



LOVE ME AGAIN

Pursued by the past...captured by passion.

*Wendy
Burge*

Love Me Again

Wendy Burge

AN [*e-reads*]BOOK

New York, NY

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This first book is dedicated to my greatest fans: my mother, who is no longer with us but still shares with me our love of the written word; my father, who refuses to stop spoiling me; and my beautiful son, Matthew, who knows his mom can do anything.

To Shannon, Nedra, and Michelle, who have always been there for me, endlessly raising my hopes, padding my flagging ego, and patiently listening to my endless whining during the writing of this book of my heart.

And to my newest fan, my editor Kate Duffy, who is so generous in her belief in me.

I love you all.

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Prologue

Grand Duchy of Austenburg
Germany, 1808

"I'm going to have a baby."

She felt his body tense and pull away. The silence was thick in the moonlit darkness of the room, and all of a sudden she didn't feel warm and sated anymore. She was afraid to look at him — she knew what she would see. Biting her lip, she turned onto her side, away from him.

"When?" His voice came from behind her, hushed, but she could hear the anger.

"February."

Again, silence. Then his arm came about her waist, tight, and he gently forced her back against him. She could feel the heavy thud of his heart against her bare back.

She swallowed, tears stinging her eyes. "I know this is — "

"I don't want to talk about it right now," he cut her off, his voice rasping harshly against her ear.

She tried to blink back her tears; they would help nothing at this point. As she always could, she knew what he was thinking, felt his anger and despair. She felt them, too.

"How could this have happened? We've been so careful!" he suddenly exploded. When he threw back the covers, she flinched and turned to watch as he shot to his feet. The moonlight gilded his powerful body as he strode about the frigid room. Finally, he paced over to the fireplace and with restrained violence jabbed the coals to sputtering life. His face was a carved mask of fury as he watched the dancing flames, his arms braced against the mantel, his legs wide-spread, the sinews of his muscular thighs quivering. Then he swung

about and glared at her, as if this whole untenable problem was *her* fault alone!

"How did this happen, Christina?" He almost shouted at her.

Now angered herself, she sat bolt upright and glared back at him. "What an inane question to throw at me, Varek! You know quite well how this happened! Just like the last five times."

Her husband stood there staring at her, anger and helpless fear playing across his hard features. Then he dropped his face into shaking hands. "God, how could this have happened? We were so damn careful! We need more time," he agonized as he threw himself into the large armchair behind him. Oblivious to his nudity, he stared off into space.

Christina bit her lip when she saw the defeat shimmering in his hard blue eyes. Also uncaring of her own nudity, she got up and padded over to him. Without even looking up, he stretched his arms out to her and she sank onto his lap, curling up against his big body, burrowing into his heat. She felt his lips against the tiny curls at her temple. Christina breathed in his scent, as familiar to her as her own. This should be a time of joy and a celebration of their love, not one of dread, as if the sword of Damocles was suspended over their heads.

Together they sighed, their minds and bodies in harmony, as they had always been over the last ten years. However, as of this night, the sands of their time together were inexorably sifting away and there was nothing they could do to stop them — except pray for a miracle. As that hadn't helped them in the past, why would it now?

They had both tried desperately to put this off, needing the precious time while they searched Europe for a doctor who could help them. How fruitless it had all been, for their love for one another was their own worst enemy. He had tried to stay away from her. She had tried to deny him, but it was like holding back the dawn. They were only whole when in each other's arms, when they became one. And now the inevitable had happened again. This was their last chance at happily ever after.

So, it was to start all over again, the endless prayers for their miracle, the dreadful waiting and the hopeless sense of inevitability. Why should this be any different from her last failures? During her last pregnancy she had worn the flesh from her knees, so devout was she in her prayers. Varek had donated millions of talers to the church in desperate hopes of bribing their miracle. All for naught. In fact, it was

a pathetic irony that their devoutness was rewarded by her sixth miscarriage at the altar of their faith.

It was as if God was telling them that they did not deserve to belong to each other.

The royal couple had been warned. After ten years of marriage, if they were cursed with one more miscarriage, the Archduchess Christina must be set aside for the good of the duchy. An heir must carry on the ancient line, and Varek was the last of the von Vischerings. It was imperative that he give the Grand Duchy of Austenburg the long-awaited heir or the duchy would be dissolved, swallowed by the vast Habsburg Empire.

This was her last chance. If she failed, she would lose not only the only home she had ever known, but, more important, her beloved Varek. She could not fail them. Not this time. This was her last chance.

Reaching up, she dragged Varek's mouth down to hers. Their kiss was spontaneous and frantic, firing their blood, melding their tongues, their hunger endless.

"It will be all right, lark," he growled into her greedy mouth as his large hands dug almost painfully into her slim hips.

The sands were slipping away, and as they joined their bodies, they knew they could not change their destiny. It was in the hands of a most heartless God.

* * *

Varek paced the royal antechamber, oblivious to the hundreds of eyes watching him. His whole life was riding on what was happening in that chamber above. He turned and glared at his chamberlain. Roget simply stared back, the bloodless statue. Varek had always thought the man's blood was ice. The little worm was waiting with a patience that made Varek want to kill him. They both knew what was happening. It was too soon for anything else. It was only late December.

Varek turned away to look out onto the beautiful winter morning and again found himself wishing it all in hell — his ancient lineage, the sumptuous palace and every last man in his duchy. None of it meant a thing to him without his beloved Christina.

With a deep resentment, he frowned up at the line of past archdukes lining the wall behind him. From the first ambitious adventurer

who founded the wealthy duchy of Austenburg right down to his father, they all glowered reproachfully down upon him for his failure to their noble dynasty. He felt their collective dissatisfaction bearing down on him. At that moment he hated every last one of them. The illustrious name of von Vischering must go on. No matter what the cost. No matter that two lives were torn asunder.

If it wasn't for the fact that he knew a fanatic's bullet would find his wife, he would tell the blasted duchy to take itself to hell and sit back uncaring when it was dissolved. However, there was a violent faction lurking within the duchy. Austenburg enjoyed too much the freedom and wealth that had been taken for granted for almost four hundred years. Never would they let a little thing such as a barren archduchess get in their way. He had even thought of taking Christina and simply disappearing. But what would that solve? They would simply be hunted animals for the rest of their lives and in the end, his precious love would still be taken from him, one way or another, whichever was more expedient. All he knew was that no matter what the cost to himself, he would do whatever it took to keep Christina safe.

Somehow he would have to make it work, for he could never let Christina go. There had to be a way to keep her with him always, even if he was forced to set her aside. Never would he let her go. *Never. Never.*

The litany pounded in his panicked mind. He felt strangled, his hands clenched white-knuckled on the window frame.

"Your highness."

Varek's eyes closed and he leaned his feverish brow on the cold glass. *Please, God! Please!*

"Your highness." The timid voice was closer.

Varek spun around, and the bloodstained doctor fell back with a gasp, fear shooting through him at the sight of those cold pale eyes boring into him.

"My wife?" The archduke's voice was quite calm, if one did not look into the hell radiating from those intimidating eyes.

Dr. Hainse swallowed. "She had a rough time of it, your highness, even more so than the last. But she will be well, given time to rest."

Varek's heart hammered. He still hung tenaciously to a thread of hope. None of Christina's other pregnancies had advanced so far. *Please, God! "The child?" Please, I'll give you anything! My life! My soul!*

The doctor looked down and rubbed nervously at his stained waistcoat. He couldn't look up. "I'm sorry, your highness."

Varek's eyes slid closed.

"You know what must be done, your highness," came an insidious voice from beside him.

Quick as a striking snake, Varek's hand shot out and latched with bruising force about Roget's cold-blooded throat. Varek smiled grimly as Roget's eyes bulged, and yet the cold bastard showed no fear.

"Killing me will not change what must be, your highness," Roget croaked, his hands held limp at his sides. "Killing me will not protect her from assassination by the rebels."

Varek wanted to kill the bastard. He wanted to spill his blood and see if cold water gushed forth. Through the rage consuming him, he barely heard the babble of voices crying at him. He barely felt the hands tearing at his murdering fingers, embedded deep in his enemy's throat. He refused to let go. The thrum in his brain grew stronger as Roget's face turned blue, his eyes red with broken blood vessels. Varek's fingers became stronger, his smile more cold-blooded. This was justice.

Then the deafening crack of a pistol startled him out of his insanity. Instantly, a crippling pain shot up his arm, and he watched dazed as Roget stumbled back, his ungainly body sprawling ignobly onto the cold marble floor, choking and coughing.

The doctor was stunned, not knowing which to tend to first, his bleeding sovereign or the man he had just tried to murder. Where was the protocol?

Varek glanced down in surprise. Someone had shot him in the arm, a nice clean hit, just barely grazing his forearm. He looked up into the face of his best friend. Sergei's eyes were filled with pain as he wrapped a handkerchief about his arm, stanching the flow of blood.

"I'm sorry, my friend. You gave me no choice. I couldn't allow you to kill the scum in front of so many witnesses."

Varek just continued to stare at him as if confused by the drama just played. Then his unblinking gaze found Roget, still sprawled on the freezing floor, coughing. No one dared to offer help. Even the doctor stood undecided between the archduke and the chancellor, wringing his hands.

"Pull yourself together, Vare," Sergei muttered close to his ear. "Christina needs you right now."

When Varek finally spoke his voice cracked with agony and dazed disbelief. "I've lost her."

Sergei couldn't bear looking into his friend's eyes. It was akin to looking into a wasteland of broken dreams. Tomorrow the Archduke Varek of Austenburg would have to put aside his beloved wife of ten years. The duchy must have its heir — it would expect no less of an ancient line that had reigned with glory for so long. If they were to remain independent, their beautiful duchess must do her duty and step down, for their beautiful duchess could only give birth to royal corpses. The deadly rumors had been floating around for months — one way or another the duchy would have its heir, no matter what the cost.

Sergei watched as Varek left the antechamber, his natural poise shaken, those proud shoulders bent under the weight of his torment.

* * *

When the door opened, Christina looked toward it. The tears in her eyes blurred her vision, but she knew it was him. It was like a sixth sense between them.

Varek came to stand over her, and the tension in the room was piercing as he waved all her attendants out. Wordlessly, he stared at the bloodstained sheets one maid hastily grabbed up on her way out. Feeble warmth emanated from a fire crackling in the chamber, the only sound penetrating the heavy silence.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, a sob escaping her blue-tinged lips.

Varek flinched as her huge, pain-filled eyes beseeched him. When her hand reached out for him, his own stifled misery burst forth and with a groan, he fell to his knees beside the bed. His arms swept her close as he buried his wet face against her now flat stomach.

Closing her eyes, Christina dropped her head back onto the pillows feeling unutterably weary. With gentle fingers she stroked his silky golden hair, so familiar to her. His face felt feverish against her, his arms sweet torture as he held her close.

As if her whole life was flashing before her eyes, she recalled every sweet and passionate moment in her long life with Varek. From the instant she met him as a love-struck child till this last disastrous moment. How would she ever be able to continue on with her life?

How would she be able to carry on day after day when all her dreams, ideals, and passions would always belong to Varek? A tear escaped her tightly closed eyes. *So, this is how the end feels.*

Biting down hard on her bottom lip, she refused to cry. If she started, she knew she would never be able to stop. She wondered how long one could survive with a broken heart.

When Varek climbed up onto the bed and took her into his warm embrace, she wrapped her arms about his neck. At least for this last moment he was still hers.

A moment that would have to last them a lifetime.

One

England

August 1814

The sound of laughter drifted lazily on the breeze, making her smile as she clipped another rose. Holding the pink blossom to her nose, she turned and shaded her eyes against the sun before she found the comical sight of her son clumsily chasing butterflies, his net ridiculously overlarge in his chubby fists. With a sigh, she turned back, and after placing the long-stemmed beauty with the others in her basket, she moved onto the next bush. Of all her garden, this heavily laden bush glowed with the orange-pink tinted blooms that were her pride and joy, as she had grafted this hybrid herself. Since childhood she had been striving for this very shade. Varek would have been so proud . . .

Her mind slammed shut on that wayward thought.

The joy suddenly gone from her pruning, she stripped off her gloves and placed them with her knife in the basket. Turning, she began to saunter toward the joyful voices lifted in encouragement as Eddie spun in another direction and scampered away after the teasing creatures.

"Come, come, Eddie, my boy, you can do better than that!" his uncle, the Duke of Kerkston, shouted in playful teasing. "Reach, m'boy, reach!"

Throwing a concentrated frown over his shoulder at his revered uncle, the toddler indeed tried his best and swung the net with all his might. Everyone laughed uproariously as his determination led to no more than a trip and tumble onto the plush green grass. Stunned, the child lay on his tummy, his body tangled in three feet of netting. Then came his excited cry from amid the twisted netting. "I've got him, sir! I've got him!"

"Jolly good, Eddie, m'boy, we shall dine hardy tonight, by Jove!"

Christina couldn't help but join in the laughter as her son began to wriggle backward, until he finally shucked free of his cocoon and raced toward the duke, a wad of netting held carefully in his hands, the frame of the net bouncing along behind him. Proudly, he held out his offering to the duke. He squealed in delight when his uncle grabbed him up and placed him soundly on his blanketed lap. Christina leaned down to pet the newest addition to the family, a cocker spaniel, which Eddie had immediately christened Pal. The puppy only added to the din surrounding the impromptu picnic.

She handed her basket of blooms to one of the hovering footmen and made her way over to her brother-in-law and her son.

"Mama, look, see what I got!" A wide, brilliant smile was turned up to her.

Obediently, she leaned down and admired the day's catch. "Oh, my, now that is a pretty one. I don't believe I've seen that one before."

Eddie shook his head. "No. Uncle said this one is the bestest one yet. Tell Mama that's what you said, sir!" the child entreated, looking up at his idol.

"Indeed, it is, madam. Lord Edward has found the rarest specie of" — and he coughed over some exaggerated term, causing her to bite her lip, while trying to maintain a studiously interested look — "... I have yet to see. You must name it, young man, and we shall submit it to the Royal Butterfly Academy."

Eddie's little brow wrinkled in thought.

Edward cast Christina a sideways glance and winked.

Fondly, she smiled back. Edward St. Pole, Duke of Kerkston, was possibly the kindest, most generous man she had ever met, and every day she blessed the fates for her good luck in sharing his life. Even the freak hunting accident that had left him crippled and in constant debilitating pain had not altered his generous spirit.

When the flicker of a grimace crossed his grace's gaunt face, she immediately lifted the energetic toddler off his lap and bounced him on her hip. Sweet heaven, but he was getting big!

"Oh, here, madam, let me take him!" entreated his young nurse, Katie. "His lordship is getting too big a handful for you."

Laughing, Christina gave her son a smacking kiss on his flushed cheek and handed him gratefully over, her back straining. "He is, indeed. Goodness, in a few days he will be able to carry me about."

"Aye, my lady, that he will." The girl set Eddie on his feet, and soon both heads were bent over his prize, still captured in the wad of netting.

With a sigh, Christina sank down on the cool grass beside the duke's chair and accepted the glass of lemonade handed to her by a footman. "How are you feeling today, Edward?" she asked as she squinted against the sun, searching his pale features.

He shrugged, offering her a faint smile. Biting her lip, Christina looked down at her glass and traced a drop of condensation down its side.

It was so hard for her at times to look into his ravaged face. Once he had been such a handsome man, but the unending pain was taking its toll on his body. Over the last three years he had steadily lost weight till now he was only a shadow of what he had been. She finally had to admit to herself that he was getting worse. At this rate he would die of starvation and lack of sleep, for he denied himself the crutch of laudanum, preferring clearheaded pain to the hazy, heavy lethargy of the drug. The doctors had all been wrong in their protestations that there was nothing wrong with his legs — that it was all in his mind. God, how she hated them all! What did doctors know anyway? What good were they? Bitterly, she thought of all the years she had sought their help during her failed pregnancies. Again, none of them had any answers for her. They had probably thought it was all in her mind, too, she reflected with morbid humor.

Still, one never knew; there might be that one miracle out there. . . .

Swallowing, she reached over and grasped his hand. "Maybe we should see that doctor in Prague. They say —"

Covering her hand with his, Edward shook his head. "No, my dear. I'm through with all those quacks. I fear they have done more harm to me than good over the years. I wish to let nature take its course. 'Tis best, I believe."

Christina snatched her hand away and shifted away from him. Breathing deeply, she looked out over the beauty of the man-made lake. She didn't want to think about nature and fate and all that rubbish. Down that path lay only heartache and loss. Immeasurable loss.

Clearing her throat, she tried for a lighter subject. "Robert should be home in a few days. I received a letter from him this morning. The suite is due to leave for Vienna by the end of the month."

When there was nothing but silence behind her, she turned and looked curiously up at her brother-in-law. He was watching her closely — too closely. She didn't like the look in his gentle gaze. "What is it?"

"How do you feel about going to Vienna? You have never been out in society with Robert, and now with these plans to attend this Congress . . . " his comment trailed off.

She stared at him perplexed, wondering why he sounded so worried. It was true that since she had married Robert in a secret ceremony in Italy and had arrived at Kerkmoor, she had chosen never to leave its borders. She wanted nothing to do with the outside world. She certainly didn't want tales of her gossiped about in the salons of England only to end up in a trail that could possibly lead Varek to her. Kerkmoor was her sanctuary and, thankfully, Robert had been content to let her hide away in the wilds of Yorkshire, never demanding that she act as hostess to his ambitions in London. And now, for the first time since their marriage, he was making a request of her, and in all conscience, she could not deny him. Even if it meant going to Vienna.

Christina's eyes slid closed. *Vienna*. She knew every street and alley in that beautiful old city. She and Varek had spent the months after their wedding rediscovering everything there was to know about its history and people. Vienna was their city. How did she feel about going to Vienna? Terrified.

Striving for calm, she took a sip of the cool liquid and almost choked, so constricted was her throat. "It should be interesting. History will be made during this meeting of the Allies, and I shall be proud to be a part of it." How smoothly she had learned to lie.

Edward looked down at his hands. When he spoke his voice was so low she could barely hear him. "The chances are great that you will see him again. You do realize this, don't you?"

Christina's heart began to slam against her chest. She stared at Edward in shock. *How did he know?* No, she was just imagining something deeper behind his words. Wetting her lips, she asked coolly, "Of whom do you speak, Edward?"

Edward pinned her with a look that took her breath away. The sympathy radiating from his perceptive gaze almost made her want to run. "I'm sorry, my dear, but I do know who you are. When you first arrived I had you investigated. It took me a while, but I did find out all about

you. Why you chose to keep your background a mystery from my brother is your affair. However, as head of this family I could no more allow a stranger with no past walk into our midst than I would allow a member of my family to knowingly endanger their life."

The glass slipped from her nerveless fingers. She rose to her feet and stood staring down on this man whom she loved above her own husband. She felt hurt and humiliated. He knew all about her and her failures! Suddenly, she felt light-headed and close to swooning. Her breath came in tight little pants from which she couldn't seem to draw an even breath. *He knew it all!*

Turning, she stumbled and would have run away, but Edward was too quick. He might look frail and weak, but his grip was strong enough as it bit into her wrist. In a fog she heard him clip out some curt orders and as if in slow motion all the people meandering about melted away. Vaguely, she heard her son calling to her, his voice sounding fretful.

"Christina. Christina!"

Blinking, she realized she was on her knees directly in front of Edward with both her hands clasped firmly in his and resting on his knees. She looked up at him and saw that he was talking to her. Dimly, she began to hear him.

"... Do you understand me, Christina? It doesn't matter. You have nothing to be ashamed of."

In amazement she stared at him and then laughed. She heard the tinge of hysteria in her laughter, but couldn't seem to control it. "Nothing to be ashamed of? If that is your belief, then you know nothing of me. Nothing!" She felt violated somehow now that all her past pains and losses were exposed. Angrily, she tried to twist her hands free of his grip, but he would not let her go. His hold was inflexible.

"I know everything, your highness," he said grimly.

Managing to free herself, she surged to her feet. "Don't call me that," she shouted down at him. "Don't you ever dare call me that again!"

"Christina." The sudden gentling of his voice and manner caused her to pause, and warily she watched him. What was she expecting him to do? Repudiate her? Mock her? She was too overwrought to think clearly, and so she just stared at him, waiting for him to make the next move.

Silently, he held out his hands. She noticed they were trembling. "Come here. Please," he entreated softly. Taking a deep breath, she

looked about her, and even though she was still tempted to run, she slowly sank back down and placed her hands into his. When he pulled her closer, she went, laying her forehead against their entwined hands, unable to look him in the eye.

What was she doing, raising her voice to him like that? Never had she raised her voice to this man who meant so much to her. Varek had been the love of her life and always would be. Years ago she had stopped punishing herself for the guilty sin of loving another man while married to Robert. And Edward had been a large factor in this momentous decision of acceptance, though he didn't even know it. Edward was like a cool, tumbling brook of soothing water, easing her life and making it that more bearable. Even though he was not all that older than herself, he was almost like the father she had never known, nurturing and supportive during the times she had felt the most alone. She knew that in his eyes she could do no wrong. And always wanting to remain perfect in his eyes, she had striven to be just that. Perfect in every way possible: the perfect wife, the perfect chatelaine for Kerkmoor, the perfect mother. But now — how could she possibly be perfect when he knew her deepest secrets?

"Does Robert know?"

"I didn't feel it was my place to tell Robert. I know you are probably smiling at that absurd thought, but I have never tried to interfere between you and Robert. He appears content with what he knows of you, and you have your reasons for your silence. I have respected those reasons. After all, they are harming no one." She heard him take a deep breath. "However, that all may change very soon now. Robert has always been a bit . . ." he paused for a minute before continuing with care, "Robert tends to be possessive of what he considers his own."

Christina looked up, a puzzled frown creasing her brow. "Possessive? Robert? I have never found him so."

Smiling, he brushed a tendril of hair behind her ear. "You have never given him cause to show it as you have never left Kerkmoor or gone out into society. But he can be difficult to deal with at times if he feels his toes are being trod upon. I believe it is because he has been relegated to what he felt was an inferior position as second son all his life. And I must admit that our father was at fault in regards as how he had always treated Robert." He stopped there, not feeling comfortable continuing, though Christina could see he was tempted to tell her more.

It was hard for her to see Robert in this light as she had never experienced that side of him. That is not to say that she had not noticed the coolness between the brothers. She would have to be blind not to notice it. But she had never seen any more in it than a typical sibling rivalry. After all, it was in every family she had ever grown up around, especially in the ranks of the upper nobility. Ambition was expected of the younger sons, and at some level resentment was to be expected. However, she had never detected any animosity between them.

So, what was Edward *not* telling her?

"You still love him very much, don't you?"

Surprised by this sudden question, Christina didn't even pretend to misunderstand his meaning. Closing her eyes, she pondered how much she could expose of herself and decided that to this man who had already proved his faith in her, she would tell him anything he needed to know. So, for the first time in years, she spoke of Varek with an honesty that was almost a relief. "I know that I will never love another as much as I loved Varek. He is with me always on some level. When I look at the stars, when I drink a fine wine, every time I look at Eddie . . . He is in the trees, and the flowers, in the snow, in firelight. Simply, he is a part of me." She gave a prosaic shrug as if telling herself it wasn't such a big thing anymore, this loss of her other half. "He is my greatest weakness."

"A love like that can never be a weakness, my dear. It is a miracle and not to be taken lightly." His understanding raked her emotions. She was the wife of his only brother. How could he possibly be so compassionate after her confession?

"Oh, please, Edward, don't do this to me. It has been years since I have ached this much. You must believe me when I say I am happy here."

Edward stared at her for a long moment. "And what will happen if you see him again in Vienna?"

Pulling away from him, Christina stood up. "Who is to say we will meet again?"

Edward sighed, exasperation clearly written on his face. Abruptly, he asked, "Tell me true, Christina, what do you feel for my brother?"

She glanced sharply at him, not liking where this was taking them. "What kind of question is that?"

"Stop hedging and tell me true."

"I love Robert." There was no hesitation in her reply.

And you, my darling, are lying through your teeth and you don't even know it! Edward thought unhappily. After a moment, he offered hesitantly, not sure he wanted to do this, "I could write to Castlereagh. I am sure I could persuade him to rescind his request that you accompany the suite to Vienna as a hostess."

Christina felt a flash of relief; then shame quickly swamped her. This appointment as attaché to Castlereagh meant so much to Robert. If she refused to assist him would he think that she was trying to impede his chances for advancement? He was such a proud man, always chafing under the stigma of being the younger brother of the Duke of Kerkston, a man who was a very respected peer with society. Any advancement Robert made on his own he considered a leap toward his independence from Edward. Could she in all conscience deny her help to Robert, a man who had given her a son she adored and a life of serenity?

Perhaps it was time to tell him the truth about her past. But even as this thought nudged her, she cringed, though in all honesty she couldn't figure out why. What was so wrong with Robert knowing?

She rubbed her temple and thought long and deep, and knew irrevocably that if she ever met Varek again, her whole life would be disrupted in the blink of an eye. Just the thought of coming face-to-face with Varek terrified her. After all these years of painful healing could she survive a confrontation with her lost love?

She was startled to realize that she was holding her breath. Heaven help her, if just thinking about meeting him did this to her, what would the reality of it do to her?

Feeling the worst sort of coward, she slowly turned to look at Edward. The words almost choked her as she whispered, "Write to Castlereagh. Ask him if he would kindly excuse me from attending." Then before she could call back the words, she fled, years of shattered dreams nipping at her heels.

Edward watched till she disappeared; then he turned to look out over the lake. He wondered if settling for the life she now had was ever going to be enough for Christina. He was not long for this world; he had resigned himself to that fact long ago. So, when he was gone what would happen to her? What would happen to her when Eddie was grown and gone? She would be so alone, for Robert would always be involved in his own selfish pleasures and ambitions. Edward

couldn't stand the thought of Christina existing in a form of limbo, patiently awaiting the end of her life, convinced she was content with the lot that fate had demanded of her. How could he allow that when her soul mate was still alive and waiting for her? She deserved her one true love, for if anyone had been born to love, it was Christina.

And sadly, he knew that he would never be lucky enough to be so blessed.

Ever since that long ago day when Robert had brought Christina to Kerkmoor, he had secretly loved her. She had been so lost and alone; thin, pale and uncaring of what happened to her. Year by year, he watched Christina struggle to heal herself, dogged in her determination to thank Robert and himself for her new life. As she had turned Kerkmoor into a sanctuary she became obsessed with never leaving, even for short journeys about the countryside. Yet, even as he doubted that she would ever find happiness again, Edward had to admit that Christina was good for Robert. With Christina he was a different man; more mature and kinder of nature than ever before. If Robert was capable of truly loving anyone, he loved Christina, and even though Robert had participated to some degree in Christina's rehabilitation, he was still totally unaware of the private hell his wife had gone through to get to this tenuous place in her life.

The worst period had been while she was pregnant, living day in and day out with her resigned dread of the inevitable miscarriage. Both he and Sergei had thought they had lost her the day she gave birth to Eddie, and both were thankful that Robert had been in London at the time. When she had given birth to her healthy son, Christina had been hysterical in a way that he hoped never to see again. They had made certain that there was a constant vigil at her bedside, fearful that she might try to take her life. Even Sergei had cried that night, cursing God and fate and the devil all in the same breath. It seemed that the only one glad to see the tiny new St. Pole into the world was his uncle. However, when the baby was finally placed into her arms, Christina had never cried again, and her son became her one reason for living, and living joyously. It was only for him that she had finally found the strength to put her past behind her and move on to a future that was bright with promise.

Edward clenched his fists. Was she truly happy in her life here? He knew only too well that contentment did not necessarily mean

happiness — and God curse him, he only wanted to see her happy. No matter what the cost.

What the hell should he do?

With a curse, he spun his chair around and started to wheel himself toward home, ignoring the footmen who ran to his aid. During the laborious journey back to the manor he made his decision. He would not write to Castlereagh. He would come up with some story to tell Christina.

“Damn you, von Vischering,” he muttered between clenched teeth, “you had bloody well better be the man I believe you to be. I am giving you this one chance. Only one before I bring her back here to safety.”

Ignoring the pangs of conscience plaguing him about betraying his only brother, Edward held steadfast in this last task he had set himself before death finally found him.

Two

Vienna

October 18, 1814

The air was stifling yet sweet scented, as thousands of expensive tapers cast a romantic glow over the shimmering ballroom. All was pristine and a delight to the eye, the classical colonnaded pavilion built especially for this important gala. And as the gentle strains of Mozart's waltz floated through the marble halls, eighteen hundred of the elite of European aristocracy and diplomatic corps shifted along in congenial fluidity, jewels and medals proclaiming their rank and wealth. Yet Christina saw none of the opulent beauty around her. Her heart was bleeding for her oldest and dearest friend, Laure.

Together they stood in a secluded alcove behind some palms, desperate for a respite from the onerous tasks of hostessing. The princess looked tired and tense, and following the direction of her gaze, Christina knew she would see Laure's husband, the great, manipulative, unfaithful Prince Metternich. The base cad! How could he do this to his gentle wife? How could he so publicly humiliate her? Didn't he care that he was making himself the laughingstock of the Congress? Christina's lips thinned in ire as she watched the way his stricken, puppy-dog eyes followed his former lover as she dallied shamelessly with her current amour.

"He is behaving like a fool! Has he no pride? If not for himself, then at least for you!" Christina hissed in outrage as she turned to the princess.

Laure looked away from her husband. Blinking back her rush of tears, she gave Christina a weak smile and shrugged. "He loves her," she stated simply.

"Why do you defend him, Laure? This isn't his first affair and it won't be his last!"

"I love him, Christina. Despite his wandering ways he is good to the children and me. I never thought I could compete with the beauties that vie for his attention. I am content with what he does give me."

Christina sighed in disgust. True, Laure was not and never had been cited for any claim to beauty, but she was probably the most generous and loving person Christina had ever met. They had known each other as children and the years spent apart had only strengthened their affection for each other. It just made her want to go over to that selfish man and box his ears till they rang. But would that help? A man as shallow as Metternich would never be able to appreciate the jewel he had in his own wife. Only beauty was of any apparent worth to his kind.

"He is letting this ridiculous affair affect his duties."

Laure shook her head with adamant refute. "No, Clemens allows nothing to interfere with his duties to the Emperor. He devotes every waking minute to this Congress. He will not fail the Empire."

Christina glanced cynically at the prince's pale countenance, exhaustion weighing down his usually handsome features. Christina had heard the same rumors that everyone else was sniggering about. Most of his waking hours lately were spent in pouring out his tortured soul in endless letters to a heartless lover who had tossed him aside for another. Yet as worn as he appeared, Metternich moved with a restless energy as he gracefully performed his duties on this most important occasion of the Congress: The Peace Ball, celebrating the first anniversary of Napoleon's defeat in the Battle of Leipzig and the turning point of the Corsican's fall. Christina watched as he paused to chat amicably with the Crown Prince of Württemberg. He was not even trying to conceal the fact that his gaze constantly shifted to Wilhelmina, Duchess of Sagan. And that fickle lady, knowing her past lover was studying her every move, seemed to take even more pleasure in her flirtation with her dashing new lover.

Concerned for Laure, Christina turned away in disgust. "Still, he should be more circumspect."

Laure turned to her friend. "I have long ago accepted this weakness of his. Clemens may wander, but he always comes back to his family. And I am content to wait."

The gentle comment was like a slap in the face. Christina's face bled white and became rigid with past pain. Should she have been so noble and self-sacrificing when she had the choice all those years ago? Should she have waited patiently by Varek's side as he — did what? Turn her into his mistress? Could she have waited patiently each night while wondering if he would come to her or perform his duty on his wife? And when would she have learned to hate herself as she callously prayed for the death of an innocent pawn, just so she could have her life back?

No, never could she have stood by and watched as their magical love deteriorated into a pitiful sideshow for all to mock. Christina started when she felt Laure's hand on her back.

"Forgive me, my dear. That was not well done of me."

Christina gave a stilted shake of her head. Her heart was pounding so hard she barely heard Laure's whispered words. A feeling of urgency was building in her hour by stressful hour as she wondered if she would see Varek while in Vienna.

Suddenly, Christina wanted to find a dark corner to huddle into and cry. How pathetic of her. It was just that she was tired from all the traveling, she assured herself. And being in Vienna again . . . Christina closed her eyes for an instant. This city was bringing back memories she had struggled for years to suppress. Yet, with every familiar face she saw, every well-known landmark she passed, they began to rise like a phoenix from the ashes, and each remembrance chipped away at another crack in her shell. Even now, any shift in the heavy air about her made her catch her breath as she detected an essence that teased her with the unforgettable scent of *him*.

"I'm so sorry," she heard Laure whisper close at her side. Poor Laure; as if she didn't have enough to worry about, now in her own maudlin self-pity she was adding to her friend's distress.

Forcing a smile, Christina took a deep breath as she quickly touched her kerchief to her eyes before turning back around. "Lud, Laure, don't be such a goose." However, her brave mask cracked under Laure's grave regard. "It's all in the past," she murmured, praying with all her heart that it stayed so.

Laure bit her lip. How very cruel of her to even allude to Christina's tragic past. Almost desperately the princess looked about her, praying

to find something, anything, to distract her friend's painful thoughts. Laure almost laughed out in relief when her attention was caught.

"Well, look there! A most ardent admirer bearing shamelessly down upon you, Christina." Laure winced at the desperation she heard in her own voice as she attempted to tease her friend. "I vow, isn't he a most handsome one at that!" Then her smile became quite genuine as she watched the object of her deliverance wend his way through the assemblage toward them. "Excuse me, my dear, but I had best see to my duties in this crush. Lord, I shall be happy when this day is done," Laure sighed wearily. Then with a swish of silken skirts she was gone, giving Christina's husband, Robert, a friendly tap on his cheek with a gloved finger as they passed each other.

Robert flashed the Princess Metternich a wide smile as he bowed to her. Turning to Christina, his smile melted away when he noticed her pale face. "What is wrong, my dear?" he questioned as he came to stand at her side.

Relieved by his presence, Christina leaned against his stocky frame. "Nothing, my lord. Laure's predicament is just very distressing to me."

Robert glanced with derision at his host. "The fool. He has a true lady as his wife and he dabbles with the common."

A wry smile lifted the corners of Christina's lips as she studied Robert's idea of *common*. The Duchess of Sagan was a stunning woman and she well knew it. Since the beginning of the Congress last month, Christina had watched with humor as every man at one time or another had laid his heart at her dainty feet. And for those who did not worship at her shrine, there was the Princess Bagration — another past lover of Metternich and a distant cousin of Czar Alexander. Both beauties shared the same floor of the Palm Palace, vying competitively for the prestige of who had the most powerful of lovers — politically speaking. Every day and night an equal amount of admirers were seen entering the plush palace, taking either the left staircase or the right. Obviously discretion was never a consideration of much importance, since between the spies, police, admirers and servants who grew wealthy on the outrageous bribes thrust at them, the Palm Palace was one of the social and political highlights of the Congress.

Laughing with incredulity, Christina turned to Robert. "Are you telling me you find nothing tempting about that temptress?"

Pulling her farther behind the palm and into his arms, Robert nuzzled her cheek playfully. "She began to pale before my eyes the moment she opened her ruby lips. Besides, I already have the best. She could only be a disappointment and a waste of time."

Laughing, Christina evaded Robert's persistent lips, a little unsettled at this uncharacteristic attention from him.

Feeling her tensing in his arms, Robert released her and said casually as he stepped away, "Sergei was looking for you earlier. He seemed quite rattled." Glancing about, he noticed a few men eyeing his beautiful wife, and anger twisted his gut. Stepping close to her side again, he took hold of her gloved hand and dropped an innocent kiss on the bare flesh of her wrist. He wasn't used to sharing her with society and he didn't like it one deuced bit.

Christina looked up in surprise. "Sergei? He *never* rattles."

"Well, he is now." He became preoccupied as he watched a pair of renowned rakes wending their way toward them, their avid attention fixed on Christina.

Christina could not believe her ears. *Sergei upset?* This she had to see.

She tugged Robert with her as she stepped out from behind the palm and looked about for her friend's tall form. An unconscious sigh of relief escaped her lips as they stepped closer to the assemblage. She was dismayed with herself to feel so uncomfortable in Robert's company lately, for it seemed these shows of possessive intimacy occurred more often when they were out in public than they ever did when they were alone. If she didn't know any better, she could almost swear he was staking his claim on her. As she had never appeared in public with Robert before, this side of her husband was a distinct surprise to her. She wanted her old affable Robert back, for all this unusual clinging had her a bit disconcerted.

"Do you realize you haven't given me one dance?" Robert complained as he pulled her toward the dance floor.

Christina turned back to him and noticed his suddenly grave expression, again wondering at his odd behavior. Looking down, she murmured, "Dare I trust my tender toes to those monstrous boots?"

Robert also glanced down at his gleaming Hessians and winced. It was quite true; he was the worst dancer to ever grace a floor — especially with the romantic and fluid waltz, still a rarity among the staid English. However, even though he suddenly had a need to hold her in

his arms, he didn't want to hurt her. Sighing with regret, he shook his head. "I suppose not."

Christina looked up at Robert with a puzzled frown. The grueling schedule that Castlereagh tossed him each day must be starting to wear him down, for he certainly wasn't himself lately. When he glanced sideways at her, she gave him an affectionate smile and took hold of his hand. His face lit up with pleasure as she tugged him into her arms, and together they bravely melded into the swirling pattern of the romantic waltz.

After a studious moment of counting out the beats, Robert grinned down at his wife and pronounced, " 'Pon my word, I do believe I could learn to like this waltzing business!"

Christina's laughter floated amidst the merry hum of over a thousand guests, lost to everyone — but one man. One man with the instincts of a predator scenting its mate. And when her laughter sang in his ears for the first time in six years, a smile formed on lips unaccustomed to smiling.

His gaze never left her as she flashed by, just out of his reach. He was about to step forward when his attention was caught by another quarry.

The smile was gone before he drew his next breath. His body tensed with a rage so overwhelming he had to physically restrain himself from leaping upon the bastard and ripping out his treacherous heart. In the next instant, he disappeared into the milling crowd.

* * *

Sergei felt a shiver of unease as he lost sight of his subject. He searched quickly for sight of Christina, then eased back when he spotted her still in the arms of her husband. Before he had a chance to expel a sigh of relief, he felt a sharp stab in the middle of his spine. He froze, then quietly cursed. How could he have been so stupid?

"I should kill you where you stand," a well-remembered voice murmured close to his ear.

Sergei's face was grim as he watched Christina and Robert stumble slightly, then Christina almost double over in laughter when Robert's face flushed the humiliating color of puce. It would have been a comical scene if his life wasn't suddenly suspended on the point of a blade.

Again, he cursed his carelessness. After all, he knew better than anyone Varek's ability to hunt and strike with the deadly finesse of a cobra. With every nerve in his body humming, Sergei waited for Varek's next move, not sure what to expect.

"Why?" Varek's question rasped harshly as the tip of the blade sliced through the fabric on Sergei's back and embedded into his flesh just left of his spine.

Sergei started to sweat. He had to remember that the boyhood friend from his past no longer existed. Standing at his back was a stranger, an enemy intent on wrecking a justified vengeance. The only thing keeping him somewhat in control was the same tension he could sense in the hand holding the knife — it literally vibrated through the steel and leached into his blood. Taking a deep breath, Sergei answered hollowly, "Did you really expect me to just let Christina walk away without protection? You knew I had no choice." Sergei kept his voice low, trying to draw as little attention as possible from the assemblage.

Sergei gasped as the tip pierced his skin. He felt the warmth of his blood as it trickled down his spine. Varek's hot breath seared his ear. "Protect her? She needed no one's protection but mine. You took her away, you bastard!"

"I took Christina nowhere. I only followed where she led. I tried to talk sense into her, Vare, but her hurt was too devastating at the time. I did what I thought best. And I don't regret any of it. Leave her be. If you would but look at her, can you not see she is content? Love her enough to let her go." He hissed as the blade stung again.

Now angered himself, Sergei spun around and for the first time in six years looked into the eyes of his oldest friend. But he saw no sign of friendship in the glacial glare bearing down on him, the light blue of Varek's eyes like chips of ice. He could have been facing an enemy on the field of battle, and death was staring him in the face.

"Tell me why, Sergei? I loved you like a brother. I raised you higher than anyone in my duchy. You had everything because *I* gave you everything. And for all that I had done for you, you repaid me with a betrayal most cruel."

Sergei's vision blurred even as his eyes remained stubbornly open. The pain that smote him at Varek's words was crushing, for everything Varek said was true. But how could he have done anything dif-

ferent? It was because of his love for Varek and Christina that he had done what he'd had to do to protect them all during that hellish time.

Nevertheless, this was all a moot point now. The die had been cast years ago, their lives tumbling about like little ivory cubes. And after all these years, Sergei had yet to figure out if there had been any winners.

Sergei forced himself to return Varek's glare with one of indifference. "You're still not behaving rationally, Vare, even after all these years. It was your decision that lost you Christina. You made your choice and now, whether you like it or not, you have to live with it. Forget Christina. She has forgotten you, I can assure you. Go back to your wife."

"That woman meant nothing to me and you damn well know it!"

Sergei just stared at him.

The rage that flared in Varek's wintry eyes was frightening to see. Sergei tensed himself for an attack.

"What would you have done, damn your treacherous soul?" Varek demanded.

"If Christina had been mine? I would have renounced the duchy."

Varek was so enraged, he felt light-headed, his skin damp with perspiration. How noble the bastard sounded! How pathetically simple-minded! Could this possibly be the same man he had once loved so dearly — this fool standing before him spouting such bloody, self-righteous crap? It hurt. God, how it hurt! In one fell slice of hell's will, he had lost both his love and his closest friend. What had he ever done that had been so wrong? He had been forced to literally rip his heart out and all he had received for his selflessness was betrayal from the very people he had been trying to protect! Varek's hand tightened about the handle of his blade.

"You pathetic fool! Would you have, indeed? And how long do you suppose Christina would have lived before an assassin's bullet found her? You may not have cared for Austenburg or had much faith in its longevity, but I assure you the thousands who live there think quite differently. Abdicating and trying to run into obscurity would have signed our death warrants even as the fanatics hunted us down like animals! At all times, Christina's safety was my first and *only* consideration."

"My God, man, all you have to do is think back on what was happening throughout Europe at that time! Death was cheap and easily had. Fears were running rampant and out of control. Look at the

masses of corpses still littering the byways of Europe from Paris to St. Petersburg. Independence may mean nothing to you, but it was and is everything to the people of my duchy! They would have done *anything* to protect their way of life, their wealth, in a world gone crazed. The *only* way I could have saved Christina's life was to put her aside, but I never meant to lose her. Damn you, Sergei! Did you really think I meant to set her up as my mistress and place her in such a position of ridicule? Did you truly believe my love for her was so shallow? I would never have put that stigma on her!"

Sergei looked away, feeling guiltier at that moment than he had throughout the long years of exile from Austenburg. He knew the truth of Varek's words. He had tried to reason with thoughts very similar to these to Christina when he had tried to dissuade her from her desperate desire to flee Austenburg on the day of Varek's wedding. Even she had admitted to the volatile situation they were all simply trying to survive. When he thought back on the hysteria and helplessness of that terrible time, if anyone could be held accountable for selfishness, it would have had to have been Christina. Varek had done anything and everything in his power to keep Christina from harm, and she has hated Varek for it everyday of her life since. It was more than possible that the only reason Christina was alive today was because of Varek's sacrifice. But even so, Sergei's loyalty was now Christina's alone.

Looking up, he noticed Varek's gaze riveted on something across the room. Christina was the only thing that had ever inspired that sense of intensity in Varek.

"How is she?" The pain in Varek's voice was unmistakable.

Sergei tensed, and after a long moment said reluctantly, "Married." That feral intensity was suddenly focused on him.

"When?" The word snapped out with the force of a steel-tipped arrow.

Sergei's head began to pound. He suddenly wished he could just disappear. Even though Varek stood before him threatening his life, Sergei didn't want his old friend hurt any more.

"When, damn you?"

"Four years ago," Sergei muttered, glancing away from the flash of stark pain and disbelief that was momentarily betrayed in Varek's eyes. With the grace of God, Sergei prayed that Varek would never dis-

cover the rest. He knew it was wishful thinking to hope that Varek would now just let her go.

Varek's lips whitened as he watched Christina. "She didn't wait long, did she?" he mused bitterly. Sergei felt him quiver with suppressed violence as Christina and Robert flashed by.

Sergei couldn't help pointing out dryly, "Longer than you."

Stepping closer, Varek brought his now impassive mien but an inch away from Sergei's, the knife a mere breath from castrating him. "Tell me, my friend who will never be again, did you fuck her?" His whisper was frigid, as his equally frigid glare impaled him.

Sergei stared at this stranger before him. The years had changed Varek. He was harder, leaner, and any evidence of what little humor he had possessed was gone with the defection of the only reason he'd had to smile. It saddened Sergei to discover that his noble friend had long since disappeared and in his place stood this tangle of bitter anger, hurt emotions, and driven obsessions. This cold-blooded stranger before him had little, if any, sense of fairness and had no use for it any more.

Yet even as he felt compassion, Sergei's own rage rose to a level equal to the archduke's, for Varek had now gone too far. He could stand still as Varek threatened his cock and he could stand chastened as Varek called him a fool, but never could he stand by and let any man disparage Christina.

With the honed instincts of a trained killer, Sergei reached down and ripped the lethal blade out of Varek's hold. Varek gave no reaction to this turnabout; in fact, his lack of reaction was almost insulting. With a frustrated curse, Sergei flipped the knife in his hand and jammed it back into the hidden sheath in Varek's boot.

Looking once more at the man standing stiffly impassive before him, Sergei murmured with a disgusted shake of his head, "Go back from where you came, Vare. You are too late."

Varek gave a grim chuckle as he watched Christina. "I've come from the bowels of hell, Massallon." Slowly, his coldly pale eyes slid sideways to study him. "And I assure you, when I return, I shall not be alone."

Sergei's blood ran cold, for he was not sure to whom Varek's threat alluded. Deliberate and cold, Sergei stepped closer, his own blade suddenly in his hand and pressed against the archduke's gut, the move hidden between their bodies. Leaning close, he met Varek's impassive

eyes without a flinch. "When you go back, and you will, I will gladly accompany you, your highness. However, if you harm a hair on her head, you will not have the chance to draw your next breath. You of all people should know not to take this pledge lightly, for my teacher was the best — you."

Varek's eyes narrowed a bare fraction, the only sign belying his otherwise dispassionate manner. Then amazingly he smiled. Sergei blinked in confusion as he stepped back, pocketing the knife with an economy of motion that was proof of his familiarity with the weapon.

Warily, the two men stared at each other. Finally, Varek turned away to again watch his wife. Clearing his throat, he offered, "It seems I have as much to thank you for as I do to hate you. I don't know what was or is between you. I don't think I ever want to know, but you have kept her safe. For that alone I owe you my life. You have nothing to fear from me, Massallon. But neither can I ever call you friend again."

Glancing over his shoulder, Varek's pale blue gaze met Sergei's. "Even after you had fled with her, I continued to trust you." His voice lowered to a hoarse whisper, his accusation as cutting as the blade he had threatened him with. "Despite everything, fool that I was, I waited, believing I could trust you to bring her back safely to me after she had a chance to calmly reconsider the situation. When you didn't come back I knew Christina was going to be stubborn, and still I waited, expecting word from you to tell me she was safe and of her whereabouts. But it never came." Varek paused as he watched Christina flash by.

"Instead, I had to face the fact that the man I loved like a brother had covered his tracks so well that he knew I wouldn't stand a chance in hell of ever finding her. All these years of pain and loss would never have been but for you, Massallon. If it wasn't for your interference, Christina would again be my wife." Turning, Varek's sardonic eyes mocked him, the hatred he now felt for this man he had loved like a brother all too obvious to see. "For you see, the woman that I was forced to take in place of Christina had thankfully died in childbirth after giving Austenburg its heir. Two years had not even passed when I was miraculously free to marry Christina again. But lo and behold, she was nowhere to be found — thanks to you."

His breath suspended, Sergei stared in dazed disbelief at the archduke. "I did what I thought best at the time. She was so distraught, so . . ."

"That is right, Massallon, at the time she was distraught, hurt and in need of a friend. I was thankful she had you. I trusted you to watch out for her. I trusted that with time and distance you could have made her understand the situation more clearly. What you did was unforgivable. If not for you, Christina would have been back in my arms the moment it was safe for her. These past years of hell need never have been . . . *but . . . for . . . you.*" The last words were forced out through the building rage in Varek's voice. His breathing deep and erratic, Varek stood poised for violence before Sergei, glaring at him with burning accusation. Then shaking his head in disgust, he turned away and disappeared into the crowd.

Sergei stared after him in horror, a deep trembling spreading through him until he thought he would bellow his rage to the world. His mind flashed on the haunting memory of Varek and Christina as children, vowing their eternal love, swearing to each other that never would they part, no matter what came between them — not even death itself.

But death had parted them. The deaths of six little souls.

It had been his responsibility to guide her back home. Instead, he had allowed her to lead them further adrift. He alone could have prevented what had followed, but he had been weak. But why? he agonized. Why? What had he been hoping for? And as always, every time he dared to ask himself this particular question, his mind went blank and guilt smote him.

"My God," he agonized as his gaze swept the crowd in search of Christina, "what have I done to you?"

Three

Varek paused on the outskirts of the dancing, watching his wife with a hunger that bit sharply into his heart.

His wife!

He still thought of her as such; he had never stopped. When she laughed again at something her partner said, his eyes slid closed. Above all the noise and bustle of the congested room he could hear only her. He knew how she looked when she laughed like that — how her head tilted back, her long lashes sweeping her flushed cheeks as she flirted with him, tantalizing him, knowing he couldn't do a damn thing about it. Tilting at the dragon she had always teased, knowing how his retribution would come later, his sweet retribution that she had always so longed for. How she had loved to tease him — how he had loved her light-hearted bantering.

At that moment he felt so brittle that he feared if he moved a step he would shatter into a million pieces. *My God, married! Christina, how could you?*

Opening his eyes, a brilliant hardness shone through the deceiving moisture in the arctic blue, making them appear cold and predacious. He hated the fact that she was still as beautiful as ever — as if the last hellish years had made no impact on her whatsoever. Had she ever truly loved him? he now wondered as the rage sucked him deeper into the swirling abyss of suffocating memories. Her figure was still slender, yet her curves seemed richer, lusher. He felt feverish as he watched how her breasts pressed against the chest of the bastard holding her too closely.

Stiffening his already tensed shoulders, Varek moved forward, intent on only one thing.

The greetings tossed his way were ignored as his long legs made short work of the distance. Years of pain and betrayal were crossed in a matter of mere seconds and in those few short moments his whole life seemed to shift and then settle into a brilliant sharpness. Afraid to take his eyes off his wife for fear that with the mere blink of his eyes she would disappear again, he navigated through the press of people toward her. He felt like a floundering ship struggling to reach the safety of her distant beacon, shimmering bright and luminous in a sea grown suddenly dull to an obscure gray. His nostrils flared as if he had caught her own special scent in the overheated room.

At long last, he had found her and soon he would finally be at rest.

* * *

Robert laughed as Christina stumbled and stepped on *his* foot! He looked down meaning to tease her when he felt a frisson of fear. Her face was a stark white mask, her eyes wide and filled with horror.

Their steps faltered together. "Christina, what is it?"

Her bloodless lips barely moved as she murmured, "Please, Robert, I need some air."

Her gaze was locked on something over his shoulder. As he escorted her quickly from the floor, Robert glanced in the direction where her attention had been fixed and saw a strange man bearing down on them, an almost feral determination in the ice-blue eyes that were trained directly on Christina. The man was overwhelming in his size — his military upright posture tensed and lethal. This stranger meant danger; he could feel it in his bones.

Possessively, Robert wrapped Christina's cold hand about his arm. He could feel her body shaking. "Who is that man?"

"Please, let's hurry," Christina pressed, casting a hounded look over her shoulder.

Robert bit down on his curiosity and as swiftly as the crowd would allow, he led her toward one of the entrances.

"Christina!" The man's deep voice reached them, causing her to pull up short, her nails digging into Robert's sleeve.

Taking a deep breath, she spun around and stared up at Varek, not knowing what to say. Even though she had steeled herself for this moment, she felt the ground beneath her feet shift, and the beating of

her heart deafened her. It had been so many years since she had last seen him. Six very long hard years of trying to forget him and what they had shared together. And now, just when she had finally contented herself with what fate had tossed her, he walked back into her life with the force of a volcanic eruption. She hated him more at that moment than she had over all their lost years. And, God help her, she still loved him as if those same years had never been.

Desperately, she stepped closer to Robert and pasted a smile on her stiff lips. "Your highness, how are you? It's been a long time."

Varek's glacial stare flicked rudely over Robert before dismissing him with insulting precision. Christina flinched when he turned that freezing glare back upon her.

"I wish to speak with you, Christina. Now. Alone." His low, clipped voice was strange to her ears. In all the years they had shared, never had she heard Varek speak to her in such a cold, commanding manner.

Robert took a menacing step forward, but Christina held him back. Swallowing, she said quickly, "Your highness, allow me to introduce you to my husband, Viscount Basingstoke, Robert St. Pole." She turned slightly toward Robert; however, every nerve was still centered on the golden giant looming over them.

"My dear," she began then faltered when Varek's gaze, still pinned unmercifully on her, flared into an inferno of enraged emotions at the endearment directed at another man. She had to swallow past the obstruction of fear tightening her throat. "His Royal Highness, the Archduke Varek von Vischering of Austenburg."

Varek ignored Robert's stilted bow and demanded again, "Now, Christina."

It was clear to Christina that he was in a foul enough humor to cause a scene if he found it necessary in order to get his way. Glancing over his shoulder, she saw Sergei approaching them through the press of revelers, and it was then that she noticed the inquisitive glances directed their way. Even Viscount Castlereagh had paused in his conversation to gaze curiously at them, a look of disapproval darkening his usually courteous expression.

"Very well, your highness." Cornered and nervous, she had no choice but to agree. Varek, with his usual ruthless authority, was making certain of her compliance. This time as she turned to Robert she met his confused and angry gaze and gave him a weak smile of reassurance.

His voice was low as he inquired of her, "It's him, isn't it?"

Avoiding Robert's scrutiny, she nodded reluctantly. Her hand reached for his, and briefly their fingers entwined, clinging, before he stepped back to let her pass. Then he was joined by Sergei who came to stand beside him. For the first time in their strange acquaintance, the two men stood together in silent accord as they faced Varek, both tensed and ready for any problem.

Varek sketched them a mocking bow before he held out his arm to Christina. There was a moment of strained indecision before she finally placed her fingers on his sleeve. She barely had the chance to steady herself after this first initial contact with him before he swept her into his arms and the room spun about her in a giddy kaleidoscope of confusing colors and sounds. With the speed of a bullet to the heart, Christina's past flashed before her, and she melted for the merest second into Varek's familiar embrace. If the world had come to a stop at that very moment, Christina would have died happy.

As Varek pulled her gently closer, effortlessly guiding her through the swaying steps, the scent of him was the antidote that her life had been missing all these years and she breathed him in as if she would never get enough of its soothing strength. It was as if they had never been apart. Glancing up, she was drawn to his gaze like the lodestone he had always been. His eyes, so cold and distant minutes ago, now were warm and searching, his stern lips full and sensuous, softening in response to the feel of her pressed against him. He was as affected by this moment as she, both more than willing to offer their hearts generously with never a mention of the hell they had both wandered through in their search for each other.

Then reality flashed by her in the form of her husband, standing on the edge of the dance floor, frowning at her. With a gasp, she jerked herself upright. With her next breath, she deliberately replaced the distance of six years between them. *God help me, what am I doing?* Frantically, she looked about her, searching for an escape — not so much from the man holding her as from herself.

Christina gasped as the arm about her waist tightened till she was forced indecently close against his hard, muscular frame. Her heart pounded, her breath caught, almost strangling her, as she felt her breasts rub with erotic familiarity against him. She was tall for a woman, looking down on many men, unintentionally intimidating

them; however, she had always fit like a glove against Varek's impressive height. The room tilted alarmingly as she remembered how Varek used to love her, his sweat-sheened body glistening in the moonlight as he rose above her, their souls as closely mated as their bodies. Feeling as if she were drowning, and fighting desperately for her life, she made the mistake of turning her gaze up to Varek for help. A stranger faced her again, his gaze the glittering, piercing eyes of a predator about to move in on his hypnotized prey, arrogant in his knowledge that he would not fail.

God, how she wanted to pull away from him, slap him; wanted to punish him for what he had done to her. The fact that he had had no choice did not matter to her anymore. It had become such a simplistic point of fact in her life: he had hurt her and now she wanted to hurt him in return. Past anger sizzled to life in her bruised heart.

"Do you know how much I would like at this moment to take that beautiful throat of yours into my hands and snap it?" His voice was a vicious whisper brushing her ear.

Again, she tried to push away from him, with as little success as before. He had no trouble controlling her. Despite the diminutive struggle between them, they moved together with faultless grace, no one being the wiser to the battle being waged on the dance floor. She bit her lips as she tried to blink her tears away. The feel of him, the scent of him, was suffocating her. She stumbled as the room faded out of focus for an instant. Christina was almost grateful as his arm immediately tightened about her, holding her steady and safe. She was going to faint; she just knew it.

Then she felt his smooth cheek against hers as he whispered into her ear, his low voice lulling her, "Steady, lark. I have you. You have never fainted in your life. Have you become so fainthearted, then?" And then those magical lips of his barely brushed her temple as he drew back.

Fainthearted? She almost laughed out loud in bitterness.

Not about to let him see any weakness on her part, she mustered her age-old anger, and it helped to steady her once more. "You are so right, your highness. I have never been fainthearted. If I had, I would have stayed in Austenburg and been made an object of pity by your people. I would have let you make a whore of me. If I were *fainthearted* I would have shot you the day you forced me to sign those papers of divorce!"

"Damn you! You know I *had no* choice!" he gritted out between clenched teeth.

The sweep of a turn was taken with a bit more force than she could handle and she had to hang on to him or lose her balance and stumble.

"Everyone has a choice, your highness. You made yours. Then I made mine. How is the Archduchess Eugenia?"

"Dead," he told her brutally.

She gaped up at him. "I'm sorry; I hadn't heard."

"Why should you have? You haven't been in Austenburg in over six years."

"How did she die?" She did not really want to know, but she didn't know what else to say.

"Childbirth."

Her heart hammered. "And do you now have your heir?"

"A daughter."

"I'm sorry." He now had a child, but not by her. *He has given another woman his child, planted his seed deep into another womb and watched as it grew and grew. He has done this with another woman and not me!* Her thoughts had no coherence as she strove for some sense of stability in the room spinning around her.

