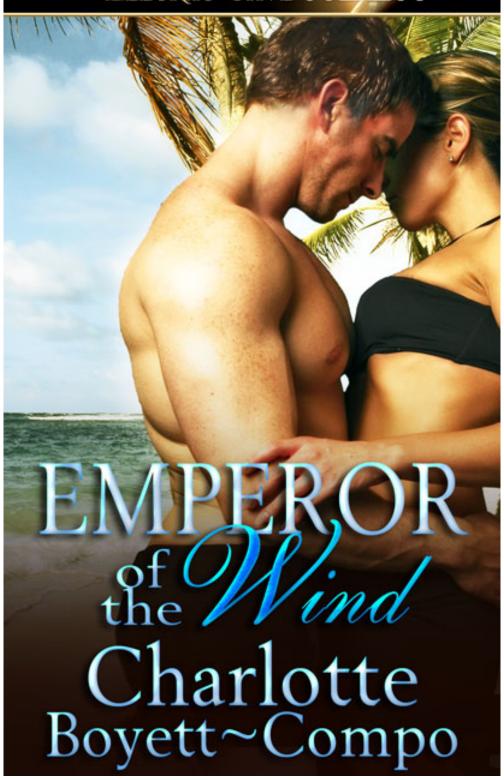
Ellora's Cave FEEN



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Emperor of the Wind

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EMPEROR OF THE WIND

Charlotte Boyett-Compo

Prologue

She looked up as the door opened with a resounding crash. The breath caught in her throat along with the gasps of the others in the room. She put a hand to her throat as he came strutting in like a conqueror of old. There was steel in his amber eyes along with a glowing heat of desire no one could miss. She rose slowly to her feet, her heart thudding wildly in her chest. Her gaze flicked past him to another man who came in behind him, but her eyes returned to the one who had—at last—come for her.

"It is done," he said, and ignored the other people in her office. With two powerful strides he was at her desk, reaching for her.

Her entire body trembled as his hand closed over her upper arm. The area between her legs flooded with liquid heat when he dragged her to him, cupping her head in one powerful hand as he drew her face to his. The moment his lips covered hers, she felt her knees buckle, but it didn't matter for his other arm shot around her to keep her from sagging. Pressed to a hard-as-rock chest, her entire body began to quiver with anticipation.

A kiss that would have seared the flesh from a dragon swept through her senses on a white-hot lick of fire. The warmth of his tongue invading her mouth, the press of his thick erection grinding against her belly, the strength of his sword hand holding her head as he fused his mouth with hers were all the stuff of her most fevered dreams. For years she had longed for this to happen. For years she had craved the passion she knew this man ached to give her and she ached to receive. She clung to him, reveling in the hard length molding to hers, the sweet mouth plying hers with such promise it made her want to cry.

"So long," he whispered against her lips. "So gods-be-damned long."

"Ah, I think you'd best take this somewhere else," she heard the young man who had accompanied her lover into the room say.

A low growl of irritation vibrated against her mouth, but her warrior broke the kiss again to sweep her into his arms and swing her around. Out the corner of her eye she saw the young man step aside as she was carried to the door.

"Milady," he said with a slight nod.

"Captain Rede," she acknowledged.

Her arms were wrapped around her warrior's neck. "Where are we going?"

"My ship. Where we will have privacy," he said, glancing down at her with such riveting lust it sent a spasm of expectation through her lower body.

She saw people stopping in the corridor to stare at them, felt her cheeks flame and buried her face against his brawny shoulder. "Couldn't I just walk?" she asked in a small voice.

"They know gods-be-damned well who I am and now they will know who you are," he told her. "By this time tomorrow, we will be Joined." He looked down at her—never breaking his long-legged stride. "But you'll be mine long before that."

"I have been yours for years, my love," she whispered.

His answer was a wink and they said no more until he was carrying her up the steps of his black runabout.

"Everything is as you wished it," a beautiful woman she didn't know told them. She was standing near the cockpit, smiling.

"Scoot," was his reply, and the beautiful woman was quick to leave the runabout.

"She looks familiar. Who was that?"

"My daughter-in-law," he replied.

His words stunned her, but she had no time to dissect their meaning for he was placing her upon his bunk—a soft silk coverlet strewn with rose petals thrown over the

mattress. A pale pink scarf covered the phosphor light on the shelf over the bunk. He straightened, his hands going to the buttons of his black silk shirt.

"I've waited so long for this," he said.

She was breathing heavily as he kicked off his boots, moved to the end of the bunk to slip her shoes from her feet. The pounding of her heart was loud in her ears as she watched every move he made.

He made quick work of the buttons, and as he peeled the shirt from his muscular chest, she unconsciously ran her tongue over her upper lip. He stopped in the act of removing the shirt and shivered, his gaze riveted on her wet lip.

"Sweeting, don't. You're gonna make me come before I ever get inside you," he told her in a voice that shook. The shirt dropped from his arms to the floor like a glossy black bird. He put his hands to the wide silver buckle of his belt.

It was her turn to shiver.

The black enamel tang at the tip of the belt pulled free of the keeper and slid sinuously from the prong. With a scratch of sound he drew the belt from his waist and it fell atop the shirt with a dull thud.

Hands to the button at the top of his fly. The snick of the slider lowering.

Her heart thundered. Her body ached.

His fingers thrust behind the waistband to push it down over his lean hips. A thick nest of wiry curls was revealed as the uniform pants dropped down his legs.

"Oh sweet Morrigunia," she breathed—eyes wide, mouth dry, palms sweating—as she stared at the jutting shaft revealed as the pants fell.

He lifted his chin, willing her attention to his face. When she obliged, his voice was little more than a dry husk.

"Do you want him?" he asked, stepping out of his pants and kicking them away.

Ripples of hunger undulated through her body, and without a moment's hesitation she sat up, put her hands to the front of her modest, serviceable white blouse and ripped it open—buttons pinging against the titanium wall beside her and bouncing to the floor. She shrugged out of the blouse, wadded it up and threw it across the small cubicle.

"Does a she-wolf want her mate?" she countered in a low grumble, breathing so fast she was beginning to get lightheaded. Before he could answer, she reached around her and unhooked her utilitarian white satin bra and let it slide down her arms.

She heard him groan, saw his cock jerk. At the tip a pearly drop lay suspended. There was such overwhelming desire in his hot amber eyes she knew a moment of fright, but it passed quickly as he put a knee to the edge of the mattress and reached down to draw her slacks from her body. The moment his knuckles grazed against her flesh, she shuddered violently, sucking in a quick breath.

He stilled like a deer caught in the glare of a ship's landing lights.

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"Did I hurt you?"
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"No. No!"

"You're sure?"

"Aye, my love."

"I swear I won't hurt you," he said. "I will never hurt you."

"I know," she said, moistening her lips once more only to have him growl and finish tugging the slacks from her almost brutally.

There was no staying his hand as he drew the panties from her hips. The motion brought a small yip of protest from high in her throat, but she had little time to feel embarrassed at him seeing her naked for he was covering her body with his, sliding against her like a drop of dew over a shiny new leaf, his long legs bracketing hers.

He put his palms to her cheeks as he braced his body above hers on his elbows. "My lady," he whispered, and his mouth descended to hers, taking hers with a slow, measured pressure that set her head to spinning.

His breath was sweet. It tasted of lemon drops. His tongue had a will of its own as it claimed her, branded her, thrust enticingly over hers, swept over her teeth, probed at the sensitive corners of her mouth.

She could feel his manhood—hard and hot and ready—against her belly. Instinctively, she arched her hips in invitation and he pulled back, looking down into her eyes with inquiry.

"Aye, milord," she whispered. "Aye, a thousand times, aye."

He took his hands from her face, flattened the palms on the pillow to either side of her head and shifted his weight so he could roll to the side, insinuating one muscular leg between hers. He nudged her knee with his then rolled the opposite way to place his other leg. She opened herself to him, spreading her legs, and he settled in the valley with such a sigh of pleasure it made her smile.

"Are you happy, milord?" she asked.

"I am where I have longed to be for so long, *lhiannan*," he answered, "that I fear I am dreaming."

"'Tis no dream, my love," she said, reaching up to cup his cheek. "We are together at last."

"At last," he echoed then turned his face to plant a kiss in the center of her palm, closing his eyes so the long sweep of the thick lashes tickled the pad of her thumb.

She loved this man, this wild and passionate warrior, with all her heart and being. She would do anything—and had—for him. To protect him she would gladly give up her life. To keep him she would slay anyone who dared try to take him from her.

He opened his eyes as her thoughts settled in his mind and he locked gazes with her.

"I would give my life for you as well, my lady. Before you, I merely existed. Without you, I would have no life," he said, his voice husky with emotion. "You will be at my side always if that is your desire."

She knew what he was asking. The answer was not an easy one nor had it been one she had entertained lightly. She had thought long and hard before making the decision she knew would please him and bind them together for all time. She had researched and she had questioned those who knew, who had the answers for her. She prayed and she read and she prayed again until she had made her decision.

"When you feel the time is right," she said, searching his handsome face—touching lightly on the scar that marred the perfection of that stalwart visage, "then I will gladly accept your gift."

"Gift," he repeated then smiled grimly. "Or curse, depending on how you look at it."

"I see it as a way to be with you forever," she said. "To me, that is a wondrous gift."

That, he thought as he lowered his hand to her chest to caress her, was why he loved this woman to distraction. He had to force himself to attend to business, to do what must be done when all the while his wayward heart strained to place images of her before him at every waking turn. All he wanted was to lie there with her for eternity, to merge their bodies into one and become a part of her. The worlds could explode around them and he wouldn't care as long as she was at his side. This precious, precious gift from destiny who made up for all the pain he had known throughout his life.

"I am dying here, milord," she said, drawing his attention back to her.

He grinned then fanned his thumb over her nipple, and when she quivered beneath him, he slid his hand lower, turning it so his palm grazed over her belly to journey to the soft curls at the apex of her thighs.

Her breath caught in her throat and she turned her face to press her forehead against the arm that rested beside her head. She tensed.

"My lady, look at me," he whispered.

She shook her head. "I can't. It's been so long. I want you so badly I'm afraid I'll shame us both before you..."

He spread the lips of her vulva apart with the tips of his index and ring finger and slipped the middle one into her moist sheath. Almost immediately he felt the tremors gripping him and he pushed deeper until the wave of little clutches took her.

She cried out, clamping one hand on his hip and the other on his shoulder—her fingers curling like a vine to imprison him. She thrust her hips up to be impaled deeper still. He flexed his finger inside her, slid two more alongside it and she came again ever harder, arching her head into the softness of his pillow.

"That's it," she heard him growl. "That's what my woman needs."

Slick with her release, slowly sinking down from the greatest height she'd ever reached, her eyelids fluttered open and she stared into a face she had dreamed of for many years. Tears formed.

"Again?" he questioned, his fingers still inside her.

"You," she said, her fingers tightening on his flesh. "I want you."

Gently he removed his fingers to wrap them around his straining cock. "What my woman wants, she will always have. I will move the stars in the heaven to provide it," he said, and placed the tip of his engorged shaft at her opening. His amber eyes gleamed as he held her gaze with his. "Once done, milady, there will be no turning back."

She nodded. "I know."

His eyebrows lifted in tandem. "You are sure now? I will never let you go. I will never allow you to leave. You will be mine for as long as I draw breath and even in the hereafter."

She tugged at him. "I love you," she said. "I want you. For now, forever."

His smile was radiant. "All righty then," he said in a boyish voice as though he'd just been given the best present ever.

Tenderly and with the greatest care, he slid into her velvety warmth until he was seated as deep as her body would allow. His arms trembled beside her as he kept his weight from crushing her. He wanted to shove his hands under her rump and jerk her to him, to thrust as hard as he could, but that was no way to treat this very special woman, this woman he loved more than the air he drew into his lungs.

"Are you having second thoughts?" she inquired at his stillness.

So deeply mired in overpowering desire, he couldn't speak. All he could do was shake his head as he struggled to behave like a rational man and not the wild berserker screaming to come roaring out of him.

She ran her palms up and down his tensed arms. He was steel-hard inside her, pressing against her very womb. His body was quivering. His eyes held a strange umber glint. She dragged her hands from his arms to the pelt of wiry hair that covered his pectoral muscles and dipped down in a perfect tiger line to the hard shaft stretching her cunt.

"Then what are you waiting for, my love?" she asked, lifting one brow. "An engraved invitation to take what you already know is yours?"

A drop of sweat fell from his brow to the soft valley between her mounds. "I..." He swallowed. "I don't want to hurt you. I swore I wouldn't. If I did, I couldn't live with..."

She moved beneath him and saw pain flash across his face, cutting his words off like a sharp knife. For a moment she thought she had hurt him then realized he was holding back. She smiled. "I won't break, but if you don't get to it, warrior, I might decide to change my mind."

His eyes narrowed. "The hell you will, wench!" he said. He withdrew an inch then thrust forward gently. He stopped again, his breathing loud.

She watched a heavy vein pounding in the column of his neck and sudden insight came to her. He was straining to keep the beast inside him at bay. She knew it was up to her. She arched her hips, and when he groaned, she tucked her lower lip between her teeth and lifted her legs to wrap them around his waist.

