

Book 6 of the Series

SIREN WARRIOR:

RECKLESS
BETRAYAL

MICHELLE MARQUIS
& LINDSEY BAYER

**SIREN WARRIOR
CHRONICLES
BOOK 6:
RECKLESS BETRAYAL**

by

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***Siren Warrior Series
Incubus Nights
Midnight Becomes You
The Love Machine***

Dedication

To the fans.

Prologue

It was the perfect morning for a murder.

Up above them the sky was a dark melancholy gray with an undeniable threat of rain. The only movement in the forest was a light rotating wind that came and went like waves on the shore. The wind rattled the branches above, sending brown leaves dancing to the ground.

Lieutenant General Caraculla felt his hyperia shift restlessly beneath him and he tugged on the reins to steady it. He looked up at the two other warriors he'd entrusted to help him with this grisly task: Grand Duke Molitov von Goth and Duke Bassik.

They heard a rider coming up the road. Baroness Nessa La Rosh rode up, her eyes a cool shade of violet clouded in fear. "He's coming."

Caraculla nodded and gestured for her to go toward the tree line. She rode into the thick woods and quieted her mount. Only a few moments after, her father Baron La Rosh's hyperia could be heard galloping up the trail. He emerged into the clearing wearing a white linen shirt with a leather vest over it and black leather riding pants. His wavy black hair was pulled into a tight ponytail and his face wore the cruel expression of a man accustomed to brutality. His skin was a darker green than most AEssyrians, probably the result of spending

too much time basking in the twin suns. Caraculla had met the baron before at official functions and festivals but never gave him much thought. But today he nursed a potent and unforgiving hatred for the man, a loathing that could only be satisfied by the baron's death.

The baron had almost made it to the far end of the clearing when Caraculla gave the signal to his co-conspirators to strike. Grand Duke Molitov blocked the trail leading out of the clearing and Caraculla and Bassik moved up behind the startled baron.

"What is this?" the baron asked as he reined his hyperia around, looking for a way out. No one answered him. Instead Caraculla grabbed the baron's sword arm and pulled him off his mount, throwing him to the ground. The unfortunate man scrambled to get to his feet but Bassik dismounted and kicked him onto his back. Reaching down to the baron's scabbard, Bassik pulled the weapon free and tossed it into the thicket.

"What is the meaning of this?" the baron demanded, his voice rising in panic.

Caraculla tossed a thick rope over a nearby branch. It had a hangman's noose on the end. Caraculla secured the rope to the tree letting the noose dangle ominously from the branch. "Do you really need to ask?"

Bassik grabbed the baron by the back of his shirt and dragged him over to the noose. The baron fought, flailing his arms wildly in a desperate attempt to fight off his assailants. Caraculla pulled on the noose, widening its loop.

"I swear to you, gentlemen, I have no idea what offense I have committed!" the baron protested, digging his heels into the soft earth. "By the Gods, have mercy!"

Caraculla ignored the man's pleas. There was no room for mercy in this grim deed. As Bassik held the struggling man still, Molitov secured his hands behind his back. The baron looked into the grand duke's face with eyes dark with terror. "Why?" he pleaded.

Nessa emerged from her hiding place. She looked like a ghost, a phantom from a time long past. She was the picture of deep sorrow as the delicate bones of her face pulled the light green skin tight around her cheeks and jaw. Caraculla had never seen a woman look so terrifyingly beautiful.

"I told them," she said in a voice as soft as a whisper.

"*What?*" the baron said, now struggling with renewed horror.

"How could you spread such lies about your own father?"

"What lies would those be, my lord?" Caraculla asked as he placed the noose over the baron's head and tightened the knot until it was snug around his neck.

"Whatever she said, it's not true!" the nobleman wailed.

Molitov walked up to the baron, tilting his head in curiosity. "You've never once asked what this supposed lie is. How would you know what your daughter is referring to if there was no truth to it?"

The baron squirmed to free his hands from behind his back. "All that ungrateful bitch does is lie!"

"Enough of this," Bassik said. "Let's get on with it."

“No!” the baron screamed. “I’ll pay you whatever you want! Don’t do this, I beg of you!”

Caraculla let the cold hatred in his heart fill him. He glanced at Nessa. “Ready?”

“I’ve been ready for this for a long time,” she said. Then she walked up to her father and stared at him. “You’ll never again stand in the way of my happiness.” She nodded to Caraculla.

Before the baron could utter another word, Caraculla spooked the hyperia out from under him. But the creature moved too slowly to effect a clean break and the baron choked and thrashed at the end of the rope. Molitov glanced off, bored, but Bassik gave Caraculla a hard look. “For the Gods’ sake, General, finish him.”

Caraculla walked up to the baron, avoiding the dying man’s kicking legs. Grabbing him around the waist, he let his weight drop toward the ground hard. A loud snap came from the baron and his body went limp.

Grand Duke Molitov mounted up, dusting off his pristine black uniform. He gave Caraculla a menacing grin. “We’d better get going or you and the baroness will be missed.”

Nessa stared at the dangling corpse of her father. “Are you sure he’s dead?”

Caraculla mounted up and rode over to the baron’s body. Pulling out a double-bladed dagger, he drove it deep into the dead man’s right eye. “If there was any doubt, it’s gone now.” He brought Nessa her mount. “Let’s go before anyone starts wondering where we are.”

A predatory bird cawed somewhere off in the distance just as the executioners rode off. Everyone would be attending the wedding in a few days. Everyone except, of course, the father of the bride.

Chapter 1

The medical clinic waiting room was more crowded than Gypsy Theron had ever seen it. Everywhere she looked were soldiers, merchants and academy cadets like herself. Some chatted quietly among themselves about women and politics; others just lounged patiently reading and snacking on whatever meager offerings they carried with them. The oddest thing of all was that most didn't even look like they needed any real medical attention.

There were probably two good reasons for the sudden rise in patients; one was the return of the chief medical officer, her mother Harlan, from her recent kidnapping and subsequent leg surgery. The other was the reputation of Doctor Krull. Like Harlan, Krull was an intelligent and dedicated doctor who would often try unusual remedies for common ailments. Happily for his patients, Krull's unorthodox methods usually worked.

Gypsy's mother, a gifted and accomplished doctor in her own right, had become as popular for her compassion as for her successes. Interestingly enough, many AEssyrian warriors liked going to her for their various male problems because they found it easier to talk to her about them than another male. Gypsy guessed that if a penis was the problem, it would be pretty hard to bring it up with another male. If a man did,

he would have to expose his worst weakness to a potential rival. Not fun at all.

As for Gypsy, she had to see Krull because her mother had asked him to treat her for this damned Primal Fever. Gypsy had protested seeing Krull at first, but Harlan had explained the Kirillian doctor was more familiar with the condition and thus better equipped to treat it. Gypsy thought her mother had passed her off to Krull because she'd just gotten tired of listening to Gypsy beg for a hysterectomy. Her mother's refusal was ridiculous. After all, what was the big deal if Gypsy never had kids?

Although it hadn't reared its annoying head in a few months because General Kharon wasn't around, she could still feel the Fever lurking in her heart and mind waiting to disrupt her life and career. Oh, what she wouldn't give to be rid of it! Krull had been working on a serum to treat the worst of the symptoms but so far they'd had limited success. It was almost as though her body would readjust to each serum the moment it was injected.

A tall male medic came out holding a file and scanning the group. "Gypsy? Gypsy Theron?"

Gypsy waved her hand in the air and came over. "Yeah. That's me." She never understood why the medics always had to yell her name a bunch of times while searching the crowd. Being the only female in a black imperial uniform, one would think she'd be easy to spot.

The medic turned his back to her and led her to one of the exam rooms. He gestured for her to go inside, then closed the door after her. Then she heard the unmistakable shuffling

of her file being dropped into the basket outside. While she waited, she stared out the window watching two peasants arguing over an old hyperia. The poor creature looked like it had seen better days and she felt a fleeting pity for the animal. Many of the hyperia used by the lower classes were worked hard until the day they died under a harness.

A knock sounded and Krull came in. Krull was dressed in his lab coat, a light gray shirt, dark pants and boots. His dark blond hair was pulled back into a loose ponytail. He was an older Krillian doctor and one of those men who grew more attractive as they aged. Opening her file, he reviewed a few pages, occasionally scribbling a note in the margin. "How are you today, Gypsy?"

She jumped up on the examining table. "Just great. Could be better, though." She was referring, of course, to the Primal Fever.

Krull smiled without looking up. He knew. He got it. "Don't worry," he assured her. "We'll find a way to make you more comfortable."

"I'd rather be cured."

"Well that is the ultimate goal but it's going to take some time. This is a very rare affliction and not something most women want cured." He tossed the file down on the counter and came over to examine her.

Gypsy smiled. "Well, if you haven't noticed by now, I'm not most women."

His blue eyes sparkled in amusement. "Could you lift up your shirt and unbutton your pants please?"

“Why don’t we skip all of this nonsense and just remove the problem? I’m not that attached to having kids and probably wouldn’t make a good mother anyway.”

“We’ve already had this discussion many times and my position is as firm as your mother’s. You are too young to fully understand the implications of removing your uterus. Neither your mother, nor Doctor Jonson, nor myself will perform the surgery so it is pointless to continue bringing it up.”

As usual, she had managed to irritate Krull without really trying, so Gypsy did as he asked. She leaned back and let him feel her abdomen. His warm hands rested on her bare flesh and the contact made her nipples hard. She did her best to look bored but the truth was he was sexy, even if he wasn’t her type.

Krull pushed around her abdomen for a few minutes, his face unreadable. Gypsy shifted and brushed her knee against his groin. She was surprised and amused to find he was erect. Interesting that under that cool, calm exterior he found her attractive. Well, maybe just fuckable. For his part, Krull didn’t seem to care that she knew his dirty little secret. Instead, he just carried on with his examination, listening to her heart and probing her glands.

Finally, he took a step back and picked up her file. He made a few notes. “I’m afraid we’ll have to adjust your medication again.”

She’d expected as much. They’d been trying to get the right dosage for a few days. “Why am I not surprised?” She didn’t bother to hide the annoyance in her tone.

Krull stared at her. "Nature is a difficult thing to fight, Gypsy. It always wants to win and will continuously adapt to ensure it does."

"I know, my mother already gave me the 'wonderful world of nature' lecture." She sighed. "I just hate being enslaved to this crap. I want to be rid of it so I can get on with my life."

"Come back tomorrow morning. I'll have a new serum waiting at the front desk. Perhaps the urge to mate with Kharon will fade with time. You're still developing and maturing, maybe you'll grow out of this," he offered.

Gypsy jumped off the table, buttoning her pants back up. "I sure as hell hope so, Doc. I can't take much more of this. See you in a few more days."

Chapter 2

Kharon.

His very name awoke a demanding hunger from the depths of her soul. Even her beloved Caraculla couldn't evoke the kind of consuming emotion General Kharon did. He was her guilty secret: a man she wasn't in love with but who owned her desire nonetheless. Kharon was the drug habit she couldn't shake.

Every waking moment of every day since she'd first had sex with the general was a new adventure in misery. And when school started next semester and he came back, she would lose herself all over again. A willing slave to Kharon's burning lust. If only Krull could find exactly the right hormonal cocktail to keep the fever at bay.

There was no other way to say it. Kharon was ruining her life, or at least the life of a warrior she'd been trying to build.

Gypsy sat in her special dressing room at the arena trying to summon the will to go out and practice. Her new armor, a gift from the Grand Duchess Von Goth, rested on the bench next to her, its shining metal mocking her. What was the use? What kind of future did she have? She couldn't go on fighting this unwinnable battle. It was driving her crazy just trying. All her heart wanted to do was go to Kharon, give him her body, and bear him children.

But her head was a different matter. It raged against any thought of domestic bliss. She wanted to be a warrior, damn it! Not some trophy wife of Kharon's. And what about her lover, Caraculla? Something was happening to them and Gypsy knew it wasn't good. Things and events were pulling them apart. Oh, he never said as much, but she knew. She could feel it in her gut. Her relationship with him was being destroyed not only by her primal connection to Kharon, but other things were also at work behind the scenes.

Gypsy knew.

She'd been hearing snippets of gossip here and there that Caraculla was seeing someone else. He'd even admitted as much. But the truth was that she simply didn't have enough emotional strength left to confront him. Especially if he told her they were done.

That would tear her heart out.

But did she have the right to try and hold him? After all, she was locked in this Primal Fever, a natural abomination that she couldn't control and there didn't seem to be any relief in sight. Worst of all, when Kharon returned she would be his again and nothing she did could stop that. As it was, it was a daily battle not to go join him in his kingdom and let the consequences be damned. But then she remembered her father and the enormous faith he'd placed in her. He'd pulled her back from the final destruction of her dream and she would never forget his doing that. Remembering what he'd done for her gave her the will to fight Kharon's pull even harder and keep forging ahead for one more day. She was not going to let this thing beat her. She had come too far and sa-

crificed too much to let these chemically induced emotions win out.

Gypsy decided to skip practice today and go home. She had put on her armor, packed up her stuff, and opened the door to leave when she spotted her father sitting in the bleachers. Gavin reclined with his arms across the neighboring seats watching two young warriors fight. He didn't look impressed. Spotting her, Gavin gestured for her to come and join him.

The last thing she wanted to do was talk but he'd seen her so she was stuck. Plopping down on the bench next to him she stretched out, resting her boots on the metal railing. A few moments passed as they watched the two fighters. Even to her untrained eye they looked sloppy. It looked like they were putting on an unconvincing show for whoever might be watching.

Gesturing to the warriors, Gavin said, "What do you make of them?"

Gypsy wasn't in the mood for games. "They suck."

"Watch them carefully," he said, leaning forward and arching his back.

Trying to ignore her depression, Gypsy studied the two males and one thing caught her attention right away. They were staring at each other more than they were fighting each other. It almost looked...no, it was definitely sexual. She leaned forward. Even their blows were subdued, like foreplay. The whole scene was weird. She wondered if the two males had been together. "They're attracted to each other."

“Have they been together?” Gavin asked. There was no judgment in his tone, just curiosity.

“How should I know?”

“They have not,” Gavin said. “But in any relationship one person has more power than the other. Which one has the power here?”

Gypsy looked at Gavin but he kept his attention on the fighters far below. There was some kind of lesson in this. *Great. So much for a quick chat.* She glanced down and noticed the shorter of the two was the one to initiate the sparring and was the first one to stop it. “The short one has all the power.”

“Why?”

“Because he’s controlling all the action. The other male is just responding, following the shorter male’s lead.”

“That’s right, Gypsy,” Gavin said. “So it follows that the shorter male will decide *if* a sexual relationship will begin. He will also decide when it will end.”

“Yeah,” Gypsy said, rolling the power question around in her mind. *The only reason Kharon has this kind of pull over me is because of the Primal Fever. If I could just get rid of it, I’d be free.*

The two males concluded their practice and walked off talking in soft, warm tones. Gypsy was too far up to hear exactly what they were saying but it sounded friendly. “Can I ask you a personal question?”

“Of course,” Gavin said.

“Who has the power in your relationship with Mom?” Gypsy thought she knew, she just wanted to hear him admit it. It would be a big truth from him.

“Your mother does. But then you knew that.”

“Yes, but that doesn’t make sense. Why does she have the power? After all, you’re the warrior. You’re one of the most powerful men in the empire.”

Gavin stood up and stretched and for a moment Gypsy thought he wasn’t going to answer her. Then he said, “Because she could leave me tomorrow and I would never recover from the loss. But she would be sad for a while and then move on with her life.”

“Do you really believe that?”

“I believe it enough not to test my luck.” He leaned down and kissed her on the top of her head. “Good night, Gypsy.”

“Good night, Gavin.”

Chapter 3

It was night by the time Gypsy left. She watched a few more matches, contemplating the power lesson she'd just learned. Then she took her time riding home and used the solitude to think about the best way to capture the future she wanted. By the time she arrived home at the villa she shared with Caraculla, it was well past midnight.

Gypsy took her boots off and left them on the stone steps. She crept in as quietly as she could. She and Caraculla had been fighting a lot lately and Gypsy wasn't sure what kind of mood he'd be in. Not wanting to wake him if he was asleep, she carefully walked into the bedroom and saw him sitting up in bed waiting for her in the dark. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "I tried to be quiet. Did I wake you?"

"No," he said. She could tell by the deep baritone of his voice that he'd been awake for a while.

"You didn't come by the arena to help me practice," she said, walking over to the bed so he could help her off with her armor. She turned her back to him and he unbuckled the rear straps on her chest armor, but didn't pause to caress her like he usually did. A heavy rock formed in her gut.

"I couldn't. I was out helping a friend," he said as she continued to undress in silence.

Gypsy stripped to her shirt and underwear. She sat in the wing chair facing the bed and pulled her knees up to her chest. She wrapped her arms around her shins and rested her chin on her knees. A few minutes passed as she stared at her lover. *How could things have gone so wrong with us?* Then she asked, "Who is this friend? Do I know him?"

"Her," Caraculla corrected.

"I see," she said coolly. She flung herself out of the chair, marched over to the bedside table and turned the light on. Caraculla shielded his eyes for a second and finally she could see him clearly. Even now after being with him for a few years his masculine beauty gave her pause. His long auburn hair hung free over his powerful shoulders and naked chest, it's warm, rich color interrupted by two vulgar streaks of blood red at each temple. Only Razorbacks had this coloring and it was a dire warning to any enemy that this AEssyrian species could spit deadly, corrosive venom.

The bones of his face were more pronounced than she remembered, a sure sign he had passed the threshold of adolescence and settled into the body of a full-grown adult male. Like his entire breed, his flesh was an earthy green and covered in an impressive powerhouse of heavy, knotted muscles. His vertical pupils narrowed to thin slits in response to the light.

"I am in no mood for your shit right now, so if you want me to leave just say the word," she said. Gypsy folded her arms, glaring down at him. Caraculla tossed something across the bed to her and she picked it up and stared down at it. The square gray notecard was embossed with Grand Duke Moli-

to's seal and the elaborate lettering was inked in a deep wine color. It was an invitation for her to come by the grand duke's home for dinner tomorrow night. Gypsy crossed the room and tucked the card into the inner pocket of her tunic and shrugged, which apparently was not the reaction Caraculla was looking for.

"You have some nerve being pissed at me when you'll be fucking your brains out with the twisted nobles tomorrow night," he said icily.

She was way too tired for this right now. "You're such a hypocrite. I can't believe you're sitting there judging me when there are plenty of sordid tales about you and your noble benefactors. I've heard you were especially popular among some of the nobles' rich wives." She shook her head, trying to ward off a headache. "I'm going," she said, picking up her pants and boots.

Caraculla jumped off the bed and grabbed her around the waist, pulling her toward him. Gypsy struggled to get free but the truth was she didn't want him to release her. She wanted to be in his arms. She needed this.

Seizing her face with both his hands, he kissed her deeply, passionately. The kiss brought a colossal wave of delicate agony with it and every time she fought to be let go, he only kissed her harder. Tears escaped her eyes, running down her cheeks unchecked. It was impossible to describe how much she loved Caraculla; her heart felt trapped in a stunning golden cage that he always kept under lock and key. He possessed her soul just as surely as if he'd bargained for it at a slave auc-

tion and a part of her hated him for how carelessly he treated it.

Taking her hands in his, he slid them down to the large bulge in his loose black pants. Her fingers slipped past the soft, thin fabric and ran down the thick, pulsing shaft. Touching his cock was spellbinding; her mind swooned with heady lust and all she could think about was being naked and entangled with him. But then a new thought popped into her mind. She battled with him to let her go and he stopped his seduction and stared at her.

“Who is this woman you were out with?” she demanded, pushing a stray lock of hair from her face.

Caraculla’s pale green eyes swept her face. “No one,” he said. “She’s no one.”

Gypsy searched the features of his face for the truth. “Sometimes I think you deliberately try to hurt me just to see if you still can. You’d better be careful, Caraculla, because one day it’s not going to hurt anymore and you will have lost me forever.”

Enveloping her into his arms, he devoured her with desperate kisses. Gypsy let go and allowed herself to be consumed by him. Within moments they were both naked on the mattress, twisting and writhing in the sheets, desperate beyond reason to touch each other. Gypsy hated the way he could break her down so quickly. She twisted her hands into his hair and wrestled with him to be on top. He resisted her at first, trying with animal ferocity to enter her in the missionary position but Gypsy simply wouldn’t have it. He may have got-

ten his way and shattered her defenses but she was going to have sex *her* way.

