



Strange Appetites

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Book 5: An AEssyrian World Adventure

By Michelle O'Neill & Lindsey Bayer

Prologue

The screaming had finally stopped.

Sarina walked among the rows of wooden pikes lined up along the riverbank. The smell of jungle rot clung to the morning fog and mixed with the stench of fresh death. Skewered on top of each pike was the body of an Imperial soldier. Most of them had been on a pike all night, occasionally crying out as their weight pushed the pointed tip deeper into their bodies. It was a sweet symphony to her ears. Now in the early light of dawn as Sarina studied them looking for any who still lived, they were little more than meat. She was slightly melancholy as she made her inspections. She'd so enjoyed the music of their agony.

The Imperial enemy had come swiftly, led by a general far, far away. A bloodthirsty, vicious man she had yet to meet. The soldiers were so brave at first, filled with the arrogance of certain victory. But they made the first mistake of combat—they'd never understood the Diamond Back Clan. Sarina had been the Queen of these proud people for over eleven hundred years and in that time she'd faced many determined enemies, but nothing like these relentless Imperials. They were better armed and equipped than any enemy she and her clan had ever faced before. But, in the end, they'd fallen like all the rest.

Hopefully this legion would be the last of them. Certainly there was nothing in the jungle so important that their leaders would want to sustain such losses.

Sarina stopped in front of one soldier with a lot of gold on his uniform. His long dark hair hung in his face stringy and wet from the jungle rain. Large parasites crawled on his body leaving small sores here and there as they devoured his flesh. He looked like a young man, somewhere around four hundred. From his uniform she guessed him to be their commander, the one who led the charge. "Tell me what I want to know and I will kill you quickly."

The commander lifted his head slightly, a trail of blood streaming from his mouth but he did not speak. She wasn't even sure he could.

"Who has sent you all here to die? Who is your leader?" she asked.

The commander lulled his head back and forth, his eyes rolling white into their sockets. Sarina thought the man too far gone to answer and was about to walk away when he croaked out, "General Gavin Theron."

Sarina turned and stared at him. His head fell onto his chest, more blood spilling from his mouth. "I've heard of this man, this general. Some have called him the greatest warrior who ever lived. If he's such a fierce soldier, why has he not come to face me himself? Why does he send such weak men to do his bidding?"

The leader's tongue, dry and cracked, peeked from his mouth to touch his lips. "No...one knows you," he said in a voice barely above a whisper.

Sarina turned her head to the side considering this information. She guessed that was true, she never ventured out of the jungle and not many dared to venture in.

"*Please*," the man rasped. "Kill me like you promised."

Pulling a long, double edged knife from a sheath on her leg, Sarina drove the blade into the leader's eye socket and pierced his brain. She twisted the knife back and forth until gore ran down the man's cheek. His body went limp immediately. With little effort, she lifted him off the pike and tossed him on the ground. He landed with a heavy thump. Two of her males came forward. They kept their heads low and fell to their knees before her.

"Take this man and carve the meat from his bones. Check the pikes for other fresh dead—for they too will be our supper. With an Imperial Legion on our table we shall burst from such a feast!" Sarina said loud enough for all her clan to hear. "We shall gorge ourselves on the flesh and blood of our enemies this day to celebrate our victory!"

Chapter One

It was the finest day General Gavin Theron had ever seen. Dappled sunshine filtered through the trees and the sea was a stunning violet-blue. Stretched out on the sand he watched Harlan play with their daughter Gypsy by the water. The late afternoon light played over the highlights in Harlan's hair. Gypsy screeched in frustration as her mother offered a little too much help on the building of a sand castle.

"Go away!" the little girl yelled pointing up the beach. "I can do it!" Harlan finally gave up on her architectural advice and walked over to Gavin. She plopped down on the sand next to him and sighed. "There's certainly no mistaking she's your daughter."

"Don't pin everything on me," he said playfully closing his eyes to enjoy a breeze. "You had as much to do with the formation of that temperament as I did."

"I can't believe she's four already," Harlan said smiling as she watched Gypsy stumble up to them. The little girl stopped momentarily distracted by a tiny Calva-bug. She made a face and began to cover it with sand.

Gavin played with a lock of Harlan's hair. "I know this is going to make you angry, but we should discuss her future now."

Harlan kept her gaze on Gypsy. The sides of her mouth dropped slightly. "Why are you always looking for a confrontation?"

"This doesn't have to be another heated argument. We can discuss this like adults."

"I've yet to see you discuss anything like an adult," she said growing angry.

Gavin ignored her hostility. "I'm merely trying to look out for Gypsy's future, Harlan. Surely you can understand that. She's young. This is the perfect time to find her a good husband before they're all promised to someone else."

"She can pick her own husband," Harlan replied. "That is if she ever

chooses to get married.”

“By the time she’s old enough to do that, all the decent AEssyrian men will be taken,” he said choosing to ignore the second half of her statement.

“I’m not going to make this important decision for her and neither are you.”

Gavin sat up to face her. This was going to be rough. “She doesn’t *have* to marry the man we find for her, but at least she’ll have a prospect.”

“I don’t want to talk about this anymore,” Harlan said getting up. She placed her hand on Gypsy’s back and guided her over to the blanket to get something to eat. The little girl sat down and chewed her thumbnail. Harlan pulled some bread, fruit and cooked meat out of a picnic basket and placed it on a plate. Gypsy poked at the food, frowned and struggled to get away.

“I’m not hungry!” she protested. I want to play.”

Gavin reached over and plucked a piece of meat from her plate. Gypsy cried out in protest.

“Mine!” Gypsy said grabbing the plate. She scooted a few feet away, turned her back on her father, and began stuffing food into her mouth.

“Now look what you’ve done,” Harlan said annoyed. She turned to Gypsy and said, “Slow down dear. You’ll choke taking big bites like that. Don’t worry I won’t let Daddy eat your food.”

Gavin laughed and pulled Harlan into his arms for a kiss.

“Just promise me you’ll think about it,” he said deciding to drop the subject for now.

Harlan shook her head. “I know you mean well Gavin—and you may just be right about this—but I just can’t make plans like that. This is Gypsy’s future and I don’t want to make one of the most important decisions in her life for her. She has a right to do things *her* way.”

Gavin was about to continue the discussion when he heard the familiar footfalls of hyperia. *Oh, the endless, untimely interruptions.* He wondered how his men found him. He’d deliberately tried to be out of touch today.

He caught a glimpse of Harlan’s face and read apprehension in the set of her jaw. Every time he got a message, he might be leaving for a long time and

both of them worried how that might affect their family.

Gavin stood up and dusted the sand from his hands. A dread filled him, and it grew stronger every time he had to leave Harlan. It was hard to go when he'd finally found happiness, hard not to be afraid of it all disappearing one day.

The soldiers rode up and saluted him.

"What is it?"

"It's the legion at Battle's Ford, lord. They haven't been heard from in days. All reports show no activity. Its like they've vanished, everyone is missing," the taller of the two soldiers said.

"What the devil do you mean, *missing*? How can a whole *legion* go missing?"

The soldiers fell silent and stared at him. They didn't know what to say.

"Where are my commanders?" Gavin asked after a few minutes of silence.

"They're in the War Room, lord. They're waiting for you."

"Well, we'd better get down there and see what the hell is going on," Gavin said climbing up on his mount.

Chapter Two

Situated in the middle of the military complex, the War Room was one of the largest and most technologically advanced rooms in the Empire. Built shortly after Megolyth's rise to power, it boasted technologies that most AEssyrian monarch's had previously shunned. Gavin hadn't been in here since the construction had finished a few weeks ago, but he had to admit he was impressed.

The War Room had three high definition screens surrounding the oval conference table so that no matter where you sat, you could see everything being presented. Gavin snuck in unnoticed and took his seat at the head of the table and watched a few of the flag officers preparing slides for the meeting. Colorful maps and jungle pictures flashed across the screen as the officers scrambled to get their presentation to their general in order. Spearo, his Western Commander, spotted him and snapped to attention.

"Attention!" he shouted.

The other men looked up startled and quickly followed Spearo's example. Gavin leaned back in his chair and put his boots on the table. His spurs dug into the pristine wood surface.

"At ease, gentlemen," he said scanning around for an ashtray.

The men relaxed but looked uncomfortable.

"Where's the bloody ashtray?" Gavin asked after several minutes of looking.

The officers glanced at each other. "The room isn't equipped with them," Spearo said. "They say there's no smoking in this building."

Gavin's temper flashed white heat through his brain. *This better be a fucking joke.*

"Who is '*they*'?" he asked. He hated the elusive term '*they*'. Usually anyone carrying the title of '*they*' didn't have the authority to issue rules at all.

Whoever *'they'* were in this case obviously didn't intend for the smoking rule to apply to him.

"The nobles, Excellency," Spearo said.

Other officers began filing in and Gavin grabbed the first one he could reach. The man looked at him startled. "Excellency?" the officer said.

Gavin glanced at the man's collar insignias. "Go to the offices across the hall and see if you can find me an ashtray, lieutenant."

The man glanced around startled. "But I thought there was no smoking allowed in this room sir."

The general glared at him. "Did you understand what I said lieutenant? The subject is not open for debate. Now kindly get me the fucking ashtray *now*."

"Yes Excellency," the lieutenant said and quickly disappeared out the door.

Everyone took their seats and the screens above flashed with the word, 'Briefing'. A few seconds later, the lieutenant rushed back in holding a crystal ashtray. It was immaculate and looked like it had never been used. Probably somebody's desk ornament. Gavin lit up a cigar and blew a triumphant stream of smoke through the air.

"You may begin Commander," he said to Spearo.

A large map of the newly conquered kingdom came up on the screen. "As you know, general, we have been busy assimilating the new kingdom into the Empire and so far everything has been going well," Spearo began. He continued on for another fifteen minutes updating his recent problems and successes with the restructure. Gavin could feel himself getting pissed again. *What the hell were they bothering him with this nonsense for?* Shifting in the chair he stared up at the large wall monitor in front of him slowly losing interest in the presentation. The next few pictures showed different shots of thick, dense jungle.

"Unfortunately however, we've been experiencing puzzling losses in the province of Kattal. Discussions with the previously ruling royal court have led us to believe that this area is full of..." Spearo paused to sip his water.

Gavin leaned forward annoyed. "Full of what?"

Spearo looked around the room. "Cannibals."

"You've got to be fucking kidding me," Gavin said.

"I wish I was Excellency," Spero said. "May I continue?"

"Yes, go on," Gavin replied. He crushed out his cigar.

"So far we've lost a scouting party and one legion in there."

"Explain exactly what you mean by 'lost'," Gavin said.

"I mean, they disappeared without a trace; no survivors, no bodies, no messages from the cannibals. Nothing."

The room fell into a tense silence. Gavin felt a cold dread move through his gut. He'd fought in jungles before and it was miserable. His worst losses had come from fighting on difficult, swampy terrain and he wasn't looking forward to what this new mess was going to cost him. He lit up another cigar and stared at the jungle pictures.

"Anyone ever capture one of these cannibals?" Gavin asked.

"No Excellency," Spearo said. "No one has even *seen* one of these people."

Gavin rocked his chair for side to side. "Well gentlemen," he said to the officers. "This mission is a career maker. Anyone want to volunteer to try and get to the bottom of this?"

Spearo switched off the overhead screens and for a few moments everyone was plunged into darkness. The overhead lights came on.

"I was hoping," Spearo said, "That you would allow me this most exceptional honor, Excellency."

Gavin chewed his cigar from one side of his mouth to the other. He stood up and met each man's gaze. He had to admit, he was disappointed there weren't more volunteers. If he'd been a younger man burning with ambition, he'd have jumped at this chance. He looked across the room at his Western Commander wondering if he was making a mistake in sending him. *Give him a chance, he might surprise you.*

"I have every confidence in you Commander Spearo, and I admire your bravery. You'll be highly rewarded when you return victorious. Muster whatever

men and resources you need on my authority. This meeting is adjourned.”

Chapter Three

The supply yards were stocked to capacity. Along the fences were small pens with sack upon sack of dried meat. The roof was covered in a tarp to prevent predatory birds from molesting the supplies. By the entrance were blankets, canteens, and personal medical kits. The kits had been Harlan's idea. She'd put them together and organized the training. She'd argued that in the field minor injuries could be handled by anyone provided they had the right knowledge and supplies. Gavin was delighted with the idea and had implemented it immediately. Any idea was welcome that kept him from losing men to injuries and infections.

Gavin walked along with the Quartermaster Zim and Master Sergeant Rakon carefully calculating how much they'd need for this expedition. Some Bramble Hens rushed over clucking and biting at their boots. Rakon hissed at them and they rushed off in a panic.

"Fucking dirty creatures," Rakon snarled in disgust.

Zim laughed. "Sure enough, but they make mighty fine eating."

Gavin stopped walking and surveyed the yard thoughtfully.

"Will there be enough game in the jungle to hunt?" he asked Rakon. "I don't want to overload the pack animals with meat. The jungle will be hard enough to navigate."

"From the sparse reports we've gotten back, there is some game in the jungle," Rakon said. "I don't know how savory it is, but it's there."

Gavin turned to Zim. "We'll cut the food ration by a third."

"Yes Excellency."

They were about to continue walking, when Gavin spotted Colonel Caraculla headed for them. *He must have gotten his orders to stay behind. This is bound to get ugly.*

"Will you excuse me and the colonel for a few moments' gentlemen?"

Rakon and Zim glanced at Caraculla and walked on to continue their work. Caraculla stalked up to Gavin holding his orders crumpled in his fist. "What the hell is *this*?"

Gavin folded his arms across his chest. Old feelings of regret and grief filled him just like he'd felt fighting with his many sons. Funny how the past was only a screaming match away.

"It appears clear to me. Those are your orders."

"They say I'm staying here!"

"That's right. You are."

"Why?"

"Because you're a drug addict and I refuse to turn a blind eye to it any more. You will get help for your problem Caraculla, or I'll have you discharged."

Caraculla stared at him, his eyes red and glassy. "You fucking son of a bitch! How dare you fuck me like this...after all the years of faithful service I've given you—you're going to cut me out?"

Gavin took a deep calming breath. "It is because of your years of service that I'm giving you this chance. I need you to get sober and I know you can do it."

"This is all Harlan's doing," Caraculla seethed. "She's put you up to this. Ever since you met her, you've become weaker."

"Do you really believe that?"

