It felt good to see other people and she tried to take everything in as Sam showed her around.

"How do you like working on the other side of AEssyria? Among the regulars, I mean," he said as they stopped in the cafeteria for a coffee.

"It's nothing like here," she said, smiling.

"Yeah, we're lucky the queen is so generous and interested in our work. So where in the U.S. do you come from?"

"I was living in San Francisco when I left to come here," she said, sipping her coffee and crowd watching.

"Wow, that's so cool," Sam said. "I'm from L.A. originally."

Harlan smiled at him, Sam was uncomplicated and easy to like. "What kind of research are your teams doing?"

"The most interesting stuff is the Razorback venom studies," he said. He pushed a piece of coffee cake into his mouth and chewed it greedily. "It has so many different properties, that we are trying to cultivate several useful derivatives."

Harlan sat still and studied him. She sipped her coffee. "I understand that the venom is extremely caustic and will pretty much melt through most carbon-based life forms, what possible beneficial uses could it have?"

"We're still working on that; we managed to strip the venom of its volatile digestive properties, but we've still had a few setbacks," he said, wolfing down the last of his cake and licking his fingers. "For instance, we came up with one derivative that showed some promise in the spectrum of viral control. Unfortunately, the project was discontinued because of its toxicity. Two AEssyrian lab assistants died after coming in contact with samples. Apparently, it absorbed right through their skin. It took them weeks to die and it wasn't pretty. It was kind of a screw up."

"How so?" Harlan asked, absorbed in his story.

"Well, we thought with the digestive properties gone, the venom would be pretty innocuous unless ingested. So we didn't take the safety precautions we should have. I managed to get some on me on more than one occasion."

Harlan stared at him inquisitively. "You seem to be in good health."

"That's the screw up. Lynda, Nigel and I are not indigenous to this planet, therefore, there are no receptors on our cells the venom can bind to. We just assumed it was safe for everyone to handle. It was awfully sad, the lab assistants' bodies had to be burned because the venom derivative doesn't breakdown in the blood, and it remains just as toxic. The queen didn't want to risk anyone else getting poisoned. We never came up with a clinical name for it, so we just nicknamed it Naked Venom."

Harlan could feel her heart speeding up, pounding in her chest as if trying to break free. That would also explain why Gavin never got sick. He was half human. "I guess you destroyed all the samples?"

Sam started collecting the trays and walked over to the scullery conveyor belt. She followed him. "All but one, Grand Duke Savion asked for a vial for his private poison collection. The nobles are really odd, you know?"

"Yes, I know," she said grimly as she followed Sam back to the labs. As the thoughts began to churn in her mind, she felt a giddy anxiety building.

"Sam, do you think I could look at the medical records for the two lab assistants?"

"I guess so, what specifically do you need?"

Harlan fought down her excitement. "First, I need their history and physicals prior to their contamination and afterward. I will also need all lab results."

## **CHAPTER FORTY-NINE**

Gavin was exceptionally proud of his weapon collection. He had been collecting for hundreds of years and had some of the finest sabers and battle axes in existence. The only problem was that his prized collection was somewhere in his now-occupied villa. He was pretty confident the prince had given his old home over to someone else by now. Gavin was counting on them not having had enough time to dispose of all his belongings so soon. All he had to do was figure out where they were storing it.

It was early morning and a thick, humid fog hampered visibility. He took a few winding, overgrown back trails from the main city. He didn't expect to meet anyone along the way, but he opted for caution and made sure to keep himself cloaked. After a short walk, he could see the villa through some gaps in the trees. As he suspected, a family was in the process of moving in. A woman with long auburn hair and a stout figure gave directions to a small, preadolescent boy. Trotting into the house, the boy nodded his head in understanding about where to put some lamps. A man with long graying hair and a bureaucratic uniform stood nearby looking lost.

Gavin crept to the back of the villa where there was a narrow storage area. He figured this would be the best place to start his search. He quietly unlatched the old wooden door and slipped inside. An intoxicating relief spilled over him when he spotted all of the boxes piled up against the far wall waiting for removal. Tearing some of them open, he rifled

through his belongings removing his muscle cuirass, a willow leaf saber, and two long-bladed knives. He also found a clean uniform and changed into it, discarding the old tattered one in a corner. After dressing and strapping on his armor and saber, he carefully attached two sheaths, one to his hip and the other to his boot. He never knew when he might need something deadly at close range.

He was ready to leave when he turned and ran right into the bureaucrat. The man stared at him, his mouth gaping. "What are you doing there? Who the hell are you?" he said, his voice quivering.

"Gods," his wife said in a breathy whisper, walking up behind her husband. "It's General Theron. They told us you were dead."

"The walking dead, apparently," Gavin said. "Listen, I don't want any trouble with you or your family. I have what I need and now I'll go."

