



TREVA HARTE

KING'S  
GAMBIT

Loose Id

*Checkmate 2:*  
*King's Gambit*

*Treva Harte*



## **Checkmate 2: King's Gambit**

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## Gambit

*Gambit: An opening that involves the sacrifice of material, usually one or more pawns.*

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chess\\_opening](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chess_opening)

*Gambit: a chess opening in which a player risks one or more pawns or a minor piece to gain an advantage in position.*

<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/gambit>

## Chapter One

It was cold once we hit the plains. The compound had been in the foothills, on the side of the mountain that rarely got rain or cold. But this countryside was different. The winds whipped across the grass, lashing at everything in their path and adding to the chill. The sky above had clouded, threatening rain or possibly snow, depending on just how chilled it got. The weather here was as tricky and dangerous as the heat in my part of the world, though conditions here promised cold rather than baking sun.

But I almost thought the weather had changed because of how cold I felt inside.

Of course that was me allowing myself to think I was important to the universe.

I wasn't.

I looked at the two riders ahead of me. They were talking to each other as they rode, not looking my way. I barely existed in their world. If Rey had been allowed to take care of things without *her* intervention, I wouldn't have existed at all.

He would have been right to kill me.

Rey touched her back, leaning forward to get closer.

He *was* killing me.

I shook my head to clear it. Since apparently I meant to stay alive, no matter how miserable my life, I needed to keep alert. Right now I didn't like our situation. The back of my neck itched, as if someone was spying.

I glanced behind me. No one was there. There were no caves to watch from or rocks to hide behind. Everything was exposed. That should make any pursuer easy to find. Of course, it made the pursued easy to catch too.

“Rey!” I called.

He hesitated before he turned to me. I suppose he always would now. I shoved the pity away. It wasn't the time for it.

“Yes?”

“I'm going to circle to the right for a bit.”

He frowned. “Why?”

“Do you see something?” The third in our little trio spoke up. Even when she sat straight up in the saddle, she was still dwarfed by the two of us. Sometimes, especially now, wrapped in a duster that was too big for her small body, Mosquito looked like a child playing with adults.

But she wasn't a child, and she terrified me even more than Rey did.

“No. I don't see a damn thing. Not even birds.”

“Hmm. Odd.” She tapped the riding crop against her chin. Then she sniffed. “I don't smell anything. I don't see any dead carcasses. There's no detectable poison.”

I shrugged.

“This road has been mined, deactivated, then mined again for decades,” Rey said. “That's why no one lives here and why we came this way. I wouldn't be surprised if most of the animals have also figured out it's dangerous and avoid the place.”

“Mined?” I looked down at my feet. I might not like having a mangled leg, but it beat having none at all.

“We're safe enough. I have a detector. It's fairly accurate since it's my father's. We might not find the latest military issue, but I doubt anyone has bothered to try planting new mines. Everyone already knows going this way is too risky.” Mosquito smiled without warmth. “If you separate from us, you're on your own.”

I really didn't want to leave now, all for an itchy neck. But I was as stubborn as I was stupid. “I'll manage.”

Rey reached under his poncho and tossed a small box to me. “Here. My old military issue.”

It was a small electro-weapon identifier. Not perfect, but serviceable.

“I'll catch up with you on the road by morning.” I traced the identifying military ID number with my finger.

I glanced over my shoulder again and loosened the reins. I wasn't quite out of earshot when I heard Rey say, "Do you trust him?"

It didn't matter what she answered; it was enough that Rey now had to ask the question.

Not surprisingly, since I was looking for trouble, I found it quickly. Trouble rested in a small gully that you couldn't see until you came upon it. Trouble was small and dark haired and smiled at me as he sat cross-legged on the ground and stretched his hand in invitation.

His clothes were a dusty brown that blended easily with the landscape. Only his dark eyes and polished boots stood out. If he hadn't chosen to greet me, concealed as he was in the gully's brush, I might have missed him.

"Paz," he said and then, "Coffee?"

I might not be as fast as other men once I was on the ground, but no one should underestimate what I could do if need be. I looked at the man, calculated my chances against him, and swung down from my horse.

"Paz." I looked him over some more once I got close.

I didn't know how old he was. His face looked young except for a few lines around the eyes and a little gray in the hair. He smiled easily, but I couldn't read him.

He handed me a mug. A puckered scar that started on his wrist disappeared into the sleeve of his tightly fitting syntho-sweat. How long or deep it might be was hidden by the clothing, but he'd obviously fought hand to hand himself and survived, despite his size and apparent defenselessness.

I looked at the steaming mug. Maybe it was a gesture of friendliness. Or not. Poison or drugs? I didn't know. It smelled good, felt hot against my cold hands, and would feel even better inside me if it weren't tainted. I gritted my teeth and put it aside. Better not risk it.

"What are you doing here?" I didn't bother to be polite.

"Waiting for you." The man sipped his own drink and didn't hide his amusement. "I figured you'd get here within an hour or so, once I saw the path you decided to take."

"So you were watching?" My gut finally eased. I hadn't been crazy after all.

The man spread his hands out as if the question didn't deserve a spoken answer.

“Why?” I asked.

“Why does anyone?”

“To kill someone. To steal from them. To spy on where they're going.” I ticked the reasons off on my fingers. They were all good reasons for me not to smile back at the man whose smile broadened with each finger I held up.

I did anyhow.

“Perhaps the third reason is closest.” The man handed his cup to me. “Try this. You look cold.”

I hesitated and then sipped it. Warmth spread through my body. I limped a little closer.

“You have no fire. How did you get this?”

“Insulation.” The man tapped a small container. “It keeps things hot or cold for a day.”

“So you've been following us for a day?” I sipped again. “It's *very* hot. Less than a day?”

“Good thinking.” He stood up.

I blinked. The man came to my shoulder. I could snap him between two hands. *This* was who I'd been uneasy about? Was this the man I remembered from long ago?

“You were wise to be nervous about drinking anything I gave. Didn't you think I might wish to punish you for your behavior in my compound with my daughter?” There was no smile left in him.

I stared into his eyes and remembered the fear I'd harbored as a young man when he visited. He had always known everything and measured out justice accordingly. The old awe came rushing back when I saw the coldness in his eyes now.

“Once I could think about what I'd done, I thought *El Patron Grande* would punish me.” I held his gaze, even though my hands were sweating. I whispered, “I knew you would. I accepted that.”

I put the cup down on the ground and wondered what was inside it. At least my original concern for the others when I saw someone following wasn't necessary. I'd been afraid they'd be hurt because of my actions and our need to run. But no immediate harm would come to Rey or Mosca's daughter. Only me. I was willing to receive whatever I deserved for my stupidity and betrayal of my own people.

Mosca would know exactly what I deserved.

I stood, my hands clasped behind my back, my head down, and waited.

“Idiot.” The tone held almost affectionate contempt.

I'd heard people call me that before. Perhaps they were right. I swallowed and said, “Very likely, sir.”

“Do you feel anything wrong after the coffee?”

“No.” Except for the shaking. “Not from the coffee.”

He paced silently.

“I know you, Calle. I knew you as a boy, and I've studied your reports as a man.”

I kept my head down. Mosca's boots stopped near my feet.

“You were willing to trade my daughter for Rey. I doubt Rey thanked you for that.”

“Yes, I was. And no. No, he didn't.” I wanted to explain my jealousy and fear and how the *Federistas* had played on that, but I knew there was no excuse.

“You want to be punished for that.”

“Yes, sir.” The misery and shame ate away at me when the old jealousy didn't. But I was where I belonged at last. In front of the right man. Finally I would receive justice without mercy.

I was on my knees before I realized what I meant to do. It felt right—I felt right—after being guilty for too long.

“Calle, you know my reputation.”

“Yes, sir.”

“When a man is on his knees before me, do you know what happens?”

I looked up at the strange note in his voice. It wasn't that I hadn't heard that tone before. It was only—

“Oh.” Yes, I knew his reputation. But I had wanted justice, and Mosca could dispense it. I had forgotten anything else.

His hand reached for his belt.

“Let me, sir.” I undid the belt, unhooked it from the pants, and handed it to him.

We waited. I began to breathe heavily. I wasn't sure how the belt would be used, but it wasn't for me to decide what happened next.

He took the leather strip, threaded it against the back of my neck, and with it still half circling my throat, he pulled my head closer to his crotch. "Well, Calle?"

My face flushed. Not with embarrassment. With pure heat.

*Very well indeed, sir.*

Justice might take a strange turn, but it felt right.

I undid the special fastener on his pants. Lust, not fear—or perhaps both—made me clumsy. When his cock was freed, erect and brushing my lips, I could have cried, for all the good that would have done either of us.

Instead I opened my mouth.

He wasn't gentle. I welcomed the ferocious thrust that half choked me. My own cock was hard, and a few drops of precum were already flowing from just that first swallow. I didn't touch myself. This wasn't for me—or at least sexual relief wasn't what I deserved today. I cupped his balls and thought about how best to service him.

He shuddered when I traced the big vein in his cock with my fingers, where blood pulsed, the cock hard and warm under my hand. Soft. Velvet-soft skin, hard cock, the salt of precum on my tongue. I shut my eyes and let myself sense what he wanted before he wanted it.

I licked the drops of precum first, flicking my tongue against his slit. His cock twitched, and then I began sucking, hard.

He cursed, so softly and in such a jumble of languages that I couldn't understand the words. The buzz in my ears didn't help. I could sense his excitement, though, and I tipped my head a little to fully swallow his length.

It wasn't easy, and it wasn't quick. I didn't expect it to be.

My jaw ached by the time the first jets of liquid hit the back of my throat. I gulped and clutched the backs of his knees to stay upright long enough to take it all.

When he stepped back, his cock drained, I was almost as satisfied as if I had come myself. I'd done penance. It might not be enough to ease the pain in my balls, but what I had done for El Patron brought its own relief. Any pain I received brought even more satisfaction.

Whatever he wanted, however he wanted it, would be my punishment and my reward.

I got to my feet again and looked at Mosca. “Do you need more, sir? Or should I go?”

I rubbed my bad leg, the one shooting twinges of fire through my body. Either staying here on my knees or walking over to the horse was going to hurt. But it still wasn't my decision.

“You're very obedient.” Mosca had already redone his pants and was looping his belt back in place. “That's not what I've heard about you.”

“Not outside of bed, no.” Not doing what was expected had almost destroyed me and everything around me. I should be happy to obey from now on, but some small demon inside made me say, “I only obey there because I like to.”

Mosca paused while tightening his belt. He gave one quick half smile and nodded. “Point taken. I'm to watch you outside of bed, then.”

I usually never find the words to say anything I'm thinking, good or bad. Whatever had taken hold of me prompted me to say next, “It would be my very great pleasure and honor for you to watch me, sir—inside or outside of bed.”

Smile gone, El Patron looked me over but chose not to respond.

I swallowed and wished I'd stayed slow of speech when it would've finally been smart to be quiet.

Mosca reached to pull over his personal hover and activate it. He mounted it, still ignoring me. But as it hummed a few inches from the ground, he finally said, “Tell Traven you can make it by tonight if you hurry. The gates still shut at nightfall, and no one is allowed in or out. Use the north gate when you ask for me.”

It wasn't so very different from the compound, then. That was almost comforting.

I nodded my head, although he didn't wait for an answer before making a neat swoop in the air, heading, presumably, for the safety of the city and leaving me to throw my hurting leg over my horse and ride back as best I could.

Even though I watched, he didn't look back.

## Chapter Two

“Where is Calle?” Rey had stopped to check the horses before he asked.

We hadn't really needed to rest them. I could see their breathing was fine and there was only the faintest sheen of sweat on their flanks. But that wasn't really why we were waiting here.

“We're in my father's safest territory. If Calle is in trouble, we have more of an issue here than harm to Calle. But there's no real problem. He'll be back soon.” I leaned over to touch Rey's hand. For reassurance. To remind him we were allies. Lovers.

