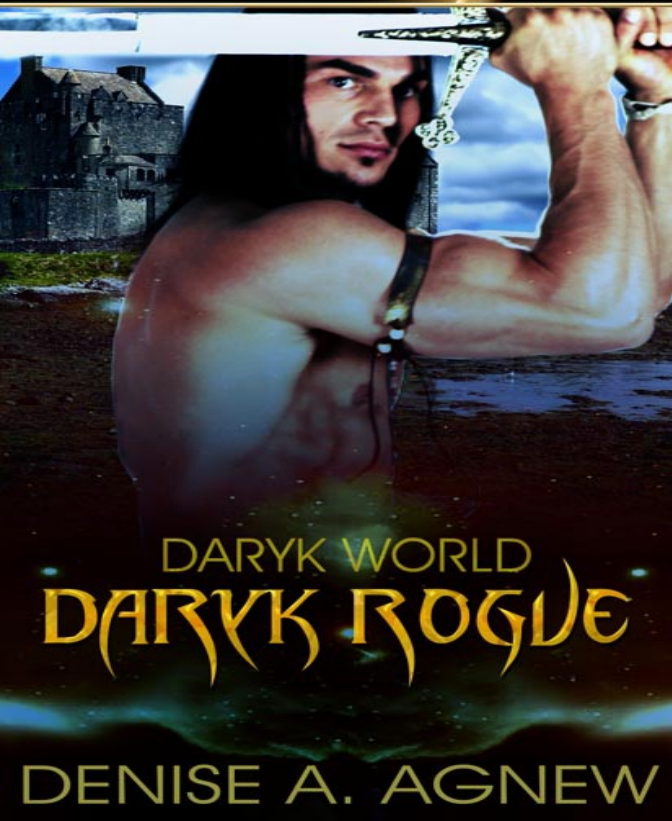


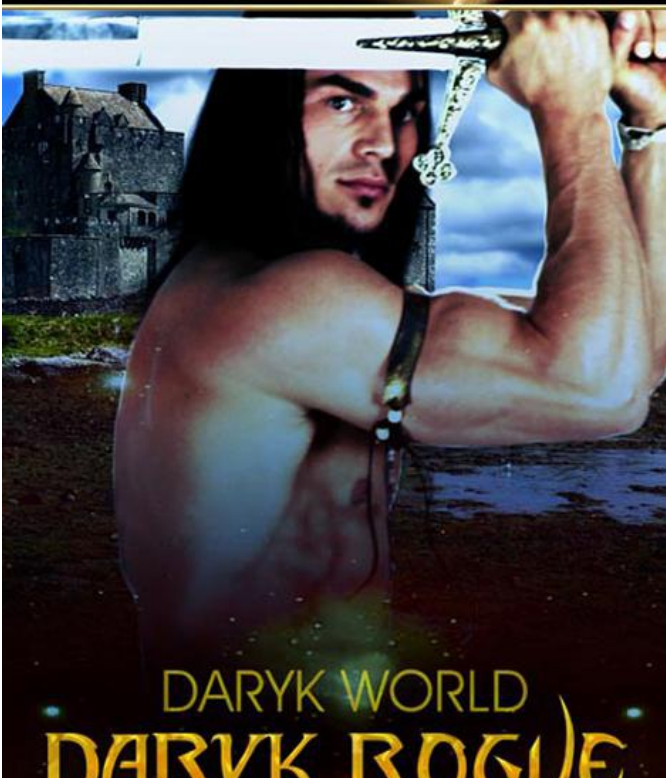
ELLORA'S CAVE **AEON**



DARYK WORLD  
**DARYK ROGUE**

DENISE A. AGNEW

ELLORA'S CAVE AEON



DARYK WORLD

DARYK ROGUE

DIRTY ROUGE

DENISE A. AGNEW

# **Daryk Rogue**

*Denise A. Agnew*

## *Daryk World, Book Two*

Ruled by treacherous desires to mate...

He would kill and die for her.

When Xandra Shorenus' husband murders her family in retaliation for her defiance she escapes, but a huge wave wrecks her ship. Rogue Daryk One Rayder Tyrus saves her but commands her allegiance with one kiss. She is his now, in and out of bed.

Rayder has infiltrated a dangerous faction, his need for redemption and retribution absolute. Desire to protect Xandra mixes with powerful carnal needs that demand he show her pleasures she never could have imagined in her sheltered life. They discover a fiery connection forged between hot kisses, adventurous touches and mind-melting unions. They must learn to survive the wrath of the breeder-slaver who hates Rayder, the elements of jungle and desert that rule the land, and a war about to erupt that could separate them forever.



An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Daryk Rogue

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# ***DARYK ROGUE***

**Denise A. Agnew**



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# Chapter One

*Planet Croan*

*Near the Supercontinent Magonia*

*Protican Ocean*

For an eternity Xandra Shoreus gasped for air. She hung on to the few breaths her lungs allowed as she was tossed upward by the ocean's waves and thrown into the chilling water with incredible force.

She wheezed, swimming through the icy water, and caught a glimpse of the ship as a monumental sheet of water hit the vessel and obliterated it like a wooden toy.

Terror choked off her breath as brutally as the mighty wave that sucked her down. Water churned and frothed and pounded. As she went under, she held her breath, lungs bursting with need to inhale.

*No. I can't. I have to survive this. I haven't come this far just to perish in a storm.*

She kicked to the surface and used formidable swimming skills to outwit the ocean.

Thousands of thoughts ran through her with lightning-quick precision. Her home in Magonia. The man she hated and was supposed to marry. Her brother and parents. Grief flooded her along with water. Her mind couldn't stop regretting, wondering if this horrible moment was the wrath of the god Magon.

Had her sins caught up with her?

Had her rebellion led to this horrible death?

Rain clouds tried to obliterate the starlight sky and the two moons that gave the water a silvery sheen. The swamped ship still floated, but within a blink it groaned as it slipped into the ocean with a sigh.

She glanced around frantically. What of her newfound friends Ketera and Mia?

Time seemed to crawl as she treaded rough water and scanned for any survivors. She couldn't be the only one alive. No one appeared, and tears burned her eyes as much as the salty ocean. She floated as best as she could, hoping to outlast the tempest and find her way to shore. But she had no idea which way to go. Despair mingled with regrets. She'd made a hash of her life, and now she couldn't do a thing to repair it. Her strength waned, and she struggled with gripping cold and horrible despair. Cold iced

her to the bone, her body racked with shivers. Ignoring the fact that water this cold killed quickly, she kept her mind active. She couldn't allow herself to forget why she'd sailed in the first place.

*I vowed to bring justice to my family's death.*

*To atone for my own sins.*

*I can't fail now.*

Moonlight speared through storm clouds and in the distance she saw another enormous ship. Her heart leapt with hope. The ship moved with incredible speed, cutting through the water and coming right toward her. Could they possibly see her? It didn't seem likely, but she wasn't going to take the chance they'd pass her by.

Desperation fueled one last cry. She screamed. Yelled at the top of her lungs. Her body shuddered, ached with a horrendous cold and weariness that threatened to drag her back into the depths. The ship slowed and before long it was close by.

A dark figure appeared at the side of the ship and looked down at her. Then many more men came to the side and looked down. The first dark man shouted orders, but she didn't know if it was at her or people on the ship. She couldn't understand him above the noise and her own

panting breath.

So cold. So...cold...

She closed her eyes. Just for one moment.

*That's all.*

*One moment.*

\* \* \* \* \*

A loud noise broke Xandra straight from unconsciousness. She gasped as she bolted upright. Daylight streamed through a porthole, blinding her, and she blocked it with one hand. Breathing heavily, her entire body aching horribly, she sat up and swung her feet off the bed. Taking in her surroundings quickly, she noted several things. The sway and motion of the room suggested she was back on a ship, as did the porthole and the scent of salty water. Wood creaked and groaned under the pressures required to sail on the ocean. She sniffed and caught a not-unpleasant scent, something spicy and earthy all at once.

She jolted into full awareness. Her hands smoothed over a soft dress. She wore a loose dress, nothing like the simple pants, boots, long-sleeved tunic and full-length coat

she'd chosen to wear when she'd left Opali with her betrothed watching her every move.

Shock held her breathless a moment. Someone had changed her clothes.

She brushed away her surprise—at least these clothes were dry.

At least she'd survived.

Shaking with cold, she took in the desk in one corner cluttered with writing instruments, an inkwell and paper. A dark brown pair of men's breeches lay over the chair in front of the desk. In one corner, a breastplate was propped along with a sword so long and heavy-looking she couldn't imagine how anyone would lift it. She'd heard of swords and seen them in a museum on Magonia, and yet she'd never seen one in anyone's hands. She tossed the question out of her mind, aware that she had far more important things to worry about.

Her stomach swirled, uncomfortable with the ship's movement. She'd suffered during the trip, never quite feeling well the entire time. Near the end, before the wave came, she'd found some normalcy. Then the wave had come. She lifted a shaking hand to her aching head.

By the god Magon, had everyone but her perished on

her ship? Tears sprang to her eyes. Part of her filled with enormous pain at the thought of her newfound friends Ketera and Mia being drowned. Another part rejoiced that perhaps her enemy Taris Elian had died. Perhaps she was free of him. She'd have to be cautious. If he'd survived, then she could be in danger right now.

She'd heard that Dragonian slavers roamed the oceans, ready to kidnap Magonian women for their slaves. If she'd been rescued by one of them—no. She didn't want to think on the horrible things that could happen. She'd also heard that Dragonian men had little scruples when it came to women, and if one decided he wished to claim her, she could be his forever. Apparently all the man had to do was kiss her as a stamp of ownership. She shivered in revulsion at the idea.

Desperate to find out if her friends had lived, she stood on wobbly legs and noticed her boots and socks by the bed. Both were dry, so she put them on and moved slowly for the door. She opened it with difficulty and the hinges creaked. Stepping outside cautiously, she held on to the door as if it could keep her on her feet.

Several men moved about the deck. Suddenly a hairy man with enormous arms stalked toward Xandra. Impressions flew at her. Far over six feet, he had the bulk and brawn capable of hurting her easily. His nose looked

half smashed, as if he'd grown a *panatan* root for a nose, all bumpy and bulbous. Lank, thin dark hair hung to his chest. A red bandana circled his neck. He wore a dirty white tunic and filthy black breeches. Watery green eyes held nothing but hostility.

She stepped back and bumped into the doorway.

"What are you doin' out here, girly?" the man's gravel-filled voice asked.

"I'm— Where am I?"

The big man stopped too close in front of her. "You're on the *Beast*."

His hand came up to touch her hair and she flinched. She threw her hand up in front of her, alarmed. "No."

"No?" He laughed and touched her hair anyway, his eyes hot with an emotion she didn't recognize. He smelled sweaty and her already unstable stomach lurched. "Girly, you don't have the right to say no on this ship. You belong to us now."

"I do not." Anger twisted inside her, and she stiffened her spine. "I was on the *Hydrasoseles*. A passenger ship. She was destroyed by this huge wave—"



"We 'eard of the ship, little lady," another man's crackling voice said nearby. An older man with long gray hair and a wobbly gait strode up until he stood nearby. "Barely escaped that wave ourselves. A fierce storm, it was." He winked. "But not as strong as the *Beast*."

His hand made a waving motion that presented the craft. Enormous sails reached for the brilliant blue sky. The ship cruised through the water at a pace the *Hydrasoseles* couldn't have managed, and the sheer size astonished her.

"Very nice, but I need to get back to Magonia," she said.

Two other men watching the conversation dropped what they were doing and closed in, their eyes intent and curious, but not as overtly dangerous as the men in front of her. Still, she was encircled, and if she wanted to escape this crowd of stinky, awful men, she'd have to think of a defense soon. But where could she go to hide on a ship? What if Elian were nearby? Fear leaked through her bravado, but she shored up her bravery. She couldn't crumble now. Perhaps a man would come along who would have some principles and decency. If she spotted a possibility, she'd peck him on the cheek, and that would keep these disgusting men away from her.

The gray-haired man's small eyes scanned her with evil

intent. "Magonia, eh? Now that's a fine thing. You shouldn't have told us that."

She swallowed. "Why?"

"Why you're our enemy, little lady."

"Enemy—" She cut herself off as she realized what they meant. "Then you are a Dragonia ship?"

The bruiser glared at her and laughed. "We ain't Dragonian. We don't belong to no country. We're on our own and better for it."

"But that's ridiculous. Every ship flies under the flag of Magonia or Dragonia."

The men all laughed, and through their guffaws the bruiser leered. "Yeah, but we have our own country. The ocean is our home. Ain't no need for dry land. A man is free here to do as he sees fit and not by another's leave."

"We don't cotton to no man's word except for the admiral's," another man said nearby.

He gestured to a flag that flew above the craft. It was solid black with no insignia.

Fear tingled along her spine and sent screams of alarm

to every part of her body.

The old man laughed softly. "Maybe I should let this here rotter have a taste of you before I get my own." He touched her hair and she flinched. "No harm in having a little play, is there? You Magonian women are as sweet as they come, I hear tell."

Bruiser nodded emphatically. "I done had one not too long ago. She was from the *Hydrasoseles* too."

Oh Magon. Had they hurt Ketera and Mia?

Panic stirred inside, but she refused to show it. Gulping down the tightness in her throat, she remembered what she'd learned from her friend Mia about defending herself. A swift kick to this hateful man's bits and—

The old guy reached for her.

She took a step forward and brought her knee up with raw force. Her knee made contact with the old geezer's manly parts and he screamed. He doubled up in pain and collapsed on the deck.

Sickness washed over her, a weakness that she'd never experienced before and that threatened to cut her legs out from under her. She tried to slip past the bruiser.

“Magonian bitch whore!” He grabbed her by the throat. His huge fist clenching around her throat with such force a fierce pain pierced her throat.

“Release her at once!” A deep and commanding voice, dark with anger, cut the air.

The bruiser didn't, and she choked, grabbing the man's forearm and digging in her nails. He didn't budge. She kicked out, made contact with the man's knees. He grunted but didn't lose loosen his grip.

A dark shadow swiftly launched at the man. Through her fading vision she saw the shape bring a baton down on the man's head. Bruiser released her and she gasped for much needed air as the big man yelled in pain and fell to the deck. Coughing, she touched her throat gingerly.

Her vision cleared as the man who rescued her roared at the other men. “Farcam! Touch her again and I'll cut off your cock and feed it to you.” He threw a deadly glanced at the old man. “Oscan, you've been warned before. Into the brig with you.” He gestured at the other men. “Get these bags of guts below and put them in chains.” Her rescuer said with deadly coldness to Farcam, “Admiral Aramus will have your hide for dinner.”

“Fuck you,” Farcam said, giving her rescuer a flash of a middle finger.

“Sorry, mate.” Her rescuer threw a disgusted look his way. “Not my type.”

The other men dragged Farcam and the old geezer away.

Her rescuer turned his gaze on her and his eyes stayed predatory, hungry almost as his gaze traveled her face and body with clear appreciation. “You, however, are.”

The man who’d saved her hooked his baton to his belt and walked toward her, his stride self-assured and as authoritative as his voice. His face was young, maybe thirty years, but there was a wealth of age imprinted in his eyes. Thick hair as inky as the night came to just above his shoulders. Danger and fierceness in his almost black eyes sent two spears of emotion through Xandra. Stark fear and unaccountable attraction. He stared at her as if he wanted to devour her. Or perhaps kill her.

She blinked, amazed at this new threat that stalked toward her. He was as big as the creature who had dared to touch her, but the difference between the men was marked. Her rescuer wore a sleeveless black tunic open down the front to reveal a muscular chest covered in a generous sprinkling of black hair. The tunic was cinched at the waist by a wide black belt. Black breeches curved over muscular thighs and calves. Black boots covered his feet

and ended mid-calf. This new predator didn't have a modicum of extra fat. He moved with grace, muscles rippling in his tanned arms.

Fear sizzled along her body. So this lug had saved her from the ugly man only to waylay her too?

Dizziness swamped her and she blinked quickly, trying to right her vision. She had to think quickly, and she held one hand out in front of her to warn him off.

Her throat burned as she managed to croak, "Don't touch me."

"I won't harm you." He frowned and his gaze landed on her hand, which she held up toward her throat, rubbing at the sore flesh. "You're hurt."

She shook her head, afraid any sign of vulnerability would set these men on her like a predatory animal. "No."

He stared at her with a mixture of vexation and curiosity, and that's when she made a rash decision. At least this man seemed decent enough that he didn't want to hurt her and he had some authority.

She found her voice. "I hear that if a Dragonian man kisses a woman, then she is his and no other man is permitted to touch her."

The man smiled, but his eyes burned with a raw heat that she'd never seen in a man's eyes before. "That is true."

"Very well then." She leaned forward, aiming for his right cheek.

Her savior had other ideas.

He snatched her into his embrace. Banded to him by steely arms, she couldn't move. His eyes burned into hers, and then his mouth touched her lips. Not softly. Not hard. But with swift, enveloping, amazing skill. She'd been kissed twice, but never like this. His mouth was tender, tasting, brushing, and then—

His kiss sealed firmly and his tongue plunged deep and rasped over hers. Shock raced through her. She never knew—had never heard that kisses could be like this. She shivered, moaning as a spark of pleasure danced in her belly and raced straight to the softness between her thighs. One thrust. Two. His tongue stroked hers with a drugging intensity. She gripped the front of his tunic, dazed. He released her, his hands clasping her shoulders.

Amazed and indignant, she gathered her remaining strength and swung. Flesh contacted flesh as her hand caught his cheek with a resounding slap.

His head jerked to the side under the force, but he kept his grip on her. His eyes didn't blaze with anger as she expected, but with a heat that seared straight through Xandra.

Men nearby laughed, their guffaws loud and raunchy.

Her legs wouldn't hold, and as her stomach tossed around with the ship's motion, she sagged against the doorframe. *No. Don't fall. Don't.*

"Whoa." The man reached for her, lifting Xandra into his arms in one swift motion. "Easy, my beauty."

Dizziness turned to darkness.

\* \* \* \* \*

Xandra's world floated in comfort and security. Other sensations eased into her awareness. Warmth. Flowers scenting the air. The give of a bed beneath her.

She smiled as she remembered a man's powerful arms cradling her, his voice deep and seductive as he whispered against her ear. "It's all right. You're all right, my beauty. No harm will come to you."

Pain in her throat had pulled her under until she'd forgotten why she needed to awaken and why she didn't



care.

Her mind jumbled as she tried to recall the how and where and when. When had a man ever spoken thus to her? Never that she could recall.

Then it must be a dream. Perhaps she'd returned home and never taken the trip on the huge passenger ship or the ship with the evil men. Maybe the wave that had pummeled her, tossing her and her friends into the air, screaming, gasping as water dragged her over the side of the ship and under to murky depths—maybe that had never happened.

All a bad dream.

She sank under for what surely must be the last time.

A door opened.

Footsteps, heavy and commanding, entered the room, and that realization made her understand she wasn't being tossed like a piece of flotsam in the ocean anymore. Thank the god. She would have smiled if she could have, but everything on her body felt stiff. Rigid with remaining cold, so cold. Shifting, she felt the ease of a bed under her and a covering. Still, it wasn't enough. The footsteps stopped next to her and internally she shrank back. Who could this be?

"Where?" she croaked her question through a parched,

sore throat.

“Easy.” Rumbling deep, the man’s voice held gentleness under hardness.

Familiarity comforted her. Hadn’t she heard this voice before? Assuring her all would be well? Part of her wished to believe the voice while the other part didn’t. How could it be all right when she’d been tossed into an ocean and half-drowned? When her quest had been dashed?

A hand brushed over her forehead. “You’re not feverish.”

“Cold.” She managed another word, but her throat felt raw and sore. “Where...”

Her head was floating and would take off on its own any time now. Light filtered through her eyelids. More footsteps, and then the soft and comforting weight of a blanket settled over her. Groaning, she enjoyed the warmth.

“More.” Her eyelids flickered but didn’t open. “Sleep.”

A hand brushed over her forehead again, big and warm. “Rest easy. You’re safe.”

The man’s touch felt so good. So right. Inhaling deeply, she savored a heady, masculine scent. Awareness

returned only in segments. He'd taken her boots off but left her socks on, and she was grateful for the warmth. By the god, would she ever be warm again? She shivered and dragged her eyelids open with effort. Xandra needed to see who touched her with such gentle attention.

A big man hovered over her, kneeling by the bed. His fingers brushed aside her fringe of bangs in a gentle caress.

The man who'd saved her from Farcam and the old geezer.

And kissed her until she couldn't think.

Memories returned with a rush. "You."

He nodded. "Me indeed."

She'd never seen a man this wicked-looking. Earlier on deck she'd been bombarded by impressions of him, but now he was close, so close, his handsomeness took her breath. A few-days' beard gave him a scruffy appearance, a rogue if she'd ever seen one. His long nose, chiseled jaw and wide mouth complemented his large, dark eyes. He blinked and thick-as-sin dark eyelashes gave his too-tough face a slight softness that only added to his attractiveness. He shifted, staring at her with those haunted eyes, and for a moment she saw tenderness flicker through a stone-cold

and dispassionate expression. He ran a hand through the thick black waving tangle of hair around his head.

“Who are you?”

His question should have been easy to answer, and she knew the answer. She hesitated, as if giving her name might mean a victory for him.

“Xandra.” She cleared her dry throat. “Xandra Shoreus.”

“Pretty name.” He smiled, and the wicked glint gleaming in his eyes sent a sweet tingle through her stomach.

“Who are you and where am I?” she managed to say with difficulty.

“Rest your voice.”

“Answer my question.”

Amusement flickered in his eyes. “She commands obedience. Very well. My name is Rayder Tyrus, and you’re on the *Beast*.”

“Your ship?”

“I am the captain and second-in-command. Karman Aramus is the ship’s admiral.”

She frowned because his answer didn’t tell her anything. “Is it a Dragonian ship?”

“Those cretins who attacked you were partially right. We belong to no country. We are Dragonian, but we are much more.” He smiled. “We are slavers, and you my beauty, are my prisoner.”

## Chapter Two

Xandra's temples pounded.

Though she'd known what he'd say, she rebelled. "No."

She surged upright, desire to escape strong. The slaver held her down, his hands on her shoulders.

His eyes narrowed. "Take care. You're not well, and even if you did escape me, there's no way you'll leave this ship short of jumping in the water. I think you've swallowed enough for now, don't you?"

She tried to inhale slowly and calm down. "I've heard of you miscreants. You plunder ships and steal Magonian women. You sell them to sex fiends in Dragonia."

Rayder laughed, and the genuine pleasure warming his eyes surprised her. If she wasn't so angry, she could have appreciated the handsome curve to his mouth and the deep, smooth sound in his laugh.

She turned on the full force of her glare. "It is not a laughing matter."

His smile remained. "I've never personally sold a woman to a sex fiend or any other type of fiend."

"You kissed me!"

He shrugged. "It was necessary to show that you're my woman."

"I've heard about that vile practice."

He chuckled. "Is that why you tried to kiss me first? I'm flattered that you chose me to perform the vile practice." Humor and something forbidden glittered in his eyes. "Perhaps you'd like me to try again?"

She sputtered. "I was only going to kiss you on the cheek. You...you took it much further than necessary."

"I was claiming you and now no man would dare touch you. On this ship, it could save your bloody life. You should thank me."

She didn't care to listen and she certainly didn't trust him. "You ruin women's lives. Chaste women who hoped to keep their virginity for a husband."

His eyebrows winged up. "I've never had a virgin." Slowly he reached for her hand and drew it to his mouth. "But I could always be persuaded to consider it."

A flush filled her face, and the back of her hand tingled as he kissed it. A hot spiral of sensation danced low in her stomach at the shocking intimacy, but it was sinful and not to be borne. She jerked her hand out of his grip. "Stop touching me." Her ire rose, rushing away all fear in the face of indignation. "Do you deny that you take women against their will and transport them to Dragonia?"

He shook his head. "I don't deny that I'm on a slave ship." He stood and reached for a large cup on a stand near the bed. This time he sat on the bed. "Can you sit up? You need to drink water."

Her mouth was beyond parched, and she slowly eased herself into sitting position. Relinquishing the cup slowly, as if he expected her to drop it, he watched as she gulped down the water.

"Easy. You'll make yourself sick. Slow down." She did as he requested, and the delicious water was cold and slaked her raging thirst.

"Here, I'll take that. There's a pitcher with more if you need it."



Reluctantly, she said, "Thank you."

"I'll bet that hurt you to say."

"It did. Very much."

Smirking, he dragged the chair from the corner over to the side of the bed and turned the chair about so he could straddle it. He folded his arms on the back the chair. "What surprises me is that an innocent like you has heard of slave traders."

She sniffed in contempt. "Why wouldn't I?"

"From what I hear, Magonian women are sheltered against all outside news lest they get strange ideas about thinking for themselves. Cloaked with protection to keep their minds as pure as their bodies."

Now far too warm, she pushed the blanket down to her waist. "Some women are cloaked in this way. Not all. My family was fairly open and liberal in comparison to others."

Xandra didn't mind lying to the man. After all, it wasn't any of his business.

He leaned in closer, gaze speculative. "Really? How liberal?"

“Do not get any ideas. Sex is a sin, as any Magon-fearing person knows.”

She didn't believe that and never had. Yet she'd done a great job all her life of covering up that belief. Stating it might save her from this man.

One corner of his mouth turned upward, but sarcasm laced his voice. “Why are Magonians afraid of carnal pleasures between a man and woman?”

Her breath hitched at his impertinent question no Magonian-fearing man would ever ask. “Because it is decried by the religious leaders. It is written in the Chronicles of Magon.”

He snorted. “Therefore it is so?”

“Indeed.”

“Humph. Perfect bollocks.”

She glared. “Do you specialize in making fun of people's religious choices?”

“I specialize in making fun of as many things as I can.”

His gaze dipped to her bodice, and that's when she realized the tie at the top had come loose. Her face burned.

By the god, she could feel his touch even though he only looked at her. A man had never stared at her like this, but she'd seen men devouring women with their eyes when they thought no one looked. She'd wondered what it would feel like and now she understood. She licked her lips and his gaze snapped to her mouth. Heat gathered in his expression and continued that treacherous yearning in her belly. Still, feeling anything other than contempt for a slaver was out of the question.

"Be that as it may," she said as she hurried to retie the bodice on the tunic, "the Truth and Order Police and scribes cannot keep all truth from emerging. As hard as they've tried, I have learned much over the years."

"Such as?"

"Women tolerate sex for a man's desire and to beget children. Pleasure is not a part of it. The Truth and Order Police say sex is still a sin in marriage, but a tolerable sin. I believe within marriage it is no sin at all."

"Amazing. And here I thought only Dragonians had bizarre notions about sex."

"It's not bizarre. It's truth."

"You mean to tell me having children is produced from committing sin?"

She nodded and licked her lips. "A necessary sin."

"Would the god Magon have made it a sin to perpetuate the species?"

Wondering why he insisted on pursuing this conversation, she answered, "It appears so."

When his eyes snapped up to hers, she saw eager interest in his eyes that confused her with its intensity. Shaking his head, he peered at her as if she'd become a dreaded three-headed lizard said to reside in the Magonian underworld. "Fascinating but utter bollocks."

Patience snapped. "You are nothing more than a sin-laden—"

"I know." He held up one hand and added a long slow look that traveled over her face in an intimate and searching fashion. "I'm a slave trader. A defiler of women. Best you remember that, my beauty."

Rayder reached out to touch her throat, and she flinched at his audacity and the soreness.

She grabbed his big hand and pushed it away. "Don't touch me."

"I wouldn't move much if I were you. You're hurt more than you know."

"I'm well enough."

"You almost drowned. A little longer and you would've slid into the ocean for the last time. Farcam is a brutal man. He could have crushed your throat if he'd wanted to."

"I know." She swallowed around her sore throat. Thinking about how close she'd come to losing her life iced her heart. "Why didn't you let him?"

He grunted. His eyes grim and mouth tight. "He's dragon dung. Filth who should have died long ago."

"Oh." She didn't know what she expected him to say. She switched subjects to avoid thinking about almost having her throat crushed. "You rescued me from the water because you saw me as slave material?"

"Yes. We watched your ship get hit by the wave and go under and figured there couldn't be survivors. When we arrived at the location, we found you and three other women floating nearby."

Her heart leapt. "I was with two friends. Mia Griffi and Ketera Aldrancos. Are they on board?"

The slaver shook his head. "Not that I'm aware of."

Disappointment and grief threatened, but curiosity stifled stronger emotions. "I demand to find out for certain."

To her surprise he said, "I will check the names of the slaves already on board."

"One other thing. Did you pull a man from the ocean as well?"

His eyes narrowed. "No. Why? Is he your betrothed?"

She swallowed hard, relief flowing through her. While she normally would never wish death on anyone, she couldn't imagine what she'd do if Taris Elian had made it onto this ship. How much should she tell this man?

She made a quick, perhaps rash decision. "His name is Taris Elian." She added acid to her voice. "He was my husband. That is all you need to know."

"You have a husband?" Rayder's mouth firmed, hardness entering his eyes. "I see no grief in your eyes for him."

Magon, she wished she could manufacture grief for the man.

"I wanted nothing to do with him. My parents arranged it. I escaped him in Opali after—" She stopped herself. He didn't need to know the sordid story. "He caught up with me at the *Hydrasoseles* and was taking me back to Opali."

His eyes narrowed, keen intelligence and curiosity sharpening his gaze. "So you were as much a slave in Magonia as you are on this ship."

Damn him for pointing that out. She nodded reluctantly. "In a fashion." She knew the answer to her next question but asked it anyway. "Why did you save me?"

Xandra thought she saw concern and a very human emotion in his eyes. It flickered and died. "In my former life it was my duty to protect others. I'm an exceptionally strong swimmer and I jumped into the ocean. The men threw me a line."

Unless he lied about his heroics and this former life, she couldn't help but admire such bravery...even if it belonged to a slaver. "Thank you for...saving me. From the water and from those odious men."

He didn't acknowledge her thanks, but his expression filled with a smidgen of admiration. "I'm amazed, my lady. You show more courage than any Magonian woman I've had the pleasure of meeting and maybe most Dragonians."

Xandra's throat tightened as she noted that she'd placed herself in jeopardy speaking to this man so boldly and engaging him in conversations about sex. Drinking ocean had apparently disrupted her common sense.

"What...what time is it?" she asked, hoping to divert his thoughts from carnal actions.

"You've been unconscious a night and day. It's morning now."

She sighed, perturbed. "How was I to know I was on a slaver ship?"

He leaned closer, and this time his fingers traced down the side of her cheek. Hot skin against skin contact sent a wake of response rippling through her skin. Part of her liked his touch, and that shocked and scared her.

"Soft. You'd fetch a pretty penny in Dragonia," he said softly, his voice a rumbling deep purr that stroked her skin as wonderfully as his touch.

He leaned in closer, his heat and warmth seeming to surround her. Rayder's eyes weren't as black as she'd believed. Hints of green and gold flashed within, and as she stared, red flashed.

She gasped and her heart froze. "*What* are you?"



His lips parted, coming closer. "I told you. A slaver."

Nearer. Nearer. Was he going to kiss her?

She couldn't move.

For a few seconds more they hung in limbo until he moved back abruptly and stood. "While you're on this ship, you will do as I say when I say."

"But—"

"Follow my direction or there will be hells to pay."

"Why am I here in this cabin? Do you house all slaves in such generous accommodation?"

He strode toward the door, and her gaze snagged on his broad shoulders, slim hips and the obvious strength in his body. Rayder turned to look at her. "No. We have slaves belowdecks in far less comfortable conditions than you are enjoying." He gripped the hilt of his sword, his gaze challenging her to do or say anything untoward that might incur his wrath. "The only reason why you're here is because I claimed you with that kiss."

Her jaw sagged as everything inside her protested. "You don't mean to make good on this...claiming. No

decent man would. I only kissed you to make it look like I wanted the claiming.”

“Too bad, my darling. You should have put more thought into it before you acted.” His words came out sharp and sarcastic. “As it is, you should only feel a little safe from the rest of the men on this ship. They don’t always follow the rules of Dragonian society. If you leave this room without me you take your life in your hands.”

Rayder turned toward her, his eyes glinting with menace. That’s also when she saw another feature she couldn’t fail to notice. His manhood pressed solidly against his trousers and the material outlined his thick, long cock.

*By the god Magon.* Surprise rocked her.

Flummoxed, she paused to take stock of what she’d experienced. “You’re saying a man might try to...harm me even though you’ve claimed me already?”

“Anything is possible. As the second-in-command of this ship, I have privileges,” he said. “One is claiming any woman who comes aboard as mine if I so chose. The admiral wanted you. I told him I hadn’t experienced the pleasure of a woman’s touch in many a month and he gave you to me as a gift.”

Her mouth dropped open, but she was speechless.

“Tonight,” he said with deadly softness as he smiled, “tonight we will sleep here together.”

Panic did a mad dance inside her. “You’d take a woman against her will?”

He glared. “You’ll come to me willingly.”

Desperate, she said quickly, “You wouldn’t really rob a virgin of her virtue, would you?”

A cocky smile touched his mouth, but his eyes were hard. “A virgin though you were married? How interesting.” He retraced his steps until he stood so close she felt his heat. “Beware of lying to me. Punishment for liars on this ship is swift and harsh.”

He left and closed the door with a soft snick.

Xandra stared at the door, her vision turned inward to the sight of his cock. She hadn’t experienced the wild mix of emotions stalking her at that moment. Trepidation. Amazement. And more disturbing, a curiosity and wild reckless desire that shook her to the core. Rayder Tyrus wanted her sexually, and his thick, long manhood pressing against his trousers had shown her the proof. She’d seen Taris’ cock, but it had been fairly small and had repulsed her. She swallowed hard.

But this man...well...

Heat filled her face and flushed all through her body.

As a younger woman, she'd read some forbidden journals her brother had located in a secret library being run out of a house in Opali, and her knowledge of sex had skyrocketed. Book learning though, was far less scary than seeing evidence of sex firsthand. She'd urged her brother to return the books before they were caught with them, and told him to never show her the journals again. But at night, her rebellious soul had haunted her with dreams of what sex must be like, what delights might be found in something so outlawed and denied by her people.

Then her wedding night with Taris had come and destroyed all hope that sexual relations could be wonderful and pleasant for all concerned.

She flopped back against the bed, her mind a jumble, and her body assaulted by unwanted but seemingly unavoidable sensations. Rayder Tyrus' kiss had ignited her cravings, and the realization he wanted her sexually had taken her off guard. Though she'd heard of these slavers and their horrible penchant for sex, she'd never imagined one wanting her.

How was she going to escape this mess?

\* \* \* \* \*

"I am fucked," Rayder whispered as he left his stateroom.

He took deep breaths as he stared at nothing, knowing his erection would take a while to disappear, and the raging sexual needs of a Daryk One would continue to flow through his blood.

*I'm not a Daryk One anymore.*

No, they had different names for him back in Dragonia and his home at Felican Castle.

Betrayer.

Rogue.

Banished for all time.

He gritted his teeth, unwilling to think about what he'd sacrificed to accomplish his goal.

*You haven't accomplished the goal, you fool.* That fact burned inside him like hot water, but his raging need for his slave burned brighter.

That kiss had been necessary, but he could have taken

her with a little peck. Instead he'd plunged into her sweetness, tasting her delicious mouth until he'd wanted to drag her into the cabin and fuck her there and then.

But the reason why she'd aroused him so intensely frightened him more than anything else.

Xandra Shorenus had worked on his vulnerabilities from the moment he rescued her from the churning black ocean. His first impulse upon seeing people in the water was to help them—living on this ship for almost three years hadn't destroyed all his humanity. Oh, he'd tried. He'd immersed himself in this world and with the taint of a slave ship came sacrifice. Losing every fucking stitch of his humanity would be easy.

But more had happened than he expected.

He'd taken a deep kiss from her because he wanted to stamp ownership on her to protect her from other men, but something astounding and amazing had exploded inside him when he'd kissed her.

He'd recognized her as his mate.

The woman he was supposed to be with for all time.

All the signs were there.

Then fear had thrown him sideways.

He didn't want a mate. Not when his mission wasn't complete.

He remembered his mother whispering to him as she lay dying three years ago, "Rayder, my boy, promise me you'll keep this family alive. Marry. Have children. Don't let Dragonia die. Don't let our family die."

He couldn't cry then. Hadn't allowed himself to cry even though he'd wanted to rage against anything and everything. For his mother. For his dead sister.

He would fulfill his mother's dying wish.

Just not here and now.

Damn his mother and damn him, and damn Xandra Shorenus.

He took a shuddering breath as emotions rocketed through him. Sexual frustration mixed with a yearning for Xandra he barely restrained. He swallowed hard. It didn't matter if his cock was so hard he could pound nails with it. He had the willpower to ignore a woman's sexual allure even if she was his mate.

He had work to do. He considered locking his

stateroom door, but the men on deck wouldn't dare enter without his permission. Farcam, who'd accosted Xandra, would be punished when the admiral heard of it. Rayder would make damn sure Farcam wouldn't consider getting within several feet of her. As men threw sidelong glances at Rayder, he knew they wondered why he'd picked her as his slave. He glared at them and continued his rounds about the deck. As he walked, he pondered his situation.

Yes. Fucked described him if he didn't take care. The admiral had questioned his motivations for wanting the woman. After all, two of the women below in the hold had bigger breasts. Rounder hips. More uniform features. Tasty morsels, as the admiral had said, licking his lips as he did so. The man was scum. Filthy fucking pond scum. He wanted to hang the—

He stopped that train of thought. He needed to keep in mind that his job here wasn't done. Might take months longer. Years longer. Just killing Admiral Karman Aramus wouldn't solve the problem. Other slavers would take his place.

*Yes, but Aramus is the one you want.*

Still, he couldn't afford mistakes. He'd made far too many over the last years. Revenge burned deep in his heart, and in the back of that emotion lay shame. Burning,



unrelenting and impossible to ignore for long. Perhaps, if he sailed on this forsaken craft long enough, he'd pay enough penitence.

His mind turned back to Xandra as he walked to the railing and gripped it.

*Taris Elian.* Obviously she'd disliked this Taris Elian with a fury evident in the way her eyes had burned. She'd seemed relieved her husband was dead. Simply because it was an arranged attachment? That hardly seemed enough to procure such wrath. She'd said she'd escaped him, so it was obvious whatever the man had done she hadn't liked it.

It didn't matter now. If the man had survived, Rayder would have fought the other for her.

And her husband would have lost.

*Fuck me.* Yeah, the realization disturbed Rayder down to the core. He'd never fought another man for a woman. He'd fought men who'd tried to take advantage of a woman on more than one occasion. He wouldn't tolerate a man abusing a woman if he could prevent it.

Better Xandra didn't know that however. It might keep her in line if she thought he was a cad of the first order.

Never mind. He needed to think about his main goals,

and not the woman in his cabin. He returned from inward thoughts to his surroundings.

Ocean spray dewed everything. *Taracore* birds sailed high in the sky, their calls horrible screeches as they traveled the air. The menacing, large creatures had tried landing on deck once recently and had torn the ear off one sailor. Only swift action had saved the man from being carried off into the sky and certain death.

Rayder winced. His world presented dangers far too numerous to mention, but he'd have to instruct Xandra. If she fell prey to one of those birds or one of these scurvy men again...

No, nothing would happen to another innocent. He'd see to that.

The sea was rough after the storm yesterday, and the god Draconus only knew this cursed ship could have been destroyed by the rogue wave too. Perhaps the massive size of the slaver ship had assured its safety. The *Beast* had plowed the sea for dozens of years, raping and pillaging these waters. Since Rayder had joined this crew, he'd learned valuable lessons. Never allow the slaves to become more important than his mission.

His one and only mission in life.

Xandra Shorenus, though, had touched something he couldn't afford to have touched. Her delicate features were young. She couldn't be more than one and twenty-five to his thirty. Blue eyes ringed by long golden lashes had sparked with fire at him, stirring his libido as quickly as his indignation. A small bruise on her right cheekbone hadn't marred the smooth rosy touch to her skin. Tangled red-blond hair fringed over her forehead and trailed around her shoulders, thick and tempting. She needed a bath to wash away the ocean, and he'd make sure she received one as soon as possible. She was tall, but his large frame still dwarfed her slim body. He'd watched her small hands move, expressive in agitation, her grace evident even when she'd suffered the elements and the brutal choking. The piece of filth who'd touched her would pay dearly. Rayder gripped the railing and battled with anger. He could have Farcam killed. Execute him with a single blow. But he couldn't afford to allow his reaction to Xandra to fuel too many questions.

She was property, and that was the end of it.

Any man who dared touch her would find death at the end of his sword, and they all knew it.

"There you are." The voice nearby came from Rayder's left side and footsteps approached cautiously.

Rayder took a steadying breath as the man he hated more than anyone on Protican came toward him. He turned toward Admiral Karman Aramus. "Admiral."

The rogue Daryk One approached him, his height intimidating. The admiral remained stalwart despite his advanced age of sixty-five. He'd lived a long time and seen too much, and Rayder wanted to end the man in the worst possible way. His head of thick gray hair hung in a flowing mane over his broad shoulders. He wore a long-sleeved black tunic open at the chest. His breeches were loose and gathered at the bottom by boots. Gray eyes, hard and intense, reviewed Rayder with a critical eye.

"I understand you fought over your slave woman. Am I to understand that she's not only your slave but your mate?"

Rayder swallowed, ready to lie and lie again, just as he did every day he set foot on this deck. "As a former Daryk One, I claimed her this very day as my intended. She's my mate."

The admiral smiled. "Congratulations. Then you shall marry her."

## Chapter Three

Rayder stared at Admiral Aramus with disbelief. “Sir?”

The admiral tucked his thumbs in his belt and strode confidently toward Rayder. “If she is your mate, you must marry her.”

Rayder had to wiggle out of this. He couldn't deny he planned to protect his mate. But he'd do the same for any innocent woman, wouldn't he? He'd want to do anything he could to assist her. His gut clenched with guilt. He hadn't protected every innocent on this ship, at least not as well as he would have liked.

It wasn't convenient for her to be his mate now, damn the hells.

Rayder recalled everything he'd heard about Dragonian mates.

*Powerful needs, both emotional and sexual,*

*overwhelm the individuals.*

*The man's protective instincts become uncontrollable. He will do anything to protect his mate, including kill.*

*There is no other mate but one to the other. They are as one.*

*These signs are undeniable and almost immediate upon meeting and touching the mate.*

Rayder's jaw clenched as he struggled with unwanted possibilities. He didn't want her to be his mate...but...

The admiral chuckled. "Why so reluctant? We shall have Suteran Carna do the ceremony."

Rayder couldn't deny that Suteran could do the ceremony as the designated religious man of the ship, but Rayder didn't take to religion or ceremony the way most Dragonians did. Before Rayder could object, the admiral gestured at a younger man who was fixing some ropes nearby.

"Jonala, fetch Suteran. I have business with him."

As the young man ran to find Suteran, Rayder posed another objection. "I've claimed her for sex, not as a true mate. You take women other than your wife for sex."