"You're a wanted man, I can't let you just walk out of here," the man said, skipping forward to grab a small battle axe out one of Gavin's open boxes. His wife pulled on his arm in protest but he shrugged her off.

"Don't be a fool, man. I'd rather not kill you over this," Gavin said.

Looking out the door past them, Gavin spotted their young son sprinting off down the road for help. Troops would be all over this place in minutes. He had to get rid of this idiot.

Gavin stalked forward, his saber on guard, and with one swift downward chop, he cleaved the battle axe in two. The bureaucrat stumbled back a few feet.



"That's not a real weapon," he advised the bureaucrat.  
"It's decorative. Do you want a real weapon?"

The man stood mute holding what was left of the ruined battle axe in his hand.

Gavin sheathed his saber. "Why don't you stick to calculating expense reports?"

Out front, Gavin spotted a small dispatch of troops riding up. He pounced forward and snatched the man as a hostage. The bureaucrat struggled until he felt the cold knife blade at the base of his skull. "Be still," Gavin said.

Master Sergeant Rakon stormed in with soldiers on each side of him. His boots thumped noisily on the stone floor as he advanced. Gavin stepped back pulling his hostage closer. Rakon continued his advancement, seeming to have no concern for the welfare of the bureaucrat. He stopped before Gavin, still ignoring the hostage, and said, "I'm here to escort you to the royal council meeting by order of Princess Shatara," he said.

Gavin released his prisoner, and the man scrambled away. Maybe things were beginning to look up after all.

He sheathed his knife and followed Rakon out into the roasting sunlight of the AEssiryan day.

## CHAPTER FIFTY

Despite the harsh overhead light, Molotov felt blackness swirling around him. He knew he had amazed his tormentors with his endurance but now he was finished, his entire body one long note of suffering. He had long ago made an ally of pain and in time, learned to enjoy it. Everyone, however, had their limits and he had reached his.

Circling around him, his torturers unfastened his arms from the ceiling restraints. He stumbled at the loss of support and fought the urge to collapse at their feet, determined not to show them weakness.

A young lieutenant stood by the door waiting for his release. He had come to halt the beatings by order of the princess and return Molotov to his cell. A soldier on his right reached for his arm to help him walk but he irritably waved the man off. When he was able, he shuffled unaided to the door taking slow, deliberate steps.

\* \* \* \*

Arriving at his cell, he was surprised to see Princess Shatara sitting on his cot waiting for him. Molotov shuffled in and sat next to her. He felt like his spine was made of glass and any quick movement would shatter it. She said nothing, waiting to speak after his captors had gone.

"I'm sorry this happened. I didn't know you had been arrested, or I would have done something. And now I desperately need your advice," she said, watching the door for eavesdroppers.

Slowly, he eased his shirt back on. "I don't know if I'm in a good position to offer anyone advice, but I'll try," he said.

"I'm pregnant," she said. "And it's not by Hector."

"Does he know?"

"In as much as he can know anything in his condition, yes. But he's been too sick to do anything about it," she said, standing to pace the floor.

"I can only hope for your sake that the child is Savion's."

"Of course it's Savion's. Who else's would it be?" she said with a hint of indignation.

"That will certainly complicate the situation," Molitov said as he watched her striding back and forth. Her agitation was annoying him and he was drained.

"What do you think I should do?"

"I suggest you send word to him; he needs to know about this. He'll no doubt return to defend the child's life."

Shatara nodded frowning.

"Has no one in the kingdom been able to cure whatever ails the prince?" he asked, more out of curiosity than concern.

"No, and he hasn't helped matters by driving off Doctor Ambrose and killing two other doctors. He's quite feeble now, Lord. He can barely function, let alone, rule this kingdom," she said.

"That's unfortunate," he said. "Soon, we'll have chaos."

"We already do," she said. "The council of nobles is meeting soon, to decide what to do about him. I'm sorry, I have to go. Thank you so much for your help and I promise I'll get you out of here soon."

Naked Venom [Book One]  
*by Michelle O'Neil, Lindsey Bayer*

Molotov nodded and lay back on his cot as she called the soldier and left his cell. In the gloomy silence, he prayed Hector's death would come soon.

## CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

The palace walkways ambled around the royal gardens bursting with springtime colors and fragrance. Delicate pink flowers grew wild and speckled the path ahead adding new and contrasting colors to the landscape's beauty. The suns were high overhead in a typically hot and humid AEssyrian afternoon. Harlan, however, had little interest in enjoying the scene as she wrestled with how she would tell the queen what she k

The queen, who was strolling along beside her making light conversation, had been more of a friend than a ruling monarch and Harlan regretted having to tell her one of her nobles may have been responsible for the AEssyrian king's death. She also feared the queen's reaction. Swallowing her apprehension, she turned to her gracious host.

"I want you to know that I appreciate everything you've done for me and I thank you," Harlan said.