"Why? She's beautiful and healthy. I could wish for no more."

Christina stared at him, bemused. She didn't know whether or not to be hurt by this revelation. He had always wanted a son by her. Had he loved his late wife so much that he was satisfied with a mere daughter? Her throat burned on her next question. "Did you love her?"

"No. I love you." He smiled coldly down on her, his eyes a wintry accusation. "Every time I looked at her I hated her because she wasn't you. Every time I fucked her I — " He snapped her back against him when she tried to push away. His breath rasping in her ear, he repeated slowly, viciously, knowing that his vulgar language was intolerable to her gentle sensibilities. His satisfaction was immense as he continued to distress her. "Every time I fucked her I thought of you. And I fucked her as often as I could, Christina — morning, noon and night. The day she was declared pregnant I never touched her again. I couldn't bear to touch any woman. All I wanted was you. Just to have heard your voice alone would have soothed me. But, instead, like the coward I never knew you to be, you ran when it became too

difficult for you. Well, what about me, Christina? Where was I supposed to run when the nights were so bleak I wanted nothing more than to put a gun to my head and end my misery? Where were you then? Fucking Sergei? Fucking this stranger you now mistakenly call husband? If you had only trusted me! If you had only loved me enough to know that our love is forever, then all these wasted years would never have been. We would be together again. Married and complete in each other as we had always wanted. But you didn't trust me, did you, Christina? If only . . . " His voice cracked and faded away into a hostile silence.

Christina's whole body turned to ice. *If only*. But it could never be, not only because of this new life she had single-mindedly patched together for herself and the husband she was now sworn to, but because never would she trust Varek again. Their love had been too deep, too obsessive at times. He had owned her body and soul. And God help her but she secretly wanted it all back again! Held close in Varek's powerful arms, she could no longer fool herself, and it only made her angrier.

For the first time she looked him square in the eye and hissed, "No, I can't trust you, Varek! You say you had no choice in what you were forced to do. Very well, I understand this, and still I can hate you for it. Yes and yes again, I understand it! Is that what you want? Do you want my forgiveness, too? *That*, you will *never* have. Do you know why, Varek? Because *I* was given no choice in the matter! It was *my* life you were debating. Did it never occur to you that perhaps I would have preferred to take my chances and stay by your side? It should have been *my* choice, too, Varek. But I was just a piece of property to you that you didn't want damaged. Well, you got what you wanted. I am alive and I am whole and I am happy with my life. You can't have everything, Varek, no matter how powerful you think you are."

His eyes were a blaze of conflicting emotion: rage, confusion, and fear. "So my failing is that I loved you too much? Is that what you are saying, Christina? That I should have told them all to go to hell and continue on in our own little fantasy world? And then what? When you were dead in my arms, I was just supposed to shrug and say, 'Bring on the next bride!' " He gave a harsh, dry laugh. "God, how I wish to hell I had. It seems I should have been the selfish bastard and just cared about how much longer I could take you to my bed before

the choice was taken out of my hands completely!" His fingers dug painfully into her side as he bent his face to within a mere breath's distance. His chilling glare stripped her soul bare. "And it probably matters not a whit to you, that when you were no longer sharing this world with me, I would have had no choice but to follow you? Is that where our selfishness should have taken us, Christina? Instead of the hope of a future together someday, we would have had nothing left to share but a grave?"

Christina just stared at him, her mouth open in horror. "You wouldn't have!" she gasped.

He looked down on her impassively. "As you just said, we all have choices. If anything had happened to you, I would have first tracked down the animal who had killed you, then I would have joined you, Christina. In life or death, we belong together."

Christina found herself drowning again. She couldn't even imagine Varek dead — cold in the ground, his vibrancy snuffed out. "Varek, don't you see that you read our fates wrong? We weren't meant for each other or none of this would have happened." She was almost stuttering, grabbing at straws now.

"Our fates are still intertwined, you little fool, don't you see that? Why else would you be here? Why else would I be here? But fate is a fickle bitch; I'll grant you that. After all, the most peculiar things can happen when you least expect it." He sounded almost bored, his musing gaze studying Robert as they flashed past.

Having noticed whom he was watching, Christina couldn't believe what she was hearing. "Are you threatening my husband, your highness?"

Varek's eyes were anything but bored or impassive when he looked directly into her startled gaze. "I am your husband, Christina. Tell me that you don't see my face when he lies above you. How often do you have to convince yourself that you love him? That you are happy in your safe, dull little world? So, tell me, lark, who are you trying so strenuously to convince — me or yourself?" His smile was brutal as he stared her down, his whole demeanor as possessive as if he had thrown her down on the floor and claimed her body physically.

When she tried to pull away again, he jerked her flush against him and she shivered as his warm lips brushed her ear, his moist breath caressing the sensitive skin. Against all her will, her body responded.

She tried to shut out the feel of his voice as it whispered hotly in her ear. "Now that you've been in my arms again, do you really want to be anywhere else? You can't deny it because your body won't let you. Is your body weeping for me even now? If my fingers were in you right now, would they be dripping with your essence?" His cheek brushed her with a tender caress. "My God, lark, I need to come home." This last anguished whisper was a stark testament to his pain.

Thankfully, the music ended and after a long, tense pause, he slowly let her go. His face was an impassive mask as he watched her, waiting for her decision. When she stumbled slightly his hand shot out to steady her, the warmth of his palm searing her through the thin silk of her glove. Almost blindly she shrugged him off, and reluctantly he released her. How she stood standing she would never know. Her life was disintegrating about her feet as he gave her a bow, his searing gaze compelling her. Just the sight of him, standing there before her, so beautiful and golden and powerfully lithe, almost brought her to her knees. Her eyes slid closed as the room tilted under her feet. When she opened them again, he was gone.

Christina looked around in a daze and when Robert materialized at her side, she was barely aware of him. Varek's insidious words were all too true. She had always belonged to Varek, ever since she had first seen him when she had been an ungainly child of eight. It was still indelibly fused on her memory how he had taken her hand and kissed it so gallantly, his gaze even then a force that could not be denied. From that moment on she knew no one would ever take his place in her life. She had loved him with an unswerving devotion that had years later turned into a consuming passion — and she had been one of the fortunate few whose love had been returned with equal fervor.

The love of a lifetime. A love such as the celebrated troubadours through the ages had glorified. And it had ended just as all those fabled legends had — in tragedy.

But, she wasn't that same person anymore. She didn't belong to Varek anymore — *or did she?*

Reaching out blindly, she grabbed hold of Robert's arm. Her anchor in a world gone suddenly insane. Without a word spoken, they turned as one and headed for the nearest escape, ignoring the curious stares following them.

Sergei hung back and studied Varek as he watched Christina disappear, the archduke's steady gaze narrowed and resolute. Sergei could tell by the tension radiating like heat from his body, that letting her go — again — was the hardest thing he had ever done in his life.

When Varek soon followed the fleeing couple out into the night with a leisurely stride at odds with his stiff posture, Sergei sadly wondered what fates his old comrade was planning to tilt at next.

* * *

Robert stared at his wife's back as she sat at her dressing table, brushing her waist-length hair. She had barely spoken a word to him since they had left the ball. He swallowed his trepidation and finally broke the silence.

"Do you want to tell me about it?"

Their gazes met in the mirror. Her eyes were huge with shadowed secrets. After a moment she slowly shook her head. "I can't," she whispered. "Not right now, Robert."

He clung tightly to his patience. He was scared as hell and she wasn't helping by not sharing this with him. He could tell she was deeply shaken by what had happened tonight. Girding himself, he asked with an unaccustomed harshness, not knowing if he really wanted to hear her answer, "Do you still love him?"

Christina set her brush down with deliberate care, carefully avoiding his intent perusal. "No," she lied, resentful that this was happening. She wasn't good at dissembling, no matter how important it was. She just prayed Robert wouldn't demand that she look him in the eye and repeat it.

Feeling the tension in the air behind her, she turned around and faced him. Both were strained to their respective limits of endurance as they stared at each other, both pairs of eyes shuttering their innermost thoughts from the other. Christina felt a stab of pain, for Robert did not deserve this from her, but she was afraid that if she spoke to him of Varek she would confess everything, even of the muddled feelings battering at her disoriented mind and body at this very moment.

The reserved front he was struggling to hold on to slipped, and Christina saw the pain beneath the mask. When he turned away from her to sit on the edge of the bed, she stood up and wandered, with

hesitant steps, to her side of the bed. The mattress lay between them like a battlefield. "I do love you, Robert."

His back was still to her as he asked stiffly, "Do you? Truly?"

She hesitated for the merest second, before answering quickly, "Yes."

Was she in love with Robert? Compared to what she had shared with Varek, the answer was a resounding no. But, that wasn't the only kind of love that existed between two people. There was the love of sharing, the love of . . . friendship . . . of companionship. The love that two people shared with their child. As if in a daze, she leaned over and blew out the candle on the bedside table.

Pulling the covers down on their bed, Robert climbed in then held out his hand to her. Her smile expressed her relief as she slid in beside him, sighing with contentment when his arms pulled her close. There were no words spoken as they lay together, her head pillowed on his shoulder. Her eyes drifted closed and her roiling emotions soon became a distant hum as his fingers hypnotically stroked her temple, soothing her exhausted emotions into a deep, dreamless sleep.

Breathing in her subtle scent, Robert stared up into the darkness as he continued to stroke her brow. The only sound in the room was the soft whisper of her breath, a mere sigh in the moonlit stillness. His arms tightened about her when he remembered the sight of her in her former husband's arms. Over his many years in the King's Regiment, serving as an aide to Wellington, Robert had fought in many a campaign, losing some and winning most; however, he knew he was now facing the greatest battle of his life. Hell, if he was Varek, he would fight without honor to get her back and keep her. Unfortunately he knew that the archduke already had a very major advantage in this battle.

Christina was in love with his enemy.

Four

Varek was leaning nonchalantly against a tree, restively biding his time, when he saw the door open. Straightening, he squinted against the early afternoon sun, then grinned in satisfaction as he watched Christina leave the British apartments. For three days he had impatiently watched for an opportunity to get Christina alone, but she had proved an elusive prey, never venturing out during the day and remaining stubbornly at Basingstoke's side in the evening. It would have been a hell of a lot simpler to have simply walked up to the British consulate and presented himself, but he wanted this next meeting between them to be private. There was just too much that needed to be said, and the last thing he needed was her so-called husband interrupting them.

He still couldn't believe she was married; however, she wouldn't be for long if he had anything to say about it. Soon he would give the man more than enough reasons to divorce Christina, and then he would step forward and hasten the proceedings along with a few well-placed bribes slipped into the right pockets. With any luck, by spring she would be his again.

Pushing himself away from the tree, Varek casually strolled along the Minoritzenplatz at a comfortable distance behind his prey. The morning was unseasonably warm, and the *ringstrasse* was crowded, but he had no trouble keeping pace behind her as she walked briskly ahead. In fact, he thought with a smile tugging his lips, her brisk pace was a bit too energetic for such a lady. Doubtless she had already sighted him, or she feared meeting him somewhere along the way.

As he lengthened his stride, he couldn't help but admire the provocative sway of her hips encased in the sheath of thin muslin.

She had matured while living away from him, and he was disconcerted by this further testament of the distance between them. Strangely he had thought that when he saw her again she would have been exactly the same, as if time itself would have stopped until they were reunited. But time hadn't stopped; it had marched ruthlessly on, and somewhere along the way she had found a new life for herself, as if he had never been.

He frowned as again he puzzled over their years apart and just where the hell she had been. How could she have been in England all this time and word had never gotten back to him? It didn't make any sense. He'd established a link with every court in Europe, Russia, and Britain. He had even sent men off to the Americas and the West Indies. It angered him at the senseless waste of time. Someone had done a superb job of hiding her and he was fairly certain it couldn't have been Sergei; he hadn't the power to accomplish such a thing. Most likely it had been her brother-by-marriage, the Duke of Kerkston. And if she were being kept so diligently out of the eyes and ears of society, why was she now here in Vienna at this momentous occasion, where the likelihood of their meeting was unquestionable? Christina was making it obvious enough to him that this meeting wasn't to her liking. So, why was she here?

It was a puzzle he was not comfortable with. Already he had his network of spies delving deeply into the background of the St. Poles. Someone was behind the scenes manipulating them all. His bet was on the duke.

Up ahead, Christina paused at a cross street, waiting with obvious impatience for a clearing in the traffic. Avidly, he studied her profile as she looked to either side of her. God, she was so beautiful, he thought with a flash of hunger. As he studied her vibrancy he suddenly felt old and weary. Life had not been kind to him without her by his side. Each day had been a struggle just to face all the empty hours that filled each of those endless days. Yet, here she was, exquisitely serene and seemingly at peace with her life. He felt a stab of fear in his gut. Could she truly not love him anymore? Was he just fooling himself? For six years he had gone to bed every night with her name on his lips, a prayer for her safety and a plea for her to return to him.

Now, looking at an older Christina, he wasn't so sure anymore that she had ever felt the same loss that had almost crippled him.

His long strides made no sound as he came up behind her, but as he had suspected, she was prepared for him, for she abruptly turned on her heel and confronted him. Her sherry brown eyes snapped with anger, her posture stiff with indignation. Even bristling like a pestered hedgehog she was a magnificent sight to behold.

Holding her gaze with his own, Varek sketched her a low bow. He didn't even try to take hold of her hand, for it was obvious from the militant look on her flushed face that a scuffle would ensue before she would even allow that simple courtesy. He contented himself with lightly taking hold of her elbow, in order to guide her out of the pedestrians' path.

"Good afternoon, my love."

"Don't call me that," she hissed in a low voice as she glared up at him.

His brows rose high over amused eyes.

"You shall address me as Lady Basingstoke."

His smile stiffened. "The hell I will. In any case, you shall not carry that title much longer."

Her hands tightened even more about the parasol she already had gripped in a white-knuckled hold. "Are you threatening me again, your highness?"

With a sigh, he reached out to brush aside a stray curl along her cheek, then froze when she flinched away. "You used to like my touch," he reminded her gently.

"I am a married lady and do not appreciate the disrespectful manner in which you approach me. I must ask you again to cease your harassing of my person, your highness!"

Holding taut rein on his escalating temper, Varek's hand latched onto her free hand and with gentle force dragged it about his arm. Cognizant of the scene that could erupt at any moment, she had no choice but to be pulled along by him.

"Why can't you leave me alone? Have you no honor?" she pleaded, almost frantic at the feel of his powerful arm under her fingers.

Varek's eyes squinted as he stared off into the distance. "Apparently not. How can I leave you alone, Christina? Whatever binds us together is still there, and as strong as ever. You know this as well I. You should have had faith in me. However, that is neither here nor there. Times are changing and, hopefully, soon there will be nothing to keep us apart."

"Except a husband I happen to love."

She gasped as he stopped short and swung her about so they faced each other, his irate gaze compelling her. "Do you indeed, my love? Don't force me to disprove this ridiculous lie you insist upon throwing at me! We both know exactly what would happen if I took you into my arms at this very moment. By the time I'd finished with you, you would not even remember what the man looks like."

Her breath was tight and labored as she tried to pull away.

Shaking his head, he coaxed her closer, his large hands gently cupping her elbows. "We can't fight what we are, lark. You have tried; I have tried. And look where we are. Right back where we started — loving each other and needing each other even more. I'm just asking you to admit this truth to yourself. Is that so hard?"

His tender words battered at her, and his endearment, which she had never thought to hear again, felt like salt being poured on the open wound that was her heart. Taking a deep breath, she looked up — and the devotion in those beautiful azure eyes was nearly her undoing. Tears gathered behind her lids, which she tried to blink away. "I can't, Varek," she whispered. "I can't. If I do, I'm lost." She had to remember her baby at home, her most precious link with the reality of what her life was. What Varek offered wasn't possible any more.

Licking her lips, she pleaded with him, "Varek, it's too late for us. You have got to let go, for both our sakes."

Stepping back from her, his hands slid down her arms till her hands rested in his. Silent, he toyed with her fingers, marveling at their delicacy. She held his life in these tiny hands. He wondered if she knew or cared anymore. Then with a sad smile, he shook his head. "I can't do that, lark. Not even for you. I've just found you after all these long years, and I would sooner lose my life than lose you again. Whether you like it or not, we belong together. One day you will realize this, and when you do, I'll be waiting."

Pulling trembling hands from his grasp, Christina didn't know whether to scream, hit him or run for her life. She chose the latter, being the coward that she was. But first she had to try one last time. So she told him coldly, "That's where you are wrong, your highness. Robert has a hold on me that you will never be able to break."

The frustration was back in the narrowed gaze he turned on her. His jaw was clenched as he thought furiously on his next attack.

As Christina's defiant glare faltered and fell beneath the weight of his regard, Varek reached a decision. He was about to take the second biggest gamble of his life. The first he had been forced into and it had cost him the love of his wife for more years than he wanted to recall. If he lost this time, he would lose her forever. Could he take the chance?

Stiffening his resolve, he plunged ahead. "I will make a wager with you, Christina. You look me square in my eyes and tell me you don't love me anymore. Tell me that what I feel is no longer shared by you, and could never be again."

The fear he saw dilate her eyes almost made him collapse in relief. He continued with more confidence, "If you can do this and mean it, I will let you go and never bother you again. But, if you can't, you have to give me a chance to win you back without fighting me all the way." He stepped back, watching her cautiously. "Do you agree to this wager?"

Varek blinked at the flare of fury that darkened her eyes before she looked past him and gazed out over the park. Her face had become an impassive mask that he could not read to save his life. Suddenly, he was scared to death. It couldn't end this way, not with all they had shared. Impatiently, he brushed away the trickle of sweat at his temple.

Minutes passed by and Christina didn't move a muscle, simply staring out at nothing. Only the stirring of the curls at her temple and the muslin skirts about her feet gave a hint that she was more than just a statue poised in thought.

Christina's thoughts, though, were frantically running amuck. At this moment she hated herself and this infernal weakness where Varek was concerned. All she had to do was look him in the eye and lie. A simple little lie. She had done it the other night with Robert. She could do it now. A simple little lie for the good of everyone involved. Then Varek would go away and she would never have to see him again. Her mind shut down on that thought. *Not such a simple lie, after all.*

Taking a deep breath, she hardened her resolve and thought of Eddie, her precious son. *This is for Eddie.*

Turning her head slightly, she looked Varek straight in the eye. Lord, those eyes of his! Licking her lips, she opened her mouth to speak and saw Varek's gaze drop to visually stroke her moist lips. Christina wanted so badly to close her eyes, to lock out the sight of

him, but she didn't. She held true, though the strain to her body was devastating. When his piercing regard moved up slowly again to meet hers, she shivered.

"I . . ." the sound of her voice cracked and she coughed.

Varek's eyes narrowed.

"I . . ." she forced her gaze to maintain eye contact with him, though in her mind she blanked out the sight of those beautiful eyes trained so intently on her. Instead, she pictured Eddie's gamine smile. She took a deep breath and declared in a flat voice, "I don't love you anymore, Varek." She had to literally force each word over her numb tongue. But she had done it! She felt giddy with relief. Thankfully, she broke eye contact with him and looked down at the ground.

Her elation didn't last long though, for she frowned when she noticed that Varek hadn't made a sound. Glancing up, she was astonished to see a small smile curl his sensuous lips. The cad actually looked relieved! Then a brilliant smile broke across his stern visage. When he reached up a finger to tap her nose, she jerked back, her mouth agape in amazement.

"You lied. I believe I just won our little wager," he drawled.

"Why, you . . . you . . ." she sputtered, thinking of all sorts of horrible things to call him but couldn't seem to find the nerve to say them out loud. Narrowing her eyes, she glared at him. "You just see what you want to see, and you know it!"

"I know when I see a lie in your expressive eyes, lark. And that one was not the least bit credible. You were looking *at* my eyes, Christina, you were not looking *in* them." His brow rose in a taunt. "You don't believe me? Very well. Do it again. Look *into* my eyes, and say it again." With a finger, he tipped up her stubborn chin. "Into my eyes, lark." She glared resentfully, deeply, into his mocking eyes. "Good. Now say it again."

She narrowed her eyes, and tried to focus beyond the penetrating blue of his eyes; his oh, so beautiful eyes!

He shook her chin. "Into my eyes, damn you, not past them."

"All right, blast you!" She jerked her chin out of his fingers and stood toe-to-toe with him. This time she did look, and in the turbulent depths she saw all the years, all the memories, all the love they had shared. Her breathing turned erratic but still she held his piercing, demanding gaze, and she opened her mouth.

"Say it, Christina," he murmured, "If you can."

She took a deep breath, and held it suspended as she battled with herself. Then she expelled it with an enraged groan, her eyes closing against him in defeat. "Damn you, Varek, you win! I can't say it. Are you happy?" She spun away from him, furious; with herself, with him, and with the fates that had done this to them again. After a fretful moment, she muttered ungraciously, "You are a cad, your highness."

Trying to keep a straight face, and the smugness out of his voice, Varek bowed low. "I do beg your forgiveness, madam."

Stepping closer to him, she leaned forward and hissed. "It doesn't change anything, Varek. I am still married, and not to you!" Then turning with a regal swish of her skirts, she hurried down the walkway.

"Not for long, my precious love. Not for long," Varek murmured as he watched her disappear into the flow of pedestrians before he waved his hand. Out of the crowd materialized a great brute of a man, who immediately took out after Christina, his faithful bloodhound on her scent.

Smiling, and contemplating the siege before him, Varek sauntered off in the opposite direction, in no hurry to get anywhere. It was a beautiful afternoon, so he was content to amble along and think of the little hawk his gentle lark had become.

* * *

Hours later, Christina was still castigating herself for her abysmal weakness in the park. To add insult to injury, she had been forced to sit through an interminable dinner under Varek's lazy smile; his heavy-lidded gaze raking every inch of her person that he could visually touch. Then fevered fantasies had taken over, and she imagined his elegant hands stoking every inch of her flesh that he couldn't see. It had been pure torture!

So, in retaliation, she had turned her scattered wits on comparing her noble husband with the rogue lounging across the table from her. *That* fruitless endeavor soon had her on the verge of tearing her hair out by the roots, which put her in such an irritable mood she could scarcely make polite conversation with her dinner partners. For no matter how hard she tried — and she did honestly try — she wasn't able to make Robert come out the victor in any physical comparison to Varek.

She had breathed a sigh of relief when Varek finally left the table with his cousin, the Austrian Emperor Francis. When the door closed on his broad back, she had relaxed for the first time since they had sat down to dinner, two hours earlier. She was finding it so exhausting being in the same city with Varek, let alone the same room.

Christina felt equally blessed when a messenger called Robert from her side and into a meeting with Castlereagh. She was just too restless to be subjected to another of Robert's sulky interrogations.

So here she was, alone in bed, restless and edgy, and desperately blanking out every erotic thought that forced its way into her fevered imaginings.

Fool, she brutally castigated herself as she yanked up the comforter to her chin and glared up at the ceiling. She thought of Robert, and became agitated. The Robert of Vienna was a stranger; he was not the man she had married, the man who had healed her pain and brought her to Kerkmoor.

So he can't stir my blood like Varek can with a mere smile. So he can't make my heart pound with joy when he simply walks into a room. What has that to say about anything?

He is the father of my child!

Finally hitting upon the ultimate trait that Robert had over Varek, she pounded her pillow, stretched out and stared up into the canopied darkness. Of course, Robert was what she needed. He had given her a son, where Varek had failed miserably. As Varek had said often enough, their destinies had all been preordained; obviously, she was not meant for Varek.

Varek had simply been her fantasy come to life. But only for a short while. Life had given her a beautiful memory to sustain her through the rest of her days, and she should be grateful for that.

That was all Varek was meant to be — a brilliant, magnificent shooting star in her life. Nothing more, and never again.

Turning her face into her pillow, Christina cried herself to sleep.

Five

Lord Castlereagh paused in his dictation and studied Robert for a few moments before he dismissed his secretary, Peterson.

Robert wasn't even aware of the departure of the man, and it was Castlereagh's prompting that brought his distracted attention back to the present. Surprised, he looked around to find them alone, then flushed with embarrassment when he found the foreign secretary's eyes trained upon him.

Sitting up straight, he cleared his throat. "Forgive me, my lord."

Castlereagh shook his head and leaned back comfortably in his chair. His gentle gaze invited the sharing of confidences, something Robert suddenly had the need to do. He certainly wasn't getting any answers out of Christina. He almost sighed with relief when Castlereagh's quiet voice broke the silence.

"Is there something troubling you, Robert?"

Robert hesitated for the slightest moment, feeling guilty about discussing Christina. She was such a secretive person, guarding her privacy almost jealously. Having second thoughts, Robert reluctantly shook his head.

"Come now, Robert; we've known each other a long time. Your brother was one of my first and has remained the staunchest of my supporters. Please, allow me to be of assistance."

Shifting restlessly about in his chair, Robert recrossed his legs. "It's Christina," he finally blurted out.

Castlereagh nodded, smiling wryly. He had assumed this, considering the appearance of von Vischering several nights ago. "It must have been a shock to her to see the archduke again."

"You know him?" Robert sat bolt upright in his chair, startled.

"Not personally, but I know of him. He comes from a very illustrious old family, the last surviving member of the von Vischerings. He rules a small but extremely wealthy duchy in Germany. He is connected to the Habsburgs, and being a favored cousin of Francis, has considerable sway over the Emperor." Castlereagh shook his head sadly as he continued, "It was a devilish shame what happened."

"What?"

Castlereagh's brow cocked in surprise. "Why, Christina's divorce, of course."

Exasperation flared in Robert's eyes as he slumped back in his chair. How many others knew more of Christina's life than her own husband did? He was almost ashamed to pursue this conversation any further. Damn, why couldn't she be more open with him?

Castlereagh stared at him in confusion and Robert, wishing to avoid eye contact, cast a heedless glance about the beautifully appointed study.

Not knowing what was going on behind Robert's agitated manner, Castlereagh kept his opinions to himself and waited with the patience for which he was renowned.

Finally, Robert swore softly and turned back toward his superior, anger lacing his usually benign voice. "Tell me what you know, my lord, of Christina's past. I need to know."

Castlereagh hid his shock at this revelation. "Did she not tell you everything before you wed?"

"No. Nothing."

Cautious to a fault, Castlereagh couldn't believe what he was hearing. "How could you marry her, not knowing anything of her past? I'm not saying she is well known, coming from a rather small duchy, but she is a royal archduchess of limited notoriety."

Robert blinked at him, stunned. He had married into royalty? There was a distinct buzzing in his head and he could feel the blood surging through his veins, even as his extremities felt cold. "I didn't know."

Taking a deep breath, Castlereagh leaned forward, his fingers steepled before him on the desk. "What do you know of Christina?"

Robert gave a short, derisive laugh. "Apparently, not enough. I met her while I was touring Italy. I fell in love with her the moment I saw her. In all fairness, she made it very clear that she wanted her past kept

behind her and told me quite bluntly that she would never speak of it. All she would tell me was that she was divorced, without family and from a small province in Germany. I loved her so much, so I didn't press her for any more fearing she would run from me as she ran from anyone who tried to get too close." He shrugged philosophically. "So, I accepted her as she was — a woman of mystery. I didn't care then and I don't particularly care now. It is just that since she saw . . . him, she has been distraught, frightened, and she still won't tell me anything. I'm so damned worried, I don't know what to do!"

Castlereagh thought hard on all he had heard about von Vischering and Austenburg. Unfortunately, there wasn't much. He had to admit he was surprised that Robert's brother, the Duke of Kerkston, hadn't checked into her background. But then again, he might have and been very satisfied with his brother's choice. Christina, after all, was a prize among women. Frowning, he admitted, "I can't recall much of von Vischering as he was a bit of a recluse, quite content to stay in his duchy and away from the politics brewing around him." His voice tapered off as he wondered just how much of Christina's past he should divulge. Obviously, she wanted it kept private and in the hierarchy of peerages, even though she was married to a viscount, she was still a royal princess and her wishes should be respected.

"How long were they married?"

"About ten years, I believe."

Ten years! She had to have been only about fifteen or sixteen when she married!

Watching the emotions war in Robert's expressive face, Castlereagh now wished wholeheartedly that he had allowed Christina to stay behind in England. If he had known any of this, he most certainly would have. Never had his intent been to put her in such an untenable position as she was caught in now. As royalty, she would obviously be known to many of the aristocracy of Europe, no matter how much the archduke and his former archduchess had kept to themselves. If the St. Poles had been careful to keep her so secluded, why hadn't the duke said something to him? Castlereagh didn't like surprises, and he intended to find out what was going on here.

"Robert, I don't know if I should speak any more of Christina's affairs. It seems to me she must have a very legitimate reason for keeping her past from you."

Robert sat forward, tensed and insistent. "I beg of you, my lord, I need to know of this von Vischering. What of his feelings for her? Could he possibly pose a threat against her?"

Rubbing his face, Castlereagh sat back in his chair and stared off into space, debating. Finally, he offered a bit more, though quite reluctantly. "I understand he was forced to set her aside as she could not bear the duchy an heir."

Robert seemed to have a hard time digesting this piece of news. "I don't understand. She was divorced because she was barren?" His voice expressed the stunned look in his eyes.

"Apparently she'd had many miscarriages, unable to bring a child to full term."

After a few tense moments, Robert asked quietly, "Did they love each other?"

Castlereagh's empathic gaze studied the young man opposite him. Should he lie? When Robert's hesitant gaze met his, he nodded slowly. "It was well known they loved each other passionately. After the divorce and sudden disappearance of his wife, there were rumors concerning the mental stability of the archduke. But, again, they were just rumors."

Robert remembered those cold, ice blue eyes devouring the sight of his wife. It was quite clear what the archduke's feelings still were for Christina. But what of hers for him?

When he recalled her fearful eyes gazing up into the handsome features of her former husband, Robert felt a numbing sensation curl about the pit of his stomach. At that moment he was more frightened than he had ever been in his life.

"If you will excuse me, my lord." He was distracted as he rose clumsily to his feet. "I beg that you except my apologies if Christina and I do not join you for dinner tonight."

"Of course," Castlereagh murmured as he watched his attaché's agitated air. "By the way, how is the duke faring?"

Robert shrugged. "As well as can be expected. Edward still does not have the use of his legs and the doctors doubt he ever will. But he seems to have adjusted well enough. Christina has been a great source of comfort to him. They are very close." He felt a twinge of the usual jealousy when he thought of his brother and Christina together. At times he wasn't sure whom she cared for more, the duke

or himself. It seemed all his life he had come second to the needs of his brother.

Castlereagh wondered at the lack of emotion in Robert's face when speaking of his brother. "When you communicate with him, please send him my regards," he asked gently.

"Of course, my lord."

With a stilted bow, Robert left the foreign secretary's presence and the British apartments and strolled aimlessly about the *ringstrasse*. In a daze, he melded with the wandering populace of Vienna, seeing nothing but Christina's stark face every time he mentioned the archduke. For over four years she had been exclusively his, attentive to his every need, serious and bantering as the mood took her. Never had he a suspicion that lurking in her past was a passionate regard for another man. He almost felt betrayed that she couldn't be honest with him about her past marriage. Was it still that painful to face? How was he to approach this problem? Should he confront this von Vischering head on? Call him out and kill him? Should he take Christina and run? But then he would never find out the answer to the question that now plagued him like a persistent migraine.

Did she still love the archduke? The uncertainty pounded like a predestined warning in his mind.

Six

Varek watched as the sheer silk slid sensuously along her long legs. He leaned nonchalantly against the headboard, his body stretched out comfortably on the smooth counterpane as he watched the slow ritual of his mistress dressing for an evening. He smiled wryly. Sophy never had much subtlety when it came to seduction. Either that or he was becoming bored with the same repertoire she used on him every time he visited her room. It was a good thing she was too vain to realize that her erotic show left him completely relaxed and insultingly flaccid, for she would probably throw something at him.

With heavy-lidded eyes, he watched her wanton endeavors, all the while wishing she were Christina. That her long silver blond hair was Christina's midnight dark tresses. That her tight, compact body was Christina's lusher one. In fact, he found his beautiful mistress decidedly lacking in every aspect because she was not, and never would be, his beloved Christina.

He remembered well how she could simply walk into a room and reduce him to the likes of a panting animal whose quivering nostrils flared for the want of its mate's scent. At times it had been frightening, her hold over him; yet never had he felt as alive as he had with Christina. Since she had left him it seemed no matter how many women he found release with, no matter their looks or their personality, he was always left with the same burning need of unfulfilled desire. If it hadn't been for his daughter, Tina Marie, he didn't know how he would have survived with a sane mind.

Feeling decidedly angry at the state of his life at this moment, he let his gaze roam over the more than willing body of the beautiful woman before him. Damn, but he wanted to forget Christina, if only for a few

minutes, and spend his resentment in a woman who obviously wanted him. With a sense of purpose, Varek stared at the shadowy recess between Sophy's spread thighs. After a moment his eyes slid shut in defeat. *Bloody hell!* Even her scent was all wrong.

With a sigh of boredom, he rose from the bed and strode to the door.

Sophy, still poised with alluring seduction over one outstretched leg, gaped in bewilderment at his retreating back. "Where are you going?" she demanded testily.

"I will see you later to escort you to the ball," he threw casually over his shoulder before slamming the door after him.

With a Gaelic curse, she reached out and, grabbing up an expensive Serves vase, flung it against the door. The laugh she heard coming through the now scarred portal only set her off into yet another confused tantrum. Again, she had failed to engage his interest.

What is wrong with me? Sophy fumed as she flung herself down on her regrettably unmussed bed. Was it her or the air of Vienna? It had to be Vienna, for ever since they had come to this accursed city he had avoided her like she was a diseased dockside whore.

Stiffening, she sat up and glared at the door. Very well. If his royal highness no longer wanted her, there were plenty of men in Vienna who did! Why, just yesterday, Prince Trauttmansdorff had cornered her in a stall in the royal stables. And most persistent he had been, too! But, unfortunately, he couldn't hold a candle to Varek's beauty — or, more importantly, his wealth.

With a flounce of indignation, Sophy continued adorning her body for the ball that night as any self-respecting huntress would. She was very careful as she spread a creamy, sandalwood scented lotion over her skin. It was a favorite of Varek's, and was sure to have him sniffing after her before the evening was over.

Retribution fired her blood as she rubbed the white cream in until it disappeared, leaving a flushed tinge to her perfect flesh. Varek was very possessive of all he owned; therefore, when he saw her flaunting her considerable charms before the interest of anything male, he would reaffirm his interest in her in the most satisfactory of ways — of this, she had no doubt. Then, when she had him firmly between her thighs again, she would latch onto him and never make the mistake of letting him get away again. She still had a few tricks she could torture him with, and when she did he would be following her around in a

constant state of arousal. She laughed, picturing herself a slave to ministering that big, beautiful cock night and day.

Licking her lips, she rang for her maid.

* * *

Christina knew the moment Varek entered the room.

A shiver ran over her body, her face flushed hot and she needed air, desperately. With frantic haste, she looked for Robert and caught sight of him, standing across the dance floor from her. He stood motionless, just staring at her. She waited for a minute or two for him to come to her. But, he didn't. So be it.

Anger directed her steps away from him and out one of the French doors. One thing she couldn't abide anymore, and that was being manipulated. It hurt her deeply to think that her husband didn't trust her. She had been nothing but faithful to him ever since they had met. *But, not my heart*, she had to admit sadly to herself.

So, feeling like the coward she was, she ran — again. Just as she had been doing since meeting Varek on that fateful evening. She couldn't be in the same room with him without breaking out into a sweat. Anger, resentment, jealousy, regret and love all swirled about her in a kaleidoscope of confusion. She had to get away from Vienna and Varek! Maybe she could convince Robert to let her go home to England. She had to or else she would go mad, or worse — fall into Varek's arms.

"How long is this going to continue, Christina?" Robert's voice jarred her out of her panicked musings.

Without turning around, she pleaded, "Please, Robert, let me go home. You don't need me here. Not really. I'm sure Lord Castlereagh will understand if you tell him I am not feeling well."

"Why should I lie?"

She swung around on him in anger. "Because I am your wife! I thought you cared for my welfare, Robert."

He stepped closer to her and grabbed her shoulders. "I do! All I can think about is you and the change that has come over you since this archduke walked back into your life. I'm not ashamed to tell you, that I'm deuced scared. You won't confide in me! All you do is hedge around my questions and leave me imagining all sorts of terrible things. All I can assume is that you love him and are tempted when you are around

him. Isn't that why you are out here right now? Hiding from him and the feelings you have for him?" He shook her lightly. "Or maybe you are waiting for him even as we speak. Talk to me, dammit!"

The one thing she didn't want to happen, had. Robert was being hurt by a force stronger than any of them. And she felt powerless to stop it. *God, how craven she was!*

Twisting out of his hands, she turned away, not bearing to see his tortured fear. She fidgeted with her shawl as she looked out over the formal gardens of the Hofburg. With a deep sigh, she began. "I met Varek when I was eight years old. My family was an old and illustrious one, but impoverished. Our families had been close and it was arranged that Varek and I would marry. Even when my father's principality had fallen and we were left with nothing but empty titles, Varek honored his parents' wishes. So at that young age I was sent to live in Austenburg, for there was no place else for me to go. The peniless princess." She smiled, her thoughts years away.

"Varek was so kind to me. He was like a god — tall, golden, and handsome as a Michelangelo work of art. I was a plump, unhappy, terribly shy child, and he made me feel so important. I grew up adoring him. When I turned fourteen his attentions to me changed, and his wonderful friendship turned into something deeper, fuller. We were supposed to marry when I turned eighteen, but it didn't work out that way." She blushed, the moonlight faintly exposing her embarrassment to her husband's unblinking perusal. Lifting her chin, she turned to face him, defying him to judge her. "We were married when I was barely sixteen. I was with child. But . . ." she swallowed painfully, "it ended in a miscarriage, the first of six in all."

Robert looked down, wishing he hadn't forced this confession. Did he really want to know the truth? "I'm so sorry, my love," he murmured, wishing he could take her into his arms. But she looked so brittle at the moment that he was afraid to touch her.

She shrugged and gave a choked little laugh. "I guess my marriage was just not meant to be. Varek was forced to set me aside. He did, and I moved on with my life. End of story."

"Is it?"

She raised her evasive gaze and stared directly at him. Her eyes were painfully dry and, she hoped, expressed none of her feelings. "Yes, it is."

"I don't think so."

They both jumped and spun around at the interruption of the deep voice behind them.

Varek, a chilling smile molding tensed lips, strolled casually up to them, his gaze riveted on Christina. "It will never be over, lark." Pausing before Robert, he looked impassively down on the smaller man. "Did she tell you how we had no choice in the matter of our divorce? Did she tell you that I was forced into a decision we both hated in order to protect her life from threats of her assassination? Did she tell you of all the years of our marriage, our blissful marriage, Basingstoke?" His impassive gaze turned cold and menacing when he drawled, "Has she told you lately that she loves you? And if so, does she look into yours eyes while mouthing the platitude? Christina never could look someone in the eye when she was lying."

Cocking his head, Varek turned the full wrath of his glare on her. "Could you, my love?"

Christina's hand shot out to hold Robert back. She felt shudders wracking his taut arm. With an almost physical grip, she clamped down on her racing heart and faced the predatory and haunting regard of her lost love. Christina flinched when she looked deeply into Varek's eyes and was hit hard by the need shouting at her beneath the forced calm. "Varek . . ." Pausing, she took a deep breath and forged ahead, her gaze never breaking with his. "It is over. Whether you wish to believe it or not, I am happy with Robert and my life in England. Please, don't disrupt my life again. If you do still care for me, you have to let us be."

Every muscle in Varek's face tightened and his eyes blazed with arctic splinters. His body was so rigid, she thought he would shatter if jarred. Her fingers tightened about Robert's arm, preventing herself from throwing her arms about him.

Varek's voice was brittle boredom when he drawled, "I believe we have already discussed this, my love."

There was a subtle rustle of fabric behind them. "Varek, my dearest, you promised me this waltz," a sultry voice infiltrated the charged air between the three.

Varek smiled enigmatically as he held out his hand to the gorgeous creature poised in the halo of light from the ballroom behind her. The radiance of thousands of candles filtered through the thin tissue of her

flimsy gown, outlining a tight, svelte body. Christina flushed with mind-numbing jealousy as she watched Varek take possession of the woman. They looked magnificent together, both blond, blue-eyed and irresistibly beautiful. It took every bit of willpower she had ever possessed to keep the sting of tears from her eyes. Pride squeezed a tight smile on a face which felt as stiff as ice.

"Lark, this is my mistress. She is keeping my bed warm until you come back." Both women gasped in unison at the utter callousness of the insult. Christina stared up in shock at Varek and was taken aback at the rage shimmering in his eyes. *Good Lord, he was in a killing mood!*

Hastily, she tugged on her silent husband's arm. When he didn't budge, she looked up at him for the first time since Varek had interrupted them. He was staring at Varek with a calm calculation that made her even more uneasy. Licking dry lips, she entreated him, "Shall we go inside, Robert? I am beginning to feel the chill."

Shaking his head, almost as if to clear it, he glanced down. "Yes, of course, my dear."

Without another word or look at the other couple, they strolled with seeming casualness toward the brilliantly lit doors of the ballroom.

"How could you embarrass me like that?" Sophy hissed.

Varek dropped her arm and strode after the fleeing couple, ignoring her completely.

They had almost made it to a door when Robert dragged her to a slow stop. She glanced curiously at him and noticed his attention directed straight ahead, his profile stiff. The fine hairs at the back of her neck tingled. Silently, she urged him forward, feeling the presence of Varek not far behind.

"One moment, madam."

She winced at the coldness in her husband's voice.

Detaching himself from Christina's clutching hands, Robert swung back around and retraced his steps. He was met halfway by the slow approach of the archduke. Both men warily eyed each other, their postures tensed and ready for anything. They reminded Christina of two rams getting ready to butt each other's fool heads together. She almost wished they would and get it over with.

When would this wretched evening end? She despaired as she hurried over, meaning to step between them. However, both men held out a hand, holding her back. Just as she opened her mouth to say

something, she noticed Robert's bare hand rising, his glove held firmly in it. Time seemed suspended as her gaze riveted on that hand.

No! her mind screamed as the glove struck Varek's chiseled cheek.

She watched in horror as a smug smile spread slowly over Varek's mouth, satisfaction gleaming in his eyes. "I was wondering when you were finally going to be man enough to call me out?"

"My seconds will call on yours this evening," Robert announced with stiff formality while his face was flushed bright red with his rage.

"No," Christina whispered, incredulous that this was all unfolding before her very eyes.

Varek bowed slightly. "I accept your challenge with the greatest pleasure. As the choice is mine, I choose blades." Then his gaze shifted to her and he winked.

Winked, for God's sake! At that moment she wished she had her own blade; she'd thrust it through his conniving heart!

Before she gathered her wits to say anything, Varek strode past them and entered the ballroom. Christina's lips tightened as she watched the forgotten mistress hurry after him like a pet bitch.

She whirled on Robert. "You fool! Are you not aware of his reputation with a blade?"

He glared at her. "How could I? I wasn't even aware of his existence till a few weeks ago. Why don't you tell me?"

Biting down on her scathing retort, she paused and regarded his glaring displeasure, a small frown furrowing her brow. After a tensed moment, she sadly shook her head. "You don't trust me, do you? You believe the only way I'll stay faithful to you is to rid yourself of the archduke. This is utter stupidity. Call it off. If not for me, then for the sake of my reputation. As an ambitious attaché in the British suite, you should understand that reason, if nothing else," she bitterly finished.

"Afraid I'll kill your one true love?" She could hear the hurt quivering beneath the sarcastic edge of his jibe.

"Call it off," she pleaded again.

"It is done."

She turned away from him, hiding her tears.

He cursed as he stepped in front of her again. "That's it, isn't it?" he accused her heatedly, "You are afraid I'll kill him!"

She raised burning eyes and stared at him, as if seeing him for the first time. Her voice was low as she responded to his absurdity. "I

never realized what a bastard you could be, Robert, and I don't like it. Unfortunately, I have no say in what the archduke does or says. However, you are my husband and I have been nothing but loyal to you and our marriage. What you have just done is declare to the world that you are a cuckolded husband. If anyone has given me a reason to do what you are accusing me of, it is you!" She raised trembling hands to her eyes and pressed back the rising tears. "At this moment I don't care what you do. You certainly won't listen to me. So, very well. Have your pathetic duel, get yourself killed. It's just what Varek wants. Go on!" She dropped her hands and glared at him. "Get yourself killed and then just hand me over to him." She forcefully swallowed the fury building inside her. Men could be such idiots!

Not able to deal with him anymore, she headed for the ballroom. She had to get out of there or she was afraid she might commit her own act of violence. Her lips tightened with ire when she heard his footsteps dogging her. "I am just going to incapacitate him so he will leave you alone."

Christina felt like laughing in his face. Instead she continued to walk on, away from him as fast as she could. "Do you believe all he wants to do is incapacitate you?" she inquired coolly over her shoulder.

"Would you care?" He sounded like a sulky little boy.

Taking a deep breath, she was so tempted to say *No, I wouldn't*. But it would be a lie, for she did care what happened to him. She cared what happened to all of them. When she felt him touch her shoulder, she flung an arm out, forcing him back. "No! Stay here; I will find my way to the apartment myself. Stay here and think about your choices, Robert, and I will think about mine." Then she quickly wended her way through the crush of guests milling about the huge ballroom.

Robert stared after her, then with a particularly foul curse, he ran a trembling hand through his hair. What in hell had he done? She was right; there was no way he could come out a winner in the upcoming confrontation. What a completely asinine thing to do. He groaned as he followed her steps slowly into the bright, overly heated room and barely caught a final glimpse of her as she exited the hall. Almost simultaneously he caught sight of the archduke, staring after her. He stiffened as the bastard's eyes swiveled in his direction.

Even across the vast, noisy hall he could hear the man's mocking laughter.

* * *

As soon as Robert had disappeared, Varek turned away from the staring faces, a frown wiping any pretended humor from his face.

Tomorrow it would all be over, he told himself with fatalistic assurance, and then he and Christina could get on with their lives.

His foul humor was growing apace with the evening's festivities, and now an insidious pain had settled behind his eyes, as if to mock him for this absurd debacle. As if his lark would fall into his arms after killing a man she had affection for. What in hell was he thinking?

He started when he felt a tap on his shoulder. Looking around, he saw Sergei standing behind him, his detached gaze staring right through him. Varek's hands fell to his side as he turned about to fully face yet another antagonist.

"What do you want, Massallon?"

"Christina wishes a moment of your time. In private, your highness."

Varek's eyes narrowed in shared hostility. "Cut the bull. You call me 'your highness' in that tone of voice again and I'll cut your tongue out. Besides, never in your misbegotten life have you ever addressed me so."

Sergei looked at him and asked in a flat tone. "Then how should I address you?"

Varek's lips kicked up in a lethal smile. "Why, mine enemy. What else? Where is she?"

Without another word, Sergei turned on his heel and walked away. With a sigh, Varek followed. It hurt to be at odds with Sergei, but he couldn't shake this feeling of betrayal every time he caught a glimpse of his old comrade. And, unfortunately, Sergei was always underfoot, watching out for Christina. It made these hellish evenings all the harder, having to deal not only with his emotions for Christina, but also his lost friendship with Sergei. To say the least, he was never far from being in a killing rage and he simply wanted for all these roiling emotions to stop. He wanted his old life back, and he was beginning to fear that it would never happen.

Sergei led him down several corridors till the sounds of the ball were far behind them. Varek idly wondered if Sergei was escorting him to his death — and at that moment, he didn't much care. So on he went, following blindly where Sergei led.

Sergei stopped at a door, and again without looking at Varek or saying a word, he opened the portal and stood aside, waiting for him to enter. Without hesitating, Varek stepped over the threshold, noted the dark room, then heard the door click shut behind him.

He stood there in the dark, wondering if he was alone, then he heard the faint whisper of a lady's skirts and blindly he turned toward the sound. Breathing deep, he caught the subtle fragrance of Christina, and instead of relaxing, he tensed even more.

"Well, I'm here, lark. You call and I come running. Rather pathetic, wouldn't you say?" He couldn't seem to keep the self-derision from his voice as he cautiously stepped closer to where he sensed she was. His eyes slowly adjusted to the dark, and finally he caught sight of her as she moved into a ghostly beam of moonlight filtering through the darkness. As usual, his heart stopped at the sight of her. He closed his eyes, almost in despair. Would to God he didn't love this woman so much.

"What do you want?" he asked with weary impatience, though he already knew what she wanted. She was here to protect her beloved Robert.

"What do you want from me, Varek? We can never marry again. So what? You want me to come to you as a lover?" Her words were a seductive whisper in the dark distance between them. Varek stood rigid where he was, for if he moved he was afraid of what he might do to her. The pounding in his head increased with his disillusionment and shattered dreams. For a moment he couldn't even think straight, so fearsome was the ache. Taking a deep breath, he inquired of her in return, his voice cold and distant, "Is that what you want?"

Her answer was immediate, "No. What I want is for you to leave me alone. I want you to leave Vienna. But you don't really care what I want, do you, Varek?"

This time she spoke with such sadness, Varek's anger melted from him in rivulets of confusion. All his life he had wanted what was best for Christina. Now he was tearing her world apart again, and the terrible thing about it was he couldn't seem to dredge up any sympathy for her. All he could think of was his own loss, his own pain, and if it was suffocating him, he could only imagine what it was doing to her. With a guilty start, he remembered the smudges he had seen earlier under her lovely eyes, and he could only blame himself. This somber stranger who stood before him was beginning to erase his precious

memories of his vibrant lark, and even knowing of the melancholy and pain he was causing her, he still couldn't make himself walk away. Just being able to look across a crowded room and meet her eyes was worth everything in the world to him. If only she could feel this same sense of connection . . .

Swallowing, he walked over to a chair and sank into it. He dropped his head back in exhaustion and looked up at the vague shadows shifting overhead. He swallowed again and tried to blink back the sting of tears. "Why did this happen to us, lark? What did we ever do to deserve this? Every day of my life since you disappeared I've pondered this. Do you know, for I certainly have never been able to figure it out?"

The silence hung heavy between them until her voice came so softly that he had to strain to hear her, "We were born into royalty. Ours lives were never our own."

He shook his head. "No, I've thought of that. It's too simple. You know what I think? I think that God envied us our happiness."

Christina stepped forward, her hand reaching out to him. "Varek, you mustn't think that."

"Why not? Could He punish me anymore for my heresy? God never listened to me when I begged for His mercy on my knees. He never listened to me then, so why would He bother now?" The irony in his voice was unmistakable. "Now you come back into my life and I am just suppose to look the other way? How can you even ask that of me, Christina?"

He heard her draw in a shuddering breath. "Varek, I can't divorce Robert. Even if I wanted to, I can't." He felt her fingers feather through his hair. It was the frightened edge in her voice more than her words that caught his attention.

All weariness dropped away as the true meaning behind her declaration began to sink in. The hairs on the back of his neck prickled as he slowly stood up and stepped closer to her. He froze when she took a few stumbling steps back, frantic to keep the distance between them. The room seemed to tilt about him and then fade as he strained to look closer into her averted face. "What do you mean, you can't?"

When she didn't answer, he took a long step forward and grabbed hold of her chin, forcing her to meet his accusing glare. Suddenly, he was terrified. The look in her eyes made him want to retch.

Lips barely moving, he demanded, "Go on."

Christina closed her eyes, the darkness a void swirling around her. *I can't do this! I can't!*

"Finish it, Christina." Varek's deadened voice told her that he suspected her secret. He had to suspect, for there could only be one thing that could so thoroughly crush his hopes. She couldn't look at him, craven creature that she was, so she didn't open her eyes. But before she could speak, she felt herself grabbed roughly by the arms.

Varek held a tight rein on the brutal fear seething within him, yet still he shook her with more force than he meant. "Open your eyes, damn you! Look me in the eye when you tell me this, Christina!" he snarled, his hot breath searing her cheek.

Christina's eyes snapped open. Unfortunately the tears blinding her still couldn't hide the sight of his ravaged face. "I have a son, Varek. Robert and I have a son." Her words were scarcely more than an anguished whisper.

His hands tightened with a grip that she was sure would bruise her for life, just as the stark pain in his eyes would leave her heart torn. He was shaking his head in disbelief, the scalding blue of his eyes burning through a mist of tears.

"No!" came his tortured moan. "How could you?"

"I'm sorry," she sobbed.

"No!" he yelled as he almost threw her from him.

Christina stumbled and watched in despair as he backed away from her, staring at her with a revulsion she would never have thought him capable of. Again, she felt the old crippling pain of all her failures to give him the child they had both wanted and needed so desperately. Weeping, she stretched out her hand toward him.

With a foul obscenity, he pushed her hand away and turning his back on her, he ran from her cries.

* * *

Varek burst into his private rooms and, seeing his valet there, roared at the hapless man to get out. After a stupefied gape at his master, whom had always been the extreme of cool inflexibility, the man scurried out barely missing the door that was slammed on him.

Varek stood there panting, his eyes shut tight against the spinning room.

A son. She had a *son*!

With a moan he clasped his head, his fingers tunneling deep into his hair. And he squeezed. Then he squeezed harder still, the pain shooting through his skull a plea that by sheer force alone he could crush this horrible truth from his mind.

She had given Basingstoke *their* son, the son they had prayed for for ten years! She had blessed this stranger with their only salvation to stay together.

Tears blinding him, Varek stumbled to his bed and fell upon it. And for the first time in six hellish years of lonely existence he could not stop the flood of tears that were wrenched from deep within his soul.

A soul that still belonged to the woman who had betrayed him — not once, but twice.

* * *

Hours later, Christina heard a soft tap on the bedroom door. She ignored it, praying he would go away. When the panel swung inward she snapped her eyes shut and forced her body to relax, feigning slumber.

She could feel Robert standing over her. Knowing her chest was moving too erratically, she held her breath. "I know you're awake, love. Am I welcome?" She turned away from him. Her cheeks were wet against the cool linen and her head felt heavy and painful. Squeezing her eyes shut, she again prayed he would just go away.

"I'm sorry," his words whispered over her.

She tensed; then, shifting about, she raised up onto an elbow and looked up at him. He was a dim silhouette in the moonlight. "Did you recant your challenge?"

"No."

She fell back down, and again turned away from him.

It had all been for nothing, she thought with a deadened sense of finality. She had broken Varek in the cruelest way, hoping that it would make him come to his senses about the hopelessness of any future together. But the duel was still on. Neither had recanted. She couldn't even summon a modicum of guilt for Robert when she heard the door open and close softly behind him.

With dry, aching eyes, she waited for the dawn.

* * *

Sergei was admitted into the archduke's presence later that night, unsure what his mood would be. He found him sprawled in a massive armchair before the fire, brandy snifter in hand. Sergei eyed the brandy speculatively.

"Well, well," Varek drawled, his voice just slightly slurred, his mood apparently mellow. "Here representing my beloved wife's husband?"

Sergei's shoulders stiffened. *Not so mellow, after all.* Slowly he approached the lazing man, tensed for anything. However, Varek just lounged there, smiling cynically at him.

"At least you are finally admitting the truth of it — the fact that Christina does, indeed, have a husband."

The hand swirling the brandy glass, paused. "But not for long," Varek softly pointed out, his smile derisive. Of course it was a hollow promise, echoing back at him with mocking frequency. But what the hell. It was his bloody fantasy.

Still unsure as to Varek's mood, Sergei sat uninvited across from him. After a long minute of indecision, he finally said, "There is something I should tell you about your nemesis, whether you want to hear it or not."

Varek simply took a sip of brandy and ignored him.

"A year after we left Austenburg, Christina was sunk into such a depression that I was at a loss as how to reach her. No matter what I did, or where we settled, nothing could spark her interest. Then one day, it just became too much for her, and . . ." Sergei's voice trailed off and he sadly shrugged as he recalled those hellish months. When he looked up he noticed that Varek's bloodshot eyes were watching him with an intensity that froze him to his seat. Having Varek's undivided attention only made it harder to continue; but he did, dragging each word out under the unblinking weight of Varek's silent hostility. "She tried to kill herself, Varek. One night she wandered out into a snowstorm. It was the middle of the night and I didn't see her go. She had on nothing but her nightgown."

Sergei couldn't even detect a flicker of an emotion in the unblinking, frigid eyes bent upon him. Just the mere stillness of Varek's lounging body was more powerful than any form of an explosive rage vented upon him.

Wetting his lips, Sergei told him. "It was Robert who thankfully found her. He saved Christina's life, Varek. Whether I like that man or not does not refute the fact that if not for him, Christina would not be here today. And it is just one more thing that holds her loyal to him."

The silence that followed was deafening, and Sergei began to wonder if Varek had even heard him as there was not so much as a flicker of an emotion in the deadened gaze turned on him. It was like staring into a death mask, the soul long departed.

Admitting defeat, Sergei finally stood up and walked to the door. He paused with his hand on the latch and glanced back over his shoulder, murmuring, "I just thought you should know."

When Sergei was gone, Varek finally blinked as he looked up at the large portrait above the mantel. A youthful, laughing girl smiled down on him. During the sitting of this portrait Christina had just found out she was pregnant with their first child. Despite the weight of royal disfavor bearing down upon them because of their unmarried state, her abundant joy never faltered during those halcyon days.

"And don't I deserve any of your loyalty for saving your life? He is so much more worthy of your gratitude, lark?" Of course, she didn't answer him. She never did.

Lifting his glass, Varek drained the last of the brandy in one long swallow, then let the glass slip from his numbed fingers. Staring into the fire he wondered with a deadened sense of finality how he could feel so empty inside and not be dead.

Seven

The mist was just beginning to rise and dissipate when Varek rode into the appointed glade. He was noticeably alone, the lack of seconds by his side stirring curiosity in the assembled men standing about the clearing. As he dismounted, Varek casually greeted most of the men who were mutual acquaintances, a little surprised that there were so few witnesses to such a juicy tidbit of sport. The duel must have been kept quiet. He wondered why considering it wasn't every day that a royal personage fought a man in order to reclaim his wife.

Out of the corner of his eye, he took note of Robert standing stiffly beside Sergei. The two men were exchanging what appeared to be some rather heated words, before Robert sliced a hand down cutting off the argument. Sergei gave a curt nod and strode across the clearing toward Varek. It was obvious to all that Sergei was not happy with his office this morning.

"Good morning, your highness. Are your seconds behind you?"

Varek's brow rose in haughty amusement. "No. Is there a problem with that?"

Sergei hesitated, then shaking his head, he pointed out wryly, "No, but then you never were one to do anything by the book." Giving him a bow, he intoned solemnly, though the twinkle in his eye was unmistakable. "I am, of course, at your service, your highness." When Varek shot him a steely glare, he dryly added under his breath, "And no you may not rip out my tongue."

