

CARNAL AMBITION

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PROLOGUE

It was the first whisper of morning with just a promise of light coloring the sky and all Megolyth could think of was murder. He'd thought about it all night, rehearsing, smelling and tasting it, and now he was ready. It was a sureness in him; a confident surrender to the fickle will of destiny which dictated this killing would have to be now.

The victim of this assassination was to be High Lord Halcion, their reigning chieftain. The reason was simple. Today, Megolyth was finally of age to challenge for leadership of the band. Leadership was what his band desperately needed. Up to this point, their chieftain had led them from the fringes of one kingdom to another, endlessly searching for a place to call home. Megolyth knew he could do better.

With quiet reverence, he rose from the small altar in his tent, his knees cracking. The stick incense continued to perfume the space with a mild vanilla scent, its thread of smoke drawing frosted swirls in the air.

His leather tunic and steel cuirass smelled of fresh oil and polish as he stepped out into the darkened camp. Tents in vibrant colors of rust and bronze peppered the landscape around the central bonfire, their walls billowing in the gentle breeze. It was too early for almost anyone to be awake, especially Halcion. Megolyth walked down the short sandy path to their chieftain's tent, observing it typically unguarded as he approached.

It astonished him that the man had managed to live so long and be so careless about his own safety. Even now, with Megolyth having come of age to challenge, Halcion still posted no guards outside his tent. Someone less scrupulous could easily slay him as he slept and never even offer the opportunity to defend himself.

He passed an old woman stripping a carcass for the morning meal. "Good morning to you, young Lord," she said as he passed.

Megolyth nodded a greeting to her and smiled. His nostrils filled with the sweet aroma of fresh meat and he noted the woman's hands covered in fleshy grime. The sight excited him, rushing his soul for a hunt.

He arrived at the chieftain's tent and paused. The warm scent of Halcion's wife, Anna, hung in the air just inside the threshold. He thought of slaying her as well, but in a second of reflection, he decided to let her live. She was still young and attractive and posed no threat to him, besides it was foolish to anger both their families.

His youth was baiting him, driving him to hurry, but he held back. He breached the tent with nimble care.

Inside laid the silver-haired chieftain, his breathing heavy with sleep. His much younger wife lay on her belly half draped across him, her exposed back partially obscured by a brown leather throw.

Megolyth circled to the old man's side of the bed. He crouched down to his chieftain's ear in the darkness, leaning in close. "It's time, Lord," he said.

The old chieftain startled and scrambled away from Megolyth. His abrupt action woke his wife, and she groaned in protest.

Megolyth stood and stared down at them. "I'll be waiting outside," he said and stalked out.

In a few moments, his chieftain emerged looking ruffled and unfocused. A group of spectators gathered around them, tasting a battle in the air.

Halcion searched the crowd for a friendly face. His countenance was desperate and haggard. "This should not be," he said, addressing the swelling crowd. He stretched his arms out, pleading. "He's barely a man. Do you truly want to be lead by someone with so little experience?"

No one spoke. Many avoided looking at him not wanting to be associated with a man they believed was soon to die. No one wanted his doom to rub off on them.

The twin suns cleared a low ridge to the east as he spoke, dazzling everyone with brilliant light and delicate heat. Megolyth pulled his bastard sword from its scabbard and waited as the old man continued to stall. Megolyth hoped

he'd die better than this when his end came. This would be a hard kill for him. The old man had always shown him kindness. Megolyth, however, had come to realize Halcion's kindness was cowardice in disguise. Today was the day the marauders would have a new future, finally shedding their nomadic past.

The old chieftain was turning now, searching the eyes of his audience for help or pity. This was an enormous mistake. Weakness of any kind was regarded as unmanly and an embarrassment. No one seemed willing to help. Defeated, the chieftain finally pulled his saber.

Megolyth charged him, taking two heavy strides forward and raising his weapon. The older man stumbled backward as though surprised at the attack. He clumsily raised his weapon in a feeble attempt at defense, but Megolyth was already on him bringing his saber down in a quick horizontal cut to the neck.

The chieftain's head came off in one smooth slice. Blood sprayed from the wound as the body fell like a crumbling tower. The chieftain's wife gasped in horror and fell to her knees, clutching the blanket around her tightly.

Megolyth was showered in blood. He stepped over the body twitching on the ground and plucked the head up by the hair. Taking a spear from a nearby warrior, he jabbed the severed head on the tip and stabbed the staff into the ground. Slick crimson gore glistened on his face and armor as he turned his gaze to the crowd.

"My brothers and sisters, although our veins pulse with royal blood, we live like savages, scraping the wilderness for our survival. Today, that has come to an end." He paced slowly, meeting each listener's eye, and then moving on to the next. "As I speak to you, there is an AEssyrian kingdom with no king. Soon, we will make it our home and put an end to this migrant savagery."

Megolyth waited, ready, wondering if his rise to leadership would be challenged. As everyone lay silent, he caught his grandfather's gaze and the man smiled at him. It was a proud, supportive smile, an encouragement to continue his choices so far.

The sound started low, a gravelly rumbling that grew in volume with the number of people who joined it. Soon, it rose from the clan; it's hard, demanding rhythm accompanied by the pounding of feet and spears.

"Megolyth!

"Megolyth!

"Megolyth!"

Megolyth shook the blood off his blade and raised it to salute them. A few bloody smears still clung to its shiny surface. It gleamed in the aura of sunlight. The steady bellow of the crowd was the most compelling thing he had ever heard. The noise thrilled him swelling his pride.

CHAPTER ONE

The imperial ballroom was a cavernous spectacle of elegance. Beneath the guests was a polished white marble floor, framed all around by white walls trimmed in gold that glowed with their cleanliness. Small round tables were situated around the dance floor, each one covered in crisp, contrasting black linens.

Gavin sipped his whiskey savoring its bite. He felt Harlan's arctic gaze settle upon him. Shifting his heavy frame in the chair, he lifted his boots onto the seat in front of him, tearing a small hole in the cushion with his spurs. The musicians fiddled with their instruments, preparing for the next set.

"Are you going to dance with me, my love?" he asked her in English.

"I don't think you're sober enough to dance," she said, looking away to study an elegantly dressed group of noblemen standing nearby. When she met his gaze again, there was a spark of warm humor in her eyes.

Gavin grinned and tossed back the remaining liquor in his tumbler.

"Nonsense."

Doctor Harlan Ambrose was the most attractive woman he had ever met, and he also found her the most erotic. Tonight, she had drawn her long black hair up in a loose bun and some wisps of it had fallen free, drawing attention to her graceful, alabaster neck. Her dress was a simple but elegant off-the-shoulder ball gown in scarlet and black, an excellent match to his black and gold uniform. He licked his lips as his loins burned to consume her.

The music began again, the band opening with an old Assyrian waltz composed centuries ago. Gavin rose from the table, set his glass on it, and walked around in front of her. He held his hand out for her to join him.

"I'm not very good at dancing," she said. "I never really learned."

"It's easy. Just follow my lead."

Harlan rose from her chair and he guided her to the center of the dance floor. As he pulled her into his embrace, he noticed her gaze roam the crowd. He

imagined he could read her thoughts, wondering who might be watching and object to their friendship.

Gavin knew no one was fooled by their usual platonic displays. His lust for her was quite obvious to anyone with eyes as he found any excuse to touch her, much to her annoyance.

Their progress was slow at first; she was tense and working too hard to catch the steps of the dance. But as the music flowed, she relaxed and glided with him. He tried to guide her gently, indicating every change of direction and step with a slight hip pressure, and soon, she learned. The music swirled like sorcery around them, carrying them away with the sweetness of its melody. He buried his face in her neck, gently inhaling the pleasant aroma of honeyed soap on her skin. Then the song was over, and he released her.

Gesturing to the balcony, he guided her across the dance floor for a break outside.

Once there, Harlan leaned against the stone railing admiring the gaily illuminated gardens below. Each of the elaborate topiaries were lit with soft colors of amber and blue, setting a whimsical mood to the surroundings.

Gavin crept up behind her, kissing the back of her neck and pushing his hips into her butt so she could feel the intensity of his erection.

She turned abruptly, making him step back. "Stop that," she said, poking him in the chest with her index finger.

Smirking, he took a small step back and reached into his tunic to pull out his favorite Earth vice, a Churchill-sized Cusano 18. He clipped the end and lit it. "Why?" he said in between puffs.

She glanced around. "Because it makes me uncomfortable and it's rude."

Gavin laughed. "I beg your pardon, then," he said with a slight mocking bow. "So when, darling, are you planning to allow me to move our relationship forward?"

"What do you mean?"

Gavin puffed on the cigar and lifted his head to blow out a long ribbon of smoke. "Don't play with me, Harlan. You know exactly what I mean."

Harlan folded her arms, fixing her gaze on a clique of AEssyrian women whispering and watching them from the garden. Their long, colorful, layered dresses billowed in the wind caressing their green skin. "We've talked about this already and I've made my feelings clear."

Gavin watched her as she gazed at the women. He slowly shook his head. Sometimes, she was a little too concerned with what people thought. "I know what your real feelings are. I can taste them in your kisses."

She met his stare. "Gavin, I'm not a teenager. I'm well aware that there are more things involved here than just sex and I'm not ready for additional complications to my life. And as long as we're discussing it, I really am sick of you badgering me with this every time your blood alcohol level peaks."

He was about to reply that he was tired of being denied by her. After all, he'd never waited so long for any woman. But just as he was about to speak, he saw Captain Slone cut across the dance floor and rush toward them. He looked worn and grim from a hard ride.

The captain was young for his rank and Gavin estimated his age somewhere around three hundred. Unlike many other AEssyrian warriors, he kept his dark brown hair shoulder length. This peculiarity was considered by many to be a hint of vanity and made him the target of much ribbing amongst his peers.

"Excellency," he said, bowing his head.

Gavin turned his full attention on the man. "What news?"

The captain glanced at Harlan, clearly uncomfortable talking in front of her.

Catching his look, she said, "Excuse me, gentlemen," and slipped back into the ballroom.

The captain waited for Harlan to be out of earshot, then said, "There is a band of marauders camped near the mountains, just outside our northeastern border."

"How many?"

"Early estimates say fifty thousand."

“How long have they been there?”

“Six to eight hours.”

“No messages yet?”

“None so far, Excellency.”

“Find the flag officers and discreetly tell them we’re having an emergency meeting in the war room right now.”

“Yes, Excellency,” said the captain and rushed off immediately.

Gavin crushed out his cigar, pocketed it again, and stalked inside to arrange for Harlan’s escort home. *Your virtue will be safe tonight, my dear*, he mused with a wicked, private smile.

CHAPTER TWO

Gavin stalked into the war room and felt a rush of cold air wash over him. Turning to a controller by the door, he adjusted the thermostat. It was set far too low, so he raised it higher to a comfortable ninety-five degrees.

His flag officers, Typhon, Barius, and Geryon followed close behind, as did Captain Slone. Freshly plucked from the royal ball, they were all on edge knowing something big was happening. If they were disappointed at leaving the festivities, they didn't let on. They filed in and took their seats at the oval conference table, turning their attention to their general.

Gavin leaned against the wall with his arms folded waiting for everyone to settle. He hated to repeat himself and he found that if he gave his audience time to focus, he usually didn't have to. When all was quiet, he moved to the podium and punched a code into the keypad. A large glass map of the AEssyrian kingdom rolled up from the floor.

"Captain, why don't you show us what your scouts are reporting?" Gavin said, stepping off to the side.

Captain Slone moved up to the map and pointed at the upper right-hand corner, where several mountain ranges were depicted by symbols. "We have reports the marauders are camped right here. Some of our men believe they are the same band who attacked the Halkok kingdom early last year. Some of our spies think they were only testing and training their young warriors. If that's correct, then they're seasoned warriors by now. Our spies tell us there was a recent change in leadership and they are currently being led by a man named Megolyth."

"Isn't he supposed to be the deceased Emperor Rathdal's great grandson?" Barius asked.

The captain nodded. "That's right," he said. "They all claim to be descended from ancient royal lines which were exiled from their birth homes for various acts of defiance or treachery."

Typhon turned to the captain. "So, what do they want?"

Gavin moved forward again and nodded to the captain, indicating he would take over. Captain Slone took his seat. "They've probably heard we have no king. I've monitored the reports of Megolyth's rise for some time and although he's young, he's very ambitious. He must be planning to offer the princess marriage. That, of course, would be the fastest path to the throne."

Barius scoffed. "She'll never agree. What woman would when faced with the prospect of her son being slain by her new husband?"

"The question before us is this," Gavin said, steering them back to the subject. "What will they do if the princess refuses to meet with their leader?"

"I would guess," said Typhon. "They'll invade."

Barius leaned his chair back and studied the ceiling. "That's crazy. They'd have no chance, we'd cut them down like swine."

Gavin stared at Barius for a long moment. "Are you so sure?" Gavin asked.

Barius met Gavin's critical look. The room dropped into a tense silence. "They only have something like fifty thousand men. We could slaughter them in the field in a few hours."

"You're assuming they would engage in a direct attack. That's not how these bands operate," Geryon said. "Besides that, how can you be sure there are only fifty thousand?"

Barius rocked his chair back and forth playing with its squeak. "That's what the scouts are reporting. It sounds good enough to me."

"No, Barius," Gavin said, striding up to his seat. "That's what the scouts are *estimating*."

Barius slipped into a sullen silence.

Gavin turned to Typhon and Captain Slone. "I want you both to prepare a report for the princess and the nobles. Be as accurate as you can, but try not to panic them. As soon as it's ready, I'll meet with them for a full briefing and provide them with the report to study at their leisure."

Typhon and the captain bowed their heads and exited the conference room.

Gavin looked at Geryon. "Commander, I want you to ride out and see Grand Duke Molitov Von Goth and tell him exactly what's going on. He needs to know all this before the princess does."

Geryon bowed his head. "Yes, Excellency," he said and raced out.

Gavin closed the door behind Geryon and turned his attention to Barius. "Having tasted the position of general, you are finding it hard to take orders from me now, aren't you?"

Barius returned Gavin's piercing stare. "Yes."

Gavin gently touched the pommel of his saber. "Feel it hard enough to try and take back your position?"

Barius took his cue and stood quickly, advancing on Gavin with long, powerful strides. His hand dropped to the hilt of his weapon ready to draw. However, before he was able to pull it free of the scabbard, Gavin closed the distance between them and intercepted him. He backhanded his officer with shattering power. The blow knocked Barius through the air and onto his back.

Gavin walked up and leisurely placed his boot on his commander's chest, pinning him. He let out a dark, humorless laugh. "You'd better learn to be a good boy and soldier along, or your relatives will be labeling the left over parts of you for burial. Do you understand me?"

Barius glared at Gavin and coughed from the pressure on his chest. "Yes," he hissed. "I understand you."

Gavin removed his boot and strode over to the door. He mentally added Eastern Commander Barius to the roster of men he never again intended to turn his back on.

CHAPTER THREE

The first week of winter brought with it a cold seventy degrees and already Gavin knew it was going to a miserable three months. This morning was worse yet, instead of being buried in blankets with his favorite whore nursing a hangover, he was here in the royal gardens under a gloomy sky, following Princess Shatara, Grand Duke Molitov von Goth, her regent, and Baron Kirus Younger, Shatara's new sycophant. He detested the maneuverings of resolute men to curry favor. It always made his job much harder in so many unexpected ways.

Everyone present was dressed for the weather in leather gloves and heavy woolen cloaks.

Shatara had yet to respond to the report Gavin had just delivered. She strolled along with her full lips pouting worriedly.

Suddenly, she stopped and turned to Molitov. "I'll not see him," she said, the wind gently blowing her long, brown hair.

"Lady," Molitov said in a measured tone, "Refusing him an audience is ill-advised. You should at least listen to what he intends to offer you."

Shatara folded her arms. "I already know what Lord Megolyth's going to say, and so do you." Turning from Molitov, she resumed walking. "I'm not going to let any man kill my son so I can brood a new royal line for him."

Molitov glanced at Gavin, a private signal for him to try and reassure her.

In response, Gavin hurried his pace, coming up alongside her. She was a lovely woman, and for a fleeting moment, he felt sorry for her. She gave him a sideward glance. "It will be safer for the boy if you do agree to see him, Lady."

"Why is that?"

"Because if he feels there's a possible future with you, he'll do all he can to stay in your good graces."

Kirus, walking a few feet behind them, now moved up to enter the conversation. "That's ridiculous." His green eyes flashed contempt.

Gavin stopped and glared at him. "What do you suggest, Lord?"

"I think she's correct in refusing to see him. She has every right to be concerned for her child. Their chieftain wants the throne and he'll definitely require his own bloodline. We must destroy him to protect Her Royal Highness."

Molotov scowled and addressed Shatara, "All we are talking about is granting him an audience. We don't even know what he is going to say. This paranoid speculation is untimely and pointless."

"There is another option," Gavin said. He was growing angrier by the second.

Shatara pulled at her cloak, tightening it around her throat as she examined him. "What's that?"

Gavin ignored her and turned to Molotov. "We could offer the boy up for adoption."

Molotov shifted uncomfortably. "I don't think—"

"That's horrific," Shatara said, addressing Gavin with her teeth clenched.

Gavin regarded her coolly. "What's more horrific, Lady, your son with another family, or your people dying in the field by the thousands for one child?"

"I can't believe my father loved you so and that I defended you when you were falsely accused of his murder!"

"As I recall, your support didn't extend far enough to secure my release from prison," he said.

"I did the best I could for you," she said, her voice taut with emotion.

"I'm touched."

Molotov rubbed his forehead and stepped between them. "That's enough of this bickering. No one is going to force you to give your child up for adoption. Gavin was only offering one of many possibilities."

Shatara leaned into Kirus, who put a protective arm around her shoulder. *He's probably already moved into her bed,* Gavin thought.

"Most days, I think everyone would prefer it if I just stepped down," she said. "But that's not going to happen. Do you understand me? Therefore, I suggest you all try a little harder to be supportive of me in my position."

“What position would that be, Lady?” Gavin said. “You really have no position to speak of. You are currently occupying a space by the good grace of the council. My guess is that they are not going to wait until your brat is of age to challenge before replacing you. ”

Molotov placed a hand on Gavin’s shoulder. “Gavin, please stop baiting her,” he said, softly shaking his head.

“Gavin,” her voice trembled as she fixed him with an iron stare. “I order you to get rid of these marauders using any means in your power. I’ll also reward you handsomely if you bring me the body of their leader, Megolyth.”

Gavin gave her a malevolent smile. “You’re not a queen, dear. You don’t order me to do anything.”

She stiffened and seemed ready to respond when Molotov adjusted his monocle and sighed, shifting her focus. “You mean you would risk war and place your son’s needs before those of the kingdom?”

A frosty wind blew over them and no one spoke for several minutes as they waited for it to pass. Then Kirus turned to Molotov and finally spoke, “I don’t think war is inevitable if she refuses. After all, Lord, they are really just a dirty band of criminals.”

“If you can’t see the danger in this, then you’re a fool,” Molotov retorted, then turning back to Shatara, he said, “The council will meet and discuss this matter, Lady. Then they will decide what the proper course of action should be.”

Shatara looked up at Gavin. “Until they countermand my order, you will follow it, or I’ll appoint someone who will.”

Gavin glanced at Molotov who seemed to have lost interest, staring off in the direction of the palace. He knew exactly how Molotov felt. “I have no objections, Lady, to bringing you the body of the chieftain,” he said. “Megolyth, however, may be of another mind.”

Seemingly satisfied, Shatara and Kirus headed back to the palace together hand in hand. Gavin and Molotov stood together in the chill of the gardens watching them go.

Gavin reached into his cloak and pulled out a slightly used cigar. Lighting it, he glared off after them. "I think I need a drink."

Molotov lifted his gaze from the departing figures and smiled. Playfully, he slapped Gavin on the back and said, "I think I'll join you. Come on, I'll buy."

CHAPTER FOUR

Kirus slid out of Shatara's bed shortly after midnight. She didn't notice his departure and he paused to look at her before dressing. She was a beauty. Her long brown hair lay across her pillow and her generous bosom rose and fell with the cadence of sleep. What a shame that she had gotten involved with Razorback Grand Duke Savion and had a son by him.

Not long before the boy's birth, the shocking truth emerged. Savion, the golden boy of the royals, was the very instrument responsible for her father's murder. Perhaps not as guilty as administering the toxic venom himself, but responsible nonetheless, for the company he kept. His guilt sealed his future and he was exiled to the Razorback queendom forever. Only, to everyone's scandal, he didn't bother to invite his pregnant fiancée.

Abandoned by the grand duke, Shatara was frantic for a legitimate husband. Deep in her heart, however, she knew her association and indiscretion made her poison to marry.

Her situation had made it easy for him. He'd known exactly what to say to make her trust him. She was so frightened for her son, so desperate for her own salvation that she would have believed anything he said. Someday, she would die for that misplaced trust. After all, she was little more than a liability when her power was stripped away.

Light blue moonlight filled the bedroom as the night wore on. He pulled his pants on and sat in a corner chair tugging on his boots. He finished dressing in the partial darkness and thought of his father. He needed to be home before morning or the old man would worry. Kirus didn't really want to field awkward questions regarding his nightly whereabouts.

Quietly gathering the rest of his things, he made his way to the door. He placed his hand on the handle and took one last look at the princess. Suppose she had a change of heart about Megolyth and decided to see him after all? An emotional move like that wouldn't be out of character for her and would certainly

screw up all his plans. That is, of course, if Megolyth did offer her marriage, which was likely. *Well*, he thought, pulling the door open as faded hallway lights spilled in, he'd just have to convince her of what a very bad man Megolyth the marauder really was.

It was late and the tavern echoed with the din of a growing crowd. Gavin leaned back in his chair nursing a whiskey and watching the patrons spill in and mingle. He sat alone, his companion Molitov having gone home about an hour ago. High priced whores worked the men, searching for a patron who would make their future a little more secure. Some caught his eye but he gave them a slow shake of the head. *No company required tonight.*

Oddly, being here only made him think more of Harlan. Not that she was the sort to frequent a place like this. No, Harlan was an intellectual, more interested in spending the night reading than wasting time in a loud, shady tavern. She was so different from any woman he'd ever known, which was probably why he was so strongly attracted to her. He also knew she cared for him. They had been spending more and more time together and he was confused by her reluctance to explore their sexual attraction. To him, it was the most logical next step in their relationship. It was possible his race intimidated her, but he doubted that was true. It was probably just as she said; she feared being hurt by him. A silly notion really, considering he had done everything in his power to communicate how much he cared for her. Now that she was in his life, he felt transformed somehow, constantly striving to be a man worthy of her affection.

Someone pulled a chair at his table out and stood over it. Gavin glared up, ready to tell them to screw off, when he recognized Commander Barius. His tall, lean frame lacked intimidation but disguised a deadly combatant. Gavin thought it odd that his long black hair, usually tied back into a tight braid, now hung loosely in waves to his shoulders, giving him an unkempt appearance. Dark shadows permanently rested beneath his small gray eyes projecting a hidden stress.

"Mind if I join you?" he said.

What the hell, Gavin thought. *Why sit here and drink alone like an old hermit?* Gavin nodded and gestured to the empty chair.

Barius signaled to the barmaid across the room for a drink. She appeared a moment later, took his order and disappeared into the growing mass of people. He leaned over the table, tracing the scratches on its surface with his fingers.

"Are you holding a grudge?"

"No. Are you?"

"No."

"Good," Gavin said. "Then we can be friends again."

The barmaid brought Barius' drink and a new one for Gavin, and then she rushed off to tend to other patrons. They lapsed into a long silence. Barius sipped his drink, stealing glances at Gavin. He leaned back in his chair. "You don't trust me anymore, do you?"

"No, I don't. And before you ask me why, I'll tell you that I don't know. Perhaps it's because I know what it was like for you to taste the power of being general and have it stripped away again. Maybe it's because I sense a secretiveness in you since my commission was reinstated. Perhaps it's because I would be disappointed in you if you didn't try to take that rank back. Who knows, but, no I don't trust you anymore, nor am I likely to change my feeling in the future."

Barius shifted in his seat twisting his glass in circles on the table. "Are you going to bust me down? Replace me as your commander?"

Gavin gulped down his shot. He gave Barius a hard stare. "No, you don't need to worry about your career. I'll not cut it short that way."

"So what are your plans? You never do anything without a plan. Maybe you'll be kind enough to share them with me."

"The game is yours to play, Barius," Gavin said. "You decide what you want. If you want to be general, then you'll have to defeat me for it. The only thing I ask is that you do it in the open, like a man. Please don't sneak around

with assassins, plotting for what you want. That might get you somewhere in the short run, but you'll lose in the end."

Barius finished his drink and stood up. "Such profound words of wisdom from the celebrated General Theron. I truly am blessed." He turned from the table, pushed his way through the crowd, and disappeared out the door.

The barmaid returned and looked older to him than she had only half an hour ago. The noise of the crowd was filling his head and he needed to leave.

She leaned down to be heard over the noise. "Another one, Excellency?" she said, her breathy voice caressing his cheek.

His thoughts turned to Harlan and the inviting warmth of her kiss. "No, dear," he said, standing and dropping several coins onto the table. "I've got someone to see."

Gavin chomped on the unlit stub of his cigar and rang Harlan's doorbell again. This time, he pressed it much longer.

Finally, the intercom crackled to life. "It's late, Gavin," Harlan said. "What do you want?"

"Let me in."

"Why can't you come back tomorrow?"

"Because I want to see you now, that's why," he said, feeling foolish the minute he said it. He shouldn't have had those last couple drinks before he left the bar. He was now much drunker than he thought he'd be and his mouth was dry and papery.

She opened the door and reluctantly stepped back to let him in. "How did I know you would be drunk?" she said as he passed her.

He made his way to her leather sofa and collapsed heavily. The thick, warm smell of roasting embers infused her living room and looking up at her, she appeared to have just gotten out of bed. Her cream-colored t-shirt was thin enough to make out the ripe fullness of her breasts and the small circles of her areolas. Her black sweatpants, baggy and loose, seemed like they'd be easy to

peel off, and he fantasized what her naked body would look and feel like. His private thoughts became liquid fire in his groin and he was engulfed with the need to touch her.

She closed the door but stayed by it. Catching his leer, she folded her arms across her chest. "What are you doing here?"

He responded by plucking the stub of cigar from his teeth and holding it out to her. She pointed to the fireplace and sighed. He flicked it though the air and it landed on what was left of the smoldering wood. "You need to go home. You can't stay here."

Gavin smiled at those familiar words and patted the seat next to him. "You're always breaking my heart," he said. "One kiss and I'll go."

"No," she said, walking over to the door and opening it. "You need to go now."

Easing off the sofa, he stalked over to her and placed his hand on the door just above her head, pushing it closed. He leaned down to kiss her and she slipped away, trying to keep distance between them. Refusing to accept her escape attempt, he pursued, cornering her by the dining room table.

He reached for her, pulling her into a loving embrace. Harlan pushed on his chest, trying to stop him. "I'm sorry I let you in here," she said in a breathy whisper.

Gavin could hear the longing in her voice and it ignited him, driving him on. He tightened his arms around her and engulfed her in a carnal kiss. For a few minutes, she surrendered to him, relaxing and yielding to his seduction. Her kiss was fire itself and he read promises in its rising burn. Then, in the next moment, she tried to break away.

Not this time my love, he thought, and he refused to let her go. Picking her up, he carried her to the bedroom as she grappled with him to put her down.

"Gavin, stop it!" she said.

The alcoholic haze was strong now, driving his lust as he tossed her on the bed.

She immediately stood up and jogged across the mattress, escaping to the opposite side of the room. "Get out of here now!" she screamed.

He closed the bedroom door and unbuttoned his tunic, tossing it on her dresser. She stayed in her corner, watching him carefully and her panic excited him more. When he spoke, his voice surprised him, spilling out in a deep, purring rumble. "Come here, Harlan," he said. He circled around the bed to corner her.

Determined to get out, she leaped on the mattress again, racing across it to reach the door before he could intercept and block her. She was not quite fast enough, however, and he seized her midway across and pinned her down, holding her with his chest.

"Are you alright?" he said, nuzzling her neck.

She thrashed against his embrace. "Get off me," she bit out.

Ignoring her protests, Gavin slid one hand up her shirt and kneaded her breasts as she struggled. While kissing her neck, his hands roamed over her body, fueling his arousal with each new discovery. Boldly reaching into her sweatpants, he dipped into her underwear, exploring the warm, inviting center of her sex. She gasped in shock. His desire was striking and urgent, confounding his attempts to control it.

Harlan was militant now, battling hard for her release. Tears of anger and fright left glistening trails down her cheeks. She looked so pale and young to him.

"Please don't fear me, my love," he purred to her.

Her green eyes raged at him. "I don't fear you; I hate you."

Her fury sobered him, and for the first time since he'd come here, he realized through his deadened senses that she didn't consider this a game. He felt an empty ache in his chest. Her rejection didn't fit anywhere in his vision of their relationship.

He lifted himself off her and she rolled away, leaving him alone on the bed. He heard her open the door, and it slammed against the wall shattering the dresser mirror. His head started to pound and he felt drained and empty. Slowly, he eased himself to the edge of the bed and sat with his head in his hands trying to quell a rising headache.

“I’m sorry, Harlan,” he called to her, keeping his head low. He was way too drunk and needed to get out of here.

Hearing him from the living room, she came to the doorway, her arms wrapped tightly around her.

“Please,” she whispered, “just get out.” Taking his uniform off her dresser, she flung it at him. He pulled it on but left it unbuttoned.

Gavin stood and approached her, but she maintained her distance, backing away and leading him toward the front door. When she reached it, she opened it and refused to meet his gaze.

He walked out silently. There was no need to speak. There was nothing left to say. All he wanted to do was go home, pass out, and try to forget this night ever happened.

CHAPTER FIVE

Gavin stood by his mount's stall in the soothing quiet of predawn with a hangover battering his nerves. He forced himself to eat the dry, salted meat from his provisions but it did little to make him feel better. At first, the food worked to enhance, and then quell his persistent nausea. All around him, soldiers bustled equipping hyperia and gathering arms in preparation for their campaign to the border where the marauders were camped.

Master Sergeant Rakon strode over to him just as he gave up eating. He fed the leftover meat to his hyperia, Vengeance.

"Excellency," Rakon said.

Gavin lifted his silver canteen to his lips and the cool water running down his throat helped to soothe him. When he had finished drinking, he said, "Your report, Master Sergeant?"

"All our preparations will be complete in about an hour. Unfortunately, we're down a hundred men."

Gavin tore his gaze from the busy soldiers. "What do you mean?"

"A hundred men in the south barracks, Excellency, too ill to march. When I went in, they were coughing and vomiting. I already sent for the doctor."

Great, Gavin thought. He hoped Harlan wouldn't hold a grudge from last night. "Typhon," he called to his commander, who was preparing his mount nearby.