The admiral nodded. "Naturally. But my wife is not my mate." He shrugged. "My wife is a mistake. I have thought of selling her."

Rayder's disgust rose high, burning inside him like hot coals. "Bound by marriage, you cannot sell her. Besides, you said she was your mate."

"I was mistaken."

Rayder couldn't restrain the words. "You *can't* be mistaken."

The admiral's stance widened, his thin legs stalwart against the roll of the deck, his mouth a firm line and a muscle twitching next to his right eye. "You've seen how she is with me. She hates me. That is not a true mate. I made a mistake. You are a good slaver, Rayder, but you aren't the admiral of this ship. What I say is law."

Rayder swallowed around his ire and contained his desire to throttle the man. "Of course."

Suteras Carna appeared around the corner, his rotund, short body rolling in a strange staggered gait. "You called for me, Admiral?"

The admiral slapped the man on the shoulder. "Ah,

good to see you, Suteras. We have a wedding to plan.”

Suteras’ pudgy face made is age indeterminate. “Who?” His gaze flicked to Rayder. “Surely not you?”

Rayder tossed a contemptuous look the man’s way. “I don’t think it’s necessary.”

Admiral Aramus frowned deeply, his patience apparently wearing thin. “You will wed your slave girl. Today.”

Rayder’s mind raced for a way around this marriage sham, but he couldn’t think of a way. Suteras might also work on a slave ship, but as a designated religious man, he could perform the weddings anywhere, and the ceremony would hold up under Dragonian law. Rayder was forced to go along with the sham. He could protect the woman in his quarters with law on his side, and after he’d taken down Admiral Aramus, he would release Xandra from the fake marriage. He wouldn’t take her sexually. After all, his threat to sleep with her tonight had been meant to keep her in line.

Besides the fact he knew if he did have sex with her, she would be bound more tightly to him than anything he’d experienced. He wouldn’t be able to concentrate on his revenge. On the true reason he was on this damn ship.

“Fine. A marriage,” Rayder said. “But give me until



tomorrow. Does your wife have an appropriate dress for Xandra?"

The admiral's expression eased into satisfaction at his triumph. "I will ask her."

Rayder's jaw clenched. "My betrothed needs a bath. I need a tub brought to my quarters."

A leering smile spread over the admiral's mouth. "Done. I'll have it sent immediately. In the meantime, we have business to attend to."

Glad to leave nuptials conversation, Rayder said, "Of course, Admiral."

The ship rocked under their feet, and Rayder saw gray clouds turning darker on the horizon. White caps rolled, a sure sign rougher waters would soon pummel the ship.

The admiral noticed the storm and growled. "Humph. Another storm is coming. The seer told me this morning this storm is worse than yesterday's."

Rayder didn't believe the seer knew better than mariners, but he didn't argue the point. No, he had other plans. "The wind is blowing east and it'll steer us toward Dragonia. We could put into shore for supplies."

Aramus turned a gaze full of speculation toward the horizon. “We’ll see how the storm blows. If the seer is right, you will stop near Drakus Fina’s camp and partake of his hospitality. Otherwise, we will stay as always on the ocean where we belong.”

“Very well. What business did you wish to discuss?”

Aramus stopped wandering across the deck, the imperious tilt of his head said he felt in control. And damn him to the hells, the man was in control with a hard fist and ruthless cruelty. Aramus wouldn’t fail to harm his wife or the slaves belowdecks, and he wouldn’t hesitate to harm Xandra.

By the god, the admiral *wouldn’t* harm Xandra. Rayder wouldn’t tolerate it. His fists tightened at his sides as he warred against the pressure building inside that demanded action. Rayder had a stake, a horrible stake in how this all played out. He wouldn’t turn from his mission and his real reason for being on the *Beast* even if he married a woman he’d known less than two days. It was all a part of the mirage. He could do this. He could do anything to reach his final goal.

Rayder waited as impatience ate at his heels.  
“Admiral?”

The man turned toward Rayder and smiled. "When you enter Drakus' camp to get supplies, you must simper like a little girl to get what we want."

"How is that different than any other time we're there?" Rayder tried to look bored and unconcerned.

"It isn't, but I have to remind you every time." Aramus walked toward him slowly, his eyes cold as a glacier. "You forget that I know you well, Daryk One. You are stronger than me. Younger. You hope to take over this ship one day. Perhaps if you follow in my footsteps and learn from me, you'll inherit my wealth and legacy. Until that time, you're still my second-in-command. *Second*. I've seen how you pretend deference to Drakus. But that's all it is. Pretend. You want to string him from the highest tree in the Tarrian jungle."

*You along with him, you dung eater.*

Rayder wrapped his right hand around the hilt of his sword. He gripped it tightly, wanting more than anything to separate this man's head from his shoulders. "As you wish, Admiral. Now if you'll excuse me, I must tend to my betrothed."

Aramus inclined his head. "Indeed. I wish you much joy of her."

“Sir.” Rayder turned away before he put thought to action and told the admiral where he could shove his joy.

\* \* \* \* \*

Xandra stood at one of the portholes in Rayder’s chambers and stared out at the churning ocean, remembering too much. Far too much about her recent past.

*Blood. Her hands were covered in blood. Her brother was dead. Slaughtered. Stabbed so many times she couldn’t tell where one wound ended and another began. Her brother Durand’s sandy hair, long and thick, lay across his forehead awash in red. His eyes were closed, his face so peaceful. How could he be in peace? How when her heart twisted, her mind skittering with questions, wanting answers, needing to escape this horror. Her father and mother lay close by, their lives cut short by the same horrible wounds.*

She gasped in horror at the memory.

The cabin door opened quickly and she whirled around, a startled scream on her lips.

“Easy, my beauty. You’re still safe.” Mocking humor touched Rayder’s eyes as he closed the door and strode

toward her. "All this screaming and the men outside will think I'm fucking the hells out of you."

His rough words made her flinch, but they also made her blood rush in a very disturbing way. "You are a rogue and a—"

"A rogue. Yes, that's true." His teasing expression disappeared as he walked to his desk. "You are trembling. Are you ill?"

Still shaking, Xandra smoothed her hands over her face. "No. Bad memories."

"Don't blame you. A wave like that comes along only once in awhile. You were in the wrong place when it decided to appear."

Thunder rolled, and she started. Xandra wouldn't reveal the full content of her dream. No one could know what happened back home. If they did... "A storm is coming?"

He fiddled with papers on his desk. "Looks like it."

She closed her eyes and saw the wave coming toward the ship again, the top so high it was almost too far up to see. She jerked back to awareness, her mind filled with images she didn't want to see ever again. "We can't be here if another wave decides to form. We'll be taken under

like my ship.”

She recalled holding onto Mia and Ketera as the water came down upon them.

“We’re heading away from it, back toward Dragonia.” His voice was unconcerned. “Besides, this ship is at least five times bigger than the one you were on. It’ll take a lot more than a wave thirty feet high to take us out.”

She shuddered. “Your admiral thinks this ship is invincible?”

“Yes, and he is too.”

“Do you believe that?”

“No, but it’s what he thinks, and on this ship, he’s the law. We have to do whatever he says, whenever he says it.”

“Are we going to Dragonia for a special reason?” She left the porthole. “To sell more slaves?”

He spared her an emotionless glance. “Of course. It is what we do”

Asking the next question took everything she had. “Are you going to sell me?”

Rayder turned his back to her. "I should."

Too many emotions warred for a place with Xandra, chief among them fury and fear. Anger won this time. "I would expect no less from you."

He grunted, evidently not the least affronted. "Just as well. Before the day is over, you'll hate me more than you already do."

Apprehension made her stomach sour. "Why?"

"The admiral has decreed that I shall marry you."

No. She couldn't have heard him right. She laughed feebly. "Your sense of humor is severely faulted."

"Do you hear me laughing? He thinks we are mates, and on this ship, there are rules. We do not keep a woman in our quarters without being married to her. If she is just here temporarily to fuck us, we must fuck her and then send her back to the slave quarters belowdecks."

She threw him a contemptuous look. "That is disgusting."

"It is how things are done here. You are lucky I haven't fucked you and sent you belowdecks."

Resentment and pure disbelief hollowed her belly, which already ached from hunger. She wanted to hit him with the nearest blunt object. With his back to her, he was vulnerable. She could clonk him over the head with a huge book sitting on the bedside table and try to escape. But that would be silliness. She had nowhere to go. Nowhere to hide. No, she'd wait until they reached Dragonia and find a way to escape.

He turned toward her, and his assessing gaze didn't soften. His hands went to his hips. "I realize this is a shock, but it has to be done. We'll marry on the ship and it can be forgotten later. I have no desire to be saddled with a whiny wife."

"No. I won't do it," she said softly.

Impatience slipped over his face. "Your husband is dead, so you are free to marry again. You'll marry me or you'll be thrown overboard. It's the way this ship runs. The admiral's wife will bring a dress, and a tub is being brought so you can wash. I'll have food sent in. You must be famished."

Famished or not, she wouldn't let this situation grow. "I am not chattel despite Magonian's idea of marriage or Dragonian's idea of marriage. I won't be married off again. I just ran from—"



"You will be married. Tomorrow morning. To me." He turned on her, his eyes darker than the storm threatening nearby. He stalked toward her and only stopped when he came within a few inches of her. "You have no choices here."

Thought she wasn't a short woman, he was easily over six feet tall, and he intimidated her with ease. She hated that, but what could she do? "You may force me to marry you, but I will not have intimate relations with you."

One corner of his mouth tilted in a sneer. "Intimate relations? Is that what they call it in Magonia? We don't have pretty names for the basics, my beauty."

"I would expect not." She tilted her nose upward and glared. "My people are significantly more refined than yours from what I've been able to tell."

Burning indignation in his eyes didn't alter one degree. "Is that so? And how many Dragonians have you met?"

He had her there, but she'd be damned to Magon if he'd have one up on her with this argument. "You and the other ruffians who attacked me outside the cabin."

As he took another step toward her, she stumbled back, bumping into the wall behind her. His gaze held hers and wouldn't let go.

"You count me as one of those scum?" Rayder's voice held low menace.

"Of course. I'm your prisoner, and you plan to marry me against my will. I won't do that again—" She cut herself off.

Curiosity remained in those dark-as-sin eyes. His nearness already made her so nervous she could barely think straight. "I can see you didn't love him. Or even admire the man."

Her stomach curled. "No." Fresh agitation made her say with great feeling, "In fact, I hated the ground he walked on."

Rayder's eyebrows slid upward. "Hate is a strong thing."

"He deserved it."

Tilting his head to the side, he spoke softly. "I understand hate."

Introspection filled his eyes, and curiosity almost made her ask him to explain. However, when he turned his gaze toward hers, she lost whatever she meant to say in the strength of his attention.

His chest brushed her breasts, and the pressure shocked her. Her nipples tingled, and her lips parted in surprise. A man had never stood this close to her before and had this effect—and she couldn't count the hugs from her brother as one sibling to another. Her father, well, her father had never hugged her. No, this feeling came from an entirely different place, boiling up hazardous sensations and feelings she didn't dare examine closely. His clean breath puffed over her face, his scent not dirty as she expected but a heady mixture of man she also hadn't encountered before this moment. Something was different. Very different about the way he looked at her, as if she'd challenged him one too many times and would now pay the ultimate price. It wasn't aggression she saw in his eyes so much as it was a desire to possess. A desire to consume. Taste. The intensity was startling.

When he placed his right hand on the wall next to her head, she flinched.

"We have a religious man. He'll do the ceremony for us and it will be legal even within Dragonia. As for sex, we'll see about that," he said.

His gaze caressed her mouth and traveled downward. Like a caress, his touch brought fire to her body, a need for something she'd never understood before. Her breathing quickened as she absorbed his admiration. As he brushed

a soft touch over her cheek and tilted her chin upward, her lips parted. He moved closer, almost touching her. His mouth brushed over her forehead, her nose, and drifted over her cheek where he found her ear. He twirled his tongue around the lobe.

“Oh.” She gasped and shivered, the sensation shocking and thrilling.

Taris hadn't tried to seduce her into sex their wedding night. He'd tossed her on the bed, yanked her dress up and attempted sex.

Attempted.

Taris had never kissed her before they married. Even then, his kisses and fumbling touches had revolted her. This...this was entirely different.

As his hands tested her, trailing along her sides to tease so near her breasts, she moaned softly. His breath was hot as he lingered along her neck, his touches soft and so tender her entire thought process dissolved under his attention.

Feathering his lips over her throat, he groaned low in his throat. “You taste like sin, my beauty.”

By the god Magon. No man had ever said that to her.

No man had ever touched her this way or spoken so boldly and gently to her. Emotions tumbled over themselves as she tried to right her world. Terrified she was losing control, she considered shoving him away, calling him every kind of blackguard imaginable.

Until he found her mouth. A warm, sweet kiss plied and teased her senses. Surprised, she started to push him away. Hard, immovable muscles defied her to budge him. An involuntary and instinctive desire demanded she explore carved pectorals and male nipples. He stroked deep, his mouth moving over hers in an intimate caress that startled her down to the roots. Earlier his tongue had taken her mouth, and yet in the privacy of this room the familiarity promised to seduce her senses into a reckless fashion. What threw her the most was his tender consideration. From his earlier fierceness and attitude, she'd expected a violent ravishing. Unguarded, she allowed him to plunder and stroke until she joined him in the chase. Tentatively her tongue moved, brushed his, tangled and stroked. Wild feelings coursed through her, starting a fire low in her belly and an ache between her legs. She wanted writhe and twist, to escape these treacherous sensations as much as she wanted relief from them.

A low moan left his throat. A growl that expressed pure male need and intention. He hauled her against him, one arm around her waist, the other buried in her hair as his

mouth twisted over hers to discover another fit. This, this was the animal inside him and she expected it, but even then he didn't hurt her. He simply took and took and gave and gave. Heat spread over her body as he kissed her, his touch tracing over her back and caressing in slow sweeping movements over her hips. He gripped her butt cheeks and lifted her until the thick evidence of his arousal pressed between her thighs. She tore her mouth from his and gasped, startled and shocked.

Undeniable lust filled his eyes. His nostrils flared, his lips parted. "You can stop pretending you don't feel something. Your little nipples are burning holes in me, my beauty. Your tongue mated with mine."

His shocking words made her mouth fall open again. "You're a cad."

He snorted softly. "I'm worse than that. Can't you feel it?"

The hardness between his thighs stirred an answering response low in her belly, ravaging her with hungry wanting that demanded she press closer, to give in to whatever he asked. "I know that you aren't a gentleman. That you can't restrain your animal urges. My mother warned me about men like you. You're just like my dead husband."

Laughter shone through the heat in his eyes. "I doubt

that. But what did she tell you? That a sexually aroused man grows horns at night and flies dragons? I know a slaver who tames dragons but even he doesn't fly them." His fingers tangled in her hair, and he angled her head so she couldn't avoid looking him straight in the eye. "Or maybe she told you there are men who will do and say anything to strip you of your clothes. To strip you of dignity and integrity. Is that what she told you?"

Startled by the passion in his question, she stared at him a long time before answering. "She said men were beasts. That they used fallen women for their pleasures until they married. When they're married, they are bound by law to have...sex with their wife. That I wasn't to have these relations until I married. Then...when I found out what those relations were..." She curled her lip in disgust.

"She didn't tell you what those relations were, did she?"

Damn him for knowing. "No. But I've read things and imagine they involve some of the things we've...just done. My husband wasn't much for kissing."

"Don't fool yourself." His voice turned even deeper and huskier. "What you experienced with your husband wasn't sex. What you experience with me...that will be sex."

Rayder's arrogance made her mouth drop open—she wanted to say something cutting and equally snide. Instead,

heat continued to pour into her belly and between her legs as she imagined sex that wasn't halfhearted. That wasn't demeaning and ugly.

"Your arrogance is astonishing," was all she could come up with.

"I don't have to be arrogant, Xandra. What churns between us is evidence enough for me. When we come together, when we fuck, the damn ocean is going to boil."

Huh. Little did this man know. She hadn't experienced real sex with her husband. At least not what she understood of sex. The Chronicles of Magon were right. Sex was for procreation. Nothing to become enamored of at any rate.

Her hands smoothed upward over his chest, tweaking his nipples by accident. He drew in a quick breath. "Don't do that, my beauty. You'll make me want you even more."

Thunder rumbled outside, the ominous sound filling her with dread. Right now she needed distraction from the storm gathering nearby. "Why do you call me that? My beauty?"

His gaze traveled up and down, assessing without any pretension at hiding that he liked what he saw. "No one's told you how pretty you are?"



“Never. I’m...not.”

He cupped her face. “What imbeciles the men must be on your continent. Your hair is a wild mess of tangled red and gold. I think it matches your temper.”

She bristled. “My hair is my hair, not my temper. Decorum, common sense, intelligence and decency are not imbecilic.”

He grunted, his thumbs brushing her cheeks. “Decency, eh? What is that exactly? Emotionless, loveless? A boring existence? I want none of it.”

Her lips parted, ready with a retort. “Marriage and coupling are for the making of children. For humanity to go on.”

He grunted. “I can agree with that.” His voice was husky, thick with emotion. “You hate the man you married. This man Taris Elian? And yet you didn’t have children?”

A burn, this one not pleasant, started in her stomach. She didn’t want to think about children, about the horrible sacrifice she’d had to make. “No. I wasn’t married long enough for that.”

Something new and dangerous flooded his eyes. “If he isn’t dead and comes looking for you eventually, I shall have

to kill him.”

*Marriage. I can't marry him. Or anyone else ever again.* Fear returned, lashing at her like a whip. “He drowned. He must have.”

He grunted. “Perhaps.”

Perhaps? There could be no perhaps. Fear rushed and throbbed inside her. If Taris was still out there, her apprehension would continue, the creeping, crawling feeling that meant she still needed to run. To hide.

With Rayder, her needs and feelings entwined with her confusion about his intentions. She knew if she didn't act now, he'd push this forbidden liaison an inch further. Perhaps more. Thrills danced up and down her body as she absorbed the sensation of his body against hers, every warm, strong, incredible inch. She shouldn't feel this way. She shouldn't want more of something that didn't exist. Cravings assaulted Xandra and demanded she take that step, to allow him access to taste and touch and do so much more.

She nudged his chest, pressing with her palms and forced strength into her voice. “Let me go.”

A knock on the door startled her, and she pulled from his arms. Without a word he crossed to the door. When he

opened it, two men stood there with a huge bathing tub and another with a tray laden with fruit, drink and some sort of meat.

“You wanted this here, Captain Tyrus?” one brawny guy carrying the tub asked.

Rayder threw a smile her way. “It’s for my bride-to-be. Bring it inside.”

The men struggled with the tub, and two women who must be slaves brought in bucket after bucket of heated water to pour into the tub. This was a luxury her passenger ship hadn’t provided, and she hadn’t felt the relaxing pleasure since she left Magonia.

He handed her a large key. “Lock the door when I leave.”

Surprised, she said, “But I could lock you out.”

“That is the idea. You don’t trust me. But know this. If I ask for you let me in, you must do so instantly. If I have to break the door down, there will be hells to pay. Don’t let anyone else inside but me.”

What could she say to that? A bath? He’d ordered a bath be brought to her and food? If he continued this way she’d start to like him. And that wouldn’t do.



## Chapter Four

It took Xandra several minutes to decide it was safe to strip and take a bath. She saw the steam coming off the water and ached to be clean. Yet the thought of water and immersing herself in it...that was a problem. She shivered, her stomach dropping as she closed her eyes and tried to ease the swift panic.

“Don’t be an idiot,” she said out loud.

She made certain the door was locked then propped a chair under the handle to make certain it was firmly secured. She stared at the tub as the water cooled and thought about Rayder leaving her the key. Amazing. She wouldn’t have expected that in all the lands of Croan.

Finally she stripped and stepped naked into the soothing warm water. She sighed in delight. Pleasure enveloped her as the water eased her tense muscles and made her forget at least for a moment her perilous situation. Make no mistake about it, she must stay on

guard. Shame enclosed her as readily as the water. She reached for the bar of soap and scrubbed. How could Rayder Tyrus have touched her when she smelled of the sea?

Touched her he had. Repeatedly. With the gentle caress of a dream lover and not the brutal beast she expected. She didn't believe what she'd experienced in two-going-on-three days. After all, men were wastrels, especially the ones on this ship. Her mother had explained once that men also didn't touch gently. They were rough, uncouth and brutal on occasion. Taris Elian had proved that. While she'd never seen her father be brutal, she'd never seen him touch her mother or herself with affection. She'd longed for a father's concern and his love and never received it. Now, because of what had happened a few short days ago in Opali, she never would. Her throat tightened, clogged with unshed tears and anger. By the god Magon, she had to think of how to escape this situation with her life intact.

The ocean had taken away Taris Elian and the danger he'd posed. But she still had other problems, not the least of which was surviving a slave ship and Rayder Tyrus.

It had taken only three weeks for her life to submerge into a morass of shambles and confusion. Tears filled her eyes, and for a little while she indulged in her grief and

pain. As she washed her hair, glad to feel so clean once more, she allowed tears to flow without chasing them away. While the water remained a tolerable temperature, she leaned her head back and closed her eyes. She was tired again. Sleep would be so wonderful, and before he knew it, she'd drifted off. Eventually the water turned completely cold, but she didn't want to leave the sanctuary. If she stayed in this drifting state, barely thinking or feeling, she could sort out the mess her life had become.

Thunder clapped outside, causing her to jerk in fear. She gasped and sat straight up. She wanted out of here. She needed to escape.

Escape to where? She couldn't flee from the waves.

A loud knock on the door made her start again, her heart banging. She hurried to get out of the tub, water splashing as she reached for a large drying cloth hanging over the chair nearby.

The knock came again. "Xandra, open up."

Rayder.

Relief spread through her, but it shouldn't have. Why would he make her feel safe? It made no sense considering his livelihood. Her keen humor and rebellious side rose to the surface. "Go away, slave trader. I'm still in

the bath.”

He grunted loudly. “You’ve had an hour. Time is up. We have a dress for you.”

Drying frantically with the cloth, she asked, “We?”

“The admiral’s wife and Phili Cranno.”

She hesitated. She didn’t have enough time to redress.

“Open the door.” His voice rose. “I don’t want to break it down, but I will if I have to.”

Angry and still dripping wet, she gathered the big cloth around herself and hurried to the door before Rayder made good on his promise.

When the door swung wide, Rayder stood on the threshold with two women. Rayder’s gaze swept over her with curiosity and genuine lust that made her breath catch. In lightning-quick speed, he assessed her. Her skin heated.

The young dark-haired woman was taller than Xandra and willowy to the point of gauntness. The girl’s blue eyes shocked Xandra—set deep and large, their depths reminded her of the dark ocean that had swallowed her and the *Hydrasoseles*. A quiver of fear ran through Xandra.



*Ridiculous. She's probably nothing more than a poor slave girl.*

Her black hair spilled about her shoulders in a thick wave that made her face appear long and thin. When she looked at Xandra, her gaze filled with unmitigated hatred. Startled, Xandra almost asked the woman out loud why she hated her when they'd just met.

On the other side of Rayder was an older woman, slightly plump with warm brown eyes and short golden blonde hair. Her smile seemed genuine. The woman's arms were full off garments.

"Come in, ladies," Rayder said as he stalked passed Xandra.

After the women followed him inside, the blonde older woman smiled at Xandra "My name is Yoanda Aramus. I'm Admiral Aramus' wife. I brought you a wedding dress and three other tunics and pants for you while you're here. This dress is congratulations from the admiral. It belonged to my daughter." The woman's eyes turned from happy to heartbroken in an instant, if that was possible. "She...uh... she died when she was fifteen."

Yoanda's eyes glittered with tears, and she held the dress out to Xandra and placed the remaining clothes on

the bed.

Overwhelmed, Xandra took the dress. "It's beautiful. Thank you so much. Are you sure you want to give such a treasure to me? You don't know me."

"My husband wants you to have it. So it must be so."

Xandra marveled at the intricate embroidery on the garment. Flowers scrolled in beautiful blossoms across the bodice. If her breasts fit in the tight bodice, the blossoms and vines would cup her with intimate detail and leave her nipples bare.

Xandra's mouth popped open as she stared at the bodice with complete disbelief. "The... Are these holes supposed to be there?"

"Many Dragonia wives wear such a dress," the younger woman said, her voice a sultry mix of mystery and undertones of dark and hidden depths. "It is an honor to show your flesh to your Dragonian husband. It gives him a glimpse at what he is marrying."

Flabbergasted, Xandra glanced at Rayder. A twinkle danced in his eyes. He thought this entire exchange amusing?

"Do you like the dress?" he asked.

*Do you?* She wanted to ask *him* that question.

Mind still reeling from the idea she'd have to wear a dress that revealed her nipples, she took in the rest of the ankle-length, long-sleeved dress. Overall it was plain, except for the bodice. It fell straight from the pointed, fitted waist and pooled on the floor. It was light green, the color of spring blooming in her imagination.

"It's beautiful except for the..." She looked at the nipple holes again and grimaced. "I cannot wear a dress with holes like these. I'm not Dragonian. When a woman is married in Magonia, it is in a modest full-length gown that covers the neck and arms and all the way to the ankles."

The younger woman scoffed. "The admiral commands it. Besides, this dress covers your arms and legs and everything but your nipples. I don't see what the problem is."

Perturbed by the woman's presumptuous attitude, Xandra placed the dress on the bed and tucked her towel closer around her. "We have not been introduced."

Rayder nodded. "Forgive me. This is Phili Cranno. She is the admiral's companion."

"Companion?" Xandra took a moment to understand. She glanced quickly at Yoanda and caught the woman's

downtrodden expression. “But you—”

“You’ll wear the dress,” Phili said, voice sharp and commanding.

Yoanda’s eyes stayed lowered, her sweet, round face a mask of subservience. While women were usually subservient to their husbands on Magonia, Xandra wondered why the admiral’s wife would allow this concubine to command her. Still, she didn’t want anyone suffering because of her. If Yoanda wished to provide her with a dress, she’d accept.

Xandra nodded. “Thank you, Yoanda. May I call you by your first name or is that too familiar?”

Yoanda lifted her gaze to Xandra’s. “It would please me if you called me Yoanda.”

Xandra smiled until she caught a quick look at Phili’s hard eyes so expressionless. Too expressionless. Xandra tried to recall if she’d seen anyone with eyes quite like them, as if the soul had left long ago or perhaps had never resided in her body. Xandra had witnessed uncaring people before—oh yes, she had. But never with the iciness Phili possessed.

“Try the dress on.” Rayder’s eyes challenged her. “In case there are adjustments.”

“Adjustments? Why would you care what it looks like?”

Rayder rolled his gaze to the ceiling for a moment then turned his attention to Yoanda. He took her hand and brought it to his lips, and then did so with Phili. Phili smiled in a simpering, fawning way that made Xandra want to slap the younger woman.

Rayder made a short bow from the waist. “My ladies, I thank you for your kindness.”

Yoanda’s eyes lit up with happiness, her cheeks aglow. She didn’t speak but left the cabin quickly.

Phili smiled, but genuine kindness never reached her eyes. “You’ll have to excuse Yoanda. She is slow sometimes.”

Xandra’s mouth tightened. “She seems very sweet.”

Without another word, Phili glared at her and then left the room. After she’d closed the door, Rayder locked it and returned to Xandra.

She shivered. “If you would leave me in peace, I’ll dress.”

“Perhaps I don’t want to leave.” His gaze strayed with

interest over her half-naked form.

Her fingers tightened on the covering that remained over her breasts and all the way to her ankles. The way he looked at her said he could see through the semitransparent cloth and wanted to see more and do more than simply admire. She shivered with a strange wanting, a desire she couldn't shake.

"Well, I will not change with you here."

"I'll turn my back."

"In my country, it is considered heinously bad luck for the groom to see the bride the night before the wedding."

Thunder rumbled outside, and she flinched. Rayder approached, but this time his eyes held concern. "Perhaps the storm will fade off to the south."

She shook her head. "No. It's not." Fear reached for her, irrational and uncontrollable. "It's coming here. Now."

Blue lightning flashed outside a porthole and thunder clapped. Her fingers tightened on the cloth and she shivered.

"You're not well enough to stand around dripping wet in this cold. Get dressed," he said.

“Not with you in the room.”

“I’ll turn around.”

She hesitated.

He glared.

“Turn around first.” The testiness in her voice came out clearly. “If I am forced to marry, the least you could do is show respect for my traditions.”

“A man in Magonia *never* sees his intended naked before her marries her?” He snorted softly when she didn’t answer. “Of course not.”

Planting his hands on his hips, he turned around. She stared at his broad back for a smidgen in time before hurrying to strip the cloth away from her body and shimmy into warm gray pants and tunic. Grateful for the warmth, she pressed her hands over the fabric and sighed. The material’s thick weave hung on her like a sack—she had to roll up the sleeves and pants legs. And though the drab gray color and floppy size wouldn’t flatter, it would keep her warm.

“You can turn around.” She slipped into the socks and sturdy ankle shoes the women had also brought.

The warrior turned and gave her a thorough inspection, as if she must pass a test. He tilted his head to the side. "Far too large, but it suits you."

Insulted, she hung the towel over the chair that had barred the door earlier. "How very flattering."

"Tomorrow you'll put on the ceremony dress first thing. Yoanda and Phili will escort you to the sanctum in the admiral's quarters where ceremonies are held. After that you'll retire to this cabin immediately."

Thunder cracked overhead and the ship's movement became stronger, rocking more from side to side. Xandra's breath shortened, but she maintained control. Rayder examined her closely.

"The storm frightens you," he said softly, easing nearer.

She stared up at him, comforted by his presence and anxious at the same time. How could one man generate two different reactions inside her?

"I'm fine."

He closed the gap until he stood in front of her, as close as a husband might choose to be. "Is that why you're trembling?"



She turned away, but he followed. He clasped her shoulders and she froze. "If I am trembling, it's because you're too close."

A soft, throaty laugh drifted on the air. "I make you tremble? That's interesting. A man could get a lot of ideas from that."

"Don't. I'm not some...some tramp you can do with what you will." Irritation mixed with her desire to run. She turned and met his intense eyes head-on. His hands dropped from her shoulders. "I'm trembling because so many things have happened to me in the last...few days."

"You've been through an ordeal not many have endured and even less have survived."

She shook her head. "More than that." As soon as the words left her mouth, she wanted to take them back. "Never mind."

Xandra started to walk away, but he stepped in front of her. "What else happened to you? What are you hiding?"

"Why do you care?"

He scrubbed one hand over his jaw, his eyes diverted in thought. A dark shadow covered his jaw. He hadn't shaved in many a day, but it only added to his

handsomeness. "I can tell when a person is running from something, and you're a prime candidate for it."

Determined not to answer his curiosity, she returned to the bed and found the comb and brush the women had brought her. "Yoanda and Phili were very generous."

She sat on the edge of the bed and flipped her shoulder-blade-length hair over her head. Methodically, she worked at the tangles until the comb ran smoothly through the strands. When she sat up, her hair flowed in thick strands about her shoulders. That felt so much better.

"Things are never what they appear," he said.

"What do you mean?"

He ran a hand through his dark hair and the inky strands curled and waved in disarray. Muscles rippled in his arms, and she remembered how strongly his arms enclosed her. "Yoanda isn't as sweet as she acts, and Phili is as sharp and ruthless as a *taracore* bird."

"I gathered that Phili doesn't like me."

He smiled. "She doesn't like other women at all. They're competition."

She placed the comb and brush on the bedstand. "In

what way?”

“She likes the attention of men, and she often gets it. She’s the admiral’s concubine, but she probably has sex with other men on the ship for money or favors. If you think Farcam and Oscan were mean to you, you haven’t faced the full wrath of Phili.”

Fascinated, she sighed. “Well, I can’t say that isn’t interesting. Women in Magonia aren’t usually that powerful.”

He sat on the bed next to her but not close enough this time to make her uncomfortable. “With freedom comes opportunity for power *and* corruption.”

“Perhaps the Truth and Order Police and the scribes are correct then.”

“About what?”

She looked over at him. “Freedom is the greatest evil. If people know too much, they think too much. If they think too much, they do too much. Certain chaos is the result.”

“Perhaps. But which would you rather have? Knowing nothing and living by rote like you do on Magonia or the freedom to be who you really are in Dragonia?”

Stunned this brute of a man had asked such a thought-

provoking and intelligent question, she stared at him a long time before answering. "I'm fine the way I am. Don't think that your philosophy can change me."

"You've never thought what it would be like to know freedom?"

She shrugged. "Until I met Ketera Aldrancos, I rarely gave it thought. I wasn't certain it was an option."

"She was the friend you mentioned with you on the ship?"

"More an acquaintance, but we quickly became friends. She was sailing to Opali to save her father who was imprisoned for having seditious documents."

His eyebrows winged upward. "Seditious how?"

"He's an archaeologist and apparently he found documents that bring the Chronicles of Magon into question. The authorities on Magon say the documents are lies and dangerous. That her father betrays his country by saying that Dragonians are not like what we think they are. That Dragonians are not so much different than we are."

Rayder's eyes filled with curiosity. "Very interesting. Do you think her father is a traitor to his country? Do you think Dragonians are the bad people the Magonian powers-that-

be want you to believe?"

What could she say to that? "I've never met any Dragonians until I met you and the other people on this ship."

His grin flashed, and it did things to his eyes that she liked, changing the brooding quality to a lighthearted moment. "What do you think now?"

"That you are all still brutish of course."

He laughed. "Many of us are." He shook his head. "There's a lot you don't understand about Dragonia and its people. Perhaps I can teach you."

"You won't be able to brainwash me."

"It's not brainwashing if it's the truth. If your eyes are opened, maybe you won't fight me so much."

"Why would you bother? I'm a slave. You only intend to sell me off when the opportunity comes along."

That shut him up, and she felt a definite flood of satisfaction. A crack of thunder made her stand up in reaction. She wrapped her arms around herself, as if that could stop the storm from coming.

"The rain is already here." He gestured to the portholes. Rain trickled steadily down, and day had turned almost to night. "You cannot run from it."

"I know. Please, I'm tired. I need... I need more sleep."

A huge crack of lightning split the silence. She jerked in fear and her hands went to her mouth. She'd never felt so much fear, so much uncertainty in her life. Her entire body shook from within.

His face darkened and he sighed. "Enough of this. Tonight we sleep together."

His change of subject threw her. "What? No. I told you no sex."

More lightning flashed and thunder cracked overhead with vicious intensity. Her trembling became uncontrollable, her heart racing, palms growing damp. How could this fear take hold of her so quickly?

He came to her, and before she knew it, his arms wrapped around her waist and back. Fear eased under his strong embrace, and impulsively she buried her face in his shoulder.

"Do you want to be alone?" he asked.

“I...”

“I confess I’m tired as well. There will be no sex tonight, as much as I might want it.”

She looked up at him, body racked by a shaking she couldn’t stop. “You can sleep in the chair.”

Rayder’s eyes darkened like the fury outside. “Oh no, my beauty. If I sleep here tonight, I’ll stay in the bed or not at all. Which is it going to be?”

## Chapter Five

Xandra stared at Rayder as shock ran through her. She backed up a couple of steps. “If you try anything, I promise I’ll—”

“You’ll scream? No one would help you. No one. The men on this ship aren’t the noble kind.”

Fear trickled up her spine. Had she misjudged him and become too comfortable?

His grin faded into seriousness. “I’m not a rapist. But I’m still sleeping in the bed if I’m staying here. Otherwise I’m leaving. Which is it going to be?”

Thunder and the increasing motion of the ship made the decision for her. “All right. You can stay.”

She wished she hadn’t said yes to Rayder as he started to remove his clothes. Allowing the virile slave trader to stay with her tonight—well, in Magonia, it wasn’t



done. No man stayed with his betrothed the night before the marriage.

Marriage.

How completely ridiculous. She'd only just met the man. Yet what choice did she have? Frustration bit her. She'd been forced to marry Taris and now this man was forcing her to marry him.

Married to two different men in a month. How bizarre.

Freedom. *Right.*

Rain splattered against the portholes and the lightning and thunder grew more intense. She'd have to get used to him for as long as she stayed on this ship. Play along with this whole bizarre marriage thing and escape as quickly as she could when they docked in Dragonia.

First his tunic came off. She took in Rayder's body with fascination. Broad shoulders and wide chest rippled with power, as did his long arms. Dark hair sprinkled across his pectorals and down over a hard muscled stomach. Her breath caught as her gaze tangled with his.

"Something wrong?" he asked as he started to unbutton his trousers.

“Stop.”

“What.”

“At the least, for modesty’s sake, leave your trousers on.”

He smiled, and the wicked gleam in his eyes told her that Rayder found her discomfort amusing and maybe gratifying. “I never wear clothes to bed, and I’m not starting now.”

She lied. “But I’m not ready to sleep yet.”

He shrugged as he tucked his thumbs in his waistband and eased the trousers down his hips. “I am. It’s been a long day. You can stay up if you like. There are books on the desk if you wish to read. Keep the lamp on if you want.”

*Reprieve.* “All right.”

As his trousers fell lower, she sucked in a breath and averted her eyes. She walked over to the desk, snatched a book of poetry and sat down in the nearby chair. “I’ll read then.”

“Suit yourself.”

Rayder wandered to the bed, and out the corner of her

eye, she saw his naked figure climb into the bed and under the covers. She couldn't see anything really, but the thought of him naked upended her. As she flipped open the book and started to read, she became even more aware of him. He lay in bed, so close, the power of his presence somehow so disturbing that even dressed he unnerved her. She glanced over quickly. He lay on his left side, his eyes closed. Good. She couldn't take it if he were lying there watching her.

As nonchalantly as possible, she continued to read.

It didn't work.

The lightning flashing, the sound of the storm lashing at the cabin destroyed her concentration, and so did the man lying in the bed. Both warred with her ability to read and that bothered her. She tried again, determined neither one would win. Despite her efforts and the minutes that went by, her awareness of him increased.

*He's just a man. No reason to become all goggle-eyed over him.*

Especially considering he was a rogue and wastrel.

She forced her attention back to the poetry. Beautiful and absorbing, the passages took her to another world. From the words, Xandra learned that Dragonia possessed

as much splendor as danger, as much life as death. Glaciers, jungles and deserts occupied the continent. Though she'd heard it all before, the poet described the land with such affection and depth that rendered the country mysterious and beautiful. Curiosity twisted inside her and made Xandra wonder if Dragonia would be her freedom or stifle her in entirely new ways.

Her eyelids started to droop with exhaustion, but she couldn't abandon the book. Finally she couldn't keep her eyes open. She closed the book with a sigh and noted the author's name carved in red on the rich black cover.

She said the name softly. "Aknada Tyrus."

"She was my sister."

Xandra jerked, startled by Rayder's voice. She dared to look up. He was still under the covers. "Your sister?"

"Yes." He sat up against the dark wood headboard. "She was."

A sinking feeling entered the pit of her stomach. "Was?"

He swallowed hard, his eyes momentarily burning with anger. "She was murdered."

Murdered. She understood so well how it felt for a loved one to be murdered. Her heart twisted as her own pain resurfaced with staggering force.

“Oh god Magon. I’m sorry.” She touched the cover reverently. “This poetry is so beautiful and meaningful.”

He nodded. His eyes sad. “Aknada wrote that poetry when she was but fifteen. She was very talented.”

“When did... When did she die?”

“Three years ago. She was twenty and betrothed.”

Tears prickled in her eyes. “How awful. What happened to her?”

“Never mind. I’ve said too much.”

Curiosity plagued her, but far deeper emotions overruled. Tears spilled over her eyelids. A few seconds later she heard the bed covers rustle as he left the bed. Her heart pounded, her breath coming shorter. She stood quickly, needing to escape. She kept her eyes averted from him.

His hands clasped her shoulders. “Are you all right?”

She looked up quickly, still afraid of his nakedness and

even more fearful she'd tell him her story. She solidified her strength and remembered her goal. Return to Magonia to live her life, and more than that...find a way to bring Taris Elian to justice for what he'd done to her family. She swallowed hard around the bitterness that filled her heart, filled every part of her until she overflowed.

“Xandra? What’s wrong?”

She kept her gaze pinned to his face, overwhelmed by feelings and a staggering awareness of his virile presence. “Why do you care? I’m merely your slave.”

His mouth tightened, his brows lowered and eyes serious. Those green and gold striations mesmerized her and added mystery to his allure.

“You’re my slave, and it’s better if you get used to idea rather than fight it,” he said.

“Just allow you to take over my body. You don’t want to marry me, so why are you?”

“You know why. Because Admiral Aramus requires it.”

“You are second-in-command. You don’t have influence over him?”

“I’ve been on this ship three years, slowly working my

way to second-in-command. I didn't get that far by arguing inconsequential points."

She made a noise of disbelief. "Marriage is inconsequential?"

His eyes sparked with a predatory glimmer. "No. It's a very important step in anyone's life. My parents made sure I knew that."

Sarcasm crept into her reply. "Really. I heard that all Dragonians are raised by their brutish fathers and the mothers rarely interact with their children."

His fingers tightened on her shoulders as his mouth became a thin slash. "Where did you hear such bollocks?"

"Our scribes."

He grunted. "They lie."

That stung, and she wanted to deny what he'd said but couldn't. "Mia, one of the women I met on the ship, was training to become a scribe. She decided the life wasn't for her. She said some unhappy things about lies and the scribes."

"There you have it then. From the mouth of one who knows."

"I would rather see for myself, but I don't have time. I need to return to Magonia."

"What is so important there?"

She shook her head, unwilling to give him more. "Business." Before he could press her to ask more, she swerved toward a new subject. "Your parents were good people?"

"My father was a professor who taught children their sums, and my mother also taught very small children. They were gentle people."

Surprised that he'd revealed his childhood to her like that, she relaxed in his grip. "That's wonderful."

"It was. I had a happy childhood. But it wasn't perfect."

"Is it ever?"

"Perhaps not." He released her but didn't move away. "When it was apparent I was to become a Daryk One, they tried to hide my abilities."

*Daryk One. Oh my god Magon.* "You're a Daryk One?"

His smile held wicked teasing, his gaze losing that intensity for one moment. "You've heard of us? What do you



*think* you know?"

She licked her lips and his gaze flicked to her mouth and settled there. Heat flowed and filled her up. "Daryk Ones are powerful. Men who are stronger than the average man and brutal killers. And you're all in alliance with Drakus Fina, an evil man who wishes to bring down the Magonian government and enslave every Magonian man, woman and child. Your slave ships are filled to the brim with Magonian women who Drakus uses as breeding material."

Teasing left his eyes, replaced by a hard, unforgiving air. "Some of your story is completely wrong. But I'm not sure I want to take the time to tell you which parts are right."

He started to turn away and took a couple of steps toward the bed. His wide shoulders were sculpted with muscle, waist trim, his butt hard. And his legs. Ah, his legs fascinated her. Thighs peppered with dark hair, corded strength through his calves and into his big feet. Xandra couldn't help but stare, and when he turned to look back, he caught her assessing his body.