"Pity," Varek murmured as he stripped off his gloves, fighting the unwilling smile that tempted his lips. Looking about him, he nonchalantly inquired, "You are acting as Basingstoke's second at her behest, I take it?"

"Actually, no. I am here at her request to tend to you."

Varek's head whipped around, and he stared blankly at his old friend. "To attend me?" he repeated, confused.

Sergei rocked back on his heels, his hands locked behind his back. "Yes, you see, Basingstoke had already chosen his seconds before I even knew of the duel."

Varek's eyes narrowed. "You mean you made yourself scarce."

Sergei gave him a smug grin. "Precisely."

Varek glanced away, unaccountably touched by Sergei's sense of loyalty. Clearing his throat, he pointed out coolly, "Well, I have no need of you as you will soon discover." With these cryptic words, he sauntered over to Robert, coolly studying his rival's demeanor as he closed the distance between them.

Sensing the tension in the men about him, Robert slowly turned to face his adversary. He was already in shirtsleeves, his coat, waistcoat and cravat discarded. His stocky body was stiffly poised, and he seemed mentally prepared for the coming ordeal. If he was experiencing any nervousness, it didn't show, except that he was perhaps a bit paler than usual.

Curtly, Varek nodded his head. "Basingstoke."

"Your highness." Robert returned the greeting through stiff lips. As usual, the archduke looked supremely confident. "Could you find no gentleman willing to act your second, sir?" His gaze flickered to Sergei, who had followed at Varek's heels.

Varek smiled slowly, all the while watching Robert with the hooded stare of a cobra. "I need no seconds to act for me, my lord. I always finish what I begin."

Robert's lips seemed to tighten even more as he glared at the infuriating man. "Very well, shall we proceed? As blades were your choice, I assume you are supplying them?" Robert's annoyed voice sounded unnaturally loud in the clearing. He cast a frowning glance toward his seconds, wondering why they weren't over here taking care of these details. Instantly, the two young men were at his side, bowing to the archduke.

Robert wasn't surprised to see Christina's watchdog standing at the archduke's back. He wondered wildly if she had asked Sergei to act as second to this man who was making their lives such a hell. Wanting this ordeal to be over, he turned back to his nemesis.

When Varek hadn't spoken, one of Basingstoke's seconds stepped forward and again politely inquired about the blades. This time the question was directed to Sergei. As mystified as everyone else, Sergei could do no more than turn to Varek with a raised brow.

However, the archduke was pointedly ignoring the trivial exchange, and was gazing out into the distance, his expression one of boredom. Idly, he was pulling his gloves through his hand, his stance relaxed and casual. When he finally spoke, his deep voice was loud enough to be heard by every man present.

"Lord Basingstoke, I owe you an apology. My manner was inappropriate last evening and my words to . . ." Here he faltered as he sliced a look of pure loathing at his opponent. Even the thought of addressing Christina as another man's wife was gall to him. ". . . to Lady Basingstoke was unforgivable. I concede this duel and hope that you will except my apologies." There was no hint of contrition in the words just spoken, only imperious command.

Robert's surprised gaze darted about the clearing. An apology was the last thing he ever expected to hear from this man. Then it flashed through his mind that Christina must have had some hand in this unexpected occurrence. What had she promised the bastard? he seethed inwardly. Was she trying to make a mockery of him?

Varek studied the stunned man through narrowed eyes, the animosity in his moody glare almost begging him to refuse the apology.

It was on the tip of Robert's tongue to do exactly that — thrust the insulting apology back into the officious bastard's face when a movement on the edge of the clearing caught his and every other man's attention. He was not surprised when he saw Christina, astride a petit sorrel mare and accompanied by one of the grooms from the apartments, ride into the glade.

Varek saw at a glance that Christina looked exhausted. Her eyes appeared bruised, she was deathly pale and her attire was so disheveled, he wondered if she had slept in it. Still he couldn't help the surge of anger he felt at her for this added interference, and deliberately he turned his back to her. Instead, he directed his aching bitterness on the source of all his anguish — Christina's saintly husband.

However, the *saintly* Robert was staring at Christina with similar feelings, and Varek's ire rose even higher. What right did this pissant have to be angry with Christina?

"Well?" he drawled, drawing Basingstoke's inimical attentions back on him and well away from Christina. All the while he was praying the man would deny him the apology he now regretted with every fiber of his being. *Deny it, you prick*, Varek prayed as he glared at his enemy.

Suddenly, Sergei was at their side, his frowning attention directed on Robert with a force that could not be ignored. Whatever silently passed between the two men was unknown, but Varek damned Sergei's interference when Robert looked away first. Varek knew in that instant he would be denied the pleasure of killing him this day.

In the hours before dawn, he had thought long and hard on what Christina and Sergei had told him. His decision to bow out of this duel had come at the cost of a piece of his soul, for what he wanted at the basest level of his being was for this man to be dead and irrevocably out of Christina's life. A divorce was now out of the question for he knew Christina would never be able to leave a child of hers behind, which is what would be demanded of her if she left her husband. And no matter how desperately he wanted his wife back he would never ask such a sacrifice of her.

So where did that leave him? Absolutely nowhere. But, somewhere, down in the deepest shadows of his bruised heart, he still couldn't make himself give up on them completely. He just couldn't. Somehow there had to be a way. Unfortunately, killing her child's father was not one of them.

His voice ripe with ungracious spite, Robert said, "I accept your apology, your highness." Then in a voice only Varek and Sergei could hear, he added in a vicious undertone, "This time. But we both know that it won't end here, don't we?"

Varek smiled grimly, "I am counting on it."

Varek started to turn away, but Robert's hand shot out and grasped his forearm. "What did she say to you? What did she promise you if you begged off?" Robert demanded in an hoarse whisper.

Varek stared at the hand on his arm so long and pointedly that Robert finally released him, embarrassed at the disgusted look in the archduke's eyes as he deliberately dusted off his sleeve. Finally Varek looked up and sliced Robert a look of pure loathing. Stepping closer, Varek leaned in and without breaking eye contact with the worm, he explained in a voice coldly harsh, "I have never begged for anything in life, except perhaps my wife's kisses. And if you think so little of her

honor and integrity, then *let her go*, for I assure you I value them above my own life." With a final glance of disgust, Varek turned his back on the angry man and walked away.

The murmur of muted voices seemed to still as Varek walked directly over to where Christina still sat her horse. The face he turned up to her was impassive enough, but the stark pain in his eyes was a cruel testament of all he had suffered last night at her hands.

"Is this what you wanted, Christina?" His voice was a low murmur, for her ears alone, his hand curled possessively around her ankle.

Christina stared down at the hard visage of her love and she wanted to shout out *No, this is not what I want!* Instead her smile was pathetically weak, and her voice was raspy with exhaustion when she gave him the only answer she was allowed. "Thank you, Varek."

He stared up at her with a sense of brooding despair, before he nodded and stepped back, his hand reluctantly falling away. "Don't thank me too soon, for I haven't given up on us yet."

"Please, Varek — "

"Don't even try," he curtly cut her off, his glacial eyes condemning her. "I'm still reeling from our last conversation, so don't try to reason with me right now. At this moment I can almost hate you, Christina. Almost." With this vicious condemnation echoing in her heart, Varek turned his back on her and strode over to his mount. Without another word to anyone, he lithely sprang into his saddle and spurring his mount around, left the clearing at a gallop.

Christina didn't dare watch him leave, for she was afraid that she would be tempted to put heel to her own horse and follow him blindly. Instead, she looked over at Robert and saw that he was busy with donning his outer garments. She watched him for a long moment, and when she decided he was deliberately ignoring her, she felt relief. She was eager to slip away and make her own way back to the apartment. As she turned her horse about, she changed her mind and decided to go to Laure's home instead. At least there she would be able to rest undisturbed.

Seeing a horse pull up alongside her, she smiled and turned to greet Sergei.

He, however, only offered her a fierce frown as he studied her closely. "God's blood you look terrible. When was the last time you slept?" he demanded irritably.

Sighing, she relaxed into the lulling rhythm of her horse's gait and shrugged. "I can't remember."

"Little fool."

With a chiding moue, she glanced sideways at him. "You are not my nursemaid, Sergei."

His lips twisted wryly. "I beg to differ with you, but that is all I am anymore." Though his voice was teasing, the shadowed look in his eyes gave Christina pause. Frowning, she looked at him, a pang of guilty conscience warning her that something wasn't right. "Am I such a trial to you, my friend?"

Sergei's head jerked around and he stared at her in surprise. "Of course not! I was only teasing you. This only goes to show how exhausted you truly are if you are so sensitive to my senseless chatter." Then he quickly started to regale her with antidotes of his latest conquest, a buxom *fraulein* from the *kaufeehause* down the street from his apartment. She might not be much to look at, but she made the best bloody cup of coffee in Vienna. Soon he had her laughing, and she gratefully clutched at his artful dissembling, refusing to worry about anything on such a beautiful day.

* * *

Several nights later, the tension between Christina and Robert increased as she made inane excuses why she couldn't attend the ball at the Hofburg that night.

"What are you planning, Christina, to remain in hiding for the rest of the Congress?" He watched in frustration as she pushed away her untouched plate. Standing, she began to wander listlessly about the room.

"I really do not feel very well, Robert," she reiterated with calm patience. "I haven't been sleeping well and this hectic pace is starting to wear me down. Don't forget it has been years since I have been out in society. I am more accustomed to the quiet life of Kerkmoor. It cannot be such a horrendous breach of duty if I forgo this one night; after all there will be another ball next week. And the week after that, and the next . . ." Her voice trailed off as if in boredom.

If only he could believe her, Robert despaired. "Why aren't you sleeping?"

She shrugged.

"Do you still love him?" He hated himself for pressing her again, but he needed to know.

With a sigh of disgust, she said flatly, "What if I do, Robert? I won't leave you for him. And I will not climb into his bed. What else do you want from me?"

"Your love, perhaps?"

She was beginning to realize she was trying to reason with a man she didn't know anymore. This man was a stranger. Snippets of her conversation with Edward all those months ago insidiously swirled into her tired thoughts. He had been trying to warn her. She should have listened, for she had no idea how to deal with this perverse side of Robert. She wasn't sure she even wanted to try anymore. She just wanted to go home.

Feeling resentful of having to beg for his trust, Christina knelt beside him and took his hands. "Robert, how can you think that I don't love you? What have I done to give you these doubts?"

Robert stared down at her with narrowed eyes, mistrust evident in every tensed muscle in his body. His hands rested heavy in hers, not wanting to give her an inch. "I see how you look at him," he accused.

How could she possibly reach the understanding of a man who was so intrinsically selfish? Had she been living with blinders on all these years; only seeing what she had wanted to see?

"Robert, most of my life I spent loving Varek. For over ten years we were man and wife and we loved each other passionately. You may not like hearing this, but your wishing it doesn't change the past. You say you love me, and I have no doubt of your love, but you have to realize that what I am today is because of Varek. But Varek is my past. You are my here and now; my future. Isn't that enough?"

Christina was watching the turbulent emotions shifting in Robert's features, saw the bleak doubt in his eyes and knew with a sense of defeat that she had made no impression on him at all. Everything was a competition to him, and he already felt he was losing to Varek.

With a sigh, she dropped his hands and rose to her feet. She wandered over to the window and looked out over the twilit park. Knowing it was useless to ask again, she nevertheless entreated in a listless voice, "May I return to Kerkmoor?"

"Is running the answer to all your problems, Christina?" His question wasn't hostile, just curious.

Closing her eyes, she leaned her forehead against the cool glass and began to despair of her future with Robert. When they returned to England would it ever be the same as it had been? She could only pray that once she was back safe and secure at Kerkmoor, that Robert would return to his ambitions in London and leave her be. It was her only chance at regaining the happiness she had found at Kerkmoor.

Looking up, Christina saw that the moon was rising, a pale lambent glow in the distant sky. And Varek? Would he ever find his happiness somewhere? Would he one day turn all his magical love and devotion onto some other woman and forget her?

"I wish you to attend at the Hofburg tonight, madam." Robert's demand was spoken gently, but unmistakably final.

Turning, she nodded and said wearily, "As you wish."

"What I wish is for you to purge him from your heart. That is what I wish, Christina."

They both knew that what he asked was impossible, so she didn't even bother to answer this absurdity. Instead, she turned her back on him again and looked out into the cold night.

Robert stared at her back, and bit off the recriminations he wanted to hurl at her. What did she want of him — a castrated bull in her bed?

A knock resounded in the room, startling them. Relieved with the interruption, Robert turned toward the door as the maid opened it. When Sergei strode in unannounced, as if he owned the place, Robert again bit off the surge of anger that infused him. Christina's devoted watchdog — another thorn in his side. He shot Christina a resentful glare, before moving toward the unwanted guest.

"What the deuce do you want?" he snapped as Sergei stepped over to the table and helped himself to a cold chicken leg.

Sergei glanced past Basingstoke and looked at Christina, and what he saw only made him tear into the leg a little more savagely. His slit-gaze slid sideways to meet Robert's, which he held until he finished the leg and tossed it back on the table. His voice was cold and clipped when he said, "Castlereagh has called a special meeting with his attachés. You are needed in the consul chamber." Again, Sergei's gaze flicked over Christina. "Now."

Robert actually looked relieved at the summons. "Fine." With a slight bow toward his wife, he told her softly, "I will see you later, my dear. Shall I come back to escort you or will Massallon here offer his services?"

Before she could answer, Sergei assured him impassively, "I shall escort her."

Robert paused, then sketched Christina another bow, not meeting her eyes. When he turned toward the door, she stepped forward saying firmly, "Robert, I would prefer your company, if it is not too much trouble."

His head jerked around and he looked at her, a smile of relief spreading over his grim features. "No trouble at all, my dear. I shall be here no later than eight. Will that be enough time for you to prepare yourself?"

Returning his smile, she nodded. It faded as soon as he was gone. She looked sideways at Sergei and saw him frowning at her.

"You look like hell. You shouldn't be going at all."

Sighing in agreement, Christina rubbed her tired eyes, thinking that the last thing she wanted to do was spend another interminable night making inane chatter with people who were much too interested in meddling in her life. To add to her troubles, Varek had been conspicuously absent from all the social entertainments the last few days.

After a moment of deep thought, she said quietly, "I told him about Eddie."

Sergei inhaled in surprise. "Was that necessary?" The tone of his voice was an accusation.

Her eyes began to burn even more as she fought off the sting of tears. "I don't know. I didn't want to, but I thought it would make him realize how hopeless it all was, these dreams of his." *My dreams, too*, she admitted sadly to herself. "It apparently worked for I haven't seen him since." She looked at him, a question in her eyes.

Sergei shook his head, worry creasing his brow. "No, I haven't seen him either."

Turning away, Christina gnawed her lip. "Would you check on him, Sergei? I'm frightened." It took a force of will she barely had to hold back the tears. "You should have seen his face." Her whisper was tortured, filled with self-loathing. "I hurt him, Sergei. I hurt him so much."

The look she turned on him was so raw with pain that Sergei was at her side in the next instant, and wordlessly he gathered her close.

Christina laid her cheek on his chest, and sighed, "You will find him?" "I will find him."

* * *

Within hours, Sergei presented himself at Varek's residence. He was told in no uncertain terms that his highness was not at home to visitors. The door was then closed firmly in his face.

Sergei blinked at the closed portal. Never had Varek turned visitors away from his door. Even if he did not see them personally, callers were admitted to his salon and offered refreshments and hospitality.

Backing down the steps, Sergei looked up at the row of windows that were Varek's private rooms. His eyes widened in surprise as he stared up directly at Varek, who stood at a full-length window, one hand holding back the drape, the other holding a crystal glass. He looked like hell; dressed in nothing but breeches and wrinkled shirt-sleeves. It appeared he hadn't shaved in days, for a dark shadow covered his lower face, giving him a sinister, haunted quality.

They made eye contact for the briefest moment before Varek turned away, the drape falling back into place.

Sergei continued to stare up at the window, seeing nothing but the look of utter defeat in his friend's hooded eyes. It had been a long time since he had felt this helpless, and looking about the plaza, he wasn't sure what he should do next.

With his head bowed, Sergei wandered off into the darkness.

Eight

As the Congress continued through the fall months, little if anything but endless quibbling was being accomplished between the ruling powers of Europe; and still Christina saw herself far from home and escape from a life in hell. Now it was rumored that no negotiations would be agreed upon through the Christmas holidays. Christina shuddered at the thought of spending her Christmas in Vienna, among hundreds of acquaintances she could care less about.

And always there was Varek. Now, with the approach of winter teasing the crisp Vienna days, more and more she found herself envisioning her former husband with the romantic beauty of a delicate winter morning glistening about him; it was unbearable at times. Winter had always been their favorite time of year. Whenever she closed her eyes she could picture him teasing her with fistfuls of pristine snow, the newly fallen flakes shining like sprinkles of diamonds in his golden hair, his white-as-snow grin slashing across the bronzed symmetry of his face. Every time she flirted with these tormenting flashes of her incredible past she felt more and more like the adulterer Robert secretly accused her of being.

As the weeks crept slowly by she almost resigned herself to her fate. Varek was again close by no matter where she went. It was as if he knew where she would be before she did: dinner at the Chancellery, tea at Lady Castlereagh's, or simply sitting down for a cup of coffee at one of the hundreds of *kaufeehauses* along the *ringstrasse*. It never failed that she would look up and there he was, propped against a wall watching her with the patience of a predator who was not yet hungry enough to put himself to the trouble of going in for the kill. This strategy was dia-

bolical in the fact that he was guilty of everything and yet could be held accountable for nothing.

Every time she looked into his face though, she felt and shared his pain. Since that terrible night, he appeared even harder than before, if that was possible. A smile never seemed to entice his beautiful lips anymore, and his eyes were shuttered to any emotion except vigilant weariness. She had no idea what was going on in his mind, and she didn't want to know. All she was sure of was that if she was in hell, she wasn't alone.

So, with a dogged determination at odds with her usually reclusive nature, she jumped in with both hands and devoted as many hours as was asked of her by the committee of hostesses involved with the upcoming extravaganza, the Carrousel, a reenactment of a medieval tournament. Thankfully, it kept her busy and out of the way of Varek and Robert's brooding presences. There were even times when she was able to forget her problems, though far and few were those blessed moments. Varek was simply a force one could never take . . . simply.

Even though she kept her days busy enough, the sun would inevitably set and she was forced to return to her apartment. If a wary peace had settled between herself and Robert, it was hard won, and she was resentful of the amount of time it took to reassure him each time they came across Varek, which was now every day, and most times within hours of each meeting.

It was at times like these she was most tempted to give them their rapiers and get out of their way.

* * *

Varek stepped out of his residence and into the cold evening, his thoughts on the meeting he'd had with his cousin Francis earlier. He was pleased with the concessions the emperor was granting him — in truth he was being far more generous than he could have ever hoped for. Now if he could convince the people of Austenburg of the benefits, he might yet be able to save the duchy from a bloody insurrection. If only the options had been available all those years ago. . . . Unfortunately it had taken the bloody monster, Napoleon, to sweep through their land, raining destruction in his path, for the people to realize

how vulnerable they were to a changing world. Austenburg was too small to marshal an army of any size to protect its borders, and for the first time in over a hundred years, war was no longer some dimly held idea of a threat but brutal reality.

When a bodyguard, armed with a torch and a sidearm, appeared at his shoulder to escort him to the palace, Varek waved him away. He knew the short distance to the Hofburg like the back of his hand, and he wanted to be alone with his thoughts. Reclusive by nature, he hated people dogging his heels, and even with Francis's recriminations ringing in his ears about protection, he cavalierly dismissed them.

A smile eased his lips as Varek looked up at the black velvet of the night. The evening was crisp and clear, with thousands of stars adorning the sky. He paused for a moment and marveled at the magnificent display spread out before him, a treat from the gods. It never failed to humble him, the vastness of this other dimension. His fingers itched to ply the dials on his telescope. It had been a present from Christina years ago on his birthday. She had teased him, saying that since he was always likening her eyes to the beauty of the stars, perhaps it was time he saw what a star truly looked like. When he had taken up the hobby of astronomy with such a dedicated passion, she had been amazed. Since that first telescope, he had collected the best science could produce from all over the world; but Christina's gift had never lost favor with him — it was still in a place of honor by the bed they had shared; the same bed he had never shared with another woman.

He had just turned onto Augustine Street and was but a stone's throw away from the imperial palace when they jumped him. Varek had no time to release the steel out of his cane as he was swept backward into a tiny side alley, three sets of brawny arms holding him practically immobile. In the scuffle he felt his walking stick ripped from his hand. As the stygian dampness of the fetid alley suffocated him, fists and clubs were employed with equal ruthlessness upon his entire body. Paralyzing pain shot to every part of him, almost taking him down, and in a flash he saw the ending of his life.

But he was not a man to take unprovoked abuse and then meekly offer up the other cheek. As his initial wave of surprised vulnerability left in a heated rush, the cold-blooded necessity of survival took over.

Soon it was the grunts and curses of his attackers that punctuated the blackness and he grinned with evil purpose when his fist con-

nected solidly with a nose. The sound of cracking bone and cartilage was sweet indeed.

Just as he knew he was starting to get the better of them, his head exploded in crippling pain when a club caught him with brutal force above his right eye. The darkness popped with white shards of brilliance, and it was with a panicked sense of awareness that he knew he was going to pass out.

With a desperate snarl of rage, he found the strength to throw his attackers off, knowing if he went down under these assassins he would never get up. Suddenly free, he stumbled back and jarred his shoulder against a damp wall. Cursing, he bent down and grabbed the stiletto out of his boot. Again, the world tilted precariously around him as he swung around to face the new onslaught and by blessed luck, his blade caught the throat of one of the thugs. The death scream hadn't even faded when his dagger found the gut of another. Exultant, he pushed the man off and was struck again, laid low with the blunt end of a cudgel to his midsection. Gasping, he fell to his knees, doubled over and instinctively prepared himself for the final, fatal blow. However, it never came. He was thankful, and totally bewildered, when he heard his third attacker take to his heels.

Fighting for breath and clutching at the fire in his belly, he was vaguely aware of hands grabbing hold of him, trying to help him up. Vague voices faded in and out around him making no sense and, confused, he pushed them away and lurched out onto the lighted street. All he knew was that he had to get to Christina. But before he could take another step, he collapsed and lost what consciousness he had been clinging to.

Christina!

* * *

Christina fidgeted with her fork as she again glanced across the table at the empty chair.

Varek should have been in that chair.

Never had he been late for a function she attended. Though there was probably a very logical reason he was not there, she couldn't help the queasy sense of dread that sat like a rock in the pit of her stomach. Surreptitiously, she glanced down the table and espied his

mistress talking and gesturing with gaiety at the attentive Prince Trauttmansdorff. Nothing unusual there.

Her glance then swiveled down the vast length of the imperial table to where her husband sat. Her eyes narrowed as she took in his animated discussion with the Countess Zichy.

Why, he looks as if he is enjoying himself, she thought, mystified. He hated the countess. Not to mention, she hadn't seen him this light-hearted in weeks. Again, she contemplated her poached eel swimming in its bowl of green herbed sauce, and her stomach lurched.

She couldn't help but feel that something was wrong. Suddenly, she felt a frisson of gooseflesh prickle along her skin. Her breath shortened and a bone-chilling fear slithered through her mind. Her startled gaze shot to Varek's empty chair and she knew.

He was in danger. She could feel it constricting her heart.

Nerveless fingers dropped her fork onto her plate and she struggled to push her chair back, smiling faintly at her partners who looked up at her in surprise. She was thankful when a footman promptly stepped forward to help her with the massive chair.

"Excuse me," she murmured with distracted deference while she, as inconspicuously as she could before four hundred and fifty guests, left the imperial dining room. Casting a furtive glance over her shoulder, she was relieved to see that Robert had not noticed her sudden departure.

Reaching the main entrance, she impatiently secured the attendance of a footman, and with him lighting her way, she grabbed up her skirts and ran the short distance to the Varek's residence.

Upon her entrance the majordomo bowed low, intoning solemnly, "Your highness."

Too worried to correct him, she demanded to see the archduke.

"Yes, your highness. Follow me, if you please." With stately decorum he marched ahead of her. Angered at his slowness, she almost trod upon his heels in her haste to see Varek. She was not led to any of the receiving rooms but taken upstairs. With the climbing of each riser, her dread grew apace, till she was sweating beneath the wispy fabric of her evening gown.

He swung open the large door leading into the master suite and without waiting for an invitation she pushed impatiently past the irritating man and hurried into the sitting room. It was empty.

Heart pounding, she called out, "Varek?" as she ran through the large rooms she remembered so well. When she reached the bedroom door she flung it wide and stumbled to a halt, gaping at the scene before her.

Varek was laid out on bloody sheets, two prominent physicians bending over him and several servants hurr ying to and fro at their clipped commands.

Her world tilted alarmingly and the room faded to a fuzzy gray as she fought the urge to swoon right there. "Varek," she whispered, her steps wandering like those of a sleepwalker to the foot of his bed. He looked dead.

Dead.

Her eyes drifted closed and she swayed.

"Joseph, grab her!" A sharp command jumped out at her.

When an arm encircled her, she weakly shrugged it off. "No, I'm all right."

"Thank God, I haven't time for you now."

Opening her eyes she watched as both men bent over Varek again. Questions crowded into her confused and frightened mind, but she bit them off, not wanting to distract them from their duty. Hands clenched into the delicate netting of skirts, she never missed a thing as the hour ticked on slowly. Bowl after bowl of bloody water was disposed of before the doctors were happy with their results. Her breath hitched painfully as she scrutinized every beloved inch of his battered body. It mattered not a whit to her, but it was sad to think that he would come away from this terrible night scarred forever, a constant and bitter reminder of his brush with death. Whoever had done this had done their job well.

Robert's animated face, his strange behavior that evening flashed through her mind. *No!* He couldn't have been a party to this atrocious act.

After what seemed like an eternity, the doctors finally stepped away and turned toward her, bowing. "Your highness," Dr. Clibourne greeted her with grave awkwardness.

Why did everyone connected with Varek insist on calling her such? Again she didn't take the time to correct them. "Will he be all right?" The question caught in her throat.

With a sigh, Dr. von Schulenberg, answered, "It is hard to say, your highness. His injuries are extensive, but, thank God, mostly minor.

The head wound is deep and may have caused a concussion. We will not know till he awakens. The swelling around his abdomen looks suspicious of internal injuries; however, if an organ is ruptured or merely bruised we will have to wait and see. A fever could foretell peritonitis." He stopped abruptly at her look of horror. Clearing his throat, he turned away and began to pack up his tools.

Christina's nails began to shred the silk at her thighs. Biting her lip, she looked over every inch of Varek's exposed body, and every inch she saw made her want to weep in fear and rage. "What can I do?"

"Just stay with him." Dr. Clibourne counseled her. "He was calling for you earlier. Your tender touch and soothing voice will contribute much toward his recovery, I doubt not."

Both men quickly shrugged themselves back into their coats and then gathered up their satchels. She watched, feeling helpless, as they strode for the door. "We will look in on him during the night, your highness, but if you need us, rooms have been provided for us and we will be just down the hall."

After their departure Christina sat down carefully on the bed beside Varek. She so wanted to touch him, but was afraid of hurting him further. After an indecisive moment, she reached out and soothed his dirty hair away from the puffy stitches above his right eye.

And there she stayed through the long, lonely hours of the interminable night, afraid to move an inch from his side. It didn't even occur to her to send a message to Robert.

Later that night she felt heat radiating from his bruised flesh; the fever had set in. She started as he moaned low, his legs twitching. Petrified, she jumped to her feet and ran into the sitting room where Varek's valet dozed. Soon the man was running to fetch the doctors and Christina returned to Varek's side. Not knowing what else to do, she wrung out a linen in the cold water by his bed and lightly wiped the sweat from his face and neck.

His head whipped to the side. "Christina," he moaned, the sound a mere sigh.

"I'm here, Varek," she quickly assured him as she gently took his hand in her own. When his fingers clenched with bruising force about her hand she cried out. Immediately he relaxed his hold, but he didn't let go of his lifeline. The heat emanating from his skin seared her, and her panic rose apace with it. She sighed with relief when the doctors

strode in, dressed in chamber robes, and swept her aside. Once again she could do no more than stand back and watch with trepidation as Varek's fate was taken out of her hands.

But Varek didn't like this situation at all. As soon as her hand had been taken from his, he grew agitated, twisting with painful grimaces, his raspy voice calling to her.

"Please, Doctor, just let me touch him. Maybe it will ease him." Her hands were wringing the bedpost. With a curt nod of their heads, both men agreed and one waved her impatiently to the head of the bed, out of their way. Quickly she slipped onto the bed, close to Varek's head and bending low, she stroked his hair and whispered soothingly into his ear. Immediately his struggling stopped and he fell limp beneath the doctors' administration.

Von Schulenberg looked up with a grunt. "I wish he was always this well-behaved," he admonished with a grin.

Christina responded with a stiff smile of her own, her first since this nightmare of an evening began. "Well, now, that wouldn't be the archduke, would it? One thing his highness never is and that is submissive."

"Watch your tongue, lark," Varek croaked painfully.

With a start, she looked down at him and almost cried when she barely saw his beautiful eyes beneath the mottled folds of swollen tissue. Without thinking, she asked in a rush, "How do you feel, my love?"

"Lark, that has got to be the most asinine thing I have ever heard you say."

She looked up with shining eyes. "He's going to be just fine."

The Archduke of Austenburg merely grunted, then flung a foul curse at the good doctors' heads.

* * *

The first thing Christina noticed when she woke was that dawn had come. The second was that every bone in her body ached from sitting propped in the roomy chair pulled up to Varek's bed.

With a start, she blinked her vision into focus and leaned over to check him. She smiled when she became aware of him watching her; then her lips stiffened as she strained to maintain the smile. He looked so awful. His pain must be excruciating, and her body ached as she shared his trauma, every nerve in her body empathizing.

Varek tried to smile back, but was only able to manage a painful grimace. His hand moved feebly, reaching out toward her. When she took it into her own, she heard him sigh. "I'm glad you're here, lark," he rasped.

She turned quickly and filled a glass with water. Sitting on the bed, she carefully propped him up and held the rim to his parched lips. It was a relief to watch him greedily drink down the whole glass. Her lips quirked as she asked him whimsically, "Will you bite me if I ask how you are?"

His distorted face turned up to squint at her. "How do I look?"

"Terrible," she assured him candidly.

"Well, that's how I feel." He looked closely at her, seeing the strain on her pale features. "You don't look much better. Why don't you go to your apartment and get some rest. I will see you later." He held his breath, waiting for her answer.

Her hesitation was minute. "No, I prefer to stay here and tend to you. If you don't mind, that is?" She avoided his gaze and set herself to straightening his bedclothes.

"Then do me a favor." His voice was weakening again.

"Anything."

"Lay down here beside me and get some rest. We can't both be dead on our feet."

Christina studied the narrow width of bed left open beside his sprawled body. Even though she was doubtful that she would attain anything close to a restful respite, in her exhaustion she had to admit that the bed did look inviting.

"Please, my love," he whispered wearily. "I will rest easier knowing you are here beside me."

Biting her lip, Christina searched his battered face and again she wanted to cry. Never had she seen Varek so helpless, and she felt cast adrift. She wanted back the forceful, charismatic man she had loved her entire life. It didn't matter that the last weeks had been hell for her, with him shadowing her every move. Anything was preferable to him lying before her crippled with such pain.

Without another word she laid down beside him, her shoulder barely touching his. After a moment she felt the brush of his fingers as he reached for her hand.

Her hand turned into his, and gently they held on, afraid that if they broke contact the other would be gone. In minutes they were asleep, both sharing the same dreams, both smiling.

* * *

As the somnolent night faded into a pale gray on the horizon, Robert sat motionless but for his narrowed eyes, which followed the path of a murky shadow on the wall across from him. It crept along inch by interminable inch as it struggled to keep ahead of the advent of the rising sun, the last warrior of a dying night. Brooding, Robert sat in silence watching the progress of each of those bloody inches, for each one heralded another minute that Christina hadn't come back to him. He knew where she was, though, and he wanted to kill them both.

When the shadow had finally lost its age-old battle with its nemesis, Robert surged to his feet and started for the door. His bloodshot eyes were grim as he made his way to the residence of the Archduke of Austenburg, and any hapless pedestrian unfortunate enough to cross his path made way promptly.

There could be no doubt in any of their minds as they turned to watch the disheveled foreigner that murder would be done in Vienna today.

Nine

Christina was spooning broth between Varek's swollen lips when the door opened silently.

"Baron Hager, your highness," the majordomo intoned, as slowly as he was prone to move. Christina set aside the bowl and disposed of the linen spread across Varek's chest. It was clear that Varek was none too happy to see the chief of police. She felt her own surge of irritation as she turned to face the baron; she never had liked the man.

Clicking his heels together smartly, the baron bowed low. "Your highness. Lady Basingstoke." If he was surprised to see her in Varek's private apartment so early in the morning, no sign could be discerned on his impassive face. Knowing the baron, his spies had informed him the moment she had walked into the palace last night. Franz Hager prided himself on knowing everything about everyone. Being around him was much like stepping in horse manure — hard to get rid of. He always seemed to be around, lingering in the air.

"How are you faring, your highness?" The man's lips barely moved, his hooded eyes missing nothing.

Christina's lips twitched slightly as she looked sideways at Varek. "I should warn you, my lord, that his highness doesn't like being asked that question. What have you found out?" She didn't need to know if he was on the trail of the men who had attacked Varek last night; she took it as a foregone conclusion that he already had his nose in it.

The baron's gaze shifted deferentially to her and again he bowed, the click of his heels irritating. Official little weasel, Christina thought unkindly, avoiding his shifty gaze. He still had that nervous tick in his

right eye that seemed to emphasize the ratlike gleam in the black depths of his eyes. Even as he bowed and toadied up to the elite of Europe, he was busy sniffing about for all the filth he could glean.

"Indeed, my lady, we have found out very little. The third man was found early this morning with his throat slashed. Nearly decapitated, he was."

Christina turned to Varek, shocked. He was staring at the baron with a stillness that set her heart racing. "How unfortunate," he murmured, a thread of frustrated anger discernible even through the rasping pain.

"We are looking for the families of the three men, but it will take some time. In the meantime, with your highness's approval, I shall set some of my men to guard you."

"No."

Christina clasped her shaking hands. "But, Varek — "

"No," he cut her off abruptly.

Angry, she pursed her lips shut, refusing to look at him or the baron. Her back stiff, she moved to look out the window. It was with some surprise that she noticed how high the sun had climbed.

"Do you have any information you could impart to help in this investigation, your highness? Have you any knowledge of anyone who would want to see you dead?"

Though the question was directed at Varek, Christina was surprised to see both men's eyes watching her with unwavering interest. Biting down on her retort, she stared Varek down, daring him to voice his suspicions. God help her, for she couldn't deny to herself that they were also her own suspicions.

"No. No one, Franz," Varek answered evasively. She exhaled slowly, unaware that she had been holding her breath.

The baron bowed again. "Very well — "

He was cut off when the door was flung open with brutal force. Robert strode into the room, two of Varek's footmen tumbling into the room after him, still trying to restrain the intruder. Robert didn't notice as Varek waved the servants out, for his glaring attention was riveted on Christina as she stood by the window, the full sun illuminating her disheveled appearance. Stepping farther into the room, Robert stopped not far from her, rage radiating from him, kept under control by the merest thread.

Remembering she had failed to send a message to him last night informing him of her whereabouts, she felt irritated with herself for causing Robert such worry. But otherwise she felt guiltless of any wrongdoing. There had been many times in the past when he had not bothered to inform her where he would be when he so precipitously disappeared, sometimes for days, without a word to her. She had trusted him and she was only entitled to the same consideration. Without a word, she cocked her chin at a militant angle and stood her ground.

"I knew I would find you here," he spat, his anger making him careless.

"Basingstoke, you know Baron Hager, I presume," Varek's voice broke into the brewing argument.

Blinking as if waking from a dream, Robert turned about slowly and stared with incomprehension at the baron and then at Varek. His eyes widened as he took in the archduke's battered face and body. "What in bloody hell happened to you?" he sputtered in amazement.

Christina relaxed, a smile softening her mouth as she went to stand beside Robert. He looked too surprised to be anything but innocent of the foul deed.

"I had come here with the intention of killing you; however, it seems someone had a jump on me. Too bloody bad of him to botch it. But," Robert shrugged, "there you have it. Tell me who it is so I can tender him my gratitude."

Varek laughed, then groaned as pain bombarded his body. The baron didn't find it quite so amusing. "Where were you last night, my lord?"

Robert continued to examine his foe. "At the Hofburg, as you damn well know. Then I went home. Alone." This was directed at his wife, along with a fulminating glare. "You could have sent me a message, y'know."

"I'm sorry, Robert, I wasn't thinking very well." She would pay for this little misdeed later. If she had been lectured before for her imagined transgressions, he was going to have a field day with this episode.

"No, you never do when he is involved."

She stiffened, but it was Varek's voice that snapped out at Robert. "Watch yourself, Basingstoke."

The baron looked on with morbid interest, a small smile curling his thin lips.

"Let me know what you find out, Franz," Varek's rough whisper dismissed him.

With another curt bow, the baron withdrew, leaving the two adversaries alone, with the viscountess standing as a buffer between them.

"What can you be thinking, Christina? Am I to simply shrug and say everything is just fine when my wife doesn't come for the night? Well, I can't. Maybe you are right; it is time for you to go home."

Christina's breath hitched, whether in joyous relief or disappointment, she wasn't quite sure. She so wanted to see Eddie again, but to leave Varek, when he was so ill . . . She bit her lip, at a loss as what to do. If only Robert had done this a day ago, she would have fled without a backward glance. Now it wasn't so easy, with Varek laid up in bed, perhaps internally bleeding to death at this very moment.

"This works out superbly, if I may say so," Varek announced with as casual a tone as he could manage.

Robert swung around to face him. "Why is that?" Even seeing Varek laid up, as helpless as a gutted goat, he still didn't trust him, especially when the bastard was in the same room as his wife.

"Why, I shall escort her, if you give me a few days of recuperation. I had planned to visit England anyway. Isn't it coincidental providence? You can be sure I'll see her safely to her destination. Perhaps I shall even stay on and keep her company, especially with you here in Vienna for lord knows how many more months." Varek's wintery smile mocked Robert.

With Robert's militant stance and out-thrust chin, he put Varek in mind of a heckled bull. In a minute he expected to see flames of rage shoot out of the poor sod's distended nostrils. How easy it was to bait the man. In truth, it was too easy. It rather took the fun out of it.

Why couldn't the bastard have died? Robert thought viciously. Now he wouldn't even have the peace of mind of shipping Christina home. He was being duly warned. And not for a minute did he doubt the archduke. Where Christina went, he would follow like a bloody leech. And he was stuck here until Castlereagh released him from his duties. Unlikely chance that would happen anytime soon. *Bloody, bloody hell!*

The moment of terror Varek had felt after Basingstoke's threat eased. He had played his bluff and, thank God, it had worked. With Austenburg's uncertain future hanging over his head, he couldn't have left Vienna anymore than Christina's husband. He had gambled

on Basingstoke's insecurities and won. Christina wouldn't be taken from his sight. Varek watched in amusement as Robert studied him with helpless rage. No, this war was far from over.

With a stifled oath, Robert turned and grabbed hold of Christina's hand. Without another word he pulled her unceremoniously from Varek's bedchamber, despite her very vocal disagreement. Just as she disappeared out the door, she cast a despairing glance back at Varek.

He gave her a weak smile in return which faded the moment she was lost to his sight. Seeing her being mistreated in such a way made his hands clench in helpless rage; it was all he could do not to stumble out of bed and chase after them. But he was too weak to lift his hand, let alone his body.

He turned his head slowly and looked at the empty chair Christina had used, already missing her. For all the pain he had suffered last night, it had been pure heaven every moment she had been beside him.

With a painful sigh he closed his eyes and breathed in the lingering scent of her.

* * *

Christina kept her back to her husband as he raged and paced behind her. She was at fault for not relaying a message to him, but that was all! He was carrying on as if he had found them frolicking the morning away in carnal splendor. Her cheeks surged with heat when that thought brought to mind a totally unsuitable image — Varek with his nude body stretched out before her — and her breathing accelerated as she thought of his bruised flesh. Despite the distortion of lacerations and swelling, he had been as magnificent as ever. Biting her lip hard, she spun around and faced her husband.

"I'm sorry, Robert. You have every right to belittle me, but are you through?"

Robert jerked to a halt, gaping at her. He hardly recognized the woman standing proud and belligerent before him. Feeling his hands beginning to shake, he clenched them.

"Send me home," she demanded, emotionless.

"You know I can't do that. You heard what he threatened."

"You have to know he was bluffing. He won't be able to move for at least a week, and traveling would be almost impossible."

When he merely continued to stand there and glare at her, her eyes narrowed to slits of ire. "Are you accusing me of adultery, my lord? If so, stop shilly-shallying about it and be man enough to say it out loud."

Surprised at her cold accusation, Robert shifted about on his feet, and his gaze dropped away from her.

"Come, my lord, you have only to voice what you have been accusing me of for weeks!" Silence. "Say it or be damned!" she shouted, her glare furious.

Robert flinched as he contritely studied her flushed face. He didn't know how to talk to her when she was in this mood; he had never known her to be other than coolly poised. In fact he didn't believe he had ever seen her in such a tantrum; it was disconcerting to say the very least. Almost petulantly he assured her, "I don't accuse you of anything, my love, but you constantly lack sense in your dealings with that man. What was I supposed to think when you didn't come home last night?" He sat down before the fire and lounged back.

"You should have assumed I had a good reason and been patient."

He gaped up at her in amazement. "Been patient? Surely you jest!"

Taking a deep, fortifying breath, she forced herself to calmness. "Did you set those thugs on Varek?"

"What?" Robert jerked upright, indignation clear on his face. She trusted this involuntary response to her accusation with relief.

With that worry off her mind, she was finally able to let her body relax. Her shoulders bowed under the weight of her fatigue as she collapsed into the matching chair across from him. "Never mind."

"You think I did that?" he demanded.

"No."

Leaning back in his chair he continued to glare at her. "Not that it wasn't a jolly good idea. I wish I had thought of it."

Christina gasped and raised her shocked gaze to see his reluctant smile, his eyes, red with his own fatigue. At last a glimpse of her old Robert. She had thought him gone. "It's not funny, Robert. They almost killed him."

He sobered instantly. "I assure you if I was going to kill the bastard, he would have no doubt it was me."

"Well, that certainly relieves my mind," she murmured ruefully as she stood again, weary to the bone.

Robert jumped to his feet as she swayed slightly. Without another word, he swept her into his arms and carried her to their bedchamber. "You have done enough this day. Now let me take care of you." And so saying, he laid her gently down on the bed and began to strip her of her rumpled gown. He frowned at the amount of blood staining the delicate silk.

When she was undressed, she curled onto her side, asleep almost instantly. It was only midmorning and there were duties he should be attending to, but none were as important to him as Christina. Quickly, he stripped down to his breeches, then climbed in behind her. As he pulled her against him, she murmured a sleepy whisper and cuddled back into his gentle embrace.

Tears misted his eyes as he rested his cheek against her fragrant curls. She had whispered Varek's name.

* * *

"Tell me you didn't set those thugs on the archduke," Castlereagh demanded with silken steel.

Robert stared back at him, straight in the eye. "I did not." He was almost becoming accustomed to being blamed for the crime.

Castlereagh nodded, accepting Robert's word without a second thought. "Very well; however, I am not at all pleased with your conduct of late, Basingstoke."

Robert's lips thinned as he continued to stand before the foreign secretary. He hadn't been asked to sit. "Yes, my lord."

"This has got to stop. It's bad enough I have to dance around Metternich's amorous tragedies, I will not condone the same weakness in my own staff. You are here to lend support, not conflict."

Robert's heart was pounding; in anger, in helplessness, in embarrassment, he could not say. "Yes, my lord."

There was a new hardness to Robert's eyes that his superior didn't like. Clearing his throat, Castlereagh suggested gently, "Perhaps it is time to send Lady Basingstoke home."

"No!" Robert clipped out, then stiffened again. "No, my lord. I will take care of my own."

Castlereagh studied the guarded man before him, speculating quickly on what might be the best course. Too many things were going

awry; he was losing control of the negotiations, and Parliament was becoming more and more unfavorably inclined toward him. He hated losing control. In truth, it was not an option, not with the fate of Europe hanging in the balance. And now he was being forced to ignore the directives of Parliament in order to force events the way he was sworn to follow and knew ultimately was in the best interest of all the powers. He couldn't waste time on petty family squabbles. On the other hand, von Vischering was a favorite cousin of Emperor Francis, and at this delicate stage in negotiations he couldn't afford to give the emperor a reason to resent him by interfering in the archduke's business. Perhaps it was best that Christina remain in Vienna — at least for the present.

With a sigh, he finally stood up. "Very well, Robert. It would be a shame for her to miss out on the Carrousel, after all her efforts on behalf of the committee. We will wait till then and see, shall we?"

Robert glanced up sharply, relief barely discernible on his grim face. "Yes, my lord." Then with a bow he withdrew, his stride long and sure.

Castlereagh pondered on that closed door for many minutes before he returned to his desk and the endless mountain of work waiting there. Already he wondered if he had made the wrong decision.

Ten

The Emperor Francis looked down on Varek, shaking his head in amazement. Had it been him laying there, black and blue from head to toe, he would have been blubbering like a baby. But then, he had always been the first to admit to his many weaknesses, and his inability to bear pain with heroic stoicism was definitely one of them.

His empress, Maria, faced pain every day of her life now. Tuberculosis had claimed her youthful beauty and day by day he was forced to watch as her body grew frailer, her gentle beauty a bit more faded. It was she who had to live every day with the wracking coughs, arising every morning to the slow, painful eventuality of her own mortality, but it was he who broke down and cried whenever he was in her presence. And now the obligation of acting hostess to the Congress was pulling her down even more. As expected, she endured it all: the lengthy dinners, the tiring balls, the hectic galas, with her usual dignity and graciousness. The people of Austria loved their empress and were sincere in their grief at her affliction. But no one grieved their empress's illness as much as her husband.

Now his favorite cousin lay before him, in obvious pain, but grinning up at him like a battered lunatic. Francis knew well the scoundrel was mocking his aversion to pain. The mere fact that he even deigned to show up at Varek's sickbed was ample testament of his great affection for this awesome cousin, even if at times they hardly spoke for years on end. If ever he had fantasized about being another man it would have been Varek von Vischering.

Recrossing his legs, Francis cleared his throat, trying not to notice the swollen stitches above Varek's eye. "Franz is no closer to locating

the villain behind the attack, but we both know what is going on here. This can't continue, Varek."

Varek's grin died slowly as he nodded. "I was a fool to leave Tina Marie in Austenburg. I thought it might soothe the people's fear; however, Roget is gaining too much popularity with the nobles. Who would have thought that cold fish would win such loyalty?" Varek turned a worried frown on the emperor. "I need to get my daughter out of there as soon as possible. When all this comes down they might hurt her out of revenge."

"Don't worry; I'll send my personal guard for her. Roget could hardly refuse me without bringing a battle to his very doorstep. He'll give her up. Albeit reluctantly, and it won't stop him from trying to get her back, even as he plots your next accident. Lord, Varek, you should have gotten rid of the bastard years ago."

"I know, but the von Vischerings have always had a rather blind loyalty to our chancellors and never had we reason to doubt that loyalty. Also years ago I could have hardly cared less what happened to the duchy that was threatening the life of the woman I loved. Being forced to set her aside was the hardest thing I have ever done in my life, or ever will again. After she ran, I was actually grateful that Roget was there to take care of the affairs of the duchy."

Contrition and embarrassment tinged this condemnation of himself. He still had such strained feelings about the duchy that it was hard to settle its affairs with any equanimity. He never had been able to flush out the faction that had threatened Christina's life, but the majority of his people were good and loyal to him, and it was for them alone that he was in Vienna looking out for their interests.

"I have been a miserable leader to my people, and I have no excuses for my failures. It has only been recently that I've even begun to realize how ambitious the bastard really is. I can only hope that with the horror of the past years of losing so much to Napoleon's greed that *all* the people understand that they can no longer survive as an independent state. I can almost thank Napoleon for impressing upon them how vulnerable they truly are."

"It will be difficult with Roget continually stirring them up."

Varek sighed. "I know. I've been hitting my head against a wall for years and I'm just damned tired of it all, Francis. I just want quit of the whole mess."

I just want to grow old with Christina. Austenburg and its blindness was no longer a concern of his, and, hopefully, he would soon be shed of its responsibilities. He even wanted to be stripped of his titles; however, that wish was one indulgence Francis was not willing to concede to.

All he wanted now was Christina and his daughter safe and in his arms. And her son.

He wondered for the hundredth time if her little son looked like her. He smiled as he imagined a rambunctious toddler with Christina's midnight curls and laughing, brown eyes.

Snapping his wayward thoughts back to the present, he concentrated on the very real threat of Roget. Single-handedly, preying on the insecurities of his people, Roget had forged their fanatical zeal with his own greediness. Varek still couldn't quite understand what Roget hoped to gain from such treachery. He practically ruled Austenburg as it was. There was no doubt that Roget now judged the archduke's life to be of no consequence, and the only possible reason had to pivot around the Austenburg heir — the continuation of their illustrious independence.

"How much do you think Roget knows of what you are planning?" Francis asked, worried.

"I have shown such disinterest in the fate of Austenburg that I am hoping he doesn't suspect a thing — a leopard never changing his spots and all that rot. Austria absorbing Austenburg is not going to be easy, cousin. It's going to cost. You may not want the headache. But I know they will do better under your rule than the uncertain future of the German states."

Francis shrugged as he gave Varek a winsome smile. "When did I ever deny you anything, cousin?"

Varek returned his smile warmly. "If I survive this fiasco, I'll owe you my life, and you know how I dislike being in debt to anyone; even to one I love as much as you."

"Will you truly? You mean to tell me that after all these long years I will finally be able to feel superior to you? Lord knows, being emperor was never enough."

Varek shook his head in amused affection at this gentle man who for too many years had shouldered the conscience of holding back Napoleon from his borders. And now with the problems of the reunifi-

cation of Europe consuming his days and nights, his beautiful wife ailing and in pain, he still had the kindness and mercy to extend his hand to Varek when he most needed it. It made him feel humble, indeed.

"When will you be able to send your men after Tina Marie?" He almost choked on the request, hating to create more problems for Francis, but his daughter was half of everything to him. The other half, Christina, was safe under his eye here in Vienna.

Francis stood up briskly, eager to be on his way. "Consider it done, cousin." And with a jaunty bow, the emperor was gone as abruptly as he had appeared.

* * *

There was a new hardness to Christina's eyes when she bustled into his room later that day. Varek watched in silence as she impersonally saw to his needs, straightening his bedclothes, ringing for the maid to clear away the dishes, opening the window to allow a brisk breeze to air the room. He didn't like what he saw.

"Did he hurt you?"

She stiffened, then swung about to glare at him. "I beg your pardon?"

She didn't appear to be hurt, but she was certainly in a simmering rage. He knew her moods so well, every endearing and exasperating one of them. "Want to talk about it?"

"No," she clipped out.

Varek nodded, wisely holding his tongue.

"What I want is for you to let me leave Vienna, Varek," she imperiously demanded.

"No."

She stepped over to the bed and winced at the angry festering about the stitches above his eye. Seeing his ravaged face mitigated much of her exasperation, but bravely she held on to her sense of purpose. "How is the swelling in your stomach?" Restlessly she twitched the already smooth sheet into place.

He shrugged with negligible care while watching her warily. "I should be up and about tomorrow."

She stared down at him aghast. "No, you will not! The doctors said you must remain in bed at least a week, preferably two." She poured a glass of water and offered it to him. He ignored it.

"Christina . . . "

"I don't wish to talk with you if you are going to persist in this plan of yours."

His brow furrowed in confusion. "What plan?"

She slammed the glass back down. "To cause me anguish."

Sitting up, ignoring the pain slashing through his gut, he roared, "Your anguish! Is that what you think I'm trying to do?"

She tried not to flinch as she faced the savage heat of his pale eyes boring into her. "What else could it be, Varek? You are angry with me because I ran from you. I know how dear you hold on to what you deem as yours, but I am not yours anymore. By a decree that you signed, and forced me to sign, I no longer belong to you. By church and law, I am now Robert's. You have to give up this insane obsession."

He relaxed back against the pillows, a smile playing painfully about his bruised lips. "Is that what you are, lark, my obsession?"

Challenging him back with a hard glare, she nodded.

"Well, you are right. Ever since I first saw you, plump and pretty as a pigeon, you have been my one obsession. So, why should anything be any different now?"

Wilting under his tender regard, she sat dejectedly on the edge of his bed. "Because everything is different, Varek, and no matter how much you want it otherwise, it can't be changed. I have a son, blast you!" Again, she sprang to her feet.

His face wiped of all expression, Varek watched as she paced the room. Most of his free time was spent in brooding over a solution for them. Which was useless, because no matter how he twisted their lives about in his mind, it ultimately came down to one irrefutable fact: Christina would never leave her son. So there was no solution. Even if Robert would let her go, he would not give up his son, and Christina — no matter how much she might love him — would never leave her son behind. No solution.

Except for Robert's death, came the insidious thought that was always swirling just beneath his nobler intentions. Too bad he didn't have less of a conscience, he thought in disgust.

Yet, even with all this against them, Varek stubbornly refused to give up. He had no doubt that there could be only one ending to this abysmal mess — Christina *would* be his again one day. And this feat would somehow be accomplished with her love intact. In the meantime,

while he puzzled his way through this maze of problems, she was wasting away, and he could only blame himself. She looked tired, thinner and hounded. What she needed was a rest, a chance to recuperate her strength.

"I'll make a pact with you," he said with sudden good humor.

She stilled her pacing and glared cautiously at him. "Another pact? No thank you, I remember your last attempt at a pact."

"You are still sore about that because you lost. You give me a kiss at a time and place of my choosing and I promise I will not bother you through this month."

Her mouth pursed with annoyance. "How gracious. No, I want you gone."

Smiling, he shook his head. Lord, she was a stubborn minx.

She slid a sideways glower at him. "This month is almost over. A full thirty days."

Irritated, he again noticed the dark circles under eyes, and reluctantly he nodded.

"Why can I not just kiss you now?" she peevishly asked.

Varek just stared at her in amusement. "You touch my lips and I just might faint from the pain. No, at a time and place of my choosing. I think that is more than fair, considering my concession to your demand."

Worrying her lip, she studied the man lazing before her, his bruised chest drawing her hesitant attention. He was so datted beautiful. To go near him, even in his sorry condition, was courting disaster. She swallowed her heart, when his biceps bulged as he shifted about. Turning away she paced slowly around the bed. She should insist on here and now. If she agreed to his demand and let him claim his kiss when he was hail and hearty again she might not survive it, for she knew from experience that it would be devastating, consuming, and euphoric. He wouldn't just be stealing a kiss from her lips, he would be reclaiming her soul.

And he knew it.

Yet thirty days of respite sounded like heaven. And anything could happen in thirty days. She might be back at Kerkmoor by then.

Taking a deep breath, she turned back to Varek. "Very well. One kiss in exchange for thirty days of blessed respite from your stifling attention. Agreed?"

He bit back his smile and nodded solemnly. "Agreed."

Christina knew she should leave, but still she stood there and gazed at him. How she wished it was her right to tend to him, to soothe him, to take care of all his problems. But it wasn't.

"Do you have any idea how much I have missed you?" he asked softly, his voice once again that deep, hypnotic hum that resounded through her heart like a temple bell.

It took her a moment to fight back the swell of tears that threatened. Taking a deep breath, she looked directly into his bruised eyes and gave him a frosty smile. "I know only too well, your highness."

Afraid she would lash out at him as she had Robert earlier, she spun on her heel and left. She so wanted to vent all her pain and frustration over his head; but she couldn't, for it would be like cauterizing a wound, preparing it for the healing process to begin and then her defenses against him would begin to crumble. Varek was a wound in her soul that had never healed, and as long as it was angry and inflamed she could keep her distance — and she needed that more than ever.

* * *

They lay before each other with nothing between them but the moon's lam-bent glow, the night sky above them a blanket of stars. Together they reached out, their fingertips barely touching, and shivered as if an electrical frisson connected them, pulling them closer until the tips of her breasts barely skimmed the taut muscles of his chest. Their breaths stopped. Then they breathed as one — her sigh became his inhalation, their breaths mingling between lips hungry for a taste of the other. Slowly, their mouths met, blending their essence as their tongues mated.

She felt his broad hands cupping her buttocks, lifting her. Her legs encircled his waist, pulling him closer, locking his loins against her moist heat. They groaned as he surged into her tight sheath, their heads thrown back, the moon's gentle light bathing them.

Slowly he teased her with long, slow strokes until she could take this frustrating torment no longer and she strained tighter against him, pulling him deeper into her, claiming every loving inch of him. He gasped as her inner muscles clenched about him, pulling him yet deeper into the very core of her being. His world spiked white with the savagery of his passion.

Flexing his hips, his hands clenched into her buttocks, bruising her, his near violence making her shudder with carnal joy. He withdrew, then groaning low, his teeth gently nipping her arched throat, he drove with hard, demanding strokes into her blessed heat.

Her nails dug into the straining muscles of his back, marking him as hers alone, and he knew he would wear these scars with pride.

Into the still night their cries echoed, the cool mist blending with the sweat streaking their flesh. Then he stiffened. She moaned. He exploded and she dissolved. Their cries became one . . .

* * *

Miles apart and in separate beds, Christina and Varek cried out in the night, both gasping as they sprang up in bed, cold slashing across their sweat-slicked bodies. Disoriented, they looked about, unconsciously reaching out, seeking their other half. But their arms dropped empty to the beds. When they fell back onto the damp, cold bedding they both stared out their windows, watching in lonely vigil the setting of another mocking moon.

One wondered if her dreams could ever possibly come true again.
The other knew it was only a matter of time.

Eleven

Varek was nowhere to be seen in the next weeks. However, out of sight was not out of mind for Christina. She was tempted to call on him and check on his progress, but she didn't dare. Sergei had informed her that Varek was well on his way to a full recovery, and that other than praying, he stayed in bed and listened to the doctors. She concentrated on putting him from her thoughts. She spent what few idle hours she had convincing herself that her life was better without him — and trying to soothe Robert's ruffled insecurities. It was easy to use her position as a hostess of the British suite as an excuse to avoid Robert most of the time. Luckily, she worked well with Lady Castlereagh, joining her when she gave teas and dinners. Several times she escorted the viscountess about Vienna, though most afternoons Lord Castlereagh made time to escort her himself.

