

# TWISTED PASSION

MICHELLE O'NEILL & LINDSEY BAYER



## **Twisted Passion**

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# **TWISTED PASSION**

Book Three of the *AEssyrian* World Series

By Michelle O'Neill & Lindsey Bayer

## Chapter One

The AEssyrian High Priest was a skinny, bent old man that spoke his native tongue in a dialect Doctor Harlan Ambrose had never heard before. As one of a handful of human doctors on this planet, Harlan had struggled to learn the local language, but because of the complex pitches and tones, she'd had minimal success. She smiled and tried to look friendly as he spoke.

The High Priest removed his tunic, tossed his cane on the floor and scrambled up onto the examining table. The green skin around his arms and chest sagged from age and his reptilian eyes showed some minor cloudiness. He pointed to his groin, with long black nails, barking and screeching out a bunch of complaints. They were accompanied by some disturbing hand gestures.

Harlan frowned. This was hopeless. She needed an interpreter. She popped her head out and called her receptionist, Karla, in.

Karla, a tall, curvy, alien woman, was dressed in a short, ivory dress with a plunging neckline. The color of the dress set off the light green of her skin, but her dyed red hair made her look rather clownish. Her large breasts seemed just about to burst out of her clothing. Even though she wanted to confront her, Harlan kept her anger down. *Who comes to work dressed like that?*

Karla eyed Harlan up and down, then glanced at the High Priest. "What?" she said in English.

Harlan took a deep, calming breath. "Could you please ask this gentleman what his complaint is?"

Karla rattled off a series of questions to the High Priest. After a lengthy conversation between the two, the receptionist turned back to Harlan. She smirked and said, "He says his penis isn't working anymore."

Harlan swallowed, wondering if Karla was making the story up to embarrass her. She decided she didn't have much choice but to trust the woman. After a lengthy question and answer session, Harlan wrote the High Priest a prescription and asked him to come back in a week. She hoped she'd have a better interpreter by then.

When the High Priest had left, Karla said, "I need the rest of the afternoon off."

Harlan was half expecting this. Karla was forever in need of time off. "Why?" she asked.

"My mother's ill."

"Wasn't she ill last month?"

Karla shrugged and leaned in the doorway. "What can I say? My family is sickly."

"Fine," Harlan said, taking the High Priest's file back to her office. She stopped and turned to ask if Karla would be back tomorrow, but the receptionist was already gone. Harlan shook her head. *Why am I even surprised?*

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King Megolyth's concubines were stunning in the soft light of the royal baths. Their green flesh glowed from the steamy moisture and their long dark hair was plastered to their round, luscious breasts as if it had been painted there. They huddled near Megolyth as he lounged in the warm pool, pouring soapy water over his back and chest. One lusty maiden leaned down and ran her forked tongue along the spinal ridges between his shoulder blades. He glanced back at her and gave a barely perceptible shake of his head. She quietly retreated to the background. Other than that, he paid them little attention except to stroke a belly here or a breast there. None of these captive women seemed to

hold much interest for him. He was still a king in search of the ever elusive perfect queen. At least for now, his matrimonial pursuits would have to wait. He had more pressing interests that needed his attention.

General Gavin Theron stalked into the balmy grotto slowly, his heavy boots thumping on the stone floor. He took his time breathing in the rich scent of the women's bodies. They made his dick ache in all the right ways, heating his blood with thoughts of a good, long orgy. Unfortunately, as desirable as they were, none of them made him feel like his human lover, Doctor Harlan Ambrose. The mere thought of her was lustful torture and he vowed to find the time tonight to ravish her, no matter how busy he got.

Megolyth watched him with an amused sparkle in his eyes. "You're late," he scolded good-naturedly. Then he added, "You've gained weight. A good, stable woman seems to agree with you."

Gavin grunted his acknowledgement. He made his way over to the bath and leaned against a stone pillar folding his arms. Ribbons of steam rose from the pool and coated the dark gray stones with their moisture. The humid air was infused with the scent of exotic oils. "What can I do for you, your Highness?"

Megolyth rose from the tub and one of the women wrapped him in a long, black robe. He turned to the women. "Leave us," he said with a wave of his hand. They gathered the oils and towels then quickly left the room.

Megolyth sat on a carved stone bench and pulled his wet, black hair back over his shoulders. "I've been studying your service record."

Gavin shifted his weight. "Have you?"

"Very impressive."

"Thank you, but I doubt you asked me here to pay me compliments on my career."

Megolyth ignored the sarcasm. "How ambitious are you?"

Gavin frowned and studied his king. A small knot formed in his gut. "I guess most would say very ambitious."

"Most would say that. What would *you* say?"

Gavin unfolded his arms and moved closer. "What are you asking me, really?"

Megolyth leaned his head back and took a deep breath. "I'm asking you if you have the appetite to take this kingdom and make it into an empire."

Gavin stared at Megolyth in search of any signs of humor. *Was he serious? Historically, several AEssyrian kings had attempted to build an empire by warfare, but not one had ever been successful. The potential was there, especially now. Two of the neighboring kingdoms had ailing monarchs and no heirs to speak of. As a result, their armies were weak and undisciplined. Trying to take them by force would be an all or nothing deal; either they'd win or be destroyed trying.*

"The real question is do you have the stomach for it?" Gavin said. "A move against either of our neighbors would bring unprecedented bloodshed. Our losses would be great and leave us vulnerable to attack ourselves. Are you willing to assume the risk of losing a kingdom you just obtained? The nobles are another problem. They enjoy their lives of leisure. You won't find many war supporters there."

Megolyth smiled, but there was no humor in it. "You let me deal with the nobles," he said. "And you? Do you have the stomach for it? Or do you also enjoy your life of leisure?"

Gavin placed his hands behind his back. He paced in a small circle trying not to agree too fast. This was the chance he'd waited his entire life for; a chance to become the most celebrated general in history. This was an opportunity to do what has never been done before. How could he possibly refuse?

He met Megolyth's gaze. His heart sped up as his soul hungered for the carnage of battle. Closing his eyes for a moment, he could almost smell the blood. This was his destiny, what he was born to do. "It will take a lot of planning and resources."

Megolyth rose from his chair smiling. He advanced holding his hand out to Gavin. "So you're in then?"

Gavin met his king half way and took his hand. “My most gracious sovereign, how could I refuse you anything?”



## Chapter Two

Gavin awoke to the rich, inviting smell of breakfast meats. He stretched and rubbed his belly absently. Megolyth had been right, since Harlan moved in, he'd put on at least twenty pounds. Luckily, his AEssyrian breeding meant it all settled in his muscles, giving him an even more imposing appearance. Size on this planet was definitely a plus for a military man.

The frequent sex was a bonus as well. Who would have thought that underneath her cautious, professional exterior lay the soul of such a passionate woman? He rolled over to her side of the bed and buried his face in her pillow. Her scent brought vivid images of their lovemaking and further stiffened his already painful morning erection.

He rolled off the bed with a grunt and lumbered into the bathroom to relieve himself. A moment later, Harlan popped her head in.

"How hungry are you?" she asked with an impish grin.

"Come back to bed and I'll show you," he said. He finished up and stalked toward her.

"I meant for food. Do you want me to make you something? Don't even think about sex. I really don't want you making me late again," she said sternly. "So how hungry are you?"

"Very," he said. "I've got a project to work on for the king. It's going to be a long morning."

She disappeared from the doorway. He stalked back into the bedroom and threw a black robe on. He had no qualms about appearing naked in his kitchen, but with the unexpected frequency of their visitors-both for Harlan and himself-he thought it best to have some clothes on.

He made his way into the dining room and took a seat at the long, wooden table. He watched Harlan as she hurried around the kitchen preparing his meal. She hated to be late for work and because of his sexual appetite, now frequently was. To him, she was the most breathtaking woman he had ever seen. Her long, athletic body moved with a dancers grace and her long, black hair shone with warm, red highlights. He wondered if human men found her as attractive as he did. He certainly hoped not. She turned around and fixed him with her lovely, green eyes as if she could read his thoughts.

“What?” she asked.

He leaned back in his chair and placed his hands behind his head. “I was thinking of skipping breakfast.”

She squinted at him annoyed. “After all the work I’ve done? No way, you’re eating this.”

He laughed at her then grew silent. He leaned forward and traced an invisible pattern on the tabletop. “Megolyth has plans for the kingdom.”

Harlan set the meat aside and put down her knife. She walked into the dining room; her eyes searching his face. “What kind of plans?”

Gavin took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “It seems as though our young king has dreams of an empire.”

She pulled up a chair and sat down. “That means war.”

“Most definitely.”

She nodded gravely and looked down at her hands, as if she’d been told of a close friend’s death. “I don’t even need to ask what you think of all this.”

He shrugged. “I’m a soldier. War is how I make my living, but my most pressing concern is you.”

“Me? Why?”

“Unless we’re married, you cannot inherit anything of mine if I should...”

Harlan wrung her hands and didn’t look up. “Don’t say it,” she whispered.

Gavin leaned forward and kissed her. He could taste the fear in the tightness of her lips. “Don’t worry about me. I’ve managed to survive this long under far more dangerous circumstances than this. The two kingdoms

Megalith's thinking of annexing are weak and have smaller armies than we do. I don't think it'll take long to conquer them."

Harlan remained silent. She got up and returned to the kitchen. She placed the sliced meat on a plate and brought it to him. He wolfed down a few pieces as she settled back into her chair with a mug of coffee.

"You haven't said a word about my marriage proposal," he said, his mouth full of food.

She smiled but shook her head. "You know I won't marry you."

He stopped eating and pushed his plate back. "Why not?"

"Gavin," she said, "I love you, but every time you get married it turns into a disaster. I don't want that to happen to us. Have you ever stopped to think that maybe you're just not meant to be married?"

A dark rage filled him, tightening his chest. "I would remind you, Harlan, I am also eight hundred years old. I've had a lot of wives because I've done a lot of living. Don't use my life to hide your fear of commitment."

"I don't have a fear of commitment," she said icily.

"I beg your pardon, dear, but you most certainly do. How long did it take you to finally sleep with me despite the way you felt about me?"

Harlan stood up and glared at him. "Oh, and my reluctance didn't have anything to do with your jealous rages, trust issues or notorious womanizing, did it?"

He didn't want to argue this point today. It was going to be difficult enough planning for an invasion. He stood up, plucked her from her chair and pulled her into an embrace. At first she resisted him; her body tensing as he held her, but soon she softened. He kissed her cheek, his forked tongue moving out to stroke the fragile pale flesh. The scent of her skin brought the animal in his soul to life. He wrestled with it as it fought to devour her in a rush of heated lust. *Slowly*, he cautioned himself. *Take it nice and slow.*

He stood up and lifted her onto the table, positioning himself between her legs. Her green eyes sparkled at him. She pushed on his chest gently. "Gavin, I really don't have time for this. I have to get to work."

He studied her, reading the openness of her body. *It's a game*, he thought. They had only begun to explore games in their lovemaking. He tested her will by giving her a scorching, hungry kiss. To his delight, she kissed him back. His desire rose high again, becoming unbearable now. Its urgency tortured as it thrilled him.

"Take off your shirt," he commanded.

She made a slight shake of her head. "No, you're going to make me late again," she whispered.

He stared into her eyes and saw a lusty fire burning there. How many countless women had he known-both whore and virgin-who could make him feel this way? Not one. In all his eight hundred years, only this tiny, little human woman could work this witchcraft on him. He both loved and hated her for it.

He slid his hands around her waist and grabbed the cool fabric of her white shirt. She lifted her arms and let him pull it off from over her head. Her bra came away quickly; he pulled her luscious, full breasts into his mouth, reveling in the soft luxury of them. A whispered moan escaped her lips as she ran her fingers through his long, black hair.

His tongue ran down the sweet flesh of her chest and belly, pausing just at the border of her skirt. From below, he slid his hands up the smooth surface of her legs, pushing her skirt up past her thighs and over her buttocks. He laid her back onto the table and nestled back into his chair leaning in so he could taste the nectar of her sex. His tongue brazenly explored her. She whispered his name over and over again; it became a symphony to his ears. He nuzzled and licked her until her thighs trembled with need, and her voice was broken by short, lusty gasps. Opening his robe to free his thick cock, he lowered her down onto his groin, impaling her. A loud groan escaped her lips as he took her, her head rolling back in a complete gesture of surrender.

Then he let the beast have her.

It emerged from deep within his soul like something from a dark, ancient jungle. Every vein in his body charged with its unstoppable power and it flooded him in terrifying ways he could never have described. His lust had a leader now,

a dark and deadly commander that needed to be fed and his beloved Harlan was its sacrifice.

Harlan wrapped her arms around him and rode the beast valiantly as it drove into her with ever increasing fury. Her liquid heat consumed Gavin, sending him into a frenzy of sexual need. She pressed her breasts into his chest. Her erect nipples tickling his battle scarred, green flesh. Every touch of her warm flesh was pure ecstasy.

By the time he finished with her, it was late afternoon. He'd already sent two messengers away who'd tried to awaken her from her exhausted sleep. The Medical Clinic could wait, his needs came first. She'd be furious with him, of course. She took her work very seriously and resented him trivializing it, but he could handle her wrath.

*Besides, he thought, as he finished buttoning up his uniform. Her angry sex was even better*

## Chapter Three

The ancient, wood door dwarfed Sasha as she stood on her tip toes to reach the thick metal ring of the door knocker. She'd never known Harlan to be so late for work and certainly had never known her to ditch entirely. So far, she had been able to handle the patients at the clinic. However, she was only the nurse, and if any of the nobles came in they would want to see the doctor. She stood on the front steps of Gavin's villa and pounded on the door again.

"Harlan?" she called. "Are you here?"

She heard the sound of padding feet, and the door opened a crack. Harlan looked out at her in a rumpled t-shirt and sweat pants. Her hair was wild, like she'd been sleeping for days. "I know, I know," she said opening the door wide to let Sasha in. "That bastard, Gavin, sent away all of my wake up calls."

"I'll be ready in a minute," Harlan said rushing off toward the bedroom to get dressed.

Sasha came in and took in the villa. It was very masculine; all dark woods and leather furniture. The walls were full of hanging weapons of every kind but mostly swords. Although Harlan had moved in close to a month ago, there was still no sign of her in the décor.

Sasha sat on the black, leather couch and stared into the empty fireplace. She wondered what it was like to be so crazy in love with someone; the general was certainly not an easy man to love. He had such a horrible reputation with sleeping around that even the AEssyrian women pitied Harlan behind her back. Sasha never told her though; why make her friend feel worse.

Harlan raced out of the bedroom looking polished, as she usually did when she dressed for work. She rushed around the room looking for her lab coat

and clinic keys. She muttered curses at Gavin as she went. Sasha suppressed a grin.

Then she remembered the message. “The Grand Duke Molitov sent a messenger by this morning asking for some headache medicine for his wife. She’s apparently not feeling well.”

Harlan continued frantically looking for her coat. “How come he didn’t have her come to the clinic?”

Sasha got off the couch and shrugged.

“Does she have any other symptoms?”

“I don’t know,” Sasha said. Then, to herself, she thought; *maybe he didn’t bring her by because we’re never open on time.*

Harlan sat on a large chair and pulled her boots on. “These AEssyrian noblemen really make me mad. They think the whole world should stop and bend over backward to do their bidding.”

Sasha roamed around waiting impatiently. “Isn’t that true of all men?”

Harlan laughed. “I guess you’re right.” She got up and stretched. “Okay, I’m ready.” she said looking at her friend. “I’m really sorry Sasha. Was it crazy, busy today?”

“It wasn’t too bad. I handled it.”

“I owe you one, and I am not going to be late anymore.”

*Yeah,* Sasha thought while following Harlan out the front door. *Until Gavin drags you off to his bed again.*

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Normally, Gavin would have held a meeting with his senior staff to discuss the invasion but not tonight. If he was to be successful in this invasion, he would need to keep all his plans to himself. The only exception was his most trusted Colonel, Caraculla.

Gavin stared at the digital map on the wall and waited for Caraculla to arrive. As if on cue, a knock sounded at the door.

“Come,” Gavin said, reaching down to unlock the door from the desk’s control panel. Colonel Caraculla came in and glanced around.

“What’s this, a private meeting?”

Gavin turned his swivel chair toward him. “Yes.”

“What’s the occasion?”

Gavin turned his attention back to the map. “We have an invasion to plan.”

He heard Caraculla walk up and take a seat next to him.

“King Megolyth’s idea, or yours?”

Gavin regarded his colonel. “Does it matter?”

Caraculla studied Gavin for a moment gauging the risks of this new campaign. He was a shrewd man for one so young, and Gavin had come to regard him as a son. Gavin had fathered many sons over the centuries, but due to war and treachery, few survived him now. For the future, he was content to nurture and adopt protégées rather than sire them.

Caraculla relaxed and leaned back against the wall. He stared at the map. “No,” he said finally. “It doesn’t matter. You’re my General. I’d follow you into the fires of hell itself.”

“Good,” Gavin said. “Then we can begin.”



## Chapter Four

The barn in the military complex was a beehive of sound and activity as the men saddled their mounts in preparation to leave. Harlan cast a worried glance at Gavin. He could read the mixture of emotions in her eyes. He was sure there was a part of her that was glad he was going, if for no other reason than to get some work done.

"I want you to stop sabotaging my career," she said as Gavin placed some supplies in his saddlebags.

"I'm not," he said. "I'm merely rearranging your schedule to suit my needs."

"Well, whatever you call it, I want you to stop doing it. My career is just as important to me as yours is to you."

He stopped working and turned his full attention on her. He pulled a rolled up piece of parchment paper from his tunic and handed it to her. She stared at it as if it were a venomous snake.

"What's this?" she asked, taking it from him.

He leaned against the hyperia. It glanced back at him and hissed, but he ignored it. "Read it."

Harlan took the paper and carefully unrolled it. She read the paper, and her face grew pale. "I thought you said I couldn't inherit from you if we weren't married," she said looking up. Her eyes were misty like the sea at early morning.

"I asked King Megolyth to reconsider. He did."

"I appreciate it but..." her voice trailed off. She looked out of the barn; her face a mask of pain. Then she turned toward him, wrapping her arms around him and pressed her cheek against his cuirass. "I don't want this," she

whispered. "I have everything I need. Besides, if anything ever happened to you I would have no reason to stay here."

He tilted her face up to him and kissed her. "It's not too late for us to marry," he said. "We could have the ceremony right here with the troops to witness."

She pulled back from his embrace and shook her head. "We are not ready to be married."

He knew she'd say that. He just had to try. Rubbing the back of his neck, he watched the men ride out of the barn. They fell into formation outside waiting for him. He knew his commanders still had to check their supplies. He had a little time left. "Very well, then, how about a quick fuck instead?"

Harlan frowned. "Do you ever think of anything besides sex?"

"Sure I do," he said while escorting her out of the barn. "I think about eating and fighting."

"Oh, well since we've already had breakfast and an argument, I suppose it's the only thing left to do."

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Gavin's office was littered with charts, maps and weapons. Harlan followed him in thinking she should have refused to come here with him. Giving into him only made him more demanding. She turned around to look at him, her heart fluttering in her chest.

