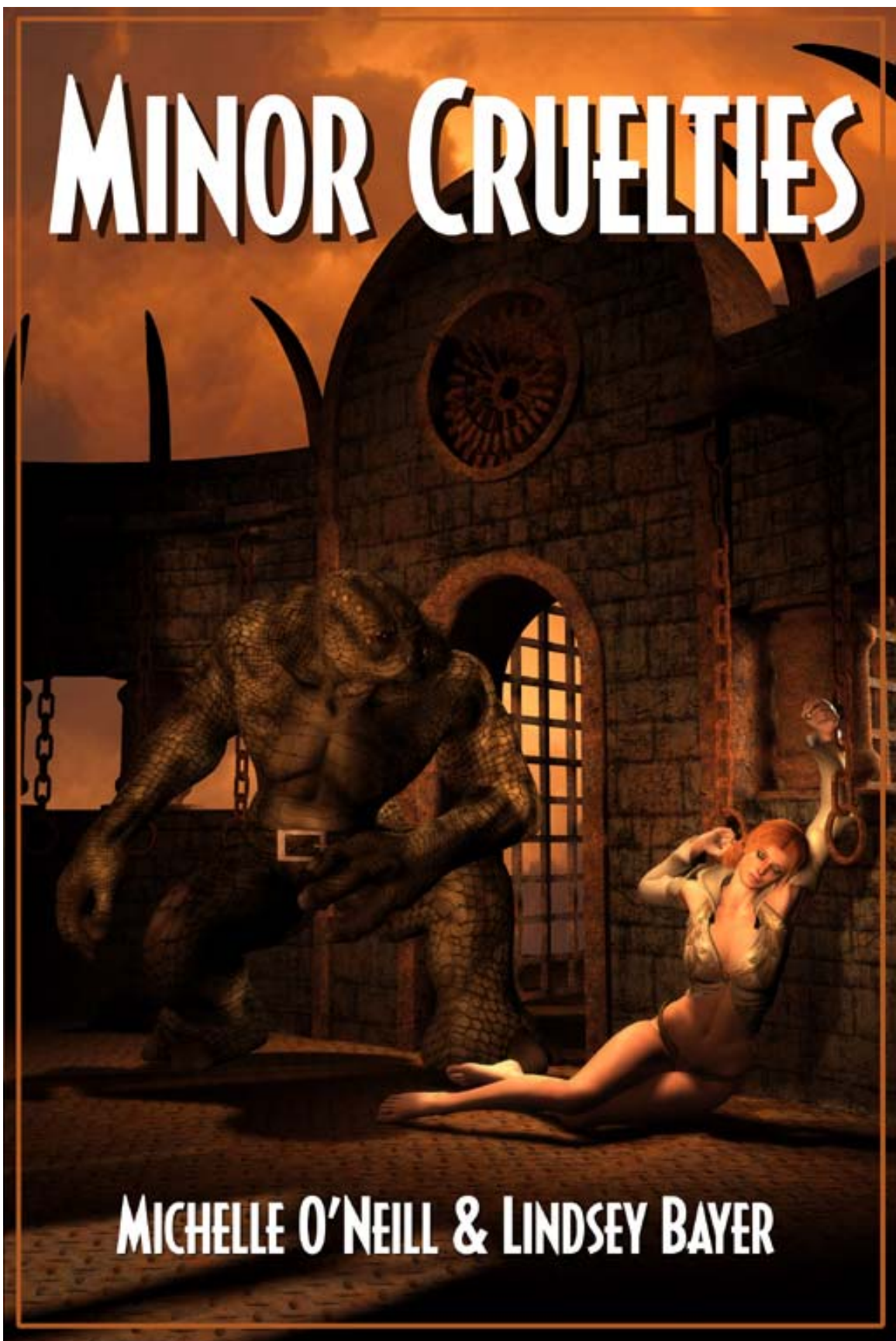


MINOR CRUELITIES



MICHELLE O'NEILL & LINDSEY BAYER

Minor Cruelties

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Minor Cruelties

Book 4: An AEssyrian World Adventure

By Michelle O'Neill & Lindsey Bayer

Chapter 1

Sasha's red hair was splashed across the ivory pillow like dark blood. The room was silent, interrupted only by the occasional creak of the large mahogany bed and the feather-light sigh of the bed's only occupant.

Grand Duke Molitov Von Goth sat naked in a corner of the dusky bedroom watching his lover, Sasha, sleep. What a night they'd had together. Rarely had he experienced a lover with such hidden ferocity; such bottomless passion. Last night had been legendary, even by his standards.

The morning sunlight bled through the window behind his chair and fell upon the cruel red welts along Sasha's back. The sight of them immediately reminded him of the music of her screams and made his cock painfully hard.

Last night she'd pushed him further than any woman had ever dared. Her violent love making awoke feelings in him so aggressive and dark that any other woman would not have survived the encounter. He'd reveled in the twisted urge to seduce, damage and eventually kill her. As she lay before him, innocent in sleep, she had no idea how lucky she was to be alive.

How many times during her binding and punishment had he forced himself to hold back his primal instincts? There had been too many to count.

It was almost as if she'd wanted to push him beyond control, as if she'd wanted him to commit the final act of murder—the ultimate claiming. He'd never admit it to her but he'd been afraid of the deadly feelings she'd dredged up from the dark places in his soul.

Sasha shifted in the dark blue sheets and moaned but didn't awaken. Molitov scratched his belly and thought about his wife, Tannyth; a fine, proud woman. He'd loved her once, but he couldn't remember what that had felt like. After he'd fathered their nine children, she'd shut him out of their marriage bed and that had been that. Tannyth never let him touch her again. By her actions, she'd encouraged him to seek sexual attention anywhere but at home. She'd

never said a word, but her consent was implied in the blind eye she turned to his countless affairs.

As he watched Sasha sleep, he knew he should break this affair off with her. He was beginning to feel trapped; controlled in the subtle ways that only a woman could manage. Besides, he would never be able to be the stable influence she desperately needed. This was a very destructive relationship for both of them and she well knew it.

A heavy knock sounded on the villa's front door, dragging Molotov from his thoughts. Sasha groaned and awoke from her sleep. He was glad he'd left word at his office of where he'd be. Most didn't yet know of his affair with Sasha and her villa would be the last place they'd look for him.

She sighed like a honeymoon bride and rolled onto her back. Her large breasts were already blotched with a few light purple bruises. "What's that noise?" she said in a groggy voice.

Molotov stood and pulled on a robe. "It's the front door, darling. Stay in bed, I'll get it."

She covered her eyes with her hand. "I wish this stupid planet would join the rest of the galaxy and get another form of communication other than messengers."

Molotov grinned and stalked into the living room. She was right; AEssyrians were notorious for their dislike of technology. They grudgingly tolerated only the most necessary technological improvements. But communication remained by messenger service and on-world transportation by hyperia; both were traditions he didn't want to change either.

The Grand Duke Molotov opened the door and stared down at a young man in a red messenger uniform. "Yes," he said. "What is it?"

The messenger bowed his head. "I beg your pardon for the interruption, lord, but I have urgent news. There's been a murder of a noblewoman."

"Who is she?"

The messenger looked uncomfortable. "Um...no one is certain, lord."

"You mean, no one recognizes her?" Molotov asked.

“No lord, she’s too...” the messenger paused and searched the ground.
“Too damaged.”

Molotov’s mind raced. *Who could dare do such a thing?* “Has anyone moved the body?”

“No lord, she’s just been found. The Master-at-Arms posted guards immediately.”

“Has Dr. Ambrose been notified?” he said, rubbing the bridge of his nose.

“Yes, lord. She should already be en route.”

Molotov nodded. “Wait for me outside while I get ready. Then you can escort me there.” He closed the door and rushed back into the bedroom.

Sasha was sitting up in bed with the sheet wrapped around her breasts.
“What’s going on?”

“There’s been a murder. I have to go,” he said while dressing.

She flopped back onto the bed and sighed. She clearly wasn’t happy.
“Who is it this time? Another soldier get killed in a drunken card game?”

Molotov sat on the edge of the bed and pulled his long, black boots on. When he was finished, he leaned down and kissed her gently on the lips. “Not this time darling. This time the victim is a high-born woman.”

Sasha sat up, wrapping the sheet around her. “Who is it? What happened?”

“I don’t know yet, apparently there are some disfiguring injuries,” he said, smoothing out his black uniform tunic.

“You mean she was mutilated?” she said, leaning forward.

He pulled on his leather gloves. “Is this exciting you?” he asked, grinning.

Sasha’s face reddened. “No, of course not. I just haven’t heard of anything like this happening before. These types of murders were pretty common when I lived on earth but here...”

“Well, they’re not at all common here. I just hope I can figure out who she is before her family realizes she’s missing,” he said. “I’ll come by the clinic to see you when I get a chance.”

Sasha scowled. “Typical,” she said as he opened the door to go. “I’m always the last in line.”

Chapter 2

The first thing Harlan Ambrose noticed about the crime scene was the small amount of blood on the ground. That was surprising, considering the carnage before her. The body was that of a young Assyrian woman; nude, filthy and partially dissected. But not cut up here. The lack of blood and close proximity to the main road made the prospect of her being killed at this location pretty unlikely. She had been dumped here. The thick woods and rough terrain made this a relatively secluded hiding place. She was surprised the body had been found so quickly. Harlan slid off her hyperia and pushed past the soldiers standing around gawking.

"You guys need to move back. You're contaminating my crime scene," she said.

They stared at her and hesitated. She knew how they hated taking orders from a woman. "Get back now!" she repeated, taking a cue from Gavin's handling of his men.

Her aggression they responded to. They moved away from the body giving her space to conduct her investigation. She pulled a large ball of twine from her saddlebag and scanned the crowd. *Its not crime scene tape but it will have to do.*

"You!" she said, wiggling her finger at a young strapping soldier. "Come here."

He approached cautiously and stopped directly in front of her. He studied her with a confused expression on his face. Even at 5'8" and 135lbs, she must have looked like a little child standing next to him. She pushed the ball of twine into his hand.

"I want you to use this to make a large box around the victim. Secure it to four points. Why don't you start with that tree over there?" she said, pointing to a

large oak about ten feet from the victim. "Once that's done, nobody comes in or out of the box without my permission. Understand?"

The soldier nodded while unraveling the twine. He tied it to a broken fence post and continued to make a box around the body as instructed. He still seemed confused but appeared to be used to following orders. She heard another hyperia ride up, snarling and hissing to announce itself. A chill rolled down her back at the sound of the noisy beast. *Will I ever get used to these ugly lizard horses?*

She glanced up to see Molotov had arrived. A wave of relief flowed over her. *Thank God, now he can help me deal with these monkeys.*

As Molotov approached, she saw the soldier with the twine freeze. He'd just finished making the box and had done a decent job of it too. Now, here was a new challenge; should he stop Molotov as instructed or not? She grinned and nodded to let him know it was okay. Relieved, the soldier lifted the twine to let the Grand Duke duck under.

Harlan crouched by the dead woman, studying the gaping wound in her abdomen. She heard Molotov's spurs as he moved up behind her. "Do you know her?" she asked, not turning to look at him.

"Yes," he said. "Her name is Duchess Bell-Anna Sorick. Her father is a wealthy arms manufacturer and a good friend of the emperor."

Harlan frowned. *Perfect. Soon, I'll have both the family and the Emperor Megolyth breathing down my neck.* "Who found her?"

"The messenger reported some soldiers passing by," he replied. "They were downwind and smelled the blood."

Harlan stood and removed a small silver camera from the front pocket of her pants. "I'm going to take a few pictures."

"Is that necessary? The family may take offense to a photographic record of this desecration," he said.

"Photos of this crime scene will be imperative to finding her killer. Once the scene is dismantled, it's gone forever. The photos allow us to go back and find additional evidence. I promise I'll destroy them once we have resolve to

this,” she said, squeezing his arm gently. He winced and his arm tensed beneath her grasp. She was immediately creeped out and let go. *He’s probably sore from some S&M activities*, she thought with a shudder.

Harlan pushed those thoughts from her mind and busied herself by taking crime scene photos. Some thoughts were better left unexplored; especially when it came to the Grand Duke’s odd love life.

After finishing her pictures she pulled out a pencil and a pad and carefully sketched the scene. The day was already reaching one hundred degrees and she could feel a droplet of sweat trickle down her face. A moment of lightheadedness clouded her vision, and she took a second to sit on a fallen log just outside of the twine.

Molotov was there in an instant. “Are you all right?”

Harlan nodded. “It’s just the pregnancy. I don’t think the human body was equipped to handle a three month gestation period.”

“Perhaps this is too much for you, I could–”

Harlan held her hand up to stop him. “I’ll be fine, really. I just need to sit for a second.” She tied her long, black hair back, stood and finished sketching the scene.

Harlan put some gloves on and carefully examined the dead girl from head to toe. Someone had spent a lot of time torturing this girl. There were small cut marks on her breasts, and each areola had been removed along with the nipples. She looked in the abdominal cavity to see if anything had been inserted inside; she saw nothing. A collective groan rose from the soldiers standing nearby as she touched the corpse. She ignored them. It was funny how squeamish soldiers could be about death when they saw bloodshed everyday of their lives.

Harlan took her gloves off with a snap and replaced them with some clean ones. She made a thorough examination of the area surrounding the body, picking up a few small items of interest and placing them in some bags. Molotov stood by the soldiers waiting.

There were a lot of hyperia tracks and footprints; unfortunately, the soldiers had been loitering around the body for a while before she'd arrived. It was impossible to tell if any of these tracks belonged to the killer. She painstakingly photographed all of the footprints surrounding the body, anyway.

Turning to Molitov, she said, "How soon can we get her out of here? Can we just have the soldiers move her to my clinic?"

The Grand Duke grew tense. A muscle ticked by his right eye. He called over a messenger and told him to have Gavin meet them at the city gates with some men. Turning his attention back to Harlan, he said, "Yes, we can have the soldiers move her, but the moment we get to the city we're going to have trouble."

Harlan folded her arms. "Why? No one but us knows about this yet, do they?"

Molitov adjusted his monocle. "In theory, no. But I have no doubt that someone has already sent word to her family. They'll be wild when we encounter them."

"We'd better get going then," Harlan said. Molitovs' nervousness was starting to rub off on her.

After carefully wrapping the body in a sheet, she mounted up on her hyperia. She watched as Molitov had the body wrapped a second time in canvas and loaded it into a wagon that was waiting on the main road. Harlan's mouth felt pasty and dry. She opened her canteen and took a long sip. Molitov ordered the men forward and rode up alongside her.

"Do you have any idea who might have done this?" she asked as they rode up the trail toward the city.

Molitov gave her an odd look. "No," he said simply. "Nothing like this."

"Maybe an angry boyfriend?"

"A young, unmarried woman like this wouldn't have had a boyfriend. I can't even imagine who might have been able to get her alone to kill her. These noblewomen are very well guarded."

Harlan stared at the back of the wagon with the body. "She couldn't have had a secret lover?"

"I told you, no."

She sighed. "I'm sorry. I know you're upset, but we have to look at this from all angles."

He reached over and patted her hand. "I know, Harlan. It's probably best not to ask too many questions in front of the soldiers, though. They love to gossip and every word of what we talk about is bound to get back to the family. They'll be unruly enough without rumor and gossip driving them."

"You really think they'll be waiting for us near the city?"

Molotov squinted ahead of them on the trail as if he alone could see the future. "I know they will, Harlan, dear. I only hope Gavin gets there first, or we're bound to have a riot on our hands."

Chapter 3

Just as Molitov had predicted, a mob was waiting for them outside the city gates. There were at least twenty of them; mostly men and all heavily armed with sabers and tridents. As Harlan rode closer behind Molitov and the soldiers, she noticed one man step out from the crowd.

His gaze roamed over all of them then settled on Molitov. "I am Herix," he said, "Eldest son of the family and the dead woman's brother." His voice had a croaking, grating quality, and Harlan attributed it to a long healed throat injury. "I demand you release my sister's body for mourning and burial."

The four soldiers escorting them stopped marching ten feet from the mob and looked back at Molitov who shifted in his saddle. He watched the family like a cat about to pounce. "I'm sorry. That will not be possible."

Harlan groaned inwardly. She'd really hoped Molitov had been wrong about running into this; but of course, he wasn't. The afternoon had now reached an uncomfortable one hundred and two degrees and she was in serious danger of passing out. She'd really been looking forward to sitting in her air-conditioned clinic and resting. As it stood, this disagreement could go on for hours. Whatever happened, she couldn't allow them to take this body until she'd had time to examine it.

"I understand your agony," Molitov said loud enough for the crowd to hear. "We only need her for a short time. Once the doctor has had a chance to conduct her investigation, she will release the body to you. I promise."

Herix glanced at Harlan and snorted his contempt. "I don't need any *human* doctor telling me how my sister died. It's obvious to anyone with eyes. I'll find the murderer myself, and I certainly don't need Gavin's whore violating her remains!"

Harlan frowned. *Here we go. It's time to insult the human.* Although she was used to hearing those insults by now, it never got any easier. Some AEssyrian's accepted her as their doctor and others certainly did not.

Molotov maneuvered his mount closer to hers. The hyperias' hissed at each other, exchanged hostile glances and then settled again.

"Must you have the body first?" he asked Harlan in a confidential tone.

Harlan stifled a sigh. "Yes," she said. "Tell them I'm sorry about this, but I will release her as soon as I'm done. They want to catch the murderer don't they?"

"At this point, they'd probably lynch anyone suspicious," he said. Spurring his mount forward, he returned to face Herix. Fixing the eldest son with an iron gaze, Molotov placed his hand on the hilt of his saber and said, "We cannot give you the body yet. I'm asking you to be patient."

Herix's mouth twisted in rage. With a metallic hiss, he pulled his saber from its sheath and held it in front of him.

Loud, angry shouts rose from the mob behind him; threats and ugly insults too. Just as things were beginning to look hopeless, a group of mercenaries rode through the crowd. The lead soldiers held checkered banners indicating they were fighters for pay and bullied everyone into two groups.

Moments later, Gavin rode into the center of the clearing. A few men in the mob snarled and spit at him. Dressed in shiny black battle armor and armed with an arsenal of weapons, he was a daunting sight. Harlan had to admit, he had the crowd and even her transfixed.

"I thought you'd never get here," Molotov complained.

Harlan met Gavin's gaze, and a wave of staggering passion charged her. Never could she have imagined a man making her feel this way. He was hard, evil and brutally handsome with golden eyes and a thick mane of long, black hair. His soaring six foot seven frame looked even more imposing seated on his massive hyperia. Decadent images of their love-making raced through her mind, making her whole body ache with want. Her fatigue evaporated as if his mere presence could fill her with energy.

Gavin gave her a private smile that was all sex, and she felt her cheeks grow hot. He dismounted, his spurs jingling loudly as he hit the ground. With slow, measured steps, he advanced on Herix, and then stopped.

Herix stiffened. "I should have known you'd show up to back your slut."

"Actually," Molotov offered, "He's here to back me." He too, dismounted and came closer.

Herix ignored the Grand Duke. He didn't take his eyes off Gavin.

Gavin glanced at Molotov. "What's going on?"

"There's been a murder," Molotov said. "Harlan needs to check the deceased for any information that might help us catch the killer. Herix and the family want the body now."

"You and your relatives need to disperse, or I'll throw the lot of you in jail," Gavin said to Herix.

The noble flashed Gavin a wicked smile. "You're a fool if you try. Your soldiers are on our side. They don't want this human woman defiling my sister either."

Gavin nodded. "Actually, I anticipated that. That's why I brought mercenaries."

A tense silence followed. After a few moments, Gavin took a step back and pulled his saber. He sliced the air playfully and gestured for Herix to engage him.

The mother screamed and rushed forward. "No!" she shouted, standing in between them.

Harlan saw her chance and took it. Jumping off her hyperia, she dodged Molotov's attempt to grab her and cautiously walked up to the mother. "Please—perhaps you and I could discuss this and come to an agreement before anyone gets killed, unnecessarily."

The mother stared at Harlan; her eyes welling up with tears, and then she nodded.

Harlan led her over to a shady tree, leaned her back against it and slid to the ground. The heat was becoming unbearable, and Harlan didn't know if she could get back up without help.

"I can't even fathom how horrible this is for you," Harlan said, fanning herself with her hand. "But, I also know that you want the correct person punished for this crime. I wish there was another way; unfortunately, this is the best way to get the information we need to help us. Please reason with the crowd. They'll listen to you. Don't you think there has been enough tragedy for one day?"

The mother squinted toward the wagon and was quiet for some time. Finally, she nodded with a grim look on her face. "I will let you conduct your examination without any further interference. However, I want to see her before you begin."

Harlan frowned, and her voice trembled as she spoke. "I wouldn't dare deny such a request, but I do wish you would reconsider. She is not in good condition."

"I know," the mother said. "The rumors were very specific, but I need to see what that vile beast did to my beautiful daughter so that I can remember it, over and over again, during his execution. Your examination will do some damage to her as well, is that not true?"

Harlan nodded slowly. "I will try to minimize it and only do what's necessary. I promise."

The mother touched Harlan's cheek. "Your pregnancy is very hard on you," she said softly. "Looking into your eyes, I can see you will have a girl." Then she patted Harlan's shoulder and walked toward the assembled crowd while shouting that they were all going home.