Caraculla seemed to deflate before him. His rage bled out of him, leaving a man Gavin didn't recognize. The colonel sat on a nearby crate and ran his hand through his hair. As he pulled the locks back from his face bright red streaks showed prominently on either side. The old fear of getting a face full of venom tied a knot in Gavin's gut. Only a fool wasn't cautious of an angry Razorback.

"I feel so lost," Caraculla confessed. "I don't know what to do."

Gavin sat down next to him. "You may not believe this, but I have been where you are many times. The best advice I can give you is to find yourself. Dig deep and remember the man you were and somehow, no matter what you have to do, go and find that man again and resurrect him."

"I don't know if I can."

“It’s not a question of whether you can or not. This is something you *must* do. This is your survival, your career. You have faced many dangers and battles, Caraculla, but nothing is as challenging as the battle you will fight for control of your mind. You cannot afford to lose this fight or you’ll lose everything.”

“If you would just let me go with you, I think I could.”

“No,” Gavin said standing up. “I’ve cloaked your sins for too long. Going on this campaign will only distract you from your goal. I want you to fight this addiction here and now. When I come back, I expect you to be cured or dead. Do you understand me?”

Caraculla stood up and angrily tore the insignia off his uniform. He tossed it on the ground.

“Fuck you, fuck your army, and fuck your fatherly advice. I’ll make this easy for you. I quit.”

Chapter Four

The villa was one of the most beautiful residences on the street. The front lawn was carefully trimmed and fertilized due to the diligent care of the imperial groundskeepers who attended to all of the emperor's properties. The interior of the villa however was a different matter. Entering it, the signs of neglect were everywhere. Coming into the foyer, a visitor's senses were attacked by the smell of rotting food, musty perfume and dirty clothes. Caraculla had gone through so many servants that he'd finally given up and just let the place go.

He could remember a time when the villa was the pride of the neighborhood, one of the most expensive properties the emperor owned. Every officer in the military had coveted this home, hoping against hope the emperor would grant it to them. And before Caraculla turned four hundred, he'd gotten it. Not because he'd deserved it, but because he was one of Gavin's officers and his most trusted friend. Now, he'd not only lost Gavin's respect he'd also lost his job. He couldn't remember feeling as low as he did now.

He walked through the large hallway and into the living room. Not surprising, there was Glenda on the couch passed out. She was an attractive AEssyrian woman with shoulder length black hair and crystal blue eyes. She was short, standing just under five six but she had a round, ample bosom that seemed to fall out of her clothing whenever she wanted something from him.

He told himself Glenda was his new girlfriend but she was really much less than that. She was a hanger-on and a sometime prostitute whose only interest in him was his inexhaustible ability to get drugs. Scattered on the floor near her were pill bottles, used syringes, and medication patches.

A rush of fury fired his blood. *How dare she sit around here getting stoned when he was out getting his ass chewed by Gavin? Didn't she realize his career was over?* He stalked over to her grabbed her shirt and dragged her to her feet.

“You’re a hopeless fucking mess,” he snarled flinging her toward the door. “Get out!” He knelt carefully picking up the pills carelessly discarded on the ground.

Glenda came to life like a demonic minstrel puppet. A few locks of hair flew across her face as she tossed her head while she talked. “What the *fuck* is your problem, asshole? You sure weren’t talking to me like that last night when you were sweating all over me. And, by the way, you’re a lousy lay when you’re stoned.”

“You’re my problem,” he said getting up and gently placing the pill bottles on the table. “What the fuck is wrong with you? Is that all you want to do with your life? Sit around here getting high all day and waiting for me to fuck you?”

“You weren’t complaining about me a few days ago when you invited me here. I’ve had to put up with a lot of bullshit since I moved in.” She shrugged and pulled her hair out of her face. “You’re damn lucky I stay here.”

“Well leave then! Nobody’s stopping you! There’s the door—go on, get the hell out! I’m sure you’d prefer to go back to being paid for it,” he said.

“Don’t try and pretend you’re so much better than me because you’re not! You strut around here in your black imperial uniform thinking you’re all that! Well I have news for you, *Colonel* Caraculla—your nothing but a low-life drug addict!”

Caraculla unbuttoned his uniform and let it hang open. He didn’t want to fight. All he wanted was for her to leave so he could get wasted. “Get out,” he said advancing on her. “Go back to the stinking gutter I got you from.”

Glenda lunged at him but he threw her off easily. Helping her to her feet, he continued to usher her out. She screamed and swore at him but he didn’t care. She didn’t mean anything to him. He’d already lost the most important thing in his life; his career. What difference did anything make now?

When he’d finally closed the door in her face, he returned to his cache of drugs and took inventory of what was left. It was then he had a moment of clarity. This was it—his lowest moment to date.

He lowered himself to the floor and lay down on his back staring at the ceiling. Gavin was right. He had no idea who he was anymore.

While he lay there he realized two things; one was that he still had a choice, he wasn't that far gone. He could make the decision to find help, get sober and rebuild what he'd destroyed. The other thing he realized was that putting his life back together meant giving up the drugs forever.

That would be tough. Maybe he should get high one last time. Then he remembered Gavin's wedding. He had overdosed at the reception and Harlan had to save his worthless ass. That miserable fiasco had cost a soldier his life when he'd spit venom on the unsuspecting man in a drug induced haze. All those images flashed back to him. He'd promised to quit then, but here he was four years later having hit rock bottom one more time.

Waves of shame moved over him threatening to pull him into a black current of despair. The room felt like it was getting hotter and smaller and he fought the panicked feeling that he couldn't breathe. How could he live his life without the sweet numbness that was so important to him? *It doesn't matter how hard this is going to be, I have to try.*

Caraculla got up in a frenzy of activity and ransacked the villa. He grabbed every drug he could find, everything that even reminded him of drugs and threw it in a pit in the courtyard and buried it all. By the time he was finished, the sickness had come over him and he retched a few times as he made his way to his room. Stripping himself naked, he tore all the sheets off his bed and curled up into a ball. He shook so violently, he was sure he was dying.

Night came and he tried to get off the bed but found he couldn't, he was too sick and weak. He couldn't even get himself a drink of water. All he could do was shiver like a fever victim and weep.

Chapter Five

The pungent smell of decaying flesh was in the jungle all around her.

Harlan tried to quiet the terror that filled her mind. She moved as quietly as she could, keeping her saber drawn when something touched her on the shoulder. She started and looked up to see...

A severed AEssyrian head hung from a rope with its mouth and eyes sown shut. She stumbled back, her mind reeling...and the stench...everywhere the stench...

Harlan sat up.

The dream faded from her mind and she blinked looking around to remind herself she was home. She'd fallen asleep on the library sofa waiting for Gavin. For a moment she pushed her fingers along the velvety soft fabric and felt a wave of relief to know it was real. Glancing at her watch, she was surprised to find it was well past midnight. Not that it was unusual for Gavin to stay out late, he had always told her not to expect him. She guessed the situation with the missing soldiers must be more serious than he'd thought. Harlan decided to head up to bed and ascended the dark wooden staircase.

Unlike most staircase walls that held family portraits, their walls held tribute to every weapon maker on the planet and probably some off. It was alright, though, the villa was all him and it gave her comfort when he was gone so she never wanted to change a thing.

She stopped for her nightly visit to Gypsy's room to make sure the little girl was still asleep and spotted Gavin's armor on the floor just inside the door. Harlan leaned inside the doorway and spotted Gavin as he sat in a chair by Gypsy's bed watching her sleep.

"I'm surprised you didn't wake her up," she whispered.

"I did," he said. "But I managed to talk her into going back to sleep again."

"That must of cost you," Harlan said.

"I had to promise I would sit here until she was asleep. Then the battle of wills began. But I always win."

"You had better enjoy these victories while they last," Harlan said with a smile.

Gavin got up and came out, pulling the door partially closed behind him. He gently pushed her against the wall and placed his lips against hers. Harlan sighed into his kiss.

"I would have woken you, but you were sleeping so soundly," Gavin said.

"I wish you would have. My dreams weren't very soothing."

"What were you dreaming?"

Harlan shrugged. "I don't know. I can't remember it now," she said hating herself for lying. She just didn't want to relive that unpleasant memory. "She stroked his face. "You're going to have to go, aren't you?"

He kissed the palm of her hand. "Yes."

"It would be easier if I didn't worry so much."

"I'll be fine, darling."

She smiled. "I know, I know, you're an old soldier and have been through this a hundred times before."

Gavin laughed. "A thousand times before," he corrected. Leaning his body into her he kissed her deeply, his tongue running along hers. He picked her up and carried her into their bedroom.

Once inside, he put her down on the bed and lay next to her. He slid his tunic off and pulled her shirt off her head. Leaning down, he kissed each breast tenderly nuzzling the nipples until they were stiff and bright pink. He reached down and unbuttoned his pants releasing his fiercely erect cock. "Come closer," he whispered.

Harlan peeled her jeans and underwear off. She placed her hands on his massive chest and stroked the hard, thick muscles under the scarred green flesh. He was all power even at the hardy age of eight hundred and five. Her desire was a smoldering furnace within her; wanting him, needing him. She had never

loved a man like this and she knew she never would again. "I love you," she said into his ear. He smiled wickedly and squeezed the base of his cock inviting her to toy with it.

A nervous, hungry heat grew inside her making her skin flush. Harlan licked her lips and draped her long hair behind her ears. She took Gavin's penis into her mouth as far as she could and gripped the base with her hand. Slowly, she moved her mouth down the hard shaft rubbing her tongue across the tip as fast as she could. Intoxicated by the pleasure, Gavin leaned his head back and moaned, running his thick fingers through her hair.

Harlan enjoyed the power she had over this brutal and dangerous man. His moans and growls became deeper as she worked, then just as she thought he was going to climax, he stopped her. She looked up at him and blinked. "Did I do something wrong?"

He let out a perverse laugh. "No," he said. "I just don't want to come like this. I want to be inside you."

Harlan straddled his hips. He kissed her and stroked her breasts. A cool breeze tickled her nipples, making them hard like tiny pebbles. Gavin crushed her breasts against his chest then pulled her back so he could lick and caressed them. He positioned himself to enter her.

Waves of stunning pleasure moved up through her body. His rough tongue circled her areola, teasing the nipple. Harlan gasped and nestled her hips over his until the insistent pressure of his cock was at the threshold of her pussy.

Gripping her hips, Gavin guided her down onto his shaft, filling her up completely. Unbearable bliss fired her body with a hunger she'd only experienced with him. Leaning forward, she gripped his hips to lift herself for another devastating plunge but he held her still.

"Don't move until I tell you," he said with a lusty edge to his voice.

Harlan was annoyed but did as he told her. Manipulating her hips back a little, he drove deep inside her and pumped with short, quick thrusts.

The pleasure inside her womb became torture. She wanted to scream, to beg him to let her move but he maintained control of her movements as he continued to manipulate his cock deep inside her.

“What are you doing?” Harlan gasped.

Gavin’s tongue darted out and licked a trickle of sweat off her neck. “I learned this in a whorehouse years ago. Human women have an erogenous zone near the cervix. If I can manipulate my cock just right, the pleasure will drive you crazy.”

Harlan wanted to tell him she just wanted regular sex but she simply couldn’t speak. Gavin was right, she could feel him getting close to something inside her and every time the head of his cock came close, her womb fluttered with excitement.

Wrapping his arms around her waist, he pumped hard and deep into her and found what he was looking for.

Harlan’s pleasure became explosive. A loud primal moan escaped her and an orgasm like nothing she’d ever experienced tore through her senses. The world melted away and all that existed was her desperate desire for him. Suddenly, she couldn’t get enough of his body. Slamming herself down onto him over and over again, she fought any attempt he made to slow her down. She took her lust from him as eagerly as a rapist, savaging him with feral kisses and begging him to come inside her.

He snarled in her ear, pounding into her with wild abandon. Harlan orgasmed again and again lost in a sea of uncontrolled pleasures. Then, just as quickly as it had come on her, the fever was gone and she was spent.

Harlan eased off him and collapsed. “You are amazing,” she said.

He laid next to her his chest heaving in exhaustion. His only response was an unintelligible growl grunted through his rapid panting.

Chapter Six

The forest was thick and dark with a light fog blanketing the coarse ground. Gavin moved through the thicket on foot, the scent of his prey close at hand. Sensing how close he was, the creature burst from its hiding place and dashed for the path. A moment later, he heard its high pitched cry. *Caraculla must have caught it.*

Gavin emerged to find Caraculla with the Ontax by the throat. He'd broken the creature's neck when he'd grabbed it and now it rested limply in his hand. "That was mine," Gavin complained walking back over to the campsite and taking a seat by the fire.

"Why can't you just admit you're getting old and it's slowing you down?" Caraculla called after him. He slung the fifty pound Ontax over his shoulder and joined Gavin at the fire. Tearing a leg off the animal, he offered it to his general. Gavin accepted the large meaty thigh and placed the offering on a nearby rock. He sat silently watching the colonel devour his catch.

"You seem to be feeling better," Gavin said.

"I am feeling better. I've been thinking a lot about our fight the other day."

Gavin nodded. "Good. The question is; are you planning to do anything about it."

"Yes, in fact I've been thinking of returning home to the Queendom. Perhaps some time away from here will help."

"How long?"

"Just a few weeks."

Gavin grunted. He hated the thought of Caraculla leaving for that long but he knew the alternative was worse. If Caraculla didn't come to terms with his addiction, his military career was finished. No more excuses. His only concern was that a visit to Caraculla's Queen might not be enough to cure the man. "You really think being coddled by a bunch of women will solve your problem?"

“I don’t know, but I do believe it’s the best place for me to deal with my issues. Besides, once the Queen finds out why I’ve returned I don’t think coddling will be her strategy for helping me.”

Gavin leaned back and reached for the thigh. He took a big bite and chewed thoughtfully. “I’m sorry Caraculla,” he said. “I feel like I’ve failed you.”

“How so?”

“Harlan warned me about the gravity of your addiction but I chose to ignore it. Much like my drinking, which has almost ruined my career several times, I assumed you could bounce back and take control once things began to spiral down. Perhaps if I had done more...”

Caraculla sucked the marrow from the bones and licked gristle off his fingers. “You can’t blame yourself for my problems. I’m a grown man and I can make my own decisions even if they’re wrong. I just got to a point where I thought I had more control than I did.”

Gavin was silent for a long time, and then he said, “I need you to recover from this. You’re one of the few men I trust, don’t fuck up your promising career over something idiotic like a drug addiction.”

Caraculla nodded. “I need to go home and get well. Give me the time I need in the Queendom.”

Gavin finished off his meal and leaned back with his hands behind his head. “Alright but make sure you don’t come back until you’re better, understand? I can’t keep making excuses for you to the emperor. If he loses faith in you, you’re done.”