He was the epitome of darkest evil. Dressed for war in his black battle armor and his long, black cloak; he could have easily passed for a savage, deadly god. He towered over her, a stunning six foot eight and built like a medieval fortress. His green flesh glowed with virility except for the many battle scars that marred its faultless finish. His face was brutish and handsome with golden eyes and powerful features. He was everything a warlord should be; aggressive, relentless, and strong.

Her desire for him was unquenchable. Every time he touched her, she wanted him all the more. Even now, her body was responding to him, growing wet and eager.

He scooped her up and placed her on the edge of his desk. She ran her fingers through his hair, enjoying the rich feel of its inky blackness. His mouth moved over hers in a deep, luscious kiss. She kissed him back, moving her tongue inside his mouth, taking care to avoid his sharp, predatory teeth.

He pulled his saber and used it to clear off everything from his desk. Harlan winched as books, papers and empty whisky bottles crashed to the floor. He slid her to the center, pulling her shirt up and mauling her breasts. Harlan cradled his head against her flesh and moaned.

Pressed for time, he didn't remove his armor but rolled onto his back so his weight wouldn't make her uncomfortable during their lovemaking. Harlan hiked up her skirt and slid her underwear off. She lowered herself down and straddled his hips.

Then he was deep inside her, filling her up and making her gasp. Her body yielded to him, growing lustier by the moment. Then, the ecstasy took her in a rush, and all she could hear was the hungry growl of the beast beneath her. She leaned forward and pushed her face into his neck using his building sweat to conceal her tears. The thought of never seeing him again was paralyzing and for a just moment, the hatred she felt for Megolyth threatened to consume her.

## Chapter Five

The town of Guinn was remote in the sense that it not only required a ten mile ride but also a twenty minute mountain hike. Harlan and Sasha had reached the town by late afternoon and then faced the challenge of setting up the temporary medical clinic. Luckily, she had plenty of help in men and supplies. She guessed being a general's girlfriend did have its advantages.

Malcolm, Gavin's AEssyrian manservant, came over barely winded from the hike. He was a short, stocky man who'd been a farmer when Gavin had hired him. His features were coarse, and he had a few more broken teeth than the upper classes. His green skin was much darker than some of the other AEssyrians and, unlike the warriors; he kept his jet black hair shoulder length.

"Would you like us to start setting up the tents, my lady?" he asked in thickly accented AEssyrian.

Harlan paused for a moment to make sure she'd understood him correctly. "Yes," she said finally. "Please start setting up."

Malcolm nodded and lumbered off shouting orders at the other men.

Sasha came over with a leather bag full of medications. She tossed her head at a group of villagers standing nearby watching them. "Looks like we have patients already."

Harlan nodded grimly. As one of the few doctors around, she felt the pressure to help the sick and ill all the time. They'd be stuck here a few days at least, to make sure they saw everyone who'd shown up.

Although isolated, the village was by no means primitive. Most of the buildings were carved from the surrounding rock, and they had a power supply and water piped in from a nearby stream. The temperature was cool and

pleasant. She was so used to living in the oppressive heat and humidity of the low lands that she welcomed the climate change.

“Doctor Ambrose?”

Harlan looked up to see the village elder walking toward her. He had a full head of long, white hair and a kind, gentle face. He smiled with sharp, white teeth. She swallowed but returned his smile. “That’s me.”

He shook her hand. “Thank you so much for taking the time to come. Please,” he said with a sweeping gesture of his hand, “let me offer you and your people some refreshment.”

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The next day was one of the busiest Harlan could remember in years. It seemed as if every town resident came with every ailment they could think of. She certainly didn’t blame them though. Who knew when a doctor would venture back to this remote location? The two days that followed were just as busy. By the fourth day, the patients had trickled down to almost nothing. At around noon, Harlan felt comfortable that their work here was done and told everyone to start packing for an early, morning departure. She almost wished for more work. The thought of spending the nights alone in Gavin’s villa, wondering if he were still alive, depressed the hell out of her.

Harlan packed until well into the night. As she collected the last few files and placed them into boxes, her thoughts, again, returned to Gavin. Her mind meandered through memories of the first time she saw him. He had been accused of murdering the prior king and she’d been summoned to sedate him as he fought his arrest. Through a strange succession of events she’d been pulled into his adventure as a fugitive. My God, how she had hated him for ruining her life and turning her into a criminal. She never thought she’d be instrumental in clearing his name and saving his life. It seemed like so long ago. To this day, she had no idea when it was during their adventures that she’d fallen in love with him. But somewhere along the line, she had.

Sasha finished packing medications into the cooler and slammed the lid. "I've finished everything. Can I go to sleep now?"

Harlan didn't acknowledge the question and continued to stare into the file box.

"I'm going to go run naked through the village now," Sasha said loudly with no hint of humor.

Harlan suddenly looked up and laughed in spite of her exhaustion. "I'm sorry. I guess I went away to my special place. Go ahead and get some sleep, just don't forget we're leaving early in the morning."

Sasha saw her chance and took it. "Okay," she said, rushing toward the tent's entrance. Glancing back, she said, "Are you sure you're all right?"

Harlan nodded her head.

Sasha disappeared into the night. Harlan looked around one last time to make sure everything was ready to be transported. She sat on the last standing cot and closed her eyes for a moment.

The small hairs on the back of her neck stood up sending a shiver down her back. She shuddered. An old feeling of unease moved over her. Her mind filled with a nameless dread. At first, she couldn't place it, like the vague memory of a bad place from childhood, and then it all came rushing back to her.

"Titan," she whispered harshly.

Gavin's wizard father moved into the tent with a liquid ease. The darkness of his presence filled the space and seemed to penetrate her very being. He was as beautiful as she remembered, tall and sadistically handsome. A breathtaking man, even for an older AEssyrian. He was dressed completely in black, right down to his cloak and boots. His eyes gleamed at her, a rich and vibrant yellow.

"I've missed you, Harlan. You never come to see me," he said. His voice was a harsh, masculine whisper, like after-sex pillow talk. "You never responded to my note."

"I wasn't interested in its contents," she said, her heart tightening as she stood up. "So I threw it away."

He stalked closer to her until she took a step back. He made a mock frown. "How unkind of you. I'm beginning to think you've been seeing my son too long. You've developed his less attractive personality traits, like mistrust."

She stiffened. "I certainly don't think that my unkindness rivals yours. If I do recall, the last time we met you blinded me."

Titan made a dismissive gesture with his hand. "Are you still holding a grudge about that? It wasn't even permanent. Besides, considering my capabilities, I thought it was a rather minor inconvenience."

*How dare he trivialize what he did to me.* Sometimes he and Gavin had more in common with each other than she thought. Harlan tried to keep the rage she felt out of her tone. "I'm sure you're not here to apologize for the past, so what do you want?"

"I have a new patient for you," Titan purred. He pulled back the tent flap to reveal another AEssyrian man standing by the entrance, waiting.

At first, Harlan couldn't see the man very well, but as he came into the light, all that changed. He was tall; easily as tall as Gavin's six foot eight but leaner. He wore a tattered gray tunic with no insignias and black pants. However, the one thing that caught her attention was his eyes.

If sickness could be read in a man's eyes, then this man had volumes to tell. His eyes were a light, unnatural green with only the slightest hint of yellow near the slit pupil. He gave off the sense of hopeless madness, a doomed man walking. When she looked closer she noticed his wrists were bound.

"Who is this and why is he restrained?" she asked.

Titan watched her for a moment, then said, "His name is Dragon, and like Gavin, he too, is my son. He has always been...*different*, but as he's grown older, he's gotten worse. His restraints are for your protection."

Harlan approached Dragon. His eyes pierced her, following her every move. Then his teeth began to chatter as if a great cold wind had swept down upon him.

"Do you think you can cure him?" Titan asked, sounding oddly like a concerned parent.

“I don’t even know what’s wrong with him,” Harlan said. “Besides, I’m not a psychiatrist.”

“Even though your *métier* is not psychiatry, you are a doctor and despite some of your more apparent flaws, I am inclined to believe a very good one. I won’t force you to treat him, but I would be indebted to you if you tried.”

The thought of Titan being in her debt sent a ripple of panic through her. She really didn’t want him in her life in any capacity. However, Dragon’s suffering was obvious and disturbing on its own. Then there was Gavin. Of course, she could plead ignorance, but she was fairly certain that he would not be a pillar of support in this endeavor. Especially since his father was involved. Maybe she could get Dragon treated and out of her life before Gavin returned from the war.

Harlan walked over to one of the packed boxes and began to rummage through it. She pulled a clipboard out, attached some papers to it and handed Titan a pen. “Fill out his history. Please be detailed,” she said, walking over to another stack of boxes.

Within seconds, Titan said, “I’m finished.”

Harlan collected the clipboard and examined the forms. Everything was filled out completely and in English. The responses to the questions were not handwritten but looked as though they’d just been spit out of a printer.

“Do you have to use your creepy powers for everything?” Harlan sighed.

“Why have them if you’re not going to use them? What else do you need?” he said with an edge of impatience.

She read Dragon’s story and marveled at his bizarre history.

“I’ll need to take some of his blood for testing. Will he let me do that?” she asked.

Titan smiled at her. “I’ll make sure he does.” Seizing Dragon’s shoulder, Titan firmly guided him over to a chair and sat him down. The spindly metal folding chair creaked under his weight.

Harlan moved up to Dragon slowly. She placed her hand on his arm and rolled up his sleeve. He remained frozen with every muscle taut. His maniacal



gaze dissected her, and she realized that Titan's influence was restraining him physically. She peeled her eyes from Dragon's and pulled the necessary amount of blood from him. She held gauze over the puncture wound and tore off a piece of tape to hold it in place.

"Don't bother with that," Titan said. "He's not prone to infections. Besides, it will only give him something to obsess over."

Harlan turned away, inverting the blood tube several times then placing the sample in the cooler.

From behind, she heard the scrape of metal on stone and then a loud crash. Harlan turned to find Dragon less than a foot from her, teeth bared. She screamed and fell back against the wall. Dragon stopped moving and she realized he was frozen by Titan's powers. Before she could regain her composure, Titan grasped her upper arm and helped her to her feet.

"My apologies for that, he sometimes gets away from me. When do you think you will know something?" Titan asked.

Without taking her eyes off of Dragon, she steadied herself. In a shaky voice, she replied, "I'll run some tests when I get back to the kingdom. I run a clinic in Radna. Take him there the day after tomorrow. If his lab work is negative for what I think he has, I have some other possibilities to explore."

## Chapter Six

The night was windy but warm. It brushed the ground in great, rushing waves as it gusted along the grass on its way back up to the cloudless sky. Gavin and Caraculla stood by the ragged edge of the Cliff of Tyria, one of the most infamous places in AEssyrian history. They'd come here to offer their respects since it was less than a mile from their first camp sight. The night here felt haunted; a place only fit for ghosts.

Gavin hated it here. The Cliff of Tyria was infamous because of his brother, Dragon, and the horrible thing he'd done one night over a century ago. Gavin reached into his pocket, pulled out a Churchill sized Cusano 18 cigar, and lit it. He offered one to Caraculla but his colonel declined with a shake of his head.

They were quiet for a long time. Then Caraculla said, "You were here that night, weren't you?"

Gavin chewed his cigar to the other side of his mouth. He stared out at the open sky just beyond the cliff. The faint sound of the ocean crashing against the rocks could be heard below. "I was."

Caraculla studied Gavin's face. "How did it happen?"

Gavin let out a cruel laugh. "Well, it wasn't by accident, as you may have heard. No, that particular act of villainy was a remorseless act of madness." He fell silent for a time, remembering the horrible sound of men screaming as they fell to their deaths. *Where can I begin? Should I tell of my fathers endless tampering or with the bottomless greed and ambition of men?* "I was a young general just promoted to the post. I was so hungry for fame, position, and all the riches that that life could provide. Dragon was sired by my father to bring me down, to prove that my success was nothing more than a fluke. He helped my

brother obtain a ranking post with a young and inexperienced king. That was when the problems started.”

Caraculla shifted his weight and pulled out some dry rations for his hyperia. The animal gulped down the offering quickly. “I heard your brother was insane. There are all kinds of rumors about his odd orders and practices.”

Gavin shook his head. “Not simply insane, my dear Caraculla, he was a fucking lunatic. Rumors began to fly among his men that he was a night walker roaming around the camp all night without reason. Then the laughing started. It was a humorless, murderous laugh that chilled the blood of every man who heard it. It also came on him without reason, bursting forth at the most inappropriate times.”

“But, his men continued to follow him. Why?”

“That’s right,” Gavin said, walking toward the cliff’s edge to peer over it. “Because he was a gifted general, and he had never lost a skirmish. But then there was the Battle of Tyria. His first battle against me; he was winning. Then, in the heat of battle, for some reason that no one will ever know, he sounded the retreat and rallied his men for another charge. However, instead of sending them back into the thick of battle with my troops, he took advantage of the thick fog and led them right off the edge of this cliff.”

A cold silence filled the air. Only the sound of the ocean below could be heard.

Caraculla imagined what a terrible sound that must have been, to hear a legion of men fall to their death. “How is it that he didn’t die with them?”

“He pulled up at the last second, you see,” Gavin said. “When we finally found him, he was sitting by that cluster of trees over there laughing like a madman. I couldn’t pay a man to arrest him; they were so afraid of him.”

“What happened to him?”

Gavin glanced at Caraculla, breaking his stare of the cliffs below. “My father came to fetch him soon after the disaster. I haven’t seen Dragon since, and I hope I never lay eyes on him again.”

## Chapter Seven

By midnight the next day, after long hours of riding, Gavin and his men finally made it over the Kalien border. No fanfare heralded the event, not even a noticeable change of scenery, just a few signs and other obvious markers.

Markers, like criminal heads posted on pikes every five miles.

Using hand signals alone, Gavin called his men to a halt and indicated they'd make camp here. Although the rocky terrain and thick tree line hindered their progress, they provided excellent cover from unwanted visitors.

As everyone prepared their camp sites, Gavin made his way over to Master Sergeant Rakon. The short, stocky Razorback AEssyrian was busy snarling orders at the men trying to get them settled in as quickly as possible.

"Have all the scouts checked in this hour?" Gavin asked, keeping his voice low.

Rakon gave him a worried glance. "All but Kull, Excellency."

Gavin instinctively placed his hand on the handle of his saber. Kull was his long range scout and very good. It wasn't like him not to check in on time.

"If the border guards have him, it won't take them long to figure out where he came from," Gavin said. "Have the men settled down, but no one is to sleep. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Excellency," Rakon replied.

Gavin came over to where some soldiers were preparing his tent for the night. He gestured for them to stop; they looked at him confused. "Don't bother with that. We'll be leaving before dawn."

The soldiers bowed and walked away.

Gavin strained to listen for anything out of the ordinary. He knew Kull was either dead or as good as dead. That was the only explanation as to why the

man hadn't checked in already. The silence of the night seemed to mock him. It was too quiet; much too quiet.

Caraculla approached, his mouth set in a hard line. "Rakon said you want to keep the men up. Are you expecting something?"

Gavin tried to hear a bird or other creatures scampering about, but he heard nothing. A cold, unease settled over him. There were troops nearby, a lot of them. He could smell them. He turned to Caraculla, "Have the men get up and make sure their armed."

Caraculla gave him a curious glance but rushed off to give the command.

Then they came.

From the blackness came a great, screaming hoard of enemy soldiers. They came with every weapon imaginable; battle axes, swords and knives, wielding them with extraordinary dexterity. Their battle cries were blood curdling.

Gavin pulled his saber as two of them charged him, yelling at the top of their lungs. With a savage snarl, he sliced one across the belly while catching the other in the chest. The cuts were deep and deadly, and the men fell where they were.

Turning, he engaged more and more of them until he thought they would never stop coming. By the time the night grew quiet again, he was exhausted but had sustained only a few cuts. Stepping over the bodies, he assessed the damage. He lost probably one quarter of his men, but the enemy had fared much worse.

Rakon rode up. His black battle armor covered in gore. "They're gone, Excellency. We've driven them back for now."

Gavin let out a deep sigh. "Good, but they'll be back with reinforcements. Get the men ready, we march tonight."

"Yes, Excellency," Rakon said and spurred his mount on.

A soldier brought Gavin his hyperia and he mounted up. The scent of blood was all over his armor, and a deep fatigue settled in his bones. With the element of surprise now gone, they would have to make up for the loss in speed.

The faster they could reach the capital, the faster they could conquer this shitty little kingdom and be done with it.

Spurring his animal, he led his weary legion forward into the forest. He could hear a few complaining and couldn't help but grin. *Better suck it up boys,* he thought. *You haven't experienced half the misery this campaign will visit upon us. Not half of it.* Then he let his mind wander to more pleasant thoughts, like Harlan and the feel of her warm, soft skin.

## Chapter Eight

Harlan came into the lab after she'd closed the clinic for the night. Without Gavin to distract her, she could get some work done and maybe find the source of his brother, Dragon's, psychosis. The metal doors swished open. Sasha and Sam turned around and smiled at her. They were seated by a large, tinted window watching some of the cadets drilling at the Royal Academy.

"Sam, it's great to see you," Harlan said while taking off her lab coat. "When did you get here?"

He and Sasha laughed. "As soon as Sasha sent word that Gavin was on campaign. That guy has some jealous streak."

Harlan felt her cheeks warm. She hated Gavin's jealous rages, especially the one that had almost killed Sam. "I can't tell you how sorry I am about him," she said.

Sam smiled, and his surfer good looks lit up. It was hard to believe he was a scientist. "That's okay, Harlan. You know I don't hold a grudge."

"Still," Harlan said grimly. "It's not right."

"Oh crap," Sasha said, jumping up from her seat. "I need that medication for the Grand Duke Molotov's wife. They've sent two messages already. I think they're pissed."

"I'm sorry," Harlan said. She used the key tabs on her ring to open a locked safe. "I've been so busy thinking about this new case that I totally forgot." She pulled a small container of pills out and handed them to her head nurse. "Do you mind taking these by the Grand Duke's in the morning with my apologies?"

Sasha took the container. "I don't mind. I would love to see the inside of his digs," she said.

Harlan walked over to her desk and leafed through her inbox. She pulled out Dragon's lab results. "Wow," she said with a slight shake of her head. "This is one hell of a chemical imbalance. I've never seen one like this before."

She was delighted. Now that she knew what was wrong with Dragon, she could probably cure him but it would take time. While she worked on a cure, she could jump start his recovery with a pharmaceutical cocktail. Luckily, he was in perfect health and would probably tolerate the medications pretty well. Of course, Dragon would need daily injections to stay sane; however, considering the circumstances, it was a trivial inconvenience. Harlan barely noticed that she was mumbling to herself.

Both Sasha and Sam looked at each other and then over at her. "Who has a chemical imbalance?" Sasha asked.

Harlan glanced up at them. "Gavin's brother, Dragon."

Sam whistled in shocked surprise. "You mean that guy has a brother? Now that's scary."

Harlan grinned and tossed the lab results back into her inbox. "From what I can gather, same father, different mother."

Sasha sat back in her chair and squinted at Harlan. "Does Gavin know you're treating his brother?"

"No, and I'm not going to tell him either. There is such a thing as patient confidentiality you know."

Sasha gave her a patronizing look. "I don't think the patient confidentiality spiel is going to fly with Gavin. What do you think?" she said, smirking at Harlan.

