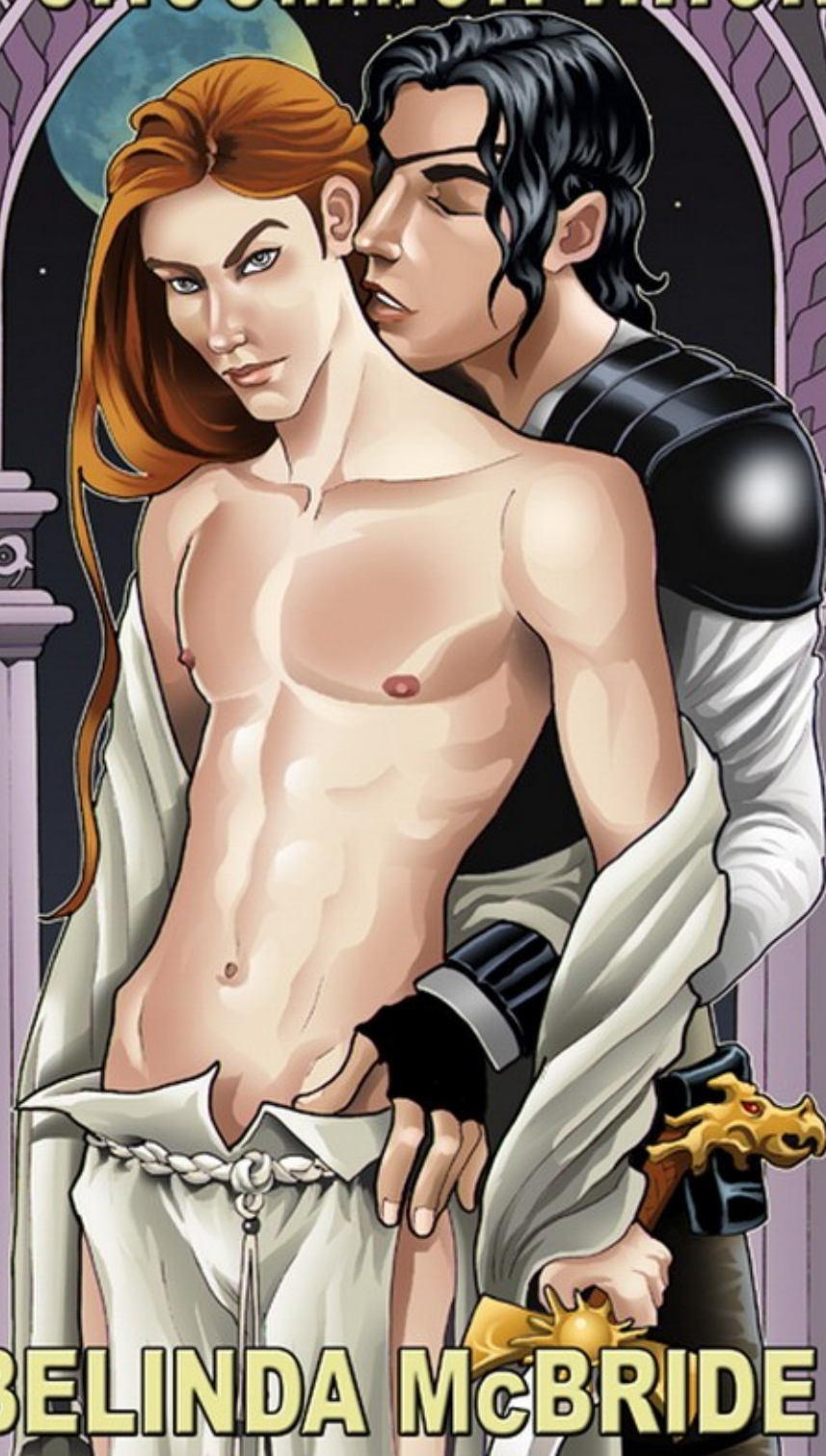


AN UNCOMMON WHORE



BELINDA McBRIDE

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Quotation

*A whore is a whore is a whore.
Except when he's something else completely.*

From the writings of King Helios Dayspring, High Priest of the Temple of the Sun

Chapter One

I sat back on a stiff wooden bench, hidden slightly behind the broad reptilian form of U'shma, my oh-so-beloved pimp and owner. Cautiously I surveyed the seedy tavern that he'd dragged me into. It was the Trell 57, and unfortunately, I wasn't a stranger to the place. The fact that we were here at all meant two things. Well, actually it meant three things.

Firstly, U'shma was broke, and the only way for him to supplement his income at the moment was to throw the veil over my face and the hood over my head and pander me out. Secondly, U'shma's itch to gamble must be overwhelming at the moment. Addiction was weakness, and if he was weak, I might be able to exploit him. Or I might suffer. Badly. And thirdly, by morning, my jaws would ache and my ass would burn.

Life really reeked.

All the whores being peddled at T57 are male, not because of the preference of the clientele, but simply because the place is fucking dangerous. No offense to the females, but they're simply too rare and precious to risk in a hellhole like this. The place was crawling with surly miners and unhappy travelers forced to wait for the next transport to someplace better. Pretty much anywhere was better than the T57. In fact, most any planet must be better than Warlan, with its dusty red soil and oppressively hot days. As far as I know, there are no sentient species native to this rock.

Crude as it was, there were rules in this tavern. No activated weapons. No illegal pharmaceuticals. Whores had to be appropriately escorted and were forbidden to peddle their services directly to the clients. In addition, planetary law kept us in the formal veil and hood. Poor johns couldn't even see what they were buying.

Not that most of the men cared—as long as they got their rocks off. Why did U'shma choose such a charming establishment? Well, the clientele at the T57 were bored and desperate

for diversion. In addition, he could hustle twice as many clients in half the time than it would take at a more reputable house where I might actually be expected to interact with a customer.

The last time I'd had time to talk to a client, I'd managed to convince him to smuggle me out of the place and onto his ship. Unfortunately Port Security found me within hours and delivered me home safe and sound, much to my rescuer's chagrin. He'd been hoping for weeks of unlimited access to my body. After that stunt, he'd probably kicked his heels in a Warlan jail for a week or two.

So there I sat while U'shma scanned the crowd for a suitable target, and I surveyed the room for escape routes. My foresight had saved our lives more than once. Like I said, the place wasn't particularly safe. But more than that, I was still looking for an exit off the planet. After a couple standard years with U'shma, it was time to leave. Destination? Unknown. As was purpose in life and the simple knowledge of the name I'd been born with. I simply knew that I was meant to be elsewhere.

That was probably the worst part, not knowing the origin or purpose of my existence. For now I was Pasha. That was common vernacular for "slave." U'shma had never bothered to give me a name of my own. I couldn't remember any other name from my past. So Pasha was fine for now.

I was a slave; that much was clear. U'shma was the third owner I could remember. Memories of brutal training occasionally surfaced when some strange creature had me kneeling between his knees, a cruel hand twisted into my long hair, my mouth stretched around an alien body part that was never intended for human attention. The other two owners were vague memories, faceless people with names that I could not recall.

I was spared the horror of sex with U'shma, who preferred my cooking to my cock. Thankfully we were anatomically incompatible, and my saliva burned his skin. At worst, he'd get a bit drunk and make me strip naked and watch as he masturbated. And believe me, watching U'shma wack his bone-spiked phallus was almost as bad as doing the real thing with a filthy scat miner.

Yeah...that kind of scat. Lovely planet, eh?

If there is a God, he does have a sense of humor, or he wouldn't have made U'shma.

He'd won me in a card game and couldn't wait to unwrap his package when he got home. It took mere seconds to determine that he was allergic to humans and that his blunt, sawlike cock wouldn't fit into any orifice I possessed. Lucky for me, he immediately fell in love with my cooking. Unlucky for me, he also saw the benefit of owning a cash cow. U'shma was too lazy to haul his scaly ass out to pimp me on a regular basis, so my life was generally dull, but not intolerable. I cooked, I cleaned, and then I sat in my bare little room, dreaming of another life. Sad to say, the occasional trips to the T57 were the most exciting moments of my life with U'shma.

The exit at the back of the tavern was blocked by a broken table, but the route to the private playing rooms was open. There was a back exit near the hidden cubicles that were available for rent by the hour or by the night. Those who couldn't afford to rent a cube took their pleasure right in the tap room. Nasty as it seems, I preferred the pinch-pennies. It kept me out in plain view of all. Less likely to take a beating that way.

Or a rape.

I continued to evaluate the room, when my attention was caught by a long, lean figure sprawled negligently at a table near the back exit. Even seated, it was plain that he was taller than the average humanoid. He was hard muscled and battle worn. His black hair was overlong and tumbled in a wavy mass down his neck. The profile he gave me was hard as a blade. An arched nose accentuated cruel, sensuous lips. He wore a black leather patch over one eye, and a scar bisected his high, hard cheekbone. Since he was blind on my side, I took the occasion to watch him openly. He couldn't possibly see me behind the veil, but I was certain that he felt my stare.

He surveyed the room slowly, stopping to watch a whore take position between a gambler's knees. After a few moments, the pirate reached down and readjusted his cock, and then turned his attention elsewhere. He might be interested, but he was here for a reason other than sex.

But God! His head turned slowly in our direction, and my mouth grew dry. My head spun at the impact of that gaze. His remaining eye was black as night and as fierce as flame. I felt the weight of his gaze from behind the veil, where my eyes were covered by a mesh panel. He looked at me for a few heartbeats and then moved on.

I shifted uncomfortably; my cock had grown long and heavy beneath the sheer gauzy robes that covered me from head to foot. Pain lanced through me as it reached the limits allowed by the

chastity ring that shackled me. Every instinct urged me to cross the room, to take his arms and look into that dark face...to make him see *me*.

Sadly I could only go where summoned, and not far from the dark man, a nervous-looking human was gesturing to U'shma. My chest went tight as my owner rose to begin negotiations with the john. They whispered and they argued, and finally U'shma signaled defeat. Not really defeat; the twitch of his blunt fingers told me that he'd negotiated a higher-than-expected price.

Rising smoothly to my feet, I carefully manipulated the folds of fabric that shrouded my body and face. There were perhaps three seconds for me to decide on a course of action. An erupting fight in my path held me steady in place, buying a few more seconds and ultimately, the opportunity to act. I'd paused within a few paces of the dark man when a body inevitably slammed into mine, throwing me in his direction. My hand lashed out, knocking over the goblet of sweet wine that sat on the table.

"I'm so sorry," I whispered as the bloodred fluid soaked into his shirt and beaded off the battered black leather of his pants. He growled in annoyance and stood, hands brushing at the wet stains. I was tall, but he towered over me. His shoulders were nearly as wide as U'shma's blockish form, and the black eye was as fierce as I'd imagined it would be.

Once again my lust surged, my heart pounded, and I knew that this man could not be allowed to walk away.

"Sir, I do apologize for his clumsiness. Please allow me to help!"

U'shma began batting at the stranger with a kerchief, angering the man even more. Finally the pirate dropped back into his chair, snarling in anger. I stood meek and subservient, with my hands neatly folded and my head bowed, watching as U'shma waved for more wine. It wasn't a surprise when he dropped into the chair opposite the man as though they were old friends. No doubt my erstwhile client had fled in fear of his life. U'shma was a top-rate con artist; he wouldn't allow that loss to deter his plans. Within seconds, he'd hauled out a set of cards, tempting the stranger into a game to sweeten his time.

"And as apology for ruining your clothing, my boy here will be glad to service you. No charge, good sir." He poked me, and obediently I dropped to my knees, waiting for the stranger to accept or reject the offer. He looked me over, no doubt seeing heavily lined gray eyes behind

the mask, but little else. He grunted in acceptance, and I awkwardly crawled under the shelter of the table and folded the robes to cushion my knees.

I knew my job—keep him unsettled, distracted. U'shma was a conniving old bastard. We'd played this game before. Kneeling between the stranger's spread legs, I palmed my cock, moaning silently at the agony of denial. Unless he hired me for the night, my climax was expressly forbidden. I mean, what if the next client wanted to be fucked? It happened often enough. The electro-magnetic cock and ball ring kept me in a continual state of discomfort. U'shma kept the remote that would free me, and that particular service cost the client dearly.

The stranger's legs were long and hard as iron beneath the leather of his pants. I ran my palms over the insides of his thighs, wondering how much foreplay I dared to indulge in. It really depended on the game they played up on top of the table. U'shma tapped once on my right shoulder, telling me to take it slow.

Fine by me.

Running my hands up his groin, I felt the length of his cock. He was aroused. Through the thick leather it was hard and broad and hot to the touch. I rolled my face over it, sliding my hands up to his stomach where the skin was a bit sticky with wine. Swiftly I pulled the shirt up higher, unlaced his trousers, and then, lifting the veil, lowered my mouth to his belly, slowly licking his skin clean. My lips tingled. The house wine here packed quite a kick; I'd probably pick up a mild buzz just by cleaning him up.

He shifted a bit, which told me to get down to business. Reluctantly I left the hard planes of his abdomen and followed his silent command. With a gentle nudge, I urged his hips up and slid the leathers down just a bit. Much as I'd like him bare-ass naked, they couldn't come down far, not with my kneeling so close.

His cock spilled out, as hard and dark with blood as I could have imagined. Even in the dim light under the table I could see the thick shaft capped by a heavy, graceful head. Again my cock gave an answering surge, which was rather amusing. As often as I serviced men, usually the women were the ones who really did it for me.

Maybe I just had a thing for big, battle-scarred warriors.

Gently I worked my hands into his pants and lifted out his scrotum. I rolled his balls in my hand and then paused. Make that...ball. He had only one. That didn't seem to be affecting his

pleasure though. I lowered my face to the silky skin and gently cherished that one ball, taking care not to injure what had already been so badly damaged. I ran the tip of my tongue over ridges of scar tissue there. I was gentle...so very gentle. He became very still in his chair. I paused until he flexed his hips, urging me on.

Raising my head again, I shifted his heavy cock to the side and laved my tongue over the surprisingly soft skin of his belly, picking up sweet wine and salty man as I followed the trail of fine hair up to his naval and then back down to his groin. His pubic hair was thick and wiry, and I nuzzled into it, grasping the root of his shaft to hold him ready.

The first taste made me shiver. I lapped up the salty tear of precum and let the thick hood of his cock slip between my lips.

He was big and powerful, and I adjusted my position, angling his cock so I didn't accidentally slam my head into the table above me. That was an occupational hazard around here. I'd seen whores carried out unconscious and bleeding after their client got a little too enthusiastic at the moment of truth. He was strong, and I was a little too tall to give a blowjob with the table above my head, so extra caution was called for.

When I took him deeply into my mouth, he sighed. Not much; he probably didn't even betray himself to U'shma, but I saw it...felt it. For a few moments, I allowed him to gently ride my mouth, shifting my hand so that the penetration wasn't too deep.

And then I let him go, placed one fist at the base, squeezing hard, and nuzzled down to his scrotum again.

If I could reach, I'd have fucked his tight ass with my finger, but that wasn't happening. Not this time. And somehow I got the feeling that this man was just dominant enough to refuse that particular service. But he'd probably be more than willing to dish it out. That thought made me shiver in delicious fear.

I played. Up the length with my tongue, and then down with my lips. I pushed his foreskin back and teased that tiny, precious spot behind his cockhead. I kissed my way down that faint line of skin as far as I could possibly go. When he grew close—so close that he grew that shade harder—I opened my mouth as wide as possible and laid my teeth in warning at the base of his cock. His hips jerked.

God only knows what compelled me to do it—he was so fucking close, and I knew my instructions—but I wanted this man to come. I wanted his seed on my skin and in my mouth. I wanted his hands on me, his skin against mine. I wanted to make him want me so very badly that he'd pay for the night. Just one night. Was it completely inappropriate to pray for such a thing?

I bore down just slightly into the meaty flesh of his cock, feeling him go still...so very still. He liked that...a lot. Releasing the pressure, I dragged my teeth up the length of his shaft, then slid my incisors lightly over the ridge of his cockhead. It would be too much for most men. Not him. My pirate liked that kiss of pain.

Without warning, his rock-hard hand came down and fisted into the veil. I could see his belly pumping. No doubt he was panting for air. His hips thrust as I swallowed down his cock. As his hot semen spilled into my mouth, his hand dug under the fabric of my veil, trembling fingers skimming over the surface of my skin. He traced the hollows of my eyes, the slender length of my nose. Pushing back the covering on my head, he dug his hand into the long braid of my hair and held tightly, his fingers flexing convulsively as his climax twisted his body in the chair above me.

He pulled away, and I let his semi-erect shaft slip from my mouth, but he did not release me. In fact, he pulled me closer to his body until my face was pressed against the damp warmth of his groin. He adjusted his pants and then pulled me close. I rested there between his powerful thighs, feeling oddly safe and content. His hand continued to stroke my hair, to roam my face, almost as though he were seeing me through the rough tips of his fingers. When they trailed over my lips, I opened my mouth, and the calloused pads slid over my teeth. I closed my lips over his fingers and sucked, and then released him.

U'shma didn't call me back up, so I carefully adjusted my position, smiling when the stranger's hand clasped my braid, not allowing me to move far. Once I was sitting comfortably between his legs, I rested my head against his thigh, letting my eyes slip closed. The conversation between the two was scant, and as hours passed, it grew terse, nearly angry.

Money changed hands, and then changed hands again. I heard my owner curse, and then later, laugh in delight. As he'd originally won me in a game of chance, it occurred to me to pay attention. My fate might be in play there above my head.

“His paperwork for this hand.”

U'shma's laughter was harsh and angry. He was clearly down by many points. "No, I think not. Perhaps...a visit until I retire for the evening. That gives you two, perhaps three hours."

"No. If not his papers, his service until I depart."

They continued in this vein for several minutes, during which my hopes rose and fell with every offer and counteroffer. At some point the flask of wine was passed to me under the table; I drank gladly, letting the wine lull me into a slumberous haze. For the first time in memory, I felt confident in allowing another to take control of my safety. I didn't sleep, not quite.

"Pasha...wake up!"

A sharp kick from U'shma's pointed shoe jerked me awake. I clumsily adjusted the veil and headscarf, and stiffly crawled out from under the table. Truly, I had no clue of my age; I was not old, but surely too old to fall asleep under a table. The stranger looked strained yet pleased. U'shma looked pissed. But it's difficult not to look pissed when the Maker gives you a damp, blue-gray snout where your nose should be.

"You will go with him tonight. He has you until this time tomorrow."

I looked from one to the other. Hope warred with apprehension. I knew I could run this time, but hell, they'd just catch me within hours. The cuffs on my wrists held all the information law enforcement needed to spot me and send me back to my rightful owner.

Perhaps the stranger had some amazing tech skills and could release me...I glanced at his battle-scarred hands and revised that hope. Perhaps he *knew* someone with amazing tech skills...

U'shma pushed away from the table, his stocky body clumsy with anger. He'd come out hoping for a profitable, pleasant evening, and walked away empty-handed. By tomorrow, the gambling itch would become a screaming rash on his brain. His addiction was a wicked thing. I bit my lip and considered my options. I glanced up at the pirate.

"I've got a room upstairs."

Hmm. Big spender. Most men on layover here just took a cube and shared the communal toilet. That's pretty much why the place smelled so bad. There was a waiting list for the single public shower.

He stood, and I stepped up to follow, hanging back the obligatory step or two. I spared a glance for U'shma; in spite of his anger, he'd already turned away and was hovering near a busy gaming table. Undoubtedly his thoughts were with the next con he could run.

The stranger seemed like the type who liked his weapon hand clear, so once there was room, I gave him space. He didn't like it.

“Up in front of me. I can't guard you if I can't see you.”

Now *that* caught my attention. I turned in surprise, looking at that stony visage. A whore preceding a client? I shrugged, turned, and led the way, pausing at the base of the stair.

“Third floor, turn right.”

His voice was deep and gravelly. I liked it. The sound made my insides a bit shivery. I tripped and went down onto my knees.

“Stupid fucking robes.” I'd gathered them up, but the ends got away and tangled between my feet. I don't know how women and clerics did it on a daily basis.

“You'll have them off soon enough.”

Now more of me went shivery. It was taboo to reveal the face of your whore, but still, the rest of my body could be naked. I'd never been in a position to ask about that little bit of etiquette, but my suspicion was that there were some whores working the brothels and inns who weren't really out for money. Some people just got their rocks off pretending to be something they weren't. Hell, according to U'shma, the local council head had sucked more dick than I would in my life.

Well, that was my hope. I really didn't want to suck dick all my life.

Chapter Two

The room was surprisingly quiet and blessedly cool. The window was slightly ajar, and I stood looking out over the busy streets. At first I wondered that he'd leave the window open, until I looked outside. No one would climb this high to enter the window of a sleazy lodging.

"The veil has to stay on, but everything else can come off." I began my memorized spiel, just in case he didn't know the rules. "Unless he gave you the remote for the chastity ring, I prefer not to penetrate you, and I am unable to climax. I'm current on my health certs; if you aren't, then I ask that you use appropriate protection. I can provide you with your choice of shields."

I slowly lifted the headscarf off, closed my eyes, and relished the sensation of cool air on my scalp and neck. I turned, checking for the effect of the slow striptease.

He stood by the door, his body taut with expectation.

"Just get that stuff off. I don't like seeing you in it."

Fine. I struggled out of the gauzy robes, leaving only a pair of high-waisted pants that were held up by a sash; the legs tapered and were tied at the ankles. Under it all, I wore decorative fabric slippers. My cock was beginning to wake up again, and I willed it down. With the chastity ring, erections were uncomfortable, to say the least.

"Where'd that scar come from?"

I glanced down and looked at the white mark on my ribs. Truly, I don't think I'd ever noticed it before. I frowned and shrugged. "I guess it's always been there."

He looked a bit disappointed. He probably got off on comparing battle scars. Or perhaps he thought it odd that I had no memory of such a vicious wound.

Standing awkwardly, I waited for him to move, to command me, but the man stood gazing, a fierce frown on his face.

“Do you know me?”

“No sir. Er...master.” I guessed he might be the sort who'd like that kind of thing. I was wrong. The word brought an even darker expression to his face.

He circled me like a giant panther as I stood obediently in the middle of the floor. Oddly, he didn't frighten me in spite of the angry face and rough hands. Even the cache of weapons piled on the table didn't intimidate me that badly. I spotted a golden *kilij*; my hands itched to grasp the hilt of the scimitar, to dance the blade under the harsh lights of the room.

Then I had to wonder, how in hell did I know that thing was called a *kilij*? That isn't in the vocabulary of the common whore.

Guess I must be an uncommon whore.

He completed his inspection of my body and ended up in front of me, just feet away. My urge was to drop to my knees and wrap my fists around that lovely cock of his. Yet something in his bearing held me back. Something that stirred in the back of my brain told me to hush...to be still.

He looked deeply into my eyes, and the expression on his face caused something to loosen inside my gut. I wanted to cry, to hide my face in shame. Instead I stood still and quiet, awaiting his instructions.

“Get rid of the veil.” His voice was faint and strained.

“Ahh...local statutes...”

“Take off that fucking veil!” His tone was a low, angry growl.

Fine. If he wanted it that much, I'd take the veil off. I had nothing to hide. I fumbled with the tie at the back of my head, but he didn't want to wait. A big hand reached out and jerked, taking a few strands of hair with it. I suppressed a curse.

He stood as though fixated, and I suppose there was cause. While slaves don't own mirrors, the temptation to sneak a peek now and again was always present. At one time I'd believed that learning my face would trigger my memories. It hadn't, but I knew that my face was handsome enough. High cheekbones crested slightly hollow cheeks. The nose was straight. The lips were wide and bowed, neither too full nor too thin. My eyes were large and gray, surrounded by deep brown lashes and brows, which were at odds with the coppery hair that was braided away from my face. A strong chin was graced with a slight cleft.

I could be objective enough to know that I was as beautiful as a man can be without looking effeminate. That knowledge meant nothing.

He stared, and defensively, I held my head a little higher.

When the pirate abruptly dropped to his knees, I was more than surprised—I was stunned. When he clasped my limp hand, pressing it to his forehead, I became alarmed.

But when he cried, taking great, sobbing breaths, I could do one thing and one thing only.

I dropped to my knees and took the huge warrior into my arms, doing my best to offer him comfort. And I hadn't a clue what was wrong.

“I failed you.”

His voice was forlorn and despondent. Ashamed. His hands hung at his sides as I wrapped my arms around his body. Tears slid from his intact eye, trickling down his cheek to settle on my bare shoulder. He outweighed me by many pounds, and I held on tighter to keep from going over.