As the crowd dissolved, Gavin stalked over. He crouched down by Harlan, pulled his glove off and placed the back of his hand against her cheek. "You feel hot, my love," he said. "We need to get you inside."

Harlan shook her head. She was going to tell him she was fine; he was just over reacting as usual; but the second she opened her mouth, the world started spinning and she fell into a bottomless hole.

Chapter 4

Gavin kicked the clinic doors open and carried an unconscious Harlan to a quiet corner. Sasha raced up behind him and handed him a tiny capsule.

“Break it with your thumb and place it under her nose,” she said. “She’ll wake up in a second.”

He did as Sasha directed and placed it under Harlan’s nose. Her eyes fluttered and her brow wrinkled. She angrily pushed his hand away. “All right,” she said. “I’m okay. I just got a little too much sun.”

Gavin moved back to give her some air. He watched as two soldiers brought in a body that was tightly bound and placed it in one of the examining rooms. They closed the door and stood waiting for further directions. They both looked very uncomfortable.

Molotov stalked up with his arms folded and squinted down at Harlan. “I’m sorry, Harlan. I didn’t realize this was going to be too much for you.”

Pushing everyone away from her, she got up. “It’s not too much for me, damn it. I’m fine. Can we all stop fussing over me now?”

Gavin and Molotov exchanged glances. Gavin would have loved nothing more than to order Harlan to get some rest and not perform the autopsy, but he knew better. She was tenacious and dedicated; those were qualities they both shared. Trying to force her to do anything always turned into a pitched battle, something he wanted to avoid. It wasn’t that he didn’t enjoy their spirited quarrelling; it was that her pregnancy might make her a little more fragile than she normally would be.

Molotov turned to Gavin. “What are you going to do?” The Grand Duke looked as if he expected Gavin to put his foot down.

Gavin remained silent for a moment. He leaned against the wall watching Harlan sip some water Sasha had gotten for her. He wondered how he ever

lived his life without her. She was everything to him. "I'm going to stand here and let the doctor do her job."

Everyone in the room stared at him.

Harlan grinned slightly, got up and headed for the exam room that held the body. "Come on," she said. "Let's get this started so we can release this woman quickly. We don't want any more confrontations like the one we just had."

When Harlan unwrapped the corpse, Gavin's mouth fell open in shock. *This murder victim is a woman!* No one had mentioned that to him. From what was left of her clothing, Gavin could tell the woman was a noble. Peasants couldn't afford fabric like that. No wonder the family had been hysterical.

"When was someone going to tell me the murder victim was a noblewoman?" Gavin asked.

Harlan began filling out a body diagram sheet while Sasha took pictures. "We didn't tell you because we thought you knew," Harlan snapped. "Didn't you pay any attention to what her brother said to you?"

Gavin scowled. "I guess not. I was a little preoccupied trying to make sure Herix didn't eviscerate you."

Harlan didn't respond; she just kept her nose buried in her paperwork. Sometimes she really took him for granted.

Molotov ushered out everyone but Harlan, Sasha and Gavin.

Sasha took a deep breath and looked up at Harlan. "Are you ready to roll her over?"

Harlan finished writing. "Did you already scrape her nails?"

"All done," Sasha said.

Harlan nodded. "Gavin will you help her?"

Gavin waved Sasha back. "Just let me do it."

Gavin grunted and pulled off his leather gloves. He put on some rubber examining gloves and went to the table. With little effort, he rolled the body onto

its side. As he held the dead girl in that position, rancid blood ran from her nose, mouth and the holes the killer had left behind. Some of the reddish-brown liquid dripped from the table onto his boot.

Gavin concealed his revulsion. He had certainly seen his share of bloodshed and death, but for some reason, this cold-blooded murder deeply disturbed him. Perhaps, it was because she was the innocent victim of a calculated and drawn out act of violence.

"Thank you, Gavin. You can roll her onto her back," Harlan said. Gavin eased the body back down with more care than was necessary.

"You know the rest of the exam is going to be very drawn," Harlan said. "I don't really need you to stay, unless you want to."

Gavin seized the opportunity and nodded. He didn't want to stick around for her to find him another unpleasant task. "I'm going outside to smoke," he said and quickly disappeared through the double doors.

"I really don't think he wanted to be present for a sexual assault exam," Harlan said. Everyone nodded their agreement.

"I've never assisted on an AEssyrian autopsy before," Sasha said as she fastened her gown.

Harlan dressed out and adjusted her face shield. "They're pretty challenging."

"How so?" Sasha asked.

"Well, for one thing, I haven't yet found a tool that can cut through an AEssyrian rib cage. The bone is just too thick. So, I just work from the abdomen, up through the diaphragm and underneath. Going in that way can be tricky. I normally have to use a lot of lights."

Harlan took a moment to marvel at the cadaver that lay before her. AEssyrian bone was one of the strongest substances she had ever come across. She had destroyed countless bone saws trying to penetrate it. Colleagues in the

Razorback Queendom were trying to develop a type of laser saw; thus far, they had been unsuccessful.

Dressed in protective gear, Molotov stood at the foot of the table. Harlan took a long swab and inserted it into the noblewoman's vagina, hoping to pick up traces of semen. In a violent case like this, Harlan was confident the assailant, being an AEssyrian male, probably raped the victim to show his possession of her. She placed the swab in a plastic bag, handed it to Sasha and moved on to the actual autopsy.

Harlan did a quick, external exam and noted bruising on the woman's throat. She moved the head to one side. "There's bruising around the neck. Sasha, make a note of this, please."

Next, she began enlarging the opening that the killer had already made in the dead girl's abdomen. Systematically, Harlan removed the organs as Sasha weighed them and placed them in a metal bin.

"Everything's accounted for except the nipples; nothing internally is missing," Harlan said to Molotov. He nodded. Harlan examined each of the organs that had been removed and finished making her notes.

"Sasha, clean the victim as best as you can and wrap her in clean sheets for the family. I'm feeling a little tired and need to sit down again," Harlan said. She stripped off her protective gear and eased herself into a rolling chair nearby.

"Are you feeling ill? Do you want me to get Gavin?" Molotov asked as he approached.

"Oh, God no, don't get Gavin. I'm fine, really. I just need to sit for a few minutes."

"All right then. Do you know how she died?" Molotov asked.

"I suspect she was strangled."

Molotov was shocked. "With all of those injuries and the hole in her belly, you think she was strangled?"

"The wound in her abdomen is post mortem. As for the rest of her external injuries, they are all relatively superficial; there is no damage to her organs or major blood vessels. However, she has several patterns of contusions

around her neck and lots of broken blood vessels around her eyes. That leads me to believe that she was choked out several times before she was killed. Oh yeah, and as for your 'no boyfriend' theory, she was pregnant."

Chapter 5

Gavin stood outside the medical clinic, smoking a cigar. The family waited across the street and watched him. They huddled together, talking in hushed, tense tones.

A wedding procession passed on the road between them; the bride looking young and worried. Gavin watched it pass by, wondering if Harlan was really going to marry him or would keep putting the matter off. He wished he could fault her for how she felt, but he knew she was just being cautious. He didn't exactly have a good track record when it came to happy brides.

As the wedding group passed, Colonel Caraculla rode up behind them on his gray hyperia and joined Gavin by the entrance. He swung one leg over his mount's neck and slid to the ground. Gavin offered him a cigar and he took it. Both of them watched the family for a few moments but said nothing.

Finally, Caraculla asked, "Keeping an eye on them so they won't misbehave?"

Gavin coughed out a laugh. "More likely, they're keeping an eye on me."

Caraculla puffed heartily on his cigar. Gavin glanced at him. "I thought you didn't smoke."

"It grows on you."

Gavin nodded. He wasn't in any position to judge another man's vice, unless that vice happened to be a drug addiction. "Don't develop any nasty habits that are hard to break, Caraculla. I need you to stay sharp. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, Excellency."

A group of young peasant women passed by, escorted by a matronly woman and two armed guards. Watching them, dozens of sexual adventures passed through Gavin's mind. He couldn't wait to get home and be alone with

Harlan. "Bad habits can be very hard to break after you've cultivated them over a lifetime," he said

"Speaking of bad habits, I heard you let Herix off kind of easy," Caraculla said.

"He's only being aggressive because he's upset. I can understand that. I too, have had my share of sorrows."

Caraculla pushed some rocks around with his boot. "Are you and Harlan still getting married?"

Gavin squinted up the road. "She's said yes, but I suspect she's stalling me." They lapsed into a long, uncomfortable silence. "How are things going in the new kingdom? Have they set up all the garrisons?"

"Almost everything is in place according to your instructions. The new governor is setting up courts, hearing complaints and establishing the new currency. The only garrison left to set up is the one in the southern jungle. It's a hard place to penetrate."

Gavin grunted and ground out his cigar. He placed it in his boot. "I'll probably have to go out there and oversee that one myself."

Harlan came out and both men studied her.

She glanced across the street at the family and then turned to Gavin. "The family can claim the body now."

Herix lifted his head at Gavin as if to ask if the deed was done; Gavin waved him over. In response to the cue, the family rushed across the street and went into the clinic.

Herix stopped alongside Gavin. "I want to apologize for—"

Gavin held up a hand. "There's no need. Just get in there and tend to your sister."

Chapter 6

The mood inside the exam room was cold and fragile. The air was tinged with a mild odor of decomposing flesh. Everyone seemed to be moving in slow motion. The woman's body still lay on the exam table covered in several clean white sheets. The eldest men moved around the exam table, quietly discussing how they were going to carry her out. That was when Gavin felt the atmosphere change.

Before he even knew why, he stepped in between Harlan and one of the sons. The man was just lifting the sheets off the corpse when he and the other brothers saw the result of the autopsy; the room exploded in violence.

The nearest son lunged at Harlan; his face twisted in a mask of rage. Gavin caught him in mid-lunge and threw him back into the rush of family members. Enraged screams exploded in the room; echoing off the walls and reaching ear-splitting levels. Someone threw a tray of scalpels onto the floor, and two of the men picked them up and advanced on Harlan.

Herix came up from the floor with a terrifying roar. Seizing Gavin by the throat, he caught him by surprise and pulled him to his knees. A blanket of pain rolled down Gavin's neck and he slammed his fist into his attacker's face while trying to break free. Herix grunted and loosened his grip. His nails came out of Gavin's flesh with an agonizing pinch.

Gavin struggled to get to his feet and slipped in his own blood. He stumbled forward and heard Harlan scream his name. A rush of fury filled him. Reaching behind his back, he pulled the knife sheathed there and brought it around to cut Herix in the face. The blade connected in the nobleman's cheeks and tore an angry gash across his face. Herix's cried out in a high anguished screech.

Finally able to get to his feet, Gavin rose and kicked Herix in the gut with all his strength. The other man doubled over and quickly collapsed.

He scanned the crowd looking for Harlan and spotted her in the corner, bleeding from a cut on her arm. In the chaos of the crowd, Gavin could see Caraculla standing in front of her, keeping her safely pinned to the wall. His weapon was drawn but he had little use for it. Everyone seemed to know it was suicide to attack a venom-spitting Razorback.

Gavin glared at the family helping Herix off the floor. The man looked more injured than Gavin had intended. *Good*. "Collect your dead and get the fuck out!"

All eyes turned to look at Gavin. Every one of them filled with mindless rage and terror. The mother broke from the group and advanced on Gavin. Her features were so twisted she was barely recognizable. "Did you see what she did to my baby? Did you?" she cried.

Gavin folded his arms across his chest, took a deep breath and let it out through his nose. "You're daughter is already dead, old mother," he said in a voice loud enough for the whole room to hear. "The doctor is doing everything in her power to help you find her killer and violence is how you've repaid her?"

Turning, Gavin pointed at Harlan. She was pale and visibly exhausted. "This woman did not kill your daughter. A man, an *AEssyrian* man, murdered her for his pleasure. I suggest you all remember that and get yourselves under control."

There was a moment of low conversations as Herix was being helped out the door by two of his brothers. Finally, the family collected the body of the dead girl and gingerly pulled her off the table. They carried her out like pall bearers, high over their shoulders. As they emerged into the late afternoon, wailing could be heard from the collected crowd waiting outside to greet them.

Gavin came over to Harlan, vaguely aware of blood running from the wound in his neck, and said, "Are you all right?"

She smiled at him and shook her head. "I thought I did such a good job not doing any more damage to the woman. I guess the family disagrees." She placed a clean, blue towel against his neck; it was soaked with blood when she pulled it away. Curiously, he felt no pain.

“It’s just a flesh wound,” he said. “Let’s see to your arm first.”

“I think a neck wound is a bit more serious than a mere cut on the arm,” she said as she placed the blue towel back to his neck. “Let’s see to you first.”

Chapter 7

Harlan sank into her office chair and let Sasha bandage the cut on her arm. It stung like hell and had bled a lot, but thankfully, it hadn't been very deep. Gavin paced the floor in front of her like a hungry lion. She knew he was waiting for Sasha to leave so he could pick a fight with her. Sometimes she wished she didn't love him so much.

"Are you done?" Gavin asked Sasha impatiently.

She shot him an ugly look and ignored his question; instead, addressing Harlan she said, "Are you all right? Do you need me for anything else?"

"I'm doing fine and I appreciate your help, very much," Harlan said touching Sasha's shoulder at the same time. Sasha gathered up her things and left the room, slamming the door behind her.

Gavin turned his golden eyes on Harlan. "What's her fucking problem?"

Harlan sighed. "You are. You should hear yourself sometimes. You're quite the asshole."

Gavin gave her a devilish grin. "I can't be all that bad. After all, you love me."

"I have never been known for my stellar choice in men; besides, I only want you for sex. You're lucky you're so good in bed or I'd dump you in a second."

He stalked over and took a seat in the chair across from her desk. He leaned back and propped his boots up. His spurs dug into the wood and added to the many scars on that edge. Harlan frowned but said nothing.

Gavin studied her. "You know what I'm going to say, don't you?"

"Since I know what you're going to say, there is no reason for you to say it. As far as I am concerned, if you are going to tell me to give up the investigation because I'm pregnant, you can forget it. We've had this argument; you don't tell me what to do. So if you're done, I have some more work to do."

“Harlan, please be fair,” he said in a patronizing tone. “My only concern is your welfare. You have more than yourself to worry about. What about our child? Aren’t you concerned that you might push yourself too far and sacrifice his health? I think passing out at the city gates is proof enough that this is too much.”

Harlan glared at him and stood up. He was baiting her for an argument on purpose and it was working. He knew just how to work her. “Listen; first of all, it’s over a hundred degrees out there. Most humans would have passed out, pregnant or not. Second, I am fine and I am not sacrificing the health and safety of our child. And third, it’s not a boy, it’s a girl.”

Gavin let out a hearty chuckle. He gestured for her to come over to him but she stayed where she was. He grinned, got up and stalked over to her.

Harlan glared at him and shook her head to ward him off but he kept coming. She wanted him with every fiber of her being. She wanted him to touch and kiss her; to use her to satisfy his bottomless lust. She loved him more than she thought possible.

He cornered her and stroked her cheek. Holding her face in his hands, he kissed her deeply, his tongue moving past her lips and finding hers. She moved her hands up his battle armor and over the sticky blood that was beginning to dry on it.

She pushed back from him and stared at the bandages on his neck. She looked into his eyes. “I hate to watch you get hurt,” she said.

He slid his hands under her shirt and caressed her tender, swollen breasts. “Then make me feel better.”

Harlan lowered herself to her knees. Sliding her hands around his codpiece, she unfastened it and dropped it to the floor. She unbuttoned his pants and freed his stiff erection. She began kissing and licking the tip of his hard cock.

He moaned and leaned his head back. He caressed the back of her head and ran his fingers through her hair. Wrapping one hand around his shaft,

Harlan moved as much of his penis into her mouth as she could. At the same time, she squeezed his buttocks with her other hand.

His body rocked slightly and he leaned against her desk to steady himself. Harlan closed her eyes and sucked harder, matching the rhythm of his now thrusting hips. She touched him in every way that he loved, and when his orgasm finally came, he collapsed into her chair...spent.

Harlan watched him pant as she folded her arms. "I'm staying on the case Gavin," she said in a tone that allowed little room for argument.

Gavin placed his cock back into his pants and buttoned them up. "You win this round, my love," he said. "But this issue is not settled."

Harlan grabbed the deceased woman's file and opened her office door. "It's settled enough for me."

Gavin caught her around the waist as she moved past him and pulled her back against him. The office door swung softly shut, and he began to caress the swollen bump in her belly. "Perhaps you would like to make a little wager as to the sex of our child," he said as he kissed the back of her neck.

"Gavin, I need to finish my preliminary report before your Emperor starts crawling up my backside," she said, trying half heartedly to pry herself from his grasp. He was not budging and she was starting to get annoyed. "I'm not going to make a bet with you about our child because you'll lose, and you're a sore loser."

"What makes you so sure it's girl? You don't have any equipment here that would tell you that," he said.

"Titan told me when I first discovered I was pregnant," she said waiting for the firestorm she knew would come. She didn't have to wait long. Gavin frowned grimly, released her and stormed out.

Chapter 8

The Imperial Throne Room had changed since Harlan had last seen it. The Emperor Megolyth had pulled out all the old, mustard colored furnishings and replaced them with earthy reds and gold. Harlan liked the change; the new color scheme was, definitely, more attractive than the old one. As she passed one of the ornate mirrors, she self consciously pushed a few, stray, ebony wisps of her hair out of her face and smoothed out her navy skirt. As she approached the French doors, she fastened the button of her blazer. Even though she and the Emperor were sort of friends, she always felt the need to dress nicely when she met with him. She was fortunate to be able to conduct most of her work in blue jeans and whatever shirt she could cover with a lab coat, but she kept a few business suits for him. He either appreciated the respectful gesture or he just liked looking at her legs; she could never figure out which.

Megolyth was seated on an enormous stone patio, sipping a clear drink and listening to his advisor's report on the state of the empire. The Emperor never asked a question or interrupted in any way. When the advisor was finished, he didn't wait for a reply; he simply stood up, bowed to Megolyth and rushed out. Harlan found it interesting Megolyth had never said a word to the man even though she knew he'd heard every word. The Emperor was subtle that way. He always looked preoccupied but never missed a thing.

Harlan waited by the double glass doors, shifting her weight from foot to foot. She was anxious to get on with the investigation. For a fleeting moment, she wondered what it would be like to have him as a lover. He had so many women, a harem in fact, but none of them seemed to make him very happy.

"Harlan?" he asked.

She walked out to meet him; her black pumps clicked on the stone. He gestured to the chair next to him, the one the advisor had just vacated. Harlan took a seat. He leaned over unexpectedly and kissed her on the mouth; she felt her cheeks heat up. A tiny, sexy thrill tickled her belly.

“Tell me about the murder,” he said.

Harlan sighed and leaned back. “This is what we have so far. Some of the information the Grand Duke Molitov gathered talking to the family. The victim is a young noblewoman, from a well respected family, with no known enemies. She wasn’t known to be rebellious, was well liked and adhered to her mothers house rules; that’s why all this is so strange. The last person to see her was her mother. She said her daughter was feeling ill and told her goodnight around 6:00 p.m. At 9:00 a.m., when the girl didn’t come to breakfast, her mother sent a servant up to get her. She was gone, her room was not disturbed in anyway, and her bed had not been slept in. Everyone agrees she must have snuck out of the house voluntarily, something that would have been completely out of character. The only thing I can think of is she might have had a secret lover.”

Megolyth frowned and lines formed around his mouth. “I don’t know about that, Harlan,” he said, “How could she have met such a man while under constant supervision?”

“I don’t care how watchful a family is. No one is constantly supervised; especially, not an intelligent young woman.”

“What about the condition of the body?” Megolyth asked, “I understand from Molitov she was in very bad shape.”

“That’s right. She’s been partially dissected. Whoever did this took their time with the killing. She’d been tortured and raped. Unfortunately, I couldn’t get any semen because the killer didn’t ejaculate, which is not uncommon in a rape. He also could have been wearing some kind of condom. Since I am still lacking a state of the art research facility, I have sent some samples over to my scientist friends at the Razorback Queendom for testing. I should have them back in a few days.” Harlan decided to risk his wrath later and withhold the part about the dead woman’s pregnancy. Since he didn’t mention it, she can only assume that Molitov didn’t tell him about it, either.

“What’s your next move?”

A servant came over and offered Harlan a drink. She smiled at him and shook her head. “Well, Molitov and I still have a lot of people to talk to, and see if

we can come up with any leads. If you can use your influence to arrange it, I'd like to look through her belongings. I'm thinking the killer must have been someone the woman knew or at least had met once."

Megolyth nodded grimly and tilted his empty glass back and forth. "I will see about finding a tactful way for you to search her bedroom but I can't guarantee it. It is puzzling why she'd sneak off without telling anyone. Perhaps your theory about a lover is true."

Harlan nodded. "Certainly it was someone she felt comfortable with. She was comfortable enough to allow herself to be alone with him, and she managed to leave without anyone noticing. That makes me think she's done this before."

Megolyth turned and looked at her. "I need you to find the killer quickly, Harlan. Everyday that goes by, it will become harder and harder to keep the family under control. The city is in a panic and they have sympathizers who would gladly join them. I don't want to see any vigilante justice."

"I know, I know. The Grand Duke and I will do our best."