"Get to it, warrior," she growled. "Or would you rather I go looking elsewhere for my..."

That was all the goading he needed. The thought of this woman—his woman—being touched by another man was more than he could take. All thought save branding her his, filling her with his seed to mark her for all time pushed all carefulness, all gentleness out of his mind. With a roar, he pulled almost all the way out of her then thrust forward powerfully.

"That's more like it," he heard her say under her breath.

Realizing he wasn't going to hurt her, that she wanted him as badly as he wanted her, he threw all caution to the winds and slammed into her with enough force to make her grunt. One look at the pleasure filling her eyes told him this was what she wanted.

Ankles locked at the small of his back, fingernails digging into the heavy muscles of his shoulders, she trapped him against her as his hands went under her ass and he lifted her for a deeper penetration. The feel of his pounding into her, filling her, stretching her, taking her was so powerful, so intense, she came harder than she ever had—gripping his shaft in quick little shudders that widened his eyes.

Through a haze of pure lust, she saw him throw back his head a second before his body jerked and she could feel him pouring into her. He growled. He shook. He flung his head from side to side—sweat beads flying—as he came. His fingers were digging into the soft flesh of her ass. Frenzied thrusts sent his seed deep into her channel then he went as still as stone. One final spurt drained him and he half collapsed atop her—his arms shaking as he tried to keep the full weight of his well-honed warrior's body from crushing her.

"The hell with that," she mumbled, and jerked him down so he was pressing her to the bunk. The feel of his weight was a sensation she had fantasized about many times. Nothing she had ever imagined could compare with the sweet heaviness of him bearing her down, the heady scent of their combined juices filling her nostrils, the sound of his heavy breathing as he struggled to drag air into his lungs. All her tactile senses were engaged with pure delight as she held him to her.

"Mine," he whispered.

"Yours," she agreed as she ran a hand up his sweaty back to thread her fingers through his thick salt-and-pepper hair. She cradled his head against her chest. "All yours."

She heard him growl, and when he would have shifted off her, would not allow it. She kept him imprisoned within her arms.

"I'm too heavy," he complained.

"You are just right."

"Too heavy," he repeated, and before she could stop him, he flipped over to his back so it was her body stretched out over his. She barely had time to lower her legs so she could slide them down his. His powerful arms tightened around her as she pressed her cheek to his shoulder.

They were quiet for a moment then he yawned.

"Sleep," he muttered, and within seconds he was snoring loud enough to wake the dead.

She bit her lip to keep from giggling.

Chapter One

Miriam Bakari stretched on the beach towel as she watched a seagull soaring across the vivid blue sky. The soon-to-be installed Empress of Aduaidh Prime tracked the white bird's progress until she lost it in the soft glare of the Theristes sun. Above her palm fronds clicked together in the soft breeze scented of jasmine that wafted over her naked body. Beside her, her new husband lay on his belly sleeping soundly and—more importantly—peacefully. She turned her head at his loud snore and smiled.

Ryden Bakari was a man much feared throughout the megaverse. Known as the Burgon, he was the Emperor of Aduaidh Prime and the leader of the New Alliance. His word was law, his reputation that of a just man but one who wielded unlimited power and who possessed uncompromising principles.

Her gaze eased over the thick salt-and-pepper-colored hair that had grown long to the nape of his neck since they'd been on their honeymoon. Normally clean shaven each morning, he had a week's growth of dark beard that—to her—was sexy as hell. His well-honed body rippled with muscles and had darkened attractively in the tropical sun of the Reaper planet.

"Your stare is so hot it's scorching me, *lhiannan*," he growled, opening one amber eye to look up at her. "Leave off else I'm gonna melt right where I lie."

"You were snoring," she said, fanning her hand down his smooth back.

"No," he said emphatically as he turned over. "I was merely breathing loudly." He reached up to touch the wicked scar that ran at an angle from his right temple to the corner of his mouth. It was an unconscious habit Miri knew revealed itself when he was uncomfortable with someone looking at his face or troubled about something. He didn't like being reminded that he made strange noises while he slept.

She sat up and took his hand from the scar and brought the knuckles to her lips, kissing the flesh scarred from many a hand-to-hand combat. "You were snoring, Ry. So loudly you frightened the gulls away and sent a poor little crab scurrying for cover. Shame on you, you brute."

He grunted. Looking up at the woman he had waited so long to make his own, the Burgon felt his heart swell with pride. To some men she might be an ordinary-looking woman with her mousy brown hair, but to him she was a veritable goddess and he loved her as he'd never loved another. He thanked the gods every day for having sent her to him, for having given him a second chance to attain true happiness.

"I was breathing loudly," he repeated firmly. The fingers of the hand she was holding flexed so he could touch her soft cheek. His gaze drifted down to the perfection of her bosom and the flat belly beyond with the piercing dangling from her bellybutton. He frowned, his lips tightening.

"Don't start," she warned, knowing precisely where his thoughts had flown.

"I could shake that little Bahiya until her teeth rattle for encouraging this," he said, glaring at the tiny grim reaper charm that was nestled against his wife's belly.

"Tarik might have something to say about that," Miri reminded him.

"Let him. Just looking at that thing makes me want to hit something," the Burgon snapped. "If the man can't keep his wife under control, he ought not to have one!"

"It was my decision, Ry," Miri told him. "It is my body even if it does belong to you."

Her words made his cock leap and he wanted to throw himself over her, shove her taut thighs apart and plant himself firmly within her sheath, but even though they were on a secluded part of the beach, they were still out in the open where prying eyes might see.

As though reading his thoughts again, Miri shook her head. "No one is going to risk the Burgon's ire by spying on us, my love."

"Rynlyn might," he snapped. "I wonder about that boy sometimes."

"I'm sure your son is otherwise engaged with his own new bride, and I think Tessa is much more of an attraction to him than his father is."

The Burgon snorted at her words then hooked his hand around her neck to draw her down to him. He opened his mouth then closed it over her sensual lips, thrusting his tongue between to taste the sweetness of the mangoes they'd eaten for their lunch. He rolled over her — pinning her to the soft beach towel — his toes digging into the white sand beyond the towel's length as he strained his heavier body over hers.

Miri encircled her lover within her arms, loving the way his hard thigh lifted to press between her legs.

"I love you with all my heart," he whispered against her mouth. "Do you know that?"

"The thought has crossed my mind," she said. "It's either that or you are a very possessive man."

"I am, indeed, a very possessive man," he agreed. "Who loves his woman deeply."

"A woman who loves her man just as deeply," she told him.

They had each lost their first mates to the abominable war between the Alliance and Coalition—a war that would not die. Though the Burgon had lost children to the conflict, Miri had not, but her grief had been just as profound as his. When one of his agents had sought her out to ask her to spy for the Burgon, she had readily agreed. Being in a prime position as secretary to General Alphon Morrison—who later turned out to be a treasonous bastard—vital information came across her desk before it ever reached Morrison. Once that man was gone, General Strom took over, but Miriam's continued assistance to the Burgon was still needed. Though her life had been in danger, she knew the emperor had assigned men to protect her against all costs. The day they had seen one another via vid-com, it had been love at first sight for each. The afternoon they finally met, that love had outshone even the brightest star.

"I wish you'd let me go with you to R-9," she said.

The Burgon sighed. "Don't *you* start," he growled. He put his lips to the side of her neck. "You're staying here where I know you'll be safe."

"You can't keep me here forever, Ry."

"Wanna bet?" He kissed his way to her ear then flicked his tongue inside.

Miri steeled herself against his tender invasion, her hands molded around his upper arms. "What about the ceremony to crown me empress?" she inquired. "That will have to be done on Aduaidh Prime."

"And you'll leave here with a heavy escort of warcruisers, starchasers and dreadnoughts. I'm taking no chances with you, *lhiannan*."

His lady-wife smiled. The Burgon had taken to using the ancient Gaothian and Chalean words of endearment that he seemed to find intriguing, loving the way they rolled off his tongue. She hailed from the Federated Moons of Rysalia and the soft love words of her people pleased her and especially so when he had learned how to pronounce them with a soft burr that made her shiver with desire.

"What happens when we reach Aduaidh Prime?" she asked as he nibbled on her earlobe. "Will I be kept a prisoner in the palace?"

The emperor sighed heavily and slumped over her, his head on her shoulder. "Miri..." he said, the word filled with exasperation. "I'm trying to seduce you here, woman! Work with me!"

"You seduced me long ago, Ryden," she reminded him. "The first time our eyes met."

He spread a hand over her right mound, kneading it gently. "Do we have to discuss this now?" He flicked out his tongue to stab at her nipple.

"Aye we do since each time I bring it up you put me off," she said. "And stop that. I can't concentrate."

He craned his head so he could look up at her. "That's the point, isn't it?" She frowned at him and he sighed again.

"Oh all right," he grumbled, and slid off her to sit up. He drew his knees into the perimeter of his arms and looked out over the rolling waves beyond the sugar-white sands. "Aye, I intend that once you are in the palace you will stay."

She sat up as well with her legs crooked to one side. Putting a hand on his hard shoulder, she leaned against him. "I am not Anastasia, Ryden. The Storian Web is in place over the entire planet. Not a single missile could penetrate that barrier, but as if that weren't enough, the Amhantarian Net as well as the Scaan Maze is encircling Aduaidh Prime. A molecule couldn't get through without your permission!"

"I'm taking no chances with you, Miriam," he insisted. He twisted his head to look her in the eye. "I could not endure losing you."

She smiled gently. "Aye you could, because you would have to. You are the Burgon. Billions of people look to you for their safety."

"One day Rynlyn will take my place as Burgon and I can retire," he stated. "That day can't come soon enough for me." His gaze pleaded with her. "Miri, I'm tired. I am so tired of this gods-be-damned war, all the killing and the dying, and the widows and mothers mourning their loved ones. I am sick of the destruction. I want it to end in my lifetime!"

"With the grace of the gods, it will," she said, rubbing his shoulder. "I know it's been a terrible burden on you, but Alel would not have placed the responsibility on the shoulders of a lesser man."

The Burgon tore his eyes from her. "I am putting a lot of hope on the shoulders of Ranulf MacKirnan," he said. "I doubt anyone other than you and I realize what that young mischief maker has been up to since he crashed through the wormhole from Terra."

It had been Miri who had brought the information regarding the man whose code name was WindChaser to the Burgon's notice. In her capacity as secretary to Generals Morrison and Strom, such intel routinely came over her desk. When she began to see a pattern with each new crime the Terran committed, with each new escapade, she started a secret spreadsheet matrix on MacKirnan's activities. She gave each offense a column, listed the planets involved under a row. If the crime was against a New Coalition target—obvious or otherwise—she put a green X where planet and crime intersected. A red X marked crimes against a New Alliance target. As the pattern unfolded, there were ten times as many green Xs as red. Upon closer inspection, where the red Xs appeared, there was some doubt as to Alliance loyalty of the person, persons or company involved in the crime.

"In regard to the crimes committed against the Alliance, I believe he's striking at targets he has reason to believe are playing both sides against the other," Miri had informed the Burgon. "Maybe he's going after those engaged in counterespionage, Sir."

"Now that's an interesting assumption," the emperor agreed.

"He's actually in a good position to help," Miri said. "My only concern is why."

"War," the Burgon said. "It nearly destroyed his world on several occasions. I don't think he wants the same thing to happen on this side of the wormhole."

She jumped as he shook himself like a wet terrier then turned to her, allowing the memory of that long-ago conversation to fade from her thoughts.

Her husband thrust out his bottom lip like a recalcitrant little boy. When he opened his mouth to speak, she knew it would be to protest something.

"Miri, I am horny. Are you going to give it up or not? My cock is as hard as you palm tree. Please don't make me take matters into my own hands."

She knew her husband better than most of his friends knew him, and yet she still considered him an enigma. She wondered if his first wife had known him any better but doubted he'd shared his private thoughts with Anastasia as he had shared them with her. Perhaps that was because the former empress had not been privy to the ugliness of the Border Wars as Miri had. She knew at that moment he wanted to forget his own memories of the ugliness and lose himself in her body.

"Don't be crude, Ryden," she said, lying back on the beach towel and holding her arms up to him. "You know I don't like crude."

He snorted, knowing that was a lie, and blanketed her once more with his muscular body. He lowered his head, putting his mouth to her breast, and drew in a tight little nipple. Her fingers threaded through his thick salt-and-pepper hair that was steadying losing the spicy tint as the interminable war raged on. She held his head to her chest. She knew there would be no more serious talk for a while so gave herself over to his tender ministrations.