Okay, so I groped him.

Not to disrespect the man or anything, but he was a complete stranger, if you discount the fact that I'd just given him a blowjob. But still, I didn't even know his name, yet here he was, leaning into my body and crying on my shoulder.

It seemed like the perfect opportunity.

He sobbed; I stroked his back, my hand dropping to his muscular ass. He let out a grief-stricken moan, and I wiggled in a bit closer.

“I am so sorry.”

I really didn't know what to say to that. If this man was responsible for my current life status...well, not good. Not good at all. But still...this man was a rock-hard badass, and he was so overwhelmed by emotion, by guilt, that he was falling apart in my arms.

And he knew me. Not Pasha the whore, but *me*.

“What was your primary responsibility...to me?” That just sounded weird.

“To keep you alive.”

A bodyguard, perhaps? That led to some interesting possibilities.

“Look at me.”

He resisted, and I leaned back, pulling away from him. Slowly he raised his head and looked at my face. Not into my eyes, though. My current status bothered him immensely.

“I am alive.”

He began to gather his composure and recover his dignity. However, he didn't move from my arms. He seemed unconvinced by my simple argument.

“Do you hear me? I am alive, and relatively well. I'm not certain who you are, but whatever happened, my life has been spared.”

We were still on our knees facing one another, and my cock was painfully happy with the contact. His cock was quite happy too, which rather impressed me. Emotional angst usually doesn't serve well as an aphrodisiac. That's the lovely thing about men; there's no guesswork involved when it comes to arousal.

Once again he bowed his head, slowly lowering it to my shoulder. His arms came up and wrapped me in a loose embrace. It was a touch that brought so many sensations. It was intimate and arousing, but ultimately, that embrace made me feel safe. Hopeful.

And strange as the entire situation might seem, that embrace was familiar. It was like returning home from a long, long journey. Succumbing to temptation, I slowly lowered my head to his shoulder, letting the smallest part of my burden rest on him.

Just a little, because the burden was mine. His burden was mine as well. In fact, it was my calling to bear the burdens of many. It was my birthright. Odd that I should know that, but that knowledge brought a sense of calm to my heart.

That was why living in the relative ease of U'shma's ownership chafed so badly. There were occasional humiliations, but really, no man should be without those moments of reality, those experiences that tell him that he is only a mortal and not a god. I sighed and let him pull me closer.

“What is your name?”

A harsh breath escaped his body. His grief literally encompassed me. I felt bad that I even needed to ask the question.

“Griffin. Captain Griffin Hawke of the Royal Guard of Astrum.”

He was still and quiet, allowing me to process that information. Allowing me to formulate the next question.

“And who am I?”

Was I friend to this man? Lover? Peer? He straightened a bit, gathering his dignity once again. He was removing himself from me both physically and emotionally. I braced, waiting for the answer.

“You are Helios Dayspring.”

“Helios.”

Sun. Hope. I whispered the name, but it fell from my lips like something foreign and strange. Looking up at him, I saw hopeful expectation fade from his expression.

“You are...were...a prince of our people. You were one of our spiritual leaders.” He must have seen the disbelief on my face, because he laughed abruptly.

“That look on your face...that hasn't changed.” He smiled then, a sad smile that settled oddly on that scarred visage. “Indeed, Sire. You were—and *are*—the hope of our people.”

There was so much to ask, and yet I didn't know enough to formulate a single intelligent question. My brain was still engaged with my new name. Helios Dayspring. I didn't want to face the idea that I was part of a greater whole. That I was no longer alone upset the odd balance of my life. It was overwhelming enough to have an identity, though it consisted only of a name.

How absolutely precious those two words were!

My knees were beginning to ache on the hard floor, but I didn't move. Countless hours of training had gone into my ability to remain on my knees; I could stay there as long as it took. Eventually he reached out and rested his hands on my shoulders, then slid them down my arms to settle on the slave bands around my wrists. His battle-toughened hands were surprisingly gentle.

“He gave me a remote...Will it remove these?” The bands seemed to offend him greatly. More than the veil, even.

“No.” I swallowed hard, and for the first time in my memory, shame settled briefly on my shoulders. I pushed it down and rose stiffly to my feet. My muscles ached from holding the position. “That remote is to the slave ring I wear on my penis.” His eyes flicked down to the front of my pants. “And I would greatly appreciate it if you'd remove the damned thing!”

That brought a reluctant laugh.

I reached to untie the sash at my waist, but his hands moved mine away, and Griffin gently loosened my trousers, then lowered them to the floor. He fished the small device from a pocket and tripped the small switch. Abruptly the device loosened and dropped from my flesh.

I braced myself for the inevitable rush of pain that accompanied the blood flow to my nether bits. It hit, and I gasped, my knees growing weak.

“Fuck.” He glared down at my wilted shaft, lips white with fury.

“That's pretty much what it's supposed to prevent.”

Unable to stop myself, I reached down and rubbed the sore skin at the base of my cock and balls. The device wasn't a toy, but rather a control device. It was legally required equipment for all male whores. Goodness knows they didn't want us out running wild and having uncompensated sex.

Stiffly I retrieved my trousers and began to refasten the wide sash. Unable to look at me, Griffin crossed to the weapons cache and began polishing the blade of a saber.

There had been many moments of humiliation in my life, but this was undoubtedly the worst. Losing the cock ring was blissfully sweet, but there was still shame in being as helpless as a child. I took a deep breath and tried to remember what it felt like to have some dignity.

“I don't want to hear everything right now, just the basics. Please.” My fingers were stiff and clumsy on the fabric. I had to focus on breathing in and out; the enormity of the moment threatened to shatter the last threads of my self-control. I wanted to cry even as laughter bubbled up my throat.

He turned and propped his ass on the edge of the table, muscular arms crossed over his chest. Gone was the formality that he'd shown earlier. Clearly I wasn't deserving of such respect. My throat went tight as the shame surged over me once again.

“God, Lio, I don't know where to start.”

Oh, not contempt. He'd relaxed into familiarity. He knew me well, it seemed. Something tight inside my heart went soft. Instinctively I knew this man would not lie to me. Tears burned my eyes, and I blinked them away. I felt positively giddy with emotion.

“You were third in line to the throne of our kingdom, Astrum. We live...lived on a planet known as Arash. Your Uncle Johan was king, your cousin Batte was the heir presumptive. His brother Bhar was the spare. After time in the army, you were recruited by the Sun Priests to serve.”

“A priest? I was a *priest*?”

He grinned then, seeing my chagrin. “It is not a puritanical sect. You were quite happy being a warrior-priest. Your wife...”

I let my eyes drop closed. A wife. Someone was waiting for me. I swallowed hard, feeling nausea rise.

“I’m sorry this is painful, Helios.” His voice was surprisingly gentle.

I nodded, waiting for him to continue.

“Your wife Cloris died some time before the invasion. Your son is well and safe.”

Oh God. I was a father. My hands trembled, and his next words were almost lost to the rush of blood in my ears.

“We were invaded without warning. The battle for our kingdom and planet did not last long. Our fighters were unsurpassed in the field, but we were unprepared for invasion from space. They outnumbered us greatly, and a neighboring kingdom joined with them. My final duty was to remove your family to safety. We were overwhelmed, and I was badly injured. After a brief fight, you commandeered my forces. You broke away and led the soldiers away from your family. And from me.”

I had no memory of these events. None at all. And yet their telling tapped into an endless well of grief and need and mind-crippling fear. My hands ached to touch the face of a child I did not know and could not remember. My heart ached for a lost wife.

“How long ago?”

“Five years.” The strength drained from my legs. I barely made it to the bed before collapsing, and there I sat, doing my best to process the information. An hour ago I was a whore with no worries, no ambitions or goals beyond a vague need to escape. Now I was a prince, a cleric, and a father.

“Our refugees have taken shelter on a small planet. It's a harsh place, but we've begun to build a city, a civilization.”

“The king? The princes?”

“All gone now. Executed. You are our king.”

“No.” I shook my head in denial. Denial of my personal pain, of course, but more at the fall of an entire people. The loss of heritage and culture and the thousands of lives that must have been snuffed out.

He stayed quiet then, running a rag over the already gleaming blade in his hand. My mind raced like a hysterical child in a hedge maze, turning one corner after another, only to come to a wall.

And as always happened when I thought too hard, my muscles began to grow heavy with fatigue. Weariness settled over me like an old blanket.

“You've been searching for me?”

“Many of us have. We are watched, so we practice great caution. Most of our military is in space now. I travel under the guise of a mercenary.”

“Well, you certainly look the part!”

He grinned briefly, and then shook his head. “I've actually made a good deal of money in this persona. It's helped feed our people.” He set the blade gently down on the table and faced me. “Do you need food? Drink?”

I shook my head.

“Well, I'm damned hungry.”

“Go straight to the kitchen for food. For a little extra scratch, the cooks will make sure it's hot and clean.” The waitstaff at this place left a lot to be desired, but the cooks were competent.

Wearily I crawled to the head of the bed. “Griffin.” He turned; his face was hard and without expression. “What you have told me frightens me. I won't deny that. But you've given me the first hope that I can remember. Ever.”

He paused at the door, stared for a moment, and then nodded his head.

“When I come back, we'll talk about getting you out of here.” His eyes fell to the cuffs. “And out of those.”

“Thank you.”

I threw my arm over my eyes; my body and mind were nearly tapped out. I covered my eyes partly to block the harsh afternoon sun, but also to hide the tears that were gathering there. I'd seen the look of pity on Griffin's hard face and didn't want to see it again. My tears must be shed in private. My pain would belong to me and only me.

The door quietly opened and shut, and I was left alone with my memories of nothing.

Chapter Three

I slept. I don't know how long, but as I rose slowly into wakefulness, all that seemed important was the amount of time I'd wasted that could have been spent in Griffin's company. I rolled to the right, meaning to rise, and encountered a large, solid body next to mine.

“Good morning.”

I blinked my eyes against the inky darkness of the room, seeing the sheen of stars still in the sky. It must be very early morning.

“I'm sorry, Griffin. I didn't mean to fall asleep on you.” I shifted and felt the coarse weave of the bed linen against my naked skin. He must have undressed me as I slept.

“Stress can cause weariness. As can malnutrition and whatever's been introduced to your body to keep you compliant.”

That brought me awake fast. “What do you mean?”

“Think, Helios. Whenever you get stressed, whether from too much anger or fear, or even humor, don't you become sleepy? Earlier you slept while under the table.”

I thought about that and realized it was true. All these years I'd been oblivious to that reaction, yet he'd spotted it within hours.

“I imagine you have a cerebral implant that keeps you placid. It probably also took your memories.”

At that, a sharp spike of pain ran through my heart. Slowly I dropped back onto the hard pillow. I could feel him next to me, a warm, solid presence in the darkness. Impulsively I turned into him, seeking the comfort of his body. When his arm settled comfortably around my shoulder, I knew.

“We were lovers.”

I tried to see him in the darkness, to see if he smiled or frowned. I saw only his profile against the night's darkness.

"Long ago. We were young."

"In school? The military?" I wasn't certain how old I was, but he seemed older. More competent.

"In the army. As is the custom of our people, our first lovers are chosen from our brothers or sisters in arms. We fight better next to those we love." He ran his hand down the length of my braid. "This is new. I think I like it." He tugged, and I winced.

"It isn't a handle."

Immediately he let it loose.

"I'm sorry, Griffin. It's just..." I trailed off, knowing he understood. He'd used it earlier when he thought I was just a whore. As had countless partners that had preceded him.

"Sometime I'd like to see it loose." His hand had wandered to my braid again, but now he stroked gently. "It must be beautiful when it's loose."

We lay quietly for a time, and a comfortable drowsiness crept up on me once again. Maybe it was indeed a reaction to stress, but frankly, I believed it had to do with the absence of the chastity ring. It was hard to get a good night's sleep with that thing strangling me all the time. Yet there was still so much I needed to know.

"How did you recognize me?"

My eyes had adjusted to the darkness; I could see his profile against the faint light of the window. His eye gleamed in the darkness, and I noticed that he lay between me and the entrance to the room.

"That trick with your teeth." He grinned, his teeth flashing white in the darkness. "You always knew just how to send me over the edge." He chuckled hoarsely. I couldn't help grinning back.

"I've never done that to anyone else, you know. It just seemed to be the right thing to do."

His smile faded a bit then, and I knew he was thinking about the years I'd served as a slave...a whore. I rose on my elbow to look at him.

"Griffin. I survived it. I survived it with all the grace I could muster. Please allow me that."

He swallowed hard. He choked back all the words that threatened to come forth. It was an admirable effort. Instead of speaking, he pulled me tightly to his body, and I reveled in that hold.

“How did we end?” I whispered.

“Not how...why.” The hand around my shoulder stroked my skin soothingly. Somewhere in my brain, I wanted sex. His touch brought forth another need as well—the need to be held and comforted. I laid my head on his shoulder, feeling...safe.

“It happened fairly quickly. You expected an army career, but one of the Sun Priests had a vision. You were called to serve in the temple, and I was promoted to officer status. Your uncle deemed it wise to provide you with a suitable wife, and you were wed to Cloris. A few years later, Suzan and I were married.”

That shot through me like an arrow. Married? He was married?

“Suzan was killed in the retreat. I wasn't there for her or for our children.”

“I'm sorry, Griffin.”

I got the feeling that he was carrying a heavy burden of guilt. He must have been at my side when his family was killed.

“My children survived. They are living with my cousin and her husband.”

“Good. Good.” I hugged him tightly for a moment. “You must have sons.”

“Daughters. Twins.” I could sense the smile in his voice. “One blonde like their mother, the other is dark like me.”

I lay a palm flat on his bare chest, feeling the beat of his heart. It sped up slightly at my touch. He knew what I was asking, even though I didn't.

“Your son's name is Alexander. He favors you, with copper hair and gray eyes.”

My eyes were wide open in the darkness as I tried to visualize the child I had no memory of. “I guess I didn't want to burden him with a silly name like mine.”

He laughed out loud, and I knew that I was correct.

“Actually, his name is Helios Alexander Dayspring. Your family insisted on the first name, you insisted on the second.”

Past the bulk of his body, I watched the slowly graying sky. The outlines of the city towers were etched black against the horizon. I'd never thought of the city as having any sort of beauty,

but there it was. Black velvet against silver gray, tiny stars twinkling with unsuppressed hope. Even the air smelled good. Why hadn't I noticed these things before?

"Griffin."

He turned his head slightly to look at me. I wondered if he'd slept at all. There was much to discuss, much to do if I was to get off this rock, but right now, this moment was out of time. It was ours, and no one could intrude.

"I know I have no right to ask, and I know you may not have the right to accept, but...I find that I need you."

He let out a slight breath of air, as though he'd taken a blow.

"You have every right to ask."

"I'm not asking as your prince...or whatever. I don't even remember you or what we had. But right now, I need touch. I need your touch, Griffin Hawke. If I had a room full of the most beautiful men and women from which to choose, you would be my choice."

His hand settled lightly over my mouth then, and I knew that my tendency to babble on must be a habit of old. But then he drew his hand away, trailing heavy fingers over my lips. Much of my body was soft and pampered like a woman's. My muscles were strong, but my skin was soft. The feel of his calloused fingers drew shivers over my spine. For the first time in recent memory, my cock was free to express its happiness, and it did, rising up to meet his wandering hand.

He grasped me in his rough palm, then pumped and pulled, and his whiskered chin dragged along the skin of my chest. He licked my nipple, and then bit it hard enough to hurt. My back arched, pushing my cock tighter into his palm.

My breath shuddered from my chest on a moan when he fondled my balls, pulling them forward to meet my rigid, straining cock.

"How do you want me, Helios?"

My eyes popped open, and I looked down at his dark form. That was *my* question! My head dropped back on the pillow as options ran through my mind. What did I want from this big, hard man? What did I want for our first time together?

"Come lie on top of me. Hold me."

I brought my knee up, making room for him as he settled his weight on top of me. “Is this how we used to do it?”

He pressed a kiss on my lips. “Later.” His grin told me this position was new to us. He kissed me again, his tongue a rough intruder into my mouth. I sucked and bit and pulled, enjoying the harsh feel of his beard. My skin was baby smooth thanks to a permanent depilatory treatment. I had no beard, no hair anywhere on my body, and I never would again. It would be a permanent reminder of my time spent as a slave.

He left my mouth; his journey took him to my jaw. His tongue swirled into my ear, bringing my hips up to buck against his. Our cocks dueled; he raised his hips just enough to give them space to tangle and embrace. Our balls pressed together tightly and then released.

I wrapped my arms around him, lost in the comfort and bliss of simple intimacy.

We rolled, trading places, and he went so easily that I knew the movement was expected. I straddled his hips and looked down at the dark beauty beneath me. His ebony eye glittered with emotion, and those harsh, sensual lips parted slightly. The lines beside his nose grew deep as his face went dark with passion.

Continuing the visual tour, I gazed down to view the broad, muscular shoulders. His chest was layered with lean, sinewy muscle, and his arms were hard and delineated. He didn't carry a spare ounce of fat on his body.

His belly was sculpted and flat; faint scars peppered his dark skin. They were remnants of battle, though some were the tokens of something much darker and uglier. My mind skittered away from that.

I scooted back to look at his lean hips; dark hair trailed from his chest down his belly, leading the eye to the dark thatch that surrounded his cock.

I pressed my hips forward, catching our shafts in my fist. My light to his dark, my circumcision to his natural.

“That's new.” His gaze was hot and fierce.

“My cock? I'm fairly certain it's always been there.”

His grin flashed briefly. “No Lio, you've been cut. Circumcised.”

“Oh.” I stared at the smooth column of my shaft. “That must have hurt.” As though agreeing, my manhood softened slightly. He nudged me slightly, which quickly solved that problem. I was hard again, and once more fascinated with the contrasts between us. I began to thrust, running our cocks side by side. He gasped as the heads caught on the sensitive ridges. I was fairly certain that we could come this way...very quickly.

But that wasn't what I wanted right now. I knelt between his legs and raised his knees. I wet my finger and pressed it to his tight hole. He clenched, which made me grin. My pirate wasn't accustomed to being plundered.

I found my discarded trousers and dug into the pocket, pulling out the tube of lubricant that was my constant companion when U'shma took me out on the town. Quickly I lubed his ass, and then moved on to my cock. I was patient and gentle, letting him grow accustomed to a finger, and then another stroking into his body.

He didn't protest as I arrowed my cock and pressed for entry. However, his very being radiated discomfort and resistance. He bore down; his gasp was muffled as I invaded him just the barest inch.

His ass was tight around my cockhead, and after ages of denial, I wanted to pump, to thrust, to spill deep inside his body. But more than that, I wanted it to be good for us both. He groaned when I withdrew, and then took the penetration stoically when I returned. I had to wonder if this was the first time for Griffin.

I stroked into him carefully, finding the little gland that gave such pleasure and watching the pain on his face melt away into shocked bliss. He began to rock into my thrust, tightening his ass on my shaft. My pleasure was rising, and my poor abused cock was near its limit. His was rigid and heavy on his belly, a pearl of liquid bearing witness to his pleasure. I don't think he expected to like it so much. Clearly my skills had grown since we were last together. I grinned when he clasped my hips, trying to control my movement.

When I could bear no more without surrendering to orgasm, I withdrew.

He cursed in protest, and then took a deep breath as I began to lube his cock. He was big and thick, and I knew this was going to hurt, but the pain would be the companion to pleasure. In honesty, I craved his possession.

Wordlessly I rolled to my back, raising my knees for him.

If you'd asked just hours ago, I'd have said I never wanted to be fucked by a man ever again in my life, but somehow this man was the exception. He knelt between my knees, forcing them just a little more apart, raising my hips just a hair.

He knew what he was about.

He pressed, and after a moment of resistance, my ass got over its reluctance to be fucked. I relaxed, feeling his massive cock gently work its way in.

That was it. He was gentle. He probably wasn't always gentle in bed, but right now, I couldn't bear anything else. He knew that. Just as the burn became too much, he drew back, lubed some more, and started the penetration once again. As I relaxed, the pain melted away into something delightfully dark and wonderfully delicious. I clenched my jaw against a guttural, animalistic groan.

"I'm in." His voice was gruff; he slowly lowered his body till we were face-to-face. We didn't fuck then; we kissed, deep and slow. He made love to me, cherishing me and letting me take all the comfort and strength that I needed. My cock was trapped between our bodies; it began to harden once again. He began to thrust, and within seconds, it was weeping and ready.

The old bed squeaked slightly under our tempo, and I smelled the night air mixed with his sweat and the spice of the incense that scented my hair. I grabbed his tight, hard ass with one hand and buried the other into his thick hair. I felt the leather tie of his eye patch at the back of his head. He brought his hand to the mattress on either side of my shoulders, rising up slightly to watch my face. That slight shift in position had him gliding over the gland that was buried inside my body, driving me into twisting, mindless bliss.

I was going to go before him, and with great effort I kept my eyes open, watching him watching me. I bucked under him, fighting to hold his cock deep in my body, savoring the sting where our skin slapped together. He let me set the pace, and I fought to hold back. I fought to draw the moment out as long as possible, to grasp and savor the shining moment of surrender.

When I came, my back arched, and I slammed down on him, my ass squeezing him tight. My semen shot between our bodies, a slick curtain that dripped from his belly to mine. I cried out in pleasure, in relief. I cried out with an emotion that had no name, at least not in the bleak existence I'd lived in for so long. And then I was finished, my body going lax, my breath coming harsh and fast.

Satisfied with my climax, he increased his tempo, and his powerful thrusts drove me up the bed till I grabbed the metal headboard to hold myself steady. He lowered his head and released a shuddering breath, his hips digging into mine. I felt the hot spill of his cum, the sudden blooming of sweat on his skin. His groan was rough and harsh in my ear. He pounded into my ass, suddenly releasing all the heat and the power that he'd been withholding. He roared like a man in pain, freezing and then pumping into my body once again. His muscles shook with tension, and I held on, breathless at his abandon.

Finally he collapsed, the full weight of his body resting on mine. I wrapped my arms around him as he recovered. I felt his cock slip from my body, and still I held on, reluctant to let this moment go.

He was weak in my arms—weak and spent. At this moment, he needed me to hold him, and it felt so very, very good. We were both limp and sated, and if an army had broken in on our stolen moment, we'd have been at a loss to fight. At that moment, we were helpless.

And you know? It was perfect.

Chapter Four

Griffin was still heavily asleep when I rose. Crossing to the small toilet area, I did my business and then washed, and then I looked critically at my reflection in the grubby mirror.

Most of the makeup had washed away from my face, leaving only the dark lines at the base of my lashes. Those were tattooed on permanently. The artist who'd enhanced my best feature had been remarkably skilled, and it took a close look to see where the pigment had been applied. Thankfully I'd been spared the full works...no lip liner or extra embellishments.

My ears were pierced, once through each lobe, and one piercing up higher. U'shma only spared enough cost to ring me with modest golden hoops. That was another minor blessing. He'd never seen the need to ring my nipples or genitals.

Aside from the hair, which I intended to shear off as soon as possible, and the slave bands, I could walk the streets without causing much suspicion. Some slaves had elaborate body modifications that marked them conspicuously and permanently. I could live with earrings and eyeliner.

Digging into the copious pockets of my robes, I located my hygiene kit and quickly made myself presentable. There was a man in the other room that I really wanted to impress. A quick shower in the tepid water did much to restore my self-confidence.

Stepping back into the bedroom, I caught the sound of a muffled snore. That made me smile; U'shma's snore sounded like a blast horn.

Since Griffin was clearly dead to the world, I began surveying the weaponry on the table, wondering how much of this he actually wore on his body.

Most of it, probably. He seemed the sort. My pirate was a bit old-school with his eye patch and leathers. I'd noticed last night that he even wore a single gold hoop in his ear.

The golden kilij seemed out of place among those grim, well-used weapons. In the morning light, it gleamed brightly, and picking it up, I saw fine etching along the curved blade.

At the decorative hilt, solar rays burst out from an orb. As I took it in my hand, my heart raced a bit faster. It was a perfect fit.

Perhaps my brain had no memory of what to do with such a weapon, but my muscles did. I stopped thinking and simply allowed my body to take over, leading us through a series of graceful, albeit dangerous, moves. I dipped and thrust, balanced and lunged.

As long as my body commanded the weapon, the set was flawless. The moment my brain engaged, weariness came over me and I stumbled, catching the point of the weapon on the table, rattling the piled swords, knives, and pistols.