I hoped I wasn't lying. What did I know about the fighting going on now? Reports in the far country were few and biased. I couldn't imagine my father defeated but thought of him as all-powerful still, just as I had when I was a child. It was probably past time to grow up.

Perhaps both he and the resistance were in danger. Was that why he'd sent me away in the first place? If so, was coming back going to put all of us in more danger?

Ah well. It didn't matter. Right now there was nowhere else to go. Thanks to Calle, we had no more safe compound in the far country. When he'd thought he could sell me to the Federistas to keep Rey safe—and away from me—everything we'd had fell apart there.

“Do you ever wonder why the two of us actually still worry over Calle?” I asked.

“I'm not worried.” Rey scowled.

“You're even more worried than I am.”

“So? I'm always more than you are. More worried, more angry, more in love. I'm human.” Rey turned his face from me as he stroked the neck of the mare I'd been riding.

He didn't see me wince. So he didn't think I was human? He could be right. I didn't have the right words for him. Worse, I didn't have the right feelings. I'd shoved down my emotions so many times for safety's sake that I wasn't always sure I had any emotions at all. It hadn't seemed

to matter to Rey when he first found me in Medianoche after I ran from him. He'd been sure of what we both felt, and that was enough.

Then.

I walked over so I could put my arms around him. His body was hot. It was always so warm. Alive. I rested my head against his back, absorbing him.

I'd spent so much of my life worrying about staying alive that I'd forgotten what it was like to actually be that way.

“Rey—”

“Traven. Mosquito.” Rey didn't turn and hold me back, even though his voice was gentle. But I could hear the love there. Even the ridiculous nickname our compound's hands had given me sounded good when he said it. “Tell me what you want.”

*Fuck me* would be wrong. He'd do it, but that wasn't what he wanted. And I couldn't ask him to make love. It didn't mean the same thing to me that it did to him. I reached up to kiss the lobe of his ear.

“Let me show you what I want, Rey. While we wait.”

He turned then and kissed me. Gently at first.

“So delicate on the outside,” he whispered against my mouth.

I pushed closer against him and whispered back, “Much tougher on the inside.” I pushed my tongue against his lips until he opened, just enough to let me slip my tongue in.

He sat down, cross-legged, and I straddled his lap, still kissing him, using my teeth to scrape at his bottom lip. He pushed my leggings down and my tunic up. I sighed against his lips.

I loved the calluses on his hands and the roughness of them on my nipples. I loved when his breath came out in one short pant of excitement when I unfastened his pants and gripped his cock.

“I know I told you it didn't matter—it doesn't—but...” He paused for air. “God, I love those breasts of yours.”

I laughed. After binding them for so long to hide my gender, I'd almost forgotten they existed as anything but a nuisance. Rey's fingers touching them, sending streaks of delight

through my body, reminded me all over again that they were a part of me, and all of me was meant to be enjoyed.

But his gentleness made me uneasy. Gentleness often did. The simmer of violence under Rey's glossily perfect surface had attracted me first. What frightened me was the kindness he could still muster when he was with me, despite his violence toward everyone else. I wanted to move on from the foreplay. Sometimes he forgot to be tender afterward.

I brushed against him lightly, so lightly that just my pubic hair touched his erection. His eyes half-shut, he smiled up at me. His cock was hard and fully erect by now, and he raised his hips to tease my labia.

*"Traven."*

Said just that way, with so much longing, I couldn't wait any longer. I wiggled down slowly, carefully at first, and he arched up. When his cock entered me, I gritted my teeth to keep from gasping.

So good.

I began to move, slick from my own need and eager to set a fast pace. He held me back just a moment.

"It's not going to always be all your way, Mosquito," he murmured.

"It is now if you want to finish. Calle may be back any minute." I laughed down at him, knowing he couldn't wait. Not any more than I could.

The tempo changed from slow to quick, rough. That was all I needed. I shouted into his hair as the fierce clutch inside tightened, almost painfully. Moments later, pleasure ripped through me. He followed after, shaking me as he came.

We stared at each other.

"Baby." He touched my lips as I eased away. I didn't want to leave. That scared me as much as anything else.

But then his face changed from sated and amused to set and alert. I knew. I'd heard the noise too. Without taking time to adjust my clothing, I rolled to the right just the way my father's defense instructors had taught me as soon as I was old enough to safely balance myself. I paused in midroll to hurl my throwing knife at the nearest rustling brush. The rustling stopped.

Rey had sprung to the left, disappearing into the cover. I heard one anguished cry and then silence. I scrambled for the extra stunner, the one we'd carelessly put inside the saddlebag when we stopped.

Rey. Where the hell was he? I kept my lower lip tight behind my upper teeth, determined to focus on staying alive and not on—

“Rey!”

He emerged in an entirely different spot from where he'd disappeared, shielding me with his body as he dragged me out of the clearing. I managed to grab the stunner just in time.

“There's too many of them. I see more hovers arriving.” He absently wiped blood from his hand when it dripped on my arm. “We have to run. I'm not sure the horses can outmaneuver them.”

I knew they couldn't, but there was nothing else to try. So much for being safe in my father's territory.

\* \* \*

Two of them had my arms bound behind me, forcing me to depend heavily on my one good leg for balance. They'd gagged me—possibly because I'd traced their ancestry a little too thoroughly and disparagingly—on the way. I still managed to head butt one before they deposited me in a heap in front of Mosca.

“Good afternoon, Calle.” He finished his work on the personal unit in front of him and pushed his chair back, not offering to help me up. “Thank you, men. You can leave.”

“Are you sure, sir?” The biggest one shot me a look through his swollen eyes. His glance promised me things that made me prefer to face Mosca alone.

Fuck him and all of them. They'd already delayed my meeting with Mosca by a day while they bullied me. Fools.

“Quite sure.”

Mosca was always confident. Of course I was on the ground in front of him once more, so he had reason to be.

“Yes, sir!” They left without freeing me.

I decided staying where I was left me with a smidgen more dignity than trying and failing to get up. And the soft carpet, the only sign of warmth in Mosca's sterile office, was more comfortable than anything else.

There was a problem, though, even beyond being bound and on the floor. Damn it, once I'd made it to Mosca, the place I'd fought to be, my words wouldn't force themselves past my throat. I was the messenger with bad news. The dirty, banged-up messenger sent into a different world that I didn't understand. It terrified me.

The city was beyond anything I could imagine. Even while I'd been fighting with the guards, I caught glimpses of the scrambled jumble of houses—a crazily constructed mass of hovels on the outside ring, gradually becoming more imposing, secure, and fortresslike as we entered the inner circle. And Mosca's headquarters, ringed by barricades and barracks, was the very inner circle.

Everything in this city on the plains was cold. Literally—the temperature was dropping by the minute—and figuratively. Outside there were no plants. No decorations. Inside, until this office and the rug, there had been nothing but military issue.

I had every reason to believe my treatment was going to be cold too.

“So, Calle. I hear you hurt two men before they got you here.” Mosca poured a goblet of alco that looked finer than I'd ever had down my throat. He sipped. “Yet you're supposedly on our side. At least this week.”

“I went to the north gate and asked for you, and they started to push at me.” The reason for my urgency swamped me again, and I found my words. “I need to talk to you immediately, damn it! Your daughter—”

“Manhandling my guards is not the best method to get to me.”

“It got your attention, didn't it? I'd have been all week arguing with them—Never mind. Damn it, this is important! Traven and Rey have been captured.”

He didn't blink, but he did put down his goblet.

“I know.” He pulled out a lethal-looking little blade from inside his jacket and pressed it against my ropes. They fell apart in seconds. “The two of them managed to actually kill two of my men and disable another four before I got them.”

“*You* captured them?”

“Not I. I was occupied with you at the time, if you recall.”

I bent my head to concentrate on rubbing my wrists and to hide the heat in my face. “You deliberately... You knew what was happening when you went to intercept me?”

And made sure I wouldn't be around to help. We all might have escaped. At least more would have died if Rey and I had been back-to-back.

Damn it, I'd only been gone a few hours. He'd had taking those two planned to the minute.

“I usually know exactly what is happening before I do anything, Calle. I wanted to see how they handled themselves, and I didn't want them coming in the usual way, where they'd be recorded and tagged. I appreciate that you didn't tell my men anything, for what it's worth. And while I didn't expect the bonus I got for diverting you, it was pleasant. It also gave me a useful insight into your character.”

“Where are they?” I refused to ask what he thought he knew about me now.

“Safe. Sounding the alarm is why you were trying so hard to find me, I gather, so you can relax.” Mosca held out his hand and, with surprising strength, helped me get on my feet again.

I touched the cut on my lip and tried not to be lost in resentment. I'd damned near killed myself to sound that alarm. For nothing.

“Can I see them?”

Rey. Even more than having hurt and resentment, I was worried. Something in my head was screaming that I needed to help Rey. Mosca's daughter would be safe enough with her father, but Rey—

“Eventually.”

“Why not now?”

“Because I have a proposition for you.”

Heat spread over my face too quickly for me to hide it. Mosca laughed.

“Not that. I'd like to propose something that may be difficult at first but would eventually provide rewards for you.”

“Ahhh.” I thought about it. With Mosca, *difficult* could mean anything. “Yes, sir?”

“Would you like to be able to walk fairly normally on that one leg of yours?”

Would I give my soul to have the chance to be what I used to be?

“Of course.” It wouldn't wipe out the years of bitterness and pain and the feeling of uselessness, but *of course*. “What would the difficult part be?”

“It may take several operations. I doubt you'd ever get your leg fully normal, but it should and could be better than now. My surgeons have a great deal of experience in getting injured limbs to function.”

I could feel the need almost choking me. But I had to ask. “And what do I have to do in return?”

“Serve me.”

“Fight?” I could fight. I didn't mind fighting for something. But fighting for Mosca meant death. I'd seen the changes in Rey after his stint in the resistance forces. If Rey had been that close to being destroyed, I would certainly be. I didn't even understand what the war was about. All I knew was that Rey and Mosca were my people, and that meant I was on their side.

“In a manner of speaking. You and Rey—and my dear child—effectively eliminated a number of my personal guards. I need a replacement.”

“Me?” Mosca's guards were known throughout the country. Becoming one was almost impossible.

“If you succeed in the training. Of course, if you do succeed and become one of my guards, you may well die. I'm a dangerous person to protect.”

I'd be with Mosca. Night and day. Watching him. Ready to step in whenever he needed someone.

I knew enough about myself to know I craved that kind of service. Hadn't I been Rey's dog for years? When he turned from me, everything had gone wrong. I needed someone else to care for. Was that what Mosca had learned about me when I did service him?

I licked my lips. “All right.”

“You're being very agreeable for a man who just smashed my guard's face in.” Mosca raised his eyebrows.

“What are my options? I can't go home again.” I'd had a hand in what must have ended with the destruction of the compound, the place I'd called home for decades. Even if it were

rebuilt, I wouldn't be welcome. "You won't let me see Rey if I refuse. I want to walk. Of course I agree."

\* \* \*

"Rey?"

Her voice was tentative. I clutched both sides of the sling chair to keep calm. My shirt collar was already ringed with sweat.

I must not scare her.

That command was all I could keep in my head while the rest of my body screamed.

"I wasn't sure—" I tried to steady my voice.

"That I'd come here?" She knelt in front of me and covered one clutching hand.

So small. Kneeling made her even smaller.

I shook my head. "That they'd let you."

"I have a right to see you." Her eyes burned dark and hot into me, and her tone was imperious.

It was foolish of me to worry that she wouldn't find her way to me.

"Yes." The wrenching, painful fear eased a little. Even if she wouldn't say it, I believed she'd needed to see me as much as I needed her. I let one hand go and clasped hers.

Gently. Mustn't hurt her.