“I know Gavin,” Caraculla said. “They can help me in the Queendom or kill me in the process. They can be somewhat unforgiving of these types of character flaws. So don’t worry about me coming back sober just worry about me coming back period,” Caraculla said with a dry chuckle. He waited for Gavin to laugh as well but all the general was in the mood for was a cool, brooding silence.

Chapter Seven

The deal was struck and the family was delighted. The father, an older man with medium length grey hair and persistent trembling hands, rushed forward and shook Megolyth's hand. "I can't tell you, Highness, how excited we are about this arranged marriage," he gushed.

Megolyth nodded and pulled his hand out of the handshake. He was sure they were excited. Their daughter marrying the AEssyrian Emperor was no small feat. Megolyth glanced at the young woman standing demurely in a corner, stealing glances at him whenever she could. What was her name again? Oh yes, Rhea. She was a pretty girl, tall and shapely with an intriguing shade of dark red hair. Most importantly, however, were her bloodlines. She came from a long line of titled nobles and that's exactly what he needed. But right at this moment what he really needed was all of these people out of his office. Their presence made the enormous room seem small and stuffy.

Playing the smitten groom, he moved forward, took the woman's hand and softly kissed it. Rhea blushed and gave him a tiny smile. "I'll see you at dinner, my dear," he said.

"I look forward to it, Highness."

Then the entire family came forward to shake his hand and pay their respects. To his great relief, they left quickly, the last one closing the door behind him. Megolyth sat down and stared out the window. What a heavy price ambition demanded. When he'd first dreamed of becoming emperor, he never gave a thought to what that dream might cost him later on down the line. Now, he was trapped by the very thing he'd built, unable to marry a woman of his choice because he didn't dare cross the nobles. He had risked so much to build this empire in such a short time that it was insanity to risk it on something so trivial. Shaking his head he thought how ironic it was that the most powerful man in the empire didn't even have the power to choose a common wife.

A soft knock sounded on the door. "Come in," he said.

The Grand Duke Molitov entered and closed the door softly behind him. "The family is elated," he said. "I trust everything went well."

The emperor stroked his chin. "Yes, everything went well."

Molitov took a seat and watched him for several minutes. "You're not happy," he said. It was a flat statement of fact.

"No."

"What's wrong? I thought you found the girl enchanting."

"She is, but that doesn't mean I want to marry her," he said grimly.

Molitov nodded. "Unfortunately it is a burden for all nobles, both men and women."

"I guess you're right about that," Megolyth said smiling.

"Highness," the Grand Duke said. "May I ask you a personal question?"

"What?"

"Is there someone else? A woman you would have married had it not been for your obligation?"

Megolyth shook his head. "No, no one. I just resent having my freedom taken rather than surrendering it to someone of my choosing. But marriage hasn't slowed you down any."

The Grand Duke gave him a private smile. "Nor should it slow you down. Everyone has mistresses."

"Do you think Gavin has anyone on the side?"

"He's so infatuated with Harlan, I doubt it. Besides, she wouldn't stand for it."

"Do you think she has anyone on the side?"

Molitov laughed. "She's as faithful a creature as anyone could wish for. She would never even consider such a thing."

Both men laughed then lapsed into a thoughtful silence. Finally the emperor said, "It would be nice to experience a love like that."

The Grand Duke looked confused. "Highness?"

"Like the one Gavin and Harlan have," he said.

Molotov shook his head. "Anything that burns that hot is bound to burn out."

"Perhaps," the emperor said. "But I hope you're wrong."

Chapter Eight

The restaurant was crowded with nobles who always made her a little uncomfortable but Gavin managed to find them a quiet corner. He pulled a chair out for her and Harlan sank down into the plush seat. The table's center piece consisted of a small round basket covered with a white linen napkin. It smelled like bread. *Real bread*. Harlan reached out and pulled the napkin back. There, peaking out from under the cloth were several toasty brown rolls.

Harlan stared at Gavin dumbfounded. He grinned and lit up a cigar. "Where did you find these?" she asked.

"An AEssyrian cook for the emperor knows how to bake bread. I asked him to make you whatever Human's normally eat with their meal and he imported the necessary ingredients and came up with this."

Harlan reached out and picked up one of the dinner rolls. It was still warm and her mouth watered. Gavin reached into the basket and placed a small container of something in front of her that looked like butter. The gesture overwhelmed her and she had to place the bread down. So many emotions came to the surface now; home sickness, her powerful love for Gavin, and her joy in Gypsy and her life so far. She never imagined that she could ever be this happy.

Gavin blew a stream of smoke out over their heads. "Is everything all right?"

Harlan smiled at him. "Yes, I just can't believe you did this for me."

He shrugged. "I also had the cook make your meal. I hope it will be more like what you're used to eating back home."

She leaned over and kissed him. "This is my home."

The waiter came and brought Gavin a drink. He puffed on his cigar and sipped it. There was a time when she would have dreaded this, but that time had

passed. Although he still got drunk more than she wanted him to, he didn't take on the ugly moods that had categorized their earlier relationship.

"Have you given any more thought to an arranged marriage for Gypsy?" he asked.

Harlan sank her teeth into the soft flesh of the bread. She chewed slowly. "No," she replied coolly. "I haven't."

"I'm not bringing the subject up to annoy you dear. I'm just worried about the girl's future," he said polishing off his drink.

Harlan wiped her hands off on a napkin. "I know Gavin, but my mind is made up. She's going to choose her own husband."

Gavin nodded and stretched his arm across the back of her seat. "I never told you much about my other children."

"No, you haven't."

"It's not by accident, you know," he said. "They are not easy stories to tell."

"I always assumed that was the reason you didn't talk about them."

Gavin took a deep breath, as if he were about to submerge himself underwater. "Because of my upbringing, I've always felt this punishing need to succeed. Unfortunately, I pushed my children as hard as I pushed myself. I married my daughters off to powerful men, often just barely past their breeding age. My sons fared far worse. I pushed them from the time they could walk to be soldiers. But not just any kind of soldiers, I wanted them to be *better* soldiers than I was. I trained them, and pushed them and drove them to the brink of madness. I allowed no weakness, no compromise, and a career besides the military was unthinkable. With few exceptions, the results were the same. Every relationship turned into a disaster, some ending in suicide and all in alienation. Not one of them escaped my influence without hating me. A number of them turned on me and tried to assassinate me, including my most promising son, Northe. And the whole nasty business was my fault. In my relentless drive, I failed to see that I'd pushed them to it. I left them no alternative. There was no way to become more successful than I was. The only way to do it was to kill me.

“I have many regrets over what I’ve done. Fueled by drink and ego, I baited and mocked them every chance I got. I welcomed them to come for me in every treacherous way they could think of. Except for a few that walked away from the military life, all of them failed and died for their trouble, except for one who still serves in army. He never had any ambition to be the best and was satisfied to just be a good soldier. Born of a Karillian whore, he was already a teenager when I learned of his existence. He was never afraid of me and refused to allow me to manipulate him. I finally gave up on him and allowed him to pursue his mediocre military career. Naturally, since I had nothing to do with his upbringing or training he is very happy and well adjusted,” Gavin gave a short bitter laugh.

Harlan put the rest of the bread in the basket and sipped her water. “What happened to the girls?”

“They couldn’t serve, you see, so I ignored them. How many times did they try to get close to me and I pushed them away. I didn’t understand women, especially young ones and, perhaps because of my mother, I couldn’t get close to them. They were tools to be used for my ambition and nothing more. I’m not proud of these things,” he said. “But I wanted you to know the ugly truth.”

“I appreciate you sharing this with me.” Harlan sat for a long time digesting his confession. This had been the first time since he’d told her about his first love Aurora, that he’d ever discussed something so deeply private with her.

“I’ll need your help Harlan to be a good father to Gypsy,” he said stroking her cheek. “I have a lot to over come.”

Harlan was about to tell him she’d do everything she could when she spotted a commander rushing toward them. *Here we go*, she thought. *Nothing can ever stay peaceful for long when your husband commands the military.*

The commander came up to the table trying to maintain his composure. “I’m so sorry for the interruption but I need to speak to you Excellency.”

“More problems at the garrison?” Gavin asked.

“I’m afraid so.”

Gavin looked at Harlan and she held up her hand. "You don't have to say anything," she said softly. "I understand."

"I'll make this up to you later."

"I'll make sure you do."

Harlan stood and began packing up the precious leftover bread and butter. She was taking it home with her. She didn't give a crap what the nobles thought.

Chapter Nine

“We must assume the legion you sent is dead, Excellency,” Commander Tomand said taking a seat across from Gavin’s desk. “No one has heard from them since they went in to the jungle. But we do have some good news—we know now that our enemy is a race of AEssyrians called *Diamondbacks*. Our experts tell us they are a throwback to an earlier, more primitive time in our history. They are basically savages who practice ritualistic sacrifice and cannibalism. They are ruled by a dominant female who calls herself Sorena.”

Gavin shifted in his seat. He hadn’t had this much bad news since his insane brother had been released. “Why would a band of savages follow a woman leader?”

All three commanders in the room exchanged nervous glances. “Because she’s much larger and more aggressive than they are,” Commander Tomand finally said.

Gavin stared at him. He’d never liked Commander Tomand much. Gavin felt he was a bit cowardly but he did always tell news straight and to the point. “Exactly how big is she?”

Tomand raised an eyebrow. “Our preliminary estimates are she’s just over eight feet tall.”

Gavin paused to consider this information. “How many warriors does she have in her tribe?”

“We’re not sure but we think just over one hundred,” Commander Aster said shifting his hefty frame to lean against the conference table. “We’re sure that number must be low. It’s inconceivable that they should have such stunning victories against our far superior forces.”

Gavin rubbed his lower lip. “Yes but they have an advantage. They know every inch of their terrain and they have the element of surprise. I don’t imagine the jungle permits you to charge a mounted legion through the thicket

unimpeded.” He glanced out the window and was surprised by how dark it was. Usually the three moons cast a silvery glow over all the complex buildings but not tonight. Heavy cloud cover had shielded their light from view. He was going to have to go on this campaign himself, and the probability was good he was not going to come back.

In his career he’d faced the specter of death more times than he could count. He scoffed at serious injury and charged blindly into thick of battle without a care. But those adventures, as much as they forged his courage, also made him painfully aware of how mortal he really was. He’d buried enough friends and sons to know that death could come all too quickly. And now, he’d have something to lose; he’d leave behind his new family. Unfortunately that was the burden of a soldier.

“There are many brave officers ready to lead another legion into the jungle, Excellency,” Commander Aster said.

Gavin rose up out of his chair and stretched. “No,” he said. “I will hand pick a legion and go myself.”

All three commanders stared at him in surprise. Everyone knew Gavin was trying to ease himself into retirement. This didn’t make sense. It was almost certainly a suicide mission.

“Are you sure Excellency?” Tomand asked. “Surely there must be someone else you’d rather send than—”

Gavin held up his hand to stop the Commander. “I’ve already sent my best men and they’ve all died for their loyalty. I cannot ask anyone else to sacrifice themselves if I am not willing to go myself. Spread the word that I am looking for volunteers to go. They should submit their names to my secretary by morning. If there are too few, then I will hand pick more. If there are too many, then the decision will be made by lottery. Do you gentlemen have any more questions?”

Aster glanced at the other two men, and then he said, “Who will have the honor of caring for the doctor and your daughter should any misfortune befall you?”

Gavin smiled. “She’s certainly capable of taking care of herself, but she will fall under the protection of the Emperor Megolyth. Now, if there’s nothing else, I have to say goodbye to my family. Good night gentlemen.”

Chapter Ten

The space was more magnificent than he'd remembered. The Razorback Queen's throne room was paved in light turquoise tiles and dark blue tapestries adorned the walls. The colors gave the room a tranquil, serene feel that Caraculla badly needed. The throne itself was a simple regal design in white gold. Tiny candles hung from the ceiling cradled in crystal cups suspended by thin silver chains.

The Razorback Queen herself was painfully beautiful, with long dark hair that, if unbound, would have swept the floor. The locks at her temples were a shocking shade of scarlet, warning everyone who encountered her that she was a deadly venom-spitting predator. Her robes were a simple but provocative blue and silver that hugged her curvy frame and showcased her ample bosom. Caraculla bowed his head and felt a vague sense of embarrassment over his sudden arousal.

He heard the slight rustle of her dress as she came down from the throne and approached him. With every step she took, his hunger for her grew, building inside him like a bridegroom on his wedding night. Even though he felt dirty and unworthy because of his addiction, he dared to look up and meet her gaze.

She smiled at him.

Looking at her this close brought a flood of memories. He remembered the day, years ago when he'd left the Queendom to pursue a military career among the AEssyrians. Although the Razorbacks were similar in appearance and cousins to the AEssyrians, there were many differences between them. The Razorbacks were a matriarchal system with a small male warrior class, whereas the AEssyrians were a male dominated society who relied heavily on combat and conquest.

The Razorback system was almost as old as the race itself. It had come about centuries ago when the males had become so aggressive and territorial

they'd started killing their rival's children. One day the woman had had enough and waged a bloody war that lasted almost sixty years. Despite major losses, the woman won and every since that day, male aggressive was discouraged and a Queendom was installed. Over the centuries, Razorback males came to accepted female rule. Indeed as time went on, it was unusual for them to seek any kind of aggressive roles, especially military careers. But when Caraculla came to the Queen one sunny spring day and discussed his ambitions to go to AEssyria, the queen had been most supportive. She understood he was different.

He'd always loved her for that. For accepting him when no one else of his race would.

"Look at you," she said eyeing him up and down. "What a marvel of a man you have become."

His lust was tightening around him like a snake, squeezing the life out of him. "You are as lovely as I remember," he whispered.

She placed a hand against his cheek and leaned down to kiss him. He closed his eyes and the memory of his many pleasures at the hands of this woman resurrected his buried soul. Her lips caressed his, teasing and tickling him. His cock stiffened so quickly he became light headed. Lifting his hands he placed them on her waist feeling the thick muscles beneath her dress.

The queen broke the kiss but kept her lips against his. "I missed you very much," she said softly. "I'm so glad you came back to visit."

Shame moved through him like a disease. "There's something wrong with me, Great Mother. I have a sickness in my soul and I need help."

She pulled back from him and her metallic green eyes sparkled. "Then coming home to me was the best thing you could have done. I can heal you my beloved, just wait and see."

