



BAD RELIGION

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Loose Id

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www.loose-id.com

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Dedication

For those who love techo-futuristics melded with high fantasy and hot erotic romances—this book is for you.

Chapter One

Laser fire stung the air. The stink of ozone permeated the space above Kree's hiding place, taking the edge off the rotting stench of the warehouse. Heat kissed her cheek where the blast flew passed her face.

Sopha, that was close.

Heavy fire pinned her in place. Only a few more minutes and the enforcer would give up and leave. She hoped.

He was a single-minded man, running her to ground like a wild animal. He'd forced her into this squalid hiding place with her back against the wall, cloaked in darkness. No matter how well the enforcer tracked her movements she had the advantage. As a master class Sophite leader—premier—she could read the signatures of organic and some inorganic matter. Her abilities far outperformed any advanced tracking technologies. So how had he gotten so close?

Another shot whizzed by her ear. The stench of burned hair gagged her.

Definitely time to move.

Deeply embedded powers warned her the enforcer wouldn't give up until she was captured and imprisoned. Or dead. Unfortunately her talents didn't expand into the psychic realm like the Unarions, leaving only emotional impressions rather than true thought. So much the worse for her.

Another shot fired overhead.

A lot worse.

Kree duckwalked sideways, hoping the enforcer wouldn't hear the soft scrape of her shoes over the dirty floor.

A pause in the laser fire stopped Kree in her tracks. She fingered the gun at her side. Damn, did she ever want to take advantage and return fire, but giving her position away wasn't worth the risk.

This new wave of enforcers didn't hunt the same as the previous ones hired by the theocrats. They were too savvy. If she had a credit for every time one of the bastards got too close for comfort to a member of the outlawed priestess from the Order of Sopha, she'd be able to buy a new country and relocate all her sister Sophites there.

Fucking politicians.

Kree waited as the silence lengthened. Maybe she should go on the offensive. Instead of running from the enforcer, she needed to double back and sneak up on

him. Serve the man right for hiring out as the long arm of the theocrats' idea of justice.

Brutal and unfeeling.

How could men who claimed to be at one with the deity sanction genocide? It went against every ideal the Sophites believed in—and they called her holy order barbaric.

She sank farther back into the warehouse, letting darkness envelop her. Rank odors filled her nose. Something had crawled into the abandoned building to die. From the energy pattern it was a large dog. She hoped not to join it anytime soon.

Kree pushed to her feet and started through the warehouse, using her command of organic matter to guide her through the refuse.

Somewhere there was safety. She need only concentrate to find her way there.

She picked her way through the darkness, feeling the energy vibrations in the ground. If she moved too far to the right or left the vibrations changed, moving into the frequency of inorganic matter. That was much more difficult for her to manipulate, but not impossible. Instead of a full reading, she used the information to pick her way through the dark warehouse like an animal tracking with the use of sonar.

When she came to the door, she squeezed out into the blazing sunset, doubling back around the outside of the warehouse. As she rounded the south corner, the enforcer stood there smiling at her, an odd oblong apparatus of some sort held in his right hand.

“Hello, Kree.”

Her breath caught in her throat.

His knowing smile spoke of dark pleasures.

Eyes like the glittering gold of an eagle flashed as the sun dipped below the horizon. Words deserted her. A flare of desire lit his eyes.

The wind kicked up, spiraling dead leaves across the drive where she stood. Their vibrations registered a faint wisp along her senses, overpowered by the man who stood before her.

The steady stamp of boot-clad feet moving in double time grew louder. Movement from her periphery captured her attention. Guards.

Oh shit, this was really bad.

Caught between an enforcer and the theocrats' private army was no way to die.

The enforcer stiffened. His muscles went taut; his jaw hardened. He mouthed the words, *I'm sorry*.

Sorry? Sorry for what? Confusion welled and threatened to choke her. She was about to ask him what he meant when he raised his hand.

The dark outline of a tattoo snaked up his hand.

A shock of electric fire hit her system, stunning her. Darkness fell.

No sounds.

No words.

No vibrations.

Chapter Two

Eavan desMort slid the stunner back into the hip holster and hurried to the unconscious Sophite premier.

She'd fallen like a sleek, shining vixen right into his trap.

He bent over her prostrate form, admiring his prize. Golden hair fell into her face, covering eyes he'd only imagined in his deepest fantasies. And he'd had a lot of them since he'd been given this assignment.

He leaned closer to her, breathing in her unique scent. Her flavor lingered on his tongue like ambrosia. Desire lit like a flash fire. His cock strained against his leathers.

Eavan didn't care what the theocrats decreed; this Sophite belonged to him. As the next chief of the Avengale settlement, it was Eavan's duty to bring the Sophite premier into the fold. To bring her to his home.

The thought heated his skin. Over the months of tracking her, he'd come to admire her ingenuity at avoiding the theocrats and their guards.

He smiled. Not so successful in avoiding him.

Gently he lifted her up into his arms. Her head lolled against his shoulder. It was all he could do to keep from placing his lips to her forehead. But with the guards passing through the area, that was a deadly idea. He must keep up the illusion at all cost.

Restraint came at a price. His body hardened further as her firm breast brushed against his chest. He fought the urges stirred by the call of his Druma blood. Pheromones filled his nose, coming from the sexual mystic like the call to mate.

Pushing thoughts of a future consummation from his mind, Eavan started for the small speed-cycle parked down the block.

Why of all places did Kree have to run to a neighborhood gone to ruin? No telling what trouble she courted being so lax with her safety. As it was, she'd sleep for at least eight hours after taking the hit from his stunner.

Brave, beautiful girl.

He readjusted his grip on her, feeling the bulge of her sidearm at her waist. No doubt hers was set to kill.

A smile tugged the corner of his mouth. She might have packed heat, but she hadn't stood a chance against his superior tracking skills. She'd probably hidden in

the warehouse with the mistaken assumption her ability to read organics protected her.

He was as organic as it came.

What little foot traffic had been on the street disappeared with the last curfew bell and the arrival of the guards.

Eavan placed her in the cycle's sidecar, pulling the safety harness over her shoulders. Guards remained at their posts, watching for those individuals unlucky enough to be caught out past sunset. Eavan pushed his night goggles into place and gunned the speed-cycle's engine. He tore off down the deserted street, heading for the coast road that would take them to safety.

She'd be pissed when she woke.

The thought curled his lip into another smile. Kree Janus was like the goddesses of the old religion, before the theocrats enacted federal edicts casting them into the netherworld.

Fury ate at his gut.

He popped the clutch and throttled into high gear. The speed-cycle rocketed under him. Wind blew his long hair back from his face, but sent bugs and other debris to sting his skin.

If the theocrats wanted a fight, a fight they'd get.

He gunned the bike and rolled out of town as if all the devils of the underworld followed in his wake. They may well be. He'd take his chances. There was no way he'd let a few angry demons dictate his actions. The Druma had suffered worse since recorded history and they'd always survived. This time would be no different.

He glanced down at the woman in the sidecar. Her firm breasts bounced with the motion of the air flying under the bike's thrusters. No matter the call of his blood, she was the key to the Druma plan's success. Only her position as head of the Sophite order would bring the others around to join the fight.

He gripped the handlebars so hard the textured patterns bit into his palms.

The Druma were prepared to use every tactic in their arsenal to bring the Sophites to heel. The women as a group were a stubborn lot. So far the others had managed to hold out against their captors. That's why his mission had been so crucial. Selling his service to the theocrats was a small price to pay for victory.

The road curved along the Masalong Ocean. Nothing but darkness and a sense of water filled the night to his left as he sped northward. No other vehicles shared the road. Not even a lone transport moved through the night. It was an eerie sensation, almost as if he and Kree were the only two left on the continent.

Trouble met them halfway up the coast road in the form of a roadblock. Floodlights lit the night to daytime brightness all along the road for about a hundred yards in all directions. Guards stood with guns poised and ready to fire.

Eavan slowed to a stop and gave a nod, pushing his goggles up on his head. The sleeve of his leather jacket rode up, exposing the totem tattoo that ran from his hand up the back of his wrist.

“Evening,” he said in a lazy drawl.

The guard captain approached and gave Eavan the once-over, then shifted his gaze to the unconscious Kree. “Where’re you headed, Enforcer?”

“Taking this prisoner to the Temple of Theomacus for questioning.”

“This late? You’ll not get on grounds.”

Eavan gave a grunt. “They’ll open for me.”

The guard captain waved him through. He let the cycle roll forward, weaving between the patrol cruisers. The guards watched him with rifles still raised in threat.

The guards would track them. He’d have to leave the coast road and head inland for the hills just to make it look good. No matter. The Druma had a place halfway to the temple. They could stop overnight and continue on later. Anyone tracking them would assume they’d stopped for a brief respite. Or he could continue on to the encampment and wait until the theocrats’ guards descended on the settlement.

Altering the timetable might work to the Druma’s advantage.

Or get the entire settlement killed. It wasn’t a chance he was willing to take.

The former regime, the Genoquois, had run their government into the ground—emptying the coffers and leaving their society open to outside intervention. When the bankrupt ruling class asked the theocrats to come in and save the country, they consigned their entire culture to live under the thumb of religious rule. Eavan had wondered more than once what exactly the Genoquois got out of the deal. He’d heard nothing of their fate. However, that of the other cultures living under the yoke of the theocrats had become a place of limited liberties.

There was a tapestry of backgrounds and beliefs that wove the fabric of their country from one coast to the other. It had begun to unravel. The Druma only wished to see the loose threads picked up again and all the holes mended.

But a project of that magnitude took time and patience. Mostly it took more than one man or one culture. Or way of life. It needed a consortium of ideas. Something the general public had forgotten in the quest to save themselves from the long arm of the theocrats.

An hour later, Eavan came upon the turnoff that would take them to the shelter. The road was hidden by the veil of night. The only illumination came from the speed-cycle’s headlight, cutting through the darkness to guide the way. At the speeds they were traveling, it was almost like driving blind. If not for his night goggles, he’d have a hell of a time navigating.

Civilization had forgotten this part of the country for some reason. The barren landscape was inhospitable to both man and beast. Nothing grew out this way but the occasional hardy plant life. Snakes and chameleons made their home in the

various tunnels bisecting the land beneath the ground. If pressed, one could survive on the land. It was just precarious at best.

But the Druma warriors had.

It was part of their training.

The Druma could survive anywhere if they had to. They just refused to. Why should they be forced from land they had cultivated and worked for generations because the government had changed hands?

A *sleeback*—one of the native lizards of the Verhaus Desert—stood on the road with his head turned in the direction of the speed-cycle bearing down on him. The giant reptile raised his nose into the air, sniffing for what he'd call dinner. Eavan put more pressure on the gas and leaned the cycle to go around the predator. The good thing about the sleebacks was they might have a supersensitive sense of smell, but they had a hard time seeing in the dark.

They rolled through the night. The terrain changed. Desert brush peeked up along the sides of the road. Small trees dotted the distant horizon. Grass tufts went from the occasional patch to long verdant stretches.

They were getting close.

The road curved around a rock cluster rising up like monoliths in the middle of nowhere. Behind the natural structure was a rolling valley that stretched as far as the eye could see. He turned off on an access road that ran along a river.

Another three hours and they'd be there.

Eavan glanced down at Kree. She was still out for the count.

Her head lolled to the side. Shoulder-length blonde hair whipped in the wind. He'd have to wash the dead bugs from her hair and body before putting her to bed. Some of the insects were toxic to the skin. She'd be lucky if she didn't wake with a rash from head to toe.

His gut tightened at the thought of touching her so intimately while she slept. But it had to be done, and there was no one else at the shelter to do the deed.

Eavan smiled.

They made the hideout as the moons started to descend in the western sky. It was early morning, just after third hour, when they rolled to a stop in the covered garage of a small cottage that looked as if it belonged in its own private paradise.

Located off the main road, the shelter sat covered by thick trees and ivy. It blended into the scenery, rendering it virtually indistinguishable from the hillside behind it.

Eavan pulled off the goggles. His face felt tight from dirt and bug innards. He needed a bath too. Already the loss of air whipping by his face made the irritations itch. First things first, though.

He opened the door between the garage and inside, then lifted Kree from the sidecar. Hefting her over his shoulder like a sack of flour, he carried her into the bathroom, where he set her down on the floor between the toilet and shower stall.

He started the water, then pulled his clothes off. Might as well save time and aggravation and wash them both at once. It wasn't as if she'd know or even care.

Taking a deep breath, he started to remove her clothes. Red bumps cropped up on her neck and arms. Hell, the toxin had already raised welts. That wouldn't do at all.

He pulled her shirt over her head. Firm breasts thrust upward as he leaned her back to start on her pants. Forcing his attention back to the task at hand rather than filling his mind with the vision of her half-naked body, Eavan opened the fly. Smooth, slightly tanned skin met his hungry gaze.

Desire rose. His cock stiffened at the sight of her.

Slowly, he pulled her pants down her legs. There wasn't a line or curve of her figure he didn't want to explore at length. But there'd be time for that later.

He went to the medicine cabinet and pulled out a vial of a special herbal wash formulated to reduce the redness the bugs left behind.

"Come on, woman." He lifted her into his arms. Their bare skin slid together. Eavan closed his eyes and prayed to the Druma god Dreeka for strength. None of his training as a warrior had ever prepared him for so great a temptation as presented by a naked Sophite.

To do anything other than administer to her ills was not only dishonorable but also a crime against his gods and the ancestors. Not that he'd do anything to dishonor her. Abduct her against her will, yes. Harm her, no. He swallowed down the guilt at having stunned her into submission.

It had been the only way at the time.

The Druma walked a fine subversive line. To do anything other than what they'd been contracted by the theocrats to do would throw suspicion on them. Every plot and scheme had to be played out with the utmost care to detail. The survival of both races depended upon it.

With the grace of Dreeka, the plan would not fail.

He set her on the shower bench, leaning her against the glass bricks. With great care, he ran the soapy cloth over the curve of her cheeks, down her neck, and across the tops of her breasts. His cock stood hard between his legs, a testament to his need to possess her. Even unconscious, Kree gave off the most intoxicating female scent. If he wasn't careful he'd be raving mad before he brought her to the point of consummation.

"You are the essence of perfection."

He slid the cloth down her arm, taking care to wash each finger.

His breath caught. Her hands were strong, yet delicate. The dichotomy turned him on even more. The power she commanded was impressive both in scope and depth, more so considering the instruments of her calling were so graceful.

His slid his fingers through hers, comparing the discrepancy in their sizes. "I pledge my life to protect you."

She let out a long, deep sigh as if agreeing to the whispered terms. The stunned sleep wouldn't last much longer. There'd be hell to pay if she woke while he bathed her.

When he finished, he held her wet body against his and dried them off with the same towel.

"If you only knew what a test this has been for me," he whispered into her hair.

He wrapped the towel around her body, then carried her to the bed. The house was fully stocked with food, clothing, and any other number of items travelers might need while traversing the continent.

Eavan took a pair of loose drawstring pants and short tunic from the closet and proceeded to dress her. It had been much easier getting her out of her clothes than it was to put them back on her while she was unconscious.

The things one did to ensure the future.

After he had her dressed, he clamped on the neck collar, setting it to the same frequency as the matching bracelet he wore. "I'm sorry, my love, but I don't have a choice."

He hit the button to activate the signal.

The collar was barbaric but necessary. Dangers on the open road made it imperative they stay together and she not try to run from him. He cursed the promises he'd made to the elders not to reveal his mission until they were safely within the confines of the Avengale settlement.

He hated keeping secrets from her. The horrors perpetrated by the theocrats and their guards made keeping the Druma's plans close to the skin imperative—for all their sakes. He only hoped it didn't backfire.

One day maybe they'd look back on their first meeting and laugh.

Yeah, and he'd contracted Bolean fever somewhere.

Chapter Three

Consciousness first came as a pinpoint of light in the darkness. Slowly but steadily it expanded until Kree could make out the basic shapes of things.

Above her, gossamer curtains were suspended from a dark wood canopy. Their bright crimson swags ran like blood from the ceiling. The mattress under her was made of the softest goose down.

She turned her head, instantly regretting the action. Twin daggers of pain ran from the base of her skull, up over her head, and lodged in the back of her eye sockets.

She moaned.

Movement from across the room caught her eye. Memory returned as fast as the current that had felled her.

Pretending sleep, Kree held still. She forced deep, even breaths through her trembling lips. It was probably too late. He'd most likely seen her movement. She only prayed her captor had been looking elsewhere when she woke.

She cracked her eyelids just enough to see if she recognized her surroundings.

Why hadn't he killed her? Had someone saved her after the enforcer shot her? It really didn't matter. She was alive, and as long as she remained so, she could still save her people.

"I know you're awake." His voice had the timbre of ground glass. But at the same time the confident tone sent desire shooting from her breasts to her sex.

Liquid heat settled between her legs.

Her heart pounded. Not even fear had caused such an adrenaline rush.

Her captor took in a deep breath and moaned. A swath of light spilled from a floor lamp. Kree couldn't see his face, but his erection was visible behind the seams of his leather pants.

He dropped a tattooed hand to his thigh and shifted in the chair.

"I'm not going to hurt you." He finally leaned into the light. Those same eagle-sharp eyes caught her in their snare, like prey.

His raspy velvet voice and hypnotic gaze enfolded her, pulling her under like a drowning woman. The mystery of the other missing Sophites had been solved. By hiring the Druma warriors as enforcers, the theocrats hadn't even given the sisters a chance at survival.

Druma hunted by pheromones. A more effective tool when hunting a population of sexually charged female mystics had never been used. The worst part was the fact Kree's own body had begun to betray her.

All along her nerve endings the sweet hum of desire caressed her under her skin, leaving a hot trail of need in its wake. All her strength and concentration remained fixed on her fake slumber. If he moved or came near her now, she'd go up in flames without a fight.

But she had to fight. That's all the Sophites had left.

Despite her best efforts, her nipples hardened under her thin shirt.

The Druma enforcer let out a long hunger-filled growl.

He stood, his pants hugging every hard curve of his impressive physique.

"If you don't want to talk now, that's all right. We can have an entire lifetime to know each other. But make no mistake, Kree Janus, you will obey me on this journey."

He put one knee on the bed. He leaned over, brushing his mouth against hers. "I have ways of making you cooperate."

A shot of pure lust exploded in her. What was happening? This man was her mortal enemy. She shouldn't have these feelings for him. His kind had been hunting the Sophites and killing them. Some of her dearest friends had died because of the Drumas' greed. Where were her powers of organic manipulation now?

She stared into his hot gaze. "Torture me all you want. I won't give you what you want."

He raised a brow and a smile curved the sensuous sweep of his mouth. "So it's torture you want?"

He looked like the kind of man who gave women exactly what they wanted whether it be good or bad. He also appeared to enjoy providing the service a great deal.

"Do your worst."

A rich laugh rolled out from deep in his chest. "This might take some time. I don't want to disappoint you."

A shudder moved through her. She arched her back, putting her breasts within a hairbreadth of his muscular chest.

His gaze slid down her body, lingering there. "Oh yeah, I'm going to have to find just the thing to make you compliant."

"There's nothing you can possibly do to make me obey you." She turned her head so she didn't have to see the flare of desire in his eyes. Her body responded too readily to his nearness. The man was as potent as any male she'd ever been in contact with.

"I wouldn't bet on it." His voice grew even silkier. "No. We'll leave that discussion for later. You need to rest now."

"I don't want to rest. I want to get the hell out of here." She brushed her hand against the softest material she'd ever felt. Finally looking down, she noticed she no longer wore her own clothes. *Sopha*, how had that happened?

"You can't leave." He tapped a metal plate fastened around her neck.

The substance didn't register on her senses. How was that even possible? Even inorganics let off a subtle signature she could detect. "What the hell?"

He held up his tattooed arm to her. A flat metal bracelet fit around his wrist. A green light blinked. Oh by the Gods, she knew that device, but hadn't seen one used in years, at least not outside a prison yard.

"I'm sorry. Once we get to where we're going, I'll remove it. But until then you'll not be able to venture more than fifty feet from me without losing consciousness again. It's for your safety. Where we're going, you won't want to try to survive alone."

"You bastard."

He gave out a low chuckle, which only further infuriated her. "That's one thing I'm not."

No, he wouldn't be. A full *Druma* warrior was at the highest echelons of his people. He definitely knew his parentage—all the way back to the founding of his clan. Just as *Kree* could name all the *Sophite* premiers back to the goddess *Sopha* herself.

"Why are you doing this?" She turned her head, closing her eyes as a sudden wave of nausea moved through her. "Weren't you under orders to kill my kind?"

"I take my orders from the clan elders."

Kree cracked open one eye. "Then you weren't sent from the theocrats?"

That annoying smile lifted the corner of his mouth again. He brushed long, fawn-colored hair off his shoulder. "I didn't say that."

"You haven't said much of anything." She opened her other eye if only to narrow them both at him. "Tell me why you've kept me alive."

He ran a thick finger down her cheek. "You are in no position to demand anything from me. You'll know everything you need to in a day or two. Then, after you have all the information, you can hate me all you want. Or not."

Something about the cockiness of his posture made her believe he didn't think she'd hate him at all.

"Your kind killed my sister *Sophites*," she reminded him.

"My *kind* is trying to preserve peace." His gaze fastened on her lips, not for the first time since she'd awakened.

"By killing off the enemies of the state."

He let out a deep breath and pushed away from her. "Rest. We have a long ride ahead. It's better if you're alert. There might be trouble on the road."

That didn't sit easy with her. What kind of trouble was an enforcer looking for on the road to wherever? Was it because he hadn't killed her when he'd found her hiding in the warehouse? More importantly, where was he taking her?

He rubbed a spot in the middle of her forehead. Instantly, her eyes felt heavy. She fought back the lethargy. There was no way in hell she'd fall asleep without some better explanation than his enigmatic smiles and the flash of sexy golden eyes.

Weapons as effective as those were going to see to her downfall. There were defenses she could raise to keep his seductive powers from touching her, but she doubted they'd work. Not when she already felt the wet slide of arousal between her legs when she moved them.

The worst part was fastened around her neck. There was no way to remove the security collar without setting off an alarm on her captor's wristband. There had to be a way to get it off and escape before he delivered her to her fate. She'd not accept defeat. Her sisters under Sopha would haunt her for eternity.

"If you want my cooperation, you have to earn it."

That made him laugh. "I don't think it's up to you at this point."

Kree's heart stopped. If his smile and eyes were seductive, his laugh was death itself. She fell under the spell of animation that lit his features. He was a truly beautiful man. One she felt the low kick of desire for as it swirled in her belly. It would have been so much easier to refuse him if he hadn't smiled. Hadn't laughed. Hadn't appeared so human.

"Is this how you mean to torture me?"

The amusement faded.

Tension hung thick in the air between them.

"No, I have something much better in mind."

Chapter Four

Eavan's blood had already grown so hot it moved like burning lava through his veins. Torture her? He'd cherish her until his dying breath. But she didn't need to know that yet.

Initiating her to the ways of the Druma would be very enjoyable. He only hoped he'd get the chance. After all he'd done to capture and secure her, he'd hate like all the hells for her to fall under the spell of one of his fellow warriors.

He traced a finger down her cheek. "I already know how you'll taste."

Her gaze flew to his.

If sin had a shape, it would be her lips. They were soft and wide with the barest pout to the lower one.

He ran his thumb across it. "The theocrats would love to get their hands on you."

"Are you planning to ransom me to them?"

"The thought never crossed my mind." He let his fingers move lower, down her throat to her collarbone. Every inch of her skin felt like silk under his fingertips.

"How long has it been since you've enjoyed a man's touch?"

Even as her eyes flashed defiance, her back arched off the bed, lifting her breasts closer to him. "I've met no men worthy enough to touch me in a long while."

Eavan smiled. Even if she meant it as an insult, the fact she'd been with no man recently sent need pulsing through his body. The Sophites used their sentries for sexual favors like most people used air to breathe. He sensed her words were all bravado or insult.

He let his fingers roam lower. The deep V of her shirt ended at the apex of her cleavage. His gaze followed the trail of his hand. Her nipples stood out behind the fabric, inviting him to feel.

He didn't disappoint.

Kree sucked in a quick breath but didn't slap his hand away as he'd assumed. Perhaps she felt the same deep, inexplicable bond as he.

A noise outside the window startled her. She turned her head and winced.

Damn! He'd forgotten about the pain. Getting hit by a stunner set to full was like having an ax buried in your brain. Eavan knew. There wasn't a mode of torture or imprisonment Druma warriors were not put through during training.

He leaned over and brushed his mouth against hers. "I'll bring you something for the headache."

"How...?"

He gave her a sly smile as he left the room. No sense in regaling her with the bloody tales of his initiation. She had time enough to learn of those.

Eavan hurried out of the bedroom to the medicinal stores. All the wonders hidden inside were made at the settlement. Knowing the plants and their properties was a revered art form within the ranks of his people. Modern technology had its place in all societies, but there were some things that remained better served in the old ways.

None of the modern medicines brought to the continent by the theocratic physicians were quite as good as those made by hand and prayer. Ironic as it seemed, the new government didn't believe in using the natural environment to provide for man's health. They locked their scientists in pristine labs, combining synthetic compounds into mind- and body-altering substances. There was something inherently wrong with holy men who forsook the bounty of the land for a cold, impersonal approach. For that reason alone the theocrats needed to be forced out of office.

Before they'd taken over, the land was rich with ideas and beauty. The council of old men who ruled with iron fists and cold hearts had no understanding of humanity. They even prayed to a god who had no interest in the affairs of man.

Eavan had read Theomacus's teachings. Learning the enemy.

He sorted through the various bottles of potions and elixirs. Normally, the cabinet was arranged in alphabetical order, but someone had gone through and changed things around. He'd have to come back and fix it before they left the shelter.

Where was the damned bottle?

He started at the bottom shelf and moved back up to the top. There it was, tucked behind a big bottle of *mariwan root*.

Father God, forgive me for what I'm about to do.

At this point he had very little choice. Well, that wasn't entirely true. He could stand and weather the storm of her increasing temper, or ply a little more seduction to soften her mood. That had never been Eavan's style. He'd rather have her bound by flesh to him. Lovers had more of a personal stake in keeping their mouths shut than someone merely riding the surface of an attraction. At this juncture she had no reason not to make his life miserable until they reached the settlement. One more roadblock full of guards with Kree awake this time, and all the long months of planning might be forfeit.

Telling her the truth was out of the question. All it took was one guard captain curious as to why a Druma warrior transported a Sophite into the Plains, and the guards would detain them both. Once that happened they'd torture the truth from

her. If she knew nothing, they'd find nothing. Of course they'd have to kill Eavan first in order to get to her. Not so easily done.

Though with her powers, who knew how well she could hide information from an Inquisitor? He'd rather not even make the attempt. It was best to leave the revelations for when they were within the settlement. The elders knew the correct course of action in this instance.

He heard that odd sound outside the shelter again.

Had they been found?

He stuck the vial in his pocket and headed to the front. Opening the bloodred drapes only enough to see out, he searched the front yard. Nothing out of place captured his attention. Even so, he pressed in a code to the security perimeter, increasing the distance of the sweep. If anyone came within the circle, it would give a quick series of beeps.

Escape tunnels crisscrossed under the hills directly behind the shelter, but didn't support a transport as big as a speed-cycle. If they had to leave that way, they would have too far to go on foot.

He'd make it, but he doubted a woman used to living in the pampered confines of a temple, surrounded by servants, had the stamina. Though he admired her dedication to keeping her order hidden, given the current political climate, and had seen her toughness in action, he doubted she had enough endurance to keep up with a full Druma warrior. Not with the pace he planned to set. Not in her current pained condition. The Druma trained years for cross-country treks on foot. One never knew in what situation one might find oneself. It paid to be prepared. However, the Sophites had managed to survive this long after being outlawed. Maybe he underestimated her. She might be a lot sturdier than she looked.

But then a headache from the stunner could have made even the Druma chieftain himself curl into a ball and pray for death. Eavan didn't wish that pain on even his greatest enemy.

* * *

Kree looked around the room, wondering exactly where she was and how far from Kemar City they were. Light fell just outside the window, filtered by the massive trees whose branches hung near the pane.

Was it night or day?

She threw the covers off and scooted to the end of the bed.

Pain shot through her head with each beat of her heart. She curled up into a ball, nauseated.

Oh Sopha! Help me. I need strength to make it through this trial you have set before me.

The silent words of an ancient prayer died on her lips as the door opened and the Druma returned.

“You’ll not escape, Kree. It’s best to not even try. I’ll only haul your lovely ass back here like a sack of sugar.”

Was he serious? Of course she had to try. There was an unwritten law somewhere in the annals of war that said all POWs had to attempt escape at least once. There were too many people who relied on her for her to sit back and wait to be raped or killed by the enforcer. Action was needed.

Not that she had gotten that vibe from him yet. Unbelievably the collar around her neck tamped her powers, made it harder to read things around her. Whether intentional or not she didn’t know.

“Here.” He held a tiny cordial glass under her nose. “Drink.”

She shoved the glass back at him. “I’m not thirsty.”

“I don’t care. Drink it anyway.”

The sickly sweet smell of overripe melon and honey filtered up to her nose. Her stomach rolled.

Concentrating her power, she tried to determine if the drink held anything harmful. It was useless. There weren’t any vibrations coming off the liquid.

“Here.” He stuck his finger into the mixture and held it to her lips. “It might be better in smaller doses.”

Kree turned her head away. “You drink it.”

“Fine.” He tipped up the glass, swallowing the elixir in one gulp.

Kree watched the muscles in his throat working. There wasn’t a part of him that didn’t fascinate her. She’d heard the stories—all children were raised on tales of the horrors visited on the Druma as they gained their ranks. A full Druma warrior endured the worst conditioning possible to achieve status.

Her gaze fell to the tattoo that began on the back of his hand, winding around his wrist to disappear up his sleeve. Sections of the intricate design were added as they moved along in their training. Each piece meant the bearer endured months of horrific exercises to strengthen their resolve.

“Do you want to see it?” Amusement curved the corners of his mouth, made his eyes sparkle.

“No. I want to leave.”

“That’s just not going to happen. I haven’t spent the better part of a month tracking you to let you go.”

“What are your plans, then?” The pounding in her temples was so bad she had to lie back down on the bed.

“I’d rather show you, but first we have to get to the Fassin Plains.”

“What’s there?”

“You’ll see when we get there.”

The theocrats were known for impaling their enemies and leaving their bodies out in the desert to rot or be picked on by carrion birds. Some gods were definitely of

a lower tolerance than others. And to think her countrymen brought the theocrats in to save their country from economic and cultural ruin. If she was going to be taken to the Plains and sacrificed to an angry god, she'd rather not.

The Fassin Plains were at least a full day and night's ride from Kemar City, and outside the direct jurisdiction of the theocrats. The region was located in a neutral zone where three countries converged. If he indeed took her to the Plains, she'd have a chance to escape and possibly survive this abduction ordeal.

"Will you take a shot of medicinal? The headache will ease with it."

Was that worry she saw in his golden gaze? No, it couldn't be. Since when did Druma warriors care about anyone who was outside their tightly knit society?

The elixir hadn't killed him, but that proved nothing. Building immunity to poisons was probably part of his training.

She shook her head in refusal.

He didn't heed her signal and brought more of the sickly sweet-smelling potion. He dipped his finger in the liquid, his gaze never leaving hers. With sensual precision he painted her bottom lip.

"Lick it, Kree. Just a small taste."

Warmth penetrated her skin.

The temptation to run her tongue along her lower lip settled like a compulsion in her belly. Desire swam with confusion in her soul. There was a potent sexuality in every one of his movements and gestures. He'd be an unforgettable lover.

His gaze settled on her mouth. As if it had taken on a will of its own, her tongue sneaked out between her lips and licked at the sugary substance. He growled, then dipped his finger back into the cordial glass. This time he painted her top lip in the same manner.

"It's better the second time," he reassured her. His voice had gone thick and low, a caress of sound against her face.

She didn't even have to wait for his invitation this time. The liquid tasted of ambrosia on her tongue. Besides the flavor and heat, she noticed the merest hint of relief in her pained head.

"What is this stuff?" She suppressed the urge to paint his lips and lick it off him.

His pupils dilated as if he'd read her hot thoughts. "*Itanie*. It's made by the Druma chieftain's family."

"You called it a medicinal. Is it a painkiller?"

He gave her a lopsided grin as he slid closer to her. "It has many uses. Painkiller. Antianxiety. Aphrodisiac."

Like he needed one? She'd noticed the ridged outline of his cock since she'd first laid eyes on him. Did he survive on this itanie? Drink it like water?

That still didn't explain why her body had responded in kind. Obviously he hadn't given her the drug while she was out cold. Otherwise she wouldn't have come to with a head that felt like a working anvil.

"More?" He held the glass up in front of her face.

Kree refused. Not only did she want to avoid ripping her clothes off and demanding he fuck her like a beast, she wanted to retain control of her senses. Anything less and she might end up dead yet. "It's taken the edge off the pain just fine."

That only made him smile more. "Good. Now we can start the torture."

He moved a bit closer.

Kree sank into the mattress, trying to get away from him. He moved closer. His gaze traced the planes of her face. This close she felt every vibration, as if he touched her.

Fire scorched her insides. Made it hard to breathe.

She couldn't imagine the strength of her reaction with the collar off. The soft fabric of her borrowed clothes made her uncomfortable. There were too many layers between them now.

Kree let her gaze fall into his.

Trapped, she tried to look away and found it impossible. That gaze of his was like a golden snare. His attention absolute.

"What's your name?" The question came out in a low puff of air between her lips.

He stilled above her. "Eavan."

It meant "morning sun" in an old Fassin dialect. Such an odd name for a warrior. His mother must have been a romantic at heart.

His breath was warm and sweet from the elixir. It stirred the hair around her face as he rubbed his cheek over hers. Unable to deny herself closer contact, Kree arched her back. Her breasts rubbed against his hard chest. A deep moan pulsed along her skin. Control slipped.

Their mouths fused together as if a magnetic force pulled them. Sparks shot through her body. Electricity flowed in a raging river through her veins. Eavan gathered her in his arms, holding her tightly. For the first time since the fall of the Genoquois government, Kree felt something more than fear.

Was this his brand of torture? Feeding her drops of a potent painkilling-aphrodisiac, then using it to his advantage? Did he think he could make love to her, then force her to spill all her secrets?

Make love to her and her powers might surface enough to break through the blocks created by the security collar.

Between her legs, her clit throbbed. The need for relief sang in her blood. If he tried to make love to her, she had no resistance.

He moved down her body, using his tongue along the pulse of her throat.

“I can smell your desire,” he breathed.

No doubt he could. Her loose pants were soaked, she was so wet. It was bad enough before he gave her the aphrodisiac. Now she was in agony to have him inside her.

He passed a thumb over her distended nipple, the soft nap of her shirt the only barrier to his touch. It was even more erotic being covered than if he'd touched her bare skin. He moved his fingers to her back, tracing a line down her spine. Tingles erupted in their wake.

She arched up to get closer to him. Her actions were dictated by the needs of her body. Her mind and body warred. Intellectually, she knew she shouldn't feel desire for him.

His kind had killed her sisters.

He'd hit her with a stunner set to full.

But as her mind attempted to convince her to push him away, desire made her move closer to him.

Sopha, if he didn't get inside her in the next few minutes she was going to blow like a powder keg.

He lifted the bottom of her shirt over her rib cage. “You need to have the edge taken off.”

Judging from the size of the erection behind the soft leather of his pants, he needed a little *edging* himself.

He pulled the shirt over her head. “Beautiful.”

The awe in his voice surprised her. What was his game?

Shock ran through her body as he gathered one of the crimson swags and wrapped it around her arm, securing it in place. “What are you doing?”

“Didn't you ask me to torture you?”

Excitement filled her. Her chest rose and fell with each heated breath.

After he repeated the process with the other arm, he bent his head forward for a long drugging kiss. His lips made love to hers, even as she begged him with her own hungry mouth to do more.

He tore away from her, moving down her body, sweeping his tongue over the surface of her skin. He stopped to circle her nipples slowly. Oh so painfully slow.

“Please, Eavan.”

He stopped and raised his head. His nostrils flared, eyes grew intense. “Say my name again.”

“Eavan.”

Without another word he continued down her body, stripping the cotton pants from her lower half. Kree watched in fascination as he tied each of her legs with the remaining swags. She didn't know how he managed it, but he tied her legs in such a way they were spread wide, knees up and bent. When she tried to move, the brass

ring where the material was connected to the ceiling pulled tighter, forcing her to remain still.

She was well and truly bound.

The room seemed an inferno. Heat seared her all the way to the core. Perspiration glistened on her torso.

“So pretty,” he murmured as he lowered his face level with her pussy. She felt his breath tease her throbbing clit.

Hot golden eyes looked up at her, burning her. “Tell me what you want, Kree. How can I soothe you?”

This *was* torture. Evil and wicked torture. She wanted him to kiss her pussy with as much passion as he had her mouth.

She shook her head, refusing to beg for it.

“Stubborn woman.” He tsked a few times. “I think the problem is here.” He spread her slick lips with his thumbs, exposing her clit to his attention. “Oh yes. You need relief.”

He leaned forward, then took her swollen clit between his lips and began to draw on it with long, practiced sucks.

Kree arched her back. Every nerve in her body went crazy.

Eavan didn't stop in his ministrations, even when she began to cry.

Never had she been so out of her head in ecstasy. Not even the temple sentries who kept the Sophite mystics serviced had tended her so well. It was as if Eavan had an innate sense of how and where to touch her.

A thick, blunt finger eased into her tight passage and began to stroke her long and deep. Tremors built in her core. He flicked her clit in quick, powerful strokes, taking her to the very edge.

She wrapped her hands around the swags, pulling tightly. If she had control of her powers, she'd have set the air on fire.

“More.”

Eavan glanced up at her. His mouth was wet and shiny. He licked his lips, closing his eyes. “You taste like Goddess nectar.”

The drink he spoke of was a bold blend of sweet fruits and honey. It was served in only the most expensive of homes and was often used in the sacred sexual rites of certain religious sects. If he'd ever tasted the real thing, he'd traveled in some high circles.

Not what she'd expect for a Druma warrior.

But then again, his skill in bringing a woman to orgasm was without parallel. High society women paid very well for the men who serviced them.

He continued to move his fingers in slow strokes, easing in and out of her as the tension built higher. “You glow when you get excited. Your skin shines like the sun.”

She'd heard that before. Men who had never made love to a mystic didn't understand the properties of their talents and the phosphoric alleles that rose to the surface of their skin when it heated. Though it was part of the science that made her a mystic, it was very hard to explain to outsiders.

Some men even thought it the work of demonic forces.

How sad were the superstitious.

She moved her arms as far as she could manage within the silken bonds. It was enough to skim the tips of her fingers over her nipples.

Eavan growled.

He slid back down on her, taking her clit in his mouth to deliver punishing strokes of his tongue. First one, then two fingers slid into her. His thumb ringed her anus.

"I knew a Sophite would be sexual, but you are amazing, Kree."

All the Sophites were taught to enjoy the pleasures of the flesh. It was one of the reasons the theocrats were threatened by them. A group of men who believed sex was something to hide, to be ashamed of, were not people who embraced the ideals Kree had grown up to believe were right and just. Instead the theocrats hid their concubines away from the lustful gazes of other men.

Eavan curled his middle finger to trace circles on that spot high in her body the mystics called the *Loral* button, named after the goddess of love.

The spasm grew, harder, deeper until she shook with the power of her orgasm. Her body trembled uncontrollably. Tears streamed down her face. A voice came from outside her, far away. A sob. A plea for more. She didn't care what it was, but it needed to be more.

Eavan continued to lick her sensitive areas. The action stoked the fire higher.

How much was too much?

Would she combust from his ministrations? If she let him keep going, she'd expire or burn to death in a sexual conflagration. What she really needed was to feel him thrusting his thick erection into her. So far, he hadn't even opened his fly to relieve the pressure she knew had to be building in his cock.

Had she lost her mind? The Druma warrior was her sworn enemy. An agent of the theocrats.

"Are you trying to kill me by orgasm?"

He lifted his mouth from her. Air puffed over her wet flesh as he laughed. "It would be an interesting way to go toes up, but not my choice of extermination." He ran his fingers back and forth over her. "Not when you're so intoxicatingly alive."

"Then what do you want with me?"

"Your cooperation."

Somehow she felt that was only a small part of what he wanted.

Chapter Five

Eavan hadn't lied. His entire way of life hinged on her cooperation. The look in her eyes said she didn't believe him. His mission was to change her mind.

The Sophites were a secret sect. Closed lipped and tight-knit, not much was known outside their society of what went on during their rituals and initiations. Plenty was speculated about—and all of it sexual in nature.

His gaze slid back to her wet female flesh, spread for her pleasure. By the gods, she tasted ripe and wonderful. The folds of her womanhood were pink and swollen from his lovemaking. So inviting.

Her scent clung to his face, filled his mouth. The strain of his cock behind his leather pants hurt like all the hells. But he didn't dare open for relief. Kree was too tempting, too open to his touch.

The vows he'd spoken as a youth sat upon his shoulders like the weight of the world. How many of his brethren had anticipated bonding with their *credah* and let sexual desire overcome their vows? As a Druma warrior his word was tied directly to his honor. If he did as his heart bade him, he'd lose his soul to her. Only the binding of the two halves ensured he'd retain control after the most intimate of acts. One only a bonded pair should enjoy.

He might want her with every cell of his being, but he wasn't going to forsake his honor to have her.

He ran his fingers through her wet mound once more, then leaned over to give her a long kiss, dragging his tongue through her folds before taking her clit between his lips and giving it a hard suck. At her sounds of enjoyment, he continued.

Heartbeats thundered through his chest. His blood quickened. He moved his hips in an imitation of lovemaking. Pressure built.

Kree bucked against his mouth. Her pleased shouts grew to a crescendo. Then she fell. The insides of her thighs trembled against his face. He kissed her again and again. Quick pecks of supplication.

Eavan rose, removing the bonds that held her captive to his attention. "Rest now. We have a long road ahead."

Her legs visibly shook as she closed them. She rolled to her side, her shapely bottom stuck out. He watched in fascination as her hand moved between her legs, skimming over the places he'd loved so hard.

He hated to leave her. He wanted to stay and watch the show. There was just something about a woman enjoying her body that made him hot—made him want to join her, ask her to touch him that way.

The vows did not preclude a warrior from allowing a woman to take him into her hand or mouth.

He closed his eyes and made a fist at his side. Not now. Not this first time.

Turning away from the bed, he left her to gentle herself into slumber.

Each step jarred pain through his balls and up his shaft. He unzipped his fly, letting out a low moan at the relief. Gulping in air, he still tasted Kree on his tongue and almost exploded with longing.

A jar of special oil sat on the bathroom vanity. It was used for such occasions when a warrior and his chosen engaged in sex play before the marriage, or as happened sometimes, traveled without their beloved.

He hit the pump and let the slick substance roll over his fingers. The oil mimicked a woman's natural wetness, but not the heady fragrance. That suited Eavan fine. Nothing exuded the unique pheromone trace of Kree's desire.

He licked his lips, tasting her there at the same time he cupped his cock in his hand. Visions of sliding his length into her over and over filled his head, danced before his closed lids.

She'd been so tight and hot on his fingers—the same ones that now stroked him. He leaned against the wall, turning his face to the ceiling. Breath sawed in and out. With each lungful of air, he smelled her essence. It brought them closer, even though she remained in the bedroom.

"Kree." Her name ripped from his soul as he pumped faster, imagining the hot, slick welcome of her pussy.

The image of her glowing body, a light sheen of sweat covering her, popped into his head. She was like a goddess, he the supplicant.

She was his mission. The savior of his people.

Eavan clenched his teeth to keep from shouting in exaltation as he came with the memory of loving her in his head.

He slid down the door to collapse on the floor. His cock was still in his hand.

After he caught his breath, he cleaned away the cum and returned to the bedroom. Kree lay on her side, her eyes closed. Possessiveness moved through him like a hot river of need. He'd go to any lengths to protect her from harm. A twinge of remorse nipped at his heart.

Using the stunner had really been the only way to subdue her safely at the time. He'd forgive himself in time. Hopefully, she would too. Perhaps when they reached the Plains and she realized what awaited her there.

Eavan opened the chest at the foot of the bed and drew out a blanket. He spread it over her sleeping form, then settled in behind her, allowing himself only the intimacy of his arm around her.

The scent of their lovemaking clung to her body. Womanly desire and need had a unique fragrance that awoke all the mating instincts in his Druma blood. The fact Kree had succumbed to his ministrations, had melted under his pleasurable assault made her aroma all the more unnerving while he fought sleep.

After breathing her in for a few minutes, he'd grown hard as steel. He closed his eyes and held her closer. Her shapely bottom fit perfectly against his groin.

He rolled his eyes and sent a prayer to Falax, god of virility. He'd not skimmed when he'd sprinkled his heavenly seed on Eavan. All he had to do was think of Kree and he became painfully erect.

"In a few days, all this will seem like a dream," he whispered into the hair at her temple. He placed a chaste kiss there.

A long, deep sigh left her body.

In time, Eavan, too, slept.

* * *

Beeps invaded his uneasy sleep. The perimeter alarms sounded harsh throughout the shelter. Eavan jumped from the bed, disturbing Kree.

"What the hell is that?"

"Someone trying to get in here."

Her eyes widened in shock. "How would anyone even think to look here?"

"You'd be surprised."

He pulled open the cabinet and threw clean clothes at her. "Put these on while I check the security." When she started to pull back the drapes to look out the window, he stopped her by placing his hand on hers. "Don't. It might be guards who followed us through the desert."

A frown crinkled her brow. "Why would an agent of the theocrats such as you care about the guards?"

"It's a long story."

The beeps increased in volume and frequency. The intruders were getting closer.

Eavan hurried to the security console. The sharp tang of pheromones and sexual release filled his head.

Kree had been here. Probably sending a message back to her cloister. Eavan checked the com system and found the proof. No time to worry about that now.

He punched up a sequence of codes. Unlike the sounds earlier, which might have only been the wind moving through tree branches, this alert had been caused by humans. The sensors were set to only go off on human intruders. Wildlife passed through the transmitter field freely.

The picture that filled the screen that chilled Eavan's blood.

Eight guards with the seal of the theocrats on their uniforms scanned the area with some sort of handheld device. From the looks of it, they were sweeping the area for an exhaust trail or electrostatic field.

That didn't bode well. Even the solar panels on the roof let off a charge when the energy moved from the terminals to the storage and converter unit. If they were looking for a hidden shelter, they'd find it.

"Come on, Kree, we have to leave."

Eavan might be a badass Druma warrior and have no problem taking on the guards, but he'd not risk Kree.

He took a deep breath, his decision made.

Gods and horses, he didn't want to do it. Didn't want to take her into the mountain.

She came into the security room, her breasts visible through the light fabric of her shirt.

His hands gripped the console. Hard. "You need shoes."

"Where are mine?" She put her hands on her hips. "I'm assuming you're the one who took them off me, unless this place has clothing gnomes you failed to mention."

"Now isn't the time for attitude." He pointed outside. "There are eight guards out there only seconds away from finding the shelter. I'd like to have us vacated before then."

Fear leaped into the depths of her emerald eyes. "How are we going to get past them?"

He wasn't going to take the time to explain it now. She'd see soon enough. "There are several sizes of shoes in the closet next to the bedroom. Find a pair that fits. Hurry. And grab another shirt. It'll be cold where we're headed."

She turned in a shower of pheromones.

Fight or flight always kicked the scent into overdrive. Eavan hung his head and took a steadying breath before going into action. He and his people's entire future rode on the outcome of the next few minutes. Best not to let the sexy scent of Kree's pussy distract him.

He hurried to the garage portion and grabbed his kit from the storage compartment on the speed-cycle. Everything they needed for a run through the mountain, he had in the pack. Hopefully, they'd have an easy crossing and be near the second shelter at the edge of the Plains in a few days.

Sounds from beyond the garage kicked Eavan's heart rate up. Time to go.

He ran back through the shelter, coming to a stop in the security room. A sequence of keys on the keyboard, a press on a button behind a book in the case, the movement of a hidden lever, and a door opened into the darkness of the hollow mountain.

Kree came running up behind him. Her hand seared him through this shirt and jacket as she pressed it to his back. "We're going in there?"

"Well, we sure as hell aren't going out there. Go!" He put his arm around her and gave her a gentle shove through the doorway.

He reached into his pack and grabbed a small lantern. Kree continued to stand at the edge of the light.

"I said go." He closed the door, turning the wheel that sealed them inside the passage. Even if the guards discovered the codes he'd used on the console, they'd never find the other mechanisms to open the door, or in what sequence to use them. And if they did access the mountain, they'd be lost inside forever. Only the Druma knew the way through the secret passages.

"I don't like it in here." Kree's voice sounded small and frightened. She folded her arms around her body, chafing at them.

"I'd think with your powers, you'd feel alive in the depths of the dirt."

"If I could feel the organics, I would." She ran her fingers over the security collar. "This dampens my powers considerably."

He threaded his fingers through hers. "I know, and I'm sorry for that. Come. We need to get started."

Chapter Six

Parakhan City

The clock tower in the center of town struck the hour.

It had been almost thirty-six since Kree went missing.

Ronen Cassius strapped the stunner to his side, hiding it under the folds of his ecclesiastics' robes. If she'd run afoul of the enforcers, she might already be dead.

Pressure pounded behind his eyes.

He had to find her.

Rumors from Kemar City intimated the former temple leader there had been killed by the enforcers. Kree had trained under Siobhán. So when word spread that a floating temple of Sophites had been uncovered and their leader executed, Kree had taken off for Kemar without taking any of the sentries to accompany her.

The world had turned to an uncertain place since the theocrats took over the government. Any individual who did not agree with their dogma was paraded through the streets, strapped to an obelisk, and beaten to death.

The damned woman knew better than to travel alone so far from home under such conditions. Her life was forfeit if she was ever caught by the theocrats' many agents. Rumors of officials paying citizens to turn in heretics circulated the city.

He fisted his hands at his sides.

Cahlen ran out to the balcony, one hand held to his hidden stunner. "There is an incoming message from Kree."

Ronen's heart beat hard against his ribs. He hurried from the balcony and back into the confines of the religious center they called shelter.

After being out in the bright sunshine, his eyes took a moment to adjust to the sudden dimness. The communications console sat on the far end of the upper level rooms. The cobalt glow from the screen called Ronen like a star, guiding his way through the darkness.

Veran rose from the seat in front of the console, making room for the former temple sentry captain. Ronen took his place. He keyed in the commands to open the receiving channel. These days, it paid to have extra security measures on all incoming and outgoing missives. For all intents and purposes, the temple guards had been rounded up and killed before the Sophite order fell. In reality, they lived in the confines of a religious center as devout theocratic monks.