Straddling his hips, she caressed her own torso, pausing to rub and tease her nipples. Caraculla groaned and reached for her breasts; his long, thick fingers tried to pry her hands away but she wouldn't let him. She wanted him to suffer for upsetting her. Leaning forward, he mauled kisses along her belly as she cradled his head.

Gypsy slid her hands down to his thick, hard cock stabbing her thigh and guided it into her. He breached her and pure bliss spread throughout her body. Closing her eyes, she leaned her head back and savored the sweet torture of pleasure and pain as her lover's cock stretched her slick pussy. Two strokes in and the orgasm was rushing her, stripping her emotions bare and leaving her gasping and screaming his name.

Grabbing her hips, he thundered into her, his explosive passion sending her to even greater heights of ecstasy. Pressing his mouth up to her ear as he climaxed, he said, "I love you, Gypsy, I love you, I love you."

Chapter 4

The AEssyrian nobles lived a life far removed from ordinary citizens. Oh sure, everyone knew they ran the government and provided obscene amounts of money for the emperor to pay his army, but few people knew the secret lives they lived behind closed doors. Put frankly, the nobles could do anything they wanted: from open slavery, to wild orgies, to even the occasional murder. Their sordid lives were the stuff of juicy royal gossip.

Gypsy knew when Grand Duchess Tannyth Von Goth gave her expensive armor that some day she would have to repay the noblewoman. Sex was usually a big part of any repayment plan and Gypsy was fine with that. This type of thing was nothing new. In fact, it was almost a rite of passage. Every cadet and junior officer in the academy had a rich, royal benefactor. But that's what made Caraculla's jealousy so out of place and confusing. He knew how things were and even he had worked the system to his advantage in his younger years. Could he be that clueless as to think she was going to send the armor back and insult the grand duchess? What the hell was his problem lately?

Wanting to avoid yet another fight with him, Gypsy put on her new armor and left the villa that evening just before Caraculla was due home. Arguing about her obligation to the

grand duchess was pointless. She had to go to dinner with the nobles or her career would be over before it even began. Caraculla was just going to have to get over his jealousy.

Arriving at the manor house exactly on time, Gypsy let the servant escort her to the library. The room was enormous with huge floor-to-ceiling windows, expensive furniture, and tons of colorful paintings. Gypsy came in, afraid to touch anything.

Grand Duke Molitov Von Goth was standing by one of the bookshelves sipping a drink. His allure was different from any male she'd ever met. Where most males attracted her because of their raw masculinity, the grand duke was all evil intelligence and silent cunning. His tall, muscular build had less bulk than his counterparts but there was nothing soft or weak about him. He was very attractive to her. Although he was around her father's age, his long black hair had developed a few small gray streaks and hung loosely down his back. Most high-ranking nobleman didn't bother with temple braids since they never saw combat anymore. When they reached a certain tier in society they hired people to fight for them. It wasn't that they weren't capable of fighting, in fact some of them had the best training money could buy, it was just that there was no need.

And ironically enough, Molitov's champion was none other than her father.

One of Molitov's most distinguishing features was a monocle he usually wore in his right eye. Her mother told her that he wore it because of a vision discrepancy and because he liked the way it looked. The nobles were no stranger to vani-

ty. Tonight Molitov was dressed in an attractive black robe secured at the waist and, she was sure, nothing else. There was no pretense with the nobles: people were invited to their homes to pay a debt and amuse them with whatever sexual escapade they wanted. It was as simple as that.

Molitov stalked over to her and grinned. "How nice of you to come, Gypsy," he said, taking her hand in his. "My wife will be joining us in the dining room. I hope you're hungry. We have quite a meal planned for you."

"Thank you," Gypsy said, smiling. "I'm starving."

The dining room was even more impressive than the library and was filled with the savory smells of spiced meat and expensive wine. The room was covered in dark wood paneling and housed a large fireplace. In the center was a dining room table that could easily seat fifty with two enormous crystal chandeliers overhead.

Tannyth walked over to Gypsy wearing a metallic gold dress slightly flared out from the hips. Around her neck was a chain of diamonds and some other precious amber stones. Her dark hair was carefully curled in thick ringlets that accentuated her beauty and made her look like a queen. Her lovely face was a light tan-olive with delicate feminine features and large, alluring eyes.

"Gypsy," she said, moving closer with her arms out in greeting. "I'm so glad you could come."

Gypsy smiled, feeling the woman take her hands and gently squeeze them. "I wouldn't miss it for the world. I love the armor," she said, looking down at herself. "Thank you very much."

Tannyth's face glowed with pure joy. She smiled and swept her gaze down Gypsy's body. "You look fantastic, but let's make you more comfortable." Then she turned her attention to Molotov. "Take her armor off, please."

Molotov moved up behind Gypsy and placed his large hands on her straps. With slow, deliberate movements, he unfastened her armor and set each piece on the floor in turn. Then he removed her boots. When he was done, Gypsy was dressed only in her lightweight black pants, a thin undershirt, and her bare feet. Tannyth backed up and gestured toward the dining room table where some food was already laid out. "Please come and sit."

A static charge sparked in Gypsy's belly. A soft tingling erupted in her sex and a light sweat broke out on her forehead. Molotov pulled a chair out for her and she sat nervously, drumming the balls of her feet on the polished wood floor. Tannyth sat next to her and picked up a silver fork resting in a plate of raw meat. She lifted the fork and let a thin morsel dangle in front of Gypsy's lips. The meat smelled amazingly fresh and hardy. Gypsy reached out and took the slice with her lips, pulling it into her mouth and chewing slowly. The food was so tender it almost melted on her tongue. A few more pieces were fed to her, one by one, as both Tannyth and the grand duke watched her eat. It was both thrilling and unnerving.

Then Tannyth pushed the meat plate back and stood up. She glanced at her husband and nodded, turning her back and stalking to a wing chair in a dark corner of the dining room.

She curled up in it like a cat and gave Gypsy the faintest hint of a smile.

Molotov pulled Gypsy's chair back and lifted her up by the waist, seating her on the edge of the dining table. His hands moved with a slow, delicate grace and Gypsy knew from the rumor mill that this was not the usual way the grand duke liked to make love. He was infamous for having a much more perverse and sadistic appetite. It was obvious he was touching Gypsy exactly how his wife wanted him to. The whole idea of this seduction was incredibly strange because it was common knowledge that he and Tannyth hated each other and hadn't shared a bedroom in centuries. Gypsy couldn't imagine what kind of bartering took place to ensure this cooperative display. She was sure Tannyth had to promise Molotov something substantial.

Unfastening his robe, the grand duke let it fall open, revealing his sculptured chest and long, thick cock. With a graceful ease, he peeled Gypsy's remaining clothes off and pushed her back onto the table. Opening her long, powerful legs, he nuzzled and caressed the delicate flesh of her inner thighs. The seduction was pure bliss. Molotov's kisses were mesmerizing, twisting her will and melting her fear until she whispered soft encouragements for him to ascend higher. He did as she asked, boldly kissing her nether lips and probing his tongue into her aching slick center. He was a demon with his tongue, dancing it over her secret places and finding every exquisite nerve until Gypsy was covered in sweat and panting his name.

“Do you want him to fuck you?” Tannyth said in a light, sexy voice.

“Yes,” Gypsy groaned, opening her legs to welcome him.

“If he fucks you, and you come before he does, he’ll get to spank you for being such a naughty guest,” Tannyth whispered.

Gypsy looked over at the grand duchess. The woman was definitely enjoying herself and had Gypsy not been so involved in her own arousal it may have made her uncomfortable. “He can do as he pleases with me, my lady.”

Tannyth ran her fingers over her sexy lips. “Fuck her, darling,” she said to the grand duke. “And make her love it.”

Molotov pushed the plump head of his cock past Gypsy’s drenched folds and eased his length all the way inside. Waves of pure delight washed up her hips, making her sigh with lust. Each slow, insistent push was another adventure in pleasure until Gypsy couldn’t hold her passion anymore and exploded in orgasm.

Molotov stopped pumping and looked over at Tannyth. The grand duchess smiled wickedly. Wordlessly, Molotov pulled Gypsy off the table and over his lap. She could feel the strength of his erection against her belly as he positioned her for her spanking. Then the first blow came, his bare hand slapping against the soft skin of her buttocks, followed by another and another. The pain and domination mixed with the sweet ecstasy of the seduction opened Gypsy up to a world she never thought existed. And as the grand duke spanked her harder and faster in his sadistic excitement, she found herself approaching orgasm again. She tried to fight it off, but the in-

toxicating mix was like a drug, sucking her in and making her love it. Suddenly her hips pumped in rhythm to his blows and an intense, warped climax overtook her.

Molotov didn't miss her open sexual display. Pulling her off his lap, he manhandled her onto the floor and bound her with leather straps on all fours. The grand duchess chewed her thumbnail and curled up tighter in her chair. Gypsy lay there helplessly, secured like an animal ready for mating. She couldn't believe how excited she was. Then the grand duke took her like a beast chasing a heat, swallowing her body and soul in a heated frenzy of dark, sexual domination.

Chapter 5

Gypsy awoke in a large four-poster bed covered with soft linen sheets. It was so early that everything in the room was colored a hazy gray. She recognized the bedroom as the guest chamber she'd been carried to by the grand duke after a night of the wildest fun and games she'd ever had. She stretched and smiled. A soft knock sounded on the door.

"Come in," Gypsy called. To her amazement, Tannyth came in holding a silver breakfast tray. Gypsy sat up. "Here let me help you with that," she said, jumping up out of the bed. That's when she realized she was still completely naked. She made an awkward gesture to cover herself with the sheet.

Tannyth didn't seem to mind. "No, you stay in bed."

Gypsy climbed back in and Tannyth placed the tray over her hips. The grand duchess took a seat next to the bed.

The tray had a generous plate of breakfast meat, eggs, and a tall glass of warm wine. Gypsy dug in and wolfed down half her meal before coming up for air. "Thank you so much for everything," Gypsy said, chewing.

"You're welcome. My husband was quite impressed with you and I assure you that almost nothing impresses him. But I'm afraid I have some sobering news," Tannyth said.

Gypsy swallowed and stared. *What now? Has my father been kidnapped?* She pushed the tray to the end of the bed. "What's happened?"

Tannyth took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I don't know if you're aware of this or not, but General Caraculla has been seeing another woman behind your back for the past few months. I'm telling you this because I don't believe you're aware of what's taking place this afternoon."

Coldness crept into Gypsy's belly. This was going to be very bad news, Gypsy could feel it. "What's happening this afternoon?"

Tannyth's lips grew thin and pale. She smoothed her dress over her thighs.

When she met Gypsy's gaze, her eyes were filled with warm kindness and pity. Gypsy wanted to scream at her to get on with it but she forced herself to be still.

"Caraculla is marrying her this afternoon, Gypsy," Tannyth said. "A messenger just brought an invitation for my husband and me this morning. It's a little unexpected. Did something happen?"

The room became suffocating and hot. Gypsy got up and dressed, feeling like someone had let the air out of her happiness. Beyond that, she didn't feel very much of anything. Tannyth must be mistaken. *This can't be happening. He loves me. We just spent a wonderful night together.* Tannyth was saying something but Gypsy wasn't listening to her.

"I have to go," Gypsy said flatly as she attached her scabbard to her belt.

Tannyth escorted her to the front door of the manor. "I'm sorry for being the one to break this news to you, Gypsy," she said softly. "I just thought you had a right to know."

Gypsy gave her a weak smile she didn't feel. "I appreciate your honesty, my lady. I just...have to leave. I have some things to do. Thank you again for everything." Then Gypsy mounted up on her waiting hyperia and rode toward Caracula's villa, praying to the Gods that Tannyth was terribly wrong.

And somehow knowing the grand duchess probably wasn't.

Chapter 6

The temple courtyard was adorned with decorative flags and banners of blue and white. Most of the guests were army officers and nobles dressed in black and gold uniforms, their chests heavy with campaign medals. Gypsy stalked through the small gathering collecting curious looks from all the guests, but her focus was on one person.

A knot of pure agony twisted in her chest. How could Caraculla have done this to her? They had just been together through yesterday morning, so why didn't he tell her about this wedding? Did he think it wouldn't matter to her? What could he have been thinking?

Gypsy rounded a corner and spotted the long banquet table already set with snow-white serving plates. At the other end sat Caraculla, softly whispering in the ear of whom she assumed was his new bride. The smoldering embers of rage roared to life inside her head, setting her emotions ablaze. Marching to the end of the table, Gypsy jumped up on top and stormed across the clean white linen, kicking plates off as she went. Plates flew to the ground and smashed one after the other until every one was destroyed. Reaching the end of the table, Gypsy glared down from the tabletop and met Caraculla's pale green eyes.

He was heartbreakingly handsome in a double-breasted black uniform with gold piping that bordered his high collar and bright gold buttons running all the way down his chest. His dark auburn hair was long and loose, framing a face of masculine perfection. His nose was long and straight with a noble curve that flattered his other manly features and his eyes danced with a ferocious intelligence. Looking at him in his wedding clothes made her heart ache with unspeakable pain and her veins pulse with uncontrollable rage. Caraculla stood with his bride and gently pushed her away toward the protection of the gathering crowd.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” he snarled.

“What the fuck am I doing?” Gypsy’s face contorted and she brought her boot forward until it connected with a crystal decanter sitting innocently on the table. A shower of glass and whiskey rained over Caraculla, who shielded his eyes but stood his ground. “I was just about to ask you the same thing!” she shot back, jumping down from the table and pulling her saber. She advanced on him, slicing the air dangerously.

Caraculla pulled his saber and tossed it aside indicating he refused to fight her. It clattered on the paving stones. “Don’t do this, Gypsy,” he said, backing away from her. The gathered guests backed away from both of them.

Gypsy didn’t answer him. She wasn’t here to talk. She lunged at him, slicing her blade at his face and neck. A part of her knew she should stop, that this was the wrong thing to do, but she was so hurt she just couldn’t hold herself back. Caraculla continued to retreat, his face a tortured mask of pain. Enraged that he wouldn’t fight her, she cut at him again, com-

ing dangerously close to his throat. He dodged it with a menacing growl and ducked low. Rolling away from her, he picked up his weapon again but held it at his side.

“Stop!” he shouted.

“No! I won’t stop! Why didn’t you tell me you were getting married today?” she shouted angrily. “Didn’t you think something like this would be important for me to know? Or maybe you just wanted to get in one last fuck.”

“Please, Gypsy, lower your sword before something happens that we’re both going to regret.”

“Don’t you dare speak to me about regrets because I’m full of them. Like I regret that I ever fell in love with you. Gods! I can’t believe you fucked me yesterday knowing you were getting married today! What the hell is the matter with you? Are you just that sleazy?”

“You’ve never had a problem fucking married men,” he growled back. “Besides, you’re one to judge me. When were you planning on telling me about your secret marriage to Kharon? Or didn’t you think that was important enough to tell me?”

Gypsy stood there, stunned. *What is this, some kind of a joke? What the hell is he talking about?* A dark feeling of doom overtook her. “Liar! I’m not married to Kharon. You’re just trying to avoid looking like the son of a bitch you are,” she snarled. She launched a full frontal attack, leaving him no choice but to raise his saber to block the aggressive blows.

“Oh, come now,” Caraculla said, advancing on her. “You must know about the marriage claim filed with the emperor. It’s dated the day you got back from Kharon’s kingdom.

Don't tell me your *mate* didn't inform you of it. I can't believe he'd hide that kind of information from you. He's such a nice, upstanding guy."

"You're making this up. I don't know anything about any marriage papers," she said, feeling a wave of nausea come over her. She so wanted to believe Caraculla was lying. But even as the words left her mouth she knew he was telling the truth. She should have seen this coming. Kharon had made no secret of wanting her. But an *AE*ssyrian marriage was major treachery even for him.

"Well then, you're the only one," Caraculla said. "The gossip circles have been hot with the news for weeks."

"I can't believe you think I knew about this. I never once lied to you, which is more than I can say for how you've treated me in the past!" Gypsy was suddenly grabbed by the guards. She resisted them a little, but soon dropped her sword and gave up, not wanting to kill one of them by accident. That would really be a disastrous error for her life as well as her career. She was already in trouble for her little display. The guards escorted her out of the wedding, their boots crunching over broken plates.

"We'll talk about this later," Caraculla called after her.

Gypsy glared back at him, her shoulder already aching from her wrists being bound behind her back. "Don't count on it!"

* * * *

Caraculla sat in the courtyard of the temple listening to the happy banter from the reception room nearby. He stared into his whiskey glass and took another sip. Nessa came out

quietly, cautiously, as if her new husband was going to detonate at any moment. "Are you okay?" she asked.

Caraculla tossed back the last of his drink and nodded. "Yes," he said, holding his hand out to her in welcome. "I'm fine."

She went into his arms and hugged him. "I'm so sorry," she whispered into his chest.

"What for? It is I who should apologize to you for ruining our wedding. I should have told Gypsy about this, but every time I got close to telling her, I lost my nerve." He let Nessa go and rubbed the back of his neck. "I just hope you can forgive me."

Nessa smiled at him and stroked his cheek. "You are the most wonderful man I've ever known. There's nothing you could do that would ever make me despise you."

"I hope you always feel that way, Nessa," he said grimly. "I know I will."

Chapter 7

King Vieran's daughter, Princess Golda rode up to the castle with her royal escort in tow and her head bowed in shame. Sent almost a year ago as a gift bride to Emperor Megolyth, she was now being returned for being too willful. The snub was an obvious and deliberate slap in the face to the king who fidgeted and muttered angrily as he sat mounted next to General Kharon.

Kharon hadn't told the king up front that he knew the match would fail, but he had dropped a few comments of doubt. Megolyth was a worldly soldier and a cunning ruler; he would be able to spot the princess as a spy the first time she asked him any unusual questions. But Kharon was sure she'd done her best, and aside from the disgrace of being turned out, the princess still might be of some use to them. She might even have been clever enough to learn of the emperor's future plans. That, at least, would be something.

Princess Golda rode up to her father and stopped directly in front of him. The king nodded his head and dismissed the escort, who slipped quietly away. Now there was only the princess, the king, and Kharon. A gust of wind blew Golda's hair away from her face and Kharon was reminded of how lovely she was: small, delicate nose; large innocent eyes; and a robust, ample bosom. Carnal hunger gnawed at him and he

suppressed a grin. He'd had Golda a few times in the past and he had no doubt that she would need comforting after the dressing down she'd soon get from her father.

"I'm sorry, Father," she said softly.

"You should be," he grumbled. A few moments passed in silence. "Why did he turn you out?"

"He said I was too inquisitive," she replied.

The king cast an annoyed look at Kharon who made it a point to avoid eye contact. The king hated it when Kharon was right and any sign that the general was gloating wouldn't go over well.

"You must be very proud of yourself," the king said to his general.

"I'm not," Kharon replied. "I'm as disappointed as you are, but Golda did her best. Perhaps you should have sent a woman with more experience in spying, Highness."

The king snorted at him.

Kharon turned his attention to Golda. "Were you able to overhear any of Megolyth's meetings with his general?"

"A few, Excellency," Golda replied.

"There, you see," Kharon said to the king. "She may have information we can use against them."

"And if her information is useless, as I suspect it may be?" the king asked.

"Not to worry," Kharon said. "I have a few other plans I'm working on. If Golda's information is of no use to us, I know of another woman who will be much more useful."

"Oh?" the king asked, his voiced edged in sarcasm. "And who might that be?"

“It’s a surprise, my dear sovereign. You’ll find out soon enough, as will she,” Kharon said.

Chapter 8

General Gavin Theron walked into the jail fully expecting to get his daughter Gypsy released, but one look at her pacing her cell like an agitated tiger made him reconsider. “Corporal,” Gavin barked at the guard who’d escorted him down here. “Unlock this door and leave us.”

The guard unlocked the door, held it open for Gavin to go through, and locked it again afterward. He disappeared down the hall. Gavin sat down on the bunk. “I heard you made quite the scene at Caraculla’s wedding.”

“He should have been honest with me about everything and I wouldn’t have felt the need to confront him during it,” she seethed.