Harlan tried not to let Sasha infuriate her. She was never short of opinions when it came to Harlan and Gavin's relationship. Harlan decided not to respond. She knew that Sasha's romance with Caraculla was not going well and that she was pretty bitter about it. Another major contribution to her hostility toward Gavin was the fact that he had once threatened to break all the bones in her hand if she did not divulge Harlan's whereabouts. Harlan was sure Sasha still held a grudge. Unfortunately, Harlan couldn't really blame her. Gavin was all military with very little diplomacy.



"I heard Gavin was trying to get you to marry him," Sam said.

Harlan threw her arms into the air. "Does every bit of information on this planet travel by gossip alone? Well, if you must know, yes, he did ask me."

"Well?" Sam said.

Harlan gave him an exaggerated shrug. "Obviously, I said no."

"Why?"

"Do you really need to ask?"

"No," Sam said. "I guess not."

Sasha got up and headed for the door. "I don't know," she said taking on a parental tone Harlan hated. "Gavin's not one for being denied anything. I just hope you can hold out." She disappeared through the sliding doors leaving Harlan to fume in her wake.

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Sasha looked up from her desk and was shocked to see Caraculla standing over her. He was breathtakingly handsome in his black and gold uniform. His tall, muscular body filled it out perfectly. His face was an intriguing mix of subtle cruelty and heroic nobility; and every time she looked at him, he made her heart melt. His long, dark hair was draped behind his ears, and she could clearly make out the bright, red streaks just above the temples. She knew them as nature's warning of just how deadly this species of AEssyrian was.

"We need to talk privately," he said trembling and keeping his voice low. He looked strange and pale.

A tense knot twisted in her gut. This couldn't be good. She sure hoped he wasn't going to break-up with her here at work. Unfortunately though, there had been signs it was over. The most telling was that they hadn't had sex in weeks.

Plastering a smile on her face, she stood up. "Sure," she said. "Let's go into the pharmacy."

The clinic pharmacy was a small, windowless room with locked, glass cabinets lining the walls. Sasha was immediately sorry she'd suggested the

place. It was too small and way too bright for this type of conversation. Taking a deep breath, she turned to face him. "What do you want and why are you here?"

"I needed to slip away for a few hours." Caraculla moved in close to her, as if afraid he might be overheard. "Listen, you're a really nice girl," he began awkwardly, "but I don't think we should see each other anymore."

Sasha felt a surge of rage overtake her. "Why not? Because I'm not an AEssyrian? Maybe you've just grown bored with the human, exotic fuck of the month." The minute the words escaped her mouth, she regretted them.

Caraculla scowled. "Where the hell did that come from? That's not why I dated you and you know it!"

"What is it then?" she seethed.

"I like you a lot, Sasha, but frankly, my feelings for you are just not that strong," he said, taking a step back from her.

Sasha couldn't believe what he'd just said. Her mind filled with a shocked, angry silence. For the first time in her life she couldn't think of a thing to say.

He opened the door and shrugged. "I'm sorry."

"Fuck you, Caraculla," she replied. Then she pushed past him and stormed out of the clinic. She needed to find a nice private place to ball her eyes out.

## Chapter Nine

*The images all around him were coming too fast to process. Lights and colors all mingling into one. Flashing, flashing, and flashing. Sometimes his stomach dropped, and he wanted to laugh hysterically like a toddler being tickled. Then he wanted to scream; he needed to scream.*

*Every once in a while, he'd try to reach out and tear someone's throat out in frustration, but then his restraints would tighten. Always restrained like a fucking criminal.*

*The woman, even though human, was attractive. He wanted to take her and fuck her in the open as she screamed in terror. He'd love it if everybody watched. Yes. While everybody watched. Then, after he'd violated her, he wanted to kill her and devour her flesh.*

*She walked toward him with no fear in her eyes, and he took a deep breath to smell her flesh. How innocent she was. How carelessly curious she was. She held an injection in one hand as she approached him. A stabbing pain...then there was...there was...Clarity.*

Every muscle in Dragon's body unknotted as the effects of the injection took hold. The voices, madding in their persistence, grew quieter and then faded away. He blinked and took in the room.

They were inside a room with bare walls. Medical equipment and supplies seemed to fill all of the empty spaces. He wasn't sure what town they were in, but then he wasn't sure of much of anything. He looked to his right and his father Titan stared at him in disbelief.

*"Father,"* Dragon managed to say.

Titan glanced at Harlan. "All my magic and I couldn't do what you have just done here. Incredible."

Dragon stared at the beautiful, young human woman. "Who are you?"

Titan cautiously removed his restraints. It felt good to finally be free. He absently rubbed his wrists.

The woman smiled at him and the room became brighter. "My name is Doctor Harlan Ambrose," she said, holding out her hand to shake his.

Dragon took her hand in his and shook it. "It's a pleasure, doctor."

"You can just call me Harlan. I don't cling much to formalities."

Dragon nodded, taking his eyes off her to absorb the remarkable colors in the room. *Has everything always looked like this?*

"How do you feel?" Harlan asked. She sat on the edge of a table and folded her arms. "Do you hear any voices?"

Dragon studied her. "Only yours."

Titan paced around watching Dragon with a slight grin playing at the corners of his mouth. "Does he have any restrictions on his activities?"

Harlan jumped down. "Only one," she said. "He must take an injection every day to remain normal. If he doesn't..."

Titan's gaze swept over Dragon like an arctic wind. "He'll return to his former self," he finished for Harlan.

Harlan chewed her lower lip. "That's right. He may also experience some mild side effects; for example, nausea, headaches or changes in appetite." She picked up some pre-filled injections and handed them to Titan. "I'm going to give you a few days worth because that's all I have. I also want to monitor his progress. I run this clinic every Tuesday and Friday, so I would like you to bring him here on both of those days for the next few weeks...if that'll be okay with you. His medication may need some adjustments in the beginning."

Titan nodded and placed his hand on Dragon's shoulder. "It's remarkable what you've done. Who would have thought the answer to be so simple?"

Harlan packed up her supplies. "It's funny, the things you miss when you're looking right at them."

Titan gave her a sinister, parting smile. "Funny indeed, Harlan. Very funny indeed." He disappeared behind the tent flap.

Dragon paused and stared at Harlan. She came toward him with a questioning look and he fantasized of kissing her long and hard. His heart sped up. Should he try? Then he decided against it. "Thank you," he said. He felt awkward, like a man who'd never been with a woman in his life. God knows that wasn't true but he'd certainly never been with a woman like this.

She smiled. "You're welcome Dragon."

## Chapter Ten

The capital city was impressive. Its architecture was thousands of years old with a mixture of influences from the many, ancient AEssyrian tribes. Many of the high spires were barely visible under the rising twin suns. Gavin wasn't particularly sentimental about such things, but he did want to avoid destroying the city when he took it, if at all possible.

He and his men had reached the capital in record time. They'd also had the added good fortune of eluding the pursuing army, which meant there weren't many soldiers left to defend the capital city. Gavin just hoped his men were up to the battle ahead. He heard Caraculla move up behind him.

Caraculla stared at the city in the valley below. "Its just as beautiful as I'd heard."

Gavin frowned and rubbed the back of his neck. "Well, don't get too attached, we may have to do a lot of killing down there." He pulled his saber and checked the edge for sharpness. "How are the men?"

Caraculla glanced at the saber in Gavin's hands, and then met his general's eyes. "They're tired, but you expected that."

Gavin grunted. Tired was fine, but he needed them to be strong enough to fight. "Give them extra rations this morning. They'll need full bellies for this mornings work."

"Yes, Excellency," Caraculla said.

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Gavin attacked before the first rays of sunlight hit the ground and took the king hostage for Megolyth. The King's inexperienced guards were no match for

Gavin's elite forces and fell quickly. The capitol, slow to wake, was taken completely by surprise. Before lunch, Gavin's army not only had the King, but full control over the capitol.

Gavin sat victorious at the mayor's desk, in a tower office, reviewing his maps. He made some notations on where to place his garrisons. He wasn't too worried about the King's army closing in on them. They'd never breach the walls and would come to heel when they were hungry enough, especially now that they had no king to lead them.

Caraculla came in and knelt.

"Rise," Gavin said, rolling his map up. "Your report?"

Caraculla stood up and smiled. "Everything is calm and under control. I think that's your fastest conquest yet."

They both laughed. "Maybe so," Gavin said. He rose from his chair and grabbed his saddle bags. "I'm going to escort the King back to Megolyth. While I'm gone, you'll be in charge. You think you can handle it?"

Caraculla nodded. "Yes, Excellency. Thank you, sir."

"You're welcome. Don't give me cause to regret my decision. I want you to maintain control over this city by any means necessary. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Excellency."

Gavin stalked toward the door; his saddle bags slung over his shoulder. "I'll expect regular reports."

Caraculla bowed his head in obedience. "Of course, Excellency."

"I'll send word when I've arrived back at the...empire, safely."

"Are we an empire now, Excellency?"

"If not, we're well on our way, Colonel."

## Chapter Eleven

Sasha knocked on the heavy, wooden doors trying to ignore the nervous flutter in her belly. The Grand Duke Molitov's villa was one of the most elaborate in the kingdom. Rumor had it that he came from tons of money and a very old family. It didn't help her nervousness that he was also devilishly, handsome. She'd been attracted to him the first time she'd met him at Harlan's home.

The door opened, and a thin AEssyrian servant stared back at her with empty, tired eyes. "Yes?"

Sasha cleared her throat and held up the medication. "My name is Sasha, I'm Doctor Ambrose's nurse. I brought the medication Grand Duke Molitov requested for his wife."

The servant said nothing, merely opened the door and gestured to a cavernous, side room filled with books. She crept in and sank into a plush wingchair, trying to make as little noise as possible.

A moment later, the Grand Duke came in. He was as handsome as she remembered. He stood six foot five with a long, powerful body and, as always, was immaculately dressed in a crisp, black and gold uniform. It framed him perfectly. His face was hard and sculptured with piercing yellow eyes. He wore a monocle in one eye. His green skin glowed with robust health and vigor; Sasha found herself blushing as she stared at him. She looked away.

"I was expecting Doctor Ambrose," he said in thickly accented English. English was a difficult language for AEssyrians and few of them took the time to learn it. In fact, the General Gavin Theron and the Grand Duke Molitov were the only two she knew who could speak it at all. Their own language was torture for a human to learn, as it was filled with meaningful grunts, growls and hisses. Sasha still could barely get by most of the time.



“She couldn’t make it,” she said. “She had an emergency.”

Molotov walked over to a minibar and watched her. Sasha tried to will herself not to stare at him but soon found it impossible.

“Would you like a drink?” he asked.

She gave him an apologetic smile and held up the bag. “I’m kind of working. Maybe, I should take this up to your wife; she’s been waiting for it.”

He grinned. It was warm, friendly and sexual all at once. “She’s fine. I fear her problem is more with me than with her head.”

Sasha kept her expression blank. She didn’t want him to guess that she knew all about his marital problems. Everybody gossiped about him. She just shook her head like she didn’t understand.

“Come now, Sasha,” he said. “You don’t need to be coy to spare my feelings. I assure you, my wife and I feel the same about each other.”

Sasha suddenly didn’t know what to do with her hands. She stood up and placed the medication on the side table. “Well, I’d better be getting back.”

He sank into a chair near hers and sipped his drink. He glanced into his glass. “Why not join me for dinner tonight?”

She stared at him, her breath frozen in her chest. “Okay,” she said before she realized it. “Where would you like me to meet you?”

“I’ll come by the clinic at closing time,” he said.

Sasha nodded and started for the door. She was so stunned; she bumped into an expensive looking statue of some kind of goddess. “Sure,” she said, rushing out the door. “That’d be great. See you then,” she called over her shoulder.

## Chapter Twelve

King Megolyth leaned back on his throne and didn't speak for several minutes. When Gavin had brought the hostage, King Torone, into the throne room, the royal court faded to a whisper. Gavin commanded every eye as he knelt before his king.

"I want to ask how you did this so fast," Megolyth finally said. "But I know better than to ask a man about his secrets." He gestured with his hand. "You may rise."

"Thank you, Highness." Gavin got to his feet. He winced at the arthritic pain in his back. He'd have to see what Harlan could give him for that.

The King Torone stood next to Gavin; his chin high in defiance.

Megolyth turned his gaze to the rival king. "I'm not sure what to do with you. I hadn't planned to have hostages." Tense whispers rose from the nobles.

"Your unprovoked invasion of my kingdom is outrageous," King Torone said. "These kind of land grabs haven't been practiced in centuries."

Gavin glanced at Torone. "Hence why your defenses were so weak."

King Torone glared at him.

Megolyth got up from his throne and paced. "If I exile you," he said, thoughtfully, "you'll be back someday for revenge. And it seems unfair to imprison you all your life, because you haven't wronged me."

King Torone gave Megolyth a venomous look. "I see sire, you are faced with quite the dilemma."

Megolyth stopped pacing. "Yes." He turned to Gavin. "What would you recommend General?"

Gavin took in the room, then met Megolyth's gaze. His king knew exactly what he would say. "Death, Majesty."

“Why death?”

“Because, it is the only way to preserve the king’s dignity and still be rid of him.”

Megolyth nodded grimly as if he’d known the answer all along but couldn’t speak it. “And by whose hand should this king die?”

Gavin looked over at King Torone. He had grown noticeably pale and he was shaking.

“His own, Majesty,” Gavin said. A horrified, silence fell over the room.

Megolyth studied the collected nobles. “Leave us,” he commanded.

A few moments later they were alone. The only ones who remained were Megolyth, King Torone, and Gavin.

The king was shaking harder now. “I don’t want to die, Sire,” he whispered.

Megolyth considered this. “Would you rather be imprisoned for life?”

“No.”

“Then offer me another solution.”

King Torone was silent for a long time. He sweated fear and it made Gavin nauseous. “I have no other solution,” he said, finally. He was defeated. He knew they’d never let him go and the dungeons were unspeakable. Gavin had experienced them first hand. If the choice were his, he’d take death gratefully.

“I can’t do the deed on my own,” the king said. His voice was shaking as much as his body.

“Would you like the general to help you? I’m sure he can give you a quick death,” Megolyth said.

The king hung his head and nodded. “But, no one is to know I died by anyone’s hand but my own. Please.”

Megolyth nodded. “Of course.”

“Where would you like to die, Highness?” Gavin asked King Torone.

The king glanced around. He spotted a small sanctuary on the side of the throne room, and then tossed his head in its direction. "At the altar of the war God Dargannon. That seems only fitting."

Megolyth led them to the sanctuary and pulled back the curtains. It was an octagonal room with a circular altar in the center. The walls were painted with the colorful scenes of the war god's many triumphs.

King Torone turned around to face Gavin. He looked to be calm, accepting his final decision. "You'll make it quick, won't you?"

"Quick as lightening," Gavin said.

Megolyth stepped away from them to avoid the blood spatter.

Gavin moved up behind the king, towering over him. He pulled his saber from its scabbard and placed the tip just below King Torone's breast bone. When it was in position, he took the king's hands and placed them over the saber's grip while placing his own hands over the king's. It would not be favorable to have the man back out at the last minute.

*This is what happens when you never see battle,* Gavin thought. *You become soft and weak.*

In a second, Gavin drove the saber up and in. The penetration was deep and hard and he pushed up until he was certain he'd reached the heart. Blood poured freely from the king's mouth. He gurgled and slumped over the blade, finally sinking to the floor.

Gavin pulled the saber from the body and wiped the blade clean on the king's cloak. His blood was racing with the kill and the smell of it was baiting the beast in his soul, making it wild. *Now, it's time to go home and fuck the life out of my beloved, Harlan,* he thought with a savage grin.

## Chapter Thirteen

By the time Gavin arrived home, it was early morning. He put his hyperia in the stable, gave it plenty of rations and looked forward to a quiet, lazy day of playing love games with Harlan. He came in the front door and immediately knew she wasn't there. He sensed it and a black dread filled his gut.

"Harlan?" he said, searching for her room by room in the enormous villa. Nothing. Silence.

He looked for notes, anything to indicate she had left him, but found nothing. *What if she'd been attacked? What if someone had abducted her?* He checked the bedroom and found some of her clothes and her bag missing. She'd scrawled some medical notes on a pad by her bedside; however, none of it meant anything to him.

He made his way into the living room and poured himself a drink from the bar. Plucking a cigar from a box, he clipped the end and lit it. Downing his drink, he poured another and stalked over to his favorite wing chair.

*What if she found another lover?*

The thought made his head pound with fury. He didn't like her being gone without even a note to where she was. When she got back, they were going to have to have a long talk.

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Harlan dismounted from the coach and almost fell in the dirt. The coachman, a young wiry AEssyrian youth, jumped down and helped her up. She dusted herself off. "Thank you," she said, as the coachman steadied her. She reached down and picked up her bag. "Thank you very much."

He nodded, climbed back into his seat and called to his hyperia to move on. The coach moved away quickly. Soon, she was alone on the road in front of the villa she shared with Gavin.

She walked over and checked the barn. His hyperia was here and munching loudly on some dried meat. *Great, I can't wait to see what kind of mood he's in.*

She came in and dropped her bag. He was seated in a scarlet wing chair facing the empty fireplace. And he was drinking. A full bottle of whiskey sat next to an empty tumbler on the table next to his chair. She looked around to see if there was any indication of how many bottles he'd already polished off. Two empty ones lay sideways on the floor.

"Is that you, darling?" he said sarcastically.

Harlan vowed to keep her cool. His drunken rages were nothing to take lightly. She moved into the living room, her shoulders so tense they ached. "You know it's me."

"I was wondering where you were?"

"I was working just like you were."

"Working all night? That's a little out of character for you."

She lowered herself onto the couch but didn't lean back too far. She wanted to be able to sprint to the door if this got too ugly, and with Gavin drunk, it was bound to get ugly. "Look," she said. "If you have something to ask me, come right out and do it."

He sipped his drink and squinted at her. "Very well then, do you have a lover?"

"No, I do not. I was working, like I already explained to you. Now can we drop this?"

He got up from his chair with such speed, she flinched. "No," he roared. "We cannot drop this! I demand to know where you were all night!"

Harlan got up and stood by the couch. "You need to stop this right now. I am not going to be interrogated like I've done something wrong."

"Where did you sleep? On the floor? In the street?"

"I'm warning you, Gavin. Don't do this."

He stalked toward her, but she got up and backed away from him; maintaining her distance. Gavin glared at her, his eyes blazing with anger. "I can find out what you've been doing, you know."

*That is it. I'm not taking this shit from him.* She folded her arms across her chest. "Then why don't you do just that so we can avoid this argument and you can feel like an idiot. I've already told you that I was working, and if you don't believe me, then that's too bad. Go ahead and find out for yourself."

"Why won't you tell me where you were?" he said, his tone softening. Then he added, "Don't give me cause to distrust you."

Harlan walked up to him and stared up. "You know where I work. I have *never* given you cause to distrust me. You, however, are another story. So, go ahead and check up on me. Do more damage to our already fragile relationship. You're going to throw everything away for nothing."

He took a step back from her as if he'd been struck in the face. "You wouldn't leave me."

"I would and you know it. I love you more than anything Gavin, but I am not going to be mistreated by you. I am not your property, and I will not tolerate being treated as such," Harlan said, trying to control the rising volume of her voice.