Megolyth glanced at the small swell of her belly. "What about your pregnancy? Are you sure you're up for this?"

Harlan frowned and got up. *Great, not this again.* "I feel fine. I just get a little fatigued when I am standing out in these hellish suns for hours. I'm your best chance at finding this guy. We had our share of serial killers on Earth. I have some experience in this area. Please, don't take me off the case just because I'm pregnant."

"You said serial killer. Does that mean you think this will happen again?" Megolyth said, fixing her with his penetrating gaze.

"I can't say for sure. It's just a hunch based on the condition of the body. Many of the injuries were consistent with the ritualistic trophy taking of serial killers. I hope I'm wrong about this, I really do. All I'm asking you for is a little time to gather the information we need to find this guy."

Megolyth took her hand and kissed it. "I hope you're as good at investigations as you are at being a doctor because a little time is all you're going

to get. As for your research facility, I made you a promise and I intend to keep it.”

She grinned at him. “Just remember that I don’t have the long life span of an AEssyrian, so I may be retired or dead by the time you keep that promise.”

Chapter 9

Gavin stalked into the clinic that afternoon and ran into Sasha preparing to leave. She looked tense and stressed which probably meant Harlan wasn't there. "Where's Harlan?"

Sasha leaned against the front desk and folded her arms. "Probably with Molotov somewhere."

Gavin grunted his unhappiness and turned to leave.

"Don't go yet," Sasha said.

He turned around and stared down at her. "Yes?"

Sasha unfolded her arms and walked over to the clinic's front door. She locked it and came back over to where he stood. Her gaze trailed up his chest and met his eyes. *She's flirting with me.* The realization sent a hot, hungry thrill into Gavin's groin. Gods, how he wanted to take her. Images of throwing Sasha on the floor and fucking the life out of her, flashed through his mind. Then he imagined Harlan walking in and joining them. The beast roared to life in his soul, and a soft groan escaped his lips.

She placed her hands on his battle armor and stood on her toes to place a gentle kiss on his lips. His cock hardened instantly. The carnal rush was so sudden, it made him lightheaded. *How long has it been since I was with another woman other than Harlan? Months. Surely, if he indulged Sasha, she'd never tell Harlan, would she?* Even though he wanted it to be simple, he knew it wasn't. Harlan would find out someday, and when she did she'd turn her back on him forever. This would be an inexcusable sin to her. It was one thing to have an affair with a woman she didn't know but her best friend was treacherous ground, indeed.

As he fought his libido for control, another thought occurred to him; Sasha *hated* him. Not as openly as most women did; but he knew, he'd seen the signs. Harlan had told him as well. Why would she want to sleep with him? This didn't make sense.

Whatever her problem was, he wasn't falling for it.

He smiled down at her. "As much as I would love to take you up on your offer, I'm afraid I can't."

She fell into a sullen silence and nodded. "Honestly, I don't know why I did it."

Gavin leaned down and pulled her into a steamy kiss. He pushed his tongue into her, tasting the sweetness of her mouth. She kissed him back, trying to muster some kind of passion for him. Then he was sure. There was no passion in her for him. This would have been a colossal mistake. He broke the kiss off and licked his lips.

"Why don't you find Caraculla and have a good fuck? Perhaps some exercise will work out whatever is bothering you," he said.

"I don't need any advice from you, General."

Gavin went to the door and unlocked it. "You probably don't need my dick in you either, dear. Don't worry, I won't tell Harlan about any of this. Your dirty little secret is safe with me."

Gavin sipped his drink, enjoying the sharp bite as it ran over his palate. He pulled the drapes behind him, back a few inches and glanced at the darkening sky. He estimated Harlan was late by about three hours. He knew it was that damned murder investigation. He wished she'd decided to let Molotov handle the case but she was far too obsessive and driven for that. No, Harlan would work this crime no matter how much he badgered her to drop it. He felt a flash of anger and jealousy over the time he wouldn't be able to spend with her.

A heavy knock came from the front door. He tossed back the last bit of whiskey in his glass, placed his cigar in the ashtray and stalked over to see who it was. A messenger stood there looking as though he was going to faint at any moment. Bad news, no doubt.

Gavin glared down at him. "Well?" he snarled, taking his frustration out on the messenger. "What the fuck do you want?"

The messenger took a step back. "The High Priest was delighted to get your message that you wanted to marry Doctor Harlan Ambrose in the Temple. He, however, must decline your request to conduct the ceremony unless you agree to do penance for the crimes and blasphemies you have committed on sacred ground."

"Did he make you memorize that?"

"Yes, Excellency, he did. What would you like me to reply?"

Gavin leaned in the doorway. From behind the messenger, he could see Harlan getting out of a coach. She paid the driver and made her way up the walkway looking worn.

"Tell the High Priest I'll respond to his request personally," Gavin said, stepping back to let Harlan in the house.

"Yes, Excellency."

Gavin slammed the door closed. He stalked into the kitchen and pulled out another bottle of whiskey. Harlan appeared at the top of the staircase and made her way down having changed into a t-shirt and shorts. She glanced at the bottle and frowned.

Gavin grinned and returned to his place on the couch. "Something wrong, dear?"

She held up a hand and shook her head. She'd given up fighting with him about his drinking. "Nothing," she said, "I'm just tired, but please, let me know if your personality is going to take a nosedive, so I can just go back upstairs."

Pouring himself a double shot, he downed it and bared his teeth as it went down. He patted the couch next to him. "Come, sit and keep me company."

Harlan joined him on the couch. Her body was tense like she was expecting violence at any moment. "I'm sorry I'm late."

"Not to worry. Are you hungry?"

"I've already eaten."

He put his arm around her. "Good. I have something to ask you."

Harlan scooted away from him a little. She cast a nervous glance at the bottle. "This should be good. Okay, ask me."

"What would you say if I asked you to have a threesome?"

A muscle moved near Harlan's eye. *I am so not in the mood for this.* "A threesome? With me and who else?"

The fury was rising in her. Gavin could feel it coming off her like summer heat. He wondered if she was going to slap him but violence really wasn't her way. He suppressed a smile. "You and Sasha, of course."

Harlan bolted from the couch. She held both hands in the air as if to ward him off. "No. That's not going to happen."

"Would you be upset if I slept with her without you then?"

Harlan glared at him. "Are you fucking kidding me? Yes, of course I would be upset! Why are you screwing with me now? You know how tired I am."

He laughed and it sounded cruel. "Not so tired anymore, I'll wager."

"No, you're right. I am not so tired that I cannot tell you what you can do with your marriage proposal. Why do you want to marry me anyway? So you can trap me in this dysfunctional relationship and torture me when you get a couple of drinks in you? Well, I've got news for you, General Theron; I have no intention of marrying you. I only agreed so you'd get off my back and leave me the hell alone."

He was up in an instant, her words cutting him to the bone. "What vicious lies you tell yourself, my love."

"These aren't lies they're the truth! I didn't even want to have this baby because I was afraid of what you might do to it. You and your enchanted graveyard of dead sons! If it hadn't been for this accident, I would have done my best not to have gotten pregnant by you."

A cauldron of rage burned in him with no place to go. He picked up the whiskey bottle and threw it at the wall. It shattered, spraying glass everywhere. "Well, as long as we're confessing our true feelings, let me tell you this—You're pregnancy was no accident. There was no mysterious, hormonal variant to

explain this unlikely event. I planned to impregnate you. I plotted and watched and tracked your cycles until I succeeded.”

Harlan stared at him and shook her head slowly. “Why doesn’t that surprise me? Anything to control me.”

Gavin folded his arms across his chest. “No, not control you. Anything to keep you.”

“Do you really think that I would stay with you because of this baby? If anything, it would give me more incentive to leave for her protection. You had better figure out your priorities, Gavin, because it’s not just you and me anymore. I hope you understand that you’re going to be sharing me from now on, and if it’s you against the health and well being of our baby then you will always come second. Grow up because you’re going to have to deal with that. Now, leave me alone. I’m going to bed.”

Harlan stormed toward the stairs.

“I’m sorry, Harlan.”

Half way up the flight, she turned and gave him a sad smile. “You always are when the damage is done. Forget about the marriage, okay? The last thing I want from you is a matrimonial prison.”

Gavin swirled the drink in his glass trying to look bored. “So fucking your friend Sasha is out of the question?”

Harlan disappeared into the darkness of the bedroom upstairs. “Do whatever you want,” she called down to him, “That’s what you normally do anyway.”

Chapter 10

Gavin came into the room to find Harlan crying on the bed. She lay on her side clutching a pillow to her chest. He was immediately filled with shame. It seized his heart with such agony he could barely make his way over to her. But he knew what he had to do. He had to make this right. He crawled on the bed behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist, burying his face in her neck. She didn't resist him.

"When I was a kid," she said, wiping the tears from her eyes and sniffing, "I can't remember hearing my parents fight. Not once. That doesn't mean they were happy but they never expressed their feelings in the open. I never knew what was real for them. Were they happy, angry or sad? All I knew for sure was they didn't love each other. I came to believe they stayed together because it was convenient. There's no mystery like that in you. Everything you feel is right there, vomited forth in a tirade of emotion. You routinely hurt me more than I thought anyone could. How is it I can love you?"

Gavin turned her around and took her face in his hands. He kissed her with a rush of heated passion. "Kiss me, my love," he said as he growled against her lips. "Show me how much I mean to you."

Harlan pushed back from him with an angry snarl and sat up. Pulling her hand back, she swung at him and slapped him hard across the face, twice. Instead of making him angry, it aroused him even more.

"Don't play you're sadistic games with me anymore," she said in a voice raw with pain.

Grabbing her wrist, he pinned it to her side and planted a scalding kiss on her lips. She struggled against him, pushing on his chest with her free hand to break free.

He let her go and she stumbled off the bed, panting. She glared at him, her breasts heaving.

His hunger for her tore through him like an inferno. He dug his nails into his palms, fighting to keep the beast inside him at bay. All he could think of was taking her in a savage claiming that she'd never forget; but, he held himself back. She knew him better than any woman he'd ever known. She knew what he wanted and how he wanted it; and if he was patient, she'd give him everything.

Keeping her eyes riveted to him, she pulled her shirt off and unhooked her bra. Her breasts fell free; full, round and swollen from her pregnancy. He groaned at the sight of her naked beauty. She backed away from him and opened the dresser drawer. Dipping her hand inside, she came out with a purple nightgown he'd bought her the other night. She pulled it over her head and it slid over her skin in silken ripples, covering her lush body from view. His cock throbbed and ached in his pants. He reached down and removed his codpiece, dropping it to the floor. He unbuttoned his pants and squeezed his cock, sending a wave of pleasure rolling through his groin. *Gods, she was lovely.*

Reaching under the nightgown, she peeled her shorts and underwear off and stepped out of them. She folded them neatly and placed them on a chair in the corner. A slight grin curled the side of her mouth. When she was finished, she sat on the edge of the bed and eyed him up and down.

Mesmerized by her, he got up and stripped his clothes off, letting them fall carelessly to the floor under him. As he advanced on the bed, she moved up on her hands and knees and offered herself to him from behind. He moved up to her and slid his hands over her hips. He slid them down, feeling the plump roundness of her buttocks and the secret moist center of her sex.

She was so wet he found it impossible to stall any longer.

Wrapping his hand around the shaft of his cock, he guided himself into her sex until he was engulfed in ecstasy. He wanted to stop, to savor this exquisite pleasure but like a starving man, he couldn't. He lost himself driving into her with a yearning he'd never known before. She moaned loudly and it was music in his ears; encouraging him, possessing him. He took her in a long, heady session that left them both exhausted and sweating on the bed.

As she rested next to him, he rubbed her belly wondering how this new addition would change their lives. She played with a lock of his hair and he kissed her.

“Did you mean what you said to me?” he asked, “Are you really terrified of what kind of father I’ll make?”

Her green eyes seemed to grow cloudy as a deep fear moved just under the surface. “Of course, I am. Your track record speaks for itself.” Then after a long silence, she said, “Swear to me you’ll never hurt our child, no matter what happens.”

Gavin frowned and shook his head as if she’d gone mad. “Oh Harlan, please –”

Harlan sat up and stared at him. “I mean it, Gavin. If you want us to go any further then you swear it!”

“I swear it.”

“You’d better mean that too. If you ever did anything to harm our child, I’d never forgive you and I don’t know if I could live without the both of you.”

Gavin got off the bed and headed for the living room. This conversation was taking a very dark turn and he desperately needed a drink.

Chapter 11

Sasha sat at her makeup table waiting for Molotov to arrive. He was supposed to take her for a nice dinner tonight but she didn't feel up to it. She hadn't felt up for much lately.

She stared at her reflection and didn't recognize the woman staring back at her. Her normally soft blue eyes had taken on a hardness that seemed to transmit only pain. Her long, blonde hair had lost a lot of shine and wave. She tried to tell herself it was the humidity but she knew better. How you look is often a reflection of how you feel. *You're nothing but his fucking whore.* Try as she might, she couldn't remember what it was like to be happy. Had she been happy dating Caraculla? She'd thought so but now knew she'd just been lying to herself. He'd wanted a much more dominate mate and the numbing comfort of drugs. Oh yes, the drugs. How could she forget his ongoing love affair with that? There wasn't much room for a relationship with Caraculla when he was controlled by demons like that. She doubted even Gavin's golden boy knew what the hell he wanted.

Gavin.

How was it, Harlan could find on this bizarre, violent planet; a relationship most humans couldn't even find on Earth? *All I wanted was some good companionship and Harlan manages to find the love of her life.* At first, she thought Harlan was nuts; that she was reaching for Gavin to curb her loneliness, now she knew. There was no mistaking the way they looked at each other. It was most likely her own jealousy that drove her actions at the clinic yesterday. She didn't really want to have sex with Gavin. She just wanted to prove she could have him if she wanted.

Recently, she'd made a second, more dangerous mistake; she'd gotten involved with the notorious sadist, Molotov. Did she really enjoy the pain he inflicted on her or was she just doing it to keep him? Her affair with the Grand Duke was another crippling lie to herself, all because she was lonely. If she was

smart, she'd go back to the Razorback Queendom where there were other humans and she'd be safe.

A wave of desperation overtook her and she lowered her face to the dark, wooden table. She wanted to cry but couldn't summon the tears. The truth was she was nothing to Molotov but an amusing subject for his minor cruelties.

She heard him come into the villa and make his way to her bedroom. His boots made a slow, steady thumping as he approached. A nervous flutter filled her gut.

"I thought you'd be ready," he said. She heard the bed creak behind her as he took a seat. "Are you ill?"

Sasha lifted her head and looked at him in the mirror. He was dressed in a perfectly groomed, black and gold Imperial uniform. His dark brown hair was combed back from his devilishly handsome face and his monocle rested on a chain in his breast pocket. His amber, reptilian eyes regarded her coolly and seemed to glow from his green face.

"No," she whispered, knowing he'd have to strain to hear her. "I'm not ill, just defiant."

Molotov got up and crept up behind her. Reaching down, he grabbed a handful of her hair and pulled her to her feet. She gasped. An agonizing wave of sorrow filled her heart and the tears that had so eluded her, came flowing from her eyes.

He let go of her hair and pulled her into his arms. "What's wrong, Sasha? I thought you enjoyed the games we play."

She nodded. *Another stupid lie. Why can't I tell him the truth? Am I so afraid he's going to leave me?* All she wanted right now was to die and be free of this horrible pain. Taking his hands from around her waist, she placed them on her neck and lifted her eyes to his. A dark and lethal beauty filled his gaze. He tightened his grip.

She closed her eyes and leaned her head back in complete surrender. All she wanted from him was death. She only hoped his instinct took over so he could finish the job.

He squeezed harder but not nearly tight enough to cut off her breathing. It was time to make him mad. It was her only hope.

Balling her fist, she pulled back and slammed her fist into his face with all the strength she had. He snarled and broke the chokehold, lifting her up and flinging her on the bed.

“Are you *crazy*?” he said, angrily pacing the room. “I thought we’d discussed provoking me. You *know* better than that Sasha. If I lost my temper, it wouldn’t take much for me to kill you. What possessed you to do something so foolish?”

“Maybe I want you to kill me.”

Molotov shook his head, annoyed. He obviously didn’t want to have this morbid conversation with his occasional fling. “Stop talking nonsense and finish getting dressed. Our reservation is in half an hour. You know how I despise being late.”

Sasha curled into a fetal position and stared at the wall. “Yeah,” she said bitterly. “I’d hate to keep the food waiting.”

Chapter 12

Sasha sat at the dining table, in the bustling restaurant, picking at her meal. She could *feel* everyone's eyes on them. She felt awkward among the white table linens and brightly polished silver. She couldn't even identify a few of the utensils. At least the low lighting and sorrel walls made her feel a bit less exposed. All those highbrow AEssyrian nobles looking down at her because she was loose enough to have dated two men, one right after the other. They're all probably thinking, *look, Molitov brought his little slut with him.*

"Now what's wrong with you?" Molitov asked, dabbing at his lips with a napkin.

She knew if she spoke, she'd burst into tears so she just shook her head instead.

"Is there something wrong with your food?" he pressed.

Sasha took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "There's nothing wrong. Everything is fine. I'm just not very hungry." She just needed to get away from him for a moment. Getting up to go to the bathroom, she glanced across the room toward the entrance and froze.

Caraculla was headed right for them. *Great, this will get ugly fast.* She sank back into her chair.

Molitov opened his mouth to say something to her when he noticed Caraculla stalk over to stand across the table from him. The two men glared at each other. Caraculla's eyes were dilated and he looked sweaty.

"Can I talk to you outside?" he said to Molitov in a raspy voice.

Sasha couldn't believe it. Was he really going to pick a fight when he was the one to dump her? "What do you need to talk to him about?" she snapped.

Caraculla pointed at her as if willing her to be silent. "You stay out of this."

Sasha stood up. "If this is about me, I most certainly will not stay out of it. What the hell do you want?"

Molitov grabbed Sasha by the arm and escorted her out, followed closely

by Caraculla. Once outside, Sasha yanked her arm from Molotov's grip. She glared daggers at him. "Don't you fucking manhandle me!"

Molotov raised an eyebrow at her. Then he turned his attention to Caraculla. "What do you want?"

"I demand that you stop using Sasha for your sick, sadistic games. She's not one of your brothel whores and I won't have you putting her on display so the other nobles can laugh at her."

Molotov eyed him coolly and placed his hands behind his back. "If Sasha wants to complain about her treatment, she will do so with me in private. Our relationship is none of your affair. As I recall, you broke things off with her rather abruptly. Could it be your dirty habit has become more important than your lover?"

Caraculla hissed and pulled his saber. He beckoned Molotov with his free hand to engage him. "Let's have this out you prissy little freak. I'm sick of you constantly looking down your nose at me. You want a piece of me so bad, let's go!"

Sasha rushed over to beg Caraculla to stop, but he turned on her in a rage. "Don't fucking touch me!" he snarled.

"I'm not going to fight you, Caraculla," Molotov said. "I know you're a better fighter than I. However, I will remind you that if you attack me anyway, you'll be flushing your career down the drain. You'll be stripped for insubordination and sent back to the Queendom and there's nothing Gavin will be able to do for you. So, it's in your best interest to let this go and walk away. I am, magnanimously, willing to have this go no further."

Caraculla sheathed his weapon, the fury visibly draining out of him. "I meant what I said about Sasha," he said.

"I know you did and I apologize if my treatment of her has offended you. I'll try to improve," Molotov said stoically with no hint of sarcasm.

Caraculla looked at Sasha. Fresh agony tore at her soul. *Why couldn't he love me?* He opened his mouth to say something but she shook her head to stop him. "You're high. Just go home and sleep it off."

Without another word, he slipped off into the darkness leaving Sasha alone with Molitov.

"I'm sorry our evening was ruined," he said. "Come, I'll escort you home."

"No thanks," she said. "I've had enough excitement for one night. I think I'm going to walk home by myself."

Molitov frowned. "Aren't you concerned for your safety?"

She gathered up the length of her dress, turned her back on him and started walking up the road. "Nope," she said over her shoulder. "Strangely, I'm not concerned about anything at all."

Sasha was a quarter of a mile down the tree lined road when she heard someone ride up behind her. At first, she thought it was Molitov or a guard, coming to escort her home, but the triple moons provided enough light to show her it wasn't.

The rider was mounted on a pale gray hyperia and wore a black cloak with a hood covering his face. A cold terror gripped her. She quickly moved out of grabbing distance. A soft, cool breeze seemed to inflate his cloak around him, ever so slightly.

"What kind of man would leave a beautiful alien woman to wander the streets alone?" he asked.

Sasha's heart sped up. She glanced up and down the road and saw no one. "I wanted to be alone," she said. "And I'll warn you, these roads are heavily patrolled. All I have to do is scream and someone will be here in a second."

He chuckled. "You have nothing to fear from me. I'm a new priest at the temple. I have no interest in harming you." He pulled his hood back to reveal a handsome, young face with a terrifying scar over his left eye. The injury had obviously cost him his vision there, for the eye was a cloudy blue.

Sasha felt the tension ease in her neck. She smiled at him. "I'm afraid I don't know much about your religion."

“Don’t be sorry. Most AEssyrians don’t either. They just do as the High Priest says but never really understand why.” He dismounted and took his animals reins in his hand. “May I escort you?”