The Burgon forced the hard worries from his mind. He constantly feared for Miri's safety and the thought of losing her was never far from his thoughts. She had captured his heart and soul as no other woman ever had. Their love had been forged in the fires of great personal loss and was so strong, so tough he knew it could survive whatever was thrown at it. But he would take no chances with her life. Three layers of protection stacked one atop the other over Aduaidh Prime still wasn't enough to his way of thinking. Every humanoid guard in the palace had been replaced by a cybot specially built and programmed with loyalty only to the emperor and empress. Every finger that could be applied to computer key or scanner screen to deactivate the Web, Net and Maze had been scientifically engineered with no chance of human error or treachery. Every humanoid on the entire planet had been embedded with a tracking chip that monitored his or her whereabouts at all times. Those with access to the palace had been given implants that read endorphin and adrenaline levels so moods could be registered. Unexplained anger, anxiety or depression within a subject was reason for immediate dismissal from the staff. Any communication into and out of the planet was closely monitored as well.

Overkill? he thought as he raked his teeth over Miri's areola. Aye, perhaps it was, but he felt better knowing every precaution he and his team of protectors could imagine had been set into place.

"Stop thinking," his lady-wife hissed at him as she tugged on his hair. "Let it go, Ryden! Love your woman instead." His body echoed the command and his cock leapt, wept with need. In the next breath he turned rock-hard, thrusting the slick shaft against his lady's thigh. He tugged at her nipple, his teeth lightly clamped around the sweet flesh and looked up at her through his thick eyebrows.

Miri swept her tongue across her full lips, heard him growl low in his throat and knew she had accomplished her goal—taking his mind off business and putting it on her where it belonged. She felt him reach between them to guide his rod into her sheath and arched her hips to accommodate him.

He spoke with her nipple still between his teeth, knowing the vibration of his voice would arouse her even more. "Antsy little twit, ain't you?" he teased as he buried himself within her.

"Where you are concerned, it is a condition I find myself in constantly, your excellency," she replied.

He snorted. Releasing her engorged peak, he pushed his hands under her hips and dug his fingers lightly into her naked rump, lifting her to better position her for the forceful plunges with which he intended to pleasure her.

Miri brought her legs up and hooked her ankles around his hips, elevating one brow. She used her inner muscles to squeeze him tight.

"Ah *lhiannan*," he groaned, and thrust hard, grinding himself into her velvety warmth.

She held him to her as his drives increased in intensity and pace. Contracting her legs more powerfully around him, she pierced his back with her short nails and held on with all her strength. She knew it would not be long before he was ramming into her with fierce abandon, lips peeled back from his teeth. He was marking her, branding her, and she gloried in his possession. She thrived with it. His love, his ownership was all she'd dreamed of these last few agonizing years while he'd been hunting down his enemy Riordan O'Shay. Fearing for his life, missing him, needing him, wanting him,

aching for him, the day he'd come to Riezell to collect her had been the happiest of her life. She would do whatever it took to make him happy.

"I love you," he said, and she knew he'd used his Reaper skills to pluck her thoughts from the ether.

"I know, my sweet one," she whispered, and their lips met, their tongues mating in sync with his powerful thrusts.

Her channel was hot—like molten silk—around his shaft. She had imprisoned him within her arms, caged him with her legs. Their bodies were sliding together as one. She met his thrusts with lifts of her hips. She took his cock to realms far beyond any he'd ever experienced with another woman.

Grunting, their breaths mingled, their hearts beat in tandem, the Burgon and his lady rushed toward the sweet point where their great love would combine with the immense needs of their bodies.

As the tropical sun of Theristes beat down on Ryden Bakari's bare back and the soft waves of the sea lapped at this distant shore of the Reaper planet, passion came full-blown with such ferocious love the gulls flying overhead dipped their wings in salute.

Chapter Two

Tarik looked up as the Burgon came trudging through the hot sand toward him. For once the emperor did not have his lady-wife at his side.

"I will make myself scarce," Tarik's wife said softly. She left the comfort of their wicker mat and rose to her feet. "I believe he wishes to speak with you in private."

"Mayhap he wants me to beat your shapely ass for encouraging Miri to get her navel pierced," Tarik said with a grin.

Bahiya flung her long mane of snow-white hair over her bare shoulder. "Your hand to my ass is welcome any time you see fit to apply it, milord," she said with a wink then sidestepped him with a giggle as he snagged out a hand to catch her calf.

He watched her run toward the hut they shared. Once she had ducked inside, he returned his attention to the tall man walking toward him. His gaze shifted to the imperial seal of Aduaidh laser-tattooed to the left pectoral of the emperor's chest.

"Was she afraid I was coming to complain about the piercing?" the emperor asked.

Tarik laughed. "There is nothing my lady fears, Ryden. Not even the Burgon."

Ryden dropped down to his knees in the sand beyond Tarik's mat and put his balled fists on his denim-clad thighs. He was not comfortable going sky-clad as were Tarik's people. Sunbathing in the nude was one thing. Walking around with his dangly swinging free in the breeze was quite another. He saw Tarik's lips twitch and knew the Prime Reaper had intercepted the thought.

"Rynlyn does not have your modesty," Tarik observed. He was leaning on one elbow, his long legs crossed.

"My son is proud of his dangly," Ryden mumbled. "Inordinately so."

"Are you not proud of yours?" Tarik queried with one dark brow elevated.

"Miri has no complaints and that's all that matters," the emperor said, shifting uncomfortably beneath Tarik's intense gaze. He sat back on his haunches. "I will be leaving in the morning."

"So I have been informed," Tarik said. "You have no need to be concerned for your lady's safety."

Ryden looked out at the ocean. "I know."

"Then what is troubling you?"

"The trip from Theristes to Aduaidh Prime," Ryden said. He was studying the horizon where a dark line of clouds was forming. It was the rainy season for the tropical planet and afternoon rainstorms were a common occurrence.

"Will you not have a hundred ships surrounding your flagship, Ryden?" Tarik asked. "A dozen Class-Ten constructs ringed around your lady with laser rifles set to incinerate anyone who dares get near her?"

Ryden turned to give the Prime Reaper a droll look. "Two hundred battleships and two dozen Class-Tens with laser cannons at the ready," he declared.

Tarik shook his head at the exaggeration. "That is overly much, my brother, and well you know it. The New Coalition would not dare attack your ship. I venture to say after what happened to Colonel Morrison and Riordan O'Shay, there is not a man in the megaverse who would dare come after what is yours."

"They'd love to mount my head on a pike and put it in the courtyard of their socalled imperial palace to watch it rot," Ryden said with a snort.

"Yours, perhaps, but not your lady's. I believe they learned their lesson when they attacked your palace the first time." Tarik cocked his head to one side. "How many men did you execute for that piece of treachery?"

Ignoring the question, the emperor moved so he was sitting flat on the sand, one leg crooked at the knee and the other stretched out before him. He shifted to lie on his hip then leaned on his elbow as Tarik was doing but propped his head on a doubled fist.

"Would you consider me an asshole, Tarik?" he inquired, and watched the Prime Reaper's eyebrows shoot up.

Tarik took a moment to consider the question as his eyebrows slowly lowered. "You are..." He paused as though searching for the word. His face relaxed. "Intense."

Ryden rolled his eyes. "A polite way to say, aye, Bakari, you're an asshole," he grumbled.

"What do you care what I think?"

The emperor rarely broke eye contact with those to whom he was speaking, but he looked down. "Your opinion of me matters." He felt the tiniest flicker of intrusion in his mind, allowed it, and then felt the flicker fade away.

"What was done to me was before—how is it the Terrans say?—your watch," Tarik reminded the Burgon. "Had it not been for you, I—and others of our kind—would still be incarcerated on Riezell Nine."

Still the emperor could not meet the Reaper's gaze. "I allowed it to go on longer than it should have because I refused to think about you being there." When Tarik said nothing for a stretch of time, Ryden finally raised his eyes. Tarik smiled sadly.

"There is an old saying, my brother – Ta reddyn ennagh ayn nagh vel niart ain orroo."

"There are some things we cannot help," Ryden translated.

"Those who question the gods do so at their peril," Tarik reminded him. "Never forget to everything there is a time. Our time came when it was destined to come. You neither hindered nor prolonged that time. You simply did what you were chosen to be the one to do." A crease formed in his smooth forehead. "Do you think I hold anger at you for what was done to us?"

Ryden took a deep breath before answering. "No, but were the boot on the other foot, I would have."

Tarik wiggled his bare feet. "Perhaps that is why this Reaper does not wear boots."

The emperor laughed. "Or anything else!"

The men were quiet for a long time, each looking toward the approaching storm. Lightning was beginning to whip through the dark clouds and a low roll of thunder echoed over the freshening waves.

"There is a storm coming," Tarik said, and Ryden knew he didn't mean the one they were watching.

"I fear you are right."

"This man you go to meet, the one you have named the WindChaser, will help to calm that storm," the Prime Reaper said. "He will not be able to stop—no man or woman can, my brother—but he will be able to lessen its effect."

"I feel that too," Ryden agreed. "And there is another warrior I have in place who is doing all he can to forestall the ongoing tide of violence." He sat up. "We need all the help we can get to end the conflict."

"Have no worry over your lady-wife while you are away," Tarik told him, also sitting up. The storm was picking up speed and the lightning was flashing more often, the boom of the thunder becoming louder. "I would give my life to protect her, but she is safer here than she would be at your side."

Ryden looked into the Prime Reaper's eyes. "I know that, Tarik. I have no concerns over her safety while she is with you, but..."

Tarik tilted his head to one side. "But?"

"I'd just as soon I not find her with any more holes riddling her body when I return for her or..." the Emperor of Aduaidh Prime arched on dark brow, "or her beautiful flesh covered with tats."

A slow, understanding smile tugged at Tarik's face then just as slowly disappeared. "I will have a talk with my lady-wife and will attempt to dissuade her from making any more fashion suggestions to yours."

"I would appreciate that," Ryden said, and both men rose to their feet, the Burgon politely refraining from looking at the well-endowed body of his companion.

Emperor of the Wind

"I said attempt, my brother," Tarik said as they started walking toward the thatched huts. "My Bahiya has a mind of her own."

"Aye," Ryden said with a heavy sigh and a droop of his broad shoulders. "So does my Miri."

Chapter Three

Morning sunlight filtered through the doorway of the hut to light the area being pointed to.

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"Right here."

"No."

"All right. What about here?"
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"No!"

Miri glared at her husband. "Did I growl at you when you got *your* tattoo, Ryden Bakari?"

"You didn't even know me then," he reminded her.

"Well, I wouldn't have growled at you if I had."

"You. Will. Not. Put. Graffiti. On. Your. Rack!" he said, stressing each word with a stiff index finger punching in the air toward her.

"Then I'll put it on the small of my back!" she retorted.

He narrowed his eyes. "No. You. Will. Not!"

Miri narrowed her eyes. "Keep this up and I'll put it on my ass and then walk around naked like Bahiya does and..."

She stopped—wide-eyed—as her husband threw his head back and roared like a wounded bull. His face turned beet red as he stood there with his fists clenched at his side and the cords standing out in his thick neck. When he lowered his head to give her a menacing look, she had a vivid impression of that bull glaring at her and half expected to see her husband scuffing his feet on the rush flooring in preparation to charge. She put out a staying hand.

"Now, Ryden..." she said, easing backward toward the door.

"Now, Miri," he growled, glowering at her from under his thick brows, nostrils flaring.

She held up an index finger, shaking it side to side. "You be a good little Burgon and stand down." She took another step back as he took one toward her.

Ryden's lips peeled back from his clenched teeth and he made a low, rumbling sound deep in his throat. "Come here," he ordered.

"Uh-uh," she denied, and whipped around to run, but she got no farther than the doorway before he snaked out an arm to loop it around her waist. She yelped as he lifted her clear off the floor, and with her braced on his hip, started toward their mat. She wiggled in an effort to break free but was no match for his Reaper strength. When he fell to the mat—cushioning her fall with his body—she heard him grunt.

"Shit," he hissed, and grunted again as he rolled her over to her back, following her so he was pressing her down to the covers.

Miri doubled her fist and punched him lightly in the ribs. "Idjut! That's a good way to break a hip at your age! What the hell were you thinking?"

Ryden flinched as she punched him again then writhed atop her until he was lying between her legs, his knees pushing hers apart. He lowered his head to her chest and turned his cheek so it was pressed against one nipple.

"I love you," he said. He covered her other breast with his palm.

Miri's mouth twitched to one side in irritation but she put her arms around him. "Aye, well, I love you too, but that doesn't give you the right to dictate what I can and can not do."

He lifted his head. "I am your Burgon, woman," he said. "I am your emperor. I *can* dictate what you can and can't do." He caressed her breast, running his thumb over the stiffening peak.

"It's just a little tattoo, Ryden," Miri said, hating the whine that crept into her voice.

"And I said no," he told her. "And no is what I meant." He could feel the Reaper navel ornament digging into his chest as he lay atop her and wanted to rip the thing from her body. "End of discussion."

Biting her lip to keep from telling him that as soon as his ship cleared Theristes' air space, she was getting the artist to do the tattoo, she stroked his back. She knew it was best with this man to let him think he had won the argument.

"And if that tattoo artist puts the first mark on you, I'll have his head," he said, lifting his own to give her a steady look. "Both of them." His amber eyes glinted. "Are you listening to me, Miri Bakari?"

Miri opened and closed her mouth in silent mockery of his words but drew in a quick breath when his hand slid down her body to cup her between the legs. His firm squeeze stopped her breath altogether. His palm sliding along her sex as he slowly stroked her front to back, causing her heartbeat to speed up.