Her attendance in the planning of the Carrousel was almost demanded of her now. This, however, was difficult at the best of times, as the European aristocracy, having no love of the stiff-necked English, preferred to treat her as if she was still the Archduchess of Austenburg. Of course, the snobbish attitude of the people from her past fueled Robert's ire even further, acting as dry kindling on the fire smoldering between them.

Now it seemed she could do nothing right. He was always close by to scowl at her or offer her an unsolicited lecture. Even a harmless, flirtatious conversation with the obese King of Württemberg had been the catalyst to spark another argument between them later, when they were alone. She was beginning to realize it was not just Varek he resented — though perhaps his presence had triggered Robert's jealousy to a harsher degree — rather he resented any friend of hers who

he felt was a threat to her undivided attention. She was still shocked and confused at discovering the extent of her husband's lack of confidence in himself. There were times he was spiteful and petty, others when he was abjectly apologetic for his actions. Then he would do a complete turnabout and be her Robert of old, witty and charming. She never knew which mood she would find him in from one hour to the next. It was disconcerting and at times almost frightening.

At least she could count on Varek to be consistent through this taxing time. Even after he had rejoined the hectic schedule of the Congress several weeks later, he kept true to his word and kept his distance, though he was never far away. His brooding presence didn't bother her anymore, just as long as he kept his distance from her and Robert.

It was late one afternoon, dusk already descending, when she finally made her escape from a particularly long afternoon as the ladies of the committee bickered over the costumes to be worn at the Carrousel. Just as Sergei was assisting her into one of the carriages provided for the guests of the Congress, she heard her name called.

Turning, she spied a very old and dear friend walking toward her. Smiling warmly, she held out her hand to Prince Adam Czartoryski, who had always been a special friend of hers and Varek's. Over ten years ago the Polish nobleman had been held as a hostage in St. Petersburg, where he became best friends with the Russian heir, Alexander. At the Russian court he had also met the beautiful Grand Duchess Elizabeth, his best friend's wife. The two had fallen instantly and deeply in love. Their affair lasted three years under the nose of Alexander, who strangely turned his head the other way during their affair. However, when Elizabeth gave birth to a dark-haired, dark-eyed baby girl, the Emperor Paul could no longer sit back and watch his son be humiliated. Czartoryski had been exiled to Sardinia, even against the vehement protestations of his son. Sadly, the lovers' child had died a year later, leaving Elizabeth even more heart-broken.

Though Czartoryski had been recalled from exile by Alexander upon his father's death, and made him a foreign minister at his court, the two lovers had strangely enough never been reunited. Now the prince was out of favor again, this time with his long-time friend, the Czar Alexander. His chances of reuniting with the empress in Vienna during the Congress were as slim as ever.

As the prince took her hand and bent low over it, Christina noticed the gray in his dark hair. Since coming to Vienna and rediscovering so many of her friends of old, she was beginning to realize how much of her old life she really did miss. Many of these people had almost been like family to her, and she had to admit that it was good to see them again.

"Adam, how have you been? It's been too long, my friend."

"How have *you* been, Christina?" he asked, keeping hold of her hand, his kindly gaze searching her face.

Shaking her head, she laughed, as she looked him over. "My God, you rogue! You only grow more handsome with age."

"Now, aren't you sorry you turned me down?" he teased with a smile curving his sensuous lips.

"You know very well that if I had accepted you, I would have kicked you silly when you started to make eyes at the empress."

"If I'd had you, I would not have made eyes at the empress." Even as he jested with her she saw a deep sorrow cloud his dark eyes. The affair between those two had truly been one born of a deep love.

Tears tickled Christina's nose as she looked at Adam. It was sad to think that now they had more in common than ever before. "Have you seen the empress?"

He smiled ruefully at her, squeezing her hand before finally letting it go. "I dare not; Alexander has me watched constantly. I don't wish to bring his anger down upon her. She has enough sorrows to bear. It seems only the good are so cursed, eh?" He glanced at Sergei, standing a polite distance away. "I have heard Varek is in Vienna."

Not trusting her voice, she just nodded.

"That rough, is it?"

"That and more."

They looked at each other in sympathy, silently understanding and commiserating with each other's anguish. Suddenly, they both burst out laughing. "What a pair we make," he chuckled. "A most unlikely couple of lonely hearts."

"I am married again," Christina assured him hurriedly.

Adam glanced sharply at her, then whistled. "I can just imagine how Varek is taking that bit of news." Then mumbled under his breath, "The poor bastard."

Christina's brows rose in query. "Who? Varek?"

"Lord, no!" he laughed. "How could one ever apply a hint of pity to Varek? No, I mean the poor man who is your husband."

Christina stiffened, her manner cooling slightly. "What are you implying, Adam?"

His gaze was too candid as he confided, "I've been there, Christina. I know better than anyone what you are going through. How can the poor bastard win? You and Varek were born for each other. It was apparent to anyone who ever saw the two of you together. And what is killing you is that you know it, and no matter how faithful you will always remain to your husband, there still won't be a day in your life that you won't wish him in Hell and your one true love back in your arms."

She gasped, stepping back, feeling Sergei behind her. Anger and a sense of betrayal shivered along nerves already rubbed raw. "I thought you my friend, Adam?"

"I am, my dear. That is why I can tell you the brutal truth. Do you think there is not a day that goes by that I don't wish the same fate for the best friend I ever had — and all because I covet his wife?" His words were brutal and stark.

Yes, it was true. More and more she found herself wishing that she had never met Robert, had never been weak enough to marry him. If only she had been stronger . . .

Adam drew a gentle finger along Christina's flushed cheek before he stepped back and gave her a bow. Without another word, he turned about and sauntered off, idly swinging his cane as he walked. Most people who noticed this impeccably dressed gentleman would have thought he had not a care in the world.

Christina hurriedly stepped forward. "Adam."

He paused and looked back.

"Come and call on me. Please. It is so good to see you again, and there is still much we have to say to each other, years to share." Sergei took the card she held out and crossed the distance to deliver it. Adam smiled warmly as he accepted it and tucked it safely in his pocket. There were not many doors opened to him lately; Czar Alexander had seen to that.

"You know where my residence is," he called back. "The door will always be open to you when you need a sympathetic shoulder to cry on. Hell, I just may wet your cheek with a few of my own." He touched his cane to the brim of his hat in a jaunty salute before he disappeared into the crowd.

Christina stared after him, a frown creasing her brow. "Is true love always so doomed, Sergei?" she murmured, "And if so, then why do we bother?" Not really expecting an answer to her gloomy musings, she turned and climbed into the carriage.

* * *

The next day was too beautiful to be wasted indoors with another interminable afternoon of the usual squabbling between the ladies of the committee, so Christina begged Sergei to escort her out on an aimless afternoon of wandering through the menageries along the avenue Jaegerzeile. The weather was brisk and clear, and for the first time in a long while, Christina was able to relax. She even let Sergei tease her into a full-bellied laugh that had her gasping for air. It felt so good, she laughed again just for the sheer pleasure of it.

Together they paused to watch a couple of dwarfs on stage dancing with some puppets. Then, hearing the roar of a lion, their curiosity pulled them along. Christina turned toward Sergei, intending to point out some monkeys to her companion, when a head of golden hair caught her eye. She stopped short, staring, her breath caught in her throat.

Sergei, unaware of her preoccupation, had walked a few paces ahead of her before he realized she was no longer at his side. Looking back, he was startled at the ravaged expression on her pale face. Following the line of her vision, he spied Varek standing near the cage of a tiger. In his arms was the most beautiful little girl he had ever seen. She was the image of her majestic father. Quickly, he retraced his steps back to Christina's side.

As if he sensed her behind him, Varek turned and looked straight into Christina's eyes. The laughter on his face died slowly; then he gently set his daughter on her feet and led her over to them.

He bowed courteously to her and gave Sergei a brief nod. "Good morning, lark," he greeted her warmly, his voice low so only she could hear.

Christina couldn't seem to find her tongue. Her gaze was riveted on his daughter. *Oh, God, his daughter. The child she couldn't give him.* She didn't know what she felt. Her breathing was erratic, she had broken out in a cold sweat and the ground beneath her tilted. Varek's child by another woman. This beautiful little angel should have been *hers*.

Almost in a daze, she sank down onto her heels so she could look into the child's eyes. She was so like him! The brilliant ice-blue eyes, wide and unblinking, framed by an abundance of dark lashes. The bold, slashing brows, so much darker than her hair, frowned solemnly at her. Christina reached out to touch a fine textured curl that was still the white blond of childhood, but with age it would darken to the deep honey rich shades of her father's silken hair. Looking sideways, she saw her little hand engulfed in her father's gentle grasp.

Swallowing thickly, she gave the curious little girl a smile. "Hello. I'm Christina."

Crowding closer to her papa's leg, she poked her thumb into her mouth. Squatting down beside them, Varek gently tugged his daughter's thumb out of her rosebud mouth. It came out with a smacking pop. Christina didn't know whether to hug Varek, his child, or to run.

"Say 'Hello' to the pretty lady, Tina," Varek's low voice rumbled softly as he wiped the sticky thumb on his kerchief.

Dutifully, the child repeated, "Hello." Then she dipped a clumsy curtsey.

Tears prickled her eyes as Christina looked into Varek's intense gaze, which seemed to possess her completely. "Tina?" she whispered.

Slowly, he nodded. "Tina Marie." Christina's middle name was Marie. Christina's eyes slid closed to capture the tears she refused to let fall. *Oh, Varek, my dear love.* Even all those years ago he had been telling the world who was his child's mother in his heart.

Blinking rapidly, Christina again studied his daughter. Tina Marie. If Varek was her soul mate, did that make Tina Marie her soul daughter? She almost laughed at the sad absurdity of it. Her voice quavered as she said, "She's gorgeous, Varek. You must be so proud." When she again had control of herself, she dared to look at him.

Still watching her intently, Varek merely nodded, his penetrating gaze speaking a multitude of his feelings, none of which could be spoken out loud at that moment.

Taking a deep breath, she stood abruptly and stepped away from them. She had to get away. *Now!* Linking her arm with the silent Sergei, she smiled with false brightness down on them. "It was a pleasure meeting you, young lady. Be sure you tell your father to take you to see the puppet show." Then she literally dragged Sergei away as she did what she was best at — she ran.

Tina Marie popped her thumb back into her mouth, then tugged impatiently on her papa's arm to get his attention. But he wasn't looking at her; he was watching the pretty lady until she was out of sight. He looked sad again and she didn't like to see her papa look sad. Holding onto his cheeks, she pulled his face around to her. "You a'right, Papa?"

Varek looked at his littlest love and felt a sadness swamp him that almost unmanned him. Christina should be standing beside them, not running away. Covering his daughter's hands, he pulled them to his lips and kissed them. "Oh, Tina, hopefully one day we will all be all right."

Standing, he lifted his daughter into his arms and determinedly strode toward the puppet show.

* * *

"Are you all right?" Sergei asked, concerned, as his long-legged stride easily matched Christina hurried steps.

"No. Just keep walking."

"He named her after you."

"Shut up, Sergei," she snapped, her voice cracking. Her shoulders started to jerk, and Sergei quickly swept her behind a colonnade, offering her some privacy. Blindly, she turned into his arms and held on as if she expected a wave to sweep her away. "She should have been mine, Sergei! Why? *Why?*" Her body was shaking with tremors that had Sergei frightened. Ignoring the curious and frowning stares around him, he held her close enough for it to seep into her panic that she was not alone.

Looking back through the crowds, he caught a brief glimpse of Varek, with his daughter in his arms again. He cringed at the stark pain etched on his friend's usually impassive face.

Still trembling, Christina pushed out of his arms, and he was surprised to see her eyes dry. However, seeing the hard, brilliant cast to the glare she tossed about her, he much preferred the tears. He didn't like this stranger suddenly standing before him. Her body was as rigid as stone when she moved off, striding with hurried steps toward the British apartments.

Sergei looked once more toward Varek and saw him gone. He stood undecided for a long moment, not knowing whom to follow. Then, with a sigh, he took off after Christina. God, in the mood she

was in, she might charge across a street not caring what she walked out in front of.

Enough was enough. Tonight he was going to write to Edward. If the duke was intent on playing God, then he could sure as hell fix this mess he had instigated.

* * *

Two days after that heart-wrenching meeting with Varek's daughter, Christina's steps dragged as she let herself into the apartment, weary and heavy-hearted. She looked about the room as if in a daze, drawing off her gloves and bonnet. She was surprised to see a light on in the study and curious, as Robert was hardly ever in at this early hour, she walked into the cozy room.

Her feelings were mixed as she noticed his figure sprawled in the chair before the fire, engrossed in a letter. Stepping closer, her heart skipped a beat. The crest on the letterhead was Kerkston's. Edward had finally written. For months she had waited impatiently for word from home.

Tossing her apparel aside, her skirts rustled sharply in the quiet room as she moved eagerly forward to stand over Robert.

Startled, he jumped to his feet and blinked down into her radiantly smiling face. Not having received such a show of warmth from her in weeks, he offered her a hesitant smile in return, bending down to give her a kiss.

"We have finally heard from Edward?" were the first words out of her mouth, her gaze fixed almost hungrily on the letter in his hands. His smile died a swift death as he realized her buoyant good cheer had nothing to do with him. As usual. The letter fisted in a convulsive grasp as she reached for it. Perversely, he stepped away from her, holding it out of her reach.

Confused, she looked into Robert's eyes and warily stepped back from the scowl he bent upon her. Her hands came up to twist together at her waist. She was having a hard time biting off the anger she was beginning to feel. Not another argument. "Is something wrong?" she asked hesitantly, striving to keep her voice calm.

He offered her no reply as he stepped around her and headed for the door. She couldn't believe he was simply walking away from her.

"Robert!" she bit out sharply.

He paused in the doorway and turned partially toward her without looking at her. Again he said nothing.

Taking a deep breath to tamp down her anger and confusion, she waved weakly at the letter. "How is Eddie . . ."

"Fine!" he grated out, turning to fling a sidelong scowl at her. "He's just fine! How about asking how my day was?" With that dearth of information he left her alone staring in turmoil about the empty room. In the distance she heard the slamming of a door and the rage that swamped her had her trembling.

From head to toe, her body shook. She was truly and totally enraged — and it felt cleansing. Striding over to the door, she did her own share of venting, and slammed the door so hard that the lintel cracked. With a strained smile, she inspected the damage. *Not good enough.*

Looking around she spotted the new mechanical music box he had just purchased and was so proud of. He had a passion for mechanical knick-knacks.

Very well. If he was going to act like a spoiled child, it was only fair she should be accorded the same privilege. Picking up the ugly box, she started to heft it at the abused portal, and then paused abruptly, the aborted toss throwing her off balance. Biting her lip, she weighed the substantial bulk in her hand, considering the damage it would cause. After all, the door and its delicate woodwork was not hers to destroy.

A decision made, she stepped quickly to the window and, sliding it open, she casually tossed the expensive box out. She smiled smugly as she heard it shatter with a delightful tinkling of debris. However, she frowned quickly enough as a muffled curse exploded up toward her. Leaning out, she apologized abjectly to the disgruntled pedestrian and then surveyed her handiwork. Sighing with contented goodwill, she gazed about the beautiful plaza. Venting her anger felt good. She should do it more often, she decided as she stepped back into the study.

Closing the window with a snap, she dusted off her hands briskly and went to her room to change for dinner.

* * *

The next morning when Christina sat down at her dressing table she noticed the letter from Edward propped against the mirror with a rose.

She couldn't help the spurt of guilty anger she felt toward Robert. Why hadn't he just given it to her yesterday?

Refusing to brood over Robert's twisted reasons for both the argument last night and his apology this morning, she hurriedly opened the letter and searched first for any reference to her little son. Soon she was laughing and wishing more than ever that she was back home.

Twelve

Lord and Lady Castlereagh bumped another chair as they executed a rather untidy turn. Their feet tangled and the lady was thrown off balance, almost falling to her knees. With curses aplenty, they paused, straightened themselves and then with dignified hauteur gamely tried again. Castlereagh's secretary, Peterson, sat oblivious at the pianoforte and banged out an inferior rendition of a waltz. He knew better than to pause, so on he continued, wisely ignorant of his superior's ungainly progress around the dance floor.

Every other day, or when their hectic schedules allowed, the Castle-reaghs met here and tried to teach themselves the intimidating steps of the Viennese waltz. So far they weren't doing very well. But they did try, saving themselves the embarrassment of the eyes of the snobbish European elite.

Seeing a bit of color out of the corner of his eye, Castlereagh stumbled to a halt, catching hold of his wife, whom he had just thrown off balance. The music tinkled off into silence. Together the Castlereaghs stared a bit self-consciously at the appearance of Lady Basingstoke in the doorway.

Smiling at the odd couple, Christina moved farther into the room. She liked the Castlereaghs. The viscountess at times was testy and difficult to deal with, but it was a fault that could be overlooked, for the devotion the two showed each other was so obvious. Castlereagh was handsome and elegant enough to be a rogue of the first water, but he truly loved his dowdy, overweight wife. It rather gave one an optimism that love really did exist for everyone and not just the beautiful.

Looking between the foreign secretary, his wife and the shy little man, who was now standing beside the pianoforte bowing, she teased lightly, "Do you require any help?"

The Castlereaghs both drew up and stared warily at her. They were accustomed to being laughed at.

Even though she was not invited to join them, Christina stepped briskly over to the pianoforte, pulling off her gloves as she crossed the shining parquet tiles. Her steps echoed loudly in the large, empty ballroom, which at that moment was silent as a tomb. After tossing aside her gloves and reticule, she reached up and untied the bow of her bonnet. With typical feminine pats to her hair, she turned around and explained as she walked over to them, "The Viennese waltz must be felt, not counted out. Herr Beethoven has gifted us with a banquet for the ears, and therefore we must savor it and applaud it with the grace of our bodies." She cocked a humorous brow at them. "Sound pretentious enough?"

Castlereagh's lips quirked with a wry twitch as he continued to try to stare solemnly at her. "Quite. But how does one get the feet to relate such homage when the grace is lacking?"

Christina held up a finger in admonition. "Not so, my lord. If you will allow me?"

So saying, she stepped up to Lady Castlereagh and, taking her hands, she drew her farther into the middle of the room, safely away from all impediments. The viscountess sent a look of confusion over her shoulder at her husband as Christina arranged her partner into the classic waltzing stance.

With a slight nod of her head, Christina motioned to the secretary, and the brisk strains of a waltz wavered bravely in the silence. Christina frowned lightly at the timid man, and he instantly slowed the tempo down. Then down some more, until she smiled. His shoulders heaved with a sigh of relief, and he applied all his attention to his task.

Looking at her partner, she asked softly, "Ready?"

Almost immediately Lady Castlereagh stepped forward, right on Christina's lightly shod foot. "Forgive me," the flustered lady mumbled.

Wriggling her toes, Christina smiled warmly and said, "First, my lady, you must relax. You need to feel the music, find the tempo. Close your eyes." The hazel eyes snapped shut. "Now listen to the strains. Catch the rhythm." Christina watched as the viscountess's features twisted with the effort of feeling the rhythm. Biting her lip to hold back a chuckle, Christina carefully began the steps of the waltz, starting

slowly and gently, just back and forth. When she sensed the tension dissolving in the rigid arms, she carefully began to turn her. The lady's eyes snapped open in fear. "No, no. Keep them shut. Just feel the music. I will lead you. Trust me."

As Lady Basingstoke patiently led his wife about the floor, Castle-reagh watched in amazement as the clumsiness in his wife's steps melted away. Soon the couple was floating with a semblance of grace about the room. After long minutes of faultless spins they came to a graceful stop before him. He gulped in apprehension as Christina held out her arms to him.

"Come now, my lord. 'Tis your turn."

He turned embarrassed eyes on his flushed wife and found her smiling widely at him. Her pride in this simple accomplishment was quite apparent. "Oh, do go on, Robert. 'Tis ridiculously easy."

With a sigh, he stepped forward and bowed, then almost awkwardly held out his arms. Christina stepped nimbly into them and after a minute of reserved fumbling, Castlereagh was ready. With another nod of Christina's head, the music again filled the room.

"Close your eyes," she instructed softly, sensitive to this man's introverted personality. After a slight hesitation he complied.

Castlereagh had a quiet shyness about him that Christina admired, though never had she mistaken this for a chink in his armor for there was no one as forceful as this reserved man when he was fighting for something he believed in. He did not always do things correctly, but he always strove to do what he truly felt was right with a grace of nobility that most men ended up admiring. Because of his popularity with the common man, he had risen quickly through the ranks in the House of Commons to the position he now held. He was a common man who had rightly earned himself the title of viscount in appreciation of his dedicated service to the Crown. Though loyal to England, it was well known he was happiest when in his beloved Ireland, away from the political machinations that were a constant source of the deep depressions that hounded him.

Christina slowly circled the gleaming floor in the arms of Castle-reagh until soon they were sailing gracefully about the room, the music picking up the tempo as they spun about faster, then faster still. Soon they were laughing aloud with his wife's accolades ringing out joyously, tempting them on to an even faster pace.

Finally winded and about to collapse, Christina begged off and sank into a nearby chair. Then she watched as the Castlereaghs were spinning about, laughing together in their newfound achievement. Christina smiled as she unobtrusively made her way to the pianoforte to collect her things. She held a finger to her lips and gave the secretary a wink before she slipped from the room, peeking at the clock as she went. She was surprised to see that almost two hours had passed.

After another quarter of an hour, even the triumphant Castlereaghs were exhausted. Disappointed to see that Christina had left them, they retired to the study for a much deserved cup of tea. As she bent over to pour herself a second cup, Emily informed her husband abruptly, "You are shortly going to have a political mishap on your hands if you don't do something quickly."

With a sigh, Castlereagh set his cup down. It had to be Basingstoke again, he was sure. "What now?"

"The hostesses of the Carrousel are going to insist that Christina join them on the dais. The archduke is to be among the knights competing."

"Christ," he muttered, rubbing his eyes. This was all he needed. Basingstoke would never sit still under such an insult to himself. He had already challenged the archduke to one duel, and possibly caused personal harm to the emperor's cousin. He closed his eyes in horror as he imagined the contretemps that could ensue at the upcoming event. In Basingstoke's frame of mind it was doubtful he would take this newest slight like a gentleman. "She should know better than to agree."

"She has refused them repeatedly. But you know better than any, you don't deny those Medusas anything. As we speak her costume is being sewn without her knowledge. She isn't going to be given a choice. And what is she supposed to do? Snub the royal biddies when so much hangs in the balance? She is being paired with the archduke and there is nothing anyone can do about it but go along."

"And what am I supposed to do with Basingstoke?" he asked almost scathingly. "He is her husband, after all."

"Get rid of him. Aren't there papers you need to send to Wellington in Paris? Send him. He is well acquainted with the duke. He was his aide for a number of years. No one would think it strange to send Basingstoke."

Castlereagh stared thoughtfully into the fire. "Actually, that is a good idea. I was wondering who to send."

"Well, do it fast. The Carrousel is the day after tomorrow."

With a little smile teasing his lips, he bowed his head solemnly. "Yes, my love. Your every wish is my command."

His teasing words earned him a hearty snort as she leaned over to pick up her cup again. Once more she had averted a catastrophe. What would he do without her? she wondered with self-righteous despair as she swallowed the last of her tea.

"Peterson," the viscount called out.

The timid maestro of the pianoforte appeared immediately in the partially closed door. "Yes, my lord?" He bowed low.

"Send for Basingstoke. I need to speak with him posthaste."

"Yes, my lord." With another bow he was gone.

"That man irritates me with all his scraping," the viscountess muttered ungraciously.

"I wish Basingstoke would do half as much scraping; then I wouldn't have these problems."

"Christina belongs with the archduke, you realize."

Castlereagh looked at his wife in amazement. "What would you have me do, Emily? Kill Basingstoke?" Though it would solve everyone's problems quite tidily, Castlereagh thought with macabre humor.

The lady pondered that for a moment, picturing Christina and the archduke together, as they should be. "No, of course not. Still, it is a shame."

With the childish way Basingstoke was behaving, Castlereagh silently concurred. Christina deserved better. She deserved the archduke, just as all of Vienna believed.

What a coil. Mayhap a long trip would blow the cobwebs from Basingstoke's stubborn brain.

* * *

Christina had waited for what seemed like hours when she finally saw them. Moving deeper into the shadows, she watched Varek and his daughter, the expression in her eyes almost hungry when she watched the golden little girl. Heavens, she was so like Varek. It caused a cramping ache in her stomach as she observed the affection between the two. Never had she been blessed to see this side of Varek. His every attention was lavished on the inquisitive child. It was strange to see this

magnificent, virile man among the predominantly feminine pedestrians who wandered the *prater* at this time of the afternoon — and of those, it was mostly nurses and governesses tending their charges. The archduke seemed oddly at home in this female domain. She watched with a jealous heart as he laughed easily with one flustered nurse while grabbing hold of a fleeing malcontent, then handing over the squalling child with an ease that amazed Christina even as it brought tears to her eyes. She had missed so much with this man she loved.

And what she was doing here, spying on him and his daughter, she had no idea. All she was accomplishing was subjecting herself to torturous hours of daydreaming, yet she couldn't seem to stay away. Every afternoon she came here hoping to catch a glimpse of them as they made their way through the menageries and every afternoon he brought his daughter to the *prater* himself. So every day she put herself through this same agony. It was pathetic! She should be elsewhere, attending to her duties, or in the apartment writing to Eddie. Or . . . something. Anything but this senseless need to watch Varek and wasting time on idiotic fantasies that could never come true.

Turning away, she headed toward the gate, desperate to put some distance between herself and her obsession.

"Christina!" She heard his voice call out to her.

Caught off guard, she stumbled to a halt, then groaned, realizing too late that she should have just kept going. Slowly, she turned about, a weak smile pulling at her tense lips. "Hello, Varek."

Her breath hitched as he strode up to her, his bronzed features split in a wide grin, the sun glinting off his golden mane. He was too beautiful to be real. And the sun shone with equal brilliance upon his golden daughter. She closed her eyes in defeat and sighed.

"Lark, what are you doing here?" He unconsciously pulled his daughter's thumb out of her mouth as his gaze swept with a hungry intensity over her.

Not being able to catch her breath, Christina shrugged helplessly.

"We were on our way to the menagerie. Tina loves the animals. Won't you join us?" His painfully blue eyes beseeched her.

Swallowing, she cast a yearning glance at the *prater's* gate and her escape. Then she heard a little voice chime in commandingly, "Come!"

Looking back, Christina saw Tina holding a grubby hand out to her. Varek and his daughter, with an almost united calculation, were charm-

ing her into doing exactly what they wanted. Looking into those identical sets of brilliant eyes, how could she win? As she castigated herself for being seven kinds of a fool, she relented.

With a triumphant laugh, Varek held out his arm and waited patiently until Christina stepped forward to take it. Together the threesome wandered down the immaculate walkway. In the distance came the roar of one of the big cats, and Tina, straining in her father's arms, clapped delightedly. After a few more minutes of wrestling with her, Varek finally leaned down and placed her on impatient feet. Like the doting father he was, he yanked her petticoats into order, all the while admonishing her to stay close. Looking far ahead, the little head bobbed her understanding and then as soon as he let go of her, she shot forward like an arrow from a crossbow. With an exasperated oath, Varek took off after the little rabbit, leaving Christina laughing in his wake. He was barely able to grab hold of her skirt before she ran between an organ grinder and his monkey.

Still laughing, Christina caught up with them, watching as the disgruntled father swept his errant daughter back up into his arms. "Well, I can see who rules this family," she teased as she retied a straggling bow under Tina's chin.

Varek flinched comically. "Don't humor her. She's a hellion as it is. She just won't listen to me."

"Why should she? She has you exactly where she wants you — wrapped around her little finger."

His bold eyes raked her thoroughly as he gave her a wicked smile. "Both my loves have always been able to wrap me around their little fingers. I confess. Does that make me less of a man?"

Her smile died under the searing intensity of his regard. Varek could never be mistaken for less of a man. It would be likening the mighty Alps to hillocks. Drawing a deep breath, she almost choked when she saw his heated gaze drop to her breasts. Raising his wistful gaze to the safety of her face, he gifted her with a slow, knowing smile before turning back to his restless daughter. Surprisingly, they both found her staring at Christina with the unflinching regard of an impetuous child who knows she owns the world.

"Are you a lark?" she demanded curiously.

Varek and Christina looked at each other, bemused. It was obvious the child had a precocious mind, along with a memory like a steel

trap. Wetting her lips, Christina offered hesitantly, "I . . . actually, it is . . . your father . . ." Her words faded away awkwardly. In truth, when she thought of it, she didn't know why Varek had ever started calling her lark. It had been so long ago that it was just like another name, though Varek's alone. Curious herself, she looked at Varek. "Why did you start calling me lark?"

A tender smile softened his lips as he looked so deeply into her eyes that he was looking back twenty years. "When you were no bigger than Tina, you would follow me around while humming little off-key melodies. I could never place them, so one day I asked you what you were humming, and you said you were singing songs that the larks in the meadows had taught you. From then on, you were my lark."

The world seemed to fade away as they stared at each other. In a daze she watched as his lips came closer, then so close she could feel his sigh. Just as she was closing her eyes Tina giggled. "That is so silly, Papa! Birds don't teach people to sing."

Varek and Christina blinked at each other as if they had just woken from a deep sleep.

Varek turned to his daughter with a strained smile. "They do to very special people, love."

"Then why don't they sing to me?" she demanded petulantly, giving Christina an accusing glance.

Christina looked surprised. "But they do, Tina. You are just too busy running to listen. In order to hear them you must walk slowly, demurely. Then you'll hear them."

Tina frowned while she took in the simple explanation. Then she pushed against her father, demanding to be let down. Raising a skeptical brow, Varek again placed her beside him, tensed for anything. After Tina walked forward a few paces slowly, she turned and gave Christina an accusing pout. "I don't hear anything!"

Christina held out her hand, and after a long moment, Tina placed hers into it. Together they strolled slowly over to an ancient oak. Varek watched in silence as his two ladies walked away. He saw Christina bend down and say something to Tina, who was intently looking up into the tree. Suddenly, her face lit up, and she gave a little jump. "I heard 'em!" Varek heard her in the distance. Together they demurely walked back to him, and all the while Tina was humming.

Varek knew he would remember this moment for the rest of his life.

"I heard them, Papa, just like she said I would. All I have to do is walk slow!"

Varek gave Christina an easy grin. "You are amazing. How did you do that?"

Christina gave a humble shrug as she grinned back. "If you want a child to do something, you have to give them a reason they can understand."

"How did you ever learn that?"

She gave him a quirky grimace. "I raised you, didn't I?"

Throwing back his head, Varek's laughter rang out, long and joyfully.

* * *

Christina sat at her desk and pondered the letter she was writing to Eddie. She smiled as she thought of her afternoon in the park and was just starting to tell him about Tina when she heard Robert enter the apartment. Setting down her quill, she closed the inkwell and followed the sound of Robert's movements into the room he had taken up as his bedroom. She was surprised to see him packing his clothes into a small portmanteau.

"Robert, what are you doing?"

He looked up and contemplated her cool demeanor. She didn't appear upset that he was leaving. Leaning down, he picked up a shirt and stuffed it into the bag. "Castlereagh is sending me to Paris."

"Why?"

He paused and gave her a searching look. "You tell me, Christina."

Knowing he was in his typical belligerent mood of late, she bristled slightly at his tone of voice. Again he was accusing her of something she had nothing to do with. "I have no idea why you are leaving. I wouldn't bother asking you if I did."

Her sarcastic retort was not missed by Robert. Stepping around the bed, he pushed past her to grab up his toiletries.

Biting down on her anger, she moved over to help him, straightening out the mess he had made of the articles already shoved into the bag. "Why are we constantly barking at each other, Robert? I don't want this animosity between us, and there really is no reason for it."

He pushed her hands aside and moved the bag out of her reach. Frustrated, she stared at his back. Years ago she had allowed herself to

trust this man enough to marry him. Now she was beginning to wish she had never met him. She didn't know this man, and she certainly would never have married him. Is this what the rest of their life together would be like?

Suddenly years and years of putting up with these tantrums stretched out before her and she grew cold. And there was nothing she could do about it.

Without another word she turned away and was walking out of the room when he asked, "Tell me you had nothing to do with my being sent away."

She turned to face him and looked him straight in the eye. "I had nothing to do with your leaving. I was looking forward to sharing the Carrousel with you. Now I will be going alone."

He scoffed, "You will hardly be alone."

Her soft brown eyes met his sadly. "You know what I mean."

Before he was even aware of what he was doing, he had moved toward her and caught her up in his arms. He crushed her to him with an angry possessiveness as he breathed in her scent. His need of her — of what they had shared before this wretched assignment — was a constant source of agony to him. "God, Christina. What is happening to us? Tell me you love me. Only me. Tell me in a way that will let me believe you."

How was she supposed to do that? Nothing she had tried in the past weeks had seemed to convince him. Did he want to be assured in bed? Her gaze flitted to the bed and she closed her eyes. God help her, she didn't want to. A fever of guilt flushed her cheeks as she leaned back to look up into the tortured light glittering in his eyes. Her heart seemed to freeze as she said quietly, "Whatever you need, Robert. You know I'll do anything for you."

His lips crushed hers, his tongue surging almost ruthlessly into her mouth. Her arms felt deadened as she raised them and encircled his neck. With a sob, he picked her up and strode over to the bed. After laying her down on the cold counterpane he pushed the port-manteau to the floor, where it spilled out its contents. Christina watched numbly as he quickly stripped off his clothes, his eyes fierce and unflinching as he watched her. When he came down hard upon her, she flinched. It was minor and she thought undetectable, but he was too attuned to her slightest move. With a curse he surged

up and sat back on his heels, his breath bellowing in his chest with harsh gasps.

His glare condemned her as he wordlessly searched her face for some clue as to what she was hiding from him. "Is it now such a trial to lie with me?" he finally asked with bitter sorrow. "Now that you have seen your own true love again?"

She closed her eyes to hide her anger. "Robert, I don't want to fight. I don't want to be flailed with your jealousy. Not tonight. Please."

Robert moved to sit on the side of the bed, his shoulders slumped. "Never have you flinched from me, Christina." His voice sounded choked, as if he was holding back tears.

Sitting up behind him, her arms encircled him and she laid her cheek against his back. "Please, Robert, come back to bed. I'll make it good for you."

Twisting around, he stared darkly at her. "You don't understand, do you, Christina? I don't want you to 'make it good for me.' I can get that from any woman looking for a coin. I want your love to ease me. I want what you gave me so effortlessly at Kerkmoor." He saw her look away. "But it can never be like that again, can it? Tell me what you want, Christina." The words almost strangled him, his heart pounding as he waited in dread for her request to fall across him like an executioner's ax.

"I want to go back to England with you, Robert. When we get back to Kerkmoor where we belong, everything will be as it was."

They both knew it was wishful dreaming, but blindly they clung to this last hope. With a sigh he laid back down. When she curled up beside him, her cheek resting on his chest, and her hand absently sifting through the hairs on his chest, he was almost content. Maybe she was right. All they needed was Kerkmoor. The bloody Congress couldn't last forever. And once the archduke was out of her sight, she would forget him. After all, she had before . . . hadn't she?

* * *

Sometime in the late morning hours, Christina stirred and came to groggy awareness in Robert's bedroom. With a start she looked around the room, noticing the portmanteau and its scattered contents gone. He had left without a word. He hadn't even told her how long he would be in Paris.

The sad thing was that she didn't know if she was relieved or not. Time without Robert scowling at her, and with Varek behaving himself she suddenly felt free. It seemed too delicious to contemplate.

With a sigh, she fell back on the bed and dropped into a deep, dreamless sleep. She didn't even awaken late the next morning when a large package was delivered to their rooms.

But later that morning as she ripped the tissue off the mysterious package she gasped in wonder and dread. A shimmering silver and black creation was folded lovingly into the delicate tissue. She knew instantly what the gown meant. It was one of the costumes of the quartet of the 'Queens of Love and Beauty' who were to be honored at the Carrousel.

It all made sense now. No doubt Varek would be one of the twenty-four knights giving homage to their Queens of Love. Obviously Castlereagh had known what was coming and, wanting to circumvent a political crisis, he had sent Robert away.

It was just as well; as a British subject in service during the Congress, she did not have the choice of refusing. Castlereagh would never countenance it. God help her when Robert returned and heard all about this fiasco in gruesome detail.

Anger swept her the more she thought about it. Had Varek arranged this? Had he gone back on his promise?

Shoving the lid back on the box, Christina stormed into her room to bathe and dress, unfairly venting some of her irritation on her hapless maid. She was just going to have to pay the archduke a visit and give him a piece of her mind!

Then, with an abrupt turnabout, she ran back into the salon and grabbed up the box, taking it into her bedroom. With the shifting emotions of a typically hysterical woman, she fretted about the delicate material. She watched carefully as the maid hung up the gorgeous creation.

Then, sinking into the tub, she grabbed her head and moaned, certain that before this damn Congress was over she would surely lose her mind!

* * *

Varek was sitting down to lunch when Christina stormed into his residence. The smile froze on his face as he stood slowly. Concern etched his features as he came hurriedly toward her.

Side-stepping his arms, she turned to glare at him. "I will not have it, Varek!"

Confused, he stared at her. "What?"

"Your interference with the Carrousel," she spat out.

"I beg your pardon?"

Growing angrier by the minute at his obtuseness, she had to count to ten before she answered with precise intonation, "Yes, you should be begging my pardon! It was you who pushed for me to be on the dais."

Shaking his head, he squinted at her, even more confused than before. "What?"

Stamping her foot, she shouted, "Stop that! You sound like Tina."

Rubbing his face, he returned to his chair and poured himself a strong cup of coffee. "I have no idea what you are ranting about, Christina."

His bewildered expression gave her pause. Wetting dry lips, she asked slowly, "Didn't you arrange to have me sit as one of the Queens of Love?"

Fighting a smile at her discomposure, he shook his head. "No, love, I didn't. I gave you my word I would not seek you out for the rest of this month."

Embarrassed to the tips of her toes, she just wanted to hurry out of his sight. Avoiding his eyes, she backed up toward the door. "I'm sorry I interrupted your supper, Varek."

Not wanting her to get away, he surged to his feet again and followed her retreating form. "Would you like to accompany Tina and me to the menagerie?"

"Umm . . . no. Thank you." Desperately she felt behind her for the door, all the while keeping her eye on him. She was afraid to let him get too close. She felt like too much of a fool at the moment. A conceited fool, at that!

He stopped pursuing her across the room. It seemed to have the opposite effect of what he wanted. "Well, then." He stared uncertainly at her.

"Yes, well then," she murmured, as lost for words as he. Suddenly she murmured, "You cannot possibly be recovered from your injuries enough to participate." She searched his face and noticed that the scar above his eye was healing nicely. It would hardly be noticeable with time.

He gave her a reassuring smile. "I am fine, lark. Trust me."

Looking down, she whispered, "I do." Then she flashed him a grin that didn't quite reach her eyes. "You are not all that young anymore, you know, and doubtless your tilting against those young blades will land you flat on your stubborn arse."

"I always did treasure your confidence in my abilities," he teased back with a rueful grin of his own.

Their gazes met again and silence settled between them. When the tension became too much, she mumbled a swift farewell and bolted from the room.

Muttering an oath and slapping his napkin against his leg, Varek walked back to his chair. However, he had lost his appetite and stood staring grimly down at the now cold fare.

Of course, he knew she was to be his Queen of Love at the Carrousel, though he had nothing to do with the arrangement. He wouldn't have agreed to joining in the festivities otherwise, for despite what he had said, he shuddered at the thought of meeting a lance head-on. But the thought of claiming Christina as his love for a day had been tempting in the extreme. What was a little pain compared to that?

Rubbing his stomach, he wondered whom he had to thank for this bit of manipulation. No doubt Francis's beautiful empress, bless her heart.

Tomorrow, in front of all Europe, Christina would be his again.

Thirteen

The brisk November morning was sharply brilliant with a crispness that hurt the eye and seared the lungs. Already the streets had been cordoned off and the Vienna police were out in full force, controlling the crowds that last night had begun to congregate in large numbers around the Imperial Riding School where the long-awaited Carrousel was to be held. The vast building would hold approximately twelve hundred people, but tickets to the event were being forged and sold at exorbitant prices. Baron Hager had his hands full today and the pageant wouldn't even begin until later that evening.

Christina stared glumly at the extravagant garment spread out on her bed, the morning sunbeams sparkling and dancing across the hundreds of precious stones set in the heavy silver embroidery stiffening the thick silk of the bodice. Beside her, Laure Metternich consoled her. "It is truly magnificent. The ladies have excelled beyond expectations with the design."

Christina shook her head with a dejected air as she bit her lip. "Their little game is going to cost me dearly, Laure. When Robert returns and hears what happened this night I will be the one to pay."

Laure walked away from the bed and went to stare out the window. "I hardly recognize him anymore as the charming man you introduced me to last month," she murmured with a deferential sideways glance at her friend.

Christina's lips twisted bitterly. "Lud, Laure, I don't know him anymore myself and I'm married to the man."

Laure turned to face her. "You could always divorce him, you know."

Christina stared hard at her. "And lose Eddie? Never."

"Do you love him?"

Christina picked idly at the sparkling threads along the hem. "Who?" Laure shrugged. "Varek. Robert. Either? Both?"

Either — both. God, what a mess her life had become. Varek? Yes, definitely, completely, madly. Robert? There was a time she would have responded, without a second thought, that she loved her husband. But had she been confusing gratitude for love? Robert had brought her to his home, and at Kerkmoor she had found shelter and security. And a precious miracle — her son.

Turning away from the bed, Christina wandered over to her dressing table and sank slowly down on the bench. "I'm afraid I don't know anything anymore, Laure. I'm too frightened to think. It seems that now no matter what I say or do to Robert I cause him ire. All I want to do is go home to Eddie, and I am refused even that simple request." With a sigh she cupped her chin in her hands and stared back at her face in the mirror. "God Laure, what am I going to do? What can I do?"

She felt Laure's cool hands on her shoulders before she lifted her eyes and stared at her friend's sympathetic gaze reflected in the mirror. Her friend's hands soothed the stressed muscles in her neck, and with a sigh Christina leaned back against the comfort Laure offered.

Laure's quiet voice soothed her, just as her gentle touch did. "My dear, does it sound contemptuous of ourselves to say that it is our lot in life to suffer the pangs of our husbands' vanities? We are wed at an early age, seldom with any say in the matter. We are expected to bed and give succor to them, to love them and forgive them. Then we are expected to bring into this life their heirs, whom we raise and teach, only to send them out into the world for the cycle to renew itself. We are asked to endure all hardships and then are given no appreciation for our sacrifices because the very men who create them ascertain them as no true trial."

"I almost envy those brazen creatures who selfishly grasp what they want from life and then are not afraid to mock the very men who have raised them high, throwing their weaknesses back into their faces. In the end, it all comes down to survival, and how one comports oneself during that long and twisting journey of life. And if, after it is all over, if a woman is able to look herself in the eye and feel justified with the choices she has made, then she can only count herself a better woman for it."

Christina felt Laure's motherly hands soothe back her heavy hair, her touch cool on her aching temples.

"You must do what is in your heart, Christina. If that means staying with Robert because you have given yourself no other choice, then it is the right decision. Your honor is of the highest. It is what makes you special. It is one of the reasons Varek loves you with a ferocity that is so inspiring. You will do what you must, and ultimately, you will have the strength to live content with the course you set for yourself."

"What you say speaks to my mind, but what of my heart, Laure? What if my heart beats to another dream?"

"The heart is not always right, Christina. The heart can be selfish and fickle and even unworthy. Is it your heart alone that speaks to Varek?"

Lowering her gaze, Christina shook her head. She only wished it were.

"Then, my friend, you have a problem." With a rustle of cloth, Laure bent down and kissed Christina's cheek. "I must be away; so much to do before this evening. I shall call for you by around six, I think. Getting through the crowds will take some time, and we will need every minute if we are to get you into your place of honor."

Her friend's gentle teasing brought no reciprocating light into Christina's somber eyes. Giving her friend a smile, the Princess Metternich moved toward the door.

Suddenly, Christina swiveled about. "Laure . . ." She watched her friend pause and look back at her. "Are you content in your love?"

"Whoever said love meant contentment, Christina?" Laure's gaze was a wealth of weariness as she returned Christina's. Christina looked away, and after a brief pause she heard the door open and then close quietly.

Nor is contentment love.

Christina felt a shiver run along her arms, and unconsciously she hugged herself. With a shake of her head, she cleared her mind of these confusing thoughts. Today, she had other worries, for tonight, in front of all of Vienna, she was to be paired off with Varek. It would be as if the last six years had never happened — as if she still had the right to be at Varek's side. Tonight would be like a dream come true.

But the last six years had happened — and she must never let herself forget that.

* * *

With an exasperated huff, Christina tried in vain to blow the gauzy silk off her lips. She couldn't see too clearly through the veil that covered her splendid person from the top of her silver headpiece to her shimmering hem, as did the veils of the other Queens of Love. She would like to know who was responsible for this silly bit of artifice. If she didn't get some fresh air any time soon they would have to pick her up off the floor.

The noise of over a thousand voices swelled and shifted about the hall with a deafening roar that hurt her ears. And the air — what air there was — was thick and redolent of unwashed bodies, heavy perfume and the tang of excited horseflesh. In addition, the thousands of candles that lit the hall to the brilliance of daylight cast off another source of heat: the smoke casting a pall over the glittering scene spread before them. All of this — and even before the games had commenced — contributed to Christina's feeling of ill will. A headache pounded behind her eyes, exacerbated by the heavy diadem pinching her temples. She didn't want to be here, and yet at the same time she couldn't wait to see Varek, resplendent in his costume.

She had seen him only briefly earlier, as she had entered the rear of the hall to be met by the other giggling, excited ladies. One moment she was standing alone, looking around for the other five women who would make up her quadrille, and then she turned and bumped into his broad chest. He had smiled down on her, his eyes speaking of forbidden thoughts, shared by the them both.

Aware of the audience around them, silent and avidly watching their every move, Varek had sketched her a slight bow as he murmured low, his brow quirked in amusement, "Good evening, Lady Basingstoke. I have come to take possession of my token." His voice was seductive and husky, and she shivered as if the languid words stroked her suddenly feverish skin. Varek's heated gaze caressed the vulnerable tops of her breasts, lifted painfully high in the tortuous bodice. Seeing her bounteous beauty on such display, he frowned slightly, then forced his attention back to her flushed face.

Christina felt her shoulder rudely nudged. Looking around, she found Dorothea, Countess de Perigord, Tallyrand's niece, standing

beside her, also dressed in the black and silver of her quadrille. Leaning over, Dorothea hissed in her ear, "The sash, Christina."

Blinking, she looked down at her hands and was almost surprised to find the black and silver waterfall of shimmering silk clutched in her shaking hands. Embroidered on one end was the image of a delicate silver lark, its emerald eye winking at her. Embarrassed at the attention directed at them, Christina thrust out the token and waited impatiently for Varek to take it.

With a slow, wicked smile, Varek raised his hand and his fingers closed about the silk, at the same time trapping her fingers in his firm clasp. "Thank you, my lady," he murmured as he bent over and laid warm lips on her inner wrist.

She gasped as his tongue slowly stroked along the rapid pulse beneath her skin. Feeling as if she was about to melt into a puddle of singed butter, she snatched her hand away, leaving the silk fluttering in his fist. Holding her gaze with shameless audacity, he raised the token to his lips. She watched as those warm lips caressed the silver lark. She shivered. Raising her eyes, she was again snagged by his sensuous smile, lost to all sense of time and place. After he wrapped her token about his neck, he turned to leave and a cold fear gripped her heart.

Before she could stop herself she called out softly, "Varek."

He paused to look back at her, and so did every person within earshot. Ignoring their curious attention, she stared into his incredibly blue eyes. There was so much she wanted to say to him. But she couldn't — and the vulgar display of curiosity around them had nothing to do with her hesitation. Finally she gave him a weak smile. "Please be careful. For me."

A molten flame flared to life in the warm regard of his gaze and for a moment suspended in time, they were alone, the buzz of voices and the heated bodies far away. For one wonderful moment a tender smile softened his hard lips; then he had the impudence to give her a slow, wicked wink before strolling casually away.

The ladies around her immediately broke into titters and whispered exclamations, all the while their envious eyes traveled from her flushed face to the broad back of the archduke. Trying to tune out the fluttering hens, Christina turned to Dorothea, who was also watching Varek. "You are so lucky, Christina. Now *that* is a man!"

Christina's lips tightened in frustration as she ignored this naive comment. With as much courtesy as she was capable of at that moment, she commented, "I see we are of the same quadrille. Who else joins us?"

Forcing her covetous gaze from Varek, Dorothea turned around, and together they studied the milling ladies. Christina saw the Duchess of Sagan, Metternich's newest love, looking stunning in emerald green, her gown blazing with every jewel her numerous lovers must have given her over the years. She didn't know how the woman could walk without falling over and being crushed from the weight of the stones adorning every inch of flesh and gown.

Christina started as Dorothea grabbed her hand and pulled her through the milling women. She was surprised when they stopped in front of the dashing, if somewhat vain, Count Karl Clam-Martinitz. With a shy smile, Dorothea extended her tribute, which was accepted with a dazzling smile and a click of the count's highly polished boots. Curious, Christina looked from the blushing girl to the handsome young officer of the Austrian cavalry. Nothing of any meaning, other than the usual flirtatious amenities were exchanged between them before he was on his way to don his costume.

Christina cocked an amused brow at the Countess de Perigord. "Do I smell a romance in the air?"

Dorothea sighed extravagantly. "Isn't he lovely?"

Christina's lips quirked drolly. "What happened to Trauttmansdorff?" Not to mention the Count de Perigord, her husband.

Dorothea blinked at her. "Why, nothing. He is a delicious flirt, but there really was nothing between us. Now Karl, he is another matter."

"Obviously."

With a pretty pout, Dorothea turned on Christina. "Oh, look who is talking — you with that marvelous stud still panting after you. You always did have all the luck, Christina. Everyone says so."

Luck! Christina didn't know whether to laugh, curse at the poor girl or just slap her silly.

Wanting to end this conversation, Christina hailed the Princess Esterhazy, who was also sporting the black and silver of their quadrille. As the lovely woman moved toward them, Christina was again almost blinded by the flash of jewels. She was beginning to feel like a veritable pauper, her dearth of jewels becoming more and more noticeable.

Was she an embarrassment to the St. Pole family? she wondered in amusement, not displaying their wealth on her body.

With a wry smile, Christina watched the nervous fluttering of Hager's staff as they hovered anxiously behind the opulently bedecked Queens. Between these ladies, sporting the wealth of several nations on their bodies, and the noble spectators flashing their own private collections of treasures, Hager had his work cut out for him. The vast hall literally blazed with the refractions of diamonds, rubies and emeralds — a thief's paradise, to be sure. And that toad Hager was responsible for every last one of them. Christina smiled broadly at the thought as she was herded, with the other twenty-three ladies, onto their lavish dais amid the excited cheers of the spectators.

And now here she sat — hot, itchy and irritable. Used to the lighter, almost sheer fabrics and fashions of the day, Christina felt stifled and confined in the heavy folds of the seventeenth-century costume. How did one appear a dazzling Queen of Love and Beauty when one was sweating like a peasant in the fields? Feeling the stiff embroidery of her low décolletage digging into her breasts, Christina cast a furtive glance about her before, under the cover of her veil — at least the dratted thing was good for something — she shifted her bosom about. Then she cursed under her breath as a trickle of sweat slithered down between her breasts. Irritated, she squirmed about in her seat, wishing she'd had the sense to bring something as common and useful as a handkerchief.

Leaning over, she grumbled softly in Dorothea's ear, "I'll not be able to make it through this night. . . ."

Excited, Dorothea cut her off. "Isn't it stunning, Christina? Just as we planned. Oh, it looks simply marvelous."

For the first time, Christina looked past her disgruntled mood and really surveyed the hall. Even as irritable as she was, she had to agree with Dorothea; it was spectacular.

Amid the glittering crowds in the gallery, twenty-four Corinthian columns had been erected on both sides of the arena. Each column, in a princely display, depicted the coat-of-arms, weapons and mottoes of the twenty-four competing knights. Christina smiled as she read a few of the mottoes closest to her. For weeks she had sat through endless hours of debate as the ladies had argued over the French translations of the Latin inscriptions.

On both ends of the oblong arena had been erected two grandstands, extravagant with the goldembroidered cloth that draped the daises. The larger stage had been set with dozens of ornate chairs, providing for the comfort of the emperor and empress, their family and the honored sovereigns of Europe. The twenty-four Queens of Love and Beauty sat on the opposite dais. The mysteriously shrouded figures awaited, as did the spectators, for the arrival of the monarchs. In the arena beneath the royal grandstand a game of rings was being played out for the entertainment of the restless gallery.

Christina grimaced as she studied the turbaned heads of Turks and Moors, staked out in wax effigy on pikes around the arena. This little bit of morbid history had been the idea of several of the Germanic princesses. They had assured all the doubting ladies that the crowd would be more than pleased to see their ancient enemies used as targets in the games by the heroic knights.

While the hall reverberated with the applause and jeers of the spectators as they watched the horsemen tilting at the rings, Christina carefully inspected the layer of sand being kicked up beneath the horses' flying hooves. It eased the dread gripping her heart to see the thick cushion of sand spread over the hard ground, for Varek had so recently recovered from the beating he had suffered only a few short weeks ago. A fall from his horse could only aggravate the internal bruising he had sustained. She was still angered over the fact that he was entered into the lists at all. It hadn't seemed to worry him at all that he would be riding against men who were many years his junior. But the archduke was known as one of the best horsemen in Europe. That was the difference between them — Varek saw it all as frivolous fun, she saw it as masochistic stupidity. She hoped he landed on his stubborn arse, to coin one of Sergei's more colorful phrases.

Again she quickly scanned the floor, reevaluating the thickness of the sand. Maybe it wasn't as deep as she had first thought, she fretted silently, biting her lip.

The blare of trumpets announcing the arrival of the royal highnesses startled her, and looking about her, she saw the assemblage rise to their feet. With a sigh of relief, knowing this fiasco would soon begin — and just as quickly end, she prayed — Christina swayed to her feet in the heavy costume. As if on cue, all the ladies swept the floor-length veils over their heads, displaying to the applauding crowd their splendid,

glittering costumes. Christina thankfully breathed deeply of the somewhat cooler air as the crowd went wild, torn between the spectacle of glittering beauty at one end of the arena and their beloved majesties at the other. The cheers continued uninterrupted as the ornate chairs were filled with the sovereigns and other high-ranking personages of the Congress, who would be shaping the destinies of their world. The people's expectations were high, their trust absolute, and they made their loyalty more than apparent in the warm reception they gave to their prospective rulers.

When the royal dais was finally settled, there came another blare of the trumpets. Again the crowd went wild as the resplendent figures of the twenty-four knights, astride the equally resplendent Hungarian steeds, their ebony coats barely seen beneath the rich caparisons, thundered into the arena. Their entrance was accompanied by a rousing martial march played from the orchestra high in the balcony above the royal dais. Behind this impressive display of the flower of Europe's elite trotted twenty-four grooms, each carrying his master's banner, closely followed by dozens of equerries loaded down with the knights' shields and weapons. Soon the arena was a hive of activity as the squires quickly found their places.

The knights also formed into four quadrilles, their colors matching to that of the Queen they honored that night. Except for the azure, emerald, crimson or black of their quadrille, seen through the slashed sleeves of their velvet doublets, the knights were dressed alike in medieval trappings. Dark, tight-fitted breeches hugged their muscular thighs, their lower legs encased in yellow boots with golden spurs. Also of the same brilliant saffron, their gauntlets were lavishly embroidered with golden thread and their broad-brimmed hats sparkled with diamond brooches sporting large plumes of their respective colors. The knights' broad chests were protected with a silver and gold armor encasement that looked more like ornamentation than protection. Christina frowned when she looked at the flimsy piece of beauty covering Varek's torso. It appeared to have all the strength of papier-mâché to her critical eye. She swallowed as she remembered the sight of Varek's battered body lying helplessly before her. The damn fool!

All the ladies caught their breaths in awe as their gallant knights made their salutations before the royal dais, tipping their lances to the ground in honor and obedience to the lovely figures of the queens and

empresses, receiving graceful nods in acknowledgment. Then, in pairs of two, the knights wheeled their horses about to thunder to the opposite end of the arena to give equal homage to their ladies. The crowds shouted their approval as each knight blew a kiss to his ladylove. Tied at each lean hip in a lavish bow, opposite the glittering hilts of their swords, were their ladies' silken tokens.

Christina's breath caught in her throat as Varek reached down and his thumb sensually stroked the lark depicted on his token. Their eye contact was a brief clash of scorching emotions before he wheeled his horse around to fall into formation with the other knights as they cantered proudly about the arena twice amid the thunderous cheers of the gallery. Finally, each knight fell out of formation and retreated to where his groom awaited him.

Christina, her gaze glued to the tall, aristocratic figure of Varek, saw nothing else as he was made ready for the games to begin. Her hands fisted in her lap as she watched his broad-brimmed hat doffed and another ornamental piece of flimsy metal was placed over his golden head. When a flute of champagne appeared at her shoulder, she grabbed it and downed the cold liquid in one gulp.

"Are you all right?" the Princess Esterhazy asked, a perplexed frown wrinkling the flawless skin of her brow.

Distracted, Christina nodded as she accepted another glass.

Dorothea exchanged a puzzled glance with the princess over Christina's head. Both looked at Christina, wondering at the change in her usually cool demeanor. The viscountess looked positively frazzled. The young countess tried to wave the solicitous footman away as he approached to replace the empty glass in Christina's hand; however, the distracted lady was too fast for them. In trepidation the two ladies on either side of Christina frowned as she downed her third glass in rapid succession. Shaking their heads, the ladies turned back to the excitement of the festivities and promptly forgot the imbibing viscountess.

Christina, noticing her empty glass, looked about for the footman.

* * *

Varek found himself watching Count von Serent, one of the rather more impetuous of the young Austrian nobility. He pondered the

count's mysterious animosity. For weeks now von Serent had been goading him. Why, he hadn't the faintest idea. However, this evening the young count had made quite vocal his displeasure with Varek. Wracking his brain for some insult he might have unwittingly given the young man, he finally shrugged it off. Then he grinned when his answer was promptly forthcoming.

Across the arena, his former mistress, Sophy, leaned over the railing in a brazen display of upthrust breasts to throw a flower down on von Serent's upturned face.

