



SAMHAIN

WICKED

Empress
ONIC EMPIRE

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MCLEOD

It'll take more than one man's love to tame her wild heart.

The Onic Empire, Book 4

Bithia, newly crowned empress of Diola, indulges herself with as many men as it takes to satisfy her voracious passion. Now that it's time to continue the family line, though, her advisors expect the unthinkable: for her to submit to one man from a sexually primitive planet.

Drahka disobeyed his tribe's strict sexual rules once. The shame still haunts him. He longs for a fresh start, but breaking one cardinal rule—a man gives, a woman takes—is not an option. His struggle to learn local customs is complicated by a mentor whose eyes hunger for the empress...and for him.

Viltori is exhausted. He's tried to teach Drakha that there are many ways to find pleasure, only to be met with anger, even violence. Touching the handsome primitive only sharpens his unbearable lust for Bithia, making him wonder if execution for failure wouldn't be a blessing.

When Bithia witnesses the results of Viltori's training, she realizes only these two men can fill her empty heart, inspiring her to take command of the throne at last. Except those who've held the reins thus far have a sinister reason for keeping Bithia—and her new consorts—in their place.

Warning: This erotic romance contains a lusty empress, a primitive alpha male, a dedicated acolyte with domineering tendencies, copious amounts of hot m/m and m/f/m sex, secret torments, burning desires clashing with duty, and a little bit of meddling by future gods.

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Wicked Empress

Anitra Lynn McLeod

Dedication

To all my Facebook buddies, but especially Joanne, my number one fan. Also, a big shout out to John Choby for being a good sport when me and Christina Crooks play on your wall.

Chapter One

Bithia always knew she would lose her freedom. She just didn't think it would happen so soon.

She'd been the empress for only three short cycles, but they'd already selected her first consort. As she understood the customs of Diola, she could have as many consorts as she wanted, but this first one would be her only bondmate. When she pressed her advisors for the reason behind this, they answered as they always did: by the prophecy, such had always been so. It seemed to her that was their answer for anything they did without knowing why. As a Diolan reared on another planet, she really couldn't argue with them.

At least she wouldn't have to stay true to this consort for long. Again, according to the prophecy, she must bring forth a girl child with him to carry on her family line. After that, she could take as many consorts as she could handle. She quivered in anticipation. Her goal was to have more consorts than any other empress in history. Bithia intended to keep them all personally satisfied. Already she'd found the men of Diola a lusty bunch who suffered no self-recriminations for their wanton behavior. Such was a welcome change from the self-flagellating men on Beserrah.

As the newly crowned empress, she'd had her pick of any man she desired. To her surprise, some women even went so far as to practically throw their bondmates at her in the hopes of currying favor. Bithia didn't care about that at all. Her only concern was with finding pleasure. So far, there had been only a few men she wanted but couldn't have. One of them, Kerrick, was a slave bound by temple rites to protect the consort of a god. He was gone now, but Bithia still thought of him. He became like the other untouchable men on Diola—fantasy fodder. In her mind, she could do with them as she pleased, and she did. Often she covered the face of her current lover to help her envision one of them, especially Kerrick.

With a sigh, she stood on her raised dais, waiting for the bonding ceremony to begin. She was naked, encircled by a ring of silken fabric that hid her from view. An audience of the highest-ranking families, dignitaries and those in authority awaited the revelation of her and her bondmate. So keen was their anticipation that they didn't even shuffle about in their padded seats. All she could hear was their quiet breathing.

Upon a deep breath, she smelled the oil her servants had covered her with after the ritualistic bath. The scent was soft and mildly arousing, but what excited her was the expectation of this man they'd chosen. At first, she'd been furious that she wasn't allowed to select her own eternal bondmate. She didn't actually believe in an ever-after, but if she had to spend eternity with one man, shouldn't she get to pick

that man? It seemed to her that as the empress, she should have the power of that choice. However, they insisted no man here on Diola would ever be enough to satisfy her. When she'd rolled her eyes at that excuse, they admitted the empire needed new blood, strong blood, which would strengthen her line for generations to come. Bithia couldn't wait to see this paragon of manliness.

Frustrated by further delay, she sat down cross-legged amidst the crimson fabric. Crimson, for that was the color of her House. Bithia still didn't understand all the details of how the elite structured themselves, but color was extremely important. The darker the shade, the more powerful the family. Her color was a deep, rich red that dazzled the eye. All her clothing was red with occasional touches of white, black and silver. Of course, for this ceremony she was nude. Sitting on the floor with her legs parted wide cooled the heat that had gathered between her thighs. Feverish dreams had tormented her from the moment she'd been told she would bond. Just what would this creature from another planet look like?

She reached up to scratch her head, but reminded herself not to muss her hair. Her short-shorn locks had shocked all on Diola, but Beserrah was an excruciatingly hot and humid world. The only way to survive the heat was by wearing as little as possible, and that included hair. With Diola's more moderate climate, she'd allowed her black hair to grow. After three cycles, it was about the length of her fingers. She preferred to wear it fluffed out around her face or gelled straight up from her skull. Her servants were forever trying to slap wigs on her head, but she tore them right off. Today, her servants had carefully crafted her hair so that it appeared pulled back. Would her chosen be upset by shorter hair? She didn't give it much more than a passing thought. Some of the men had been put off by her appearance, for she was not the most beautiful woman, but what always got them was that she *knew* things. Bithia knew exactly where and when to touch a man to make him writhe in ecstasy. This man would be no different.

Or would he?

She'd been assuming he was basically human like her. What if he was so alien his entire physiology worked differently? What if he fornicated in some fashion she could not envision, a way she found repulsive?

Panic rushed through her, shooting her to her feet. She should have asked more questions before agreeing to this. Just as she fumbled her hand in the fabric, seeking the split that would free her, the fabric fell in a great *whoosh*. Her heart stopped, then hammered against her chest as she beheld her bondmate.

He was magnificent.

Bithia had never seen a more perfectly formed male. Everything about him was rough-hewn, primitive and primal right down to his hairy chest. It was as if the word "man" had been created exclusively for him. His eyes were black with white shards spiraling out from the pupil. Hypnotizing eyes that held her so riveted she almost forgot to check out the rest of him. And there was a lot of him to look at. He was the tallest and widest man she'd ever seen. Muscles covered his entire form. Not small, sleek muscles such as the Diolan men gained by their body sculpting enhancements, but big muscles from physical work.

His face was a series of harsh angles. A black mark shaped like a half circle rode on his right cheek. His lips were not too thin, not too full. They softened the severity of his face and looked utterly perfect below his long, straight nose. Heavy brows rose over his riveting eyes and drew her gaze to his deep black hair. His was like hers, slicked back so she could not tell the length from where she stood. Somehow, though, she knew it would be long.

Considering him, she decided he looked like a warrior. Given the way he was looking at her, he was certainly a man skilled at controlling himself. No emotions flickered across his face. She had no idea what he was thinking as he swept his gaze from her face to her feet and up again to settle on her eyes. For all she could tell, he was simply acknowledging her presence. He seemed neither pleased nor disappointed by her physical appearance.

She darted her gaze down to his cock. Hard and heavy, it leaned to the side as if it were so massive it could not stand at full attention. Or maybe the sight of her was not sufficiently arousing. She smiled inwardly. Soon enough she'd have him on his knees begging for her. Again, her gaze drifted to the mark on his face. What was that shape and what did it mean?

He ignored everyone around them to focus exclusively on her. Almost as if by staring at her, he could ferret out all her secrets and make her bow to him. The hairs at her nape bristled. That would never happen. Bithia was too smart to fall fully for any man, even one she would mate with. They said the bond of a child was the deepest connection a man and woman could share, but she simply didn't believe it. She would give him and the people of Diola a daughter and then she would return to her endless pursuit of pleasure. Still, she wasn't going to mind having this man in her bed. Watching his stoic features give over to passion would be a heady victory indeed.

The rotund magistrate, Ambo Votny, entered the room wearing a white robe and an enormous white fur hat. Bithia wasn't sure what the ridiculous outfit was supposed to symbolize, but he looked a bit chagrined at having to wear it. Supposedly, her and her intended's nudity symbolized a new beginning, a rebirth of their bodies and spirits uniting as one. Frankly, Bithia thought it was just so everyone could see them naked. Silly, really, since she'd been intimate with about half the men in the small audience.

Ambo stood beside the dais and recited a lengthy invocation she didn't get a word of since he spoke in the language of the ancients. A glance to her bondmate revealed nothing. She had no idea if he understood, but she rather doubted it unless they'd somehow crammed the language into his skull. They'd tried to teach her, but they'd given up when she seduced every teacher they sent. Finally, they sent a woman, who taught her everything phonetically. Bithia had briefly considered seducing the woman, just to fill the mouths of the elite with new salacious tales, but she just couldn't summon any arousal. Women did not interest her. Men riveted her attention. Always had. From the moment she'd been able to walk, the difference between her body and a man's body enchanted her.

As she listened to Ambo drone on and considered the man she would shortly be bound to, she found his stoicism disconcerting. He was so emotionless she wondered if he'd been drugged. However, his eyes didn't seem glassy and his stance was solid. Where had they gotten him from and what exactly had they done to get him to come here? A part of her heart softened because she knew what it was like to be ripped away from the only home she'd ever known and forced into a whole new world.

She'd been on Beserrah, living in the high court, blissfully unaware of Diola and her link to a long line of empresses. If she knew then what she knew now, she never would have gone with the handsome stranger. But again, she'd followed her cunt and not her brain. She sighed. Her hot-and-bothered nature always got her into trouble. But what could she do? Keeping her legs primly closed wasn't any fun at all. The one time when she'd sworn off men, her vow had lasted for only a few nights. She'd masturbated constantly to try to stick to her declaration, but that didn't work. Distancing herself from sex only made her cravings worse. She'd decided to indulge herself to the fullest and damn the *peckards* who bandied rude comments about her to each other. She decided they were just jealous since nobody would ever want to be with them.

After the longest time, Ambo finally shut up. He pointed to a spot before Bithia's feet. Knowing what was coming caused her to grin widely. This she understood the symbolism to—her consort would bow to her authority.

Without comment, her intended stepped forward, dropped to his knees and placed a kiss upon her mound. Black curls glistened with oil and increased the heat of his lips, but the touch was far too fleeting for her to fully indulge her senses. What stunned her was that, even on his knees, he had to lean over to press his mouth against her. He stood with more grace than a man his size should possess, then stepped back without a flicker of sentiment crossing his features.

Her body oil coated his perfect lips, making them shimmer in the light. Too, as he knelt so briefly before her, she'd gotten a taste of his scent—masculine, spicy and something different but intriguing. She couldn't wait to get him all hot and sweaty and then take a deep breath of his essence. She had a feeling he smelled as good as he looked.

Ambo issued another ploddingly long speech, then handed her a green vial covered with gems. She pulled out the small stopper, handed it to Ambo, poured the glittering liquid into her palm and then passed the bottle to him as well. While she rubbed her hands together, warming the liquid and making it sparkle, she gave a short speech. This was what her last teacher had worked so diligently to help her memorize. Bithia had no idea what she said. Something about binding him to her for all eternity or some other such nonsense. All that really mattered to her was what she got to do after her little speech. When she finished, she took a step toward her intended and cupped her hands around his cock. Never had a man felt so hard and hot in her grip. Was it the *jaras* gel? Ambo insisted the liquid had magical properties as it was named

after *Jarasine*, the land of the gods, but whatever the cause, she literally felt the life in his flesh. Each and every texture that made up the whole of his cock felt unique in her hands.

Stoic still, he simply stood there while she rubbed the glistening liquid from the tip of his cock to the cradle of skin that held his balls. Finally, a reaction: his nostrils flared wide and he rocked back just a bit on his heels. It wasn't much, but at least it was something. From what she'd heard, this gel drove a man right to the brink of orgasm. It compelled him to mate no matter what might be in his mind.

Turning her back on him, she bent over from the waist and lifted her bottom, presenting herself to him. Without hesitation, he stepped forward, grasped her hips and speared her. His cock invaded her so hard and fast her breath whooshed out in one great blast. He felt even bigger than he looked, forcing her body to stretch to accommodate him. Rock-hard thighs pressed against the back of her legs, telling her without words he would not stop until he'd found his satisfaction.

He was everything and more than she ever could have asked for. Literally, he took her breath away. Locked into a firm pace, he thrust into her with great pounding waves that lifted her off her feet. To keep her steady for him, he pressed her against his chest, forcing her to hold still for each wicked, wonderful thrust. Lowering his head to her ear, he said something she didn't understand, but what did it matter? She didn't care if she never understood a word he said. They didn't need to talk when they could do this.

Each rock of his hips smeared the *jaras* gel across the lips of her sex and then finally up to her clit. "*Grandathall!*" She uttered the Beserrah swear without thinking. Now she knew exactly what the magical liquid did. It set her body on fire, clamoring a need for climax across every nerve she possessed. No wonder his nostrils had flared and he'd rocked back! It amazed her he'd been able to maintain that much control. Just as she stood on the verge of possibly the most intense climax in her life, he withdrew.

Alarmed, she looked back over her shoulder only to be spun directly into his arms. Her gaze darted across the startled faces of the audience, then settled on her intended's face. His eyes were narrowed, his nostrils wide, his lips parted over teeth bared in a half snarl. Sweet, merciful Datanna! He looked like he was going to attack her! Before she could run or call for her guards, he grasped her waist, lifting her into the air as if she weighed nothing, and slammed her down onto his cock. Her whimper of surrender caused him to grunt with satisfaction. When she realized he only wanted to be face-to-face with her, she relaxed in his grip. Without a word, he carried her, still impaled upon him, off the dais and out of the room.

"Way?"

He'd spoken only one word, but his voice was so deep and rich it vibrated his chest and consequently her. Oh, to have him hum while wrapping his lips around her clit would be nothing short of divine! Eagerly, she pointed toward the exit.

"Want alone with you."

He wasn't the most eloquent speaker, but he didn't need to be. She felt exactly the same way. They'd given the audience enough of a vicarious thrill.

Ambo waddled behind them. “He must climax in full view of everyone!” His enormous hat fell off as he tried to catch up, but her intended was practically running with her strapped to his body. He showed no signs of slowing down.

Bithia didn’t bother to answer Ambo. However, she did get a bit of a chuckle when she imagined Ambo trying to stop her bondmate. He would simply plow the chubby man down with one hand and keep right on going. She had a feeling he wouldn’t let anything stop him from getting her alone and fucking her brains out. This only endeared him to her more.

Clinging to his massive shoulders, she directed him through the maze of hallways. Not once did he slow his stride or let her slip from his grip. Twice guards tried to step into their path, but Bithia swore to have them put to the stone if they dared. Each time the guards retreated when they realized whom the enormous man carried so swiftly through the palace. Everyone knew what today was. Tomorrow all would celebrate her bonding, but for tonight, they would be alone.

He held her to him possessively and she thrilled at the shimmer of sparks each bounce against him caused to her tender clit. She tried to hold back, but she couldn’t. The most explosive orgasm of her life ripped through her body, clutching her to him so tightly he growled and pressed her against the nearest wall.

“No can wait.” He held her to the cool, smooth stone as he rocked once, twice, then released in a great, gushing tide. Tossing his head back, he howled out his satisfaction. As he lowered his face to hers, his gaze hit her with such regret he didn’t have to speak to convey he was ashamed he’d been unable to wait.

She smiled up at him, cupping her hand to his face. “It’s not you, but the *jaras* gel.” Frankly, she was amazed he’d lasted this long. Her fingertip traced over the stain on his cheek and he yanked his face to the side, hiding the mark. Whatever the black symbol meant it was not something he was proud of, or perhaps she wasn’t supposed to touch it. Who knew the taboos of an alien culture? *Grandathall!* She didn’t even understand half the traditions of the culture she now ruled over!

“Where?” he asked, pulling her away from the wall.

She pointed and he continued down the hall, still carrying her. He slowed his pace a bit, but not much. To her amazement, he was still hard. Clearly, she had to get her hands on more of this magical liquid for future romps.

“Here, go in here.” Finally, they’d reached the last hallway before her enormous suite of rooms. As he started down, she bellowed out to the guards, “Open the doors for him!” By the time they’d reached the massive Onic doors, they were open wide. She didn’t have to tell the guards to pull them closed once they’d entered. The two hunks of wood slipped silently shut.

He cast his gaze around, saw her bed and marched toward it. Lowering himself to his knees, he placed her bottom on the edge of the mattress with her legs still wrapped around his hips. He took a moment to

look down at her while he caught his breath, not that he was all that winded. Clearly, the man was used to hard physical labor. She imagined he could ride her all night without tiring. His eyes were bright with lust, his mouth parted from his exertion and his lips curled into a snarl as he pushed her arms off his shoulders.

“Lift hands.”

Indulging his clear need to dominate, she did as he ordered, lifting her hands up over her head. She’d always enjoyed a man who knew how to take charge. As long as his bossiness didn’t extend past the bedroom, she was fine with letting him be as aggressive as he wanted to be.

“Good.”

He palmed her breasts, twisting the nipples between forefinger and thumb while watching her face. “My women no have.”

She took a moment to comprehend what he’d said. “They don’t have breasts?” She tried to picture women without boobs but saw only men.

“No have big.” He couldn’t seem to take his eyes off them now that they were alone.

She imagined he’d struggled greatly during the bonding ceremony. Even on Diola her breasts were considered much larger than average. On his world, she would be considered a veritable freak.

“You like?” she asked, keeping her words simple to better communicate with him.

“Like much.” He nodded, twirling his fingers against them again, until her large nipples stood hard. “You like?” he asked.

She stretched out below him, wordlessly conveying her pleasure at his touch. His hands were big and very strong, but he was careful not to twist too roughly. “Take one in your mouth.”

He tilted his head to the side, revealing his confusion and the fact that his hair was quite long.

She touched her finger to his mouth then to her nipple.

The face he made was one of repulsion. She tried again, touching her nipple first, but as she lifted her hand to his mouth, he jerked his face to the side. “Not a child.”

Baffled, she considered for a moment that she wasn’t being clear. When she lifted to put her mouth on his nipple, he pushed her back onto the bed. “I no woman!”

Then she understood. In his culture, only babies nursed at a woman’s breast, and a woman certainly didn’t touch a man’s nipple. Damned, dangerous Delpho! They were in a world of trouble. She wanted to put her mouth all over him and wanted him to do the same to her. If he had issues with using his mouth on her body, she wasn’t going to stay faithful to him no matter what the prophecy said.

Without knowing his language, she really couldn’t argue the point. She was either going to have to get an interpreter or simply tie him down and do whatever she wanted with him. The latter sounded easier than her learning his language. Binding him also sounded like a lot more fun.

With a smile and a submissive sigh, she laid back, wondering whatever she would do with him. If mouths were out, she would have to find other ways to tease and torment him this night. When she shimmied her hips, he frowned.

“No move.”

When she lifted her brows and playfully rolled her hips again, he grabbed her hips in his massive hands and pinned her decisively to the bed.

“No move.” On that point, he was very clear, and she didn’t think he was worried about climaxing too soon.

“Aren’t you the bossy one?” Determined to defy him, she flexed the muscles in her cunt tightly around his cock several times without moving her hips. “What are you going to do now?”

One eye twitched down as if he tried to understand what she’d said and how she’d managed to clutch him so strongly without moving. Contracting the muscles of her sex was one of the things she knew that many women didn’t. By consistent exercise, she could now easily grip a man with the strength of a fist. Not a strong fist, but certainly strong enough to make a man notice. Usually, said man was shocked and then excited about her skill. Never had one been upset, not like her new bondmate clearly was.

“You no move.” He pressed her harder into the bed.

Flexing and releasing her walls in a quick series caused him to yank his cock out of her. Glaring, he shoved his hands under her, gripped her butt cheeks and lifted her up. He took a good, long look between her thighs. She helped him by spreading her legs wide, balancing her pointed toes on the edge of the bed. When he apparently didn’t see anything he wasn’t familiar with, he lowered her back to the bed and cast her a suspicious glance.

When she realized he would not continue until she agreed, she rolled her eyes. “Fine.” She lifted her hands higher over her head and utterly relaxed her body. “Do whatever you want, big man. I’m all yours.”

Watching her closely, he placed his cock right against her dripping sex. He waited for the longest time. Then he thrust into her so hard he pushed her farther onto the bed. “I give, you take.”

Stunned by his aggressiveness, she simply nodded.

He did it again, and again, each time forcing his way just a bit deeper inside. Each rough thrust caused him to grow bigger and harder, stretching her almost beyond endurance.

Bithia had never been with such an insistent and commanding man. He clearly wouldn’t tolerate anything but her complete passivity. Holding still for him was almost impossible as she was not a submissive lover, but she was willing to try.

Sensing her compliance, he grew more assured. His eyes narrowed dangerously, almost daring her to defy him again. Idly, she wondered what he would do to her if she did. Would he paddle her bottom with his massive hand? That could be fun. Perhaps later she would try, but for right now, she would indulge him. Lying back, utterly still, was a rather novel sensation.

His intense gaze dropped to her breasts. Each thrust jiggled the mounds of flesh, entrancing him. If one of her nipples softened, he would tweak it just enough to harden it again. Each time, a little smile flitted across his mouth. So fascinating did he find her bouncing breasts he never looked at her face.

As he grew closer to climax, his lips peeled back, revealing white teeth that would give him a dazzling smile, but as she examined him, she didn't think he smiled much, if ever. Seriousness stamped every line in his face. Even here, engaging in pleasure, he was severe. Bithia had always approached sex with nothing but enjoyment on her mind. This man took it so gravely it was as if sex were literally life or death.

"Have you ever laughed?" She asked the question before she could stop herself.

His gaze darted to her face as if he just now remembered she had one. He'd been so riveted by her bouncy boobs that was all he'd been looking at. Tilting his head, he lifted one brow.

"Laugh. Like this." She laughed.

A snarl of disapproval washed across his features.

"I wasn't laughing at you, I—never mind." Bithia shut her mouth. Touchy didn't even remotely encompass how irritable he was. It seemed everything she did or said aggravated him. The only time she ever felt utterly secure with herself was in the bedchamber. Not anymore. Not with him. She honestly didn't know what to do other than let him do as he pleased. But her advisors would hear of her displeasure come tomorrow. Ancient ceremony or no, he was gone from her life and her bed, or her advisors would suffer her wrath.

After a long time of letting him return to his measured thrusts while alternately twisting her nipples, he grew relaxed with his position of authority. Watching him closely, she sensed when he was on the verge of climax. Wanting to join him, she lowered her hand to stroke her clit. He snarled something in his native tongue that was clearly a command for her to stop. When she didn't, he grasped her wrists in his fist and pinned her down.

"I give, you take."

Before she could argue, he rocked her into the bed, taking her breath away. Fast and furious, he pounded into her until he climaxed with a great bellow. Eyes closed, he struggled to regain his breath. He let go of her hands and pulled out of her body, kneeling on the floor between her legs.

Now it was her turn to become annoyed. How dare he use her to find his pleasure but not give her any in return? Just what kind of a culture did he come from? Determined to climax, she slid her hand down and rubbed her clit. Little sparks shot up, infusing her body. As she thought on Kerrick, he of the golden hair and riveting green eyes, her climax hovered so close she could almost taste relief. Smearing some of the *jaras* gel across her tight little nub brought her even higher and terribly close.

He didn't notice at first, not with his eyes closed, but when he opened them and saw what she was doing, he grabbed her hand, preventing her from climaxing.

“I give, you take,” he reminded her, as if she could ever forget. “I give no more.” He glanced down at his limp prick.

Did he actually think his cock was what caused her to climax? What planet was he from? Beyond furious, Bithia yanked her hand from his. Before he could react, she slid up and across the bed. Dropping off the other side, she ran into the basin, slamming the door behind her. Instantly, Bithia thrust her hand between her legs.

While she struggled to get off, he fumbled with the knob, his voice low and furious against the carved wood. She didn’t understand a word he said, but he was clearly trying to get her to open the door. She ignored him. Bithia finished herself off with a few well-placed strokes. Sadly, her pleasure was feeble when her release could have been so spectacular. Once the last of the tremors left her, she felt drained and sick at heart. How could she spend a lifetime with that man?

Chapter Two

One swift kick would make splinters of the door. He stood there for a long time, considering what that action would lead to, then decided against destruction. Clearly, his chosen was not a normal female. Everything about her was different from the women of his tribe. He'd never seen breasts so big, hair so short, or a woman so tall. And her eyes... As soon as he'd seen her, he'd been attracted to her differentness. Everything went wrong once they'd come to these elaborate rooms.

From what he'd been told, women did not move when a man gave. They took. This one moved her insides without moving her outsides, which had felt very good. So good, in fact, that he knew such pleasure must be wrong. When he told her to stop, she'd smiled up at him, mocking him with the cast of her face and her unusual eyes.

She wanted to give, but he knew that was not how things worked. A man gave and a woman took. That was the way of mating. Even though here in this alien place they would not make him suffer the penalty for not following the true way, he still did not wish to displease the elders. Already he'd been punished enough by having to come here and mate with a woman who was as wrong as he was. May those who had gone before bless the children that would come from their union.

Sitting before the closed door, he waited for her to emerge. Simple logic told him that eventually she would have to come out. When she did, they would...talk. He shook his head, causing long black strands to tumble around his shoulders. He had difficulty speaking her language even after intensive study. He knew what he wanted to say, but when he was anxious, everything tumbled out in a messy jumble. Viltori, the man who had been teaching him Diolan, could barely speak Oughunian, his native tongue. Viltori softened the clicks to mush and accented syllables that should roll smoothly off the tongue.

Even with that, the man was a gifted teacher. Viltori found creative ways to convey meaning and he never let frustration darken his light features. His teacher was another filled with differentness: pale of hair and eyes, but curiously strong. Muscles rippled below his white robe, and more than once he'd seen Viltori become aroused, his cock hard against silken fabric as he tried to teach the names of body parts. He knew Viltori had to touch to convey meaning, but he'd not liked the feelings inside, so he'd lashed out. He was stunned when Viltori caught his fist and pushed him to the floor. After that, they came to a truce. Viltori touched him with a stick, not his hands, because he taught Viltori that one man does not touch another man in such a way.

All during their training, Viltori had been consumed with knowing his name. He stood without words and without a way to convey he did not have a name. The tribe shunned one such as he. He had earned a name as a child, but the elders stripped him of his title during adolescence when they put the mark of shame on his face. One mistake cost him his identity. Afterward, his tribe called him nothing. So low was he that he had no name. Clicking the same words for “no” and “name” over and over again made Viltori call him no name. In Diolan, this translated to Drahka. He ran the words together as if they made a whole. In his shame, he who could not be named became Drahka. Since it was the only name he had, he’d taken to thinking of himself that way.

Within the closed room, Drahka heard water running. He’d been most impressed with their command of the elements. Diolans could channel wind, water, earth and fire within a dwelling for their convenience. His tribe did not have such power. However, he thought Diolans spent too much time grooming themselves. Moreover, even though they were scrupulously clean, they still covered themselves in a plethora of scents. His first step into the palace had sent his senses reeling. Eyes watering and nose running, he’d spent the first few days trying desperately to breathe. He was used to it now, but still, why would his chosen need to wash when she’d been cleaned thoroughly just like he was for their rites?

The answer hit him in a sudden, painful rush. She did not wish to have his scent on her. As he’d worked his hips between her legs, he’d watched her breasts bounce with entrancing motions. When he’d looked up at her face, he did not understand what he read there: displeasure, boredom, irritation. He was mating correctly. She was the one who did not know how to take. He had given to her hard and fast as he’d been instructed to do. And he’d given twice. What more could a woman want? If he gave to her this way twice each night, then she would soon be with child.

When she’d reached down to fill herself with her own hand, he’d been furious that he wasn’t enough for her. He would give again, but he was exhausted. Besides, he needed to find release, not her. It did not matter if a woman reached the peak of pleasure for the creation of children. He frowned. Maybe she did not know that. Perhaps his chosen was uneducated about such matters. He’d assumed that, as the leader of her people, someone would have told her how mating worked. Obviously, she did not understand, as she’d motioned for him to put his mouth to her breast, something only a child would do. That she wished to put her mouth to his was beyond bizarre. He needed Viltori’s help to teach her the right way of things, or whatever children they created would echo their wrongness.

He heard the door open and lifted smoothly to his feet, startling her back into the room. Stepping forward caused her eyes to widen. She stumbled back, lifting one hand to the crimson cloth around her body and the other to him, telling him to stop. He frowned. Did she think he would hurt her? What kind of man did she think he was?

Calming himself first, he found the words he wished to say then uttered them in a slow, clear manner. “I would not hurt you.”

"You got that right." She stood tall, puffing herself up to intimidate him, even though such was folly. "Get out of my way."

"We talk." He refused to move away from the door because if he did, she was going to run through it and get as far from him as she could. If he couldn't make this work, he would have to return to his tribe with such shame on his head they would surely kill him. His spirit would be so worthless they would not even bother to consume him as they did with most who died.

"I have nothing to say to you." Up her chin went as she turned to her own reflection. "I will have this bonding dissolved or abolished or whatever they call it. I am not going to take any more of what you have to give." She ran her fingers through her wet hair, fluffing the strands around her face, softening the harshness of her expression.

He didn't understand every word she used, but he got her meaning: She didn't like how he gave. Whatever she was expecting, he didn't provide it. He hung his head in shame. At the time, he'd been very proud of how hard and fast he'd given to her. He might have corrected his mistakes had he been watching her face and not her enormous breasts.

"I gave hard I could. I couldn't give again." Perhaps if he had, she would not be so angry now. How many times was he expected to give in a session? He thought only once, but that had not been nearly enough for her.

"You *peckard*," she snarled over her shoulder, "I can't believe you think your cock—" She stopped abruptly when she turned and faced him.

He was so deeply humiliated he couldn't even meet her gaze. Keeping his attention on her feet, he waited for her diatribe to continue. When it didn't, he lifted his gaze to her without lifting his head.

Confusion drew her brows together. "You really don't understand."

That he actually understood. He nodded miserably. He barely comprehended the most basic customs of this strange new land. Apparently, his rudimentary grasp of mating in his own tribe was no help to him here. "I never gave to a woman before."

Her mouth fell open. "You're a virgin? I mean you—I was your first?"

Why would this surprise her so? Then he realized she did not know that none of the women in his tribe would touch him, not after his shame as a young boy. The mark on his face told everyone what he was. His curiosity had stripped him of his name and made him an outcast. The elders were very wise not to tell the sky people of his disgrace for they would not want him had they known. Now he realized he could not tell her or she would not want him either.

Haltingly, he said, "I wait for you." That wasn't quite right, but he didn't know how to say he'd deliberately waited to mate with her, even though that wasn't the full truth. He'd wanted to mate desperately with a woman of his tribe, but of the two he'd approached, one laughed and the other screamed. Still, his words seemed to touch her for her face softened further.

“That explains so much.” Turning to him, she cupped her hand to his face. He met her gaze but was perplexed when he discovered both her eyes were now the same translucent blue. Before, one had been blue and the other green. During the rite he’d been mesmerized by her odd eyes. For a moment, he considered this was not his chosen, but another sent to trick him, but he knew this was Bithia. Already he knew her scent. If ever she ran from him, he could hunt her down no matter what perfumes she slathered upon herself.

She slid her hand from his face to his chest, teasing her fingertips through his hair, finally resting her palm above the beating place in his body.

“You will kill me?” To touch one there was to imply such a threat.

“No!” She shook her head. “It’s not your fault.” She sighed while smoothing both her hands across his chest to his shoulders.

Fearing she sought to mate again, he captured her hands. “No go again.”

Tilting her head to the side, she considered him, then followed his gaze down to his cock. “A touch doesn’t always mean a desire to mate. I just wanted to feel you.”

He didn’t know why anyone would do such a thing. He thought any touch meant a desire to mate. Everything he thought he knew might be wrong, as he wasn’t properly instructed. He’d learned what he could by listening to the others and watching what they did.

“We have to find a teacher to help us.” She stepped back, considering him from face to feet. “Because with some training, you’d be a magnificent lover.”

He got about half of what she said, but his spirit lifted when she mentioned a teacher. “Have Viltori.”

One brow lifted. “He’s your language teacher?”

He nodded. If anyone could help them solve this dilemma, that man was Viltori.

“Well, then, come morning, we will both be taking lessons from Viltori.” Smiling, she removed her crimson cloth and let it fall to the floor.

Despite his best efforts, his gaze riveted to her breasts.

“You really are fascinated with them, aren’t you?” She put her hands under them, lifting them, forcing them to go round and high against her chest. Nipples as dark as deep-day shadows peeked over the edges of her palms, almost as if her breasts looked back at him with as much interest as he gave them. Immediately he wanted to tell her to stop touching herself, but then realized such an action was clearly not taboo in her tribe as it was in his. To his shock, she lifted one breast as she lowered her face, then licked her own nipple!

His cock, which he thought utterly drained, came slowly back to life. Each caress of her tongue hardened her nipple and his shaft. He couldn’t help but imagine her working her tongue on him down there, no matter how perverse such a thought was.

She noticed that he hardened. After another quick swipe, she smiled up at him. “Why don’t you try?” She stepped close, offering her breast to him.

Pushing away the wrongness that swept over him, just as he'd done during their rite when he'd had to kneel and kiss her down there, he lowered his head and ran his tongue over her nipple. He tasted something sweet and marveled at the different textures. Her breast was so soft, but her nipple so hard. She cupped his chin, curling her fingers around his mouth to open it and take the entire nipple within. When he did, she moaned. When he sucked softly, she arched her back and plunged her fingers into his hair, holding his head to her breast.

Now he understood this was not like what a woman did with a child. She wasn't feeding him—he was giving her pleasure, and she was greedily taking all he could give. Satisfied they'd come to this understanding, he switched to the other nipple, and then went back and forth, then managed to squeeze them together to take both into his mouth at once. Somehow, the idea that the elders thought this a great wrongness only thrilled him more.

Bithia murmured encouragement with words he didn't understand but didn't need to fully grasp. When he looked up at her face, all he saw was satisfaction. Confidence surged another flow of pleasure across his cock. That was the word she and Viltori both used. Drahka liked the power in the sound of it. Cock sounded strong and hard, just like he was.

When he leaned away from her breasts, Bithia slipped her hand around the heavy weight of his cock. He opened his mouth to admonish her and then forcefully shut it. She wasn't going to give to him. She was going to take from him. Telling himself that helped him relax and let her explore.

Strong fingers traced around the blunt tip, then pulled his foreskin down, exposing the sensitive skin below. Slowly she sank to her knees until her face was close to him, exciting him with her proximity and the heat of her breath.

“Lovely uncut male.”

He didn't understand anything of what she said other than the word “male”, but he didn't care as she stroked the loose skin up and down, making him so hard he strained as if to leap inside her. Holding himself back was difficult, but he sensed she did not wish to rush. Perhaps before, they'd gone too fast and that was what had displeased her. Even if she drove him mad with her touch, he would wait until she was ready for him to give.

She continued her journey along the length until she cupped his sac in her palm. Carefully she felt the weight of him, rolling his balls back and forth, her fingertips tracing up and back to a spot of skin that was so sensitive he groaned.

“You like?” Her whispered question caressed the swollen tip of his cock, sending fire along his flesh.

Unable to speak, he nodded and grunted, causing her to glance up at him and smile. Parting her lips, she took the very tip of him into her mouth. Shocked, he simply stood and watched as the length of his cock disappeared into her face. He knew what she did was wrong, but her mouth felt so good. Simultaneously,

he wanted to step back and stop her, but he also wanted to step forward and thrust into her. Such duality held him immobile.

Her eyes met his as she pulled back. She rolled her tongue around the tip, then drew him deeper within. Lost in her gaze, he couldn't stop her even if he wanted to. This perverted act was what had cost him his name. He now let her do it because none from his tribe would ever know.

As she held him in her mouth, she slid her hand up, behind his sac, past the sensitive spot to the puckered skin of his ass. Another shock surged. His instincts told him to step away, but he simply couldn't move. When she pulled back to twirl her tongue around the tip this time, she also circled her finger around the tight ring of flesh. Bit by bit she worked her finger inside as she took his cock into her mouth. Now she had him firmly locked into place. He couldn't step forward or back, so he stood and watched her, feeling a slew of mixed emotions about what she was doing to him.

Drahka knew he should not climax this way. Doing so was a waste. If he came inside her, a child might come of his pleasure. Each time he tried to tell her this he would open his mouth, but all that emerged were short, sharp bursts of breath, panting groans and strangled gasps. Wasting his seed was against the most basic tenets of his tribe. Those who had gone before would see what he was. They would block him from joining them in the after place. Still, Drahka did not stop her or move away. With her encouragement, he rocked his hips, moving his cock in and out of her mouth as her finger slid in and out of his ass. He came suddenly, thrusting forward without intent, but she took him deep into her throat, her mouth and tongue working to drain him, as if she slaked her thirst from his climax. A twist of her finger caused another surge. Feeling dizzy, he gripped a wall as the last of his pleasure coated the back of her throat.

He knew in that moment he could never go home again.

Chapter Three

Viltori floated on his back, examining the artwork above the great pool in the *tishiary*. This early, he had the place almost to himself. There was only one other person within the servant rooms, a *serbred*, who scrubbed her master's clothing in the washing basin. Her owner was high ranking, given the deep green of the clothing she washed. Her face held the blankness of a child, as all the deliberately bred servant's faces did. Shivering slightly, Viltori placed his ears under the water to drown out the sounds of her work. For a time, he wished to simply float, breathe and think upon his student.

After three long cycles of teaching him Diolan, Viltori had finally discovered the man's name was Drahka. Viltori didn't think the name suited him, given his power and strength, but at least he had something to call him. He considered that a great victory, even more so than learning the man's language in a scant cycle. He'd helped the magistrate negotiate with Drahka's people. Viltori worried that the two different cultures would never come to an agreement, but with enough bribes and promises, Ambo got his way. Drahka belonged to Diola now and to Bithia forever.

Warm water caressed Viltori's body as he paddled in a lazy circle, gaze upon the depiction of a humble servant, bowing low before his master. The servant was dressed in brown, as all servants were, and he kept his eyes low, on his master's feet. Light glowed from the master's face as he placed his hand upon the head of his slave. Viltori thought the artwork was the most pathetic propaganda he'd ever seen. The artist tried to show that the servant enjoyed his subservient position and that the master was a paragon of kindness. This scenario he knew to be untrue. Viltori could not count the number of times he'd seen the marks of brutality on the bodies of those who served the elite. Since every servant came to the *tishiary* to bathe, acquire supplies, or clean their master's clothing, he'd seen most of them at one time or another. True, most had gentle masters, but some had owners who were so vicious they injured their slaves or used them for perversities none should suffer. A desire to right those wrongs rose up in him. He deliberately quashed that yearning. He was not a hero. He was not responsible for fixing what he knew in his heart was wrong. If he could do something, he would, but if he alone rose up to decry the injustice, he would be put to the stone. Ambo himself would crush the very breath from his body until he spoke no more. Of all the most vile masters on Diola, Ambo was notorious for his cruelty and perversity, which often went hand in hand.

With a sigh, Viltori closed his eyes, letting his awareness shift outside his mind. If he could, he would happily spend the day here, floating on his back. He did not care for the temple. Drugged air hurt his chest

and caused bizarre hallucinations. Still, there was something sensual about the rituals that he enjoyed, something deeper than just the feel of the oils and fabrics, but nothing as profound as an actual connection to the gods. Viltori did not believe as most acolytes did, mainly because he was not truly an acolyte.

They allowed him to wear the white robe and serve in the temple, but before the magistrate discovered his talent for languages, he'd been a recruit. High hopes of becoming the Harvester had been dashed when he'd entered the training rooms. Every man there seemed bigger than the last. Viltori, who'd always felt massive, felt almost puny in comparison. He would never master these men. He would languish just a few steps below greatness until he grew too old to compete. Then he would become a palace guard, forever trapped in service to the empress.

All of that changed when the magistrate, Ambo Votny, had heard him translating a dispute between two recruits from different regions. Viltori could not explain how he understood what each was saying. He simply did. Given a chance to leave the obscurity of becoming a palace guard behind, Viltori had eagerly taken up Ambo on his offer to travel to a far distant world. Immersing himself in the customs of a unique and completely different culture had helped him grasp the subtleties of their language. He wasn't an expert by any means, but he would do to teach the future consort to Empress Bithia.

Just thinking of her made him smile. There were those who said she was the most vulgar woman. They disdained her unique look and mocked her awkwardness. They said she should not be allowed to sit upon the throne, not with her lascivious nature. Viltori adored her from afar. She was the only high-ranking person in the entire palace who said what she thought and did exactly what she felt like doing. She had whatever man she wanted and never let decorum or anything else stand in her way. So bold was she that Bithia had seduced several acolytes who'd been sent to teach her the language of the ancients. How he'd delighted in hearing the tales of her wild adventures. True, some stories were probably exaggerated, but if even a modicum of them was correct, she was a lusty woman indeed. He had sought a position to be her teacher but withdrew when he found out the men she seduced were quietly shipped to faraway regions. Viltori did not wish to lose his position in the palace.

In a way, he felt close to Bithia, for he had taught Drahka, her now eternal bondmate and primary consort. Viltori hoped he'd done well enough that their first night was up to her demanding standards. Viltori knew he'd still be teaching Drahka, but they would not spend as much time together as they had been. A shame. He enjoyed the man and took pleasure in each burst of insight, each shining grasp of understanding that crossed Drahka's stern face. As of yet, Viltori hadn't seen the man smile, but he knew it was simply a matter of time.

A great splash of water covered Viltori's face and he sputtered himself upright.

"Dangerous to sleep here." Rown splashed water with a hard sweep of his right hand across the top of the pool.

Swinging his head away, Viltori retaliated with a great blast of kicks from both his legs.

Rown swam around him, trying to come up behind, but Viltori was too quick. He spun, catching Rown about the waist and pulling him under the water. Struggling with a half-hearted effort, Rown rubbed his nude body against Viltori's form, causing him to harden with an almost automatic response.

"You know better," Viltori said, pushing Rown away. Not that he wouldn't mind losing himself in those enigmatic eyes, but violating an *ungati* was a line he was not prepared to cross. Besides, Rown's heart belonged to his master, Sterlave, a man who Viltori found most kind.

"You wouldn't know what to do with it anyway," Rown teased, swimming away as fast as he could. "Acolytes are notoriously uneducated in the art of pleasure."

Viltori laughed, making a rude gesture with his thumb and fist. As an *ungati*, Rown's entire life had been devoted to the study of pleasure, and yet he was forbidden to climax. Only alone and under strict protocol could Rown find release. Viltori often wondered how his master and mistress coped with such a restriction, but he'd never had the courage to ask.

Still, their flirting was harmless and helped each forget what they simply could not have. Rown's master cared for him, but Sterlave did not love him, not the way he loved his bondmate Kasmiri. And Viltori could not find love as an acolyte. He was supposed to be satisfied with the love of the gods. He wasn't. Viltori realized far too late that he'd escaped one problem only to embrace another.

"Tell me, Rown, what news have you heard?" Viltori swam near, settling himself on one of the lower steps of the sweeping underwater staircase.

"I hear that the empress' consort didn't fulfill his part of the bonding rites." Rown scrubbed a foamless soap through his black hair and over his face.

Viltori's heart plunged to his belly. He'd spent an entire cycle going over and over the exacting nature of the empress bonding ritual. What had he done wrong? Before he could ask, Rown plunged below the surface. Rown rinsed vigorously, then emerged, splashing water everywhere.

"What happened?" Viltori asked.

"I am not privy to the details." Rown made a face that suggested not letting him know everything was a foolish mistake on everyone's part. "But he didn't climax in full view."

Viltori thought back as to what a punishment that might entail but drew a blank. He had no idea. "What did he do?"

Grinning, Rown said, "He plunged into her from behind, as he should, then pulled out, spun her around, picked her up and slammed her down onto his cock!"

Viltori could actually see Drahka doing that. He found the visual unbearably arousing, especially when he pictured the surprised and yet pleased look on Bithia's face. For he believed she craved an aggressive male who behaved just like that. Bithia was not a woman wooed by poetry and lukewarm kisses. She was a woman who hungered for brute strength and the most wicked of words.

“Once he had her against his chest, he swept her from the room.” Rown sighed, as if he would enjoy finding someone who would take him away in such a dramatic fashion. “Her bondmate sounds like a passionate man.”

“He is.” Viltori had never met a man more serious about sex. Every time they discussed what he needed to do with Bithia, Drahka grew hard and restless. Unable to sit still, Viltori had taken to teaching him while they walked about the gardens in great, ground eating strides. Of course, what made matters worse was that Viltori became aroused as well. So much so that Drahka had noticed his cock tenting the fabric of his immaculate white robe. Their eyes met and Viltori swore he saw an echoing hunger right before Drahka had sent his hand flying at Viltori’s face. Capturing his fist, Viltori had pushed Drahka to the ground. Stunned, he’d looked up, and the moment had been broken. After that, Viltori used a small pointing stick rather than his hand. Still, there had been a welcoming arousal in Drahka’s eyes. Of that, Viltori had no doubt. However, engaging the consort of the empress in such a way had terrible repercussions for them both. No matter how lustful his dreams or painful his longings, Viltori kept his desire firmly contained. He had no wish to be exiled or killed.

“As if you would know passion.” Rown rolled his eyes playfully. He strode to the uppermost step, grabbed the bottle of soap and proceeded to smear the liquid over his hairless chest, his arms and his legs. “Ambo waddled after them, but the man was practically running down the hall with Bithia in his arms.” Rown paused. “Can you imagine what that would feel like? Wrapped around his massive chest with his cock buried deep inside? Every step would just plunge the man deeper.”

Viltori couldn’t quite see that scenario, not when he was almost as big as Drahka himself, but he could see Drahka in numerous positions. Himself in numerous positions. Of course, Viltori always saw Bithia there too. He wanted them both. Shaking the images from his mind, Viltori glanced over at Rown.

With a meaningful lift of sleek brows, Rown grabbed a handful of hard cock and stroked the soap up and down. For a relatively small man, Rown had a big prick. His penis stood proudly up and out from a thatch of dark hair. Each stroke of his hand hardened him further. One thing about the *ungati* was their notorious self-control. Rown could stand there and fondle himself all day without climaxing.

“Tease,” Viltori growled. Below the water, he hardened in response. Unlike Rown, he was not trained in self-denial. At night, in the great sleeping room filled with acolytes, none of them dared to touch themselves. The vast rock-walled room echoed even the slightest sound. Worse, they slept upon cots that squeaked at the barest movement. Ears were ever-vigilant to any fumbling in the dark. Viltori missed the room where the recruits slept. There, at night, beds squeaked, men moaned, and nobody cared. At times, some men turned to each other for comfort, which held no stigma. Though the handlers frowned upon such activity, they turned a blind eye as long as it was mutual.

“I’m just washing myself,” Rown said with mock innocence.

Usually Viltori could handle the teasing nature of their banter, but today he was having a difficult time. He hadn't had an orgasm in several cycles. It seemed everything excited him lately, almost as if he were again an adolescent without a shred of control. Every look, every thought, every feeling hardened Viltori's cock until it became like a perpetual rock between his thighs.

Rown licked his lips when he saw what lurked below the water between Viltori's hairy legs. Even though the hair on his head was light blond, his body hair was dark brown. He'd been told it made a delightful contrast, as if he were innocent day above and sinful night below.

"I could wash you too," Rown whispered.

Viltori would like nothing better. Rown would know just how hard to touch, how fast or slow to go to give him the greatest moment of satisfaction. With lips, teeth and tongue Rown could have him begging for more within moments. Toss the man's educated hands into the deal and Viltori would become his willing slave.

However, if anyone caught them...

Stepping down into the water, Rown rinsed himself, then swam near to Viltori. Darting his gaze carefully about, Rown tossed a hank of black hair off his forehead with a flick of his head. "There is none here but us." Cupping one hand around Viltori's shaft, Rown stroked him with slow, almost lazy movements as his black hair slid slowly down his face, obscuring his gaze. "It's early yet and we have time."

Viltori wanted to say no.

Viltori tried to say no.

Cursing those already cast to the nothingness, Viltori shut his mouth and didn't utter so much as a murmur of protest when his friend stroked his cock.

Rown's hand felt so good and the whispered words he breathed into his ear were so wicked that Viltori's voice literally stuck in his throat. Lacking any will to struggle, Viltori surrendered. With a push here and a shove there, Rown guided Viltori to a higher step so that his aching cock thrust out of the water. With one quick look around, Rown smiled up at him and took his entire length into his mouth.

Biting his bottom lip to hold back a cry of pleasure, Viltori clung to the step, holding himself just at the waterline so Rown could lift and lower his hips, moving his cock in and out of his mouth. Bobbing his body in the water, Rown worked his prick leisurely. Stars exploded in his vision as he climaxed. Rown sucked hard until Viltori was utterly drained, then released him.

"Poor denied acolyte." Chuckling, Rown took his hands off Viltori's hips, lowering him into the water, which felt freezing cold after the intense heat of Rown's mouth. "You are pleased so rarely, you go off so quickly."

When a group of female servants entered, babbling excitedly about the empress and her new consort, Viltori had no chance for a comeback. They didn't even glance over at him and Rown because they were

far too focused on sorting and cleaning their owner's clothing as they gossiped. Gossamer curtains shielded Viltori and Rown from the women on the other side of the *tishiary*.

"Perhaps next time you will last longer." Rown exited the pool, his still-hard cock bouncing with each step. Playfully shaking his erection free of water, Rown slipped on his plain brown robe, then cinched it closed with a black sash. Black because he was, after all, the property of a mighty Harvester. The color of a servant's sash indicated the rank of his master or mistress. All servants wore brown robes. Each was individual only by the color of his or her sash. Among the servants, Rown was unique. His black sash was trimmed in crimson, indicating his mistress was once an empress. Rown belonged to two of the most powerful citizens on Diola and yet he was not a conceited fool. Rown was a considerate young man dedicated to his god and his master. Rown did not violate his personal, professional, or proscribed rules by sucking Viltori's cock to a spectacular climax. Rown actually lived up to the very spirit of his caste. *Ungati* gave pleasure. Rown lived to give pleasure unto those he would willingly serve. That Rown chose to give pleasure to Viltori was a beautiful gift, but a gift Viltori could not return. No matter what, Viltori could not reciprocate a climax to Rown. *Ungati* climaxed only by their own hand and only for their god.

As he walked away, Viltori wondered what his master, Sterlave, would do if he found out Rown was giving away his favors. Would he care? He didn't think Sterlave would punish Rown, because the man was kind. Still, Viltori thought it wise to keep their liaison a secret. Not that he had anyone he could tell. Sighing, Viltori replayed the encounter in his mind, then deliberately smiled as he silently thanked Rown for his generous present.

Tension that had lurked in his shoulders for cycles was gone. The ache in his balls receded. After a quick dunk, he rose out of the water and dried himself with a rough towel. Now he felt he could face another day of temple rites and if by chance his student came for instructions, Viltori might just be able to keep his mind on his work and off the spectacular bulge in Drahka's pants.

Chapter Four

“I wish to meet this teacher of yours.” Bithia considered her consort over the string of covered platters that lined the table. She’d already filled her plate twice and probably would do so again. Never had she woken so ravenous.

“Viltori?” He’d barely touched what little food he put on his plate. Mostly he sat in studied silence, his gaze downcast, his shoulders slumped.

“If that is his name.” She wished to know exactly what this fool had taught her bondmate. Whoever heard of a woman lying utterly passive while a man rammed his cock into her? She could understand such a scenario if he’d bound her, and that could be fun, but she wouldn’t tolerate a lifetime of passivity. A strange custom, to be sure, but this teacher, this Viltori, should have taken more time to educate her consort about the wide range of erotic delights available on Diola. At least she’d gotten him to allow her to take him into her mouth. She’d sensed he’d wanted to tell her to stop, but the pleasure had been too great. Sadly, afterwards, he hadn’t been able to meet her gaze. They’d gone to bed with him on the far side, on his back, his gaze riveted on the snow-covered glass ceiling.

She still felt she’d made progress with him, but they had a very long way to go. Having him suckle her breasts and letting her take his cock into her mouth was just the smallest of the things she wished to do with him. If this teacher wouldn’t help her educate him fully, she’d have the man sent far from the palace. She just might do so anyway. Her greatest fear was that Viltori had deliberately misled her consort to mock her. She would not tolerate such insolence. Perhaps she would have him bound. A hundred hard palace guards pounding away at his upturned bottom would convince him of his foolishness. Picturing the scene caused her cunt to grow slick. She did so enjoy watching men together. They were more aggressive than women were, which was in and of itself arousing. Also, men fought harder for their climax and took what they wanted with a lusty greed she identified with.

“We will see him after we eat.” Bithia summoned two guards and gave them explicit instructions. They bowed and left to do her bidding.

Her bondmate watched them go with a frown. “You hurt Viltori?”

“He will come to me, not I to him. I am the empress. Something that seems to be forgotten far too often lately.” She had never awakened quite so famished or so furious. Usually she woke with a smile on her face as thoughts of seduction filled her mind. This day was all grumbling annoyance at having to fix a problem she should not have. Given her way, she would have called in those two palace guards, thrown off

her crimson robe, and fucked and sucked her way into oblivion. Instead, she would spend the day in tedious instructions.

Picking at his food, her bondmate finally pushed the plate away and met her gaze. “You no like me.” White shards spiraled around the black of his pupil, hypnotizing her with his terrible sadness and unbearable shame. “I will die.”

“Not this again.” Bithia rolled her eyes, trying desperately to distance herself from the raw emotions he displayed. His face remained stoic, but his eyes said more than words ever could. How could he convey so much with his gaze alone? “I’m not going to kill you. I’m going to train you.” After she spoke, she realized how cold she sounded. Softening her tone, she said, “I need Viltori to help me teach you our ways.” Although that wasn’t quite true. She wanted to teach him *her* ways. She wanted to teach him what she liked, what she didn’t, not that there were very many things she didn’t like, other than total passivity. To her, sex was a lavish banquet, and she wanted to sample every dish. Once she found a favorite, she would gorge herself to the fullest, then return to sampling until she found a new favorite. She never tired of her endless pursuit of pleasure.

“If I do not do what you...” He paused, searching for the words, but he didn’t have to bother. She knew what he was trying to say. He wanted to know if he didn’t do what she wanted, would she kill him then?

Bithia wanted to shake him until he understood that she would never do that. Just what kind of a planet did he come from? That thought stopped her cold. Of course, he didn’t know she would never hurt him. He believed if he displeased her, even a little bit, she would simply kill him. What kind of a deal had Ambo struck with his people to bring him to Diola? Her shoulders slumped. And just what kind of a selfish bitch was she for not recognizing his agonizing position earlier.

Lifting her hand, she said, “Stop.”

He closed his mouth abruptly, but at least this time he didn’t drop his gaze.

“I would never hurt you. You are my chosen.” She smiled at him, deliberately softening her voice and her face to convey the truth of her words. “I wish for you to learn, for me to learn.” After a pause, she added, “We will work together to be together.”

Cocking his head to the side, he considered her down the long length of table. “You will learn too?” Harsh lines that darkened his brow lightened with this new idea.

Nodding eagerly, Bithia placed a forkful of seared *aket* into her mouth and chewed vigorously. “We will learn.”

He didn’t smile, exactly, but the twin corners of his perfect lips lifted fractionally. What heartened her soul was that he followed suit. Stuffing a big bite of meat into his mouth, he chomped as if he would now willingly eat to keep himself alive to learn. Finally, she’d convinced him he wasn’t doomed to die for displeasing her.

Again, a small step, but she felt they were making progress. Chewing thoughtfully, she now watched him eat with the same ravenous gusto as she. Good. He would need his strength to keep up with the instructions she wished to give.

Gods help this Viltori if he dared to thwart her plans.

Chapter Five

When Drahka entered, his gaze immediately fell on Viltori. His teacher stood wide-eyed in the center of a lavish room filled with puffy furniture, deep green plants and seemingly hundreds of mirrors. Every step Drahka took echoed his form back at him from a different angle, jarring his perception. He wondered if they were purposely placed to make anyone unfamiliar with the room feel unbalanced. He considered Bithia, who strode inside without issue, and thought she had deliberately chosen this place to meet his teacher.

Dressed in white, Viltori stood out in the mostly crimson room. Blond hair gleamed under golden lights as he nervously clenched and unclenched his brows. Worry ate up all the usual joy that filled his face. When they entered, Viltori's eyes widened at Bithia, but his panicked expression lessened on a sigh when he saw Drahka. Dark brows smoothed over brown eyes.

"Drahka, my student," Viltori said, using Drahka's native tongue.

"My teacher." Drahka reached out to clasp Viltori's shoulder, as was the custom of his people, but Bithia intercepted him, pushing him back with the palm of her hand to his chest. The red robe her servants had dressed him in bunched below her hand and left a moist spot of heat when she withdrew. As much as Drahka wanted to push her back, he let her have her way, as she was the ruler of this planet. Any move Drahka made that angered her might hurt the teacher who had only tried to help. Drahka would rather die than hurt a man who had never done him wrong.

"You taught him?" Bithia demanded, striding toward Viltori as she pointed back at Drahka. Her voice was pitched high and hard, only the cushy furniture and fur rugs softened her harsh tone. Clad in a decorative crimson robe, Bithia consumed the massive space with her mighty presence. If she were not his chosen, Bithia would have terrified Drahka. Still, even though she was his, he held a deep respect for her power, her strength, and the fact that she knew exactly what she wanted. And what she wanted right now was an explanation for his failure.

Eyes going even wider, Viltori nodded. "Have I displeased you?" Viltori bowed low before Bithia. "Forgive me, my lady, as I did my best."

Drahka understood what each of them said. Bithia was upset that Drahka didn't give the right way and Viltori was sorry he hadn't taught Drahka better. Furious that they were talking about him as if he were not present, Drahka couldn't summon the power to speak. Diolan and the words of his tribe jumbled up together in a confusing mix. Whenever he was agitated, he seemed to lose his ability to speak clearly in

either language. Unbalanced by the room, terrified for his teacher, he found his mounting panic only compounded his turmoil. If he could speak, he'd defend Viltori, for he had tried to show him the ways of those on Diola, but Drahka had held so strongly to the true way, the way of the Oughun, that he'd not listened to Viltori. Only now did Drahka realize his refusal might result in the punishment of an innocent man.

Bithia glared at the bowing Viltori, her voice rising and falling in pitch and fury. Murmuring softly back, Viltori didn't answer so much as he offered apologies. He must have the same fear Drahka did, that any displeasure of Bithia would result in death.

"Stop!" Drahka called. Finally, he was able to pull the Diolan word out of the swirl of phrases in his mind.

Crimson robe furling around her legs, Bithia spun in his direction. Fire filled her mismatched eyes, making him again wonder how sometimes they were the same color and other times not. Berating himself for letting his mind wander, he took a calming breath before he spoke.

"He not do wrong. I do wrong." Drahka stepped between Viltori and Bithia. "I did not do what he said." Drahka moved to Viltori's side, but Viltori shook his head, determined to stay in a subservient position. What fear Bithia instilled in her people! Forcefully Drahka pulled him erect, again struck by the power in Viltori's form. His arm was hard as rock and he almost kept his bow but for Drahka having more leverage. Once he stood by Drahka's side, he kept his face lowered, whispering in Oughunian that by Drahka's insolence he would get them both killed.

"She promised not to kill me." Drahka spoke in Diolan so that Bithia would understand Viltori's fear.

Bithia looked from one to the other, the anger in her face fading. She sighed. "I'm not going to kill him, either."

Viltori looked up without lifting his head.

"Not having enough orgasms makes me extremely irritated, but not enough to kill." She spoke to Viltori, who translated her words when Drahka understood them perfectly well. She ran her fingers through her still-damp hair. After they'd eaten earlier, she'd insisted they bathe again. Her servants had scrubbed him everywhere, even peeling back the skin of his cock to wash below. Just like Bithia, they seemed surprised by the appearance of his cock, but he didn't know why. Gentle as they were, their motions were still disconcerting, as Drahka could clean himself.

"What can I do to please you?" Viltori asked the question, repeating it for Drahka.

One edge of her mouth quirked up and Drahka knew she'd thought of something wicked. He did not know her well, but when she thought certain wrongful thoughts, she made that expression. She'd looked up at him just like that right before she'd taken his cock into her mouth. Drahka wasn't so sure he wanted to hear what either of them could do to please her. So far, he'd found her almost impossible to satisfy. Perhaps

if both he and Viltori gave to her that might be enough to make her happy. Before he could suggest the idea, Bithia moved to Viltori.

Stepping near enough to Viltori to touch his face, Bithia tilted his head up with one finger to his chin. “What is the meaning of this word, this drahka, you keep saying?”

Viltori frowned. “Drahka is his name.”

Bithia’s eyes went wide.

“You did not ask his name?”

Drahka didn’t think she cared and besides, Drahka wasn’t actually his name. Drahka meant no name. Since it was the only title he had, he decided to keep it by staying silent lest they discover the truth.

Bithia opened her mouth, then abruptly pressed her lips together. “I did not.” Turning on her heel, she stepped so close to him that Drahka could smell the sweet perfume she’d dabbed behind her ears and between her breasts. “I am sorry, Drahka.”

Viltori needn’t have translated. Drahka could see regret in her eyes. He nodded his forgiveness. When she leaned her face up to his, as if to press her face against his, he stepped back, frowning down at her, then casting a curious glance to Viltori.