Sasha shrugged. “Sure, but I’m still watching you.”

“I promise to be on my best behavior. May I ask why you’ve chosen to walk at night by yourself? The evening can be dangerous for a woman alone.”

“Boyfriend troubles,” she said, hoping he’d drop the subject. “What does a priest do all day?”

He grinned. “We pray to the gods, perform sacrifices and offer counsel to those in need of spiritual guidance.”

“Do you get a lot of people in need of spiritual guidance?”

“You’d be surprised.”

After a long walk filled with light conversation, they finally reached her villa. Sasha was feeling better already. She turned to face him and stuck her hand out. “My name is Sasha,” she said. “I’m a nurse at the medical clinic.”

He shook her hand, holding it for a second longer than she was comfortable with. “I’m Bellock Strom. It’s very nice to meet you, Sasha.”

She felt her cheeks heat up and she cast her gaze at the ground. “It’s nice to meet you too, Bellock.”

He mounted up again and smiled down at her. “If you’d like to come by the temple some time and talk, I’m always available. You don’t need any special permission, just stop by and ask for me.”

Sasha folded her arms willing herself not to cry in front of this stranger. “That’s very nice of you, Bellock. I just might take you up on that.”

“I certainly hope you do.”

Chapter 13

The two young women stood outside the servants entrance in back of the stone manor house with their arms folded, trying not to meet Molitov's piercing gaze. The younger of the two, Karin, had cut her hair above the shoulder, an unusual style for an AEssyrian woman. She looked especially troubled. She kept pushing a pile of dirt around with her foot, stealing curious glances at Harlan every now and then. Harlan wondered if her presence here comforted them or made them more nervous.

"You say you saw someone hanging around outside when your mistress left the house that night?" Molitov asked Karin.

She nodded and looked at the other girl, Mai. "You saw him too, didn't you?" Mai looked at Harlan and said, "Yes, that's right. He was definitely an AEssyrian, I'm sure of that because of his size. I never saw his face but I'm sure he's never been around before."

"How do you know that?"

"Because our mistress was a proper lady," Mai said. "She would've told her father and brothers if she'd seen a man she didn't know, hanging around."

Molitov frowned. "So you think she knew this man?"

"She must have known and trusted him," Karin said. "They must have met before."

Harlan paced and looked at Molitov. "But how would he have had access to her to have met her before?"

"Was your mistress betrothed?" Molitov asked the girls.

"Not yet, lord, but her family was in negotiations," Mai said.

"She never met any of the men possible for her arranged marriage?" Molitov asked.

"No lord, that would have been improper," Karin said.

"But not impossible," Harlan countered.

Karin glared at her. "It didn't happen," she said stiffly.

"If you're so concerned about what is proper, why didn't you tell anyone that she had left," Harlan snapped back.

"It's not my place. You would know that if you knew anything about how a household is run."

A rush of anger filled Harlan and she imagined how gratifying it would be to punch the girl for her tone. Her hormones must be out of whack for her to be thinking about assaulting a servant.

Molotov nodded to the girls in dismissal. "Thank you, ladies. You've been very helpful."

The servants turned and walked back to the manor house.

Harlan leaned against a tree and waited until they were out of earshot. When they were finally gone from view she said, "Why do you suppose Karin cut her hair so short?"

Molotov smiled. He took out his monocle and polished it with a soft cloth from his pocket. "She probably did it to be less attractive to the killer."

Harlan smiled and shook her head. *Not a bad idea, though.* She sighed. "Well, we're no further than we were before."

"Not exactly," Molotov said, replacing his monocle in his eye. "We know one important fact. We know she met the killer somewhere. Now, all we have to figure out is who could have gotten close enough to meet her and not have been deemed a threat by anyone."

"It wasn't a family member, because everyone has an excellent alibi. What about someone who comes regularly to the house? A tutor or a cook perhaps?"

"That's an excellent idea. We'd better start checking on people who had trusted access, next. Hopefully, we'll come up with a suspect soon. The Emperor will be furious if another body turns up."

"I get the feeling this is sort of a new profession that you've acquired," Harlan said smiling.

“How very perceptive of you. Under the old king it would have been up to the family to solve this murder. This would have been seen as their problem to solve. Megolyth does things differently. He believes that the old system could lead to innocent people being killed which could spark civil unrest.”

“That’s Megolyth, always worrying about the big picture. How do you feel about your new position as Imperial Detective?” Harlan said, laughing.

“I’m actually fond of it. As a doctor you have a lot of empirical knowledge and I enjoy watching you work. How is it that you know so much about what to look for on corpses? I thought you were a general practitioner that specialized in off world species.”

“I am, but I did my fellowship in a Medical Examiner’s office. I was all set to become a Forensic Pathologist, but after a year I realized that I wasn’t cut out to work with the dead all day. I internalized everything and got personally involved in all my cases. In the end, I was really close to needing antidepressants. I think I was probably just too young to deal in death all the time.” She shrugged. “Guess it’s back to the clinic until something turns up.”

Chapter 14

Harlan wanted to get back to the clinic and keep working, but she knew she'd have to stop by and see Gavin. As temperamental as he was, he got even worse if he felt neglected. She didn't need his temper tantrums in the middle of her murder investigation. It was late afternoon and she knew exactly where he would be.

She came into the Military Complex and made her way to his office. She entered the oval, outer office expecting to see his secretary working in the center like a fiend. Instead, she noticed his secretary's desk was empty. *He probably insulted her and she quit again.* Harlan moved around to his office door and knocked softly.

"Come in," he snarled.

Harlan came in and took a seat across from the huge, mahogany desk that bore years of scarring from his spurs and God knows what else. The walls were lined with book shelves filled to capacity with volumes on history and strategy. Were it not for all of the deadly weapons on the walls, one could mistake the room for a mini library. The windows behind his desk were as wide as the room itself and stretched from the floor to the ceiling. They, of course, overlooked the grounds where the troops drilled. His office was a mess of papers and reports piled on top of each other and some even stacked next to his desk. She knew from gossiping with his secretary that he was notorious for not getting his paperwork done. It usually took threats from the emperor to get him even to *glance* at a report.

Gavin sat with his boots up on the window sill. He was smoking a long cigar and staring out at nothing at all.

Harlan grinned. "Contemplating the universe?"

He looked back at her and smiled. Crushing out his cigar, he turned his chair to face her. "I'm contemplating something more important than that," he said with a hint of amusement in his tone. "I'm thinking about our wedding."

“How is that going for you?”

Gavin shook his head grimly. “Not good, not good I’m afraid. It seems as though the High Priest will not let us get married unless I make amends for all the blasphemies I’ve uttered.”

“Well, you did threaten him too, on more than one occasion. This is a dilemma. I know how much you love to apologize.”

Gavin got up and paced with his hands behind his back. “Indeed. But they’re not willing to budge on the issue, so I guess I’ll have to do it.”

Harlan nodded thoughtfully. *This might be a blessing in disguise.* At the very least, it would make Gavin think a little more about whether or not he really wanted to be married again. “How long will this apology take?”

“From what I’ve heard, it takes about two weeks. It’s a ridiculous long, drawn out process. I’ll be able to come home at the end of the day, but I’ll be spending every day there.”

“Doing what?”

“Praying.”

Harlan fought a grin. “Wow, that’s a lot of praying. Do you really love me that much?”

Gavin stalked over to her and knelt by her chair. He touched his lips to hers and Harlan felt a flood of emotion come over her. She gently kissed him back, running her fingers through his thick, black hair. He broke the kiss and stroked her cheek with the back of his hand. “I love you more than any woman I’ve ever known. If I’m forced to debase myself in front of the High Priest for his pleasure to make you my wife, then so be it.”

Harlan took a deep breath. *Better bring this up now, while he’s still in a good mood.* “Gavin,” she said. “You know, we’re already living together. You have me, there’s no one else. Why do you feel this drive to get married? I mean, you haven’t exactly been happy in any of your marriages...” She let her thought trail off.

He stood up slowly and arched his back. She knew his arthritis had been bothering him lately. Suddenly, she felt guilty for his pain even though she had nothing to do with it.

“You don’t want to get married,” he said flatly.

“I...,” she began awkwardly. *Tell him the truth.* “No, I don’t want to get married.”

He folded his arms. “Because you’re afraid of commitment,” he said. It was a cold statement. He was gearing up for a fight.

“No, I—”

“Are you planning to leave me at the altar like that man you left back on Earth?”

Harlan shot up from her chair as if it had caught on fire. “You don’t know anything about that situation, so don’t pretend you do!”

“I know you left him on the day you were to be married to him. You told me that story yourself,” he said.

She stood up and held her hands in the air in a gesture of surrender. “I am *not* going to discuss this with you. It’s none of your business. I’m leaving.”

Gavin moved across the room and stood in her way. “I don’t think so, Harlan,” he said in a dangerous baritone. “You started this and you’re going to finish.”

Harlan sighed in surrender. “I left him because I knew he was wrong for me and I knew that I didn’t love him. I was too much of a coward to face him and I’m filled with shame every time I think about what I did. *Okay?* Does that make you happy?”

He stared down at her. “And me? Do you really love me or am I just good company for you?”

“I love you, but I don’t want to marry you.”

“Why not? The truth now, no lies,” he said.

Harlan sighed. “I don’t want to marry you because I think you’ll change. I don’t think you’ll make a good husband. I think you’ll be happy for a while but then you’ll get bored. You’ll start to cheat, stay out late and drink. We’ll start

fighting more than we do now. I'd end up hating you and I don't want that to happen. There you are. That's the truth."

Gavin moved out of her way and sat behind his desk. His expression was unreadable. "That's just your hormones talking."

"You believe that if you want to," she said. "Are we done here?"

"Not quite. Where does that leave our marriage plans?"

"You mean *your* marriage plans? Well, that depends on you," she said, opening his door to leave. "You go and do your penance and we'll see how you feel when and if you make it through."

"And if I do make it through?"

"Then maybe I'll take your marriage proposal a little more seriously," she said over her shoulder as she stormed out of his office.

Chapter 15

The bar was surprisingly crowded for a late afternoon. Gavin stalked through the hot, smoky room and found Caraculla in a booth near the back. He slid in across from the colonel and the barmaid immediately brought him a bottle and a tumbler. He poured himself a drink, tossed it back and eyed the younger man.

"Would you care for a drink?" Gavin asked.

Caraculla shook his head, slowly keeping his gaze on a card game a few tables from them. He seemed to have something under his tongue. "No thanks," he said.

"Harlan and Sasha seem to think you've been stealing drugs from the clinic. Is that true?"

Caraculla swallowed something. His eyes were dilated into a strange inky black. "No, I'm not."

"Good," Gavin said. Then after a few moments of silence, he leaned forward and said, "Look, Caraculla, I don't care what you do as long as it doesn't affect your job. Do I make myself clear?"

"Crystal."

Gavin sipped his drink. He was worried about the colonel. He and Caraculla had been through a lot together and he had grown to think of the young soldier as a son. Usually, very open with his emotions, Caraculla had become more secretive and recently had taken to brooding.

"Have you broken up with Sasha?" Gavin asked.

"Yes."

"May I ask why? I thought you really liked her."

"I do, we're just not right for each other. She doesn't satisfy me."

Gavin frowned. That was more information than he'd cared to know. Still, he was curious. "Was she frigid?"

Caraculla gave him a nasty look. "Why, are you thinking about nailing

her?”

Gavin leaned back in the booth and glared. “Maybe I already have.”

The colonel laughed. “You’d never cheat on Harlan. She’d cut your balls off.”

That was it.

Gavin leaned in close to Caraculla. “Listen carefully to me. First, Harlan doesn’t control my actions nor do I control hers. Second, you need to stop sucking down narcotics like they were candy. It’s turning you into someone I don’t want to know, and if you don’t watch it, it’ll ruin your career.”

“Just like drinking ruined yours?”

Gavin got up. “I built my career on victories I achieved before you were even born. You, young man, still have a hell of a long way to go if you’re going have anything remotely close to my career.”

Grabbing the bottle by the neck, he turned his back on Caraculla and stalked over to a vacant bar stool to finish his drinking alone.

Chapter 16

Gavin climbed the countless, black stone steps to the entrance of the temple. The air was moist and weighted with large dark clouds congregating over the afternoon sky. He entered the sanctuary through two ornately carved pillars. He walked along with a million emotions boiling up into his mind. Unlike other visitors, the temple held no happy memories for him. He reached back in time, remembering how the steps had been caked in dry blood and gore from the endless sacrifices at the command of the old king's insane stepson. It was also here where he'd brought Harlan for a forced marriage. He'd thought he'd lost her forever when Megolyth had come to save her. All that seemed like so long ago.

Walking across the polished black marble floor, he looked up at the massive statues of the seven high gods. Dargannon, the war god, was in the center, flanked by the other minor gods.

The high priest emerged from a side room dressed in yellow ceremonial robes. His customary headdress was absent today. Instead, his long white hair was loose around his shoulders, making him look even older than his fifteen hundred years. He stared at Gavin for a long time before speaking.

"My priests told me you'd be coming, but I never thought I'd see the day," he said.

The words inflamed Gavin's rage like kindling. They went back a long way and neither man was afraid to show his dislike for the other. Gavin ached to spit an insult at the priest but held his emotions in check. Casting his eyes down, Gavin bowed his head and went down on one knee.

"I have come for forgiveness, your Grace," Gavin said.

"The proud apostate? The fornicator and renowned whore-chaser? What miracle has afflicted you that you would stoop to come here seeking forgiveness?" the High Priest said in a voice thick with sarcasm.

Gavin took a deep breath before he spoke. Fury pounded at his temples and it was becoming very hard to hold his temper. But he knew he had to if he

ever wanted to marry Harlan. This was proving more difficult than he'd thought it would be.

"I have fallen in love, your Grace," Gavin said. "She is a remarkable woman and I would like to marry her in the temple."

"You're referring to the human doctor, Harlan Ambrose?"

"Yes."

"As I recall, your last attempt at marrying her did not go so well," the High Priest smirked.

"That was a mistake, your Grace. I am fully aware of my error and am willing to atone for it," Gavin said. He was growing numb with hatred for this half-wit.

"Interesting," the High Priest said thoughtfully. "She's such an intelligent woman. I would have thought your nasty, vulgar habits would have driven her off by now. But there's no understanding love." He fell into a sullen silence, and then he said, "You have committed many crimes against the temple. Your penance will not be easy or quick."

"I know, your Grace. I am prepared to do whatever is necessary."

"You will be required to open your soul and explore the depths within. Are you truly ready to take such a daunting journey? Do you truly understand what a monstrous black thing your soul is, general?"

Gavin felt the arthritis in his back ache. "As I said, I will do whatever is necessary."

"Good. This exercise will take two weeks. During that time, you will be required to come here sober every day. You will do as you are requested and you will obey the rules or, once again, you will be banned from this holy place...this time for good. Are you agreeable to that?"

"I am agreeable, your Grace."

"You may stand, general," the High Priest said.

Gavin got up stiffly. He was intensely annoyed he was forced to remain down for so long. "What now?"

“Come with me,” the High Priest said, gesturing to the double doors on the left that led outside.

Gavin frowned and followed the High Priest through the doors.

The gardens were small and colorful with winding paths and a few covered rest areas. Gavin assumed the areas were quiet places for the priests to meditate on the injustices of the universe. *What a bloody hopeless waste of time.*

A young priest in a dark gray cloak came out from one of the rest areas. He had an old scar over his left eye that left him blind on that side. Gavin wondered if it had been a battle injury.

The young priest extended his hand in greeting to the High Priest. They shook hands warmly and turned to Gavin.

“This is General Gavin Theron,” the High Priest said. “He is here to make amends for his numerous crimes. You will be overseeing his penance and reporting back to me at the end of each day.”

The young priest held his hand out to Gavin. “My name is Bellock. It’s a pleasure to meet you. I’ve heard such fascinating stories about you.”

Gavin shook the man’s hand as briefly as possible without appearing combative. *This is a fucking nightmare. Now I have a babysitter, who himself, is a child.* He wished he was anywhere but here.

Turning to the High Priest, Gavin said, “So, when do we begin?”

The old priest smiled. “Why don’t we begin right now?”

Chapter 17

The prostitute's nude body was hanging by the neck from a rafter high above her bed. Both her breasts had been cut off leaving two large, gaping wounds in her chest. The ligature was constructed of blue and white braided strips that had been neatly cut from her dress and knotted into a hangman's noose. Her face was a pale, sickly green. Her eyes were bulging and bloodshot. Her swollen tongue protruded through her lips and her neck was stretched, grotesquely, from the weight of her body pulling on it for so long. In contrast to her face, the lower portion of her arms and legs were a color green so dark that they looked black from the doorway. Molotov marveled at how anyone could have hoisted her so high from the floor alone. He sent a soldier to fetch a tall ladder.

The room in which she had lived and worked was an old storage facility that had probably been converted into her quarters. It was spacious with a secluded entrance behind the main row of buildings, an ideal place to conduct her affairs without any trouble from the local businesses. She was a young woman and Molotov guessed her age to be somewhere around four hundred. Her long, brown hair was set in a neat braid that wove down to her lower back.

The five guards with Molotov were nervously pacing and taking turns staring out the window. The Grand Duke could read their minds; they wished Harlan would get here soon so they could cut this woman down and get the hell out.

Miles, the Captain of the Guard glanced at the body. His mouth twisted into a frown. "Can we open the door, lord? She smells to high hell."

"No," Molotov said. "I know the stench is unpleasant but we can't take the chance on drawing a curious crowd. The last thing we need is a panic."

"Here comes the doctor," one of the guards said, rushing toward the door. He flung it open so quickly that Harlan didn't even have time to knock.

Harlan glanced around nervously and entered the room. She was dressed in blue jeans and a light blue shirt and Molotov noted that her pregnancy barely showed. Her long, black hair was pulled back into a loose ponytail and she carried her brown leather doctor's bag. Her emerald eyes scanned the room, apparently looking for the source of the foul odor. Then she looked up and immediately stepped back.

"*Shit*," she whispered.

Molotov raised an eyebrow and adjusted his monocle. "Indeed," he said. "Shit."

"Can the soldiers wait outside?" she asked.

They didn't even wait for Molotov's answer. They all pushed past her to stand outside.

Harlan grinned at Molotov. "I guess they're a little uncomfortable in here."

"They've been whining since we found her," he said coolly. He stared up at the prostitute and shook his head. "Poor creature."

Harlan set her bag down on the floor and unzipped it. Pulling the small, silver camera from within, she began moving around the room taking pictures. She climbed up on the ladder to get better shots of the victim. Molotov moved up behind her and placed a hand on her back to hold her steady. It wouldn't do to have the pregnant doctor tumble off the ladder and injure herself.

She shifted uncomfortably for a moment, and then relaxed. "Who found her?"

"A soldier looking for a good time. Apparently she was his favorite."

"Neat," she said, signaling him that she was ready to descend. They stepped down and Harlan moved around collecting all the evidence she could find in the room. "Okay, I think I'm done with this. Can we have the soldiers cut her down?"

Molotov opened the door and gestured for the soldiers to come back inside. They reluctantly filed back in and looked at the doctor for direction. Harlan stripped the blanket off the bed and pulled the sheets off. She took one, twisted it into a rope and handed it to one of the soldiers.

“My suggestion is that two of you climb up the ladder. One of you needs to wrap the sheet around her chest and under her arms. The other one cuts the ligature at its midpoint and lowers her down slowly. Sound easy enough?”

The soldier holding the sheet groaned. “Can’t we just cut her down and let her drop? It’s not like it’s going to hurt her.”

“Be that as it may, I don’t want any additional damage to her body. If you drop her, it may break her neck and then I won’t know whether the broken neck was caused from the hanging or from you clowns.”

Molotov was tired of waiting. “Stop wasting time and do as the doctor asks.”

“Yes, lord,” they all said in unison.

Without incident the soldiers managed to lower the body onto another waiting sheet that Harlan had placed on the floor. She quickly examined the woman and took a few more pictures before carefully wrapping her in the sheets and binding them. Then, as an afterthought, she said, “Does she have any family waiting around for her?”

“If she does, they’ve probably disowned her by now. I doubt we’ll have the same kind of trouble we had last time.”

Harlan nodded, packed her things and started for the door.

Molotov touched her arm and she turned around and looked at him curiously. “Is everything all right?” she asked.

“No,” he said. “Not everything. You might want to have a talk with Sasha. I think she’s having some troubles.”

“What kind of troubles?”

“Emotional troubles, female troubles, I don’t know. I’d rather not go into details but could you talk to her? I think she needs a friend’s ear.”

Harlan’s brow wrinkled. “I think you need to stop screwing with her. She’s not in your league. She’s just lonely and confused.”

Molotov opened the door for her. “I know you’re right, but I’m afraid that if I stop seeing her she won’t understand why. She’s been saying and doing some odd things lately. I’d hate for her to do something foolish and get herself killed.”

Chapter 18

Harlan came into her office after the autopsy and flopped into her chair. Molotov sat in the chair across from her desk watching her. Anticipating her fatigue, he'd made her a warm tonic. She smiled at him and sipped it gratefully. It tasted like a delicate white tea with just a hint of sweetness.

"That's good. What is it?" she asked.

"Something to keep your strength up while you're pregnant. My wife used to drink them all the time while carrying our children. It did wonders for her."