Chapter Eleven

Gavin sat on the Imperial patio watching two Saleen Raptors circling lazily in the sky. With a 10-12 foot wingspan they were an ominous sight. Something was dying nearby and they would wait for just the right moment to attack. Gavin had come across them a few times while hunting. They were fierce fighters when food was involved and if they could bully you into giving up your kill they would. A servant brought him a bottle of Sawjack Whiskey and a shot glass. The man bowed silently and left. Heavy foot falls came up behind him.

“Isn’t it a little early to be drinking?” Megolyth said.

Gavin poured himself a shot and tossed it back. “Not if you started at one in the morning.”

The emperor sat down and drummed his fingers on the table. “If you’ve been drinking since one, you must have bad news to tell me.”

A tense silence fell between them. Finally Gavin said, “I’ve lost another group of men in the jungle. They were just a scouting party but no one has heard from them in days. It appears I’ll have to go myself to solve this problem.”

Megolyth grunted his understanding. “That will be hard for you. I know you don’t want to leave Harlan and the child.”

“I’m a lucky man,” Gavin said gulping down another shot. “My wife understands my devotion to duty. She’s the finest woman I’ve ever married and I love her desperately.”

The emperor traced the design on the table with his finger. “And I know she loves you very much. I’m sure I don’t need to tell you that she’ll be cared for in the event you don’t come back.”

Gavin shifted and placed his boots on the seat in front of him. “Let’s be honest. I probably won’t come back.”

“You could send someone else,” Megolyth offered.

The general laughed. "I've already tried that. No, I cannot ask another man to do what must be done. This is something only I can achieve, if indeed it is achievable." Gavin studied Megolyth. "How goes your plans for marriage?"

"Fine, fine. Everything is set. She's exactly what the nobles expect. She has good bloodlines and is well versed in diplomacy. I expect she'll make a fine Empress."

"What will happen to Harlan if I should die and you take a wife?"

Megolyth looked at Gavin for the first time since he'd sat down. "She'll maintain her special protected status. If she agrees, I may marry her as well to have a father to her child and protection under the regime."

"What will your new bride think of a human rival?" Gavin asked twisting his shot glass around in circles.

"Harlan is a strong and independent woman. I'm not worried. She can take care of herself, as long as she doesn't have any ambitious males hanging around."

"I'm very grateful you're going to watch over her and Gypsy. Harlan is very fond of you."

The emperor nodded. "I am curious though, why didn't you ask Colonel Caraculla? I thought you two were like brothers."

"We are but he's had a few personal problems of late that he needs to address. Besides, he's a young man. I'd hate to saddle him with a family before he's ready."

The emperor shook his head as if he were trying to clear a bad taste from his mouth. "I don't believe this enemy will best you, Gavin. You're a fierce old bastard and you've seen a lot of battles, I have faith you'll find a way to win this one, despite the odds."

Gavin picked up the whiskey bottle and noticed it was almost empty. He hadn't even realized he'd drank that much. Worse yet, he barely felt the buzz. By the Gods he missed Harlan and Gypsy already.

"I'm sure you're right, Highness," Gavin said grimly. Some of his best commanders had gone to vanquish this enemy and not one of them had

returned. Gavin didn't hold out much hope he'd fair any better. He'd faced some terrible fights in his time but this one was different. Perhaps it was because he had so much more to loose now. This battle made him feel like he was little more than a dead man walking.

Chapter Twelve

Harlan was looking more tense than usual. Her green eyes, normally the color of emeralds, were a darker shade this morning and it worried him. Gavin watched the servant prepare his hyperia and moved closer to Harlan. He placed a hand on her back. She responded to his kindness by leaning into him and placing her head on his shoulder. "I love you," she whispered so softly he almost missed it.

Gavin kissed her on top of the head in response. He didn't need to say the words, she knew how madly in love with her he was. "I'll be back as soon as I can manage."

"I know," she said watching Gypsy chase a butterfly with a stick through the courtyard.

"I've spoken to Megolyth and he's assured me that you will be cared for if anything should happen to me."

Harlan's body tensed. He knew how she hated discussing the possibility but he'd put it off long enough. She needed to know the things he had to tell her. "There's also some money stashed in my bureau. It should be enough to buy food or whatever else you may need."

"I wish you didn't have to go," she said. "But I understand."

"If I am killed I want you to go to Megolyth immediately, don't wait around. You know how quickly these men can get ideas in their heads."

"I will."

The servant came over and stood a few feet from them. "Your mount is ready, Excellency."

Gavin nodded and tossed the man a few coins. He squeezed Harlan and touched his lips to hers. She kissed him back with a sorrow he'd never known in her before. Pain filled his chest. He broke the kiss and took a deep, cleansing breath. He needed her to leave or he might change his mind.

“You should go now,” he said. “It will only be harder if you watch me leave.”

Harlan said nothing. She stood up, took Gypsy’s hand and slowly walked away. For several long minutes he watched her go. She looked so small and vulnerable against the imposing architecture of the Military Complex. He wanted to say so much to her but he just didn’t have the words. He remembered when they’d first met when she’d drugged him as he fought for his freedom against a trumped up murder charge. They’d traveled such a long road since then and he realized he was a lucky man. Some men lived their whole lives and never knew a passion like this. They lived and died like animals, never knowing the heights of happiness such an intense love could bring. But he’d known it, lived it and savored it, and now it was hard to let go.

Gavin buried his sorrow and went to his hyperia. Reaching into the darkness of his soul he pulled out two familiar old friends; hatred and fury. He let them loose inside himself, let them grow and choke off all other emotions until there was no room for anything else. Then, without a backward glance, he mounted up on his animal and signaled his men to advance.

Chapter Thirteen

Gavin arrived at Outpost One late in the afternoon of the third day. It was an unimpressive military garrison on the banks of the Stamfian River. The building looked solid enough, built two hundred years prior out of crude brick and mortar. The heavy stench of rotting fish hung in the air, a byproduct of the men stationed here having little other game to eat. Just beyond the outpost was the thickest part of the jungle, a canopy of rich green vegetation that would be hell to march through. Not to mention the ever present danger of ambush.

As Gavin took in the scene, he felt guilty that he hadn't come out here before. He should have come the first time he'd lost a man and maybe things would not be as bad as they were. The garrison commander, Tamerack came out of the building to greet them. He was a thin middle aged man, with quick tense movements. Gavin had dislike him the first time they'd met but had grown to admire the efficient way he handled this desolate post. His reports were always on time, accurate and detailed, a godsend when trying to get a clear handle on a difficult situation.

"General," he said hold Gavin's hyperia still as he dismounted. "We are honored you came."

Gavin wondered if there was a sarcastic crack in that statement but then decided to dismiss it. If he took offense at everything everyone said to him out of guilt, he would be defensive his whole tour. Besides, he didn't have to explain himself to anyone.

Gavin pulled his gloves off and placed them in his saddlebag. "Still no sign of any scouts?"

"No, Excellency," the commander replied. "We did however manage to retrieve some bones hanging as a warning from a tree at the trail entrance."

“Do we know whose they are?”

“We believe they are the bones of Commander Spearo.” Tamerack frowned and squinted off down the river. “A terrible shame that.”

“Indeed,” Gavin said falling into a sullen silence. *What a waste of a good man.* After a few moments, he added, “Any sign of the rest of his men?”

Tamerack shook his head. “No. Listen, why don’t you come inside and have a drink. I’ll tell you everything I know.”

Gavin followed the commander into the dark building pausing for a moment to let his eyes adjust to the gloom. A strong sense of dread came over him and images of being imprisoned so long ago flashed through his mind. Sucking in a deep breath, he forced his mind to calm itself.

Tamerack led him into a small office with a tiny window facing the river. A breeze rustled some papers on the commander’s desk. Tamerack’s reached into the bottom drawer of a filing cabinet and pulled out a bottle and two glasses.

“I hope you don’t mind gin, Excellency. I’m afraid I have to take what I can get out here.”

Gavin took a seat in one of the only two chairs in the room. He did mind gin—hated it as a matter of fact—but he really needed a drink. *So much for my staying sober.* Taking the glass from the commander he sipped it and grimaced.

Tamerack’s boots scraped on the stone floor as he settled in his chair and downed his drink. “As you already know, we are dealing with a savage and ruthless enemy. From what I’ve been able to gather, these people have been here for a long time and rumor has it they are cannibals.”

Gavin felt the bile rise in his throat. *Like matters weren’t bad enough without the enemy being a bunch of man eating savages. It’s a shame I don’t have Caraculla with me, a venom spitting Razorback would sure give us an advantage.* He tossed back his drink and signaled the commander for another. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

Tamerack poured him another drink and shook his head firmly. “I wish I was. Part of their strategy is terror. What I never told you in my reports was that the first legion did come back from the jungle. They just didn’t come back in one

piece. Six hours after they went in they came back out like this.” The commander went to a wooden chest in a corner of the room and opened it. Reaching inside he pulled out a long thick vine which looked to have several rabbits hooked into the length. But the closer Tamerack brought the vine the more detail Gavin made out. They weren’t rabbits, they were Assyrian scalps. Gavin held his hand up to stop the commander’s advance.

“Why didn’t you tell anyone about this?”

“If I had, you’d never get a soldier in there.”

“Who leads these people?”

“Believe it or not, a woman. Her name is Sorena and she’s well over seven feet tall. These people are unchanged from an earlier time in our evolution. They are completely independent and fiercely territorial. They also engage in live sacrifice.”

Gavin frowned. “Have they used my men for sacrifice?”

“Yes.”

Gavin got up and paced. A vengeful fury fired his gut. He wanted all those savages dead. The major obstacle of this campaign was of course the dense jungle. He liked facing his enemy in the open, where he could see what they were up to. Since the Sambien Wars, he couldn’t stand fighting closed in by vegetation. He knew how the enemy could come up out of the depths and you’d never see them coming.

Tamerack held up the bottle of gin but Gavin shook his head. The stuff had given him a nasty pain in his chest. “So when do we march?” Tamerack asked.

Gavin arched his back and felt a stab of pain from his arthritis. “We’ll go in before sun rise in the morning. We might as well get this dirty business over with. I’ve brought additional supplies. Make sure all the men are issued a chopping blade. We’re going to need to cut our own path in.”

Chapter Fourteen

Gypsy had finally gone to sleep and the absence of her rambunctious endeavors made the villa eerily quiet. Harlan settled into her favorite wing chair and tried to focus on her new procedures manual for the clinic. She sat for a long time just staring into the fireplace at the shapes manifesting in the flames. It had been almost a week since Gavin had left and his absence left a hollow vacant space in her life. She tried not to play out scenarios of death in her head and instead tried to concentrate on other things; Gypsy, her work—but nothing helped. The longer he was away, the more she worried.

Outside the night was growing cooler and the damp trees glistened with that familiar moonlit sheen from the three moons. Adding to her depression it had rained most of the day and Gypsy kept asking when Gavin was coming home. Harlan wondered if Gavin was looking at the same sky she was and if he was safe and well. For a moment the thought made her feel a little better.

A knock sounded on the door and she was abruptly yanked from her thoughts. Setting her notebook aside she got up and crept over to the door. Looking out the side window she could see it was Megolyth. Harlan felt an insane panic overwhelm her. She flung open the door and stared at him on the verge of tears.

“Has something happened? Is he alright?” Harlan said feeling the muscles around her eyes and nose tighten.

“Everything is fine. I haven’t heard anything to make me believe otherwise. I just came by to check on you,” Megolyth said holding up his hands.

“I’m sorry I was just afraid that you were here...never mind I’m just being paranoid and ridiculous.”

“May I come in?” he asked.

Harlan stepped back from the door. “Oh yes. I’m sorry please come inside.”

Megolyth came in and took a seat on the leather couch. “Is Gypsy asleep?”

“Yes,” Harlan said. “Finally.”

They both laughed. Harlan sank into the chair on his left. Just seeing an Assyrian man on that couch brought a bundle of painful memories of Gavin.
God how she missed him.

“How are you doing?”

She bit back some tears and forced a smile. “I’m fine—keeping myself busy.”

“Me too. I don’t know if I told you but I’m going to be married soon,” he said.

“That’s wonderful. I’m so happy for you.” Suddenly the pain seized her heart and the tears burned their way from her soul. She covered her face with her hands but her emotions were too raw. Before she could stop herself she was sobbing and shaking her head trying to will her outburst to stop.

Megolyth came up along side her and pulled her up into his arms. His kindness lanced a wound within her that had been festering for days. Her sorrow flowed out completely beyond her control. When she was finally able to stop sobbing and catch her breath, she gently pushed back from him.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I didn’t realize I was that upset.”

“Don’t apologize to me,” he said in a voice rich like honey. “I understand this is hard for you. Love is an impossible emotion to master. The more you try, the more it rebels and confounds you.”

Harlan patted his chest and sank into her seat again. “I haven’t heard a word. I hope he’s okay.”

“He’ll be alright. Many enemies have tried to kill that man and no one has managed it yet. In fact, that’s one reason why Gavin is a legend. He manages victories when he’s hopelessly outnumbered. I know he’ll find a way to overcome this challenge as well.”

“What about you? When is the wedding?” Harlan asked trying to change the subject.

“We haven’t set a date yet, but it will be soon. I have to admit, I’ve been stalling.”

Harlan wiped her eyes on her shirt. “Why?”

“I don’t want to get married. I resent the fact that I have to marry a woman I don’t love just to make the nobles happy. But it is my duty and I will do it.”

“It’s very sad that you have achieved so much and can’t share it with someone you choose,” Harlan said thoughtfully. “But maybe you’ll learn to love each other.”

Megolyth stroked her hair. “Maybe. I’ll be back to check on you again.”

Harlan nodded and took his hand. She placed it against her cheek and squeezed it. Her heart slow to a calmer pace, then she released him.

“Do you want me to stay the night?” he asked.

“No,” Harlan said in a voice barely above a whisper.

Megolyth stalked toward the door and she stood up. “Megolyth?”

“Yes Harlan.”

She shrugged a little embarrassed. He’d probably misunderstood her affectionate gesture. AEssyrian men always thought everything was solved with sex. “Thanks anyway for the offer.”

“Maybe next time you’ll take me up on it.”

Chapter Fifteen

The quarry was one of the only places on AEssyrian where pure white marble could be found. Because of that, men labored there in twenty four hour shifts, day and night to meet the demand. Orders for the snow white rock came from all over the planet but it was primarily used in the Queendom. Most of the workers enjoyed mining here. They saw it as a service to the queen who used large quantities of marble to adorn the different buildings she had constructed.