The queen smiled. "You are, of course, welcome to stay as long as you wish, so why do I get the feeling you're planning to leave soon?"

"I have come across some information that may implicate one of your nobles in the AEssyrian king's death," Harlan said, trying to read the other woman's expression. *Might as well cut to the bone of this*, she thought.

"All right, please continue," the queen said.

"It has come to my attention that Lord Savion is in possession of a toxin which may have been used to facilitate the king's demise. I also believe the AEssyrian queen

succumbed to the same poison and it may even be the root of the prince's illness."

"Are you sure?"

"Not entirely. I have to return to the kingdom and compare my notes with the medical records of the two AEssiryan lab workers who died from exposure to Naked Venom," Harlan said. "Then I'll be sure."

"I was under the impression the project had been discontinued and all the samples had been destroyed," the queen said, turning from Harlan to continue their stroll.

Harlan hesitated, not wanting to get Sam into any kind of trouble. "I was told Lord Savion specifically requested a vial for his personal poison collection."

The queen nodded somberly. "Well, if what you've found is correct, we should give him the opportunity to answer these charges."

As they ducked into the south entrance, the queen turned to one of her guards. "Summon Grand Duke Savion to my private chamber." The guard bowed and rushed off.

Harlan and the queen made their way toward her chamber to wait in an awkward and tense silence for the Grand Duke. Just before they reached it, the guard returned panting.

"Pardon, great mother, but I have been informed that the grand duke has left."

"Then you must go, too," the queen said, turning to Harlan. But she was already running down the hall.

\* \* \* \*

It took Harlan two days of heavy riding with an armed Razorback escort to reach her villa and compare her findings with those in the AEssiryan queen's records. Just as she suspected, those components in the queen's blood Harlan couldn't identify, perfectly matched the foreign components in the lab assistants' blood which had been identified as Naked Venom. Grand Duke Savion had either poisoned the king himself or supplied someone with the means of doing so. And now he was here somewhere, trying to cover it all up.

Harlan grabbed the reports and frantically stuffed them into a leather satchel, racing to get an audience with the royal council. She needed to get this information to them and hopefully, clear Gavin. But once she reached the council chambers, she found they were in session and the soldier stood fast in a bullheaded way refusing to let her in.

"Just tell them I'm here, please," she persisted. She wished she had been allowed to bring the Razorback escort with her inside the palace.

"I'm sorry, miss, I just received strict orders from the prince that no one is to enter or leave until he arrives," he said, looking amused at her frustration.

"I don't understand why you can't just poke your head in and tell them I am here. This is an urgent matter that I must discuss with the council right away," Harlan said, feeling her temper boil. "God, what is wrong with you?"

"They'll be done in a few minutes," he said lazily. "Why don't you have a seat on the nice little bench and wait? I'm sure they'll hear your complaint as soon as they're done."

"It's not a complaint, you half-wit. I have vital information they need to know right now." She stood less than a foot from the soldier and glared up him trying to look menacing. "I'm a wanted fugitive, you know. I escaped with General Theron, so you should take me inside the chamber and turn me in. I'm sure there's a reward."

The soldier yawned showing a mouth full of sharp, predatory teeth and pointed to the bench again. "Like I said, have a seat. They'll be with you shortly."

Harlan marched over to the wooden bench and sat down with a hard thump, she couldn't believe how obtuse this soldier was, and at such a time. No wonder Gavin was able to get away so many times.

\* \* \* \*

Gavin strolled into the crowded council chamber escorted by a twelve man guard. Although they had tried to bind him, he vehemently refused to allow his hands to be shackled. Finally, they relented not wanting to be late for the meeting. He audaciously surveyed the bright oval room lined with tiers of cushioned seats filled with the soft backsides of the AEssyrian aristocracy.

He could sense all eyes on him as he entered. *The fugitive has arrived.* He approached the bench, nodded a greeting to Judge Girth and the princess, who was seated directly to his left. He proceeded to his own seat in the witness box off to the side of the council officer's table.

"Lords," the judge said. "We have a number of issues to cover, so let's try to keep the outbursts to a minimum."



Everyone present seemed to murmur in agreement with a few dissenting grumbles.

"I think everyone will agree that the prince is dreadfully ill and should not continue ruling until he has recovered. According to the laws of succession, anyone of noble blood may challenge him for the throne. Unfortunately, since he is unable to fight because of his infirmity, a champion may act in his stead. It has been announced that he has chosen General Barius as his champion." The judge stood up to be heard over the crowd and projected his voice to the back of the room, "Your Excellency, are you still willing to champion the prince?"

Barius stood revealing his position in the sea of attendants. "Yes, it would be my honor."

The judge took his seat again. "Is anyone opposed to this arrangement?"

As he spoke the words, the heavy rear doors burst open and a royal herald advanced quickly to the center of the room. "All stand for His Royal Highness, Prince Hector the Divine!" The crowd came to their feet falling into an anxious hush.

