

ALLIANCE



**COSMIC
SCANDAL**
LYNDI LAMONT

Alliance: Cosmic Scandal
by Lyndi Lamont

Amber Quill Press

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Author's note

Vilem's blood disease is, of course, similar to hemophilia, a disease that still has no cure, though it can be treated and controlled. The disease is caused by an X chromosome defect and is passed on by the mother. It was common among European royalty.

Thanks go to Dr. D. P. Lyle for information about medical chimeras, animals that have more than one set of DNA, allowing Myrek and Khira to have a child with both Ziganese and Mhajavi DNA.

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CHAPTER 1

Oh, gods, don't let him die. Not here.

Myrek cradled the small, still body of his son as he ran into the emergency room of Mahdesh City Hospital. The doors swished open as he rushed inside.

A nurse jumped up from behind the desk. "What is wrong with the boy?"

"I have no idea," Myrek replied in Mhajavi, thankful his language skills had improved in the last few weeks. "He woke up with a headache, then threw up his breakfast. A few minutes ago he had a seizure."

The nurse pressed a button and spoke briefly to a doctor before turning to Myrek. "Dr. Udam ordered a brain scan. Please follow me."

Myrek followed her down a corridor and into a room with a state-of-the-art scanner dominating it. A technician directed him to lay Vilem on a bed. His son lay still, eyes closed, but thank the gods, he was still breathing.

A middle-aged Mhajavi man rushed into the room and introduced himself, in fluent Ziganese, as Dr. Udam, head neurologist. "What seems to be the problem?"

Myrek repeated what he'd told the nurse, then added, "As you may know, my son suffers from an inherited blood disorder called *annariblut*."

"*Annariblut*," the doctor repeated, a puzzled look in his face.

"The name reflects the fact that the disease occurs primarily among the *annari*, the children of the aristocracy. But I've never seen this set of symptoms before, so it may not be related."

The doctor examined Vilem, running his hands over his torso and limbs, then his neck and head. "When did he hit his head?"

"I didn't know he had," Myrek answered. "He was fine yesterday."

The doctor turned to face Myrek. "I'm going to run a full body scan now. He may be bleeding internally."

"Internally?" Gods, the condition was getting worse. "Will it take long?"

"Just a few minutes," the doctor said in a soothing voice. "Please, Your Excellency, go sit in the waiting room. I will send for you as soon as I finish my examination."

"Yes, of course." Myrek smoothed Vilem's blond curls from his forehead and dropped a kiss on his son's pale cheek. "Take good care of him."

"We will," Dr. Udam assured him.

After one last look, Myrek left the lab and headed back to the familiar waiting room. He'd been here several times since arriving on Mhajav, but Vilem's condition had never seemed this serious before. After the adrenaline rush of racing to the hospital, he felt numb and helpless, feelings he despised. He clenched his fists in frustration. He'd spent a lifetime training to rule Zigan. But what good was absolute power if it couldn't save his own son? Dear gods, what would he do without Vilem?

Back in the waiting room he found Vilem's nurse Lokri and her son Tadu waiting for him. She jumped up when she saw him, worry in her blue eyes. "Is Vilem going to be all right?"

Myrek ran a hand through his hair. "I hope so. The doctor is running a scan to see if he's bleeding internally."

Lokri's face paled. "Oh, no, what could've happened to him?"

"Sit down." Myrek took her hand and drew her down on a divan next to him. Lokri had been Vilem's nurse since birth. She loved the boy like her own son. "The doctor said Vilem must have hit his head. Do you know how it could have happened?"

"No," she whispered, her face paling even more.

"I do," Tadu said quietly.

Myrek's gaze swiveled to the boy's guilty face.

"What happened, Tadu?" his mother asked in a tone that brooked no disobedience.

The boy looked at his shoes. "We were playing last night."

"After you were told to go to bed?"

"We weren't sleepy. We had a pillow fight, and Vilem bumped his head against the wall." He looked up, his blue eyes huge in his freckled face. "He didn't hit it hard, though, and there wasn't any blood. I checked."

Myrek put a hand on the boy's shoulder. "It isn't your fault, Tadu. But you should've said something when Vilem's head hurt this morning."

"I didn't want to get him in trouble," the boy muttered.

Lokri took her son's face in both hands and made him look at her. "Listen to me, Tadu. You will *never* get in trouble for

telling the truth. If anything happens to Vilem, you have to tell me."

"Yes, Mother."

"I know it isn't fair to you, Tadu, but Vilem isn't like other children." His own words sent a stab of pain deep into Myrek's heart, but it was the truth. Vilem wasn't a healthy child and never would be. Not without some kind of miracle cure.

"Why don't you take Tadu back to the embassy?" Myrek suggested to Lokri. "There's nothing to do here but wait."

Lokri nodded and rose, followed by her son. "Yes, Prince Myrek. Call if you need anything."

"Thank you. Please tell my assistant to cancel all my appointments for the day, and let Prince Rulik know what has happened."

"Yes, of course," she murmured. "Please let us know if there's any change."

He nodded, unable to speak around the lump lodged in his throat.

* * * *

Khira stood just inside the door of the hospital waiting room and watched Prince Myrek talk to the Ziganese woman and child. The news of the ambassador's dramatic appearance had spread through the hospital like wildfire. A steady parade of staff members walked by, pausing to peek in at him. Of course everyone knew who he was. After all, Mahdesh City wasn't exactly full of fair-skinned men with golden hair and blue eyes. Since the embassy had opened two weeks earlier,

all the members of the Ziganese diplomatic contingent had attracted attention wherever they went.

Especially the handsome and single prince.

The reddish-haired woman and child started to leave. Khira suspected she was a servant of some kind, perhaps the injured boy's nurse. It was well known in the medical community the boy suffered from a rare blood disease, probably hereditary in nature. Khira had been waiting for a chance to meet the ambassador and speak to him about studying his son's condition. The chance to compare the DNA of both her people and the Ziganese was a geneticist's dream. And she might be able to apply her current work on gene therapy to the boy's disease.

Her heart beat faster. Finding a cure for such an exotic disease would make her reputation as the premier Mhajavi geneticist. And the chance to cure a child of a life-threatening disease would be even more fulfilling.

She straightened her shoulders and walked toward Prince Myrek. *A prince.* How odd the notion seemed to the democratic Mhajavi way of thinking. It gave him a special status, though, and coupled with his good looks, made him irresistible to many women. Khira smiled to herself, convinced she wouldn't be affected. But when he looked up and smiled at her, her step faltered and her heart raced even faster.

"Excuse me, Ambassador," she said. "I'd like to speak to you about your son."

He jumped up, his expression anxious. "How is he? Is he going to be all right?"

Khira held up a hand. "I'm not treating your son. Not as yet anyway."

"Can you find out how he's doing?"

"Of course." She stepped aside, pulled out her in-house comm and contacted the lab. "Any word yet on Prince Myrek's son?"

"We've finished the exam," Dr. Udam said. "Would you bring the ambassador back to the lab?"

"Of course." Khira shut off her comm and turned back to Myrek. "If you'll come with me, you can speak with the doctor."

"Thank you."

He fell into step with her. "Excuse my manners, but I've been so worried."

"Not at all," she said. "I would like to introduce myself, though. I'm Dr. Khira and my specialty is genetics. I'd like to take a look at your son's DNA, if you agree."

He turned his head to stare down at her from his formidable height. "You're Dr. Khira? I was expecting someone older."

"You know about me?"

"Yes, one of the doctors who traveled to Zigan for the diplomatic conference mentioned your name. He thought you might be able to help Vilem. I intended to contact you as soon as we arrived, but everything has been so hectic."

"I can imagine," she said as they reached the lab where Dr. Udam awaited them. Vilem had been moved to a gurney.

"Will my son be all right?" Myrek asked.

"As I suspected, he's bleeding into his brain."

Myrek looked stricken by the news, and Khira squeezed his hand reassuringly. He tightened his grip on hers, as if reaching for some kind of lifeline, and she left her hand in his. From what she knew, the poor man had been dealing with his son's illness on his own since his wife died shortly after giving birth.

"Don't worry. We'll insert a tube to drain off the blood and administer the clotting factor to stop the bleeding."

"Do whatever it takes, doctor," Myrek said. "Let me know if you don't have enough clotting factor. Vilem seems to have developed a resistance to the medicine. It takes more and more of it to stop the bleeding now."

Khira exchanged a look with Udam. That wasn't a good sign. The sooner she found a cure, the better. She turned to Myrek. "While Dr. Udam is treating Vilem, will you come to my lab so I can take a sample of your DNA? I'd like a sample of Vilem's also, for comparative purposes."

Myrek nodded.

"I'll see you get a sample of the boy's DNA," Dr. Udam said. "Don't worry, Ambassador, we'll do all we can for your son."

"Thank you, doctor. That's all I can ask," Myrek said, his voice sounding choked. He leaned over his son's bed, brushed a blond curl back, and kissed the boy's forehead. "Come back to me, Vilem. I need you."

"Come." Khira took his large, masculine hand and tugged him gently away as Vilem was wheeled out of the room. "He'll be well cared for."

Myrek let Khira lead him out of the room and down the hallway, his hand still holding onto hers. Feelings of compassion mingled with her physical attraction to this man. She just hoped Dr. Udam would be able to save his son's life.

* * * *

In her lab, Myrek sat and waited for Khira to take a sample of his DNA. He'd do anything she asked, and not just because she might be able to cure his son. The lovely young doctor intrigued him. It was partly her exotic beauty, with her soft, golden-brown skin, gleaming black hair and big brown eyes. He'd had erotic dreams of late, involving lithe, dark-skinned women trained in the sexual arts. He pictured her naked, her legs parted to receive him, and blood pooled in his groin.

He clenched his fist, forcing his thoughts away. How could he even be thinking of sex when his son's life was in peril? But it had been so long since he'd been with a woman. And like most of his countrymen, he was intrigued by Mhajavi culture, especially the women. Coming from a world where women rarely worked outside the home, except as nurses or teachers, he found Khira's manner of quiet competence, coupled with her youth and petite stature, both singular and fascinating. Of course, he'd met strong, powerful Mhajavi women before, but none quite so young, and none to whom he'd been attracted.

"Vilem is a beautiful child," she said setting a tray with swabs and sterile bags on the table beside him.

Myrek smiled sadly. "He is beloved of the gods. So much so they keep trying to take him from me."

She glanced at him, her expression one of sympathy. "I hope we'll be able to help him."

"I hope so, too. You may be his last chance to live a normal life. Our doctors have not been able to come up with a solution."

"I don't understand," she said. "Your technology seems as advanced as ours."

"It is in many ways," Myrek acknowledged. "But not in medicine."

"Open your mouth."

Myrek complied and she ran a swab along the inside of his cheek, gathering cells to test his DNA. She placed the swab in a bag for later study.

"If possible, I'd like to take samples from all the Ziganese working at the embassy, as well as any other samples you can gather from your home world. The larger the study group, the better."

"I'll speak to my people, but I can't guarantee a large sample."

Khira raised her brows, but before could speak, an older woman entered the room. Her graying hair was pulled back in a twist, and her white clothing contrasted with her dark skin. Wrinkles fanned out from her brown eyes and bracketed her mouth.

"Ambassador, I'd like to introduce Pragata Hiral, my mentor. We'll be working together to find a cure for your son's disease."

Myrek stood and exchanged greetings with the older woman. The use of two names indicated she was the host for

an *ujela*, an ancient and wise being that dwelt in her body in a symbiotic relationship. He gave her a formal bow, reassured to know the *ujela* had taken particular interest in his son's illness. "It is an honor to meet you."

Pragata Hiral inclined her head. "Likewise, Prince Myrek. Welcome to Mhajav."

Khira waved her mentor to a chair. "I was just telling the ambassador we're going to need a larger study group than just the people at the embassy, and he said he couldn't guarantee a large sample. I was about to ask why the Ziganese scientists aren't better acquainted with the genetics of their own people."