Viltori hissed out a breath that told Drahka without words he’d just made another mistake.

In his language, Viltori said, “She’s trying to kiss you.” However, the word kiss was not one Drahka was familiar with and he said so.

“Of course, he’s never been kissed because he hadn’t been fucked until last night.” Bithia laughed. “You will help me teach him.”

Viltori slowly nodded, as if either he wasn’t sure what she wanted, or perhaps he did not wish to do what she suggested. Drahka was glad now he hadn’t suggested they both give to Bithia.

“Let me show him using you.” Bithia stepped over to Viltori. She moved in so close she caused him to take a deep breath and hold very still. Bithia lifted her finger, tracing the tip along Viltori’s mouth, as if inspecting him carefully. He held very still, his gaze upon Bithia’s shoulder. “Surely, you know how to kiss.”

“I am an acolyte,” he whispered.

Bithia laughed. “Which means you burn with lust denied.” Pressing her lips together in a curious way, she moved her mouth very close to Viltori’s mouth. “You don’t want to kiss me?”

Whatever this kiss was, the idea of it excited Viltori, because his cock grew hard under his robe. Drahka could see the dark outline pressing against the white fabric.

“I think such would be offensive to your bondmate.” Viltori darted a quick glance to Drahka, then translated his words into Oughunian.

Not fully understanding what she wished to do, Drahka couldn’t very well say no, so he nodded to her, lifting his hand to convey they should show him what they discussed.

“Are you sure?” Viltori asked in Oughunian.

“Is it shameful?” Drahka couldn’t understand his teacher’s reluctance. It was his job to show Drahka the right way of things.

“Kissing is intimate.”

Before Drahka could ask the meaning of that word, Bithia pressed her finger to Viltori’s lips, cutting off his speech. “Are you asking him for permission when I am the empress?”

“I am trying to teach him,” Viltori said.

Bithia ran her gaze from one to the other. When she leaned forward, bringing her face close to Viltori’s, Drahka realized she wished to press her lips against his. Viltori turned his face away at the last moment, forcing Bithia to press her lips to his cheek.

Chapter Six

Terrified that what Bithia wanted would eventually lead to his dismissal, or worse, his demise, Viltori turned away from Bithia right before she could kiss him. Her lips landed on his right cheek. Growling in annoyance, she withdrew.

“You dare defy me?” Anger stiffened her spine and she clutched his face with her hand, forcing him to look at her. Rage filled her eyes, but he would rather suffer her wrath here than be exiled to one of the outer regions. Trapped between his lust, for he wanted to do so much more than just kiss her, and his fear that doing as she wished would hurt him, Viltori stood still, gazing into her eyes. He was shocked to realize one was translucent blue and the other opaque green.

“I do not wish to be exiled, my lady.” Casting his gaze to the floor, Viltori added, “I know what happened to the teachers sent to instruct you in the ancient tongue.” He’d been thinking of their fates just this morning in the *tishiary*.

“What do you mean?” Bithia stepped away from him, her surprise dispersing some of her anger.

Speaking only in Diolan, for Viltori did not wish to alarm Drahka, he explained that all of the acolytes she had seduced had been sent away. Or so he’d been told. The magistrate could have had them killed, for all Viltori knew.

“All I know, my lady, is that I would like nothing better than to teach you and your consort anything either of you would wish to know.” One direct glance deep into her unique eyes conveyed the erotic depth of how Viltori would revel in teaching them. “But not at the cost of my life.”

Bithia answered with a slight widening of her pupils and an almost imperceptible widening of her nostrils. Like a huntress, Bithia examined Viltori’s scent. When she leaned near, indicating her acceptance, he drew back. Not submissively, but wary and wise.

“Respectfully, my lady, I do not wish to suffer for teaching you or your consort.” His soul did not debate the morality of engaging the empress and her consort in sexual congress. Viltori’s only concern rested with the perceived ethical dilemma: Acolytes professed their bodies and souls to the gods. Teaching Empress Bithia and her eternal consort Drahka how to share their bodies for pleasure was within his realm as a teacher. Teaching was a great part of being an acolyte.

Doing was not.

Viltori could tell Bithia and Drahka how to use their bodies. He could fashion art detailing how a man could use a woman or how a woman could use a man or how any number of Diolans could place their

bodies together. He could even watch them use their bodies. However, he could not use either of their bodies to find his own pleasure. Ethically, what he'd allowed Rown to do to him this morning was wrong.

A new kind of anger crossed her features, drawing her brows low over her mismatched eyes. "I did not know of this, but I will not let you suffer any harm." Bithia lifted her head regally. "You are his teacher. I need you to help me teach him about my needs. Ambo told me you are the only acolyte who speaks his language." She paused for a moment, then added, "Actually, you are the only one on all of Diola who speaks Drahka's native tongue. That means none will harm you. Especially not I."

When she spoke of herself as the empress, her grammar improved substantially. "You didn't protect the others." The accusation left his mouth before he could clamp his foolish lips together. Expecting her to burst into anger and berate him an insolent fool, Viltori was stunned by the softness of her reply.

"I did not know that what I did would hurt them." After a deep breath, she placed her hand on her heart, curling her fingers over the edges of her robe. "I was only having fun."

Viltori believed her. Bithia was not a ruthless woman, only a lusty one. Clearly, she hadn't meant to harm anyone. Viltori spared a quick glance to Drahka, who stood still, his face stoic as he tried to understand what they were discussing. In the interests of discretion, Viltori thought it wise not to translate what Bithia had done with multiple men prior to bonding to him. What Drahka didn't know couldn't hurt him.

With a look to Drahka, Bithia turned away, moving toward the ornate door. She pulled it open and spoke quietly to the guards waiting there. Over her shoulder, she told them to wait for her. "Continue teaching him until I return." In a swirl of crimson, she left, closing the heavy door with a reverberating thud.

"She is angry," Drahka said.

Viltori nodded. "But not at us." He had a feeling the magistrate, Ambo Votny, was about to get an earful of righteous fury. Viltori's estimation of Bithia rose greatly that she would now try to save those hurt by her actions. He knew most elite simply wouldn't care what became of those who slaked their needs. Ambo didn't. Viltori had heard of men who sold their female slaves into hard labor when they grew bored with mounting them, or when they impregnated them, such as Ambo was rumored to have done. He'd heard of women castrating men who failed to please them. Bithia was honestly surprised that her seductions ended in exile.

"What was she trying to do to you?" Drahka asked.

"She wanted to kiss me."

"Show me."

Now that would be a sight: him kissing Drahka when a touch to the arm disturbed the man. A kiss would probably get him a lot worse than a fist to the face. "I will show you when Bithia returns."

Viltori settled into the softest chair he'd ever sat upon as he motioned for Drahka to sit across from him. For a long time they simply sat, using the furniture as a way to teach each other new words.

Even in the unfamiliar room, they fell to their usual form. Point, ask, explain and repeat. Immersed in learning, Drahka was oblivious to the fact that his robe, unlike his trousers, did not stay closed when he shifted about. Each time Drahka moved, he revealed more of his hairy calves, then his thighs. Each time he celebrated his understanding, Drahka lifted the crimson fabric up higher, getting ever closer to the juncture of his legs. After grasping a particularly difficult word, Drahka lifted his hands in triumph, which wrenched his robe apart, exposing his hips, cock and both legs.

Viltori tried not to gape, but the man was huge, hairy and, hottest of all, uncut. Most men on Diola, even those in the barbaric outer regions, were circumcised shortly after birth. Viltori had not known of the difference until he'd traveled to Oughun. As he stood with several other men urinating directly into a rushing stream, they'd excitedly pointed to his differentness. The Oughun men asked a hundred questions and Viltori hoped he'd answered them fully. Oughunian men had never seen a cut cock and Viltori had never seen one that wasn't. Culturally they exchanged much that bonded them together. Viltori knew Drahka was uncut, and he'd tried to tell Drahka that he should inform Bithia, but when he'd tried to show him this information, he'd lashed out. Oughnians had clearly defined taboos about same-sex touching of any sort.

To his horror, Drahka noticed the direction of Viltori's gaze. Before he could babble out an explanation, Drahka cupped his cock and asked, "What is wrong with my cock?" Lowering his head he said, "You tried to touch, to show me, and I tried to hit you. I'm sorry. Please now show me what is wrong with my cock."

Gulping, Viltori said, "Nothing." Not a damn thing he could see, anyway. He'd like nothing better than to do to Drahka what Rown had done to him earlier. "What makes you think there is anything wrong with your cock?"

"Bithia say something uncute."

After a moment, where he couldn't imagine anyone, even Bithia, calling a cock cute or not, Viltori understood. "Not cut," he said. "Uncut, not un-cute." Briefly, he explained the difference between the two words, then tried valiantly to convey the meaning behind Bithia's comment.

Thrusting his finger at Viltori, Drahka demanded, "Show me yours that is cut." Concern filled his stoic face as if he were genuinely worried that someone had cut up Viltori's cock.

Eyeing the door, wondering just how much longer Bithia would be gone and if she'd be upset about him teaching her consort this, Viltori moved to a seat that blocked him from view of the doorway. If she did enter suddenly, he could pull his robe closed before she saw what he was doing.

Drahka seemed to understand the furtive nature of their discussion. Frowning, Drahka moved to the couch, sitting next to him. He eyed the door that was well over the high back of the couch. When Viltori parted his robe, showing Drahka his painfully hard, circumcised cock, Drahka leaned over.

Breathing hard enough to brush hot air over the pounding length of Viltori's cock, Drahka said, "You not cut." Reaching out his left hand, Drahka wrapped his fist around Viltori's cock. "No cut." Lowering his head, placing his face a bare breath above the tip, Drahka bellowed, "Ah! Cut off tip!" Pulling back, yanking open his robe, Drahka grasped his own cock and tugged his foreskin. "Cut off tip, not cut up cock!" Proudly displaying his penis, Drahka considered Viltori's for another moment, then grasped him again. Running his fingers up and down, hardening him further, Drahka leaned close again and asked, "When you were cut, were you hurt?"

"I was a baby when they cut me." He thanked the gods for that. He couldn't imagine what having that done as an adult would be like.

"You no feel pain now?" Drahka ran a fingertip along the faint circumcision scar that encircled the hardest part of Viltori's prick.

"No, it doesn't hurt now." Of course, that wasn't quite true. He was so hard and excited his prick truly did hurt. If not for Rown's generous gift, he would have erupted all over Drahka's hand.

Drahka nodded, turning his attention to his own cock. "Mine hurts. Bithia's servants scrubbed under the tip."

Viltori cast a wary eye to the door, than to Drahka's hand-held prick. "Does it hurt now?"

"Some." Frowning, Drahka looked toward the door Bithia had exited. "She take twice, then suck once. Still I am excited thinking of her."

Nodding, Viltori asked, "On Oughun, do men seek solo pleasure?"

Horried, Drahka yanked his hand off his cock. "I not doing that, just showing!"

"Calm down. I'm not accusing, just asking." However, clearly by his response, the men of Drahka's tribe did not masturbate. In a way, such a taboo made perfect sense. His tribe was relatively infertile. Each ejaculation was sacred and necessary for the continuation of his people. Self-fulfillment would be considered the height of selfishness.

Not only had Drahka been a virgin when he'd gone to Bithia, he'd been relatively untouched. If he could have swooned, Viltori would have. Drahka was a blank slate. Anything he or Bithia taught him about their culture he would believe, accept and likely perform. Heady with the erotic possibilities, then cautioned by the ethical dilemma, Viltori reluctantly wrapped his robe around his body.

Following suit, Drahka covered himself up too. "Is looking wrong?"

"No, I'm cold. Did you want to see more?" Gods, why was he asking? He should let this matter drop.

Drahka considered for a moment, then whispered, "Do you do solo touching?"

Technically, he wasn't supposed to, but then he realized he was teaching and letting Drahka watch him masturbate could be considered a form of education. Or maybe he was just desperately trying to justify doing what he wanted to do.

"Do you want me to show you?" Viltori caught their reflection in a mirror strategically placed across from the couch. They made a wicked contrast: he in white, Drahka in crimson, his finger-length blond hair glowing, and Drahka's long black hair gleaming. Drahka was bigger, broader, the silk of his robe caressing massive muscles below. Viltori was muscular too, but not like Drahka. In his tribe, Drahka had been a hunter, felling great beasts to feed the entire group. He also cut trees for their fires. Such hard labor gave him a remarkable body, one the elite would pay handsomely to mimic through surgical enhancement.

Drahka nodded. "Show me solo touching."

Parting his robe, Viltori took his cock in hand, cradling his shaft with his dominant right hand as he cupped his balls with the left. "The trick is not to rush." Gods no, he wasn't going to rush. He wanted to enjoy every bit of this encounter. Desperately he prayed to the god of Harvesters that Bithia would not return until he was finished with his lesson.

Drahka watched intently for a moment, then parted his robe. He gripped his cock with his right hand and stroked, fumbling.

"Use your dominant hand." Viltori nodded to his left.

Drahka switched to his left hand. Now his motions were sleek and exact, mimicking perfectly what Viltori did.

"Slowly?" Drahka asked. "Faster would feel better."

"Stroke too fast and it's over too fast." Viltori had to summon the very depth of his will to continue with his measured, even strokes. "Solo touching is a way to learn to last longer when with a woman."

"Ah, that is good to learn. Bithia happy with longer lasting."

"Bithia will be happier with me lasting longer," Viltori corrected automatically.

"Bithia will be happier with me lasting longer." Drahka repeated the words, then looked to him for confirmation that he'd spoken correctly.

Viltori nodded, knowing full well his interest at the moment was not with Bithia's pleasure. His gaze darted between his own hand, Drahka's, and the mirror where he could see them both. Drahka's body was big and covered in dark hair. Muscles flexed as he tightened his form to keep his mounting passion at bay.

"Feels good," Drahka said, squeezing his fist a bit tighter, causing his foreskin to move smoothly up and down his shaft, exposing the slick, dusky-red tip.

Viltori thought he would climax right there. Drahka kept his gaze on Viltori's hand, mimicking each motion. He followed along so exactly that when Viltori looked into the mirror he felt he was stroking Drahka's cock. His mouth watered, desperate for a taste of him.

Behind them, they heard a click. Their eyes met, widened, and they hastily jumped to their feet. Viltori had his robe down covering his prick in an instant, but Drahka struggled with the open ends and the tied sash. Before he could determine if the couch was high enough to shield him from Bithia's view, she looked directly into his eyes through one of the mirrors.

“Tell me, Viltori, exactly what have you been teaching my consort?”

Chapter Seven

Bithia should have let them finish their mutual masturbation session, but she did not wish to waste two such powerful eruptions. Making them wait would make the moment of climax even more profound. She found it difficult to decide which one she would have first, with one so dark and the other so light, and both men strong in different ways. Drahka was so curious and Viltori so knowledgeable. She knew Viltori had not always been an acolyte. Ambo confirmed he was once a recruit. That explained his muscular build and his easy acceptance of sex with another man. And it seemed Drahka's curiosity was overtaking the ingrained teachings of his tribe.

Bithia felt ready for a day of lusty pleasures. Taking care of those she'd hurt by restoring them to their rightful places, for her appetites should not affect them, had filled her with pride. After a thorough verbal bashing, Ambo would never again punish her lovers. His blubbering apologies had filled her with loathing. She did not believe Ambo was sorry for what he'd done, only sorry for getting caught. Ambo seemed to forget he was not in charge. However, she needed him. For now.

When she'd checked on her consort's teaching, she'd been stunned then excited by the possibilities. Behind the looking glass, she'd fingered herself almost to orgasm as she'd watched them. Clearly, Viltori was attracted to Drahka. And to herself, if she wasn't mistaken. All that held him back was his silly notion of acolyte morality. At the moment Drahka seemed merely curious, not excited at the prospect of sex with Viltori, but that was fine too. She wanted them both focused on her. Their encounters with each other could come later, well after she was satisfied.

Timing her entrance to the critical moment, she'd walked in just as Viltori had begun to lose control of his timing. Caught in the act, Viltori hastily covered himself, then hung his head, shame slumping his shoulders. But she knew deep inside he wasn't ashamed of what he'd been doing, only wary that he'd been caught. Mimicking his teacher, Drahka struggled with his robe, then gave up. Any other man would look comical with his hard and heavy prick hanging out from between the edges of his robe, but Drahka managed to look almost commanding.

"We do wrong?" Drahka whispered to Viltori, clearly confused. She noticed his grammar worsened when he was perplexed or flustered.

"There is no wrong," Bithia said, causing Viltori to glance up at her, his brows lifted with curiosity. Below his white robe, his guilty cock created a slowly spreading wet spot. Stepping between the two men, she cupped Drahka, then Viltori. "Nothing wrong at all."

Drahka's lids settled low over his intense expression as he lifted his hips just enough to give her better leverage. His groan was one of deep pleasure as he said, "This is better when you touch."

"Please," Viltori whispered, closing his eyes tightly, "I cannot do this."

He was convinced if he indulged his lust, he would be sent away. "Yes, you can." While still stroking Drahka, she let go of Viltori and untied the sash of his robe. Tossing the tie onto the couch, she pushed the fabric off his shoulders, pooling the white *astle* on the floor behind his feet. "No longer are you an acolyte."

Dark suspicion devoured a brief burst of joy. "What am I now, my lady?"

"Mine." Before he could question her further, she stepped close. "Now help me show Drahka how to kiss." Turning to Drahka, she drew him closer by tugging gently on his cock until he stood near her and Viltori.

"You show me this kiss?" Drahka asked.

"He is such an eager student." Bithia slid her hand slowly along the wonderful length of Drahka's cock. "And you are such a devoted teacher." She gave Viltori's cock a knowledgeable squeeze, then released him.

Viltori puckered his lips and pressed them against Bithia's neck. Lifting his head to Drahka, he said, "You do that, but to her lips." Edging away, so Drahka could not see, Viltori nipped the nape of her neck and whispered, "You might find owning me is a dangerous prospect."

Bithia shivered in response. She'd had a feeling if she pushed him in just the right way, she could bring out his aggressive side. If he taught this to Drahka, the two men could keep her thoroughly satisfied. She did not care for wimpy men and Viltori was clearly not subservient. He'd bowed and mumbled abject apologies to appease her, but she could tell he did so for show. He honestly did not feel he was beneath her. Good. Because she didn't think he was, either.

Drahka leaned close and pressed his mouth against hers. Tentative and curious, he held his lips to hers. Bithia lifted her hand to his head, kissing his lips softly at first, with small pecking motions, until he mimicked her.

"Now, open your mouth just a bit." Viltori moved to her side to give himself a better view for instructions.

Slowly, Drahka opened his mouth. When Bithia slipped her tongue inside, he groaned, sending a shudder through her body. He tasted masculine and pure. Knowing she was the first and only woman he'd ever kissed thrilled the huntress inside. Such a moment must have excited Drahka too, because he grabbed the back of her head, leaned into her, then stabbed his tongue between her lips as if he were fucking her mouth.

"Gently, Drahka, not too aggressive," Viltori murmured in both languages. "Give, but give lightly."

Apparently, Viltori understood Drahka's obsession with giving. If she could have, she would have brought him into her rooms last night to explain to the man that he didn't always have to give so hard and

fast. Not that she was opposed to rough couplings; to the contrary, she liked them very much, but not all the time. Variation, foreplay, teasing: these were the concepts Drahka must learn.

Drahka relaxed his hold on her head and continued his exploration, but with more grace. He pulled away just a bit, then said, "You kiss too. Show more."

Bithia cast a wanton gaze to Viltori. "Yes, my servant, show more types of kissing."

Anger tightened his lips at the derogatory title, but he spoke not a word.

"Come, now, Viltori. You won't be able to kiss with such fury making your mouth so tight."

Eyes narrowed dangerously, Viltori brought his face to hers. "By your wish, my lady." He turned her head so that she faced him and then kissed the breath out of her. In that brief, shining moment, he captured her complete attention. He kissed her as if his life depended on it. As if he would rule her with the power of his lips, and he almost did. Just as she began to fall under his spell, he pulled away, casting her a triumphant smirk. To her shock, he grabbed the back of Drahka's head and proceeded to kiss him with the same powerful passion.

Drahka's startled expression gave way to a curious fumbling that Viltori tried to tame. Watching them clash tongues sent her senses reeling. Each tried to give more than the other, which made their kissing a battle. Back and forth the struggle for supremacy went until Bithia separated them with one palm to each man's chest.

"I give, you take," Drahka said, clearly perplexed that Viltori did not understand that concept.

"Now you know what last night was like for me," Bithia said to Viltori.

"He's alpha," Viltori explained. "He doesn't understand there can be give and take without threatening his position."

Bithia laughed and whispered, "Seems to me he wants to dominate you." Challenging him with the tilt of her face and the subtle lift of one brow, she asked, "What will you do now, teacher?"

In that moment, she knew she'd pushed him too far. A new and dangerous light bloomed in Viltori's dark eyes. He wouldn't allow anyone to dominate him, especially not her.

Slipping behind her, he captured her wrists, binding her quickly with the discarded sash of his robe. "I am a teacher, as you say, and I think the one who needs to learn is you."

Before she could protest, he said something in Drahka's native tongue. Eagerly he responded by pushing open her robe and cupping her breasts. Twisting her nipples until her peaks stood hard, he then lowered his mouth to them at Viltori's command.

Bithia opened her mouth to issue an order, but Viltori turned her head to the side and filled her mouth with his tongue. Again, he kissed her until she was breathless. Pulling back just a fraction, he whispered against her lips, "You will submit, Bithia, or I will refuse to teach."

“I am the empress,” she challenged. Even though she wanted Viltori, and wanted him aggressive, she would not allow him to hold power over her. No man would ever have command of her. “What makes you think you have any authority with me?”

“You gave me the idea yourself.”

Her mouth went dry at the certainty in his gaze.

Smiling slyly, he cupped her chin. Teasing his finger along her mouth, as if speculating about all the things he could put there, he whispered, “I am the only man on all of Diola who speaks your consort’s native tongue.” Viltori glanced to Drahka, who was eagerly playing with her breasts. “That makes me just as important as your consort.”

Too late, Bithia realized she’d placed herself firmly under Viltori’s thumb.

Chapter Eight

Drahka fondled Bithia's breasts, loving the weight they made against his palms and the texture of her nipples in his mouth. Something on her skin tasted sweet and floral, a flavor he simply could not get enough of. He heard her and Viltori whispering back and forth, their voices low and heated. He understood what they said, but mostly he concentrated on touching his chosen. Her dark skin contrasted against his lighter skin just as Viltori's even lighter skin contrasted against hers. The shading of their flesh was visually pleasing, as if they each blended into the other, then round again.

Drahka very much enjoyed the teaching of solo touching. If he could stroke himself for a long time without climaxing, he could give longer and harder to Bithia, which should please her. His tribe had taught that such touching was shameful, for it wasted a man's essence, but if he did solo touching without orgasm, there would be no waste.

Watching his teacher had been exciting too. Viltori's body was similar to his but different as well. His teacher had light hair on his head, no hair on his chest, and very dark hair on the rest of his body, especially around his cut cock. At first, Drahka had been horrified that someone had cut Viltori's cock, but someone had only cut the tip. Drahka had been so fascinated that he'd touched Viltori several times before he remembered men should not touch other men.

Trying to remain faithful to the true way of his people would be difficult, but not impossible. Like when Viltori had shown him kissing; that was wrong, and Drahka almost hit his teacher, but then he realized Viltori was only trying to show, so maybe that kind of man-to-man touching was permissible. Touching for the purpose of teaching wasn't against the true way. It wasn't as if they were doing what had caused Drahka to lose his name. Still, Drahka wanted to be the one to give. When Viltori tried to force Drahka to take, Drahka had fought back. In a most curious way, he'd enjoyed their battle for dominance.

Kissing Viltori was different from kissing Bithia. They each tasted unique. The feel of their lips and tongues was different too. What was the same were the feelings inside, and that, he knew, would give him trouble. He could not feel for Viltori what he felt for Bithia. Drahka could not have those feelings and hold to the true way.

When he looked up, something had changed with the cast of Bithia's face. Her confidence was shaken and Viltori's seemed renewed. Was it always this way with these people? Just like those in his tribe, they strove to master each other. Switching of those roles could mean great shame. Just as Bithia opened her

mouth to speak, Viltori pressed his finger to her lips and silenced her. Her glare said more than words, but she held her tongue.

“Drahka,” Viltori said, “I wish to teach the empress something new.” He spoke first in Diolan, then translated to Oughunian. “Bithia needs to learn how to take, as I’m sure you discovered last night.”

Drahka nodded. Bithia had not seemed to understand she should be more receptive to his giving.

Bithia swallowed hard, her mismatched eyes wide as she considered them. Carefully, they arranged her upon a padded bench so that she was facedown, with her bound arms behind her. The tiny bench was just long enough to hold her body from the top of her head to the edge of her hips. Knees buried in thick carpet, her bottom stuck up from the edge just a bit. Viltori whispered things to her as he draped her crimson robe over her body, covering her completely yet displaying her artfully.

Drahka would have preferred her in this position nude. When he told this to Viltori, he chuckled, his hand pausing to caress Bithia’s bound arms. “Just as Bithia needs to learn to take, you must learn to give slower.” Each time Viltori spoke, he carefully gave his words in both languages so that he and Bithia could understand.

“You see, Drahka, a woman like Bithia is used to being in command.” Easing her knees apart, Viltori settled himself behind her. “She knows how to take, but not how to take without a struggle.” Cupping one hand to each of her back cheeks, Viltori leaned very close to her, then said, “I’m going to teach her how to be submissive.”

Twisting her head so she could see Viltori over her shoulder, Bithia seethed, “Enjoy yourself now, teacher, because once I’m free—”

“You’ll what?” Viltori asked. His dark brows high over glittering brown eyes.

Drahka stood silently, trying to understand what was happening between his teacher and his chosen. Bithia seemed reluctant to accept Viltori’s teachings even though over their earlier meal, she’d said that she would learn just as he would.

Viltori pushed her cheeks apart and breathed long, slow and low against her bottom. Whatever Bithia intended to say was lost when she groaned. Never having heard a woman make such a sound, Drahka knelt beside Viltori and asked what he’d done.

“This fabric,” he stroked his long fingers over the crimson material of Bithia’s robe, “is called *astle*. One of its most wonderful properties is that it holds heat close to the body. So when I breathe...” he breathed out again, eliciting another groan of pleasure, “...Bithia feels that particular spot heat up far beyond anywhere else.”

“It’s like touching without a touch,” Drahka confirmed.

With a smile and a nod, Viltori whispered something against Bithia, something that caused her to squirm, not in an effort to get away, but as if she wished for him to press his face closer.

“What are you saying to her?” Drahka asked. Learning the words that pleased Bithia would be wise.

"I am telling her all the wicked things I wish to do to her. All the ways I wish to use her lovely body to sate my lust." Lifting up, Viltori slowly pressed his cock in the fabric-covered split of her bottom, then rubbed his length up and down by rocking his hips.

Drahka went hard in such a rush he almost lost his balance. Viltori's long, thick cock contrasted against the darkness of the red fabric, his movements leisurely but strong. Viltori moved against her as if he could do so all day without climaxing.

Exuberant with understanding, Drahka said, "This is why one practices solo touching!"

"Indeed." Viltori nodded. "Because if one is controlled, one can last a long time and thoroughly torment—I mean arouse—his partner."

Bithia swiveled her hips, trying to change the path of Viltori's cock, but she was unsuccessful. His teacher simply followed along with her, as if he danced against her bottom. Watching them together was both arousing and frustrating. Drahka wanted to be the one who built Bithia's passions. When his chosen struggled too much, Viltori grasped the tie around her bound hands and pulled up until she whimpered. After cautioning her to stillness, he let go, and now she held her bottom still for him. If Drahka thought Viltori was hurting her, he would have stopped him, but he seemed to be warning her with the threat of pain, like the straps riders used to control the *rangoug* beasts. It only hurt if they resisted.

"But a man should not put his cock there. Not in that place." Drahka frowned for Viltori rubbed against her dark passage, not the entrance to her glory. No matter what Diolans believed, doing that went against everything he held to by the true way.

"Why shouldn't a man put his cock here?" Viltori dipped down, nudging the tip of his cock against Bithia's dark passage. Only the thin fabric of her robe prevented him from plunging within. As shocked as he was, Drahka couldn't prevent a surge of excitement. Would Viltori force himself into her? Would Bithia let him without struggling? If she cried out in pain, would Drahka stop his teacher? All of these questions collided in his mind, keeping him immobile as he watched Viltori hold himself steady against her. Bithia was so perfectly still she scarcely breathed.

"No child can come of such a coupling," Drahka explained, convinced that Viltori must already know this. And since he knew this himself, why did the prospect of taking her here, in this wrong way, excite him so? He didn't want to watch Viltori slake his passion in this way. He wanted to do it himself!

A brief laugh confirmed Viltori knew the truth of what Drahka had said. "No child, only pleasure." Turning to him, Viltori smiled more wickedly than any look that had ever crossed Bithia's face. "Here a man can find his satisfaction without creating a child."

"But the whole point of giving is to make a child!" Drahka was horrified that Viltori would deliberately waste his essence.

Viltori's gaze traveled down to Drahka's cock. Anticipation caused his essence to leak from the tip. Embarrassed by his clear lack of control, Drahka yanked the edges of his robe to cover himself up.

“Don’t.” Viltori pushed the edges apart, the fabric sliding sensuously as his teacher exposed him. “Don’t hide the truth. Watching excites you. Here.” Viltori moved away from Bithia, drawing Drahka to take his place between her legs.

Bithia turned her head to see what they were doing, but she remained curiously quiet despite the fact Viltori had not bound her mouth. Perhaps his threat to do so convinced her to keep silent. Drahka settled himself between her knees, his chest feeling tight from his shallow breaths.

“Do as I did. Rub yourself against her.”

A part of him said no, but another part, a stronger part, pressed against her as if drawn by unseen forces. Closing his eyes, he saw in his mind where he wished to place his cock so that when the contact came, the feeling was pure, undiluted by his sight. Raw and hot, his cock smoothed into the crevice of her bottom, moving against the fabric that was so slick it was almost like the wet he’d felt inside her last night.

Her groan matched his.

Keeping his eyes closed, Drahka placed his hands on her hips, not to hold her steady, but to steady himself. What he was doing was wrong in so many ways, but as long as he did not climax, he could tease her and himself. However, holding back became ever more difficult as the fabric held the heat not only against her flesh, but his. Each stroke increased the temperature, until his cock felt bathed in the slick hotness of her passage.

Wrenching back, Drahka stopped just before he lost control. He kept his eyes closed, thinking of anything, everything, other than Bithia.

On his shoulder, he felt the weight of Viltori’s hand. “Calm, deep breaths, Drahka.”

Mimicking his teacher, he drew in air through his nose and released it from his mouth. In this way, he staved off his climax, but only barely.

“I cannot do this, my teacher. I am not as trained as you.” When he opened his eyes, he saw that Viltori was kneeling next to him, slowly sliding the back of Bithia’s robe up. Ever so slowly he exposed her strong calves, the tender cup at the back of her knee where her skin was just a bit lighter, to the smooth ebony strength of her parted thighs, and then the glistening entrance to her glory.

“Do you see what teasing has done to her?” Viltori pushed the robe up to the middle of her back, then slid his long-fingered hand between her legs. When he pulled his hand back, his fingers glistened in the light. “See how slick she is? She weeps for your cock. The barest brush against her clit will send her screaming into orgasm.”

Determined to keep his composure, Drahka continued to take slow measured breaths through his nose, but each time he did he could smell and taste Bithia’s essence. He stood. To distract himself, he demanded, “Show me this clit.” His teacher had talked about this magical place once before, but Drahka refused to listen because a woman need not climax to make a child. Now he understood that wasn’t the point. Giving her pleasure was just as important as giving her a child.

Grasping her shoulder, Viltori angled Bithia up to her knees, then, with Drahka's help, they pulled her to her feet.

"If you promise to be a good submissive, I'll untie you."

Bithia lifted her chin, but then lowered it slowly, nodding her agreement. The promise of pleasure was the only thing that made her willing to indulge Viltori's teachings. Drahka had a feeling if he tried to boss her in such a way, he would not be as successful.

Viltori untied her wrists, slipped off her robe and tilted her chin up. "We are going to make you feel so good, Bithia, that you will never forget this day."

Flicking his chin, Viltori indicated the chair where he wanted Drahka to sit. Drahka settled himself on the deeply padded armless chair with his legs held together. Viltori guided Bithia to sit upon his lap, facing away from him, but refused to let them couple. Her slight growl of annoyance pleased him, for he wished to fill her with the now-throbbing length of his cock just as much as she apparently wanted to be filled. Instead, his cock only pressed against her cool bottom as she spread her legs, straddling his lap. Speaking only in his native tongue, Drahka begged Viltori to hurry with his lesson for he could not last much longer.

Chuckling, Viltori placed himself on his knees and pushed Drahka's legs open, which forced Bithia's legs even wider apart as her thighs rested on the outside of Drahka's.

"Bring your hands around her, Drahka, cup her breasts."

Drahka did, heating the coolness of her flesh with the moist warmth of his palms. Arching her back, Bithia turned her head, kissing him over her shoulder as he twisted her nipples.

When she lowered her hands, Viltori gently slapped them away. "I am trying to teach, Bithia. This won't do him any good if you rub yourself."

Instead, Bithia reached back, smoothing her hands along Drahka's waist, reaching until she flattened her palms against his lower back.

Mastering his movements, Viltori drew Drahka's left hand down the smooth slope of Bithia's belly to the triangle of hair that guarded the entrance to her glory. Pressing his middle finger firmly into her flesh, he slid his hand lower until he brushed against something firm. As soon as he touched this spot, Bithia jumped. Her thighs tried to pull together automatically, but his legs were far too strong. Deliberately he spread them farther, fingering her until she whimpered in surrender. Much like his teacher, he enjoyed having control over his chosen. Exploring with Viltori's guidance, Drahka felt all along the lips of her sex, the snug entrance he could not wait to fill, and that hard little nub.

"Slowly, evenly, pressing not too hard and not too light will bring her higher. You control when she will find the summit." Viltori moved his face very close, using the breathing technique to further torment Bithia, but Drahka could also feel his moist breath against his balls. He tried not to think of his teacher's face that close to his cock. With Drahka's finger and Viltori's murmured words, Bithia squirmed against the power of his legs and the unbreakable grasp of his arm. Leaning near to her ear, Drahka swore in her

language that he would not stop until he felt her climax. Her reaction convinced him that she enjoyed hearing aggressive words while he gave to her. This lesson with his teacher had taught him a great deal.

“Now is the time.” Viltori helped Bithia lift up. He grasped Drahka’s cock, sliding him into her with one smooth motion. She plunged down on him so swiftly she suddenly engulfed his entire length. Desperate to hold on, determined to pleasure her first, he lost control of his movements, but Viltori was there, telling him to breathe, helping him keep his rhythm by mastering his hand.

Gasping, Bithia bounced upon his lap, moving within so that she grasped him almost as tightly as his fist had earlier. Closing his eyes, determined to feel everything from the nubby texture of the fabric against his buttocks to the burning heat of his chosen, to the moist breath of his teacher, Drahka erupted just as Bithia clamped down on him, her whole body shuddering.

For a long moment, he simply held on to her as he pumped his seed deep inside. Bithia turned her head, kissing him over her shoulder, lifting her hands to twine in his hair. When the last of the shudders left their drained bodies, Bithia opened her eyes just as he opened his. In her gaze, he saw the truth—he had pleased his chosen beyond her expectations. Before pride could puff his chest, he realized he never would have been able to do so without his teacher. As if she had just remembered him too, Bithia turned her head as Drahka lowered his gaze.

Tormented cock jutting up from his body, Viltori knelt on the floor, his gaze darting between their eyes. A slow grin of triumph spread across his face.

“Tell me, Empress, will you now punish the teacher?”

Chapter Nine

After tossing out the challenge to Bithia, Viltori gazed upon his two students. At first one was so eager and the other so defiant, but now, both had a glow of satisfaction. He fell back upon his heels. Tension filled his entire body, but he found it was a good kind of pressure. He wanted release, but he also felt strong enough to put that moment off. Enjoying the need for climax was pleasurable in and of itself, something he hoped he'd just taught Drahka. All he'd taught Bithia was that he had no problem dominating her.

After a few blinks of her unusual eyes, a gleam filled Bithia's expression, and he knew in that moment the power had shifted back to her. He was surprised his mastery had lasted this long.

"I think your unsatisfied cock will be punishment enough." She stretched languorously atop Drahka's strong legs, displaying the full of her satisfied body. Oh the things that he could do to her. He almost had. Yanking up her robe and plunging into the tight darkness between her rounded cheeks would have been sublime. Yet he hadn't. Bithia was not his. He did not have the right to slake his needs upon her, only Drahka could. He was here to teach him. Bithia said that he now belonged to her, but she'd not given him any details.

Concern slowly ate away the satisfaction on Drahka's face. "It unfair to keep him in such pain." His Diolan was getting better, but he clearly needed more lessons. Viltori couldn't wait to continue with his instructions in both language and love.

Bithia turned her head, nodding with false concern. "If you wish to help him, you may, with my blessing."

At that, Drahka blanched. "One man does not touch another man."

"You let him touch you earlier," Bithia pointed out with barely concealed glee.

"That was to show, for teaching, not for pleasure." Clearly horrified by the very idea of touching another man, Drahka twisted his face into such a moue of disgust he managed to make himself utterly unattractive.

"Well, it's either by your hand or his own, but it will not be by my hand." Bithia cast Viltori a smirk.

"He should not waste his essence."

"Yes, it is a puzzle." Bithia rose, dislodging Drahka's softening prick, and slowly pulled on her robe, making sure Viltori got a clear view of her luscious cunt. "But I'm afraid you two will have to work this out, as I must go. Meetings and important empress duties."

Drahka lifted his arm as if to stop her, but in the end he simply watched her walk away. He was not yet ready to take a power position over Bithia. Her robe swirled around her calves as she yanked open the door and departed.

Viltori saw his own reflection in one of the mirrors and almost laughed at his pathetic state. His cock was so hard and primed that moisture leaked from the tip like tears. Drahka too looked at him and frowned.

“Not right to leave you this way.”

“No.” Viltori shook his head. He knew by Drahka’s pained expression that he could probably guilt him into alleviating his problem. Manipulating his student would be simple; however, he just couldn’t take advantage of his friend that way. Standing and covering himself in his discarded robe, he motioned Drahka to follow him.

“Where we go?”

“Where are we going?” Viltori corrected automatically. Drahka repeated the phrase. “We are going to the training rooms.” Along the way, Viltori reminded him about the Harvesters and their role in Diolan society. They’d discussed them many times, but this would be his first exposure to how they were trained.

“Why will we go to the training rooms?” Drahka asked, looking for confirmation that he’d spoken correctly.

“You show remarkable progress, my student.” Viltori clapped him on the shoulder. Just as he started to enjoy the feel of his hard muscles, he pulled his hand away, clasping it to the other behind his back. “There is more than one way to deal with unrequited lust.”

As soon as Viltori stepped into the training rooms, he took a deep breath. Sweat, leather and the faintest tang of blood scented the air. Groups of men were scattered about the room training in different ways: some grappled barehanded; some swung double clubs; some used dull-edged swords atop the tilt-table; and some practiced the fluid movements of *kintana*. Drahka’s gaze seemed to be everywhere at once, taking it all in. He asked question after question, for his tribe had no such organized way to train in the art of combat. So few lived on his world that they never fought with each other. There would be no point when they had plenty of resources.

Leading Drahka to the gear room in the back, Viltori selected two pairs of *mondi* pants for their training session. The drawstring trousers were drab brown and loose, comfortable for a wide range of movement. Drahka pulled his on under his robe, then removed the heavy crimson garment. Viltori had far less modesty; he wrenched off his robe first, then drew on his pants. He noticed Drahka made a point to look away. Once they were dressed, Viltori led him out to the mats.

Rather than starting with unfamiliar weapons, he chose first to show him the basics of barehanded wrestling. Drahka was convinced such a fight would be unfair as he was larger. One quick tumble to the mat convinced him that size had little to do with this style of fighting. Drahka rapidly grasped that to prevail, he had to keep a cool head and use his opponent’s weight and momentum against him.

As Viltori pinned Drahka down to the mat, his head close to his crotch, Viltori realized his mistake. Teaching him involved a great amount of touching, which exacerbated the longings in Viltori's body. Rather than decreasing his arousal, pawing all over Drahka was only making things worse. Drahka's body was so solid and he smelled strongly of Bithia. Viltori could not imagine a sweeter perfume than that of her sex.

To protect himself from an embarrassing erection, Viltori moved on to the *dantaratase*, a tall, slender staff used for both defense and offence. Drahka was an excellent student who was comfortable with his body and quickly grasped the mechanics of the weapon. It didn't take long for Drahka to knock his teacher to the ground. As Viltori lay on his back, realizing that physical punishment was not removing his lust, Drahka stepped forward and pulled him to his feet. Drahka ran his hand over his back, making sure he had not hurt him, which only increased Viltori's ardor.

"I am fine. A bit of damaged pride, but other than that, I am fine." The man was nothing short of amazing. Drahka could wield an unfamiliar weapon far better than he could, and Viltori had spent two seasons in training.

"This is how you try to forget a woman?" Drahka asked. He leaned close and whispered so that the other men wouldn't hear.

"Me? No, this is not what I prefer to do, but I thought it might help." In a way, it had. He was no longer hard and he wasn't thinking about Bithia anymore. Unfortunately, his longings returned to his student. Viltori couldn't believe his misfortune. Instead of one person he couldn't have, he now had two. Once freed of the restrictive rules of being an acolyte, he couldn't self-indulge for fear of losing the respect of his friend. Because of cultural taboos, his friend couldn't release him, and the woman he craved was determined to punish him by keeping him unfulfilled. His only hope was for a wild dream that released him unto his bedclothes. That would literally take the matter out of his hands.

"Why Bithia no let you give to her?"

Concerned that they would be overheard, Viltori drew him back toward the cells, where the recruits slept, so they could have some privacy. Rather than taking him into a private room, he chose the open area where the lowest of the recruits slept. Viltori thought he would be less tempted in a more public place.

"I cannot give to Bithia because she is not my chosen." In the simplest terms, that was true. However, there were many other issues holding Viltori back.

The frown that spread across Drahka's face would have been comical but for his genuine confusion and hurt. "But I will let you give to her. I will share with you."

Viltori felt his brows rise. "In your tribe, men share women?" For all their backward taboos, Drahka's tribe apparently had some startlingly permissive attitudes as well.

Drahka patiently explained that any man could give to any receptive woman. Such increased her odds of having a child.

“But Bithia must have a child that is yours,” Viltori pointed out.

“How would they know?”

After having spent time with the primitive Oughunian people, Viltori knew how technologically inferior Drahka’s people were. Drahka didn’t understand that a simple test that took mere moments to perform could reveal the mother and father of any child on Diola. Viltori tried to explain this concept to him, but the science baffled Drahka. Moreover, he didn’t understand why paternity mattered when all that mattered to him and his tribe was making more children. They cared not where they came from, or who made them, only that they were strong. For the Oughunian people, sex was all about procreation. Once Viltori understood the concept Drahka operated under, he could comprehend the man more fully. His drive to procreate shaped his beliefs and reactions to sex. Changing those perceptions would be almost impossible. Viltori sighed. It seemed he would never be able to have either of the two people he lusted after. Even Rown, who’d given so greatly to him, was forbidden to receive pleasure by his hand. If he were a man who believed in the gods, he would think he was being punished.

“Then what will we do about you?” Drahka asked, clearly not liking the idea of his teacher going unfulfilled.

Viltori didn’t like the idea, either, but with his status unknown, there wasn’t a lot he could do. He could simply take care of himself; but the idea of it so upset Drahka, he didn’t think he could masturbate even behind the man’s back. He couldn’t give to Bithia without terrible repercussions should she bear his child instead of Drahka’s. Bithia’s sister, Kasmiri, relinquished her crown when it was revealed she was the child of an empress and an unofficial consort. Such parentage made her invalid to sit upon the throne. While Viltori stood there pondering what to say, he heard a shuffle and whispered voices coming from the back of the main sleeping room.

Placing his finger to his lips, he moved toward the noise, with Drahka following in his wake. As his eyes adjusted to the murky light, he discovered two recruits standing very close together. Their foreheads touched, but they were not kissing. Peering closer he realized each had a hand to the other’s cock. Slowly, with great finesse, they were stroking each other.

Viltori’s erection returned in a shocking rush. He remembered his own furtive gropings in the semi-darkness with anonymous men who sought the same thing as he: relief. As he watched, one of the recruits dropped to his knees and took the other into his mouth. For a long moment, Viltori let himself imagine he was the one against the wall with Drahka wantonly sucking his cock. Drahka would swirl his tongue over the head and down the length as he worked his palm over his balls. Then he’d grasp his buttocks in both hands, pulling him deeper, encouraging him to fuck his mouth with great, hard thrusts.

It must have taken longer for Drahka’s eyes to adjust because just as Viltori began to lose himself in his lustful imaginings, Drahka drew back with a great hiss of indrawn air. Before he could bellow

something out, Viltori turned, clapped his hand over his mouth, and dragged him away. Pushing him against a wall, Viltori leaned close and said, "Do not speak loudly."

"But they do wrong!"

Viltori had grown weary of Drahka's insistence that everything he didn't understand was wrong. "Different isn't necessarily wrong." Taking a deep breath, remembering the man's upbringing, he added, "Your way isn't the only way."

"But that, one man sucking another man's cock, is wrong!"

Pressing his body into the wall, Viltori placed his face very close to Drahka's face. "When I touched you and you touched me, was that wrong?"

"That was to teach," he defended. When his gaze shifted away, he revealed the truth; he enjoyed what they'd done and that caused him tremendous guilt as it went against everything his tribe had taught him.

Forcefully grasping Drahka's head, Viltori pressed his entire body along his, and kissed him as hard and deep as he could. Startled, Drahka accepted for a moment, letting Viltori thrust his tongue between his shocked lips, but then he fought back. Just as he had earlier, Drahka tried to get Viltori to accept the thrusting of his tongue. Dueling for supremacy, Drahka groaned when Viltori cupped him through the thin weave of his pants. Hard and hot, Drahka's cock filled his hand to overflowing.

Yanking Drahka's hand to his cock resulted in another duel for each to give more greatly to the other. Viltori could read the signs and knew Drahka was close. He wanted to taste him. Viltori wanted to know the full of his pleasure. Falling to his knees, Viltori ripped open the flaps of his pants, revealing the wicked length of Drahka's uncut cock, and took him deep into his mouth.

Never had a man tasted so good. Viltori savored the lingering essence of Bithia but also the salty sweat of Drahka's body. Drahka thrust forward, almost gagging him, and grabbed the back of Viltori's head with one mighty hand. Growling, he worked his hips roughly, but Viltori was ready. He wanted him wild and untamed. Aggressively, Drahka worked his prick into Viltori's welcoming mouth.

Bellowing out in Oughunian, "I will not lose everything for this again!" He pushed Viltori away so violently he smacked his head against the floor. Yanking the edges of his pants closed, Drahka strode from the cells. Viltori's only redemption was that no one would have understood what Drahka cried. Not even his teacher. Viltori understood the words, but not the meaning. Drahka had once lost everything by a man sucking his cock?

Stunned, his head spinning, his cock now twice tormented and denied, Viltori drew shakily to his feet. He did not know where to go. He was no longer an acolyte so he could not return to their great sleeping room below the temple. He did not wish to go to the empress rooms and await Bithia, not when he might run into a still-fuming Drahka. Sighing, Viltori decided to go to the one place he always felt welcome.

Once in the *tishiary*, Viltori stripped off his pants and slipped into the great pool. Floating on his back, he again studied the artwork above. What had compelled him to do that to Drahka? If he had continued

with their mutual stroking, they each would have reached a shattering climax. But no, he had to have more. He had to push Drahka one step too far. Clearly, the man was not ready to change his perceptions that much. Moreover, something beyond the teachings of his tribe held him back from his true desires. Drahka could not deny that, at first, he'd been consumed with the act. He'd enjoyed what he and Viltori had done. But Viltori got greedy and ruined everything. Viltori closed his eyes and floated on his back.

A playful tug on his cock alerted him that Rown had entered the pool. Opening his eyes, he looked over to find him swimming around him in circles. Black hair plastered across his forehead, Rown was speaking as he bobbed along, but with his head underwater, Viltori couldn't hear a word he said. For a while, he enjoyed simply watching Rown's animated face move with the flow of his words. His lips caressed his speech, reminding him of what happened this morning. Rown and his amazing cock-sucking mouth. Viltori wondered what delights he could have taught him if he'd only been able to last longer. Another sigh escaped him. Rown was just someone else he simply couldn't have. Still, watching Rown was pleasant and he would never forget what he'd given him.

Rising to the surface, Viltori shook the water from his ears. "I did not hear you."

Rolling his eyes, Rown said, "I am not repeating all that."

"I'm sorry."

"You didn't miss much. Just me gushing about how wonderful you look when you swim, how amazing it is to me that your cock is again so hard after this morning." Swimming near enough to whisper, Rown asked, "Did your teaching not go as planned?"

"Not at all," Viltori confessed with a long, drawn-out sigh. "He is convinced that male-to-male touching is wrong. Always. Well, he did make a slight exception for teaching."

Rown tilted his head, thinking deeply. After a moment he said, "Then find more creative ways to teach that involve touching."

"So I can torment myself?"

Darting his gaze down, then up, Rown asked, "You satisfy him, but he won't satisfy you? Sounds familiar."

Growling, Viltori caught Rown about his waist and pulled him near, loving the way his legs entangled with his. "I'd be more than happy to satisfy you if only it didn't violate your duty to your god."

For a long moment, Rown hung in his embrace, but it was clear Rown held his allegiance to his god, and probably to the man he secretly loved.

Releasing him, Viltori sighed and said, "Sterlave has no idea how much you love him. How do you handle knowing that you can assuage his lust, but even if he wanted to, he cannot fulfill yours?" Viltori felt annoyed just thinking of such an unfair situation.

Shrugging, Rown put some distance between them by swimming backwards. "It is the way of my kind. Even if he wanted to, I couldn't let him, but I don't mind. I find my satisfaction in his."

Viltori did not think he could ever be so altruistic.

"I'm not suggesting you do the same." Rown shook his head, flinging water droplets off the ends of his hair. "You were not trained as I. It would be unfair for you to withhold your climax. And even I am allowed a release during *strocation*."

Viltori laughed. "Drahka doesn't believe in self-gratification, either."

"So he thinks he can arouse you and leave you hanging forever?" Rown was genuinely appalled.

"Apparently." Viltori didn't have the heart to tell him the rest, that he was now considered the property of the empress, not when he worried Rown would likely tell everyone else. The point became moot when the empress herself entered the *tishiary*.

Striding up to the great pool in the tightest crimson dress Viltori had ever seen, she pointed to Rown and flicked her finger away.

In a flash, Rown bounded out of the water and disappeared.

"My lady," Viltori began, swimming over to her, "what can I do for you?"

"You. Out. Now. Follow me." She spoke in the crisp, clear manner that one did to a domesticated animal. When he didn't immediately snap to do her bidding, her eyes narrowed. High red marks colored her cheeks. "I said now."

"I heard you." Viltori knew he was playing with fire, but he couldn't help himself. "Tell me first of my position with you."

Leaning near, she hissed, "It will be over my knee with a paddle if you continue to defy me in the presence of others!"

Viltori glanced casually about the *tishiary*. "We are alone, my lady. And having you spank my defiant ass doesn't sound as unappealing as you might think." Any contact would be welcomed at this point. "If you spank me long enough, I might just climax. Of course, you'd have to punish me for that too. Such a scenario of discipline could go on and on. Possibly for a lifetime."

Bithia reached out as if to grab him by his hair. Without thinking it through, Viltori clasped her arm and yanked. Bithia fell headfirst into the pool, crimson dress, shoes and all. When she surfaced, sputtering, her fingers scratched in the direction of his face, but he swam backwards out of her reach.

She followed him, then her eyes went wide as she sank. When he realized she couldn't swim, he came up from underneath her, cupping her body to his chest as he swam backwards toward the sweeping underwater steps. His hard cock pressed into her curvy bottom, and he thought for a moment about lingering her rescue, just long enough for him to find release against the pleasure of her bottom packed in the tight dress. It wouldn't take long. Not with everything that had happened today. But he relented. Damn Drahka for putting it in his head that to do so would waste his essence!

After a moment to gather her wits, Bithia glared over at him. "Get. Out. Now."

Viltori figured he was in for a long night of torture, and probably not the good kind. He opened his mouth to apologize, but the fire in her gaze silenced him. Head down, he exited the pool, quickly dried off, and pulled on his *mondi* trousers.

Slogging her way out of the pool, Bithia removed her shoes, dried herself as best she could, then squished her way along the polished hallways with Viltori following in her wake.

Chapter Ten

Bithia held her head high, despite her drenched state. Her plans for the evening now ruined, she marched her slave back to her suite as quickly as she could stride in the sopping dress. Rarely did she put forth effort on her appearance and the one time when she had, her new servant destroyed all her hard work. And yet, curiously, she was not angry. Oh, she would let him follow behind her and think her the most vengeful creature ever, but in truth, what he'd done had shocked her almost into a fit of giggles.

She hadn't been on Diola for long, but she'd never met anyone like Viltori. He was not only intelligent but also thoroughly wicked. He had captured her attention like no other man, not even her chosen. Although, to be fair, her opinion of Drahka had changed considerably after one lesson with Viltori. Carefully, Viltori crafted his threats to silence her, and she'd allowed him that power, for he'd promised her a great release. She swore that if he failed, she would punish him. After what he'd accomplished, she was determined to keep him for her very own.

Spinning suddenly, she halted Viltori mid-stride and demanded, "What is the meaning of the mark upon my consort's face?"

His brows lifted, curiosity filling his gaze. "I know not, my lady."

"You never thought to ask?" Exasperated, she placed her hands on her hips. Her angry pose did not have the desired cowering effect, not when her nipples, which were now tight and hard from the cold, wet dress, distracted him. Much like Drahka, Viltori seemed enamored with her chest.

After a moment, he whispered back, "You never asked his name."

She could have acted if she had not heard him, but she chose not to. "You dare to talk back to me?"

He stepped close. "I do."

A shiver went down her spine that had nothing to do with her wet clothing. "I could have you punished."

Viltori took another step closer. "Why not punish me yourself?"

Pressing her palm to his naked chest, she pushed him against the nearest wall. Leaning in, lifting her face tantalizingly close to his, she breathed, "I fear you would enjoy such punishment far too much."

Darting his gaze up and down the length of the hallway, Viltori grabbed her upper arms, reversing their positions with one great lift and swing of her body. Bithia found herself pressed against the wall, Viltori's body pressing warmth into her, his cock hard and hot against the cool of her belly. Never had she known a man willing to risk her wrath by taking command of her, not on Beserrah and certainly not on

Diola. Secretly she thrilled inside, even though she purposely made her face convey nothing but shock and fury.

Before she could falsely berate him, Viltori lowered his face, kissing her silent. He kissed her as if she were his entire world. Dropping all pretense of anger, she kissed him back with just as much heat. If she could, she would part her legs and wrap them around his waist, pulling him even closer to her. But as it was, she just wiggled helplessly as he pressed into her so tightly he took her breath away.

Lifting his mouth from hers, he grasped her hips, thrusting himself against her as he moaned into her ear all the things he would do to her. "I want to rip this dress off you until you're standing there naked and shivering, then I'd rub my body against yours to warm you up. I'd slip my hand between your legs and finger your tight, sweet cunt until you were panting and sweating and begging for my cock. Still, I wouldn't give it to you. You'd swivel those luscious hips of yours on my fingers, crying for more, your body writhing, your mouth seeking mine, and I would thrust my tongue into your mouth, making you think of my cock in your cunt." He fell to kissing her again, using his tongue just as he said, making her think of his cock doing the same.

Tearing her mouth away, she struggled to remove her dress. She wanted to feel him against her, flesh to flesh, with nothing separating them. So far, she'd only felt him through fabric and she wanted to know the texture of his skin, the scent of his body, the taste of his sweat. Tugging at her dress, she uttered a growl of frustration as the wet fastener slipped from her grip. His hands were there, helping her, fighting against the sodden fabric that refused to release her. Together they struggled with her dress, kissing and snarling, breathing out all the depraved things they would do once she was free.

"Stop." Breathless, he fell against her, his weight a comfortable protection from the cold. "I cannot do this."

"Damn you and your silly morals!" She forced him to look at her. "You are not an acolyte anymore. There is nothing holding you back from me."

"That never held me back." His finger traced along her nose to the tip, then down to the very edge of her upper lip. "You are beautiful, Bithia, but more than that, you are a wild, untamable woman. You are everything I've ever wanted. With you, I honestly believe I could be satisfied for a lifetime."

No man had ever spoken so plainly to her, so forthrightly about his feelings. No games, no courtly flirting, just simple honesty that left her feeling more vulnerable and afraid than she ever had because she knew in her heart he wasn't finished. She wanted to stop him from speaking any further and ruining this moment, but she couldn't get her hand up to his mouth in time.

"But you are my friend's bondmate."

Her eyes closed because that was the last thing she expected him to say. She imagined he would worry about creating an illegitimate heir, or that she would cast him aside when she no longer wanted him,

but instead, his concern was for another. Not himself, which she could understand, nor even her, which would have touched her deeply. No, his concern was for another man.

“I thought Drahka was just your student.” Even as she made the accusation, she knew it wasn’t true. She’d seen the way they looked at each other, but she’d thought only simple lust glittered their eyes, not anything deeper than that.

“At first he was, but now he is my friend. And...” His voice trailed off, making Bithia aware that more brewed between the two men than she had previously thought. He couldn’t put it into words, but she was certain Viltori looked upon Drahka as more than a student, more than a friend. Dare she think he looked upon the man with something like love in his eyes?

An age-old hurt rose to the surface, decimating whatever kindness she felt. She pushed Viltori away. He would rather have Drahka than her. Always, Bithia was second best, second choice, second-class. Her parents had rejected her for her half-sister Kasmiri, and now Viltori rejected her for her bondmate. If Viltori were honestly swept away by her, he wouldn’t have let anything come between them in that moment. He would have torn off her dress and plunged himself deep into her. Repercussions might have come later, but he would have lost himself in that moment. That he didn’t said more than words ever could.

“Bithia, please.” He grabbed her arm, trying to pull her back, but the water-slick fabric allowed her to slip from his grasp.

Spinning back, facing him, Bithia lifted her head. “You were honest with me, so I shall be with you. I only wanted you to ensure you would teach Drahka. That is all. Play your silly games and think that you command me when you don’t. At any time, at any moment, I can have you cast out.” Turning on her heel, she strode away, this time her anger very real. Nothing blocked the flow of tears better than utter fury.

Viltori caught up to her, matching her pace. “I am the only one who can teach him,” he reminded her, his voice low yet pointed.

Bithia stopped short, sending him a step ahead of her before he stopped and turned back.

“It will not take forever to teach him. Once he is sufficiently trained, I will no longer be in need of your services.”

Chapter Eleven

Drahka had never felt more uncomfortable. Bithia's servants had put clothing on him that was unlike anything he'd ever worn. Uncomfortably clinging, the fabrics rubbed his body so provocatively that simple movements aroused him. Everything, from the shirt, to the pants, to the calf-high boots, was crafted of crimson fabrics and leathers. Since he had no family color, he was dressed entirely in Bithia's family color. When the servant turned him, facing him toward his reflection, his eyes widened in shock. Automatically he thrust his hands over his cock. The servant pushed them away, patiently explaining that what he wore was supposed to display his body. Drahka wanted to ask why, but the strangeness of his outfit left the words a jumble in his head. By the time he'd taken a few deep breaths and made some order out of his thoughts, the servants were gone.

Settling himself upon the edge of the bed he'd shared with Bithia caused him to shake his head. Already he understood that he'd done so many wrong things. Forcing her to hold still and thrusting into her without giving her body any teasing strokes were just two of the most egregious mistakes he'd made. He thanked his teacher for showing him a way that would please his chosen. Drahka couldn't wait to try out what he'd learned tonight when they were alone. He did not want Viltori to join them again. Not after what he'd done today. Crushing the bedclothes into his fist, Drahka tried to remove the image of his teacher on his knees. Drahka tried desperately not to see his thick cock thrust between Viltori's wanton lips. Against his will, he saw Viltori's eyes open, gazing up at him, drilling the truth of their mutual longing into him like an accusation.

Leaping from the bed, Drahka paced across the white floor, his boots booming against the tile, then silent across the fur rugs. Back and forth he went, with his strides almost musical. He did not know how long he walked the length of her room. All he knew was that he was determined not to think of his teacher. Yet the more he tried not to think of Viltori, the more he thought of him. His gleaming golden hair, his glistening intelligent eyes, the firm way his lips wrapped around his shaft, tugging, pulling, begging Drahka to give to him everything he'd held back for so long.

Drahka more felt than heard the door open. When he looked over, Bithia strode in. Her crimson dress was wet, clinging to her form in a way that made his cock twitch. Behind her came Viltori. Drahka couldn't help but notice his pants were wet. Dark brown fabric outlined his semi-hard cock. Looking from one to the other, he realized only the front of his teacher's pants was wet and Bithia's entire dress was soaked. It didn't take much for him to realize his teacher had been pressed up against his chosen.