Gavin leaned back in his chair lifting his boots leisurely on the wooden railing in front of him. The seat creaked in complaint under his weight. Every one of the twelve soldiers pulled their sabers and pointed them at their former commander warning him to be still.

"This your fucking idea?" Gavin asked, eyeing the judge. Judge Girth shot him a hostile glance.

"No, you bag of puss, it was mine," Colonel Hess said, pulling his own weapon and circling around to Gavin's box from behind the council chairs.

"Well now, there's a shock," Gavin said, turning his attention to the front doors where royal slaves had just lugged in a large black veiled litter.

The litter was toted up to the judge's bench and set down with care. The crowd of gathered officers and nobles buzzed with nervous talk.

"Who authorized this meeting?" the prince croaked through the closed veil.

"The nobles have the right to meet whenever they deem necessary," the judge said, trying to see the prince through the opaque drape.

"It's of little matter to me anyway, soon you will all see the true power of the God Nox," he said, having difficulty speaking. "There is only one thing I want from you people."

"What is that, my Prince?"

"Him," the prince said, stabbing a skinny, bent finger through the veil at General Gavin Theron.

## **CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO**

Gavin slowly undertook the four-story stairway leading to the sacrificial altar. The wind grew stronger as he ascended and blew in short, powerful bursts. Dried blood mixed with spatters of fresh soiled the steps in various spots along the way.

The stairs were completely void of handrails making the climb precarious, especially since Gavin's hands had been bound behind his back by the prince's men. He despised being shackled like an animal and hatred boiled in his soul fueled by dark thoughts. With every step, he watched and waited, his concentration now devoted to one goal: find a weakness in his guards and exploit it. Whatever the outcome, if death came here in this place for him, he'd take that blasted priest and anyone else he could grab with him.

Reaching the platform, the city yawned out far below. It was a vast and impressive sight. Gavin could smell the rank blood from past victims that stained the altar in front of him. It filled his mind and quickened his muscles for a fight. He gazed up from the ground, meeting the eyes of the High Priest.

The man was adorned in flamboyant yellow ceremonial robes and a high, towered headdress. He rushed toward Gavin to anoint him in preparation for the ceremony.

Gavin glanced to his left and spit; his spittle struck Nox's idol directly in the center of its face, landing just above the nose. The priest recoiled in disgust.

"I piss on your Gods," Gavin said in a rumbling growl.

"Sacrilege!" the priest screamed, wiping the offense away with his sleeve. "I'd pity you, mongrel, but I'll not waste the emotion."

"Don't worry for me, little man, your young wife gave me plenty of emotion the last time I bedded her."

"That's a filthy lie, you apostate."

Gavin gave him a devilish grin. "Is it? Your daughter has my eyes."

The High Priest choked on his response but had little time to reply. A moment later, they were interrupted by the grunts and pants of litter slaves.

The men made a tremendous racket, pushing the prince's litter up the last length of steep stairway. Just behind the prince, a group of nobles followed.

The slaves managed to maneuver the heavy litter over to where the two men were standing and gently set it on the floor. "What the hell is the hold up?" the prince said from behind the veil. "Kill him already."

Everyone standing within fifteen feet of the litter could smell the sick, putrid odor of death emitting from within. The rancid smell turned Gavin's stomach and he wondered how anyone could bear to be near it.

"Lords," Judge Girth said, coming over the last rise of steps followed by Harlan. Once at the top, he stopped and bent over fighting to catch his breath. "Doctor Ambrose has brought news."

Harlan hiked up to the nobles and said, "I have proof that Gavin didn't kill your king."

"Arrest her, she's a liar!" the prince screeched from behind the curtains. His guards moved forward to take her, but were stayed by the judge's hand.

Colonel Hess folded his arms and addressed the nobles present. "She's Gavin's lover, and she'd say anything to clear him."

Harlan scowled. "But I've brought proof that—"

"She's a whore! Don't listen to a word she says!" the prince roared, verging on hysteria.

"No," Grand Duke Savion's voice rose as he moved into the crowd. "She is telling the truth." He walked over to Harlan and stood near her. "Gentlemen, why don't we all go back to the council chamber? We have a lot to discuss."

The judge gestured at Gavin. "Release the general," he said. The guards took their keys and removed the shackles.

Gavin hung back, rubbing his wrists, as everyone else descended the stairs. He fell into step with Harlan. "I suppose I owe you some form of debt for this little rescue," he said.

Harlan smiled and began walking down the stairs just ahead of him. "Most definitely. And boy, is it going to cost you."

## CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

The council listened quietly as Harlan paced while explaining how she came to learn about the toxin called Naked Venom. To illustrate her point, she passed around lab reports from the two dead assistants and the queen herself. Gavin could see she was losing them. She got so technical sometimes, they really didn't understand what she was saying.