Caraculla had volunteered to work here to sweat out some tension and free his mind of the constant anxiety that lived there. All day long, he cut slabs of rock. At days end, he'd stagger back to the small furnished villa he rented and collapse on the bed. There he'd fall into a dark, dreamless sleep and wake up to do it all over again. But somehow the grueling, back-breaking work was never enough to bring him complete peace, and the demons that brought him here were waiting for just the right time to resurface.

So far, he managed to stay away from drugs but, with every passing day, his isolation increased, tempting him to indulge. Recreational drugs were not an easy thing to find in the Queendom but like most addicts he could be resourceful.

"Colonel?" a man's voice said from behind him.

Caraculla turned around. A young messenger stood a few feet back staring at him with large frightened eyes. The boy looked frail and thin and Caraculla wondered if he was ill.

"Yes," he said.

The boy blinked. "The Queen would like to see you in her private chamber."

Caraculla knew this was coming and didn't want to go. There would be questions, questions he didn't know the answers to. Unfortunately, he knew he couldn't refuse her. "I'll be right there." He returned the marble cutter to its

rickety wooden shelf and grabbed his shirt. He would have to stop by the villa and get cleaned up first.

The boy rushed off and disappeared quickly up the rock steps. Caraculla pulled his shirt on and rolled his shoulders to loosen the muscles. *What was she going to ask him?* He guessed he would soon find out.

Caraculla entered the Queen's private chamber escorted by two large female guards. The Queen nodded to them and they left, closing the door behind them. The room was elegantly furnished with large throw pillows all over the ground and embroidered curtains shutting out the daylight. The Queen was lounging on the pillows sipping wine from a golden goblet.

"You sent for me?" he said.

The Queen lifted the side of her mouth in a quirky smile. "Yes I did," she replied. "You're different than I remember. Harder and more confident. The military seems to agree with you."

Caraculla didn't feel more confident. He felt lost. "Thank you."

The Queen tossed some pillows together and made a comfortable looking pile next to her. "Come and be with me."

"With all due respect, I'm not really in the mood for sex."

The Queen laughed. "I don't think I've ever met a man who was not in the mood for sex." She paused and studied him. "What's wrong? What's happened to you?"

What could he tell her? He didn't even know himself. He folded his arms across his chest. "I don't know."

She held her arms out to him. "Come here," she said.

Caraculla came toward her and settled on the pillows. Taking his face into her hands, she kissed him. Her lips were soft and delicate against his and he found himself relaxing against her. Her hands slid up his chest pulling his shirt up over his head. A slow burn began in his gut, a sexual hunger he hadn't felt in

a very long time. The Queen's scent filled his lungs, reviving him like a blast of cold water. Gone was his indifference—now all he wanted was sex. With an aggressive impatience, he finished undressing them both, his eyes feasting over the sensual beauty of her body.

He pushed himself into her flesh, clutching her body like a drowning man. Suddenly he remembered all the magic within the Queen's chemistry and was reborn. She whispered softly to him, encouraging him in his fevered trance to take her. His lips and tongue couldn't get enough of her. Within minutes he was on her consuming her like a banquet, feeding a lust he'd thought he'd forgotten. The depth of her heat was exhausting and through their long and sometimes violent coupling, he found himself again.

And it was the best homecoming he'd ever had.

Chapter Sixteen

It had been almost a week. The days bled into each other as Gavin and his men pushed deeper into the hot stinking jungle. There was little game in this harsh, tangled terrain, and Gavin and his men had been living on snakes, lizards and other small vermin for almost as long as they'd been here. Gavin held his hand up and all his men stopped their advance.

Tamerack rode up along side him. "Did you hear something, Excellency?" he said softly.

"No," Gavin replied. But he knew danger was close. He could smell it as surely as he drew breath. A sudden stench of death blew their way and the men stole nervous glances at him. "I sense something."

Gavin signaled his men to move forward slowly. Just in front of them was the source of the smell. A parameter had been created with AEssyrian heads on spears to mark the border. Although many of the heads were too decayed to make out the faces, Gavin knew it was his fallen legion. A cold fury filled him and he clinched his teeth so hard his jaw ached. He'd have revenge for this slaughter.

"Who are they?" a soldier said from behind him.

Gavin turned in his saddle. "Silence," he hissed. Twisting back to face the border, Gavin pulled his saber and heard his men follow his lead. Spurring his hyperia forward, he moved through two of the spears listening so hard he almost forgot to breath. The jungle was a bloody awful place to fight an enemy. No matter what you did, they always had plenty of cover for an ambush. They also knew the terrain better than their invader. Gavin expected to have a ton of causalities.

The first thing he heard was the booby traps going off. The thin wires let off a quick hiss and snap, cutting men and mounts in two. Officers called to their men to charge but that only made them die quicker. Before Gavin could issue an

order and try to regroup, his mount fell from under him. Blood sprayed his face and chest armor and for a moment he was weightless. Then he struck the ground with a bone jarring crash.

He looked around and realized he was in a hole, his hyperia in gory pieces around him. Within inches of his face were several long, sharp spears sticking out of the ground. Another foot to the left and he'd have been dead. He tried not to be disappointed.

Above him in the dark canopy of the jungle he heard men screaming and hyperia snarling, everyone fighting for their lives. He moved around the walls looking for any place to climb up and out. He tried several spots that looked promising but ended up falling and almost impaling his arm.

The horrible noises from above seemed to go on for hours, and then suddenly there was silence. Gavin focused on the only thing he could; escape. He continued to walk around the pit, forcing himself to think of ways to escape. Then, a few faces showed themselves at the mouth of the pit. They resembled AEssyrian men but looked to be only around five feet tall. They were adorned in animal skins and their faces were painted with strange symbols. As they gazed down at him, they spoke excitedly among themselves in a dialect Gavin found impossible to understand.

A rope ladder came down and Gavin climbed it to the top. Nothing could have prepared him for the carnage before him. Blood and body parts, both AEssyrian and animal, littered the ground. Gavin lunged for a nearby saber but the savages tackled him and wrestled him to the ground. Pain exploded in his brain as several small spears were thrust into his back and thighs. Then there was nothing but the cold blackness of night.

Chapter Seventeen

It was late and the tavern was crowded. Megolyth watched some of his nobles play an old trivia game lost in thought. Soon he'd be married. Such an occasion should be a happy one but he was anything but. Melina, his bride to be, was a lovely woman, well bred and as far as he knew a virgin. He should be overjoyed at such a catch but all he could feel was trapped. He consoled himself with the fact that he'd looked everywhere for a more suitable mate but it was not meant to be. One noblewoman who would have been perfect for him was quickly dismissed by the nobles simply because of the fact she was a widow. What could Megolyth do? He needed the nobles' support to run the administration and the army smoothly. So despite some spirited discussion, he'd surrendered to their choice, Melina.

He felt sorry for the young woman because he knew he could never love her. They were just too different in so many ways. For a fleeting moment he envied Gavin. Rare was the man who found the kind of love Harlan and he shared. She was a good match for the general, smart and tough. Megolyth made a mental note to stop by and see her tomorrow.

Lifting his glass he stopped in mid-sip hearing a terrible commotion from behind him. Instinctively, Megolyth got up and drew his saber. Racing toward him was a messenger wearing only his uniform pants, his hair sticking up on his head. He looked like he'd just fallen out of bed and gone mad. Megolyth didn't see a weapon but kept his at the ready. You never knew who held a grudge against a ruling sovereign.

When the messenger was a few feet away, two nobles jumped him and wrestled him to the floor. The young man screamed in frustration.

Megolyth approached him and stared down at him. The messenger stopped struggling and said, "I have horrible news, Highness. Please let me speak!"

The nobles helped the man up. Now that Megolyth could see him clearly, he noticed the messenger's face was wet with tears. "What is it? What's happened?"

The messenger doubled over to catch his breath. Then he said, "General Gavin Theron is dead. He and all his men were ambushed and killed in the jungle. Only one man managed to escape and even he may not survive his wounds."

A deafening hush fell over the tavern. The music stopped and every voice silenced. It had become so quiet in the room, Megolyth could hear his heart beating wildly in his chest. *This can't be! It must be a mistake.*

Megolyth swallowed. "Who is this man who managed to escape?"

"A foot soldier. He said the scene was complete carnage. Everyone is dead. He'd been treated in the Grand Duke Molitov's home because he couldn't travel any further."

"Who's treating him?"

"One of the visiting Kirillian doctors, Highness."

"So Harlan doesn't know yet?"

The messenger shook his head. "No, Highness. Would you like me to go and tell her?"

"No. I'll do it," Megolyth said. "You may go."

The messenger left the room moving past the patrons as if they were ghosts. No one dared breathe. It was as if holding their breath would stop time. Megolyth heard a woman break into heartbreaking sobs and rush from the room. A few men took to their seats.

Baron Weiss slammed his fist on the table making everyone wince. The thick brown hair on the back of his head stood up on end like the hackles of a dog. "It can't be possible!" he roared.

A few others voiced their angry agreement. But there was no true conviction in their objections. Everyone knew Gavin's death was long overdue. He was one of the oldest military men who still actively fought on campaigns. Facing that many dangers all your life couldn't go on forever.

In soft, reverent tones, the men began to sing. The sound was sweet and melancholy like one would sing to a lost love. It was a song Megolyth didn't know but the words told the story of a brave soldier who went to an early grave for his king. Megolyth wasn't sure but it sounded like a very old tune written about a legend. And he was certain that legend was Gavin.

Chapter Eighteen

Harlan was just about ready to go to bed when a knock came at the door. A nervous flutter tickled her belly but she pushed it down. *Get a hold of yourself and stop panicking.* Wrapping her robe around her, she turned on the outdoor camera and was surprised to see Megolyth. She opened the door smiling then she looked into his eyes.

Everything was there.

She opened her mouth to speak but before she could utter a word her knees buckled. Her mind spiraled down a black hole and she wondered if she was dying. She watched with cool detachment as the floor rushed up to meet her but she never hit. Megolyth caught her and carried her inside. He laid her on the couch and sat next to her. She hated him for being so quiet. Suddenly she hated him for so many things, some in his power and some not.

Harlan tried to feel something but she'd gone numb, as if someone had pulled a switch inside her and drained all the emotion out. When the dizzy spell passed she sat up and unintentionally glared at Megolyth.

"You already know why I'm here," he said.

Her mind exploded in agony. She shook her head. "No," she said feeling her mouth contort into a frown. She reached out as if to cover his mouth, then pulled her hands back to cover her own.

"I just found out myself," he said. "I wanted you to find out from me so came here right away."

"I said NO!" she screamed, her body shaking like an exposure victim. Megolyth reached for her but she wildly slapped his hands away. "It's not true. Prove to me he's dead!"

"One of the foot soldiers managed to escape and brought back the news that Gavin and the rest of the men were ambushed and killed. I'm so sorry, Harlan."

“*You* should be! *You* sent him there to be killed for your bullshit conquests!” She placed her hands over her mouth as if she couldn’t believe what she was saying. After a few calming breaths, she said, “I’m not going to accept this. I want proof. I want to see his body. I am not going to trust the word of some terrified foot soldier.”

“Harlan we cannot risk more men to retrieve our dead, we have to—”

“Goddamn you he’s not dead!” Harlan screamed at him clenching her fists.

Megolyth pulled her into his arms and she felt her heart cave in. Her pain was so intense she couldn’t even cry. She couldn’t imagine a life without Gavin.

“I’ll stay with you tonight. You shouldn’t be alone.”

He can’t be dead, he just can’t be! Not Gavin, no one can kill Gavin. For a tiny second, she thought about Titan. He could bring him back...he could.... The tears burned her eyes and horrible sobs escaped her body. She was lost, adrift in a sea of torture. Images of Gavin flashed across her mind, images of him playing with Gypsy, images of them making love, images of them fighting. She squeezed Megolyth as hard as she could.

“You’re going to be all right Harlan,” he said. “I promise you. You and Gypsy will be all right.”

Harlan released him, got up and paced the floor. “I knew this might happen someday, but I guess he seemed so invincible I never really thought that—”

“I know. We’re all in shock.”

She wrung her hands and then stared down at them. They looked thin and frail. “I want you to go.”

Megolyth looked at her surprised. “You want me to *go*?”

She nodded. “Yes. I want to be alone. I need to think about this and decide what I am going to believe and accept. I can’t think straight with you here and I need to figure out what I’m going to tell Gypsy.”

He stood up. "Are you sure?"

Harlan stood up with him and walked over to the front door. She opened it and stood there. "Yes."

Megolyth walked over and touched her chin. "Don't worry about a thing," he said. "I promise you—I'll care for you and your daughter. And as for whoever killed my general, I'll take care of them as well."

Harlan was relieved when he left. The pain burned through every inch of her and contact with anyone else just made it worse. If Megolyth had stayed she would have taken every bit of anger and frustration out on him if for no other reason than the fact that he was still alive. Her mind reverted back and forth between intense sorrow and a refusal to believe that Gavin was dead. The scientific training that she received had programmed her brain not to accept anything at face value. She needed to have proof but was frustrated by her inability to get it. There was no way she could go look for Gavin. She couldn't risk leaving Gypsy an orphan even though she would always be taken care of by Megolyth. No. Nothing makes children feel more betrayed than losing their parents, even if it's not their fault. The battles of uncertainty waged through her mind without resolution.

Harlan ascended the staircase and walked toward Gypsy's room. The air seemed viscous and slowed her steps as she approached. She needed to tell her more for her own comfort than for Gypsy. It was almost selfish as if she wanted to share this pain with someone who would be just as devastated as she was. She stood in front of the dark wooden door with ornate carvings of flowers scattered throughout it. Harlan took a deep breath and pushed the door open. When she stepped into Gypsy's room she felt the painful burning ebb a bit. Gypsy sat cross legged on her bed watching her with Gavin's yellow eyes. Harlan silently navigated through the terrain of toys over to the bed and climbed

up next to her daughter. For a moment Harlan looked out of the window unable to speak or meet Gypsy's gaze. Still unable to look at her Harlan said, "Did you hear what Megolyth said?"

"Yes. Is he really dead?" Gypsy said. Her voice shook.

"I don't know. I'm not sure if I believe it," Harlan said.

"Then I won't believe it either unless you say so."

Harlan pulled Gypsy into an embrace and lay back on the bed with her. She brushed her long chocolate colored hair out of her face and kissed her on the forehead. Gypsy squeezed her in return and curled up in her arms. Tears fell from Harlan's lashes creating damp speckles on Gypsy's hair.

"I don't want him to be dead because I'll miss him and that will make me sad," Gypsy sniffled. Her child's simple words encompassed all that Harlan was feeling.