The safety of the Sophites' future depended on the ability of the sentries to remain anonymous. That included ensuring their communications remained private.

The message opened. The few short sentences blurred as emotion clouded his eyes.

Taken by Druma warrior. Destination: Fassin Plains.

Ronen deleted the message. "Gather the others."

The command was no less fierce for being said in a whisper. He stood and headed to his quarters to begin packing for the journey. They'd have to travel smartly through the country. One false move might bring them under scrutiny before the planned revolution. Before they threw off the yoke of their oppressors and took their beloved homeland back by force.

Timing meant everything.

And this was not the time to have the head of their religion missing.

His heart contracted with pain.

Sopha, why? And by the Druma of all the goddess's creatures? The one detail he grabbed on to with both fists had Kree still alive and able to send messages. She'd always been a resourceful girl—who'd grown into an even more resourceful woman. He prayed she stayed alive long enough for the sentries to rescue her.

The quarters were plain, adorned with nothing save religious icons he never believed in. Their power had no presence in his life. Their graven images only served to stir his anger, witness the plots of his revenge night after night.

One of the extreme prices he paid for perception.

Quickly, he packed his kit. Ecclesiasts' robes, sacred texts, underclothes, toiletries all went into his satchel. The more important items weren't kept in the center.

Heavy arms and munitions were held in special cases that fit into the false floorboards of the rover car. Where they were going, they'd need every damned one of them.

The Druma.

He jerked the satchel off his single bed and hurried down to the lower levels. Half a dozen men were gathered, carrying similar bags, dressed in the homespun robes of simple monks. Underneath they were tough as Unarion steel forged by fire and blood. They'd all made vows to protect the Sophites unto death, and if Doran, goddess of the afterlife, waited with arms outstretched at the end of this journey, so be it.

Ronen turned as a small figure exited the arched doorway. A monk's cowl was pulled down low, obscuring the delicate features underneath. Hands were pulled up under long sleeves and folded solemnly at the waist.

He should have known she would try to insinuate herself into the middle of this very important mission.

Ronen met her halfway to the rover cars. "You can't come with us."

Jerella squared her shoulders. "I am."

"I can't protect you and devote my attention to saving Kree." He kept his voice soft, yet firm. An argument from a Sophite priestess was the last thing he needed at the moment.

"You see me as a burden where in truth, I'll be an asset." She continued on to the rover car. "Who is going to pick up her trail on the organic level if you lose it?"

"I won't sacrifice your life for convenience." He grabbed her under the arm, pulling her up short. "We've already lost Siobhán." He choked back emotion, gritting his teeth. "We might yet lose Kree. I won't lose you too."

Jerella sagged against him. "I need to do this, Ronen."

They had that compulsion in common. Finding Kree was essential to his soul. He'd never be able to live with himself if he didn't give this mission his undivided attention. Complications in the form of a woman were not appreciated at this time. However, her argument was the only one that prevailed.

"I'll need your promise you won't take unnecessary chances. You'll stay with one of us at all times."

The flash of laser blue eyes came from beneath the cowl. "I promise."

"Then let's leave."

The group piled into the two rover cars, sitting on an entire arsenal of weapons deep in the hidden subfloor.

The vehicle's thrusters elevated them about three feet off the ground before the car started forward down the long tree-lined drive leading to the main causeway.

Traffic ambled by, slowed by the progression of a regiment of armed guards. They marched in double time under the weary stares of Parakhan's citizens. The sight had become more common in the past weeks. The theocrats were gearing up for something, increasing the presence of their personal army within the city proper.

Tension hung in the air as Cahlen piloted the car into the fray. The sun shone on the bleached white stone pillars that led into the square. The blinding light reflected from the surface, casting the city in brilliant white.

At one time, the pillars had been carved with the pictorial history of the Sophite leaders who claimed Parakhan for a religious seat. When the theocrats took over, workers had been commissioned to file down the carvings and fill in the gaps with a liquid chalk that hardened in the sun. For anyone who had never seen the pillars in original form, the destruction was so seamless as not to be noticeable. For those who did, the fact the pillars still stood after their desecration was salt in a very deep wound.

Jerella kept her cowl up, hiding her face from citizens and soldiers alike. Women were not allowed to take holy vows into the theocrats' sacred orders. For

some reason the priests were threatened by the female species—loathed them in most cases. If Jerella intended to survive the mission, she had to stay well hidden.

Ronen studied her covered head. It seemed the little priestess had already decided how best to play her part. She might be headstrong, but he doubted she was foolish. Jerella had been an acolyte under Kree and stood in line to ascend to premier when Kree returned to Mother Sopha on the golden throne.

“Quit staring at me, Ronen.” She patted her hip as she continued to gaze out the window at the passing soldiers. “I am a deadly shot.”

“I know.” He faced forward again. “Chances are we’ll be stopped at the checkpoint leaving the city. The cover story will be that we are heading to a religious retreat at the coliseum in Masalong proper. You have taken a vow of silence as penance for gossip.” Gossipers were also required to hide their faces from society until their punishment term had lapsed.

Cahlen shot a glance at Ronen. “Then we need to find her a penitent’s mask.”

“Give me some credit. I’m way ahead of you.” Jerella stuck her hand in the deep pocket of her robe and showed the edge of the penitent’s mask concealed there. “It’s too hot to wear until we get closer to the checkpoint. I’ll suffocate.”

The mask was made of deep red leather and covered the jaw to just below the nose. She’d be able to breathe through her nose, but all air to her mouth would be cut off.

Ronen hated like hell for her to wear the device, but for the disguise to work, it was a must. It appeared she’d thought this trip through. But who had gone to her tower chamber and given her the news of Kree’s message? When he discovered the leak, the sentry would be reprimanded.

Taking chances with the lives of the Sophites was unacceptable—even if it was her idea to accompany them.

The soldiers continued to file past the bewildered onlookers. Traffic moved slowly to the gate. Pilgrims walked on sandaled feet, unable to afford either public conveyance or private transport.

At this rate, they could have walked faster while carrying the luggage. Time was of the essence. One lost minute might mean the difference between life and death for Kree. The Fassin Plains were so far away. Across the desert.

The burning, Sopha-damned desert.

The closer the rover car crept to the gate, the more the traffic bottlenecked. The checkpoint was overrun with soldiers, checking papers and deciding which citizens would be allowed to venture to other territories and which turned away to try another day.

Anger boiled in Ronen’s chest. Before the theocrats, people came and went freely, without having to show papers or identification before exiting the city limits. Now, all citizens were tagged. Some were even forced to wear tracking devices hidden under their skin so the theocrats knew where they were at all times.

Kree had dug hers out shortly after they'd placed it in the skin behind her ear. The irony was that the physician who implanted the device hadn't known Kree was the Sophite premier. He'd come with a band of soldiers to a park and rounded up all the people enjoying a nice sunny day. They'd decided at random the fate of over one hundred people, restricting their movements to the confines of Parakhan City.

Once the device had been removed, she hid it in a small charm dangling from the temple cat's jeweled collar. Anyone monitoring the movements of the tracker would think Kree kept to the cloister.

It was an ingenious way to dispose of the hated item while making those in power believe they still had the upper hand. Ronen did wonder how many other such devices ended up under the skin of livestock.

The rover car rolled forward. A guard leaned into Cahlen's window. Cahlen handed the guard their forged papers. The guard gave them a cursory glance, not looking much farther than the gold seal and crimson stamp on the bottom of the page proclaiming them on official clerical business.

"Destination?" The word was barked.

"Masalong. A religious retreat and conference."

The guard nodded his head to where Jerella sat. "You sure you want to take him along?"

"We believe he will benefit from further instruction."

The guard shrugged. "Suit yourself."

He waved them through the gate.

Ronen watched in the mirrors as their fellow sentries were stopped and asked the same questions. They caught up quickly as traffic eased on the causeway, stretching out into six lanes.

As if the traffic allowed in and out of the city needed that many lanes these days. Well, maybe coming in. People still sought to see the sights of the once-proud city that had been the seat of the Sophite order.

By darkfall they'd made the edge of the desert. The dual moons were high. Only a slice of each shone in the dark sky.

Cahlen spared Ronen a glance. "Do we make camp, or keep going?"

"Go. We wasted enough time. No telling what the Druma plan to do with her once they get to the Plains." He fisted his hand. Kree was armed and dangerous to those who threatened her. If she'd made a move to defend herself, there was no telling if she'd met her death or not. They'd not heard from her since she sent the message to the cloister.

That worried him more than he let the others know.

Jerella had shed the penitent's mask. Her head rested against the window. A soft snore drifted from her open mouth.

Static came through the radio speakers. Occasional guard transmissions peppered the white noise. None of the talk had been immediate or cause for the sentries' concern. Most of the calls came from somewhere along the coast road, which they were well away from at this point.

Ronen watched as Cahlen's head bobbed more than once. "Pull off the road and we'll change drivers."

"I'm fine."

"You are *not* fine. You've been piloting this damn car for the past nine hours."

"I've been at the toggle longer than that on trips."

Ronen raised a dark brow at his sylvan—the rank just under his own of captain. "Even though we no longer have an official order, I'm still your superior. I'm ordering you to pull over."

Cahlen did as told this time. The lights from the other rover car filled the back window as it pulled in behind them.

"Who's going to drive?"

Ronen got out to switch places with him. "I still remember how to operate a rover car."

Parras got out of the other vehicle. "What's wrong?"

"Change drivers," Ronen mandated as he got back into the rover car.

As he buckled his safety harness, a faint transmission came through the speakers.

"Sophite premier and rogue Druma warrior located at safe house in the Carlsbern Province. Exact location is currently being downloaded into the DRs—data retrievals."

Ronen stared ahead. They were at least three hours outside the southernmost part of the Carlsbern Province.

"Any guards within the vicinity are urged to assist with apprehending the fugitives."

"Strap in." It was a cursory command, issued only a second before he opened to full throttle and the rover car rocketed back onto the road.

So, the Druma was a rogue? Ronen didn't quite know if that news was to their advantage or not. No telling what a bloodthirsty warrior would do to a lone woman if he had nothing to lose.

If he tried to ransom her back to the theocrats so she could be tried as a heretic, Kree was as good as lost to them.

"Did you get those coordinates?"

Cahlen tapped a DR he'd stolen off the body of a dead guard who'd wandered too close to the cloister. "Oh yeah. We need to take the next access road and turn

farther inland. According to this, the safe house is in the northeast corner of Carlsbern.”

“How long until we reach our destination?”

“Several hours.”

That was not what he wanted to hear.

Chapter Seven

Trails through the mountain were not built for speed. Leaves, brush, and rushes covered the floor, making for a treacherous walk. However, the debris did an admirable job of covering their tracks.

Eavan guided them through the tunnels without use of compass or GPS. It was as if he knew instinctually where to go. Is this how the Druma moved through the country like wraiths, showing up in improbable locations without being seen?

Kree followed him down a long shaft. They made a right turn and stopped.

“Damn the skies.” Eavan brushed his hand along the wall of rock that had caved in at some point, filling the tunnel.

“What do we do now?”

He turned an enigmatic smile her way, so incongruous with the situation. “There is always more than one path before us.”

“Is that a quote or condescension?”

“Neither. It’s one of the great truths handed down by my people from the gods.”

He turned back the way they’d come. Instead of going back through the main tunnel, he headed through a smaller side branch that veered left.

“If there was a cave-in in the big tunnel, it’s realistic to expect one here.” Kree followed Eavan more slowly than before. The closeness of the walls pressed in on her. It was like moving through an open tomb.

The air was thick with mold and dead things. More than one small creature had met its doom under the rock. Even with the collar on, there was too much information for her senses to process. This far underground, thousands of years of organic material had become one with the rock. The fossil records stored in the walls would be a paleo-archaeologist’s dream come true.

Kree had lost all concept of time from the moment they entered the tunnel system. However, her stomach gave out a loud growl. Hunger pains cramped her to where she almost doubled over. Only by sheer will did she remain upright. She’d show him no weakness while at his mercy. Not even that of her physical needs.

Heat shot to her face.

She had let him see how much she loved the call of the flesh. Even without the itanie she’d been wondering how Eavan’s cock would feel inside her.

The heights of pleasure they'd shared before drifting off into sleep had blown her mind and senses wide open. It had been like nothing she'd ever experienced with any of the temple sentries. Not even her frequent trysts with Ronen had been as powerful. And Eavan had dampened her reception of power considerably when he fastened the collar around her neck.

A quick step to the right and a jog down a short flight of stairs, and Eavan held back a thick curtain painted to blend into the rock wall, camouflaging it from anyone who had no knowledge of its existence.

"We'll rest here for a while before pressing on." He waited for her to step through, then entered and pulled the curtain down again.

He set the flashlight on the ground and slung his pack off his shoulder. He knelt beside it, rummaging inside. Kree watched as he pulled out a portable campfire, a few small foil packets, and two thin thermal blankets.

"Not exactly all the comforts of home, but it will get us through the next few hours."

Kree noticed, not for the first time, the powerful charm of Eavan's smile. How it made her heart beat in overdrive.

She cleared her head with a firm shake.

He was leading her to a destiny she had no control over, and here she was wondering if he planned to eat her for dessert.

Just the thought had her wet and aching.

Eavan glanced at her over his shoulder. "Come and sit. Rest your feet and have something to drink. We still have a long journey. You need to take every opportunity you can to reenergize."

With her rampant emotions and untrustworthy libido, she skirted the campfire and sat opposite him. The bright blue flames gave his face an odd masklike glow. He looked almost demonic in his expression.

Some would say the Druma sprang directly from Kasam's—Lord of the Underworld's—very loins. Kree wasn't so sure about that anymore. He'd confused her when he ran from the guards. It was his job as an enforcer to turn her over to the theocrats, not protect her from them.

She canted her head, staring at him over the flames as he took out a small camp kit to heat their dinners. "Why'd you do it?"

"Do what?"

"Flee through the mountains instead of turning me in. I'm sure there's a good bounty on my head by now." The thought of which made a small shiver run down her spine.

"All will be revealed."

"You said that before. I want answers not platitudes."

"It's still too dangerous." His golden stare pierced her over the flames. His eyes picked up the blue glow and took on an eerie green shade. "If we're captured, I'll be

killed immediately as a traitor. There's still a chance you might negotiate your freedom."

"You really are living in a dream world, warrior. The theocrats, once in possession of me, will never let me go." She took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. Painful memories spiraled up to clog her throat. "Do you know why I was in Kemar City?"

He only stared. Never gave an indication he'd heard her.

"I was there to pay respects to the woman who had trained me. The theocrats and their enforcers hunted Siobhán down like a wild dog and murdered her."

Angry tears filled her eyes. She blinked them back before he could see and judge her for them. "No matter your reasons for abducting me, they will never be good enough to justify why my life was spared and hers taken so arbitrarily."

She watched his jaw work back and forth, as if grinding his thoughts through his teeth and chewing them back.

"You want to say something, so out with it. I never suffered fools gladly as the head of my own temple. I won't do it now."

"Was the enforcer who killed your Siobhán a Druma warrior?"

Shock had her blinking her eyes. "I don't know. I wasn't there when it happened."

Eavan held her gaze. "I can tell you with all certainty the enforcer was *not* one of my people."

"You're awfully confident about the actions of your brothers-in-arms." Resentment laced her words, cut the air like a bitter blade.

"I am." He held her gaze a few more beats, before turning his attention back to their dinner.

The foil packets hissed over the fire. He pulled them back with the tips of his fingers. Holding the end over a small bowl, he pulled a tab and the contents slid out. Fragrant steam filled the air, teasing Kree's stomach and palate.

Her belly let out another loud growl.

As he handed her the bowl and utensil, their fingers touched. A shock of power arced in the darkness. Kree's gaze flew to his.

He shrugged. "Static electricity. It happens in here sometimes."

She doubted that very much. There was energy certainly, but nothing in their area to conduct static. Skeptical, but not willing to make an issue of his lie, she took the offered food and dug in.

The flavor slid over her tongue in heavenly splendor. There were many rituals in the Sophite order that used food as a temptation and precursor to sexual rites. She doubted the prepackaged trail rations provided by the Druma warrior could hold up to the epicurean delights of a temple's master chef, but at the moment she had a hard time remembering any meal she'd appreciated more.

* * *

Eavan watched the firelight play over Kree's features. Everything inside him went tight. He wished to reveal all to her, but knew to do so was sheer folly.

Her assessment was correct, no matter how he hated the thought—if the guards captured her, they'd not hesitate to kill her. Her body would be tied to the back of a speed-cycle and dragged through the desert. The jackals would catch her scent on the wind and come to feast on her remains.

Eavan had seen it before.

Disgusted at the images flowing through his mind, he threw his bowl onto the ground.

Kree looked up sharply. "Something wrong?"

"No." He stood, moving to the far side of the cave to make their pallet beds. When he completed the task, he took a clean pack from his bag and washed his bowl.

Kree finished her meal, then held her hand out to him. "Give me one of those and I'll take care of this." She wiggled the bowl in his direction.

"I'll finish here. You lie down and try to get some sleep."

She narrowed her eyes. If he read her expression correctly, she wanted to know why he acted so caring toward her.

He swallowed down the answers to her unasked questions. No, keeping the reasons to himself served them both better for now. That was the plan he'd agreed to before the elders. That's the one he'd stick to. No matter how much he burned to disclose all.

He watched from the corner of his eye as Kree moved to the pallet and crawled under the thermo-blanket.

Eavan finished cleaning the bowl and packed the camp equipment away. He doused the portable fire and set it aside to cool, then cut the light on the lantern to conserve energy.

Anticipation swam in his veins. Being near her, lying on the cave floor beside her was not going to make for a restful sleep. Not when the scent of her skin filled his head. Not when the memory of her taste remained on his tongue.

If he made love to her now, he'd not be able to blame the itanie.

The bracelet on his wrist clinked as it brushed against the floor. One day she'd understand the need for the extra precaution.

He lay down on his side, facing away from her.

"How much farther until we get to where we're going?" Kree's voice was a quiet whisper in the dark. The intimate tone rippled over his skin, made his body stir.

"Days. It all depends on how much ground we can cover and how many tunnels are blocked." He turned to face her, unable to see her in the absolute darkness. "If we need to double back, that will add distance and time."

“Is there a way to tell which tunnels are blocked before we take them?”

Eavan heard the tremor in her voice. She hated being inside the mountain. It had added to her stress. As if being abducted by an enforcer wasn't enough.

He reached out a hand, finding her despite the lack of visibility. It was as if she called his touch like a lodestone. He ran his hand down the side of her face. Emotion rose, hot and immediate.

Despite knowing rumors and innuendos about the Order of Sopha, there were some aspects that remained a mystery. “How were you selected into your order?”

“The ability to sense the energy patterns only runs in certain families. Occasionally there is an odd quirk of genetics that makes it appear in someone not from a strongly Sophite family. Hardly ever. My *adja* is one such woman.”

“So the temple heads test female children from Sophite families to bring them into the order?” He continued to stroke her skin. It was an action meant to calm, but the tension in her body hummed, calling to his.

“In essence, yes.” She curled her hand around his. When he thought she'd push him away, she covered her breast with his palm. “Sophites, especially we leaders, are not used to abstaining from sexual release. I know you want to service me. I give you permission.”

Service her? Yes, more than he'd ever wanted anything in his life. But the idea she'd *permit* him to give her the orgasm she needed stuck like a burr in his leathers.

He turned to his other side again. “That's nice to know. Now get some sleep.”

An outraged huff of breath stirred the back of his hair. Served her right. By the blood of his ancestors there was no way he'd bend to *her* will. He might be her sworn protector, but that didn't mean his will cleaved to hers.

The Sophite premier's influence came to an end when they stepped into lands controlled by the Druma. That included the inside of the mountain.

Treat him like one of her sentries—not this warrior. He'd as soon have the snake tattoo removed from his arm and be banished into the desert.

She'd learn she could not expect him to jump at her whims. Lovemaking was a mutual experience, not one of unbalanced power. The Druma knew and understood this. That's why once a Druma took a mate, it lasted until one or both ceased to breathe.

Eavan crossed his arms and stared off into the darkness. Angry energy poured off Kree, pushing against the back of his head.

A smile stole across his face. He'd give her a day or two and then service her. When he was good and ready. Until then, it would be fun to tease and tempt. Make her beg instead of order.

Chapter Eight

Ronen slowed the rover car as the sentries neared the coordinates of the safe house.

They had arrived too late.

Acrid smoke billowed into the air, coming in the vents to choke the car's occupants. The damn guards had burned the place to the ground.

Laser burns—from a cannon, if the scorch marks on the ground were any indication—scored the ground. By *Sopha* he hoped Kree had gotten out in time, had found some alternate shelter.

He adjusted the dial on the field glasses to increase the range. The front door of a garage had been pulled completely off the front of the house and left in the front yard. The charred chrome of a speed-cycle resembled the exoskeleton of a dead bug.

Gorge rose in his throat. The fact the only means of transportation remained at the safe house gave him a very bad feeling for Kree's safety.

"Do you see any guards?" Cahlen assembled the heat sensor to scan the area.

"No." Ronen lowered the glasses. "They probably torched and ran."

Cahlen rolled down the window and held the wand, pointing it to the smoldering building. "This will pick up any heat, including the embers. However, if I see anything even remotely human shaped, we'll have to pull back."

"Unless the shape isn't moving." Ronen's bitterness filled the quiet interior of the rover car.

Jerella leaned forward between the seats. "Can you get any closer?"

"Not until I'm positive there aren't guards still in the vicinity." Ronen panned the area to see if any lookouts remained to watch the safe house.

"With all the smoke and carbon covering the energy, I won't be able to pick anything up unless I'm right on top of it." Jerella grabbed the handle and started out of the rover car.

"Get back here!" Ronen threw the field glasses at Cahlen and went to follow Jerella. "I've lost too many leaders lately. I won't lose you too."

The *adja* halted. Eyes as blue as the sky above cut him through. "She was *my* mentor. I have a right—an obligation—to find her."

"Don't speak to me of obligations." The constant press of them on Ronen's shoulders made his back feel like it would break. One day he'd snap like a tree

under the weight of ice and snow. And still he pressed on. "I've known about obligations since before you were old enough to leave your mother's breast."

She narrowed her eyes. Her nose inched into the air. "Until Kree is recovered, I am the acting leader of the order. Don't forget that."

"And I am still the sentry captain. Your safety and my vows to protect you supersede your foolish need to prove yourself. Now get in the rover car, or I'll have Quillan take you back to the cloister."

"No." She turned and started the walk to the burned-out shell of the safe house.

"Sopha preserve me," Ronen mumbled. He rested his hand on the butt of the stunner hidden under his robe. "You aren't going to be able to go inside. It's still smoldering. Any information you can pick up will have to be obtained from outside the structure."

"You have no idea the range of my powers, do you?" The cryptic remark hung on the breeze as Jerella stopped at a rocky outcrop. She scanned the immediate area, eyes closed, hand stretched outward.

"I know the exact range of every Sophite's powers." He leaned in close to her. "Do not underestimate the *range* of my knowledge."

Her hand stalled on a direct line with the center of the smoldering shell. "There's something right there. It doesn't feel right. Colder than stone. Manufactured. I can't feel anything on the other side."

"Can you determine the size or shape?"

She moved her hand back and forth as if feeling the air for the answer.

Quiet descended. The only noises were the ambient sounds of local wildlife and the breeze as it rustled leaves on the nearby trees.

"Rectangle." She lowered her hand. "It's a door. Cut into the mountain."

An avenue of escape.

If it went into the mountain, was it an access to tunnels that went through?

Blood beat hard in his temples. His vision turned black around the edges. It was too much to hope for. If the Druma warrior got Kree out of danger and they were on the move, no telling where they'd end up.

Ronen choked down the anger that he'd be beholden to an enforcer for sparing Kree's life, but at this point he was only thankful it appeared she may not have been killed by the guards.

"Come on. We won't find any more information here to help us."

Jerella lifted her head. Surprise was written on her face. "You don't even want me to verify she was here."

Ronen pointed to the safe house. "That's all the verification I need. That and the coordinates where Kree was last seen by the guards. I doubt they tried to confuse their fellow guards with inaccurate information."

He started back for the rover car. Soft footfalls scurried in the brush behind him.

“Do you think we’ll find her, Ronen?”

“I’m going to try my damndest.”

A gentle touch on his shoulder stalled him. “I know you love her.”

Ronen didn’t look at her. Shrugging off her hand, he started walking again. His feelings for Kree were deep and complex.

And he’d never admitted them out loud.

He didn’t plan to start now, either. Not to her adja within hearing distance of his men.

Who cared if he’d let his heart show upon his sleeve over the years? He’d always done as his duty bade in protecting all the Sophites. On the nights Kree had invited another to share her bed and body, he’d let the incident pass without mention.

Sophites were allowed to pick and choose who among the sentries would service them and when. It wasn’t up to the sentries to take what they wanted.

He fisted his hand in the fold of his robe.

When Kree turned of age and took her final vows, he’d been the one she selected to spend that first night in her bed, bringing her to sexual and spiritual pleasure.

The memory was sweet on his tongue and burned on his brain. She’d been like hot, liquid silk in his arms.

They reached the rover car and climbed inside.

Ronen disregarded the speculative expression on Cahlen’s face. “Find the quickest route around the mountain. They may be traveling through.”

“Is that even possible?” Cahlen frowned, taking out his handheld and tapping in the destination to the nav center.

“When dealing with the Druma, it’s best not to underestimate them.” He turned to Rhees in the backseat. “See how much information is available about the Druma. Concentrate on any obscure legends or factoids you can find.”

Rhees began to work quietly in the backseat.

Jerella got in and strapped the harness across her chest. Her gaze met Ronen’s. “What more do you need to know other than they’re murderers?”

“Apparently not all of them or he’d have killed Kree by now.”

“She might already be dead. Perhaps the guards used the fire to cover the bodies?” Her voice caught, broke on the last word.

The adja was an emotional woman. She’d just taken her final vows and completed the penetration ritual when the theocrats came to power and stripped the Sophites of their order. Ronen had not been her choice of sentry to take her into the next level of her talent, but from what he’d heard, the ritual had been a bitter

disappointment for Jerella. There remained some pocket of power in her yet untapped.

As far as Ronen knew, none of Jerella's sentries had managed to release the power.

She hadn't asked any of the sentries who manned the cloister to relieve her of the hindrance to using her full power. It was as if she'd given up hope.

Perhaps it was safer that way. When the adja came into her own, the powers would be enough to devastate.

Then again...

He let his gaze follow the contours of her face, play across her lips. She was certainly beautiful in her own right. She lacked the magnetism Kree had, but he supposed others of their order had noticed her ripe body and pristine features. She was one of the few Sophites who lived at the cloister. The constant temptation of her lithe form had taken its toll on the sentries.

The other Sophites had taken lodgings in small apartments nearby, but far enough away they did not fall under the guards' suspicion.

He wondered if she'd be open to having him try to tap her power.

Jerella wiped at her face. "What?"

"Nothing. Just considering our options for future reference."

Cahlen raised his head from studying the nav system. "There is an express route a couple of hours from here. It doesn't say how well it's maintained, but we can cut at least a day or two off travel—barring unforeseen problems."

Ronen started the vehicle. "Relay the information to the others."

Thoughts of Jerella and her dormant powers receded into the farther reaches of his mind. The only thing that mattered now was finding Kree.

They stopped some time later to make camp as they came down into a gully between two mountains. The going was slow and laborious, both mentally and physically. Ronen's nerves were shot. Anxiety danced across his senses. He'd not rest easy until he verified Kree was alive.

He fisted his hand.

Keep it together. You'll do Kree no good if you drive yourself mad.

He stretched out his hand, as if releasing the emotion with the action, and went back to work, setting up a makeshift bed.

Darkness had fallen an hour before, and the twin moons shone bright enough above to see well without camp lights. The sentries set up their sleeping pallets in a circle. Jerella would sleep in the middle, protected by the sentries. All had stunners—set to kill—near at hand.

Ronen looked around, doing a quick head count as he watched his men to ensure no one had wandered too far from camp. One small figure was conspicuously absent.

“Sophia!” Ronen swore under his breath and stood. “Has anyone seen Jerella?”

Several of the men turned their heads, but no one confessed to seeing her leave the campsite.

Ronen took off into the woods, looking for a flash of bright white among the dark foliage. Where could she have gotten to and why? If she had to relieve herself, she should have told one of them, and they could have gone with her. Modesty had no place in such a wilderness. Not with the bounty on her Sophite head. An adja was just as much a threat to the theocrats as the premier herself.

Twigs snapped and leaves rustled under his heavy footfalls. If he were trying to sneak up on someone, he’d have given his position away. Where had she gone?

Stupid woman.

Sometimes he really wanted to shake her. What was it about Jerella that irritated the hells out of him? Was it the fact she was so stubborn she refused to use common sense to guide her? It was as if she had to prove herself at all cost. Unfortunately the greatest cost would be her life.

The order simply couldn’t afford to lose another Sophite. Not and survive.

He pushed back a swath of branches and beheld a lake sparkling in the moons. Near the bank sat a boulder as big as the rover car. A figure lay on top, moon kissed and glowing with ethereal energy. Jerella had shed her robes and absorbed the moons’ rays through the phosphorescent alleles in her body.

Renewing the source was an important part of the Sophite sense of well-being. They’d been traveling so hard since receiving the message from Kree, there hadn’t been time to allow Jerella such a basic necessity. For that, he felt shame. He’d slacked on his sworn duty.

Arrested by the beauty of the moment, Ronen let out a sigh and stood back to protect Jerella from a distance until she was ready to return to camp.

Slowly she sat up and turned to him. “Ronen.”

He came from the brush a few steps. “I didn’t know where you’d gone. You didn’t leave word you needed time to rejuvenate.”

“You were busy.” She slid down the boulder and came forward, forgoing her robes that sat in a forgotten puddle on the ground by the boulder. She lifted her hand. “Come, Ronen.”

Heat sang in his veins.

He might love Kree, but he’d never once turned down the offer of servicing another Sophite. It went against his vows as a sentry captain to do such. There was no honor in refusing. Judging from the way Jerella moved with sensual grace, she was in desperate want of sexual release.

The energy gathering must have aroused her.

Ronen closed in on her but made no move to touch her. Moonlight played over her fair skin, turning it to pearl. The faint glow increased, grew brighter with every breath. Her breasts were small but perfect. They rose and fell, hypnotizing Ronen.

The nipples were hard little peaks, begging to be warmed in the hot recesses of his mouth.

“Kree always said you’re the best of all the sentries.” Her gaze met and held his before sliding away. He watched her swallow and move her arms around in a nervous way. As if she didn’t know what to do with them.

Was she afraid of him when it came to her sexual needs? Why? He’d never given her reason to fear him. He needed to put her at ease. “I live to serve the Sophites in all things.”

“You may serve me, but you don’t like me.”

“I never said that, Jerella. Not once in the years I’ve known you.” Now he touched her, running his hand down the side of her face, along the strong muscle at the side of her throat and on down to her collarbone. “You are delicate, yet strong. Beautiful, but untouchable. You want so much to prove yourself and at the same time undermine your power by doing so.”

She glanced up. “How?”

“You don’t listen to those who wish to protect you.” He let his hand slide away from her but not before grazing his knuckles across her left nipple.

Her breath hitched, then released on a soft moan. “I’m a Sophite adja. I can command you to my will.”

Ronen took a step back, proving his point. “And that’s exactly what I mean. You command when asking is more prudent. You shout when a whisper is needed. You wander off into the woods when staying closer to camp is the smartest course.”

Her head canted to the side. “Why *should* I ask?”

There was that haughty attitude again. He wondered sometimes if it was because she was from a family who had no Sophites in the bloodline. She was an anomaly among her kin. Her education in the finer points of being a Sophite leader were lacking. For that he blamed Kree.

“Because even though we sentries are devoted in our service to the Sophites, we are still people, full of feelings and emotions. We deserve to be treated with respect and dignity. We are here because we want to be. Not because we were sold into servitude.”

Jerella held her hands behind her back, her head bowed. The position threw her shoulders back. Her small, pert breasts thrust outward. Ronen had a hard time looking anywhere else but at the tempting display before him.

His cock began to harden under the ecclesiasts’ robe. During his tenure in the sentries, he’d sampled more female flesh than a male prostitute. He never tired of it. The fact he’d never tasted Jerella sent anticipation rolling through his body.

Perhaps that was about to change.

“If I had selected you to be my first, to perform the penetration ritual on me, would you have?”

Ronen lifted her chin so she had to look at him. "I would have been honored, Jerella."

She let out a sigh. "Will you service me?"

Ronen didn't answer but pulled her to his chest, lifting her slightly as he did. He rotated his hips forward so she felt his erection. There was no mistake he was ready and able to provide the release she so desperately wanted. Truth be known, he needed some relief himself.

When he started to kiss her, she pulled her face away.

Odd.

"No. No kissing."

He fell back on his role of sentry and servicer to the Sophite. Let her show him where and how she wanted release. "As you wish, Adja."

She slid down him, then pulled him back toward the lake. When she reached the boulder she rounded the side facing the water. "Take off your robe."

He did so, pulling it over his head, and spread it out on the sandy ground. Jerella took a place on the garment. She lay back, spreading her thighs for him.

Even in the dim light provided by the moons and the faint glow that still emanated from her skin, Ronen could see Jerella's nervous, almost jerky movements. Where had the grace she normally moved with gone?

He admitted he was at a loss. She acted as if she'd never done any of this before but had read it in a book. Her false bravado had deserted her.

Ronen ran a hand up her thigh and over the crest of her slim hip. "Relax. I wouldn't hurt you for the world."

"Of course not. Why would you?"

This was not going to go well if she didn't trust him and give over to the pleasure of the moment. "Do I scare you? Or intimidate you?"

She turned her face away again. "You're Ronen."

Surprise stalled him in the gentle pursuit of her belly. "And that means?"

"You are the pinnacle. The premier's favorite." She trembled. "The captain of the sentries."

Ronen stretched out beside her. "I still fail to see your point. Someone has to lead the sentries. If not me, someone else. Cahlen perhaps. Or Quillan."

"No. There is no one else."

Oh Sopha. Had little Jerella fallen for him? Is that why the hesitancy to ask him to service her needs? How to navigate the minefield of emotions and not break her heart or spirit? She already knew his feelings for Kree, though he'd kept them close to his heart.

Slowly, he brought his fingertips up to trace a slow circle around each nipple. The points were hard as little daggers.

A moan escaped her throat. He replaced his finger with his tongue.

Her back arched.

Sometimes words were too much. If he did anything she didn't like, he had every confidence she'd let him know. He worked his way down her body, placing little licks and nips down the center.

She ran her hand through his hair as he neared the juncture of her thighs. Soft, silky hair covered her mound. Light blonde, it glowed in the moonlight as much as she did. The sweet, musky scent of aroused woman filled his nostrils, excited his senses.

Ronen parted her legs wider, dipping his tongue in to find her clit. His tongue met with the wettest pussy he'd ever had the pleasure to lick. She tasted clean and innocent. It was a heady flavor he wanted to savor and pull into his mouth, roll it over his palate.

Jerella moaned beneath him. Her hips bucked against his face as he worked. He circled his arms around her upper thigh, bringing his hand in through the underside of her leg. The wet slide of her lips parted as he slid his index finger into her tight sheath.

By all the deities!

No cunt had ever pressed tighter or harder against his finger. It was as if she were forcing her muscles to contract into a viselike channel.

How had she risen to the rank of adja and maintained such an inner core of fear and anxiety about the sex act? It wasn't something Ronen was used to when dealing with a Sophite. Historically, the order embraced sexual gratification in all forms. Some of the practitioners even pleased one another before taking that final vow in the penetration ceremony.

Jerella's reaction begged the question if she had been so uptight with all the sentries, or was this a fear she developed with him?

The only way Ronen knew to ease her anxiety was to continue to stroke, tease, and suck her into orgasm. Maybe then she would settle into riding the tide of pleasure rather than fighting it.

He moved his finger in and out, going as high into her tight passage as possible. On either side of his face, her thighs trembled. Whispered words fell from her mouth, but Ronen was too busy enjoying the act to listen.

A light caress ran down his spine. He longed to feel her hands cup his balls and stroke his shaft, but she came nowhere near the area. Matter of fact, other than the gentle glide of her hand up and down his back, she didn't touch him at all.

As the captain, it was part of his duty to ensure all Sophite acolytes received the same educational benefits throughout their training. No matter the subject. For a sexual mystic, Jerella's knowledge of lovemaking was sorely lacking. The woman was in desperate need of some additional tutoring.

He'd discuss the matter with her at another time.

At the moment, he was too busy concentrating on drawing out her reaction to think of an extra curriculum. Regardless of whether she was uptight, Ronen wasn't.

He enjoyed having the taste of woman on his tongue. Loved the flavor and scent. Enjoyed the way women responded to his ministrations. The lifting of hips to gain more sensation. The soft moans and heavy breathing when the subject neared orgasm.

He held her clit clasped between his teeth and flicked it with punishing strokes. Jerella lifted her bottom off the ground. She held his back with both hands, almost in a sitting position.

A long anguished sigh fell. Cool air bathed his back as she lay back again. Her pussy contracted around his finger as she came.

Ronen didn't draw the experience out, didn't let her catch her breath before he turned and thrust his cock into her hot, tight passage. He clamped his teeth together to keep from moaning loudly. The sound stalled in his throat, rumbled through his chest.

Damn the skies, she felt so good around him.

Like a burning, velvet cocoon filled with the sweetest wetness.

He thrust over and over, going balls-deep into her. Jerella thrashed and moaned under his assault. Then she tightened all around him, her hips lifting again.

Oh please don't come yet, sweetheart. The words were clamped between his teeth, held on the tip of his tongue. It felt way too good to want it to end so soon. If she came now, he'd lose it.

"Ronen."

It was a plea. A prayer.

"I'm here."

"Please...touch my clit."

Jerella let off enough light now, Ronen could have read the entire ecclesiasts' missives by it. She burned hot and bright.

He braced his hand on her mound and let his thumb stroke her with each hard thrust of his hips.

"Oh Sopha." She threw her head back and let out a low, strangled cry.

Lost, Ronen followed her into orgasm. He closed his eyes against the emotion. It had been weeks since he'd come inside one of his beloved Sophites. The fact it was Jerella made it all the sweeter.

Stars burst behind his eyes as the hot rush left his body. He continued to thrust through the crisis, milking all sensation from her. As he waited for reality to return, Ronen held his arms locked, refusing to collapse on top of her. She was so delicate and fragile. The discrepancy in their sizes was not lost on him, especially after having been inside her.

The light in her skin rapidly faded. Disappointment had the ability to diminish the phosphorescent properties in a Sophite. He knew it wasn't due to lack of sexual

satisfaction. She'd come hard, his cock shuddering at the power of her orgasm. The reason for her letdown had nothing to do with the act but something more.

Ronen brushed the hair from her face. "What's wrong?"

She shook her head. "It didn't work."

He rolled off her. Perhaps the time to bring up her core of anxiety had presented itself. "You need to let go, Jerella. You hold too much back."

She rose and walked to the water. There were no protestations or defenses. Ronen hoped she took his words to heart and at least considered them. If he gave her the tools, or at the very least a reason to acknowledge the problem might be intrinsic, she might work out a conclusion that tapped into her hidden powers.

Ronen joined her at the water. They bathed in a silence only broken by the soft splashes they made. If he concentrated hard enough, he was sure he'd be able to hear her mull over his observation.

In all honesty, he'd never known a Sophite, particularly an adja, who found it impossible to tap into all her powers after the penetration ritual. But standing on the banks of an unknown lake, Ronen vowed to help her solve her dilemma.

Chapter Nine

“I can’t see a damn thing.” Kree held her hand to the cavern wall. The temperature inside had dropped at least fifteen degrees. The slope they navigated dropped even farther, taking them straight into the bowels of the mountain.

The floor was slick with water and some kind of fungus. It was probably better that she couldn’t see. The borrowed shoes she wore kept sliding in the muck. More than once she’d had to grab the back of Eavan’s shirt to keep from tumbling them both forward.

Eavan waved the flashlight beam back and forth, trying to light as much of the way for them as possible.

“How much longer until the floor levels out again?”

“About another two hours.”

In two hours she’d be dead from falling and breaking her neck.

The tunnel they had been walking was another casualty of a cave-in. Eavan had taken them down an access passageway until they came to the current one.

Kree had not enjoyed the change of route.

She was positive that a few times she’d heard something moving either behind or in front of them.

“Do you need a rest?” Eavan slowed his pace a bit.

Kree ground her back teeth together to keep from begging him to stop. “No. I just wondered how much longer.”

A brief burst of what might pass for laughter was quickly covered by a cough. “There is a side room where we can stop, if you wish. It has a spring running through it.”

A spring? She tried not to moan. A place to soak her poor, abused feet would go a long way to making her feel better. “If you want to stop, we can. Or we can push on. It doesn’t matter to me.”

Her tongue should fall out with enormity of her lie. She lifted her eyes heavenward, mouthing forgiveness to Sopha.

“It’s just ahead.” Eavan continued moving down the passageway. The walls narrowed. At one point he had to turn sideways to get through.

Kree slipped through, brushing both her arms against the wall. Something sharp scraped her skin, stinging. “Ow.”

She stopped and felt her arm. Her fingers came away sticky with blood.

“What’s wrong?” Eavan turned back, shining the flashlight low, as not to blind her.

“Nothing. I got too close to the wall.” She tried to push past him, but he blocked her way.

“No. Let me see.”

“It’s nothing. Let’s get to the spring, and I’ll be able to better assess.”

Eavan made a grab for her arm. “You’re bleeding.”

“Don’t look so astounded. I do have blood, you know.” She jerked her arm from his grasp.

His expression softened. “I know you do. I just want to ensure that the injury wasn’t caused by some of the cavern wildlife.”

“What kind of wildlife?” She looked at her arm. The sleeve of her shirt was ripped.

“There is a form of scorpion down here that is highly toxic. One drop of the venom is enough to fell ten men.”

She shot him a look. He wasn’t kidding.

“But if it stung me, I’d be writhing on the ground, gasping for air by now, right?”

“Most likely.” This time when he picked up her arm, she let him inspect the injury all he wanted. “It looks like a scratch. Must have been a sharp spot on the rock. We’ll still need to clean it well. Some of the moss and molds have their own bacterial or venomous secretions.”

“Then what are we waiting for? Let’s get to the spring and clean me up.”

Eavan took her by the hand, leading her down the passage. The floor sloped sharper than before, making the walk even more treacherous.

He turned abruptly, pulling her down yet another tunnel. The sound of rushing water echoed off the cave walls. The farther they moved, the louder the sound grew.

That didn’t sound like a spring. More like a full-blown river. She inched closer to Eavan’s back.

He stopped and bent down. “Let me get out the campfire so we have more light.”

Reluctantly, Kree let go of his hand. She scanned the room for any wildlife. The only organics she sensed were Eavan and her. There were some fish in the turbulent water, following the river flow.

The pale blue light of the portable fire glowed off the cavern walls. Crystals glittered in multicolored brilliance.

She held her breath. “It’s beautiful.”

Eavan looked up from where he continued to root in the pack. “Kind of a shame it’s in the heart of the mountain. Not many people get to see or appreciate the beauty here.”

Kree held out her hand to the wall. The crystals sang with energy. If she had her collar off, she’d probably be out of her head with the cacophony. For the first time she was grateful for the metal shackle around her neck.

“Take off your shirt.”

Eavan stood in front of her. Above the roar of the water, she hadn’t even heard him move.

“Why?”

“Because I want to see how badly you’re hurt.”

The suggestion alone made her nipples pebble. But after the way he’d rejected her before they napped, she’d be damned before she’d offer him her body again.

She slid the shirt up, only far enough to get her arm out. Eavan’s face went into shadow as he bent to study the injury, but she was sure she saw the flash of his teeth as he smiled.

He wiped an astringent pad across the surface. It burned, but Kree didn’t say a word to let him know how badly.

“You’re lucky. It’s definitely a scratch. A scorpion would have left a puncture mark along with its stinger in the wound.”

“You should have told me about the scorpions and venomous plant life before we came down here.” She shrugged her arm away from him.

“What difference does it make? You would have come down here with me regardless.”

“At the time, I didn’t have a choice. I realize this, but it doesn’t mean you had to withhold the dangers from me.” Kree tried to stomp off, but the nimbus of light from the campfire and flashlight didn’t penetrate far enough to ensure she didn’t fall into the river.

Eavan gave that deep, throaty chuckle again and took her by the hand. The sound irritated her on a primal level. She hated being laughed at, especially by someone holding her captive. Not to mention the warm velvet of his voice made her nipples painfully erect.

One of the benefits of being a sexual mystic was the power over her own body and its reactions to sexual stimuli—so far that hadn’t been the case around Eavan. He’d robbed her of her freedom and her control. Even now, irritated as she was, she wanted to feel him on her and in her, giving her the ultimate pleasure.

“Watch your step.” Eavan’s hand tightened on hers as they stepped up a small slippery lip to the edge of a pool.

He helped her as she sat on the wet rocks. Quickly, she removed her shoes and dipped her feet into the cool water.

Pure bliss ran through her system. The water was alive with vibrations from plant life growing at the bottom. There were healing properties here. The energy frequencies swirled around her ankles, ran between her toes.

Kree tipped her head back, looking up at the sparkling ceiling, and concentrated on the energy moving around her. "I think we should stay here for a while."

"Is that a fact?" He leaned over, dragging his fingers through the water.

"I know you're anxious to get wherever it is you're taking me. I can't say I feel the same." She rubbed the collar. "I know our beliefs are different, but I like my life. I like drawing breath and feeling the wind on my face." She kicked her feet back and forth. "Water between my toes."

"I don't know how else to convince you I mean you no harm." He lifted his hand, rubbing her back in a slow, comforting caress. "You have to take it on faith."

"Faith." Kree snorted. "I'm running a little low on that lately."

"It's the darkness." Eavan leaned over and brushed his lips against her forehead. "You're made for sunshine and light. The dark pulls the energy from you."

Warmth spread from his lips to surround her. He pulled her into his arms. "I'll get you to the light again. You just have to trust me."

"You're making that very hard." She tipped her head back to look into his face. "How can I trust you, if you won't tell me where we're going or what happens when we get there?"

Time stood suspended between them, measured only in the breaths he took before lowering his mouth to hers.

The same unchecked arousal she'd felt at the safe house consumed her. This time no itanie sang in her system.

She ran her hands up his shoulders and into his thick mane. Their tongues tangled, sliding back and forth against each other. Eavan walked his hands slowly around her body to cover her breasts. A moan left her mouth to fill his.

He traced the tips of his fingers around her nipples.

Kree arched her back, allowing more of her breast to fill his hand. This time he moaned.

Then he lifted her up from the pool, her face to the cave wall. He yanked her bottoms down her legs until they pooled on her wet feet. Her lips parted, eyes slid closed. He snaked his hand around her, finding her without error, and stroked his long fingers over her clit. Kree lost herself to a thousand hungry sensations coursing through her body.

Eavan pressed his lips against her ear. Words in his mother tongue filled her head, none of which she understood but knew intimately their intent. From the way his hands slid over her so softly, she had to be soaking wet.

Suddenly, Eavan stepped back. There was frantic movement behind her, then his hard, hot cock slid between her cheeks but didn't penetrate her. He rubbed up and down as he returned his fingers to her slick heat.

Kree bent slightly at the waist, inviting him to slip inside her body. Oh Sopha, he was driving her crazy. The head of his cock rubbed against her anus a few times, making Kree suck in her breath and hold it in anticipation of his thrust.

He didn't.

Eavan continued to move against her, repeating hot, unintelligible words in her ear. His other hand held him braced against the wall.

"Please, Eavan." The words were out before she had a chance to check them.

"In time," he whispered. His middle finger moved in and out of her as his thumb stroked a primal rhythm against her clit.

Even in the coolness of the chamber, sweat broke out on her back and belly. Eavan was an amazing lover, even if he thought to torture her by withholding from her the ultimate sexual connection.

Kree's hips rocked against his hand of their own volition. So close. If he kept up the pace, stroking her in just that way, she'd come for him. With as much control as she had left, she clamped down on his fingers. He reached a little higher, hitting the Loral button again. This time she screamed as her orgasm ripped through her. Hot liquid covered the small of her back as Eavan came against her. His breath was harsh in her ear, hot along her neck. His body fit up close to hers, trembling.

They stood that way for a few silent moments. The only sounds in the cave were those of the rushing water and the harshness of their breathing.

Eavan dropped a kiss on her bare shoulder. "We need to get you cleaned up."

A single-word question paused on her lips. *Why?*

However, that question sparked so many others. Why didn't he enter her when he had to know she was dying to feel him inside her? Why did he choose seduction when he could have used his strength and size to take what he wanted? And perhaps the most terrifying of all her questions: why did it feel so damned good when he touched her?

No words were exchanged between them as Eavan helped her to lower herself into the pool where she could bathe away the evidence of their lovemaking. Sadness stole over her. She was trying to stay alive the best she could, for her followers and all those who had been suppressed by the theocrats. She didn't appreciate the way her body betrayed her even while her mind continued to justify her actions.

Small eddies under the water surface bubbled against her skin. The erotic pulses tickled her, teased her. She turned so one that came from the side of the pool stimulated her directly on her pussy.

Eavan's hands skimmed over her body, paying close attention to the place he'd come on her. Already evidence of his arousal brushed against her thigh. "Your skin is like hot silk."

It was as if he'd sucked all the air out of the cave. She wrapped her fingers around the length of his erection. He gritted his teeth, then grabbed her under the arms, lifting her back up to the side of the pool. She lost the grip on her prize. He pushed her legs apart, burying his face between them. One sweep of his tongue over her already sensitized clit and her legs fell open, granting him full access.

Kree buried her hands in his hair, reveling in the flick of his tongue over her. She always enjoyed oral sex. It was as goddess-bound as any act could be. The man between her legs pleased her as thoroughly as any supplicant.

A smile, known only by Kree, curved her lips. The thought of Eavan ever acting as supplicant to any woman was laughable. His Druma blood would never allow such a thing. She was sure in his culture women were relegated to fending for the men, while the warriors strutted around with their cocks hanging out to show their superiority.

Heat rose to her cheeks. She lifted her hand from Eavan's hair to pat her face. It was so hot. Whenever he touched her she went molten. Her skin began to glow that phosphorescent sheen that began to fill the cave in light.

Even if the Druma warriors claimed superiority over their women, they obviously put some emphasis on catering to the sexual pleasure of women. Eavan had a technique that threatened to blow the top of her head right off. Kree ran her hand down her body, circling her nipples with her fingers. She lifted up on her elbows, watching as Eavan's head moved back and forth, his tongue entering her over and over. His thumb pressed her clit, and she shot off like a rocket.