She couldn't avoid seeing his manhood without acting the complete ninny, the full prude. His cock, she'd once heard this part of a man called. Somehow the word fit so well. Thick and long, his arousal stood erect from a thatch of dark hair that grew between his thighs. Her mouth

opened, her breath caught. Her body reacted beyond her control as an ache grew between her thighs. He nipples peaked, grew taut, her breasts feeling larger and rounder.

Taris Elian hadn't looked anything like this.

And his cock certainly hadn't either.

She should look away—all the teaching of Magon said she shouldn't even see this part of him once she married him. Of course, Taris wasn't concerned about that. He'd showed her his cock the moment they were in the marriage bed. Rayder didn't need to know that. "A man and woman never see each other's..."

"Nakedness?" His voice dropped, going deeper and harder. He approached again, his stride sure, his power evident.

She couldn't tear her attention away as stood close in front of her. Every inch of sculpted, finely honed man created conflicting emotions. "Yes."

"Does it scare you?"

"Yes."

"There's nothing to fear. I can show you."

“No. Our marriage is a sham. We can’t...consummate it.”

He speared his fingers into her hair and drew her slowly against him. “We can if we wish to.” His mouth hovered over hers, his breath fresh and warm on her lips. “You might not like it, my beauty, but there’s something between us. It’s hot and it’s real. There’s no shame in it.”

Thunder roared outside and she flinched.

“You can deny it all you want,” he said, “but I feel that you want me.”

Fire blossomed low in her stomach. She sucked in an uncertain, shocked breath.

“We can partake of pleasures of the flesh then dissolve the marriage when convenient,” he said.

That stung, even when it shouldn’t have. “You would toss aside a wife so easily?”

“Yes. The marriage is binding on Dragonia, but we can get it dissolved once we’re on dry land. It’s of no consequence since we don’t love one another and we’re not mates.”

Love? Did this man truly believe in love? The idea

started an ache way deep inside both in her mind and body. She didn't know why, but the thought of Rayder in love with a woman sent strange sensations bolting around inside her. She didn't understand love between a man and woman, yet she still didn't like the idea of him bonded with another woman in an undeniable way.

Feeling bold and angry, she pushed at his chest to get away. Hard, warm muscles moved under her touch, her fingers tickled by the hair that sprinkled over his chest. Heat blossomed in her belly.

He tugged her closer and slipped his hands down her arms to her waist. "Why are you provoking me? Do you like making me insane with your questions and insinuations?"

"I don't know. I've never wanted to provoke a man the way I do you. Maybe because I've never met a slave trader before."

"You don't know a damn thing about me, Xandra. Don't presume to know my motivations."

"There's nothing I need to understand about a slave trader."

He jeered. "There's nothing I need to know about you other than your body. From the moment I pulled you out of the water, you've haunted my every waking thought. Your

hair is so beautiful.” He tangled his fingers in the strands. “Your body is soft in all the right places.” His fingers caressed her hip then returned to her cup the back of her neck. “Your breasts burn into my chest whenever I hold you. I can’t wait to see you in that bridal dress. And you don’t know how much I want to suck your nipples and sink my cock deep between your legs, fucking you until you’re screaming in ecstasy.”

Her mouth dropped open in shock, but she couldn’t retort, couldn’t think of one thing as she drowned in powerful sensation.

“You think I’m nothing more than a dirty bastard.” He whispered close to her ear, his hot breath teasing her until she shivered. His tongue wisped over the side of her neck and shot fire through her body. “If there’s nothing I can do to prove you wrong, then I guess I’ll have to prove you right.”

She wanted to growl at him, her pique growing as he pressed his naked body against her. She gasped as his hardness nestled against her belly. She understood that hard column of flesh. He wanted her, and that frightened her more than the storm and grief recalled. For she wanted the same thing, her curiosity rampant, her longing deep and unaccountable. It was if he’d erased every moral she’d learned in the Chronicles of Magon. How could this disreputable man make her respond, challenge everything

she knew?

His gaze flickered, a spark of red that took her off guard and made her gasp.

“Your eyes—”

“You don’t see anything,” he said raggedly. “I swear you’ll be the death of me yet.”

Before she could move, he cupped the back of her neck, anchored her body around the waist and kissed her.

Rayder’s mouth settled upon Xandra’s, tasting so much richer and hotter than it had before. As his arm braced her waist and he kept her anchored to him, she shivered with myriad sensations. Achy, feral, needy feelings. Heat shot through her belly, boiling upward as his mouth twisted across hers. Taste after taste, he urged her into response. She clutched at his shoulders and hung on tight as every hard inch of his body demanded her notice. His legs braced apart, and when he cupped her ass cheeks in his hands, she moaned softly in protest. Thick cock pressed intimately against her pleasure spot, and she gasped again as frantic pleasure rocked her. As her lips parted, he thrust his tongue into her mouth. She gasped at the invasion, but it felt so good, so right. Again and again his tongue caressed hers, creating a fire far more tempestuous than any storm she’d endured.

He tore his mouth from hers, breathing raggedly as he buried his face in the side of her neck. His tongue traced tiny patterns on sensitive flesh, and she shivered with wanton need. She craved—no, she died for more of what he was giving her despite the immorality of what she did. But it was too wild, to uncertain, too amazing to abandon.

Before she could gather air, his touch became far more intimate. His palms slid down over her waist and hips then back to cup her breasts. With a soft pluck, he teased one nipple. She moaned as heat as fierce as the lightning outside jolted her. He wedged one strong thigh between her legs and pressed upward. The ache between her legs burst into serious throbbing need. She writhed on his leg, pressing, retreating, allowing the upward movement of his thigh between her legs. One hand plunged into the front of her pants and touched her pussy lips. She gasped.

In the back of her melting sensibilities, she knew she had to stop this. She pressed against his chest. Under her touch, his chest muscles bunched and wiry hair prickled along her fingertips. Before she could speak, he teased a spot at the top of her pussy. She inhaled sharply as pleasure danced and tingled in that one spot.

“That’s right,” he said softly, hotly into her ear. “Feel it.”

She couldn’t think of anything else as unbearable

pleasure spiraled out from that sensitive point. He dipped one finger between her pussy lips and drew the wetness upward, circling and brushing over the sensitive spot with soft touches that drove her one step away from madness.

*Must stop.*

*Must.*

His other hand reached into the back of her pants and smoothed over her bottom, cupping, stroking and adding fuel to her already fiery needs.

“What’s happening to me?” She whimpered the question, too far gone for embarrassment.

He licked her earlobe and a shiver went through her body. “Pleasure.”

He slipped one finger into her pussy and she quivered, more surprise and more pleasure hitting her hard. With steady rhythm he pumped his finger inside her. The fire increased, threatening to tear her apart. She threw her head back, eyes closed, body out of control and writhing in his arms.

“I can’t.” She gasped, wanting to beg for something. Anything to stop this staggering pleasure that must surely be a sin.



“You can.” His voice was a husky demand. “You will.”

His fingers swirled over that sweet spot outside her pussy. He then slipped two fingers deep inside and thrust with a steady, gentle beat. Higher and higher sensations piled one upon the other. She ached deep, wanting something she couldn't define but didn't want to abandon.

Rayder pushed her to the edge with the steady movements of his fingers as he touched her inside, caressing over tender surfaces that tingled and ached.

She didn't understand what she wanted, and she wriggled, grasping at his shoulders with desperation. “Please. I need...”

A low growl left his throat, and she dared to open her eyes. Red burned there. It should have frightened her, drove her out of his arms. Instead, the conflagration within her rose higher and hotter. He lifted her tunic, baring her breasts. She caught his hand and for a moment thought he'd relent.

Rayder's eyes glowed and he took a deep breath. “So beautiful.”

He leaned forward and touched his tongue to one already hard nipple. She jerked in reaction to the intimate

caress. It was too much, too sensitive, too incredible. He suckled her and returned to caressing her between the legs. The combination of wonderful sensations threw her closer to the top, until she fell into the abyss without looking backward.

The rhythm caught her in its control, and his touch danced again. She rose with the tempo and became part of the song, drawn upward until she'd reached the tallest mountain and teetered on the precipice.

He slipped his hand down her butt cheeks, and with one finger teased her back entrance then dipped his finger partway inside. A hot tingling throbbed outward from her womb to that tender button at the top of her sex. As his fingers continued to plunder inside her creamy channel, the finger teasing her back passage plunged deep.

Startled and astonished by the pleasure, she came apart with a gasping, shivering delight that shook her from the core outward. She'd never felt anything as glorious and beautiful, and it took her breath away. She cried out at the apex, unable to control her delight. As her breath came in gasps, he withdrew his fingers and released her breast. Dazed, she tried to catch her breath. Xandra stared at Rayder in fascination as the red remained.

Rayder peppered gentle kisses to her lips, down her

neck and once more to her ear. "There's more, but I'll save that for our wedding night." Gently he released her and stepped over to the washing basin. After he'd washed his hands, he strode back to the bed. He slipped under the covers and gestured. "Come. Sleep beside me. I promise not to touch you again tonight."

She almost refused and said she'd take the chair, but lightning sent a sharp dagger into the room and she started. The ship rocked harder. Fear vaulted upward, and against her better judgment, she padded across the floor to the bed. She crawled under the covers swiftly.

Once she'd covered herself to the neck, she lay as far on the other side of the bed as she could. She stayed stiff and unmoving. She didn't know what to think. What she'd just experienced with him threw her into a tizzy of confusion. Taris' touches, his groping, fumbling actions hadn't caused this type of pleasure. Only revulsion. Why was it so different with Rayder?

"Was that..." Embarrassment burned in her face. "Was that sex?"

"Yes." His voice was gruff. "But there's more. Go to sleep. Tomorrow is an important day."

She licked her lips. "Nothing like that has ever happened to me before."

“I guessed as much.”

Surprised that he didn't mock her, she asked, “Have you had sex with many women?”

“A few.”

“And were they... Do they act the same as I?”

“Act?”

“That feeling? That strange and beautiful explosion that caused me to...” She simply couldn't say it. She was out of her depth and didn't know how to explain what she meant.

“That's sexual satisfaction.” His voice was low but he didn't mock her. “Your body responded to my touch and your own arousal. Some call it an orgasm.”

Clearing her throat, she tried not to sound as ignorant as she felt. “I read that a man puts his erection into a woman's...” Her throat dried up. “Her womanhood.”

“And other places.”

Her eyes snapped open and she stared into the dimly lit room. “Other places?”

He blew out the lamp on the bedstand and plunged the room into darkness except for the blue flash of lightning. "Yes."

"Oh." What could she say to that? "It hurts a woman the first time, doesn't it?"

He shifted in the bed. "Wait. Why are you asking me these questions? You were married."

Mortification filled her. She wanted to kick herself. She swallowed hard. Nothing could help it now—she couldn't avoid telling him the truth. "Yes, but Taris was...he tried, but his manhood wouldn't stay hard."

Rayder laughed, and the sound was loud and mocking. "By Draconus. Are you saying he couldn't fuck you? That his cock couldn't enter you?"

Her cheeks burned with embarrassment, and she was glad the light was off. "If you must put it so crudely, yes."

"You are a virgin."

She licked her dry lips. "Yes."

Rayder groaned. "Draconus help me."

Irritated, she turned on her side away from him and

stayed silent.

“On Magonia these things aren’t explained to women,” she finally said.

“Your mother didn’t tell you?”

“She told me some things, but she was too embarrassed to explain the rest.”

When another boom of thunder cracked near and she jerked, he turned on his side and slipped his left arm across her belly. “Easy. I’m not going to hurt you. Rest easy.”

Any other time or situation, she would have demanded he stop touching her, pulling her close. She would have ignored the strength of his arm as he gathered her against his nakedness. But as the storm continued, she allowed tears to flow and she relaxed.

Her mind ran around in circles, overflowing with questions about sex and what had just happened between them. She lay awake in his arms the rest of the night, imagining what he meant about a man putting his cock into other places. Part of her feared it while the other half died of curiosity. Anger quickly replaced amazement at what had happened between them.

If her body could do this...orgasm and completely lose control, what chance did she have of claiming her freedom?

## Chapter Six

Rayder stood outside his cabin and stared down the men who'd come to see the spectacle. *My wedding*. What a load full of shite. He heaved a breath and gave the half dozen gawkers a dirty look. Some grunted, some smiled, but all of them turned away.

Two continued to glare at him. Farcam and Oscan. Rayder had seen to it that Oscan had spent a day and night chained up without food or water, and so had Farcam. Rayder stalked toward them, his muscles tightening as he readied for a fight. He hadn't busted anyone's face in a while and today he felt ready to burn off hostility. He had plenty of it.

He knew why.

Xandra Shorenus was driving him to drink. A tankard of ale sounded delicious right then, but he'd have to wait until the wedding was over. Perhaps after he'd consummated the wedding. He shoved his hand into his right trouser



pocket. His fingers tightened around the box inside the pocket. He'd kept the ring, passed down to him from his family. He'd never planned to use his mother's wedding ring to marry any time soon. The right woman to give it to, for convenience sake, appeared to be Xandra Shorenus.

*Who are you kidding? She is your mate, the one you are supposed to marry.*

But by the god, he didn't want that. Not right now. Not when it wasn't convenient.

He might not look forward to this ceremony, but he did want more of what he'd experienced last night. *Draconus*. He'd wanted to lay her on his bed and initiate her, show her there was even more pleasure to be had if she'd open her legs to him and let him slide his cock into her sweet, tight body. Her innocence had shocked him. When he'd learned her bumpkin of a husband hadn't taken her virginity, it had made him want her even more. The power of his need exploded inside him.

He would be the only one to fuck her. Take her. Make her scream as he plunged deep into her body and planted his seed in her womb.

The force of his thoughts shook him and he took a deep breath.

Right now though, he had to get through the ceremony without punching someone's face. Among friends, Rayder wouldn't have minded Xandra's wedding dress. With miscreants like these, he damn well did mind. He didn't want them getting any more ideas about her. He'd take care of the lecherous bags around him, one way or other.

"Mornin', Sir." Oscan nodded, face impassive and carefree.

Rayder wasn't worried about the older man. His frame was far shorter and frailer than Rayder's. Oscan wouldn't be much in a fight—for a man. A woman? Rayder didn't like the odds if this lowlife got his hands on Xandra.

"Mornin', Sir." Farcam's grin showed rotten teeth, and Rayder knew the bastard had an even nastier disposition. "Fine day for a weddin', eh?"

Rayder didn't have patience for the niceties, especially not with these two assholes. "Stay away from the ceremony." Rayder gripped his sword. "You can clean belowdecks or perform other duties."

Farcam's smile held evil down to his soul. "Beggin' your pardon, Sir, but I'd pay to see it."

Rayder stepped forward, but a voice behind him stopped Rayder in his tracks. "There you are, Rayder.

Good to see you on such a fine morning.”

Karman Aramus, the bastard. Hatred seethed like an open wound inside Rayder, but as usual, he held it back and put on the good face. The face everyone believed in and trusted even when they damn well shouldn't.

Today the older man wore a brilliant red tunic and breastplate adorned with spears and skulls. His matching red trousers looked ridiculous, but the man never did care much what others thought of his clothing sense. Behind him at several paces walked Phili and Yoanda. Both women also wore fancy dresses—Yoanda in a brilliant green dress that looked similar to the one she'd given to Xandra, minus the holes for nipples. Phili, though, had chosen to wear a screaming-red dress that matched colors with the admiral's tunic, and her nipples were almost bared by the filmy material on the bodice. Rayder knew why she wore the dress. She wanted him. Phili had thrown herself at Rayder more than once in the passageways and byways of the dim underworld belowdecks. She'd wanted a good fuck, he knew, and thought he could provide it.

Perhaps he could, but no way in the hells would he.

First, she belonged to the admiral, and a crew member didn't mess with the admiral's women. Two, he wasn't the least interested. Too bad Phili hadn't taken the hint yet.

“Good morning, Admiral.” Rayder kept his voice modulated and calm. He threw a glance at the men gathering nearby.

“Where is the bride?” Aramus asked.

“Still getting ready,” Rayder said with a smirk. “You know how women are.”

The admiral threw his head back and laughed. “Too right. Well, hurry her along. And don’t become so distracted fucking her that you can’t make it to the ceremony.”

Rayder’s patience broke. “Is that why it took you so long to get here? You were with Yoanda and Phili at the same time?”

The admiral blinked, his eyes shocked. His gaze flipped to irritated a second later. “You’re in a fine temper today. I advise you save your tongue for tonight when you most need it.”

Only partially curtailed by the fact Phili and Yoanda both stood there and could hear the conversation, Rayder smiled through the anger. “At least I *know* what to do with my tongue.”

Phili smiled, and Yoanda also managed a grin for a half moment before she hid it by looking away.

Admiral Aramus threw him a look filled with contempt and disconcerted embarrassment. "You're a fine bastard, Tyrus. It's a good thing I like you so much or I'd have you flogged for that."

The man could order him killed, but he wouldn't. The bastard understood it was Rayder's knowledge of ships that kept their craft afloat. It wouldn't be long now before Rayder could accomplish what had taken three long years to obtain, and the admiral would smile no more.

Rayder nodded. "I'll see what's taking my betrothed so long."

"Wait." Yoanda's voice came sweet and clear. "I can help. Perhaps she needs a woman's advice. I know how nervous I was on my wedding day."

"Very well." Aramus waved his hand dismissively. "Do it."

As soon as Yoanda knocked on the door, Xandra's voice asked, "Who is it?"

"Yoanda. May I come in?"

The door unlocked and opened, and Rayder caught a quick glance at Xandra still dressed in her rough-weave

clothing. She hadn't changed when he'd left after promising to provide privacy. He wanted to growl. What was she waiting for? For him to become completely incensed? Xandra allowed Yoanda in and quickly closed the door.

"Come, Rayder," Aramus said. "We can put off the wedding a few more minutes. Better yet, let's go to my cabin and have a drink to stave off wedding jitters. Every man feels reluctant to marry until it's forced upon him by society and the need to be seen as legitimate to the world at large."

Rayder's gut roiled at the idea. Marrying Xandra amounted to inconvenience, and yes, the admiral had commanded it. Society on this ship demanded he marry for legitimacy, but it was farce, just as everything else on the *Beast*.

The admiral headed toward his cabin and Rayder followed. Phili threw Rayder a feral smile that reminded him of a jungle carnivore ready to make a meal. She took the admiral's arm and sauntered along. The bitch liked to play both sides. She smiled, pouted and cajoled the admiral into doing what she wanted—she wasn't much of a slave anymore, if she ever had been. Yoanda, on the other hand, was the exact opposite. It bothered Rayder to see Yoanda being ordered around and mistreated by a concubine, but he couldn't change it. He had too much at stake. Besides,

before long, both Phili and the admiral would get everything they deserved and more.

Rayder would see to it, and if marrying Xandra for a short time was the price to be paid, he'd pay.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I can't wear this dress." Xandra placed the dress back on the bed and turned back to Yoanda.

Yoanda's pale lips opened, her washed-out appearance more pronounced than yesterday. "You have to. The admiral commands it. Your betrothed expects it."

In no mood to play games, Xandra asked, "Did Rayder say he expects it?"

Yoanda toyed with the blonde hair that barely reached to her chin. "No."

Xandra crossed her arms. "Then I'm not wearing it. We all know this marriage is a ridiculous deception rather than a sacred vow."

Yoanda snatched the dress off the bed and held it up to Xandra's neck. "You remind me so much of my daughter. She would have looked wonderful in this dress. I didn't... When I was married to the admiral, I was..." Indescribable

emotions, perhaps anger, perhaps sadness marked her eyes.

Xandra waited, but when the older woman didn't elaborate, curiosity demanded she find out. "You were what?"

"He made me walk out on the deck in only shoes."

Xandra couldn't have heard her correctly. "Shoes? No clothing?"

Yoanda nodded, still holding the dress up to Xandra's neck. "Naked but for shoes. Actually Phili came into the room and said I was to wear shoes and nothing else. It was humiliating."

Amazed, Xandra couldn't think of anything to say. This poor woman had been made to attend her wedding completely naked. Wearing a dress with nipples showing seemed far less intimidating now.

"Phili knew the admiral before you married him?" Xandra asked.

Yoanda smiled, sadly and with a sarcastic twist. "Yes. Don't ask me why he didn't marry Phili first. She is beautiful and intelligent and competent. Everything I'm not."



An ache started in Xandra's chest. She clutched the dress and took it out of Yoanda's hands. "Honestly, I think she is mean and conniving and horrible to you. As for a beauty, I guess some men will take anything to slake their hunger."

Yoanda's eyes widened then a hint of humor entered her gaze. "That's why I don't mind that the admiral prefers her over me for his carnal...lusts. Wifely duties with Aramus..." She shuddered. "Phili can have him. As long as he leaves me alone, I'm happy." The woman smiled, her eyes now filled with cheerfulness. "I think you are very lucky to catch Rayder Tyrus." She rolled her gaze to the heavens a moment. "He is so handsome and nice."

Xandra's eyebrows went up in incredulity. "Is he?"

Yoanda chuckled and sat on the bed. "He's always been kind and gentle to me. You are young and beautiful, and he favors you. I think he's properly besotted."

Disbelief made Xandra snort. "Ha. I do not believe it. As I said, this is all a fraud." She eyed the other woman warily. "Perhaps I shouldn't say anything."

Yoanda shook her head. "Oh, don't worry about me. I won't tell a soul what you said. Even if my husband asks, I'll make something up."

“He won’t be able to tell you were lying?”

“Despite the fact he runs this ship, he’s quite the dunce. If it wasn’t for your betrothed, I think this entire ship would fall into chaos.”

“Then Rayder is really the admiral of this...this slave ship?”

Yoanda nodded again. “I’d say so. My husband got this ship by winning it from another admiral four years ago. He bought and paid for the crew and decided that selling slaves was a far more lucrative money maker than a legitimate business.”

Part of Xandra was happy to know this information if it would help her escape when the time was right. She placed the dress on the bed next to Yoanda. “Then he didn’t work his way up to admiral of this ship or inherit from another sailor?”

“No.” Yoanda chuckled, swinging her feet as her legs dangled from the edge of the bed. “He cheated his way into it, just like he does everything else.”

“Why are you telling me all this?”

Yoanda reached over and clasped Xandra’s left hand in both of hers. She squeezed warmly. “There’s so much to

know about this ship and the people on it. If you're going to live here, I thought you'd want to understand a little of what makes it run."

Warmed by her new friend's concern, Xandra said, "Thank you. It's very kind."

"It's good to have a friend on board. I haven't had a friend in years." Yoanda released her.

Sadness wended its way through Xandra as much as additional inquisitiveness. "Your daughter died? How? And how did you end up marrying the admiral?"

The cheer sucked from the room the minute Yoanda turned tortured eyes Xandra's way. "I am from Magonia too. Near Opali. I was on a ship to meet my husband in the west mine lands when the *Beast* came along side and used its guns to wreck the passenger ship. They didn't need a huge wave to do damage. The admiral took all the women as slaves and either killed the men or also took them as slaves. Many of the women and men on my ship were sold off in Dragonia. My daughter and I... My daughter was sold, and I've never heard from her again. It's easy for me to think of her as dead than to imagine what horrors she must endure. Shortly after he sold my daughter, the admiral decided he wanted me for a wife. Here I am, and here I'll stay until I die."

Xandra didn't know how to respond. Finally, she turned full toward Yoanda. "I know how horrible it must have been to lose your daughter, but you could still find her. She's not dead to you. We can plan an escape—"

"No." Yoanda put both hands out like a shield and stood. "You expect me to go into that jungle land just beyond the beach? I've seen it from the ship. It's dangerous and horrible, and there are many beasts there. I won't go." She paced to a porthole and stood on her tiptoes to see what happened outside. She dropped back to her heels and turned to Xandra. "You don't understand. There is no escape from this ship unless the admiral wills it and decides to sell you."

"If I marry Rayder, he can't sell me, can he?"

"He could, but I do not see Rayder choosing that. So you see, you have the best possible worlds. You cannot escape, but you have a man who will treat you well and protect you from the admiral."

"Protect me?"

"You've seen how those scabs are outside this cabin. Awful men, the lot of them. And yes, the admiral isn't above lifting a skirt from time to time even though he has Phili to fulfill his needs." The sneer on her face turned the

innocence to pure hatred. The transformation from sweet to sinister shocked Xandra.

“All the more reason to escape.” Xandra pressed her woman’s shoulder. “I don’t want to marry Rayder. I want to escape.”

The short woman stood and stared down at the wedding dress with sober, somber clarity. “You can try it as soon as we pull into port within a day’s time. If you dare.” Yoanda turned those sad eyes on her. “When the storm and wave came that tore your ship apart, I was out on the deck watching. I like storms.”

Surprised, Xandra sat down. She never would have guessed. “I used to enjoy thunder and lightning. It always seemed so wild and free. One of the few things wild and free in my country. Now I...”

Yoanda’s eyes held complete understanding. “Forget your freedom, Xandra. From this day it is well and truly over. Dragonia is a free nation, a place where many women are allowed to do what they will. But not on this ship. We don’t follow the rule of law here. If you want to escape, use the men to get what you want. Start with Rayder.”

Conflicting emotions stirred inside Xandra. She’d escaped Magonia only to find a new prison, and it made her angrier than anything she could have imagined. She

vowed from that moment that her struggle wouldn't end here. If she had to beg, borrow and lie to achieve freedom, she'd start here and now.

Xandra stood and eyed the wedding gown in her hands skeptically. "To freedom then."

Once she'd climbed into the dress and arranged her hair in a careless toss about her head, Xandra decided she looked well enough. The slippers she wore lacked much support, but she wouldn't have to wear them for long. After the ceremony, she'd return to the cabin, jump back into the rough weave tunic and pants and return the dress to Yoanda. It took several deep breaths to gather the courage to leave the cabin. She left with Yoanda and they hurried through the throngs of dirty, scruffy sailors.

All of them seared Xandra with needy gazes. Torture would have felt preferable to enduring the slimy men ogling her naked nipples. She looked straight ahead and followed Yoanda. No matter what they might do or say, Xandra stayed determined to remain dignified. To her surprise, no one said a word to her.

To distract herself from probing gazes, she paid attention to the workings of the ship, amazed at the size of the vessel and impressed that it had weathered such a horrible storm last night. Above her huge masts swayed,

sails open to catch the wind. The ship swayed slightly as it cut through the water. Sun blazed onto the deck, but the air temperature stayed cool. A crisp breeze fluttered through her hair. When the breeze touched her nipples, they went rock-hard. She bit her lower lip. By the god Magon, she didn't want this. Everyone would see her nipples and think she enjoyed this wanton display. Her face heated.

It seemed to take forever to reach the opposite end of the ship and the admiral's quarters. Rather than enter, Yoanda knocked.

"Come!" The admiral's voice boomed his order.

Yoanda opened the door and stepped through. As Xandra followed her, she caught Rayder's gaze. Fire burned within his eyes for a few moments, red and intense. She almost gasped. Fear prickled and danced up her spine. His attention sizzled, sliding downward to land on her breasts. He stared. Oh yes, he stared. When his eyes returned to hers, the red was back, but this time it had an odd effect. Fear left, replaced by a heat in her core that seemed to always burn when he looked at her, and especially when he touched her. The man had no shame, and she couldn't stop watching him watch her. He approached, his eyes devouring as he took in the dress. Amazing how a reserved garment in every other way could also be so immodest. She swallowed hard and tried to

catch her breath.

When her attention darted to the admiral, his mouth turned upward in a lecherous smile that made her want to slap him. She wanted to put her hands over her breasts and hide the beaded tips from his greedy gaze.

“Ah, the young bride is here.” The admiral’s voice was loud, too loud. “You are a lucky man indeed, Rayder.”

“Am I?” As Rayder extended his hand, she placed her fingers in his hold and kept her attention on him.

“Very much so,” the admiral said.

Rayder offered her his arm and she accepted his strength.

“This is Suteran Carna, the religious man. He’s performing our ceremony,” Rayder said.

“Good day,” Xandra said softly.

The tubby man smiled, the gesture genuine. His gaze stayed away from her breasts, thankfully. “My lady, it’s a pleasure to have you here. Step up to the altar.”

Toward the left side a door opened onto what looked like a bedroom with two beds, one small and one large.



Very interesting. She wondered if Phili slept in the small bed or if Yoanda did. Kitchen facilities resided in another corner, a huge roll-top desk and a seating area with chairs and three large couches.

At the farthest end, a corner had been cleared. She'd expected something elaborate when the religious man mentioned an altar, but this one was decorated with fine delights. A pillar around waist high sat in the corner, a bowl adorned with fruits. A white filmy material acted as a canopy and was held up by four thin wooden poles.

Rayder stepped first into the canopy and then held his hand out to her once more. "It's all right."

"What happens? I'm not familiar with Dragonian marriage custom," Xandra said.

"Just follow my lead," Rayder said with a calm she didn't feel.

Her heart started banging and panic started to set in. She glanced around the room as if she could find escape, but knew there wouldn't be anywhere she could hide if she ran away. Frustration mixed with curiosity and fear.

As she took a deep breath, she clasped Rayder's hand and stepped under the canopy. Suteran stepped in front and faced them. Yoanda moved to Xandra's left side and

the admiral to Rayder's right. Phili closed the door to the cabin and stood beside it like a sentinel.

### *Trapped.*

Rayder turned toward her until they faced each other. He clasped both her hands. A message warmed his eyes, one of admiration and lust mingled with sincere curiosity. Just for that moment, if no other, she was safe.

Suteras cleared his throat, and everyone looked at him. He opened a large book, many pages long, and started to read. "My friends, we are gathered here under the sight of Draconus, to bless a union between this man and woman. Our laws are sanctified by Draconus, who shares our world with other gods and other beliefs. Thousands of years ago, our planet came into being, created by Draconus. He rose from the terra in the form of the great dragons and with his fire-filled breath created all that we see and feel. We are one on Croan. One with the terra beneath us, one with the sky, one with all life. We begin this process at birth and with death we return to the terra. My friends, rejoice in the creation of life in the union of man and woman, in the bonding of male and female. In the bond of sex that creates the god force."

The words stirred Xandra more than she expected, and for a few moments she believed this ceremony truly meant

something to her and Rayder. His eyes, though dark, were warmed by that heated red glow. Within him she saw everything that made a man worthy. Fierce. Protective. Perhaps even a good man.

She blinked. He might be fierce and protective, but he'd shown a darker side, a side willing to be ruthless in pursuit of a goal. A man who shouldn't be admired. She'd allowed a ceremony connected with love to make her believe something that didn't exist in this man or in this union.

What about love? She couldn't help wonder if it existed inside him for any woman now or in the past.

*What does it matter? He doesn't love me.*

Suteras continued. "As we gather here to witness the bond between this man and woman, is there one here who would deny the sanctity and sincerity of their bond?"

It hung in the air. *Tell them this is a mistake. Be the one to say it's a lie of the first order. Do it.*

She glanced at Rayder, and his eyes met hers. Firmness lit his eyes from the inside out. He wouldn't say a thing to stop this marriage. Her stomach sank and within the beauty of the ceremony resided trepidation. But denial wouldn't form on her lips and the chance passed. What

difference would it make? Arguing with this situation wouldn't garner her any friends and certainly form more enemies. If she had to play along to secure her freedom later, so be it.

When it remained quiet, Suterus started again. "Within our uncertain world there are many challenges, but in the sanctity of a marriage before Draconus, there is no need for fear. We are all one, and the marriage between a man and woman, the sexual union between them, symbolizes that truth." He smiled at Xandra and Rayder. "Do you have a ring for the bride?"

*A ring?* Surprise held her immobile as Rayder reached in his right front pocket and withdrew a small red box.

"I have this ring for my bride." Rayder opened the box and lifted out the thick silver band. He stuffed the box back in his pocket and lifted Xandra's left hand and slipped it on her left ring finger.

"What say you, Rayder Tyrus?" Suterus asked.

When she caught Rayder's gaze again, something had changed. Certainly the red glow was there, but this was more. More intense, more animal. Undeniable. "With this ring, I vow my fidelity and trust in marriage." His voice shook slightly in a sign of vulnerability that amazed her. "I

vow that Xandra Shorene is my true mate for now and forever.”

She gasped as the ring encircled her finger with perfect fit. A large square stone, clear as water and catching light sparkled with what seemed a million prisms. She'd never seen anything more beautiful. Speechless, she peeled her gaze from the jewelry and caught Rayder's burning gaze. Red flamed in his gaze for a few moments then faded. He gathered her hands in his and pressed them so gently, so sincerely, she couldn't catch her breath. Warmth swept over her, but not like a fever. A headiness, a wishful feeling she couldn't dissolve or understand.

She couldn't look away from Rayder and the possessiveness she saw inside him only for her.

Suteras proceeded. “By all that is holy under Draconus, you are now joined in marriage. You may kiss the bride.”

## Chapter Seven

*You may kiss the bride.*

As Rayder stepped close and cupped her face gently in both hands, Xandra's heart pounded and her pulsed kicked up. Embarrassed that people watched an intimacy like this, she stayed rigid. She averted her eyes, knowing if she looked into his she'd find that fire again. She didn't know if she could stare into that flame and not be swept away in the conflagration. When his mouth touched hers, it was a tender touch that didn't demand. Warm and coaxing, his mouth teased and dissolved in a heartbeat.

Suteras cleared his throat, something he seemed to do an awful lot. "I introduce you formally as Rayder and Xandra Tyrus."

Shocked that her name had been changed, she frowned. That just wasn't done on Magonia. Women kept their last names, even though children used their father's last name. Before she could question it, Rayder took her

hand and lead her out of the canopy into the center of the room. The magic she'd felt standing under the canopy with him had diminished in an instant.

"Congratulations," the admiral said as he shook Rayder's hand.

Rayder kept a straight face and said nothing. Aramus frowned at him but spoke no rebuke. Instead, he turned to Xandra and lifted her left hand. "Congratulations to the new bride." He eyeballed the ring. "A most lovely present he's bestowed upon you. And valuable to from the looks of it." He pressed a swift, cold kiss to her fingers.

Her skin crawled as she withdrew her hand, wanting to immediately wash her skin. "Thank you."

She didn't want to thank him for being so crass about the ring, but what else could she do?

Yoanda smiled. "I'm pleased you're married and safe."

"Thank you," Xandra said automatically, finding the entire exchange awkward.

Phili stood near the door like a sentinel with boredom etched into her features. She approached and it was all Xandra could do not to run from the room.

Phili came to Rayder first, reached up and grabbed his head in both her palms. "Such a shame ladies will no longer have the pleasure of your flesh."

With a shameless smile, Phili drew his head down and planted a huge kiss on his lips. Xandra's blood came up, an unaccountable anger surging so high she almost reached out to yank the impertinent chit away from her husband. To his credit, Rayder grabbed Phili's wrists and pried loose.

He reached for Xandra's hand. "If you'd excuse us, we're eager to begin married life."

Phili, looking put out, stepped away as Rayder started for the door.

"Why, I never," Phili said in a bored tone. "He didn't even thank you for the hospitality."

"Shut up, Phili," the admiral said. "He's just hungry to bed his mate. It's natural."

Xandra hurried to keep up with Rayder's stride as they left the admiral's quarters and crossed the huge deck back toward Rayder's cabin. Men lined the deck, and she half expected them to jeer or cheer, but they stayed quiet. Most kept blank expressions and continued their work, but here and there she caught their quick glances as they leered.



Her stomach tossed and turned, and she almost felt ill. How humiliating to have them staring at her, but it could have worse.

Her foot caught on the hem of her dress and she tripped. As she gasped in surprise and started to fall, Rayder snatched her back and lifted her full into his arms.

She gasped again, totally surprised. “What—”

“Are you all right?” The soft concern in his eyes and voice as he held her sent a new, disturbing sensation into her belly. This one was hot and filled with pleasure.

“Yes.”

He didn’t reply, just walked swiftly toward the cabin.

“Is it really necessary to rush?”

“Yes. I won’t have these bastards staring at you any more than I can help.”

A smidgen of humor made it past her nervousness. “Ah, so you’re troubled for my modesty.”

He threw her a quick look as they approached the cabin. “Yes and no.”

His confusing agreement and contradiction kept her off guard until they reached the cabin and he set her down long enough to unlock the door. She stepped in ahead of him as new trepidation rose inside her. What would happen next? He didn't honestly expect sex right now, did he?

The click of the door shutting and locking gave her a voice. "Listen, Rayder, we don't have to—"

He moved so quickly she barely saw it. He buried his fingers in her hair, tilted her head and kissed her. His mouth ravaged hers with heady intensity, his tongue sinking deep and caressing hers with wild, luscious strokes. She moaned and arched into him, caught up in his sudden passion. Instinct flared, and she responded. Her tongue moved, tasted him with feral intent. His cock pressed solid against her belly and excitement fluttered through her stomach. Breathless, she flung her arms around his neck and dove into the sensations rocking her. He tore his mouth from hers and peeled her arms from around his neck.

"Wait." His chest rose and fell with heavy breaths, his eyes red and lips parted. "Not like this. I won't fuck you like a brute. Not your first time."

Amazed, she stared at him.

He stalked away, going to a small cabinet and opening it. He gathered two tankards and a large flask. While she

recovered her breath, her body still throbbing with glorious sensations, he uncorked the flask and poured an amber liquid into both tankards. He lifted one tankard to his mouth and drank a copious amount without stopping then poured more amber liquid within. A warmth spread over her she didn't understand as he walked toward her with both tankards in hand. His erection still pressed thick and long against his trousers, but she tried to avoid noticing it. That *wasn't* going to be easy to do.

As he handed her one tankard, he said, "To our marriage, however long it lasts."

"As long as it takes for me to return to Magonia."

"You aren't ever going back there."

The finality in his low voice shocked her. Anger followed quickly. "You won't command me like that. I won't allow it."

He laughed, soft and certain. "Oh? A few days from Magonia and already you're a true Dragonian woman. I like that."

She started to speak, but when he threw back his drink then wiped his mouth, she did the same. The fiery liquid burned her throat, but she barely choked on it.

Rayder's deep, hearty laugh caught her off guard. "You've had liquor before?"

"Do not be so surprised." She returned his smile. "I'm only twenty and three, but I've managed to sneak in a few drinks when my parents weren't looking." When his eyebrows lifted in disbelief, she jumped on it. "You doubt me?"

He laughed again, and the accepting quality of his chuckle made worries dissolve. "I suppose I've judged you unfairly, just as you've judged me."

Not sure she wanted to admit she could have been partially wrong about him, she asked. "How do you see me?"

"You've been sheltered and repressed. Given few options in life. Men have tried to control you and sometimes succeeded." His gaze glittered, but the red had disappeared. "You've been good about following the rules until recently. Something changed all that."

Afraid he could look inside her and somehow extract the truth, she frowned. "I believe in many of the things the Chronicles of Magon say."

He snorted softly. "Are you sure? Women are allowed to drink liquor?"

“No.”

“Yet here you are. Breaking the rules. How does that work? How can you believe in a book that is full of shite about a woman’s place?”

She’d never heard such passion in a man’s voice, particularly when it came to defending a woman. She certainly hadn’t expected it from him. “I’ve loosened my beliefs over the last year considerably, but that doesn’t mean I’ve abandoned all propriety.”

“Last night you allowed me to stroke you between the legs, to touch you where no man has ever touched you. To suck your nipple. Is that allowed in your Chronicles of Magon?”

Challenged, her blood heated and her face flamed.  
“No.”

“Then own up to it, my beauty.” His voice was liquid soft and rumbling deep. “You’re breaking the rules with me. What does that say about you?”

“That I’m...” Shame washed through her. “Sinful.”

“I think it says you’re learning the truth. That women are equal to men. That women deserve freedom and

happiness. On Dragonia, women have that.”

Astonished, her brows knitted as she thought about what he'd said. She held out the tankard. “I think I'll need another.” He grinned and returned to the table to pour. Curiosity turned her in another direction. “I thought the ceremony was to be on deck.”

“I told the admiral I wouldn't subject you to other men's stares. At first he balked, but he gave in soon enough.”

He came back with her tankard and this time she sipped the liquor and allowed the heat to flow downward slowly. Something that resembled admiration started inside her. “Thank you. I didn't expect...”

“You didn't expect me to care for your feelings.”

“No.”

He tossed back the reminder of his drink and returned to the cabinet where he set it down. “Don't admire me too much, Xandra. My feelings for you are temporary. Born of lust.”

He gripped the side of the cabinet with both hands, his knuckles showing white as he lowered his head and closed his eyes for a moment. He returned to her, his eyes flaming, his cock looking even harder and thicker. He took her

tankard from her and slid it onto a table nearby.

Anger flared under her skin at his words. She wanted to lash out. “How can you be a slave trader and believe about women what you just told me?”

He drew her into his arms. “Because I’m not the man you think I am. Let’s leave it at that. It’s safer.”

“For whom? You or me?”

He leaned nearer, his hands caressing up and down her back. “I’m not going to take you tonight. When and if you decide to give me your virginity, it has to be on your terms.”

His hands rucked up the back of her dress and cupped the globes of her ass. He squeezed and she gasped in surprise and arousal. Her palms spread over his chest, taking in the uncompromising hardness beneath her fingers. Thick desire swirled in her stomach—she recognized it from last night, the same slow and inevitable craving.

“What if I don’t ever want more...sex with you.”

He kissed her forehead then her nose then her mouth. His lips trailed to her ear where he swirled his tongue and caused a soft gasp to leave her throat. “I never said no sex. I just won’t fuck you.”

His harsh word, which she'd heard even in Magonia and knew what it meant, didn't offend her. No, it caused a new flame to burn low and catch fire between her legs. "I'm your wife. Aren't we supposed to have sex?"

His breath whispered over her earlobe. "Oh yeah. That's what everyone outside this cabin thinks we're going to do." Rayder pressed his hips to hers. "I want you. I've wanted you from the first moment I saw you. What I feel for you isn't sweet or pretty or neat. It's hot. It's dirty. It's the most animal feeling I've ever had. I've never wanted to fuck a woman more than I want to fuck you. And I'm afraid of that."

"Why?"

"Because it's obsessing me. Stalking me like a *bastia* in the jungle."

"Bastia?"

"A nasty lizard several yards long. Has a horrible bite."

She shivered, but not from fear as his lips traveled over her neck with soft attention. "I'm like a lizard? How flattering." He slapped her butt and she yelped in surprise at the small sting. "What are you—"



“You’re mine.” His statement was rough and uncompromising.

“What?”

“Now that we’re married, no man would dare touch you or harm you. He knows if he did I have license to kill him.”

A little perturbed, she came back with, “How barbaric. I thought you said women in Dragonia are free.”

“They’re free. You don’t understand my meaning. The people on this ship claim to be Dragonian, but they don’t follow the general rules of society.”

She wrinkled her nose. “Obviously not.”

“Women are precious in Dragonia. The people are going sterile and few have babies any longer. That’s one of the reasons why Drakus Fina buys slaves from Magonia and gives them to Dragonian men. He believes that if we breed with Magonian women, we’ll repopulate our continent again.”

Shocked, she asked, “Do you believe that?”