"Me too my sweet angel. Me too."

Chapter Twenty

General Theron was a stunning specimen of a man. Serina had her warriors lay him inside her cave on a stone slab. Methodically she stripped him of his armor and clothes admiring each piece as she removed it. It was all very impressive but she thought cumbersome in a fight. When she had finished relieving him of everything covering his flesh she retrieved some leather straps that hung from hooks embedded in the gray stone walls. Effortlessly she rolled him onto his stomach and bound his forearms behind his back wrapping the long straps from wrist to elbow until his arms were completely immobile. When she had finished assembling his restraint she rolled him back onto his back and watched him. While he slept, she took the liberty of running her hands down his heavily muscled body. She traced the many scars that covered his flesh wishing he was awake to tell her of his many adventures in combat. To her surprise, he grew erect under her touch.

She had been planning to kill him slowly for the insult of his invasion but soon a new thought came to her. A fine male like this would surely sire an equally impressive female child. Serina had been dreaming and praying for an heir and now it looked like the Gods had answered her prayers.

Sliding her undergarments off, Serina moved up over Gavin's body and guided his penis deep inside her. A rush of hungry pleasure moved up from her sex and enveloped her. Moaning softly, she pumped her hips down over and over again, not caring if he woke or not. Soon, she orgasmed and felt his seed spray deep inside. He awoke just as she was easing herself off him.

Gavin groaned and twisted under his restraints. He said something but Serina couldn't understand him. She stepped into her undergarments and turned back toward him.

"Are you awake General?" she asked.

"Where the *fuck* am I?"

“You’re in my home. You are my prisoner.”

The memory of the battle raced back to him and he burst into a fit of violence trying to break free.

“That is a hopeless waste of time,” she said.

Gavin glared at her and Serina was impressed by how dangerous he looked. His golden eyes glowed with a pure hate and venomous rage. If he were larger than her, she might actually have been afraid.

“Where are the rest of my men?” he asked.

Serina laughed. “Oh general, I’m afraid they are all dead. Everyone is dead except you and one we allowed to escape. Once he tells the others how their great general has fallen then I expect we will be left alone.”

“What are you waiting for then? Why not finish me off too? You must know the Empire won’t pay a ransom for me.”

“I’ve found another use for you.” She shrugged as an afterthought. “Well, for a little while anyway.”

“I can’t wait to hear this.”

“I need an heir, a princess to carry on my line. The Gods answered my prayers and sent me you. I think you’ll make an excellent breeder. I’m going to use you to impregnate me, and when I’m done I’m going to kill you.”

Gavin fought his restraints with renewed vigor. Finally he stopped in exhaustion and stared at the ceiling. “What if you get pregnant with a son instead of a daughter?” he asked.

Serina shrugged. “Then I kill the child and start over again.”

“How long are you planning to keep me bound like an animal?”

“A long time, General,” she said with a cruel smile. “A very, very long time.”

Chapter Twenty-one

Caraculla was awoken with a kiss. The heaviness of sleep evaporated from his mind bringing with it the harsh clarity of a hot summer day. He opened his eyes and looked up into the lovely face of the Razorback Queen.

She gave him a delicate smile. "There's an Imperial messenger here for you," she said.

He sat up too quickly and pulled a small muscle in his neck. Frowning, he rubbed it and the pain faded. "What messenger? Where is he?"

She handed him a robe and gestured toward the door. "He's waiting for you outside in the hall."

A sinking feeling pulled at his gut making him feel like he'd fallen in quicksand. No one would have sent a messenger for him unless it was very bad news. He came outside and stared at the messenger. The young man was older than most of them, a male just on the verge of adolescence. There was anxiety etched in his face and fear in his grey eyes. "I'm sorry to interrupt you colonel," he stammered, "but my news is most urgent."

Caraculla tried to swallow but found he had no spit. He kept silent and waited.

"It's the General Theron, sir," the messenger continued. "I'm afraid to tell you he's been killed. The Emperor is requesting you return immediately."

Caraculla stood there unable to think of a thing to say. This boy had just told him his best friend—a man he considered a second father—was dead. None of the messenger's words seemed to make any sense. What he was saying was impossible.

For everyone who knew him, Gavin was more than just a soldier and general. He was the embodiment of the war god Dargannon himself. Certainly no man had been so blessed. Where other military men had died on campaign, Gavin had triumphed. He had led armies into battle against superior forces—and

was not only victorious—but brought most of the soldiers back alive. He was the only man in Assyrian history to lose his rank, be thrown in jail, only to be pardoned later and reinstated. He'd cheated death so many times everyone just assumed he was immortal. And now a child messenger was telling him this legendary man was no more. It just didn't seem possible.

The messenger touched Caraculla's arm. "Are you alright sir?" he asked.

"How?" Caraculla managed. "How did he die?"

"He was killed in the jungle with his men. Only one man survived to escape and tell us the news, and he's near death himself."

Caraculla went cold. "Is Harlan tending to this man?"

"No sir. He was taken straight to the emperor last night. I believe some Kirillian doctors are seeing to him."

"Has the General's body been recovered yet?"

"No," the messenger replied. "No one has dared venture back there yet."

"Tell the emperor I'll be back as soon as possible. I just have to gather my stuff and say my goodbyes."

The messenger bowed and hurried off.

Caraculla fell back against the wall feeling dazed. Could it really be true? Could the greatest general in history be dead? There was only one way to be sure—he'd have to go back and find out for himself.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Every waking moment in bondage was agony. Bound on his knees with his hands behind his back, Gavin found it hard to remember ever having been in so much pain. His legs had gone into a cramped numbness except for his knees scraped raw from kneeling on the dirt floor. His shoulders felt like they'd been broken and put back together wrong on the rare occasions he could actually feel them. Endless hunger and thirst were the least of his woes. The Diamondback Queen came in obscuring what little daylight there was from the cave entrance. She sat down near Gavin and studied him like a sideshow curiosity. Even in his horrific pain he was impressed by her size. She was easily well over seven feet tall and must have outweighed him by a hundred pounds. She smelled gamey and damp, much like the jungle around her.

"Why do you keep sending your soldiers into my territory?" she asked.

"It's not your territory, it's the Emperor's."

She smiled grimly. "Not yet, it's not."

"You're hopelessly outnumbered. The Emperor's soldiers will find and kill you and that band of naked savages you call a tribe. It's only a matter of time. And I for one, can't fucking wait."

The queen slammed her fist into his face with bone-rattling force. "It's a shame I have to kill you," she said calmly. "I rather admire your brave defiance."

Gavin glared at her through his soiled black hair tasting blood in his mouth. Lifting his head, he spat the gore into her face.

The queen rose and wiped the spit off on his arm. Then, crouching down behind him, she tightened his binding until he was certain she'd dislocated his shoulders. The ropes creaked with the strain. He roared as anguish ripped down his arms and back. His body shuddered.

“Perhaps you should rethink how you treat me?” she said.

Gavin wanted to curse her, but he was still struggling to adjust to this new pain level.

She leaned down and watched his suffering with an amused detachment.

“Don’t you have anything nice to say to me?”

Images raced through his head. *The comforting warmth of Harlan’s embrace, Gypsy’s tiny arms as they hugged him before bed, the smell of raw meat at the summer banquet. A rush of regret came over him too; the many sons he’d trained and pushed until he’d finally driven them away, the slaying of his favorite son Northe—a young man with staggering promise who’d raised an army against him and tried to destroy the father who had trained him. The many women he’d loved and left, the children he’d fathered and walked away from, the legions of men he’d fought and watched die. All these things and so much more—what a tremendous life he’d had, the victories, the pain and joy and the finding of his one true love, Harlan.*

He knew all that was gone now, he’d certainly be dead soon. But his last act would be to take this great bitch out before she killed him. Then, he’d probably fall prey to her naked minions in a frenzy of revenge but at least he’d have the satisfaction of winning a last victory. All he needed was to get her to trust him enough to loosen these bonds. “I apologize,” he said keeping his voice as neutral as he could manage.

The queen blinked as if he’d said something completely unexpected. In response, she moved up behind him and cut his straps. Gavin fell forward onto the ground, his body screaming in agony. He tried to will himself to get up but his body simply wouldn’t respond. Naked and dirty he managed to twist onto his side and lay still.

“There you see?” the queen said rolling him onto his back and grabbing his penis. “I can be merciful.” Then she manipulated him into a partial erection, and forced herself onto him. She slammed her hard muscular body down onto him for what seemed like hours, then grunted and climbed off. Gavin never

imagined that sex could be so painful. Every muscle screamed with every adjustment as the blood returned to his appendages.

Gavin tasted bile in his mouth and thought he was going to be sick.

“I don’t think you’re much of a threat so I’m going to leave you loose,” she said. “If you attempt to leave or try to harm anyone I’ll bind you again, and this time I won’t be so kind. Do we understand each other, general?”

All Gavin could manage was a groan.

Chapter Twenty-three

The first one showed up just as Harlan was getting ready for work. She was combing her hair in the bathroom when Gypsy ran in. “Mommy,” she shouted pulling on Harlan’s shirt. “There’s a man outside.”

Harlan rushed past her daughter and checked the double locked on the front door. Looking through the camera she spotted him dismounting his hyperia. She recognized him as a man Gavin pointed out to her in the arena once at a fight. He was a mercenary named Nero who had a nasty reputation as being a ruthless soldier with a bad temper. As he approached the door Harlan could see a disfiguring scar that twisted the right side of his mouth.

His knock was so loud that it startled her. She remained silent and held her finger to her lips at Gypsy who covered her mouth with her hands.

“Harlan?” he said through the door. “I heard the news about Gavin. I can’t tell you how sorry I am.”

Harlan didn’t dare breathe. She pulled Gypsy close and held her still.

She should have expected this. AEssyrian men were very sexually aggressive and circled like sharks at the sight of an unprotected female. She was especially desirable because as Gavin’s wife she was a memento, a piece of his property, a collector’s item. She didn’t blame them, they were just doing what came naturally but this was a very dangerous situation for her and Gypsy. Even if Nero left thinking no one home, he’d be back and there’d be others.

Nero placed his hand on the door and stroked the wood. The gesture sent chills down Harlan’s spine. “I know you’re in there. I can smell you.”

“I’m grieving, damn it. I don’t want any visitors.”

He laughed and it came out harsh like sandpaper. “I’m not a visitor, I’m a suitor.”

Harlan's hands shook. "I don't give a *shit* what you are. In case you hadn't heard we are spoken for. The emperor has already claimed us, so unless you're willing to challenge him for us, get lost."

"What would the emperor want with a frail little human doctor and her half-breed brat?"

"Why don't you go ask him? I'm sure he would have no problem justifying his actions to some one of your status."

"I think I'll just wait until you come out. Then we can discuss this face to face. Perhaps I can convince you to change your mind and choose me as your guardian." Harlan watched him walk back to his mount, pull out a flask and take a seat on some rocks.

Great, now I'm trapped here. God how she wished she could at least get Gypsy out, but she didn't dare risk it.

Gypsy looked up into her face. "Who is it mommy?"

Harlan stroked her cheek. "No one baby. Why don't we do a puzzle in the library for a little while?"

"But aren't we going to your work today?"

"No. I think we'll just stay here. Listen very carefully. Do not go outside or open any of the doors. Do you understand?"

Gypsy nodded and tried to peer out one of the windows.

"How is Harlan taking the news?" Caraculla asked as he and Megolyth walked through the royal garden.

A pained expression crossed Megolyth's face. "As badly as you might expect. She's refusing to believe that he's dead."

"I can't say that I'm convinced either. But I'm probably still in shock. I should have gone with him," Caraculla said stopping and rubbing the back of his neck.

“You needed to take care of yourself first. But it’s a good thing you’re here, perhaps you can give Harlan some comfort. I fear she blames me for this.”

“That’s just her grief talking.”

“Perhaps.”

“I’ll go and see her and invite her to stay with me.”

Megolyth frowned. “No,” he said. “I want you to bring her here to the palace. She’s to be under my protection from now on.”

Caraculla stiffened. “What if she doesn’t want to be under your protection?”

“Well then she can tell me herself. Don’t challenge me on this issue Caraculla. You are Gavin’s military heir but Harlan is mine. Do I make myself clear?”

Caraculla wanted to argue but he’d brought this on himself. He’d lost Gavin’s trust with his addictions otherwise things would have been different. A dark moment of self-loathing came over him but he quickly pushed it away. He needed to stay focused to avenge Gavin.

“You’ve made yourself clear.”

“Good,” Megolyth said. “Have her to the palace by nightfall. I don’t want her staying at that villa alone one more night.”

“I’ll be back by the early afternoon Highness,” Caraculla said turning back to the main pathway.

“Caraculla,” Megolyth called after him.

“Yes Highness.”

“She is very proud and very angry. If you have to force her to come then do so, just tell her that it’s by my authority. I’ll take the responsibility and deal with her wrath.”

Caraculla bowed and walked away.

Chapter Twenty-four

There was a sea of corpses on pikes before him, all of them soldiers. The stench, although unbearable, was nothing compared to the sorrow in his heart. He had to force himself not to weep openly. The great whore dragged him out of the cave to listen to her endless justifications. She droned on and on to her savages, telling them how the gods had favored them with victory. He didn't give a shit what she had to say, all he wanted—all he lived for now—was to kill her.

Finally she turned to him and said, "You will apologize for the mischief your Emperor has brought to out home."

Every fiber in him wanted to tell her to go and fuck herself but he knew he needed to play along. She was certainly capable of injuring him to the point where revenge would be impossible, and he couldn't have that. He feared death much less than being incapacitated and stuck here for years. Sucking in a deep breath, he felt a sharp pain in his side. He winced knowing one or more of his ribs must be broken.

"I'm sorry, great queen," he said.

At first she stared at him like that wasn't what she'd wanted from him, then she shrugged. Grabbing him by the neck she led him back to the cave entrance when he saw one of the soldiers move on his pike. He broke from her grip.

"Some of those men are still alive," he said horrified.

She squinted at the landscape littered with twisted bodies. "Yes, I think you're right. Some are much more resilient than others. Not to worry, they'll die soon enough. Come."

The thought of such brave men dying like that was too much for him. Gavin fell to his knees before her. "Please...I'll do anything you say. Just put them out of their misery."

The queen looked indecisive for a moment. "Will you mate with me?"

A wave of intense nausea moved over him. *Whatever it takes.* "Yes."

“Until I am satisfied?”

Fucking whore, I'll cut your fucking heart out. “Yes,” he said swallowing down some bile. “Yes, my queen anything you want.”