He drank deeply from her. There was no slacking of his attentions. If anything, he worked her harder, more desperately than before. He wrapped his arms around her thighs, bringing her closer to his hungry mouth. His teeth scraped against her sensitive flesh. It felt so good, as if he knew exactly where to touch her.

She gazed up at the cave ceiling. Crystals twinkled like thousands of constellations.

Sopha, please don't let me lose my soul to this man.

Even as the prayer filled her mind, Kree knew that some odd connection bound her and Eavan together as surely as their cultures threatened to rip them apart. If she allowed her heart to follow the path of her body, she not only risked betraying those who'd died to keep the rites of Sopha preserved, but those whom she led against the theocrats.

As a Sophite premier she'd conditioned her body to think better after the sexual hunger had been slaked. Though with Eavan servicing her, she found there was very little concentration left when he finished.

There wasn't a part of her he left untouched by lips, finger, and tongue. Her body pulsed with the need to release again. He brought her to the edge, only to back off and repeat the process. Kree pulled at his hair and slapped his shoulders, urging him to stop the delicate torture.

It wasn't so much what Eavan did, but how he did it that threw her into swirls of ecstasy. Really, it was a crying shame he hadn't been born on the southern side of the Fassin Plains. If so, he could have very easily entered sentry training. The man would have been a natural.

Jealousy spiked her heart at the thought he'd loved any other woman in such a manner. But a man did not become so proficient at lovemaking without some hot and heavy practice. At the moment, Kree hated every woman he'd ever loved.

Such an odd emotion coming from a sexual mystic. Pairings in the Order of Sopha didn't often happen. The priestesses were free to take pleasure from any of the sentries, and the sentries were not tied to any one Sophite. That didn't mean the leaders, such as herself, didn't take first pick of the commanders.

Shockwave after shockwave rolled through her nerve endings. Her inner muscles contracted almost painfully. When she didn't think she could take another orgasm, Eavan touched her in just the right way to send another lancing through her body.

"Eavan." She bit her lip to keep from begging him to stop.

He rose up out of the water surging like an aquatic predator. His body fit to hers, lying down lengthwise.

She opened her legs to invite him in. The length of his erection slid along her wet lips, nudging against her clit, but never penetrated her. Frustration sent Kree's hands into Eavan's hair, pulling it hard.

He abruptly stopped nuzzling her neck. "Ow. Kasam's balls, woman, what are you trying to do? Snatch me bald?"

"You missed."

"I what?" He backed up. Between the camp light and the glow of her skin, she could barely make out the frown on his face.

Did she have to spell it out for him? He might be aces at oral play, but he had no idea how to fuck. "Do I have to take you by the cock and show you where it goes?"

The slash of his white teeth gleamed in the low light. The idiot was smiling. Big and broad and turning the tables on her. "I know very well where my cock is supposed to go, Kree. And maybe one day you will too, but not today."

Stale cave air and the musk of sex filled her mouth when it gapped open. "Why not today?"

Eavan leaned forward and brushed his mouth against hers. "Because it isn't time yet."

Kree wanted to smash his face for making her feel like an utter fool. Was he playing some sort of game with her? Waiting until she begged on bended knees before he gave her the sweet relief she so desperately needed?

She didn't, though. He managed to ease all the anger from her body as he molded her breasts to his palms, sucking her hard nipples. Apparently, Druma warriors were ruthless in all their pursuits, be they love or war.

He placed kisses down the center of her body, slowly moving lower. His two-days' growth of whiskers prickled her skin. The added sensation shot sparks from head to toe. When Eavan reached her mound, he rolled up onto his knees.

“Rest for a while; then we'll eat and start our walk again. We have so far to go, and I'm afraid we may run out of time before we get there.”

Guilt stabbed at her conscience.

If Ronen and the others were following her distress call, that could very well be the worst trouble the Druma had ever known.

The sentries would stop at nothing short of massacre to free their Sophite premier.

Chapter Ten

The endless road stretched out for miles in front of them. All of it down the winding side of a mountain. This was supposed to be the short access? They'd be lucky if they didn't plunge down the unguarded side of the mountain to their deaths.

Ronen shot a glance in the rearview mirror and then the control panel. The second rover car had fallen way behind them in the last few hours.

"Cahlen, get on the com to Quillan and find out if there is something mechanically wrong with their car. I want them to stay with us, not be so far behind I lose them on one of the curves."

Having his men out of sight bothered him in no small measure. If they went over the side, he'd need to mount a rescue. He glanced out the windscreen at the sheer rock face and down into the cavern. If there was anything to save.

Cahlen gave Ronen a headshake. "Quillan said that Parras is terrified of heights, and he's driving."

Ronen lifted his eyes to heaven. "Tell them we'll pull off at the next hostel and take a break, and they can change drivers."

Cahlen relayed the message.

Ronen didn't really care to stop, but they hadn't a choice. He'd not risk three of his men for something as stupid as time. He needed Parras sharp when they met up with the Druma warrior.

Jerella leaned over the seat between Ronen and Cahlen. "I can drive the other rover car if you want. Heights are the least of my fears."

"No. I want you right where I can see you at all times."

She narrowed her eyes. "One day you're going to regret treating me like a child."

"I am not treating you like a child. I'm treating you like a cherished member of our order. You are the leader's adja. I hold you in very high esteem." His tone of reassurance must not have been convincing, because she gave him another narrow-eyed look and sat back in her seat.

Their sexual rite the night before hadn't taken the edge off her worry, nor had it produced the desired boost to her powers. It hadn't been for lack of trying on either of their parts. The orgasms had been spectacular in their intensity.

Unfortunately their conversation hadn't softened the attitude enough to carry over into the light of day.

He shook his head in near defeat. Between Jerella's sullenness over her untapped powers, Parras's fear of heights, and the slow movement of their convoy, Ronen was near the breaking point. It was worse than driving a rover car full of schoolchildren on a vacation trip across the country.

Ronen gripped the toggle so hard his knuckles blanched white. They were all on edge since Kree had been taken. With Siobhán dead and Kree missing, there was little hope, save revenge, for their order.

Each mile they traveled, each mountain they crossed brought them closer to confrontation with the Druma. One warrior they'd be able to handle, regardless of his intensive training. Sentries weren't exactly a bunch of old women when it came to fighting. However, an entire regiment of war-hungry Druma warriors would be a sight harder to handle.

Maybe impossible.

But if Ronen were to die, he'd rather do it fighting for someone and something he believed in than letting the theocrats impose more of their will on the land.

Lately, rumors had surfaced that the Unarions, a sect of psychics, had tried to warn the Genoquois of the results of bringing in the theocrats when the country began to collapse. The prognostications had gone unheeded, and the Unarions were denounced as a subversive order of crackpots.

Ronen knew better. Before joining the Sophites as a sentry, he'd lived down the street from a Unarion collective. They were as sane and well-meaning as any of the other people inhabiting the neighborhood.

A brief vision of a united front flashed before his eyes. In a perfect world, the Sophites and Unarions would unite to expulse the theocrats from the country. Things would return to the sweet freedom the citizens had once enjoyed.

Cahlen pressed a few buttons on the com system. "There is a hostel another four clicks from here. In the valley."

"Inform Parras. Perhaps he'll speed it up a bit if he knows there is a destination point in mind."

The next four clicks were treacherous as they came down the mountain and out into a valley. As they neared the hostel, one thing became very apparent: it was crawling with guards.

They appeared to have commandeered the structure, using it as a headquarters or command post of some sort. Rover cars, speed-cycles and the trademark black-bladed helo-planes filled the parking area and grounds out back.

"What do we do?" Cahlen typed information into the com system, probably looking for another place to stop.

Ronen didn't like the situation, but in their disguises as ecclesiasts, they had as much right to use the hostel as the theocrats' henchmen.

“We pull in.” He caught Jerella’s gaze in the mirror. “You need to put your penitent’s mask back on. We don’t want to risk one of the guards looking under your cowl.”

She picked it up off the seat beside her and began tying it over the upper half of her face.

“Tell Quillan and the others when we stop, I’ll do the talking. They can get out and stretch their legs, but I don’t want them poking around.”

Quillan had a penchant for getting himself into scraps with the guards. There were most likely multiple alerts out for him.

They pulled into the crowded lot, making space for their rover cars along a natural wood garden wall that led to a picnic area.

Ronen killed the rover car’s thrusters, setting it down on the pavement. Half a dozen armed guards in the black death-watch uniform came across the lot toward them.

Ronen let the harness slide up to the ceiling before he opened the door and got out to stand beside the car. He waved good-naturedly to the guards.

“Good day to you.” He folded his arms up under the sleeves of his robe and bowed at the waist in a supplicant’s stance. “My brothers and I are on pilgrimage and needed a rest from the harsh road. Have you enough room for us to stretch our legs and take a brief repast before we head back on our journey?”

The head guard returned the bow. “Father, forgive us. We had no notice you and your brothers were coming this way.”

Ronen gave him a bright smile. “We changed our route at the last minute. It seemed more befitting of our purpose to see this untamed wilderness provided by the grace of Theomacus.” He spread his hands to indicate the mountains surrounding them.

“If you and your brothers will follow us, we’ll show you to the dining hall.” The guard bowed again.

“Bless you, my son.”

Ronen motioned for the others to follow him. Cahlen gave him a signal letting him know the silent alarms had been set. If the guards attempted to search the vehicles while they were ensconced in the dining hall eating, an electronic pulse would alert in the charm hanging around Ronen’s neck. He had only to stroke the center piece of the charm to release a mechanism that sent a shot of deadly nerve toxin directly into the intruder’s lungs.

The best part of the toxin was it became untraceable after being airborne for a mere twenty seconds. So far they’d only had to use the toxin twice during the time the theocrats had been in power. He hoped like all the hells the guards weren’t doing some of their random searches.

The disguised sentries were led into the hostel and down a long, dim hallway to a small communal dining room. Ronen scanned the sea of black uniforms. To a man, the guards wore the death-watch colors. The black indicated they had been

given EOS—Execute on Sight—orders from their commandant. Orders of such a nature were only given to deal with extremely dangerous fugitives. A Sophite leader would definitely qualify as dangerous to the theocrats.

When the sentries started to sit together at one of the emptier tables, the guard captain motioned for Ronen to sit but directed the others to seats throughout the dining hall. When Jerella took a step away from him, he grabbed her arm.

“The penitent must stay with me.”

The guard frowned. “If you wish.”

“It’s not a wish, my son, but part of our devotion. Seeing the punished maintains the penitent’s vow of silence during this time rests on my shoulders.” He pulled out a chair and pushed on Jerella’s shoulder, forcing her to sit.

“Ah. I understand.” He bowed at the waist. “The commandant will be with you in a moment.”

The commandant.

So not only were the guards in the death-watch uniforms, they also had their commanding officer with them. Any quick decisions needed in the field would come directly from him. This was bad. Very bad.

Worse than facing down the Druma.

Ronen refused to let his alarm show on his face. He’d been schooled too well in the art of war and diplomacy to tip his hand. He returned the bow. “I will look forward to dining with him.”

Plates full of lean meats and fresh fruits were placed in front of Ronen and Jerella. Mugs full of frosty cold drinks were set on their right. Under the table, Jerella covered Ronen’s knee with her hand and squeezed.

He took it for the sign it was. How were they going to get around the fact that if she took off her mask her charade would be discovered? All of their charades.

He took her hand and gave it a gentle touch. There was nothing for it. He’d have to lie through his teeth and hope the commandant or guard captain weren’t well-versed in the intricacies of ecclesiasts’ punishments.

A door at the far end of the dining hall opened, and a squat man dressed in black from head to toe entered, escorted by four armed guards all at least a head taller than he. A bright red sash cut crosswise across his chest, identifying him as the supreme commander of the theocrats forces—the commandant.

Commandant Orlaf made his way to the head table as all the soldiers stood to attention. Ronen glanced around, deciding he should show the commandant the respect he would anticipate from the ecclesiasts, though quite honestly the priests held a higher place in the theocratic pecking order.

Commandant Orlaf folded himself into the seat in a crisp manner, flipping the tails of his formal jacket out from under him. With that same economy of movement, he nodded to his men to be seated.

A guard of very low rank set a covered dish in front of the commandant. He lifted the lid for his CO and then bowed away.

Ronen watched from the corner of his eye in fascination. They treated the man as if he were some sort of king of old. The man probably didn't even dress himself without help. Not even the sentries at the highest pinnacle of the Sophite order had ever relied on servants to perform basic tasks for them. It was...unmanly.

Commandant Orlaf's plate was filled with twice the food of the other men, and certainly more than the priests were allotted. It showed. The man had gone soft in the jowls and chin. His barrel chest hardly excused the generous gut beneath.

He was a disgrace to his uniform.

"My captain tells me you and your brothers are on pilgrimage." The statement was made without preamble or eye contact. Ronen let the slight pass.

"Yes, and enjoying the lovely scenery on our way."

Commandant Orlaf sliced a huge chunk of meat off the slab covering his plate. He stuffed it in his mouth, then proceeded to talk around it. "Have you noticed anything unusual in your travels?"

Ronen began to cut into his own meager portions. "Not that I can recall. We've been having too good of a time driving and discussing canonical matters to take much note of things not of a religious nature." He cut a delicate slice of melon and held it aloft. "Is there something we should look for?"

Give a man reason to believe he'd trust them to spy for him and he might begin to spill some secrets.

"Nothing the guard cannot take care of, I assure you."

"Well then, that's reassuring to hear." Ronen stuck the fruit in his mouth and chewed slowly, savoring the flavor.

The meal continued in relative silence, until the commandant pointed his fork tines at Jerella. "Why aren't you eating, priest? This is a cause for insult."

Jerella lifted the side of her cowl that faced the commandant to show him the red mask.

"Ah, a penitent." He put the food that dangled on the fork into his mouth. "No offense then, lad."

Jerella merely gave a slow nod of her head to indicate no offense had been taken. Whatever else the Sophite adja did, she was a good little actress.

"If I may ask, Father, how do the penitents eat if they cannot remove their masks to do so?"

Ronen smiled indulgently. "They eat in an isolated room where they are not disturbed. While we are traveling we must make do, and Brother Archemedes here goes off into the woods by himself to dine."

Commandant Orlaf gave an appreciative grunt. "You ecclesiasts are always ready with an answer to life's problems, aren't you?"

“Theomacus teaches us to be resourceful in all things, including how we abide by *his* laws.” Jerella wasn’t the only one who’d gotten into her disguise as an ecclesiast.

Ronen had spent many nights reading the teachings and study guides, picking through information on the theocratic order. He tried to read both sides of the issue—those of the most pious and those who were not. In his role as an Ascendant, the fourth level of the order, he needed to know the teachings inside out and interpret them with a finesse only one who’d studied for years could accomplish.

All his study time had paid off. He’d even met a Grace, the fifth and final level before that of the theocratic council, and had fooled the man completely.

Many of the teachings had merit. Ronen had no quarrel with the basis of the religion. His main affront came from the theocratic council. Religion and politics had no business mixing. Not in the time of interstellar travel and commerce. The theocrats had closed their portion of the world off from others, refusing any overtures from any number of off-planet governments and those of other continents on their own planet.

Jerella reached over and squeezed his knee for a second time.

He shot a gaze her way and only then noticed the second platoon of guards coming into the dining hall. These were not dressed in the death-watch black, but desert gear. Their monochromatic uniforms were wide and billowy, in shades of light tan and beige.

A contingent entered behind them in forest colors that from a distance would blend into the foliage.

Damn, that did not bode well for the possibility of finding Kree before the guard did. They’d pulled out all the stops.

Despite the fact they might discover some tidbit of information to help them better locate Kree, it was best they ate, paid their thanks, and left the hostel as soon as possible. The guards had an incredible amount of manpower to aid in the capture of Kree. They had but six sentries and an adja. Not nearly enough to go against the firepower of the entire theocratic guard.

Ronen lifted another piece of melon to his mouth. “You have a very fresh supply of produce for such a remote location.”

Commandant Orlaf picked up a piece of fruit and studied it. “Only the best for the guards. They work very hard maintaining the peace in these troubled times.”

Ronen nodded his head piously. It was not the direction he thought the conversation would go, but then the commandant wasn’t anything like he’d expected. “Yes, they do. You must be very proud of their dedication and devotion.”

“They serve the theocratic council well.” Commandant Orlaf let out a loud belch, wiped at his mouth, then stood. “Now, if you will excuse me. I have fugitives to find.”

It was the only mention he’d made of the death-watch uniforms, though he’d not mentioned Kree by name. Given the fact Siobhán was killed in cold blood with

no prior hint her cover had been blown proved the guards didn't always publicly announce their intentions.

When the commandant had gone, the guards hurried through the rest of the meal and began to depart, probably returning to their duties.

Ronen watched as Jerella unfolded one of the linen napkins and placed her food inside. She folded the four corners in, then tucked the packet into the pocket of her ecclesiasts' robe.

Ronen kicked back the rest of his drink and stood, motioning to his men. It was past time for them to get back on the road. They had many a long click ahead and no time to spare.

They used the facilities to freshen up before going back to the rover cars. Once there, Cahlen did a scan of both cars to ensure a tracking device had not been stuck to the vehicles while they were inside.

A subtle nod of Cahlen's head told Ronen what he needed to know. Now they only had to find a way to rid themselves of their trackers.

* * *

They drove out of the mountains at a sedate pace. Quillan took over the operation of the second rover car. Rhees drove the lead car. Ronen wanted them to make the outskirts of the

Fassin Plains by the next midday. It was a lofty goal considering the density of the mountain passes.

Ronen sat beside Jerella in the backseat. Both were engaged in reading detailed maps of the area in an attempt to locate the best way through the treacherous terrain without calling attention to their party.

They also needed to set down somewhere for the night where they could pull the tracking devices from the vehicles and plant them. Preferably a place located near a Theomastic temple. The problem was the guards had decided to follow them down the side of the mountain and up the next one.

Cahlen turned from his shotgun position. "I'm picking up a transmission from the Commandant. They've sent helo-planes up to the northern foothills to search for them by air."

"They'll be using heat signature tracking in that area. Our only hope is that they mistake some wild animal for Kree." It was only a halfhearted attempt at sarcasm. The sophistication of the heat-tracking devices used by the guard could distinguish pretty clearly between animal and man.

Jerella looked over at him. Her bottom lip was caught between her teeth. Worry marred her features. "The whole idea of a rogue Druma bothers me. What are his intentions? Why a Sophite premier if not to collect the bounty?"

"I wish to hell I had an answer for that. Anticipating the actions of a Druma warrior are about as easy as predicting the strategy of a wild animal." Ronen laid

his hand on top of Jerella's. "No matter how clever the Druma, we have to be twice as clever."

She shifted her gaze to Rhees and Cahlen, lowering her voice. "I have a plan, but I want to discuss it in private first to see if it's an option."

The cautionary side of his nature rose. "An option for what?"

"Defeating the theocrats for good."

Cold ran through his blood. "That's a lofty aspiration."

"You don't think it's possible for me?"

Ronen tightened his hand on Jerella's. "I think in order to overthrow the theocrats it's going to take a lot more than the power of one person."

Jerella seemed to consider his words for a moment. She looked out at the passing scenery, her face pulled into a frown. After a long pause she said, "We really won't know that until I come into my full powers. It *might* just be possible to defeat the theocrats in one fell swoop."

Ronen closed his eyes, gathering strength before dealing further with the headstrong adja. "At the expense of your life."

"You don't know that!" The words hit the air like acid vapor. Sharp and biting.

Cahlen turned around in his seat and raised a brow at Ronen before turning back to his com system.

Ronen leaned closer to Jerella. The sweet scent of female flesh filled his head. He took in a deep breath of her. There was no perfume headier than that of a Sophite. He supposed it was part of their phosphorescent properties that caused the alluring fragrance. However, it was also elusive. One had to be in intimate contact in order to appreciate it.

"I know enough about the theocrats to realize they will stop at nothing short of extinction for the Sophites. I've already heard reports they are herding entire families known to possess the Sophite gene into camps. They are never seen again."

Jerella rested her hand over her heart. "Why don't the people just defend themselves? Surely if enough citizens rise up they can overtake the theocrats and their bloodthirsty guards."

"The time to stop them would have been when the Unarions first warned the government." Ronen moved away and looked out the window on his side of the rover car. The mountains weren't nearly as high in this section. The sun had started to descend in the western sky, or what could be seen of it. "Unfortunately the people never heard the warnings in time. Now we all have to pay the price."

"Which makes me more determined than ever to contribute something." Jerella's words were partially drowned out as a black helo-plane roared overhead. She turned her face away from the window in case the surveillance cameras snapped pictures of the rover car's occupants.

"Wait until the sun goes down and pull off into the trees and park. We'll camp for the night."

While the sentries worked their way over and down the mountains, waiting for the sun to set, the helo-planes continued to fly overhead. None doubled back to sweep the area, so they were obviously not interested in the faux ecclesiasts. The tracking chips attached to the vehicles made them easily watched via a remote screen. As long as the party stayed to their course, they'd raise no red flags.

They weren't going to stay on course for long.

Camp consisted of a small grotto with a rocky outcropping for cover. The rover cars were parked under the canopy of trees. Silver moonlight only dared to break through the thick foliage in a few spots. The camp lights were kept to a bare minimum as not to draw unwanted attention.

They ate a quick repast of nuts, fruit, and cheese. It wasn't a hearty meal, but it was enough to keep the hunger at bay.

Jerella approached Ronen as he bent over to make his bed. He saw her slender silhouette reflected in the low light. "Ready to talk?"

She made a noise that he wasn't sure was an affirmative or an attempt to put him off for later.

Ronen glanced over his shoulder. She stood with her hands behind her back again. "Well?"

"This is difficult for me. I've never done this before."

Sensing Jerella's distress, Ronen laid his blanket on the ground and straightened. He took Jerella by the hand and moved away from the campsite to give them a bit of privacy.

"All right, we're away from the rest of the group. You can tell me what's bothering you without fear that anyone will think worse of you."

She hugged her midsection as if in pain. "It's not that I think anyone will think badly of me. Not with it being a daily occurrence at the temples."

She still had yet to enlighten him as to what *it* was which she referred.

"All right." Ronen waited in silence for her to finally come clean.

It didn't take long.

She dug her toe into the ground, making little mounds of dirt she packed back down with the ball of her foot. Her concentration remained on her foot rather than looking him in the eyes. "I had such hope that you would be the one to break through my power block."

"Sorry to disappoint you."

She sighed. Her shoulders slumped. "No. You didn't disappoint in that way. You're a wonderful lover, but the block is still there."

"And what did I tell you?"

"I know, but I still think there's something else we're missing. Maybe I need more."

“More?” Ronen didn’t know whether to be surprised or offended. None of the Sophites who selected him for their rites had ever accused him of not having enough. This was definitely unknown territory for him. Not to mention a real ego buster.

Jerella gave him a sweet smile. “Not in *that* department, Ronen.”

“Glad to hear it.” He refused to go into exactly where she found him deficient.

She swallowed and looked away again. “I thought maybe if I engaged in a rite with two sentries it might break through the block.”

Heat flooded his system. A memory sharp as a blade sliced through his heart. Before the theocrats, when the Sophites enjoyed all the power and freedoms of their order, Kree had taken a visiting sentry captain and his sylvan to her bed.

Ronen had sneaked into her chambers and watched the rite from behind a pillar. She had been magnificent in her passion while both men penetrated her at the same time. Voyeuristic tendencies were unlike Ronen, but he’d been so eaten with curiosity about why she’d selected those particular sentries to share her bed that night, he hadn’t been able to stay away.

Kree sat straddled over the captain’s cock, taking him deep into her body. The sylvan moved in behind her, leaning her over onto the captain’s torso. Ronen had watched in fascination, gripping his hard cock in his hand while the sylvan used Kree’s wetness to lubricate her anus. Then slowly, he entered her there. The sounds she made came straight from her gut.

Ronen stroked himself while the sylvan thrust into Kree’s ass and the captain bucked up into her pussy, over and over. The throaty grunts filled the chamber in a cacophony. The room had lit with the glow from her skin.

Ronen was so turned on watching the threesome, he’d lost himself to the moment and almost missed the summons alert on his communicator. The visiting adja, who had arrived with the captain and sylvan from the sister temple, had requested his presence that night.

He had been more than happy to oblige.

The memory faded into oblivion as Jerella’s face filled his vision.

She had stepped closer to him. “You’re shocked by the request.”

He shook his head to clear the last strains of the sensual memory. “No. I think it’s worth a shot if it unlocks your powers. We may need all the firepower we can get in the coming months. Letting you realize your potential is only the first step. A prudent step.”

The smile she gave him was huge and warm and sexy. It was akin to being smiled at by the goddess herself. “I think we should try tonight.”

He’d hoped she’d say that. The memory of watching Kree in a similar configuration had brought him to full erectness. But wait, she’d never mentioned wanting him to participate. “Do you have any particular sentries in mind you wish to select?”

Jerella stepped even closer, running her hand up his chest and over his shoulder. "You, of course." She rubbed her breasts against him. The nipples were already shockingly hard. "And Cahlen, if he'll agree."

The harder task would be getting Cahlen to refuse. The man watched Jerella like a starving hawk watched a field mouse.

"Do you want to ask him or shall I?"

Jerella shook her head. "You wait here. I'll go get him. We can find some place in the woods to work."

Work was a hideous misnomer for the pleasure they sought. The rite's success rested on Jerella's slim shoulders. Ronen and Cahlen's ability to bring the adja to orgasm was a given. She had to want to break through the blocks. So far, she hadn't proven to Ronen she held to that goal. Words were hollow. Actions were substance.

Ronen leaned against a tree, folding his arms over his chest while he waited for Jerella to return. Thoughts spun out, moving down paths filled with the happiness of years gone by. So much of their culture lost. He wished there was more he could do. Traveling across the provinces, hunting Kree's abductors when there were other matters pressing the order was not his idea of time well spent.

Not that he blamed Kree or even thought twice about following the bastard who took her. On the contrary, there was nowhere he'd rather be than trying to retrieve her from the hands of an enforcer. But damn the timing.

Jerella and Cahlen came from the direction of the campsite, holding hands. In Cahlen's other hand he held a camp light. Even from where he stood, Ronen recognized the look on Cahlen's face for what it was: the man was running way hot.

Ronen let out a slow, easy chuckle from the back of his throat. He'd have loved to have seen his sylvan's face when Jerella made the offer of double penetration. It must have been priceless.

"You approve of this?" Cahlen asked when they were within speaking distance.

"I do."

As if by tacit agreement they moved deeper into the forest, away from the campsite, for greater privacy. Ronen stopped by two large fir trees that had grown together, twisting their trunks as they spiraled upward. Between the trees lay a deep bed of moss.

"Here." Ronen took off his robe and spread it out on the ground. The camp light gave off enough illumination to paint his body in a soft lavender glow. There was no hiding the size of the erection between his legs. He didn't even try.

Jerella backed up a step into Cahlen.

"Is there a problem, Jerella?" Ronen rose up, supporting himself on an elbow. "Is this spot not to your liking?"

She shook her head. "The place is fine. I just..."

"What? Tell me so we can correct the problem and commence the rite."

She wrung her hands and looked on the verge of fleeing the woods. Cahlen placed his hands on her shoulders and leaned in, whispering something in her ear. Ronen couldn't hear the words, but felt their intent as Jerella lifted her hand to lace fingers with Cahlen.

Ronen watched as Cahlen moved his free hand to Jerella's side, skimming it up under her breast. The position molded the thin fabric to her nipple. With deft fingers, Cahlen began to unbutton her robe, exposing the long column of her throat and chest to Ronen's hungry gaze.

His cock pulsed as Cahlen brushed the sides of Jerella's robe open. Her breasts were milky white and beautiful in the lavender light. A soft glow radiated from her phosphorescent alleles, letting her lovers know she was aroused.

So was Ronen.

He moved his hand down his body, looking deep into Jerella's eyes as he circled his hand around his cock and began to stroke.

A gentle moan fell from her lips. The robe came loose, puddling at her feet. Cahlen caressed her belly, breasts, and pussy, building the fire higher.

Ronen leaned forward, burrowing his face between Jerella's legs. Her hand came up to the back of his head, steadying herself as he thrust his tongue into the wet folds of her sweet cunt.

Wet? Hells, she was drenched. Her juices ran down his chin as he licked and sucked her folds. He zeroed in on the tight bud of her clit, flicking it until she tried to climb on his shoulders. The harder he worked her pussy, the tighter he stroked his cock.

Cahlen stood behind Jerella, holding her in place, hands busy kneading her breasts, plucking at her nipples until she let out little yips of pleasure.

Jerella clawed at the back of Ronen's head as he dug deeper with his tongue. "Fuck me. Please. I'm so close."

Ronen moved back, licking the sweet nectar off his chin and lips. "Sit on my cock."

Jerella straddled Ronen's hips, taking him deep inside her wet channel. Her mouth opened, and her eyes slid shut. He lifted his buttocks off the ground, pumping up into her.

"Oh Sopha." Jerella began to shudder. The glow coming from her skin brightened, filling the glade in golden light.

Cahlen let his robe fall to the forest floor. He moved in behind her, bending her at the waist. "Lean over on Ronen's chest. Bring your hips up slightly. Yes, perfect."

Ronen felt Cahlen's practiced touch skimming over Jerella's pussy, gathering moisture where Ronen's cock moved in a steady thrust. Cahlen dragged his fingers upward to lubricate Jerella's anus.

Ronen braced himself to take Cahlen's added weight as he bent Jerella over farther and entered her. Jerella's eyes flew open. Her soft mouth made an O of surprise.

"Deep breath, beautiful," Cahlen said against Jerella's neck. "That's it. Relax. Feel how open you are. Let the energy flow from us to you."

Sopha bless Cahlen for saying what Ronen should have but was too close to orgasm to speak.

Ronen felt every thrust of Cahlen's shaft through Jerella's soft vaginal walls, heightening the experience. The sentries looked at each other and smiled. They spoke of this often. Sharing one of the sensual priestesses in a sacred rite. Though this one was as basic and humble as it got. But what better place to connect with Mother Sopha? In the woods, under a star-laden sky, the moons high and bright.

Ronen began the invocation to call down Sopha. Cahlen joined the chant. Their combined voices echoed off the canopy of trees. Jerella lowered her forehead to Ronen's chest. Hot breath bathed his neck. The words she spoke didn't match those of the calling, though she spoke them so low he couldn't hear them over his own voice.

Ronen placed his hand on her chin, lifting her face. He said the words against her soft lips, drinking her in as he spoke. The scent of her pussy remained on his face, heating on his skin from their close proximity. The fragrance rose, filling his head and nose, taking him to another level of desire.

Need was a drumroll through his system. It surged him higher. He moved his hips harder, faster as Cahlen punished her from behind.

They were losing her to her own mindless passion. Or something neither anticipated.

"Let go, Jerella." Cahlen's encouragement broke the chant. "Open your mind and heart. Don't hold back."

"I can't. I can't." The words came out as fractured sobs.

Then she let out one long scream. Night birds lit from the trees. Her orgasm ran through Ronen like live current. He let go, ending his own torment as Cahlen gritted his teeth and pumped harder.

Ronen felt Cahlen's hand moving between their bodies, finding the sweet, hard jut of her clit. She came again, milking Ronen's cock. He looked up, catching Cahlen's face as it moved from tense to sublime.

Pleasure waned as quickly as Jerella's light. The exercise had not been a success. Jerella had blocked Cahlen and him at every turn. The only question now was why.

Chapter Eleven

Eavan stopped at a bifurcation where two tunnels met. Their luck had not been good where clear tunnels were concerned. Some of them appeared as if they hadn't seen maintenance in more years than Eavan could remember.

Since the theocratic council had taken over, the Drumas' concerns had been elsewhere. As soon as they returned to the settlement, he'd have to alert the elders they needed to divert some manpower to cleaning out the debris so the main arteries of the mountain tunnels remained passable. No telling when or why they might need the structure in the future. In such uncertain times it was best to have one sure, secret route of escape free.

He shone the light beam down the passage as far as it would penetrate.

"Is something wrong?" Kree stood behind him so closely her heat warmed his back.

He hated like all the hells the direction of his thoughts. "How much of inorganics can you feel with the collar on?"

"Barely any. Why?"

"What is the range when you have the collar off? Do you have to be right on top of the substance, or can you be away from it?"

"What are you thinking?"

Eavan lowered the power on the light and turned. Quickly, he pulled the key chit from his pocket and waved it in front of the pad on the collar. A light snapping sound clicked in the darkness. The collar slipped off into his hand.

"If you run from me, know there is a distinct possibility you'll get lost in these tunnels for the rest of your life. It's as sure as any death sentence the guards could hand down."

He turned the light back on and grabbed her by the shoulders and pointed her in front of the two tunnels. "Which way is clearer? And before you answer, remember if you tell me wrong because you think you'll outsmart me somehow, you'll only add time to our journey."

Eavan let go of one shoulder and slid his hand into his waistband, pulling out the stunner. The electric *pop* of the voltage snapped as he powered it up.

Kree jumped and looked over her shoulder. "What's that for?"

"Insurance." He shoved the barrel into the small of her back. "Now, tell me which tunnel is the clearer of the two?"

She lifted her left hand and waved it in the air as if sifting through an invisible waterfall. After a few moments, she lowered her hand and shifted her body slightly. Once again, she raised her hand, repeating the motion to the second tunnel.

“Neither of them is clear. This one,” she pointed to the left, “is better. It feels as if there might be a gap in the rocks where the cave-in didn’t completely fill the passage.”

“We’ll take that way, then.”

Before she could protest, or knew what he was about, he clipped the collar back on her neck.

A shudder ran through her body. Eavan put a hand out to steady her, but she pushed him away. “Don’t touch me.”

“Be angry all you want, Kree, but it doesn’t change the fact that until we reach the Fassin Plains you’re as good as my prisoner.” He kept the stunner trained on her as they began the slow trek down the tunnel.

In the mood she was in, she’d probably do something stupid like make a break for it. Though with all the cave-ins she’d have an easier time navigating through the tunnels than he would. Even *barely any* ability was better than none at all when it came to the cave-ins. There were so many. However, he hadn’t been lying when he told her she’d end up walking the tunnels until she died. Only the Druma knew the secret to the underground mazes.

They continued the slow walk for another few hours. If his internal compass was correct, they were nearing the point where the tunnels spit them out into the northern foothills. He’d kept mental track of the tunnels they’d taken, and his recollections had them at the exit. Once outside, they’d have to be more careful of how they traveled through the country. They’d gone horribly off course, but it couldn’t be helped at this juncture. The worst part was they were too far away from the second shelter to make that a safe option once they exited the tunnels.

During this leg of the journey, he made Kree walk before him, but now he pushed past her and panned the light back and forth. Yes, they were exactly where he thought they were.

“Watch your step.” Eavan took her hand despite the fact she tried to jerk it from his grasp. “There’s a slight dip here and then the trail will begin slanting upward.”

Kree stopped, pulling on his hand as he continued forward.

He came to a halt and turned to look back. “What’s wrong?”

“How long are we going to walk uphill?”

He made a quick calculation in his head. “From this point, about another click. It’s a gradual incline, so you’ll barely notice. The last quarter of the distance, however, is pretty steep.”

He heard her release a long, disgusted breath. “Let’s get going, then.”

Eavan smiled in the dark, leading the way up the path.

The walk was much worse than he anticipated. In one section a large boulder had come down and gotten wedged between the walls.

Eavan stood at the chest-high barricade, shining the light over the edge. The floor was littered with various sized stones but other than that remained relatively clear to foot traffic.

He turned to Kree. "I'll lift you through first; then I'll climb up after you."

She backed up out of his reach. "Why do I have to go first?"

"So I can assist you."

"I need no man's assistance for anything."

By all the hells he couldn't resist the devil that rode his shoulder. He leaned forward so his lips pressed to her ear. "Anything?"

He licked the delicate whorls. Kree shivered, then gave him a face shove. "I told you not to touch me."

Eavan laughed. She'd change her mind once they got to the surface and she'd spent her mad by trying to survive in the wilderness. "All right then, climb up and over."

Kree put one hand on the boulder, the other on the wall. She bounced, once, twice, then shot through the opening to the other side. There was a thud and a moan.

"Kree!"

Eavan put his arms through the pack straps, then scrambled over the impedence. Kree lay on the tunnel floor, holding a hand to her shoulder.

Eavan dropped down on the ground beside her. "Are you all right?"

"No! Of course I'm not all right. If I were I wouldn't be lying here with my arm numb."

He shone the light on her shoulder joint and groaned. Her left arm hung drunkenly from the socket. It was definitely a dislocation. He'd seen enough in his Druma training to know the injury on sight.

"I need to pop your arm back into place."

"If you know what's good for you." She spat the words between gritted teeth.

Eavan got into position, placing his foot in her armpit, and pulled. Kree's scream filled the tunnel. Then she turned and promptly heaved onto the ground beside her.

Eavan shrugged out of the pack and dug inside for something he could fashion into a sling for her. He also grabbed a wet towel pack. He ripped open the towel, lifted her hair, placed the cool cloth at the base of her skull. "Deep breaths. The worst part is over. Relax."

She let out a breath and leaned back against him. Her hand clamped over his as he held the towel there. "I should blame you for that, you know?"

He smiled into her hair. "I know." He moved the cool cloth from her neck to her shoulder, hoping to take away some of the pain.

"If it weren't for you, I'd be inside a secured cloister right now."

"If it weren't for me, you'd be the next in line for assassination." He held a piece of a spare shirt between his teeth and ripped it down the center.

He heard her quick intake of breath when she tried to turn and see what he was doing. "What are you doing now?"

"Making a sling for your arm. I want you to keep it immobilized as much as possible."

"It's not that bad."

"Don't play tough for me. I know it's hurting like bitch fire. I've had more than a few dislocated shoulders during my training."

Eavan made Kree turn to face him. With much care and tenderness, he wrapped the swatch of cloth around her arm and lifted the ends to tie around her neck. "Is that too tight?"

"No. It's fine."

"Do you want a longer rest before we get moving again?" He shoved items back into the pack.

"Absolutely not." She put her weight on her right hand and pushed up from the ground. She groaned but tried to cover it with a cough.

Eavan shook his head. Admiration for her strength and determination filled his heart. She'd make the perfect mate for a Druma warrior. If she didn't maim herself completely before they reached the settlement.

"Keep going straight. I'll walk behind you in case you fall."

She shot him a hot look over her shoulder—and not the good kind of hot, but one full of anger and annoyance. "I slid on a rock when I came down; that's how I hurt my shoulder."

"Yes, and this entire passage is filled with rocks." He shone the light on the floor as the incline increased. "See how steep it becomes past this point?"

Kree moved to the right side of the tunnel and held up her hand to the rocky surface. It would just kill her to ask him for help.

They continued to climb. The only sounds in the tunnel were the heavy breaths Kree made as she struggled up the hill. He wanted to reassure her this leg of the journey was close to an end, but there remained the possibility the tunnel could be blocked farther ahead.

It was best to keep moving, to stay in the moment, and not fixate on what came next. At least for someone untrained in the Druma ways. The Druma were trained to anticipate all possible outcomes, which was the reason they'd taken the Unarion's word at face value and began to plot against the theocratic council from the earliest days.

Vibrations began to shake the walls, the floor. Eavan held his hand out to the side of the cave, trying to determine if they were in a quake. The floor rumbled but didn't shift.

Kree stopped. She tilted her head back.

A roar of helo-plane blades came from beyond the darkness.

"We're near the end of the tunnel." Eavan moved by Kree, running his hand along her back in comfort. "Let me take the lead."

"Guards?"

"I'd bet my tattoo." He moved cautiously up the ramp.

The passage turned sharply to the left. Starlight filled a painted sky. The moons hung low. The nearer one big and full. Eavan stayed out of reach of the searchlight as the large helo-plane flew overhead, illuminating the ground in an arc of daytime brightness.

Kree rested her good hand on Eavan's back. "They aren't fooling around."

"As a Sophite premier you're public enemy number one." He inched back as the searchlight came closer. "And I'm right up there with you at the moment."

"No one asked you to get involved. The Druma could have just kept to themselves and dissolved into the dust of the Plains and never been heard from again."

Eavan turned and gazed down, barely able to see her in the deep night and shadow. Not that he needed to. He'd memorized every angle and curve of her face. "It's not that simple."

"Neither is crossing the country through the middle of a mountain or staying under the radar of the guards." The moons painted an odd glow over half her face as she tipped it up.

Eavan squelched an unmanly sigh. "They'll have their heat-sensing equipment and GPR running tonight."

"I understand the heat-sensing, but the GPR, that doesn't sound like it's in our best interest."

"Ground Penetrating Radar."

"You mean they were watching us while we were inside the mountain?" Kree moved back a few steps into the darkness.

"For the most part, no. Some off-planet governments have a higher-grade system that can pick up objects under miles of rock and minerals. Luckily the theocratic council feels importation of such devices goes against the teachings of Theomacus. The system the guards use can only penetrate so far beneath the surface and not into the mineral deposits in this particular mountain chain." He set the pack down off and opened the flap.

"It's ironic I'm actually thankful for once that the theocrats are such a bunch of throwbacks."

Eavan chuckled. "And that the Druma make it a habit to stay one step ahead of them."

He pulled out a thin thermal blanket they'd used for sleeping and passed it to Kree. "Put this over your head when we walk out of here."

"Why?"

"Because the thermal fibers in it will block our heat signatures from the sensors."

The helo-plane made another pass over the area. Eavan stepped back with Kree. "But we'll wait until they leave the area before we go."

* * *

Kree leaned against the cave wall. She smelled of sweat and fear. Her mouth tasted of bile. Her teeth felt fuzzy. Every time her heart beat her shoulder throbbed in the worst pain she'd ever known.

Sopha, could she use some of that itanie, but she'd be damned twice before she'd ask Eavan if he had any in that magic bag of his.

Even in the cool confines of the cave, with the moons above, she was unbearably hot. Perspiration beaded on her back and upper lip. The makeshift sling dug into her neck. She was miserable.

She reached behind her with her right hand to lift the sling, taking some pressure off her neck, and felt a pull on her upper arm. "What the...?" She let the words fade away. No sense letting Eavan know she had more problems than just the bum shoulder.

Too late.

He abandoned his watch post at the mouth of the cave to come to her. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. My butt and legs are falling asleep."

"Then lie down." Eavan wrapped his hand around her upper arm. He swore under his breath. The word harsh, violent, but not one she'd ever heard before. "You're fevered."

"It's nothing."

"It's infection." He ran his hand along the back of her left arm, across the scratch she'd gotten earlier. "The site is weeping. Why didn't you tell me?"

Kree held her breath. Her heart pounded against her ribs. The alarm in his voice was potent. Maybe he did care.

She shut off the thought like a switch. He was a Druma warrior, contracted by the theocratic council to hunt down her kind and terminate them on sight. Nothing more. Nothing less.

"I'm going to remove the sling so I can see your scratch. You're going to have to take your shirt off again."

"You just have a fascination with seeing my breasts."

He glanced up, gaze locked with hers. “Well, they are pretty spectacular.”

All right, perhaps his caring came from sexual desire. It wouldn't be unheard of for an assassin to spare the life of a mark because he'd fallen in love with her. The histories and mythoi were filled with such stories. What happened then when reality set in? When and if they made it to the Fassin Plains?

Better to take it one moment at a time. No telling what kind of infection she'd contracted so far beneath the ground. He'd warned her that some of the fungus and mold spores were toxic.

Kree worked her right arm out of her shirt, while trying to keep the left shoulder still. Not an easy task by any stretch of the imagination.

“Here, let me.” Eavan helped her pull the shirt over her head. Very gently, he worked it down her sore shoulder and over her arm.

The cold air teased her hot flesh. Her nipples hardened. To her surprise, Eavan took one of the thermal blankets and tucked it around her back, brought it over her right arm, but kept her left side out.

“Lift your arm a little so I can feed the blanket under it.”

Kree did as told, holding back her reaction as his knuckles grazed across her breast. A glance to his face and she wondered if he even realized he'd touched her. His handsome face was filled with concentration and concern.

He adjusted the camp light to shine on her injury. He rummaged in the pack and came out with a small vial. “This is going to sting like I've set your arm on fire. But it works.”

“Why didn't you use it before?”

“Why use a laser cannon when a stunner will work? You use the right tool for the job at hand. Anything else is overkill.” He brushed a wet cloth over the scratch. Strong antiseptic fumes filled her nose along with the sweet putrid stench of infection.

“Gods of Mercy, Kree.” He gave a cough, covered his nose and mouth, then swiped a fresh antiseptic pad down the length of the injury. “This has proliferated alarmingly quickly.”

“Am I going to die, doctor?”

He leaned over and pressed his lips to her forehead. The kiss felt cool against her fevered skin. “I promised I'd take care of you. I intend to keep that promise if you will.”

Delirium had crept into the edges of her mind. A giddy madness settled over her. Uncertain where reality ended and illusion began, Kree clamped her jaws together to keep from asking Eavan if he saw the dancing stars collide on the cave ceiling. White ferrets performed circus acts in little painted shoes adorned with bells.

That wasn't real. There hadn't been a ferret circus in the tunnel a few minutes ago. When would they have had time to set up and begin the show? A calliope played odd, disjointed music, in notes not on the musical register.

"Kree?" A hand on her face brought her attention away from the puppet show competing with the dancing ferrets.

"They're so precious in their little collars."

He swore. Black swirls came out of his mouth like puffs of acrid smoke.

Kree poked him in the lips. "Do that again."

"Do what?" He lowered her down, causing her head to spin violently.

"Curse me."

He let out an exaggerated sigh. "I didn't curse you. I cursed the situation."

"It sounded like you cursed me—"

Kree screamed as he lit her arm on fire. When did he have time to pull down the sun and immerse her in it? "Sopha, save me!"

She had the odd sensation of being carried up into a pair of strong arms and away from the one who tortured her. Slow crooning words filled her ears. Someone brushed her hair back from her sweaty forehead.

"What happened?"

The answer came from somewhere underwater.

She floated along with the sound. Down and down until there was nothing around her but black murky water.

Chapter Twelve

Golden light spilled in and down the tunnel floor like a shining river. Kree brushed the sleep from her eyes and pushed herself up on her good arm. A ghost of a headache made a band around her forehead. Not bad enough to need medication, but to know she'd been through an ordeal.

The thermal blanket was tucked close to her body, wrapping around her like the dressings on a Paldasian mummy. She kicked out, trying to untangle herself from the layers. Each swing of her body jarred her left shoulder. That hurt worse than her head. Her skin was clammy. She needed a bath.

Where in all the hells was Eavan?

Did the guards return and take him away?

Kree stilled and listened for any telltale sounds that indicated a struggle. Birdcalls cascaded down the cave opening like an auditory waterfall. Tree-dwelling rodents chattered to one another. Something smelled like vomit.

All in all a sterling beginning to what proved a rather shitty day. Her powers wouldn't reach far enough with the collar to determine if Eavan—or his body—was anywhere in the vicinity. The only traces she detected were the small bands of wildlife that had already made their presence known. No tall, broad-shouldered Druma warrior in the area.

Using the cave wall for stability, Kree slowly made it to her feet. The horrible smell followed her as she walked. Damn. That was so not good. Eavan probably thought she'd died and started to decompose.

Evidence of a makeshift camp littered the immediate area. The portable fire remained out but had been doused. The thermal blanket Eavan used was folded and sat near his pack. He couldn't have gone far. There was no way he'd have left his pack behind. There were too many survival essentials inside.

Sound at the cave mouth had Kree folding deeper into the shadows. There was very little self-defense to be had with her shoulder injury. If the guards came for her, she'd be unable to fight back.

Her glance slid to Eavan's pack. Did he keep his stunner there or on his person?

The dark silhouette grew closer. Larger. Like a child, Kree wanted to close her eyes to block out what she didn't want to see.

"Kree?"

Relief washed through her at the sound of his velvet voice. Eavan.

She stepped out from her pseudohiding place, arm held close to her body. “I didn’t know where you’d gone.”

He lifted a collapsible bucket filled with water and tapped a pouch at his hip with his free hand. “Collecting a few necessities.”

“Wasn’t that dangerous?”

“Not really. The guards left the area yesterday.”

Shock brought her forward. “Yesterday?”

“You slept for a very long time.” There was a hint of relieved amusement in his voice. “Come on. Take off your clothes, and you can take a quick bath while I make you something to eat.”

A bath sounded like the best idea she’d heard in weeks, but her clothes needed to be buried somewhere and given full funeral rites. The garments were just that bad.

“I don’t have anything else to put on afterward.”

“I can fix that for you.” Eavan set down the water bucket and went about digging into his pack. He pulled out a tunic shirt and a pair of drawstring pants. “They’ll be a little big on you, but they’ll do. We can wash your other clothes after you bathe.”

The man had an answer for everything. “What about my shoulder? There are places I’m not going to be able to reach.”

A smile from the very devils of all the hells lifted his mouth at one corner. “I’ll help you with whatever you can’t reach.”

Heat shot directly to her face. Liquid pooled between her legs. The memory of the last time he helped her bathe was still extremely fresh in her mind.

What was wrong with her? Had she taken leave of all her good sense? This man had kidnapped her after a stunner blast, taken her to a secluded hideout, and then through a mountain where she may have contracted a horrible disease from something on a rock. How in Sopha’s name did she manage to dredge up any lust for him?

Because he worked a clit like a man possessed.

Her nipples hardened. She leaned against the cave wall and crossed her legs, putting pressure just where she needed it most.

Where was Ronen when she needed him? It was his goddess-bound duty to see she didn’t suffer from lack of sexual gratification. He had never left her hanging when she wanted to feel a hard, thick cock inside her.

Kree narrowed her eyes at Eavan. The man seemed to get rather perverse pleasure from withholding from her what she needed to survive. With Sophites, sex was as essential as breathing.

Quickly, her thoughts turned to Jerella. Her adja had some untapped potential buried deep in her subconscious that no amount of sexual rites had been able to

penetrate. It was as if a key had been forged to unlock the power—a key that no one had been able to find. Sure, other keys fit, but they didn't do the job for which they were designed. It was frustrating for all involved.

Poor Jerella, especially. She'd so wanted to pull her full weight in the fight against the theocrats, but had been denied that due to some—Kree hesitated to use the word flaw—quirk of genetics. With Kree missing, she hoped like all the hells Ronen had found a way to tap into that latent power. Someone had to. It might be their last defense.

Kree let her attention fall back to Eavan. *Poor* Jerella had a cloister full of sentries fucking her silly, trying to break through her power barrier, and Kree was stuck in the middle of nowhere with a Druma warrior who found pleasure in her sexual frustration.

She lifted her eyes heavenward. What had she done to come to such a pass? She lived and breathed the letter of the tenets of Sopha. Her rule of the order was done fair-handed and with love. Her sentries and priestesses followed her without question. Why then the trial?

"Are you all right?" Eavan started forward. Concern pulled his brow into a frown.