Gavin sank back into his chair to brood then took a sip of his drink.

She headed for the bedroom to get undressed. She was exhausted. Then, she turned in the doorway and looked at him. "It amazes me that you are confused as to why I won't marry you."

## Chapter Fourteen

King Harrah was younger than Dragon had imagined. He was also much taller, standing close to six foot six, but thick in the neck and belly. What had Gavin called it when they were kids? *The Noble's Disease*. Harrah was annoyingly arrogant, when he had little right to be. After all, he hadn't fought for his throne, he'd bought it.

Harrah looked off the stone balcony and watched his troops drilling in the field below. Dragon had to admit, they were impressive with all their new armor and crisp uniforms. Unfortunately, the very thing that made them handsome also made them targets for contempt. It was obvious they hadn't seen battle in a long time.

Harrah drummed his fingers on his pant leg then rolled his shoulders. "I don't know, Titan. I know my general. I trust him. I think he can handle General Gavin Theron."

Titan leaned his head back and laughed. It wasn't a mocking laugh but one of genuine mirth. "Your general, Highness, is no match for my bastard son."

Harrah looked annoyed. "What makes you so sure? I thought you hadn't given Gavin any supernatural powers? How is it you think he's so good?"

Titan's eyes gleamed. "Because, he is that good. So good in fact, he's managed to foil every attempt I've made to destroy him."

Harrah snorted skeptically. "Why would you want to destroy your own son?"

"Because, he fascinates me," Titan said. "I want to break him down and see what makes him tick."

Harrah turned to Dragon. "And you think this is the man to do it?"



Titan grinned. "I know he is." The two men went inside and discussed the details of Titan's proposal.

Dragon stayed behind, focusing again on the troops below. He didn't believe he would make a better general than Gavin. He didn't feel it like Gavin did; hadn't lived it. He also lacked the experience. He never led an army again after that day...the day he now found impossible to remember. *Something happened, something...* Perhaps the memory would come in time, when his mind had fully healed.

Tomorrow he'd go out to meet her for his regular injection. He closed his eyes and imagined the sheen of her ebony hair and those impossibly green eyes. He could almost smell her; feel her body close to his. He opened his eyes and the vision faded away. He would have to find a way of telling her how he felt, when the time was right.

Titan came back out onto the balcony. A cruel grin curved the corners of his mouth. "He's agreed," he said with a smooth edge to his voice. "Tomorrow you are his new general."

Dragon looked at his father. He could almost taste the evil seething from him. "And what do I get when this is all done?"

Titan gave him a sly wink. "Everything that Gavin has will be yours, Dragon. All you have to do is kill him for it."

Dragon looked back down at the troops and licked his lips. *Harlan*, he thought. *She'll be all alone with no Gavin to get in the way. What could be better than that?*

## Chapter Fifteen

Gavin came into the bedroom where Harlan was reading her book. She didn't look up as he leaned in the doorway. His drunken buzz had worn off, a by-product of his frequent drinking. He scratched his bare chest and studied her. Just gazing at her was painful. He hated feeling this way about her. It made him far too vulnerable. He stalked into the room, pulled up a chair and sat on it backward. He rested his arms across the top of the backrest.

"I came to apologize," he said.

She ignored him for a while then turned the page. "What's the matter? Do you have an erection?"

He suppressed a smile. "Come on now darling, that's not fair."

"Is it true?"

He got up off the chair and moved to the edge of the bed. She gave him a warning look. "Don't, I'm still really pissed at you."

Nudging her over, he lay on the bed next to her. She placed her book on her chest. "What can I do to make it up to you?" he said.

Harlan stared at the ceiling, then sat up and got off the bed. She put her book on the bedside table and stared down at him. "Let me tie you up." Her eyes revealed a slight twinkle.

Gavin had grown to enjoy the games they played but that was the one thing he had never let her do. Being tied up meant he'd be completely at her mercy, and he was very uncomfortable with that. "Why?" he asked, stalling for time. He had to think of another alternative she'd find equally fun.

"Because, I want to know if you are able to trust me."

Gavin got up and paced the room. Every part of him wanted to say no, but he knew better than to dismiss the idea right away. "I'm not at all comfortable with that, Harlan."

Her eyes gleamed with triumph. "I know. That's the point. Can you put aside your feelings and trust me?"

"How long are you going to tie me up for?"

"It shouldn't matter."

He stopped and looked at her. "Come on, you can't expect me to just say 'yes' to that!"

Harlan didn't say a word. She just watched him.

"You're serious?"

Harlan loved every minute of this. She had him, and she knew it. "You know I'm serious."

He fell into a brooding silence. After a few moments without a response, she nodded, as if she'd known his answer all along. Picking up her book, she started reading again. He wanted to leave, to ignore her request and walk out the door, but he knew this was important. It was a test and he needed to pass it.

"I agree," he said.

Harlan stared up at him, her mouth slightly open. "Really? Just the way I want it?"

He stiffened but spoke the words. "Just the way you want it."

She wasted no time in going to his primary weapons room. Inside, it housed every conceivable hand-wielding weapon and several confinement devices. She tapped her lips and rummaged through a chest of chains. She glanced back at him. "What do you think will hold you?"

He came in the room slowly with his feet dragging on the floor. Reaching over her, he pulled out a thick, leather harness with wrist and ankle chains. A nauseous twinge turned his belly. Letting her bind him was madness. He held it up and frowned. "This should do it."

Harlan beamed like she'd found the perfect dress for the ball. "Good, bring it into the bedroom."

He followed her, dragging the harness behind him. He wished he had the will to call this off. "Where are you going to bind me?"

She went over to an enormous cloth chair in a corner of the bedroom. She pulled on it to test its weight, and it didn't budge. She let go and pointed at the chair. "This will do."

Gavin knelt before the chair and set the harness up so it would hold him down. A nervous fear tickled the back of his neck. *What if she betrays me? What if this is a trick to assassinate me?* He forced the thoughts from his mind. He had to trust her, or he'd never be able to do this. When he had all the straps and chains in place, he sat in the chair and let her lock each fastening into place. Each lock that clicked home sent a new spike of panic through him.

"I'm not enjoying this," he complained, hoping she'd make this brief.

She made no acknowledgement of his complaint and continued to bind him meticulously. When she was done and he was completely confined, she leaned back to admire her handy work. A slight grin curved the left side of her mouth.

"That's perfect," she said. "Now we can begin."

## Chapter Sixteen

Gavin tried to will himself to relax. He kept his gaze on her, ready for any sign of treachery. Harlan, in contrast, seemed more at ease than ever. She leaned forward and tenderly kissed him on the lips. She pulled away before he could kiss her back.

She began by putting her hands on his chest. It was a light touch at first, but then she remembered how he liked to be touched, and her strokes became harder...rougher. She climbed on top of him, straddling his hips and pulled her shirt off. Her breasts were lovely; plump and round with delicate peach areolas and nipples. Despite his anxiety, he was losing his fear, giving himself over to her selfish will.

Wrapping her arms around his head, she lifted her breasts to his lips and he gratefully took one into his mouth and then the other. He let his forked tongue explore her flesh, tickling and teasing the nipples as she guided each breast near him in turn. Her hot mouth dragged along his face, racing up to his ear. Her breath against his neck made his skin come alive.

Then the beast in him awoke from its quiet slumber. It could smell Harlan's arousal, and it desperately wanted to take her. His body tensed; flexing against the straps. Her eyes widened for a moment, fearful he might break loose but seeing he couldn't, she continued to kiss and love him.

Still on top of him, she peeled her underwear off and lowered herself to rest in his lap. He still wore his pants, and his erection struggled against the fabric. He was desperate to taste her secret heat.

"Please let me go," he said in a harsh whisper.

"No."

She was more aroused than he had ever seen her, and he understood why. For the first time since they had started seeing each other, she was in complete control. He wanted to fight his restraints but he didn't. He wanted her to have this, to enjoy sex with him on her own terms.

Her kisses became more passionate. Her mouth roamed all over him; awakening him, torturing him. She licked his chest; her tongue circling his nipples, her teeth gently biting them. Every time she touched him, he felt it titillate him even more.

She freed his cock and stroked it. Her mouth toyed with his cock causing him to growl in frustration. At last, she took him inside her.

He closed his eyes and let his mind explore the ecstasy of her flesh. She was moving faster, crying out with the pleasure she took from him.

He stole a kiss from her and said, "I'm not going to last much longer, my love."

Harlan's love became wilder and more frenzied. She bounced on him faster and faster; until, with a final lusty moan, she was released. She leaned against his chest, her body damp with sweat. A few more thrusts and his own orgasm took him, sending him into an exhausted, quiet bliss.

Panting, she unbound him and collapsed on the bed. He stayed seated in the chair, watching her stare at the ceiling. He was physically free at last. But the truth was he'd never be free again.

## Chapter Seventeen

The royal messenger had come while Harlan was sleeping. Gavin invited him into the living room and pulled the bedroom door closed, so Harlan wouldn't be disturbed. Gavin made him wait as he poured himself a drink and lit a cigar. He didn't sit down, he knew this was probably bad news.

"What is it?" Gavin said finally.

The messenger was a young man with wild, brown hair and a nasty scar that had split his upper lip. Gavin guessed it a childhood accident. If it had been a battle wound, the youths face would have more scars than that. You didn't often get to walk away with only one injury in war. "The Emperor Megolyth sent me to inform you that King Harrah has a new general. He wishes for you to meet with him right away."

Gavin rolled the title of emperor around in his head. Megolyth hadn't wasted any time taking on his new title. "Do you know anything about this new general?" he asked.

"Sorry Excellency, not much. All I have is a name."

Gavin finished his drink and put out his cigar. "And what is his name?"

The messenger paused. A muscle twitched near his eye. "His name is Dragon, Excellency. Dragon Theron."

An icy current filled Gavin's blood. *Damn*. He studied the youth, but his face was blank. "Wait outside," he growled. "I'll join you shortly."

The messenger bowed and left.

*Dragon*. How many centuries had it been since he'd heard that name? Three? Four? Gavin couldn't remember. He had vague memories of his brother from his early adulthood. They'd never been close, but they were cordial. That

was until Titan took Dragon under his wing. Not long after, his brother's mind began to crack. The memory of it made Gavin shudder. How was it possible that his brother, a raving madman, could command an army? This had to be his fathers doing.

Gavin came into the bedroom and dressed. He sat on the edge of the bed and stroked Harlan's hair. Leaning down, he kissed her, and she looked at him groggily.

"I have to go," he said.

Harlan sat up. "So soon?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Do you know how long you'll be gone?"

"I could be back by tonight, or I could be on the march. If I march, who knows?"

She frowned and nodded. She wrapped her arms around him, and he pulled her close. "I love you, Gavin," she whispered in his neck.

He kissed her deeply. "And I you, my love." He got up off the bed and strapped on his saber. He didn't say anything else, there was no need. Both of them knew this might be the last time they saw each other. It was always that way, and he had long ago learned to accept it. Harlan too, seemed to face it with an inner strength and maturity he so admired her for.

He came out into the blazing morning heat, shielding his eyes with his hand. The messenger had prepared his hyperia. He mounted up, pulled out a fresh cigar and lit it. He glanced back at his villa, spurred his mount and rode off to see the emperor.



## Chapter Eighteen

Harlan had gotten up and dressed as soon as Gavin left. The villa felt so cold and empty without him. Luckily, she had work to do as well. She started to worry about him but quickly pushed it back. It didn't do any good to worry about Gavin, he was a capable soldier, and few AEssyrian men had been as successful in war as he was.

She'd packed her medical bag and rode out to the border town alone. It was a risky move, she knew, but she didn't want anyone knowing about her medicating Dragon. She didn't need Gavin getting wind of this and going into a jealous tirade.

She arrived at the medical clinic in the late afternoon, long after the staff had gone home. She came inside and turned on the lights but left the closed sign on the door. She didn't figure it would deter Titan and Dragon.

She pulled some charts for the next day's work while she waited for Dragon to arrive. An hour passed, then two. She poured herself a glass of water and was just about to go home when Dragon came in. He looked very different than she remembered from a few days ago. His eyes were a clear, vibrant, yellow-green, and his skin had taken on a healthy, green glow. He seemed taller too, no longer carrying that disturbing crouch like an animal ready to pounce. Best of all, he moved with a confident grace, not with the jerky strangeness he'd had in his illness.

He wore a dark gray, double breasted uniform, gray pants and black riding boots with spurs. His saber hung loosely at his side. He came to the front desk where she was sitting and took the seat across from her. His gaze flashed

around the room, and he twitched slightly. Harlan could tell the drug was wearing off.

“Where’s Titan?” She said eyeing the door.

At first, it appeared that he hadn’t heard her even though his eyes locked onto her. She slowly pushed her chair back and got up.

“He’s not here,” he said in a raspy voice.

“Pull up your sleeve,” she said and retrieved a full syringe from a black, leather case. She swabbed his arm and administered the injection. Harlan disposed of the syringe and sat back down, watching Dragon. She had wanted to question him first to see if he was having any side effects. However, with Titan absent, the last thing she wanted was for him to slip back into his special place and attack her.

The muscles in Dragon’s face relaxed and his pupils dilated. He appeared more at ease and let out a deep sigh.

Harlan studied him. “How have you been feeling?”

Dragon leaned his chair back on the rear two legs. “Much better, thanks to you. Can I have some water?”

She smiled, grabbed her untouched glass and gave it to him. “You look good. From the look of your new uniform, I guess you’ve found a job.”

He took the glass from her and drank it down. He placed the glass on a table then looked down at his uniform as if he hadn’t noticed it before. “Yes,” he said. “Things are starting to fall into place.”

Harlan leaned against the front of her desk. She didn’t normally have casual, one-on-one conversations with AEssyrian men. Except Gavin, of course. She wasn’t quite sure what to say. She settled for, “Good.”

Dragon smoothed his hands down the front of his uniform. “I understand you’re seeing my brother, Gavin.”

A nervous flutter tickled her stomach. She didn’t want to discuss her private life, but she didn’t want to be rude to her patient either. “Yes,” she said cautiously. “That’s right.”

“Do you love him, or are you with him for safety?”

Harlan's mouth went dry. "I love him."

Dragon grunted and let his chair fall forward. "Did he ever tell you about Aurora?"

"Yes, I think he mentioned her once. She was one of his wives, wasn't she?"

"That's right. Did he mention how he tried to murder her? In fact, there are those that believe she didn't die of a fever as he claims. Some believe he poisoned her."

Harlan played with the end of her stethoscope. "I've heard those rumors before. Why are you telling me this?"

Dragon gave her a humorless smile. "Because I like you, Harlan, and I owe you." He shrugged. "I'm just warning you, be very careful of Gavin. He has no qualms about killing anyone, even those he loves the most."

She was quiet for a long time. Then she said, "Other people have warned me about him before. Why don't you tell me your version of the Aurora story?"

"First off, let me say that she was an odd woman. She enjoyed playing cruel little games with Gavin, and he was so obsessed that he was easy to bait. She'd do all sorts of outrageous things just to watch him react.

"Well, it was no secret Aurora liked her men. Everyone was surprised how tolerant Gavin was of her open, frequent affairs, but one night she took matters too far. She took a young recruit to Gavin's bed just before he was supposed to come home. Of course, he caught them. He butchered the young man on the spot, and then he took Aurora by the throat nearly strangling her to death. If his maids hadn't come in when they did, he would have surely finished her.

"He disappeared for days afterward. Many believed he'd committed suicide, but he eventually returned. Not ten days later, Aurora was dead."

Harlan's skin crawled. As much as she didn't want to believe it, she knew Gavin was certainly capable of such a thing. Gavin was also the kind of man that generated lots of unpleasant rumors. She decided to shrug off the creepy feeling in her gut and stood up from the desk. Without a word, she packed up her work bag and decided to change the subject.

“What about you?” Harlan asked. “What are your plans now that you’re able to function? Surely, there are things that you want to go out and do.”

“Nothing in particular. I’m just enjoying the clarity,” he said.

“Do you live with Titan still?”

“I don’t think that my time spent in Titan’s pretty garden would be considered living. What do you think?” He shifted his weight and the chair creaked.

“I’m sorry. I was just wondering if you were...” She hesitated while waiting for the right words to come.

“—free of his influence? The answer is no. I will never be free of him. As I’m sure you’ve found out for yourself that no one is.”

“I don’t understand. You’re capable of making your own decisions. Why not just leave?” she asked.

“You’re right, you don’t understand. Titan would end my existence if I ceased to be of use to him. All he’d have to do is wave his hand, and I’d be a statue again. As much as Gavin enrages Titan, he doesn’t kill him because Gavin is a curiosity to him,” Dragon said with a sneer. “Me? I’m little more than a tool.”

“Gavin’s also his son, like you.”

“Do you really think that has any relevance to Titan? He has more dead offspring, by his own hand, than Gavin has. I’m trapped until my father; either, becomes bored with me or lets me go,” Dragon said.

“Then why did he want you cured so badly?” she asked, turning off a few lights and grabbing her bag.

Dragon was visibly uncomfortable. He didn’t seem to want to answer her question. Then, he said, “Are you and Gavin planning to have children?” Now it was Harlan’s turn to be uncomfortable.

“I don’t want to get into that. Besides, I have to get back before it gets too late,” she said. “I’ll meet you back here in another two days.”

Dragon rose and followed her out. He helped her up onto her hyperia and squinted off down the dirt road. “Do you want me to escort you back?”

“No, no, that’s the last thing I need,” she said, desperately wanting some time alone. “I’ll be fine. See you soon.”

He looked into her eyes. “I look forward to it.”

## Chapter Nineteen

When Gavin arrived at the Imperial Palace, Megolyth was sitting outside enjoying his breakfast. He looked good. His black hair was neatly combed and his plush, red robe with gold accents made him appear all the more regal. Upon seeing Gavin, he gestured to an empty chair next to him and dismissed his servants.

"I take it the messenger told you about Dragon Theron," Megolyth said.

Gavin slumped in the chair and stared out at the royal grounds. New, yellow flowers and short, plump shrubs had been planted along the gravel pathway below.

"I need a drink," Gavin said in a complaining manner.

Megolyth finished the last bite of his food and pushed the plate away. "Is that all you have to say?"

"For the moment."

"Well. there's more bad news."

"I can't wait."

Megolyth stared at Gavin for a moment. "As you well know, Dragon is not capable of all this on his own. He's had some very powerful help."

"Don't tell me. Titan is involved. I'm hardly surprised by that revelation. I am; however, surprised that after all these years he was finally able to cure him."

Megolyth shook his head. "Titan's been guiding him, helping him and even got him a job. But he's not the one who cured him."

Gavin glanced at Megolyth. He really needed that drink now. "Go on," he said. "Floor me."

"The person who cured him is Harlan."

Gavin's whole world stopped. He glared at Megolyth. "That's a lie!"

“Why would I bother lying to you about something like that?”

Gavin opened his mouth to speak but couldn't think of anything to say. He was betrayed again. This wound was deep.

Megolyth tapped his fingers on the table. “Did she say anything to you about this?”

“No. Of course not. I would have put a stop to it.”

“I wouldn't blame her too much,” Megolyth said. After all, she's a doctor. They've found the perfect way to use her.”