She stood up, and I saw the normal Mosquito again. Her face was composed while she assessed my situation. She pulled her broad-brimmed hat off and tossed it to the floor so she could look me over closely. "How are they treating you?"

"Very carefully." I cleared my throat. "I broke one of the doctor's arms when I first came."

She snorted. "If they got that close while you hallucinated, they were idiots."

"They've gotten smarter with time. Traven—"

"Rey?"

"Don't let me hurt you." I didn't want to tell her the things I'd imagined while hallucinating. My worst fears roared to life during my waking nightmares, and apparently all my worst fears

now included losing her. I could probably live without seeing her, as long as I didn't hurt her. Probably.

"Not likely." She looked too nonchalant, so she had to be acting. Even so, she was the first person I'd met in days who didn't seem terrified of me. Including me. She whirled toward me, eyes hot again. "Did they put you in restraints?"

I smiled the first real smile I'd had in days. "Not likely. You're the only one who gets to do that, baby."

She grinned back but kept questioning. "No sedatives?"

"Not until I purge what I have in me."

"You're eating?"

"Some." If you called soup that I threw up a few days ago eating.

"Then you'll eat more." She stroked my arm. It quivered where she touched it. "You're tense as a new recruit with a stunner, Rey."

"And as liable to blow." I nodded.

An orderly knocked on the door with a bowl. I could smell the contents and tried not to make a face. More of the same soup. Traven met him at the door, not allowing him any closer. Thank God. I'd had enough of people. Of everyone but her.

"How—" I stopped. She hadn't asked anyone to bring anything, but she didn't need to. There were transmitters in here, of course. Every sound and move I made was likely watched. And anything she wanted would be allowed.

She opened the cover of the bowl and sniffed.

"Do better than this slop." She put the bowl back on the floor by the door and turned again toward me. "What would you like to eat?"

"Nothing." That was the wrong answer. She frowned. "I mean, anything but that so-called soup." My stomach pitched again at the smell.

With my peripheral vision, I saw the door open cautiously, just wide enough to allow the soup to be whisked away, but I was happier to focus on Traven. Watching her pace, eyeing the swirl of her skirts as she marched up and down the small room, was suddenly soothing even though she was in nervous motion.

“So. How do you feel?”

“Like a man withdrawing from something that could kill him.” In other words, like I was being ripped open and letting raptors feed on my guts.

“They say it's good you switched to *Tía's* natural drug from the military brand. That creates less-potent fighter flu.”

As if I had a choice. There had been nothing left but *Tía's* drug when I switched. Now there was almost no drug left in me at all, and my body was desperate for something to ease the comedown. I kept staring at Traven, trying to hold on to reality through her. Everything away from Traven was frightening and ugly. “But they don't know if the experimental antidote will work, because it's not the same. Close, but not the same.”

“Why do you say that?” Traven sounded angry again.

“Because I'm not deaf, and the staff talk in front of me. I'm not a fool either. An experimental antidote combined with the wrong drug makes this trial even riskier.”

“I insisted on letting you be in the test group.” Traven's voice sounded far-off to me.

She had ordered it, and Mosca hadn't put up much of an argument when she confronted him with her plan for me. Was that because he didn't want to fight his own blood or because he knew it was useless? He'd been my mentor long ago, but that was very long ago, before I ran from his military and left his home unprotected. He must care for his daughter, but I was nothing. Less than that. It wouldn't really matter if I died.

“I was there when you demanded it for me, baby. I know. Thank you. You did good, fighting for me.” The door opened again, but I didn't even try to glimpse what was there. I didn't want to lose sight of Traven.

Besides, thinking of others was dangerous. The adrenaline was surging in me at just the thought of prey nearby. It would have been satisfying to beat on someone just to let some of that seething violence out, but not with Traven watching. I didn't want to lose control in front of her the way I had before.

Traven. Alive and fierce and afraid. She made my blood beat harder, made me want to live when I'd started to think death was easier than life.

She swooped over to the tray and said, “This food looks better. If we try hard, we can pretend it's stew.”

Calle used to make a hell of a stew. Back home...

She spooned something into me that was hot and almost had taste.

“Better?”

I swallowed. My stomach jittered and then settled when she put her hand against it.

“Yes.”

She fed me. I would have added as if *I were a child*, but I didn't remember being fed that way before in my whole life. She fed me as if she cared.

When she was done, I muttered, already half-asleep, “Kiss me.”

She didn't argue. Her mouth was on mine, and I tasted her. Her lips were like life pouring into me. A life with strength and hope.

“It's chilly in here.” She pulled up a thin military blanket and put it over me. I didn't tell her that I alternated between the sweats and the shakes, so it wasn't needed. For some reason the blanket's weight on me relaxed me this time.

“I need to sleep now. Come back when I'm awake.” I wanted to clutch at her hand.

I dug my nails back into the chair instead, my hands hidden by the blanket. I wasn't going to hurt her. I wasn't going to touch her. And the damn vultures who were watching us weren't going to see more of how much I cared and how strong she'd stay for me.

But she didn't care who watched. She kissed me, sweetly and long, until I kissed her back, my hands tight in her hair, wanting her to be with me.

“Always. I'll always come back, Rey.”

## Chapter Three

"You look tired." Mosquito said the words like they'd been surprised out of her.

If she hadn't noticed that before after these weeks with him, she was blind. Or a daughter not used to seeing her father weak.

Mosca looked more than tired. He looked like he was hollowed out. If I could have moved freely, I would have moved to catch his arm before he stumbled. But I couldn't, and he didn't.

"A little." He went to fetch one of his bottles of alco. Expensive or not, it served the same purpose any cheap alco could—to blur some emotion that needed to be smoothed out and forgotten. Something had been bad for him today. I could tell.

She didn't want to hear that, though, and he wasn't going to tell her. So I broke in.

"You look tired too," I said to her. Her face was drawn, and there were smudges under her eyes.

"Calle! You're here!" Mosquito turned to where I sat in the corner. She sounded pleased.

Guilt, mingled with the almost wish I could be as pleased, flashed over me. I was used to those emotions with Mosquito. There had never been anything easy between us, not even before Rey arrived to claim her.

"Yes." I tried for simple.

"How are you?"

I'd had half the operations promised me. I was in a wheeled chair now, my leg completely immobile, while I waited for the rest. The pain was only now tolerable, after days of agony.

"All right," I said. What I felt didn't matter to these two anyhow. They wouldn't want to hear about the endless pain of the operations. "I've been learning to read."

"What?" Mosquito looked startled. "You didn't know how?"

"Who would teach us? The schools shut down before I could walk."

“I see that all my military and personal guards learn basic reading as part of their training. It can be useful in the field.” Mosca stared into what was left of the liquid he was drinking.

“But the children don't know? Something should be done.” Mosquito frowned. “I'll think about what later.”

I nodded, not sure if she wanted to continue to talk to me or go back to ignoring my presence.

We'd settled into what had to be the most luxurious part of Mosca's headquarters, the formal dining room. There was art in this room—paintings and marbled sculptures. The walls were painted a soft yellow, where everywhere else, if it was painted at all, was a grayish white.

I'd been told this was where dignitaries met with Mosca. It was the only place where he showed he had more wealth than his followers—that is, if you didn't know all the electro-equipment he owned or the fine food his guests ate or that whatever he wished was there within minutes once he said he wanted it.

The two of them fit the grandeur of the place. I'd never seen Mosquito in a gown before, if you didn't count the time she played prostitute at Medianoche. This outfit was quite different. She was dressed in virginal white and lace and looked as elegant as her father did in his uniform.

“I saw Rey.” I wasn't sure if she meant to say that to me or her father. She didn't look at either of us as she settled in front of the piano. She touched the keys. Soft, intricate music whispered quietly around us.

Mosca didn't answer. But I wasn't going to play games, waiting for one of them to crack first.

“How is he?” I asked.

For a half second, her music faltered. She began again. “Unhappy. Afraid. I know you must have reviewed what he was like, Father. What do you think?”

“I'm not a doctor.” Mosca kept drinking.

“He doesn't need a doctor. At least not as much as he needs me.” She still didn't look at him.

The two of them played against each other like masters. But this was about Rey, not gamesmanship.

“Why?” I asked.

“You overestimate what you can do for an addict, Traven.” Mosca wasn't slurring his words, but he looked...different.

“This is not just an addict. It's *Rey*.” There was almost feeling in Mosquito's words this time. But she finished her tune and carefully shut the cover to the piano's keyboard as if it didn't matter.

“Traven, what do you remember of the day the Federistas came to kill you and your mother and brother?”

I jolted. There was still no visible emotion in Mosca's voice, but I could feel tension rise in the room. I could've made bets that neither of them ever talked about the past, and I would've won.

“What does that have to do—Never mind.” Mosquito stood up. “I remember lying still, very still, trying not to breathe because Mama told me I must. And she lay next to me, holding Stephen while he slept. I prayed he would stay asleep, because he was too small to know how to be quiet. And then there was a burst of noise as someone battered through the wall. I thought it was all over then. But it was your men breaking in to grab us. I didn't know that. None of us did. But they snatched us and were gone before we could do anything.”

“I started training you to defend yourself after that. To stay strong and alert.” Mosca drank again. “To always watch. To not care if everything else around you fell apart, as long as you were safe.”

“Yes.”

“You're safe now. As safe as I can make you. But you're suffering over someone else. Your mother never learned to be careful above everything and anyone else. Eventually it killed her as surely as the Federista poison they slipped into her. I thought I had taught you, though.”

“Yes. I thought I'd learned your lessons too well to let anyone become important to me.” They'd forgotten me. They'd forgotten they were playing. I tried to think of myself as invisible so they could talk. “Perhaps I wasn't as good a student as I thought.”

“I wasn't as good a teacher as I should have been, perhaps. Because I always cared about you more than anything or anyone else, especially after your mother and brother were killed.” Mosca set the glass down. “Just as now you care about someone else. More than anyone.”

“No! I don't want to care.” Traven rubbed her arms, as if chilled. “I haven't told him anything. It frightens me.”

“Yes.” Mosca half smiled. “It should.”

“I love you, Father.” She bent forward and kissed his cheek. “We haven't said that to each other in a very long time.”

“I may never say it again.” He touched her hair and then shook his head. “Go tell the doctors that I've ordered Rey moved to my quarters. Under guard. He's still dangerous.”

“The most dangerous man in the world for me.” Mosquito smiled suddenly and radiantly. “I'll get you something to eat now. That should make you feel better.”

She darted out of the room, probably afraid to admit anything more emotional.

*“The most dangerous man in the world for me.”*

Yes. I understood. Rey had been the most dangerous man for me—because I cared. Cared and competed against him. But he had always been Rey—sun and king and leader. Even before the accident, I could never be quite as fast or strong or clever. And he would never care as much as I did, because I wasn't worthy.

But Mosquito. Traven. She'd called herself a trophy once. She was. She was the crown princess, the prize. And Rey had won the prize. Whether she ever admitted it out loud, they both loved each other. She and Rey had won each other. Which meant I'd lost.

“What are you thinking, Calle?” Mosca's voice wasn't drunk, not quite, but didn't hold its usual cool tone.

Tonight Mosca was going to be a mortal?

“I'm wondering why I'm here.” Among many other things.

“For me.”

I'd lost to a king and a crown princess, but now Mosca wanted me? That couldn't be right. Mosca was... There were no words to describe his importance. Maybe *Dios* was closest.

“I can't protect you the way I am now.” He must want me to guard him. He couldn't mean anything else.

“You can begin to learn. Just as you learned to be completely silent when I speak to others.” Mosca tapped his chin. “I almost did forget you were there while Traven and I talked.”

Of course. I was to be in the background. I *was* the background. That was an easy lesson. *Campesinos* knew that from the time they were old enough to know El Patron existed, and that it was best not to have him notice you.

One of his aides came with food and set it in front of Mosca. Mosca toyed with some fruit as the orderly fussed around him and then retreated. I waited.