“I can agree with that,” he nodded.

“So you’re not here to yell at me for wrecking his wedding and ending up in jail?”

Gavin leaned back against the cell wall and laughed. “With my reputation, I would be the last person to chastise someone about letting their emotions drive them to violence. In my younger days, not only would I have done the same, but I probably would have left several people dead. Thanks to your mother, you’re a bit better grounded than I was.”

“That’s comforting,” she said as she continued to pace.

“What’s this I hear about a marriage between you and Kharon?” Gavin asked.

Gypsy threw her hands in the air helplessly and stopped in front of him. “I had no idea he did that.”

Gavin nodded sagely. “I warned you.”

She glared at him. “Yes, Excellency, I know! You tried to warn me and I wouldn’t listen! Are you happy now?”

“There’s no need to get cross with me, young lady. I’m on your side.”

She turned and plopped down on the cot next to him. “I know you are. I am so pissed off right now that I don’t know who I want to kill more, Kharon or Caraculla.”

“Understandable. You have no control over the Caraculla situation, so what do you intend to do about Kharon?”

“I’ll have to find a way to convince him to set me aside.”

“Don’t do anything foolish, Gypsy,” Gavin warned. “He’s obviously not above deception to trap you.”

“I know that. But I have to do something.”

Gavin shrugged. He got up off the cot and adjusted his armor. Then he started heading for the cell door.

“Aren’t you going to get me out of here?”

“Not right away,” he said, eyeing her up and down. “I don’t think you’re ready yet.”

“Not ready? You can’t be serious! I’ve been locked up in here for hours!” she snapped, jumping up off the cot.

“Oh, I’m very serious. Perhaps I’ll come and get you tonight when you’ve had a chance to cool down some more. The Gods know we don’t need another display like the one

we had this afternoon. Why don't you try and nap? I hear it makes the time go faster."

Chapter 9

The villa Nessa's family had given them for a wedding present was small but elegant. Nestled in the rolling hills just outside the empire, it was a prime location for privacy without being too far from the main military complex. It was a two-story stone structure with high sandstone walls framed by two medium-sized towers and a large interior courtyard. But no matter how attractive his second home was, nor how gracious his new wife, his soul was tortured with longing for Gypsy. Unfortunately a future with her as his lover was probably impossible now. She'd never forgive him for this betrayal.

Nessa touched his arm, giving him a gentle smile and he realized he must have been brooding again. "Are you alright?" she asked. "You've been so quiet. I guess that wedding fiasco was pretty unpleasant for you."

Caraculla tried to smile back but just couldn't summon the action. "I'm fine."

He dismounted from his hyperia and held hers. She dismounted and looked around the courtyard as if appraising the architecture. "I so love it here," she said softly.

"Your mother was very generous to give it to us."

"She still feels guilty." The suns were already sinking in the sky but their heat usually lingered until the moons rose.

Nessa closed her eyes and lifted her face to the fading warmth. Her beauty was as close to perfection as he had ever seen and his heart ached for the pain she'd known in her short life.

"I want you to know," she said, keeping eyes closed as she soaked up the last of the sun's rays, "I am aware of what a huge sacrifice this was for you. I appreciate your kindness more than you will ever realize. I sincerely hope you and Gypsy can find a way to love each other through all of this."

"It's all in the hands of the Gods," he said dismissively. The last thing he wanted to talk about was his wounded lover. He just couldn't face that mind-crushing pain at this moment.

"Come on," she said, brightening and grabbing his hand. "Let me show you around."

Nessa was young and nowhere was that more apparent than in her childlike enthusiasm for everything around her. She dragged him from room to room chattering about this piece of furniture and that, telling him stories about how she and her mother had argued about color and style, and about how Nessa had finally won out on decor in the end, all the while never realizing he hadn't uttered a word. That was fine with him. Caraculla really didn't have much to say. When she was done, she brought him into the study and poured him a whiskey. Caraculla tossed the drink back and stalked over to a wing chair by the window. He settled into it as Nessa watched him with growing curiosity. He didn't need to ask to know what was on her mind.

Suddenly her body tensed. "Are you going to make love to me tonight?"

“Would you be very disappointed if we waited until tomorrow?”

“Not at all,” she said, sounding more like a child than a woman. She brought him another drink. “Don’t you find me attractive?”

Caraculla stroked her cheek and took the drink from her. “I find you very attractive, Nessa, but I just hurt someone I love very much today. I’m afraid I’m not feeling very romantic.”

Her face blossomed into a beautiful smile. She climbed into his lap and curled up against his chest, wrapping her arms around him. “I wish I could talk to Gypsy and make her understand.”

“Don’t,” he said sternly.

“But if she knew the reason why.”

“You can’t discuss our marriage with anyone, Nessa. Do you understand? We can’t risk anyone getting curious. Do you understand me?”

She squeezed him tight. “Yes, Caraculla. I understand.”

He sipped his drink, willing all thoughts of Gypsy from his mind. It didn’t work.

“Caraculla?” Nessa said her voice drowsy.

“Yes?”

“I just wanted to say I love you,” she whispered. A few minutes later, Nessa was asleep.

Caraculla stared out the window at the deepening darkness, sipping his drink. He only wished he was worthy of Nessa’s love. But how could he be when his heart was held captive by another woman? His thoughts immediately flooded

back to Gypsy. A wrenching sense of loss tightened his throat. He was damned just as surely as if he'd made a pact with that devil Titan. There was probably no way out of this tangled mess. So he did what his mentor Gavin always did at times of great emotional agony. He proceeded to get quietly and completely drunk.

Chapter 10

Gypsy was startled awake by the steel door of her cell smacking against the stone wall as it was flung open. The doorway filled up with the familiar gray uniform of a royal guardsmen. "Rise and shine, Theron. I got an order for your release."

"It's about fucking time," she muttered. She pulled herself up from the bench and shuffled toward the door.

"Your master sergeant sibling is waiting in the hall for you. See the guard at the front desk on your way out. He'll give you back your stuff. Thank you for your patronage. I hope you enjoyed your stay. Come back and see us again." He smiled a big toothy grin.

"You're a funny guy. Maybe your venture into the military was premature. I'm pretty sure the emperor doesn't have a court jester yet."

The guard looked at her thoughtfully, as if considering her counsel. "You should stop talking now and move along before I lose your release papers for a few more hours."

Gypsy glared at him but managed to keep her mouth closed. She really needed to get out of here and didn't want her freedom delayed by a surly guard. Gypsy went through the steel door and saw Desmond leaning against the wall watching her. He didn't say anything when she approached.

Instead he turned to walk down the hallway. She fell in step with him and said, "Where's Gavin? I thought he was going to get me out last night."

"He guessed you would still be pissed. He also didn't want to listen to you bitch about your extended stay. So he sent me to listen to it instead. By the way, nice job destroying your boyfriend's wedding. I wish I'd been there to see it." Desmond burst out into peels of genuine laughter.

"Fuck you, Desmond. He's not my boyfriend anymore." She stormed ahead of him, marching through the double doors into the large entry hall.

The exit guard was sitting at a rickety wooden desk that had stones propping it up where one of the legs had broken off. He was as old as the moons and had been doing this so long he didn't feel the need to rush for anyone. Behind the desk were several rows of long lock boxes each sporting a dirty brass number over a keyhole on the edge of the lid. The old guard took a full ten minutes to review each released prisoner's paperwork and there were three people in front of her.

She scowled and stood in line obediently. Desmond had managed to find a vacant bench where he laid down to take a nap.

Almost half an hour later she finally stood before the geriatric obstacle to her freedom. His gray uniform showed wear in every fold and crease. A few stray pieces of thread hung from the cuffs of his shirtsleeves. They brushed the edge of the desk as he turned and read each page of her release. Finally he rose and meandered over to the lock box that had the same number as her cell. He collected several items from the

box and walked back over laying each of her weapons down on the desktop.

"Is that all of your things?" His tone had an air of nonsense bureaucracy that sapped any desire she had to be a smart ass.

"Yes."

"Sign here at the bottom. Pick up your weapons and carry them outside. Do not remove your sword from your scabbard or your knives from their sheaths prior to exiting. Do you understand?"

"Yes," she said, quickly signing the register, collecting her weapons and heading for the door.

"Ensign," the guard called after her. "I also have a message for you." Gypsy turned around and saw the guard holding an envelope out to her. "The emperor wants to see you."

She might have thought the message was a joke except it had the royal seal and no one would dare fake a thing like that. *I might be in big trouble.* Desmond followed her outside wearing a somber look.

"This is probably bad," she ventured, hoping her brother had some other explanation to make her feel better.

"You're probably right. Whatever you've done, you had better be damn repentant for it. Megolyth doesn't fuck around. If he's really pissed, you can kiss your career goodbye."

"Will you come with me?"

"You're kidding, right? If there's one thing I never want to see, it's the inside of the emperor's private office. You're on your own for this one. I'll let Gavin know where you're

going. Good luck.” Desmond walked off down the gravel path to his waiting hyperia.

So, with her guts churning with terror, she left the Imperial Jail and made her way to the Imperial Palace. Slowly she walked up the paved walkway and presented the message to the captain of the guard. He looked as surprised to see it as she was to receive it.

“This can’t be good, Theron,” he said, grimly waving his hand at the posted guards to open the main gate. The two men grabbed the thick handles of the gate and heaved it open, their muscles bulging with the strain under their uniform tunics.

Gypsy racked her brain over what the emperor could want. A creeping nausea filled her. The captain was right, this couldn’t be a good sign. She hesitated before going through the gate. “What do you think he wants?” she whispered to the captain.

“With your reputation,” he said with a cruel grin, “who knows?” He gestured toward the palace beyond. “Better not keep his Royal Highness waiting.”

She nodded and stepped through the gate, wincing when the guards slammed it shut behind her. This could be really bad indeed.

* * * *

Gypsy had never been inside the emperor’s private office. Although spacious by most rooms’ standards, it was smaller than she expected. Red velvet drapes bordered by gold fringe covered the large windows keeping out the morning’s bright light. An enormous dark wood desk stood before her with a

painting of the emperor's three wives and many children behind him. The painting was elegant but most of the figures too heavily shadowed for her taste. In fact, the whole portrait, with its muted browns and muddy yellow hues, carried an eerie gothic quality Gypsy found haunting. She recalled a story she'd heard recently that the emperor had rejected a potential fourth wife because she was unsuitable. Gypsy wondered what that label really meant.

Emperor Megolyth sat behind the desk with his fingers interlaced, watching her like she was an interesting sculpture that he was going to pass over for another. A huge bull male, he was as attractive as she remembered even if the strain of his position was showing on him. His face was serious and strong with high cheekbones and a long, proud nose. His sensual lips, normally curved in a sardonic grin, were turned down in a paternal hint of disapproval. Megolyth's bright yellow eyes moved over her in a slow appraisal that she could almost feel. Suddenly she remembered her protocol and went down on one knee bowing her head.

"You sent for me, Highness?" she said.

She heard him get up and stalk over to her. Shiny black boots came into her line of vision and a wild flutter of panic filled her head. She sure wished she knew what he wanted.

"You may rise," he said.

Gypsy stood up, keeping her eyes down. "Thank you, Highness."

"General Kharon has exercised his right as your husband and requested you be turned over to him immediately. How do you feel about that?"

Her fear evaporated in the building heat of her fury. Wasn't it bad enough Kharon had married her without her knowledge? *Now he wants to make me his virtual prisoner!* "I don't acknowledge he is my husband, Highness. He married me without my knowledge or consent. Am I not technically still under the protection of my father? Wouldn't he have needed his permission, thus voiding the marriage?" she replied, choosing her words carefully.

"No. You have already been married once and since you put that marriage aside you are not considered your father's property anymore. As with all things concerning you, this situation is somewhat unique. I understand you spent a lot of time with Kharon when he was here. You also visited his kingdom," Megolyth said, pacing slowly.

"I did, Highness, and he tried to recruit me, but I refused."

"Why?"

"Because I took an oath of loyalty to you when I entered the Academy. I also never want to have to raise arms against my father and my brother," she replied.

Megolyth stopped pacing and stared at her. "That's understandable enough." He stalked closer, walking around her slowly, his gaze dissecting her. A faint scent of cologne and warm, clean skin drifted through up to her nose and heat rushed into her cheeks. Gooseflesh rose on her arms and she trembled, wondering if he was going to send her off to Kharon.

Finally he said, "Although you are no longer under your father's protection and Kharon does have a legal right to you,

your potential career in my military is also legally sponsored. At this point I have no plans to turn you over to Kharon. But I am concerned about you.”

“How so, Highness?”

“I heard what happened at Caraculla’s wedding,” he said coldly. “I’m wondering if you are temperamentally suited for life as an officer.”

Gypsy cringed and tried to swallow the small rock in her throat. “That was a mistake, Highness, that I deeply regret. The wedding took me completely by surprise and I allowed my emotions to cloud my judgment.”

“How would you handle it now, if you had to live that moment over again?” he asked.

“I would have chosen not to go.”

Megolyth nodded as if that had been the right answer. “There is more going on there than you know,” he said softly and she wondered if he was speaking to her at all. “One more breach of discipline from you and your military career is over. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Highness.”

“Then you may go,” he said, turning back to his desk.

“Excuse me, Highness. May I ask you something?”

He stopped and looked back at her. “What is it?”

“Do I really have a future in the military or am I wasting my time? I’m not so naive. I know most of the nobles and a number of senior officers are against me once I graduate. I want to know where you stand in this.” She held her breath keeping her eyes down, afraid of what his answer might be.

“It is for that reason that you need to conduct yourself in an exemplary manner. Gypsy, I’ve known your father for many years and I also know that he wouldn’t waste his time if he thought you were incapable of a successful career. If he has that much faith in your abilities, then so do I. But my faith is not my support. You have to earn that by proving to me you have the emotional maturity to handle that kind of responsibility. If you can do that, your career will have my blessing.”

Gypsy nodded slowly. “I understand. Oh, I almost forgot. Trajan, a local scout, was instrumental in helping my father and I find my mother. The only thing he asked was for his sister, a mistress in your harem, to be freed. Would you please consider granting his request?”

Megolyth smiled. “Your father already came to me before his back surgery and I have released her.”

“Thank you, Highness,” Gypsy said with a bow.

“Thank me by behaving yourself, Gypsy. Don’t give the nobles ammunition against you. They already hate you as it is. Now get out and don’t give me cause to call you back in here.”

With a quick bow, Gypsy rushed out before he changed his mind.

Chapter 11

Morning for Caraculla came all too early and with it the memory of Gypsy's grief. Sharp, jagged emotions ravaged him as he remembered her beautiful face twisted in rage at his surprise wedding. How he'd wanted to tell her the reasons behind it but he was sworn to secrecy and lives depended on his silence. General Theron suspected something was up, of course, and so did the emperor, but only a few actually knew the truth about Nessa. He'd have to make it up to Gypsy somehow; he just needed more time.

Nessa slept next to him bundled in a blanket and the pain in his heart eased a bit. He'd done the right thing, he knew he had. All he had to do now was live with it. Easing out of bed so as not to wake her, Caraculla dressed quickly and slipped out to go and visit Gavin.

He rode along the familiar trail wondering what Gypsy was doing. Had she finally been released from jail? Was she still furious at him? It was annoying to be so obsessed but no matter how hard he tried, he just couldn't get her out of his mind. The thought of losing her forever was unbearable and he tried to focus on possible solutions. His thoughts tumbled back to their brief marriage only a few short years ago and he wished, not for the first time, that she was still his wife. Urging her to set him aside as her husband had been the biggest

mistake of his life and not a day went past that he didn't regret it.

She hadn't wanted to set the marriage aside but he'd insisted. They'd fought for weeks until finally she relented. He remembered how hurt she was and how he'd explained that he *did* want her for his wife but it was too soon. She was so young and he was scheduled for a lengthy campaign. He really thought the decision was for the best. Never had he been so wrong about anything.

Gavin's villa came into view and Caraculla found himself wishing his old friend would pick a fight with him so he could purge some of this horrible guilt with violence.

Harlan let him in, smiling and hugging him in welcome. It only made him feel worse. "He's in the courtyard," she said.

Caraculla entered the courtyard. Gavin sat in a large chair near the door with his boots up on an ottoman smoking a cigar. He didn't look up as Caraculla took the seat across from him. "They let her out of jail this morning. I sent Desmond to fetch her but she was diverted by courier to Megolyth's chambers," Gavin said. He examined the tip of his cigar.

"He didn't expel her from the Academy, did he?" Caraculla felt his emotions swell with even more guilt.

"No. But I think he sufficiently scared the shit out of her. I imagine she'll be behaving herself for the time being."

"I'm glad." Caraculla lapsed into silence for a moment. Then he said, "Is she still angry?"

"What do you think?"

Caraculla's stomach clenched and he felt a little nauseous. "You're acting like this is my fault."

Gavin shrugged. "I think you should have told her you were getting married. Don't you?"

"I did," Caraculla said, feeling heat build in his neck.

"Then why wasn't she ready for this?" Gavin asked.

"I don't know. Apparently she wasn't ready for a lot of things. Like why didn't she know she was Kharon's wife?" Caraculla countered. "I would think *you* of all people would have warned her about that possibility."

Gavin stared at him but Caraculla didn't look away. "I told her he was capable of treachery but she trusted him," Gavin said.

"Well then, I guess we both failed her."

Gavin nodded grimly and crushed out his cigar. "Yes, but she'll forgive me. You, on the other hand, have probably lost her forever."

Those words were so sharp they found their mark. A tension headache started pounding in Caraculla's head. *Please don't let that be true.* "She loves me. I love her. Nothing can ever change that."

Gavin stood up, arching his back and Caraculla found himself hoping it hurt. "You keep telling yourself that, Caraculla. You keep telling yourself that her feelings for you are just as strong as they always were. But the truth is, love needs care and feeding or, like everything else, it dies. If you love her, you need to find a way to reconnect with her or she'll cut you out of her life forever and move on."

Caraculla ran his fingers through his hair, wishing Gavin would just shut up. He should never have come here. He stood up and glared at his general. "Fuck you, Gavin," he

snarled. "You're always so full of useless advice on women, but the truth is, most of your relationships have turned to shit. Thankfully Harlan puts up with you or else you'd be a bitter old drunken recluse whom no one bothers to visit." He got up and stormed toward the door.

"You shouldn't have asked her to set aside your marriage," Gavin called after him. "That dissolution opened the door for Kharon to make his claim."

Caraculla whirled around furious. "Don't you think I *know* that? Not a day goes by that I don't regret that decision. But I can't change what already is. Just like you, I have to live with my mistakes." He turned to leave, immediately regretting their fight. Pausing by the door, he said, "I'm going to fix this, Gavin. I don't know how yet, but I am going to make this right."

Gavin came up and squeezed Caraculla's shoulder. "Good luck with that, my boy. I'm sure she'll forgive you, in time."

"I sure as hell hope so," Caraculla said.

Chapter 12

As the twin suns hiked their way into the sky, Caraculla returned from his morning duties to find Gypsy sitting in his office waiting for him. She was as beautiful as always with her long dark hair pulled back to reveal a strong courageous face. He walked over cautiously and took a seat on the edge of his desk facing her. "I should have told you about the marriage. I'm sorry," he said.

She looked up at him with those riveting golden eyes and his stomach twisted into a tight knot. Gods, how he loved her. Every ounce of his being wanted to tell her everything but he couldn't. He'd taken an oath and too many lives were at stake.

"I'm the one who's sorry for screwing up your wedding. It was none of my business," she said. Her voice was laced with a gut-wrenching pain that made him horribly ashamed. "But I do want you to know I never consented to being Kharon's wife. That secret marriage was all his doing."

Caraculla nodded. What difference did it make? They were both bound in marriage to the wrong people. For the millionth time he berated himself for convincing her to put their marriage aside. He'd always assumed they'd have another chance. How wrong could one man be? "Well there isn't a whole lot you can do about it," he mumbled.

"The hell I can't. I'm going to request a meeting with Kharon in the buffer zone and convince him to set the marriage aside," Gypsy said.

A surge of panic filled him and he stood up. "I'm sorry, Gypsy, I cannot allow that."

Her golden eyes flashed and her body tensed. "I won't let him get away with this! Do you know he's petitioned the emperor to send me there? Of course Megolyth refused, but as long as this marriage stands, I'll always be his legal property. I just can't live like that. I have to do this, Caraculla."