"Well?" he insisted, dragging his middle finger over and over the opening to her sheath.

"Aye, Ryden," she whispered. She squirmed under his assault, aching to have him slip that strong digit into her cunt. When he tapped it against her entrance, she swallowed.

"Aye, who?" he countered – brow arched, finger paused.

"Your excellency," she replied breathlessly.

Very slowly he inserted his finger into her wet warmth. All the while he held her captive with his powerful gaze. Their eyes were fused as he moved his finger in and out of her until she was slick around his flesh.

"Who am I, milady?" he asked as he probed a bit deeper, his other fingers spreading the lips of her sex open so the base of his middle finger rubbed lightly against her clit with each passage.

"My Burgon," she said with a shiver. "My emperor."

"And?" Another deeper probe.

"My husband."

"And?"

Miri said nothing. Even when he thrust his finger as deep inside her as it would go she kept her lips clamped together.

"And?" He wiggled his finger, his brows arching higher.

Miri squinted. "I will not say 'my lord and master' so get over it, Bakari," she grumbled.

He chuckled then shrugged carelessly. "It was worth a try," he said, and began a rhythmic in-and-out motion that brought hot desire to her pretty eyes.

"Would you not rather have something else inside me than those puny fingers, warrior?" she challenged then gasped as he quickly withdrew the questing digits.

"And what would you rather I use, wench?" he said.

She turned her head to look at the bowl of fruit on the low table they used for eating. "A banana, a cucumber, a..."

He gave a low roar then was over her, wedging his hard body between her thighs. He prodded at her opening, his cock as hard as stone, making no effort to gain entrance.

His sinister grin as he continued to push against her brought a hard glint to Miri's eyes.

"Not very good at this lovemaking thing, are you, Burgon?" she queried then put her hand up to pat her lips in a pretend yawn of boredom.

"Oh, now that is just mean," he said. He rammed into her with enough force to shoot her upward on the mat.

"Hey!" she protested, eyes flaring, but brought her legs up to encircle him. "You're a brute."

He thrust hard, a muscle grinding in his cheek. "You ain't seen nothing yet, baby." He slammed into her again and again.

She dug her fingernails into his suntanned back. "Two can play that game, mister!" She dragged her short nails down his side—not to draw blood but to goad him on for she knew how much he liked the slight discomfort.

Ryden laughed—the sound coming from deep in his chest—and he sped up his thrusts until the meaty slap of their bodies meeting filled the little hut.

They came at the exact same moment. Depleted, they sagged against one another—his arms around her, her head on his shoulder—to lie staring up at the thatchwork covering the ceiling. After a few minutes, she raised her head to look up at the underside of his strong jaw.

"It would only be a little tattoo, Ryden," she said.

He sighed heavily. "No."

She lifted her hand and held her thumb and index finger an inch apart. "Just a teeny, tiny one with an itty bitty scythe."

"No!" he said, making the single word a growl.

She slapped her hand against his chest. "You are such a badass!"

"Aye, but I'm *your* badass," he countered.

Miri pursed her lips. She had every intention of getting the tat whether he liked it or not. She wasn't afraid of his big, bad temper. He'd get over it—and himself—eventually. Her concern was for the artist who would put that tat on Ryden Bakari's possession.

"I'll pull his dangly out by the root if he so much as comes within a mile of applying a laser to your rack," she heard him grumble.

Annoyed he had read her thoughts, she reminded herself to ask Bahiya if there was a way to shield those thoughts from her Reaper.

"Nope, there isn't," he declared.

Miri ground her teeth. "All right, then what about the old-fashioned way?" she asked. "Ink applied with..."

"No," he stated. "No laser, no ink, no graffiti on my woman."

"Huh," she said with a grunt. She knew if she was to get a tattoo, she'd have to do so before she was installed as empress, for soon after that, she would be taking on the mantle of a Lady-Reaper and when that happened she wouldn't be able to...

"No tat!" he snarled, and flung himself over her, pushing her legs wide apart with his knees. "No tat. No tat. No. Tat!"

"Stop reading my mind, you oaf!" she said, swatting his ass hard enough to make him yelp.

He stared down into her eyes with a hard, brittle glower that she realized must terrify anyone unlucky enough to have it directed at them.

"Miriam, I will say this only once and then never again," he said, jaw tight. "I am not only your husband, I am your Burgon. I am your emperor, and whether you admit it or not, I *am* your lord and master!"

She grunted in denial of that claim and felt him grind his growing erection against her center.

"I am telling you—nay, I am ordering you—not to have your flesh marked in any shape, form or fashion. If you do, I swear to you, I will set your sweet little ass on fire with the palm of my hand!"

His words were spoken with a harsh grating that set her teeth on edge. He was glowering at her. She could see the anger flashing in the amber depths of his eyes and was a bit surprised to see a spark of crimson lurking there as well.

"Ryden, please," she begged. "It will be just the once. I want the tat to remind me I am yours."

"You don't need any reminding, wench!" he shouted at her. "You know you do not!"

Now she saw real rage glittering in his eyes.

"That's not how I meant it," she said, reaching up to lay her palm against his scarred cheek. "I am proud to be your woman, to belong to you. I merely wanted to have the tattoo to celebrate that belonging."

"That evil thing dangling against your belly is celebration enough," he snapped.
"I'll not allow you to mar your body with anything else!"

"Oh!" Miri hissed and pushed at his arms. "Get off me if you're gonna be like that!"

For a second or two he didn't budge then he rolled off her and with a lithe movement was on his feet. Without another word he thrust the bamboo curtain aside and stalked from the hut. The bamboo rods clicked together violently for a moment then finally swayed to a stop.

Miri sat up and reached for the floral sarong she had taken to wearing much of the time. It was a mark of how furious her husband was that he'd left their hut without a stitch of clothing to shield him. She giggled, knowing he would rather have his fingernails torn out with hot pinchers than come back to grab his pants and have to admit he'd stormed out without thinking.

* * * * *

Rynlyn Rede glanced up as his father came barreling toward him. He blinked, blinked again then ducked his head. "Stay in the hut, *lhiannan*," he said out of the corner of his mouth. "We have company."

His wife Tessa poked her head out of the hut. "Who...?" As soon as she saw her naked father-in-law bearing down on them, she ducked back inside.

Ryn was sitting tailor fashion on the sand, patching a fishing net. He continued to work the shuttle through the webbing as his father came to stand beside him. He refrained from looking up.

"Trouble in paradise?" he questioned.

"Gods-be-damned women can be more trouble than they're worth," the Burgon muttered.

"The tat?" Tessa called out.

Ryn's lips twitched as out of the corner of his eye he saw his father's head snap toward the hut.

"There will be no tat!" the emperor barked.

"Wanna bet?" Ryn heard Tessa query with a laugh.

"You better get your woman in hand, boy," Ryden snapped as he dropped to the sand beside his son.

With his father seated and his nakedness partially hidden, Ryn looked over at him. "What have you got against her getting a tat?" He pointed the shuttle at the tattoo that had been lasered to the emperor's left pec. "You got one."

Ryden made a rude sound with his lips. "I'm a warrior and that is my imperial seal. She wants a gods-be-damned mini Reaper on her rack!" he said crudely. "I don't want any drawings on her rack!"

"It's her breast, Papa," Ryn said, using the term he knew his father was proud to have him use.

"It's mine too!" the Burgon reminded him.

"But it's more hers than yours," Tessa said as she poked her head out of the hut again. "You are being unreasonable, Ry."

"You want my hand on your ass, Tessa?" Ryden demanded.

"It wouldn't be the first time," Tessa said with a playful batting of her eyes. It was a reminder to the great man that they had enjoyed a special friendship long before Ryn had entered the picture. Even though Tessa and the Burgon had never been lovers when she had been a highly priced courtesan on one of the New Alliance's pleasure ships, they had been close acquaintances. The emperor had come to her to be held when his life became too hard for him to endure alone.

Ryden gave his son a hard look though he said nothing.

"What is this really about?" Rynlyn asked, laying aside the net and shuttle. He glanced up at Tessa, who wisely withdrew into the hut again.

The Burgon had drawn his legs together. Though he would never admit it to anyone, he was mortally ashamed of sitting there in his birthday suit. Rynlyn was dressed in a pair of cut-off pants and that just underscored Ryden's embarrassment.

A Reaper like his father, Ryn called out to his wife to toss him out a pair of pants. The words had barely left his mouth before the bamboo rods parted and a pair of khaki pants sailed toward him. He snaked out his hand to grab them in midair.

"Like minds," Ryn mumbled as he tossed the pants to his father.

With a grunt of thanks, the Burgon drew his legs up, leaned back on the sand and thrust his feet into the pants. When he had the pants buttoned, he rose to his feet.

"Walk with me," he ordered, and set off toward the beach.

Rynlyn sighed then got up to follow his father.

The beach was littered with seashells from the storm the night before. Already there were clouds building again in the west. From the looks of it, the daily rain would reach them before the noon hour.

Careful not to step on any of the sharp shells, the Burgon skirted the damp sand, his bare feet slogging through the sugary white crystal that stretched for as far as the eye could see. He was walking with his hands clasped behind his back, head down with his son close beside him. They walked for five minutes in silence as the waves undulated to shore.

"I don't know how long we'll be, but once I've settled matters with MacKirnan, we'll come straight back to fetch our women to Aduaidh Prime," Ryden finally said. He glanced at his son. "You're to be installed as my future successor the day after Miri is crowned empress."

Rynlyn nodded. All this had been discussed and discussed again many times so it didn't need readdressing. It was an indication that whatever was troubling his father was critical enough to make him forgetful they'd gone over this more often than would ever be needed.

"And there's the matter of your half brother to be seen to."

"Aye," Ryn agreed. That too had been discussed ad nauseum. It was a subject he'd just as soon not revisit. "What's troubling you, Papa?"

The Burgon stopped. He turned so he was staring out over the heaving waves. There was deep worry creasing his face and his amber eyes were filled with pain.

"I love her, Ryn," he said. "With my entire being. When she hurts, I hurt."

Vertical creases formed above Ryn's slightly hooked nose. "Is she ill?" He prayed that wasn't the case, for he feared if anything happened to Miri it would completely destroy the Burgon.

His father shook his head. "No. Nothing like that."

Ryn reached up to touch one of the many tats he too had chosen to have applied to his flesh. "Tats don't hurt that much," he said. "If you'd rather she not have it lasered on, the artist can use ink."

"It's not the gods-be-damned tat, Rynlyn!" his father exploded, kicking at the sand.

Ryn's eyebrows shot up. "All right," he said slowly. "What is it then?"

"It's what it represents!"

The eyebrows came down and the vertical creases returned between Ryn's eyes, deeper this time. "You don't want her to have the symbol?"

"I don't want her to have the pain!" the Burgon bellowed.

"But the pain is minim..." Ryn stopped as understanding hit him like a lightning bolt. "Oh I see."

"It was bad enough when you went through it," Ryden said, sweeping a hand through his hair. "It nearly broke my heart to know you were in such agony."

"Pain passes, Papa. There is no way to get around the discomfort of becoming a Reaper," Ryn said gently. He would have said more but his father looked around at him and he saw tears streaking down the cheeks of the most influential man in the megaverse.

"You know how ungodly that pain is though, Ryn," the Burgon said. "We've both been through it. It is sheer agony."

Ryn put a hand on his father's shoulder. "Aye, but it passes." He squeezed the hard flesh. "Think of the benefit. The two of you will be together forever."

"I should never have asked her if she wanted to become like us," Ryden said, reaching up to swipe at his tears. He scrubbed a hand over his face. "I wasn't thinking."

"Would you rather have a few dozen years with her, watching her grow old—perhaps infirm—and then dying?" Ryn asked softly, removing his hand from his father's shoulder. "Would you rather lose her forever?"

The Burgon flinched. "By the gods, no!" he said, taking a hitching breath.

"That would be the alternative," his son reminded him.

Ryden hung his head. "Aye, I know that in my mind, but my heart is screaming at me that she will know such agony."

"Don't you think she understands what is involved?" Ryn asked. "I would imagine she has discussed it with Bahiya, but my guess is she knew all there was to know about it long before now from reading the files of other Lady-Reapers. Miri is a very intelligent woman and she would have wanted to know all she could about it. Whatcha wanna bet she spoke personally to some of the other Lady-Reapers?"

Ryden raised his head. He considered that for a moment then nodded. "Aye, you're right. She would have."

"Here's something else to consider," Ryn said as he thrust his hands into the pockets of his cut-offs. "She is proud of what she is going to become. If she wasn't, she wouldn't want the tat. It's her way of telling the world that becoming a Lady-Reaper is just as significant to her as becoming the Empress of Aduaidh Prime."

"She doesn't give a warthog's pecker about being the empress," Ryden scoffed.

"I didn't say it was important to her," Ryn replied. "I said significant. I know she isn't glory- or wealth-hungry, Papa. To her, being the empress simply means she's the emperor's wife. It's you who matters to her, not the title. I've known Miri for a few years, and with her it's what you see is what you're gonna get."