Duke Curin, a massive, wealthy man with grey, angry eyes, looked up from the reports and furrowed his brow. "I don't understand how any of this clears Gavin. All you're telling us is how the king was killed."

Harlan stopped pacing and met his hard gaze, "Gavin didn't have access to the toxin, only Lord Savion, the prince and the queen did," she said.

The prince, who even in the chamber had yet to leave the safe obscurity of the litter, said, "This is insane! Who cares what Gavin's tart has to say? We all know he—"

"My Prince," Judge Girth said. "Please be quiet during this hearing or I'll be forced to have you removed."

The prince moved in the litter causing a hostile rock back and forth as he slipped into a mumbling monologue of apparent persecution.

"Go on, Harlan," the judge said, gesturing to her.

"Gentlemen, I have been informed that Lord Savion has an impressive collection of poisons."

All attention turned to the Razorback grand duke. "I do indeed. It's a hobby of mine," he said with a private grin.

"How did the king and queen come to be poisoned? I can assure you, it was not by my hand. What I will tell you is this; one night a few weeks before the wedding, the queen, escorted by the prince, came to my manor to finalize some arrangements."

"Lies, lies, damned lies!" the prince shouted suddenly in a singsong voice. "Shall we spend the night listening to the sweet music of this braggart's lies?"

The judge frowned, his cheeks reddening. "My Prince, I won't tell you again to be silent."

The grand duke continued, "The queen was particularly interested in the Naked Venom. She questioned me on it for an hour. She wanted to know how it worked, if it was traceable, those types of questions. I get a lot of inquiries about my collection, so I thought nothing of it."

"Go on," the judge said.

"That was all," Savion said. "My collection is on display in my library and I can only assume that they seized an opportunity to steal it when I left them alone while I dressed for dinner. The next thing I knew, my wedding day came and the king was dead."

Harlan studied the grand duke. "If you suspected someone had used the venom, why didn't you say something?"

The grand duke paused and swept the council with a cunning gaze. He looked at Harlan again. "I was unaware the Naked Venom was missing until your investigation brought the possibility to light. In any case, it was an internal assassination. I had no idea who was responsible. I only knew the possible method used by the killer. I was also unsure how

many people were involved. If I had voiced what I knew, I might have ended up in prison myself, just like Grand Duke Molitov Von Goth."

"Is he still confined?" the judge asked a soldier on his right, breaking the narrative flow.

"I don't know," the man said.

"If he is, have him released at once and brought here," he said. The soldier walked out immediately followed by two others. Turning to the litter, the judge said, "My Prince, what do you say about these charges?"

There was a long pause. Then the prince began to weep bitterly behind the litter veil. "This entire mess has been a nightmare for me," he moaned. His voice was garbled, like he was submerged in liquid. "It was my mother's brilliant idea to use the Naked Venom. She thought it was the perfect weapon. She knew it would be untraceable in small doses. But she panicked because the old man wasn't dying fast enough. So she emptied the vial in his breakfast wine the morning of the wedding."

He sobbed like a child and Gavin shook his head in disgust.

He paused for a moment, trying to collect himself. "She threw the blame on Gavin at the last minute because she knew everyone would believe it."

"Yes they did," the judge said and turned to Gavin. "I guess we owe you a profound apology, your Excellency. You are hereby restored to your original rank and privileges."

Gavin lowered his head in gratitude.

"What is to become of me?" the prince sniveled in a faded voice.



The judge ignored him and turned his attention to Harlan. "Doctor Ambrose, we owe you an apology as well. Is there anything you can do for him?"

"I don't know of anything that can save him. The only thing I might be able to do is ease his suffering and try to make him comfortable," she said, watching the litter warily.

The scene was interrupted by the entrance of Grand Duke Molitov, who walked up and took his council seat.

He looked thin and weary but sported a freshly pressed uniform giving him a more lively appearance. He nodded a greeting to his fellow nobles, who watched him as if expecting him to drop from exhaustion at any moment.

Suddenly, the prince stopped weeping and a vacuous silence descended over the room.

"Doctor Ambrose, will you please check on him?" the judge said, tossing a look at Harlan.

Harlan approached the litter, stopping just before it to listen. Hearing nothing, she softly called the prince but no reply came.

"Watch it, Harlan," Gavin said. "He's completely mad." His voice was strong and intimate, as if they were the only two people in the room.

Harlan delicately pulled back the curtain. Before her was the gory waste of the prince. His clothes and bedding were smeared with blood and feces. The mattress was wet and reeked of urine.

"Can you get me some gloves from the clinic please?" she asked, turning to one of the litter slaves nearby. The man paused, unsure if he should follow her request.

Gavin advanced to join Harlan snapping his fingers with annoyance at the man. The slave took the cue and raced off.

Moving up next to her, he looked in the litter at the prince's crimson form. "What a disaster he is," he said to Harlan as his nose filled with that familiar burnt citrus undertone.