"What if he takes you prisoner?"

"He won't. He had plenty of opportunity to keep me there on my last visit and he chose to let me go. I don't think he'd keep me there against my will."

"He married you against your will. Maybe he's changed."

"I can handle him," she said as she stood up.

"I think you should let this go. He'll get bored with this little game and set you aside eventually."

"Let this go?" she shouted and began to pace. "I can't just let this go. Don't you realize that he has complete control over me now? I can't leave the planet without his permission. Anytime I go outside the empire I'll have to worry about bounty hunters picking me up and returning me to him because I'm his fugitive wife. Like I said, I won't live like this, Caraculla, I can't!"

As much as he hated to admit it, she was right. Kharon had the right to do anything in his power to get her back, and Caraculla had no doubt he would. "Then let me challenge him for you." But Caraculla knew she'd refuse.

Gypsy stopped pacing and pointed at him. "No. This isn't your problem. Kharon has been disrupting my life in one way or another ever since I first laid eyes on him. I need to put an end to this. I have to go and at least try and convince him to release me."

"If he takes you prisoner instead, I won't be able to help you."

"I know," she said softly.

"You should tell Gavin what you want to do," Caraculla said in a last ditch effort to get her to reconsider.

"He'll only interfere. I'm a soldier. I need to handle this myself or completely lose face. You must understand that. Don't go to Gavin with this. If you still love me, leave General Kharon to me."

Caraculla was helpless. She had used his guilt against him and it was a powerful weapon. Even though he knew he should order her not to go he couldn't bring himself to do it. So he tried one more appeal. "I have a very bad feeling about this, Gypsy. Once you're there, you'll be completely under his control. At least take some men with you."

"You know I can't do that. If something happens and things go wrong I'm not going to sacrifice anyone else for my personal problems. Going alone is the only way."

"If he keeps you there, I'll do all I can to free you," he said.

"You'll only get yourself killed or start a war. Both of which will end up being my fault. Please, Caraculla, let me handle this. I know he won't hurt me."

He reached out and pulled her into his arms and hugged her as tight as he could. "I love you, Gypsy," he whispered in her ear. "I always have and I always will."

She pulled back and gave him a sad smile. "I love you, too, but you can't protect me from this. This is my problem and I'm going to solve it."

Chapter 13

When Kharon returned to the barn from the afternoon hunt, an Imperial messenger was waiting. Kharon dismounted, tossed his reins at a nearby stable hand and pulled off his gloves. The stable hand led Kharon's hyperia off, leaving him and the messenger alone. The messenger shifted nervously, waiting for the general to address him. Asking the messenger what he wanted was a formality, he knew who the message was from and what the boy was going to say.

"Speak," Kharon commanded. The messenger flinched from the harsh tone in Kharon's voice.

"Ensign Gypsy Theron would like a meeting with you over your AEssyrian marriage to her," the boy said.

"Where?"

"Somewhere in neutral territory."

"I figured that. Name the place," Kharon said.

"She suggested Isras Pass," the messenger said, taking a cautious step back. Kharon didn't blame the boy. It wasn't unheard of for a warrior to attack a messenger when he didn't like the message.

"You tell her that's fine. How about tonight?" Kharon suggested.

"I'll let her know, Excellency," the messenger said, bowing. "May I go, sir?"

“Yes,” Kharon said with a dismissive wave of his hand. Walking over to the barn’s double doors, he stared out at the palace’s busy courtyard. Maids rushed around bringing clean table linens inside for the evening meal, master trainers worked with young hyperia teaching them to take a saddle and bit, young soldiers practiced sparring with one another hoping to one day be good enough to rank. Everyone embroiled in their own private lives and ambitions, just like him.

So Gypsy had finally discovered he’d made her his wife. The realization both thrilled and shamed him. He was delighted that the truth was finally out in the open, but shamed that he’d snuck around behind her back to make them man and wife. There was no doubt she’d be furious. But Kharon wasn’t too worried, because once he told her he had reduced his other three wives to consorts, she’d warm up to the idea.

But what if she didn’t? She could be extremely headstrong and didn’t take submission very well. It was one of those things he both loved and hated about her.

Rubbing the back of his neck, he worried he might not be able to convince her to come back with him. There was no bullying Gypsy. If she didn’t want to do something, she certainly wouldn’t.

He was going to need more time to convince her that this was the best for both of them. If she wouldn’t come willingly, he’d have to bring her back by force. Hopefully, with Gavin still somewhat recovering from his back surgery as Golda had reported, he’d have enough time to talk sense into her.

The memory of her lusty scent fired his passion and his cock grew painfully hard. He couldn’t wait to be with her

again so their chemistry could work its magic. What nights they would have! And, if the Gods were willing, she might even conceive a child, their child. If he could only convince her to join him, there is no limit to what they could achieve together. He reined his emotions in. First things first. He had to get her back here. Then, with a little time and patience, the rest would fall into place.

“Buried in thoughts of conquest or love?” Golda’s voice came from behind him.

Kharon turned to see the princess strolling up with a wicked grin. He swept his gaze down her body. She was a beautiful girl, but treacherous, and he always watched what he said around her. One slip of the tongue and the whole court knew your business. “Conquest always,” he replied.

“I’ve heard it rumored you’re smitten with Gypsy Theron,” she said playfully.

“Your ears should be twice the size for all the gossip you hear,” he said.

Golda giggled. “Well, if you do love her, this would be a good time to win her heart for good. Her longtime lover, Caraculla, left her for a new wife and rumor has it Gypsy is desolate.”

Kharon considered this information. What an odd thing for Caraculla to do. He had been so sure the young warrior had been madly in love with her. Perhaps Caraculla was threatened by Kharon’s primal connection to Gypsy. Kharon knew if their roles were reversed he would be insane with jealousy at the very thought of his mate being brought into season by another. Either that or there must be more to this

marriage than the gossip mill knew. Maybe even a political maneuver. But Golda was right about one thing: it would make his courtship of Gypsy easier.

Golda sashayed up to him, smiling. Wrapping her arms around his neck, she placed a gentle kiss on his lips, awakening the beast inside his soul. “You still haven’t told me you missed me,” she said with a seductive pout. “Perhaps you’re so taken with General Theron’s daughter that there’s no room in your bed for anyone else?”

Kharon grinned and ran his fingers into her thick, dark hair. “There is always room in my bed, no matter who owns my heart. All you have to do is ask.” Then Kharon picked up Golda and carried her off to be ravished before dinner.

Chapter 14

Gypsy arrived at Isras Pass midevening. It was a peaceful, quiet place surrounded by dense forest and tiny, scattered meadows. The three moons were high and full, casting a brilliant glow that seemed to ignite the surrounding woods. Just being here reminded her of a dozen legendary war stories fought by long-dead kings to get control of these coveted lands. Finally, after centuries of violent, bloody war, it was designated a buffer zone and became a place where anyone could come and hunt but no one could officially call it their territory. It also meant that no one was policing the things that went on here. Gypsy reminded herself to be cautious and keep her wits about her.

Then a familiar scent flooded her senses and sped her heart to frantic life. General Kharon was close. It was more than his scent that told her, it was an instinct rooted deep in the earth of her soul. Just the thought of being with him again made her desire burn high. The stronger his aroma grew, the more her anger floundered. Her entire being ached to see and touch him. *He married you by force! You need to be pissed! I don't care how hot for him you are.*

General Kharon rode into the clearing in full dark gray battle armor and the sight of him caught her breath in her throat. He was as magnificent as she remembered, a true bull

male weighing over three hundred pounds of pure muscle. He was also very handsome, his tough, hard features a perfect marriage of animal cunning and harsh aggression. And then there were those two mismatched eyes: one a dull brownish-green and the other an arctic blue. The blue one sported a three-link chain tattoo under it. Seeing him again was such a narcotic rush she could barely remember why she was here. Then it came back to her and her temper ignited.

"You fucking bastard! How dare you marry me without my consent! We discussed this. I thought I made myself clear on the issue," she said.

She expected him to be angry but he wasn't. A devilish chuckled tumbled from his chest. "None of that matters now, Gypsy. The fact remains, you are my wife and I want you to come home with me."

"My home is in the empire," she replied icily.

"No. You are still under your father's protection like any young girl would be. Now it is time for you to become a woman and take your place as my wife."

Gypsy was stunned. Any passion she'd felt only a few moments ago disappeared like a phantom in an empty house. Kharon seemed so different from when she'd known him a few months ago. *What has changed?* "I'm only here to ask you to put the marriage aside."

"I won't," he shot back.

"Why not? You already have three wives. Surely you have enough women throwing themselves at you that you don't need one more unwilling one," she said, hoping to appeal to his logic.

"I reclassified my wives. All of them are consorts now, and so fearful I'll put them out in the street, they wouldn't dare bother you. You are my destined mate, Gypsy. You are the one I want, the one I've always wanted. Can't you see I am the male meant for you? Why do you refuse to see what is obvious to all?"

"I do not recognize this marriage and I will never go back with you," she said, glaring at him.

Kharon made a small gesture and suddenly a group of his soldiers rode into the clearing and surrounded her. Gypsy was shocked that she hadn't detected their presence earlier. *It's this fucking Primal Fever. My senses are so completely screwed up, all they focus on is Kharon.* She was so angry at herself for trusting him she wanted to scream.

"The subject is not up for debate," he replied ominously.

"So this is it, then," she said, reaching for her saber. "This is how it's going to be."

Kharon spurred his hyperia forward and grabbed her arm before she could clear her weapon from its scabbard. She snarled in rage and slammed her elbow into his jaw but it did little to loosen his grip.

Side by side, they brawled for a few minutes until Gypsy was able to break free and jump off her hyperia. Then she pulled her saber. She took a few cautious steps back as Kharon dismounted. "I don't want to hurt you, Gypsy," he said.

"Well you're going to have to, Kharon," she replied, holding her saber at the ready.

Kharon signaled his men and five of them dismounted and surrounded her. Gypsy fumed, unable to believe how naive

she'd been. Her thoughts tumbled back to when Gavin had warned her something like this might happen. How she'd wished she'd listened to him. "Afraid to fight me by yourself?" she taunted.

Kharon grinned. "That's just it, darling. I don't intend to fight you at all. I'd never forgive myself if I injured you."

Gypsy scoffed at him and sliced at one of the soldiers getting too close. She backed toward a dense thicket of trees trying to read which one was going to come for her. A young male charged forward and she sliced her sword upward, opening up his thigh and part of his hip. While she was momentarily distracted, the rest of the men pounced on her at once. She collapsed under their collective weight. They wrenched her saber from her, but she continued to fight them hard enough for it to take all four of them to subdue her.

The fifth, now a gory mess and blind with rage stumbled forward with his saber raised. Before he could separate her head from the rest of her, Kharon dismounted and grabbed him from behind. He gripped the soldier's jaw and twisted his head back with a sickening snap. The soldier fell to the ground in front of her. The others continued to struggle with her until she couldn't move. Then her arms were yanked behind her and bound. She was hauled to her feet roughly. Two of the men held each arm and dragged her before their general. "You son of a bitch!" Gypsy snarled at him and tried to kick him as she struggled. "Let me go!"

Kharon mounted his hyperia and pulled her on in front of him. He wrapped one arm around her waist. Then he leaned in close to her ear and whispered, "I'm sorry, Gypsy. I can't

let you go. You are mine, whether you choose to accept it or not. I'm going to do everything I can to keep you."

"And I'm going to do everything I can to kill you, Kharon," she said through her teeth.

"Well then, we both have our work cut out for us," he said. Then he nodded to his men and, leading her mount behind them, they headed back to his kingdom.

Chapter 15

The ride to Kharon's kingdom was nothing less than pure torture. Forced to sit on the front of his hyperia for the entire ride, Gypsy's will to fight was waning. Oh sure, she struggled here and there but nothing like she would have had she not had to contend with her raging hormones. The accursed Primal Fever worked its infernal magic on her mind and body until the only thing she could focus on was having sex with the treacherous bastard. Just being in this casual contact with him was making her break out into an animal sweat like she'd been running for miles. Gods, how she hated this damn connection!

Kharon leaned forward and nuzzled her ear. She lifted her shoulder to shrug him off but even that was halfhearted. "I've missed you," he said.

"I haven't missed you," she growled back.

"Your body tells me otherwise."

"Does my body also tell you that my shoulders are killing me and my arms are numb from these damn restraints?" she snapped at him.

Grasping one of her wrists tightly he unclamped the band on the other wrist, moved her arms to the front then refastened the restraints. "Better?" he asked.

"No! Not better!" she snapped. "I hate you for marrying me against my will and behind my back. I thought we unders-

tood each other.” Gypsy wanted desperately to sound angrier than she truly felt but it wasn’t working. He could smell her desire.

“I think you will come to see this is best for both of us.”

“You’re crazy if you think that. I’ll never stop fighting you to win back my freedom.”

“You won’t need to fight me, my beloved. I’ll offer you your freedom once I’ve had a chance to talk some sense into you,” he replied.

“I’ve already given you my answer! It’s not going to change.”

“Don’t be angry,” he said, daring to sound wounded. “I did this because I love you.”

“This has nothing to do with love,” she seethed. “This is about control.”

Kharon chuckled. The rich, deep sound of his voice made her nipples hard. *Oh this is truly a hellish experience.* “I wouldn’t dare presume to control you, my beloved.”

“But by ignoring my request to be set free, you are controlling me.”

“Just give me a little time to convince you of my honest intentions. If you still don’t believe this is for the best, I’ll let you go,” he said. He sounded far too relaxed and happy for her taste.

“There is nothing honest about you or your intentions. Release me now and return to your wives who actually want to be with you,” Gypsy retorted, feeling evil.

“I only have one wife now. The others have been reduced to consorts.”

Gypsy's stomach twisted into a hard, tight knot. *They must be scared shitless that he married me.* "You're a cold, miserable asshole."

Kharon shrugged. "They've not been harmed and they are still being provided for. None of them have even had a cut in their revenue. I think I've been very compassionate."

"But you did it because of me," she said. It was an accusation disguised as a statement of fact.

Kharon stopped his hyperia and let his soldiers ride up ahead. They were deep into his territory now and safe from possible attack by the empire. When the soldiers were out of earshot, he said, "I love you, Gypsy. I don't think you understand how deeply, but you will. You are the only woman who has ever made me feel like this and I intend to do everything and anything in my power to keep you as my wife. And don't bother lying to me about how you feel. Your scent is pure and clear; you are mine. Your body rages with a storm only I can calm. Why won't you surrender to your feelings and try for a little while to live as my wife? Let me show you how happy we can be."

"I'll never be happy here with you. The harder you try to keep me the fiercer my resistance will be. You may hold the key to my desire but that's it!"

"We shall see, my beloved. We shall see."

Chapter 16

Caraculla stared at the dirty, wrinkled dispatch paper as a cold wave of fear washed over him. The news of Gypsy's abduction came twenty minutes after she didn't report back from her meeting with Kharon. Now he had to tell Gavin. A light knock sounded on his open door and he looked up to see her Kirillian half-brother Desmond.

"Sorry to bother you, sir, but Gypsy didn't show up for practice and nobody else seems to know where she is," Desmond said. "I thought I would try you as a last resort." Desmond gave the lieutenant general a suspicious look, which was probably in response to whatever mask of worry Caraculla was wearing at the moment. Caraculla didn't know what to tell him, so he just stayed silent.

"What's happened?" Desmond finally asked.

"She went to meet with Kharon. She wanted to convince him to put an end to the marriage and General Kharon took her back to his kingdom by force," Caraculla said. It had been the most difficult thing he'd ever had to tell anyone.

Desmond stared at him. "Are you fucking crazy? You let her ride out there by herself? What the hell were you thinking?" Desmond took two aggressive steps into Caraculla's office.

"I didn't have much choice. She was going with or without my permission," Caraculla said.

"Are you her commanding officer or not? You could've ordered her not to go. You could have locked her up if you had to. Don't you realize that Megolyth just turned Princess Golda Vieran out? King Vieran's daughter has been sent home in disgrace. Now there's going to be a dispute because Megolyth is not returning the lands that came with her. The king's got to feel insulted and pissed off right now. This may turn into an armed conflict and you've just handed him an Imperial hostage!"

"How is it that you know all of this?" Caraculla said, having no knowledge of this himself.

"My girlfriend, Doctor Jonson, had to examine Golda before she left to assure King Vieran that the traitorous bitch wasn't carrying the emperor's child." Desmond was yelling now and his anger was intensifying. Caraculla had never seen him this agitated and although he wasn't afraid of Desmond, Caraculla had a healthy respect for his fighting ability.

"You standing there yelling at me isn't going to solve anything. Don't you think I know what's at stake here?"

"Well, you need to *act* before things get worse!" Desmond shouted.

Caraculla's frown deepened. "I'll need Gavin's permission to try a rescue. We'd better go tell him what's happened."

* * * *

The muffled sound of a heated argument bled through Gavin's door and mixed with the light haze of cigar smoke

that meandered through his office. One of the voices had a familiar tone and was possibly that of his son Desmond...yes that was definitely Desmond and he was most certainly yelling. *Strange*. Gavin had never head Desmond yell about *anything*, even those things that should be yelled about. Gavin crushed out his cigar and went out into the hallway following the shouts toward Caraculla's office. The fact that the angry participants were his son and his lieutenant general gave him a feeling of dread. Something must be very wrong indeed. The second he darkened the doorway of Caraculla's office both men fell silent.

"Tell me what?" Gavin asked.

* * * *

When Gavin was angry, he usually made Caraculla stand at attention in front of his desk for a long time before being addressed. There was no such formality this time. Gavin wasted no time in getting to the root of the problem.

"Would you mind telling me, what the *fuck* is going on?" Gavin bellowed.

Caraculla stared straight ahead. "Gypsy has been abducted by General Kharon, sir."

"I overheard that part," Gavin said icily. "But what I want to know is how the fuck did she get in a position to be abducted by General Kharon in the first place?"

Desmond wasted no time in interjecting. "This bastard let her waltz off to the buffer zone to have a friendly meeting with Kharon. He's probably just gotten her killed."

"You!" Gavin barked, pointing at Desmond. "Stand down and close your mouth or I'll throw your ass out of here. I'm

speaking to Caraculla.” Desmond snapped to attention and immediately fell into a sullen silence.

Caraculla swallowed. “She was upset about the Assyrian marriage Kharon conducted without her knowledge. She went to ask him to release her. The answer seems to have been no.”

Gavin glared at him. “Don’t try and get cute with me, Caraculla, or I’ll hack your head off.”

“Yes, Excellency. I’m sorry, sir.”

“Am I wrong in assuming she came to you first with this stupid idea?” Gavin asked the lieutenant general.

“Yes, sir, she came to me and told me what she was planning to do. I tried to talk her out of it, but she was adamant,” Caraculla replied.

Gavin eased down into a chair and took out a fresh cigar. Not bothering to light it, he stuck it in his teeth and chewed it from one side to the other. Some of the edge seemed to have come off his anger.

Caraculla felt completely responsible for what had happened and wished Gavin would just run him through to put him out of his misery. But he knew the general wasn’t going to let him off that easy. *Is there anything in my dealings with Gypsy that I don’t fuck up? First the secret wedding and now this.* “I’d like to try a rescue, sir,” Caraculla managed after several minutes.

Gavin squinted at him as if he was some stranger who had approached him on the street mumbling crazy things. “No,” Gavin replied with a finality that shocked Caraculla. Not an “I’ll think about it” just a solid “no”.

“Why not?” Caraculla and Desmond said almost in unison.

Leaning back in his chair, Gavin put his boots up on the desk. “I’ll tell you why not. Because she is a soldier, not a child. If I suspend my commission to go off and rescue her, not only will I dishonor her as an officer, but I probably won’t be successful. No, as much as I hate to abandon her, she’s a big girl and she’s on her own. Unfortunately, this is one blunder that she is going to have to figure her way out of by herself.”

“And what if Kharon kills her?” Caraculla said barely able to contain the venom in his voice. “Then what?”

“Listen, she’s my daughter and I don’t want to see her harmed any more than you do. But the difference between you and I is that you still see her as a cadet and I see her as a competent warrior. I believe she can handle this. Besides, Kharon would never kill her. He’s madly in love. If anything, she has an advantage over him.”