Typhon walked over, studying them curiously. "Yes, Excellency?" he said.

"I'm going to the south barracks for a while. Let the men know there's a hold on our marching orders. Keep them ready until I know if this is going to screw things up."

"What's going on?" Typhon said.

"Some men are sick," Gavin replied, hanging his canteen back up by the stall door. "Master Sergeant, you come with me." With that, the two men headed off toward the royal barracks.

When Gavin arrived, Harlan was standing in front of a soldier's bed intently scribbling in a medical chart, her face grim with worry. The stench of sweat blended with vomit permeated the large, elongated quarters and immediately, he began to feel sick again. The dingy brown walls and narrow windows gave the room a stagnant feel. He strode up, feeling her bristle.

"Do you know what's wrong with them?" he inquired.

"I suspect a viral infection and by the looks of it, a very contagious one. I'll need to quarantine these men and test the rest for infection," she said, turning to look at him with those dazzling emerald eyes.

Gavin frowned and walked down the row of beds housing his afflicted soldiers. They all looked pale and listless, sweating in their twisted white sheets. "How long will that take?"

"If I hurry? A day or two," she said, plunging her hands into her lab coat pockets.

Gavin glanced off down the hall and said to no one in particular, "Grand Duke Molotov and the other nobles will not be pleased about that."

"It's the best I can do."

"I know," he said. A long, stiff silence fell between them. There was so much he needed to say to her but this was not the place.

Rakon was standing by the makeshift nurse's station waiting when Gavin called him over. "Let the grand duke know we've encountered a delay. I'll be in to talk to him about it shortly."

Rakon bowed his head and marched out. Gavin watched him go worrying over the potential disaster of all his men falling ill.

He felt Harlan move closer. "Since you're here," she said. "I might as well test you first."

He grunted his agreement and followed her to a red leather chair with a medical cart parked next to it. Sitting down, he obediently rolled up his sleeve as

she opened a package of sterile syringes. He studied her face for any sign of anger but found none. She was ever the professional.

Swabbing his arm, she expertly found a vein and pulled a vial of blood from him, giving him a cotton swab to hold over the site. As she placed the sample in the data tester, he mopped at a drop of blood, tossed the cotton swab away, and rolled down his sleeve. Within seconds, the tester rolled out a small data sheet, which she tore off and read.

“You’re fine,” she said, without looking up.

“One down,” he said darkly, standing up to leave. “A legion left to go.”

CHAPTER SIX

It was late evening and Harlan was exhausted but she had good reason to be proud. Despite what she'd told Gavin, she had managed to test almost all the soldiers, quarantining those who needed it, and clearing the ones who could leave. That should make him happy.

The mess hall smelled of hot grease and raw meat and was almost completely empty, except for a couple cooks and a tired looking soldier who was probably just coming off a watch.

She gazed down at her sandwich and frowned. She appreciated the cook's efforts, but AEssyrians never really understood the human diet. The sandwich (or what they thought passed for one) was a big pile of rare meat in between two sorry slices of a breadlike substance. No mayo, no mustard, no nothing. AEssyrians didn't seem to have much use for condiments. To make matters worse, the bread was soggy with blood and looked rather unappetizing.

Harlan opened *a New England Journal of Medicine* and began to read. She picked off the top layer of bread and tore a small piece of meat from the interior mass, chewing slowly. She heard his heavy footsteps cross the room and stop near her table.

Gavin was a mountain of a man, broad, commanding and dangerous. He was also a Pandora's Box of narcissism and villainy. His green skin, deep-set gold eyes and strong brow complimented an already striking handsomeness, and Harlan had to warn herself to keep her feelings in check. If he knew how she really felt about him, he would surely exploit it to try and control her.

She found it ironic he had such a pronounced English accent (probably picked up from his English mother), as if he were some blueblood British aristocrat instead of a half human alien warrior. It certainly made for an interesting contrast to the reality of him. As he drew closer, she felt a nervous flutter in her chest. He would probably want to talk about the other night and she

just wanted to forget it. She didn't look up, and without invitation, he took a seat across from her. Harlan turned another page of her magazine.

"What news? Rumor has it, you finished early," he said.

Harlan glanced up at him. "Most of the soldiers are done. There's a release roster of who can go with you making its way to your office as we speak."

Gavin smiled at her. "You're a fucking marvel."

She grinned, not looking up from her reading. She pulled another piece of meat from her sandwich with her fingers and thought about throwing it away. She would have given anything for a chicken salad sandwich right now but AEssyrians didn't like chickens. *They didn't much care for mayonnaise either*, she thought.

Gavin pulled a napkin from the dispenser and began folding it into small squares. "Are you still upset about the other night?"

Harlan closed the magazine and regarded him silently for several minutes. "I was, but I'm not anymore," she said. "But I want you to understand that I'm not your girlfriend. From now on, I want everything to be business between us."

Gavin gave up folding the napkin in favor of tearing it into confetti. His gaze roamed the room. "I thought you said you're no longer upset?"

"I'm not."

"Then why the sudden change?"

"It's not sudden. Despite what you choose to believe, Gavin, we do not have a romantic relationship."

He leaned back in his chair with an evil glint in his eyes. "I would disagree with that. I'm not a lovesick schoolboy or some poor, stupid fiancé. I know how you feel about me."

"I didn't say I felt nothing for you," she said. "I'm simply not going to allow myself to get involved with you."

His rage ran through him like an icy current, flowing just below the glacier.

The soldier, who had been eating nearby, glanced at them, and then picked up his tray and walked out. The distraction broke their focus on each other

for a moment. The scullery was alive with talk and laughter as the early morning cooks arrived to prepare the breakfast meal.

Gavin riveted his golden eyes on her again. "Look, Harlan," he said. "I'm sorry for what happened. It seems we are forever misunderstanding each other."

"There was no misunderstanding, Gavin. I said no and you proceeded to try and take what you wanted. I understand all too well. I am a difficult conquest for you, nothing more."

Gavin leaned forward across the intimate table. "No, Harlan, it's not that simple and you don't understand."

Before he could continue, she picked up her tray and stood. "I'm really tired, Gavin, and I'm going to bed. Good luck with your war."

Gavin settled back into his chair and sighed. "It's just a policing, dear," he said.

She turned to leave but he stopped her by placing a hand on her stomach. His touch was firm but gentle. "I'll never give up on you, Harlan," he said. "Someday, I intend to make you my wife."

A feeling of dread filled her gut. "There's not enough room in your life for your whores, wars, liquor, and a wife. Besides, there's nothing you could ever say to me to convince me to marry you," she said, sidestepping his hand and strolling over to deposit her tray and sandwich remains on the conveyer belt.

"Convincing you may not be necessary," she heard him say from behind her as she passed through the sliding glass doors.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Gavin sat on a battered wooden bench by the livery stable focused on his fourth attempt to light his cigar. The early morning held a sharp breeze that seemed to maneuver relentlessly in pursuit of his flame. He gave up for a moment and listened to the clatter of activity surrounding him and patiently waited for the journey to commence.

From what he could see of the men and equipment, everything looked ready for their morning march, and his plan was to get everyone on the road quickly. They'd have to ride fast today to make up for the yesterday's loss.

Barius rode up, nodding his head at Gavin in deference. Looking down at the general from his mount, he said, "Everyone is ready, Excellency."

Gavin squinted up at him and tucked his cigar back into his boot. "Take them to the first scheduled campsite. I'll catch up with you."

Barius appeared curious, but knew better than to ask. Wordlessly, he spurred his hyperia forward and called out the order to march. Each squadron in turn called out their acknowledgement and pulled away according to their unit number.

Gavin watched the men go, and looked off down the road in annoyance. He wished Malcolm would hurry. He didn't want to get too far behind and have to travel at night. Glancing up, he spotted Harlan and a human man he didn't recognize talking earnestly. They appeared to be heading toward the medical clinic.

Blistering jealousy ravaged him, fueling a quick ferocious rage. Could it be she had a human lover all this time? Watching them only engaged his wrath, especially upon seeing how easily she laughed with the man, how relaxed and easy she seemed around him. He was convinced this was no first meeting; she knew him from somewhere else.

Gavin got up to march over to the clinic, but just as he started to go, Malcolm appeared from around the corner. "I have what you requested, Lord," he said with a broad smile. He handed a small list over to the general.

"What's this?"

"It's a list of the men you ordered arrested and executed for trying to lynch you. I expect they'll meet a speedy end, Lord."

"I've told you before," Gavin said, distractedly examining the list. "I'm not a lord, Malcolm."

"Right. I'll try to remember that."

Gavin read the list slowly trying to match faces with names. "Is this all of them?"

Malcolm nodded. "Every last one of them bastards."

"Excellent work," Gavin said and reached into his pocket for a generous wad of bills. He handed them to Malcolm, who quickly stuffed them into his trouser pocket. "Thank you, Excellency. Is there anything else?"

"Not right now," Gavin said, standing and stalking off toward the clinic. "If something comes up, I'll let you know," he tossed back over his shoulder as he left.

Gavin burst through the clinic doors in an explosion of noise, stalking into the empty waiting room. He scanned for Harlan and her companion as frosty air from the cooling unit licked his flesh. It raised goose bumps all along his back and he hated how it felt on his skin. He shuddered involuntarily.

Spotting them by the glass doors leading to the exam rooms, he and Harlan locked eyes. With dark intent, he advanced.

She quickly moved in front of the man, placing herself in Gavin's path of confrontation. The man, young, blonde and tan with bright blue eyes, glanced up appearing genuinely confused.

Gavin stopped directly in front of her. "Who's this?" he said, his voice a low rumble.

Harlan crossed her arms across her chest. "A friend of mine."

"Is that right?" he said. In a flash of speed, he pushed her aside and snatched the man by the throat.

The man immediately resisted. Trying to defend himself, he swung his arm in a wide arc and slammed his fist into Gavin's jaw. Although the pain wasn't much, the violence ignited Gavin's battle instinct and, lifting the man in the air by the throat, flung him into a nearby group of chairs. With a crash, the man's body collided heavily with the lobby furniture, sending everything sprawling.

Harlan stepped in front of her companion again, stopping Gavin momentarily from completing his attack. "What the hell is the matter with you?" she screamed at him with edgy frustration.

He jabbed an index finger at the man. "Is he your lover?" he roared.

Harlan glared at him. Her pupils expanded to large pools of oil. "What if he is?" she said. "It's certainly none of your damn business."

The man suddenly glanced at Harlan in alarm. "Are you nuts? Do you want him to kill me?" He looked at Gavin with intense terror. "I swear I'm not anything to her but a friend," he stammered.

Gavin studied him, trying to determine if he was lying to save his skin or not.

"Sam, go wait in my office while I have a word with the general," Harlan said, coolly keeping herself between the two.

The man scrambled to his feet and scurried off, disappearing behind the double doors to the offices and exam rooms beyond. Harlan watched to make sure he was gone.

Turning her full attention on Gavin, she said, "This is it. You need to stay the hell away from me and anyone I'm with, or I will have a talk with Grand Duke Molitov von Goth and see if I can't get a bodyguard."

Gavin towered over her frowning. "That won't be necessary."

"I hope not, Gavin. For the last time, stay away from me. We are not anything. I don't want to have dinner with you. I don't want to dance with you. In

fact, I don't want any contact with you at all. You are making me miserable and I want it to stop. Now, get out of my clinic."

Gavin held his tongue, and turning, made his way back to the clinic door. He fought hard to keep his temper in check, and lucky for him, Harlan was anything but antagonistic. He needed some time to sort out his feelings and right now, he was too angry to say anything constructive. When they both had a chance to cool off, they were going to need to discuss this matter and several others until they were resolved.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Molotov knocked hard, plastered a smile on his face and pushed the door open without waiting for a response. As he entered, he took note of the room; an explosion of colorful toys strewn carelessly about the bed and floor. He crept over the clutter to a nearby chair and sat down. Shatara stood by a window near the bed, staring out the window stoically.

The young prince, Gregor, toddled over with a welcoming shriek and hurled himself at Molotov. The grand duke caught the youth and lowered the child to his lap. Carefully, he placed his monocle in a small inside pocket of his black uniform. They wrestled playfully for a few moments, and then Molotov turned to Shatara and said, "Have his nurse take him for a walk, we have things to discuss."

Shatara crossed the floor and mumbled something into the intercom on the wall by the door. Within seconds, a heavyset matronly woman with short gray hair and deeply set eyes entered the room and scooped the boy up.

Molotov watched them go and felt a pang of pity for the boy. The child was taking more and more after his father, Razorback Grand Duke Savion, and that would always be a mark of dishonor. There was something else about the boy that bothered Molotov, elusive and just under the surface. It was a suggestion of cruelty in his eyes, an ever so slight perversion of emotion that hinted of a malevolent character flaw. Molotov could only hope his instinct was wrong.

"He adores you," Shatara said, returning to her vigil by the window.

Molotov shrugged and replaced his monocle in his right eye. "All children love adults. They feel protected." A silence thickened the air as Molotov studied her. "You must meet with Megolyth, Shatara," he said.

"What's the point? I know what he's going to say. The answer is no."

"All you have to do is listen to him."

Shatara tore herself from the window, her arms folded tightly around her chest. "Gods, I wish I had someone to champion me against this man."

Molotov was unmoved. "You made some bad choices," he said. "You are where you put yourself."

"How was I supposed to know how treacherous Savion was?"

He stood up, indicating the end of the conversation. "I am confident the nobles will support me in this matter," he said.

Shatara slinked toward him, moving her hips in a seductive, inviting roll. When she reached him, she stopped suddenly, meeting his gaze, trying to read him. "I need you, Lord," she whispered softly. "I know I can please you. Please help me." With her final words, she slapped him across the face with all the strength she had.

His monocle fell from his eye, hitting his chest, coming to dangle from a golden chin attached to his uniform button. His head barely registered the blow. These kinds of attempts always amused him. Most women had no idea what he really wanted, although they often tried to tempt him with these kinds of clumsy, amateurish passes. He needed to educate her.

Reaching out, he seized a handful of her thick brown hair and wrapped it around his fist. He pulled her into him and took her lips in a demanding, savage kiss. She gritted her teeth against his brutality but didn't complain or resist. Suddenly, he broke the kiss, still holding her head immobile by the hair and seized the hand that struck him. He twisted it back upon her wrist until she screamed and sank to her knees to relieve the pressure. She struggled for her release and he gifted her with a sadistic smile. "Do you really want to spend the night pleasing me, Shatara?" he said, his voice a deadly purr.

Hanging her head in defeat, she began to sob. "No," she said in a defeated whisper. He released her immediately, and she slumped over her injured hand, cradling it.

Molotov strode over to the door. "I know you're afraid, and I am doing my best to help you, but this is a difficult situation. Surely you must see that."

Shatara got to her feet, drying her eyes with her sleeve and sniffing. "I do," she said.

He nodded. "Good," he said. "And don't offer things when you don't know what lies in someone's heart. You could end up making matters worse for yourself."

Reaching for the door, he opened it only to have Gregor's gaze fall upon him over the nurse's shoulder from across the hall.

CHAPTER NINE

As he rode, Gavin could smell the waterfall just beyond a thicket of lush trees and it pacified his spirits. In these quiet, still moments, he felt natural and at peace, the savage dreams of revenge on the men who hung him melting away with the night's lazy breeze. What difference did it make now? They'd all be dead soon. After a while, his thoughts drifted to Harlan, her scent, her smile, and the gloss of her dark hair. His growing attraction to her was as baffling as it was compelling, and he had (for the first time since his early adolescence) found the need for frequent sexual release more pressing than usual.

The sentry on duty moved suddenly from under the cover of trees, his spear at the ready. Recognizing the general, he lowered it quickly, murmuring, "Sorry, Excellency."

Gavin nodded to the soldier as he passed, entering the camp. Everything looked in good order. The large night fires still burned, casting much needed light on the group of tents that surrounded his central one. Feeling the ache and hunger of a long ride, Gavin made his way to his tent, handing his hyperia to a waiting groom.

His tent, a spacious, luxuriant dwelling, was shrouded in red textile, and embossed with threaded gold designs along its borders. Three colorful flags flew in front: one, his personal military banner, exalting his victories and rank; another for the kingdom; and the third specifically representing the royal house. By the entrance, two heavily-armored guards snapped to attention as he passed. He ignored them, ducking under a flap to enter.

The air inside was stuffy but comforting and he spotted Barius and Typhon sitting in the center of the tent, their legs crossed, helping themselves to the heaping platter of glistening, red meat before them. Gavin watched as each morsel was picked from the mound with curved, three-pronged forks. Between each mouthful, they gulped greedily from jewel-encrusted wine goblets.

Gavin stalked past them, unfastening his cuirass, then hung it on its stand. Turning to face them, he scratched absently at his black tunic, feeling hunger pangs tear his belly.

He made his way over to them and took a seat. "No problems?"

Typhon gave him a welcoming smile, wrinkling a thick scar by his right eye. The young man had been Gavin's discovery among a sea of fresh-faced recruits. He'd taken him in and mentored the boy, much to the resentment of his then wife, Karina. The young man was clever, loyal and had proven surprisingly intelligent over the years. "None. You're lucky you showed up when you did. We were about to finish this off and go to bed."

Gavin smirked. "I would have beaten the life out of you."

They all laughed and Gavin plucked a juicy piece of meat from the pile and wolfed it down.

Barius studied Gavin for a moment, then said, "So what's the plan, Excellency? Do we attack like the princess wanted, or not?"

Gavin froze over his fork, a tender, bloody morsel dangling temptingly from its end. "No," he said, his gaze sliding sideways to Barius. "Grand Duke Molitov has made his feelings clear on this issue. We need to determine what their intentions are first." That said, he gulped down the tasty piece just as an angry snarl filled the air from somewhere outside.

Gavin and his officers jumped up in unison, rushing from their seats and out the door to investigate. It didn't take long to find the small group of soldiers swearing and cursing at each other a few tents away.

Within moments, Master Sergeant Rakon also arrived, pulling the men away from each other and seizing a young woman by the arm. Gavin knew instinctively she had to be the source of conflict.

"What's going on?" Gavin demanded as he stared at all three feeling his temper boil. He hated fights over women, they always got messy.

The three young soldiers snapped to attention, saying nothing.

"Who the fuck is this?" Gavin said, locking his gaze on Rakon and gesturing at the woman.

The woman was lovely in a worldly sort of way. Her face had taken on the hard edge of a difficult life dependant upon unreliable men. Her hair was bronze and her body long and muscular from a lifetime of working in the fields. Gavin would have found her more alluring if he'd met her under other circumstances. Here, however, she was little more than a nuisance.

Rakon sighed and shook the woman like a child to stop her from struggling against his grip. "It seems, Excellency, the corporal decided to bring along a little recreation. These other two probably just wanted a piece."

Gavin stalked up to the red-haired corporal and stared down at him. "Is this true?"

The young man swallowed hard, keeping his eyes forward. "Yes, Excellency."

"You know doing that is forbidden for just this reason."

"Yes, Excellency," he said, frowning. "I'm sorry but she was so desperate to join me, I thought—"

"Don't talk back to your superiors!" Rakon boomed. The girl in his grip started, staring at him warily.

"Sorry, sir."

Gavin eyed the corporal darkly, and then turned to the other two soldiers. "Ten lashes for these two," he said. "Thirty for this man, and have someone escort her back to her village, Sergeant."

Before Rakon could answer, the girl erupted into a fit of violence. "No!" she screamed, breaking from Rakon's grip and flinging herself at Gavin's feet. "Please, Excellency, I beg you, don't send me back there! I have nothing, I'll starve. Please have pity on me."

"We're not a charity, young woman. You can't stay here," he said firmly. She must have done something to make herself unwanted. It was unheard of for an attractive young woman to have no one to take her in. He also thought her too cunning to be a complete innocent, as she was portraying herself. She was toying with everyone's emotions to gain allies, and it was working. A small group of men were slowly gathering around them, attracted by all the commotion.

“Excellency,” the corporal said. “Please let her stay. I can care for her and keep her out of the way. She won’t be a bother.”

Gavin’s anger thundered in his temples. “She’s already a fucking bother. She’s not staying.”

Murmurings of support for the woman began to rise up from the assembled men.

Gavin’s massive hand fastened onto her upper arm and he pulled the woman to her feet. “You will go tonight,” he snarled at her.

Looking into the crowd of soldiers, she yelled, “Won’t any of you help me? Surely a group of you can convince him to let me stay.”

Gavin pulled his saber, the rising noise of the crowd filling his head, fueling his fury. She could easily cause a rebellion, and well she knew it. This had to stop. She stared at him, her eyes darkening with fear.

“Please don’t...” she said, her voice delicate and low, a bedroom voice. He felt it titillate his groin with its feather-light resonance.

Hardening his heart, he pulled her to him, a dangerous and intimate gesture he reserved for only those he would love or kill. Then looking down into her eyes, he plunged his saber into the soft flesh of her belly, up under her ribcage piercing her heart. Her eyes grew dull and glassy as he let her lifeless body sink to the floor. His hands and thighs were saturated in her warm blood. The gathering stared in stunned silence, having been unaware of what was transpiring right in front of them until it was too late.

Rakon stepped forward, tossing a jaded glance at the dead woman crumpled at Gavin’s feet. “What do you want done with her, Excellency?”

Gavin gave the corporal a brooding, ugly, stare. “Have this man bury her. He can dig her grave alone,” he said, using the woman’s skirts to wipe the blood from his saber. “After all, it’s his fault she’s dead.”

When he was finished, he sheathed his weapon and turned to Barius and Typhon. “I’ll see you gentlemen in the morning. I’m not much in the mood for company right now.”

The men bowed and watched him stride off toward his tent for a good night's rest.

The last thing Gavin heard before entering was the harsh sound of the master sergeant ordering everyone back to their tents, and the rhythmic scrape of a spade burrowing deep into the rocky ground.

CHAPTER TEN

“The princess sent General Gavin Theron and a legion, Lord,” said Commander Holt, rushing into Megolyth’s yurt. His breath came in quick, jerky rasps from his haste. The man was a mere six feet tall, but he was tough and stout with a wild mane of dark brown hair he always kept loose.

Megolyth glanced at Luther, seated directly on his right. Luther, his grandfather, was just completing his morning prayers, thanking the gods for his grandson’s new position of power. He was entranced by the ceremony, his eyes rolled white in his head, the state often referred to by many as ‘seized by the gods.’ His long, blanched hair hung free around his shoulders resembling a shawl.

Holt breathed sharply in preparation to speak again, but Megolyth silenced him with a hard look and a finger to his lips.

Luther opened his eyes and regarded the two men, blinking hard like a blind man with new sight. The white candle before him flashed out suddenly, as if snuffed out by unseen fingers.

Megolyth turned to Holt and said, “Thank you for the information, Commander, but there’s no need for alarm. If the general wanted to attack us, he wouldn’t have stopped to make camp first.” The commander’s eyes darted around the room as if looking for answers. He bowed and left the tent.

Luther studied his grandson. “The princess seems very shrewd. Even with her son at stake, she holds her hand from violence.” Then, as an afterthought, he said, “For now, anyway.”

Megolyth rose from the floor, moving silently to the yurt’s doorway and watched the morning’s busy bustle. A few women chattered happily amongst themselves as they carried large laundry baskets down to the river to wash. The princess was probably holding off an attack in anticipation of a marriage proposal. Certainly her and her nobles must have thought it a possibility, and despite his concerns about her character, he had to admit it was the easiest

route to the throne. Provided of course, she said yes. "Not so shrewd, perhaps," he said thoughtfully. "I suspect she has many handlers."

Luther stood and brushed some dirt off his suede trousers. "Who is her son's father? Why has he not tried to take the throne?"

Megolyth turned his full attention on the older man and folded his arms across his chest. At one time, his grandfather had been an exalted and powerful prince with sole governorship of one of the richest provinces in all the Umbrian kingdom. That had been before wars and age had beaten him down. Now he was like an anxious mother, always doubting the tide of fate.

Picking up the incense and candles, Megolyth reverently put them in a lavish silver box on the makeshift altar. "Because he's a Razorback, old father," he said, bending to pick up the ceremonial chalice and drinking down the remnants of wine.

"Oh," Luther said. "I see. I hope you're not pitting us against an enemy we cannot vanquish."

An introspective quietness passed between them. Then Luther continued, "What trouble will we have with the Razorback queen if you are forced to slay the boy?"

Megolyth moved around the old man, rolling the narrow floor rugs up and binding them with leather twine. "I've already corresponded with her about it. She assured me they would take the princess and her son in as refugees, if it should come to that."

Luther looked worried but said nothing more.

"It's fairly easy to guess what they're up to," Megolyth said. "I've invited the general for dinner. Let's see if they accept."

Luther frowned. "Do you think that's prudent, inviting him here so he can see our numbers?"

Megolyth laughed. "I'm certain he already knows our numbers."

The old AEssyrian shook his head slowly and made his way to the door. "I still think letting him in here will offer him an opportunity to spot any weaknesses."

At any rate, I certainly hope he's a reasonable man, because if he's not, may the Gods help us. "

Megolyth grinned as he watched his grandfather go, then he said to himself, "I hear the general has one profound weakness of his own."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Harlan sat cross-legged, cradled in the warm comfort of her favorite leather chair leafing through the *Chronicle*, a local newspaper. Gently biting her lower lip, she circled a group of symbols with a rapidly depleting felt tip pen. AEssyrian was a language easier to speak than read. She ran her finger along each line of the article's text studying each character and symbol, having to stop often and use reference materials. For the most part, it was her own fault she wasn't more proficient at reading and writing the native tongue. She had been provided with a translator, who also transcribed all her medical dictations into AEssyrian and that had made her a bit lazy in her linguistic pursuits.

The ceiling fan rotated smoothly above, offering only minimal relief from the late morning stuffiness inside her villa. Shifting slightly to see the wall clock, she wondered when the nurse from the Razorback queendom would arrive. She had taken some rare time off to talk to the woman who would soon be sharing her home, for a little while anyway. It would be nice to see another human face and hear another voice from Earth on a regular basis. And better yet, she was an American, so language wouldn't be an issue.

With little to do but wait, she thought about Gavin and unwanted emotions bubbled to the surface. Certainly, she had never met a man like him, human or alien, and he inspired a strange cocktail of terror and sexual excitement within her. Intellectually, she knew he was bad for her and over the past few months, he had become much more aggressive in his carnal ambitions. To add to the list of problems, he was also prone to fits of jealous rage. It was unfortunate that poor Sam had ended up on the receiving end of one of his intolerant outbursts. She was still apologizing to him and doubted he'd ever visit again.

In many ways, she excused Gavin for his frequent bad behavior, knowing that in this harsh world dominated by men, he thrived because of those very qualities she found so alarming. There was also the matter of his upbringing in a whorehouse, which certainly wouldn't have smoothed out his rough edges.

Then she came to the most pressing reason she needed to stop seeing him, her growing attraction to him. That, in her mind, was the worst malady of all, because if he knew how she felt, he would certainly exploit it. It was bad enough he suspected and Harlan had no interest in becoming another one of his sordid barroom tales.

The knock came hard and swift, startling her from the depths of her ponderings. Quickly, she crept over to the door on bare feet, feeling a rush of excitement. She flung the door open and before her stood a pretty blonde woman with bright blue eyes and a hint of hardness around her mouth. She looked to Harlan to be somewhere in her late twenties. She held an old, battered suitcase in one hand and a brown leather purse draped over her shoulder.

"Doctor Ambrose?" she said, her eyebrows shooting up as if she'd suddenly been surprised. "I'm Sasha, your new nurse."

A wave of relief swept over Harlan. "Yes, that's me. Come in and please, call me Harlan."

Sasha strode in with a cheerleader's bounce to her step. "Wow, what a great place this is," she said, moving in a circle to take in the carved stone foyer.

Harlan smiled. She had had the same reaction when she'd first moved in. Harlan gestured to the left of the foyer. "I have a room set up for you." Both women made their way to an enormous side bedroom decorated in fabrics of royal blue and silver.

"This is wonderful," Sasha said, flinging her suitcase and purse on the bed.

"Better than the Razorbacks?"

"I'll say," she said, grinning. "All I have there is an apartment. Nice, mind you, but nothing like this." Sasha opened her suitcase and started unpacking.

"I'll make us some coffee so we can talk," Harlan said.

"Great," Sasha said. "Point me in the direction of the kitchen and I'll come find you in few minutes."

The twin suns painted amber light throughout the kitchen as the late afternoon shadows grew long. The heat inside was daunting, so they abandoned their coffee for ice tea and moved to the outside veranda.

As the afternoon wore on, Harlan lost all sense of time. They talked for hours about everything; how they decided to come to AEssyria (for Sasha, it was the pay); what adventures they'd had since coming here, and how long they might plan to stay.

Eventually, of course, the conversation wandered around to Gavin.

Sasha toyed with her glass of tea, rolling it around on its base. "Tell me about the general," she said with a sly smile. "There are all kinds of rumors about the two of you."

Harlan frowned and gave Sasha a dubious look. "What kind of rumors?"

Sasha sipped her tea, and then set it back down on the cork coaster. "Just that he's very smitten with you. What's the matter? Don't you like him?"

"I take it you've never met him."

"No. Why?"

"Let's just say he leaves an impression," Harlan said. "I like him, and I guess you could call us friends, but he's not shy about trying to get what he wants. Add to that his rather nasty drinking habit."

Sasha smiled and shook her head. "I believe you, but I've met a lot of women who would give anything to be with him."

"I'm sure," Harlan said flatly.

"Are you attracted to him?"

Harlan sat quietly, considering the question. If it weren't for his propensity to use women and cast them aside, she wondered if she would sleep with him. "Yes," she said. "But he's just looking for a good time and I want something more than that."

Sasha picked up her glass and rested the rim on her bottom lip. "Have you ever slept with an AEssyrian?" she asked, then took a sip and replaced the glass.

"No, have you?"

"Yes," she said, giving Harlan an impish smirk. "A Razorback."

Harlan nodded. *Great, who knows what kind of trouble will be visiting my front doorstep.*

Then Sasha added, "I hope you don't mind. He'll be coming by tonight for dinner."

Harlan gave her a thin smile. *Perfect. If Gavin gets wind of this, he'll be charging around here like an angry baboon in no time.*

CHAPTER TWELVE

The afternoon brought with it a thick fog and dense clouds that completely blanketed the double suns. Misting rain was occasionally interrupted by a rich downpour that drenched Gavin and his men in sheets of water. The weather made each step a misery.

Gavin rode with Typhon, quietly discussing what should be done with Colonel Hess, whose men were slovenly and undisciplined, and more problems like the incident with the village woman were starting to arise. Gavin knew he had put off dealing with Colonel Hess for too long. When they finally reached a clearing, Gavin ordered a break and followed Typhon down to the riverbank to refill his canteen.

"You've been quiet for an hour now," Typhon said, crouching to fill his canteen in the cool, blue water. "That usually means you've made a decision."