Ryden turned to his son. "But the pain, Rynlyn!" he said.

Ryn shrugged. "Aye, so? You will be there with her. You will have her in your arms and you will take as much of it from her as the goddess will allow. The pain *will* pass. What is left behind is far more important." He nudged his father with his elbow. "Think of soaring through the skies with her at your side. Think of running through the jungle nipping at her pretty little tail."

Ryden smiled as an image of a silvery brown she-wolf flitted through his mind. "She'll make a beautiful she-wolf," he said.

"Uh-huh," Ryn said, and started back toward his hut.

"Ryn?"

Ryn turned so he was walking backward. "Aye?"

"Thank you."

Again the younger man shrugged. "Any time, old man," he said, turning his back on his father as he chuckled. His laugh deepened when a starfish went sailing past his head.

Chapter Four

Rain pelted the hut and the wind skirled among the branches overhead, clicking the palm fronds together.

"Brutal," the Burgon pronounced as a particularly violent gust of wind pushed against the hut.

Miri was stir-frying shrimp over the fire. The aroma of garlic and butter wafted around her. "I've a feeling it's going to get worse before the afternoon is over."

"You may be right," he said. He was lying on his side with his head propped on a fist, watching her.

They were silent for a moment while she finished their light supper. Ladling the shrimp on a banana leaf layered with fried rice, she handed him his share. She came to sit beside him, leaning her back against the edge of the low table.

"What are you thinking, warrior?" she asked as she cautiously dipped the tips of her fingers into the shrimp and rice mixture then brought it to her mouth.

He was staring at the shrimp, thinking how primitive the meal was and wondering what the people of his homeworld would think of their Burgon if they could see him at that moment. Imagining their shock and the displeasure of his councilors made him smile.

"Pomp and circumstance," he said aloud. "That's what they expect of me." He used his fingers to scoop up a goodly portion of what Bahiya had called *ingagh* then poked it into his mouth. He smiled as he chewed. "Delicious."

"Pomp and circumstance," his wife repeated. "Perhaps I should have served this on a plate with a fork."

"Wasn't meant to be served that way," he said, "and I doubt it would have tasted half as good."

"Why are you concerned with what is expected of you?" she asked. She didn't particularly care for the dish and the garlic was very potent. She knew it would leave a very unpleasant aftertaste in her mouth.

"I'm not concerned," he said. "I'm just saying."

"You are hinting that your people would not be impressed with you lying on the floor, half naked, eating with your fingers," she surmised.

He made quick work of the food on his leaf then held it out for more. She handed him the rest of hers in exchange.

"Don't like it?" he asked.

She shook her head as she crawled on her knees to the pan to ladle more rice and shrimp onto his banana leaf. By the time she turned around to carry his food back to him, he had demolished what had been left in her leaf. She laughed.

"Pig," she accused as she handed over the refilled leaf then plucked a brace of rosy nectarines from the ever-filled fruit bowl for herself.

"I'm a growing boy," he said. "Why don't you just drop the rice in the pan with the shrimp, mix it up and hand me a spoon?"

She rolled her eyes. "You'll be a waddling boy the way you've been eating of late," she replied.

"Is it my fault you're a good cook?"

"It's your fault if you consume more of it than you know is good for your body."

"There's a cure for that, you know," he said then wagged his brows.

"Oh, I intend to work it off you before you return to the palace, warrior," she told him as she bit into one of the nectarines.

"Promise, promises," he said then tilted his head to one side. "Gonna give me what I want or not?"

She sighed, laid aside the nectarine and started to fetch the food for him, but one quick glance in his direction stopped her in mid-action. She looked pointedly at the crotch of the khaki pants he'd come back to the hut with. The hard erection beneath the fabric couldn't be missed. Her eyes went to his and when he shot her one of his infamous cocky grins, she dropped her hands to the mat and crawled over to him.

"You are incorrigible," she said.

"I'm hungry, wench," he responded.

"Aye, but not for the *ingagh*," she charged.

"Well, mayhap not, but I do want something juicy and plump and hot."

She reared up on her knees, put her hands to his chest and pushed him flat to his back. "You'll get what I give you," she growled. Her fingers went to the button at his waist.

"Aren't you hungry?" he inquired as she worked free his fly.

"Aye. For something hot and juicy and very plump," she said in a husky voice.

Ryden laced his fingers together then slipped his hands behind his head as she tugged off his pants. "Never let it be said the Burgon did not provide nourishment for his citizens."

His cock was thick and jutted like a broadsword from the nest of wiry curls at the apex of his thighs. He shifted his legs apart as she lifted a leg to straddle his then settled down between his opened legs, stretching out on her belly so her lips were directly over the part of him that was waving for her immediate attention. He raised his knees.

Miri raised her head and squinted at him. "You clamp my ears with your thighs again and I'll bite your dangly clean off!" she warned.

He laughed. "You'll do no such thing," he scoffed. "You like that dangly almost as much as I do. You—"

She cut him off as she swooped down to take him into her mouth—opening her throat to swallow his entire length. She felt him jerk beneath her.

"Mother of the goddess, Miri, where did you learn that?" he gasped, his fingers unlaced and threaded through her hair.

He knew, of course, precisely where she'd learned it—or thought he did. Either Tessa—who had made her living with such expertise—or Bahiya—who was one of the most unique women he'd ever met—had instructed her on the technique. His entire body flooded with testosterone and he couldn't help but wish he'd been there to see the instructions.

Miri ignored him as she used the flat of her tongue to slide it along the underside of his shaft. Tightening her lips, she moved her head back until only the tip of his cock was in her mouth. She drew hard on that meaty bulb and felt his fingers tense in her hair.

"Ahhh," came from somewhere deep inside him.

Drawing from the combined advice of Bahiya and Tessa, she alternated between lapping at the sensitive area under the head of his shaft and flicking her tongue over the weeping slit. She swirled her tongue around and around the head then drew him deep once more.

He trembled, his thighs flexing as she ran a hand under him to cup his balls and knead them gently but firmly. Her free hand she used to slide underneath the balls to press at what Tessa had told her was a man's very sensitive GO button.

"Miri!" he gasped, hips arching involuntarily as she pressed on that smooth spot between the base of his scrotum and his anal opening.

She sucked hard on his cock then began to move her mouth up and down his length, her taut lips along his shaft. She could hear him beginning to pant. She released him—heard him groan at the interruption—but quickly began to nibble on his glans with fleeting nips of her lips all around the head. She licked her way to the base then took one of his heavy, tight balls into her mouth.

"Shit!" he hissed, jerking as though someone had prodded him with a hot poker.

She mouthed first one then the other ball then dragged her tongue from their base, along his cock to the head, clamping her lips on the glans.

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He shot like a cannon, his fingers flexing in her hair to hold her head as he came. Pulse after pulse of his cum squirted down her throat and she swallowed it, listening to him growl at the pressure of her tongue against his cock as she did.

One last twitch of his body and his legs shot down—knees falling apart. He was breathing heavily, loudly and his hands fell away—arms limp at his side.

Despite the tremors that racked his body as she licked him clean, he lay there helpless, his eyes on her every moment. She could have done anything to him and she doubted he would have made an effort to stop her. He was completely, totally at her mercy as she slithered over him to lie on his chest.

"Right here," she said, putting her finger to the left side of her chest.

"Aye," he agreed, unable to deny her anything after that.

"A teeny, tiny Reaper with an itty-bitty scythe?" she wanted clarified.

He sighed. "Aye, baby. Whatever you want."

"And you'll leave the tattoo artist intact?"

He sighed again. "Aye."

Miri smiled then lowered her head to his shoulder. "Good Burgon," she said.

"Whipped Burgon," he mumbled as he enclosed her in his weak arms.

* * * * *

He was determined to be there when she got the tat so he delayed his departure for R-9 by a few hours the next day. He insisted she have the tattoo artist come to their hut with his gear, and even though it was pouring rain, the man had come without complaint.

"No bigger than this," the Burgon stated as he held his thumb and index finger an inch apart.

Miri took his hand in hers and spread the fingers wider.

"Wench," he warned, and tried to close the distance, but she stood on tiptoes to plant a saucy kiss on his hard mouth.

"I love you," she whispered against his lips.

"Don't push it," he grumbled. He turned a fierce expression to the artist. "We'll split the difference. She wants three, I want one. Make it one and a half."

The artist looked to Miri.

"Make it three," Miri stated.

He looked back to the Burgon.

"Two," Ryden snapped.

The artist looked pained as he turned his head toward his customer.

"Three," his wife maintained.

Husband glared at wife; wife glared right back. The artist held his breath.

Blowing like an annoyed bull, the Burgon threw his hands into the air and stomped over to his mat. "Gods-be-damned pigheaded woman," he complained as he plopped down on the floor then patted the spot beside him. "Come here and let me hold you while he does it!"

"Ooh, now that sounds intriguing!" Miri said with a giggle.

Ryden's eyes narrowed dangerously, so she hurried over to sit beside him.

"Ah, she needs to be lying down, your excellency," he told Ryden.

"She will be," the Burgon growled, and slapped a hand to his thigh. "Come here, wench."

Miri hiked up the skirt of her sarong, turned in a ninety-degree angle to his body, sat on the mat then lay down with her head on his thigh. His hand went automatically to her hair, smoothing it back from her forehead as she pulled the elastic top of the sarong down to just above her nipple and held the fabric there. Her husband had already decreed the artist would "see no more than absolutely necessary to do his

work" and she was abiding by his wishes. She looked up at him and he nodded approvingly.

Bringing his equipment over to the couple, the artist also brought a lamp, putting it on the low table.

Throughout the ordeal, as he saw it, Ryden kept his jaw clamped shut, his teeth gritted. He refused to look away from the needle that drew the outline of the tattoo on his wife's flesh. His stomach was doing funny little clenches as he watched the blood bead up on her smooth flesh and his knees felt weak. What, he wondered, would he do if she cried out because she felt a moment's pain?

He flicked stormy eyes to the artist.

"Don't you hurt her," he snarled in a low, deadly tone of voice.

The artist didn't look up. He kept his attention on what he was doing.

Miri craned her head back so she could look up at her husband. "Stop trying to be such a badass," she said. "Darjin is not afraid of you."

"Oh aye, I am," the artist said as he wiped a streak of bloody ink from the design, keeping his head lowered.

"Are you married, Darjin?" the Burgon inquired, carefully scrutinizing where the artist placed the base of his hand as he worked. It was too close to Miri's nipple for his peace of mind and he had to bite his tongue to keep from bellowing.

"Aye, your excellency," was the answer.

"Does your lady-wife like your dangly?" he asked, grinding his teeth.

"Ryden, stop it!" Miri chided.

"Just asking," Ryden said. "If she doesn't, it won't matter should I tear it off at the root if he hurts you. On the other hand, if she does like it—and he's any good at using it—it would be a shame should I need to break it off."

"You'll neither tear it off nor break it off, Ryden Bakari," Miri declared with a sniff.

"There's no need for you to worry, Darjin. He's just being his usual disruptive self."

The artist's lips pulled taut in what could either have been a grimace or a smile. She wasn't sure which it was, but his hand never wavered as he applied a dab of scarlet to the eyes of the miniature Reaper. He was, however, sweating profusely. Whether that was from fear of the Burgon or the heat from the lantern that was close to his right shoulder, she did not know.

"It is done."

Ryden leaned over to take a look at the tat. He frowned. "Her flesh is all red around that ugly thing."

"I'm sure yours was too," the artist said.

"Mine burned like a son of a bitch," the Burgon said. "Gods-be-damned laser set my skin on fire."

"Well, mine didn't hurt," Miri lied as she sat up. She had wanted to cry it hurt so badly, but she had bluffed her way through it. She knew if she had so much as blinked, her husband would have sprung at the poor artist and pulverized him.

Ryden's brows drew together in a thunderous scowl. "You little liar," he said. "I sensed every twinge so don't pretend otherwise." He glanced at the artist—who had suddenly turned very pale. "You didn't hurt her enough to warrant having your dangly ripped off, but you'd better hope she doesn't have any problems with that wound."

Miri's heart did a funny little squeeze. For all his blustering, he had allowed her to have what she had wanted although he had been dead set against it and knew it was hurting her.

The artist taped a clean white cloth over the new tattoo, gave Miri a special lotion to apply to it and told her to keep the wound clean and dry.

"No swimming in the ocean until you are fully healed," he warned.

"Thank you, Darjin. It is a beautiful tat and I love it," she said even though her husband snorted. Since money was not needed on Theristes, she knew the artist's payment was in the joy of seeing his work displayed by those who had requested it.

"Milady, I am honored that you are happy with my humble work," the artist said, bowing. He gathered his kit, bowed to the Burgon then hurried out the door, wiping sweat from his brow with a kerchief.

"Intense little bugger," Ryden observed. He was sitting on the mat with his legs crossed tailor fashion.

"Thank you," his wife said, and when he cocked a dismissive shoulder, her eyes twinkled, "for not pulling off his dangly."

Another careless shrug. "Most likely wasn't big enough to get my fist around anyway," he said with a twist of his lips.