The fiery rage in Gavin's gut threatened to consume him. “She knows my father. She should have known better.”

Megolyth signaled for a nearby guard. The guard stalked over, keeping his distance from Gavin. “Highness?”

“Have someone fetch the general a drink, will you?”

The guard bowed and rushed off. He returned quickly with a small glass and a bottle of Sawjack Whisky. Gavin poured himself a full glass and drank it in one swig.

He stared into the empty glass. “I'd better plan a counter attack. They'll be coming for us soon.”

Megolyth studied Gavin. “What are you planning to do with Harlan?”

Gavin poured himself another drink, swallowed it quickly and got up. “Wait and see.” He bowed to Megolyth and left.

## Chapter Twenty

Harlan was literally hauled from a deep sleep by someone dragging her out of bed. Terror filled her as she scrambled for the gun she kept on the nightstand when she was alone. Seizing the handle she swung the barrel around toward her attacker, but he grabbed her wrist. The gun discharged to his left with a loud bang. Harlan swore under her breath and fought as the gun was wrenched from her hand.

Then, she was thrown to the floor, and the room filled with light. She squinted, her heart racing. Gavin towered over her. Blind fury filled her gut. “*Gavin!* Have you lost your fucking mind? What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

He folded his arms across his massive chest. “I might ask you the same question.” He leaned down and grabbed her by the arm, pulling her up to sit her on the bed. “Are you seeing a new patient?” he said while seething. “A Dragon Theron, perhaps? Since you’re not stupid, I can only assume that you know he’s my brother.”

She glanced around the room trying to see where he’d put her gun. She spotted it on a tall dresser by the window. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Yes, I know who he is. I didn’t tell you for exactly this reason. I know how jealous you are.”

“*Really?*” Gavin said, his voice full of sarcasm. “What happened to your sanctimonious speech about trust? Could it be that there’s more going on here than an innocent doctor-patient relationship?”

Harlan tried to keep her voice calm. “No, there isn’t. Unfortunately, that



never stops you from thinking that there is. Sometimes, I think you enjoy starting a massive fight with me.”

“So you thought it best to lie to me instead.”

“In this case, yes, I did. If I thought we could have a reasonable discussion about this, then I wouldn’t have kept it from you. But, here we are again; as usual, with an emotional, violent outburst from you before you know all the facts. If you must know, I’m just treating him for mental illness. That’s all.”

Gavin glared at her. “Who brought him to you to treat?”

Harlan avoided the question. She didn’t want to believe she’d been fooled again by Titan. “What have I done that’s so terrible? Why is it wrong to make Dragon a functioning part of society again?”

Gavin leaned in close. He smelled like whiskey, and he spoke with such hatred that she feared for her life. She wondered if she could bolt and get to the gun. “Dragon may be mentally ill but he’s also a military genius. He’s Titan’s wicked little pet and now you’ve made him well again. It might interest you to know that Titan has found him an army to command. They’re armed, ready and coming after me. That’s what you’ve done that’s so terrible.”

Her eyes were starting to water and sting. “I didn’t know. How could I? I was just trying to help a very sick man.”

Gavin collapsed in a chair and ran his fingers through his hair. “You helped him all right. He’s as good as fucking new.”

A few stray tears ran down her cheeks. “I didn’t *cure* him. He still needs medication every day to function.”

Gavin rubbed his face and shook his head slowly. “Why didn’t you tell me about this?”

A rush of adrenaline filled her. She got up off the bed and moved toward him shaking. “I didn’t tell you because I am not accountable to you for everything that I do! I have a job to do too, and that job is to help people no matter what’s wrong with them! I don’t need you telling me who I can or cannot treat. Despite what you think, you don’t *own* me, Gavin. I was hired here to do a job, and I’m going to do it. I’m sorry that this has happened, but the person trying to kill you isn’t

me, it's your father. I can't be held responsible for the bizarre, murderous whims of your dysfunctional family."

He didn't move. He just sat in the chair brooding. "I should have known better than to trust you."

Harlan wiped her tears from her eyes with the back of her arm. "This isn't about trust. I didn't tell you about him for the same reason you don't volunteer information about how many whores you lay with while on campaign. I knew you would be angry because Titan was involved. I certainly wasn't aware of some convoluted plot to bring about your death. And if you truly believe that, then we have nothing more to say to each other!"

Harlan's grief was so powerful, it threatened to overwhelm her. Glaring at him, she marched over to the dresser, grabbed her gun and stormed out of the room.

## Chapter Twenty-One

It was late afternoon by the time Harlan was able to take a break from the clinic and eat her lunch. What a difference in her caseload compared to when she'd first started working here. When she'd first become the local doctor, she practically had to beg AEssyrian patients to come and see her. Now, she was so busy most of the time she could barely take a lunch. Soldiers, impressed with how she'd saved Gavin from death due to an assassination attempt, came to her for everything. She wasn't complaining. She was glad for the work, but it sure kept her busy.

She unwrapped her sandwich and gingerly picked at the stale bread. Someday, she'd find a shop that understood the concept of bread. In the meantime, she was forced to make due with whatever experiment the local butcher was trying for bread this week. Every time she went in, he'd smile and wink at her while nodding his head so hard that his jowls would shake like Jell-O. "I have it," he'd say in broken English. "The perfect recipe for bray-ud."

She didn't know how he would be able to bake bread if he couldn't even pronounce it. But she'd smile and try some out of politeness, even though it always tasted like wood. In the end she'd buy what he had. When she got home, she'd throw half of it away; all the while, listening to Gavin laugh at her for being too kind-hearted.

*Gavin.* Her heart ached when she thought of him. She could barely function today. Thank goodness for Sasha's help. Was this the end of their relationship? Her throat tightened at the thought. God, how she hated his father. What a vicious old bastard, forever trying to destroy the only son he'd ever fathered that was worth a damn. She was mad at herself too. Mad for not

realizing it was a trick. She'd been so consumed with curing Dragon, she hadn't even stopped to think that it might be a trap. She felt like a complete idiot.

Sasha knocked and poked her head in. "There's an old AEssyrian here to see you. I think its Titan."

Harlan fumed. She nodded stiffly. "Let him in."

Titan swept in past Sasha with the silken grace of a panther. He was as evilly handsome, as always; with strong, intelligent eyes and a proud, haughty manner. As was his trademark, he was dressed completely in black; black cloak, black boots, black tunic. He stalked into the room like he owned it and took the seat across from her.

Sasha closed the door to leave them alone.

Harlan pushed her sandwich aside and stared at him. "I should be surprised you showed up here. Sadly, I'm not."

"You always knew me better than anyone," he said with a savage glint in his eyes.

"No one knows you," she said flatly. She took a deep breath. "I want you to call Dragon off Gavin."

Titan cocked his head to the side like he didn't understand what she'd just said. "Call him *off*?"

Harlan stood up and paced. "I'm really in no mood to play your games! You know exactly what I mean."

Titan smiled. It chilled her. "Don't worry so much about Gavin. He can take care of himself."

She stopped pacing and glared at him. "You used me to get at him. Why can't you just leave me out of your sick little amusements?"

"You love him, don't you?"

"Yes, of course I do."

"Even though he probably can't give you children because he's alien?"

"That doesn't matter to me."

"Even though, if you did have a child with him, he'd probably end up killing it?"

Harlan's temples throbbed with anger. "Are you so emotionally bankrupt that you have to come here and say these things to me? Are you so empty and vicious inside that you can't love your own son? You should be trying to help him, not destroy him."

"You're so wrong about me, Harlan," Titan said. "I am helping him. I'm making him stronger."

"Why can't you just leave me out of it?"

Titan stood up. His sorcery oozed from him like spent motor oil. A sickly, sweet smell filled the air, and a ghostly whispering filled the room. They belonged to no one and everyone. "I'll tell you why. Because you are the only thing he cares about more than his own life. He loves you more than I have ever seen a man love any woman. He would give you anything, go anywhere to save you and do anything you asked. Now I want to see how strong that love is. I want to see if he can be pushed to hate you as much as he now loves you."

Harlan felt as though someone had thrown a glass of ice water in her face. Her breath caught in her chest. *What have I done?*

"And now, he feels that you have betrayed him," Titan continued, "First, by not telling him about Dragon; second, by probably sleeping with him. How tortured he must be; thinking you slept with his most hated rival, his brother. Can he forgive you for that, Harlan? Is his love for you stronger than his murderous jealousy?"

## Chapter Twenty-Two

Sasha pushed the clinic's medicine cabinet closed and it popped open again. Leaning in close, she examined the locking mechanism and discovered it was broken. She twisted her key in the lock a few more times to make sure it was broken. The lock turned, but the hook didn't budge. *That's really weird. I wonder if Harlan broke it because she lost her key.*

She groaned and tossed her keys on a nearby desk. This was just great, closing time and she was going to have to sit here for two hours taking inventory of the controlled medications inside. God, she wished she could get in touch with Harlan without the use of messengers. This planet was backward in so many ways.

Grabbing her keys again, she stomped to the front door to lock it. The Grand Duke Molitov Von Goth stood in the darkened waiting room near a chair by the door. "Um," Sasha said, glancing around to see if anyone else was here. The office was deserted. "We're closed."

A slight, devilish grin curved the edge of his mouth. "I know. I was wondering if you would like to accompany me for dinner."

He was dressed in the imperial black and gold uniform and filled it out nicely. He was a muscular AEssyrian, and Sasha found it impossible to imagine him not looking good in anything he wore. His long, black hair was neatly combed and hung loose around his shoulders. His black thigh boots were polished to a high shine. He adjusted his monocle as he awaited her response. It was an interesting touch for such a rugged looking alien.

She gestured awkwardly toward the back office. "There's a lock broken on one of the controlled substances cabinets. I have to inventory it to make sure nothing's missing."

"May I keep you company?"

Sasha blinked. A nervous flutter tickled her belly. "Sure, if you want to." She walked over and locked the front door. She went back to the cabinet with Molotov following close behind her.

He came in and examined the cabinet. He opened and closed the broken door a few times inspecting the lock. "Could Harlan have done this?"

Sasha leaned her hip against a metal desk. "She could have, but I can't see why. She has a key, and it's not like her not to ask me for mine. Maybe it just broke on its own."

Molotov leaned in close to the lock then shook his head. "No," he said. "Someone broke this deliberately, with a knife. I can see the gouge marks."

"But who? Not many people have access to these offices."

He stalked over to a swivel chair and sat down. "It must be one of your patients, no doubt."

Sasha fell silent. The only one who'd been back in this office, aside from herself and Harlan, was Caraculla. This was where they'd come yesterday to talk in private. This was where they'd had that heated argument about breaking up. Could he have stolen some drugs after she'd left him to go back to work? It seemed too incredible to be true.

Molotov rocked his chair back and forth. "Have you thought of something?"

She glanced at him and shook her head. "It's nothing. I'm just thinking I have to get these drugs counted quickly. I have to know what's missing."

He got up and stalked over to her. "Let me help you."

A wave of shame flowed over her, stinging her eyes. *How could I have been so stupid to leave Caraculla in here?* But she'd been so angry at him for breaking up with her. No explanation, no apology, no nothing. Tears flowed from her eyes, and she angrily wiped them away.

"I feel so stupid," she sobbed. "I should have never left him in here alone."

Molotov pulled her into his arms and hugged her. "Who Sasha? Who did you leave in here alone?"

"Colonel Caraculla. He came here to tell me he wanted to see other

people. I was so furious I stormed out and didn't think. He must have broken into the cabinet when he was in here alone."

"Calm down. We'll inventory the medications and find out what he took. Then we'll have a little talk with Gavin."

Sasha nodded and pulled back from him. "I really appreciate your help," she said, sniffing. Then she opened the cabinet and pulled out the first of twenty bottles and emptied it in the plastic pill tray.



## Chapter Twenty-Three

By the time one in the morning came, Harlan knew Gavin wasn't planning to come home. She wanted to leave, to pack up and move back to her own villa. But knew she had to face this horrible thing between them, even if he was too wounded to. She rode out to the military complex and gave her mount to the groom. She looked up the towers toward his office and saw his light blazing. He would be raving drunk, she was sure of it. He might even kill her if they argued bad enough.

She swallowed and made her way to his office like a condemned prisoner. Every step seemed to take a hundred years as she ascended the grand, spiral staircase in the main hall. His office was located at the end of a long, elaborately decorated hallway. It was announced by a simple, bronze plaque and two heavy, wooden doors. The plaque said 'His Excellency, General Gavin Theron'. Harlan touched the doors handle and paused to catch her breath. Her heart was pounding so hard she thought it would drum itself right out of her chest. She'd never had such powerful emotions for anyone before. Gavin was an easy man to hate; he was crude, vicious and arrogant. But he had other qualities, noble qualities not as readily apparent on the outside. He was brave and loyal; he claimed to love her. This would be a good test of that.

She tried to sort out how she felt about him. She loved him of course, but there were so many other things mixed into that one emotion. Her body craved him like a drug, and their lovemaking was the most satisfying experience she'd ever known. She hated his bravado and his stubborn refusal at civility most of the time. And as much as she didn't want to face it, she often feared his boiling tempers.

So here she was, about to face down one of the most terrifying rages of their brief relationship. She reached in her pocket and touched the handle of her gun. If he was going to kill her, she wasn't going to go alone.

She didn't bother to knock. She came in, passed through the reception area where his secretary usually sat, and let herself into his office. He was sitting at his desk, studying a map and drinking. A cigar smoldered in the onyx ashtray. His uniform was unbuttoned and hung open revealing his thickly muscled chest. His long, black hair was pulled back carelessly. A number of long strands hung around his face and obscured his eyes. He didn't acknowledge her when she entered. She took a seat in the chair across from him.

The room stank of old sweat, tobacco and liquor. Harlan waited for him to say something to her, but he acted as if no one had entered. He folded his map back and toyed with it while puffing on his cigar. Great billows of smoke curled in the air.

She waited for a long time then she got up. She moved toward him slowly, like you'd approach a vicious dog. Without looking at her, he held one hand up as if trying to ward her off.

She ignored him. She knew it was a risk because if he became violent, he could easily injure or kill her. She moved up behind him and placed a hand on his shoulder. He shrank from her touch.

She kept touching him.

"You're father came to see me," she whispered.

He sipped his drink noisily and got up, breaking her hand's contact. "Get out," he said with a growl. "I have work to do. I have a fucking war to plan."

"He admitted he set me up."

Gavin smiled bitterly. "You should have seen that coming."

"I haven't had as many years of experience as you in dealing with his treachery. But apparently I'm not allowed to have any faults and you can carry yours like medals. I just came to ask if we're done."

He put his drink down and placed his hand on his saber. "It would appear you are, dear."

Harlan eyed his hand. A surge of adrenaline made her fingers twitch. She thought about the gun but something told her he was bluffing. If she pulled the gun, he might follow through in his present drunken condition. She decided to take a risk and wait him out.

She didn't take her gaze off his hand. "Are you going to murder me?"

"Murder is such an ugly word. Let's call it a mercy killing."

"But that's what it is, isn't it? Murder? Just like Aurora."

Pure hatred poured from his gaze. "Who told you such vile lies? I never murdered Aurora; although, I certainly would have had cause."

"Spare me your drunken homilies. Besides, it's all the same to you. You don't really care who you kill. It's all part of the endless body count that follows you."

He pulled his saber, and it came away from the scabbard with a hiss. He advanced on her, his eyes glassy. Harlan stood her ground and met his gaze. A chilling calm came over her; a deadly quietness.

Gavin stopped directly in front of her and raised his saber over his head. Harlan could feel the breeze from the swiftness of his action. She trembled, lifted her head and closed her eyes. Her hand ached to pull the gun, but she remained still. If this was it, then so be it. She heard him utter a horrifying roar and waited for the blow to strike.

Nothing happened.

After a few moments she opened her eyes. He was kneeling at her feet with his head bowed. The saber lay on the floor next to him. She reached into her pocket and felt the cool metal of the gun, and just for a second she thought about shooting him.

She let go of the gun and let out a slow, trembling sigh of relief. "I guess nobody's going to die today," she said calmly. "I'm going to go home now and pack. You don't have to hide out here anymore. By the time you come home, I'll have moved back into my villa."

Gavin reached for her, but she brushed his hand away like it was a dirty rag. She walked out of his office, keeping her hand on the gun the entire time. Just in case he changed his mind.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

It was early morning, but already Dragon was sweating. Trickle of moisture ran down his back, soaking his shirt and making his cuirass chaff. He shifted as he sat on his hyperia watching the troops spar during their morning drills. King Harrah and Titan were mounted on either side of him. They were painfully silent. They were wise not to speak. They didn't need to utter a word. One look at the men told them everything.

The troops were a disaster. None of them had ever seen battle and it showed. They fumbled around the field like drunken farmers, waving their weapons clumsily in the air. Dragon shook his head. Even though their numbers were greater than Gavin's, Gavin's army would cut these soldiers down to the man in days.

Dragon stared at the king. "This is no good."

"What do you mean?"

"Isn't it obvious? These men aren't ready to face Gavin on the field. They can barely face each other." He caught Titan's grin and looked away. He was glad this was so amusing to the old wizard.

King Harrah glared at Dragon. "Perhaps it's their new general that isn't up to the task."

Dragon looked past the king to Titan. "I can train them," he said. "But it's going to take me at least a month."

Titan stared at the men and stroked his chin. They were returning to formation to begin their war game again. "That's too long. Gavin is probably already on the march."

Dragon frowned. "If he's not now, he will be soon."

King Harrah threw his arms up in frustration. He wasn't a man accustomed to being ignored. "Will someone please tell me what is wrong with them?"

"I'll tell you what's wrong with them," Dragon said. "They're undisciplined and poorly trained. They have plenty of weapons and equipment, but no one knows how to use them. They don't have a standard watch bill; not one of them has ever lost a night of sleep. They can't march without becoming winded, they talk back to their superior officers and some of them can't even be accounted for."

The old king looked embarrassed. "Surely, Gavin's men must be the same."

Dragon gave him a cold smile. "That is a common mistake. Many people think Gavin's men are ill prepared because they are sloppy, and he's a drunk. But I can assure you, Highness, they are a well-trained machine. These boys don't stand a chance as they are."

King Harrah looked at Titan. The wizard studied the men carefully, like they were tiny insects created for his pleasure. "We don't have a month," he said to Dragon. "But we might be able to tilt the scales in our favor."

A ball of lead formed in Dragon's belly. "What do you propose?"

"We could make the men immortal."

Dragon squinted at him. "I don't follow you."

Titan grinned. "Suppose every time you cut a man down with your saber, he rose again to fight after death." He shrugged as if it were an elementary subject. "That would be a very difficult army to defeat. Then once the war is over, we can dispose of the risen soldiers."

King Harrah barked out a joyous laugh and struck Titan on the back, keeping his hand there to squeeze Titan's shoulder. Dragon flinched as Titan fixed the king with a savage glare. King Harrah took his hand off. His lip trembled.

Dragon stared at his father. The evil shadow of rage passed away from his face. "I don't know," Dragon said. "I don't want to defeat Gavin through sorcery. It's an empty victory."

Titan turned his hyperia around to leave. For a fleeting second, he shot a vicious look at the king who did not return his gaze. "Gavin will use every means necessary to destroy you, Dragon. I wouldn't get too sentimental about how he meets his end."