"Well?" the judge asked, mirroring the anxiousness of the group.

"He looks dead to me, but we'll let the doctor rule after her examination," Gavin said, stepping away again to give Harlan room.

After a few minutes, the slave returned with the gloves and handed them to Harlan. She put them on and checked the prince for a heartbeat. When she was done, she pulled the soiled gloves off with a snap. "He's dead," she said to the judge. "It's imperative that precautions are taken so that no one comes in contact with his blood."

A small entourage of close relatives escorted the litter out to prepare for the burial.

"Now to the next order of business. Who will rule?" the judge said, studying the assembled nobles. "Who among you, gentlemen, wishes to bid for the crown?"

Baron Kirus stepped forward, as did a few other higher ranking nobles.

"Molotov, are you prepared to champion the princess? It is your duty as the highest ranking noble."

"Yes, my—"

"No," Grand Duke Savion said, prowling into the open. "It's mine."

Kirus scowled. "This is outrageous! He can't challenge for the AEssyrian crown!"

The princess, obviously pregnant, entered the hall from a side entrance. "Yes, he can," she said, surprising the assembly.

Kirus, knowing the weakness of her position, turned on her. "He's a foreigner and ineligible."

"He's also the father of my child," she said. The gathering erupted into heated debate.

Gavin, standing near the rear, folded his arms and leaned back against the wall. "This ought to become interesting," he whispered to Harlan.

"I didn't think a Razorback could challenge," she said, watching the judge try to regain control of the melee.

"He can represent his unborn child. If it's a boy, he'll be allowed to fight when he comes of age. If victorious, he'll be able to keep the throne his father won for him this day. If a girl, the outcome will be forfeit and a new challenge called."

Harlan nodded.

The judge climbed on his desk and stood up projecting his voice. "Lords, please, your arguing resolves nothing. Let us handle this in an orderly manner."

The crowd began to die down.

"I can see only one solution for this matter. Lords Molitov and Savion will match each other to see who will champion the princess for the crown," the judge said.

Kirus marched over to the judge looking even more agitated. "Molitov is too weak from his confinement for this

challenge. He'll not admit it, but he won't be able to last one round against a fresh opponent."

Molotov eyed Kirus suspiciously. "I'm grateful, Lord, for your concern but I am completely capable of winning this match."

The judge sighed. "No one here is questioning your ability, Lord, but you do look worn. Perhaps someone else with no designs on the throne can do the deed."

"I'll do it," Gavin said, his voice booming across the room.

Everyone turned and watched as he strolled up the center aisle toward the judge's seat. "Besides," he added, moving up along side Savion, "It's become something of a personal matter."

Savion didn't acknowledge his rival. His face remained cool and empty.

"Is this arrangement acceptable to you two, gentlemen?"

Molotov reluctantly agreed.

The judge turned to the Razorback grand duke. "Lord Savion?"

A cruel grin stretched across Savion's lips. "I find it most agreeable," he said.

## CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR

The clinic examining room was cold and sterile but Gavin didn't mind. He sat shirtless as Harlan completed the examination and made some notes on his medical chart.

"You're all done. You can put your armor back on," she said, not looking up from her clipboard.

Gavin jumped down from the table and waited for her to finish.

She looked up and studied him with curiosity. "Is there something wrong?"

"Yes, I need an item for luck," he said. Wickedness smoked into his golden eyes.

"Like what?" she said, annoyed.

"Just a piece of your shirt will do," he said, pulling a knife from his lower back.

"Why my shirt?"

Without answering her, he sliced off a small strip of fabric from the bottom of her t-shirt and stuffed it down the front pocket of his heavy black pants. Gavin felt a quiet, powerful attraction passing through them. He could read it in the warmth and dismay of her eyes and the pleasing scent of glow on her palms. He thought about pulling her into a mauling, sexual kiss but let the moment pass like sand through his fingers.

Molotov had told him she planned to leave as soon as possible, so there was no point in getting all worked up if there was no hope for release.

"I heard you're leaving," he said, pulling on his cuirass and fastening the harness.

Harlan nodded, closing his file and holding it to her chest. "Next month," she said.

Gavin strapped on his weapon. "Safe journey," he said as he made his way to the door.

"Gavin?"

He stopped and turned to face her, one hand resting on the door lever.

She smiled. "Good luck."

He flashed rouge's grin. "Luck and skill, my dear doctor. Luck and skill. I never rely entirely on luck for anything," he said, stalking off to make his way to the arena.

\* \* \* \*

The arena was an ancient monument to battle crafted for modern convenience. It boasted careful climate control to ensure the durability of the combatants and housed a round battle area with packed black sand to improve visibility. Everything was surrounded by elevated tiered benches. High above was a painted dome that depicted the many fearsome wars of the Gods in brilliant shades of bronze, silver, and red.