Kree shook off the tumbling thoughts. "Yes." She came forward a few steps. "How much of the water is for my use?"

"Half at the very most. We need to refill our water supply before we start down the side of the mountain. We have about a day's walk until we're within communication range of the settlement."

"And we can't follow the water source?"

"No. It will take us too far out of the way." Eavan set the portable fire to heating, then took rations from his bottomless pack. "Do you like tea?"

At the question, her ears perked. "Yes."

"Good. I found some *chantaberry* root. It will help with the inflammation of your shoulder. But it's only effective as a tea." He pulled some of the root from the pouch he wore and cleaned off the dirt with a small drizzle of water. "I can't promise you it will taste good."

Nothing could taste worse than her mouth already did.

As she attempted to undress, she watched as Eavan took some of the water to boil, then carefully measured out some of the chantaberry root and placed it in a metal tea ball. He knew a lot about herbs and healing. Had that been part of his training?

Probably. Part of survival training was being well versed in field medicine.

Her shoulder burned when she tried to remove the sling from around her neck. It would be impossible to remove her shirt without assistance. Asking for help was a bitter pill on her tongue.

As it was, he'd been watching her and came to her aid without asking. Heat seared her back as he moved in close behind her. Slowly, he lifted the shirt hem, pulling it up her body. Cool cave air kissed her bare skin.

"Lift your good arm."

Kree did as directed, waiting as Eavan held the garment for her to slip her arm out. Next he lifted it over her head, then slid the shirt off her injured arm.

Heart ramming against her insides, she looked over her shoulder. His face was stark in desire. He traced the tips of his fingers down her spine, raising gooseflesh on her skin, his gaze never lifting to hers.

After a long, silent moment, when all Kree heard was the pounding of blood in her ears, Eavan let his fingers drop. "I'll get the water for your bath."

He was such a contrast—an enigma. Eavan had a warrior's heart and a poet's touch. He'd cared for her in the height of her illness when she was too sick to care for herself. Not to mention unconscious. But then he'd cared for her while incapacitated once before, when he'd stunned her.

If he truly meant her harm, he'd had ample opportunity before now. Though she hated the idea to her very core, she'd been at his mercy since their journey began. Not that she even knew the point of the journey.

Sopha, she hated the unknown. Kree lived to taste and smell and experience all of life's pleasures and pitfalls, but with eyes wide open. Not traversing the country in an underground peril. Not headed to a destiny not of her making or knowledge. What awaited her when they arrived?

The stories of the Druma were legendary, and yet she'd not once heard of them practicing human sacrifice. However, execution of their enemies was common practice. Had she or the order made some public outrage against the Druma she was unaware of? Was she being taken to their settlement to stand trial?

It was a possibility she never even considered before.

But would Eavan get involved sexually with someone he planned to see placed on trial and possibly executed? He'd have to be a stone-cold bastard for that to happen. And no matter what she thought of Eavan, she'd stopped seeing him as cold or unfeeling.

Eavan filled their canteens with water, then took out a small disposable towel and a little white pill, dropping the pill into the middle of the bucket. Instant effervescence rose up from the bottom, roiling the water as foam. Kree watched the action, amazed at the ingenuity of the Druma chemists. There was nothing they hadn't thought of to make long travel by foot more easily managed, and decrease the weight of a warrior's kit.

Kree grew passive as Eavan took the towel and began to slide the wet cloth over her skin. The cool mountain water tightened her nipples to hard peaks. She kept her back to him as he worked. When he nudged her to turn around, she held her arm against her breasts.

There was something about his actions this time that were more intimate than anything he'd done before. Even the oral sex he'd performed on her didn't compare to this raw, aching feeling he exposed as he washed away days' worth of sweat and illness from her body.

His touch on her arm was gentle, lifting it out of his way. "Don't go all modest on me now, Kree. I'll think the great Sophite premier still has a maidenly bone somewhere."

Kree had never once been shy or reserved about showing her body. Even in the early days of her training, she'd enjoyed watching the sentries' gazes glaze over as she practiced stimulating her own body and bringing herself to orgasm.

Sophites didn't know modesty. It was a concept that was as foreign to them as interstellar travel was to the theocrats. The belief that the body was sacred and pleasure the ultimate form of religious expression had been ingrained since she'd been plucked from her home and sent to live at the temple.

There was a slight shake to Eavan's hands as he ran the cloth over her breasts. The soap glistened white on her skin. There was no scent to it, which Kree found odd, but made sense in a warrior's world. Anything other than a natural scent would alert prey to a hunter's position. Perfumed soaps would put the hunter at a disadvantage. In this case, a Druma warrior.

Kree watched the hard planes of his face as he worked. His concentration was absolute. A benediction of expression.

Did he have a woman? Were the Druma monogamous, or did they practice polygamy? Did he have a betrothed waiting back at the settlement for him?

Kree let a slow breath ease from between her lips, careful not to let him hear her sigh. He glanced up. Damn, she'd been caught anyhow.

"Are you still in pain?" Gingerly, he lifted her injured arm to wash under there.

"It's sore."

The stink of her illness wafted up. Embarrassment painted her face in heat. She'd never been exposed to anything other than decadent bathing and grooming rituals.

Lower level sentries took on the duties of bathers. It was a way for them to learn restraint and honor the Sophites as they worked their way up through the ranks. Kree remembered the first time she'd been subjected to the bathers' ministrations. The one working on her front had stood before her, washing her as stoically as possible, while his erection broke the surface of the water, bobbing up and down with his movements.

He'd only been a few years older than she and so handsome she'd spent the night pleasuring herself while imagining his face, hands, and cock. For months, she'd been obsessed with him, wanting to break all the rules. Ask him to meet her in her private chambers that night.

Over time, she'd wondered more than once what had ever happened to him. Had he been caught up in the ethnic cleansing of the theocrats, or did he still serve in the sentry order at some remote post? She'd never known his name. Sophites were forbidden from knowing the names of their bath attendants. It was all part of the anonymity of the sentries' training.

She raised her face to stare at Eavan.

He had that same concentration thing going for him her unknown bather had. Oddly, he didn't seem to mind administering to her sweat-soured skin. His actions were all businesslike. Not even the usual sensual charm Eavan exuded was present, save the earlier caress to her spine. Random acts of kindness weren't things she'd necessarily associate with Druma warriors.

Perhaps her beliefs needed an overhaul.

Nothing he'd done so far had been expected.

"Turn around." The command was a soft brush of breath against her skin. Kree shivered and did as told.

Eavan kept his gaze on his hands as he rubbed more of the foam into the wet towel. Kree studied him as he worked. His deep bronze skin hid a smattering of freckles she'd not noticed before. They dusted his nose across the bridge. This close, the slight imperfections lent him a vulnerable air.

The overwhelming urge to lean forward and kiss the area surged through her body. Then his hands moved over her breasts, leaving nothing but want in their wake.

This was dangerous. For her body, mind, and heart. She shouldn't want a man whose entire existence threatened the lives of all her sister Sophites. Tender feelings had no place in their association.

Kree cupped one of his hands with her good one. Eavan lifted his head. His eyes were dark with desire. Hot. Vivid in the low light from the portable fire.

Kree cleared her throat. "I think I can manage the rest. Thank you."

Eavan relinquished the towel and stepped back. "I'll finish making the tea for you."

Raw emotion filled the cave. An uncomfortable silence followed. Odd, how after they'd been intimate more than once, unease blanketed the space between them. This was different. It wasn't about sex or desire. Or even want. It was about the basic principle of trust.

Oh Sopha, have mercy! Was she actually beginning to trust her mortal enemy? How had she let that happen? Let down her guard with this man and she could kiss her life good-bye.

Kree finished her bath and then stood near the cave mouth, letting the air flowing down the shaft dry her. She struggled to dress but wasn't about to ask Eavan to help her. That way lay trouble. As it was, she had to work her sore shoulder to get the tunic on and tie the drawstring on the pants.

By the time she finished, she was in severe pain. Sweat had broken out on her brow and a sick feeling filled her gut. She backed up to the wall and slid down it, letting the rock take the majority of her weight to keep her from falling. When she was finally in a sitting position, she rested her head between her bent knees and took slow, deep breaths.

How she hated being infirm. Any kind of injury or illness was simply unacceptable. She hated that feeling of not being in control of her body. The weight of the collar around her neck bore a stark reminder that even her powers were not under her control.

The sound of soft steps made her raise her head. Eavan approached, carrying a cup of steaming tea.

“I want you to drink all of this.” He handed her the cup, then reached into his pocket and pulled out a ration bar. “And eat. When you’re finished I want you to rest.”

“I thought we needed to get through the woods to your contact point?”

“Not until some of the swelling in your shoulder goes down.”

Kree didn’t like the thought of being trapped in the cave longer than necessary. “I can walk. It isn’t my leg that’s injured.”

“If you stumble and fall, it might be. Or your neck. I want you to at least be able to catch yourself if you go down, without doing more damage to yourself.” He ended the sentence with a slow caress of his tattooed hand up her injured arm. “Let me put another sling on your arm. It’s not good to risk moving it too much so soon.”

“According to you, it’s already been a few days.”

“When your body was busy fighting the infection from the scratch on your other arm. You didn’t exactly have sufficient time to heal.”

“What are you, a physician?”

Eavan frowned. “No. But I am the man who is caring for you on this trip.”

“A trip we wouldn’t be making had you not abducted me.” Annoyance colored her words. Made them harsh.

“You’ll be glad I did.” With that cryptic remark hanging on the air, he left her to eat the ration bar and drink her tea. Neither item inspired culinary ecstasy.

Eavan had been right about the tea. It tasted horrible. The ration bar was little better than compressed hay. Kree ate it in surly silence. She was in pain, worried, scared, and uncomfortable. Not only that but she’d started to believe that maybe Eavan wasn’t such a coldhearted killer as she’d believed.

He had cared for her when she hadn’t been able to do so for herself.

Yes, she’d argued this point over and over, worrying it like a sore tooth. But, why not? Nothing on this journey so far had been as she’d believed it would be.

What if she started to cooperate rather than be obstructive? How would the rest of the journey go, then?

Chapter Thirteen

For days Ronen and the sentries trailed a contingent of guards as they came down the other side of the mountain and into the foothills heading to the Fassin Plains. Com unit traffic from the guards consisted of speculation of where the fugitives were hiding.

The rover cars were useless in this terrain. Not because of an inability to hug the ground over the rocks and other debris, but because the dense growth of trees made passage impossible. So they stuck to the roads and prayed that the guards didn't find Kree before Ronen and the others.

Jerella let her window down and leaned out. Her eyes were closed, nostrils flared. "If she's on this side of the mountain, I can't feel her."

"Interference?" Ronen pulled the rover off the road and started down a hill where the tree growth was thinnest. He'd not be able to get too far, but far enough from the road platform that the sensors in the pavement, which allowed vehicles to hover, no longer jammed Jerella's powers. If that was her problem. He'd never encountered such before, but who knew with the new equipment the theocrats were constantly developing in order to subdue the citizens.

"There is something out there, but it's not Kree." She opened the door and started down the ridge.

Something. Not someone.

"Can you get a lock on what it is, exactly?" Ronen followed her out of the vehicle. There was no way in hell he was going to let her go without some protection.

"I really have no idea. I've not felt this before. It's a new energy signature. Nonorganic, but menacing."

Ronen didn't like the way that sounded. What could it be? A device used to block the Sophites' powers, or the telepathic waves of the Unarion psychics? Perhaps both.

"Get in the car, Jerella."

She turned to look over her shoulder, her blue eyes wide. His tone brooked no argument. She didn't give him one.

"Until we figure out what that thing is, I don't want you wandering away from the car. No telling what the theocrats have developed to take you and the others out."

He did, however, want to investigate further. He climbed back into the driver's seat, turning to Cahlen. "Do you have any analysis probes you can shoot over that way?"

"One maybe, in the boot. I don't know if we're close enough to launch it from here." Cahlen turned to Jerella. "Were you able to determine how far away the apparatus is from here?"

"No. Only that it's big and lets off an energy signal without the organic signature." She frowned, as if trying to put what she'd experienced into words. "It's more like the energy field surrounding a generator. Except, along with giving off some energy, it felt like it was sucking in as well. Almost...breathing."

Ronen glared down the hill into the small dip in the terrain. Another hill rose on the other side, obscuring their view of what lay beyond. He put the hover car in gear and backed out of the area and back up to the road. This part of the path wound in between the foothills that would flow down into the valley and out to the Fassin Plains.

They traveled for another hour or so before the hills flattened out and the Plains stretched before them. They'd not run into whatever mechanism had dampened Jerella's powers. Once they rescued Kree they'd have to backtrack and do some investigation into the area.

Ronen wished they'd had a way to get a sensor or probe close to the device. The next excursion they'd have to bring the right equipment to investigate. As the hover car trundled into the Plains, he made a mental list of all he had to do after this mission.

The sun began to set and the dual moons rose on the eastern horizon. It was time to pull over and let another drive. He'd been at the control for days it seemed, and he needed a rest, both mental and physical.

The road dipped to the east. The trees parted, and there stood a large monolith, reflecting the dying sun and rising moons as if it were used to light a thousand homes.

Ronen slowed the hover car, then came to a stop. "Is that what you felt, Jerella?"

She put her window down and leaned out the door. Her eyes slid shut. She made a face as if some acrid scent had filled her nostrils. "Yes. Let's go. I don't want to be here."

Ronen motioned to Cahlen. "Get the sensor out of the back. We'll plant it before we move on."

Cahlen unbuckled his safety harness and got out of the vehicle. Ronen joined him at the boot. "By Sopha, that thing is big. I wonder if they hauled it here in sections or one slab?"

"No telling with the theocrats. I'm more interested in what it is and why it was placed in the middle of nowhere than how it was brought here." Ronen grabbed one of the supply bags and started rummaging through it. "Where'd you put it?"

Cahlen bumped him out of the way and opened a storage compartment under the boot's floor. "I keep things like that hidden. I don't want some guard to get it into his head I make a habit of analyzing their new torture gadgets."

While Cahlen found the sensors, Ronen went back to the passenger compartment and leaned in. Jerella's attention was fixed on the monolith.

"What is it?"

She shook her head. "I can only think that whatever the purpose of that structure, it is entirely sinister."

Ronen hated to admit he agreed with her.

Cahlen closed the boot and hurried to the hulking slab to place the sensors. He returned moments later and sat with a remote, calibrating the readings. "I'll receive information on this while we're in transit. I won't be able to compile it until we stop for a while and I can study the readings properly. The most I'll be able to view will be trends in emissions or intake."

"Will you at least be able to tell what it's emitting?" Ronen took his place once again and strapped himself in. "That's the key here."

"Well, it hasn't upset the frequencies on the equipment so it doesn't use a transmission-type signal."

Jerella frowned and lifted her hand with fingers splayed as if she were letting water or sand run through them. "It's not something I can pick up either. Something foreign."

That didn't encourage confidence in the rest of their journey. The worst part about the structure was that Ronen doubted it was there for aesthetic purposes. It had to have a function above and beyond just sitting there in the middle of nowhere.

"We'll wait and see what the sensors tell us before we jump to any conclusions. Then we'll proceed on how to dismantle it without being seen."

Jerella continued to watch the structure as they pulled away. "I don't like it. It's wrong. Sinister."

"Try to put it out of your mind for now. We need to concentrate on locating Kree."

"If I had my full powers, we'd already have found her."

The charge was said with such certainty Ronen didn't dare contradict her, though he doubted her failure to tap into her higher powers had anything to do with the monolith.

Cahlen wasn't quite so politic. He turned in his seat. "Grow up and quit your sulking. We did as you asked and you still aren't happy. Frankly, I'm offended to have your lack of power thrown into our faces at every turn. The only person you ever worry about is yourself."

Jerella closed her mouth with a decided click. She blinked her eyes a few times but didn't argue with the sylvan. She crossed her arms over her chest and turned to look out the window.

Ronen should have intervened, but he didn't. Let her get a taste of what the world would be like if the order completely fell. She'd not have the respect due an adja.

He only wished they'd find Kree and could return to the cloister. But deep down, Ronen had the niggling feeling life as they knew it had ceased.

Chapter Fourteen

Sunlight.

Kree never thought she'd ever seen anything so beautiful in her life as that first glorious beam that cascaded down through the foliage and bathed her shoulders in heat and light. She glanced over at the hidden cave entrance. She shuddered.

Never again.

If she hadn't been claustrophobic before their trek through the mountain, she definitely was now. She took a deep breath of fresh mountain air. Hearing the birds in the trees and seeing white puffs of clouds float across the cerulean sky brought a smile to her lips.

There was nothing more reassuring than knowing she was not going to meet certain death by cave-in. From the amount of debris in the tunnels, the mountain access had seen more than its share of quakes in the past.

Eavan held out his hand as they started down the sharp incline to an area that was relatively flat. Not quite a valley, but close enough. "Shh." The command was given before she had a chance to ask why he stopped her.

He nudged her behind a group of trees with heavy bushes near their base. It was the perfect place to hide.

Her heart hammered.

Voices filtered up the hill. Not just the sounds of conversation, but communications as relayed over electronic devices. She couldn't make out the exact words, but knew they were the focus of the discussion.

Guards. The word was mouthed as Eavan slipped the stunner from the holster.

They hadn't been out in the open but for a short time, and already they'd run into a contingent of guards. How was that even possible? Eavan assured her the guards had left the area days before.

He motioned for her to go back up the way they'd come.

Was he crazy? There was no way in all the hells she'd go back into that cave. Not even for protection.

She wanted to protest but knew better. Lingering around the area put them both in peril, and she'd not risked life and limb walking through the mountains in

order to be gunned down so close to discovering why Eavan had abducted her in the first place.

Gods, why couldn't he have just told her the reason? Then she wouldn't have felt compelled to follow his lead. She'd have struck out to find a place to rendezvous with Ronen and the sentries. But no, she had to be stuck with the only Druma who knew how to keep a secret.

Well, maybe not the only one. What the outside world knew of the Druma wouldn't even cover the head of a pin.

They climbed back up the hill, moving in an arc away from the cave mouth, and came back down behind the guards, continuing on a course in the opposite direction.

"Where there's one, there's others." Eavan continued to hold his stunner in his hand as they descended to the bottom of the hill and finally made the small valley floor.

"More effective that way." Kree held her arm. It had begun a steady throb on the way back up the hill. Eavan frowned at her, so she turned the rub to a scratch. No need to let him know she was feeling miserable again.

"They're a damn nuisance that way." He lifted his hand to take hers and help her down the last few feet, where the ground had given way to a sharp drop-off. "They're like *skitter* bugs."

That assessment made her smile.

Their gazes locked as he moved his hand around her waist and lifted her down. "You like that, huh?"

Oh yes! But she didn't know whether he meant the comparison of guards to bugs, or the fact his muscular chest pressed against her.

Her nipples hardened.

Eavan let out a low growl as she slid down the front of him. "We don't have time for that."

"Time for what?"

"What you're thinking." He caressed her cheek. "I promise you that when we reach the settlement, I'll give you all the time you want or need."

Promise swam in the depths of his golden eyes.

She wanted to hold him to it, to make a promise of her own, but pride kept her silent. There was still that small matter of her abduction between them. Until she got answers to her satisfaction, there was no way she'd make any promises to him.

They continued to walk. Hour after hour of rugged terrain and over hill and dale. Since being taken by the Druma, Kree had never walked so much in her life. She knew they were a physical culture, but this was ridiculous.

As they came through the trees, they noticed a large manmade reservoir. The water sparkled in the sun. Eavan stopped at the crest of the last hill and took a small disk from his pocket.

“Damn.” He tapped the button in the center. “Still too far away to get a signal.” He started walking again, pointing the disk at the water.

“What are you doing?” Kree followed him, watching in curiosity as he tried a few more times to get a signal.

“Attempting to bounce the signal off the water to get a longer range.” He made a frustrated sigh. “These little com disks are good for short distances only. The advantage of them is that the signal output can’t be picked up by the guards. Biggest disadvantage”—he bounced the device in his hand—“you’re witnessing it.”

Impressed, Kree stared at Eavan. Why did the Druma need com devices with untraceable signals or that were unable to be monitored by the theocrats?

She started to ask when the unmistakable sound of a helo-plane’s engine and rotors sounded in the distance. Eavan pulled her back under cover of the foliage.

At this rate they’d never make it to the Druma settlement.

Luck held and the helo-plane moved away down the valley.

“Come on. Let’s get to the reservoir while we still can.” He returned the disk to his pocket but kept the stunner in his hand. With his free one, he took her hand. “We need to hurry before another helo-plane decides to come up this way. You don’t need to run, but walk very fast.”

Kree knew the instructions were meant for his long legs and not her slightly shorter ones. A brisk walk to him was most definitely a run for her.

They made the reservoir as more helo-planes filled the sky, heading north.

Eavan let out another curse. “I really need to get this signal to bounce.”

Voices rose from the other side of the reservoir, skimmed over the water. Kree looked up from their hiding place behind a pump house.

The sounds came closer.

Eavan dug into his pack and came out with a set of tools. He hurriedly picked the pump house lock. “Get inside.”

“Why?”

“I need to take care of these guys once and for all, and I don’t want you hurt.”

Musty air rushed out when he pushed the door open. Kree shook her head. “I want to stay with you.”

“Normally, I’d give you a stunner and say have at it, but with your injured shoulder you’re a liability. Please get inside.” His jaw hardened as shouts rose.

Time was running out.

Kree put her hand to his cheek. “Be careful.”

His gaze went molten. “If I’m not back within the hour, leave without me. Please promise me you’ll get to the settlement. All your questions will be answered there.” He grabbed the back of her head and pulled her to his mouth. His lips claimed hers in a passionate kiss that tasted of good-bye.

When he let her go, he pressed a chaste kiss to her forehead and spoke a word she had no meaning for. Credah. He took the key chit out of his pocket and removed the collar from her neck. Sensation hit her with the force of a bomb blast. All the organic matter within range screamed to be heard and noticed by the Sophite, eager to tell its story. It was almost overwhelming after being denied the input for so long.

Her knees nearly buckled.

The last thing Eavan did before closing the pump house door was to hand her a stunner. "Don't hesitate to use it. The guards will have no mercy if they catch you."

She swallowed the lump in her throat and took the stunner. She turned it over, studying the chamber. It had a full charge and an illegal sight guide. The Druma didn't fool around when it came to firepower.

"Lock the door."

He shut the door, closing her in total darkness. The pump whirled noisily behind her, drowning out the voices outside.

She felt for the doorknob and turned the lock. How was she supposed to count time while closed up in a dark room? The alleles in her body refused to fire under the stress of fear. It was a defense mechanism that had evolved in some long-dead branch of Sophite evolution.

The small, dark room seemed to close in on her. It was worse than the cave. At least there Eavan had been beside her, sharing in the misery. Here she was alone while he went out to face their enemies. Sopha only knew how many guards had descended on them.

Staying in the pump house while he went out there to face death to defend her was unconscionable. She couldn't let him do it. Not without assistance. An hour might have him long dead and beyond help.

She owed it to him to help. Even if it was his fault they were in this predicament, he had gone above and beyond to keep her safe from the guards and to heal her injuries.

Kree put her ear to the door and concentrated. No telltale sounds came from the other side. Organics billowed from under the door. None were promising. Blood and death already seeped into the pump house from the outside.

Oh Sopha.

It was now or never.

Her hand shook as she unfastened the lock and opened the door a crack. From this angle she saw nothing but the rise of the hill and the trees before her. Power uncoiled as she sent it out to search for Eavan's signature.

The unique chemical composition that was Eavan was about a half click out, surrounded by at least six other energies. The patterns kept changing and shifting, indicating their energies were in flux. Emotions toxic.

That was all Kree needed to know.

She slid from the pump house and back out into the sunshine, following the noxious trail of battle. She found them in the glade. Bodies littered the ground around Eavan, who fought like a man possessed by demons.

His body moved with precision and cunning. There was a symmetrical beauty to his moves. Kree could have watched in fascination forever, but the odds were still against him. Two guards sneaked up from behind the tree line. He had no time to look around him. He was too busy fighting another set of guards.

One guard jumped Eavan. She saw Eavan's arm come up, and heard a gurgling sound. The guard fell to the ground, his throat slit from ear to ear. The second one came in low, but Eavan grabbed him, spinning the guard's head into an impossible position. Kree felt the life force flow out of the guard, his neck broken.

Two other guards dropped out of the tree line. Before Eavan turned to face the threat, Kree raised the stunner and hit first one and then the other guard. They fell forward in heaps. Kree moved forward to check if they were dead, but Eavan beat her to it. He didn't bother tapping them with the toe of his boot. He stuck a long hunting knife through their spines. Even if they had survived the initial electric jolt, they were now among the dead.

No grief or remorse rose in Kree. Perhaps it would have at one time. She'd once held all life sacred, but such a humanitarian stance was hard to maintain against a group who saw the demise of her order as a divine calling.

Eavan pulled his knife from the second guard's back and wiped the gore on the black uniform. "So much for staying where I put you."

"I didn't like the odds."

"You mean you were worried about me?" An odd light came into his eyes.

Bathed in blood, he was the sexiest man she'd ever seen. Not that she had a morbid fascination with blood, but knowing he had risked his mortality to save her life changed everything. It was one thing to say or know it, quite another to see the evidence drying on his skin and clothes.

"I mean, I've never been so glad to see anyone alive in my entire life."

He gave her a lopsided grin as he sheathed his knife and started down the hill to the reservoir. "It's a start."

She followed him down to the water, watching as he washed the blood from his body. After he finished, he took the com disk out of his pocket and held it near the water. There were two beeps, followed by a series of clicks.

"About damn time."

"What? That's your communication? Two beeps and some clicks?"

"I didn't lie to you, did I? It can't be tracked or traced. At least it's not important enough to track. The guards are only looking for verbal communications on relays, not something that sounds like static."

There was a certain logic to that.

He put the disk back into his pocket, then held out his hand.

Kree looked at the offering, her breath suspended in midcycle. She slid her palm into his. Their fingers linked.

“Come.”

It was the only word he said as they started down the mountain together.

Chapter Fifteen

Full dark had fallen hours before.

Kree's feet ached, and her shoulder had begun to throb with each foot that hit the ground. The vibration went straight up her body and lodged in her sore joint.

Thankfully Eavan had not returned the collar to her neck. They walked side by side in companionable silence.

How much farther to the Fassin Plains? She dared not ask. Her feet, however, screamed the question from the soles of her borrowed shoes.

Eavan hit her hip. "Get in the woods."

"What?" Kree looked up in time to see the lights of a rover car coming over the rise. She scrambled to make it to the tree line before the rover car came close enough to see her in the lights.

Eavan covered her with his body, looking toward the road. His heart beat hard against her back. His breath came deep and even. He was gathering strength in case he needed to fight again.

The rover car stopped and the doors opened. Birdcalls filled the night.

Eavan rose up slightly. He made a similar call in the back of his throat. An answering call responded to the whistle.

What in all the hells?

"Stay here until I can verify their identity." He stayed low in the grass as he made his way down to the road.

She lifted her head just enough to see Eavan's silhouette against the rover car's lights. Whoever the driver was, he grabbed Eavan and hugged him in a tight embrace. Backslaps ensued.

All right, obviously friend and not foe.

Kree was slow to rise. Her shoulder hurt worse now she had been on the ground. She made her way up from the ditch and to the roadside.

The driver smiled. "So this is the Sophite premier?"

"It is."

He bowed with his hand fisted over his heart. "Wulf."

Eavan smiled. "My little brother."

Kree gave Wulf the once- and twice-over. There was no way the man was anyone's little anything. He was as muscular as Eavan was lithe. Not that Eavan

was lacking in the muscle department, but he was well proportioned, where Wulf was stocky.

The second warrior stepped from the vehicle. He completed the same maneuver with hand over heart. "Grey. I am honored to be of service to you, Premier."

"I have to say, I'm glad to see you as well. Much more walking and I would have thrown myself off the next ridge."

Wulf gave a smile reminiscent of his namesake. "Then get in the rover and let's be on our way. We have a ways to go tonight before we reach the settlement."

Kree sat in the back with Eavan.

He smiled as she fastened her harness. "Don't bother with that."

"I don't want to get bounced around. My shoulder aches."

"Then here." Eavan put his arm around her, resting her against his side. "Sleep."

She closed her eyes, comforted by the warmth and solidity of Eavan's body. The soft brush of his lips over her forehead and a whispered word were the last things she remembered until she was jostled awake a few hours later.

"We're here."

Those two little words were like a gong going off in her ear. Kree sat up and took in her surroundings through sleepy eyes.

The Druma settlement was like nothing she'd expected. All the buildings were squat structures with only one level. Some were spread out through several large and small rooms, but none rose up higher than a single story.

All dwellings radiated out from a central structure like the rays of the sun. Each concentric circle moved out by one. On the extreme outskirts of the homes were small shops and workspaces.

Kree climbed out of the rover car and took in a deep, assessing breath. Organics flowed through the air, kissing it in a bountiful signature that spoke of nothing but warmth, love, and cooperation. The air shuddered out of her lungs as unexpected emotion rose to fill her eyes with tears. Her heart grew so full it ached.

The outside world feared the Druma. They had been forced to live in a no-man's land, and yet there was nothing here but all the best emotions humanity had to offer. Even her feelings had been prejudiced by rumors and lies.

Eavan playfully tugged the ends of her hair. "I take it the settlement meets with your approval."

"First assessment is very impressive." She stepped away from him, afraid to be overcome in the moment. What she needed was distance and perspective. He'd promised her answers. A positive first impression had answered no questions; it only presented more.

“Come. I’ll show you to my *heta*, and you can refresh before we head to the *mei heta*.” Eavan grabbed his pack from the rover car and placed his arm around her shoulder as they walked through the settlement.

“Are you going to explain those words to me so I know what you’re talking about?”

He pointed to one of the small dwellings. “Heta. You would say house or home.”

“So the *mei heta* is a big house?”

Eavan gave a soft, sexy chuckle. “In a manner of speaking. It is big, but only because it needs to be large enough to hold the entire settlement. We use it for community meetings and gatherings. *Mei* is every or all.”

“Your native tongue seems very practical.” And he appeared a patient and competent teacher. “Explained that way it makes sense to an outsider.”

A devilish expression made his eyes sparkle. “You won’t be an outsider for long.”

She didn’t know about that. So far none of the other *Druma* who passed them on the street had bothered to come over and say hello or introduce themselves. Instead they gave her and Eavan a wide birth and turned their curious glances away.

And still she hadn’t picked up on any negative emotions.

Until they reached the door of a *heta* near the very center of the settlement.

Eavan opened the door as a wave of anger and hatred rolled out onto the walkway and puddled around Kree’s feet. He started to help her inside, but Kree shook her head.

“What’s wrong?” His brow knit into a V. “This is where I live. You’ll be safe here. You’ll be safe at any home in the settlement.”

Kree backed up a few steps as a shadow lengthened inside the house. A definite female signature ran across Kree’s senses. An angry female.

“Is that the whore?” A sultry female voice rolled out of the house to the stoop. From where she stood, Kree couldn’t see her, but being called a whore was enough to make her step forward again.

Eavan was quick to turn an angry glance in the direction of the voice. “Behave yourself. You knew I was bringing Kree here.”

He held out his hand to Kree, lacing their fingers together. “It’s all right. *Abbinet* was just leaving.”

Uncomfortable, Kree shook her head. “Maybe I should find somewhere else to stay.”

“No.” He brought Kree over the threshold and into the piercing dark gaze of the most beautiful woman she’d ever seen.

Kree swallowed. A bad feeling that had nothing to do with the anger emanating from the woman, and everything to do with the possible outcome of the next few moments, rose up to clog Kree's throat.

"Kree, I'd like you to meet my wife, Abbinet."

Her eyes closed on their own accord. A wave of sick anger and betrayal raged through her veins like a burst dam. This was no time to tell him that if he was married to Abbinet, he'd had no business making love to her. But it did explain why he'd withheld coitus from her.

It did not, however, absolve him from being the worst sort of blasphemer in her eyes. The Sophites might live and die by the act of making love to a veritable banquet of sentries, but not once they had committed to only one man. Once that occurred, the Sophite only enjoyed pleasure from her chosen mate.

There was the remote possibility that the Druma did not hold oral sex as a form of betrayal to their spouses. Even so, it did not absolve Kree of the crime against Abbinet.

She placed her hands together and bowed at the waist in a sign of humble respect and apology. "My honor to meet you, Abbinet. If I have wronged you, it was unwittingly done. I ask your forgiveness."

Abbinet narrowed her eyes. "Usurping me in my home is not something I can easily forgive. If ever. You are unwelcome here."

"I understand." Kree bowed again and started out the door.

Eavan grabbed her arm to stop her. "This is *my* home. Only I say who is or isn't welcome."

Kree shook off his hand. "Do not touch me or you'll bring back a bloody stump. You may not have done anything wrong according to your customs and mores, but you have violated tenets of behavior and decorum I hold very dear."

His narrowed eyes widened. "Ah, I know what's wrong. You misunderstand the term *wife*."

"No, Eavan. I grasp the concept very well." She continued to walk down the short row of paving stones to the street.

"Not in the Druma tradition." He grabbed her by both arms and held her. She flinched as a pain shot through her injured shoulder. He loosened his hold. "Please listen to me."

"If there was anything more than deception to hear, you would have told me before you presented her. It's not like you are a novice to the language."

"No. You're right, but I was a bit preoccupied keeping us alive to think of the differences in our cultures on the minor levels."

"Minor?" Kree pointed to the house. "You call that minor? Vows and commitments are everything to a Sophite. Even more so to a premier, who must keep to the highest standards at all times. By keeping your marital status a secret, you coerced me into breaking my word to Sopha. If you understand nothing else

about what you've done, please understand how deeply you've injured me in the eyes of my goddess."

Eavan clasped both of her hands in his. His face was partially in shadow, making it hard to read his expression, but not hard to feel the emotions running through him. For the first time since he removed the collar, she wished like all the hells to have it back around her neck.

"A wife in the Druma tradition is not the same as it is in other cultures. It only means that I am responsible for her welfare until she takes a credah. She has no one else."

There was that word again. The one he'd said into her temple and hair and against the skin of her forehead in the tenderest of ways.

He continued. "Once a Druma warrior takes a credah, they are bound for life. There is no divorce. We take our vows of love and matrimony just as seriously as your Sophites. There can be no mistakes."

All right, so perhaps it wasn't as bad as she'd first believed. But there were still some particulars she wanted to know. "Does she share your bed?"

"Not even once. Druma warriors learn to pleasure their women through tutelage from women of our culture who have lost their mates." He ran a hand down the side of her face. "Only that and making love to one's credah is permitted. Once a warrior takes his credah, he is no longer allowed to engage in the services of the widows' beds."

It took a moment to digest the anthropology lesson. Kree squeezed his hands. "If you don't intend to take Abbinet as your credah, have you told her that? It seems to me she has already taken it for granted she owns you."

He let out a heavy sigh. "I know. I discussed this with her before I left to find you. I allowed her to stay here until my return. I've even arranged for her to wife another warrior until she finds her own credah."

At least he'd been responsible enough to ensure Abbinet had someone to care for her. Though judging by the amount of attitude she had, Eavan's wife would probably be able to take care of herself without problem.

"Please, Kree. Come back inside and freshen up. I promise you are very welcome in my heta."

She took a deep breath and gave a nod. As soon as she could, she'd contact Ronen and let him know where he could find her and to pick her up.

* * *

Anger continued to course through Eavan's insides as he sat on the bed, listening to the shower run. He'd had a fantasy of bringing Kree to his home and experiencing another bath with her. Of going down on his knees to lick the wet folds of her pussy until she came in his mouth.

By all the gods, he'd missed that over the last few days. There hadn't been time to enjoy her body the way she deserved. The way he knew she needed. The way he wanted.

His cock strained against his leathers.

He let down the fly to relieve the pressure. With more room to expand, his cock lengthened through the opening.

Abbinet came to the doorway, leaning against the jamb. "I'll not forgive either of you for this."

He covered the evidence of his arousal with his shirttail. But not before Abbinet got an eyeful. She arched her back, letting her generous breasts press against the filmy material of her cotton shirt. Tight nipples made impressions behind the fabric. If he had been another man, the sight might have begged for further exploration.

"There is nothing for you to forgive. You knew how it would be when I returned, and you chose not to believe it."

"I thought you'd change your mind." The pout and the pose proved she thought her charms capable of seducing him into both a change of heart and mind.

"No."

Water continued to pound in the shower. Good, he had enough time to say what needed said without fear of Kree overhearing.

"You were at the meeting when it was decided I would be the one to retrieve the premier. You heard clearly the words of Ki Jovan. My duty rests in seeing to her protection and welfare. Nothing else is as important."

"And what do you think your precious premier will say when she discovers you brought her here to start a war with the theocrats?"

He didn't even need to contemplate the answer. "I think she'll be on board."

"And when she discovers you plan to keep her here against her will as your credah?"

Eavan's insides heated. Tightened. His cock grew harder at the thought. Kree as his credah? He should live to be so blessed. The taste of her sweet pussy filled his head and mouth in remembered passion. When they made love, she'd been right there with him.

Need for her was an unstoppable ache inside. It started the day he'd been assigned as her protector and had grown stronger over their journey.

Judging from the way she'd begged him to consummate their affair, she had no problem with keeping him as a lover.

He gave a deep, sensual chuckle. "Not against her will."

Abbinet's dark eyes rounded. "You have anticipated vows that have not even been approved by Ki Jovan."

“Credit me with some honor.” He pointed to the door. “Go. Now. I’ll not be insulted under my own roof. I lived up to my end of our contract, and you seek to break yours. Who lacks honor now?”

Shame washed over her features. Abbinet was a good woman, but she was young and impetuous. Often her wants dictated her behavior. Eavan thought he’d managed to counsel that trait out of her. In the days before he’d left to find Kree, Abbinet had been sulky instead of acting out in her anger. It had been a slight improvement, but by no means a complete change in attitude.

“You’ve wronged me, Eavan.”

He sat up straighter. “You forget who I am.”

“Oh I know well who you are. I’ve known you all my life and still you choose to bring a *jachitan* here.”

Jachitan was the Druma word for outsider. However, the connotations had taken on a negative bent over the generations. It was now one of the worst epithets a member of the settlement could bestow on a visitor. Calling an honored guest such as Kree Janus a jachitan was an unforgivable act of malice.

He stared at Abbinet for a moment. All anger rose in a tide and then washed from his body. In the next room the shower cut off.

Eavan lowered his voice, taking out all emotion but pity. “You know, I’ve always cared about you. When your brother and father were killed by the theocrats, I never thought twice about opening my home to you, to give you a sense of belonging until your credah found you. I thought you would appreciate my kindness. Instead you’ve thrown it back in my face at every level. I’m ashamed for you.”

Tears filled her eyes.

“Eavan—”

He held up his hand, shutting off her protests. “There are no more words between us. Go to Cicero. He’s waiting for you.”

Abbinet stood staring at him. Tears spilled down her cheeks. Finally she bowed her head and turned away. It wasn’t until after the outside door closed that the bathroom door opened and Kree stepped out looking pink and scrubbed from her shower.

“I’m so sorry, Eavan. I could have found another place to stay. Or slept in the rover car. You didn’t have to send her away.”

The idea of Kree sleeping in the rover car made him smile. She had a generous heart and a giving nature. Abbinet had shown her nothing but hostility and still she managed to dredge up sympathy for the woman.

He reached out a hand and pulled her to him. “There isn’t a place in your heart that isn’t beautiful.”

He bent his head, nestling between her breasts.

Her arms came around him, holding him in pious comfort. It was an odd sensation, as if redemption and forgiveness were there in her embrace. Suddenly,

having the Sophite premier as his credah was an overwhelming prospect. Was it possible? Could she be his credah?

The call of their flesh wasn't nearly as strong as the call of his heart to hers. She tapped into all his protective instincts. Made him want to be a better man for her. Her opinion mattered to him.

But was it even possible to forge a future with her?

What if her religious calling was bigger than a lifebond? Just because they were mates as dictated by the gods, it didn't necessarily follow that she would choose to stay with him in this lifetime. The decision to stay with him must be her own. He'd not influence it in any way.

Yeah, and he was going to go stand in the desert buck naked and wait for the sleebak to come after him.

No matter how much he longed to make love to her, they were going to be late for the gathering. It wasn't good to keep the elders waiting.

He placed his hands on Kree's hips and gently moved her back. "I need to get cleaned up so we can go."

Before he went into the bathroom alone, he lowered his mouth to hers and gave her a long, drugging kiss full of thanks. When he pulled away, her eyes were soft, mouth swollen. He traced his thumb over her bottom lip. "If I live to be a thousand, I don't think I could ever deserve you."

A question came into her eyes, but he slipped from the room before she could ask. Sometimes retreat was a good strategic alternative.

Chapter Sixteen

They walked in silence to the large heta in the middle of the circle. The sense of community hung heavy on the air. Even their settlement planning ensured the place where they met as a group was always the center of their world.

Kree didn't quite know what to think about being taken before the entire settlement. Odd as it was, given the circumstances and her reaction at the onset of the trek through the mountain, fear wasn't present. Apprehension, a smidge. Curiosity, oh yeah.

Eavan's actions and the warm welcome she received from his brother, Wulf, and their friend Grey had dispelled any lingering fear she felt in the presence of Druma warriors.

They were to the door of the mei heta when Eavan stopped her by placing his hand firmly on the door. "Before we go inside, I want you to know that sometimes secrecy is needed to ensure the greater protection against enemies."

All right, that didn't sound good.

"And here I was just thinking I'm no longer afraid of you or the Druma."

"You need never fear us."

He opened the door, and the first thing Kree noticed was the impressive display of warriors lining the sides of the room. Women and children filled in the center. A long table on a dais made up the far wall. Elders sat watching her and Eavan enter. The chieftain was positioned in the center. His hair was tied in intricate braids. Colorful beads framed his face. No doubt each one had significant meaning within the hierarchy of Druma society. He was a large man, who seemed even more so when he stood to call them forth.

Pride shone in his eyes. His face broke into a wide grin. "Son, it is so good to have you home again."

Son? Another fact he'd not shared with her.

"Father." Love and respect deepened Eavan's voice.

It was as if she were seeing him through new eyes. How many more secrets did he have to tell her? She was almost afraid to ask.

Giggles ensued from where the women and children sat. Kree turned to look at what they found so amusing. And stopped cold.

Rapid blinking didn't fade the vision from her eyes. Rubbing them had no effect either.

Kree placed her hand on her pounding heart. "Eavan?" The name came out weak, disbelieving.

"You aren't imagining it. They're really here."

"Oh dearest Sopha!"

She made her way through the Druma women, stumbling a bit as they tried to part for her. The laughter rose from all over the room now. When she came to the row of women she sought, she fell into their awaiting arms. Kisses and tears flowed as she embraced Sophites she thought long dead to the enforcers. Meriah, Ceela, Faria, Eris, Tessia, Beckha, Vonya, and Serrilla.

With tears streaming down her face, she turned to Eavan. His smile by rights should have blinded her. Imagine keeping such a thing from her across the expanse of desert, mountain, and the plains. He had not given her even a hint that her sister Sophites were still alive.

He'd also said it was for her protection.

And he'd been right. If the guards had gotten her, she might not have been able to keep the knowledge to herself. Rumors abounded that the theocrats had forced Unarion psychics into interrogating prisoners. If that were the case, no secret would stay hidden for long.

They all tried to speak at once.

Kree gently silenced them. "We can all talk later. I want to hear what the Druma have to say." She turned to the chief and elders. The plan had to be long in the making since Eris had been gone for almost a full year. "Why?"

The chief bowed, acknowledging the question. "It was the only way we knew to save your order without raising suspicion from the theocrats or their guards. The fact we had to withhold our plans from you and the other temples until the time was right was a decision we did not take lightly."

"Thank you." She let her gaze scan the room. "All of you. For bringing my sisters here and caring for them."

Truly they all looked hale and hearty. Eris even looked as if she had put on some much-needed weight.

He bowed again. "Come, daughter of Sopha, we need to talk and let you know our plans."

Kree gave the other Sophites one last squeeze of their hands and rose, making her way back to the front and center before the dais. Eavan took a place next to her on a straw mat.

The chief regarded the elders, then the rest of the Druma. "Ever since the theocrats came to power, our ways of life have been under threat of extinction. Not a day passes that freedoms we once enjoyed are threatened or stamped out completely.

"This must not continue."

Kree couldn't agree more.

“We offered our services as enforcers to gain access to the Sophites. One by one we brought them into the fold, ensuring their safety until such a time as the ancestors decreed it safe to bring you here. Decisions must be made. It is time to declare war on the theocrats and take back our freedoms.”

There was a long silence. Eavan tapped her knee. They expected a response from her now? What was she supposed to say? Fundamentally she agreed with every word they said. Realistically they hadn't a chance against the firepower of the theocrats.

“As the head of the Order of Sopha, I agree the time has come to regain our lost freedoms. However, caution must be taken. If you haven't the opportunity to see a helo-plane full of guards bearing down on you from above, you do not understand the awesome resources they possess.”

Murmurs filled the room, either in umbrage or agreement. She didn't take the time to ascertain. No matter which, they needed to hear the truth.

“How are we, a settlement of Druma and what is left of the order, going to oppose forces as well-armed and organized as the guards?” She turned to look at Eavan. “Not that the Druma can't take care of more than their share of guards in hand-to-hand.”

There were calls of appreciation.

“What we need is a way to trip them up on the things they rely on most.” She warmed to the topic. “Technology. They fear the rest of us having it, but they think nothing of using it against us. If we can cut it out from under them, we may have the advantage.”

The elders looked to one another and nodded.

“Our tech team is in the field. We will reconvene in two days and share ideas on how best to deal with the theocrat situation when they return.”

The elders stood and exited the mei heta first. The women and children stirred, readying to return to their respective homes. A large warrior came forward from his place along the wall and helped Eris to her feet. Her hand supported her back. Her belly was distended.

Dearest Sopha! Eris was pregnant.

Her gaze caught Kree's, and she smiled. Her hand stroked over the child growing inside her. “Come, Kree, meet my credah.”

The large warrior had his arm draped around Eris's shoulder in a protective manner. Love showed in his expression as he gazed down at Eris. When he lifted his head, his smile was one of joy. “I am Deniol.”

Kree nodded a greeting. “Kree.”

“I know. The settlement has been anxious for your arrival. We feared you'd been captured by the guards.” His gaze fixed on someone over her shoulder. “But Eavan refused to allow another warrior to go with him.”

Hands on her shoulders made her look behind her.

Eavan smiled. "No, because *he* didn't want any other warrior to take the risk."

Kree stared at Eavan for a beat or two. He was a good man. An honorable man. She'd so underestimated and misjudged him. No man had ever come close to measuring up to Eavan. He simply had no equal.

Eris whispered something to Deniol. He ran a tender hand down her hair and spoke in soft Druma.

"We need to go home, Kree. The baby tires me easily these days." She caressed her expanded abdomen once more. "I think I have a little warrior in here."

"Of course." Kree folded Eris in a thankful embrace. "I'll come to you tomorrow. We have so much to discuss."

They left the mei heta with Deniol's arm around Eris's shoulder. Kree watched until they disappeared into the night.

"Are you ready to leave?"

There was little point in staying behind. "Yes."

Alone with Eavan for the first time since they left for the meeting, Kree was deluged with a thousand and one questions. None of which she felt sure enough to ask without sounding accusatory or defensive. It was an odd position to be in. Perhaps if she opened with something neutral, or at least a confession.

"I need to contact my sentry captain as soon as possible."

"Yes. Let him know when he arrives that we have taken good care of you."

Kree stopped walking. Eavan sounded just too matter-of-fact for comfort. "You knew?"

"What? That you contacted your sentry captain at the safe house? Of course." He continued toward the heta as if he hadn't admitted to knowing all along she undermined his plans from the beginning.

"How did you know?"

"Two ways." He held up his fingers in a victory sign. "The com console left a transmission signal to your cloister embedded with a time stamp." He leaned closer. "And your pheromones were all over the board."

Breath eased out. She'd sent the message after Eavan had given her multiple orgasms the first time. She hadn't even thought of that when sending the message. Her scent would have been stronger after the lovemaking.

Kree hit Eavan with a backhand to the gut.

He winced and held his midsection. The hit hadn't been hard enough to hurt him. "What was that for?"

"Because you never let on that you knew." She poked him in the chest a few times. "For not telling me about the other Sophites and for keeping your place as a Druma chieftain's son a secret."

Eavan laughed. "We're trained very well to keep our own counsel."

"I'll *keep* your counsel if you ever do that to me again."

He grew somber. The night closed in around them, insulating the moment. Eavan lowered his mouth to hers. Kree opened for him, accepting the passionate exchange. She wanted this. Wanted him.

The taste of forever clung to his lips.

With the Druma the Sophites had a chance to save their religion. Their culture. Even now, Eris carried the next generation of Sophite genes in her child.

Kree pulled away. "Let's go home."

They arrived at Eavan's heta without any of the fanfare that had awaited them earlier. Thank Sopha for that small miracle. It had been a long time since Kree had been three in a bed, and never with another female. When she let a man into her bed, she tended to want the sentries' undivided attention. Call her selfish that way, but really a sentry's job was to make sure *she* felt pleasure. That *she* was hoisted to the heights of ecstasy and communed with Mother Sopha. Not that her lover had to spend his time making sure another woman got off.

Sentries. This wasn't about the sentries who served under her. This was about her and the Druma warrior Eavan. The man who had abducted, then saved her.

Eavan let them into his house. How they managed that feat without falling, she'd never know. Their arms and legs were tangled and mouths fused. She forgot about the pain in her shoulder.

Eavan kicked the door closed behind him, and they stumbled to the bedroom. She tugged his shirt open, wanting nothing more than to feel the warmth of his skin against hers. Eavan followed suit, opening her shirt with such violence the sound of ripping fabric filled the room.

He didn't miss a beat, but brought her breasts up to his mouth, sucking the hard peaks of her nipples into that hot recess. First one breast, then the other. He stroked her with his tongue and bit down, before flicking them hard and fast.

"Eavan." Kree planted her hands in his hair, holding him close. He acted as if he'd never tasted her flesh, as if he never knew the undeniable pleasure of making love to her.

He moved off her, gently laying her down on the bed. "Close your eyes."

She smiled. "Why? Do you have another surprise for me?"

Eavan leaned over. His arms made a cage on either side of her head. "A gift."

Kree tilted her head back, running her mouth over his chin. "You've already given me the greatest gift I've ever received. You returned the others to me."

The smile he gave her in return was lopsided, cocky. "That was a duty I gladly took on for both our cultures. This is something a warrior gives his credah before they consummate their bond."

"I'm intrigued." She brought her leg up and over his hip. His erection strained against his trouser placket. Kree lifted her hips, grinding against him in a slow, sensual dance.