Dragon could feel Titans power sweep his thoughts. He kept his emotions buried. It was beyond dangerous to let Titan know how you truly felt about anything. He was bound to use it against you.

He rode off leaving Dragon and the king in a vacant silence.

After a long time, King Harrah said, "I think I hate that man."

Dragon turned his mount around. "Don't let him know you think that. You can't even imagine what he would do to you just for his own amusement."

## Chapter Twenty-Five

Gavin hadn't been to Valdia's brothel in years. The sight of its red doors and loud, open windows brought back many memories; some pleasant and some definitely not. Nestled in the red light district of the city, it was surrounded by broken down buildings and shady businesses. He rode up to the main entrance and handed his mount to a young boy acting as the brothel groom. Probably a whore's bastard, like himself. He tipped the boy generously and stalked inside.

The music was loud, and the main lobby was smoky. Gavin lit up a cigar and stalked up to the madam. She was the kind of woman who looked more attractive wearing lots of makeup than she would be otherwise. Her lips were painted a rich, scarlet red and her eyes were framed in black eye shadow, making their pale orange color more vibrant. She was dressed in a tight fitting, red, corset dress; decorated with ribbons, lace and sequins.

She leered at him and wrapped her arms around him seductively. "Gods, what a nice piece of meat you are!" she said squeezing his butt hard.

Normally, Gavin wouldn't have allowed anyone to grope him, but he knew whores and felt comfortable with their over familiar touching. Being friendly was how they made their money. The friendlier they were; the more money they made.

"I'm here to see someone special," he said, pulling out a paper credit.

The madam eyed the money. "Perhaps, Lord, I can serve you tonight? I'd even grant a big discount to a fine looking beast like you."

"This is business, not pleasure, lady."

She gave him a bawdy smile and rubbed his erection through his pants. "Our business is pleasure. But if you must break my heart then tell me who you wish to see."



Gavin leaned down close to the madam so he could be heard over the music. "I'm here to see Nina."

The madam's smile melted from her face. "She's retired. She doesn't even live in the brothel anymore. She lives out back in the pauper house."

"May I see her?"

"Help yourself," the madam said, sauntering off toward a better prospect. "But you know where to find me if you want some exercise afterwards."

Gavin puffed on his cigar and watched her make her way to some young soldiers. He made his way through the building, out the back and on to the pauper house. It was a sorry looking building with broken, wooden steps and badly peeling paint. He came inside trying to adjust his eyes to the dim candle light.

Rounding a corner to his left, he came into the living room and spotted her sitting in a wheelchair, smoking a pipe. She was much older than he remembered with long, stringy, white hair and sagging jowls. She pulled the pipe from her mouth and coughed hard, sounding like she was drowning in phlegm.

Gavin pulled his cigar from his teeth. "Nina?" he asked to make sure it was her.

She squinted at him. "If I owe you money, you're wasting your time. And, if you want sex, you can fuck off. I'm retired."

He moved closer to the candle light on the table next to her. "I'm not here for either of those things," he said.

"That voice," she said in a subdued whisper. "I haven't heard that voice in a long time. Come here boy."

Gavin moved toward her and was immediately besieged by memories. Nina had been one of the most beautiful whores in the brothel during her time. Rich and powerful men traveled for days just to spend the night with her and shower her with gifts. She was never without a suitor. She had seduced him at the tender age of fourteen and took him as her lover for a few short weeks. He'd barely known what to do with her insatiable, sexual appetite; she'd been a loving and patient teacher. What a glorious few weeks that had been.

He knelt down by her wheelchair and let her take his face in her hands. She studied him for a long time, let him go and put her pipe back in her teeth. "What a handsome devil you are."

He pulled up a chair and sat down across from her. "I've come to get your advice."

She cackled. "I don't know if I'll be much help to you, but you're welcome to ask me anything."

"I've fallen in love with a woman, but I cannot shake the fear that she might be cheating on me."

"Does she love you?"

"Yes, I'm certain she does."

"How long had she known you before she became your lover?"

"A long time."

Nina studied his face. Her lips moved into a thin line. "Then why do you think she would bed with a man she'd just met?"

"That's just it. I have no reason to distrust her. She has been nothing but loving and truthful with me. It is I who threw her aside once to find another lover, even though I eventually returned to her."

"And she took you back?"

Gavin puffed on his cigar. "Yes, but it was hard going." He frowned. "It still is."

Nina shrugged as if the answer was easy. "You cannot trust her because you, yourself cannot be trusted. You are a whore's son who's bedded more women than any Assyrian man I know. Your history is tainting your future."

He crushed out his cigar and hung his head. "I can't lose her Nina. I have to find a way to rid myself of this mindless stupidity."

The old woman leaned forward in her chair and placed a hand on his shoulder. "Your problem is an easy one to solve. First, you must ask yourself, and answer truthfully, if she had cheated on you, would you still be able to love her? Would you still want her as your lover and not treat her unkindly. Secondly, you must decide that it doesn't matter if she cheats on you or not. You must love

her so much that nothing else matters. Nothing like sex should ever come between you.” Nina puffed hard on her pipe and smoke billowed up from it. “Once you answer those two questions honestly, you’ll know what you need to do.”

## Chapter Twenty-Six

The royal trails were some of the most beautiful in all of AEssyria. They were well plowed, well maintained, and policed free of criminals. Gavin didn't usually have time to ride them, but he did today. This was one of the favorite rides for his talks with Megolyth, and he had grown to enjoy them. That was until today.

Megolyth was unusually quiet this afternoon. He rode alongside Gavin in his ceremonial battle armor and hadn't said a word since they'd left the palace. This was an effective punishment because Gavin hated feeling ignored. He tried to think of many subjects to break the ice but didn't have the energy to try any of them. Instead he rode along in silence, waiting for the axe to fall.

Megolyth glanced at him like he'd just noticed Gavin was there. "Have you completed your battle plan against King Harrah?"

"Yes, Highness, I have. I had planned to march tonight with your permission."

"What do you think our chances of success are?"

"Good, but I was wondering..."

Megolyth stared at him. "Wondering what?"

Gavin shrugged innocently. "Wondering if there might be a diplomatic solution to all this." There, he'd said it. Already, he could feel Megolyth's disapproval staring him down. Ambitious men didn't want to hear words like diplomacy; it set their teeth on edge. But Gavin knew he had to try. A war right now would keep him from Harlan for months, even years, and he doubted she'd wait for him for that long. She'd probably make her plans to return to Earth as she was always threatening to do.

Megolyth pulled his hyperia to a stop. A few large birds flew overhead, shadowing them for a moment. "Has the famous General Gavin Theron lost his nerve?"

Gavin avoided looking him in the eye. "Don't be a fool, you know I haven't."

"Is this about leaving Harlan?"

"No. It isn't. You've never fought a man like Dragon; I have. He was designed by Titan to be my equal, and trust me, he is in every way. As long as he's sane, he'll match me on the field because he has one big advantage that I do not."

"And what is that?"

Gavin met Megolyth's cynical gaze. "He has Titan helping him, and all the black magic that evil old man can summon. They could destroy us both and there would go your precious empire."

Megolyth nodded and glanced off at the road ahead. "You have a valid point. But we both know we are way beyond diplomacy here. Dragon and Titan are rushing to prepare their troops as we speak. We won't have the advantage much longer. You are right; they may defeat us on the field by using sorcery, but you have an extraordinary opportunity too. If you defeat them, you will become a legend in AEssyrian history."

Gavin grunted his agreement. "I'd better get back. I have a lot of things to take care of before I leave."

Megolyth's hyperia pranced sideways to show its impatience. He reined it in. "I know you're concerned about Harlan, but you needn't worry. I'll make sure no one bothers her and she doesn't leave the planet. That ought to make you feel somewhat better."

Gavin grinned. "She'd be furious if she'd heard what you said."

"Do we have a deal?"

"Certainly," Gavin said with a smile. "A devil's bargain if ever there was one...All or nothing."

"I've heard those are the kinds of bargain's you like best."

Gavin pulled a cigar out of his tunic and lit it. He offered one to Megolyth who held his hand up to refuse. "Enjoying them just underscores the weakness of my character."

Megolyth grinned and spurred his mount on; heading back to the palace. Gavin stuck the cigar in his teeth and followed close behind him.

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

Harlan sat in the courtyard of her villa; crying and watching the evening grow darker. What a fool she'd been to think she could have a lasting relationship with that egotistical bully. Frustrated by her mood, she wiped the tears off her cheek with the back of her hand and sipped her herbal tea. Who was she fooling? She knew what kind of a jerk he was. It was just her bad luck to fall in love with him. Well now, at least that was over.

She heard a hyperia ride up and her stomach dropped. She knew it was him. Maybe he was just bringing her something she'd forgotten from the villa. *Why can't he just leave me alone?* Scowling, she got up and marched for the door.

She opened it before he could knock. "What do you want, Gavin?"

He looked tired; dark circles rounded his eyes, and she could see by the set of his shoulders that he was upset. "May I come in?"

Harlan swallowed, fighting the lump in her throat. She said nothing, fearing if she did, all her emotions would come crashing out of her. She stepped back from the door.

Gavin stalked in. She gestured to the courtyard, and he followed her out. He took a seat in the heavy wooden chair next to hers. She sat slowly, carefully; as if her own chair were made of twigs. They sat in silence for a few minutes. Harlan sipped her tea.

"I love you, Harlan," he said.

She focused her energy on her breathing; keeping it steady. "But you don't trust me."

He leaned back in the chair and it creaked under his weight. "I don't trust anyone."

“I had no idea Titan would use Dragon against you. How could I know he’d once been a military commander?”

“You could have, if you’d told me who you were treating instead of sneaking around in secret. Weren’t you the least bit suspicious why Titan had suddenly become such a compassionate father?”

Harlan chewed her thumb nail. The pain in her heart was torture. “I was so excited about finding a cure for Dragon that I just didn’t think. Titan must have been counting on that.”

Gavin stood up and unharnessed his cuirass. He laid it on the floor by his chair and sat back down, unbuttoning his uniform. “You haven’t said you love me.”

“Would you believe me if I did?”

He scratched his bare chest. “I have before.”

“I didn’t sleep with Dragon.”

Gavin was silent. Then he said, “I’m on the march when I leave here.”

A rebel tear fell from Harlan’s eye. She angrily brushed it away. “I love you, Gavin.”

“Marry me then.”

“I’m sorry, I can’t do that.”

His eyes flashed a furious, golden yellow. “Why the fuck not?”

“Because you can’t trust me; because we fight all the time; because I need some time away from you to assess my life and where it’s going. Take your pick.”

She could feel his rage boiling under a calm surface. He’d want her to have sex with him now; rough and angry sex. It was one of the many ways he liked to subjugate her after she had defied him. Harlan was torn between her longing for him and her emotional exhaustion. He was a solid mass of iron will, and she was too wounded for this.

He took her hand in his, and she gently pulled it away. Tears ran down her cheeks, but she didn’t sob. “I’m not going to sleep with you tonight.”

“You’d send me to the field to die without your kisses on my lips?”



“I’ll kiss you but that’s it.”

Harlan got up off her chair and moved into his lap. He tilted her chin up and kissed her. The kiss opened a floodgate of pain in her. He held her against his chest like a small child as she softly sobbed.

His hands stroked her; running caresses down her arms and across her belly. He nuzzled her neck; arousing and awakening her. She was falling into his spell and was powerless to stop it. His mouth claimed her, his kisses growing hotter and more demanding.

Harlan pushed on him trying to get up, but he knew her too well. His hand moved into her hair pulling her into the scorching passion of another kiss. His other hand slid under her shirt, stroking the flesh of her back in slow, soothing circles. She pulled back from the kiss trying to catch her breath. He licked tears off her face.

Harlan shook her head trying desperately to get the words out. “Please Gavin, don’t,” she said. “Please don’t seduce me.”

Her words fueled his passion. His mouth licked and kissed her throat as his hands peeled her shirt off. He mauled her breasts; licking and sucking them until Harlan gasped with pleasure. She tried to push him off but the will just wasn’t in her. It was easier to surrender.

Once he felt her soften, he moved in for his conquest. He had her naked in seconds. His mouth and hands devoured her; licking and touching her all over, until her own body betrayed her. He pulled his leather glove off and touched the wet center of her sex. She was very ready for him. She felt her cheeks burn.

He moaned with excitement and freed his erection from its metal codpiece. Lifting her to face him and straddle his hips, he buried his cock inside her.

Then he was still.

Harlan pushed her face into his neck, her lust forcing her to ride him. The pleasure was more intense than she could ever remember it being. Excited by her desire, he became a hungry lion; devouring her with a feral lust she adored.

Her orgasm began in a quiet center of her womb and erupted fire throughout her belly. She tossed her head back and groaned his name. It was a quiet and desperate sound that was swallowed by the night the moment it was uttered. His own pleasure overtook it; consumed and destroyed it in a monstrous, savage roar of sexual triumph.

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

After Gavin left, Harlan stayed up late and went to the local clinic to catch up on some work. She knew it was dangerous riding the AEssyria roads at night, but it wasn't that far and she just couldn't face being alone. She tried to push her sorrow to the back of her mind.

She came to a dark, wooded area before the city gates and reined in her hyperia. The beast hissed and looked back at her. She reached into her pocket and felt the reassuring weight of her Colt. Guns were illegal on the planet, but she'd managed to smuggle one here anyway. She knew she'd be in serious trouble if she was ever caught with it.

Spurring her mount on, she rode quickly into the darkness. She could see the sparkling lights of the city up ahead and felt her spirits rise as she neared safety. Suddenly, her hyperia startled and pranced sideways. It lowered its head and hissed into the darkness. Harlan quickly reached for the gun. She pulled it out but kept it hidden in her pocket.

A dark figure rode out blocking the road. At first, she thought it was robber, but as he advanced, she saw it was Dragon. He wore a handsome, dark gray uniform with gold piping along the high collar and cuffs. His yellow-green eyes seemed to glow with supernatural malevolence.

"You didn't come to meet me," he said. "The medication is wearing off and I am losing focus. I can feel it."

Her mind fumbled through a dozen excuses. Then she settled for, "I couldn't get away."

He rode closer to her. "You don't look so busy now."

"I was just heading to the clinic. We can get your medication there."

She spurred her mount forward, and he moved up alongside her. "It's very late for you to be up and riding alone." She didn't say a word. Then he ventured, "Saying goodbye to Gavin?"

"I would prefer if we didn't discuss my private life," she said.

He let out a low, cruel laugh. "Everyone knows about you and Gavin. Your private life isn't very private. I would invite you to discuss mine, but it's not nearly as exciting as yours."

Harlan saw her opening and took it. "What have you been doing lately? How's your new job?"

He smiled. "Good, thank you."

"What are you doing?"

"A little of this; a little of that." He lapsed into a dangerous silence. "You know I can't let you go."

Harlan stopped her animal. "What do you mean?"

"I need you, Harlan. I need you with me, so I can grow stronger. Perhaps you can find me a permanent solution to my problem."

"So you can defeat and kill Gavin?" she said, her voice edgy and raw.

"If I can, but that's only part of it."

"What's the other part?"

"I want to live the life that has been denied me these many years due to my illness. You're going to help me achieve that."

Harlan glared at him. "What makes you think that I would help you?"

He smiled and nodded like she'd said an amusing joke. "You'll help me."

"No," Harlan said, "I won't. And there is nothing you can do or say that will change my mind."

"Of course there is."

"What then?"

He fixed her with an icy stare. "I'll use my father's sorcery to impregnate you."

Harlan's stomach dropped. She couldn't believe what she'd just heard. "You would, wouldn't you? You'd do that to me after I helped you; after I made this new life possible for you? There is certainly no denying your paternity; you are obviously all Theron."

He glanced down the trail, and then squinted up at the sky judging the time. "Are you going to accompany me peacefully or make a scene?" he said seizing the muzzle strap on her hyperia.

"I'll go with you to the clinic and supply you with as much of your meds as possible. After that, my cooperation ends. Now get your hands off my mount or I will throw a scene."

Dragon sighed and released her animal. "You are going to come with me one way or another. I'd think you would prefer to be conscious, but that's up to you. If I did have to put you under, I'd hate for you to wonder what occurred while you slept," he said with a lecherous grin.

Harlan immediately felt queasy. It was true. If she cooperated, she may be able to talk her way out of this. It wasn't the first time she had been abducted on this planet, and she was beginning to believe that it wouldn't be the last.

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

The brothel was a classy one; the kind where the prostitutes dressed like noblewomen instead of whores. It was also situated on a discrete side street of the city in a quiet, affluent area. Sasha watched Molitov dismount and come over to her hyperia. A muscle twitched by her left eye.

“Shall we go in?” he asked.

This was their third date, and each one had proven more interesting than the last. She never knew where he was going to take her, but she always enjoyed it. Even though they’d been seeing each other, they still hadn’t had sex. She guessed he was saving that for tonight.

She tried to quiet the nervous flutter in her belly. “What are we doing here?” she said, trying to stall.

“I rent a room upstairs. We can go there and not be disturbed.”

This was dangerous territory. If she agreed, there would be no turning back, and she wasn’t entirely sure what that meant. Were they lovers now or just engaging in casual sex? Sasha loved the element of danger in it. She made up her mind. She’d just go along and let it go where it will.

She took his hand and dismounted. They made their way to the door, and she could hear the bawdy laughter of the women inside. *Won’t they be surprised to see me? If they weren’t before, they’ll be gossiping now.*

She hesitated by the door. Sleeping with him might give other AEssyrian men the wrong idea. She could be putting herself at great risk.

Molitov glanced at her and adjusted his monocle. “Another night, perhaps?” he suggested.

Sasha studied him. He was unbearably sexy and the definition of a bad boy. The only man on this planet that was worse was Gavin. However, Molotov was easily the more erotic of the two. She'd never met another man like him, human or otherwise. Her lust for him had grown over the past weeks; it had become a terrible burden, reminding her of how lonely she really was.

She sighed and smiled at him. "No, I'm fine. Let's go in."

Molotov pulled out a key and inserted it in the lock. The laughing and talking inside stopped as they entered. There were four men and six women inside scattered around the living and dining rooms. They were all elegantly dressed and sipping drinks from long crystal glasses. She felt painfully underdressed in her t-shirt, britches and boots. They eyed her curiously as Molotov led her up the grand staircase.

His room was the last one down the hall. He pulled her inside and locked the door behind them. Stalking across the room, he turned on a soft lamp by the four poster bed.

The room was simple but elegant with a large queen bed covered in a black and gold bedspread. There were numerous scars in the wood along the headboard. Sasha swallowed.

Along the wall, opposite the window, hung all sorts of angry devices; a leather torso harness and matching ball gag, a viper whip coiled on a hook, an assortment of small crops, gleaming silver manacles, and a black velvet blindfold. Nervous sweat dampened her lower lip. Her heart was beating frantically like a tiny bird caught in a cage.

Molotov sat in a plush, brown wingchair and interlaced his fingers. "Undress," he said in a commanding tone.

Sasha pulled her shirt off and unhooked her bra. She let them fall to the floor. Glancing at the window, she moved a little off to the side so she wouldn't be seen from the street.

"Modest?" he said with a slight smile curving his lips.

Her cheeks grew hot and she shrugged.