In a small ready room, Gavin did the last minute checks on his armor and weaponry. He could feel the aggression quickening in him, a rushing tide of fury. As always, it was a welcome friend, filling him with focus and determination.

Gavin marched the long hallway to the arena floor. Robust, calamitous yells and cheers filled the room as he emerged into the open. Raising his saber, he saluted their enthusiasm.

The crowd roared louder creating an ear-splitting wall of noise.

He stalked the arena floor, slicing and cutting the air with his weapon, testing its weight and loosening the tension in his arm and shoulders. As he worked, a thunderous pounding began from the seats. Spectators stomped their feet in a heavy, angry rhythm to build tension and mood.

From the far end, Grand Duke Savion emerged dressed in blue-silver chest and shin armor with a spit-guard obscuring his nose and mouth. The restraint made his eyes glow with malevolence. Rolling his saber into an on guard position, he began his advance with slow, methodical steps.

Gavin roared at his enemy, a bellowing, savage howl of bloodlust that momentarily hushed the area. They soon recovered, however, and met his war cry with blistering screams of encouragement. The arena was a living, breathing monster of sound and he drank in the heated energy that spilled down from the seats.

Gavin broke into a run, tearing at his opponent and snarling with such wild abandon, that Savion broke his cadence and stopped to wait for his arrival. He was upon the other man in seconds, exploding into a riot of violence.

Raising his saber high, Gavin drove it down in a chopping, vertical blow that missed Savion's forearm by inches. While Gavin's saber was lowered, Savion shifted his stance and lowered his own weapon to waist level for a horizontal parry. The maneuver failed, however, and Gavin brought his weapon back up in a vertical cut that opened a nasty gash on the

grand duke's thigh. Savion roared in pain and stepped back, successfully deflecting Gavin's onslaught of harrowing blows.

Savion launched a counterattack, faking a low slice, then, when Gavin responded to parry, rotating his weapon upward, leaving a thin cut across the general's cheek. Bloody ribbons ran from the wound, flowing down the general's jaw and neck. Gavin swore and clenched his jaw shut against the pain.

Gavin lunged forward, locking his weapon with the grand duke's, using his size to knock his opponent down. Savion hit the ground hard and, immediately on the defensive, rolled out of the way, getting back on his feet quickly.

Gavin circled him, dipping away to the left, trying to land a strike on the other man's back. Savion, feeling the move to his advantage, sliced at Gavin's now exposed shoulder blade, but was thwarted by a behind-the-back parry.

Savion backed up again, still struggling with the close distance Gavin maintained to prevent him from an effective attack. He hissed to distract the general, a high, chilling sound that spiked Gavin's blood and made his skin flush.

Moving in close again, Gavin locked his blade with Savion's for a second time, binding his opponent and knocking the other man off balance. Savion went down again, Gavin's action scoring another strike along Savion's outer thigh.

Ruby blood slopped from the wound and the Razorback screeched in riled shock. Rolling out of the way, Savion barely avoided a driving chest strike Gavin delivered a second too late to end the fight.

Stumbling to his feet, the Razorback pivoted and sliced an open gash into the flesh of Gavin's calf. The injury opened a



profound cut that bled in pumping gushes and brought the general to his knees.

The hungry sand below them grew moist and clumped with the flow of blood and sweat, clinging to any skin it touched.

Gavin absorbed the anguish in his leg and rose to block an incoming blow with an upward chop from the hip. Unsteadily on his feet, he shook the blood from his blade and met Savion's attack again. In his rush to best Gavin before his strength gave out, Savion left himself open. Swinging fiercely, blow after blow of Savion's attack was deflected. The general took his opening, driving his saber into the yielding flesh between the gap in the Razorback's armor.

Savion's eyes blazed with terror and wrath as Gavin lifted him high, impaling him further on his saber's stinging edge. Then, with a brutal swing, he flung the other man off in a ruined heap of scarlet gore.

The crowd was up chanting Gavin's name with frenzied delight as he moved in for the kill.

Savion had dropped his blade. He rocked helplessly, his hands covering his mutilated side, his breath coming in short gasps. Gavin raised his saber high overhead, the pain in his leg dulled by the intoxicating craving for murder.

Harlan followed Molotov into the arena and strained to approach the combatants but he kept her behind him for safety.

"Gavin, you must let him live. If you don't, your career is finished," Molotov's voice bellowed over the crowd.

The homicidal light dimmed from the general's eyes and he stepped back, lowering his saber and allowing them to help

his fallen enemy. Gavin turned, limping in agony to a side bench when the sound came.

It was a high-pitched, soul-chilling noise that Gavin knew well. Off to the side, he spotted Molitov pushing Harlan away from the Razorback lord. The crowd, confused, dropped into silence.

When Gavin turned around, Savion had risen to his unsteady feet. With his saber supporting part of his weight, he tore the spit-guard away in one swift motion.