“Have something, Calle. I'm not hungry.” Mosca waved to his plate.

“You should eat.”

“I'm rarely hungry and rarely sleep. Perhaps I'm not human, as the Federistas believe.”

“A spawn of the devil?” I'd heard that said in Medianoche. “I doubt it. Or no more than any other man is.”

I'd thought myself one often enough. But hunger couldn't let me think about the devil or my own wickedness. I wasn't sure if Mosca was tempting me with his food for a reason, but I was willing to give in tonight. Probably any night if he wanted me to. Just let me get my strength back, and I'd be happy to agree to anything.

For now, though, it was food.

I rolled myself forward in my chair and, tentatively, forked up something that smelled delicious. I didn't know what it was—I didn't cook anything that looked like that. But I was an ignorant peasant who had been used for his strength until I was crippled. I had only been forced to cook once I had no other useful skills at the compound. It was that or be thrown out.

“She's beautiful. My daughter.”

“Yes, sir.” Aha. I suspected we were getting to the reason why I was here, though I wasn't sure why he cared about my opinion of Mosquito.

“And you hate her.”

“No. And yes.” I might as well be honest. Mosca was supposed to know everything, just like Dios did. Did he know I watched his daughter with lust and anger? Sometimes. There *was* wickedness in me. “I envy her.”

“Don't.”

“Yes, sir.” It was easier to say than to do. But tonight, while Mosca smiled at me as if he enjoyed my company, and fed me delicious tidbits, I was prepared to try. I was entering a new world. It was time to shed old habits.

As if he knew my thoughts—and perhaps he did—Mosca said, “After tonight you belong to me. Just me. There will be no envy of others, because there is no one but me.”

I swallowed the last bite of food down a dry throat.

“You said you had no other options when you agreed to be my guard. But I want you to choose, Calle. Freely choose.”

“And if I choose you, there will be no other gods before you? Sir?”

“Exactly. In a few more weeks you'll have two legs again. I want you to use them and the rest of your body in my service. No one else's.”

If I left, what would he do?

Find someone else. He was to be everything to me, but I knew that feeling wasn't going to be returned. As long as I knew there was no hope of that, maybe there would be no envy. Maybe what he offered was enough.

He sat, waiting for my answer, his eyes staring into mine.

No. I was going to have to try for more, even if there was no hope of more. Didn't I always?

“I agree. There will be no one else for me. But you're going to find there is no one else for you. At least no one else will be able to do what I can for you.” I meant it. I don't even know how I believed it after coming in second to everyone else. But I knew I was right.

I thought his eyes glittered for a moment. Tears? Amusement? A trick of the light? But then he bowed his head in agreement, and I wasn't sure what I'd seen.

“I know that already, Calle. You're going to be very important to me. That's why you're here.”

When he laid his hand on my leg, I got hard. Just like that, as if I'd been waiting forever for him to touch me. It hurt to even breathe, I wanted him so badly.

He flipped the back of my chair down. The chair was an expensive one that was meant to double as a stretcher in a hospital. But I didn't think most military hospitals used it for what he planned—God, what I prayed he planned—to do.

He peeled away the opening of my loose leggings, and there I was, exposed to him, my cock standing tall as he smoothed the fabric down my thighs. I did my best to help him get the damn things out of the way. Even the jolt of pain as I shifted was worth it when he took my cock in a firm hold. I damn near wanted to cry.

I tried to tell myself it was because I hadn't jacked off in weeks—hadn't even wanted to during the pain—but that wasn't the only reason. If he touched me, whenever he touched me, I'd always want him just this way. Just that much.

But I couldn't do anything for him. Not like this. Why the hell had he started anything now?

As if he were reading my thoughts, he said, “Don't move, Calle. I'm not going to hurt you. I'm going to please you.”

He gripped my balls, and I thought it might be over right then. I concentrated on not moving instead. I wanted this to last a little longer. I doubted Mosca did this often, and I wanted to enjoy my gift.

Then he whispered, next to my cock, “I want this.” He brushed, lightly, against my marred leg, and I fought not to buck against his hand. “I want this too. All of you, good and bad. All of it is important to me, Calle. You're perfect.”

“Then take me.”

He grasped my cock firmly and began to pump it. I shuddered and gasped. I stared at the wedding ring that glinted on his finger, the scars on his knuckles, trying not to let myself go. But my balls hurt with the effort.

“Don't fight me, Calle. Anyone else, if you wish. But not me.” His thumbnail scraped against the head of my cock, tantalizing with a flick of painful pleasure.

He sucked on his fingers and paused just long enough to smile at me, a slow, cocky, promising kind of grin. Mesmerized, I watched him suction the digit in and out of his mouth. I was past feeling pain twinges from my surgery when he rolled me onto my good side, or if there

was pain, it didn't matter. When he pulled his finger out of his mouth and teased my asshole with it, I shouted out.

I gripped his forearm, braced above me, like it would save me. I tried to watch what he'd do next, but my vision was blurring. He took two fingers and stretched. I shut my eyes and reminded myself not to move.

"I like that. I like watching you helpless," he said, his words jumbling in my head.

He kissed me, his teeth biting on my lips as he thrust his fingers in my hole—not roughly, but not waiting for my permission. There was slight pain as he entered and more pain as he pushed up deep and, over all that, the wash of blinding, white-hot pleasure when he hit the right spot. I groaned into his mouth, the sound lost in his kiss.

"Now, Calle. Come for me. *Mi soldado*. Mine."

With a sigh, I gave in. Gave up. Surrendered to him, let the need pull me under. And when he kissed me again, I came.

"Thank you." I didn't thank people well. But I needed to then.

He smiled and stroked my thigh until the last of my cum eased out of me. Then I shut my eyes to hide the tears.

## Chapter Four

“Ugh.” Other than the one grunt, the other man had no warning.

Calle sprang from flat on the ground to up on his feet and rammed the trainee with his shoulder.

“Ahh!” Clutching at his rib cage, the man gasped for air and dropped his weapon.

Calle ran a hand through his hair, grimaced at the sweat and blood he found there, and limped off the field.

“Did you hurt him?” I was waiting, arms crossed, leaning against the academy wall.

“That's not my problem. I try to make sure no one is seriously injured when they fight me—but my definition of serious might not be theirs.”

“I admit I wondered when I heard you'd been recruited. You're not as young as the rest of them. You're damn good on that leg, but you're not as agile. Yet the others have been talking about you in awed whispers all during practice today.” I hadn't seen him fight like that for years, not since we were young and stupid and able to take on almost anything, including each other.

“I'm meaner. And I know a hell of a lot more than they do about dirty fighting.” Calle wiped his face with one dirty tunic sleeve.

“You're winded, old man.”

“Not as bad as the agile kid out there.” Calle grinned, a glint shining in his eyes.

“You're enjoying yourself.” I uncrossed my arms and fell into step beside him. It felt both odd and right that he strode easily across the field now, matching my steps. “I don't know when I've last seen that in you.”

“You're happy yourself. I don't know when I've seen that last either.”

“I am?” I paused. I'd had nowhere to go, no job to do, and a woman who wanted to avoid loving me. “You know, it's crazy, but I think you're right.”

The demon of death wasn't chattering at my shoulder anymore. I had time to figure out what came next. I had a whole new life to lead.

"You smile." Calle paused to look at me. "Almost like you used to, Rey. I always liked that smile."

"Huh. You never smiled before. Now you do." It gave me an uneasy twist in my gut. Fate was never that good. And Calle had always had the worst luck of any of us. "Any reason for that?"

"I can walk. Isn't that reason enough?"

I'd had a hand in crippling him. It'd been an accident, but it destroyed everything he was meant to be, turned him into someone he shouldn't have become. I didn't want to probe more, change his mood back to the old, angry, restless Calle. Why not let us both be happy?

"Any particular person you're smiling about?" I hadn't believed Traven when she told me what she suspected. But something was going on with Calle. Even I could tell that.

"Jealous?" A flash of the old, bitter tone ran through the question.

"No. Happy for you. That is, if things are good between you and him." Jesus, I was an old woman. What difference did it make?

If it was Mosca, it made a difference. Mosca didn't do anything purely for someone's happiness. Especially not his own.

"You have other people's happiness to worry about now. Why not go and do that?"

I cleared my throat. "Strange you should mention that. I'm thinking of asking Traven to union it."

I didn't know how she'd like the idea of being a wife. I doubted that she'd want to be that close to anyone. But I couldn't stop thinking about the possibility.

"That's no surprise. You've wanted something like that from her ever since you saw her."

"She wants to get out of the city. She hasn't said so, but I know. We might try rebuilding the compound." I said out loud what had been buzzing inside me ever since I'd been told I was "cured." We could make a new start in the place I still thought of as home. She wouldn't say, but I believed she thought of it as home too. Or she would if she let herself.

"That could be tricky, Rey."

“I know. Do you want to help? Come with us?” I hadn't even let myself think that until now.

Calle had always lived in the out country. I couldn't imagine him here, in the middle of a military compound in the middle of a city, even in his strangely happy mood.

He stared at me after I asked. His face changed from happiness to something more wistful. Then he closed himself off, like the old Calle would have, and shook his head.

“Why not?”

“I'm not needed enough there.”

“You think I don't need you, *hermano*?” It was the closest we'd ever come to saying what was between us. To try to put a label on it.

“You might need me, but not enough. I understand that now. Once I would have said yes. It would have been difficult even then. You know I care about you. I might've come to want you and your Mosquito's happiness—almost enough. But it would always grate that you never needed me the way you do her. And Mosquito? She doesn't want to want anyone, not even you. You'll have to focus everything you have to keep her.” Calle shrugged. “Better to leave it all behind, Rey. Make your place without me.”

I don't know why I did it. Traven would have laughed at me and said because I was a man. But when he dismissed me like that, I jabbed him in the ribs, exactly where I knew he'd fallen from a horse long ago. He hissed.

“So you're tough enough to be on your own at last, asshole?”

“Maybe you've forgotten how tough I am, Rey.” The reckless glint was back in his eyes, even though he put his war face on.

He fainted. I stayed steady, just moving enough to let his fist whoosh past my ear. He fainted again, but this time I pulled his bad leg out from under him and rolled down with him to the ground. How many times had we done this over the years? Half war, half love, with our bodies straining against each other?

I grunted when he jabbed into my scarred shoulder. If he separated that again, I'd be pissed. His arm held against my windpipe until I slammed my fist against his nose.

Wheezing, I tried for the bad leg again, but he moved it.

“Idiots!”

That was our only warning before ice gel fell on top of us. Jesus fuck! We both yelled. Ice gel was effective when you dipped an aching hand or leg into it. A bucket of the stuff all over you burned as much as froze.

Mosquito didn't waste time in sympathy or explanation. She stood over the two of us until she saw we were more interested in flinging the clingy ooze from us than fighting.

“Fucking fools. Both of you get healthy just long enough to beat yourselves senseless?” She turned on her heel and marched back toward Mosca's headquarters. The small crowd of trainees behind her took the hint and backed away too.

Calle began to laugh. “Maybe I *could* love her, hermano. She made you look like pig swill.”

“You might want to clean yourself up too. You don't look exactly street ready. God, I hope there's enough water pressure to take a shower.” I inched some of the mess out of my ear, shivering, and hoping the unpredictable water supply had enough in store for me to get clean.

“You need to look pretty for your woman, I suppose.” He didn't sound sour about Traven the way he usually did.

I paused. “I always did care about you, Calle.”

Maybe not quite the way he wanted. But I did.

“I know.” He stood up, slowly, rubbing his leg. “But if you care too much more, we'll end up in the hospital again.”

“Naw. This is different.” This fight wasn't drug-hazed anger. This had been...fun.

Traven had known we wouldn't really hurt each other. If it'd been serious, there would've been more than ice gel on us. She hadn't hesitated to use a stunner on me once, when she had to.