“I think it makes sense. Our continent and yours have been too isolated from each other for many hundreds of years. Perhaps we need to mix our bloods.”

“So you condone this Drakus Fina, whoever he is, taking women as slaves?”

Conflict simmered in his eyes, but his desire for her was overwhelming it. “I’m trying to explain while you’ll need to act a part while on this ship. Admiral Aramus isn’t like most Dragonian men. He’s like Drakus Fina and has little or no regard for women as equals. As my wife, you’ll have less trouble from him. Don’t let him know what you really think and feel. Be subservient. Keep your mouth shut around him. Do as I say.” He slipped his hand behind her neck and held her steady, eyes fierce and hot. “If he thinks at any time you’re not subservient enough, he may try to have you thrown overboard or instantly sold. Perhaps even sold to someone as odious as Farcam. He won’t care that you’re my wife if you piss him off enough.”

Silence drowned the room as she shivered at the implication. Emotions boiled up inside her. Fear. Defiance. Mostly defiance. “But—”

He smothered her protest with a kiss, cupped her ass and dipped down to line up his cock with her pussy. She groaned as he lifted and instinctively her legs wrapped around his waist. His cock rubbed and stroked along her folds as he walked to the bed and released her.

“Sit on the edge of the bed,” he said.

“Why?”

“Wait and see.”

He reached down, removed her shoes and tossed them aside. Before she could muster one word he snatched her dress up over her head and off. She was naked just that quickly. A flush covered her body as he examined her with flaming eyes. He'd take her now. He seemed too aroused to do otherwise, and she realized that she didn't care.

Yes, she did. This beast of a man, a slave trader, did things to her she couldn't comprehend. She'd heard of women falling to urges forbidden in the Chronicles of Magon. Yet Ketera had explained to her that on Dragonia these thoughts and inclinations were even encouraged. The words of the wedding ceremony helped confirm that. And Daryk Ones, like this man, well, that was something all together different. She didn't know if Daryk Ones were different from other men on Dragonia and Magon. Perhaps now she'd find out.

His gaze devoured her, appreciation more than evident. “Lie back.”

She did as he asked, quivering with an excitement that held her silent. She'd heard whispers, hush-hush talk of a

woman's moment when she learned the biggest mystery of all. Perhaps tonight she'd know the answer. His eyes burned that red, and she had to know why.

"Why?" She took a deep breath. "Why are your eyes like that? What are you?"

He didn't growl or grow angry. Instead his smile came slowly and seductively. "I'm a Daryk One. And my blood runs hot for sex. When I meet the woman who is my mate, she is mine. My body is hers to cherish. To take. To enjoy. I'm hers. My eyes burn this way in battle or passion. It's a part of my blood and can't be removed."

"Forever?" It couldn't be. She didn't love him and he didn't love her. "Love doesn't exist between a man and woman unless it's a union proclaimed by the will of Magon. My religion says—"

"Bugger your religion *and* mine," he said with passion. "I'm not a religious man and never have been. What I feel with you can only be one thing. I didn't want it to be, but it is. Mating is a primal desire, declared by nature, not some god that humans have designed for purposes of control and greed. We are the gods, my beauty. Only us."

*Blaspheme.* "Impossible."

"Why?" He hovered over her, his eyes burning so red

now she couldn't avoid looking at them. "Why is it impossible? Think for yourself and decide if what you feel is the will of a god or your own desires."

"I don't..." Desire did ride upon her, but if she let go, if she gave in to what he said, then where was her willpower? How did she ever return to herself if he possessed her? "You cannot expect me to understand this mating the way you do. I'm Magonian. It will take time. Time I'm not sure I want to take."

A smile laced with sarcasm touched his mouth. "Where can you go? If you try to leave this ship, I will bring you back. If you escaped me, Dragonia is a huge country. Everywhere there is danger. Poisonous animals, ravenous dragons and lawless men who don't care if they treat you with respect and unharmed. Even if none of those things killed you, the jungle or the desert or the ice would. You wouldn't survive without me, Xandra. Not one day."

His arrogance fired her blood. She stared him down. She was naked, but she wasn't defenseless. "That, as you've said before, is bollocks."

He smiled, but humor never reached his eyes. "You don't understand. Even if I have to let you go eventually, you're still my mate. I would do anything for you. Anything to protect you. Once a Daryk One finds his true mate, it cannot

be any other way. When we went through the ceremony, that's when I realized my attraction to you was more than surface." His voice held a thickness, a drugging need for her. "Your body is mine, your desire is mine and you can't escape it."

She never expected a man this rough-looking would ever speak so passionately and with undeniable conviction. She'd expected uncouth. Mean. Brutal even.

*Never this... Oh never this...*

Everything within her responded, as if he'd put some spell upon her she couldn't escape. Perhaps she should have run and been frightened, but it had the opposite effect. If she was to know slavery soon, she wanted this small moment in time, filled with the extraordinary, with feelings and touch.

"Oh," was all she managed, breathless as she watched him crawl up her body, bracketing her hips with his thighs.

He settled beside her, his big body touching her from calf to chest. He hadn't taken off a piece of his clothing, and being so naked before him made her feel vulnerable in an entirely new way.

He encircled one breast in his right hand then drew his thumb and forefinger together to lightly pinch and tweak the

already hard nipple. "Beautiful. By the god, you are beautiful."

Xandra couldn't hold back the moan as pleasure flew from her sensitive nipple straight to between her legs and tingled. She closed her eyes as she trembled. Taris had fumbled with her breasts, clumsy and harsh. This was so different. With Taris they'd had all their clothes on and he'd caressed her over her garments.

Rayder dipped his head and flicked with his tongue, licked the aroused nipple and teased it with brush after brush of wet, hot attention. She started to writhe under the intimate touch, the ache between her thighs growing higher. Oh, if she could only...

She didn't know what.

He sucked and licked, making circles around her nipple then moving to the other breast. As he tortured her flesh with his tongue, he continued the madness by plucking at the nipple he'd just feasted upon. Warm licks brought her to the edge of an abyss. He wouldn't stop, and she couldn't beg because she didn't know what she wanted. Perhaps more of what she'd experienced last night. Could his suckling bring her to the edge of sexual fulfillment again? A moment later, he stopped playing with her breasts and moved downward, sprinkling her belly with tender kisses

until he slid off the bed to kneel between her thighs.

“What are you doing?” she asked, half excited, half-frightened.

“Bringing you to fulfillment. As I did last night.” She allowed him to part her thighs then slip his hands beneath her knees. She propped up on her elbows.

She trembled as he placed her feet on the bed. She was open to him in every way, and while she felt indecent and sinful, the sensation tore away barriers. He kept his eyes on hers until the last moment when his mouth touched her intimately.



## Chapter Eight

“Wait,” Xandra said, shocked. “What are you doing?”

“I’m going to lick your sweet pussy.”

She blushed. “Why?”

“Because it will feel good for both of us. I’m going to thrust my fingers inside you.” His eyes burned as he looked up at her. “I’ll flick my tongue over your sweet spot until you explode under my mouth.”

“Oh.”

Her breathless declaration made him smile. “Now lie back and close your eyes.”

“But—”

“Do it.”

The slight command in his voice made her want to pop

him one, but she did as told.

Xandra's eyes closed and she threw back her head at the sharply thrilling sensation of his tongue lapping at her folds. She was wet, so wet, and he tasted, made a meal of her. Her heartbeat quickened and she fell back on the bed. His tongue soothed a path over each fold, and the tingle it left behind with each stroke made her moan softly. His tongue pushed inside her and shock made her rise up on her elbows again. But that made it worse—he stopped long enough to spear her with those brilliant eyes blazing with his desire and the sharp need inside her increased. Watching his mouth settle between her legs, watching him devour her with steady licks made her stomach contract and breath catch. A heat wave throbbed low in her belly, making her ache for the sexual fulfillment she'd experienced before. She lay back on the bed, unable to stop the groans that fell from her lips. His tongue slipped inside her as his thumb found her tingling bud and brushed it with gentle touches. Her hips twitched and rose against his insistent stimulation. As he had her mouth, his tongue speared into her with sensual strokes.

She clutched at the bedclothes, her breath strangling in her throat. "Please. Please."

Rayder hummed, and the vibration tickled and teased unmercifully. She couldn't take it and the last thing she

wanted was to lose control. She held back.

“Come on, my beauty,” he whispered against her flesh, hot breath adding to the flames licking her, burning her alive. “Come for me.”

One finger slipped into her core and a tiny pinch made her gasp. Sliding deep, his touch rubbed again and again until the stimulation made her wriggle. It felt so good, but it wasn't enough. She needed... She needed something. By all that was holy, she couldn't take it. The sensation was too much, too strong. This was even more powerful than the beautiful ecstasy he'd given her before.

He added a second finger and the thickness increased her excitement. Involuntarily she lifted her hips, trying to escape the stimulation as much as welcome it. Faster he rubbed. The slick friction along her sensitive walls beyond anything she could have imagined. His tongue licked her clit, lapping until she gasped for breath and groaned in pure ecstasy. Like the wave that had taken her ship under, his talented tongue and fingers ensured she couldn't escape. Her heart pounded until she knew it would explode. She couldn't fight it anymore and allowed her mind to flow with the bliss and find this treacherous experience at least one more time. She exploded against his tongue, writhing under his touch as the pleasure flared across her entire body. Crying out, she tumbled into the wild splendor, whimpering

and gasping. Her pussy contracted over his fingers, and he continued the back and forth motion, slowly drawing out more pleasure. He removed his fingers from her core even as she wanted to keep him inside.

With a wicked smile, he eased his middle finger deep into her backside.

Surprise jolted her, as well as shock. "What are you doing?"

"Creating another pleasure. There's more where that came from."

She groaned. "More? But this is so...so..."

A wicked gleam entered his eyes, barely overriding the red passion. "Forbidden?"

"Yes." Forbidden was an understatement. She couldn't believe he'd touched her this way.

"Trust me."

She went silent, astonished by his unexpected touch and the joy that danced through her when he moved his finger and flicked his tongue over her pussy. He stuck his tongue inside her, and she couldn't hold back the pleasure. Hot, slick craving built deep to her womb and her entire

womanhood tingled. She closed her eyes and allowed the bliss to ride her hard, take her up and throw her to the wind.

She whispered, "Yes. Yes."

Rayder didn't relent as he fastened his mouth over her clit and suckled. He eased her into his touch as he teased her backside with slow, deep strokes until the pleasure soaring inside her grew to a firestorm. Before long the pleasure rose so high it threatened to burst once more. One last thrust up her backside and a quick flick over her clit, and she writhed in ecstasy. Groaning and panting, she shook from within.

As she lay still, eyes closed and heart pounding, he left the bed. She heard him washing up, the water splashing. Before long he returned to the bed, and when she opened her eyes, a blush heated her face.

"Are you embarrassed?" he asked.

"Of course. I mean... What we just did..."

"Was as natural as the two moons in our sky."

Boldness came to her in a flash, as blinding as the lightning that had crashed and threatened yesterday. "You said there is more?"

He nodded, those red eyes burning with an insistent need. "Indeed. You can ease my need."

She glanced down at his cock, pressing so hard against his trousers, she wondered if he felt pain. Rayder didn't take his tunic off, but he'd taken off the belt that held his sword and dagger a long time ago. He stood, unbuttoned his trousers and eased open the front. His manhood sprang out, released from its prison, and she drew in a quick breath. Amazement, curiosity and a strong return of arousal swirled in her stomach as she stared. Though she'd seen his cock before, he was more excited in his passion than before. His cock stood firm, high and thick. The power in his hardness, in this sexual muscle stirred the fire still simmering within her. When her gaze snagged his, fear disappeared. Understanding and tenderness lay there, even in the harsh reality of his sexual desires, in the animalistic needs he'd shown. She wanted to know more about him, about sex. He stood in front of her, his cock close.

Rayder circled his cock with one big hand and stroked. "Do you want to touch me like this?"

When her answer came, it was soft. "Yes."

She waited, and a moment later took the plunge. "Show me what to do."

He drew her hand toward him, folded her palm around the thickness. "Stroke it."

She grasped his flesh, moved with the motion he showed her, drawing it up and down. He threw back his head and moaned, his breathing coming harder and harder. Within a few moments he released her hand, and Xandra kept the pace, loving how his flesh grew more rigid the longer she pumped him. A droplet of moisture came from the tip.

"Lick me," he gasped the words, eyes blazing into hers. "Suck it."

Shocked, she halted the pumping.

He growled softly, his chest rising and falling swiftly as if he'd run miles. "Please. Or I'll have to finish it myself."

Taken aback by the suggestion but caught up in a desire to give him what he'd given her, she complied. She held his cock then leaned forward and licked the tip where the tiny bit of fluid glazed the tip. It was salty, his scent musky. He gasped then gasped again when she repeated the action. Over and over she swirled her tongue along the tip, taking no particular direction other than instinct. Following that instinct, she took his cock in her mouth and did as he'd suggested. She sucked him, used her tongue, pumped with her hand until the motion was effortless and

natural. Excitement danced inside her where she would have expected repulsion.

“Wait!” Rayder was gasping. “I’ll come in your mouth if you keep that up. I don’t know if you’re ready for that yet. I have another idea. Lie back.”

She did as he suggested, sliding up toward the head of the bed. He stripped off his boots then his trousers then pulled his tunic over his head. Standing there naked, he made an impressive sight. She gawked. How could she not? Yes, she’d seen him naked before, but somehow this time it meant even more. If there were gods, this man stood among them as a remarkable one.

As he crawled onto the bed, she asked, “I thought we weren’t having complete sex.”

“We aren’t. But close to it. You tempt me too much.”

He spread her legs, wedged his hips between hers and propped on his forearms. His cock touched her pussy, and she moaned at the sensation.

“What are we doing?” she asked.

“Close your eyes and feel.”

She did and he kissed her. His tongue took her with



heated thrusts. His cock slid over her pussy, teasing the wet folds and over her clit. She gasped into his mouth, but his kisses muffled her exclamation. Moaning and writhing, she lifted her hips and found a rhythm as he stroked her. She gripped his shoulders as he moved her faster, harder, bringing her quickly to the top until she couldn't take anymore. Her pussy contracted and released as she climaxed. She screamed, a high, loud call of mind-splintering ecstasy. With a guttural roar, he stiffened and shuddered. White liquid spurted from his cock in heavy streams and splattered on her stomach.

He hovered over her for a considerable time, and she opened her eyes. His eyes were still closed, but the utter bliss on his face filled her with awe.

When Rayder looked at her, his eyes had returned to their dark brown mysteriousness.

"The red is gone," she said quietly.

"Because the fire is extinguished. For now."

He rolled away from her and left the bed. Bereft, she wondered if the bliss she'd experienced would ever happen again. He entered the cleaning room and returned a moment later with a wet cloth for her. When she took it, he returned to the cleaning room and closed the door. Her mind awl, a thousand sensations bouncing around in her

mind, she cleaned herself. After he returned, she went naked into the small room that served as a special place to take care of personal needs, including another washbasin and a strange device that trickled water like a cascade. She took her time, and when she returned refreshed, he was in bed under the covers.

“You’re wearing clothes,” she said, surprised.

“To prevent temptation.” He put his hands behind his head and watched her approach with obvious appreciation for her nakedness. “But you may sleep naked if you wish.”

Still shaken by her experiences with him, still filled with questions, she shook her head. “I need time to think.”

He smiled, and wickedness sparkled in his eyes. “You are the most cerebral woman I know.”

She dressed quickly in the cool room. “I should hardly think so. What about the other women on the ship?”

He held his hand out. “Climb into bed and I’ll keep you warm. You need some rest.”

She did as he asked, and when her head lay on his chest and his arms held her tight, the warmth of his embrace eased her into a sleepy state. “It’s only morning and we’re lying abed.”

“People expect us to.”

“You’ve never impressed me as a man who does much because it’s expected.”

He snorted. “You’d be surprised.”

“Such as?”

“Never mind.”

Exasperated, she sighed and then couldn’t suppress a yawn. “You never answered my question. What about the other women? Yoanda? Phili? They aren’t cerebral women?”

“I don’t know how intelligent they are. Best stay away from Phili.”

“No need to worry. I can tell she can’t stand me.”

“She’s an imbecile if she doesn’t like you.”

His compliment took her almost as much by surprise as the wild acts they’d just performed. “Sometimes I’m sure *you* don’t like me.”

“I wouldn’t have made love to you if I didn’t like you.”

“You don’t have women just to…”

“Have them? Yes, my needs are strong, but I can resist. If I’m aroused after I fight, I just take my cock in hand and take care of my own needs.”

She flushed. “Oh.”

He hugged her close and rubbed her arms, breathing in deeply. “At least I could resist until I met you. With you…”

“Yes?”

“You’re my mate, and that means I can never have another woman.”

Startled, she leaned up on one elbow and dared stare at him. “Never?”

It was his turn to yawn, and his warm palms moved up and down her back and over her arms. “It’s abhorrent to me.”

Amazed, she sank back into his arms. Guilt also surfaced from an unknown place. Never have another woman? She didn’t know what to think about that. When she left him to return to Magonia, he would never be with another woman. But she would leave him. She must.

"I have no idea how to return to my previous state of mind," she said.

He chuckled, and the sound rumbled under her cheek. She adored the feeling, the sense of protection and comfort and complete safety with him holding her. "Why do you have to return to your previous state? Every moment of every day we're altered by our experiences. By our desires."

She smoothed her palm over his chest, continuing to marvel at his strength. "This experience isn't what I expected."

"Oh? What did you expect?"

"Pain. Disgust. Something...awful."

He sighed. "We haven't had full sex yet. You're no longer a virgin in one sense."

She pulled out of his arms and sat up. "Why?"

"When I had my fingers inside you, I broke your virginal seal."

"Oh." She rubbed her hands together. "The little pain I felt."

“But it’s gone now. You can have sex without pain. No matter what your scribes or parents or Chronicles of Magon say.”

Mockery in his voice made her rebel. The thought of her parents filled her with emotions too sharp and haunting. She turned a scornful look on him.

“What’s wrong now?” he asked.

She turned away from him, lay on her side and pulled the covers to her chin. “You expect me to simply take your derision as if it were all true?”

He sighed, the sound unusually weary. “I spend so much time with thieves and brigands I sometimes forget a woman needs a finer touch.”

Disgruntled, she kept her back to him and clutched her pillow. “I don’t need a finer touch. I need honesty without ugliness and respect as a human. All Magonians are not the same, and no matter what you may have heard, you don’t know everything about our continent. There are many beautiful things about Magonia.”

He turned on his side as well, but didn’t touch her. He stayed so silent for so long, she thought maybe he’d fallen asleep. “You’re right.”

The man never ceased to surprise her. "I'm right?"

He laughed. "I've never been to Magonia." His fingers tangled in her hair gently, like a caress. "Perhaps you'll show it to me someday."

"No, I wouldn't. That could never be."

"It will be."

The conviction in his voice sent her hackles up. She wanted to refute him, to argue with him and realized she'd never spoke with such challenge to any man before she met Rayder Tyrus. And each time she did, her connection to him appeared to grow deeper and stronger. Despite what she'd experienced in his arms, the amazing ecstasy she'd felt, she couldn't remain his wife. He'd never agree to her returning to Magonia without him. And she couldn't live knowing that Taris Elian had gotten away with destroying her family.

But he was dead now and that soothed some of her desire for revenge.

Rayder's assertion he couldn't have another woman or that he'd see Magonia with her kept her mind awash in uncertainties. When she reached Dragonia, she would escape him. Besides, she could never prove a good wife to Rayder even if she wished to. He wanted children to

repopulate Dragonia.

She could never give him children.



## Chapter Nine

As Rayder and Xandra stepped outside the cabin later that day into the clear sky and bright sun, Xandra surveyed the immediate area with suspicion. Several men worked on the deck. The work they did meant little to her—she'd never learned much about ships. Now was her opportunity.

Two of the men looked her way, and the interest in their eyes made her flinch.

“Take my arm.” Rayder offered her his arm and she obliged him.

At that moment she understood that she'd lied to herself. She feared exploring the ship after the ceremony and the wondrous experience of lovemaking. People would look at her differently now, knowing that Rayder had taken her. Holding his arm gave her security, and she didn't like that idea. Depending entirely on this man didn't sit well with her on so many levels. If she was to escape, she couldn't rely on him.

His forearm bunched a little as she touched him, and she smiled. She recognized how she'd affected him and power filled her. Power over a man was something she'd never experienced before or imagined that she ever would. Uncertainty still filled her thoughts around him. He'd been gentle with her, but she sensed his ruthlessness.

This man could be cruel when required. She never wanted to incur his wrath, for she knew it would be a terrible thing to behold.

Her fingers slid from his forearm to biceps, and when his muscle bunched, the strength under her touch sent wild thrills through her. If nothing else, last night had proven she must be on guard against further seduction. What happened had torn her off her foundation and shown her something about herself she'd never known existed. Shaking off the thought of physical pleasures, she walked with him, and he provided details on the ship.

"We arrived in Dragonia a few minutes ago," he said, even though she'd recognized the sensation of the ship coming into a dock. "We'll head to the other side of the ship so you can see."

Excitement curled in her belly. Despite her fear of Dragonia and what may lie ahead, part of her wanted this experience with a force that refused denial. "What part of

Dragonia?”

“Closest to Grimnald Castle. We’re several miles from it, but it’s the closest civilization.”

“Are you from this castle?”

“No. I was born and raised in Felican Castle, which is near the border between the Ithaycan desert and the Tarrian jungle.”

“There aren’t any castles in Magonia. I’d like to see one.” They didn’t move from their place on the deck, and she turned toward him with curiosity. “Is it safe to come to shore here? Won’t the authorities take the ship?”

He laughed softly, the sound more deadly than amused. “They wouldn’t dare. There’s one thing about this ship you have to know, Xandra. We do what we want when we want, and the Daryk Ones haven’t been able to stop us. With Drakus Fina on our side, we’re powerful.”

Disconcerted, she tightened her grip on his arm and they started walking. Fear started a slow and creeping rise inside her. So many new things had happened, and her situation seemed perilous. She had to stay strong if she wanted to survive.

From this point forward she’d plan her escape. “How

long will we dock here?"

"I don't know. Perhaps a day or two. It depends on several factors." He gestured to the sails on the ship, obviously wanted to turn the discussion in a totally different direction. "Come, let me show you around. This ship is heavily gunned and a first-rate."

"First-rate?"

"It has over one hundred guns."

He gestured as they walked, using quite a few words to describe the ship that meant nothing to her. Mizzen mast, poop rail, topmast, futlock shroud, spritsail, outer jib and inner jib, fore topsail and main topgallant sail. The list went on. Beyond the technicalities, she admired the brutal beauty of the *Beast*. She'd never imagined a ship this large before. The passenger ship was five times smaller than the slave ship, and that said a lot—the *Hydrasoseles* had dwarfed most others at the dock. This colossal craft dominated the water, and the way it handled a storm proved its worth. The open gallery and balcony and elaborate woodcarving gave the ship a splendor she admired.

They stopped near the admiral's cabin above the upper gallery. "I've never seen anything like this ship before."

“There’s only one of us. We’re the largest ship sailing in the ocean right now.”

Right then the admiral’s cabin door opened and Aramus emerged. Tension snaked up her back at the sight of him.

“My lady,” Admiral Aramus said as he took a formal bow. “Tyrus.”

Today Aramus wore a scruffy shirt with stained lace on the yellow front. Wrinkled trousers and a bleary expression caught her attention.

Aramus’ bored expression slid over her chest. The cretin couldn’t get enough of her breasts, it seemed. “I take it married life agrees with you.”

“Of course it does,” Rayder said before she could respond.

From behind him, Yoanda exited the admiral’s cabin. Her right eye was black and blue.

“What happened, Yoanda?” Xandra asked without thinking.

Yoanda smiled, but her eyes swam with tears. “Nothing. I tripped and fell into a table.”

Phili came out behind her, a brilliant red dress making her as striking as a bird. "She's clumsy. Always has been."

Tension tightened the muscles in Xandra's back.

"Wife, shall we see Dragonia?" Rayder asked.

Excitement made her eager. She would ignore Phili in favor of seeing Dragonia. They left the others behind. After what seemed forever walking to the front of the ship past Aramus' quarters, they reached the chest-high wood railing. Her mouth popped open at the same time her eyes widened.

A wide, blinding-white sand beach stretched out before them. "How beautiful. I've never seen sand this pristine before."

Rayder smiled. "Everything about our land is beautiful and awful. We're a study in contrasts."

Beyond the beach, at least fifty yards away, lay a thick jungle. From that jungle came strange animal screams and twitters from amazing beasts she couldn't imagine. The air even seemed different here, a thickness in the humidity that made breathing more problematic. She drew in a deep breath.

“You’ll get used to the air. It takes time.” As her hand clutched his biceps, Rayder pressed her hand.

She sensed his gaze upon her and looked at him. “What is it?”

“I can almost read your mind. Whatever you do, do not venture onto this land without me. It’s not safe.”

Somewhat affronted, she sniffed. “And this ship is?”

“Yes, in comparison to the jungle. There are dangers you cannot imagine. Animals that would consume you. Poisonous insects, men who are ruthless.”

“As you’ve told me already.” She believed him, and she’d tell him what he wanted to hear. “All right.”

The admiral walked up behind them. “Better you listen to your husband, Mrs. Tyrus. He knows of what he speaks.”

She saw a muscle twitch in Rayder’s jaw and his eyes hardened to dark pools just before he turned to the admiral.

Before Rayder could reply, the admiral placed his hands on his hips and spoke. “Rayder, today you take a contingency of men ashore for supplies and to speak with Drakus Fina. Make provisions for your woman’s safety, if you will. Phili would be happy to entertain her if need be.”

Rayder nodded with a slight blow. "As you will it, Admiral."

The admiral left, and Xandra made an impulsive decision. Xandra spoke quickly and softly. "I'd rather spend my time helping the slave women on this ship than spend one moment in company with Phili."

He released her but stood close enough their voices couldn't be heard by men passing by. "If the admiral wants you to spend time with Phili, you will. I agreed to it just now."

Annoyed, she sighed. "Fine. Perhaps she can take me to the slaves."

"How would you propose to help the slaves?"

"I'd like to tour belowdecks and see how these women are kept. I'd like to bring them food and drink."

"They are fed. I see to it they are well-kept, despite what you might believe."

"A dead slave would be no good to you."

"Yes."

"Still, I'd like to see them."



He pondered a good long time. "I'll give you more food and water since we're going ashore for more supplies, and you can take it to the women."

Surprised that he'd agreed, she smiled and touched his forearm. "For a slaver, you are sometimes biddable."

His eyes heated, glowing red for a second. "Never tell anyone that. I have a dastardly reputation to uphold. And I'm not as kind as you might think, Xandra. Test me in any way, and you'll discover how harsh I can be."

Startled by his change, she kept her disappointment to herself. She couldn't afford to think of this man as anything but a means to an end. Just as Yoanda had said, Rayder was her safe passage. Yoanda believed there was no escape. Xandra refused to believe a chance wouldn't come.

Her hand slid away from the strength in his arm. "Show me the slaves."

Rayder eased closer, his voice a low rumble. "If I do, you must promise me to take my dagger for protection. I'll give you the belt and sheath. You must keep it close to your body and never allow anyone else to touch it."

She smiled. "Why? Is it magic?"

His expression went grim. "Of course not. This is serious business. It's for your protection should anyone attempt to harm you. And I mean anyone, even the admiral."

"You think he would try to harm me?"

"I'd never put it past the man." Rayder drew her against him, shielding her against him, and he whispered low and deep into her ear. "Do nothing that would bring attention to yourself or you may pay the consequences."

Shivers crossed her body, half from fear. Hard muscle cradled her, sent wild stirrings deep into her loins and resurrected memories of the pleasure she'd found under his talented hands and lips. "Of course. I'm always careful."

He drew back just enough to stare into her eyes. "Why don't I believe that?"

"I don't know. Have you known many women who aren't careful?"

He frowned. "My sister was wild and free, and lost her life because of it."

She sensed there must be more to this story than he'd told her. "Well, I'm not like your sister."

"That is for certain." He released her quickly. "Come. I

will help you gather supplies.”

And he led her away from the intoxicating view of Dragonia.

\* \* \* \* \*

Phili didn't help when Xandra walked along the deck with two cloth sacks filled to the brim with soap and fresh linens for the beds and bread and fruits. Instead, Phili strode as if she owned the ship. None of this surprised Xandra, but it did perturb her.

Wind tossed Xandra's hair about her head, and she wished she'd tied it back. The day had turned crisp, not as warm as she would have expected near the jungle. Clouds already brewed on the horizon and heralded a brand new storm.

As Phili lead her to a door near the center of the ship, Xandra remembered Rayder's request that she take his dagger. He'd given her one of his belts, which now hung a little low on her hips. It held the sheath with the dagger though, and a sensation of safety surrounded her. At the same time, she noted the furtive attention the sailors gave her, as if they expected Rayder to return at any time and harm them if they even dared look her way. Perhaps there was a slight advantage to being his wife, for however short

a time that was. Even as she walked along the deck, she found herself distracted by the thought of him. Just before he'd left the cabin, she almost...almost told him to be careful when he stepped foot off the ship. But no, that wouldn't have been wise. He'd been prickly, his mouth firm and implacable and his mood dark.

Disconcerted that she'd considered saying such a thing, she'd managed to hold back. When Phili came to collect her, Xandra was still thinking about Rayder.

About his smile. The thick length of his midnight hair, the strength rippling in his powerful body. About his frown. By the god, even his glower held a sensual, strange effect upon her that created fluttering sensations in her stomach and made her long for sex with him. Everything to do with the man caused her great confusion. She shook off her obsessive thoughts and paid strict attention to her surroundings. Soon she would have to leave Rayder behind and wouldn't think of him again.

Her actions recently, before she ever left Magonia, would assure that.

Phili stopped at the door and hair tossed in a tangle around her head, giving her the appearance of a vengeful goddess with harm in mind. Phili extracted a large metal ring that held dozens of keys.

“You are the queen of keys?” Xandra asked, wanting to keep conversation light.

Phili stuffed one key in the lock and opened the rickety wooden door. “Better I am than Karman’s wife.”

Interesting how the admiral’s concubine used the admiral’s first name. “Why is that?”

Phili stopped on the threshold and sent her a withering glance. “Because she is incompetent and stupid.”

“Aren’t you being harsh on her? She seems gentle and kind.”

Phili laughed, the sound filled with contempt. “Once you’ve known her longer, you’ll change your mind. This way. If the admiral sees us tarrying about, he’ll have my ass.” She laughed. “Of course, I don’t mind when he has my ass.”

Blindsided by the woman’s statement, Xandra said nothing. But Phili must have caught Xandra’s startled expression. “Oh, forgive me. You’re a Magonian through and through with strange religious inhibitions. Rayder hasn’t taken you that way, has he?”

Irritation straightened Xandra’s spine. She didn’t know what Phili was talking about but she didn’t plan to show it. “That isn’t any of your business.”

Phili's grin lacked mirth and went straight for condescending. "Oh, I see. You don't know what I mean. It's when a man fucks you in the ass. Dragonian men love it. Don't worry, Rayder may get around to doing it to you some day. Then again, maybe he doesn't find you attractive enough. If he doesn't, I'm sure I can help him. I've helped him before."

Phili's talk perturbed Xandra and she wanted to slap the woman. Instead she pretended she could care less.

"Just as you help the admiral when Yoanda tires of the admiral?" Xandra asked calmly.

Derision filled the other woman's eyes. "You have it wrong. Yoanda never gives sex to the admiral unless he takes it from her. Dragonian men are all dragon dung. But they are necessary and serve their uses. You and I should have a meal together someday, Xandra. I think I could help you."

Why did Yoanda and Phili seem so intent on helping her? While she believed Yoanda wanted to help, she knew she couldn't trust Phili.

Irritation crawled up Xandra's spine and refused to disappear. "Why would I need your help?"

Phili shrugged, and another blast of wind made the door creak on its hinges. "Of course you do. You're clearly an innocent in the ways of men. You need someone to explain things to you."

Xandra didn't want to hear anymore. "Rayder showed me everything I need to know."

He hadn't, but Xandra certainly wouldn't tell this woman.

Phili laughed, the sound overflowing with skepticism. "If you say so." She pushed the door the open and gestured at Xandra to enter. "After you."

Xandra stepped inside onto a small landing. Light barely shown at the bottom of the steep staircase that went straight downward. Sobbing came to Xandra's ears, and she frowned. By the god, what was happening down there?

Rain started to splatter against them, driving from the clouds at an angle as the rapidly-building storm headed their way.

"Go on," Phili said, crowding behind her as she closed the door. "We'll get wet."

Xandra didn't move, the confines of the narrow passage pressing in upon her. It took all her willpower to descend, taking each narrow step with slow deliberation.

Xandra wasn't sure why this bothered her so much. After all, she had lived in an underground dwelling with her parents to avoid the blazing daytime heat in Magonia. She calmed her racing heart with a deep breath. When they reached the bottom, Xandra could only stare at the picture before her.

The room before her was wide and quite long, a sizeable area in which to live and sleep. Six beds lined one wall and another six lined the opposite side, making it even for the dozen women who occupied the windowless room. Candles flickered in various sconces. A fire hazard, no doubt. Water jugs and tankards sat on one unbalanced table at the far end of the rectangle. Some of the women cleaned a long table that ran along the wall at one end of the room. Perhaps a meal had just culminated. All the women stopped and stared. She took in their appearance quickly. They looked to be somewhere between twenty to thirty years of age, fine of face or plain and with slim to plump bodies. They didn't smell or look starved and beaten as she'd expected. Instead they looked as content as they could be.

Pity entered one young woman's face. "Are you all right, lovey?"

Xandra broke her silence. "Yes, thank you." She sat the sacks on the floor and placed the linens on top. "I'm very



well. I brought you food, extra water and fresh linens for your beds.”

One of the younger women broke from the group and approached. She smiled at Phili with a wickedness that implied they were in cahoots. “You’ve brought us another one?”

“For the time being.” Phili sighed as if she was tired and disgusted. “She is Rayder Tyrus’ wife. She is here to keep other men from grabbing her and fucking her.”

“Here now. None of that talk in here. We are Magon-fearing women,” one of the oldest women said. She had short black hair and piercing green eyes. “We’ll see to her.”

Phili grunted. “Show her the ropes. Rayder may get tired of her and sell her.”

The woman with black hair stepped forward. Despite the sweat gleaming on her face—it was far too warm down here—the woman had a regal profile and an air of dignity.

Xandra found her voice. “I’m Magonian.”

“We are all from Magonia,” the dark-haired woman said.

The dark-haired woman was thin with circles under her

green eyes. She stepped closer. She was taller than Xandra, at least six feet.

“If you’re not a slave, why are you here?” the dark haired-woman asked.

Xandra pointed to the two sacks she’d placed on the floor. “As I said, I brought supplies. A gift from me and my husband.”

The other women gasped softly and moved nearer, their eyes pinned on the supplies.

Xandra smiled then laughed. “Help yourselves to the provisions.”

Smiling and with a few laughs, they dug into the supplies with obvious relish. Gratified, she couldn’t banish her smile. At least she’d given these women what little she could.

One petite blonde with dirt smudges on her left cheek frowned. “You married Rayder?”

“Yes,” Xandra said, unsure why they were so surprised by this news.

Sighs echoed. Disappointment clouded the blonde’s sky-blue eyes. “You are so fortunate.”

Xandra didn't know how to respond, and she didn't have to.

Dark-haired woman smirked. "Perhaps he needed a personal slave."

That stung. "He hasn't treated me like a slave."

Not much.

Xandra returned the dark-haired woman's superior look. But it wasn't arrogance that ruled this woman but confidence. Xandra had never lacked confidence until the wave had ripped it from her. *No. No that wasn't true.* She'd lost her confidence when Taris Elian destroyed her family. From those horrible days not long ago, she'd learned what it meant to find her life torn to shreds.

Xandra didn't lie to the women. "You're right." She held her hand out to the haughty woman. "I'm pleased to meet you."

The dark-haired woman finally relented and shook hands. "Malena Humbola from Timia near Opali, Magonia. My parents were miners."

Xandra smiled, glad she had a common bond with the woman. "My parents were miners in Opali."

Malena frowned, a spark of recognition in her eyes. “I think perhaps I’ve heard of you.”

Unease crept up Xandra’s spine. What if Malena had heard of what happened to Xandra’s family and believed what the authorities had said about Xandra?

“But maybe not,” Malena said. “Come, share a meal with us.”

The older woman’s gaze turned from wary to warmer, and Xandra’s tight muscles relaxed a little.

While the women drew together a meal, Malena warmed up to Xandra so quickly she wondered at the transformation.

“Come over here, my dear. You look too thin. You should eat more,” Malena said as she placed a plate of bread and fruit in Xandra’s hands.

“No.” Xandra handed the plate to a young woman who looked as if she could gain several pounds and still be thin. “I ate already this morning. But thank you.”

Malena nodded and smiled. “A good woman you are, Xandra.” Malena tilted her head to the side. “May I speak with you over there?”

Curious, Xandra nodded and followed the woman to a large alcove that proved to be an entrance to a bathing room. At least the women had running water and a way to cleanse.

Xandra couldn't help but marvel at the conditions. "This place isn't quite what I expected. It's a bit stuffy and crowded. But you have beds and running water and a bathing room. How extraordinary."

Malena kept her voice low so it didn't sail over the din the other women made as they prepared to eat. "It is amazing. But it's all the fault of Rayder Tyrus."

"Rayder?"

"I heard from Phili that Rayder insisted the women be moved into these accommodations a long time ago. Rumor has it before Rayder came three years ago women were just thrown down here and barely fed. Rayder pointed out to the admiral that half-starved, half-dead women were little use on the slave market." Malena snorted. "You'd think that idiotic admiral would have known that already."

Had altruism affected Rayder's decision to keep the women healthy or simply a desire to assure his purse was lined with money? "I see. Are you great friends with Phili?"

Malena laughed, her eyes sparkling with genuine mirth.

“Oh no. That two-faced mother of a dragon would never be my friend.”

Xandra didn't hold back a smile. “How long have you been down here?”

“For five weeks. I was on a pleasure cruise with my husband when the *Beast* came alongside.” Malena swallowed hard, her eyes filled with hard memories. “My husband was killed in the fight.”

“By the god. I'm sorry to hear that.”

Malena shrugged. “Don't be sorry about my husband. He was a filthy miner. We only managed to get the cruise because my lover arranged it.”

Xandra's mouth popped open and shock must have shown on her face because Malena chuckled.

“Don't be so surprised, Xandra. I'm from Magonia, but I'm not like most women you've met. I'm not some innocent creature without a mind of my own. I don't think you are either.” Leaning against a wall, Malena stuffed one hand through her short hair. “You're in a position to help me.”

“I am?”

“Your husband isn't like the rest of the slavers on this

Magon-forsaken ship. Rayder has been good to the women. A few of the slaves have been down here longer than I have. They say he's visited at least a few times a week. He may be a slaver, but there's something very different about him. He's never taken a woman out of here to have sex, nor does he call us names or mistreat us in any way. Half the women here are in love with him."

Xandra's lips twitched in a half-smile as disbelief warred with belief. Malena's description of him rang true and false. "It makes no sense. Why would a man like that be on a ship like this?"

"That's the rub." Malena nodded. "Maybe you can use that against him to get us set free."

Recognizing a possible ally, Xandra relaxed a little. "Have you ever hoped to escape?"

Malena nodded and crossed her arms. "Every day. What about you?"

A loud bang announced the door at the top of the stairs had closed. The snick of a lock sounded.

Xandra stepped out of the alcove and looked around. Phili was nowhere to be found.

Malena chuckled. "Well, would you look at that? The

bitch has locked you in here with us.”



## Chapter Ten

Rayder took in the jungle around him, half cautious and the other half excited to be on land again. Birds sang happily in the trees, lending virtue to the jungle it didn't have. The jungle had everything a man needed to survive and everything that could kill him too.

A dragon's roar in the far distance reminded Rayder and the men with him that danger could present itself at any time. Rayder and the other men slashed the foliage with their swords, and the sharp metal cut through with ease. Paths didn't exist through the greenery. Plants grew so furiously in the Tarrian jungle that everything they hacked down would have grown back within a couple of days. Feudal lords who ruled the castles in the jungle always employed men to keep the jungle back—it proved a fulltime job.

His mind turned to Xandra for the eight-hundredth time, and no matter how many times he pushed back thoughts of her, it didn't work. He'd left her well protected with his

dagger, and she was resourceful and intelligent.

She'd be fine.

Didn't matter. Worry ate at him, especially with the admiral on board.

"Fuck," he whispered under his breath.

He couldn't afford to worry, even if she was his mate. He needed to keep his mind on the dangers that lurked in the jungle. They'd narrowly avoided a fight with a dragon, and some of the men had wanted to take on the creature. Rayder had warned them they didn't have the time. Drakus Fina expected them at his camp. While he didn't tell the men, Rayder wanted to know what was happening in Dragonia before he set foot on the *Beast* again. He'd never liked living on a ship, not the whole three years he'd sailed and rose up the ranks, waiting for the right time to take revenge.

He knew what some of his fellow Daryk Ones would have said to him about Admiral Aramus.

*Just kill the bastard and be done with it.*

He could have long ago.

Problem was this. He killed in self-defense in battle and

to save an innocent. The admiral deserved it, but Rayder needed a little more time to accomplish his revenge. To ruin the admiral's life once and for all without hurting the innocent women on the ship.

Second, he wanted to make it out alive if he could. Now that Xandra was in his life, he would have children. He would fulfill his promise to his mother. Nothing stood in his way. Magonian women proved fertile. He'd never expected the good fortune of his mate being a Magonian woman in the first place.

The black stench of the ship had wended its way into his heart, and maybe if he stayed on the *Beast* long enough, his soul would be as filthy as the rotters who trailed behind him into the jungle.

Xandra wormed her way into his thoughts.

Xandra.

By the god, she did things to him no woman had ever done. She reached him in ways no other woman had. He wanted to make slow, passionate love to her, give her pleasure beyond her wildest dreams. If he gave a woman one orgasm or at the very least some pleasure, he was happy enough. With Xandra, he wanted her writhing, squeezing his cock as her body exploded in ecstasy. And he wanted her to come so many times that she fell asleep

in his arms.

It had taken everything he had not to seduce her into full sex. She made him happy, and he'd almost forgotten that emotion until he met her.

Aggravating thoughts such as these swirled in his head despite his efforts to keep his mind on the dangers before him. From the few landmarks he could depend upon in the jungle, he knew they neared Drakus Fina's camp.

He held up one arm and made a fist. The men behind him stopped. Rayder cupped his hands around his mouth and made a shrill call that mimicked a bird not found in the Tarrian jungle. Out of the jungle came the return undulating call. It was safe to enter camp.

Daryk Ones who served as guards for Drakus Fina halted the group not far from the perimeter. As far as camps went, it was a large complex. Anyone trying to find the camp had to guess if they resided in the same place. Men frequently had to cut back the vines, creepers and other plants that would have overtaken the camp daily.