“I sure hope you’re right,” Caraculla said. He tried to sound less worried but he wasn’t. Gypsy was in serious danger and they all knew it.

“She’s a tigress and more than a match for Kharon. I should know, I trained her. Now you go home and take care of your new wife, Caraculla. And you,” Gavin said, turning to Desmond, “go home to your girlfriend. We’ll discuss this later...if I survive breaking the bad news to her mother.”

“Yes, sir,” Caraculla said. He left his office feeling worse than when he’d arrived this morning. If only he hadn’t let the nobles and the emperor talk him into marrying Nessa. Maybe

then he and Gypsy might have had a future. But even as he wondered what might have been, he knew Gypsy would have gone to meet Kharon. She never would have tolerated this forced marriage and Caraculla couldn't blame her. Gavin was right. Gypsy was more than a match for Kharon. He just hoped her battle of wills with the general didn't leave her dead.

Chapter 17

From the cliff's edge, the view was spectacular. The crests and valleys of the mountains were freckled with small towns and hamlets, their inhabitants busily preparing for the night ahead. Off in the distance were the formidable walls of the Royal Palace and its surrounding buildings. But Gypsy wasn't impressed by any this. She'd seen it before on her first visit to Kharon's kingdom. Now it held just about as much allure as any prison would.

"Why have you brought me here?" she asked.

"To show you all that could be ours. Don't you realize, Gypsy, that we are on the verge of an historic moment? Never before has there been a match like us. With our combined ability, we could destroy the king and build a dynasty of our own."

Gypsy sat there, stunned. No wonder he had brought her up here far out of earshot of his men. What he was proposing was treason. "You think quite a lot of yourself."

"I think a lot of *us* as a team. You and I together. We could be the first husband and wife co-rulers in AEssyrian history."

Her throat was annoyingly dry and she gestured for the canteen. He handed it to her and Gypsy took a long sip. Lowering the canteen, she allowed herself a moment to let the

possibility sink in. There was still so much for her to learn. Was she up to taking command of a legion? Gypsy knew she wasn't. But it was quite a tempting offer. Bypass all those annoying lower ranks and rise right to the top of the heap. "And what if the emperor opposes our coup and sends Gavin to stop us."

"Gavin wouldn't march against you."

She shook her head in amazement. The ghostly stories of her brother Northe echoed through her soul. Had he once been engaged in a conversation similar to this? A cold terror chilled her blood thinking of what it must have been like for Northe to hate Gavin so much that he wanted to kill him on the field of battle. Did she hate her father? No, not even close. She loved him and dared to believe he loved her as well, even if he never really showed it.

"You're wrong, Kharon," she said with a hint of doom to her tone. "He would march on me without hesitation. And the emperor wouldn't just sit idly by and let us take over this kingdom. Once he found out the king was dead, he'd send troops and try to annex the territory himself."

Kharon placed his hands behind his back and hung his head in thought. "I have already considered that. We may be able to negotiate a treaty with him."

Gypsy didn't know the emperor that well, but she'd bet her career he wasn't going to go for any treaty she and Kharon cooked up. "He'll spit it back in our faces. Even with the size of your army, you're no match for Imperial numbers." She wanted to add, *or the wrath of my father* but decided that was better left unsaid.

“We won’t be solely dependent on my army,” Kharon said with an evil light in his eyes.

Gypsy’s palms started to sweat. Something terrible was happening here and she was at a total loss to stop it. Kharon had been a busy boy planning all this. It must have taken him years. Gypsy put on her best game face. “How many troops are we talking about?”

“At least two other kingdoms are willing to support us,” he said.

It looked like there were many ambitious males out there, but that didn’t surprise her too much. There had been rumblings over the past few years from those who wanted to bring down the emperor and her father. She wondered why they hadn’t tried already. Then she realized the tipping point was her. Gypsy’s capture by Kharon was a stroke of cunning that served two purposes. If Kharon got her to join them, she worked as both a defector to cripple Gavin and as new talent. Who better to set against her father than the soldier he himself had trained? As tempting as the offer sounded, she wasn’t ready to take command of anything, let alone a legion. Gypsy still had so much to learn and so much experience to gain. This was doomed to fail and she knew it.

“I have to think about it,” Gypsy said, trying to buy some time.

Kharon chuckled. “Don’t think too long or your window of opportunity will be gone.”

“And then what?” Gypsy asked.

He shrugged and pulled her back onto the front of his mount. “Then I’ll just keep you home and breed you. And

there's not a whole lot you'll want to do about it, because you're coming into another season, Gypsy, and this time my seed will find its mark."

Chapter 18

They arrived back in the early evening to an impressive feast. Kharon brought Gypsy into the banquet room and handed her a plate. She couldn't believe how cavalier he was being about her abduction.

"I'm not eating anything," she said, putting the plate back down on the table.

Kharon had the nerve to look insulted. "Why not?"

Gypsy folded her arms. "You *are* joking, right?"

"No, I'm not."

"You've taken me prisoner and you expect me to act like I'm just here on vacation? I'm your captive, Kharon. Nothing but my release will change that," Gypsy said.

Kharon moved closer and the witchcraft of his scent made her lightheaded. "If you won't eat, I'll just have to work an appetite out of you." Slipping his arms around her, he pulled her into a powerful embrace. Gypsy stiffened but despite her wish to be let go, her body betrayed her, refusing to fight the general. Instead a terrible desire overtook her, muddying every intelligent thought in her head.

His mouth covered hers in a sensuous kiss and she was lost. Never in her life had she felt so helpless and alone. The seduction bordered on painful, with her blood rushing through her body and her pussy slick with desperate need. As her

body's betrayal continued, her hands lifted without her willing them to and pushed into the thick mane of Kharon's hair. Her fingers curled through his dark locks as her mouth reveled in the sensation of his carnal kisses.

A rushing began in her ears like a great wave had crashed over her and she was drowning in its salty foam. Then Kharon lifted her into his arms and carried her out of the banquet room to his private apartment. Reaching his colossal bed, he laid her down and rained delicate kisses along her face and throat. Each gentle contact was a butterfly landing on her skin. Gypsy's instinct took over, pushing her until she undressed and welcomed Kharon's magnificent body on top of her.

Kharon too stripped and moved over her as she writhed and twisted beneath him. His tender lips nuzzled the hair away from her ear. "How I love you, Gypsy," he whispered.

Tears of frustration burned her eyes as every part of her wanted to tell him that she loved him too. She grabbed control of her tongue and instead said, "If you really loved me, you would let me go."

"I will," he promised.

"Do it now," she demanded.

"Why don't you just ask me to tear my heart out of my chest?"

Gypsy ran her hand down his face, staring into his mismatched eyes. A tiny part of her surrendered completely. It wasn't all of her, but it was enough. She parted her legs and let him drive his enormous cock home.

Arching her back, Gypsy let out a loud gasp. Every nerve sang with luscious contact as Kharon pushed his sex all the way to the hilt. The part of her that still had logical thought wanted to fight him but it was an empty wish. Her body was his, as completely as if he'd cast a spell on her and there was nothing she could do to stop it. As long as this Primal Fever flowed through her veins she was never going to be able fight him properly and the realization made her sad but even more determined to escape.

Kharon's hunger grew fiercer with every stroke, massaging her drenched walls until Gypsy's climax slammed into her body like an avalanche. Her smooth muscles clenched around his cock, squeezing and caressing it, until Kharon couldn't contain his passion anymore and shuddered out his own climax, filling her with a generous amount of seed.

She knew it would only be a few moments before he was ready again and the thought filled her with a strange mixture of dread and anticipation. How was she ever going to get free of this horrible curse? And was this damned Primal Fever the end of an all-too-short military career?

Chapter 19

Gypsy laid awake listening for the respiratory cadence that would tell her Kharon was asleep. It never came. When an hour passed, he arose and began to dress. She watched him silently, praying he would leave her. Instead he leaned down, wrapping his arms around her. Then he stood up with her in his arms and gently placed her on the ground.

“Get dressed. You’re changing quarters,” he said gently, pushing her toward her clothes.

“What do you mean changing quarters?” she said, slipping into her clothes.

“This room isn’t secure enough. I want you some place safe and sound until we can spend more time together.” When Gypsy had pulled on her boots and stood up, he quickly moved up behind her and bound her hands with a leather strap.

“Is that really necessary?” she said, annoyed.

“You should be flattered that I think so. I will not make the mistake of underestimating you, Gypsy. You have been trained by the best and I am not so naive as to think that you’re not a threat.”

Kharon led her from the room into the main hallway where she drew some curious stares. He didn’t appear to notice the audience as he gripped her arm tighter and brought

her down several spiraling flights of stone steps. Once they hit the bottom landing they walked through a dimly lit corridor. Gypsy guessed it led to some type of holding area. A guard unlocked one of the steel doors and Kharon escorted her inside. The room could have easily been guest quarters were it not for the wall of bars making up one side of it. The other three walls were bland gray stone with a fairly large bed situated across from the bars. Halfway up the wall above the bed were three small square openings in the stone that provided a view of the opposing mountain range. Although the openings were too small for even her to fit through, each was secured with crisscrossed bars.

“My cell?”

“Your room. It’s a bit nicer than a regular cell. We use it for prisoners of nobility. It has all of the basic comforts of a guestroom coupled with unbreachable confinement. This will be your new home until I can convince you to accept this marriage and your destiny.” He slid the inner cell door open and gently pushed her inside. As soon as he had untied her hands, she immediately moved across the room away from him. Kharon sighed and pulled on the bars until the door slid shut. The lock emitted a loud click when it engaged. Gypsy walked around the cell taking in its limited furnishings.

“You’re wasting your time, Kharon. By keeping me prisoner you are only strengthening my resolve.”

“I disagree, my love. The more time you spend with me the more your instincts will take over and pull you closer to me.” He took a few steps back from the bars, watched her for a moment longer, then turned and walked out. The outer

steel door closed behind him with an ominous clang. Gypsy sat on the edge of the bed and put her face in her hands. *How could I have gotten myself into this? Why am I always so wrong about everything?*

Chapter 20

Later that night, Gypsy awoke to a whiff of Kharon's masculine scent sweetly caressing her nose. Her body immediately filled with a familiar warmth and need. *Oh crap! Not again.* She lay frozen on her bed with her back to the door hoping that she was mistaken. Her cell door creaked as it slid open and she felt Kharon's presence fill the room with a stifling heat. Her body sang with delight as her mind concentrated on trying to hate him. She was so focused on keeping still and controlling her passion that she didn't even hear Kharon come over to the bed. Wrapping his arms around her waist, he pulled her onto his lap as he sat down on the bed with his back resting against the wall. She closed her eyes and reveled in the momentary bliss of her contact with his warm skin. She was confused, depressed, tired and hungry. Worst of all, even if she hadn't been all of those things, she would have been ill-equipped to fight him. Shame filled her as she submitted to his soft kisses and even dared to enjoy them. Cradling her against his chest, he stroked her belly while licking her neck.

"I fail to understand why you are still resisting the inevitable," he whispered into her ear. "Don't you realize we complete each other and I will never willingly be without you?"

A soft moan escaped her lips as she clenched her fists, trying not to return his caresses. "Don't you realize that this isn't

real? It's nothing more than some hormonal throwback to a different time. Even you're not thinking logically because of the hold it has on you. Can't you see it doesn't *mean* anything?"

"You're so wrong, Gypsy. It means everything, and if I have to keep you locked up and breed you every night until you conceive, then so be it. You can't fight what's natural. Why can't you just accept the love we have? Why are you denying yourself the opportunity to be happy?"

"You are crazy, Kharon. The love we feel for each other doesn't really exist. Why can't you accept that we are being manipulated by our hormones?" she countered, leaning her head back against his shoulder, shuddering with pleasure at each touch.

Placing his fingertips on her cheek, Kharon turned her face toward him. "Are you fighting these emotions because of Caraculla?"

"I love Caraculla and no amount of primal subjugation will ever change that," she snapped.

"Why? Why do you love him? All he has ever done is betray you."

"That seems to be a common theme with the men in my life," she replied flatly.

"You were never meant to be with him. Even *he* knew it. First he demanded you put him aside as your husband and then he marries another woman behind your back. Are these the actions of someone who loves you?" he continued.

"As if you're any better. You who married *me* behind my back knowing I would object. Then you abduct me and hold

me prisoner. What makes you so much more honorable than him?"

Kharon pressed his cheek against hers and whispered, "Because everything I have done to this point I have done because I love you."

"Again that's the fever talking. You have no other reason to be in love with me."

"Why do you say that? Is it so hard to believe that my feelings are real? You and I are not so different. I have broken the bonds of slavery and of convention. We understand each other to the core, and all you want to do is deny this perfect union."

Gypsy stopped talking to him. It was obvious he had lost his mind and there was no logic left in him. She would need a different strategy. Maybe if she submitted to him he would let his guard down and she could escape. She had to try something because she was enjoying being close to him and it was interfering with her desire to leave.

Swallowing her pride, Gypsy ran her hands up his heavily muscled chest and softly kissed him. Stripping off her clothes, she climbed backward into his lap facing him and reached into his pants to free his enormous member. Gently, she stroked her hands up and down the thick organ while rubbing her thumbs along the ridges.

But Kharon wasn't having her sweet seduction. He bit his lower lip and swatted her hands away. Roughly wrapping his hand around the shaft, he thrust it up and into her moist center with a lazy growl. Plumes of complete pleasure raced up her spine. Gypsy grabbed his shoulders and began pumping

her hips up and down his swollen cock until a simultaneous climax erupted from both of them. Leaning her head back, she cried out, digging her nails into his flesh. He reclined backward, pulling her down on top of him and murmuring something unintelligible in her neck. Sliding her arms around him, she gently massaged the base of his spine until he grew hard again. She was confident he would attribute her affections entirely to the Primal Fever rather than treachery. It was time to start using this curse to her advantage if she hoped to get an opportunity to escape.

* * * *

For a male like Kharon, there had always been women. From the time he hit puberty and even through his slave years, women had wanted to be his. They'd given him their bodies, their hearts, and even on occasion, their money. They'd sought him out when he'd first become a general, tempting him with their beauty and intellect. And he'd rarely turned away any of them, but there was always something missing in the mix, and that was love. He'd dated some of the most beautiful and intelligent women on AEssyria and not one of them had ever made him feel anything more than sexual hunger. That was until Gypsy came along.

To try and define his feelings for her was like trying to explain the purpose of blood in one's veins. She was much more than carnal desire and fulfillment, she was the cornerstone of his heart, a heart he never thought he had. She made him feel more alive than he'd ever felt in his life and he simply couldn't dream of a life without her. She had become everything to him and now he worried about how he was going to

keep her. Their future was stuck, stalled in the mire of conflicting wills, and Kharon had no idea how this was going to end. But the only thing he did know was that even though it appeared he had the upper hand, he was losing.

Lying next to her on the bed, he could hear the gentle rhythm of her breathing and for the first time in his career, he didn't want to go back to the army. He wanted to stay here with her for as long as he could. He nuzzled the delicate flesh behind her ear. "Stay here in the kingdom with me," he whispered.

"And throw away everything I've worked and fought for? I can't do that, Kharon, and you know it," she replied without turning around.

"I can help you forge a new career, one where we can both serve together."

"And what about my father? Am I just supposed to turn my back on him and my brother to serve you?" She scooted away from him and sat up. "I'll tell you what. If you want to be with me so bad, you give up your career and come serve Megolyth with me."

"I can't do that, Gypsy," he replied.

"Why not? There's nothing to hold you here but vanity. You've given up your wives and it's no secret you have no great love for your king. Why not come and join me in the empire? I know my father would welcome a male with your background and military experience. Why not?"

Kharon got up off the bed. It squeaked loud in protest under his shifting weight. "I'm going, but I'll be back."

“Is that your answer?’ Gypsy asked, her gaze sharp and inquisitive.

“Yes,” he growled. “You have my answer.”

Chapter 21

It seemed like weeks had passed but she wasn't sure, having lost track of time in her confinement. They had reached an impasse. Kharon refused to let her out of the cell and Gypsy refused to eat...as far as he knew. She did eat a few small unnoticeable things just to keep up some strength but she wanted Kharon to think that she was much weaker than she really was. He was a lot of things, but unfortunately for her, stupid wasn't one of them. Where most males would have underestimated her based on the mere fact that she was female, he took every precaution. He stripped himself of all weapons and made sure that she was visible and away from the door before he entered her cell. Were it not for her current predicament she would have been flattered that he thought so highly of her abilities.

As she lay on her bed staring at the stony imperfections in the ceiling she guessed it was about late afternoon when the guard came in with a satchel of food. Pushing it in through the bars he dropped it near the cell gate and pulled out the previous bag that had remained untouched.

"You know I have to tell him every time you don't eat." He sighed, opening the bag and surveying the contents.

"Then stop wasting your time bringing me food," she said, feeling an abrupt spark of fury ignite in her. She got up

suddenly, bolting toward the cell gate and causing the soldier to quickly backpedal to the far wall. Grabbing the new satchel, she pushed it back through the bars and threw it toward the exterior door. It hit the floor with a thud and some of the contents spilled out.

The soldier glared at her. "I wish you *would* eat. Then maybe I'd get lucky and Golda would poison you," he muttered under his breath.

"Who the hell is Golda?" she asked, although she cared little about anything but being with Kharon.

"One of the king's daughters and another one of the general's playthings. Kind of like you, only he doesn't have to keep her in a cage." He smirked at her.

Gypsy launched herself at the bars, swiping at the soldier, but he remained just out of reach. "Fuck you and leave me alone, you piece of shit!"

The soldier shrugged and said, "I could really give a damn whether or not you eat. I just wish you'd either give in or die, so I don't have to keep contending with your surly ass."

"The feeling is mutual. You can tell that oversized asshole that I'm not eating until he lets me out of here."

* * * *

Every night he came to her and usually stayed until morning. She knew he was trying to bring her into season and probably thought the more often he had sex with her the sooner it would happen.

And he was probably right.

Their evenings seemed to follow a preset agenda that usually started with her demanding that he put the marriage

aside and release her. He, of course, would refuse and erupt into one of his endless rants about the potential future they could have together. Then their terse dialog would devolve into a loud, vicious argument which always, always ended with them naked, gasping for breath entwined in their passion for each other.

Gypsy wanted to believe sex was always initiated by him, but that would be a lie. The second their confrontations became physical they also became sexual. And when it was over she would try and will herself to break the contact, to roll away in rejection with her back to him. It never happened that way. Instead she would press against his warm skin drinking in the blissful aromas as he dozed.

Kharon would be here in a few hours and Gypsy needed to start putting her plan in motion while she still had the faculties to do so. Every waking moment, she spent fighting the urge to surrender and remain here with him. The battle that raged within her was so intense that it manifested itself in physical maladies. She could feel changes taking place in her body and she knew she was quickly running out of time. Each day her desire to be with him strengthened and her resolve to leave weakened. Her oncoming season was causing changes in him, too. She doubted he was even aware of them. As her body became more receptive to his primal pull she spent more time yearning for his presence. *I can't lose this war. I won't live at his mercy like this.*

Gypsy stood on her bed staring out the middle window at the purple and green hues of the valley below. Throwing her-

self from the window would have been preferable to this misery. If only she could fit through it.

There it was...sooner than expected. His virile aroma was like a narcotic that dulled all analytical reasoning and a stimulant that awakened her instincts at their primitive core. Sometimes she could smell him a full five minutes before he even reached the door to her cell.

After several minutes, the all-too-familiar bang of the steel door followed by the click and grind of the cell gate sliding open signaled his arrival. She remained on her perch with her back to him. Then out of nowhere a spike of aggression shot up through her emotions.

"Isn't it a little early in the day for you? Or is Golda not available?" she said, not looking back at him. The threads of jealousy that weaved through her tones annoyed the hell out of her. *I can't believe I'm jealous over his attentions to another woman. How much worse is this going to get?* She heard his boots scrape across the floor and the bed groan under his weight as he climbed on it, coming to stand behind her. He ran his hands up her body and under her shirt, stroking around her hips to her back. Gypsy moved her hands up to the window and gripped the two bars to prevent herself from turning around to participate.

"I see the guards have enough idle time to gossip. But to answer your question, Golda is always available to me but not as responsive or as enjoyable as you. She is merely a distraction. It is you that I love," he said, his fingers caressing up her spine. She knitted her eyebrows. This felt more like an exam than a seduction.