Myrek sighed. "As you know, my people have many gods. The more traditional among us, including my father, believe everything in our world, however imperfect, is the work of the gods, and doctors shouldn't be allowed to interfere. Therefore, the government has refused to fund the research, and private industry hasn't seen any financial incentive to do so either. These attitudes have set our medical scientists back by decades."

"Will you continue this policy when you become king?" Khira asked.

"No," he said. "I have a good reason to facilitate medical research. In fact, a lot of things will change when I have the power to do so. But until then, my hands are somewhat tied."

Pragata Hiral smiled sympathetically. "I've always believed the power that created our worlds, the gods, if you will, gave humanoids a mind for a reason. We are expected to use them to solve the mysteries of the universe."

"Yes, that's my view," Myrek said. "But I have not been able to convince my father to change his mind, and out of respect for him, I won't speak out in public about this matter."

"You may trust in our discretion," Khira said.

He smiled at her. "Thank you. However, I know a few scientists who may be willing to help unofficially. I'll contact them to see if they can provide the samples you need."

"Wonderful!" Khira beamed at him. "I'd like to see samples from a broad spectrum of your people, not just the upper classes."

"I'll make it a priority. When can I see my son?"

"Let me check." Khira spoke to someone on her in-house comm. "Good news. Vilem is out of surgery and being transferred to a private room. He's going to be fine."

"For now," Myrek murmured. *But for how long?*

* * * *

The next morning Khira found Prince Myrek waiting outside her lab when she arrived at work. Seeing him pleased her more than it should have, sending jolts of awareness through her.

"Good day, Ambassador. I hope you haven't been waiting long."

"Not at all. Vilem is due to be released soon, but I wanted to stop by and see if you've learned anything yet."

Khira unlocked the lab and led him inside to her office. "I believe so." She sat behind the desk and picked up her lab

results. He sat opposite, an anxious look on his handsome face.

"What have you discovered?"

She leaned forward. "Please remember, my findings are very preliminary, based on the limited DNA samples we already have of your people. Thank goodness so many Ziganese offered to be tested during the recent diplomatic talks. I believe you had something to do with that."

He nodded. "Yes, I believe strongly in cooperation between our people. We have much to learn from each other."

She smiled at him. He seemed to be the perfect diplomat. "I've identified a genetic anomaly in Vilem's DNA, which I believe may be the source of his condition."

"And did you find the same anomaly in mine?"

"No."

The look of relief on his face surprised her. "You didn't know?"

"I wasn't sure," he admitted. "I thought his disease might be partly my fault."

When she reached out to touch the back of his hand, he grasped hers.

"A genetic mutation is no one's fault," she said softly. "It sometimes happens spontaneously."

"But that's not the case here, is it? Too many of my people suffer from this disease."

She withdrew her hand. "So I understand, which is why we need a larger sample. So far, Vilem's is the only DNA I've tested with the mutation. Ideally, it would help to have

samples from an entire family with a history of the disease. As many generations as you can manage."

"In Vilem's case, that will be difficult. His mother is dead, as I'm sure you realize. She was an only child, the last of her line, except for Vilem."

"I'm sorry. If this is too painful to discuss, please say so."

"It's all right. It has been a long time now."

Khira picked up a tablet to take notes. "How did she die?"

Myrek stood and paced around the small office. "She bled to death after Vilem was born."

"Then she may have had the disease herself, though excessive bleeding after childbirth does happen in healthy women. Thankfully, we have medicines to stop it."

"So do we." Myrek's expression was bleak. "But nothing worked."

"You must have loved her a lot."

His head swung around to stare at her. "I became fond of Bechina, but ours was an arranged marriage."

"Arranged by whom?" Khira looked away, oddly relieved to learn he was not still mourning the love of his life. What possible difference could that make? Their relationship was purely professional after all.

"Our mothers. Bechina was the only daughter of a powerful *diryn*, an aristocrat, who died when she was little. Her inheritance was considerable, including a large estate and several factories."

Khira shook her head. "It seems so strange to me."

He shrugged. "I never expected to marry for love. Not the first time anyway."

"How sad. Here on Mhajav, we nearly always marry for love. Will you choose your own bride next time?"

He smiled. "Now I know I can produce a healthy child, yes, I will eventually remarry."

"Any prospective bride will have to be tested for the mutation," Khira pointed out.

The smile he gave her was crooked. "So you're saying, be careful who I fall in love with."

She smiled. "I guess so. At least until we've found a cure." It seemed surreal to be discussing his potential marriage to someone else with a man she herself was attracted to. "It won't happen any time soon. There are only a handful of Ziganese females on Mhajav and none of them are eligible to be the wife of the next king."

His last comment struck Khira as an odd thing to say. "Why not? What do you need besides a healthy woman you care for who can give you more children?"

He leaned forward and rested his arms on the edge of her desk. "By law, a member of the nobility must wed a virgin. By tradition, the wife is a daughter of another aristocrat."

Khira raised her brows. "Customs like that certainly limit the gene pool and explain how a genetic mutation can be passed on through the group. It would be wise for you to look elsewhere for a bride."

"But I'm *not* looking for a bride at the moment."

The warmth of his gaze sent a jolt of awareness through her, making her heart pound. If he wanted a lover, he'd come to the right place. Too bad she was the only woman in Mahdesh City unable to accommodate him.

She stood. "I won't keep you any longer, Ambassador."

"Call me Myrek," he said, rising to his feet.

"But you're a prince."

"I'm also a man."

She saw the hunger in his gaze, felt the sensual awareness that seemed to hum between them, and damned herself for the insane promise she'd made to her parents.

"Have dinner with me tonight," he said. "At the embassy."

"Yes." The word was out before she could think about it.

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CHAPTER 2

Khira dressed carefully for her dinner at the embassy, choosing a brightly flowered, traditional gown in shades of red and gold. After brushing her shoulder-length hair until it shone, she slipped gold bracelets on her arms, then added matching earrings. Finally she fastened gold chains around both anklets and donned gold sandals. She hardly recognized the woman in the mirror, so used was she to wearing her plain med uniform. The woman staring back at her was vibrant and sexy, not at all like her usual persona.

A visit to the embassy demanded her best outfit, she assured herself. She was representing Mhjav tonight. The fact she was having dinner with an incredibly attractive man had nothing to do with it.

Who was she kidding? She'd dressed for him.

Once her dinner invitation had become common knowledge, she'd been the envy of all the single women at the hospital, and many of the married women. She'd received a lot of advice on how to dress, how to fix her hair, and how much makeup to wear. The attention had been gratifying. If wasn't often anyone sought her out for any reason but medical advice.

The thought made her pause, and she realized how few friends she'd made over the years. *Something to be corrected and as quickly as possible.*

She wandered to the window to watch for her ride. Ambassador Myrek had insisted on sending a car for her. He

seemed like a kind, thoughtful man, one who'd be a gentle and considerate lover. Desire stirred inside her. It had been too long since she'd been touched by a man.

When the embassy hover car arrived, she walked outside. The car was larger than most Mhajavi vehicles and far more luxurious. A uniformed chauffeur introduced himself as Egin. Like Myrek, he had blond hair and dark gray eyes. He held the door open for her. Murmuring her thanks, she slipped into the back seat, breathing in the smell of new leather. *Nothing but the best for the royal family.* The inside air was chilly, but she quickly located the climate controls and turned up the heat.

Egin turned his head to flash her an apologetic grin. "Sorry, Dr. Khira. I didn't mean to freeze you. I'm still not used to this warm climate."

"I'm fine," she assured him. "But you need cooler clothes."

He turned back and started the vehicle. "The prince has ordered new uniforms for the staff, but they haven't arrived yet."

"How thoughtful of him," Khira said.

"Yes, he'll make a fine king one day," Egin said, "though not like his father. He's his own man, Prince Myrek."

"Yes," Khira agreed. She hadn't known Myrek long, but he'd already indicated there would be changes when he assumed the throne, and she suspected those changes would be better for everyone involved.

Fortunately, traffic was light this evening, and they zipped into the center of town in record time. It would be more convenient to live closer to the med center, but she cherished

her peace and privacy, what little she had of it. She often worked long hours in the lab, absorbed by her work. A night out would be good for her.

Egin drove the hover car onto the embassy grounds, waving at a guard on duty at the entrance. Another guard appeared to escort her to the private quarters. She couldn't imagine what it would be like to be royalty. She doubted Myrek was ever really alone. Of course, as heir to the throne, his safety was of paramount importance. What it would be like to live in such a rarified world?

She was ushered into a medium-sized room decorated in the Mhajavi style. A sofa ran along one wall with low tables in front of it and to the side. Comfortably cushioned chairs made of local wood created a cozy sitting area. The opposite wall was a series of doors open to the night breeze. Just outside, a small table sat on the veranda.

"You made it."

She spun around at the sound of Myrek's voice. He stood in a doorway, smiling at her. He was dressed Mhajavi-style, in a white shirt open at the neck and tan pants. She gestured ruefully at her own clothing. "I think I'm overdressed."

"You look beautiful." He moved forward and took her hand, bringing it to his lips to press a kiss on her wrist. "Like an exotic flower."

Warmth suffused her as she drew her hand from his. "Thank you. I thought this was a special occasion."

"It is," he agreed. "I haven't had dinner with a lovely woman for quite some time."

She wandered outside, letting the breeze cool her heated face, and looked out over the embassy's garden. She couldn't see much in the dark, though some of the paths were lit. "I hear the embassy grounds are beautiful."

He poured wine into two glasses and handed her one. "Then you must come back sometime, during the day. I'd be happy to give you a tour."

She laughed. "And when do you think either of us will have time for a casual stroll, Ambassador?"

He shrugged. "Perhaps early in the morning, or at sunset. We can't work all the time."

She took a sip of wine and stared at him. "I suppose not." Work had consumed her life for a long time, and she was beginning to realize what she'd missed.

A few moments later, Lokri appeared with the two boys. Vilem ran into his father's arms and was swept off his feet, squealing as Myrek spun in a circle. Khira smiled at the affection between the two. Vilem seemed to be completely recovered from his injury, thank the universe.

Setting Vilem down, Myrek steered him toward Khira. "Son, there's someone I want you to meet. This is Dr. Khira. She's going to work on a cure for your problems."

Khira moved forward. "I'm pleased to meet you, Vilem."

He stared up at her with those big blue eyes. "You're going to fix me?"

She knelt and took his small hand in hers. "I can't make any promises, but I will try very hard to find a cure. All right?"

His smile wormed its way into her heart. "All right."

She squeezed his hand before letting go of it and stood. While Myrek talked quietly to his son, Khira introduced herself to Vilem's nurse.

"I'm Lokri and this is my son, Tadu," the woman said.

Khira joined hands with the other woman in Ziganese fashion. "Welcome to Mahjav. I hope you're adjusting to your life here."

Lokri was quite lovely, with auburn hair and blue eyes. Her son took after her, though his hair was a brighter shade. Khira was struck by the difference between the two boys. Myrek's son was truly beautiful, with those blond curls and blue eyes, but he was pale and fragile-looking, with dark circles under his eyes. Tadu, Lokri's son, was a sturdy, healthy-looking child.

"Everyone has been very nice," Lokri replied. "But it is hard to get used to this warm weather."

"Perhaps you don't have the right clothes for our climate," Khira said, eyeing Lokri's long skirt, which seemed to be made of a heavy material, and the boots on her feet. "It looks like a shopping expedition is in order. I could direct you to some local shops. On second thought, I'll take you there. I'd enjoy showing you around Mahdesh City."

"Thank you," Lokri replied with a shy smile. "Come now, boys, it's time for bed."

The boys grumbled a bit, but followed her from the room. Lokri turned her head to look back at them, and Khira caught a glimpse of longing on her face. Could she be in love with Myrek or just hungry for adult company?

"Lokri seems nice and she's very pretty. Will she be joining us for dinner?"

Myrek seemed surprised by her question. "No. She usually eats with the boys. Sometimes Egin joins them."