Gavin, having already filled his own canteen, screwed the cap back on and grunted in agreement. "I think I'll put him in charge of the hunt. That ought to keep him out of trouble. His men will be split up between you and Barius."

Typhon studied Gavin. "Thank you," he said, cautious of Gavin's dark mood.

They walked up the embankment together as the rain slowed to a prickly drizzle. The men had begun pitching temporary tents and hitching posts for their hyperia. Rakon's unmistakable bark sounded in the background, shouting orders.

Gavin reached his animal and began unsaddling it. Turning his attention to Typhon, he said, "Tell the colonel I want to see him in my tent in an hour. We have a few important things to discuss."

"Yes, Excellency," Typhon said with a bow.

Gavin disappeared into his tent as Typhon made his way over to Hess' section to deliver the message.

Gavin was just completing some reports at his desk when Colonel Hess announced himself. Like his men, he was unkempt and had the bad manners to arrive thirty minutes late. He offered no excuse.

"Come in," Gavin said, rising and gesturing to a chair by his desk. Hess advanced nervously and took a seat.

Gavin walked around his desk and sat on the edge of it. He folded his hands on his thigh and stared down at the colonel. "Tell me what happened with your corporal."

Hess, who had been bouncing his right foot, crossed his legs to quiet his activity. "Nothing happened," he said with a shrug. "He had a girlfriend follow him on campaign. It's happened before with other men."

"He should have known better. It was your responsibility to have given him leadership in this matter. Instead, you encouraged his mistake."

Hess frowned, his body shifting as if he were about to rise. "Keep your seat," Gavin commanded. The colonel's shoulders sank in surrender. "I'm sorry, Excellency. It won't happen again."

"You are correct it won't happen again, because you are being relieved of your duties and reassigned to the hunt."

"The hunt?" Hess shouted, jumping to his feet. "That's a job for a junior man! I'm not going to do it."

Gavin leaned forward and fixed him with a menacing stare. "You will do it or I'll have you stripped of your rank and discharged."

Hess set his lips in a thin line. He met Gavin's gaze, but soon dropped his to the floor. He let out a soft sigh. "Very well, Excellency. I'd be honored to take the new post."

"Good. Then you may go."

Hess rose from his chair, and with a slight bow, left the tent with a sharp, brisk walk.

Gavin closed his eyes and massaged the bridge of his nose. A moment later, Typhon came in and Gavin glanced at the commander. "Yes, Commander, what is it?"

“I have a message for you, Excellency,” he said. “Megolyth’s man dropped it off just a moment ago.”

“Read it and tell me what it says.”

Typhon tore the seal and opened the letter. Looking up in surprise, he said, “It’s an invitation to dinner.”

“Wonderful,” Gavin said. “I thought he’d never ask.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The gentleman's club may not have been the oldest in the kingdom, but it was certainly the most revered. Men of noble birth politicked for years to get in, oftentimes without success. The reason for its exclusivity was simple, one's peers either both liked and respected one or they didn't, and despite the scandal of Molitov's rather exotic sexual appetites, others liked him.

Inside the grand dining hall, long silver serving platters artistically displayed thin cuts of imported meats. A well-stocked bar provided any kind of spirits one could want, as well as an impressive collection of expensive cigars and pipes. The French windows leading to the patio were open, airing out the thick, smoky haze from the hall.

Grand Duke Molitov von Goth sat with two other nobles, Baron Kirus Younger and Duke Nim Dragor, at an oval table by the doors smoking and enjoying a decanter of smooth domestic scotch. Dragor, an older, stern traditionalist with heavy jowls, sat scowling into his drink. It obviously didn't sit well with him that Princess Shatara was trying to exert some independence.

"Who does this woman think she is, refusing to meet with a legitimate suitor?" he growled. "She would be lucky to have someone of Megolyth's lineage and reputation consider her. After all, she's used goods with baggage."

Kirus studied Molitov and Dragor with a cautious stare. His jade eyes were clear and unreadable. Glancing down at his drink, he licked his lips and took a measured sip. "The princess is only trying to protect her son," he said.

"I'm sure Megolyth would have no objection to exiling the boy to the queendom with his father," Dragor snorted.

They all lapsed into silence and took in the servers rushing from table to table getting food and drinks for the other members. Molitov picked up his tumbler and rolled the golden liquor around in circles, sniffing its rich, inviting aroma.

Kirus picked up the decanter from the center of the table and topped off Dragor's drink. When he came to Molitov's, the grand duke covered it with his hand. Molitov adjusted his monocle and met Kirus' gaze. The younger man took no insult, shrugged, and replaced the decanter on the table.

"My Lord Dragor," Kirus said, smiling. "I have a great deal of respect for your opinion, but I think too much emphasis is being placed on her actions. She was scared, as any woman in her position would be. I'm sure she'll change her mind about Lord Megolyth."

"Best she does or she'll find herself and that scrawny, bastard half-blood of hers clamped in irons," Dragor said darkly.

Kirus sipped his drink and took a token puff on his cigar. "I'll talk to her, Lord. She likes me. I think I can convince her to see reason."

"Rumor has it," said Molitov suspiciously, "that you and her have become quite friendly of late. I would just warn you, young Lord, to be cautious of the company you keep."

Dragor studied Kirus with a piercing gaze. "As would I. It's unbecoming for a nobleman to supplicate himself before a woman. Watch your reputation, young man, or you'll become a laughing stock."

Molitov nodded in agreement. "Or worse yet, her pawn."

"I'll be careful," Kirus said, shaking his head good-naturedly.

"So what's to be done about her dispatch to Gavin to attack Megolyth and his men?" Dragor said, turning to Molitov. He spotted the serving woman passing by and waved her over for another decanter of scotch. She nodded and disappeared behind the sculptured wooden bar.

Molitov finished his drink. "A new order was drafted today by the council. It should reach Gavin sometime tonight."

"What does it say?" Kirus asked.

"I expect exactly what you said you could accomplish, young Lord," Dragor said, finishing the liquor in his glass. He looked around the hall for the status of their new decanter.

Molotov looked at Kirus. "It says the princess would be delighted to meet with Lord Megolyth. It also has a private note to Gavin not to attack unless he is forced to do so."

The serving woman appeared and refreshed all their drinks, then placed the decanter on the table removing the empty one.

"I just hope," Molotov said when the woman had left, "that Gavin doesn't take the princess' orders too literally."

The villa was hot and stuffy by the time Kirus came home. Hearing him enter, their servant Cora rushed in from the kitchen ready to offer him a hot meal or stiff drink. She was an older woman with a stern frown and sparkling grey eyes. He adored her as a child, especially after his mother's death all those years ago. He waved her off before she could speak. Reading his mood, she turned around and disappeared again into the kitchen.

Kirus could see his father was still awake. The old man's light glowed bright under his bedroom door. Kirus ascended the stairs trying to make as little noise as possible. His life had become so complex, he found himself lying more and more to his father about his activities. It was easier just to avoid conversation. As he reached the top, his father's door opened and the elderly man squinted at him.

"Why are you keeping all these late hours, Kirus? I find all this sneaking around disturbing," he said. He smelled of stale cigar smoke and unwashed clothes.

Kirus stood for a moment, unsure of what to say. He certainly couldn't tell him he was off sleeping with the princess most nights. His father would find such behavior disgraceful. Finally, he concocted the most glamorous lie he could think of. "I was waiting to tell you in the morning," he said with his most engaging smile. "Grand Duke Molotov sponsored me to join the Gentleman's Club."

His father's face lit up with pure joy. "By the Gods, my boy, that's wonderful! I told you you'd be king one day." The old man paused and looked thoughtful. "Funny, though, I thought the grand duke didn't like you much."

Kirus moved into his father's room to escort the old man back to bed. He shook his head playfully while a dark pit formed in his stomach. Too many complicated lies are a very bad thing. "You're wrong, Father. He's quite fond of me. We speak frankly all the time. Now you get some rest and we can discuss it at length tomorrow."

His father slid into his bed and gave him a warm smile. "I always believed in you, Kirus," he said softly. "I know you will become king and restore our family glory. I'm counting on it."

Kirus gave him a weak smile and pulled the blankets up over him. "I love you, Father," he said. "Sleep well." His father reached a frail hand up and patted Kirus' cheek affectionately. Kirus fought a lump rising in his throat. *If I do become king, I pray the Gods never reveal to you how I got there.*

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The message from the royal council came just before their visit to Megolyth's camp in the early evening. Gavin had chosen to camp at the foot of the Syree Mountains, close to where Megolyth's marauders were holed up. The mountains were a natural cover for any armed band, with many arid, high peaks and low-lying valleys to hide in.

As Gavin expected, the message from the council instructed him to refrain from armed conflict, unless deemed necessary for the safety of the kingdom.

Gavin sat astride his hyperia waiting for Barius to join him for the ride to Megolyth's camp. The beast shifted restlessly as he waited and Gavin reined it in to calm it. He normally wouldn't have taken Barius with him, but his distrust of the man grew by the day and he preferred to keep Barius close and watch for signs of treachery.

"Where the hell is Commander Barius?" Gavin barked at a passing private.

"Pardon, Excellency, but I don't know," the man said, looking confused.

"Well, find him then."

"Yes, Excellency," the private said and rushed off.

A few moments later, Barius walked over to Gavin escorted by the private. He was still adjusting the straps on his cuirass. "What's the rush?"

Gavin's hyperia pranced and he jerked the reins to quiet it. "I've been waiting for you for fifteen minutes. You're as bad as a wife."

Barius scowled. "That's hilarious. I'll be right with you, let me get my mount."

They rode in silence, each man keeping his own thoughts. Gavin enjoyed the verbal solitude. He and his commander had found themselves with less and less to talk about over the past few months. The things that really needed discussing, as typical among AEssyrian men, remained unspoken but held close to the heart.

Once they passed the border, they picked up an armed escort sent by Megolyth that brought them all the way into the camp.

Like the rest of his people, Megolyth's yurt was simple, even though elegantly decorated for guests. Gavin and Barius entered cautiously, anticipating danger behind every furnishing. Gavin studied the room, admiring the impressive collection of custom weaponry. He was vaguely aware of Barius fidgeting next to him. Both men turned as Megolyth entered behind them.

"Good evening, gentlemen," he said. "I'm glad you decided to come. Please have a seat."

Everyone took a seat at a small, round table with silver domed trays over each plate. When they were settled, Megolyth gave Gavin an easy smile. "I've heard all kinds of stories about you and your victories. I always hoped we'd meet."

Gavin folded his arms. "You're very kind, Lord, but if you don't mind, I'd like to get on with our business." Gavin stiffened, expecting to have insulted the warlord, but Megolyth only laughed.

"Tell me your business then, General," he said, lifting the domes to reveal thick strips of spiced meats. Megolyth picked up a plate and heaped food onto it.

Gavin sat motionless, scanning the room, waiting. Barius reached for a plate, and then hesitated, glancing at him. "Aren't you going to eat something?" he said to Gavin.

Gavin looked at the trays, then at his commander. "I've got a little stomach thing," he said. He pulled the royal council's invitation to Megolyth out of the satchel he'd brought with him. "You go ahead."

Barius glared at him and lowered his plate. "I'm not very hungry either," he said to Megolyth.

Gavin handed the white envelope over the table to their host. Megolyth, still chewing, wiped his hands on a napkin and took it, laying it next to his plate unopened. "Rumor has it, the princess was disappointed by my pending visit," he said, carefully watching Gavin's face.

"Nonsense," Gavin said. "She's delighted."

Megolyth turned his attention back to his meal, shaking his head and smiling. "And you, Gavin? Are you delighted also?"

"I am a humble servant of the crown, Lord. I serve whoever holds it."

Megolyth stopped eating again and wiped his mouth and hands. He met Gavin's gaze. "It that so?" he said. "How reassuring."

Gavin shifted in his seat, the smell of fresh meat was causing his hunger to peak, but he didn't feel comfortable consuming it. He doubted there was anything wrong with it, but he could never be sure, and not eating was an easy solution. "I would be honored, Lord, if you would allow us to accompany you back," he said.

Megolyth sipped his wine. "I'd like that. But I'm afraid I must insist you eat before we go. After all, what kind of host would I be if I let you leave my table hungry?"

"That's fine with me," Barius said, grabbing a plate without hesitation and piling food onto it.

"Here, let me get you started, General." Megolyth picked up a fresh plate and scooped food onto it. When he was finished, he held the plate out to Gavin.

Gavin sat for a long moment knowing he was trapped. He didn't want to risk insulting Megolyth again as the warlord might not take it as well this time. He had little choice. Meeting Megolyth's gaze, Gavin gave the warlord a cool smile. Then he took the meat and started eating.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

By the time they made their first stop to rest that afternoon, the air was heavy and wet with humidity. Although Gavin relished the heat, he could have done without the mugginess, it only made him feel slow and lazy.

The spot he chose to camp was in a thick cluster of saplings and vines, much like the rest of the area. The troops spent almost an hour chopping a clearing for the legion to rest. Megolyth, his grandfather, and the two warriors accompanying them, were good traveling companions. They helped whenever there was a need and stayed out of the way the rest of the time. Gavin liked Megolyth. The man had an easy, natural leadership that men followed without realizing it. Gavin even found himself deferring to him occasionally. Something he almost never did.

Gavin's men had cleared another area a short distance away from the soldiers' encampment so he and Megolyth could talk without being overheard. They spent their lunch camped in that clearing, under a great osala tree, sitting on rugs and swapping amusing stories about political marriages and other kingdoms.

Finishing the last bite of meat from his portion of the morning's kill, Gavin leaned against a tree and lit a cigar. He held one out to the warlord. "Do you smoke, Lord?"

"No," he said, holding up a hand. "Thank you." Megolyth set his plate aside. "Do you mind if I ask you a sensitive question about the princess?"

Gavin plucked the cigar from his mouth. "I'll answer it if I can."

Megolyth nodded, then asked, "How did the princess come to rule?"

"She's not exactly ruling. She's governed by a regent for her son and the royal council."

"Why is it the regent hasn't tried for the crown himself?"

Gavin puffed on his cigar sending up great clouds of smoke. "He has no interest in it. He has other hobbies."

Before Megolyth could respond, they were interrupted by a young private. "Excuse me, Excellency, but Master Sergeant Rakon would like you to sign off on the night's watch bill." The man squinted, as if waiting to be admonished for the intrusion.

"I'll be right there," Gavin replied. "Will you excuse me for a minute, Lord?" he said to Megolyth.

The warlord lay on his side, playing with a small blade of grass. "Of course."

Gavin made his way over to Rakon. The man was short and solidly built with fierce green eyes. He was normally so full of energy, Gavin felt like he was in danger of being attacked at any moment. Today, though, Rakon seemed tired and subdued. Gavin made a few minor changes to the bill and then signed off on it without comment on Rakon's mood.

When he returned, the first thing he noticed was the fresh bowl of basted sweetmeats newly delivered and resting at the center of their dining area. The delivery was odd, since he didn't recall them taking any such luxury on this mission.

"What's this?" he said.

Megolyth picked up a fork and plucked a glistening slice from the pile. "Dessert," he said, glancing at Gavin.

"Don't eat that, Lord," Gavin said, giving Megolyth a dark stare.

Megolyth put his fork down. "What's the problem?"

"Who delivered it?"

Megolyth pointed to a corporal slipping into the obscurity of the meal line.

Gavin walked over to a posted guard. "See that corporal in the line there?" he said, pointing to a man in a rumpled uniform with wild black hair. "Have him brought here to me."

The guard nodded silently and, enlisted the help of two others. They brought the man struggling before Gavin.

Gavin gestured to the food bowl. "Did you bring this?"

The man's eyes darted around, cutting from Gavin to Megolyth. "Yes," he said.

"Then, please," Gavin said in his most congenial tone, "have some." He held a forkful of meat out to the corporal.

The man hesitated for a moment, tension etched in his face and neck. He tried to bolt, but the guards held him still.

"Come, come, now," Gavin taunted. "It couldn't be that bad, could it?"

The corporal struggled against his captors, but refused to take a bite of the meat Gavin offered him.

"Perhaps you could enlighten us as to who sent this delicious indulgence?" Gavin pushed the fork closer to the corporal's lips. He tried to turn his head away but the guard held it firm.

"What are you planning to do with him?" Megolyth said.

Gavin studied the warlord, trying to read his expression. "I'm planning to force him to eat this tempting dessert he brought us, unless he tells us who sent it."

Megolyth smiled. "May I help?"

"Lord," Gavin said with a sadistic grin, "I would be honored to have your assistance."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Harlan stared out at the ebony skies, her black hair blowing in the restless wind. It was a beautiful night, and she reveled in the warm breeze that played over her face. She sat on the stone steps leading to the main entrance of her villa, sipping a glass of wine and listening to the flow of classical music playing from her open windows.

He was coming. She could hear him riding up the road. His hyperia's steady pace mixed with the fluid sound of the music. His arrival was both expected and surprising, a confusing mix that illustrated her limited understanding of him. She thought briefly about going inside and locking the door behind her. Something made her wait for him instead and she marveled at the complex emotions she felt whenever he was near.

Gavin rode up and dismounted, his spurs jingling loudly as he hit the ground. His chest armor was caked with dried mud and his face was powdered with dust and grime. He looked like he'd come straight from the trail, and despite her aversion to him, she was flattered. He took a few steps forward until he was only a couple feet from her. She felt a rush of energy, a coloring of her cheeks, but kept her ground and eyed him coolly.

Standing before her, she thought him the most handsome man she had ever seen. His soaring six foot seven frame was impressive, even for an AEssyrian, a race which prided itself on size and strength. He was also a wall of muscle, and carried his armor and uniform as if they were an organic part of his body. His green face was a perfect sculpture of muscle and bone, with strong, high cheekbones. The furrows in his face gave his gold eyes a hint of villainy. How many women had fallen in love with him because of his brooding beauty and flattering words? *Probably too many to count*, she thought. *Well, I'm not going to be one of them, my good General, and as soon as I can swing it, I'm going home.*

"The shower at my home is broken," he said. "May I bathe here?"

Harlan sipped her wine. "You only have one shower in your six bedroom villa?"

Gavin grunted his response and she wasn't sure it meant anything at all.

Putting her wineglass on the steps, she pulled her knees up to her chest, hugging them. "I really don't want to let you in. I don't want a repeat of your last visit."

Tugging one finger at a time, he pulled his leather gloves off. "Then I apologize again. I'm sorry and I promise to behave myself."

"If I let you in, you might get the wrong idea. You understand there isn't going to be anything between us. Ever."

Gavin stared at her for a moment. "I know and if that is what you truly believe, than I will respect that," he said. He turned and put his gloves in his saddlebag. He left her and walked his hyperia over to a guest stall on the side of the villa. Giving the animal some dry rations, he pulled the bridle off, draping it over the stall door. When he was finished, he returned to where she was sitting.

Wordlessly, she got up, finished her wine, and let him inside. She gestured toward the master bedroom. "The master bathroom's in there," she said, heading toward the kitchen for another glass of wine. She really didn't want him using her bathroom but since Sasha had her personal things in the other one, she thought it would be rude to turn him loose in there.

"Isn't there someone else here?" he called after her.

"She's out on a date," Harlan said, adding to herself that Sasha usually didn't return from her dates until morning.

When she came back out, he'd disappeared into her room. She heard the water start running. Standing alone, she felt a spark of annoyance at herself. Why had she let him in here? The truth settled somewhere in the back of her mind, something she couldn't yet face. She thought about going back to the front steps, but didn't feel right leaving him inside. He might get too comfortable somewhere.

She stayed in the kitchen waiting for him to finish so she could hustle him out the door. After some time, she heard the water stop. Everything seemed to

be quiet, so she made her way to the master bedroom. There he was, lying on his stomach asleep on her bed, breathing deeply. She tried to roust him but he was sleeping too hard, or playing possum. *So typical of him*, she thought.

Harlan glared at him and snatching a pillow from the bed, started toward the door. She was really irritated she was going to have to sleep on the couch in her own home.

“Stay here with me,” she heard him say behind her.

Harlan returned to the side of the bed and pushed the pillow at him.

“Good, you’re awake. Now you can go sleep on the sofa.”

Gavin responded by pulling her onto the bed beside him, his arms enveloping her from behind.

She tensed. “You promised,” she whispered.

“I don’t want that,” he rumbled in her ear. “I want this.” He buried his face in her hair and nuzzled the back of her neck, squeezing her affectionately. His hands roamed a little and she tensed, but soon he was asleep again. His body was tightly spooned against hers.

Harlan waited, expecting at any moment to fend off an aggressive pass but it didn’t come. After a while, she relaxed and fell asleep, too.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

"We've discussed this," Shatara shouted. "I'll not see him!"

Molotov had reached the end of his patience. He'd been trying to reason with the princess all morning and was tired of arguing. He followed behind her in the greenhouse as she moved from plant to plant. She stopped in front of each one, pulled up the sleeve of her white morning gown, and jabbed a finger into the pot to test its moisture.

"The council has said you will, so you shall," he said.

She reeled around to face him. "How dare they tell me who I will and will not receive!"

"This is not a decision you can refuse."

"Everyone is against me," she said, glaring at him. "I know you're only doing the bare minimum of what you have to do. Why don't you admit you would rather see someone other than my son on the throne?"

He glanced down at his uniform and plucked a piece of dried leaf off it. Frowning, he flicked it to the floor. "That may be true, but it's beside the point. I have served you and your son faithfully as regent."

Shatara's eyes watered. She hung her head and leaned against a water line coming up out of the ground. "I know, and I do appreciate all you have done for us. But how can I see him when I have no intention of accepting his marriage proposal?"

"I understand your feelings, Shatara, but this is not a debatable subject. The council is not beyond removing you from power, should it come to that."

The princess stared at him, her face a tight mask. "Did you know Baron Kirus has offered me marriage? He has also sworn to adopt my son."

"Madam," Molotov said, sinking into a nearby chair. "I don't care who you marry. But you will, at least, meet with Megolyth."

Shatara wiped her eyes and folded her arms. "Fine, but it'll be brief."

Molotov stood and approached her, stopping his approach only when she took a step back. "It will take however long is necessary. Make no mistake, madam, I'll not risk a war resulting from your bad manners."

She toyed with a plant leaf and pouted. "I don't see why the meeting is necessary. After all, I think I've already decided who I'm going to marry."

Molotov placed a hand under her chin and forced her head up to look at him. "No matter who you marry, they'll still have to win in the arena for you to be able to keep the crown for you and your son."

Shatara pulled her face from his hand. "Baron Kirus is more than capable of besting any man who comes against him in the arena."

"I wish I shared your confidence in him."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means that the arena is a brutal proving ground and few men are skilled and strong enough to battle their way to the top."

Shatara walked among the plants and wrung her hands. Her youthful brow wrinkled with worry. "Kirus has been practicing," she said.

Molotov followed behind her, his head throbbing with the beginnings of another headache. Once again, he would need a drink to dull the irritable sensations he suffered after every encounter with this woman. She was beginning to rival his wife in annoying him. "Hopefully, that will be enough for him to win," he said. Then, without another word to her, he turned and left the greenhouse.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Megolyth, closely followed by his grandfather and two warriors, made their way up the carpeted walkway to the princess' throne. She looked elegant. The front locks of her hair were done in thin braids and her gown was a rich crimson and gold.

For a moment, he felt a stirring for her, a flash of desire that made him more aware of his body, and then he saw the mood in her eyes. They were red-rimmed and hateful, as if she'd been crying, and when she gazed at him, they took on a hard, ugly edge. He'd have to handle her carefully for all this to go right, but there didn't seem to be much to lose if it didn't.

His party stopped just before the throne, bowing their heads in a gesture of respect to her position. A few high ranking nobles sat on the sidelines. Megolyth met their gaze, each in turn, and each nodded a silent greeting to him. Looking back at the princess, he noticed her gripping the armrest of her throne tightly, glaring at him.

"Alright, you're here," she said. "What do you want?"

Megolyth stared at her, resting his hand on the hilt of his saber. Although beautiful, he found her anger repulsive. Her behavior suggested she already had a lover; a sexual habit marriage probably wouldn't break. Suddenly, his plans to marry her evaporated. "I've come to tell you to step down, for your safety and that of your son."

"What?"

"I don't think I need to repeat myself, do I?"

The royal council gasped but offered no protest. They shifted in their seats and murmured amongst themselves.

The princess leaned forward, her eyes wide and uncertain. "Forgive me, but I thought you were here to offer me marriage," she said.

"I wouldn't have you," he said. "You're tainted."

"Tainted?"

“Yes,” he said.

Baron Kirus Younger stood up from where he’d been sitting with the other nobles and went to the side of the princess. He leaned down and whispered in her ear, keeping an eye on Megolyth.

The princess listened for a moment, and then looked up at him. “What will happen if I refuse to step down?”

Megolyth glanced at Kirus. “Then you’d better have a damn good champion for the arena.”

“You think highly of yourself, Lord. I wonder if you’re really man enough to achieve all that you hunger for,” she said.

Megolyth remained silent as Kirus whispered in her ear again.

“Who’s your pet?” he said, tossing his head at the baron.

Kirus glared at him. “I hope you are not referring to me with that insulting comment.”

“I am.”

The princess shot up from her seat, her fists clenched. “How dare you come in here and degrade me and my nobles? Get out of here before I have you thrown in jail!”

Kirus and two of the queen’s royal guards took that cue to rush forward and try to drive Megolyth and his party out of the throne room, but the warlord pulled his saber free and held his ground. He sliced at Kirus, driving him and the guards back and up the shallow steps to the throne, where the princess was shouting chaotic orders no one seemed to be listening to.

The nobles rose from their seats pulling their weapons. They tried to contain the marauders so order could be restored. Megolyth engaged a few of them, but their efforts were clearly half-hearted, intended only to distract and hold him and his men, not kill them.

Gavin sat in his office looking at the mountain of paperwork on his desk that needed reviewing and signing. It was the least glamorous part of his

position, but important nonetheless. He leafed through a few forms absently, wondering if he should go get a drink instead. A hard knock rattled his door.

“Come,” he called.

His secretary Lynda entered, her dark brown hair secured on her head in a tight bun. Sometimes he thought she went out of her way to make herself unattractive to him. “What is it?”

“A message just came for you, Excellency,” she said. “There is a serious disturbance reported. They need you right away in the throne room.”

By the time Gavin gathered some soldiers and arrived, the fighting was done, but not the drama. Entering from the rear, he could hear the princess arguing with the captain of the guard that Megolyth should be arrested, but the captain adamantly refused stating he was under strict orders not to arrest Megolyth or his men. Gavin stalked over and moved between them.

“No one is going to be arrested today, Lady,” Gavin said in his most condescending tone. Then, turning to the captain, “Please escort the princess and her entourage to her quarters. I’ll handle matters from here.”

The princess shot him a dirty look. “I hate you, Gavin Theron.”

“Why, princess, I didn’t know you were given to such open displays of affection,” he said, amused. “Trust me, my dear, the feeling is mutual.”

The captain rounded up the princess and her entourage and guided them out the doors as Gavin took in the room. Everything was a shambles of broken chairs and some fallen paintings. Over to the left of the throne, Gavin spotted Harlan and Megolyth kneeling by one of the wounded marauders. Harlan’s nurse, Sasha, stood just behind her handing down supplies from a black medical bag as requested. As he made his way over, he recognized the fallen man as Luther, Megolyth’s grandfather. This was very bad.

Gavin crouched by Harlan, catching the velvety scent of her nervous sweat. He ignored his instant arousal. “How bad is he?”

She glanced at him, keeping pressure over the chest wound, her hands covered in blood. "I need to get him back to the clinic right away."

Gavin stood and signaled for his stocky, balding master-at-arms, Sergeant Cahal. "Get a stretcher. We need to move this man to the clinic now."

"Yes, Excellency," he said, rushing off to find one. He returned shortly, maneuvering the stretcher through the crowd to the wounded man.

Harlan kept pressure on the stab wound as the other soldiers lifted him onto the stretcher and carried him out to the clinic. Gavin and Megolyth followed close behind. "What happened?" Gavin said.

Megolyth frowned. "I didn't offer the princess marriage and the young baron got overexcited trying to evict us for the insult."

"I thought marrying her was why you came."

"She turned out to be unreceptive to my visit. Besides, someone is already tending her garden."

Gavin glanced at Megolyth as they walked. "I see. So what did you offer her? Or should I even ask?"

"I offered her the opportunity to step down in safety. Unfortunately, it didn't go over as well as I'd planned."

"Obviously," Gavin said. "Well, at least you made an impression." He played all types of scenarios in his head in case Megolyth's grandfather should take a turn for the worse. It would be a shame to have to kill them all because they'd become too dangerous, but his primary concern was protecting Harlan. If the old marauder died, Megolyth might blame her and try to exact his revenge on her in a rush of anger.

Before they entered the clinic, Gavin placed a hand on Megolyth's arm and pulled him aside. "Excuse me, Lord, but if I am to allow you in the treatment area, you'll need to turn your weapon over to me."

Megolyth stiffened watching the soldiers disappear into the clinic in a frantic rush. Gavin waited. He was unnerved that he couldn't read the warlord's mood, like he could most men. He toyed with the handle of his saber.

In a slow, smooth motion, Megolyth pulled his weapon free and, handle first, surrendered it to Gavin. Gavin took it and turning, tossed it to the master-at-arms for safekeeping. When he turned back around, Megolyth had already vanished inside the clinic and Gavin hurried in to catch up with him. Even unarmed, he was a formidable foe.

When Gavin entered the clinic, Megolyth was leaning against a wall, his arms crossed over his chest, his face dark. One glance at the guard told Gavin everything he needed to know. Harlan had rushed the old marauder into surgery and no one was allowed entrance. Gavin stared at the trail of blood and gore that disappeared under the double doors.

Gavin regarded Megolyth for a moment, then ventured over to the doors and peered into the small, opaque windows. The shapes were fuzzy but he could make out a flurry of activity. He was thankful Megolyth wasn't trying to get in. Gavin was in no mood to engage him physically.

"My Lord, I know that the doctor is doing everything in her power to help your grandfather."

Megolyth said nothing and watched the double doors intently.

Gavin could see the frenzied movements inside the surgery room begin to abate. That was probably a bad thing. He kept his face stoic but he knew the old man was probably dead. He could feel Megolyth's stare piercing his back. He ignored the scrutiny and continued to try and see the actions in the surgery room. He saw a figure come toward the double doors and took several steps back. He wanted to be sure he was between the chieftain and Harlan should bad news move the marauder to violence.

Harlan came through the double doors, her scrubs spattered with the ruby blood of the old man. Her face etched in sorrow and defeat. Before she could speak, Megolyth suddenly turned and walked out of the clinic.

"I'm sorry, Gavin. I tried to save him, but the severity of the wound and his age..."

"I don't think Megolyth blames you," Gavin offered.

Harlan didn't look convinced. She walked over to the sink and began washing the blood from her hands. "Are you going to find out who is responsible for this?"