A muscle twitched in Drahka's jaw. Earlier he'd told Viltori that in his tribe, any man could give to any woman, as long as she was willing to take, but Drahka discovered he did not like the idea of them together without him. But what made him turn away in embarrassment was he couldn't decide if he was angrier that Bithia might want Viltori more than she wanted him, or that Viltori might want Bithia more than he wanted Drahka. If they wanted each other, they would have no need of him. Then where would Drahka be? Bithia said she would not kill him, and he believed her, but there would be nothing preventing her from sending him back to his tribe.

Knowing he should not think of his teacher that way did not help stop him from doing so. He'd enjoyed what his teacher had done. Wantonly he'd grasped the back of his head to hold him steady for his thrusts. Just as he'd been about to unleash a great gushing tide of satisfaction down the man's throat, he'd pushed him away, horrified at his own perverse needs. What the elders said was true; there was a great wrongness in him. They were right to take away his name and shun him from the tribe. That he could find the mouth of a man as pleasurable as the glory of woman meant he was deeply disturbed.

Now, with the fury on Bithia's face, and Viltori's shamed expression, Drahka feared Viltori had confessed their transgression to her. Bithia would now uncover the whole truth about him, and why his tribe had willingly traded him away. They lost nothing in the exchange and gained greatly. What would she do when she found out they'd given her a man filled with such perversity his own tribe had disowned him?

When his chosen's eyes met his, they widened a bit. As her gaze traveled along his body, a slow smile spread pleasure across her mouth, chasing her fury away. When her gaze fell upon his artfully displayed cock, her mouth changed into an O, as if she wished to wrap her lips around him again. Now in his mind he saw both of them on their knees, taking turns sucking his cock. Each wayward thought hardened him more, making him press against the fabric, which in turn caressed him, hardening him further. If he couldn't control himself, he'd climax just standing still.

"You look wonderful," Bithia said, crossing the room to him. She leaned carefully up, keeping her wet clothing from touching his, and kissed his mouth. He like this way of greeting and kissed her back. Perhaps his thoughts were wrong and Viltori had not told her what happened. His next concern became what had angered her so?

"What happened?" Diolans had some odd customs, but wearing wet clothing probably wasn't one of them.

Bithia cast a quick, meaningful glance to Viltori that made it clear whatever had happened was his fault. "Your teacher has an odd idea of what is funny."

Viltori couldn't meet Drahka's gaze, which caused his chest to tighten unbearably. Drahka did not want to lose his teacher. He'd been angry earlier, but that was only to hide his fear. What they did could harm them both, which, ironically, made the entire scenario more appealing. Somehow, they had to find a way to avoid being alone together where that type of touching could happen again, because it was now

clear that Viltori wanted him just as much as he wanted Viltori. What a mess they would make of things if Bithia found out. Perhaps, if he stumbled more with Diolan language, Bithia would have to keep Viltori near to teach him, but not too close where Drahka would be tempted.

“It was an accident,” Viltori explained, keeping his head down.

“No, it wasn’t.” Bithia struggled to remove her wet clothing and Drahka stepped forward to help. Although, he did like the way the wet fabric clung to her breasts, tightening her nipples, making them stand out like hard little peaks. Still, she was shivering and he did not wish for his chosen to suffer even a tiny bit. Each time they tried to work the fastener apart, it slipped from their fingers. As the moments passed, Bithia began to shake and her lips turned blue.

“Let me.” Viltori stepped between them. Rather than grasping the tab with his fingers, he used his teeth. With one smooth motion, he tugged the fastener down from below her arm to her hip. As soon as he let go, her dress fell to the floor, revealing that she wore nothing below.

Drahka and Viltori both caught their breath. Seeing her completely bare, her body brushed with tiny bumps that echoed the hard tips of her breasts, was profoundly exciting. The moment spun out as they stood there silently looking at her. Gazes sliding sideways, each man caught the eye of the other, wordlessly confirming their mutual decision.

“Whatever you had planned for tonight, Bithia, you are going to be late.” Viltori used that voice, like the one in the mirrored room today, that commanding voice that sent shivers down Drahka’s spine just as it surely did Bithia’s. His was the voice of an elder, a tone that couldn’t be denied, issuing commands that must be obeyed.

“We are already late. I will change and you—”

She tried to brush past them, but Drahka grasped one arm while Viltori grabbed the other.

“What are you doing?”

With unspoken agreement, they moved her toward the bed, her question ignored.

“We cannot be any later than we already are.” Bithia struggled, but the two of them were far stronger. “It’s a celebration of our bonding!”

Drahka didn’t care. They would have a much more private, and far more beneficial, celebration right here.

Further protests echoed off the glittering white walls as they pushed her onto the bed. So stunned was she that she lay there looking up at them for a long moment before she even thought of trying to crawl away. By the time the idea occurred to her, Viltori was on the bed, pulling her up into his lap so he could hold her in his arms. Viltori would keep her from struggling or escaping.

Watching her watching him, Drahka began to undo all the work her servants had put into dressing him. Off came the formfitting shirt. Off slipped the great booming boots. Gone too were the clinging pants

that displayed every muscle from his ankles to his butt. All that remained was the odd scrap of fabric that cupped his cock and balls, lifting them up, placing them out from his body.

“It’s called an *echalle*.” Viltori nodded to the last of Drahka’s outfit. “Only a consort can wear one.”

“And how do you know of it?” Drahka thought it curious Viltori had chosen to speak in Oughunian. Perhaps he wished to increase Bithia’s unease by speaking in a language she could not understand.

“Rown, a servant, has told me far too much about them. Rown served the empress before Bithia, and he had to dress her consort.” A funny smile twitched the edge of Viltori’s lips, making Drahka wonder what else this Rown had done for his master. Was this male-to-male touching common here on Diola? If it was, they had used great care to keep the truth from him until now.

“What is the purpose?” Drahka struggled to release himself from the complicated series of straps, but he could not remember the precise order.

“To display your cock to the citizens of Diola.” Viltori tried to hold back his amusement but couldn’t. Drahka realized he wasn’t laughing at him, but at his dilemma of having his genitals in bondage. “All should look upon you and be jealous of what only the empress can have.” Viltori motioned him up onto the bed. Drahka climbed up and drew close, already knowing what would happen.

Just as he predicted, Viltori slid his hands along the straps, slowly freeing him from the confining garment, but in doing so, he had to touch him, which aroused him, sending him into another spiral of shame. Sensing his discomfort, Viltori moved as quickly as he could, touching him only when he had to. Once he freed him, he tossed the *echalle* off the bed.

Bare, Drahka looked down into Bithia’s expectant face. She’d watched the way Viltori touched him, and she sensed Drahka’s response. To his great relief, she said nothing. But something in her eyes was different. Hot coals of desire had cooled, not to ashes, but it would take more fuel and strong work to bring her back to a burning fire. No matter what he had to do, Drahka swore he would show her that everything he did was for her. Drahka wanted Bithia to look at him with the same heat she did Viltori. He wanted her to follow his commands as she did his. Drahka wanted to master her. Not in all things, just here, in this way. If he could command her here, he would happily let her command everywhere else. However, Drahka realized he needed Viltori’s help. Alone, he would not know the words to say, the orders to give. To please his chosen, he would have to first master his longings for his teacher.

As he considered her upon the bed, her upper body comfortably held by Viltori, Drahka didn’t know where to start.

“Climb back off the bed, stand at the edge.”

Drahka did as instructed.

“Grasp her ankles in your fists,” Viltori said in Oughunian. “Let her feel the power in your hands as you open your fists and slide your hands up her legs, pushing them apart as you go.”

Drahka followed Viltori's instructions, watching how Bithia's lips parted with pleasure. It seemed once she realized she would not be free until they were finished with her, Bithia relaxed and let Drahka do whatever Viltori told him to do.

Lazily Viltori cupped her breasts, pressing them together, then flicking his thumbs across her nipples. His hands were pale against the darkness of her flesh. All the while Drahka drew his hands up her legs, loving the feel of her skin, which was still a bit cold, but growing warmer with each passing moment. As he reached the juncture of her thighs, he pushed her legs out and up, opening her to his inspection. Viltori tossed him several pillows to place under her bottom to lift her up, making her position more comfortable.

Following Viltori's explicit instructions, Drahka lowered his face to her sex. What he'd felt earlier with his hand he now explored with his eyes. Again, his teacher named the parts of her glory, from her lips, to her clit, to the entrance of her cunt. This last he said in Diolan, for he wanted Bithia to hear that word; cunt, not glory, as Drahka had always thought. Drahka memorized the words, repeating them as he stroked each part in turn, then brought his face so close he almost touched her and said, "Your sweet, hot cunt."

Bithia squirmed and parted her legs wider.

"That's it, my lady, show him how pleased you are by what he's learned. Let him look at that luscious cunt of yours." Viltori leaned over her, kissing her as he continued to tease her breasts. Between kisses, he gave further instructions on how Drahka should go about tormenting his chosen.

Starting with the heat of his breath, he caressed the entire area between her legs by repeating the words Viltori gave him. Each word sparked a different response in Bithia, bringing her higher into ecstasy. Once he'd warmed her with his breath and words, Viltori whispered something in his native tongue that Drahka at first resisted doing. On the verge of saying the action was wrong, he closed his mouth, lowered his face and followed his teacher's instructions.

Placing his massive hands on either side of her sex, he pushed her legs apart, exposing the tender pink inside her glory. With Viltori's words flowing over him, encouraging him, he lowered his face and slipped his tongue inside Bithia. She tasted salty yet sweet, unlike anything he'd ever known. He discovered he loved the unique and succulent flavor of her sex even more than the floral flavor of her skin. Once he started plunging his tongue within her, he didn't want to stop.

A long, low keening noise, like an animal caught in trap unable to find freedom, came from her chest. He realized Bithia knew she was lost. Once he mastered this skill, she would do his bidding, just as she did for Viltori. Each time they were together, Drahka learned new ways to give to his chosen. As he continued to lick and suck at her delicious flesh, he wondered if one day he would know all there was to know. On that day would he become bored with his chosen? Would Viltori go when he'd taught Drahka all he knew? Both thoughts panicked him, taking away his joy, so he dismissed them, determinedly concentrating only on pleasing Bithia in this moment, in this way.

“That’s it, Drahka, thrust your tongue inside her.” Viltori again used the Diolan words, and he timed them with Drahka’s motions.

Words and actions combined until Drahka felt the power of both. Joining Viltori, echoing the words between thrusts of his tongue, sent Bithia into excited, breathless moans.

“Lift up, take her straining clit into your mouth.”

Drahka did so, feeling the smooth hardness with the rough side of his tongue. His pride soared when Bithia made that noise, that noise he’d never heard a woman make until Viltori pulled it from her body, but this time she made it for him, for what Drahka was doing to her. Flicking his tongue over her clit, he sucked and teased until her chest rose and fell so rapidly it was as if she ran from him. Placing his hands upon her hips, he held her down, showing her clearly he was her master, and she would never outrun him.

Bithia surrendered with a high-pitched moan of submission that swelled satisfaction throughout Drahka’s body. She climaxed hard, her cunt gushing against his chin, her clit hiding away from the flicking of his tongue.

Unable to resist any longer, Drahka yanked her to the edge of the bed, ready to give to her as hard and as fast as he could.

“Wait,” Viltori urged in Drahka’s native language. “I know how badly you wish to be inside her, but turn her to her belly first, as she was today.”

Bithia’s eyes met his. Both were the same translucent blue. Lowered lids tried to hide her curiosity at what Drahka would do.

When her lips parted, as if to order him, Drahka flipped her over before she could speak. So abrupt was his action, Bithia had no breath. Her rounded bottom quivered as he pushed her up the bed and climbed behind her. Vulnerable, exposed, Bithia let Drahka and Viltori maneuver her into position. Eventually, Bithia was facedown against Viltori.

Viltori bent his knees, placing them on either side of Bithia’s hips, helping to hold her for Drahka. Placing his cock against her creamy sex, Drahka hesitated, watching what happened as his teacher cradled his chosen.

Cupping her face to his, Viltori kissed her softly, murmuring that she was now their captive and they would not let her go until they were satisfied. However, he spoke not in her language, but Drahka’s. Still, Bithia squirmed restlessly with her bottom up high as her lower body pressed against Viltori.

“Now Drahka. Feed your cock into her slowly.”

Sliding his cock up and down the wetness of her lips, he settled against the entrance and pushed forward, using his hips. When a surge of need tried to force him to hurry, he closed his eyes and determinedly held back. Bit by bit he slid inside, her heat welcoming him, her whispered words sounding of surrender and appeasement.

“Do you like that, Bithia? Tell Drahka how much you love his cock. Tell him how good he feels inside that tight, wet cunt of yours. Tell him you want more of him, all of him, you want to feel him slam into you so hard he takes your breath away.” Viltori said the words slowly into Bithia’s ear, but he kept his gaze on Drahka. Watching as Drahka kept to his even pace of slowly filling Bithia. Feeling her glory as he looked at his teacher’s face sent his senses reeling. Confused by his longings, he closed his eyes, focusing all his attention on Bithia.

Once he filled her, his cock hitting the very depth her body could take, he rocked back, pulling almost all the way out before he slammed back in. Viltori held her for his aggressive movements, encouraging him with more powerful words said in both languages. When he reached out to hold her hips, he felt his teacher’s knees and held them too, as if he held both of them for his giving. Below their weight, the bed gave in time to his movements, bouncing them with his powerful thrusts. And then his balls slapped against his teacher’s hand as Viltori teased Bithia’s clit. When she came, she released a moaning scream, and clamped around Drahka’s cock. As he released into her, Viltori cupped his balls, teasing him, making his climax even greater. Shivering against her, Drahka opened his eyes, but all he saw was a gleam of triumph on Viltori’s face.

Chapter Twelve

Still hard, Viltori held Bithia as she recovered from Drahka's wicked thrusts. The man had enough power in his body to light a small village. It took her locking her hips and Viltori's knees cradling her to keep her steady as her bondmate slammed into her. Lifting his hand to her creamy clit sent her into a screaming orgasm that clamped her cunt around Drahka. Viltori knew the precise moment when it happened by the look on Drahka's face; pleasure so intense it practically bordered on pain.

Viltori had to struggle to reach his sac, but he did, pleased when Drahka did not bellow for him to stop. Feeling the power of his balls lifting his climax into Bithia had almost pushed Viltori over the edge. Almost. But what he'd said to Bithia was not just words said in the heat of the moment. He meant what he'd whispered into her ear as she laid panting against his neck.

Once she caught her breath, she moved away from them and rolled onto her back. Stretching out along the bed, she sighed and closed her eyes, a satisfied smile on her face. None the worse for wear after having been soaked, she actually looked much better without her hair carefully coifed. Wild and tangled, her short black hair spiked up from her head in tousled, sexy disarray. Her dress was probably ruined, but she didn't seem to care. Amazing how one good orgasm could mellow the empress into languid ease.

Drahka fell back on his heels, his eyes closed, his long hair barely mussed. No doubt he was replaying everything in his mind and regretting it. Viltori sighed. Why couldn't Drahka simply accept that he desired both a man and a woman? Viltori had accepted it with ease, although, to be fair, he had not been reared in a culture that punished such relationships.

"As little as I want to, we must attend the bonding celebration." Bithia sat up with a sigh, her breasts swaying gently as she moved off to the basin room after summoning a large group of servants.

Everything Drahka had stripped off they put back on him. Despite his struggles, they encased his cock in the dreaded *echalle*. Viltori watched, understanding why he disliked the garment; however, he had to say it did have the desired effect. The *echalle* lifted his cock up and out, placing it on display for the envy of others. Viltori certainly felt envious. Not that he was lacking in that area, but he would enjoy knowing Drahka's cock was not just for Bithia's pleasure, but his too.

Viltori puzzled over his outfit, trying to understand the meaning of the colors. Drab brown pants indicated his station as a servant, but a white shirt proclaimed him an acolyte. His boots were brown and simple, just like the trousers. The fabrics were of the highest quality but he wasn't certain what this particular combination of colors would say to the elite.

Encased in another clinging crimson dress, Bithia moved toward him with a red sash draped across her palms. She wrapped the *astle* around his waist, tying a knot above his right hip.

"This shows you belong to me." She gave the sash a tug, yanking him close so only he could hear her whisper, "If I catch you with anyone other than myself, I will have you put to the stone."

Meeting her gaze, he whispered back, "I meant what I said, Bithia. There is no other for me but you."

"What about Drahka?" She glanced back at him over her shoulder, then returned her gaze to his. "I see how you look at him."

"I want him too, but only if I am with you as your consort."

A quick roll of her eyes said she did not believe him. He didn't expect her to, not yet. She would have to see for herself that what he'd sworn to he would hold to, even if it killed him. As she'd clung to his shoulders to brace herself for the powerful thrusts of her bondmate, she'd encouraged Viltori to lift up and spend himself by rubbing against her belly. Viltori flatly refused. He swore he would not climax until he was inside her. Bithia shivered as she met his gaze but in her eyes, he saw her disbelief. She didn't believe him because, of course, he could not penetrate her unless he was her official consort.

Viltori knew what he'd done was crazy. Bithia could claim him if she chose to, but why would she? She only needed him to help train Drahka. Once that was finished, his usefulness to her was at an end. As soon as she gave Drahka and the people of Diola a daughter, she could return to her wicked ways, sampling every man on the planet without repercussion, or any kind of commitment. Why would she bind herself to him when she didn't have to?

Still, he'd spoken from the heart. He wanted to be with her and Drahka. A formal declaration was the only way he could have them both. He was willing to suffer to reach his objective. Not that he hadn't already suffered. Getting aroused and letting his cock return to normal without climaxing had started a slow burning ache in his balls. Still, there was something powerful in holding back. As Rown said, there was satisfaction in knowing he'd greatly pleased the two people he cared about the most. Before he would find pleasure for himself, he would have their commitment to him. They couldn't just say they cared; he needed them to show they cared.

Bithia brushed off her servant's attempts to style her hair or replace her washed-away makeup. Instead, she motioned Drahka forward. He came with ground-eating strides, his boots booming against the white tiled floor. Dressed all in red, he seemed taller, somehow, bigger. Especially in the mostly white room. Bithia's servants had pulled his long hair back and tied it with a strip of red leather. Drahka was the only man Viltori had ever seen with long hair who didn't look feminine. Actually, his long hair made a striking contrast to Bithia's short locks.

From below a length of decorative fabric, Bithia removed a gem-encrusted sword that glittered under the crystals.

“I’m sure there is some great ceremony and certain words I am to say, but I didn’t listen to Undanna when she gave me instructions, so...” Bithia held out the sword. “This is the Sword of the Empress. I give it to you because if ever there is a war, you will lead the palace guards into battle.” She considered for a moment. “I’m supposed to say something about this making you my protector, the father of my children and the defender of the empire.” With that, she attached the sword to a thick belt that hung low on Drahka’s hips.

The reverence that glowed from his face would have been almost funny on any other man, but Drahka took the gift very seriously. “I will defend the empire,” he said, his voice solemn. Lifting his face, he looked right at Bithia. “I will protect you.” He bowed to her. “And I will happily father your children.” A film of tears glittered in his eyes, but he refused to let them fall. Clearly, though, he was touched by the symbolic meaning of the gift.

Bithia smiled. “You certainly are taking care of the last part. I’ve never known a man so eager to produce children.”

Viltori tried not to make a comparison between his sash and Drahka’s sword, but it was difficult not to. Drahka’s sword gave him power where Viltori’s sash took away all his rights. A sword was a symbol of dominance and strength, a sash was a symbol of submission and powerlessness. Bithia had deliberately put the sash on him herself, because she could have let the servants do it, but that would not have ground his face in his worthless position. As she turned from Drahka, she caught his gaze and smiled mischievously.

Viltori smiled back, lifting one brow up higher than the other, twisting his face into a smirk of contempt.

Bithia’s confidence faltered into confusion. With a huff, she turned on her heel, giving him her back. Her crimson dress plunged down almost to the split of her bottom, yet covered her everywhere else. Never had he seen a more provocative dress. Between her outfit and Drahka’s, he couldn’t decide who was more alluring. Together they were a stunning couple that all on Diola would envy, especially him.

No matter how badly what she had done to him hurt his pride, Viltori would never let her know. Even if his face froze into a mask, he would smile all throughout this celebration and forever afterward until he again had Bithia and Drahka in bed. Once there, they would all realize who the real master was. Viltori could survive his self-imposed celibacy if he had the rich, exhilarating power of commanding them into ecstasy.

Surrounded by palace guards, the three of them walked along wide hallways, Viltori ten paces behind, until they came upon the Room of Ceremonies. Every color of the elite made up the mosaic tiled floor, but tables and chairs decked in crimson dominated the color of the room. A clear spot in the center was obviously reserved for dancing. Men and women clad in deep jewel tones sat at the long tables eating, drinking and gossiping. All mouths closed when the empress and her consort entered.

Forced smiles and half-hearted cheers resounded as the entire room rose to their feet. Bithia nodded to the left, the right, then lifted Drahka's hand in hers. Another brief round of bellowing approval rang false to Viltori's ears as he stood in the doorway, waiting. Once Bithia and Drahka were seated, he was ushered behind.

Viltori felt the eyes of the elite upon him, the looks on their faces puzzled as they considered the curious colors he wore. However, once they saw the brown of his trousers, they dismissed him, their eyes now riveted to the couple before him.

As Bithia and Drahka settled at the high table, he stood behind, unsure of exactly what he should do. A servant rushed forward and pointed at the floor between Bithia and Drahka. After a moment of confusion, the order was clear; the servant wanted Viltori to kneel down by Bithia's side.

Viltori refused.

The last thing he would ever do was sit at her feet like a domesticated animal. Baffled by his resistance, the servant finally left when Bithia waved him away with a flick of her wrist.

"You may stand, then, if you wish." With that, she turned her attention to Drahka.

Standing between them, Viltori kept his hands clasped behind his back, leaning forward when she or Drahka needed something translated. Food-covered platters weighted down the table as wine flowed freely. Viltori had to stand and watch as servants filled Bithia and Drahka's plates and cups to overflowing. His empty belly rumbled. Drahka glanced at him, concerned, then frowned at Bithia. He leaned near and said something to her that Viltori couldn't hear, but clearly, Drahka did not like the way she was treating his teacher. Whatever he said, Bithia ignored him. Deliberately she turned to the person on the other side and began chatting about the woman's dress.

Excusing himself, Viltori headed toward the basin rooms in the back. Pushing open the door, he walked into the middle of two men conversing. They stopped for a moment, considered his odd combination of colors, and then dismissed him. Only the elite could snub so thoroughly when they saw the color brown. Viltori moved to the basin at the back to relieve himself.

"I'm amazed she even showed up," one man said to another, inspecting his deep blue-green jacket.

"And dressed!" the other quipped. Fastidiously he picked bits of lint off the back of the man's suit.

"What do you make of her consort?" the first asked, turning this way and that, making sure nothing else marred his fancy clothing.

"The idiot?" The two men switched places so the other man, in a slightly less bright blue-green suit, could examine his clothing for wayward smut. "I imagine the only thing he has going for him is that enormous cock!" Leaning over to the mirror, he smiled, exposing his teeth. He picked out a bit of food, flicked it away, and then rinsed his mouth.

"He'd have to be an idiot to bond to Bithia," said the first. "No man on Diola would want a woman who found it impossible to keep her legs together."

Snickering, the other said, “Even with her legs glued together all she would have to do is bend over.”

Viltori finished and turned to the long row of sinks. Washing his hands, he felt the eyes of both men on him. They considered the red sash around his waist.

“You belong to the empress?” the second one asked, his voice a curious mixture of disdain and dismissal.

A thousand denials sprang to mind, but in the end, he softly said, “I do.” How he wished he really did belong to her, and not as her servant.

The first one approached. His face was flushed red and his eyes were glittering from too much drink. Possessively, he ran his fingers along the sash. “Then she must have you well trained.”

Viltori stood silently, unsure of what, exactly, the man was implying.

His intent became clear as he nodded to the other, who grinned and moved over, blocking the door.

Fumbling, the first began to lower his trousers. “Show us how a slave of the empress sucks cock.”

Both men focused intently on his face, waiting to see if he would comply willingly, or if they would have to force him. Viltori was convinced they would enjoy the latter.

“On your knees, slave,” the first said, pointing to the floor as if Viltori might be too stupid to know what he meant.

“Why don’t you get on your knees?” Viltori settled his hands on his hips. Slave or not, he was not a toy to be passed around.

Snarling, the man lunged for him, but Viltori stepped aside, sending the man into a drunken sprawl on the floor. He let out a blood-curdling howl when he landed on his penis.

“I will have you put to the stone!” he sputtered, rolling over and glaring up at him. He cupped his hand over his rapidly deflating prick.

“And you will tell of what happened here?” Viltori cocked his head to the side. “You will stand at the inquisition and tell how you tried to force a servant of the empress to suck your cock during her bonding celebration?” Viltori plucked his white shirt away from his chest. “Do you know what this color means?”

Both men did, but they’d never seen the white of an acolyte mixed with the brown of a slave.

“I am a teacher. I am the translator for the empress and her consort. Do you think Bithia would let any harm befall me?” Even as he asked the question, he felt sure of the answer. Bithia would protect him, if only so that she could play with him herself. “If you are in dire need to have your cock sucked, ask him to do it.” Viltori pointed to the man blocking the door. “The bulge in his trousers indicates he is in need himself. You two could assist one another.” Viltori walked toward the door, but the second man took a solid stance, refusing to move aside. Viltori asked him politely to step away. He refused. Using the palm of his hand, he shot his arm forward in a quick snap, smacking the heel of his hand into the center of the man’s chest. He *oofed* out a breath, then slowly sank. Leaning over him, Viltori said, “Before I was a slave, I was a recruit.”

Viltori pushed the man aside and left before they could say anymore. Nevertheless, they had said enough. Bithia's subjects mocked her reign and her consort. Something in his heart hardened. As the door *whooshed* shut behind him, his eyes sought out the high table. Bithia's gaze met his. Despite her forced gaiety, he saw the vulnerability in her eyes. Did she know her own people had no respect for her?

Chapter Thirteen

Bithia saw something in Viltori's gaze she had tried very hard not to see—concern. Not for himself, not even for Drahka, but for her. When he'd whispered his oath to her ear, she thought he was only doing so to increase her passion in that moment, but he was serious. He would not have his release until he could be with her as her consort. Swallowing down the sudden fear that filled her, she turned her gaze away as she reached for her drink. Strong, the wine flowed over her tongue with the lightest burn. Warmth filled her belly first, then spread out along her limbs. Tension faded, allowing her to return her gaze to Viltori.

He was moving toward her, the lights gleaming in his golden hair. Bouncing steps caused strands to lift and fall, giving life to his features. She avoided looking directly into his eyes and instead looked at each part of his face from the dark brows slanted sharply above his brown eyes, to the harsh set of his lips, to the barest bit of stubble darkening his cheeks and chin. Open against his chest, the white shirt only accented the darker skin that peeked through the V. Intrigued by his mixture of light hair on top and dark hair below, she let her gaze fall naturally down to his hips. Brown trousers were loose against his muscular body, but each step he took pushed the fabric against his cock. He wasn't hard, but he didn't have to be. She licked her lips, thinking that one kiss would awaken his member to full attention. Now that he'd put the thought in her head, she could not stop thinking of having him fully inside her. To feel him erupt within the grasping strength of her cunt caused her to shiver.

Viltori was a master of sex. She would never admit that to him, but she had to acknowledge in her own mind he knew more about pleasure than she did. His knowledge had turned her opinion of Drahka around. Never had her body been so sated. For the first time in her life, she didn't feel an obsession to find new and greater pleasures with another man. All she wanted was the two men she already had. She tried to push that truth away, but there it was. What had the man done to her? Bithia couldn't remember a time when she didn't feel a constant ache so deep inside she feared it would never be filled. Now, that pain was gone. Viltori had eased her compulsion and yet started a new one: She had to have him.

Without turning, she felt him come up behind her. Blinded in a room full of men, she would know Viltori and Drahka without touching just by their presence. Each man gave off strong, unnamable sensations she responded to. If she were a believer in mystical powers, she would think the men had bewitched her. Although, only children and the foolish people of Beserrah believed in such occult powers.

Stepping between her and Drahka, Viltori bowed slightly to her, then clasped his hands behind his back. Despite her treatment, he continued to show her nothing but respect. He was not a weak man, or

submissive in any way. He was simply trying to show her without words he would be a man who would stand by her, no matter what happened. Bithia was on the verge of clasping his and Drahka's hands and leaving this dull party behind when a cry rose up from the back of the room.

Turning her attention to the noise, she saw an overdressed *peckard* in blue-green fuming and pointing in her direction.

Viltori leaned near to her ear and said, "Forgive me, my lady, but I may have created trouble for you."

She considered the first man as another, dressed in almost the same color, stumbled out of the basin room clasping a hand to his chest.

Out of the side of her mouth, she asked, "What did you do?"

"They wanted me to suck their cocks. I said no."

"Said no?" she asked.

"Said no forcefully," he amended.

Bithia smiled. Unlike the rest of the elite, she would never force someone, servant or citizen, to her bed. However, that didn't stop many of them from taking liberties with any slave they happened across, no matter who owned them. Her magistrate, Ambo Votny, was the worst offender. Lately it seemed to be a game for them to abuse the highest-ranking servants they could find. And what higher slave was there than one who belonged to the empress?

Rising to her feet, she drew attention to herself without saying a word. She knew it wasn't just the glittering crimson dress but also her commanding height. Conversations fell away as everyone hung silent, awaiting her words.

"You." She pointed at the man who'd been blathering and gesturing her direction. Knowing he was pointing at Viltori didn't matter; none should dare to even think of pointing in her direction with fury on their faces.

Eyes wide, he stumbled forward until he stood before the high table. "My lady." He bowed low, his thinning brown hair allowing the light to bounce off his pale skull.

"You touched my servant?"

His gaze darted to Viltori as a snarl darted across his face. Quickly, he looked to the floor. "I did not, my lady."

Bithia turned to Viltori. "Did he touch you?"

"He touched my sash."

Nodding, she again considered the man before her. "You asked him to do something for you. What was that?"

Squirming, clearly embarrassed, the man mumbled something into his chest.

"Speak up."

Lifting his head, glaring at her, he snarled, "I wanted him to suck my cock. He is a slave, after all."

“My slave, not yours.” Lifting her chin, Bithia called forth two guards. “Remove him. Keep him until I decide on his punishment.”

A collective gasp almost changed the air pressure in the room. No member of the elite had ever been punished for taking advantage of a servant. At the far right end of the high table, Ambo hauled his ponderous weight up, his finger lifted to pontificate at length, but Bithia cut him off before he could utter a word. His ass slapped back into his seat long before he’d risen fully to his feet.

“Let it be known that from this day forth, any citizen caught forcing a slave to perform sexual acts will be punished.” For too long she’d turned a blind eye to what her people did. No more. Letting Ambo and the others run her empire had let the elite believe they could do whatever they pleased with no repercussions.

“But what about the *ungati*?” called a timid voice from the back of the room.

It took her a moment to remember that the *ungati* gave pleasure as part of their obeisance to their gods. “Slaves crafted for pleasure still have the right to refuse.” Bithia let them grumble and moan. It was all they could do. She was the empress and her word was law. “I will not tolerate the use of force against those who have no voice to protest. Is that clear?”

The room fell so quiet she could hear her heart beating against her chest. Had she pushed them too far?

“You have your pleasure. Let us hear if your slave welcomes what you demand of him.”

Her eyes sought out the speaker, but the man was smart enough to hide himself away after he spoke.

“I have never forced any.” She lifted her hand to Viltori. “Ask him if I have ever compelled him to my bed.”

After a moment, several people posed the question. In a timeless moment, she realized Viltori could have his revenge upon her now, if he chose. If he said yes, she would be deemed a hypocrite. The elite would continue with their ways, mocking and laughing openly at her. She realized just how vulnerable she’d made herself.

Viltori’s gaze met hers, the cool brown of his eyes soft in the light. “Bithia has never forced me.” He bowed as she released a tense breath. “Beautiful women such as Bithia need only a wink and a smile to make any man a willing slave.”

There were those who might have scoffed at him, but there was such a note of truth in his words, they ended up believing him. She felt something give in her heart, something she swore she would never feel toward any man again. Slow tender strings of tentative love began to wrap around him, binding her to him in ways that terrified her. Why did he have to be so blessedly perfect when she simply could not have him?

Once she gave Drahka a daughter, then she could have him, but that was a long way away. Bithia didn’t think she could resist Viltori that long. Already she hungered for him. Even now, as he simply stood there, she wanted him.

“No! It needs to be said!” A man with pale features came to his feet, fighting off the restraining hand of his mate. His deep violet outfit glittered with gems, indicating he was of the highest rank. “We are told to control our appetites when our empress parts her legs for all on the planet!” He looked about, seeking agreement. When he found accord, he became bolder and lifted his voice higher. “So vulgar are you that the only man they could find to mate with you comes from another world!”

Some gasped, but many nodded. Others remained decidedly removed from the accusations, waiting to see which way the group went before they joined their voices. These were the most dangerous people. Like milling animals, they waited to see which direction the herd went, then ran headlong without thinking.

Bithia knew her wanton ways might one day harm her. She hadn’t cared then, but she did now. She couldn’t even glance at Drahka to see if he understood what was being said about her. But then, the color of the man’s suit gave away the reason for his anger. His daughter had competed with her for the right to become the empress. Janda, the woman’s name was. No wonder the man was furious. His family could have ruled the empire if not for her. And what he said was true. She had fucked and sucked just about every man in the palace in three cycles. So what? None had said no. All of them were willing. Most had hoped for some type of favoritism, but they were not disappointed when she grew bored and moved on without giving them anything other than shattering orgasms. And too, since she’d been bonded, she’d been true to her mate, just as was demanded of her. In her eyes, she had done no wrong. Her only concern was that she did not want her past to hurt Drahka. In a way, she had hoped he would never find out, but that was foolish. Of course, he would find out, she just didn’t think it would be in such a public forum. Drahka had saved himself for her. She hadn’t been able to give him the same gift.

Drahka drew slowly to his feet, his gaze riveted on the man in violet. Bithia feared he would lunge over the table, lift his sword on high and cleave the man in two. Instead, he did the last thing she expected.

“You will not speak to my chosen in such a way.” His voice was calm, but clearly in command. She shivered when she realized he was using the same tone Viltori did when he ordered them about in the bedchamber. “I defend her and the empire.” Drahka placed his hand over his sword, ready to draw it at the slightest provocation.

Eyebrows rose.

Bithia realized they thought Drahka was simpleminded and didn’t grasp their language. They probably thought he was sitting there oblivious to what was going on. A surge of pride filled her, for he might be from an unsophisticated world, but he was no idiot. His clear words and strong stance showed him as a powerful man who did not need to shout to be heard. Again, her heart felt those same soft tendrils reaching out, binding her to him.

Swallowing hard, the man in violet finally allowed his mate to yank him back to his seat. Whatever his problems with her, he had no desire to take on Drahka in a fight. The man might have the courage of strong drink, but he was not so foolish as to fight a man twice his size.

Drahka's eyes swept along the tables as if he sought another disgruntled voice. None responded. He turned his head to her, gazing into her eyes as if to reassure her he would always be there to protect her. When she extended her arm, he gently clasped her hand. Together they settled back to their seats.

Slowly, the celebration resumed, but there was less noise and far more sobriety. Apparently, no other citizen wanted alcohol to loosen his or her tongue. Swift retribution by her bondmate had cautioned them to moderation. But still, the truth was out that her own people thought little of her. Bithia couldn't blame them, but she still didn't believe she'd actually done anything wrong. What irked her so was that her father had been held in high regard for his lustful ways. When it was revealed her mother had had a long-term, ongoing affair with the same man for many seasons, the citizens decried Clathia as a lustful *yondie*. Her half-sister, the former empress, Kasmiri, came from the trysts of her mother Clathia and another man, Helton Ook, an unofficial consort. The dual rules infuriated Bithia. Men were encouraged to find pleasure with as many women as they could, including her biological father, and yet they expected women, like her biological mother, Clathia, to remain true to one man. *Grandathall!* The only way that worked is if all the men used the same woman! Then, in a flash of insight, Bithia realized that Diolan women were just as lusty, only they were more discreet. That was where she had made her mistake—she had flaunted her licentious ways.

"You seem deep in thought, my chosen." Drahka lifted his cup to his lips and drank.

Smiling warmly at him, she placed her hand upon his thigh. "I am thinking of what I will do to you."

For the first time, she saw him smile. Ever so slowly, his lips tilted up, transforming his face. He did not part his lips to show his teeth, but still, his grin was most becoming.

Leaning over, she kissed him softly. Returning her kiss, he cupped her hand and slid it slowly up to his cock. Hard and hot below his trousers, his cock pressed against the *echalle* as if it would burst through the fabric.

"I am burning for you," he whispered to her ear.

Viltori leaned forward. "He's been drinking *illias*."

Bithia knew all about the sparkling aphrodisiac. Once, she'd deliberately given some to a slave in the hopes of reaping the benefits. Kerrick had refused, preferring to remain true to his owner. At the time, she'd been a bit upset, and then that pain returned, because no man had ever sacrificed anything to be with her. Until now. Bithia realized how lucky she was to have not one, but two men willing to defend her. If the worse of it came, she believed they would lay down their lives for her. Tears gathered in her eyes, and she blinked them rapidly away. It wouldn't help her image to be caught crying openly in public. No matter that they were tears of joy; she had to keep them to herself.

Without a word of explanation, Bithia, Drahka and Viltori left the celebration. When Viltori tried to stay the customary ten paces behind, she offered out her arm. After kissing her hand, he looped his arm

with hers. Drahka followed suit. Arm in arm, her firmly sandwiched between the two strong men, they returned to her rooms.

Sleepy-eyed servants entered from the back. Bithia gave them several instructions, then turned to Viltori.

"I am having them bring you something to eat. I'm sorry you were not seated or fed at the celebration." She genuinely regretted the way she'd treated him when he had no ill will toward her at all.

He shook his head. "You could not have broken protocol that deeply without some type of outcry."

"Still, it will not happen again." Stepping forward, she untied the sash and tossed it aside. "I don't want someone to hurt you in my name."

Viltori grinned. "They were two tubby drunken men and I was once a recruit."

"Still." He confirmed her belief that there was more to him than being an acolyte. A man who spent his life in service to the gods would not have such a strong body or such a perverse mind. "I would not let anyone force you. Not even I would do so." Tears again tried to fill her gaze, but she turned away before he could see. Her gaze fell on Drahka, who stood silently watching them.

His face was drawn tight, as if he wished to say something she would not want to hear.

"You can speak freely, Drahka." Was he upset by her obvious interest in Viltori? How could he be when he'd shown indications he wanted him too?

After a deep breath, Drahka said, "I do not like your people."

That was about the last thing she expected him to say. Delighted, she laughed. "I do not like them, either."

Relief washed over his features. "I think some would try to hurt you." He looked at Viltori, then back to her. "They were angry at what you took from them."

"He's right, my lady." Viltori held his words until after the servants put the platters of food on the table and left. Settling himself, he removed the covers and filled his plate. "We must make plans to ensure your safety."

Drahka joined him, nodding agreement. "I do not trust the sparkling man in the deep-colored suit. He was very angry."

Bithia explained why he was so upset, that his daughter had vied for the position she now held, but neither man seemed to care.

"Whether that is the reason or not doesn't matter." Viltori licked his fingers and she had to forcefully keep her concentration on his words and not his mouth. "Anger like that festers in a man. He will spread his hate to others. Given the color of his suit and the gems, I would say he is the highest-ranking member of his House. All those below him will support his position. They in turn could rouse support from the other Houses."

Bithia did not want to think of political intrigues, not now, not when she had the two most handsome men in the entire empire in her rooms. “There is little we can do about the situation tonight. Besides, I feel safe here, with my guards posted and two strong men to protect me.” She darted her gaze between Viltori and Drahka. After a pause, she dared to ask a question she might not like the answer to. “Drahka, did you understand what they said about me?”

“That many men gave to you?” He nodded proudly. “I understood this, but not why they were angry about it.” Drahka looked from Viltori to her. “In my tribe, a woman who had many men eager to give to her would be considered very powerful.”

Astonished by his answer, Bithia realized that for all her thinking his ways were backwards, she finally understood that in some ways, his tribe was quite sophisticated. “And you, Viltori, what do you think?”

A wanton smirk rolled across his lips. “I agree with Drahka. They are simply jealous that so many men gave to you and yet you are now content with your bondmate.”

What he said sparked a momentary confusion, for she was not content with just Drahka. Bithia was determined to have both men.

Wiping his mouth, Viltori flashed a look to Drahka, and both men stood. Bithia did not understand exactly how the men communicated so clearly without words, but they seamlessly moved as one, Viltori embracing her from behind as Drahka cupped her face.

“My beautiful chosen.” Drahka tilted her face up to his, kissing her with soft nips that deepened as she leaned into him. His mouth tasted of *illias*, sweet and compelling.

Behind her, Viltori released the clasp that held up her dress. “Wicked empress.” His hands followed the fabric as the garment fell down to pool around her feet. She could not see him, but she knew he was on his knees because he kissed her calves, his strong fingers sliding down to remove her shoes. “Defender of the weak, protector of the poor.”

She would have laughed, but Drahka distracted her by cupping her breasts. His hands were so big they almost covered the entire surface of her chest. And what Viltori said was true—she was a wicked empress. She vowed to live up to the other title he’d bestowed upon her. From now on, she would defend the weak and protect those who could not protect themselves. Inside she sighed. It must be love she felt for these men, as she had never wanted to live up to anyone’s expectations before.

Drahka drew one nipple then the other into his mouth, sending shivers straight down to her clit. Viltori stroked his hands up the insides of her thighs, gently pushing them apart, until he reached her bottom. Splitting her cheeks, he breathed out against the ring of puckered flesh, causing her to arch her back, simultaneously thrusting her breasts into Drahka’s willing mouth and her bottom toward Viltori’s face.

Standing between them, her hands feeling useless, she lifted one to stroke Drahka's long hair. The other she reached back, twining her fingers in Viltori's silky locks. What had she done to deserve such profound pleasure? Just when she thought her body could take no more, Drahka lowered slowly to his knees, parted her thighs gently, and then breathed against her clit.

Both men now teased her with their hot, moist breath. One in the front, the other at her back. Holding still, she kept her hands on their heads, afraid that if she closed her eyes she would lose her balance. And then, by some unspoken agreement, each man slid his tongue out. Drahka's swiped hard and fast against her clit as Viltori's flicked across the sensitive flesh of her bottom.

A strange noise startled her until she realized it came from deep in her chest. A moan, a groan, a plaintive whimper erupted, pouring out the truth of her pleasure from between her lips. In concert, the men tongued her body until she gasped breathlessly.

"Please, fill me." Her voice sounded desperate, wanton and strangely beautiful. It was her voice, but something was different. Something within had profoundly changed because lust wasn't the only need compelling her, not anymore. Her need was deeper than a longing for climax. She wanted to join with both of them. She needed to feel each man within her body. For the first time she wasn't seeking oblivion in pleasure to escape the painful questions of her past. This time, she was in the moment, feeling only the graceful strength of slowly growing love.

Drahka looked up, his gaze riveted to her eyes as he continued to flick his tongue over her clit.

"Please."

Slowly he stood. Her eyes tracked him as her neck craned back to hold his gaze. Heavy lids settled over his hypnotizing eyes. Tugging gently on his long hair, she drew him near, kissing him, tasting herself on his lips. Together they struggled to free him from his clothing. What stopped them cold was the dreaded *echalle*. No matter what they did, they couldn't figure out how to remove the accursed item.

"Once I get you out of this thing I swear I will set fire to it!" Bithia had to admit she loved the way Drahka looked dressed in official consort clothing. The only problem was with how long it took to get him out of it.

"The whole point, my lady, is to delay gratification." Chuckling, Viltori rose until he pressed himself against her back. His cock nestled into the split of her bottom as he reached around her waist. All that separated them was the thin weave of his trousers, but she could feel every hard bit of him.

Slowly and clearly, he showed them how to remove the *echalle*. Her breath caught at the tender way Viltori moved his hands over Drahka's body as he slid the small scrap of fabric off. When she looked up, she noticed Drahka's eyes were closed, not in shame, but as if he wished to absorb every bit of pleasure he could from Viltori's touch.

Freed of all clothing, Drahka stepped forward, nestling his cock to her belly as Viltori did the same from behind. Again, they moved in unspoken agreement, teasing her by rubbing their bodies against hers until the need to feel them both inside overwhelmed her.

“Please, please,” she begged, her hands seeking to lower Viltori’s pants as she tried to push Drahka’s cock between her legs. They ignored her pleas. Viltori captured her hands, bringing them behind her back, holding them as he continued to slide his cock up and down the split of her bottom. At the top of his stroke, she felt the tip of his penis with her fingertips. He’d leaked a bit, creating a wet spot against the fabric of his trousers.

“We will not rush, not this time, not when everything has changed.” Viltori’s powerful voice filled her ear, shivered her body, and made her turn her head to kiss him. Between sweet and greedy kisses, he swore, “You will never forget this night.”

No longer was Viltori making any pretense of teaching Drahka. Now, they had decided to educate her. Surrendering her will, she let the two powerful men take total control of her body.

Chapter Fourteen

Drahka knew what Viltori said was true. None of them would forget this night. Together they moved, seeking pleasure, working only to lift each other higher. When Viltori had placed his hands upon him, Drahka no longer felt shame, only a profound joy. He had found two people who accepted him. They asked little of him and gave greatly in return. As Bithia had placed the Sword of the Empress on his hip, emotions overwhelmed him. He would die to defend her and the empire she ruled. His greatest pleasure would be to bless their lives with children. And he wanted Viltori there to share that with them.

Bithia leaned her head back, kissing Viltori. Moving near, Drahka joined into their kiss, making three tongues slide in harmony. Bithia's pleading moans inflamed him as much as Viltori's lower grunts of longing. Wrapping his arms around both of them, he hugged them hard, crushing them to his body. Bithia yielded, her body soft while Viltori's body was firm, his muscle straining as he hugged them back. The contrast of male and female excited him beyond rational thought. He wanted to fill both their bodies with his. He wanted all three of them to meld together in mutual bliss.

Reaching his long arms around, he grasped Viltori's trousers, pulling them down, feeling the cool flesh of his ass, but what he wanted to touch was his cut cock. Drahka wanted to feel that smooth skin stretched over hardness, his fingers feeling rough and strong against him. And then, very deep down in the secret part of his heart, he admitted that he wanted to do to his teacher what he had done to him; he wanted to take Viltori's cock into his mouth and suck until he climaxed. After tasting the sweetness of Bithia, he wanted to know the flavor of his friend. Now he wished he had let Viltori finish what he had begun in that darkened room.

"Wrap your arms around his neck, Bithia," Viltori said, "so we can lift you up."

Even though he no longer needed instruction, Drahka didn't mind that his teacher couldn't stop teaching. Viltori enjoyed being in charge. Drahka discovered he didn't mind so much anymore. Viltori wasn't bossing to have control. He simply wanted them to put Bithia in the most pleasurable position.

Drahka cradled her bottom with his hands as she wrapped her arms and legs around him. Lifting her up higher against his chest, he held her steady as Viltori positioned Drahka's cock to her sex. Slowly he lowered her down. Bithia exhaled as he entered her until she blew the last of her breath out when he hit the very limit of her body. Once he hit that smooth, hard flesh inside, she gasped in a breath and buried her face against his chest. Every time he sank into her heat, he couldn't help but marvel at the snug wetness. At first, he'd feared he would stretch her, but Viltori explained he would not wear her out. Still, it was a

miraculous thing to him, the texture of her. He would never grow weary of feeling her give around the thrusting need of his body.

“Now you, Viltori, now you.” Bithia turned her head.

“Yes, now you,” Drahka joined her in encouraging him to meld with them. He understood that filling her dark passage would not be a waste of his essence, but a grand joining of the three of them.

Viltori met Drahka’s gaze, his expression pained, his eyes weary. “I cannot.”

Both he and Bithia startled at his forlorn tone.

“What I swore to I meant, Bithia. Only when I am your consort will I have my release within you.”

Bithia looked up to Drahka, as if he had the power to change Viltori’s mind.

“We need you.” Drahka took a breath to summon his courage. “I want to give to you too.”

Something softened in Viltori’s gaze. He was pleased, proud, but in the end, Drahka did not persuade him.

“I will make you my consort when I can.” Bithia turned her head to look at him over her shoulder. “I give you my word, Viltori. Please, don’t stop what we’ve started.”

Lowering his head to her shoulder, Viltori hid his face, but the gentle shaking of his head clearly said no. “I cannot do what you ask until I am your consort, but I will not stop what we have started here.”

Drahka knew Viltori was fingering Bithia’s bottom because he felt her squirm against him, her lovely cunt gripping his cock with great strength. Pressing against her back, Viltori moved in concert with Drahka, lifting and lowering Bithia between their bodies until she cried out, her climax clamping him so hard he too lost control and came with one last hard thrust into her.

Panting, his strength drained, Drahka lowered to his knees, keeping Bithia with him. Settling himself cross-legged, he cradled her against his chest. Eyes closed, he held her as their bodies continued to quiver, the last shocks of release rolling through them. The sound of running water broke him from his peaceful bliss of holding his chosen.

Bithia looked over at her bathing unit and sighed. “Viltori must be using cool water to try to ease his needs.”

Drahka didn’t understand.

“Sometimes, when a person is very aroused but unable to climax, cold water can help relieve the need.”

Frowning, Drahka glared at the bathing unit. “He doesn’t need water when he has us.”

“I know that, and you know that, but I don’t think Viltori does.” Bithia kissed him softly, her hand cupped against his heart.

“Why does he refuse to give to you when you have told him you are willing to take?” Drahka still didn’t quite understand Viltori’s reluctance.

“He wants a commitment.” Bithia shook her head. “He is the only man I have ever known who wanted that before he would indulge his lust.”

“Your world is very different from mine.” Drahka teased his fingers through her short hair. “I would have given to you no matter what.”

Bithia smiled wickedly. “You just like to give.”

“Yes. Especially to you.” He kissed her again. So far, the best thing he had learned on Diola was the art of kissing. In his opinion the most erotic kiss was when all three of them had swirled their tongues together. Just thinking of that moment caused him to twitch inside Bithia.

“If I were to give to him, would that upset you?” Drahka asked.

“I would be pleased.” Her pupils dilated. “Since this is a night of telling truths, I’ve always loved to see two men together. It excites me. I don’t know why.” After a moment, she pulled back, frowning lightly, her brows drawn down. “I thought that male-to-male touching was wrong where you come from.”

Drahka nodded. “But I am not of my tribe anymore.” He knew now he never really was. Somehow, in some way, he’d always belonged here. Those who had gone before had slipped and put him with the wrong tribe. On Diola, with Bithia and Viltori, he knew he was home. He felt safe here when he’d never felt that way on Oughun. Not even as a child had he felt welcomed there. He’d always felt different, awkward and unwanted.

After a deep breath he said, “I must tell you why my tribe tricked your people into taking me away.” Fear trickled cold sweat down his back, but he had to tell her the truth. Once it was out, he would feel better and be able to confess the rest of the feelings he held so tightly inside. Drahka’s emotions churned in his gut, his need to express them great.

“I can’t imagine it’s any worse than what you heard about me tonight.” Bithia snuggled her hips against him, keeping his cock within her glory. “And I do not feel tricked. I’m honored that you are my bondmate, my consort.”

Relief showed with a long sigh. “You honor me.” Still he had to tell her everything. “When I was young, there was another boy, like me, a misfit. We would hunt together and—” he searched for the words, “do chores together.” Drahka thought back to the curious warmth that had filled him when his friend had smiled at him, or clapped his hand to his shoulder. “One night, we were too far from our village to continue home. Water fell from the sky and we took refuge in a cave.” Just recounting the tale filled him with alternate flashes of lust and shame. “We were cold and we huddled together to try to stay warm. His body was smaller than mine, and his skin was soft, almost like a woman. When he touched me, I wanted to say no, but his hands felt good, and then he...” Drahka didn’t know if he could finish.

One fingertip to his lips drew his attention to Bithia’s face. “I won’t judge you. You didn’t judge me. I am glad you found comfort with each other. I’m proud you were strong enough to feel for him the obvious care you still do.”

Tears blinded his vision, for that was not the case. He dropped his head to her shoulder, needing that momentary privacy. That she knew he was crying was embarrassing, but he did not wish for her to actually see the tears fall from his eyes.

“He took my cock into his mouth.” Even now, the memory of that exact sensation caused his body to warm. “His mouth was so hot compared to the cold air. I remember just lying back, letting him do as he wished.” Drahka held Bithia close as he spoke, needing her warmth, her acceptance to help him finish. “Between taking me deep, he spoke of how much he’d always admired me, how long he’d dreamed of having me within his body. He said he loved me, but he knew I did not feel the same.” Drahka’s voice broke then, because he realized he had loved him, but was too cowardly to confess. “After that night, we snuck away every chance we could. Always he took me into his mouth, never I him into mine. I was too afraid.” Drahka sighed. “He did not care, but I felt badly for using him to ease my longings when he had only his hand to ease his.”

Drahka knew that Viltori had been listening for some time, but he couldn’t summon the courage to meet his gaze. Not yet. “Bolder each time, we became lazy about secrecy, and I think I wanted to be caught and punished because I always thought what we did was wrong. What I didn’t realize was what they would do when they caught us.”

When he finally opened his eyes, he looked up to find Viltori standing in the doorway of the basin room. Around his hips he’d slung a crimson towel, but the rest of his body was bare. Looking right into the watering eyes of his teacher, Drahka confessed, “They killed him for what he did. They let me live in shame as an example to others. First, they took my name from me. In Oughunian, Drahka means no name. Second, they marked my face, so that as soon as anyone saw me, they would know my shame.”

The tears that fell from his eyes were mirrored in Viltori’s. He shook his head as if he could take away the terrible pain, but of course, he couldn’t. When Drahka could no longer take the intense eye-to-eye contact, he lowered his gaze only to find Bithia crying as well.

Unable to speak, she simply wrapped her arms around him and held him, as if her arms could protect him from ever feeling such pain again. After a very long time, he felt a hand upon his shoulder. Warm, moist and large, the hand felt as familiar to him as his own. Clasp his hand over Viltori’s, Drahka lifted his gaze to his teacher.

“I wish to give to you what I could never give to him.”

Chapter Fifteen

Inadvertently, Viltori dug his fingertips into Drahka's shoulder. Their tears were barely dry and the man was offering to suck his cock to honor the friend he'd lost. Viltori's stunned gaze sought Bithia. Blinking back tears, she nodded slightly, as if he dared to say no he would hurt Drahka more deeply than the loss of his companion had.

Viltori had stood under a stream of cold water to force his erection away. Just the thought of slipping his cock into Drahka's willing mouth destroyed all his effort. His vow, to wait for Bithia to make their relationship official, clashed now with a need to validate his connection with his student, his friend, the man he cared about as much as Bithia. Saying no would be like a slap in the face. Refusing him would convince Drahka his feelings were wrong when they weren't.

Unable to speak, Viltori gave his consent by dropping his towel to the floor. Gaze locked to his, Drahka slid his hand up Viltori's leg, reaching higher until he cupped his balls. Shivering at the intensity of the contact, Viltori refused to look away or let Drahka do so. In this, they must each be certain there was no shame and there would be no regrets. He could not bear any misgivings on Drahka's part.

Eyes clear, Drahka held his gaze as he explored his body with gentle brushes of his fingertips. Hands hot against his cold body, Drahka's touch seemed amplified, his hands more massive, his touch conveying devotion and a trust so deep Viltori was almost afraid. This was not playful pleasure like what Rown had bestowed upon him. This with Drahka was profound. Emotions rocked Viltori; affection, excitement, and rapture so deep he felt his awareness expand out from himself until his consciousness enveloped all three of them.

Bithia leaned back, but kept Drahka within her body, cradling him with her sex as he explored Viltori's cock and balls. He did not have to look at her to know she watched with rapt attention. Her affinity for watching two men was well known, but he didn't think this was about lust for her, not if her feelings were as strong as theirs were.

"Ever since I first saw you in your white robe, I wanted to know what lay below." Drahka brushed his fingers under his sac and up along the length of his rapidly hardening cock. "When you told me yours was cut, I panicked, for I thought someone had cut yours off."

At that, Viltori smiled, for he remembered the look of horror that washed down Drahka's normally stoic face, and the way he'd grasped his cock in strong fingers, touching him everywhere to ensure he was still whole.

“When you showed it to me, I was so relieved I grasped you, touching you without fear, before I remembered that I should not.” Drahka urged Viltori forward with a leisurely stroking pull along his shaft.

Taking a step brought his cock close to Drahka’s mouth. As he spoke, his hot breath caressed his aching body, almost as powerful as a touch. Viltori practically winced at how good even that limited contact with his mouth felt.

“Then you showed me solo touching, but all I could think about was touching you.” Black eyes with hypnotizing white shards pulled Viltori closer until his cock hung literally a breath away from Drahka’s mouth. “I watched as you did in the mirror, feeling myself with my hand but imagining it was your cock I stroked, your cock that trembled in my fist, your cock pulsing with a need for climax.”

Anticipation caused Viltori to breathe in short, shallow gasps that left him lightheaded. What Drahka had just confessed to was exactly what he’d done as well. He’d watched Drahka in the mirror, feeling that glorious uncut cock slipping through his fist.

“And when you took my cock in your mouth—”

Viltori darted a concerned glance to Bithia, but she showed no disapproval or shock. She simply leaned back, supporting herself on one arm as she stayed joined to Drahka, watching the two men. As he’d predicted, lust did not fill her eyes, but compassion. She was grateful to be a part of their relationship, pleased to do her piece to bring all three of them together. She licked her lips, as if she would like to taste his cock too, but she held back, knowing this time was for them, and not her.

“—I returned to that moment, that first moment, when my friend did that to me.” Drahka’s plaintive voice drew Viltori’s attention back to his face. His gaze had not faltered. If anything, Drahka’s gaze intensified, as if he could project his very soul into Viltori through his eyes. “I wasn’t ashamed of what you did, but what I did to him. That’s why I pushed you away. I still blamed him for what I lost when all of it was my fault.”

Viltori opened his mouth to defend Drahka’s actions, but Drahka cut him off with a quick shake of his head. “Had I the courage to stand up for him, I might have prevented his death, but I was a coward.” Drahka closed his eyes then, taking a deep breath to bolster his resolve. He opened his eyes, peering up the length of Viltori’s body. “I refuse to be a coward anymore.” With a subtle move of his neck, Drahka brought his mouth to the tip of Viltori’s cock and kissed lightly.

Contact caused Viltori to involuntarily groan, but he held his place. Drahka’s lips were dry and firm, his kiss reverent yet passionate. Viltori drew a deep breath through his nose to settle himself, but he released his lungs on a gasp when Drahka opened his mouth and drew the tip of his cock within. Sensations exploded along his tormented nerves. Too much stimulation then denial had left him utterly vulnerable. Visually and physically overwhelmed, Viltori reached out, cupping the side of Drahka’s head. His hair was thick and so long it tangled in his fingers as he slid his hand to the back of his head. He didn’t pull or force, he simply wanted to hold him, to touch him and acknowledge their connection.

Besieged more by his emotions than sensations, Viltori tried to blink away the tears that gathered in his eyes, but he was unsuccessful. One by one, heavy tears of tenderness fell down his face, landing on his chest, splashing on Drahka's forehead like a benediction. Sharp angles of his face softened as Drahka eased his mouth down the length of Viltori's shaft. Rather than plunging down all at once, as he had done to him, Drahka took his time. Caressing his way along with his tongue, pulling him deeper by sucking gently, teasing his fingers along the tightening skin of his balls, Drahka drew him within the heat of his body and into the power of his acceptance.

Only furtive couplings had Viltori ever shared with a man. Stealthy and quick, his encounters gave him surcease from his aching needs but did not feed his soul. Not like this. Here, in the light, looking right into Drahka's eyes, Viltori exchanged love with a man for the first time. Feeling the depth of his emotions without any barriers was both terrifying and immensely liberating. By looking into Drahka's eyes, he knew he felt the same. Drahka wasn't using him as a stand-in for his long-lost friend, nor as a way to pay homage to him, but what happened to Drahka as a young man shaped him, for he too had engaged in sly couplings strictly for climax. This, what they shared now, was the exact opposite.

Drahka wanted him to climax, but it wasn't just about that. Drahka wanted to give him pleasure, he wanted to feel his pleasure, he wanted to celebrate in what they could give to one another. At first Viltori felt odd for standing and simply receiving, but that was what he needed to learn to do. Drahka taught him that he was very good at giving, for he'd been giving to both Drahka and Bithia all along, but he'd not been able to receive back the pleasure he gave. Drahka was determined to teach him that lesson, which was why he wanted him to stand, unable to do anything more than accept the gratification being given.