"I see," Khira replied. It didn't seem like much of a life for a young woman, especially one in love with her employer. "Is she married?"

"She's a widow. Her husband was my friend and one of my father's guards. He was killed in the recent rebellion."

"Oh, how awful for her and Tadu."

"Yes, he was a good man. Come, you must be hungry." He guided her to the table and held a chair for her before taking his own. He'd barely sat down when a servant appeared with a tray of food.

* * * *

After dinner, Myrek led Khira to the sofa. He'd barely been able to keep his hands off her during dinner. He'd found her attractive from the first, when she was wearing her plain doctor's clothing and a minimum of makeup. Tonight she was stunning in her brightly colored gown and with black outlines around her lovely brown eyes, making them even more dramatic.

"I've called a team meeting for tomorrow morning to brainstorm ideas for finding a cure for this blood disease."

He put a finger over her full lips. "I didn't ask you here to discuss work."

Her brows rose a little. "Then why did you ask me here?"

"Don't you know?" He moved his hand to her neck and leaned forward to capture her mouth, touching his lips to hers lightly, then with more pressure. She relaxed, opening her lips to allow him better access, as her arms circled his waist. He traced her bottom lip with his tongue, then delved inside her mouth. She tasted like paradise, the flavor of the fruit they'd eaten for dessert mingling with the sweet palm wine and her own intoxicating taste.

He ran his hands through her thick, silky hair and down her back, pulling her closer. She arched her back and pressed her breasts against his chest. Sheer physical need pounded through his veins and pooled in his groin. He wanted—no, needed—to fuck her, to plunge his cock into her hot, tight cunt. Gasping, he pulled his mouth from hers. "I want you, Khira."

She looked at him, eyes dilated and lips swollen from his kisses. "I want you, too."

Her whispered confession was all it took. He stood, picked her up and carried her into his bedroom. After sitting her on the bed, he knelt to remove her sandals. Her feet were tiny, the toenails painted red. Everything about her was petite and dainty, making him feel large and powerful.

He drew in a deep breath. *Take it easy. No need to overwhelm her.* He watched her face as he ran his hands up the soft skin of her calves, pulling her long skirt above her knees. Her eyes were half-lidded, her mouth slightly open. A shudder passed through her.

"Do you like that?"

"Yes." Her whisper was soft, breathless. "I like it wherever you touch me."

She untied her gown and pulled it open, revealing an expanse of smooth, brown skin. To his delight, she wore no undergarments. His cock grew even heavier. "Beautiful," he whispered. Her stomach was flat, her breasts small but perky, with light brown nipples already pebbled with need.

Standing, he drew her up and swept her gown off her shoulders and onto the floor. He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close for another hungry kiss. One hand on her ass, he pressed his hard cock against her stomach.

She pulled her mouth from his and started to unbutton his shirt. "We need to get these clothes off you." She took her time about it, though, lingering to play with the fair hair on his chest and stomach. He let her explore, knowing his hairy body was different from the other men she'd known.

Other men. Shit, why had he thought of that now? He wasn't sure he liked the idea of Khira being with any other man.

She was kissing his chest now, running her tongue around and over one of his nipples. He tried to relax and enjoy the sensations, but all he wanted to do was throw her on the bed and take her like a rutting animal. He sucked in a breath when her hand grazed his cock. She laughed as she yanked his shirt out of his pants and pushed it off him. After moving her hands to his waist, she unfastened his pants and his cock sprang free. When she touched it, he nearly came in her hands. Gods, it had been a long time.

"Get into bed now." His voice sounded harsh, his breathing uneven.

When she gave him an uncertain look, he managed a smile as he removed her hands from his dick. "Please, Khira."

She climbed onto the bed as he toed off his sandals and removed his pants. Lying beside her, he ran a hand over her body from thigh to stomach and up to her breast. Cupping it in one hand, he leaned forward to take one nipple into his mouth.

She gasped and gripped his shoulders. "Oh, yes, that feels so good."

He continued to suckle and lave her breasts while his hands roamed over her bare body, her thighs, hips, stomach. Finally he touched her wet core, and she squirmed against his hand. He touched the smooth skin of her pubis and traced her slit, noting she was already wet with desire.

"I want to taste you." His voice was thick with need. Positioning himself between her bent legs, he pressed a series of kisses to her inner thigh, moving closer and closer to her pussy, breathing in the scent of her arousal. First he dropped kisses on her outer lips, then delved deeper until he found the hard bud of her clit. He gently blew on it before kissing her outer lips again. Slowly he licked her slit from one end to another, taking his time to savor her taste and texture. When he pressed his tongue to her clit, she shuddered.

"Sweet universe!"

He smiled to himself, but kept tasting, licking, and kissing her sweet cunt as her breathing quickened. She gasped and

writhed as her climax hit her, her sweet face contorted in ecstasy.

He pressed one last kiss to her pubis and moved to lie beside her. She nestled into his arms, rested her head on his shoulder and sighed. He hugged her close and chuckled.

"Don't get too comfortable. We're not finished."

"I should hope not."

"I want to come inside you."

She stilled, then lifted to her head to look at him, "I want that, too. But there's one thing you need to know."

"What?"

"I'm a virgin."

* * * *

The look of utter shock on Myrek's face might have been comical if they hadn't been naked together in his bed. Oops, she should have mentioned this sooner.

"What did you say?"

"I said I'm a virgin."

He ran a hand through his hair, disheveling it more. "But how is that possible? Don't tell me you're under age."

"No, no, I'm twenty-four."

He pulled away from her and sat up. "I don't understand, Khira. I thought all Mhajavi went to sex camps."

She sat up, too. "Yes, but I was ... well, a prodigy. I finished secondary school at the age of twelve, so I was too young to go to camp with my classmates. By the time I reached eighteen, I was in medical school and didn't want to take the time away. Now I'd be six years older than everyone

else and it seems silly. Besides, I'm a doctor. I know how the body operates. I've even had some sexual encounters." She didn't want to say how pathetically few they were or that most were with other women.

"But technically, you're still a virgin."

"Yes." She hesitated, then plunged on. "It's not against the law for me to lose my virginity to the man I choose."

"Why me?"

"Why not? We're attracted to each other."

His grin was crooked. "I'm not in the habit of deflowering virgins."

She rose to her knees and took his face in both hands. "I didn't think you were. But I'm not one of your aristocrats. There's no taboo here."

Leaning forward, she kissed him. He returned her kiss, but made no move to touch her. Tension radiated off him. With a sigh, she pulled back. "I won't ask it of you again."

"Give me some time to process this."

"Of course. In the meantime, there are other ways we can pleasure each other. Lie back and let me show you."

Hands on his shoulders, she pushed him down on the bed and straddled his pelvis. He lay still, a smile on his face, his blue eyes dark with desire. "Feel free to do whatever you want to me."

She raised a brow. "Oh, I will." Slowly she explored his upper body, running her hands down his arms, then over his chest, enjoying the feel of his firm muscles. The blond hair on his arms and chest tickled her palms. Using one finger, she traced a path down the side of one pec, around and up the

center of his ribcage, then repeated the motion, circling his other pec. She leaned forward to blow on one flat male nipple before licking and suckling it.

Passive no longer, he ran his hands up her thighs and slid one hand between her legs. She gasped as his fingers grazed her clit. The mere touch of his fingers sent another orgasm crashing through her, leaving her collapsed on top of him. *Sweet universe, where has this man been all my life?*

Determined to please him as well as he had her, she moved to the side and took his engorged cock in her hands, caressing the smooth skin and tracing a blue vein. Lowering her head, she nibbled on his shaft, then turned her attention to the head, licking a drop of pre-cum. A long, slow lick up the underside of his cock had him squirming.

She raised her head and circled the base of his shaft with one hand, while using the other to trace a circle around his balls. She looked at him and saw his eyes were half-closed, his mouth twisted.

"Don't stop," he grunted.

With a grin, she pressed her tongue against the tip of his cock and held it there before slowly taking it into her mouth as her fingers gently squeezed his shaft. As she continued to suck, she moved one hand to the sensitive area between his balls and anus. Using two fingers, she pressed the area in a steady rhythm until he came, spurting his seed into her mouth.

When he was done, she crawled into his arms and cuddled close to him. But as she lay there doubts crept in. Had she just made an enormous mistake? It would be so easy to fall in

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love with this man who was so wrong for her in every way. And soon she'd have to make a decision that might mean they could have no future together.

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CHAPTER 3

Four standard weeks later, Khira sat in the waiting room at the embassy, studying the results of the DNA sent from Zigan. Myrek's scientists had done a good job of coming up with a fair-sized sample of men and women from all classes of society. As she'd expected, the genetic anomaly was clustered in the upper classes. She sighed. It appeared Prince Myrek had only two choices. Change Ziganese mating habits or wait for a cure. Neither would be accomplished overnight.

So far, a way to cure the disease had eluded Khira and her team. All they'd been able to figure out was a way to prevent the disease. One King Ormin was sure to oppose. If only Mhajavi and Ziganese DNA weren't incompatible. There was no trace of the anomaly in the Mhajavi genetic map.

He's not for you.

But no matter how many times she reminded herself of that, she still wanted him. It had been a terrible mistake to make love with him. She'd thought it would be so easy. Lie with him once, lose her virginity and go her own way. She hadn't realized she'd become addicted to his touch, his voice, his very essence.

She stood and walked to the open door to stare out at the embassy gardens. The greenery was soothing to her eyes and the light breeze cooled her heated body. If only he'd agreed to relieve her of the burden of her virginity, one of her problems would be solved. But he was too noble. He had a

code he lived by, one which seemed old-fashioned by the standards of her world, but a code nonetheless.

"Khira?"

She spun around to see Myrek had entered the room. He was dressed in Ziganese fashion today, in a dark blue pants and a lighter blue tunic that brought out the color of his eyes.

His face bore an uncharacteristic frown. "Did we have an appointment?"

"No. I've finished studying the data sent from Zigan and thought you'd like to hear my conclusions."

"Yes, I would, but I have an urgent meeting right now."

"Has something happened?"

"Nothing I can discuss openly."

His admission alarmed her, but she knew better than to ask for more information.

"Perhaps you can stay and wait for me? Lokri and the boys are here and would love the company."

"Very well," Khira agreed. There wasn't much she could do until she'd spoken to him anyway.

"Good. Just follow the path to your right and you'll find Lokri."

When she nodded, he rushed out of the room. Khira left also, wandering along the garden path. She smiled when she heard children's voices. It sounded like the boys were having fun. It was good Vilem had Tadu to play with. Otherwise, this would be a lonely existence for him, as one child in a building full of serious adults.

She rounded the corner and found the boys splashing in a pool of water. Lokri sat nearby, looking pretty in a green,

sleeveless top and long white skirt. Khira recognized the outfit as one they'd chosen together on their shopping trip. The expedition had been more enjoyable than she'd expected, and once again she'd realized how much she'd missed. She'd spent relatively little time with people her own age.

Khira, sometimes you're too smart for your own good.

Shaking off the thought, she greeted Lokri.

The other woman waved, a smile brightening her face. "Dr. Khira, how nice to see you. Please join us."

Khira sat in a chair next to Lokri. "Myrek said I could wait with you while he goes to his meeting."

"Of course. Did he seem all right? He has been very serious all week."

Khira frowned. "He seemed preoccupied, but said he can't talk about what's going on. I suspect it's something to do with the raiders."

A shadow crossed Lokri's face, and Khira cursed herself for mentioning the outlaws who had killed her husband. "I'm sorry."

Lokri touched her arm. "It's all right. I just think of Gelfrid sometimes and wonder what our lives would be like if he'd lived."

Khira covered the other woman's hand with her own. "I can't imagine what you've had to endure, not to mention Tadu growing up without a father."

Lokri withdrew her hand, blinking back tears. "It's always hard to lose someone you love."

"Then your marriage was not arranged?"

Lokri seemed surprised by the question. "Oh, no, marriages are only arranged among the nobility. Gelfrid was *annar*, and I'm from a merchant family."