"Yes I will. In fact, I suspect Megolyth already knows who did it."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The mastian elk meat roasted over the fire lightening the somber mood of the camp. For one of the few times in his life, Gavin didn't feel hungry, but he took the kill off the fire and portioned some off for himself anyway. He took a serving over to Megolyth, who sat at the edge of camp writing in his log book. He closed it and looked up as Gavin approached.

"Hungry?" Gavin offered.

"Not really."

Gavin grunted his agreement and sat on the ground near Megolyth putting the platter nearby. He grinned. "I don't suppose you're going to share your plans with me."

"Right now, I don't have any."

"I'm very sorry about Luther. A nasty bit of luck that was."

Grand Duke Molitov joined them, holding a heaping plate of food in one hand. "Mind if I sit with you, gentlemen? I brought some extra, but I see you already have plenty."

Megolyth nodded a greeting to him. "You are most welcome, Lord, of course."

Molitov plucked a slice of meat off his plate. "I know how angry you must be about what happened, but please, let me speak with the council before you make any decisions."

Megolyth studied the grand duke. "Like I told Gavin a moment ago, I don't have any plans to do anything right now." There was a long silence. Megolyth looked at the grand duke. "Tell me, Lord," he said finally, "do you want to see the princess' son eventually become king?"

Molitov shifted uncomfortably. "I don't really see how—"

"Just answer the question."

The grand duke stared at Gavin, and then ate another piece of meat. He chewed with slow deliberation. "No, I would rather he not become king."

“Why? Is it because he’s a half-breed?”

Both men looked at Gavin, who was gnawing a tough piece of cartilage off some bone. “What?” he said self-consciously. “Don’t worry about me, you’re not hurting my fucking feelings.”

Megolyth smiled. “What do you think of the princess, Excellency?”

“I think she’s a willful little idiot. But my opinion of her is pointless. I’ll serve under whoever the council directs me to.”

The grand duke shook his head. “Don’t ask the general his opinion, he’ll surely give it to you, whether you like it or not.”

Megolyth picked up a morsel of meat with his fingernails. “I find his candor refreshing,” he said.

“I hope you always feel that way.”

Gavin reached into his tunic and pulled out three Cusano 18 cigars. He offered one to each of his companions, and each accepted. They all passed around a burning branch from the roasting pit and sat silently smoking for a while.

Gavin really hoped Megolyth was not planning an attack. He would really hate having to kill the man. So few men had inspired his respect, and he felt a kinship with the warlord. He also worried about being away from Harlan for too long. Suppose her interest in that human scientist from the queendom should grow? He really didn’t like to entertain the prospect of losing her.

Gavin glanced at Megolyth, blowing a long stream of white smoke from his lips. “So is it safe to assume you’ll take no action against us?”

Megolyth stared off into the darkening night. “Gavin, you of all men, should know it’s never safe to assume anything.”

After that, the three of them didn’t exchange another word all night, nor anytime during the next day’s ride.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Princess Shatara stormed into Gavin's office heaving and out of breath, abruptly interrupting his strategy meeting. He was pretty sure why she was there. *This'll be unpleasant*, he thought.

Gavin leaned back in his chair, scratching his bare chest through his unbuttoned tunic. "Could you please excuse us, gentlemen?" he said, standing to roll up some maps on his desk. In response, his officers filed out, glancing at the princess as they left.

When everyone had left and the door was closed, he looked at her. "What is it?"

She stepped closer to his desk, squinting from the morning sunlight streaming through the windows. "Did you order Commander Typhon to issue a call to arms for the nobility?"

"Yes, I did."

"Oh, really?" she said, disgusted. "You didn't think to consult me?"

"Why would I need to consult you, Lady? It's standard defensive procedure."

The princess threw up her arms and walked around to his window gazing down at the drill yard below. "You've panicked all the nobles. They're all afraid their sons are going to be killed in a war because of me!"

"They're right to blame you. You created this situation," he said, filling a crystal whiskey glass from the decanter on his desk. He picked up the engraved glass and sipped the thick cool liquid.

The princess turned to face him. "I want you to cancel that order."

Gavin absently scratched his chest again studying her. "I wouldn't advise it, Lady. I need to be able to meet Megolyth with a strong defense should he decide to attack."

"Do you really believe he's going to attack us over me?"

“Quite frankly, I don’t know what he’s going to do. And, if he does attack, it wouldn’t be simply because of you. It would be for the crown.”

The princess walked over to Gavin’s desk, gently caressing the dark wood of its surface. “You don’t really need to mobilize the nobles yet. Please cancel that order.”

Gavin chewed the end of his cigar, moving it from one side of his mouth to the other. “What does Molotov think of your idea to cancel the call? Or, haven’t you discussed this with him yet.”

The princess leaned down and gave him a smooth, sexy kiss.

Gavin didn’t resist, allowing himself a moment to revel in its decadence. How tempting it would be to allow her to seduce him. She was so deliciously fearful, so carelessly desperate. Unfortunately, such pleasures never came without strings attached, and he certainly didn’t want to be beholden to her for anything. She was so stupid and reckless. He didn’t expect her to live very long. He gently pushed her away. “As tempting as your offer is, I’m afraid I must refuse.”

“Why? Because you’re smitten with that human doctor, Harlan?” she said with an angry sneer. “She could care less about you and what’s more, I’ve heard she already has a lover. I’ve heard she’s seeing that human woman staying with her. You know the one, the nurse.”

Gavin smiled. What an interesting attempt to bait him. “That doesn’t foul up my plans for her, my dear.”

The princess pushed away from him angrily and paced the room. “You’re a filthy pig.”

“Not so revolting, apparently, that you wouldn’t have slept with me on the spot.”

The princess’ pace quickened. “How badly do you want to be with her?”

“Badly enough, it’s certainly no secret,” he said, resting his cigar in an onyx ashtray on his desk.

Suddenly, she stopped and fixed him with a cunning gaze. “Take back that order, and I’ll strip her of her diplomatic immunity and turn her over to you.” Her

delicate mouth twisted into a dark grin. "We could even seal the deal with an Assyrian wedding, sponsored by the crown. How does that sound?"

Gavin looked down into his drink. He dipped his fingertip just inside the glass and stirred it. What a tempting offer. A loss of status, a forced marriage, and Harlan would be his. In circumstance only, of course, because she would definitely never forgive him for it. Perhaps she would come to in time. He didn't doubt she had some feelings for him. The question was did he want her that way, a woman essentially his slave?

"That's a damn good offer, but no," he said, standing and buttoning up his uniform. "I'll speak to the grand duke about the call to arms and see what he advises."

With four quick steps, she closed the distance between them and slapped him across the face.

He barely registered the assault. He snuffed out his cigar, leaving it in the ashtray, and made his way to the door. He opened it and held it waiting.

She walked stiffly over, her eyes fixed to the floor.

"And, Shatara," he said as she made her way past his secretary's desk and out the main door, "the next time you want to share your ideas with me, please do so through your regent first."

Ignoring his comment, she made her way down the long, winding staircase to the lobby below.

Gavin stood in the hall after pulling the main door closed, waiting for her to leave the building. *For a second there, my dear princess, you almost had me.*

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Grand Duke Molitov stalked into the royal library looking for Princess Shatara. After searching a few empty rows of books, he finally found her, curled up in a rust colored wing chair buried in a lonely corner, staring out the window.

He looked down at her and adjusted his monocle. "Did you try to tell Gavin to modify his battle plans?"

The princess pursed her lips and continued staring off. "No," she said. "I tried to persuade him not to get the nobles involved."

"By what right did you do that?"

"I just felt he was overreacting."

Molitov leaned down to draw her gaze. He paused for a moment until he was certain he had her full attention. "You don't ask Gavin to do anything. Do you understand? You leave him to me."

The princess looked away. "Leave things to you? That's a laugh. You probably can't wait for me and my son to be murdered." She lowered her face into her hands and cried.

"Shatara, that's a ridiculous accusation," he said, trying to ignore her emotional outburst.

"I want another regent. Someone who I feel will do what's best for my son," she said in between sobs.

Molitov waited for her to calm a little before he replied. "Someone like Baron Kirus, perhaps?" He let out a slow measured breath. "Save your tears, Lady. Only the royal council can remove me. Besides, aren't you a little suspicious of why he's being so kind to you?"

"He loves me!"

He shook his head in pity and folded his arms across his chest. "He loves you the same way a viper loves his catch."

Shatara glared at him and wiped her eyes with the sleeve of her sky blue dress. The breeze from her actions sent a hint of perfume over to him. She took

a few unsteady breaths. "Some on the council have started showing an openness to change."

"They're just being polite to you."

"Oh come on, you know some of them object to you, if only because of your lifestyle."

She did have a point there, he conceded. Molitov let out a long, tired sigh. "Anyone of them could have this cursed position babysitting you," he said. "In any event, I'm confident a regent won't be necessary that much longer," he said, pulling up a nearby leather chair and sitting across from her.

Studying her face, he could see the resemblance to her father, such a brave and noble man, and he felt a blanket of sorrow cover his heart thinking of the old monarch's murder. The king had certainly not intended for Princess Shatara to ever rule, not only because of her sex, but also because she was spoiled and impetuous, a disastrous mixture in a ruler. Then there was the now deceased Prince Hector her brother, unwittingly killed by his own hand. He'd finally been caught in the deadly web of his own assassination plot against his step-father, the king. Had the king ever intended that boy to rule? Molitov found that possibility unlikely too.

The princess watched the grand duke, her eyes red from crying. "What do you mean a regent won't be necessary much longer?"

"Simply, what I said. I think Megolyth will win the crown and become our new king. I, for one, welcome it."

"What about me? What about my son?"

Molitov took out his monocle and polished it with a soft, white cloth from his uniform pocket. "I'm sorry to say, Lady, but I don't really care what happens to you after that. I'm confident, however, that after your little greeting the other day, he won't be choosing you for a queen."

The princess glared at him and turned her attention back out the window. Molitov got up, replaced his monocle and left.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Harlan sat in her office pondering Luther's death, running over the scenario a hundred times in her head. Intellectually, she knew there was nothing else she could have done, but she felt responsible for his life nevertheless.

There was a quick, sharp knock on the door and Sasha poked her head in. "What are we doing for lunch?"

Harlan glanced at her and tapped her pen against her lips. "I'm not hungry, you go ahead."

Sasha frowned and stepped all the way in. "Are you still brooding over losing that old marauder?"

"There was a lot more at stake in his death than I think you realize."

"Well," she said, crossing her arms and giving Harlan a scolding look, "if it means anything to you, I know the general thinks you did a good job. I overheard him talking to Grand Duke Molitov afterward."

Harlan gave her a thin smile. "I need to talk to Megolyth," she said.

Sasha walked over and took a seat across from Harlan, usually reserved for patients. Lifting up a model of an AEssyrian skull, she toyed with opening and closing the mouth. "Not likely, he went back already."

"I know. I'm going to ride out to his camp and meet with him."

"Have you gone insane? You don't actually think the grand duke or the general are going to let you do that?" she said, replacing the skull on the desk.

"I'm not going to ask them. I'm just going, and you're not going to say anything about it."

Sasha slumped in her chair. "Harlan," she said in her most diplomatic tone, "I know you feel really bad about this, but I think going out there alone is a mistake."

Harlan stood up, peeled off her lab coat, and tossed it over her swivel chair. "I'll be fine," she said with a dismissive wave of her hand. "I managed to

get into Gavin's war room and have a look at the map. I think I have a good idea where the camp is."

Sasha shook her head grimly. "This is crazy. The general is going to be so pissed at you."

"I'll be back before he knows I'm gone," she said, lifting a pant leg to holster a long knife.

"Or you'll be dead before he knows you're gone."

"Look, it's not that far. I don't expect Gavin to come snooping around to bother me for a few days. Just keep things running smoothly until I get back and don't worry, I'll be just fine."

Harlan opened a drawer and took out a spring-loaded anti-venom kit and some dry rations. In the AEssyrian wilderness, one never knew when one or both of them might come in handy. "Besides, they have no reason to kill me, I'm a doctor. I'm neutral."

"Oh yeah? What if Megolyth thinks you let his grandfather die on purpose?"

Harlan stopped her preparations and let out an exasperated sigh. "That's exactly why I have to go. I have to convince Megolyth that I tried my best to save his grandfather."

Sasha stood as Harlan gathered her things and trotted toward the door. "Shouldn't you leave this to the council and the general?" she called after Harlan.

"No," Harlan said, stopping in the door frame. "They'll just make things worse. I was in the operating room, not them. I know what happened and why I couldn't save him. Maybe I have a small chance of keeping the peace," she said. Then she hurried off down the hall, leaving her office door open behind her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Megolyth ran his tongue up the thick, raised spine of his concubine, Namar. She groaned pleasantly and squirmed. On all fours, she pushed her buttocks against his throbbing erection, teasing him with a low, purring growl.

Wrapping his arms around her waist, he eased into her, luxuriating in the lush and fertile feel of her sex. Nuzzling the back of her neck, he was transported by the pleasure that claimed him, their bodies moving in a long and timeless dance of communion. He murmured sweet, meaningless words into the shelf of her shoulder blade rubbing his cheek along her flesh. His hands explored the landscape of her belly and his breathing sped up, coming now in hard, greedy pants. He could both smell and feel her lust and he lost himself in the heady sensation of her body heat. A soft, hungry whine escaped her lips, and she trembled, rolling her buttocks back in a gentle rhythm to meet him until, with a loud moan, her delight was complete. A few minutes later, he too was spent.

Megolyth rolled off and lay near her, and although ready to take her again, he waited patiently for her to rest. They had all night to please each other. He didn't need to rush. She rubbed her scent in his bedding and he grinned watching her.

"I'm sorry for the intrusion, Lord," came a guard's voice from outside the yurt, "but you have a visitor."

Namar glanced at the door, and then gave him a worried look. "A visitor?"

He smiled, not wanting to alarm her. "I'm as intrigued as you are. It's probably the grand duke with some kind of deal. You'd better go for now."

Namar frowned but dutifully got up and pulled her sheer grey robe on. Megolyth slid into his pants, carefully stuffing his throbbing erection down into them. *This better be good*, he thought.

When Namar had left, he wandered around tidying up some discarded clothes and poured two goblets of sweet wine for his unexpected guest. He sat on the floor, crossed his legs, and called for his guard to let the visitor in.

When the guards brought in Harlan, alone and unarmed, he almost couldn't believe it. Either she was ignorant of the danger (which he doubted) or she was somewhat insane. She was putting an unbelievable amount of trust in his good nature.

When they were alone, she said, "I'm so sorry about your grandfather, Lord."

He gestured to a pillow next to him on the floor. "Have a seat," he said, checking his raging passion. He was normally not attracted to other races, but lust could be difficult to control when with another woman so soon after mating, and she was attractive. "You're pretty bold for coming here. I take it neither Gavin nor the grand duke know you've come." He offered her some wine and she took it.

"No," she said. "As I'm sure you're aware, they would have never let me come and I really wanted to talk to you about what happened. I feel awful about your loss."

"I'm grateful for your work in trying to save him, but the matter is closed."

Harlan sipped her wine. "I was afraid you would think I was part of some elaborate assassination plot. Not to be morbid, but I came to explain in detail the nature of your grandfather's injuries and why I couldn't save him. If you are so inclined to hear it."

Megolyth studied her, his fingertips tracing his bottom lip. "That won't be necessary," he said. "I believe you did your best and that was all I could hope for."

Harlan nodded and stood up. "Well, that was all. I just didn't want you to think I let him die on purpose. I already feel responsible for all this tension. Anyway, thank you for seeing me," she said and began making her way to the door. She was nervous, edgy. She probably sensed she had interrupted something.

Megolyth rose and slowly followed her. "I can't let you leave tonight, Harlan, it's much too dangerous."

Harlan turned to face him, her brow furrowed. "There's still some light left. I'm sure I'll get back fine."

He walked up and stood before her, looking down into her eyes. He could almost taste her worry in the scent of her light sweat. He resisted the desire to undress her. "Now that you are here with me, I am responsible for your safety. You'll stay the night."

She opened her mouth to speak and he placed his index finger on her lips. He traced their plump fullness and stared deep into her eyes. He could see her concern growing, her pupils dilating. "The only word I want to hear out of your mouth right now is yes," he said.

Harlan took a careful step back from him, folding her arms across her chest. For a moment, she looked conflicted and indecisive.

Megolyth scratched his chin. "Yes?" he prompted her.

"Yes," she said after a few moments. "But I'm not staying in here and I'm leaving in the morning."

"I wouldn't have it any other way," he said with a smile. He sipped his wine. "I'll have the guards set up a tent for you next to mine. That way, I'll be able to hear if you need anything during the night."

"Great," Harlan said, stepping out of his way as he stalked out to give the order. "That'll be just great."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Gavin stood outside the clinic entrance with Typhon, puffing on the last inch of his cigar. He was worried how Harlan was taking the death of Luther and had decided to stop in and check on her. Perhaps she'd agree to have dinner with him to talk it out. Typhon was restless next to him, he had a young wife at home and Gavin knew he was worried a war could keep them apart for a long time. A couple of Gavin's own early marriages had crumbled under the pressure of his constant battle-related absences, among other reasons.

"What do you think?" Typhon said, looking at him. "You think he plans to attack?"

"Go home and stop fretting about it. Whatever Megolyth decides, he'll let us know soon." Gavin tossed his cigar on the ground and crushed it with his boot. He coughed a few times, a longtime smoker's cough. He pulled a flask from his inside breast pocket and took a deep swig of Sawjack Whiskey. The familiarity of the liquor's bite soothed him.

Typhon glanced at the clinic door. "You really like her, don't you?"

"No, Commander," Gavin said, replacing the flask, not sure anymore what his feelings for Harlan were. "I just want to bed her." He didn't think Typhon believed him, and wondered how much he accepted it as true himself.

Typhon smiled and nodded. "If you say so, anyway, I'm going home." With that, he strolled off awash in delicate moonlight, his spurs jingling like wind chimes in a breeze. After a few moments, he disappeared between two buildings and was gone from view.

Gavin came into the clinic just as Sasha was shutting off the lights. He noticed Harlan's office dark.

"Has she gone home then?" he said.

"I'm not really sure." Sasha replied, quickly gathering her belongings.

He frowned darkly. He could taste deception like a stale cigar. "Tell me where she is."

“She had to run an errand,” Sasha said, not meeting his gaze.

“What type of errand?” The last drop of his patience evaporated.

“I’m not supposed to tell you.”

Gavin leaned forward, casting darkness over Sasha with his enormous shadow. Immediately, he thought of the human man from the other day.

“Perhaps if I start snapping each of the small bones in your hand, you will reconsider your allegiances.”

Sasha moved around to the other side of the desk and stuffed her hands into the front pockets of her jeans. “She went to see Megolyth. She should have been back hours ago.”

“What!” he shouted as his jealousy was replaced by a thousand horrible fates slamming through his mind.

“I tried to tell her it was a bad idea, but she was so sure she’d be all right.”

He flung the clinic door open and held it. “How long ago did she leave?”

Sasha’s mouth dropped into a frown. “Early this morning, before the first sunrise.”

Gavin rushed through the door and ran to the stable, taking out his hyperia and saddling it. He’d have to inform Molitov before he left, a prospect that was certain to turn into an argument.

As he tacked his animal, he worried over Harlan’s recklessness. He had never known a woman like her, and she was certainly as bold as any man. Who knew what Megolyth might do to her if he was angry enough? It made him sick to think of her beaten and raped, left bound to a pike to die.

Once his animal was tacked and armored, he made the journey to Molitov’s house, arriving not long after midnight. To his surprise, the maid informed him the grand duke was awake and escorted him into a small downstairs study.

Molitov sat at his desk, looking as if he’d just been roused from his bed. His long black hair hung free around his shoulders, a few rebel locks lay across his right eye. He wore only some thin, loose-fitting black pants. Several angry,

fresh welts marred his chest and shoulders. A crumpled note lay before him on the desk.

Gavin tossed his head at the injuries. "What happened to you?"

Molotov glanced down. "They're nothing," he said with a private smile. "Did you know about this?" Molotov held up the note. "I can only guess it's why you've come. Unless you're here because Megolyth has attacked."

"Not that," Gavin said. "Not yet." He picked up the note to read it. "So he is holding her hostage," he said, tossing the note back down.

"And you want to go and secure her release," Molotov said.

"I don't *want* to go, Lord, I am going."

"Gavin, I can't risk losing you. What if he attacks tonight?"

"Commander Typhon knows the battle plan. He's more than capable of taking over for me."

"What about Commander Barius?"

"I no longer trust him," Gavin said.

Molotov leaned back in his chair and stared at Gavin. "Why are you doing this for this human woman?" Rumors are flying that you're obsessed with her. I must admit, I've never seen you act like this."

"It's only lust," Gavin said. "Now, there's an emotion you surely understand." He let the silence between them build, feeling uncomfortable over this line of questioning.

"Do you really believe it's only desire that drives you?"

Gavin turned and headed toward the door. "I have to go, it's late."

Molotov nodded slightly, interlacing his fingers across his stomach. "Let's hope it's not too late. I'd hate to see you get yourself killed for no good reason."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Gavin was intercepted as soon as he crossed the border. In a good faith gesture and out of necessity, he surrendered his weapons without incident and, in return, was escorted back quickly.

The largest of the twin suns had begun her rise, the warm, reddish light kissing the high ground as she made her way into the sky. The women of the camp had begun their morning work already, some of the younger ones watched him with excited curiosity, whispering to each other as he passed.

Gavin stood patiently outside the yurt waiting for Megolyth to see him. Although not bound, he was guarded by four soldiers, their weapons drawn and ready. He studied the structure before him and noticed a newer tent pitched beside it. He struggled to keep his temper, realizing it probably housed Harlan, kept close to ensure her protection.

A soldier emerged from the yurt and nodded to the guards. Gavin was escorted to the door, and then allowed to enter alone.

Megolyth sat in the center on a pillow. A large, round serving table with meat and wine was set before him. "Good morning, General," he said. "Why don't you come and have some breakfast?"

Gavin carefully scanned the room for danger. They appeared to be alone. "I appreciate the hospitality, Lord, but I'm not hungry."

Megolyth turned his attention to the food and began eating, wolfing down large, bloody chunks he speared with his fork. "Why have the nobles sent you? You're not exactly known for your diplomacy."

"Cut the crap," Gavin said, feeling his mood darken. "Where is she?"

"The doctor?" Megolyth said with obvious amusement. He stopped eating and wiped his hands with a nearby cloth napkin. The white fabric came away with crimson smudges.

"Yes."

"She's fine."

"I want to see her for myself, if you don't mind," Gavin said.

"She's still sleeping. She had a long night," Megolyth said with a grin.

Gavin moved a few paces forward.

Megolyth was immediately up and armed. His eyes twinkled with adolescent mischief. "You're kind of nervous. Would you be upset if I slept with her?"

"I want to see her now."

"Answer the question."

Gavin's temple throbbed and he held his blistering temper in check. A savage rage licked at the edges of his soul. Pure fire burned in his gut. "If you touched her, I'll take you apart."

Megolyth appeared unmoved by the threat. "I'll let you see her, but I must be present."

"That's agreeable," Gavin said. He was willing to agree to almost anything.

The two men made their way next door to Harlan's tent. When they came in, she was just waking and sat up in startled surprise. Although fully clothed, she pulled her blanket around her self-consciously.

Gavin stared down at her. "Sleeping well, are you, dear?" he said.

She scowled at his sarcasm. "What are you doing here?"

He wedged his thumbs into the waistband of his pants. "Trying to get you released."

"I'm not a prisoner," she said. Then looking at Megolyth, she asked, "Am I?"

Megolyth smiled at her.

Frowning, she ran her fingers through her hair pulling it back from her face. "I guess I am."

"What the hell possessed you to come out here alone, Harlan?" Gavin shouted, unable to contain his fury.

She glared at him. "I just wanted to apologize for what happened."

Gavin turned to Megolyth. "What do you want for her release?"

Megolyth looked from Harlan to Gavin thoughtfully. "I want you to talk to whomever you need to on the council about setting up a challenge for the throne. And I want permission to fight in it."

"Then you'll let her go?"

"Let's take this one step at a time. After all, you can never know when a hostage might prove useful. Fear can unearth a bounty of hidden emotions in a man," Megolyth said, watching Gavin carefully. "Wouldn't you agree, General?"

Gavin folded his arms and gave him a dangerous look. "I'll get you your fucking challenge, Lord. Just make sure Harlan stays healthy and happy until I return. Are we agreed on that?"

Megolyth nodded and both men looked down at Harlan again. "What am I supposed to do in the meantime, just sit around?" she said.

Megolyth graced her with a dazzling smile. "Don't worry, Harlan," he said. "I have plenty of things to occupy your time."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Gavin stood with his hands behind his back staring out the tinted window. The royal meeting room was small, but he wasn't expecting a lot of attendees, so it should serve just fine.

He heard someone enter behind him, and recognized Kirus Younger in the glass' reflection. The man took his seat wordlessly and Gavin grinned, he was not surprised the baron had come to champion his mistress' interests.

Gavin watched Master Sergeant Rakon drilling a company of new recruits in the courtyard below. "I don't recall inviting you," he said to Kirus without turning around.

"Evict me then."

"I wouldn't dream of it," Gavin said. "How else would your mistress get any news?"

Gavin heard him shift in his seat. "I haven't seen you with your human girlfriend in a while. Could it be she finally sees you for the drunkard you are?"

Gavin turned around. "She's a fine woman. She knows exactly what I am. Can Princess Shatara say the same about you?"

The conversation was interrupted by the arrival of Grand Duke Molitov and Duke Pollick, two of the highest ranking nobles on the council. They took their seats, flashing curious looks at Kirus, who ignored them.

"Alright, Gavin," Molitov said when everyone had settled. "Give us your news."

Gavin paced in front of the window. "As you know," he said, addressing Molitov, "I've met with Megolyth and he has given me the terms of Doctor Ambrose's release."

Duke Pollick, a heavysset man with shoulder length brown hair and a deep scar on his upper lip, lit his pipe. "I suspect we already know what he wants," he said in between puffs.

“I’m sure you do,” Gavin said and stopped pacing by Molitov’s chair. “He wants to challenge for the throne.”

For a long time, no one spoke.

Molitov took out his monocle and began cleaning it with a handkerchief. “And if we refuse, he’ll kill the doctor, then invade as well.”

“That’s right,” Gavin said.

Kirus tapped his fingers lightly on the table. “Well, who really cares what happens to the general’s slut? As for invading, he hardly has the manpower to be a serious threat. We should stick by the princess’ decision and refuse him.”

With a swiftness not expected for his size, Gavin moved across the room and slammed Kirus’ chair to the floor, surprising the man and sending him sprawling. Then Gavin was on Kirus, one knee firmly planted on his chest, pinning him as Gavin pulled a small knife from a sheath in his lower back. He held the knife to Kirus’ face and glared down at him. “I’m going to filet you, savage little rodent,” Gavin snarled.

Molitov was up and at his elbow. “Gavin, put that away and try to control your temper. You know we are all concerned over Harlan’s safety,” he said.

Gavin slowly lifted himself from Kirus, deliberately increasing the pressure on his knee to compress Kirus’ chest. Once off, Kirus groaned, clutched his chest and rolled away.

Gavin kicked him in the side as he passed. He returned to his place by the window and reined in his temper. Looking around, he caught Duke Pollick studying him as he played with the loose skin under his chin.

Molitov stood over Kirus giving him a cool stare. “You’d better get up before he attacks you again.”

Duke Pollick pulled his pipe from his mouth frowning over the scene but said nothing.

Kirus rose and, after righting his chair, sat glaring at Gavin. “This is not done between us, whore’s son.”

Gavin smiled venomously and held his arms out in welcome. “Anytime you want me, little Baron, I’m all yours.”

“That’s enough, gentlemen,” Molitov said, then turning to Duke Pollick, he said, “What say you, Lord?”

The duke studied Gavin for a long moment. “The recent murmurings in the council have been to allow a challenge by this most worthy lord, and, although I cannot speak for all, I am in agreement. Doctor Ambrose has been a well-respected member of our community and I am confident the council will want to see her safe release.”

“The answer then, is yes,” Molitov said, clarifying the issue for all.

The duke turned to Gavin. “Tell Megolyth a challenge will be called and he may compete for the crown.”

Gavin bowed his head in deference to the duke and the older man rose from his chair, making his way to the door. Reaching it, he paused, glanced at Kirus, and then gave Gavin a sober look. “I have a great deal of respect for your accomplishments, General,” he said, “but the whorehouse home of your childhood shines on you like a beacon.”

Gavin folded his arms. The fabric of his uniform strained over his massive biceps. Although used to these personal attacks, they always irritated him. “You mean I’ll never become king?”

“No,” the duke said. “I mean you’ll never be more than a dangerous thug in a uniform. If Doctor Ambrose knows what’s good for her, she’ll maintain a good distance from you in the future.”

Gavin didn’t reply. He knew from experience how much the nobility hated him and resented the military successes he had achieved. It was pointless to return a comment as he’d not change the noble’s mind about him. Besides, he thought as everyone left the room, he had what he wanted, a challenge for Megolyth. So what if he had to lie to them to get it?

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Megolyth watched Harlan creep along the river's edge in her bare feet, a spear at the ready. Worrying her lower lip with her teeth, she craned and bobbed looking for a fish worth eating.

After several minutes, she thrust the spear into the water and pulled out an aggressive spiky faharn impaled on the end. The creature fought back with great vigor, falling free of the spear tip and landing hard on the ground to chase her around in a circle before scurrying back into the water.

He walked over to join her as she stood staring at the blue-green river as if it had betrayed her. She glanced at him.

"Hungry?" he said.

"I was really craving something other than meat for a change."

"You should have told me. I would have sent a hunter out to get you something special," he said.

She sat down by the water's edge and was quiet for a long time. "I really wish I could go home."

He looked down at her, and then crouched by her on the ground. They both stared into the water. "I'm sure Gavin will secure your release."

"No, that's not what I meant," she said. "I mean home to Earth."

Megolyth stared at her and nodded, understanding her loneliness. "What's keeping you? Other than your current situation, of course."

"A lot of things. I like it here, I want to finish my commitment and, of course, the expense of the ticket."

Megolyth looked out at the river. "What about Gavin?"

"What do you mean?"

He laughed. Could it be she was completely unaware of the general's strong feelings for her? *More likely*, he thought, *she didn't want to acknowledge them*. He couldn't blame her, their interracial difficulties aside, Gavin was not the kind of man most women would be happy with for long. There was a darkness in

him, a just-under-the-surface boiling rage that Megolyth found disturbing.

“Harlan,” he said, grinning at her, “he’s quite obviously in love with you.”

Now it was Harlan’s turn to laugh. “He feels something for me, but it’s not love.”

“He may not be aware of it, and you may not believe it, but it’s definitely more than just lust. How else can you explain his willingness to let me use him?”

Megolyth stood, dusting the dirt from his hands and pants.

“What are your plans for me?” she inquired, squinting up at him.