She knelt beside him. "Thank you nevertheless. I'm sure his wife will thank you too."

He sniffed. "She'd better."

Miri ran her palms up his thighs. "How can I thank you?" she asked. She curled her tongue over her lower lip then slowly drew it back in.

"Woman..." he said, drawing out the word. "You're playing with fire here." He glanced to the door. "I'll be leaving in a little while."

She slid her hand to the crotch of his pants. "We have a wee spot of time before you do, don't we?" She stroked him between the legs.

The Burgon sighed. "I suppose, if that's what you want." His cock had a mind of its own and it wasn't sighing. It was roaring. It leapt against her palm. He looked at the covering over her new tattoo. "Are you sure you're up to it?"

Her fingers were on the buttons of his uniform pants. "Are you?" she asked, drawing his stiff shaft from the opening.

Ryden Bakari's eyes turned dark as molten gold. "Aye, you eager little nymph. Where you are concerned, I will always be up to it."

She bent forward, slid her lips along his straining length then straightened when he drew in a long, deep breath. She reached down to hike her skirt higher then moved to

straddle his thigh. With one lithe move, she impaled her slick heat upon his cock. Her arms went around his neck; his arms went around her waist.

"I will miss you," she said then placed her lips over his.

Their tongues dueled as she began to raise and lower her cunt over his throbbing shaft.

"Papa?"

The intrusion at the door made the Burgon growl fiercely. He tore his mouth from his lady's.

"Not now!" he snarled.

"The runabout is ready and the cruisers are in position to accompany us. I thought we should..."

"Not now, Rynlyn!" came the bellow.

Miri heard a small, strangled "Oh" then silence as she continued to lift and settle her body. She stared into her husband's stormy eyes then began to methodically contract her inner muscles.

"Ah, wench, you are tormenting me now," he groaned, and clapped his hands to her hips. He lifted and lowered her in a quicker rhythm, throwing his head back as the contractions of her vaginal lips milked him.

The climax that overtook the two of them was as explosive as any they'd ever achieved together. It was so strong the force of it made Ryden Bakari see stars as he shot thick and long into his woman's velvety depths. When the last pulsing was done, he lowered his head to her shoulder and took great gulps of breath to steady himself. His arms were so tight around her he could feel the hardness of her erect nipples pressing against his chest.

"A man could die happy in your arms," he mumbled, nuzzling her neck.

"This woman would be happy to die in yours," she said gently.

He lifted his head, gazed long into her eyes before he finally gave her a sweet, tender kiss.

"I have to go," he said.

Miri nodded, returned his kiss then slid her body from his. Bracing her hands on his brawny shoulders, she rose to her feet and went to retrieve his black silk shirt as he stood and adjusted himself in his trousers.

"You'll be careful?" she asked, holding his shirt so he could thrust his arms into the sleeves.

"I will," he answered.

Silently, she watched him button the shirt then stuff it into his pants. When he was ready, she reached out to cup his cheek. There would be no words of goodbye.

He turned his face to kiss her palm then walked out without a backward glance.

"Aye, you are my Burgon," she whispered. "My emperor." She smiled. "My lord and master and the keeper of my heart."

Chapter Five

Rynlyn glanced over at his father to find the most powerful and celebrated man he knew gazing out the port window of the runabout. For the last half hour, the Emperor of Aduaidh Prime had been silent. Their mission accomplished, everything heading in the direction the Burgon wanted it to go, they were now heading back to Theristes and the women they had left behind.

"Do you think MacKirnan will find out why the shipments of...?" Ryn asked.

"It isn't a large tat, although larger than I wanted, but it's in a very sensitive place on a woman," his father interrupted. "She felt it as it was applied, although I attempted to shield her from the pain." He looked around at his son. "Why do you think I couldn't shield her from the pain, Rynny?"

Ryn frowned. "Mayhap you were trying too hard?" he countered. "You were worried it would hurt her so your powers were not directed as sharply as they could have been."

The Burgon stared at him for a moment then shook his head. "No, that wasn't it. I could feel the mist of control being pushed aside." He narrowed his eyes. "Do you think that interfering goddess did that?"

"Which goddess would that be?" Ryn asked, glancing down at the ship's readout that suddenly fluctuated wildly.

"Morrigunia," his father snapped. "The goddess Who sticks Her finger in every Reaper pie."

Once more Ryn saw the readouts pulse in ranges they shouldn't. He swallowed. "Papa, I suggest when you speak of Her, you speak with respect." When his father frowned, Ryn pointed to the readout dials.

"Huh," was the comment, but the Burgon wisely made no other disparaging remarks about said Triune Goddess.

"It was most likely a test," Ryn said. He released an uneasy sigh as the dials returned to normal.

"A test of what?" his father demanded.

"How well you were going to handle the coming ordeal."

Ryden Bakari flinched. He'd been striving to keep that particular event off his mind. Every time he thought of his precious Miri going through the Transition his belly started to cramp and his esophagus filled with burning acid, his hands shook and his palms sweat. Fear such as he had never known was his constant companion now. Not for himself but for the woman he loved.

The warriors were silent for a long moment then the Burgon shifted in his seat to face his son.

"What do you think she would say if I told her I've changed my mind and I won't let her...?" He stopped for Ryn was shaking his head. "Why not?"

"Because you can't go back on your word."

"Aye, I can! I am the Burgon!" his father snapped.

Ryn swung his head toward the man who had been half of the equation that brought him into this life. "Let me put it to you another way—you won't go back on your word."

"Huh," the Burgon snorted once again. He reached up to finger the scar on his cheek. "Well, I should."

"Not if you want to keep peace with your lady," Ryn reminded him.

"What if I can't stand seeing her like that, Rynny?" He brought his thumbnail to his teeth and began chewing on a loose cuticle, speaking around the obstruction. "What if I go stark-raving mad watching her in pain?"

Ryn had to control the smile that threatened to tug his lips sideways. "I don't believe that's gonna happen."

"It could."

"No, it won't." Ryn looked at his father. "You're too strong."

"I'm a piece of overcooked noodle where she's concerned," the Burgon complained.
"One look from those soft little eyes and I'm worse than an overcooked noodle. I'm an overcooked noodle that's been stepped on and squashed to juice."

"An appetizing image," Ryn said drily.

"Why can't this ship strike a faster speed?"

"Why can't you just sit there like a good little Burgon and be quiet?" Ryn inquired. When his father would have chastised him for daring to be disrespectful, Ryn held up his hand. "No amount of worrying about it, talking about it, discussing it or fearing it is going to change the outcome, Papa. There will be pain during the Transition and you will be there to see it, although there is an alternative."

"What?" the Burgon asked, jumping on the phrase as though it were a lifeline.

"You could let one of the other Reapers—it could be me if you choose—help her through the Transition."

"Hell no!" the emperor exploded. He struck his chest brutally with his fist. "It will be me who sees my woman through it!"

"Then stop agonizing over it and let it be!" Ryn snapped right back at him. "Let it rest! I'm tired of hearing your angst."

The Burgon narrowed his eyes as he stared at his son for an unsettlingly long time. "You know," he finally said, "you are not too old for me to turn your ass over my knee."

Ryn chuckled. "Nor are you too powerful that I can't attempt to set you down hard on *your* ass if you think to."

"The telling word there is 'attempt', Rynlyn," Ryden said with a sniff. "I don't suggest you try."

His son agreed but would have had hot pinchers applied to his testicles before admitting it.

* * * * *

The moment her husband's runabout streaked over the Wings of the Raven of Mount Korak—the two-mountain range that had formed in the shape of a giant flying bird—Miri took off running. She and her daughter-in-law Tessa had spent the morning picking berries for a homecoming pie for their men, but now the basket of berries she had chosen so carefully was tossed aside as she picked up the hem of her sarong to facilitate her speed.

"Great," she heard Tessa say, and knew the woman would be picking up the spilled berries. With her psychic abilities, she would know everything was all right with the men, but Miri had no such enhancement. She wanted firsthand knowledge that her husband was all in one piece.

Tarik waved to her as she streaked toward the landing zone—a broad meadow cleared long ago of trees and kept in pristine shape for the ships of the New Alliance. He was always on hand to welcome each arriving ship with Bahiya at his side.

Overhead, a cordon of orbiting starcruisers and heavily armed battleships patrolled the airspace over Theristes. Though Tarik, as Prime Reaper, had declared it unnecessary, the Burgon took no chances of an enemy invading the idyllic tropical world and especially not with his womenfolk in residence there.

Coming to a skidding stop as the runabout made a slow, lazy arc across the sky above her in preparation for landing, Miri put a hand to her hair. She looked over at Bahiya.

"How do I look?" she asked.

Bahiya smiled warmly, her white hair shining like a halo in the bright sun. "As beautiful as you always do, Miri." She stood with her arm around her husband's waist, both of them as naked as the day they'd been born. "Doesn't she, husband?"

"Truely," Tarik agreed.

The Fiach's powerful engines throttled back and the black runabout with its brilliant red Reaper insignia settled gracefully to earth. Almost before the hum of the engines died away, the hatch was thrown up and the Burgon jumped—not walked down the steps but jumped—from the ship to the ground and came running toward his wife.

"Such an impetuous man for a Burgon," Tarik observed. "One would wonder what possessed him to do such a dangerous thing. He could have broken a limb."

Bahiya dug her elbow into her husband's side, knowing he was joking. "Be quiet, Tarik," she whispered, though she was grinning as broadly as her husband.

Miri was trembling—unable to take a step toward her rushing husband. Her gaze was roaming closely over his tall frame to satisfy her heart that he was well and hearty as he should be. The moment he reached her to grab her up and swing her around and around, she threw her arms around his neck and plastered her mouth to his.

"Rynlyn looks well too," Tarik said. "I believe we should go greet him as he walks sedately as befits a future Burgon across yon grass."

"Behave!" Bahiya hissed at him, her eyes twinkling, but she—like her husband—did not turn their attention to the husband and wife whose passion was so palpable it could be felt.

Overcome with his relief that his lady was safe and sound, Ryden dipped his knees, thrust his arm under her legs and hefted her high against his chest without breaking the kiss that had all but sealed their lips together. The only thought in his mind was to get her to their hut as quickly as his legs could carry him.

"Well, we know where they're going to be for the next hour or so," Rynlyn joked as Tarik and Bahiya reached him. He thrust out his hand to clasp hands warrior-style with the Prime Reaper. "Anything going on we should know about?"

"Captain MacKirnan seems to have vanished while you were on your way back to us," Tarik said.

Rynlyn's mouth dropped open. "By the gods, that's not good."

Tarik shook his head. "There is no need for you to worry, Rynlyn. All is as it should be with that one."

"You're sure?" He knew the Reapers of Theristes were privy to megaversal knowledge they did not always share with their allies. Sometimes it was hard to accept their enigmatic pronouncements, but to question them would be futile.

"We are sure," Bahiya said. "Although you may need to search for him after a bit, we believe all is as it was destined to be."

"Let's not mention this to *him*," Rynlyn said, nudging his chin toward his departing father. "Not right away, at least."

"Such were our thoughts as well," Tarik declared.

* * * * *

The daily rain was soft against the thatched hut as dawn's light chased away the night's shadows. Theristes' rainy season was winding down, the storms passing to another quadrant of the Green Sector. Cool air wafted over the sweaty couple as they lay entwined in one another's arms. The lovemaking had been especially intense and both were as limp as the Burgon's fictional overcooked noodle.

"I like him," Ryden told his lady as he slowly ran his fingertips up and down her arm. "He's a lot like Rory Quinn, but then we suspected that, didn't we?"

Miri knew he was referring to Ranulf MacKirnan, the man whose codename was WindChaser. "They will most likely bond," she observed.

"I think he has already bonded with the Faolchú, Rune Degendesch," the Burgon said. He chuckled. "Can you imagine the mischief the three of them could get into together?"

Having read the files on each of the three men, Miri had to agree that would well be an interesting affiliation. She spiked her fingers through the thick chest hair that covered her husband's broad chest.

"I stopped on Akhkharu to pick up your gown," he said.

Miri craned her head to look up at him. "What gown?"

"The gown in which you will be crowned Empress of Aduaidh Prime."

She sat up, the better to see him. "I thought I was to wear the gown the Empress Anastasia wore to her crowning," she said. "The gown worn by each successive generation of empress."

"Anastasia was buried in that gown," he said, sadness flitting through his amber eyes at saying the name of his first wife. "It would only have been a replica of the gown you would have worn."

"But I thought the imperial gown was kept in a glass case at the palace."

"A replica of it, aye," he said. "Empresses are buried in the gown they wore to their coronation."

She frowned. "But won't our people be offended if I don't wear the gown they expect me to?" she questioned.

Ryden put out a hand to touch her cheek gently. "Our people," he repeated. "It makes my heart swell with pride to hear you call them such."

"Ryden, I don't want to offend them!" she protested.

"You won't," he insisted. "I asked my Council's permission to have a new gown commissioned and I gave them my reasoning." He caressed her cheek. "You will be the first empress of the New Alliance. Ours will be a new beginning. We will have our marriage blessed with a second Joining for the people to see then you will be installed

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as their empress." He sighed. "Then Rynlyn will be installed as my successor. It's going to be a gods-be-damned long night and it will be late into the morning—even noontime—before we will be able to slip away to..." He looked away. "To our apartments."