Calle reached down and helped to haul me up again. Dios, the bastard was strong! I kept my hand in his for a moment longer.

“If she says yes—and I'm not so sure she will right now—will you stand with me at the union?”

Calle smiled. His real smile, which had been hidden for so long. “I'll always stand with you, Rey. Even at your damned union to someone else.”

“So, I hear you two boys wanted to play.”

I saw Calle look up as guiltily as I did. There they were—father and daughter, looking eerily alike as they stood together, arm in arm.

“It's done, sir.” I opted for military formality. “Very sorry.”

“You two may want to show the others how to spar sometime. It was quite a show.”

Jesus, he'd probably recorded it. His electro-toys were everywhere. If so, he'd seen how Traven stopped it too. I wondered how many in the barracks were going to get a laugh from that.

Traven grinned at me. Oh yes. A lot of people were going to laugh.

Calle straightened himself up. “We—”

But whatever Calle meant to say was lost in the sudden explosion behind me.

\* \* \*

“Jesus fuck.” I realized I was saying the words over and over as I crouched over Traven, touching her arms and legs. “Baby? Are you all right?”

She shook her head and coughed.

I didn't know what the head shake meant except that she couldn't talk. The dust and smoke were thick enough that talking was difficult. But I kept patting her and looking for blood.

There were screams and groans behind us, but since no one was bothering us, I let the rest of the angry and the wounded fend for themselves. Traven sat up and coughed.

“I'm all right.” Her voice was as calm as ever when there was danger. “You're bleeding, Rey.”

Her hands reached out to touch my cheek. It stung for the first time.

“I caught some debris flying by.” I looked at her as she moved. She really did seem all right. The fist in my stomach unclenched a little.

“What the hell—” Calle's voice from behind me was strong, if a little dazed.

“It's nothing. We get attacks every now and then.” Mosca sounded as calm as his daughter. “I'll need to find out how the fuck someone got through, though. It's a danger when we take new recruits. You don't know for sure where they come from for the first few weeks.”

“Are you all right, sir?” Calle sounded more shaken than anyone else.

“Yes. I'll be curious to know if they used some of the experimental explosive we've been working on.” Mosca rolled over and stood up. “I'd like to think they haven't gotten their hands on any yet. Of course if they have, they haven't used it properly. We might have died, otherwise.”

He walked over to his daughter and reached out to touch Traven's hand. They touched briefly before he let go.

I turned back to see Calle, flat on his back, slowly push himself up. He looked at all of us like we were crazy. He finally said, “Let's get inside. It's probably safer there if there's a second explosion.”

Mosca pulled out his transmitter. “Jules, I'll be at headquarters. Report there.”

Calle kept staring at Mosca. “Sir.”

“Yes?”

“You got it wrong.”

I thought Mosca looked almost...embarrassed.

“What do you mean?”

“You're not supposed to be shielding *me*. Sir.”

That's when I realized Mosca had been covering Calle's body with his own. Considering their sizes, that seemed to be not just a reversal of procedure, but futile. Mosca could never have completely protected Calle.

But he'd tried.

I knew enough to keep my mouth shut as we limped toward headquarters. But I wanted to know more.

Or maybe I didn't. Usually it was better for my peace of mind when Mosca kept his dark secrets to himself.

\* \* \*

“So. What do you think of them?” Mosca had come for our suddenly hurried graduation. With more guards dead after the explosion, our weeks of instruction were going to be cut short, and we were to be pressed into service immediately.

Mosca himself planned to inspect us. I wanted to think his presence was really for me, but of course he needed to get to know all his new personal guards. Even more lowering, he wasn't looking at me or any one of the new guards. His attention was focused on our trainers.

Our instructor looked toward Gato first. I hid my annoyance. Of course he would push that recruit forward. She was the epitome of what Mosca's personal guard should be. Unobtrusive, fearless, and quick.

"This one will shine for you, sir." The instructor laid his hand on Gato's shoulder.

Shine indeed. Gato'd been my nemesis for the past three months, held up as an example from the first day.

"It will be a pleasure to work with you, Gato." Mosca nodded to her, and Gato stood a little straighter to attention, if that was possible.

Work with her indeed. I'd make sure she never got closer to him than—

"And Calle?" Mosca looked at me, finally singling me out.

The instructor hesitated, damn him. I trained myself to stay still, face blank. If after all this he turned me down, I'd gut him.

"This is your man in a rough spot."

I relaxed inwardly, just a little.

"But he's a bit of a handful at other times."

I almost snarled. Only that damned training they'd yelled and cursed and damn near beat into us kept me from displaying what a handful I could be.

"I can manage difficulty as long as he's worth it." Mosca's amusement lurked, just a little, in his voice. His face was sober.

"With all that's gone on today, I suspect you'll be seeing plenty of trouble. He'll be worth it during those times, sir."

And with that dubious accolade, I stepped forward, saluted, and stepped back. Done. I was one of the general's personal guard.

I was officially Mosca's.

"Congratulations." The instructor saluted all of us in turn.

Mosca stepped forward. "I look forward to knowing all of my new guards. My life is, quite literally, in your hands. While my life is important to me, of course, it shouldn't be important to you. I, as a man, shouldn't be important. What I can do for the cause we believe in if I stay alive—that is worth sacrificing for. That's what we will be working on together. Thank you."

Was he trying to tell me something? If so, it was too late. He'd put the lie to whether the cause was more important than an individual life when he risked his for mine. No, even before, when he'd asked for more from me. I was his, not the cause's, and he knew it.

He turned to look at me with a critical eye, as if to argue with my inner thoughts.

"You. Calle. Come on." Mosca turned on his heel. "You may as well begin your duties now."

\* \* \*

"As far as I can see, you and the Feds have fought each other to a standstill." Traven peered at the interactive map. "Your side and theirs know each other too well."

She had her hands in her pockets while she spoke to her father. Were they shaking, the way mine were now that we'd had time to realize what had almost happened? I could have lost her.

"You could move Dulks to reinforce Rojas. It would leave you vulnerable at the west wing, but there's not much else left you can do." I shrugged, realizing I'd only corroborated Traven's more pithy summation.

"That's not something to be said outside this room, but...you're precisely right." Mosca rubbed his face. "Both sides have limited resources, and there's no more to be had for any of us."

"Then what?" Calle stood in the corner like a well-trained personal guard would, his gaze on the room, scanning for threats, not looking at the people in it.

"Then it's time to do something different." I cut in. I didn't want this discussion now, though I'd had it in my head for months and promised I'd say something if the opportunity presented itself. I'd spent years fighting and rehearsing in my head—usually with more obscenities than anything else—just what I'd tell Mosca and the rest of his generals if I ever got the chance. Of course the chance would happen right now.

Right now when I had other things on my mind.

But here everyone was—at least two people too many in the room—and my personal plans weren't going to happen anytime soon. It appeared that we were going to talk about war instead.

“I agree with you, Rey.” Mosca looked at me. “It's time for diplomacy.”

“You *agree*?” The resistance never negotiated with the Feds. Ever. It was something we'd all learned from the start of the war. Because Feds never negotiated with us unless they intended to betray us.

“I've had some indirect discussions with Freyer.” Mosca kept looking at me as if I had still more answers.

He overestimated me. All I had was questions. Generalissimo Freyer? The head of the North Federal Army was willing to talk?

“I don't understand.” Freyer was one of our fiercest opponents and led one of the largest Federista armies. How the hell did Mosca manage to secretly contact him?

“And I don't understand why you're telling us. I'm only your daughter, not one of your lieutenants. Yet you're showing us your plans, things you probably don't show to your most trusted aides.” Traven walked over to stand beside me, her hand on my shoulder. “What do you want, Father?”

He sighed. “From you? I want you away from here.”

She didn't get angry or hurt. Not Mosca's daughter. She considered, frowning slightly, and then said, “Am I in danger beyond these random attacks? Or am I a danger to your plans?”

“Both.”

Her hand was still on my shoulder, but this wasn't the romantic setting I'd thought we needed. But then, it wasn't as if we'd ever had romance between us.

Just a bond. My heart bonded to hers.

And crap! I suddenly realized if my little tussle with Calle had been recorded with audio, she likely already knew what I wanted from her. She'd learned it in front of her father and God knows how many military men.

This wasn't a good time to ask, but it was necessary.

“Traven.” I said the words to her, just her, even though her father and my almost brother, almost lover were in the room with us. “Will you union it with me?”

No one said anything. She took her hand from my shoulder.

“Why?”

I must have shaken her. She hated to ask that simple question. Usually when she was forced to ask, she showed she had already guessed the answer. Did she really have no idea this time?

“Because I want to be with you forever. I want you to be with me. Because I love you.”

She looked down at her fingers, then up again. “It's not common for people to bother with a formal uniting anymore. It's legal, of course, but unnecessary. For us it would just mean another way for Feds to track us down.”

“Your father and mother did. They were in more danger then than we are now.” I hoped. “We can go back to the compound. If it's safe.”

“It's as safe as anywhere. The Feds either know or suspect what I planted there, and have done nothing to disturb the place,” Mosca said.

“What did you plant?” I asked, not sure I wanted to know.

“There's a small amount of Howl in the entry gates. It's a new, very stable, very concentrated explosive. It will only be activated by a particular electro-starter. And it will completely destroy anything within twenty yards of its epicenter. Beyond that there is no property destruction. Only living things will die for a mile or two.”

Like the area around the road we'd used to enter the city. We'd be living with that threat at our entryway.

Traven glanced at her father and then back at me, frowning again.

*What do you want to do, Traven? And if you know, will you admit it?*

“All right.”

Her voice was emotionless, but God help me, I shut my eyes to hide my tears. It wasn't the words. It was when she'd said them, she reached out to grip both my hands tightly, as if she didn't want to let go.

## Chapter Five

I lit candles. Once I did, I realized it was something a woman might do for her lover. I wasn't a woman, and I didn't mean it to be romantic. The explosion had fucked up our power supply, and the lights in the dining hall flickered on and off like...like candles.

On the other hand, the candle glow did add a soft light. I glanced over at Mosca, who was back at his personal unit, working. He'd been soft today. Protective of me.

I wondered if I could take advantage of that softness and the candlelight tonight.

Not likely.

So I tapped his shoulder and said, "Time to eat, sir."

He glanced up at me, his eyes unfocused. "Later."

"No, sir. Now."

He focused on me then, looking annoyed. "I'm not hungry."

"You will be once you see this dinner." I folded my arms and refused to leave. "I cooked it myself. Your cook went missing in the explosion, so someone had to step in."

I didn't add that several personal guards were checking the grounds carefully to see if pieces of the cook were all that remained or if he'd just run. We still didn't know who had set off the explosive, and the cook was as likely a suspect as any.

"What culinary masterpiece are you going to tempt me with?" He almost smiled.

"Chili. With huevos rancheros on the side." I might not be a fancy cook, but what I could cook, I knew how to do right.

"It'll be like being home." He stood up. "Very well, Calle. I'm tempted."

I hoped so. I'd wished the whole crowd of others away a million times today. Even watching Rey, standing there with tears in his eyes as he kissed his woman, hadn't made me stop

wishing they'd all vanish. Or maybe it was especially watching Rey, slowly reeling in what he wanted, that made me want to try for myself.

I served dinner to my prey at the large, lonely table, and then I waited. He looked up, as I'd hoped, and gestured for me to sit.

I sat there and rested my aching leg, wishing it were completely healed instead of ready to fall apart when I had to push. It had been a long day.

He didn't ask me if I'd eaten. I didn't expect him to. He'd already shown he felt something toward me today. He wouldn't want to expose himself any more. I'd made a study of him and his habits just the way we'd been trained, and I knew him better than he thought. Ever since I'd started personal guard training, it was as if I were learning to put to use everything that had stayed confused inside me before now. My observations about people and my past as a fighter had had no purpose until now. *I'd* had no purpose.