Eavan moved down her body, tracing a path with his tongue. He kissed her navel, then moved lower, skimming her pants down her legs. She lay there naked beneath him, watching as he made his way back up, nuzzling her pussy.

She brought her knees up, cradling his face in her thighs. The pass of his tongue over her wet lips and swollen clit sent shivers down deep into her core. "Please, Eavan."

"Please what?" He lifted his head, licking his lips. "Please let you come on my tongue? Please let you ride my face until you scream?"

Kree shook her head. "I want to feel your cock inside me."

Eavan moaned and rested his head on her mound. "You don't know how bad I want to give you that. But I can't. Not yet. I have to be sure."

Kree rested on her elbows, looking down at the top of his head. He lifted his gaze, golden eyes full of fire and passion. "Why not yet? What is there to be sure about?"

He gave her the same enigmatic smile he'd unleashed before when she asked him to fuck her. "There will be time to discuss that later."

"There is no time like the present."

Eavan let loose with a throaty laugh that sent a sexual thrill down Kree's spine. "No. You're correct." He stood from between her legs and made his way to the closet. "Close your eyes."

Kree rolled over onto her side, watching as he rummaged for something on the top shelf. From the way it sounded, he'd hidden his *gift* all the way in the back.

Eavan glanced at her over his shoulder. "I won't say it again. But I won't give it to you if you don't do as I ask."

Kree closed her eyes, listening for any telltale sound that would uncover the mystery.

"Turn over on your back and spread your legs."

Her heart rate accelerated and breathing came fast. Whatever he meant to give her wasn't organic, but was definitely sexual in nature. She knew that by the increase in the energy that came from him. By the timbre of his voice.

Footsteps came near the bed. Her breath hitched as cool air bathed her wet pussy. Blunt fingers spread her slick lips as a domed head sought entrance. It wasn't his cock, but felt so real, so lifelike. The skin was soft over a hard inner core. It was even warm like skin, but not hot as a real cock.

"Do you like that, credah?"

Like it, hells she loved it. "Yes."

He pushed the dildo deeper, moving it slowly in and out. A nub brushed against her clit, and she moaned.

"I have something else for you."

She'd lost her breath, right up until he flipped a switch and the vibrations began radiating outward from the dildo. The protuberance that rested against her clit moved in a frantic dance. Kree let out a scream of intense pleasure. It was like nothing she'd ever felt. Tears ran down the sides of her face into her hair.

If this was the kind of gift Eavan liked to give, she was all for it. As a matter of fact, he could keep them coming.

He hit another button and the head rotated, leaving no area of her pussy untouched.

“Oh Sopha!”

Her back arched off the bed. Her legs fell open. She came with a sound usually reserved for those in mortal peril. Uncontrolled spasms rocked her from head to foot. If Eavan wielded a fake cock so well, there was no telling what would happen when he finally allowed himself to come inside her.

He pulled the dildo out, then rolled her to her stomach. As he had done in the pool, Eavan moved his cock through the cleft of her buttocks. His breath was hot on the back of her neck. The words even hotter.

It didn't take him long to moan into her ear. The hot spray of his cum jetted up her spine.

His hands found hers, curling their fingers together. “Soon,” was all he said before he collapsed and rolled off her.

His eyes were closed, face relaxed. Kree brushed his hair off his forehead. He was already sleeping. Kree rose and went into the bathroom.

So many secrets.

Why did the Druma feel they needed to be so damned secretive about everything? Eavan was an exciting and inventive lover. He was going to drive her mad.

He called her his credah. Didn't that stand for something?

She stood under the hot spray of water, bathing. The handmade soap and body lotion sent up a woody scent into the steamy shower. While on the run, Eavan had smelled natural and masculine. She didn't know if she would be able to get used to the artificial scent.

The shower door opened, sending in a blast of cold air to mix with the steam. Kree brushed the soap from where it ran into her eyes. “I sure hope that's you, Eavan.”

He gave a throaty laugh and reached for her. He pressed his wet, slippery skin against her. “It sure by all the hells better be.” He ran his mouth down the column of her throat, licking beads of water off her as he moved lower.

The trail of his mouth left a wake of fire singing along her nerve endings. It amazed her how fast he could arouse her with barely a touch. In Eavan she'd met her sexual match—but for one thing.

Gently, Kree pushed Eavan away. She cradled his cheek in her palm and gazed directly into his eyes. “We really need to discuss your lack of wanting to fully make love to me. You seem to want me, but you can’t bring yourself to cross that line. Why?”

He turned his face to kiss her palm. “It’s not that I don’t want you, Kree. It’s that I want you completely. No barriers. No sentries. I need to know you will commit to me only. That’s the reason. The Druma believe they are lifebonded to their partners. That we have mates who are destined for us alone. I can’t let lust and passion cloud my path. If you are my true mate, my true credah, I have to be absolutely sure first.”

Kree took a small step back as if seeing him for the first time. The shower was no place to have such a discussion. This was too big for the small confines.

She reached back and turned off the water. Towels from their earlier baths were hung on a drying rack, with radiant heat to warm them. She grabbed one and wrapped it around her body before stepping around Eavan and out of the shower.

He followed her, taking the other towel and pulling it around his waist. “I’ve shocked you?”

“It’s a tall order for me. I’m the head of a religion. I just can’t commit without careful consideration of how it impacts my duties to those I govern.” Kree turned her face into shadow so Eavan wouldn’t see how his request had made her pulse pound in her neck. She laid down on the bed.

Silence.

Disappointment was palpable in the air.

The bed was depressed under Eavan’s weight. Calloused fingers ran down her bare arm, sending shivers cascading through her system. “I won’t force you to stay with me. But I want very much to be your chosen. Your bonded. I think we owe it to ourselves and this deep attraction we have to discover if it’s real or a product of our situation.”

At that, Kree turned. Their gazes met. “You don’t even know me.”

“I want to know you. *All* of you.” A sad smile lifted his mouth at the corner. “We Druma have ways of knowing those we have never met. A consultation with our Ki will verify if we are lifebonded or not. We also have strict rules that dictate our conduct with respect to our sexual practices. It is dishonorable for a Druma warrior to take his credah before vows have been spoken. So you see, no matter how badly I want to be inside you, I can’t and preserve my honor.” He waved his hand at the dildo that remained on the bed. “We have ways of getting around that rule, of course. Crafters who make reproductions of warriors’ cocks to use in the interim, but it’s only a temporary measure.”

Kree glanced at the toy. “You mean...?”

“Want to compare?” His smile turned sexy, hot.

“I trust you.”

He pulled her closer. His mouth a breath away from hers. “Do you?”

“Yes.”

He took her mouth, kissing her with unchecked passion. He took the towel from around her body. “If you are my credah. I won’t ever take another.”

Conviction shone in his golden eyes.

It was a long time before either of them fell asleep.

Chapter Seventeen

The com unit on Ronen's hip chimed. He had to dig to get the device out of its hiding place under his ecclesiasts' robes. He hit the button that decoded the encrypted message.

"It's from Kree."

The message hardly made sense. Was it a way to warn them away or send them into a trap?

"How do you want to proceed?" Cahlen navigated the rover car over a series of small hills. Lights in the distance danced along the ground like a twinkling of stars. It was hard to tell if they reflected off a body of water or were from a small town.

"With caution."

"If we should come to the settlement at night?"

"We have Jerella. This far from the monolith she should be able to read Kree wherever she's being held." He pointed to the dense collection of lights. "Head that way and stay on the outskirts. I don't want to attract any unwanted attention until I've had a chance to scope out the situation."

More importantly, he wanted to watch the Druma and see exactly what was going on in the settlement. No matter the skills of the sentries, for stealth and silent stalking no one beat Druma warriors. It was foolish to even try.

Night didn't even afford a cover worthy of the attempt. The Druma hunted with equal accuracy in both day and moonlight.

Ronen put on the infrared goggles and scanned the area as they came within spitting distance of the settlement. Only small animals and nocturnal birds inhabited the immediate area. No warriors waited to ambush.

They rolled to a stop, lowering the thrusters. The rover made easy contact with the ground. Ronen kept watch out of the windows. A knock on the back glass was the only warning before Druma warriors folded out from the darkness.

Both rovers were completely surrounded.

Cahlen made a signal indicating the back of the rover and the weapons cache. Ronen gave a slight shake of his head. They'd play this cool as a winter morning in the highest mountain pass. No heroics. He at least wanted to see Kree and know if she was still alive or if they had gained access to her personal IDs and encryption codes. Kree was tough and courageous, but Ronen dared anyone to stand against Druma torture.

The warrior who stood at the rear of the car made his way forward. He leaned down and smiled into the window.

“Welcome to the Fassin Plains settlement, Sentry Captain Ronen.”

Ronen grew uneasy. He opened the door and stepped out to face the Druma warrior. “I am Captain Ronen. You are?”

“Wulf. You have brought camp gear?”

“Yes.”

“Then collect it and please come with me. We will show you where you are to lodge.”

A sigh came from the backseat. “They’re huge.” Jerella kept her hood up as the majority of the warriors moved to the outer rim of the settlement.

“Stay away from them, Jerella. With your fairness, you’ll be a real novelty.” Ronen had no doubt the warriors had seen few beauties to compare with Jerella. Most Druma were dark haired and dark eyed with deep olive skin.

The sentries piled out of the rovers and collected only the essentials. They were paraded through the quiet streets of the settlement. Most of the squat single-story homes sat in darkness, their occupants most likely asleep for hours by now.

They were brought to a large home at the edge of the center circle.

Wulf opened the door and waited for them to enter. “The chieftain will meet with you and the Sophite premier in the morning. Do you have any special considerations we need to be aware of to make your stay more hospitable?”

“I only wish to see Kree.”

“She has retired for the evening.” Wulf frowned. “I was told she contacted you. Is that not true?”

“I received a message.”

His smile widened. “Good. For a moment I thought it may not have gone through. We’ve had trouble with interference.”

Ronen knew why.

He’d take that up with the chieftain in the morning.

Jerella remained in the hood and cowl. She had gone to the farthest corner of the room and begun to set up her sleep area. She seemed unperturbed by the change of events, or even apprehensive. He’d like to know what she’d picked up in her higher senses.

Cahlen took out the liberated DR theocrat technology. He hit the screen a few times. “It appears the theocrats have found a way to bypass the problem.”

“Of course they have.” Wulf raised a brow—his expression a study in anger and disgust.

A moment of strained silence passed; then Wulf gave a quick nod. “Good sleep.”

When the door shut, Ronen let out a slow, steady breath. "We'll take turns posting guard. They might appear friendly so far, but I would rather not trust the appearance of comradeship."

Jerella pulled back her hood and unfastened her robe to reveal the short thin shift underneath. "Kree is fine. I felt her presence as we walked by one of the huts."

"Which one?" It was a demand as much as a command. One that Jerella didn't take lightly.

She placed her hands on her hips. "I'm not telling you so you can storm the place and drag her out. She'll be fine where she is, and we'll see her in the morning. Just as our guide said."

Ronen tried not to throttle her. He seriously doubted the other sentries who stood between them at the moment would allow him to get all the way across the room to get her slender neck between his hands.

But maybe in this instance, Jerella had it right. If he stormed into a private hut in the middle of the settlement, he'd only enrage the Druma.

This was going to be the longest night of his life.

* * *

Kree rolled over, her arm landing on a male body.

Eavan.

A smile formed on her lips.

The soft press of a warm mouth on hers made the smile widen. She opened her eyes. Sunlight filtered in through the bedroom window, partially blocked out by Eavan's silhouette.

"You're beautiful when you wake. Full sunlight on your face." His hand brushed the side of her breast, then circled around her distended nipple.

"That's not my face."

He gave out a groan, then replaced his hand with his mouth. Kree bowed her back, bringing her breast higher.

She brushed his hair away from his face, watching as he let his tongue make the same path his fingers had. "That feels good."

He felt good.

Imagine how powerful the Sophites would be if they used Druma for their sentries. Why wasn't that option explored in the past?

As Eavan began a lazy trail down the middle of her body, a knock on the door shattered their blissful morning.

He let out a frustrated growl.

"Ignore it." Kree ran her hand through his hair as he dipped lower, flicking his tongue over the tight bud of her clit. She let her legs open wider.

"I intend to."

A lot could be said for a lover who took such exquisite care of her needs because he wanted to, not because he was dictated to by the laws of religion and tradition. Not that she regretted a moment of time spent with Ronen and the other sentries. All of those times had prepared her for this incredible experience.

And yet...

If she was ever going to feel the erotic press of his cock inside her, she'd have to agree to become his lifemate. She had no idea of the logistics of such an endeavor. He was the chieftain's eldest son. She was the head of the temple. How was she supposed to perform her duties in a settlement that wasn't equipped for Sophatic rites?

Obviously the arrangement worked for Eris.

It was just too big of a decision to base on passion. If she became Eavan's credah—or bonded—she'd essentially marry the cultures and religions. Or she could hand over the reins of the premiership to an adja.

Then there was the possibility that she was not his bonded. That he'd take another woman for his partner in life and forget Kree.

Desolation swamped her. She held tighter to Eavan's head, as if the physical contact would ensure he stayed with her. Eavan slipped two fingers into her, stroking her high up into her very core. His thumb ringed her anus; all the while his tongue worked magic over her clit.

The knocking grew louder, more insistent.

"Go away," Kree groaned.

"Eavan? Father wants to see you and Kree with the sentries." The voice came from just below the bedroom window.

Eavan kissed her pussy several times before lifting his head. "Forgive me, credah."

Kree caressed the side of his face. "Later."

"Later." Eavan rose, beautiful in his nudity. His cock stood between his legs in rigid splendor.

Kree reached out and circled her hand around the shaft. His eyes closed as he eased his hips forward. "It's going to be a long day."

Eavan gave a disgruntled laugh. "I'll make it worth your wait."

Kree had no doubt.

They hurried through their morning ablutions.

Nerves bubbled through Kree's belly. She and Ronen shared a special relationship. One forged through years of training and rites. Religion bound them together. Whatever she decided to do about Eavan, she had to discuss with Ronen at length. His tenure as a sentry captain didn't end if she took solemn vows to one man. Most premiers abdicated their titles when they made those vows. Kree felt stepping down from office during such a turbulent time was inherently wrong.

But she was getting ahead of herself.

Slow down. If the goddess wants you to stay with Eavan, she will let you know.

It was best to concentrate on things she had control over. Like the future of the order.

If the combined strength of the Druma and Sophites could put down the theocrats for good, perhaps they need not worry about the practice of the religion. If not, well, what's to say she couldn't move the seat of the order outside the confines of the country proper. Build a temple out on the flats of the Fassin Plains and let those with Sophite alleles come to one sacred temple for teaching. Make it a refuge.

The knots untied. Kree took a deep, easy breath.

Things always seemed so much better when a plan B was in place. Logistically, building a new temple would require a lot of funds, manpower, and materials. It wasn't, however, out of the realm of possibility.

The thought warmed her all the way to her toes as she walked beside Eavan. She threaded her arm through his and leaned against him. Gold eyes stared down into hers. His smile was warm and sensual but also had a quality she'd not seen before in any man.

Happiness.

That was the difference. The elusive quality Kree hadn't been able to put her finger on before. Eavan was happy to be with her. Not out of desire to please her due to her rank in the order. Not because she was a sexually desirable female, but because she was *her*.

An overwhelming sense of belonging welled up from a place she hadn't known existed until that moment. One that had been empty all along, without her knowledge. All the books, rituals, rites, relationships, teachings, experiences in her life had only camouflaged the void, but had never truly filled it.

Eavan did.

Kree swallowed.

It was an awesome realization.

Her arm tightened on his. If she ever lost him, the void would reopen and consume her.

They entered the mei heta to find her sentries busily working with their handheld devices. Ronen paced a circuit around the floor. The chieftain spoke in quiet tones to a delicate figure, hidden by a long robe and full hood. Kree tried to get a lock on the identity of the person, but came only to a large black nothing. A block. It was a person of some considerable power.

Ronen stopped and turned. His gaze flared in anger as it flashed to the Druma warrior at her side. His jaw tightened. A quick head-to-toe inspection didn't relieve the fury as he started toward her.

"What in all the hells is going on here?" The question came from behind gritted teeth.

Eavan bowed up beside her, pushing her behind him before stepping toe-to-toe with the sentry captain. "Step back."

Dark organics filled the air in a pungent aroma. Male energy tangled in a testosterone cocktail that threatened to knock Kree to her knees. Sophite senses were never meant to run wide open when two alpha males began the dance for supremacy.

She placed her hand gently in the middle of Eavan's back. "He's my sentry captain, Eavan. He won't harm me."

Kree felt the subtle shift of tension in his body, but it didn't leave altogether. It remained coiled under the surface like a snake ready to strike out at a predator. Or lunch.

Her gaze landed on the tattoo that ran up Eavan's arm. The inky reptile looked like it meant business, much like her lover.

"You got my message, Ronen?"

He gave her a tight nod. His teeth remained clenched.

"Then why the anger? I dared not tell you everything in the missive. I didn't know if it would be intercepted by the guards. We ran afoul of them more than once since we started our journey." She grabbed the material of his robe and guided him to sit on the straw mat in the center of the room. "The Druma have done our order a great service."

Kree made him sit, though she suspected he really needed to blow off some energy and anger. The robed figure turned and pulled the cowl down. Jerella smiled and practically threw herself at Kree.

Kree caught the adja and held her tight. "Why did you come? Why didn't you stay behind at the cloister?"

"I couldn't stay. I was so afraid for you." She placed her cheek against Kree's. A light breath filled her ear before Jerella said, "I didn't tell Ronen about the others. I feared he'd go look for them and demand they be turned over to our care."

Kree pulled away and stared into Jerella's face. She ran her hand down the younger woman's cheek. So much power in such a delicate and beautiful package. Power that had grown considerably in the days since they were last together.

"I'm very proud of you." She patted the place beside her. "Sit next to me."

Jerella sat as instructed.

The door opened and Wulf entered, followed by several other warriors Kree remembered from the night before and, of all things, a female Druma warrior in full war regalia. She was an impressive example of womanhood with her long black hair plaited in tiny braids around her head. Beads in all shades of brown and beige lined her face. A tattoo of a lynx moving through *ontero* blossoms ran the length of her arm.

The warriors took places near their chieftain on the opposite side of the circle. The sentries sat on either side of Kree. Eavan took a place at his father's right. He winked at Kree from across the circle.

Jerella turned to look at Kree, a question in her blue eyes.

"We'll talk later," was the only explanation she gave as the chieftain called the meeting to order.

"We are pleased to have the sentries and the adja here," he said. "Our reports from the field are not in good favor. I will let Lynx tell you what she and the tech team have found."

The female warrior nodded and her hazel gaze locked on Kree's. "Over the last few months as we've been tracking the progress of the guards, we have noticed increased interference in our communication relays. At first we thought the problem celestial. Sunspots, flares, debris in the atmosphere. It is not so." She handed a com device to Cahlen.

His right eyebrow went up. "We encountered similar when we came out of the mountains." He handed the device to Ronen.

Ronen frowned. "Are you telling me there are more than just the one we found?"

Lynx nodded. "We have found a total of six so far. As yet we have not determined their function. Nor have we been able to understand their placement. It seems as if it is random, but I find that hard to believe. Nothing the theocrats do is random. It's all for the purpose of oppressing those they mean to rule."

Ronen handed Kree the device. The image onscreen filled her with cold. The monolith reached into the sky. It blocked out the sun and cast shadows long across the desert floor. Why was this the first she'd heard of such structures?

"You say these are causing interference in your communications?" Kree passed the device on to Jerella, who shook her head.

"There is something more to them. My ability to read the area around them was blocked as well. I was also able to pick up a slight drawing of energy."

Lynx looked up sharply. "Drawing, you say?"

"Yes. They might block signals in the immediate area, but they also have the nasty ability to suck the life force from living things around them. I bet if you inspect one that has been in an area longer than a few weeks, you'll find the grass and plant life surrounding it dead." Jerella folded her arms around herself. "I have a deep unease that the monoliths have more ominous reasons for being erected than just the blocking of communications. At least known forms of communications as we understand them."

Eavan leaned forward. "What do you mean?"

"Sophites communicate through senses other than signals and electronic waves. We use the Sophatic alleles to pull in information on the subatomic level. It's as much science as mysticism." Jerella lifted her hand into the air and wiggled her fingers. "The information is there in the air. I can tell a hundred different things

about you without you giving me even one shred of verbal communication. All of it is emitted by your life force alone.”

He took a deep breath and rubbed his chin. His gaze shifted to Kree. “We gathered as much from the other Sophites, but it’s never been explained in quite such clear terms.”

“Other Sophites?” Ronen tensed beside Kree.

In the haste of their meeting she had failed to tell him about the others. She held on to his arm, garnering a watchful gaze from Eavan. “Meriah, Ceela, Faria, Eris, Tessia, Beckha, Vonya, and Serrilla are all here.”

Ronen and the rest of the sentries all turned as one to stare at her, then turned to the chieftain.

“How are they? Why aren’t they here?” Cahlen had a look of disbelief on his face, one he directed at Jerella. “You knew this last night.”

“I felt them. I also knew they were well and whole, and yes, happy. I decided as the adja to withhold the information from you. It was the end of a long journey, and we needed rest.” With her profile to Kree, Jerella looked every bit the adja. She’d grown so much in the last few weeks. Not enough to control a temple, but one day she’d be sitting on the premier seat of her own, commanding her own sentries.

Cahlen gave a huff but turned back to the matter at hand. “We placed sensors around the monolith in the mountains. I’ve yet to analyze the data from it.”

Ronen scratched his chin. “It is odd that the ’liths will pull energy from living things, and yet the com devices themselves will hold a charge. You’d think that would be the first thing to lose power. Life force is on an entirely different plane than transmission waves.”

Lynx’s smile was lopsided, as if she held a sweet secret. Coming from a full Druma warrior, it was a powerful and mesmerizing sight. The fact the warrior in question was a woman made it even more elusive. “We’ve learned to shield our devices.”

“And yet we had no trouble with ours.” Ronen was in serious thought mode. Kree knew that expression. He’d sunk all his concentration into the problem at hand. “Our vehicles are standard in operation. You’d think the power drain on them would have occurred when we got close to the ’liths. That didn’t happen either.”

Lynx shook her head. “I don’t have the answer for that, but perhaps the guards have found a way to limit the type of signal affected. Your sensors might tell us more.”

Kree failed to get the image of the monolith out of her mind. It bothered her more than she let on. The damn thing appeared huge in the picture. If it was there in the desert and one was in the mountains, how many more were stretched across the country?

The meeting adjourned for a communal meal shortly after that. Cahlen agreed to work with Lynx on the possible implications of the monoliths. Ronen seemed at a loose end, so Kree invited him to dine with Eavan, Jerella, and her.

The meal was served in open tents and on tables spread out behind the settlement. Warriors participated in tests of skill and endurance. Laughter and music ensued. The scene was a beautiful counterpoint to the pain and uncertainty of life under the theocrats.

Kree walked between Ronen and Eavan. It was an odd place to be. Ronen had grown stiffer and more formal the longer they were in each other's company. He was angry, but he'd been trained too well to express it—other than his initial outburst upon seeing her.

She knew him too well to accept his silence as complacency.

Guilt, sharp and jagged, stabbed at her insides, drawing blood. She knew how he felt about her, and yet she'd done nothing to discourage the emotions. She'd thrived under his sexual tutelage over the years since her final initiation. Most of her strength and determination at holding the order together after the fall of the government had been largely due to Ronen. He was as much responsible for her success as any of her proctors.

What she owed him was a full explanation.

After all, she had brought him here by sending that first message. They ate a quick meal in silence while watching the warriors compete. Every so often Eavan would explain some finer point of the competition or yell encouragement to those on the pitch.

Kree grew steadily uncomfortable. Until she cleared the air there weren't going to be any real easy moments for her. She finished her meal and stood, hitting Ronen companionably on the leg. "Come, we need a conference."

Eavan tensed, but kept his eyes forward, never letting on he was affected by her actions, though she felt his emotions like a blast. So little time spent in his company and she had become so attuned to his moods and emotions, without words needed.

Kree led Ronen to the edge of the practice field, away from prying ears and wagging tongues. *Sopha bless Jerella.* From the distance they stood, she could see her adja engaging Eavan in conversation and pointing to different things along the field.

That's it, keep him occupied.

Across the picnic area, Eris walked with Deniol. Kree turned so Ronen had his back facing Eris. She had to explain everything before he saw the very pregnant priestess and jumped to the wrong conclusion.

But how best to ease into the conversation? Talking to Ronen had never been so unsettling before. She'd never had a hard time bringing up any topic with him in the past. Why now? It was almost as if he were a different species. A stranger.

Kree took a deep breath. "It's almost as if the theocrats haven't touched this place." She pointed to the Druma interacting as if it were a festival day and they were not under the thumb of a group who lived to control even happiness.

“Way out here on the plains, they have more freedom. Even if the theocrats wanted control of the Druma, they’d be hard-pressed to gain a foothold here without alerting or pissing off the other governments.” Ronen turned away from the practice field and looked down into her face. “I was sick with worry when you were taken.”

“I know. I was worried for me too. I woke up in a hideout with a Druma warrior sitting beside the bed and the mother of all headaches.” She rubbed her neck where the collar had been. That was one detail she’d leave out for now. “Eavan didn’t tell me the other Sophites were here. He couldn’t for safety reasons. If we got separated, or if we fell into the hands of the guards, he didn’t want them to torture the plans out of me.”

Ronen swallowed. “That was very forward thinking on his part.”

“On all their parts. The Druma have been systematically hiring themselves out as enforcers in order to get the Sophites to safety. We owe them our very lives.” Kree tried to impress upon him the debt held by the Druma. “Some of the Sophites have even fallen in love with Druma warriors and intend to stay with the settlement.”

Stark pain washed over Ronen’s face. “Does that include you?”

“I haven’t decided yet.” She clasped her hands together. “I want you to know, you have been the very best friend, confidant, and sentry I’ve ever had the pleasure to know. I’d be nothing if not for you.”

“And I’ll continue in my duty as sentry captain for as long as you need me.”

Kree gave him a sad smile. “I’d expect nothing less.”

Ronen turned to look behind them—where Jerella and Eavan sat watching the warriors on the field. “Jerella, despite repeated attempts, still has not managed to break through the block to gain the majority of her powers.”

“But she’s much stronger than when I left.”

Ronen raised a brow. “You can tell?”

“Of course.” She gave a short chuckle. “And I notice your influence on her as well. You’ve counseled her.”

And done more than that if his expression gave it away, but Kree wasn’t about to ask. Jerella was an adja and could pick and choose which sentries serviced her, including Ronen. Besides, Kree knew how much Jerella adored Ronen, even if privately. Maybe something would come of that, but she doubted it. Though Jerella seemed more in command of her powers, she still had an unsettled quality to her aura that wasn’t going to be altered by remaining still for long.

“I’ve done what was asked of me.” Ronen’s gaze followed Lynx as she entered the field. “I didn’t know the Druma allowed women to enter their warrior ranks.”

“Neither did I.” Kree watched as the warrior took up arms. Throwing knives. Not weapons for the faint of heart, or one with a shaky hand or bad aim.

Each throw landed directly in the center of the target, until the knives stood up like a metallic bouquet.

“That’s definitely the woman to have at your back in a fight.” Kree thought back to Eavan’s fight with the guards. How he’d managed to bring down so many on his own she hadn’t known, but seeing the warriors in action now, in a friendly competition, she understood.

“I would hate to get on her bad side.” Ronen stopped. His entire body went tight. “Is that Eris?”

Kree turned, noticing that Eris and Deniol had moved along the crowd of spectators. When the Sophite turned, her prominent belly was not disguised by the cut of her dress.

“It is. That is her credah, Deniol. Her lifemate.”

As they watched, Deniol lifted the hair off Eris’s neck and gave her a sound kiss. He then pulled a chair over for her to sit, before he, too, took the field.

“We can go sit with her if you like.”

Ronen shook his head. “I’m going to take a walk, find Cahlen. We need to get started on analyzing the data from the monolith.”

Typical Ronen. Bad news struck and he threw himself into projects. The same thing happened when the order was outlawed. He’d purchased every book he could find on the teachings of Theomacus and began to learn ways to use those same teachings to the advantage of the Sophites and against the theocrats.

Now he’d throw himself into finding a way to climb out from under the yoke of the theocrats and their monoliths. She knew him that well.

As she watched his retreating form, broad shoulders held straight, head high, she wondered if he’d soon get over his heartbreak. Sopha, she hated to be the one to make him feel that way.

Chapter Eighteen

“You have no idea what you’re talking about.” Ronen set down the transcripts in his hand, after waving them in the air for emphasis. The blasted woman just didn’t understand. Nor had he expected her to. She had biceps for brains.

Lynx pierced him with a hazel gaze. Her eyes seemed to get greener the madder she got. And that black hair had to come from a dye. No one had hair that color.

“I have enough experience deciphering lost languages to know one when I see it.” She took the papers and spread them out on the table in front of them.

They’d been at this all day. Ever since Cahlen had managed to download the sensor input from his handheld into a printer. So far, working with Lynx had been a nightmare. She was opinionated and stubborn.

He’d always thought it was bad form for someone to bear a tattoo that had something to do with their name. Like someone named Rose should never have a rose tattoo. Same with Lynx. Who was she kidding? Ego trip in leathers. No humility.

“Is this a lost language? For all we know, it’s signals from space.”

Cahlen sat next to another warrior by the name of Grey, who seemed to take great delight in the fact Ronen and Lynx had argued about every single point made in their discussions.

Cahlen, however, was busy making his own assessments and didn’t even bother to look up from his paper in order to comment.

“I’m telling you this is ancient Unarion.”

“How did the Unarions get these monoliths into place?” Ronen had no doubt in his mind the Unarions had nothing to do with the construction of the monoliths. A project of that magnitude in that many places would have been noticed. “The theocrats won’t even let the Unarions live in their communes. How are they going to carry this out? Under cover of night, no less, when they are watched and placed on curfews more rigid than the rest of us? I don’t buy it.”

“Do you only talk to hear yourself?” Lynx stood up from the table and walked around. She had her hands dug into her trim waist. Her short shirt showed off a muscular midriff. “I’m not suggesting the Unarions placed it there. I’m saying that the transcripts are transmitted in the language.”

“All right, if we go on the assumption that the structures are theocrat construction, why then would any transmissions coming from them be in ancient

Unarion?” Ronen really wasn’t trying to be obtuse. The entire situation just didn’t feel right. It was as if they were on the wrong path.

“To confuse anyone who was able to pick up and translate the transmissions?” Grey offered.

Ronen chewed on that for a moment. “Possible.” He turned his attention to Cahlen, who still had his head buried in the files. “Have you found anything yet?”

“No. Not really. It’s what I’m not finding that disturbs me.” He clicked a few commands on his handheld, then transferred data to a bigger unit. There he manipulated templates and programs, running the information through a series of diagnostics.

Ronen came around behind his sylvan and watched as the screens rolled by, dissecting the data at top speed. “What are you looking for?”

“Transmission origin. There should be some kind of encoded tag that tells us where the messages originated.”

Ronen gave Lynx a once-over. “If that is ancient Unarion, do you think you can decipher it enough to read what the transmissions say? If the theocrats are sending messages to their bases coded in an ancient tongue, the least we can do is crack it and thwart their plans—whatever they may be.”

Lynx crossed her arms and raised her brow. “The problem with that is that the signals came in overlapping. When the files spit them out as transcripts, it took whatever word was clearest at that moment and put it on the page. What we have are just words without regard to proper form or syntax. The files will have to be cleaned and gone over layer by layer and then reprinted.”

“Great.” Ronen pointed to another console brought in from the rover car. “Maybe you’d like to get started on that while I see if I can gather some warriors to go back for the sensors.”

She made a face and sat down. “I can go for the sensors.”

“No. We need someone with knowledge of the Unarion language to figure out if you have the transmission layers correct.”

Lynx narrowed her cat eyes at him. “You are a strange little man.”

Ronen raised a brow. “There’s nothing *little* about *this* man.”

He left the hut and stalked to the grounds where the chieftain and the elders sat around this time of day. Keeping to a common schedule made them accessible to the settlement. There was an odd sort of comfort in the routine. Even being at the settlement for only a day, Ronen found reassurance in the knowledge.

There were several people ahead of him wishing to speak with the elders. Eavan sat on his father’s right, listening to the complaints and problems of the settlement.

Ronen’s insides went tight.

He didn't need to be a mystic or even a psychic to tell Kree had fallen hard for the Druma warrior. It was in her eyes whenever she looked at the man. It burned and rankled and even made for a bitter taste in his mouth.

Sinking to the level of open hostility was not something he'd do, given the fact the Druma sacrificed their entire civilization to help the Sophites without being asked. That was the true measure of the culture. Eavan was clearly not some warrior who wanted nothing more than to get his rocks off by fucking a sexually charged mystic.

Ronen still couldn't get over Eris's defection.

Did the Sophites feel they owed the Druma their bodies for more than a night for what they'd done for the order? What about the sacrifices the sentries made? They'd died protecting the Sophites since the theocrats denounced the order. All they had gotten was a slap and tickle and treated as if their actions were expected.

Ronen frowned.

To a man, the sentries had never once considered leaving the Sophites unprotected. Their training was too ingrained to let the mystics fend for themselves against a government that had turned against them.

Maybe the Sophites had used the sentries' dedication to the goddess as a way to bind the sentries. A sort of indenture that had not been assigned an end point.

"Captain Ronen."

Ronen focused on the chieftain. In his silent contemplations he'd not realized the small group waiting to speak with the elders ahead of him had already been seen and now it was his turn to address the council.

He bowed in respect. "I come seeking aid for an important task. On our way to the settlement, we placed sensors at the monolith located in the mountains. I would ask that a few of your warriors accompany me and another sentry to collect the sensors."

The chieftain turned to the elders as they discussed the matter.

Ronen felt the weight of Eavan's gaze on him and forced his attention to stay away from the warrior, treating him as if he did not exist. It was the only way to keep from flying over the distance between them and strangling the man.

If he didn't get the requested warriors, he'd leave the other sentries here and go alone. It was more important that the Sophites remain protected by the sentries than it was for him to remain by their side himself. Cahlen was perfectly capable of watching over the mystics.

"We have considered your request and have granted you the use of three warriors." He held up his hand to show he was not finished. There were going to be conditions, Ronen knew it. "You are influential in your order. The sentries look up to you as their leader. Is this true of the other lost temples? Do you have communication with other sentry captains throughout the country?"

This was not where Ronen thought the conversation was headed. "I do."

“In order for our plan to work, we need you to disseminate the information to the other lost temples. Let them know there is hope. The Druma stand with them.”

“Of course.”

The chieftain narrowed his eyes, but there was humor around his mouth. “You don’t trust the Druma warriors.”

Taken off guard, Ronen had the good sense not to appear shocked by the astute assessment. “I believe in your honor and your sacrifice. The Sophites you brought to your settlement might have been lost to us if not for your intervention. For that, I am eternally grateful.”

“That is your office as a captain speaking. Not your heart as a man.”

“My heart doesn’t factor into my duties as a sentry. I serve. That’s it.”

Now the chieftain frowned. Sadness brought his mouth down at the corners. Pity rimmed his golden eyes. “A singular existence. A man needs more to feel alive. He needs family, community, and love.”

Why the lecture? Did the chieftain think Ronen posed a threat to his son’s happiness? He need not worry. Ronen would slit his own throat before he would dare make an ass of himself before his men over Kree. They all knew better than to become too emotionally involved with their charges.

The fact he had was not his proudest moment.

“I have community within my order. And in that community is a family of sorts. Respect certainly.” He let his mouth curl slightly. “And in the area of love, believe me, we sentries do not fall short on that mark either.”

The chieftain laughed. One man to another. “I know all about your practices of keeping your priestesses well and happy. It is not the Druma way, but we respect it as a product of your religion. We do not wish to alter or take that away from you.”

Now Ronen found a genuine smile for the chieftain and the elders. “I wouldn’t believe you’d have gone to all the trouble of saving the Sophites if you meant to change their order in any way.”

“Do you resent the Sophites taking credah of our people?”

Ronen let out a long breath. This was the crux of the conversation. “It is not for me to say. Each Sophite priestess must make that choice for herself. I can only offer counsel if they ask.”

The chieftain nodded again. “You are wise beyond your years, Captain Ronen.”

Ronen gave a bow in thanks. “I will need to leave the settlement before daybreak. Please have the warriors you select to accompany me meet us at the rover car then.”

“I volunteer.” Eavan rose from his place on the straw mat.

He was the last person Ronen wanted along. He’d rather take Lynx in a temper than Eavan when he was trying to be helpful.

Ronen finally looked at the warrior. He was younger than he first appeared. At least a handful of years younger than Ronen, maybe more. "You only returned yesterday."

"I need to see the monoliths firsthand."

Ronen waited for the chieftain or elders to intervene with some excuse why Eavan couldn't be spared to return to the monolith. It didn't happen. It must have been another test for Ronen to pass.

He turned his hands palms up. "If you feel that strongly, be at the rover car in the morning."

* * *

Eavan watched the sentry captain walk away. There was something very appealing about the man. Something that demanded respect and approval. Why was that? It wasn't as if Eavan hadn't gained his rank to become a full Druma warrior. That alone was accomplishment enough. But there was some unfathomable quality that made Eavan seek the sentry captain's approval.

The only approval he'd ever needed was that of his family, his settlement. Coming up through the ranks was not an easy life. It was full of hardships and competition.

The captain was in love with Kree.

And yet, he'd not mentioned his feelings. He'd denied he even had a right to them. Every man had a right to his own heart. To have dominion over his own emotions. The love Ronen spoke of was of the physical kind, not of the heart. Not of the *true* heart.

The elders broke. The time of listening to concerns of the settlement at an end for the day. Ki Jovan tottered on his walking stick away from the group, heading to his heta.

Eavan hurried to catch up with the settlement's holy man. As the Ki, he was the direct link to the ancestors. His senses were a window to the souls of all the Druma.

"May I have a word with you?"

Ki Jovan smiled. His wrinkled face nearly hid his eyes entirely with the action. "I always have time for you, Eavan."

Eavan stood there for a moment, unsure. He'd found himself in a strange place once he and Kree reached the settlement. The intimacy of the mountain tunnels had disintegrated. Not that they were drifting away from each other, but there were so many distractions now.

He took a deep, even breath, trying to find his center. "I need to know if Kree is my lifebonded."

Ki Jovan poked a bony, arthritic finger into the middle of Eavan's chest. "What does your heart tell you?"

“It’s not my heart I’m questioning. It’s my head. I don’t want to make a mistake and take the wrong woman for my partner.”

Ki Jovan gave a gentle smile. “Your head is for logic. Love and happiness, the bond of a credah, knows nothing of logic. The mind is not love’s domain.”

What in all the hells did that mean? Eavan was afraid to question the holy man for fear he’d get another puzzling answer.

Ki Jovan stared at Eavan, not saying a word.

Nervous, Eavan balled his hands into fists, then released them. “I can’t imagine life without her.”

The Ki lifted a rounded shoulder. “Then don’t.”

“I want to have the commitment ceremony with Kree—the binding—before I leave with the captain.”

Ki Jovan turned and started walking again. “What does the premier say? Has she given her consent?”

“Not yet.”

“I cannot perform the ceremony without her consent.”

“I’ll get her consent.”

Saying so and doing so were two completely different concepts. Kree had pretty much told him the night before she needed more time to decide. He, however, didn’t want to leave the settlement again without knowing she had committed to him. Despite the fact he’d decided not to pressure her. There was something in the very air that pushed him. Something bad was coming down, and he wanted to know she was his before it happened. Wanted to know she’d wait for him if they were separated. To give her more of himself than just a few incredible nights of passion.

Eavan squeezed Ki Jovan’s shoulder and started through the settlement to find Kree. He didn’t find her, but he did stumble across the little adja sitting on a rock, staring off into the distance like a flesh and blood version of a statue.

She turned laser blue eyes his way. “Kree is in your heta. She said she needed a nap.”

For a mystic she had quite a bit of psychic abilities. He wondered if her ancestors had some Unarion blood, or if her powers were just that strong that she read deep emotions as well as organics.

The pheromones the adja put out were overpowering. Bringing her to the settlement had been a risk. The unmated warriors followed her around like hounds on the scent of a tasty little rabbit.

“Thank you.” He took two steps and stopped. “Are you all right?”

“Yes. Why do you ask?”

“Well, for one you’re out here on the edge of the settlement by yourself. You should stay closer to the center.”

She stood. Tension clung to her body. "You haven't seen any guards out this far, have you?"

"Not yet, but that's not saying they won't become that bold." He held out his hand for her. "Come."

She took it as he helped her down off the rock where she'd been sitting. When she was back on solid ground, she released his hand. "You mean to take a firm place in Kree's life, don't you?"

"Yes. Tonight, if she'll have me."

The adja crossed her arms, hiding her hands under her sleeves. "How did you know she was the one? Surely there was more to it than abduction."

Eavan snorted. "Quite a bit more."

She let out a breath. "It's hard to love someone when they don't return that love."

His heart stalled for a moment before he realized she wasn't talking about Kree and him. "Someone broke your heart?"

"Yes."

"Then he's a fool."

They made the outside circle of the settlement. Birdcalls shook the trees. Their loud squawks were full of fear. Eavan put his hand on Jerella's back, hurrying her into the circle proper.

"Go to your heta and shutter the windows and doors. Now!"

"What's happening?"

"Sandstorm."

"I don't see any sand around here."

"It blows in from the coast, tracking for hundreds of miles on the wind." Even now the roar of the wind could be heard in the distance, coming down on them like a renegade god. "Your sentries should be back at the heta. You won't be alone."

He made sure she was inside and the window shutters were bolted tightly in place. All over the settlement similar scenes were taking place.

The sentries came running from the far end of the circles. He opened the door for them, letting them pass. The captain was the last one to arrive.

"Does this happen often?"

"Once or twice a summer season, but it usually lasts for hours. Settle in with something to keep you occupied." Eavan pointed to the door on the far side of the great room. "Inside is a store of water and trail meals. You'll not starve."

Ronen gave a stiff nod and entered the heta, closing the door firmly behind him.

Eavan hurried to his own home. Kree stood on the small porch, looking at the flurry of activity happening around her. "What is going on?"

“Sandstorm.” He started for the side windows. “Get inside, credah. It’s coming fast and hard.”

The birds took flight from the trees, flying overhead in a mass of black. Their dark bodies blocked out the sun as the shadows stretched long over the settlement. The coming storm was a big one. Huge.

The high-placed windows had shutters that were raised on struts. Eavan unlatched the pole that held the shutter in place and let the covering slam down. He flipped the foam seal and turned the key, locking it into place. He repeated the process on the remaining windows, then joined Kree in the heta. Before he closed the door, he placed a foam strip under the door to keep the sand from blowing into the house.

He found Kree standing in the small hallway between the bathroom and living area. She appeared frozen with fear.

“Hey.” Eavan placed his hands on her biceps and chafed warmth into her cool skin. “I’m here, credah. Nothing’s going to harm you.”

“Where are my sentries? My adja?”

“They are secure in their heta. They have food and water and one another.” He ran his hand under her hair, lifting it off her neck. He traced his thumb over her lower lip. “I asked the Ki to prepare for our ceremony tonight, but I guess the gods had other plans.”

Kree’s gaze slammed into his. Her pupils went large and dark, nearly swallowing up the irises. “I haven’t made my decision yet.”

Eavan didn’t get angry or feel even the first pang of fear she’d leave him. Tenderly, he rested his forehead against hers. He used the words of the Ki. “Look into your heart. You know you’re where you belong.”

“I’m the Sophite premier. I can’t just abandon my order when we’re in our most desperate hour.”

“Ah, credah, no one is asking you to.” He slid his lips down to hers, taking the barest of kisses from her.

Outside, the wind rattled against the shutters, picking up in speed and intensity.

Kree opened her mouth to him, touching the tip of her tongue to his. Words were lost to the hot urgency of the moment. Her hands slid over his shoulders, pulling him closer. He didn’t deny her. How could he? Every time they touched, he felt as if his body was going to ignite into a ball of flames.

It was no less true this time.

Heat danced in the air between them. He lifted her from the floor and carried her into the bedroom. It was a short way down to collapse on top of her, but the woman knew what she wanted. Her legs fell open, welcoming him into the cradle of her thighs.

Eavan moved his erection against her. Even through the layers of their clothes, her pussy was hot. Flaming. Her skin had already taken on that soft glow as she became more excited.

Slowly, making sure each patch of skin got its just attention, Eavan undressed Kree. He spread her out in the middle of the bed to drink in the sight of her beauty, and his heart caught. "Could you walk away from me, Kree?"

A frown settled between her brows. "What do you mean?"

"How would you feel if this was the last time you'd ever see me? Do you feel anything at all?" He traced the planes of her face with his fingertip as he talked. When she didn't answer, only stared at him as if considering, he moved his hand lower, to the valley between her breasts.

Her heart hammered against his fingers. It was the best nonverbal answer he'd ever received. Eavan leaned down, placing his lips there for a chaste kiss. Her hand wound into his hair as if of its own accord.

He slid his hand down her body, taking his time by caressing both her thighs and then back up again to the flat plane of her stomach. He worked his hand out to the sharp bones of her hips and around to the firm, full globes of her buttocks.

He filled his palm with one round cheek and pulled her to him. "Loving me won't diminish who you are to your order. You will always be their premier, until you choose to step down. I don't want to change you, only give you the life you were meant to have."

"Funny, the last time I consulted Sopha she didn't mention you."

Eavan smiled. "Maybe not by name."

He watched her expression change. Blank. Nothing.

Suddenly, her eyes rounded. She pulled back from him, studying his face as if seeing him for the first time.

"That birdcall you made when we were waiting for your brother, what was it?"

"A crested red eagle. It's a call they give their young when teaching them flight."

She took in a deep breath. "You're right. She did mention you."

"And what did she say?" He kissed his way down her body, following the path of his hand.

"Beware." Then she giggled.

He kissed her pussy, letting his tongue sneak into the soft, wet folds. She spread her legs, giving him more room to love her.

Eavan lay upside down, his torso and legs near Kree's head. She turned toward him, pulling him free of his leathers. The gentle slide of her hand over his cock made his hips gravitate in her direction.

He turned fully to her. She took the advantage and slid her hand around to cup his balls. He let out a moan from deep in his soul. Not even the widows had touched him with such exquisite care. Kree tended to him as a credah should. Her

mouth and hands played tribute to his cock, massaged his balls in pulses as she took him deep into her mouth. The warm, wet walls in concert with the roll of her tongue sent him spiraling on a blind fall and into a complete state of bliss.

It was almost impossible to remember his ministrations over Kree's body. Not when she brought him to the very edge of sexual madness. Not when he hovered between reality and abyss.

"Kree." His voice had gone hoarse, foreign to his ears.

It was better than he'd ever imagined it could be.

Outside, the wind rattled the shutters. Wind-swept sand pounded the walls. None of it mattered to Eavan, not when his credah sucked his cock with the most perfect pull of her mouth. With her hand, she made a tight ring around the base, stroking him as she worked him over.

He sent his tongue into her cunt, fucking her the way he wanted to with his cock. He placed his thumb on her clit, moving it back and forth with each lick. Her thighs glowed on either side of his head, caging him in a lighted prison. In this case, he really didn't mind. Kree had already taken him prisoner when he'd felled her with the stunner. For him, there was no other possible credah than the woman currently in his arms.

Then he was there, falling down a bright shaft. Shooting down through the layers of self until he ended on the bottom, then rebounded, flung up through the stratosphere. He closed his eyes, drowning in the sensation of Kree swallowing as he came.

Chapter Nineteen

Kree reveled in the throaty sounds coming from Eavan. Loved the way he lost control when she let him come in her mouth. Such a strong, capable man. So practiced at making love to her, of touching her where and when she needed it. To think he was a virgin. That all the unmated males of the Druma had never experienced coitus. It was mind-boggling.

She turned to look over her shoulder at Eavan sprawled back against the mattress. His breathing remained ragged. Sweat dampened the hair on his forehead. He looked like a man who was sexually satisfied and content to be so. He also opened his eyes at that moment and captured the last piece of her heart to hold out.

She crawled off him and turned so they were face-to-face. "What are the vows I have to speak?"

"You don't have to if you still have reservations. I will only accept them if you speak them freely."

Looking at Eavan she didn't see a reason not to. "I need assurances my religion will be preserved and not muted or controlled by the Druma culture."

Eavan took her hand, threading their fingers. "We saved the Sophites to ensure your ways continued. Not to take them over or subdue them like the theocrats."

"You will be the next chieftain of this settlement, correct?" She ran her hand over his warm chest. His tattoo twined around his shoulder to end on his left pec. Kree ran her hand over the flat coin of his nipple, up to where the ink began on his skin.

"Yes."

"But you are beholden to traditions and the decisions of the elders. You don't rule by absolute, you rule by committee."

"In a manner of speaking." He lifted his hand, traced his thumb over her lower lip. "Why?"

"I need to know that your office and mine will be compatible in the long years to come." She stretched out over his body, moving back and forth against him in sensual motions.

"We will work things out. Always. I give my word."

And in that word was his honor.

Kree placed her legs on both sides of his hips, straddling him. His cock began to stir against her. "I'll hold you to it. In the meantime, I pledge my life to yours and take you as my chosen. My lifemate."

Eavan sat up, taking her in his arms, pressing his lips to hers.

Breathless with excitement, Kree broke the kiss. "Are you supposed to promise something as well? Fidelity? Loyalty?"

"I pledge all that along with my unwavering devotion. Understanding and respect. In witness of the ancestors I bind my life to yours."

"I accept."

Then there were no more words, only the claiming. A Druma warrior taking what was freely given. His honor remained intact as he turned her over onto her belly, lifting her backside into the air.

So this was how he wanted his first time. A conquering. The Druma warrior declaring his supremacy over his mate. Kree didn't mind. She'd had her first time, years ago, and the ritual had been dictated by the cannon of Sophite law. There was no variation or deviation from the sexual dance. Each practitioner made the same moves as the one before her and the one before her, all reenacting the loss of Sophia's innocence. How freeing to be able to convey love and mutual respect through honest expression.

Eavan rubbed against her pussy. She knew she was hot and ready. Just the thought she would be the only woman he'd ever put his cock into was lifting her to a level of pleasure she'd never experienced before. She rested on her elbows, then cupped her breasts in her hands, rubbing the nipples into tight peaks.

He traced the rim of her cunt with the tip of his cock. "Oh, Kree." Her name was the only word she understood; the rest were spoken in Druma. A prayer. A promise. She had no way to know. Maybe one day she'd ask him, but for now she concentrated all her energy on the way it felt as he pushed forward so slowly it became torture.