"*Annar*?" Khira asked, a little confused.

"A younger son of a nobleman. Only the eldest son must marry a nobleman's daughter. The *annari* are free to choose their brides from any class of society."

"Ah, just as we do here, though we no longer have social classes."

"But you did at one time?"

"Yes, ages ago, though Havir tried to reinstate the tradition. Of course, his idea of the upper class consisted of himself and his henchmen, as well as descendants of the old ruling families. My father was one of his supporters for that reason. He comes from an old and distinguished line, or so he continually tells me."

Lokri looked at her thoughtfully. "Then if Mhajav had social classes, you would be from the upper class?"

"Yes, I suppose so, but it really doesn't matter. Not for the most part." The problem was it did matter to her parents, who clung stubbornly to the old ways.

"Are you in love with the prince?"

Lokri's question took Khira by surprise. "I don't know. I have come to admire him, and I'm certainly attracted to him. But love between us would be a terrible mistake as we could never marry."

"Why not? He nearly wed Arpana Toryl."

"He did?" Khira asked, amazed by that bit of information. "But she's married to his brother."

Lokri leaned forward and lowered her voice. "Yes, but it was supposed to be Myrek. King Ormin wanted a dynastic marriage to seal the alliance between our two worlds, but Prince Myrek needs to produce another heir."

"And Arpana Toryl could never give him a child, nor could any Mhajavi woman. Our DNA is incompatible with yours."

"Oh," Lokri said, "I didn't know."

"So even if I loved him, I could never give him the heir he needs. But you could."

Lokri stared at her, blue eyes wide. "But I could never marry the prince. It would be forbidden."

Khira leaned toward her and lowered her voice. "But you love him, don't you? I've seen the way you look at him when you think no one is looking."

Lokri's blue eyes widened in surprise. "I admire him, as you do. He has been so kind to us since Gelfrid's death. But I do worry about him. He's been so lonely and so worried about Vilem. He seems much happier since he met you."

"Do you really think so?" Khira asked.

Lokri leaned forward. "I've known him for a long time and I've never seen him look at anyone the way he looks at you. I think he's in love with you."

Khira stared at her in shock. Though they'd been intimate, she hadn't thought about the consequences of her relationship with Myrek. She was the last person he should love. If she didn't put a stop to this, they might both end up with broken hearts. Or worse.

* * * *

When Myrek returned from his meeting, he found Khira on the balcony waiting for him. She was in her medical uniform, but she'd let her hair down to curl around her shoulders. Just seeing her raised his spirits after the meeting he'd had with his brother Rulik and his wife, Arpana Toryl.

He walked out onto the balcony. "I didn't think you'd wait for me."

Khira spun to smile at him. "I have some information for you."

"You've made a breakthrough?"

She shrugged one shoulder. "Of sorts. We're still a long way from a cure, but we've found a way to prevent the disease."

"You mean you can fix the defective gene."

She sighed. "No, not yet. Why don't we sit down and have some wine?"

He pulled off his warm tunic and hung it on the back of his chair and made a mental note to order some new, cooler uniforms for himself. He sat as Khira poured glasses of palm wine for both of them. "You may as well just tell me. What's another bit of bad news?"

She sat next to him. "I take it your meeting didn't go well."

"The meeting went well enough, but the subject is troubling." He wished he could confide in her, but the information they'd received about the raiders was top secret. A joint undercover team had found the raiders' lair on the asteroid Undhara and learned Havir was building a robotic

army and planning to attack Mhjav. Had he known, he'd never have brought Vilem here.

"Is it about the raiders?"

He leaned forward. "Have you heard something?"

Her lovely eyes widened. "No, I just assumed, since that's the main problem facing both our worlds. It just seemed logical."

"Yes, of course. Please let me know if you hear any rumors flying about the city. I'd hate to think our security has been penetrated."

She smiled. "I'm sure it hasn't, but I'll keep my ears open. In the meantime, try to relax. You're much too tense."

He sighed. "Now, what news do you have for me?"

"From our study, we've determined that a woman who possesses the gene for the disease has a fifty percent chance of passing it to any male offspring. We think the disease can be prevented, but the procedure requires that eggs of women with the anomaly be fertilized in the lab. Then they can be tested for the defect and only those that are healthy will be implanted. But I doubt your father and his priests will agree to this procedure."

His shoulders slumped. "No, they would see it as interfering with the work of the gods. I don't doubt Father would outlaw it."

"He can't outlaw it here on Mhjav," Khira pointed out.

"True," Myrek said. "That's definitely something to think about." He took her hand in his. "I appreciate all your efforts."

"We have made some progress on a synthetic clotting factor, so I'm hoping it will be ready soon."

He brought her hand to his mouth and kissed it. "Thank you. All I ask for is some hope of a cure. Some hope my son has a future."

Her eyes filled with tears. "Oh, Myrek, I hope for that, too. But in the meantime, I think you should get married again, to someone who can give you a healthy child."

He froze. "How can you even suggest such an idea? I'm falling in love with you, Khira, and I think you feel the same way."

She put a hand over his mouth. "Don't talk like that. You know I care about you, but most of all, I want you to be happy. You take your responsibilities seriously, and that means you won't be content until you produce a healthy heir. I can't help you with that. But Lokri could."

Her words left him completely stunned. "You're seriously suggesting I marry Lokri?"

"Why not? She's not a carrier of the disease, she's already produced one healthy child, and she's the only mother Vilem has ever known. Since she's a widow, the virginal requirement could be waived."

"No, it's not possible."

"Why? I know her family isn't aristocratic, but under the circumstances, does it really matter?"

"Perhaps not to you, but it flies in the face of tradition."

"Following tradition is what has gotten your aristocrats into this situation," she pointed out gently.

"Logically, what you say makes sense, but Khira, it's you I love. Not Lokri."

* * * *

Two days later Myrek walked up the path to Khira's bungalow, anxious to see her again. He couldn't understand why she'd tried to push him into Lokri's arms. It was an odd thing for a woman to do, especially one who'd let him make love to her. But Khira wasn't like any other woman he'd met. Perhaps that was why she intrigued him so much.

He paused at the door on hearing raised voices inside, speaking in lightning-fast Mhajavi. He could distinguish Khira's voice from those of a man and another woman. Frowning, he knocked loudly.

The voices stopped and he heard quick footsteps, then she opened the door. She wore a cropped top and short skirt in a red-and-white print that showed off the lovely smooth skin of her shoulders and midriff. He couldn't wait to tear the clothes off of her, but they weren't alone. "Did I pick a bad time to drop by?"

She gave him a slight smile. "No, I'm glad to see you."

He drew her outside and dropped his voice. "What's going on in there? Are you all right?"

She made a face. "My parents have paid me a surprise visit."

"Then perhaps I shouldn't interfere."

She grabbed his hand and pulled him inside. "No, please, they'd love to meet you."

Uncertain of what to expect, he let her lead him into the small sitting room where a distinguished-looking, gray-haired man paced the floor. An older version of Khira sat by the window.

"Look who has come to visit," Khira said. "Prince Myrek, these are my parents, Johar and Nahali. Mother and Father, this is Prince Myrek, Ambassador of Zigan to the Mhajavi Republic."

Her father's eyes widened, then he bowed in a courtly manner. "Your Excellency, it is an honor to meet you. I'm an admirer of your father."

"The pleasure is mine." Myrek turned to her mother. "I see where Khira gets her beauty."

Nahali smiled. "And I see your legendary charm is well deserved, sir." She glanced at Khira. "You failed to tell us you were acquainted with Prince Myrek."

"My team is working on a cure for his son's condition," Khira explained.

"Oh?" Her mother cocked one eyebrow. "Is it usual for clients to visit you at home?"

"I consider Khira a friend, not just a colleague," Myrek put in. "She has helped me adjust to life here." She'd done more than that—she'd made his life worth living again—but he didn't say so. He wasn't sure how her parents would take to the idea of their daughter being involved with a foreigner.

"I see," Nahali murmured.

By the look on her face, he knew she hadn't been fooled at all, but neither did she disapprove.

Nahali stood. "Come, Johar, we've taken up enough of our daughter's time today. Khira, we'll see you tomorrow morning."

Khira stiffened, but nodded her head. "Yes, Mother."

After exchanging more empty pleasantries with Myrek, they left. Khira sagged against the door after she'd closed it on them.

"What was that all about?" Myrek asked. "If it's any of my business."

She turned to face him, her expression troubled. "Yes, in a way it is your business, too, since we've become so close."

He drew her into his arms, her head on his shoulder. Tension radiated throughout her body and he kneaded her tight shoulder muscles. "What's wrong, *draha*? Tell me."

A huge sigh shuddered through her, and she burrowed closer to him for a moment. When she pulled back, there were tears in her eyes. "I'm leaving tomorrow."

"Leaving? What are you talking about?"

"Come and sit down. It's a long story."

He followed her back into the sitting room, where she perched on the edge of a couch. He sat on a chair across from her. "Out with it, Khira."

"How much do you know about our social customs?"

"Very little. I've been too busy dealing with political and military matters to spend much time studying Mhajavi culture." And until the space raiders were dealt with, things were likely to remain that way.

"You do know about the sex camps, though," she said.

"Yes." He frowned. "Your parents want you to go to camp? I thought this was the wrong time of year."

"It is." She brushed a hand through her hair. "Before the sex camps existed, we had a different custom, one that only affected women."

Myrek searched his memory but came up with nothing. "Go on."

"In the old days, when a girl came of age, she entered a brothel, where her virginity was auctioned off to the highest bidder."

"What? That's barbaric!"

She smiled, but without amusement. "Yes, that's exactly what the *ujela* thought. They took steps to change our customs, but the practice was never outlawed. Such brothels still exist."

Suddenly he knew what was coming. "That's what your parents want you to do?"

She spread her hands. "You have to understand my father comes from a very traditional family. He thinks a few months in the brothel is my best chance to make a good marriage."

Myrek jumped up and began to pace. "This is the most insane, illogical thing I've ever heard. How could anyone find a marriage partner in a brothel? I've seen what they're like, in the docks area."

"No, not like those," she said. "I'm talking about a very exclusive brothel, on a privately-owned island. It's very secluded, and both women and clients are carefully screened."

He swung around to face her, filled with mounting dread.
"How can you even contemplate doing this?"

"I'm Mhajavi. The idea of multiple sexual partners is normal for us."

He bit down his frustration. "Why must you go now?"

"They won't take any woman over twenty-five, so I must go soon, before my birthday."

"What will happen if you refuse?" Every muscle in his body tensed as something close to panic filled his mind. How could she consider something like that? How could her parents even ask it of her?

Her smile was rueful. "I have limited alternatives. I can go to sex camp next summer and lose my virginity to an eager but inexperienced eighteen-year-old, or I can remain unmarried."

He knelt before her and took her hands in his. "There is another choice, *draha*. Marry me."

She withdrew her hands, a shocked look on her face. Cupping his head, she touched her lips to his. "Oh, Myrek, I wish I could. But it's impossible."

"Why? I love you, and I think you feel the same."

"I do," she whispered. "But there are so many reasons why it can never happen."

"What reasons?" he asked, refusing to take no for an answer.

"Legal reasons, for one thing. The laws of our two worlds are diametrically opposed. You are required to marry a virgin, while I'm prohibited from marrying as long as I am one."

"We could be wed at the embassy since it's considered sovereign Ziganese territory."

"In violation of Mhajavi law?"

"If that's what it takes."

She covered his lips with her fingers. "Listen to yourself, *priya*. You're talking like a man in love, not like an ambassador. There is much at stake here, matters more important than our feelings. The alliance for one."

"Yes, but—"

"Besides, you need to marry a woman who can give you healthy heirs, and I'm unable to do so. Our people are genetically incompatible. And if I marry you, I'll never be able to have children of my own."