She knew what had interrupted his words. She knew he was terrified of making her a Lady-Reaper. Her pain was ever in the forefront of his mind and she sensed it like a lurking cobra lying in wait to strike at him when he least expected it.

"What does it look like?" she asked to distract him.

Ryden's eyebrows drew together. "What?"

"The gown, silly!" she said. "What does it look like?"

His forehead relaxed. "It's dark red silk with solid gold threads running through it, fashioning the Royal Seal of Aduaidh Prime."

Her gaze went to the tattoo on his shoulder.

"Along the ten-foot train is a three-inch band of gold wire tatted into lace."

"It sounds beautiful," she said.

"Not as beautiful as the woman who will wear it," he said. He snaked his hand around her neck to draw her lips down to his. His tongue slid seductively across her lower lip before easing into her mouth.

"Umm," she said then drew back. She gave him a look that made his cock swell. "You know what I want?"

"You can have anything your heart desires," he said, and meant it.

She pulled his hand from her neck to her breast to mold his hot palm over the softness. Her eyes fused with his.

"I want to pretend."

Ryden's brows shot up. "Pretend what?"

She licked her lips then pressed his hand harder against her bosom.

"I want you to conquer me, Ryden Bakari," she said in a husky voice that made his entire body clench. "I want you to be the marauder who rides down from the mountain with your hoard of ravaging warriors on your cold black steed to attack my village."

His brows came down with confusion. "You want what?" he questioned.

"I want you to see me hiding near my tent and I want you to be so overcome with lust that you can think of nothing but ravishing me."

"I do that already," he reminded her.

"I want you to rein in your mount, throw a leg over its head, slide to the ground and come running after me with pure devilment in your golden eyes."

He arched a single brow. "Pure devilment, eh?"

"I'll turn and flee—shrieking to the heavens that I have a ravisher hot on my heels—and I'll run into the jungle." She licked her lips again. "And you will come after me in tireless pursuit until you have run me to ground."

His cock was so hard he had to shift position on the mat. "Then what?"

"You will grab me around the waist, spin me around, bend me backward and kiss me until my knees buckle. Then you will toss me over your shoulder and carry me to your lair where..."

"I've got a lair in your jungle?" he questioned.

She swatted at his shoulder. "Pay attention, Burgon!"

His lips twitched. "I'm all ears, wench."

She frowned. "Where was I?"

"I was carrying you to this lair I seem to have on your world," he reminded her.

"Oh aye." She licked her lips a third time and it was all he could do not to pounce on her. "Then you throw me to a soft bed of furs in your lair and have your wicked way with me, thrusting my flailing legs wide apart with your knees, falling on me and rutting like a man crazed."

"Crazed, no doubt, with lust," he added.

"Of course, crazed with lust!" Her eyes sparkled. "Can we pretend that?"

He squeezed her breast gently. "No, wench, not right now."

Miri blinked. "What?" she all but shrieked at him, her eyes wide with disbelief.

He pulled his hand from her grasp and stood. "Right now, I've got to go see Tarik and have a conference with him."

"Now?" she demanded, hands on her bare hips. "You've got to go see Tarik now?"

"Right this minute," he said, wishing the hard erection poking straight out in front of him would subside as he reached for his pants.

"Ryden!" she protested in a little girl voice.

He had difficulty stuffing his aching shaft into his pants but he managed. He turned to chuck her under the chin. "When I come back, we'll play. How's that?"

Tossing her head, she sent him a murderous glare then ignored him as he walked to the door. She was hurt that he was taking her suggestion as though it were of no importance. To her, it was very important. It had taken her a while to work up her courage to suggest the playacting to him. To have him treat it so lightly wounded her and made her feel like a fool.

Once outside his hut, Ryden had to wipe the sweat off his forehead. Her words had created such a vivid image in his mind it was all he could do to put one foot ahead of the other. His manhood was screaming for him to turn, barge into the hut and ravage his woman until the sun went down. He had to brutally stamp down the notion.

Ignoring the rain that soon had his hair plastered to his forehead and his pants a miserable clinging mess sticking to his legs, he trudged to Tarik's hut and stood there a moment before calling softly to the Prime Reaper.

* * * * *

Miri muttered under her breath as she paced the confines of her hut. Her husband had been gone for several hours and her body had finally calmed from the high state of arousal it had suffered for quite some time after the uncaring man left. She'd invented

some very creative names to call the Burgon once he deigned to show his face in their hut again. She...

It was the strange sound that brought her up short. It sounded like thunder but the rain had stopped long ago. She cocked her head to one side to listen and it was then she heard the screams. Her eyes flared and she ran to the door.

They were riding down from the mountain—a dozen warriors on horseback. Brandishing swords, they were shrieking like banshees and all around the settlement people were fleeing, rushing toward the beach.

She recognized him in the lead, of course, as she stood there just outside her door. Her heart swelled with so much love, so much pride in her man her lip trembled. He was looking right at her as he raced his big black destrier into the clearing.

"The hoard!" she heard Bahiya shout. "Run, Miri, run! They are the very demons of this world and he..." she pointed to the leader, "he is evil incarnate!"

Miri giggled, but the look in her lover's eyes was so fierce, so savage and so primitive it sent a chill down her back. She drew in a breath as he reined in his mount and tossed a leg over its head.

"Well, look what I've found," he said in a voice that made her knees weak. Tossing aside his sword, he started toward her.

She looked toward the jungle. No one was fleeing there. Had it been a true assault on the people of Tarik's village, he would not have led them to the beach where there was no concealment, no place to hide. He would have taken them into the jungle where there were hundreds of hiding places.

Her husband was only a few yards from her when she took off running toward the lush green foliage. She heard him crashing behind her—batting aside the banana leaves and fronds from the low-growing palms. His heavy boot heels crunched on the jungle floor and frightened away the little creatures that scurried to get out of his way.

"You can't escape me, wench!" he called out to her.

Winding her way through the jungle, she had come to know like the back of her hand, she skirted trees, bushes and rocks—heading ever deeper into the lush, darkly shadowed tropical paradise. Rain still coated the leaves and her sarong was soon clinging wetly to her thighs. She stopped to catch her breath and listened closely, trying to pick out where he was behind her. She heard nothing.

Eyes searching the foliage around her, she saw no movement. Everything was still, quiet. The jungle creatures seemed to be holding their collective breaths for there was not even the sound of a bird fluttering in the canopy overhead.

Tentatively she moved around a mango tree, bending down to avoid one of its lower branches.

He came out of nowhere—his arm looping around her waist like a python dropping down from the tree. She yelped. He spun her around and bent her over his arm, snagging his hand in the bodice of her sarong.

"Gotcha!" he said, an evil leer aimed into her startled face.

He ripped the sarong away from her breasts and lowered his head to capture one rosy nipple.

"No!" she shrieked, fists beating against his back as he sucked hard on her swollen bud. She felt rather than heard him chuckle, and then she was up and over his shoulder, one heavy warrior's hand swatting her hard on her upturned ass. "Ouch!" She clawed at his back, his rump in an effort to make him drop her.

"Fight me all you want, wench. It won't change a thing. I'm going to have you and have you hard!"

Beating her fists on his back, trying to wriggle off his shoulder, she cursed him, but he ignored her. Deeper into the jungle they went until she no longer recognized the area. It was to a cave he was taking her.

Out of the corner of her eye, she thought she saw movement. A pair of amused eyes was peering at her from the dense foliage.

She stopped struggling, rising up from his shoulder as much as she could. "Ryden, is that Jules Guerrier? Is that the Reaper who..."

He swatted her again, hard enough to make her yelp. "I am evil incarnate, wench. You'll think of me and no other!"

Miri heard laughter from the foliage and knew it had to be the scarred warrior who haunted the jungles of Theristes. She knew his tale, of course, and that he was a sweet and gentle man, but had never seen him. That he knew what was about to happen made her cheeks burn.

Into the cave he took her. Deep into the darkness. With his Reaper vision he could see perfectly, but all she saw around her was pitch black and the occasional fiery star that exploded in her head from being carried upside down.

"I'm getting sick to my stomach, Ry," she told him.

He stopped immediately, lowered her feet to the ebon floor then picked her up in his arms again, mumbling something to the effect that he "wondered how long it would be before you complained".

The sound of bubbling water then a pale green glow began to push away the unrelieved black. A cool, fresh wind wafted around them then the smell of salt water tickled her nostrils.

"Grotto," her captor said, shifting her weight in his arms.

"Getting a bit heavy for you, am I, evil incarnate?" she teased, caressing his neck.

"You gotta stop eating all that spiced pork," he mumbled.

The light grew steadily brighter until a soft green glow suffused the rocks around them. Shadows flickered across the rockface, and then upon turning a sharp corner, there was the milky green water of a lush, underground lake.

"Ooh!" she said.

Of course he had thought of everything. There on the pristine white sand was a carpet of furs. He took her to them then dropped to one knee, placing her naked body in the center of the softness.

She stared up into a face that was handsome beyond belief but was hard as stone at that moment. Idly, she wondered what it cost him to refrain from smiling, for the amusement was lurking in his golden eyes. She closed her eyes and flung an arm over them.

"Woe is me. I am about to be ravaged!" she said in an attempt to make him laugh. He didn't.

She pried one eye open. He was standing above her with his hands to his shirtfront. With one savage snap of his wrists, he tore the garment from his chest. Lifting one leg, he jerked off a boot, the other one, and then put his hands to the buckle of his belt.

Miri could feel her heart racing. This was what she had wanted. This was the stuff of all the years of fevered dreams she had conjured with this man at their center. This was the culmination of all the lonely nights she had lain unable to sleep with her body on fire with want of his.

"I am going to wipe out the thought of any other man," he said between clenched teeth as he shoved the pants down his long legs.

Breath caught in her throat for his cock was larger than she could ever remember seeing it—so engorged it looked monstrous there in the flickering light from the vent that allowed in light from the grotto's roof. Her mouth went dry as he fell toward her. She shrieked, anticipating the contact of his body to hers. She heard him grunt then felt his knee pushing her legs wide.

"Fight me if you want, wench," he said. "Claw me, bite me, do your gods-bedamned worst, but I am going to have you in ways you could never have dreamed in your most fevered imaginings!"

She put her hands up to push at his shoulders for a tiny trill of fear had wiggled through her at his words, but he was like an avalanche hurtling toward her. His cock pressed against her core then thrust deep and true.

"Ryden!" she cried out, clutching at his upper arms.

It wasn't pain that made her throat constrict. It was an immediate climax that shook her to her core. Her cunt rippled around him as he drove unmercifully into her slick sheath. His hips like pistons were pounding away at hers, her legs forced so wide she felt a cramp high in one thigh.

"You are mine!" he growled. He was braced on his palms, his eyes locked on hers, his lips drawn back in a grimace of — aye, pure devilment — as he rammed into her.

Drawing her legs up to relieve the ungodly cramp, she lashed them around his rocking hips then drew his mouth to hers.

"No, baby. You are *mine*!" she whispered against his lips before she thrust her tongue between them.

Chapter Six

"Pomp and circumstance," he complained then yawned. He looked out over the gathering and frowned. "I hate pomp and circumstance."

Miri was sitting demurely at his side and wanted to complain about the weight of the heavy coronet that sat upon her upswept hair, but her husband was doing enough complaining for the two of them.

He had fidgeted through the second Joining that had seen them united before the entire populace of Aduaidh Prime. Screens forty feet high had been erected all across the inhabited portions of the planet so those who wished to see their new empress could.

He had fidgeted even worse during the brief but sedate ceremony that installed her as his empress. He had all but growled at the bishop who had placed the coronet upon her head for the man had taken that moment to deliver an obviously oft-rehearsed speech of welcome to his new empress.

Shifting from foot to foot as Rynlyn was endowed with the title of Kerstin, Heir to the Bronchi of the Idiom Galaxy, Miri had to thread her fingers through Ryden's to keep him still.

Then had come the ceremonial walk to the dining hall. She had stumbled along in his wake as he practically dragged down the white ermine carpet. What should have been a slow, dignified stroll as the visiting representatives from other planets and galaxies, his Council, ministers, government officials and honored guests greeted them with bows and curtsies had become a race with Ryden pulling her behind him and the other members of the coronation party rushing to catch up. It didn't help that she could hear Rynlyn and Tessa giggling behind her.

And the dinner!

By the gods nothing had been right with the fabulous spread put before him. The meat was too cold; it was too hot. It was too salty; it was too bland. The vegetables were too crisp; they were soggy. The wine was too sweet, too bold, too vinegary, too dry. The dessert was...

"Stop it this minute!" she'd finally said, leaning over to hiss in his ear. "Our people have gone to a lot of trouble and expense to celebrate this day. Don't you dare ruin it for them *or* me!"

That he might be causing her distress seemed not to have entered his mind. He flinched, turned to look down at her and—apparently from discovering the military look she aimed his way—was surprised she was angry.

"I'm bored," he defended.