“We’ve set up a medical tent for you. Maybe you’d be willing to treat some patients when you’re ready.”

As he turned to leave, she called to him and said, “I really wish you wouldn’t use me against Gavin anymore.”

He stopped. “I’m sorry, Harlan,” he said. “I haven’t even begun to use you against him.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

The royal council was buzzing with earnest, idle talk. Molitov sat in his spot tensely flipping through his note cards and glancing up to watch the greetings going on around him. Since he'd become regent, his life had taken a more laborious turn and he really resented it. He knew his fellow nobles envied him for the post, but none so much, they were willing to relieve him of it.

The princess's entourage entered and Molitov stood up. "All rise for her Royal Highness, Princess Shatara," he said, raising his voice above the crowd. All the nobles came to their feet and fell silent as she mounted the steps of her council box and took her seat.

"Come, gentlemen," Molitov said, as the crowd began talking again. "Let's take our seats so we can begin."

Molitov paused for a moment until everyone was still quiet. Before he could begin, the princess stood up, fixing him with a lofty gaze. "May I speak first, Lord?" she said.

Cunning move, he thought. She effortlessly shifted the meeting to her advantage by making the opening statement. "By all means," he said, uninterested in the prospect of battling her.

Looking out at the assembled nobles, she said, "I wish to request the council appoint a new regent to represent my son."

Loud murmurs rose from the group and the princess lifted her hand for quiet. "Most of you swore an oath of loyalty to my father when he was your king and, with that in mind, I am asking you to act on that loyalty now. I know you are all in agreement over allowing Megolyth to challenge for the throne, and I accept that. But in order for me and my son to receive fairness and proper representation in the arena, I want a new regent and champion."

The assembly roared with the noise of many passionate conversations. Soon, the clamor died down again and Duke Pollick looked at Molitov. "What are your thoughts on this, Lord?"

Molotov studied the crowd. They watched him anxiously like schoolboys with a strict new teacher. He knew they were expecting him to be outraged, to fight for his position of power, but he had no interest. If she wanted a new regent, then she would have him. But as much as he wanted his freedom from all of the princess' tireless plotting, he couldn't bring himself to give up the post without sharing a word of caution. They would ignore his advice, of course, but perhaps they would pay closer attention to the princess from now on.

"Lords, the statement by the princess is certainly no revelation to me. Nor, I'm sure, to any of you who truly know her, will her choice of regent be," he said grimly. "I advise against this."

The group roared their opinions all at once.

"I have a right to be championed by someone who is dedicated to me, and yes, I feel Baron Kirus is that man," she said, yelling over the clamor of the crowd.

Duke Pollick raised his hands and hushed the nobles. Then he said, "Your objection is well taken, Lord Molotov. This, however, is a minor thing she wants. I think it harmless to grant it to her. Is anyone else in opposition to the princess appointing Baron Kirus Younger as new regent?"

The assembly remained quiet.

"Then it is decided," the duke said. He looked at the princess again. "Where is the Baron tonight? I'm surprised he didn't attend to find out the outcome of your request."

The princess gave him a victorious smile. "He's watching my son. The boy adores him."

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Harlan stood in the medical tent slowly putting bandages back into the first-aid kit. She'd been waiting about two hours for word from Megolyth on her release and she was beginning to fear it might not be today. She really didn't have time to be a hostage; she had work to do in her own clinic. Walking over to the tent's entrance, she looked out to see if any more patients had come by, but saw no one. A great burden had settled in her heart, not because she minded caring for the marauders, but being held against her will only reminded her again of how vulnerable she was here.

A rider entered the camp escorted by some guards and the sight of him pulled her from her thoughts. It was Gavin, and she was overwhelmed by the sight of him. He was filthy, his uniform dusty from his long ride and he looked tired. The guards took his hyperia and, swinging a leg over the animal's withers, he dismounted. She watched him stalk off toward Megolyth's yurt, really hopeful for her escape for the first time.

Could it be possible that Megolyth was right about Gavin's feelings for her? She simply couldn't believe it. He always seemed immune from such softer emotions, and what about her feelings for him? They were terribly confusing. Yes, he was her friend and he had proven to be quite a loyal one, and yes, too, he certainly made no secret of his attraction to her. But her feelings, however much she hated to admit it, were running deeper than just physical attraction. She was in serious emotional trouble and she knew it.

He ducked his head into the tent startling her. Getting up, she walked over to him suppressing a smile.

"Get your things," he said in a warm, low rumble. "We're going home."

Gavin's villa was exactly as she had envisioned it, a museum of arms and armor. Each room was decorated with black leather furniture and lavish wood

paneled walls that proudly displayed swords and shields of every size and variety. This was definitely a man's home. She laughed at the lack of anything remotely feminine. He was obviously not sentimental about any of his past wives.

She could hear him out in the courtyard preparing a spit to cook her meat as she wandered through his home alone. She didn't have the heart to tell him she wasn't hungry; he had gone to so much trouble to make her a meal from his meager icebox offerings.

Stepping outside, she spotted him standing by the fire, lighting the end of his cigar with a burning twig. Thin white veils of smoke rose from the end and drifted dreamily into the air like small, lonely ghosts. He had stripped off his tunic, tossing it over a chair back, and she lingered for a moment to take in his rugged beauty.

His torso was a wall of muscle, a fortress carved with the scars and etchings of a thousand battle wounds. His long, dark hair hung freely down to the middle of his back, and its sheen reminded her of black satin. The bones of his face were broad and perfect, emphasizing the handsomeness of his harsh masculinity. The light, cool hue of his green skin was both exotic and familiar, and she found herself for the first time hungry to touch and kiss it.

Tossing his lighter back into the pit, he fixed her with a golden-eyed stare. Reading her gaze, he swaggered over, his vertical pupils so dilated, they obscured the color of his eyes. He stopped in front of her. "Where's my thank you kiss?" he said.

Harlan broke eye contact and turned to move away, but he gently seized her by the arm and kept her still. He leaned down and kissed her, and it felt soft and warm and full of need. Her body ached for him as if he'd always been her lover, and when his mouth pushed harder into hers, she knew she was lost and would give him anything he asked for.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Gavin broke the kiss and licked his lips, tasting the sweet flavor of her mouth. He could smell the fire burning the meat behind him but he didn't care, he didn't want anything to break the spell of this moment. Wrapping his arms around her, he kissed her again, a steaming, wishful kiss that made his loins ache.

To his surprise, she remained calm and relaxed, slipping her arms around his neck and parting her lips to take his tongue into her mouth. A shock wave of lust slammed through him and he struggled to hold himself in check.

"Don't tease me, Harlan," he said. "Give me what your kisses promise."

"I will," she said, her voice barely a whisper.

He lifted her into his arms and carried her inside and upstairs to his bed. Laying her down, he nuzzled her neck murmuring AEssyrian love words into the shell of her ear. She smiled, then laughed, her voice rich with desire, and arched her back to push her breasts against his chest. Sliding her shirt and bra up, he caressed her breasts, finding them with his mouth and licking each in turn as she struggled to pull the clothes off her body. Finally free of them, her fingers moved into his hair and her kisses became breathier and more urgent. He couldn't remember being so lost, so taken with a woman, that all of her yearning consumed him to such a degree, he couldn't imagine being this happy with anyone else. He heard her moan and beat down the savage desire to take her quickly. He wanted to savor and truly taste her, for she was a hard won victory, and rushing simply wouldn't do.

Her hands were exploring him, touching his chest, his face, his lust, a touch both cautious and light enough to be almost nonexistent. He placed his hands over hers, pushing them into his flesh, showing her how he liked to be stroked, then guiding them back to thick erogenous glands along his spine. She obediently touched them, her fingertips running down his spine, sending liquid fire into his blood.

As she stroked him, he removed the rest of her clothes and his own, tossing all the items carelessly to the floor. The sight of her perfect white skin on his sheets was magical, and he let out a low growl of pleasure as their flesh touched. She was kissing him now, a feverish kiss, her tongue exploring his mouth and neck, her hands roaming down his back and buttocks.

He reached down and moved his fingers through the hot, moist, center of her sex. She twisted eagerly under his touch. Then his tongue found her, teasing her womanhood with its daring strokes and he knew she was close to release. Then he took her, lifting her hips off the bed to meet him and filling her body as she wrapped her legs around him in welcome.

The beast of his passion was riding him now, his mind a slave to its feral hunger. Each sensation was a delight, her sound, her scent, her taste, and he both possessed and was possessed by her. Her breath was quickening in his ear; her moans, a poetry of sound. His pleasure had become torture. His body was enveloped in her erotic heat, until a sharp gasp and thunderous ripples inside her signaled her climax.

Her scent was all over him, driving and exciting him and he gave himself over to the powerful feelings it evoked. His desire, so long denied, peaked, and washed over him in stunning tides of ecstasy and deliverance.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Megolyth was barely asleep in his new villa when he heard the jingling and snatched his sword from its resting place by the headboard. He rolled off the mattress and crouched in the darkness, taking in the stench of old sweat and dirt the intruders gave off. *Assassins*, he thought. It didn't surprise him. Shatara had a lot to lose, and with him inside the city preparing for the challenge that would unseat her son, she understandably had become far more desperate to stop him.

Although the assassins' break-in was quiet, they had neglected to remove their spurs, which clinked softly as they crept around, betraying their location. Barely breathing, he listened to determine their number. From the sound, he guessed there were around three. Not too many to kill, he reasoned. He just hoped he didn't kill one of his guards by accident in the melee.

One moved close to him, bumping the bed with his thigh and lifting his axe high to cleave its unseen occupant. Megolyth rose from his crouch and swung his weapon into the man's torso, chopping the meat of his chest with a deadly blow. The man let out a scream, filling the room with its terrifying ring and brought the axe around to counter his attacker. Megolyth could feel the draft from the swing as the blade came within inches of his head. Light instantly filled the room, causing everyone to squint and blink. In that moment of confusion, Megolyth brought his sword down and chopped the man's right arm off at the shoulder. The warrior bellowed in pain, his arm and axe falling to the floor amid a spray of blood.

Megolyth left the wounded man on the floor thrashing and moved on to the next. A gigantic warrior with a thick scar down the center of his face strode toward him wielding two short swords with equal skill. Stepping into the attack, he feigned a low chop to the abdomen, and when the man lowered his blades to intercept, Megolyth sliced upward, opening his opponent's neck with a diagonal cut. The man dropped his weapons, his hands clutching his ruined throat as he tried to stem the crimson tide.

By the time Megolyth turned to engage the last intruder, the assassin was already wounded and captured by his guards. Walking over to the man by his bed, he dragged him up by his remaining arm and placed him by his surviving companion. The man was pale and looked dangerously close to passing out.

“Are you in Shatara’s pay?” Megolyth asked the one-armed man.

The man averted his gaze in defiance.

Megolyth lifted his sword and nodded darkly to his men. In response, his men seized the warrior’s other arm and held it up, restraining the assassin, who was desperately struggling.

“Yes, yes!” he screamed, just before Megolyth brought the blade down.

Megolyth sheathed his weapon. “Thank you for your help.” Then, turning to his guards, he said, “I need a gift box for Princess Shatara, and I want it lined with thick butcher paper. I’ll also need that battle axe over there.” One man brought the axe as another went to find a box.

Megolyth looked down at his two captives and gave them a chilling grin. “We’d better take these two gentlemen outside to the courtyard,” he said. “This is going to get messy.”

The man with one arm began to sob.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

When Harlan woke up in Gavin's bed at sunrise, he was already gone. She pulled the soft linen covers over her head and groaned. *I can't believe I slept with him*, she thought. She was miffed by his absence, but chastised herself for expecting anything better from him. She was surprised he didn't leave a few coins on his bedside table for her. She kicked the covers off and got out of bed to find her clothes. Her body ached deliciously as she moved, sore from their many hours of lovemaking. *Correction*, she reminded herself, sex. She was sure that's all he considered it. She was nothing more than an orgasm to him. *Why do women always think they're the special one?* She was much harder on herself than him for how she felt. After all, he was quite open about his promiscuity.

Harlan finished dressing and stomped outside to the stable. First light was stroking the sky, illuminating cloud formations in vibrant shades of amber and pink. Stuffy heat filled her lungs as she walked. His primary mount was, of course, gone, but he had at least saddled his second hyperia for her and left it tethered in its stall. She couldn't have imagined any bigger of a hint, except maybe a note requesting she be gone before his return.

The chestnut hyperia peeked out at her lazily as she approached, munching slowly on its breakfast. She led it out of the stable and mounted up, feeling a little lost. *This was so strange*, she thought, *how could I have been so wrong about all this?*

As she rode home, she was a mess of conflicting emotions. One part of her was glad his tireless sexual pursuit of her was finally over. Now, maybe he would focus his attention on some other poor unfortunate. But the truth was, she did have strong feelings for him and they were at the heart of why she'd let him seduce her. Her only regret was he obviously didn't feel the same way. Anyway, it was done and she promised herself she wouldn't dwell on it.

The ride home was quiet and uneventful, interrupted by the frequent and annoying erotic images of last night's steamy liaison. Sometimes they were so vivid, her body would respond with a tingling rush of desire. Her thoughts badgered her all the way home, and she hated it. *I have to make sure this never happens again. I'm not going through this again.*

When Harlan arrived home, she was shocked to see the princess' mount tied up in back. More surprising still, she appeared to have come alone. *If she has no guards with her, Harlan thought, something must be terribly wrong.*

Harlan put the hyperia away and came in through the back entrance. The princess and her young son were waiting in the living room with all the drapes closed. The princess' hair hung unkempt around her shoulders and her hazel eyes were dark with fatigue. Her son played innocently by her feet.

Harlan looked around cautiously, almost expecting someone else to be here. "What's going on?" she said.

The princess chewed her lower lip. "I know I have no right to ask this of you. But I can't trust anyone else. I desperately need your help."

Harlan was moved by the woman's fear. "I don't know what kind of help I could offer," she said, taking a seat on the couch next to the princess.

"I know Megolyth will try and kill my son soon," she said, her voice shaking with emotion. "Will you please take him to his father, Grand Duke Savion, so he can protect the child?"

"What makes you think Megolyth is going to kill your son soon? The challenges haven't even started yet," Harlan said.

The princess sat on the edge of the sofa and put her face in her hands. "I received a box from Megolyth. It contained someone's head. I don't know who it was, but I can only assume it's a threat. I haven't gone to the council about it yet, because I have to ensure my son's safety first."

Harlan frowned. She really didn't want to get involved in this. She wouldn't mind a visit to the Razorback queendom but she had no love for Shatara's ex-fiancé. "Grand Duke Savion and I are not exactly on friendly terms. How do I know he won't hold a grudge and just kill me after I give him the boy?"

The princess stood and took her hand, her eyes wet with tears. "I promise he won't harm you. He just wants to have his son delivered safely. Please, Harlan, I'm begging you. If I had anyone else, I'd ask them, but as I said, you're the only one I can trust."

"What about you? Why don't you take him? You're probably in danger as well."

"I can't. I need to stay here and fight for his throne. I'll be fine. No one would dare harm me. It's my son who's in mortal danger. Please say you'll help me," she said.

It'll get me out of here for a while, she thought, and I'll probably be saving the little boy's life. But I'm sure not looking forward to seeing Savion.

"Alright," Harlan said, "but don't tell anyone about my involvement, do you understand? I don't want my job or my life ending up in jeopardy over this."

"I won't," Shatara said as she leaned down and whispered a few parting words to her son. She stood up and quickly turned back toward Harlan, tears flooding her face. "I swear to you, I'll die with this secret. And I will owe you a great debt that I will make up to you someday."

Harlan nodded impatiently and followed her to the door. *Promises, promises*, she thought. Young Prince Gregor fixed his gaze on Harlan and she was immediately creeped out by the misplaced maturity in his somber look. Once again her thoughts reached out for Gavin. He would be furious if she left the safety of the kingdom again, especially on a venture to meet up with Savion. He probably wouldn't even notice she was gone. After all, he was done with her. In the more juvenile recesses of her mind, she hoped he did find out and that it made him just as pissed as she was this morning.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

“What would you have me do, Kirus? Should I just sit here and wait for him to kill my son and then me?” Shatara sank deeper into the pearl bubbles that filled her bathtub. Only her head and knees were visible through the velutinous foam.

Kirus leaned in the doorway to the bathroom with his arms folded across his chest. The light from the brass sconces cast shadows on his already dark face and he absently tapped the toe of his boot on the floor. “Where is your son? Have I not said I would protect you and the boy?”

“Then tell me what you plan on doing about Megolyth’s little gift,” Shatara snapped as she sat up suddenly. The warm, soapy foam was pulled down her torso and back into the water by gravity.

“I don’t plan on doing anything. It was unfortunate my strategy failed, but I think I have a remedy.” Kirus left his position in the doorway and walked over to the tub, his tall leather boots clacking on the smooth marble. Confusion filled Shatara’s face and she opened her mouth to speak, but Kirus cut her off. “The box Megolyth sent you was a thank you gift for the failed attempt on his life you ordered.” Kirus continued to move toward her.

“But I didn’t order any such...” Horror consumed Shatara’s expression as the cognizance of what Kirus had done erupted through her mind.

“Have you lost your mind? Why would you do such a thing? I could be executed for this.” Shatara’s voice cracked with hysteria.

Kirus sat on the edge of the bathtub and gently rubbed the back of Shatara’s neck gazing down into her panic-sticken eyes, feeding off her terror..

“Don’t worry, my love. They can’t execute you if they can’t find you.”

The maid was on her belly bound and blindfolded, thrashing hungrily beneath him. He stroked her buttocks reassuring her, giving her time to learn his touch as he leisurely explored her body.

Then he spanked her and she started with the shock of it. He measured each strike hard and firm until her green skin was flushed and tender. She whimpered and he stopped to let her catch her breath. Leaning close to her face, he asked, "Shall I release you, Margaret?"

Her tongue darted out, slowly moistening her lips. "No," she whispered.

"Shall I have you then, my love? Anyway I want?"

"Yes, Lord," she said. "I am yours in any way that pleases you."

A knock sounded on the door and she groaned in protest.

"Just a minute," Molotov said, taking a knife from the bedside table and cutting the girl loose. She removed her blindfold and sat up, covering her nakedness with a blanket.

Molotov put on a charcoal colored robe and cracked the door open. His bodyguard, Focault, stared in at him. An old scar that crossed the bridge of his nose looked darker in the dim light of early morning. His deep-set yellow eyes were cold and intelligent.

"What is it?" Molotov said.

"There was an assassination attempt on Megolyth last night. Word is the princess paid them. The killers are all dead and she has fled the kingdom with her son, Lord," he reported.

Molotov was thoughtful. This was yet another careless blunder by the princess. She seemed to have a talent for creating dangerous problems for herself. He studied his bodyguard. "With no heir, we need to start the tournaments right away. See to it the council is informed and a public announcement is made so the preparations can begin."

"Yes, Lord," Focault said.

"Does Kirus know about this?"

"I don't know, Lord. I don't think so."

Molotov glanced back into the room where Margaret fidgeted impatiently. "Let him know. And tell him I'll be by to see him shortly. I just have something I need to finish first."

Focaault smiled. "As you wish, Lord," he said.

Molotov closed the door and leaned against it. He was certain the princess must have fled to the Razorback queendom to seek the protection of her lover, Grand Duke Savion. *Excellent*, he thought, *maybe now we can secure a man worthy of the throne.*

Margaret watched him, her lovely violet eyes shining as she grinned coyly. She was a beautiful girl, and so lusciously willing. Her rich, dark hair covered her full breasts and she rubbed them provocatively. Too bad he wouldn't have time to use her all day. "Aren't you coming back to bed, Lord?" she said.

Molotov stalked across the room and removed a leather crop from an open black case by the bed. He smacked it across his thigh a few times to intimidate her. She winced as it snapped fiercely against his robe.

"Of course I am, my love," he purred in a honeyed voice. "We have just enough time for you to confess your sins to the Gods before I have to leave. And I think you should be made to do that as loud as you possibly can."

Margaret giggled and put the blindfold back on.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Baron Kirus Younger intercepted Gavin on the steps of the military complex before the day had even begun. His uniform was wrinkled and he looked tired but other than that, plotting seemed to agree with him.

"The council has ordered the kingdom placed under curfew immediately," he said, handing Gavin the order.

"What for?" Gavin said, trying to hide his impatience. He wasn't in the mood for drama this morning and putting the kingdom under curfew would definitely bring it about.

"The princess is suspected of trying to murder Megolyth. The assassins were defeated, but now, no one can find her."

Gavin folded the order twice and put it in his pocket. "She probably took off to the queendom to join Savion. She must be out of here by now."

"Some of our informants have intelligence she's still here, so you'd better act quickly if you're going to catch her," Kirus said.

Commander Barius walked up to join them. Gavin looked him in the eyes but the commander avoided his gaze. "What's going on?" he said.

"Get Typhon and break the men into police squads. We need to put the kingdom under curfew," Gavin said.

"Yes, Excellency," Barius said and stalked off.

"If you find the child," Kirus said, watching the men prepare their mounts, "bring him to me right away, so I can look after him."

Gavin studied him. "I'm sure if I find the son, the mother will be with him."

"Of course, you might find both, but the informants think she may have left the boy with someone for safekeeping."

"The informants can tell you all that but not where she is?"

"I'm just relaying the information given to me."

"What do you want done with the princess if I find her?"

Kirus rubbed the back of his neck thoughtfully. "Take her to the council, they can deal with her."

Gavin grunted his understanding. "No longer pissed at me?"

Kirus looked at him and appeared confused for a moment. He didn't seem to remember the fight in the meeting room and Gavin thought that interesting, given how angry Kirus had been. *What is on your mind, little man?* he thought.

Then Kirus smiled and said, "I think I can set that aside for now until we establish a new king."

A corporal brought Gavin his hyperia and he left Kirus behind on the steps to mount it. He pulled himself into the saddle and watched Kirus. He was up to something, but Gavin had no idea what. Kirus didn't seem to notice the scrutiny. He was too busy staring off into the distance. "Good, I would hate for anything to interfere with our current task," Gavin said.

Kirus looked up at him, shielding his eyes from the rising suns. "I'm sorry about what I said about Doctor Ambrose. I didn't realize how much she meant to you."

Gavin shifted in his saddle, trying to ignore the mild arthritis in his back. All his men were mounted and ready to march. He felt uneasy about a policing. He never liked the idea of marching on his own people. There were so many things that could go wrong and they were assured resistance from the citizens.

"Apparently," Gavin said, raising his hand to signal an advance, "neither did I."

He dropped his hand and the army moved forward, a great armored tide of steel, beasts and men.

The Gamboge district had always been a policing problem, and now that the army had taken hold, things were deteriorating rapidly. The air was murky and thick with the smoke from a burning storefront, an angry signal from the residents for the troops to pull out. Gavin struggled to hold his mount still as his

men made some arrests. It hissed and tried to bolt every time he slackened the reins.

Colonel Hess had learned nothing since they'd returned. Against Gavin's wishes, the council had reappointed him to his command and now his men were running through the streets getting into brawls with the resisters. To make matters worse, Hess himself was nowhere to be found. Gavin rode through the melee looking for him, a bottle striking him on the back and shattering against his cuirass. He ignored it and made his way to an alley where a sergeant under Hess' command was making an arrest.

Gavin leaned down from his hyperia so he could be heard over the noise. "Where's Hess?" he asked through his teeth.

"I don't know, Excellency," the sergeant said, forcing his struggling captive onto his knees.

Screams sliced through the clamorous group, and Gavin turned from the sergeant to see its source. Two of Hess' men had seized a woman, tearing her young child from her embrace, and in the few seconds it took Gavin to spur his mount toward them, decapitated it. *What the fuck are they doing?* He vowed to beat Hess into a bloody pulp when he found the man.

The reaction was immediate and powerful. Horrified silence took the crowded streets in radiating waves from the event. It rippled outward, touching everyone present with its ominous tide. In an instant, the crowds turned into a vicious mob.

Gavin tried to signal the flagmen to sound a general retreat, but they were swallowed up by the angry hordes who ripped them from their mounts, stabbing and beating them amidst howls of rage.

A frenzied group turned on Gavin, charging him with daggers, broken bottles and a menagerie of other makeshift weapons. Gavin battled his hyperia for control, reining the terrified animal around and pulled out his saber. With a furious roar, he rode into the thick of them.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Gavin remained on his knees before the council despite the muscle aches throughout his body. His wounds were healing but many were still open and causing intense pain when he moved. The council members had been whispering amongst themselves for a while and that was always a bad sign. He'd prepared himself for many eventualities as he awaited his punishment, even the possibility he might be stripped of his rank. He certainly didn't expect any mild treatment, not with over sixty dead, including twelve of his own men. *What a bloody waste that had been.*

As he waited, his brooding turned to Harlan and a deep sense of shame filled him. He was sure he'd hurt her. He hadn't talked to her since they'd slept together and he'd fought every moment since not to think of her. He realized he was falling in love with her and intended to resist it before it could completely take hold of him. He was terrible at relationships and always ended up making both himself and his lover miserable.

"You may rise," Kirus said as the council members resumed their seats. Gavin stood, watching them but kept his head lowered.

"Do you have any excuse for what happened?" Kirus said.

"No, Lord," Gavin replied. "The incident is my failing alone. I accept full responsibility."

Molotov, seated off to the left of the council, adjusted his monocle. "I don't understand how this could have happened. You are usually so strict with your men."

"A few got out of line and they will be dealt with."

Kirus rocked back and forth in his swivel chair. He seemed to be enjoying his new position as regent. "We have decided to overlook this, but you are now on probation. If something like this happens again, you'll be relieved of command and stripped of rank. Is that clear?"

“Yes, Lord,” Gavin said. His anger was already hatching a nest of punishment for Colonel Hess. This was the last time that man would cause him trouble.

“Do you have any leads on the princess and her son yet?” Kirus said.

“Not yet.”

“Then maybe you should redouble your efforts.”

Gavin surveyed the council, noting they all looked slightly bored. He doubted anyone cared as much as Kirus where the princess had gone. “I will, Lord, but it certainly seems likely she’s gone to the queendom.”

“Perhaps,” said Kirus, “but we need to be sure.”

Gavin bowed his head deeply in understanding. This was no time to argue the point. “If she’s still in the kingdom, Lord, I’m certain to find her.”

“Good. Let’s not forget she’s a fugitive from justice. She should be made to answer for the assassination attempt against Megolyth.” Then Kirus looked past Gavin, appearing transported by some upsetting problem. “We also need to find her son, Gavin. The world isn’t safe for a young child with no parents to protect him.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Harlan sent word to Grand Duke Savion before she left telling him where to meet her. She'd suggested an old battlefield cemetery just outside the Razorback queendom and hoped he'd be agreeable to that since she didn't have time to wait for his reply. It was also the only place she could think of where they were unlikely to be seen by anyone.

As she waited amongst the many stone pyre monuments, she'd begun to wish she'd chosen a more cheerful location. Even with the suns shining, this was a sad and dreary place. Another thought suggested that so much seclusion may not have been the best idea. Harlan still wasn't sure of how Savion would receive her. She also realized the futility in tucking a knife into her saddlebag for protection. Savion could saturate her with his deadly venom from twenty-five feet away. Her pistol would have been a better idea, but since they were highly illegal on AEssyria and carried a heavy penalty for their use, she had promised Gavin she would never carry it outside of her villa.

The child was well behaved but weary. Although only a toddler, he seemed to know he was in danger and made very little noise or complaint, even though she knew he must be hungry.

She smelled the wet dog stench of Savion's hyperia before she saw it. The hyperia were great horse looking beasts, but it was only when a person got up close that they saw the creature's snakelike eyes and mouth full of carnivorous teeth. They were natural scavengers on this world, adapting themselves as companions and helpmates to the AEssyrians, if assured a comfortable life and an adequate food supply. She hated riding them, but they were one of the only forms of transportation allowed here, the AEssyrians being militantly protective of their natural environment.

Harlan rode out from the tree cover so Savion could see her. The child was fearful, clutching her bosom and making her wince as his sharp fingernails

dug relentlessly into her skin. Savion, spotted her and rode over moving his animal up alongside her.

He was a villainously handsome man and looked much as she remembered him. He was sharply dressed in a dark red and black double-breasted uniform of the queendom. His long, black hair was loosely pulled back, showcasing the bright red temple locks of his race, and his green skin glowed with good health. He studied the child with reptilian green and amber eyes.

“Why didn’t the princess accompany you?” he said.

Harlan shifted the boy around to loosen his grip on her shoulder. “She said she felt safe enough. It was the child she was most concerned about. She seemed certain Megolyth would kill it.”

Savion nodded grimly. “I’m sure she’s right.”

“Can you take him please?” Harlan said, as the child gripped her tighter. Savion obligingly reached over, ignoring the boy’s threatening hisses, and tore him from her chest. He placed the boy on the front of the saddle and held him still.

Harlan examined several tears in her shirt, and some small bleeding scratches. “Thanks,” she said, frowning at the damage. She felt bad for the boy, but he was definitely safer here with his father.

“You should stay, too,” Savion said. “If Gavin finds out you helped me, he’s certain to beat you.”

Harlan studied Savion trying to decide if that had been a threat. “I didn’t do it to help you. I did it to keep the boy from being killed. And as far as Gavin beating me, I feel fairly confident he wouldn’t do something like that.”

Savion gave her an icy smile. “You are talking about the same man who slaughtered several of his own sons. I would say such a man would be capable of almost anything. Wouldn’t you?”

Harlan had a long ride back and had definitely had her fill of Grand Duke Savion. “I’m sorry, Lord, I have to go.”

“Of course,” he said, moving back so she could leave. “You know you always have a room in my house, Harlan. In case you should ever need it.”

“Thank you, Lord, but I would rather take my chances with Gavin,” she said, spurring her mount and riding off toward the AEssyrian border. *Now that is one invitation*, she thought, *I never plan to accept*.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Gavin didn't bother summoning Colonel Hess. Instead, he went looking for the colonel filled with boiling fury. Right after leaving the Council of Nobles, he had hunted down Typhon and enlisted him to help round up every man under the colonel's command. Hess was the last to be located, sitting leisurely at the officer's club, laughing and joking with some other men, just a few drinks into an all-night bash.

Gavin marched over with such dark purpose, that Hess' companions drew away in alarm. Hess, who had just enough time to look up from his drink, was seized by Gavin and heaved out of his chair. He struggled to free his tunic from Gavin's iron grip.

"What the hell is wrong with you? Let me go," he snarled.

Typhon moved up alongside them to keep any would-be interference at bay. Gavin hauled Hess outside and dragged him over toward the military complex, at the center of which stood the infamous whipping post. A group of men from the bar followed them, keeping their distance either out of fear of Typhon's blade, or of Gavin's wrath.

Just ahead of them by the whipping post, Master Sergeant Rakon waited. A viper whip neatly coiled in his hand, he wore the grim expression of a man with a terrible purpose.