So that is how the wind blows, Varek realized with a chuckle. Thank God! It had taken weeks, even after he had paid her a handsome endowment, to get rid of her and her possessive attentions. He had finally been forced to cruelty, having her physically removed from his residence. His ears still rang with the shrill curses the incensed lady had thrown at his head. And of course he placed the blame for the whole distasteful episode at Christina's feet. If she had never left him, he would never have been compelled to deal with the mundane problem of having to abide the tantrums of a mistress.

His grin died a slow death when the objects of his attention both turned toward him. Even across the vast width of the arena, their menacing expressions could be seen.

"So you see it too, your highness?"

He glanced down sharply to see Sergei standing at his knee. "What the devil are you doing here?" Varek grated out.

Sergei shrugged as he rechecked the richly tooled leather straps holding up Varek's silver stirrups. "Executing a favor asked of me."

"What favor?"

There was a pause as Sergei continued with his inspection. Finally he looked up, his expression wary. It was obvious that Varek intended to hang on to his animosity against him. "Need you ask?" he asked wryly.

Varek's lips thinned to a tight white line. Looking up, he glared across the length of the arena at his irritating woman. He frowned when he saw her take another flute of champagne. That had to be her third or fourth. Since entering the lists he had kept an eye on her. Old habits died hard, or not at all, he was finding out.

His eyes narrowed on Christina as she drained another crystal flute. Christina did not hold her drink well; it went straight to her head, even after only a few. He had always been amazed at how quickly she

could go from soberness to cup-shot to the inevitable after-effects in just a matter of a few short hours.

"I'd watch out for von Serent. He's been glaring daggers at your back since you arrived." Sergei interrupted his thoughts.

Varek shrugged this inconsequential annoyance aside. He had a bigger problem at the moment. His eyes narrowed as he watched Christina list dangerously to one side as she stood to reach for another glass from a bobbing tray just out of her reach. He sighed in relief when the princess grabbed hold of her and sat her back down into her chair. Any minute he expected to see Christina tip over the railing and end up sprawled in the middle of the games. "Get the hell out of here, Sergei," he muttered, still frowning across the arena.

With a lopsided grin, Sergei stepped back, his arms flung out wide and his shrug apologetic. "Would that I could, your highness. However, as I said, I am doing a lady a favor. Never have I told her nay, and I'll not start now simply because I'm asked to do something that is not particularly appealing. Myself, I hope you land on your stubborn arse." Then he bowed low without breaking eye contact. "Your highness," he drawled in mock deference.

Varek couldn't help it. He threw back his head and roared with laughter. Even as betrayed as he felt by his childhood friend, Sergei could still make him laugh — most times at himself. Damn, if he didn't miss him! Losing Christina and Sergei in one fatal blow had been devastating. With a curse, Varek turned away from Sergei's engaging grin.

Just then the trumpets blared forth, announcing the starting of the games. With a sardonic salute to his traitorous friend, Varek wheeled his horse about and cantered back into formation.

Sergei's grin faded as he turned to watch von Serent move into position behind Varek; then he spared a quick glance at the woman who had been Varek's mistress. He had heard the rumors she was spewing about Vienna, and obviously young von Serent believed her lies of the abuse she had supposedly suffered at the hands of Varek. His hooded gaze studied the demeanor of Varek's former mistress as she closely watched Varek move about the arena. She didn't even try to mask the hatred twisting her face. Not once did she glance at von Serent.

Thoughtfully, he turned away to inspect Varek's lances again. It was bound to be a long evening, and he had no intention of letting von Serent out of his sight.

* * *

Christina was definitely feeling none of her earlier anxieties as she watched the handsome knights display their expertise in catching beribboned rings on their ornate lances. She clapped and shouted her approval with the other ladies. None noticed as a hiccup caught her by surprise. She giggled as she leaned over, and thinking she was whispering, shouted into Dorothea's ear, "Aren't they gorgeous?" Seeing a tray of champagne flutes out of the corner of her eye, she eagerly reached behind her.

Many of the ladies exchanged amused glances, several just as tipsy as the usually sober-minded viscountess.

"Your valiant knight is surely the most exquisite piece of heaven I have ever seen," one lady sighed, her gaze pinned on Varek as he galloped by. The archduke made no effort to hide the devilish smile he cast boldly at his love. As Christina stood up to wave, she tottered, then blew him a kiss. Varek's eyes widened as he flashed by, close to the railing. He briefly cast a worried glance over his shoulder before he turned his attention to stabbing another ring. His lance fluttered with the ribbons of a dozen captured rings as he continued on to the opposite end of the arena.

"He is so clever. Look at all those lovely rings," Christina crooned as she sat back down, her champagne spilling over the railing and into the sand below. Frowning, she looked down into her empty glass; then, blinking in confusion, she looked around for a footman.

"I think you have had enough," the Princess Esterhazy laughed as she waved the attentive young man away. Leaning over, she pried the glass out of Christina's obsessive hold.

She hadn't had *that* much, Christina thought. She flinched as the ladies all applauded, standing as they praised the young Prince Trauttmansdorff's performance of charging full tilt, with scimitar in hand, at a cluster of apples suspended on ribbons. With a cavalry yell, his sword slit a ribbon; then while still in midair, he severed the gleaming apple in two.

Not sure what she was applauding, Christina nonetheless stood and cheered with the others. As the excited ladies settled down into their chairs again, one lady behind her whispered rather loudly, "He has the most nimble fingers! I swear he can titillate you even as you

lay between those rock-hard thighs and suck that stallion cock of his. I vow, I've never felt the like before! And talking of delicious!"

My goodness! Christina giggled as she pictured arms down to the young prince's knees. They'd have to be to reach that far! With interest, her wide eyes searched out the object of such talent. She frowned in disappointment, for his arms didn't look

so very long. "That is nothing! Have you ever had Tour du Fen suck your nipples as he plunges deeply into you? Divine, simply divine, my dears. You must try him."

Christina, mouth agape, looked behind her and found the source of this little bit of generous advice. Petite Marie Gresset, who didn't even reach five feet in height. Heavens, the lady barely reached mid-chest to the French count, who was famous for his towering height. Christina slapped a hand over her mouth, trying to stifle the laughter that bubbled forth. The thought of those two in bed together brought all sorts of hysterical pictures to mind. She couldn't help but imagine the lanky gentleman climbing out of bed, his spine bent in half, after servicing his diminutive ladylove. Another spurt of laughter erupted and she slapped her other hand on top of the other as she faced forward, her shoulders shaking.

Dorothea glanced quizzically at her. "Are you crying?" she asked in alarm.

Frantically, Christina shook her head. When she was finally able to swallow her giggles she heard the tail end of another snippet of boasting. " . . . I vow I could feel his tongue touch my womb!"

Again her hand clamped over her mouth, the nails of her left hand digging into the tender arm of Dorothea, causing the poor girl to jump. Behind her hand she was laughing so hard she could barely draw breath.

"Did you hear that?" Dorothea demanded as she pried Christina's nails out of her forearm. "Jeanne Marie just said that her lover has hair on his back! Can you imagine anything more repulsive? Christina, let go!"

Christina had to let go. She was too busy stuffing her veil into her mouth to smother the gasps of hilarity that were now uncontrollable.

If one paid heed to the experienced ladies about her, she had been given the picture of the perfect lover — a hunchbacked gorilla, arms

swinging about his knees and tongue lolling somewhere past his jaws. All that was needed to complete this mad image was this paragon of sexual dexterity drooling in abject adoration of his love. In desperation she gulped for air. Varek didn't stand a chance!

Dorothea stared at Christina, aghast. "I vow, you cannot hold your champagne. Christina, you are drunk! Stop it! Right now! You are making a spectacle of us. Anyway, the jousting is about to begin."

That sobered Christina instantly. Blinking through the tears in her eyes, she sat at the edge of her chair and grabbed hold of the railing. Dizzy, she spit out her veiling, wondering how it had gotten into her mouth.

The orchestra was swelling with another martial beat as the knights, in two teams of four, aligned themselves on either side of the lists. Unfortunately, Varek was among this first tilt. When the heralds trumpeted the signal, both teams wheeled their horses and charged their challengers, their extended lances trying to lift their opponents from their horses.

Christina closed her eyes as Varek charged fearlessly into the fray. Her sightless void tilted alarmingly about her as she heard an explosive clashing of men and beasts. Then the hall erupted with the gallery's thunderous cheers.

Christina shivered. Why did blood sport always drive a crowd to such frenzied heights? she wondered in disgust as she opened her eyes again. At first she couldn't see Varek in the tangle of men and horses. Then she saw him. Fear surged through her. Clamping a hand over pale lips, she thought she was going to be ill.

* * *

"Well, I'll be damned," Sergei laughed, coming to a skidding halt beside Varek, who was ignobly sprawled on his stubborn arse.

Varek threw a sour look up at this unwanted help. Wincing, he climbed to his feet, brushing aside Sergei's outstretched arm. "Damn your eyes, Sergei. You have been nothing but ill luck for me. Take your own unabused ass and get the hell out of here!"

"Oh, ho! I do that and I'll have to deal with a very drunk, very emotional lady. I try never to deal with very drunk, very emotional women. Can hardly reason with them when they are sober, let alone

in their cups. Never saw a woman yet who could hold her liquor with any modicum of respect. The darlings just aren't men, after all."

Varek listened to this inane diatribe with a withering glare. Then he had the misfortune to look into the twinkling eyes of the audacious bastard and he had to bite his lip till it bled to stop the smile that fought to betray him. God, how he missed Sergei's pointless banter that could lighten any situation. He watched as Sergei turned and gave Christina a jaunty bow.

Directing his ire where he felt it belonged, Varek growled as he too looked down the arena at the dais. "I knew it!" Just as he had feared, in her nervousness she had imbibed too much. Knowing what the coming evening would bring, Varek cursed foully. So much for his erotic intentions that night! It could have been so perfect.

Grabbing hold of his horse's reins, the two men quickly left the floor as the next sets took their places. "Mayhap you'd be more useful seeing to her until I'm done with these blasted games." He had to have been insane to get involved with this infantile show, especially when his ex-mistress's new lover was out to prove some undefined point of honor.

"Absolutely not. I was instructed to stick to you like tar, your highness."

"Well, much good you were when von Serent's hit landed under my shield." Scowling, Varek glared over his horse's back at the nuisance across the arena. He cursed long and viciously as he watched von Serent receive another flower from the vindictive ex-lover. Looking up, Sophy gave Varek a taunting smile, then blew him a kiss. He looked away in disgust.

Sergei scratched his chin reflectively. "Shall I inform the heralds-of-arms of the illegal pass? Clearly none of them caught it."

"Hell, no! I want to get that bastard in the next round. It is time he knows who he is dealing with. After I'm done with the little worm he'll be lucky if he can climb between her greedy thighs in a month!" Another groan escaped Varek's lips, and he rubbed his burning gut. His chest ached under the deep dent in his chest piece.

"Just be careful. You don't want to get yourself disqualified."

"Whenever have you known me to do anything dishonorable?" Varek charged in a scathing retort as he turned away.

Sergei just quirked a brow at his friend's back.

* * *

"See there," Princess Esterhazy soothed as she rubbed Christina's back. "He is just fine." Christina nodded numbly. She felt so ill. All she wanted to do was get out of there, away from the heat and the thundering noise of over a thousand voices. Swallowing thickly, she held a hand to her throbbing temple.

When a cool cloth was thoughtfully pressed against her warm forehead, she sighed in relief. "Thank you," she murmured, not really caring who had performed the merciful act. "I don't know how much more of this I can take. I think I really do need to lie down before I swoon at your feet . . . or" — she swallowed deeply — ". . . or worse."

"Nonsense," Dorothea announced brightly. "Just sit still and draw in deep breaths. The dizziness will pass soon enough. It always does for me. I never realized you drank so much," she added in awe.

Christina shuddered, and her mouth felt like cotton. "Please, could I have a glass of water?"

"Of course, my dear. Right away." The princess turned in her seat and whispered to the footman who had arrived promptly at her elbow. Turning back, she patted Christina's hand, which was clamped with a death grip on the arm of her chair. "Now, just take it easy. The archduke is going to expect your support during the next skirmish, do not forget."

Good heavens! Christina looked up quickly and gasped as the arena tipped alarmingly before her. "Are you sure he is well?"

"But of course. They would not allow him to mount again if he wasn't. The emperor himself would see to that."

When the glass of cool water appeared over her shoulder, she grabbed it and tried to swallow the entire contents in one long pull. However, the glass was yanked from her hand as her two companions tsked at her. She was ordered to drink slowly; then, thankfully, it was held to her lips again. As demanded, she sipped slowly as she took the glass back into her trembling hands.

When Dorothea's squeal of delight shot like a bolt of lightning behind her eyes, Christina almost dropped the glass. Dorothea jumped to her feet, clapping and waving her veil. Her cavalry officer must have done something right, though at that moment Christina could have hardly cared less. With a groan, she pulled on Dorothea's

skirts to get her to sit down again. "Please, my friend," whispered Christina, "if you are indeed my friend, could you please not shout."

Dorothea looked hurt, indignant and apologetic all at once. "But I wanted Karl to hear me."

How could Christina argue with this bit of romantic logic?

Would this night never end?

Fourteen

Varek ignored the good-natured jostling of the men around him as he almost rudely squeezed himself through the crowd of battered, happy knights. Thank God, this interminable night was over! He couldn't even remember why he had agreed to participate in the farcical extravaganza. What had it brought him but a sore arse, an aching gut and one hell of a guilty conscience? Again he saw young von Serent's expressionless face as he lay before the doctors' probing hands and questions. Varek hoped to God that those learned men were wrong. Not to ever walk again . . .

Disgusted with the revelry around him, Varek quickly strode out of the room provided for the knights' use and made his way down the long corridor, side stepping the tide of people going in the opposite direction. Hopefully, if he hurried, he might find Christina still on the dais.

Christina had been right, as usual. He had been a fool to participate in an event that should have been left to the young. He was ashamed to admit it to himself, but he knew why he had gotten swept up in the seduction of a fantasy. In a weak moment he had had the puerile, idiotic notion that flaunting his skills before Christina would impress her. He would wear her colors and win honors for her. The humbling fact was, she hadn't been impressed at all — instead she had gotten herself drunk! A spurt of reluctant laughter passed his bruised lips. Lord, what a mess this evening had turned out to be. Next time he talked himself into such an insane situation he would have Sergei slap some sense into him.

Von Serent's face again plagued him as he continued through the maddening throng. Over and over, those last fatal minutes of the mock

battle twisted and shifted about in his mind. Maybe there was something else he could have done to bring the young fool down? Something he should have said when he had a sense of what was coming? But no matter how many times or in how many different ways he replayed the damned scene in his mind, it always had the same unfortunate ending. He had had no choice but to repel von Serent's attack exactly as he had. Would he ever forget the sight of the young count being taken from the field in disgrace, his father turning his back on his only son? Attacking a man's back could not be condoned as anything but what it was — the act of a dishonorable man.

Varek's temper, not at its best at that moment, only flared higher, when, out of the corner of his eye, he spotted the cause of today's debacle. Smiling and laughing with a conscienceless frivolity that made Varek grit his teeth in enraged frustration, Sophy sauntered along with the crowd preparing to depart for the main ballroom. So much for flying to her lover's side in agonized devotion, Varek fumed as he continued on his way, not trusting himself to contain his temper if he was forced to confront her.

Unfortunately, Sophy turned at that moment and caught sight of him. Immediately, she crossed the busy corridor and darted his way. Biting back a particularly vulgar curse, he tried to step around a group of giggling ladies, in the vain hope of avoiding her. No such luck, for she was too intent on her prey to give up easily.

"Varek, darling," Sophy purred, her claws latching onto his sleeve.

Taking a deep breath, he stopped short. His hands clenched as he swung around on her, shaking off her hold. "You had best stay out of my way," he warned coldly as he stepped away from her encroaching presence.

Her eyes widened in a pretense of hurt. "I just wanted to compliment you on your valiant play in the games. A truly heroic knight, to show such mercy where none was given." Her low, breathy voice grated on his already strained nerves.

Varek couldn't believe the gall of the woman. For a long moment he contemplated the wall behind her, his expression flat. "Listen to me, madam." His distaste for her was all too evident in his steely voice. "Since it is obvious you have no intention of conducting yourself with any integrity, then so be it. You leave me no recourse but to treat you accordingly." His gaze suddenly shifted down.

Sophy gasped as she involuntarily stepped back. Those famed icy blue irises were frigid with a devouring rage held close on the edge. His glare met her wide eyes full on, and she felt as if his fury would rend her apart. Swallowing hard, her breath accelerating, her hand inched up to clutch her throat — as if to protect that defenseless flesh from the jaws of a ravening beast.

Through her fear she heard his voice, low and clipped — so very precise. “Your petty vengeance has done irretrievable harm this day. Because of you, a brilliant young man lies paralyzed, and his noble and ancient name has been brushed with the taint of dishonor. Least of which, you have forced my hand to be a part of this sordid mishap.” Leaning down, he pinched her chin between ruthless fingers as he brought her face so close she could feel his breath burn her lips. “Listen to me true, madam. I give you till tomorrow to remove yourself from Vienna. If you ignore me, I shall feel it my duty to seek retribution from you — and that equal to what you have taken from the von Serent family.”

Sophy tried to pull free from his painful grip, but it only tightened. When tears sprang to her eyes, she saw him smile, the cruel lips curving slowly. “Do we understand one another?”

Shaken, her face still painfully clutched in his merciless fingers, she whispered back fiercely, defiant to the bitter end. “What could you possibly do to me that you haven’t already done? I loved you, damn you!”

Varek’s crack of laughter mocked her words. “Loved me?” he derided callously. Flicking the expensive circlet of diamonds around her wrist with his finger, he taunted her, “This is the only love you know, madam. This is what you dream of, what you covet. As to what havoc I could cause in your life?” His finger brushed with seeming tenderness over her cheek. “Von Serent lost the use of his legs this night. How would you be able to sell your body for such jewels as these with a scar running down your pretty cheek? Would that be retribution enough?” He smiled in genuine amusement this time as his threat sank in and terror flashed across her flawless features. Softly, he drawled, “Perhaps now we understand one another?”

Through tight lips, she asked, “Do I have a choice?”

His gaze raked over her, his expression hard as flint. “None.”

When she said nothing further, he brushed past her and hurried on his way.

Shaking with the power of her rage, Sophy took a deep breath as she struggled to gather up the shreds of her ravaged pride. When she finally had the courage to look about her, all she saw were malicious smiles spread before her like the evil tides of an approaching storm. Her narrowed gaze swung back to Varek, and she caught a last glimpse of his broad shoulders before he disappeared behind the curtain that led to the dais of the Queens. To lick his lady's feet, no doubt, she thought viciously.

Then, as the crowd continued on its way, teeming around her as if she didn't even exist, she raised her head high. Her fingers clutched the folds of her skirts to hide their trembling and, with unhurried grace, she left the gaily laughing people behind as she headed for the exit.

Tonight she had to pack and make arrangements for traveling. But tomorrow . . . tomorrow she would have all the time in the world to decide how she would make that bastard pay.

* * *

"Oh, dear!" Varek heard Laure's voice before he snapped back the curtain and stepped onto the now empty dais — empty except for a very pale Christina and her obviously worried friend.

"Good evening, my ladies." He bowed low, amused at the sight before him. As he had thought, Christina was now paying for her transgression. "Enjoy the games?"

Christina didn't even look up at this bit of mockery, and Varek's smile faded a bit at this untypical reaction to his teasing. His gaze shifted to the princess, who was glaring, at him in obvious irritation.

"Stop teasing Varek, and help me. I believe she is going to be ill, poor thing."

The grin now wiped from his face, Varek was on his knees beside Christina in a heartbeat. True to Laure's words, Christina's face had a decidedly sickly pallor, her skin damp and clammy. He could feel her shiver as she struggled to keep down the contents of her belly. When she slowly turned her head to look at him, he could see her eyes were red and watering.

She swallowed heavily, her lackluster eyes lighting a bit at the sight of him. "Are you all right?" she croaked, her shaking hand gripping his with surprising strength.

"Of course I am, lark. How could you have thought otherwise?" He gently removed the heavy headpiece pinching her temples, then smoothed away the damp curls that fell about her face. Not caring who might be watching, he gathered her close and felt her head drop onto his shoulder. Feeling her shiver again, he sat on a nearby chair and easily pulled her, ungainly costume and all, onto his lap. As if she had never been out of his arms, she snuggled in with familiar simplicity, sighing.

"My poor love," he murmured, his lips brushing her clammy skin. "You know what drink can do to you."

"Don't preach to me, Varek," she whispered, her voice defiant, despite her pain. "If you do, I promise you won't like the consequences." Again she swallowed, then buried her face against his warm neck.

Laure frowned down at them, then looked about warily. "I had best get her to her rooms immediately. She needs to get out of that torturous gown and into . . ." Laure flushed under Varek's penetrating gaze.

Christina's head lifted weakly. "Oh please, Laure, don't miss the ball on my account. I'll be fine in a few moments. Just let me rest for . . ." In mid-sentence her eyes closed, and again she leaned back into Varek's arms. She was too tired to try to convince them, let alone herself anymore. She was content to let Varek take care of her.

Shaking her head in irritation, Laure watched her friend with frustrated affection. "Come Varek," she demanded in a voice usually reserved for her errant children. "Help me get her to my coach."

Varek, with plans of his own, followed along docilely enough, his love secure in his arms. As they left the dais, they were thankful to see that the crowd had thinned out greatly, and what people still lingered were politely pushed aside by Princess Metternich's servants. Most of the Carrousel's celebrants were, doubtless, already crowding into the buffet and ballroom, where the festivities would continue till the early morning hours.

Worried at Christina's stillness, Varek glanced down and again noticed the delicately shadowed skin around her closed eyes. Her lips appeared bloodless, and the sight of them brought back, with all too much clarity, the terrible days after Christina's many miscarriages. His breath hitched with remembered anguish.

"Damnation," he bit out roughly, ignoring Laure's shocked glance. "How much did she have to drink, Laure?"

Laure also gazed anxiously at Christina's limp body in Varek's arms. "I'm not quite sure. But Dorothea, who was sitting next to her, said she had stopped counting after Christina's fifth glass."

Again Varek cursed, this time quietly. What was wrong with Christina? She knew well her body's low tolerance to wine or spirits. Was she that upset over the absence of her precious Robert? Not liking the direction his thoughts were taking him, his arms instinctively tightened about his love.

They reached the carriage and Laure was preparing to mount the steps when Varek's firm voice stopped her short. Looking over her shoulder, she immediately recognized the belligerent stance of his long legs and the hard glitter in his gaze. Expecting an argument, Laure stepped back down and turned to face him, a militant stiffness in her usually benign expression. She was not about to see further harm come to her childhood friend.

"I'll take her back to her apartment, Laure. You go on to the ball . . ."

"I vow, Varek, at times you can be the most pigheaded, selfish bastard," Laure grated out heatedly. Varek stifled a smile as the shy Laure gave him a piece of her mind — and with such wicked language to boot. He suddenly felt like a despicable hawk swooping down on her defenseless chick. Varek grinned down into Laure's frown.

"Good Lord, Laure, I'm hardly going to ravish her." He paused as the princess blushed, then took pity on her. "I assure you, as much as I love her, I have no intention of putting myself in the position of having her cast up her accounts all over me."

Laure's eyes widened, she blinked, then self-consciously laughed at the picture Varek's words brought to mind. "Very well, Varek. But that is not what I was worried about. Not entirely, that is," she added when he gave her a skeptical look. "It's Viscount Basingstoke. He can't get word of this. Their relationship is under enough strain, thanks to you, and her life has become unbearable, pulled hither and yon between the two of you. Don't cast any more fuel on the fire you have already lit. Please, Varek, for Christina's sake."

Basingstoke be damned, Varek thought uncharitably. Giving cause for the man to divorce Christina was exactly what he wanted. However, in the face of Laure's pleading, how could Varek refuse? With a sigh he nodded as he stepped past her and climbed into the carriage. Christina moaned as he settled himself onto the plush squabs of the

Metternich coach, Christina still held firmly in his arms. Hearing a tap on the door he winced, then stuck his head out the window and stared down into Laure's worried face, expecting another lecture.

"I'll expect to see you no later than twelve of the clock Varek. Don't let me down."

Giving her a wry smile, he nodded. "Very well, my solemn Laure, by the twelfth stroke, my sworn word."

Laure smiled back. "Tass here, will help clear your way unobserved into the British Consulate and to Christina's rooms." She motioned to a young, redheaded footman standing at her side. Then she gave Varek an uncharacteristic grin. "Please tell me you don't know where Christina's rooms are, Varek."

"Not a bit of it, I swear." Varek sat back as the carriage leaped forward. Even though he had never been to Christina's rooms in truth, he was sure he could find them blindfolded. His spies were always very detailed when giving information.

* * *

Varek stood back from the bed staring down on Christina, now deeply asleep. His poor little lark had not had an easy time of it this evening, and his heart turned over at the sight of her. If he lifted the cover he knew exactly how she would be positioned — her knees drawn up to her chest, her toes curled inward, her fisted hands tucked snugly under her chin. Many had been the nights he had lain beside her watching her sleep, wondering if their children would sleep in the same endearing way.

Suddenly realizing he was exhausted, he silently circled the bed and very carefully climbed in beside her. Out of years of habit, he turned on his side and pulled her warm body gently back against his. The fit was perfect, as always.

Tired, yet restless, his heavy-lidded gaze wandered around the room. Did she share this bed with Basingstoke? He couldn't see any masculine paraphernalia lying about. Picking up a strand of her hair, the ebony tress curled about his fingers and idly he wound it around his finger till it wouldn't go any farther. Then he let the silken strand spring free before he began again.

He remembered the first time she had allowed him to touch her hair. She had turned thirteen and, he had found out later, had just had

her first menses. She was feeling very much a woman and curious to test her newfound status.

She had followed him to his secret hideaway, a secluded part of the lake where he would go to escape his studies and the endless calls of duty. He tried to slip away and swim in the brisk waters every day the weather allowed.

He had almost had a heart attack that day as he broke through the surface of the water and spotted little Christina solemnly staring at him from the edge of the lake. And him buck-naked! Yelling at her had made no impression; pleading with her hadn't swayed her. So, in hopes of frightening her off, he swallowed his self-consciousness and marched straight at her. How was a lad of nineteen supposed to respond to such boldness in a lass of thirteen, even if she was his affianced wife? Apparently, it hadn't been a problem. Christina had calmly held out his breeches and innocently asked him if all men had one of those. Varek doubted there had ever been a time up to that day or since that he had blushed so thoroughly.

As it had turned out, it was to become one of the most memorable afternoons of his life, forever branded into his mind. After dressing, he had sat beside her, and for the first time since she had been delivered to them five years before, they had talked. For hours. He had been amazed at his future wife's intelligence and sprightly humor, and had learned, one by one, the many quirks that made it possible for her to be able to laugh at herself. It was that day he had fallen so irrevocably in love with her. Needing an excuse to touch her, he had hesitantly stroked her long midnight curls, which were tangled in an untidy mane down her back. With the simple trust she had always given to him alone, she turned her back to him, asking if he would braid it for her. The last thing he wanted to do was tell her that he had no idea how to braid a lady's hair, so he quickly ran his fingers through the silken mass and trembled.

Nothing had been the same between them since that day. From that moment he knew she would never leave his side, and for the next thirty years she never had.

But if they were meant to be together, why had they been so cursed?

"This is right, isn't it, Christina?" he whispered into her hair, his lips brushing the silky texture. His hands slid along her arms till he felt her fisted hands tucked beneath her chin. Gently, he pried them open so

that they rested palm to palm and held warmly between his own. "If we weren't meant to continue on, why would we have been brought together once more? God couldn't be that cruel to us again."

Releasing her hands, his arms slowly enclosed her, his heart pounding with a sense of homecoming. It felt so right. "All those lost years, lark. Were they as hard on you? Did you waste countless hours, then days, then years, searching endless crowds for my face?" Sighing, he stared into the fire, his cheek pressed against her cool hair. "I did. But it never helped; because each night I still went to bed with my arms as empty as the night before."

And every damned night for six cursed years. But the year his daughter was born — that had been the worst. With the death of the second archduchess he had been free again; only Christina had been lost to him. She had preferred to flee rather than trust him. He had stopped looking for her then, at least officially. His emotions were too twisted; not knowing if he loved her still or hated her more. But still he had looked at every face . . .

Now she was legally tied to another man. He still couldn't believe it.

Feeling her press herself deeper into his arms, he kissed her with lingering gentleness, his lips worshipping the feel of her soft cheek. Her face turned toward him, and in the candlelight he studied her profile, the delicate silhouette as deeply etched on his heart as a precious cameo.

"Laure called me a selfish bastard. Am I, Christina? Am I merely obsessed with a dream that you no longer share?" He paused, not wanting to say the next words, perhaps tempting fate against him. "Am I wrong not to let you go? God, I need to know, lark. I don't want to hurt you. Tell me our love is as strong as ever — that it will be forever."

The room was dismally silent except for the slight sound of her gentle breathing, far away from him in another place. Did she feel him beside her? Apprehension seized him. Was that the truth of it? Was he going to have to let her go yet again?

Sitting up, he looked down on her serene profile, willing her to awaken and show him what was in her heart. "Tell me, lark," he whispered fiercely. "Give me some hope, a sign. Something, dammit!" His voice cracked with the strain of holding off his rising fear. She shifted about and Varek's breath caught. Then she settled down again, her eyelids smooth and relaxed.

Varek, unsure of himself, felt the same insidious fingers of betrayal squeezing the very air from his lungs. She couldn't hear him. She wasn't connected to him anymore — not as she had been in the past.

His jaw clenched ruthlessly tight, he carefully rose from the bed and for long, nerve-wracking minutes he just stood there and watched her. His long shadow, cast by the candles behind him, loomed over the bed, hovering like a lost spirit, mocking his faith in the love he had believed would be forever.

Suddenly the air in the room was thin and stale. His lungs struggled for his next breath. With every passing minute, heralded by the merciless ticking of the mantel clock, another piece of his fraying dreams bled from his heart.

A sign, Christina, he willed her, unable to give up on them. *Give me a sign.*

Christina's breathing remained even and untroubled.

Finally Varek turned away, his face granite hard, his mind stark with a reality he couldn't bear to acknowledge. Not realizing what he was doing, he extinguished the few candles remaining lit, throwing the room into deeper shadows. His tread muffled, he made his way to the door, only one thought in his mind — the need to get away before he did something he would regret for the rest of his life.

So lost was he in numbing pain that Varek almost missed the whispered moan. But that part of his soul that belonged to Christina didn't. He froze, his hand clenched on the door latch. Slowly he looked over his shoulder, his sharp gaze piercing the shadowed distance between them. Then he heard it again, and a surge of relief rushed through his body.

In a moment he was at her side.

"Varek?"

It was the loveliest sound he had ever heard. "Yes, lark. I'm here." He bent down beside the bed.

"I had the most wonderful dream, my love." Her words were soft, vaguely slurred, lost somewhere between slumber and coherent thought.

He didn't dare touch her, afraid he might awaken her completely. His mouth was dry. "What dream?"

There was no answer. Disheartened, he thought she had drifted off again. Then her eyes fluttered. "I dreamed it was summer and we were at the lake. You know, our special place." He barely caught the last word.

Their special place. Varek's eyes misted. She had given him the sign he needed. She had been dreaming of his earlier memories. "Yes, lark, I remember."

"We were with our children," she murmured sleepily, her hand restlessly searching till it came to rest on the bed, beside his, their fingertips touching.

His heart accelerated alarmingly. "Our children?"

Her beautiful eyes suddenly blinked open and she looked directly at him. But he could see they were unfocused. She was still asleep. "Yes, all six of them were there with us." As soon as the last syllable had sighed past her lips, she turned over and snuggled deep into the covers. Within seconds her even breathing again told of her deep slumber.

Varek didn't know whether to shout for joy or cry. What did it mean? *Six children. Six miscarriages.* Was she dreaming of the past or of their future?

Hearing the chime strike midnight, Varek roused himself. With great reluctance he slipped stealthily out of his wife's rooms and hurried to make good his promise to Laure.

Back in the Metternichs' coach, he stared distractedly out the window. *Six children. Six miscarriages.*

Was this the foretelling of God's intention to correct His mistakes of the past?

Varek grinned as the carriage clattered through the streets to the Hofburg.

Now nothing would stop him. She would be his again.

Fifteen

Christina awoke with a pounding head, a churning stomach and a strange sense of peace. Why she didn't quite know, but it was the first time since coming to Vienna that she didn't feel an aura of doom hanging over her head. Perhaps it was because the Carrousel was over and that large worry was behind her? She smiled. Yes, that was the reason.

Stretching her arms high over her head, Christina lay there thinking of Varek and how he had looked last night. She smiled as she pictured her knight in shining armor. As always, she marveled at his beauty, which had only deepened with the years. He was so large: in his presence, in his spirit . . . in the generosity of his love.

God, how she missed him. Not to be able to acknowledge his smiles, not to be able to walk by his side. Not to be able to walk into his arms and know she was home — the pain of it forever caused an ache in her heart.

Taking a deep breath, she swallowed her sorrow and threw back the covers. She had the whole day to herself, and for a moment she felt at a loss as what to do with it.

As if in answer to her dilemma, she heard a knock on the door. "Yes, Helen."

The maid swept in, balancing a glass atop a silver tray. "His highness thought you might be in need of this horrid concoction when you awoke."

Christina looked the glass and winced. One of the reasons she had never over-indulged in liquor was not so much the next morning's ills as it was Varek's cure. It did work, but it was a trial to get the potion down.

Reluctantly she took the glass, then glanced sideways at Helen. "Uhm, how bad was I last night, Helen? I don't even remember how I got back here."

Helen hesitated a moment; then, setting the tray down, she began to busy herself picking up the discarded costume that littered the floor about the bed. Christina glanced down and felt confusion wash over her. If Helen had put her to bed, the room would be in impeccable order. How had she gotten herself undressed and into bed? The costume had been laced down the back. She couldn't have possibly gotten out of the dress herself.

God in heaven! The pounding in her head increased, forcing her to lie down again with a moan. Immediately Helen was beside her, rescuing the glass from her hand. Then she held it to her lips. "Drink, my lady, it will help."

Dutifully, Christina took several sips of the vile stuff, gagged, then waved it away. After a moment she asked hesitantly, "What time did I get back, do you know?"

"No, my lady. If you recall, you had given me the night off so that I could attend the Carrousel."

Christina thought a moment and nodded. Yes, she did remember now. Frowning, she glanced down at herself clad only in the thin chemise she had worn the night before and felt a tremor of relief. If Varek had taken her to bed, she would undoubtedly be shed of even this flimsy barrier. But, it still didn't answer how she had gotten back to the apartment and into bed. Just thinking about it began to exhaust her; so shrugging, she let the whole matter go. Raising her fingers, she gently massaged the pounding at her temples, and vowed never to drink again.

"I will get your breakfast now. Something in your stomach will help," Helen promised as she came around the bed with Christina's dressing gown in her hands. At the mention of food, Christina's stomach churned with a queasy vengeance.

"There is a note on the tray, madam."

Christina looked over and saw the expensive velum, folded and sealed on the tray. She immediately recognized the impression in the green wax. How could she ever forget it? The crest used to be hers.

Reluctantly, she stood up in the cold room, slipped her arms into the dressing gown, slipped her feet into her slippers, then waved Helen out.

Taking up the note, her thumb caressed the heraldic design for a second before she peeled the wafer off. Unfolding the page she read,

My darling lark,

I will be escorting my daughter to Princess Esterhazy's ball tomorrow. Please join us. Tina sends her earnest pleas along with my own. I beg of you, don't deny us.

*All my love,
Varek*

Christina grinned at the thought of attending the children's ball at Marie Esterhazy's with Varek and Tina. She knew it would be great fun, this novel idea of the princess's. They had spoken briefly about it at the Carrousel, and Christina had been intrigued with the charming fête, wishing that Eddie were with her so they could enjoy the festivity together. This was one meeting with Varek that she was looking forward to with her whole heart.

When Helen entered the room again, she asked, "Is the messenger still here?"

"Yes, madam."

She walked over to her *escritoire*, scribbled a quick reply, and sealed it. Turning about, she held out the missive. When Helen took it, she mused with a smile, "I feel like going out and spending money. I've been thinking for weeks that I need to visit Hofer's Toy Mercantile. Would you like to join me?"

Helen returned her sunny smile as she took the note. "I see his highness's tonic has worked wonders." Then she left to deliver the note to the messenger.

Varek's tonic had nothing to do with her exuberant mood. It was the man himself that made her feel like she was floating on air.

Humming, she went about the business of dressing, already worrying about what she would wear tomorrow. As she riffled through the gowns in the clothes press, a bright color caught her eye and she paused. Biting her lip, she pulled out the shimmering silk gown, a deep azure blue, the one Robert had disliked as he thought it too brash. It *was* a bit more daring than the gowns she usually wore; the décolletage was lower, the watered silk was tissue thin, the cut of the skirt was not as voluminous as her others. It clung to her hips almost indecently. It was provocative to say the *very* least. Holding it out in front of her, she

felt a shiver of pleasure as she thought how much the color matched Varek's eyes. Maybe that is why she had always liked the gown so much. She'd never had the nerve to wear it; till now . . .

Maybe she would buy a few things for herself as well, thinking of a particularly lovely silk shawl she had seen in a window on the avenue Ballhausplatz. And a pair of blue topaz earrings had caught her eye the other day. They would be perfect.

Not feeling this light-hearted in . . . well, in years . . . she waited impatiently for Helen to return. There was so much to do today and she didn't want to waste another minute.

She ruthlessly tamped down any feelings of guilt that niggled at her. Today she felt carefree and alive, and she wasn't going to let anything destroy it.

* * *

"My God," Varek muttered, dazed at the sight of Christina as she descended the stairs. She was a vision of beauty that struck him dumb with a lust that almost staggered him. A gown of shimmering blue sheathed her slender figure, highlighting each and every lush curve, and the tops of her breasts gleamed in the candlelight making his mouth go instantly dry. Even her hair was a feast for the senses as it was piled high in a loose spill of curls and tendrils that brushed her long neck and bare shoulders with a sensuous caress that made him want to bury his face there. She looked like a wanton fairy, delicate and carnal, coming down to earth to haunt him.

He knew Christina to be beautiful, but it was a beauty he had always taken for granted. He loved Christina, not for just her physical beauty, or just her wit, or just her intelligence and compassion, but as a melding of all these qualities that made her so dear to him. However, the vision standing before him made him want to tear that alluring, sinful gown from her body and take her right there on the floor of the consulate.

He realized he was shaking he was so sexually charged, and desperately he looked about for something, anything, to help him — a glass of ice would do nicely, he thought with a desperate sort of humor. Raising a hand, he rubbed his lips, already hungry for a taste of her gleaming breasts, which were barely contained by a layer of thin silk.

Christina hesitated when she saw the horror on Varek's face. Suddenly she felt gauche, like a schoolgirl trying to dress up for her beau. Pulling the shawl about her breasts, she suggested hesitantly, "Perhaps I should change. Maybe this is not the best dress to wear for tonight's festivity?"

It might not be correct for Tina's ball, but it would be perfect for his bed. Silently, he groaned. All these weeks he had tossed and turned in a torrent of sexual frustration, starved for the taste of her, the scent of her, the feel of her. After this vision of her seared into the retinas behind his eyes, he doubted he would ever sleep again.

When Christina started to turn away for the stairs, Varek almost jumped forward, taking her arm. She looked up at him with such an expression of embarrassment that he wanted to cry and laugh at the same time.

"I must look ridiculous?"

"You look so stunning that I don't even know how to express it." His voice was raspy with the lust that held him hostage. "I am speechless, lark."

Not quite believing him, she looked down at herself and blushed. It *was* an indecent gown. "I'm going to change. Will you wait?"

"No." He drew her closer; he had to, or expire then and there. "Please don't. I love how you look; it is just that you took my breath away when you walked down those stairs. You are so beautiful, I don't think I ever realized how much till this moment." And it was true. The years had been very kind to Christina. Her stunning looks had only been enhanced with maturity, and he was more determined than ever that they grow old together. He had lost enough years as it was.

She gave him an uncertain smile. "You are sure?"

"Absolutely." How the hell was he going to survive this evening? he silently groaned. If keeping his hands off her had been a trial before, tonight it was going to be sheer torture.

"Papa?"

His little glass of ice, come to the rescue, he thought comically as he turned around to see Tina standing in the doorway.

"Are you coming?" It was obvious to the adults that Tina knew this was her night and they must not keep her waiting. Christina's heart tumbled as she looked Tina over, bedecked in a froth of silk and satin,

her white-blond tresses tamed into a waterfall of curls down her back. Christina still couldn't believe the matching beauty of father and daughter; it was uncanny to look upon.

Varek grinned at her, and holding out his arm, she took it gladly. Tina smiled as they approached, her shining eyes studying every inch of Christina. "You look pretty!"

Varek raised a brow. "I told you so," he teased, pressing her arm against his side.

"Well, I do admit that now I feel better with Tina's approval." And turning to the little archduchess, Christina thoroughly praised her own impressive person as she took Tina's little hand into her own.

Together, the three entered the carriage and were off to Tina's first ball.

* * *

Princess Maria's palace was a hive of pomp and ceremony and hilarious fun as Varek and Christina escorted an excited Tina through room after room of delight designed only for the children's joy. The children seemed to show their thanks in the only way children knew how, with exuberant squeals and full-bellied laughs that had the indulgent adults grinning and applauding. There was no dearth of sovereigns and dignitaries at this sprightly affair, for everyone had turned out in record numbers to witness this most novel of festivities.

Varek and Christina soon found themselves deserted as Tina ran from room to room to marvel at the acts of sleight of hand and shadow shows and wandering petting zoos and other marvelous treats. She could hardly contain her giddiness, and soon she was making fast friends with other awestruck children her own age. Varek felt content to let her roam as she wished as he had brought with them a small army of nursemaids and footmen to make sure she didn't get into any mischief, and no harm befell her. So the happy couple meandered through the rooms, enjoying the sport of children ranging everywhere from the littlest toddler to young adults who were reluctantly enjoying the ensuing mayhem.

As enjoyable a time as Christina was having, sadness underlay her joy as she missed Eddie and thought wistfully how much he would have enjoyed this.

"I wish Eddie was here with us," Varek murmured, his eyes watching her with sympathy as they stood before a puppet show amidst the laughter of dozens of children.

Christina looked at him with a grateful smile. "Thank you. He would have loved this. I know he would love Tina."

He took her hand and squeezed it. She took his arm, and leaning against him they moved on, in silent accord, exchanging greetings with acquaintances. And every face they looked into from their past gazed fondly at them, accepting the fact that they were a couple who belonged together and that this was meant to be. It made it all the harder for Christina, for she knew that in her heart she belonged at Varek's side. With him she felt cherished and protected and, most importantly, she knew she was loved unconditionally.

Gazing about her, enjoying the children's excitement, she suddenly paused. "Varek." She tugged on his arm and directed his attention across the room. "Look over there. It is Adam."

Varek's tranquil gaze immediately found the Polish prince, Adam Czartor yski. The handsome prince was standing much too close to the Empress Elizabeth, his solemn gaze watching her every move. Both Varek and Christina could just imagine the pain the empress must be suffering as both her children, her daughter from Adam and, years later, her daughter from Czar Alexander, had died in infancy. She has been childless ever since. And the one thing the Russian empress wanted above all else was a child to love. Unfortunately, Varek and Christina could empathize only too well with her devastating sense of loss and failure.

When Christina saw the empress look over her shoulder at Adam, then turn away again with a dejected tilt of her head, Christina wondered if Elizabeth felt any joy in her reunion with her old love, or if his presence only impressed upon her more the despair of what her life had become.

When Varek started to move them toward the couple, Christina hesitated. It just brought their own tragedy that much more to the forefront to witness the devastation of lost love in another couple they cared about.

"I can't talk to them, Varek. I just can't." She looked up into his eyes that had darkened in tandem with her distress. "You go. I think I will wander about and find Laure."

Nodding, Varek brought her hand to his lips. Smiling, he drew a finger down her cheek in a tender caress. "I will find you later, my love. Don't wander too far," he admonished her with a seductive wink, before he strode off to speak with Adam.

Not bearing to look at the star-crossed lovers anymore, Christina turned away and set herself the task of looking for Laure in the press of revelers. Soon she was laughing again, as she lightly was dodging children and rakes alike, the men around her admiring her with an appreciation that actually had her blushing and rather proud of herself.

"Good Lord, you look beautiful," came an exclamation from close behind her. Whirling around, Christina hugged Laure. The princess looked frazzled but happy as she kept an eagle eye on her boisterous brood. Laure stepped back, her incredulous eyes running up and down Christina's gown, and touching on her hair. "I hardly recognize you!"

Christina laughed self-consciously as she pulled the shawl over her shoulders. "Was I so drab before?"

"No, of course not. It is just that you look so . . . "

"Wanton," Christina injected dryly.

"Alluring."

"Shameless."

"Lud, Christina, half the women in this room are more scantily dressed than you."

"If that's possible," she mumbled, looking about the crowded room at the other women who were indeed dressed in less than her. Many even had their skirts dampened, an affectation from the French court that many ladies still held true to.

"Varek must be in heaven tonight," Laure jested as she directed a maid to chase after her youngest son as he shot by them, pursing a squealing piglet.

Christina remembered so clearly Robert's aversion to her dress. He had said it made her look like a slut — perhaps his words had been more kindly expressed, but his meaning was clear enough. Perhaps Varek had thought the same, despite all his protestations to the contrary. "I honestly don't know what he thinks. When I first came down the stairs his mouth dropped open and he stared at me with the most incredulous look in his eyes. I think he was shocked, and not in a good way."

"He was doubtless wondering how he was going to make it through the evening without exploding in his pants," came droll murmur from behind them.

Gasping at the crudeness of the comment, Christina and Laure spun around to see the Princess Bagration — the obvious culprit of the risqué comment — and Maria Esterhazy watching Christina with equal smiles of amusement. The Princess Bagration was wearing a sheer sheath of a gown that could only be deemed shocking in the extreme, even by the most liberal of minds. Christina blinked at the flimsy creation, relieved to see that she was overdressed next to this stunning lady.

Soon the ladies were in a lively conversation about men, their appetites, and whether to fulfill them or not. Of course Christina and Laure felt out of their depth in the scandalous commentary, which was readily joined by any number of other women meandering by, and soon they were laughing with a much gusto as the groups of men scattered about the many rooms. Princess Maria had to excuse herself many times in her role as hostess, but she always came back, having too good a time to miss the hilarious comments being thrown about with such irreverent aplomb.

"There he is again," muttered Laure, as she nudged Christina's elbow.

She looked around and saw Varek watching her from across the room. He was standing in a tight knot of men, obviously not listening to a thing they were saying. His entire attention was transfixed on her. She flushed when all the ladies turned, as one, to watch the archduke across the room.

"He has been pacing around you like stallion that knows it is going to be castrated in the morning," Princess Fürstenberg told Christina dryly.

The women laughed merrily while Christina blushed yet again, if that was possible. She felt she was burning up, her skin was so sensitive to Varek's every visual caress across the crowded room. Then reluctantly she joined in the merriment around her. It did feel liberating to be so accepted again. She felt like the girl she had been all those years ago, parading about on Varek's arm, knowing she was the envy of every woman in the room. It was vain, and conceited and . . . exhilarating.

And the reason for this sense of euphoria stood across the room from her, staring at her like she was his last drink of water before a drought. With this reckless feeling bedeviling her she almost wished he would

take the decision out of her hands and just ravish her. Closing her eyes, she sighed, picturing Varek doing exactly that; she wanted to be thrown over his shoulder and carried away to his bed. She wanted to spend blissful, carnal hours tussling with him between cool sheets.

Opening her eyes, her gaze met his with a clash of flaming desire and she shuddered, her heart speeding up till she felt strangled. Holding his look, she willed him to come to her.

And he did, his fierce gaze never wavering from her, as he strode purposefully across the floor toward her, a predator finally tired of the chase and closing in for the kill — and Christina couldn't think of anything sweeter than to die in Varek's arms.

She unconsciously stepped away from the circle of ladies, and when he reached her side, they were standing alone. Taking her hand in his he murmured low, his voice a silken whisper for her ears alone, "Do you remember our pact, lark?"

Her heart was now pounding in her ears and she could only nod.

His fingers tightened about hers. "I am claiming my kiss. Now." And with this seductive promise ringing in her ears, he pulled her along behind him.

She followed blindly, almost running to keep up with his longer stride, her eyes on the broad width of his back. She was barely aware of the maze of halls and rooms they traversed, or the stairs they climbed. She only knew that finally he pushed open a door, pulled her in and snapped it shut. Immediately she was in his arms, his mouth voraciously claiming hers, his arms bands of hard muscles that wouldn't let her go.

And she didn't want to go anywhere. With a whimper of need, her arms were around his neck and she was hanging on for her own life. At that moment nothing else existed in the world for either of them as they claimed, with selfish need, what they had been denied for years, and their tongues mated in a dance never forgotten.

Varek's hands roamed her body, caressing every bewitching inch he could reach, and frantic to expose to his hands and mouth every inch he couldn't. He insinuated his knee between her legs, and when she urgently pressed her heat against his thigh, straining tighter against him, his groan was deep and long.

Before either knew it, her bodice was somehow around her waist and Varek's hot hands were cupping and kneading her aching breasts.

His mouth left hers, traveling down her neck, nipping and stroking her heated flesh till he reached his desired goal, the swollen tips of those generous globes he held reverently in his hands. Bemused, Varek could only stare at them for a lost moment. He didn't remember them this large, or lush. His mouth was parched, hungry as he bent down and drew one hard nipple into his mouth.

Christina collapsed in his arms, sobbing with the joy of it, the absolute carnal truth of this moment. This was where she belonged, where she was meant to be — now and forever. When Varek's teeth gently nipped her, she cried out and rode his hard thigh, lost in the frenzy of the tumultuous yearnings, her body on fire . . . on fire . . .

When his fingers touched the molten heat of her, searing her through the silk of her gown, she threw her head back and sobbed, "Varek!"

He raised his head and his whisper was a harsh rasp against her cheek. "I am here, lark. Right here. Come to me." His fingers began to stroke her with a feverish intent.

"No!"

The word slithered through his crazed lust like acid. At first he denied her whispered moan; denied the cruelty that she could even utter such a cursed word, and his fingers sank deeper between her thighs, wishing he could rip the silk apart and plunge into the very depths of her. But again he heard her shuddered moan, "Varek, please no." He felt tears on her hot cheeks, and still he was tempted to ignore her bloody convictions and just take her — here, now, forever.

His own body shuddering, he froze, his arm clamping her wilting body against his, his other hand cupping the weeping heat that belonged to him. He wanted to scream out his frustration. After a long, long moment, he gave a savage curse and struck his hands viciously against the wall behind her, trapping her between his arms.

She flinched at the suppressed violence shuddering through his body. She was barely able to hold herself upright without his arms supporting her, and she collapsed back against the wall. "I can't, Varek. You know, I can't."

He felt like strangling her. "No, damn you, I don't know," he spat out, his glare a blaze of condemnation.

Feeling pinned beneath his pained rage, Christina closed her eyes and bit her lip. Panting, she couldn't understand it herself. More than anything she wanted to be in his arms, to take this moment to its joy-

ous conclusion, but she couldn't. She felt like sinking down into a huddle and crying, so great was her confusion.

Varek stared down at Christina's face with a tumult of so many swirling emotions he couldn't even think straight. He couldn't begin to understand why she said no just when it seemed she had surrendered to him — and to her own need. But then the complexity of this woman was one of the things that held him in such thrall. Her convictions, her morals; she was a person who was above pride, or selfishness or greed. She was his lark and, he above all people, should understand her.

He felt a surge of tears sting his nose, and his jaw flexed with the force it took to fight them back. Breathing deeply, he slowly eased the suffocating misery. Finally, he sighed. Leaning his forehead against hers, he closed his eyes and whispered, "Yes. I know."

Her arms wrapped around his chest and she leaned against him, her cheek pressed against the tightness in his chest, where his heart was breaking again. "Oh God, why did we have to find each other again? It is so unfair!"

With a dragging sense of defeat, he wrapped her in his arms and he held her close, the feel of her body pressed against his a memory that would have to sustain him again for more years than he wanted to think about. Maybe he should just go, leave Vienna, and never look back. His heart froze at the thought, but perhaps it would be for the best. Slowly, he released her and stepped back. The sight of her standing there in her rumpled gown, her breasts still exposed to his hungry gaze, was torture.

Christina looked into his eyes as he stood before her, passive and remote. Slowly, she drew up her bodice. "I love you — with my entire heart and soul, I love you. But I have a child waiting for me in England that I love every bit as much. Please understand that what I do is for him alone."

At least there was no mention of the saintly Robert any more, he thought spitefully. In a deadened voice, already knowing it was a lost cause, he said numbly, "We could make it work. We could live in England, where you could see Eddie as much as you needed, and as much as he needed you."

"What would you do if the situation was reversed? In order to live with me, would you give up Tina?"

His eyes narrowed into a heated glare. The sexual frustration still surging through him made him edgy and vindictive. "Of course, not," he snapped. "Why would I need to? I would not be ashamed to raise my child with you."

Anger curled about her heart. "Is that what you think? I would be ashamed for you to raise my son?"

Those sensual lips were now thinned with ire. "You have stated as much, feeling your honor would be so tainted that even your son could never love you."

"Devil take you, Varek, there is no reasoning with you!" Christina turned on her heel and headed for the door.

"Christina, don't you dare walk out that door! Is that your answer to everything? To run away?" Spinning about, she shouted back at him, "I did not run away! You threw me away!" Panting, she stared at him with the rage she had never allowed herself to show. When he stalked toward her, she held her ground and returned his glare with equal fierceness.

"I did not *throw* you away!" he gritted out, so sick to death of having to defend himself to this woman. He grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her. "I was trying to protect your life. Never in all our years together did I realize what a selfish little bitch I loved. You *ran*, Christina! You ripped our lives apart to get even with me for keeping you safe."

Wrenching out of his grip, she pulled back and slapped him. He froze, and stared down at her in shock. Primitive satisfaction surged through her and, pulling back her hand, she slapped him again — then again. God, it felt so *good*! she thought with a sense of liberating fury.

Varek flinched but, seeing the ravaged pain in her eyes, he did nothing to stop her. If this was what she needed, then by God, he would stand steady for her, even if she put a bullet through his heart. His face was burning, his heart was in tatters and his arms longed to pull her close, yet all he could do was stand steady and accept her enraged pain, wanting nothing more than to cleanse her soul.

"Damn you, Varek! How I *hate* what you did to me! You had no right to make that decision!" She brought up her fists and slammed them against his chest. "You didn't even discuss it with me. What was I, just some possession, some lifeless doll you didn't want broken?" She struck him again, her voice cracking with the sobs that were stran-

gling her. "You had no right to ruin my life. It should have been my decision." Crying, she leaned heavily against him, her face buried against his chest. "It should have been *my* decision." The last words came out in a choked whimper.

Varek's arms came up and enfolded her close. With a weary sigh, he leaned his bruised cheek against her hair. "I gave you no say, my love, because I knew what you would do, and that wasn't an option. You were the most important thing in my life. Even having lost you all these years, I would still make the same decision if it meant keeping you alive. I love you Christina, and I could no more have stood back and seen you endangered than I could have hurt you myself."

"But you did hurt me," came her muffled accusation.

"I'm sorry," he murmured, his lips pressed against her temple. "I am *so* sorry, but I had no choice."

"Yes you did."

"No, Christina, I had none."

Raising her head, her tearstained eyes stared up into his with a numb finality. "And now I have none."

He knew he couldn't continue to fight her like this. Her nobility was too innocent, too consuming. When Christina loved, she loved with her entire being. Her son had a part of her that he could never touch and it hurt like hell. It should have been their son that was inspiring such devotion. It should have been his son that she had carried under her heart.

Knowing nothing else could be said between them, he gently kissed her temple. "We have to go find Tina," he told her with a heavy sigh.

Sniffing, she nodded, her head resting again on his broad chest. She just didn't want to let go of him.

"Do you feel better?" A handkerchief was in his hand and gently brushed against her cheek.

Taking it from him, she blotted her eyes and nose. "Strangely, yes." She gave a watery chuckle.

"Well, that is good, since my face hurts like the devil."

Her head jerked up and she stared aghast at the skin of his cheeks, which was indeed red and flushed. Tsking in regret at her selfish actions, she reached up and cupped his hot cheeks. Then she kissed one gently, then the other. "I am so sorry, my love."

His heart skipped a beat. It was the first time she had called him that since they had been reunited. Shaking his head, his own hands

covered hers as she caressed his face. "Letting out rage is cathartic. I think we both needed this."

This time she pressed a feather-soft kiss on his lips before she stepped back. Self-consciously she patted her hair, as she looked distractedly about her for her shawl. "How can I possibly go down looking like this? I am so embarrassed. What will everyone think?" She deliberately applied herself to making her gown and hair presentable. She couldn't look at Varek anymore, especially with the sight of the large canopied bed standing in majestic state behind him. For the first time she realized they were in a bedchamber. Blushing, she flinched when Varek draped the shawl around her shoulders.

"What does it matter what they think? We know what went on here, and you have nothing to feel guilty about."

"Except loving you," she couldn't help saying sadly as she turned to stare up at him solemnly. Stepping closer to him, she rearranged his cravat, which was hopelessly rumpled. How she missed this simple task.

His eyes slid shut. "God, lark, don't say that to me now or I may not let you go." He grabbed her fussing hands and bent his head to kiss her fingers for a lingering moment before he set her away from him again. He tucked a silken curl behind her ear, then walked toward the door.

"Will you do me a favor?" Her hesitant question broke the sudden silence between them.

"Anything."

"Forgive Sergei."

His lips quirked, and he asked with a comical reluctance, "Must I?"

Thankful for his attempt to lighten the mood, she offered him a stern frown as she marched up to him. "Yes, you must."

"Oh, all right," he grudgingly agreed like a sulky little boy. Then with an endearing grin, he opened the door, and held out his hand to her. "Are you ready?"

Supplying her own brave smile, she slipped her hand into his and together they went in search of Tina.

She almost resented Varek for what had happened here, for her wound had finally been lanced and was now healing. What she had feared was happening — she was letting Varek back into her heart without any reservations of guilt or anger. She was healing, and just in time for her heart to be ripped in two again.

* * *

They found Tina squealing amid a boisterous crowd of children who were scampering about under a huge tree whose golden branches were bowed under the weight of numerous toys and trinkets. Tina immediately spotted her father as they walked into the room. Running over to him, she grabbed his hand and pulled him under one branch where a brightly feathered bird was perched. A golden cord dangled from its jeweled beak, and when Tina tugged the cord a sweet melody trilled forth. Giggling, she looked past her father to Christina, her eyes dancing with delight. Turning back to Varek, she pleaded prettily, "Please, Papa, I want the lark!"