He stared into her brown eyes, brimming with unshed tears. In his head he knew she was right, but his rebellious heart longed only for her. When he came to Mhajav, all he'd cared about was doing his duty and finding medical help for his son. He hadn't expected to fall in love, and he hadn't expected to be rejected. He was a prince, the heir to the throne. More women than he could remember had cast out lures for him. But Khira was like no other woman he'd met. Though she was warm and loving, she seemed to possess no womanly wiles.

Well, if it was reason she wanted, he could give that to her. He took a deep breath to calm himself. "How can I let you go? I need you. Vilem needs you. Who will head up your team?"

"Pragata Hiral has agreed to take over for me. Everything I know I learned from her, so the team will be in good hands. And I'll only be gone for two months."

Two months. Two months without Khira, laying awake, picturing her in the arms of another man. A succession of men. He clenched his fists. *Never.* He had to find a way to stop her. "I won't allow it. You can't leave."

"I have to. Unless..."

Hope flared inside him. "Unless what?"

"Make love to me as you would to your wife."

He closed his eyes as personal desire warred with a lifetime of obedience to tradition. He wanted her so badly, but not just for now, for a lifetime. If he did as she asked, he could keep her close now, but not as his wife. Would that be enough?

Opening his eyes, he stared at the woman he loved and knew the answer. "I can't, *draha*. Don't ask it of me."

Her hopeful expression crumpled. "Then there's nothing to be done."

"Don't say that, Khira. I love you."

Her expressive dark eyes filled with tears. "You shouldn't."

He let go of her hand to brush a tear from her cheek. "I can't help it. Love isn't very logical, you know."

She half-laughed, half-sobbed. "No, it isn't."

"Love is powerful, though. You feel it, too, I think."

She looked at him, her gaze troubled. "How do we tell love from desire?"

He gazed into those deep brown eyes, feeling like he could drown in them. "Desire is fleeting. If foiled, it finds another outlet. Love never looks for the easy way."

She sighed. "Will you wait for me?"

Regret stabbed at him, but he couldn't give her false hope. "I don't know if I can. Circumstances may require my return to Zigan."

She sucked in a breath, her eyes wide with shock.

He stood, pulling her off the couch, then let go of her hand. "Difficult decisions lay ahead of both of us. The outcome of those decisions will affect the rest of our lives."

She stared up at him, desire and anguish mingling in her gaze. "Then make love to me, Myrek. As if it were the last time."

Slowly she removed her clothes until she stood before him naked, physically and emotionally. He ran his gaze over her, from the luxuriant black hair tumbled around her shoulders to her small, high breasts to her groin. She pushed her hair back with one hand, while running the other over her stomach to her slit. His cock stiffened in response. How could he refuse her request?

He ripped his clothes off in record time and pulled her to him. With one hand he cupped the back of her head and pressed kisses on her jaw, the corner of her mouth, her lips. When she opened her mouth, he slid his tongue inside to taste her liquid heat. She responded with urgency, gripping his shoulders. Using his free hand, he gripped her ass and pulled her pelvis against his.

Blood pounded in his brain and pooled in his groin. More than ever he wanted to fuck her, thrust his needy cock deep into her body and end this impasse forever. He kissed her forcefully, and she responded in kind, her tongue dueling with his.

She broke the kiss, breathing hard, and sank to her knees, trailing her hands down his chest and stomach. Looking up at him, she took his cock in one hand while the other caressed his balls. His hips bucked forward. Gods, that felt good.

Lowering her head, she kissed his cock, then nibbled up and down his length. Then she used her tongue to lick the back of his shaft all the way up, sending shivers through his body. As she lavished attention on his cock, her long hair teased the skin of his belly and upper legs. The sensations nearly undid him, and he fought to keep from coming now.

"Khira, is this what you want?"

She stopped to look up at him. "I want to feel you between my legs."

He knelt and pushed her onto her back, lying beside her, their legs tangling together. She kissed him, her hands gripping his head tightly, tugging his hair. "I'll never get enough of you," he moaned into her mouth.

"I know."

He closed his lips over one erect nipple and reached between her legs with one finger. Her cunt was wet, her labia swollen and her clit distended. A few strokes of his finger was enough for her to come.

Instead of relaxing, she pushed at his shoulders until he rolled onto his back. She straddled him, rubbing her crotch

against him until his cock was slick with her juices. She spread her lower lips and rubbed up and down his shaft. He thrust upward, increasing the friction. Gods, he wanted to ram his cock into her warm body, take her virginity, and be damned, if necessary. Somehow he summoned the control to lie back and let her take the lead.

Some day, he swore. Some day I'll make you truly mine.

Her eyes were closed, her breathing rapid. He reached down to touch her clit, stimulating it. With a cry, she came again, her face contorting with ecstasy. He watched as spasms shook her body, glad to have given her pleasure.

Reaching down, he grabbed his cock and rubbed it roughly until he came, too, intense sensations exploding outward from his genitals, leaving him panting but oddly unsatisfied.

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CHAPTER 4

Myrek leaned forward in his chair, gaze fixed on Egin.
"What have you learned?"

"There are two of these exclusive brothels in the area, but only one is on an island. It's called Talishoa, which basically means red lotus in ancient Mhajavi."

"Were you able to reconnoiter? Inside and out?"

Egin hesitated. "Yes, but I had to pretend to be a customer."

Myrek grinned. "I hope you enjoyed your work."

The other man's face flushed slightly "Let's say I found a willing partner. She was happy to show me around the gardens, and I found a back gate in one corner. It's used by the gardeners who come in during the day to tend the plants. And sometimes used by the girls to sneak out to meet nonpaying lovers."

Myrek clenched his fists. The thought of Khira in such an establishment, no matter how high class, was driving him insane. He couldn't concentrate on his work, couldn't think about anything else. He had to act and the consequences be damned. "The woman didn't suspect anything, did she?"

"No, sir. I basically led her to think I enjoyed putting on a show for anyone who wanted to watch."

Myrek raised his brows. "I thought this was a private garden."

"Oh, it is, completely walled around the outside. But inside, it's sectioned off by walls with decorative windows, so

no spot is completely private. There are rooms inside with peepholes, too, for the pleasure of any voyeurs."

Myrek fought a smile. He'd never have picked Egin for an exhibitionist. "I appreciate your dedication to duty."

Egin coughed. "It wasn't a problem, sir."

"I'm glad someone on my staff is enjoying his work," Myrek said dryly. "Now this is what we're going to do."

* * * *

On the day Khira was to lose her virginity to a stranger, she paced her room at Talishoa. For the last week she'd been given instructions on how to please a man, though there wasn't much she didn't already know from her private study. Private study she longed to return to. If only Myrek had agreed to take her virginity, but she loved him the more for his refusal to compromise his principles. If only their two worlds were more similar in outlook and tradition. *Perhaps one day.*

In the meantime, she had to endure tonight's humiliation. She stopped to stare at herself in the mirror, her fists clenched at her sides so her brightly-painted fingernails dug into her palms. She'd been bathed, massaged, and pampered, her ear lobes and navel had been pierced, false fingernails applied, and her entire body scrubbed until her skin was soft as a newborn babe's. Though the pampering had been enjoyable, the reason for being here left a cloud over the whole experience.

Tonight she wore a diaphanous red gown and little else, a fact all too apparent. Her feet were adorned with dainty,

silver-colored sandals, her navel with a dangling jeweled ornament, her ears with diamond studs, and small white crystals were stuck on her forehead and at the corners of her eyes, which were heavily outlined by black liner. In truth, she hardly recognized herself. No sign was left of the independent, professional woman she'd been.

What had Myrek called this tradition? Barbaric, that was the word. She wasn't sure exactly what it meant beyond outdated and ridiculous. At the same time, she found it hard to ignore the sensuous movements of the silk over her skin, especially her nipples. How could she be even a little aroused by the notion of men bidding for her favor? And yet, it was intoxicating to realize the sexual power women could use to manipulate men. In the old days, it had been a woman's only power.

"It is time."

Khira turned to see a servant standing in the doorway. Silently she followed the woman to her destiny.

* * * *

Myrek lounged in a comfortable chair in the auction room at Talishoa, trying to give the appearance of polite interest. If he let his disgust for this farce show, he might be asked to leave, and that would defeat his purpose. He'd come prepared to do what was necessary to make Khira his own.

Eyes half closed, he glanced around the room. A half-dozen Mhajavi men had joined him to await the auction. Some of them were old enough to be Khira's father, he noted with disgust. Of course, only the wealthiest need bother. The

price of a virgin could be astronomical, given the scarcity. He'd best warn his father about this custom, lest it ever be started on Zigan.

A dais stood at one end of the dimly-lit room, no doubt for Khira to be displayed like a prize farm animal. He clenched his teeth, then forced his jaw to relax. Thanks to the reconnaissance done by Egin, he knew ahead of time how much money to bring. He also knew this was a small turn out for such an auction, probably due to the advanced age of the virgin in question. He stifled a snort of contempt for the men who kept such a bizarre tradition alive.

A door in the front of the room opened and an older Mahajavi woman entered. Still beautiful, she was dressed in an elegant black gown and wore her dark hair swept up onto her head. She stepped up on the dais as a bright light came on above her.

"Good evening, gentlemen. I am Mohani Rhada," she said. "Shall we begin?"

Myrek sat forward in his seat as Khira entered the room and stepped onto the podium. She walked slowly, her head held high and proud. *Good girl.* Her red gown hid none of her charms, and he saw other men leaning forward to stare. He forced himself to lounge back into his chair. *Gods, let this be over soon.*

He sat silently as the bidding commenced, content to wait. If he appeared too eager, he might drive the price up beyond his means. When only two bidders were left, he raised a hand to join in.

"Ah, I see we have new interest," Mohani Rhada purred.

He saw Khira tense and look his way, but he doubted she could recognize him because of the lighting. No doubt to preserve the anonymity of the brothel's clients. As the bidding inched higher, one Mhajavi dropped out. Sensing his moment had come, Myrek doubled his bid. When the other man shook his head, the auctioneer declared the bidding over.

For the first time in weeks, Myrek felt himself relax. Khira was his now, at least for one night.

* * * *

When the bidding ended, Khira narrowed her eyes and tried to see into the darkness surrounding the dais, but couldn't make out any faces. She could hear footsteps as most of the bidders left the room.

"Khira, come meet your patron." Mohani Rhada beckoned to her.

Obediently, Khira followed the older woman off the dais, wondering who in the universe would pay so much for a virgin of her age. He stepped forward as she reached the bottom step, and she froze when she realized it was Myrek.

"Your Excellency has honored us tonight," Mohani Rhada was saying. "Khira, you should feel quite gratified to have attracted the attention of a prince."

Her head was spinning, but questions had to wait for later. She dropped into the bow she'd been taught, forgetting she was still on the step. His hand on her elbow steadied her.

"Careful," he said, guiding her down the last step.

She looked up at him, saw the tenderness on his face, and knew he'd meant it when he said he loved her. "I'm glad it's you," she whispered.

"Not as glad as I am."

"Shall we go to my room?"

He nodded, his face a polite mask now, and she wondered why he had come to the auction. But, sweet universe, she was glad he had. There was no one she'd rather be with tonight, even if it meant they could never marry.

* * * *

Still in a daze, Khira led the way to her room at Talishoa. In her absence, the room had been tidied, the bed made with red satin sheets, and scented candles lit, creating a sensual atmosphere. She was already in a state of arousal, her nipples taut and her clit throbbing with need. Anticipation was a powerful aphrodisiac and she was more than ready.

Myrek followed her into the room, closed the door and locked it before drawing her into his arms. She felt his heavy cock pressing against her stomach, his hands kneading her ass.

"Gods, I missed you," he groaned, his mouth pressed to her hair.

"I missed you, too." She turned up her head for his kiss, staring into his eyes, darkened with desire. He lowered his head and settled his mouth on hers, nipping and tasting. The kiss grew more intense as his tongue invaded her mouth. She sucked on it and rubbed her body against his, enjoying the friction of her clothing against her nipples and clit.

With a groan, he broke the kiss to gulp in air. "You're so passionate tonight."