Gavin flung Hess forward toward the post and the man stumbled, falling to his knees before Rakon. Struggling to rise, Hess placed a hand on the hilt of his saber to attack, but Rakon seized him before he could clear his weapon. The men grappled for a moment, but Rakon proved the stronger, slamming Hess into the whipping post with stunning force. While Hess was momentarily dazed, Rakon pulled the man's saber and tossed it to Gavin, who caught it in-flight and drove it into the ground by his feet.

Hess's tunic was ripped from his chest and his hands were bound. As Rakon finished securing him, Gavin studied the diagonal scars on Hess' back, a sad testimonial to a man who simply could not listen.

"This is outrageous," Hess complained through gritted teeth. "I've done nothing wrong."

Gavin walked over and met the man's gaze. "You failed to follow my orders," he said.

"I never received any from Commander Barius!"

"Really? That's interesting," he said. "In any event, did you think that a curfew was license to murder and rape your way around the kingdom?"

"I—"

"Shut up," Gavin said, cutting him off. "Master Sergeant, you may begin."

Colonel Hess was beaten so severely, he almost died on the post. No man under Hess' command escaped unmarked, and when Rakon was too tired to flog another man, Gavin took over the whip and finished the job. The violent beatings bled well into the night, filling the clinic with the wounded.

Gavin finally dismissed Rakon and the guards near dawn and sat on the ground by the bloody post for a cigar. He lit it and watched the three crescent moons fading from the sky. He blew out a long stream of smoke thoughtfully and found he was at peace; his vengeance spent in a river of blood and violence.

Glancing toward the clinic, he thought, *You'd better never cross me again Hess. The next time you try to fuck me, I'll have your head on a pike by the city gates for weeks.*

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Gavin had never seen Baron Kirus Younger in such a joyful mood. They stood outside the baron's sprawling manor as Kirus greeted each party guest who arrived personally.

Gavin leaned against a stone railing waiting for the next lull so they could continue their conversation. When the guests had gone in, he said, "I'm calling off the search."

The bulk of guests had arrived earlier and Kirus looked around to be sure no one was near enough to overhear them. "You are most certainly not giving up the search for the princess and her brat," he said, his voice taking on a hostile edge.

Gavin studied him and shook his head slowly. "Lord, my men have searched everywhere. I'm certain they're gone."

"I need you to find that boy."

"Whatever for? You're not exactly the warm paternal type."

"Just promise me you'll keep looking."

"I'll set aside a group of men to search out some leads, but I'm not tying up the entire fucking army for this. It's a waste of time."

Kirus glared at him. "I swear I don't know how you've lasted so long as a general with that vulgar mouth."

Gavin pushed off from the railing and arched his back. "I've had a long week and I'd like to get some sleep," he said, deciding he needed to see Harlan before he did irreparable damage to their fledgling relationship. "Is there anything else?"

"Yes." Kirus was smiling. An attractive AEssyrian woman walked up to them and took Kirus' outstretched hands. "I'd like you to meet Navarra."

She was tall for a woman, standing just a few inches short of Gavin's six foot seven. Her eyes were a warm hazel and her cheekbones set high. She

looked of noble blood, and Gavin wondered what grievous sin had made her single so young.

She bowed slightly to him and said, "It's a pleasure to meet you, General."

"And you, Lady," he said. *I should leave now*, he thought, *before this goes any further*. Already he could feel the beast in his soul rising, hungry for this new woman. It rolled in him with perverse appetites.

"I hope you don't mind," she said, "that I asked the baron to introduce us. I've heard so much about you that I was curious."

"Curious about what, exactly?" Gavin said as Kirus slipped away from them to greet other arriving guests.

She smiled and wandered toward the garden path that ambled off to the side of the manor. Gavin fell into step behind her, waiting for her reply.

"Curious what a man like you would be like in bed," she said, not looking back at him.

"Well, dear," he said in a low rumble, "I suspect you're close to finding out."

She walked deeper along the sculptured path and into a area where the trees provided more darkness than the crescent moons would normally allow.

Gavin kept his senses sharp, even though he doubted this to be a trap. One could never be too careful when a woman was involved. "Why don't you have a husband?"

Navarra stopped and turned to face him and he could just make out the pain in her eyes. "I'm barren," she said. "My husband put me aside for a new wife last year. The baron said that wouldn't matter to you. You wanted no more children."

"That's right." Then he thought of Harlan. If he did this, threw her over for this woman, it would devastate her and it annoyed him that she was even a consideration. After all, no commitment had been spoken between them and he was obviously becoming too taken with her. *Just like Aurora*, he thought bitterly, and the crushing pain of his old love's loss filled his heart again. The agony was fresh, as if her death had happened only yesterday instead of these hundreds of

years long past. He didn't think he could endure the demands of that kind of consuming love a second time. No, he must replace his desire for Harlan with a new woman, and Navarra was a good catch.

She touched him, dragging him from his brooding. Her graceful hands caressed his cuirass, unfastening the straps that held it in place and he lowered it to the ground. She leaned forward and kissed him, rubbing her body against his. Pausing, she said, "I heard you have a human lover. Are you still seeing her?"

"No. We are finished." What torturous lies he could tell when it suited him.

He gave himself over to the serpent in his soul, letting his lust seduce her against a boca tree in a dreamy, secluded part of the garden. He took her without feeling, like a favorite lay at the local whorehouse and when he was done, they joined the party.

He spent the rest of the evening getting quietly and devastatingly inebriated.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

Harlan arrived at the loud, smoky tavern late in the evening and scanned the mob for Sasha. She saw Sasha alone toward the back of the room, waving wildly. Jostling through the crowd, Harlan made her way to the tiny table and took a seat. It had been two days since she'd dropped the princess' son off with Savion and she had arrived this morning in just enough time to finish treating the last of Gavin's beaten soldiers. The two humanoid Kerillian doctors, who had covered for her while she was gone, were irritable and sullen from all the work. She suspected they liked the title and privilege of doctors more than the practice of medicine.

"I'm glad you got my message," Sasha said over the din. "I never know if Karla is going to give it to you or not."

Harlan frowned knowing that was a sad truth. She really needed to replace Karla with a new receptionist but she was afraid a replacement might be worse. "Where's Colonel Caraculla?"

"He had to work. Are you still seeing the general?"

Harlan looked around for a barmaid. She really needed a drink. "No. We had sex and we moved on."

"I'm sorry. I thought you really liked him."

"I was just hoping to finally get rid of him. I'm happy, it worked."

"How was it?"

"How was what?" Harlan said, turning in her chair to catch the barmaid's eye.

Sasha shook her head and grinned. "The sex."

"It was okay, I've had better." She really wanted Sasha to drop the Gavin subject. *How can you run a business like this?* Harlan thought irritably. A barmaid finally came over and took their order.

After she left, Sasha leaned over the table and said in a whisper, "Did you hear the princess and her son are missing?"

“Since when?”

“A couple days ago. I don’t know too much about it, except Gavin has been turning the kingdom upside down looking for them. He’s had Megolyth in his office three times now to question the warlord.”

The barmaid brought their drinks and Harlan sipped hers slowly. She wondered what happened to the princess since she’d last seen her. *So much for being safe.* Harlan was beginning to feel that safety was an elusive thing on this plane. *Perhaps she changed her mind and went to join Savion.* That would have made the most sense.

A second barmaid came by, nudging Harlan’s elbow out of the way and placing a fresh drink in front of her. “From the officer,” she said with a toss of her head toward Commander Barius. Harlan was about to refuse it, but the woman disappeared again into the crowd.

Sasha gave her a worried scowl. “Get ready, here he comes.”

Harlan felt her heart race. She should never have come to the tavern so soon after Gavin dumped her. It sent an unintended signal that he had scored and now she was up for grabs. This was going to be a disaster if she didn’t get out of here.

She stood to leave but Barius was there in an instant, taking her arm and easing her back into her seat. Her mouth went dry. “Please take your hand off me.”

“All right,” he said, sliding back a chair and joining them. The closeness of all of them at this small table was stifling.

“Gavin leave you for another woman?” Barius smirked.

“What?” she said, trying to make out his thick AEssyrian dialect over all the noise. She did, however, catch the words ‘other’ and ‘woman’.

Barius leaned toward her with a nasty leer. “He has another lover, Harlan. Now you’re alone. I can help keep you safe.”

Harlan glanced at Sasha, who appeared to be close to bolting. *Don’t you leave me here with him, Sasha,* she thought. Her mind filled with panic. “I don’t need any help. I just want to be left alone,” she said.

"A beautiful woman should never be treated so poorly, no matter what her race," he said, rising from the table.

Harlan was up too, but he seized her arm before she could get enough distance between them. He pulled her close as she struggled. Glancing toward Sasha, Harlan watched as her friend stumbled out of her chair to avoid his hand and he barely missed grabbing her. A second later, Sasha was on her feet and out the door.

Harlan fought him hard but he didn't seem to register the effort. Instead, he dragged her out of the tavern. No one said a word to stop him.

"Don't worry, little human," he said, trying to soothe her. "In time, you will come to appreciate me. I'll be much kinder to you than the general ever was."

That wouldn't be hard to do, she thought as she struggled to break his grip. He pulled her over to his mount to begin the journey home.

Barius' home was a small villa along what was known as the Row of Kings. Harlan had only been here once, back when she'd first arrived to treat a nobleman's ailing son.

Her resistance had changed to periodic outbursts of violence, as her fatigue began to overpower her. He barely seemed to notice her punches, no matter where she landed them. He rode up to the villa and dismounted first, helping her off the hyperia. A servant took the mount and led it to the stable.

"Please let me go," she said, struggling as he pulled her along the walkway.

He laughed. It was a low, threatening sound. "Why would I do that?"

"Because I'm asking you to. I have diplomatic immunity here, damn it!"

"Diplomatic what?" Laughing again, he dragged her into the living room where he bound her hands behind her back. Harlan felt close to tears and fought with renewed vigor. His actions were sluggish but deliberate as he drunkenly pushed her down to the floor.

“Taking me by force is a crime among my people,” she said, fighting down the lump in her throat. “It’s called rape.”

He walked over and softly stroked her cheek. She turned her face away from his hand.

“Among my people,” he said darkly, “it’s called seduction.”

CHAPTER FORTY

There were only four of them tonight. The arena floor almost swallowed them all in its vast black sand and Gavin thought of how he loved it this way. Each man was moving in unison to the ancient form of swordsmanship known as Sinnjun. It was practiced combat taken to an art form, a rehearsal for war disguised as dance.

He closed his eyes and gave himself over to his muscle memory. He could feel the fluid movements of his body as he cut and sliced the air, the balance and power of his muscles as he turned and engaged an invisible enemy. His mind was clearer now than it had been in weeks, and he explored his newborn pain as he worked. In this moment of quiet and calm, he knew he was fooling himself about Harlan. Her memory ransacked his thoughts and his nights with Navarra only highlighted his longing for his forsaken lover. He missed her so badly, he no longer knew how to approach her, so certain was he she would reject him.

“Gavin!” one of the men said, jarring him from his thoughts.

Gavin looked up to see Sasha racing onto the arena floor toward him. As she approached, a current of fear ran through his gut. He could see she had been crying and was winded from the run. *Something’s happened to Harlan*, he thought with dread as he sprinted to the side of the arena to meet her.

She stopped before him doubling over to catch her breath. “You’ve got to help Harlan.”

“What’s happened?”

“We were at the tavern and Commander Barius came over and dragged her off.”

Gavin didn’t even bother putting his tunic back on. He ran out bare-chested and commandeered the first hyperia he could find.

He arrived at Barius's villa twenty minutes later, brandishing a thirty pound battle axe that had been conveniently strapped to the hyperia he had taken. Not his first weapon of choice but it would serve his purpose.

"Barius!" Gavin bellowed, slamming his fist into the heavy wooden front door. "Open this fucking door, or I'll smash it to pieces." Behind it, he heard Harlan's muffled scream and his instinct erupted into a blinding rage. With devastating force, he slammed the axe into the door. The weapon bit deep, tearing away shards of lumber as it broke free. Again and again, he swung until the door crumbled and fell inward in fractured pieces.

Gavin broke through the remaining fragments and strode into the room resting the axe over his shoulder. Scanning, he spotted Harlan sitting on the floor, her hands bound behind her back and her face wet from crying. Barius was kneeling in an earthy brown robe near her, staring at Gavin in stunned silence.

"Have you suddenly lost your mind?" he said.

Ignoring him, Gavin advanced, kicking a small side table out of his way. It tumbled to the side with a few loud thumps. When he was only a few feet from them, Barius scrambled away, standing to retrieve a bastard sword from over the mantle.

Gavin swung the axe at his rival, its heavy blade coming close to taking off his commander's right arm. Barius swore and parried the next swing with his sword, blocking the axe's momentum by striking its wooden handle. Gavin roared in frustration. Snarling, he brought the weapon around for another strike. Barius ducked the swing, seconds before it would have taken his head clean off.

"Gavin, stop!" Barius shouted. "Why are you doing this? You were finished with her, weren't you?"

Gavin slammed the axe into the thick dining table. The blade embedded a few inches and he released the handle. "She's not one of us. She's not governed by our rules."

Barius kept his sword but relaxed a little. "I didn't touch her. I swear it."

Gavin, however, wasn't listening. He charged Barius and tackled him to the ground, grappling with him to release the sword. Finally, it clattered to the

floor. With furious power, Gavin lifted his commander over his head and smashed him to the ground.

Barius lay still, groaning.

Gavin was lost in his rage. Lifting Barius over and over, Gavin flung him across the room like a child's toy. Finally spent, he walked over to Barius and said, "If you get up, I'll kill you on the spot."

Barius didn't move or speak. Gavin leaned down to make sure he hadn't already done the deed. His commander, however badly wounded, still lived.

Somewhere behind him, Harlan was weeping again and he turned to find her curled up in the clutter of the broken room. He stalked over, crouched by her and gently brushed her hair from her face. He pulled a knife from his lower back and cut her ropes. As soon as she was free, she wrapped her arms around his neck. He lifted her and buried his face in her neck. How could he have been so stupid and careless to put her in this kind of danger?

"Are you all right, my love?" he asked, a tide of relief rushing over him when she nodded. If she had been injured, he was certain he would have killed Barius.

"I'm okay," she said, collecting her emotions and releasing him. "Please just take me home."

They arrived at her villa not long after and he could feel the tension flow out of her as he helped her off the back of his mount. He jumped down and she turned to him, staring at him with those beautiful light green eyes. He leaned down and kissed her, a hot and lusty kiss, but she broke it and stepped back.

"Thank you for helping me, Gavin," she said. "Good night." She turned from him and walked to her door.

He knew he should have expected this, he certainly deserved it, but it stung nonetheless. "Why did you do it?"

She stopped and turned to face him. She played with a large tear in her shirt. "Sleep with you?"

“Yes.”

“I was curious.”

He laughed. She was lying. Harlan wasn't the type to try sex with a man out of simple curiosity. No, she was the kind of woman who slept with a man because she wanted more and Gavin knew he had cheated her. Or perhaps, closer to the truth, he had cheated himself. “That's a bloody lie,” he said, striding over and taking her arm before she could escape inside.

She glared at the offending hand on her arm. “I've had all the bullying I'm going to take for one night. Now take your hand off me.”

He kept his grip on her. If he let go now, she would get off much too easy. He needed to hear it from her and he would stay all night to do so if he needed to. “Why did you really do it?” he whispered. There was too much emotion in his voice. Too much.

“You know why.”

“I need to hear it.”

Harlan pulled her arm roughly from his grip. “I don't owe you nor do you deserve an explanation for anything. You used me and then gutted me and I'll be damned if I'm going to let you do it again. I am completely finished with you.” Turning from him, she opened her door and, without turning around again, said, “I'm beginning to think your son Northe was right. You don't love anything.” She closed the door and left him standing there, a broken man on her walkway.

He bent down and pulled a flask from his boot. He took a swig, then strolled back to his hyperia thinking of what a fool he had been. His pain was so intense and deep, he couldn't even touch it with his thoughts. *You're so wrong about me, Harlan. I do love something. I love you.*

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

The cut on Megolyth's back throbbed painfully and he could feel the slick, sticky blood running from the wound. Harlan came in and rushed over to him. She set her medical kit on the bench next to him and walked around behind him to see his back.

Popping open the kit, she took out some bandages. "That's pretty nasty. Do you want something for the pain before I get started?"

"Yes," he said. "I think that would be a good idea." He didn't want to get ugly with her if the pain should become too much for him. He was already irritable and weary from fighting.

Harlan pulled out a small, pink strip of gelatin and gave it to him. "Put this under your tongue."

Megolyth placed the strip under his tongue and it dissolved immediately. The medicine deadened some of the agony and he was able to think a little clearer.

Harlan worked quietly behind him threading the stitches. He could sense her tension and wondered what had upset her. He felt her hand on his back and the first pinch made him bristle in annoyance.

"How are the tournaments going?" she asked.

"So far, I'm winning."

"Congratulations," Harlan offered.

He smiled despite his discomfort. She was so amusingly human sometimes. *Congratulations*, he thought, as if he were getting married instead of being beaten to a pulp daily.

"And how are you doing?" he said. "You seem out of sorts."

"I'm fine," she said a little too quickly. "Everything's fine." Finishing the stitches, she walked over to a battered metal deep sink and rinsed the bandages, wringing them out and laying them on the edge to dry. AEssyrians did not generate a lot of inorganic garbage. Almost everything was reused. It had taken

Harlan a long time to get used to the lack of sterility. It was lucky for them they were not prone to opportunistic infections.

“What happened?”

She shrugged and didn’t meet his eyes. “I got into a predicament with Commander Barius.”

“Did he rape you?”

She walked over and began putting her supplies away. “No, Gavin’s impeccable timing prevented that from happening.” Her tone was grateful but bitter.

“That’s strange. Surely he knew you and Gavin were seeing each other.”

“We’re not anymore,” she said, rolling the bandages back up and putting them in paper bags.

“I see. His choice, or yours?”

“His.”

That explained Commander Barius, Megolyth thought. If he believed Gavin was finished with her, he would have moved in, knowing she was no longer protected. “You said Gavin showed up?”

“Yes, and I was thankful for the rescue but that doesn’t change anything. I’m finished with him.”

Megolyth nodded. He was perplexed by Gavin’s behavior. He was sure the man was in love with her, so why would he cast her aside for no reason? “If you have anymore predicaments in the future, have your friend come and get me right away.”

“That’s very kind of you.” She gingerly snapped her medic bag closed and he could see how hurt she was over Gavin. He felt a pang of sympathy for her. Love could be a difficult thing to endure, especially if not reciprocated.

He studied her for a moment. “Are you still thinking of going home?”

“I’ll probably wait until my last year is up, but yes. I just never feel safe here anymore.”

Megolyth jumped off the scratched-up examining table and walked over to the sink. Pulling a towel from a nearby rack, he washed the blood and sweat from

his face and throat. He couldn't wait for these challenges to be over. They were very grueling. He thought about the journey to Earth from here. "That's quite a trip back. You won't even be in the same time period as when you left. How much time would have passed?"

Harlan sat in a chair by the sink. "About a hundred years."

Megolyth tossed the towel over his shoulder and looked down at her. "None of your family or friends will still be alive."

"My parents were dead when I left. There was no one left there for me anyway."

"Is the cellular breakdown process painful?"

"It's not too bad, I was just a little nauseous for a few days after the trip," she said, getting up and picking up her bag to leave.

"You don't want to give Gavin some time to come to his senses?" he said. He took his used towel and tossed it in the laundry bin.

She gave him a sad smile. "There's no point, he's already got someone else." She walked toward the door. "Is there anything else you needed?"

"No. Thank you for coming so quickly."

She nodded.

"Harlan?" he said just as she was passing over the threshold. She stopped and looked back at him, her face haunted. "I don't know if this will mean anything to you, but I'm usually good at reading other men. I think he does love you. I just don't think he accepts it yet."

She gave him a weak smile. "Thanks," she said, and walked off down the corridor, the frantic echoes of arena battles sounding in her wake.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

Molotov's wife, Grand Duchess Tannyth von Goth, was waiting for him in the study when he returned from his afternoon ride. She was dressed in an elegant sequined black dress he had never seen before and he wondered what the occasion was. Her auburn hair was loose around her shoulders and back, gently brushing her buttocks as she paced the room. She was as he always found her, beautiful but inaccessible, remote in her indifference to their marriage. He had long ago stopped wishing they could grow closer. They were simply too different in every possible way.

Molotov pulled off his riding gloves and nodded for the maid to close the study doors. "This is an uncommon pleasure, my dear. I don't think I've laid eyes on you in weeks."

She stopped pacing and looked him in the eye. "I want you to put out your mistress."

He walked over to the bar, a surge of aggression suddenly pulsed through his blood. "Why? I thought you were grateful for her since she relieves you of your wifely duties."

"The perversions you enjoy, no wife would indulge."

He poured himself a brandy, and then turned to study her. "So why are you complaining then? I haven't coupled with you in years."

"Your whore told me to 'shut up' yesterday in my own house in front of the servants!"

Molotov sipped his drink and nodded. "So this isn't about any newfound passion for me." He doubted the woman felt anything for him but contempt. He took a seat in a burgundy wing chair by the empty fireplace.

Tannyth lifted her chin defiantly. "I want her out."

He rolled his glass in his hands warming it and kept his silence. Despite their constant marital strife, he still believed he'd married well. Tannyth was a landed woman and wealthy with exceptional bloodlines. Unfortunately, like many

woman of her social position, she was haughty and demanding, and in Tannyth's case, rather frigid. He'd laboriously sired nine children in their marital bed, amidst her constant complaining, and after the last, didn't touch her again. He found his pleasure elsewhere, an arrangement they both were happy with until, of course, now.

Molotov looked up at her. "Certainly, my dear, I'll see to it right away."

Tannyth grinned and turned to leave. He waited until her hand touched the lever to speak again. "I'll have my things moved back into our bedroom tonight. It will be nice to enjoy my wife again after so long."

Tannyth froze but kept her back to him. "That won't be necessary," she said. "She can stay. Just make it clear that I am not to be disrespected by her."

He knew he had her. The last thing she wanted was him in their bed again. He finished his drink and smiled into the empty glass. "I'll talk to her."

"Oh, yes," she said, opening the door and glancing back. "There's a note for you from Grand Duke Savion on the table." She walked out and pulled the door closed behind her.

Molotov got up and put his empty glass on the bar. He crossed the room and lifted the envelope from the center table, checking to make sure the seal was not broken. It was intact and he broke it, pulling the note from inside to read it.

My dear Lord,

In response to your inquiry, Princess Shatara is not here with me. Our son is though, delivered by Doctor Harlan Ambrose per the princess' request. I hope you find her safe and I'll inform you if she does show up here.

Sincerely,

Degrassa Savion

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

Karla, the clinic receptionist, was turning the key in the lock when Gavin walked up and tapped on the outside glass. Seeing him, she unlocked the door and opened it just wide enough to speak to him.

“What can I help you with, General?” she said, giving him a flirty smile.

“I need to see Doctor Ambrose, please.”

Karla frowned looking confused. “She normally doesn’t see anyone this late, sir. May I tell her what the problem is?”

“Tell her I’m sick.”

Karla stared at him for a moment, and then disappeared into the back office. After a short wait, she returned with Harlan in tow. Harlan let him in and looked him up and down. “You look fine to me. What’s wrong with you?”

Gavin felt his heart speed up. He hated her cold anger. He also missed her beyond words. He tossed his head at Karla and said, “Like I told her, I’m sick and I need to see you.”

Harlan stepped aside and pointed down the short achromatic hallway. “Fine, go to exam room one.” Gavin stalked toward the room glancing back at Harlan as he went.

She turned to Karla, who was gathering her things to go. “Lock the door behind you so no one else shows up sick.”

Karla nodded and left, snapping the lock into place behind her.

Gavin came into the room feeling anxious. He took a seat in a chair by the examining table and propped his boots on the edge, soiling the sanitary paper. Harlan came in and left the door open. She folded her arms and stood by the exit looking down at him, as though she were peering at a virus through a microscope. Before she could speak, he was up, standing and pulling her to him as she struggled. Despite her protest, he held her fast and landed a steamy, lusty kiss on her full lips.

She broke the kiss and stepped back out of reach. “You’re not sick.”

"I am," he said. "I have a broken heart."

Harlan gave him an icy look. "Don't play with me, you arrogant bastard."

Gavin released her and sank back into his seat. This was going to be much harder than he thought. He searched for the right words to say to her and came up empty. Pain and regret plagued his soul.

"Why are you really here?" she said.

Gavin leaned down and pulled a fresh cigar from his boot.

"There's no smoking in here." She took a step toward him, and then hesitated.

He glanced at her, and then struck the match lighting the tip and puffing hard. He knew she wouldn't want to get too close in case he grabbed her again.

Harlan sighed and leaned back against the examination table. "What do you want, Gavin?"

"I want you back."

"It's too late. That door is closed."

Gavin stared at her for a moment, puffing hard on his cigar. "You're full of crap, Harlan. I know you're in love with me."

"What I might have felt for you wasn't that strong, and now it's gone," she said. "Besides, as I recall, you got what you wanted and then immediately moved on."

"It was a stupid mistake and I'm deeply sorry I hurt you."

Harlan glared him. "Are you still seeing her?"

"Yes."

Harlan's eyes immediately ignited and she exploded. "I can't believe what a complete ass you are. You came here to get back together with me, but still have your other girlfriend on the side just in case I say no? What kind of idiot do you think I am? I'm not going waste my time being your exotic screw of the week. Now get the hell out of here and quit stalking me or I will go to the council and file a complaint. And from what I hear, you're not exactly on their A-list right now."

Gavin clenched his jaw tight. No woman had ever dared speak to him like that. He could feel the darkness in his soul rising, wanting to hurt her both

physically and spiritually. Nevertheless, he remained cautious, for he knew if he lashed out and broke her, he would lose her forever. "My relationship with Navarra is meaningless. We are using each other and she knows it. There is nothing deeper between us than casual sex."

"Do you sneak out every morning on her, too?"

Gavin rose from his seat in a quick, fluid motion. He tossed his cigar to the floor and advanced on her, crushing it out as he walked. Harlan, alarmed, scrambled back trying to maintain her distance but he grabbed her wrist just before she could escape.

"Stop it!" she shouted, slapping frantically at his grip.

Ignoring her, Gavin pulled her closer to him and reached into his tunic. He pulled out a small strip of white cloth and held it up for her to see. "Do you really believe I only want sex from you?"

"You've never given me any reason to believe anything else," she said. She stopped her struggling to meet his gaze.

"Do you remember this?" he said, shaking the cloth for emphasis.

"No, I don't."

"It's a piece of your shirt. I cut it off just before my challenge with Grand Duke Savion. I took it for good luck, do you remember now?"

Harlan looked stunned. She gently bit her lower lip. "Yes," she whispered. "I remember."

Gavin released his grip on her wrist and watched her rub it. "I've carried it with me ever since as a reminder of you."

"That's very flattering, if it truly is what you say, but it doesn't change anything. I don't trust you. For a short time, I let my guard down and allowed myself to believe that you did care about me. In an even shorter amount of time, you just proved what my inner voice had been telling me from the start. You're deceptive and mean, and the only thing you care about is winning. Well you've won, so please, by all means, notch your bedpost and leave me alone."

Gavin's gut felt torn by talons. He was drained and wasted from all this arguing and he only wanted to be done with it. He put the cloth back in his

uniform and turned away from her, leaving her alone in the exam room. Making his way to the door, he stepped out into the early evening and tasted cool moisture in the air. He needed to let her go and stop torturing himself. He needed to get drunk and forget this conversation had ever happened.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

"Where have you been?" Navarra asked as Gavin fumbled through the door. The tone and volume of her voice enraged him.

"It's none of your fucking business where I've been." He staggered in, bumped the coffee table and collapsed on the black leather couch. Navarra had taken to spending a lot more time at his villa and he was starting to resent the intrusion. It was late and she should be at her home, not waiting around for him to return to his.

"I'm sorry. I was just worried."

He burst out laughing. *Was she kidding?* He'd battled some of the most lethal men on the planet in his eight hundred years. Was he in mortal danger stumbling home drunk from the local bar? "Don't waste your time worrying about me."

Navarra stood rigid by the stone fireplace staring at him with her arms wrapped around her. "Am I not allowed to love you?"

Gavin leaned forward and unfastened the top buckles of his boots. He kicked them off and said, "I wouldn't waste too much emotion on me, Navarra. I can't return your love."

"Why not?" she said. Her voice was brittle with emotion.

Gavin unbuttoned his uniform and scratched his bare chest. "Because I'm very much in love with someone else."

"Doctor Ambrose?"

"That's right."

Navarra ran her hands up and down her arms as if she'd caught a chill. She was a delicate featured woman, the type most men pursued in earnest. He admired the hearty look of her body through her sheer, ivory dress.

"She's not even your species."

"There you're wrong. I'm half human. It wouldn't matter anyway. No one cares who I bed. Except, of course, for you."

"Were you with her tonight?" she said.

"Earlier, yes. But she didn't sleep with me, if that's what you're driving at."

"Is it over between you two?"

"By the Gods, I hope not," he said, getting up to fetch a cigar from the bar. Picking one from the box, he lit it and poured himself another drink.

Navarra watched him and frowned. "How drunk are you planning to get?"

Gavin slammed the bottle down on the bar making her wince. "Get the fuck out of here! I don't need a wet nurse watching over me. Why don't you go home?"

She wiped a tear from her cheek and stood firm on her spot by the fireplace. "I love you, Gavin, and I'm going to fight for you."

Gavin drained the tumbler and stalked back to the couch, the cigar between his teeth. He eased himself down and chewed the smoke over to the other side of his mouth. "I'm not worth all the pain I'll cause you."

"What does Doctor Ambrose think of your feelings for her?"

"She wants nothing to do with me, and for good reason."

"Why?"

"Because I hurt her badly. I left her because I couldn't face how strongly I felt about her. You were just unlucky enough to come along at the wrong time."

"Then it's over between the two of you?"

"No," Gavin said, relighting his extinguished cigar. "I'll never give her up. If she took me back tomorrow, you and I would be done."

Navarra crossed the room and picked up her cloak lying over the back of a chair. "You're obviously drunk and hateful tonight. Perhaps we can discuss this tomorrow when your mood improves."

Gavin grunted at her, intentionally saying nothing at all. She probably took it as an affirmation.

Opening the front door, she looked back at him. "Good night," she said, pausing for a reply.

He stood, crushed out his cigar, and strolled off toward the bedroom without saying another word.

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

Megolyth is a brilliant fighter, Gavin thought. He had come in late, taking a spot high in the bleachers to watch the latest challenge and had to admit, he was impressed. The current battle had started less than twenty minutes ago and Megolyth's opponent was already staggering around the arena from fatigue. Gavin studied Megolyth's fighting style and noticed an eclectic use of techniques. He'd never seen anyone fight like that, but for Megolyth, it worked. He always kept his opponent on the defensive and unsure of what he would do next.