Pushing past him, she shouted some orders to her clan who immediately began slaughtering the survivors. When they were done, they took the decayed remains over to a large fire pit and placed the fresh dead near what looked like a bloody altar.

“What are they doing with those bodies?” Gavin asked.

The queen folded her arms across her chest. Her biceps bulged. “Preparing them for the feast. We eat our enemies, general. I thought you knew that.”

For a moment, Gavin was tempted to provoke her into killing him as well, but then he reminded himself that these men were dead. Nothing could harm them anymore and he had a grim deed to do before he was done.

The queen moved up close and smiled at him. “I kept my part of the bargain,” she said. “Now you keep yours.” One of her large hands encircled his neck and her thick ragged nails scraped his throat.

In all his eight hundred years, Gavin had faced many unpleasant things but nothing compared to having sex with that great she-male. The only bright spot in this dark vat of misery was that, as the weeks dragged on, she was beginning to trust him. One evening, as the fire crackled in the pit and she lay next to him she said, “Do you have children general?”

“A continent full, I imagine.”

“Have they been a comfort to you in your life?”

Gavin allowed a stream of obscenities to race through his mind. What the *fuck* did she want from him? Love and friendship? After she'd slaughtered some

of the finest men in the empire? Many of those men had been his friends. Keeping his tongue, he replied, "Yes, they have been."

"Do you think I'll ever get pregnant?"

Then the idea came to him. In order to have a good chance of slaying her, he'd need to get his weight back up to fighting strength. She was blurring the lines of their relationship, forgetting that he was her enemy. She'd already started to get sloppy and he knew if he waited she would provide him with the opportunity he needed.

He met her gaze and shrugged. "You'd probably have a better chance if I hadn't lost so much weight in your care. I am a somewhat unhealthy specimen right now so I'm sure the problem is with me, not you."

The queen propped herself up on an elbow. She'd taken the bait. "You think that is the reason?"

"Oh I'm certain of it. If I put on some weight my seed will be stronger and I'll bet you'd get pregnant right away."

The queen studied him for a long time, and then she said, "Why are you suddenly so interested in my success? I haven't been very kind to you."

Gavin decided to test this bitch's loneliness. "I'm hoping that you'll change your mind about killing me. Perhaps you'll consider keeping me alive as your companion after you conceive."

The queen sat up so suddenly he flinched. "That's a splendid idea! I'll have the clan cut up some—"

"No Assyrian meat," he said. "I won't eat that."

She considered this for a moment. "They'll bring you game meat then."

Gavin took her hand and gently kissed her knuckles. "Perhaps I have misjudged you, my queen. You truly are kind and merciful."

Chapter Twenty-five

When Caraculla rode up to Harlan and Gavin's home he was surprised to see three AEssyrian mercenaries there. They were milling around like scavengers waiting for the leftovers of another predator's kill. A flash of anger filled his chest. He rode up and commanded all their attention with a hiss.

Everyone turned around and stared at him alarmed. No one wanted a face full of lethal Razorback venom. Nero took a few cautious steps forward. "I thought you'd resigned your commission Colonel," he said.

Caraculla glared down at him from his mount. "You were obviously misinformed." He dismounted. "You men need to leave here. Harlan is the Emperors' property now."

For a moment he thought there might be an argument. Then, without a word, they all mounted up and rode off. Caraculla approached the front door just as it was flung open. Harlan leaned in the doorway looking like she'd been crying all day. "I can't tell you how glad I am to see you," she said. "How are you doing?"

He smiled. That was just like Harlan. Her life was falling in around her and she wanted to know how he was. "I'm taking my recovery one day at a time," he said half joking.

Without warning she rushed into his arms. He caught her and held her close holding his pain inside. Gypsy's small head peeked out from behind the door, and seeing it was him, she rushed over to hug his leg. They brought him inside, Gypsy still clinging to his leg. She immediately began chattering.

"Those men were here all day yesterday too!" she said.

"I know sweetheart, but they're gone now," he replied stroking the little girl's head.

"I was expecting Megolyth to come," Harlan said.

“He sent me to get you,” Caraculla told her closing the door and locking it behind him. “Better pack your things.”

She took a deep, trembling breath. “Is anyone else going out there to see if he’s really...” she let her thought trail off.

“I’m going,” he said.

Harlan turned her back on him and her shoulders shook. Caraculla moved up behind her and hugged her. “I wish I could stay here and take care of you.”

He felt her stiffen. “I’ll be alright. The sorrow comes and goes. I never know what I’m going to do lately,” she said. “We’re not going with you. I’m just going to hire a guard to protect us. The thought of leaving all of his stuff –our stuff is making me come apart again.”

Caraculla turned her to face him. “Even if you found a guard you could trust he can’t stay awake twenty four hours a day. Eventually more men will show up and he will be out numbered and you will be vulnerable. Besides, Megolyth told me that I am not allowed to take no for an answer and surely you don’t want me to get in trouble.”

“That son of a bitch. I am not going to be added to his collection of properties. You tell him that I said he can go screw!” Harlan’s voice was bordering hysteria. She pulled away from Caraculla and sat down on the stone platform of the fireplace with her face in her hands. Gypsy watched them silently.

Caraculla hadn’t been expecting such an outburst. He approached Harlan cautiously and knelt in front of her. “You’re not being fair to Megolyth. You know he’s only trying to protect you. Please come with me Harlan it doesn’t have to be permanent. If you’re unhappy there you can appeal to him. He likes you. Maybe he’ll let you return and provide you with protection you need to stay there. But give him a chance because you’re not safe out here. Gypsy’s not safe out her.”

When he mentioned Gypsy all of the resolve seemed to exhale with her breath. She stood up and he waited for another tirade. Instead she headed toward the staircase.

“I’ll go pack some of our things.”

The ride to the imperial palace was the longest in Harlan’s life. The further she got from home the deeper she fell into despair. Caraculla’s quiet presence made her feel safe and she was grateful he didn’t try and discuss Gavin. For her part, Gypsy was doing as well as could be expected. Even at the tender age of four, she knew something terrible had happened to her father but she didn’t have the maturity to truly absorb what death really meant. So she teased Caraculla by copying every move he made and asked him a million curious questions.

As she watched them together she felt better about Gypsy’s future. Caraculla was a good man and if he had truly kicked his drug addiction, she knew he’d never leave her daughter’s side. Harlan knew in her gut he’d be there always, watching out for her. Perhaps if Caraculla hadn’t been battling addiction, he might have been the one Gavin would have entrusted them to.

Instead, Gavin had turned to Megolyth who she wasn’t so sure about. The Emperor had so many obligations that she doubted he would be of any comfort.

A deep anguish filled her thinking she’d now have to live with the Emperor. She enjoyed her life with Gavin, but truthfully, there were many times when she’d missed living on her own. Now that would be impossible. The AEssyrian men viewed her differently since her marriage to Gavin. She was considered one of them, and she would be subject to their laws.

For the first time in a long time, Harlan thought about going back home to Earth. It would be a long journey and she worried what effect the culture shock would have on Gypsy. Earth was nothing like AEssyria. Her daughter was so much like Gavin, Harlan worried she might even end up a criminal on Earth with no outlet for her aggression.

Harlan sighed. There were so many things to think about now. How would she ever have the strength to build a whole new life without Gavin?

“You could come and stay with me,” Caraculla said.

She looked over and noticed Gypsy had managed to get on the front of his mount. Harlan smiled despite her dark mood. "I appreciate it Caraculla but you'll be going out there too and...well..."

"I know," he said riding closer to her. "But I'd like you to consider marrying me when I get back."

"You're very kind but I can't do that. I don't want to marry anyone."

Caraculla nodded. He looked very sad and somehow older, like he'd aged right before her eyes. "This must be very hard for you too," Harlan said.

"I can't forgive myself," he said. "I should have been there. I feel like I failed him."

Harlan wiped a few stray tears away. "Don't do this to yourself. If there was one weakness Gavin understood, it was addiction. But that wasn't the only reason he left you behind. He thought the world of you. You were so many things to him and he used to tell me that you were the only person he'd ever met that could succeed and even surpass him. The empire goes on without him and someone needs to run the military. Besides, if you'd been there you would have been killed as well and Gypsy would have lost the two most important men in her life."

He hugged Gypsy and kissed the back of her neck. She squirmed, "No kisses," she protested wiping the back of her neck with her sleeve.

They rode up to the palace and Harlan dismounted. Caraculla lowered Gypsy into her arms and jumped down himself. Harlan put Gypsy down and the little girl hugged Caraculla's leg. He stroked her hair then met Harlan's gaze. "Don't isolate yourself from me, okay?"

Harlan angrily wiped a few more tears from her eyes. She sniffled and nodded. "Okay," she said. "Don't do anything stupid in the jungle. You know how things can turn to revenge. I'm not willing to sacrifice you out there just to answer my questions." He pulled her into his arms and held her for a long time.

"I love you Harlan," he whispered in her ear.

She gently pulled back and glanced at the waiting Imperial Guards. "I love you too. Remember what I said."

Chapter Twenty-Six

Once Harlan and Gypsy had settled into their quarters at the Imperial Palace, Harlan went back to work. For the most part, work helped except for those few times of the day when she was alone. Going to bed was the worst. Most nights she would lay awake reliving her memories until the end of the week came and she could pass out into the dreamless world of exhaustion. That was when she began to seriously think about going home to Earth. She'd miss AEssyria but it might be the best thing for her to heal.

The clinic was slow this morning and Harlan found herself trying to think of outside calls she could make. She grabbed a file off the wall, opened it and frowned. Snapping it closed, she marched up to Karla's desk and dropped the file down in front of her. The receptionist looked up at her with a slightly bored expression on her face. "Yes, Doctor Ambrose...I mean *Theron*?"

The reminder of Gavin made Harlan cringe inside. "Who's been writing in these files?"

Karla shrugged and examined her painted red fingernails. "The visiting Kirillian doctors," she said. "Somebody had to see patients while you were gone."

Harlan clinched her teeth. "Do any of the Kirillian doctors know English or AEssyrian? This is all in their language, how the *hell* am I suppose to interpret the chicken scratch called Kirillian?"

Karla stared at her. "What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to get one of those Kirillian doctors in here to translate these notes into English!"

Karla was just about to respond when the sliding doors opened and Megolyth came in. "Can I see you in your office?" he asked.

Harlan turned on her heels and marched into her office leaving the door open. Megolyth followed behind and closed the door behind them. "What?" Harlan said surprised by her hostility. She smacked her hand against her mouth wanting to prevent anything else unpleasant from escaping. She seemed to have lost all control of her common sense. She never knew what she was going to blurt out anymore. Worse yet she didn't seem to care anymore she just said whatever crossed her mind.

"I came to see how you were," he said in a smooth and gentle tone. "Did you get settled into the palace all right?"

His kindness was a knife in her heart. She fought to keep herself under control. "We have beautiful rooms, thank you."

"How are *you*?"

Tears flowed from her eyes against her will. She moved to fold her arms across her chest but Megolyth grabbed her arms and pulled her into a tight embrace. At first she fought him, hating him for making her face the horrifying pain in her heart. Then she wrapped her arms around his powerful body and squeezed with all the strength she had.

He buried his face in her neck and whispered how sorry he was, how he should have sent a younger man in Gavin's place, but even as he said these things she knew none of it would have mattered. Gavin would have gone no matter what Megolyth had said.

The great emptiness in her soul opened up and devoured his warmth. Leaning down with her clutched in his arms, he placed his lips against hers. Before she knew what she was doing, she kissed him back with a ferocity she hadn't expressed since Gavin. It was lonely and angry and a million things in between but, whatever it was, it wanted to be close to this man. With tears steaming down her face, she grabbed at his battle armor and whispered, "*off*."

Megolyth never questioned her. He unharnessed his battle armor and let it fall to the floor. Lowering Harlan to the ground, he rained kisses over her face and neck, peeling away her clothes as he went. The emptiness inside her became a hungry lioness, devouring all of Megolyth's attention. She surrender to

him hoping that this intimate act would somehow heal her, make her feel normal but knowing it wouldn't.

Then, in a raging torrent of emotion, Megolyth was inside her. She ran her hands down his bare back, murmuring lovers words into his ear but they were just words on her lips, not in her heart. When he orgasmed, she curled up next to him and reveled in the strength of his body. Her heart told her what she suspected all along, it wasn't the sex she had wanted. That had been a means to an end. What she'd truly wanted was this quiet closeness, this intimate moment that meant everything and nothing all at once.

Chapter Twenty-seven

It had begun to rain. Gavin stood by the cave entrance gazing out at the wet, steaming jungle nursing his rage. The queen was nearby stripping the meat from an AEssyrian leg that had been salted and dried like jerky. She hummed as she worked, like an old married woman preparing the evening meal for her family. In reality she was a monstrous sight and Gavin hated her with a passion that frightened him.

"You've been so quiet over the past few days. What are you thinking I wonder," she said.

"I'm thinking how grateful I am to be alive."

"You have gained almost all your weight back and I'll be coming into season again soon. Do you think I will get pregnant now?"

"I'm certain you will, sure."

"Did you have another wife at home?"

Gavin chest squeezed tight at the thought of his beloved Harlan. How was she? Was Megolyth keeping his vow to care for her? He was sure he was. Megolyth was a man of his word. He didn't want this abomination knowing anything about his wife. Not her name, or what she looked like, and certainly nothing about his daughter. He didn't want her touching those sacred memories or worse, seeing his family on the outside should he die trying to assassinate this female devil. "No," he replied. "I have no wife except you."

The queen smiled at him.

She had been leaving him unbound lately and he was always on the look out for a weapon lethal enough to kill her. He turned around and something shiny caught his eye. Glancing down, he noticed the queen had placed her knife on the ground next to her. The blade was only about five inches long but it was enough to cut her throat. A heady thrill filled him. *At last.*

Gavin looked at her and suddenly their eyes met. A moment passed between them where time seemed to slow to a crawl. A rush of adrenaline came over him and Gavin lunged for the knife.

The queen snarled in rage and snatched it a second before he could put his hand on it. Rising up to her full height, she brought the knife up and dragged the blade along the right side of his face. His skin tore open with a slick, fleshy sound. For a moment his right eye flashed with light, then everything went dark on that side. Horrible pain radiated from his eye socket and his right cheek was wet and sticky. Gavin roared and fell backward holding his face.

Hands reached down and dragged him up, roughly binding his arms behind his back. Blow upon blow rained down on his face and body but nothing compared to the agony in his right eye. Outside in the pouring rain, he was dragged to a tree and hung upside down. One of the queen's men picked up a switch and struck him several times along his chest and back opening gaping wounds in his flesh. When they had exhausted themselves beating him, they left him to die.