"I want you, Myrek, only you." She still couldn't believe he'd followed her here and spent such a large sum for her.

He pressed kisses to her neck. "Were you surprised to see me?"

"Yes, but why did you come here? You could have had me any time these last few weeks."

He looked into her eyes, his gaze tender. "It had to be this way, Khira. Trust me."

She smiled and ran a hand down his jaw, feeling the slight stubble. "I do trust you."

"Good. Just let me take charge tonight and everything will be fine."

He guided her to the bed and helped remove the form-fitting dress, his hands skimming over her body, leaving a trail of heat. "When I saw how they dressed you, I wanted to carry you out of there. It drove me crazy for other men to see you like that."

She laughed. "I think the gown is designed to drive men mad."

His smile was rueful. "Then it worked."

"Why did you wait so long to join the bidding?"

"I didn't want to drive up the price until I was sure I'd win."

"What if you hadn't? What if someone had topped your bid?"

A muscle jumped in his jaw. "I was prepared to go higher. You're mine."

A warm glow spread through her at the possessive words. "Yes," she whispered.

He captured her mouth with a growl and crushed her to him. She clung to him, marveling at his passionate display, so unlike the perfect diplomat she'd first met.

She went to work on his clothing, unfastening his tunic and pushing it off his shoulders. Tonight he wore no undershirt and she ran her hands over his chest, toying with his mat of crisp blond hair. When her fingers brushed his nipples, he drew in a breath. Smiling, she lowered her head to suckle on a nipple as she let her hand follow the trail of hair down his chest and to his waistline.

Impatient, he pushed her hands away and tore off the rest of his clothes. When he was naked, she let her gaze roam over his body from his broad shoulders to his narrow waist. Though not overly muscular, he was fit and toned without an ounce of extraneous fat. His legs were long and strongly muscled, his feet long and slender, as was his cock.

"You've been in the sun." His upper body was tanned a light brown in contrast to the whiter skin of his legs and pelvis, but he was still pale next to her own brown skin.

She took him by the hand and led him to the bed. She lay back on the red satin sheets, smooth and cool against her bare skin, feeling sexier and more decadent than she'd ever expected to feel. Oddly enough, coming to Talishoa had released any lingering inhibitions she'd had.

He knelt beside her, his hungry gaze roaming over her body. His hands and mouth soon followed. She closed her eyes and reveled in the sensations of his warm mouth on her

nipple, his touch roaming over her body. Spreading her legs, she guided his hand to her vulva. Using one finger, he explored the area, wet with her juices, but ignored the area of most need.

"Touch my clit," she said.

He chuckled and applied some pressure to the sensitive nub.

"Oh, yes," she gasped.

He moved down and replaced his fingers with his mouth, licking and sucking on her clit and labia until she was panting. She lost all sense of time and place as he continued to feast on her needy core. Pressure built inside her, igniting her senses, washing over her like a tidal wave.

When her contractions eased, she reached for him. "You always take care of my needs." Except for one, and that would happen soon.

"I aim to please," he said modestly, but his grin was one of male satisfaction.

She hugged him, wrapping herself around him as tightly as possible. In truth, she never wanted to let go. She'd fallen in love with him and didn't know how she'd manage to get through the next few weeks. The thought of being with another man, any other man, disgusted her, but what could she do? She'd agreed to come here.

"How long can you stay?" she asked.

"I'll be here all night," he said, rubbing her back.

"Good. I don't want you to leave."

He kissed the top of her head. "I'll never leave you, Khira. Not if I can help it."

They lay close for a few minutes, but she was aware of his heavy cock against her belly. Sitting up, she removed a prophylactic from the night stand and handed it to him.

"Talishoa requires you wear this," she said apologetically.

"Even though there's no chance of you getting me pregnant."

"I understand." He took it from her and rolled the thin sheath onto his cock.

She ran her fingers over the hard shaft. At last she was going to lose her virginity. "Do you want me on top?"

To her surprise, he reached for the jar of lubricant sitting on the bedside table. "Do you trust me not to hurt you, Khira?"

"Of course," she murmured.

"Touch yourself." He poured some oil into his palm and rubbed it on his cock while she touched her breasts with one hand and fingered her clit with the other. He watched her, his blue eyes blazing like a laser beam.

"Get on your hands and knees."

She did as he ordered, but rested her forearms on the bed for better balance, leaving her ass elevated.

He moved behind her and ran his hands over her ass, kneading her flesh. His fingers teased the sensitive skin around her anus, making her squirm with pleasure. He inserted a fingertip, but stopped when her muscles clamped down. "Easy, love. Tell me if anything hurts."

She frowned. "It doesn't hurt. You just surprised me." She took a deep breath and relaxed, pushing down as she'd been taught, taking his finger a little deeper. "You paid a premium for my virginity."

"So I did and it is precious indeed to me. You said you'd trust me," he reminded her, his tone gentle. "There's more than one way to make love to a woman, and we have all night."

"That's true." When she relaxed, he inserted another finger, easing in slowly.

He withdrew, then she felt his cock probing her anus. She pushed her hips back and gently he inserted himself into her opening. Her muscles expanded to receive him. At the same time, he slid a hand around her leg to tease her clit, engulfing her in pleasure.

He moved slowly, thrusting gently in and out, setting up an easy, rocking rhythm that carried her higher. Her clit responded to his touch and she came again as he continued to thrust. His breathing grew harsh, and she clamped her muscles tighter. He came then, crying her name.

Afterwards, he rolled onto his back, his chest heaving. She cuddled next to him, happy with their lovemaking, but a little puzzled. Why was she still a virgin?

* * * *

After a shower, Khira took her time in the bathroom, brushing her wet hair and savoring the afterglow of another orgasm from their mutual masturbation in the shower. She still didn't understand why he hadn't relieved her of her virginity, but as he'd said, they had all night.

Myrek dried himself quickly and returned to the bedroom. When she walked into the other room, she was surprised to

see he was already dressed. A feeling of dread crept up her spine. "Are you leaving?"

"No, of course not. I thought we might go for a stroll in the gardens."

His suggestion surprised her, but why not? The gardens had been designed for moonlit trysts after all. "Just let me throw on some clothes." She reached for the gown she'd worn for the auction, but he stopped her with a hand on her arm.

"No."

She shrugged and went to her closet. There wasn't much inside, just the clothing she'd worn the day she came here, and a few lightweight robes she'd worn during her training.

"Wear the black one."

She pulled it out of the closet and turned to see him holding her undergarments. "And these."

"Are you kidding me?"

His mouth quirked. "Humor me."

"Very well." She shrugged and donned the undergarments, then her robe. As she slipped her feet into her sandals, she noticed he was blowing out the candles.

"We can leave them on. We won't be gone long."

"Fire hazard," he said. "We can always light them again."

"I suppose so."

When the room was dark, he opened the door and peered out. The hall was dimly lit and deserted as she followed him down the back stairs. The place seemed deserted, but she knew it was an illusion. The rooms had been soundproofed for complete privacy. Still, he moved furtively, as if they had

something to hide. He was behaving strangely tonight and she had no idea why.

Myrek held a door open for her, and Khira stepped out into the garden. She'd wandered through it before, during the daytime, but never after dark. Low lamps illuminated the paths, but left the pavilions dimly lit for amorous assignations. Moans and laughter could be heard from several directions. The air was warm and balmy, scented by night-blooming flowers, perfect for outdoor lovemaking.

She slipped her arm through Myrek's and pressed against him. "Do you want to find a secluded nook?"

"Let's keep walking. This way, I think."

He led her through a rounded entry, ignoring the couple entwined in the interior of the pavilion, and around the lagoon. The path wound along between the lagoon and open-air rooms, all occupied. Khira smiled. Apparently no pleasure seeker had been turned away.

"Did you know this was a temple once?" Khira asked to break the silence between them. He seemed to be searching for something. "Back when our ancestors worshipped many gods, it was dedicated to the goddess of love."

Myrek chuckled. "I think it still is."

She laughed. "Yes, I suppose so."

As they walked, the sound of a waterfall grew louder and she knew they were nearing the far side of the garden. "This area seems deserted."

"Good," he said.

She stopped in front of the small, man-made waterfall, barely visible beyond the lighted pathway. "This is my favorite

spot. Whenever I had free time, I'd come here and listen to the water. It's so peaceful."

Myrek drew her into his arms. "I almost went mad thinking of you here, out of reach. I don't want to be parted from you again."

She sighed and rested her head against his chest. "I don't want that either, but you can't stay here forever."

"Then come with me now."

She pulled back to stare at him, but it was hard to read his expression in the dim light. "What are you talking about? I've made a commitment to stay. Mohani Rhada would never let me leave."

He took her face in both hands. "There's a way. I'd like to take you away from here."

"I'd like that, too," she whispered. In fact, given half the chance, she'd bolt from this place and never come back.

"I was hoping you'd say that." He reached into his pocket for a small object, flicked the switch, and a narrow beam of light shone from it. Using it, he led her off the path and behind the waterfall where they found a small door. "This is how the gardeners enter."

"How do you know?"

He unlocked and opened the door to lead her outside. "I'll explain later."

She followed him, not sure she was doing the right thing, just knowing she wanted to be with him. As they rounded a corner of the garden, she realized they'd come to the landing pad.

Myrek flashed his small light twice, then once more, and a hover craft moved toward them. She'd arrived at Talishoa by boat, but knew many of the well-to-do clients came by air. As it pulled up, she recognized Egin at the controls.

"Where are you taking me, the embassy?"

"No," Myrek said, opening the door. "I have somewhere else in mind."

"But you'll bring me back in the morning."

He hesitated. "If that's what you truly wish."

She frowned. He was acting so strangely. As much as she never wanted to see the place again, what other choice did she have? Bemused, she got into the back seat of the craft, greeted Egin and buckled herself in. She had felt trapped these last few weeks. She was used to coming and going as she pleased, to being in charge of a top medical team, to being busy from dawn to dusk. The island was so isolated. It felt like an alien world.

As the hovercraft rose into the air, she watched as the lights of Talishoa faded into the distance. Up ahead she saw the glow of Mahdesh City, but Egin continued to guide the vehicle to higher altitudes. Confused, she turned to Myrek.

"Just where are you taking me?"

"To the space port."

"What?"

He leaned toward her, his expression serious. "I'm sending Vilem, Lokri and Tadu back to Zigan for security reasons."

Alarm filled her at his words. "But why? The embassy is perfectly safe."

"For the moment, yes, but..." He hesitated, then seemed to come to a decision. "Earlier I asked you to trust me. Now I'm going to ask for your word you won't tell a soul what I'm about to reveal."

She glanced at Egin.

"He already knows," Myrek said. "Do I have your word?"

"Yes, of course."

"I shouldn't be telling you this, but our future may depend on it. Your government has learned Havir is planning another attack on Mhjav."

Khira sucked in a breath. "But what can he do? His followers are few, and I can't imagine they're any match for our fleet."

"Lately one of his followers defected to Mhjav. She reported he's building an army of robotic soldiers."

"But how? He's been on the run for years."

"No, he's been holed up on the asteroid Undhara. He built a complex underground as a refuge before he was deposed."

Khira sat back, stunned at his news. The return of Havir would be devastating for her world. "He must be stopped."

"Yes, and plans are under way to do so. But I want to be sure my son, and the other people I care about, are safe in the interim. That includes you."

She stared at him in disbelief. "Are you suggesting I go to Zigan with Vilem? I thought you wanted us to be together."

"I do. If you agree to leave, so will I." His smile was rueful. "I'll probably be thrown out of Mhjav anyway after what I did tonight."

She stared at him. She'd left Talishoa without any warning or a parting note. "Mohani Rhada will think you abducted me."

"Yes, I imagine she will."

"Then we need to contact her, explain what happened."

"If we do, you won't be allowed to leave Mhjav. Not until your contract with Talishoa is finished, and that could be too late."

Her mind was reeling. "But you're the ambassador. Don't you have to stay here?"