He hissed again, a warning and an oath of death. The sound was sharp, carrying a slight liquid gurgle. It was an auditory threat of the toxin's pledged delivery. Gavin's skin came alive, prickling with the anticipation of a charring venom strike.

Gavin met Savion's eyes and they were empty, bleeding pure hate. Reaching back to his sheath, he pulled his knife hoping even at this distance, for a clean throat shot before the strike came.

Another hissing growl pierced the arena's quiet but this time, it was different. It was a feminine, high tone; the unmistakable sound of the Razorback queen. Gavin dared not take his eyes off his opponent, for fear he'd lose his opportunity for a counterstrike. The stare down broke when she walked between them.

"Savion," she said in a powerful, commanding tone. "You will stand down."

Lowering his head, the Razorback lord spit his venom onto the ground, where it steamed and burned in frothy goo. The queen helped him off the field trailing great volumes of blood

from his wounds. The spectators began applauding again, filling the cavernous space with the rich, happy sound.

Gavin was fatigued and battered by his pain. The injury to his leg throbbed in agony and his head pounded in rhythm to his pulse. Soon, Harlan was there at his side, tending to him, and directing three soldiers to carry him to the infirmary.

## EPILOGUE

Harlan threw her favorite blue sweater into her suitcase and frowned. She was surprised leaving was upsetting her so much after all she had been through. Picking up another item to pack, her thoughts were interrupted by the doorbell. She trotted over and threw the door open. Molotov smiled, dressed in an impeccably neat uniform. She thought he looked quite dashing.

"Hello, sir. Or should I call you regent now?" she said, grinning.

"Molotov will do nicely. May I have a moment of your time?"

She opened the door and stood back for him to enter. "Please, come in."

He crossed the threshold and took a seat at the dining room table. "I've come to beg you to stay. Your value to us is immeasurable."

Harlan closed the door and pulled a dining chair up near his. "I miss home and quite frankly, I don't feel safe here. Any change in rulers, and I could land in jail again or dead."

Molotov looked thoughtful. "I can't always promise you that you'll be safe, but then again, I couldn't promise you safety anywhere you lived." He rubbed his hands together slowly.

"What if I offer enticements for you to stay?"

"What kind of enticements?"

"Your own research facility. I can't say when it will be built, but..."

"Anything else?"

"A pay raise."

"Is there more?"

Molotov stroked his lower lip with his index finger. "I could throw in a bigger villa."

"Now you're talking."

"So you'll stay then?"

"I'll stay for a while longer," she said, not wanting to commit.

Molotov rose to leave and Harlan showed him to the door. As she opened it, they spotted Gavin limping up the walkway. As Molotov walked past, the two men stopped for a moment to exchange a word. Then the grand duke continued on.

Gavin moved up and leaned in the doorway without, she noted, the cane she'd given him until his leg healed.

"Where's your cane?"

"It's at the office," he said offhandedly. "May I come in?" He was breathing hard from the effort of limping.

Harlan let him in and closed the door behind him.

"I've heard you've agreed to stay," he said and lowered himself into a wing chair by the fireplace.

She folded her arms. *I didn't stay because of you*, she thought. "He offered me a nice deal to stay."

Gavin tossed her a probing stare. "Did he? May I smoke?"

"I wish you wouldn't."

"I'm a wounded old man, show me some mercy."

Harlan frowned and retrieved an ashtray from the bar as he lit a cigar. He puffed heartily on it, filling the room with veils of smoke.

"How's your leg?" she asked, still standing.

"Better," he said, examining it from the outside of his boot. "You do nice stitch work." He fixed her with a riveting look. "Come here."

"Why?"

"Don't make me get up, my leg is killing me," he said.

Harlan strolled over to him and pulled her chair in to face his. But before she could sit, he grabbed her arm. Slowly, he pulled her into his lap and placed his cigar in the ashtray.

He kissed her deeply. A soft, hungry kiss parting her lips and stroking his tongue onto hers. The scent of him, warm and musky, intoxicated her. His mouth was hot, searching, sliding down the milky whiteness of her throat. His hands reached under her shirt, freeing her breasts from her bra and massaging them. He pulled her shirt up, taking each breast into his mouth and loving them until the nipples were rosy and tender. His hands were all over her body, awakening forgotten feelings of longing and need. She knew she had to stop him or she would soon be engulfed by the passion of his lust.

"Gavin," she said, bracing herself for his anger.

"Yes, my love." His voice was a sexy baritone whisper.

Harlan smiled and carefully eased off his lap. "I'm really not ready for this yet."

To her surprise, he nodded and picked up his cigar again. "What about dinner then?" he said, struggling to rise from the chair.

"That would be nice," she said.

She helped him up and they made their way to the door. Opening it for her, he said, "Do you think there's a future for you and I?"

Harlan grinned, liking him for the first time since they'd met. "I don't know, General. There just might be."

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