Gavin thought of himself as a purist in form. The maneuvers he used had been taught to him by some of the most gifted men at the academy in a more golden age. Secretly, he was glad he was ineligible for the throne. Who wanted to spend the rest of their lives marrying and breeding for bloodlines, while watching their back for assassins?

Glancing up, he saw Kirus walking his way down the aisle. He took a seat next to Gavin, and watched the fight below.

"Megolyth is a talented fighter, wouldn't you say? I've been fascinated by him and his style. I've tried to make all his matches," he said.

"I saw your name on the list to challenge," Gavin said. "I didn't think you wanted the throne."

Kirus smiled. "The idea grew on me."

Gavin turned his attention back on the arena just as Megolyth's opponent withdrew from the fight, battered and bloody. Megolyth himself looked worn and, after waving to the cheering crowd, made his way to the locker room to get cleaned up.

Kirus looked over at Gavin. "How are you and Navarra getting along? You make such a handsome couple."

Gavin kept his eyes on the arena, watching a small group of men arguing about the upcoming battle. He couldn't make out what they were saying exactly

but everyone looked angry, and there was a lot of pointing and gesturing. “She’s a lovely woman.”

“Do you have any long-term plans with her?”

“Did she request you ask me that?”

“No,” Kirus said, shifting uncomfortably. “You’re kind of aggressive tonight. What’s wrong?”

Gavin glared at him. “I don’t like discussing my personal life, so get off it.”

Kirus looked thoughtful. “I should tell you that people are talking about your drinking.”

Gavin felt a surge of anger. “People, or Navarra?”

“People,” Kirus corrected. “Does it have anything to do with Doctor Ambrose?”

“What? My drinking?”

“Yes.”

“I was drinking long before I met her. She’s nothing to me. All I wanted was to sleep with her and I achieved that.” Gavin hated himself the moment the words left his mouth. *What a shameful, obnoxious lie.* The truth was, he loved her more than he could remember loving any woman. That included his former love, Aurora. Perhaps, though, if he said he didn’t often enough, he might grow to believe it. He needed to get out of here before Kirus probed him any further.

“Listen, I’ve got to go. Let me know how the next match ends, will you?”

As Gavin rose to leave, Kirus said, “If he wins, what kind of king do you think he will make?”

“A competent one, I would imagine.” Gavin waited to see if there was more.

Kirus paused, staring down at the arena floor which was now empty. “I always thought of him as the kind of man who’d want to control everything, especially the military.”

“What are you getting at?”

“Just this, I would think that a man in your position would be wary of the next king, even more so if he is foreign-born. Where would his loyalties be? You

know as well as I how the bureaucracy can change when a new man comes to power. Suppose he plans on appointing a new general?"

Gavin frowned. That was always a risk, even when he was friendly with the rising king. Throughout the years, he had learned to accept it. But now there was Harlan to consider. He was her protector and he couldn't bear to be separated from her for any length of time. Losing his position would mean he'd be forced to leave, and if he were exiled, he'd never be able to return. He'd just have to take her with him, with or without her consent. "There's not much I can do about that."

Kirus looked at him and grinned. "Of course there is. You have command of the army. They're loyal to you, right?"

"You mean a coup."

"No," Kirus said. "A partnership. You control the army and I'll be in charge of the nobles."

"And what about Megolyth?" Gavin said, rolling the idea of a partnership around in his head.

"An early grave for him and his marauders. I have a plan to poison the lot of them."

The idea was both alluring and distasteful all at once. He'd have to give it some serious thought. There were many difficulties to overcome. "I'll consider it," Gavin said, squeezing past him and heading toward the stairs.

"You do that, General," Kirus said. "You give my proposal some serious thought. I think you'll find it more attractive with every passing day."

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

Gavin's office door slammed, waking him with a start. His head was pounding and his eyes stubbornly refused to open. He placed one hand over them and rubbed, then squinting, shielded them from the morning light. They felt raw and dry, but they were nothing compared to the ache in his head. It throbbed in agony to the rhythm of his pulse.

"You're a sight."

Gavin recognized Molitov but closed his eyes again. He dragged his boots off the elaborately carved wooden desk, adding more scars to the already damaged surface with his spurs.

"You look like you slept in here all night," Molitov said, picking up three empty Sawjack Whiskey bottles and throwing them in the trash.

Gavin said nothing, concentrating more on not throwing up. He squinted and watched the grand duke sit down in the chair across from his desk. "What do you want?"

"I need your help," Molitov said, eyeing Gavin as if he were an insect barely worth speaking to.

Gavin got up, stumbling a little over the chair and went to his minibar. He poured himself a glass of water and stood by the small sink drinking greedily. He downed two more, dug out a cigar from the box and returned, lighting his smoke on the way to his chair. "Help with what?"

Molitov watched him for a moment and Gavin felt a surge of annoyance. "Help with what?" he repeated louder.

"Princess Shatara is missing."

"Nonsense. She's in the Razorback queendom with her son."

"Her son is there, but Grand Duke Savion assures me she is not."

Gavin scoffed. "There's a fucking reliable source."

"This is serious, Gavin," Molitov said. His voice was hard. "Did you have anything to do with her disappearance?"

“Of course not. Why would I? I have no cause.”

“I’ve known you a long time. You don’t need cause and you made no secret of your hatred for her.”

Gavin puffed on his cigar, raising heavy clouds of smoke. “I didn’t kill her, nor would I waste my time doing so. Satisfied?”

Molotov ignored the question. “You need to find out what happened to her.”

“Savion is probably lying for his own reasons.”

Molotov stood up, raising one eyebrow at Gavin. “He wouldn’t lie to me about this. You need to find out what happened to her. Do you understand me? If Megolyth was indeed responsible for her disappearance as Kirus believes, then he becomes ineligible for the throne. Now pull yourself together and find her.”

“Yes, Lord,” Gavin said. This argument was tedious but Molotov was right. Besides, if the princess really was missing, it was a serious matter. He tended to think, however, that she was hiding in the queendom somewhere.

Molotov walked to the door, and then turned to look at Gavin. “What happened to Harlan?”

“Why is everyone so fucking interested in my personal life?”

“Are you not seeing her anymore?” Molotov said, ignoring Gavin’s question.

“No, and she’s better off for it. But I am still watching out for her safety.”

Molotov nodded. “Hopefully she won’t be as vulnerable when Megolyth takes the throne. So far, he appears to be a sure winner.”

Gavin chewed on the end of his cigar and smiled. “No one is a sure winner in this kingdom. Grand Duke Kirus still has to fight, and he, too, has done well so far.”

Molotov folded his arms and studied Gavin warily. “He’s unlikely to ever become king even if he does win, unless he happens to have friends in dangerous places.”

“My dear Grand Duke Molotov, whatever do you mean?”

Molotov turned from him and opened the door, then paused. "I hope you don't make any rash decisions about using the army to influence the crown, Gavin. That would prove disastrous for everyone, including you."

Gavin watched him, his boots on the edge of his desk pushing his chair to balance on its back legs. He smoked and said nothing. No need to tip his hand this early in the game. It was enough to keep Molotov on edge and he hadn't made any decisions yet.

"It's too bad you broke it off with Harlan," Molotov said as an afterthought. "She was a good woman for you and you were a better man for loving her. I wonder how safe she would feel here if the kingdom again lost stability?" He walked out, and pulled the door closed behind him.

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

Navarra hadn't eaten a bite of her meal. "You're drinking too much," she complained, waving the waiter off impatiently before he could offer Gavin another one.

Gavin sipped his drink listening to the ice tinkle in the glass as he tilted it. He savored the biting scent and welcomed the searing burn as it ran down his throat. Navarra, who sat across from him, was pouting and shooting him dirty looks with every drink he ordered. He was now on his fifth. He didn't mind her indignation. In fact, he'd be relieved if she just left him in the restaurant and never spoke to him again.

Over the past few days, they had entered into an unspoken contest; she, to stick with him no matter what he did to insult or anger her, and he, to experiment with various ways of enraging her. It was silly, he knew, but they both seemed to be trapped in this battle of wills, neither one willing to concede defeat to the other.

Unfortunately, it wasn't all game playing for him. His resentment of Navarra had taken on a sadistic edge, forged in his miserable longing for Harlan. He thought of her constantly, the pain of her loss a knife in his gut with every sober moment. His only relief came when he was drunk. So he drank more often, but even that didn't always work.

"Why don't we just go home?" Navarra said, leaning over the table and keeping her voice low.

Gavin picked up his smoldering cigar in the ashtray and puffed it back to life. "Your home, or mine?" he said. Bored, he shifted around in his chair, draping his arm over the back to watch the front entrance.

"I really hope you don't have any thoughts of sleeping with me tonight."

He glanced at her and let out a curt laugh. "You'll sleep with me if I tell you. But don't worry, dear. I have no plans to play *fuck the corpse*."

"You'll not tell me to do anything," she said through her teeth. Her eyes flashed with fury. "And if you're referring to my lack of passion for you, you

should tread carefully. I don't know many women who'd enjoy the brutal, sweaty battering you call lovemaking."

"You've never refused me. It couldn't have been that much of a sacrifice."

"Putting up with you is a sacrifice. I'm not surprised Doctor Ambrose wants nothing to do with you. She's the smart one."

Gavin glared at her and watched her grow pale. He restrained himself from slapping her, knowing that a few more drinks in him and he would have belted her across the room. "You should shut your mouth while you still have teeth in it."

Navarra launched into an emotional speech about his behavior and he tuned her out, focusing instead of the patron's comings and goings. As he watched, Harlan walked in and his breath caught in his chest.

She moved past the busy waiters with an easy, natural grace and smiled at everyone she saw as she made her way to the bar to pick up a meal. The sight of her woke him from his dark mood as if an electric current had touched him. His body responded before his mind in a rush of fiery lust. She filled him, flooding his mind with memories of her sweet scent, her body naked and squirming beneath him. He licked his lips, and for a moment, he completely forgot where he was. His erection was sudden and painful pushing against his pants, making him feel like a schoolboy with his first crush.

Harlan played with a napkin on the bar, then looked up to scan the room. She caught him watching her and quickly dropped her gaze.

"Gavin!" Navarra shouted, breaking the spell.

He sipped his drink. He couldn't stop glancing at Harlan, who looked uncomfortable and anxious to leave. "What?"

"Are you even listening to me?" Navarra followed his gaze and scowled spotting Harlan. She stood up abruptly, slamming her purse on the table as she pushed her chair back. "I give up!" she said, spitting the words at him. "Let me know when you decide to grow up!" she said. Standing up, she stormed out of the restaurant.

“I’ll do that, darling,” he mumbled to himself. He finished his drink and signaled the waiter for another. By the time he looked over at the bar, Harlan had gone.

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

“You’re looking very serious today,” Molitov said to Harlan as he approached her in her villa’s courtyard. The rich scent of blossoming flowers filled his senses, a sure sign of approaching spring. They blanketed the stone walls, reaching their budding vines to the iron gates.

She glanced at him surprised by his visit, and then resumed her slow, thoughtful pacing. “I have a few things on my mind.”

“I apologize for intruding. Sasha let me in to see you, but I don’t think she knew you were busy. Would you like me to come back later?”

“No, of course not,” she said with a smile. “Please, come and sit down.”

Molitov walked in and waited for Harlan to take a seat before he sat himself. He removed his monocle and cleaned it with a handkerchief from his pocket. He replaced it over his left eye and studied her. She looked tired and sad under the gentle courtyard lights and he felt pity for her. He knew well the agonies of love. “Gavin giving you problems?” he ventured.

“No more than usual.” She fell silent and looked out through the courtyard’s iron gates. They stood partially open to greet the aging night. Her thoughts seemed to be far away as a lazy breeze tousled her dark hair. “I just don’t understand him.”

Molitov nodded. “He’s a complicated man and he’s not been doing well since you two stopped seeing each other.”

“He’ll be fine. He sure found someone else fast enough.”

“That’s true, but he doesn’t care for her. He seems as haunted as you do.”

Harlan avoided his eyes and ran her fingers through her hair. She seemed to want to drop the subject.

“Anyway, I didn’t come here to discuss Gavin. I need to know when the last time was you saw Princess Shatara.”

Harlan sat up in her chair. “Why? Has something happened? I heard she was missing.”

“No one has been able to locate her for quite a few days,” he said, gliding his hand along the table’s glass surface.

“I saw her at the end of last week. She came to me because she was afraid for her son. She was certain Megolyth would have him murdered because he sent her someone’s head in a box as a threat. She asked me to take him to Grand Duke Savion so he’d be safe.”

“She didn’t go with the boy?”

“No. She said she wanted to stay and work toward securing the throne for him. She didn’t seem worried about her own safety. I’ve been so busy at the clinic, it didn’t even occur to me that I hadn’t seen her in a while.”

“Did she mention her botched assassination attempt against Megolyth?”

“No, she seemed genuinely confused as to why he sent her the gruesome gift.”

Sasha walked in dressed in a long, powder blue nightgown. “Sorry to barge in,” she said with a smile, “but I just wanted to make sure you guys didn’t need anything before I went to bed.”

“No, I think we’re fine,” Harlan said. She looked at the grand duke. “Do you need anything, Lord?”

Molotov slid his gaze down Sasha’s body, taking in the voluptuous curve of her breasts and hips. A dark fire burned in his loins, and he entertained spanking her with a buggy whip. He imagined her painful cries spiked with desire, and the heated red welts on her white buttocks and thighs. “No,” he said, trailing his eyes up to hers.

A slight smile curled the corner of her mouth. “Good night then,” she said and padded off silently in her bare feet.

He glanced back at Harlan, who was watching him with a glint of amusement in her eyes. “Do you think the princess took off fearing Megolyth might win the throne?”

“She’s not that independent. Besides, she’d have no other place to go but the queendom. Unfortunately, Harlan, I think she’s dead.”

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

Harlan stabbed at the climate control buttons as sweat dripped down her face. This was the hottest it had ever been in the clinic, and to make matters worse, the climate control wasn't working this morning. She thought she was going to pass out. *Come on, you*, she thought in frustration, *work!* A buzzing sounded letting her know a patient had come in the front door. Muttering under her breath, she closed the control room door and made her way to the front office.

When she came out dusting off her lab coat, Grand Duke Kirus was in the waiting room. He wandered around with his hands behind his back. Then he stopped to pick up a magazine and leaf through it.

What the heck does he want? "Good morning, Lord," she said in her most pleasant voice. "I'm sorry, but we're not quite open yet."

"I'm not here for an examination, Doctor. I just wanted to have a word with you, if I could."

Harlan was uneasy. Nothing good ever came of people on this planet wanting to talk to her in private. "Sure," she said. "What can I do for you?"

Kirus walked up, closing the distance between them and Harlan took an instinctive step back.

"I have reason to believe Gavin intends to harm you," he said, his mouth set in a grim line.

Harlan played with the prescription pad in her pocket. There was a time when she wouldn't have believed something like this, but now, she wasn't so sure. "What possible reason would he have to hurt me?"

Kirus shook his head. "I know I don't need to tell you how jealous he is. He's convinced you're lovers with that human scientist from the Razorback queendom. Sam? Is that his name?"

Harlan's stomach twisted in a knot. "Yes," she said. "That's his name." She thought that was settled, but apparently not. She also felt guilty for not

seeing this coming. She didn't want Gavin going on another rampage and killing Sam over her friendship with the man. She'd never forgive herself if that happened.

"I'm convinced he intends to kill you both."

Harlan walked over and sat down on one of the yellow waiting room chairs. She had to find a way off this rock and soon. If only she had the money on hand. With all the political upheaval and the princess missing, she hadn't been paid in weeks. Luckily, all her other needs, like food and shelter were automatically met. "I guess I need to talk to Megolyth," she said. Maybe he would help her get off world before things got out of hand.

Kirus sank into a chair next to her. "I know you don't have the means right now to leave, Harlan, and I don't think you can be safe here anymore," he said. His voice was low and confidential. "So I bought you a ticket home to help."

Harlan looked at him surprised. She felt a little better, but at the same time, a little worse. "That's very kind of you. I really appreciate this." She took the ticket he held out to her.

"I know this is a difficult decision for you but don't worry. I'll make your apologies for you. I'm also afraid you don't have much time, the shuttle to the cryo-teleporter leaves this afternoon."

Harlan nodded and stood up. "Thank you so much for this. I can't tell you how much this means to me."

Kirus smiled and shook her hand. "You just have a safe trip, Harlan. And good luck with your future on Earth. You may be returning a hundred years later than when you left, but think of all the wonderful new things awaiting you."

She put the ticket in her pocket and stabbing sorrow filled her heart. *I have to leave*, she thought, *I may never get another chance like this*. "I'd better get going," she said, swallowing the rising lump in her throat. "I don't want to miss my shuttle and I have a lot of packing to do."

CHAPTER FIFTY

“Go away, Gavin. I’m not going to open the door,” Harlan said over the intercom.

Gavin pounded on the door again. He had come here sober, and the agony in his heart was almost unbearable. He had to see her. He had to make things right between them, or he’d regret letting her walk out of his life for as long as he lived. “Please, Harlan, just talk to me for a moment,” he said, thumping his head gently against the door in despair.

There was a long moment of silence, and then he heard the bolt pull back. She opened the door a crack and shot him a hard look. “Stop coming here.”

Taking care not to harm her, he used his weight to force his way in. She screamed in alarm and tried hopelessly to push him out, but he easily overpowered her. He stalked inside, her shouting after him to get out, and spotted the suitcases on the couch. All her things were neatly packed and ready to go. Harlan dropped into an edgy silence.

It took a moment for the realization to hit that she was leaving. His body went numb and all he could hear was the blood pounding in his ears and her heavy breathing behind him. She slammed the door and it sounded like a cannon in his head. He turned to face her. She was leaning against the door with her arms folded, her cheeks flushed with anger.

“You’ve got a lot of nerve forcing your way in here,” she said. There was an icy edge to her voice and a light sheen of sweat on her brow. “Get out.”

Gavin gestured to the baggage. “What’s this?”

“It’s exactly what it looks like. I’m leaving. The coach will be here any minute, so please leave.”

Hot adrenaline spiked his blood. “The fuck you’re leaving,” he snarled. He stalked over to her bags but before he could reach for one, she rushed in front of him.

“Don’t touch them!”

He stopped and struggled to rein in his temper. "I can't let you do this, Harlan. It's a mistake."

"It is not a mistake. You were the mistake. I should never have gotten involved with you, but that was my own fault. But I have a chance to leave and start a new life without you, and I'm going to take it. You have another woman anyway and I am not going to stay here and have you stomp all over my emotions."

He had never seen her so angry, or hurt, and he knew this was all his doing. He had foolishly thrown away the most meaningful relationship he had ever had, and now he was paying the price.

"I thought you didn't have the money to get your ticket."

"Well, someone was kind enough to help me out."

"Who? Your human friend from Earth?" He thought of her friend Sam from the Razorback queendom and envisioned finding and killing him.

Harlan seemed to read his inner contemplation and said "It's none of your business, Gavin. But if you must know, it was Grand Duke Kirus."

"Kirus...Kirus, that conniving fucking bastard. You just accepted a ticket from him without even wondering what he's up to." Gavin was astonished.

"I don't care what he's up to. By the end of today, I'll be on my way home and Kirus can hatch whatever little plot he wants, because it won't affect me. Now get out."

He was doomed. He had no idea how to stop her, except through force and that could only mean one thing. In a rush, he seized her and pulled her against his chest.

Her pupils were wide and dark, crowding out their normal green. He could read the terror in them. "Since when do you fear me like this?"

"You are an unpredictable bully and I don't know what you're capable of. Kirus told me you might try to kill me."

"I would sooner take my own life than injure you, my love." He leaned down to kiss her and she turned away fighting him. She landed a strike with her free hand hard across his right cheek. Seizing her around the waist, he tossed

her over his shoulder and stalked toward the door. So intent was he upon the task at hand, he barely felt her fists pounding his back.

Harlan's spirited fury was a sight to see and an even more difficult thing to contain. Gavin had been forced to bind her several times to make sure she didn't harm herself. Her violence also appealed to him on a more primitive level, awakening the hungry beast in his soul. She was arousing and teasing him without even realizing it, and he struggled with his darker feelings as they tempted him to rape her.

Their combat made a twenty minute ride last an hour, and by the time they reached the temple, it was already early afternoon. The moment she saw the temple, she panicked and began to fight with renewed purpose. He eased her off his hyperia, keeping a strong grip on her arm, and jumped down after her.

Her face was smudged with dirt and her hair was wild. She glared at him. "I hate you for this." Her tone was poison. If she truly loved him, he would eventually find a way back into her heart. Everything and anything was worth the risk to keep her.

Taking her hand, he pulled her toward the entrance of the temple, up the black marble stairs, and along the wide, columned halls. An old priest in crimson robes rushed toward them, crouching fearfully like an animal as he neared Gavin.

"What is your pleasure, Lord? How may I serve?" he said, casting a strange look at Harlan.

"Fetch the High Priest, old father," Gavin said. "There's going to be a wedding."

Harlan struggled to pry his hand from hers. "No!" she yelled.

The old priest pursed his lips. "Normally, Lord, these things are done by appointment."

"Well this is a fucking emergency!" Gavin bellowed, pulling his saber with his free hand. "Get the fucking High Priest or I'll carve you up where you stand."

The priest visibly trembled under Gavin's ferocious tirade. He bowed quickly and rushed away.

Gavin sheathed his saber again and Harlan renewed her struggle to break free of him. "Don't do this!" she screamed as tears of anger rolled down her face. "If you do, I will hate you until the day I die."

Gavin tugged her close to his face to emphasize his words. She gave a little cry of alarm. "If it's a choice of losing you forever or living with your anger, I'll gratefully choose the latter."

"What are you trying to say? That you love me? This isn't love, it's obsession. All you want to do is possess me. You don't actually care about me. You are the most selfish son of a bitch I have ever had the misfortune of meeting." Her tears were waning as she tried to appeal to his logic.

"*You!*" the High Priest called out as he strolled slowly toward them from an alcove behind the altar. "I never thought you'd have the audacity to set foot in here again. It's a miracle the Gods don't strike you down where you stand."

"Spare me your homilies, holy man. I need a wedding right away."

"These things are normally handled in advance," the High Priest said, stopping a few feet away from Gavin. "In any event, she's not AEssyrian. You'd need her consent."

"Fuck that," Gavin snarled and advanced on the priest, who jumped back out of grabbing range. "Do the ceremony or I'll hack your head off," he said. He sliced through the air and pointed his saber at the priest.

"Now, General," the High Priest said in a soothing voice, holding a hand up as if to ward off Gavin's anger. "There's no need for violence. You'll get your ceremony." He turned to two young priests who had just joined them. "Fetch my scepter and some incense. We're apparently having a wedding." The two men hurried off.

Gavin yanked the still struggling Harlan up alongside him as they stood before the priest.

"This won't solve anything," she said. Her chest was heaving with exhaustion from her resistance. "I'm still leaving the first chance I get."

“You won’t be able to. They’ll never let you on the shuttle if they’re aware we’re married, and I intend to make sure everyone knows.”

Heavy steps echoed through the temple, closing on them and quieting her response. Gavin turned toward the entrance to see the source of the sound and was surprised by the sight of Megolyth. He looked fresh from the arena and in full battle armor. He advanced on them slowly with his weapon drawn.

Gavin lifted his saber from his side and pointed the tip at him to ward him off. “How kind of you to come and attend our nuptials.”

Megolyth was sullen. “Release her, Gavin.”

“I’m sorry, Lord. I simply can’t do that,” Gavin said.

Without warning, Megolyth rushed forward for an attack, forcing Gavin to awkwardly deflect a few blows with one hand. He released Harlan to mount a proper defense and watched her run behind her new champion.

Keeping an eye on Gavin, Megolyth said, “Go on, Harlan. Go to your shuttle.”

“I can’t,” she said defeated. “It’s too late, it left half an hour ago.”

Gavin roared and charged Megolyth, attacking the other man with a flurry of fast and punishing blows. Megolyth was driven back a little but soon regained his momentum, giving back to Gavin as good as he got.

The High Priest raced around them as they battled, his arms waving in the air. “No violence in the temple! Not in the temple!” he shouted, but no one was listening.

For the first time in a long while, Gavin took a terrible beating. Megolyth’s different fighting style made it impossible to formulate an effective defense, and Gavin was cut several times. His uniform was in tatters. Finally, he decided to concede defeat and raised his hand to indicate his surrender to Megolyth.

“On your knees,” Megolyth ordered.

Gavin dropped his saber and listened to its metallic clank as it struck the marble floor. He dropped to his knees and bowed his head in obedience. He could feel Harlan’s eyes on him and he hated her to see him like this, defeated.

“Swear your loyalty to me,” Megolyth said, kicking Gavin’s sword out of his reach.

“I so swear, Lord. I am your man in all things from this day forward.”

“Good,” Megolyth said. “Now you listen to me. You stay away from Harlan or I’ll convince the council to imprison you for a while. That will probably cool your passion. Is that clear?”

“Very,” Gavin said. “May I rise?”

Megolyth nodded and kicked Gavin’s saber back to him.

Gavin picked it up and sheathed it. He met Harlan’s angry gaze as she stared at him. Then she turned away and walked out, the echo of her boots a lonely, empty sound in the temple.

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

“I’m sorry I couldn’t get to you sooner,” Megolyth said, leaning against the fireplace of his new villa. “You might have been able to make your shuttle after all.”

Harlan sipped her water and replaced it on the side table. She laid her head back on the plush wing chair she was reclining on.

Megolyth thought she looked tired and sad, but then one could never be sure with a woman. Their emotions were as mysterious to him as they were to any man.

“There will be another one in six months. I’m just grateful you came. How did you know, anyway?” she said.

“One of the priests ran and told me you were in trouble.”

Harlan sighed and got up, wandering over to the large paned window overlooking the front garden. She grinned. “They gave you a much nicer villa than mine,” she said teasingly. “Want to trade?”

“Were you really going to leave?” he said, coming finally to the subject they had been dancing around for a while.

“Yes, I was.”

“Gavin would have been devastated and I would have been mad you didn’t come to say goodbye,” he said, walking over and taking a seat on the couch.

She looked on the verge of tears but she smiled. “I was trying to get out of here before Gavin found out.”

“He loves you, Harlan, and I think it’s making him crazy.”

She paced slowly studying the floor as she went. “He’s given me no reason to believe that. He’s never said it and meant it and he certainly hasn’t ever shown it.”

Megolyth watched her pace, her mouth a firm line. “Well his feelings aren’t really important here, are they? How do you feel about him, honestly?” Megolyth

said. He put his boots on the coffee table and stretched one arm across the back of the couch. His muscles were aching from all the constant fighting and he was grateful he was a young man enduring this. Luckily, the challenges were almost over and he could begin constructing his kingdom.

Harlan stopped pacing and looked up at him. Her green eyes were bright and vibrant. "Every time I entertain deep feelings for him, he does something to make me hate him."

"Was leaving an easy decision to make?"

"No. I knew if I thought about it too much, I might hesitate and miss my opportunity. So I just wanted to pack and run. Then, of course, he showed up."

Megolyth laughed. "You're both insane," he said. "I think the two of you should talk this out and see if there's anything to this relationship. And since Gavin seems incapable of coming to you without it turning into a fight, I think you should go to him. If you still want to leave afterward, I'll make sure you do."

"I don't know," she said, gazing out the window again lost in thought. "Every time we end up in the same room together, it ends badly."

CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

The brothel's gaming house was a loud and dangerous place. It was the perfect place to shut out his sorrows and drown his pain in liquor. Sharp laughter and angry shouts bounced off the walls as men gambled their pay away and prostitutes of every breed competed with each other to land the best paying customers. Gavin himself had been lucky. A few whores had bedded him just for tips because of his fame and position.

Gavin jostled through the crowd to Kirus' table clutching a bottle of Sawjack Whiskey by the neck. He pulled up a chair and took a long pull off the bottle, setting it down in front of him to light a cigar. "They said you wanted to talk to me," he said, coughing slightly as he puffed his smoke.

Baron Kirus Younger gave him a cunning smile. "I heard about what happened with Megolyth and I thought a little revenge might appeal to you."

A few drunken soldiers bumped the table as they made their way past them and Gavin held his bottle steady to ensure it didn't fall over. He shot them a dirty look but they ignored him. "What do you have in mind, Baron?"

"Only what we already discussed. I think it's time for a coup. What do you say, partner?"

Gavin eyed some cuts on Kirus' cheek and neck. He pulled his cigar from his teeth and said, "You lost your challenge, didn't you?"

Kirus gave him a sullen stare. "Yes, so what?"

"Technically, you're ineligible to rule."

"Since when are you such a stickler for the rules?" Kirus said angrily.

Gavin looked around the smoke-filled room trying to spot an open card game to join. "The challenges are almost over and Megolyth is the obvious winner. He's going to be our king, so you might as well try and live with it."

"You're taking back your offer then?"

"I never made you an offer. I said I'd think about it and I have."

The barmaid came over and Kirus ordered a drink. When she had left, he said, "What about your girlfriend, Harlan? Are you just going to sit here getting drunk while he takes her from you?"

"He's not interested in her. He needs an AEssyrian noblewoman with perfect bloodlines. Harlan definitely doesn't fit the bill. Besides, after our botched wedding, she'll probably never speak to me again."

Kirus' drink arrived and he waited for the woman to leave before he spoke. "Maybe you've lost your balls over Megolyth, but I haven't. I'm not giving up on the throne quite so easily."

Gavin nodded bored. "Good for you. Mind if I ask you a question?"

"No," Kirus said disgusted.

Gavin gazed at him icily. "Why did you purchase the ticket for Harlan?"

Kirus stammered for a moment, either surprised Gavin was aware of his purchase or shocked he hadn't already attacked him for this blatant breach into Gavin's personal life. "She was a distraction and I didn't want her influence over you to become a liability."

With that, Gavin stood picking up his bottle and spitting the stub of his cigar into the dirty ashtray resting on the table in front of Kirus. "Not exactly an ideal way to start a partnership," Gavin said as he walked away.

He melted into the thickening crowd, trying to forget Kirus and his royal ambitions. Sometime during the evening's drinking and whoring, he ran into Fallon. The man was a famously cunning bounty hunter and mercenary who had given up a bounty on Gavin a year ago for a later payday. Gavin paid him what he owed him and they spent some time catching up. By the time midnight had come and gone, a heavy drunken buzz was clouding the edges of his vision. Aside from that, however, he was exactly where he wanted to be emotionally, empty and cold.

Kirus rode back to the military complex seething at Gavin. It was his own fault; he should have never trusted the man to follow through on a coup. What else could he expect from a half-breed drunkard?

There was still a chance for success, however. He knew Commander Barius might join him. After all, it must be a difficult thing to take a back seat to Gavin again after having sampled the position of general.