I checked the bed and found Griffin sitting up, watching my impromptu performance.

“That was very nearly perfect, Helios. It is a fine thing to see you with the kilij in your hand once again.”

He was ruffled with sleep, his brown torso bare, the thin sheet draped casually over his hips. I wanted nothing more than to toss away the sword and dive face-first into that sheet.

It would be a breakfast fit for a king. Or a whore. Luckily, I was both.

Instead I set the scimitar carefully aside. “I’m sorry, I should have asked first.”

“No need, it’s yours. You’ll wear it when we leave.”

Mine? Granted, the solar rays were symbolic of my name, but still, it was a grand piece of metalwork. I took it up again, inspecting it a bit closer.

From the corner of my eye, I saw movement and looked up to see Griffin rise from the bed and stretch, his magnificent body etched against the light of the window. He vanished into the toilet for awhile. I heard the water running, and when he returned, his wet black hair was plastered to his skull and his morning beard was dark against his face. Even that had me thinking illicit thoughts.

Damn, the things that happen to a man when you take off his chastity ring!

Anyhow, I clearly needed to pull myself out of the moment and look down the road a bit. I had less than twelve hours before being returned to U’shma. It seemed that Griffin was to be my rescuer, but as yet he hadn’t presented a viable escape plan.

Hell, he hadn’t presented a plan at all! He leaned up against the rough wall, naked and splendid, watching me with an amused gleam in that eye of his.

"I can't decide if you're like a child learning to play with a new toy, or an adult remembering to balance on a barely remembered beam from childhood."

"Beam?" I set the sword down, keeping it slightly separate from the others. That way my gaze could wander freely to the weapon.

"From the time we learn to walk, we learn balance. Our children learn to walk on upended beams and bars. As they grow, they begin to carry weapons and then to fight on those surfaces. There are no better fighters in the universe."

"Unless you count those who come from the sky."

He snorted in disgust, finally pushing away from the wall and donning his leathers. I was wearing only a hip scarf, so he tossed my trousers across the room, planting them squarely over my face and shoulders.

"Get dressed. We need to talk, and it's difficult to focus with your naked body as a distraction."

Aha...he wasn't unmoved! I grinned and stepped into the loose trousers, then wrapped the sash around my waist. When I bent to wrap the ankle ties, I made sure he had a good view of my ass. A rumbling growl behind me indicated that my ploy had been effective. A pair of strong hands clasped my hips; a hard, leather-covered cock ground into my ass.

"Helios...If you keep distracting me this way..."

I grinned and leaned back into his hold. After so many years of isolation and denial, touching him was like water to the parched. I soaked it up. He rasped his beard up and down my neck in a stinging embrace. One hand came around and clasped my crotch, rubbing and pulling till I was hard and needy.

"Do I have your attention?" he rumbled in my ear.

Breathless, I nodded. I might be king, but at that moment he commanded.

"Then take a seat so we can talk." He stepped back, leaving me swaying on my feet.

"Bastard," I muttered, flopping onto the bed. For the first time since arriving in this grubby room, I looked around, noting the peeling paint and scarred walls. Like most buildings on this planet, it was made largely of rock and heavy clay of some sort. The normal daytime

temperatures were uncomfortably hot, and the earthen structures helped keep building interiors cool.

I leaned back against the headboard and sighed, watching my belly rise and fall with my breath. My cock was still hard, curving up long and thick under the thin fabric of my trousers.

“How could I forget something like a circumcision?”

Griffin didn't answer. There was no need. At some point in time, someone had put something foreign into my head. The question was, could we undo the damage? And who was responsible for my enslavement? Just thinking about it made me slightly weary and sad.

“So, Griffin, do you have a plan?”

“Actually, I've always got plans. I just need to decide which one to implement.” He lowered himself to the rickety chair that served the table. “I could simply kill that lizard and take your papers and the remote.” He grinned, and I had to wonder how serious he was.

For a moment I considered that option, and then shook my head. “U'shma is probably the best owner I could have hoped for. As it is, losing me will be a bit of a blow to him.” Not many people around here had the knack for cooking at all, much less for a finicky reptilian humanoid. And over the years, I'd come to see that U'shma was as alone as I was. He'd left his people and his planet long ago.

“I could try to buy you from him.”

That was a distinct possibility. He was hurting for money.

“Or I could just take you and run.”

Folding my arms, I looked at him in question. A rather charming dimple had manifested on his left cheek. God! What a rogue.

“The ports are heavily patrolled. My cuffs have a sensor that will trigger an alert if I try to pass through security.”

“Then we've got to get the lizard to release you.” He fished a communicator from his pocket and swiftly entered a message. “I'll have my copilot standing by to depart.”

That was the first I'd heard of a traveling companion. Griffin stared at the display on the unit, awaiting a response. He frowned at the tiny screen. Without comment, he slipped the unit back into his pants pocket.

We both sat for a long moment, staring at one another. I wanted him...I craved him, and I let that need show in my eyes. Wickedly, I dropped my gaze to his groin.

“We don't have time for this, Lio.”

I licked my lips. Rested my hand on my bare stomach. I brought up one knee to frame my thinly covered erection.

He growled. Obviously he was a man of few words.

“So will you visit U'shma alone, or am I coming along?”

He swallowed, cleared his throat, and dragged his gaze from my body. Reaching behind him, Griffin pulled a sword from the pile of blades and began idly whirling it in the air. His skill was quietly breathtaking, with none of the flamboyant moves that I'd made with the golden blade that he said was mine.

“Together, I think.” While his hands were busy, his gaze never left mine. “No one will question my returning you to your owner.”

I stretched a bit and relaxed, watching my pirate fight for control.

“And if U'shma doesn't agree to release me?”

“I'll use force.”

His control was exquisite. Clearly I'd need to exert a bit more force to compel him to join me on the bed. My hair was unbound; I pulled it forward and began to comb my fingers through the length, spreading it over my chest. I separated long strands and began to weave a complex plait.

He watched with unnerving intensity. As I reached the end of the braid, I dragged my fingers into the rope of hair, releasing it to fall free once again. This time I pulled out small sections, making a tiny braid at my temple.

“I'll have to cut this off. It's bothersome.”

“I like it.”

“Then I'll keep it.”

Dropping the hair, I let it spill like a fiery gold curtain over my torso, pooling in my groin.

“How much force will you use?”

His sudden leap onto the bed took me unawares. His weight dragged me down to the lumpy mattress; the heat of his breath seared the skin of my neck. This time he wasn't so gentle, and I reveled in the rough attention. He bit and nipped, drawing blood to the surface of my skin. His kiss was harsh, his tongue thrusting, teeth clipping mine. His hips pumped into mine; our iron-hard cocks pressed together in a painful, mind-bending embrace. One rough hand was twisted into the length of my hair, the other jerked frantically at my pants, pulling them loose of the sash.

His mouth closed over my cock; he sucked hard, pulling a strangled curse from me. I rose a little, watching in stunned disbelief as he went down on me savagely. The blinding pleasure of the act skated dangerously close to pain. One hand was still tangled in the length of my hair, the other burrowed between my legs, stroking my balls, rimming my ass with the threat of dry penetration. All the while he sucked and stroked, pulling my cock deep into his throat in a wet, tight claiming.

I dropped back, unable to speak aside from animalistic grunts of pleasure. Movement was impossible beyond the convulsive thrusting of my hips. I surrendered to the sheer, overwhelming assault on my body.

A finger returned to my ass; it was wet this time, and he pressed inward, seeking and finding my gland.

I'd have come then, but he withdrew, and a heavy grip locked over the base of my cock, forcing me to come down just a bit, to submit to his control. Dragging my head back up, I watched. He released the length of my hair and twisted, shedding the tight leather of his pants. The muscles of his body played under his skin in a sinuous dance. His skin shimmered golden brown in the light of day; the scars on his torso and shoulders had a harsh beauty of their own.

I expected him to top me, to penetrate my already sore ass, but instead, Griffin lowered his body over mine, pushing and thrusting aggressively. His hips pumped into mine; our cocks came together. I caught them in my hand, his harsh face contorted in pleasure as we found a rhythm. He looked down as our slick shafts strained together. This was his kink; he was wildly excited by the struggle for dominance, by the sight of our male bodies entwined, by the sight of our cocks clasped in my fist.

His breath came quickly; he was braced on muscular arms and watching our bodies, and then he looked up at my face. With my free hand I urged him on, squeezing and kneading the tight muscles of his ass.

“I didn't believe we'd ever be together like this again, Lio.” His whisper was taut with emotion, and the revelation came to me like a blaze of light.

This man loved me.

It showed in every line of his body as we made love. It showed in the harsh planes of his face, the timbre of his voice. I felt it in the passion of his kiss.

This man whom I had no knowledge of prior to the day before loved me to the very depths of his soul.

It made me frightened and elated. It made me sad. Grief welled up, and tears flooded my eyes. I'd have looked away, but he gripped my hair, holding my head in place.

“Helios. Open your eyes.”

I wanted to refuse, to shake my head and squint my eyes shut like a frightened child. His grip became tighter, his hips thrust hard against mine. Our sweaty bodies slid together in perfect, familiar harmony, yet I was afraid to face the moment.

“Helios.”

His voice was soft yet commanding. Against my will, I looked up at him and thought that surely I must love him. Yet I had no memory of this man. Reaching up, I stroked the side of his face then cupped my hand over the eye patch. Without asking, I knew that this injury was inflicted because of me.

He pressed his face into my hand, but never looked away.

Griffin increased his tempo; in my slick, sweaty hand our cocks grew just that shade harder. He gasped, finally looking away from me, arching his back into the air like a great, muscular beast. I slammed backward onto the mattress; my body shuddered and heaved. My cum spilled over my fingers. In seconds, he followed. Another spasm hit me, followed by another. Our muffled groans joined in an odd, gruff harmony, followed by the sound of labored breathing in the quiet of the room.

He remained over my body, looking down into my face. I could see the realization gather and settle in his expression. Perhaps he hadn't known that his love for me had never died. Perhaps he suddenly understood that his search had finally ended.

Whatever the case, his epiphany wasn't followed by fear or panic. Instead, a quiet peace settled over his expression. Whatever he felt brought him comfort. Seeing that look on his face flushed the panic from my heart. I took a deep breath and then another.

I was safe. I was home.

He leaned down and kissed me, and I kissed him right back.

Chapter Five

With one hand on my shoulder, Griffin guided me into the low, long house that had been my home and prison for years now. As I was a slave, the front door was off limits, so we made a quiet entrance through the back where the kitchen and my room were located. Almost immediately, we knew that all was not well with U'shma.

The kitchen was dirty and littered; U'shma had probably sated his gambling itch with a food orgy. I smiled because cleaning up after him was no longer my concern.

What did concern me were the dull, rhythmic thuds that carried on the air. Griffin was immediately on the alert. Like me, he recognized the sound of a beating when he heard it.

We moved stealthily through the house, finally peering around a corner into U'shma's private quarters. The room was torn apart, and my erstwhile master lay in a heap on the floor, his hands and feet tightly bound.

A man I didn't know was swinging a heavy object in a tube of fabric. I jumped as it struck U'shma about the shoulders and head. The weapon was designed to cause minimum injury with maximum pain. I'd been visited by that sort of weapon at some point in my past. My skin pebbled in gut-twisting fear, and I moved to defend my owner.

Griffin held me back, and while my instincts were to stop the beating, U'shma's life wasn't in immediate danger. There was much to be learned by waiting.

One more blow, and the man straightened.

He was tall and slender, his head crowned with a crop of rusty-colored hair that was cut in a short, bristly cut. I swallowed. He bore more than a passing resemblance to me. His profile was clean, with a slender nose and strong chin.

"Where is the slave? The copper-haired human male?"

He stood poised to swing the weapon again, and U'shma spat greenish-white blood on the floor. His face was hideously swollen, and his blunt fingers were broken and bloody.

“Fuck yourself, human!”

Got to admit, U'shma had class. He also had pretty good tolerance for pain.

The stranger began to swing the weapon, and Griffin drew his sword. It cut through the fabric once it arced through the air. With one swift move, he clubbed the man with the hilt of his weapon, and the stranger fell like a stone.

Without a word, the pirate began rifling through U'shma's clothing, searching for the missing remote. He found it on a loop around my owner's wrist and quickly activated it.

For the first time in my memory, the cuffs dropped loose. My skin was white and chafed where they'd rested for so very long.

I stood idly rubbing my tender skin as Griffin bent and pulled the clothing from the man's limp body. He tossed the clothes to me and then locked the cuffs around the other man's wrists. It took only seconds to strip and don the leather pants and long-sleeved shirt.

It was amazing how well they fit. I stared at the stranger; suspicion ran through me, causing the skin to prickle on the back of my neck. This person was not unknown to me, and his presence was disturbing.

When Griffin produced the chastity ring and locked it onto the man's genitals, I didn't protest, though I felt I should have. Seeing that reflection of myself on the floor nauseated me. But this was Griffin's game, and I'd play by his rules.

“U'shma. It appears that your slave has gone rogue. I'd suggest that you take him to a clinic for rehabilitation.” Griffin's smile was grim and ominous.

I stomped my foot into a knee-high boot that fit perfectly. It could have been custom made for me.

From the floor, U'shma struggled against his bonds. “Pasha, release me. Now!” He glared at me in fury.

“My name isn't Pasha. I believe that your slave is on the floor next to you.”

He cursed and struggled. “I will notify the authorities! They will track you down!”

Griffin stood back and pushed at the unconscious man with the toe of his heavy boot. He gave U'shma a threatening look and unbuckled a sword from around his hips. I just grinned and

caught the kilij as he tossed it to me. The scabbard fit comfortably at my hip. I couldn't resist giving a bit of a flourish with the weapon.

"As my copilot said, your slave is on the floor next to you. If you continue to insist that Markus here"—he swept his hand in my direction—"is your slave, we'll leave him unbound before we go. That way he'll be able to...assist you with those ropes when he wakes up."

At Griffin's threat, U'shma went quiet. He was afraid of the unconscious man. I didn't blame him.

"It's a good trade, U'shma. He's sound in body. If you aren't happy with him, you can have him mind-wiped, or you can sell him to another who will appreciate his finer points." Griffin smoothly returned his sword to its scabbard.

"Perhaps you won't be allergic to his saliva," I suggested. When his gaze darted to the other man, I turned away so he couldn't see my smile. Behind me, Griffin bent to check the cuffs on the unconscious man. Once again, a wave of pity rolled over me. Who was that man to me? Could we really leave him to the existence from which I'd just been liberated? Unable to watch anymore, I wandered the house, looking at it for the last time.

My room was austere and nearly empty, containing few traces of my past life. Spare clothing hung on a peg set into the plastered wall. A mirror that was barely larger than a coin hung above a small shelf that held a pot of kohl and a hairbrush. I felt I should take something to take with me, something to show that I had lived these past years, some artifact of my existence. I picked up a handful of items and tucked them into my pockets.

"Are you ready, Lio?"

I looked around the barren room and nodded. Turning away, my gaze fell on a small book that had tumbled to the floor. Griffin paused and retrieved the book, then handed it to me.

Recipes of the Uldmar Guyam. It was mine. Probably the only possession that was really mine. It was a worn, beat-up cookbook that I'd salvaged from a pile of rubbish at the side of the street.

I smoothed my hand over the tattered cover and slipped it into the inner pocket of my vest. In the other room, I heard U'shma moving about. His voice was guttural with anger. I was leaving another to take my place in what would surely be a hellish existence. Guilt washed over me, and I looked to Griffin for reassurance.

“Helios. That man...my copilot. He meant you harm.”

I studied his face, seeking and finding the truth there. The stranger had been beating U'shma, trying to force him to disclose my whereabouts. For now, that would suffice.

I took a breath and straightened my shoulders.

“I'm ready.”

Griffin nodded, and we walked away.

* * * * *

The docks were a bustling, noisy place, and as I took my seat in the shuttle that would carry us to the space docks, I realized what a cloistered, limited existence I'd led.

Griffin and I sat together, monopolizing an entire row of seats. He'd placed himself between me and the aisle, once again using his body as a living, breathing shield. After a day in his company, I'd come to realize that the gesture was automatic. He remained on alert though his body appeared loose and comfortable. Seated next to him, I felt the tension that he hid so well. When I tried to speak, to ask him about what had happened at U'shma's home, he shook his head. We'd speak of it later.

Humanoids of all sorts filled the sleek shuttle. Some were familiar, some were strange and exotic. I watched in fascination, ignoring the leering smile of a blonde mercenary. It was a bit ironic that even dressed in the utilitarian clothing of a space jockey, I still drew unwelcome attention. I wondered if this had happened before my fall from grace. Somehow I doubted it. Something fundamental had changed within, and it must have shown on the outside as well.

The shuttle was swift, and within an hour, we disembarked into a zero-grav corridor, using heavy straps attached to a conveyor belt to move us to the station. After a brief time in a pressure lock, we stepped into the noise and chaos of the Warlan space docks.

Griffin led me past rows of sleek fighters and sturdy, heavily armed freighters. My gaze was caught by ships that looked like pleasure craft and others that looked like patched-together barges. We approached a disreputable-looking cruiser, and my heart dropped in my chest. Surely the crate had something magnificent in the engine room?

To my relief, we passed it and arrived at a common-looking cruiser. It was nothing special; nothing about the ship would catch the eye or draw suspicion. At our approach, a ramp slowly

lowered, and without pause, we boarded the *Aida*. I stifled a smirk. It felt like I was boarding a sedate, boring, family vessel. The trash heap docked next to us was more interesting!

As the ramp closed behind us, Griffin must have caught my skepticism.

“If you were a port agent, which cruiser would you inspect for contraband?”

His point was clear; the anonymous appearance of the *Aida* would draw much less attention. I shrugged and looked around at the clean, utilitarian interior of the vessel. Clearly some modifications had been made inside. This cruiser had been stripped down to the basics. This was obviously not a passenger ship. The common area had been converted to a space designated for training and exercise, with mirrored walls and padded floors. It could also store plenty of cargo. I suspected there were also false walls and removable floors.

He skipped any sort of tour, heading straight for the bridge. I quietly slipped into the copilot's seat, feeling rather useless as Griffin began a preflight check. The expression on his face was grim; I could see that he was in a hurry to leave the planet behind. There was no telling if the authorities were seeking us. I chewed on my lip, suddenly realizing what a big fucking deal this was: I was a missing king and had been hidden away as a slave on a planet known for criminal activity.

Someone on Warlan knew about me. Someone would quickly realize that I'd escaped and left another man in my stead. If we were caught, I'd probably be mind-wiped. And Griffin? That dominant temperament of his wouldn't be modified, even with a mind-wash. I doubt they'd bother to keep him alive.

For all I knew, the chip in my brain might activate a tracking signal. My heart fluttered in panic. And U'shma...what of him? Would he suffer from my actions?

I caught myself at that thought. Why would I care about U'shma's fate?

As the engines powered up, Griffin activated a holographic display over the instrument panel. It was a map with a course plotted.

“We'll keep to the original flight plan. Our next stop is here.” He pointed to a tiny dot on the map. “It's an agricultural planet. We'll purchase grain and farming implements. But after we take on our cargo, we'll be taking a slight unscheduled detour...to this little rock.”

It all meant nothing to me. I didn't know how to read the map and didn't recognize the system. Feeling that it was expected, I nodded in agreement.

“What's at the planet we're detouring to?” I gazed at the glittering display in front of me. It was nothing like the night sky of Warlan.

“Your memories.” He gave me a brief smile. “I know a few people here and there. This one won't appreciate the visit, but he owes me.”

I rubbed the back of my head, almost imagining that I could feel the microscopic implant that had taken so much from me. There was odd comfort in not knowing. It was freedom from the harsh reality to which I'd be returning. Memories held only the promise of pain and grief, of mourning the loss of so many. In all honesty, I'd rather remain safe in my forgetfulness.

For the next several hours, Griffin worked, taking us out of the port and safely into the stars, while I simply tried to stay out of his way.

* * * * *

Time dragged.

I tried to sleep, but to no avail. The room was strange to me, the bed uncomfortable. I smelled a stranger in the air. We still hadn't discussed the man that we'd left behind on Warlan—the man who looked so much like me. His room said little about him beyond the fact that his body was the same size as mine. There were no mementos, no decorations or images of family or friends. Simply basic clothing and a hygiene kit. Being in his room disturbed me.

Wandering the cruiser, I returned to the large space that was clearly a gymnasium. Two walls were lined with mirrored surfaces. Standing racks held swords and poles and other weapons used in hand-to-hand combat. The other walls were padded. That made me grin, imagining the violent sparring that must sometimes take place here. The weapons were held in place by a strong magnetic force so they didn't fall loose during rough travel.

I entered the room and began walking a form with the kilij in hand, letting my body guide me. If I thought about what I was doing, it slipped away. When I simply followed the sword, my body followed too. Emptying my mind soothed the panic that simmered just under the surface of my thoughts.

I walked the form until my muscles burned and blisters rose on my skin. The pain threw me deeper into the meditative state. Words rose unbidden in my mind—nonsensical, meaningless words. Yet those words had meaning when combined with the swordplay. Faces...images wavered in my mind as I moved. Gradually I increased the speed of the set, until the room

blurred in front of my weary eyes. I knew nothing but the blade and the form. This was one set, one story. This was the story of the beginning, of darkness and light—Chaos and Logos.

I knew there were others—dozens of others—but for now, I'd perfect this first set. In my imagination, I pictured the golden kilij cleaving a path through nothingness, separating it into night and day.

“Helios.”

My focus was shattered, the tip of the blade dropped, and I turned to where Griffin stood leaning against the frame of the entryway. I hadn't heard the door slide open. Another weakness. No wonder I'd needed a bodyguard.

“It's time to stop now.” He moved to my side and pulled the hilt of the sword from my aching fingers. He examined my hands critically, cradling them in his own.

“You've caused yourself harm, Lio. I know this is all difficult, but you must rest. I'll begin training you tomorrow.”

“Training me?” I looked around in confusion.

“I had to learn. I didn't expect you to walk onto a cruiser and know how to operate it. You need to train just like I did.”

That left me feeling just a bit foolish.

“Truth is that I'm fine when we're flying by the computer, but there'll be times I'll need your vision.” He tapped the patch over his left eye. “This affects my depth perception. You've always had better hand-eye coordination than me. I expect you'll become a skilled pilot.”

“So I was actually better at something than you were?”

He cocked a brow at me in humor. He was doing something with my hands, but I didn't look. Moving caused the room to tilt.

“Let's see...You consistently bested me with short blades and hand-to-hand, while I excelled in wrestling and long blades. You also bested me with pistols, though not the longer-range weapons. You've always been better on the skimmers, while I fought better on horseback.”

“Horseback?”

“Yes, Lio. We managed to bring many of our horses away when we fled. We managed to recover your old stallion, Pax. He's put several foals on the ground these past few years.”

My arms were nearly too weary to lift the sword, but I hefted it up, tip to the ceiling.

“This? Are you better with this weapon?”

“No. The kilij is a weapon of the Sun Priests. You are one of the few among us who knows the kilij forms. I've never trained on it.”

“Yet you've had it with you all this time.”

He gave a curt nod and turned to leave the practice room. I followed him into the curving hallway.

“You knew that you'd find me.”

He paused and then turned to face me fully.

“I have reason to believe that Markus was a spy and a conspirator against our people. When I partnered with him last year, I knew that it was a risk, but I expected that eventually he'd lead me to you. I was right.” He leaned back against the smooth wall of the tidy cruiser, weariness etched on his face. “He obviously knew that you were on Warlan, living with U'shma. This planet wasn't on our flight plan. Markus coaxed me into stopping there. He insisted that the ship needed maintenance.”

“While in reality, he was looking for me.”

“You weren't where he expected you to be. We'd been planet side for three days, and Markus had vanished on me. He damned himself by knowing you'd be with U'shma.” Fortunately Griffin was a better gambler than U'shma; otherwise I'd have been at home, exactly where Markus expected me to be.

Wearily I leaned against the wall opposite him. “Did *you* suspect that I'd be on Warlan?”

He sighed. “Actually, no, I didn't. I thought that Markus just wanted some planet time. I sometimes planted a tracker on him when we landed on a suspicious planet, but this one slipped past me. I was just happy to get away from him for a few days. You and I being in the same bar at the same time was strictly serendipity.”

If Markus was indeed a spy, Griffin had to have lived with his guard up every minute. No wonder he'd need some downtime. The pity was that he'd had to take it on Warlan.