“So why are you here this early? The suns haven’t even begun to set.”

“I’m concerned about your health. The guards say you’re still refusing to eat. You’re losing too much weight,” he said, stroking her ribs for emphasis.

“My mother’s a doctor. Why don’t you send me home so she can look after me? She did save your worthless life, as I recall,” she said, attempting to shrug his hands off of her. He, of course, ignored her physical protest and only pressed his body closer.

“Your mother is quite an exceptional woman and I would love having both of you to enjoy. However, your father would go to war for her even if not for you.” Gypsy knew a stab when she heard one. He was trying to play on her naiveté, believing that she would feel slighted that Gavin didn’t come to save her. She knew why he didn’t come. Why he couldn’t come. There were many complex reasons, and she understood them all. Although she hated being at Kharon’s mercy, she knew the worst thing Gavin could do for her was come to her rescue.

“As much as I enjoy our little chats, why don’t you just fuck me and get out?”

“Turn around and look at me,” Kharon said. He tried to pry her hands from the bars but she wouldn’t budge. Gypsy stared out the window doing her best to shut him out by focusing on some birds of prey circling below.

“You should know by now that your defiance won’t stop me from taking you or stop you from loving it,” he purred in her ear.

She continued to ignore him and the heat that rose up through her body. Gypsy thought it might be time to test the waters.

"I'm going to lose my mind in this cell. Why can't I just stay with you until you give up this insanity?" She quickly sucked in her breath as he reached around and unbuttoned her pants, pushing them down to her knees.

"I think we both know the answer to that. I have neither the time nor the patience to babysit you twenty-four hours a day and that's exactly what you'll need. I cannot ignore your training or your tenacity." He exhaled hot breath onto the back of her neck.

"Just take me out of here for a little while. Please. I'll do anything," she pleaded. Then for emphasis she let a soft moan escape her lips.

"Start eating your meals and I'll think about it," he said, trailing kisses down her back and over her butt until he knelt behind her. She felt his large rough hands part her thighs and his tongue expertly slide past her anal core and stroke her moist sex. Gypsy gasped, digging her nails into the stone sill. She could neither speak nor think as his tongue massaged her to the brink of insanity. Just before she broke, he slowly rose, licking a damp trail up her spine.

"I won't try to escape," she groaned the last word as Kharon gripped her hips, pulling her back onto his massive organ. Gypsy pressed her cheek against the cool wall as he lifted one of her legs, sliding deep into her. Unable to say anything intelligible, she let herself get lost in his passion once again, knowing the regret she would feel tomorrow would be fierce.

Chapter 21

Three weeks since her abduction and not a word. Dispatches sent to the kingdom demanding Gypsy's release had thus far gone unanswered. Desmond knew they were at a stalemate. Had Megolyth not booted the king's daughter out they may have been able to make an appeal in the guise of maintaining good relations. General Kharon and the king knew that Megolyth wouldn't go to war for one soldier, especially one who had gotten herself into this mess in the first place.

Gavin was right.

Gypsy had to deal with the consequences of her bad decision on her own. Unfortunately the longer this played out, the less chance Gypsy would have to escape. Desmond didn't know a lot about Primal Fever but he was pretty sure the longer she stayed around Kharon the harder it would be for her to leave. Something needed to be done and soon.

Desmond dozed, lost in thought, while stray lines of morning sun pushed through the drapes casting streams of light on the bed. Slowly, savoring the feelings, he ran his eyes up the alabaster curve of his lover Scarlet, the spicy redhead sleeping next to him. In the few months that they had been together, this tempestuous nymph had pulled some of the

most inspiring emotions out of him. Emotions that he didn't even know he had. The thought of leaving her so he could help Gypsy twisted his mind with indecision. For the first time in his life he had something to lose. Carefully he got up and quietly dressed. When he had finished, he knelt down next to the bed and softly kissed along the line of Scarlet's jaw. Her lips curved into a slight, pouty smile and her eyes blinked open.

"You're up early. I didn't think you had duty today," she mumbled as she stretched.

"I don't. I have to run an errand outside the empire for a few days." He forced himself to make eye contact so she wouldn't suspect anything. Scarlet sat up, instinctively clutching the sheet around her naked body. Apparently he was a bad liar.

"What do you mean? What kind of errand?" she said, completely awake now.

"I can't tell you. If Gavin comes looking for me, it's better that you don't know where I've gone." Desmond stood up and sighed.

"So this isn't an errand for your father," she said with a suspicious tone.

"No," he said, hoping she would stop asking him questions, but knowing she wouldn't.

Scarlet shook her index finger at him in maternal scolding. "Don't you dare lapse in to one word answers with me, Desmond Theron. I want to know where you're going and why I can't tell anyone."

She was the only woman who could pry almost anything out of him. Desmond was a master at stonewalling confrontation with silence and avoidance. But he had come to realize that his skills were meaningless against this fiery she-devil who had managed to hook her claws into his heart. There were still a lot of things she didn't know about him but he was sure, to Scarlet, he was her work-in-progress. "I can't tell you where I'm going. But I need to do something to help Gypsy or she'll never get out of Kharon's kingdom."

"What makes you think you can get in there and rescue her when even Gavin can't?"

"First off, it's not that Gavin can't, he just won't, and second I didn't say I was going there to rescue her. But I know someone who can, if he's willing."

"Who?"

"I can't tell you that," he said firm enough to make her stop pushing. "Gavin would have my head if he knew what I was doing."

"What am I supposed to tell him if he sends for you? I'm not much of a liar either."

"Tell him I picked up extra border patrol duty. He'll believe you since I'm always complaining about how little he pays me." He nodded more to convince himself than her.

Scarlet's lips pulled into a straight line of disapproval. "All he has to do is check the roster and he'll know it's not true. Then I'll give you one guess who he's going to come after first."

"He won't bother you. But even if he does, you'll have no idea where I've gone, so you won't have to lie. I just have to

hope he doesn't figure it out. At any rate, I'll be back before he gets too bent out of shape." *I hope.* Gripping her chin firmly, he pressed his lips against hers and lingered for a few moments. After breaking the kiss, he said, "I have to go so I can get back here before I'm missed. I love you, Scarlet."

"I love you too, Desmond. Please be careful."

Chapter 22

Gypsy sat on the cool stone floor in a corner of the room with her knees pulled up to her chest and her face buried in them. The amount of time that she spent alone was becoming unbearable. Every time Kharon left her a dark depression took up residence in her body and she counted the seconds until he would return. She even looked forward to the few moments a day she spent trading barbs with her asshole guard. The emotional highs with Kharon's presence and lows with his absence put a strain on her that threatened to break her will. She was on the brink of her next season and she didn't know what was going to happen. Sometimes she played with the idea of giving in and exploring the potential of a new life. But memories of her family and Caraculla quickly doused those sparks.

Over the past few days she'd stopped eating completely as her despair consumed her. Unaccustomed to being helpless for long periods of time she was adapting poorly. It wasn't just the physical confinement, that she could deal with as any soldier would. No, the biggest source of her distress was the emotional turmoil storming inside her. She had no control over her passion or her actions, and she was losing herself with each passing day.

The Primal Fever was also making Kharon more sexually demanding and aggressive. When he left, she became restless

and agitated, sometimes pacing her cell for hours. When Kharon was near, a calming force enveloped her and the suffocating loneliness was lifted. It had become so bad she was beginning to loath herself. The mere thought of complete surrender to Kharon during her season sent her soul spiraling into a desolate chasm of sorrow. She was so absorbed in her predicament that for the first time since her capture, she didn't sense Kharon's approach or even hear him come in the door.

"Why are you sitting there on the floor?" he said with a hint of caution. Gypsy didn't move or respond even as he approached. "Gypsy, what's wrong with you? Please answer me." The worried tone that played on the edge of his voice made her heart ache. His boots scraped the smooth floor as he crouched before her. Taking her face in his hands he forced her to look at him.

A stream of fresh tears ran down the shiny trails left by their predecessors. It was the first time she had allowed herself to cry in front of him. "I don't want to stay in here by myself anymore. Please, Kharon, let me out. If you move me someplace else I'll eat something. I promise. Don't leave me here."

Kharon stroked her hair out of her face and stood, pulling her up with him. The sorrow in his eyes coaxed even more tears from hers. "I can't turn you loose in the fortress. Not yet. But I think you'll be okay back at my apartment. You need to realize that this defiance is destructive and unnecessary. You're wasting time fighting this battle. In a few more days you will come back into season and you'll understand how needless your resistance was."

Gypsy didn't contradict him. All she wanted to do was get out of this cell and she wasn't going to say anything that might jeopardize that.

* * * *

Once they'd reached his apartment, Kharon sat her down in one of the plush black chairs that accompanied his dining room table and left the room. Gypsy waited obediently, taking in and enjoying the change of scenery and his presence. When Kharon returned he was carrying a large wooden bowl filled with sliced meat and a variety of fruit pieces. *I hope he doesn't think I'm going to eat all of that.* He pulled the chair out and gestured for her to sit. When she did, he pushed the bowl toward her.

"I've kept my end of bargain. Now it's your turn." He eyed her like he was waiting for her to default. Instead she picked a small slice of meat out of the bowl and began to eat. A current of nausea ran through her and she stopped for a moment, which apparently caused Kharon some concern.

"Are you alright? Should I call the doctor?" he asked, watching her closely.

Gypsy shook her head. "I'm fine. My stomach just has to adjust to eating again."

"I'm afraid I don't trust you enough to leave you here by yourself. So once morning comes I'm going to return you to your room until I finish my daily duties."

"You bastard." She glared at him and spit the meat out that she was chewing. "Fuck you, Kharon. If I'm going back to that cell, I'm not eating." She sat back in the chair and folded her arms.

“Don’t be angry, my love, it won’t be for much longer.” He smiled at her and offered another piece.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” she said, making no move to accept his offering.

“I’m surprised that you’ve forgotten. Once you come into season, not only will you not want to leave, but your primal nature won’t allow you to. Don’t you remember when the season first came upon you, how hard you resisted the urge to come to me? Surely you remember how ill you became and how much physical pain you endured when you tried to ignore it? It will be physically impossible for you to leave without suffering debilitating pain. When your season starts I will give you your freedom and you’ll choose to stay. All we have to do is wait.”

Chapter 23

The lush green forests of the Empire ended abruptly and the tan, dry, cracked ground began like an artist switching color palettes. Desmond had been fortunate enough to avoid ever having to come here. But he'd heard the stories of Titan's lands since childhood. So when he finally crossed onto the cursed lands, he recognized them for what they were.

The next hour was spent riding toward the hellish suns until he could see the outline of the large black castle. Towering spires pierced the sky and were circled by some type of flying raptors fighting over a kill. Their screeches echoed off the castle walls. It was the first sign of life he'd seen since leaving the forest.

The castle rested on a land island, surrounded by an endless drop into blackness. Its immediate grounds had no such aversion to life and were thick with an overgrowth of vines that covered its walls and gates. The only entrance lay at the end of a narrow land bridge spanning the chasm. The connection was devoid of any railings and arched high in the air like an archer's bow.

Desmond dismounted and led his nervous hyperia across the bridge, which came down right in front of the castle's ornately carved wooden doors. His guts twisted in panic as he looked back over his shoulder at the only escape route. All he

wanted to do was return home to Scarlet. But he couldn't. He had to at least try and help his sister, Gypsy. When he looked back at the front doors they were open. *Of course this is going to be creepy. My grandfather couldn't have it any other way.*

Acknowledging his cue, he slid off his mount and looped the reins through one of the rusty tether rings protruding from the castle wall. He took a deep breath and climbed the stone steps entering the dark foyer. The interior of the castle was enormous and almost seemed mismatched with the exterior. An icy breeze caressed the nape of his neck and a song of whispering voices called from the darkness. Gypsy had told Desmond of her experience coming here so he wasn't too surprised to be experiencing many of the same things she described. He just wondered how long this crazy old wizard would fuck with him before finally showing himself.

Not wanting to delay, Desmond continued slowly walking ahead through the entrance hall. Twisted paintings of all shapes and sizes decorated the walls. At first some appeared to be mirrors but when he looked at them something terrifying would be staring back. He stopped looking at them and decided to keep his eyes focused in front of him. It didn't help. Disturbing statues exhibiting half-Assyrian, half-beasts sat on each round table spaced perfectly apart in the middle of the corridor. As he approached the large staircase at the end of the walk of horrors, he saw Titan sitting on the last few steps with his elbows resting on his knees watching him.

There was no mistaking Titan. There were certain features distinct to all the Therons and Titan was no exception.

Desmond stopped a few feet in front of his grandfather, forcing himself to keep his hands off the hilt of his saber.

"The one that got away," Titan mused. He gave a cruel smile and glanced out a side window to his garden beyond.

"You know why I'm here. So can we cut through the mind games and parlor tricks?" Desmond stared at him unwavering.

"Actually I have no idea why you are here. You must understand, I don't really keep up with family dramas."

"Allow me to summarize. Gypsy has been taken prisoner by General Kharon. I'm here to ask you to help her escape."

Titan absently rubbed his chin and squinted off down the hallway past Desmond. "Why would I do that? And an even better question is, why should *you* care what happens to her? Compassion is not one of our genetic strengths."

"Because I believe she's good for us. Let's face it, your lineage is in decline. Your progeny has been wrought with weakness and mental instability. Gavin is the only one who managed to overcome his personal obstacles and even his offspring haven't come close to his achievements. None of Gavin's kids have survived long enough to realize their full potential. Gypsy adds strength to your stock that I'm sure you haven't seen in a long time."

"And what of *your* potential? To hear your father lament, you should have been the greatest swordsman in existence. Why play all of your cards for the girl when I can give you anything?"

Desmond shook his head and let out a choppy laugh. "I'm far too damaged to ever want that kind of responsibility. I

have neither the drive nor the confidence to achieve whatever everyone thinks I'm capable of. Suffice it to say that I would rather sit back and watch Gypsy go as far as *she* can...and maybe help her out here and there."

"Why can she not escape on her own? Why bring the debt of my help upon your own head?" Titan asked, standing up.

Desmond immediately felt threatened and took a step back but kept his hands at his sides. "Unfortunately, I don't think she can escape General Kharon on her own. She is bound to him with a primal mating fever and is incapable of resisting him."

"Interesting. That is a very rare thing in this time and probably quite distressing to her. It might even cost her her career. Tell me, did she ever make it into the Military Academy?" Titan asked. He walked toward the glass-paned doors and Desmond fell into step behind him.

"She did. That was where she had the misfortune to meet the general."

"Are you sure she wants to escape? I know from experience that Primal Fever can be extremely gratifying. Most people would give anything to have a mate with an unbreakable connection," Titan said.

"I'm sure. I know prior to her abduction she made almost daily visits to the clinic trying to find a cure for this. She doesn't want to be at Kharon's mercy, or anyone's, for that matter."

"Very well, grandson. If I agree to help her, are you going to be responsible for my fee?" An evil smile bled across his lips.

"I wouldn't have come if I wasn't willing to. What do I have to do?"

"I have something fairly easy to ask. You, of course, may not agree. I will demand payment from you now and once you've done the deed, you may go. Then I will leave to give my granddaughter some assistance."

Desmond's mind spun in circles trying to second-guess the evil bastard. *What could he possibly want from me? At least he's going to help Gypsy. He could have easily told me to fuck off and killed me anyway.*

"What do I have to do?"

"You are aware of the contents of my garden?" Titan asked as he pushed open the back doors and stepped outside.

"I've heard the stories," Desmond said, cautiously following him. His flesh crawled as he crossed the threshold, coming to stand outside on a patio atop a stairwell. A few gusts of wind chased each other around them as he stared out at the enormous courtyard. Statues of men, women and even a few children could be seen in various throes of death. Some were cordoned off by wrought iron fences or stone walls. A few were partially hidden by trees that had grown up around them. All of the bases were covered with plant life and debris but the statues themselves were pristine.

"Your brother Northe is one of my residents. You were very close to him, as I understand."

Desmond felt like he was falling down a hole. *Of course this will have something to do with Northe.* With just the mention of his name Titan had managed to slice through a hundred years of scar tissue like a dedicated surgeon.

Northe had been the only solid thing in Desmond's life. At the age of thirteen, the culmination of all the abuse he suffered at the hands of his mother's many companions manifested itself in violent outbursts at any semblance of authority. His mother, deciding that she could no longer control him, sent Desmond to AEssyria to live with the father he'd never met.

Gavin.

Northe had just become an adult and Gavin convinced him to take Desmond in to avoid upsetting his current wife, Northe's mother. Northe agreed and seamlessly filled the role of brother, father and best friend. He channeled Desmond's anger into a keen fighting ability and taught him the ways of the arena. When the boy's skill with a sword surpassed even Northe's, he rewarded him with praise and encouragement. For the first time Desmond had felt like his life actually mattered to someone. But Northe was extremely ambitious and was constantly in competition with their father. Desmond was still very young when Northe defected to another kingdom. He'd wanted to go with him but was afraid of Gavin and decided to remain. That decision haunted Desmond's daily life with the ghosts of regret. The day that he watched his father cut Northe down on the battlefield, he withdrew from any path to success and began his own endless battles with Gavin.

He knew he couldn't back out of this deal with Titan, there was too much at stake. But he was too tortured to respond either, so he just stood and waited for the evil bastard to speak.

“How quiet you’ve become. Earlier you showed so much concern about what was best for this family. Have you given any thought to what might be best for you?” Titan asked, descending the steps that led deep into the stone garden.

“I don’t know what you mean,” Desmond replied numbly. He remained where he was at the top of the steps, unable to follow.

“Come now,” Titan said, stopping midway down and turning to look at him. “You have been plagued with the demons of Northe’s death for most of your young life. I want to give you the chance to purge some of those destructive emotions. After all, you never had an opportunity to say goodbye.”

Desmond swallowed and steadied his voice. “I really don’t want to talk to Northe or whatever it is that you’re keeping in this vile cemetery.”

“The statue here in my garden *is* Northe. He will be just as you remembered the day he died.”

“Why this?” Desmond asked. “I don’t see what you could possibly gain by opening up this old scar.”

“What an interesting misconception you have of your current emotional state. The pain you refer to as an old scar is in reality an open wound that still throbs and bleeds. The pain carried in your soul is projected like a beacon of light and you don’t even realize it. You have always been a mystery to me, Desmond. Concealing yourself behind a cloak of mediocrity, you kept a low profile and avoided attracting my interest. Then from nothing, here you are presenting yourself to me in sacrifice to save your sister. You have now made the mistake

of intriguing me. I want you to face your brother. You ask what I gain from this request? That's easy. I am presented with an opportunity to inflict some devastating emotional damage on you. I'd like to watch how you deal with it. Will this encounter make you stronger or will you wither and die under the weight of your sorrow?"

"Nice," Desmond said, and in the blink of an eye, the old wizard disappeared.

Desmond's throat was tight. So tight in fact, he had to swallow several times to make sure he could swallow at all. In the back of his mind common sense was screaming, telling him in a desperate shrill voice that he should leave this place and never dare to think about it again. But even as the warnings thundered in his head, Desmond's feet moved on. One step at a time, they brought him down the steps into the very gate of hell: Titan's demonic garden of lost souls. Worse still, someone was walking among the pale statutes and twisting vines and Desmond knew that someone had to be his long-dead brother, Northe.

Desmond stopped walking as if his feet had suddenly become rooted to the ground. His throat was so dry now it actually hurt him to try and swallow.

Northe emerged from behind a white marble marker. The writing on the marble was unreadable due to the years of weather exposure but Desmond was certain it was something creepy and sad. Everything in this damned garden was creepy and sad, including this resurrected version of his brother.

The *thing* that approached him was like a faded photo of Northe, all light colors and withered details, but there was no

mistaking it was him. Northe walked with the same slow, steady gait Desmond remembered and that realization brought on a spike of emotional anguish. "Don't come any closer," Desmond managed, his hand going instinctively to the handle of his saber.

"Has it been so long that you don't remember me?" Northe asked.

"Of course I remember you, but you're dead."

"No," Northe corrected. "Not dead. In waiting."

"For what?" Desmond asked.

"I've been waiting for the day when you might finally wise up and kill Gavin. I understand you had the chance a few months ago when his back had finally given out and you didn't do the deed. I can't understand why you wasted such a prime opportunity to rid the world of that evil beast."