Now my purpose was Mosca. I was going to make sure he knew I wasn't here just to protect him. I was out for a lot more than that tonight. But I needed to catch him by surprise if I caught him at all, which would be a hell of a feat.

"A formal dinner requires entertainment, I'm told. I can't play the piano, but I can do this."

I turned on an old audio recorder. Music filled the silence. I realized I hadn't heard any since Mosquito had played the piano. Music and songs were luxuries during war, and dangerous ones at that. Transmitters, even those playing music, could be traced. Older technology that didn't use tracking devices was gone. So unless someone could sing or play an instrument, there was precious little music to be had.

For a moment he gave a flashing smile. "I haven't heard one of these since—well, probably since you were a toddler. I think this was popular when I was—I can't remember when. A teen? A lot younger than now. Where did you get it?"

I didn't say how I'd threatened and bribed and searched for the damned thing. I just shrugged and watched some of the tension seep out of his shoulders.

"You're not that much older than me," I ventured.

Someone had tried to kill him today. He didn't even acknowledge that as a shock, but it had to bother him. God knows it bothered me. The tension was still sizzling inside me, waiting to leap out.

He put his fork down to fully listen to the sounds from the AR unit. I waited for him to relax as much as he'd allow himself. When he had and I pulled him to his feet, he looked a little surprised but let me fold him into my arms.

"If I hurt you doing this, try to be stoic," I muttered.

I hadn't ever done much dancing beyond fiestas in the compound, back when I was young and uninjured. But dancing meant being close and holding someone, which is what I had in mind for tonight.

I meant to keep him off balance—maybe literally—tonight. I'd figured out something else about Mosca that he thought he'd kept hidden. Of course I couldn't keep what I'd learned to myself since I wasn't the always knowing, always silent type.

"I know why you liked what I did when we saw each other outside the city. Why you liked me."

"There's a mystery about me liking someone who sucks me off?"

"Not just that. Although I suck pretty well. Pretty well indeed." I shifted my body, and he followed. At least he knew how to dance and to shift quickly. I hadn't injured him yet. "You liked the surprise of it. You liked that I was willing to do that for you without you planning it out first."

He frowned but let me pull him a little closer.

"I don't intend to surprise you this time. I'm going to kiss you," I told him, crowding him a little more. The pupils of his eyes dilated when I pressed my body against his. I was hard already, just from that little contact, but then so was he.

"No."

I hesitated, my thumbs stroking the sides of his mouth. "No?"

"We're going to kiss each other. For a long, long time." He looked too serious when he said it, but then his kiss was very serious too, when he leaned forward and pulled my head down. For a moment I just drifted while he tongued me, like a silly girl with her first deep kiss.

Then I caught my breath. The music had changed to something more brooding. More desperate.

We slid all the way down to one of those fine, warm carpets on the floor, and he unfastened my pants.

This time I touched his shoulders, his neck, his face. The memory of the earth ripping apart near us, with him protecting me, shook me and let me say what needed to be said.

“Don't ever risk yourself again by trying to save me,” I whispered. I took a deep breath. “Because I'd die without you.”

“Calle.” He sounded as torn up as I'd been a few hours ago, wondering if he was alive.

When I touched his lips, checking yet again that he was warm and whole under my hands, he sucked my finger inside the warmth of his mouth and bit.

That bite released everything. We went at each other like animals. I forgot he was the boss, he was smaller, that I was trained to protect him. Hazed, ferocious lust was all I knew. We smashed against a wall once, I think, as we grappled, and the music screeched to a halt when the unit toppled over.

Clothing ripped. Sweat-slickened hands grabbed and slid over skin, unable to hold on.

I pinned him down with my weight when I finally got his legs over my shoulders, the two of us panting like we were going to die. I think I growled when I penetrated him. Once I was there I had just enough sense to slow down. I didn't want to hurt him. Just...master him. This once.

Oh God. Just this once while I slid into the heat of his body.

I pumped, still panting, not wanting to completely pull out, even for the joy of entering him again. I watched his face change from ferocious to agonized, the kind of agony when you were close to the ultimate pleasure.

I wanted to drive into him. I wanted to watch. To wait, to enjoy, to tear into him. Then he twisted to lift himself up and gripped me.

“Calle. Now. For God's sake, *now*.” He sounded wild.

I'd done that to him. Made him crazy. Made him need. Made him clamp against me, squeezing my cock as he came.

I poured into him, my ability to wait gone. I climaxed seconds after he demanded I did.

Climaxed? Oh hell, I came like I never had before. I thought my heart was going to be ripped out along with my sperm before I was done pounding into him, spilling myself into his body. When it was done, when I had emptied myself into him, we lay there, mashed flat against each other, still panting, wet and exhausted and close.

“Calle.”

I looked up. “Yes?”

What did he need? I'd have given him anything then.

“Get away from me.”

\* \* \*

“I hear music.” I lifted my head and glanced down at Rey. He looked scruffy, sleepy, and unshaven. Instead of jumping him the way I wanted, I continued. “I can't remember when I last heard that around here. My father used to play duets with my mother when I was small. He could make the violin sing when he tried.”

*Moonlight Sonata*. That was what was playing. I remembered the name now from some dim childhood memory. It had been a long time since my mother had taught me...

“Mmmm.”

“Rey?”

He opened one eye. “This goin' to be a long conversation?”

“Yes. No. Yes.” I sat up, hugging my knees against my chest. “This is hard to say.”

He sighed and sat up too, slouching and rubbing his face. The music, just barely heard, swelled up from downstairs. It was romantic. Nighttime and music. You were supposed to say *I love you* then, weren't you?

“I—” I couldn't do it. I guess I just wasn't capable of romance. “I want to go home. Just the way you said to Calle. Back to the compound. I don't care how hard it is. I don't care if we might all explode with one of my father's special weapons. I want to rebuild there. I want to get Tía and the campesinos back with us. I want to play my piano—my mother's piano—for you. I—”

This was really hard.

“I want to have your baby there.”

“What?” Rey sat straight up, wide awake now.

He reached out and lifted me up by my elbows. I wasn't sure if he was tempted to shake me or hold me, but instead he just kept me there, dangling, searching my face. Then he relaxed and let me down, right up against him, so I could hide my face in his chest.

"You meant to get pregnant before you asked me to go back. Did I push your timetable for the announcement by asking you to union it?" He didn't sound angry.

I would have been furious if someone had done the same thing to me. But I'd needed an excuse to be with him forever. I'd needed to have something of his no matter what. I'd needed to do anything, everything, but tell him I loved him.

"Yes. You're starting to know me too well, Rey. That scares me. *You* scare me. You mean too much for me to lose you." I touched my stomach. It didn't seem true yet, but his baby was inside. Ours.

Rey placed his hand over mine so we could imagine the baby together.

"I love you." He said what I had wanted to. It should be that simple. I shouldn't have had to scheme out a way to have him and not say why.

I took a deep breath. "Me too."

He kissed me, accepting what I'd said and not said. I kissed him back, hoping that would make up for the lack of words.

"Baby, we'll go home as soon as we can." Rey looked troubled. "But I wish I knew why Mosca wants us to stay together and to leave him. I never expected any of that."

"Because he loves me—us—and if we stay, he thinks we're going to die with him." I leaned against him, needing Rey's solid strength to hold me. "Can't you tell? He thinks he's near the end."

## Chapter Six

“What do you mean?” Dazed, I eased up and away from my recent lover.

“Get out.”

He was furious, his emotions as clear as I'd ever seen them. He jumped to his feet with his fists clenched before I staggered up. I took a step back.

I thought my heart would break right then. That had never happened to me before. I'd been angry, resentful, or despairing. But I never saw the world end in front of me. Not even the earth exploding around me today had destroyed me like his words.

I don't know how I did it. But I held my ground. “No.”

“I'm ordering you out, damn it!”

“You're my job. I don't just love you; I'm supposed to protect you, so shut up! I can't go.” I shoved him backward, and he slid back a few inches.

“You fucking well don't love me.”

“Excuse me, *sir*, but that's one order you can't give me.” I didn't even know the bastard's real name. How the hell was I that far deep in with someone I didn't know?

He glared at me, and I glared back. He might have won. Oh yeah, he would have won, except that I moved forward and kissed him. It was that or hit him, and I was afraid I might hurt him if we turned to blows. I was sure he'd hold back, but I wasn't sure I could.

Instead I kept kissing him, punishing, hard kisses, while he struggled. Until he gradually stopped fighting. Until he responded to me with his mouth hot and open, and we ended up clinging to each other, no longer kissing.

“Oh Dios,” I whispered. “Dear God Almighty. You're crying.”

He turned his face away, as if that were going to stop me now. “Will you just leave before it's too late?”

“No. Oh hell no. I'm with you.” I would've liked to have been dressed when I made my stand, but you couldn't have everything. “You're going to tell me what's wrong. Just give it to me. I already know it's bad.”

“If you stay, I'm going to kill you.” He took a deep breath. “No. I'm going to ask you to kill yourself.”

I whistled my breath out, just the barest of sounds. He walked over to a chair and sat down, putting his head in his hands. I sat in the chair next to him and put my hand on his shoulder. I couldn't tell if he was still crying. I couldn't tell if he was even breathing.

“All right.” I stared down at his bowed head. I didn't know what else to say for a moment. “All right. Now explain more.”

“When you had your leg operated on, I had the doctors add a little extra to your synthetic bone additions.” He dropped his hands but didn't look up. “I put Howl in the hollow of those bones. It doesn't take much to become lethal. You're a walking explosive.”

“Ah.”

*“I'd like to propose something that may be difficult at first but would eventually provide rewards for you.”*

*“And what do I have to do in return?”*

*“Serve me.”*

“I asked you—I said you would have to be mine. Completely. I've never asked that kind of personal loyalty of anyone. Of course I didn't tell you everything.” There wasn't any self-reproach in his voice. There was nothing in his voice.

*“In a few more weeks you'll have two legs again. I want you to use them and the rest of your body in my service. No one else's.”*

“I don't suppose you ever planned to. So why? When did I become worthy of being told your plans?” I wanted to get his old words and mine out of my head, to replace them with harder words. Truer words.

“You were always worthy. I'm the one who isn't.” Mosca stood back up. “I planned to play God with you, like I have with others. But I failed at that.”

“Perhaps because you aren't God?”

“Perhaps because you started to matter. More than my cause. More than winning and ending the fighting.”

I was still numb. “How? How did you plan for me to die?”

“When I meet with Freyer and his council.” Mosca glanced at me quickly and away again. “Of course I fully expect them to try to kill me there. No matter how we pretty up the meeting, both sides know it would be easier to get rid of the opposition than to negotiate with them.”

“But you'll escape?”

“I don't plan on that.”

Both of us, then?

“I don't understand. When you spoke to the guards, you said your life was important for the cause.”

“I don't believe that anymore. Or...I believe that giving my life may be better for the cause now than trying to preserve it.”

“Ah.” I tried to think it out. “I suppose you thought it wouldn't make much difference if you told me or not. No matter what, I've been trained to die with you rather than save myself.”

“Something like that. At first I told myself it was all right. You were so ready to...give yourself.”

“To you. Because I had nothing else.” *And because it was you.*

“It doesn't matter what I thought then. It was an excuse. You should leave.”

“Who will take my place as your personal guard at this meeting? Who would you sacrifice instead?”

“I don't know.”

“What's your real name?”

He looked up and stared at me. “Stephen. What difference does that make?”

He looked frustrated, angry, confused, and unhappy, all emotions I wasn't sure he allowed himself to feel ordinarily. I'd been dazzled before, but this was the real man. And I knew then what he really meant to me. Because now I knew him.

“I think I should know the name of the person I'm going to die for. Stephen”—I took his hand. He jerked under my touch and then held steady—“I would be honored to do this for you.”

It was ridiculous in one way that he'd revealed all this. It didn't matter for his purposes. Now we both knew I would've done this for him even knowing the truth. But I might've preferred dying with the pretty lie that he cared for me—not the uglier reality that he could both care for and use me at the same time.