“He looks like me.”

“Markus is your cousin. I'd suspected that he was involved in the invasion of our planet. He was probably hoping to be elevated to some position of leadership. Under your uncle, he was simply another member of the extended family. With their deaths, and then yours, he'd have been within striking range of the throne. Following your death, only your sister and your son would stand in his way.”

Any sympathy I might have had for the man we'd left in U'shma's house suddenly evaporated. In fact, I rather wished we'd killed him. Anger curled in my chest, tight and hot. Though I had racked my brain for an alternative explanation, I could only conclude that Markus had nothing but ill intentions toward me. He was my cousin, and his betrayal left me feeling sick and frightened.

“Why did you have my sword with you?”

His gaze dropped to the golden blade in my hand. He then looked at me.

“It's all that I had left of you. And I'd lost so much already.”

“I'm sorry, Griffin.”

His face was gaunt with old pain, years of suffering.

“It killed me to be with him, day in and day out. Seeing your face in his, and yet knowing that he was involved in the deaths of so many of our people. Knowing that he might have been involved in your disappearance.”

“Why do you suppose he was looking for me?”

He shrugged one shoulder, leaning his head back against the bulkhead. “Perhaps they'd lost track of you. Perhaps he'd decided enough time had passed that he could safely assassinate you. I doubt he had your well-being in mind.”

And this was a member of my family.

“If this is what I'm returning to...”

“What you are returning to is not an easy life. We're still struggling just to eat and keep ourselves warm in the winter. We are finally settling into a method of governance that most are comfortable with.”

“My return will upset that as well.”

“Your return will give us hope. You will bring the stability that we haven't had in years.”

I clenched my fists, feeling the sting of raw flesh. My arms hurt, and my body was weary. But thoughts raced one after the other. A future that had been bleak and amorphous yesterday was suddenly full of promise as it loomed before me; yet it was also full of fear. My body sagged. Panic gripped my chest. Something was happening to me. For a moment, I thought perhaps I was dying. I rubbed a hand over my heart and noticed that it was bloody, but I didn't care. I needed...I needed to go back. Back to Warlan...I gasped, my knees buckled, and I fought to stay on my feet.

"Lio. Right now. What are you feeling?" His voice was low and urgent.

I shook my head in frustration.

"One word, Lio. What are you thinking?"

"U'shma."

The word broke from my lips painfully. Cold sweat trickled all over my skin, and nausea carried bile into my throat. I hadn't eaten in hours, but my stomach cramped and roiled. The need to crawl away and hide battled with the desire to go back, to return to the safety of my life.

Griffin crossed the corridor with dizzying speed, lifted me off my feet, and slammed me hard into the wall.

"He is no longer your master." He shook me, his harsh face contorted into a snarl of anger. "Do you understand, Pasha? You no longer belong to U'shma. You're with me now!" He spun me, forcing me face-first into the smooth wall. My arm was wrenched back in a vicious hold. "Mine, Pasha! Do you understand?"

Pain seared through my arms and up into my shoulders. Anger rose, cutting through the haze of panic and loss.

"Fuck. You."

I shook with confusion and quaked with fear. I was hot with fury. I struggled against his hold, and he pushed me harder, wrapping a fist into my braid, dragging my head back to look into his face. I kicked backward, connecting with his knee. He had the advantage; his heavy bulk kept me trapped and helpless. My free hand tried to clasp the wall, searching for a grip. Long streaks of blood marred the white surface. I twisted to look at this fearsome man; his face was cold and hard. It was the face of a stranger.

"You no longer belong to the reptile. You are mine, Pasha!" One big hand fumbled at the waistband of my pants and brought them down past my hips. He thrust his hard, leather-covered cock against my ass in a brutal show of dominance that left me breathless and afraid.

"I will fuck you if I want to fuck you...I'll beat you if that is my will." He thrust hard, pushing my pelvis into the wall. "Your life is mine, Pasha. If I wish you dead, you'll die."

His breath was hot against my face. Blood rushed through my body. My ears rang. My vision began to grow dark. All I could hear was the frantic beat of my heart.

"Say it, Pasha. You do not belong to U'shma."

Frantically I shook my head in denial. That couldn't be! He was all I knew...the only safety in my life. I felt Griffin's hard hand on my flaccid cock, pulling, pumping, forcing me to erection. I opened my mouth to swear, to shout, but instead, I screamed. It was a primal shriek of rage, of pain and denial.

"Say it, Pasha..."

"No...not...no..." My hips bucked and jerked under his rough handling. Behind me, he'd kicked my legs apart and kept one hand buried in my hair, pressing my face into the wall. I sobbed in pain and arousal. I sobbed in denial.

"Say it, Pasha!"

I resisted, fighting to keep my voice sealed. But he would not be denied.

"*Say it*," he whispered harshly.

"Not his! Not U'shma's!"

The words released a torrent of emotion that threatened to drown me. I was lost, blinded, held on my feet by hard hands and an iron personality. Tears mixed with the blood and sweat smeared the walls.

"You aren't Pasha. You are Helios. Say it."

I swallowed hard. The words caught in my throat.

"Not Pasha."

I still struggled, twisting my hips away from that brutal hand. I was hard, my cock painful and weeping. I wanted to run, to be free of this stranger. I wanted him to take me, to fuck me.

The sound that came from me wasn't the sound of a grown man, but rather a wounded, frightened animal.

"What is your name?" His voice was a threatening whisper in my ear. "*What is your name?*"

"Pa...Helios. It's Helios. Dayspring."

"Say it all now." His hand had grown gentler, a reward for right behavior. I trembled, grateful for the respite.

"I'm Helios Dayspring. I don't belong to U'shma anymore."

"Who do you belong to?"

I didn't answer, and was rewarded with a sharp jerk on my braid.

"Who do you belong to?"

"You. I belong to you," I whispered.

I'd submitted. Slowly my body began to relax; I slid forward into the wall. I might have climaxed, or maybe I didn't. I don't really know. I just knew that once the words came from my mouth, I broke, and the image of my former owner began to slip from my mind. The fear of the future became soft and distant. The hard body that held me against the wall was the only reality in my existence.

I didn't cry anymore. There was no grief, only a painful shift in my mind. I went limp, and he caught me. Before my vision faded, I saw the face of Griffin Hawke looking down at me; a terrible pain had settled over his expression. I wanted to wipe that look away, but my arms were too heavy to lift. He dragged me back into the gym and laid me on the padded floor. I glanced at my reflection, and in distant shock, saw that my tears were blood; my face was white and ashen. Blood trickled from one ear down to the collar of my shirt. Something very bad was happening to me. Pain seared through my head, more powerful and potent than anything I'd ever before experienced.

My eyes slipped closed, and before I passed out, strong arms wrapped around me and held me close.

Chapter Six

I woke alone, naked and warm. The blankets that I'd burrowed into were light and soft. For a moment I lay wondering where I was...and who I was.

For all my life I'd been called Pasha...slave. I had no real name of my own. Now I was Helios. I blinked and sat up, immediately surrounded by the spicy scent of man...Griffin's scent. Vaguely I remembered a fight. I remembered anger and fear and insurmountable pain.

My hair cascaded around my body; I never slept with it loose. My arms ached and my hands were stiff and rigid with raw, blistered skin. A white substance coated the wounds. What had happened?

The room was bare and Spartan. Weapons lined the wall; blades and energy weapons along with a savage-looking whip and an ancient leather shield.

Carry back your shield, or let it carry you.

It was a familiar old proverb that I couldn't remember hearing. It was better to fall in battle than to be dishonored by the loss of the shield.

Pretty stupid, if you ask me. I figure you could always get another shield.

Moving stiffly, I rose and crossed the room to where an assortment of personal items lay neatly arranged. Images flickered through a holoframe, face after face that I didn't recognize. Babies and children. A sweet-faced woman smiling happily. Griffin kissing that same woman.

I started to turn away from this poignant reminder of his losses when an image caught my eye. I touched the frame to freeze the image.

It was Griffin, his arm thrown casually over the shoulder of a tall, bearded youth. Griffin's face was whole and much, much younger. The other man's hair was cut short to his skull. His stylized beard and mustache were darker than his copper-red hair. He grinned broadly. His posture was arrogant and sure. His left hand had come up to casually clasp Griffin's fingers. It

was a gesture of casual intimacy. The man was hard; his open shirt displayed roped muscles over his chest and abdomen.

I reached up and ran my fingers through the silky length of my hair, over the smooth planes of my face.

Me? That warrior was me? I looked closer and then blinked as the image shifted. The same copper-haired warrior knelt before an elderly man, his formal robes spilling out to pool on the floor around his body. I studied the face of the elderly man in the image. He was ageless and ancient, his face creased into happy lines. I touched, my fingers sinking through the holographic image.

Another image, and then another. Youth passed quickly into adulthood. There I stood next to a tall woman with dark, flame-colored hair; she held an infant and her belly was swollen in pregnancy. There was a candid shot of me sitting at a table, Griffin at my side, and other men and women looking grim. Maps were scattered across the table. An older man dominated the image. It was a war room.

“That was your uncle.” Griffin reached past me and turned off the display. The holograph withdrew into the frame, leaving only a two-dimensional image of a pair of pretty little girls. They were toddlers. The image must have been taken before the war.

“I didn't mean for you to see that. Not yet.”

“My uncle.” I wanted to look some more, but he'd turned it off. Uncertainly I stepped away. It wasn't until he glanced at my body that I realized I was nude. I waited for his instructions.

“Helios. Your clothing...I brought clean clothes for you. They belonged to Markus, but should fit.”

There was an odd tenor to his voice, but I thought only of dressing. Carefully, item by item, I clothed myself in the garb of a man who would have killed me. Griffin hovered awkwardly, looking at the floor rather than at my body as I dressed. I didn't understand his discomfort.

“Lio, I'm sorry for what I did to you.”

He did appear stricken by guilt, but I didn't understand. Sitting on the edge of the bed, I pulled on a pair of knee-high leather boots. They buckled up the side, and I focused on the fastenings. There were six on each leg, enabling me to adjust the boot to my calf.

"Helios. Look at me, please."

Obediently I looked up. To my surprise, there was a tear at the inner edge of his eye. It seemed odd to see such a tough man brought to tears. I folded my hands in my lap and waited with humble patience.

Obedient? I shook my head, trying to catch the thought. Even with...I blinked, unable to remember the name. Who had I been with before? A feeling rushed through my chest...that feeling you get when you are just about to remember that something really bad has happened, but it's still so new, you have to recall what it was.

"What did you do to me?" My voice came out cracked and harsh. Even with the other...before Griffin, I'd never been a particularly obedient slave. I glanced around the room, looking for something to remind me, and I saw a small, ragged book. He had liked my cooking...

"U'shma. That was his name." I frowned, the creature's image slowly forming in my mind.

"Helios, do you remember...You have a slave chip implanted in your brain. I didn't realize that separating you from U'shma would send you into a separation crisis. You were having a meltdown. I was afraid." He pulled a heavy chair away from the wall and sat facing me. "I had to break the imprint."

"By dominating me."

He nodded, his gaze on the floor.

"And now you've imprinted on me."

"It's just temporary. Until we can deactivate the chip. I promise."

He sounded so worried, but I felt warm. Serene. Willing to do anything for this big man. My master.

Master?

I was going to be so pissed when this thing was out of my brain!

"I never felt this...compliant with U'shma."

“He probably never had the force of personality to establish his mastery over you. And considering how badly you reacted to the separation, I'd say that was a good thing.”

I remembered that a slave would receive a memory wash every time he or she switched owners. That's why my world had revolved around my owner. Griffin had forced his imprint on me, but hadn't taken my memories.

“You had better be very careful how you handle me in the next few weeks. You don't want me pissed at you, Griffin.”

His laugh washed over me, rich and full. He sounded immensely relieved. I couldn't help laughing in response. “So for now I'm your slave boy, but once we meet up with your friend...”

“I don't know how much damage was done to you, Lio. But once the chip is deactivated, there should be some recovery. And your own personality will be back in command. This imprint will dissolve.”

“Oh God. Good. No offense, Griffin. It feels good, but I don't like it. Not really.” I started to rub my hand over my face, and then stopped as the rough skin throbbed with pain. “What in hell happened last night?”

“It wasn't last night; it was three days ago.”

“Three days?” That explained why my hands were scabbed.

“I found you in the gym. You'd been repeating the same kilij form for hours. The sleeves of your shirt were soaked with blood. Initially I thought you'd be all right once I stopped you, but then you began to melt down. Your eyes were bleeding...your ear as well. I was afraid you'd have a heart attack. You'd gone white as a sheet, and you were icy cold. You kept saying his name over and over.”

“I remember talking to you...and then...”

“I assaulted you. I'm sorry.”

“You son of a she-wolf.” My curse lacked conviction. He'd saved my sanity, if not my life. “I can't believe I was out for three days.”

Oddly, I didn't feel that I'd been unconscious for that long. Aside from some stiffness and the distinct need to pee, I felt good.

“You weren't really out. I had you up a bit. For food...water...”

"I don't remember."

"I imagine the chip was rebooting." He stood, and I followed suit, trailing him as he left the room and crossed over onto the bridge. "If ever I meet the person who invented that thing, I'll take pleasure in killing them slowly."

The deadly intent in his voice gave me the chills.

Once he took the pilot's seat, I settled into the vacant chair, surprised at how comfortable it was.

"We've got another two hours in ID space, and then we'll drop out just outside of the orbit of Barris 9. I'll deliver the cargo, resupply, and we'll be on our way fairly quickly."

"ID space?"

"Inter-dimensional. It's a fairly new technology. A small reactor throws us into an alternate dimension of sorts. The distance varies depending on which ID you choose. We can also use wormhole and energy jumps."

Wormholes made sense. "Energy jumps?"

"Think of it as a giant slingshot. The ship is placed in a gate within the orbit of a major planet or a small sun. Energy builds, and when the ship is released from the gate, it's acquired enough energy to propel through the system. It's crude, but good for short jumps."

The remainder of the day was like that; my questions grew and multiplied, and Griffin patiently answered. He showed me how to activate my navigational screen, and I began learning the equations to calculate ID jumps. Thankfully it seemed that I'd actually paid attention to my studies as a youth. The equations were complex, but with the assistance of the computer, I was able to calculate a course with accuracy. The whole concept of moving through an alternate dimension made me a bit uneasy, but in reality, the travel was not only faster, but completely uneventful. Unlike wormholes, which were few and far apart, ID space was always accessible.

"It's odd, Helios. After all that's happened, you're still you."

"Hmm?" I looked up from the display that had extended from the arm of my chair. It was only then that I realized how weary he looked. Griffin's face was lined with fatigue; his posture was very loose. Had he been at the helm since we'd left?

"I said, you're still you. You may have lost your memories, and even some of your habits, but at the core, you're the same person."

Oddly, that gave me comfort. I ended the program and pushed the display back into place. I looked at him curiously.

"You've always had this ability to shut out everything and focus completely on your task. Of course, in the past you never allowed me to take you by surprise."

My cheeks flushed in embarrassment. I'd been kicking myself for being so careless.

"You'll pick it up again, Lio. You're just out of practice."

I stared down at my hands, noticing that they were still stiff and sore. I'd blocked the pain as well as other outside distractions.

"What's the frown for?"

"Oh...It's just..." I started to say something about my hands, but to my horror, the truth came out instead.

"I don't remember being so...gratified when U'shma praised me."

He swung his chair around in my direction, a slightly grim smile on his face. "It's the reward and punishment system. You probably received extensive training when you were first captured." The smile faded at the mention of my capture. It was still a mystery to me; I had no idea how I'd ended up in enemy hands.

"Anyhow, you were conditioned to seek praise and reward for good behavior."

"And I was punished for bad behavior." I swallowed; long-forgotten beatings itched along my nerve endings.

"I imagine you received a great deal more punishment than reward. You must have been a terrible slave." He smiled again, turning back to the piloting console. His comment was rich with meaning, and for whatever reason, blood rushed to my groin. What had he been up to during those three days that I could not remember?

"Griffin, may I return to my quarters for a few moments?"

"Why are you asking...oh. Yes. I figure you can take Markus's room. It's directly across from mine." He kept his head averted, his blind side to me. I felt acutely disappointed that I was

being moved into another room. Didn't he want me close? I fought not to look over my shoulder as I exited the bridge.

The cabin was mostly empty. I visited the latrine and found a comb, and carefully tied my hair back into a long braided tail. There was a mirror inside the door of a recessed wardrobe. The rest of Markus's clothing was similar to what I was wearing—functional and sturdy. I studied myself, taking in the tall, lean silhouette. Out of the robes, I could see that my legs were long, my hips were narrow. The tight shirt showcased the width of my shoulders, the flat planes of my belly.

My face...it was the same man in the photos that I'd seen, but less animated. There were so many things lying in hiding behind the smooth mask. I could look at that face for hours and never unlock the mysteries that were just under the surface.

Chapter Seven

The shift from ID space to regular speed was smooth and uneventful. It wasn't always that way; the ship could shift over into the middle of an asteroid field or even into the path of another ship. Someday someone would come up with a warning system. It would undoubtedly save lives.

Traveling in ID was usually safe, allowing the pilot to relax and nap when needed. Griffin had a pull-down cot near the piloting array. He'd been catching short naps while we traveled. Travel in real time was often rife with danger. Once we shifted, Griffin stayed at the helm, completely focused on the journey. He didn't even respond to my mild efforts at flirtation.

There were no more lessons on piloting, no more chatter about past owners or the implications of the imprint that he'd forced on me.

What if the imprint held? Frankly I didn't mind being enraptured with the man, but considering I was the heir to the kingship of our people, there would undoubtedly be dire consequences to consider. If Griffin wished to rule from behind the throne, I'd be at his mercy. Thankfully he appeared more disturbed by the turn of events than I felt.

Secretly I could admit that it was nice to be under his control. There is a lot less stress once you lose all responsibility for your life. I didn't have to worry about what the future held knowing that Griffin held the reins. He was strong and safe. I'd known him for mere days, perhaps weeks, and had never felt so at peace.

Of course, my mind kept straying to carnal matters. In all honesty, my mind had been on carnal matters since the first moment I'd seen him in the bar, but now various scenarios played out in my mind. I pictured myself on my knees, servicing that beautiful cock of his. I lay still and prone as he fucked my ass, spread his seed all over my body. In my heart, I lived to serve him. In my brain, an angry little voice wouldn't let me indulge in those fantasies without a severe lecture. I ignored the voice and luxuriated in the novelty of having a painless erection.

If I wanted to, I could have retreated to the privacy of my quarters and relieved that hard-on, but I sort of liked it. It made me feel like a man again. That was empowering. What frustrated me was the distance that he'd put between us. Granted, he was piloting the ship, but still, he'd shut down to my advances. I'd grown sensitive to Griffin's moods, to the subtle expressions on his face, and I knew that he was worried. No doubt the consequences of the imprint weighed heavily on his mind. As we grew steadily closer to our destination, he barely spoke.

Within an hour, we'd drawn close enough to the Barris 9 spaceport that it was time to begin preparations to dock. Griffin became tense; I knew he didn't like relying so heavily on the computers to bring the *Aida* into port, but his vision impaired him too much to do otherwise. I had the rare wisdom to keep my mouth shut and stay out of his way.

The port grew enormous in our view screen, eventually dominating the entire landscape. After hours of manipulating the ship into the complex docking system of the port, we finally inched into place. The cruiser shuddered to a stop, and Griffin released a deep breath, slumping slightly in his chair. Now I understood the toll this trip must have taken on him without having another pilot to back him up.

"When's the last time you slept?" I turned to face him fully, concern overwhelming lust for the moment.

"I napped while you were sleeping. We'll start taking shifts on the trip out."

He activated a computer console and quickly entered data. I watched curiously, too far away to read the entry.

"I'm notifying the port authority of our arrival, where we traveled from, and also attached our bill of lading. They want to know what we are transporting and who we'll be conducting business with here."

"What exactly is our cargo?"

His grin was roguish. "Mostly agrichemicals. B9 is a farm planet. That's why you see all those heavy freighters out there."

"And what else?" There had to be another cargo, one that didn't appear on the bill of lading.

He shrugged and rose from his chair. "We'll be staying on the station a couple days. There's a case already packed in your closet. I've reserved rooms at the Phase. It's one of the nicer establishments here."

I'd learned his poker face by now. He could be either laughing at me or hiding something dangerous. Part of me was angered, but that little voice was stifled by the happy, content feeling that clouded my mind.

Once we disembarked and headed into the station, I had to fight to walk beside Griffin rather than behind him.

"Why couldn't I bring my sword?"

He glanced at me briefly. "It's too obvious. Plus it's the badge of your status in the Sun Temple. If word gets out that you're alive and with me, we might end up walking into an ambush somewhere. And you're not ready to fight."

He looked around warily, all the lines of his body hard and cautious. Most of the men and women I saw as we entered the station had the same posture. This place was miles above Trell 57 and the other seedy bars I'd visited, but everyone I looked at was ready to fight.

We boarded a lift and rose to the upper levels of the station. Through the glass walls of the car I could see most of the station interior. It was huge, very nearly the size of a small city. Plants grew abundantly, and space jockeys hurried from shop to shop, laying in supplies, shopping for clothing and goods, or simply taking time out from constant space travel.

When I turned and looked in the other direction, I saw the planet below. Barris 9 was shrouded in blues and greens, testament to an abundantly fertile environment. I wondered what it would be like to live the life of a farmer. Of course, the farmers below were corporate and rarely touched the soil from which they drew their living. Heavy robotics and machinery did all the hard work. In time, the lack of human touch would take its toll on Barris 9, and the planet would begin a tragic decline. Soil would erode, water would diminish, and the stewards of the land would flee to search out another planet to harvest.

"Griffin, what is the name of our planet? You've never told me."

"It doesn't have a name. It was considered too unimportant by the early surveyors. Officially, it's called HP1500."

"How sad." The lift began to slow. "What do you call it unofficially?"

Griffin turned his head so he could look at me. "Home. We just call it home."

I sighed. Home. That was a good name for a planet.

We stepped off on a high level of the station. Not the highest, as those were reserved for the truly wealthy and for members of various governmental entities. Nevertheless, the halls were cool and hushed; thick padding kept our footsteps silent.

We worked our way through the crowds until we arrived at a hotel with a discreet-looking doorman who ushered us in.

The lobby was spacious but not huge; the décor was remarkably elegant. Griffin checked us in. I swallowed a twinge of fear as the scanner checked my ID card, but I was confirmed as Markus Dayspring. I guess the hair didn't seem to be too much of an anomaly.

Shouldering my bag, I followed Griffin into another lift. We rode in silence. The door slid open to our room, and with a sigh of relief, I stepped in, grinning at the plush carpeting and luxurious appointments of the suite. I dropped my case and wandered around, peeking in at the water bath and playing with the room settings.

"Damn, Griffin! This place is big enough to..."

I turned, slamming right into the big pirate. He wrapped his arms around me and held me tight. There didn't seem to be much point in speaking, so I just held him back, soaking up the luxury of his touch. Sexy as the whole scenario might be, I could feel his fatigue. This wasn't the time for sex.

"Back then, you did this too. You were always poking around in new places, like a kid." He sighed and loosened his hold on me. "You asked about our cargo."

"You said it was mostly agrichemicals."

He nodded and walked back into the suite. The room was divided into a business area and a sleeping area. We bypassed the sleeping chamber. I craned my neck to look at the huge bed that dominated the room. Bed, as in singular. That was promising.

He picked up my small overnight case and ran his hand smoothly over the edges, and I watched in surprise as a slender compartment opened. Carefully he lifted out a flat box and carried it to the table. He opened it as though it contained the heaviest burden a man could carry. When I saw the contents, it took only moments to understand why.

“Griffin, where did you get this?” Reaching out, I ran an index finger over a chunk of mineral that was rough edged yet clearly priceless. When he didn't object, I picked it up, watching the play of fire and light over its surface. “This is *candar*. I've never seen sunstone specimens this large.”

Candar is one of the rarest, most highly sought-after gemstones in existence. So rare that I had no memory of ever touching a piece, and yet I recognized it clearly. Candar is as hard as diamond, with similar characteristics. It's cherished as a gemstone, but more importantly, a single good-sized crystal can be used to power the engine of a ship or a turbine for energy. A handful of these could power a super-freighter; a dozen could light up a small city. I turned it, watching the crystal shift from clear white fire to hot red, and then to cool blue.

“How could you possibly be crazy enough to travel with a case full of these things?”