"I'm not like you. I couldn't kill him in cold blood," Desmond replied.

Northe shrugged. "That's unfortunate because every day you hesitate is another day closer to his murdering Gypsy."

"What are you talking about?"

"You know." Northe smirked. "You just choose to ignore it. At this very moment General Kharon is seducing Gypsy into joining him. She'll fall, if she hasn't already, and when she does, Gavin will stop at nothing to destroy her. Just as he hunted down and destroyed me."

Desmond shook his head. "No, it was different with you. You tried to march against Gavin twice. He never wanted to kill you, Northe. You forced his hand." And in that moment Desmond understood the horrible choice Gavin was forced to

make that fateful day. Gavin might have gone on and on giving Northe chances, hopeful that one day they might reconcile but with every attack, Northe became more familiar with Gavin's weaknesses.

But then Desmond also realized that the same thing was happening with Gypsy and Kharon. One of them was learning the other's weaknesses and eventually one would emerge victorious. The thought made him nervous and ill. What if Gypsy wasn't the one? What if she too ended up marching against their father? Was Northe right? Would she also end up dead by Gavin's saber?

But when he put those pieces together none of it made sense. Gypsy loved Gavin. Desmond couldn't see her turning on him for any reason, certainly not for Kharon. So that only left Kharon to bend. But would he?

Desmond stared at his brother and all the old pain just faded away. Northe was dead because he couldn't live being second to Gavin. Like a moth drawn to the flame until it destroys itself, he'd clashed with their father until Gavin had been forced to end it once and for all. "You know," Desmond said, "I just realized something that should have occurred to me a long time ago. Why didn't you surrender to Gavin? I know he gave you the chance."

Northe's face twisted in fury. "Because I *had* him! All I had to do was hold out a little longer and he would have made a mistake that I could exploit!"

"But instead you were the one who made a mistake because of your arrogance."

Northe slammed his fist into his chest. "I was *the one*, his trained and groomed successor! If only the old bastard had..."

"What? Let you cut him down?" Desmond shook his head and chuckled. "No, you of all people should have known that was never going to happen." He had heard enough. It was time to go. "No, Gavin has a new successor now, and she's a better soldier than you ever were."

"He'll kill her too!" Northe raged. "Just like he did me!"

Desmond mounted up feeling like a demon had been exorcised from his soul. It wasn't his fault nor Gavin's that Northe died that day. It was Northe's. Why hadn't he seen all this before? "I don't believe Gavin would kill Gypsy. Not any more." Then he opened the gate that led back to the front of the castle, found his mount still tied up, and rode off with his brother Northe shouting curses behind him.

Chapter 24

That night, as she lay next to Kharon, she heard the heavy rhythmic breaths that told her he had finally fallen asleep. Gypsy decided it was time to seize the opportunity to look for an escape. He seemed to be convinced that her weakened physical state also meant that her resolve was just as weak. Hopefully that faulty impression had made him careless. Now that her body's desire had been sated for the moment she could finally form some coherent thoughts and develop a plan. This wouldn't be easy. There were tons of guards and soldiers everywhere and all of them knew her on sight. But anything was better than sitting around here waiting for him to wake up. If she stayed here any longer her season would come and he might actually succeed in getting her pregnant. Then things would get really ugly. There was no way she was going to settle into the happy obedient wife he was waiting for. Then escape would be much harder if not impossible. She had to get out of here now, tonight.

But the first step in escaping was getting out of this apartment without waking the general. It had taken a lot of convincing for him not to return her to the cell for the night.

Gypsy eased out of the bed in millimeters, freezing in terror every time Kharon sighed or grunted in his sleep. After

almost half an hour, she placed both feet on the floor and glided off the mattress.

Kharon only snorted and rolled over.

Gypsy grabbed her clothes and dressed in the farthest corner of the apartment she could find. Every minute passed as an eternity as her heart pounded a panicked rhythm in her chest. It wasn't that she feared what he might do if he caught her. No, her fear was born from the realization that if he woke and caught her, all hope for an escape would be lost forever. Kharon wasn't the kind of man to make the same mistake twice.

Now dressed but carrying her boots, Gypsy padded around the apartment searching for a weapon and wasn't surprised not to find any. Kharon had obviously thought ahead and left nothing out she could use against him. Even the decorative sabers had been taken off the walls. *Damn it!* She was just going to have to do this the hard way and fight hand-to-hand if she had to.

Hoping beyond hope, she placed her hand on the front doorknob and twisted but it wouldn't budge. That only left the windows. Gypsy walked over to one of the large open windows and glanced down. There was no ledge and a one-hundred-foot drop. She checked the other windows and found that the only one without a potentially fatal drop was the bathroom window. That one had a stone balcony about ten feet down. She didn't know what chamber the balcony led out from but it was pretty much her only option. The challenge was fitting out the small window.

With aching slow movements Gypsy closed the door and jammed the lock. She froze, held her breath and listened. If Kharon awoke she could still pretend she was using the bathroom and hopefully not arouse his suspicion. After a few moments she was satisfied that he still slept.

Leaning out the window Gypsy dropped her boots onto the balcony below. The noise was mercifully faint but she paused for several heartbeats anyway. Placing her hands on the window ledge, Gypsy lifted herself up and pushed her legs through. Then as she tried to get her hips through the opening she suddenly realized this was going to be a tighter squeeze than she thought. If she hadn't spent the last few weeks of her confinement on a hunger strike this would have been impossible. Twisting her body this way and that, Gypsy squished her hips and buttocks through the opening, only to run into another problem with her shoulders. Forcing herself not to panic, she summoned her father's commanding voice telling her to keep her cool and work the problem. Her shoulders had to be eased through with much more patience than her hips. Then she hit a snag and couldn't move any more.

Cold terror gripped her heart. *I'm fucking stuck!* A moment of frenzy filled her as she struggled not to freak out, and keep her breaths short and quick. Clamping down on her panic, she resumed working her body through the window, only this time working much slower. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, she came free and almost fell to the landing below. Gypsy gripped the ledge tight, knowing she had to drop and dreading it. Hoping she didn't hurt herself on the way down, she let herself drop and landed hard.

Her ankle twisted under her, sending a shock wave of agony through her right leg. But she was down. Gypsy tried to stand up but the pain in her ankle made it difficult. Of course this happened. *But at least I'm not stuck in the window.* That would have been embarrassing to be caught like that.

Moving against the wall, Gypsy glanced into the landing to see where she was. The room beyond the balcony looked like a soldiers' residence. But luckily for her, the two in there were tag-teaming one of the maids who seemed to be enjoying the encounter just as much as the soldiers were.

Gypsy pulled her boots on and crouched by the door until the party moved into the bedroom.

Seizing her chance she quickly crept inside toward several piles of clothes littering the main living area. While the soldiers were distracted in the other room, she pulled one of the cloaks over her uniform and flipped the hood up. It perfectly covered her head and face. Carefully she picked up a sword, still in its scabbard and slipped out the front door. Now in the hallway, she fastened the scabbard to her belt and rushed down the stairs unnoticed. For a moment she dared to hope she might actually get out of here. Two steps from the bottom landing the alarm sounded.

Shit!

Jumping off the steps to the ground floor sent another shock wave of pain through her injured ankle, forcing her to run with a pronounced limp. Racing through the main courtyard, Gypsy made a dash for the stables in a daring attempt to get a hyperia. Of course, even if she had a mount there was

still the problem of the huge fortress gates. Unfortunately she never made it to the stables.

Within seconds she was surrounded by armed soldiers, far more than would have been necessary. But Gypsy wasn't ready to surrender yet. Drawing the sword she had borrowed, she engaged two of the soldiers as she tried to walk backward to the stables. Lunging at one of the smaller soldiers, she tried to tackle him out of her way and break free but they only wrestled her down. And there she lay once again pinned to the ground by Kharon's soldiers.

In spite of her capture, she continued to fight as best she could. As Gypsy twisted her body, aggressively trying to free herself, Kharon's boots came into her line of vision. She ceased her struggle and ran her gaze upward stopping at his face which revealed a mask of dark fury. *Uh oh.*

"Bad girl," he said.

Gypsy glared at him. "Fuck you, Kharon. You've had plenty of time to convince me to stay and I still want to leave. I'm not giving in so just let me go."

"From that limp, it looks like you injured yourself during your escape attempt." Kharon knelt down by her. "Let me take a look at that." As the guards held her still, Kharon removed her boot and sock. He caressed her swollen ankle with chilling tenderness. Then his grip tightened over the joint and with startling speed, he twisted the ankle, which emitted a loud crunch that even made the soldiers cringe. Gypsy threw her head back and howled in agony. Trembling, she yanked her foot away.

Kharon stood up and glared down at her. “That should slow you down a little.”

“What shall we do with her, Excellency?” one of the guards asked.

“Put her in prison cell one. I’ll decide what to do with her later.”

Manhandling Gypsy to her good leg, the guards dragged her off toward the prison, but not until Gypsy managed to spit in Kharon’s pale blue eye.

Chapter 20

Gypsy was taken to a cavernous cell, which for prison standards, was fairly clean. There was a steel bench attached to the wall and a wool blanket folded neatly on top of it. The cell even had two large barred windows that let in a fair amount of sunlight, which was the only light available. When the suns set she'd be in total darkness. It was definitely a downgrade from her last room. Gypsy wondered with mounting dread how long this kidnap honeymoon would last before Kharon got really angry and just killed her.

Hearing the steel doors clank behind her, Gypsy hobbled over to the bench and sat down. Her broken ankle was killing her and to make matters worse was twisted at an unnatural angle. She hadn't been offered a doctor yet and worried about the very real prospect of ending up crippled for life. A wave of desperate sorrow filled her heart and it took everything she had not to cry. *Oh, Gavin, I should have listened to you. You knew this could happen and tried to warn me. What I wouldn't do to take back those last few days before my capture and do them over again.*

The guards let Kharon in and he advanced on her holding a canvas sack and a canteen of water. "I'm sorry these accommodations are so crude but you obviously can't be trusted."

Gypsy rubbed her ankle. The torment from her injury was definitely cooling any feelings of passion. "Neither can you," she snarled, trying to keep the pain out of her voice.

"I suppose I deserve that." He placed the sack and the canteen on the bench next to her. The sack smelled like dried meat. "You know, Gypsy, it doesn't have to be like this. All I want is an apology and your word you won't attempt another escape. We can try again."

"Okay, I'm sorry and you have my word. I won't try to escape again. Now let me out of here," she said a bit too quickly.

Kharon grinned and shook his head. "You are a witty delight, my love, but I'm afraid that I'm not convinced. I told you before; I'm not stupid."

Even though her stomach was twisting in hunger, she picked up the sack and tossed it at him. He fumbled but caught it. "No, but you are a liar. Fuck you and get out."

"You're hunger strike is just foolishness," he said, annoyed.

"That doesn't even compare to how foolish I was for trusting you."

Kharon scowled as if he'd swallowed something bitter. "How long are you planning not to eat?"

"I already told you, until either you let me go or I starve to death. Take your pick."

"You're bluffing."

Gypsy gave him a cold stare and lay down on the bed. "Okay," she replied in a deadpan voice. "I'm bluffing." She winced as sparks of pain shot up from her ruined ankle. Look-

ing deep inside herself she realized she didn't feel anything but an icy shock. Then the realization that Kharon had broken her ankle on purpose resurfaced and a wrenching pain filled her. *How could I have been so wrong about him? Is this damn fever making him more aggressive too?*

A long awkward silence followed. Finally Kharon said, "I'm going to leave you here until the fever comes. Then we'll try this again. I am betting we will have much better results. I'll send a doctor by to see about your injury. I'm sorry I lost my temper."

Gypsy rolled over with her back to him. "Just get out."

Several minutes later, she heard Kharon leave and the heavy metal of her cell door slam shut. Then she closed her eyes and tried to forget the throbbing agony in her ankle and the lonely pain of betrayal that seared her heart. As the minutes passed like hours she tried to think of an escape plan but the darkness of her depression kept engulfing her, pushing all hope of salvation away. The longing for Kharon intensified and she prayed that he would come back. The fever was almost here and soon she would be lost for good.

* * * *

Night came after an endless day of suffering. A doctor had come as promised, stinking of gin with the bedside manner of a street thug. He had taken one look at her ankle, grunted something to himself, and left without doing anything. Gypsy guessed the lure of more drink had trumped her treatment. The doctor hadn't even had the decency to give her anything for the pain.

As if matters weren't bad enough, her ankle had swollen to twice its normal size and the hurt was relentless. More worrisome still was the horrible red and purple bruising surrounding the bone and the nonstop mind-bending ache. No matter what position she moved into it still throbbed so bad she couldn't even try to sleep anymore. All she could do was regret she'd ever met Kharon and hope one day to have her revenge.

Then, just as the night reached its darkest and the three moons shone their silver light through the window, a fog seeped into her cell. The first thing that drew Gypsy's attention was the smell: like liquid ice, cold and sharp at the same time.

Darkness filled the space moving across the ground like tar until it stopped and elongated into the form of a male. A male she knew all too well as her grandfather, the notorious wizard Titan. Although she had only encountered him once, his image was forever burned into her mind.

"Titan," Gypsy said, letting the name slip from her lips like a deadly sin.

Titan's image became clearer, an imposing dark magician dressed all in black: black cloak; black pants; black boots. His handsome face was sculptured perfection; a diabolical mixture of evil cunning and hidden cruelty. He was a tall Assyrian male, over six foot five, and carried his power like a loaded blaster coiled within his menacing soul. Normally Gypsy would have steered clear of him, having been warned by her father in the past about Titan's trickery but right now he was a welcome sight.

Her grandfather glanced at the bars on her window. "What manner of treachery is this?"

Gypsy struggled to sit up. A bolt of suffering ran up her leg and she yelped and froze. When she could finally speak, she said, "General Kharon has taken me prisoner and broken my ankle." There was so much more she wanted to say but short sentences were all she could manage.

Titan's yellow eyes glowed with power. "Choose your men better."

Gypsy bit her tongue against a sarcastic remark. "I didn't exactly *choose* him. Please help me, Titan."

The wizard was motionless for several minutes. Then he held his arms out in welcome. The room seemed to become a little darker. "First, come to me."

Resting all her weight on her good foot, Gypsy hobbled over to where Titan stood. When she was close, he held his hand up for her to stop. She did as he directed her.

"If I take this Primal Fever away it will only be temporary. The chemicals that cause these changes will regenerate and your desire for Kharon will return," he said. "Someday you may need him and this affliction. Do you understand what that means?"

"Yes," Gypsy said. "If I ever want to have children, I have to keep the fever."

"Second, by accepting my help, changes might occur in you. Changes you may not like."

"From the way things stand right now, I don't see that I have much of a choice," she replied.

"Then come and kiss me," Titan said.

Gypsy limped up to her grandfather feeling like she was climbing the steps of a gallows. "What kinds of changes?"

Titan's yellow eyes pulled her in closer. "I don't know," he said. "It's different for everyone. But you are special to me, Gypsy. So I'll tell you this, you don't owe me for this little rescue. Your debt's been paid. But next time, it won't be."

"Who paid it?"

"I can't tell you. Just be grateful someone loves you enough to pay it for you."

Gypsy nodded grimly. "Okay, I understand," she said. Then she tilted her face up to kiss Titan and closed her eyes.

The kiss was biting like a winter wind: all numbing cold and arctic chill. Its magic forced itself into her body, breaching all her defenses and latched onto each individual cell in her being. The pain was horrible and overwhelmed even the throbbing ache in her ruined ankle. Gypsy slammed her hands into Titan's chest, trying to break the devouring kiss but it was too late. Titan had her at his mercy. He was a vampire feeding, a leech under the skin, and there was no escape. An avalanche of sorrows filled her heart, threatening to break it, and all the while Titan drew the passion from her cringing soul with a savage ruthlessness undaunted by her struggling.

Then from the darkest recesses of her mind and body, he drew the Primal Fever out. Gypsy could actually feel him siphoning the hormones off, drawing it out into himself to be destroyed by the darkness that resided there. The process felt like surgery without anesthesia. When it felt as if there was nothing left to strip from her, Gypsy pushed on Titan's chest

again. This time her efforts broke the kiss. She stumbled backward trying to catch her breath.

That was when she realized he'd also healed her ankle. She was grateful but cautious. Gypsy tested it by taking a few cautious steps forward and back. No pain at all.

Titan's eyes seemed to shine with furious glee. It wasn't sexual desire she saw in him, but rather the essence of raw, naked power. "I'm sorry if I hurt you, Gypsy. But complicated spells can sometimes be brutal on the recipient."

Gypsy tried to slow her racing heart and mind. His apology had taken her completely off-guard. She swallowed and noticed her hands were shaking. "Am I cured?"

"You are temporarily," he said. "You will skip this season and lose your desire to remain here despite Kharon's efforts."

"Why can't you take the damn thing away forever?"

"Changing the course of what is natural can be quite difficult, sometimes even impossible. Nature is used to getting its way," he explained. "Are you so sure that your love for Kharon is solely the result of Primal Fever? Perhaps your feelings for him are genuine and the fever is merely an enhancement. Have you ever considered that?"

She shook her head quickly. "I don't *really* love him. I know it's just the hormones. Don't you understand? I'm in love with Caraculla."

She didn't like where this conversation was going. Kharon was her enemy now. And even if she did love him, which she didn't, he had betrayed her. As far as she was concerned they were finished.

"I never said you weren't in love with Caraculla. Why does it shame you so to be in love with two men?"

Gypsy growled in frustration. "I am not in love with Kharon!"

Titan held up his hands in surrender, not bothering to hide his amusement. "Maybe you're not. But you should at least entertain the possibility."

Gypsy was about to embark on another protest but Titan placed his black gloved index finger on her lips and continued to speak. "Before I leave I will indulge you in some unsolicited advice; don't become estranged from your own emotions. At some point in your life they will be torn from you by someone. If you are unfamiliar with them you will be incapable of controlling them and they will control you. Your father and brother are perfect examples of this folly. If you are honest about your feelings for Kharon, you will be better equipped to resist him. Then you will be in control of the relationship."

Gypsy stared at the ground for a moment to hide her irritation. "You still haven't told me why you won't remove this curse. Then I wouldn't have to bother learning about it."

Gently grabbing her chin, Titan tilted her face up to him and gave her a smile that was purely demonic. "Were you anyone else," he whispered, leaning close to her ear, "I would joyfully remove it. I'd love to watch the disastrous effect it would have on your life. You were meant to have this gift, my granddaughter. Stop fighting it and start learning how to control it. Use it to your advantage. There are more levels to Primal Fever than just sex. It is part of who and what you are and what you will become. It has always been a part of your

life. Your maturity is what brought on its sexual aspect. It is no accident that you are different from other women and desired a career based on violence and aggression. Removing it could be as devastating as removing a portion of your brain.”

“But it incapacitates me. All I can think about is being with Kharon. How am I supposed to pursue a military career? I can’t ride into battle worrying about whether or not I’m going to go into heat. How about giving me some advice about what the hell I’m supposed to do about that?” She pulled her chin from his hand and folded her arms.

“Control is a part of all relationships, even the one you have with yourself. In order to control the fever you have to understand it. When it returns, you must embrace the potential power hidden within. That is all I can tell you. The rest you need to figure out for yourself.”

“How long will the fever be dormant?”

“That I cannot foresee. But it will be long enough for you to escape Kharon and return to the empire.”

The mere mention of General Kharon’s name ignited a fireball in her belly. *Fucking double-crossing bastard!* She pushed her feelings aside for the moment. “Have you done anything to me? I mean...I feel different.”

“I haven’t done anything deliberately, but you may notice some changes.”

A fresh panic exploded in her brain. “Like what?”

Titan shrugged. It was a calm, casual action that infuriated her all the more. “It’s impossible to tell if our contact has had any effect on you. We’ll just have to wait and see.”

"I don't want to wait and see!" Gypsy exploded. "I want to know what to expect now!"

Titan gave her a chilling stare and she wondered if she hadn't just made the worst mistake of her life accepting his help. But then she reminded herself that she'd just been faced with being imprisoned for life. She guessed being Titan's plaything was the lesser of the two evils.

"I can always put you back the way you were when I found you," Titan offered. The tone was cool and even but there was a dark threat encased within.