Drahka's touch ranged from tentative to rough, from compelling to aggressive, but in the end, Viltori could not hold back. Every nerve in his body vibrated, on alert, waiting for the final spark, the very last breaking of his resistance and, when he surrendered, his entire body contracted in a simultaneous wave. Viltori climaxed in a great rush that left him dizzy and breathless. Drahka's eyes blazed with pride as he took his offering, drinking deeply of his essence. Together they knew this type of sharing was not a waste. Giving between them was a way of showing their affection. Never again would Viltori look at reaching orgasm the same way, not after what he'd shared with Drahka. When Drahka released him, he stood for a moment, so at peace, so deeply moved, he could do nothing but silently give thanks.

Reaching up, both Drahka and Bithia grasped his hands, holding him steady, conveying their compassion for his fragile state. Standing there for a long time, swaying to the pounding beat of his heart, all he could do was close his eyes and clasp their fingers between his. Collapsing down, he fell naturally into a three-way embrace with Bithia and Drahka. Viltori opened his eyes, saw their tear-streaked faces, and for the first time ever he felt he was exactly where he was supposed to be.

After a time, they moved to the massive bed, giggling and groping as they tried to figure out the best way to arrange their three bodies. In the end, they decided to put Drahka in the middle and Bithia would curl up on one side with Viltori on the other. Above his belly, Viltori and Bithia clasped hands.

Drahka let out a great sigh. "I finally feel as if I am home."

Viltori startled, his gaze jumping to Bithia. "I was just thinking the same thing. That I was finally where I belong."

Kissing Drahka's chest, then Viltori's hand, Bithia said, "I too was thinking that I finally feel comfortable in my own skin. I have no drive to seek out more pleasure. For the first time in my life, I am truly sated." A beautiful smile transformed her face. "And deeply grateful."

Viltori kissed her hand and Drahka's chest too. "But I must know one thing." He angled up a bit, looking at Drahka up the massive expanse of his chest. "How long have you been pretending you needed help with Diolan language?"

Drahka lifted his brows as if to explain, then grinned. "I have grasped the basics for quite some time. But I still needed education. Just not with language."

Viltori nodded. "I thought you had improved rather dramatically this evening."

"I was waiting for the right moment."

"You were being very clever."

"That too."

After a round of laughter and a three-way kiss, they fell asleep, but not before Viltori silently thanked the gods for bringing him exactly what he'd always needed.

Chapter Sixteen

A hand to her shoulder woke Bithia. She would have growled out her annoyance, but she did not wish to wake her sleeping lovers. Flat on his back, Drahka took up most of the bed. Viltori had angled to the side so he could lie on his back too, but she noticed they'd clasped their hands to each other's wrists. Even in sleep, they needed contact. For the rest of her life she would remember watching them share a most profound moment. She was grateful to be a part of what they'd experienced.

A slight twinge of jealousy touched her, but only the smallest bit, because Viltori had finally allowed Drahka to do what he would not let her do, not until she'd made a full, public commitment to him. In many ways she understood and was almost proud of him for holding out for more, but still, there was that part that wanted him to be so overwhelmed by her allure he could not refuse her.

Placing her finger to her lips to silence her servant, she left the warmth of the bed. Drawing the woman well away, she scanned for something to wear. Spending most of her time naked had its advantages but also clear disadvantages. She found Viltori's discarded towel and all of their clothing in a heap. Foraging through the pile, she grabbed Drahka's red shirt. Slipping it over her shivering body enveloped her in his masculine scent.

Smelling him reminded her how last night, as Drahka had taken Viltori's climax into his body, he'd given his to her, spending inside her clamping sex as she'd been pushed over the edge by watching Viltori. Round and round their circle went, one gave, another received, only to give to the other.

"You are being called to the circle," the woman whispered, her pinched features looking more severe in the milky light. The glass ceiling above glittered with a covering of fresh snow even though the twin suns, *Tandalsul*, hadn't fully risen yet. The whiteness of the empress suite amplified even the barest brush of brightness.

Bithia's shoulders slumped. What a way to start the day, listening to a bunch of *peckards* whine about their pathetic lives. She found it amazing that those who had so much could complain about so little. It seemed the richer the citizen, the more they grumbled. No matter what they had, they wanted more. No matter what she gave them, it wasn't enough. With a sigh, she had to admit she'd had the same basic problem. No matter how much sex she had, she always wanted more. Multiples of multiple orgasms hadn't been enough to keep her satisfied. However, all that had changed. Relaxed, she smiled at her servant. She had no doubt her edict last night was the reason for this early morning meeting.

"Gather my things and I'll meet you in the antechamber."

Normally, the gaudily decorated room was for her to receive guests, but she could use it today as a dressing room. Bithia slipped into her bathing unit, washed quickly, and then made her way to the antechamber just off her sleeping room. She'd always wondered at the arrangement. Had the empresses before her used the closeness of their bed to advantage when dealing with certain guests? She couldn't be the only empress who understood the power of sexual passion. Besides, what other reason could there be to have a small gathering room so close to a bedchamber? Dismissing the question from her mind, she allowed her servants to dress her, but this time she refused the small eye covers.

"I do not wish to wear those anymore." Most of her life, she'd hidden her unique eyes behind colored lenses, but not anymore. As they'd been giggling and playing last night, both men had told her they liked her beautiful eyes just the way they were. Drahka had confessed confusion because sometimes they were the same color and sometimes not. She removed the tiny lenses and showed him. He and Viltori liked them better just as they were naturally. They encouraged her not to hide who she was. So she didn't. If the elite didn't like her appearance, they didn't have to look at her. Bithia had always thought of herself as a confident woman who did not care about the opinions of others. Only lately had she realized she used disdain to mask her deep-seated fear of rejection. She suspected she'd used sex for the very same purpose. Losing herself in pleasure had been a way to avoid her feelings of abandonment. Even as a little girl she knew she did not belong on Beserrah. Her first clue was that she looked nothing like anyone else there. But why had her parents dismissed her so coldly? That was a puzzle she still had not unlocked.

Her servant held out an elaborate wig. "I'm not wearing that, either." Instead, she ran her fingers through her hair, fluffing the short strands around her face. She'd never been amenable to wearing the wigs, but she admired that her servants always tried. Their tenacity was impressive even if their sense of style was appalling. Each wig they offered was worse than the last. This one was shaped like a cone that would add an absurd length to her already generous height.

Dressed in a simple crimson gown, Bithia remained seated while her servant slipped flat sandals upon her feet. The shoes were more decorative than practical, but she allowed this frivolity. They refused to put her in heels anymore. First, she was too tall as it was, and second, she'd almost broken her legs tripping over them. What could she say? She'd basically lived her life barefoot. Any shoes caused her to feel awkward and unbalanced. The flat sandals were a compromise and it wasn't as if she had to walk far.

Standing, she towered over the group of servants. "Call for my guards."

One of the most critical things she'd learned was to always have guards attending her. Not that any of her subjects had tried to harm her, but several drunken ones hadn't accepted her refusal of their advances. Just because she'd wanted them once did not give them a forever-after invitation. A well-placed knee had stopped both overly amorous men, but it was much easier on her clothing and body to let her enormous guards glower. Nothing chilled a man's passions as quickly as the chilling gaze of a man twice his size.

Too, after what she'd decreed last night, a bit of muscle would be wise. Eyes filled with daggers had cut into her when she'd issued her edict. One thing the elite never liked to hear was the word no.

In her heart, she knew she'd done the right thing. Taking advantage of helpless individuals wasn't right. Another smile lifted her lips when she thought of those two *peckards* trying to force Viltori to satisfy their needs. They were lucky he'd left them intact. She knew he could have severely injured both of them if they'd tried to force him. And then her thoughts returned to last night. To see such a powerful man as Viltori humbled by the touch of another brought a spate of fresh tears. Never had she seen a man so unashamedly cry.

Determined to hurry back to them, Bithia strode to her advisor's room. Once inside, she was taken aback at how many had come. Cast in a circle, the seating ranged from low and primitive, to very high and luxurious. Her chair was the grandest of all. When she entered, the silence almost slapped her. Glaring eyes followed her mercilessly as she settled herself. She flipped the switch below the right armrest, and her amplified voice floated out over the room, bringing the meeting to order.

Another flick and a blue screen of text floated before her face. On the agenda were several items, mainly issues that mattered little, but she noticed a new addition slipped in near the bottom. This is what brought out not only all the heads of the Houses and most of their lesser members, but also representatives of the closest villages, and it had nothing to do with her edict last night.

Because Drahka had not climaxed in full view of the audience for their bonding, the magistrate had declared their ceremony invalid. Any child that came of their pairing Ambo decreed illegitimate and thus unfit to rule. He had petitioned the advisors and all had signed an order for her to immediately surrender herself for examination. Something in her heart broke. Bithia didn't know if she carried Drahka's child or not, but this would devastate him. Stunned beyond words, Bithia sought out the next highest chair. There Ambo Votny sat in all his blubbery glory. Narrowed eyes peered back at her, malice clearly etched into the lines of his aged face. His silver uniform reflected light around him, making him sparkle, but also showed a plethora of snot swipes. Ambo's most disgusting habit was his chronic nose picking and his inability to wipe the gunk anywhere but on himself. Gifts of handkerchiefs went unused. As she considered the patterns of nastiness, and the fact that Ambo had more slaves than most of the Houses combined, and had subjected those slaves to more perversities than all the Houses combined, she understood why he'd waited to do this. Right after the ceremony, he could have declared it void, but he'd waited. Last night had everything to do with this.

If she wouldn't have stood up for the servants he and the rest of the elite used and abused, Ambo would have let the glitch with her bonding ceremony slide. Or he would have simply held on to that to use against her whenever he needed leverage. Bithia could do nothing against the petition. Should she choose not to surrender herself for examination, she wouldn't be stripped of her crown, but any child she brought

forth would bear the stigma of illegitimacy. Her own half-sister, Kasmiri, had abdicated the throne before Ambo could have her executed.

Turning to her guards, Bithia ordered them to bring forth Undanna, her protocol liaison, so she could explain what options Bithia had at her disposal.

“Undanna is dead.” Ambo delivered the information without a shred of compassion. He didn’t grin his nasty smile, but his glee was apparent nonetheless.

Respectfully, Bithia lowered her head, offering up her prayers for Undanna’s soul. “When did she die?” The woman was old, but not that old.

“Last night.” Ambo shrugged, dragging his snot-covered uniform up then down. “In her sleep. She just stopped breathing.”

Bithia didn’t bother to ask if there would be an inquest. Ambo would see to it that there wouldn’t be one. So determined to keep the status quo, he would kill an innocent elderly woman who delighted in pageantry and protocol. Somehow, Bithia knew the parade of wigs had been Undanna’s doing. Bithia had never really listened to her, not with all her rules and endless rites, but Undanna had been kind and endlessly patient. Now that she was gone, there wasn’t a single person who could help Bithia make sense of the rules and regulations she’d so despised but now desperately needed.

“You will, of course, give me time to find a new protocol liaison.” Bithia didn’t ask so much as she commanded.

Again, Ambo shrugged. “I ask all here if there is one among you who will stand beside the empress. Is there one who will willingly take the position of interpreting the old ways from the old books?”

Another slap in the face by silence. Bithia didn’t know how or where, but she would find someone. “It is my right, Ambo, and those here are not the only people who can take Undanna’s place.” As if she’d trust any of these worthless fools. Bithia would have a better chance of grasping the rules by casting stones like the soothsayers on Beserrah.

“You still must submit to the examination.” Ambo put a heavy emphasis on the word submit, as if seeing her brought low would please him greatly. Apparently, he’d been most happy when she’d been an absentee ruler who didn’t bother to show up to meetings. One well-intentioned decree and he was ready to wrest control right out of her hands. Bithia knew all this was to put her back in her place: right under Ambo’s thumb.

Even though she wanted to slap the eyes right out of his skull, Bithia rose like the empress she was. When Ambo bustled up to lead the way, she held him back with an uplifted palm. “I will go alone. I trust you will accept the word of the royal physician?”

A flicker of annoyance crossed Ambo’s face, but he relented. Settling himself back into his chair, he said, “We will wait.”

The entire group settled in, all eyes watching her, most of them filled with gleeful revenge. She'd taken something from them, the right to use and abuse their slaves, so they took something from her, the right to love and honor her consort and their children. Bithia did not see how one equaled the other, but in their minds, they probably thought her punishment wasn't harsh enough.

Bithia left the circle with her head high. With her two guards attending her, she made her way to the royal physician. She'd met the man once, when she'd first come to Diola. He'd been the one to prove her parentage. Bithia couldn't remember his name, but he'd been as baffled as she had about her origins. He had known Clathia all of her adult life and he knew she'd never carried any child but her daughter Kasmiri. Which could only mean someone else carried Bithia. Someone had combined the elements of Clathia and her official consort then implanted the embryo into some unknown woman. But as to who and why? There still were no answers.

Bithia walked along endless hallways, her decorative sandals slapping from her great strides, creating so much clatter she removed them and flung them aside. As she continued on now with only the pounding of her guard's boots, she thought on her sister.

When Bithia found out she had a half-sister she'd been overjoyed until she discovered her sister wanted nothing to do with her. Kasmiri refused to even meet her, let alone speak to her. Bithia had no idea why Kasmiri hated her without even knowing her. Bithia didn't know Kasmiri, either, but her rejection still hurt. So far, not one member of her actual family had ever spoken a word to her. Bithia pushed the bitter emotions away. Right now, she needed strength. She would submit to this vindictive examination and then she would find a new protocol officer and then...she didn't know.

What if she couldn't bond to Drahka a second time? What if there was some ancient rule that forbade her from ever taking a bondmate? What if any child she had, even a legitimate one, was so hated that the elite would refuse to follow their rule, or worse, they chose to simply kill them? After what she'd seen in their eyes today, she had no guarantee they wouldn't just assassinate her.

Overwhelmed, she pushed all the nagging questions away. All her life she'd lived without thinking things through. Going from one decadent pleasure to another, losing herself in mindless bliss to obliterate her feelings had served her well then, but not now. She took a deep breath. She felt her apprehension and continued anyway. Running away would solve nothing. Panicking would not help, either. If she wanted Drahka and Viltori, she would have them, no matter what she had to do to get them.

When she entered the physician's rooms, he bowed graciously. He'd known she was coming because he didn't ask why she was here. Cold hands probed her skin without emotion as he pinched the flesh of her upper arm. After a little poke, the test was done. She wasn't pregnant. Part of her was relieved, but another part despaired. It would have been something to see Drahka's face if she could have told him she carried his child. She had yet to see him smile—a grin, but not a full-blown smile that transformed his entire face—but she had a feeling that news of a child would spread his grin from ear to ear. And Viltori, what

would he think? Bithia imagined he too would be pleased. Her child would be blessed by not one, but two proud fathers.

Turning away empty-handed, for the physician had already sent the test results to the waiting advisors and House heads, Bithia clutched her hand into a fist and brought her clenched fingers to her mouth to stifle a scream. Her guards moved back as six guards carried in two brutalized men.

Blood covered their faces and their clothing, obliterating their features, but there was no mistaking the identity of the man it took four guards to carry. Only one man on all of Diola was that massive and had such long, beautiful black hair. As she looked to the other, she knew there was only one man who wore a white shirt and brown pants.

Chapter Seventeen

Drahka woke to the most glorious sensation. He didn't have to open his eyes to know that Viltori teased his lips along the rapidly hardening length of his cock. Moaning, he stretched his arms out across the surface of the bed. No shame touched him, only a wonderful exhilaration. After feeling so lost for so long, he was home. He would have pulled Bithia into his arms, but he'd felt her slipping from bed before first light.

As the twin suns rose, the snow-covered dome above blazed brightness into his face. Growling, he pulled the covers up over his head, making crimson darkness for him and Viltori. Blinking in the sudden shadows, he looked down to see glittering eyes looking back at him.

"You don't want to watch?" Viltori teased, licking his way from base to tip.

"I'll watch." Drahka lifted one leg, bending his knee, creating a tent filled with a soft, ruby glow as the light slipped through the red bedcover. "But I do not need that much light to see your wicked mouth working such magic."

Chuckling, Viltori maneuvered his hand between Drahka's legs, cupping his balls as he swiped his tongue up again. "I can taste Bithia on you." Both his words and the moist heat of his breath aroused Drahka, causing him to groan and press back into the bed.

"A pleasing flavor, no doubt." Just thinking of her slick sweetness made his mouth water. The memory of Viltori's gushing tide also caused him to lick his lips. Two such wonderfully different and yet similar tastes stirred his senses. For a moment, he thought of having them both before his hungry mouth. Her succulent cunt, his luscious cock. From one to the other he would revel in the unique flavor of each.

"Utterly wonderful." Viltori smiled. "Directly she is much sweeter, but she still tastes good on you too." Lifting up, Viltori took the tip of his cock into his mouth, causing Drahka to grit his teeth and arch back. Viltori's mouth felt far hotter than his sleepy body.

As he drew him within, Viltori teased his tongue under the loose skin that covered the tip of his penis. Sensitive flesh below responded to the rough texture as he swirled his tongue around the tip while sucking at his foreskin. So expertly did Viltori move his mouth he almost pushed Drahka over the edge. Viltori didn't just suck his cock, he worshiped his cock. Body and soul, his teacher pleased him so enthusiastically Drahka lost his mind.

"Don't take me to the end too fast!" Drahka blurted the request half in Diolan and half in Oughunian. In his panic, he spewed words rather than doing the same with his climax. His hand gripped Viltori's head,

ready to push him away, but he relented. "Forgive me, my friend, I do not wish to rush through this moment."

Viltori released him, smiling up in the ruby light. "I can tell you are flustered. You always mix your languages when you are."

Uttering a laugh, Drahka touched Viltori's mouth. "You are far more skilled than I."

"Partly." Viltori lowered his mouth along his shaft. "An uncut cock is far more sensitive at the tip."

Drahka cupped Viltori's head, twining his fingers through his golden strands. "Giving you an unfair advantage."

"Completely unfair." Viltori cradled his balls in his palm, lifting them to his mouth so he could tease his tongue across the flesh. "I'm not sure what we can do to make things even."

Drahka considered. "You could be less skilled."

"Be less skilled or act less skilled?" Viltori asked, sliding his hand leisurely along Drahka's prick while licking his balls. "I can fake ineptitude if you wish." Viltori slid his finger up between his inner thighs, then right between his cheeks. "Or I can use everything I know against you." Teasing his finger against Drahka's ass caused him to clench his cheeks together.

"That is not what I desire," Drahka said, causing Viltori to withdraw his hand. "I meant your behaving unskilled."

"No?" Viltori returned his softly probing finger. "How about I touch lighter?" He kissed the tip of Drahka's cock with barely any pressure. "How about slower?" Viltori gently drew his prick between his lips. Lifting away, he asked, "How about I use my hands more than my mouth?" One fist wrapped about his shaft, cupping snugly, but not too tightly.

Deliberately, looking right into his eyes, Viltori drew his fist down. When he hit the base of Drahka's cock, he squeezed, forcing a pearl of moisture to leak from the tip. Thumbing it down into his fist, he lifted up, milking the next drop to the top of Drahka's cock. Just as the cream threatened to spill down, Viltori lapped it up.

Mesmerized, all Drahka could do was watch and think of the time when he would do these same lusty things in return. While looking right into his eyes, Viltori deep-throated Drahka. From tip to base, Viltori wrapped his lips around his cock and gave to him so hard and fast he had no choice but to accept.

Drahka lifted his hips, thrusting his cock into Viltori's hungry mouth. On the brink of a great climax, Viltori pulled away, wrapping his hand around the base, squeezing lightly while pressing against the tip with his thumb. Ever so slowly, the need to climax relented.

"Just how many times have you done this?" Drahka realized after he spoke how harsh his question sounded. Before he could take it back, Viltori chuckled.

"Not all that much, but if you ask how long I've been thinking of sucking yours, I'd say from the moment I saw you. When I found out you were uncut I thought I'd go crazy if I couldn't have you."

Murmuring his words as he toyed his lips down his penis, Viltori added, "And when you insisted man touching man was wrong and tried to hit me, I swear my soul cried."

"You are ever so dramatic." Drahka pulled him up, turning to his side so they lay looking at each other in the red glow.

"I wasn't finished." Viltori kept his hand firmly around Drahka's prick. "You have no idea how badly I want to taste you."

The image made Drahka groan, but there was time for that later. "I wanted to kiss you."

Smiling, Viltori leaned near, pressing his lips against Drahka's mouth. Tentative at first, they kissed lightly, like unsure lovers, but quickly the kissing turned heated, as it always did. Battling for control, struggling to give harder and better to the other, Drahka grew so desperate that he pushed Viltori onto his back. Wrapping his legs around him, Viltori tried to flip him over, but Drahka's bigger body gave him more leverage.

"Just as when we wrestled, I am stronger than you." Grasping his hands, Drahka pressed Viltori into the bed.

"Stronger but less skilled," Viltori teased, rocking his hips, rubbing his cock against Drahka's. "If you need control that badly, then go ahead." Viltori relaxed. "Do with me as you please, mighty warrior."

One eye narrowed. "Are you mocking me?" Leaning up, lifting the covers so he could see Viltori's face, Drahka peered down at him.

"Yes." Viltori grinned. "Now punish me."

"I would like to give to you so hard and fast your mouth would be so filled with moans of pleasure you couldn't speak."

Closing his eyes, Viltori shivered. "You do know how to punish a man."

Leaning near, placing his mouth right to his ear as he'd seen him do to Bithia, Drahka said, "I would fuck you until you came in a great gush. And then I would fuck you again, making you take all of me into your dark passage." He wasn't sure what words to use, as Viltori did not have a hot, sweet cunt. However, Viltori groaned when he said dark passage so he said it again, thrusting his cock against his belly, so now their cocks battled against one another.

"Gods, yes," Viltori said, opening his eyes and looking right at him. "That is exactly what you should do to me." But then his face twisted with concern. "Let me up for a moment."

Drahka frowned down at him. "Why would I let you go?" He thrust leisurely against him. "I have you where I want you."

"I'm sure you've noticed this, but you, my friend, are massive. If you want to do what you said, fuck me until I'm silent, you're going to need some help."

Lowering his face with concern, he asked, "Another man?"

Viltori laughed. "No, I'm not wet inside like Bithia."

Reluctantly, he let him up.

Viltori jumped from the bed and strode directly to the bathing unit. Picking up a bottle, he would examine the contents, sniff, drop some onto his fingers, but he put all of them back. Finally he found what he wanted and returned to the bed. Just as he promised, he went right back to where he was before—flat on his back with Drahka above him.

Handing him the bottle, Viltori said, “Here. Coat yourself with this first.”

Moving back, Drahka poured golden oil into his palm, then smeared it all over his cock. When he saw Viltori watching with glittering eyes, he continued to stroke, only more slowly. Gripping his fist around his cock, he stroked oil up and down, covering the entire region of his hips. For good measure, he pushed Viltori’s legs apart and worked some into him with his fingers. Watching him part his lips and sigh only made Drahka harder. Pumping his finger into him caused Viltori to lift his legs, spreading them wide, giving him more room.

“I’m going to open you up for me.” One finger became two. Viltori reacted with a sigh, and a further lifting and leaning back, as if willingly holding himself open for anything Drahka would do. “I’m going to make you wetter than Bithia inside.”

Groaning, Viltori placed his hands behind his knees, lifting his legs up and out. His eyes riveted to the movement of Drahka’s arm as he pumped his fingers, causing his biceps to flex. Deliberately he flexed the muscle harder, showing off the power of his arm.

“You’ve seen me give to Bithia.” Two fingers became three and Viltori’s eyes went wide, then closed on a long, low growl. “Are you sure you can handle me giving that fully to you?”

Looking right into his eyes, Viltori said, “By the gods, I certainly want to find out.”

Unable to wait any longer, Drahka leaned forward, lowering his body over Viltori. Pressing his cock against the tight ring that guarded his dark passage caused both of them to groan.

“Slowly, my friend,” Viltori cautioned, pulling the covers over their heads, returning them to the enclosed privacy of the ruby glow. “Slowly.”

Once he felt how tight he was, Drahka realized he must move more carefully so as not to hurt him. The rough coupling he did with Bithia would damage Viltori, and that was the last thing he wished to do. Easing his way inside, he kept his eyes on Viltori’s face.

When he winced, Drahka pulled back. “I don’t want to hurt you.” Maddening, this conflict inside. He wanted to give to him as he gave to Bithia, but not if such giving caused him pain.

Cupping his face, Viltori drew him near, then kissed him tenderly. “Let me try.”

Drahka allowed Viltori to place him on his back. He thought he would now try to fill him, but he didn’t. Lifting himself above Drahka, he draped his body along his length, legs spread over his hips.

“This way, I can control how fast, how deep.”

Nodding, Drahka was determined to hold very still.

Against the muscles of his belly, he felt Viltori's hard cock as he wriggled his hips down. Again, Drahka felt the tip of his prick push against that tight ring. Carefully moving down, Viltori took the tip inside.

Such gripping tightness! The oil had made him slick, but still he was almost crushing his cock with the walls of his dark passage. Drahka wanted to thrust, but he didn't. Using all of his will, he lay passive. He found it odd he was giving to Viltori without moving. Was this really considered giving, he wondered, then decided he didn't care. The concept of giving and taking was best left with his tribe.

Grabbing his head, Drahka kissed Viltori as he moved atop him. Dueling tongues, panting breaths, they worked their hard bodies together until most of Drahka's prick was buried deep in Viltori's ass. New and unique sensations assaulted his body as he lowered his hands to grasp Viltori's hips.

Snarling, Viltori lifted his lips to Drahka's ear. "You want to fuck me, don't you? You want to slam your body into mine. You want to thrust that massive cock so deep inside my ass you steal my breath."

Drahka wrapped his arms around him, rolling him over so now he was on top. He gave a tentative thrust while watching Viltori's face.

"More."

Viltori reached up, grasped his shoulders, holding on to him as he thrust. Each forward lunge was a bit harder, a bit deeper, a bit more brutal. When he realized all Viltori felt was pleasure, he lowered his hands to his ass, grasped him tightly, and fucked him so hard and fast he shook the bed beneath them. Viltori did what Drahka had longed to hear—he made that sound, that wonderful sound of pleasure like Bithia made. Moaning out his joy, Viltori met Drahka's eyes. Under the covers, watching each other, Viltori came, gushing against Drahka's belly and chest.

The scent filled Drahka's mouth with the taste of him, which caused him to lose control and thrust wildly into Viltori until he climaxed. At that precise moment, Viltori tilted his hips, crushing his passage even tighter around Drahka's cock. With one last mighty bellow, he thrust and drained the last of his orgasm.

Breathless, they clung together, Drahka careful not to drop his full weight on Viltori.

After a moment, Viltori laughed. When Drahka looked up, confused, Viltori shook his head. "I have to say that when you promise to fuck somebody, you really mean it."

"Did I hurt you?" Instantly alert, Drahka tried to lift himself away.

"Would I be chuckling if I was hurt?" Viltori wrapped his arms and legs around him, rolling them until they lay side by side, Drahka's slowly shrinking cock still inside. "I feel very good."

With a playful thrust, Drahka said, "Yes, you do."

Together they laughed. After a time, Viltori grew serious. Drahka wasn't sure he wanted to hear what his teacher would say. When he wore that face, the information was usually something unpleasant.

"There's someone I want you to meet."

Relieved, Drahka sighed.

“You thought it was something bad, again, didn’t you?”

“You made that face.”

“Did I? I don’t know why. You’ll like this man.” Viltori held up his hand. “And before you even ask, I’m not sharing you with anyone other than Bithia. I just want you to meet him, not fuck him.”

“I didn’t say—”

“You made that face.”

After another passionate duel of tongues, they reluctantly flipped back the covers.

Snarling out an expletive, Drahka winced and covered his eyes with his hand. “Why is this room all in white? It is torture on my eyes.”

Closing his eyes to bare slits, Viltori rose, dragging Drahka with him. “I have no idea. Given that her family color is crimson, it should be red.” He paused. “Ah. It’s white so that any House who gains the throne can turn the room to their own family color.”

“Where are you taking me?”

“To wash up.”

Getting clean was never so much fun. Again, they playfully wrestled for control of the soap, then spent an inordinate amount of time cleaning each other’s cocks. Drahka wanted to come again, and this time in Viltori’s wicked mouth, but Viltori pushed him back.

“We can’t use everything up this morning,” Viltori said, leaving behind the jet of water. “Think how furious Bithia will be if we are both drained utterly dry.”

Drahka considered that his chosen would be upset if they could not give to her at least once. After a moment, he asked, “Will she be upset that you and I gave to each other without her?”

Viltori considered with a frown, then smiled as he rubbed a towel briskly against his golden hair. “No. I imagine Bithia would thoroughly enjoy hearing a detailed description of what we did while we pleasure her.”

Drahka grinned. “I at her front, you at her back.”

“Don’t get me all hard again.” Viltori punched Drahka’s shoulder.

“Will you give to her?” Drahka tossed his towel aside.

Viltori wouldn’t meet his gaze. “I cannot.”

“If you did to her what I did to you, no child would come of that.” And after feeling the delicious tightness of Viltori, he would like to feel Bithia that way too.

“It’s not just that.” Shaking his head, Viltori took his towel and Drahka’s and threw them over a bar inside the bathing unit. “And it’s not just that she’s your chosen.” Digging through a pile of clothing on the floor, separating out his clothing from Drahka’s, Viltori said, “I need more.”

“What more?”

“A commitment.” Viltori tossed him his clinging pants with a smirk.

“You didn’t need one with me.”

At that Viltori reddened. “It’s different between you and me.”

Before he could ask why, Viltori turned away, cutting him off.

Chapter Eighteen

Uncomfortable with the turn their conversation had taken, Viltori dressed quickly and practically threw Drahka's clothing at him. He wanted to get out of the empress suite. The smell of the three of them exacerbated deep-seated longings and dreams that he was just now starting to think weren't impossible, but still, he didn't trust his heart not to go too far. Moreover, he had to admit, he wanted to see Rown. Their gossip sessions had become such a part of Viltori's mornings he felt bereft without them.

Showing off Drahka was just an added benefit.

Viltori knew Rown would be honored to meet Bithia's consort. He also had a feeling that Rown would be fascinated by Drahka and thoroughly smitten. Just like Viltori was himself. As he pulled on his plain brown trousers, he sighed.

Viltori owed Drahka a better explanation, but he simply couldn't summon the energy to explain why a commitment from Bithia was different. It seemed rude to tell Drahka that Bithia had power where Drahka did not. In the Onic Empire, power mattered. Last night was a perfect example. If not for Bithia's protection, the two elite men that Viltori had rejected could have killed him, or worse, without repercussions.

Viltori had witnessed the results of the more horrific punishments the elite inflicted on disobedient slaves. It didn't matter that he did not belong to them; the elite took the position that all servants should bow to their wishes.

Viltori survived because he trusted the commitment he had with Bithia. However, that commitment was fragile and he wanted something stronger. Empress Bithia was well known for her fornicating ways. Not a woman in the empire fucked like the empress. But her fancies were notoriously fleeting. What she desired today she cast aside tomorrow. Viltori understood why she was the way she was, and he firmly believed he and Drahka could keep her completely entertained for a lifetime, but he wanted a fully binding commitment first.

A flush of admiration washed through him, remembering the way Bithia stood up not only to protect him, but all those cast in the unwanted role of servant. Despite the nasty comments, Bithia wasn't a woman interested only in her own gratification. Beneath the image of a self-absorbed pleasure-seeker she so vigilantly projected was a woman who cared about her subjects, a woman who cared about her empire. Below all the boredom and disdain, she was a woman who cared so deeply it frightened her. Bithia needed exactly what she had: two strong men to stand by her side and show her that she alone could rule.

Viltori saw the dichotomy of that idea. If Bithia was truly strong, she wouldn't need anyone, let alone two men, but Viltori knew great changes loomed for the empire. Bithia could not face them alone. If she were brave and bold, she could change the world. The passionate love of two men would bolster her to meet the challenges. Not a one of them could live to the fullest without the other two. He knew that truth right down to his bones.

Bithia truly wanted the best for her citizens, no matter if they were servants or members of the upper class. Something about her calm pride, the way she'd stood tall and faced down a room full of rejection, confirmed what he'd felt since he'd seen her—Bithia would bring changes to the Onic Empire. Viltori desperately wanted to be by her side when she did. He didn't know why. All he knew was that he needed a firm commitment from Bithia before he could proudly stand beside her. If she never offered out her body in bonding, then he would be relegated to her shadow. Eventually the darkness would drive him away. As much as he loved Drahka, he would not be able to live as Bithia's servant.

Viltori paused then, watching Drahka dress. He hadn't told him how deep his feelings went, not that he didn't want to, because he did, especially this morning as they'd tussled under the glowing red covers, but he couldn't tell Drahka he loved him until he knew if Bithia was courageous enough to stand up and take them both as consorts. As sad as Viltori felt by withholding the truth from the man he loved, he would feel worse to tell Drahka only to fade away if Bithia didn't claim them both. Viltori knew that his relationship with Drahka hinged on Bithia.

Ambivalent, his heart wanted to believe she was strong enough to rise above the disdain, but alternately he despaired that she would relent and maintain the status quo.

"Who is this man you wish me to meet?" Drahka struggled with the *echalle*. As he lifted one strap around his hip, the opposite strap whapped him across his balls.

Viltori winced at the sight and sound of elastic slapping his sac.

Snarling, Drahka slipped it off, glaring at the tiny scrap of fabric that barely covered his palm. "I would like to meet the one who designed this and force him to wear it!" Crushing the silky red *astle* in his fist, Drahka swore, "I would make him put it on, then watch him dance as I yanked upon the straps."

Laughing, Viltori snatched the garment from his hand. "I thought Bithia was going to set fire to this thing?" As much as he liked the way the unique garment displayed Drahka's commanding genitals, he didn't wish to have it block his access later, when the three of them came together again. He tossed the *echalle* aside. Viltori's only hope lay with frustrating Bithia so much with longing for him that she made him her consort. Frustrating her access to Drahka would help, but he didn't wish to be blocked himself. Again, he sighed. Viltori found it difficult to dance the line between lust, longing and a committed lifetime.

Drahka laughed and pulled on his formfitting pants. Once he had them up and fastened, Viltori realized he didn't need the *echalle* to show off his amazing cock. Whatever the fabric of his trousers, it molded around him, clinging to every muscle the man possessed, which was a prodigious amount. Viltori

forcefully kept his tongue in his mouth but, left to its own devices, it would be hanging out the side as he followed Drahka wherever he wished to go, panting all the while.

Cupping his bulge, Drahka said, “You had your chance under the water.”

“I’ll get another chance later.” Viltori pulled his own pants on, but they did little to cover up his semi-hard state.

Greedy beyond the grist of the gods, Viltori wanted all of his dreams to come true. He didn’t think he could settle for less. He wanted Bithia and Drahka as his mates. Not just in words or body, but by law. Viltori wanted a decree that gave him the right to them, just as that decree gave them the right to him. Viltori did not want to agonize over the father of Bithia’s children—if both of them were legitimate consorts, then paternity wouldn’t matter. Only with that kind of commitment could he give to Bithia in the manner Drahka and she wanted.

“You sigh like an old woman.” Drahka pulled his long hair back, then tied it with a strip of red leather. “Have you seen my shirt?”

Viltori didn’t realize that as he ruminated he kept sighing. “I am frustrated this morning.” He cast his gaze around. “I do not see your shirt.”

“Then I will go without it.” Drahka stepped near. “I could give to you again.” He cupped Viltori’s bottom with one massive hand. “I would still be ready for Bithia this night.” He placed his mouth right to Viltori’s ear and breathed, “I feel I could give to you all day. Sometimes slow, sometimes fast.”

As good as that sounded, and as good as the moist heat of his hand felt, Viltori reluctantly shook his head. “We can’t spend all our time in bed. Think how it would look that Bithia is out running the empire and we’re in here running around naked?”

“You do have a way with words, my friend.” Drahka clapped his hand to Viltori’s shoulder. “Now lead the way to this man you wish me to meet.”

The hallways narrowed dramatically by the time they reached the *tishiary*. Fewer decorations covered the walls too. Mostly more ghastly paintings of masters offering out the sweet benediction of their touch to their humble servants. Viltori rolled his eyes but stopped short of sighing.

Drahka considered the paintings as they passed, but he thought the people depicted were ready for sex. “Look at the way he stands above this woman, grabbing her head. He wishes her to take his cock into her mouth.”

Viltori laughed, because in a way, that did seem to be what was going on. “He’s touching her head, not grabbing it, and see how she is in darkness while he is in light, and the way she’s looking up at him with that worshipping vapidness on her face?”

Drahka narrowed his eyes and peered closely at the painting. “I see, but does this try to show that her master is her god?”

At that, Viltori laughed so hard he almost doubled over. “I think that’s exactly what they are trying to convey. All slaves should worship their masters.”

“A subservient slave is the only natural way.”

Viltori’s head turned. One of the two men from last night, still dressed in his best blue-green suit, although it was now wrinkled and stained, stood at the end of the hall that led into the *tishiary*. Bloodshot eyes and twisted strands of brown hair indicated he hadn’t slept well, if at all. Perhaps he’d spent the night worrying that whatever punishment his friend received, he would get too. This was the less bold of the two, the one who had blocked the door, the one Viltori had thumped in the chest.

“You see how that worthless slave bows down?” He lifted his chin to the painting, his spicy scent of humiliation wafting through the air. “That’s what you will do to me.” The man pointed to the floor, just like his companion had last night.

Drahka puffed out his chest while lifting himself up. Merciful gods but he damn near took up the entire hallway! Before he could speak, Viltori shook his head slightly, trying to convey to him that fighting with this man wasn’t worth the effort.

Rather than engaging the man in an argument, Viltori stepped forward, as if to walk by him, and that’s when over ten men, dressed in almost the same color as the man he’d slighted, stepped up behind the first.

Danger sent warning signals up Viltori’s spine, causing his breathing to accelerate right along with the pace of his heart. Turning to the hallway behind them, he gritted his teeth when he saw another ten men. Obviously they’d been following them, waiting for the right moment to stage their attack. Viltori might have noticed, but for his churning thoughts and the thoroughly distracting Drahka.

Drahka quickly assessed the situation. Without hesitating, he crouched into a fighter’s stance, just as Viltori had taught him in the training rooms. That round of exercise had been just about fun, but now they would need every skill they possessed. Two men against twenty. Viltori wasn’t a coward, but the smartest thing they could do was run.

“So, you were once a recruit.” The man examined him up and down, smirking at him.

Viltori knew he should not have bragged about that when he hit this man in the chest. “This is between us. Leave the other men out of it.” He doubted the man was looking for a fair fight, but Viltori thought it was worth trying.

The man’s snorting laughter said it all. Then, his face split into a nasty grin. “You can save your friend there, and all you have to do is get down on your knees and suck my cock.” He paused for a moment. “While all these good men watch, you are going to be the humble slave you should have been last night.”

Behind the group of men he saw Rown, hand to his mouth, his face twisted with worry. None of the blue-green man’s people had noticed him. Viltori wanted to warn Rown away, but doing so would only bring attention to him.

Casually, Viltori moved toward the man. When everyone stiffened, ready to strike, he lifted his hands submissively. "In order to do as you ask, I need to be close." Lowering his head, he added, "I can hardly suck your cock from over here."

"Do not do this, my friend." Drahka placed his hand on Viltori's shoulder. He absorbed everything he could from the power of that gesture.

Whispering, Viltori told Drahka, "When I give the word, run. Run as fast as you can back to the empress suite."

"I will not leave you!" Drahka tried to whisper but his deep voice carried.

"Perhaps it would be better to have him do it." The man pointed at Drahka.

Confusion filled the faces of some of the men surrounding him. It was one thing to abuse a slave, quite another to do so to the consort of the empress.

"Oh, fear not, my brothers, he is not her official consort after all."

Every nerve in Viltori's body went on alert.

"In the circle, just a short while ago, the bonding between Bithia and Drahka was declared invalid." A wide and thoroughly malevolent grin transformed the man's face into something beyond evil. "As far as his status goes, he is simply a *barsita*."

The derogatory term referred to anyone not native to Diola. Viltori considered calling the man a liar, but his gut told him he wasn't. That Drahka had not completed the bonding ceremony by climaxing in full view of the audience meant he wasn't really her official consort. Viltori had no idea what laws stood to protect Drahka as a visitor.

With a dismissive wave of his hand, Viltori uttered a bark of laughter. "He is favored by the empress, as am I." Drilling his intense gaze directly into the man's eyes, he added, "Do you really think Bithia will change her mind based on a technicality with a ritual?" Viltori pointed at Drahka. "Look at him." He took a moment to follow his own advice. Drahka was the most massive and exquisite hunk of man ever to grace the planet. "I don't think Bithia will trouble over it longer than it takes her to arrange for a new ceremony."

Chancing a quick glance to Drahka's face, Viltori realized he was gritting his teeth to hold back a response. Never should he have found out like this. The man had timed his revelation to have the most hurtful impact on Drahka. To his credit, Drahka controlled himself, but just barely. Then, to Viltori's shock, he spoke.

"I will suck your cock." Drahka took a step toward the man, who backed up, fear wiping away his ruthless grin. "But first you must let him go." He pointed to Viltori.

Viltori had the same reaction Drahka had had. He wasn't going anywhere without his friend. And then he realized this man didn't want what he said he did. He wasn't going to let either of them near his penis, not when they could simply bite it off. They were going to die in this hallway. All this was just a way to increase their torment before they killed them.

“Bithia will put you to the stone,” Drahka said. He cast his hypnotizing gaze to each man, weighing him, measuring him, dismissing him. Each of them received a full measure of Drahka’s intense gaze. “If you continue, you are exchanging your lives for ours.”

The leader of the men laughed. “Not if all the Houses join in rebellion against her.” Glancing about his brothers, he added, “None welcome the rule of a *yondie* empress.”

Even if Bithia condemned them to death, it would do him little good at this moment. They needed help, and they needed it now. As the two groups stepped into them, forcing him and Drahka back-to-back, Viltori screamed out to Rown, “Run! Run and tell Sterlave!”

Chapter Nineteen

A whirl of activity left Bithia pressed against the wall of the physician's office, her heart breaking, her senses reeling. A swarm of people dressed in gray fell upon Drahka and Viltori, speaking in words she didn't understand as they labored to save their lives. Coolly calm, she let their professionalism pacify her. They were not frantic bundles of fear like she; they moved quickly, their words short and clipped, but they did not panic.

Never in her life had she ever seen so much blood. Viltori's once-white shirt was maroon, ripped down the center as they did something to his chest. Drahka's hair dripped crimson in fat, sluggish tears. Idly she noticed he was shirtless, but that only exposed the fact that someone had cut knuckle-deep grooves across his mighty chest.

Unable to bear anymore, she turned away, and her gaze fell on a man just outside the doorway. Tall, muscular, with finger-length brown hair and dressed in loose black trousers, he gave a series of orders to the guards who had brought in Drahka and Viltori. Without hesitation, the men marched off to do his bidding. When he turned, his gaze fell upon her, and she knew at once that she could trust this man. Something in his stance, something about the way he looked at her with concern and respect, told her everything she needed to know.

Four strides brought him near. "My lady." He bowed, then lifted his gaze to hers. Golden shards glittered within the soft brown, soothing eyes that were well acquainted with desperate situations. "I have instructed the guards to block off this part of the palace. We have captured most of the men involved, but several managed to escape during the fray." He paused. "I swear to you they will be found."

At a loss in her misery, she simply stared up at him for a moment, then managed to ask, "Who are you?"

A blip of shame darted across his face. "Forgive me, my lady." He dropped to one knee, placing his hands on his lifted leg. With his head lowered, he said, "I am Sterlave of Gant, a former Harvester, a handler to the recruits and bondmate to your sister Kasmiri."

For a moment Bithia simply looked down at him, too shocked to remember protocol or that her sister refused to speak to her. Bithia decided in this situation, she didn't care. "Rise, Sterlave." When he did, his concerned face almost caused her to break out in tears. "What happened?" She looked back over her shoulder only to see the people in gray cutting open Viltori's chest. A wave of dizziness caused her to

falter, but Sterlave grasped her hand, drawing her away from the room. Into the hall he took her, settling her on a low-slung bench that took up the wall outside the open archway.

Sitting beside her, still clasping her hand, he conveyed what he knew. “My servant, Rown, likes to gossip with Viltori.” Sterlave smiled gently. “He thinks very highly of him.”

“Viltori is a good man.” She’d almost said he *was* a good man, as if he were already gone. Forcefully she lifted herself. He wasn’t dead yet. There was hope. If they survived, she would take them both to Beserrah. She never should have come here. Damn the handsome stranger for luring her to Diola. If she ever saw him again, she would...she let the thought trail off because she wouldn’t do anything. Had she not come to Diola, she wouldn’t have met either one of them. But that didn’t mean she had to stay. Why would she want to stay ruler of a world that mocked her for her passion and hurt those she loved?

“Viltori is a very good man.” Sterlave brought her attention back to him before he continued. “Rown went to meet him this morning, but when he arrived, a group of men from Blue-green House had Viltori and Drahka trapped in the hallway.” He hesitated for a moment, clearly leery of telling her more about the fight than she wished to know. He conveyed what his servant had told him, leaving out the gore.

When Sterlave finished, Bithia sat very still, her gaze on the tiled floor. She could almost see her reflection in the spotless and highly polished gray stone. She placed her other hand over his. Right now, the warmth of his touch soothed her. Otherwise, she feared she’d be on her feet, pacing, issuing crazy orders that would lead to further chaos.

“Now I understand who and why.” What she understood was this was her fault. She’d humiliated the top member of Blue-green House, but worse, she’d taken away their right to use their slaves as they saw fit. “But to beat a consort?”

Sterlave lowered his face and grimaced. “They said he was not.”

Bithia winced, remembering Ambo’s decree from the meeting this morning. How had the information spread so fast? She’d barely had the test done when the guards brought them in. Wasn’t she supposed to find a protocol liaison to fight the decree before Ambo issued an edict?

“My lady, I swear to you, the guards are loyal to you.” Sterlave forced her to look at him. “They stand ready to defend you and the empire from this uprising.”

“Uprising?” Her brows lifted when she asked. “I thought only Blue-green House sought revenge for what I did last night?”

Before Sterlave could answer, another man said, “Ambo Votny has banded all the Houses together.”

Bithia lifted her head to the owner of this rich, commanding voice. Sweet, merciful Datanna! Her mouth almost dropped open when she saw a massive man with black hair and riveting azure eyes. A curious longing to either fall at his feet and worship him, or fall at his feet and take him into her mouth, left her stunned and unable to do anything at all but stare up at him. It certainly didn’t help matters that all he

wore was a black loincloth, slung low on his hips. He wasn't as big as Drahka, but there was such power emanating from him that he literally glowed.

"Ambo seeks to unseat you."

Before she could ask, he did as Sterlave had—he dropped to one knee, his hands crossed over his leg. "I am Chur Zenge."

Undanna had said his name a hundred times, forcing Bithia to repeat it back until she understood how to pronounce it. Moreover, she wanted Bithia to grasp exactly who he was. Chur was a demigod. Undanna had deftly avoided all her questions about when she would meet this man. At the time, Bithia thought they did not want her to seduce a man one step from godhood. Now she realized they didn't want him to seduce her with just one look. But when she considered him again, he wasn't trying to seduce her. There was just this sexual energy rolling off him. Briefly, Bithia envied his bondmate.

"Why haven't I met you until now?" Right after she asked she realized that knowing the answer didn't matter. Why was her brain so focused on meaningless ruminations when the men she loved lay dying?

"You did not need me until now." Chur lifted one sleek, dark brow, as if asking her permission to rise.

With an extension of her hand, she granted him consent. He stood and again dominated the area. Despite the height and width of the hallway, Chur took up a large portion. When Sterlave stood beside him, they effectively blocked the entire space. Comforted by two such powerful men, Bithia felt some of her anxiety recede. These two had helped the two who lay fighting for their lives. Each bowed to her to show willing obeisance. Now she had to be strong enough to cast down Ambo and his band of indolent elite.

Bithia rose from the couch. She wasn't going to collapse in tears and let fear rule her, for that was exactly what Ambo wanted. Only he could have put the idea into the heads of Blue-green House. Only Ambo could have told them where to find the two men and that he would declare Drahka invalid as a consort, thus making attacking him not punishable by death. All of this, from her early morning meeting, to the dismissal of her bonding, to the attack on her lovers, Ambo had carefully arranged. Going deeper, she wouldn't be surprised if Ambo had staged the harassment of Viltori last night.

Ambo had been more than happy when all Bithia wanted was one man after another. As soon as she took an interest in running the empire, he'd bowed and acted all pleased, even spent time teaching her about the circle and when and how meetings were conducted. He must have realized she would push for more equality as many of her questions had been about the treatment of servants. Ambo was not a hasty man. As soon as he sensed her change of heart, he'd readied himself. When the opportunity presented, he lashed out, grasping for power. The gods only knew what else he had done to her empire.

"What is the strength of their force?" Bithia asked both men, for they seemed to be sharing leadership of the guards. Again, she felt she could trust them. If they wanted power for themselves, they never would have helped Viltori or Drahka. They wouldn't have knelt to her, either. What surprised her more than anything was that before her were two prime examples of sexy male and she wasn't interested in either one.

Oh, there was that power from Chur, but he didn't project it on purpose, and she could choose not to respond. Her smile was bittersweet. She'd finally learned to control herself. In the same breath, she might lose the two men she'd longed for her whole life.

"Ambo thought the guards would be loyal to him," Chur said, his face grim. "He was wrong. Upon hearing what you decreed last night, some of their own servants ran rather than stand and fight by their owner's sides." Chur paused for a moment, listening to voices she could not hear.

As she opened her mouth to ask, Sterlave begged her to silence with the press of his finger to his mouth. A part of her reacted with displeasure, for who would dare to shush the empress, but then she let it go, as it wasn't important. Sterlave and Chur were here to help. They might be a bit odd, but so was she. She almost cracked a smile: Empress Bithia and her merry band of misfits.

After a long time, Chur turned his intense gaze on her. "My lady, the guards have captured Ambo. Apparently when he realized he'd grossly miscalculated his own power, he took what riches he could carry and tried to fly off in the Golden Bird."

Bithia's frown must have conveyed she had no idea what that was.

"A ship capable of space flight," Sterlave supplied. "It belonged to your mother."

Nodding, Bithia considered for a moment. "Have Ambo held until I decide what to do with him."

Locked inside a clear glass coffin, Viltori lay on his back, his body nude and newly washed. An angry red line ran down the center of his chest. Whatever they'd done to his heart by cutting him open had worked. Below his back was a mat that sensed his heart rate, his breathing, making minute adjustments to the drugs in both the air and those that went up through the mat, directly into his skin. Eyes closed, he lay so still, breathing only occasionally. The physician said this was for the best. Deliberately, he'd put him into semi-suspended animation to give his body time to heal. If he actually felt all the pain he was in, the agony would kill him.

A lone tear fell against the glass and she hastily wiped it away with the sleeve of her gown. She wanted to touch him, to hold his hand, to whisper in his ear how sorry she was and that she would do anything to fix the mess she had made. He was so near but still so far away.

Darkness had fallen outside the palace. To mimic the natural flow of day and night, the room where Viltori was kept was dark. Cool blue lights lined the edges of the walls so anyone who entered would have a sense of space. Bithia did not fear the darkness as some did. She welcomed the shadows, as they mimicked the gloom inside her heart. Even though the physician had insisted his prognosis was fair, Bithia read the truth in his eyes. Viltori's chances for a full recovery were slim. The men had beaten him so badly with their fists and feet that they had damaged every organ in his body. In their fury, they'd yanked hanks of his beautiful blond hair out by the roots. They'd pummeled his face until all that was left were two slits where his eyes should be and a crooked strip that roughly outlined his mouth.

Hesitantly, the physician had informed her that one of them had violated Viltori. When she sputtered that all of them had, he explained that wasn't what he meant. For a long moment, she'd glared at him, demanding he speak plainly. Cautiously he said that one of the men had raped him. Blinded by rage and fury, she almost didn't hear him explain that it was curious, as he was not torn, but the evidence of another man was clearly present. She breathed a sigh of relief that left the doctor baffled. She explained that Viltori hadn't been violated by one of the mob; he'd made love with Drahka. The physician nodded without censure, then made a note by summoning a blue floating screen. He'd left her alone after that, just as she'd asked. At least before all the trauma, Viltori had shared something wonderful with Drahka. Somehow, knowing they'd been together gave her peace.

Turning, she walked over to the bed upon which Drahka lay. He was not encased in glass. Bithia wanted to touch him, but did not wish to wake him. Like Viltori, he rested upon a mat that kept constant track of his health, dispensing medications, even providing heat should he grow cold. Even though he was bare below a clean gray sheet, she could still see every part of his form. How could a man so big be so motionless?

"My lady?"

Bithia turned. In the doorway stood her newly appointed protocol liaison. She was a beautiful woman, but Bithia expected no less from the bondmate to the mighty Chur. Cascading harvest-colored hair fell to her mid-calf and her eyes were a commanding jade. However, the most amazing thing about the woman was her remarkable intelligence. She knew the Harvest prophecy more fully than any other person on the entire planet.

"Enovese." Bithia nodded slightly, keeping her voice a whisper. "Have you found the answers I seek?"

Holding a book to her chest that was wider than her slender body, she offered, "I have, my lady."

With a last look at the two men she vowed to avenge, Bithia left the infirmary. As they walked toward the entrance of the palace, Enovese's steps were as silent as her own were. When Bithia glanced down, she noticed both of them were barefoot.

"Are the people assembled?"

"Yes, my lady." Enovese's posture was serene, but she betrayed her anxiety by chewing at her bottom lip.

In silence, they continued. Alternate flashes of determination and distress shot through her at what must be done. Part of her wanted revenge, but another part wept at the horror of vengeance. A line of guards pushed open the heavy wooden gates. When they stepped outside, crisp winter air chilled her bare feet, but then the crimson carpet she walked upon warmed them. Shimmers of heat rose into the night, melting back a circle of snow. Stars twinkled in the night sky, looking oddly cheery against the gloomy tableau.

In the center of the gardens, the block had been set in the pit. In a semicircle around the pitted slab of Onic rock stood most of the palace populace. Jewel tones sparkled amidst the wave of bland brown as most in attendance were slaves. Bithia now understood just how vast the palace was given the number of people who lived there. Blue-green House stood the closest to the block. Bithia wanted them to have a good, long look. Stricken faces lifted from the ground to her, then fell. If they searched for a flicker of forgiveness in her eyes, they found none.

Lifting a smooth black stone from a massive pile, Bithia tested the weight against her palm. Devoid of features, the oval rock was slippery in her grip and frightfully cold. As she moved on the carpeted walkway toward the block, the crowd grew utterly silent. Ambo lay below the pressor, a device that held him flat on his back, against the slab of stone. Walls along the four edges of the pressor created a basket.

“You have committed treason against the Onic Empire.” After uttering her accusation, she cast the first stone into the pressor. The weight was slight. The device barely moved. She looked down at Ambo’s flushed face. His mouth was unbound, but he could not speak; the pressor crushed down on his rotund belly, pushing his guts into his lungs, making speech impossible.

Defiant, he mouthed words at her, vicious and hateful words no doubt, but she couldn’t make them out. Moreover, she didn’t care. Ambo had spoken his last to her when he questioned her bonding to Drahka. Giving Ambo her back, she walk along the heated pathway, past the pile of stones, and took her place upon her throne. With a nod, she let the next accuser step up to the pile of rocks.

Once she had cast the first stone, any other person, citizen or slave, could step forward and state his or her own grievance against the condemned. Bithia wasn’t surprised that a long line of people stood silently waiting their turn. Ambo had wielded considerable power in the empire for scores of seasons; he’d wronged many people.

Bithia had other things she could have accused Ambo of, but by precedence, she stated the grievance for which he was put to the stone, not her own personal complaint. If she could, she would stand above him and cast stones until her voice gave out. By the prophecy, she spoke for the empire, not herself.

Black hair bound in a simple clip at the nape of her neck, her sister Kasmiri picked up a stone, her face grim as she approached the block. “You unleashed a monster unto the world.” She cast her stone, then turned, her loose black dress pressing against her body in the sudden gust of wind. At that moment, Bithia realized her sister was with child. Their eyes met across the expanse of crimson carpet. Subtly, her sister nodded while lowering her gaze, as if thanking her for finally delivering Ambo’s comeuppance.

Bithia wanted to ask why she’d refused to speak to her, but this was not the time. As Kasmiri drew close to her husband, she paused to kiss him, then left the gardens for the warmth of the palace.

Enovese set her book aside. She stood looking at the pile of rocks for a long time, as if debating whether to participate in Ambo’s stoning. A memory brought tears to her eyes and she grasped one. Walking smoothly toward him on her bare feet, her hair swaying with her movements, Enovese stood very

close to Ambo's head. "You told me I was nothing. I am not nothing." She threw the stone as hard as she could, then turned, swirling her black skirt around her ankles as she glided by the pile of rocks. She picked up her book and then came to Bithia's side.

Sterlave came forward. He selected his rock without looking at it, then marched to Ambo. "You abandoned Kasmiri and me on a world with the monster you created." He cast his stone into the pressor. He strode away without looking at Ambo. At her throne, he paused, bowed and then followed his bondmate inside.

When Chur stepped forward, there was an audible drawing-in of breath from the crowd. Bithia wasn't sure if their anticipation was because of his stunning appearance, for he glowed in the darkness, or curiosity about what he would say. She found herself leaning forward expectantly.

Hefting a stone in his fist, Chur strode to Ambo. "You conspired with others to have me killed when I was the Harvester." As soon as he threw the stone, the crowd released a collective breath.

Others stepped forward, selected their stone, moved to Ambo, gave voice to their accusation, cast the rock upon him and stepped back. Ambo had been put to the stone for treason, but the nature of the ritual let any give voice to their grievance. The number who stepped forward, and the natures of their accusations, several of which were repeated endlessly, shocked Bithia:

"You forced me to your bed."

"You killed my father."

"You raped my sister."

"You beat me."

"You stole from me."

"You lied to me."

"You have worked tirelessly to overturn my bonding."

"You have vilified me to others behind my back."

"You corrupted the true nature of the prophecy."

"You demanded bribes."

So many people accused him of taking bribes that Bithia wondered if he held the bulk of the money in the empire.

Stone by stone the pressor crushed Ambo against the block.

Once everyone had a chance to cast as many stones as they wished, Bithia stepped forward again. This time she had to stoop forward to grab one. As these were closer to the heated carpet, the highly polished stone felt warm in her hand. She looked toward the Onic Mountains. Much of what they used on Diola came from the soaring peaks, including the rocks they now tossed upon the traitor.

As she drew close, Ambo was no longer mouthing vileness. He sipped air in a desperate bid to stay alive. His eyes met hers. Terror filled his gaze, his eyes beseeching her for forgiveness. Her heart was

harder than the stone in her fist. She could summon no measure of mercy. If she wished to be kind, she could have had Ambo placed under a large stone that would have crush him immediately, but she'd forgone that clemency. She wanted Ambo to suffer as Viltori and Drahka now endured the trauma of their beatings.

"You conspired to kill the men I love." Bithia held the stone in her hand for a long time, feeling its warmth, thinking of the heat she might never feel from her two lovers again. Never had she professed to love anyone, but now she loved two men, and this man, this worthless bully who she could not even call a man, might have taken them both away for no other reason than his pathetic lust for power. "There is no forgiveness in my heart for the harm you have done to the empire, or to me."

Slowly, the rock tumbled from her fist. As it fell, lighting crystals around the area flashed across the polished surface, glittering into her eyes, causing her to squint. Ambo closed his eyes, holding his breath, as if that could save him.

Bithia's stone clinked against the mound in the pressor, and as she turned away, she heard a gruesome gushing *pop*. Simultaneous revulsion and relief shivered her spine. She looked to the Onic Mountains again. Had the gods let him suffer and squirm until her stone finished him? Was this their way of saying her accusation was just?

Turning to the crowd, Bithia nodded. "It is finished." Calmly assessing them, taking the time to catch and hold the gaze of the highest members of every House, she lifted her voice into the cold night. "Let this be a reminder to all that I rule the Onic Empire." Bithia stood tall, her glittering crimson dress sparkling. "To conspire against me is to conspire against the empire as a whole." She lowered her hand to the crushed remains of Ambo. Only his head had escaped the pressor. "Traitors will not be tolerated." Lowering her gaze to the members of Blue-green House, who were now splattered in Ambo's remains, she deliberately drilled her gaze into each pair of eyes as she spoke. "At dawn, we will assess the nature of your crime against the empire. In the circle, we will decide your punishment. I suggest you bring your most skilled protocol liaison."

At that, the highest member of Blue-green House allowed a self-satisfied little smirk to cross his face. It darted away as soon as he caught Bithia's direct gaze.

"Do not think yourself so blessed, for I have found a protocol liaison of my own." Turning, she sought out Enovese, who bowed with touching grace, her enormous book held to her chest. Confusion ate up the confidence of the man's gaze. Bithia realized he did not know who Enovese was. Not that she knew the woman well, but she knew enough to know there was no other person on the planet with Enovese's knowledge of the Harvest prophecy.

With a flick of her hand, Bithia summoned guards to take all the members of Blue-green House into custody. There would be no escaping to other worlds for refuge, as Ambo had sought to do.

As she turned away, there was a mumbling, a murmuring, the slightest show of dissent. Spinning back around, Bithia demanded, "Who grumbles against our royal decree?"

Dead silence.