He shook his head. “Don't.”

“You picked wisely. I told you I have nothing without you. You made it clear I have nothing now even when I'm with you—when I thought I was with you. Why not take advantage of me?”

I wanted him to contradict me, but years of being a second, a substitute, told me he wouldn't.

“Calle—” He took a breath. “For years now I picked men over women for sex. Because they were there and easy to have and because I didn't want to care the way I did with my wife. I thought it would make a difference.”

I nodded. I wanted to stay numb, because I could almost feel the wide horror scrabbling to reach inside me if I let it. I didn't want him to open me to what I should be feeling now. Numb was all right.

Numb and this desperate need to somehow make things right again.

“You've made me care. I can count on one hand the people I still personally care about. Who I'd give up almost everything for. Calle. Calle, don't make me do this to you. Don't make me try not to care. That would be too easy for me.”

Goddamn it. I shut my eyes. Just when I'd settled into miserable endurance, he yanked the rug out and made me feel a hurtful kind of hope.

“No.” I shook my head this time. “No, that's wrong. It's not too easy. It's too hard for you. That's what will kill you, Stephen. Do you even know what you're doing this for by now?”

“To win. Because I'm on the right side.” Mosca looked old.

“Truly?”

“I'm not sure what's true anymore. But I believed that when I started. I saw the Federistas destroying our land, killing those who argued with them. I knew they were wrong and evil. What

I didn't know was that I would grow more like them each year while we tried to overcome them. If we could negotiate this fighting away by now, I would. But I don't think it's possible.”

“You're saying you don't know why you're sacrificing us any longer?”

“Yes. But only to you. Because you deserve to know. I didn't start thinking I needed to play God. Not that I didn't always use the power I've been given. I've taken it when it's not offered. Ruthlessly.”

“I know.”

“Of course. But you never really saw what could happen because of it until tonight.”

“I'm not the most thoughtful man, that's true. But I'm getting an idea of what you can do by now.”

“Good. Then you'll stay away from all this? From me?”

“No. I'm with you. Just the way you thought I'd be from the beginning. I can tell you still care about what's right, even though things have gone wrong. Perhaps I can remind you that you still care. We'll care together.” I would have said *we'll die together*, but that was obvious already.

“Let's leave the matter open for now.” He went to the cabinet where the alco was. “You're free to change your mind. Just tell me when you do.”

*More free to change than you are.*

I pushed myself forward. To touch him. To embrace him. He was rigid when I first reached out, but almost fell into my hold when I didn't let him go.

I whispered to him, “Tonight we'll get drunk. And tomorrow we'll go on. Don't think, Stephen. Don't explain anymore. Just for tonight.”

I didn't think I could go on if I had to think anymore.

\* \* \*

“To Traven and Rey!” Calle held up the glass of champagne, and everyone tossed it off except me. I sipped and smiled to make up for not drinking.

Weirdly enough, I was happy. Truly happy. The ceremony with Rey had been casual—the signing of formal papers, really. But my father had looked at me at the end and said, “You'll be good to each other.”

And somehow, with his words, the occasion changed to something more important. More joyful and sad than I'd expected it to be.

"Yes, sir. I swear it." Rey looked at me as if I were the only one left on earth.

"I swear too," I said, not even sure what I meant any longer, but knowing I had to tell him, tell everyone, how important Rey was.

I was going to be with Rey, to share my life and my fortune and my family with him. That was the joyful part.

The sad part was everything else. There was something dark happening with my father, and I could almost see it spreading out to the others. But not to me. Not today.

I had today with the people I loved. Even Calle had entered in that circle today. He looked happy too. And sad. Immeasurably sad, the way my father did.

"I'll file this with the magistrate tomorrow after you've left," Father said, sweeping the papers up in a neat pile.

He'd made sure no one had an official record of when we arrived—we'd been seized and brought straight to his home before we got to the city gates. He'd make sure no one knew what we'd done while we were here until after we were gone. And *I* was sure that he'd be equally careful no one knew when we left or where we were going.

I kissed his forehead, solemnly. Then I squeezed him, not solemnly at all.

"I think it's time for some of Calle's red velvet cake to celebrate." He hugged me back.

"Ah, the infamous red velvet cake! I was incredibly jealous of Rey when Calle made it once for him and not me."

I moved to Calle, who was standing behind the rest of us like a good guard, even though today he was part of the ceremony. A part of us.

I reached my hands to him.

"Thank you, Calle." I wasn't even sure for what.

"It was my pleasure, Traven." He never called me Traven.

"Calle?"

He looked inquiring.

"Will you come with us? I know Rey asked you. You know we want you and need you."

“Just me? Why aren't you asking your father?”

“He wouldn't listen. But we want you both.” Neither of them had said anything in front of me, but I knew there was something between them. For this one day, *my* day, I could believe in miracles. I could ask for one, anyway. “Can you make him leave here?”

“So you think I can persuade him when you can't? Ah, Mosquito. Can you see your father abandoning his work? Or either of us getting old and fat and sunning ourselves back at the compound?” Calle's smile hurt me with the sadness behind it.

“Yes. Yes, I can. I want to see you getting fat and bald in front of me. I want to torment you when you get deaf and blind from age. I want to spoon pabulum into my father's mouth when he can't chew anything. Calle. Please. You could help do that.”

I took a deep breath. Calle bent down, held my chin, and kissed one of my cheeks gently. Then the other.

“Thank you again, Mosquito, for thinking of me. Of us. But you're giving me more power than I could ever have. Go. Have a wonderful, long life with Rey. And leave your father to me.”

\* \* \*

I walked into the dark bedroom and sat down next to the man lying on his back, his arm over his eyes. It wasn't really morning yet, although the first light had begun to hint at its arrival.

“They're gone.”

“Godspeed.”

“I'm the only one left, Mosca.” *And you're in bed.* I wondered if I could try for more.

“I'd hoped Rey might take over for me once.” Mosca sat up. Obviously the man wasn't in the mood for sex. Damn it. I knew where I was with sex. “He's brilliant, did you know that? Soldiers would follow him anywhere. He was already a lieutenant and tapped for major before he...left ranks.”

“I know Rey is brilliant.” I thought about how he had eyed the confusing battle map and in minutes pointed out what needed to be done. How I'd been willing to follow him anywhere for years.

“But I'm glad he's out of it. There are others who could take my place. Not as brilliant as he is, but excellent men.”

If Mosca died, would Rey return? And who else could truly take Mosca's place? I shivered. That wouldn't be my concern.

"Yes, sir."

He looked at me, probably wondering why I suddenly had become so formal.

"I'm spoiling your night with me. As long as we're alone, why not enjoy it? Wasn't that what you were thinking?" Mosca pulled me down without warning. He held me in a tight grip, but that was all. Despite his fast move to secure me, he didn't seem ready for anything quick.

"Something like that." I let him hold me. Let him look at me.

But I couldn't stand it. I needed something. That something couldn't be slow. Not now. Not while tension and desire boiled up inside me. I grabbed my cock in a punishing grip and jerked upward.

He kept watching. Damn him. If I were going to do this alone, I wasn't interested in putting on a show for him. I pulled harder and faster, trying to lose myself in the sensation and not in him.

"No."

"I can't wait," I said thickly, already fighting the need to come.

"Yes, you can. Stop." His voice cracked with command.

I stopped, panting and resentful. Was I to have nothing, then? Nothing of what I wanted, even quick relief?

"Kiss me first, then. Slowly."

I opened my mouth to protest, but he put his tongue into it. We kissed, nothing but lips, tongue, and teeth, until he broke free and began to nuzzle at my skin, rocking his body against mine. My muscles, my scars, everything was up for exploration with his hand and tongue. I settled into his rhythm, my skittering needs slowing down as he comforted and aroused. Neither of us said anything. The sound of him, his breath rasping on my skin as he slid down my body, was enough.

But the sound and feel of his mouth sucking on my cock were more than enough. I gripped the blankets below me and arched up. He didn't hurry, but he didn't hesitate either. Just a deep,

hard sucking mouth that begged for me to come, but a firm grip near my balls that wouldn't let me.

"Mosca." I forgot his real name. I forgot everything but wanting him to finish me off. I twisted, looking for relief. "Oh God. Mosca."

"You want me?" He lifted his head, and I could have cried because he stopped.

"Yes. You know that."

"Sure?"

"Always." I was shaking, small, nervous tremors that I couldn't control.

His. I was his. Still. More than ever. He could do whatever he wanted with me.

He sucked my cock back into his mouth at the same time he loosened his grip on my balls. I think I gave a strangled yell when I shot into his mouth, although I wasn't totally aware of anything but my huge relief while I spurted into him.

He took it, all of it, until I was done.

And when I was done, finally done, I did something I'd wanted to do for a long time. I knelt, laid my head against his feet, and kissed first one and then the other.

"Calle." He touched my head.

I cleared my throat at last. "I still love you, in case you're wondering."

He didn't respond. I suppose he couldn't. That wasn't the way he was.

Instead he turned me to my side, traced the line of my spine.

Then he slapped my ass. "Let me fix you something to eat. It appears to be my turn to take care of you, right?"

"You cook?"

"I can cook some things. I just haven't had to for a long time."

I watched him move across the floor, snapping his pants together as he walked. His hair was a little tousled. In the dark I couldn't see the expression on his face, but he seemed untroubled.

I'd wondered what it would be like being with just him, waiting for what came next.

I stood up. Apparently not bad at all. I had a view of a fine male body for now and food in my future. I opted not to think about what more would happen and instead enjoyed the sight of the great Mosca cooking for me.

\* \* \*

“Eggs? You're fixing me scrambled eggs?” I laughed.

“I said I can cook. I didn't say I was a good cook.” He looked over at me. He cracked the remaining eggs and threw them in the skillet. “I had more word from Freyer this morning.”

“I'll fix some salsa.” I stood up, not wanting to let go of the carefree moments we'd had and start the next conversation. Just a little longer. I wanted just a little bit more of him and me and nothing else.

Mosca waved his hand. “I can do that while I explain.”

He pulled out his army defense knife and began chopping tomatoes with quick, efficient movements.

I sighed. “All right. I'm ready. What did he say?”

“I may be getting married.” Mosca's voice was entirely too casual now.

“Married?” No one married. The last of that archaic ceremony had died out when the churches were barred from operating. The Federistas had decreed no churches before anyone I knew was born. “You? Married to who?” I wasn't fool enough to think he was asking me.

“Freyer's youngest child.”

“What? Do you even know the kid? Male or female?”

“No, and I don't know. What difference does that make? I wouldn't be offered young Freyer for anything but tactical reasons.”

I shook my head to clear it. “So...this would be like something from ancient history where two powers ally themselves in marriage?”

“Yeah. Freyer is an old-fashioned sort of guy.” He pulled out hot peppers and began to chop them, still not looking at me.

“And you said yes.” I didn't even have to ask.

“It's a chance for a meeting. For that I wouldn't care if he asked me to his next clusterfuck. Of course I said yes.”

I blinked and blindly accepted my plate of food. Mosca sat down opposite me with his own plate. He leaned forward.

"It means nothing, Calle. You know that."

Not to him, anyhow.

"I know." I picked up my fork. "When?"

"When?"

"When will it be?"

"This evening. We agreed it was best to hurry it through so no one decided to stop things."

"That's not much time." How long had he known this?

"No. Can you see to it that my uniform is cleaned and everything looks good?" Mosca pushed his hair out of his eyes. "I don't want them to think it's anything but a real marriage."

I nodded. Then I put my fork down and pushed my plate to his side of the table. I took his food and began to eat.

"This is damned good," I mumbled through the eggs.

He glared at me. "Why did you do that?"

"You put something in my food."

"What makes you think that?"

"Why else would you cook for me?" I smiled at him. "You aren't going to drug me and keep me out of this, Stephen. You can't."