Varek looked over Tina's bobbing head at Christina and her breath hitched at the look of such love in his eyes. Then he told Tina in no uncertain terms, "So do I, little love."

As the gifts were being raffled off for a charity, they had to wait with an excited Tina inspecting every gift won and stripped from the tree before the auctioneer finally reached her glittering bird. Varek won the bid with his first offer, gasps of surprise floating among the guests at the generosity of his bid.

The bird was taken down and placed into Tina's arms. "I will hang her over my bed," she pronounced as they made their way over to their hostess to extend their thanks for such a joyous fête.

Princess Maria glanced at Christina and, seeing the wounded look in her eyes behind the polite demeanor, could only assume that all their speculations about what had happened behind that closed door was just that — speculation and nothing more.

Which was a true pity, for if anyone needed a good tumble between the sheets, it was Christina.

Sixteen

Vienna sparkled under a fresh blanket of snow, and wanting to enjoy the pristine morning Christina persuaded Sergei to accompany her for a stroll in the *Prater*. He did so, but his heavy-lidded eyes and yawns spoke of a long night; where, she didn't want to know. To compensate for his kindness, she directed their steps to his favorite *kaufeehause* and he only started to come alive after a steaming cup was placed in his hands. She smiled when with his first sip, he gave a deep sigh of relief and offered her an audacious wink.

When she noticed Castlereagh enter the crowded room, she was surprised. It was unusual for this reclusive man to be out and around alone; if he wasn't escorting the viscountess, or attending some fête where he felt the need to socialize for political reasons, he was buried under a mound of work at the consulate. He barely took the time to find the respite of sleep, let alone idle away important hours at a *kaufeehause*.

She waited a few minutes to see if he was here to meet someone, but when it was apparent he was looking about for an empty table, she stood up and hailed him over. A smile of relief seemed to ease the strain on his features upon seeing her, and pausing to acknowledge a few acquaintances on the way, he weaved his way through the tables to her side. He greeted them both, bowing over her hand, and when Sergei held out an empty chair for him, he demurred till she brushed aside his protestations.

"I must admit I am surprised to see you here, my lord." Christina told him after they were settled. She looked closely at his face and saw a weariness in his eyes that normally wasn't there. He appeared defeated, which was absurd for Castlereagh held a tight rein on

everything about him. She doubted if the word defeat was even in his vocabulary.

"I am afraid I suddenly had this urge to get out of my office, and the morning looked so beautiful that I did just that. As my wife was already out, I simply took off on my own." His words sounded a bit forced, even to himself, and when a cup was placed before him, he applied his attention to sweetening it.

Castlereagh swallowed a sip of coffee along with his depression, and took this opportunity to inform Christina of the latest information. "I am pleased to tell you that your husband should be back within the next few days." The expression that flitted across her face was beyond even his intuitive abilities to decipher. However, he had the feeling she was not pleased. "And then on the tail of this, I am sorry to tell you that you will only have him for a few days before I must send him off again. The negotiations are not going as well as we had hoped and I need to communicate with Wellington again. I pray you will not think too unkindly of me, my lady," he asked with a respectful smile.

Christina took in his words and felt a myriad of sensations sweep her body, but didn't seem to know what she felt. Feeling too disjointed to speak of Robert, she queried instead, "Do you see the negotiations reaching a conclusion anytime soon?"

With a sigh, Castlereagh cast his tired gaze about him, then reluctantly shook his head. "I fear not, my lady. And I am afraid England is not happy with my skill at the table."

Christina glanced sharply at him. "How so?" With a shrug, Castlereagh turned back to her with a rueful smile. "How can they be happy with our progress when none has been made? They intimate that I am not forceful enough. Yet when I take a calculated risk they ridicule me for being too rash. I can do nothing right, it seems." For a moment Christina thought he was going to say more but apparently thought better of it; Castlereagh was nothing if not cautious.

Suddenly, she understood what he was alluding to, and she was appalled, for if anyone had kept these delicate mediations from falling apart it was this gifted man. "They mean to recall you." It was not even a question.

He paused then nodded slightly. "I pray you keep this knowledge to yourselves." This command was directed across the table at Sergei.

Sergei gave a solemn nod. "Of course, my lord. On my life."

Castlereagh gave him a strained smile, then looked at Christina and explained, "Hence the need for Robert's attention in this matter. The least amount of people privy to this information the better. If all goes well, the change of England's authority will cause as little disruption as possible in the negotiations."

"Wellington," she said tonelessly.

With an enigmatic smile, he nodded. "Wellington. The situation in Paris has become tenuous, to state it mildly. After the last assassination attempt we all felt it wise to remove him. Bringing him to Vienna to continue with the negotiations solves the problem of getting him out of Paris with honor and the pride of England intact. However, he is still insisting he has much to accomplish in Paris before he can come here. It could be months yet before we see him, if he has anything to say about it."

"Months?" She stared at him in horror. She looked at Sergei and saw his own shock. She knew he wanted the Congress over as much as she did.

Castlereagh sighed at the stunned look on the faces across from him. "I am trying to impress upon him the need to arrive as soon as possible, for Parliament is eager to get me out of here."

Christina was beginning to despair of ever seeing her son again. Wetting her lips, she asked hesitantly, "Would it be a problem if I was to return to England?" When she saw the beginning of a frown enter his eyes, she quickly added, "It could be just for a visit. But, if you see the Congress progressing into spring, I would like to see my son." Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Sergei shift in his chair.

Castlereagh pondered her request, tempted to honor her wish and send her home, but suddenly Massallon caught his eye, and a surreptitious message passed between the two men. Castlereagh glanced at Christina and the pleading hope in her eyes did nothing but exasperate him. He was getting so tired of manipulating people's lives. He could sympathize with the viscountess for he wanted nothing more than to return to Ireland and forget Europe and England and all the damn responsibilities that were beginning to suffocate him. But he knew what message Massallon had given him with that look. To send Christina away would earn the ire of the emperor's favorite cousin.

Biting back an uncharacteristic curse, Castlereagh firmed his resolve and explained tactfully, "I am afraid I can't allow that, my lady. There is just too much to be done here, and my wife does appreciate your support." He felt such a surge of guilt as Christina quickly looked down, biting her lips, her distress only too obvious.

On the spur of the moment he decided to offer her a concession to ease her sorrow — he was, after all, a diplomat, he thought wryly. "However, I see no reason why your son could not visit you here. In truth, he is of an age where he might actually enjoy the excitement of a trip, and Lord knows there are enough children among the Congress to keep him company." They both knew he was referring to the hoards of children present last night at Princess Maria's diminutive ball.

He finally felt a sense of accomplishment with his political prowess when a glow of gratitude shone from Christina's beautiful eyes. It was disheartening to think it was his first in weeks.

"My lord, that sound like a wonderful idea." She paused as a shadow of a frown flitted across her face. After a moment, she entreated, "If you could perhaps mention it to Robert? He would listen to you."

Meaning the man didn't listen to his wife, Castlereagh assumed with a flash of anger at the dolt. The man should have sent for her son a month ago when they were all aware of the slow progress of the Congress. Unfortunately, he was becoming disenchanted with the ambitious young viscount since the Congress. Perhaps he should just transfer Basingstoke's service to Wellington's staff now and be done with it. Let the duke straighten him out; he was used to dealing with the sulks of young men. After all, he had an army of them to deal with.

"Of course I will, my dear. I will discuss it with him as soon as he arrives. Well . . ." he quickly finished his coffee in one long swallow. "I need to get back to my work." Standing, he bowed over her hand. "This has been a pleasure. Thank you for inviting me to join you." Then with a nod to Sergei, he was gone, his strides long and hurried, as if he couldn't wait to get back to his office.

Christina turned to Sergei with shining eyes. "Oh, Sergei, to see Eddie again! Come, let's go make the arrangements!" With that giddy thought, she was up and hurrying out of the crowded room.

Sergei followed more slowly, concerned about how Robert was going to take another directive in regards to his wife.

* * *

Castlereagh was correct in his assumptions. England recalled him, and now he must defend his actions before the House of Commons. For the viscount it was just one more irritation heaped atop a growing stack of failed attempts in the negotiations that seemed to do nothing more than amble aimlessly about in an unending circle of petty squabbling.

Despite this, Castlereagh held to his optimism that the Allies would come together, and he hoped his dear friend, the Duke of Wellington, would succeed where he had obviously failed. Castlereagh was if anything pragmatic, and he knew his inherent coldness had not endeared him to the more earthy Europeans, with whom he found himself at a distinct disadvantage. However, the hero of the Peninsular Wars could do no wrong as far as most of the world was concerned, and Castlereagh fervently prayed that Wellington's considerable charm would ultimately win England's concessions.

Castlereagh was also true to his word about Robert, for not a week later he finally arrived in Vienna. Upon his arrival Castlereagh immediately closeted himself with Robert for several hours. When he emerged he did not hide the fact that he was in a sullen rage, of which Christina bore the brunt. They shared a quietly hostile supper and then, without a word to his wife, he retired to his room. The few days he remained in Vienna were conducted in the same manner, except that he did not even dine with her. Soon he was gone again, and it was from Castlereagh that she learned he would remain in Paris with Wellington. He was now assigned to the duke as attaché — a promotion for him. It was quite obvious to Christina, though, that Robert had not considered it so.

Her husband had left only one directive for her: Eddie was to remain in England.

At her husband's abrupt departure, Christina could only feel a building rage at the callous way he had treated her, as if she was of no more consequence than one of his mistresses. She was tempted to write to Edward and invite them to Vienna and damn Robert to hell if he gave her grief over it.

But she didn't. For despite all her growing animosity against Robert, she could not rid herself of an underlying sense of guilt. Robert was a man of pride, just like most men, and his self-respect had certainly tak-

ing a beating during this assignment. Perhaps if she had been a better wife, Robert wouldn't be treating her so harshly.

So, she was determined to try harder to be the wife he expected, even if it killed her. And if that meant avoiding Verek to within an inch of her life, then she would do it.

Yet no matter what happened at the negotiation tables, or how her life was being torn asunder, the Congress never lacked for entertainment as it inexhaustibly danced on; its intrigues, its foibles, its excesses were celebrated with a flamboyance that impressed even the carefree Viennese. And in the midst of all this carnal exuberance, Christina was sunk in miserable loneliness. She missed her baby. She missed her brother-in-law, the duke. She missed the haven that Kerkmoor had become for her. But, most of all, deep in the very heart of her soul, she missed her life of six years past when she had walked these very streets at Verek's side.

However, the news Laure shared with her one sunny morning gave her a new outlook on life that was just as dazzling as the sun reflecting off the newly fallen snow.

"I am going to have a baby." Laure's calmly spoken announcement was belied by the look of giddiness in her eyes.

With a squeal of delight, Christina swept the slighter woman up into her arms. "Oh, Laure, how wonderful! When?"

"Late summer. Clemens is beside himself with joy. I think he is finally over her, Christina." It was the first true smile Christina had seen upon her friend's lips since she had come to Vienna.

And, in truth, it had appeared that the prince's attentions had returned to his wife. He was only seen to notice his ex-mistress, the Duchess of Sagan, when the dictates of polite society requested it of him. Christina prayed with all her heart it was true. Looking at Laure's radiant face at that moment, Christina could almost believe that, indeed, love could conquer all.

If only . . .

Christina pushed that useless thought aside, refusing to allow thoughts of Verek to intrude on this happy occasion.

With buoyed spirits, the two ladies sat down for an animated chat, speaking of the up-coming event: a day of festive sleighing through the countryside to the Schrönbrunn, the majestic royal palace on the outskirts of Vienna.

Due to the warmer weather, which had turned the roads into a quagmire of mud and slush, the festivities had already been postponed twice. But with the new snow and the crisp freezing of the past few days, it seemed the event was on again, scheduled for the next day. Christina had to admit she was looking forward to it.

"Have you heard from Robert?" Laure asked with an abrupt change of topic.

Christina hesitated, then shook her head, not knowing quite what to say.

Laure raised her brows in question as she watched her friend closely. "Glad or disappointed?"

Christina fiddled with her cup and saucer, afraid to meet Laure's eyes. "Robert is not pleased with the situation. He barely spoke a word to me the few days he was here." Sighing, she shrugged, then leaning forward she put her tea down. "I can't say I blame him. He is not a stupid man. I am sure he knows why he is being shuffled back and forth."

"You must admit it is easier on everyone not to have him here."

Raising her eyes, Christina stared at Laure with worry. "Is it? In all fairness, Robert should be at my side. He is my husband, Laure. If anyone should leave it should be Varek. Or me."

Laure couldn't help but be aware of Christina's dispirited attitude in everything she approached this last week. She couldn't seem to relax, and her pallor was not the typical paleness of the aristocratic lady's complexion. Setting her teacup down, she asked as gently as she could, "Have you been with Varek?"

The look of outrage Christina sent her spoke more eloquently than any verbal denial could. Tactfully, she suggested, "Maybe that is the problem. Perhaps if you and Varek . . . well, came together again it might ease some of the pain."

Christina stared at her in abject horror. "Laure, what can you mean? If that were to happen I would be lost. That can't happen," she was almost shouting when she cried out wildly, "Ever!"

Regretting ever bringing up the subject, Laure leaned forward and poured fresh tea. "My dear, I did not mean to upset you. It is just that lately —"

Christina gave a bitter laugh as she interrupted, "Lately? Ever since Varek walked back into my life I have been walking a fence. On one side is a placid, comfortable life with my adored child and a man who

had treated me gently and respectfully. On the other is the love of my life, whom I yearn for with every breath in my body! On one side is the love of my son. On the other is the loss of my son. How should I be feeling, Laure? You tell me, for I certainly wish someone would."

Surging to her feet, Christina began to pace in front of her concerned friend. Back and forth she paced, like a caged animal. "Every blasted night I lie in my lonely bed wondering why. Why am I denying myself something that is taken for granted between the majority of married couples throughout Europe? Even Robert has his little bits of muslin. So why, Laure?" she demanded passionately as she spun about and glared down into Laure's shocked gaze. "I'll tell you why. Because the moment I give in to my selfish desires I am scared to death that I won't give a damn about my child back home." Christina's eyes were wild with pained confusion. "Then what, Laure? Some would shrug and say that I will have others. But even if I could, which is doubtful, considering our past, how could I ever forget my Eddie? Could you? Even for Clemens, whom you love just as fiercely as I love Varek, would you desert your children for him? Could you?" Her voice rose to a shrill pitch as she towered over Laure, who was now almost cringing back from the raging woman before her.

Knowing it unwise to mention the fact that Clemens *was* her children's father, Laure instead gave a vehement shake of her head. For, in truth, she understood what Christina was saying. "No, never! Never in a million years could I ever desert my children."

Christina seemed to come to her senses and, aware of what she was doing, took a couple of deep breaths. Turning about, she returned to her seat and sank gracefully onto the chair. With hands still shaking, she picked up her cup and saucer and took a fortifying sip of tea. When she looked up, her smile was forced, but calmness had settled about her again like a well-worn blanket. "Well, then, there you have it."

Laure merely blinked at her. After a moment of speechless staring, she cleared her throat and said faintly, "Indeed. So what think you of this beautiful snow?"

* * *

The next morning, Christina and Laure were standing on the steps of the Metternichs' apartments on the Josephplatz, looking about

themselves with bemused interest at the congestion of gaily decked sleighs and horses. The sleighs were each supplied with expensive furs for warmth and the horses were adorned with ribbons and bows braided into their manes. Down the street, surrounded by a curious crowd, an enormous sled could be seen with an orchestra dressed in Turkish costume already tuning up to lend itself to the festive atmosphere. Christina and Laure's breaths misted in the frigid air with each laughing comment as they pointed out to each other all the equally beribboned and furred ladies who were loudly complaining of the cold and voicing their displeasure rather emphatically with the open sleighs, preferring enclosed carriages in which to relax.

"How shockingly dull of them," Laure laughingly commented as they began to stroll over to the Metternichs' personal sleigh, which was to transport them. Glancing around, Christina saw Sergei mounted on his magnificent Berber stallion and gave him a wave, which he returned immediately. She saw him turn his horse in her direction. The poor dear looked terribly bored. Actually, when she squinted at him through the brilliant morning sunshine, she could swear he looked as if he was suffering from a night of excessive drink. She hadn't seen much of him lately, as he had relatives not too far from Vienna, and she knew he was taking advantage of his time here to visit them. She never knew where he was on any given day. Sadly, she wondered if he was trying to wean her away from his companionship. Perhaps he intended to remain in Austria when she went home. She was about to walk over to him when an all-too-familiar voice murmured close behind her, "Good morning, lark."

Taking a deep breath, she turned about and saw Varek, looking as magnificent as ever, his cheeks ruddy with the cold winter air and his eyes alight with laughter. Perched high on his chest was Tina, giggling and restless in his arms. Seeing the identical grin on her cherubic face was beyond her tenacious resolve to resist him, and Christina found herself grinning back as she reached up and pulled Tina's thumb from her mouth.

"We were hoping you would join us in our sleigh," Varek beseeched with an underhanded determination that he knew could not fail. He knew she could no more say no to Tina than she could say yes to him. High above them, Tina was giving an enthusiastic nod.

Sliding a look of intense ire at him, Christina accused in a low growl, "You did this on purpose, didn't you?"

An innocent look of confusion crossed his face, wisely erasing his smug grin, "I have no idea what you are alluding to." Politely, he nodded at Laure, and even gave Sergei a cordial nod of the head when he drew up beside them. " 'Morning, Massallon. Ever the faithful watchdog, eh?"

Sergei looked at Varek's daughter, and noticed her watching him with a wide-eyed curiosity. Not helping himself, he looked back at Varek and gave a ferocious growl and barked.

Tina giggled, and announced loudly, "I like him, Papa!"

Varek gazed speculatively at his old friend, and after exchanging a long, speaking glance with Christina, he returned with a grudging smile, "So do I, my pet."

Sergei froze in mid smile, and searched Varek's face with a questioning glance. Finally he muttered dramatically, rolling his eyes heavenward, "Well, that's a weight off my mind. Now if you will excuse me?" And tipping his hat at the group, he turned his horse and melded into the crowd, ignoring the teasing smiles that were cast his way by some of the local beauties.

When Varek again glanced sideways at Christina, he saw she was smiling, and softly she whispered for his ears alone, "Thank you."

Sensing the sudden tension in her father, Tina looked at him and asked artfully, "Are you in trouble again, Papa?"

Varek cast Christina a smile that almost blinded her and murmured, as his heated gaze raked her from the toes of her boots to the tip of her bonnet, boldly lingering on certain points along the way, "As always, my pet." Then his eyes met hers with a clash of audacious innuendo.

Christina narrowed her eyes and snapped, "You behave yourself or I will call Sergei back!"

Varek gave a shudder which set Tina to giggling, "Oh, heavens, who will protect me?"

"I will, Papa!" Tina shouted, still giggling.

"There you have it. I would set my imp against your watchdog any day!"

Then at the top of their lungs, father and daughter threw back their heads and shouted out together, "Huzzah!" which set most of the people around them into gales of laughter, Laure and Christina included.

"Down, Papa," Tina pushed restlessly against his chest, so Varek didn't hesitate to do as ordered.

When Tina moved to her side, and slipped her gloved hand into her own, Christina knew she was defeated. Leaning over to adjust Tina's rumpled skirts, she received a smacking kiss on her cheek, which she returned with unreserved affection.

"And how are you this morning?" she asked Tina, while trying to ignore her gorgeous father who was standing much too close. Without making it appear so, she edged away, which only invited him to step even closer.

"Cold."

"But, of course. It is winter. It is wise to be cold in winter."

Tina smiled, pleased that she was so wise for her years.

Looking sideways at Varek, Christina said with no little asperity, "Well, are you going to keep us standing here all morning?"

With a grin, he offered her his impeccably clad elbow with a gallant bow. "At your service, my lady." Looking over his shoulder, he sent Laure an audacious wink as he swept his prize away.

Laughing, Laure waved them on their way before greeting her husband, who had come to her side. She leaned into the arm he wrapped around her waist.

Staring after the beautiful trio, the prince commented dryly, "He just won't give up, will he?"

Laure shook her head as she also watched them. Her heart contracted a bit when she saw Varek throw back his head with laughter, the boom of it heard clearly above the ever-increasing distance between them. Christina lightly punched him in the side, which made Tina join in her father's hilarity. Seeing them together like this was so reminiscent of happier times that it brought tears to Laure's eyes. "Lord, I hope not," she whispered as she turned away and took her husband's arm.

Knowing they were drawing too much attention to themselves, Christina hissed, "Varek, please! Must you be so loud?"

Still chuckling, he guided them through the milling crowd to his richly appointed sleigh. Carefully, he placed Tina among the pillows and furs before turning to Christina and deliberately encircling her waist with his hands. His fingers tightened about the well-remembered feel of her.

Gasping, Christina stared up in wide-eyed astonishment as he pulled her closer. All amusement gone from his impossibly blue eyes, he was now staring down at her with a hunger that had her breathless — and equally starved.

“Ashamed to be seen with me, lark?” he asked, his voice low and his breath a gentle mist that warmed her lips. Any thought of resistance had disappeared as soon as his hands had claimed her, and so all she was capable of was a weak shake of her head.

His lips, so near her own, turned up into a smile that made hers fall open with anticipation. “Good,” he growled as he leaned in that last inch to cover her mouth with his. Her body instantly went numb, and closing her eyes, she leaned against him. His tongue swept in for a lingering taste before he pulled away. She moaned as cold air seared her moist lips, and then she felt herself airborne as he lifted her with an ease that made many women watching the tender scene sigh with envy.

Finding herself standing in the sleigh, Christina blinked down into the possessive flame of his gaze, lost to everything else around her. Suddenly, the sleigh jerked forward, and with a cry Christina instinctively grabbed hold of his shoulders.

With the lurch of the sleigh, Varek grabbed hold of her thighs, and the feel of those slender legs raised a hunger in him that had him sweating in the winter air. All he could think of were those long limbs locked in passion around his waist. He could barely breathe as he flexed his fingers, the fine wool of her skirts no barrier to his erotic thoughts.

Again the sleigh lurched, and thrown off balance with the jolt, Christina sat down with an awkward thump beside Tina, who was fussing with the furs as she tried to wiggle beneath them. Christina’s cheeks burned with embarrassment as she heard the muffled sniggers around her. Jabbing her bonnet back into place, she glared at the footman holding the horse’s head.

Varek climbed nimbly aboard, sitting on the other side of his daughter.

It was Varek’s turn to look smug as he took up the reins and maneuvered them into the long caravan that was now wending itself slowly through the streets of Vienna, where the populace was wildly cheering them on their way. In the distance a martial air rang out, barely heard over the cheering mass and the jingling bells.

"I never knew you were so devious," Christina groused as she placed her cold feet between the warmth of flannel-covered hot bricks which lined the bottom of the sleigh.

"If I am becoming so, it is completely your fault."

When she didn't answer, he demanded of her in a low voice, "You want to tell me why you have been avoiding me? What have I done?" His gaze on her face was searching, solemn.

Looking away, she watched the crowds, cheering as the cavalcade proceeded. "Please Varek, no strife today, no questions. Its such a beautiful day, can't we just enjoy it?" She turned to look him in the eye. "Please?"

After a long, thoughtful moment, he flashed another of those heart-stopping grins. "But, of course."

Giving him a grateful smile, she looked down on Tina who was bundled under the furs, and was watching the cheering crowd with wide-eyed interest. When a group of children began to run alongside the sleigh she sat up and waved back. "One thing that has been puzzling me — why is this little lady so prettily behaved this morning?"

Tina turned from waving at the adoring crowd to flash her a smile. "Papa said that if I behaved, I could give you my present."

Christina's brows rose in confusion, "A present?" She glanced at Varek. "A present for me? For this, she is behaving?"

Mysteriously, he informed her, "Oh, it's not just any present; it's very special, and she has been hounding me for days to give it to you." Then his mouth tightened as he looked away, "But we haven't seen you lately."

Glancing into Tina's excited eyes, she felt incredibly small. Here was this adorable child, starved for the love of a mother, accepting her wholeheartedly, and thoughtless to her feelings she had walked away from Tina because of her own selfish pain. She peeked sideways at Varek again, but he was looking pointedly over the horses' heads, his profile stern.

Wrapping an arm about Tina's frail shoulders, she drew her close and kissed her forehead. Tina immediately snuggled against her. *She should have been mine!* She loved this child as if she was her own. For the briefest of moments, she compared their profiles, so startlingly similar. Tina suddenly climbed to her knees and, leaning over Varek's lap, she pointed to something in another sleigh, and he grinned, wav-

ing his whip in greeting. When Tina patted her father's cheek to get his attention, Christina bit her lip. The look of tenderness he turned upon his tiny daughter forced Christina to look away in a hurry. The world around her blurred for a moment.

She heard her name, and turning back she saw both of them staring at her with identical looks of concern, their gazes a soft, shimmering blue.

"Are you alright, lark?" Varek asked quietly. Reaching out, he covered her gloved hands, which were clenched in her lap. Without thought, she turned hers over and clung to his fingers. She looked longingly into his eyes for much too long before wrenching her gaze away.

Biting her lips, she said almost desperately to Tina, "Have I told you of my son, Tina?"

Varek gave her hand a squeeze before letting her go. Tina had turned back to her with curious eyes and for the next hour, as the sleigh glided across the countryside, Varek and Tina listened raptly to her stories about Eddie. Once she started she just couldn't stop, and she blessed them for the caring attention and interested questions they shared with her.

She didn't want the day to ever end.

* * *

The evening had been as beautiful as a dream, and as Christina looked out onto the quiet countryside, blanketed in moonlit crystals, she smiled as she relived every moment. The gentle, muffled hoofbeats of the carriage horses seemed to keep rhythm with the lyrical strains of the ballet they had seen that evening which kept circling in her mind. The crisp air had the redolent scent of the orange and myrtle trees that had adorned the Schrönbrunn's ballrooms. Everything had been so perfect. And when Varek had taken her into his arms and waltzed her under the stars, she was sure time had stood still.

Hearing a rustle, she looked across from her to see Tina stirring in her sleep, oblivious in her father's arms. Varek, however, was staring at her, his eyes shimmering in the darkness.

"Did you enjoy yourself, lark?" his words whispered across the short distance, his voice a comforting rumble.

"Oh, yes," she sighed, her own smile sleepy and content. "It was a heavenly day."

"Yes, it is."

She noticed his use of the present tense and smiled. "I thought that dancer was going to secret herself in this carriage, she was so adamant to have you," she teased drowsily.

Varek's white teeth flashed in the dim light. "She was a persistent little thing."

They chuckled together. It brought back such memories for both of them: he always dodging aggressive women, and then chasing aggressive men from around her skirts. Never had either of them felt a shred of jealousy, for no one had existed in their lives but each other.

Glancing down at Tina, who was snoring with her little mouth wide open, Christina laughed softly. "She certainly gave the prince a lesson in humility."

Varek winced. "Please, don't remind me. I shall be in Marie Louise's black books for quite a while to come, I have no doubt." However, he couldn't help but grin, for he could still see his little daughter chasing Napoleon's son about the room with a wooden saber, jabbing him in the royal arse. She had been showing the conceited boy how the Allies had routed his father. Four years old and already she knew how to make her point.

"As wonderful as the entire evening was, that was, I believe, the highlight."

They chuckled together.

Suddenly all humor was wiped from his face as he sat still, staring at her. The silence stretched between them, but Christina didn't mind. It was sheer heaven sitting in this warm carriage Varek had arranged for their return to the city, watching the world sway past in a magical wonderland of ice and moonlight.

"It could be like this for us again."

She shook her head, disappointment lacing her words as she murmured, "Please don't spoil what is left of this magical evening. You start talking like this and the truce is over and I wake up. And right now I don't want to wake up. I want this dream to go on as long as possible."

Very carefully, Varek twisted on the seat and set Tina down, tucking the furs about her. Then he was sitting beside her, taking her hands into his. Slowly, he stripped off her gloves. "It doesn't have to end, lark."

With a sigh, Christina looked out the window. Sadly, she said, "I already feel myself stirring."

Then she felt her shoulders grabbed and she was twisted around to face Varek and his tightly leashed anger. "Damn you, lark!"

She stared at him, then very low, so he could barely hear her, she whispered, "Kiss me, Varek."

A sigh left his lips as he gathered her closer. She tunneled her fingers through his hair, pulling his head down as she strained even closer against him. "Kiss me till I never wake up," she pleaded. Then her lips were hungrily opening under his. She needed no coaxing to surrender to him, and when his tongue swept in, hers met it with a ferocity that had his heart stumbling and careening. The world as they knew it had vanished in that very moment, and nothing existed but them.

On this quiet, moonlit ride home they finally allowed their souls to come home from a long exile.

Christina felt alive and whole and at peace. The heat searing them had nothing to do with sexual hunger, but rather was a forging of their broken hearts into one thriving, beating whole. All other emotions were little more than dust in the wind as she clung to this man whom she loved to the very depths of her soul. This moment was theirs, and theirs alone.

She had come home.

Varek had come home.

And their souls were in heaven.

That is, until the carriage jolted to a stop and they were forced to face a reality that was a prison of impossibilities.

Their lips parted reluctantly, and as she leaned away Varek's fingers brushed her swollen lips. Again, he insisted, his voice harsh, "We don't have to wake up."

She stroked his lean cheek slowly before pushing herself completely out of his arms. "I believe we already have." Looking past him, she teased, "Hello, sleeping beauty."

Tina knuckled her eyes as she peered about with groggy curiosity. "Are we home, Papa?"

Varek, who had fallen back against the cushion and was now looking moodily out the windows, seemed to shake himself before he leaned over and took her into his arms. "We are indeed. And it's bed for you."

"But you promised, if I was good . . ."

He slid a glance at Christina's face, which was frozen into a pleasant mask. "Perhaps tomorrow would be best, pet. We are all very tired."

Tears sprang into her tired eyes. "You promised."

Seeing her like this, he knew she would not settle down until he had fulfilled his promise. Sighing, he turned to the silent woman beside them. "I am sorry, but a promise is a promise, and this lady did hold up her end of our bargain. Can you spare us a few more moments?" He watched her warily, and with a little resentment, which he could not hide.

Christina's smile warmed as she looked at Tina, who was still flushed with sleep and belligerently staring at her. "I can't wait. I have been curious all evening."

Tina's face lit up with delight. Scrambling out of her father's lap, she bounded into the waiting arms of the footman who had opened the door. This apparently was a common occurrence, for with a grin the young man swept her up and did not set her down until they were through the front entrance. Varek and Christina followed, neither touching. Varek looked grim and edgy. Christina simply felt defeated.

Once the door was closed behind them, Christina looked about in confusion, for Tina was nowhere to be seen.

"This way," Varek directed gruffly as he extended his arm, indicating his study.

As they approached the entrance, Christina could hear Tina's voice, murmuring and crooning. She also heard what sounded like puppies, yipping and whining. With an arched brow, she looked up at Varek. He was staring down at her with a brooding intensity that made her want to draw him into her arms and sooth away the pain.

"Look!" Startled, Christina spun around to see Tina standing before her with a wiggling little tan pup in her arms, which were extended to her. "She is yours. Papa said that this is the one you would want."

Christina's mouth fell open as she looked down at the precious bundle that stared up at her with a pair of eyes that were so familiar it brought tears to her own eyes. "My God," she whispered as she dropped her reticule and gently took the tiny creature into her hands. Immediately she brought the pup up to her face and laid her cheek on the velvety head. Confused, she looked at Varek. The tenderness in his eyes told her all.

"Kayla's granddaughter," he said simply.

Trembling, Christina hugged the puppy closer. It squirmed and wiggled and wanted nothing more than to plant messy puppy kisses all over her face. All at once, she was laughing and crying. When she had left Varek all those years ago, she had also left behind her best friend, and the child of her heart, Kayla, the Italian Greyhound that Varek had given her on her twenty-first birthday. She had never let herself dwell on that loss, which had left yet another hole in her heart.

Christina, glanced up sharply, as Varek's words sank in. "Her granddaughter? Then in there . . ." she looked toward the study. ". . . is her daughter? Where is Kayla?"

Varek's smile faded. "She's gone, Christina. She . . ." he hesitated, then finished slowly, "she was never the same after you left. She just slowly faded away." *As I wanted to.*

Christina buried her face against the puppy's wiggling body.

Seeing Christina's tears, Tina asked fearfully, "Don't you like her?"

Immediately, Christina looked up. Sniffling back her tears, she knelt down beside the little girl. Holding the pup in one arm, she swept Tina up in a tight embrace and held her close. "I love her, Tina! She is the best present I have ever received. Ever!"

Tina threw her arms around Christina's neck and hugged her back.

Varek swallowed thickly and, not able to take any more, he spun around on his heel and hurried out of the room. Christina was aware of his departure, and her tears this time were for a different reason.

"Want to see her mama and brother?"

"Indeed I do."

Christina stumbled to her feet and Tina tugged on her hand, pulling her along behind her. Looking over her shoulder, Christina searched in vain for Varek, but he was nowhere to be seen.

The dream was indeed over.

Seventeen

The shadows were fading as evening slowly settled in. The room was stifling hot and still Christina was cold, shivering under her nest of blankets. Her body ached and her nose felt raw and blistered.

She had a blasted cold and she was miserable.

Mostly miserable because this confounded affliction had prevented her from spending time with Varek and Tina. And time was running out. Wellington was expected by the end of the week — and Robert.

She was feeling decidedly sulky when she looked about the room, which had been her prison for the past few days. She was bored and restless. She felt unloved and forgotten . . . though why she should feel that she had no idea, for Varek was constantly sending over something: a book, soup, flowers, toys for her puppy, a variety of doctors — himself, whom she adamantly refused to see. She had her pride, after all, and she looked every bit as awful as she felt.

A painful sneeze exploded from her, and with a disgusted moan, she plucked at the covers that felt like an infant's swaddling. Peevish, she glared toward the door. Lud, how long did it take to walk one little dog? Helen should have been back ages ago. She missed her puppy.

She sighed when the door finally opened, but then was startled senseless when Robert entered the room. She lay there staring at him as if he were the last person in the world she expected to see. And he was.

Robert walked slowly to the foot of the bed and stood there, looking uncomfortable as he shifted from foot to foot, like a recalcitrant schoolboy who had been found out in a bit of mischief. He was travel-stained, obviously weary, and a couple days growth of beard shadowed his jaw. She had never seen him looking so unkempt.

Opening her mouth to say something, she sneezed instead, which actually suited her, coward that she was. Burying her nose in one of the pristine kerchiefs arranged in a neat pile at her side, she didn't know what to say, let alone how to feel.

"I heard you were not feeling well," he began, his words as hesitant as his manner. He could barely look her in the eye.

"A mere cold, more bothersome than worrying," she assured him through her nasal congestion. "What are you doing here? I thought Wellington was not supposed to enter Vienna for several days at least."

Robert shrugged. "'Tis what he wanted. He abhors fanfare, so he decided to come ahead of schedule." He sent her a sideways glance. He waited, as if expecting her to say something.

Which she should. Gently, she wiped her nose, thinking furiously. It was never easy for her to dissemble, and it was terrible how unhappy she was to see him. What a horrible person she had become, she thought bleakly. Taking a deep breath, she gave him a wane smile. "I am so sorry, Robert. I was hoping to be over this by the time you arrived. I must look an absolute fright."

Robert's smile looked relieved as he sat down carefully on the foot of the bed. Her answering smile was tentative at best. "You are always beautiful to me, Christina. Surely you know that."

That caught her off stride, and Christina peered more closely at him through the dusky light. It had been so long since he had offered her a compliment. "Is something wrong, Robert?" She couldn't help being suspicious. Fear suddenly gripped her. "Is Eddie all right?"

Robert frowned at her. "Of course he is. At least I believe he is."

Sighing, she wiped her nose and settled back into her pillows. "I'm sorry, it is just that you are acting so strangely."

He flushed as he looked away, then busied himself with lighting the lamp on her bedside table. "Forgive me. It is just that . . ." After finishing with the lamp he stood up and wandered over to the window, where he stared out into the clear evening. "I feel awful. I have since I last left you. I was an unconscionable bastard."

Christina looked down at her hands. She knew she should demur, but she held stubbornly silent, for she could not help but agree with him. Finally, she said, "It is all right, Robert. You have been under much stress. The whole delegation has."

He turned back to face her. "Don't make excuses for me, Christina. What I did . . . well, it embarrasses me. It angers me that I treat you so — hurting you, when all I want is to love you. All I want is for you to love me." He rubbed his forehead. "The problem is, I want you to love me the way you do him. While I was away I did a lot of thinking. Too much thinking, truth be told." He gave a bitter laugh. "It made me realize that I can't demand your love to suit my expectations."

Christina leaned forward, her hand outstretched, "Robert — "

"Christina, please," he cut in harshly. "I need to say this." He waited till she reluctantly relaxed again. "When I met you, my life became centered on you. I wanted you, and that was all that mattered. I didn't care who you were. I didn't care what you wanted. I didn't care where you came from." For the first time he looked her straight in the eye. "I didn't care. One way or another I would have won you. When I brought you to Kerkmoor I was actually exultant that Edward took to you so well, because I finally had something he couldn't have. You were mine, and only mine."

Frightened where this was heading, she helplessly shook her head, but he paid her no heed as he walked about the room. He didn't appear upset or angry, merely contemplative. "That pleased me, you see. The fact that you didn't want to go to London pleased me yet more, for I knew that you would always be there at Kerkmoor, waiting for me. I didn't have to worry about which men were sniffing around your skirts and which men you would find attractive. I have never liked my possessions poached on. Edward would be the first to tell you that I have always had problems dealing with my jealousy. Edward believes it is because I am resentful of being born the second son, and all that rot."

Christina stared at him, stunned. "Is that what I am? Your possession?"

He stopped and stared down at her as if seeing her for the first time. "I have to admit that once upon a time that was how I thought of you. I have always loved you, you know, from the first moment I saw you. But at the beginning it was a matter of ownership. I had to have you."

She smiled at him bitterly. "As you had to have your prize stallion, Goliath?"

Sadly, he shook his head. "At one time, yes, but now I find myself wanting above all to see you happy. I love you that much, Christina."

She blinked up at him. "What are you saying?" she whispered.

He paused, his jaw tensed with inner turmoil. His chest was rising and falling as his tension grew. "I don't know. That is the problem. I know you are not happy. I know what it would take to make you happy, and yet I don't know if I am noble enough to make the sacrifice. Does that make sense?"

Christina realized she was staring at a stranger. He looked familiar, yet this man's eyes were those of a stranger. Since coming to Vienna the man she had loved and felt comfortable with had been replaced by this rather perplexing enigma, with whom she had not the slightest idea of how to deal. "Robert, do you believe I am not happy with you?"

He studied her with wary distrust. "Can you say you are?"

"I can tell you I have not liked the man you have become since coming to Vienna."

He stretched his arms wide and said with a sense of regret, "Behold the man that I am, Christina."

Confused, she shook her head. "The man I know is gentle and generous and . . ."

"The man you knew never felt threatened. Since coming to Vienna I feel as if my world has been yanked from beneath my very feet. I see the woman I love with a passion I never even suspected gazing at a stranger with a passion she has never shown me. You have given me no reason to be gentle and generous when you are on the verge of taking away everything I live for."

She was shaking her head, "What am I taking away from you, Robert?"

"Yourself!" he shouted. Then he caught himself and raised clenched fists to his eyes. "God, Christina, look at me! I can't think straight anymore."

Christina's head was pounding with a pain that made her dizzy. Helplessly, she sneezed, then sneezed again. "Robert, I don't understand . . ."

"Of course you understand, Christina," he replied wearily, his arms dropping limp at his side.

Tears in her eyes, she stared up at him, "No, I don't. I do love you, Robert, and as soon as this horrid Congress is over, I will be returning home with you. What more do you want?"

Your soul, he thought, as ever jealous for everything. *I want what you have always given him*. His lips twisted wryly. "Ever the dutiful wife, eh, Christina? But there are many forms of love, aren't there?"

Resentment suddenly twisted in her heart. "Yes, there are, and you loved me like a possession."

"And now it is you who possess me," he told her softly. "And that's the problem, you see. You don't want me."

The silence between them grew deafening as they stared at each other. When the door opened and a little tan body came hurtling through, nails scrabbling on the slick wooden floor, Christina was thankful for the interruption. Helen, walked in, with the puppy's leash trailing in her hands. "The little lady was a good girl . . ." Her words trailed off when she noticed the viscount standing next to the bed. Immediately she dropped into a curtsy. "My lord, welcome back."

Robert was too busy staring down at the tiny creature sniffing at his boots to reply. "What is that?" he demanded irately as he sidestepped awkwardly away from the little beast that was now intent on grabbing hold of the swinging tassel on his boot.

Helen retrieved the puppy and put her into Christina's outstretched hands. Smiling, she cuddled it close and kissed the cock-eyed ears and happily received an equal amount of squirming love, which was mostly excited whimpers and sharp little nibbles that passed for kisses. "This little lady is Katie."

Seeing how laughter had softened his wife's face, which only a moment earlier had been stiff with strain, he shook his head in disbelief. Every time he turned around that bastard was doing something to put that look in *his wife's* eyes.

Looking over at Robert, Christina instantly saw the anger in her husband. "She was a gift from a little girl."

Little girl, be damned! Did she take him for a fool? "Well, as you are busy, I will come back at another time."

Surprised, Christina watched as, without another word, he stalked past Helen and out the door. In the distance she heard the door to their apartment slam shut. A question in her eyes, Helen turned to look at Christina.

Looking away, Christina busied herself with the playfully growling pup, teasing her with a knotted rag. Katie's whole life centered around a good game of tug-of-war.

Sadly, Christina was thinking that now that Robert was back she couldn't see Varek again. She was, after all, Robert's possession.

Thoughtfully, she looked at the still open door.

What had he been trying to tell her?

* * *

Varek stepped to the balustrade and looked down onto the entrance hall. Sergei was standing in the center, his hands clasped behind his back, looking about with little interest.

"You wanted to see me?" Varek's question echoed down with an eerie quality.

Sergei jerked his head back and looked up. "Good evening, your highness."

The formality made Varek unaccountably angry.

"Come up."

"Thank you, but I did not want to take up your time. I merely thought you should know that Basingstoke has returned."

News that Varek had been dreading. Taking a deep breath, he asked shortly, "How is she?"

"Still has her cold, but she is getting better."

Varek clamped down on his anger. "Don't be obtuse."

Sergei looked away. After a few moments of debate, he admitted slowly, "She is unhappy, I believe."

"How is he treating her?"

Sergei's mouth tightened. "I heard him giving directions to a few of his men to have her followed."

Varek's fingers clenched around the smooth wood. How he wished he had that bastard's neck between his hands! He nodded down to Sergei. "My thanks, Sergei."

Without another word, Sergei bowed his head and backed away.

Varek stared down on his hands, still gripping the wood with white-knuckled rage.

"Damn it to hell!" he hissed out, then slammed a fist down on the railing. He welcomed the pain shooting up his arm, bringing him back to his senses.

With Wellington now in Vienna, Varek was going to have to think of another way to get rid of Basingstoke. Either that or kill him, which wouldn't please Christina in the least.

"Hell and damnation, why don't you rid me of this pissant?" he shouted into the cavernous hall, his words echoing back to him as ominously as a death knell.

* * *

Robert never did finish the strange conversation he had begun that night, and Christina didn't know whether to be relieved or not.

No one saw much of Castlereagh or Wellington, much to the disgust of all the Congress's hostesses, for they were closeted together while the viscount brought the duke up to date on the shambles the negotiations were in. In the meantime, Robert seemed always to be underfoot. Christina had to admit she much preferred it when he had been the unconscionable bastard — his own words — and ignored her. Now his gentle esteem seemed no more than a way to keep her safely under his control and out of Varek's way.

And so the next month progressed. By the end of it Christina was ready to run screaming to the nearest church for sanctuary. The man Robert had become was a man she would never have married. He was too moody. He was too kind. He was too solicitous. He was too jealous. He was just too damned unpredictable. She couldn't turn around without him dogging her steps, asking if she needed anything, and even when she demurred, insisting that she needed something, and bound and determined to find out what it was.

His love, or this new version of it, was stifling her. Much better if she had remained a mere possession that he had taken for granted. She never realized until now how much she had cherished the independence his behavior had once afforded her. But Vienna had changed all that, and even when they returned to England, it might never be as it once was between them.

She had never been a violently inclined person, but she was afraid that if he asked her one more time how she was feeling, she was going to take Katie's leash and wrap it around his congenial throat.

And in the background Varek watched and waited. He seemed to know of her frustration and his amusement taunted her every move.

Blast all men anyway!

Eighteen

Christina was sitting at breakfast when Robert rushed into the apartment and headed directly for his desk. "It is confirmed. Napoleon has escaped Elba and is marching toward Paris."

Placing her cup in its saucer, Christina set Katie down and rose to her feet. "Is there war in France?"

"No, they seem to be welcoming him back with open arms, the fools!"

"But what of King Louis?"

"Fled to the Netherlands."

"Oh, my God. There will be war again, won't there?" Silly question, for the Allies, who were gathered together at this very moment in hopes of arranging a world peace for the future, would hardly sit back while Napoleon ran rampant again. She hurried over to Robert and placed her hand on his arm, gaining his attention. "What is Wellington planning?"

Robert stared down into her frightened eyes, and some of his tension eased away. Taking her hand, he drew her over to a settee, and together they sank down. "It is too early to tell yet, love. But I think we all know Wellington well enough to take for granted that he is already making plans to deploy troops. Already dispatches are flying back and forth among the capitols of Europe. Rothschild was sent for this morning." The premier money-lender of the world; already funds were being sought to finance the troops and arms.

In a daze she realized they were all facing the inevitable — war.

"Perhaps Napoleon has no intention of marching beyond France. Perhaps accord can be reached with him."

Robert's gave her an incredulous look. "Surely you jest?"

She pulled her hand away. "No, I am not. Are the Allies going to at least try to negotiate with him?"

Shaking his head, Robert went back to his desk, searching for something. "Just like a woman. No understanding of politics whatsoever."

However, Christina's insight was not too far off the mark, for indeed, emissaries came from the restored emperor of France with negotiations for peace. Apparently, Napoleon was content with ruling France and, as they had just witnessed, France wanted him to lead them.

But one of his conditions was that he wanted Belgium.

And so it started again, and the Allies recognized it. Belgium, and then what? And any country being ruled by a revolutionary was not a concept any of the Allies was comfortable with. What kind of message was that sending to all the people of Europe? The thought of another revolution such as that in France had sent shudders of fear through even the strongest of men.

Whatever halfhearted attempts to negotiate with Napoleon the Allies had opened where closed immediately upon learning of his conditions. War was indeed the only way to stop a man who knew nothing but his own egocentric demands for total domination.

By mid-March the Congress had declared Napoleon an outlaw, subject to the justice of the Allies.

With Robert gone most of the days and nights, closeted with Wellington, Christina was pleased to find that again her time was her own, though she could have wished the reasons different. It was on a bright, sunny morning that she made plans to join Tina in the park for a picnic. She hoped Varek would join them, but with the upheaval in the Congress, she rather doubted he would have the time.

As it turned out, Laure accepted Christina's invitation to join them and brought her brood also. Between the children and the pets running about, it turned out to be a truly enjoyable experience with hampers of food spread around in a banquet of delights to tempt the fussiest palate. Christina wished with all her heart that Eddie could have been there, but she had Tina and Katie to ease her sense of loss.

At some point Christina found herself puppysitting, with a wig-gling menace in each hand. The pups' mother, Sandi, was napping contentedly at her side, and Laure's little schnauzer, Minx, was lazing against her knee as she watched with perk-eared interest the quick movements of the children. Another game of blindman's bluff was just starting, all the children scattered in a wide circle as Laure's young son was blindfolded and spun around. The children's laugh-

ter and squeals echoed loud in the crisp air, and the adults' light-hearted calls of encouragement had the blindfolded boy stumbling in every direction.

In her hands, the pups, Katie and CeCe, were trying to knock each other silly, sparring with bared teeth, their high-pitched whining sounding eerily human. She flinched as their teeth knocked together, and looking up, she searched for Tina, intending to call her over to help with the little rascals.

But she wasn't with the other children.

Scanning the park farther afield she didn't see the two burly bodyguards that were set to watch Tina when Varek wasn't with her. Even Sergei was gone. A trickle of unease slithered down her spine. Frowning, she rolled to her knees and again looked closer among the children, trying to catch a glimpse of Tina's bright blue frock. But still there was no trace of her. Worry started to pound in her chest.

Without turning from her perusal, she thrust the puppies into Laure's arms and stumbled to her feet, crying out Tina's name.

Immediately, Laure and Helen were at her side, also looking about. In no time the footmen and nurses were all ranged out along the park, calling Tina's name and questioning the park's pedestrians.

Christina herself was frantically going from person to person, when finally one little old lady pointed down a side street. Without even waiting for the lady to finish, Christina lifted her skirts and darted recklessly out into the street, dodging vehicles, pedestrians and curses alike as she ran across. A footman, noticing her frantic change of direction, followed after her, sprinting hard to catch up.

They ran at full tilt into the small street, the pounding of their feet loud in the deserted lane. The coolness of deep shadows bore down on them as they stumbled to look around them. Dismayed, Christina saw that countless side streets verged off from a small circular plaza. "Oh, no!" she breathed out, shock gripping her as she looked about helplessly. Which way? God, which way?

In the distance they both heard a high-pitched scream. It was undoubtedly a child's.

"Tina!" Christina screamed back as her feet flew over uneven cobblestones, down a passage to her left. Right at her side was the footman. Still more streets verged out from this small lane. Just when she was growing hysterical they heard the scream again.

"This way," the young man panted as he ducked into another side street that was little more than an alley. And there, at the end of what appeared a dark tunnel was Tina, in a patch of bright sunshine, struggling in the arms of a woman. Christina watched in horror as two men stepped around a carriage to grab hold of the little squirming body and begin to thrust her up through the door.

Both Christina and the footman screamed their denials as they flew toward the kidnappers, and when they got close the young man launched himself on the man nearest him, knocking them both to the street in a tangle of flailing arms and legs. Without thought, Christina flung herself on the back of the other man, clinging to him with the tenacity of a barnacle.

Startled, he let go of Tina, who instead of running turned about and started kicking the villain. Cursing and jumping, the man kept spinning in circles, trying to dislodge Christina, who was scratching and clawing any piece of skin on his face she could reach. When his flailing fist struck the side of her face, she barely felt it, so intent was she on gouging out his eyes. His bellow of pain was the sweetest sound she had ever heard. But she hadn't time to enjoy the sense of power, for she suddenly noticed the woman coming up on Tina from behind and reaching out to grab her. Pushing herself off the man's back, Christina gave her own bellow of rage as she ran to tackle the bitch. Both women tumbled to the ground amid screaming curses and churning skirts.

The explosion of a pistol startled both women into looking up. Christina stared into the face of the man she had just attacked. His face was bruised and scratched and his look of utter surprise would have been comical except for the knife that he held suspended over his head, ready to strike her. It seemed time stood still as he hung above them, then slowly toppled backward — dead. When the woman gave her a fierce push and shot to her feet, Christina twisted about and grabbed her ankles, tripping her face first onto the filthy cobbles. Immediately, Christina rolled herself to her knees and then sat with a satisfying thump on the woman's back.

She hardly had a chance to draw a breath of relief before Tina crawled onto her lap and, latching her arms tightly around her neck, began to cry.

When the woman tried to heave her off, Christina gave her ass a vindictive swat.

"Shh, baby, I have you now," she crooned to the hiccupping child, whose strangling hold barely let her breath. Tina's body was trembling, overheated and ever so dear as Christina held her close to her pounding heart. Their tears mingled as they pressed wet cheeks together. "The bad lady can't hurt you now."

"I beg your pardon?" came an indignant voice from beneath her. "I never had any intention of harming the child."

"Are you all right?" a wonderfully familiar voice inquired. Two pairs of wet eyes turned to look up at Sergei as he squatted down beside them. When he tried to take Tina from her, the little girl swatted his hands away and then turned her face back into Christina's neck. Sergei frowned as he stroked Christina's bruised temple with a gentle finger. She flinched. Now the pain came with a vengeance.

"We're fine, thanks to your marksmanship." Christina looked over at the thug, whose blood was staining the dirt under him. Remembering the heroic boy who had run beside her, Christina twisted around to see him standing over the other kidnapper, proudly holding a pistol on the unconscious man. He grinned at her and gave a cocky salute.

Grinning back, she said with all the sincerity in her heart, "Thank you so much."

"Excuse me," came the muffled voice from beneath Christina again. The woman did seem to be in pain when she grunted out, "Could you please get off of me!"

Christina thought it over for a moment, then nodded reluctantly to Sergei, who was starting to chuckle. But then, he always had found amusement at the worst times. Standing, he helped Christina to her feet, while Tina, now more curious than frightened, was looking down at the woman.

"Thank God," she muttered as she climbed painfully to her feet. She turned to see Varek's woman and daughter glaring at her with such hatred that she felt herself in more trouble than she had at first thought. This was one predicament she would not be able to charm her way out of. Looking around, she saw the two incompetent fools whom Roget had sent with her, one trussed and bloodied at her feet, the other dead. Sighing, she looked up into Sergei Massallon's frigid gaze, his mouth pressed into a grim line.

"Well, well, well. His highness will not be pleased to see you again," he drawled as he took in her rumpled appearance.

She raised her brows and replied with acid sweetness, "Then perhaps you should just let me go."

"Go?" Christina almost screeched out. "I will yank your heart out and stuff it down your throat before I let that happen!" Tina gave a firm nod of agreement, then sniffled.

Sergei looked over his shoulder at Christina, smiling at the picture she made, the outraged hen with her chick, ruffled feathers and all. He expected to see her start scratching the ground at her feet any second now. She couldn't have been any more protective if it had been her own son in her arms. "I don't believe you will find a heart to pull out," he pointed out, barely keeping his laughter in check.

Christina considered that, looked at Tina and then said, "Too true. Then we shall have to settle on her gizzard. Right, Tina?"

"Right!" Tina immediately seconded. Then she leaned in and whispered in Christina's ear, "What's a gizzard?"

"I promise you, it's very disgusting."

That seemed fine to Tina.

Keeping a wary eye on the disgruntled stranger, Christina stepped toward Sergei and asked softly, "Isn't that Varek's mistress?"

This time his laughter did escape. With ungentle hands, he hustled his prisoner into the carriage, saying over his shoulder, "I believe I shall leave that explanation to Varek."

By this time the area was swarming with police and the princess's servants. Tina's nurse had hurried over to take her into her arms, but Tina clung all the more fiercely to Christina. And the woman was definitely in Christina's black books. If she had been doing her job properly, Tina would never have been taken from the park in the first place. She would make sure Varek turned her away. She would see personally to choosing a new nursemaid for Tina.

And so Christina was content to keep the child in her arms. After what had just happened, she knew it was going to be hard to ever let Tina out of her sight again.

* * *

The minute Varek stepped into Tina's room Christina was out of her seat and into his arms. She clung to him, shivering, and he held her tight against him as he looked over her head to see his daughter safely asleep in bed.

Closing his eyes, he dropped his cheek next to Christina's and breathed deeply of her scent, reassuring himself that she was unhurt and exactly where she belonged — in his arms. When his lips claimed hers with urgent need, she melted against his hard body, and her kisses were just as wild and demanding. They held on to each other with a fervor that would leave bruised skin, but neither cared as long as for a few precious moments they could fool themselves into believing that they never had to let each other go again.

"God, when I heard what had happened . . ." he began to moan before her lips covered his again, cutting off his anguished gasp.

"It's all right. She is safe," Christina whispered her assurance into his mouth. Her fingers tunneled into his silky hair, the feel of it against her palms a balm to her fractured emotions.

"And you, little lark, how are you?" Gently he pushed her away to look into her eyes. Then he saw the swelling bruise, and renewed rage coursed through him. He was sorry Sergei had killed the bastard so quickly, for he desperately needed to take the edge off the savage heat that was seething through his blood. Beating the hell out of the bastard who had dared to harm his loves would have helped tremendously.

Taking a deep breath, he looked into her eyes and saw remnants of her own rage and fear — but overlying that, there was a frenzy of passion heating her gaze as she devoured the sight of him. He knew why she was acting so strangely, so vulnerable. He had been in enough situations to know how the blood continued to pump with a force that drove out all thoughts except for a reaffirmation of life in the most elemental sense. If he took advantage of her weakness now — and God help him, how he wanted to — he knew she would be remorseful later, and he couldn't bear the thought of her regretting anything they shared together.

With a reluctance that tested his deepest mettle, he gently drew her to his side, and slowly they walked together to the bed. Tina was curled up into a tight little ball and was sleeping as if nothing of any significance had happened to her today. Her face looked so sweet in profile, her thumb in her mouth, her curls spread out on her pillow. Bending down, Varek very gently pulled her thumb out of her mouth, then he kissed her silky cheek. When he stood upright, Christina could see a shimmer of tears in his eyes.

Christina's voice was tight with too many emotions to define as she castigated herself. "I almost lost her, Varek. When I saw her struggling with those men . . ."

Varek pulled her close again, hushing her. "My God, lark, you risked your life to save her! When I heard how you threw yourself onto that man and then, little fool, turned your back on him! God, when I think of what could have happened if Sergei — " His mind shut down on that horrendous thought. It should have been him there protecting his ladies. But, again, it had been Sergei, Christina's ever faithful watchdog.

"Why, Varek?" She pushed him away from her and stared up at him. "Who is that woman?"

Varek wasn't even going to try and dissemble. Taking her hand, he sat her back down in the chair she had been sitting in when he had come in. Intending to sit on the edge of Tina's bed, he checked for tell-tale lumps. As usual, there they were, close to Tina's side. He laid a gentle hand on the largest lump and felt it shift beneath his hand. When he heard Sandi's sleepy groan, he crooned at her to go back to sleep and then opted to squat down beside Christina's chair.

In a low voice, so as not to disturb Tina, he told her, "At one time she was my mistress. Our parting was not an amicable one." To say the least, he added wryly to himself.

Christina frowned. After a moment of thought she asked, "The woman you taunted me with at that ball?"

Holding her gaze, he nodded slowly. "The very same. From the moment you came back into my life I never touched her again. I suppose I could have ended the affair with a little more diplomacy than I did, but I just wanted her gone."

A spark of anger entered her gaze. "So now this is my fault?"

He couldn't help the grin that popped out. "Well, I suppose, in some ways it is." He quickly placed a finger over her lips to still her next outburst. When her lips pursed into a moue of anger, he drew his finger very gently over the outer edges of the wicked bruise. "In all seriousness now?" His brows rose in challenge at her belligerent expression, then continued. "I believe her to be a puppet in a wider scheme."