The head barely slipped inside when he shuddered. "By Dreeka." Then he slid in all the way, grinding deep. There wasn't a part of her where she didn't feel him. It was infinitely better than the replica, though that had been so good it was transcendent.

Eavan wound his hand under her belly, finding her pussy open and waiting for his touch. He pressed his finger against Kree's clit. She bore down, taking as much of the sensation as she could grab. Even though this was for him, it didn't mean she intended to go without fulfillment.

He picked up the pace. His balls slapped against her nether lips, adding another level of pleasure. Suddenly he was gone from her back. Kree turned to look over her shoulder, only to see Eavan rear his head back. Cords in his neck stood out in relief as he let out a shout to the heavens. Hot spasms bathed her channel.

It was done.

* * *

The storm raged until the early hours of the morning, blanketing the area in the deep tanned sand. It was for reasons such as this that the majority of the food was grown in houses, safe from the elements. The storms were known to wipe out entire crops in one fell swoop.

Eavan gathered his gear and prepared to go out. First they'd have to dig the rover cars out of the sand and get them moving before they did anything else. That might take a while. Ronen wanted to leave at daylight, but that plan might not come to fruition.

They should have moved the cars into an empty building to keep them from the elements. Eavan had seen more than one rover car ruined by sand getting blown into the engine components and thruster beds.

"Where are you going?" Kree rose up on an elbow, studying him from the comfort of their bed.

When he looked at her, his heart swelled.

She was really and truly his. She'd repeated vows to him. Even without the binding ceremony, they were committed for life. They'd promised it to both his ancestors and her goddess. Now the most important words had been said, they'd perform the binding upon his return to the settlement.

"I promised Ronen I'd travel with him into the mountains to retrieve the sensors at the monolith."

"You're leaving?" She sat up, holding the sheet to her breasts. "We've been married less than six hours and you're already taking off without me?"

"I need to do this, Kree."

She tilted her head. "Why? Just because Ronen asked you to?"

"He didn't ask me. I volunteered to go with him." Eavan stuffed more ration packs down into his bag.

"If I were you, I'd not mention to him that we repeated vows to each other. Let me be the one to tell him." She scooted off the bed and stood, the sheet wrapped around her.

Eavan stalled and glanced up. "You think he'll challenge me?"

"A full Druma warrior? No. He'd be crazy to, but Ronen is a good man. An honest man. He doesn't deserve to have his heart broken callously." Kree ran her hand down his cheek.

Eavan turned into it and kissed her palm. "Contrary to popular belief, the Druma do not get off on hurting people, physically or emotionally."

Her smile went a little crooked. "Is that why after we met I had the mother of all headaches?"

Eavan stood to full height. "No, that was seizing the only way to get you to safety without blowing my cover with the guards."

Time stretched out as they stared at each other. Shades of awkwardness filled the gap.

Kree cleared her throat.

“How long will you be gone?”

Eavan gave her a shrug. “A few days at least.”

“Do you think your elders will mind if I put together a small temple here? The Sophites need a place to worship in private.”

“You’ll have to go before them and ask.” He smiled. “But just so you know, now you are committed to me, you will have more pull with the elders.”

“How are they supposed to know we spoke vows?” Kree dropped the sheet and advanced on him.

He was never going to make it to the rover car if she presented temptation like that before him. “They’ll know.”

Kree moved against him. “Don’t you want to come back to bed for a while?”

Eavan took a deep breath, falling headlong into the scent of her pheromones on the air. Nothing smelled as exquisite as her desire. “You know I do, but I have to go dig the rover cars out. If they still work. If not, we have to ready the horses for a long trip.”

Kree pulled open the closet door and stood on her tiptoes, looking on the top shelf. “Where is that model of your cock?”

Eavan groaned in longing. Images of her lying on the bed, pleasuring herself with the replica cock, were more than he could bear at the moment. He already regretted saying he’d go with Ronen. Leaving his beautiful Kree so soon after saying their vows was like ripping his tattoo off with a dull blade.

“Here.” He grabbed the box off the shelf and set it beside the bed.

She sat down and took out the dildo, stroking the length of it. “For a culture who abstains from coitus until your vows are said, you sure know how to get around the rules.”

“Yes, well. We are allowed to enjoy the bodies of our credahs. Love is beautiful and can be expressed in varying ways. Honoring our women by letting them know we give our semen only to the one we will spend our life with typifies that sacred act.”

“That’s a beautiful way to say you don’t want any bastards running around. Making it a matter of honor to abstain is a clever device.”

The observation didn’t offend Eavan; it amused him. “There might be some truth to that. How often does a culture turn something into a taboo or tradition because it suits some purpose other than what is intended or stated? I’m sure the Sophites are no different.”

Kree leaned back on the bed, stroking the dildo through the sweet pink folds of her pussy. “Of course. Scientific studies have proven the alleles in our DNA that drive the Sophatic powers can be stimulated by the introduction of chemicals into

the bloodstream. Atropine. Epinephrine. It's just so much more exciting to introduce the reaction by those chemicals releasing naturally than taking them...orally."

The room grew twenty degrees hotter while he watched her play with the stiff, fleshlike copy of his cock. "You really know how to put a man behind schedule."

"Behind schedule? I'm going for a total postponement. No bride wants to be left behind after the wedding." Her smile was saucy enough to make his toes curl.

Eavan pulled his leathers down. He was already so hard he could barely stand it. He grabbed her hand that held the dildo. "Give that to me."

She relinquished her hold. Eavan grabbed her hips and flipped her over onto her belly. She was ready for him. He didn't waste time taking the advantage.

He pushed into the hot walls of her sheath, gathering moisture on his fingers as he did. The ring of her anus winked as he continued to thrust. It held his attention, mesmerizing like a Kalwen vagabond trying to hypnotize him. He made a slow dance around the rim, before letting his thumb inside, opening her wider.

Kree made a low keening sound. That was all he needed. He took the dildo, tracing the path his thumb had taken. Kree backed up against the invasion.

"You want that?"

"Yes."

Her skin glowed warm and luscious. Oh yes, her body told him as much as her words. He pressed the head of the dildo against her anus, then let it slide inside, careful to be gentle with the delicate area.

Almost instantly she contracted around him, coming in a warm bath over his cock. Indescribable bliss swam through his veins. Knowing he gave so much pleasure to his chosen. That of all the men his credah had been with in the course of her tenure with the Sophite Order, this magnificent woman would commit to him alone, humbled him.

He continued to thrust with both flesh and replica, taking her higher. Pheromones sparkled in the air between them like the pop and crack of a bonfire. This time when she came, he followed her down into bliss.

There was no time to languish in the afterglow. No moment to get lost in the sweet giddiness of loving her. He had made a promise to go with Ronen to the monolith, and he meant to honor that commitment.

He hurried through another shower and dressed, wondering the entire time if he wasn't doing one of the most foolish things he'd ever undertaken.

He found Kree in the bedroom where he'd left her.

Eavan gave Kree a long, lingering kiss. When the farewell threatened to spiral into another passionate encounter, he pulled back to study her swollen lips and flushed face. The glow from the lovemaking still hadn't receded.

He ran his thumb down the curve of her cheek. "You should be well and truly *powerful* now."

“You have no idea.” Her eyes shone with laughter. “I could probably dismantle one of those monoliths and carry it back here strapped to my back.”

“I don’t even want you near the monoliths. No telling what kind of power they leech. After what your adja told us she felt in their presence, I’m more than a little concerned over what they mean to races who are sensitives.”

“I guess I’ll occupy myself by helping Cahlen and the others decipher the texts they uncovered.” She looked out over the sand-covered settlement. “If I can find the tech heta.”

Worry filled her eyes when she turned back to him. “Be careful. I didn’t take this step of commitment to you lightly, and I damn sure didn’t do so to become a widow.”

It wasn’t the declaration of love he’d wished for, but it was enough for now. He had her vow. He knew her to be a woman of integrity. The rest would come in time.

“Though it would hurt me even into my afterlife, if such a time comes when I no longer am by your side in flesh and blood, return to your sentries.” Eavan curled his hand around her face, feeling the slight tremble that moved through her body.

“I’m not even going to discuss this with you now.” Her arms came around his waist. She rested her head on his chest. “Take care.”

“And you.” He touched his lips to hers one last time, then headed through the ankle-deep sand to the rover cars.

As he came around the edge of the parking area, he noticed one rover car missing. None of the settlement cars had been moved from their normal designated spots. The only one gone was one of the sentries’. Did they leave without him?

Damn. One day as a bonded pair and already he let his dick get the better of him. What was Ronen supposed to think? When he finally discovered that the premier he’d dedicated his career to had committed to one man, and that man incapable of even the most basic of concepts—keeping to a schedule—he’d advise Kree to dump her credah.

Epithets in the basic tongue peppered the air behind Eavan. He turned to see the sentries coming around the corner of the last row of hetas. They stood staring at the empty place where the rover car had been parked.

Ronen sent one of the other sentries back through the settlement as he continued on to where Eavan stood. “Did you see anyone leave with the rover?”

“I just arrived myself. I assumed you’d left already.”

Ronen rolled his eyes. “Not without a complete dissertation from Cahlen on what not to do to violate the data on the sensors.”

Grey and another warrior, Erole, came around the corner.

Grey set his pack down in the sand next to his feet. “Is there a problem?”

“One of our rovers is missing. I sent Quillan back to see if one of the others took it for some reason.”

Grey and Erole exchanged a telling glance.

“You know something?” Eavan crossed his arms over his chest and took a command stance. He wanted no doubt in their minds who the ranking Druma was in the group.

Grey made a face. “Cicero was out looking for Abbinet right before the storm hit. He didn’t find her.”

“Why wasn’t I notified?”

Erole gave an uncomfortable cough. “Your father told us not to disturb you. And Ki Jovan was insistent that if we did, he’d block us from the ancestors when we died. I don’t believe he was joking.”

Eavan didn’t know if he should react or not. Any affirmation or denial would call Ronen’s attention to the situation. “Even so.”

He started for the second rover car. “We need to see if this is still going to fire, or if sand bogged down the engine.”

“Is that all you’re going to say, Eavan?” Grey came up beside him, speaking low enough that Ronen couldn’t overhear.

“It’s all I can say for now. We’ll talk about this later.” He turned to Ronen. “I think your rover may have been taken by our rogue female. I apologize for her actions.”

Ronen waved the apology away. “If she did take it, I’m glad she took that one and not this one.”

“Why?” Grey leaned against the vehicle as Ronen opened the door and engaged the start-up sequence.

Ronen looked up at Grey. A hard expression filled his eyes. “This one would see her executed on sight if it were searched.”

Unease moved through Eavan. “Why is that?”

“You don’t want to know.”

Chapter Twenty

Kree made her way to the tech heta designated for the sole purpose of uncovering the secrets of the monoliths. Each step sent sand into her shoes. It lapped up over her feet and ankles like a shallow, gritty tidal pool.

There were already several people at work when she arrived. Cahlen had his head buried in a console, watching it as if some miracle was about to occur and if he looked away or blinked he'd miss it. Lynx punched commands into another console. Rhees sat next to Lynx and pored over what looked like an ancient scroll. Parras appeared to be busy calibrating various instruments.

Jerella came into the heta and stood next to Kree, looking at the Druma and Sophites working together. "When Eavan abducted you, did you ever think it would lead to this? The Sophites and the Druma working together to find a way out from under the theocrats' rule?"

Kree slid her arm around Jerella's shoulder. "When I woke in the safe house and saw the snake tattoo slithering up his arm, I thought I was going to meet Mother Sopha."

Jerella became thoughtful. "No man who's ever met you would ever wish to take your life. You enchanted Eavan like you do all of them."

Bitterness tasted sharp on the air.

Kree turned to fully look at her adja. "Have I caused you some injury?"

Jerella shook her head and moved away, taking a place at the table next to Cahlen.

At a loss, but feeling the slow leak of animosity coming from Jerella, Kree made her way to the work area. She came up behind the Druma warrioress. The program running separated layers of a compressed document into compartmentalized files. It was an arduous process that required the programmer to pull each file as it finished. It was primitive, but it worked.

Lynx looked up at Kree. "Do you read ancient Unarion?"

"Some, but not well. My premier, Siobhán, insisted all her adjas learn the ancient languages. She was a stickler that way. I'm actually better at Fingali and Swendule than Unarion." Kree sat down in the seat on Lynx's left. "What do you need me to do?"

Lynx handed her a stack of pages that had just finished printing. "Translate these."

"I'd probably have an easier time running the program." She glanced at the pages, then looked at Cahlen. "Do you have a translation program on your handheld?"

"Yes, but not that is programmed with ancient Unarion."

Lynx stood and stretched like the cat she was named for. "Switch, then." She tapped the chair she'd just vacated.

Kree moved in front of the console and sat. The program scrolled by. Letters, words, entire sentences fragmented and pulled away from others. It looked like a textbook had been shaken and thrown into the computer at random. Words were odd, souplike in their randomness. Not to mention they were written all wrong. Whatever program had converted them from audio to written had transcribed them in standard, not the ancient Unarion cartouches.

Several words moved by in their phonetic babble, heading to their folder. If she said the words out loud they made sense. Too much sense.

"These were transmissions found embedded in the monolith?"

Lynx glanced up from the papers in front of her. She held a finger on her place. "Yes."

"Rather conversational to be code, don't you think?"

Lynx leaned on her tattooed hand. "If I were writing a code to pass sensitive information to my comrades, I'd do it in such a way no one realized it was code."

There was an odd kind of logic to Lynx's argument.

That didn't stop Kree feeling there was something more sinister to the transmissions. Why would the theocrats, who hated every race and culture that did not agree with the teachings of Theomacus, use an ancient Unarion tongue to transmit their messages across the country? Even if it was sent from the psychics they had forcibly conscripted. Kree doubted they would let the theocrats violate something as sacred as their mother tongue. It made little sense. Unless one looked at it as the theocrats thinking few people spoke or wrote the language anymore, so therefore wouldn't understand the dialect if it were uncovered. There was also the possibility that the theocrats thought to embed the code inside other transmissions.

Kree looked over the monitor to Cahlen. "Have you noticed any other signatures inside the transmissions?"

"No. Not even origination sequences."

That was even more disturbing. Where did the signals come from, then? She had no doubt Cahlen and Ronen had made all the arguments over and over.

"Is there any way that those codes could have been piggybacked into another transmission?"

Cahlen frowned. "I suppose, but highly unlikely. It would require a very sophisticated system to do that, and I doubt the theocrats would sanction such a thing."

“Maybe not for others, but if it gave them a leg up on those they’re trying to subjugate, you better believe they’d sanction it in a heartbeat.” Kree settled into her argument. “Did you happen to see the firepower they command when hunting someone down?”

Cahlen nodded. “Up close and personal even.”

Jerella made a face. “They aren’t divine. They have no more power than most men. Less perhaps. That’s why they fear those of us who have the ability to read organics. Or to pluck speech from the minds of our neighbors.”

The bitterness was back, full force. Trouble brewed in the heart of Kree’s adja, and she didn’t quite know where the hostility came from. Be that as it may, Jerella did have a point. It wasn’t, however, a new revelation by any stretch of the imagination.

Kree remained silent, reading the energy that leaked from Jerella. The few strands that managed to find their way to the air painted a toxic cloud. There had not been that same reaction when they were reunited. Jerella had been relieved to see Kree. There had been a genuine relief. Where had that gone?

It was almost as if the younger woman had been seized by jealousy. It was an emotion almost unheard of in the order.

Sophites were raised and educated with the knowledge that men were sometimes transitory in their lives. There was no one Sophite who laid claim to a particular sentry. The rules were implicit. The sentries were there for pleasure and rites. If a premier leaned on the broad shoulders of her sentry captain and his sylvan, it was because they were reliable, dependable, and wise.

That didn’t mean some of the temple leaders did not take their captains for lifemates, because it did happen. It just wasn’t the norm within the order.

Kree had always depended on Ronen, from the first moment they met during her later years of training. He had always been the one she turned to for advice. For that she had felt closer to him than any of the other sentries, so when the time came to take her last step to full power, Ronen was the natural choice for her.

Why did that decision, which seemed so right at the time, come back to haunt her now, years later?

Kree let the comment go for now, but vowed to get to the bottom of the adja’s behavior before sunset. Since Eavan was gone, she’d have ample time to spend with the other Sophites. They needed to make plans.

Kree slid into her authority as the premier and looked directly into Jerella’s eyes so there was no mistake she was about to give an order not a request. “Gather the other Sophites. We will have a meeting at midmeal.”

Jerella stared at her for a moment as if defying the order. A gentle nudge from Cahlen and she was in motion, rising from the table and heading for the door.

When the door closed behind her, Cahlen raised a brow. “She’s had a rough journey. I don’t know where her head is these days.”

Cahlen was probably closer to Jerella than any of the other sentries. “Any idea what has her so unsettled?”

“Yes, but we’ll discuss it in private.”

Lynx never lifted her attention from the printouts before her. “Feel free to speak in front of me. The Druma have a strict code of not repeating things they overhear if given in confidence.”

“I can vouch for that.” Kree glanced over at the female warrior. “It took until I met the woman face-to-face before I ever knew of Eavan’s wife.”

Cahlen frowned. “He’s married?”

Kree held up her hand to stave off the storm she saw brewing in the sylvan. “It’s complicated.”

“How complicated can it be? He’s either married or he’s not.”

“Not,” Lynx answered. “He assumed responsibility for Abbinet when her father and brother were killed by the theocrats. I believe in your native tongue, you would say she was his *charge*.”

“Big leap between charge and wife,” Cahlen mumbled. “He still should have told you.”

Kree shrugged. “We discussed the finer points of disclosure when the fact came to light, I assure you.”

Lynx laughed and finally looked over at Kree. Her hazel eyes twinkled, and her brilliant smile was engaging. She really was a very striking woman. It amazed Kree that someone who looked so soft and feminine would bear the tattoos of the Druma warrior. “I like you, Kree Janus. I think you and I shall become fast friends.”

Touched, Kree returned the smile and the sentiment. In some other life, Kree was sure Lynx had probably been a Sophite. Or perhaps Kree had been a Druma. Did the Druma even believe in reincarnation?

Lynx let her attention fall on Cahlen. “It was unsafe for Eavan to reveal too much about the settlement while they traversed the country. A guard bent on gaining information from her and learning Eavan’s reasons for not turning Kree over to the proper authorities or killing her on sight, would be eager to torture the information out of her.”

“I understand that, but was there reason to hide the fact after they were safely with the others in the rover car?”

“Of course. The guard could have stopped them anywhere along the way. Eavan is a wanted man now. His presence anywhere within the lands controlled by the theocrats is a dangerous gamble.”

Kree put her hand to her heart. Then why had he chosen to follow Ronen there? What was the point? She’d worry about that fact later in private.

“Back to our former discussion. What is wrong with Jerella?”

Cahlen looked mystified. “She attempted several times on the road to force her full powers to come, and they refused to reveal themselves.”

Kree let her eyes close. There was no doubt in her mind that Jerella had finally asked Ronen to make love to her. It wasn't the first time the thought had occurred to her. Had doing so, forcing the issue, cost Jerella to lose a bit of her focus?

And things had seemed so promising when Kree and her adja had been reunited. Jerella had made some very sound and mature decisions regarding the other Sophites when she had arrived with the sentries. Where had that confidence and self-assurance gone?

Kree shook her head. "I'll talk to her later. I don't want her to feel her lack of full powers is a handicap for us defeating the theocrats."

Cahlen crossed his arms and leaned slightly forward. "I don't know how she could possibly believe that. She's probably the most powerful adja I've ever worked with."

"Some advice," Lynx said. "She knows she has great power, and yet she doesn't have the maturity to control even her emotions where that is concerned. If she were a warrior, she would be sent to learn a lesson in humility. I realize that is not the Sophite way, but you do have tools at your disposal you can utilize."

"Like what?" Kree was slightly confused. The only thing she could do as premier was to assert her own power or, more correctly, her title. Jerella had already far surpassed Kree in mystic powers.

"Let her know her value as an individual and give her the want, the means, to use her power wisely." Lynx pointed to the pages. "She gave us information at that first meeting we hadn't known before. She felt the pulling of power by the monoliths. We hadn't realized that. She *is* valuable." There was a brief pause. "She walks in your shadow, Kree. You might not think it so, but it is. And you cast a very long one."

Kree thanked Lynx for the advice and went back to filtering the transmissions. Her mind wandered back to exactly what Jerella had said about the monoliths. The sucking of energy around them, able to leech nutrients from the soil and grass. The very life force of everything around it. More importantly, how the exchange of information could be managed on a subatomic level.

"Oh by the Mother Sopha," Kree whispered as she stood at the terminal.

Work in the heta stopped. All eyes turned toward her.

"What have you found?" Cahlen rose from his seat and came around to look at the console. Lynx had already nudged in, gazing at the screen.

"What is the one group the theocrats felt most threatened by when they took power?" Kree asked.

"The Unarions," Cahlen answered immediately.

"Right. Even to the point of disallowing them to live in their communes. Making it so they could not lawfully marry their own kind, and refusing to let more than one live on the same street. Those who refused to comply were killed."

“I don’t see where you’re going with this.” Rhees finally joined the conversation. He’d been conspicuously quiet until now.

“How do the Unarions communicate with one another?”

Lynx was the first one to catch on to Kree’s theory. She looked down at the paper in front of her, raising her hands off the words as if touching something both sacred and private. “*Mindspeech.*”

“Right.” Kree pointed to the screen as more files separated themselves into appropriate layers. “These sound like conversations, because they are. The theocrats have found a way to capture the mindspeech of the Unarions and use it against them.”

Rhees looked stunned. “How is that even possible?”

Cahlen answered for Kree. “Find the right frequency they use to communicate with one another, and it becomes a study in building the right receiver.”

The more Kree considered it, the more it fit the information in front of them, no matter how far-fetched it sounded. “If they are capable of absorbing the telepathic signals of the Unarions, how long until they are no longer monitoring those conversations, but blocking them altogether?”

Lynx started for the door. “We need to find a Unarion and put our theory to the test.”

“Do you have one?” Kree called out after her.

“I only wish.” She sent a knowing smile over her shoulder. “But I believe we might have the next best thing right here in the settlement.”

Chapter Twenty-one

Eavan had barely exchanged two words with Ronen since the journey began. That had not been part of his plan. He wanted to get to know the sentry captain better, to facilitate understanding between the warriors and the sentries. If history was written in the present, then the story being told was that the Druma and Sophites would be forever linked. There had to be some kind of accord reached.

That link needed to come through the sentry captain and the next chieftain of the Druma. More importantly, Eavan was just proud enough to want that bridge to be built with his own hands and not that of his credah.

However, he found very little to say to the sentry captain now they were headed to the monolith. Talking of the weather and the recent sand storm seemed nonbeneficial to his purpose.

There was one topic that was safe and put them on even footing without delving into the particulars of Eavan and Kree's flight through the mountain.

Eavan charged in with all the finesse of a war chief on campaign. "Did you encounter much guard traffic on your way to the settlement?"

Ronen turned an acid glance his way. "Thick as locusts and twice as useless."

If Ronen had ever trained as a Druma warrior, he'd have surpassed all others. He'd have gone straight to the upper echelons. No wonder Kree had such respect for him.

"Your hideout didn't survive their search. They burned it to the ground. The structure was still smoldering when we arrived. We were afraid Kree had been trapped inside."

But not you.

The thought was explicit in its exclusion. The implication was clear enough.

"I did what I had to in order to save her life."

Ronen's jaws worked back and forth. "Don't think I don't know that. Everywhere I turn in the settlement I see evidence that the priestesses who have been living among you have done so with the utmost care and love showered on them. Believe me, no one is as grateful as I over the Drumas' intervention. I just wish I would have known sooner so we could have worked together from the start. Instead you Druma blindsided us on arrival."

“It was too big a secret to entrust to those outside the settlement. We meant no disrespect.” Eavan looked out at the passing countryside. Slowly the sand that had been dumped from the storm gave way to stalks of green vegetation.

“You are a very honorable race. I didn’t, for one minute, think you meant disrespect.” Ronen pushed the rover into a second thruster power as they began to climb a hill. “I’ve spent my entire adult life in the service of the Sophites. Goddess willing, I will continue until my last sputtered breath.”

There was so much more in that confession than what Ronen let on. Like the safety of the Sophites under his care fell to his shoulders and the Druma had effectively cut him off at the knees when they began to abduct the priestesses. As a warrior, Eavan knew such loss of control was unconscionable by a man in such a position.

Kree had forbidden him to mention their commitment vows. Was there anything he could say to pave the way? Eavan studied Ronen’s profile.

No. Definitely not.

The sentry captain’s jaw was hard as granite. His lips were pressed into a thin line. He gripped the thruster toggle with white-knuckled hands. The man was keeping his resentment in check by only the thinnest of wires.

All right. Not a good time to preface it all by saying there were bigger forces at play. Even a Druma knew not to poke an angry snake.

The rover car passed the reservoir where he and Kree had fought for their lives against the guards. Had they been so close to the monolith and not realized it?

Eavan asked as much.

Ronen shook his head. “Still another day of travel. We should reach it by midday tomorrow.”

Eavan glanced in the back to Grey, who was currently thumbing a small handheld device, searching for any output signal indicating a guard base. “You get anything yet?”

“Nothing. They’ve cleared the area.”

Ronen flashed Eavan a severe frown. “This area in particular?”

Eavan gave a curt nod and pointed to the western slope of the foothills. “They were moving from that direction, sweeping over the hills like a blanket of death. We managed to make it to the reservoir pump house before they struck. I locked Kree inside and confronted the bastards.”

Ronen’s hands noticeably tightened on the toggle.

“I was able to subdue them.”

A sentry by the name of Quillan leaned over the seat. “How many of them?”

“Six. Eight. A nice even number.” Eavan continued to look out the window, scanning the ridge for any possible reappearance.

“You took on half a dozen guards on your own?” Quillan’s voice was incredulous.

“I had no choice. It was either confront or run scared. We no longer had the protection of the internal mountain trails.”

Ronen spared Eavan a glance. “No choice? There is always a choice.”

“Not if we wanted to make it out of the mountains and to the settlement alive.” Eavan finally turned back to Ronen. “I believe my strategy worked.”

“I’m not taking issue with your strategy. I’m taking issue with the possible cost. You could have gotten Kree killed.”

A vision of Kree standing before him with her stunner in hand, about to shoot him on the day he finally captured her, popped into his mind.

“Kree is a completely competent woman when it comes to her own safety.”

“You look as if you have experience with that?”

There was no time to answer the question. The handheld in Grey’s hand set off an alarm that shattered the tension-filled banter, placing the sentries and Druma on guard.

Ronen slowed the rover car near the ridge. A battalion of guards covered the valley floor. They walked with their bodies bent parallel to the ground. Shiny instruments glinted off the sun, sending shafts of light spiraling outward.

“Are they taking samples or searching for something?” Erole put his hand on the back of Eavan’s seat as he leaned forward, trying to get a better look.

Eavan grabbed a pair of field glasses and raised them to his eyes. “Searching.”

“For what?” Ronen whispered the question. He, too, had lifted a pair of glasses, these with recording capabilities. “If I didn’t know better, I’d swear it was mineral deposits, but these mountains were surveyed years ago and the main veins plundered.”

Quillan made a noise from the backseat, a cross between a grunt and a question.

“Find something?” Ronen hadn’t taken the glasses from his eyes.

Neither had Eavan. The scene was too fascinating to turn away.

“Ley lines.” As he said the words, a hidden screen popped up between Ronen and Eavan. A display of a topography map appeared. Lines of vivid color streamed through the landscape like veins pulsing with the blood of life. Only these were vessels of energy buried deep within the ground.

Eavan finally lowered the glasses. He turned to Ronen. “Now, why would the theocrats, who decry anything not of Theomacus’s making, suddenly take an interest in ley lines? That seems way outside of the realm of their dogma.”

“But not that of the Sophites and Unarions. This is a calculated move.”

Eavan turned to Grey. “Do you have a map plotted of where all the monoliths were located?”

“Yes. Let me figure out how to send it to the screen.”

There was movement in the back and some whispered instructions as Quillan assisted Grey in making the connections between the Druma and Sophite technology.

The topography map with ley lines was superimposed with that of the location of the monoliths.

For the first time in years, Eavan knew a sense of freefall. He pointed to the bright red lights, indicating the monoliths. "They've erected them over the intersections."

Ronen reached over and hit a button on the screen. A counter appeared, then flashed off again. "I've sent the information to Cahlen."

Eavan continued to watch the guards work the area, searching for the ley lines. "What should we do now? Go around the upper ridge and bypass the guards and try to make it to the sensors?"

"I'd love to grab the guns from the storage and blow the hell out of the bastards when they're least expecting it," Ronen said between gritted teeth. "Prudence dictates we try to make it to the sensors without bringing notice to ourselves."

"Backtrack and go by way of the Okton Pass. It's a little more remote than your monolith, but it will get us by the guards without notice." Eavan lifted the glasses once again. Black helo-planes roared in from over the far rise. Large black rectangles hung from transport nets under the dark bellies of the helo-planes. More monoliths. Smaller this time. Most likely sections that needed to be assembled into a larger whole.

"This doesn't look good." Eavan adjusted the field glasses to get a better view of the helo-plane.

The helo-plane hovered, lowering the building materials to the ground. There was a slight vibration as the slab made contact with the valley floor. Definitely heavy materials.

Eavan started out of the rover car. "I'd love to get a sample of what those are made of."

"Where do you think you're going?" Ronen reached out to pull Eavan back into the car, but Eavan slipped away, brushing the sentry captain off like a swarming bug.

There was a muffled exclamation behind him.

Eavan didn't stop to look back. He came to the very end of the ridge and lay on his belly. This low, he was unlikely to be seen by the guards in the helo-plane as they came in for a landing. As it was, the rover car was in a vulnerable spot. Any air traffic coming through the area would have a good view of the rover sitting stationary, while the occupants monitored the guards' activities.

Ronen landed on his stomach next to Eavan. "We need to get something straight right off, Tattoo Boy. I'm in charge on this operation. I don't take rogue behavior lightly. You pull this shit again and you'll walk back to the settlement after I drop you off in a nest full of guards. Do I make myself clear?"

One look at Ronen's face and Eavan believed the sentry captain meant every word.

"As water."

Ronen pointed to the guards as they removed the clamps that held the net together. They used a large winch to hoist the piece onto a base, which they rolled over the valley where it would go into an upright position.

The ground vibrated under Eavan's belly as one of the guards started a large digger and brought it over to where a group of them stood. They marked the spot with a big red X made in paint in the grass. "I think they found the intersection."

"Not just the intersection, but the direct center of one, I'd imagine. More power in the vortex." Ronen lifted the glasses again. The motor on them whirled slightly as the recording device began to capture the scene.

"We should clear the area. We've been lucky so far, but eventually the guards are going to spot us up here. One of the pilots I'd guess."

Ronen lowered the glasses to shoot Eavan an incredulous glance. "I'm not the one who decided to get out of the rover car."

"But you did come after me." Eavan gave him a quick smile. "You must care after all."

The noise that came out of Ronen was a growl. "I'm finding it a challenge not to knock your ass down the mountainside."

But he wouldn't. That much Eavan was certain. He chuckled. "You would have made a good Druma. A little on the hothead side, but we'd have tamed that out of you."

Ronen turned the recording glasses off and moved slowly back down to the rover car. "Let's get the hells out of here."

Eavan followed. There was no sense in pushing the issue. He'd already pissed Ronen off more than he should have by rights. There really was no reason why he tested the sentry captain the way he did. He'd come out here to forge an understanding, not alienate the man. And yet, some tiny germ of rebellion deep inside made him want to prove himself worthy of Kree by showing Ronen that, as a Druma warrior, he was much more than the stuff of legends.

The mythos of the Druma warriors tended to get in the way of the facts at times. At others, it proved a benefit. There was nothing more gratifying than seeing the terror in the eyes of a foe when they realized they faced a full warrior in battle mode.

Eavan climbed into the rover and closed the door. "Can we send the video stream to the settlement?"

Quillan put his hand over the seat and wiggled his fingers. "Give me the headset and I can download from my handheld."

Ronen handed the glasses back, then started the rover car.

The thrusters engaged and lifted them off the ground. He moved the toggle and backed them down the hillside and to the reservoir. Once there, they took the north branch of the mountain road as it twined on a path up and around the guards' work site.

"I have an incoming transmission from Cahlen," Quillan said. "I'll put it on the forward screen."

The message was encoded. As each word appeared on the screen, the encryption process turned the text from a series of numbers to characters.

Eavan read the message for Ronen, who was busy operating the rover over some extremely rugged terrain. "Have working theory of transmissions pulled from monoliths. You aren't going to believe it."

"Well, tell us." Ronen's irritation filled the cab of the rover.

"No. You don't understand, that's what the message says."

Ronen took his attention off the road long enough to glance at the screen. "Damn cryptic."

"It must be so big he dared not say it in a transmission. No telling what those damn monoliths are picking up." Erole had his window down with a probe stuck out. The wandlike projection was calibrated to pick up a variety of signals from the guards' communication devices.

Grey shook his head. "So far, the only language we've been able to identify and transcribe has been ancient Unarion. That in itself is a mystery. Who uses that dead language now? I bet if you asked the remaining Unarions, not one of them knows the dialect."

Ronen shook his head. "I don't know. It seems to me, if they wanted to communicate in terms no one else understood, they'd do so in an unfamiliar tongue. What better way to keep their secrets?"

Grey laughed. "This from the man who advocated the idea that the theocrats were making the transmissions?"

"Just because I posed the question, doesn't necessarily mean I believed it to be true. I was trying to rationalize an argument in hopes of brainstorming a reason for the monoliths. That's how answers are obtained. By questions." It was more a dissertation than an explanation Ronen gave, but it did make some kind of rambling sense.

"Should we ask for a more detailed explanation?" Quillan sat with hands poised to send a message to the settlement.

"No. We'll get it when we arrive. I want to retrieve the sensors and get back. The more information we can get to them, the better they can confirm or dismiss their theory. Either way, we have to figure out a way to dismantle these behemoths. I'm sure they're meant as a deterrent."

They arrived at a fork. Ronen took the rover off the track and down the back side of the hill they'd just gone around. "This will cut some time off the journey."

Quillan, watch the screens for more guard traffic. I don't want to run into a hive of them unexpectedly."

Nor did Eavan.

They probably had his likeness spread across the country by now, waiting for him to show his face. The dead bodies of the fallen guards had been cleared from the area near the reservoir. He was certain the carrion and predators hadn't carted all the remains away. There was nothing left. Not even their clothing.

News of the almost single-handed massacre had no doubt burned up the com units. Leaving the bodies of their comrades there in the wild was probably not an option. Not with the beliefs of the theocrats about death and burials. They were very specific about the timing of such rites.

Yes, it was foolish for him to cross the borders back into the lands controlled by the theocrats, but he didn't much care at the moment. It was more important to figure out what the theocrats were up to with their monoliths than for him to keep a low profile in the mountains.

Besides, it wasn't like a warrior to shirk away from duty or to hide away in fear. He'd have to present his tattoos for removal if he ever came to that pass.

His thoughts moved to Kree.

Every decision he made now depended on her and the family they would one day have. A family they may have started already. He wasn't sure how long it had been since she'd practiced the Sophatic method for birth control. Not that she had need of it now.

Warmth filled him as he imagined Kree fat with their child.

"What are you smiling for?" Ronen frowned at him from the driver's seat.

"Was I? I didn't realize." He rested his elbow on the window frame. "You have something against smiles?"

"Not normally."

"Only mine?" *That's it. Poke the snake a bit more.*

"Yours are more suspicious than the average smile." Ronen didn't take his attention off the terrain this time. He kept dedicated focus on the next rise.

"You've been listening to too many stories. The Druma are not the bloodthirsty race you believe us to be."

Ronen turned to Eavan then. His eyes were hard, unfriendly. "I wasn't speaking of the entire Druma race."

From the backseat, Grey hid a laugh behind a cough.

Eavan shot him an annoyed glance.

They traveled the rest of the distance keeping to the topic of the guards and the monoliths. Quillan gained no more intelligence from the settlement. They'd gone silent on the matter, stating only that they were working on the theory.

They made camp late in the night, or early in the morning, Eavan wasn't quite sure. He'd lost track of time and distance. His mind traveled down other pathways, trying to work out exactly what significance the monoliths had to the country and why they were erected in the first place. He agreed with Ronen. They were a definite deterrent for something.

The sentries and warriors sat around Eavan's portable campfire. The sentries marveled at the ingenuity of the device. Pride at the invention swelled in Eavan. It wasn't his particular family that had created the labor-saving trail essential, but it was a Druma family to which he was loosely related.

"Anything to make our packs lighter and save time and energy on the trail is considered when we travel. Everything one should need has to fit in this." Eavan held up his pack to show the group. "Anything else we can find in the wild. No packing necessary."

"You have members of your race who do nothing but develop new technologies?" The thought seemed to fascinate Ronen.

The question threw Eavan on guard. "Yes. Of course. We have need of many different types considering we live so far from the comforts and commerce of the major cities. Being self-sufficient and self-supporting is essential."

Ronen gave a heavy sigh. "I wish the Sophite order had that ability. We've had to liberate items from other sources and modify them for our own uses. It's not been easy since the government fell to the theocrats."

Quillan reached out to the portable fire, testing it at the base and up near the flame generator. "No. We spend all our time trying to blend into the scenery as a group of monks dedicated to Theomacus. It's a bitter pill when we are capable of so much more."

"Once the theocrats are ousted from power, you'll enjoy the freedom to indulge in discovering inventions of your own." Eavan watched for a reaction from the sentries. It wasn't long in coming.

"I'm beyond the point of being tired of living this lie." Ronen plucked at his robe. "We felt it was the only way we could stand and fight to save the order. To blend. To infiltrate. To subvert."

Eavan smiled. "That gives me a very good idea."

Chapter Twenty-two

Sand as far as the eye could see covered the land. The mountains were a dark outline on the horizon. Somewhere out there, Eavan and Ronen were traveling in unfriendly territories in an attempt to recover the sensors.

The Sophites gathered at a small table near the practice field. They had broken off from the rest of the settlement in order to meet during the meal. It was a calculated move on Kree's part. Mealtime meetings never really carried the weight or urgency of those that happened without the presence of food. What she wanted was their cooperation, not to bludgeon them with orders.

Besides, whatever they decided was going to be more about a vote than a direct mandate.

Meriah picked at her food. Her nervous gaze traveled between her plate and Kree's face. So far, Kree hadn't talked at all about the plans she'd been considering since arriving at the settlement, or the progress they'd made on the monolith situation.

Meriah wasn't the only one. Ceela and Faria were trying to look inconspicuous as they watched Kree. Only Eris seemed content to eat her meal without the tension of uncertainty emanating from her being. And why not? She was bonded and committed to a Druma warrior. Her place at the settlement was secure. As was Kree's now. Maybe that's what she'd start with. Rumors had to have moved through their order by now.

Kree patted her mouth with her linen and gave each of her priestesses a look in turn. "I imagine by now you've all heard that I've accepted and recited commitment vows with Eavan desMort."

Apparently not all of them had heard. Vonya drew in a sharp intake of breath. Her utensil clattered onto her plate. Serrilla shot Vonya an exasperated look.

Jerella refused to meet Kree's gaze.

"It wasn't an easy decision for me." She laughed in spite of the reaction the news received. "All right, it was pretty easy. But not without consideration to the future of the order."

Eris smiled and picked up a piece of fruit. "I understand your compulsion. There is just something about the Druma that goes directly here." She pointed to her heart.

At least she had one ally.

“My decision to take Eavan as my lifemate serves another purpose. I do think he’s one of the most compelling men I’ve ever met. I don’t want what I say next to diminish that in any way, but our union also means the future of the Sophite order.”

Meriah stopped picking at her food. She looked up like a tiny forest creature that spotted a predator on the horizon. “What do you mean?”

“Has it escaped your notice we’re diminishing in number? We have to take measures to ensure we continue.”

“By throwing our lot in with the Druma?” Beckha raised a dark brow and set her utensil on the edge of her plate with careful precision. Her nostrils flared slightly. She leaned forward, lowering her voice. “I do realize they saved us, but I’m too much of a purest to think they should replace our sentries.”

Kree went on the defensive. “Who mentioned that? At what point did I even suggest it?”

Beckha’s face burned a dull red. Either from anger or embarrassment Kree wasn’t sure. “Then what are you suggesting?”

“I want to build a new temple out here on the Fassin Plains. Outside the jurisdiction of the theocrats. I don’t know why we refused to see the logic in it sooner. We’ve been so busy fighting the enemy and finding ways to subvert them that we forgot how to seize the freedom to create our own destinies.”

The Sophites were speechless.

Except for Jerella. “So all our sisters have died in vain? I don’t like it. I don’t want to stay here, hiding in the sand like some scorned lover because the great overseer refuses to acknowledge me as a contributing member of society. No. I say we stand and fight like we have been.”

Kree tried to maintain her patience. Most of the Sophites agreed with Jerella and were nodding their heads.

“All right. I’ll give you that. I’m not exactly backing down from the fight, but I don’t want to continue at the risk of victims of genocide either. Standing and fighting is admirable, but it is also costly.” When Jerella tried to interrupt, Kree held up her hand for silence. “We can’t afford not to have a secondary plan in place. I won’t be the premier who stands by and watches her sisters get picked off like holiday beasts by the long arm of the theocrats’ guards.”

A gentle wind blew, bringing the sting of cool air. A storm was coming. The air had the smell of rain coming from the north.

“A relocation until the theocrats’ hold on the country is broken or we are rid of them isn’t a bad idea.” Ceela shrugged at Jerella as if apologizing for agreeing with Kree.

What in all the days of the hells was going on? Had Jerella planned a small coup of her own to take over the order? Time to move the conversation in another direction.

“Good. I will give you time to consider what I’ve presented here, and we can reconvene to discuss it further in a few days. We need to keep in mind what is best

for the whole of the order, not just the few individuals we see here. Any decision we make will be transmitted to the other temples, and they will be given a chance to join or stay where they are.” She turned her full attention to her adja. “Meanwhile, I have a very special project for you, Jerella.”

Jerella glanced up. Shocked covered her face. “Me?”

“And only you.” Kree leaned her elbows on the table, displaying the air of a friendly conversation between confidants. “You’ve impressed the Druma with your ability to uncover a facet of the monoliths they hadn’t realized before. That information has proven invaluable.”

Jerella looked slightly uncomfortable at the compliment. What an odd creature she’d morphed into over the course of her journey across the country.

“Your senses are sharper, better honed than the rest of ours. Even Cahlen has confided in me that he’s never worked with a stronger adja.” Before she laid on the compliments too thick, Kree lifted her hand. “We need someone to psychically read the information we’ve obtained from the monoliths.”

Her eyes widened. “I’m not a Unarion.”

“No, but you are highly gifted and damn close.” Kree fanned her hand around, indicating the other Sophites. “I know you can read much more than auras. Organics and inorganics are not your first choice. You read biorhythms as well. Wavelengths, if not actual words. That’s only one step below a full psychic.”

Color rose in Jerella’s cheeks. She lowered her gaze to her plate. “I don’t mean to. It’s just so loud sometimes.”

“I figure in time, when your full powers come, your ability to sort and block the information will come as well.” Kree reached across the table and placed her hand on Jerella’s. “Don’t despair. Your full powers will come. They only wait for that one special key to unlock them. You simply haven’t found it yet.”

A solitary tear rolled down Jerella’s cheek and splashed on their linked hands. “Can you forgive me, Kree?”

“For what? You’ve done nothing wrong.”

Jerella wiped at her face. “I’ve been awful to you and everyone around me. I don’t know where I fit in anymore. At the temple I knew. I had my place. This”—she indicated the settlement at large—“is so different from our experiences. It’s so open. I feel danger here.”

A small shiver ran down Kree’s spine. “Not danger from the Druma.”

“No. Not them. I feel very safe when they’re near.” She pointed into the distance. The mountains. The way back across the land to the seat of the theocrats. “From the open spaces. It’s too wide out here. Even in Parakhan City I felt safer inside the cloister.”

Kree gave a laugh. “You’d really have enjoyed going through the mountain. Nothing there but rocks, insects, and toxic fungus.”

Kree remembered the crystal chamber where Eavan had made urgent and breathtaking love to her. Her breath caught at the memory of his touch.

“I think she’s gone someplace else.” Tessia giggled.

Kree snapped out of her reverie.

“All right.” She picked up her utensil once more. “Let’s talk about something else. Like what you’ve all been doing while we’ve been parted?” She pointed her utensil at Eris. “All except for you. We know what you’ve been doing.”

The Sophites all laughed. The sound was reminiscent of fonder days, long before the order had been placed under attack and the theocrats forced them all into hiding.

The reckoning would come. It was only a matter of time.

* * *

Kree sat across from Jerella as the adja tried valiantly to concentrate on the files in front of her.

Jerella made a disgusted face. “I’m getting no pattern. It’s a void. Do you have something besides pictures and downloads? Maybe a sample of the material used on the monoliths? Something that has directly absorbed the signals?”

Lynx nodded and rose. “We have both soil samples from the site and scrapings of the material. So far we aren’t finding a composition on any of the databases we’ve cross-checked. It’s as if it’s from off-world.”

That stopped Kree cold. “And you’re just telling us this now?”

“There was nothing to report as of yet. Taking samples is a basic task of an investigation. Even if our jobs are tech in nature, we still have an obligation to be as thorough as possible while on-site to collect possible evidence or pieces of the puzzle.” She gave a sly smile. “Besides, the elder in charge of tech is a full warrior. There would have been all the ancestors to pay if we’d not obtained samples.”

Kree watched Lynx move to a storage cabinet on the far side of the heta. The unit was as tall as the warrior and made of some shiny, reflective metal. The warrior’s biceps flexed as she pulled the drawer open. So, the cabinet was also heavy.

“We keep our samples in here. It’s lead-lined to keep all potentially dangerous energy inside. The reflective surface helps to protect contamination from other such materials that might be in the area.” Lynx brought the requested samples over and placed them on the table in front of Jerella.

Even from where Kree sat, she felt the presence of the samples. There was some toxic energy going on there. It was as if the very soil had absorbed every negative thought and feeling it came into contact with.

Kree indicated the soil pack. “Did this come from the area directly around the monolith?”

Lynx nodded. “Right up against the foundation.”

“Sophia have mercy. That evil is potent.” Kree shook her head and stood from the table, unable to be close to the sample.

Poor Jerella had gone pale, but not from the soil. Her hand hovered over the material that came straight from the monolith. She swallowed, her throat working fast.

Cahlen moved closer to the adja and whispered something into her ear. She shook her head. He rubbed her back in comfort.

Finally, Jerella put her hand over her heart. “You were right, Kree. These are stolen thoughts. Somehow the theocrats have found a way to pluck the psychic communications from the air. It’s a full-out attack on the Unarions. If the theocrats sever the primary source of the Unarions’ power, they cripple the race completely.”

Cahlen closed his fist. “They level the field for anyone trying to deal with them. The Unarions become like those citizens without power. But where will it end? If they’ve discovered a way to steal those signals and dampen the powers of the Unarions, who is next?”

Kree tried to keep everyone calm. They needed the sensors before they verified if Jerella read the information correctly. Though if asked her opinion, Kree was willing to stand behind Jerella’s findings. That might not be good enough for the Druma.

She wrapped her arms around her waist. “The more I look at this, the more I believe we need to find some Unarions. They’ll be able to tell us if they’ve noticed a problem with their powers. We need that information.”

Lynx shook her head. “Not to bring down the monoliths, we don’t. I say we treat them as the dangerous weapons they are and blow them.”

“And what happens if there is a ripple effect?” Cahlen was clearly distressed at the prospect of injury. “Waves of that nature are bidirectional.”

“Well, hells.” Lynx rested her face on her fist.

Jerella put a finger in the air. “Not necessarily.”

“Explain,” Kree commanded.

“If I felt these things sucking energy when I got close enough, I’m willing to bet a lot of creds that Unarions can feel them from a lot farther away. They’ve probably already set up mental blocks to tune out the source of the drain.”

“Like patching a hole in a wall,” Kree whispered.

Jerella shot her with a finger. “Exactly.”

“Makes sense.” Cahlen typed a few commands into his handheld. “Do we want to start an encrypted message to the Unarions? We might be able to at least warn them.”

“Not yet.” Lynx stood. “We need to discuss a strategy with the elders first. We wait for the team to return with the sensors. Look at that information and then present a plan. The elders will be more accepting if we have more information.”

Kree ran a hand through her hair, exasperated. “They were the ones who wanted us to come up with a plan and then get back to them.”

“Yes. But they will still need to discuss it with one another, and the Ki will need to look to the ancestors.”

“No disrespect here, but we’ve agreed to help. We never agreed to allow our hands to be tied. As the head of my order, if I feel the plan to bring the monoliths down is feasible, I’ll order *my* people to do so.”

Lynx’s expression was implacable. “I’d expect nothing less. But what you lack at the moment is manpower. You simple don’t have the bodies left to cover all the monoliths at the same time. We do.”

She had a point there. If the decision was made to blow up the monoliths, the structures had to all come down at once, or risk guards being placed at the remaining ones after the first explosion. It had to be an effort coordinated down to the minutia.

“We’ve also forgotten one major snag.” Kree threw the point out like a gauntlet of old.

“What’s that?”

“We have no idea if they’ve erected more of them, or if there were only six.”

“No problem.” Cahlen tapped into his handheld. A grid appeared on the big screen that showed the entire continent of Sangrah.

Cahlen typed a few more commands. Red dots appeared across the grid. “Those are your monoliths.”

Kree shook her head. The man was a master of the typed command. If he told his handheld to go fetch like a trained dog, it probably would. “Print that out so we have a strategic map to refer to.”

“It might change. I doubt this is a static situation. Not if it’s getting the theocrats results.”

“All right. We’ll check back daily. But for now, we can at least use this as a working model.”

After an agreement all around, Kree left the tech heta to find some much needed solitude. She’d had no alone time since her abduction, and with events moving as fast as they had been, she’d had no time to perform even the simplest of rites.

Arriving back home, she looked through cabinets and drawers to find enough candles to perform a self-pleasuring rite. It wasn’t as powerful as those performed with the assistance of a sentry, but for short bursts of energy, masturbatory rituals worked well.

After closing the shades and lighting the candles, Kree stripped and lay in the middle of the bed. In her hunt for ritual-worthy items to use, she’d found a small vial of essential oil. The sharp sandalwood fragrance hung on the air as she anointed her pulse points.

Normally, black snakeroot was used, but since she was on short stock, she had to make do. Besides the added bonus of sandalwood's spiritual properties actually made it a better choice in this case. She only wanted to commune with Sopha. Ask for some guidance in their most desperate hour.