He looked down at the eggs on his plate and laughed. "I'm becoming too damn obvious lately."

"I'll fix you something else if you want."

"No. I'm not sure I can eat anything anyhow." He reached out to touch my face. "I wish you weren't involved. How can you kiss my feet one minute and defy me the next?"

"Life is damned unfair. It doesn't seem right that the great Mosca can't have his way in this, but there it is." I swallowed and put my fork back up again. Suddenly I wasn't so sure I wanted anything else to eat either. "This time you have no choice in the matter."

## Chapter Seven

The ruins of a church on the edge of no-man's-land wouldn't have been where I'd want to unite—marry. But this marriage wasn't for me, and out in the open, away from others, including potential hidden others, had its merits.

I'd entered first, while the sun was still up, checking for potential bombs or snipers. It had taken a long time. Now the last of the sunlight flickering through the broken stained glass was eerie. But even though the back of my neck prickled, I didn't see anything or anyone. As dusk turned rapidly to night, I began to light candles. Inwardly I cursed. Soon I wouldn't be able to make out potential threats out there in the dark.

I warmed my hands over the tiny flame. It seemed even colder than usual as the sun set. I checked my watch. Almost 1900 hours. How long would this take?

Just as if I'd wished it with my thoughts, I heard footsteps. I tensed, wishing to hell I had more weapons with me than what I carried inside my leg. I forced myself to relax. We were supposed to be unarmed.

A shadow figure appeared, cloaked so that its features were impossible to see.

“Yes?” the voice asked.

He pulled his hood down. He was an older, sharp-eyed man with a military haircut.

“General Freyer?” I made it as respectful and nonthreatening as I could.

“Who are you?”

“General Mosca's man. Er, his best man.” I tried to remember the right archaic term and wished to hell Mosca were here instead of waiting. That anyone were here to back me.

Oh fuck. I remembered what was to come. No, it was better if no one else was here. I took a deep breath and tried to relax suddenly tight muscles.

"I'm the priest." He didn't look like what I'd imagined a priest to be. And from the quick glances the man took, surveying the entire area, he was more than a religious figure. Maybe he was just nervous, but it was obvious he was looking for threats as well.

I stood a little closer—not close enough to threaten, but close enough for him to be aware that I was keeping an eye on him. I could do more than that too, if need be, but it didn't seem like the way Mosca would want his sham wedding to start off.

"Problems?" Mosca's voice asked in my ear as if I'd willed him there.

I almost jumped. How the hell did he manage to move silently enough that I missed him? Ah well, he was Mosca, and so able to defy all laws of nature, and I was a little rattled.

"Not so far."

There were more footsteps. Two more hooded figures arrived. Now we were outnumbered, even though one of the figures looked small enough to be a child.

"What the hell is he doing here?" The taller of the two new visitors barked that out while staring at me. He had to be General Freyer.

"He's here to witness the wedding, of course. I expect you have other...witnesses as well." Mosca looked at the perimeter of the ruins, and I swallowed.

If I'd missed any silent watchers, then I wasn't doing my job. Even if I had only a few more minutes to continue to do it, I wanted to have done a good one.

"May I see the...bride?" Mosca opened his hands, as if in invitation.

Freyer laughed and pulled the figure behind him forward, toward the candlelight. He pulled the hood down. "Here. Isn't he pretty?"

He was indeed. A very pretty, slight young man, with tousled blond hair and downcast eyes, who swayed a little on his feet as he stood in front of us. Drugged or beaten into submission? I couldn't tell. But he didn't appear to be any threat.

"Calle, search them."

I stepped forward, wondering why I'd waited for an order to do something so basic. Perhaps knowing death was minutes away had a bad effect on my brain. Scowling to myself, I managed to summon up enough attention to do a thorough search of each man, both electronically and manually. The first search left Freyer cursing out loud while the second one

left the priest completely silent after he'd let out the first hiss of surprise. I left nothing, absolutely nothing, to chance. They weren't concealing anything.

I turned to the kid last. The boy's breathing seemed shallow and his skin clammy to the touch. Poison, perhaps? Infected with something contagious that might kill us upon contact? Nothing would surprise me.

I snorted with laughter. Soon nothing could either surprise or kill me again. I wondered when Mosca would set things off. I glanced over at him for a good last look. There he was, uniform in place, looking calm and strong. He glanced at me and half smiled. Excellent. That was a good way to say farewell.

"If you'll allow me to do the same?" Freyer stepped forward with his own electro-reader without waiting for an answer.

The boy swayed forward suddenly, and I stepped forward to catch him.

"No!" Mosca yelled at me and blocked my path with his shoulder.

I took a step back as the boy leaped forward, something in his hand. I stared at the formerly pretty face now turned ugly, watched as his teeth bared, like an animal. Damn it! I ducked, snarling at my own stupidity. I'd allowed myself to be fooled by the seeming docility.

He had a weapon, of course. A small slice of it nicked my shoulder. Before it could do more, Mosca smashed at the kid's thin wrist. I thought I heard something snap. It didn't completely register, because meanwhile I had pivoted and kicked at a springing Freyer.

We both grunted when I connected with his chest. He staggered back. My bad leg sang with pain, but I concentrated on more important things, like immobilizing him. In the corner of my eye, I saw the kid fall, and then, Jesus God, Mosca collapsed on top of him.

No. I refused to allow it.

He couldn't die this way. That wasn't going to be my last memory of him, crumpling down to the ground. No snotty little kid could kill him that easily.

I didn't waste any more time with my opponent. I applied a choke hold. Damn it, we'd die on our terms, with our enemies going down with us.

\* \* \*

In the distance a pillar of fire rose and burned brightly, as if it offered a sacrifice to some angry, ancient god. The two of us, two tiny human figures on horseback, stared at it silently.

“Hell of a thing,” I finally offered. I cleared my throat and spit into the ground. “Never saw anything like that.”

“I underestimated their ability to create explosives.”

“Lucky it was timed, and we outran it.”

“Since we did, maybe we should keep moving on instead of gawking,” my companion suggested. “Anyone who went too close to that would—well, they'd be too late to do anything.”

“If we move too fast, you're going to fall off the damn horse.”

“I'm tied on, aren't I? Besides, you stopped most of the bleeding.”

“Shut up. You're wasting your strength.” I turned both horses and clucked to the burro I was leading. “We'll head for the mountains. Bad enough to have you wounded, but we've two prisoners to watch.”

“At least you got rid of one. We could've had three to manage.”

“I'm glad I didn't kill the priest, at least. Doing that would be a bad omen. We'll need all the luck we can get to escape this.”

“He isn't a priest.”

I coughed again. Smoke tended to stay in your lungs, like it or not. “Then who the hell is he?”

“Freyer, of course.” Mosca was talking steadily enough, but I could see he was sinking into the saddle.

“Who the hell did I kill, then? Don't tell me he was the priest after all.”

“Unlikely. He was a decoy, nothing more. But I know what Freyer looks like.”

Of course he would. But that meant we had a living general of the opposing army, bound, hooded, and gagged, resting on the ass of one of our pack burros. Dios, the odds of getting the whole menagerie out alive were getting smaller by the minute.

“That does it. When I can, I'm transmitting for help.”

“It would be better for us to handle this alone.”

That should be easy. I could handle one wounded man, one demon from hell disguised as an angelic boy, and not one but two generals who everyone wanted to either find, capture, or kill.

I voiced my biggest objection first. “Your bride almost killed you while you were still healthy. How the hell are we going to handle a twenty-four-hour watch? I’m not leaving you alone with either of them right now.”

“Jealous? I promise to keep my hands to myself with him.”

“Funny. It might’ve been easier to just get blown up,” I said sourly.

“It was your idea to bundle us out of there once I was unconscious. I still have the push button if you want to try it my way. Ready when you are.” Mosca grinned a second before he grimaced.

“Hmph. Why didn’t you just push the button when the hell child jumped me? Instead you tried to protect me—*again*—when you planned for us to die in a few seconds anyhow.” I stopped, realizing what I’d just said.

Why the hell hadn’t he?

“I couldn’t.” Mosca sounded like he was confessing his worst sin. I waited, but he obviously wasn’t going to say more.

It didn’t matter. He’d said enough. Despite the whole improbability of us escaping safely, I was almost giddy with happiness.

“I have a better idea, Boss. Rey and Mosquito are only a day ahead of us. They can backtrack and start their new lives together by cleaning up this mess.”

Mosca frowned but didn’t say anything. I decided that meant he was getting weaker, because Mosca always had something more to say.

“Maybe.”

I leaned forward to touch the other man’s face. Warm, but not burning yet.

“You don’t have a fever, yet you’re agreeing with me. Something is wrong.” I resisted keeping my hand on his face. Touching him longer.

“I have a problem with anything we do.” Mosca stared off into the distance for a minute and then said, “You see, the problem is, I need to be dead.”

“What the fuck—” The quick kick of fear sank viciously in my gut, mingling nastily with the brief euphoria I'd just felt.

Mosca laughed this time. “No, no. I mean I want people to keep believing I was in *that*.” He gestured behind him. “I don't know how long I can stay dead, but it might be useful. For now. And keeping quiet about who we have with us would be smart. So if you contact Rey, don't tell him much.”

It was too easy to listen in on even the most secure transmissions. I nodded. “I never do.”

“Idiot.” Mosca snorted. “I can read your face before you even start.”

I scowled. “I can do the same with you now. Pretty much.”

“I suppose that means we are...in tune.”

In tune. I wondered what that meant to Mosca. I know what I wanted it to mean.

Oh hell. I'd find out. In fact, I'd take it as far as he'd let me once he was better. Then I'd push it a little bit more.

“We're simpatico? Wonderful. I'm in tune with a bloodthirsty, suicidal commander of the resistance, who has stranded us in the middle of nowhere. I think there's a storm coming too. In tune. It's come to this with me.”

I pulled on the burro's lead as I urged my horse onward. If it had to come to this, *this* wasn't so bad a place to be. But getting back home would be even better when the two of us could be alone.

“Calle?”

“Keep quiet. Sir. We still have a long way to go before we're safe.”

He sighed. “I'd like to be safe again. But you need to know something first.”

I looked over at him, half-impatient, especially when he seemed to hesitate instead of telling me what was on his mind. Finally he grabbed one hand with the other and pulled off his wedding ring.

“I don't know if this fits, but here.” He shoved the band on my finger.

It was snug there, but I ignored the tightness.

“Ah! It'll work. You must have really big hands, Boss.” We looked at each other and smiled. “Just an observation.”

He hadn't pulled his ring off, not even to deceive his enemy with his sham wedding. But now it was mine.

“We're a little more than simpatico, Calle. I want you to wear that ring. I never thought I'd say that.”

Jesus. Of course he didn't come out and say we were a couple. That he cared for me. But I looked at the ring on my finger and knew it was staying there until I died. Of course, if I took it off, he'd probably kill me anyhow.

I couldn't help it. I took the hand that had worn the ring all this time. Then I kissed his palm.

I cleared my throat. “Of course. Now let's move on before we freeze. I'll be glad to get back to our hellish hot weather in the out country.”

“Me too. I never thought I'd have the chance to go back.” He touched my cheek and pulled back. “You're right. A man could freeze over in a place like this. Time to get home.”

 THE END 

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## Treva Harte

Treva Harte lives near a city with many, many attorneys. Thanks to Loose Id and her writing, she is now able to be a recovering attorney and spends her time writing, editing, raising adolescents, taking care of an elderly mother and dealing with a hyperactive husband (he says he's just very energetic.) She is also co-owner and Editor-in-Chief of the e-publishing company [Loose Id](#).

She and her husband both like writing in whatever time they have left, so they often fight over—sorry, since he is still a practicing attorney they NEGOTIATE—keyboard time. No wonder Treva's particular brand of sensual romance is a bit offbeat and usually mixed with fantasy.