After the longest moment, a bitter wind swept over the crowd, wiping away the heat that rose from the carpet. Bithia gave them all her back as she entered the palace. Alone, she returned to the room that held Viltori and Drahka. Blinking away her tears, she took a stand between the two beds.

“There is always a sacrifice.”

The voice came from everywhere and nowhere. Bithia whipped her head around but saw nothing. On the verge of calling out to her guards, she held back, for the voice was so familiar.

Into the room walked the handsome stranger who had taken her from Beserrah to Diola. Tall, muscular, his shape was reminiscent of someone else she knew, but before she could determine who, he moved out of the light of the hall and into the glowing blue darkness of the infirmary. Still, she’d seen a flash of the black band etched into his upper arm. Parallel lines against angles drew around his biceps in an endless circle.

“You.” She could say no more than that, for she didn’t know his name, or why he’d taken her away from all she knew to bring her to a world that had given her the heights of ecstasy, then the depths of pain.

“I.” He dropped to one knee, draping his hands over his bent leg, just as Sterlave and Chur had done earlier. After a moment, he tilted his face and his calm gaze hit her and held her immobile. “You must decide which one.”

“Which one what?”

Slow-motion seductive, the stranger stood. “Which one do you want more?”

Bithia looked between Viltori and Drahka. She didn’t know why she did, because she already knew she could not choose. “I want them both.”

Shaking his head, letting his shaggy brown hair with golden streaks fall over his face, he said, “No, Bithia. There is always a sacrifice.”

“I won’t choose.”

Lowering his chin, the handsome stranger held her gaze even with his subservient pose. “If you don’t pick one, you will lose them both.”

Bithia’s heart broke. “Who are you? Why would you do this to me?”

Sudden fury turned his body hard. Muscles flexed against tanned skin. “I do not do this to you. I am simply the messenger.”

Placing one hand upon Viltori’s glass coffin, she placed the other upon Drahka’s arm. When he moved, she stifled a gasp by yanking her hand away from Viltori’s glass cage.

“And the choice has been made.” With that, the handsome stranger exited the room, the curious eternal circle on his arm glowing golden.

Chapter Twenty

Lost in darkness, Drahka thought those who had gone before had finally condemned him to pay for his transgressions. Pain unlike any he'd known assaulted his body. He floated in agony, so alone and hurt he did not know what to do. A part of him gave up, almost embracing the endless crush of death, but another part longed for the loving embrace of the woman and man who inspired so much heat. And then, just when he thought he couldn't decide whether to fight against the pain to love again, or give up and face no more pain, a tentative touch to his hand made the choice for him.

When he blinked open his eyes, Bithia stood over him, one hand clasped to his, one covering her mouth. "Drahka?" She mumbled his name against her fingertips.

He moved his mouth, but nothing emerged. His vision of Bithia doubled, trebled. Her dress glittered blue, but he knew that was wrong. Bithia wore only red. Because of her, he wore only red. Then he saw the tiny blue lights along the floor. Closing his eyes, he took a deep breath. He had to know. "Viltori?" That was all he could summon.

"Oh, Drahka." Bithia clasped his hand, squeezing firmly.

He tried to squeeze back, but he could barely tighten his grip. Weak as a child, he tried again to open his eyes, to see where he was, but his head hurt terribly from the effort. With his eyes closed, all he could see was man after man kicking, punching and spitting at Viltori's limp body. What kind of warrior continued to pummel his opponent when he'd clearly surrendered?

Anger had rolled off the men like a stench. Such fury at Viltori, but Drahka didn't understand why. Both of them had offered to suck the man's cock. Drahka had offered so Viltori could run; Viltori offered so Drahka could run. However, that's not what the man wanted. He did not seek pleasure, only retribution.

After an exchange of words, Drahka realized the man in the rumpled suit wanted revenge for the embarrassment Viltori caused him. Before the most powerful members of the tribe at the bonding celebration, this man had been shamed. When Viltori refused his attentions, he lost face. Drahka didn't understand how beating Viltori would return him to prestige.

Two against twenty was unjust, but there was little they could do to stop such a determined group. Reason would not work. Pacification held no promise. They wanted blood. In the end, rather than one of them running to safety, they'd both stayed to fight. Drahka had a quick glimpse of a young man with black hair and blue eyes who Viltori urged to run, but then the group was upon them. Drahka had tried to fight

them off, but they glommed onto him to keep him occupied while they went after Viltori. Bared teeth amidst snarls made him realize they would not stop until Viltori was dead.

Panic infused his body with great strength, but even he wasn't big enough to prevail against so many. He knew he'd killed at least two men, maybe more, but none of that meant anything if Viltori were gone.

"Dead?"

"Please don't speak." Bithia leaned close to whisper in his ear, her scent of flowers and growing things soothing. "I have the men in holding. They will be dealt with."

Drahka couldn't find the breath to tell her that he didn't care about those men, or what happened to them, all he cared about was his teacher, his friend. Words refused to form and he fell back into a dreamy mist.

There was something from the exchange he'd forgotten, something that was terribly important about his relationship with his chosen. The man in the rumpled suit had taken great glee in telling Drahka this information. All Drahka remembered was that the comprehension of it hurt. Whatever the man said was like a punch to Drahka's gut, but no matter how hard he dug at the hidden knowledge, he could not uncover it. When struggling to remember hurt his head, he stopped trying to understand. He would find out soon enough.

Bithia stayed close, her scent and her heat filling him with hope that he would live to see another day. If only Viltori would be there with him, he could sleep in peace. And then, as if he had tried to protect himself from the truth, he realized Bithia's refusal to answer told him all he needed to know.

Tears fell from behind closed eyes as he mourned the loss of not only his friend and teacher, but also a great man. Finding a small measure of strength, he lightly gripped Bithia's hand.

On a shuddering gasp, she placed her head gently against his chest. Tears fell onto his skin, confirming the truth.

Viltori was no more.

Drahka entered a massive circular room lined with chairs in ever-expanding rows. Some seats were low in the pit and others rose along the edges. Drahka thought the rings of chairs looked like flower petals. Cacophony dropped to sudden silence. He was aware of murmurings, subtly pointing fingers, but he didn't care. His thoughts were far from this room. Beside him, Bithia moved with her arm linked through his, gently guiding him to the two highest chairs. He sat with grim dignity, his gaze on the far edge of the room. A few steps behind came Enovese, Bithia's new protocol liaison.

"I call this meeting to order." Bithia settled into her chair, Enovese stood beside her. A blue screen floated before Bithia, which might have impressed Drahka before, but now he did not care what it was or how it worked. Lighting crystals filled the room with pure, white light, but all he saw was darkness. Shadows had covered his heart, and not even the brightness of the twin suns could banish them.

As befitted his rank, he did not cry or let any emotion flicker across his face. That was reserved for alone-time with his chosen. He swallowed hard. Drahka finally remembered what the man in the rumpled suit had so elatedly told him—he was not actually Bithia’s chosen. Since he had not completed the ritual bonding, he was not actually her consort. They considered him only her lover, which held no status. Bithia had her protocol liaison working endlessly to have him reinstated, but so far, there wasn’t anything in her massive books that could fix the mess Drahka had made. If only he’d performed the ceremony the way Viltori had told him to, but he hadn’t, because Drahka desperately wanted to be alone with Bithia.

When he wondered why it mattered so much, Bithia told him that if he were not officially her consort, any child they created would be illegitimate. It took a great deal of time and effort for her to explain the meaning of that word. His tribe had no such label. The only way a child in his tribe could be rejected was by his or her own actions. The two people who created the child mattered not at all. Here, on Diola, the origins of the child mattered greatly, mainly to the empress. In her careful way, Enovese had explained to him how important legitimacy was for the royal line.

When he suggested repeating the ceremony, Enovese shook her head, making her fascinating hair dance not only around her shoulders but also all the way to the floor. “There is no protocol for that, but I am doing my best to find a solution.” Her voice held genuine regret that she couldn’t give him the answer he wanted. Softly she added that Bithia had already asked. Even if they could repeat the ceremony, Bithia and the heads of the Houses must agree on the appointment of a new magistrate. Until the issue was resolved, their relationship held no power, but Bithia refused to follow the dictates of her own laws. She continued to dress him in red and determinedly called him her consort. Bithia did this like a tiny hand attempting to grip the entire world. No matter how tightly she clung, she could not make her wishes so just by her will alone.

Still, her resolve and strength impressed him. At night, when they lay together in the big bed, bodies pressed tightly under the ruby covers, the scent of Viltori becoming ever more a memory, that was the only time when Bithia let go of her rigid control. Sobbing in great gasps, she cried herself to sleep against him, holding him firmly as he did the same to her. Mingling tears soothed them into slumber, but horrifying dreams ripped them right back out. Since he’d left the infirmary, they hadn’t been able to share their bodies. Each time they tried, Viltori’s absence hung over the moment, shrouding them in black.

“You violate the prophecy yourself!”

The accusation drew Drahka back to the present and the circular room, now stifling hot with so many bodies. While he’d been thinking, hundreds more people had pressed into the space, lining the walls and eating up every walkway between the chairs. In this one room, there were more people than in Drahka’s whole tribe. Colors glittered from very deep to very pale, making his eyes blink from overload. A multitude of distinct perfumes filled the air, invading his lungs, making him dizzy. Clinging to the arms of his chair, he fought through the nausea, determined to see the men who killed Viltori punished.

“We are not here to debate my actions.” Bithia lifted her entire body. She sat so straight her back didn’t even touch the padding behind her. “This meeting is about Blue-green House and the crimes the House committed against Viltori.”

“A citizen cannot commit a crime against a servant.” Blue-green House’s protocol liaison spoke with cool authority. Robed in copper, the man was almost entirely unremarkable but for a deep purple stain that ran from under his right eye to the edge of his mouth. He’d styled his long brown hair to the side, as if to cover the mark, but each time he threw back his shoulders, he revealed ever more of the splotch.

“Viltori was not a servant, but an acolyte.” Enovese’s voice filled the room despite her diminutive stature. Fascinated gazes ate her up whenever she spoke. Her beautiful hair fell over one shoulder, sparkling against her copper robe. As the bondmate to the greatest Harvester ever known, Enovese wore a highly decorative black sash that encircled her slender waist. The upper edge of the sash was trimmed in crimson, showing all that she was protocol liaison to Bithia. Drahka found her so much more pleasant to look at and listen to than the other liaison, whose sash was simple and medium blue-green.

“He was dressed in brown as a servant.” Stain-face spoke through his nose, which gave his voice a most annoying whine. “From readings in Kipfer’s unabridged Harvest Text, it’s clear that the color brown indicated his rank as a slave.” Smiling broadly at Enovese, the liaison pointedly asked, “You are familiar with Kipfer’s text, are you not?”

A great pause silenced the room as all gazes fell on Enovese. Drahka didn’t move, but internally he leaned forward, curious if she was as well-read as she seemed. He hoped so. He and Bithia needed a strong liaison to see them through the wealth of troubles that mired them.

“Kipfer’s in the ancient language?” Enovese turned, hefting an oversized book into her arms. Even a bare bit away, Drahka could smell the animal hide that bound the pages. “Or did you read the translation by Picer?”

Stain face’s nose twitched slightly. Just a bare wiggle caused by him lifting his lips and lowering his brows at the same time. Clearly, he’d not expected Enovese to respond as she had.

“If you read Kipfer’s in the ancient language,” Enovese said, “you would know that when a person is wearing mixed colors, the color of the highest rank takes precedence.”

There was a long pause as several people in the audience murmured quietly. Drahka couldn’t tell if they agreed or disagreed with Enovese.

“I don’t see how that applies here.” Stain-face spoke while holding his gaze steady on Enovese. In his eyes, Drahka saw he knew he was lying, but he had to follow the whispered urgings of the man beside him. As the higher-ranking member of Blue-green House, he had the right to prompt his liaison if he saw fit. Drahka noticed that Bithia did not do the same. She let Enovese speak freely according to her own mind.

“Viltori’s shirt was white, thus indicating his station as an acolyte.” Enovese returned the enormous book to the table behind her, but it was clear the other liaison would not win by knowledge alone.

Realizing that argument was lost, Stain-face turned to another disagreement. "There is no precedence for punishment of one who inadvertently kills an acolyte."

"Then you concede Viltori was an acolyte?" Enovese lifted her nose as she peered down at the man.

"His station hardly matters." Upper lip twisting in annoyance, the liaison nodded snidely. "However, for the sake of argument, Blue-green House concedes his rank as acolyte."

Nodding, Enovese turned again to the table, this time picking up a loose sheaf of pages. Flipping through them, she asked, "Are you acquainted with the works of Esslean of Plete?"

Frowning, Stain-face paused before answering, "I know he established the rules governing recruits, but I don't see what he has to do with this. We are not conducting an Esslean tribunal." No one could miss the mocking in the man's voice. He chided Enovese as if she were clearly out of her depth. Several people in the audience snickered behind cupped hands.

"Of course not." Enovese smiled warmly. "The man you represent could hardly lift an *avenyet* let alone compete against other men in a fair challenge."

Several people let out long, low *oos* of surprise that Enovese had tossed the insult at the man so effortlessly.

For the first time in a long time, Drahka felt a grin longing to spread across his face. Enovese wasn't just beautiful, but she was smart and witty.

The mark on Stain-face darkened visibly while the man beside him sputtered, "I am better than any recruit!"

"Are you?" Enovese asked, tilting her head. Her hair glittered in the light.

Despite his liaison's attempts to calm and still him, the man shot to his feet and bellowed, "That worthless *cratifan* dared to refuse me!"

Stain-face darted his gaze to Enovese, witnessed her slowly spreading smile, and then dropped his gaze to the floor in defeat. Shaking his head, he began to gently gather the papers spread out before him.

"You demanded sexual satisfaction from an acolyte." Enovese lifted her brows. "Kipfer's original, Kipfer's translation by Picer, and the writings of Esslean of Plete all agree on one salient point: Acolytes belong to the gods. No servant or citizen, not even the empress herself, can *demand* sexual favors from an acolyte."

Eyes wide and face suddenly pale, the man returned to his seat. By his own bold proclamation, he had destroyed his defense.

Desperate to restore some type of justification, Stain-face, said, "But he was confused by his brown trousers."

"You already conceded that Viltori was an acolyte."

The liaison's mouth hung open, for he realized Enovese had subtly directed him along this path from the moment they started their debate. Ever so slowly, he closed his mouth, but Drahka saw how his mind

turned the proceedings over, looking for some way to save the man at his side. Drahka had a feeling that if he failed, the liaison would lose face with his family.

Lifting her gaze to all those in the audience, Enovese said, "The prophecy regarding placing such a demand on an acolyte is open to interpretation, but the penalty for killing an acolyte for not performing a sexual act is clear."

"He didn't kill him because of that!" Stain-face blurted.

Face open and expectant, Enovese waited for him to continue.

Thinking quickly, he said, "He refused to give way." Nodding quickly as if encouraging himself, Stain-face added, "He deliberately blocked the hall refusing to grant a citizen passage."

"One man blocked an entire hallway?" Enovese considered for a moment. "Just how tall are you claiming Viltori was?"

Was.

Drahka lost whatever grin he'd gained. This wasn't a joking matter. Viltori was gone and this man didn't want to suffer the consequences of his actions. Worse, the liaison refused to even call Viltori by his name. Drahka sat and considered that the man Stain-face defended would probably be left alone at some point. Alone and vulnerable. It wouldn't take much to kill him. But at least Drahka would give him a chance. He would fight one-on-one, not track the man down with a group of other men. No, Drahka would like to kill him with his bare hands.

Drahka returned to the current situation when a short, thin man dressed in a faded version of blue-green rushed to the table where the accused sat. Whispering into the liaison's ear, he pulled back, then nodded profusely.

"The point ceases to matter because, technically, Viltori is not dead."

A simultaneous gasp from the crowd echoed in the room.

Drahka's eyes darted to Bithia, then away. He'd begged her, but she would not listen, and now her refusal to let Viltori go would allow his killer to escape unpunished.

Enovese quietly said, "For all intents and purposes, Viltori is dead."

"He's being held in stasis. Until that support is withdrawn, he's considered alive. I can cite chapter and verse from several sources, as I'm sure can you." Stain-face glared at Enovese as if it was her idea to try to trick him, but Drahka knew it was Bithia's idea. "We will return to debating this matter when the man is actually dead."

Smugly, the accused stood. His self-satisfied smile dropped suddenly when he met Drahka's intense gaze. Making sure he was well-surrounded by his brothers, he left with a group of guards trailing him. He was afforded limited freedoms until the matter was resolved. To ensure he didn't leave the palace, guards followed him everywhere. It kept him on planet but prevented Drahka from taking his own vengeance.

"I am sorry, my lady." Enovese bowed. "I did my best."

With a lifted hand in dismissal, Bithia turned her gaze to the people who slowly departed. Disappointment filled their faces, for they had hoped to see the matter resolved today. Possibly, they hoped for another bloody demonstration of the block. Wherever Drahka went lately, people couldn't stop talking about what happened to Ambo. They acted shocked and disgusted, but he saw a curious bloodlust in their eyes, like the way his tribe had willingly watched his companion's execution.

"Perhaps now you will let him go," Drahka said softly, so only Bithia could hear.

Bithia barely moved her lips as she said, "Do not start that again, not here." She rose with dignity, keeping her head held high despite the failure to get revenge.

Drahka followed her up. When she looped her arm through his, he gripped her elbow firmly with his other hand. "I will not permit you to go and see him again." He found the situation morbid. Bithia would spend hours touching the glass coffin that held Viltori, but Drahka knew the man was long gone. What she held her vigil over was nothing but a shell. "He is no more. Clinging to the form he occupied is disturbed."

She would have yanked her arm from his, but with his grip on her elbow, she couldn't. "Let go of me," she hissed through clenched teeth.

"No." Determined to confront her, he forcefully guided her along the hallways. Bithia held her tongue only so as not to attract attention. Once inside her suite, he closed and locked the door.

Flinging herself away from him, she gave him her back as she eyed the servant's door. With a quick glance over her shoulder, she ran, but even injured, Drahka was faster. He caught her about the waist.

"You can't stop me!" She struggled so hard she tore her dress along the waist.

Refusing to argue, Drahka carried her to the bed, tossed her down and then leapt upon her before she could slip away. Beating at his chest, she kicked and squirmed, ripping at his shirt, but there was no way she would ever move him. Breathless, frustrated, she finally stopped struggling. Silent tears fell, and he kissed them away.

"I am still here."

At that, she winced, realizing how her cleaving to a dead man had hurt him more deeply than the initial loss had.

"I miss him so much." Eyes closed, Bithia grasped his shoulders, clinging to him rather than pushing him away.

"So do I." Drahka kissed her lips, tasting her sorrow. "But what you are doing will not bring him back."

At first, the physician had been hopeful that Viltori would recover, but the damage was so great they'd placed him in semi-suspended animation. Drahka had not understood the concept until the doctor explained. The problem was, Viltori was healing at the same slow rate at which he was living. A lifetime would pass before he even partially recovered. Drahka thought the doctor did this to avoid Bithia's wrath for not saving Viltori; however, all he'd done was prolong her agony.

“We must let him go.” Before she could argue, he kissed her, not hard, but firmly, showing her he needed her. “I cannot live without you and him both.” It was difficult enough to let one go; he could not abide losing both of them. “Please, don’t turn me away.”

Bithia opened her eyes. As he and Viltori had asked her to do, she left them bare. Beautiful mismatched eyes that reflected the depth of her sorrow.

“There will come a time when his passing won’t hurt so deeply. I promise.” When his tribe killed his companion, he thought the pain would never end, but slowly, each day, the ache receded just a tiny bit, until there came a time when thinking of him felt better than it hurt.

“I don’t want to forget him.” Tightly she pressed her lips together, determined to stop crying.

“We will never forget him.” Lying above her, balanced on one arm, he cupped her face. “One day we will be able to remember him without tears.” Tenderly he ran his hand along the fasteners of her dress, sliding the fabric away from her body, kissing the skin he revealed. “He will always be with us.” Lips against her neck, he worked his way across her shoulder, down her arm and all the way to the tips of her fingers. They were cold so he breathed against them, holding them within his hand as he pressed them against his lips.

Moaning, Bithia surrendered against the bed, her eyes closed and her mouth partially open as she uttered low sounds of encouragement from the back of her throat.

Drahka continued to peel away her dress, warming her with his breath and body heat as he went. Once she was bare, he pulled off his shirt, his pants, and tossed them over the side of the bed. Carefully he pushed the covers down and then drew them up and over their nude bodies. Pressing against Bithia, he turned her head up, angling for another kiss.

Nude, they lay twined together, simply kissing and touching. When Drahka grew hard, he sighed with relief, for he’d begun to believe he would never become aroused again. Bithia felt strong and sleek beside him, her body writhing against his, as if she wished to rub her entire form against his. Her fingertips glossed lightly over him, touching him everywhere, as if to reassure herself he was whole. There were bruises, but the deep gashes in his chest were gone, magically erased by the physician’s skilled blade.

Lowering his hand to cup her breast, he dragged his thumb across her nipple, teasing the bud to firmness before enveloping it with his lips. Drawing the tight little nub into his mouth caused Bithia to clutch her hands to his head. Her answering moan shivered pleasure down his spine.

Maneuvering gently, Bithia nudged him onto his back. He resisted at first, because he wanted to give to her, but he relented at the pleading look on her face. Lying still below her, he let Bithia straddle across his hips, her nipples rubbing against his chest as she brought her mouth to his.

“I need,” she whispered. “I need you so much.”

Her voice touched him so deeply inside he grasped her hips to hold back his answering tears. He had cried enough. Instead, stroking her, he whispered back, “I need you too.”

Cupping his face, she looked into his eyes, then kissed him, softly, sweetly, her lips gentle against his as if he were fragile. Drahka knew she worried not about hurting him, but she needed tenderness and not the hot, fiery passion they'd shared before. This wasn't frantic mating but something far deeper, what he'd come to call love. Despite the empty space left by Viltori's absence, there was still love between them. So delicate now, it would only grow stronger if they allowed their devotion to show.

As difficult as it was for him to lie passive, he did, willing to let Bithia set the pace. So many nights had passed where they couldn't summon the energy, the will or, he suspected, overcome their guilt, to engage one another. Pleased they'd finally found their way back, he reveled in the feel of his chosen's body against his.

Bithia nuzzled her face to his, softly placing her lips along his cheeks, his nose and his brow as if she could memorize his features with her lips. Toying gently with the dark hair along his chest, she rubbed her fingertips across his nipples, sending liquid fire along his flesh. His cock twitched against her belly and she moaned.

Lifting up, arching her back, she reached down between their bodies and angled his cock to the entrance of her glory. Her hand was now hot and moist, feeling wonderful against his still-hardening flesh. Her welcoming wetness and heat caused him to buck up, pressing the tip against her.

Contact caused both of them to shiver.

Powerful needs shook him. His chest rose and fell so fast he grew dizzy. Forcibly he calmed himself. Gazing up at Bithia's face, he lifted his hand and cupped her cheek. "Never have I seen a woman as beautiful as you, my chosen. Those who have gone before blessed me greatly the day they sent me here."

Gently she smiled. Keeping their bodies poised for union, she hesitated. "You don't regret anything?"

Every moment, from his first day on Diola to what had transpired today flashed through his mind. "No." He shook his head. "I closed myself down to learning your ways." If he had been more open, he would have had more time with Viltori and handled his initial encounter with Bithia with far more grace. He almost winced at how he'd treated her. However, despite all his mistakes, he would not be the same man now if he'd done things differently. "I wouldn't change anything."

At that, she nodded. "I wouldn't, either."

In that moment, they made peace with Viltori's passing.

Moving together, he lifting up, she sliding down, they joined their bodies. Slick heat smoothed down his shaft, making him groan and dig his fingertips into her hips, holding her still, giving him a chance to feel the completeness of their joining. Relief swept him that they'd found their way back to one another. Never would Viltori be far from their thoughts, but he would be grateful he had not ruined their relationship. Drahka believed Viltori wanted them to move on together, not stay mired in the past that would never be. Tossing up a prayer to those who had gone before, Drahka asked them to guide Viltori into their ranks.

Gripping him, moving her insides in that grasping rhythm, Bithia ground her clit against his body, rolling him inside her in a tight circle. Swiveling her hips was like adding kindling to an already raging fire. Bursting into an explosion of sparks, his body cried out for release. Building their movements slowly, bodies sliding, sweating as they worked, a slow-motion orgasm lifted up from his toes and fingers and jetted out from him in a rush.

Replete, Drahka wrapped his arms around Bithia and crushed her to his chest as she climaxed. Her glory contracted so hard around him she almost pushed him out, but he held her and thrust himself deeply within. Cradling her close, he had a moment of sheer panic when he wondered if he'd filled her with his child.

Chapter Twenty-One

Viltori had never considered himself a slave, but now he was a thrall to pain. Agony beyond comprehension tormented every cell in his body. Suffering was his world. Misery was his shadow. He wanted to die, but something held him back. A great wall rose up around him, keeping him from releasing his spirit unto *Jarasine*.

As an acolyte, Viltori had intently studied all the gods, goddesses, their powers and the rituals that governed their sacrifices. They taught him that if he had faith, they would reward him with an afterlife of ease among the clouds. If he failed to live up to his potential, he would drift forever after in the nothingness, watching the mortal realm and hoping he happened upon one foolish enough to grant him entrance. If they dared, he would wreak vengeance upon the mortal realm for being denied access to *Jarasine*.

Fear surged when he thought he might be a *fauben*, a fallen one. Had he died and the gods found him so unworthy they cast him out? What had he done that had been so horrible they would punish him ever after?

Viltori scrolled through his life. Those he'd hated, those he'd ignored and those he'd loved flashed through his consciousness. With the last, his mind found solace. Thinking of Bithia and Drahka gave him surcease from the pain. If he had only one regret he could rectify, it would be that he'd never fully expressed his love to Bithia. The morning below the ruby covers with Drahka caused joy to burst into his body like tiny flashes of intense fire that incinerated his pain. Had he put aside his pride and joined with Bithia, he might be able to eliminate his agony, or at least let go, and move on, but he'd been too worried about rights and position.

What a fool he'd been.

Viltori should have grabbed every moment he could while he could. In a flash of profound awareness, he realized that was the sadness of life; he did not regret anything he'd done, he regretted only things he hadn't done. Foolish to worry on those missed opportunities now, because he knew the gods wouldn't grant him a second chance. Miraculous things had happened to a handful of people in the Onic Empire in the last two seasons, but Viltori had done nothing of greatness, nor had he sacrificed anything of himself. He didn't think withholding a climax from Bithia counted as much of an offering. Surely, the gods laughed at his puny, worthless oblation.

A new thought crept into this mind, taking his attention away from his pain for a while. He wondered what had happened to Drahka. After he screamed at Rown to run away, he'd suffered a series of blows that knocked him to the floor. He'd lost all coherent thought as they turned to kicking rather than punching. The last thing he saw was Drahka smacking two heads together in a sickening crunch as they slammed into each other face first. As mighty as he was, he could not beat down twenty angry men.

The only way to ease his mind was to imagine Drahka survived. Had he, Drahka could soothe Bithia. Tears fell beyond Viltori's closed lids, stinging horribly as they fell into open wounds along his face. How he would have rejoiced in their bond. Had he survived, he would have put everything aside, including his stupid pride, to fully share his world with two people eager to share their worlds with him.

Drahka, so serious, all along hiding his astounding intelligence, and Bithia, the flirt, hiding behind sex as a way to reassure herself she was worthy of love. Had Viltori been brave enough, he could have shown her the truth. She was beyond worthy. So great was her due, the gods had sent two men to her. Sadly, one hadn't been courageous enough. Viltori's only hope was that Drahka would give her the love she so deeply needed and deserved.

Wondering now what would have happened if he'd just fallen to his knees and satisfied the two men in the basin room, Viltori almost laughed. Bringing the two excitable fools to climax would have taken so little of his time and might have been more enjoyable by shaming them with their greedy lust. Nothing humiliated a man more than making him climax with barely a touch, and Viltori knew all the secret spots. Yet he'd held to principal. It was wrong for them to demand. Had they asked, he probably still would have said no, out of respect for his relationship with Bithia and Drahka, but still he wondered what if?

With his life held in oblivion, Viltori had plenty of time to consider what might have been. What happened to the recruits he'd shared fleeting moments with? What of the girls from his village before he'd come to the palace? Had he broken any hearts in his need for satisfaction? He honestly hoped not. None had hurt him. Always, he'd looked to his lovers with an open heart and an even more open mind. When it came to sex, nothing was out of bounds. Viltori didn't think he'd ever put his needs before his companion's needs, but perhaps he inadvertently had. Was that why he was being punished? Despair gripped him when he thought he had unintentionally slighted someone.

Muffled voices drew his attention away from himself. They talked so fast they sounded like buzzing insects. He laughed at that. People as bugs. Bithia with wings. She would make a lovely picture with her spiky black hair, enormous eyes and great spanning gossamer wings. But what of Drahka? To lift his bulk into the air would take a gigantic wingspan. Not only that, but he would look silly flittering about. Time and again the buzzing voices came and went. Too, he sensed light and dark shifting very quickly. What was wrong with him? Why was everything around him moving so fast? He swore he'd heard Bithia's voice several times, but the noise was so fleeting he couldn't fully grasp on to her.

Frustrated, he stopped bothering to understand where he was or why he was there. All he knew was he hurt and if he couldn't return to those he loved, he wanted to die.

Chapter Twenty-Two

As Bithia entered the infirmary, she caught a young man with unruly black hair leaning over Viltori's glass case. Terrified blue eyes leapt from him to her. Before he could run, Bithia lifted her hand. "Wait!"

Trembling, he lowered his head submissively. He was dressed in a brown robe with a black sash trimmed in crimson. She recognized him as the young man she'd chased away from Viltori in the large bathing pool in the *tishiary*, which explained his fear of her, but she also knew he was the one who alerted Sterlave about the attack. If not for his quick feet, Drahka might be dead. Moreover, the guards posted all along this wing of the palace wouldn't let anyone harmful near Viltori.

"You must be Rown." She tried for a bright air, but that was impossible given the room, the circumstance and what she had come to do. Drahka had grudgingly agreed to give her time alone to say her final goodbye. When the twin suns set, they would meet here and remove all support from Viltori.

Rown nodded miserably.

"Please look at me."

Warily, he looked up. The redness from crying had only enhanced the white shards in his soft blue eyes.

"I wanted to thank you for what you did."

His bottom lip trembled. Fresh tears slid down his cheeks. Body slumping forward, his shoulders sloped down, curving in toward his chest as if he were curling himself up into a ball.

Bithia had no idea why her statement would cause so much pain. "You're a hero."

A cry like a wounded animal escaped him as he shook his head. "I ran like a coward!"

Understanding now, she regretted her statement. "No." Stepping toward him, she took his shoulders into her hands, forcing him to stand tall despite his still-bowed head. "You saved Drahka's life."

Darting his tormented gaze to Viltori's passive form, he said, "If I would have fought, I might have saved him too."

Below her hands, Rown's shoulders were strong, but slight. As an *ungati*, he was trained for gratification, not combat. He no more knew how to throw a punch than she did. Softly she said, "You were made for pleasure, Rown, not fighting. You did the right thing." If he'd stayed, those men would have killed him.

Lifting his head, meeting her gaze, he took a deep breath, then blurted, "I miss him so much!"

"I know." Embracing him, Bithia wrapped her arms around him, hugging him to her chest. Gasping sobs escaped him as he tried to collect himself, but her soothing words and touch told him she didn't mind. "I miss him too." Somehow, the act of comforting another person who cared about Viltori gave her strength. Her eyes watered, but she held her tears in check. Right now, this young man needed to release his grief, and she would gladly help. Beyond Rown's tousled hair, she saw Viltori, lying so still. Closing her eyes, she squeezed Rown against her as if hugging Viltori one last time.

"He was so smart." Rown hiccupped, his arms surprisingly strong about her waist. "And funny. He was always joking around and he was fascinated by you." Rubbing his cheek against her, he took a deep breath. "Viltori was a good friend."

With one hand to his back and the other against his head, Bithia stood holding Rown until his tears abated and he caught his breath. Such a simple show of kindness gave her the strength she would need to let Viltori go.

"I want to ask you something and I want your honest opinion." As soon as the words left her mouth, she wanted to call them back. She already knew the answer. Why would she wish to further torment this tenderhearted young man?

Rown nodded, his chin hard against the top of her breast.

Since it was too late for her to turn back now, she plunged ahead. "Would Viltori want to stay alive forever trapped in that glass cage?"

Stepping back, Rown forced her arms to release him. He turned to Viltori and whispered, "No, my lady. Viltori was a man who rarely stood still." He winced, closing his eyes. "Trapping him in there forever would be cruel." Rown looked to her face, then his gaze dropped to her chest. Grabbing the end of his sash, he briskly rubbed the fabric across her breasts in an effort to mop up his tears. Suddenly realizing where he was touching her, Rown turned bright red and yanked his hand to his side. "My lady, I'm sorry, I made a mess."

"It doesn't matter." She brushed her hand across the bodice of her dress. A few tears and sniffles were not going to hurt anything. By the end of this day, she imagined her own and Drahka's would cover her. Besides, one more man touching her breasts wouldn't hurt anything, either. "Has your mistress come to see him?"

Rown shook his head, causing a clump of black curls to fall across his gaze. "Kasmiri did not know him."

Bithia remembered the brief glance she and her half-sister had exchanged across the gardens during Ambo's stoning. "Why does she refuse to meet with me?" Her own sister rejecting her cut cruelly into her self-esteem. Bad enough her own mother and father could not abide her, but her half-sister? What had Bithia ever done to Kasmiri?

Confusion twisted Rown's face. "My lady, she said it was you who refused her."

Upon a deep breath, Bithia realized the truth. “Ambo.” For some reason he did not wish for them to speak. Perhaps Kasmiri had the answers Bithia sought. “Will you take me to her?”

A genuine smile transformed Rown’s whole demeanor. He stood tall and nodded toward the door. “I would be honored, my lady.”

“And that’s why I didn’t force the issue.” Kasmiri settled delicately into the puffy chair across from Bithia, arranging her black dress over her swollen belly. “After all, you are the empress, and Ambo insisted you refused me as your sister due to my illegitimacy.”

Ironical that Bithia had been discussing that term with Drahka just a few days ago. “I would never refuse you.” Personally, she agreed with Drahka that the origins of a child didn’t matter one bit. What mattered was the child. Bithia set her cup on the low table between them. Muttering under her breath, she swore, “If Ambo were still alive, I would kill him.”

Kasmiri laughed, then sobered. “Ambo was a greedy, vicious man who cared nothing about those he hurt.” Brown eyes darted toward a generous bank of windows that overlooked the gardens.

Bithia offered, “I am truly sorry if the activities there have lessened your enjoyment of the view.”

Rubbing her belly absently, Kasmiri shook her head. “No, it has no impact. He deserved his punishment. All those citizens and servants lined up to cast stones... Clearly, Ambo hurt many, many people.”

After hearing the story of Kasmiri and Sterlave’s adventure, Bithia understood just how deeply her sister’s hatred of Ambo went.

“By his actions, he almost killed me and my bondmate.” Gripping her glass so tightly she practically put dents into the surface, Kasmiri said, “He destroyed our mother, taking all of her wealth to keep his mouth shut, and in the end, he still betrayed her!”

“He took all of her wealth?” With her constant bed-hopping, she’d never even thought about her inheritance.

“You did not know?” Kasmiri looked mortified to be the one to tell her. “I’m sorry, I assumed...”

“I guess I thought someone was watching over it.” She cringed. “Besides Ambo.” She took a measured sip of her drink, then set the cup down as her mind whirled. “I don’t know why I’m surprised. At the stoning, so many stepped forward and accused him of taking bribes that he seemed to have stuck his fat, greedy fingers into everyone’s pockets.” She would have to have someone locate those funds and return them. It seemed she herself must stand in that line with hundreds, possibly thousands, of others.

“Please accept my most humble apology.” Kasmiri trembled, and Bithia realized her sister thought she would punish her for telling her an unwelcome truth.

“Better that I know than not, yes?” In an effort to calm her further, Bithia asked, “What was our mother like?” To give her nervous hands something to do, she grasped the cup again, taking another sip. She couldn’t remember what Kasmiri called the strong and sweet drink, but the purple liquid warmed her and filled the air with the most appealing fragrance.

“Clathia was beautiful.” Relaxing into the velvety black fabric of the chair, Kasmiri cupped her glass in one palm as she cradled it with the other. “Well, of course you know that, you’ve seen the paintings of her, but she was strong too. She climbed *galbol* trees for sport.” Kasmiri described the trees as massive with spiky branches that spiraled around the trunk. “She was as devoted to the gods as she was to her empire.” After a brief hesitation Kasmiri finished, “And no matter what a rude, insensitive idiot I was, she still loved me.”

Despite her best efforts, embarrassing tears filmed Bithia’s gaze. Abruptly she stood, depositing her cup to the table before moving off to the windows. Mounds of clean, white snow covered all traces of the activities that had transpired below. Regardless of the gruesome nature of the punishment, Ambo had earned every bit of torment he’d received. Her breath misted the glass. Bithia wiped it away with the palm of her hand.

Kasmiri drew near, standing silently beside her, her hands low on her stomach as if holding the child within. A brief flash of envy shot through Bithia, but she pushed the unwelcome thought away. She was happy for her sister. What felt like jealousy was actually longing. Only now did she acknowledge how deep her disappointment was when the physician told her she wasn’t pregnant.

“How can it be that our mother never carried me?” From all Bithia had gleaned from careful conversations, Clathia carried only one child: the woman at her side.

Hesitantly, Kasmiri explained. “The technology has been used for seasons to create *paratanists*.” Somewhat ashamed, she precisely explained how the elements of male and female Harvesters were combined after the Harvest to create children, who were then carried by *tanists*, who in turn were harvested to bring forth *paratanists*. “Your new protocol liaison was created from this ritual.”

“Enovese?” From what Undanna had taught her, *paratanists* were untouchable servants given to the Harvesters. They lived their lives in silence, speaking only when spoken to, and they were forever shrouded in bland beige robes with enormous cowl hoods that hid their faces. Bithia would very much like to learn how Enovese and Chur had become bonded.

Kasmiri nodded, then hastened to add, “No more is this ritual practiced. Chur, Enovese’s bondmate, put an end to this. Now, after the Harvest, the male and female Harvesters mate in the traditional way.”

“Like Kerrick and Ariss.” Bithia knew that someday, the child they’d created, the first true *paratanist* in thousands of seasons, would rule by her side. However, she had not understood all the details until now. No wonder Ambo did not want her to talk to her sister. Kasmiri was the one person who could give her the details that mattered.

“All someone needed was a viable sample from our mother and your father, and then a woman to carry you.”

“Where would they get such a sample...” Bithia trailed off, deep in thought. Just at the edge of her mind, the answer waited. Closing her eyes forced her thoughts deeper and there she found the solution. Popping her eyes open, she turned to her sister and blurted, “The breeding cage.”

Kasmiri shuddered. Clearly, she knew what the cage was and the purpose behind it. In order to secure the throne, Bithia had to enter the cage and subject herself to a myriad of mental and medical tests. She’d never spoken to anyone about her experiences there; however, that would be how someone could get a viable sample from Clathia. As to her father, that wouldn’t be difficult, given the fact the man had sex with just about everyone he met. Bithia was convinced her penchant for lust was inherited from her father.

“I don’t think Mother ever entered the cage.” Doubt creased lines on Kasmiri’s forehead and along the sides of her mouth. “I didn’t.”

“Of course not.” Thoughts spinning, Bithia placed one hand on the glass to steady herself. “Ambo knew you were not legitimate. He never would have let you enter the cage. Had you, everyone would have known the truth. Ambo wouldn’t have had anything to hold over our mother’s head.” It was all starting to make a horrible kind of sense. Bithia’s mind churned with possibilities as the cold seeped slowly up from her palm. “Ambo would have ordered our mother within before her first bonding to ensure she was legitimate, but also to verify her fertility.” A flash of fury stiffened her spine, clenching her fingers against the freezing glass. “What if I killed the one man who could give me the answers to my origins?”

Uttering a bark of dismissal, Kasmiri said, “Do you honestly think Ambo would have told you the truth?”

Relief flooded her ravaged nerves. “No.” Ambo would have delighted in sending her on dangerous journeys seeking information that would have left her further *from* the truth. “For all I know, Ambo is the one who had me created. What I still don’t know is why would he or someone else do such a thing? What do they stand to gain with my existence?”

“I don’t know.” Kasmiri pulled Bithia’s hand from the glass. Her touch was like fire across her cold fingers. “All I know is that I am glad you are here.”

Acceptance was like a balm to her soul. Bithia gave her hand a soft squeeze. “Thank you.”

Together they looked out over the vast blankness. Snow covered everything. No tracks or marks of any kind marred the pristine surface that stretched away from the palace. For a brief moment, Bithia wondered how supplies were delivered, then realized they could not move overland in these conditions. They either had supplies stockpiled or brought them in by air. Or transported them the way she’d come to Diola, through a portal.

“It’s going to snow again,” Bithia said, for lack of anything better to say. Over the Onic Mountains, the sky was deep gray, colored like an angry bruise.

"I think Mother would have loved you, Bithia." Kasmiri's voice was as soothing as the drink she'd offered. "You are like her. Very strong physically and deeply passionate, about more than just your empire." Kasmiri placed her hand against Bithia's back. Warm and dry, her touch brought both joy and sadness to her heart. "I'm so sorry about Viltori."

Nodding, Bithia noticed it was just getting dark enough outside that she could see her own reflection in the glass, faint and insubstantial, but there. She was still here. Like Drahka said last night, he was still here, and her obsession with Viltori's body had to end. She was strong enough to release him. Loving him included releasing his spirit when he passed.

"I'm supposed to meet Drahka in the infirmary at sundown." Placing her hands against the glass, she let the cold bleed into her to chase away the sudden inferno of denial. "We've decided there is no hope for recovery, so we will let Viltori go."

Kasmiri visibly leaned closer. "He's not dead?"

"The physician put him into semi-suspended animation." She'd tried to keep that fact a secret, but the revelation spread like a huge wave after the liaison debate today. Bithia was surprised Kasmiri had not yet heard. Then again, she said she'd been feeling too sick to do much of anything but rest in the plush comfort of her rooms. Everything in her and Sterlave's suite was black, burnt umber, or the deepest brown. The colors complimented Kasmiri. Bithia found that though the furnishings were sparse, they were of the highest quality.

"Then there is hope." A great smile transformed Kasmiri's face from sorrow to joy.

"You don't understand." Bithia cringed at her optimism. Looking at her was almost like looking in a mirror. They looked so much alike but for their height and eyes. Everything else was eerily similar. "I've been holding out hope, but there is none." Removing her hands from the window, she wiped them against her dress. "Viltori is healing at the same rate that he's living. Two lifetimes from now he might be healed."

Kasmiri didn't lose her confidence. "I want you to meet someone."

"Who?"

"My father."

From the story Kasmiri had told her, Helton Ook was a handler, a man who trained recruits to become Harvesters. "What could he possibly do to help Viltori?" After last night in Drahka's arms, she'd made peace with the idea she must let go. She didn't dare let even a sliver of hope back into her heart. Having it ripped away again would hurt too much. Before she could question Kasmiri further, the metal knob of the main door turned with a resounding click.

Rown pushed the door all the way open, then held the knob while Sterlave entered.

"I'm perfectly capable of handling the door myself," Sterlave said, his attention on Rown.

"I like doing things for you." When Rown lowered his face but lifted his gaze to Sterlave, Bithia knew that the young man was utterly smitten. Not that she could blame him. Sterlave was beyond handsome,

especially in his loose black shirt and trousers. Dark sweat stains marked his clothing below his armpits and along his chest. Pulling his straight brown hair back with a sigh, Sterlave kissed Rown's forehead. "I keep telling you that you are not my servant."

Rown melted at his touch, then reddened when he saw Bithia and Kasmiri watching. Before Rown could caution him, Sterlave kicked off his boots, scratched his groin and yanked his shirt up. As the thin weave covered his face, he called out, "Kasmiri? What smells so good?"

Turning to Bithia with an indulgent smile, Kasmiri said, "Perhaps the delightful scent belongs to our guest."

Wrenching the shirt back on so fast he pulled his hair into his eyes, Sterlave almost stumbled as he flicked the strands away. His eyes went wide when he saw who was standing beside his bondmate. He sputtered, "My lady." Swiftly he bowed. "I didn't see you there."

"Obviously." She tried to appear very stern, but she knew she failed miserably when her sister giggled. Bithia too laughed. "Please don't stand on ceremony. We are family, after all."

Briefly unsure, Sterlave darted his gaze between the two of them, then settled his long-lashed gaze on Kasmiri. Even from a distance, Bithia noticed the change in him when he looked at his bondmate. "I missed you." Stepping forward, he kissed Kasmiri firmly on the lips with a great smacking smooch. Bithia could tell he wanted to linger, but in deference to her, he didn't. After pulling away from Kasmiri's mouth, Sterlave leaned over and kissed her belly. "I missed you too."

Another shot of longing gripped her, but this time, Bithia was ready. She let the feeling pass, knowing that soon, she and Drahka would reach this comfortable place.

"I want to introduce Bithia to my father."

Annoyance slammed down Sterlave's face, harshening the sharp angles of his cheeks and jaw. "I don't see why." Stubble caught what little light there was in the room, but this only shadowed his features, highlighting his anger. As if remembering who he spoke in front of, Sterlave relaxed marginally. "Forgive me, my lady, but I do not care for my bondmate's father."

She didn't know why he'd told her when his reaction had been perfectly obvious. Unsure what to say about that situation, she offered, "Please call me Bithia." Suddenly she felt stiff and intrusive. "I must go."

"No!" Kasmiri grasped her arm, holding her where she stood. Realizing she attempted to restrain the empress, Kasmiri let go and lifted her hands. "Please wait." With a sharp frown to Sterlave, she grasped his arm and pulled him away from the windows and into another room. Curious, Bithia listened but could only make out the bubbling earnestness of Kasmiri's voice and the low negativity of Sterlave's.

Bowing to her, Rown listened to them briefly, then said, "Can I offer you refreshments?" He eyed the two cups on the table between the chairs. "I can bring you a wonderful bread that accents the *h'venta*."

Feeling the light slipping away, knowing the time to release Viltori drew near, Bithia refused Rown's hospitality. "Please give my apologies to Kasmiri and Sterlave. I cannot linger." Before Rown could speak,

she darted out the still-open door. Long-legged strides swept her away from their rooms. Once she had made up her mind, she just wanted the situation over and dealt with. After Viltori passed, she and Drahka could grieve properly and then move on. Bithia didn't think Viltori would want them to stop living because of him.

Her hurried, silent steps carried her past a multitude of guards and brought her back to the infirmary. As she stood in the arched entranceway, she saw Drahka, with one large hand pressed against the glass of Viltori's cage. His fingers were not tight, but placed loosely upon the cover, as if he were touching Viltori directly with the greatest care. Eyes closed, Drahka stood there, his chest expanding slowly. After holding his breath for a few moments, he would release the air from between his lips. Bithia wasn't sure if he prayed, meditated, or simply sought to calm himself. Whatever the purpose, she found herself relaxing just by watching the steady expanding and contracting of his chest. Rich crimson fabric stretched across his massive shoulders and around his buttocks, showing off the perfection of his form. Drahka said something in his native tongue, something that sounded like an apology and a farewell, then lifted his hand. When he dropped his hand to his side, he took a deep breath and held it for so long Bithia felt dizzy. He released it in a rush.

Black eyes met hers. Just like Rown, crying had enhanced the white shards that spiraled out from his pupil. Just like the first moment when she saw him at the bonding ceremony, her attention was riveted to his hypnotizing gaze. Wordlessly she moved toward him, her hand out. He lifted his and when they made contact, powerful emotions threatened to drop her to her knees, but he pulled her close, wrapping her in his embrace, enveloping her in his strength. Together, there wasn't anything they couldn't handle. Clinging to one another, they stood without tears, letting their shared grief mingle, then dissipate.

Leaning back, Bithia placed a soft kiss to Drahka's mouth. "I missed you." She didn't think Sterlave would mind that she borrowed his manner of greeting.

A soft smile tilted the edges of Drahka's stern lips. "I too missed you."

So strong was the connection between them that Bithia had to step back or she would be lost again, crying in his arms. For what they must face, she had to draw upon all the strength she possessed.

"My lady, please, my mistress begs you to wait!" Rown flew into the room, then skidded to a halt when he saw Drahka. Eyes widening, he looked from his boot-clad feet to the top of his head, down his long hair and then across the width of his chest. For a very long moment, his gaze held at the bulge in Drahka's pants. Drahka wasn't aroused, far from it, but he didn't need to be to create an impressive lump. Apparently, when Rown had seen him in the hallway prior to the fight, he hadn't been close enough to see all of him. Remembering himself, Rown bowed his head, "Forgive me, my lady, but Kasmiri begs your indulgence."

Bithia felt Drahka's arm stiffen. Clenching his fist, he considered Rown. "Who is this?" Anger deepened Drahka's heavy voice. Before Bithia could explain, Drahka peered more intently at Rown. "You were the one who Viltori told to run."

Rown nodded and Bithia saw that same miserable shame threatening to overtake him again.

"You saved my life." Drahka's quiet proclamation stopped Rown's shame from deepening, and she was pleased they both had the same thought. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." Meekly, Rown backed away, bowing submissively, but still, he kept sneaking peeks at Drahka nonetheless. Bithia realized Rown was an *ungati* trained to pleasure men, not women. Now his smitten attention to Sterlave and Drahka made sense. Curious, she wondered just how deep his friendship with Viltori had gone. Not that it mattered. Bithia was not selfish with her lovers. If Rown and Viltori found pleasure together, she was grateful he'd found another person with whom to share his generous spirit. Sadly, that thought brought her back to their purpose for being here. Turning off the crystals that powered Viltori's stasis would be like turning off the brightness of his soul.

"Why does your sister wish us to wait?" Drahka continued to consider the shy Rown, but he directed the question to her.

Bithia clasped her hands together to stop them from shaking. *Because she thinks she can save him and I'm desperately trying not to let myself believe she can.* "I don't know. She said something about there being hope for Viltori."

Again, Drahka stiffened, this time his entire body tightened. "We have decided, Bithia." His gaze drilled into her with the force of a heavy blade. "There will be no more clinging to the body of a dead man." He kept his voice low but the tone carried all his pent up frustration. "I loved him too, but I will not allow him to be kept like a precious plaything in a glass box."

Drahka referred to the collection of items in her room, fragile toys given to her over the course of her childhood that were now stored in tidy rows of glass boxes. She'd never made the connection until now. Resenting his accusation didn't take the truth away. Was she keeping Viltori like a memento? Too afraid to let go, she would keep him forever to make herself feel connected? A burst of insight showed her what Rown had already told her; keeping him alive but dead in a box was cruel. And yet, there was that tiny fleck of hope that her sister had given her. Bithia had tried so hard not to let it in but there it was, that painful, magical what if?

Defensively, Bithia straightened her spine. "My sister asked for my indulgence. I am willing to grant her a moment. If you are not, you may leave."

Flared nostrils displayed Drahka's shock at her pompous tone. He did not submit well to her authority, and Bithia did not take pleasure in using her superior position against him, but neither would she let him dominate her, especially not in front of one of her subjects. After all, she was the empress.

Realizing that things might get ugly, Rown sidled toward the archway.

Narrowing his gaze, Drahka's lips thinned to a straight, brutal line as his gaze raked her from head to toe and back again. "I will not go."

Standing her ground, Bithia lifted her chin, tilting her face fully to his. Her words were held in her throat as Sterlave entered. Holding her breath, she turned, catching his gaze.

Aware of the high emotion in the room, Sterlave glanced between her, Drahka and Rown. In the end, he fell back on protocol. "My lady." He bowed to Bithia. "Kasmiri is coming."

"Why does she delay the inevitable?" Drahka demanded, taking an aggressive step toward Sterlave.

"Don't you dare." Bithia threw her hand up, pressing her palm against Drahka's chest. As soon as she felt the hardened muscles below, she realized the futility of trying to hold him back. Removing the domineering tone from her voice, she whispered, "Please, no more fighting."

Ashamed, Drahka stepped back. Keeping his voice low and his attention on her, he said, "This is between you and me." He looked to Viltori, then quickly away. "I do not want others making our decision."

"They won't," she reassured him. "But she's my sister, she's with child, and if I can give her the indulgence of some time, then what is the harm?" The tiny fleck of hope had grown now to a sliver. After a look to Viltori, then back to Drahka, she added, "Waiting a bit more will not hurt him."

Chapter Twenty-Three

Drahka reluctantly agreed that a small delay would cause no further damage, but he saw the sparkle in Bithia's eyes. Hope had returned. He feared that if her sister's idea, whatever it may be, failed, Bithia would want more time to try something else. Drahka dreaded an endless series of ever-hopefuls consuming her life until her spirit was so damaged she was as much a shell as Viltori.

And Viltori...

Drahka could feel his confusion. Alive and yet not, trapped in the confines of his own body with pain his only sense. Drahka would not wish such torment on his worst enemy. He'd learned the necessity of grieving from the loss of his companion. The first step came with letting go. They couldn't move on until Viltori was well and truly gone. Drahka loved him, and he would miss him, but he also understood he must release him.

As they waited, Drahka considered Rown and his obvious interest in him. His hungry blue eyes returned to Drahka's crotch repeatedly as if forcefully drawn there. He wasn't wearing the hated *echalle* today, or any other day, for that matter. On that, all of them had agreed—that annoying scrap of fabric had to go. It gave him a prominent bulge but getting it off took too long. Even without it, he pressed against his clinging trousers.

Uncomfortable, he hastily adjusted himself, causing an almost imperceptible sigh of pleasure to escape from Rown's slightly parted lips. Into his mind came the image of the young man on his knees, head tilted back, and lips just as they were right now—barely parted, moist, willing. Rown wouldn't just suck his cock. No, Rown would worship every bit of his wicked length. Something in his stance told Drahka that Rown knew more about pleasure than the rest of them combined.

Crushing guilt caused Drahka to sway on his feet when he remembered where he was and why. How could he be thinking such a thing when he stood right next to Viltori? In that instant, Drahka realized the images had come from Viltori, almost as if he were giving Drahka permission to find his replacement. Another wave of guilt gripped him when he thought he was blaming Viltori for his own twisted mind.

Silence stretched around the group of him, Bithia, Rown and Sterlave. Everyone just stood looking at the tiled floor, the art-covered walls, really anywhere other than at Viltori or each other. Except for Rown and Drahka. Neither one of them could stop looking speculatively at the other. Regardless if Viltori were feeding him the sensations or not, Drahka was uncomfortable feeling them in this place at this time. With a

sigh, Drahka turned, but now Rown kept his gaze on Drahka's behind, causing an entirely new set of thoughts to swirl in his mind.

After a while, Sterlave became aware of Rown's concentration. Frowning, he darted his golden brown eyes between them. Drahka pretended not to notice, but when Rown caught Sterlave's attention, his eyes widened and his face turned red. A quick lift of Sterlave's brows chastised Rown into keeping his eyes turned to the gray floor.

Now Drahka's attention fell on Sterlave. He was muscular and dressed entirely in black, which indicated his status as a Harvester. Not the current Harvester, or he would have crimson along his outfit to show his allegiance to Bithia, but a past Harvester. Then Drahka noticed that Rown cinched his brown robe with a black sash, indicating he was a servant to Sterlave, but the sash was trimmed in crimson, which was Bithia's color. Was Kasmiri allowed to use the color to indicate she owned him too? Now Drahka was doubly confused. Was Kasmiri still considered a part of Crimson House despite her illegitimacy? Sterlave did not like Rown's attention on another man, but Sterlave was bonded to Bithia's sister. Did he keep a male slave to play with? Clearly, Sterlave did not like the idea of sharing Rown, not that Drahka would ever ask.

With a sharp pang, he missed Viltori. He could have explained this new and confusing aspect of Diolan culture. Unwilling to ask anyone else for details, Drahka was relieved when Kasmiri entered. He knew she was Bithia's sister because they looked so much alike except for their height and eyes. Also, Kasmiri dressed entirely in black, while Bithia was clad in crimson. And then his gaze fell on her distended belly. Something about that gentle curve pushed all his instincts into overload. He wanted Bithia to look like that. Big and round and slightly unsteady with that glorious glow all pregnant women seemed to have. Kasmiri radiated contentment and joy. Drahka would do anything to have Bithia looking the same way.

"Thank you for waiting." Kasmiri stepped into the room and right to Sterlave's side. Behind her came the most strangely put-together man Drahka had ever seen. Squat and wide, his body was so bulky he could not cross his arms, which seemed too long and his legs too short. His shoulders were so thick with muscles he could not turn his head. A shock of white hair covered his skull. He was dressed in black, indicating a prior status as a Harvester.

While Kasmiri introduced Helton Ook to Bithia, Sterlave curled his upper lip behind Helton's back. Drahka sensed a long history between the two men, but again, he wouldn't ask for details. All he needed to know was what was obvious: Sterlave utterly detested his bondmate's father.

After pleasantries had been conducted, Kasmiri finally explained what her grand idea was. "Remember when I told you how the creature injured us?"

Bithia nodded while Drahka stood still, trying to glean information. He felt as if he'd come into the middle of a conversation.

“Well, one of the people on that planet healed us with a bare touch.” Kasmiri flashed her sparkling gaze on Viltori. “I’m sure she could help him.”

Before Helton could even speak, Sterlave interjected, “He’ll never survive the trip.”

“I didn’t mean take him.” Exhaling an annoyed sigh, Kasmiri glared at her bondmate. “The portal works both ways. We could bring one of them here.”

“You are not making that trip, not in your condition.” Sterlave wrapped his arm around her shoulder, as if already holding her back.

With a roll of her eyes, Kasmiri patted Sterlave’s hand. “I didn’t mean me, exactly, but someone could—”

“They won’t come.” Helton’s voice was harsh, like two enormous boulders rubbing together. “The Treagen people have never left their world.” Helton softened his tone at Kasmiri’s hurt expression. “I would have told you this privately if you’d explained why you were dragging me up here.” Bowing to Bithia, he added, “I am truly sorry, my lady, for getting your hopes up when I cannot help you.”

“Do you rule these people?” A sharp, commanding tone filled Bithia’s voice.

“No, my lady, I own the planet on which they live, but I do not rule them. The planet was given to me as a gift.”

An entire world as a gift? Suddenly, Drahka felt very small and terribly concerned about the tribe he left behind.

“There is no harm in asking them, is there?” Bithia nodded to her sister, who in turn nodded imploringly to Helton. Sterlave glowered behind Helton’s back while Rown continued to sneak peeks as his crotch. The only one who had no say at all in the matter was the one man the outcome would affect. Viltori lay still and silent in his glass cage. Drahka placed his hand above his friend, trying to feel what he would want them to do. And then he remembered a story his teacher had told him.

“I think we should try.” Every gaze swung his way. Clearing his throat, Drahka added, “The worst they can say is no. However, they might say yes.”

“They have never left their planet,” Helton reminded him.

“Then we will give them a good reason to do so.” Now that he’d made up his mind to seek the help of the Treagen people, he wouldn’t let anything hold him back. “Who will go with me?”

“I will go.” Bithia lifted her chin, her eyes shining with pride that he’d stepped forward, forcing the decision to be made.

“No, my chosen, you are ruler of this world. It is far too dangerous for you to go.” Drahka cast his gaze to Sterlave. “You have been there. You know their ways.”

Shrugging helplessly, Sterlave looked to his bondmate, but Kasmiri practically pushed him toward Drahka. “Of course he will go.” At Sterlave’s annoyed frown, she added, “He would be happy to help my

sister, the empress, she from which all good things flow.” Her words were a not-too-subtle reminder that being in Bithia’s favor was important. Helping her now could endear them to her for a lifetime.

“As much as I appreciate your...willingness, Sterlave, I cannot ask you to go if you fear any danger.” Bithia tried to keep her words politic, but there was a tone of gentle chiding since she herself had offered to go.

Helton scoffed, causing Sterlave to roll his eyes very much like Kasmiri had, then out the side of his mouth snarled, “I’m not a coward, old man.”

“I said nothing.” Helton lifted his bulky arms and flattened his hands, holding his palms out. “But they are the tiniest of people who would not harm a child.”

“Then we are agreed.” Drahka turned and kissed Bithia soundly on the lips. She embraced him, and he took the opportunity to lower his lips to her ear. Quietly, so the others could not hear, he whispered, “You must swear to me that if this fails, we will let him go. Swear it.” He pulled back and Bithia gave a short, curt nod, but he could see the hope shining through. He feared again what would happen if they failed.

“You will need a servant as they will need one to talk through.” Helton considered Rown. “He will do nicely.”

Rown’s entire body lifted with excitement and his lips parted to accept.

“No,” Sterlave said before Rown could say anything. “They can talk through me.”

Crumpling back against the wall, Rown hung his head and pouted.

“Don’t do that. I hate when you do that.” Closing the distance between them, Sterlave took Rown’s shoulders into his hands. “I want you here to watch over Kasmiri.”

“I can watch over myself.” Kasmiri stood tall, but that only made her vulnerable belly seem larger.

“I will stay here with her,” Bithia offered. Smoothly moving to Kasmiri’s side, she looped her arm through hers. The resemblance between them was even more pronounced.

“They will not talk through you, you are too high in rank.” Helton clearly didn’t agree with the assessment he’d just rendered.