Once the guards realized it was Rayder, they allowed him and the other men to enter the encampment. While the slavers headed to the trading tent or the drinking tent, Rayder headed straight for Drakus' elaborate, large tent

near the center. His gut roiled at the thought of hobnobbing with the slaver and rogue Daryk One, but what choice did he have? He'd made this trip for supplies and to forge a fake bond with Drakus Fina more than once. He'd do it again.

Two guards at Drakus' tent nodded and parted the tent opening without saying a word. Drakus didn't stand on ceremony with other slavers.

At first the tent's unusual splendor came to Rayder's attention. A huge bed dominated the tent with frilly pillows tossed here and there and exotically colored linens. Plunder such as statuary and other art stolen from Magonian ships stood around the room in hasty disarray.

Lying on the bed, propped on his elbows, was a large man in his late thirties, his blue eyes sharp with intelligence and cruelty.

Drakus Fina.

Like all the Daryk Ones, he wore a sleeveless tunic. Like every Daryk One, the man was muscular and powerful. Long blond hair flowed over Drakus' shoulders to mid-chest. But Drakus wore something else.

A woman.

An extraordinarily homely woman, at least in the face. The naked woman's body was half-draped over Drakus' naked lower body. She slurped and gulped noisily at the man's cock.

Blasé, Rayder watched the rogue leader take his pleasure. Many men would have found the scene arousing, but Rayder didn't. Rayder knew the slave had probably been called to the tent to service the leader over and over again. After all, a man like Drakus Fina owned concubines whom he treated with callousness.

The woman looked up, her eyes widening in shock. Her white hair flowed around her shoulders. She stopped sucking, her mouth still wide around the huge penis.

Drakus grunted as he saw Rayder standing there. "Rayder. Enjoying the show? Pippan, don't stop or I'll have to hurt you." His voice was nonchalant and calm even as his breathing quickened. "Show Rayder how talented you are and perhaps I'll share him with you."

The woman's cheeks flushed. Maybe she wasn't used to having someone watch her commit fellatio. She returned to her work—for the look in her eyes said this was work and certainly not pleasure.

"I can return later." Rayder figured he could give the woman some privacy.

“Stay,” Drakus said as he gasped. “If you’re lucky, perhaps you can watch me fuck her.”

Damned if he would. He gritted his teeth. He couldn’t watch a man rape another woman, and he wouldn’t suffer even Drakus to hurt her. *Fuck*. That would screw his plans. Rayder bit his inner cheek, his mind whirling in turmoil. He hadn’t lied to Xandra. Rayder would do what he could to protect the woman. Killing Drakus now would create a huge problem.

Luckily, the woman seemed clever enough to realize what would happen if she didn’t please Drakus. She moved faster, her hand pumping, mouth sucking and licking with quickening pace. Drakus groaned, his hips twitching, and it didn’t take more than thirty seconds before Drakus lay back and let out a throaty gasp of pleasure as he shot come down the woman’s throat.

“That’s it,” Drakus said as he panted. “Lick it all off, girl.”

Rayder’s stomach wrenched. He hated this.

The young woman continued to lick until Drakus barked an order. “Stop.”

The nameless woman started and stumbled off the

bed. "As you wish."

Rayder surveyed the woman's naked body. The girl might be homely of face, but her body more than made up for it. She'd fetch a fine price in the slave market. Rayder couldn't banish the disgust that curled inside him.

Drakus sat up as his cock went flaccid. He slid off the bed and reached for his breeches. He stepped into them, buttoned them up and smiled at Rayder.

Drakus gestured at the woman. "Please take her. As a welcome present."

Trembling, the woman gazed at Drakus with wide blue eyes. Rayder saw fear there. Fear and hatred for Drakus. Disgust rose inside Rayder at the woman's situation. Helplessness also burned within Rayder. He could do little to help the woman here and now.

"No." Rayder walked toward the woman. "I've had mine earlier today."

Drakus grunted as he reached for a goblet on a side table and poured red wine. He slammed back the wine with one gulp. He choked and some of the wine ran down his chin.

Drakus wiped away the wine with his forearm. "You



aren't usually so reluctant to take a gift, Rayder. Why is that?"

"You've never offered me a woman."

"Fuck her."

Rayder's blood started to boil. "I don't rape."

Drakus laughed and he slammed the goblet down on the table. "Come on. You know you could make her willing."

"If I have to *make* her do anything, it's rape."

Drakus' eyes burned with a curious mixture of humor and contempt. "Such a noble man for a scum-sucking slaver. You vex me, Rayder."

"You've known me three years. It's just the way I am."

"Never understood that." Drakus walked closer, eyes laser sharp and filled with barely concealed menace. "Unless you aren't who I think you are."

Rayder shrugged. "I can't help what you think."

Drakus walked around Rayder, hands on hips. "You're a Daryk One through and through, but something changed you."

“You know the answer to that too. We need Magonian women so we can repopulate Dragonia.”

“We’ve had few pregnancies from the Magonian women we’ve bred. Not in the three years I’ve known you. So it must be something else that keeps you going.”

Rayder should have expected this. Drakus liked to test him every time he came into camp, which was more than once a month. “My reasons are my own.”

“Secrets can get you killed. Makes a man think he can’t trust you.”

Rayder didn’t move as Drakus crossed behind him. If Drakus thought he could kill Rayder, the man had no idea who he was up against.

Drakus came back into view, but Rayder didn’t relax. “I don’t trust you either.”

The leader of the largest band of rogue Daryk Ones glared at Rayder. “You don’t approve of what I’m trying to do.”

“I think you’re right about one thing. Magonians and Dragonians should no longer be apart. We should mix and understand each other’s cultures and blend our peoples. It’s the only thing that’s going to save us from going extinct. But

the Magonians don't see it that way and they're having plenty of children over there." Rayder wasn't in the mood to play games. "I think they don't give a fuck whether we live or die."

Rayder chuckled. "And you think we're wrong to steal their women and prepare for war with them."

"I don't think they'll invade Dragonia and fight us."

"You think they'll try to breed us out of existence?"

"Probably."

"You don't approve of us invading them?"

"Never did."

Drakus shook his head. "If I hadn't seen you slay so many men, I'd think you were too soft to be a Daryk One."

Rayder could have lectured Drakus on the morals held dear by true Daryk Ones, but knew it would fall on deaf ears. He kept an impassive face and said nothing.

Drakus threw a contemptuous glance at the naked woman, who stood with her arms wrapped around herself. "This bitch will fetch a fine price. Perhaps. If a man can get over her face of course."

Rayder took a closer look at her pockmarked face. She'd probably survived the putrid fever that sometimes struck otherwise healthy Dragonians when they didn't eat enough as a child. Rayder almost went to the gaudily appointed bed and ripped a covering off so he could give it to the concubine. She shivered. Probably from fear more than anything. A hot wind blew through the tent. It was too balmy to cause a chill.

Drakus took another goblet and filled it with wine. He handed it to Rayder. "I could have you beaten and chained for not obeying me and mocking my goals. Eventually the Magonians will be made to see how wise we are."

Rayder's spine prickled, his muscles tightening with barely concealed hatred. "At least that's what you think will happen someday. Or maybe you're using that theory as an excuse to fuck as many women as you want." Rayder handed the wine to the woman. "I came here to discuss procuring more supplies for Admiral Karman Aramus and the *Beast*."

Drakus' eyes glittered dangerously. "Why did you give her that wine?"

"It's the least she should get for sucking your dick, don't you think?"

Drakus' eyes turned red, and Rayder knew he'd pushed the asshole too far this time.

The woman dropped the goblet and wine splattered everywhere. She gasped and edged closer to the entrance. Drakus stalked toward her and grabbed her by the arm. Drakus shoved her toward Rayder. Rayder caught her in his arms and held her close. Trembling and gasping, the woman gazed up at Rayder with pure terror. He hated seeing that in a woman's eyes. Especially when she feared him as much as Drakus. When Xandra had looked at him with a little fear but a lot of defiance, it had fired Rayder's blood around the edges, exposing feral needs within him like a live nerve. He'd wanted her instantly. Wanted to do nasty, sex-filled things with her. Things he hadn't tried with her yet.

This...well, this was damn different.

Drakus snarled his next words, eyes red with fury. "If you want the supplies, you'll have to show what a man you are. Fuck this whore. Here and now. In front of me."

\* \* \* \* \*

Xandra stood for a moment and her situation surrounded her with quick, disturbing force. Voices intensified around her, as did the smell of sweat, of the

bathing room, the food and the stuffy air. She swayed on her feet a little. Better to sit down.

“Stupid girl,” Malena said as Xandra sat next to her.

Xandra threw a hard look at Malena. “I beg your pardon?”

Malena smiled as she chewed bread. She swallowed. “Not you. Phili. She’s a troublemaker of the first order.”

“How long have you known her?”

“I don’t know her really. I just know her type.”

Xandra couldn’t deny that. “I think I do too.”

“Yoanda’s been down here a time or two.” Malena smiled with only one side of her mouth, her eyes sparkling with a malice that made Xandra vaguely uneasy. “That woman is even worse.”

Surprised, Xandra threw a glance at her. “She seems very nice.”

“Seems is the right word.”

Xandra frowned. She didn’t know what to believe anymore. She hoped her instincts proved right about

Yoanda and not Malena's. Xandra took a quick, hard glance at Malena, blocking out the other chatter nearby. Lines bracketed the woman's mouth—she was older than Xandra had first guessed. Not that Xandra ever found age easy to judge, but Malena appeared around fifty. Subtle wrinkles around her eyes and on her forehead gave it away.

Malena chewed a bit of dried meat then sipped water from a goblet. "So how did you get here? On this ship?"

"My passenger ship was capsized by a wave." Sadness pierced her, a hot and overwhelming pain. "Two women I was building a friendship with...I think they died."

Xandra winced, recalling how she'd lied to Ketera and Mia about her marital status. In a very weak moment, she hadn't wanted to admit Taris was her husband, and perhaps part of her hoped the marriage could be dissolved. After all, since she couldn't have children, Taris should want to toss her out of his household. He'd threatened as much, but she knew his cruelty demanded he keep her long enough to torture her. To humiliate her.

By the god. She didn't want to remember what he'd done. It hurt far too much. She teared up as she thought about how she'd made her entire situation worse in every way. Guilt racked her. Taris Elian had been a heartless, horrible man, but she was to blame for everything that

happened to her brother and parents.

Malena frowned at her. "All right? You went pale there."

Xandra sucked in a deep breath and wrestled with her emotions. Tears threatened. She dared a glance at Malena and saw gentle sympathy. As hard as this woman talked, she did understand.

Xandra shoved her plate toward a lady across the table who ate as if she hadn't tasted food in days. "Here. I'm not hungry anymore."

The woman smiled and dug into the bread and fruits.

"One step at a time." Malena patted her on the back.

"How do you do this?" Xandra didn't know how to ask this. "How do you stay down here day after day without going insane?"

Malena gestured to a young woman huddled against a wall who Xandra had noted earlier. The thin, black-haired girl had skin as white as a cloud and with cavernous blue eyes that seemed hollow and unseeing.

"She was fine when they first put her down here. Day later, she was a nutter." Malena sighed, the sound almost disgusted. "We practically have to force her to eat."



Xandra surveyed the rest of the women. Most were medium-sized, not too thin or fat. "Rayder is sending down quite a bit of food."

"Amazing, isn't it?" Malena smirked. "Nicest damn slaver. Doesn't make any sense. Unless he's got some conscience. Hard to believe though."

"Perhaps he's got a sister or mother somewhere," the woman across the table said, her blue eyes lively even as she ate with her mouth full. "And he thinks about them being stuck in these conditions. His guilt, you know."

Xandra wondered, but she didn't speak about it. "Who's been down here the longest of your group?"

Malena sniffed then took a drink from her goblet. "Two women over there. Two months I think."

Xandra couldn't comprehend. Well, she could. She didn't want to. Her imagination worked well enough. "You haven't been out of this place for five weeks?"

Malena's face visibly paled, her eyes haunted as something new and shadowy entered her expression. She hastily untied her tunic and loosened it enough to show the top of her chest and her right shoulder. A pattern of bruises from dark blue to light green fanned out across a large

expanse.

Xandra's inward gasp caught in her throat. She took a sip of water. "By the god. What happened?"

"Five days ago the admiral came down here and picked me." Malena's voice went raw with hate.

"Picked you?" Xandra didn't know if she wanted the answer.

Malena didn't lower her voice, but it also didn't carry over the din. "He came in here one night, rousted me out of bed, dragged me outside. He took me to an empty cabin. I fought him, but he threatened to kill me with his dagger."

Malena didn't have to explain. Xandra shuddered. "He...raped you."

"Yes."

The woman across from them sent a blank look at them both and left the table.

Xandra reached for Malena's right forearm and pressed gently. "I'm so sorry. That's horrible. Unspeakable. Does he come in here and pick women from time to time?"

"Not often. Probably gets enough out of Yoanda and

Phili to satisfy him most of the time.” Malena’s jaded expression returned, replacing her vulnerability from a moment before. “I don’t know why he picked me.”

Xandra surveyed the room then looked at the steps leading out of this dungeon. “I wonder how long I’ll be stuck down here?”

“Good question. I wonder that every day—how much longer I’ll be here.”

A clanging above the stairs signaled that someone unlocked the door.

Xandra started to rise, but Malena grabbed her forearm. “Not so fast.”

“It might be Rayder.” Xandra wanted out despite the hospitality the woman had shown her.

Heavy footsteps, definitely a man’s, thumped down the stairs.

Legs came into view, but the boots are beeches were all wrong. It wasn’t Rayder.

Admiral Karman Aramus stood at the bottom of the stairs, pure arrogance and self-assurance on his face. “Good day, ladies.” He gestured toward Xandra. “Xandra

Shorenus needs to come with me.”

## Chapter Eleven

Xandra's heartbeat hammered as she stood up and faced the admiral.

She kept her face neutral. Her stomach roiled as she thought about what Malena had been through because of this man. She wanted to take the admiral's manly bits and twist them until he screamed for mercy. Anger replaced fear and gave her a strength she didn't know she possessed.

"My husband asked me to stay down here until he returns." Xandra took a chance and caught the gazes of several women around the room. All of them narrowed their eyes and glared at the man.

Malena cleared her throat. "Whatever you've got planned, you can take me in her place. She's married."

The admiral's smiling face turned ice-cold as he marched down the rest of the stairs and walked toward

them. The other women scattered, moving back quickly. Xandra's muscles tensed.

"It doesn't matter." The admiral's gaze narrowed on Xandra. "She is coming with me."

"Why?" Xandra wouldn't agree to his request without a fight.

Leering, the admiral stopped in front of the table. All conversations ceased as the other women moved closer. What did they think they could do? Did they want to help her?

Aramus gestured with one hand. "You will cease this nonsense and come with me. There's been an accident and your husband needs you."

Xandra felt something constrict in her throat. "An accident? What happened?"

"He was injured on the way back from Drakus Fina's camp."

Gasps went up around the room. If there was one thing apparent, the slave women liked and respected Rayder.

Worry twisted inside her and she stepped away from the table.

“No.” Malena reached for Xandra’s forearm. “Girls, gather round. He’s lying.”

Xandra glanced at the woman holding her tight. “What if —”

“He’s lying.” Malena’s grip tightened.

Torn, Xandra glanced between Malena and the admiral.

The admiral’s gaze held pure contempt for Malena. His eyes suddenly blazed red. “You are a stupid wench.” He glanced at Xandra. “Your husband is dying upstairs and you’re allowing these bitches to tell you what to do?”

Xandra pulled out of Malena’s painful grip. Xandra didn’t know whom to believe, but the thought of Rayder dying pierced her to the heart. She trembled, shaky and stunned by her own reaction.

“Don’t listen to him, miss,” another woman said across the room. “He’s lured others upstairs with threats or promises. This ain’t no different.”

The admiral snorted. “You have all earned punishment for this. Half rations from now on until I sell you. There’s a slave auction two days hence. We’ll see how cocky you are

then.”

“No.” Xandra took a deep breath. “I’ll go with you if you don’t cut their rations or sell them.”

“Let him sell us, honey.” Malena crossed her arms. “It can’t be any worse than this particular version of the hells. Who knows, we might run into a decent man or two who’ll treat us right.”

Several women mumbled positive statements under their breaths.

Confusion piled on—she’d never been this swayed one way or the other when she set her mind to things. Somehow these women and the admiral had changed that.

Or perhaps her feelings for Rayder influenced her. She hated that most of all. She couldn’t afford to have feelings for him when she would have to leave him. Besides that, he wasn’t the kind of man she could see herself with for life. She needed a gentle, kind and loving man without violent tendencies, a man who would never hurt her. No, he wasn’t the man for her, regardless of his statements that she was his mate.

Xandra shifted on her feet, weariness tearing into her strength. “I’ll stay.”



The admiral stepped forward, and she stood her ground, daring to look straight into his eyes. Daring him to try anything with so many witnesses. His slimy gaze trailed up and down her body, and when he licked his lips she almost hauled off and slapped him.

“So be it. I came here as a humanitarian gesture. I’ll tell your husband you don’t care. I could have told him no whore from Magonia would care whether he lived or died.”

He turned and stomped up the stairs, and Xandra didn’t know whether to sigh in relief or beg forgiveness and run up the stairs after him.

After all, if she didn’t leave now, would she ever leave? If she went upstairs, would she find Rayder broken and dying? Would she find it a ruse designed by the admiral to lure her into a dangerous situation? At the same time, why would Rayder ask for her?

When the door closed and locked again, the choice was taken from her.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Fuck her!” Drakus threw one hand up in a gesture of anger.

“I won’t.” Rayder’s anger boiled at the surface, and he

was ready to do whatever was needed. He released the woman. "If it comes down to it, I don't need supplies badly enough to rape. And I never will." He reached into his breeches pocket and pulled out coins. "My lady. For your troubles."

He held out the money, and the woman's gaze darted from him to Drakus. She snatched the money from his hand but didn't move.

Drakus looked dumbfounded. "You dare defy me in this?"

Rayder placed his hands on his hips, not touching the weapons he'd obtained before leaving the ship. "I'll always defy you when it comes to rape. No exceptions."

Drakus stalked to the tent flap and threw it open. "Leave us!" He pushed the girl out of the tent. "Guards, take her back to the other slaves. Bring me a new one." Drakus waved for two other men to come inside as other men hauled the girl away. "Tie this man up just outside the perimeter. A dragon might find him tasty. Send his men away with assurances Rayder intends to stay longer."

Rayder tensed as the men came toward him. He had no intention of becoming dragon dinner. He could fight the guards and win, but it wouldn't be worth the effort. He couldn't fight his way through an entire camp of Drakus'

men. No, he'd bide his time and wait until the two guards took him into the woods.

Rayder held up his hands to give a submissive impression.

Drakus threw Rayder a dismissive look. "Enjoy your death, Rayder. It's unfortunate. You could have helped me win this battle by impregnating that woman."

Rayder laughed as the guards divested him of his sword and placed it on a table by the tent flap. "This so-called battle isn't about saving the people of Dragonia and you know it. It's about your abuse of power and arrogance."

Half-expecting one of the guards to cuff him, he braced for impact. Drakus glared but didn't respond to the barb. "War is soon upon us, Rayder. You could have been a part of the solution. Get him out of my sight."

Rayder regretted that he couldn't save any of the slaves in the camp. But if he died, he wouldn't be able to finish his main goal.

Xandra. He couldn't leave Xandra to languish on that slave ship under Aramus' fist.

As the guards marched him through camp, many of the rogue Daryk Ones stopped whatever they were doing

outside their tents to watch him go by. A few spit at his feet, but others acknowledged him with respectful bows of the head. None of them lifted a finger to help Rayder.

No matter. He could do this without help.

Night had fallen and nocturnal creatures emerged to prey on the weaker. Unlike Drakus, who seemed afraid of the dark, Rayder thrived in it. Something about the night always intrigued him.

Seeing well at night had never been an issue for a Daryk One. The guards were Daryk Ones, but as they left the area a couple of ordinary men left camp and joined the group. They'd probably joined Drakus' fight believing the bollocks Drakus told them about repopulating Dragonia and taking over Magonia. One held a torch. They took him farther into the jungle than he expected—far east, as a matter of fact. Soon they were out of sight and hearing range of the camp. None of them spoke, and Rayder liked that. It gave him an idea for a plan. Element of surprise always worked. They found a rocky outcropping that jutted straight into the sky, utterly devoid of plant life, a rarity in the jungle.

"The execution rock," one of the Daryk Ones said. "Tie him down."

The two other men helped, staking Rayder's arms to

the rocks by drawing his arms upward. His feet were free, but it didn't matter. They figured he would be safely pinned. Rayder smiled.

"What you smiling at?" the short man with the torch asked Rayder.

Rayder shrugged even though his wrists were secured. "Wondering how long you'll last out here with the poisonous insects and lizards and other creatures."

"Why would you care?" Torchman asked.

The Daryk Ones glared at Rayder but stayed silent.

"Maybe," Rayder said, "the Daryk Ones have an agenda you don't understand."

The regular men exchanged cautious glances with one another and drew their swords as if they suspected danger were afoot.

The Daryk Ones nodded at Rayder, their eyes suddenly glowing red.

Rayder wanted to laugh but he didn't wish to tip off the men who'd just drawn their swords. With cries of battle, the Daryk Ones launched at the other men. Rayder yanked at the ties on his wrists. Bonds snapped under his strength.

With sharp cries of pain, the men fell under the Daryk Ones' swords, dying before they could take more than a few breaths. The Daryk Ones stood over the men then threw glances at Rayder.

"Thank you, my friends," Rayder said. "Why did you help me?"

One of the Daryk Ones answered, "We're working from the inside out. Spying, you might say."

Rayder grabbed one of the fallen men's sword and dagger. "It's my good fortune. How will you explain my escape?"

The Daryk Ones shrugged. One said, "We'll say the mighty and powerful slave trader overpowered us."

"Right." Rayder knew his voice sounded sarcastic. "Not a believable story, but I'm grateful."

He didn't waste more time asking how the men would cover their butts. He ran, because once Drakus realized Rayder had escaped, he might send additional men after him.

*A fine fuckin' situation it is.*

It would take him a better part of the night to reach the

*Beast*. Despite his strong constitution, he needed more food and drink to keep up his strength. Living off the land wasn't a problem, but he also wanted intelligence and figured he could find it with a former Daryk One named Minilos Willburi who had retired from service to run a tavern. The tavern was outside of Grimnald Castle. He could grab some food and drink and head back into the night and locate the *Beast*. He didn't like the fact Xandra was on the ship without his protection for this long.

Rayder ran faster.

\* \* \* \* \*

"You win." Malena smiled as she tossed her cards onto the pile in the middle of the table.

Xandra returned her grin as she scooped the cards toward her and gathered them into a pile. "You won the last time."

"Guess we're even then."

Several of the women watched them play in the early morning hours while the rest continued to slumber. Xandra was tired too. Malena had insisted she take her bunk, but Xandra had barely slept. She couldn't keep Rayder's whereabouts out of her mind. What if he needed her and

had asked for her? Conflicting emotions bombarded her. She couldn't recall the last time she'd felt this conflicted. Why would Rayder ask for her even if he were dying? Because he thought she was his mate?

A clanking noise at the top of the stairs startled them, and they jerked toward the sound.

Xandra had had enough of the admiral and stood, ready to do something...anything in her own defense, up to and including using Rayder's dagger on the admiral.

Perhaps, if all were well, Rayder would be the one at the top of the stairs. By the god, she hoped. Heavy footsteps clanged down the stairs, but when Phili appeared, the room went silent. Surprise kept Xandra mum at first too. Phili was the last person she expected to see.

Phili walked toward Xandra, her face impassive. "Time to leave."

Not wanting to miss the opportunity to escape the ship's dungeon, Xandra decided she'd ask questions later. She turned to Malena. "Thank you for the hospitality." She waved to other women in the room. "Thank you very much, ladies."

A chorus of genuine goodbyes followed Xandra upstairs.



"You take care now," Malena said as Xandra reached the top of the stairs and freedom. "Don't forget us."

Xandra's gut clenched with guilt at the thought of leaving the other women, but what choice did she have? She had to take this escape while she had a chance.

When Phili locked the door and turned to Xandra, Xandra wondered what the woman had up her sleeve. "Why did you let me out? Is Rayder injured?"

Phili glanced around the bustling ship. Men moved with purpose and quickly. "I let you out because the ship is leaving soon, and I need you to convince the admiral that he can't leave without Rayder."

"What? But I thought—"

"You thought Rayder was hurt. The admiral lied. He only wanted to take you to his cabin and have his way with you."

Xandra shuddered. "I thought perhaps that was the case, but I was so worried about Rayder."

Phili's smile was thin, her eyes filled with sardonic amusement. "You are truly mated with him, aren't you?"

Xandra didn't want to think this Dragonian mating

phenomenon was possible. "I don't see how. If I am, then why doesn't the same thing happen on Magonia?"

"Mating?" Phili shrugged, her voice sarcastic. "I don't know. Hundreds of years of cultural sexual repression?"

Xandra didn't respond to the mockery. "Rayder should have been back by now."

"Exactly. Something might have happened to him. I locked you in the dungeon and left you there to keep you safe."

Surprised, Xandra almost didn't know what to believe or say. "Thank you. I think."

Phili's nose wrinkled. "Do not flatter yourself. I did it because I hate all men like the admiral. I knew when Rayder left the ship the admiral would try to take you. He's an animal with sexual appetites no woman should have to suffer."

Xandra's confusion deepened. She didn't want to like this woman. "You suffer them."

Phili smiled. "I do. But only to survive. For money. For that security I'll satisfy any man's bumbling sexual needs."

"Any man's? Have you...satisfied Rayder's?"

Phili's smile this time held genuine amusement, and she chuckled. "I suppose I should tell you the truth. No. I've never slept with Rayder, and he's never asked for sexual favors. The damn man has been nothing but honorable with all the women on the ship. It's why they adore him. That's why you have to be on the lookout for more trouble. Yoanda will try to take him from you. And she will go to any lengths to get him."

Xandra's mouth opened but at first nothing came out. Impossible that Yoanda would try such a thing. "I don't believe you."

"Which part? That Rayder is as honorable as I say, or that Yoanda would try to cause you trouble?"

"Either one. Rayder is a slave trader. He couldn't possibly be that honorable and still do what he does. And I've seen how sweet Yoanda is. She told me about her daughter and about how she was taken by the admiral."

"I didn't say Rayder is perfect. But Yoanda is an entirely different animal from me. She pretends to be sweetness and light but she's a two-faced coward."

"Perhaps what you think is cowardice is simply fear. Besides, no one is perfect."

Phili snorted softly. "Not even you."

The assessment stung, even though it shouldn't have. "I never said I was." Xandra looked around, afraid one of the men might overhear them. "How can I take your word about Yoanda? What proof do you have?"

"I have no proof. I'm from Magonia too. Perhaps that will make my word carry more weight."

Surprises just kept evolving. "You're Magonian?"

Phili nodded. "From far out in the deserts, beyond the mines of Opali."

"I thought no one lived out there."

The other woman snorted softly. "That's the idea. My parents didn't believe all the crap the scribes and Truth and Order Police tell us. They moved as far from civilization as possible and eked out a life where few people dare live."

"But those lands are forbidden. They're almost one hundred and forty-degrees during the day. No one can live out there."

"That's what the Truth and Order Police and the scribes say. True, it's hotter than the coast and Opali. But it's not livable. People in the Badlands have learned how to

adapt, and they showed my parents.”

Amazed and stunned, Xandra said, “This is fascinating. So how were you kidnapped?”

“My parents wanted me to see the ocean. They hired a boat to take us offshore for a small cruise. Heavy waves drew us farther out than we should’ve been. Before the boat could turn back to shore, the *Beast* came alongside.” Phili’s eyes filled with undeniable pain, her already tight lips now a thin slash of bad memories. “Everyone was killed except for me. Sometimes I wish I’d died that day.”

This certainly put a new spin on Phili’s life and on what Xandra had believed about her. “How long have you been on the *Beast*?”

“Six months.”

Xandra tried to imagine staying on this ship that long and couldn’t. After all, she’d been here such a short time and already wanted so desperately to escape. “I’m sorry about your parents. I understand.”

“How could you understand?” Phili’s voice rose slightly then she lowered it again. “Have you ever seen your parents murdered in front of you?”

A deep ache centered in the pit of Xandra’s stomach.

“No. But my parents were murdered.”

It was Phili's turn to be surprised. She eyeballed Xandra for a long time before she said, “How were they murdered?”

“I'd rather not say.”

“Why?”

“Because as much as I want to trust you, Phili—”

“You can't. I know. I wouldn't trust me either.” Phili pocketed her keys, as if just now remembering that she still held them. “But you're trustworthy. I can tell. That's the only reason why I'm telling you as much as I am.”

Xandra battled for a moment with telling Phili everything, but she couldn't. She hadn't even told Rayder. “I'm sorry you've had to live like this for so long.”

Phili, whatever her faults, seemed affected by Xandra's sincerity. “I gave up being sorry long ago. Everything I do is to survive this place. But I promise I'll get revenge on every man who used me on this ship. Especially the admiral.”

“You wouldn't harm Rayder?”

“He's never done anything to me, short of being

dismissive. But one can hardly blame him. He thinks I'm a whore and user." She laughed. "And I am. His judgment of my worth doesn't matter to me. What does matter is finding a way off this ship and back to Magonia."

Now that interested Xandra. "How do you plan to escape?"

"I've made contact with a man who claims he can help me get away from here. For a price."

"What price?"

"That isn't for me to say right now. But I will let you know when the time is right if you want to escape."

"You could have left the ship while we were berthed overnight. Why didn't you?"

Phili grunted, the sound filled with disgust. "Because after the admiral said that you hadn't come up with him, he decided to have me instead. He kicked Yoanda out of the admiral's quarters for the night."

"By the god." Xandra winced. "You're saying he raped you?"

Phili's thin shoulders lifted and lowered. "I don't know the difference anymore. I let him do it. Keep the admiral

happy and he doesn't beat you."

Guilt added to Xandra's other emotions. "Yoanda's black eye...did you do that or did the admiral?"

"I did it." There was no remorse in Phili's tone. "The she bitch started ranting that I was trying to steal her husband. She threw shoes at me and tried pulling my hair. I fought back."

Xandra had always believed she could tell if a person lied, but this conversation had twisted that theory around on itself. She drew in a deep breath of the salty, fresh air. "When are you escaping?"

"As I said, I'll tell you when the time is right."

"You think the admiral is going to take the ship out with Rayder gone?"

"Probably."

"Then I'll talk to him." She didn't want to, but the idea of being stuck on this ship without Rayder filled Xandra with dread.

Phili shook her head. "Maybe you shouldn't. You seem too delicate. I don't think you could outwit the admiral if he decided to make a meal of you."



“No. I don’t want to stay on this ship without Rayder—”

“Never mind. I’ll talk to the admiral.” Phili gestured with one hand and said, “Back to your quarters. No doubt Rayder will be back soon. If he isn’t, the ship may leave without him.”

“Wait!” Xandra grabbed Phili’s arm. “I’ll talk to the admiral. We can’t leave Rayder on shore.”

Xandra waited as Phili’s eyes darkened, as if she might refuse. She stared at Xandra so long, she couldn’t be certain if Phili would agree.

Finally Phili nodded. “Come on then.”

Xandra followed the other woman. Apprehension sliced Xandra to ribbons. She wanted to run, but she also needed to make certain the admiral wouldn’t leave without Rayder. She must be insane. Heading to the admiral’s quarters when he’d lied to her about Rayder being harmed... She didn’t know what would happen. Uncertainty had never been one of her favorite emotions. Yet here she was, stepping into evil’s den.

Xandra glanced at Phili. “Will you stay in the cabin with me?”

They arrived at the admiral's quarters, and Phili shook her head. "Why would I do that?"

Anger boiled up inside Xandra. "Because you claim to be a better person than you are?"

Phili stopped and glared while men moved all around them and worked. "I'm no better than I should be."

Phili continued and Xandra took the chance of following. She didn't know where this would lead, but she had to do what she could. When they reached the cabin's quarters, Xandra took a deep breath and tried to calm her nerves. She couldn't do this if the admiral believed he could intimidate her.

Phili knocked, which surprised Xandra. After all, the woman seemed to move about the ship with great freedom for a slave—correction, a concubine. The door opened swiftly. Yoanda stood there, her eyes watery-looking and her tunic and pants rumpled. Had she just tumbled out of bed?

"What do you want?" Yoanda's voice was sharp.

"I need to speak with the admiral," Xandra said.

Yoanda hesitated, her mouth twisted with dislike as her gaze bounced from Xandra to Phili. Her gaze softened as

she looked at Xandra again. "You can come in. She stays out."

Phili shrugged. "Whatever you wish."

She turned and walked away before Xandra could object. Yoanda stepped back and allowed Xandra inside. When the door locked behind her, a chill trickled up Xandra's back. Phili's warnings about Yoanda intruded, despite Xandra's skepticism. What if Phili were lying to her about Yoanda? She'd have to remain on guard with both women.

Yoanda's smile came late, with a distinct bouquet of dislike. "Why are you here?"

"As I said, I need to speak with the admiral." Xandra tried a smile, hoping the woman would return her former attitude of kindness. "It's about Rayder."

Yoanda's glance darted to the bed. She stepped forward and lowered her voice. "He finally fell asleep." Sarcasm filled her voice. "What about Rayder?"

Disconcerted by Yoanda's almost furious frown, Xandra said, "He's still not back on board. Is the admiral planning to leave shore without Rayder?"

Yoanda took a deep breath. "He said he would if

Rayder wasn't here before the sun went down."

Worry bit Xandra hard. "That isn't long from now."

Staring at Xandra as if she didn't believe a word of it, the woman said, "What are your real feelings for Rayder?"

"I'm not certain." She wasn't exactly lying and instinct told her not to tell Yoanda.

"Very well. The admiral is this way." Yoanda gestured just as the admiral rose from the bed in the middle of the room.

Xandra started. She hadn't seen him lying among the voluminous folds of the bed. Had he been in bed with Yoanda when they knocked? Embarrassment sent heat to Xandra's face. It couldn't be helped. She would approach him no matter what he was doing.

"Admiral, I am sorry to bother you." Xandra stepped forward, reluctant to come closer.

The admiral wore trousers but no tunic. His pale chest was heavily muscled despite his paunch. Obviously he couldn't compare with Rayder's beautiful physique, but she couldn't make the mistake of thinking he couldn't hurt her with his strength.

Xandra's throat seized. She hated being here, but for Rayder she'd do this.

"My dear, what brings you here?" His voice pitched low, as if he tried for a seductive tone.

"You came into the slave area and told me Rayder had been hurt, and I needed to come with you. Why did you do that?"

Shock entered his eyes for a few seconds, and his gaze darted to Yoanda. His mouth tightened. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Liar. Well, she hadn't expected for him to say anything differently.

Yoanda stared at her as if she'd lost her mind. Yoanda couldn't possibly believe the admiral, could she?

Surprised by the woman's coolness, but not that the admiral would lie, Xandra said, "Are you having the ship pulled away from shore without my husband?"

*My husband.* The words sounded strange on her lips. Intimate.

"I have every intention of leaving him if he doesn't show soon with our supplies. And the men who went out with him

haven't come back either. If they don't come back soon, we'll need to put into another area for supplies."

"What if something happened to him?"

He gestured contemptuously with one hand. "He is a slave trader. There's no need to concern ourselves with his welfare."

Her fingers snarled in the hem of her tunic as she gripped the material. "He's one of your crew and second-in-command. Surely that means something to you. It's my understanding you cannot run the ship without him."

*I hope it wasn't a mistake to say that.*

She held her breath.

Aramus stared at her as if she'd lost her sense. "I can run the ship without him."

"But do you wish to?"

His eyes flashed with annoyance. "No, I don't wish to, but if he does not return with supplies and information from Drakus, I have no choice but to head south."

"Why?"

“Because we can trade slaves as well along the coast as we can inland. There are plenty of men in Dragonia looking for fertile wives and concubines to bear their children.”

She threw a glance at Yoanda and saw curiosity and contempt in those eyes. Perhaps the best way to assure compliance would be in creating jealousy. “Why did you lie about Rayder being injured?”

Aramus scoffed. “I didn’t. She lies, Yoanda.”

Yoanda looked disgusted. “Does she now. We’ll see about that. Take me now, Aramus. I will sate your potent needs. Not this woman.”

Wondering if Yoanda acted this way to protect her, Xandra pushed the issue. “Perhaps we both can help you, Admiral.” The words had almost stuck in her throat. She didn’t want to say this. “Let both of us see to your needs.”

A broad smile touched his mouth, and he licked his lips. Her stomach curled at the sight of his tongue and everything else about him. She took a deep breath and realized what she hadn’t noticed before. The man stank to high heaven. She wrinkled her nose.

“I thought you would never see the wisdom.” His smile became even wider, if that were possible. “Rayder may

believe you are mated with him, but I know the truth. There isn't a Magonian woman alive who is worth the trouble. "

"Not even to keep Dragonians from extinction?" Xandra asked.

He huffed, his meaty hands at his waist. "Drakus believes it. I don't give a shite about anyone's survival but mine."

His statement shouldn't have surprised her. How would she extract herself from this mess? As he walked toward her and placed his hands on her shoulders, she gulped. Revulsion filled her stomach. By the god, what sort of mess had she gotten herself into?

Yoanda stepped close. "Husband, I want you to myself. Don't touch her." She placed her hand on his shoulder.

He threw a cold glance at Yoanda. "Get your hand off me."

Yoanda kept her hand right where it was.

Aramus moved so quickly, Xandra took a step back and stumbled. Yoanda went flying as he used his broad forearm to thrust her away. Yoanda cried out at the same time Xandra did. Xandra searched for a weapon and found a sizable statue on a table near the door. She snatched it



up and held it aloft. Admiral or no admiral, she'd crack him over the head if he came one step closer.

Yoanda pushed up from a prone position, her breath coming in gasps and hate pure in her eyes. She didn't speak. Aramus advanced on Xandra, his eyes filled with anticipation and sick desire.

A heavy hammering on the cabin door made them all pause.

## Chapter Twelve

Aramus stopped his forward progress. “What the shite

—”

“Admiral, open this door!” Rayder’s voice sounded harsh and strong.

Relief sent strength through Xandra. She shook from the inside out as she unlocked the door and yanked it open. Rayder stepped inside, hale and hearty. Tears popped into her eyes. He was alive, and from the look of him, unharmed. His gaze swept over her, eyes red and taking in the statue she held. Yoanda came to her feet, but Rayder had taken in the scene. Anger tightened his jaw into a strong line.

Rayder’s hands stayed on his belt, close to sword and dagger. “What is going on here?”

Aramus stepped closer to Yoanda, but Yoanda moved away, her eyes wide with fright. “So you finally managed to

put in an appearance, Tyrus? What took you so long?"

"Drakus took exception to a few of the things I said. I'm here now and that's all that matters."

Aramus stepped toward Rayder, but Rayder kept his stance. Xandra couldn't stop shaking, and she refused to put down the statue even though her arm protested the weight.

"Did you fight with Drakus?" Aramus asked.

"He wanted me to fuck his concubine right in front of him. I refused and he didn't like it. I almost didn't make it back in one piece."

Xandra's heart jolted. Rayder had the opportunity on this ship to take other women, and he'd been offered another one by Drakus. She found it amazing he hadn't taken the chance when asked. After all, her mother had told her men had congress with other women when they thought no one knew. When Xandra had asked if her father had done so, her mother admitted that he had. Xandra remembered how she'd felt at hearing that news. Betrayed. He shouldn't have sought another woman other than her mother. The Chronicles of Magon forbade it.

"And where are the other men?" Aramus' tone was sarcastic.

“Your guess is as good as mine.” Rayder shook his head. “Maybe Drakus’ men did away with them, or maybe they were smart enough to not to come back to the ship.”

“This is their livelihood! Why the hells wouldn’t they come back?”

Rayder shrugged.

“Why did you come back?” Aramus hissed the question.

Rayder’s arms went down to his sides, as if he sensed that Aramus wouldn’t start a fight. “For my wife.”

Xandra’s heart filled with warmth. Rayder had come back for her, and she couldn’t wrap her mind around the idea.

“Are you all right, Yoanda?” Rayder asked.

Yoanda nodded, her eyes now sparkling with unusual glee. “I’m wonderful now that you’re back, Rayder. We were all so worried.”

Rayder chuckled, and at this angle, Xandra couldn’t see his face, but she heard the sarcasm in the sound. “I doubt the admiral is happy I interrupted...whatever it is I

interrupted.”

Rayder kept his body angled so he didn't turn away from Aramus. He took Xandra's arm as he opened the door. She placed the statue on the table. Rolling and tumbling, her stomach danced with nervousness. She couldn't wait to get out of there.

“My wife and I bid you good night.” Rayder nodded as they left and he closed the door. He started away without speaking.

“Rayder—”

With his grip still on her upper arm, he walked so fast she had to trot to keep up with him. Men hailed him, but he hurried without acknowledging their calls.

From the fury on his face, she didn't know if he was angry with her or the situation. Either way, she didn't like his expression. Her heart beat in her chest with leftover fear.

When they reached his quarters and he closed them inside, she'd had enough of being dragged along. “Rayder, you didn't have to drag me. I'm capable of walking myself.”

He clasped her shoulders and searched her face. “I wanted to get us the hells away from him.” His voice was rough with concern. “Are you all right?”

“Yes, but I’m glad you came when you did. I went to the admiral to beg him not to leave shore. I thought he’d leave you behind.”

“He probably would have. Why did you take the risk of going to his quarters?”

“I was worried. I would have done anything...” And she almost had.

“By the god, I don’t know whether to strangle you for putting yourself in so much danger or kiss you.” He groaned low in his throat and dragged her into arms.

His mouth came down on hers just as he stuffed one hand in her hair and bracketed her close to his body with his other arm. As his mouth tasted hers, his tongue thrust deep, teasing and stroking. Flame ignited in her belly, and she clutched at him.

Rayder’s arms made her instantly forget that she’d suffered an agony of not knowing if he’d been injured or killed. Relief filled her heart. His tongue stroked, not teasing but taking, caressing, desperate in his passion.

He drew back and she trembled at the fire in his eyes. “Phili told me the admiral might move the ship before you got back. I was afraid of being here alone without you.” Her

fingers gripped his shoulders as anger made her say, "And I couldn't stand that. I should be strong here without you. I should—"

"You couldn't have stopped him if he wanted to move the ship. As it is, he didn't leave because he knows he can't run this ship without me."

"I was willing to..." She shuddered at the thought of what might have happened if Rayder hadn't appeared.

His eyes narrowed. "Willing to do what?"

"Offer myself to him to make certain he wouldn't leave you on shore."

Rayder's grim expression didn't frighten her, but the disapproval in his expression left no doubt what he thought. "By all that is holy, Xandra. Are you out of your head? I'm not worth putting yourself in that much danger."