"Well," she said, setting back in her chair. "Do we know who this woman is yet?"

Molotov tossed a thin file on her desk. "Nyla Cosik. She's rather well known to the local authorities, as most in her profession are."

Harlan picked up the file and leafed through its few pages. "This doesn't tell me much," she said thoughtfully. "From the injuries on her, it looks as though she was tortured for quite a while before she was killed. The only thing I can't figure out is why she doesn't have any defensive wounds."

"Because she didn't need to defend herself," Molotov said.

Harlan stared at him. "I don't follow you."

"Her customer paid extra to be able to hurt her. She wouldn't have needed to defend herself because the violence was foreplay."

Harlan paled and shifted uncomfortably. She squinted at him and held up the file. "Do you know her?"

"I know *of* her."

"But you've never been with her yourself," Harlan asked.

"No. My women are...more expensive and more skilled."

Harlan swallowed. "How come you didn't mention this before?"

Molotov shrugged. He knew how distasteful his sexual lifestyle was to her. "I didn't think it was relevant."

“Do you have any idea who might have done this? Perhaps one of your blueblood friends who went a little too far this time?”

“No, I don’t. But I’m certain it’s the same killer as the noblewoman,” he said.

“Why do you think that? They aren’t exactly the same kind of woman.”

“I suspect it’s the same killer because I think the noblewoman was his first. Realizing his mistake, he decided to try again. So this time around, he chose a victim that no one would care about. This time, he chose a victim that would die unlamented and unnoticed, a woman whose profession puts her in danger everyday. Nyla is the perfect victim. Even now, we cannot find anyone to claim her.”

Harlan leaned back in her chair and stared out the window.

Molotov felt guilty for this prostitute’s death and he didn’t know why. Was it because he too had exploited these women for his perverse fantasies? Did Harlan think less of him because of his strange hungers? He hoped she didn’t. She was one of the few women he deeply respected, and he’d hate for this issue to come between them.

“May I ask you a question?” he said. “And please answer me truthfully; I don’t need you to spare my feelings.”

Harlan turned her chair to look at him. Her lips were slightly pink and full; for a second, he longed to kiss them. He imagined her pants around her ankles, her body pulled over his lap and him spanking her bottom raw. A dizzying wave of lust rushed through him, and his cock stiffened in his pants. He grinned but ignored the impulse.

“Do I disgust you?” he asked.

“You mean your lifestyle?” she asked. She stared at her desk for a moment, and then said, “You don’t disgust me. I just don’t understand the thrill.”

He sighed. “It’s something you either feel or you don’t; there’s no faking it...which brings me to Sasha. I’m concerned about her, Harlan. I think she’s seeing me out of loneliness, not lust. I don’t think she enjoys our little games. In fact, she’s made some unsettling requests.”

“What kind of requests?”

“Lately,” he said, taking his monocle out and placing it in his pocket. The chain gleamed in the office light. “She’s made the request that I kill her.”

Harlan came into the exam room just as Sasha was closing the prostitute’s body. Sasha looked tired and pale. “Need some help?” Harlan asked, not sure how to start this conversation.

Sasha finished her stitching with her mouth set in a tortured frown. “No,” she said. “I’m done here. Good thing too because I’m sick of that creepy guy from the pauper’s cemetery hanging around the back door. Now he can collect his corpse and get lost.”

Harlan folded her arms and leaned against the wall. There was no easy way to broach this subject, so she might as well dive right in. “Sasha, is everything okay?”

Her friend stepped back from the body and pulled her gloves off. She tossed them in the trash nearby. “Yeah. Sure. Why?”

“Molotov seems to think you’re...troubled.”

Sasha coughed out a harsh laugh. “That’s silly. What does he mean by that?”

“He thinks you’re suicidal.”

“*What?* That’s crazy. I’ve never tried to kill myself,” Sasha said. Her eyes had become glassy.

“He said you asked him to kill you,” Harlan said.

Sasha chuckled. It sounded forced. “I was just kidding,” she said as she inched toward the exit. “Thanks for worrying about me, really, but I’m fine. Everything is just great.”

Harlan opened her mouth to tell her to wait; to stay and talk this out, but Sasha was already bolting out the door.

Chapter 19

When Harlan got home that evening, the rich aroma of cooked food and exotic seasonings enveloped her. She walked through the entryway inhaling deeply. Her mouth watered, reminding her she hadn't eaten since noon. Making her way through the grand hall toward the dining room, she spotted Gavin in the kitchen. He had just finished roasting some meat. He sliced and plated it for her. He placed his own plate on the table across from hers, meat raw like he preferred.

"You made dinner?" she said, unable to believe her eyes.

Gavin picked up the utensils and placed them on the dining room table. She followed him and realized he'd also made her some tea. This was very weird. He *never* cooked.

He pulled out a chair for her. "Yes, I made dinner. Aren't you hungry?"

Harlan eased herself into her seat and stared at him. "I'm starving."

"Good," he said. "Then you'll have nothing to complain about."

Still staring at him, she placed a morsel onto her tongue. It was delicious. The moment she swallowed, her hunger took over and she wolfed down a few more bites. She paused to sip her tea and thought that was excellent too. *What is going on?*

"So is making me dinner part of your penance?" Harlan inquired.

"No, love. My penance requires much harsher sacrifices than merely cooking you dinner. This is just a pleasant side effect for your benefit."

Gavin continued gulping down his food, stopping occasionally to drink some water. Harlan squinted at the glass. Yes, it definitely was water.

Harlan struggled to bury the smirk threatening to appear on her face.

"Does the harsher sacrifice have anything to do with the water your drinking?"

"I am not a liberty to discuss the sacred ceremonies of my reparations. So, let's discuss something else. How goes the investigation?"

“Crappy, thanks. Another body has turned up. A prostitute was killed in the city center.”

Gavin nodded and grunted. “Unfortunately, murder is an occupational hazard.”

“Molotov thinks it’s the same killer and I think I agree with him,” she said, putting another tasty piece of meat into her mouth.

“Probably is. Murdering women is an unusual activity for AEssyrians. Men usually prefer to murder other men.”

Harlan leaned back in her chair. “You’ve murdered women before,” she said, regretting it the moment it left her lips. Why was she picking a fight with him over this?

Gavin picked up his napkin and roughly wiped blood from his mouth. “Yes, I have killed women, but only when I had to. And I certainly never enjoyed it.”

She shook her head and sipped her tea. “I’m sorry, Gavin. That sounded harsher than I’d intended.” She smiled at him. “Thank you for dinner.”

He leaned forward and kissed her. She tasted blood on his lips. “I’m glad you’re pleased. With this penance I have to do at the temple, I may not be home early enough to cook every night, so enjoy it.”

“Why can’t you just cook me dinner for awhile? Why do you have to go through with this penance?”

He pushed his empty plate back and slumped in his seat. “It’s the only way they’ll marry us.”

Harlan fell into a dark silence as Gavin picked up the plates and put them in the kitchen. She sighed. *Oh yeah...that*. She couldn’t think about marrying Gavin right now so she didn’t pursue that portion of the conversation any further.

“I just wish someone knew who that prostitute was with last,” she said as she rubbed the back of her neck.

Gavin finished washing the dishes and came back in. He tossed back the rest of his water and sat on the edge of the table. “Someone does know, my

love, and she's much closer than you think. Check with the madam that controls that woman's appointments."

"But Molotov spoke to the madam. She said she had no idea who the woman's dates were."

Gavin shook his head and laughed. "She's lying. I'm surprised Molotov believed her. But then, his companions are of a higher social status. Low rent working girls, like the dead woman, are controlled by their madams. Much like how pimps work on your planet. You can bet that madam knows exactly who that girl was with last. In fact, the madam must have come looking for her when she didn't turn up for her next appointment. When she found her dead, she just closed the door and waited for someone else to discover the body."

"Why would the madam do something like that? Why would she protect a killer?"

"Money, dear. The madam can get a whore anywhere. The orphanages are full of young women ripe for the picking. Good paying clients, even if they are murderers, are harder to come by."

Harlan lowered her head onto the table. "Great. Guess we'll have to go talk to the madam again tomorrow."

Gavin stroked her hair and kissed her on top of the head. "Let me come with you," he said. "I can be very persuasive."

She lifted her head and grinned at him. "I think that's an excellent idea."

Chapter 20

Harlan lay awake in bed listening to Gavin's light snoring. His heavy, masculine scent was reassuring and she twisted in the sheets, trying to find a comfortable position. Rolling on her side, she watched him sleep. This was a switch. Usually, it was him that had trouble sleeping. Most nights, he was haunted by a million demons, in his past and in his present, both real and imagined. When she'd first moved in, he'd driven her crazy with his getting up all the time. He'd have a bad dream then get up and pace the floor smoking until he calmed down. Thankfully, he didn't do it as much anymore. Their being together seemed to calm him a little.

Tonight it was her who couldn't sleep.

She reached down and rubbed her small, round belly. Soon she'd be a mother. How odd and alien that word seemed. *Who would have thought I'd fall in love with such a big jerk?* Looking at him again, a vague hunger warmed her sex. Reaching down to her underwear, she was surprised to find she was very wet. The pressure of her fingers against the lusty tender flesh made her gasp. *These hormone changes are nuts.*

Reaching over, she ran her hand down the thick, scarred muscle of his chest. He opened his yellow eyes and stared at her. She leaned forward and touched her lips to his, slipping her tongue into his mouth.

He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her against him. His kiss became pure fire and Harlan couldn't get enough of him. She moaned against his mouth and took his hand. She slid it under her t-shirt and guided it over her breast. Every muscle in Gavin's body grew hard like rock.

His hand cupped and kneaded her breasts, taking care not to squeeze them too hard. Harlan's body went wild. Passion exploded in her and all she could think of was getting his cock inside her.

Clawing at her underwear, she peeled it off and pushed her hips toward him. She was grateful that he always slept nude. Gavin rolled onto his back and

helped her straddle his hips. She grabbed the thick shaft of his penis and pushed it against her slick core. Rocking her hips back, she pushed herself down on him, gasping as he filled her. She opened her mouth and moaned, consumed by the mind-numbing pleasure.

“*Gavin*,” she whispered as she rocked back and forth on his cock. The orgasm was coming too fast. She slowed her movements trying to prolong her pleasure but nothing could stop its relentless rush. The ecstasy took her in an unexpected rush of furious heat and feverish desire. It moved over her in waves, giving her pleasure she’d never known possible.

Gavin rolled her over, taking care to keep his weight off her; he thrust his fervor into her with punishing strokes. Harlan’s body became a slave to her emotions. Arching her back, she cried out his name as her fingers ran through his hair. Touching his mouth to her ear, Gavin spoke to her in AEssyrian; taunting her and telling her how beautiful she was to him.

The next few orgasms came one on top of the other, charging her system with the most exquisite pleasures. Her hands trembling, she took his face in her hands and kissed him with all the love in her heart.

“I love you, *Gavin*,” she whispered to him as he neared his own climax.

Gavin roared his release into the pillow and filled her body with his seed. He collapsed next to her, panting.

“I love you too, Harlan,” he said in a voice already thick with fatigue. “And you’ll never know how much.”

Chapter 21

The red light district looked like a simple slum in the daylight, but Harlan knew better. Flagged on AEssyrian maps as one of the most dangerous places in the city, she couldn't imagine what possessed anyone to come here. Oh yes, what had Gavin called them? *The indulgence of bad habits.*

The streets were lined with whorehouses, each one controlled by a ruthless madam. Each one specializing in different types of bedroom pleasures; from straight sex, to bondage, to other perverse desires she didn't even like to think about. They arrived, on foot, at the building they were looking for, and Harlan thought about waiting outside. The two story wood building had a sagging porch, wood rot and broken windows. Harlan hung back, letting Gavin and Molotov go in first.

Inside the house smelled like dirty bodies and old sweat. Harlan breathed through her mouth to filter the stench. Gavin turned to look at her. "Someone is dead in here," he said frowning.

She was amazed he could single out that scent among the various other unsavory ones, but then, he was an AEssyrian. "Where?"

Molotov put his hands behind his back as if he wanted to guard himself against the possibility of touching anything.

Gavin pulled his saber and held it at the ready position. He took on that predatory leer that Harlan loved so much. "Upstairs," he said. He stalked toward the staircase and began a slow ascend.

"Gavin, be careful," Harlan said wincing. "I don't think those stairs will hold you."

He didn't acknowledge her. With the next step Gavin took, his foot broke through the wood. "Shit," he growled.

Harlan moved toward the stairs to follow Gavin, but Molotov grabbed her arm and shook his head, frowning. "He's a big boy, Harlan. He can take care of himself."

Gavin finally made it to the top landing and began searching the bedrooms. A few minutes passed that felt like years. Finally, he came to the top of the steps and sheathed his weapon. "The madam's up here, all right. Unfortunately, I'm afraid she won't tell you much. Someone beat you here and cut her throat."

Harlan dodged Molotov's grip and rushed up the stairs, taking care to stay as close to the wall as possible. "You didn't touch anything yet, did you?" she called up to Gavin.

He frowned, watching her ascent. "No, dear. I saved all the fun for you." When she reached the top, he pulled her onto the landing. She followed him into the bedroom and spotted the body slumped over the vanity. It looked as though someone had just crept up from behind and surprised her. The murderer didn't appear to want to spend as much time with this victim. *She was probably killed because she knew him.*

Gavin watched her as she collected evidence and took pictures. Then he said, "You'd better go see Megolyth after you're done here, Harlan. He's going to want to know you're body count has gone up to three."

Harlan lowered her camera and frowned at the body. "What if he wants to take us off the case?"

Gavin crouched by the madam and inspected the pool of blood by her feet where the throat wound had bled out. He let out an evil chuckle. "Then what would he do? He still has a murderer on the loose. No Harlan, he's not going to take the two of you off the case. But he is going to be hopping mad."

Harlan had never been on the wrong side of the Emperor's cold anger, but she was today. Megolyth paced the royal study, with his hands behind his back, while she and the Grand Duke stood in front of the fireplace, waiting. The summer heat in the room was stifling; she wished he'd yell and get it over with so they could leave. Unfortunately, he hadn't said a word to them in fifteen minutes. Not since they'd told him about the last murder.

Suddenly, he stopped and turned to them. His eyes were blazing with fury. "How many murders is that now?"

Molotov glanced at Harlan who remained silence. She just let him answer the questions. "Three, Highness," Molotov replied.

"I thought you two were closing in on the man?"

"We are, Highness. That's why he killed his last victim. He didn't want the madam to identify him."

"So you have nothing," the Emperor said. "Now, what do you intend to do?"

Molotov adjusted his monocle. Harlan admired how cool he stayed under questioning. It was hard to rattle the Grand Duke, no matter who you were. "We're going to go back and talk to some of the other prostitutes. Someone must have seen something. There's also the possibility that he's been with other women out there before."

Megolyth came over and touched Harlan's cheek. It was a quiet, intimate gesture and it made her blush. "What about you? How are you doing?"

She didn't know if he was referring to her relationship with Gavin or her pregnancy. "I'm feeling fine, really," she said. Then she added, "We're working very hard on this case, Highness. We want to catch this killer just as much as you do."

The Emperor stepped back and stared at Molotov. "I want you to promise me you'll catch this killer before he gets anyone else," he said in a low, dangerous tone.

Molotov frowned. "I can promise we'll do our best."

Megolyth glared at him. "That's just not good enough, lord. Promise me."

The Grand Duke met Harlan's gaze and she could almost read his thoughts. *Boy, are we screwed now.* "Okay, you're Highness," Molotov said. "I promise."

Chapter 22

Gavin arrived at the temple the next day ready for any form of humiliation they could inflict on him. Bellock, the young priest assigned to him, was waiting and greeted him warmly. After a brief exchange, Bellock led him outside to a shaded patio and gestured to a plush suede seat. Gavin sat feeling his body melt into the chair. A meticulously manicured garden surrounded the courtyard adding brilliant colors to the otherwise gray surroundings. For a moment, he allowed himself to relax in the morning heat.

As the sun baked into his already damp skin, a deep sense of contentment came over him and he knew Harlan was the cause. Just the thought of their burning sex last night charged him and ignited his blood. Never had sex with a woman felt more *complete* and satisfying than it was with her. Granted, he knew some of her passion was due to hormonal changes brought on by her pregnancy, but he didn't care. Even when she hadn't been pregnant, she'd been hot for him. Their relationship had become more passionate as the months passed by, something he'd never experienced before. Usually, his desire for a woman cooled not long after his first orgasm. But with Harlan, the longer he stayed with her, the more unquenchable his lust became. Now that her pregnancy was beginning to show, he couldn't get enough of her.

Bellock sat down across from him and held out a box of, Churchill sized, Cusano 18 cigars. Gavin took one, clipped it and lit the tip. He pulled a long satisfied drag then exhaled smoke rings. "I thought we'd be face down in the temple praying," he said.

Bellock laughed. "Is that what you think we do all day?"

"Frankly," Gavin said, "I have no idea what you people do here."

"We'll save the praying for later. For now, I thought you and I could get to know each other," Bellock said. He pulled out a bottle of Sawjack Whiskey and cracked it open. He poured them both a double shot.

Gavin's mouth watered as he stared at the glass. "What is this, a test? I was told not to drink."

Bellock grinned and sipped his drink. He grimaced. "Just for today, it's okay."

Gavin picked up the drink and tossed it back. He made a mental note not to get too drunk. He didn't trust Bellock. There was something about the man that didn't feel right. He decided to dig a little deeper and see if he could find the real man behind the pleasant mask.

"What happened to your eye?" Gavin asked.

Bellock winced as if the wound still hurt. He reached up and touched the pale scar that ran over his eye. "It was a childhood accident. My step-father was showing me how to fight and cut my face."

"Is that why you became a priest?"

"One of many reasons."

Probably the primary reason, Gavin thought. He poured himself another shot and sipped it. Assyrian men never chose benign careers like priests or merchants unless they were, somehow, unfit for military service. An injury like Bellock's would have been devastating in combat. Not only did you have limited vision, but you were constantly obliged to protect the other eye. And the good eye would be the prize every combatant would be trying to take from you.

"I've heard you just transferred here," Gavin said. "Where did you grow up?"

"Sun Morrow," Bellock replied.

Gavin never heard of it. He'd have to look it up on a map when he got back to his office.

"Married?" Gavin asked.

Bellock poured them both another drink. "Widowed. You?"

"Engaged."

"Ah yes, to the human doctor. I've seen her around. She's very pretty."

Gavin bit his tongue against a nasty remark and reminded himself to be agreeable. He let the conversation lull for a few moments.

Then Bellock said, "What's it feel like to kill so many people?" He was slumped in his chair as the whiskey worked its magic on him.

"It feels like work," Gavin said.

"You ever kill any women?"

"When I've had to."

Bellock met Gavin's gaze. "Tell me, and this is just between us, did you ever enjoy it?"

"Sometimes," Gavin lied. The truth was, he hated it and he hoped he never had to do it again. "Sometimes, I'd go back to my tent and jerk off afterward."

An infernal light came into Bellock's eyes. "*Really?*"

Gavin chewed the end of his cigar and feigned boredom. "Really. What about you? As long as we're sharing secrets, have you ever killed a woman?"

Bellock's lips stretched into a paper thin grin.

Gavin thought he caught the other man wink at him, but it was so fast he couldn't be sure.

"No," Bellock said in a voice that was low and dangerous. "I'm a priest. I'd never do a thing like that." Then he tossed back his drink and smiled.

Chapter 23

Gavin slammed his saber into Caraculla's blade, knocking him back four feet. The Colonel, he guessed, was high because Gavin would never have been able to do that when Caraculla was sober. Caraculla grunted and lowered his weapon. Sweat poured down his face like he'd been hiking for hours. Taking advantage of the sudden opening, Gavin lunged forward and cut his opponent across the chin.

Blood flowed quickly from the open wound. "Fuck!" Caraculla said as he snarled and glared at Gavin with bloodshot eyes. He wiped the blood with his forearm smearing it along his jaw.

Gavin advanced and Caraculla held up a hand. "Stop, will you?" he asked. "I'm not ready, yet."

Gavin stepped back and sheathed his weapon. "You're not ready a lot, lately."

Caraculla sat on the sandy floor of the open arena and rested his forearms on his knees. He placed his saber on the ground next to him. "I know how you love kicking my ass, but I need to stop."

"Are you sick?"

"No, I just need to take a break."

"Like an old woman on a shopping trip."

"Fuck you, Gavin. Okay? Just fuck off."

Gavin frowned and sat on the ground next to him. "I love you like a son but I'm not going to tolerate this excessive drug use. It's affecting your job. You need to cut back. I don't want you coming to the arena for practice stoned out of your mind anymore. Got it?"

Caraculla nodded and sighed. He made no eye contact.

"And another thing, if you steal anymore narcotics from Harlan's clinic, your intervention will be a dark cell in the bowels of the prison. I am tired of defending you and telling Harlan that I'll talk to you. Your drug habit is now

inconveniencing me. So give it a fucking rest,” Gavin said through gritted teeth.

Caraculla hung his head and a few long strands of red streaked hair covered his face. “I know, Gavin. I’m sorry. It won’t happen again.”

Gavin let the moment pass. He listened to Caraculla trying to catch his breath. “What happened to you and Sasha?” Gavin asked as he lit a cigar.

“It didn’t work out. She’s too submissive for me.”