"Which is?"

"The insurrection brewing in Austenburgh."

"But what has that to do with Tina?"

"Everything, my love. She is my heir and Austenburg's salvation. You better than anyone should know what Tina is to our people."

Not my people, Christina thought angrily. *They tossed me out.*

"I believe somehow they know that I am trying to dissolve the duchy. Added to that, over the last years, Roget has gotten greedy for power, and Tina is the key to that power. These two sets of circumstances make for a rather combustible situation, don't you agree?"

"Roget? Surely you jest?" The thought was ludicrous. Christina remembered the chancellor as a nondescript, unassuming diplomat who had always seemed to be underfoot, and always giving his opinion whether you wanted it or not. She could still see him lurking in the shadows, scurrying in and out of rooms on silent feet. He had a brilliant mind, one had to give him credit for that; he was a political tactician without peer, but the man hadn't appeared to have an ambitious bone in his body. His whole life rotated around serving the royal family of Austenburg, just as his father had before him, and his grandfather before that, and he took such pride in that very heritage. The name of Roget was synonymous with unquestionable loyalty to Austenburg's royal family. The idea of him inciting rebellion was beyond belief. It was impossible.

And yet, looking into Varek's eyes, she could see that he believed it was not only very possible, it was reality.

"Will you stay tonight?" he asked on a whisper.

Startled out of her dazed thoughts, she blinked at him, then nodded. "I don't want to let her out of my sight just yet."

Varek hadn't thought he could love her any more than he already did, but seeing this devotion and love turned upon his child shifted his whole concept of love to an even deeper level than he could possibly conceive.

Then he remembered that he had a problem to deal with.

Angrily, he turned on his heel and left the room, praying he could deal calmly with the bitch and not strangle her as soon as he saw her.

When Sophy saw Varek enter the room, she held up her trussed hands and asked peevishly, "Is this really necessary?"

The smile he turned upon her sent a shiver of fear down her spine, and she leaned back farther into the nest of pillows she was propped up against. She suddenly began to wonder if she would leave Vienna alive.

"You should be thankful this residence does not have a dungeon."

Wisely, she held silent. She watched with wary resentment as he walked about the room. His seeming idleness was a deception that had her sweating under the heavy woolen redingote she still wore.

"Why did Roget send you?" he inquired with smooth politeness.

Varek always had been too astute for his own good, Sophy thought with a despondent finality. And yet for years he hadn't known what was brewing beneath his very nose. If she was going to walk away from this debacle with her life, she knew the time for dissembling was long past.

All at once she was surprised at how tired she was, and wearily she shrugged. "When I returned to Austenburg I was still angry with you, and Roget seemed to sense it — like a rat sniffing cheese. He approached me and told me how, for the good of Austenburg, we needed to get back the princess. Well, as you can guess, political intrigue and loyalty to the duchy never held much interest for me, so I politely shrugged him off. Then he dangled the promise of a title in front of me, with a handsome stipend thrown in for good measure." She glanced sideways at him and entreated with a pout, "How was I to say no to that?"

Varek stopped beside the bed and stared down at her with a coldly lethal smile that could cut flesh. "You will soon wish you had, my dear. I promise you that. It doesn't pay to get too greedy. Didn't I warn you of that before?"

"For God's sake, Varek, your daughter was never in any danger and you know it. Roget needs her alive and well. I still have enough feelings for you that I would have made sure she was taken care of."

Varek was so close to throttling the bitch that the hands he held clenched behind his back trembled. He remembered the bruise on Christina's face, and the knife that had been pointed at her back before Sergei had taken the man out.

Sophy's next words caught his attention with a clarity that echoed at the back of his mind, "It is you he wants dead."

Eyes narrowing, he demanded softly, "Go on."

Those chilly blue eyes really were intimidating when turned upon you with an intensity that sucked the very air from your lungs, yet she couldn't seem to look away. Raising her bound hands, she brushed away a trickle of sweat from her temple. "The beating. That was Roget."

He hadn't been too far off, thinking it was some revolutionaries from Austenburg. He just hadn't suspected it was Roget. Dependable,

dedicated Roget. A man he had disliked most of his life and had always taken for granted because of his family's loyalty to his own. How utterly imbecilic of him! The embarrassment he felt swamped him with the force of an Atlantic gale. His fingers flexed as he remembered that day long ago when Roget's throat had been in his hands. How different would his life be today if he had killed him then.

Sophy watched in silence as he continued to stare at her without even blinking. Didn't anything make an impact on the man? Was he made of a block of ice? Well, let's see how he takes this piece of news, she thought vindictively. "He has hired an assassin. Bröchre."

That seemed to spark something, for his eyes widened an infinitesimal degree. His lips barely moved as he said dryly, "I'm honored. This must be costing Roget a king's ransom."

A king's ransom to hire the assassin of kings.

Even after twenty years of infamy, no one knew what the man looked like. He was as invisible as the plague and twice as deadly, for he left no survivors in his wake. If you were marked, you were as good as buried.

Now, knowing this man had marked him, Varek felt his own mortality staring him in the face.

Sophy's voice droned on at the back of his consciousness. "Roget doesn't want you to be made a martyr to the people who love you, and he doesn't want Francis coming down on him with his imperial forces. So Bröchre was instructed to do it during a battle, which of course, with Napoleon free, there are certain to be many."

"How positively diabolical," Varek murmured. A stray bullet that could be linked back to no one. Roget, as usual, had outdone himself, and his insurance was Bröchre.

He thought of Christina and had the absurd desire to weep. He had just found her again, and now this.

Spinning on his heel, he headed for the door.

Sophy shot upright in the bed. "Wait! What about me?"

He looked back over her shoulder and said tonelessly. "Be glad you are still alive." With that he slammed the door behind him, the only emotion he had shown since stepping into the room.

"No one is to enter unless I say so. Not even to feed her, do you understand?" he told the guard curtly.

The man snapped to attention. "Yes, your highness!"

Varek continued down the corridor and only paused when he turned a corner and was finally alone. He leaned against a wall and dropped his head back.

God, Bröchre! He was a dead man; it was only a matter of time. How could he fight an enemy he could not see coming?

He would move Tina into the imperial nursery tonight — Baron Hager would see that she was protected with his most trusted people.

Now the only question was, how long till the first battle? Already, he felt the grains of his life slipping away and there was so much to do.

Nineteen

By the end of March, the Congress had made a formal decision to engage war and recapture Napoleon once and for all. Wellington was appointed Commander-in-Chief of the British and Dutch-Belgian forces in Flanders. With Napoleon on the move, the Allies lost no more time in bickering and, for the first time since the Congress had opened, they came together as a united force. More than a million men had been deployed and were marching for the Swiss border.

Tomorrow Wellington was leaving for Brussels to garrison the city. As usual he traveled light, with minimum baggage and only two aides at his side — and Robert was one of them.

Christina was up early the next morning with her husband, helping with last minute arrangements and escorting him to the coach being loaded in preparation for their departure. Even this early in the morning, a large number of the Congress had turned out to bid their hero farewell and Godspeed.

“I still think it best if you went back to England,” Robert again argued as he watched the loading of the coach.

Christina adamantly shook her head “I will be fine, Robert. The prince insists that I stay at the chancellery now that the Castlereaghs are gone. And with Laure in her delicate condition, I want to help her finish with her responsibilities with the Congress; then we will be closing the palace and moving to Brussels.” She wrapped her hands around his face and pulled his attention completely upon her. “I will see you in Brussels soon, Robert.”

His frown slowly melted away as he stared down on her. Secretly he was pleased, but it was hard to leave her behind with the archduke still sniffing about her skirts. He had been getting progressively more

indignant with each trip he was expected to make, leaving his wife behind in that bastard's clutches. He knew there was a conspiracy to keep him out of Vienna, but he was still unsure as to whose door to lay his grudge. Looking down into Christina's candid gaze, he knew he could hardly take his anger out on her.

Gently, he took her hands into his and kissed them. "Promise me you will take care of yourself and arrive safely?"

Christina smiled up at him and teased, "With Francis's imperial guard to escort us, you should worry more about your own trip."

As if on cue, Wellington came striding out of the Hofburg with Metternich and Castlereagh on his heels, and made his way over to the coach. As he moved, he had the habit of looking about him with a keen, searching eye that made a point of missing nothing. He moved with military precision and grace, and even with his unassuming height, made an impression of power.

When he paused next to Robert, he gave Christina a courteous bow and a charismatic smile of such warmth that she found herself blinking up at him. "I do apologize for taking your husband from you again, my lady, but I find him indispensable." She saw Robert, standing slightly behind the duke, give a mock shudder.

She bit her lip to stifle the giggle that threatened, then murmured in return, "So do I, your grace. However, for the sake of peace, I must not be selfish."

Taking her hand, Wellington raised it gallantly to his lips. "A gracious and beautiful patriot. What could be more perfect? *Adieu*, my dear Lady Basingstoke. I shall look forward to the princess's and your arrival with great impatience."

Then he was gone, and Robert stepped close again. "As will I," he whispered as he took her into his arms.

Christina's arms went tightly around his neck and she held him close for a long moment. Tears stung her eyes; for this briefest of moments she was holding her old beloved Robert in her arms again, and she didn't want to let him go. Reluctantly, they pushed away from each other. With a sad smile, he brushed her lips with a fingertip before he turned away and joined Wellington in the coach. As soon as the door closed upon him, the horses were whipped up and the coach jerked forward. Immediately, a cheer rose from the people who had turned out to send the hero on his way.

Laure stepped to her side and entwined her arm with Christina's. "And so it begins," she said sadly as they stood together and watched the coach disappear.

Christina nodded, too depressed to speak.

She prayed she would see Robert again before battle was engaged, but now they never knew what to expect from one day to the next.

* * *

Several nights later, Christina was curled up on a chaise in her sitting room, staring into the fire, her thoughts morose. She could only be thankful for the joy that the little puppy, curled up on her stomach, gave her. At that very moment, Katie gave a sleepy stretch; then, shifting about, she trustingly exposed her pink tummy. It proved to be too much of a temptation to resist, and leaning over, Christina gave it a light kiss, then stroked it softly.

Smiling, she thought back over the day she had just spent with Tina, who, back to her usual rambunctious self, had run her and her guards a merry chase through the menagerie. Of Varek she had seen very little, as he was closeted most of the hours of the day with Francis and Metternich. She had heard a rumor being whispered over tea at the chancellery that the stunningly handsome archduke would soon be leaving for Austenburg. With a sigh, she dropped her head back and stared up at the ceiling.

Please God, just let it be a rumor. The thought of Varek walking into a possible rebellion had her tense and restless.

At a soft knock on the door, Katie jerked up and tumbled off her lap and onto the floor with an inelegant thump. However, that didn't stop her from running to the door, yipping and whining. When Laure walked in, Katie's barking turned into a joyful whining that was much too shrill for so late at night. Laure was still dressed in her evening gown, but she didn't hesitate to kneel down to pet and calm Katie, while telling Christina in a soft undertone, "Varek is still here. He was worried when you didn't come down to dinner. He wishes to see you."

So it was true — he was coming to say good-bye. Swallowing, Christina rubbed her eyes, knowing that if she saw Varek she was going to make a decision that she didn't know if she could live with

later. But how could she not? She would probably never see Varek again, and the very thought was devastating.

"Shall I send him away?" Laure asked gently as she stood again.

"No!" Christina came hurriedly to her feet. "I must see him. I am just so frightened, Laure."

Coming to her side, Laure brushed a stray tendril away from Christina's eyes. "I know you are, my dear. Just follow your heart."

Christina shook her head, her smile bitter. "That is the last thing I should do."

"No, it's not. You have a brave heart, Christina. You will do what is right. Never doubt that."

"God help us, Laure, but I hope you are right."

"I believe I shall take this little lady with me." Laure easily caught up the prancing puppy, knowing that in this case three would definitely be *de trop*. "Shall I send him in here or will you dress and come out?"

Taking a deep breath, Christina asked that he be brought in, and when the door closed on Laure, her blood surged through her, making her weakkneed. The pounding of her heart was as thunder in her ears, and though she missed the sound of the door opening again, she felt his presence. Turning, she watched him walk into the room.

He was such a magnificently gorgeous man, and when his gaze captured hers with such wild hunger, she felt herself melting under the heat of it. The maroon velvet jacket molded his broad-shouldered torso with a precision that left no doubt as to the power that was leashed beneath the trappings of sophistication. And those white pantaloons hugging his hips and thighs were as close to indecency as society expected and left little to the imagination as to his physical endowments. Yet, despite the passion heating between them, his regal features were suffused with a look of deep sorrow. Her fingers twisted together as her body began to quiver with the premonition of her worst fear. She had to take several deep breaths before she could even speak.

"You've come to say good-bye, haven't you?"

Varek stopped in the shadows. He knew he was being a coward as he hung back in the concealing dimness, but with his emotions stripped bare, he couldn't face her yet. It took him a moment to catch his breath as he watched her. She was so damn beautiful. The loose wrapper she wore clung with a seductive softness to her curves, which

were visible to his hungry gaze with the firelight behind her. Her sable hair tumbled about her, clinging to her shoulders and hips in lush tendrils that made his hands clench with the need to bury his fingers in its silken weight. He closed his eyes on the sting of tears. How was he going to give her up again? He was almost thankful that his time on earth was so limited, for he wouldn't live long with his heart torn to shreds again.

"Yes. I have to go to Austenburg, but I promised Francis I would join the Austrian forces when the conflict starts. I know not when we will see each other again." Which he doubted would be in this world.

Christina looked down at her clenched hands. "I cannot begin to understand why we were brought together only to be torn apart again. I refuse to believe that we are still being punished for a love that was as pure as ours. What we have is so special, Varek. So rare." Looking up, she tried to search his face, which was impossible as he hid from her in the shadows. They stood staring at each other with a room separating them, and in the blink of an eye, it was suddenly crystal clear what she wanted. A sense of peace began to suffuse her body with a lightness that was liberating.

Her fingers relaxed and her body tingled in anticipation as she slowly smiled at him. "Would you do one last thing for me, Varek?"

"You know I would die for you, lark." His voice was a hoarse whisper.

"Make love to me."

He stared at her stunned, praying he hadn't misheard her. "And in the morning? Will you hate me in morning? For I couldn't bear it, lark."

"Oh, Varek, how could you ever think that? I will spend every day of my life loving you. Give me what is left of this night to hold in my heart. These few stolen hours will not harm my son. They will not harm my husband. For this one night I want to be selfish and hold you in my arms again. I need it, Varek, as surely as I need to draw breath."

Varek came into the light, and the look on his face suddenly opened the door her soul had been locked behind. When he stood beside her, he tenderly traced the faint bruise still marring her temple. "You *are* the air I breathe."

Christina raised her arms and encircled his neck. She felt herself lifted into those powerful arms and held against his pounding heart. This was the sense of sheltered tranquillity she had been missing all

these years. When next her feet touched the floor she found them beside her bed, firelight flickering gently over the cool silk sheets. Looking into his eyes, she reached up and pushed his jacket off his shoulders. "I am starved for the sight of you."

"I vow that I will not leave you hungry." His promise feathered over the tender skin of her nape as he pushed the heavy tresses aside.

Impossible, Christina thought as she plucked at his cravat. Already her hunger was out of control and she only had this one night. "Take these off," she demanded with breathless greed.

He stripped off his garments in mere seconds, and Christina ran her hands over his chest, luxuriating in the feel of his satin skin. Even after six years his tautly muscled chest was as familiar to her as her own body. She sighed with delight as her fingers burrowed into the golden pelt that lightly covered his chest. Closing her eyes, she let her fingers be her sight as they trembled in their rediscovery of the beauty of Varek. She felt the muscles of his flat stomach clench beneath her light exploration, and the scent of him made her light-headed with desire. His breath exhaled on a hiss as her hands smoothed over his flanks and cupped his firm buttocks, chuckling when they flexed in her grasp. His thighs were the sculpted muscles of an avid horseman, and they quivered beneath her touch as she teasingly glided her fingertips up the sensitive skin of his thighs.

His moans were the most beautiful sounds she could ever remember hearing as she knelt down before him, her wandering fingers grazing the soft hair of his calves, then skimming over his slender feet.

Breathing deeply, she opened her eyes and saw that most stunning length of flesh that for years had held her a slave to unbridled pleasure. Reverently, her hands encompassed the burning heat of his erection. His body jolted, but he stood firm under her tortuous teasing. She felt his hands in her hair, his fingers gently massaging her scalp and then raising handfuls of her long tresses so he could bury his face in them.

With fascination she watched her fingers stroke along the purple veins of his heated flesh to the tip, which was engorged and wet. She touched her thumb to the pearly moisture and delicately smoothed it over the enflamed tip. His penis jerked and seemed to grow even more in her tender grip.

"How I have dreamed of this." Laying her cheek along his hot flesh, her lips brushed the dense curls at the base as she reminisced in whis-

pered awe. "How I have dreamed about taking you in my mouth and loving you. I have never forgotten your taste, the exquisite scent of you. I never will."

"Lark," Varek groaned as he fell to his knees in front of her. "Let me see you now," he pleaded, his voice strangled with the force of his desire. It was killing him to go slow, when all he really wanted to do was pull her beneath him and thrust into her — and finally come home.

Her eyes and smile were so sensuous, he had to bite back a curse of impatience. "Lark, God, please, let me see you."

She rose gracefully to her feet, and with a whisper of silk, the dressing gown pooled at her feet. Varek felt the air sucked out of his lungs as he stared up at her. *God help me, but how will I ever let you go again?* he thought in anguish as he worshiped her with his eyes.

Her slender curves were lusher than he remembered, yet the feel of her flawless skin and the scent of her were so very familiar. Overwhelmed at the sight of her, he traced a delicate circle around her tightened nipples, larger now, and her breasts — though just as firm as when she was a young girl — were fuller, filling his hands with a sensuous weight that had him trembling. His hands surrounded a waist still so tiny he could encompass it fully in his grasp, but her stomach was gently rounded, with the faint, silver tracery of the noble scars of childbirth. As he drew a finger along one he again cursed the fates that had not awarded these upon the births of their own children.

Christina had stiffened with this gentle exploration, and wanting to reassure her, he replaced his finger with his tongue, worshiping every mark, holding her close by gripping her firm buttocks in his large hands. Her skin was still so petal soft that he couldn't get enough of fondling those perfect globes.

Her head dropped back on a groan as she felt his breath feather over the hungry core of her, and she thought she would faint from the wonder of it. Then his fingers were stroking through the tight curls and his lips nuzzled into her damp heat. The fire that had been steadily burning in her now raged into an inferno that had her wild with ravenous need.

"Varek," she gasped out, "please, lay with me. I need to feel all of you on all of me. Please . . ." Before she could finish he had stood and swept her up into his arms, and then she felt the coolness of the bed beneath her. When he covered her body with his, the world as it

had existed just an hour before splintered and melted away. Her arms and legs snaked around him and she held on tightly — heaven was finally in her arms again and she wasn't about to let him go.

"Love, I need to be in you," Varek panted into her ear, his body held so stiffly over her that he was trembling, his chest heaving as if he couldn't draw breath.

"Come home, my love," she entreated, and then he was driving deeply into her, filling her with such perfection, the room exploded around her into a glittering mist of stars. As he pulled back to again drive himself deeper inside her, she thrust against him, reveling in the stunning ravishment of his heart pounding against her with the force of his wild thrusts. His groans echoed through her soul, and suddenly, with a scream of pure ecstasy, she began to spasm beneath him, clinging to him with a strength that defied the fates to take this moment from her.

When she shattered in his arms, Varek let loose a shout that rivaled her own, and they ascended to the heavens, wrapped tight around each as their bodies strained together, both fighting against the moment when reality would claim their starved senses, both reluctant to let the moment of passionate surrender go.

All too soon they were slowly floating back down to earth, their panting gasps the only sounds that fractured the dark silence, until Varek groaned into her neck, "I can't believe I just did that!"

She grinned at hearing the utter embarrassment in his voice. "It was rather quick, wasn't it?" she teased, her own voice laced with a heavy dose of mock disappointment.

Growling, he rolled them onto their sides and playfully swatted her delectably rounded buttocks. "Are you complaining, my lady?" Then his large hands were sensually massaging the silken globes that had always fascinated him so.

"Well, I am still hungry and you did promise . . ." Her eyes slid closed with a moan as his massaging hands became more aggressive with her tender flesh.

His lips stole the rest of her grievance into his mouth, and for the next hour he gave her nothing to complain about as he feasted on every inch of her delectable flesh.

He was, after all, a man of his word.

* * *

In the blessed cover of night the lovers lived in a world of their own design. All ceased to exist but the two of them — both insatiable to fulfill years worth of heated dreams and fantasies.

When Christina began to stir from a lethargic daze of bliss, she moaned as Varek's mouth deeply suckled her breast, then soothed the tender nipple with slow, luxurious strokes of his tongue. She raised a heavy hand and ran her fingers through his hair; the feel of that silken mane was a memory she had never forgotten.

She still couldn't believe this night was happening, and she had never been happier. She couldn't dredge up even a moment of guilt. After tonight the rest of her life would be devoted to Robert and her baby. *But not tonight.* Tonight was Varek's alone.

And then came the stunning thought that perhaps tonight would give her something else to carry away with her other than delicious memories. Varek's baby. Her heart began to pound as, with a will of its own, her hand stole to her stomach.

Varek felt his love's increased heartbeat and looked up, a sensuous smile curling his bruised lips. "Still hungry, are we?"

"For you? Always."

He stilled as he watched her, sensing some deeper emotion that she seemed hesitant to share with him. Pulling himself up next to her, he took her into his arms, and her head nestled with natural ease onto his chest. From long habit his fingers combed through the dark tresses that he loved so much. He was quiet as he spread them out over his chest and down his stomach.

"Years ago I lived in paradise, taking for granted my good fortune." Beneath her cheek his chest rumbled with his softly spoken words. "Then it was stripped from me and I found myself walking in a hell I couldn't find my way out of. Yet somehow I must have done something right, for here I am, basking in your light again. I do not know what is to come; now I don't even care. All I know is that whatever happens I will die a happy man."

Christina jerked upright and glared down at him, "Don't even jest about something like that!"

He stared at her with an intensity that frightened her when he finally asked softly, "Do you know why I am resigned to the fact of losing you again?"

Swallowing, she shook her head. She didn't like where this conversation was taking them one little bit. He sounded so . . . fatalistic.

"All our life together I have spoken, rather prosaically I am ashamed to say, of our souls being joined. But after having lost you and then this miracle of finding each other again, I finally understand what that really means, lark. In this life, or another, we will always find each other. God created us, not as two souls coming together to form one, but each of us a half of one soul. When we come together we are complete. When we come together, only then are we home. No matter what happens to us in the years we are forced to be apart, it is part of the greater design that we will find each other again. It is quite simple, really. It is just a matter of suffering through the times we must be apart. If we lose each other in this life, I will find you in the next, lark. It is predestined."

Was it really that simple? Christina wondered sadly. She stared into Varek's tranquil gaze and wished she had such faith, but just the idea of Varek not existing in this life with her, even if oceans separated them, was too wrenching for her. She had to know, at the very least, that they were watching the same sun rising and setting, that she breathed in the same air he exhaled.

And yet what he said made such sense to her, for when they had been parted she had felt as if half of her was gone. She *had* felt incomplete. Even the birth of her beloved Eddie had never filled that void. Not until the moment she had seen Varek striding across a ballroom to claim her again had she been whole.

"I love you, lark. Nothing will ever change that. Not time, not distance — not even death."

Death. There was that word again, and it struck such terror in her. Her heart slowed to a hard, heavy thud that made it difficult for her to breathe. "What are you trying to tell me, Varek?"

He didn't hesitate in his answer, "Only that I love you beyond life itself. Nothing more."

She leaned closer and gazed deep into his shadowed eyes and could read nothing there. "Swear to me that you are keeping nothing from me," she demanded with a harsh insistence that was foreign to her.

When the emotion in his eyes turned haunted, her stomach clenched with a painful lurch. Then his gaze shifted away and he gently brushed her hair back over her shoulders. "I swear, my love."

"You're lying," she accused, angry and hurt at his lack of faith in her.

His hands closed about her waist and he lifted her above him. When her legs naturally settled about his flanks he thrust up into her with a force that had her gasping.

Angered even more by this tactic, she pushed away from him, holding herself suspended over him with stiff arms. "Why are you lying to me?"

His eyes were gleaming in the firelight. "Make love to me, lark," he whispered, turning her own plea of hours ago back on her. "Please."

Her arms relaxed and he pulled her closer, his lips closing hungrily about an aching nipple before drawing it into the warm cavern of his mouth.

"Damn you, Varek!" she moaned, her head falling back as he turned her into a slave to their passions.

"When the dawn comes I will be damned well enough. Just love me now, lark. Just love me."

And she loved him with a wildness that made them hunger for each other all the more.

* * *

Even as much as they cursed the coming of the dawn, not even their great love could hold it at bay. They lay in bed, wrapped in each other's arms, and watched with heavy hearts the inevitable beginning of a new day. With every minute that lightened their haven she was tempted to beg him to take her with him — but she knew she wouldn't.

He was tempted to convince her to leave with him — but he knew he couldn't.

Reality had a way of tarnishing even the most precious dreams. For what could he offer her but the life of a notorious woman, ostracized by her family in England and separated from her beloved son? Truth be told, even if he wasn't marked for death, he would never ask of her such a sacrifice. He knew that once more he had to love her enough to let her go.

But he also knew that someday, in some other life, they would be together again.

He had to believe that or go mad.

Sensing her sadness, he rolled over and nuzzled her face with his scratchy cheek. "Well," he teased as he nibbled her ear, "have I satisfied you?"

She blinked her tears away. She would not ruin these last minutes with her weakness. She would be strong for him if it killed her. *Which it probably will*, she thought dismally. "A thousand nights like this could never be enough to satisfy me."

"We will be together again, lark. Please believe that as strongly as you love me. I will find you again. If not in this lifetime, then in the next." He kissed her softly, a tender brush of lips that made the tears rush to her eyes. "Promise you will wait for me."

She flung her arms around his neck and clung to him with a ferocity that disturbed him. "I will wait for you, my only love. For eternity and beyond."

"Then all will be well and I am content." And their lips met for the last time.

Twenty

The weeks that followed Varek's departure were pure torture for Christina. She wanted nothing more than to hide in her room and cry out her grief in private, but between Sergei and Laure, she was never given that luxury. It was as if the two of them had bonded together in a mission to force her to deal with life whether she wanted to or not.

At night she would lay in her bed, reliving every minute of their last night together. At times it gave her such comfort, but mostly it made her turn her head into her pillow and weep for the loss of him again.

The more she pondered on his theory of their destinies being interwoven throughout time, the more she began to share his conviction. Perhaps it was just her way of coping with her pain, yet it did give her a feeling of strength, and soon the days and nights didn't seem so lonely. Knowing Varek was out there, waiting for her, whether in this life or on some other infinite plane of forever, she found herself comforted.

And so the days passed.

Laure was kept busier than she wished with the Congress as she was forced to step in as hostess for the ailing empress, who was bedridden more often than not, the ravages of consumption stripping her of whatever strength she had left. Christina visited the empress often, usually with Tina holding her hand and behaving like the little princess she was. It was so difficult to see the once beautiful woman wasting away so tragically, and Francis was beside himself with grief. The probability of the Empress Maria surviving the year was dim, and already the country was mourning the loss of their beloved empress, as she had completely withdrawn from public life.

Much too soon for Christina, Laure was prepared to move her household to Brussels. The prince would follow her when he finished the final negotiations the Allies were still trying desperately to reach.

And Christina had to prepare herself for yet another good-bye — this time to Varek's daughter, whom she loved with a maternal devotion as strong as the one she felt for Eddie. Would she ever see the little scamp again? Christina wondered painfully. Heartache seemed to define her life lately, and she was so tired of it all. How she wished she could fall into a deep sleep and wake up back in England, with Eddie in her arms.

Her final visit with Tina was even worse than she had feared, for the little girl, feeling deserted again, clung to Christina, screaming for her not to go. It took Sergei to forcefully pry the thin arms from around her neck before Christina could finally stumble back and race like a coward from the tearful pleas. As soon as the door slammed with a finality that cut her heart in two, she crumpled in a heap of sobs on the floor. When she was done soaking Sergei's coat, he silently picked her up and carried her to her coach. Neither one said a word to the other. After all, what was there to be said that wouldn't sound trite or callous?

Christina was sick to death of the reality of what her days had become. At times she wished Varek had never come back into her life. But those times were few and far between her other memories of laughter and love, and Varek gazing at her in a way that could send her to her knees.

Oh, yes, he and Tina were worth every moment of this unending sorrow. As Varek had told her — this was one of those times that she would just have to suffer through, for one day . . .

* * *

They arrived in Brussels by mid-April, shocked at the sight of the beautiful little city in such turmoil. It seemed to take forever to wend their way through the congested streets, the noise so deafening that their heads were pounding with pain by the time they arrived at the rented house that had been secured for Metternich. News seemed to travel fast, for Christina and Laure had just crossed the threshold when Robert burst into the room and grabbed Christina up in a strangling hold.

Stunned at his abrupt entrance, Christina stiffened for such an infinitesimal moment before wrapping her arms around his neck that he didn't seem to notice.

"God, how I have missed you!" Robert murmured into her neck.

Over Robert's shoulder, Christina was surprised to see Sergei lounging against the mantel as he watched her with a smile. Closing her eyes to shut out his sympathetic gaze, she gave her husband her full attention. She *was* glad to see him, she assured herself. She was.

She returned his embrace with an earnestness that she finally did believe in.

The next hour was spent over tea as he brought them up to date on what was happening in a city preparing for war. Ever yday more regiments marched into Brussels, rations were cut back on an hourly basis as the city struggled to feed a population that was growing several times its size in mere weeks. Living space was nonexistent and men were sleeping with their horses just to have a roof over their head. Robert told them that Napoleon was already marching toward Flanders, gathering men into his Grande Armée as he went, and it could be just a matter of weeks before battle was engaged. Wellington had chosen the site where the battle would be engaged, a town twenty-one miles outside of Brussels — Quatre Bras.

Christina watched Robert's excitement, thinking how very much like Eddie he looked, as if he were getting ready to deploy his wooden soldiers in a mock battle on a counterpane spread out of the floor.

Looking away from his animated face, she wondered what Varek was doing. Glancing at Sergei, she tried to read his expression, find a hint that he had communicated with Varek and that everything was fine. Sergei had come days ahead of them, in the hopes of connecting up with Varek through the Austrian generals, but by his restless manner as he wandered about the room, she had to assume he'd had no luck so far.

"What do you think, my dear?"

Christina jerked her head around and stared into Robert's expectant face. She blinked slowly, afraid to open her mouth. She had no idea as how to respond.

"I think Christina was planning on staying here with Laure for a few days. At least till she has settled in a little more." Sergei inserted smoothly, covering as usual for Christina's wandering thoughts, which seemed to happen frequently since Varek's departure.

When Robert's face fell, and he started to frown, Christina hastily added, "It will only be a few days, Robert, no more. It's just that Laure tires so quickly now." She flushed with the guilt of using Laure's advanced pregnancy as an excuse to avoid him. Seeing Robert's hurt and confusion distressed her even more. But she didn't understand; she had just assumed they would be staying in the Metternich's large residence; after all, living space was at a premium. But far above all trivial reasons, she needed to stay close to Laure and her calming influence. Worried, she glanced over at Sergei.

Raising a brow, he merely shrugged.

"You are more than welcome to stay here, my lord," Laure assured him as she refilled his cup.

Looking a little put out, Robert hedged, "Yes, your highness, I appreciate that, but I was hoping to have my wife to myself for a while. It has been so long since . . ." Christina's mind shut down and she missed the rest of what he was saying. She was suddenly sweating and shivering at the same time. Of course she had to expect this, and yet . . .

As the room tilted around her she shot to her feet and then swayed, her hand held over her eyes. Instantly, Robert and Sergei were on either side of her, both talking at the same time, but their voices sounded hazy and far away.

"I . . . I don't feel . . ." She felt herself being lifted, and in the distance she heard Laure snapping orders, then everything went black.

* * *

Breathing deeply, Christina smelled rosewater, and felt a cold dampness heavy on her eyes. Raising her hand, she tried to push off the strange weight, but it was removed before she could touch it. Her lids opened slowly, then blinked as she looked up into Laure's concerned face.

"I don't believe I have ever seen you faint before. Are you all right? Shall I send for the doctor?"

"Of course not. Don't be a goose," Christina tried to joke as she looked about her. They were thankfully alone. "Robert?"

"Pacing down below. I thought it better than to have him fretting over you."

"Is he going to be staying here?"

Laure paused, her brows raised in surprise at the strange question. Watching Christina's pale face, she said slowly, "Why, I don't think so. He mentioned that until the two of you could be alone together he might as well remain in his room at headquarters."

Christina swallowed a sigh of relief. How could she explain to her friend her sudden antipathy at the thought of sharing Robert's bed? To the princess, marital duty was everything. Not that Laure was a prude. One couldn't live amid the loose morals of European society and not accept the inevitability of affairs of the heart — and other parts down under. Laure, of course, knew about her and Varek's last night together and had silently supported her decision. But this sudden aversion to her husband's bed Laure would not be able to understand.

"You can't hide from him forever, you know."

Rubbing her eyes, Christina shook her head. "Oh, Laure, I know. I don't know what came over me. It was just that the thought of him touching me after . . ."

"If that's the way it is going to be, then divorce him."

Christina adamantly shook her head. "No."

"It's not fair to him, Christina." For the first time Laure was looking at her with condemnation in her eyes.

Looking away, Christina thought furiously. "I will get over this, Laure, I promise you. I will be a wife to Robert again. I owe it to him. And once we are back in England, it will be the same as it always was." *Keep telling yourself that, my girl. Maybe one day you will begin to believe it.*

"He needs you now, not when you get back to England."

Christina couldn't blame Laure for her defense of Robert. Truth to tell, she needed Laure to shake some sense into her. Taking a deep breath, she nodded. "You're right, Laure, as usual." Her lashes fluttered with uncertainty before she looked her friend in the eye and asked firmly, "Could you please ask Robert to come in?"

Standing, Laure smiled down on her friend. "Remember, Christina, you have a brave heart."

Christina watched as the door closed behind the princess. Unfortunately, her heart, brave or otherwise, belonged to Varek.

And here she had selfishly thought that a night of bliss spent in Varek's arms couldn't harm anyone.

Oh, what a bloody fool she was! Her lies and procrastinations were turning into a vicious cycle from which she was beginning to fear she would never break free.

* * *

By the time Robert entered the room, Christina had carefully climbed from the bed and stood facing the door, as if about to face her executioner. As he came toward her, Robert tried to mask the anger he was feeling, but it was all too obvious to her, and she took a deep breath, expecting this encounter to be anything but pleasant.

"We are going to discuss this only once and then never bring it up again, do you understand?" he demanded, his voice flat. His eyes as he watched her were simmering with accusation.

Christina nodded, her face even paler than before, if that was possible.

* * *

"Did you sleep with him?" She stifled a hysterical giggle, and her eyes widened in horror at what she had almost done. But she couldn't help it. She understood what Robert was asking, but in reality she had not slept with Varek; they had been too involved in other pursuits. *Fool, don't dig yourself in any deeper than you already are!*

But if she admitted to her perfidy, would she ever see her son again? Could her husband be so cruel? Staring into Robert's flushed, angry countenance, she thought it highly probable, especially when she considered his jealousy throughout the past months.

Her only chance was to lie. She had to lie. Yet, when she opened mouth to speak, a whispered "yes" feathered over her numb lips. She couldn't believe what she had just said, and devastated, she could do nothing but stare at Robert.

At her admission, he looked away and remained utterly still as he faced the far wall.

Christina swallowed.

"Will you again?" he asked quietly, his gaze darting sideways to watch her every expression.

"No."

"Is he out of your life now?"

Closing her eyes, she took a deep breath. When she opened them again, he was standing directly in front of her, studying her intently. "Is he?"

She had come this far, it was best she finish it, she speculated with a calmness that surprised her. "I will always love Varek, but it doesn't matter for we shall never see each other again. We have both resigned ourselves to that fact."

"It doesn't matter?" he bit out, incredulous. "You can stand there, shunning my touch, and tell me it doesn't matter!"

Anger flickered to life in her bruised heart. She was standing on the precipice of losing the one thing she held dearest and yet she wouldn't let him crush her beneath his hypocritical heel. "I am still a good commodity, Robert. Still a possession of value, I believe. If I can forgive you your numerous dalliances, than you can surely forgive me this one transgression!"

His eyes fluttered as guilt flushed his cheeks. When he spoke, he was clearly embarrassed. "I didn't know you knew."

She stared him down. "Of course I knew."

She was surprised when he shot her a sullen glare before turning away and wandering over to the fireplace. "And obviously you didn't care enough to mention it to me."

In truth, she hadn't.

Sighing, she followed him and settled down in one of the armchairs facing the empty fireplace. After another hurt glance cast her way, he sprawled in the matching chair.

"I realized that I was not giving you what you needed and so you were seeking it elsewhere. For that I am truly sorry, Robert. You have to believe me when I say that I have only wanted you to be happy, and if turning a blind eye to your affairs was required, then so be it." *Lord*, she thought in disgust at herself, *now who is being hypocritical?*

He was silent for a long while as he stared into the cold hearth. His manner was sad when he finally wondered, "So where do we go from here?"

When she didn't answer, he looked up. "Do you want a divorce?"

"Can I have Eddie?" The question popped out before she could even think of calling it back, and she was appalled at herself.

His mouth tensed, but he shook his head and said gently enough, "You know that is impossible. One day he will be the Duke of Kerkston."

Biting her lip, she nodded. He did not mention the fact that Eddie was also his son. Is that how he saw his own child? A commodity?

"I can't change what has come between us, Christina, but I do love you. I think I can make you happy again if you will give me a chance. I know that you will never love me as you do him, and I have come to accept that. Yet you do care for me; I am not mistaken in that. We have been close; indeed, you are the best friend I have ever had. If I promise not to expect so much from you and even not importune you to perform" — he cleared his throat and colored slightly — "your conjugal duties, then perhaps one day we can be as happy as we once were."

Tears glittered in her eyes as she whispered hoarsely, "Oh, Robert, you humble me."

Leaning forward, he took her hand in his. "I do love you, Christina, and I want you by my side. The rest will work itself out — you will see."

Christina wasn't quite sure if she was happy or devastated by his forgiveness. However, her fingers tightened about his. "And by your side I shall stay."

His smile was relieved as he told her, "Then I am content."

And in the back of Christina's mind echoed those same words in Verek's melodious voice. Could she find contentment again? she wondered sadly. Was she to live the rest of her life waiting?

Wait for me, lark.

Smiling softly, she answered in her heart, *Forever.*

Twenty-One

"One good thing I must say about having come to the Congress is that you are now able to maneuver about the floor with the grace of a dandy, my dear," Christina teased her husband as they gracefully twirled about the floor at the Duchess of Richmond's ball. The glittering assemblage was held on the ground floor of the Richmonds' rented house, and the duchess had outdone herself, as usual. Everywhere one looked pillars were festooned with brightly colored ribbons, leaves and flowers, and the doors and windows were so richly draped that they appeared as if they were dripping with the royal colors of crimson, gold and black. When Christina threw back her head and looked upward, magnificent crystal chandeliers winked down at her.

Robert quirked a brow and then mused with a thoughtful frown, "You know, I do believe you are right. In the three waltzes we have shared tonight not once have you limped off the floor in pain."

She laughed out loud, happy to see Robert in such a playful mood. Despite the escalating tension during the day due to the booming cannonade and artillery in the distance, Wellington and his generals and corps commanders were putting up a good show of nonchalance this evening.

"I have heard a rumor spreading like wildfire through the crowd. Is it true?" she finally asked the question that had been worrying her since the whispers began.

Sighing, Robert glanced over at Wellington, who at that moment was in a private conversation with the Prince of Orange. It was obvious to him that another dispatch had just been received. They had been coming in at a steady stream for days. "Yes, love, I fear 'tis true — Quatre

Bras has fallen. We will ride to Waterloo tonight. Wellington needs to set the defense lines."

"My God!" Quatre Bras was only twenty miles from them! And tomorrow he would be in Waterloo, a mere ten miles distance. Napoleon was practically walking down the streets of the city.

She glanced uneasily at the urbane commander-in-chief. "Why is he wasting his time here, for heaven's sake?"

"It is his way of assuring everyone that he is in control and there is nothing to worry about. After Quatre Bras and Ligny it is imperative to keep a sense of order."

Christina looked up at her husband and said urgently, "Robert, please be careful!" Already the casualties were flooding the hospitals of Brussels and outlying villages.

Smiling, he leaned down and kissed her nose. "Not to worry, love. I've come through just fine so far, beside that man. If I can trust him with my life, you can too." But she didn't look convinced. Then he offered her a promise he knew he might not be able to keep — however, if it helped to ease her anxiety than it couldn't hurt. "I will try to send a courier during the day to let you know what is happening. Does that satisfy you?"

Giving a strained smile, she nodded. "Yes, please, if you can."

When the waltz came to an end, dinner was announced and the crowd started to shift toward the dining room.

The next couple of hours were filled with a forced gaiety that was beginning to strain even the most hardy souls. Everyone watched uneasily as one by one many of the officers began to drift off, leaving many empty chairs as a grim reminder of what was before them. When Wellington gave a slight nod to the Prince of Orange and that young man also left, the laughter about the table began to die an uneasy death. It was almost a relief when dinner was over and the Duchess of Richmond rose.

It was at this time that Wellington gave his compliments to his hostess, and as he offered the room in general a few courteous comments, the rest of his officers quietly made their farewells to family. Christina clung to Robert for as long as she could before he stepped back and smiled down on her. Confidently, he assured her, "I will see you soon."

"You had better," she insisted with a mock scowl as she straightened his sash. Giving her a final kiss, he moved away and into the tide of men heading toward the doors.

Seeing Sergei leaning negligently against a column, Robert veered off to speak with him. For the first time he was actually glad of Massallon's annoying presence. Without a greeting, he asked, "I know how much you want to be at your friend's back tomorrow, but . . ." he looked hard into Sergei's cautious gaze. "If Napoleon breaks us you have to get her out of here. Already most of Brussels is evacuating." He looked away self-consciously. "I know we have never been friends, but I beg of you — stay with Christina."

Sergei hated being left behind, but he knew better than any the condition of the troops and their chances tomorrow. Everyday since coming to Brussels he had ridden through the Austrian camps searching for Varek with no luck. Sighing, he knew he wouldn't leave Christina for he couldn't trust her with the good sense to flee if Brussels fell; she would never leave without knowing the welfare of Varek and Robert and himself.

The least he could do is ease Robert's worries about Christina's safety. Firmly, he assured him, "I swear I will protect her with my life. I'll make sure she doesn't do anything foolish, even if I have to gag and truss her. You'll have enough to worry about." Pushing himself upright, he offered his hand. "God go with you, Basingstoke."

Robert didn't even hesitate when he took Sergei's hand. It was probably the first time they had shaken hands in years. "I must admit that I am vastly relieved to know that if anything happens to me, you will see her safely home."

The two adversaries stared into each other's eyes in perfect understanding. Without another word, Robert spun about on his heel and was gone.

All too soon the remaining guests were looking at each other with grim-faced dread. An uneasy silence, overlaid with low murmurs of fear, had fallen on the festive hall. Christina moved to Sergei's side looking about the room thinking it was all so shallow and superficial. And outside the windows they could hear the moans and cries of the wounded as they poured into the besieged city.

Just then the clock struck the midnight hour.

It was now June 18—a day none of them would ever forget.

* * *

“My God, Laure, look at it!”

Laure came to stand beside Christina and Sergei on the terrace. The horizon to the south was black with the heavy smoke of artillery and cannon. That added with the dark clouds still hanging over from yesterday’s storm, it was an eerie sight to behold. Even at the distance that separated them from the battlefield, the noise rumbled like thunder — and it was endless. The air was humid, sticky and heavy with the scent of spent gunpowder. She rubbed her cheek, and noticed a sooty moisture staining her fingertips.

Christina glanced at Sergei’s profile and saw the anger there. She knew how much he wanted to be at Varek’s side, yet she couldn’t feel guilty for playing on his sense of duty toward her. She already had two of her men in that hell. She needed Sergei here with her.

So far there had been no couriers from Robert, but already the wounded were pouring to every available hospital and any other building made available to the medical corps. There were so many, and they had only been fighting for four hours.

Looking at the pall of smoke, she knew that somewhere out there was Varek. She knew that Robert would be at Wellington’s side, but she had no idea where her love was.

When Laure went back inside to sit down, Christina asked softly, “Do you know where he is?”

His jaw clenched with his own frustration, Sergei shook his head. “All I know is that he was with the emperor at the Allies headquarters in Heilbrönn. But that was two weeks ago.” His voice was stiff with anger.

“Please don’t be angry with me, Sergei. It is bad enough that I have Varek and Robert to worry about. I couldn’t have stood it if you were out there too.”

Sergei glanced down at her with frowning bewilderment. “I am not angry with you, Christina. If I am angry at anyone it is that monster, Napoleon. God, when I think of how many men’s lives will be sacrificed today — how many lives we’ve lost over the years — it makes me want to retch. I hope when they catch the bastard they execute him this time.”

She heartily agreed, though the Allies would never commit regicide, even to rid themselves of such a madman as Napoleon.

Again she glanced off toward the scene of carnage and saw that the heavy pall seemed even denser. "How can they even see what they are doing?" she wondered aloud.

"They can't. Half the time they are on top of each other before they know it. You can't see more than a foot or two before you. And the battle is being fought in fields where the rye is higher than the men." And with last night's storm, they were sloughing through mud. More than half the troops were wet, exhausted from the grueling march of the past days, and close to starvation as they had been on quarter rations for the same amount of time. Sergei had already walked among the wounded on the streets and heard the horror stories of how many of the regiments were so exhausted they were sleeping at their positions and being picked off by snipers, too defeated to even care.

How insane men were, Christina brooded as she shook her head in horrified disbelief. If women ruled the world, this would not be happening. She didn't know what would be happening, but people wouldn't be brutally killing each other over possession of land and honor. Women wouldn't blindly follow other women into death — it was too ridiculous to even contemplate. What was it with men and their dueling and their boxing and their hunting and their — it was all simply so demented.

She heard Laure call to her, "Both of you come in here and eat something. Neither of you have had a bite all day."

Just the thought of food made her stomach churn. It would probably taste of smoke and gunpowder.

Instead, she stood at Sergei's side, listening to the rumbling that never stopped, and watched the sky becoming darker and darker as the sun began to wane. "How much more can those men take?" she muttered.

There was a flurry of movement in the salon behind them, and hoping it was a courier from Robert, she hurried into the room. However, it was only one of the princess's footmen looking weary and stained with soot and sweat. Laure turned a pale face toward them as Christina hurried to her side.

"La Haye Sainte has fallen to Ney!" she whispered, shocked into a crippling sense of terror.

Christina turned to Sergei. "That is the center of Wellington's defenses, isn't it?"

Sergei tersely demanded of the footmen, "Have they broken the line?"

The man shook his head. "I couldn't really tell. Can't see anything down there. I heard La Haye had fallen and I came here right away." Evacuation was now a reality to be considered.

Damn fool, Sergei thought in disgust, coming here and frightening the women for what could be nothing at all. The Anglo-Allied armies under Wellington were deployed strategically between three large farmhouses. La Haye Sainte was the center of the triangle and it was true that it was the most important stand of defense. Wellington had placed his King's German Legion there, for they were his stoutest regiment and he trusted them implicitly. That it had fallen was a blow. But Wellington was a master tactician who planned for such a situation as this, and worse.

Suddenly there was a growing roar outside, which built to a cacophony of shouting and cheering in the streets, muskets fired into the air. After staring at each other in shock, the four of them, as a group, rushed out into the street. The people flowing about them were ecstatic, hysterical in their revelry.

Sergei grabbed hold of a filthy soldier's arm. "What is it?" he shouted over the din.

"It's the Prussians. They're here! We've routed Boney and sent the bastard fleeing!"

Sergei spun around and grinned at Christina, who was grinning back. With a shout she launched herself into his arms. "It's over! Thank God, it's over!"

But was it? She still had to find Varek and Robert, and in the jubilant crush and endless stream of people and carts flowing through the streets like a steady flow of lava, it seemed an impossibility. Already she was searching every face as she was jostled along in the on-flowing tide. When Sergei grabbed hold of her and pulled back into the Metternich house, she was trembling with fear.

Hours later she was still waiting, and it was driving her insane. Pacing by Sergei's chair, where he was sprawled watching her with a moody wariness, she again demanded that he take her to Waterloo.

And he replied, just as he had the other countless times, "We will stay right here until we hear otherwise. I am not about to drive you around

at night through a war-torn countryside where there will still be snipers, and God knows what." He could see she was slowly starting to come apart, a hysterical tinge to her voice every time she spoke. Thankfully, Laure had retired to her bed, exhausted and with an aching back. He was tempted to dose Christina with some of Laure's laudanum just to calm her down.

They both heard it at the same time — a pounding on the street door. They froze in expectation, listening to the muffled voices out in the hall. When the salon door opened and a man marched in, Christina blinked at the uniform of the exhausted and bloodstained man standing before her. The facing on his uniform was yellow: Austenburg's Imperial Elite, Varek's legion. Numb, her gaze traveled up to the man's grim face.

Clicking his heels, he bowed, and held out a missive.

As if in slow motion she watched her hand reach out and take the parchment. There was blood on it. She didn't even see the courier's departure; all she could see was the blood staining the edges of the paper.

"Sergei," she whispered.

He was at her side, his hand supporting hers, which was still extended. "Do you want me to read it?"

Shaking her head, she opened it, the crackling of the paper the only sound in the deathly quiet room.

Sergei, his own heart racing, watched Christina, the emotions stark on her pale face. He felt the room tilt as her shaking hand covered her mouth, and when she looked up at him tears were already pouring down her ashen cheeks. "Oh, God! Oh, God, Sergei," she choked out. Then she was in his arms and her body was convulsing with the force of her sobs.

Sergei closed his eyes.

"Oh, Sergei, he's alive!" she choked out on a laugh.

"What?" he shouted. Reaching up, he tore the note for her fingers and read, "*Fear not, lark, for I am well. I love you, Varek.*"

Grabbing her shoulders, he pushed her away and shook her, "Damn you, Christina! I thought he was . . ." He stared into her drenched eyes, and suddenly they were laughing in hysterical union as he spun her around.

The next knock on the door did not bring such happy tidings.

Robert had been wounded.

Immediately, they were off, Christina dressed in breeches for the convenience of fast riding. By the time they reached the inn at Waterloo where Wellington was staying it was close to midnight, and still the area was a hive of activity, as men saw to the dead and wounded. The smoke and stench was so cloying it stuck in her throat and everywhere she looked the moonlight was glistening off blood. The cries and screams of thousands of men could have been a chorus straight from hell. Everywhere she stepped she had to be careful so as not to stumble on a supine form, either dead or dying or sleeping. She was relieved when she was hustled into a cramped inn and then up the stairs, the air fetid with fresh blood, sweat and smoke.

When she entered a room the only thing she saw was Robert on the bed with two blood-soaked men bent over, and examining his legs, while he writhed and moaned as if tortured.

She hurried over, stumbling over something on the floor, which grunted at her. Looking down, she saw Wellington glaring up at her. They both blinked at each other in surprise.

"What are you doing down there?" she inquired stupidly.

Sitting up, he rubbed his face. "I was trying to sleep."

"I'm sorry," she muttered, then stepped around him and hurried to the bed.

It took her a moment to grab hold of one of Robert's thrashing hands and hold on tightly. "Robert," she called to him. Several times she leaned over him, calling out his name, before she was finally able to gain his attention. Weakly, he turned toward her, blinking at her with eyes so dazed and pain-filled that she wondered if he even knew who she was.

Then he was saying in a voice raw with panic, "Don't let them do it." The hand she was holding turned and now gripped hers with a strength that almost brought her to her knees as he crushed the small bones in her fingers. "Promise me you won't let them do it!"

Frightened, Christina looked up at the doctor standing beside her, who was frowning angrily. Steeling herself, she looked down at Robert's legs and almost gagged as she stared in horror at what was left of his right thigh. His leg was a mangled mass of torn skin, muscle and shattered bone, the outer half of his thigh gone. And where his left leg lay straight on the bed, his right was laying askew. For a moment

everything flickered out and then back again. Swallowing thickly, she croaked out, "Will he live?"

"If we take the leg, he has a chance," the man across from her reported curtly. "It's his only chance." For the first time she noticed the assortment of stained instruments strewn about the bed, glinting dully in the candlelight.

"No!" Robert screamed. Then he turned wild eyes on her. "Don't you let them, Christina, you hear me!"

"But, Robert . . ."

"No, damn you, no!"

She felt a presence behind her and looked over her shoulder to see Wellington. He was looking down on Robert with the cold command of a superior officer. "It is not up to you or your wife, Basingstoke. The leg comes off."

Robert was panting, staring at his commander-in-chief with the look of a doomed animal. His head started shaking back and forth. "No, sir, please. I will get better."

"No, you won't, not if you don't get rid of it." Christina was appalled at the duke's lack of humanity, and yet when she glanced back at Robert he was now laying still with his eyes closed. It looked to her as if he had suddenly given up.

Very low, Wellington apologized to her. "I am sorry, my dear. Sometimes when they are in shock, the voice of command seems to be the only thing they can understand. Forgive my callousness."

"I understand, and thank you for being here."

"No place else for me to go just now. He has my bed," he explained wryly, but the look in his eyes was infinitely sad as he looked down on only one of the many loyal friends he had seen wounded or killed that day. "Today I lost eight of my aides, loyal men who rode by my side and took bullets that were doubtless intended for me. And here I stand, untouched." He sounded angry.

Not knowing what to say, Christina turned back to Robert. She noticed the doctors staring at her, as if waiting for something.

The next voice she heard at her shoulder was Sergei's as he began to pull her away. Instinctively, she struggled against him. Then he gave her no choice as he swept her up and bore her out of the room. She watched the door slamming behind her with a finality that had her shuddering with dread.

Sergei took her outside of the inn, where she could not distinguish Robert's screams from those all around her.

As Sergei held her trembling body, he looked about the madness around them and again wondered where Varek was. As soon as he could he was going to hunt the slippery bastard down and this time he wasn't going to be turned away.

* * *

It wasn't until the middle of the next day that Sergei was able to find the time to leave Christina, who was completely absorbed with easing Robert's pain and fever as much as possible. She had sent him away to get some sleep, but instead he began his search for the elusive archduke.

It took him close to five very frustrating hours to finally run his quarry to ground. And when he approached the tiny farmhouse outside Waterloo, he was amazed to see quite a few of emperor's own personal guard situated around the modest dwelling. When upon his approach he was abruptly forced back, a heated argument ensued. At the end of his tether, and seething with a rage that rarely escaped him, Sergei was soon shouting at the top of his lungs, "Damn you to hell, Vare, get out here and tell these bastards to let me in!"

The door was jerked open and Varek stood on the threshold, a look of surprise on his strained features. His first words were, "Why aren't you with Christina? Is something wrong?" The panic on Varek's face made Sergei assure him hastily that she was fine.

His frown easing, Varek gave an abrupt nod to the guard standing in Sergei's way, and then turned back around and disappeared into the cottage, leaving the door wide open. Sergei threw a challenging glare at the man, and when the soldier reluctantly stepped aside, he quickly followed, slamming the door behind him.

"What the hell is going on, Vare? Why are Francis's personal guards knee deep around this place?"

Varek shot him a disgruntled look as he sat down at a table that was covered in food. Sergei quickly noticed an elderly couple sitting quiet and roundeyed in the corner. "It was the only way Francis would let me leave Heilbrönn."

Dropping down on the bench across the table from his friend, Sergei picked up a piece of bread and suddenly realized he was fam-

ished. As if by a miracle, a bowl of the most heavenly smelling stew appeared over his shoulder, and plunked down in front of him. Sergei smiled his thanks at the timid woman, who silently nodded and then retreated back to her corner. "Will you now please tell me what is going on?" Sergei demanded between spoonfuls of the ambrosia he was shoveling into his mouth.

His lips quirked in amusement as he watched his famished guest, Varek instead countered with, "First tell me of lark. Where is she? Is she all right?"

Swallowing, Sergei shook his head in exasperation and sighed. Varek always was single-minded to the point of obstinacy where Christina was concerned. "As I said before, she is fine. With me looking out for her, how can you doubt it? She is at Wellington's headquarters in Waterloo right now. Basingstoke lost a leg and, of course, she is with him."

Varek's gaze sharpened, and Sergei foresaw his next question by saying gently, "It is most likely he will live, Vare."

Varek looked away, despair crushing him, "Of course. And now she has even more reason to stay by his side," he said heavily.

Sergei paused in his chewing as he thought about that, and then silently agreed. "Now, about the guards . . ."

Varek's mind still fretting with this last frustration seemed not to hear him at all. When Sergei repeated the question, Varek looked over at him as if in a daze, and answered, irritation ripe in his voice, "There is an assassin on my tail, and Francis learned of it. I was on my way back to Austenburg when he had me intercepted and brought to Heilbrönn."

Sergei blinked at him. "Did you know of this assassin?"

Giving Sergei a testy glance, he nodded.

Very calmly, Sergei put down his spoon. "And you didn't tell me?" he asked in a voice silky and low.

Varek's eyes narrowed as his expression turned belligerent. "That's right, I didn't tell you!"

Sergei took a deep breath and counted to ten. "Damn you, Vare, how long have you known?"

"Sophy. My error was placing her in Francis's custody, where he also learned of the plot."

"And knowing this, you went to Austenburg alone?"

"You are not my keeper, Sergei." Then he wished he could pull back the words when Sergei's face fell with a confused hurt. The look in Varek's eyes when they met Sergei's was filled with a comradeship that neither had ever forgotten.

"I would die for you, Vare, don't you know that? You and Christina are the only people in this damn world I care about. If something happened to you, do you have any idea what would happen to her? Or to me, for that matter?"

Varek dropped his face into his hands and wearily rubbed it. "Bröchre has marked me, Serge. I am as good as dead, with or without you by my side. In fact, Sophy told me that I was to be killed in battle, to hide the assassination. I find it amazing I am still alive. And I would just as soon you stay out of it."

The silence that followed this announcement was deafening. When he looked up Sergei was staring at him with an expression of blankness that had Varek wondering what he was thinking.

"Who hired him?" Sergei asked in a detached voice.

"Roget."

Surprise lit the deadened look in Sergei's eyes.