She'd say it even if he didn't want to hear it. She tapped her chest with two fingers. "Maybe you aren't worth it. But even if I don't like it, I need your protection."

She wouldn't admit to anything more, to heavier, more elaborate feelings. No, admitting that would only lead to problems later when she had to leave him.

That luscious red, as rich as a sunset, filled his eyes. Passion stirred in her stomach in response.

He kissed her again, his tastes lingering, gently passionate. He ignited a yearning within her core that grew like a fireball. His kiss didn't coax her it threw her into a maelstrom and demanded an answer. She gave it. She met his tongue, using what he'd taught her. He groaned against her mouth as she became the aggressor. She explored, tasting Rayder with the same passion he'd shown her. His hand slipped down, down and cupped her butt. He squeezed her bottom, and she clenched, her pussy aching deep with a desire to hold his thickness inside, to feel it stroking her thrust after hard thrust.

Curling her fingers against his hard chest, she wished he were naked. The thought flew through her head, shocking but completely true. She wanted to experience that tenderness, that ravenous passion he'd introduced her to not long ago. This time, though, she wanted to know him in every way possible. She wanted his body inside hers to discover the ecstasy she'd already found. Before she could show him how much more she wanted him, he drew back quickly.

Words backed up in her throat, tight and almost impossible to say. "When I was locked up in the hold with the other women—"



“What?” Anger crossed his face.

She shook her head. “It is a long story.”

“One that you shall tell me in short order.”

“Take your rest first.”

Rayder cupped her face. “I’m sorry I didn’t come back last night.”

Her hands clutched his waist. “What happened to you?”

“Complications.” He released her and headed for the bathing bowl. “Several.”

“I’ve had some complications of my own.”

He removed his shirt and belt in short order. Pectoral muscles shifted, moved, his muscular stomach tempting her. She wanted to feel the strength under that light dusting of hair.

“Are these weapons yours?” she asked when she didn’t recognize the sword and dagger in his belt.

“No. Mine were taken from me.” He splashed water across his face.

Back muscles bunched and rippled as he moved, and she licked her lips. By the god, she loved his muscles.

“Drakus Fina wanted me dead,” he said.

As water dripped off his face, she puzzled over this information. “I thought you were compatriots with Drakus Fina?”

He grunted. “Yes and no.”

He explained his adventures in more detail and how he escaped Drakus’ men with the help of Daryk Ones. “They apparently didn’t like the idea of killing me.”

“Thank the god.” She wanted to hold him again, wanted to experience the reassurance that he was really here. Really alive. She might have lost him, and the thought staggered her. “You might have been killed.

“Every time a man goes into the jungle, he puts his life at risk.”

She sank down on the side of the bed. “What does this mean for your slave trading? Will the admiral be angry with you?”

“It means that Drakus Fina is probably my enemy now. It means he might be the admiral’s enemy now. I’m not

certain.”

“Oh dear.”

He laughed, the sound unconcerned but weary. “An understatement of amazing proportions, my beauty.”

“What happened after you escaped Drakus’ men?”

He wiped his face with a towel. “I headed to Minilos Willburi’s tavern outside Grimnald Castle. That’s when I ran into another Daryk One.” Rayder’s mouth twisted with regret. “We used to be friends. I helped him rescue his mate from a slave trader.”

Her eyebrows went up. “You’re a slave trader, yet you helped your friend save his mate?”

“My loyalty to Dane Charger is far stronger than my loyalty to a slaver.” He smoothed a wet cloth over his torso. “You’ll be happy to know Dane’s mate is your friend from the ship, Keteria Aldrancos.”

Xandra gasped with delight. “That’s wonderful. She’s alive.” A bad thought interrupted her joy. She grabbed his arm. “Was she harmed? Is this Dane Charger treating her well?”

“I got the distinct impression, though he wouldn’t admit

it, that he was desperate to recover her. She's his true mate, and he would die for her."

Xandra exhaled. "I'm so relieved she's alive. I would love to see her."

"Not much chance of that at present."

Xandra recalled what Phili had said considering Rayder's protective attitude toward the women on the ship. Taken together with his loyalty to his fellow Daryk One in recovering Keteria and she'd begun to doubt the evil slave trader personality he wished to cultivate.

"You are a fake," she said softly.

"How?"

"From what I learned from Phili and from Malena, you've helped the slave women. Tried to keep them as safe and comfortable as possible."

He sniffed. "Do not believe everything you hear."

She snatched the cloth out of his hand and smoothed it over his pectorals. Her skin brushed his, hot and undeniably potent. She savored his masculinity, wanting to explore and touch with abandon.

When she dared look up, his eyes flamed that potent red. He gasped and held her hand to his chest. "Why do I have the feeling you've much to tell me?"

"I do."

His head tilted to the side, his eyes devouring her. A tingle started low in her belly. Heat gathered and pooled. Moist need dampened her between the legs. Restless need demanded she act. Before she could try anything reckless, he eased the cleansing cloth from her hand and stepped back. Disappointment pinched her until he continued to undress.

He removed his boots, shucked his pants and kicked them aside. Her heartbeat increased as she eagerly took in sculpted muscles, hard thighs, and his thick, erect cock. Her breath caught at the sight of him so aroused and ready.

"Tell me what happened to you while I was gone," he asked.

She barely heard him.

"Let me help you." She snatched the cloth from his hand again and swallowed her inhibitions. "Turn around."

His eyes widened a little with disbelief, but then a smile touched his mouth. "As you wish."

When he turned away from her she almost closed her eyes to block her overwhelming reaction to his sculpted form, the powerful line of his wide shoulders, the way his back tapered down to that intriguing firm butt. He was a sight to feast on, and her mind whirled with possibilities. Sinful thoughts dominated, and yet she could barely dredge up a smidgen of guilt for feeling them. He looked over his shoulder, and the fire in his eyes made her breath catch.

“What happened?” he asked.

In a halting voice, as she cleansed his back, she told him about Phili locking her in with the rest of the women, of the admiral attempting to lure her upstairs, and Phili’s surprising revelations. To her surprise, he listened without interrupting. Men on Magonia frequently interrupted women.

Each movement of the cloth over his skin raised her temperature until she believed she might burn. His skin gleamed with moisture as she allowed the cloth to skirt those firm ass cheeks. She knelt to touch his thighs, one hand touching the left, the cloth making quick work of his other. Hair sprinkled over his hard legs, and the masculine lines of one muscle after the other made her heartbeat quicken, her mind filled with appreciation. Yes, she’d seen him naked before, but this close and touching him so intimately changed everything.

His muscles twitched slightly, and she wondered if her touch affected him that much. Disconcerted, she stood slowly. He turned toward her, his eyes filled with red and an anger that was almost palpable.

“That bastard Aramus. To think he could have taken you out of there and—”

He cut himself off and clenched his fists.

Once she'd been a bit afraid of that red. His passion was high, and if he wanted her, she didn't have it in her to deny him. Instinctively she understood if she told him not to touch her or take her, he would honor it. He'd said he wouldn't hurt a woman, and once she'd seen how the slaves below adored him, she wondered which was the true Rayder? The honorable man or the dishonorable one?

Everything in Rayder's expression said if Aramus had been in the room he would have killed the man and damn the consequences.

Rayder would kill for her.

She didn't know how she knew, but she felt it. A scary feeling, to be certain.

“You musn't believe what Phili tells you,” he said, interrupting her thoughts.

"I wouldn't have, but she was sincere. I could see that."

He shook his head. "She lies."

"Perhaps. But only to survive."

"She lies to survive, but she also lies to get what she wants. She's not the worst woman I've met, but she is far from the best."

"Who is the best person you've ever met?"

He shook his head. "Perhaps my sister." His voice was hushed, his gaze caressing hers. "But she's gone."

"How did she..."

His face darkened, and his anger seemed to increase. "Not now. I can't tell you now. It'll only make me more angry, and you don't want that."

Some of his tension eased, and then his closeness surrounded her, his masculine beauty so potent she couldn't ignore him. She felt overwhelmed and protected at the same time.

Perhaps she should change the subject. "Phili also told me Yoanda is not what she appears to be. That Yoanda is as much a manipulator as she is."



“Yoanda is timid enough.”

“Not according to Phili.”

“Take what Phili says with great caution.”

She plunged onward. “She’s also planning to escape this ship.”

He looked surprised then indifferent. “Let her try. It is on her head.”

“I could go with her. You would no longer need to keep track of my whereabouts.”

“No.” His voice lowered to a determined rumble. “Do not dare to think about it. She’s not to be trusted.”

“And you are?” She heard the doubt in her own voice.

“You can trust me with your life, damn the hells.”

His statement transfixed her. Rayder, for a flash in time, looked totally stricken. Vulnerability filled his eyes she’d never seen before, and it melted something hard and cynical in her chest. She didn’t know what to say or how to say what his statement did to her. She’d never imagined a man wanting her this much physically. Could he feel more

for her emotionally? No. Perhaps not. This mating thing he spoke of was more physical than anything, a biological imperative that glued men and women together to ensure continuation of their species.

His took the cloth away from her again and tossed it on the table. "I'm sorry."

"About what?"

"That I couldn't return fast enough to get you out of that damn dungeon. By the god." His voice lowered to a harsh whisper. "That bastard Aramus!"

She flinched at the sharpness in his voice. "You couldn't have known. I'm glad you helped your friend, otherwise I never would have known Keteria is safe."

His fingers slid over her shoulders, and she touched the dusting of dark hair on his chest.

She feared what she wanted. She wanted his touch, more of the lovemaking she'd experienced before.

His hand slipped through the tumble of hair at the back of her head. "I'm angry and I might scream or even break something. The thought of the admiral harming you fills me with a rage I've never experienced in my life before. I don't know how to control it." He drifted for a moment. "But

always remember, you should never fear me.”

Comfort eased into her tension, and she closed her eyes. “I only know that you’re here safe and alive. That’s all I need for the moment.”

He lifted a strand of hair to his nose and sniffed it. A low rumbled cleared his throat. “My beauty.”

His husky voice sent a wild thrill through her body, and she shivered. He gathered her close.

Before this moment she’d always wondered what it would be like to possess a man as much as he possessed her. On Magonia such a thing couldn’t happen with their morals and beliefs. Yet it hadn’t stopped her from wondering.

His eyes burned into hers, conveying the message of how much he needed her. Rayder brushed his lips over hers, teasing each lip with one sweet kiss and then the next. She didn’t respond, too drugged by the feeling. All she could do was enjoy. Jerking her closer, he kissed her with a ferocious taste of lips and tongue. He delved deeply. Stroking, he teased, flirted until excitement danced along her skin with sweet, sweet tingles.

Xandra responded, wanting him inside her though she’d never experienced his masculinity within her most

private flesh. She needed his flesh melding, stroking until desire consumed her. She skimmed her hands over his nakedness with greedy desire, enjoying the metal-hard muscles as they bunched and flexed. Her body understood what her mind hadn't.

This was inevitable.

Destined.

Exploring him, she brushed her fingers over his chest, tantalized by the arousing sensation of his chest hair along her skin. When she touched his nipples, he gasped against her mouth. She did it again. Again. Each time he quivered, his throaty moan delighting her, giving her power she never imagined she'd have over a man.

He cupped her butt and lifted her slightly until her pussy nestled over his cock. He rubbed his length against her clit and a fire started deep in her womb. He walked her backward until the back of her knees hit the bed. She sat down and he knelt to slip off her shoes. He tossed them in a corner and looked at her. He yanked her pants off then lifted her tunic above her head. She was naked in moments, breathless with the quickness of his approach, stunned by desire.

Ruthless need heated his eyes as he stared at her with clear hunger. His gaze turned as red as a star extinguishing

at night. She crawled onto the bed then scooted backward to make room. Rayder hovered over her.

“Show me...” she whispered.

“I’ll show you everything. Everything your heart desires.”

## Chapter Thirteen

Desire pooled low in Xandra's belly. She'd never seen him like this, beyond frantic, eager and overwhelming with passion. With any other man, the swiftness of her craving would have astonished and perhaps frightened her. Yet they'd been here before, and with skin against skin, she craved what they'd had. That silky slide into heat, the unstoppable plunge straight into euphoria. Pleasure like what he'd shown her couldn't be explained, catching a human's soul and stripping away barriers.

"My mate," he whispered in her ear.

Overwhelming joy twisted inside her. She couldn't deny the connection, the unbreakable heat that brought them together. He palmed her butt and brought their bodies even tighter together.

Crispy hair on his chest teased her nipples and they tingled and tightened. A stirring swirled in her belly and moved with liquid fingers to the soft folds between her legs.

Oh yes. Yes. She wanted this. Ached for it. Every texture became new as his muscles moved against her, cradling and protecting, arousing with each movement. He stared down with those red eyes, and the heated glow added fuel to the fire starting to climb. One muscled thigh slipped between her legs and pressed her clit. It felt so wonderful she closed her eyes and just felt. Too many emotions and too many sensations bombarded her. It all felt delicious and amazing.

Rayder's emotions flew around inside him like a beast determined to break loose. He'd never known a more beautiful woman in his life or a more infuriating one. She'd risked her safety for him, and while he admired her courage, anger sank deep teeth into him. She'd been reckless. Punishment was in order. He needed to torment her with pleasure so undeniable she'd never want to be free of him. Eager, he tightened his arms around her. His gaze swept her. Though he'd seen her naked before, this time it felt more precious and meaningful. Her body was creamy white, a bruise here and there marking the trauma she'd suffered during the shipwreck. He traced one small bruise on her shoulder and felt her body react with a small shiver. He kissed another bruise on the opposite shoulder. Tenderness assaulted him, causing his gut to clench not only with physical need but a driving desire to fuck. He wanted her. Now. By the god, now.

“Never do that again.” His voice roughed. “Ever.”

She wrapped her arms around his neck. “Do what?”

He brushed his index finger over her nose with a soft, teasing touch. “Try to save me. You should not.”

“Why?”

“You know why.”

Exasperation crossed her face, and she allowed her hand to slide down his broad shoulder. “Yes, I know. You think it’s dangerous. That something bad could have happened to me.”

“It almost did.”

Those eyes sparked, flamed as her lips flattened into a tight line. As it had from the moment he’d first spoken with her, his body craved hers, his delight in the back-and-forth-banter requiring that he put his stamp on her. When she licked her lips again, he couldn’t help but stare. He wanted to taste each lip, to caress her mouth until she parted for him in surrender. Her hair drifted over her shoulder, and he reached for the long tresses. He buried his nose in the pretty scent. God, she smelled finer and more edible than any meal. He trailed his lips down her neck.



Her body quivered. "But nothing bad really happened."

He growled softly. "You defy me."

A surprised and satisfied sound entered Xandra's voice as she said, "Yes."

"I like it."

She laughed. "I thought Dragonian men were dominating and expected compliance."

"I'm not dominating."

Her eyes twinkled with amusement. "You're not dominating? Hmmm. I do not think I agree."

His fingers swept down her arm to snatch her hand and bring it to his mouth. He pressed tender kisses to the back of her hand and when he looked up, her pupils were dilated. She licked her bottom lip. His cock, already hard as spike, grew even harder.

Fluttering his tongue in her palm, he tickled Xandra and hoped she felt as out of control as he did. "By the god, you are sweet. I want to lick every inch of you, suck your nipples and pussy until you can't stop screaming with pleasure."

"You are too explicit, Rayder." Her voice was

breathless with a feminine huskiness that betrayed her arousal. "It is too..."

He tormented her arm as he kissed upward, upward until he reached her neck. "Good?"

Once there, he teased with tiny kisses. Under his lips, her pulse jumped wildly. He licked over that pulse point, loving how her skin prickled and she shivered and moaned. Every sigh drove him to do more, to take more. Tasting. Lingering. Brushing. Until her body arched in his arms, pushing up against his hard thigh, rubbing against him to increase the beautiful sensations that grew with every movement. He looked down at her body and admired those small shoulders, long arms and the perfect jut of her plump breasts with their tantalizing reddish center.

He cupped both breasts with tenderness, aware a woman's breasts could be over-sensitive when first touched. This was going to kill him. He wanted to devour her on the spot. Instead, he reined in his desires, knowing it might take some time to bring her to an orgasm.

Women needed special touches. Special attention to feel wanted and sexually motivated. His mouth teased her right nipple. She gasped as he licked, drew the bud into his mouth and tantalized with tiny flicks of his tongue. She tasted more appetizing than any fruit.

Moving to her other nipple, he sucked it, used his tongue to taunt her flesh into a tight, hard bud. He worked his way across her breasts and heard the pleasure on her lips as he swept his tongue over and over each crest before sucking them into his mouth and feeding on them with ravenous attention. His cock felt so hard and tight, he wondered how much longer he could wait. He wanted her writhing and helpless beneath him. Soon he fell into a trance where only the moment mattered. The past was gone. The future never came.

All was now.

He maneuvered down her body until he reached the rounded curve of her hips. Hungrily he took in reddish-gold fluff between her legs. It curled tightly, barely covering her pretty little clit as it peeked out from its protective folds. His groin tightened unbearably and he wanted to sink his cock inside her. He held back.

Protectiveness also welled inside him—he wanted her safe, but he wanted her to know she could trust him. Rayder gave her the first taste of what he could do to soothe any caution she might feel about what he planned to do.

Xandra watched in anticipation as Rayder swept his tongue between her legs. She gasped in delight. Pleasure escalated and built as he explored one fold and then

another.

“So slick.” He smoothed her moisture over her clit.

Another lick and another tortured her until the unrelenting way he searched brought her craving that much higher. She wriggled, trying to get free of the continuing torment.

“Please, Rayder.”

He worked her, the movement of his thumb on her clit threatening to drive her mad. “What do you need, my beauty? Do you want to come?”

Her head tossed from side to side as she tried to escape. “Yes. Yes!”

He slid two fingers slowly inside her tight passage, pushing deep, deeper. He began to move them in and out. She didn’t know what to ask for, and when his mouth fastened on her clit and sucked, she came apart in shuddering waves of paradise. She cried out as bliss rocked her for what seemed eternity. As she came down from the high, she lay completely replete and joyful.

With a soft growl he released her only long enough to slip between her thighs. As a maiden she knew so little, and under his patience, she witnessed physical love in a far

sweeter way than she could have imagined. She knew there was more to come, and curiosity mixed with apprehension and eagerness.

Her body tingled from end to end as she looked up at Rayder. She sighed. He was beyond beautiful. No. Not beautiful. The stark lines of his hard jaw, eyes dark and hungry, lips parted and nostrils flared. All of it sent new, hot feelings straight to her pussy. She shivered with longing.

“Please, Rayder.”

To her surprise, his eyes weren't red. They simmered with a tenderness she hadn't expected. “What do you need, my beauty?”

Slowly she shook her head. “I don't know.” Her hands clutched at his shoulders. “I don't...”

His mouth smothered her words, his tongue plunging in to stroke hers. His cock settled between her folds, the teasing sensation and the caress of his tongue in her mouth made Xandra squirm. Writhing, she pushed up against Rayder and his cock slid inside her. She gasped and moaned against his lips as his thick length spread her wide.

“Easy.” His soft groan into her mouth sounded rough, unsteady.

“You’re so...big.”

He chuckled, and she opened her eyes to his smile. His lips brushed hers with tender touches. “Does it hurt?”

“No. It’s...” Her hips surged against him, and his cock slid deeper. “Oh... That feels wonderful.”

“Mmm.” He shuddered against her. “Do you know what you feel like? Hot. Wet. You’re squeezing my cock.”

She tunneled her hands through his hair. Allowing the sensual slide send sweet sensation over skin. “Is that all? I mean, what happens next?”

“Don’t you know?”

“I know some of it, and this feels good, but—”

He pushed and slid deeper into her wet core then immediately drew back until he removed his cock from her completely. She sighed and closed her eyes. Nothing had ever been so wonderful. Everything inside her was sensitive, on fire, alight with craving that she couldn’t define. He thrust, easing inside with one gentle stroke. His erection went deeper then drew back, thrust again, easing farther inside her with one stroke. Two. Three. Her body responded, and she arched her hips. She touched him

everywhere she could reach, grabbing on to his shoulders as she opened to the feelings his flesh created inside her. He thrust and found his way all the way inside her.

A giving sensation, a small twinge caused her to gasp. "Oh!"

"All right?" He rasped against her mouth.

She was more than all right. She was in awe. "Yes."

"You're mine."

Her right of passage into womanhood had arrived, and it felt more beautiful and divine than she could have imagined. No. She had never dared imagined coming together with any man like this.

He moved slightly, his length stroking at the mouth of her womb. "Oh."

"You like that, my beauty?"

"Oh yes."

"There is a spot within a woman's cunny that a man can sometimes touch—" He undulated his hips and brushed over a spot inside her.

Pleasure spiked inside her pussy. She groaned. Her hips arching into his as pure excitement darted to every inch of her body. "Yes!"

His laugh purred low, seductive, an assurance more would come. "I think I found it."

She'd expected to be sore, that his large cock would hurt. Instead all she felt was pure pleasure. "More."

He gave her what she wanted, thrusting with tiny movements of his hips. Steady. Over and over. Heat spread through her loins. She gasped, moaned, her head thrashing back and forth. She wanted to find that wonderful plateau she'd experienced before, but didn't grasp how to reach it.

Her fingers dug into Rayder's shoulders in desperation as her hips moved in reaction to his unrelenting strokes.

Rayder made a low sound in his throat as he moved slower. "Feel me deep inside you. Hold me inside. Hold me tight. I need to feel you."

She bucked under him. "Rayder, I can't stand this I need...harder."

He didn't, and it drove her wild.



Steadily, he continued the seduction, hips surging, his hands buried in her hair. She couldn't stand it any longer, her heart pounding, breath panting as the pleasure rose so high she couldn't contain it any longer. Her breath suspended, white spots forming before her eyes as everything seemed to still.

Hot pleasure exploded deep within her core. She quivered, total abandon, pleasure more fierce than any she'd imagined breaking her apart and coming back together. Her body clenched and released, clasp the hard cock still moving within her. In a daze of heady pleasure, she fell into his continued movement. He pushed up on his palms, and with a growl, he plunged between her thighs. Harsh breath parting his lips, throat exposed, he rammed inside her with hard thrusts that pounded deep.

Rayder couldn't take it anymore, his body out of control, wanting to stamp his possession upon her. He allowed his body free reign. He looked down at his mate, saw her eyes go wide, ecstasy breaking over her features as her pussy clamped down on him and throbbed around his flesh. She was coming again, and he never wanted her to stop. Sweating, breathing hard, he gave her everything he had. As ecstasy hovered, he let go. Surging into her one last time and holding deep, he growled loudly as he shot stream after stream of hot semen into her creamy softness. Shaking, he sank on top of her. He rolled to the side and

then onto his back, gathering her into his arms. Her sweet, tight pussy still held onto his cock.

He couldn't remember the last time he'd felt this good inside a woman. Though his mind would normally feel somewhat blank and he'd drift in the afterglow of pleasure, he felt his cock harden within her and the desire to fuck her surged to the front. Shaking with need, he lifted her gently and she slid off his cock.

"My beauty, I want you again."

Her eyes widened from their dreamy state. "Again?"

"Again. And I promise you it will bring you great pleasure."

## Chapter Fourteen

“Turn over on your stomach and get up on your hands and knees.” Rayder’s voice slid over her with silken, deep vibrations.

“Why?”

“There are new pleasures to be found.”

A soft smile touched his hard lips, and part of her quailed with concern about what he wanted her to do. After all, the red in his eyes looked even hotter, more ablaze than it had been a short time ago. He walked away and opened a drawer. He extracted a bottle with a clear liquid. As he opened the lid on the bottle, she drank in the sight of him. She would never tire of observing each long, hard sinew in his shoulders, his arms and long legs. Between those legs his cock stayed erect and thick.

“You are still... I heard that most men have to wait before they can make love again?” she asked, shy about

inquiring.

He grinned as he poured oil onto his fingers and into his palms. "Most men do. I'm a Daryk One and bonded to my mate. We could make love several more times tonight without stopping."

Her mouth opened in surprise. What could she say?

"Don't worry. Tonight there is only one more loving you need to experience. Then we'll rest." He returned to the bed. "This oil will bring you ecstasy beyond what you just experienced. It will introduce you to another kind of passion."

Curiosity stirred higher, as did a pulsing need between her thighs. She couldn't have predicted it, but she wanted him again. Wanted to feel that thickness thrusting deep and opening her wide. She turned over and got on her hands and knees. He touched her buttocks and the sensation made her twitch with pleasure. He cupped her ass, sliding the liquid over the globes and gently squeezing and caressing. A tingle throbbed in her clit and her nipples tightened into achy little points. This position was shameless. Erotic beyond anything she'd expected. After all, he could see her butt. He could touch her and observe her when she couldn't see him. Vulnerability almost gave her a voice and denial.

Before she could react, he nestled behind her and leaned over her body. His cock bumped between the crease of her buttocks. She jumped in surprise and a shock of unexpected arousal.

“Easy,” he whispered softly.

He rubbed the thick oil up her back and over her shoulders then down to her breasts where he smoothed the oil around and around her nipples without touching them. She pushed into his touch, closing her eyes and moaning softly. Tingles radiated from her nipples and warmth spread in a slow, drugging wave from her breasts down to her belly and swirled with erotic force in the tender folds between her legs. Earlier her arousal had bubbled up slowly, and surely now it simmered and boiled. Xandra wanted him again so quickly it astonished her.

“How does that feel, my beauty?” His voice rasped low.

“I want you.” She didn’t hold back. “Is there something in that oil? I can’t wait. I can’t.”

He chuckled, and the rumbling sound strummed her body as if it touched with physical fingers. “Good. Yes, the oil heightens your need for sex. It also makes what we’re about to do easier.”

When his fingers touched between her buttocks, she

gasped in shock. "What are you doing?"

"Giving you new pleasure. Do you trust me?"

She didn't hesitate. "Yes."

"Then close your eyes and feel. I won't hurt you."

She closed her eyes and concentrated on the feelings. His fingers returned to her buttocks, lightly brushing up and down the crease, between the crease. Each pass sent new sparks of delight radiating from her ass down to her pussy. Another pass and this time he circled her forbidden entrance with a light touch. It tickled and tingled and she squirmed.

"Rayder." Her voice sounded breathy to her own ears. "What..."

"Trust me. We did this before."

She kept her eyes closed and concentrated on the sensations bombarding her. Slow and sure, he circled that little, tight hole with the oil and arousal built and burned. By the god, she liked it, and that surprised her. In a million years she never would have imagined a man touching her there or the exciting sensations that would come from his touch. Her body trembled, a fine sweat beading her skin as her temperature rose. Though she wondered what was

happening, she also understood that nothing could stop what he wanted next. For whatever he needed, she needed it to, her desire to please him so overwhelming she ached inside.

Rayder eased one finger deep into her backside. As it had the last time, the feeling grew, the need hot and fierce. But then, as he drew that finger out, he added another. Slow. Slow. He pushed two fingers with deliberate pressure into her. A slight pinch and then nothing but soul-stirring pleasure as two fingers thrust into her backside and retreated. The touch stayed gentle as he reached with his other hand to stroke one nipple between two fingers. She gasped, writhed as exhilaration flared across her body into her pussy, making her so ecstatic she knew if he touched her between the legs she'd be even wetter than before. For long moments he stroked, petted and teased her opening with thrust after thrust. When he removed his fingers, she groaned. Magon forgive her, but she wanted those wicked fingers. She yearned for a conclusion to the stirring in her body, the raging craving that threatened to drive her mad. Everything she'd believed considering a woman's sexuality had been torn asunder by this man's passion.

The rounded tip of his cock pushed between her crease and teased her entrance. She held her breath as he eased the thick tip into her with a minute thrust. The oil had made her pliant, slick, ready for penetration. She'd thought

it would hurt, but as he pressed forward, his long erection went deeper and deeper. Moving his hips in slow rhythm, he delved with gentle persuasion. Rayder's cock slipped in with a smoothness that surprised her, and she closed her eyes to absorb the startling sensation. He cupped her hips in his big hands.

He caressed her skin, sliding his calloused fingertips over her softness. Pleasure ignited as he pumped his hips. Arching her back, she threw herself into the moment. Her body felt light, open to experience, awash in heady pleasure never ending. Rayder's grip tightened on her hips as he quickened the thrusts. Xandra's heartbeat picked up the momentum as she squirmed in his grip, feelings too intense and fierce to withstand. He thrust faster, moved deeper, pumping his cock into her ass until his thickness filled her channel completely. Assaulted by desire, she pushed back against his thrust, she added to the fire. His touch found her everywhere. Hips. Waist. Butt cheeks. Her back.

Climax assaulted her with pulsing, pounding bliss. Heat spread through her loins, to the forbidden entrance where Rayder continued to plunder her secrets. She cried out. Sharp. Almost startled as she shook and quivered. Rayder's cock grew larger, harder before he gave one last thrust and roared. His voice a growl of demand. Heat blossomed as he shot semen into her ass. The strange



sensation added to her delight, and she smiled in astonished pleasure. He fell away from her, his cock slipping from within her. Immediately he found his way to the bathing area, pouring new water, cleaning himself swiftly.

When he turned to her, his smile showed in those eyes. Red had left his eyes—he no longer possessed that feral heat in quite the same way. She smiled again, too amazed by all that had happened. Rayder's arms surrounded her in solid strength. She laid her head on his chest and ran her fingers through the curly mat of dark hair between his pectorals and explored the slightly thinner growth of hair over his nipples and down over his ridged stomach. His power fascinated her, and the extraordinary delight running through her now wouldn't dissipate. Perhaps it wasn't supposed to. Perhaps this was the illusive truth that Magonian Truth and Order Police and the scribes didn't want women to know. Or men for that matter.

He shifted, one arm coming around her back and the other cupping her wandering hand and stilling it on his chest.

“Rayder?”

“Hmm?”

“Is sex always like this?”

Rayder chuckled. "It is never like this. Or I should say it was never like this for me."

"How do you feel?"

"Feel?" He grunted. "By the god. Even Magonian women are plagued with wanting to know how men feel."

She pushed up from his chest, boldness making her straddle his hips. Her naked, still-sensitive pussy brushed his still-hard cock. Tingles of pleasure radiated from where they touched, but she ignored it. If he didn't wish to talk feelings, she would learn more another way.

"There is still more for me to know about you, Rayder Tyrus. You have secrets from me."

A smile touched his lips as he grasped her hips. His gaze dropped to her breasts and he licked his lips. A heat wave tingled over her body as she realized how hungry he still looked. As if he could take her again in a heartbeat. "I am all that you see. There's nothing more to know."

Doubt riddled her confidence. "No, there is more."

His eyes flamed to red, his nostrils flaring as his hands ran up to her breasts and cupped them. "Indeed there is more. More for us to do. I didn't think I would need more

tonight, but your body tempts me beyond madness.”

Madness? Was that the reason behind her insatiable need for him?

Any idea she had to extract secrets from him disappeared when he lifted her off his hips with incredible strength. His cock touched between her pussy lips, a burning brand. With one deep thrust, he took her. She gasped at the stretched, totally full feeling.

A wild shiver traced her body. “What are we doing now? I thought we were finished.”

“We’ll never be finished, my beauty. Ride me.”

Before she could ask what he meant, he slipped his hand behind her head and drew her gently down for a kiss. With one hand still at her waist, he thrust upward. His cock surged inside her as his hips pumped. Hot spirals lit in her pussy, a pleasure so unexpected she moaned into his mouth. His tongue fucked her mouth as his cock plundered her depths. When he released her from the kiss, she allowed instinct to take over. She joined the gyrations, riding his cock up and down and gasping as searing bliss pulsed out from her clit then fired to life within her pussy. She cried out at the startling climax and the powerful effect. But Rayder didn’t stop, his hips meeting hers again and again as she rode him hard and fast. Growls issued from

his throat, and his hips snapped up one more time. His cock throbbed inside her, and once more warmth flooded her pussy.

Gasping with pleasure, she sank against his chest. “Rayder?”

“Yes?” His voice was thick.

“Do you plan to do this every time I ask questions you don’t want to answer?”

“Yes.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Rayder couldn’t stand it. If his wife walked by him one more time completely naked, he would have to put a stop to it and fuck her again. He’d asked her to put on clothing. She’d smiled and refused. He’d growled a little and scowled, but she still wouldn’t dress, claiming the cabin was stuffy. He’d opened a porthole to allow air inside, knowing that any conversation or carnal pleasures they indulged in would be heard outside. He didn’t care about that. He’d polished his boots, made them meals, and in defiance of everything he thought he knew about her, his little chit had become wanton as hells.

They’d fucked three times then spent the rest of the day

and evening sleeping, reading and eating. They'd fallen asleep entwined in each other's arms. He hadn't taken her this morning, much as he'd wanted to. She would be sore after their vigorous activity.

She irritated him in ways he'd never been irritated before, and he hated that.

He didn't like how she *ooed* and *ahhed* over his sister's poetry. Part of him wished he'd thrown away Aknada's book. Sitting on the shelf, dusty and purposely forgotten, the poetry couldn't hurt him. Xandra insisted on reading it out loud, exclaiming on Aknada's virtues as a poet. On his sister's obvious beauty of mind.

Rayder had wanted to forget.

But that wasn't the half of it.

Since that morning, when the ship had started to sail toward the southern tip of Dragonia where Aramus planned to sell more slaves, Rayder and Xandra had stayed mostly in their cabin. He planned to keep Xandra even closer to him if he could. He needed... He wanted her...

Pregnant. By the god, he wanted her pregnant.

The thought raced through his head so quickly and powerfully he stared at the bed and felt sexual fires break

through his restraint and demand action. His chest lifted up and down as he took slow, steady breaths. He clenched his fists and released them.

As he thought about her round with his child, Rayder's cock twitched and stirred. Rayder's mating urges rose to the boiling point as Xandra walked in front of him on the way to the bathing basin, her nakedness driving him to within an inch of madness.

"By the god," he gasped, and snatched her wrist.

She stopped, startled, with her mouth open and eyes wider. Before she could speak, he stood, lifted her in his arms and tossed her on the bed. She bounced a little and sat up part of the way.

"Rayder!"

"I told you to put clothes on."

Little lines of confusion cleared between her eyes. "Oh, am I distracting you?"

"You know you damn well are, you little pest."

"Pest?" Mock hurt entered those eyes. "I'm your mate."

His voice went deeper, affected by the lust breaking

free and pulsing to each part of his body. "Mine. Mine to enjoy. Mine to pleasure."

"Are you ready to tell me your secrets now?"

Damn the consequences. His animal needs screamed with a craving for fulfillment as he undid the front of his trousers. His cock sprang free. "I'll give you my secrets."

Realizing, perhaps, that she'd bit off a little too much by teasing him so unmercifully, she dashed from the bed and pressed herself against one space on the wall that was free.

"Where do you think you're going? You're naked," he said.

"I..." Her eyes widened and spied his cock.

He didn't want to frighten her, and he was pretty certain what he saw alight in her gaze wasn't fear. He stalked toward her, cupped her ass, lifted her up against the wall, and sank his cock straight into her open, already wet cunny.

"Oh!" Her gasp sounded surprised and pleased. "Rayder, that's so good."

He chuckled as triumph surged. "Wrap your legs around my waist."

“We’re... This is...”

“Yes?”

Xandra’s eyes turned dreamy then her eyelashes fluttered as he started to thrust. Her eyes closed as a soft sigh left her mouth. Her arms went around his neck and he helped her wrap her legs about his waist. This was too good. Too exciting for words. His mind retreated until nothing but pure sensation enveloped him. Her soft, tight wetness gripped him as he pushed his cock as deep as it would go. She wriggled a little, a tiny moan of utter arousal breathing through her parted lips. He knew what she needed and continued to move. He circled his hips and found a rhythm that would bring them both the orgasm they deserved. He gauged her needs in a way he’d never experienced with another woman, listening to the hitch in her breath, the little whimper, the sigh.

“Do you want this? Do you want me?” he rasped the questions.

“Yes.” Eyes closed, she shivered, clasped at him.  
“Please more.”

With primitive satisfaction he gave it. There was nothing beyond the moment, beyond the excruciating need to feed his cock into her tightness again and again until



there was no her and him, but only them. Closing his eyes, he lost himself. She tightened and released over his cock in waves, telling him her body was ready to come. He increased the pace, thrusting with solid momentum. Breath rasping, heart banging in his chest, he drove toward the end result.

Hot. Wet. Silky pussy clenched over his thickness, and he gasped as he almost lost control and came inside her. He drew back from feelings to a less frantic place. Circling his hips, he threw his head back and moaned. Her fingernails tightened and bit into his shoulders. The tiny pain ignited fierce instincts. He hammered inside her, and she came unraveled. A high-pitched cry left her throat and her pussy throbbed around him. He shouted, holding inside her as his cock released stream after stream within her.

Xandra thought she'd died and been fortunate to find a beautiful hereafter. She was still propped up against the wall, fingers clenching at Rayder's tunic-clad shoulders. Pleasure made her head fuzzy, her breath coming in gasps. She became aware of his cock sliding from her as he set her on her feet. But if she thought he'd finished with her, she had another think coming. Before she could do much, he turned her to face the wall. Rayder's voraciousness surprised and thrilled her. What amazed her the most was the desire to fulfill his wants, to accept whatever he wanted to do. Yet nothing he wanted scared her or made her

uncomfortable. It was as if he'd turned her into someone else—perhaps the person she'd been all along and had never known.

“Rayder?” she asked softly.

He leaned against her from behind, his arms sliding around her waist as she pressed her palms to the wall. “Mmm.” His purr was throaty and his hot breath teased her ear, arousing yet more delights. “What is it?”

And his cock slid between her legs. With one smooth thrust he thrust into her channel again and filled her, stretched her wide and deep. She gasped in delight.

“Are we doing anything else today?” she barely managed to ask.

Drawing his hips back, he removed his cock from her pussy until only the tip touched just inside her wet entrance. She felt swollen and aroused. “Only if you want to.”

He was giving her a choice?

Another thrust.

With a groan, she managed, “Are we having a meal?”

Another thrust, this time deeper than the last. “Later.”

“Talking?”

“Doubtful.”

His hips circled, grinding until he lit a fuse and she cried out, came apart. She quaked around him, whimpered and groaned. When she came to herself once more, still panting and shaking, Rayder picked up the speed of his thrusts, pounding deep into her pussy until he erupted with a harsh cry. He shook against her and the hot flood of his essence flooded within her.

As they panted for breath, she said, “We might starve at this rate.”

“No,” he whispered against her neck, his cock still buried between her pussy lips. “I might never eat again. I will stay within you and feed you my life force.”

For the first time since they wed, she held doubts. One of those doubts left her stunned when the consequences should have floored her, should have made her reconsider this union.

She barely whispered, “Are you trying to make me pregnant? To test Drakus’ theories about Magonian women?”

If he did, he would be seriously disappointed.

Emotions crashed inside her and tears threatened. She could never give him what he wanted, and what would happen once he realized that fact?

## Chapter Fifteen

Rayder withdrew from Xandra and stepped back. She turned to see his expression. She drew in a harsh breath, battling with a desire to confess that she couldn't give him what he wanted and would one day have to leave him despite his assertion they were mates.

His hands came up to cup her face. "The god may strike me down, but yes. The thought of you bearing my child fills me with a fierce, possessive desire."

He swallowed hard, and for a small increment in time vulnerability flickered in his eyes. The red had disappeared. Discomfort flickered there, and he turned away. He rearranged his trousers then stood with his back to her, his chest heaving, hands on hips.

Worry sideswiped her. "Rayder?"

"Whatever you may believe about me, I would never try to impregnate you to prove one of Drakus' twisted desires."

His voice was hot, low with passion. "It burns within me to see you round with my child. But it has nothing to do with experimenting."

She touched his forearm. "Rayder, I'm so sorry. I... You have to understand what this is like for me. I had a life on Magonia. It wasn't the best life, but it was all I knew. Now in such a short time I'm here with you and experiencing...sex. If you were taken onto a slave ship and didn't know from one day to the next what would happen, wouldn't you be apprehensive?"

He looked over his shoulder. Understanding removed the thunderhead from his gaze. "Yes. I believe I would. Sometimes I forget that you aren't Dragonian."

Still uncertain, she asked, "Do you wish you'd mated with a Dragonian woman?"

He shook his head but didn't answer further.

She went to the bathing bowl and cleaned herself. As she washed, she pressed him for more answers. "You did not expect to mate at all, did you?"

"No."

"Why?"

He slowly sank onto the bed, leaning back on his palms in a deceptively relaxed pose she knew could change in a moment.

“Because my life as a Daryk One has been harsh and violence-filled. Some Daryk Ones see no problem with taking a mate and having a family.”

She dried off with a towel. “Do you know many Daryk Ones with families?”

“A few. But a family can suffer because of what a Daryk One is. What he must do to preserve the peace.”

“Because Daryk Ones are warriors?” She found her scattered clothes piece by piece. “A woman should feel safe with a Daryk One as her mate and husband.”

His gaze had returned to darkness, to memories he might wish to forget. “How can a woman mate with a man who can kill ruthlessly? A man who won’t stop until he completes his mission?” He shook his head. “There are consequences for such physical power.”

“Is that why you’re a slave trader instead of a Daryk One? How is a slave trader better than a Daryk One?”

He blinked, his eyes emotionless, then a stark and bitter expression crossed his features. “Do you honestly

wish to know? You might not like what you hear.”

She laughed, the sound sarcastic. “I’ve heard plenty I haven’t liked since I came aboard this ship.”

He didn’t speak, looking as if he’d fallen into deep thought.

She pulled her tunic over her head and down the rest of her body. She settled on the bed beside him. Part of her was terrified to know him so deeply. “If you tell me why you’re here in this place and this time, I’ll explain to you how I came to be on the *Hydrasoseles*. And it is very possible you won’t like what you hear either.” One way or the other he would have to learn the truth. Perhaps it was better to tell him now. “You don’t know my whole story.”

His silence disappointed her. Xandra wanted him eager to know her inside and out. While she knew he’d keep her safe and that he would do anything for her, that yearning for deeper connection ate at her. Until she knew everything driving Rayder, she wouldn’t feel complete. That she wanted that connection drove her mad.

Fire returned to his gaze, frustration and doubt close seconds. “If I tell you what you want to know, you may want to run from me. You may desire escape. But I can’t let you leave.”



“I’ll take that chance.”

He nodded and stood. He kept his back to her, his hands at his waist, gaze pinned outside the porthole.

He cleared his throat, and when he spoke, it issued as a rusty, misused sound. “I was born near Felican Castle near the border of the Ithaycan desert and the Tarrian jungle. We’re sailing to that region now.”

During their tempestuous lovemaking, she’d missed the fact they’d left shore.

Before she could comment, Rayder said, “Since we’ve lost a sale to Drakus, there is another trader near Felican Castle who may buy women.”

She winced as she thought of the women belowdecks still in danger. “Drakus isn’t the only one?”

His scoffing sound answered her. “More and more men are succumbing to the belief that stealing Magonian women is the only solution to save our people. Most of them don’t care about Dragonia. They want money and they thrive on terror and hatred.”