Gavin grunted his understanding. That explained why Sasha had come on to him. She was rebounding from being dumped. This was a delicate subject; therefore, it was probably best to talk about something else.

Some other fighters came into the area and took a position on the far side, away from Gavin and Caraculla. “Have you ever heard of a city called Sun Morrow?” Gavin asked.

“Yeah,” Caraculla said. “It’s a poor, central city. Why?”

“One of the priests, overseeing my debasement, is from there and I’d never heard of it.”

“I’m not surprised. It’s a shit hole.”

“Have you ever been there?”

“More like, I’ve been *through* there,” Caraculla said. “That’s pretty interesting about your priest. He probably chose that profession over a life of crime.”

“Do you think you can find out more about him?” Gavin asked. “His name is Bellock.”

“Sure, but why?”

“Let’s just say, there’s something about this priest that seems out of place. He’s just a little too interested in murder for my taste. He might be the killer Harlan and Molotov are looking for.”

Caraculla laughed. “That’s a pretty dangerous accusation. You know some people would see that as a manifestation of your disdain for the priests in the temple. Besides, he may just be trying to impress you.”

“I am well aware of the power of these priests. Especially, that head idiot who hates me. I would feel better if I knew more about him, so just humor me,” Gavin said.

“All right, what’s this guy’s name again?”

“Bellock.”

“I’ll see what I can dig up,” Caraculla said, picking up his weapon and getting up. Gavin got to his feet as well.

Caraculla grinned. “Care to go for another round?”

“No,” Gavin said, walking off the arena floor. “You’re just not much of a challenge anymore.”

Chapter 24

Sasha closed her eyes and tried to enjoy the sex but she just couldn't. A deep sadness flowed through her and she wasn't sure where it came from. It wasn't Molotov's fault but she did hope he would finish quickly and get out. She looked for shapes in the wood grains of the ceiling slats as she lay beneath him. Noticing her indifference, he stopped thrusting and looked down at her. "What's wrong? You're normally more passionate than this?"

"I guess, I'm just not into it tonight," she said.

He pulled out and climbed off her, propping his back against the headboard. She knew it was hard for him to reach orgasm without some violence during foreplay. But he hadn't wanted to do that tonight. He was becoming wary of her, cautious, like she was about to explode at any moment. He probably wouldn't be back after tonight and she really didn't care.

There was a small part of her that wanted to keep up the front; to continue to fake that she liked the spankings and beatings, but she knew it was a lie. It had been fun at first; something new and different but it wasn't her. The truth was they just didn't turn each other on anymore.

"I'm sorry it's no good for you," she said. "Maybe if you spanked me you could come."

Molotov glanced at her and got off the bed. He picked up his clothes and began dressing. "What's the point?" he said. "You don't enjoy it. Why don't you just admit we both made a mistake and go find someone else?"

Sasha pulled the thick blanket over her breasts. Her chest tightened but she forced herself not to cry. "I'm lonely. I don't want to lose you."

Molotov sat on the edge of the bed. He leaned down and kissed her. "You never had me, Sasha, and sleeping with me isn't going to make you feel less lonely. In fact, it's making your loneliness worse. You need to find someone who's right for you."

Tears fell from her eyes and she wiped them away angrily. "I know, I know."

"What about that human scientist working at the Razorback Queendom?" he asked.

"Sam? I haven't spoken to him in a long time."

Molotov stood up and buttoned his uniform. "Go look him up. Perhaps he's just as lonely as you are."

Sasha nodded stiffly. She really didn't want his advice. All she really wanted was for him to get the hell out.

Chapter 25

Harlan met Gavin that night at Konrick's Black Room, a local restaurant and bar located in the center of the city. The atmosphere was dark and gloomy but the food was really good. She was surprised the place was deserted; usually, the bar was hopping this time of night. She wondered if word of the murders had spread. If it had, most men would be at home watching over their families.

As she had requested, Gavin had gotten a booth at the back of the room. She walked up marveling at how naked the table looked without his signature bottle of whiskey as the centerpiece. Only two glasses of water dripping with condensation. He stood up and she slipped in next to him. "Am I late?"

He put his arm around her and kissed her. "A little but I forgive you."

"I'm sorry," she said. "The Emperor is beating us up over this investigation and no one wants to talk. It's extremely frustrating."

"Well, my love, I have good news for you."

"What's that?"

"I may have found you a suspect."

Harlan turned around in the seat and stared at him. She sipped her water.

"Who?"

"The young priest at the temple. We had our first one-on-one meeting this morning, and he asked me some rather odd questions."

"What kind of questions?"

"He wanted to know what it is like to kill women and how many women I have killed in my career, those kinds of questions. I usually have good instincts about people and he is definitely setting off alarm bells," Gavin said.

Harlan resisted the urge to rush out of the restaurant. He'd be furious with her if she dumped him to go talk to Molotov. He picked up his glass of water and gulped it down.

"Have you quit drinking?" she asked.

“My religious obligation requires me to cut back, so I’m cutting back.”

The waiter came by and took their order then quickly disappeared. Harlan ran her fingers up the gold piping of Gavin’s uniform. “All this sacrifice just to marry me...I’m flattered.”

“You haven’t said yes, yet,” he reminded her.

“I’m so afraid a marriage will ruin what we have. Why is it so important to you? We’re happy, aren’t we?”

Gavin draped her hair behind her ears and placed a gentle kiss on her temple. He nuzzled the side of her face and her passion for him flared. She took a deep breath to calm herself and grinned.

“I want to marry you because we belong with each other, Harlan. I know I haven’t always been a good man to you. I understand you have concerns but I’m certain this is the right thing for us. I’ve never been so sure of anything in my whole life. When I’m with you, I feel like I’m home,” he said.

Harlan knew that feeling because she had it often enough herself. “What about when I grow old? This planet has slowed down my aging process but I’ll still age at twice the rate you will. Someday, you’ll regret being bound to an old lady.”

He shook his head. “My feelings for you go deeper than your beauty or your brains. We are meant for each other. There never has been, nor will there ever be, a woman who makes me feel like you do. Say you’ll marry me, my love, please.”

“I don’t know,” she said. “I need more time to think.”

Their food came and Harlan took the opportunity to move a little away from him. She hated when he became loving like this, it clouded her judgment and made her weak. “Will you let me out, please?” she said touching his arm. “I have to go to the bathroom.”

He got up and let her out of the booth. As she passed, he leaned down and said, “Let me come with you.”

Harlan looked into his eyes and saw his savage hunger. She nodded slightly and rushed past him.

Harlan stepped into the bathroom with her heart pounding in her chest. She quickly relieved herself and then waited in the largest stall with the door open; almost laughing at how excited and turned on she was.

The first thing she heard was the jingling of his spurs as he entered. His boots thumped along the tile floor, coming ever closer to where she was. He leaned in the stall doorway and Harlan felt her womb quiver. He came into the stall and pushed her against the cool tile wall. Unfastening her pants, he pulled them and her underwear down to her ankles. Harlan closed her eyes and moved her head to the side, pressing her cheek against the tile. Every fiber of her wanted him...needed him. She heard his low, evil laughter as a soft moan escaped her lips.

Putting his boots between her legs, he pushed her feet as far apart as the clothing would allow. Reaching around her, his fingers touched her aching sex, slipping through the warm, plump folds to find the swollen nub of her clitoris. His touch made her jump and sent shock waves through her entire body. "Now, Gavin. Now!" Harlan said, her voice trembling with desire. Then slowly, he pushed himself inside her, filling her.

Gavin placed a hand over her mouth to muffle Harlan's cries of pleasure. He pumped hard into her, at times lifting her off the ground, sending unbearable pleasure up her spine and into her brain. Her climax came quickly, taking her over the edge before she knew what was happening. She couldn't control her release; she rode it to the very end.

Someone tried the bathroom door and swore loudly.

"We're going to get caught," Harlan whispered.

Gavin snarled as he reached his own climax. He pulled out of her and she put her clothes back in order.

"No we're not, dear," he said breathless. "I locked the door when I came in."

"Great, now they'll definitely know something's going on."

Gavin laughed at her. "Like it would take a locked door to tell them that with the noise you make."

Harlan glared at him. "Come on, let's go finish dinner. I have some research to do about this new priest of yours."

Gavin put his cock away and zipped up his pants. "No need. Caraculla is already on it."

"Forgive me if I don't find that reassuring."

Chapter 26

The twin suns hadn't even begun to rise when Harlan was out of the house and headed to the Military Complex to look for Caraculla.

Taking the winding staircase two at a time, she came upstairs to his office and was surprised to find his door slightly ajar. She pushed it open, cautiously, and stepped inside. The air was stale and smelled like a smoky bar room. The office was somewhat cluttered with paper and armor. The walls were decorated with all kinds of exotic weaponry.

The only light from within was from the rising suns through the office window. "Colonel Caraculla?" she said.

Nothing.

She took a few more cautious steps forward and heard someone move. They sounded like they were on the floor behind his desk. She sure hoped she hadn't come in on anything private but she *needed* that information.

"Caraculla?" she called again, louder this time.

She heard a masculine cough. "I'm over here," he replied.

Harlan came around the desk and spotted the Colonel sitting on the floor with his back against the wall. His head lulled forward and his uniform was unbuttoned and soiled. Harlan was so surprised to see him like that she fell into a stunned silence.

"Are you all right?"

He squinted at her; his eyes were bloodshot. "Yeah, I'm just sleeping. What do you want?"

The realization that he was stoned shocked her. She knew he did drugs, but this was excessive, even for him. "What did you take?" she asked.

He gave her a lazy smile and shrugged. "A little of this, a little of that."

She took a penlight out of her pocket and tested his pupil response. It was very sluggish. *Gavin couldn't have any idea how bad this is or he, surely, would have put a stop to it.*

Harlan got up and opened his desk drawer. Caraculla must have had six different narcotics in there, all with the Medical Clinic labels on them. She picked up a few and shook them at him. "Don't you realize how easily you can overdose on these? Where did you get them?"

He glanced at the pills in her hands. "Some I got from Sasha, some I stole."

"So you have been stealing."

He laughed. "Of course, I stole them, Harlan. You wouldn't have just handed them over to me. Your meds from earth are a hell of a lot better than ours. Don't be too hard on Sasha, she hasn't given me any pills in a long time. Most of the new stuff, I just took."

"Is Gavin aware of this?"

"He doesn't care what I do as long as I can perform."

"I can't imagine you've been performing very well with all this crap in your system," Harlan said, putting the drugs in her pocket.

Caraculla got to his feet with surprising speed. She took a step back and bumped into the desk. "I'm afraid I can't let you take those, Harlan," he said, his voice low and gravelly. He moved in close to her and held his hand out.

"It's not your property, Caraculla. It's mine. I'm taking it back to the clinic for people who really need it."

Caraculla leaned in close and there was something evil in his stunning, green eyes. She'd never seen him like this before, and he was starting to scare the hell out of her. Who knew what he was capable of when he wasn't in his right mind?

She tried to squeeze past him, but he blocked her with his body. He moved his mouth an inch from hers as if he was going to kiss her. "If you touch me," she warned, "Gavin will kill you."

He nuzzled her cheek. "That old man isn't going to kill anyone, Harlan. Being in love with you has made him a pussy. He's not nearly as dangerous as he used to be. I'm not afraid of what Gavin might do." As he spoke, his lips

brushed her skin. She suddenly felt very cold. "Now give me back those drugs or I'll take them back by force."

Harlan reached into her pocket and held the bottles out to him.

"Put them on the desk," he commanded without taking a step back.

She suddenly became acutely aware of his ability to spit venom, and she was filled with terror for her unborn baby. Squeezing past him, she threw them on the desk. One fell off and rolled to the floor. "I gave you what you wanted," she whispered, trying to keep her voice steady. "Now please, let me go."

Placing his right hand behind her head, he ran his fingers through her hair. "That will cost you one kiss."

"No," she said. "I will not kiss you. Let me go."

He met her angry gaze and moved back. Harlan took that moment to push past him and rush toward the door.

He quickly snatched her by the wrist and Harlan gave a startled yelp.

Caraculla let out a throaty chuckle. "What did you want anyway?"

"I came to get that information about the new priest you were supposed to get for Gavin," Harlan said, twisting out of his grasp and continuing toward the door.

"Here," Caraculla tossed her a thin file. "It's all I have for the moment."

Harlan turned and just barely caught it.

"Not much there," he said, sitting heavily in the brown leather chair behind his desk. "Didn't Gavin say the guy was a widower?"

Harlan stared at him, her heart finally slowing down. "Yeah, I remember Gavin saying that to me too."

"Well then, he must be clairvoyant because according to official records, she just went missing. It was presumed she left him. How is it he's so sure she's dead?"

Not wanting to continue anymore interaction with the Colonel, Harlan bolted out the door and down the hall towards Molitov's office.

Chapter 27

Priest Bellock wasn't at all what Molotov was expecting. First of all, the man was larger than most of the other priests, built more like a warrior than a cleric. Secondly, was his nasty facial scar that had obviously cost him his left eye. Molotov didn't know why the old wound was so unsettling, but it was.

He led them to a quiet place in the temple gardens so they could talk. Once everyone was settled in, Bellock said, "What's this all about, anyway?"

"There have been some women murdered," Harlan said. "We're collecting information in case anyone has seen or heard anything."

Bellock ignored her as if she hadn't said a word. "It's a rare treat to be visited by a grand duke."

Molotov watched Harlan's mouth twist into a frown. He nudged her foot under the table to remind her to keep quiet. Some Assyrian men from the old school believed women should keep out of the affairs of men. Apparently, this priest was of that belief.

"I apologize in advance for some of these questions but they are necessary," Molotov said.

Bellock visibly relaxed when Harlan remained silent. "I understand. Ask me anything."

"Do you frequent prostitutes?"

"Not really, no."

"Have you visited any since you've moved here?"

Bellock glanced at Harlan. "No."

Harlan changed tactics. "Please? May I ask you a question, sir?"

"What?" Bellock asked, obviously put out.

"How did you get that eye injury?"

His mouth became a grim line. "My whore wife did it during an argument."

Harlan nodded. "Oh," she said.

Molotov interlaced his fingers. "Did your wife move here with you?"

“No,” Bellock said. “She’s dead.” He got up from the table so quickly, Molotov almost pulled his saber. “Listen, my availability for answering questions is now at an end. I have an appointment with the General later and I’d like to do a few things before he arrives.”

“Of course,” Molotov said as he stood. “Thank you very much for meeting with us.”

Bellock nodded. “Pleasure meeting you, lord.” He didn’t say a word to Harlan, but he looked her up and down before turning and stalking off into the temple.

Harlan looked at Molotov and raised her eyebrows. “A little touchy, isn’t he.”

Molotov gave her a slight grin. “A little. We need to discuss this with the Emperor before proceeding and further. If it *is* the priest, then things can get complicated.”

Chapter 28

Molotov and Harlan entered the arena and made their way to the Emperor's private training ring. Megolyth was taking a break, leaning against the railing and casually talking to one of his sparring partners. For a moment Harlan was captivated by his well defined musculature especially with its light coat of fresh sweat. His dark, braided hair was tied back and fell down to his lower back. He was a sight to behold. Mentally and emotionally, he didn't ignite any *real* passion in her, but he was definitely a nice piece of eye candy. When he spotted Molotov and Harlan, he gestured for them to meet him in the dressing rooms behind the bleachers. Harlan hoped he hadn't spotted her gawking at him. *Terrific, I think I just blushed. Way to go, Harlan.*

Molotov came in first and Harlan followed close behind. The Emperor closed the door behind them and leaned against the lockers. "Well?" he said staring at Molotov. He wiped sweat off his chest with a small towel.

"We have a good suspect," Molotov began.

"—But we're not sure," Harlan interrupted.

Megolyth frowned. "What does that mean?"

"He might just be strange," Harlan said. "We need either a confession or some kind of physical evidence."

"Nonsense," the Emperor said, turning his head to look at Molotov. "Have him arrested and give him to Gavin to torture. The General can be very persuasive. We'll get a confession."

Harlan sighed. "I'm sure you can get a confession. But if it's not him, you'll alert the real killer and he'll escape, maybe to come back when things cool down. Also, there is another issue."

"What other issue?" the Emperor growled through his teeth.

"The suspect is a new priest at the temple," Molotov said after a pause.

"This is fucking unbelievable," Megolyth exploded. "I send you out to find a murderer and the first place you look is the *temple*? I cannot afford to have

them disavow me. My eventual marriage will have no legal meaning if it is performed outside of the temple! And that goes for you, too,” he said pointing at Harlan.

Molotov stepped forward. “I know, Highness. That is why we want to be sure that we have the right man. We have posted an undercover guard on the priest and Gavin is meeting with him again today. He likes Gavin. He may tell him something we can use.”

Megolyth stretched to his imposing six foot seven height. “Listen to me carefully. I want this handled with discretion and tact. I don’t want this priest to know he’s a suspect. It’s bad enough that I have the nobles crawling up my backside to catch this killer. I don’t need the High Priest up there as well. Do you understand that?”

“Yes, Highness,” Molotov said. “We understand the pressure you’re under.”

Megolyth came over to Harlan and stared down at her. “I have great respect for you, Harlan, but I’m just not so sure you should be involved in this.”

“Molotov can’t do this without my help,” she said. “I highly doubt you’re going to get a voluntary confession, so the only thing left is forensic evidence. Just trust me.”

He placed his hand under her chin and smiled down at her. “You know I can’t trust anyone. Is Gavin’s penance at the temple part of your investigation, or is he really going to marry you the right way?”

“Gavin’s temple duty is for real. It just happened to work out in favor of our investigation. He was the one who alerted me to this guy,” Harlan said.

Megolyth gave a hearty laugh. “I don’t know who has worse problems, me with my killer running amok, or you with your smitten general.”

Chapter 29

Gavin had just lit a cigar and begun signing reports when Harlan burst into his office. She looked beautiful; her pale skin radiant and her green eyes blazing. His memory pulled images of them fucking in the restaurant bathroom and his cock grew hard. However, she didn't look much in the mood for an amorous reunion now. She looked more in the mood for a fight. That was all right by him. He loved a good fight and she was a worthy opponent. He wondered what had aroused her pregnant fury today.

"You have to do something about Caraculla," she said, standing in front of his desk with her hands on her hips. She rarely gave him advice about his men, and that's just the way he liked it. But, she'd been on him a few times about his colonel's little drug problem, and he wished she'd just mind her own business.

He leaned back in his chair playing with the squeak. "Why? What's happened now?"

"I went to his office this morning to get that information about the priest and he's stoned out of his mind sitting on the floor. I found some of the drugs he's been stealing from the clinic in his desk drawer. He even admitted that he stole them. When I tried to take the drugs and leave, he got very ugly," she said. Sighing in frustration at his lack of concern, she sat in a chair eyeing him intently. "You can't keep ignoring this, its getting worse."

"I've already talked to him. He'll straighten up, just give him some time."

"Gavin," Harlan said. "I don't think you understand how serious this is. This isn't some silly little habit he's picked up on the sly. He's a very sick man. I don't think he *can* stop."

He decided to humor her. It was the fastest way to get her off this subject. "What do you think I should do?"

"He needs to be hospitalized; put in isolation for a few days so he can clean the drugs out of his system. Then we can look at strategies for keeping him off the stuff."

Gavin nodded. *Had she gone completely insane? He wasn't going to lock his Colonel in a room tied to a gurney, he needed him to run the army.* "I'm not going to do that, Harlan. Caraculla is a big boy, and he can deal with his problem on his own. I'm not going to disgrace him like a small child and take his choices away."

Harlan gripped the arms of the chair until her knuckles went white. "He's not *capable* of making his own choices anymore, don't you understand? He's a full blown junkie—an addict. He's stoned *all* the time. It's not recreational and it's not a game. He's seriously ill and will continue to need larger and larger quantities of drugs, just to stay high. He's in danger of an accidental overdose."

Gavin chewed his cigar and reminded himself, she was acting like this because she was pregnant. "I think you're overreacting."

"Do you have any idea what *kinds* of drugs he's taking? One of the many drugs he's taking is Thoralease. It's a powerful narcotic that induces hibernation in AEssyrians."

"Well, he's obviously not taking enough of it to hibernate."

"No, but what he doesn't realize is it collects in the body. It can take up to a year for it to work its way out of his system and he's taking it *everyday*. It's only a matter of time before it catches up with him and kills him."

"I appreciate your concern and I'll talk to him. Was there anything else?"

Harlan stared at him for a few moments. Then she said, "As usual, anything you don't agree with, you don't take seriously. You equate Caraculla's drug use to your alcoholism. What you fail to realize is when you have had too much booze you throw up and pass out. Caraculla won't have that option. He will just die. His heart will stop. So go ahead, have another lame ass talk with him but make sure to continue to do nothing. Then his death can be your responsibility."

Gavin felt a furnace of rage burning in his gut. Despite its intensity, he resisted the urge to bellow at her and throw her out. He was often amazed at how well she could manipulate his emotions. It was ironic that some of the very things he loved most about her were some of the things that made him want to

kill her. She was, without question, the smartest woman he'd ever known. Not just book smart but instinctually smart, she felt dangers much like he did. She was also as driven as he was and had spent many a long night saving a soldier that others would have written off. She had saved his life numerous times too. The love he felt for her was beyond sexual, it was as deep and strong as what he felt for his men, although he'd never admit that to her. And yet, here she was infuriating him to such a degree he wanted to pinch her head off like an insect.