I gently set it down and retreated a bit. Frankly, being so close to the stones frightened me; many people would kill for these little gems.

“The planet we were exiled to is little more than a barren rock. We could irrigate, but the water is so far below the surface that we don't have the available technology to drill that deep. Without access to water, we have no crops. One day, a child brought one of these stones to her mother. She recognized what it was and brought it to me. I sold it, and the proceeds fed us for many months. Later we discovered that deposits of candar are scattered throughout the entire planet. Other valuable minerals as well.”

“And if you sell more, you can purchase the equipment you need to farm the planet.”

He nodded.

“Griffin, do you realize the implications of this? You've barely settled the planet, and if it becomes known that so many valuable deposits exist, we'll be overrun by miners. Or worse.”

My mind reeled. “Have you done a geological survey of the planet? Can we possibly be self-sustaining without resorting to this? At least for the present time?”

Something flickered in his expression—apprehension and...relief? Was he relieved to share this burden with me?

“Not yet. The council was so elated to find something marketable that it didn't stop to consider the consequences of revealing that we were the source of the mineral.”

“You brought it here to sell? All of it?”

He took a deep breath and nodded. "I tried to tell them how dangerous it could be, but I was overruled. They told me I'm a dangerous man and could deal with the situation accordingly."

"Shit." I rose and paced the room, looking warily at the glittering gems. They shimmered with malevolent charm. They represented food and warmth and prosperity, but when I moved my head just so, their gleam turned the same red as the flow of blood.

"I'm..." I cleared my throat; the words just caught there, unwilling to come out. "I'm king now. Is that correct?"

Griffin nodded, the relief on his face obvious.

"Griffin, if you show these...like this...you'll die. We'll both die. We won't make it off the station."

"I know."

"I'm king. I'm sure there are formalities, and if there's a council, it may not even recognize my claim. But at this moment, I'm king, and I forbid you to sell all of these."

Can I tell you how hard it was to force those words from my mouth? The imprint screamed...Griffin was the master...not me. Not me. But if I remained silent, he'd die, and the imprint screamed even louder at that thought.

I stepped up, plucked two moderate gems from the tray, and stepped back. "We'll sell these. Later in the trip, we can sell another if the opportunity arises. We'll imply that they're stolen...perhaps from our own royal treasure." Two stones would buy much, particularly if the buyer was carefully chosen. When Griffin slid the tray back into the hidden compartment, the tension that gripped my chest eased a bit.

"The buyers will be here soon." The confident, dangerous mask slipped over his face once again. It was amazing that he'd shown me that moment of weakness. It moved me deeply.

I slipped the stones into a pocket, and then ran my hands through my hair. Strands had pulled loose from the braid; they trailed around my face. Impatiently I opened the case and pulled out my hygiene set, then headed to the bedroom to put myself to rights. The braid unraveled into a sheet of rippling fire cascading down my back. It was really too much.

"Griffin, can I cut it? Maybe just to my shoulders?"

He moved up behind me and peered into the mirror. “You don't have to ask my permission.”

But I did. He put out his hand, and I set the brush into it. The feeling of having another tend my hair was luxurious and decadent. Since it was Griffin...well, it was beyond that.

My eyes dropped closed in pleasure as he stroked gently, separating strands, massaging my scalp. When I looked, the expression on his face rivaled any look of love or passion I'd ever seen. He was enjoying himself. Nurturing me was becoming second nature to Griffin. I let out a long sigh of pleasure.

“You like it?”

“It's beautiful.”

It aroused him. I pictured myself astride Griffin, the silkiness of my hair trailing over his skin. “I won't cut it then.”

“Thank you.”

He gave a small lopsided smile, and then looked up at my image in the mirror. For a moment, we froze as our gazes met.

“Helios...your eyes...”

I glanced at myself, seeing nothing unusual. “My eyes?”

“Did you bring the cosmetics you wore when we met?”

I flushed; I'd dropped the brushes and kohl into my bag along with a few other items. They were the only things that were really *mine*.

“What exactly are you thinking?”

“You were an uncommonly beautiful whore, you know. Once the veil came off, it took me by surprise. In fact, I nearly didn't recognize you with the rouged lips and blackened eyes.”

“And you think...”

“You might be a very effective distraction.”

I wasn't sure I liked this idea, but in a way, it appealed to my sense of adventure. I hadn't been ignorant of the looks I'd drawn from both men and women as we walked through the station. Griffin hadn't been indifferent either; he'd growled under his breath the entire time. I

suppose the imprint might have made me a bit more willing to obey Griffin's orders as well. Damned imprint.

"The robes were left at U'shma's."

"I don't want you to dress as a whore, Lio. Just...pretty."

"Pretty?" Great.

"Yeah, man-pretty. Get rid of the utility vest. I packed a silk shirt..." And he had. Within moments, I was out of the knit shirt and he was dropping a white silk tunic over my head. The fine fabric was nearly sheer, clearly an item meant to be worn under a dress jacket. The style was strange to me, but oddly familiar. The garment felt appropriate against my skin.

It was a little large, which added to the drape and flow of the garment. When I moved, the silk clung to my body, a clever contrast to the deep brown leather of my pants and boots.

"Can you put your hair up partway?"

I played with it a moment, finally drawing it back from my face and into a tail hanging from the crown of my head. It was the style of a swordsman and a warrior, but so very appealing. It took only moments to shade my eyelids and to subtly tint my lips.

I turned, spreading out my hands to show Griffin the entire effect. His eye went wide.

"Damn, Lio...just...damn!"

I returned to the mirror and was pleased with the result. Not feminine, not exactly. The makeup was subtle. The hair was a common style among cultures that wore long hair. The clothing wasn't flamboyant, just slightly exotic.

"You need a sword."

"You wouldn't let me bring it."

He sighed impatiently and dug into his own pile of discarded weaponry, finally settling on a long, slender blade. I belted it over the tunic, low on my hips. He stood back to evaluate the effect. "Dangerous in more ways than one." He grinned then and pulled me tightly to his body, grinding his pelvis into mine.

"You'll do anything I tell you to do, won't you?"

I didn't like the gleam in his eye as he said that. I did like the feel of his cock pressed snugly against mine.

“What are you planning on telling me to do?” I decided to play the sex card and gave him a glance from under my lashes. “I might say yes...I might say no.” I rubbed my cock against his and reached around his body to stroke his ass.

“You're going to do exactly what you're doing now, Helios. You're going to flirt.”

“With you?” I leaned in close, my lips dangerously near his.

“With me. With anyone who walks in that door.”

“So I'm back to being the distraction.” I wanted to be surly; after all, this wasn't far from what I'd done for U'shma. Maybe a bit less hands-on.

“With U'shma, you were distracting his opponents so he could cheat at cards. With me, you are distracting our opponents for the lives of our people.” He hadn't moved back, and his lips feathered against mine as he spoke.

“That does make a difference, doesn't it?” I reached up and stroked his cheek as I pressed a kiss against his lips. I caught his tongue with my teeth, drawing it into my mouth, sucking lightly. Immediately heat flared between us. He clasped my head, and the kiss grew hot and wild. My heart pounded as loud as a drum in my ears. Our labored breath filled the room.

“God Lio, I want you. I thought I'd left it behind...” He looked down into my face; hunger radiated from his body. “I never thought I'd need you as badly as I did back then.” He stopped speaking and returned to my mouth, kissing me with lips and tongue and teeth. For a moment, I forgot everything—the gemstones, the buyers, even the unknown people waiting for me on a nameless planet. For that moment, my world was Griffin.

He was the first to break the kiss, but he didn't let me loose. He wrapped his arms around me, holding me close, and I held him too. The next kiss was light, nearly apologetic. He stood back then and carefully rearranged my hair as he ran a finger over my swollen lips.

“You look like you've just been kissed.”

“Is that good or bad?” I stepped back slightly, looking steadily into his rugged face.

“It's perfect. Absolutely perfect.” His hand dropped, briefly caressing my cock. It couldn't possibly get harder, but under his touch, it did. I stood mesmerized, wishing he'd keep going, keep fondling, but just then, a buzzer sounded lightly. Our guests.

He let me go and turned away to return to the side of the room that had been set up for business. Following him, I then took a seat on a low sofa and relaxed, letting my thoughts settle. Time to go to work. I looked at Griffin, and he smiled—a harsh, wicked expression. His gaze darted to my groin, to where my cock swelled and ached so sweetly. His own pressed tightly against the front of his pants. If he wanted our guests to think they'd interrupted something, he'd no doubt succeeded.

“Enter,” he called.

Chapter Eight

He'd called the game just right. From the moment they walked in the door, our buyers were fixated. One was a tall, dangerous-looking woman. Her braided black hair was liberally streaked with white and fell to the middle of her back. Her lean, muscular body was clad in serviceable black leather, and she wore blades at her wrists as well as at her waist.

I exchanged glances with Griffin, wondering if he found her as attractive as I did. My guess was that he did.

She stood nearly as tall as her companion, a male who looked as though he'd be more at home in a government office than on a space station. I rose and offered my less-injured hand when Griffin introduced us, allowing her to hold it overlong and him to stroke my wrist with his thumb.

Once seated on the other sofa, they faced us. A low wooden table divided the small space, allowing us room to work. Griffin leaned back with his arm casually thrown behind me. It wasn't quite intimate, but a clear demonstration of territory. I wondered if he'd done it on purpose. His fingers caught in my hair, and a fingertip trailed along my neck.

The woman was Carlotta Berne. The man was her business partner, Tomas Cassel. I had no doubt who was the brain and who was the muscle in this pair. Carlotta bristled with nearly as many bladed weapons as Griffin did. Her eyes moved restlessly, from me to Griffin, and then to the hidden part of the room. She was cool and efficient, not letting my subtle flirtation distract her from business.

The same couldn't be said of Tomas. He could barely look away from the front of my pants, and when he wasn't staring at my groin, he fixated on my face and on Griffin's hand as his long fingers toyed with the length of my hair.

"Captain Griffin, your copilot doesn't look like the images we've seen of Markus Dayspring."

Hmm. She'd done her research.

"My official images were recorded several years ago, Ms. Berne. I've allowed my hair to grow."

"That changed his appearance greatly," Griffin added.

I met her gaze and smiled slightly as she colored up a bit. She was younger than I initially thought, but dangerous. Very dangerous. She'd have my head in a flash if I gave her the incentive.

"Your communication indicated that you had something that would interest me greatly. As you know, Captain, I primarily deal in gems and minerals. It would take something extraordinary to intrigue me."

The old scoundrel looked at me then. Clearly he felt that I would be of interest, even if our offering was not. I smiled at Griffin, who nodded. Slipping the crystals from my pocket, I carefully opened the cloth that covered them and laid them on the table.

Tomas frowned, squinted, and then his eyes grew wide in shock.

"Where did you get these?" He dug into the pocket of his tunic and pulled out a pair of tweezers and an illuminate magnifier. He picked up a crystal and turned it to the light. It refracted, throwing flashes of color throughout the room. It was the smaller crystal and was about as large as the tip of my thumb.

The bodyguard stood back, her attention divided between us and the candar crystals.

"Sadly we've come to realize that in order for our people to survive, we need to part with the remnants of our royal treasure," I lied. "We are confident that if he were present, our king would support this decision." I reached up and casually caught Griffin's hand, linking our fingers. It felt completely natural.

"How much do you want for these?"

The dealer's color was high, and his distraction had fled. I didn't like that, so I sat forward, letting my hair cascade around my shoulders. He glanced at me while listening to Griffin.

"This is the figure per carat that candar is fetching on the open market. This is the figure that we are asking." Griffin had entered numbers on a small handheld monitor, and then he turned it, showing it to Tomas.

From there, the bargaining began in earnest. I was surprised at Griffin's skillful handling of the negotiations. No wonder he'd been able to fleece U'shma at the gambling table!

I watched the bodyguard carefully, and she kept a close eye on her boss, clearly waiting for a signal. When no signal came, she relaxed a bit, her gaze moving between Griffin and myself. Clearly he interested her as much as I did. Maybe she was picturing us together. Maybe she was picturing herself in that scenario with us. That brought a smile to my face, as I briefly indulged in the fantasy.

Maybe someday. For now, I wanted Griffin to myself. I deserved that, didn't I? After all, I might just lose him again at the end of our journey. Nothing in life was certain.

The negotiating came to an end, and an unworldly amount of money was agreed upon. To my relief, we finally saw them to the door without any trace of violence or trouble. Tomas had transferred the monies to Griffin's account, and I placed the crystals into his trembling palm, stroking my finger along his as I did. Lust and greed warred in his eyes, and the bodyguard had to tug at his sleeve to move him along. She threw a glance over her shoulder, and right then I knew we hadn't seen the last of Carlotta Berne.

With the door safely closed and sealed, we relaxed as much as our elation allowed.

"It's amazing to believe that something so small as a rock could transport a man to such ecstasy." Under Tomas's proper business suit his cock had been hard, and I don't think it was in response to me.

Griffin put an arm over my shoulder and guided me to the sofa. We sat and stared at the figure in his account. The hand that held the comp pad trembled slightly. "Those stones have just purchased many months of security for us. Food and weapons and fuel. More than that, Helios. Much more."

I wanted his attention, yet felt his urgency as he composed a letter to the council, informing it of the sale. He then arranged for the funds to be transferred to the community account.

"They will wish to know why I didn't sell the lot."

"Are you going to tell them? About me, I mean?"

“No. Not yet. I need to do that over a secure, encrypted transmission. Your safety is paramount, Lio. I don't know that all who currently hold power can be trusted. Your cousin had allies, and I don't know who they are.”

I flopped backward, my head resting on the arm of the couch. “I don't really want to be king, you know. It sounds like the community is doing well with a democratic council.”

“But it isn't.” Griffin lay back at the other end of the couch, his hands crossed over his belly. Our legs intersected midway. “It isn't democratic, and it isn't ruling wisely. For example, you immediately saw the big picture when I told you about the mineral deposits on the planet. Our councillors see only the quick fix. They'll exploit our resources and allow the planet to be raped for its riches.”

“Thus rendering it uninhabitable. Haven't we learned our lessons from the past?”

“They are desperate, Lio. Watching children grow thin and pale can prompt rash behavior. I think they still believe that we can go home again.” His eye had dropped closed, and as I watched, Griffin began to submit to the great fatigue that he'd fought off for days now.

“Griffin. Stand up.” I rose and reached a hand out to the man. Warily he clasped it and rose to his feet. I might not have the answers that he needed, but I could at least tend to him right now. We walked into the sleeping area, and he collapsed onto the bed without removing his clothing.

I knelt to pull off his boots, and as he struggled from his shirt, I unfastened his pants, doing my best not to be distracted by the beautiful body I uncovered.

Easier said than done.

Once he was undressed and in bed, he watched lazily as I stripped, carefully unfastening the high boots, folding away the pants and silken shirt. For so long I'd had so little, so I took great care of what I had. The habit was hard to break.

I slid between the sheets, sighing at the feel of fine linens against my skin. His arm stretched above my head, and I rested against it.

“Who did that to you, Griffin?”

He rolled his head to look at me with his good eye.

“The eye, the testicle. You were tortured. Badly.”

His mouth quirked into a half-smile. "Occupational hazard, Helios. You know that."

"Do I? Torture is not something I'd expect my people to suffer. Not on my behalf."

He rolled onto his side to face me. "We'd never fought anyone like this before, Lio." He sighed, no doubt realizing that his sleep would be delayed a bit longer. I felt bad, but since he was willing to talk, I needed to hear.

"Later on I'll give you the history of the conflict. For now, it's enough for you to know that our neighbors, the Kingdom of Talis, made the unwise decision to reach out to the Landaun. The Talisians betrayed us, and in so doing, brought about the downfall of their own people."

"Were they forced into exile as well?" These names meant nothing to me. How could an event this huge have been wiped from my mind?

"They suffered a rather unfortunate fate. While we were forced off the planet, they remained behind. The entire royal family was slain, and all survivors are now slave-laborers for the Landaun. The aliens are ripping apart the planet in search of minerals and other resources. When they leave, our planet will be a shell of what it was."

How ironic. Here we were planning the best way to conserve the resources of our new, inhospitable home, and our beautiful planet was being destroyed.

I desperately wanted...needed to know more. I wanted to know how many survived, the condition of our army. But all this could wait.

"They tortured you. Why?" He didn't answer. "Was it because of me?"

"You'd vanished. When you retreated, you split their troops, enabling us to get the majority of our people to safety. Unfortunately, I fell. They tortured me to force me to disclose your location."

Nausea roiled my stomach. Guilt tied my heart into a painful knot. "I'm sorry, Griffin."

He reached out and clasped my shoulder. "You saved thousands of lives, Lio. Tens of thousands! Even as they held us...tortured us...you harried them. You rallied small groups of guerilla fighters and picked them off one at a time. You'd appear in the west, and then in the south. Their armies degenerated into a confused mess, allowing our people to evacuate the planet. I don't know how you were finally captured, but by then, I was taken away with the others."

I frowned in confusion. We were not a space-faring people; that much I knew. “How did our people evacuate?”

“Several planetary governments that we were unaware of stepped in at great risk to themselves. It was a humanitarian effort.”

I lay flat on my back, looking at the ceiling. So very much had happened. “I can't believe you don't hate me. All of you.”

“Helios, you are a hero. Your actions were noble and daring. In years to come, our children's children will hear stories of your exploits.”

“I'm not a hero, Griffin. I'm a whore. A slave. That's all I know.”

He smiled and pulled me close, tucking my head under his chin.

“You may have been a whore, Lio. But you were a most uncommon whore indeed. Now stop talking. Stop thinking. Just rest.”

His words were couched as a command, and I found myself unable to deny him. I lay silently, awake long after he'd fallen asleep. Fear and anxiety mingled, and then blew away like ash in the breeze. He believed in me. How could I not?

I draped one leg over his and closed my eyes, feeling a deep sense of arrival.

I'd come home.

Chapter Nine

Waking with an erection is no unusual occurrence in my life. However, waking with an erection and a clear plan of action was something of a novelty.

I opened my eyes a bit blearily, aware of a large, warm...no, make that a hot body next to mine. We hadn't moved much as we slept. Griffin was splayed out on his back; I was on my side, my leg pinning his. My cock was rigid and hard, and as I stroked his leg with mine, I grinned at the sheer luxury of the sensation.

Through the thin sheet I could see the outline of his heavy shaft. Carefully I shifted position, moving the fabric aside. He was flaccid, but when I breathed lightly over his skin, his cock stirred slightly. I grinned. I licked and nuzzled the soft, loose skin, and then pulled him into my mouth. I reveled in the sensation of him growing, filling my mouth as his cock grew long and hard.

He cursed softly as he woke, one big hand settling on my head, guiding my strokes. His hips bucked slightly, and he moaned. Letting his shaft slip free, I nuzzled around the base of his cock, licking and nipping with my lips. I moved lower, down to his scrotum, kissing and loving every scar, every injury that he'd suffered on my behalf. I trailed the tip of my tongue over a long, jagged scar that ran up the inside of his thigh. My hands lightly kneaded the iron-hard muscle of his legs.

Returning to his cock, I braced it in one hand and went down on him, tasting the salty tang of precum on his glans. I relaxed my throat, letting his length glide down as far as possible, sucking hard as he pulled out. He buried his hand in my hair again, alternately stroking the skin of my face and urging me along faster and faster.

He wasn't far from climax when he forced my head away.

"Fuck, Lio!" He gasped. "I know what you're doing...and you won't get away with it this time." His voice had lowered to a growl, and he pulled me up the length of his body.

“Just what is it that I'm doing?” I trailed my tongue along his chin, steadily pumping my hips into his. I nipped his throat, and then licked away the sting.

“You're going to get me off, and then you'll want to fuck me.”

“And what's wrong with that? It sounds like an excellent plan...”

“Except you know I hate being bottom.”

“I do?” I had already guessed that, but when Griffin's face went sober, I knew that he'd forgotten. He'd gone back all those years in his memory. I smiled and kissed him, hoping to soften the moment for him. “I guessed that our first time together, but you weren't too unhappy once I was in. In fact, you seemed rather unhappy when I pulled out.” I pressed my cock to his, reminding him there was more than one way for men to fuck. “And if you don't like being bottom”—I sat up and straddled his hips. I'd slicked him up pretty good with my saliva, so I arrowed his cock into my anus—“you can always bottom like this.”

I relaxed and let gravity carry me down onto his cock. He was big—bigger than most men I'd taken—so I gasped a bit as I rose, wishing for lube. Griffin reached blindly for the table by the bed, coming up with a tube. I love a man who comes prepared.

He slicked his cock, and I came down again. Each time I repeated the penetration it became easier, until I was relaxed and slick and riding him easily. He reached up and fondled my cock, massaging it with the lube he'd used on himself.

“You think I'll do it like that?”

“I'm hoping you will.” I rather liked being up here on top; it gave me a perfect view of Griffin's face. I controlled the penetration and shifted to the perfect position, moaning slightly as his cockhead slid over my prostrate. “You have no idea what you're missing, Griffin.” He laughed a bit, throwing my rhythm off. That little jolt was enough to steal my focus, to push me headlong into a climax that had me bucking and gasping. He grasped my hips, steadying me as I shuddered. Then one hand clasped my cock and pumped me hard and fast, just as I liked it best. My body gripped his shaft, and he moaned but held out till my orgasm had shaken every bit of seed from my balls, leaving me limp and weak atop his body.

When my heart slowed and I caught my breath, Griffin pulled me down to cover his body, and he arrowed up into my ass. He moved steady and slow at the start, and then faster, harder, until he was shouting out his climax. His arms wrapped around me like iron bands, holding me in

place. I felt the heat of his semen spilling deep into me. I heard the slamming of his heart in my ear. He strained into my body, groaning with every last spasm, until we both lay weak and content in one another's arms.

I lay on top of him, smiling at the novelty of his strength, the rise and fall of his chest under mine. I lifted my head and caught his mouth in a deep, soulful kiss.

"Was it always this good for us?" I rolled off his body and rested my head on his outstretched arm.

"Always. Even after..." He broke off, looking up at the ceiling. He was still protecting me.

"Griffin, once this chip is deactivated, I'll probably remember. If I don't, I'll rely on you to remember for me."

He looked over at me, the expression on his face indescribably sad.

"Even after we split, we never got past this passion. Even once you married, it was still there."

"I was unfaithful?"

He smiled, a surprisingly gentle expression. "No, Helios. Not in deed. You were faithful to your lady-wife. I believe that you came to love her. Once I realized it was truly over, I sought out Suzan, and we married. She'd been our friend early on and knew of our feelings for each other. I grew to love her greatly."

"And my wife?"

"She was never fond of me." He rolled to his side and reached out, fingering my hair. "She...walked in on us once. Nothing too shocking, but enough to alert her to our feelings."

"How did she die?"

"An accident. She was traveling and her skimmer overturned. She was killed immediately."

There was more to the story than he was telling, I was sure of that. But at the moment, I didn't want to know.

"Griffin?"

"Mmm?"

"I'm starving." As if to support my claim, my stomach growled noisily. He laughed that rare, precious laugh.

"Are you recovered enough to get out of this bed?"

I sat and considered that. Maybe. I looked at him through my lashes. "Are *you* recovered?"

That prompted more laughter. He was out of the bed and strutting across the room, heading for the shower. It had real water. I hurried after him; the bathtub was easily large enough for two grown men.

And judging by what I'd just seen, he was quite recovered. Thankfully the hotel provided room service.

* * * * *

I struggled not to feel like a rube fresh from a backwater planet somewhere, but in fact that's exactly what I was. Never mind that I was royalty; I felt gauche and naive among the various pilots, space cowboys, and the artificial world that revolved around them.

Griffin and I had remained holed up in our lodging well into the following day before we'd finally sated our lust and slept off our exhaustion. Hours had been spent making love and memories. He'd taken me fast and hard on the sofa in the living area, slow and leisurely in the oversized bathtub. He'd roused me in the middle of the night with soft touches not meant to incite passion. Griffin was simply reassuring himself that I was there and real.

Those hours were precious. He fed and loved me with his body and his actions. Griffin braided my hair and then oiled my skin, rubbing my aching muscles till I was nearly mindless with lazy arousal. I'd collapsed amid the pillows, my hand buried in his thick hair as he sucked me off with drugging deliberation. That two-room suite will forever represent Paradise in my heart.

Business finally drove us out of our room and into the vibrant world of the space station. Prostitutes strolled the halls—male, female, and otherwise. They openly displayed their faces and weren't accompanied by owners or pimps. They owned themselves. They had licenses and a guild that protected their interests.