Glaring, Sterlave asked, “How would they know the difference?”

“They do.” Helton looked again to Rown. “It’s either him or another servant.”

Expression hopeful, Rown looked up at Sterlave with eyes so wide they were like twin pools of pleading. Realizing he now had no good reason to say no, he reluctantly gave in. “But I want you two,” he pointed to Kasmiri and Bithia, “at the portal. I don’t trust some people not to close the way behind me.”

Helton startled back as if struck. “Ambo closed the gate on you, not I.”

“Still.” Sterlave considered Drahka for a moment, but Drahka did not know what the man weighed or measured in him. “You cannot take that.” Lifting his hand, he pointed to Drahka’s hips.

Confused, Drahka palmed his cock.

“Your sword.” High spots of red appeared on Sterlave’s cheeks. “We cannot ask for help if we are armed.”

Removing his gleaming Sword of the Empress, Drahka handed it to Bithia for safekeeping. “Should we not take a gift or an offering of some kind?”

Helton shook his head. “You will not need one.” There was something in his eyes, something not malevolent, not malicious, but perhaps mischievous? “They will ask you to stay for a while and that will be your gift to them. If they offer food and drink, be sure to consume the items or they will be gravely insulted.”

Sterlave didn’t seem to notice the odd gleam in Helton’s eyes, so Drahka let his gut instinct pass. Perhaps his senses were only heightened due to his grieving being put on hold. With a last look to Viltori, they left the infirmary.

Twisting around the seemingly endless palace hallways, they finally made their way to a simple room. Had Drahka not known better, he would think a servant lived here. Clean and orderly, the cramped room held a bed, a washbasin and a cloth folded over a rope that hung high between two walls. Behind the drape lay their destiny. Here, a large flat oval hovered above the floor. Silent but sparkling, the gateway loomed, calling to Drahka. His heart lurched.

“Are you afraid?” Sterlave’s face expressed concern, not condescension.

“No.” Fear was not what gave him a feeling of lightheaded anticipation.

Without asking, Sterlave tucked Drahka’s long hair down the back of his shirt.

“I am in awe.” What magic they took for granted! Traveling between worlds with only one stride. Drahka had always felt large, but this made him feel a giant. Holding his breath, he did as Sterlave said and simply stepped within the gate.

Rushing winds ripped along his body as lights glittered beyond his tightly closed eyes. If Sterlave had not hidden his hair away, the wind would have whipped the strands into his face and around his neck. Per Sterlave’s instructions Drahka pressed his legs tightly together but kept his knees unlocked. When he was suddenly spit out the other side, he discovered why. Landing awkwardly on one foot, he caught his balance by flinging out his arms and flexing his knees. Before he could look around, Rown almost crashed into him. Drahka caught him before he fell, but not before Rown clutched madly at him, getting a handful of his cock and butt in the process. Drahka wasn’t sure, but he didn’t think Rown was quite that unsteady on his feet. Still, accusing him of indiscriminately groping him seemed inappropriate, so Drahka let it go. After a moment, Sterlave joined them. He landed perfectly on both feet. Drahka let a small trickle of annoyance pass as Sterlave had been this way before.

When Drahka turned, his mouth fell open.

They stood at the end of an enormous room seemingly carved out of one solid piece of rock. The color was unlike anything Drahka had ever seen. It was as if all the colors known to him danced before his

eyes. Blinking fiercely, as if to correct his vision, Drahka then noticed the heat. Sweat gathered under his arms and between his legs. He pulled his hair out of his shirt, grateful he'd bound the heavy weight of it. At the far end of the room, he saw a throne, also carved right out of the rock. Everything had a pall of quiet, as if this place had been vacant for time beyond measuring.

"Where are the people?" Rown flinched when his voice echoed off the far wall, repeating softly until it finally died away.

"There wasn't anyone last time," Sterlave whispered in the vast space. He stood over a spot on the floor for a moment, as if recalling what had happened here. "They must have cleaned up the stain." With a deep breath, he lifted his head. "Let's move." Sterlave strode toward the side wall. Confused, Drahka followed behind. His panic rose as Sterlave walked right into the wall...which disappeared, letting him pass. Rown went next and Drahka brought up the rear.

Unlike the hallways at the palace, this one was so small Drahka had to hunch over. Sweat gathered at his neck, then ran down his chest.

Before they got far, Sterlave stopped. Peering over Sterlave's shoulder, Drahka saw a curious group of people. Tiny, thin, extremely pale with silver hair, and all dressed in the same loose, shimmering fabric, Drahka could not tell male from female. Enormous silver eyes with side-slitted pupils considered them without emotion. Narrow lips below almost-absent noses did not move, but Drahka felt as if they'd spoken.

"They remember you," Rown said to Sterlave. "They wish for you to follow."

"I guess Helton was right." Casting his gaze over his shoulder to Drahka, Sterlave said, "Last time, they didn't say anything. Well, nothing Kasmiri and I could understand." Clapping a hand to Rown's shoulder, he added, "Thank you for coming."

Bowing graciously, Rown took the point position as they followed the small troop down the hall.

Drahka wanted to prompt Rown to ask for what they wanted, but he realized they had to show graciousness to their hospitality first. Helton had been very clear on that point.

With a precise flick of his hand, the leader caused a doorway to appear. When they entered the room, Drahka's eyebrows climbed. Before him was an exact replica of the empress suite. Right down to the fur rugs on the floor and the glass ceiling above. However, instead of sky, he saw only light. He knew it wasn't sunlight as the tone was wrong. Simulated to mimic the twin suns of Diola, it came close but not quite. Still, he found the entire thing odd. Why would these people wish to imitate that room? Sterlave seemed unconcerned, which counseled Drahka to show no reaction.

At the table where he and Bithia shared their meals, someone had laid out an enormous feast. Lifting his head, Rown said, "They offer refreshments."

Once the three of them settled at the table, the skinny pale people left.

"Last time they watched me and Kasmiri eat."

Slipping a piece of sugar-drenched *niela* into his mouth, Rown said, “You were injured. They wanted to make sure they had healed you fully.” Chewing, Rown turned his gaze around the room. His chewing slowed as he considered.

“What?” Sterlave stuffed a hunk of seared meat into his mouth as he too looked about.

Dismissing the question with a shake of his head, Rown wiped his hands upon a wetted napkin. He rose with startling elegance, then moved about the suite. Running his hands over the furniture, Rown seemed to be inspecting the place for authenticity. He moved a padded chair to a specific spot on the floor, considered the position, then moved off to inspect the bed.

Eating without tasting, Drahka couldn’t stop thinking of Viltori and Bithia. He did not want to waste any time lingering here, but if this show of courteousness would grant them a cure, he had no choice but to do his best.

Leaning close, Sterlave asked, “Does the food taste funny?”

“The food does not make me wish to laugh.” Drahka plucked his sweaty shirt from his chest.

A great chuckle came from deep inside Sterlave’s chest. “I meant does the food taste odd to you.”

“No, it’s fine, but why is this room like Bithia’s?”

Shrugging, Sterlave grabbed an enormous roll, ripped it in half and ravenously ate one portion then the next.

“When do we ask them for help?” Drahka pushed away from the table. He had done his best to eat, but he could choke nothing else down past the lump in his throat.

“They know.” Rown turned with a cryptic smile that was reminiscent of the one Helton had flashed. “But first we must give them our gift.”

Pushing back from the table, Sterlave scratched his belly contentedly. “I thought we didn’t have to bring one.”

“We have all that we need right in this room.” A chill of foreboding went up Drahka’s spine when Rown looked right at him with unabashed hunger in his eyes. He held his gaze as he returned to the table and poured three equal glasses of sparkling liquid. Plucking one cup up for himself, he nudged the other two at Sterlave and Drahka. Warily they picked them up. “Drink,” Rown encouraged, quaffing his share quickly.

With a quick glance to Sterlave, who gave a bored shrug and a smirk of dismissal, Drahka drank. Flavor exploded across his tongue as the warmth of the drink went straight to his belly, then spread out along his limbs. Suddenly, the high heat seemed to have gotten much worse. Plastered against his sweaty chest, his shirt stuck uncomfortably against his skin, matting down his hair, making him feel as if he walked through water.

Without a word, Rown stepped forward and popped the buttons apart, one by one. Mesmerized, Drahka stood, clutching the table for support while Rown’s skilled hands quickly peeled his shirt away,

pulling it from his shoulders, down his arms and off his back. Cool air hit him like a blessing. Freed, Drahka sighed while Rown draped the sodden mess over the back of a chair.

“What are you doing, Rown?” Sterlave stood. He too wavered a bit so he grasped the table edge.

How could the drink affect the two of them so much more than Rown? He was half Drahka’s weight. As he took a step to widen his stance, and thus give himself better balance, his foot gooshed into the rug below. Looking down, he saw a splot of liquid. Rather than drinking, Rown had held the liquid in his mouth, then spit it out when their attention was diverted.

“You wicked little man,” Drahka said, wagging his finger at an unconcerned Rown.

Moving toward Sterlave, Rown took his hand and guided him, unresisting, to the chair he had so carefully placed. Sterlave fell into the seat with an ungainly plop. Leaning over him, loosening his shirt, Rown softly said, “Our gift to them is a simple one. They wish to watch.” Pushing the shirt off his shoulders, Rown slid the fabric down his arms.

“Watch what?” Sterlave looked around the room in confusion, then suddenly his mind cleared. “Oh, no. No, no. I’m not doing that for a bunch of voyeuristic *barsitas*.”

Sterlave struggled to stand, but Rown pushed him back into the chair effortlessly. “You don’t have to do anything. Do as they do. Watch.” With that, he skillfully pushed Sterlave’s arms to the backrest of the chair, and tied him with the sleeves of his shirt. Growling, Sterlave struggled, until Rown leaned in, placing his face right before his master’s face. “Please,” he whispered. “Let me do this to help Viltori. This is the least I can do after running like a coward.”

Drahka almost interrupted that had he not run, both of them would be dead, but he held his tongue.

Sterlave considered Rown, their noses almost touching, then he darted his gaze to Drahka. “You want him.” His tone was cold with accusation. Resentment filled his gaze.

A bashful smile tilted up the corners of Rown’s lips. “Yes, so this is truly no sacrifice. And it is in my blood to provide pleasure. It’s been so long since—” Rown cut himself off with a frustrated sigh. Spoken so softly Drahka almost couldn’t hear him from across the room, Rown wept, “You don’t want me yourself, but you won’t let me be with others. You owe me this.”

Hurt twisted Sterlave’s face. Battling between his own possessive nature and letting go to please his friend, begrudgingly, Sterlave nodded. He closed his eyes as if he could not believe what he’d done.

Permission heaped upon his head like a crown, Rown moved toward Drahka. He would have turned away, but there was nowhere to go. And the drink, or the air, or even what he’d felt before leaving Viltori compelled him to submit. How could a massive man such as he allow such a tiny man to command him?

Rown sank to his knees before him, causing his prick to press fully hard against his sweaty pants. Slipping off one boot then the other, Rown stood, unfastened his trousers and then peeled them slowly away. Each soggy bit of fabric that shifted away from his skin brought cool air to his overheated body.

Swearing in a language Drahka didn't understand, Sterlave watched as Rown undressed him. Sterlave's eyes widened and his mouth fell open. "I've never seen a cock that big."

Cupping him almost reverently, Rown whispered, "Neither have I." Looking up at Drahka's face, he added, "And uncut too." Taking his hand, Rown lead Drahka to the bed, settling him on the edge. "I wanted to be on my knees while you stood, but you are far too tall." Pushing his unresisting legs apart, Rown knelt between his feet. "But this will do."

Placing his hands on his knees helped Drahka keep his balance and not topple forward. This also put him in a perfect position to watch Rown. Just as Drahka had imagined, Rown didn't suck his cock. He worshiped the entire length. Taking his prick into trembling hands, Rown caressed the shaft, then placed hot, open-mouthed kisses all the way from his balls to the head.

"Viltori could not stop talking of you." Rown slipped his tongue around the crown. "Every morning he would tell me of something you did." He rolled his tongue again. "Something you said." When he took the tip into the hot wetness of his mouth, Drahka resisted the urge to thrust his hips.

Darting a glance to Sterlave, Drahka discovered his face was a mixture of lust and torment. Slipping his gaze down revealed a fully erect cock straining against the sweaty fabric of his black pants. Sweat outlined his groin, making his erection seem far larger than it actually was.

Rown released Drahka's prick from his mouth and reverently whispered, "He made you seem a god, so highly did he praise you."

Sterlave struggled against his bonds, determined to get free. Idly, Drahka wondered what he would do when he did. Not that he cared. Right now, he was happy to sit in stupor with the most expert cocksucker lavishing his skills upon his aching member. Rown continued to suck and praise him, his words growing more poetic as he took his cock ever deeper. As determined as he was, Rown could take him only so far. In a show of frustration, Rown leapt to his feet, retrieved a bottle from the outside of the bathing unit and returned between Drahka's legs.

Pouring a palmful of golden oil into one hand, he smoothed his other hand against the first before gripping his fists around Drahka's cock. Stunned by the slick, tight grip, Drahka fell back on the bed, moaning in great, chest-heaving cries. Now he could rock his hips without fear of hurting the young man. Rown encouraged him again with great words of praise that lifted him closer to release. When Drahka turned his head, he caught sight of Sterlave just as he escaped from his makeshift restraints.

Snarling, Sterlave stomped over to them, yanked Rown to his feet, twirled him to face him, then gathered his robe-clad body against his. For a long moment, he held him, breathing hard, his face twitching with emotions Sterlave tried desperately to suppress. Whatever he fought won, because Sterlave closed his eyes and lowered his lips, kissing Rown fully on the mouth. Rown's arms went around his neck, pulling him tighter as their kiss turned from sweet to passionate.

With a deep breath, Sterlave pulled his head back, but kept his forehead pressed to Rown's forehead.
"You know I love you."

"I know," Rown whispered, clinging to Sterlave.

"But you needed to hear me to say it."

"I did."

"It's complicated because of your station."

"I know."

As he lay on the bed, his cock three strokes from climax, Drahka realized Rown had used him as bait. Rown wanted more from Sterlave, more than Sterlave wished to give, so he forced him into a situation where he had to reveal the true nature of his heart. As he watched them, he could not summon any anger, not when his path with Viltori had been just as troubled. Only one thing concerned him as he lay idle: what of Kasmiri? Would she welcome a servant to their bed? Or would she reject them both?

"Between you and Kasmiri, I never had a chance." Sterlave reached for Rown's sash. When he fumbled with the knot, Rown gently pushed his hands away and untied the silken fabric. Tossing the sash to the bed, he pulled the brown robe up and off, flinging the garment aside. From the back, Rown's body was slender but strong, with two high, well-molded buttocks. Dark body hair dusted his legs and, as he turned, there was a smattering around his surprisingly large cock.

Rown cast his gaze upon Drahka, parting his lips as if to speak, but Drahka shook his head. He didn't need an explanation or an apology. He thought they would now move away from him, but Rown returned to his knees, between Drahka's legs, using Drahka's thighs as leverage to hold him up as Sterlave knelt behind him. Now it was Sterlave who palmed a great deal of oil, then smeared it liberally over his cock. Drahka lifted up by bunching some of the bedclothes behind his head so he could watch.

Rown's eyes sparkled with joy as he again took Drahka's cock into his hands. Behind him, Sterlave oiled his shaft, each stroke of his hand tightening and expanding his flesh until the head was dark with need.

"Are you sure?" Sterlave teased his slick fingers between Rown's cheeks, just as Drahka had done to Viltori, to ready him for what would come.

"Yes." Rown closed his eyes and lifted his face, one hand bracing him against Drahka's hip as the other hand hovered over Drahka's cock.

Tension filled the air and Drahka realized Rown's intent right as Sterlave pushed forward. As he did, Rown's tight fist slid down Drahka's cock, as if he too were sliding his shaft up the tight heat of his bottom. All three of them uttered a simultaneous moan. Each time Rown breathed, his hot breath rushed across Drahka's cock and balls, adding another layer of pleasure to the wicked feel of his fist.

When Drahka peered down between barely slitted lids, he saw Sterlave with his head bowed, his eyes closed, his hands dark against Rown's pale hips as his fingertips dug into his flesh. Drahka wasn't sure if he

held him steady or tried desperately to hold himself in check. Either way, Sterlave drew in great breaths of air each time before he moved forward in such small increments Drahka was almost mad with need. For, as slowly as Sterlave went, that is how slowly Rown slid his hands along Drahka's prick.

Anticipation grew, causing each man to gasp in an effort to maintain the slow, steady pace Sterlave had set. Looking down the length of his body, Drahka's gaze fell on Rown. His face glowed with peaceful satisfaction, a longing finally fulfilled, making Drahka wonder how long he'd lusted for and loved his gentle master. And Sterlave, when he finally opened his eyes, met Drahka's with a stunned kind of relief, as if he'd been waiting for a moment that would leave him with no choice but to declare the truth.

"I want to touch you," Sterlave hissed, slipping another incremental bit inside Rown.

"Do. I'll tell you if I am too close."

Baffled, Drahka looked to ask, but Rown filled in the answer before he could.

"I am *ungati*. I cannot climax but during a ritual devoted to my god."

Drahka saw it then, that their situation, as similar as it was to his, was not the same at all. No wonder Sterlave had held back. He did not wish to use Rown for his pleasure when he could not return the same. In a way, their conflict reminded him of the guilt he'd felt that his companion always gave pleasure but only received it by his own hand.

Drawing his attention to Sterlave, he met his tormented gaze with understanding. He could see how Sterlave wanted to tell Rown to break with his god, to renounce his faith and become a true partner with him and Kasmiri. But Sterlave could never ask such a great sacrifice from a man he truly loved. Rown was as devoted to his god as he was to his master. He was willing to sacrifice direct pleasure at Sterlave's hand to keep a delicate balance between them both.

Drahka could not see how Sterlave touched Rown, but he could see the longing such caresses gave to Rown. Eyes closed, his breath came in short pants as he reveled in Sterlave's strokes but maintained his control. Again, Drahka was amazed at his mastery. Rown knew just how far to go before pulling his needs back, bundling them up, keeping them constrained. No wonder he was so skilled at giving pleasure. He knew just how far to push to bring the object of his attention ever higher.

Finally, fully within, Sterlave hissed out a breath between clenched teeth as Rown now stacked his fists one atop another to cradle Drahka's entire prick. Pulling back and pushing forward, once, twice, and on the third time Drahka came, jetting his climax into the air, then along his chest. Seeing his release prompted Sterlave to grasp Rown's hips and give one final thrust. As he climaxed he bellowed and shoved Rown forward, pressing his face into Drahka's groin, which prompted another jolt.

Spent, each man breathing hard, Sterlave settled back on his butt, his legs crossed, taking Rown with him. Holding the young man against his body, Sterlave placed a soft kiss to his ear and then rested his head on his shoulder. Drahka saw that Rown was still hard, his cock throbbing as he nestled against Sterlave.

"Do you think we pleased them?" Sterlave's brows lifted as he glanced up at Drahka.

“They are beyond satisfied.” Rown leaned his head back against Sterlave, taking measured breaths that slowly released the tension from his prick. As he spoke, he softened in stages until he was once again limp. Drahka could not imagine that kind of self-denial. “Always it has been a man and a woman. This is where Helton and Clathia had their trysts.”

“Kasmiri’s father and the empress?” That explained why the room was a replica of the empress suite. Kasmiri and Bithia’s mother must have wanted something familiar when she met with her lover. “But why do they wish to watch?”

“They feed off the emotions.” Rown wrapped his arms around Sterlave’s arms, hugging his arms even tighter around his chest.

“Is that why they healed Kasmiri and me?” Sterlave sighed as he settled Rown into a more comfortable position.

“Yes. But before they could observe you two, Ambo came with the guards.” Turning to look at him, Rown added, “They were terribly disappointed not to see you in action.”

Smirking, Sterlave said, “I think I’ve more than made up for that.”

Leaning up on his elbows, Drahka asked, “But have the three of us done enough that they will save Viltori?”

Chapter Twenty-Four

Tingles of hot and cold raced along Viltori's nerves, causing him to alternately giggle and wince. Pain swirled along his body like a sluggish river with no outlet. Just when he thought he would drown in agony, a great rip released the pressure, gushing pain up through his face and out a hole in the top of his head. He would have screamed, but the flow of pain would not let him move. After a great surge had escaped, little dribs and drabs followed, allowing him to breathe.

He heard concerned voices whispering around him, quietly demanding to know if he would live or die. He heard an answer, but not one that was spoken. When he opened his eyes, he looked into an impossibly pale face with enormous silver eyes. There was something wrong with the eyes. After a moment, he realized her pupils were vertical slits. How strange and lovely. Her spun silver hair fell down around her face, then flowed back over her shoulders like a curtain. Below her tiny nose was a bare slit of a mouth. Most curious of all was her utter lack of emotion at what she was doing. With a hand to his forehead and the other cradling his head just above his neck, she peered down at him with a blankness that was almost terrifying. Who was this curious woman and what was she doing to him?

Again, from somewhere, he heard her voice. Not spoken, but pushed into his awareness. She had come to do her duty as demanded of her by her people, but she was not happy to violate the laws of nature. In her mind, nature was a being of great power, which gave generously, but when crossed, nature could wreak a terrible vengeance.

You should not have lived. Her words were just as emotionless as her face. She spoke without malice or condemnation, as if she simply stated a fact everyone but he already knew.

Viltori wanted to turn away from the truth, but she held him enthralled by her touch.

There will be a sacrifice.

He wanted to weep, because he knew that was true as well. For him to live, another must die. On the other hand, if nature were as perverse as the Diolan gods were, then the exchange would not be a one-to-one reckoning. One would not die to take his place. One would suffer horribly and it would be on Viltori's conscience. Unable to bear the pain he might inflict on an innocent, he tried to push her hands away, but it was too late. She'd healed him. Even if he turned right around and killed himself, someone else would still have to pay his debt. His torment would be wondering who and when.

Sleep now, and may nature have mercy upon your surrogate.

Viltori awoke to darkness. As he blinked, he became aware of two things—little blue lights and deep breathing. Turning his head, he saw Drahka slumped in a chair far too small for his enormous frame. With his head lolled to the side, he appeared both exhausted but also young, as sleep erased all the hard lines from his face. In his hand, he clutched something, but shadows obscured the item.

Coughing caused him to jump to his feet. Blinking he wavered. When he saw Viltori's open eyes, Drahka rushed to his bedside so fast he was a blur.

"My friend, I have missed you." Leaning over him, he lowered his face and placed a delicate kiss against his lips. Viltori took a deep breath of his sleepy and slightly sweaty but so compelling scent. Viltori wanted to rise from his bed and wrap his body around Drahka. A hand to his chest held him immobile. "Do not rise. The doctor was clear that you must stay here longer."

Nodding, Viltori relaxed against the narrow bed. Below his back, he felt a gooshy pad that lifted heat up into his body. When he looked down, he saw a simple gray sheet covered him.

"Bithia will be so disappointed she was not here." Drahka smoothed the hair off Viltori's forehead, his touch soothing and yet conveying strength.

"Where is she?" His dreams of her still lingered around the fringes of his memory. Her sad voice, her pleading for him to return. Now he had. But someone else must pay. Gods save him if his resurrection caused either of the people he loved so dearly any pain.

A frown returned the hard lines to Drahka's face. "There have been so many demands on her time. With Ambo gone—"

"Ambo is gone?" Viltori didn't think the venerable old man would ever die. Ambo had been the magistrate for over forty seasons. "What finally killed him?" Given the man's massive weight, he was thinking his poor heart finally collapsed.

Drahka looked down at the floor. "He was put to the stone for treason."

A shock wave slammed into Viltori's body, causing him to tense so dramatically that the pad below pumped soothing chemicals into him. He knew without asking that the fight with Blue-green House had set all of this into motion.

"It is long and complicated and I do not wish for you to worry." Drahka smoothed his palm against Viltori's head again, each pass caressing his forehead. Despite his agitation, he did calm. "There will be time enough for those details later. Bithia is strong enough to deal with her advisors and the naming of a new magistrate." Looking sternly into Viltori's eyes, Drahka added, "Your duty is to heal fully. So that I may give to you again."

The statement turned Viltori's feelings away from darkness and into light. "I would like you to give to me very hard, very fast." He would have delivered his sexy words with a provocative glance, but he had no idea how horrible his face appeared. With a laugh, he captured Drahka's hand. Kissing his fingertips turned into a tease with lips and tongue, causing him to redden and pull his hand away.

“You are too weak now, but soon, I think, you will be able to handle all that I can give.” Drahka tried to make it seem a threat, but the promise of his wild lovemaking had Viltori’s cock stirring to life.

“What did you bring me?” He lifted his chin at Drahka’s other hand, the one gripping the unknown item.

Frowning in an utterly charming, confused way, Drahka held up a small blue vial. “This is a gift from Rown. He said you would understand the meaning.” Drahka placed the bottle in Viltori’s hand.

Warmed by his body heat, the little vial felt almost hot in his palm. Pulling the tiny stopper, Viltori sniffed cautiously at the contents. There wasn’t much of a smell, so he carefully tilted the bottle until a drop of golden oil fell onto his fingertip. Rubbing his fingers together caused slow warmth to spread along his hand and a grin to grow across his lips.

“He finally got Sterlave to accept him fully.”

Surprised, Drahka pulled back, confirming his statement. “How did you know?”

“Rown has lusted after the man since the day he saw him in the empress suite with Kasmiri. However, as a servant, Rown could only go so far and do so much. He was allowed to play with him under Kasmiri’s direction, but not be with him of his own accord.” Sighing, Viltori put the stopper back in the bottle. “When Kasmiri relinquished her crown, Rown stayed with her and Sterlave, but he was still considered a servant. Rown was convinced Sterlave worried over his inability to return the pleasure he received, and I think he was right, but it seems they have overcome that issue.”

“You got all that from oil?”

“Ah, no. Rown once swore to me that when he got Sterlave to put aside his issues, he would oil his cock and take him within. I’m assuming Rown is using the oil to signal victory.” Viltori handed the bottle to Drahka. “Wait.” A new thought occurred to him. “How would you know that Rown and Sterlave have overcome their conflict?”

Lifting his brows mysteriously, Drahka said, “You will not believe what I had to do to get you help.”

Jealousy surged but retreated when Viltori saw the proud way Drahka held himself. Had he done something untoward, he would not be so arrogant. “Do tell.”

Pulling his chair close, Drahka settled in and told him of the Tregan people. With great enjoyment, he conveyed how he, Sterlave and Rown had to satisfy their voyeuristic tendencies. Easily Viltori could visualize the three men together as Drahka described them. His telling of the tale was so detailed that Viltori developed a profoundly hard erection that pushed up the sheet from his hips. So intent was Drahka on his tale he did not notice Viltori’s state. The medical pad at his back took his excitement for tension and immediately began dosing him into a stupor, yet his arousal remained strong.

“She was unable to heal you fully, but the doctor is clear that you will return to full function within a quarter cycle.” It was then Drahka noticed the levitating sheets. “I guess part of you is sufficiently recovered already.”

Viltori would have blushed, but the drugs wouldn't let him. "You told your tale well."

"Did I?" Scooting his chair closer, Drahka whispered, "Do you wish for me to take care of you?" He glanced down, then back to his eyes. "I would like to, but not if it will hurt you."

Viltori shook his head, which only made his dizziness worse. "The bed keeps medicating me. I think it would be impossible to orgasm in this state." Cupping a hand to Drahka's chin, he added, "But you are kind to offer."

"Kind? No, I am greedy. I've longed to take you into my mouth again, to feel the blood coursing through your hard flesh, to feel your cut cock pump pleasure deep into my throat."

Viltori's eyes rolled into the back of his head as his mind pictured what Drahka said. Moaning, he tightened his grip on his chin, pulled his face close and kissed him hungrily. Releasing him he asked, "Who taught you to talk like that?"

"You." Drahka kissed him again. "I've discovered that you and Bithia love talking before, during and after sex. I think I am becoming most proficient, but I did have an excellent teacher."

Blinking slowly, Viltori said, "I still have more to teach you."

"I'm looking forward to your lessons." Drahka sighed and gave his head one last loving stroke. "Now you should rest. I will stay and watch over you."

This thought lured Viltori into sleep with a satisfied smile on his face that turned wistful then sad when he remembered the prophetic words of the woman with silver hair.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Sleep pulled at Bithia, but she was determined to put this issue to rest before she found her own. Arguments had raged for a quarter cycle over the appointment of a new magistrate. All her choices were immediately rejected. She in turn rejected all the suggestions of the Houses. In the end, her advisors stepped forward, fielding names in the hopes they could come to an agreement. Without a magistrate, many rites and ceremonies were on hold. Bithia hated to admit the truth, but for all his annoying ways, Ambo deftly handled an amazing number of responsibilities.

Even with that grudging admittance, she did not regret what she had done. Leading a rebellion against the throne was best handled with swift and sure retribution. Visibly cowed, the House heads voiced their dissent, but with respect. No more would they openly demean her or her decrees. They might do so privately, but outbursts and treasonous comments uttered to her face had ceased. Bithia realized she had only herself to blame for their disdain of her. From the moment she'd arrived on Diola, she'd treated her position as a joke, calling them all *peckards* and letting Ambo rule in her stead. No more. Ambo had convinced her to be a figurehead while he did all the work. What he'd done was turn her empire into his own. What saved her was the simplest thing: tribute.

The prior Harvester, Ariss, had sat in residence in the temple once a cycle, giving all the palace guards a chance to give tribute. During this ritual, the guards would kneel before her and masturbate. This was the only honorable way for them to find release. When Ariss and Kerrick had left the palace, there was none to sit upon the temple throne to receive their offerings.

Bithia felt for their plight.

She thought it utterly unfair that those virile men were expected to contain themselves until they bonded. At her behest, Undanna had uncovered a very ancient part of the Harvest prophecy that said if there was no female Harvester, then the empress may sit upon her throne and receive tribute from the guards. Bithia willingly went to the Throne of the Empress each cycle. While she sat upon her elaborately carved Onic throne, every guard had come before her, grateful and eager to give his offering. Three times Bithia had donned an exquisite crimson dress that exposed her breasts, then sat upon her throne as the guards looked upon her to find their pleasure. As the first empress in thousands of seasons to revive the tradition, the guards were fiercely loyal to her. When Ambo ordered them to go against her, they rebelled against him instead.

Though she had said nothing at the time, she already knew Helton Ook. As the head of the palace guard, he too was allowed to give tribute, and had, all three times. Realizing who he was when Kasmiri introduced him, she wondered if he'd thought of her mother while he gave up his tribute. Bithia thought it prudent not to mention this before the man's daughter, but she wondered if her indulgence encouraged him to help Viltori.

Now that Viltori had recovered to full health, she was unable to punish Blue-green House for his death, so she made an example of them by sending the entire House from the palace for ten seasons. At the end of that time, they would be welcomed back, but she had cautioned their head gravely. "Should you or those of your House return with hatred burning in your hearts, you will be cast out into permanent exile." Such was a caution for him not to spend the next ten seasons fostering loathing against her. This punishment might be another reason the House heads had learned to bite their tongues.

Blue-green's protocol liaison had argued valiantly against their removal, but Bithia had the right to refuse anyone from living in the palace. "Living here is a privilege, not a right, and I will have the hallways echoing from emptiness before I will allow conspirators in my midst."

In the end, realizing that further protestation would only get him a more drastic punishment, the leader of Blue-green House had accepted her ruling and departed. Watching him, his family, and all their worldly possessions float away in the cylindrical *turusk* had given a visual reminder to those left behind. Bithia was not a woman to be crossed. No more did she spend her time hopping from man to man and party to party. Now she ran her empire with a strong hand and a determined heart. She'd been unable to uncover Ambo's cache of riches, but that was the least of her concerns. By the end of most days she was too exhausted to do anything with her two lovers other than cuddle, although there were other reasons for that as well.

"Menon Levotch."

Bithia startled at the bellowing voice of the palace guard. Returning to the present, she tapped at her floating blue screen, scrolled through the list of names, found his and quickly scanned the information. A former Harvester from the Plete region, he'd served two seasons before selecting a bondmate. After retiring, he'd returned to his homeland to help his widowed mother run their *nicla* farm. The only reason he was here now was at the behest of Bithia's advisors. Menon clearly stated that he did not want to vie for the position of magistrate; however, he also realized he could not refuse an official summoning.

Turning her gaze to the side door, she couldn't wait to see this refreshingly honest candidate. From the arched doorway emerged a man as massive as the two guards who flanked him. Straight copper hair flowed across his forehead, bringing attention to his golden eyes. His skin was deeply white, almost the color of snow, but warmed by small bronze dots. His nose hooked to the left, probably from a break during his years as a recruit. His lips were perfectly formed, but just a shade too dark for Bithia's tastes. Moving with the lumbering of a great beast, he strode toward the edge of the circle so she and all in attendance could get a good look at him.

Menon's clothing was black as was due his prior Harvester status, but simple in cut and fabric, with lighter patches at the knees and elbows. Clearly, his family farm was not doing well if he could not afford a suit to come to the palace. Or, given his attitude, perhaps he didn't wish to waste his funds on something frivolous for a post he didn't want. Still, his chest was wide, his hips narrow, and his legs long. Looking closer at his hands, she realized they were rather too big for his arms, and his palms were red with scratches. Here was a man accustomed to hard labor. Like Drahka, his body did not come from sculpting or brutal training, but from work.

She listened attentively as the House heads pelted him with questions. Menon answered in simple, forthright terms. His voice was soothingly low, almost like the rumbling of the far distant sea during a storm. Despite the personal and imposing nature of some of the questions, he maintained his dignity, neither flinching nor leaning forward with eagerness. Straight and tall, he kept his body still as he turned his head to address each speaker. As he turned to Orange House, Bithia noticed a slight silvering of hair above his ears. Just a tiny bit of gray in the copper gave him added maturity. Considering her screen again, she discovered his age was forty-three seasons. Returning her gaze to him, she thought he carried his age well. If not for that hint of silver, she would have put him in his thirties.

When the Houses and her advisors had run themselves dry of questions, Bithia asked, "Your predecessor, Ambo Votny, was put to the stone for treason. Do you agree with his punishment?"

Unlike those who had gone before him, Menon didn't hem and haw, fumbling for an answer. His golden eyes hit hers directly. "My lady," he bowed slightly, "Ambo Votny was a disgusting man who couldn't control his lusts. Food, wine, young women. Anyone with one of those three things could bribe the man into their favor. I am surprised it took this long for an empress to have him executed."

From him flowed a pure confidence in his words. He spoke from his heart with pride and fierce determination. This man was honorable and he would be a fair arbitrator of disputes between the Houses. Too, he would not be swayed by bribes.

"I approve." Bithia considered now her advisors. Each stood and gave their approval. When her attention turned to the heads of the Houses, she saw what a neat trap they were in—to disapprove of this man would be tantamount to admitting they were holding out for a magistrate who was bribable. Realization filled their eyes as they glanced from him to her. In the end, the remaining ten Houses approved the appointment of Menon Levotch as magistrate.

He matched her sigh of relief with a deep breath that he held for a long moment before releasing it between frowning lips. Bowing to her and all in the circle, he swore, "I will do my best." With that, he turned and lumbered from the room, his head held high, but his shoulders slightly slumped. His body language said it all. He did not want to do this, but he would. Tomorrow would be time enough to indoctrinate him and perform the ceremony to make him the official magistrate.

Pleased that she finally solved one of her many dilemmas, Bithia made her way to her suite of rooms. Behind her trailed four guards. After what happened to Viltori and Drahka, she no longer went anywhere without a contingent of strong men. She insisted her lovers do the same, despite their objections. In the end, it was Viltori who relented and convinced Drahka having some extra muscle behind them couldn't hurt.

Upon reaching her rooms, the two guards posted greeted her warmly, then pulled the massive wooden doors open. The fading light of *Tandalsul* slanting through the glass ceiling softened the blinding whiteness of the main room. Behind her, the guards wished her well and closed the doors.

"My lady." Viltori approached with a welcoming smile. Wrapped in a simple crimson robe that showed off his golden hair, he looked scrumptious. Just seeing him on his own two feet almost brought tears to her eyes. Keeping her hands off him had been difficult, but she'd been too exhausted since he'd returned to do anything about her building lust. "We have a surprise for you." He took her hand and led her to the low-back couch that angled away from their raised bed. When she opened her mouth, he pressed his finger to her lips, silencing her.

Dubious, she allowed him to settle her upon the sinking softness of the cushions. Placing a pillow in the hollow of her lower back, he motioned to Drahka. He too wore a crimson robe, yet his managed to show off his dark eyes and hair. She smiled, as she adored seeing them in her color, and it pleased her that red complemented each of them. Now that she had named a new magistrate, she could begin pushing for a new bonding ceremony in earnest. A part of her heart sank, because she knew she would have to choose only one to be her bondmate. She could have as many consorts as she desired, but only one eternal bondmate. Picking a favorite between the two seemed an impossible task.

"Whatever you are thinking of, stop it at once." Viltori pressed a kiss to her forehead. "I can see it's unpleasant and this night is about us making you happy."

"You are the one who was just released from the infirmary. Drahka and I should be—"

Again, he shushed her. Leaning close, he whispered, "Don't make me bind you, because you know I will."

Secretly thrilling at his erotic threat, Bithia decided to indulge him. She settled into the couch, waiting to see what they would do, because clearly, they were up to something. Drahka sat on the floor with his legs crossed, his robe parting just enough to give her a tantalizing glimpse between his thighs. He scooped her legs into his lap, and proceeded to remove her shoes and rub her feet. Melting into a contented puddle, she grinned down at him, her heart singing when he smiled back.

A waft of food smells intensified. Beside her, Viltori held a plate filled with all kinds of treats that he fed to her a bite at a time. Closing her eyes, she allowed herself to utterly relax as they tended to her every need. Finished with her feet, Drahka moved up to her calves. His big hands kneaded deep into her muscles, forcing the tension to dissipate as Viltori filled her belly with choice morsels.

When she could eat no more, he leaned over, for a kiss, she thought, but he actually passed wine from his mouth to hers. Delighted with this erotic way of drinking, she willingly met his lips again and again until a pleasant warmth stole all the tension from her form. It seemed a lifetime since she'd been relaxed. Blinking her eyes lazily, she discovered Viltori's hands at the tied straps of her dress. Catching her gaze, he pulled the crimson fabric bows apart. Releasing the straps caused her heavy breasts to fall free of the fabric prison. Cool air peaked her nipples.

Viltori's gaze and hand moved down to her exposed breasts. Palming the heavy weights, he flicked his thumbs over her taut nipples, causing the flesh to contract further and her to sink lower into the couch as she arched her back.

Drahka continued up her legs, his strong hands working the muscles of her thighs. Each movement he made pushed her dress up as Viltori's pushed the top down. Fabric bunched around her waist. She felt utterly tawdry being dressed and yet exposed, here on her couch, with one man at her head and the other at her feet. When she reached out to touch Viltori, he moved back, but captured her arms.

"No, my lady. Tonight is about you. Only you." Compelling her to interlace her fingers, he planted her hands behind her head. "You will relax and let us do all the work."

Feeling special and pampered, Bithia dissolved into contented bliss. In all the empire, there were not two men who knew how to please her better than these two did. To have their full and undivided attention riveted to her was heady indeed. She felt every inch an indulged empress.

Cupping her full breasts, one in each large hand, Viltori lifted them up, sliding her nipples between his fingers until they were so hard they were like twin pebbles upon her chest.

"Such full, firm breasts begging for my mouth." Leaning near to her ear, he whispered, "That's what you want, isn't it, lovely lady. My lips upon your hard nipples. Biting and sucking and chewing."

His wicked words caused her to lean her head back as she tried to lift her breasts toward his face. He chuckled lightly and pinched her nipples. Her moan only encouraged him to take each bud between fingers and thumbs. Hesitating for a moment, he waited until she took a breath, then twisted. Liquid pleasure flowed straight down to her cunt.

With a wicked laugh, he held something before her eyes. "Have you ever seen these?"

Bithia considered the pair of slender wires. In the center of each wire was a circle about the size of his fingertip. She shook her head.

"After today, you will never forget them." Sliding the wires along her sensitive breasts, he pushed until the circles encompassed her nipples. When they did, they emitted a low vibration and gentle warmth.

"Such a wanton empress." Viltori rubbed his face against her ear, then encouraged her to watch Drahka.

Looking down through barely opened eyes, she watched his hands push her legs apart, sprawling her across the couch and exposing her to his hungry gaze.

“Just as you said, she wears nothing below.” Drahka looked up to Viltori then met her gaze. “Naughty empress with her glory bare.” He admonished her with a series of soft *tsks*.

“Is she wet?” Viltori asked, squeezing her breasts together, making the wires vibrate faster.

Drahka made a great show of pushing her legs apart as if to get a better look. Angling her legs up and back, he had her immobilized and fully spread before him. He brought his face very close, so close she felt his breath caressing the lips of her aching sex.

“Very wet.” Lifting his head, he caught her gaze again. “So wet she has made a mark upon her skirt.” Sliding the fabric forward caused her body to shift forward, pulling her down the couch and pushing her legs back even more. Letting go of her breasts, Viltori captured her legs just behind her knee, holding her in place for Drahka’s continued inspection.

With one massive hand on either side of her sex, he spread her cunt lips apart, exposing the sensitive inner flesh to the cool air. When he lowered his lips and breathed a moist breath against her, she shuddered. Viltori gripped her knees more firmly. Captured between the two strong men, she now realized that even if she wished to move, she couldn’t. Neatly they had trapped her.

“What a sweet, hot cunt you have, my lady.” Drahka looked right into her eyes as he spoke, his words flowing over her held open sex. “Pink and perfect between ebony folds.”

On the tip of her tongue, a stream of orders rested, but she knew if she issued them, they would only laugh and drag her torment out further. Despite her building needs, she kept her mouth closed.

“Does she smell good?” Viltori nuzzled her ear, nipping along the tip as he breathed against her. With the wires humming against her nipples, he was free to hold her legs while he bit and kissed her sensitive neck.

“Good enough to eat,” Drahka said, pushing his hands farther apart, opening her even more.

They knew just how to torment her. Teasing her with their breath while making her wait for their touches was maddening. Her body felt afire. Forcefully held exposed like a wanton *yondie*, she struggled briefly to find a more dignified position, but neither man would let her move.

“I like you this way, Bithia. Spread out so we can do what we please to you. All the sinful things we have been thinking of.”

Her moan became a cry of need.

“Is her little clit hard?”

Drahka’s hands smoothed up, his fingers parting her flesh, exposing her throbbing clit to cold air. Shivering, she again tried to curl in.

“Hard and trembling.” Drahka’s words brought another body-deep shudder as they wafted heat over her demanding clit. “Ah, I can see her contracting inside, longing for something to fill that snug space.”

“Is that it, Bithia? Do you want something to fill your hot, tight cunt?”

She wanted to answer, but didn't dare. Turning her head to the side, she caught Viltori's gaze, pleading with her eyes. His masterful smile sent a new erotic thrill over her flesh. Not in all her life had she found a more commanding man. Pressing his face to hers, his lips a whisper from hers, he asked, "How about Drahka's big, thick cock? Would you like that plunging into your greedy slit?"

Closing her eyes, she sighed, and begged, "Yes, please, I want—" He cut her off with a soul-searing kiss that stole her breath.

Pulling back, Viltori looked at her as he spoke to Drahka. "I'm going to tongue fuck her mouth. You should do the same to her cunt."

Before she could react, both men plunged their tongues into her body. Gasping, she drew Viltori's tongue inside, sucking at the pointed flesh as if it were a cock. Drahka stabbed his tongue deep into her sex as he held her open. Her nether lips had cooled from exposure and his face brought shocking heat when he pressed close. Delaying this moment sent her senses reeling. Each man rammed his tongue into her repeatedly, doing as Viltori said, fucking her with rough aggression.

Drawing back, Viltori grinned and cast his gaze down between her legs. She followed suit. Drahka held her open with his strong hands, his tongue stabbing into her, making her squirm.

"That's it, Drahka. That's what she craves. Something hot and slick inside her."

As if they shared some unspoken language, Drahka moved his hand so that he now held her open to his ministrations with one hand. Between flicks of his tongue, Drahka said, "I think she needs more, my teacher, something bigger than my tongue."

"I agree." Viltori nipped her neck. "Slide your finger into her."

Doing as he was bid, Drahka slipped one big finger into her sex. Instantly her walls clamped around the digit. Now he used his tongue to tease her clit as his index finger slid in and out with a lazy rhythm. So sensitive had they made her with their teasing that she could almost feel the texture of his skin as he slipped inside her.

"Is her cunt sucking at your finger?"

Looking up, a possessive grin lifting one edge of Drahka's mouth, he confirmed, "She's tugging at my finger, trying to pull it deeper and crush it inside."

"Wouldn't that feel good around your cock?"

Moaning, Drahka nodded agreement, flicking his tongue up and down her lips, slipping the tip around his finger before he settled back on her clit. Deliberately he slid his thick finger in and out of her, increasing her need, her longing, until she thought she would pass out from her inability to breathe.

Pressing his mouth right to her ear, Viltori whispered, "I want to shove my cock into you so hard your head flicks back." Her moan of longing only encouraged him to continue as Drahka followed the beat of his words with his thrusting finger. "I want to ride you slow and steady until you scream for more." Somehow,

his words caused the wires around her nipples to vibrate in tune with the rumbling bass of his voice. “I want you to cream around my prick, gushing out each time I press deep.”

Breaking his steady rhythm, Drahka lifted his head and growled, “You do have a way with words, my teacher.”

Viltori smiled, then tweaked the wires around her nipples until they vibrated so swiftly they hummed. Waves of longing rushed along her body, centering in her core, causing her to gush around Drahka’s finger.

How Viltori knew, she couldn’t comprehend, but he knew that she needed more than Drahka’s lone finger. “Despite how big his finger is, it isn’t big enough to fill that emptiness in you, is it Bithia? You need a big, thick cock to stretch your sweet little hole.”

Nodding, she worked her hips, begging for more without using words. Bithia squirmed as Drahka tormented her into a frenzy of longing that nothing but both thick cocks could satisfy.

“That finger is big, but not nearly big enough.” Viltori tormented her, knowing just how erotic she found his wicked words. “Slip another finger into her grasping sex, Drahka.”

“Are you sure?” He looked up. “I think she might climax if I do.”

“Hmm.” Viltori considered her for a breathless moment. “I don’t think we should let her come, not yet.”

Her protesting growl was lost as he swooped down to kiss her. To pull her back from the brink, Drahka left off licking her clit, but continued a slow plunge with his finger. Once he sensed he’d pulled her back enough, Viltori encouraged him to slip another finger in beside the first.

Howling behind closed lips, Bithia met his thrusting hand with a roll of her hips. Viltori held her knees, but now yanked her up, lifting her bottom so that she hung free and unable to move. Frustrated, she squirmed in desperation, but Viltori only nipped her lips and continued with his wicked, wicked words.

“I know, Bithia, I know. You want our big, thick cocks inside your sweet, hot cunt.” His words struck her physically, vibrating the wires on her nipples, encouraging Drahka to press hard with each statement. Looking up into Viltori’s eyes, her breathing shallow, panting, almost gasping in her frustration, she realized that was what he wanted. Viltori mastered her.

“Not this night or any other will I give you my cock or allow Drahka to do so.”

For a long moment she simply stared at him. “All this was to force me to legitimize our relationship?” Now she didn’t have the right to either man. She had suspected they were up to something, but conspiring to sexually torment her into claiming them was the last thing she would have surmised.

“If you want us, you will have to publicly claim us.”

“I’m trying,” she protested. It was cruel for him to punish her for something she had no control over. “Try harder.” Viltori’s face was kind despite his harsh words. “We need this from you.” He kissed her then, his tongue going deep, claiming her mouth as Drahka did the same to her aching sex with his thick fingers and flicking tongue. “But we aren’t without mercy.”

At that, the two men teased her in earnest. Viltori held her legs up and wide, spreading her for Drahka as he continued to pour a steady stream of perversities into her ear. As Drahka worked between her legs, sweat beaded across his brow and when he knelt up to get a better angle, his massive cock slipped between the edges of his robe. At Viltori's urging, Drahka cupped his cock with his free hand, stroking his thick prick until he pulled the foreskin down, exposing the wet and needy tip. Seeing what she so desperately wanted increased her torment until she thought she would faint from longing. A climax waited, just beyond her reach. What pushed her over the edge was Drahka flipping his hand over, so his palm was up, and thrusting two fingers into her with great body-moving force as he stroked his cock with the same aggressive pace. All the while, Viltori encouraged her to look upon what she couldn't have, and he ordered Drahka to stroke himself harder, and her harder, until his hand became a blur between her legs.

Bithia climaxed with such power she lost her vision, her hearing and her mind. For a timeless moment, she was nothing but sensation. Pure, unadulterated pleasure lifted from the physical into something just one breath shy of divine. She felt her lovers, their bodies, but more deeply their needs. As the empress, she couldn't keep them as lovers indefinitely. Bringing Viltori back from the brink of death did not mean he would submit to her needs. If anything, he'd grown entrenched in his position, and this time he'd gotten Drahka to take a stance with him as well.

As her climax rolled through her, she could feel the lust gathered in the straining flesh of their cocks. They didn't tease her lightly, but with purpose. What Viltori said was true—each of them longed to plunge his cock where Drahka thrust his fingers. Filling her grasping sex would bring them both great pleasure, but they would forgo their own needs and wait for more than just a fleeting tryst.

The last lingering waves of her orgasm dissipated. Viltori let go her knees but Drahka caught her trembling legs, lowering them gently down. When she looked, she discovered he had not climaxed. His cock was still hard and dusky red, pushing out from his robe.

She wanted to speak, to swear that she was doing her best to claim them both, but all that emerged was a gasping sob of frustration. She was the empress and yet she was powerless in the face of the prophecy. Enovese had been working feverishly to find the answers she so desperately sought, but even with her extensive knowledge, she could find nothing. How much longer could the three of them live like this?

"Shhh." Viltori lifted her chin, kissing her softly. "Don't speak, Bithia."

Drahka knelt beside her and scooped her up into his arms. He carried her to her bed as if she weighed nothing. Settling her in the center, they removed her dress, pulled the covers up, tucking her in like a child.

Each man stood looking down at her, their cocks hard, pressing against their robes. When she lifted up, reaching out as if to take them in her hands, Viltori held her back with a lift of his hand and a shake of his head.

“But you...” She couldn’t leave them this way. If she couldn’t have them in her still-quivering cunt, she could have them in her mouth, her hands, or even between her breasts. She suggested this to them and for a long time they considered each other.

Twin grins of sinful pleasure slowly spread across their faces as the two men removed their robes. Strong bodies, sleek with sweat from what they had given her, stretched as they stood so near and yet so far. Breathless with anticipation, Bithia watched, curious as to what they would do now.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Nipples peaking in the cold air, Drahka continued to gaze up the length of the bed at Bithia. Her eyes were wide, her expression sated but curious as she peered over the crimson cover. Beside him, Viltori stood nude, his smaller and paler nipples just as hard, much like his cock. Long before Bithia returned, they had eagerly mapped out their strategy. Planning what they would do to her had kept them in a perpetual state of arousal. Actually doing all those wild things had left them both in dire need for release. They'd planned for this moment too, but what they hadn't discussed was Viltori's determination to withhold giving to her until she made their relationship official.

In Oughunian, Drahka asked, "Why did you lie to me?"

Viltori turned, regarding him coolly, his uplifted brow pushing the question right back at him.

"You said we would tease her for her pleasure, not to force her to claim us." Drahka knew that Bithia had worked tirelessly to find a way to have them both. Without a magistrate, a bonding ceremony couldn't even be performed, nor could she issue a proclamation claiming one of them as a consort.

"I didn't lie. I just didn't reveal to you the full of my plan."

Bithia watched them, her gaze darting between them as if by watching them closely enough, she might understand what they spoke of.

"You said that while you lay dying, you'd regretted not giving to Bithia."

Nodding, Viltori said, "Even if she claimed me, I still could not give without repercussions. Something happened when the silver-haired woman cured me."

Repeatedly, Drahka asked him what, but Viltori refused to speak of it.

"Now is not the time." He considered Bithia. "Not when we have yet to sate ourselves."

"If this is over who will be first chosen, I already told you I care little which of us—"

"It's not about that."

Drahka wanted to argue the matter further, but his body begged for a release more strongly than his mind demanded answers.

"Trust me when I tell you it is more important than ever that whatever children the three of us create are legitimate." Gaze drilling into his, Viltori finished, "I couldn't bear to inflict any harm on the innocent."

His impassioned speech compelled Drahka to agree. They would have to forgo giving to Bithia until the issue of their bonding was resolved. Watching her longing, seeing her pain, had almost prompted him to forget his agreement only to tease her. With the taste of her glory on his lips and the feel of her clutching at

his fingers, he wanted to yank his hand back and shove his aching cock deep inside. Her eyes would have gone wide with shock, then lowered with pleasure. Just the thought of having Viltori holding her open for him while he thrust hard and steady between her thighs caused his prick to twitch.

Viltori noticed. With a smirk, he turned to Bithia and asked, “You like to watch, don’t you, Bithia?”

Even below the covers, she shivered at Viltori’s words. His voice carried such intensity that Drahka shivered too. Authority oozed from his tone, as if none would be foolish enough to ever disobey him. Regardless of his time lost to them, he’d forgotten nothing. Two things pushed Bithia into a state of sexual torment: lusty words and watching two men. Viltori had crafted a scenario that would give her both.

“Remember when you interrupted us that day in the room of mirrors?”

Understanding hit. Bithia clutched the covers tighter and nodded.

“I’ve never really forgiven you for that.” Viltori lowered his face but kept his gaze upon her while he cupped his cock in the palm of one hand. “I wanted to watch his muscular arm work that massive prick into a great, gushing climax.” While holding himself, he slipped one knee on the bed. “I wanted to watch Drahka lose control.” With amazing agility, he pulled his other knee onto the surface of the bed. “I wanted to see his head go back as he grimaced, come splattering along his hairy chest.”

Drahka knew Viltori intended to talk to arouse Bithia, but he had no idea what he was going to say. Until now. He was already hard enough to fell a tree, but Viltori’s words only increased the pressure throbbing through his body. Holding to their newly founded agreement was going to take every shred of self-control he possessed. Each time he took a breath, he could smell Bithia on his lips. Snaking out his tongue, he tasted her musky sweetness, causing a drop of come to pearl at the head of his cock.

Slowly, as he spoke, Viltori worked his way up the bed, his golden hair gleaming. Drahka’s eyes were drawn down to the dark hair along his legs, around his cock, still clutched in one hand. Viltori held his prick like a tool. One he longed to wield upon the woman below him. His ability to resist her impressed Drahka and reminded him of Rown. If not for having Viltori at his side, Drahka would damn the consequences and impale Bithia upon his shaft.

Bithia’s gaze darted between them as her breathing accelerated. Panting as if she were running, she struggled to sit up, but that was when Viltori pounced. Letting go of his prick, he leapt upon her hips, pinning her down into the bed, using the coverings to capture her completely.

Leaning close, he whispered, “Did you really think we were done with you, my lady?” He smiled, then licked her lips slowly with the tip of his tongue. “Did you think I would make you climax only once?” Sliding up until his cock was tantalizingly close to her mouth, Viltori cupped her chin, his thumb working her lower lip, his intent clear. “I want to make you scream with pleasure. I want you to beg for my prick and then watch me give it to him.”

Bithia’s gaze shot to the end of the bed. Drahka stood very still, letting her look at him as Viltori had told him to do. Was he seriously going to fuck him while Bithia watched? That wasn’t what they had

agreed to. That seemed almost cruel. If she could not have their cocks within her body, they should refrain too. Still, Drahka kept his mouth closed, curious as to where Viltori would go. What he said and what he did could be two different things.

“Would you like to watch that?” Viltori leaned up just enough to rub the tip of his cock against Bithia’s lower lip. “Would you like to watch me pound my prick into Drahka’s tight ass?”

Bithia nodded, causing a bit of his head to slip inside her mouth. Viltori hissed as he quickly drew in a breath between clenched teeth. His control was wavering. Drahka could feel it. Watching him tease Bithia was making Drahka’s balls ache. He wanted to taste the tip of Viltori’s prick. He wanted to ram his cock deep into him. Needs and longings swirled through his mind in a confusing whirlwind. Still, Drahka held his position at the foot of the bed, just as he and Viltori had agreed he would. Somehow, he knew that if he lost control, Viltori would rapidly lose his. He had no idea what they would do in that state of crazed arousal.

“I’ll bet he’s as unyielding as a fist inside. Tight and hot and just as greedy grasping as you are,” Viltori said. Bithia’s eyes closed as her lips parted on a moan. Before she could slip her tongue around him, Viltori pulled his cock away. “Oh, no, my lady. Not for you. We have something special for you.”

Viltori cast his gaze over his shoulder. Eyes gleaming with mischief and control that hung by a bare thread, he nodded to Drahka.

Reaching down under the bed, Drahka removed a small box of items. When he dropped the cache of goods on the bed, Bithia’s eyes flew open.

“I wonder what’s in the box?” Viltori asked playfully. With a quick command, he reactivated the wires that encircled Bithia’s nipples. Thrusting her breasts up against the cover exposed how hard her nipples were. Chuckling, Viltori tweaked them further. “Did you think I had forgotten about these?”

Bithia writhed below the crimson blankets. Her moans only aggravated Drahka’s heightened senses. He could smell her, he could taste her, and more than anything he wanted to be inside her. What they had in mind would be a pale substitute for the slick-crushing feel of her glory.

As Drahka lifted the covers, he regretted his deal with Viltori. A new frustration caused his brows to settle low over his eyes. Viltori was always deciding what they would do. He liked being in charge and, so far, Drahka had willingly let him lead, but now, Drahka wanted to command Viltori. Maybe not for always, but this night, he wanted him bound and tormented. Drahka had a feeling it was the one thing Viltori had never allowed anyone to do to him. After his lie of omission earlier, this would be the perfect revenge.

With his back to him, Drahka realized he could easily overpower Viltori, restrain him and then do whatever he pleased. However, he would need help to immobilize him. Viltori might be smaller, but he was strong. Drahka had a feeling he would fight. For some reason that thought only excited Drahka more. Forcing him to submit to his will was a heady notion, just as it had been when they’d discussed doing it to Bithia.

Once he had exposed Bithia's long legs, Drahka grasped her ankles and pushed up, pretending he was going to bind her, but instead, he caught her gaze. Holding up the restraints, he shook his head, glanced at Viltori and then nodded. Bithia flashed her understanding with a quick blink and a nod that she masked by struggling.

"Are they on?" Just as Viltori turned to look, Drahka grasped his arms and slapped the metal restraints around his wrists. "By the gods!" Viltori climbed to his knees, clearly panicked.

Drahka wrapped his arms around his chest, encompassing his bound arms, and squeezed, lifting him up and then pushing him over, face down on the bed.

"Don't fight me, Viltori." Just as he did to Bithia, Drahka leaned close. Placing his lips right to his ear, he said, "I don't want to hurt you."

"This isn't what we agreed to." Viltori struggled in earnest.

Calmly sitting on his buttocks, holding him down with the sheer weight of his body, Drahka said, "I changed my mind."

Bithia settled next to him, her eyes alight with the erotic possibilities. Nuzzling Viltori's ear with her lips, she asked, "What's wrong, teacher? Don't you like seeing your student become so adept?"

Struggling and snarling, Viltori whipped his head from side to side. He bucked his hips trying to throw Drahka off. Each time he did, he jostled Drahka's prick, which he made a point of rubbing against his back. Growling with frustration, Viltori went limp when he realized that Drahka held him down without straining himself at all.

"What are you going to do to me?" The bed muffled his dejected voice.

"Anything I want." Drahka turned to Bithia. Calling her close, he murmured instructions into her ear so Viltori could not hear. Flashing him a grin, she readied everything they would need to fully restrain Viltori. Watching her move about, her face flushed with excitement as the wires continued to hum and tease her breasts, almost pushed him over the edge. Determined to make this moment count, Drahka took several calming breaths.

Releasing one wrist, Drahka lifted Viltori's captured hand while Bithia helped him lift the other. Clicking the restraints back on, he rolled Viltori over. Now he straddled his chest. Drahka realized he could swing his bound hands down, so he moved up higher on his chest, using his legs to hold his arms up. This position also placed his cock very close to Viltori's mouth. Viltori was angry, but he wasn't going to bite. While he held Viltori firmly captured, Bithia tried to bind his legs, but he kicked, dislodging her hands. He wasn't trying to hurt her, but he refused to assist her in binding him.

"Going to make this difficult, are you?" Drahka leaned back, captured Viltori's legs, and held them while Bithia pushed the soles of his feet together and encased his ankles in the restraints. Once they were locked into place, Viltori stopped struggling. There was no point now. The way the restrains worked, he could not bring his legs together, or even get to his knees, not with the soles of his feet touching. Viltori

had gotten aroused just holding the device and describing its use to Drahka earlier today. He seemed shocked to find himself captive by the same implement.

Drahka scooted back a bit on Viltori's chest, staring down at his friend's flashing eyes. A thousand future punishments lurked in his gaze, and Drahka would gladly take them all to have this one moment of mastery.

Cupping his chin, he teased his thumb along Viltori's lips, just as he had done to Bithia. "Do you want to watch him suck my cock?" He looked at Viltori, but asked the question to Bithia.