His body became a burden of unspeakable pain and to make matters worse, his position made it hard to breathe. But Gavin reminded himself he couldn't die yet. He had one thing left to do before he joined the gods in the great beyond. The beast in his soul waited and grew. Hour after agonizing hour, he nursed his anger and kept it fresh. He repeated one mantra over and over in his mind. He repeated it as the suffering clouded his thoughts and threatened to drive him mad. He held onto it like a man lost at sea would hold a salvaged piece of driftwood: *If I ever get another chance at that horrible bitch, I will not fail...I will not fail...I will not fail...*

Chapter Twenty-eight

The long shadows of evening were settling over the buildings of Outpost One when Caraculla and his men arrived. It had been a grueling but necessary trip. Caraculla had been very restless the entire march, hungering to kill the first savage he could lay his hands on. The bloodlust had even begun haunting his dreams.

"You've surprised me with how quickly you've arrived Colonel," Tamerack said as he rushed out of a stone building to greet Caraculla. "I just got word from the Emperor yesterday morning you were coming."

Caraculla dismounted and handed his hyperia to a nearby soldier. "Have any survivors come out of the jungle since the massacre?"

The commander glanced at the overgrown trail. "I'm afraid not." He stared at the modest platoon of men behind Caraculla. His face was grim. "I hope you've brought more men than this."

"We can't spare any more. The rest must stay to protect the empire. We also have some nobles coming to join us. My numbers don't really matter for what I have planned. Our mission is going to be to burn them out."

Tamerack nodded. Suddenly he started as if he'd just remembered something very important. "I'm so sorry, where are my manners? Won't you come inside for a drink?"

Caraculla followed the commander into his office. Tamerack held up a bottle. "All I have is gin I'm afraid."

Caraculla held up a hand then pulled off his gloves. "That's alright," he said. "I'll pass. I'm not much of a drinker."

Tamerack poured himself a drink and settled back in his chair. "I understand that you and the general were very close."

"We were, yes."

“My entire career I’ve heard stories of the general’s exploits. I can tell you—it was a thrill to finally meet him. Tell me, do you think there’s any possibility he might still be alive?” Tamerack asked.

Knives of sorrow and regret filled Caraculla’s chest. If it hadn’t been for his blasted drug addiction, he could have been here helping Gavin. He looked up and met Tamerack’s gaze. “If any man could survive such an enemy, it would be him,” he said.

The commander stared into his drink. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I know how difficult this must be for you.”

Caraculla shook his head as if trying to shake off a bad dream and stood up. “We brought some accelerant with us to begin the fires. We’ll need the help of all the men you can spare, of course. We’ll divide the jungle into sections and if the weather is permissive we will start in the morning.”

“What if the burn gets out of hand? Fire can be very tricky,” Tamerack protested.

“Then I guess those savages will be in for a very hot day. Now if you’ll excuse me, I’m very tired and I think I’ll get some sleep. Tomorrow is going to be a busy day and I don’t want to miss any of it. Good night Commander,” Caraculla said making his way out.

“Good night.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Gavin didn't remember being cut down from the tree. All he knew was suddenly he hit the ground hard and was enveloped in a sea of pain. He lay in the dirt for what seemed like an eternity waiting for a weapon to pierce his body. He waited and waited but it never came. Squinting, he studied the world around him with the serene detachment of a condemned man. The night skies barely revealed the outline of the trees above and all was quiet. Very quiet. There was an anticipation that hung in the air. Even the jungle residents seemed to be holding their breaths waiting to see what he would do next. But all he could do was lay still and let his brain reestablish control over his muscles. Surely they would kill him soon. Of that he had no doubt. But he was going to go out fighting just as he had always planned.

Eventually someone came over and told him to get up in a guttural AEssyrian he vaguely understood. He rolled onto his chest and pushed himself to his feet. He was getting use to being in pain. Thankfully he wasn't as weak as he should have been from his ordeal. The queen had probably saved his life with her generous rations. He scanned the crowd of savages looking for her but only saw a mob of frightened, painted faces. Hands grabbed him and escorted him back to the cave. He didn't fight. The queen's lair was exactly where he wanted to be. He came inside and the smell of moss and wet mold assaulted his senses. There was also a faint scent of old blood and it turned his stomach. Someone from behind him struck the back of his knees and he went down.

The queen walked up to him looking smug. "Leave us," she said to the savages. Her men disappeared soundlessly. She waited until she and Gavin were completely alone, then said, "I hope you have learned your lesson General. When are you going to understand that you're no match for me? I should have killed you for trying to get that knife. Lucky for you I can't say I would have done

any different if our roles were reversed. So I have decided to forgive you just this once.”

Gavin kept his head bowed while scanning the room with his eyes. “You are most kind my queen.” Draped over a metal stake embedded in the cave wall was a four foot length of rope, probably used to bind him at one time. A glimmer of hope filled him. Maybe...just maybe he’d get another chance at this great whore.

“I must admit though,” she continued, “I admire your spirit. I’ve never met a man like you. Few others could take the punishment I’ve measured out and still try to best me in a knife fight.” She marched over and placed a hand under his chin, lifting his face to look at her. “But make no mistake, General. I will not tolerate another assassination attempt from you. The next time you try to kill me, it is you who will be dead.”

Gavin forced down his revulsion and tenderly kissed her hand. She seemed surprised by the gesture but didn’t pull away. Pushing his advantage, Gavin placed soft kisses on her wrist, her arm, and on up until he was standing in front of her.

Then he sprang.

Reaching out with his right hand he snatched the rope off the wall and wrapped it around his fists. The queen uttered a small sound of outrage but it barely escaped her lips. Gavin slipped around behind her and looped the rope around her throat. Crossing the rope, he placed the queen in a garrote and pulled the rope up over his back. At first, she fought like a wild animal but soon her neck broke and she went still. Gavin waited another few minutes until he was sure she was dead.

He dropped her to the floor and fell to his knees next to her body. A cool numbness came over him. He reached over and took her knife, working with a mindless determination, he sawed into the muscle and tissue of her throat and hacked through her vertebrae until he severed her head. Gavin had no idea what the savages would do when they realized he’d killed their queen and a part

of him didn't care. He'd won, he'd avenged all those good men who'd died so horribly. Anything he had to suffer after this was worth it.

Holding the head high by the hair he emerged from the cave. It began to rain and he imagined himself quite the sight; naked and filthy, missing an eye, covered in blood and holding a severed head. The reaction started slowly, one savage spotting him, then another, then another. They gaped at him with mouths open. Silence gripped the jungle like a vengeful hand. Then they did something he never expected.

They all lowered themselves to their knees and bowed their heads in respect. A few dared to reach out and touch him as he passed by. Gavin ignored them. All he wanted was to go home. He made his way to the trail they'd followed to get here and began his long journey out of hell.

Chapter Thirty

The morning was a blistering hot one. The twin suns had barely risen and already the air was thick and humid. Caraculla shifted in his saddle waiting for all the torches to be lit. He stared into the murky jungle and thought of his best friend Gavin. It was still hard to believe he was gone. His thoughts turned to Harlan and Gypsy and his own problems with drugs seemed to be so trivial in comparison to their loss. Guilt tugged at his soul. If only he had been here with Gavin instead of off finding himself in the Queendom... Perhaps things might have been different.

A captain rode up startling him. "Lord, it sounds as if something or someone is coming out," he said pointing to a thick bundle of leaves. Caraculla steadied his mount and stared ahead. Loud rustling sounded as if it was drawing closer.

Both Caraculla and the captain pulled their sabers. Then they froze in shock.

Gavin emerged from the jungle looking like he'd been resurrected from the dead. He was completely naked and his torso was covered in angry cuts and purple bruises. In his right hand he carried a severed head by the hair. His right eye was ruined by a horrible wound that had begun to fester and dried blood and dirt was smeared all over his face and body. His long black hair was matted and filthy, hanging in stringy locks over his face.

Gavin stopped but didn't seem to recognize any of them. He fell to his knees and Caraculla sheathed his weapon and rushed to him.

"Come and help me!" he called to his men as he took Gavin into his arms. A flood of men rushed forward and the general was lifted on a sea of shoulders. They carried him into the building and laid him on a cot. The medic pushed through the crowd to examine Gavin.

After a few tense moments, Caraculla said, "Well?"

The medic turned around and frowned. "He's got a bad infection and needs immediate treatment. If we don't get him back soon, he's going to die."

Caraculla grabbed the messenger. "I need you to get back to the Empire as fast as you can and have Harlan get ready for him. He'll probably need to be put in hibernation. Go now!"

Harlan sat on Megolyth's patio watching the twin suns setting. She didn't know how long she'd been out here, but the smell of food reminded her it had been a long time. Her stomach rumbled a little. Megolyth brought out a hot plate.

She smiled at him.

He put the plate down and stood next to her. "Do you regret what happened between us?"

Harlan glanced at the food but didn't touch it. "No."

The emperor was quiet for a moment, then he said, "I sense a growing distance between us."

"I'm sorry. I don't mean there to be. The reality that Gavin is probably dead is scratching at my soul and I am at a loss as to how to face it. I want to believe that he's still alive but it's becoming harder and harder as more time passes." She shook her head as if warding off terrible thoughts. "Gypsy hides it from me, but she cries a lot. I wish I knew how to comfort her but I don't even know how to comfort myself. I just feel so lost."

He nodded. "I miss him too. Strange what a powerful influence he had over all our lives. Death has not been a stranger to me and yet I am also at a loss in this situation."

With her foot Harlan pushed the chair out next to her and gestured for Megolyth to sit, "When I was a child my parents were killed by burglars. I was so lost, so alone that I built a wall around my deepest emotions so I would never

have to feel such a horrific pain ever again. I never realized that my fortress had been torn down until Gavin disappeared. I don't even know how long its been down. There are so many things that I never shared with him about myself."

Megolyth rubbed the back of her neck. "We always think that there will be plenty of time for everything."

"Believe it or not at one time I hated him."

Megolyth laughed. "I don't find that so hard to believe."

"Let's talk about something else. When is your marriage?"

"In a few days. But don't worry I'll continue to be your protector."

"I appreciate that," she said.

A loud frantic knock sounded on the door. Megolyth scowled. "What the devil could that be? Everything in this empire is always an emergency."

He stood up. "Come in," he shouted. A messenger rushed in covered in dirt and sweat. He ran toward them until Megolyth held a hand up for him to stop where he was. "What is it?" the emperor asked.

"It's General Gavin Theron, Highness," he said panting to catch his breath. "By the Gods, he's alive!"

Chapter Thirty-one

When Caraculla and his men arrived with Gavin in a litter, Megolyth could scarcely believe it. The news had traveled like wildfire all around the empire and the streets were clogged with cheering throngs of well-wishers. Megolyth ordered his men to line the street and form an honor guard all the way to the clinic.

He sure hoped Harlan was up for this.

Harlan came out of the treatment room and found Megolyth in the private waiting room reserved for nobles and such. She flopped down on the plush sofa next to him and thought how great it would be to take a long, hot bath. Except for her shock, she was giddy with joy but she hid it well. “He’s badly hurt, but he’s going to be okay. He’s hibernating now. You saw him. I guess I don’t need to tell you that his eye is finished.”

Megolyth took her hand and squeezed it. “I’m very happy for you Harlan.” He didn’t look happy though, he looked miserable.

A sudden rush of relief came over her and tears flowed from her eyes. She didn’t know if she was more emotional now or when she first heard he was dead. Harlan covered her face with her hands. “Yeah,” she said through her tears. “I happy too.”

He pulled her into a warm hug. “Are you going to tell him about us?”

Harlan sniffled and pulled back. “No. There’s no need. We didn’t do anything wrong—we thought he was dead. I’ll let it be.”

“I know you have a very important patient, but will you try and stop by my wedding tomorrow?”

She hugged his arm. "If my patient stays stable, sure."

Megolyth got up and touched her face. "I love you Harlan, and I'd be lying if I didn't tell you I'm a little sad to lose you."

"You know maybe if you put forth a little effort..." Harlan said taking his hand.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that you have condemned yourself and your bride to a miserable loveless marriage without even giving it the benefit of the doubt. With the exception of Gavin's father I believe that there is something to love about everyone. Maybe you could find that one thing to love in Melina. She's young, let her grow with you don't automatically shut her out because she isn't what you think your bride should be."

Megolyth smiled at her. "For you I will try."

Chapter Thirty-two

No amount of water could wash away the memories. For days since his recovery, he had taken hour long baths but, no matter how hard he scrubbed, the feelings remained. Gavin shut the water off, wrapped a towel around his hips and came out into the bedroom. He looked at himself in the mirror and frowned at the big black patch covering his right eye. That'd be a devil of a thing to fight with. If he didn't retire he'd be practicing for months.

Harlan sat in bed, a book in her lap. She looked up at him and smiled. He climbed into the bed next to her and curled up into her arms. It felt so good to be with her, he was afraid he might be dreaming. "I've been thinking of retiring," he said.

Harlan stroked his wet hair. "What would you do with yourself all day because I won't be here to baby sit you?"

"Play cards in the park with the other old fossils until you came home."

"Do you think that that would make you happy?"

He fluffed his pillows and sat up. "I don't have a very complicated definition for what makes me happy anymore. What do you think?"

Harlan shrugged. "I think you'd get bored very fast and in turn drive me insane. Besides now that you're visually impaired you have the challenge of learning how to fight again. That should keep you busy enough until the next time you run off to battle and scare the crap out of me."

Gavin reached over to the bedside table and grabbed a cigar. He lit it, puffed a few times, and then blew a long stream of smoke into the air. "Perhaps your right."

"I know I'm right."

A soft knock sounded on the door and Gypsy peeked in. "Aren't you suppose to be asleep?" Harlan asked.

"I want to say goodnight to daddy again," Gypsy said making a beeline for Gavin.

Gavin picked her up and held her tight. She kissed his cheek. That simple act of love made the pain of the past few months fade away. Gavin knew he was a very lucky man. "I missed you," she whispered in his ear.

"I missed you too," Gavin said putting her down.

Gypsy rushed out of the room, slammed the door and ran down the hall singing happily.

Gavin kissed Harlan. "She's very noisy, your daughter."

"She's just like her father."

He crushed out his cigar and pulled her against his body. "What lies," he whispered seductively. "I'll have to punish you for spreading such grievous lies about me."

Harlan kissed him deeply and ran her fingers into his hair. "Oh, please do."