Stores and restaurants dotted the hallways, and various businesses and living spaces were scattered throughout the station. The place was a bustling hive of activity, almost overwhelming once we left the quiet of the hotel floors.

Griffin and I ended up in a low-key restaurant, not too highbrow, but not a dive either. I was uneasily aware that my appearance was drawing looks from passersby and patrons alike, but after a few moments, the novelty wore off, and I began to ignore the looks. As long as the hair cascaded down my back, I'd be drawing attention. When a drunken pilot lurched in our direction, my lover growled, giving him the full force of his one-eyed glare.

Problem solved.

The food was hearty and tasted excellent even to my discriminating palate. If U'shma had given me anything, it was an appreciation of fine food. We ate, and I found myself watching the people around me. I gazed at the décor of the restaurant, even the movement of the waitstaff. I was starved for new sights and sounds. Griffin watched me as a parent watches a child, with quiet amusement and affection. He answered my questions patiently and allowed me to pay the bill so that I could grow accustomed to handling money and interacting with people in a normal fashion. Showing my face, meeting the eyes of others, kept me slightly on edge. My training was deeply ingrained.

Once we finished at the restaurant, we strolled, and I spent hours looking into shop windows, gazing out observation ports, and simply experiencing the novelty of freedom. All the while Griffin was watching out for my safety.

After lunch we stopped at the farm bureau and arranged for the immediate transport of a shipment of grain, fruits, vegetables, and meat to the home planet. I still thought it odd that the planet didn't have a name, just a designation number: HP1500. To me, that sounded like a piece of equipment. I began to rack my brain for appropriate planet names. It was more difficult than it seemed; you don't go about naming a planet the same way you would name a dog.

As Griffin settled in to negotiate with the farm agent, I strayed into the corridors, watching the crowds and listening to the multitudes of unfamiliar languages. Most were humanoids, but there were some strange species that I'd never seen before. Some looked human, but had unusual coloring or markings on their skin. I saw more than one wearing environmental masks; obviously the oxygen-rich station was hostile to their systems.

As I walked, a tingle up my spine spoke of company—possibly dangerous company. I came to a stop and leaned up against the wall so I could watch both directions.

Energy and projectile weapons were expressly forbidden on the station, but many wore blades. I was uncomfortably aware of the fact that my hands were still stiff and sore and that the slender blade I wore belonged to Griffin. Still, I'd face the challenge head-on. I propped a booted heel against the wall, ready to kick away for a little extra drive. The adrenaline began its normal reaction in my system. My muscles started to ache, and I took deep breaths, allowing my brain to disengage from the crisis.

It was Tomas's bodyguard, Carlotta. She was wearing a stunning red dress suit that skimmed her sleek, dangerous body. She was still heavily armed, and she approached me with a smile.

"I expected that you would be helpless without your watchdog, but your senses are good. I'm surprised that your bodyguard left you unattended."

I relaxed a bit, noting that the corridor was quiet and had little traffic. Not a good place for me in an ambush, but I didn't get the impression that she was here for a fight.

"He isn't my guard, Carlotta. We're partners."

She cocked a brow at that. "Lovers, I'd imagine, but partners? He walks just behind you and to the right, keeping his blade hand free. He's your guard."

I chose not to answer.

"Sleeping with the bodyguard is dangerous for both."

She had a point there. Ostensibly, Griffin was my guard, but I'd take a blade for him. In fact, with the imprint still active, I'd do pretty much anything for the man.

"Your point?"

"Are you hiring?"

My jaw probably hit the floor at that. "Weren't you employed just yesterday?"

"Yes, but Tomas forgot to mention all the services he expected me to provide. I had to remind him...rather forcibly...that I don't provide sex. He was more than a little intrigued by your performance and expected me to relieve him."

I straightened up from the wall and began to walk slowly. She fell into step beside me.

"He tried to rape you?"

"I suppose that's the appropriate term."

She was tall, and in her heels, came just inches short of my height.

“Why us?”

“You two are so infatuated with each other, neither of you will be looking at me in a sexual sense. Well, maybe you will, but not enough to bother me.”

I grinned. She was right on the mark with that comment. She was exactly the sort of woman I'd like in my bed if that space wasn't already occupied.

“Besides, I recognize you.”

That brought me to a dead halt. I turned, my hand on the sword.

“What?”

She smiled slowly, and I was acutely aware that the hall was now empty. This was an access corridor with little traffic. I was mere yards away from Griffin, but it might as well have been miles. Adrenaline caused my skin to prickle, and the chip responded by settling a heavy fatigue through my muscles.

Regardless of my skills, I'd never be able to defend myself against this woman. Not like this.

She dropped her hands to the front of her body, showing me that they were empty of weapons. “I did the background check on Griffin Hawke and Markus Dayspring for Tomas. And yes, your cousin is very similar in appearance to you, but I used recognition software to verify your identity, Your Highness.”

“I'm not the king.”

“No, the king is missing. He's been missing for years now. I imagine his return would cause chaos, not only among his people, but among those who betrayed him on Arash.”

“I thought that the people of Talis have been enslaved by the Landauns.” I racked my mind for any information about the Talisians. Griffin had been slowly sharing the history of our people. He took my reeducation seriously, and now, I was deeply grateful for that knowledge.

“Some. Not all. There are those who rose to positions of power over their peers. And there are those who managed to escape the planet.”

I didn't know what to say. She'd know if I lied, and if I agreed, I'd confirm my identity. I'd be exposed soon enough anyway.

“Why? Why do you wish to serve me and Griffin? Our people are destitute. Our new planet is a wasteland. We have to sell our few precious items merely to feed our people.”

From the corner of my eye, I saw Griffin approaching; his very aura promised violence. I shot him a look, pleading for restraint. Carlotta looked at him and then back at me. She waited to speak until he was at my side.

“I was eighteen when my father sat down with the Landauns. They promised great things for our people—new technology and powerful weaponry. They promised him power. My family objected. We had no ill will toward your people beyond our different belief systems. But my father saw only the lure of power and riches. By the time I was nineteen, my father lay dying in his own throne room. His last hour of life was spent watching the slaughter of his family. He was forced to watch the rape of his wife and daughters. I was left for dead, tangled amid the bodies of my brothers and sisters.”

I glanced up at Griffin. He watched Carlotta with an expression of cold distrust. I also noticed that his eye scanned the hall.

“There are cameras, but no audio. I hacked the system earlier to find the quiet zones in the port.”

She was good. Very good.

“Carlotta Berne. Princess Carlotta Berne Trey, of the Kingdom of Talis.”

She bowed her head to Griffin. “And you are Captain Griffin Hawke of the Royal Guard of Astrum. You are the bodyguard of Prince Helios.”

He went stiff, but remained otherwise still and quiet. I wished that he'd speak. Was it safe to betray my loss of memory to a woman who had once been our enemy?

“Carlotta wishes to enter our employ.”

Griffin cocked a heavy brow.

“She believes that our involvement with one another is a liability. You're too focused on me to do your job, and I'm too attached to you to allow you to do it.” Glancing at the deposed princess, Griffin nodded in agreement. “I haven't yet discovered why she'd be willing to work for her former enemy.” We both looked at her and waited.

“Just after I turned twenty, I had been living with a small band of refugees. We scabbled to survive, to stay hidden from the marauding Landauns as they marched to war against the Astrum. Women were at particular risk, even from the surviving men of our kingdom. I'd been raised by the sword and taught the women in the group the best I could. There were soldiers among our number, and they helped us to learn fight tactics. We scavenged battlefields for weapons and armor. Early one morning, we came upon a small band of Landauns. They had energy weapons, while we were armed only with blades. Many of my fighters fell. But the Landauns didn't kill us; they meant to capture us once again. We'd be used as slave labor and prostitutes.

“It seemed that all was lost when a small army of soldiers emerged from the surrounding forests. They were led by a man with hair the color of flame. I knew he was Helios Dayspring. Even in hiding, we'd heard that the Sun Priest had been leading raids against the Landauns, keeping them disorganized and confused.

“They flanked the Landauns, allowing us to escape. My greatest wish was to have fought at his side, among his warriors. That day my wish was fulfilled, if only for a few hours.”

I was speechless. It seemed Griffin was too, as he simply stood glaring at the woman. Her honesty was irrelevant to my captain; he saw only a member of the House of Talis. Our betrayers.

“And where are those who fought with you?”

She gave me a slow smile. “Around. Some settled on other planets. Some are earning their living as I do, as a mercenary. Others have been...strategically placed.”

“You are still a unit?” Griffin sounded somewhat intrigued.

“All my soldiers are on standby.”

“For what?” I asked.

She looked at me steadily. “For the return of the Dayspring. We've been waiting for you, Helios. Your return will not be easy or safe. We offer our services.”

I felt I'd been punched in the gut. Even Griffin let out a whoosh of breath.

“How many? And what is your training?”

She answered him, and in that moment, a frisson of understanding settled between those two. She might be the enemy, she might be royalty, but they understood one another. They served a common purpose.

“We are down to seventy-five men and women in the field, all fully trained in blade, hand-to-hand, and energy beam weaponry. I don't have the military background that you do, Captain, but we took a page from the book of this one.”

She nodded at me. I just kept my mouth shut.

“We survived largely by fighting with guerilla tactics. I can have a private guard of at least seven meet us within a week. The others will take longer to recall. Some I'd prefer to leave in their current positions.”

“Spies?”

Carlotta nodded. “They are home, observing the Landauns and the traitors.”

“Griffin, shouldn't we take this conversation elsewhere?” I was feeling a bit itchy standing in the access corridor of the space station, discussing what amounted to state secrets. If I was the missing heir to the kingdom of the Astrum, Carlotta was the heir to the throne of Talis. We were a very dangerous pair.

“Can I give you two a word of advice?”

We looked across the hall at where Carlotta casually leaned against the wall.

“Get your stuff and get out. Tomas will be...incapacitated for awhile, but he's certain you have more candar, or at least information about where he can access it. I'm not sure he believed your story about it being part of your royal treasury.” She crossed her arms, and her full breasts swelled temptingly over the top of her suit.

“You didn't buy the story either.”

She gave me a small, rather sad smile. “My father made it his business to know as much as possible about your kingdom. I don't recall him speaking about candar crystals. Your treasury consisted mostly of precious metals. I assume you acquired the gemstones elsewhere. They're uncut roughs, so you must have gotten them near the source, before they came under control of the cartels. If you have more, the two of you are in over your heads. You need to get off this station.”

“We need to leave soon anyway. Can you meet us at our cruiser? It seems we have much to discuss.” My heart dropped just a bit at Griffin's words. I knew we'd have to leave eventually, but had hoped for more time.

They exchanged information while I stifled my disappointment. I'd cherished the hours with Griffin, falling asleep with him at my side and waking in his arms. My mind flinched away from the days ahead. Ignorance gave me a certain measure of comfort. Once my memories returned, who would I be? Would my feelings change toward Griffin?

Would I be any more worthy to step up, to offer myself to the people who might wish me to be their king?

These thoughts kept me occupied as we returned to the room and quickly packed our belongings.

We were both uncomfortably aware of the precious stones in our possession. They represented hope, but also held the potential for disaster. The case felt much heavier now than it had just one day ago.

“I'll be hearing from the council soon. It'll want to know why I haven't sold all the material.”

We strode down the hall, dodging other pedestrians, watching carefully for hidden dangers.

“Tell them there's been an unexpected development and that you're returning early.”

“They don't understand, Lio. They don't understand that we now live in a world that is so much larger, so much more dangerous than anything we knew at home.”

When...if I became king, I didn't want to be that sort of ruler. I wanted to know what and who was out there. I didn't want to look to the sky and believe that the universe revolved around our little planet, our tiny sun. That might have been the way of my uncle, but it was not my way.

I no longer worshipped the sun.

After boarding a lift, we were silent until we stepped onto the *Aida*. As the access door swung closed, I gave a sigh of relief. Even then, we didn't speak until Griffin completed a security scan.

I quickly unpacked and then stepped to the doorway of the bridge. “Do you trust her, Griffin?”

He'd started a systems check, moving from screen to screen as he spoke.

"Trust is always a gamble, Lio. How do you feel about her?"

"God, Grif, I have no memory of her. There's no proof that what she's saying is true. But we could use her."

"We could use her mercenaries." He swiveled his seat to face me. Under the cool light of the bridge, the hard planes of his face were set off in high contrast; the black eye patch looked like a pit in his face. "I do recognize her from the visits between kingdoms. Your wife...Cloris..." He broke off and sighed. "Cloris was from their kingdom. She was accused of leaking information about us to Carlotta's father."

"My wife was a spy?" Why didn't that surprise me? There was a greater surprise to come.

"Helios, Carlotta was Cloris's younger sister. She was your sister-in-law."

All right, now I'd officially reached the "too much information" point. My brain simply didn't want to continue to process the intrigue. I couldn't connect the brazen bodyguard with the mother of my son. Predictably, the muscles of my entire body went heavy and weak, and my thoughts grew hazy.

"Helios...Lio!" A slight shake on my shoulder brought me about. "She's on her way. You need to pull it together. We need to make this decision, and now."

I didn't think; I simply reacted.

"We need her."

"That's your instinct?"

I nodded. "When I think, I get fuzzy. When I ask the question, the answer is yes."

He looked steadily at me. "I trust your instincts, Lio. You need to trust them as well."

I rose and headed back to the small cabins. "I'll get the spare cabin cleared out. I won't be needing it anyway."

The look he gave me was hot, and even as my heart accelerated, my cock expressed its interest in my wayward thoughts. There wouldn't be time for sex anytime soon. I'd have to hang on to my few memories of my time with Griffin and hope that would carry me through.

Chapter Ten

The procedure was far from what I expected.

After weeks of seemingly random travel, we arrived at a small, hostile-looking planet. In reality, it was a moon with an atmosphere. No person in his or her right mind could possibly survive there, and looking back, I'd say the man who lived there was probably not in his right mind at all.

Griffin's "friend" was a big, surly-looking fellow with dirty fingernails and greasy hair, attesting to hours spent in the underbellies of heavy equipment. He glared when Griffin strolled into his work bay, and then his eyes went slightly wide at the sight of me. He licked his thin lips and then paled as Carlotta leaned on his immaculately organized tool bench, using a slender dagger to trim her impeccable fingernails. She was back in her leather flight suit, her hair pulled tightly back from her face. The only concession to her femininity was deep red lipstick that was perfectly applied. Her flashing dark eyes needed no enhancement. She was a combustive combination of danger and beauty.

Within ten minutes, the nameless tech had seated me on a battered reclining chair. He shuffled around in piles of wires and motherboards, finally locating all the components he needed. He waved a reader over my head and then hunkered over a screen, scanning the results.

"Standard-issue slave chip with built-in suppression for aggression and independent thinking. Records indicate three...no, four disparate memory washes. If you want 'em, I've got the names of your trainers and owners as well as the original broker. There's an awful lot of data here."

I swallowed hard at that information. "Will I remember what was wiped?"

He shrugged indifferently, sliding a chip into the computer. One dangerous look from Carlotta adjusted his attitude. I was gaining a whole new appreciation for the new royal bodyguard. Between her and Griffin, I had a formidable set of bookends clad in black leather.

“Regardless of how sophisticated the procedure, an implant in the brain damages tissue. I can't take it out, and I can't repair that damage. Basically, I'm just killing the implant. You might recover everything, or nothing.”

My heart sank. I wanted to remember the faces of my parents and the birth of my son. I wanted to remember the first time I saw Griffin. There was much I could recover through study, but I desperately wanted my memories.

After copying the data, he stepped up, and his grubby hand pushed my hair aside at the base of my neck. The device he pressed against my skull was cool. I shivered as it thrummed against my skin. I imagined ultrasonic vibrations or magnetic waves slashing through my brain. Yet when he finished, I felt fine.

Both Griffin and Carlotta bent over the monitor, quickly scanning the damning evidence. Neither seemed concerned that my brain might have been rendered to mush.

“There you go. Today's the first day of the rest of your life.”

Griffin's friend retrieved the data chip from the computer and handed it to me. Turning his back to us, he returned to his tool bench. Carlotta gave him a sly grin and leaned against the table next to him. She stroked a booted foot up his thigh, chuckling as he hastened away. I wasn't sure if he had an aversion to females in general or to this one specifically.

Whatever the case, she purred in sadistic delight. “Fucking ped.”

Griffin's eyebrows lifted in surprise, and the tech's face went dark in anger. Clearly Carlotta knew more than either of them expected.

“We're even, Griffin. Don't show your face around here again.”

Griffin gave a dangerous smile, letting the tech know that he didn't take him seriously at all. If he needed something, he'd be back. With a hard fist, he chucked the man under the chin.

“Someday I'll be back, and you'll be glad to see me.”

The tech pulled his head away, and even from a distance, I could see the goose bumps rising on his skin. I shot a quizzical look at Griffin, and he just grinned. Obviously he had a few unsavory secrets of his own.

“He's okay now, but I imagine he'll have some hazy moments. His brain is going to have to adapt to the absence of the signals he was receiving. Don't let him drive.”

I guffawed at that; thus far, both Griffin and Carlotta had kept me away from the piloting station. They trusted my navigation, but not my novice piloting skills. Unfortunately I hadn't lived up to Griffin's expectations as a pilot. The stress of taking the helm made me sleepy. As we left the workshop, Griffin took a moment to bend down and whisper in the man's ear. He laughed as the tech spouted off a stream of muttered obscenities.

We quickly returned to the ship, eager to be away from the nameless tech and his collection of parts and pieces. I had to wonder what exactly he was doing hidden away on a moon like this with those parts. I wondered if Griffin knew.

Carlotta piloted the *Aida* from the surface of the tiny moon. We rose gracefully from the thin atmosphere and traveled carefully through an artificial asteroid field of space junk. Griffin's surly tech might have an immaculate tool bench, but he was a slob in every other way. However, his space trash was an effective barrier from casual visitors to his little hideaway.

* * * * *

I'm not certain what I expected, but nothing seemed to change. My thoughts were the same, and when I looked at Griffin, I saw the same big rough man that I'd first encountered in the Trell 57. My gut went tight; my cock went hard when he gave me a raffish grin. But it seemed there should be more. I still couldn't recall his face without the scarring and the eye patch. No early memories came to tease me unexpectedly.

Initially I thought the imprint had remained active. When I caught myself feeling annoyed when Griffin absently waved me from the bridge, I sighed in relief. I was still foolishly infatuated with the man, but not slavishly devoted. And to his credit, he hadn't taken advantage of me during that time. I'd have done anything he asked of me. I wondered if it had frightened him to have that sort of power over another person. He'd often stared at me when he thought I wasn't paying attention, and when we slept together, I'd wake to find him studying me soberly.

"Who was that man?" I leaned in the doorway of the small bridge, watching as Carlotta carefully steered us around what appeared to be a broken bed frame.

"His name's Randall Scott. He used to be a top design engineer for a company that designed state-of-the-art spacecraft. He very kindly agreed to upgrade our fleet. Even our smallest ships have ID capability, plus a few other tricks under the hood."

He grinned, once again looking rather wicked.

“So what exactly is in it for him?”

“His life, I suppose.” Carlotta gave Griffin a sidelong glance. “If I remember correctly, Scott was tried and found guilty of pedophilia. He was sentenced to a particularly harsh term on a penal planet, and then vanished during transport.”

We both looked at Griffin in question.

“I had nothing to do with his escape! A couple years back, I had to take the ship down for repairs. I landed on his rock, recognized the bastard, and decided to make him an offer.” He crossed his arms, looking a bit defensive. “There he was, living alone down there, with no access to children, not even to outside communication. He has his junk, and that's pretty much it. Sort of a step down from working in the most high-tech labs that money can buy.

“So, Markus and I agreed to bring him some salvage and basic supplies in exchange for work.”

Carlotta shook her head in disgust. “Can he travel off-planet?”

“No. He's well and truly grounded. Of course, he's bright enough to build a ship from that junk of his, but all he seems to want is to be left alone.”

It was an ethical conundrum. He should be in prison, but in a sense, he was, and in addition, he was isolated from anyone he might hurt.

“What did you say to him before you left?”

“I told him if he set foot off the planet, I'd send Carlotta after him. He's not real fond of women. Particularly strong women.”

“Well Griffin, that's the nicest thing anyone's ever said about me!”

They laughed, comfortable in their camaraderie. Once I'd begun to trust Carlotta, Griffin had as well. I enjoyed listening to their banter and good-natured arguing. Clearly their similar experiences were the grounds for friendship.

I turned away from the bridge with a sigh and headed for the practice room. I could sit and read manuals or find an observation window and watch the stars until we entered ID space. I could try to take a nap. The absence of memory worried at me incessantly. I needed to keep myself occupied. Since sleeping or reading had no appeal, I decided to test my new limits. Or to be more accurate, my lack of limits.

I stretched my muscles, slowly building up the intensity of the workout. The kilij was comfortable in my hand; my damaged palms had healed well. I walked the form slowly at first, finally working it up to full speed. I spun and dropped to the floor, dodging an imaginary opponent. I leaped into the air and landed with a wicked kick. Only the normal fatigue of exercise came over me, and I grinned in delight. I chose another weapon from the rack—a long saber—and again, the weapon felt natural, easy to manipulate. The quarterstaff felt equally good when I fainted at myself in the mirrors.

Finally I stopped, my heart pumping in my chest. At some time during my practice we'd shifted dimension, and the cruiser now flew in near silence. I glanced up into the mirror to see Griffin watching. He leaned casually in the doorway. His easy posture was belied by the enormous erection that crowded the front of his pants. He liked to watch me.

"It's coming back."

He smiled, but it wasn't a happy smile. I slid the blade back into the rack and turned to face him. "No memories yet, but my stamina...it's just...normal."

He remained very still, and I crossed the room then slapped the panel that shut and locked the gymnasium. I returned to the weapon rack and chose two blades. No time like the present to put myself to the test.

He caught the blade that I tossed, and before I could breathe, the fight was on. He attacked; I parried, thrust, and was thrown back. Again he went on the offensive, pushing me backward in a blinding series of moves. I lacked his strength and speed, so I attempted to move on his blind side. He'd anticipated that. If I knew Griffin, he'd worked long and hard to adapt to his handicap.

I tired quickly, but didn't feel the sting of embarrassment. It had been years since I'd sparred, and my eventual loss was inevitable. Yet when I yielded, Griffin looked...surprised. He was barely winded, yet I panted like a dog. Leaning against the mirrored wall, I waited for my heart to settle a bit before speaking.

"In the past, I'd have fought to collapse."

"In the past, you would never have submitted to me." He paced, hiding his face from me.

"Well, once you learn how to do it, submitting isn't so bad."

I took his blade and returned both to their proper places in the rack. Turning, I looked at Griffin. The sadness in his face had changed to puzzlement.

“What bothers you, Griffin?” I wanted to take him in my arms, to hold him, but his pride kept me at bay. “Do you fear that I no longer need you?”

He didn't answer.

“This has always been the problem with us, hasn't it? Neither of us was willing to give ground to the other. We both needed to win and maintain the dominant position. I've changed, and you don't know what to make of me.”

He flinched at my words.

I strode to him, grabbed him by the shirt, and swung him against the mirrored wall. “You submit to me because of my status, but it's unnatural to you. If I commanded it, you'd fall to your knees and service me. Am I right?” He didn't speak, but his face went dark and angry. “If I command it, will you service me?”

The muscles in his jaw flexed, and he gave a short, angry nod. “When we were together that first time, I took you into my body. You took me into yours. Was that so bad?” I relaxed my grip and smoothed the fabric of his shirt. “I asked if that was how we'd done it before. You never answered. That was the first time we fucked, wasn't it?”

He let out a sigh, giving me his blind side. That was how he hid his feelings. If he couldn't see me, then surely I couldn't see him.

“We did everything but that. I wouldn't submit, and you couldn't. You were the prince. It went against my nature...and your pride.”

I reached up and stroked the rough whiskers of his face. “What foolish, foolish young men we were. Love isn't about forcing submission, Grif. It's about...doing for the one you love. It's about their happiness over our own.”

“And you love me?”

My breath caught painfully in my chest. How could I love a man after knowing him just days? That's all I remembered, but not all I felt. Years of loving this man lived in my heart. Had I ever told him how I felt? Even in these short weeks we'd been together?

“I do love you. I may not remember us, Griffin, but my soul remembers. My heart remembers.”

He rested a hand over my chest, feeling the beat of my heart. I clasped his wrist and felt his heart beat there. For a moment, we didn't speak; we simply touched.