His eyes sparkled. "Take the rest of it off," he said, gesturing to her britches and boots.

She stripped naked and stood before him, fighting urge to fold her arms over her chest. Without standing, he took a crop off the wall.

"Come here," he said.

Sasha walked over, stopping when he held his hand up. He gestured for her to turn around. She did.

"Spread your legs and bend over at the hip," he said.

She leaned forward, exposing her sex to him. Her palms were moist and her pussy throbbed gently. He tapped the leather crop against her exposed clitoris. She trembled and closed her eyes. The tapping grew harder and faster until sparks of pleasure came from every strike. She moaned softly and he stopped. She looked back at him.

He stood up and arched his back. "On your hands and knees!" he demanded

She did as he told her.

He struck her on the buttocks with the crop and it made a loud crack. The first strike was shocking and she cried out in pain. The next one wasn't as surprising but hurt a lot. Hot tears formed in her eyes and fell freely as he spanked her relentlessly. Then he stopped.

He knelt behind her, his fingers exploring her throbbing sex. Without removing his clothes, he released his penis and pulled her hips back. With savage aggression, he pushed his cock deep inside her. Sasha whimpered as he took her; her body already betraying her. Great waves of pleasure moved up through her hips accented by the burning pain of her buttocks. Each thrust of his hips was a strange mixture of pain and pleasure. He pumped harder into her, filling her and whispering cruel threats into her ear.

Sasha wanted to hate what he was doing to her; wanted to hate him. But then she realized the truth as the first orgasm took her in a dizzying rush; she didn't hate any of it at all.

She loved it.



## Chapter Thirty

Dragon was sick.

He paced the floor of the tower room grinding his teeth, his eyes flashing around the room seeing everything and nothing all at once. His face was pale and drawn like a drug addict. For a fleeting moment, Harlan felt a note of pity for him. She drew his medication into a syringe and hating herself for helping him. She would find a way to defeat him, but right now she lacked a plan.

"Come here," she said.

Dragon stalked up to her; his eyes a swirling cauldron of chaos. She was surprised he'd understood her and seemed to still be able to keep a clear thought. He unbuttoned his uniform and stripped to the waist, waiting.

She swabbed his arm, injected him and threw the syringe in the trash. He took a deep breath through his teeth while every muscle in his chest flexed and bulged. He turned to look her in the eye. Harlan opened her mouth to say something but as soon as she did, nothing came to mind. His eyes were clearing and the madness began fading away like a fleeting summer storm.

Wrapping one arm around her waist, he pulled her against him. Harlan struggled to free herself, but his eyes were draining her will. They were hypnotic like a venomous snake and after a few moments, she found it impossible to look away.

"Kiss me," he whispered.

Before she could refuse, he touched his lips to hers. It was a smooth, sexual kiss that left no impression of innocence. She pulled back and fought his embrace.

"Let go of me," she said through tight lips.

He let her go, and she scrambled to the farthest point she could get to in the room. "Don't do that again," she said. Her voice was shaking.

Dragon let out a low, menacing laugh. "Oh I intend to do more than that Harlan; a lot more than that."

"If you rape me, I'll kill myself."

His fingers moved stiffly as he unbuttoned his trousers. "You're bluffing."

Harlan glared at him. "No," she said. "I'm not."

"What about Gavin?" Dragon countered. "Your suicide would devastate him. I don't believe you mean to do it."

"I'll just let you worry about Gavin. He'd find out you drove me to it. You know he would. He'd question everyone he could find. Someone would be bound to tell him why I killed myself. I'm sure you know he'd never rest until he avenged me."

For the first time since she'd known him, Dragon appeared concerned. He was weighing the danger in her statement. "That's probably true."

"Why don't you let me go, Dragon?" she said. "I promise to keep treating you. Taking me hostage isn't necessary."

He leaned against a polished, wood table. "I'm sorry, Harlan, I simply can't take that chance. Besides," he said with an evil smile, "having you here makes things much more interesting."

"If anything happens to Gavin, I'll stop treating you. Then you'll have nothing to hold over my head."

"Don't be so sure of that, my dear," he said getting up. "Don't be so sure."

## Chapter Thirty-One

Gavin stood as motionless as he could while the servants encased him in battle armor. It was a grueling process and took well over an hour. To make matters worse, he'd slept badly. Too many worries, he thought. The arthritis in his back was bothering him, and he made a mental note to take a full flask with him when they crossed the border to the kingdom. Being slightly drunk always helped with the pain. The servants completed their task and rushed out of his tent to dress the other officers and men.

Gavin dug through his saddlebag for a cigar. He found one, walked outside to a small cooking fire and lit it.

Caraculla stalked up in full battle armor. It shone in the firelight. "You're a little stiff tonight," he said.

Gavin squinted at him and blew a thick stream of smoke out. "We'll see how stiff you are when you reach my age."

Gavin put the cigar in his teeth and walked back into his tent. Caraculla followed him.

Caraculla watched Gavin struggle into a chair and grinned. With great care not to be stabbed by his own armor, Caraculla took a seat as well. "How did Harlan take the news that you were going off to war?" he asked.

"She was disappointed, but she accepted it."

"And you?" Caraculla asked. "How did you take the news?"

Gavin smiled. "I took it worse than her." He fell into a thoughtful silence. "I've been thinking of retiring," he said, puffing on his cigar. "I was going to name you as my successor."

Caraculla stared at him.

"Surely, you're not too surprised," Gavin said.

"I guess I am a little. No one ever expected to hear you say the word 'retire'." Caraculla got up and went over to where the minibar was. He poured himself a drink. He held up an empty glass to Gavin and the General nodded. Caraculla sipped his drink and handed Gavin his. They paused their conversation to sip.

Gavin stared into his glass. "I've been thinking about it for a while. I think it's time."

"How much does your decision have to do with Harlan?"

Gavin stretched his legs out and puffed on his cigar. Great billows of smoke rose up and filled the tent. He didn't answer.

Caraculla swirled his drink in his glass. "I've heard King Harrah's general is your brother."

"That's right. Same father different mother."

"You never mentioned you had a brother."

"He's been on ice for the past three hundred years. My father-for reasons I can't begin to understand-took him out of storage and to one of Harlan's medical clinics. He must have guessed she wouldn't be able to resist a challenge like that."

"What's wrong with him?"

"He's a raving madman. He has been ever since he reached adulthood. I've always blamed Titan's infernal tinkering. He was conceived solely to become a military genius. Trust me; he was very much a planned baby."

"But why? Titan had you."

"Dragon was created to destroy me. Titan resents my successes; they confound him. He doesn't understand how I have thrived with such poor beginnings so he's forever testing me...looking for weaknesses."

Caraculla finished his drink and rested the empty glass on his leg. "Is Dragon a better general than you?"

Gavin laughed. "No, because he lacks the one thing he needs the most to be a great general."

“What’s that?”

Gavin got up out of his chair and poured himself another drink. The pain in his back was fading. His blood was quickening getting ready for the battle ahead. “Experience.”

A messenger rushed through the door panting to catch his breath. “I have an urgent message, Excellency.”

Gavin sat down. “What is it?”

“Doctor Ambrose has been kidnapped by General Dragon Theron.”

Raging fury exploded in Gavin’s gut. He fought the urge to twist the messengers head off. “When?”

“Only a few hours ago.”

Gavin got up and paced. Gritting his teeth, he hurled his whiskey glass across the room where it struck a wooden post and shattered into a million pieces.

## Chapter Thirty-Two

The battlefield was a grassy meadow surrounded by patches of dense forest. The early morning dew smelled clean and fresh, and Dragon tried to remember the last time he's smelt it. Was it two or three hundred years ago? Some Travena Vultures circled overhead waiting for the first bodies to fall. They'd be a little disappointed today, he mused. The only meat for them would come from Gavin's men.

Gavin's army was waiting in formation across the field. They didn't make a sound, and Dragon admired their discipline. His men, in contrast; were nervous, fidgeting and their eyes wild with fright. They'd be even worse if they knew the witchcraft in store for them should they die in battle.

Dragon had decided to wait and let Gavin make the first move. He did so, not out of generosity but out of concern that if he led his men out first, they might balk. He'd be amazed if they didn't flee the field once the dying started.

Gavin's men began their advance, staying in formation with their sabers still in their sheaths. As was his custom, Gavin was out front, decked out in a heavy, black armor. He looked like a vengeful demon-god. Dragon suppressed a flutter of panic. Gavin wasn't a god, just a man like everyone else here, except for maybe Titan. Dragon looked around wondering where the old wizard was. Typical of him to start this and be conveniently absent once his handiwork was unleashed.

Dragon pulled his saber and signaled his men to advance. They moved forward in sloppy formation, turning into a mob as soon as they were a hundred paces forward. Dragon could see some toward the back, slipping behind to run for the woods. Damn deserters. He'd have to hunt them down later and make an example of them.

Many of Gavin's men were putting their helmets on and adjusting their weapons as they rode. Gavin was legendary for never wearing a helmet in battle. He'd told Dragon once that it obscured his vision, and he'd learned to fight better without it.

When Gavin's men were within fifty yards, they pulled their sabers. All of them combined made a sharp hissing sound, like an enormous snake sounding a warning. He signaled them to spread out and they did with perfect precision. Gavin held his saber up and roared for his men to stop.

Dragon too, signaled for his troops to stop. Some did and some did after they saw others do so. Dragon wished he'd never agreed to this battle. The men needed a lot more training. They were scared and confused.

A vulture overhead screamed, sending a visible tremble through Dragon's men.

Gavin dropped his saber and his men broke into a charge with weapons drawn. Dragon responded with a charge of his own, spurring his hissing hyperia forward, into the enemy.

Chaos erupted. Men and animals screamed as limbs were cut and chopped. Dragon was sprayed with blood. It only took a few horrible minutes for Gavin's men to realize this was no ordinary battle.

"They're not dead!" someone shouted. "They're not dying!"

Through the dust and melee, Gavin appeared; his face a mask of vicious hate. He advanced on Dragon with his saber dripping with blood. "I'm going to chop you into a million pieces," he said with a snarling sound.

Dragon stood his ground, watching for a surprise attack from behind. "Then you'll never free Harlan."

Gavin growled. "You should have let her be," he said. "She had nothing to do with this."

"I need her."

"The hell you do. You have *daddy* to help you."

"He's more of a liability than a help. You of all people should know that."

"Then tell him to stop helping you and fight me like a man."

“I can’t do that, Gavin.”

“And why the fuck not?”

Dragon laughed. “Because, I want to keep Harlan and because I want to win.”

Gavin released a deafening roar and lunged at Dragon; slicing the air with powerful strokes. Dragon held him back as best he could. He knew this fight would be over soon.

If there was one thing he could be sure of in all this crazy mess, it was that Gavin’s men had no chance against an immortal army.



## Chapter Thirty-Three

Gavin disengaged from his fight with Dragon as soon as he saw the first enemy soldiers get up. This would be a disaster if he didn't get his men out of here fast. He should have suspected this trickery of Titan. He raged inwardly over his father's treachery. In the thick of battle, he found Rakon slicing a soldier to ribbons only to have the parts try and come after him again.

"Sound the retreat!" Gavin yelled at Master Sergeant Rakon.

Rakon didn't need to question the decision. He gave the fallback order and men fell over themselves to obey.

Gavin's army was pursued through the thick forests, to the border and a little beyond. For a few tense moments, Gavin thought they might try to march on the empire; however, they were too poorly trained and lacked the leadership to know what to do on their own, especially the dead ones.

They made camp as soon as it was safe and tended to the wounded. Gavin walked among his soldiers, feeling like he'd betrayed them. He should have guessed what Titan had planned; he should have been ready. Then his thoughts turned to Harlan. Isn't that what he had been so angry at her for? He certainly knew Titan better than she had, and he'd made a similar blunder of underestimating him. Why had he been so hard on her?

Once he thought of her, he was miserable. He loved her desperately and wanted her more than any woman he'd ever known. Yet, he knew he could never make her happy. There were countless women who had loved him and suffered dearly for it. He should let her leave him and let her find happiness somewhere else.

But even as he entertained the idea, he knew it was impossible. Nothing in him would ever let her go. She had become as much a part of him as the

breath he drew in his body. He would rather die than live his life without her. So, he'd just have to find a way to be a better man; for both their sakes.

Now he had the difficult task of getting her back from Dragon. If Dragon had been as much of a villain as his father, Gavin would have worried more but the truth was, he was a good man. Before his mental illness had enfolded him in its grips, he'd been an ambitious young man with dreams of making the military his life. He'd idolized Gavin; they trained together, went on maneuvers together, gone drinking and whoring together. In those more innocent times, Gavin had come to see his brother, not as a rival, but like himself; a young man looking for leadership and direction.

Then Titan had gotten involved and pushed Dragon to be what he wasn't. He drove him, isolated him and intimately destroyed him as he did all those he claimed to love. Gavin shook the grief off and rolled his shoulders. There was no use going over all this painful stuff from the past.

Caraculla stalked up; looking tired and worn. "By my count, one third is dead or wounded."

Gavin looked up at the sky as if the answer to a million questions was laid out there. "We're lucky it wasn't worse. Can the ones that are wounded travel?"

"Most, I think." Caraculla stiffened and watched Gavin. "Dragon has Harlan, doesn't he?"

Gavin grunted his yes.

"Do you want me to take the men back so you can try and find her?"

Gavin stared at Caraculla. He slapped him on the arm affectionately and said, "No, I think that's exactly what Titan is expecting me to do. Besides, I don't think she's in any real danger from Dragon. She might even be able to escape on her own, she's a clever girl. For now, my dear Caraculla, we'll wait."

Caraculla nodded; looking worried.

Gavin mounted his hyperia and studied the rows of wounded men. "What is the nearest town to here?"

"Soratha, about a mile west."

"Do you think we can get the most wounded there?"

Caraculla squinted at the men. “I think so, but we’ll probably lose some on the way.”

“We’re definitely going to lose more if we keep them here in the elements. Let’s pack up and start for Soratha.”

## Chapter Thirty-Four

The solitude of the tower room was comforting in that it gave Harlan a lot of time to think. She hated to admit it but since she'd met Gavin, they'd spent very little time apart, and she hadn't had a chance to get her bearings on their relationship. Did she really love him or was their attraction just sex? It was hard to tell where one began and the other ended. Moving over to the window, she looked out, marveling at the tremendous drop. No one was escaping through the window; that was for sure. She felt like the captive princess in a fairy tale.

She heard the heavy door unlock and Dragon came in with a tray of food. Her stomach growled, and she moved closer. She was curious as to what disaster he'd brought this afternoon. He set the tray down and gave her an easy smile.

The silver tray had an assortment of cooked meats and even some delicious looking bread. He'd even managed to find her some fruit.

He collapsed in a chair by the open window and kicked his boots off. His spurs jingled as they scraped the stone floor. "Hope you like it. That stuff took me an hour to assemble."

Harlan sat down and picked up some meat. She gingerly placed it in her mouth and chewed slowly. It was fantastic. "Where'd you get the meat?"

"The royal kitchens."

"I think it's the best I've ever had. Thanks."

Dragon shrugged. "I saw Gavin this morning."

Harlan studied him warily. He said it as casually as if he had passed him on the way to the store. "Where? On the battlefield?"

He nodded. "We managed to drive him and his men back."

She suddenly was consumed with hatred for Dragon. "How wonderful for

you, but I can't help wondering if you would have done so well if you hadn't had Titan."

He shrugged as if the insult was of no importance. "I also had you to help me."

Harlan threw the meat back onto the tray. "You only got my help through deception!"

"I did what I had to do. Besides, if everything I've heard about you is true, I am confident that you would have helped me anyway," he said, a slight grin curling his lips.

"I would never have helped you if I'd known you were going to try and destroy Gavin."

He shrugged still smiling. "Your right, I would have had to leave that part out."

"So what are your plans now?" she asked.

Dragon leaned his head back and closed his eyes. Harlan resisted the urge to push him out the window. "March on their, so called, empire. If all goes well, we'll be in the empire by the end of this year."

"Don't you have any emotions at all? Why are you going to do this to your own brother?"

"Trust me, Harlan. There's no love lost between us; I can assure you of that. Gavin and I may have been close a long time ago but those feelings are lost now."

"Only because of your father's tinkering," she said.

His eyes suddenly ignited, and she was intensely aware that she had struck a dangerous chord. "No matter what you have heard, I am not the experiment that Gavin claims me to be. My father loves all of his children equally, which for the most part, is not at all. You of all people should understand the propensity for mental illness given our phenomenal upbringing. Gavin is not such a statue of sanity either," he growled.

She sat there stunned for a moment and then overcome by hunger, Harlan started eating again. She avoided looking at Dragon. She had nothing else to say to him.

"I'm really surprised you defend Gavin so strenuously," Dragon continued. "Isn't he the same man who's caused you such misery? Didn't he get you arrested for helping him when he was accused of the old king's murder? From the things people tell me, he practically keeps you tied to his waist."

Harlan snorted her disgust. "That's maid's gossip. I'm surprised you listen to that crap. He understands my need for independence."

Dragon shook his head slowly. "Wait until he manages to talk you into marrying him. We'll see how much he respects your independence then."

"You don't know anything about our relationship!"

Dragon got up and paced the room with his hands behind his back. "Maybe not, but I do know Gavin and I know he hasn't changed much. Do you think it's because he's such a nice guy that he's gone through so many women? He suffocates every woman he loves until they can't take it anymore and leave him."

Harlan pushed the tray away. "I'll take my chances."

"If you agree to marry him, that's exactly what you're doing."

She got up and wiped her hands on a white, linen napkin. "Why this sudden concern for me anyway? I thought Gavin was your enemy?"

"He is, but you're not. I just don't want to see you hurt, Harlan."

She stared at him not believing a word of it. No one on this planet had done anything for her benefit so far, and she wasn't holding her breath. "Your concern for me is touching," she said acidly.

Dragon leaned against the wall. His eyes glowed with evil intelligence. "You have enough problems without being saddled with his child."

Harlan's heart dropped to the pit of her stomach. "What are you talking about?" she said, trying to keep the panic out of her voice.

Dragon leered at her. "You're pregnant, Harlan. I've known ever since I picked you up. Surely, you must have felt *something*."

Suddenly, Harlan felt trapped in a box. The room seemed much too small.  
“It’s not possible...he’s a...we’re not...”

“Compatible? Oh, but Harlan, you are. He’s half-human...remember? It was probably just a matter of time.” He stalked closer to her watching her as if she might shatter at any moment. He took her arm and helped her into a chair.  
“Are you all right? I know this must be a shock.”

Harlan shook her head but no words came. *This can’t be; this just can’t be. Dragon must be lying to frighten me. I have to have a blood test; I have to be sure!*

## Chapter Thirty-Five

The town of Soratha was small but had two midwives who doubled as doctors for the town. They were not as skilled as Harlan but they were better than nothing, Gavin thought. When the wounded had been placed in a barn and made comfortable, Gavin gave the rest of his men leave. A dark gloom had settled over the troops, and he hoped the off time would help perk up their spirits. He too, needed a little dose of hope and desperately needed a drink.

He came into the tavern, ordered a drink and settled into a dark corner. A few minutes later Caraculla came in. His colonel took a seat across from him and ordered water.