"No," she said quickly. "I truly am grateful for your help." Then after pausing for a moment of thought, she said, "How did you know to find me here?"

Titan's face lightened into a mischievous smile. "That's not your concern. You have more pressing matters to contend with." From his long black cloak he pulled out a dark gray saber. It had a handle in the form of a raptor's claw and a bright red ruby at the base. The blade was also a dark gray. Titan held it out to her. "I was saving this for your first real battle. Who knew it would come so soon?"

Gypsy took the saber from him and its weight felt good in her hand. "Thank you."

Titan smiled, his body already turning to smoke. "You're welcome, Gypsy, and good luck against General Kharon."

And just as the wizard faded completely from view, the cell door slammed open and Kharon came in, staring in amazement at Gypsy's healed ankle. Next his gaze moved to the saber she was holding. Then he reached down and pulled his own saber and held it at the ready.

Chapter 21

Like a roaring lion Kharon charged her, but, oddly, didn't raise his weapon to strike. It didn't matter what his intentions were, Gypsy was ready for him. Ducking under his bulky frame, Gypsy brought the blade of her saber across the abdominal gap in his armor, cutting him deeply. Kharon trotted a few feet past her and stopped, falling to his knees. He'd made a careless mistake and Gypsy knew why; he thought she was still under the spell of Primal Fever and incapable of hurting him.

But just as Titan had promised, her feelings for General Kharon had evaporated for now. It was just like her love and desire for him had never existed and try as she might, she couldn't recall what they'd ever felt like. A vague sorrow shadowed her triumph as she advanced on Kharon.

He remained as he was on his knees and she knew his real suffering ran much deeper than the wound in his gut. But even though she knew it in her mind, her heart was anesthetized. Gypsy raised her saber and a new hunger tempted her: the need for a kill. It took all her self-control not to attack him while he was down. "Get up so I can look you in the face when I kill you," she growled.

Kharon didn't move. Instead he did the last thing she expected him to do. He dropped his saber and hung his head. "What's happened to you?" he asked.

Gypsy moved closer, taking cautious steps until she was in front of him. The thought occurred to her to kick his saber away but she decided against it. She wanted him to get up and fight. "I got a little help from a friend."

"What kind of friend has the power to heal broken bones in seconds?" Kharon asked.

The reminder of her injured ankle sparked her temper. She leaned down until her face was mere inches from his, "Release me from this marriage or I'll butcher you on the spot."

Kharon locked his eyes with hers. Shaking his head slowly back and forth, he said, "You will remain my wife until death claims one of us. I won't live without you so I will never let you go."

Gypsy gritted her teeth and kicked him in his wound for revenge. Kharon grunted and doubled over in pain. "Damn you, Kharon! I can't believe I ever loved you," she spat at him.

"Nor I you," he replied. His voice was strange, tortured.

Gypsy pushed his saber closer with her boot but Kharon made no move to pick it up.

"The fever has been taken from me and is gone forever. Take up your weapon and let me prove it to you."

"Destroy my body like you have my soul," he rumbled. "Finish me or I swear I will never rest until I have you back again."

Gypsy shook her head. Cautiously she knelt down and retrieved his sword, sliding it through her belt. "That's a waste of time. The connection is gone. I hate you and I'll never put myself in a position to be captured by you again. I won't kill you in this vulnerable state but someday we will meet on the battlefield and you'll be forced to fight me. Good bye, Kharon." She headed for the cell door the general had left open in his haste to grab her.

"You're making a mistake by not killing me, Gypsy," he said, his hands over his ruined belly and covered in his own blood. "Someday, I will have you back. I swear it."

"If you ever try, I will kill you for sure, Kharon." She pulled the cell door closed and glared in at him. "Your feelings for me will fade. Go back to Golda or your three wives. I'm done with you."

* * * *

Gypsy's escape from the kingdom came about much easier than expected. Every guard she passed was sleeping and every hallway she traveled was vacant. *Titan must still be helping me.* There is no way anyone could be this lucky.

When she reached the huge double gates that exited the fortress to freedom they were wide open to allow a caravan of vendors to pass through. No one seemed to notice her as she slipped out into the darkness. It was almost as though she were invisible. Of course there couldn't have been a stray hyperia wandering around. That was probably asking too much.

Fortunately Gypsy had traveled to this very place earlier in the year so she knew her way home. On foot and in her

weakened condition it would probably take her a couple of days. She stayed off the main roads, anticipating Kharon's pursuit. Instead she weaved her way through the underbrush and hunting trails, staying close to the rivers and streams for access to water. One of the many things she could thank her father for was teaching her how to survive with no supplies. There had been many training sessions where she would come home injured, half-starved and shaking from dehydration. Gavin was merciless and more than once she had convinced herself that he was secretly trying to put an end to her career. All of that punitive brutality made perfect sense to her now. She knew without a doubt that she could survive long enough to get home.

For the next two nights she slept in trees and under shrubs. Not only did she not encounter any of Kharon's men, she didn't encounter anyone at all...not even a robber. Again she thought that maybe she was getting some lingering help from her grandfather. All she did for three days was walk and sleep. She was too exhausted and frail to hunt but she did manage to forage for a few edible plants. The only thing she had to keep her company were her thoughts of Kharon. Having spent so much time alone in the past few weeks she would have imagined that all of her thoughts would have been purged. Of course that was until Titan had sown some spores of doubt about her feelings. Was it possible that she really did love Kharon or was Titan finding another way to amuse himself?

Why couldn't I kill him? He betrayed me and I let him live. I had both motive and opportunity and I failed just like Gavin pre-

dicted. There had been no excuse as the Primal Fever was gone, even if only temporarily.

It didn't matter anymore. She had escaped and would be home in a few more hours. There were more important things to think about. The past few weeks had wreaked havoc on her mental as well as physical condition. She had lost a lot of muscle mass and would have to work on building herself back up if she hoped to finish the Academy. Gypsy also decided to take Titan's advice and learn as much as she could about the fever and how to control it...just in case Krull couldn't cure her. Even if Krull could develop an antidote to this Primal Fever she knew in her soul that Kharon would never put the marriage aside. Gypsy was going to do everything she could to ensure that if she crossed paths with Kharon again, the relationship was going to be on her terms.

Chapter 22

Nessa crouched down by the riverbank and dipped her pitcher into the clear water. Even though her villa had running water, she preferred to make her morning tea with river water because it tasted so much better. Silly as it may seem, she also believed the old wives' tales that river water was better for the baby during its development in the womb. Besides, it was a beautiful spot to be as the suns were rising.

Her bodyguard, Raif, dismounted and moved closer. He pulled his saber. "Someone's coming."

He reached down and placed his hand under her elbow, helping Nessa to her feet. She strained her hearing but heard nothing. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, my lady."

From out of the brush a dirty, tattered, and rather smallish soldier emerged...actually it was a female soldier. Of course there was only one in the whole empire. Nessa recognized the tall woman right away, "Gypsy!" she shouted.

Gypsy froze and squinted at them. She looked exhausted. "Nessa?"

Nessa rushed over with her bodyguard close behind. "Yes, Gypsy, it's me! I can't believe you're here. I thought you were kidnapped by General Kharon."

"I was," Gypsy said in a flat monotone. "I escaped."

“You look a wreck. You’re so thin, my dear. Please come with us back to the villa where we can give you something to eat. Caraculla will be so relieved to see you. He’s been beside himself with grief over what happened.”

Gypsy nodded weakly. “Okay,” she said. “But only for a few minutes. I have to report back to my father and the emperor.”

“Here use Raif’s mount,” Nessa said as her bodyguard led the animal over.

Gypsy just shook her head. “I don’t have the strength left to ride, let alone mount up.” Nessa looked at the bodyguard, who climbed into the saddle, pulling Gypsy up behind him with ease. Gypsy shakily wrapped one arm around him, hooking her thumb in his belt and resting her head against his broad back.

* * * *

Gypsy arrived at the villa feeling like all the strength in her had been sucked out the top of her head. She went inside and collapsed into the first chair she saw. It was good not to be walking anymore. Caraculla walked in from the courtyard responding to Nessa’s calls. He was dressed in his dark gray battle armor with his black Imperial uniform underneath. She guessed he was just about ready to go on duty. His mouth fell open the moment his eyes hit her.

“You’re as much of a marvel as your father is,” he said, scooping her up out of the chair and hugging her tight. Gypsy melted against him. It felt so good to be back she didn’t even care about Caraculla’s marriage anymore. Then she remembered she was still bound to Kharon and a sick feeling twisted

her stomach. She hoped to the Gods that she had convinced him that the fever was gone for good. Maybe after awhile he would put the marriage aside thinking there was no longer any hope for a reunion.

“I’m very hungry,” she said into Caraculla’s neck.

Nessa rushed into the kitchen and ordered the servants to make Gypsy something to eat.

Caraculla lowered her back into the chair. “So how did you manage to escape Kharon?”

Gypsy just shook her head. She wasn’t in the mood for stories right now and the aid that she received was probably best left out. “I don’t really want to talk about it right now.” *I need time to come up with a good story...one without Titan.* Her food arrived and she wolfed it down so fast she made herself sick. Then, as Caraculla continued to try and ask her questions, she curled into a ball, closed her eyes and fell asleep.

Chapter 23

Gypsy awoke with a start.

She'd been dreaming she was still Kharon's prisoner and the dream's horrible panic still lingered even after taking in her surroundings. Nessa sat in a chair by her bedside. She offered Gypsy a mug of cool water. Sitting up, she took it and was surprised by how thirsty she was. All of her muscles ached but she felt better...much better.

"I know you're still tired from your ordeal but there's something very important I must discuss with you," Nessa said, scooting to the edge of her seat.

Gypsy gave her a weak smile. *This has got to be about their surprise wedding.* How she wished Nessa would just drop it. Of course Caraculla's betrayal still hurt but so much had happened it seemed silly to stay mad. At least Caraculla had never held her prisoner and broken her ankle. If this woman was what he wanted, then fine. She hoped they were happy together. "I'm not really in the mood and it doesn't matter anymore. I wish you two a wonderful life together."

"Please," Nessa said. "There's a lot you don't know about why Caraculla married me."

Gypsy flopped back onto the bed and stared at the ceiling. She was exhausted and knew no matter where she went in the villa, Nessa was sure to follow. "Okay, say what you

want to say. I'll listen and then I don't want to talk about it anymore."

"Of course," Nessa said, smoothing out her dress. "First of all, I'm sorry Caraculla didn't tell you about the wedding. I know how much it hurt you but please understand it wasn't his fault. He was ordered not to tell anyone about marrying me."

"So why all the secrecy?" Gypsy asked.

"Because the truth is very bad."

Gypsy sat up and looked at her. Maybe this was more interesting than she originally thought.

Nessa got up and closed the door so the servants couldn't hear what she was about to say. She resumed her seat. "I trust you, Gypsy. I know you won't repeat what I'm about to tell you."

"I won't," Gypsy promised, growing more curious.

"For the past few years my father had been...raping me," Nessa confessed. Gypsy felt her mouth drop open. It was hard to keep a secret like that, especially with the amount of gossips around.

"The last time," Nessa continued, "I got pregnant. Of course, my father threatened to kill the child so I went to the emperor for help. He dealt with my father immediately, dispatching some nobles to lynch him in the forest where his relatives couldn't interfere. Then the emperor had a problem. He had a young pregnant noblewoman who everyone knew hadn't been sleeping around. It was only a matter of time before everyone guessed who the real father was. My child would have been an outcast, always under threat of being

murdered as an abomination. So Caraculla offered to marry me. It was early enough in my pregnancy that we could just claim the child was his and he agreed to treat it as his own.”

“So your father wasn’t killed by robbers as reported?” Gypsy asked, remembering the shock that had reverberated through the nobility. It was unthinkable that one of their own had been murdered by common thugs.

“That’s right. I was there and allowed my father to pursue me into a trap.”

Gypsy sat there stunned but everything fell into place. Caraculla would have been the best choice. He wasn’t married anymore and the emperor trusted him to keep a secret. Even one this juicy. Perhaps he would have told her eventually. Gypsy was sure he would have. “I don’t know what to say.”

“It’s a lot to take in,” Nessa agreed. “I just wanted you to know why he married me when he was still very much in love with you.”

“I appreciate you confiding in me. But none of this changes anything. I don’t want to sleep with him while he’s married to you.”

Nessa nodded. “You’re very kind but I was going to ask him to set our marriage aside. Now that we’ve been together for almost a month, my pregnancy looks legitimate. There’s no need to continue this deception.”

“Don’t you want to stay married to Caraculla?”

A big smile erupted on Nessa’s face. “Oh yes. He is a wonderful man and I would be the luckiest woman in the world to remain his wife but he has already sacrificed so much. Despite the pain in his heart, he has never once com-

plained about our situation. But it's obvious to all that he loves you, Gypsy. It would be wrong of me to expect him to stay with me indefinitely. The marriage has served its purpose and it is time for both of us to move on with our lives."

"But aren't you afraid the other nobles will gossip about you?"

Nessa laughed. "They gossip more about you and Caraculla. Rumor has it the two of you are sneaking around behind my back. Besides, the marriage appeared rushed to the outsider. We kept up the ruse that with my father's death I would need protection. Now it will just look as though it didn't work out. Unfortunately, you will probably be to blame in the gossip circles."

Now it was Gypsy's turn to laugh. "Trust me, I have grown quite accustomed to being the object of their disdain. Most of them have hated me since the day I dared pick up a sword."

She shook her head. "If they only knew I wanted the two of you to be together. Caraculla has done so much for me. All I want is his happiness."

"I'm sorry for ruining your wedding," Gypsy said, feeling guilty.

Nessa got up and smiled. "Don't be. It's me who should be sorry we didn't take your feelings into consideration." She opened the bedroom door and the smell of fresh cut meat drifted in. "Why don't we go and get something to eat?"

Groaning from the soreness that permeated through her muscles, Gypsy pushed herself forward and swung her legs

around to sit on the edge of the bed. She would have loved to sleep a few more hours but she needed to talk to Gavin.

Gavin.

Then she glanced over at her sword that had been hung on the wall by her boots and frowned. It would take her father exactly one half second to know where that sword came from. “Will you do me a favor, Nessa?”

The young woman looked at her with shocked curiosity. “Anything, Gypsy. Anything at all.”

Gypsy painfully got off the bed and crossed the room to her belongings. She lifted Titan’s sword from the wall hook, sliding it into one of the scabbards that had been left with her belongings. Delicately running her hand up the blade of Titan’s gift she caressed the red ruby embedded on the hilt. “May I leave this sword here for a few days? I’ll be back to get it. I just don’t want to have to explain it to my father. Not right now, anyway.”

Chapter 24

Gypsy had been holed up at the villa for about ten days. She hadn't planned on spending close to two weeks here, but it had taken longer than she thought to regain her strength. Caraculla had informed Gavin that Gypsy was back, staying at his villa and doing well, so the general sent word he'd come by and talk to her when he got the chance. That was fine with her. Gypsy was in no hurry and not in the mood for one of her father's 'watch who you trust' lectures.

Nessa also ended up being a wonderful nurse, tending Gypsy's wounds and cooking her anything her heart desired. Gypsy was eating so well she forced herself to start practicing every day in order not to gain too much weight. Nessa was also one of the sweetest women Gypsy had ever met. The two became fast friends, and it was because of that friendship that Gypsy decided to have a heart-to-heart with Caraculla.

Gypsy waited until he'd returned from work to go into the courtyard and talk to him. He was sitting in a plush chair, savoring a drink and smoking a cigar.

"Hi," Gypsy said, taking a seat near his.

Caraculla smiled and a ribbon of pain wrapped around her heart. Gods, how she loved him. "You're looking much better. Nessa tells me you have already packed."

"Yeah, it's time for me to go. I really appreciate everything both of you have done for me."

Caraculla reached out and squeezed her hand. "I still feel guilty for letting you go to meet Kharon."

"Don't," Gypsy said. "I learned an important lesson from all that. I also learned that maybe Gavin isn't as full of crap as I thought he was." They both laughed. Then, after a brief pause, she said, "Listen, about you and Nessa."

Caraculla let go of her hand. "She already told me she wants me to set this marriage aside. I was going to do it in the morning."

"I'd rather you not do that," Gypsy said.

He sat up and frowned. "I don't understand. Why not?"

"Because I think you're good for each other. She can give you the family you so long for and you can offer her the safety she needs." Gypsy shrugged. "I mean, let's face it, Caraculla, we're at two completely different places in our lives. It's probably going to be a long time before I want to settle down and have a family, if ever. Don't throw a good thing away for an uncertain future with me."

A few tense moments passed where neither one said anything. Gypsy decided this was a good time to leave. She headed for the door.

"It's General Kharon, isn't it?" Caraculla asked.

"He's one of the reasons," she admitted.

"Don't you love me anymore?"

Gypsy wanted to run into his arms and tell him yes but then he'd leave Nessa for sure. That was the last thing she wanted. No, Gypsy had to let him go for both their sakes.

Maybe in another place and time this could work but not now. She took a deep breath and lied, "Not as much as I love Kharon." The air was thick with everything unsaid and oddly, her lie didn't feel so far from the truth. *Do I really love that bastard Kharon after everything he did to me? I don't know, I really just don't know.* "Good night Caraculla."

"Good night, Gypsy," he said. His tone seemed lighter somehow, easier. Perhaps even a little relived. *He does care for Nessa.* "I'll see you tomorrow."

* * * *

Gypsy finished packing the hyperia Nessa had given her and was ready to ride home when someone approached out of the darkness toward her. At first she feared it might be Kharon, come to try and reclaim her again, but then she realized it was a much more familiar sight.

Gavin rode up on his hyperia all decked out in his trademark black battle armor. He sat on his mount for a moment, then dismounted and grinned at her. Gypsy had never been so glad to see anyone in her whole life. Without thinking, she threw herself into his arms and hugged him tight. He squeezed her back, resting his chin on top of her head.

Collecting her emotions, she pulled back and straightened out her uniform. "It's good to see you, Dad."

"And you, my darling," he replied.

She stroked her mount's face and played with the bridle. "I suppose I'm in for a lecture all the way home."

Gavin tucked his thumbs in his belt and rolled his shoulders. He looked more relaxed than she could ever remember seeing him. What the hell was going on? She thought he'd be

furious at her for making such a silly blunder in trusting Kharon. "No," he said simply. "No lecture tonight."

"But aren't you mad at me?"

"I might have been before. But things have changed."

"Changed? I don't follow you. What's going on?"

"Earlier this evening, General Kharon resigned his commission as general and commander of the king's forces and defected to the Empire. He stood before Emperor Megolyth unarmed and placed himself at the sovereign's mercy. Once I determine he's sincere, I plan to enlist him in my army." Gavin smiled evilly. "He's quite a catch."

Gypsy stared at her father, only slightly aware her mouth was hanging open. "I don't understand. What reason did he give?"

"Kharon said the choice was easy. He was desperately in love with you and had to choose between this and suicide."

"I..." Gypsy stammered. "What should I do?"

"I know a lot has happened between the two of you, but why don't you just take this powerful relationship one step at a time? First, maybe the two of you can make up and be friends again. Then we'll see what the future holds. Okay?"

Gypsy nodded and mounted up.

"Now, let's get you home so your mother can see you're alright. She hasn't spoken to me much since I told her I wasn't going to rescue you," Gavin said as he mounted up and spurred his animal forward.

It felt just like old times riding along the dusty, Imperial road with her father. Then she remembered Kharon and was astounded that he'd left his kingdom, his career, everything

just to be with *her*. It was the craziest thing she'd ever heard of. Only insane people did things like that. A tiny flicker of white-hot joy warmed her belly. It burned brighter the more she thought about Kharon. Maybe he really was her soul mate and she *did* love the old bastard.

The more she thought about it, the more she knew. Yeah, she loved him. But he'd have a lot of making up to do to repay her for busting her ankle.

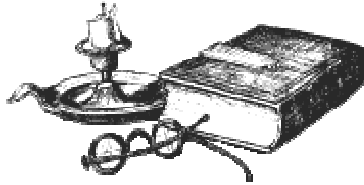
He gave up everything in his kingdom for me.

Gypsy leaned back in her saddle and smiled.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michelle and Lindsey live in Florida with their families and write constantly. For more information on them and their works, please visit the website at www.michelle-oneill.com

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