He stood up and escorted her to the door before he said something nasty to her. "I will do something," he said. "I'll speak to him again, just like I told you I would. I will have an intense conversation with him, complete with threats, and I promise it will not be 'lame ass'. You've given your warning, been a dutiful doctor and told me what you needed to get off your chest. Now run along and find that murderer before the Emperor has you and Molotov thrown in prison for disappointing him. All right?"

Harlan paused and met his gaze. "You're not planning to do a damn thing," she said incredulously. "Well, I hope you realize you're making a huge mistake, Gavin," she said. "And you're going to regret it."

"It wouldn't be my first mistake but I think you're wrong about this. I'll see you at home." He bent down to kiss her but she ducked under him and stormed off down the hall.

Chapter 30

When Gavin arrived at the temple for his meeting with Bellock, he found the priest was waiting for him outside at the base of the stone steps.

"I thought we'd go to the tavern to talk some more," Bellock said as a groom led out a saddled mount.

At midday, the tavern was empty except for a few older whores and the local drunkard. Gavin took a seat at a middle table where everyone could see them and he could see anyone approach them. If it weren't for the fact that Harlan and Molitov wanted more proof, Gavin would have arrested the man on the spot. Everything about Bellock set his nerves on edge.

The priest sat across from him. They ordered their drinks and Gavin lit a cigar. He offered one to Bellock; the priest refused.

"I met your future wife earlier today," Bellock said. "Very pretty. But very opinionated."

Gavin remembered the argument they'd had about Caraculla. "Yes," he said, puffing heartily on his smoke. "I should beat that willful disobedience out of her before we get married, or she'll become a shrew."

Bellock nodded. "My thoughts exactly. You know, Gavin, I was thinking about our discussion last time we met and I must confess that I lied to you."

"About what?"

Bellock paused as the barmaid brought their drinks. She set them down and hurried off to help the drunk getting sick in a corner.

"About what happened to my eye. You see, I didn't get this injury from sparring with my stepfather," he said, "I got it from fighting with my wife."

Gavin sipped his drink. "I don't follow you."

"When I was younger, I had dreams of joining the military. I trained and my tutors thought I had a good chance of getting in and going far, but I had married badly. We fought constantly and one night it got very violent. She cut me in the face with a kitchen knife, and I..."

Bellock paused and sipped his drink.

“Go on,” Gavin said.

“And I—when I recovered enough from the injury to get up off the floor; I chopped her up with a battle axe. Needless to say, losing the eye ended my career.”

Gavin nodded while hiding his disgust. The very air around Bellock seemed oily and tainted. Gavin made a mental note to stop Harlan from continuing with this investigation. This man was not only a murderer but dangerously insane too.

“Understandably,” Gavin said, encouraging the priest to continue.

Bellock downed his drink. “I’m just telling you this story so you won’t make the same mistake I did. Don’t marry a woman who doesn’t know her place.”

“I appreciate you being honest with me,” Gavin said coolly.

Bellock leaned across the table toward Gavin. “I feel a connection with you General. I think we both understand each other. When you first told me about enjoying your kills, I can’t tell you how thrilling that was! Here was a man who *really* understood. A man who shared the exquisite pleasure of delivering death.”

“But I thought you only killed your wife,” Gavin said as he glanced toward the door. He hoped no one came in to distract this idiot from his confession.

Bellock gave him a strange smile and waved his hands in the air.

“Enough of this morbid talk—let’s discuss your penance.”

Gavin finished his drink and stood up. “Would you mind if we continued this later? I have an appointment with the Emperor and I don’t want to keep him waiting.”

Bellock grinned. “Of course, of course. I’ll be at the temple when you’re ready. Tonight we can begin your spiritual journey.”

“I can’t wait,” Gavin said.

Chapter 31

Sasha had finally settled on a way to kill herself that wouldn't be too painful. An overdose was the obvious choice, what with her being a nurse and all. She had access to all kinds of things that could do the job quickly and painlessly. All she had to do was decide which drug to use and how much she would need. Harlan trusted her implicitly, so she had complete access to every drug safe in every clinic. It seemed so much simpler than it was.

It was late afternoon and the brutal heat had begun to ebb. She'd been wandering around the city during an extended lunch hour trying to decide on the minute details of her plan. She thought about talking to Molotov or Harlan but decided against it. Harlan would be riddled with guilt and she was sorry for that. Molotov might give her a passing thought but it wouldn't break his heart. She couldn't stand the loneliness here any longer, and she didn't have the money to leave so her options were few.

In her meanderings, she passed the temple and decided to stop for a break. She found a large sitting stone and sat, gazing up the ominous black steps. The massive, wooden doors were open, daring anyone to enter. Sasha had never had any interest in going inside but she guessed if she was going to join the gods, or God, then maybe it wouldn't hurt to go in and introduce herself.

Creeping in as quietly as she could, Sasha found an old, wooden bench near the rear and sat down. Before her were several twenty foot tall statues of the AEssyrian gods. The only one she recognized was the war god, Dargannon, because he adorned many of Gavin's weapons and battle armor.

"Are you all right?" a masculine voice asked from the shadows. As she watched, a young priest came out dressed in gray robes. An orange glow from a nearby copper fire pit illuminated his features. He was attractive in a rugged sort of way, but his beauty was marred by a vicious looking scar over his left eye that left it a smoky, pale blue. She immediately recognized him as the priest she had

met on the roadway after her fight with Molitov and Caraculla. The young priest showed no such recognition for her.

Sasha felt heat crawl up her neck. "I remember you."

The priest stopped advancing and froze. He seemed to stop breathing.

"I apologize, but I appear to be at a disadvantage. Have we met?" The priest moved closer and took a seat next to her on the bench. He was so close their legs were touching.

Sasha smiled weakly. "I was a mess the last time you saw me. I was walking alone on Lairds Road, late one night, and you escorted me home. Your name is Bellock, isn't it?"

The priest immediately seemed to relax. "Yes, that's right. I remember you now. You never did come to see me. Unless that's why you're here, now."

Before she could continue her controlled chit chat, the tears escaped from her eyes. They flowed with such relentless emotion, that soon, she found herself sobbing as well. She tried to stop herself, but her body refused to obey her.

Bellock put an arm around her and pulled her into a warm embrace. He didn't ask her any questions or make any comments, he just held her.

All the pain she'd been feeling, for the past few months, poured out of her. She babbled about Caraculla, being dumped, Molitov and being beaten; all the while, in the arms of this kind and loving stranger.

When she was empty and spent, she sat back. He took his arms from her. "Feeling better?" he said.

She laughed and wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. "Yes," she said. "Thank you."

"You don't really want to kill yourself," he said. "A pretty, young woman like you has a million reasons to live."

Sasha hiccupped. "It's just that I've been so lonely and I don't know where to turn."

He rubbed her back. "Well, you've come to the right place. I'll get you through this."

She smiled at him again, only this time it was a happy smile. "You're very nice, Bellock. This is the second time that you have made me feel like everything will be okay. I feel lucky to have met you."

"Please don't be insulted, but I have forgotten your name."

"That's all right. I'm not at all insulted. My name is Sasha," she said, wiping the last of her tears on her sleeve.

"Sasha. That's right, you're a nurse at the medical clinic. I believe you work with General Theron's companion, Doctor Ambrose." Bellock's last statement had a strange tone, but Sasha was unsure of its meaning.

"Yes, I am and I do. Please don't tell anyone about me wanting to kill myself, especially Harlan. She'll freak out and probably blame herself."

Bellock winked at her. "Don't worry. Your secret is safe with me, but promise you'll come talk to me before you do anything...permanent. I'd like a chance to help you through this troubling time."

Sasha sniffled. "You're sweet. I promise, Bellock."

"Listen, why don't I come by your house tonight and keep you company? It might help to have someone right there to talk to when you're feeling low."

"That's very kind of you. I don't suppose you remember where I live?"

"Oh, I remember. I may have trouble with names but I never forget a location."

Chapter 32

The medical clinic was crowded but Gavin didn't care. Pushing past the waiting patrons, he rushed through the automatic glass doors and into the back room. Spotting Sasha, he stormed up to her and said, "Find Harlan and tell her I need to speak to her in her office, now."

Sasha nodded and rushed off down the hall. Gavin watched her knock on one of the exam room doors and slip inside. He went into Harlan's office to wait for her.

She came in a moment later, her eyes blazing. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

"That priest you're investigating is crazy. I forbid you to have anything else to do with him or this case."

"What did he say to you?" she said, calming a little.

"He fucking confessed to murdering his wife, that's what. Although, she did rob him of his eye and that may be considered a killing offense. But that's not the point. He's not too fond of women in general; you in particular," Gavin said. "I don't want you anywhere near him."

"I hope your reaction didn't tip him off. You're our best information source."

"Nonsense, he doesn't suspect me at all. I am, after all, his friend. Right now, he thinks I'm meeting with the Emperor about business. We are going to meet up with each other again later. I would have arrested him but he didn't confess to murdering anyone else, and I didn't know how you and the Grand Duke wanted to handle this."

Harlan frowned and looked thoughtful. "Good thing you didn't. We don't have the link we need to place him at the murders. When you do grab him, we have to be sure that we can prove the charges. Its bad enough the temple will scream their heads off when he's arrested."

“He doesn’t think I should marry you. Says you’ll make me miserable because you don’t know your place. He suggested I beat you,” Gavin smiled, watching her take the bait. “So what do you think of that advice?”

“Beat me or not marry me, huh? I would be worried if the priest telling you this wasn’t a psycho. If you had decided to take his advice and not marry me, I’m pretty sure you’d only be setting foot in the temple to threaten the high priest,” Harlan said, returning a smile. “And that is what I think of your friend’s advice.”

“Well, you have clearly won that debate. Bellock did say that women are too dangerous to be allowed an education. I can’t say I entirely disagree with him,” Gavin said, reaching out and stroking her hair.

“Don’t pick another fight with me right now,” Harlan said as she pointed at him. “We have more important things to deal with. I’m worried Bellock will become suspicious and disappear. Maybe you should arrest him now while he’s still in a comfort zone. If, like most serial killers, he’s kept trophies then they should be among his personal belongings.”

Gavin fell into a sullen silence. The mention of trophies clearly bothered him. Then he said, “He’s expecting me. You go. Let Molotov know we are reasonably certain we have the killer, and I’ll meet him as planned. When we finish our little prayer service, I’ll lure him outside to get a drink and we can arrest him peacefully outside. That should buy you some time before the High Priest finds out that one of his own has been detained.”

“What if he’s not there as planned?” Harlan asked.

“Then we hope he’s not out hunting for a new victim.”

Gavin arrived at the temple just as the suns were setting. He stalked through the marbled halls with an increasing sense of dread. *Don’t tell me this fucker is not here to greet me.* The High Priest came down the hall, looking older than Gavin remembered from a few days ago.

“General,” he said warmly.

"Your Grace," Gavin replied, with a bow of his head.

"I want you to know that Bellock has given me an excellent report of your progress. He says you have come a long way, and that you are working hard at your penance."

Gavin scanned the hall, behind the old priest, to see if Bellock was coming. It was empty. "Where is he? We were supposed to meet this evening."

"Oh, I'm sorry, Gavin. He asked me to tell you he had a soul in trouble tonight and wasn't going to be able to make it. He was going to her home to give her comfort. I hope you understand. He's so dedicated to service."

Gavin felt a rock form in the pit of his stomach. *Great, another AEssyrian woman dead by morning.* "Did he mention anything about this troubled soul?"

The High Priest looked confused. "No, I'm afraid he didn't. Why? Does it matter?"

"Probably not anymore, your Grace. Good night," Gavin said, turning to leave.

"Good night, General. Why don't you come by my office tomorrow and we can schedule your wedding to Doctor Ambrose?"

Gavin didn't turn around. All he could do was laugh.

Chapter 33

"You have a beautiful home," Bellock said, as he stalked into Sasha's living room.

"Thanks," she said, gesturing to the couch for him to sit. "It came with the job."

They both laughed. He placed his arm across the back of the couch.

"I want you to know, I took our talk today very seriously," he said, "I think I have a solution for you."

Sasha smiled. "I've been thinking too and you helped me realize that killing myself is stupid. You're right. I have a lot to live for. I guess I just let my depression and self pity take over. But I'm sorry," she said, placing her hand on his leg. "What was your solution?"

"My solution is death," he said, his smile taking on a chilly edge. "I've come to kill you."

At first, Sasha thought he was joking; however, the expression on his face was no joke. She pointed at him with a trembling finger. "You're the man they've been looking for. You're the one who killed that prostitute and that noblewoman."

Bellock stood up and rolled his shoulders to loosen them. "That's right, my dear. I'm going to give you the one thing you've wanted so badly; I'm going to release you from the pain of your life and give you death."

Sasha sprang to her feet and bolted for the door, but he was on her in seconds. Grabbing her arm with his right hand, he pulled out leather bindings from his pocket with his left. "But before I give you what you want, we're going to have a little fun first. And I'll tell you now; the more you scream, the more I like it."

Sasha's mind exploded in panic. She lunged at him, slamming her fist into his wounded eye. He snarled in agony and his grip loosened just enough for her to break free. Scrambling to the back of the villa, Sasha made a flying jump for the brick wall surrounding the courtyard. She dug her fingers and toes in to

scaling the wall with as much speed as she could. She could hear his footfalls behind her, closing in.

Her right hand grabbed the top of the wall and she pulled the rest of her body up. A hand closed around her ankle and she screamed in fear and frustration. "Let go of me! Somebody help!"

Bellock pulled her off the wall with stunning force. She hit the ground and it knocked the wind out of her. He knelt on her chest and grabbed her wrists. Sasha fought him with all her strength; biting and punching, but it was no use. He was simply too strong. He bound her hands and heaved her to her feet.

"I have to admit, I admire your strength," he said. "Maybe it will help you last longer than some of the other ones did."

Then he dragged her into the living room and closed the drapes against the night.

Chapter 34

"That's strange," Harlan said to Molitov as she unlocked the medical clinic that morning. "Usually Sasha has this door open by six."

With the Grand Duke behind her, Harlan entered and turned on all the lights. She quickly looked around for a note but found nothing. Something was wrong. It just wasn't like Sasha not to leave her a message if she wasn't going to be in.

Harlan had stopped by this morning to tell Sasha to cancel her appointments today and to check up on her. Gavin and Molitov were going to detain Bellock and Harlan wanted to be on hand to help search through his stuff. But now Sasha was missing and all Harlan had was a bad feeling. *Where the hell could she be? Please don't let her have done something stupid.*

Molitov had a grim frown plastered to his face. "You don't think she did something foolish, do you?"

Harlan wanted to tell him "no", that Sasha was much too grounded for something like that, but to tell the truth, she just didn't know anymore. Lately, Sasha had been so sad and distant. Harlan scribbled a note about the clinic being closed today and taped it to the inside glass of the front door. Grabbing her black medical bag, she headed out the door and locked it.

"We'd better get over to her villa and check on her," she said to Molitov as she waved down a coach.

The twenty minute ride to Sasha's home was the longest in Harlan's life. She kept staring out the window, a million horrible scenarios playing over and over in her head. Why hadn't she paid closer attention to Sasha's breakdown? She knew the woman was having problems, but she just didn't know what to do for her. Or was the truth more like she didn't want her friend interfering in the progress of the case? Shame burned her chest. *Please don't let her be dead.* Perhaps she and Gavin had more in common than she even realized. Perhaps, like him, she'd let her ambition cloud her judgment. God, she hoped not.

“My mother committed suicide,” Molotov said softly. The statement hung in the coach like poisonous gas. The simple words filled Harlan with a renewed sense of dread. She really didn’t want to talk about death and dying. The reality of it was much too close.

“I didn’t know that,” she said, then hastily added, “I’m sure Sasha didn’t do anything like that.”

“She’s been thinking about it,” Molotov said. “Sasha, I mean. She asked me to kill her once.” His voice was sad and haunted. Harlan stared at him and the burning in her chest turned to ice. Why hadn’t she remembered that? Maybe she hadn’t wanted to.

“Don’t do this to yourself, lord. I’m sure she’s okay. She probably just over slept.”

“*Come on*, Harlan!” Molotov said angrily. “You know she didn’t over sleep.”

“No, I don’t know that and neither do you.”

Molotov fell into another troubled silence, like he knew what they’d find when they got there. Harlan stared out the window so she wouldn’t have to see that look in his eyes.

“What happened to your mother?” she asked.

“I was grown when she did it, but it still haunts me to this day. She adored my father and when he was killed during the Sambien Wars, she was a broken woman. She talked about death a lot over the years, but we never believed she’d do it. Even so, there was always that sorrow that would never go away, that sense of doom. One night, when my brother and I went to visit her, she told us she was going upstairs to change for dinner. A few moments later, we heard a strange noise outside followed by a commotion. She had thrown herself from her bedroom balcony. No note, no nothing. Her brothers and parents refused to accept any explanation other than an accident. Even in our society, suicide leaves a stigma.”

Harlan touched his arm. “I’m sorry.”

Molotov banged on the roof of the coach to signal the driver to stop. “No need to be sorry,” he said. “It was a long time ago.”

Harlan and Molitov rushed into Sasha's villa fearing the worst. The moment Harlan crossed the threshold, she sensed it. An Assyrian man had been here. Molitov sensed it too because he pulled his saber and crept forward with more than his usual caution. Harlan tried to swallow but her mouth was paper dry.

"Sasha?" she called.

Silence.

Harlan stuck close to Molitov as they began a room to room search. An empty wine goblet sat on the coffee table along with some thick strips of leather. Other than that, nothing seemed disturbed. Then Harlan saw the blood on the floor by the courtyard. She pointed it out to Molitov. He nodded grimly.

They found Sasha, in the master bedroom, on the floor with a leather belt around her neck. Harlan rushed over, noticing a piece of broken ceiling beam next to her friend's body. She dropped her medical bag on the ground and kneeled down next to Sasha. Loosening the noose from around Sasha's neck, she grimaced at the raw line where the rope had rubbed off the top layer of skin. With trembling fingers, she lightly touched the side of Sasha's throat above the noose. Harlan felt that familiar pain in her sinus. The one she got right before she was going to break down. Then she felt it...a faint pulsation in Sasha's carotid artery touched Harlan's fingertips. She pressed a little harder to make sure it wasn't wishful thinking; but there it was, just under her fingertips.

"She's alive, but we've got to get her to the clinic right away."

Harlan took some bandages out of her bag and wrapped both of Sasha's wrists. Each wrist was marred with several deep cuts. As Harlan prepared Sasha for transport, she noticed some other injuries on her body that were unsettling.

Harlan looked up at Molitov. He looked broken, like a man staring at a horrible massacre. She couldn't imagine the pain he was in. "Help me get her up. We need to keep her head very still."

Molotov didn't hesitate. He sheathed his weapon and picked up Sasha as gently as he could, while Harlan held her head. They rushed out to the coach waiting outside.

Chapter 35

Harlan gingerly cleaned and medicated Sasha's wounds. The steady beep of the heart monitor gave her some comfort, but her friend still had not woken up. *Please don't let her have any brain damage.* A soft knock on the door made Harlan jump. Molotov looked in at her.

"It's all right. You can come in. We need to talk about this," Harlan said, gesturing to the chair next to the bed. Molotov sat down obediently but said nothing.

"Sasha didn't do this to herself, Molotov. I truly believe that she had a run in with our killer."

"I understand that you are upset at your friend's tragedy, but don't you think it is a little far fetched that she was attacked by Bellock. Whether or not you want to face it, you and I both know that she was suicidal," he said.

Harlan leaned against the side of the bed and folded her arms while watching Molotov. Obviously he didn't see the marks on Sasha's wrists as she had.

"Don't tell me you didn't smell another AEssyrian man in the villa."

"That could have been anybody. I doubt that I was the only one Sasha kept company with," he retorted.

"Fine, I'll give you that. But Sasha is a nurse, she knows that if you're going to kill yourself by cutting your wrists, you don't cut across the wrist but rather up the inside. She also knows that you don't need to suspend yourself from a ceiling beam to hang. You can just as easily hang yourself from a door knob. And I'll show you something else," Harlan said as she turned around and

gently pulled up the left sleeve of Sasha's tan blouse. Several dark purple bruises surrounded her upper arm.

"This is a pattern injury. She was grabbed pretty forcefully. Her attacker wanted this to look like a suicide, that's why he didn't mutilate her. Please believe me. I need you to find Gavin and make sure he's holding that son of bitch at the temple. I can prove that it's him if you still need me to. Please, Molotov."

Molotov stood up and removed his monocle placing it in the breast pocket of his uniform. "I believed you from the beginning. I just needed to hear the evidence. Are you sure you want me to leave? Maybe I should stay in case you need help with her."

"The rest of the clinic staff is here now, so they can assist if needed. I would rather you go find Gavin and meet me back here. He should have arrested Bellock by now, and I want to go through that vile, piece of filth's belongings."

Molotov nodded. "Very well, I will fetch Gavin. But it may take me some time to find him." With that, he walked out the door.

Harlan nestled into the chair beside Sasha's bed and reexamined all of her guilty feelings. She pulled herself from her brooding when she heard some soft moans. She looked at Sasha, her face was twisted in pain. Harlan looked for her medical bag to give Sasha some relief but she couldn't find it.