Leaning near, she considered Drahka's cock, Viltori's lips, as if debating the issue. "Yes, I think he would look very good with your cock in his mouth. But first—" Bithia slipped the twin wires from her nipples and placed them on his. Arching below Drahka's body, Viltori released a groan that vibrated Drahka's balls. Mockingly, Bithia asked, "Did you think I'd forgotten about these?"

"I'll make both of you pay for this." Viltori's hair was a tousled mass of gold, which only highlighted the soft brown of his eyes. Despite his blustering, he was hard, because Drahka could feel the tip of his cock against his right buttock. When he moved, he created a small circle of wetness against his flesh, which flashed multiple scenarios through his mind. He could do so much to Viltori, especially with Bithia's help.

"Then we better make the most of the time we have with you." Sliding his hips forward, Drahka teased the tip of his cock along Viltori's lips. Opening his mouth as if to bite, Viltori flashed a nasty grin, then darted his tongue out, swiping the textured flesh along his taut foreskin. "Tell me how much you love the taste of my cock." When Viltori refused, Drahka pulled back, holding his prick just out of reach. "Tell me."

Teeth gritted, eyes glittering, Viltori swore, "I love the taste of your cock."

"Tell me you want to suck it."

"I want to suck it dry."

Smiling down, Drahka said, "You're a good student."

"You don't have to bind me to have me do this."

"I know, but this is so much more interesting." Holding his face in both his massive hands, Drahka placed his cock against his lips. When Viltori opened his mouth to speak, Drahka thrust his cock within, loving the hot, wet feel of Viltori's mouth. Despite his snarling and occasional resistance, Viltori was more aroused than Drahka had ever seen him.

Bithia climbed behind Drahka, nestling her cunt right atop Viltori's cock, tormenting him in a whole new way. "Do you feel how slick I am?" She leaned around Drahka's chest to peer at Viltori. "Doesn't that feel good?"

Drahka wanted to caution her not to take him inside, but she seemed to grasp the rules of the game. They commanded him, but they wouldn't make him do anything he didn't actually wish to do. Given the greedy way he was sucking at Drahka's cock, he clearly wanted to continue.

Sliding her hand around Drahka's hip, she captured his cock, holding the shaft as she pressed her body against his back. Softly she said, "It's like it's mine." Nudging him forward, she pushed the tip deeper into Viltori's hungry mouth. "It's like he's sucking my cock." Back and forth Bithia worked their bodies along Viltori's chest, her cunt sliding along as Drahka's cock moved in and out of Viltori's mouth.

On the verge of climax, Drahka pulled back. Just as Viltori had done, Drahka whispered, "No, my teacher, we are not done yet. You won't be finished so quickly."

Disappointment darkened his gaze. Drahka climbed off him but stayed close, settling back on his knees while Bithia teased her cunt fully along Viltori's cock.

"What is it you love to say?" Leaning forward, Bithia teased her nipples against Viltori's chest as she spoke. "Ah, yes. My sweet, hot cunt." Sliding her hands up his bound arms, she captured his wrists, placing her face within kissing distance of him.

Drahka loved seeing the contrast of their bodies—Bithia so dark compared to Viltori. Her hair was short black spikes and his was masses of tangled blond curls. Her body curvy and plush, his hard and strong. If he could, he would do them both at the same time. Instead, he settled back, watching Bithia drive Viltori into madness. As she kissed him, she whispered more erotic words against his mouth.

"I want you inside me so badly. The walls of my sex weep for you." All this while she continued gliding up and down.

Viltori closed his eyes in frustration and begged her for surcease.

"So many times you've teased me beyond rational thought. It seems fair I do the same to you."

Below her, he strained up, as if he moved at just the right time he could plunge inside her, but Bithia managed to move away right before he could. Sighs of disappointment became furious growls of frustration.

"There it is. The anger." Bithia leaned up, settling herself atop him as she cupped her breasts. "That's what I want to see. You deny me? Now I deny you."

Bound hands clenched into fists, Viltori swore, "When the day comes, my lady, and trust me, it will come, when the day comes for me to fill your cunt with my cock, I'm going to pound into you so hard you will never, ever forget that moment."

Drahka had never seen his eyes so intense. Viltori had longed to give to Bithia since he'd met her. To continue to hold back must take self-control beyond measure. Captive below her as she teased him mercilessly was only solidifying his determination. Drahka could not wait to witness that moment. If they came together without him, he would never forgive either of them.

"Promises, promises." Bithia offered a lazy smile and kissed him again. "I'm going to use you to climax. I'm going to hold myself right here and make you watch me." Bithia's hand moved across his chest, then to the space between her thighs. When contact came, she sighed and arched her back, thrusting her breasts forward, holding them well out of the reach of Viltori's hungry mouth.

“And you, just sitting there letting her use me like this?” Viltori woke Drahka from his trance. “Why don’t you do something?”

“I am.” Viltori’s frown prompted him to add. “I am watching.” Drahka lowered his hand to grasp his own prick. “I like to watch.” Giving his cock one good, long stroke caused Viltori’s entire body to tighten. Bithia too tightened her legs as she watched him, which in turn clutched her more firmly around Viltori. A swell of pride filled Drahka that he could arouse them both without contact. Again, he stroked himself, this time drawing up on his knees, showing off the muscles in his legs, hips, chest and arms. Left hand firmly wrapped around his shaft he squeezed lightly, teasing himself further. “Both of you like to watch.”

Eyes riveted to him, Bithia continued to rub herself as she watched Drahka stroke himself and Viltori rocked his hips, getting some satisfaction against Bithia.

“You said you wanted to watch me.” Drahka lowered his face but lifted his gaze to his teacher. Connection hit. The link between them was so strong Drahka almost looked away. In his eyes, he felt his longing, almost as if Bithia’s sweetly slick sex was against Drahka’s own aching cock. But he knew if he pulled her from Viltori now, he would not be able to resist. He would plunge into her with abandon, damning the consequences.

“That day in the mirrored room, you wanted to watch me lose control.” Holding his hand steady, Drahka rocked his hips, plunging his cock rhythmically into his fist. “Watch me now, my friend. Watch me climax while I watch you getting tormented.”

Increasing her pace, Bithia worked her body against Viltori as she rubbed her finger across the tight nub of her clit. Breasts bouncing as she worked, her gaze held steady to Drahka, which infuriated Viltori. Determined to get her attention, he lowered his hands and cupped one ample breast.

“Look at me,” Viltori commanded. Pulling her down as he angled up, he managed to pull her breast to his mouth and suck hard at her nipple.

“Greedy man.” Cupping the back of his head with one hand, she continued to rub her clit as she squirmed above him. “You know I’m not going to help you climax.”

“I want to feel you.” Biting at her breast, he switched to the other and nibbled hard. “Use me to climax, but look at me, not him.”

“Jealousy?” Bithia mocked him, but gently. “I will make you my whole world.” Drawn to him, she leaned forward, rotating her chest, feeding him one breast, then the other, as she rocked her slick sex over Viltori’s cock. “Look only at me.”

Viltori did.

Drahka lessened his strokes, giving Bithia the opportunity to go first. Determinedly she moved atop Viltori, who demanded her attention with his aggressive handling and sucking of her breasts. Each pass she made along him caused him to lift up, a mimic of what each truly wished to do.

“Are you close, my lady?” Drahka asked.

Bithia nodded, increasing her movements, working her hand firmly until she jerked forward, collapsing against Viltori's chest. Delicate quivers contracted her form. Viltori placed his bound hands around her head, holding her to him, letting her wring the last of pleasure before he let go and placed his hands behind his head. Much to Drahka's delight, Viltori had not climaxed. When Bithia rose up, Drahka whispered in her ear. Her smile was sweet and ruthless all at the same time.

Viltori watched them both with lowered brows. Bithia moved back slightly and, using her slick climax, she grasped Viltori's cock in both hands.

"Watch Drahka." Bithia turned her head, following Drahka's timing. Each time he stroked his fist down, she stroked her fist down Viltori.

"It's like I'm touching myself and you at the same time." Leaning up again, showing off his body, Drahka continued his leisurely strokes. Watching Bithia torment Viltori only increased his rise to the inevitable. "All day and most of this night I have been aroused." Looking now deeply into Viltori's eyes, he added, "The way you talk about taking control lights up your whole face, and now that I've done so to you, I can see why." Drahka took a deep breath and made one hard slide down to the base of his cock. Viltori moaned when Bithia did the same to him. "Such power, such an incredible rush in overwhelming you, taking command of you, doing what I wished with you." He could feel his balls lifting, ready to release him from his daylong distress. The rapid rise and fall of Viltori's chest told him was close too. Concentrating now on the finale, Drahka timed his breathing to his strokes, encouraging Viltori to match with Bithia. As his awareness shifted outward, he connected again to Viltori and, when he climaxed, so did Viltori.

A mutual growl lifted into the air and rumbled against the glass ceiling. Gushing jets of white splattered along the hair of Drahka's chest as he leaned back, giving Viltori the visual he'd mentioned to Bithia. Watching the same jet along Viltori's chest only increased Drahka's pleasure and the connection he felt. Lowering his head, he slumped forward, exhausted. Bithia released Viltori from his restraints. Cautiously she looked at him, ready for anything.

Climbing to his knees, Viltori swept Bithia and Drahka into his arms and shared a three-way kiss.

"You're not angry?" Bithia caressed the hair right above his ear, smoothing it back from his face.

"No." He kissed her shoulder, peering up playfully into Drahka's eyes. "But I will have revenge."

Drahka took the threat as a promise.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Morning light filled the empress suite with dazzling brightness. Viltori shielded his eyes with his hand, then flipped the covers over his head. Sadly, he was alone in the crimson darkness. Bithia and Drahka had left much earlier to see about the issue of their bonding. Alone and hard, Viltori thought back over last night, amazed at Drahka's cunning.

"Perhaps I am a better teacher than I realized."

Initial terror had given way to sublime pleasure. Bithia was so wet and hot he'd forgotten his vow and tried to slip his cock within her. In the harsh light of day, he thanked the gods he'd been bound and unable to give into his lust. The unspoken words of the woman with the silver hair and eyes rolled in his mind:

May nature have mercy upon your surrogate.

The way she'd pushed the words into his consciousness convinced him she meant his child. Each time he considered what she'd said, he saw a helpless innocent suffering untold heartache so that he could live. He considered the idea that he could prevent his shame from touching his child by not having one. There were ways to forever prevent himself from impregnating Bithia; however, if he took such drastic measures, he would be denying himself and Bithia the joy of having a child.

But Drahka could still have one with her.

Viltori thought he could love Drahka's child just as much as he could love one of his own. What Drahka said was true—what did it really matter who the father was? A child was a gift from the gods. Any and every child between the three of them would be thoroughly loved. But then his heart turned to ice. What if the gods took their revenge on Bithia and Drahka's child? If Viltori tried to deny his fate, the gods would find another way to punish him. Perhaps something more vile by visiting his shame upon one utterly removed from his crime.

Rolling onto his belly, Viltori hugged his pillow hard, determined to keep his tears at bay. Regret for what Bithia and Drahka had done seemed terribly inappropriate. They'd given him back his life. But at what cost? He couldn't bear to have what should have been his death placed on another. Still, though, the way of the silver woman's mind told him it would not be a one-to-one exchange. One would not die to take his place, but one would suffer horribly. How could he do anything with that threat hanging over his head? How could he live his life without constantly considering the due that must be paid?

What if he left? He considered this option for a long time. Actually pictured himself living on one of the few planets he knew something about, but leaving wouldn't fix the problem. Proximity to him probably

had nothing to do with when or how the obligation would be paid. Since both Bithia and Drahka had a part in bringing him back, he feared they were equally guilty. Even if he ran to another planet, his debt would only follow him. He could not run from this problem, and he couldn't tell Drahka or Bithia. They would dismiss the silver woman's words, or worse, seek her out and demand an explanation. Viltori couldn't let the Treagen woman suffer, not after she'd given him back his life. In his heart, he knew that would only increase the magnitude of his debt. Somehow, he had to find a way to pay his own due.

Flinging back the covers, he slid out of bed. His wrists and ankles were tender, but not horribly so. Rubbing his belly, he moved toward the table filled with covered platters. He ate without tasting, bathed without feeling, dressed without caring. His mind could not let go of the problem facing him. The only time he'd been free of the all-consuming thoughts was when he and Drahka had been planning their lusty encounter with Bithia.

A twinge of shame hit him then, that he hadn't been completely honest with Drahka. But he knew if he told him the truth, he would argue against such a stance. Giving to Bithia no matter his station was more important to Drahka than Viltori's moral dilemma. Still, he should have told him the truth. But he feared that Drahka, amazing and persuasive Drahka, would have convinced him to change his mind. However, when they'd been acting out their detailed scenario, Drahka offered his surprising twist. Watching him stroke himself had been just as arousing as Bithia's teasing. But he knew they could not make do with that type of sexual activity for much longer. The urge to mate fully and completely with Bithia grew stronger each time she was near. In a moment of weakness, he knew he would surrender.

Determined to find a way to right his own wrong, Viltori left the empress suite. As soon as he did, a contingent of guards fell into line behind him. Somewhat embarrassed, Viltori strode toward the temple. When he'd been an acolyte, he'd never really felt a connection to the gods, but he had found a sensual peace in the rituals. Perhaps if he could center himself, he could determine a solution.

Lingering just outside the fabric door to the temple, his guards let him enter alone. Subdued azure light filled the vast space. When he took a deep breath, he tasted the familiar burning herbs. As he moved toward the massive statue devoted to the god of bonding, his eyes were drawn toward a small rendering. Her features were subdued, her head lowered demurely. Viltori could not remember having seen this goddess before, so he had no idea what she was the goddess of. Still, there was something about the tentative way she stood, with her long, straight hair hiding her face, that intrigued him. Her right hand crossed her body, cupping her left shoulder, as if she were protecting herself from an unknown foe. Unable to see where her left hand was, he rotated the statue, and her tiny hand touched his.

Startled, he almost dropped her as he hurriedly yanked his hand away.

"Have you come to save me?" Her voice was that of a lonesome child, high-pitched and indecently compelling.

He wanted to say no, to turn away, but he couldn't. He was here to solve his problem not take on whatever issues she had. Shaking his head, he hoped to dislodge the hallucination that was surely brought on by the drug-laced air. Oddities such as talking statues were not common, but they weren't unheard of, either. Many acolytes claimed the inner workings of the person's psyche were to blame for most, but not all, of such illusions.

"Are you a coward?" Now her voice took on a sinister edge.

Her accusation enraged him, but he replied, "No, I am not a coward."

"Then help me."

"What do you want?"

"A child."

Now he knew all of this was in his mind. The horrors of creating a child that would suffer for his existence had consumed his thoughts. "I'm not giving you a child to kill."

"Why would I want to kill a child?" She turned her face up, which slid her hair back, revealing that half of her face was horribly damaged. Twisting scars crossed from her forehead to her chin. She noticed him looking and quickly covered herself with her hair. "I want a child to love me."

It was as if she'd reached right into his chest and squeezed his heart. "I can't give you a child."

"Yes, you can. You can create a child that will worship only me." Her little face radiated joy. "All over the temple there are those who bow and pray and sacrifice to the other gods and goddesses, but none lay at my feet." Pain radiated from her voice.

Such compelling distress dropped him to his knees. "I will worship you." Viltori wanted to alleviate her suffering.

"You are too old and you do not really believe." She shook her head, her ruined face flashing in and out of the light. "I want a devotee trained only to me. One who lives only for me, one who would sacrifice anything to me, even her very life."

Viltori shivered. "I wouldn't ask a child to do that for me, so what makes you think I would give one to you?" In an effort to break free of her commanding presence, he turned his face away, but he felt the pressure of her hand upon his shoulder. A full-sized hand and not the tiny one that had touched him only a moment ago.

"Why do you refuse me? Giving a child unto me would pay your debt."

Shivering despite the moist warmth of the temple, Viltori wrapped his arms across his chest. "I will not. I cannot." He would do anything to find another way to pay what he owed.

"Then I will take one from you anyway." Her hand tightened on his shoulder, crushing him so hard he felt his bones ready to break under her grip. "I will take one produced by your lovers."

"No!" Lunging away from her, he was halfway across the floor when he opened his eyes and looked about. The tiny statue was still within the niche on the wall. Not a soul was anywhere near him. Climbing to his feet, he clutched his shoulder, shocked to feel tenderness.

Simultaneously his guards and a group of acolytes rushed into the room. His guards came from one end and the acolytes from the other end of the long room. Swords drawn, his guards considered the acolytes, who rapidly backed away.

Lifting his hand, Viltori held them back. "It was nothing. Please wait for me outside." His head was spinning and his stomach clenched.

With a suspicious glare at the acolytes, the four guards left, but he could hear them just beyond the doorway. They took their role of protection seriously, probably because of Bithia's threat to stone anyone who let anything happen to either him or Drahka.

Before the acolytes departed, he called one over. She was tiny, possibly the smallest woman he had ever seen next to a *serbred*. "Who is this goddess?" Pointing from where he stood, he didn't want to be any closer to the statue than he had to be, and he certainly didn't want to be alone with it.

Unable to see from where she was, the diminutive acolyte approached and peered intently at the statue's face. "Shartaya. She is the goddess of tragedy." The acolyte flipped back her oddly cut black hair and cast him a look that he should know since he was a former acolyte.

"Does she have followers?" Who would worship a woman that represented heartbreak and disaster?

Frowning slightly, the young woman nodded, then paused, her head tilted to the side. A slow creep of shame covered her face. "I do not know. She is a lesser goddess and she is tucked away back here." The acolyte reached out toward the statue as if to scoop it up and perhaps move her to a more prominent spot. Viltori stopped her before she could. Yanking her hand away, the acolyte practically fled from him. He understood why. His skin was ice cold.

Realizing he was alone with the statue, Viltori departed the temple, his awareness of his surroundings dampened as he tried to understand what had happened. To him, the goddess represented his greatest fears. Devoting a child to her worship was symbolic of what he feared would happen to any child the three of them created. All his trip to the temple had done was increase his distress.

Silently cursing the gods, Viltori hurried through the halls, unaware of his destination. Clomping away behind him, his guards dutifully followed. When he came upon the *tishiary*, he sighed with relief. Here he felt safe. Wary, the guards followed within. They had their own place for bathing, dressing and gossiping. Besides, they were clearly upset he would ever wish to return to the place where he'd been beaten almost to death. He didn't bother to try to explain. In the large bathing pool, Rown swam back and forth, a happy smile lighting his face when he saw Viltori enter.

"My friend!" Rown almost shot himself right out of the water with his joy. "I am glad to see you." Rown moved as if to join him beside the pool, but Viltori motioned him back.

“I am glad to see you too.” Removing his clothing and setting each item aside, Viltori noticed his guards turned away, as if to offer him privacy, which he appreciated but didn’t need. He had been a recruit, after all. Rown watched him with sparkling eyes and clear appreciation. Once he was bare, he slipped into the water and swam over to Rown. “Tell me of Sterlave.”

Taking a deep breath, Rown launched into a detailed account of everything that happened with the Treagen people. Much like Drahka’s telling, Rown’s tale excited him too, causing him to harden below the water. Possibly the most compelling part of the tale was Rown’s own enthusiasm.

“As soon as I saw Drahka, I completely understood your longing. He’s huge, and so silent, and strong.” Lowering his voice so the guards could not hear, he added, “However did you dare to approach such a stoic man?” Rown shook his head, clearly impressed. “I do not think I would have had the courage. Well, Sterlave was brooding, but Drahka is more so, and look what I had to stoop to in order to get Sterlave to finally acknowledge—”

“For the love of the gods, Rown, take a breath!” This was what Viltori could never explain to someone else about why he would never tire of coming here. He loved listening to Rown’s rambling stories. It wasn’t the same meeting up with him elsewhere. Water brought out bubbly, effusive elation in Rown that soothed Viltori’s stress. Despite incredible difficulties, Rown never lost his joy in life. Perhaps that was the answer as to why one would worship the goddess of tragedy. By kneeling before a goddess who embodied all that was most painful and horrible in life, one made peace with it. Acknowledging tragedy took away the shock of it when it happened, for it always happened. Not a soul anywhere had ever lived a life free of tragedy.

Sighing dramatically, Rown sobered. Reaching out, he cupped Viltori’s chin. His hand was cool from the water. “I thought I would never see you again.”

Taking his hand in his, Viltori nodded. “I am blessed to be alive. And I thank you for your part in making that so.” After a moment, he pointedly added, “Even if you did use the situation to your own lustful ends.”

Blushing, Rown shivered in the water. “I worried that when we returned, Sterlave would return to his same elusive silence, but he didn’t.” Glancing over at the guards, who were vigilant but not eavesdropping, he added, “Three times he has been with me since we came back.”

“He told Kasmiri?” Sterlave’s bondmate, the prior empress, wasn’t known for her indulgence. Before her renouncement of her throne, Kasmiri was considered a greedy, selfish and insufferably vain creature. Viltori found it difficult to believe that pregnancy had softened her nature.

“He did. And Sterlave confessed the truth with his head held high.” Pride filled Rown, causing a smug satisfaction to cross his features. “Sterlave looked her right in the eye and told her everything. And do you know what she did?”

Viltori considered. “Clearly she didn’t castrate him or you wouldn’t be so happy.”

Rolling his eyes, much like his mistress, Rown said, “No, she didn’t castrate him. She put her hands on her hips and said it was about time.” Rown demonstrated by cupping his hands to his waistline below the shimmering water. “She couldn’t believe he’d denied his feelings for as long as he had.” Smirking, Rown released his hands and fell back in the water with a great sigh. When water washed over his face, he sank down, almost to the bottom, then shot up, flinging water out of his black hair.

“So everything worked out.” Viltori was happy for his friend, but envious as well. He wanted the same for himself and the two people he loved.

Pouting in a stylized way, Rown swam in a tight circle around him. “I can tell that you are genuinely happy for me.”

“I am but something else troubles me.” Viltori swore he wouldn’t tell Drahka or Bithia, but Rown was ever so good at picking a problem apart until it no longer seemed a problem at all. “I shouldn’t be here.”

Rown looked about the vast space of the *tishary*.

“Not here, exactly, but anywhere.” Viltori took a deep breath, feeling his chest expand against the weight of water. “I shouldn’t exist.”

Stopping suddenly, facing Viltori, Rown blinked. “You would rather be dead?”

Unable to decipher the emotion on the young man’s face, Viltori hastily tried to take back his words. “No, that’s not—never mind.” Viltori dropped below the water, letting the cool wet embrace cut him off from all other sensations. Only for a moment. When he rose, everything came right back with him. Whipping his head around, flinging the water off his face and hair, he considered Rown for a moment. “There is a debt to be paid for my return. One I cannot pay myself. I was in the temple and...” How could he tell Rown he must dump his burden on a child? What would his friend think of him then? Blurting everything out before he could change his mind, he gushed, “The goddess of tragedy wants a child from me, a child to worship only her, a child forced to devote her life to her.” Once he’d spewed everything out, he took a gasping breath. In the oddest way, he did feel better at having told someone else. What didn’t make him feel better was the way Rown was glaring at him.

Arms crossed, Rown clenched his jaw and pressed his lips so tightly together they almost disappeared. Very softly, he said, “If your guards did not stand ready to pounce, I would strike you, even knowing you would best me in a fight, I still would. Even knowing what you went through not far from here, I still would hit you.”

Stunned, Viltori reached out to his friend, but Rown flinched back, splashing water with the sudden jerk of his body. This in turn alerted his guards. One man stepped closer, but Viltori waved him back. They were like a pack of hunting animals ever vigilant to the sounds of chase.

Lifting his hands in a plaintive gesture to Rown, Viltori asked, “Why?”

“Tell me what you find so reprehensible about a person who is faithful to their god.”

“Nothing.”

“Then what’s wrong with a child who is given to a god?” Rown barely held back tears. “I am a devotee of Behdera, given to him on the day of my birth. I had no idea this made me less in your eyes.”

Viltori realized he’d denigrated Rown’s entire existence. He was about to say he didn’t mean him, but that would only make matters worse, so he said the only thing he could think of. “I’m sorry.”

“You are not.” Rown turned as if to go, but whipped back around. “You’re sorry the truth came out. I always knew you did not have faith in the gods even though you were a part of the temple, but what I didn’t know was what low esteem you held the faithful in.”

“I do not hold you in low esteem.” Anger flared. “But what kind of a man would I be to give a child in my stead?” Viltori hoped this would explain. His words only further infuriated Rown.

“Oh, so you would not wish my existence on your child.”

Viltori’s face must have told the truth that his heart didn’t dare speak.

“I thought you were my friend.” Something broke then, twisting Rown’s face, ripping away all the joy that was so much a part of him. “I thought you understood how difficult my relationship with Sterlave had been because of my station as an *ungati*. Little did I realize that you were looking down on me the entire time.”

“I have never looked down on anyone, and certainly not you.” Viltori could not believe the conversation had gotten so far from the point he was trying to make. He felt nauseous and dizzy, as if the water around him swirled in a great downward spiral. Every word he uttered dragged him further into oblivion.

“I remember now, that time when you suggested I simply break with my god and give in to the pleasure Sterlave wished to give to me.”

Viltori remembered that day. On that day, he learned the depth of Rown’s devotion. Giving pleasure was what Rown did for his god. Taking pleasure was something he could not do unless he was alone and giving of himself to his god. Rown spoke with finality. As if that was the only way he could ever be. Breaking with his traditions would be like breaking his soul. Without his faith, Rown would not be Rown.

“I was willingly given to Behdera on the day of my birth,” Rown turned and began slogging his way out of the pool, “and for you to make that sacrifice ugly—”

Viltori grabbed him by the shoulders, refusing to let go even when he struggled. Rown’s body rubbed against his, but not playfully, not like he had that day that felt a lifetime ago. Now his struggle was in earnest, but he was no match for Viltori’s strength. He felt horrible for what he was doing, but he also wasn’t about to chase him around the palace naked. Viltori wanted Rown’s attention and, by the gods, he was going to make him not only hear his words but listen to them.

“Did your parents give you to a god to pay a debt on their souls?” At this, Rown ceased resisting. Wide-eyed he peered at Viltori. “Because that is what I would be doing. Selfishly I would give Shartaya my child so that I could live in peace.” Shaking Rown within his grip, he pressed his face very close. “Do

you see now what eats at my soul? How can I in good conscience give away an innocent to atone for my sin?" At that, Viltori pushed Rown away, causing a great ripple. "For the sin of Bithia and Drahka. They brought me back, but now I have to pay for it!"

The truth tumbled from his lips before he could shut them. Viltori was so angry with them for what they'd done to him. The wave created by his shoving of Rown broke along the side of the bathing pond, spilling water beyond the edge. "Because they could not let me go, they changed what should have been. Dead should remain dead. But now I walk in shadow, unable to live my life for fear of my burden becoming another's."

Closing his eyes and taking a deep breath, Viltori turned his back on Rown. What was done was done. He couldn't take back a word he'd uttered, nor could he undo what his companions had done. Hating those he loved for giving him back his life was wrong, and Viltori knew it, yet still the fury gnawed at him. If not for their intervention, he would have died, and hopefully, gone on to a life among the gods in *Jarasine*. But no. Because of the interference of Bithia and Drahka, Viltori was trapped—too afraid to live and too afraid to die.

And still remained the question of what he would do.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Endless petty arguments had dominated the meeting, but Bithia was determined to put the most pressing matters to rest. First and foremost was making Menon's position as magistrate official. After he'd offered his vow to uphold the office of magistrate, he settled himself to the next highest chair. He sat tall and proud but still clad in his work-worn black clothing. By the celebration tonight, he would have proper garments of silver to indicate his rank.

With him in place she turned to what she considered the most critical issue, that of her bonding to Drahka, who sat by her side, reserved, knowing full well he was not welcomed by the heads of the Houses because they saw him as nothing but a *barsita*.

Enovese, her protocol liaison, who stood beside her, leaned near and whispered, "I have a surprise that will most assuredly please you, my lady." Before Bithia could ask, Enovese settled her lone piece of aging paper on the podium before her. Bithia would have worried but for the confident smile Enovese offered as she nodded to Menon that she was ready.

Across the circle stood an elderly man, his glittering copper robe washing out the paleness of his features. Around his waist he wore a sash that combined all the colors of the Houses but for crimson. He too nodded to Menon, then turned his shockingly dark gaze to Enovese. Rather than a secure smile, he flashed a glower that seemed to say he would like nothing better than to put Enovese in her place. Next to his podium, he had a stack of books and papers that swayed precariously. This man would not make the same mistakes the other protocol liaison had. He realized the threat that Enovese presented and he would not underestimate her.

A trickle of apprehension hit then as Bithia compared his stack to Enovese's lone page, but she showed no reaction as she relaxed into her chair. She had unwavering faith in Enovese, and if she believed she could best a man four times her senior, then Bithia believed it too. Something about Enovese inspired that level of confidence. Even Drahka, when he glanced over at her, seemed assured she would prevail.

Menon stood, nodded to each in turn, then lifted his hand to the elderly protocol liaison. "Make your opening statement, Areland."

He cleared his throat, then in a surprisingly young voice he said, "From the time of the ancients, the sacred bonding between an empress and her primary, eternal bondmate and consort, has been held to the most strict guidelines." With hands that shook from age, he grabbed one of the books and hefted it onto his

podium. Dust poofed into the air when the massive tome landed. Flipping it open, he found the page he sought, and continued, “In reading Kipfer’s in the ancient language, we see that...”

Bithia’s mind drifted off as he plodded on, praising the wisdom of the ancients, and that upholding their traditions was what had kept the Onic Empire vital and blah, blah, blah. Behind his back, the people began to wilt, bored by his history lesson and the flat monotone of his voice.

“Because Drahka did not climax in full view, the ceremony between Bithia of Crimson house and Drahka of the Oughun is invalid.”

Finally, he shut up, and everyone in the room released a relieved sigh. To her side, Enovese yawned, delicately behind her hand, but still, the meaning of her motion was clear. Bithia almost burst into laughter for her gentle show of disdain, but she refrained. This was no laughing matter.

“We concur.”

A moment of stunned silence spilled over the room at Enovese’s short statement. Shocked witnesses leaned forward, eyes wide as they considered Enovese. She was agreeing with him? What strategy was this? Bithia sat very still despite how her heart raced and her palms grew sweaty.

Menon quickly reined in his shock. “You agree with Areland?”

Enovese nodded. “On the subject of the bonding between Bithia and Drahka, we concede that the bonding is invalid.”

Next to her, Drahka curled his hand into a fist and held it below view. He clenched so hard the edges of his hand turned white. Unsure what madness had possessed Enovese, Bithia cupped Drahka’s hand to hers, soothing him, trying to show him he should calm himself.

Clearly disappointed, Areland leaned heavily against his podium, his face thunderous as he considered that Enovese had wasted his time and everyone else’s.

“Now that we have resolved that issue, we can move on to discussing the bonding ceremony between Bithia, Drahka and Viltori.”

Eyes bulged. Furious whispers and a cacophony of angry babble erupted.

Menon clapped his hands, calling for order. “Present your objection to her motion, Areland.”

Doing his best to smooth away his disgust at the mere idea of a multiple bonding, Areland didn’t even turn to his books. “Such a thing is unheard of. For you to even suggest we indulge such perversity shows a gross ignorance of the Harvest prophecy.”

Collectively the heads of the Houses nodded behind him.

Drahka clutched her hand. No longer did he clench his fist in fury, but he now clasped hers with hope. She too squeezed back, daring to believe that what they’d most longed for could come true. All of them equal in their joining. Both Drahka and Viltori as eternal bondmates and consorts.

Holding aloft her lone paper, Enovese calmly replied, “That you condemn me for a lack of knowledge only reveals your own ignorance. Do you think Kipfer’s in the ancient language is the only source of the Harvest prophecy?”

Areland’s gaze riveted to the paper.

“If one is diligent in perusing the stacks of the great library, one can find many, many treasures.” With exceeding grace, Enovese moved down the aisle toward Areland, carrying her page. “This is documentation of the bonding of the first empress, Farjika the Dark. It was she who founded Crimson House and the Onic Empire.”

For a moment, Bithia feared that once he got the paper, Areland would simply tear the fragile article to shreds, but he took the document from Enovese with great care. She understood then that he was a protocol liaison, not a tool who would mindlessly do the bidding of the Houses. Areland cared about the prophecy. He wanted to see the rites and rituals honored, not just held to at the whim of the current person in power. After placing the tan parchment on his podium, he leaned close to examine the words written there. The room fell to silence, giving him time to inspect Enovese’s evidence.

As Enovese returned to Bithia’s side, she smiled and raised her truculent little nose. Her beautiful hair swayed with her steps, the glittering strands falling behind her like a living cape. Her gaze lingered on Bithia and Drahka’s clasped hands for a moment, then lifted. Nodding subtly, she seemed to be conveying that all was well. She knew exactly what she was about and none would stop her from proving her point. If Enovese could carry this off, Bithia swore that she would give Enovese anything, everything her heart desired. Even if she had to steal from the empire’s funds she would to cover Enovese in riches.

When Areland finished, he looked up, a stunned kind of respect replacing the earlier hatred. “The document is valid.”

Since Areland represented all the other Houses, they couldn’t very well decry his assessment. They had appointed him and they were bound by rites and rules to respect the outcome.

Refusing to be arrogant with her besting of him, Enovese shyly offered, “A lusty woman, Farjika the Dark. She bonded to over twenty men. Each was considered a bondmate and a consort and all her children by those men were legitimate. From her fertility sprang a line of powerful women, of which Bithia is one. It was Farjika who created the system of rank by colors and enacted many of the rites we still practice today.”

Bithia was as stunned as the rest. As a recent transplant to Diola, she knew little of the world’s history, but that her ancestor had established the very empire itself was a grand revelation indeed.

“Do you concur with her assessment, then, that Bithia may proceed to bond to both Drahka and Viltori?” Menon turned to Areland.

Clearly at a loss, he looked to his stack of books and papers, but he seemed to realize they would do him no good. His shoulders slumped as he lowered his face. He seemed to age another ten seasons before her eyes. “We concede.”

Enovese faced Bithia with so much joy it was almost as if she had argued for herself. As she stood and embraced her, joining her in a silent but no less profound celebration, she realized that for Enovese, it wasn't about pleasing her as the empress, or winning the argument, but about proving herself. Enovese had known down to her bones that she was correct and she reveled in the vindication.

"You have pleased me greatly, Enovese. Tell me what I can do in turn for you."

"Nothing, my lady." Her glorious hair danced around her shoulders as she shook her head. "I see how you look at both Drahka and Viltori. Never would you be able to choose between them. In this way, you can have them both. Your joy, their joy, is my joy." With that, she left, her pleasure radiating out of her in an almost palpable wave.

When the heads of the Houses realized further arguments were pointless, most of them left the meeting. They were not much interested in the day-to-day issues. Invigorated by the wonderful news, Bithia pushed through the agenda, eager to finish so that she and Drahka could share their fantastic information with Viltori. As the meeting wound down, Menon waited until only he, she and Drahka remained in the circle.

Darkness lurked in Menon's gaze. Her heart sank. "What now?" It seemed every time she was lifted up, something else just smacked her down.

"My lady, I..." He trailed off as he glanced around the room, ensuring their privacy before continuing. "There is something I must make you aware of." He lifted his hand to her seat, then knelt beside her. He activated her blue screen and flipped his thick, callused fingers rapidly over the floating text. With a grimace, he pulled back so she could examine the information unfettered.

Bithia considered the numbers hanging there, but had no idea what, exactly, she was looking at. And then, in a slow motion realization, the full horror hit. "Are you certain? How can this be?"

"My lady, to the best of my knowledge, Ambo used the empire as collateral to acquire loans from several powerful worlds."

Worlds that now, for lack of a better term, owned Diola. The figures were staggering. Numbers so large that she simply couldn't comprehend their magnitude. "And what of the funds he secured? Where are they?" Ambo had stuck his greedy fingers into everyone's pockets in the palace, he had wiped out the royal account, and now she discovered he'd not only destroyed the empire's funds, but left them vulnerable to mighty worlds that would think nothing of invading and taking whatever they wished. What did it matter now that she, Drahka and Viltori could bond, when there soon would be nothing for her to rule over?

"I have done all I can to find where he hid this great fortune, but I cannot. The money he placed in the Golden Bird has been used to pay the palace staff and cover the current expenses, but that is the last of it. Without incoming funds, we will be destitute in a quarter cycle."

In a room full of people, Bithia felt alone. All around her, the elite showed off their finery in outfits so garish they bordered on obscene. Bright fabrics, masses of jewels, shoes that flashed tiny lights as they moved, and hats so enormous some were relegated to lounging on couches, unable to move less they topple over. Ostensibly, they did all this to celebrate the placement of Menon Levotch as the new magistrate, but she knew their display was about showing off.

Bithia sighed.

Comparably, her dress was almost drab. A simple wraparound style that covered her from neck to ankle, but left her arms bare. She'd chosen this one for comfort. That and the fact the crimson fabric enhanced the natural curves of her body. She did not care what anyone thought of her understated elegance. No wig adored her head, so her hair was freshly washed and fluffed around her face in soft black strands. No colored lens covered her eyes. No makeup of any kind altered the true state of her face. Bithia did not need to attract attention. There were only two men whose eyes she wanted upon her. Sadly, neither one had hardly looked at her most of the evening.

Plucking a drink from a passing tray, she again turned her hungry eyes to Drahka and Viltori. Dressed in crimson outfits as understated as hers, the two men had cordoned themselves off in one of the privacy areas scattered throughout the great hall. Lush plants surrounded a couch and two chairs, but she could see them through the green fronds.

Drahka sat upon the couch while Viltori sat in the chair nearest the couch. Their heads were close, one light, one dark, as if they were staring deeply into each other's eyes. Despite what they looked liked, she thought they were talking intently. She smiled. Perhaps they were planning their next lusty romp. When she considered the slump of Viltori's shoulders and the hanging of Drahka's head, she frowned. She didn't think they were doing anything more than bemoaning the horrible news.

Unwilling to dwell on what she could not change, Bithia sipped her drink and caught the gaze of Menon. When she nodded to her newly placed magistrate, he nodded politely back, then returned his attention to his bondmate. Menon's silver uniform contrasted beautifully with his copper hair and Onic black eyes. The royal tailors had outdone themselves. Every line of the outfit complemented a man who took care of himself and took pride in his appearance. Menon was a welcome change from Ambo. As Bithia appreciated the picture Menon presented, she could not say the same for the man's bondmate. Ngela was stunningly beautiful with spun white hair and glittering pink eyes. Delicate features made her seem fragile, ethereal and delicate.

Until she spoke.

Ngela's voice was like rocks careening into one another at high speed. Never had Bithia heard a more unpleasant tone. Looking as delicate as a falling flake of snow, Ngela sounded like a caterwauling creature in heat.

Bithia shivered. Her heart went out to Menon. He'd selected Ngela as his bondmate during the Harvest ritual. He would not have known about her voice until *after* he'd claimed her. Too late to turn back, Menon had made peace with what he could not change. Menon selected a beautiful woman to share his life with. Her voice was horrid, but Ngela was lovely. After a time or two of Menon's prideful indulgence, Bithia discovered that she too liked Ngela despite her grating voice. Ngela was soft and sweet, her soul so open and kind the most basic charlatan could finesse her.

As she and Menon exchanged a small salute of their cups, they too exchanged a fleeting cast of worry. As the magistrate, Menon had uncovered the truth of Ambo's schemes. Concern etched deep lines into Menon's face when he had vowed to do all in his power to set the empire to rights, but as to how, he could offer no solution, but he would not cease in his determination to restore the Onic Empire.

Turning her gaze again, Bithia caught the eye of Helton, Kasmiri's father and head of the palace guard. Dressed in a rich black suit, he looked proud to have Kasmiri at his side. Sterlave was near, but not too close, his obvious dislike for Helton clear even from this distance. When her gaze locked on Kasmiri, Bithia glanced away before her sister noticed her looking but she was too late. Sharply aware, Kasmiri left her father's side and moved gracefully to Bithia's side.

Unable to retreat, Bithia prepared herself for a conversation she did not wish to have.

"What troubles you so, my sister?"

Touched by the way Kasmiri offered out that simple word, sister, and all the loving connotations the endearment carried, Bithia discovered she desperately wanted to tell her the truth and seek her counsel. After confirming none were near enough to listen, Bithia said, "What you told me, of our mother's account?"

Kasmiri nodded, encouraging her to continue.

"It is worse than that. Not only am I without personal funds, but the coffers of the entire empire are utterly bare."

Bithia could tell that Kasmiri wanted to react, but she held her features immobile as if they discussed nothing more than fashion. "How can this be?" Her hand cupped her belly, her concern clearly focused on what kind of a world she might bring her child into. In that moment Bithia wanted to relent; why tell her sister painful news she could not change when so much already pressed upon her? But Kasmiri's concern, her pleading gaze, compelled Bithia to confess the full.

"Ambo took everything and skillfully concealed it all. None have any idea where he placed his ill-gotten gains. What little he'd left in the spacecraft was barely enough to cover the guards' wages and the palace staff for another quarter cycle."

To conceal her shock, Kasmiri sipped her drink.

"And still it is worse."

Kasmiri seemed reluctant to ask, but softly she whispered, "How?"

“Ambo borrowed from many powerful worlds that Diola now owes.”

With a wince, Kasmiri cast her gaze at the lavish display around them. “How has all this been paid for?”

“At the moment, the empire survives on the graces of those other worlds, but soon, far too soon, that generosity will cease, and the bill will fall due. I have no way of paying them. Even if we export what few goods we have, it’s not nearly enough . . .” she trailed off, knowing that her half-sister quickly grasped the crushing depth of the financial nightmare. Fury at Ambo consumed Bithia, briefly, but holding a grudge against a dead man served no purpose.

Bithia and Kasmiri’s mother, Empress Clathia, had given all her personal funds to Ambo. Clathia had done so to bribe him into silence about Kasmiri’s illegitimacy. In doing so, Clathia had drained the royal funds. As Bithia stood gazing about at the excess displays of the elite, she realized part of her annoyance was that she had no funding of her own to compete. Worse, she didn’t want to compete so much as she feared a hostile takeover when the other Houses realized her inability *to* compete. Having the funding necessary to display vulgar wealth was one the most basic parts of being the empress. Crimson House had displayed affluence for centuries. The fact that Bithia no longer had the wherewithal to do so because of her mother was devastating. She hadn’t realized that everything she’d been given to wear was a hand-me-down from her mother or her half-sister, which now explained the constant need for alterations. The only thing holding the Houses at bay was the fact that Bithia had been so eccentric since her arrival. They looked upon her lack of display as charmingly unsophisticated. Bithia would do anything to keep that consensus going.

Her predecessors, her ancestors, the longest line of empresses in the history of the Onic Empire, had built up a massive royal account that Clathia drained in one short lifetime. Her mother left Bithia destitute. In fact, the empire Bithia had been tricked into claiming was now deeply in debt to mighty worlds with almost unlimited resources. No wonder her mother had committed suicide once she’d passed the empire on to Kasmiri. Her hugely pregnant sister had also vacated the throne. Unwittingly, Bithia stepped in. As proud as the title *Empress of the Onic Empire* might sound, the lofty label possessed little in the way of actual clout.

Now that she knew the magnitude of the problem dumped into her lap, Bithia wanted to wrench off her dress, fling her symbolic crown to the ground and return to the peaceful world of Beserrah.

As she considered the garish display around her again, she felt an aching sadness for them. They had no idea that all of this, the pageantry, the parade of obscene wealth, would all crumble to dust within nine days unless Bithia found a way to save their way of life. When that happened, they would not blame Ambo, but her. As much as she wished to run, she would not take a coward’s way out. She would stay and fight for her empire. The only problem was she had no idea what to do.

Kasmiri placed her hand gently over Bithia’s. “If there is anything I or my bondmate can do, you know we are at your loyal service.”

"I thank you." After a squeeze, she let go. "Just telling you has lifted part of my burden, but I am sorry such has weighed you down." Bithia glanced to her belly. "When you are already so fully burdened."

Rubbing her belly, Kasmiri, said, "Do not worry over me, Bithia. Better to know and plan than be oblivious."

"Yes. But—"

"I will keep this to myself and my bondmate. I will tell my father nothing."

Bithia sighed. With a slight nod, she silently thanked her for her discretion. "Please, do try to enjoy the rest of the evening." She didn't add that tonight might very well be the last good time Diola would ever see.

Kasmiri left her then, her stride amazingly smooth despite her ponderous belly. All at once Bithia envied her and feared for her. Too much responsibility crushed her. Telling her sister had helped, as had telling her loves, but telling did not solve the problem.

Her gaze sought out Drahka and Viltori. Just as she glanced over, Viltori set an empty glass on the table next to him, grabbed another drink, and tossed the liquid back. Why was he drinking so heavily? Was it the news of imminent collapse? But there had been good news too. Although, that was probably meaningless to him now. If there was no empire, what did it matter that they could now all be together in full of the Harvest prophecy?

"They seem quite engaged with one another."

Bithia turned. Beside her stood an elderly man, dressed in bronze, with a shockingly dark and thick brown mane. The richness of his hair contrasted sharply with his melted features. Deep-set eyes, a flattened nose, drooping lips; he seemed as if at one time he'd been very large, then suddenly lost most of his weight. And his height. The top of his head barely came up to her shoulder. After sipping his drink, he gestured to Drahka and Viltori.

"I have never seen two *men* so enamored of one another." His voice was casual, but the meaning behind his pointed words was not. Whoever this man was, he did not approve of their relationship. "It seems to me a woman would be most unnecessary to men like that. Unless they were using the woman for some gain." On the verge of calling for her guards, Bithia hesitated when the man lowered his voice to whisper, "I know what your mother did. And I know why. But I know something you don't know."

Swirling the red liquid in her cup with a gentle motion of her arm, Bithia dared to ask, "And what do you think you know? Make it good, old man, or I will have you put to the stone like Ambo."

At that, he smiled, displaying amazingly straight and white teeth. In the next breath, the smile fell, as if it just couldn't bear to lift the slack skin of his face. "Ambo was a fool. He took all those funds from your mother and wasted them on his lusts. Food and women and perversions." The man shook his head, disapproval etching deep brackets around his mouth. From the way the lines settled, Bithia determined this man often cast his face in censure. "But what is worse is your mother's stupidity."

As furious as Bithia was with her mother, she wouldn't allow anyone to denigrate her. "Speak of my mother that way again—"

"And I'll be executed. Yes, my lady." He bowed without conveying any respect. "I heard your threat the first time, but I do not fear it." He paused and daintily sipped his drink as if it were the last liquid in all the land and he would make it last. If Ambo had been a glutton, this man was the opposite. "You will not kill me, not when my death would expose so many of your secrets."

Bithia took and held a deep breath. After slowly releasing the air between tight lips, she glanced at Viltori and Drahka, still deep in conversation, and then turned her attention to— "What was your name?"

"Eld, my lady. I am the overseer." A sneer wrinkled up the flesh of his face around his nose. "Everything you see, I control." He lifted his hand to the great hall. "I am responsible for the servants who cook, clean and decorate your pompous palace."

With every breath, he insulted her. In the back of her mind lurked a perverse joy that he would soon find himself the master of nothing. "You try my patience. Either say what you will or depart."

Glaring up at her, Eld shook his head. "Your mother never wanted you."

"My mother didn't even know I existed." Despite knowing that his accusation was false, it still hurt the child inside, the young woman convinced her parents didn't love her, the wide-eyed innocent who had always felt second best.

"Not at first, but eventually she did."

Eld played a dangerous game. Should she choose to do so, Bithia could have him taken into custody, questioned in detail, and then executed. However, Eld wasn't a fool. He must have something planned for that very occurrence. Biding her time, Bithia suffered his insolence and listened to his accusations.

"How would you know anything about what my mother knew?"

"Because I'm the one who told her."

Bithia's heart skipped a beat. "And how would you know?"

Angling his face up, Eld grinned in a way that sent shivers down her spine. "I'm the one who created you."

Clutching her drink in her fist, Bithia forgot to breathe for several moments. Shocked, she simply stared. Trapped in his gaze, she realized his eyes were gray, like storm clouds gathering. His eyes were the color of the ominous winter clouds that gathered over the Onic Mountains and they carried all the threat of a violent storm.

"The difficult part was finding a woman to carry you. One who could keep her mouth shut." Smugly he sipped his drink. "Death is a remarkable silencer. And no one missed one worthless slave." He cast his gaze around the gathering that grew louder as the night wore on and the drinks flowed more freely. "What do you think they would make of an empress birthed by a lowly servant?" He laughed without mirth. "Moreover, what would they make of a ruler without funds?"

Bithia couldn't find her voice. She didn't doubt his words for a moment, not with his insufferable self-satisfaction. If she asked, he would provide proof, but doing so would only rub salt into her freshly wounded heart.

"But do you know what's really sad?"

She didn't, and she didn't want him to enlighten her, either. But as she tried to move away, she found she couldn't. No matter how horrible the information, there was a part of her that simply had to know the truth. Regardless of how awful that knowledge was, she had to learn the secret to her existence.

"Your mother knew about you and still she did not want you."

His words hit like a physical blow. Bithia literally slumped forward and almost spilled her drink. Determinedly she stood upright, casting her gaze surreptitiously about to confirm none had witnessed her momentary lapse of control. Sweet, merciful Datanna but the elite were too far gone into their own revelry to notice her.

"I've always wanted to be the magistrate. Watching that power wasted on Ambo grated my sensibilities. Therefore, when your mother came to power, I decided to create some leverage, for as you know, the eldest daughter is the one who ascends to the throne. So I made you. That way, no matter how many children your mother had, I would have the eldest."

He spoke as if what he had done were the most clever scheme and perfectly normal. Bithia literally felt sick to her stomach.

"But my mistake was waiting too long. I didn't know your mother was a *yondie* spreading her legs for Helton." Eld snorted. "Another insufferable fool. All he had to do was let go of his pride and become her consort, but no, Helton couldn't lower himself to be second-best. Worse, he created a *pharadean*, your illegitimate half-sister Kasmiri, which gave Ambo all the leverage he needed. So Ambo started with his demands. More and more bribes he took. When I found out, I went to your mother and told her about you. I asked for only a modest sum, and do you know what she did?"

Bithia shook her head.

"She laughed in my face. Even though I proved to her that you were legitimate, she still dismissed me." Fury turned his pale face burnished red. "I told her I would bring you forth and she said if I did she would have you put to death." He looked at her then, his hooded eyes so cold they burned. "When I told her I would go to your father, that is when I discovered the truth. She didn't want to give your father the satisfaction of having a legitimate child. Because he *knew* Kasmiri wasn't his. If you came along, he would have some power, and Clathia was determined your father would remain powerless."

Wavering on her feet, Bithia tried to understand why her mother would hate her father so much. Had there ever been a time they were happy? "You never told my father?"

"I did."

She waited breathlessly, but the cruel *cratifan* was going to make her ask.

“And?”

“He didn’t want you, either.” Eld shrugged. “Here I was offering him a legitimate daughter who would ensure his position, and he rejected you too. Said that would make his whoring ways impossible. With Kasmiri ready to take the throne, and your mother playing the wounded empress, he was free to do as he pleased. Having you around would have messed up everything.”

Heart breaking with pain, Bithia took one step from Eld, determined to run somewhere and hide. She did not want to believe Eld, but she did, because he confirmed all of her worst fears. And Ambo...he had not had a hand in her creation. Ambo must have been shocked when she arrived on Diola, but he’d turned her appearance to his advantage anyway. How Eld must have burned with fury.

“I haven’t told you what I want to keep silent.”

Frozen, with one foot before the other, Bithia turned her head and looked back at him. Shrunken in his bronze ill-fitting robe, Eld grinned at her as if he owned her very soul. He took one shambling step toward her, cupped her arm and clung to her. This close, she could smell him. He smelled exactly like one of Enovese’s ancient books, musty and old, like he too had been left on the shelf for years, unused, lonely, wiling his time away developing one scheme after another.

“I cannot make you the magistrate.” Thinking back, she didn’t remember him even vying for the position, not that she would have considered him. He was far too old to take such a demanding job. Ambo had been over seventy seasons, but he’d started as a young man.

Eld exhaled a sharp snort. “As if I care about that any longer. No, I think I am ripe for a much more powerful position.” Rubbing his face against her upper arm, he simpered a smile. “I want to be your consort.”

Time stood still.

“I want my daughter to one day hold dominion over all of Diola.”

Her mouth opened, but all that came out was a shuddering gasp of horror.

“I will give you my funds, of which I have amassed plenty, thus fixing one of your problems. And of course, if you were my bondmate, I would never reveal the truth of your origins.”

Mutely she continued to peer down into his face.

“Should you refuse, I will tell everyone everything I know. You will be ridiculed, reviled, and the other Houses will begin to campaign for your removal. As loyal as the guards are to you, they will stop being loyal once they are not paid.”

“But the palace accounts pay the guards.” She said this only to see if he knew that Diola was as destitute as she was. His answer confirmed he did not.

“Not the royal guards. I believe it was your grandmother who made the change, thinking that if she paid them, they would be loyal to her. And she was right. Although what worked for her does leave you in

a bit of a mess.” He handed her a memory crystal. “In case you do not believe what I have spoken.” She stood mute, holding the black crystal in her hand.

“Think of what I offered. I will give you until sundown tomorrow to decide.”

Bithia watched him shuffle away, his steps slow, careful and precise. He moved as if he waded through syrup. Her mind tried to imagine a bonding ceremony between them, but rising bile made her stop.

Oh, the rich irony of him angling for a position of power in a soon-to-be powerless empire! She would have laughed in his face but for her own overwhelming feelings of shame. Unwanted, unloved, created solely for the purpose of securing funds. No matter how much some people had, they still desired more.

When she looked up, she saw Drahka and Viltori still with their heads together. And there was her salvation. With them she’d never once felt unwanted. They needed her, they wanted her, they cherished and adored her. When they’d discussed the lack of funds, they’d shared her fears, but refused to leave her side. They vowed that together they would solve the problem. But this, this horrible truth of her shameful birth. Would they still stand by her side?

Emotions overwhelmed her, but she managed to exit the great hall with her head high and her steps even. As she passed the guests, she nodded to those who bowed to her, but in their glittering eyes, she saw the animals within, the beasts waiting for her to show weakness.

When she did, they would pounce.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Drahka could barely think with all the noise surrounding him. Diola had more parties than his village had inhabitants. Silly displays of wealth adorned everyone, each striving to outdo the other. Rich foods filled the air with a hundred different scents along with all the elite's clashing perfumes. He could barely breathe, but he also couldn't leave. Doing so would be a slight to the new magistrate. Drahka had met the man briefly, and thought Menon was a solid choice, but Drahka didn't linger in conversation, not when other matters weighed heavily on his mind.

"Pathetic *peckards*." Viltori finished off his fourth drink of the evening. "That's what Bithia would call them."

Drahka didn't like seeing his friend ensnared in a combination of alcohol and anger. It made him unpleasant and frightening, mainly because Drahka had no idea what he was likely to say or do. Ever since he'd returned to the empress suite, he'd been as snarly as a tangled fishing net. Drahka had tried to embrace him, tried to offer him an ear for his troubles, but Viltori pushed him away, both physically and emotionally. His rejection hurt more than Drahka wanted to admit. Whatever bothered Viltori, he was determined to keep the matter to himself.

"Are you not pleased that Enovese found an ancient rite regarding the empress bonding?" As sad as he was about Bithia's precarious financial situation, he was pleased that, finally, they could all be together.

Viltori leaned forward. "Now there's an interesting woman. All that hair! A man could get strangled by the length of it." He grabbed another drink from the table between the couch and chair they sat upon. He took a prodigious swallow.

Drahka grabbed one as well, mainly to lessen the amount Viltori had access to. He sipped at the curious green liquid. The taste was sweet and bitter all at once. Like drinking tree bark mixed with fruit juice. Discreetly he dumped the liquid into one of the potted plants that surrounded them.

"Have you seen her bondmate?" Viltori nodded enthusiastically as he lifted his hands. "Big as you, but not as tall, and he glows. Gold. And his eyes are like azure crystals. He's a demigod." Viltori smirked nastily. "I wonder what his cock is like. All big and glowing. I'll bet his tiny woman squeals when he gives it to her."

Drahka placed the empty cup on the tray and grabbed another drink, this one blue. There were two cups of *illias* sitting there, but he noticed Viltori deliberately avoided them. Apparently, he did not feel amorous this evening and had no desire to become aroused, yet he continued to make sexual remarks about

everyone who came up in conversation. Viltori spoke vulgarities without lust, almost as if he were daring Drahka to become angry with him. Drahka wondered what he had done to so offend his teacher. Had he gone too far in binding him? Viltori had seemed furious at the time, but then seemed to enjoy the tormenting he and Bithia had given to him.

“Please tell me what is wrong.” Drahka considered the creamy blue liquid in his glass, but he had no desire to actually drink it. When he lifted his gaze to Viltori, his eyes were watery, the soft brown nearly black in the shadow of his golden hair. “I thought you would be pleased that we can now all bond together. I thought that was what you wanted above all else.” Such news had delighted Drahka even though the bad news of the funding situation dampened his joy, he still was relieved that after all this strife, Viltori could now finally, and fully, give to Bithia. But Viltori did not seem happy at the news.

“Oh, yes, now we can bond. And have children. Poor innocent children.”

Over and over Viltori had bemoaned their possible issue when Drahka had thought that’s what had held him back; his desire to have legitimate children.

“Legitimate, yes, but not safe. Not from me.”

Drahka grabbed his hand, preventing him from taking another drink. “You will explain yourself. I tire of this confusion.”

“You should have let me die.”

Drahka sat very still, his eyes trying to connect to Viltori’s gaze, but his gaze was distant, as if he looked upon a world so far away no ship could ever sail there. He shoved off Drahka’s hand and took a drink without moving his head. Viltori poured the liquid into his mouth, then swallowed. Grimacing, he closed his eyes as the alcohol went down. He swayed from the impact. As he started to slide forward, Drahka caught him by the shoulder. Viltori straightened, then glared at him.

“You and Bithia, all this is your fault.”

Drahka had no idea what he was talking about, but when he asked, Viltori shook his head, causing his gleaming hair to further tumble around his face. He finished his drink and reached for another. All that remained on the tray was the two cups of glittering *illias*. While Viltori considered his choice, Drahka noticed Bithia leaving. Her stride was even and purposeful, but there was something wrong with the way she carried her shoulders. Normally Bithia kept them wide, taking up as much space as possible, but now they curved in, not excessively, but a subtle drawing in as if for protection.

Drahka stood. “Do you want another drink?”

Viltori peered directly at Drahka’s crotch. “I want a drink all right.” He didn’t even look around before he leaned forward and kissed him there, awakening his cock with his talented mouth. Drahka cast his gaze about, but saw none looking at them. Still, he did not wish to do this here, and not when Viltori was befuddled by drink and irate over being alive.

Abruptly, Drahka moved aside, causing Viltori to fall forward. He caught himself at the last moment on the edge of the couch.

Drahka offered out his hand.

Viltori crossed his arms. "I want to stay here."

"Then stay." Drahka turned on his heel, leaving behind the semi-sheltered area as he headed for the huge arched doorway. If Viltori did not want his help, perhaps Bithia would.

Drahka hadn't taken more than a few steps when Viltori stumbled into his side, slurring, "You prick. When did you become the boss of everything?"

"When you decided to drink yourself stupid." Drahka put his arm around Viltori as if in friendship, but in reality, he was holding him up. He made haste toward the grand doorway. Guards and guests nodded politely, but also with some restraint, as they probably already knew what had been decided today. The guards were pleased Bithia had gotten her way, as they were fiercely loyal to her, but the elite were not happy that she'd prevailed in having not one, but two eternal bondmates and consorts. How odd that they were so greedy and yet decried her for wanting more.

Once they'd cleared the great hall and those who straggled in the hallways near, Drahka turned, grasped Viltori about his waist and tossed him over his shoulder.

"What do you think—"

Whacking his ass sharply with his free hand, Drahka said, "Silence. I've had enough of your drunken blathering. If you won't willingly tell me what's wrong, I'm going to make you."

"Good luck with that!" Viltori slapped Drahka's ass as he carried him, but his blows were pathetic, little more than pleasure taps. "I will never forgive you for what you did!"

It was a telling statement. "You blame me for keeping you from death?"

"You and Bithia!" Viltori stopped struggling. "Why didn't you just let me die?"

There were a thousand ways he could answer him, but Drahka settled for a simple, "Because we love you." For all his disagreements with Bithia about letting Viltori go, he was profoundly glad she had not given up on him. Why his living caused him so much pain was a mystery Drahka was determined to solve.

"And now I have to hurt someone because of you!" No longer content to simply hang off his shoulder, Viltori took to punching his backside in earnest.

After a blow to his lower back that caused him to wince, Drahka dumped Viltori off, then pressed him to the nearest wall. Using his entire body from shoulder to knee, he pinned Viltori to the cold stone. Face-to-face, he could smell the mixture of drinks Viltori had consumed over the course of the evening. It was a wonder he hadn't thrown everything up when he'd inverted him. Grabbing the back of his head, twining his fingers in Viltori's thick hair, Drahka forced him to look at him.

"Tell me."

Smiling, Viltori pressed his face forward, placing a sloppy kiss against Drahka's lips.