Taking deep breaths through her nose, she started the exercise to increase physical awareness. Chemicals fired in her brain, releasing hot into her blood, increasing her heart rate and respirations. Behind closed lids, she visualized the gentle lap of cool water against her pussy. Gentle. Slow. A trickle streaming against her clit. She moaned and adjusted her hips on the bed.

With each breath, the scent of arousal mingled with the sandalwood, coating her nasal passages and falling down into her lungs. Excitement tightened her nipples. Anticipation of pleasure pooled as liquid between her legs.

She began to chant.

Images of Mother Sopha rose like a great white mist covering a lake of moonlight-kissed water. Kree moved her hand over her breasts, tweaking her nipples hard, gaining pleasure from the pain. As she worked her breasts, she moved her other hand between her legs. Her nether lips were drenched in silky seduction, her clit hard and sensitive.

Oh, did stroking it ever feel good. The chant morphed into a series of moans. Her hand worked faster.

Sweat beaded on her skin, running from her throat down into her hair. She tried to get a hold on the goddess's form. The elusive image wouldn't coalesce into a discernable figure.

"Please."

Her hand played a frantic tempo against her clit. Orgasm lingered on her periphery, moving closer.

"Yes."

She fell.

The fragile vision shattered like breaking glass. Fragmented and jagged, the images flew outward toward her. She lifted her hand as if the blow were real and not located only in her mind's eye.

"What in all the hells?"

Not in all her training had she ever had a ritual go so completely wrong. Was it interference from the monoliths, or her commitment to Eavan?

There was no way to know.

Fear bubbled along her nerve endings in an aching rush. Things were coming to a head and the outcome unsure by even the gods and goddesses.

Chapter Twenty-three

The storm broke halfway through the night.

They gathered their gear and headed for the rover. Rain drove straight down like the force of a waterfall. Wind was nonexistent, which only made the rain seem to drive harder, faster.

By daylight the downpour had only increased, turning the view to a watershed.

Ronen looked out the front windshield at the saturated world. It was as wet as his mood. Traveling off-road in this deluge was not feasible. He needed the special sensors in the road to keep them on track. Not only that, but the rover's nav system would also pick up any mudslides on the route. The feature wasn't active on non-sensor-embedded surfaces.

"We need to get back to the roads." He switched on the thrusters and pulled the toggle. Travel out of the valley proved treacherous. The thrusters' power caused the wet, runny ground to fall away from under the rover, making the entire vehicle shudder as it climbed up the rise to catch the road.

One of the drawbacks of the rovers was their inability to stay aloft at distances above two meters. One-point-nine, yes. Two-point-zero, naturally. Two-point-one and you were in danger of stalling your servo drivers that kept the engines moving forward. It was a flaw that normally meant nothing to those using the mode of transportation, since most people stuck to the roads. To a group who needed to cover unmolested ground, it was a dangerous prospect.

Alarms exploded from Quillan's handheld.

Beside Ronen, Eavan had a stunner in his hand, ready and charged at full. "Let Grey, Erole, and me out here. We'll meet you on the other side of this mountain."

Panic raced up to seize Ronen. "Have you lost your mind, man? There are guards out there, and you're a wanted man."

"I stand a better chance moving on foot than in the rover. Besides, if I get caught, you all do. You need to keep going and collect the sensors."

Ronen gave a swift nod. The doors opened and the warriors rolled out, blending into the rain. They had not taken but a few steps before they disappeared into the scenery.

He leaned forward, thinking for a moment that they had just been lost to the driving rain. "Do you see them, Quillan?"

“No.” He shook his head. “I can’t even pick them up on the heat scanner.”

Ronen shook his head and attempted to wrestle the rover to perform the way he needed over the unsure terrain.

Guard troops came over the upper rise. No helo-planes in sight. In this weather they were foolish to even attempt to take their search to the air—and Ronen had no doubt this was a search.

The landscrapers they traveled in were large enough for an entire battalion. The onboard weapons sophisticated. What they lacked in speed, they more than made up for in firepower and sheer size. *Landscrapper* was only a nickname for the vehicle. KadamX12 was the official designation, but it sorely lacked the visual imagery of the more common moniker.

Engine vibration shook the ground in its wake. Large parts of the hill began to give way under the weight. It listed precariously to the side.

“Please stop your vehicle and step outside with your hands raised.” The voice came from the external speaker system on the landscrapper.

“What do you want to do, Ronen?”

“Do what they say.”

Ronen managed to get the vehicle to a relatively stable spot on the hill. He lowered thrusters and powered down the engine. The rain had intensified in the last few moments, as if that were even possible. All the gods and goddesses of the pantheon were angered. Not that Ronen believed the weather was controlled by the forces of the divinity, but they sure seemed to take a side with the theocrats lately. Perhaps Theomacus had an in with the atmospheric forces.

“Prepare to get drenched.”

They stepped outside of the rover as a unit of soldiers exited the landscrapper with their weapons raised.

The ecclesiasts’ robes were no match for the downpour. In seconds they were both soaked to the skin. Ronen raised his hands up near his face as the guards came closer.

“Priests!” the lead guard yelled into his mic. “Ascendant.” The man bowed to Ronen.

In his fabricated station one notch below the graces on the theocratic council, Ronen had the power to have the guards executed for stopping his rover and holding him and Quillan in such contempt. However, it seemed a better choice to show his gracious side and figure out what the troop meant to accomplish out in the rain-soaked mountains, stopping random traffic.

“I trust you have a good reason for stopping me and my assistant in the middle of this dangerous weather.” Ronen stopped short of making the statement a question.

The guard commander held his hand to his earpiece. He answered whoever was on the other end. "An ascendant and his assistant." The guard shot a glance at Quillan; his gaze settled on the insignia on the robe. "A latter."

The soldier's gaze flicked between Ronen and Quillan. "Yes, sir."

Ronen didn't fail to notice that the other guards had yet to lower their weapons. The barrels were still trained on the fake priests.

Ronen had a very bad feeling about this. Thank Sopha, Eavan had enough presence of mind to blend into the storm.

The lead guard came near. "Please, step into the vehicle with us."

Ronen started forward to comply as a group of four other guards broke off and swarmed the rover, searching it.

"This is highly irregular," Ronen protested.

"We had reports of a stolen rover."

Ronen put his hand against his chest. "Yes, that was mine. Some woman stole it while I slept."

The guard looked confused. "The woman claimed the priest was a fraud."

Ronen gave an incredulous laugh. He was beyond soaked now. At any moment he'd have to swim for it. Not only that, but his anger had just shot into the stratosphere. "Would a fake priest be able to recite the Thirty-first Proclamation of Theomacus in the original tongue? Would a fake priest stand here in the rain while a bastion of guards checked his vehicle? No, he'd have run for it."

The guard shrank under Ronen's anger.

He pushed it further. "Would a fake priest be out on a day so vile in order to make it across the mountains to the Shuotlow temple to perform a reading of the Declaration at Kamance at the proper time of day? I believe he would not."

He saw in his periphery the soldiers about to discover the weapons stored under the rover. Ronen raised one hand to the sky, the other he placed over the medallion around his neck. "May Theomacus's displeasure vindicate me. May his justice be swift and sure for those who wrong me."

He pressed the button to release the deadly gas. The guards at the back of the rover landed in the mud on their faces. Dead.

The head guard hit the mic at his mouth. "He's called down retribution. The ascendant called Theomacus to judge us."

The young man was obviously much more than a common soldier. He was a true believer.

Ronen started forward as the soldier fell to his knees in supplication. Other soldiers had filled the open bay of the landscraper to watch. As Ronen neared, they fell back, eyes wide and terrified.

So that was how the theocrats controlled so many soldiers. By brainwashing. Indoctrination. They'd placed the fear of the deity into them. Used it as a bludgeon to beat the troops into doing their bidding. What would be the outcome once the

theocrats were ousted from power? Would the soldiers fight to the death to preserve a way of life that respected no life but those who agreed with the theocratic council? Make no mistake, it was the council who molested the doctrines into perversions of their true meanings.

The only difference between good and bad religion was those who followed a particular dogma. Ronen had never read anything in the teachings of Theomacus to explain the theocratic council's willful hatred of everyone. The teachings were profound and even uplifting. No, the problem wasn't with Theomacus but with the interpretation.

Ronen entered the landscraper as if he owned the world and rented the heavens. Even dripping wet he commanded complete respect from the soldiers huddled inside.

Slowly, the men began to fall to their knees in quivering respect.

"Your commanding officer. Now!"

One man rose and shuffled forward, his head bowed. He refused to make eye contact.

Pity for the men filled Ronen with unease. These men would kill without mercy if they suspected he was a sentry captain, and yet they believed, as an ascendant to the teachings of Theomacus, he'd called down divine retribution and as such was a man to be feared.

There was great power in his situation.

It was his duty to exploit that power.

"Go collect your dead and leave us be. We are on sacred duty for the council, and time is of the essence."

They were quick to comply.

"And since you've seen to it that my assistant and I are unfit to travel in comfort or dry clothing, we require two uniforms to wear to complete our journey."

The commander didn't hesitate. He sent one of the other soldiers to a storage compartment. Ronen leaned out of the entrance bay and motioned for Quillan to join him.

They quickly changed their clothing and were asked to give a brief blessing, which Ronen did, if for no other reason than to prove he knew the appropriate words as any ascendant.

It gave credence to his cover and impressed his authenticity on the soldiers. Granted, the commander would probably never tell any of his superiors he'd run afoul of an angry priest, but the word would get out. The *miracle* he'd performed would be discussed in reverent tones, until it spread throughout the ranks.

Even better.

After the bodies were hauled away, Ronen and Quillan climbed back into the rover and continued on their journey.

They never did run into the Druma.

Chapter Twenty-four

Eavan and the others had just reached the last rise. The monolith stood in the valley, rising up like some horrific symbol of oppression. Ronen and Quillan had yet to show.

He was worried.

Not only for the sentries, but for them. The area was far from secure. Not that he'd seen any signs of guards in the immediate area. It was a feeling in the air. A dull throb in his heart and current in his nerve endings.

The rain had slowed to a drizzle.

It didn't help the situation much.

Grey and Erole had moved to other points along the ridge to begin sweeping the area for the sensors. Eavan started down the hill, holding the device angled at the ground, moving it back and forth in a slow arc. The sensors the sentries placed were close to the monolith, but Eavan wanted to sweep the entire area in case the guards had placed sensors of their own that needed neutralizing before they continued the operation.

A horrible sound came from Grey's direction. A crackle of power and the Druma was down on his face, clutching his chest. Eavan ran, reaching the fallen warrior at the same time Erole did. The stench of burned flesh filled the air. Grey's hair stood up at the scalp. Electrocuted.

How?

Erole moved to turn him over, but Eavan stopped him. "No. Don't touch him. We don't know if the charge is still alive. Look for the tripwire."

They checked the ground but found no wire. However, in the dirt where Grey had stepped was a small silver disk. Eavan ran his hand over top of it, careful not to touch. Voltage radiated from the apparatus, raising the fine hairs along Eavan's arm.

If there was one in the area, there were more. It had been planted in the ground like an electrical minefield.

Erole stared at Eavan. "What do we do?"

There was no time to answer. A sound not unlike the sing of an arrow was on them before they had a chance to react. Eavan slumped forward. His mind alert and awake, but his body numb and useless.

What kind of nerve toxin had they used?

The Druma were conditioned to over thirty different varieties. This had to be of synthetic manufacture, made in the godless labs of the theocrats.

Guards, with rifles trained on their hearts, came to stand over them.

“It’s the rogue enforcer. He has the identifying snake tattoo up his arm,” one of the guards said into a helmet mic.

Terror flooded his veins. It did nothing to flush out the toxin. If anything, it made the drug spread faster. His eyelids became heavier. Is this how Kree felt right before she fell? That her life was over and those she loved would be left to carry on?

He fought back the veil of sleep.

Druma training had been worse. He’d been complacent of late. Digging deep to his earliest lessons, he forced himself to stay awake while they carried Erole and him to a transport vehicle.

The entire ride, Eavan attempted to move his fingers, his legs. Anything to help free himself. Nothing. It seemed the only thing still working were his vital organs. Good. As long as he had those, he stood a chance.

Unfortunately, he had a hard time moving his eyes side to side. He had no idea if Erole was close by, or if he’d been taken away in a separate vehicle. He needed a plan, and he needed it fast.

Admonishment for his carelessness could come later. That and the guilt for Grey’s death. The blood of his friend was on his hands for letting them come along when he was a hunted man.

They traveled for an hour west, if Eavan’s reckoning was correct. This far and the sky had turned a deep cerulean. No signs of the earlier rain appeared.

The vehicle came to a stop. The back doors were thrown open, and Eavan’s gurney removed from the back.

“The commandant wants you to put him in the interrogation room.”

So, it was going to be that way. With Orlaf the Damned at the helm. Fine. Now that Eavan knew what he faced, he knew how to handle the situation. Thing was, if they planned to get answers out of him, they’d have to reverse the effects of the toxin. And therein lay their peril.

He was moved to a room and the gurney turned upright so he was in a standing position. Straps across his ankles, legs, abdomen, chest, and throat kept him in place. It might prove a challenge to get out of, but it wasn’t impossible.

Commandant Orlaf came into the room. His double chins wobbled as he walked. There had to be some military law where the man in the highest position should be able to physically perform the job. Common foot soldiers had to maintain physical fitness, why not this lump of greed and undisciplined flesh?

“Eavan desMort, you are charged with high treason and failure to surrender a known criminal to the proper authorities.” Orlaf gave a curt nod to one of the soldiers.

A long needle was stuck in the base of Eavan's neck. A warm rush followed the path of his circulatory system. His groin felt warm, as if he'd urinated. He'd heard of that physical reaction, along with the metallic taste that filled his mouth. It was a byproduct of a certain component of the drug, but Eavan didn't remember which one at the moment.

He longed to make fists at his side, if only to ensure his limbs were in full working order. Giving his enemies any chance to see a reaction from him was not going to happen. Not in this lifetime.

"Our sources tell us that your settlement harbors refugees of the Sophite order. Is this true?"

Eavan looked forward and refused to acknowledge that he'd even been spoken to. As far as they knew, the nerve toxin had yet to wear off.

"Give him another injection."

Another needle was driven into his skin. Eavan continued to stare forward. He slowed his heart rate and respirations until he was in a slight hypnotic state. On his periphery the ancestors lined the walls, watching over him. Comforted by their presence, he knew he was doing the right thing. His decisions were sound and filled with honor.

"What are your plans for the Sophites?"

Nothing.

"If he won't talk now, maybe he will if we take off pieces of his beloved tattoo and send them back to his family. Only Theomacus knows why they place such importance over such disgusting displays of their primitive culture." Orlaf spit on the floor at Eavan's feet. "Alert me when he decides to talk. If he still refuses, remove the entire damn thing."

Eavan tried not to flinch at the condemnation. The loss of his tattoo was akin to stripping him of his honor. A Druma warrior without his tattoo was as close to castration as one could get without ever touching the genitals.

They started at his upper left chest and shoulder.

Eavan gritted his teeth.

Please, beloved ancestors, grant me strength to show no emotion. To endure this with honor and dignity.

The knife was dull. The pain radiated down his arm and through his back muscles. The physical agony of the moment was in no way or form as crippling as the emotional.

Blood ran down his body, dripping onto his feet.

Images of Kree filled his head. He clung to them like a lifeline. She had been brave and brash when she hadn't trusted him. When she thought her next breath would be her last, she'd given him attitude. Gods, how he loved her. He owed it to her to survive. To get back to her. To warn the settlement an attack was imminent.

If they attacked the settlement, the theocrats would be in breach of no less than fifty continental laws. Eavan had no doubt they'd do it, despite the potential firepower coming from the north. Up there, the countries were still in contact and had trade agreements with off-world governments.

The interrogation and torture continued.

As each piece of the tattoo was removed, it was taken out of the room to ancestors only knew where. Blood dripped off his fingertips, hitting the floor in a steady splash.

He wanted to look, to see how far down they'd gone. Had they stripped him to the muscle underneath or removed only the epidermis? His life depended on how far down they cut him. He could either slowly bleed out or die from infection before he reached the settlement. Then there was the less happy prospect of trying to free himself with his dominant arm injured to such a degree.

None of the men in the guard station would live to see the next sunrise. He'd make sure of that.

Each new question met with greater resistance. Darkness pulled in from the corners of his eyes. The ancestors faded a bit, then came back even stronger.

Embrace the pain. Let it nourish and sustain you. Live inside the pain.

When the guard with the knife started on his hand, Eavan grabbed the wet handle. He turned it around, bringing it up through the straps. The blade slashed across his own palm as he turned it.

Damn. It hurt, but he kept up the struggle.

A blast hit him in the side.

The lights went out.

Chapter Twenty-five

Days passed with no word from the retrieval party. Kree had since decided she'd lost her mind with worry. Even if Eavan hadn't contacted her, she was surprised not to hear anything from Ronen. He damn well knew better than to leave her guessing. But then, perhaps they ran afoul of guards. In which case, communication might be a problem.

Kree hunched over a console, working on the monolith files, when Wulf entered the heta, his face ashen. His gaze sought Kree's, and he shook his head.

Cold as thick and slow as a glacial slide shifted throughout her body. It started in her heart and radiated out to her limbs. By the time the feeling entered her feet, she knew what Wulf had come to tell her: Eavan was dead.

She reached out along the organics, shifting through centuries of debris lying among the grasses and hills of the Fassin Plains, moving farther still, into the lands controlled by the theocrats, following a bright trail left behind by Eavan's essence. She saw no end to it. He left bright orange, the burning light of sunshine, wherever he'd been. It crisscrossed the land again and again until she saw nothing but the pattern flowing back in on itself.

"Kree, come. My father wishes to see you." Wulf held out his hand.

The others in the room stared at her, waiting for her response. She didn't look at them. Didn't dare make eye contact. A warm hand rested on her arm. She looked down at the blossom tattoos across the back of the hand. Lynx.

She turned her hand over and linked their fingers, taking in Lynx's strength for comfort.

Cahlen rose and came around the worktable. He put his hands on her shoulders. "I think you need to go with him. I'll come with you if you need me."

She nodded, unable to speak even if she wanted to.

This very moment in time. Right here and now. This was the reason why she'd never bonded her life to another. In these uncertain times a loved one could be taken away without mercy or explanation.

Digging deep into the well of all the premiers who had come before her, calling on their wisdom to see her through, Kree stood.

The walk to the elders became a blur. Her vision narrowed down to the images in the very immediate line of sight. The chieftain sat with a box in his lap. Great sobs racked his body.

He looked up. Tears streamed down his weathered cheeks. "Come, daughter of my heart."

Kree swallowed down the lump in her throat. Her glance fell from his eyes to the box and its contents. Long swatches of bloody leather were nestled in gauze. An intricate design covered the patches.

Her stomach pitched.

That wasn't leather. It was Eavan's tattoo.

Her knees buckled. She hit the ground with such force it clacked her teeth together. With hands shaking, she reached into the box and pulled out the largest section, the one that had been on his chest. Information leaked to her from the organics of his severed skin. Images of the incident filtered through her mind.

Tears spilled down her cheeks as she looked up into the chieftain's eyes. "He was alive when they cut it off him. He didn't talk. They tried, but he didn't say a word."

"Is my son dead?"

Kree reached into the deepest part of her soul, searching for him again while holding the evidence of his torture in her hands. It was a common saying among the Druma that they'd rather lose their tattoo than give up a secret. She'd never realized how true that statement was until now. But the thing that intrigued her most was the fact that the pieces did not contain the memory of his death. He'd been alive.

Frantic, she picked up each piece in turn, trying to find some clue as to his fate. Reading the organics wasn't a foolproof method of detection if he'd been killed after the tattoo was removed, but it was something to hope for.

"What is it?" The chieftain searched her face, trying to read something in her expression.

"I can't tell his final fate from these pieces. He might still be alive. If I know Eavan the way I think I do, he didn't allow the removal of his rank to stop him from seeking revenge."

The chieftain nodded solemnly. "It is a warning from the theocrats. They know we plot against them."

Resolved to carry on the fight, Kree gave a decided nod. "And we won't disappoint them."

Wulf gave an angry huff. His body was tense, fists clenched. "If I have to hunt the bastards down to my last breath to find the ones responsible, I will kill them without mercy."

Not if Kree got to them first.

At a loss, she sat with Eavan's father and the rest of the elders as they performed a ritual to call upon the ancestors. Ki Jovan chanted and sang in an ancient Druma dialect. Censers of incense were lit around the perimeter of the meeting place.

The scents and music lulled Kree into a trance. A path unwound before her. Lush summer trees and rolling hills covered in colorful blooms spread out to the farthest horizon. A solitary figure stood on a hill. Waiting.

“Kree.” Her name was a whisper on the wind. It surrounded her, swirling around her body in a sensual caress. The scent of Eavan’s skin invaded her senses. She took in a deep breath.

She let her mind go, taking the path that led up the side of the shimmery hill. Each step that brought her closer to the man became harder.

It was Eavan, and she couldn’t reach him.

There was no way to tell if the vision was him in the afterlife or his mind in a state of unconsciousness. They looked pretty much the same on the astral plane, especially from such a distance.

And she couldn’t seem to get closer.

Every step became a valiant yet vain attempt to reach him.

Kree tried calling his name, but her voice was captured on the wind and thrown away to get tangled in the trees.

She held out her hand, hoping he’d feel her reach out. He turned away, long hair blowing on the breeze. What was he doing? Pointing the way? Showing them direction? It was hard to tell. Maybe he was looking for a way out.

The vision shattered. His image exploded in the air. There was no blood, no gore in this plane, only the glittering shards of his essence.

The pieces sprayed out from the blast site, flying so fast, Kree had no time to get out of the way. Tiny fragments passed through her. Love. Hate. Revenge. Need. All rammed their way into her soul like a runaway rover car.

She put her arms around her waist, trying to hold on to those elements that were essential to Eavan. How can a man who was larger than life, so solid and safe, fall to the guards?

It was impossible!

She’d seen him in action. Watched him take down an entire troop.

The chanting grew louder, or had it returned to the foreground? It was hard to tell. This was no rite like she’d ever participated in.

The chieftain laid his hand on her shoulder. “He lives.”

Kree didn’t want to refute his conviction. Tell him she didn’t feel that way. She wanted to believe him. Sopa, how she wanted to believe.

Eavan’s father smiled into her eyes. He leaned over and captured one of her tears on his finger. “Trust us, daughter. The Druma know.”

Engine noise from a rover car filled the side lot. Cahlen and Wulf headed for the parking area. Kree hesitated only a moment before following them.

Ronen slid out from the pilot's seat. His only passenger was a worried Quillan. They both looked road worn and soul weary. But more confusing, they were wearing guard uniforms.

Kree pushed around Cahlen and Wulf to stand before Ronen. Anger bristled through her body, a rage-filled wave about to crest and break over her sentry captain. "What happened?"

Ronen frowned, then closed his eyes as realization came. "The others didn't return?"

"Parts of them," she spat. "Eavan's tattoo."

It was the first time since she'd known Ronen that he looked as if he'd hit the ground. His face paled. His mouth turned down at the corners. "I'm sorry, Kree. I'm so fucking sorry."

She swallowed down the bitter taste of bile.

He gathered a pack from the rover car and started walking toward the settlement. Kree moved beside him, little better than mechanical in her movements. Between the thick sand under her feet and the dead weight of dread on her shoulders, she had hardly the strength to move at all.

"Tell me what happened."

"There was a horrible storm. Guards found us as we made it to a rise in the foothills. Eavan and the others got out and told us they'd meet us at the monolith. They never showed. We waited. We even searched in several directions. There were signs of a guard troop passing but not of a struggle. I'm sorry."

They had reached the door of the heta the sentries used. Kree stopped and looked up at Ronen, studied his face. His emotions were sincere. He really did feel her pain of loss.

"The chieftain and elders are convinced he's still alive."

He gave her a sad smile. "Then I'm sure they're right."

"But you aren't convinced?"

"The guards have turned into fanatics. If they thought for one moment Eavan was a blasphemer, they'd kill him on the spot. No questions asked. He had a price on his head. That was enough."

* * *

Ronen stared at the door after Kree left. His heart bled for her.

No woman should have to worry over the fate of her bonded. Yes, he knew they'd spoken vows. No one had to tell him. It was the buzz in the settlement. The future chieftain had finally claimed his mate. It was cause for much Druma celebration. However, the gods had postponed it due to the sandstorm.

If Ronen truly believed in the Druma gods, he'd have said they disapproved of the match. Looking at Kree's tears, he hadn't the heart to form the words. She loved Eavan, even if she hadn't as yet admitted it to herself.

Noise behind him made him turn to see who invaded his solitude. Jerella stood by the door to the bathroom, hair dripping and a swatch of silk clinging to her wet body.

“You look tired.” She took a few steps, but remained far enough away he couldn’t touch her. Not that she had issued the invitation.

“To the bone.”

“Come. I have a bath waiting.”

He cocked his head to watch her as she disappeared through the doorway. Had the woman no mercy in her heart? He’d just traveled across the Provinces, had a run-in with the guards, lost three men in the field, and still she wanted him to perform.

Duty had never tasted so bitter.

Unable to refuse, he followed her into the bath. Incense burned in holders around the sunken tub. Steam rose from the water.

“Take off your clothes and get in.”

He did as told, watching her through slit eyes as he did.

Naked, he moved into the water. Warmth lapped at his achy muscles, offering instant comfort. When he was up to his neck, Jerella took off her robe and leaned over the side of the tub with a scrub pad and scented soap in her hands.

Appalled, he made to stand. “What are you doing?”

“I’m going to bathe you.”

Shock reverberated throughout Ronen’s system and lodged in his balls. His cock hardened despite the fact every cell in his body screamed at the wrongness. It was too decadent for him. Too much of a slap in the face of Sopha.

Jerella leaned close. Pretty, pink-tipped breasts brushed against his cheek. He turned his head, seeking the sweet, puckered nipples. He rimmed first one, then the other with the tip of his tongue. She let out a soft moan, her hand gentle on the back of his head.

“Not yet.”

How was he supposed to refuse such a sexy offer? He was only a man—one weary-to-the-bone man.

He leaned away and stacked his arms behind his head. “All right. You have my full cooperation.”

She started at his front, working the soap into a soft lather, spreading it over his chest with the sponge. “You might need to stand. The water is too high to do this properly.”

Ronen pushed off from the sides of the tub. Water sheeted down his body. His cock stood out, rock hard and in Jerella’s face.

Her eyes grew round. “You like it when I touch you?”

“I can’t think of a man alive who wouldn’t. You are very beautiful.”

A slight frown marred her perfect brow. She said nothing. Instead, she stood and worked her way over the surface of his chest, down his torso. When she reached his cock, she stroked her soapy hands up and down the length of him.

Ronen gritted his teeth to keep from coming in her hand. She wasn't practiced at masturbating a man. As a matter of fact, she acted as if it were her first time. What she lacked in technique, she more than made up for in strength.

She gripped him tightly.

Ronen closed his eyes. A sound not unlike a growl came from deep within.

Then, just like that, her hands were gone. He opened his eyes and saw her sitting on the edge of the tub, legs spread. Light glistened off the wetness pooled in her pussy.

"Kiss me here." She slid her hand through her center, fingers spread on either side of her clit.

Ronen lowered himself back into the tub, turning so his mouth was even with her. He did as instructed, using his lips and teeth and tongue on her sweet, wet flesh. He brought her to orgasm quickly, unable to prolong either of their torture. He wanted inside her. To lose himself in the relief her body provided.

An emotion somewhere between agony and freedom crashed over him. He needed to fuck her hard. Ride her like a rutting beast to expunge his failures and reclaim his manhood.

It was against everything inside him to use her that way.

He'd taken sacred vows implicit in their credo to cherish and protect the Sophites.

When the last strains of her orgasm eased, Ronen rose out of the water a second time, like some ancient water deity, and drove into her hard and fierce.

Jerella screamed and clutched at his arms. Clawed his back. Her thighs closed on his hips. "Oh Sopha!"

"Is that what you wanted? To bring me down? To make me toss my vows away and use you like some cheap backstreet whore?"

Ronen worked his cock like a piston, pressing faster, harder, and deeper with each thrust. It felt so good. So wrong.

Her gaze captured his. Blue eyes glittered like precious sapphires under a veil of sooty lashes. She arched her back. The cords in her neck strained. She gasped.

"That's it, sweetheart. Don't fight it. Let it all go."

"Ronen!" She bucked her hips up, meeting his with as much force as he used.

No, he hadn't hurt her, thank Sopha. He'd reveled in her. Celebrated her body. She'd wanted the sexual rite this out of control, had been asking for it for a long time, only she hadn't known what she wanted. She hadn't said the words.

He lifted her leg, putting it up over his shoulder, then drove into her with fierce possession. Her breasts bounced with the movement, catching his attention.

Her nipples were harder than he'd ever seen them. Oh, she was running so hot. The sexy scene beneath him was enough to make a grown man cry.

Jerella began to tremble. He felt her pulling away from the brink. Frustrated, he bared his teeth at her, carving out instructions in the air. "Open to me, Jerella. Open your mind and soul as well as your body. Let go and feel your power."

Her orgasm raged. It squeezed his cock, milking him. He held on, giving her more, hoping she'd surrender control and let herself finally feel with something more than her body.

He swore viciously as his hold slipped and he fell, releasing his cum into her. Jerella turned her head away, tears running toward gravity, pooling on the floor beneath her.

Ronen stayed inside her, rolling them to their sides. He slipped his arms around her, gathering her close. He buried his face in her partially dried hair and took a deep breath.

"Don't cry, sweetheart."

She pounded his chest with a small fist. It did no damage. There wasn't much power behind it. "I love you so much, and it's never enough."

"Shhh." His heart ached, bleeding fresh. Even if the admission sounded as if it were ripped from her soul, he didn't return the words. He couldn't and be an honorable man. The feelings weren't there. Not the way she wanted them. He loved her as the adja, respected her as a Sophite. Cherished her as a woman.

She shook her head. "I want to open to you. I get so close, then when it's time, I can't. There's something hiding in there, and I don't know what it is."

"Does it feel harmful?" He ran his thumbs over her cheeks while tilting her face up so he could look in her eyes. "I can't imagine anything about you being harmful."

"No. But it frightens me. I can't help it." She nuzzled his chin, searching for comfort. "It's so big and powerful and wants to consume me."

He kissed her lips as she clung to him. "I won't let anything happen to you."

"You can't help this, Ronen." She shifted slightly.

The movement made her slide against the length of him. A rush filled his groin. He wasn't surprised he began to harden inside her.

"I *can* protect you." He eased his hips forward as if the physical act of coitus verified his claim.

Jerella's eyes fluttered shut. Her lips parted. A breath eased out on a sigh. Ronen took that as consent to bring her to another orgasm. If he'd put a long enough fissure into the blocks around her power, hammering her emotions might break through. Or he was being entirely selfish and expending his own fears and loneliness by using her?

Either way, he wasn't going to stop unless she asked him to, and judging from the way her cunt squeezed his cock with every thrust, she wasn't about to deny herself the pleasure.

This time their lovemaking was slow and easy, a benediction instead of a condemnation. Ronen rode her slow and easy, building sensations along her sensitive areas. With tongue, teeth, and lips he moved over her face, neck, and breasts. His hands roamed freely over her soft skin.

He ran his fingers down the seam of her buttocks, dipping into the cleft. Lifting her hips slightly, he worked his index finger around the tight ring of her anus.

"Yes." She shivered and backed up closer to him.

Jerella thrived under double penetration. He'd noticed that the first time he'd serviced her. The night they spent with Cahlen had confirmed it in Ronen's mind. She would do almost anything to scrape every last bit of pleasure out of the moment. Then why did she hold back that most essential part of herself?

Even saying she loved him hadn't freed her.

Ronen moved his finger in and out at the same time he thrust his cock. Her grip on his arms tightened. Knuckles blanched.

"Please, Jerella, for the love of Sopha, let it go."

When she refused to give in to the power, he changed angles, moving up in an arc to brush against her exposed clit.

Her nails left tiny half-moons in his forearms.

"Don't fight it."

"I'm not." The words were a gasp of emotion. Tears rolled down into her hair. She mumbled incoherently. Ronen frowned. The words were not of the faith, or even in any dialect the Sophites normally used to converse.

Troubled by the turn, he placed his hand under her hips and lifted her slightly, wanting to bring her to orgasm and end the session.

Her eyes were closed, brow furrowed. Her mouth moved in unfamiliar syllables. Then it hit him; she was channeling Unarion.

One pale hand released his arm. She reached for something only she could see. What in all the hells was going on? Had she tripped into a hypnotic state?

Intense pleasure rocketed through him from Jerella. She arched her back and shuddered. Her eyes flew open, lips parted on a silent scream.

He came on a hoarse shout, then rolled off her. He lay next to her on the tile for a moment, trying to figure out what had just transpired. It was none of his doing. It was as if one moment she was there, the next hovering outside her body, connected to another.

She swallowed and lifted a hand to cover her face. Slashes of red bloomed high on her cheeks. Ronen wanted to ask her what she'd seen, but by the way she buried her face, she didn't want to talk about it.

They lay there in silence for a few minutes; then very quietly Jerella pushed a button to turn the sonic heaters on to warm the bath water where it had grown cold.

At a clear loss, Ronen asked, "Do you want to finish bathing alone?"

She shook her head. A troubled expression filled her expressive face.

Ronen had made use of the separate shower and took a place on the side of the tub, watching her, waiting for her to tell him what bothered her. Jerella didn't speak again for a long time. When she finally did, she was neck deep in scented water.

She canted her head to the side. "Have you ever had words in your head bleed over from some unknown source? Like listening to a handheld stuck between two frequencies?"

"Not that I recall."

"Even during high rites and holy days?"

"I know my duty and my calling. I've been touched by Sopha, but I've never spoken to her personally. She works through me." Ronen leaned forward, resting his arms on his legs. "I am her instrument, much like I am the priestesses's."

Jerella shook her head. "No, I don't mean hearing the voice of Sopha. I meant that powers are at their height during those days so it would be easier to hear voices."

"What did you hear? Maybe we can figure it out if we know."

"I don't know. It was a faint whisper that came from here." She pointed to her forehead. Her finger trailed down to her heart. "And here."

He'd take that at face value. She may not have realized she'd channeled the voice she'd heard.

"We'll work it out."

The promise was meant to comfort her, but he doubted it did the trick. Not when the situation had him worried as well.

Chapter Twenty-six

Light split his head like a poleax and rattled Eavan's brain all the way up from his lower spine. It was the Great God of all headaches, and it had lodged itself firmly behind both his eyes.

He lay strapped to a table. His arm was on fire and felt stiff and itchy. He braced himself for unbearable pain. Time to assess the damage. Bright, angry skin reached from shoulder to hand. At least the bleeding had stopped. He needed to get back to the settlement before an infection killed him.

How long had he been here? Long enough to lose all sense of time. A vision hovered on the edge of his battered brain. He'd been called by the elders. The Ki had been there, asking after him. When he arrived on the Hill of Eternity, he was alone.

Gods and ancestors, he hoped the settlement hadn't come to harm while he'd been away. Were they attacked by the guards?

He wouldn't put it past the commandant. He'd already known the Druma helped the Sophites to escape to the Fassin Plains.

Eavan tried to break free. The bonds were tight but not impossible. When he moved a certain way, his chest ached as if he'd taken a blow to the sternum. At the moment it was the least of his problems.

As it was, he was pretty sure the stunner the guard hit him with had been one notch below lethal. No time to worry about that now. He had to break free and see if he could find Erole in this hellhole. Plus he had a whole lot of guards to kill on his way out.

Instead of trying to unfasten the straps that kept him held to the table, he worked his body back and forth, wriggling until he managed to inch his way under the one across his chest. The motion scraped his injured pec in fiery agony. He gritted his teeth to keep any noises inside.

When he'd finished the torturous process, he lay still in a pool of sweat and nausea. After that it was only a matter of unlatching his legs and feet.

He started to work on freeing his lower extremities.

"Damn!" The mechanism needed a combination entered on a keypad located on the left side of the gurney. He studied the apparatus for a moment. The wires were not covered, and he didn't see a way to open the component from the back.

Voices outside the room stalled Eavan's escape. He lay back down on the gurney and closed his eyes. If he appeared as if he were still unconscious, maybe they wouldn't notice he no longer had on the chest strap.

“The commandant wants this one taken care of today. He’s not going to talk no matter how much skin we remove.” The guard had a voice that sounded like he’d burned his throat in a fire.

“That’s one tough fucker. I’d hate like hell for him to wake.” That one sounded young, as if his balls hadn’t fully descended.

Were the theocrats so desperate that they sent children in to try and tame a full Druma warrior? Poor kid wasn’t going to get out of here alive.

Eavan waited until they were close enough that he felt the brush of a uniform against his open wound. Fast as a snake strike, he disarmed the bastard.

Before the other guard could react, Eavan had the knife buried in the guard’s heart. He dropped the knife and grabbed the guard’s stunner out of his pocket.

One guard tried to stun Eavan, but he shot up off the gurney. He aimed the stunner at the control panel and fired at the board.

A blast brushed his ear. He turned his liberated stunner to the other guard and fired in the guard’s face. The hit knocked him backward.

With both guards down, he made quick work of the bindings on his legs. The mechanism released with a hiss of air. Free, he armed himself from the dead guards, hiding a knife in each boot, and stuck an extra stunner under the waist of his leathers in the small of his back.

The guard barracks was a squat little building. There weren’t many places to hide and most of those were abandoned. There was no sign of the commandant. He’d probably hauled his porcine ass after giving the order to strip Eavan of his tattoo.

He did find a medical bay. Inside were bandages and disinfectants. He broke into the storage cabinet and grabbed a few bottles of the noxious stuff. He took one and opened it, upending it along the length of his arm.

Pain radiated, burning like a flash fire, as the astringent made contact with his exposed dermis. He spun gauze around his arm, making a very crude bandage. It had to last only long enough to make it to the settlement.

After searching the rest of the barracks and finding no sign of Erole, he made his way through the halls littered with the bodies of the guards he’d killed after leaving the interrogation room. He made his way out of the barracks and to the parking area. A couple of rover cars stood outside. He climbed in the nearest one and rewired the ignition. The car started, and he lifted it off the ground. There wasn’t enough charge to make it all the way back to the settlement, but it was enough to put distance between him and the barracks.

He took off heading due north. It wasn’t the best way, but he’d cross into the Fassin Plains within a few hours and then cut across rather than angle northeast. That way backtracked their original path. It wasn’t safe. Not now.

As he crossed the border, a monolith rose up in the heart of the Plains. He made note of it and plans for its destruction. The guards, the theocrats, the monoliths, they all had to go. No question about it.

Pricks of pain moved up and down his arm. It was as if thousands of little needles coursed over his skin. He'd have a horrible scar there for the rest of his life. It didn't matter. He'd wear it with pride. He'd earned it. Just as he'd earned the tattoo they'd stolen from him.

By the time the sun set, the fuel cell ran down. He searched the vehicle for a spare, but there wasn't one. What kind of military outfit didn't carry a spare fuel cell in their rover cars? And these were the guys winning the war? It was hard to believe.

He didn't dare use the com system to call the settlement. No telling what kind of tracking devices the signal emitted. It wasn't worth the risk. Without benefit of his pack, he set out on the long walk to the settlement.

* * *

Days fled and nights had fallen since Eavan's tattoo had been delivered to the settlement. Kree woke with a start, feeling the empty place beside her.

Her vision blurred. Her eyes had grown puffy.

Sopha, she'd been crying in her sleep again.

How had a man who had been in her life less than a full moon's phase come to mean so much to her? He'd burrowed under her skin and right into her heart. She smoothed her hand across the place in the bed where he'd slept.

It had only been two nights—one as a bonded couple—but it had left a deep impression on her soul.

Before leaving for the order, Kree's mother had told her that every person, if they were lucky enough, had one true love. Kree had been too young at the time to understand. Later, when she'd made her way up the levels to adja and then to premier, she'd been too fascinated by the power of her position and the devotion of the sentries to realize the implications of her mother's words. Now, they sank in with painful clarity.

She rolled over, putting her back to the emptiness. It was no use. The space haunted her. Seemed to whisper in her ear like her name on that hill during the Ki's chant.

It was too much.

Pushing up from the bed, Kree gritted her teeth in determination. She had things to do. No matter how much she longed to lie in bed and wallow in her misery.

Regrets didn't get tasks done; actions did.

Her heart felt shattered and hollow, but there were other problems in the Sophite ranks.

Jerella had requested a conference with both Kree and Ronen. That didn't bode well. She hadn't been able to get anything out of her adja in preparation for the meeting. At the moment, Kree didn't need the added drama in her life. The timing was horrible. Resentment was hard to tamp down.

She moved through her morning routine as if her feet were planted in quicksand and her arms surrounded by glue.

A knock on the door interrupted her while she dressed. She laced up the loose tunic and hurried to the door.

Ronen stood there, looking off into the hills as he waited for her. "I thought we could walk together."

"All right. Let me get my shoes." She slipped into the little leather slippers she'd kicked off the night before.

"Have you eaten yet this morning?"

She shook her head. Truth told she didn't remember the last time she had eaten. Surely it was before the messenger came. Or at least that had been the last good meal.

"Do you want to get something to eat before we meet with Jerella?"

"I'm not hungry."

Ronen put a companionable arm around her. "You might not be hungry after. I have a feeling she's going to come clean about something that's been bothering her for a long time."

"They say confessions clear the mind and release the soul. If that's the case let her be done with it and move on. I don't have the strength or energy to deal with something she's not even willing to admit." She hugged her arms around her waist. The bone-deep cold had returned.

So many aspects of the order had gone wrong since the theocrats had taken over and Siobhán was murdered. When Kree was elevated to premier, she believed it was because she was ready to lead. Looking back over the last few years, she questioned every decision she'd made.

Had she taken the order in the right direction? Were her current plans in keeping with the doctrines of Sopha? Did any of it matter without Eavan?

Of course it mattered. She had been a Sophite long before she'd known of Eavan's existence. He'd just shaken up the order of things for her.

Jerella waited for them on the edge of the training field. She sat on a bench facing out to the rolling hills. The wind blew her hair back from her face, whipping it around her like a pennon.

Kree sat on Jerella's left, and Ronen took a place on the adja's right.

Jerella had her hands linked in her lap. She rubbed one thumb with the other as if trying to smooth the skin. She took a deep shuddering breath and let her gaze cast out to the farthest horizon. "I'm leaving the settlement."

Everything inside Kree went tight. Protective instincts rose. Kree shook her head. "No. It's too dangerous."

"I can manage fine on my own."

Kree stood, angry that her adja would even make such a preposterous announcement. She paced back and forth in the sand. "I can't let you go."

"I'm not asking permission. I'm telling you I'm leaving." She looked up, blue eyes filled with torture. "They're calling me."

Chills broke out on Kree's arms. "Who?"

"I don't know. But they need help and only I can hear them. Thousands of voices who have been hushed by the theocrats." A single tear ran down her cheek.

Ronen frowned. "How long has this been going on?"

Jerella swallowed. "Since after that first night we were together. I heard whispers that night. Not well. They were more like a buzzing in my ears, then. After the night with you and Cahlen, they grew louder."

Kree tried to wrap her mind around what Jerella said. It wasn't unheard of for the Sophatic alleles to also hold a bit of psychic awareness. This, however, was more than a bit.

Kree put her hand on Jerella's linked ones. "Can you tell what they're saying?"

"Not well." Jerella let out a breath. "I can hear one voice in particular now. A man's voice. He's so angry. Wronged somehow. He's speaking Unarion."

Kree only stared at Jerella. There was the distinct possibility the adja had some Unarion blood in her lines somewhere. With her untapped powers and the depth and breadth of the ones she did have, it was most probable.

"Do you think you can find him?" The words came from Kree's mouth, but she hadn't the knowledge she'd even said them. It was as if Sopha spoke through her.

Jerella perked up, looking at Kree with surprise. She pointed to the hills. "All I know is, he's that way."

Ronen rubbed his hands over his thighs. "We need to take care now more than ever. If a full Druma warrior can succumb to the guards' wrath, one tiny adja will be no match for them."

"I'll travel as a pilgrim bound for Ostako. They have a holy healing order there. It won't be too much of a stretch to pose as a *vallean*."

Kree wanted to laugh despite herself. Valleans were said to be chaste woman who forswore sex for the higher calling of healing. No matter how hard she tried, Kree just could not see Jerella in that role. Healing yes, acting the celibate, no.

The idea of the disguise might be funny, but the thought of Jerella traveling across the Provinces alone filled Kree with a core-deep panic.

She studied her adja closely. There were violet smudges under her eyes where she hadn't slept well. Despite being out in the sun for most of her journey, Jerella was paler than usual. There were tiny lines of stress around her eyes and mouth.

"If you should go, I want you to take someone with you. I won't spend every day worrying about you out there, facing the theocrats alone." Kree stroked Jerella's cheek. "I'd not find another adja to replace you."

Jerella's eyes widened. "You mean you'll give your blessing?"

There was something inherently childlike in the question. Kree tried not to let the painful laugh she held back escape to lighten the mood. It was anything but

light. It was dark and heavy and threatened to take another person she cared for out of the reach of her protection.

“I don’t like it, but I can’t stop you, especially seeing how important it is.”

Ronen frowned over the top of Jerella’s head. With one look he conveyed how much he hated the idea of sending the adja off to an uncertain fate.

His jaw flexed. “Who do you propose to send with her?”

“I’ll have to give it careful consideration. I don’t have the sentries to spare.” A deep-seated pain started in her heart, radiating out. “I need them here at the settlement. The Druma have three...” She paused to steady her voice. “Three missing warriors. It’s left a hole in their defenses.”

Jerella let out a breath. Kree could see the gears turning behind the adja’s eyes. “Still no word?”

“No. And the elders refuse to send a search party. They believe Eavan will return on his own. I can’t say I’m as confident.” Fear did that to a person. Made them lose faith when it should be the one thing they clung fast to.

Her feelings might have been different had he turned toward her in the vision. Moving away from her indicated he’d left this life behind and headed to another one. The symbolism was clear to her. Why did the Druma leaders not feel the same? Were there other symbols unique to the Druma culture that she missed? Or did the symbols take on a different significance depending on the one interpreting them? Then there was the distant possibility that not all the participants had the same visions.

Kree pushed away from the bench and started back to the settlement proper. “We need to work on unraveling the information on the sensors.”

There was a brief exchange of glances between Ronen and Jerella. Kree walked away without asking the reason. She didn’t want to know. If those in her care thought her coldhearted when her bonded had been taken from her and she thought of nothing but work, so be it.

What would it help if she confessed her legs were heavy as lead boots and her heart hollow? Going forward with their plans was the best way to honor Eavan and his efforts to beat the theocrats.

Chapter Twenty-seven

By rights Eavan should have stopped at the healer's heta. Instead he crept through the small rooms of his home, careful not to wake Kree. He was exhausted, dirty, stank to the heavens, and he was sure his wound was infected, but all he wanted was to slide in bed beside his chosen and sleep for an entire week.

Wulf had met him at the settlement border, his smile wide and arms open. He'd encouraged—damn near ordered—Eavan to seek medical attention before going home.

That hadn't even been a consideration as far as Eavan was concerned. He'd have to see someone about his injury soon, but not first. Not before he let Kree know he was alive.

Some part of him felt she already knew. Just as he would know if anything happened to her. It was there, right under his heart, an innate sense that ensured the cords that connected their souls were intact.

He slipped into the bedroom.

Kree lay curled on her side, hand tucked under her face. Tears on her cheeks glistened in the low light coming in from the bathroom.

"Oh, love, you didn't have to cry for me."

The whispered words were loud in the quiet darkness. Kree's eyes opened, and she gasped.

It took a few moments before she reached out a shaking hand to him. "You're real this time?"

"This time?" He smiled, though his heart broke from the look in her eyes. "You mean I've returned to you before?"

"Every night in my dreams. Then I wake up and I'm alone." She shook her head. "Don't let me wake up this time."

"Kree." Her name was ground out from the very bottom of his soul. Love shone from her, but she didn't say the words. Not yet.

She crawled closer to him, lowering the sheet she used for cover. Her bare breasts rubbed against his chest when she put her arms around him. The feel of skin on skin after so long away from her was like ambrosia to his senses.

Fresh tears spilled over his good shoulder, wetting his body. "Shhh. Don't cry, credah. I'm real and I'm with you. How could you ever possibly think I'd leave you so soon after making you my bonded?"

“The ancestors...”

The rest of her words died off as nonsense in his ears. It didn't matter the words; he knew the sentiment. Then her mouth was all over him, kissing his lips, chin, cheeks and eyes. The tears came harder. Sobs racked her body. Eavan held her as tight as his injury allowed.

He wanted to make love to her, but though his cock was as ready as it could possibly be, his arm thought differently. Not all the heat he felt was due to being so near to Kree's sensual body and experienced mouth.

Very gently, he moved Kree away. “I need to go see the healer.”

Her attention moved from his face to the tattered bandages. “Yes.” She slid from the bed in all her naked splendor and grabbed her discarded clothes from the floor.

“Go back to bed. I'll see you when morning comes.”

“Oh no. You aren't going anywhere without me.” She slipped her feet into her shoes. “Come now. I'm not going to get you back from the wilderness, torture, and the theocratic guards to lose you to an infection. There's just no dignity in that.”

Eavan smiled. The room grew quiet.

Only the night calls of birds broke the silence. Kree turned to Eavan, her head canted to the left.

“Tell me, Kree.”

Her chest rose and fell with each heavy breath. Her lips parted. For a moment he thought she'd deny him the words he so longed to hear.

“I love you, Eavan.”

The smile now filled his face, stretched the dirt-encrusted skin until he thought he heard it crack. “Was that so hard?”

“If you really knew my upbringing, you'd not ask that.”

“I know enough of what happens inside the walls of a sacred temple. If anything, it taught you to love without restrictions. There is nothing wrong in such a lesson.”

“It also taught me that it goes hand in hand with sex. Loving you, making a commitment to you alone is not something I take lightly.” She held her hand out to him. “They say actions speak louder than words. But they take the measure of the power of words.”

“So, you needed to know it was real before you admitted your feelings.”

Kree nodded. “And I needed to know it here.” She lifted her hand to her heart.

Eavan eased his fingers through hers, linking them together. “By the warrior's creed, I love you.”

He pulled her close. She smelled of exotic flowers and promises of forever. Her hair tickled his face as he buried his nose in the thick waves. “I promise never to disappoint you. Or to take your gift of love for granted.”

She bent her head back, looking into his eyes. “You haven’t disappointed me yet.”

“And I hope I never will.”

* * *

Nothing in Eavan’s memory compared to the pain of having his arm debrided by the healers. It helped to watch the process. He tried to look on it as instructive. One never knew if the skills might come in handy someday. It paid to always take useful information from every experience. The fact this particular one was racked with incredible pain only impressed it on his memory more clearly.