Oh crap, I left it at her villa.

After securing some pain medicine from the locker and giving it to her friend, Harlan came into an exam room and found one of the nurse's aides cleaning up. She was a young Kirillain girl, a humanoid race, with long, brown hair and pretty, dark eyes.

"I've left my medical bag somewhere and have to go get it. Would you mind sitting with Sasha until I get back? I really don't want to leave her alone. I just gave her some pain medicine, so she should sleep comfortably."

"Yes, Dr. Ambrose. I'll keep an eye on her while your gone."

Chapter 36

It was much faster to travel by hyperia than to go by coach, so Harlan made it back to Sasha's villa in only a few minutes. Prior to leaving, Harlan had changed out of her clinic clothes and into the more rider-friendly garb of jeans and an old t-shirt. Luckily, she would be back long before Molotov returned with Gavin.

As she ascended the steps to Sasha's bedroom, she felt a bit queasy. Being pregnant and riding a bumpy hyperia was not an ideal combination. Of course, it could be the stench of the creature. She didn't know how the AEssyrians could stand these smelly beasts. Not only did they have temperament challenges but they always smelled like a wet dog.

Harlan came into the bedroom and was immediately overwhelmed with sadness. There on the floor, next to some bloody bandages, was her medical bag. She bent down, began placing debris in her bag and then something caught her eye. A chill rolled up her body and her spine turned to ice. Suddenly, there was a pair of brown leather boots in the doorway of the open closet, less than three feet away. She looked up knowing who filled those boots and met that pale blue eye transected by the hideous scar. She didn't dare move or breathe.

"How fortunate for me," Bellock said, his voice crisp and matter of fact. "I was just lamenting at how cheaply constructed these villas are. Can you *imagine* the luck of that whore? Not only did she escape death from a rotting beam breaking, but she was also lucky enough to be rescued.

"Oh well. No use brooding over the one that got away when I have you. Since I've been temporarily robbed of my latest victim, it just occurred to me that I don't have one victim to look forward to, but two," he said.

"Or should I say, three," he grinned, gesturing to her small belly.

Harlan slowly stood up straight gripping her medical bag tightly. She thought about bolting but he was too close. "If you kill me and Gavin's child, I guarantee you he will ensure your suffering never ends."

Bellock's laughter echoed down the villa's empty hallway. "You are not worthy of being married to such an accomplished man. You will only bring him sorrow and desolation. But for some strange reason, he seems to care for you deeply and I have been unable to convince him otherwise. So, perhaps I will not kill you. Maybe I'll just give you some obedience training. By the time I'm through with you, Gavin may not even want you anymore."

He lunged forward and Harlan stumbled backward, tripping over the fallen ceiling beam. She landed on her back with a painful thud, and he was on top of her with his hands around her neck. He squeezed gently and leaned down, kissing her jaw line. As she frantically clawed at his hands, she noticed the contents of her bag had spilled onto the floor next to where she fell. She reached into the pile of instruments and laid her hand on a pair of bandage scissors. Just as he realized her distraction, she slammed the scissor blades into the side of his head, penetrating his ear canal. Bellock uttered a high-pitch shriek and grabbed his head. Harlan pushed him off and scramble to her feet.

"Now I *am* going to kill you! You fucking whore," he snarled as blood poured freely down the side of his head. Before she could get to the door, he threw himself forward, grabbing her around the ankles and bringing her back to the ground. She landed hard on her stomach. Harlan flailed; kicking and trying wiggle loose. Bellock sank his teeth into the back of her calf, easily tearing through her jeans, while he tightly wrapped his right arm around her lower legs. Harlan screamed and clawed at the door frame. With his left hand, he pulled the scissors from the side of his head and wailed. His teeth came loose from her leg. Harlan seized the opportunity to pull one of her legs loose as he brought the scissors down into the meat of her still restrained thigh. The pain that exploded through Harlan's leg was unimaginable. Gritting her teeth, she managed to twist onto her back and kick him as hard as she could in the face with her free leg. The move won her freedom.

Harlan grabbed the door frame and pulled herself up, launching herself into the hallway. She knew she would never make it outside before he caught her, so she hobbled down the hallway and into a spare bedroom. She choked

back tears as she frantically secured the lock and pushed a dresser in front of the door. She slid down the wall and onto her knees. She reached behind her to find the scissors still protruding from the back of her thigh. Grasping the slick handle, Harlan mustered up all of her courage and pulled.

She clinched her teeth against a scream so hard her jaw ached.

The blades slid out of her leg without too much resistance and she collapsed the rest of the way to the floor, sobbing. Only a moment passed before she heard footsteps coming down the hall.

“I know where you are, you stupid slut. All I have to do is follow your blood,” he rasped. “Since you came alone, I would guess nobody knows you’re here. So I have lots of time to work on getting into that room.”

Chapter 37

Finding Gavin had been easier than Molitov expected. The first place you always look for him is in his office and that's exactly where Molitov found him. Gavin sat behind the black, wooden desk smoking one of his, signature, Cusano 18's.

"Am I to assume that you did not make an arrest this morning?" Molitov asked.

"The bastard stood me up. That miserable High Priest said Bellock had to attend to a soul in trouble. So I left. I figured I'd go back later today and—"

Molitov held up his hand. "You need to come with me to the clinic, now. Bellock tried to claim another victim, but so far she's managed to survive."

Gavin felt sympathy toward what happened to Sasha but he was also delighted at the prospect of seeing Harlan. When Gavin came into Sasha's clinic room, he was surprised to see a dark haired Kirillian girl instead of Harlan.

"Who the hell are you? Where's Harlan?" Gavin demanded.

The young girl, immediately intimidated, began to stammer. Molitov interjected before the girl burst into tears.

"Do you know where Doctor Ambrose went?" he said in a soothing tone.

The girl eyed Gavin nervously and then looked back at Molitov and said, "She went to get her medical bag."

Gavin walked around Sasha's bed, inspecting her injuries. "Then we'll just wait here for her. Go on, shove off, we'll call you if your needed," Gavin said, waving his hand toward the door.

The girl gathered her things quickly. "I expect she'll be back soon. She's been gone for almost two hours."

Molotov spun around so fast that Gavin almost drew his sword. “*Two hours?* By the Gods! Come Gavin—Harlan must have gone back to the villa. She probably forgot her bag there when we were carrying Sasha out to the coach.”

Gavin burst out of the clinic doors with a speed and fury that sent cracks running through the glass. Molotov was right behind him. They mounted up and tore through the city streets toward Sasha’s villa. *She had better be alright. I’d hate to miss out on the opportunity to strangle her myself for going out there alone.*

Chapter 38

Harlan cried out as another strong impact slammed against the door.

She'd torn one of the sheets and wrapped it around her calf and thigh to stop the bleeding. Again, she looked out the window for anyone passing on the road but all she saw were the twin suns scorching the landscape. She had spent the last hour yelling out the window hoping a passerby would hear her cries for help. Unfortunately, Sasha liked her seclusion. Her voice was now raw and she was feeling drowsy from the fatigue and blood loss. Bellock continued to taunt her but she could hear in his voice that he was losing patience. Harlan was thankful for Sasha's feminine décor. Had this been happening at her home, Bellock would have had half a dozen battle axes to choose from and he would have chopped the door down by now. Luckily, there were no weapons of any kind adorning Sasha's walls.

Silence settled in the air for a few moments and then Harlan heard a new noise. Soft friction. Bellock was rubbing the door.

When he spoke, his whisper matched his gentle caresses, "I'm afraid I'm going to have to leave. Sadly, you will not be afforded the one luxury my other victims had...my company. You will die alone. Since they apparently did not use the same material to build the doors as they did the ceiling beams, I will not be able to kill you in a more personal way. Goodbye Harlan."

His molestation of the door ceased, and Harlan listened to his boots clicking down the hallway. She wasn't falling for that old trick. As Harlan waited for the next onslaught, she began losing the battle against her exhaustion.

Gavin and Molitov were almost through the small patch of dense forest when they heard a rider approaching fast. Bellock emerged from a cluster of trees. When the priest spotted them, he slid his hyperia to a stop and bolted back the way he came. It took five strides for Gavin's mount to overtake

Bellock's. Gavin hurled himself at Bellock and both men went crashing to ground. Gavin vaulted to his feet, with his saber drawn, in less than a second. The sight of the priest covered in blood was almost too much for Gavin. He desperately hoped it wasn't Harlan's blood.

"I am going to cut you into little, fucking, pieces," Gavin snarled.

"I can't imagine a better way to die," Bellock said, getting to his feet and drawing his own saber.

"Where's Harlan?" Gavin asked, advancing on the younger man.

"Your human whore is fine. She locked herself in one of the villa's bedrooms and I couldn't get in, so I left. She's not too hurt. She's one nasty bitch, though. You would have been better off if I had killed her. You'll have nothing but misery from that one."

Gavin had heard enough. He desperately needed to get to Harlan and he couldn't while this piece of shit was standing in his way continuously talking. He launched a vicious attack, causing Bellock to stumble back into the clearing he had come from. When Gavin emerged into the clearing, he froze, staring past Bellock at the black smoke that billowed skyward from Sasha's villa. He took two large strides, closing the distance between himself and Bellock and brought the hilt of his sword upward crashing into the underside of Bellock's chin. The murderer went down and stayed there. Gavin mounted up and drove his hyperia as fast as it would go toward, the smoke and flames.

Harlan awoke to the sounds of cracking and popping. The heat in the room was unbearable and there was a thin haze of smoke surrounding her. *Oh my God, he set the place on fire!* Harlan removed her barricades from the door and grasped the metal handle. She yelped and pulled her hand back, staring at the angry red wound across her palm. Tears began to stream down her face again as she made her way to the window. She screamed for help several more times, but then had to cover her nose and mouth with her shirt.

Harlan knew she would have to jump. It was a survivable fall unless, of course, you landed badly. All she could think about was the baby, but neither of them would have a chance if she stayed and died of smoke inhalation. Between the wounds on her leg and the burn on her hand, climbing onto the window sill was no easy feat. She thought that if she could hang down and drop, she may get out of this with a broken leg or hip. Landing any other way would surely hurt or kill the baby. Harlan looked back into the room and the door had begun to burn. Flames consumed the wood, and the smoke was so thick that breathing was becoming impossible.

She looked down at the stone courtyard where she would be landing and cringed. She guessed the fall to be about twenty feet. Harlan gripped the sill, wincing at the pain in her hand and hung down. She took a deep breath, inhaling mostly smoke, and let go. It felt like she was falling for several seconds but she knew that was a distorted perception. As she mentally braced for impact, she was snatched almost midair by someone on a mount.

Believing her rescuer to be Bellock, she immediately began to fight. She was instantly subdued when two large, familiar arms enveloped her and pulled her close. Harlan turned around and gripped onto Gavin, burying her face in his neck. All of her emotions erupted into sobs as he galloped away from the burning villa.

Chapter 39

Bellock sat on the floor of the temple, his hands bound behind his back and his head hung. Above him loomed the massive statues of the gods, looking almost as real as if they were there in the flesh. He was surrounded by Gavin's men, all of them with their saber's drawn, each one hoping he'd do something that would provoke them to kill him.

Gavin leaned against the wall waiting for the High Priest to finish his search of Bellock's quarters. From the screams of disgust, Gavin was sure the findings were grim.

The High Priest stormed out with Molotov close behind. The priest's long, white hair flowed behind him like a thin cloud on a hot day, and he clutched a black canvas sack in his right hand. When he was almost upon Bellock, he flung the sack at the young priest's chest. The sack fell to the floor and a woman's nipple fell out. Gavin's men glared at Bellock and took a step back in horror.

The young priest had changed in their eyes but not in Gavin's eyes. In another life he might have been a celebrated warrior; he certainly had the stomach for it. Unfortunately, killing women for sport was an act of gutless cowardice, even though Gavin was sure some men got away with it for years. From the sound of the angry mob outside, Bellock was lucky he was in here with them. Gavin was sure the crowd had an equally gruesome fate in mind for Bellock's body parts.

"You *animal!*" the High Priest snarled. "What kind of man does such things to women? Were the killings not enough for you that you had to take parts of their bodies?"

Bellock remained silent, only the hint of a grin curving his lips.

A tense hush moved over the crowd outside, and Gavin knew it must be Megolyth arriving. Everyone went down on one knee as the Emperor approached.

Megolyth prowled up to Bellock and slammed his boot in the young priests face. Reaching down, he grabbed him by his collar and dragged him out of the temple. The mob roared with rage as Bellock emerged on the temple steps.

Megolyth held a hand up and the crowd fell silent. "Doctor Ambrose," he called into the crowd. Harlan, still on crutches, made her way to the bottom of the steps and two heavily armed guards helped her up. Unable to kneel, she settled for bowing her head.

"Are you able to name your attacker?" he asked in a booming voice.

"Yes, Highness," Harlan replied.

"And your nurse, Sasha, was finally able to name hers as well?"

"Yes, Highness," Harlan again replied.

"Who do you and your nurse name?"

"This man, the priest Bellock," Harlan said, pointing at Bellock.

The mob bellowed their bloodlust. Gavin raised his saber in warning and they all fell silent again.

"Have you also completed your investigation of the other women's murders?" Megolyth asked.

"Yes, Highness," Harlan said. "The forensic evidence shows that this man, Bellock, killed both women and kept parts of their bodies for his trophies."

Megolyth nodded and Harlan moved back behind the crowd. "Does anyone protest the innocence of this man with evidence?"

Gavin stared down at the crowd. No one said a word.

"Then I hereby sentence him to death," Megolyth said. The mob exploded in cheers. A low chant of 'kill him' came from the family of the dead noblewoman.

Megolyth pulled his saber and held it high. "Do you have anything you'd like to say before I send you back to hell?"

Bellock looked at Gavin. "Yes, Highness. I have a request."

"What is it?"

“If it’s all the same to you,” Bellock said “I think I’d prefer Gavin to kill me. Death is such a personal thing, let’s keep it that way. Just him and me—killer to killer.”

Megolyth looked at Gavin. He lowered his saber and moved up along side his general. “Make this filth suffer,” the Emperor said.

Gavin smiled and pulled his saber. “With pleasure.” He moved toward the killer and the crowd exploded with screams and applause.

With a swift slice, Gavin cut Bellock across the belly, spilling his intestines. The murderer stared at him for a moment, and then fell to his knees. Blood flowed from the wound and spilled over the temple steps. Many spectators rushed forward to dip their hands or clothing into the gore; a reminder of this day.

Bellock’s body lay on the ground, shuddering but still alive. Gavin met Megolyth’s gaze and the Emperor nodded.

Gavin brought his saber down and hacked the killers head off.

Chapter 40

Harlan hobbled into the recovery room and smiled down at Sasha. Her friend was looking better but she was still very weak and hoarse. Harlan was glad Molotov had been stopping by to see her. He'd been very diligent in lifting her spirits. Today he'd brought a surprise and Harlan was hopeful it would cheer Sasha up even more.

Harlan took Sasha's hand. "You're going to be fine and you'll be glad to know that creep, Bellock, is dead. I think that was the only time I've ever seen Gavin kill someone and actually enjoy it."

Sasha tried to smile but she winced instead. "I'm sorry for everything, Harlan."

"Don't be. It's me and Molotov who should be sorry. We were so wrapped up in the case we just didn't make time for anything else. I wish I'd been a better friend to you."

Sasha looked away, her eyes welling up with tears.

Harlan took a deep breath. "Hey, listen. Molotov brought a special visitor with him. I think he'll be great to cheer you up."

Sasha looked past Harlan and spotted Sam at the door. He looked as handsome as ever; his dirty, blond hair and blue eyes gave him that endearing surfer look. Sasha broke into a warm smile. She squeezed Harlan's hand tight. "Thank you," she whispered.

"Don't thank me, thank Molotov. He sent word you'd had a close call and Sam was here in a day." Harlan backed toward the door. "I'll give you two some time to talk."

Harlan came outside and joined Gavin as he leaned against the building and smoked. Gavin glanced toward the clinic. "Everyone inside happy?"

"Everyone."

Gavin chewed his cigar to the other side of his mouth and watched merchants hustling back and forth. "I guess that makes you something of a hero. Or should I say heroine?"

Harlan shrugged.

"The High Priest is very impressed with you. He's also been gracious enough to forgive me of all my past transgressions. He said we can marry in the temple since I have done my spiritual duty."

"Gavin I—"

He held up his hand to stop her. "You don't need to say anything, my love. I understand why you don't want to marry me. You are the love of my life, nothing will ever change that. I don't care if we live together forever or if you marry me tomorrow, nothing will change how I feel about you. I'd be lying if I said there was no element of possession in my desire to marry you. But it means so much more to me than that. I guess if you cut to the root of it all, I wanted us to be a family. You, me and our daughter."

Harlan sighed. "I hate it when you say things like that to me. It makes it impossible to turn you down."

"Impossible?"

"Yes, impossible. At this particular moment, I would love nothing more than to be your wife."

Gavin grinned and stared out at the busy city. "Good. I will, of course, wait until your wounds have healed. It wouldn't do to have you limping down the aisle with a cane. Hopefully, I won't do something in the interim to make you change your mind."

Chapter 41

The wedding was a small event with only a few close friends in attendance. Harlan hesitated before saying her final vows but she did and Gavin breathed a sigh of relief. He half expected her to leave him at the altar. There was only one thing troubling him through the entire, hour long, event; Caraculla.

Normally an outgoing and friendly man, he sulked around the edges of the reception, looking drawn and pale. As soon as Gavin could get him alone, he pulled him off to the side.

“What the devil is wrong with you?” Gavin snapped.

Caraculla shook his head. His eyes were glassy and his pupils dilated. “Nothing, it’s just that—”

The colonel collapsed at his feet in convulsions. After that, everything seemed to move in slow motion. Gavin felt that odd, helpless panic he’d had when he cut his own son down in battle so many years ago. He was vaguely aware of Harlan kneeling down by Caraculla.

“He’s not breathing,” she said.

She tried to warn me. I should have listened...I should have listened.

“Gavin!” Harlan said, shaking him.

“*What?*” he managed. The world around him was spinning. Caraculla was like a son to him, and Gavin’s ignorance had killed him. His colonel was going to die.

“He’s probably overdosed,” she said. “Grab some men we have to get him to the clinic!”

Gavin tore off a strip of his uniform and placed it over Caraculla’s mouth. He couldn’t have the colonel drooling venom on all of them. Then he signaled his men, lifted the colonel and rushed him to the medical clinic.

Chapter 42

Fortunately, the main clinic was only two buildings away from the wedding reception. Caraculla had resumed breathing but it was weak and shallow. Harlan prepared a broad spectrum antidote as the guards hoisted him onto the gurney. As they laid him down, he began to convulse and the piece of cloth Gavin had placed over his mouth disintegrated as venom leaked past his lips. Harlan pushed up the sleeves of her wedding dress and struggled with the restraints.

“Hold him down while I secure his straps!” Harlan yelled. “Sasha! Get a spit shield for him!”

No sooner did the words leave her mouth, when Caraculla leaned forward and released a spate of venom that soared across the room and hit one of the guards in the middle of his chest with a sickening splat. The duration of the guard’s scream was short as he fell to the floor and died quickly. Everyone watched in horror as the viscous fluid ate through his flesh and bones.

Harlan knew he was finished the second he was hit and she hated the feeling of helplessness it created in her. For a moment no one spoke.

“You’re leaving now,” Gavin said, grabbing her around the waist and pulling her toward the door. “This is far too dangerous.”

With a quick twist Harlan ducked out of Gavin’s grasp and made her way back over to the gurney. Helping Sasha secure the spit shield, she waved Gavin away.

“Harlan, I don’t want you in here. This is much too dangerous,” Gavin pleaded.

“I’m sorry, but he doesn’t have time to wait for another doctor to get here. We’ve got the shield on him now and he’s restrained. I’ll be fine. Please wait outside.”

Gavin reluctantly conceded and skulked out of the room. Harlan turned back toward Sasha and said, "Get his blood to the lab for TOX. I need to know what is in him and how much?"

Harlan didn't allow smoking in the clinic, so the first place she looked for Gavin was outside. He was definitely sulking as he leaned against one of the stone pillars that marked the entrance. She half expected him to have his flask in hand. But no, he just puffed the end of his cigar and watched the late night activity in the street.

"He's going to be fine—this time," she said, approaching him. He nodded slowly and slid his arm around her, pulling her close.

"You're not going to chastise me for ignoring you about his addiction?" he asked.

"Is it necessary? I still expect you to continue to ignore this problem until he either dies, or he screws up so badly that he compromises your military career," she said.

"That's a rather grim prediction," Gavin said, dropping the cigar stub and crushing it out under his boot.

"I'm not trying to be a bitch, Gavin, especially today of all days, but I have seen this story unfold before. Unless you take a stand—be his friend and mentor—then this will not have a happy ending."

"Very well, I will demote him until he cleans up. If he doesn't, he's discharged permanently. Will that make you happy?"

Harlan sighed. "Damn it, Gavin, you are not getting it. This is not about making me happy. You either want Caraculla to succeed or fail. It's your choice, not mine. Now quit pissing me off and take me home. I want to get out of this dress."

Gavin's eyes lit up and he grinned at her. "And you were afraid that marriage would change things."