Wryly, Varek smiled, "I know it's a bit hard to comprehend, but apparently Roget has been behind the brewing rebellion in Austenburg for years. Patient devil; I have to say that for the bastard. I do believe I deserve a knife in the back for my utter stupidity. How could I have been so bloody blind?"

"I never did like the worm, as Christina always liked to call him, but it is hard to comprehend that he would go to such lengths. And why?" Sergei shook his head in wonder as he thought of the little weasel of a man who always seemed to be underfoot. "What are your plans now?"

Varek shrugged. "When things have settled here, I will take a contingent of Francis's troops and crush the rebellion and officially dissolve the duchy. I had prayed to do it peacefully, but my optimism is long gone. At this point I can only hope to succeed before Bröchre does."

"Don't be an ass!" Sergei snapped back as he pushed the half-eaten bowl out of his way, his appetite suddenly gone.

Gently, Varek told him, "Being realistic doesn't necessarily mean I am an ass."

"Yes, and you thought you would be dead in battle and you are still bloody well here, aren't you? When you go back I am coming with you."

Now Varek was frowning, as he said stiffly, "Absolutely not!"

"You," Sergei snarled as he shot to his feet and pointed a finger in Varek's angry face, "have no fucking say in the matter! Whether it is at your side or trailing behind, I am coming!"

Varek watched as his friend stormed out of the cottage, the door slamming behind him. After a thoughtful moment, Varek found he was suddenly feeling more light-hearted than he had been since saying good-bye to his lark. Turning, he grinned at his hosts and said simply, "That was my friend."

In unison, they nodded and grinned back.

Twenty-Two

Christina felt herself floating, and then blessed coolness drifted over her. Her lids felt too heavy to lift, but she finally opened her eyes and saw the room moving about her. Her head was resting on a broad shoulder.

Frowning, she lifted her head and looked about her. Sergei was carrying her out of Robert's room. "What are you doing?" she demanded, her voice scratchy with weariness.

Sergei's gaze was grim as he glanced down at her. "I am taking you to bed. If you don't get some rest you will be as ill as Robert. Laure has plenty of servants to watch him for a few hours."

It was on the tip of her tongue to argue, then she decided she was too tired to try. With a sigh she dropped her head back onto his shoulder and let him take care of her. When he lowered her onto her bed, she snuggled into the cool sheets, which seemed to drift down over her like magic. Instantly she was drifting off to sleep again. Bending down, Sergei lifted her little shadow onto the bed and lifted the cover so Katie could burrow under and curl up beside her mistress.

Sergei stood over her for a long time, fighting with his conscience. How could he leave her, especially now of all times? But how could he let Varek go off to Austenburg and into that nest of vipers alone? Rubbing his eyes, he made his way over to the daybed, and stretching out on it, he lay there staring up into the darkness. Earlier, before he had gone to get Christina, he had closed the heavy draperies tight, but still the endless noise from the streets could be heard. They were back in Brussels, having carefully moved Robert to the cleaner comfort of the Metternichs' rented house. The shouts, curses, laughter, even the crying of broken men were an endless cacophony of sound that Sergei

didn't think he would ever forget. Bloody hell, how he hated war! And here he was contemplating walking into another one beside Varek.

Smiling wryly, he closed his eyes and tried to catch a bit of the rest he had forced upon Christina. He wasn't looking forward to the talk he would have with her when she awoke.

However, when he next opened his eyes it was morning, and Christina was gone. Cursing, he shot up and got tangled in the blanket Christina must have placed over him sometime during the night. "Damn that woman!" he grumbled as he strode out of the room and into Robert's — where he found her trying to hold down a hysterical, fever-ridden man.

"Damn it, Christina," he shouted as he ran over and forced Robert down.

Christina barely heard him, as Robert was doing his own share of cursing her.

"I want to go home, you stupid bitch!" Robert raged as he tried to throw off the added strength of Sergei's weight. "Let me up! What is wrong with you people?"

In a matter of minutes his shouting had the room filled with enough help in the form of stalwart footmen that it didn't take long for Robert's thrashing body to be firmly restrained. His fever-glazed eyes glared condemningly at Christina as he panted under the constraining hands.

Seeing Christina's stricken expression, Sergei took her by the shoulders. "He doesn't know what he is saying, Christina."

"I know that, Sergei, but he is constantly telling me how he wants to go home. What am I going to do?"

"What do the doctors say?"

"That to move him such a distance right now would probably kill him."

"Then you'll have to stay here," he reasoned in a calming voice. "Once the fever dies, he will become more lucid. Just be sure to have the footmen close by and you should be fine."

Christina, hearing something strange in his voice, turned to look at him with a curious frown. It was then that she noticed how distracted he was, which was so out of character for Sergei. He usually had the steady calmness of a cool summer day. Casting a quick glance at Robert, and satisfied that he had dropped off into another exhausted doze, she pulled Sergei out of the room. "What is going on, Sergei?"

Running a hand through his disordered hair, he wondered how he was supposed to break the news of his defection to her. Sighing, he took hold of her hand and led her back into her room. As she watched him firmly close the door, Christina became more frightened by the moment. She was relieved when he began to speak.

"I saw Varek yesterday."

Her heart started to pound heavily. She couldn't understand why he continued to watch her with such serious intent. She clenched her hand and waited.

Seeing her stark fear, he assured her as quickly as he had done Varek. "He is fine, Christina. My God, the two of you have such a sense of the morbid." When she looked as if she didn't trust him, he took her hand again, and together they sat down on the edge of the bed. "Truly, he is fine. I wouldn't lie to you about that."

Taking a deep breath, she cleared her throat and asked again, "Then what is wrong?"

Sergei was looking down at their clasped hands, and seeing how tiny and helpless hers looked, he almost changed his mind. Then he thought of Varek trying to stay one step ahead of Bröchre. Swallowing, he told her gently, "I have decided to go back to Austenburg with Varek."

Christina jerked her hand from his and reared back. "What?"

Steeling himself, he looked up and saw the look of betrayal staring back at him. "I have to go, Christina."

"Why?" she demanded angrily. "I need you here."

Standing, he wandered over to the window, rubbing his aching eyes. He started when he felt her behind him. She laid her head on his back. "I am so sorry, Sergei. That was thoughtless of me. If this is what you need to do, then of course you must go. It's just that . . ." Her voice broke, and he heard her take a deep breath. "It seems all my life you have been the one constant I could rely on. I am going to miss you."

Turning, he pulled her up into his arms. "It won't be forever, Christina. I'll see you again in England. It's just that with this rebellion, Varek will need someone at his back. Once that is over . . ."

"Please don't, Sergei. Don't commit yourself to me and then torture yourself if you find you can't keep it." Leaning back from him, she looked deeply into his troubled gaze. "Just promise me one thing."

"Anything."

"Remember that you always have a home with me."

He smiled tenderly down at her. "I know that, Christina. You don't have to tell me."

Smiling sadly back at him, she kissed his cheek. "When will you be leaving?"

"That depends on Varek, of course."

Frowning, she moved away from him and wandered aimlessly about the room. He saw her cast him a sideways glance. "I worry that there is something you are keeping from me. I felt it with Varek, too."

Though his gaze faltered, he remained stubbornly silent.

Sighing, she fiddled with her brush and comb on her dressing table. "What will happen when the duchy is dissolved?"

Shrugging, Sergei leaned against the wall. "I would imagine that Varek will probably settle onto one of his outlying estates."

She nodded. Wetting her lips, she turned about and looked him squarely in the eye — and he had never seen her look more serious. "There is one more thing I want you to promise me."

"Anything," he repeated softly.

"If something should happen to Varek" — she closed her eyes briefly, then continued — "you must bring Tina to me. I don't think the emperor would find fault with that."

Sergei saw how hard this was for her, for just the thought of Varek leaving this world was wrenching for her, but even so she was still looking out for him by caring for and loving his daughter. Nodding, he stated without hesitation, "I know Varek would approve, and the emperor will honor his wishes."

Nodding briskly, she turned quickly away and moved toward the door. "I have to check on Robert," she announced and then was gone.

His hands dug deep in his pockets, Sergei turned to watch the endless wave of humanity flow by on the streets below, and worried whether he was doing the right thing.

* * *

The following days were hell on earth for Christina. Robert only seemed to get worse, his abusive tantrums unending, and every hour she dreaded that Sergei would tell her that he and Varek were leaving. Even though she had been assured of Varek's well-being, she was still

so tempted to go and see for herself that she found herself pacing the floor in her anxiety. But they had said their good-byes and she must content herself with that painful reality.

Plus the doctors had her testy and snappish for she was getting fed up with them telling her that her husband was mending when she couldn't see any of these improvements. The severed flesh was just as inflamed and hot, and day by day she watched in fear as the telltale streaks of infection could be seen to rise higher into his groin. This, they assured her, was not unusual as his body fought off the effects of the fever. It would just take time.

And it was time that Robert didn't want to give himself. Every waking moment he was railing at her that he wanted to go home, and often she was tempted to bundle him into a coach and send him on his way just to silence him. She was becoming weak from exhaustion and lack of food as her appetite was nonexistent. She was ready to tear her hair out by the roots, and for the first time she couldn't turn to Sergei to solve her problems, for she did not wish to burden him further. He had his own problems now, and she had to keep reminding herself that they no longer included her. As much as she wished she could be angry with him, she couldn't. For too many years he had selflessly held his life in abeyance as he took care of her; it was time to let him go and learn to stand on her own. She was thankful, knowing that Varek and Sergei were reunited, and she wished them Godspeed.

After a week of battling Robert she finally admitted defeat and told Laure that they would be leaving as soon as she could make the arrangements. Perhaps when Robert was home he would settle down and begin to heal. He certainly wasn't doing himself any good constantly battling her. When she spoke with Wellington, he graciously supported her decision and offered a cavalry regiment to escort them safely home.

Even Helen offered to come with her, which set her mind further at ease. They would be fine, she assured herself, as she prepared herself for the long trek back to Kerkmoor.

Kerkmoor! And her baby!

* * *

On the morning of their departure, Christina watched as Robert, heavily dosed with laudanum, was carefully settled into the huge traveling

coach, with the interior benches opened out to form a bed. It had cost her a handsome sum to purchase the vehicle, but seeing how comfortably Robert was resting in it, she knew it was worth every penny. Helen was to follow in a second coach that was loaded with the luggage, plus a few other wounded soldiers who lived not far from Kerkmoor. Having met them while she was at Wellington's headquarters in Waterloo, she had sent them a note, offering them space in the second carriage, which they had gratefully accepted.

Hearing a familiar voice behind her, she turned to see Wellington striding up to her, a smile on his handsome face. "My lady, I had to come and wish you Godspeed. How is that heroic husband of yours doing?" Stepping past her, he peered into the coach and nodded approvingly. "I am sorry to have missed seeing the princess off yesterday."

Laure had left early yesterday to return to Vienna with her husband. It had been the farewell of a dear friend that Christina swore she would not lose again; so they had made each other promise that this was not goodbye for them and that they would see each other again.

Pulling on her gloves, Christina asked, "And when will you be leaving, your grace?"

"We will be heading for Paris shortly. There is much to do for my men in the aftermath of such carnage."

Shaking her head, Christina smiled up at him. "You have always confused me, you must realize. I have never met a military man who has such a distaste for war as you do. How do you manage it?"

"I never let myself dwell on it for too long, I suppose. It is the tactics of warfare that fascinate me, where the reality of it appalls me. To see so many worthy men lose life or limb is of course, inevitable; but if by employing the proper strategies I can reduce the losses than I will feel I have done my duty to England."

"Hear, hear," she whispered. "I also wanted to thank you for your generous offer of one of your regiments to escort us."

"Please, my lady, no need. These gallant men are due for a leave, and they are also carrying dispatches to Castlereagh, so it is no trouble at all. Indeed, I thank you for offering the comfort of your coach to my men." She noticed him looking over her shoulder before he said quietly, "I believe there is someone else who wishes to bid you farewell, so I shall take my leave of you." Taking her hand, he bowed over it. "Godspeed, my lady. It has been one of the great pleasures of

the Congress to have met you. Hopefully, we will soon meet again, in our own beloved England."

As he walked away to speak with two wounded men who were standing beside the second carriage, Christina turned around and froze. Varek was standing before her, looking incredibly handsome to her starved heart.

He was drinking in the sight of her as he greeted her softly, "Hello, lark."

Raising her hand, she touched his lean cheek, and his hand covered hers, holding it tightly against his face. Her voice quavered as she murmured, "Thank you for coming. I so wanted to see you to assure myself that you were indeed well."

He grinned at her. "Hale and hearty, as you can see."

Off to the side, she noticed Sergei standing not too far off, searching the crowds around him with alert eyes. Confused, she noticed they were actually surrounded by Varek's own elite guard, plus an added force of the emperor's personal guard. They were all suspiciously alert, hands held close to their weapons. Frowning, she looked again at Varek.

"I was sorry to hear about Robert. Is there anything I can do?" He truly did sound regretful, and she couldn't help but try to lighten this last moment left to them.

"Well," she teased, playfully tugging on a yellow frog on his tunic, "you could give me back Sergei."

Sergei, hearing this, flashed her an impudent grin. Grinning himself, Varek bantered back, "Oh, no you don't. It's my turn to have him."

Christina gave him a mock pout. "Then I suppose the only other thing you can do for me is to take care of him."

"Without a doubt." His gaze softened as he continued to stare into her eyes.

She moved in closer and rose up on her toes. Taking his face between her hands, she pulled him closer till their lips were a breath away. "And take care of yourself, my love. And never forget that I will wait for you forever."

His arms swept around her and their lips met and burned with the fever of regret and loss. Feeling herself falling apart, she pushed herself out of his arms. She then hurried over to Sergei and they embraced tightly, wordless in their grief. Not trusting herself to

look at either of them again, she ran to the coach and let a footman help her in.

As soon as the door closed, Varek was there, his hand extended to her. She grasped it tightly, and as the coach moved forward, he walked beside her. Just as their hands were ripped apart, he rasped out to her. "One day, Christina. I promise you, one day I will find you again!"

Tears streaming down her cheeks, she leaned back against the cushions, her hands pressed against her mouth, holding back the wrenching sobs that threatened to consume her. Glancing at Robert, she was startled to see him staring at her. His gaze was unfocused, drugged. Without a word, his eyes closed and he seemed to fall into a deep sleep.

She could only pray that he had not been a witness to her parting from Varek.

Twenty-three

The trip home took several weeks, and were some of the worst days of Christina's life. Even heavily drugged most of the time to mitigate his pain as much as she dared, Robert's moans filled the coach, and she lived in constant dread that he wasn't going to make it. His fever never seemed to lessen, though she thought it a good sign that it didn't get worse either. But what had her terrified most was that the leg refused to show signs of healing. She was thankful that in the regiment escorting them was a medical student, Henry Mason, who seemed to know what was needed and took over the application of medications and the changing of Robert's dressing, which had to be done more than was normal due to the putrid stains that quickly saturated the linen. When the young man gave his grim assessment of Robert's progress and offered the suggestion that they take him to a hospital in Calais, she immediately made plans to do so. However, when Robert became aware of her intention, he became so hostile and uncontrollable, she gave in with frustrated reluctance and instead concentrated on finding a ship that would take them directly to London. The only thing that seemed to go her way on the hellish journey was that she almost immediately found a captain who was making ready to sail that very afternoon.

She was doubly thankful for the company of Helen and with Sergei no longer there to lean on, she found herself turning more and more to the young woman as a source of friendship. Perhaps because of the constant anxiety, perhaps because of a deep sense of loneliness, she felt a compelling need to confide in this empathic soul. And, strangely enough, it helped tremendously. She felt lighter, as if sharing her troubles seemed to lessen them. Trusting Helen as she did, it was easier for

her to leave Robert in her care and relax on deck with Katie for company. These stolen moments of relaxation were her first since learning of Robert's injury.

When the ship docked in London, Christina put her foot down and turned a deaf ear to Robert's angry demands that they continue on to Kerkmoor. She adamantly refused to go further than the St. Pole London residence, where she could finally send for a doctor. Before she had even left Brussels Sergei had sent a courier ahead to warn the duke of Robert's condition, and to alert the London staff of their coming, and she almost collapsed in relief when she spotted the Kerkston livery on a young man who was obviously prowling the docks, looking for their arrival on every ship that docked. As soon as she hailed him over, he blew his whistle that soon had other Kerkston footmen running to her assistance, while one of the young men took off to notify the town house of their arrival.

Closing her eyes, Christina leaned her head back and breathed in the sooty, salty air of England and thought she had never smelled anything as lovely. She was once again under the Duke of Kerkston's gentle reach and felt at home already. Feeling a presence at her elbow, she turned to find Helen, who was looking about her with an excited Katie in her arms.

"I never thought I would be so glad to see this filthy city again," the woman commented wryly as she put the restless puppy down, careful to keep a firm hold on the leash as she began to scamper wildly about, sniffing and barking at any and everything.

Seeing the duke's huge traveling coach pull up, Christina smiled. When the door was opened, she was not surprised to see that it had already been prepared with the benches dropped down to expand out into a bed. Leave it to Edward's staff to be the model of efficiency.

She turned back toward the gangway to see to Robert's transfer into the coach, however, the soldiers seemed to have the situation well in hand as her husband was already on a stretcher and being carried across the plank. For the hundredth time Christina blessed Wellington for his thoughtfulness in providing her such competent men to see to their comfort and safety, and the addition of Henry Mason had been a godsend. She could tell immediately that her husband had been given another dose of laudanum; he was resting on the stretcher with relative calm, looking about himself with dazed disinterest.

Knowing she need worry only about her husband's comfort, she turned her back on the ship and the unloading of their luggage and climbed up into the carriage, settling close beside Robert. She was so eager to see Edward and her son, but she resigned herself to the fact that they were probably still at Kerkmoor, as traveling was too painful for his grace. A few more weeks would not matter much, she convinced herself, and besides, Robert still needed her too much for her to be distracted by her rambunctious son.

Turning to one of the numerous footmen bustling about the carriage, she directed him to fetch the St. Pole's London doctor.

"He is already awaiting you at the town house, my lady," he assured her as he snapped the carriage door closed and locked it securely. Glancing out the window, she saw Helen escorted to a second coach, and grinned back at the laughing woman, who was holding up the squirming, yapping puppy to show her they were all right and following right behind.

Sighing, Christina turned to check on Robert and was grateful to see that he seemed to be dozing easily. She brushed his hair out of his eyes and leaned down to kiss his forehead, frowning when she felt the increased heat from his flushed face. When would it go away? she fretted as she pulled out her flask and trickled watered brandy past his dry lips.

"Soon, Robert," she whispered. "Soon you will be home and tucked in your own bed, and then this nightmare will be over."

She was surprised when his lids lifted slowly and he stared at her. The look in his gaze froze her, for he was looking at her with the eyes of death — she knew it well by now, for she had seen it staring out at her from the hundreds of corpses littering the streets of Waterloo. Bending nearer, she assured him urgently, "Just a little more, my dear, and everything will be fine."

He closed his eyes and turned his face away from her.

* * *

The coach drew up outside the town house. The wheels and hooves sounded muffled, and looking out, she could see that the street had been liberally dusted with sawdust to lessen the noise of the traffic around the town house.

Just as she was stepping down from the coach, the front door flew open and a joyfully squealing boy came hurtling down the steps. She barely had time to open her arms before her son's sturdy body flung itself against her. Hardly believing she was holding her baby, Christina fell to her knees and rocked him in her arms as she cried, holding on tightly as if afraid someone would again wrest him from her.

When she could think straight, she tried to concentrate on his babble, which was not easy as she could barely hear him over the excited barking of his spaniel puppy — which was no longer a puppy but a gangly, flop-eared terror that was bound and determined to join Eddie in her lap. Finally, giving up and laughing joyously, she tumbled backward onto her bottom with a thump that rattled her teeth. Apparently, Helen had also arrived, because Katie now joined the mass of arms and legs and paws that were attacking her.

"Quite a homecoming, wouldn't you say?" an amused voice observed from the top of the steps. When she looked over Eddie's russet curls, she was shocked even more to see Edward — and he was *standing*! She gaped at him in shock, seeing that he was supporting his thin body between custom-made canes that he held in his white-knuckled grip. He looked a bit unsteady, and if it wasn't for the husky footman standing close behind him, observing his grace's every move with an eagle eye, she feared he might topple over.

Still holding her son close, she came to her feet with the help of yet another faithful footman and walked up the steps. "Edward, my God, look at you! You look wonderful. When did this happen?"

Smiling wryly, he looked down at Eddie, who was grinning so widely that he proudly showed off a gap in his front teeth. "This imp of Satan gave me choice. If I was going to keep up with him, he made it known I had best get off my unmentionable and start using my legs again. So here I am." His expression turned to concern when he saw the utter exhaustion on her face. "You look horrid, my dear."

Chuckling, Christina shook her head. "Thank you, Edward, and yes, it is so good to be home!" She gave her son a smacking kiss on the cheek that set him off into giggles again. Then, looking down, he pointed at the tiny puppy scampering about.

"Is it mine, Mama?" he asked excitedly.

She loved her son to distraction, but she could not give up Tina's gift. "No, love, but you may play with her to your heart's content. I

have enough presents to keep you more than satisfied." Setting his restless body down, she went to Edward and embraced him, careful not to unbalance him. "Oh, Edward, how good it is to see you again. You have no idea how much I have missed you!"

When she stepped back, he searched her face with a thoroughness that had her squirming as much as Eddie. It was obvious he didn't like what he was seeing, for he began to frown. "That bad, was it?" he queried with gentle concern.

Flinching, she tried to quip lightly, "It was heaven and hell on earth. I am just so glad to be home. But Robert . . ." She cast an uneasy glance over her shoulder at her husband, whose stretcher was being maneuvered carefully out of the massive coach.

Edward was also watching the transfer of his brother's inert body, and sorrow enveloped him. They had never been close, but seeing him wounded brought a sharp pain to his heart. "Don't worry anymore, Christina. Dr. Elliston is upstairs already, arranging Robert's room to best suit his convalescence. We will see him through this together."

Still watching her husband, she murmured, "I pray you are right, Edward."

"Papa?" Eddie's voice came from behind her, and looking down, she saw Eddie standing beside her with Katie in his arms. His huge eyes were on the unfamiliar sight of his father being carried up the stairs. Thankfully a sheet covered his body so that Eddie was spared the sight of his father's true condition.

She heard Edward's voice as a mere whisper beside her. "I thought it best to tell Eddie about Waterloo, and how his father was coming home a great war hero."

Touched by his thoughtfulness, Christina nodded, then knelt down and drew her son into her arms. "Papa is not feeling too well yet, Eddie, but soon he will be up and around. Then he can tell you all about beating Nappy, and how he saved Wellington's life."

Instantly awed, Eddie tore his anxious gaze off his father and turned his excitement upon her. "Papa did that? He saved the general?" Wellington had been Eddie's hero since he had gotten his first pewter-cast soldier and had listened raptly to his uncle tell thrilling stories of the Iron Duke's heroism. That his own papa saved his life was thrilling beyond all expectation. Smiling, she eased his grip on little Katie. "He

did indeed, my darling. You must be patient and let him get better, and then he will tell you everything."

Nodding, he assured her with endearing earnestness, "I promise, Mama."

Brushing his hair out of his eyes, she drank in the sight of him, thinking how much he had grown and how much she had missed. But she was back, and never would she leave him again. With a new spurt of optimism, she decided to believe Edward's assurances that all would be well. Robert would recover, and he still had his political career to pursue. They would be leaving for Kerkmoor soon, and once she was back in that beloved haven her life would be perfect again.

Standing, she took Eddie's hand and began to follow Edward into the house when she paused and looked up at the sky. Wondering where Varek and Sergei were was as much a part of her day as waking up and going to sleep. Which only brought home to her the sad reality that her life could never be perfect without them by her side.

* * *

"He will die," Christina heard as she quietly opened the door. Unnoticed, she paused on the threshold and stared in dazed surprise at the doctor, who was sitting beside Edward in the darkly paneled library. The gloomy shadows about the room seemed to echo the doctor's bleak prognosis.

"The doctors in Brussels said he would probably survive," she challenged him when she finally found her wits. Leaving the door open, she hurried over to them and stationed herself behind the duke's chair.

Rising to his feet, Dr. Elliston sketched her a bow before shrugging and responding with the resignation of his profession, "'Probably' was the key word, my lady. It didn't help that he was jostled over rough roads for close to a week before he was able to heal completely."

Christina's hands gripped the back of the chair, and she looked away from the doctor, feeling guilty down to her soul. If Robert died it would be her fault; she hadn't had the strength to do what was best for Robert instead of bending to his will.

"However, my lady, the amputation was doubtlessly done under the meanest of conditions, which is all too common during war. Infection

most often sets in as soon as the filthy instruments touch the skin. There is also lead poisoning, depending on how long they waited till amputation. There are so many contributing factors that it would be impossible to narrow it down to a single reason why gangrene has spread to the degree it has. All I can tell you for certain is that Lord Basingstoke is in a terminal state of infection, and I will not horrify you by going into details. The damage done is irreversible."

"How long does he have?" Edward asked quietly.

The doctor paused before rendering his opinion. "I would be surprised if he lives past the week. The only thing I would recommend at this point is to keep him heavily sedated, else the pain will be intolerable."

Christina's fingers clenched about Edward's shoulders, and reaching up, he covered one of her hands with his, his thin fingers holding hers firmly. Swallowing past the thickness in her throat, she asked weakly, "Can we move him?"

Shrugging, the doctor assured her that at this point it wouldn't matter one way or the other. The room was silent for tense moments before Christina announced, "Then as soon as possible, preferably tomorrow morning, we will leave for Kerkmoor. It is where Robert wants to be."

Edward glanced at the doctor, who again simply shrugged, then agreed, "It shall be as you wish, my dear."

Without another word to either man, she walked out of the study. Closing the door behind her, she fell back against it and stared up the stairs, wondering how she was going to tell him. Should she? It worried her that she was not crying. She felt numb — so terribly numb that she didn't know what to feel. Rubbing her eyes, she thought how much she wanted to go to her room and lock the door and go to sleep for a week. She couldn't even dredge up guilt for the callousness of her thoughts upon learning of the eminent demise of her husband.

Pushing away from the door, Christina slowly ascended the stairs, thinking that above all she needed to get Robert home, where he could die in peace. She was walking along the upper landing when the walls around her began to waver and shift. Stopping, she reached out a hand to steady herself; then, after a befuddled moment, she continued on. When she reached Robert's door, she paused with her hand on the latch, and suddenly she couldn't remember what she was doing there.

In lethargic confusion she looked down at her hand, thinking that she was here to tell Robert something. Closing her eyes, she rubbed at the pounding pain in her temples and the burning behind her closed lids. When she opened her eyes again, she squinted as she pushed open the door and entered the dimly lit room. The first thing she noticed was Robert's labored breathing and as she approached the bed the putrid smell of gangrene became more pervasive in the stale air.

A bit impatiently, she asked Helen, who was sitting at Robert's bedside, to open a window and allow fresh air in. As Helen passed her, she paused to say softly, "He has been calling for you." Christina gave a nod and asked her to leave. When the door closed softly, she moved to the bed, her lips tightening as she searched Robert's face for some sign of recovery. Of course there was none; instead he appeared worse than he had an hour ago. He was flushed and looked horribly bruised, his eyes sunken and the lids tinged almost black. Then she remembered with brutal clarity — her husband was dying.

She must have made a sound, for his lids lifted slowly, and she watched as he focused on her with difficulty. The smile that stretched his lips appeared painful and almost ghoulish in his emaciated face. Hurrying to his side, she picked up his hot hand. His fingers curled about hers, but his grip was so weak that it was nonexistent.

"I'm dying, aren't I?" his voice wavered weakly.

Biting her lip, Christina nodded. Sighing, his eyes slid closed again, as if it expended too much energy to keep the heavy lids open. Sitting down on the bed close to him, she tried to ease him by saying, "I thought we would go to Kerkmoor tomorrow, if you feel you can bear the trip."

"I would walk through hell itself to go home," he assured her with another ghost of a smile.

Her own smile was so forced, she thought her face would crack. A strained silence settled between them, and as she frantically thought of something to say, she heard his voice feather over lips that barely moved.

"As you can imagine, I've had nothing but time to think, and I have decided I am not proud of what I have done."

Leaning forward, she admonished him gently, "What foolishness are you talking about, my dear?"

He opened his eyes and stared at her with feverish intensity. "I was neither a good husband to you nor a good father to Eddie." When she tried to say something he interrupted her, his voice stronger, more insistent. "When was I there, Christina? I wasn't there when he was born — Edward and Massallon were. I wasn't there for his first steps, nor when he first spoke. I didn't buy his first toy soldiers; Massallon did. Edward was there to teach him his first letters. Both of them have been more a father to him than his own ever tried to be.

"And you? When was I there for you? I expected everything from you and gave you nothing in return. What kind of man does that make me, Christina?"

Staring at him wide-eyed, she could hardly refute any of what he was saying. In truth, she had never noticed that he was never around and therefore had never faulted him for it. Edward and Sergei had filled in for the loss of a husband, and her son unselfishly gave his adoration to all the men in his life, never having time to feel the lack of his father.

"Who will miss me when I am gone, Christina?"

Shocked at his question, she stared down at him, wondering at this self-condemnation. "Your son will. I will. Perhaps we have not been the best of lovers, Robert, but we have certainly been the best of friends."

Bitterly, he castigated himself. "I have treated casual acquaintances better than I have treated my own family."

"You are being too harsh on yourself."

"No, and you have never been harsh enough. I look back now and too late realize what a fool I have been." He was getting more agitated by the minute, and she became concerned at the haunted look in his eyes.

"Robert, please — "

"I'm tired now and wish to sleep." He dismissed her abruptly, turning his face away from her.

"All right, my dear. Sleep, for tomorrow will be a long day." She kissed his averted cheek, feeling the hot skin with dread. The fever was flaring again. *Please God*, she prayed as she let herself quietly out of the room, *let us just get him back to Kerkmoor. Give us at least that much time.*

Twenty-Four

After close to two weeks on the road, Varek was surprised that he was still alive. He began to wonder if by some miracle Bröchre had been killed at Waterloo. The thought was sweet indeed, but he had to doubt it. More likely the assassin was dogging his steps this very moment, patiently waiting for the most likely opportunity to fulfill his devil's pact.

In Würzburg Varek was met by a regiment of Hussars under the command of a veteran soldier, Baron Wilhelm Kinsky, on orders from the emperor to accompany the archduke to Austenburg to deliver the Proclamation of Consolidation with the Austrian Empire, as agreed upon by the Allied Powers at the Congress of Vienna, and to assist in the quelling of any potential uprisings. And so when he and Sergei finally entered the square of the royal palace of Austenburg, the force at their backs was three hundred strong, between his own loyal guard, Emperor Francis's Imperial Guard and the Hussar regiment. The emperor himself was expected shortly to rest in Austenburg on his journey back to Vienna, and with him were the regiments that had fought at Waterloo. It was a show of force to make even the most rabid of rebels think twice about their treason.

However, the show of force also alerted Roget, who slipped away, disappearing before he could be arrested. No doubt he was busy at that very moment, rallying the resistance to make their own show of force.

Immediately upon entering the palace, the archduke convened a general assembly in the plaza for the reading of the proclamation. He hoped that the rebels would see the senselessness of armed rebellion against the Emperor of Austria, therefore sparing his people yet another

war. After all, with the horror of the past years, when Napoleon swept thought their lands, Austenburg was tired of giving its young men's lives for the greed of others.

In the meantime, Varek called in his bankers and made arrangements for his personal funds to be transferred to the emperor's court banker, Leopold Elder Von Herz, knowing his fortune would be in trustworthy hands while he decided where he wished to settle. He was secretly leaning toward England.

Then Varek made dispositions of several of his outlying estates, deeding them to Christina, Sergei and his daughter, respectively, and made arrangements for the Duke of Kerkston to be Tina Marie's guardian should something — God forbid — happen to him. He had discussed this with Francis, making it explicitly clear that he wanted Christina to raise his daughter. Naming the Duke of Kerkston as Tina's guardian was the only way to guarantee this as women were not allowed to hold guardianships.

Sergei watched Varek's frantic settling of his estates with anger, knowing that somewhere there were two men plotting his friend's death. Roget they would find, but the assassin Bröchre was another matter altogether.

When Sergei noticed one of Kinsky's Hussars enter the chamber, he strolled over to him, and the soldier quickly reported, "The nest has already been flushed, sir. Several citizens came forward to expose the rebels. Roget is under guard and being transported here."

Thanking him, Sergei turned to tell Varek the reassuring news. One down, one to go.

* * *

The afternoon was waning when Varek walked out to the plaza with Sergei at his side, his personal guard close around them. Glancing about, Varek was pleased at the optimistic air of his people. Earlier that day they had been informed of the duchy's consolidation with the Habsburg Empire. At first concerned about their new status in the huge empire, they were quickly assured that though there would be a removal of the ruling family, there would be little change in their lives or their economy as all taxes would remain status quo and the guilds would continue with their businesses undisturbed. They

were told they would soon participate in the new parliament being formed by Metternich, and his people, or rather the citizens of the new city of Austenburg, seemed to be pleased with the concessions he had secured for them.

Varek had to admit feeling pride in knowing that his last act as their ruler had been a step forward into a prosperous future for them. He could now walk away and not be ashamed of never looking back.

The square was abnormally quiet as he walked over to where the rebels were being held. Varek was surprised how many of his highest ranking nobles were among them. Their greatest fears were now realized — they had lost everything: titles, land and their wealth. After only a few hours of questioning, justice had been passed and sentences handed down, overseen by Baron Kinsky, who now held jurisdiction over the duchy with martial law until the appointment of the officials who would then oversee a new order of Austrian law.

In the middle of the immaculate plaza, standing at attention, was the intimidating line of an execution squad. In honor of this great day, clemency was shown to most of the rebels, who would serve time in prison for their transgressions. However, the leaders were not so fortunate — and Roget was one of the few sentenced to death for high treason.

Varek walked slowly up to the little man and asked curiously, “What were you hoping to gain from this foolishness?”

“That which was rightfully mine.” Roget’s enigmatic answer was delivered with no emotion, the look in his eyes cold and already dead. It was obvious to all who watched him that he felt no regret for his crimes.

Varek frowned in puzzlement. “And you believe Austenburg was rightfully yours?”

“Indeed,” came the galling rejoinder.

Not wishing to deal with the irritating man any further, Varek simply shrugged his shoulders and turned away.

“Did you never guess that I am your elder brother?”

Stunned, both Varek and Sergei paused before turning around and staring at the madman. “What the hell are you talking about?” Varek demanded, incredulous.

“You cannot tell me that you did not hear of the affair our father had with my mother?”

Varek and Sergei cast each other confused looks. Of course they knew of the scandalous affair of the late archduke Joseph with his chancellor's wife, Katerina Janecke. The two were not circumspect in their liaison, and it had gone on for years.

"I was the product of that unholy pact, and born before our father ever made his political union with the archduchess that produced you. I was first born and should have been ruler of Austenburg."

Varek had no clear memories of Katerina Janecke, but she had made his mother's position at the court of Austenburg pure hell. It seemed her son had inherited her spite. Coldly, Varek looked down at him and responded with equal coldness. "If this is true, you were born a bastard and should count yourself fortunate that you were able to continue as chancellor after your mother's husband died."

Roget's eyes narrowed, the only sign of emotion he had shown since being led under guard onto the square.

"Did you truly think this puny insurrection of yours would win you anything?"

"Of course not." He shrugged dismissively.

That gave Varek pause. The man sounded too smug by half.

Roget explained with a sullen sideways glare at Varek. "If you hadn't gone behind my back and dissolved the duchy, it would have all been mine. I have to admit that surprised me, for I didn't think you would want to deprive your beloved daughter her birthright."

Through stiff lips, Varek demanded, "Oh, do go on. You have us enthralled."

"It started many, many years ago, my plan. Actually, the day I became chancellor I set my plan in motion."

Roget had stepped into his father's shoes as chancellor the year before Varek married Christina. Not long after that, his father had died of a mysterious ailment. Because of that very mystery, there had been speculation of poisoning. Varek felt a chill run down his spine. "My father?"

"Our father," Roget reminded him gently, with a cold smile. "He was old anyway, and was not as appreciative of my work as he should have been."

Varek and Sergei stared at the reptile in astonishment. "This started all those years ago?"

"I am known for my patience. You have mocked me for it more often than not. In truth, you should be thankful for my forbearance, for it kept your beautiful wife alive."

If Varek had felt a chill before, the icy shock that swept through his veins now almost stopped his heart. "What are you talking about?"

"My whole plan hinged on your love for her, you see. I knew that with enough time you would set her aside to protect her. Then I would slip in another woman that you had no affection for to produce the required heir. I was praying it would be a girl, and you obliged me again. When she was old enough and I had gotten rid of you, I would have married my son to her, and the line would have reverted exactly as it should have, to my blood. I had made arrangements with the Count Wurstein years ago that upon his daughter producing the Austenburg heir he would have more wealth than he could dream of." Roget shrugged. "It was a rather simple plan, really; it just required time."

Varek and Sergei stared at the man in revulsion. Roget returned their regard with such nonchalance that he was repulsive to watch. The man reveled in his machinations, appearing only slightly sullen that it had all blown up in his face. Hell, even the knowledge of his eminent death seemed not to bother him in the least.

"But how did you know Varek would set Christina aside?" Sergei was too stunned to even think of the amenities of titles.

"He was stubborn on that, unfortunately. It took six miscarriages to finally convince him to set her aside, and that was only after I had spread the rumor that the rebels were going to assassinate her in order to rid the duchy of the unproductive marriage."

Varek's head started pounding, his tongue so numb that he could barely get out the words. "You caused the miscarriages?"

Again, the monster shrugged. "Certain herbs mixed together and added to her food or drink. It was not difficult."

"Why not just kill her?" Sergei wondered aloud as he stared at the reptile with sick curiosity.

"I actually like the archduchess, and I knew with her dead, Varek would likely be unwilling to marry again, especially not to a woman of my recommendation, no matter how politically advantageous the match would be. You see I needed the heir to be of a family I could control. I

would have had no power over any child Christina bore." He glanced at Varek. "And with you gone, there would be nothing to stop me."

"You killed my children for your warped ambition?" Varek demanded in a frigid whisper of despair. "You threatened the life of my wife so you could manipulate me?"

Roget's smile was Machiavellian as he gloated, "You have to admit it went splendidly till Bröchre failed at Waterloo." Shaking his head, he commented sadly, "I had expected so much better of him, considering his reputation."

Varek stared at him in stunned silence for so long that Sergei looked over at him with a worried frown. The archduke's profile was stark, bare of all emotion, as he stood staring at his nemesis with an unblinking intensity that had the men about him fidgeting. Varek's face was as unreadable as a death mask.

When he abruptly turned to Baron Kinsky, who had been standing close by, listening to the ghastly confession, the men about him snapped to attention. "The execution will commence now," he ordered curtly.

The baron nodded at his Hussars, who grabbed hold of Roget's arms and led him onto the thickly sanded field of execution. Turning smartly on his heel, Varek strode over to where the firing squad stood at attention, and curious, Sergei followed close behind him.

Varek stopped beside the officer in charge of the squad and quietly instructed him to tell his men to stand down. Though confused, the officer immediately followed the archduke's instructions. Varek then held out his hand to one of the soldiers, silently demanding his musket. The soldier stepped forward with a salute and handed over his firearm, which Varek took with a nod of thanks — then, with grim determination, he strode over to stand on the firing line. Sergei, seeing what his friend was doing, also confiscated a musket and took up his stance beside Varek.

He looked sideways to see Varek glaring at him. "Do you deny me my right to stand beside you in this?" Sergei demanded indignantly.

After a moment, Varek shook his head. Then he swung his burning glare on the officer and clipped out, "Proceed."

Still confused, and not sure what the protocol of this situation was, the officer looked to his commander-in-chief, Baron Kinsky, for instructions. Firmly, the baron nodded to him.

Snapping to attention, the officer barked out, "Ready!"

Varek and Sergei both assumed their positions and sighted across the expanse of patterned brickwork at the smugly smiling monster who had ripped all their lives apart.

“Aim!”

Together they raised their weapons and sighted on the yellow cross that had been painted crudely over Roget’s heart. Varek’s mind flashed back to all the years of pain that Christina had suffered through with each of the deaths — no, murders — of their children. Closing his eye, he aimed between Roget’s eyes. He was sorry the bastard’s death was going to be so quick and painless.

“Fire!”

The muskets spat out their justice and Roget was flung backwards, sprawling gracelessly on his back, his sightless eyes staring up into the sky — his traitor’s blood quickly drenched the sand beneath him. A cheer rose up from the populace as they witnessed an end to an unwanted chapter in Austenburg’s recently bloody history.

Sergei turned with a grim smile toward Varek and with horror watched as a red stain blossomed on Varek’s chest. Varek was also staring down in surprise. He dropped the musket and raised his hand, as if in confusion. Turning to look at Sergei, he stumbled and then crashed heavily onto the pristine bricks of the plaza.

Pandemonium struck as the relative calm erupted into a fury of activity. The crowd quickly turned into a mob of panic-stricken confusion as the soldiers either rushed toward the archduke or took off toward the trail of smoke drifting lazily up over the west side of the square. The sound of gunfire could be heard over the screams of the people as they surged toward safety.

Sergei vaguely heard the commotion around him as he fell to his knees beside Varek and gently rolled his limp body over and into his arms. Varek’s face had bled white with shock and the motionless look in his eyes had Sergei calling out frantically, “Vare, do you hear me?”

Varek’s eyes fluttered, slowly forcing his gaze to focus as he stared up at Sergei. Weakly, he smiled. “We forgot about Bröchre.” His voice was barely a rasp of sound. “The man certainly knows his business.”

Sergei would have kicked Varek for his hellish sense of humor if he hadn’t been lying in his arms bleeding to death.

When Varek spoke again, Sergei had to lean close to hear him. “It seems my time of waiting in this life is over. Tell her I will find her.”

Blood bubbled past blue-tinged lips and his breathing assumed a deadly gurgling sound in his chest that warned of a punctured lung.

"Vare?" Sergei whispered helplessly, his heart pounding so loudly in his ears that he couldn't hear anything. "Can you hear me?"

Again, Varek seemed to focus on his friend. He smiled as he raised a hand as if to touch Sergei's face, and murmured in wonder, "Lark?"

Sergei watched as Varek's eyes glazed over before falling shut, his hand dropping limply onto the ground and his breath sighing out. Sergei was left frantically searching Varek's neck for some sign of

life. "No!" The word was wrenched from Sergei's closed throat. "Damn you, you can't do this, Vare! I promised her!"

"Step aside," a harsh voice commanded from above him. Looking up, dazed, Sergei found the emperor standing close beside him, his worried frown bent down on his cousin.

"He's dead," was the only thing Sergei could manage to say, as he clung to his friend's limp body.

Nodding, Francis bent down and said gently, knowing well how close these two men had been through half their lives, "You must let him go, Massallon."

Before Sergei could even try to assimilate what was going on, Varek's body was lifted away from him and borne swiftly away through the crowds of weeping, screaming people converging from every angle. When Sergei looked around, the emperor was gone, too, and he was left alone, crouched over the ground that had just quenched its thirst on Varek's blood. The first sob, when it exploded from his cold lips, felt as if the hand of God had reached down and wrenched it from deep in his soul.

And as he sat there doubled over with grief, his tears mingling with Varek's blood, he despaired of how he was ever going to be able to tell her.

* * *

Sergei couldn't stay for the funeral, the thought of seeing Varek laid to rest too devastating, so he left the next day, and in his possession was the last will and testament of Archduke, Varek von Vischering. His mission now was to return to Vienna and escort Tina Marie to her new guardian, the Duke of Kerkston. Never in his life had he felt so weary and disheartened, and he deliberately prolonged the journey, unable

to bear what faced him at its end. He was instructed by the emperor not to tell Tina of the death of her father, that it should be left until later, when she was settled in England. Sergei felt only relief to have that responsibility taken off his shoulders.

What awaited him in England was punishment enough for his failure.

* * *

Christina knocked softly, and upon hearing Edward's voice, she opened the study door and entered, being sure she closed it firmly behind her.

Looking up, Edward smiled, and when he began to stand, she hurriedly admonished him to sit. With a groan, he settled back down into the large armchair, and she joined him in the companion chair before the fireplace. The room was freezing except for the snug little area before the blazing fire. After tucking the woolen throw back around his legs, she settled carefully into the generous seat, her mourning skirts settling about the pronounced rounding of her stomach. Tenderly, she smoothed her hands over Varek's child and again felt a thrill of sublime anticipation. When she had realized she was going to have Varek's child it had given her a new sense of direction after Robert's painful death. But now it was time to be honest with Edward — she couldn't go on deceiving him.

"There is something you must know, Edward," she began hesitantly as she fiddled with the fringe of her shawl.

With a gentle smile, he cocked his head to the side and waited. Lifting her gaze she announced quickly, "This child is not Robert's."

Edward merely nodded, saying in his usual smooth voice, "I suspected as much."

Christina bit her lip, watching him warily, "I will leave if you wish."

Frowning, he leaned forward as he watched her closely, "Is that what you want?"

"Heavens, no!" she choked out. "But as I will be giving birth to a bas —"

He cut her off curtly. "I will never again hear such drivel out of your mouth, Christina. I am pleased that you will be having Varek's child."

Astounded, she blinked at him. "You are?"

Now he began to fidget, his fingers clenched about the glass of brandy he was holding. "I believe it is my turn for honesty. I have sent

one courier to Austenburg and another to Vienna, just in case, informing the archduke of his impending good fortune."

Christina could only stare at him in dazed wonder. "How could you know for sure it was Varek's?"

"During one of our last conversations, Robert had bitterly recounted how your relationship had deteriorated in Vienna. He mostly blamed himself, but it was also quite apparent that there had been no congress between the two of you for months prior to Waterloo. I knew it could only have been your Varek's."

Raising her hands, Christina buried her face in them. "Oh, Edward," she moaned, her words muffled, "I am so ashamed."

"Why?" he asked, perplexed.

"That I didn't tell you right away. I didn't want you to be disappointed in me."

Smiling at her foolishness, he shook his head in mock despair, "Christina, you can be such a child at times."

Her lips quirking, she murmured wryly, "Thank you." Then she frowned before asking, "How long ago did you send the messages?"

"A few weeks after Robert passed away." The funeral had been a quiet affair, with only the immediate family and the servants present. Edward felt guilty at his lack of feelings on the death of his brother. Even though he had tried all his life to establish a closer bond between them, theirs had not been an easy relationship. Was it wrong of him to be secretly glad for Christina? His only regret was in knowing that she would soon be leaving Kerkmoor and returning to her husband's side. The thought of this huge house without her and Eddie was a desolate one, and it kept him restless at nights and depressed during the days.

Christina was biting her lip as she thought of two months passing with no word from Varek. Alarm chased through her. Certainly if Varek had learned of her pregnancy he would, at the very least, have responded by courier.

Seeing her fear, Edward quickly reassured her, "My dear, don't worry yet. Europe is still in upheaval and things will come about, but you have to expect the progress to be slow. Have patience. He will come."

Comforted only a little, she gave him a tremulous smile and nodded. Edward always knew best, so she would take his advice and not worry.

At least not yet.

Twenty-Five

It was a lazy autumn afternoon, with the first snowfall barely covering the brittle carpet of dead leaves, when Sergei finally arrived at Kerkmoor. As the coach turned down the broad tree-lined road that approached the elegant Palladian manor, Sergei felt as if he was coming home after years gone — he was that weary of heart. Behind the massive Corinthian portico was the woman he loved like a sister, and on his shoulders rested the horrendous task of telling her that the one man she loves above her own life was dead. Rubbing his eyes, he did not know how he was going to tell her.

When the coach rolled to a stop before the broad steps that marched up either side to a high podium, Sergei saw the front entrance open immediately. As expected, the ever faithful Sefton appeared between the marble pillars, and when Sergei waved him down the man hurried down the left staircase, a broad smile creasing his usually somber features.

“Mr. Massallon, how good it is to see you again! My lady will be so pleased.” Sefton’s grin slowly faded as he approached Sergei and saw the gloomy defeat on the traveler’s weary face. “Is something wrong, sir?”

He watched as Sergei climbed from the coach with a beautiful golden-haired angel draped in silent exhaustion over his shoulder. When he came to Sefton’s side, Sergei inquired in a low murmur, “His grace is in residence, I presume?”

“Yes, sir. The house is in mourning for the viscount.”

Sergei froze at this unexpected news. “My God!” he whispered as he held Tina tighter. Now the thought of having to give Christina his sad tidings was even more appalling. Closing his eyes, he almost

cried out at the cruel irony of it all. If only . . . There was that damned *if only* again.

Sefton had turned to motion to the footmen to gather the luggage when Sergei informed him that it was imperative that he speak with the duke alone before the viscountess was made aware of his presence.

Concerned, Sefton nodded and immediately ran back up the stairs to inform his grace of Sergei's arrival.

Slowly, dreading each step he took, Sergei climbed the stairs and reluctantly entered the huge hall. The light from the skylights above cast an incandescent glow about the marble floor and walls, and blindly his steps took him into the front salon. He wasn't worried about running into Christina as the family usually spent their time in the east wing, which was set back from the formal front entrance.

It was not too long before he heard a strange tapping sound coming toward him, and turning, he watched in amazement as the duke carefully limped into the salon, supported between two canes. "Damn my eyes if you don't gladden my heart, your grace." Sergei laughed out loud as he strode forward to shake Edward's hand. The duke was grinning back, his face flushed and excitement flashing in his eyes.

"Well, you are also a sight for sore eyes. Christina will be ecstatic that you are finally here." Eagerly he looked about the room; then with a confused frown he turned back to Sergei.

Before he could ask, Sergei suggested that they sit down, for there was much to explain. After a moment's pause, the duke made his ponderous way across the room to a settee, where he lowered himself with a sigh. As Sergei also seated himself, Edward was studying the solemn little girl who was staring at him with weary interest.

"Your grace, I would like to introduce you to your ward, Tina Marie von Vischering."

Edward looked down and wet his lips. When his gaze rose it was damp with shared pain; he knew this unexpected guardianship could only mean one thing. "How much more is she expected to take?" he asked hoarsely.

Firming his jaw, Sergei wordlessly shook his head.

Clearing his throat, Edward set his canes aside, and smiling with gentle reassurance, he held out his arms to little Tina, who was studying him with increasing interest. "Will you come to me?" he entreated in the same soothing voice that had won Eddie over as a baby. Tina

blinked at him, and when Sergei hesitantly set her on her feet, she continued to lean against his knee, the comfort of her thumb tucked snugly into her rosebud mouth. Edward knew enough now about children that this initial meeting was crucial to their future relationship. Patiently he waited as the little girl continued to study him with a wary frown. She glanced up at Sergei, who smiled his own encouragement at her. After another slight hesitation she pushed away from Sergei and walked straight into his grace's arms.

As Edward lifted her onto his lap he wondered at the beauty of this child, and thought that if she was anything like her father, he could understand Christina's obsession. When Tina leaned with trusting acceptance against his chest and trained those solemn blue eyes upon him with such serious attention, he began to talk of Eddie and his toys and his pony and any other nonsensical things he could think of. When he cast a quick look sideways at Sergei, he was not surprised to see him gone.

Soon he didn't know whom he was trying to distract more with his rambling monologue — himself or the little orphan in his arms. All too soon he heard a scream rend the tomblike silence of Kerkmoor Manor. Tina burrowed further into his arms, and he took comfort from her tender warmth.

Silently he promised her father that he would protect this precious child with his very life, and with a sorrow he hadn't felt on the death of his own brother, he deeply mourned a man he had never met.

* * *

Days later Sergei was in the middle of a nightmare he had prayed he would never have to relive again. Angrily, he paced outside of Christina's bedchamber, glaring at the barrier of the door that denied him entrance. As he heard her screams rise in torment, he dragged shaking hands through his hair and cursing viciously he struck the nearest wall with his fist. He was glad that Edward was devoting himself to the children in the nursery, keeping them oblivious to the drama unwinding in another wing of their home.

The shock of Verek's death had sent Christina into early labor, and Sergei despaired that if she lost this child she would never recover. The screams were fading to low moans and, nursing his swollen hand,

he resumed his frantic pacing. When her screams increased again, Sergei could take no more and, kicking open the door, he stormed into the fetid, hot room and glared at the doctor. "Can't you do something?" he shouted angrily at the group huddled about the bed.

Equally angry, and feeling just as helpless, the doctor jerked around and shouted back, "I can't do anything; the child is breach and is coming too soon for me to turn!"

Too soon? Hell and damnation, she had been in labor for twenty hours! How could it be too soon? Panicked, Sergei glanced down at Christina, who was mostly senseless to what was going on around her. After all she had endured he could not blame her for looking as if she was giving up. However, looking it and doing it were two different things!

He felt a hand gripping his arm. Startled, he turned to glare down at Helen. Her eyes were stark with helpless fear. "She needs you, Sir. She needs you to pull her through. She doesn't seem to hear me at all."

Eyes narrowed, Sergei hurried over to the bed and sat down beside her with his back against the headboard. "Oh, no you don't, Christina! I will not allow this!" he raged at her as he pulled her forward and then swiftly positioned his body behind her so that she lay in the vee of his body, her back propped against his chest.

Harshly, he whispered in her ear. "Damn you, Christina, enough is enough! No more death. No more sorrow. You will bring Varek's child into this world and you will raise him and you will be happy!" Stroking her belly with broad firm strokes, he could feel the child twisting. "Christina, wake up and finish this! Varek would expect no less from you! For him, damn you, for him!"

Weakly, Christina lifted her head and snapped back, her voice cracking, "Stop yelling in my ear."

He grinned at the doctor, who was watching her with renewed hope. "Then you'd better damn well finish this."

"All right, damn you. I am trying, but it won't come." Her voice was a touch stronger in her asperity, and Sergei was breathing again. She was back and they would do this.

Looking down the bed at the doctor, Sergei instructed, "You will have to turn him."

Christina interrupted testily. "Why do you keep saying *him*?" She shuddered in relief when Helen laid a cold compress on her brow.

Sergei shrugged. "I want a boy, I suppose. I think Eddie would prefer a brother. After all, he has a sister now."

Suddenly, Christina was screaming again as another contraction ripped through her. Instantly, the doctor was reaching into her passage for the child. Grimly, he looked at Sergei and shook his head. "I can't turn him. We are going to have to try for a breach."

Swallowing, Sergei held Christina higher in his arms. His lips next to her ear, he said softly, "This next time we have no choice, love. You have to push as hard as you can."

She barely had the strength to nod her head when the contraction was upon her again. As her scream rose, Sergei pushed down on her stomach as the doctor latched firmly onto the feet and pulled. Christina's screams were chilling in their strength, and Sergei feared he was losing her as Varek's son slipped from her bloody body. Sergei hardly noticed, for Christina had gone limp in his arms.

"Christina?" He lifted her face and saw how white she was. Fear gripped him and harshly he shook her. "Christina?"

The doctor had passed the bloody child to one of the nurses and was immediately beside them. Bending over, he lifted an eyelid; then he put his ear to her chest. When he stepped away he reported grimly, "She is alive. Barely."

Sergei's heart started beating again.

She was alive — that was all that mattered.

When he turned to look at the baby, his eyes shot open in stunned disbelief. "Oh, my God!"

* * *

Christina stirred and immediately felt a pain she had only felt once before. Opening her eyes, she saw the cradle beside the bed. Reaching over, she tipped it toward her and saw it empty. Closing her eyes, she took in the dreadful silence around her. When she had given birth to Eddie the first thing she heard were his blessed cries.

A tear slipped down her cheek. She had failed Varek again.

This time she didn't even curse God — long ago she had run out of them. With a sigh, she turned her head and found herself looking into a pair of the weariest eyes she had ever seen.

She blinked and looked again.

Varek's eyes.

"Hello, lark." His whisper was a mere sigh across her cheek.

Disoriented, she told herself, "I am dreaming."

"Do I look like a dream?" His smile was woefully strained.

Still dazed, she told him mindlessly, "You look horrible."

And he did. His gaunt face was so ashen that his skin looked gray. The translucent flesh was stretched tightly over protruding bones, and his eyes were sunken and bruised. The beautiful blue of his irises was dull and almost colorless — a far cry from the azure glory of only months ago.

"Are we dead?" She asked stupidly.

"No, my love." He slowly shifted, and a flash of pain wrenched his wasted features. She reached her hand toward him and his hand shot out to catch hers, stopping it short of her goal. Confused, she glanced down at their joined hands, and instead she saw the little bundle she had almost hit.

Snuggled against its father's stomach was their newborn infant, sound asleep. *Their child?* Again she wondered at this most wonderful dream.

"Thank you, lark. He is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen."

Tears rushed to her eyes. Twisting her hand out of his, it wavered in midair, not sure who she wanted to touch first. He took the decision away from her when he gently grasped it again and raised it to his mouth. His lips were dry and hot, cracked, but never had she felt anything so tender as his lips caressing the palm of her hand. Then he wrapped her fingers around the downy head of their son.

It suddenly hit her that this was no dream — *this was real!* "My God," she gasped as she painfully raised herself onto her elbow and leaned closer to her love. "*It really is you!*"

His shaking fingers reached out to stroke her cheek. "I told you I would find you."

"But how?" she stuttered, wanting to know everything.

Sighing, he shook his head. "Persistence, stubbornness and one hell of a miracle. I will tell you the story soon, my love, but I am so very tired. It has been a long, hard road getting back to you."

She covered his lips with a lingering kiss, which he leaned into. "Shhh, love," she whispered as she skimmed his face with her fingers, still not believing he was beside her. "Go to sleep. I will watch over you."

"After all these years I am finally home," he murmured sleepily as he relaxed against her, his sigh long and one of utter exhaustion.

Moving as close as she dared without jostling him, she eased her beautiful son higher against her heart, then just as carefully eased her arm under Varek's head. With her brow resting against his and her lips on her son's head, she watched every breath Varek took, knowing that as long as she lived, she would never let him out of her sight again.

Miracle, indeed, she wondered in awe as she breathed deep of the scent of her newly born son. Her lips nuzzled the precious down of gold, wondering if he would be the image of his father just as Tina was. God, she hoped so! She nudged a finger into his tiny fist and shuddered as it opened and then latched on with surprising strength.

Tears shimmering in her eyes, she looked at Varek, and slowly her gaze caressed every feature, every shadow, every crease of pain.

"I love you." Her vow was barely a sigh between them, yet though his body was deeply immersed in its healing slumber, his lips turned up in a smile as gentle as the thrum of his heart against their son.

Their two halves had been reunited at last, and they were complete.

Eternity opened before her like a shining beacon, and she knew that whatever was to come it could never be as perfect as it was at this very moment.