He gritted his teeth as the healer, a woman by the name of Geeta, scraped a wire brush down the length of his arm. It was hard to keep from crying out, but to do so would make him lose more honor than he had already.

She had asked if he wanted painkillers before they began. He’d declined.

He was still alive. The pain proved it.

He latched on to that fact like the jagged teeth of a sleebak. At some point the endorphins would flood his bloodstream, making the pain bearable as it numbed the area. So far that hadn’t happened.

He wanted to remember. Needed to.

The theocrats and their guards caused this outrage. He needed to hold on to the pain and use it to fuel his hatred.

Geeta glanced up. “You doing all right there, Eavan?”

“Any better and I’d be dancing.”

She chuckled and looked over at Kree, who stood by the wall watching the process with a pale face and large eyes. She hadn’t said a word or winced. He was damn proud of her, though he wished she’d have listened to him and gone back to the heta.

“This is a mess.” Geeta moved down his arm. “It’s a wonder it’s not gangrenous.”

“You should have seen the other guys.”

She nodded once to acknowledge the point. “Good thing you had enough forethought to cleanse and wrap it, otherwise...”

She didn’t need to finish that sentence. He knew the implications. Instead of sitting through a painful debridement, he’d be watching the healers remove the limb. Given that, dealing with an arm-length scar was something an initiate warrior could manage.

The destruction was absolute. The skin might grow back and toughen over time, but his arm would never be the same, and he’d not be recognizable as a member of the Druma. The arm didn’t even look like it belonged to him. It was a stranger’s arm now.

These were the thoughts he shared with no one. Not even his beloved. He didn't want her to worry.

The door behind him opened. He turned to see his father enter. "Wulf told me you'd returned."

"Did you doubt I would?"

The chieftain stared into Eavan's eyes. "For a moment. When I saw your tattoo wrapped in paper like a severed badge of honor."

Eavan continued to watch Geeta's ministrations. She had the brush on the back of his hand now. It hurt worse there than it had in the other places.

His father turned his attention to the cleansing. "What do you wish to do?"

"Kill the commandant. Topple the theocrats." He spread his hand wide so Geeta could get the brush into all the crevices.

"That's a given. I mean about your arm."

"Leave it. From now on this will *be* my tattoo. I earned it as much as I did my rank. My only regret is that I couldn't save Grey or Erole in the process."

"They died trying to help others. There is honor in that."

Eavan looked up sharply. "Their honor was never in question. It's the implication to the settlement when they see mine has been violently removed. There will be questions on how I let it happen."

"No one will question you. You did what you had to survive. There is no dishonor in living, only if you gave away information to the enemy." His father's gaze strayed to the arm where Geeta rubbed a healing salve over the area. "Judging from the extent of your injuries, knowing your integrity, I have to believe you protected us."

"With my dying breath if it came to that." And it almost had. He glanced back at Kree, who only stared as if afraid he'd disappear before her eyes.

Eavan swallowed. He needed strength for what he said next. His father wouldn't appreciate him dancing around the fire on so important an issue. But it was also something they should discuss in private or before the elders, not in the medical heta.

He took in a biting breath of astringent air. "I will understand if, in light of my loss of rank, you and the elders decided to hand the line of succession to Wulf and ask me to stand aside."

His father acted as if he'd been hit between the eyes by a board. "What is this?" He shook his head. Colorful beads clacked together in a counterbeat of distress. "Do you wish to step down?"

"No. Never. But if it is the will of the settlement, I will not oppose your decision."

His father gave a gentle smile. "And Wulf would never feel comfortable in a position he knew was rightly yours by birth."

“Then what? Our settlement is to be led by a warrior without proof of rank?” He hadn’t realized how much the loss of his tattoo bothered him until he said the words. No matter if he’d decided it was a badge of honor; others might not see it that way. Tattoos on warriors were so ingrained in their culture, one could not survive without the other.

“Proof of rank?” his father scoffed. He held his hand out to indicate the length of scar down Eavan’s arm. “That is more proof than any warrior should have to give for his status. That is the culmination of all your years of training. Wear it with as much pride as you did your ink. You earned it.”

“Good. Then we see this the same way.”

* * *

Clean and his wound seen to, Eavan had been lying on the bed, trying to rest, but the sound of Kree moving through the heta distracted him. Not to mention the gentle fragrance of her pheromones enticed him even in his soul-weary state.

He opened his eyes to watch her as she worked quietly at his private console. From where he lay, he couldn’t see the screen but knew instinctually it had something to do with the monoliths. The failed mission ate at his soul.

At least Ronen and Quillan had retrieved the sensors.

Somehow it wasn’t enough.

He wanted—no, needed—to see the commandant burn for his crimes. Slowly. Over an open pit. Maybe turning on a spit like the pig he was.

“Eavan?” Kree watched him, her eyes wide with concern.

Damn. He’d have to learn how to control his emotions better now they were living together.

He lifted his arm. “Come, credah. Lie beside me.”

“Dare I?” She stood and made her way over. Sensual grace accented every movement.

He tried to smile against the pain. “You dare.”

The silky tunic she wore fit close, accentuating every curve and valley of her figure. Each step shifted the material over the peaks of her breasts.

She folded her leg under her as she took a seat beside him. “Are you hungry?”

“Yes.”

“Would you like me to get you something?”

He reached for her with his good hand, rubbing his thumb over first one nipple, then the other. “Only you.”

“Are you sure? I don’t want to hurt your arm.”

“The greater hurt will come if I don’t get inside you.” He trailed his hand down the front of the tunic, coming to rest where hem met skin.

Eavan stared deep into her eyes as he walked his fingers up the inside of her thigh. Heat radiated from her pussy, along with the scent of acute desire. "As the guards cut into my skin, I thought only of you. Of never seeing your beautiful face again or kissing your sweet lips." He slid his fingers along her wet seam. "Of never making love to you again."

Kree ran her hand through his hair. "I was afraid too. When I saw your tattoo, I thought the world had ended."

He couldn't help the smile that spread across his face. Their beliefs really were so vastly different. In time they would both learn the intricacies of each other's religion.

Kree traced her hand down the side of his face and rubbed her thumb over the corner of his mouth. "What's that smile for?"

"The Druma believe that even though we die, we remain in the ether, guiding our loved ones from beyond the veil. The physical world might have ended, but not my love for you. Not my need to watch over you." He took her palm and pressed a lingering kiss there, and at the same time he advanced his finger into her slick heat. He brushed his thumb over her clit and watched in rising desire as her eyes grew heavy.

Pheromone-laced air curled around his head. His nostrils flared, taking in a deep heady scent.

"We really shouldn't do this." Kree rose, lifting the tunic over her head, her voice muffled by fabric.

"I have to disagree with you." He took the advantage, sliding his finger higher in her, adding another one. He worked in and out in a slow dance. Kree remained on her knees beside him. Her breasts rose and fell with each deep breath, tempting him to taste and touch.

He started to move his other arm, but sudden pain shot through the limb. He gritted his teeth, cleverly turning the sound of pain to a moan of pleasure. A little deceit, but for her gentle heart it was worth it.

Kree placed her hand in the middle of his chest. "Lie back."

He did as told, rolling back down onto the mattress. Kree moved over him, unfastening the drawstring on his linen pants and shimmying them down his hips. His erection lay against his belly. He held it away from his body.

Kree started at his instep and made her way over him, licking and sucking a path all the way to his balls. Her hair tickled the insides of his thighs, heightening the sensation. Warm breath bathed his scrotum. Then the tip of her tongue was there, tracing a line over the center of the fleshy sac, from front to back. She took it into her mouth, giving gentle suction to first one, then the other.

Eavan thought he'd come in her face. He looked down on her, watching as she took his cock into her mouth once, twice, three times. That was all. He almost sobbed when she moved on, rising up between his legs like some sexy nymph. She rubbed her breasts against his balls and erection. Then she undulated in sinuous

motion with his cock firmly entrapped in the hollow between her breasts. Every time she moved back, she licked the tip of his cock.

He ground his fingers into the bed, holding on for dear life.

This was worse than any torture he'd ever received. He wanted to hold her, grab her, fuck her so hard and fast they both screamed for salvation.

Stars burst behind his eyes as she moved up higher, then seated herself, taking his cock deep into her body.

Eavan bowed upward, thrusting his hips higher. Oh gods and ancestors, this was good.

Mutual love and pleasure. So much of what the Druma believed centered on that concept. From the cradle they were taught to respect, first their family, then the elders. Then the settlement. Then their credah. It was a lifelong lesson that culminated here in the bed he shared with Kree. She took his breath away, watching in fascination as she made love to him. It was every erotic thought and fantasy he'd ever enjoyed, but it was so much more.

She threw her head back, rocking on his cock, her fingers strumming her clit. Eavan wanted to lean forward, take her bouncing breasts into his mouth, but he didn't dare move and break the spell.

He held her hip in his left hand, helping to guide and steady her. Her skin was hot to the touch, glowing through him until even his hand illuminated.

The torment was too much. He placed his feet firmly on the mattress and bucked up into her as she came down.

Kree's eyes were closed, her brow furrowed. She was almost there. He knew. Her expression gave her away even as the first ripples of her orgasm vibrated against his shaft.

Shouts filled the small bedroom. Liquid ran the length of his cock and trickled down his balls. He burst upward one more time before letting himself go.

Kree folded over onto his chest, missing the bandage and snuggling against his right. Problem was he couldn't hold her as tightly as he wanted to in that position.

Slowly he brought his injured arm up, resting it on the curve of her waist. With his other, he traced lazy circles on her lower spine. She kissed the place over his heart.

They remained locked that way until the peaceful hush of sleep claimed them both.

Chapter Twenty-eight

The skies overhead had turned a dull gray once again. This had been the wettest month in recent history. The Druma gathered under the threatening clouds to say good-bye to the warriors fallen in the confrontation with the guards.

Eavan stood stoically beside his brother, Kree on his other side. They watched as the empty pyres were lit. Personal belongings of the dead were burned in place of the missing bodies. It was all they had left to offer the gods—symbols of lives ended much too soon.

The weather had no intention of cooperating. The skies broke halfway through the service. The fires dwindled and finally went out. It was just as well the bodies were not recovered, given the brevity of the funeral rites.

Eavan's arm itched inside the confines of the mesh bandage. He pulled at the top, trying to get the fabric away from the area. Kree shot him a glance, telling him with her eyes to leave it alone.

The mourners broke up, walking slowly away from the doused pyres. There was no need to run. Water dried. Running from a funeral rite was disrespectful. The ancestors would see and judge such actions harshly.

Eavan guided Kree back to the tech heta designated as a lab. They had to break down the information gained from the sensors Ronen brought back from the monolith. The hope was that they would locate the area of greatest vulnerability to the structure. Plans to bring the damned things down had been agreed on by both Sophites and Druma. It was really the only way to regain some lost foothold on their country.

Who knew what else the monoliths were used for besides the unlikely function of capturing the mindspeech of the Unarion psychics?

They reached the lab. He held the door open for Kree. Ronen followed her inside, but not before Eavan touched his arm. "Can I speak with you in private for a moment before you get to work?"

Ronen looked uncomfortable with the request but nodded once in agreement.

The soft drone of conversations faded into the background. Eavan directed Ronen to a quiet corner where they could talk without being overheard, but were within easy distance should someone need them.

The sentry captain regarded Eavan's bandaged arm with a sick glance. "I really am terribly sorry about your injury and the loss of your friends. I should have thought better and taken only sentries with me."

Sudden anger filled Eavan's throat, choking off any reply he tried to make. He fought to master the emotions and managed to only when he saw the intense sincerity in Ronen's eyes. The anger morphed to irritation.

"Your apology is appreciated but unnecessary. The death of a warrior at the hands of an enemy is not your responsibility. To offer apologies diminishes the honor of their deaths." Eavan raised his hand in a gesture meant to close the topic for discussion. "This is not what I wanted to talk to you about. It involves a mission I want you to consider."

Ronen frowned. "A mission? What kind?"

Eavan glanced behind him. Kree had her head down, studying the screen in front of her. Lynx pointed to something, her mouth moving but the explanation lost to distance. Confident the request he was about to make of Ronen could not be overheard, he continued. "To the capital. Infiltrate the theocrats in their seat of power."

An odd light filled Ronen's eyes. "You might have some Unarion blood, Druma. I had decided the same thing myself."

The tale the sentry captain spun of events after the Druma warriors left the rover car was enough to convince Eavan he'd been right to suggest the mission. News the ascendant had the power of Theomacus at his fingertips would spread like a brush fire through a region of drought. It was also dangerous if the theocratic council decided to challenge that power.

"Have you told Kree you plan to leave?"

Ronen's gaze strayed to the premier. "No. With you missing, I didn't want to bring it up. It wasn't the right time."

"You will tell her soon?"

"When we've taken down the monoliths. Not before." Worry drew Ronen's brows together. He leaned in. A confidant's stance. "Jerella is also leaving the settlement."

This news didn't surprise Eavan in the least. He'd felt the restlessness in the young woman, brewing as surely as the storms overhead. His heart bled for Kree. So many changes in her life in such a short time. She'd lost much, but gained more. He only hoped she saw the blessings in the changes.

Ronen glanced behind him once more, then turned back. "Your missing Druma woman is wreaking havoc with our plans. It was her doing our rover car was stopped at all. The soldiers said she'd reported a stolen vehicle transporting fraudulent priests."

Eavan's heart fell. Abbinet must have been the one to tell the guards the Druma hid the Sophites. If so, she'd more than burned her bridges with not just this settlement, but all of them.

"There is nothing to do for it. She's made the damage and betrayed us. Consequences for her actions will be paid when she next meets with another member of our race."

A commotion started at the terminals. Excited chatter, squeals, and exclamations.

Eavan and Ronen hurried over to see what had caused the celebration.

Eavan stood behind Kree, looking down at the screen. A three-dimensional model of the monolith spun on an invisible axis. Input from the retrieved sensors overlaid the picture, showing clear areas where information leaked back out of the structure along nearly imperceptible seams. Definite areas of vulnerability.

“Now that we know where to place the explosives, we need to figure out what kind and how much.” Cahlen busily typed into his console. The composition parameters showed up on the screen. Some of the components listed were unknown. “Well, that’s not good.”

Eavan rested his chin on his hand. “Not necessarily. I’ll get with the weapons specialists and see if they can solve the problem. We might not need to bring the structure down completely as long as we render it useless. Or sever its ability to receive information.”

Ronen nodded. “That might actually be the smarter way to go. Leave them standing. The theocrats will go crazy trying to figure out how to fix them.”

Kree turned to look at them. “And we don’t run the risk of hurting the Unarions should they suffer a backlash of power from the explosion.”

Eavan smiled and ran a hand down her hair. “You are a very tenderhearted woman.”

The actions were just to keep him from exploding in a shower of raw hatred and emotion. If he had his way, he’d blow the monoliths all the way to the ancestors and let them send the fragments onto the gods, where they’d never be seen again.

There were other questions that needed to be answered: like where did the unknown materials come from? Were they imported from off-world? And if so, who were the theocrats trading with while denouncing such actions if practiced by another government?

He feared this little group of intrepid technicians had forgotten that basic fact.

Kree studied his face. A telltale sign his anger must have been present there. She didn’t make comment on it, but turned back to her screen. “We might even be able to erect fields that can block the monoliths’ reception.”

“And that would require we place more sensors to ensure the fields worked,” Cahlen said.

Lynx placed her hands on her hips and stepped back from the group. “I don’t like it. I say we go for ultimate destruction. Make it harder for the theocrats to build new ones. We leave the structures standing and the technicians come out and replace internal components. Then what? We keep taking it off-line? It’s like spinning a wheel in the mud. All it does is get you dirty, but it doesn’t move you anywhere.”

Eavan could have kissed his kinswoman for saying what he’d held back.

Kree turned around, staring at Eavan for a long, silent moment. Then she narrowed her eyes. "You agree with Lynx."

At the risk of pissing off his bonded, he nodded. "I have the right to vengeance." He held up his arm. "If I can't take it out in blood, I'll take it out in stone."

Kree's expression went cold. "Something tells me you already had your vengeance when you escaped your captors."

"And you'd deny me that?" Eavan challenged.

She looked as if he'd hit her in the head with a blunt object. The thought hadn't even occurred to her. If not, then what was her opposition? Did she really want to keep the monoliths and their potential for havoc alive on the off chance their destruction might have repercussions for the Unarions? By the ancestors, they already knew the structures were dangerous. How much more proof did she need?

"Let me know when you all have decided which way you wish to go. I'll take the decision to the elders and see what they say." He turned from the group and walked away. As far as the technical aspects, they had it covered. His presence was unneeded.

He needed to be alone.

Too many raw emotions boiled inside him.

Two of his friends had been sent to the ancestors this very morning. How could vengeance not be on his mind? How could Kree not expect him to feel that way?

Didn't she want the same when her beloved mentor had been killed?

He exited the tech heta, allowing the door to close behind him. The clouds hung low and angry over the settlement. Ominous. First a sandstorm and now the torrential rain. It was as if someone had learned how to affect the weather.

Eavan stopped in the middle of the settlement and stared up into the sky. It wasn't as if he didn't care about the fate of the Unarions. He did. But without the ability to interview them as to how the monoliths affected them, if at all, they were all shooting in the dark.

Leaving the monoliths standing wasn't an option, as far as he was concerned.

"Eavan."

He turned at the sound of his name. Kree came through the thick sand, her arms and legs pumping with the effort and speed.

He started to hook his hands through his waistband as he waited, but bending his right arm hurt. He bit back a wince. To show any outward pain while he healed was inexcusable. He wanted the pain. To let it drive him forward and remind him of the torture the Druma enemies were willing to inflict.

Kree stopped in front of him, looking up into his face. "You don't really believe I want you to forgive and forget, do you?"

"I sure as all the hells hope not. You'd be bitterly disappointed."

Gently, she took his right hand, lacing her fingers through his. The touch of her hand alone was enough to make him want her. There were times during his short imprisonment he'd been afraid he'd never see her again. That his love for her had been doomed from the start and the Ki never told him.

"I never want you to feel or be something you aren't," she said. "I only want us to be responsible about how we dismantle the monoliths. Enough people have been hurt already."

"Grey and Erole weren't the first Druma to fall to the theocrats. There are widows living throughout this settlement and others who can give me any number of reasons why vengeance for my people is justified. Killing the few guards who did this"—he held up his arm—"is only scratching the surface of what we're owed."

"Where does it end, Eavan?"

"Did you ask yourself that question while you watched your Sophites taken to public executions?"

The words jarred her, striking like a fist. She turned her face away. "That's cruel."

"I think you need to be reminded of what's at stake, Kree."

She swung back to face him. Her glare shot at him like twin lasers. "I know only too well what's at stake. I have the distinction of being bonded to the warrior who had his tattoo cut off and sent to his family." Tears filled her eyes. A sob tore from her that she failed to hold back. The shock of her emotion sent shivers through his body. His arm throbbed in nearly unbearable pain. It was enough to drive a man over the edge. A warrior had better conditioning than to succumb to the stress he'd endured. But seeing Kree's hurt so raw crippled him.

He folded her into his arms, burying his face in her hair. "Shh."

She rubbed her face against his chest. "I just don't want anyone to feel what I did when I thought you were dead. No one should ever go through that."

"We don't even know for sure if the Unarions will feel anything from the explosion. If they do, it might be a sense of relief."

"Or it could backlash to their psychic-neuro networks and burn their talent out permanently."

Eavan ran a hand down her head and spoke against her forehead. "Nothing like looking at things positively."

She let go of him long enough to hit his good arm. "I'm just tired of it all. I want to start our life together. I want to set up a temple here in the Plains. Away from the theocrats and their genocidal tendencies."

"We can. We just need to take those damn monoliths down first."

She lifted her hand to his chest and rubbed his nipple through the fabric of his shirt.

"Kree, you mean to disarm me. You'll win your argument at all cost."

“I don’t want to argue. I want you to take me home and love me. I need to feel you inside me so I know you love me. I need to know through rite and ritual.”

He held her face in his palm. “Never question that I love you.”

She rubbed against him. His thin pants were no cover for his erection. There was no denying how much he wanted her.

Silently, he turned her toward the heta.

* * *

Talk about a monolith. Whew! Eavan had one right between his legs. Not that Kree minded in the least. At the moment, he used it to rim the edge of her anus. She had her face planted in the pillow, ass up in the air, legs spread.

Ritual! So far all the visions she’d had contained multiple orgasms and a savagely beautiful man mounting her like a beast.

If they continued on in such a fashion, they’d get nothing accomplished. Servicing wasn’t a problem in her marriage. Not that she’d imagined it would be. From the very first time they met, he’d proven his prowess at making her come. Maybe she’d been right on first assessment—he drank itanie like water.

Or maybe he just enjoyed what he’d been denied for so long.

Anyway, she wasn’t going to complain. Their lovemaking was the most powerful she’d ever enjoyed.

“There isn’t a place on your body that doesn’t fascinate me.” This said while he continued to tease her with whether or not he intended to slide his cock in.

Kree scooted closer, trying to take the decision from him. “Please, Eavan.”

“Please what? I want to hear you say it.”

Did he honestly think after all this time she of all people would shy away from telling him exactly what she wanted? It wasn’t in her nature as a Sophite, nor as a premier. “Fuck me there, credah.”

She felt him shudder with the use of the endearment.

“I love you, Kree.”

There wasn’t time to answer as the wonderful sensation of fullness took away her breath. The head of his cock breached her opening.

“Oh, my love.” It sounded ripped from his throat as he pushed in the rest of the way.

Kree hunkered down, stretching under her body for all she was worth, managing just barely to touch his balls.

He went on, thrusting and murmuring words she had heard him say before but had never been able to ask the meaning.

“Tell me,” she moaned as she dragged her fingers through her pussy, delighting in the throb of her clit.

“There is no translation worthy.” She felt the bandage on his injured hand as he grazed it across her butt cheek.

He didn’t seem to even want to try at the moment. She didn’t blame him. The intimacy they shared was intense, almost painful in its beauty. Why spoil it with an attempt to find the right words when the ones he spoke were lyrical?

She felt him tense a second before he shouted in triumph. She followed before the last pulse ebbed.

Eavan collapsed on the bed beside her, looking into her eyes. “I don’t know how the sentries live as long as they do.”

Kree laughed. “Look at it this way. You’re one man, taking the place of a temple full of sentries. No one said it would be easy.”

He kissed her brow and closed his eyes. Kree snuggled in and drifted off.

* * *

A knock on the door woke Kree sometime later. Her body was warm where Eavan spooned in behind her. He kissed her brow and slipped from the bed and pulled on his pants.

Noises from the settlement filtered into the room when Eavan opened the front door. Low voices whispered in urgent tones, though Kree had no idea what they said.

She sat up on the bed and started a frantic search for her clothes. Whatever had happened sounded as if it needed immediate attention.

The door closed with a quiet *thud*. Eavan returned to the bedroom, his expression grave. “The elders have called a meeting with the entire settlement, including the Sophites.”

“Do you have any idea what it’s about?”

“The monoliths. They’ve made their decision based on the information given them by Cahlen and Lynx.”

“Why do I feel I’m not going to get a chance to make my position heard?”

“Oh you will,” Eavan reassured her. “It just won’t make much difference. Their decisions are based on advice they get from the Ki and the ancestors in conjunction with the evidence collected.”

Meanwhile, she’d heard not one word from Sopha on any matter but the one that took her to the warehouse where she’d first met the sting of Eavan’s stunner. That consultation with her beloved goddess had brought her to this moment. Though in all truth, she’d not have missed going to the place where Siobhán had been murdered. To see the pillar where she’d been strung up and beaten before they burned her alive as a heretic.

Siobhán was no heretic. She was true to her calling to Sopha. True to the religion that evolved around the first woman born with the phosphorescent alleles.

The only heretics in the provinces were those who had taken the power they'd been given and seized more every chance they got, until nothing remained of the former country.

Maybe it *was* time to let go with a little rampage of their own. She still had reservations about the safety of the Unarions. Let it never be said she had the same disregard for others that the theocrats had shown to those they ruled.

Kree went into the bathroom and bathed. She'd dress in the borrowed clothes made in the settlement. She'd been assimilated into the culture in record time. Not that she felt out of place in the Druma town. Not that she wanted to be anywhere that Eavan wasn't—no, she never wanted to be away from him again.

Sopha led her here for a reason. Adjustments needed to be made in her thinking. In the settlement, the elders and chieftain were the law—the first and last word on every aspect of life. Yet the Druma did not live under a cloak of tyranny. Not the likes of which the theocrats imposed. The Druma rites and rituals were as much a part of their freedom of spirit as they were with the Sophites. There was peace in the knowledge, but also a certain amount of trepidation. No matter what the Druma elders decided, the safety of her people was still her responsibility. Regardless. If she didn't agree with their decision, she had to offer alternatives. She owed them too much to flat-out refuse to agree to their plans.

"Are you almost ready?" Eavan stood in the doorway, watching her as she ran a wet cloth over her breasts. His eyes had grown hot with want. Desire filled the air between them.

She gave him a crooked smile over her shoulder. "Depends on what you want me ready for."

He lifted his uninjured arm and ran a bent knuckle down her bare spine. Chills lifted bumps on her skin. Her nipples tightened. "We don't have time for that right now, but I will promise to make very thorough work of you later."

She had no doubt he would. The man was insatiable.

But so was she.

Kree reached behind her for his hand and pulled it through to cup her breast. "Later, then."

Chapter Twenty-nine

It was worse than Kree ever imagined.

The chieftain stood in the middle of the dais, the elders flanking him on either side. His gaze was angry, mouth hard with emotion. “The monoliths must come down. Structures such as these are capable of much more horrific uses than collecting the stray thoughts of the Unarions. How much longer until they find a way to manipulate the input and transmit back to the psychics, and use the ’liths for control? Once that is accomplished the Unarions become part of the guards, giving them the ultimate advantage in bringing the rest of us to extinction.”

Kree ran her hand over her heart. It beat hard, as if she’d just run a great distance at her top speed. “Do you not think the Unarions have enough control to feel an outward influence taking control of their thoughts and emotions? I have to believe they would.”

The chieftain leaned forward, bracing his knuckles on the table. “Not if it’s used as a subtle blade.”

“So far nothing the theocrats have done has been subtle. It’s not in their makeup. Even some of Theomacus’s teachings advocate the use of blunt force on those unwilling to heed to god-bound law,” Ronen offered. He sat next to her as the senior advisor for the Sophites. Jerella sat on her other side, stiff and bristling with the exchange.

“No, you are correct, Captain. Which is why they will understand greater the intent if the monoliths are completely destroyed. Blunt force, as you put it.”

Kree’s attention shifted to watch Ki Jovan. His gaze stayed forward, not on the people gathered. It was a stoic expression that could have been carved of stone. This hard-line tactic had to do with something the Ki had seen in a vision. It had to. The Druma did nothing without consulting the Ki and the elders in league with their beloved ancestors. A man who could speak with the long-dead Druma had a unique perspective.

Ronen took a breath as if to rebut the chieftain’s statement. Kree put a quieting hand on his arm, a signal to give her the floor.

“Full disclosure.” Kree stood from her place on the mei heta floor. She felt the collective eyes of the Druma staring holes into the back of her tunic. Perhaps they didn’t need to know the very essence of information under consideration by the elders before decisions were made. The Sophites didn’t operate under the same set of rules. Never had. This is where their cultures had never seemed so different.

She turned to stare at the other Sophites seated throughout the room. Eris caressed her extended belly, as if soothing the child that grew inside. It wasn't just the Sophites. It wasn't just the Druma. The future belonged to both races, and the theocrats had meant to stop that any way possible. Had they meant to use the Unarions as a subtle knife? An enemy the Sophites and Druma would never see coming.

"What do you mean, Premier? We have told you everything we know."

Kree shook her head. "Not everything. How can you use an assumption—a speculation—to decide your course of attack? You had to base it on something concrete." She raised her arms, indicating the Druma gathered. "You might be mighty warriors, but you use great discretion in your actions."

The chieftain looked to the elders, a quest for permission. The Ki gave a single nod.

"The ancestors have shown two paths before us: one that will lead to an even greater evil to be released and one that will eventually lead to a lasting peace."

"Eventually?" Ronen raised a brow to Kree, then turned back to the elders. "I don't think I like the way the odds play either way."

The chieftain sat down and folded his hands in front of him. "You are correct to assume it will be bad no matter what we choose. By letting the theocrats retain control of the monoliths, we run the risk of inciting the evil. We need to curb it. The risk to the Unarions is minimal this way." He held up his hand in caution. "But we need more. Rest assured, for every monolith we destroy, the theocrats will erect others to take their place. Each successive generation will be more powerful than the last until the structures are perfected."

Kree knew instinctually what the elders wanted, and she had to admit it made for a tempting pursuit. Cripple the theocrats at the base of their invasive operations.

Ronen tensed beside her. "And you have a traitor feeding information to the enemy."

Sounds of outrage filled the room.

Eavan stepped forward, shaking his head back and forth. "You smear the honor of the Druma."

"Not all Druma. Abbinet. Were you not going to tell them?" Whispers rose around the room. Kree watched the byplay with breath held.

Ronen continued, "The guards mentioned she'd passed on information to them."

Eavan held up his injured arm. "After what they did to full warriors, do you honestly believe one woman could hold out against an interrogation?"

An intense sense of incredulousness came from Ronen. Had they discussed this before?

“She stole a rover and left the settlement of her own will. Do you honestly believe her actions were altruistic? I don’t. The only motive was revenge.” Ronen stood. “Ask your Ki. I bet he knows exactly what I’m talking about.”

Ki Jovan finally acknowledged those gathered, in particular, Ronen. “The wheels of destiny have turned as they must.”

Eavan’s look of disbelief said it all: he felt betrayed by his own leaders. “You knew and didn’t warn us beforehand. When Ronen informed me of her actions, I thought it was of little matter since the damage had been done. If I knew beforehand, I could have prevented it.”

“Do not berate yourself. You did nothing wrong.” The Ki held Eavan’s stare for a long moment as those of the settlement shifted around them. “Before her betrayal there was little point. She had to make her move as you must make yours. Go to the monoliths. Destroy them. Set the path for the future.”

The holy man charged not only Eavan with the task, but the entire contingent of Druma warriors. Power radiated through the room, racing from person to person like the arc of a snapped electrical grid.

A silent pulse began a low hum, trilling along the surface of her skin.

Kree watched the proceedings, feeling the energy race through her body. It was almost sexual in its manifestation. Her nipples hardened to tight points. Her pussy became wet and throbbed with the need for release.

Sopha was here.

Her presence lightened the room, turning the interior of the mei heta into a golden glow. The Ki had spoken the truth. Sopha had come to confirm.

Kree stood on shaking legs, yet her voice was strong. “The Sophites agree.”

The chieftain gave a nod of agreement. “It will be done.”

* * *

Plans progressed quickly from there. The readouts from the sensors gave specific areas where the explosives would be most successful. However, nothing on their data gave any indication of how to place the charges without being seen by the guards. For that they’d have to do it the old-fashioned way.

Ronen hated old-fashioned.

There was a reason man had advanced technology to a point that it worked for him. The theocrats tried to use it to work the other way. Against those who opposed them.

He wanted in on that in the worst way. Wanted to see them blown to the heavens and block out the sun. It was the last thing he wanted to do for Kree before leaving on his mission to the seat of the theocrats.

There were no illusions in the request from Eavan. The Druma warrior wanted a potential rival out of the way. Not that Ronen held any hope he and Kree had a chance in all the hells to end up together now. No, she’d made her choice. Ronen chose to honor that and move on.

He'd not served Sopha all these years to not see the signs for what they were. As the Ki observed, his destiny lay elsewhere.

Munitions techs moved around him, packing bags with explosives. Druma warriors and sentries were divided up into teams. He cooled his heels waiting for his charges and destination. With luck it would be far from the settlement. He'd already decided to continue on to the tabernacle. There was no sense in returning to the settlement after the monoliths were destroyed. Like Jerella, there was nothing left for him here.

His job as a sentry captain was done.

Cahlen worked at one of the consoles, doing last-minute calculations and triangulations to find any new monoliths that might have been erected since the last one they'd witnessed. The sylvan was the natural choice to elevate to captain.

Cahlen had more than proven himself ready for the task.

"Gathering wood?" Lynx said from over his left shoulder. It was full of both mockery and irritation.

He chose not to rise to the bait. "Making plans for my absence. It might be of some duration."

Sultry hazel eyes captured his. "I know. I've been assigned as your concubine."

The Druma never missed an opportunity to keep their fingers in all the pies. Though having a Druma warrior at his back wasn't a bad idea, he wished there had been another female they could have sent. Lynx didn't strike Ronen as being the sort of woman to bow to a man as concubine, especially the likes of which the theocrats employed.

Again, he made no comment. What would be the point? She had her instructions. He had his mission. They had to work together to bring the theocrats down. Even if his idea of a perfect woman was one without tattoos and attitude, she would be able to infiltrate areas of the tabernacle he'd not be able to go. Not to mention she was a tech head. As a plan, it was a good one. Better than his idea of living as a celibate for as long as it took to bring the theocrats down from inside the organization.

A momentary look of surprise softened her expression. "Not going to argue?"

"Why? It makes perfect sense." He let his gaze fall to the full-sleeve tattoo on her right arm. "You will need to keep that covered at all times while inside. If any of the others see it, you'll be discovered and executed."

She turned her arm up, studying it. "I'd like to see them try."

* * *

All teams left the settlement under the cloak of darkness. Eavan moved with the stealth and speed drummed into him during his training. Miles of ground had to be covered in the fastest time possible. There were no margins for error. The monoliths had to go down at the same time to prevent the theocrats from sending more guards to defend.

Kree rode at his side, refusing to be left behind. Her exact words had something to do with the fact she'd crossed the provinces with him once already; she'd do so again. He thought it was more the fact she didn't want him out of her sight.

Warmth filled him in all the best places.

Loving Kree was everything the Ki had promised when he'd finished his much belated consultation. The pieces of his life puzzle had fallen into place and locked fast. It didn't even bother him that she thought he'd died. Not really. She had misread the Ki's vision. Time with the Druma would change that.

He glanced over at her profile. He only hoped it didn't change her. She was perfection.

At least in his eyes.

Energy hummed around her. She was keyed up to blow the monoliths.

So was he.

It might be a small victory, even a temporary one, but the theocrats needed to learn not all the citizens enjoyed subjugation.

The first of the monoliths came into view. Power radiated from it, sending up a beacon in the still dark sky.

"It's glowing." Kree pointed to the far horizon where a beam of light rose high into the clouds.

"Maybe it's transmitting now. Ki Jovan and my father seemed pretty sure that was the next step." Eavan slowed the rover to a stop. Rhees sat in the back, tapping away on a com link. Wulf insisted on assignment to their team. He sat beside Rhees, fidgeting in his seat.

Wulf just wanted to blow something up.

Or so he'd said about once every click since they'd started their journey.

"I say we do the next leg on foot. If we get too close with the rover, we'll be target practice." Wulf shifted closer to the door. "I wouldn't bet they haven't armed the fuckers."

He had a point.

"Was there anything in the information gathered that suggested they might be able to train these as weapons on anyone besides the Unarions?" Kree asked. Her eyes narrowed.

Rhees lowered the com link. "Not that we found."

"Then why the light show? For amusement?" Wulf was good and riled. "I didn't think the theocrats cared for amusements."

"Not normally." Eavan powered down the rover. "It's about a mile and a half off. We'll set up camp here and wait for word from the others before we move."

It was going to be a long wait.

The teams had gone silently in their travels, forswearing contacting one another until they were in place and the charges set. Nothing communicated on the com units gave away their plans. It was safer should guards intercept their signal. It had been agreed that any information would be sent in a series of beeps. There were only so many things that needed to be transmitted. Arrival. Readiness. Detonation.

They hurried to set up their camp to wait on the beep from the settlement that indicated the others were ready to set their charges. When that call came, Wulf and Eavan would travel the last click and set the explosives, quickly and quietly, then get out.

Rhees had the frequency of the explosive devices in his com link. On the signal from the settlement, he would hit the codes that would set off the blast.

They all had their tasks to complete. Save Kree. She sat in silence around the portable fire, much as she had on their trek through the mountain, staring at the heart of the blue flame.

Eavan sat beside her, running a hand down her hair. She leaned into his touch, turning fully to him.

She and Ronen had had a long talk before he left with Lynx, Deniol, and Jerella for the farthest monolith, tucked far up into the interior of the provinces. She hadn't been very talkative since. He knew why, and guilt swamped him.

"He's doing important work," Eavan offered without preamble.

Kree didn't even pretend not to know what he meant. "It's a blow I really didn't need now. I'm losing my adja and my captain."

"Cahlen has proven capable of command. The men respond to his authority. He was a good choice."

Kree worried a stick between her fingers. "An excellent choice. But that's not the point."

Eavan took her hand in his. She dropped the stick on the ground. "It *is* the point." He turned to look down into her face. Light from the fire painted her face in blue. "These are uncertain times. Sacrifices must be made to ensure the future. If that means letting go of loved ones whose paths differ from ours, so be it."

"I've sacrificed a great deal to keep the order together since the theocrats took over. I don't know how much longer I can do it. Not without my adja. Not without my sentry captain."

"You've said Cahlen was a good choice. Let him take on his duties and find his place before you judge him."

"I'm not judging him. I've just worked with Ronen so long I wonder how I'll function without him."

"The way you always have." Eavan touched her over her heart, between her breasts. "You'll feel him here when you need to make a decision. All the wisdom he offered you over the years will be there waiting. That will never change."

"I chose my bonded well." Kree tipped her face up. "I don't deserve you."

"You do." He brushed his lips against hers. "We were destined for each other."

"So you've said."

He stood and pulled Kree up to stand against his side. Rhees didn't seem to notice, but Wulf gave him a sly grin.

"We're going to take a walk. Don't come looking for us unless we're gone past highest moon."

Wulf put both hands over his heart. "Ah, the lusty hearts of the newly bonded. Go on, but keep your com unit handy just in case."

Eavan nodded as he turned Kree to head into the tree line. He didn't want to go too far away from camp, just enough to ensure some privacy. Though the Sophites and their sentries were very open and accepting of sex, the Druma were more modest about overt displays of affection. Sex was to be shared by bonded pairs, not a spectator sport for the entire settlement.

Kree's entire life had been about sex and the expression thereof. One of these days he'd really have to ask her about life in the temples. What if any daughters they had carried the Sophatic genes? He'd have to let go and allow her to follow the path—if it was her wish. But thinking of a sentry touching his daughter stirred uneasy feelings in his soul.

And here he thought he was an enlightened man.

"You've grown quiet." Kree tugged on his good hand, taking him to a small copse of *sable* bushes. The gentle fragrance wafted up, filling the air with a subtle musky scent.

"Thinking about the future. Our children." He slid his arms around Kree, content for the moment just to hold her.

"I haven't been off the birth control herbs long enough to be pregnant."

A breeze blew, ruffling his hair on his forehead. "Will you go back on them now we aren't running and can get them into the settlement?"

She let out a breath. "When you didn't come back, I wanted very much to think I might have your child growing inside me. It might have been the only thing I had left of you." In the dim light he saw her caress her lower abdomen. "A warrior with his father's eyes and generous heart."

Eavan thought his heart would burst. Who would ever think love could be so immense? That it was too huge to fit inside the physical body.

He brought her to his chest, careful to use tenderness when passion was pressure behind his sternum. Slowly, he removed her clothes. Each new exposed area of skin he painted with kisses.

The attention was reciprocated. The press of her mouth on his chest, belly, and cock took him to a level beyond emotional endurance. If this was a simple madness, he went gladly.

He reached over his shoulder, plucking sable shoots from the bush. The fronds had long furry wisps, soft and decadent. Eavan traced them down Kree's neck and over her breasts. Sexy musk rose up, bathing her skin. It was said the milk of the plant, if drunk, could make a man hard for hours without losing his load.

The Druma had never tested the theory, preferring to remain free of such devices while pleasuring their beloved. It was a test of a Druma's strength and endurance to make love for hours without spilling his seed. He'd been unable to make it that far, given the unbearable pleasure of Kree.

He circled each of her nipples with the frond, watching with growing desire as she arched her back, lifting her breasts higher. "You like that?"

"Yes."

"Here, lie down." He spread out his tunic on the ground and arranged her for optimum arousal. Next he stripped off his pants and rolled them up to place under her hips.

Her knees fell open, exposing her pussy like an offering on the Altar of Paradise. He leaned forward, kissing her there, before running the soft fronds through her delicate folds.

"Mmmm." She turned her head toward the sable bush. Fronds hung down over her face, like a silky veil. "More."

Oh, he wanted to give her more. Wanted to give her every pleasure imaginable. He opened her, exposing the jut of her clit, then flicked his wrist, using the wisps to strike the sensitive bud.

Kree lifted her hips for him. Her hands were pressed to the inside of her knees, forcing them wider. "Yes. Like that."

He kept up the vibrating play as she writhed beneath the strokes. Her body took on a deep luminescence. Orgasm was only moments away. Eavan pressed his advantage, surging up to plant his cock in her quivering walls. The frond continued to stimulate her clit, harder and faster now.

She threw back her head and cried out.

He didn't want to fall now. It was too soon. But the way her cunt squeezed his cock as she continued to come had him reciting everything from the Warrior's Creed to the Invocation of the Ancestors. Anything to take his mind from the immediate and intense awareness of her white-hot orgasm.

Kree held out her arms, as if calling to Sopha. "Come with me, Eavan."

He wanted to. But it always seemed to happen too fast. They had no time in their lives for long, leisurely lovemaking. One day. But not now.

Eavan lowered himself down, so their bodies touched from mouths to toes. He set a slow, steady pace, prolonging the agony.

And it was. Each time he touched her, there was a pain close to fatal that ran through his body. As if he had no way to get close enough. The consequences of which were dire. Hot wetness slid all around his cock. The feeling comforted and

inspired. He never wanted to be away from Kree again. There was too much at stake.

She brought her legs up around his waist, tightening her hold on him. Damn, his credah had strong thighs. They were like steel bands. The hold also prevented him from moving the way he wanted. But from the look on her face, it worked just fine for Kree.

Bits of dirt and rocks dug into his hands as he rocked back and forth above her, using the ground for leverage. Kree reached up, taking his hands in hers, then pressed a tender kiss against his lips.

The Sophite word for forever fell from her lips a second before another orgasm claimed her. This time Eavan held on tight, following where she led, promising in word and deed to never let go.

Chapter Thirty

The beeps came the next evening as the Lode star rose on the horizon. Eavan took Kree into his arms for a long kiss of luck.

He and Wulf set out on the trek, jogging on silent feet for the entire click.

The eerie light that stretched up into the sky the night before had returned.

Eavan carried the pack of explosives on his back. The essential components were there, but separate for transport. The last thing the Druma and Sophites needed was to blow their own people sky-high on the trek across country. Safety first, especially in this type of operation.

The closer they came to the monolith, the brighter the light. It cut through the ground cover, moving out both laterally and vertically.

Eavan stopped behind the cover of a giant pine. Wulf moved in beside him. "How do you suppose we get close enough to plant the explosives? I have the feeling those lights are triggers of some sort."

Wulf leaned out to look around the tree. "Or recorders. They might monitor the 'lith in a three-hundred-and-sixty-degree arc. If so there's no way we'll be able to get close enough without being seen."

Rhees hadn't mentioned any guards in the area. His equipment would have shown it.

Eavan hoisted the pack up higher on his back. "I wonder if there's a way we can take out the lower lights. I'm not too worried about the vertical ones."

"No, unless you plan to climb, they don't pose much threat I can see."

They exchanged a silent look.

Nothing the theocrats did was without threat or malice. They'd proven beyond a doubt they had no love for humanity, only for their own way of life.

"I wonder if Kree can help us with this."

Wulf frowned. "How?"

"You've not seen our Sophite visitors in a state of arousal, have you?"

Even in the dim light coming from the monolith, Eavan saw his brother's color rise.

"I'd hardly be in a position for that, now would I?" Wulf crouched down, looking at the monolith at ground level. "I think when I choose my bonded it will be one from the settlement. Not that I find fault with your Kree."

“Did you have someone in mind? Or have you consulted with Ki Jovan?”

“Neither.” He moved forward, slowly. The light seemed to pass through Wulf, illuminating him from within until his bones showed through his skin.

Eavan snatched him back. “By the ancestors! Don’t do that again. You want to permanently sterilize yourself?”

Wulf rubbed his chest and thighs. “It tingles.”

“What was that?” Rhees’s voice came over the short-range com link.

“Wulf stepped in front of the light beam coming from the monolith.” Eavan watched as Wulf put his hands in his hair and roughed it back and forth as if getting rid of spiders.

“The sensors just threw back a string of code that looks like DNA sequences.”

Wulf raised a brow. “Great. The theocrats can track my DNA now.”

“I wouldn’t worry about it too much,” Eavan said as he took out a set of field glasses from the pack. “They probably already had it stored.”

Tapping came through the link before Rhees said, “I’d be more worried about them knowing there is a human so near their monolith and not an animal.”

“How are we supposed to get to this thing?” Frustration sharpened Eavan’s tone. “If it’s tracking our DNA as we move toward it, we’re caught before we do anything.”

“It’s not like you to be a quitter,” Kree said.

He smiled. “Never. I just need an idea of how to get past the light show.”

“Hold on, I’m coming to you.”

Eavan might have joked about Kree helping them, but he damn sure didn’t want her in the line of fire. He’d seen too much of that while trying to get her to the settlement. He tried to tell her not to move. The area might be crawling with guards shortly. The last thing he wanted was for Kree to come out from cover.

A quarter hour later she came through the brush, panting slightly. A slight glow rose on her skin from her exertion.

“I’ll shield your way.” She motioned for them to follow her. “Fall in line behind me.”

They came in low, hunkering to the ground instead of walking upright. The distance from the ground used to confuse any information being sent back to the guards.

Instead of the light passing through Kree as it had Wulf, it stalled inside, diminished before fading away. But only in her direct path. The beam split, moving around her like a pylon holding back the tide.

They crept forward on hands and knees. In the distance the sounds of a helo-plane beat time with Eavan’s racing heart. Time was running out.

“Hurry!”

The last few yards were done in a crouched sprint.

Kree turned to Eavan, her hand out. "Hand me the explosives!"

With her body blocking the light, she had the perfect perspective for planting the charges in the monolith.

A series of beeps signaled the others were ready.

"No. No." It was hard to see Kree's hands fly over the rigging as she made the connections. It made it hard for Eavan to instruct her.

He leaned forward. "No, you have the wrong junction."

The helo-plane came closer.

Kree made the change, then moved to the south side of the monolith, planting the charges there. Wulf calibrated the fuses, while they finished.

The helo-plane roared overhead.

"Out of time." Eavan set the pack down and pulled a stunner rifle from his holder, putting it together in a short series of snaps. Mechanisms clicked into place. He raised the sight to his eye and pulled the trigger.

A beam shot from the barrel, striking the rotor blades on the back end of the helo-plane. Electricity popped and crackled along the fuselage in a bright blue dance. Engine noise ceased. Terrified shouts came from the flight crew.

The helo-plane fell from the sky, nose down, planting in the forest floor.

The night lit up as the fuel exploded, sending sparks out along the underbrush.

"There'll be more coming on their tails." Eavan set the rifle on his shoulder. "We need to clear the area."

Kree let out a loud huff, followed by, "I'm not quite done here."

Wulf slid in behind her, letting her natural ability to absorb and project light protect him. He fixed the connections and laid the ground wires for the last set of explosives.

Two more helo-planes flew in from the south, hovering low to inspect the damage on the forest floor below.

Gunfire broke out, peppering the ground around the monolith.

Eavan turned the rifle and brought it to his eye. He squeezed the trigger, sending a bolt of canned lightning into the cockpit. The interior lit bright enough to show the startled faces of the guards as they burst into flames.

No mercy.

Eavan had no room for it in his heart. Not after watching friends die. Not after seeing the brutality of their superiors. Kree popped out from around the monolith, Wulf running behind her.

"Let's go!"

The three ran through the woods, zigzagging their way around trees and underbrush, making it harder for the guards in the air to track their retreat.

The last series of beeps came.

Confirmation.

Time had run out.

“Where are you?” Rhees’s voice was harsh. Harassed.

“Do it!” Eavan commanded.

The sound of breaking branches came from behind them. Eavan turned and let go with a few shots, hoping he hit something, not caring much if he didn’t.

A terrible stillness occurred, sucking air from the forest before the monolith exploded in a boom so loud the entire ground shook with quakelike ferocity.

In the flash of fire, Eavan watched as Kree went down. Wulf kept running, reaching down with his left hand to drag her up by the waistband of her pants. Eavan glanced behind them. Their pursuers lay flat on the ground, face down, unmoving.

The team kept moving, putting as much space between the explosion and their presence as possible.

Rhees waited with the rover car at the edge of the forest. The doors stood open. “Hurry. Major troop movements headed this way. It lit up the grid.”

So the guards had pulled out all the stops. No mere helo-planes for this operation. They were going to retaliate without prejudice.

Kree dove through the door. Wulf went in behind her, followed by Eavan. “Go full throttle.”

Rhees pushed the thrusters and throttle at the same time. The rover car shook as if it threatened to fly into a million pieces.

They didn’t stop until they reached the settlement.

Chapter Thirty-one

In the aftermath of the attack on the monoliths, the Druma moved to the top of the theocrats' most wanted list. Preparations were made to disassemble the entire settlement and move deeper into the Plains to an area near the banks of the Gaian River. It was a land settled by the first ancestors, the founders of the Druma nation, far away from the reach of the theocrats.

It was as much a respite as a regrouping. There were other plans under way that needed time to come to fruition.

Kree looked over her shoulder as they prepared to depart. Eavan had his arm around her shoulder, comforting. She hadn't lived in the settlement long enough to explain the intense sadness that settled over her. But it was there, right under her breastbone.

Encrypted messages had gone out to all the remaining temples hidden as cloisters throughout the provinces. They were given the choice of coming to the new temple, which would rest outside the new settlement, or stay and fight the theocrats as Ronen had left to do.

Either way the Sophites would survive.

It was all she could hope for.

She had not as yet heard from Ronen or Jerella. It was as if the world had reached up and swallowed them whole. From all reports the monoliths had come down successfully, and there had not been any casualties.

For that, she thanked Mother Sopha.

"Come, credah." Eavan kissed her brow. "A greater adventure awaits."

If anyone knew about adventures, it was her bonded. Her chosen.

The sunshine reflected in his amber eyes, making them glow with power and purpose. In that moment, he took her breath completely. And she knew.

Sometimes the course of bad religion produced something beautiful.

 THE END 

Kathleen Scott

Kathleen Scott lives for today and not tomorrow or yesterday. A mercurial individual, she has the high flying life of the jet set, and is hard to track down on most days.