It was late when he finally returned. Kirus rode into the complex stables to see if Barius' mount was still there and caught him just as he was mounting up to go home. *What a lucky break.*

Kirus summoned up his most engaging smile. "Good evening, Commander. I was wondering if I could have a private word with you?"

"Certainly, Lord. Where would you like to speak?"

Kirus rode up alongside him. "Why don't we go to your place?"

Kirus stepped over the smashed door debris and stepped inside Barius' home. Entering the living room, he glanced back at the destruction. "What happened here?"

Barius pulled aside a few planks to clear his own way inside. "Gavin and I had a disagreement. I haven't had a chance to fix it yet."

"Are you two still friendly?"

Barius entered and took a seat at the dining room table. "No. We're not as close as we used to be."

Kirus strolled around the living room taking in the left over signs of the fight. Barius was running his thick fingers over a deep scar in the table. "I'll get right to it then. I want you to help me stage a coup."

Barius nodded grimly. "You lost in the arena. I'd heard rumors."

"Yes, I did. But I still believe I'd make the best king, the arena be damned."

"What about Gavin? He's not going to sit by and let this happen, and I take it he already refused your ambitious offer. What are you planning to do with him?"

“I’ll take care of him,” Kirus said. He sank into a nearby plush chair. “What about the army? Do you think they’ll follow you if Gavin’s gone, or is there someone else to worry about?”

“I’m certain they’ll follow me. When will Gavin be out of the way?”

Kirus grinned. He knew he’d chosen an excellent accomplice in Barius. The man wanted Gavin dead as much as Kirus himself did. “As soon as I can manage it. Once he’s gone, the next move is yours. And I’ll warn you now, don’t try to turn on me, because I have a colonel in my pocket who’ll be watching you.”

Barius laid his hand over the gouge in the table as if by doing so he could make it disappear. “What about Doctor Ambrose?”

Kirus got up and arched his back. “I don’t care what happens to her. If you want her when this is all done, she’s yours. Now, if you’ll excuse me, Commander. I have a general to kill.”

The fight began in the early hours of the morning, and as was typical, it was over money. Gavin swiped his cash off the table as the corporal and private before him rose from their seats shouting accusations at each other over the last hand dealt.

“Do you think I’m blind!” the corporal screamed. “I saw you take that card from your boot! Forfeit your winnings, or I’ll beat the living Gods out of you!”

Gavin rose and staggered back from the conflict. The two men lunged at each other causing a brawl to erupt all around them.

Knowing he was much too drunk to fight, he made his way to the back door and spilled out into the alley, along with a few other patrons seeking refuge.

When the blow came, it took him completely by surprise. A man passing him swung his arm forward and plunged a dagger into his gut. Searing pain engulfed his consciousness and he sobered immediately. Gavin grabbed his assailant’s wrist before he could pull it free and bent it back until he felt resistance. He pushed it further until it snapped like a dry tree branch. The man cried out and fought trying to break free, but Gavin held him firm.

Gently, he pulled the blade from his belly and heard his blood spill on the ground with a splash. He was injured worse than he first thought. He studied the man who had stabbed him. His yellow eyes looked wild and terrified. Gavin recognized him as a local thug, always willing to take on any illegal deed for money.

“Who paid you?” Gavin said. His voice was so slurred, he barely recognized it. He was beginning to feel lightheaded.

“Some nobleman named Kirus,” the man said, struggling harder.

Gavin could feel his knees weakening and the dizziness from loss of blood. “He didn’t pay you enough,” he said, and drove the knife into the man’s throat.

CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

Gavin awoke in a coach curled up on the floor. The scent of blood was everywhere and the dim light overhead made his eyes water. His belly burned and throbbed in agony and his head pounded furiously. His mouth was as dry as the dust in an attic. "I need water," he croaked.

"I can't give you anything until we see how bad your wound is." A woman's voice. *Human. Harlan? No, the other one at the clinic, the nurse, Sasha.* She was bent over him keeping pressure on his wound. She was covered in his blood.

"How did you find me?" he said, unsure if he'd stay awake for the answer.

"My boyfriend found you. It seems like the two of you haunt some of the same places. He got this coach and loaded you up for me. He's riding with the coachman to make sure we don't take any detours."

Gavin felt himself drifting in and out as the coach rocked, flinging them about. A wave of nausea rolled over him. "We need to stop," he mumbled. Every breath he took was laced with pain. He was going to be sick and he really didn't want to do it in here.

"We're just a couple streets away. Hold on," Sasha said, helping him sit up a little.

"I'm going to be ill."

"Here," Sasha said, handing him a cream-colored blanket.

Before he could protest, he vomited blood into it. Blood. Everywhere he looked. It occurred to him that he might be dying. He couldn't remember ever bleeding this much from a wound. "Tell Harlan I love her, will you?" He felt delirious.

Sasha craned to see out the window and the coach suddenly stopped. She stared down at him, her face a mask of determination. He heard the coach door open and felt hands grabbing him, pulling him out.

"You'll be able to tell her yourself when we get done with you."

Harlan could hear Gavin's agonizing roar from the exam room as she hurried to scrub up. It tore at her, as if she herself were suffering, and she wondered if she'd be able to keep her emotions under control if he died. Her heart went cold at the realization and her temples pounded so hard, she thought she was having a stroke. *You will be all right*, she focused. *I will not let you die.*

Sasha helped her put her gloves and mask on and Harlan noticed her hands trembling. It was difficult to accept she felt so strongly about Gavin, but the truth was, her feelings for him grew every day. That had been why she was so frantic to leave. He was a dangerous man to love.

When she was ready, she raced to the exam room, and pushed her back into the swinging door to enter. The smell of alcohol stormed through her nostrils and the first thing she saw was blood, lots and lots of it. Blood covered Gavin's mouth, neck, and belly and at first, it was impossible to tell where the wound was. Towels were tossed around the floor under the table to sop up the pools of blood forming from what was running off the table. Gavin's inner lids were partially closed over and he looked barely conscious, but he was restrained anyway. Few things were more deadly than a wounded AEssyrian.

Colonel Caraculla held bandages over Gavin's stomach to keep pressure on the wound. The bleeding was so profuse, he was replacing them every few minutes.

Caraculla moved back and removed the bandages so she could examine the wound. As she moved toward the table, she was very concerned about all the blood and feared that his liver had been lacerated. His intestines were definitely involved in the wound. Thankfully, AEssyrians didn't get sepsis. She hoped it looked worse than it was and the intensity of the hemorrhage was from Gavin's high blood alcohol level.

Harlan glanced at Sasha. "Prep him for surgery," she said. Sasha wiped some sweat from Harlan's brow as they both studied Gavin's vital readings.

"Let's hibernate him to get him out of shock and stop this bleeding," Harlan said. Sasha picked up a syringe and drew out a dose of blue fluid from a bottle of

Thoralease. Swabbing Gavin's neck, she injected it into his vein and watched his vital readings. Suddenly, they dipped low, and then stabilized again. His body relaxed and his eyes closed completely.

Harlan exhaled, relieved the wound was already beginning to bleed less.

It took Harlan close to four hours to finish all the mending and stitching. Gavin's strength amazed her. His body seemed to work from memory, entering hibernation easily and mending his wound with practiced efficiency.

When she was confident he was reacting well to the medication, she moved him to a recovery room and sat in a chair by his bed.

Caraculla walked up and grinned. "He looks good. What was that drug you gave him?"

Harlan watched Gavin as he rested. "Thoralease, it's a heavy narcotic. It induces hibernation in AEssyrians, thereby speeding up the healing process." She got up and pulled off her gown, balling it up and tossing it in a hamper. "It's actually a lucky thing for him he's been wounded so many times," she said, walking to the sink and splashing water on her face. "His body reacted quickly to the medication and is already healing. I expect he'll be able to take in fluids by tomorrow night."

Caraculla nodded. "That's great," he said. He seemed distracted. "Hey, Doc, is there any way I could get a vial of that medication, Thoralease?"

Harlan studied him for a long moment. "Not likely. There are some pretty heavy controls on it. Only a doctor should give it, it's not exactly an aspirin, you know. What on earth would you need it for anyway?"

"I understand," he said with a winning smile. "It was just something that would be good to have on hand. You know, just in case."

"Trust me, if you're in a situation where it's required, you aren't in any condition to administer it to yourself," Harlan said. She looked him in the eye and thought she saw a mischievous twinkle. She was so tired, though, she might be imagining all kinds of misdeeds.

CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR

Molotov walked amongst the scattered burial mounds feeling pity for the dead. A recent rain followed by an intense heat caused thick pools of fog to settle in the lower parts of the cemetery. The majority of AEssyrians were cremated upon death, but not the poor. For those who had no one to care for them, they were put here, in this lonesome, empty place. The dreadful thought of Princess Shatara's body being hidden here brought with it a profound feeling of sadness. No matter who a person was or how highborn, everyone ended up the same, lost and forgotten to the world that once knew them.

As he stalked along followed by Gavin's newly hired manservant, Malcolm, and two of his own men, he studied each mound carefully, looking for signs of fresh interment. At each stop, Malcolm held the Alvian lantern low (so as not to draw attention to them), sweeping it across the site searching for clues. Molotov could tell by the men's demeanor that they found this an unpleasant waste of time. He didn't entirely disagree with them, despite the excellent tip he'd bought, the chances were slim they would find her among all these many graves.

Spotting a higher mound than the rest, Molotov stopped and took the lantern from Malcolm's hand. He held it up, slowly approaching the wall where the slight mound rested, snuggled against the stone foundation. Some vines and twigs were wrapped in the dirt with some scattered leaves resting on top.

Molotov considered the area for a moment. It was a place both out of the way and close to the entrance. The perfect spot if one was in a hurry. If he were going to hide a corpse anywhere in here, this would be a good spot, although he would have done a better job of camouflaging it.

"Shall we begin digging, Lord?" Malcolm said, trying to read Molotov's expression.

"Yes," Molotov replied, meeting Malcolm's questioning gaze. "Start digging here."

Harlan heard someone come in and she woke disoriented. Where was she? Her office? *Yes, that's right.*

At first, she was terrified, afraid Gavin had taken a bad turn, but when her eyes focused, she saw her visitor was Grand Duke Molitov.

"What is it, Lord?" she said, groggily sitting up from the couch. "What's happened?"

"I think we've found the body of Princess Shatara. The body is decayed, but the clothes seem to match," he said.

"Where'd you find it?"

"A pauper's field just outside the city."

She rubbed her face. She was so tired, she was having trouble concentrating on their conversation. "Where is it? Did you bring it here?"

"It's in a coach out back under guard. Of course, I will need an autopsy right away."

Harlan ran her fingers through her hair sweeping it from her face and stood up. "I'll tell Sasha to prepare the body and we'll get started."

Molitov opened the door for her. "How is Gavin, by the way?"

Harlan stepped out into the hall. "I don't know. Would you like to come with me to check on him?"

"What an excellent idea," Molitov said, falling into step behind her. "I'd like to hear his thoughts on the princess' murder."

When they entered Gavin's room, he was sitting naked on the edge of the bed, a sheet draped loosely over his hips. He glanced at them, and then continued to pull a fresh uniform out of a canvas sack.

"What are you doing out of bed?" Harlan chided him.

"I'm not out of bed, dear. I'm very much in it. I'm just sitting up," Gavin replied.

Sasha, who was standing by the bed writing in his chart, didn't look up. "He's a really crummy patient. I can't do anything with him. He won't listen to a word I say."

Gavin busied himself with removing his military insignias from the previous night's bloodied uniform and attaching them to his new one. Harlan grinned, despite how annoyed she was with him. He looked like a crazy old man intensely bent over a crossword puzzle.

Molotov walked over to him. "I found the princess' body," he said, watching Gavin's reaction.

Gavin looked up from pinning on his collar insignia. "Her body?"

"Yes, Gavin. She's dead."

"And you think I did it?"

Molotov rested one hand on the hilt of his saber. "Did you?"

Gavin's gaze dropped to Molotov's hand, and then searched the man's face. "No," he said warily. "I think that honor goes to Grand Duke Kirus."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because I know for a fact he's a busy boy who's been hatching plots and planning murders. He wants the throne badly and he's willing to do anything to get it, treason, murder, coups, any and all. Take your pick."

"Did he approach you to stage a coup?"

Gavin glanced at Harlan, who was staring at him. "Yes."

Molotov pulled up a folding visitor's chair and sat down. "Why didn't you try?"

"I have other interests," Gavin said, meeting Harlan's gaze again.

She felt her face flush. Harlan could feel the energy between herself and Gavin. It was a strange, powerful, wonderful thing she had never felt for any man before. Her flesh suddenly came alive, wanting his mouth, his touch, his hungry lust spilling over her in fiery waves of lovemaking. *I must be out of my mind.*

Turning from everyone, she headed for the door. "I'd better get started with that autopsy," she said. "Sasha, can you prep the remains?"

“Sure, I can hardly wait.” Sasha groaned and followed Harlan out of the room.

CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE

The council chamber was dim and stuffy. Thick brown velvet curtains covered the large panel windows, keeping out the warming rays of morning light. The few nobles who'd bothered to show up were seated in their assigned chairs behind the elevated horseshoe desk. As Gavin stood before them waiting to be admonished for the bar fight which he had nothing to do with, they whispered among themselves. Gavin would have been worried but he was used to this. Every few months, he was dragged before them for some transgression, whether real or hearsay, for their ritual browbeating.

Those in attendance included Grand Duke Kirus, the man who had bankrolled Gavin's would-be assassin the other night. Gavin wasn't sure why Kirus wanted him dead, but he was sure it had something to do with his lack of cooperation in Kirus' coup. He sat behind the other nobles avoiding eye contact. *Coward*, Gavin thought.

The council had dismissed the charges against Kirus, as he suspected they would. The nobles always tended to band together when one was accused of something unseemly. At least Grand Duke Molitov was usually on his side. However much he despised Gavin, he had a fair sense of justice and often spoke in Gavin's defense. But he had skipped this morning's hearing too, probably thinking it was one of their routine sanctions.

Unfortunately, Gavin had little to deny. He couldn't say he wasn't there and although he was not responsible for this particular fight, he was legendary for engaging in past ones.

Finally, the nobles quieted and Duke Curin stood to address him. "It is a strange paradox that such a brilliant general is also such a discipline problem. This is not the first time you've been before this council on charges of fighting and public drunkenness."

"No, Lord," Gavin said. He bowed his head to appear repentant.

“We cannot continue to tolerate this behavior from you. This time, you will be punished.”

Gavin looked up, meeting the duke’s cold, blue eyes. A moment later, the rear door opened and Commander Barius entered. Walking up the aisle, he avoided Gavin’s gaze, and took a seat in the front row of otherwise empty spectator chairs.

The duke riveted Gavin with a hard, angry look. “You are suspended until further notice. Commander Barius will take your place and you will afford him every courtesy during the transfer of power.”

Kirus watched Gavin grinning.

A hot rage boiled in Gavin as he thought of a catalogue of things with which to counter the duke but he kept his mouth shut. This was not the time to start an argument and solidify their decision. It was obvious they were being manipulated by Kirus, and unknowingly, giving him the one thing he needed most to stage a coup, a loyal general.

There would be time to fight this, and some powerful supporters who would vehemently object to it. He just needed to wait.

The duke descended and ambled over to Gavin, limping slightly on his left leg. “Your insignias, please, Gavin.” He held his hand out.

Gavin unbuttoned his tunic, his eyes locked with the duke’s. He peeled it from his chest and dropped it on the floor at the duke’s feet.

The duke bent down and picked up the tunic, draping it over his right forearm. “These kinds of things don’t help you. In fact, they do anything but.”

“Don’t lecture me, old man,” Gavin said, turning his back on the duke and casually stalking out. “I don’t work for you anymore.”

The saber blade sliced into the target, cutting off a massive piece of flesh that fell wetly to the ground. The target carcass was severely mangled and Gavin studied it to see if there was anything left worth attacking, but he’d managed to completely destroy it over the past ten minutes.

In lieu of what had happened, he should be packing, but he wasn't in the mood. Let it wait until they came to force him out, as was inevitable if he didn't get his position back. He thought of different prospects and comforted himself knowing there were at least two nearby kingdoms that might hire him, their own generals getting well on in years.

The real problem was Harlan. How was he ever going to convince her to come with him? He reached down and touched the swollen gash where his stab wound had been. His fingers played over the clear, neatly placed stitching but there was no pain, only mild discomfort. Had she worried he might die when she saw him? Had she felt anything at all besides professional curiosity? If she did, she hid it well, and for one of the many times since he'd met her, he felt miserable without her. It seemed as if they were always in conflict.

Cutting his saber through the air, he worked the tension out of his shoulders and back. Unsoiled parts of the blade gleamed as it moved, reflecting the brilliant light from the twin suns above. He raised it to cut the target down and thought he sensed movement behind him. He turned with his weapon at the ready and was astonished to see it was Harlan.

She leaned in the doorway to the courtyard giving him a soft smile. "Since you always leave your door open, I let myself in. I hope you don't mind," she said.

He walked over to the patio table and wiped off his blade with a cotton rag. "You know I don't mind."

Laying his saber down, he stalked over to her, stopping close. She met his eyes for a moment, and then nervously looked away. He could smell the fresh, clean scent of her skin and he burned to touch her, taste her. "I doubted you'd ever come back here, but I was hopeful."

"I only came by to see how your wound was healing," she said. She dropped her gaze to his stomach. She reached out and touched the stitches, examining his wound. "I think those can come out." Pulling a pair of small medical scissors from her pocket, she snipped the stitches open and gently pulled them free of his flesh with her fingers.

Her touch against his skin charged him, scorching a trail of lust down to his groin and making him painfully hard. His mind was engulfed with desire, and it almost overwhelmed him, but he struggled to maintain control. They had a lot to discuss before he could quench that driving thirst. He placed his hand under her chin and lifted her gaze to meet his. Her bottomless green eyes were gentle, questioning, but he could see her pain within them.

"I have been a horrible, thoughtless fool, my love," he said, "and I'm very sorry I hurt you."

Harlan broke away and took a few steps from him. "That's all over with and I don't want to talk about it anymore."

"No, we need to talk about it. You deserve to know why I left you, and now you'll have it."

Harlan shook her head. "Gavin, I really don't—"

"I need to finish," he said, moving up close to her. "The truth is, I was afraid. I was afraid of how quickly I was falling in love with you. Afraid of how strong my emotions were. So I thought if I ended it and found someone else, the power of those emotions would fade and grow dim. But I soon found out, to my misery, that they only grew stronger in your absence. I have been a desperate wreck since that day, living only on the hope that you might forgive me."

Harlan turned to leave, but he placed a hand on her shoulder and turned her to face him. "I have to go," she said. Her voice rippled with sorrow.

He pulled her into his arms and gave her a heated kiss. "I love you and need you, Harlan. Please forgive me."

She struggled but there was no conviction in it, no determination to leave. "I do love you and I forgive you," she said weakly, "again."

Leaning down, he kissed her moving his tongue past her soft, yielding lips. She moaned and wrapped her arms around him, pushing her body against his. He ran his mouth along her face and down her throat, aching to take her as she stroked his chest with trembling hands.

Her touch was madness. He lifted her and placed her on the patio table, her breath coming faster in his ear. The beast in his soul was up and on the

prowl, savaging his lust to be inside her, driving his desire to a fever pitch. He pulled her shirt off, taking each breast in his mouth and gently licking them, she squirmed with delight.

Dragging feral kisses down her breasts and belly, he unbuttoned her jeans and nuzzled the soft flesh of her abdomen. She gasped as he continued and ran her fingers through his hair. Sliding her jeans and panties off, he explored the sweet flesh of her sex with his tongue. He probed and tickled her, feeling her swell with yearning for him.

The honeyed taste of her body was a narcotic in his blood and he couldn't get enough of her. She bucked against his tongue, so moist and ready. He stood up, unbuttoned his black pants and released his hunger, pulling her off the table. She wrapped her legs around him and he turned to brace her back against the wall. Then slowly, he entered her.

He buried his face in her throat and inhaled. Her tender moans filled him with blinding exhilaration and he began pleasing her with slow, easy thrusts. A low growl left his chest as the heat of her body seared him with pleasure. Letting go, he lost himself in it.

For the next few hours, he took her in every room of the villa. They made love with the feverish urgency of young lovers until they finally collapsed in his bed. Soon after, they were devoured by exhausted sleep.

CHAPTER FIFTY-SIX

The arena was a thunderous wall of cheering as Megolyth stood before them on the packed black sand, the clear victor of the final challenge. His last opponent lay dead at his feet, his head hanging by a few strands of flesh. He prowled the floor, waving his weapon high above his head, whipping the crowd into an intense frenzy. He imagined he was quite a sight covered in blood and gore.

From high above the bleachers, he saw the nobles coming. They descended the steps like condemned men. Their heads hung low and their eyes downcast. Once they reached the arena floor, they made a line to offer their congratulations to him.

Megolyth grinned as he watched them. Many of them looked lost. Now they were men uncertain how to curry favor with this new and unknown king. Some of them had even challenged him earlier and were lucky to have escaped with their lives. Little did they know he still considered killing them, but he decided to wait and see which ones proved to be the most troublesome.

He studied the crowd and wondered where Gavin was. Megolyth met Duke Curin's eyes as he approached, being the first to swear allegiance.

"Where's Gavin?" Megolyth said.

The duke struggled stiffly to his knees and bowed his head. "The council elected to replace him, Highness. He's been a serious discipline problem lately, so we found it best to elevate his western commander, Barius."

Megolyth stared down at the noble and didn't speak for a long time. "No," he said simply. "You will personally go and tell the general he has been reinstated. He is to replace Commander Barius immediately. Is that understood?"

Duke Curin kept his head lowered. "Yes, Highness. You are my sovereign and I will serve you faithfully."

"You may rise."

“Thank you, Highness,” The duke rose, made a final bow, and left the arena.

The last man to approach Megolyth was Grand Duke Kirus. “I don’t swear anything to you, Lord,” he said through his teeth. “I demand a rematch.”

Megolyth laughed and it echoed in the now quiet arena. “You’re such a stupid little man,” he said coolly. “Just before I came here, I received the autopsy report from Doctor Ambrose regarding Princess Shatara. Do you know what she found?”

Kirus glanced around, his face looking ashen. He said nothing.

“The cause of death was drowning. She assumes in a bathtub because the water in her lungs was soapy. Another interesting thing is that she found bloody flesh underneath her fingernails. Now, isn’t that a curiosity? I wonder whose it is.”

“That proves nothing,” Kirus said. His voice was tense and low.

Megolyth studied him for a long moment to make him squirm. “How far do you want to take this, Lord? The last confirmed sighting of the princess alive was by her personal servant, who let you into Shatara’s bathing quarters before retiring to bed. Shall we have Doctor Ambrose run a comparison between you and the flesh under the princess’ fingernails? The doctor has some remarkable technology.”

“A lot of that would be considered circumstantial. After all, Shatara and I were lovers. My presence while she’s bathing, or even my flesh under her nails is not that much of a stretch,” Kirus retorted.

“Give it up, Lord. Your servants have already confessed to helping you bury her body to save their own skins. It may also intrigue you to know that the men you sent to kill me recanted their original confession about the princess. Under my persuasive counseling, they pointed to your payroll. My only regret is that I kept this information until what I thought was the right time and it cost the princess her life.”

Kirus swallowed hard. “So, now what do I do?”

“You mean if you want to spare your family’s titles and allow them to keep your fortune?”

The grand duke nodded and placed his face in his hands. This was a nightmare, he was finished. How could he ever face his father? The old man would be devastated by this disgrace. The only question now was who among those he loved could he save? “Yes,” he whispered. “I want to spare my family this dishonor. What would you have me do?”

Megolyth sheathed his bloody bastard sword and gave Kirus a menacing grin. “Find some way to be dead by morning.”

CHAPTER FIFTY-SEVEN

Barius sat on the granite steps leading to the altar of the war god. As Gavin approached, he slowly stood and faced him. He looked very lost and confused. Gavin almost felt sorry for him, but he banished the emotion. Barius' fall was his own fault.

"I'm finished, aren't I?" he said.

Gavin's footfalls sounded impossibly loud in this sacred place. He stopped advancing and stared at his commander. "Kirus was thoughtful enough to implicate you in his plans for a coup and his servants advised us that you helped with the concealment of Shatara's body."

Barius snorted. "You're not so innocent either, you know. I understand that you considered it first."

"I was never really considering anything. And I certainly never acted on it."

Barius shook his head frowning. "But I wasn't the one who actually killed the princess. That was all Kirus's doing."

Gavin advanced a little further, stopping at the bottom of the steps. None of this really mattered. Barius was correct, he was finished and Kirus wouldn't be answering to anyone anymore. "Perhaps," he said calmly, "but why didn't you report it to me or Molotov if you knew?"

"Because Kirus offered me things that I would never get otherwise."

"Things like sole command of the army?"

"Yes, those kinds of things."

"Well, unfortunately for you, he's dead now. He did the deed this morning, so I guess he won't be honoring any of those promises. Will he?" Gavin said.

Barius glared at Gavin, his eyes glistened with hate.

"I wish you had come to me," Gavin whispered. "I loved you like a brother."

Barius gave a bitter laugh. "You and I weren't exactly friendly. You had already begun to shut me out. Besides, the only thing I ever wanted from you was your power, not your love."

“And now you have neither,” Gavin said, pulling his saber clear of its scabbard.

Barius brushed the dust off his pants. “Spare me your speeches, General. Tell me, have I been exiled?”

“Worse,” Gavin said. “I have your execution order in my pocket.”

He gave a boyish grin. “Maybe I’ll escape,” he said, pulling his own weapon free.

Grief touched Gavin’s heart. Suddenly, the room felt chilled. “Not today, you won’t, Barius. Today, you die.”

Barius descended the steps toward Gavin. A light sheen of sweat covered his brow. His saber high, he reached the bottom and circled Gavin warily.

Gavin let loose an ear-splitting roar and charged him, driving him back deflecting blow after blow. The men battled their way back up the steps to the altar, each kiss of steel singing through the sacred temple.

Barius was an experienced and skilled warrior but he seemed distracted, lost. His defense lacked the same force he usually displayed in combat. Gavin exploited the opportunity, landing a few cutting blows.

Barius scrambled around the altar, desperate to find some area free of sanctified clutter to launch a meaningful attack. Gavin, however, never let up, nor gave him time to think. He pressed on, raining blows down on Barius until the other man lost his footing and fell at Gavin’s feet. In that minor blunder, that precise moment in time, Barius was done.

A strange, intimate moment passed between them. Their eyes locked and Gavin could taste the terror, that sweaty, salty flavor on his tongue. His blood quickened in his temples and he took a deep, cleansing breath, driving his saber down into the other man’s neck.

There was no sound, only the hot, sticky spray of blood that showered Gavin in victory and he licked some of it off his lips. After a few moments, Barius’ pulse stilled, and the flow of blood slowed. Gavin pulled his blade from his commander’s body. He knelt by Barius and lifted his body onto the altar so the priest could give a final blessing before burial.

A peaceful sleep for you, my friend, Gavin thought. When my time comes, may I die as bravely as you did.

CHAPTER FIFTY-EIGHT

The coronation celebration was a vibrant spectacle, and although apprehensive at first, Harlan was glad she'd come. The great hall was decorated with elegant white drapes, golden goblets and plates, and accents of the richest reds she had ever seen.

Gavin, Harlan's hand firmly in his, walked through the crowd as he jostled his way closer to Megolyth their new king. Megolyth smiled when he saw them.

"Your Highness," Gavin said with a deep bow. "I must speak with you."

"Hello, Harlan," Megolyth said, kissing her on the cheek. He turned to Gavin. "What can I do for you, General?"

Gavin frowned at the kiss and pulled her a little closer. "Harlan was promised a new research facility by the previous regent. Do you intend to honor that promise?"

Megolyth gave him a warm smile and winked at Harlan. "I guess he really wants to make sure you stay."

Harlan cheeks heated. "I guess so."

"I'm sure we can afford a research facility for Harlan, General. Don't worry."

Gavin nodded and pulled her out of the crowd and back to their table. "Now, for the other matter."

Harlan sat and sipped her wine. "What other matter?"

Gavin studied her for a moment. "I would like you to move in with me."

Harlan shook her head. "I don't think that's a good idea. I need my own space."

"You'll have it. We'll keep your villa until you feel comfortable enough to let it go."

Harlan looked around the room feeling tense. He was always trying to pressure her into things and sometimes, it really pissed her off.

"Yes?" he said.

"I don't know."

"Harlan," he said, turning her face to look him in the eye. "I know exactly how I feel. I love you and I want you with me. If I'm not mistaken, I believe you feel the same. I know it will be a long time before I can ever convince you to marry me, so at least concede this small thing. If you are unhappy, you can move back to your villa without argument. I promise."

Harlan looked into his stunning golden eyes, all her emotions swirling inside her. She did love him, more than she had ever loved any man, and she did want to be with him, but the real issue was trust. She just didn't trust him, and worse, he made loving him very difficult. "All right," she said. "But no more jealous rages. I have never given you any reason not to trust me, so from now on, we discuss things like civilized people. Understand?"

"Agreed," he said, pulling her into a soft kiss. "And since we're in agreement to discuss everything, why don't we discuss marriage?"

Harlan glared at him as a waltz filled the great hall. Several couples moved onto the floor to dance. "Why don't we not?" she said. "That's a discussion for another time." *A long time from now*, she thought.

A waitress came by to offer him another drink but he refused it. "I'll wear you down, my love," he said roguishly. "Someday soon, you'll break and agree to be my bride."

Only if I've completely lost my mind, Harlan thought, sipping her drink. Gavin excused himself and left her alone to talk to some of his military friends.

Harlan scanned the room and spotted Sasha in a long blue dress standing with Caraculla by the entrance. They looked so handsome together, Harlan had to smile. She finished her drink and got up, squirming through the crowd to greet her friend. Halfway there, a young serving boy grabbed her arm and pushed a small tan envelope into her hand, then quickly disappeared into the crowd. Harlan called out to him, but she had lost sight of him so quickly, that she turned her attention back to the object in her hand.

She looked around to see if anyone else had notice the transaction and then turned the envelope over. It was blank, no name, no return address, nothing. She tore it open and removed a parchment note that read:

My Dear Dr. Ambrose,

I realize this is an odd way to appeal for your help but I knew Gavin wouldn't let me anywhere near you. Please meet me at the township of Guinn on Samas Day Four and I will explain everything.

Warmest Regards,

TITAN

Harlan heard Sasha walk up and she hid the note up her sleeve. She greeted her friend with a warm hug.

"What was that note all about? More Gavin trouble?" Sasha said with a friendly wink.

Harlan's mouth went dry and a strange fluttering fear moved through her stomach. She laughed off the question. "It was nothing," she said, smiling with a good humor she didn't feel. "Come on, let's go and get a drink. Who says only the men can have all the fun?"

When her friend's back was turned, Harlan crumpled up the note and tossed it in the trash.