"Suck it up," she snapped, tossing her head and looking away.

She heard him repeat the fact he was bored but in a low, grumbling voice meant only for her ears. She sniffed to let him know she heard but had no intention of allowing him off the hook.

His thigh jumped. His foot tapped. His fingers drummed on the pristine white tablecloth. He slumped in his chair. He sat up and started playing with his fork, banging it against his water glass until she reached over to take it away from him.

He pouted then—his lower lip thrust out like a petulant child—as one after another of those gathered rose to toast him and his bride and the Kerstin.

"Will they never shut up?" he mumbled. "All this shit has given me a wicked headache."

She knew what was wrong. It wasn't the ceremonies or the speeches. It wasn't the food or the wine. It wasn't the toasts that—to her—seemed to have no end. It was her. He was worried about her.

Nay, she thought as she cast him a sidelong glance, he was terrified. His normally ruddy complexion was pale and he constantly reached up to rub at the scar on his cheek. His thigh wasn't jumping so much as his legs trembling.

Taking a deep breath, she decided to put him out of his misery. She took up her knife to tap it loudly against her own water glass. Ignoring her husband's jerk of surprise, she rose—everyone along with her. He was looking up at her with shock, too stunned to rise to his feet.

"We are deeply honored that you have graced our celebrations with your presence. It means a lot to the three of us that you and those you represent have given a hardy stamp of approval to the future into which your Burgon and Kerstin have sworn to lead us. We look forward to seeing you here at the palace on many occasions in the years to come. For now though, I would ask your forbearance. It has been a long day for the Burgon and me and we are not getting any younger."

Laughter greeted her words.

She reached for her glass. "I have one last toast to make and then the Burgon and I must leave you." She lifted the glass of pale orange Chrystallusian wine. She turned to her husband. "To the Burgon."

"To the Burgon!" those gathered echoed.

He was looking up at her with an expression that reached out to squeeze her heart. He picked up his own glass to touch it to hers.

One by one, the assembled dignitaries lowered their wineglasses then stepped back from their chairs, going to the center of the great dining hall to form two lines to the huge double doors.

"Milord?" Miri asked as she set her own glass aside and held her hand out to husband. "It is time for us to retire."

She saw panic flit through his eyes and didn't give him a chance to deny her. She reached down for his hand, threading her fingers through his. She tugged and he had no choice but to rise. With his hand firmly in hers, she stepped back to allow him to

move around his chair. Together, they skirted the long ornate table and started down the silent rows of guests who bowed and curtsied.

Rynlyn winked at her and Tessa smiled knowingly as they passed the young couple. She met the eyes of Shanee Iphito Harmattan, Davan Shanahan Ghrian and Ardor Kahn Leveche—women who had all undergone what she would experience once she and Ryden were alone. She saw her husband looking with dread into the eyes of Ailyn Harmattan, Cair Ghrian and Gabriel Leveche, and each man—each understanding Reaper—put out a comforting, reassuring hand to clasp his shoulder to give him strength.

Had it been possible, she thought she might have heard her husband's knees knocking together as they left the dining hall and started up the long, winding staircase that led to their quarters. He was shaking so violently she had to put her free hand to his arm to steady him.

Servants lined the staircase and the landing, and just outside the imperial residence, a tall man dressed in black bowed deeply to them before he stepped up to open the door to their quarters.

"I am at your command, Burgon," he said softly.

Her husband came to a dead standstill at the entrance to the quarters—seemingly unable to take one step more. He was dragging breath into his lungs so loudly she feared he'd pass out.

"Pick me up," she said, and when he turned a confused and uncomprehending face to her, she nudged her chin toward the opened door. "Pick me up and carry me across the threshold."

Given something to do, he immediately obeyed, sweeping her up in his arms.

"Be careful of the train," she whispered, for she had a sudden image of him trampling on the, as she thought of it, ten-foot-long silk carpet sweeper.

He nodded as though unable to form a sentence. Taking a deep breath, he carried her over the threshold and into the room, swallowing as loudly as he was breathing.

Two lady's maids were waiting to help her undress and he strode over to them, lowered Miri's feet to the floor then hurried out of the room, disappearing behind a door she knew led to his private dressing area.

"Nervous as a long-tailed cat in a room full of warriors wearing hobnail boots," one of the maids giggled. She had been assigned to Miri earlier that morn and the two had hit it off immediately. The younger maid was her daughter and laughed along with her mother.

While the exquisite gown her husband had designed for her was being removed and the soft white sarong she had asked to be laid out was being drawn over her head, she could hear him pacing from one end of the room beyond to the other. Now and again she heard a crash and winced, wondering what he'd broken now.

"There'll be cleaning up to do in there, I'm thinking," the older maid mumbled.

"There is an old Terran adage about a bull in a china shop," Miri told the woman whose name was Aeena. "I believe that describes the Burgon at this moment."

When she was dressed and the maids were gone, she walked barefoot to his dressing room door and tapped lightly.

"Ryden, I am ready."

She heard a low, miserable groan from behind the door and pressed her cheek and the palm of her hand to the wood.

"My love, it will be all right."

After what seemed hours but in actuality was only a few minutes, she heard the click of the handle and moved back from the door. It opened slowly to reveal her husband clad in a soft white shirt opened halfway down his broad chest and a loose pair of white pants. He was barefoot. She saw him glance toward the bedroom door.

"In there?" she asked.

He nodded, still apparently unable to form words.

She took his hand and led him like a reluctant child on his way to his first day of classes after an enjoyable summer spent in carefree abandonment to the door. She opened it and pulled him into the sumptuous room and to the elegant bed they had yet to share. Her gaze fell on the covered glass jar on the night table and the black-handled dagger that lay beside it then skipped away.

"Ryden?" she said, turning to him. Her heart did a hard little thump for he was paler still now, his gaze going back and forth between her and the glass jar. She tugged on his hand to get his full attention. When he looked at her, she smiled. "What should I do?"

It took him a moment to get what was obviously a dry tongue around the words. "Run like hell," he said in a trembling voice.

She lifted her chin. "Not a chance," she stated. She used her free hand to caress the one she held. "Should I undress and lie down?"

Concentrated alarm flickered through his eyes. "Miri, no. I can't do this!" he said. "I can't..."

"Should I undress and lie down?" she repeated firmly.

He shook his head wildly then snapped it around as he looked at the door. Afraid he was about to bolt, she tugged brutally on his hand.

"Ryden, get a grip!" she snapped. "This is going to be done. If you cannot do it, then pray find someone who will! Call Prince Cair or Prince Gabriel or..."

"The hell I will!" he growled. "This is my job to do. My right!"

"Then do it!" she ordered.

His eyes went to the glass jar then jerked away.

"Ryden?" she said, a note of warning drawing out the word. "Is the man outside the healer who is to do the incision?"

At the word incision, he yanked his hand from hers, his knees buckled and he went to the floor, his hands to his face. "Is he, Ryden?"

"Aye," came the miserable reply.

Though she pitied him for the overwhelming emotions that were flooding him, she was just as scared as he was and wanted to get it over with. She spun around, went through the door, through the sitting area and to the entrance to their quarters. She snatched the door open, reached out to snag the healer's arm and pulled him into the room.

"He is being a ninny," she said, dragging the poor man behind her as she led him to the master bedroom.

Ryden Bakari, the most influential, powerful and feared man in the megaverse, was on his knees gasping for breath. Rocking back and forth with his hands cupped over his face, he was gasping for breath.

"He's hyperventilating," the healer said, and rushed to his Burgon, helping the emperor to his feet and to the bed. He pushed Ryden down then instructed him to lean forward. "Put your head between your legs, Burgon. Down, put your head down, excellency!"

Obeying, he wasn't even aware of Miri scrambling onto the bed behind him. She put her finger to her lips then pulled the sarong down to bare her breasts.

The healer turned away from the nakedness of his empress. His hand was on the Burgon's back, stroking him as he instructed the great man to take deep breaths.

Miri stretched out, looked pointedly at the jar, arched a brow at the healer. He nodded, half turned from the emperor, continuing to speak softly to him, and reached for the dagger.

It was an uncomfortable situation and she was sure the healer was as nervous as she was. The incision he made over her right kidney was quick and precise and hurt like hell, done awkwardly but done nevertheless. She tensed as he fumbled to open the glass jar with one hand and fish inside for the hellion her husband had donated earlier that day. When he winced, she knew the vicious little barbed beastess had pricked him

with one of her many barbs. She closed her eyes as he began to draw it out of the jar—unable to see the fledgling that would be dropped onto her back.

But she felt the plop of its wet body. She shuddered as it wriggled over her flesh and then all hell broke loose as the thing slithered down through the cut on her back and into her body. She never heard the healer running as fast as he could from the room. She never heard her husband's gasp of anguish as she began to Transition.

What she did hear with the last of her human reasoning before the fiery agony overtook her were his words as he gathered her into his arms.

"I've got you, lhiannan. I've got you."

Epilogue

Tarik nudged his lady-wife as the two wolves went careening past them, playing tag with the waves that were washing over the white sand beach of Theristes. The male was a big black beast while the female was dainty and of a soft light brown color.

"I do believe she can outrun him," Bahiya observed.

"No. He lets her win," Tarik replied.

The male nipped at the female's hindquarters and she turned to snap at him before he rose up on his hind legs to shove her playfully aside. Digging her rear paws into the sand, she shot ahead of him and into the jungle.

They observed the frolicking wolves for a moment then lay down on their mats again.

"I think he was as shocked as we were when she took her winged form," Tarik said. He was lying with his hands cupped behind his head, legs crossed at the ankle as he watched a gull sailing on the thermals.

"I've no doubt he was," his wife agreed. "It is a good thing he brought her here before he taught her to shift into her flying shape at the palace."

Tarik chuckled. "Can you imagine the stir that would have caused had she done so on Aduaidh Prime?"

As though the thought had taken shape, a brilliant scarlet macaw flew past overhead with a huge black eagle beating the air behind her. The plumage of the macaw was primarily scarlet, but the rump and tail-covert feathers were light blue, the greater upperwing coverts yellow, the upper sides of the flight feathers of the wings dark blue as were the ends of the tail feathers, and the undersides of her wings and tail flight feathers were dark red with metallic gold iridescence.

"Stunning," Tarik pronounced. "Absolutely stunning."

"Have you ever known a Lady-Reaper to be anything other than a bird of prey?" his wife asked.

Tarik shook his head, marveling as the birds chased one another through the brilliant blue sky. "No, but Miri is unlike the other Lady-Reapers," he replied. "She is not a warrioress."

"Oh, do not let her meek and mild nature fool you, husband," she chided. "There is steel in her backbone."

"There would have to be in order to deal with the Burgon," Tarik replied.

Wings spread so the dark blue of her feathers touched the black of his, the birds rode the thermals alongside the seagull.

"Is that Jules up there with them?" Tarik inquired.

Bahiya shielded her eyes from the glare of the sun. "I can't tell but it could be. He spends a lot of time in bird form."

The love birds swept over the tall palms and disappeared into the canopy of the tropical rain forest. In the distance, a rumble of thunder turned the Prime Reaper's head to the gathering storm.

"It is hard to believe nearly a year has come and gone already," he commented.

"Time is fleeting, is it not, my love?"

"For some but not for us," his lady answered. She eased her foot over to tap her husband's ankle. When he looked her way, he saw the two love birds walking hand in hand toward them.

"He seems more comfortable with going sky-clad now," Tarik said.

"He is more comfortable with everything now that his lady's Transition is past," Bahiya replied.

Charlotte Boyett-Compo

The Burgon and the empress waved to the Prime Reaper and his lady. It was a polite inquiry to see if their company was wanted. When Tarik waved his arm to call them over, Ryden and Miri joined them.

"Was that Jules?" Tarik asked.

"It was," Ryden answered. "He often flies with us."

"He is coming out of his shell a little at a time," Bahiya said. "Thanks to Shanee and the two of you."

"In bird form he doesn't have to speak and can communicate easily with us," Miri said. "Did you know he has the ability to assume many bird shapes?"

"No," Tarik said, eyebrows shooting up. "I did not know that, but now that I think on it, I have seen many a different bird sitting in the trees watching us. I suppose that was most likely Jules."

"I knew of it," Bahiya said, and when her husband gave her a surprised look, she shrugged a dainty shoulder. "You do not know everything, husband."

"Apparently not," Tarik said with a grin.

Thunder rolled again – closer this time. The wind picked up.

"The storm is coming," Ryden said softly.

Tarik looked to his guest. "We will weather it," he replied.

The Burgon slipped his arm around his lady and she laid her head on his shoulder. He placed a kiss on her soft brown hair. "Aye," he agreed. "With such women at our sides, how could we not?"

About the Author

Charlee is the author of over seventy books. Married 42 years to her high school sweetheart, Tom, she is the mother of two grown sons, Pete and Mike, and the proud grandmother of Preston Alexander and Victoria Ashley. She is the willing house slave to five demanding felines who are holding her hostage in her home and only allowing her to leave in order to purchase food for them. A native of Sarasota, Florida, she grew up in Colquitt and Albany, Georgia and now lives in the Midwest.

Charlee welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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