Her stomach tumbled, roiled at his words. “The danger is far worse than I believed.” She shook her head. “I’m sorry. You were trying to tell me your story.”

He turned toward her and continued. "My parents were exceptional people, as I mentioned to you before. My sister was three years younger than I. She was a brilliant fighter. Though Daryk One traits usually only occur in one child in a family, it was clear my sister displayed the tendencies." He turned to glance at her. "And her inclinations were not welcomed by most."

"I don't understand."

He wiped one hand over his face, as if he didn't want to explain, but knew she'd pester him until he did. "My sister was at least as tall as I am, and that isn't normal for a Dragonian woman. Right away she distinguished herself with fighting skills. She could even kill dragons. No woman in recent history has ever done that. I was proud of her, and even my parents were proud."

"That's wonderful."

"It was terrible."

He waited, staring at her as understanding glimmered on the surface.

"But her abilities were remarkable," she said.

"She was capable of everything a Daryk One can do."

Understanding made it through. "That would be a death sentence on Magonia." Shock held her motionless. "Are women killed for having the skills of a Daryk One?"

"No. Never. But because it is so rare, few women who have the skills are ever mated and married. Very few men wish to mate with a woman as strong and skilled as they are."

Indignation made her say, "So Dragonian men aren't as different than Magonian as you say."

His thick lashes masked his gaze as he looked down at the bed. "All men have commonalities. Even the ones who think they are advanced. Dragonians are not a perfect people." He waited, as if he expected her to argue. When she didn't, he proceeded. "When Aknada realized her skills cast her from most societal norms, she became depressed. I spent time with her, trying to get her to understand it wasn't a problem and her family supported her. I told her I would take care of her." He rubbed his temples as if they ached. "She accused me of wanting her to be as delicate and feminine as other women."

An ugly suspicion took hold. "Did you? Want her to be like other women?"

He pushed out a loud breath and dared look her

straight in the eyes. "Yes."

She didn't know how she felt about that. "Why?"

"I didn't want to suppress her. I knew how she'd be treated, and I didn't want her to suffer. I believed she'd never find a mate."

Xandra stood, her heart aching before she knew what the end of his tale would reveal. She felt it in the air. "But something bad did happen."

"She tried complying to societal norms. She dressed like a woman. Yet I saw that she was hurting trying to be something she was not. Eventually she found a man she seemed to like. She seemed genuinely happy, and I was certain they'd have a long life together."

"A Daryk One?"

"An ordinary blacksmith. They were in love...at least that's what she told me." He shrugged. "I don't know what love is like, so I only had what they told me to go on."

She frowned deeply at his words. "You don't believe in love?"

He shrugged, face impassive. "Not as so many poets describe it."

Discomfort made her move past the subject. “Did Aknada write poetry to become more feminine?”

“No. She wrote poetry from the time she was a child.”

“I see. What happened then?”

“Three years ago she was in the Ithaycan desert with her betrothed near the market. Bandits raided. She tried to defend her betrothed, but he stepped in front of a sword and was killed.”

She covered her mouth with one hand. “How awful.”

“She blamed me for his death.”

“Why?”

“The bandits had tried to steal from legitimate business owners for some time. When they discovered that I was leading a pack of Daryk Ones to keep Felican Castle safe, they attacked my sister. She felt if I hadn’t antagonized the bandits, there wouldn’t have been an attack.” He sighed. “That isn’t all. I took her back to Felican Castle after her betrothed’s death. In the night, the bandits attacked again. We fought hard, but he had superior numbers, rogue Daryk Ones. He stole my sister and many other women. I never saw her again. There were rumors that she was sold to

another slaver.” His voice roughened. “A month later I heard that she was thrown off a slave ship and drowned.”

Eyes prickling with tears, she reached for him. She didn't know what to say, felt the words backing up in her throat as she ached to express her sorrow for what he'd experienced.

Her palm soothed his shoulder. “I'm so sorry.”

He didn't move. His face a study in remembered sorrow and returning memories. “I'd tried to find her many times before that. When I heard she'd been killed...”

“You felt guilty.”

“Yes.”

She cupped his face in her palms. “Was the slave trader who took her Aramus?”

“You are too perceptive. I vowed to hunt the man down.”

“Yet you haven't killed him?”

“Because I wanted to make his life a living hell. To work my way so far inside his life he wouldn't know when the betrayal came. He doesn't know who I am, Xandra. He doesn't know what I have planned for him.”

Fear slid like a cold, heavy hand over her body. “Dare I ask what you have planned? If it isn’t death, what could you do to him?”

His eyes glittered. “Take his entire empire and steal his wealth. Free his slaves. Make him suffer for throwing my sister off this ship.”

She understood, perhaps more than he knew. “Are you certain that’s all?”

He clasped her wrists gently and eased her hands from his face. Gathering her hands in his, he kissed her fingers. “What else could there be?”

“Your guilt. Perhaps you’re not just taking revenge. Perhaps you mean to punish yourself.”

His eyes clouded and he dropped his hands. “Maybe.”

She wondered if she could say or do anything to make him realize he didn’t deserve self-punishment for his sister’s death. Then she recalled the guilt she still felt on a daily basis for what she’d done to her family.

He drew her against him and looped his arms around her waist. “Now you know why I’m here. Why were you on the ship with your husband? A man you didn’t love?”

"My family was..." How could she explain it? But she had to, if only to make him see she could relate to his anguish. "I mentioned before that my parents were more liberal with their acceptance of individuality and sensual matters than the average Magonians. Still, if they saw me doing this I'm sure they'd be scandalized."

He chuckled. "Praise Draconus they aren't here to see us then."

She smiled sadly. "My father wasn't as liberal when it came to his beliefs about a woman's purpose. He still believed a woman should marry, stay at home and take care of a family. He decided I would marry another miner, Taris Elian." She smoothed her hands over his shoulders aware that his strength gave her courage to continue the tale. "I protested that I didn't love Taris. In fact, I knew Taris was a liar and hateful. Father didn't see it that way. He told me I could tolerate all of that because Taris has a great deal of *triand*. I didn't have any choice in the matter. At least I couldn't think of a way to escape the actual marriage."

"You accepted his proposal?"

"Yes." She sighed. "You do not know how much I grew to regret that decision."

Rayder's eyes narrowed. "If your father loved you, how could he force you to marry?"



“Father did love me, but he also believed marrying me to Taris was looking after my well-being. Taris made advances toward me. I fended them off, telling him I wouldn’t have sexual congress outside the bonds of marriage.”

Rayder’s palms soothed over her back. “Thank Draconus you were able to persuade him.”

“The only reason he relented is because I told my father what he was trying to do. Father told him he’d call off the engagement if Taris continued.”

“A nod to your father’s good sense.”

“Perhaps not. It was my decision not to give in to Taris’ desires that killed my family. And something else I did.” Deep within Xandra a shaking started. Old fear and uncertainty haunted her as she forced words past her throat. “When Taris and I married...on our wedding night he tried to...”

Rayder’s eyes were grim. “What did he do?”

“He forced me down on the bed, climbed on top of me. But he couldn’t. He couldn’t thrust inside me because his manhood shriveled. That’s why I was still a virgin when you met me. Taris then he hit me and gave me a black eye.”

Pure seething anger filled Rayder. "Bastard. That fucking bastard dared to hurt you?"

She rushed to explain the rest, unable to keep it inside now that she'd started. "I defied him and told him never to touch me again. I told him I didn't want his children. It enraged him. He stormed out of the house and I didn't see him for a week. I was glad and I thought maybe he'd been killed somewhere, though murder is a rare occurrence on Magonia."

"By the god." Rayder's eyes saddened and he pulled her to his chest.

She buried her face in his shoulder, gulping as old anguish threatened to rush forth. "There's more. And when you learn the truth perhaps you'll hate me as much as Taris did."

"I don't think that's possible."

Oh, it was possible and very likely. A shaky breath left her throat as memories assaulted her. Her entire family with their throats slit. The image was seared into her mind. Even when she opened her eyes and stared at the wall the images stayed. "I cannot forget what happened next. Ever."

"What happened?"

She eased back to continue her story, but he kept his arms about her. "He murdered my brother and parents."

"No." Rayder's denial sounded more than heartfelt, his eyes softening for a moment before returning to shocked anger. "Why wasn't he arrested for it?"

"Taris knew important and corrupt people. He was very powerful in the area. His *triand* bought loyalty when nothing else about him would. He told me he did it but knew that because I was his wife that no one would believe me if I told the authorities he did it."

She sobbed.

"No, my beauty. It's all right. You don't have to tell me any more." He cupped the back of her head, cradling her as she buried her face in his shoulder again. "Please don't torture yourself."

"I do. You have to know." She sniffed as tears came like a rain shower, wetting his tunic. "You see, the real reason why he murdered my parents is all my fault."

He drew her face up so he could look into her eyes. "I don't understand. How could that be?"

"I heard through a friend there are potions women can

take to prevent pregnancy and cause sterilization.”

He nodded. “We have those potions on Dragonia, but few use them anymore.”

“Well, I never assumed that Taris wouldn’t eventually be able to...” She shrugged. “You know. I went to an old woman to get the potion. I paid with most of my savings for it. Now that I knew Taris as a hateful man, I couldn’t bear the thought of having his children. Taris caught me drinking it. It enraged him. I managed to escape to my parents’ home.” She trembled. “One day while I was out to market...” Her throat tightened with tears. “Taris retaliated. That’s when I came home and found my brother and my parents murdered. I ran for my life and escaped onto a ship. I didn’t know where I thought I was going. The next port we came into, Taris caught up with me. He’d taken the next ship after mine. He threatened to kill me on the spot if I didn’t come back with him to Opali. We boarded the *Hydrasoseles* on the way back to Opali. I met Ketera and Mia, and when Taris wasn’t threatening me, I had peace with my friends. I didn’t tell them what I was going through. Not much of it anyway. I didn’t want Taris to understand how much their friendship meant to me. I was afraid he’d hurt them.” She cried harder, hoping Mia was safe and that Ketera’s happiness with Dane would last.

She saw it then. The darkening in Rayder’s eyes, the

grim line to his mouth. His hatred and rejection would come now. He released her and the loss of his embrace hurt. Rayder walked away to stare out a porthole at the ocean.

If he decided to retaliate against her in some way, she couldn't escape the way she'd run from Tavis. A terrible sense of the inevitable swamped her and a helplessness she'd never experienced.

She'd fought against wanting his admiration. She'd struggled not to care about him beyond the physical.

She had failed miserably.

"After the wave took down our ship and I was drowning, my only solace was that Tavis was dead," she said. "But perhaps now you will feel I am as worthless as he did."

Rayder turned toward her, and his expression surprised her. A bleakness was there, for certain, but not true anger. He reached for the rest of his clothes, including his dagger and sword. He started for the door.

"Where are you going?" she asked, panic lacing her voice.

"I must think."

"Rayder—"

“No.” He turned back to her, and contempt crawled across his face. “Do not talk to me now.”

He left, slamming the door behind him.

Misery twisted in her gut as she buried her face in her hands and allowed sobs to come.

## Chapter Sixteen

Rayder watched Xandra covertly as she wandered along the ship railing. Phili had brought her a new tunic and pants as well as a wide-brimmed hat that kept the sun off her head. She wore the hat and clothes today, her lithe body barely visible under the formless garments. Rayder liked the way Xandra's hair tumbled about her shoulders, and unlike some men might, he hadn't insisted that she put it up or cover it. Many men would be tempted by the beautiful tumble glowing with a fine and rare beauty. He didn't care. He wanted it out where he could see. He moved toward her, damn glad the tunic and pants hung on her like a sack. Since Rayder had returned, none of the other men on the ship dared even look her way. That included the slimy Farcam and Oscan, who stayed out of Rayder's way too.

Rayder's duties as second-in-command kept him busy far more than he liked. It meant more time with Aramus and less with Xandra.

Still, Rayder didn't regret the way he'd stalked out of the cabin two days ago and left Xandra alone. In fact, he'd stayed away until late in the evening then come to bed after she was already asleep. He hadn't held her in his arms or tried to make love to her again. He'd need time to process what she'd told him and how badly it had twisted inside him.

She couldn't have his children.

The vow he'd made to his mother, the necessity of repopulating Dragonia, the deep and overriding compulsion in his blood to have children had been thrown back in his face.

He didn't know what to think about that.

Xandra's prickliness, her nervousness as she'd stayed quiet proved that his mood showed. He had nothing to say to her. Nothing at all.

For two days they'd danced this way, quietly and without more than the basics to say to each other. She'd grown harder under his coldness. He felt her drawing away more and more.

Perhaps it was for the better.

But by the very god, their estrangement didn't wipe



away this drugging, gnawing desire for her. He'd wanted her fiercely even when she'd pronounced she couldn't have children. He wanted his yearning to disappear so it wouldn't torture him. It didn't.

He hated that.

He still hated what she'd had to go through with Taris Elian. It made him want to hunt the man down and rip out his throat.

But, of course, the man was dead and Rayder couldn't avenge Xandra's loss.

Just as he hadn't yet avenged his sister's death.

Frustration bit into him and sliced like a knife.

He took a deep breath to quell the rising anger inside him, knowing it wouldn't do any good.

Instead, he concentrated on the sight of the port near Felican Castle, and he watched Xandra's reaction as the giant fortress came into view.

While all the castles in Dragonia were massive, Felican was the biggest. No other castle commanded such a picturesque or strategic point. The building sat inside the jungle on a high ridge, surrounded by huge trees and other

vegetation. Toward the right of the castle, the searing desert leapt up in black-and-cream-colored dunes. Harsh winds blew across the panorama, surprising anyone not expecting it. A man could step into the jungle and experience sticky heat then wander into the desert and find the blistering heat parching to skin and mouth. Such a sharp contrast in landscape didn't have an explanation—at least not one that anyone could recall. Rayder knew how deadly both areas could prove to any man or woman.

He left his post near the center of the ship and came up behind Xandra, eager to explain to her the realities of the land.

She started and turned quickly, apprehension marked in her wide eyes. When she saw him, she sagged against the railing.

“Is something wrong?” he asked when she didn't speak.

Tiny frown lines appeared between her eyes. “Perhaps it is this strange land, but I feel...uncomfortable. As if someone or something is watching me.”

He glanced around. No one paid the least attention to them. “You're tired. Our journey hasn't been easy. I have business on shore again, but when I return, we'll have dinner and relax.”

He'd hoped to see her eyes clear. Instead her frown increased. "I want to go with you. I don't feel safe here."

"You are far safer here than on shore. Felican Castle is beautiful and in any other circumstances we could visit. I have—had—friends there who might still welcome us. But this trip it is not to be."

He drew closer, eager for her touch. He wanted to drag her close and take her into his arms for a kiss, but he resisted. He ached to return to the cabin and slide deep into her silky, wet heat. What he wouldn't give to take her away from here now and make certain she never had to worry about ruthless men again.

*Huh. That would mean she wouldn't be exposed to my basic nature again either.*

The thought of leaving her life ate him alive. No, he couldn't do it. He'd just have to take whatever measures necessary to keep her safe.

"Rayder, there's something wrong here. I can't tell you what it is because I don't understand it myself. I feel it in here." She touched her midsection.

Worried, he asked, "Are you ill?"

“No, no. Nothing like that.” Her smile was strained and uncertain. “It is instinct, if you will. It tells me that I shouldn’t stay here. I need to go with you.”

He pondered, but the answer came swiftly. “No.”

Anger tightened her mouth and blazed in her eyes. Before she could retort, Yoanda wandered toward them from across the deck. Unlike the last time he saw her, she appeared unmarked—perhaps Aramus had let off beating her for a blessed while. Self-assured steps brought her closer. Her eyes seemed brighter and more at ease than normal. Perhaps she’d found a peace somewhere in the life she led aboard this godsforsaken ship.

Yoanda waved at them and came to a stop close next to him. “There you are. It is good to see you both. Are you going ashore today, Rayder?”

“I am.” He gestured to Xandra. “Would you keep a close watch on my wife so no one will bother her while I’m gone?”

Yoanda looked delighted with the idea as she turned her attention to Xandra. “Most definitely. I’d be pleased to spend time with you.”

“I’m afraid I’m not feeling as well as I’d like.” Xandra’s face turned icy.

Yoanda's face showed concern. "I can give you some holic tea. I hear many a new bride experiences discomfort or tiredness after her wedding nights."

"I'm not sure it is fatigue." Xandra tossed a long length of hair back from her face. She rubbed her belly again. "I think my stomach is complaining."

"Yoanda is known as a healer. If she has a potion to help you, you should try it."

Bleekness marred Xandra's eyes. "Very well. Husband, I will retire to our cabin while you go ashore."

Yoanda touched Xandra's shoulder. "I'm so sorry, my dear. Should I send for the medical man?"

Xandra shook her head. "I am certain it will wear off as soon as I'm inside the cabin." She glanced at Rayder expectantly.

Rayder sighed but kept what he really wished to say to himself. "Pardon us, Yoanda. I'll see Xandra to the cabin."

Yoanda nodded. "Of course. Stay safe, Rayder."

After Yoanda left, Rayder turned to Xandra, ready to question her thoroughly. "What in the seven hells was that

about? You told me you're not ill."

He'd never seen his wife look as angry as she did now. "I think my mood suffers from being on this wretched ship for so long."

She left it at that, and from the high color in her cheeks and the taut line of her mouth, he guessed she couldn't be ill.

"Very well," he said as he took her upper arm in a light grip and started for the cabin.

He walked fast, eager to see her safe in the cabin. She trotted alongside him, and he made no concession to her smaller steps.

Once inside the cabin, she turned on him with pure fury. "There is something not right going on here, and I don't know what it is, but this entire day feels wrong. You cannot leave me here."

Tired of her nagging, he made a chopping motion with his right hand. "No amount of caterwauling or arguing will make me change my mind. You aren't going with me."

"There is no safe place on this ship. Unless you count the dungeon. Maybe if I was down there with Malena Humbola and the other slaves, I could count on strength in

numbers.”

“The admiral could try to trick you again if he was there.”

She shrugged. “He wouldn’t dare with so many women ready to come to my aid.”

“You don’t understand how evil he can be.”

She shrugged. “He seemed ineffectual to me.”

He snorted. “You haven’t seen nor felt his true wrath. We can’t trust him with your safety.”

“If he wanted to get into this cabin while you’re gone, he could anyway. Yes?”

“Perhaps. But he knows what I’d do to him if he tried.”

“Then let me spend time with the women downstairs. I could take them more food.” Desperation gleamed in her pretty eyes as she twisted her hands together. “Since I am as much your slave as I am your wife, maybe I belong in the bowels of the ship like the other women.”

Anger as he hadn’t known in some time boiled up. He growled his answer. “That is rubbish. You know I don’t think of you that way.”

“I know you think of me *this* way.”

She headed toward the bed. With her back to him, she drew her tunic over her head and dropped it on a chair. She leaned over to remove her shoes and tossed them aside. His gut clenched. What the hells was she doing? With a shimmy she slid her pants down to her ankles and kicked them away.

By all the gods above and below. He drew in a startled breath as his body reacted instantly. Sweat beaded his forehead as his gaze took in the creamy length of her back, the smooth rounded shape of her ass cheeks, the long line of her legs. Her body fascinated him even though he'd mapped it time and again with his tongue, his lips and his hands.

She turned toward him, hands on her hips. Her expression held pure heat and desire. Surprised, he watched in stunned fascination.

A fine-edged blade of anger overran caution. He stalked toward her. “Are you trying to drive me mad?”

“Why would I want to do that?”

He towered over her, his cock aching with an instant desire to find a home within her. “To stall me leaving.”



Before he could register that he'd moved, his arms surrounded her, his mouth hovering near hers. "Do not tempt me. Whether you like it or not, I'll go on this venture to Felican Castle and no amount of pouting will change it."

Before she could protest, he kissed her. Hot need slammed him in the gut, and with merciless desire, he reached between her legs. As his tongue took her, his fingers explored, his arousal spiking as he realized she was already wet. He smoothed her cream along her femininity and over her clit. As he stroked her with mouth and fingers, she shivered and twitched.

He groaned into her mouth. "You are wet. Ready."

"I'm always like this with you." It sounded real and raw, but he wanted proof. Her eyes were wider, lips parted and luscious. "I can't seem to control it."

"Neither can I." He resented it, wanted it, couldn't deny it.

He lifted her, laid her on the bed and crawled over her. He opened his pants, lowered between her thighs and slid straight inside her. She gasped, eyes open and staring into his with shocked delight.

"Rayder."

“I know, my beauty. I know.”

“This is...”

“I know.”

Xandra hadn't expected this. She'd thought maybe seduction would slow him down, give him time to reevaluate and reconsider leaving her behind. Instead, the feral heat she felt within his arms surged with such force she couldn't escape. Her arousal around him didn't abate, refused to leave her even in her anger. As his cock stretched and plunged deep within, she gasped at the overwhelming pleasure.

Two days without sex with him had driven her mad. Despite his coldness, she couldn't seem to stop craving him.

He glared down at her, eyes red. “What are you doing to me?”

“I just wanted to get you into the cabin so we could have this at least one more time. No matter what you think of me, you won't be able to forget this.” Her voice sounded raspy and weak in her throat.

He thrust, and the friction made her belly clench and her pussy walls tighten over his thick, hard length. He ground

his hips against hers and touched that special area deep inside her channel. "No."

"Yes." She arched against him, closing her eyes as she shivered in pleasure. It felt so good, so incredible she didn't believe she could stand it a moment more.

"No." His hips gyrated, small thrusts that rubbed and caressed.

Sparks of pleasure shot outward, making her squirm. "Rayder."

He pushed up onto his palms and the action shoved his cock deeper into her welcoming body. She couldn't stand this. Anger moved her to restrain the desire, to corral it until he'd come deep inside her. He would fall before she did. She struggled with her body's desire to climax, wrestling with her wanting.

His lips slid down, down until he captured one nipple and sucked. A hot flush spiraled outward as desire climbed higher. As his tongue lapped at one nipple and the next, he stirred his hips into a seductive retreat and return that burned her from the inside out.

"You can't keep me here. You can't make me your slave forever." Her voice broke, tears coming at the same time the pleasure vaulted forward in leaps and bounds.

"Maybe you should just let me go. Let me go. I don't want to be with another man who hates me."

His mouth buried in her throat as he growled his next answer and thrust hard. "You are mine. Never forget it."

"Then you can't ignore me. You can't pretend that I didn't tell you that I can't have children." She said it with anger and force and watched his eyes widen. "Why won't you talk to me?"

He growled. "Don't push me, Xandra. You don't know what I'll do."

Her hips lifted into his next push and powerful waves began to build from her womb and in the hot, wet folds that caressed his cock. She'd wanted to hold off. To defeat him at his own game.

Pleasure slammed her so hard she wasn't ready for it. She screamed.

"Yes!" His triumphant yell didn't stop his motions, his thrusts sure and steady and powerful.

He bucked, cried out gutturally as his cock spewed hot liquid into her.

Shivering, she lay there in a mindless pleasure, her

pussy continuing to convulse around his thickness. As the throbbing pleasure finally subsided, he withdrew his cock.

Before she could speak, he slid his fingers into her pussy and drew out the sweet cream. He spread it between her butt cheeks, inserted one finger and then another with slow deliberation into her back entrance.

“Rayder, what—”

“Tell me you don’t want this.” His eyes were fire, his lips parted. “Tell me to stop and I will.”

She opened her mouth but it wouldn’t come. He waited, but his fingers still plied her back entrance. He slipped another finger into her backside, stretching, preparing her for what he wanted next. Two fingers plundered her body.

His breath came quickly as he hooked her knees over his arms and tipped her buttocks up. His cock touched her back entrance. All the while he kept his gaze on hers. A second later he nudged into her.

“Open to me,” he said softly.

She relaxed, wanting this as much as him, hating that she did.

His hardness took her ass, sliding with slow

deliberation. She'd expected it to hurt in this position, but he'd prepared her well. His thickness pushed forward until his entire cock filled her ass.

Without more hesitation, he began to move, thrusting in and out. "Touch yourself."

Puzzled, she didn't speak.

"Touch your little button," he said.

So she did, as heat filled her face. As she caressed her button, excitement rose higher and quicker. The forbiddenness, the luscious desire forced its way into her and required more.

He whispered harshly as he moved faster, his cock working inside her ass with steady strokes. "Come on my cock."

At his demand, she writhed, gasped and refused. "No."

He moved faster and picked up speed. "Come."

Her fingernails bit into his shoulders as she roared another answer. "Damn you, Rayder!"

Her flesh was hot and out of control. Her mind refused to think, all sensations melded together until only pleasure

mattered. Thoughts of anger only fired desire to bigger heights.

This wasn't seduction. This was animal need, a potent action of body to body, of need against need.

Her desire for him wouldn't be destroyed, no matter what she thought or said or did in defiance. She trembled, her body betraying her as the heady, sweet tingling shot out from her womb, throbbed in her pussy and pulsed into her clit. She cried out sharply as her body shuddered around the cock still moving in her ass. He thrust one last time.

He growled as his cock shot his life force into her body.

## Chapter Seventeen

As harsh animal voices made a cacophony, the jungle parted for the contingent of four men, two of them Farcam and Oscan, one a sailor named Conto and one Rayder.

Perspiration ran into Rayder's eyes and he swiped his forearm over his face. Menacing clouds gathered directly to the east, and Rayder's gut told him they'd barely make it to the encampment before the storm burst. But he had more pressing matters to worry about than threatening weather.

Rayder knew he couldn't depend on these men if anything happened in this god-forsaken jungle, but Aramus had insisted Rayder take them as a so-called show of strength. Rayder stayed at the back, supervising and making sure no man could come up behind him. Rayder refused to take women with him this trip even after Admiral Aramus tried to demand it. Rayder had argued they couldn't guarantee Drakus Fina's ally Marc Gampia would want their slaves. These things had to be negotiated. Aramus had reminded him that he'd failed miserably to



negotiate with Drakus. Rayder hadn't apologized, and Admiral Aramus made a threat Rayder knew he couldn't ignore. Aramus said he must negotiate a successful meeting with Marc or Aramus would sell Xandra.

"Over my dead fucking body," Rayder muttered under his breath as Oscan and Farcam used swords to cut swathes through the jungle. "He will not touch her."

Rayder's blood came up at the thought of Aramus touching Xandra. Rayder's anger had surged when he'd learned Xandra would have offered herself to Aramus to save him. He couldn't abide the thought. At the same time, indefinable emotions had swamped him. Warmth. Gratitude. Lust. Staggering affection. Feelings he'd never experienced for another woman. Magonian or not, it was clear Xandra had feelings for him. Rayder had found his reaction to her seduction overwhelming and had fucked her with an intensity he couldn't have imagined with another woman. Few women pursued a Daryk One with the boldness she had, but she was his wife. He'd wanted her so badly, so fiercely it had seemed like a feral force out control.

Still his mind reeled from the realization she couldn't have his children.

He still didn't know what to feel about that. All his life

he'd been decisive. Sure of himself except for when he'd let down his sister.

Now another woman made him doubt himself and what he wanted and needed all over again. Damn Xandra and the powerful force driving him toward her. He didn't like needing someone so fiercely, and it shook him to the core.

He turned his thoughts back to what had happened before he left the ship.

Rayder had also argued with Aramus that if he took women with him, they would make slow progress through the jungle. Rayder had catered to Aramus' incorrect belief that women were weaklings and also said once the party reached Marc's encampment, Marc might try to take the women away from Rayder. Aramus had agreed and reconsidered. Telling the greedy bastard they could lose money made all the difference. Rayder knew enough about Marc, who he had known since childhood, that Marc wouldn't harm a woman. But he didn't want Aramus to understand that.

"Let me bring Marc and his men to the ship. We can turn the women over to him at that time," Rayder had said. "This puts us in a more powerful position."

Of course Rayder's plan would fail if he couldn't convince Marc to agree. Knowing what he did about Marc,

Rayder suspected he'd get what he wanted. Marc's greed, his connections and his attitude would assure that.

Aramus had finally relented, and brimming over with relief, Rayder had left with the other men. Rayder had ulterior motives. He'd meet with Marc, arrange for Marc to come to the ship. Marc was also known as the least nefarious slave trader, a man with more scruples than the ordinary and a sense of fair play. Unlike Drakus, Marc had a huge dislike for Aramus. Marc would relish any plan to bring Aramus to his knees. Rayder couldn't help but feel on the edge of victory. Gaining Marc's trust would go far toward Rayder's ultimate goal.

They'd passed Felican Castle's farthest south boundaries and came near the desert sands. In between the castle and jungle and the desert, Marc had created a territory where slave traders and free people came and went unharmed. It was live and let live to the fullest extent anywhere in Dragonia could be. As far as Marc was considered, only Magonian women could be traded as slaves, and only to men who had proven they would take care of the women and treat them well. It was a dichotomy Rayder found odd.

As the jungle parted and they came to Marc Gampia's encampment, Rayder couldn't help noticing the huge difference between this encampment and Drakus'. A large

stone structure, an almost exact replica of Felican Castle only considerably smaller, stood several miles from a break in the jungle where desert sands stood stark cream and black and white. Along the area outside the moat and drawbridge was a full market of people selling wares. Even women operated some of the stands, selling fruit and other foodstuffs travelers would require if venturing into the stark and hazardous desert beyond.

Beyond Marc's compound another huge building held something else most people didn't know about. The large building behind his complex probably housed a tame dragon. A dragon Marc could use as a weapon if need-be. Whereas Daryk Ones could fight and kill hostile dragons, Marc had a way with the creatures no other man on Dragonia seemed to have.

Except maybe Daryk One Eryk Gauth, who had been known to tame a dragon here or there. Eryk had learned it from his father, but Marc was the only non-Daryk One any could recall having this same skill. It was a mystery few understood.

Felican Castle and its lord Bellrus Famila tolerated Marc, but only because he'd proven less problematic than people like Drakus. Unlike Grimnald Castle's lord Armen Helnak, Bellrus was politically aware that many people in this area at jungle's edge didn't want direction or rule. They

were wilder than most, less harsh with judgment. Bellrus was the least autocratic ruler Rayder knew, and also less likely to join the burgeoning call for war against Drakus and his slave trader rogues. When Rayder had ventured to Grimnald Castle after being almost killed at Drakus' camp, Rayder had noted how edgy everyone seemed. Of course his old and former friend Dane might take up arms against rogue Daryk Ones soon, and so would Eryk Gauth, another Daryk One Rayder had been friends with before Rayder decided to infiltrate the rogue faction. Rayder often wondered if that was why he found this region more home than anywhere. Here he could be everything he was, both good and bad, and no one gave a shite.

As the slavers with Rayder stood watching activity outside the three-story abode, Rayder thought of Xandra alone at the ship. Visions of the torrid sex he'd had with her earlier in the day haunted him. He wanted to be with her now, thrusting inside her wet cunny until his life force planted within her and bore fruit.

His gut clenched as he instantly remembered it couldn't happen. He still had the smell of sex in his nose, taunting him, making his lust burn higher and hotter. All the tales he'd heard about mating hadn't included the driving desire to fuck until the female was with child. No one had told him that. Perhaps they assumed it should be a foregone conclusion. Part of him rebelled that any person should

have such a hold on him. That any woman should twist him into knots the way she had. Yes, a small part of him was angry that Xandra had changed him.

A low rumble came from around the side of the building, the unmistakable guttural and threatening sound of a dragon on the prowl. Rayder's lustful thoughts disappeared as the creature stomped around the side of the complex.

Although it was small as far as dragons went, the creature had a uniqueness that made it positively beautiful in comparison to most. Delicate wings unfolded, fanning outward in a combination of blue, purple, pink and green dazzling to the eye. The body was solid black, the eyes a jewel green. The dragon's long muzzle and sharp horned crests at the top of the head looked fierce.

"Sir, do we move forward?" Conto asked, raising his sword slightly.

The other men stepped back, and Rayder liked the fact they were afraid. Good. He'd let them think the creature was far more dangerous than it was.

"We move forward," Rayder said. "But cautiously. Arcos is Marc Gampia's pet and patrols this encampment as its guard."

Conto's eyebrows went up. "Are you sure, Sir? The beast is eyeballing us like he's considering us for his next meal."

"Arcos is very tolerant as long as we show no aggression. The beast seems to read minds. If it thinks you are a threat, it will eat you in a second." Rayder layered on that last bit of bollocks, but it wouldn't hurt if these men believed it.

They proceeded with none of the caution one employed approaching Drakus' camp. Marc's men wouldn't harm Rayder or anyone with him—most of them saw Rayder as a fellow rebel, a man going against the rules of conduct placed on a Daryk One. At the mouth of Marc's abode, he saw a figure who looked familiar. A man he hadn't seen in many months but would recognize anywhere. Marc's long blond hair fell almost to his waist, but was tied back today in a neat queue. Marc didn't have a special guard surrounding him, and Rayder knew the ruler didn't need one. People respected him too much. It was doubtful anyone would attempt to harm or kill him. Rayder headed that way, eager to speak with the man.

Oscan and Farcam muttered to themselves, but Rayder could easily hear them.

"There's that Marc fella." Oscan's voice was gravely

and filled with disapproval.

Farcam laughed. “Bugger me. Would you look at his fancy clothes?”

Fancy clothes? Rayder almost said something to Farcam but realized it wasn't worth disagreeing. Marc's bright red tunic and black pants looked more pristine than the workers hawking wares or otherwise engaged in labor, but Rayder wouldn't have considered Marc's clothing more than extraordinarily bright.

Conto grunted. “Looks damn right ordinary to me.”

Conto threw a grin at Rayder, and Rayder returned it. Conto wasn't always the sharpest knife in the drawer, but of the three slavers, he was the most trustworthy and useful.

Marc had a way with women—most found him so sexually attractive they couldn't resist any request he made. He stood as tall as Rayder and was built with strength and purpose. He was young for a ruler. His father had died several years ago and left Marc leader at age twenty. At only thirty, Marc had the experience many older rulers accumulated over a longer time.

Two minstrels near the drawbridge started to play, one with a *Bodgian* drum and the other a *Stigian* hornpipe. Marc saw Rayder's entourage coming and headed their



way. His face lit up with a smile.

Rayder waved at the ruler. Arcos took up position at the side of the building and watched.

Marc waved back, and any tension Rayder held within his gut eased. Marc would never smile and wave if he planned to order an execution rather than a greeting. Not that Rayder expected anything less than a fairly enthusiastic greeting. He'd always gotten on well with Marc.

Marc's smile broadened as they all met in the middle of the drawbridge. "Rayder Tyrus, you old bastard! What brings you here?"

Marc put his hand out, and Rayder met the greeting with a firm handshake. "What usually brings me here?"

"Wenching? Supplies? Selling women?" Marc's sharp blue eyes missed nothing.

Rayder laughed. "You know me well. But there's serious games afoot and I need to speak with you."

Rayder didn't bow or scrape to the ruler—Marc saw that as more disingenuous than outright mouthiness.

Marc nodded. "Very well. And these are your men?"

Rayder introduced them then said, "They're here to gather supplies."

Thunder rumbled overhead, the large thunderheads closing in.

"Then let them gather supplies before the storms come," Marc said, gesturing to the sky. "After they've finished, they may wench as long as they wish. There are some fresh wenches in the tavern."

"We don't have long." Rayder didn't like the idea of letting the men run amok.

Marc grinned again and eyeballed the three other men. "I see. Then they may gather supplies and eat at the tavern. No wenching."

Oscan's hairy eyebrows went up in annoyance. "The admiral said we could fuck all we wanted when we got here."

"Yeah," Farcam said with a surly tone.

Instead of taking offense at Oscan and Farcam's belligerent tones, Marc's eyes sparked with amusement.

"Then when you're at the tavern, tell the barkeep that I sent you to see Bavarda and Cantertina. They're two of our

finest ladies. They'll service you quickly but well."

Oscan and Farcam had the good sense to look at Rayder and wait for directions. "Get the fuck out of here then." Conto stood at Rayder's right side, silently observing. Rayder turned to him. "What are you waiting for?"

"If I'm not too forward, Sir, I think maybe Bavarda and Cantertina aren't the kind of women I want to service me."

"Why?" Rayder asked.

Marc chuckled. "Perhaps he's met them before."

Conto smiled. "I'll find someone else."

And he strode off.

Rayder frowned then turned his attention to Marc. "Why do I have a feeling there's something I don't know about these women?"

Marc clapped his hand onto Rayder's shoulder, then gestured that they proceed into the structure. "Oh, you have no idea."

\* \* \* \* \*

Xandra lay on the bed later in the day, her eyes wide

open and staring at nothing in particular. The bed was empty beside her. Of course. Rayder had slipped out while she still lay almost completely senseless from pleasure and a need for sleep. She sighed and closed her eyes. She'd made a complete hash of things when she'd tried to seduce Rayder. By the god, she hadn't realized, hadn't imagined that his own seductive force would overwhelm any resistance she possessed. He'd overwhelmed her with heat and desire with one look. Rayder was clever, handsome, devastating in sexual prowess. How did a woman ignore that in one man?

All her life she'd prided herself on her independence, the parts of her that refused to be tethered to a man despite what her culture said she should do. Now that Rayder had stamped his mark upon her, she couldn't resist him any more than she could prevent him from leaving the ship without her.

She analyzed her fears and knew that was the only way she could reach an answer.

If he left her, she would be as defenseless as she was before. Only she wasn't defenseless and never had been. She'd proven that to herself.

If he left her, he might be hurt or killed and never come back. If any man could survive Dragonia, it was Rayder.

If he left her, she might recognize more feelings for him.

She sat up and ran one hand over her face. Who did she think she was fooling? Her feelings for him already ran amazingly deep for a man she'd known so few days. The realization grounded inside her, rubbing against a rawness that refused to disappear. She rubbed her stomach again, but instead of apprehension, she recognized hunger.

Sighing, she snapped out of her reverie and reached for a bowl of fruit. She ate hungrily and within moments she'd consumed fruit, bread and water.

A knock on the door startled her. Rayder had cautioned her against allowing anyone entrance.

She crossed the room and leaned on the door. "Who is it?"

"Yoanda."

Xandra smiled and opened the door. "Yoanda, come in."

Yoanda's eyes brightened as she entered the cabin. She held a yellow metal tankard. "It's good to see you, Xandra."

"And you. What brings you here?"

“I promised I’d check on you, remember? Rayder wanted it.”

Xandra recalled the conversation. “Is that the tea you mentioned?”

Yoanda handed her the tankard. “My mother said it cured anything that ails the body. Especially after...” Her cheeks reddened. “Well, after a man has relations with you.”

Xandra’s mouth quirked. The tankard was warm. “I’m fine, Yoanda.”

“Certainly, but aren’t you a little...sore?”

Such an intimate conversation made her uncomfortable. “No.”

For a flicker, Yoanda’s eyes betrayed anger. No. The woman’s smile returned. “That is wonderful. Drink up now. It’s very good for you regardless.”

The pleasant scent made her nose twitched. Her taste buds wanted the first large sip. The flavor burst on her tongue, more delicious than she’d expected.

“Good?” Yoanda asked.

“Very. Thank you.” Xandra moved toward the bed.

Instantly she was tired and her feet heavy.

Yoanda’s hand touched her shoulder. “Do not fight it. I’m sorry I had to do this. But I needed the money to escape. I can’t be with Aramus anymore.”

“What?” Xandra’s confusion dissipated in a blink as her body suddenly felt lighter than air. Horrible recognition assaulted her. “What did you do?” The tankard fell from her suddenly weak hand, landed on the floor with a clank, and the contents splattered on the floor. “What was in that drink?”

As Xandra’s vision started to blacken at the corners, she couldn’t even panic. It was too fast. Too overwhelming. All the questions running through her mind disappeared. Yoanda’s eyes had lost their normal sweetness. Only urgency and sadness lurked in those depths.

“You’ll be all right,” Yoanda said.

Xandra’s legs weakened and daylight went out.

## Chapter Eighteen

“Tell me what you’re truly here for,” Marc said as the young, nubile woman put a tankard of drink in front of Rayder then preceded to do the same for Marc. She left without speaking.

Marc always served his guests first. It was one thing Rayder liked about the man.

“Negotiations.” Rayder laid it out after he’d taken one sip of liquor from the tankard. “I’m still with the *Beast*, and we wish to sell slaves.”

“And you want to sell them to me?” Marc’s voice sounded deceptively mild, as if he didn’t quite believe what Rayder told him.

“Yes. And no.”

Marc sipped his drink. He could have sat at the head of the twenty-person table and insisted on Rayder sitting at



the far end, but he hadn't. "You assume I need more slaves."

"The people working for you here don't seem much like slaves. If they are, they are the best treated of any I've seen. No slave is paid by his master. And I hear yours are paid well. Perhaps you need more *servants*."

Marc didn't look pleased with Rayder's assessment. He pushed a bowl of fruit toward Rayder. "Eat. You look skinny."

Rayder laughed, knowing this was Marc's subtle way of insulting him. He grabbed up a piece of fruit and munched. "Don't change the subject. You are less the brutal ruler than you want others to think. You're nothing like Drakus. I don't know why you do business with him."

Marc shrugged. "It is convenient. Nothing more." Marc leaned his forearms on the table. "I do not think you came here today to insult me, as amusing as you find it. And if you meant to attack me, you wouldn't have been so nice about it. You wouldn't have brought those scum-sucking bags of bones into my home. You would have brought men capable of doing the deed."

"I'll send them away if you like."

"Not necessary. Do you think I'm a fucking fool? You

and I have known each other since we were children, even when you weren't *supposed* to know me. You understand me as well as I understand you. Which is it? Do you want to sell me slaves or don't you? Just get to the bloody point."

Rayder laughed and scrubbed one hand over his chin. "I have a big problem. One that I've been trying to solve for three years."

"Since you became a slaver."

"Yes."

Marc's eyes clouded over and his mouth went tight. "After you banished guilt over your sister?"

Rayder hadn't expected the sharp tone, and he locked eyes with Marc long enough to recognize pure anger in the man's voice. "If I didn't know better, I'd say you're judging me, and I'm coming up damn short. For the record, Marc, I haven't banished my guilt. But I have a plan to get revenge. Redemption."

Marc stared at him for a few moments, his eyes hard. "Revenge against me?"

Surprised, Rayder didn't keep the amazement out of his voice. "No. Unless you were responsible for her death?" Rayder's skin tingled, his body braced for something. For

action. “Do you know something about the way she died?”

Marc’s gaze snapped to him and his eyes flashed. “By the god, you know I wouldn’t have harmed one hair on her head. —” The ruler looked around the room, his eyes serious and contemplative. “You know, she was only in this room a few times.” Marc gazed around the room again, a faraway look entering his eyes as if he remembered something ancient and dear. “Aknada’s voice still rings in my ears. I can still hear her reciting her poetry. I can still see exactly how she looked. Did you know she was a lovely dancer?”

Rayder’s instincts had never turned him wrong, and he knew why Marc sounded strained and angry. He’d tried to deny the ruler’s feelings for his sister for years, tried to pretend they didn’t exist. “She could dance very well, and she was a wonderful poet.”