Yanking back, Drahka shook his head sharply within his grip. “I swear you will tell me, or—”

“Or what?” Narrowing his eyes, Viltori glared up at him. “You’ll fuck it out of me?” He thrust his hips, rubbing their cocks together. Despite his drunkenness and Drahka’s disgust, they both hardened. Even in this state, Drahka could not control his arousal. However, the last thing he would ever do was give to someone who was clearly and thoroughly inebriated.

“I’m not going to fuck you until you tell me.” Holding him steady, Drahka teased his body against his pinned teacher. Muscle hit muscle. As he pressed tight, rocking his hips, he heard Viltori’s breathing change from anger to longing. “You feel that?”

Viltori nodded, almost against his will.

“You want that?”

Again, he reluctantly nodded.

“Then tell me.” Drahka hated using sex as a weapon, but he could not help him without knowing what the problem was. He was determined to do anything he could to release Viltori from pain.

Closing his eyes, Viltori leaned his head away, as if to escape from Drahka’s firm grasp.

Pressing his lips to his ear, Drahka whispered, “Struggle all you’d like. You’re just making me harder and torturing yourself more.”

Snarling, Viltori faced him, his eyes flashing in the subdued light of the hallway. “I should be dead, and since I’m not, there has to be a sacrifice. My child, your child, *a* child from the three of us must be given to the gods to pay the debt.” Tears welled up in his eyes, then tracked down his cheeks. “I can’t make the sacrifice myself. It must be paid by another. And if you two had just let me die, I wouldn’t have to live with this over my head!”

Viltori collapsed against him, his weight sagging into his body. Tenderly Drahka released his hair from his grip, then curved his hand around, cupping and lifting his head.

“I am sorry.”

Before Viltori could speak, Drahka kissed him softly on the lips. He tasted bitter tears mixed with alcohol, but below it all, he tasted the depth of Viltori’s sorrow, the exquisite pain he’d tried to drown with drink.

“Give to me, Drahka,” Viltori pleaded, gripping his shoulders. “That will take the pain away for a while.” His tormented eyes locked upon him. “And you and I cannot make a child.”

A part of Drahka’s heart broke then because it seemed that once they had resolved one issue, another emerged, and now yet another still. How ironic that in addition to the debt of the empire, the three of them had another debt due, one that they must pay with the product of their love. Regardless of all the problems, Drahka was determined to have what he’d always longed for: a home. And people who accepted him for who he was. People who loved him just as he was. People whose only wish was for him to be happy, as that

was his only wish for them. At the moment, his chosen were miserable. Now he understood Viltori's torment, and he was bound and determined to understand Bithia's.

Against him, Viltori clung, no longer speaking, no longer crying, just holding on with an anxious grip. Soothing him with nonsensical words, Drahka wrapped his arm around his waist and together they walked to the empress suite. Inside, the lights were subdued. Drahka heard water splashing in the bathing unit. Tenderly he undressed and placed Viltori into bed. Viltori turned into the pillow, seeking the blessed release of sleep.

Drahka rubbed Viltori's back in small circles, offering comfort even though inside he was agitated. He wanted to move, to run, to lift massive trees and cut them apart, something, anything physical. He knew where the training rooms were, but he didn't think it wise to go this late, not when there was a party going on. From what he'd observed, the elite overindulged to deliberately lower their inhibitions so they could sneak off to engage in sexual acts they would never perform sober. In the morning, everyone conveniently forgot the activities of the night before. Drahka found such practices pathetic. Twice this night he could have taken advantage of Viltori's state and yet he did not because he loved him too much to use him in such a way.

The water stopped and after a moment Bithia emerged, nude, her black hair in wonderful disarray, her heavy breasts swaying with softly peaked nipples. He rose, ready to embrace her, but her eyes stopped him. Red-rimmed, narrowed, hurt, her gaze forced him to stand where he was and wait for her to speak.

For a long time she stood looking at him, then at Viltori in the bed, then up to the glass ceiling as if trying desperately to hold back her tears. She was successful when she gritted her teeth and clenched her fists.

"I will have you returned to Oughun."

Drahka felt as if she'd slapped him. After everything they'd been through to be together, she was throwing it all away, and he didn't even know why. He was worn out after dealing with Viltori, but now he had to soothe Bithia as well. He sighed. Why couldn't they have more faith? For all their gods and goddesses they seemed to be so distant from any sense of true belief in those they worshiped. Drahka thought that those who came before had set him on a difficult path, but there were always reasons for the trials he bore. They did not make his life difficult to punish him, but to teach him.

"If he wishes, you may take Viltori with you."

Bithia grabbed a crimson robe. Deliberately she slid her arms within the sleeves, then wrapped the edges across her body, hiding herself from his gaze. She projected a position of strength, but he saw the lie in her shoulders. Gently rounded, not enough for anyone else to notice, her shoulders curled in, making him want to grasp her arms and lift her to stand tall, as she should.

"Don't you have anything to say?" She didn't look at him. Instead, she moved over to the table where they ate. With a flick of her finger, she activated the floating blue screen. Her movements were not the fluid

grace he was used to. Now she moved much slower, jerking slightly with each extension of her body. Again, only one who knew her well would notice.

Drahka continued to hold his place. Inside he felt molten rock churning, building up pressure, urgently seeking an outlet. He feared if he moved or spoke, that would be the fissure through which his frustration would erupt. Here he stood ready to sacrifice everything to be with his chosen and yet both of them rejected him on the same night and practically with the same breath.

“Do you wish for me to go so you two can be alone?” She glanced over her shoulder at him, then darted her gaze to the bed. “Or did you already fuck him in the hallway?”

From her sharp tone, he surmised she was upset because she thought they’d had sex in the hallway without her. Bithia knew they’d been together, just the two of them, just as Drahka had been alone with her. And Drahka would be fine with Viltori and Bithia alone. On his world, jealousy was an unknown concept, and the emotion had never entered into their relationship, until now. He wondered why. Especially after they’d come so close to having everything. The funding was a serious issue, one that was well over his head, but he had no doubt that Bithia, Enovese, and others could find a way to make Diola profitable.

“There is no problem we cannot solve.” Drahka did not know what else to say. “Viltori drank himself stupid because he believes he must give a child to the gods to compensate for his existence.” Drahka took a deep breath to dampen the heat of the fire within as he toed off his boots and his socks. “You are angry because I have given to Viltori without you. If such bothers you, I will cease, but I did nothing more than comfort him in the hallway.” Feeling confined suddenly by his consort clothing, he popped the tiny buttons of his shirt apart as he spoke. “I do not understand the nature of funding, as you call it, as my tribe did not use such a system. However, you, Enovese and Viltori are the most intelligent people I have yet known. I trust you will find a solution to that issue.”

Once he’d unbuttoned his shirt, he pulled the clinging fabric off his shoulders, letting the garment slide to the floor. Cool air washed across his skin, tightening his nipples, allowing him to take a deep, cleansing breath. What he wouldn’t give to be outside. He considered opening the ceiling, but did not want snow to fall over the sleeping Viltori.

Bithia stopped fiddling with her blue screen. She turned to watch him, one hand on the back of her chair, the other on her hip. As he unfastened his pants, her fingers dug into her waist, as if she strove to hold herself back. His goal was to free himself from constraint, but now he saw another angle to undressing. More deliberately and far more slowly, he worked his clinging pants free from his waist, then shimmied them down his hips. Since he no longer wore the hated *echalle*, he was bare beneath the tight red trousers. His brief stint with Viltori in the hallway left him slightly aroused.

Bithia’s grip tightened to the point he thought she would leave a mark upon herself or the back of her chair. Swallowing hard, she let go of both. From the table she swiped a small object into the palm of her

hand. As she watched him, she toyed with what looked like a chunk of black ice. Since the shard didn't melt in her hand, he knew it wasn't ice, but something similar, some type of crystal.

"Have you nothing else to say?" He kicked his pants aside. Unbound, unprotected, he stood before her, vulnerable yet proud. Drahka did not understand this art of subterfuge, of hiding behind a mask. He knew only one way to be. Himself. Unadorned. If Bithia and Viltori did not want him just the way he was, he would move on. Leaving them would hurt him deeply, but he'd fallen for them and claimed them because he thought they accepted him utterly. If that was not the case, he had no choice but to go. However, the look in Bithia's eyes said more than words ever could. She did not want him farther from her than the reach of her arm.

"Will you still want me when I have nothing to offer you beyond myself?" Bithia asked the question while peering intently at the object in her hand.

Drahka raked his gaze from her feet to her face, taking in everything about her in this moment. She was a goddess, and he would take her just as she was. Yet he sensed a deeper meaning beneath her question.

"Are you offering yourself to me?" He took one step in her direction.

Clutching her hands together, protecting the black crystal hidden there, Bithia took a step toward him. "What if I am?"

"I would claim you now just as I did before." Drahka took another step. He was close enough that he could smell her. Fresh from her bath, soap lightly scented her, but below he smelled her longing, that sweet essence that belonged exclusively to her.

Bithia took another step, bringing their bodies within touching distance. "You would?"

Unable to speak, Drahka nodded, then closed the distance between them. He leaned over, placing his face as close to hers as he could without touching.

Her hand lifted, and he pressed his palm to hers. Contact almost caused their flesh to sizzle. This moment was just as intense as their bonding had been. A reaffirmation of everything he'd given on that day.

"You want me with only what I have now?"

"I do."

She held out her other palm, showing him the object hidden there. Black, six-sided, slender, about the length of her pinky finger.

"What is it?"

"A memory crystal with proof that my parents did not want me." Out came what she had suffered this night from Eld's accusations, his threats and his demands. But what really hurt was the belief that if her parents didn't want her, no one else ever would, either. Bithia couldn't be more wrong. Drahka understood,

only because he'd had the same misconception. He thought if his tribe did not want him, how could anyone else? Bithia and Viltori proved him wrong. Now, he had to do the same for her.

Placing his hand over hers, Drahka took the crystal and tossed it aside. Clinking merrily, it hit the wall and rolled under the table. If he still had his boots on, he would have crushed it below his heel. "It matters not."

"Throw away that one and he'll just make another. And it doesn't change the truth that I was unwanted. Created in a bottle and birthed by a slave." She tried to pull away, but he interlaced his fingers with her upturned hand, holding their palms together.

"I want you."

Her mismatched eyes, so lovely in their uniqueness, met his with vulnerable hope.

"Viltori wants you."

She opened her mouth to speak, but he cut her off.

"What does it matter what happened in the past? There is nothing we cannot solve, Bithia. You, like Viltori, must have faith." Tentatively, he kissed her, keeping his eyes open, watching her keep her eyes open as she echoed the movement of his lips.

Her sigh said everything.

She reached up, cupping his face, tracing her finger over the mark on his cheek. "Do you wish to remove this?"

He had heard her people had such technology, but he knew his answer before she asked. "No. Because what they consider a mark of shame, I now consider a mark of pride. I loved a man. Deeply. In that, I did no wrong."

Tears shimmered in her eyes. "And your name—"

He cut her off with a kiss before she could finish. "To them it means no name and they used it like the mark to humiliate me. To hear you and Viltori moan and groan my name strips that power from them." Gently he kissed her again. "I would change nothing."

He removed her robe with ease. Embracing her, Drahka carried her to the bed, settled her on the opposite side of Viltori, and then climbed between them. Snoring softly, Viltori rolled over, flinging his arm across Drahka's chest. When he touched Bithia, he sighed and returned to sleep.

Bithia ordered the lights off, and darkness filled the room. As his eyes adjusted, the snow-covered dome above glowed softly.

"But he'll tell about my birth." Her whisper was quiet and filled with torment.

Wrapping his arm around her, Drahka pulled her close. "You are the legitimate heir to the throne. None can change that fact."

"But it's shameful."

“How?” He almost wanted to turn the lights back on, but refrained. “You had no control over what he did. How could you? Neither did your parents. Who’s to say what their motives were in keeping you a secret? This man, this Eld, he says one thing, and perhaps your parents even said something to him, but people lie.” Drahka kissed the top of her head, his lips pressing against her still-damp hair. “People often say one thing when they mean another, Bithia. You know this. Don’t take this man’s word above all others.”

She laughed then, pressing her face against his chest to muffle the sound. “When did you become so clever?”

Chuckling, he lifted her face and angled down to kiss her. “I had a very good teacher.”

“One who would like to sleep,” Viltori grouched. He rolled away from them with a groan. “If you two are gearing up to get lusty, then do it quietly.” He sighed. “I’m going to have a terrible headache come morning.”

“It’s your own fault,” Drahka reminded.

“Quiet, you.”

Bithia teased her hand along Drahka’s chest, toying with his hair as she made her way to his semi-hard cock. Cupping him softly, she asked, “Do you need release?”

“Need? No. Want? Yes. But not tonight.” He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed her fingertips one by one. “Let us wait for our bonding.”

Her eyes went wide in the milky dark. “We can’t go through with that now.”

“Why not?”

“There is no funding for such an elaborate event.”

“Who says it has to be elaborate?”

Viltori rolled over. “You’re not seriously going to go through with this now, are you?” His voice was suddenly sober and laced with pain.

“Yes.” Drahka pulled him near. “With you.”

“No.” Viltori tried to pull away, but Drahka wouldn’t let him. “I’m not creating a child to be tormented by the gods.”

“What is he talking about?” Bithia tried to sit up, but Drahka held her down and explained about Viltori’s belief that they must sacrifice a child to the gods for cheating Viltori’s death. Bithia attempted to argue the idea with Viltori, but Drahka hushed her. Exhausted beyond what he thought he could endure, Drahka said, “And what makes you think they would torment the child we gave them?”

Viltori lay silently stunned. “Because it’s a sacrifice.”

“Not all sacrifices are about pain and agony. In my tribe, there are those who devote their lives to those who came before. We do not leave them huddled in the cold without food. We provided everything for them so that they can learn our history and retell each glorious moment in detail. We cherish them. To

give a child unto those who came before is a great honor.” Drahka paused, considering. “I imagine the same is true here. You were an acolyte. Did they subject you to cruel punishments and fill your life with painful torment?”

“No.” Viltori’s answer was soft and hesitant. “Some of the restrictions were unpleasant, but I wasn’t abused.

“Then what makes you think they would do that to a child?”

After a very long silence, where by feeling his breath start and stop against his chest Drahka knew Viltori kept opening his mouth to say something only to close it quickly, Viltori finally said, “If I didn’t know better I’d swear you’d been talking to Rown.” Viltori stopped trying to pull away. Defeated, he sighed. “And you Bithia, could you give a child over to the gods?”

“I’ve never thought about it.” She offered comfort to Viltori with a touch to his arm. “But why must everything be decided now? Perhaps in time another solution will present itself. We can’t live in fear of what might come about.”

“Now you sound like Drahka.” Viltori sounded alternately relived and yet angry that they’d taken away the sting of his problem.

“I am pleased to be compared so favorably.” She kissed Drahka’s chest, then lifted up and kissed Viltori too, despite his slight show of resistance. “So far, of the three of us, he’s the only one to act and not simply react.”

Drahka squeezed his arms, drawing them both tightly against him. “Now, my chosen, may we sleep?” Slumber pulled at his eyelids, settling them down above his cheeks. His eyes flew open when both Bithia and Viltori grasped his cock.

Chapter Thirty

Viltori stood in a white *astle* robe, enshrouded in a curtain of crimson fabric. Below his feet was a raised dais. Beyond the fabric that shielded him, he heard a great group of people, some talking in whispers, others grumbling without care as to who heard them. Clearly, this bonding did not please many, but he couldn't see them, so he could not hold resentment. He waited and wondered what would come next. When a servant removed his robe, he stood nude, and far more anxious. Drahka, that sneaky *cratifan*, had refused to tell him the details of the bonding ritual. All he would say was that Viltori would know what to do when the time came. From his teachings, Viltori knew some parts, but not all. The suspense was maddening.

A night of longing, gentle slumber and lingering morning kisses had erased Viltori's fears. Come what may, the three of them would stand together. If the gods wanted a child, there was nothing to be done about that until that moment. Viltori knew he owed Rown an apology. Even then, all he'd really thought about was himself: his feelings and his reactions. Viltori said it was the child that concerned him, but it really wasn't. He was afraid of what he would look like to others if he gave a child in his stead. Drahka—annoyingly wise and knowledgeable Drahka—had pointed out perhaps that was the path the child was meant to take all along. One could not know the minds of the gods. Letting go of his fears and shame had been difficult, mainly because Viltori had been using them as an excuse not to live his life to the fullest. Now that he'd come to terms, he had no more excuses.

Beyond the curtains, Drahka and Bithia waited just as he did. He assumed they were nude. They damn well better be. Anxiety rose in him, causing his pulsing erection to pound so hard he almost shook. Without warning, the curtains fell, pooling in three distinct piles on the dais, exposing the three of them to each other and the audience.

Silence filled the room with a palpable presence.

To his right stood Drahka, glistening and hard and looking more massive than Viltori remembered. His cock jutted forth from his hips, pointing into the center of the circle. Viltori had a sudden urge to fall to his knees and take him in his mouth, just as he'd tried to do last night. But Drahka had insisted they would not find satisfaction until their bonding. No matter how diligently he and Bithia tried to sway him, he held fast, even going so far as to turn over to his belly, denying them access to his cock. Eventually, bored of teasing his bottom, they'd given up and gone to sleep.

To his left, only a few steps away, stood Bithia, her hair in charming disarray, her heavy breasts pointed with taut nipples. Oil clung to the short ebony hairs that protected her sex. Even from this distance, he swore he could smell her. Involuntarily his hips jerked, his cock pointing toward her as if it knew today he could have her without repercussions, without regrets. In her eyes, he saw a welcoming hunger. She longed for him as much as he did for her. Only calm and centered Drahka stood there without a bit of anxiety or need. Viltori's cock throbbed, but it was with knowing that satisfaction was soon at hand.

The new magistrate, Menon Levotch, approached the edge of the dais, an enormous white fur hat almost toppling off his head. Viltori would have laughed, but his lust tamped down any sense of mirth. Menon recited an invocation in the ancient tongue, but Viltori was too distracted by his soon-to-be bondmates to hear exactly what he said. Something about their rebirth in each other's arms, and their souls binding for eternity, even through death and into the land of *Jarasine*. Viltori wanted to tell him to get on with it, but he didn't dare speak, not when Drahka had ruined everything the first time by breaking the rules. However, had Drahka followed the exacting nature of the ritual, Viltori would not be standing here today. What Drahka said was proven again—just because something seemed bad at first, didn't always mean it was. Things happened for a reason. The more Viltori accepted that, the happier he would probably be.

As he stood listening and looking at his chosen, he wanted to be inside Bithia. His body ached for her. He felt he'd waited a lifetime for that one singular moment of joining with her and giving to her everything he had. To have Drahka be a part of that moment just made something wonderful extraordinary.

Menon stopped speaking and pointed to a spot before Bithia. Drahka stepped forward, then knelt. Viltori did the same. On his knees, he looked up the length of Bithia's glistening ebony body. Closer now, he could smell the musky sweetness of her sex. Forcibly he held himself back from grasping her thighs, shoving them apart and sliding his tongue deep inside.

Lips softly parted as she gazed down at them, Bithia stepped forward. Placing her hands atop Drahka's head, she guided him toward her until his face was near her sex. Reverently he kissed her mound. Bithia released him and brought him to his feet with a cup of her hand to his chin.

Turning, she now rested her hands upon Viltori's head. Moist heat transferred from her palms, through his hair, to his skin. He let her direct his face close. Unlike Drahka, he couldn't resist temptation. As he placed a kiss upon her mound, he swiped out his tongue, snagging a taste of her sex, causing her to gasp slightly and dig her fingertips into his hair.

When he looked up, she flashed her eyes in warning, but one edge of her lips twisted almost imperceptibly into a smirk of satisfaction. Sliding his tongue across his teeth released her essence. Viltori's already tense body only tightened further. He had to have more of her sublime and utterly wonderful taste. His body demanded to possess all of her. He wanted to toss her down and have Drahka hold her open for his detailed exploration between her luscious thighs.

Bithia cupped her hand to his chin and drew him to his feet.

“Can’t you ever behave?” she whispered as she leaned near.

Drilling his gaze into hers, he flashed a quick grin and shook his head.

Viltori and Drahka stood facing Bithia as Menon recited another speech, this one about their sacred essence, and should they combine to form blessed children. At those words, Viltori’s gut tightened, but he deliberately took a deep breath to release his tension. Chanting in his mind, he reminded himself that fate was what it was and no matter what he did, he could not change what was destined. The sooner he grasped that concept, the happier he would be.

When Menon finished, he held out a small green vial to Bithia. The gem-covered glass looked old, ancient, really, with overly large teeth to hold the smoothly polished, irregularly shaped stones in place. Removing the stopper, Bithia poured an oily liquid into her palm, capped the bottle, handed it back to Menon and then gently rubbed her hands together.

Bithia spoke in the ancient tongue, and he had to bite his lower lip not to chuckle. Her pronunciation was horrible. Whatever the liquid was, it glittered more brightly when she rubbed her palms together. What she didn’t realize was that her speech was actually an ancient spell designed to bind them to her for eternity. Not their souls, but their cocks. As she spoke words she clearly didn’t understand, she was attempting to make their cocks flaccid for anyone but her. Viltori considered that Farjika the Dark was not only a lusty woman, but also a jealous one. Imposing impotence on any consort who cheated on her was rather cruel. Viltori doubted the spell would work, not when Bithia mangled the words so hopelessly, but, magically bound or not, there was no question of his fidelity. Forever after this moment, he would know no other but his chosen bondmates. If any two could keep him sexually bound for a lifetime, Bithia and Drahka would. Endlessly inventive, wildly free and utterly welcoming, his partners would be more than enough to please his lustful body. Viltori had no qualms at all about the commitment he made here today.

When Bithia finished her garbled speech, she cupped their cocks simultaneously, Viltori in her right and Drahka in her left. Viltori wasn’t sure what he was expecting, but not exploding heat from her hand. He unlocked his knees for fear he would topple forward with the sudden weight of his cock. His prick felt enormous, far bigger than her hand, the room, even the planet. Never had he been so all-consumed by his prick. Each tiny cell that made up his blood, he felt, and all the blood in his body rushed to his cock, desperate to feed the beast, to fill him so full he could take what was rightfully his. When he licked his teeth and tasted Bithia, her flavor was so intense, so commanding, he knew if he did not have her he would die.

Drahka must be feeling the same, but he controlled himself well. A flare of his nostrils and a narrowing of his eyes were all the outward signs of torment he displayed. Now Viltori knew why Drahka didn’t tell him what to expect. He wouldn’t have believed him. Nothing in his experiences had prepared him for this.

Once Bithia had coated their cocks, she turned and bent at the waist, presenting herself. Drahka stepped forward before Viltori could react. With one smooth motion, Drahka speared her with his cock. A collective groan rose from not only the three of them, but also the entire audience. Massive hands gripped her hips as Drahka rammed into her. Not lightly, not gently, no, Drahka fucked her brutally hard and fast, his glittering cock a blur between her legs. Each plunge made her breasts jostle as she held her arms out for balance. Unable to get deep enough, Drahka wrapped one arm around her chest, the other across her hips, pulling her back and up, yanking her off her feet, holding her against his body as he bounced her on his prick. Snarling, lost to pure sensation, Drahka rocked his hips, forcing his cock into her as Bithia dangled loosely in his grasp. Quietly at first, Drahka was murmuring something into Bithia's ear. As each ruthless thrust jolted her, his voice grew louder, more demanding. "Come for me. Come for me."

When she did, Drahka tossed back his head as he pumped everything he'd held back into her. His butt cheeks clenched tightly as he gave the last. Viltori could almost feel the power of his release and the gasping acceptance of Bithia.

Standing there, panting, nothing left inside him but an animal, Viltori stepped forward, ready to rip Drahka from her so he could take his turn with her. Without missing a beat, Drahka withdrew his still-hard prick with a wince. He turned with her held in his arms. Leaning back, Drahka grasped the still standing and stunned Bithia behind her knees, and spread her wide, holding her ready for him. Viltori didn't think it was possible, but he became even more aroused. Just as he'd held her spread for Drahka's hungry mouth, he now returned the favor, stretching her wide for his rampaging cock.

In a daze, Bithia blinked slowly, her focus returning just as Viltori stepped forward and rubbed his cock down the slick wet of her cunt. When the ridge of his prick bumped along her clit, she squirmed and tried to pull her legs together, but Drahka held her firmly.

"Please, Viltori. Fill me."

He wanted to obey. Everything inside him told him to do what she said. Primal and animal, his hindbrain ordered him to possess her, to fuck her, but his rational brain took control. He would not rush. He'd waited forever, it seemed, and a few more moments were not going to kill him, despite the screaming need in his body. He glanced up at Drahka's face and saw his answering nod. Drahka wasn't straining a bit holding her up and open for him.

"How badly do you want my cock, my lady?" Slowly he teased his length up and down her slick lips, loving the heat and the combined slickness of her and Drahka's orgasm. "After his massive prick, you crave another?"

Viltori's focus was so intent on Bithia he scarce noticed those around him. The audience had fallen into gasping stillness, each holding their breath, waiting for Bithia's answer. He wasn't sure if talking violated the ritual, but he didn't think so, not when Menon waited patiently by the side of the dais, his gaze just as riveted as everyone else's.

"I crave your cock." Bithia would have reached for him, but her hands were clasped to Drahka's shoulders, helping to hold herself up and open. Frustration filled her gaze and, as he continued to rub against her, she shivered each time he nudged her throbbing little clit.

No longer able to take a steady breath, Viltori drew air through his nose and his mouth, taking in her scent, driving his body further into lustful madness. Each time he smeared his cock along her, he spread the glittering gel until his entire shaft and balls, and the whole delicious length of her sex, glowed. Each pass created sparks. The faster he went, the more the tiny jolts of electricity increased until their bodies jerked in response.

Snarling in Oughunian, Drahka ordered, "Give to her!"

Following his command, Viltori plunged deep into Bithia.

Time slowed.

Liquid heat flowed over his shaft as he sank within. Each unique texture inside her sex stroked along his cock. Blissful, content, so profound was the feeling he closed his eyes and, for the first time in his life, he offered genuine thanks to the gods. He gave his honest gratitude for the pleasure of joining with Bithia. Beyond his wildest dreams her sweet, hot cunt clamped around his cock, crushing him so tightly he could not move until her muscles flickered, and he shoved forward, exhaling in time with her.

Once he'd thrust as deep as he could, hitting her cervix so hard they both gasped, he felt her wetness slide down along his sac, taking the glittering, sparking liquid there, tormenting him anew.

Stepping into her spread legs, Viltori grasped her hips, helping Drahka hold her up. Each time he thrust, he felt Drahka's hairy legs against his own and the tip of Drahka's still hard cock rubbing against his balls. After a moment to visualize, Viltori realized his intent and helped maneuver Bithia into position.

Letting go of her legs caused Bithia to wrap them around Viltori's waist. New sensations assaulted him, encouraging him to rock harder, deeper, and then he realized it was Drahka, urging him with low, growling whispers in multiple languages as he teased Bithia's ass with his cock, just as Viltori had done to her cunt.

Wrapping their arms around each other, Viltori and Drahka crushed Bithia between them, flattening her breasts against Viltori's chest. Drahka lowered his hands to Viltori's hips, helping him thrust to Bithia and steadying himself as he slowly sank his cock into her bottom.

Bithia's eyes went wide, her lips parted and a breathy moan of pleasure rose from a whisper to a loud belted whimper as Drahka entered her. Viltori held still until Drahka was fully within. All that separated their two cocks was the thinnest membrane.

Murmuring to her ear, Drahka held still, his eyes begging Viltori to do the same until Bithia was ready for more. Her head fell forward onto Viltori's shoulder, and he thought they had gone too far. Shuddering, she grasped his shoulders, clinging to him, her breath hot and fast against him. His guilty gaze landed on Drahka's tormented face. Deep black eyes assessed him, her. Drahka bit his lip, ready to withdraw.

Lifting her head, her gaze fever-bright, Bithia kissed Viltori hard then turned just enough to draw Drahka into the kiss as well. Clashing tongues dueled as they held each other.

Drawing her head away, Bithia demanded, "Give to me, both of you, gods, give to me as hard as you can."

Working in tandem, they gave deeply to her. As Viltori withdrew, Drahka plunged deep. When he withdrew, Viltori slammed home. Timing their strokes, they further teased Bithia by angling her against Viltori's body so that her clit rubbed against the roughness of his pubic hair. Rocking, building their rhythm, they waited, gauging the look in each other's eyes for the perfect moment.

When the inevitable rose through their bodies, both of them plunged into Bithia, filling her beyond breath, crushing her between their two muscular bodies as they came.

Great gushing jets exploded from his cock with such force Viltori almost collapsed. Only by Drahka's strength did he stay upright. As he climaxed, he felt Drahka's cock twitching against his, both of them filling their chosen, reveling in their release. Bithia came too, her body clamping around them with such strength her grip bordered on pain. After draining them dry, she released them.

Carefully they withdrew, the loss of her body so profound Viltori almost burst into tears. He felt as if his heart had been taken from him. When he looked to his chosen, he saw the same bereft pain. This was more than mating. This truly was bonding beyond the merely physical. Never would Viltori forget this day, nor could he envision sharing this intimacy with anyone other than Bithia and Drahka.

Bithia's feet touched the dais, yet she did not let go of Viltori's shoulders. Drahka stayed close too. Swaying, they stood, regaining their breath and their grasp on reality.

A shattering burst of applause almost shot Viltori right out of his skin. Together the three of them turned to see the audience, on their feet, applauding exuberantly. Viltori noticed bulging trousers and taut nipples pressed against expensive fabrics. Even those who had dared to grumble were so caught up in the moment they too stood and cheered.

Menon gave a closing speech about how they were eternally bonded and neither man nor god could separate their souls. After a modified bow, where he used one hand to hold his massive fur hat on his head, Menon left. Before the guests could depart, Bithia called forth one of her guards and whispered in his ear.

Chapter Thirty-One

Bithia was amazed she wasn't sore. Drahka was a big man, and to take him from behind with Viltori in the front... She shook her head, convinced a combination of his inherent gentleness, the *jaras* gel and her overwhelming erotic needs had cushioned her. She moved without even a twinge of discomfort. She felt wonderful. Utterly fulfilled and satisfied, unlike anything she'd felt before. All three of them jolted when the audience burst into enthusiastic applause.

Cupping Drahka and Viltori's chins, she kissed them softly and whispered, "Ignore them."

"Difficult to do after what they just saw," Viltori said.

And that's when the solution hit her. Bithia called forth one of her most trusted guards, gave him explicit instructions, then took Drahka and Viltori by the hands. Silently they left through the back rooms, the same way Drahka had whisked her away what seemed a lifetime ago.

Once they'd returned to the suite, her servants, having anticipated her needs, had several platters of food waiting on the table. Bithia pulled the lid off one and ate directly from the serving plate, as did her two new bondmates. She sighed. Bondmates, not just consorts, but eternally hers forever. Mouth stuffed, she looked at them, feeling as if her smile might be permanently affixed to her face.

"What did you tell the guard?" Viltori asked around a mouthful of seared *aket*.

"You'll see. Let us eat, bathe, and then we will discuss my great and glorious plan."

Both men eyed her curiously.

Sated for the moment, she entered the bathing unit alone, but not for long. Both men joined her, leaving little space to maneuver. If her plan were a success, she'd be able to expand the unit to three times its current size. No matter the close quarters, they washed, teasing fingers over each other, spending far more time cleaning each other than they truly warranted. It was Drahka who finally put an end to Viltori's lustful strokes.

"If you continue, I won't be able to give again."

Sighing dramatically, Viltori left off his cock and now teased his fingers to Bithia's bottom. "Sore?"

"Surprisingly no."

"Gods, I was afraid we would rip you apart."

"Aren't you glad you didn't?"

"Most pleased, my lady, most pleased." Pressing against her back, he cupped her breasts, placing his cock in the split of her bottom. "But next time, I will give to you here."

“Promises, promises,” she teased, turning to face him. Both he and Drahka were hard again, which made her wet, but all three of them were exhausted. Quickly they dried each other then practically threw themselves in bed. As they cuddled together, a tangle of arms and legs, Bithia realized there was one thing they had not done. One last bit of giving they must do before their bonding would be complete. But first, they would sleep.

Drahka awoke to Bithia’s sex right above his face, her mouth wrapped around the tip of his cock, a pillow under his ass, and Viltori sliding his oil-slicked hand between his cheeks.

“He’s awake now.” Viltori’s voice held that commanding power that set her clit to throbbing. “Amazing what it takes to wake him.”

“I know,” Bithia said, lifting her head from his hardening prick. “My sex right above his face and all he does is lick his lips and dream.” She lifted up and looked at him down the length of his chest. “If I didn’t know better, I’d be insulted.”

“My chosen, I have failed you. Accept my most humble apology.” Drahka lay on his back with her legs parted around his head, her mouth near to his cock, and Viltori at the ready between his uplifted bottom.

“I’d rather have your tongue between my legs.”

“Your wish is my command.” Drahka licked her from one end to the other, making her squirm above him.

Returning the favor, she licked her way up his shaft then took the tip of his massive cock into her mouth.

“Bithia said there was one thing left that we had not done.”

“Mmmm?” Drahka asked, his tongue swirling around her clit, his muffled humming question vibrating her in a most delightful way.

“I haven’t given to you.” Viltori slid his middle finger into Drahka’s ass with slow, deliberate intent.

Bithia could see everything perfectly as she held Drahka in her mouth.

Drahka lifted slightly off the pillow, angling himself better to take Viltori’s thrusting digit.

“Do you want my cock up your tight ass?” Viltori asked.

Pulling back from her sex, Drahka sighed. “Why do you always ask questions you already know the answer to?” He paused for a moment. “Ah, yes, you like to hear yourself talk, especially if you can toss around your lusty words.” Dipping his tongue to her, he murmured, “Fuck me, Viltori. Take that glorious cock of yours and give to me as hard as you can. There, does that help?”

“Smart ass.”

“I thought I was a tight ass?”

“That too.”

Drahka wrapped his arms around Bithia’s waist and pulled her down as he speared her with his tongue. Her moan was lost as she again took the tip of his cock into the welcoming heat of her mouth. With quick, plunging strokes, Viltori worked his finger inside Drahka’s bottom, opening him, making him ready, just as Drahka had done to her.

“Tight as a fist, just as I suspected.” Viltori slipped another finger beside the first, which caused Drahka to moan against Bithia, and her in turn to suck harder at his penis. Around and around their teasing went until Viltori finally deemed him ready. “Watch me, Bithia. I know how much you love to watch.”

Drahka continued to eat at her sex as she now teased him with her fists, stroking him in mimic of what Viltori did between his widely spread legs. The pillow held him up and angled back, a perfect position for what Viltori would do. Where once Drahka would have reacted violently to taking rather than giving, he no longer seemed to trouble himself about such things. All of it was pleasure. The only thing that mattered was that they were in complete agreement about what they were doing. Bithia had no doubt that Drahka longed to feel Viltori’s cock there just as much as Viltori longed to give it to him. Still, anticipation caused him to tighten his body, which earned him a brief reprimand from Viltori.

“Relax. You’re so tight I can barely pull my fingers out.”

As Viltori placed the tip of his cock against his ass, Bithia placed the tip of her tight fist against Drahka’s cock. Each bare bit that Viltori slid in, she slid down, her hot breath panting against his shaft.

Bithia glanced up at the pleasurable satisfaction on Viltori’s face as he finally slid into Drahka. Viltori closed his eyes. One side of his lip curled up as he fought down his lust. Slowly he went until his balls nestled against the pillow.

Bithia’s fists tightened on Drahka’s shaft, making him lift up, which caused Viltori to groan and grasp his hips, holding him down. Between Bithia’s body and Viltori’s hands, Drahka was well and truly pinned. Not that he seemed to mind. This was when all their problems disappeared. If they could keep this much faith in dealing with the other issues confronting them, they would be unstoppable.

“Tell me you want more.” Viltori used that aggressive tone that caused both her and Drahka to quiver.

Lifting his lips from Bithia, Drahka growled, “I want more.”

“Tell me you want me to fuck you.”

“I want you to fuck me.”

“And you, my lady, do you want to watch me fuck him while you grasp that enormous cock of his?”

Viltori loved to talk. Words excited him, just as they did Bithia. As he spoke, her sex gushed. So wet was she that Drahka was happily drowning between her ebony thighs. He licked fast and hard, trying to keep up, making her writhe in erotic need.

“Yes, my chosen, I want to watch you fuck him. Hard.”

“Then help hold him open for me.”

Excited, Bithia moved away from Drahka's face and settled above his prick, letting him feel the heat of her.

"Take him inside your snug cunt."

Smiling up at Viltori, loving his nasty streak, she teased Drahka's prick up and down a few times before centering him. She plunged down so hard and fast both he and Viltori gasped.

Leaning forward, she grasped Drahka's legs behind the knee then leaned back, holding him open for Viltori.

"That's it. Spread him wide for me."

Bithia pulled on his legs but Drahka helped her. Otherwise she'd have just fallen forward. His stomach was tight below her bottom as he worked to keep his legs up and parted. Holding him, balancing on her knees, she watched as Viltori pulled all the way out, then slammed deep.

Drahka's whoosh of air rushed against her back, chilling her skin, peaking her nipples. Nestling herself down, she flexed her inner muscles, clamping her cunt around his cock. Each time Viltori plunged, she clamped, setting up a wonderful rhythm.

"Lie back, beautiful lady."

Viltori took hold of Drahka's legs as Bithia reclined, her back to Drahka's chest. When she turned her head sharply, she was able to see part of Drahka's face. Ecstasy poured from his heavy-lidded eyes and his wantonly parted lips. Reaching up, he strained to kiss her as she pressed back. All they could manage was a frustrating kiss with just the edges of their lips.

"Look at me," Viltori demanded. He thrust so hard into Drahka he forced Drahka's cock deeper into her clutching sex.

Chuckling almost directly into her ear, Drahka said, "He does like attention, doesn't he?"

"Most definitely," Bithia agreed, turning her gaze on Viltori.

"And you like to watch, you lusty *yondie*."

Grinning, Bithia lifted her hands to her breasts. "I guess we all have our needs." Cupping them up, she rolled her nipples between forefingers and thumbs, tightening them as Viltori watched.

Not to be outdone, Drahka lowered his hand between her legs. Rubbing his finger over her clit caused her to rhythmically clench around his cock.

Viltori's gaze bounced from her display, to her face, to Drahka's face, to his hand between her legs, to the sight of his own cock sliding in and out of Drahka's ass. Each pass caused him to move just a bit faster, his breath to accelerate just a fraction more. Ultimately he was digging into Drahka's legs so firmly his fingertips went white. Sweat plastered his golden hair to his forehead, then slid down his hairless chest, giving him the appearance of a wild animal.

She felt Drahka clench his buttocks, which caused Viltori to roar as he dug his knees further into the bed. Bithia feared he would hurt Drahka, but for his panting breath tickling her ear. Softly Drahka spoke,

his words unfamiliar, but whatever he said caused a shift in Viltori. Crazy, he moved with astounding speed, his body slapping against Drahka, jostling his cock into Bithia. Between his words to Viltori, Drahka snarled some to her ear in a language she could understand.

“Clench that tight, hot cunt around my cock. Come for me, Bithia. Drown us both in your sweet juice.”

When they chanted the words together, there was no hope for resistance. She climaxed so hard her body lifted from Drahka’s, pushing him down into the bed, giving Viltori just a bit more access. As soon as her climax started, Drahka’s followed, then Viltori’s, until they were nothing but a quivering mass of flesh writhing together on their bed.

Viltori fell forward, catching himself at the last instant with his locked arms. Hungrily he kissed her, his mouth tasting of fierce pleasure and pride. Viltori loved to talk, to boss, but more than anything, he reveled in providing pleasure to his mates. When he finished with her, he pressed down to reach Drahka and kissed him just as thoroughly. As a group, Drahka doing most of the work, they rolled until they all lay on their sides.

As much as Bithia loved the pulse-pounding excitement of their uninhibited lovemaking, she also enjoyed the afterglow when they cuddled their sated bodies. Wedged between the two, she could not have been happier. After a long, lonely life of feeling she never really fit in, she knew she was finally home.

Once they each caught their breath, Viltori peered closely at her face. “What is in that bag the guard left for you?” He flicked his chin toward the table. One of her servants had left a rather sizable pouch there. “Does this have anything to do with what you whispered to him after the bonding?”

Nodding sleepily, Bithia closed her eyes, wrapping her arms around Viltori as she pulled him near.

Determinedly, he withdrew from her embrace. “You realize there’re two of us to only one of you.” Tracing his fingertip over her nipple, hardening the flesh effortlessly, he leaned forward and nipped her there, lightly. “We’ll do what we have to do to get the information out of you.”

“Mmmm?” She glanced down at his flaccid cock. “You’re not going to be doing anything with that for a while. And certainly not until you’ve thoroughly bathed.”

“Don’t tease him, Bithia.” Drahka pulled her close, determined to keep his cock inside her for as long as he could. “Tell him so we can nap before our bonding celebration.”

Sighing dramatically in mimic of Viltori, Bithia pouted briefly, then laughed. “That, my loves, is our salvation.” She refused to say another word until they’d bathed and dressed because otherwise they were never going to make it to the party.

After submitting to her will by cleansing each other in a most thorough and lusty fashion, they began to dress.

“Isn’t it wasteful to have another party so soon after the one we just had?” Drahka reluctantly pulled on his consort clothing, including the dreaded *echalle*, just as did Viltori.

Bithia wanted everything perfect for her announcement. Besides, watching the two dress each other was comical yet exciting. The thought of frustrating them later had her sex clenching in anticipation.

"It's not wasteful, as we're using what was left over from Menon's celebration." Viltori helped her with her elaborate gown that covered her completely but for her back. "You'll notice I'm wearing the same dress I wore before." Both men appraised her with lust-filled eyes. She held up her hand. "None of that." Softening her tone, she added, "Well, none of that now, but later..."

"About this bag of salvation—"

Bithia snatched the bag from Drahka's hand. Ever so slowly she loosened the drawstrings that held it closed. Both men leaned forward, eager to see what lay within. When she extracted a handful of the items, they both blinked and frowned with disappointment.

"Memory crystals?" Drahka fingered one. "How are those going to help?"

"It's not them, so much, it's what's on them." Bithia placed one upon the table over the device that projected her blue screen. In stunning three-dimensional detail, the scene came alive.

"That's us!" Viltori examined the image from several vantage points. "That's our bonding ceremony." As he watched, his *echalle* stretched, displaying him in just as much detail. "Gods save me from arrogance, but we look amazing."

Drahka nodded, his trousers swelling too. "Look at how Bithia's breasts bounce."

Bithia ended the display by palming the crystal. Both men whined unhappily. "I got the idea from the Treagen people and my sister. You see, at every empress bonding, someone sneaks in a memory crystal. They aren't supposed to, but they do, and then the recorded information manages to make its way across the galaxy." Bithia shook her head. "Kasmiri was furious when she found out a bunch of perverted *barsitas* were watching her most intimate moment with Sterlave." Bithia paused for effect. "I, however, want them to watch."

Drahka and Viltori exchanged dubious looks.

"For a price."

Slow, spreading smiles crossed their faces.

"You intend to sell copies." Viltori nodded. "You lusty *yondie*."

Smirking, Bithia coyly asked, "Why give it away for free when you can sell it and make a fortune?"

A frown replaced Drahka's smile. "Isn't the ceremony sacred?"

Bithia had already considered this. "Yes, but still, does it matter to the gods if we are witnessed by a hundred people or a hundred million people? We have to have witnesses to confirm the relationship was consummated. I don't think the number matters. Besides, every empress, from my greatest grandmother to myself, has had to deal with that moment being shared with those from other planets." Bithia hesitated for a moment, but in the end, she decided he was better off knowing the truth. "Drahka, even our first ceremony has already made the rounds. And from what I've been told, it's wildly popular."

Drahka's eyes widened.

"Since it happens all the time anyway, what's wrong with me taking control of the situation?"

"Are you sure you got all the copies?" Viltori asked.

"The guard I selected was very thorough." And a little too enthusiastic about searching some of the guests, but Bithia would deal with that later.

"But once someone has a copy, they can just make more." Viltori tried to put the crystal back on the display unit, but she snatched it away.

"Ah, I thought of that too. There is a way of recording so that you can watch only once. After that, the crystal is useless." Math had never been Bithia's best subject, but even with her own quick mental calculations, she saw the potential, and apparently, so did Viltori. "This will return not only me but all of Diola to a position of strength. Too, it puts Eld's scheme to shame. Let him tell others what he knows. Let him show them his crystal. I do not think the elite will care if I can save their entire world."

Drahka, who had been frowning lightly, smiled.

"You weren't sure about this, were you," she asked.

"Not until I heard you say that." He kissed her forehead. "Now, I am proud of you and your inventive mind."

Viltori kissed her too. "I think you will go down as the cleverest empress ever."

Bithia shook her head. "No, that's not how I wish to be remembered. I want to be known as Bithia the Wicked."

"You are that." Viltori clasped her hand.

"Most definitely." Drahka took the other.

Together, they went off to celebrate their bonding and announce her plan. Bithia had lost her freedom, gained an empire, but most important, she had the unconditional love of the two most amazing men in the entire universe.

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Anitra Lynn McLeod has been writing since she was twelve. Creating unique worlds is her forte, combining unlikely genres such as historical, fantasy, futuristic and erotic into a steampunky—and steamy—brew.

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Nothing has ever come easy for Jace Lawless, captain of the salvage vessel *Mutiny*. Forced into thievery after a virus unleashed by the InnerWorld Government killed his family, only one ambition burns at the back of his mind. Kill the next IWOOG officer he has at his mercy.

Bargaining over goods with a middleman isn't exactly his strong suit. But who in his right mind spends an entire salvage job's profits on a woman, even if she has a body built for sin and eyes so fathomless a man could lose himself in them? He must be getting soft.

Once Kraft realizes Jace expects only the "cook" part of their cook-whore contract, she sets out to change his antiquated ideas about women. A challenge she relishes, especially if it earns her the freedom and money to get her own ship. Her big mistake is letting down her guard.

Shameless flirting only intensifies the itch to ride Jace hard and put him away wet—several times. It's an itch it would be dangerous to scratch. Exposing her heart could reveal her secret, one that the still-grieving Jace must never know..or showing her mercy will be the last thing on his mind.

Warning: Contains a celibate ship captain who can't abide swearing, a kick-ass woman with a marshmallow heart, a motley crew of misfits, interstellar battles, thwarted groping, sensual seduction, and a total bastard who owns his own planet.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Thief:

Kraft willingly cooked, willingly fought, and claimed she would willingly whore. By her own honor, she offered the full of herself up to him, but Jace sensed that she expected him to restrain himself by his own dictates of honor. Asking her to cook and fight was one thing, but asking her to whore? Well, that was an entirely different matter.

When she saw him approach, Kraft stood at full attention with her face demurely lowered. All at once he felt a foot taller than her when he wasn't.

He'd ordered her to his bunk as a spur-of-the-moment way to get her to stop defying his authority. He never thought Kraft would actually obey. Now that she had, he wasn't sure what to do with her. Feeling awkward and shy, he thought the first thing he should do was explain and apologize.

Embarrassment at her having saved him and his crew fueled his need to remind her and himself that he was in charge. As he drew close to her, he longed to reach out and touch her face. On a rush of emotion, he wanted to confess he didn't always know what to do, or how to proceed, and sometimes acted rashly, fueled more by his heart than his head.

As a captain, Jace wanted to ask for her help and make her his partner in crime. Perversely, he felt he shouldn't need her help and should make her his partner in bed. As a man, Jace wanted to possess the full of Kraft. He wanted to protect her even though he knew he couldn't. Worse, he knew he didn't have to coddle Kraft, which only increased his longing to claim her as his bedwarmer. Beyond that corral of confusion, Jace knew Kraft shouldn't have to protect him.

Instead of saying anything, he unlocked his bunk with a slap of his hand to the wall com. The metal catch released with a soft snick that vibrated the floor below their feet.

Her braless breasts jiggled against the worn yellow fabric of his secondhand shirt. The enticing movement caught his attention, and he forgot what he intended to say. Instead, he found himself imagining what she would look like topless.

"If you'd like, I could put the harem outfit on."

His gaze went from her chest to her mouth.

Lifting her lowered face a fraction, Kraft met his gaze, and whispered, "Someone placed the costume in my closet." She flashed him that slow, lazy and sexy smile.

Jace had no idea who put the outfit in her closet, but he wouldn't mind seeing her in that getup again. Fluffpink clinging and exposing the full promise of her undeniably strong and sexy body was certainly worth a second look. After seeing her in the revealing outfit, he knew her nipples were large and toffee-dark against her skin. He remembered the snug slit of her innie bellybutton drawing his gaze down to the wide pleasure of her hips. Between her lush thighs, he would find another snug—

"Should I fetch that costume, Captain?"

Her seductive, superior attitude dispelled all his thoughts of apologizing. Kraft didn't worry one bit about him taking charge, because she assumed she had the upper hand. His blushing and backing off made her think she could say or do anything, and he'd just turn away. Normally he would have, but not this time.

Slipping a finger under her chin, he lifted her face until she met his gaze. Fathomless black eyes held a smirk that he wanted to quash in a sudden rush. For the first time, she didn't flinch away from his touch. She melted to him as he stroked his finger across her full, sensuous lips. More than anything in the Void, he wanted to kiss her. He wanted to taste every bit of her luscious mouth. Kraft had a body built for sin, but she had a mouth destined for seduction.

Jace lowered his voice as his mouth descended on hers. "Seems like a waste of time for you to put on all those complicated clothes when I'm just going to make you take them off."

Her eyes widened.

Placing his mouth to her ear, he whispered, "Or did you want to dress up and then strip for me?"

She tensed and swallowed with an audible click.

He pressed closer. "I've never had a whore in my bed. If you're familiar with the concept, maybe you could walk me through it."

Kraft pulled back and narrowed her gaze. “After ten years of celibacy, I think a walk is all it would take.”

“Is that so?” Refusing to back down, Jace traced his finger along her ear to her neck. “Since it’s been a decade for me, I’m thinking you won’t be able to walk by the time I’m satisfied.”

Her jaw damn near hit the floor.

Jace took a perverse delight in shocking her, and her dismay made him even more determined to make her back down this time. Even if he had to say the most vulgar things in the Void, he would force her retreat.

“I can’t believe you’re surprised.” He stroked her lips with a forceful fingertip. “You can read me so well, right?”

She darted her gaze to the floor. “I told you, I can’t read you like that. I can read—”

Plush lips gave way below the thrust of his silencing finger. When her hungry eyes met his, he said, “Don’t try to distract me. I don’t care what you can read. You don’t have to read me. I’ll tell you what I want.”

Lowering his mouth to her neck, he nipped lightly. “I want you.” After pulling her mocha skin, marking her, he lifted his mouth to her ear. “I want you writhing and panting and sweating below my thrusting body.”

She placed her large hands on his chest, pushed him back and looked him right in the eye. The depths of her black gaze swarmed with heat, smoky and slightly unfocused. “You want me by force?”

He heard the catch in her voice and sensed her desperation. He smiled at her as he answered her question with one of his own. “How can I force you when sex is part of your contract, my lovely cook-whore?”

Kraft withdrew with a startled step back. She pressed against the metal door of his bunk and flattened her palms against the smooth durosteel to steady herself.

Closing in on her, he took a half-step forward and placed his palms on the door, encasing her with his arms. In a tingling rush, a fleeting ripple washed over his body, and he wondered if he could actually feel Kraft trying to read him through the door. He forced himself to contain the rush by focusing his mind and constricting his body to a tense stance.

Kraft stood taller. Confusion and fear darted across her expressive face. He wondered if the darkness in him caused her reaction, or if he’d succeeded in preventing her from reading him. Either way, he sensed his advantage.

Pressing his mouth to her ear, he whispered, “What’s wrong, sugar-britches? I thought you were all for this kind of dance between us, especially after what you said in the cargo bay.”

With her back to his bunk door, she lifted her face and the whole of her body until she met his gaze with level intensity. Since she couldn't force him to retreat verbally, she now tried to force his retreat with the fierceness of her gaze, and it almost worked.

He fought down the urge to step back by moving closer. She radiated the scents of cooking, but below, he found that enticing hint of her musky perfume. Her scent was rich, intoxicating and alluring. He wanted to find the source of her fragrance and lose himself in it.

"Just give me the order, Captain Lawless, and I'll ride you until we both collapse."

One fleeting vision of her proudly riding astride him caused him to blush and turn away. The triumphant look on her face clarified she thought such a command a distinct impossibility.

She seemed pleased that she'd finally forced him to back down. He watched Kraft's pulse jump below the smooth skin of her neck when he closed in on her and said, "That's an order I'm not likely to give."

Her lips parted in surprise. She lowered her face but not her gaze.

"I wouldn't order you to ride me because I like to be on top."

He forced her chin up so their lips came close without touching. "Stop giving me that submissive face when you've got nothing behind it but arrogance."

Kraft stood tall. "I thought you preferred submissive women?"

"As a matter of fact I do." Tracing his finger along the open V of her shirt, he smoothed the fabric against the curve of her breasts and popped open one of the small wooden buttons. "Do you like submissive men?"

She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, but it caught in her throat. When he looked down, he discovered her nipples were pressed tight against the soft yellow fabric of his old shirt.

He chuckled and stroked the barest brush of his fingertip over the swell of her nipple. "Obviously not."

His beast will have her beauty...but only on his terms.

Prince of Dragons

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Orion, Book 3

Sirena Blaze has left a string of smiling males across the galaxy—but she's not smiling now. After two attempts to sabotage her ship, it's time to call for backup. Her warriors deserve the best, and that means recruiting a member of the elite Serpentine guard as co-commander.

One look at Slyde Stone, and Sirena's smile returns. She sets out to indulge in the sensual delights for which his people are legendary.

Slyde would like nothing more than to bed the famous beauty, but a secret binds the hands that burn to take her. He is a half-dragon shifter, a race thought to be nothing more than a myth. He's real, and so is the code he must live by—he can mate only once.

Sirena's fury at Slyde's refusal knows no bounds—until saboteurs loose a pair of deadly serpents on board the *Orion*. And the infuriating man has the gall to make a wager. If she finds them first, she can have him. But if he wins, she must agree to be his alone—for life.

Warning: Space cougar on the prowl, a handsome virgin in her sights. Hot love scenes, and even hotter dragon shape-shifting.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Prince of Dragons:

Sirena looked down at the naked male straining beneath her and smiled. She might be a siren, but she led males not to disaster, but to pleasure greater than many of them had ever known. And this one wouldn't forget her any time soon.

"Ah, gods," he groaned, his hands clamped on her hips as she rode him with sinuous abandon, letting his cock slide nearly out of her before enveloping it once again. His pleasure-glazed eyes were locked with hers. Sweat soaked his short dark hair and gleamed on his skin, enhancing the play of muscle beneath. "That's so damn good! You are...unbelievable."

Since he was approaching his third orgasm, she chose to believe him. She herself was far ahead of that number. She supposed this would be his last effort—human males were lucky to be able to achieve arousal more than twice in such a short time.

She rose and fell on him, closing her eyes to enjoy the sensation of the shaft working inside her, stroking her tight channel. Tipping back her head, she lifted her arms and twined them behind her head, knowing that the motion thrust her breasts out more prominently.

Her com-link beeped a tiny warning in her ear. She ignored it as the pilot surged upward, filling his hands with her breasts and suckling greedily on her nipples.

“Mmm, yes. Like that.” The pleasure began to tighten inside her, and she rode harder, feeling her orgasm begin.

Her com-link beeped again. Protocol demanded that whoever was paging her wait for an answer before opening a holo-vid link. She hoped for their sake they abided by the rules, because any commander who opened a link now was going to get an eyeful.

A hologram sprang up in sharp relief against the shadowed stateroom. It was Slyde Stone, watching her ride the other man. His stance was rigid, jaw clenched, his eyes flaming with such heat she was vaguely surprised her skin didn’t burn.

In the two lunar months they’d been working together, they’d been through a major crisis, trained new guards and improved the quality of security on the *Orion*. And through it all, the heat of desire hadn’t faded, and he still refused to act on it.

Her gasp of shock caught in her throat and, as their eyes held, it became a soft, escalating moan as she climaxed harder than she had all night, pleasure imploding deep within her pussy and then exploding outward through her body. Her co-commander’s voyeurism was as delicious as the cock inside her.

By the time she finally managed to open her pleasure-drugged eyes, he was gone.

A short time later Sirena stepped outside the pilot’s stateroom and stopped short, startled to see her co-commander of the Serpentine guard walking toward her. Walk—such a colorless word to describe the way he moved. He strode, he prowled like the magnificent male creature he was. His tall, heavily muscled body erect and graceful, his beautifully shaped head held high, he surveyed her with narrowed eyes.

His sculpted jaw was still clenched, his nostrils flared. Pushing back her hair, she eyed him cautiously. Great serpents, he wasn’t embarrassed. He was furious.

Perhaps it would teach him a lesson. He could have been the male groaning with pleasure beneath her.

Her own body hummed with satisfaction. She’d left her latest lover sprawled across the bed in the stateroom behind her. He wouldn’t wake for a long time, but when he did, it would be with a smile. As she recalled some of the things he’d done to her and with her, the corners of her mouth curled up with satisfaction.

If she’d sighed, feeling detached even as he groaned his eternal devotion, that was no one’s business but her own. As was the fact she’d come most deliciously of all with Slyde watching them.

“Commander Stone,” she said now, ignoring the way his narrow gaze made her want to touch her flight suit to see if it smoldered. Even after coming several times in the last hours, she still felt the usual low curl of desire at his nearness. But she’d resolved from the beginning that she wouldn’t hang on his sleeve. That was for dewy-eyed ingénues. Let the great beast tell her what was wrong, if he wished.

Otherwise, she was headed straight for a hot shower-dry.

Slyde berated himself in savage silence. What had he been thinking to confront Sirena here outside her lover's door? Nothing coherent, that was certain. Since the instant he first saw her, he'd been thinking mostly with his cock.

After he'd refused her in the bar that first night, he'd seen the fighter pilot preen himself before her. Had known how it would end when the fellow swaggered out of the bar after her. And he'd watched the scene repeated several times in the last two months. The lovely, sensual Sirena was a typical Serpentine, sharing her body with any male she chose. And he was nearing the end of his patience. He'd done his best to show her how well they got along as they trained, planned and worked together, had even resorted to showing off in sparring. But still she turned to other men.

Tonight, he'd overridden a prime rule of courtesy on board ship and opened a com-link between them. He bitterly regretted his decision. Because now he had to do more than imagine the things she allowed her lovers to do to her—the things he dreamed of doing to her, with her, himself.

Now he'd seen her. Her lovely body naked, kneeling astride another male, riding him with perfect, sensual grace. Had seen the other man's hands on the taut swell of her ass, his mouth on the perfect globes of her breasts.

Now he knew her skin was the same silken gold over her entire body, save for the dusky peach of her nipples and the delicate line of auburn that limned her mons. Knew how those scant curls looked soaked with another man's seed, how the pink lips of her labia stretched taut around another man's glistening cock as he drove it in and out of her.

Now he knew her soft, escalating moans as she enjoyed her orgasm. And the look in her eyes as she came, because their eyes had locked and he'd been unable to break away, drowning in those emerald depths.

Controlling his anger with a supreme effort, he stopped before her. Her golden cheeks were flushed, emerald eyes sleepy, her auburn mane tousled. Even the collar of her sleek top was crooked, which she would never allow on duty. It was obvious she'd just come from her lover's arms. Arms that Slyde wanted to rip off and feed to the bastard.

He grimaced as her fragrances mingled with the stench of another male ripped at his sensitive olfactory glands like rotting Pangaeian fruit.

She raised an arching brow at him.

"Commander?" she asked in her throaty voice. "Are you well?"

"That's a question I might ask you," he answered, his deep voice as rough as mountain stones grating together. "Were the answer not so obvious."

She straightened, frowning. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Merely that a shower-dry is in order. You reek of your lover's sweat."

“Commander Stone. You forget yourself.”

“Forget?” he sneered. “I’m not the one who has lain with too many lovers to remember.”

She drew in a hiss of pure rage, her emerald eyes going molten.

Good—let her have a taste of the frustrated rage he’d been battling since he laid eyes on her and realized that here was the woman of his dreams—his fervid, tormenting dreams—and that she would never be his... unless she agreed to his terms, which she was unlikely to do. Why should she, when she could enjoy any male she chose, for as long as she chose, instead of pledging herself to just one?

“I presume you had an important reason for following me?” she asked with dangerous softness. “And for spying on me?”

“It will wait,” he bit out.

He’d come on this voyage to look for a woman—a far different kind of woman. The kind who’d saved herself for marriage and who was chaste. Instead, he’d taken one look across that hellhole of a bar on Solaria and fallen like a space rock for this beauty, a warrior who could fell a man as easily with a kick or a look—and did both with regularity.

He turned his back on her before she could reply and before he could do what he really wanted: throw her over his shoulder, carry her off to his quarters and toss her in his shower-dry until she’d been through three or more cleaning cycles. And then...imprint his own touch and scent on her, so thoroughly she would never want another.

Slamming through an open hatchway, he raced down one of the many small spiral staircases, not caring where it led as long as it was away from her and what he wanted of her.



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