"You are afraid that if I remember being the royal prince, I can't submit to what I feel for you." He turned his head away. "I need you to know that I've learned to step back. I've learned that humility is not such a bad thing, and that strength can be found through submission. I've learned that I am not always right, and that being wrong is not a bad thing, nor is it weakness."

Slowly my head slipped forward, coming to rest on his shoulder. It was a silent plea for his strength. Yes, my job was to shoulder the burden of my people, but I knew that I didn't need to carry that burden alone. There was room in my life for friends, for people who cared enough to help.

The woman at the helm of the cruiser was proof of that.

"Griffin, I want you, I love you, and I need you by my side. Forever."

He collapsed backward, his weight resting on the mirror. The sound he made was dangerously close to a groan. When I pressed into his body, he didn't resist. I pulled him close and kissed him with as much honesty, with as much emotion as existed in my soul. My hands trailed down his body, unfastened the front of his trousers, and pulled the tight fabric down his hips.

Slowly, deliberately, I lowered myself to my knees.

"No, Helios." He reached down, catching my clothing, trying to pull me to my feet. I evaded his grip and bent forward to press a soft kiss just above that curly thatch of hair. I licked a wet trail along his skin, and he shuddered.

"Why not?" I looked up at him. Bewilderment chased over his face. Bewilderment and confusion.

"It's not... You're my king."

"And I'm your lover." Another long lick, and then I coaxed his cock into my hand, watching it harden slowly. "I'm not dominating you, nor are you dominating me. I'm making love to you. It's a position. That's all."

Whatever he was going to say was cut off on a gasp. I'd pulled his length into my mouth and sucked hard. For long moments I tongued him, losing myself in the sensation, the taste of Griffin Hawke. And then I let him go with a wet *pop*.

“Though I'm kneeling before you, is this submission?”

“No.”

Good boy, he was beginning to understand. Slowly I stood. “When I took your ass, was that humiliating? Was I forcing you?” I held my breath, praying that he hadn't perceived it that way.

“No.”

I looked him in the eye. “I know the difference between sex and love. I know what it feels like to truly submit to another. And I know what humiliation is. I would never humiliate you, Griffin. I would never dominate you just for the sake of domination. I might be aggressive sometimes, as you are sometimes aggressive with me. And when you are, it's exciting and powerful and so amazing to feel you unleash all that strength. But sometimes I feel that way too.”

He took a deep breath, the look on his face still troubled. “I don't want you on your knees before me, Helios. It's too much like...”

“Like the whores in the tavern,” I supplied.

He went white. “I used you, just like you were a whore.”

“Griffin. You know, we are all born naked and squalling. We all come into the world the same. It was simply a trick of fate that made me a king, while another man was born a pauper. And frankly, I think many kings and queens do their fair share of pandering.”

“Not like that.” He shook his head in denial, though we both knew otherwise. I'd been pandered out to a political marriage.

“Do you know that I manipulated that situation? Back at the T57, I saw you across the room and knew...*I knew* that I had to connect with you. I knew that you were the one person on that planet who could get me out of there. I'd have done whatever it took to get you to see me, Griffin. If it hadn't been the wine, I'd have figured something out. And those hours on the floor between your feet? Well, that was probably the first real peace and comfort I'd had since...since I surrendered my freedom. That was magical.”

Something played over his face...belief or hope...it was something good. Something that made him take a deep breath and pull me close to his body. His cock wasn't hard anymore, but I decided to leave well enough alone. For perhaps the very first time since I saw him on Warlan,

he was relaxing, letting down his guard. He was accepting that I was safe, home, and incredibly, that I wouldn't abandon him as my memories returned.

“That...scene that my wife walked in on...what happened?”

His eye dropped closed and he grinned, his head resting back against the mirror. “I'd just reported for duty. Your uncle assigned me to guard you. And you...” He lifted his head and looked at me. “You felt that it wasn't necessary, in spite of our intelligence that reported otherwise.”

“But that wasn't it, was it?”

He shook his head. “No. You recognized the danger you were in. You didn't want me to be your guard. We fought, and you finally broke. You told me...you told me that it was too difficult to be near me and not be with me. You told me that you still loved me.”

His face had gone still, and I couldn't help but smile. But there were tears in my eyes as I smiled up at him. “And she heard.”

“And she saw us embrace. We broke apart, and I left. She was in the hall as I stepped out of the door.”

I groaned in embarrassment. Nothing like having to experience a humiliating moment twice. “Is that why she spied?”

“No, we already knew she was passing information. You did your best with her, Helios. You really did.”

“Except I molested my bodyguard.” I leaned back a bit and ran my hands down his hard chest. “Which is sounding like a mistake worth repeating.” I jerked the shirt away, grinning as the fastenings tore from the fabric. I licked at the exposed skin, following the path of a long, white scar.

“How'd you get this?”

He hissed in arousal as I nipped along the mark. “Sword practice. It was shallow.” He chuckled; the sound echoed in his deep chest. “You gave me that mark!”

I looked up in surprise. I found another and tasted it, savoring the salt and musk of his skin. Another small line led to his shoulder, and from there, I traveled to his neck, smiling in approval as he arched, giving me access to his bare throat.

“How did you get that scar on your belly, Lio?”

“The last battle, when I surrendered...”

I gasped as the memory washed over me. I'd handed my shield and sword to the enemy. That had been the ultimate humiliation among my people. I should have died fighting.

As quickly as it came, the memory fled, and I was once again running my lips across Griffin's throat, down to his jaw. I whispered a kiss across his mouth.

“Floor, Griffin.” I wasn't going to dominate the man, but I wanted to drive this time. He settled to the floor and lay back. Quickly I got rid of the rest of his clothing, pleased that he allowed me that task.

I covered his body with my kisses, touching and tasting, then rolled him facedown so I could explore every muscled inch of him. I kneaded his tight buttocks, finally giving in to the urge to nip and bite, watching him twist under that torment. I spread his legs and gently stroked his sac, then trailed my fingers up the crack of his ass. He went tense, but quickly relaxed.

When I rolled him to his back, he looked surprised.

“When you're ready for me to take you, you'll let me know.”

He'd better; I was hard in my pants, and I was dying to take his ass again. But for now, I'd do anything to make him happy. Anything.

I bent for a kiss, a slow, sultry embrace this time. Our tongues wrestled softly, and I savored his taste. When we broke apart, I rolled to my side, presenting my back. He reached around my body, his big hand settling on my cock.

“You're sure, Lio?”

I nearly laughed and looked over my shoulder at him. “I've told you, I won't push you into anything. This is good for me.” I shivered a bit as he pressed his hips against my ass; his iron-hard shaft was hot as it slid up my crack. In response, I bent my upper leg, offering him access. Unexpectedly, he cursed and rose to his feet. I groaned impatiently when he vanished from the room. He'd gone to the head and rummaged around, causing a racket. He returned with a container of lube in his hand and a triumphant grin on his face. Moments later, he was back in position, prepping himself and then reaching around to slick my cock.

He gently lubed my ass, stretching, relaxing me back there. I wondered if he'd made love to other men over the years or if he and Suzan had done this. From his gentle touch, I suspected that his wife had coached him. I decided that I didn't want to know about other lovers. I didn't need to know.

He cupped my balls, and they grew tight with arousal. He brought his arm back around and pumped my cock even as he began to press into my body. I gasped against the pressure and the burn, and then moaned as he carefully pulled out. With his next smooth thrust, his cockhead pushed past the tight ring of muscle, easing the way for the rest of his shaft. Griffin nuzzled my neck, his breath hot against my throat, and I turned my head, catching his lips in a deep, carnal kiss. When he pressed in again, harder this time, I caught his lip in my teeth, panting through the burn.

“Tell me if you want me to stop.”

I nearly laughed. If he hadn't gripped the base of my cock, I'd have shot my load! Instead I panted a little more, swiping my tongue over his lips.

“Please don't stop.”

“Fuck Lio...fuck!”

He pushed in, and I felt the brush of his pubic hair against my ass. With agonizing deliberation, he pulled out nearly all the way, only to return just as slowly. The pain was receding as my arousal climbed, and I pushed back to meet him. He fucked me slowly, smoothly, keeping a tight grip on my cock. He brushed up against that gland, making me grunt deeply in my throat. I was nearly sobbing with the pleasure.

I opened my eyes and blinked against the light of the gymnasium. I could see us reflected in the mirrors, and it was beautiful. Griffin looked up, meeting my gaze, and he smiled, bending over to kiss me.

“So beautiful, Lio. You've always been beautiful, but now...” He gasped, lost his tempo just a bit. “Now you don't try to hide it.”

He couldn't get the traction he needed, so Griffin rolled me to my belly and lay full-length over me. I loved the weight of his body, the feel of his skin slick and sweaty on mine. I craved the sensation of holding him in my arms, but the feeling of his possession swept over me. I felt cherished. He paused, raised me to my knees, and clasped my weeping cock in his hand again.

“You can't come yet, Lio!”

I groaned in frustration. We were both on our knees, and he was thrusting hard, bringing one foot up to brace on. I leaned forward and put a hand against the wall, fascinated with the display in the mirror. His face was sweaty, his chest flushed. Griffin's body framed mine just a bit, his dark skin a contrast to my paler tones. He worked at my braid, freeing my hair to drape around my shoulders and down around our bodies.

I felt him grow close, yet he still held me back. He buried his face in my shoulder; his bared teeth were hard and threatening. He was coming, and I watched in fascination as the cords stood out on his neck and blood engorged the veins of his arms. His face twisted into an agonized mask of joy and bliss as he threw his head back and shouted wordlessly.

I felt the heat of his seed filling my body, and without warning, his grip on my shaft loosened, and he began to pump hard and fast. Still hard and erect, he dug into my ass, hitting that gland again and again. One hand pumped my cock, the other kept me pinned, my back to his chest.

With shocking speed, my balls pulled up and shot their load, and my cum spilled over his fist, spattering onto the glass of the mirror. I shuddered and twisted as the spasms continued each time he thrust against my prostrate. I was helpless in his arms, powerless against his strength.

I didn't care that I was helpless, because it was Griffin, and I trusted him with my body, with my kingdom, and with my very soul. He drove me until I was ragged with bliss—sated, drained, and completely, utterly fucked.

Panting and sweaty, we slumped there on the floor, looking at one another in the mirrors, and I did my very best to convey my love and my trust without saying a word. If I'd tried to speak, no sound would have come from my throat. Instead, I tried to communicate without words.

When his head dropped to my shoulder and he kissed my neck, I knew that he understood.

Chapter Eleven

“I thought I'd die when you left, Lio. We were fighting, trying to get you and your family to safety. I'd gone down and couldn't continue, and you rallied my men. It had been years since you fought as part of a unit, but you took command and led the enemy away in the most brilliant retreat I've ever seen.”

He grabbed me by the shoulders and shook me once, twice. “You son of a she-wolf! We were supposed to be protecting you, escorting you to safety, but you took command and led those bastards into a trap. I heard that not a single Landaun on the ground survived that day. And then you took my troops and hid away, teaching them to fight from cover, to strike and retreat. You baited the enemy, leading them away from the capital, giving us time to evacuate. When it was done, you sent the survivors onto a ship. You surrendered in exchange for their safety.”

“Well, that was stupid.” My throat was tight. As he spoke, I saw images of war, blood, and terror, our gliders twisted and smoking, leaving us to fight on foot or on horseback.

I saw Griffin bleeding and broken, unable to stand on his own. I saw the frightened faces of my nieces and nephews, my sister...my son. There'd been weeks and months of fighting, of hunger and hardship and unceasing travel, harrying the enemy. Vividly I recalled approaching the enemy, looking into their hard, alien faces, and extending my sword in surrender.

My legs went weak, and Griffin caught me, then carried me to the padded floor.

Submission and surrender. They'd forced me to my knees to taste the sweaty, filthy cock of their commander. I'd listened to the laughter and jeers of his soldiers. They didn't kill me; death would have given our people a martyr. Instead they dragged me to the capital with the intention of showing my people their broken hero, but my people were already gone.

The palace was empty, as was the temple and all the buildings in the city. The dead lay unburied and uncaring, but thousands had escaped. I had looked at the empty city and rejoiced. We'd been unsuccessful in making alliances to help us fight, but they'd come and taken our

refugees. That knowledge had given me...hope. Regardless of my future, my loved ones had been given another chance.

"Helios." I opened my eyes. I was cradled against a giant, hard chest.

"Flashback," I uttered.

"I understand. It's just the start."

"I know." My arms came up and rested on his shoulder.

"I'm sorry, Lio."

I didn't know what he was sorry for. Perhaps for giving me unconditional love? His implicit faith in my abilities? My laugh came out as a sob. Even wrapped in his arms, my brain was overwhelmed with the memory of being thrown naked onto a slave block, stripped of my name and identity. I vividly recalled the first time a trainer took my ass, leaving me broken, bleeding, and trembling in shame.

Mingling into the horror were the good moments and the bad times that came with my life. My marriage and the birth of Alexander. The joy of coming home from the temple to see a smile on the face of my baby son. The sadness when I first realized that Cloris was merely a tool of her father. The lonely years that followed, highlighted by occasional encounters with Griffin and his sweet wife.

"She knew, didn't she? Suzan, I mean."

"Of course she knew."

And I laughed; the memory was a delightful wash of color and sensation. She'd been a young soldier who'd taken two rather naive young men into her bed. It had been Suzan who'd first taken my hand and guided it to Griffin's, forcing us to confront our love.

"Oh shit. Suzan!" My laughter felt dangerously close to hysterics.

He laughed a delightful, wicked laugh. "She was so very kinked!" And though he laughed, a tear streaked down his face. He'd loved her so very much.

I remembered precious nights spent in their snug little house, the children asleep in one room while the three of us made love in their bed. Sorrow twisted through me at those memories. After the death of Cloris, I'd found my solace in their arms. Suzan had been the third of our whole. If things had been different, we'd still be lovers today.

“How did she die?”

He didn't answer for a very long time. I waited, knowing how hard this must be for Griffin to confront. I was willing to believe that he'd never spoken of his wife's death to anyone before.

“When they found that I wouldn't submit to their torture, they moved on to my family. Suzan didn't survive. As I watched...as my children watched, they beat her to death. They didn't even question her first.”

That's when I broke. All the tears, the grief and guilt, rolled over me, and I didn't resist. I sobbed in his arms then, twisting with the pain that had been locked inside, unseen and unknown. I cried for my weak-willed wife and for my stiff-rumped uncle. I cried for the dozens of temple workers and apprentices who'd fallen in the first attack. I cried for the gaunt-faced refugees that wandered the countryside, trying to survive.

I cried for myself.

I cried for Griffin, who had been left behind.

* * * * *

The sound of a soft chime woke me.

I was stretched out on the floor. The lights were dim. The warm body that had been cradling mine moved away, leaving me bereft.

“How is he?” The woman's voice was soft and low.

“About how we expected it to be. Memory comes in fits and starts.” A heavy sigh. “I just wish he had better memories.”

“But he's resting now?”

“Yes, until the dreams start. How long's it been?”

“About seven hours, standard. You look like shit, Captain. Why don't you take a break, grab something to eat? He'll need food too. I'll keep an eye on him.”

“How much longer do we have in ID?”

“If I bring us out in a couple hours, we'll have about a four-day trip. That'll give him time to recover a bit more.”

I cracked an eye open and saw Griffin and Carlotta standing together. Both looked worried. For me? What a concept. I wanted to sit up, to tell them both to fuck off, but my body wouldn't

cooperate. All I wanted was to lie here and not think. Not feel. Before I could speak, Griffin left the room, and Carlotta came and settled on the floor next to me.

“Hello, handsome.” She smiled slightly. I’d initially thought she was shockingly beautiful in a bizarre, flamboyant fashion, but here in the soft lights, she was...pretty. The lines of her face were softer somehow. Maybe it was her hair; it was still pulled back, but loose, with strands falling around her face.

“Did you hear?” she asked.

“About four days.”

I continued to lie there on my side, looking at her. Her hair was nearly as long as mine. She wore it in a ponytail. Mine was loose and spilled all over the floor. It was going to be a bitch to comb out. Good thing Griffin liked doing it.

“I’ve got a small group who will rendezvous with us. You’ll arrive with a royal guard.”

“Made up of Talisians.”

“True. Talisians who swore fealty to you over five years ago.”

“It was on a battlefield. You were bleeding.”

“And you bound my wound.”

That left me speechless. But of course, I recovered.

“In this light, I see what your sister would have looked like eventually.”

“She was prettier than me.”

“No. Not at all. Your strength gives you beauty. She never had that strength.”

“No. Unfortunately Cloris was more like my father. I was influenced by my mother. She was outraged by the war. If they’d survived, my mother would have taken the throne.”

“She’d have deposed your father?”

Carlotta smiled, and the expression reminded me of Griffin at his worst. “No, she wouldn’t have deposed him, but Father would undoubtedly have fallen ill and remained confined to his quarters...for a very long time.”

Like her mother, Carlotta was not a woman to cross. I was grateful to have her on my side.

“I remember seeing you at the engagement dinner. But your hair was black then.”

"It changed a bit, didn't it?" The words were sarcastic, but the tone wasn't. She sounded sad.

"Why?"

Not content to drag myself through the hellfire of memory, I had to force her along for the ride.

"I imagine it was that night."

"When your family was killed?"

She nodded. "The men raped me within inches of my mother's body. They raped me, and all I could see were her dead eyes." Her voice was dispassionate. Numb.

"The first time I was raped, they tied me and threw me over a bench. All I could see was the pool of blood on the floor from my broken nose."

She looked at my face a bit more closely. "It doesn't look bad. Not at all."

I grinned and found the energy to push myself up to a sit. "I was prime meat. They brought in the best healers to fix me every time they broke me. I wonder how much they sold me for?"

"I doubt it was even close to the amount Tomas paid for those crystals of candar."

"Hmm. Now that doesn't seem right, does it? That a royal whore would be of less value than a rock?"

She shook her head and laughed at my comment. But then something less funny came to mind.

"Carlotta, you're my sister-in-law. You're my family."

"Yes, I am. That's why I recognized you so easily when your raiders rescued us."

"You're also the aunt of my son."

She went very quiet, her face sober. "I admit that's part of my reason for coming with you. He's the only blood family I have, Helios."

That meant that Alexander was the heir to the rightful queen of the Talisians. I wasn't sure how I felt about that.

I scooted back on my ass and leaned against the wall. The more we talked, the clearer my thoughts became.

"I don't know what exactly we're walking into, but it could be very bad. When I return, someone will wonder about my eye tattoos and figure out where I've been all these years."

"So don't hide it." She looked at me unflinchingly. "You've done nothing to bring shame to your people."

"Honor in slavery, eh?" I chuckled. "And the long-absent king brings his sister-in-law as his chief bodyguard. That'll ruffle some feathers."

"No doubt," she agreed.

"Not to mention that I have no intention of being bullied into giving up Griffin this time."

"He is a very inappropriate choice for a queen, Helios. I can't see him in a tiara."

That image made me laugh, and the laughter felt good. It brought life back to my nerves and muscles, and clarity returned to my mind. Just then, Griffin entered carrying a covered plate. My stomach growled.

"Your timing is impeccable."

"My timing has always been perfect." His smile was dangerously close to a leer, and a thrill of arousal skittered through me.

Four days? We had a copilot now; there was much we could do in four days!

* * * * *

We didn't get our four days. No sooner had Carlotta returned to the bridge did the communications array light up in glittering urgency. The three of us stood blinking as the messages began to pour in.

Literally every member of the council had something to say about the lack of finances that had been transferred. I was stunned by the casual contempt with which they addressed Griffin. General Willis had sent a coded message, alerting Griffin that three unknown ships were in orbit around the planet. He'd already recalled all of our soldiers, but only few were near enough to be of assistance.

Griffin's cousin sent a voice message. His daughters were distressed by the general panic that seemed to be taking hold in the settlement. Griffin sent a flurry of reassuring missives to all parties, and with a solemn look at me, made the decision to remain in ID space. We would arrive at my new home much earlier than planned.

There was much to do in that time. I pored over documents and records, educating myself on the laws and statutes of Astrum. I familiarized myself with the names and images of the significant council members, priests, and elders I'd soon encounter. I spent hours simply meditating and breathing, the golden kilij across my lap as my focus. During those hours, memories flowed through me, disconnected and random. It was almost worse than remembering nothing at all.

On the bridge, Carlotta communicated with her ships, while Griffin began a series of coded messages to recall dozens of soldiers who'd been dispatched in the search for Helios Dayspring. Clearly the loyalty of the military was with Captain Griffin Hawke rather than the council.

And now their loyalty was to me. Their king had returned, and they were coming in support of me.

It was then that I realized the problems I'd be facing. The council had virtually neutered the military by splitting the units apart. Some were searching for me, and others were taking freelance work, trying to funnel money back to the planet. The commanding general was in his hundreds, an ancient lion of a warrior. I remembered him as long retired and rigid in his opinions. Griffin was the senior commanding officer, and the general had ordered him out into space, leaving the planet virtually unpoliced and unprotected. I could only shake my head at the folly of their actions.

There was one person I knew I could believe in, one person on that planet that I had to contact.

I'd seen her image in Griffin's holoframe—a tall, flame-haired woman. She'd been holding a baby...my son. Cloris had run from me not long after the birth of Alexander. The Sun Priests had uncovered evidence of her spying, and she'd fled from her eventual trial, killing herself in the process. My sister had been the mother that my son had needed so desperately. Her son had been like a brother to Alexander.

I sent a brief message via Griffin's signature, reassuring her of my health and the need for secrecy. I ached to see her again, to see my child and the remaining members of my family. At the same time, fear thrilled through me, aggravated every time a memory played out before my mind's eye. The flashbacks continued, striking me down without warning.

The hours blurred together, and when I finally stumbled to our cabin, craving sleep, I was stunned by the scene before my eyes.

Small lights dotted the room, reminiscent of wax candles. We couldn't allow open flame on the ship, but these flickered and floated above every surface. The air was scented with sensual spices, and fine wine sparkled in crystalline flutes. I heard the soft strains of the Farthian lute playing.

In the midst of this seductive web, Griffin lay on the bed, naked and waiting.

Suddenly I wasn't so weary anymore.

"Did you do this for me?" I put one knee on the bed, admiring his long, muscular body. It shimmered with oil, and my cock throbbed in time with my heart.

"For you, but for me as well. When we get home, private time will be hard to come by." He casually clasped his cock, and I examined it, reaching out to stroke the distended veins, the ridge that ran up its length. He crooked his leg, sighing as I stroked.

"I will not keep you a secret from our people. You *will* be my sworn consort."

"I believe that you mean it, Helios."

"And you also know what a pigheaded bastard I can be."

He grinned at that.

"We've lost too many years. *I've* lost too many years to sacrifice myself on the altar of sovereignty. If need be, I will step down in favor of another."

"You will do no such thing." He sat up, boiling with fury. His erection had faded, and that was far from what I wished right now.

"Griffin. I promise to do what is best for the kingdom, regardless of what that might be."

"*You* are what is best for the kingdom."

For now, it seemed best to let that comment go. I was weary; I was horny. What I wanted and needed lay stretched out on a bed before me. When my shirt came off, Griffin's attention fixed on me fully. He watched, his cock swelling as I slowly stripped. Glancing around, I located the oil that he'd used. It glistened as I dribbled it over my skin. He watched it trail from my chest to my belly and then trickle beside my cock.

He swallowed nervously, and suddenly, the point of this seduction became crystal clear.

“You don't need to do this if you aren't ready, Griffin.”

“I want it. I've thought of little else since that first time you took me.” His skin flushed dark and his cock jerked, proving the truth of his words. He caught my wrist and pulled me slowly to the bed, down to his body.

He was hot; our skin slid together sensuously. He was aggressive, licking and biting at my nipples, then across my chest to the tender skin under my arms. My eyes dropped closed in bliss; he was clearly demonstrating that while he might be bottom, he'd be dominant in that position.

“I want to feel your hair when you fuck me, Lio.”

Obediently I unraveled the braid, watching as the strands surrounded him like a copper-flame curtain. He reached up and buried his hands in my hair, close to my scalp. His thumb dragged over my lips, so I opened and sucked the digit into my mouth, circling the pad with my tongue. I then bobbed, mouth-fucking it as though it were his cock. Releasing it, I leaned forward, bringing my lips close to his ear.