"I left a letter of resignation on my brother's desk."

"You've thought of everything, haven't you? Except my wishes."

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CHAPTER 5

After Egin docked at the space port, Khira followed Myrek into the corridor. She'd never been here before and she looked around curiously. At this late hour, the port was quiet except for a crowded bar. Shops selling Ziganese delicacies had sprung up along the main concourse next to Mhajavi souvenir shops. She glanced in the display windows as they walked by, but nothing was open. In the two months since the start of joint military patrols, the space raiders had gone into hiding and trade had blossomed between the two worlds.

After a short walk, Myrek led her up a ramp to where the imperial yacht was docked. A guard snapped to attention at the sight of the prince.

Myrek gestured for her to precede him into the ship. She hesitated before entering. They needed to talk, but in private. Surely he wouldn't hold her hostage, would he? She hardly recognized him tonight. She'd known he was a passionate man, but he hadn't seemed impetuous. Nor was he. Everything he'd done tonight had been clearly thought out and planned. Everything but asking for her permission.

When he took her hand, she pulled it from his grasp, but followed him into the ship to a small cabin. He might well end up getting his own way, but she wouldn't make it too easy for him. Inside, she walked to a porthole, where she stood and stared out at space, her mind in turmoil. Behind her, she heard Myrek pacing the small space.

Finally he said, "Talk to me, Khira."

She turned to stare at him. "I don't understand. I'm beginning to feel like I've been abducted. You said you'd take me back to Talishoa in the morning."

He rubbed the back of his neck. "You're free to go if you wish, but is that what you really want?"

"I don't know," she admitted. She was shocked at the lengths he'd gone to bringing her here, yet part of her was gratified by the fact he was ready to give up so much to be with her.

His gaze pleaded with her. "Don't make me choose between you and my only child."

"I would never ask you to do so. Of course you must go with Vilem. He needs you."

"He needs you, too."

She closed her eyes and leaned her head back against the wall. *Vilem. What would happen to that sweet little boy on Zigan, a world where tradition was more important than the life of a child?* She opened her eyes to stare at Myrek. "I don't know what I should do."

He stepped closer. "Don't think about what you *should* do. For once think about what you want, what you need."

She swayed toward him, then straightened. What could she say? That she didn't need him, didn't want him, couldn't bear the thought of life without him? She forced herself to look at him. "I want you, Myrek. Want isn't the same as need."

His smile nearly broke her heart. "You do want me."

Tears sprang to her eyes. "Yes, I want to be with you, want to feel your hands on my body, feel you deep inside me."

I want to bear your children, but it's not possible. I know it's selfish. Universe help me, I know how much you stand to lose by this night's work, and I still want you."

A relieved smile spread over his face. "Then you'll marry me and come to Zigan."

Tears filled her eyes. "I don't know. I need to think about this."

His smile faded. "I'll leave you alone, but only for a while. We can't delay much longer."

He turned and left the room.

Once she was alone, Khira sank into a chair and clasped her hands to stop the shaking. *Sweet universe, what a night.* Her thoughts tumbled through her head, and her throat ached with unshed tears.

Calm down. You're a scientist. Think this through logically. But what had logic to do with any of this night's doings?

She still couldn't believe what Myrek had done to be with her. If she left, she'd be flaunting an old Mhajavi tradition, one important to her parents. There would be financial consequences for leaving Talishoa so abruptly. No matter, she had enough put away to pay the fine. So far, at least, no laws had been broken. Yes, good, she was thinking logically. For the moment, at least.

The question was what to do now. In her head, she knew there was no choice but to demand he return her to the brothel. But that wasn't what she wanted. She'd spent her life doing what was expected. When other children played outside, she'd stayed in and studied. Later, when her older classmates were dating and having sex, she'd stayed in her

single room and studied. And as an adult, she'd worked long, hard hours in the med center.

It dawned on her that her happiest moments had been with Myrek, and not just the hours they'd spent making love. She'd grown accustomed to having him in her life, not just in her bed. A future without him seemed long, bleak and loveless, but there would be a price for a future together. If he was willing to pay the price, could she do any less?

* * * *

Myrek paced the corridor while he waited for Khira's decision. He'd already checked on the boys and found them sleeping in their bunks. Egin was monitoring Mhajavi communications, but so far there had been nothing of concern. Still, they needed to depart before sunrise.

What if she decided to stay here? Leaving her would be like tearing out his heart, but the decision had to be hers. Marriage by capture had gone out of fashion centuries ago, though he was sorely tempted to revive the custom.

He spun around when he heard a door open. His heart raced when Khira emerged and walked toward him. "I hope you have good news for me."

Her smile was tremulous. "I want to go with you."

"Thank the gods." He swept her into his arms and hugged her close. "I don't know what I'd have done if you'd said otherwise. We can be married as soon as we reach Zigan."

Khira pulled back. "I do need some assurances, though."

"Whatever you want."

"I want to continue my work in genetics. I won't be a pampered princess," she warned.

He laughed. "I didn't expect you to quit work. In fact, I've made some inquiries into private financing for a new research center. I hoped you'd head it, and we can bring in as many members of your team as are willing to emigrate."

"And my parents? Can they come, too? I'd hate to leave them in danger."

"Of course. We'll send for them as soon as possible, but won't they be furious at me for taking you from Talishoa?"

"It's all right. They'll forgive all when they learn I've married a prince."

"I may not be a prince for long," he warned her. "There's a good chance I'll be disinherited for what I did tonight."

"What will you do if that happens?" Khira asked. "Where will we go?"

"Do you remember me telling you Vilem's mother brought a sizable estate to the marriage?"

"Yes, vaguely."

"We can live there. I've already made arrangements to open the house and have it readied for us. You'll love it. The house is old and needs work, but the grounds are beautiful. And extensive," he said, gesturing with his hands as he spoke. He seemed more animated than she'd ever seen him. "I've been thinking about this. We can build a state-of-the-art medical research institute. I have sufficient means to start it, and I'm sure we can get more private financing. We'll bring your team in right away. They can work from the house until the facility is ready."

"It's a wonderful idea." she said. "I'll be happier working. I never wanted to be a princess anyway."

* * * *

A contingent of palace guards greeted Myrek the moment he stepped into the space port. It was no more than he'd expected, after what he'd done. Mohani Rhada had had sufficient time to lodge a formal complaint against him. The captain of the guard was courteous but insistent about escorting Myrek and Khira directly to the king.

He did allow Myrek to send Lokri and the boys off in a separate vehicle. Though he assured her all was well, the frown on her brow said she knew better. At least Vilem would not have to witness his father's disgrace.

The captain escorted them to an official hover car. Khira sat close to him, her small, cold hand in his. She glanced up at him, an anxious look on her face.

"What do you think your father will do?"

Myrek tried to smile reassuringly. "Father has a quick temper, but he doesn't stay mad long. Just be prepared for a tirade."

"This is all my fault."

He used a finger to tip her head up. "No, *draha*. It was all my doing, and I don't regret a bit of it. Not if it means we can be together."

Her expression turned bleak. "Your father will never agree to our marriage."

"He cannot stop me from marrying whoever I choose. I married once to please him, and look how that turned out. Never again."

He put his arms around Khira to warm her. She was still in the thin black robe she'd donned at the brothel, with one of Lokri's warm shawls draped over her shoulders. They'd tried to find warmer clothes for her on board ship, but Lokri's clothes were too large for Khira's petite frame. She rested her head on his shoulder and closed her eyes, no doubt exhausted by all he'd put her through.

He glanced out the window as the familiar scenery sped by. When he'd left, the leaves had been at their most glorious in shades of red, gold and orange, but today bare branches stirred in the cold wind. He hadn't missed Zigan as much as he'd expected. The more relaxed Mhajavi culture had freed him of old bonds and restrictions. He'd hoped some day to loosen the laws and traditions of his own world, but in truth, he no longer cared if he ever inherited the crown. It was time for Zigan to change, and the sooner the better.

When they arrived at the palace, the guards led them to his father's audience chamber. Inside, his parents were waiting along with Queen Yerina, his father's first wife. Myrek bowed, and Khira performed the formal curtsy Lokri had taught her. His father looked older than he had just a few weeks ago. His face seemed more lined and there was more gray in his hair.

"I understand you want to see me, Father."

King Ormin glared at Khira. "Is this the young woman who started a scandal of cosmic proportions?"

Khira shivered and drew closer to Myrek. He put an arm around her and faced his father. "None of this is her fault. The blame for any scandal rests on my head."

His mother suddenly spoke up. "Our guest seems to be cold."

"So she does," Queen Yerina agreed. She stood and held out a hand to Khira. "Come, child, let me find you something warmer to wear while Prince Myrek talks to his father."

Khira looked at Myrek, and he nodded in agreement. "Go ahead. I'll see you later."

His mother stopped to cup his face and kiss his cheek. He embraced her. "I'm sorry to let you down."

"You're a good son, no matter what your father says," she whispered. "Don't worry about your little bride. We'll take good care of her."

"Thank you," he managed to say through the lump in his throat.

After the women left the room, his father spoke again. "Imagine my shock when the Mhajavi government informed me my eldest son, my ambassador, had abducted a common whore from a brothel."

"Khira is not a common whore," Myrek declared hotly. "She's a brilliant scientist and the woman I love. And she's a virgin."

"Then why was she in a brothel?" his father asked, a perplexed look on her face.

He explained the odd Mhajavi custom which had led them to where they were now. It sounded unbelievable, even to him.

"And what do you propose we do now?" his father asked.

"I suspect Mohani Rhada, the brothel owner, will agree to drop the kidnapping charges in exchange for some financial settlement. Then Khira and I can be married."

"A doctor will have to verify her virginity," his father warned.

"Yes, she's prepared to be examined."

"Please, son, stop and think about what you're doing," his father said. "You need to marry within your class."

"Khira comes from an old Mhajavi family, their version of our aristocracy."

"But she won't be able to give you children," his father said. "You need a healthy heir."

"Vilem is healthier, thanks to the doctors in Mhajav."

"You'd best hope he stays healthy," his father warned. "The Mhajavi have made it clear you will never be allowed back as ambassador, perhaps never."

"I assumed as much," Myrek said. "Rulik will do a fine job in my stead."

His father shook his head. "Yes, he's turned into a fine man and a loyal officer. A few months ago, I might have expected this kind of rebellion from him, but not from you. You've changed."

"Yes, I have," Myrek admitted.

"And not for the better. You've insulted our ally at a time of grave crisis."

"Would you prefer Vilem and I had stayed on Mhajav waiting for Havir to attack? I thought you were more concerned for your heirs."

The king rubbed a hand over his wrinkled brow. "Of course I want you and Vilem safe. That's not the point."

Myrek shrugged, refusing to argue with his father. "As for Vilem's health, I'd like to bring Khira's medical team here so they can treat Vilem and other children who suffer from the same disease."

His father nodded. "Fine. Let's hope they find a permanent cure because he's probably going to be the next king of Zigan. Are you determined to marry that woman?"

"Yes, Father."

His father's expression turned smug. "I wish you luck in finding a priest to perform the ceremony. They won't dare go against my wishes."

Myrek refused to take the bait. He already had an idea of how to get around the problem.

"Be warned, Myrek. If you go through with this, I'll have no choice but to disinherit you. You'll be stripped of all honors and privileges. In any case, I want you out of the palace in twenty-four hours."

* * * *

Khira allowed the two queens to lead her from the room. Myrek's mother, Queen Dahnya appeared to be about fifty years old. She was still beautiful. Her light auburn hair had only a few gray strands and her bright blue eyes made her seem merry. About ten years older, Queen Yerina seemed like a shadow next to Dahnya, with very light hair, more silvery gray than blonde, and pale blue eyes. She carried herself with

dignity, though, as a queen should. Neither said anything, giving Khira too much time to think.

What would it be like to share your husband with another woman? While the Mhajavi thought nothing of occasionally sharing a sex partner, true *ménage à trois* were rare. And someday Myrek might want to take another wife in his quest for another child. Would she be able to share him?