Gavin snorted his contempt. "Fucking toughest officer in the army and he drinks water most of the time."

Caraculla shrugged. "I prefer more refined pleasures," he said, slipping a pill onto his tongue and chasing it down with a sip.

Gavin ignored it. Whatever a man's pleasure, he had no objection, as long as he was fit to do his job when need be.

"So what's the plan now?" Caraculla asked.

"We'll pull back and regroup. Although it doesn't seem like it, we still have the advantage as long as they don't pursue us. I'm inclined to think they won't. Dragon will be wary of me coming around and attacking the kingdom from the rear. He won't risk chasing us and leaving the kingdom unguarded. Even with their apparent immortality, they can only move as fast as any other army and they'd have a hell of a time getting back in time to engage me."

Caraculla twisted his water cup and nodded to some other officers who'd just come in. "Unless Titan gives them more supernatural powers."



Gavin tossed his drink back in one shot and poured himself another. He hated that old man, Titan. Then his thoughts turned to Harlan. He missed her horribly, but he felt certain she was safe. Dragon was many unsavory things, but he was also a hopeless romantic that would never hurt a woman, especially one Gavin loved. Even Titan wouldn't dare harm her, for he knew how relentless Gavin's vengeance would be. He shook his head trying to will his worry away. Whatever their plans for her were, he couldn't do anything about it right now.

"Any word on Harlan?" Caraculla asked, casting a wary glance at Gavin.

"None."

"I don't get it. Why would Dragon bother with Harlan? He must know that as much as you love her, you won't back down because he's holding her."

Gavin sipped his drink and grimaced. Reaching into his tunic, he pulled out a cigar and lit it. "He took her because she's his doctor. She helped him recover from his debilitating mental illness. Unfortunately for her, she found out that he was bringing an army against me too late. She must have refused to continue to help him, so he took her in order to ensure her cooperation."

Caraculla was quiet for long time. Then he said, "I take it she found out about Dragon from you."

"That is correct," Gavin said, annunciating each word.

"So does that mean you're finished with her?"

Gavin stared at Caraculla trying to read his meaning. "No. I love her and I will never give her up; although she would have every right to leave me for how I've treated her. I know it seems unlikely but we are alike. I know every angry gesture and every loving touch. She is as familiar to me as if I'd known her all my life. I cannot explain it but what I feel for her is different from any other woman I've ever known. She makes me strive to be a better man, but so far I've been something of a disappointment."

Caraculla gave him a lazy smile. He seemed to be far away. "I don't know," he said softly. "I kind of like you better since you've fallen in love with her. You're a little bit less of an asshole."

Gavin puffed on his cigar and watched his colonel. "I'll remember that at your next promotion."

## Chapter Thirty-Six

Dragon loved to watch Harlan sleep. She'd been sleeping more and more since she'd confirmed her pregnancy, and he wondered what the stress of having an alien baby would do to her. He leaned forward and blew on her cheek. She didn't stir. He'd brought her breakfast but hesitated to wake her. He knew she'd need all the rest she could get. Glancing down at her belly, he looked for signs of her pregnancy. There was only a slight bulge and a subtle change in her scent.

Most AEssyrian men were repulsed by the scent of a woman pregnant from another male but not him; at least not with Harlan. He supposed it helped that she was pregnant with his nephew or niece. He smiled at the word; he was going to be an uncle.

"Pining over Gavin's whore?" Titan said, stalking into the room.

Dragon bit his tongue against a nasty retort. He settled for, "She's not a whore."

Titan dismissed the comment with a wave of his hand. "Why are you sitting here like a love struck school boy when there's an army to see to?"

"I saw to them yesterday and the day before that, they're fine."

Titan settled into a chair on the other side of the room. "Sometimes I wonder how much you really want this."

"You're confused father. I didn't want this...you did."

Titan let out a cold laugh. "I don't mean the war, I mean your freedom. Or shall I call it, your sanity."

Dragon felt a cold chill move through his shoulders. Harlan stirred, and he wished she wouldn't wake up just yet. He decided not say anything, Titan was getting dangerous.

Harlan stretched and looked at Dragon. Her lovely mouth twisted into a frown. Glancing around, she spotted Titan and her eyes narrowed. "What are you both doing in my cell?"

Titan smiled at her. "Just discussing Dragon's future. Are you aware he's falling in love with you?"

Dragon got up from his chair and glared at Titan. "Your age is catching up with your father. You're confused."

His vision changed to black and white; he was aware of great, black wings beating on either side of him. The next sound he heard was Harlan screaming. She scrambled off the bed away from him, staring at him with eyes wide in terror. She was shouting something to Titan that Dragon couldn't understand. Then, just as suddenly, he fell to the stone floor.

Harlan rushed over to him and helped him sit up. His head throbbed horribly, and he pinched the bridge of his nose to ease his suffering.

"Apologize to him or he'll change you into that thing again!" Harlan said, gesturing to Titan. The old wizard didn't look to have moved one muscle.

Dragon struggled to his feet. "I'm sorry."

Titan stood up. His eyes were a tempest of fury. "Before you start thinking you're more powerful than you are, my boy, I would advise you to think again. You would be nothing without my help. Without me, Gavin would have crushed you like the hopeless mental defective you are. You owe me everything, not the least of which is respect. The next time you talk to me like that, I'll throw you off the battlements and start all over again with a new, more worthy son."

Dragon would have said a million things, damn the consequences but there was Harlan to think about. He knew Titan would take his vengeance out on Harlan and her unborn child, he simply couldn't allow that. Swallowing his pride, he lowered himself to one knee and bowed his head in deference to his father. The most evil and hated man he had ever known.

## Chapter Thirty-Seven

The lab Titan provided Harlan to work on Dragon's medication was state-of-the-art. On a planet where technology was shunned and despised, it was an unbelievable triumph. She'd asked him where he'd gotten all the equipment, but he'd just shrug in that elusive way of his and wander off. Looking around, she wished there was a way she could take some of this stuff back to her clinic, but she knew Titan would never allow it. That was if he was even planning to let her go at all. She suddenly felt very tired and sat down.

Titan poured her a glass of water from a deep sink and brought it to her. "The child is zapping your strength. Your pregnancy won't be an easy one, I'm afraid. The human body wasn't built to carry AEssyrian children."

She took the water from him and sipped it. Her stomach rolled in protest, and she handed it back to him. "How long are you planning to keep me a prisoner?"

He replaced the glass by the sink and shrugged. "I wasn't the one who took you, if you'll recall."

"Yes, but you have the power to let me go."

"Perhaps."

Harlan sighed. "Listen, I'll agree to make one more dose for Dragon. I'll show you the formula. You can make it yourself after that."

Titan leaned against a glistening metal table. "A bargain? I thought you were through making bargains with me."

She looked away from him as tears welled up in her eyes. "I have learned that there is no other way to deal with you other than bargains."

He watched her for a long time, saying nothing. She kept her guard up, making sure he didn't try to creep into her thoughts. The last thing she needed was him fumbling around in her mind.

"I can't help thinking you have something planned to help Gavin," he finally said.

She wiped a few tears away with the back of her hand. "I just want to go home," she looked at him trying to fight off an ocean of tears. "Please Titan."

His features softened. He got up and walked over to her. Standing over her chair, he placed his hand under her chin and lifted her face up. Suddenly, he was inside her head, pushing into her thoughts like a midnight thief through a barred back door. She screamed from the pain and slapped his hand away from her face. She hung her head and wept in her hands.

Titan paced the floor. "So, you were going to give me the formula, were you? The correct formula; no strings attached? Really, Harlan? How naive do you think I am? I know how in love with Gavin you are. I know you'd do anything in your power to help him."

Harlan wanted to run, wanted to do anything to protect her baby but there was nowhere to go. She was completely at Titan's mercy. And now he knew of her plan to change the formula to plunge Dragon back into madness. She kept her gaze on her hands. She wanted to look anywhere but into Titan's hateful eyes.

He pulled up a chair and sat next to her. "You won't believe this, but I am proud of Gavin. Perhaps doubly so because he has accomplished great things without my help and despite my interference. I am also not too proud to say that I am jealous of you both. Jealous that I have never, in my many years of life, found a woman to love as much as he seems to love you."

Harlan saw her opening and took it. She met Titan's gaze and swallowed hard. "If you are proud of Gavin, if you care anything for him, please stop helping Dragon win this war."

Titan licked his lips with a long forked tongue. "I'll back off with no strings attached for one small price."

The sorrow threatened to break again, but Harlan held it in. “What?”

“One kiss.”

“No sorcery,” she said. “You won’t do anything to my baby? Just one kiss?”

“That’s it, and you can create whatever formula you like for Dragon. I promise, I won’t interfere. But understand, I won’t help Gavin either. It will be a fair contest. One military man against another.”

Harlan nodded, fresh tears moistening her face.

Titan took her face in his hands and touched his lips to hers. The kiss was gentle and soft; surprisingly sweet. Then he broke the kiss and left the room.

Harlan sat there for a long time, frightened and confused. Finally, she got up and started working on the new formula for Dragon’s medication.

## Chapter Thirty-Eight

Sasha stretched and winched at the sudden pain from her butt. She rolled over and snuggled against Molotov who growled irritably. What a night she'd had! Molotov had done things to her she never thought she'd enjoy, but she'd loved every minute of it. Every time she moved, her body sang with the exquisite punishment he'd given her.

"Are you awake?" she whispered, gazing at his devilishly handsome face.

He rolled onto his back and shielded his eyes with his hand. He grunted his response.

She jumped out of the bed and looked at her watch. "It's almost noon!" she said in surprise. "I've got to get to work! With Harlan away, everyone is probably looking for me."

Molotov watched her dress. "Where's Harlan?" he said in a groggy voice.

"Oh my God, I didn't tell you? She's been kidnapped by Dragon!"

"Isn't that Gavin's insane brother?"

Sasha nodded as she hopped around the room pulling her skirt on.

"That's him."

He considered this for a moment. "I hope she's alright," he said finally.

Sasha finished dressing and sat on the edge of the bed. She leaned down and kissed him. He ran his fingers into her hair and pulled her into a deep, sinful kiss that made her blush.

She broke the kiss and stared into his eyes. "When will I see you again?"

He sat up and stroked her arm with his fingertips. "I don't know darling," he said. "As soon as I can manage it. I don't want my wife getting too curious about you. She'd probably have you killed."



Sasha stared at her hands. She knew how dangerous this affair could be. She'd seen Assyrian women beaten by hired thugs for sleeping with another woman's husband. This planet could be lethal if you didn't watch who you offended. She should just end this romance now and be done with him, but she enjoyed spending time with him. She guessed it was worth the risk.

Leaning down, she gave him one more fleeting kiss and avoided his attempts to hold onto her. "I have to go," she said, laughing.

He got up and threw his clothes on sloppily. "Let me walk you downstairs then."

Sasha agreed, feeling happier than she had in a very long time.

## Chapter Thirty-Nine

Dragon released her on a foggy morning the day after she'd prepared his new medication. He had done it out of fear because she was now refusing to eat. After an afternoon of trying to persuade her to eat something, he'd panicked that morning, fearing she might lose the baby. To ensure her safety, he took her right back to Gavin's front door. She stood before it, unable to believe she was finally free and feeling a small tinge of guilt over Dragon. She'd dosed him before he'd let her go; the effects, or rather lack of them, would begin to show soon.

She walked up the stone steps and placed her key in the lock. The door opened easily; it was unlocked. She came in cautiously. The smell of whiskey was everywhere. She kicked an empty bottle with her foot and looked down in surprise. Gavin was here, she knew he was. She'd seen his hyperia in the stable.

The first thing she heard was his heavy footsteps coming from the bedroom. He stalked into the living room; saber in hand, ready to attack whoever had dared enter without announcing themselves.

Harlan stood perfectly still staring at him. She couldn't believe how happy she was to see him. The tears came before she knew what was happening. She whispered his name then placed her hand over her mouth, as if she couldn't bear to hear it spoken.

Gavin dropped the saber and it clanged loudly on the tile floor. He took a few halting steps forward then rushed her.

She was swept up in his arm. The tears came harder and faster as she embraced him. She was terrified of his reaction to her pregnancy. He was so

jealous; he'd never believe it was his. She squeezed him, running her hands up into his hair and raining kisses over his face and throat.

He carried her to the couch and gently set her down. Brushing her hair from her face, he touched his lips to hers in a tender and loving kiss. "Thank the Gods you're all right," he said.

Harlan nodded, fighting to get her feelings in check. She placed her hands over his and lowered them from her cheeks. "There's something I have to tell you. You may even know already." She took a deep breath then said, "I'm pregnant."

He leaned back on the couch and pulled her closer to him. He smelled like whiskey and stale cigar smoke. "I know, my love," he said. "I can smell the changes in your body chemistry."

She stiffened. "You're not going to ask me whose it is?"

Gavin nuzzled her and smiled. "Why would I need to do that? It's mine, I assume."

"Yes, it is, but I was with Dragon and Titan so long, I thought you'd think..."

"I don't care about any of that. It wouldn't matter to me whose child it was, Harlan. I would still love and raise it as my own. I've been a fool. I was willing to throw away everything we have over needless jealousy. I know you love me, I've always known it. That's enough for me."

Harlan started crying again. She buried her face in his chest and squeezed him tight. "I do love you, Gavin. I guess I just never realized how much."

"And, I love you, my dear. I hope we have a long and happy life together," he said.

## Chapter Forty

When Harlan awoke that morning, Gavin had gone. He had planned a counter attack on Dragon's army, and he was already on the march. She stroked his pillow and imagined him there. A small piece of paper rested on the white linen. He'd left a note for her. Just a short note telling her he'd be back soon and that he loved her. It seemed so simple and ordinary, like he was going to the store and not out killing other men.

She had some coffee but a few sips in, dumped it. Nothing tasted the same since she'd become pregnant, and sometimes she had to force herself to eat. She dressed quickly and headed for the clinic; taking her time and daydreaming about their baby. Would it look human or AEssyrian? It didn't matter to her, but she suspected it would be more human since she was human and Gavin was half.

There was a figure on the road ahead and she knew from the uniform it must be Dragon. She slowed her hyperia; then stopped it. He advanced and rode up along side her.

He looked sick and drawn; his eyes had taken on that startling murky madness. "What did you do to the medication?"

Harlan took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "You needed a change. I made you a new formula."

"Did my father put you up to that?"

"No one put me up to anything. You lied to me when you came for my help. You only wanted to be cured to kill Gavin. I refuse to help you do that."

"I didn't lie to you, Harlan," Dragon said, his voice was raspy and hoarse. "Titan did."

"You kidnapped me, do you deny that?"

Dragon looked at the ground. “No,” he said softly.

Harlan toyed with her reins and watched him. She hated that she’d had to do this to him. “I’m sorry, Dragon. I’m sorry things couldn’t have been different. What will happen to you now?”

A flash of a smile twisted his features. It was an uncontrolled muscle reaction. It was gone in a moment, but chilling nonetheless. “I’ll end up back in the stone garden until the next time my father decides to take me off ice.”

“I never wanted that to happen.”

He shook his head dismissing the conversation. “Just promise you’ll come and see me sometime.”

Harlan nodded, keeping her tears down. “I promise.”

“I really enjoyed our time together, even if it was brief.”

“Goodbye Dragon, maybe next time I will be able to offer you that permanent solution you wanted,” she said.

He reined his mount around and disappeared into the thick forest. Harlan waited a moment; fearful he might return and try to take her again. But he didn’t. After several minutes alone, she breathed a heavy sigh of relief.

## Chapter Forty-One

Gavin brought his men to a grassy ridge not one hundred yards from the castle and found no army to meet them. He didn't like the look of this. What could his father and Dragon be up to now? He shuddered to think. A scout rode up and waited.

"What news?" Gavin asked.

"No news to report, Excellency. The gates are open and the army is within. I don't understand it."

Gavin spotted a lone rider coming across the ridge. Squinting, he made the rider out to be Titan. *What new trickery is this?* Gavin glanced at Caraculla. "Keep the men here. I'll be right back."

Gavin rode up to Titan keeping an eye out for trouble. "What's going on *daddy?*"

Titan winced at the tag. "Your lady had decided to stop treating your poor, afflicted brother, Gavin. Even now as we speak, he's falling into madness, picking flowers by the castle. The men are terrified of him and the king has barricaded himself in his room."

"What a pity. But I have to wonder; why are you not helping them?"

Titan let out an evil chuckle. "I can't do every bloody thing, now can I? After all, it's not really my war." He looked back at the castle as if it were an ancient ruin. "I'll take Dragon when you're done. Go ahead and do what you do best."

"I want to feel grateful to you for getting out of it but my hatred gets in the way," Gavin said.

Titan smiled. "I understand."

“I will thank you for not harming Harlan. I’d hate to spend the rest of my life hunting the two of you down like dogs,” Gavin said.

Titan turned his hyperia around and said, “And I would have hated turning you into a speechless, lower form of life.”

Gavin chuckled. “Is it fair to hope I may never see you again?”

“I have a grandchild on the way,” Titan said riding off. “I’ll want to see if she proves to be as big an asshole as you are, my boy.”

Gavin rode back to his men and unsheathed his saber. He turned to Caraculla, “We’ll ride into the castle and when she’s secure, we’ll round all the occupants up. Enemy soldiers must pledge their loyalty to me or be executed on the spot. When you find the king, bring him to me. He’ll make a wonderful present for the Emperor.”

## Chapter Forty-Two

Gavin rode home the next day, still dirty from the trail. Harlan sat on the steps of their villa waiting for him. Without a word, he put his hyperia in the stable and fed it. He came out and stalked toward her, his spurs jingling. She suppressed a smile. She held a drink out to him and he took it, joining her on the stairs.

She kissed him and said, "Since you're here, I assume the war went well."

"I took the kingdom without losing one soldier."

"That's great. I'm guessing Titan got bored?"

Gavin shrugged. "Once Dragon fell ill again, he lost his ambition." He toyed with a lock of her hair. "Thank you, Harlan. I know it wasn't easy for you to sabotage his treatment."

She nodded sadly. "The most frustrating part is that given more time, I think I could have cured him permanently. But it's a small price to pay for this," she whispered. She leaned forward and brushed her lips against his cheek. "Besides, I've been thinking about your marriage proposal."

"Really?"

"Yes," she said with a sly grin. "I think I will accept after all."

He pulled her into his arms and gave her a scorching kiss. She embraced him, running her hand up his powerful back. She was glad this had all worked out; she'd been so afraid for him.

"That is," she added, "if you still want me?"

"I've always wanted you, my love," he whispered, nuzzling her neck and getting up to go inside. She took his hand and they climbed the stairs together. Just before she reached the door, she stopped. Someone was coming.



Harlan glanced at Gavin. His face was set in a grim mask. "It's an imperial messenger," he said, stalking down the stairs.

The rider pulled up and shifted in his saddle. "Sorry for the intrusion, Excellency, but the Emperor has sent an urgent summons."

Gavin frowned. "I'll get my mount."

"Excuse me, Excellency, but the summons is not for you. It's for Doctor Ambrose."

Harlan stared at the messenger, unable to digest what she was hearing. The Emperor wouldn't summon her unless something really bad had happened. "What is it? What's going on?"

The messenger shook his head. "I'm not really sure, my lady, but I think it has something to do with a murder!"