“I love you, Griffin.” I then sucked his lobe, nipping lightly. His hands roamed my body, stroking my ass, pulling our hips together to dry fuck. Of course, with oil slicking our bodies, it wasn't that dry at all.

He reached up and pulled my head from his throat, where I'd been leaving little marks, and brought me to look directly into his face. I tried to kiss him, but he held me steady, his hand in my hair.

“I love you, Lio. Always have.”

“I know that, Griffin. You showed me that very first night that you found me. You've shown me every hour of every day since.” I reached up, stroked his face, and cupped the eye patch gently. “And I have cherished every moment with you. Call me a selfish bastard, but I won't let you go, Grif. Never.”

And just like that, belief spread across his face. Belief and joy. The smile he gave lit him, made him young and wicked and dangerous. He laughed, and pure joy flooded me, sheer elation at seeing life and hope awakening like the dawn in this man who was my life.

He laughed, wrapped both arms around my body, and held me tight. Forever in his arms wouldn't be such a bad thing, not if he kept holding me like this.

“So when are you going to fuck me?”

I struggled up enough to look at him, to see if he really meant it. His legs parted, and I settled into the cradle of his pelvis, feeling his rigid cock against my slick belly.

“Right now, Grif. Right this fucking minute.”

It would have been easier if he'd given me his back, but Griffin wanted to hold me in his arms. He wanted to watch my face as I took him. He lay on his back, his legs parted wide while I worked his tight hole with my oiled fingers.

He'd tolerated it well that first time, so I wasn't shy with him. I oiled his anus, his scrotum, and his cock, making everything slick and wonderful. I fucked him with my finger till he grew impatient for more. I rose onto my knees, dragging the tip of my glans into position.

“You know the routine, Grif.” I couldn't help the shit-eating grin that I wore.

He nodded grimly.

“Relax. Take a deep breath, and let it out as I push.”

He bore down as I pressed in, and I bit my lip, fighting my body's need to spasm into climax as my cockhead breeched his muscular anus. He was hot and slick and powerfully tight. I muffled a curse and pulled out, then pressed back in a bit deeper.

His eye was over bright. The expression on his face was slightly wild, and why not? Griffin was challenging all of his preconceived notions about himself as a dominant male. He was willingly participating in an act that made him vulnerable to pain, to unexpected pleasure, and to the emotional storm that accompanied it.

I looped my arms under his legs, finally pressing in till the smooth skin of my groin kissed his ass. Griffin gulped down a deep breath, his head finally dropping back to the pillow. He swallowed hard; the muscles of his throat flexed beautifully.

I fondled his cock, and as I thrust gently into his ass, I smiled when I felt it twitch every time I passed over his prostrate.

“Are you all right? Any pain?”

He nodded jerkily, finally meeting my gaze. “Burns a bit.” When I withdrew, I dribbled more oil onto my cock.

“Better?”

He didn't answer; he simply nodded.

He was feeling it, the unexpected pleasure that came from being penetrated this way. His cock dribbled a bit of precum; his scrotum was tightly drawn to his body. I lowered his legs and leaned forward, covering his body with mine.

The oil and sweat made us slick, adding another layer to the tapestry of pleasure that we were building.

The tension ebbed from his face, replaced by pleasure. His powerful arms encircled my waist and hips. True to form, Griffin began to control my tempo, the angle at which I penetrated his ass. He leaned up with a slight groan and caught my mouth in a searing kiss. I had no choice but to follow where he led, and right now, he was chasing bliss. He was kissing my neck, my chest, his sharp teeth catching my nipples, raising my urgency by the second.

There would be no teasing this time, no raising the bar only to lower it. His arousal climbed, and I followed willingly. His panting breath caught. I felt the powerful clench of his muscles on my cock, and his groan of release was deep and guttural. His semen jetted hard, slipping between our already slick bodies. Feeling his seed on my skin was the last straw. White light flashed into black starlight, and I came.

His hand clasped my ass as I bucked hard into his depths. He pulled me harder, deeper, and all concerns for his comfort fled. He was big, powerful, and was flying on that burnished edge of pain and pleasure. His body jerked again; this climax was dry and most likely painful in its intensity. We finished together, moaning and panting, our union sealed in sweat and seed and the blood that seeped from the scratches he'd furrowed into my skin.

Griffin hadn't needed to submit to prove that he loved me; I'd known from our first time together. He'd needed to surrender to prove to himself that he could love, and be loved in return.

Griffin had never surrendered completely to his lovers, not even to Suzan. He'd always held on to his control, and just now, Griffin's control had shredded.

The panting had become deep, chest-heaving sobs. He buried his face against my sweaty chest and trembled. All I could do was be there, stroke that thick dark hair away from his anguished face, and say nothing, because there was nothing to say.

Griffin had surrendered to me, and had found that he was still powerful, whole, and unconquered.

Chapter Twelve

Before I was prepared, we fell out of ID space. For the first time, I saw the distant, hazy blue image of the planet that was now my home.

It was not as blue as my old home, nor as large. Yet the rugged little planet held untold riches and unimagined opportunity for those with courage and imagination. We did a preliminary geo scan, mostly for my benefit. I found that the planet was indeed abundant in water; it was mostly in underground lakes and aquifers trapped under granite shelves. The soil was balanced and fertile; it needed only irrigation and seed to make it come alive. Granted, I might feel differently once I set foot on the rocky surface, but nothing could be as ugly as the red dust of Warlan.

We orbited and joined Carlotta's three ships. Within hours, four more ships joined us. These were Griffin's men. More would arrive within the week, and dozens more were several months' travel away. There was no docking station and no shuttle service, so we carefully entered the atmosphere and cruised until we found a large plain that could accommodate all the varied cruisers and ships. Griffin estimated that it was about a mile from the settlement and could be expanded into a proper airfield as more ships arrived. Some would be too large to land, so we would link smaller ships to the larger cruisers and create an orbital docking array. Cruisers like the *Aida* would act as shuttles, carrying Griffin's soldiers and Carlotta's warriors to the surface as they arrived.

And within a few more hours, a freighter would arrive with food, clothing, and building supplies. There would be hundreds more to house and feed in a very short time—thousands as all the soldiers came home. I watched Carlotta and saw a play of emotion over her face. No doubt she hurt for her own people—for those who'd been exiled to space, and for those who had been left behind. She met my gaze and smiled sadly, and for the first time I saw the queen that she should have been.

When we landed, my heart was broken by what I saw. Our welcoming committee was frightened and defensive, their weapons drawn on the well-armed soldiers that poured from the cruisers. Children were ragged and gaunt; fear etched their faces into expressions far too old for their years. When the armed adults saw Griffin's head towering over the others, the weapons were lowered in uncertainty.

A woman broke from the crowd, and Carlotta stepped up, putting herself between me and the potential threat. She recognized my sister before I did, and quickly stood down, her warriors moving to her side.

"Helios!"

As soon as I saw her, I remembered her. I found myself wrapped not only in her arms, but in years and years of memories. To my delight, they were mostly good. I held her tightly, feeling her tears soak into my shirt, feeling her hand groping, grabbing onto my braid.

"Deirdre," I whispered, unable to squeeze anything else from my throat. She let go, stood back, and stared.

"You're so different..." She looked at the tail of hair that she still grasped, and then stroked my cheek. "I have the feeling you have many stories to tell."

"Just one, and it isn't for telling here."

She looked up at me, taking in the lined eyes, the smooth skin. "You are absolutely beautiful, but I get the feeling that you didn't choose this appearance."

She was still lovely, still striking, but there were lines of fatigue around her eyes, and she was thinner than I remembered.

"Alexander...they wanted him to stay behind. He's at the village with the priests. He'll probably sneak away!" Her eyes were bright with tears and pride.

I nodded, glancing at the small crowd that was closing in on us. Alexander was heir to the kingship and still very young. It was only right that he'd be kept away from what could become an explosive situation. My men were healthy and armed, but the settlers numbered in the thousands. As I watched, the small crowd grew larger by the moment.

To my back were Carlotta and Griffin and their soldiers; to my front were faces that were familiar, yet unknown. One man approached, a look of angry disbelief on his face. His attention was on Griffin. A group of robust-looking men flanked him, their weapons at the ready.

“Captain Hawke, we sent you and Markus out with specific orders, which you failed to carry out. And now you've returned with a stranger as well as what appears to be a show of force. Explain yourself!”

Griffin stepped up and stood next to me, so close that our arms brushed. The weapons of the villagers had come up once again, but I saw uneasy glances cast in my direction. There were whispers, furtive gestures.

One voice carried on the air. “That's King Helios! It is!”

A laser rifle clattered to the ground, followed by another, and then another. Before me, a man dropped to his knees. I recognized him, but couldn't recall his name. He reached up and clasped my hand. He was followed by another, and then another. Hands pulled at my clothing, ran down my skin. They touched me, and I allowed it.

Panic welled up inside me. What could I possibly do for these people? How is it that my very name brought desperate hope to their eyes? Griffin squeezed my shoulder, and then looked at the man who had challenged him.

“Councillor Evan, my primary directive was to locate and return with King Helios. Indeed, it is the standing order of the military. I found him, and I thought it best to return with him immediately. I have also recalled all military units.”

“Why didn't you warn us? We'd have arranged a reception of some sort!”

From the corner of my eye, I saw the slight figure of a man break away and run toward where the town must lie. He was bearing the news of my return. Looking back at the councilman, I saw a glimmer of something in his expression...dismay? Fear?

“Just coming home is enough, Councillor. And Captain Hawke was only observing protocol. It would have been unwise to announce my survival where the message could have been intercepted.” I kept my voice smooth and even, trying to reassure the crowd.

“Where is Markus?” He addressed Griffin, pointedly ignoring me. It was not a particularly auspicious beginning with the council.

“I will answer that, Councilman. Markus Dayspring broke the law on a planet known as Warlan. He attempted to murder an upstanding citizen and was captured in the act. His fate is enslavement. By now, he has been chipped and has undergone a memory wash.”

I didn't add that the records in my own chip proved that Markus had been among a small group of conspirators who had helped to overthrow our kingdom and sold me into slavery. That was for later.

The man went pale, and I heard several mutters from the crowd. Questions began to crowd my mind. Where were all of the able-bodied men and women? Had they all been dispatched to space?

I looked around. The planet wasn't barren; it was rocky, yes, but trees studded the dusty hills, and low grasses and shrubs clung to the hillsides. The sky was a mild blue and dotted with fluffy clouds. If all the strongest members of the community had been sent away, it was no wonder the populace was in dire straits!

A grim and dangerous knot of men and women, we walked toward the rough settlement. Carlotta took her job as bodyguard seriously. I walked with her to my left and Griffin to my right. To my amusement, a tall, heavily armed woman had fallen in on Griffin's other side. He'd been assigned a bodyguard as well.

Griffin's men fell in behind us with military precision, while Carlotta's guerillas kept to our perimeter. Councilman Evan couldn't help but notice the protective stance they'd taken, and he scowled. A single rusty skimmer pulled up, driven by a young man, and he paused next to the portly councillor, taking him up and speeding away.

"Is this necessary?" I was a bit concerned about the show of strength.

Griffin just scowled at me, and Carlotta answered.

"It's most definitely necessary, King Helios. Your strength is the strength of the people." She'd adopted a rigid, military formality toward me. I sort of missed her bitchy side.

I searched the crowd and gestured for my sister to return to my side. She linked her arm into mine as we walked.

"I have many questions to ask, Deirdre."

While I'd been away, my sister should have been regent in my stead. She'd have been next in line to the throne after Alexander. Instead the throne had sat empty. Well, in a figurative sense; there was no real throne here. I'd have to have somebody build one for me.

"I have much to tell you as well, Helios." She looked at Carlotta, who dropped back a bit. "We should talk now, while we can." She glanced at Carlotta once more, and then came to a stop. Recognition flooded her expression.

"Don't worry; this is a group of Talisians who joined me before the end of the fighting. They've sworn loyalty to me."

"And we will do so again, with your people to witness." Carlotta's face was carefully neutral.

I suddenly remembered Carlotta on her knee, offering her weapon. A gigantic man had knelt at her side. Automatically, I looked for him, but couldn't recall his name.

"But you're..."

"I'm Alexander's other aunt." She gave Deirdre a smile then, the smile that spoke of so much lost, and yet so much to hope for. "I look forward to meeting my only living relative."

We stood there on the dusty trail as two strong women came to an understanding of sorts. When Deirdre smiled back, I knew the start of a bond had been formed.

"Carlotta, there was another, a large man..."

"That was Caius. He was a lieutenant in my father's army. He was my right hand." She broke off, a look of grief flashed over her face. "He was terribly wounded. He lives still, and will arrive within days." This had been someone important to Carlotta. My curiosity was piqued.

"There is so much to tell you, Helios. So much! But for now, there are some on the council you must be wary of. Some in the village as well." Deirdre drew my attention from Carlotta.

"That one we just met?"

"He's greedy, but mostly harmless, I think."

I looked at Griffin to see if he agreed with her judgment. He looked uncertain. How well did he know the members of the council?

"You aren't really a member of this community, are you Grif? None of the soldiers are. Have they exiled *all* of you?"

We gathered into a small cluster. I wished for privacy, but at the same time, everyone had something to say. They'd been waiting very long for someone to listen.

“Initially we needed to strike out into space to feed the people, to bring back supplies and materials for building. But when we tried to organize, to lay out the camps and repair the homes and equipment, we were sent away.”

I looked at the woman who spoke. I remembered her from another life. She'd served in the same unit I'd originally trained in.

“They...certain members of the council insisted that the people didn't need our protection, that they needed us out there, making money. I'd have gladly moved to farming if they'd have allowed me to stay.”

“I was forced to leave my wife and children...”

“I have skills that could have been useful here...”

Their voices whispered around me like dry leaves in the wind, with long-suppressed anger and despair.

“Is this true, Griffin? Were you forced to leave behind your daughters?”

He looked up then at the faces of all those who'd gathered around us. Carlotta's people had dropped back; I was surrounded by eight of my own soldiers. I looked away from them, up at Captain Griffin Hawke.

“Helios, I'd have never given up the search for you, not ever. But I'd have chosen to do it differently. I see my children rarely, when I return to the planet to deliver supplies.”

My heart was cold, and my anger was hot.

“Helios, they are afraid of the soldiers. They were afraid that they'd try to take over leadership and make it a military government.”

I looked at my sister in shock. “That is the purpose of the military, to take control until normalcy is maintained. Our men and women are well trained.”

“The general objected as well, but he's old, and the council eventually overruled him. It would not accept me as regent in Alexander's stead, though I've been allowed a presence in the council. It initially voted to seat Alexander as king upon his twentieth birthday. I had to battle tooth and nail to keep him with me.”

We were on a ridge now, and I looked down at the ragged city unfolding before me. Even from a distance, the poor planning and construction was obvious. Even with the limited technology they'd had these past years, there was no excuse for such ramshackle construction.

"Griffin, did any of our engineers survive?"

"Yes, Helios. Gwinn and her crew will arrive next week." I nodded. Clearly we'd need to sell more candar crystals. I glanced at Carlotta, and she nodded, understanding the direction of my thoughts. I'd dispatch her and a crew of her mercenaries to sell the mineral on the black market if need be.

There was a disruption at the outer edges of the circle, and suddenly two children forced their way through the crowd, then threw themselves into Griffin's arms. A flurry of black hair and blonde, patched clothing, and gleaming skin.

"Daddy!"

"Maia...Lauren..."

I saw a look on his face that I'd only glimpsed briefly in the few weeks we'd been together. It was love...aching, painful love. He went to his knees then and buried his face in their hair.

The blonde pulled away first, and my heart twisted. She was the very image of Suzan. I could see her mother's irrepressible dimples and vivid blue eyes.

"I'm Maia." She approached me cautiously.

"I remember you, Maia, but you were just a little girl when I saw you last. You are a young lady now." She giggled at that.

"I'm Lauren."

My heart stopped then and there. And suddenly, I knew I had no choice in my future. All selfish wishes, all fears and doubts slipped away. One heartbeat of time made me realize what my duty was to my people.

She stood halfway behind Griffin's leg, peeking at me shyly. Lauren was the image of her father, right down to the black patch that covered her left eye. The tip of one finger was missing. A small scar traced her jaw. I had the sick feeling that there were other scars under her clothing. I swallowed my grief and smiled, dropping to one knee.

"Hello, Lauren. I remember you too." And I meant it; I could vividly recall these two romping around the gardens when I visited their parents. "How old are you now?"

"We're seven."

"Almost eight," Maia piped in.

"Maia, you are the very image of your mother, and Lauren, you look just like your father."

Her hand flew to the patch, and I caught it, holding it in mine. "And your father is one of the most beautiful people I know, so you must be beautiful as well."

"I think he's beautiful too." She clasped my hand tightly.

Maia crowded close to her sister. "But don't say it too loud, or he'll get mad." She gave me a sincere look that was filled with suppressed humor. They both moved closer to me, Lauren leaving the shelter of her father's body to stroke my cheek, while Maia pulled my braid forward.

"Your hair is like a girl's hair."

"Yes, but I like it quite a lot. It took a very long time to grow."

"Why do you have lines painted on your eyes?" Lauren had spotted the tattoos along my lash line.

"Someone thought my eyes were so pretty that they wanted to show them off, so they put tattoos around them."

"Like a doll?"

"Yes, rather like a doll."

She stroked her finger along my eyelid, looking very close. My knees ached from kneeling so long, but that was a small matter. Across from me, Griffin's face had gone still, his eyes full of pain.

"Why did you let them do that?"

I reached up and stroked the skin along the edge of her patch. Her good eye was as dark as obsidian and full of sad knowledge. Maia draped an arm around my shoulder. The compassion and wisdom that these two exuded was breathtaking.

"Lauren, the lady who did it didn't ask my permission."

"Did it hurt?" Maia was now looking closely. "Because people hurt my sister, but she was so brave. I cried more than she did."

A tear streaked down Griffin's cheek. He didn't try to hide it. "I cried too." He said it with a smile that said so very much.

Lauren broke from me and retreated to her father, offering him comfort.

"Yes, it hurt. But I couldn't move, or my eyes might have been injured."

They'd tied me to a table. My arms and legs had been bound, and my head had been braced into position. At the time, I'd thought it was brutal. But I was intact; Lauren wasn't.

There was movement around me again, and I looked up into a face so similar to mine, it was uncanny. My eyes looked out from a much younger face. Hair that was several shades darker than mine was cut in a short, choppy cut, similar to the style I'd once favored.

"Alexander."

He looked proud and strong, awkward and frightened, all at once. He was a boy transitioning into manhood here in this miserable place. He'd be twelve now, or maybe thirteen.

I stood, my sister at my back, my lover at my side, and I faced my son. He had several inches to go before reaching my height, but seemed tall for a boy his age. I watched him look me over, from the soles of my booted feet to the length of my hair. He didn't know whether to shake my hand or throw himself into my arms.

I took that choice away by pulling him close and holding him next to my heart. He struggled to be a man, to not break down and cry, and I simply held him as he regained control of himself.

"Where...where were you?"

I knew there were eyes on us—everyone was listening—but I opted for absolute truth.

"I've been on a planet called Warlan. I was a slave there until Griffin came and found me."

He stood back then, rubbing tears from his reddened eyes. This close, I could see a sprinkling of freckles over his nose. His eyes weren't as gray as mine; they held more blue in their depths. His nose looked a bit like Carlotta's.

"Did you try to escape?"

"All the time. I'm afraid I was a very bad slave."

That drew a guffaw of laughter from Griffin, who stood now, two little girls clinging to his hands.

“Captain Hawke promised that he'd find you.” He looked up at the big man. “Thank you.”

My son was remembering his position and his pride. I smiled; we'd soon break him of that. Hopefully he'd quickly return to being a boy.

“Alexander, there's someone I'd like you to meet. She's a very special person.” I reached back and caught Carlotta's hand, bringing her to my side. “This is Carlotta. She's your mother's sister.”

“My aunt?” He looked her over appraisingly.

“She is indeed your other aunt. And she'll be staying here with us.”

“You are staying? All of you?” His voice was hopeful.

“We are all staying. And in the next few days, more of the soldiers are coming home. There is no reason for anyone to leave again.”

A cheer went up, and I looked around, shocked to find that the small group had become a large crowd. I saw faces that I recognized, and in a surreal moment, found myself being passed from person to person. They examined my face, some hugged me, and others pressed their foreheads to my hands.

There were hostile eyes, to be sure. I took note of them and moved on, finally arriving at a face that made me laugh and cry at once. His face was as lined and elderly as it had been when I was a youth, and his blue eyes still smiled.

I went to my knees in front of Basil Alexander, the high priest of the Sun Temple and namesake of my son. This man had taught me the kilij and its forms. He'd ingrained something in me that had survived the chip and the memory wipes and years of conditioning. He'd been the priest whose vision had pulled me from Griffin and the army to Cloris and the temple.

In a moment of clarity, perhaps even precognition, I understood what he'd done. If I'd remained on the path I'd been on, Griffin and I wouldn't have survived the first wave of the invasion. We'd have been commanders on the front line.

There would have been no Alexander, and like an arrow into the future, I saw my son taking the throne when I stepped down to rejoin the Temple. I saw him leading our world into a brighter, prosperous future. I looked around and saw crops in the fields, animals grazing. I saw a splendid city rising in the hills.

On the ground, something caught my eye. I leaned forward and pushed a bit of dirt away from a rock. Turning it to the sun, it blazed with white fire and then with a deep red gleam.

This single stone would bring technology to bring water to the surface. Another like it would bring shelter and safety. Candar, the sunstone.

I remembered that not so long ago, I'd given up on the Sun.

"You will now be our priest king, Helios. And after you, your son, and then his daughter..." My moment of sight had fled, but his continued. Next to me, Alexander had also dropped to his knees. Basil held tightly to my arm, still caught in our shared vision. His face was radiant.

"Dad, I saw something..." My son's eyes were wide with awe and swimming in tears.

"You'll send the prince to me when I call for him. In the meantime, you are to begin his kilij training."

I struggled to my feet, blinded by my vision and the tears that accompanied it. A strong hand steadied me and remained on my arm for the time it took for me to recover. I slid my hand down Griffin's arm and laced our fingers together, gripping him tightly. I blinked, looked up, and saw hundreds of faces looking on in awe. It seems that the prayers of many had been answered. I took a deep breath.

"I am ready."

Around us, the soldiers took formation and began to move. I saw a single rider leading several horses. My ride. I grinned and mounted up, pulling Alexander up behind my saddle. Griffin rode beside me. One little girl rode on the saddle in front, the other perched behind, her arms around his waist.

Deirdre rode with Basil. My guards rode unencumbered.

From my mount, I could see the crowd all around us. Yes, they were poor and ragged, but they were joyful. My heart pounded painfully. It was time to make it official.

"I have come home."

Many excited voices echoed through the air. When the noise settled, I spoke again. "I've come to our new home, which is called Neo Domus." It was a very old language, one that I'd

learned from Basil. The Sun Priests communicated in code. The sword sets told stories, and we kept our secrets in a long-dead language.

“Neo Domus means 'New Home.'”

The people clapped and cheered, and Griffin's laugh carried over it all.

We moved forward slowly, careful of the crowd that accompanied us. I caught Griffin's gaze, and he was smiling. I reached out, caught his hand, and leaned over to capture his lips. I broke away to applause and cheers that rose when we kissed.

“Welcome home, Helios.”

I didn't let go of his hand.

 THE END 

Loose Id(R) Titles by Belinda McBride

An Uncommon Whore
Belle Starr

Belinda McBride

Belinda was born in Inglewood, California, but grew up far to the north in the shadow of Mt. Shasta. While her upbringing seemed pretty normal to her, she was surrounded by a fascinating array of friends and family, including a polyamorous grandmother, a grandfather who is a Native American icon, and various cowboys, hippies, scoundrels and saints.

She has a degree in history and cultural anthropology, but in 2006 made the life-changing decision to quit her job as a public health paraprofessional and stay at home fulltime to care for her severely disabled, autistic niece. This difficult decision gave Belinda the gift of time, which allowed her to return to writing fiction, which she'd abandoned years before.

Belinda's hobbies include soap making, collecting gemstones, travel, and martial arts. She has two daughters, six Siberian Huskies and an array of wild birds that visit the feeders in the front yard.

She supports no-kill animal shelters, and donates platelets twice monthly at her local blood center.

As an author, Belinda loves crossing genres, kicking taboos to the curb, and pulling from world mythology and folklore for inspiration. She is committed to taking her readers on an emotional journey and never forgets that at the end of the day, she's writing about love.