The older women entered a large storage room, filled with racks of clothing.

"This is where we keep extra clothing," Yerina said. She eyed Khira up and down. "You're about the same size as my youngest daughter, Aneska. She's tiny like you."

Khira followed the queen to a rack of clothing and chose several warm gowns in shades of blue, green and rose. Next she tried on fur-lined boots until she found a pair that fit. Just having warm feet again lifted her spirits.

"Here it is," Queen Yerina exclaimed, holding up a lovely gown of sparkly pale blue material. "Aneska's wedding dress. It should fit you, my dear."

"Oh, no," Khira protested. "I couldn't. I'm sure she wouldn't want anyone else wearing it."

The queens exchanged a look Khira was unable to interpret. "Surely she has wonderful memories associated with this dress. Doesn't she?"

Yerina sighed. "Aneska never married. I'm sure she won't object to you wearing it. She and Myrek were close, growing up."

Khira took the gown from her. "Then I thank you. And I'm sorry things didn't work out for her." She was dying to ask

what had happened, but didn't think it was any of her business. She'd ask Myrek later.

"Come along, child, and tell us all about yourself," Myrek's mother said.

Arms full of clothing, Khira followed the older women to a guest chamber, hoping she'd pass muster.

* * * *

A week later, Lokri helped Khira dress for her wedding to Myrek. She was relaxed after a long, leisurely bath in an old-fashioned lav lit only by candles. The hot water scented with fragrant herbs had been prepared by Isara, the Algottan priestess Myrek had found to perform the ceremony. She'd advised Khira to meditate on the idea that the water would remove any lingering negativity and leave her pure in heart as well as body for the start of her new life with Myrek.

Aneska's gown fit her perfectly, though she was unaccustomed to the form-fitting style. Lokri had squeezed her into a contraption called a corset that made her waist several inches smaller. The sparkly blue gown was trimmed in gold around the waist and neckline, and the puffy short sleeves were of a paler, diaphanous material. Queen Yerina had explained Ziganese brides always wear blue to symbolize fidelity and devotion to their wedding vows.

"You look beautiful," Lokri assured her.

"Thank you." Khira surveyed herself in the mirror. This was an unaccustomed style of dress for her, but the effect was lovely. She'd even received a message from Myrek's sister

Aneska, welcoming her to the family and assuring her she was welcome to the gown.

It had taken a few days to find someone to perform the ceremony. As his father had predicted, none of the local Ziganese priests would agree to marry them. Finally, he'd found Isara and arranged for a traditional Algottan ceremony.

In between getting settled in her new home, making amends with Talishoa, and arranging for her parents and some of her medical team to move to Zigan, she'd researched the local religion. She'd known the Ziganese worshipped a pantheon of gods and goddesses, but she hadn't realized the natives of Algott, a separate continent in the southern hemisphere of the planet, worshipped only one goddess named Maradon. The priestess, Isara, had assured them no servant of Maradon would ever stand in the way of true love, no matter what the king said.

Khira's parents had arrived yesterday. They'd scolded her for worrying them, then forgiven her for running off with the man she loved. Though she didn't always agree with them, she knew they loved her and wished her well. She just wished someone from Myrek's family would be present for the wedding. His father had forbidden his mother and siblings to attend. He'd shrugged it off, but she knew he was hurting.

When she was ready, she and Lokri went downstairs to the room set aside for the wedding. The scent of fresh flowers from the estate's greenhouse mingled with the more pungent odor of incense. The few guests were seated before a makeshift altar covered with a white cloth—her parents, plus

Egin sitting between Vilem and Tadu. The boys waved to her and she smiled back at them.

Myrek stood to one side waiting for her. Her breath caught at the sight of him in his ceremonial dress, a deep blue tunic trimmed in gold over purple pants and knee-high, black leather boots. He'd never been more handsome, and soon he would be her husband.

Heart pounding with anticipation, Khira made her way to the altar and joined hands with him.

The priestess, Isara, was dressed in a curious outfit of pale blue violet pants under an overskirt of silver gauze. Her short blouse of white gauze trimmed in violet left her midriff bare. She was nearly as tall as Myrek, with deep auburn hair and brown eyes. On the altar in front of her were the brazier in which the incense still burned, two red candles in golden candle holders, a crystal pitcher of water and a silver goblet.

Isara lifted her arms and turned her face upward. "In the name of the great goddess Maradon, I welcome you to witness the joining of this man and this woman in marriage."

She then began to chant in a language Khira assumed was Algottan. Though she didn't understand the words, the cadence of the ritual words soothed her mind and spirit.

Isara poured water into the silver goblet and handed it to Khira. "This water symbolizes the purity of your love and the happiness you will find together."

Khira took a sip, then held the goblet for Myrek to drink from. Together they set it back on the altar.

Next Isara lit a taper and handed it to Myrek. Khira put her hand over his and together they lit the red candles.

"May the great goddess gift you with long life, lasting love and many children," Isara intoned.

Khira smiled at Myrek, but her heart was heavy. As much as she loved Myrek, she'd never be able to give him children. Not in the traditional fashion, at any rate.

* * * *

Later that day, Khira joined Myrek to put an exhausted but still excited Vilem to bed. She was touched when the boy hugged her and whispered, "Can I call you Mama?"

Tears filled her eyes as she hugged him back. "I'd like that a lot." She kissed him on the cheek and tucked him under the covers.

Myrek's eyes were suspiciously moist when she glanced at him. When he held out his hand, she let him lead her to the room they'd share from now on.

"I never thought I'd hear a child call me mother," she whispered.

He wrapped her in his arms. "You'll be a wonderful mother to him."

"I'll do my best," she promised, barely able to get the words past the large lump in her throat. Silently she vowed to do all possible to find a cure for Vilem.

Myrek lowered his head and touched her mouth with his. The kiss was light, but soon became more intense as his lips and tongue melded with hers. She pressed against him, impatient with the layers of clothing between them. She wanted to feel him against her, skin to skin, their bodies locked in a lovers' embrace.

She pulled back and unfastened his tunic, slipping her hands inside to caress the strong planes of his chest. "I love your body," she crooned. "I want you inside me, Myrek. No more delay."

He chuckled and shrugged his tunic off. Next came his boots, pants and undergarments, until he stood proud and naked in front of her.

"How handsome you are, my prince."

His smile dimmed for a moment and she cursed herself for using the term, but he recovered quickly.

"Now it's your turn, my princess."

She turned around and let him undo the archaic hooks on the back of her gown. "I've never worn anything so pretty before."

"I don't know," Myrek said. "I like you in red, too. We should've brought the gown from Talishoa with us. It showed off your charms to advantage."

She stepped out of her gown and petticoats and lay it over the back of a chair. "I thought you didn't like it."

"I never said so. What I didn't like was other men seeing you in it."

She turned to face him, still wearing the waist-cinching undergarment Lokri had squeezed her into earlier. It made her breasts spill out over the top in a way they'd never done before. Her only other clothing was a scrap of lacy underpants.

Myrek surveyed her with approval in his gaze. "Very sexy. Maybe we should suggest this look to Mohani Rhada."

Khira laughed. "All she's interested in is more money, but I'll think about it. Now help me out of this contraption. It's killing me."

Again she turned around so he could undo the ties of her corset. When he pulled it off, she rubbed under her breasts to get the circulation going again.

He pushed her hands aside and kneaded her breasts, flicking his fingertips over her hardening nipples. "Was it uncomfortable?"

She pressed back and rubbed against his groin. "A little. Lokri said you get used to it, but I don't want to."

He brushed her hair to one side and kissed her neck and shoulder. "Then you needn't wear it again. I want you to be happy, Khira." His voice was husky and his breath puffed against her ear.

"I am." She turned to face him, pressing her breasts against his hairy chest. The roughness felt good against her sensitized nipples. "Now take me to bed, husband."

With a laugh, he picked her up and deposited her on their huge bed. He climbed in after her, a determined gleam in his eye, and she opened her arms to receive him.

He kissed her everywhere, her brow, cheeks, ear, lips, and on down to her neck and shoulders. Finally his lips settled over a nipple, drawing it into his mouth as his tongue laved it back and forth. A delighted gasp escaped her and she gripped his shoulders.

He moved a hand down her abdomen and she spread her legs for his touch. She was already wet, her clit begging for

his attention. He traced her slit and teased her clit, then inserted a finger in her vagina.

"Yes," she moaned.

His fingers stretched her entrance, while his thumb caressed her clit and labia.

"Now, Myrek," she said.

"Patience, *draha*." But he positioned himself between her legs and probed her entrance with his cock.

She pushed upward, taking more of him inside. As he went deeper, she felt a tear and a brief flash of pain, then he was deep inside, filling her. She clung to him and rode a wave of sensations. Finally he was really hers. A tear leaked from the corner of one eye and ran down her face.

He stilled. "Did I hurt you?"

"No ... don't stop." She urged him on with her hips, unable to get enough of him. "I love you, Myrek."

He pulled back and thrust inside her, again and again, as her need spiraled out of control. Then her climax coursed through her, shaking her to the core.

He came shortly afterward, and they lay together in a hazy slumber. She felt a little soreness between her legs, but mostly she was content and sated. She must have dozed for a few minutes because when she awoke, she was lying on her side with her head on Myrek's shoulder.

"Happy?"

She smiled. "Yes. Only one thing would make me happier."

"What's that?"

She hesitated. "I really want us to have more children."

He stilled, then turned to her, his expression full of hope. "What are you talking about? I thought it was genetically impossible."

"It is, unless we use in vitro fertilization. I've been thinking about this. We'd need an egg donor, a woman free of the genetic defect for *annariblut*. Lokri, perhaps?"

He rose onto one elbow to stare at her. "You want Lokri to carry my child? That's asking a lot."

"No, I will carry the child."

His brows knit together in a frown. "Is that possible? Explain this to me so I can understand."

She sat up in bed brushing her hair back with one hand. "We start by fertilizing one of Lokri's eggs with your sperm. Then we'll fuse the resulting cell with one of my unfertilized eggs. Some additional genetic manipulation may be needed in vitro. It's important the placenta have my DNA, as well, to avoid rejection when the fetus is implanted in my body."

"The baby will be a hybrid?" he asked.

"Not really. Our child will be Ziganese, but with a small amount of Mhajavi DNA, perhaps ten percent. But he, or she, will be our child, not yours and Lokri's."

He sat up and clasped her hand. "This sounds incredible."

"It may not work," she warned him. "This technique has never been tried with humanoid life forms. And, of course, your father will never approve."

"It doesn't matter. I have faith in you, Khira. You're the best thing that ever happened to me."

She studied his face, but saw only sincerity. "How can you say so? You've given up so much to be with me. You could've

been king, with the power to change your world. It doesn't seem right and it's certainly not fair."

"It doesn't matter. You've given me love and hope, things more precious to me than power. To tell you the truth, I never wanted to be king."

She gaped at him. "Are you serious? But you'd be a wonderful king."

He shook his head. "It's too much power and too much responsibility for one person. I'd like to see Zigan become more democratic, like Mhajav."

"That's exactly why you'd make a great king, Myrek. You'd put the good of your people ahead of your own desires."

His mouth turned up at the corner. "Like I did these last few days? If I were as altruistic as you think, I'd have married a woman I didn't love for the good of the state. No, that's not me. Perhaps one day Vilem will be a great king who ushers his world into a new era."

She reached out to take his face in her hands. "If he's as wise as his father, then that's exactly what will happen."

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Lyndi Lamont

Lyndi Lamont is the racy alter ego of author Linda McLaughlin, who writes historical and Regency Romance. Since becoming Lyndi Lamont, she has discovered that writing erotic romance is a license to be naughty, and at her age, those opportunities don't come along very often!

Finding Jason, her first male/male erotic romance, was named a Finalist in the 2008 EPPIE Contest.

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To learn more about Lyndi and her books, you can visit her web site: www.lyndilamont.com

* * * *

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* * * *

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* * * *

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