“I still have a book of her poetry near my bed.” Marc’s voice held nuances both intimate and regretful.

Such a mention seemed wholly out of character for Marc. A building suspicion became full-fledged anger. “Are you trying to tell me that you and my sister—”

“No. And before you say that you’ll cut my balls off with your sword, your sister and I never reached that point. At least not to the extent you’re imaging.”

"I don't want to imagine it." Rayder considered leaning over the table and throttling the man.

"If she'd wanted it, I would have given her everything she wanted. A home. Safe haven. Instead, she fell in love with Braxis Lorando."

Rayder reined in and took another drink of the powerful liquor. "She once said he was her very best friend."

Marc shook his head. "Her friend was an acceptable replacement for an unacceptable man." Marc snorted. "Whatever she felt for me, it wasn't a woman's foolish idea of love." Revelation held there, stark and bright. Marc blinked. His mouth opened then closed. "Perhaps I should have quenched my need for revenge long ago and had you killed for letting her die."

"You couldn't kill me any more than you could have killed her." Rayder's ire came on full force. He glared at Marc. "I never told you why I became a slave trader, why I went rogue."

"No you didn't, but I always saw the potential in you."

"After my sister and her betrothed were murdered, I knew I needed revenge, and I plotted it from end to end. You know Aramus killed her, don't you?"

Marc leaned back in his chair, eyes hard as ice. "Yes."

Rayder wondered if Marc's desire to avenge Aknada could match his. "You may not have loved her. But my guess is you cared for her enough to want the man who caused her death to pay."

Marc stared at him silently.

Rayder pressed onward. "I joined Aramus' slave trading ship to ingratiate myself with him so he would trust me. Now that I've accomplished that, I need help completing revenge. I should have asked for your help a long time ago."

"That's the only reason you went rogue?"

"You didn't think it was because you wore off on me when we were little kids, did you?"

Marc laughed, the sound genuine and hearty. "Yes."

"Bollocks."

They both laughed.

Marc gestured to the big room around them. "Look at all this, Rayder Tyrus. My father built this place and built our empire. I maintain this abode because of the way I treat my

people. No matter what the Daryk Ones think, I am not a bad man. I am good to my friends and probably better to my enemies than I should be.”

Rayder glanced around the enormous great dining hall with the two-story ceiling, the large fireplace at one end, and the ruler sitting only one seat away. The twenty-person table in the center of the room looked lonely with only the two of them sitting there, and the building seemed amazingly quiet. Rayder wondered why the man had never married and filled the place with children.

“And?” Rayder asked. “Tell me something I don’t know.”

“If I help you, my empire has the potential to crumble. Drakus Fina has asked me to join his quest against the Daryk Ones. He knows that my people would follow me into the hells if I asked.”

Rayder feared this moment but had suspected it might come. “You would do that?”

Marc sighed. “No. No matter what I might have done or what evils most think I’ve committed, I’m not the man Drakus Fina thinks I am. I won’t help him fight the Daryk Ones. My life is independent of the Daryk Ones *and* Drakus’ rogues. I don’t belong to either world.”

Relief filled Rayder. "Then I need to ask something of you, but if you think I'm responsible for my sister's death, you might refuse."

Marc stared at Rayder as if he'd lost his sanity and perhaps he had. "Aknada was a grown woman. She knew what she was doing. When I first heard she'd been murdered, I was...bereft."

Marc's words were sincere. His eyes haunted, his mouth grim.

For a few moments Rayder thought that maybe Marc had lied to himself for three years. Rayder saw it in Marc's eyes no matter what the man said. He'd loved Aknada.

Rayder planned to use that love and laid it all out on the table. "Help me destroy Aramus once and for all."

Marc glanced at him sharply. "You are serious. How do you propose we do that?"

"Use your people. Pay them if we have to. They'll become our personal army against him." Rayder went on to explain his plan of marching on the *Beast* under the pretense of buying slaves. "The men on the *Beast* are weak. We could easily defeat them and take over the ship."

Looking more interested than Rayder had expected.

“Then you have the ship as your own personal slaving vessel.”

Rayder’s stomach turned at the idea. “No. I leave the slaving life forever. I have a wife now. A mate.”

Marc grunted. “Really?” He laughed. “A woman wanted to mate with you?”

Not taking offense, Rayder grinned. “Yes.”

“Huh. I never would have imagined that.” Marc’s tone wasn’t spiteful but filled with amusement.

“Do not try.”

“Very well. Tell me more.”

“She’s a Magonian. A passenger ship on the way to Opali in Magonia was destroyed by a wave. I pulled her out of the ocean.”

“Lucky woman.”

*Lucky man.* He’d almost said it out loud. But was he? How lucky could he really be if he’d mated with a woman who couldn’t bear him children and help him complete his vow to his mother? Bollocks. It was all bloody ridiculous.



He wanted the children and would have wanted them even if his mother hadn't begged him to have them.

"Hmm." Marc's grunt was filled with a man's certainty. "If you found a mate, then you are fortunate. Aknada was..." He swallowed hard and for a few seconds the pain in his eyes was stark. "Never mind. That is behind me. But if what you say about Aramus is true, then I will help you. Tell me your plan."

"First, tell me what my men are facing if they fuck the whores at the tavern."

Marc's eyebrows went up. "The women I mentioned can more than handle their shite, that is all. Don't be surprised if your men come back beaten to a pulp or missing body parts."

Rayder laughed. "Oh?"

"They have no scruples about who pays them for a fuck. They just like to copulate. They sit on men and have their way with them. Bavarda is particularly nasty. You don't even want to know what she's done to men who fuck her."

"By the god."

"Indeed. It's also possible that your men will be imprisoned by these ladies if I don't persuade the women

to let them go. Would that be a problem?"

"Pay the women to keep them."

Marc laughed. "It is done."

Relief again flooded Rayder. With Marc's help, there might just be a chance this situation would turn out just fine.

\* \* \* \* \*

Xandra wakened to a throbbing headache that pulsed down the back of her neck. Impressions came slowly. Her body felt limp, powerless and dangling. Her eyelids were weighted down and refused to open. Rough texture poked her in the stomach. An ache plagued her lower back, and she wanted desperately to wake. By the god, what had happened? With a jolt she recalled the tea Yoanda had given her. Maybe everything Phili had stated about Yoanda was true. Feeling betrayed and angry, Xandra knew she had to defend herself from whatever Yoanda had in mind for her. As a thousand questions ran through her mind, she forced her eyes open.

And got the shock of her life. She was draped over a man's big shoulder, head hanging down his back. From her vantage point, she saw vine tangled ground and leafy jungle. She pulled hot, humid air into her lungs. Weak and

thirsty, she couldn't make an effort to struggle. Fear didn't come into her mind—grogginess kept her unable to respond to what she saw.

She sensed several men in front of and behind the man who carried her. She smelled rot or bad body odor, but carefully made no reaction. She decided against letting the men know she was awake. Better to see what was going on first.

Her discomfort increased as time dragged. She kept her eyes closed. The men didn't talk at all, which seemed odd to her. Better that she'd stayed unconscious. Not too long after, the air changed from hot and sticky jungle to hot and dry. She dared to open her eyes just as a familiar voice spoke.

“Put her down here,” Taris Elian said.

## Chapter Nineteen

Xandra stiffened. Taris had survived the shipwreck.

She'd never believed, short of a few moments after she'd awakened on the *Beast*, that this man could have survived.

Why not? She had.

The horror climbing up her throat threatened to choke off her air.

The sky and ground went topsy-turvy as the man who carried her laid her down on the ground. She kept her eyes open, her surprise and fear rising to panic level. She gulped in a breath and forced her paralyzed body to cooperate.

About twenty men surrounded her, some looking away as if they guarded against a threat. The jungle seemed eerily quiet here, and that's when she saw they were on the

edge of the jungle and a wide expanse of desert, where dunes obscured the land with black, cream and white sands. It was the strangest thing she'd ever seen—Magonian deserts came in various shades of tan and nothing more. The dictomy of jungle turning into instant desert amazed her.

Even that surprise couldn't drag her attention from Taris for more than the few moments it took to notice the landscape.

Taris glared at her. For a man of near fifty, he'd preserved well. Midnight-black eyes, unusually white skin, black shaggy hair and pock-marked face went with the cold look on his narrow face, but he had few wrinkles. Despite his paleness, which she'd never understood since he'd lived in the deserts of Magonia all his life, he wore no hat. His tunic was rumpled and stained, his trousers stained as well. From her position, he looked tall, but in truth, he was a bit shorter than her. His stocky build more than made up for his short stature.

"You thought you'd escaped me," he said, voice low and husky.

Some women would find that low and melodious sound arousing. She, though, knew the violence he could do, and her heartbeat thudded in her ears.

Drawing in a deep breath, she kept her answer cold and unemotional. She'd learned that he knew how to use a person's emotions against them. "It appears not."

His slow, lopsided smile made her stomach curl. She felt ill, but it could have been the drug.

He put his hand out to help her stand, but she ignored it and hauled herself to her feet. By the god, she wouldn't give him the satisfaction of showing weakness. She wanted to scream at him, to kick, to growl, to scar him in some way. Hate grew within her as high as the wave that had taken down her ship.

Her legs almost gave out, and the huge man who had carried her reached out to grab her upper arm. He kept her steady, and she felt so ill at first she didn't shake off his help.

Taris smirked and planted his big hands on his hips. "Xandra, you know there is no escape from me."

For a terrifying moment she believed him. After all, he'd found her once before and now he'd found her again. She licked her dry lips.

Taris gestured at the man who held her arm. "Give her as much water as she wants."

The man released her long enough to give her a water skin, and she drank gingerly. She didn't know how her stomach would react. After she'd had her fill, she handed it back to the gallute. When she looked at the man who carried her, she didn't expect what she saw when she really paid attention to him. He was enormous, yes, but there was an odd gentleness in his eyes. His round face had a sincerity and kindness that didn't match his brutish size. His blue eyes held no malice for her.

"Mangalor, scout ahead and see if the caravan has arrived yet," Taris said to one of the other men, and the man did as he was asked, running east through the foliage lining the last of the jungle.

Curiosity demanded answers. "How did you survive?"

"I swam. Struggled. I almost drowned but ended up on shore. I found my way to Grimnald Castle and got help there. The people are amazingly civilized there for complete barbarians with blasphemous ideas. These Dragonians make good slaves." He looked around at the men making a circle around them.

"How did you get them to follow you?" she asked.

"*Triand*. You know I had a lot of coin with me, and even the ocean can't drown coin."

*Triand* had always been the only thing he loved. Her stomach roiled but she ignored it. “How did you find me?”

He walked toward her. She took a step back and bumped into the bruiser behind her. His meaty hands clamped on her shoulders and held her in place. She froze.

“It took time, but bribes work even in Dragonia. There were a couple of men on board who have a grudge against your lover. They told me all about your heinous marriage to this Rayder Tyrus.” Taris’ eyes turned colder. “Then there is the sweet little wife of the ship’s admiral.”

“Yoanda.”

“She seemed eager enough to be rid of you for the right price. When your ship docked, I spoke to the right people at the right time.”

Her mind wanted to reject that Yoanda could have done such a thing, but Phili had warned her. “She plans to escape the *Beast* and the admiral.”

“Just so.”

She closed her eyes a moment and swallowed hard. “Why are you doing this, Taris? You don’t need me. Dragonia is full of women who’d be eager to do whatever you want for a price. And there are plenty of Magonian



women who would have your children. Why do you want me when I can't have your children?"

He was too close now. "What a stupid bitch you are. Do you think this is really about children? That you are cold and barren because of your traitorous actions? I want to make you suffer for what you did."

She could imagine only too well what he might have planned for her, and her heartbeat picked up speed.

"I am married to Rayder Tyrus and he will never give me up." She didn't know if that was true anymore, especially after he'd learned she couldn't have children.

He laughed. "Really? Did he tell you that when he took the most precious gift a woman has to give her husband?" He pointed at her. "You're a slaver's whore and that's all you'll be now. I want no more of you now that he's sullied your body."

"Then return me to the ship. What difference does it make to you if I'm on a slaver ship if you think I'm a slaver's whore?"

His smile held contempt. "Because whatever is mine is mine to do with what I want. You've been sullied, yes. Used, yes. But you are still my property to do with what I choose." He leaned in closer until his breath brushed her face. "Do

not worry, Xandra. I do not take soiled goods. Your purity is no longer.”

Thank the god for that.

He shook his head and crossed his arms. “It’s a pity though. I don’t think the particular slavers I have in mind for you are quite as civilized as these jungle people. I guess the desert does strange things to them.”

She didn’t want to know.

His grin widened, as if he could read her mind. “They wrap their women up to protect them from the desert, but they have no compunction about trading them for beasts or other goods. At least we didn’t do that on Magonia.” He shrugged. “Still, if I was going out into that blazing desert, I’d do the same. I’d make certain I had plenty of women in case I needed to trade for something vital.”

Her contempt for him grew, if that was possible. “If you have no use for me, just let me go.”

He laughed.

Fury exploded from her as she shrugged off the bruiser’s grip. “Let me go!”

“You have caused me no end of trouble. And for that

you'll pay dearly. I have no doubt this Tyrus will come looking for you, if only to save face. Not because he loves you, whatever that is." Taris pointed a finger in her face, shaking it with each word. "Cooperate and I won't hurt you. After I've traded you for a valuable item, I am done with you."

An odd relief flowed through her even though it didn't settle her desire to throttle him. "Then get on with it. Better I am with anyone else than with you, you murderous—"

His hand flashed out, and sharp pain lanced through her cheek and jaw as her head snapped back. Bruiser caught her before she could fall. He picked her up in his arms. Her hand went to her cheek as the pain throbbed and stung. She almost swung at the bruiser then thought the better of it. If he decided to hit her, she might not survive.

"Let's go. Mangalor is slow," Taris said. "If the caravan has arrived, I will dump you off and be done with you. If the caravan isn't in the area, maybe we'll take you all the way to Austos Castle."

She could only hope he told the truth. Few people would relish being left with more slavers, but she would do almost anything to escape this man. "Where is this Austos Castle?"

The man who cradled her in his arms set her on her

feet and waited until she regained her balance. Her cheek still throbbed, but at least Taris hadn't broken her jaw.

She glanced at Bruiser when Taris didn't answer.

"A day into the desert, my lady," Bruiser said. "But the caravan isn't that far away."

Taris threw a disgusted glance at the man. "Don't talk to her, Clada."

The bruiser's eyes turned cooler, as if he wanted to detach from caring. How had this gentle giant become a minion to Taris so quickly?

They marched into the jungle. But though Clada walked along by her right side, he didn't release her entirely. His meaty hand circled her upper arm.

Before long, she wished she'd allowed Clada to carry her. Her first experience of a jungle threatened to overwhelm her senses. Strange animal sounds she couldn't identify echoed, screams that sent skitters of apprehension over her skin. Terrain snarled with vines and creepers as thick as her wrist threatened to trip her at every step. The heavy heat that came with a moist environment sucked at her energy. Perspiration trickled down her scalp and onto her face. Air felt heavy and hard to breathe. Her head started to throb. Was it from heat or the drink Yoanda had

given her?

*I was a fool.*

She shouldn't have trusted the woman.

Rage surged as betrayal cut deep. Good. Anger would keep her moving, keep her will to survive high.

*Rayder will come for me.*

She knew it in her gut. After he realized what had happened, he would comb the continent for her. Strength returned to her legs at the thought. A thousand thoughts rushed through her mind. She'd need all her wits to survive what came next. She'd survived a shipwreck. Slavery. Marriage to a man she didn't know.

*I do know him.*

She knew him now, and the sweet pang of yearning tearing her apart brought hot tears to the surface. She wanted him more than life itself even though she knew he would eventually discard her.

She stumbled and Clada tightened his grip on her. She straightened, determined to persevere without complaining. She refused to show weakness.

A strange noise, the trill of an animal, echoed nearby. Hints of desert showed through the vines and trees.

Another loud animal noise, this one closer, trumpeted to the right. She'd never heard anything like the noise—it was a trill and a horn all at once. A moment later she saw it.

Twenty tall, leggy animals plodded along the desert sands. Their long necks ended in narrow, almost attractive faces. Whiskers dotted their noses, and thick lashes surrounded their big eyes. The animals themselves didn't appear dangerous, but the men riding on them were another thing. Large wraps surrounded their heads and tunics were belted at the waist. Long pants and boots that rose to the knees protected their bodies against the heat and sand. On Magonia, men donned similar attire. Several men walked alongside the animals, guiding them with harnesses and leads.

Mangalor returned from the desert. "They are here."

Taris laughed, but there was no humor in the sound. "We could have figured that out for ourselves. Where were you?"

The man looked sheepish. "Talking with their leader. He wants the woman."

The woman. Mangalor stared at her, so she couldn't

mistake his meaning.

“Very well. How much will he give me for her?” Taris asked.

The man whispered an amount in Taris’ ear. Taris grinned. “For sight unseen?”

Mangalor looked extremely pleased with himself. “For sight unseen.”

Taris smiled. “How extraordinary.”

Xandra’s stomach tossed. Dizziness threatened to claim her. She couldn’t fade now. She needed to stay alert and capable of fighting.

“There’s one problem,” Mangalor said.

Taris’s self-assured grin faded. “What?”

“He wants us to bring her into camp and then leave. A courier will bring our money back here to us.”

“Bugger that!” Taris laughed. “Is he fuckin’ crazy?”

Mangalor’s stoic expression didn’t change. “Very possibly.”

Taris licked his lips. Xandra searched his eyes and

saw one thing she recognized. Uncertainty. She'd experienced his wrath, his insincerity, his adherence to the strongest and most condemning Magonian laws and religious beliefs. Yet despite his certainty, she recognized discomfort when she viewed it.

"Let's do it," Taris said.

On the edge of a precipice, she tottered in fear and an overwhelming desire to cry. She swallowed hard. One way or the other, she'd find her way out of this mess and back to Rayder. She could never return to Magonia. Never. A pang of deep regret tugged inside her. She wanted to see her old home, yet she despised the idea. A vision of her last moments in her old home kept her from moving.

Blood. Everywhere.

Her parents' bodies.

The destruction caused by this man.

Nausea rose in her throat. Tears stung her eyes.

"Let's move it." Taris gestured forward. "With any luck, when I sell you, Rayder Tyrus will never see you again."

To her despair, she realized that she feared it too.



## Chapter Twenty

“We have enough supplies, I think,” Rayder said to Marc. “Enough to appease Aramus right before we kill him.”

Marc stood outside his fortress with Rayder. Rayder’s contingent of men had backpacks filled with supplies and awaited orders as they stood down the hill from the entrance to Marc’s compound. They’d considered taking Marc’s dragon, but Marc decided he’d keep the dragon there to stay on guard. The dragon was sleeping in his building, but they knew at the slightest hint of danger to the complex, the dragon would come out with a vengeance.

“Good.” Marc planted his hands on his hips. “When do you want to head back to the *Beast*?”

Urgency hummed inside of Rayder. “As soon as possible.” Rayder felt Marc’s scrutiny and met the other man’s critical gaze. “I don’t like leaving Xandra there alone.”

“Yet you did.”

Regret burned in his gut but it made no sense. “I should have brought her with me.”

“Because you think you could protect her in the jungle?”

Rayder sniffed and shook his head. “I don’t know if I could protect her any better than leaving her on the ship. But my instincts tell me something is wrong.”

“You left her on a ship with slavers like me.”

“They aren’t like you.”

“I am flattered.”

“They are worse.”

Marc’s eyebrows popped up. “You are right. They are. You wouldn’t have asked for my help if you knew otherwise.”

Rayder shoved a hand through his hair. “It is time to destroy Aramus.”

Marc hefted his own backpack from the ground. “We never discussed who gets his ship.”

Rayder had known, from the time he headed out on this venture. "You and your men. But you must promise to give safe passage to the women. Send them back to Magonia if they wish to go."

Marc's eyes sparkled with a form of amusement, but then humor faded. "You really aren't the man everyone thinks you are."

Rayder didn't care. "It doesn't matter to me. I wanted to return the women to their land. I won't compromise on that."

Marc nodded. "You have my word. And you know my word is my honor."

"Do slavers have honor?"

"This one does. Forgive yourself for what happened to Aknada, Rayder. We both have to forgive ourselves or we'll pay for it the rest of our lives."

Regret continued to torture Rayder, burning in his gut. "Why would you need to forgive yourself?"

Marc shook his head. "Because..." He swallowed hard. "It doesn't matter now."

Rayder wanted to ask more, but decided they didn't have time. "Let's go."

Marc nodded and headed down the hill. They came to a complete stop, though, when Rayder saw a familiar figure stumbling out of the jungle.

“By the god.” Rayder said.

“Who is it?”

“Phili from the ship.” Fear spiked high inside Rayder. “Admiral Aramus’ concubine.” Rayder ran toward her.

Marc followed and when they reached Phili, Rayder saw her condition more clearly. Her face was streaked with dirt and her clothes torn. Phili’s long hair lay in lank dark strands against her body. She was breathing hard and gazed at Marc as if he’d sprung from the earth as a monster. Yet she looked strong and capable, carrying a pack and a sword.

“What are you doing here?” Rayder asked.

“I escaped the *Beast*.” Phili didn’t look confident for once. She seemed suddenly fragile, her body quivering with exertion.

“You’ve been running. You must have left the ship not long after me,” Rayder said.

Phili allowed her sword arm to drop. She glanced

around at the variety of people moving about the grounds outside Marc's fortress. "It's a long story."

"Explain." Rayder wouldn't take Phili's shite. "And make it quick. I do not have time for this."

"I didn't know if I'd make it. I thought man or beast might kill me along the way." She smiled and wiped her hand across her forehead. "I am free."

"How did you escape?" Rayder asked.

"I've been planning to escape since I knew we were coming into this last port." Phili lifted a water skin off the leather strap she'd secured over her tunic in the form of a belt. She gulped a significant amount of water. "I'm finding my own way from now on. You've always been respectful of the slaves. Not me so much." She gulped and took a shuddering breath. "But I deserved that. I haven't made it easy to respect me, but I knew you'd want to know and I had to find you. Xandra's been kidnapped by the man who was once betrothed to her."

Surprise and fear jolted Rayder with a punch to the stomach. He sucked in a breath. "What?"

"Yoanda has been skulking today and seemed to be up to something. I didn't trust her." Phili grunted. "As if I ever have. After you left, I followed her and saw her go into your

cabin. Not long after two men I'd never seen before knocked on the cabin door and Yoanda let them in. I knew something was terribly wrong."

Rayder's stomach tumbled. "What happened?"

"At first I didn't do anything."

"Why the hell not? Is because you don't like her?"

Phili made a short, sharp laugh. "I do like her. That's why I am here. I was planning to leave the ship anyway while we were docked. I'm tired of being that wanker Aramus' concubine."

"Get on with it." Rayder practically hissed the words.

Phili scowled. She lifted one hand to her mussed hair. "The men working around me weren't paying any attention to strangers on the ship. Several were grinning to themselves, as if they knew what was happening. Maybe they were paid off. The men came out not long after, and this one fellow carried her over his shoulder. No one said a damn thing. I got the idea really fast that no one was going to help her. I grabbed the pack I'd stowed away and ran after them. I stayed well back because I knew they might see me. They're on the edge of the jungle where the desert meets. I ran on. I didn't know if I'd even find you or how I'd find you." Her eyes looked haunted. "Nearly got eaten by

this winged thing. I think it was a dragon.”

Rayder’s suspiciousness ate away at any trust. “And by sheer dumb luck you found us?”

“No. I ran across a husband and wife traveling to Imekland. When I asked where I could purchase supplies, they told me this place and Felican Castle farther west. Here I am.”

Rayder’s jaw clenched as he tried to shove aside any sympathy he felt for the ragged woman. He always believed women should be treated well, and she had come here to tell him about Xandra. “Did you hear where Taris Elian plans to take Xandra?”

Phili shook her head. “No.”

Rayder turned to Marc. “Forget my plan. I must go after Xandra.”

Marc nodded. His eyes grave. “I’ll come with you.”

Surprise kept Rayder silent for one moment. “No. You have to take the *Beast*. Make it your ship.”

Phili’s eyes widened. “You’re taking the ship from Aramus?”

His gaze intent on Marc, Rayder continued. "I never intended to make the ship mine. You know that."

But Marc didn't seem to care. He clamped a hand on Rayder's shoulder. "I think I know where she's been taken. Pian Forma is a slaver in the desert. He has a caravan of nomadic people."

Rayder's blood started to boil with anger, and he shook off Marc's touch. "Do you do business with him?"

Discomfort flickered over the man's face. "Rarely. But he's done business with Drakus and Aramus in the past. That's probably how this Taris Elian found out about him." Marc glanced at Phili. "Taris Elian is Magonian?"

"That's what I hear," Phili said.

"He is." Rayder hefted his pack higher on his back. "He's rich enough to pay for information and hire help to take Xandra. He must have paid Yoanda handsomely."

Phili snorted. "That woman would sell her own mother given the motivation."

Rayder ignored Phili's comment and turned to Marc. "All right. Help me get Xandra back." His throat tightened as emotion slammed him. "I'd do anything to get her back. Anything."



Marc nodded. "I will help you."

Before Phili could turn away, Rayder took out some coin and held it out to Phili. "For your trouble."

Phili took it and her eyes widened. Her mouth opened and worked, as if she wanted to speak but simply couldn't.

Rayder said, "Thank you for coming here. You didn't have to. I respect that."

Phili looked shaken, as if her hard core had been breached for one moment by a simple gesture of thanks.

Marc gestured to his fortress. "You have refuge here, for as long as you need it." Marc returned his attention to Rayder. "Let's go. We'll leave the other men here. We don't have that much daylight left."

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A cool cloth touched Xandra's forehead, and the comfort pressed a soft moan from her lips. By the god Magon, her body ached. Her throat burned. She drifted in a haze and tried to feel her surroundings. She lay on something soft. Comfortable. She was warm—too warm as a matter of fact. Her fingers searched and found an itchy blanket over her lower body. How long had she slept? Her

thoughts jumbled as she scrambled to recall where she was. Was she on the *Beast*?

“You’re awake. Come, you must drink.”

The voice startled her into awareness and her eyes snapped open. Sitting next to her bed was a startling-looking woman. Her eyes were a pristine blue deeper than the ocean. Creamy white skin and red lips contrasted against the dark-as-night color of her long thick hair tumbling around her shoulders. Familiarity pricked Xandra. Had she seen this woman before?

The woman smiled. “How are you feeling?”

Xandra couldn’t speak at first, her mind scrambling for coherence. She reached up to touch the damp cloth on her forehead. “Who are you?”

“A friend.” The woman smiled again, and Xandra saw sincerity in those thickly lashed eyes.

Xandra moved her head gingerly, taking in the room. No, not a room. A tent stretched over wood poles. The tan walls looked secure enough, but a breeze moved the sides and made a soft sound. Brightly woven pillows were scattered around the white and black sand. Billowy curtains in bright jewel colors fell across the walls of the tent.

"You're safe," the woman said, pressing Xandra's forearm. "You have nothing to fear from me."

Xandra didn't try to sit up, her confusion intact. "Did you buy me?"

The woman's eyes widened and then she laughed. "Most definitely not. I'm a slave myself. Or, at least, that is what Pian calls us when outsiders approach."

"Pian?"

"Pian Forma. He's a wandering ruler with a band of a hundred. He travels the vast Ithaycan desert."

Xandra sat bolt upright despite the pain in her head. "Is he allied to Drakus Fina or Karman Aramus?"

"Easy there." The woman urged her to lie back down. "Pian pretends he is their ally, but he isn't."

Xandra pressed her fingers to her temples. She needed to think, but physical discomfort made it harder. "Water please?"

"Of course." The woman reached for a metal tankard, and Xandra sat up long enough to drink deeply as the woman held the tankard for her.

Xandra finished drinking and lay back down. She wanted answers quickly, and her thoughts moved too slowly. "I was with a man named Taris Elian. Where is he?"

"Are you certain you want to know?"

"Yes."

"Pian has imprisoned him."

Surprise made Xandra's mouth pop open. She could not believe it. She gaped at the woman for a long time before she managed to speak. "What of the other men with him?"

"If they are Magonian, there's a good chance he's let them go."

Xandra thought of Clada, the big man who'd treated her well enough. "I cannot say I'm not sorry that Pian has imprisoned Taris Elian. But I'm not sure I like him being so near."

"Do not worry. He is well guarded and won't be allowed to harm you again. You see, Pian is a slaver, but he treats his slaves so well they might as well be free. Most of his slaves are loyal to him, and eventually he pays them."

"That is incredible." Xandra eyeballed the woman.

The woman sighed. "Perhaps I should tell you all I know. Then you'll see why it is better to be with Pian."

"Better to be any man's slave?"

A slow, indulgent smile played over the woman's full lips. "You're Magonian?"

"How did you know?"

"Taris Elian said you were both from Magonia. That was his first mistake, though perhaps he doesn't realize it."

"First mistake?"

"Pian hates Magonian men." The woman's hand waved as she tried to come up with words. "Most of his slaves are Magonian men. He makes them labor around his camp. Dragonia men he won't enslave."

"A Magonian man did something to him?"

"No. It's what Magonia stands for that Pian really hates. You see, Pian prefers men over women...sexually."

Xandra's eyebrows went up. "I heard of this...of men preferring men and women preferring women. It isn't done in Magonia. There are laws against it."

The woman's smile this time was sarcastic. "You think just because there are laws against it that it isn't done?"

Xandra sighed. "No, of course not. It's just that it isn't done openly. There are severe penalties for such behaviors. The scribes tell us it is a sin, and the Truth and Order Police will arrest people for such fraternization. Even the suspicion is enough to get people arrested and oftentimes found guilty."

The woman frowned. "Do you abhor men and women like this?"

Xandra shook her head. "No. I never thought much about it. I only knew it was forbidden in Magonia. But then so many things are." Curiosity wouldn't keep quiet. "Are you...do you prefer women?" A thought came to her and she sat up quickly again and swung her feet off the bed. "Is that why I'm here with you?"

The woman stood, towering over the bed. She waved both hands in dismissal. "No, no." Her expression hovered between annoyed and accepting. "Though because of the way I am, many men have accused me of preferring women over men."

Blinking in confusion, Xandra inspected the woman closer. She stood at least six feet if not taller. Instead of feminine clothing, wore a tunic with a breastplate. Her arms

were muscled—she obviously labored hard. A short skirt garment fell in filmy white to just above her knees. Her legs were shapely but obviously fit. Black ankle boots supported her feet.

“You appear strong.” Xandra stood and compared her height to the other woman. “You’re very tall and sturdy. But I don’t see why that would make men think you prefer women over men.”

For a heartbeat Xandra wondered if she should have remained quiet, but the woman didn’t seem angry with her.

“Men don’t think I’m feminine enough because I can fight. I have my own sword, my own dagger. I am stronger than some men.”

A niggling familiarity poked Xandra but she didn’t know why. “That hardly seems reasonable. I mean, that men would rebuff you for that. But like most men on Magonia, I suppose many on this continent don’t like to be seen as weaker than a woman.”

“That is certainly so. But enough about my troubles. Are you truly feeling better?”

“Yes. I think I was poisoned.”

“So I guessed. Why?”

“You don’t know my story?”

“When Taris Elian brought you here to Pian’s camp, I overheard your story. At least part of it.”

Anxiety started to rise to the surface. “What did you hear?”

“He said that a woman poisoned you on board the *Beast* and sold you to him.”

“There is so much more to the story than that.” Xandra decided she could trust the woman and explained her entire story up to a point. “Admiral Aramus’ wife wanted money to escape him. She even apologized as I was collapsing from the poison.”

“So she made a pact with Taris Elian and sold you to him. How did she make contact with such a man?”

Xandra returned to the bed and sat down. “I don’t know. All I do know now is that she isn’t the kind woman I first believed.”

Silence gathered, as if the woman didn’t want to add conjecture. Xandra ran her hand over the surface of the bed. Two pallets of soft cushioning, thick and sturdy, lay on top of each other. Pillows stacked at the head.



Suddenly the woman moved to a small table near the bed. “What am I thinking? Have more water. You must be parched, and the poison may take some time to purge from your system.”

“Thank you.” Xandra took the refilled tankard and sipped slowly.

The woman moved to the tent flap and pulled it aside to peek out. “You do not have to worry about Pian mistreating you. I told him you would work for me.”

Xandra’s suspicious nature, something she’d never had until this whole mess started, reared its head. “I thought you said you were a slave?”

“I’ve been with Pian for almost three years. He’s gained my respect.” She shrugged. “I cannot fault Pian for all that he’s done when there is so much I have to atone for.”

Curiosity got the better of Xandra. “What could you have done that was so bad?”

The woman returned to the chair by the bed. “Deception. Judgment. Impetuousness when caution would have been prudent.”

Xandra frowned. “Everyone has deceived and judged and been impetuous at some point. I’d hardly call those

horrific sins.”

The woman nodded and smiled. “Perhaps. But maybe the average person hasn’t done them in the quantities I have.”

Xandra took a deeper sip of her water and noticed her head had started to clear. Strength returned to her limbs. “Revenge seems to be a common thing in Dragonia.”

The woman laughed, and the soft, feminine sound drifted on the air. “Dragonians are a wild and treacherous lot. But then you already know that.”

Xandra had an idea, relieved this woman displayed kindness and consideration. “Perhaps you could help me.”

“How?”

“Help me escape. I’ve escaped Taris Elian but now I’m someone else’s prisoner. I’m tired of being passed from one man to another.” Xandra heard the whiny tone in her own voice but wasn’t proud of it. She explained that she’d married a second time, to a man on the *Beast*.

The woman looked more than curious now. “I don’t know that I can help you. Besides, why would you want to be with this second husband? You were just complaining about passing from man to man.”

Why indeed?

“He is a former Daryk One. I believe he cares for me. I know he’ll come looking for me. He is a slaver but...but he isn’t really. It’s complicated. He wants revenge on Admiral Aramus, the man who murdered his sister.”

The woman squinted a moment, taking a measuring look at Xandra. “A Daryk One. There is only one man I knew who does what you’ve described. He was once a good honorable man.” Conflicting emotions raced across her face. “Is your husband’s name Rayder Tyrus?”

Alarm raced momentarily through Xandra. “Yes. How did you know?”

The woman stood again and paced the room, her expression grave and taut. “You’ll want to know then, that I once wanted revenge against Rayder Tyrus in the worst way.” She turned to Xandra, and the anger in her eyes was palpable. “I wanted him dead for destroying my life. I wanted him to suffer the hells of the damned just as I did.”

Fear ran a fast river through Xandra. Her fingers clutched the tankard. “Why? Who are you?”

The woman took a step forward and held out her hand. “I am Aknada Tyrus.”



## Chapter Twenty-One

Xandra's mouth opened but shock kept her quiet. She shook Aknada's hand.

Aknada released Xandra's hand, and Xandra found her voice. "By the god."

"By them all." Aknada's expression stayed solemn. "I did not catch your name."

"Xandra Shorenus. Xandra Shorenus Tyrus."

"Do you love my brother?"

The unexpected question hit her so hard, she couldn't think. Her heart pounded, her breath shorter at the startling question. "Do you still want to harm him?"

"Answer my question first."

Xandra swallowed hard. "Your brother will be so happy to see you alive. No matter how much you might hate him, I

know he grieves deeply to this day over your loss.”

Aknada made a soft noise. “Even if he does, he may disown me when he learns what happened to me when I was on the *Beast*. Now do not avoid my question. Do you love my brother?”

She couldn’t express her deepest feelings because she didn’t know them. “He compels me more than any man I’ve ever known. We are... He has taught me so much of physical love.”

A quick smile touched Aknada’s lips. “Please, the man is my brother. I can be spared such details.”

Xandra flushed. “Of course. It is just that he means more to me than I could have imagined anyone meaning to me. If that is love, then yes. I do love him.”

Aknada paced the big tent slowly, her hands clasped behind her back. “Good. At least I know he’ll be happy. If he loves you, that is.”

An ache started in Xandra’s midsection. “I don’t know. He’s very protective of me.”

“Sounds like my brother.” Aknada chewed on her lower lip for a second. “But then he is protective of all women. I would have to see how he is with you to be certain about

love.”

Xandra wanted to run, to leave all this behind and return to Rayder. To ask him the critical question of love and know his truthful answer. Beyond that, she knew how much Rayder would want to have Aknada back in his life.

“Rayder thinks you’re dead. He...he showed me your book of poems, and I read them.”

A flush filled Aknada’s face. “Poems are nothing more than foolish musings.”

“Do you really believe that? How could you write so beautifully if you believed it was all foolish?”

Pain echoed through her eyes. “Yes. When I realized how foolish it was, I stopped writing them.”

Disappointment for Aknada and sympathy for her pain filled Xandra. “Beautiful musings all the same. The poems spoke to me as if you’d experienced and known so many of the things that I have.”

Aknada looked at the tent floor. “I wrote those poems when I believed in love. When there was a man who...”

“Rayder told me that your betrothed was killed. He told me the whole thing.”

“He told you what he thinks he knows.”

Curiosity gripped Xandra. “He said he failed to protect your betrothed and that his guilt for that is enormous.”

Aknada looked up at her, her eyes inscrutable. “When Admiral Aramus killed my betrothed and took me prisoner, I thought I’d never get off that ship.”

“Why did Rayder think you were dead if you weren’t?”

“Because a tale circulated that Aramus threw me overboard to drown. Instead he sold me to Pian.”

“And you’ve been here all this time.”

“Yes.”

“That’s why Rayder wants revenge against Aramus. That’s why he has spent the last three years trying to undermine his slaving operation.”

Aknada turned away and lifted her own tankard. “I grieve that he believed I was dead.”

“Yet you let him believe it, and you say you wanted revenge against Rayder.”

After taking a sip, Aknada returned her gaze to Xandra.



"I don't wish revenge anymore. I've learned so much since I've been with Pian about forgiveness. Perhaps it's been too long for me to ask for Rayder's pardon."

Xandra's stomach dropped at a sudden thought. "What did Aramus do to you?"

Aknada's expression tightened, confirming terrible darkness lived in her thoughts. "He raped me before he sold me. The only way he managed it was by having six men hold me down. They watched it, enjoyed it. Then he let them take their turns. When they were done, he said I'd always remember him. That day I lost my... I lost my desire to fight like a Daryk One. All my strength, all my training, my extraordinary strength, it didn't save me." She shrugged. "What use was it?"

Xandra's stomach soured, her throat aching with sudden tears. She told Aknada what had happened to her on the ship and how Rayder had kept her as safe as possible but that Aramus had tried to snatch her from the bowels of the ship.

"There was a slave on the ship, Phili. She locked me in the slave hold to save me from Aramus and the other women down there kept me safe as well. Rayder wants to free all of them. You should see how well he treats them."

Aknada placed her tankard on the table and paced

once more. "I'm sorry you have endured such hardship at Dragonian hands. You've heard of the rogues and Drakus' minions wanting to steal Magonian women for procreation?"

"Rayder explained it to me. He abhors it."

"My brother does love you." Aknada smiled, her eyes warming. "He must."

Hope bloomed in Xandra's thoughts. The idea that he could love her filled her with an inexpressible joy. "When I first met him, I thought he must be a horrible man. But he kept doing things that made me wonder if he wasn't a good man wrapped in a disguise. His words were sometimes harsh, but he never hurt me and always protected me."

A teasing smile touched Aknada's mouth. "Rayder is a rascal. He knows how to charm women. But I think this time with you is different."

"He said I'm his mate and he can't be parted from me. I'm the only woman he can ever be with."

Aknada's mouth hardened. "I lost my belief in the so-called mating when Aramus took me."

Xandra wondered if she'd allowed her horrible experience with Taris color her perceptions in some ways.

She also had a feeling there was more to Aknada's story than Aknada would admit to out loud.

"Perhaps you'll regain that belief someday," Xandra said softly. Her mind veered to another question. "With all that you went through, why have you stayed with this desert slaver?"

"To avoid making another grave mistake. Staying with a slaver who has no designs on my body is a relief to me."

Xandra thought she understood now. She placed her tankard on the table. "Pian offers you protection and understanding. Aramus destroyed your trust in men. With Pian you know you're safe. He's the lesser of evils."

Aknada stopped pacing and stared at her. "Very astute. Though he has bought slaves from Drakus, it's more to keep them away from Drakus and Aramus than to enslave people."

"A good man?"

"Better than most."

"You're hiding," Xandra said with conviction. "You don't want anyone to know you are alive."

Aknada nodded slowly. "Not Aramus."

Kinship made Xandra want to help Aknada. "I am so sorry you've had to endure so much."

Aknada settled into the chair by the bed. "Thank you, but it seems you've been through a fair amount yourself. Tell me more."

Xandra gave more details about her time on the ship, and Aknada listened without interruption.

When Xandra finished, she wondered if Aknada would help her return to Rayder. "I cannot stay with Pian and his group. I want to go back to Rayder."

"Where is he now?"

"When he left me on the ship, he planned to negotiate selling Magonian slaves to Felican Castle."

Aknada visibly paled.

"What is wrong?" Xandra asked.

"The other man I don't want to see is Marc Gampia of Felican Castle."

\* \* \* \* \*

Rayder's heartbeat seemed to be pounding out of his

chest as they crossed the remaining jungle between Marc's compound and the Ithaycan desert. Soon they would come upon Pian's caravan of animals known as *alamuts* and the desert people who relied on them.

Alongside Rayder, Marc kept the pace. Rayder understood now he'd underestimated Marc in more than one way. Granted, he hadn't spent much time with his old acquaintance and friend for three years. Devoting himself to revenge had cut his friendships, devoured his ability to imagine friendship with anyone again. Even fellow Daryk Ones Eryk Gauth and Dane Charger thought he was scum, or at least not much above the slimiest life forms that populated the Tarrian jungle floor. More than once he'd deserved their scorn. Perhaps wallowing too close to evil had transformed him into the thing he hated most.

Rayder regretted the damage to those friendships but not why he'd followed a murky path. He didn't expect to repair his relationships with Dane and Eryk. Once a betrayer, always a betrayer. No getting around that solemn and true statement. He closed his eyes and allowed the pain of his failures to settle inside him. He would make this situation right for the women back on the ship. Hatred he'd carried inside him for years still boiled for Aramus, but so did his need for Xandra. Running through the jungle had drained his energy, and he didn't care. Getting to Xandra quickly was all that mattered.

Marc came to a full stop in a small clearing where a dragon had obviously smashed fronds for a bed. "Wait. We need to eat before we attack. We're almost there."

Rayder had stopped, but he grumbled. "We need to hurry."

"Think, man." Marc's breath sluiced in and out as he caught his breath. "You need energy. Eat and drink. Then we'll go on."

Rayder heard distant sounds, perhaps the slave caravan. "They're near. Fuck me, we should have brought Arcos."

"I don't think we'll need him. I understand Pian is peaceable."

"Peaceable?"

"They never venture into the jungle. They stay on the outskirts or deep in the Ithaycan desert. The *alamuts* hate the jungle."

"I'm surprised dragons don't eat the *alamuts*."

"Not bloody tasty, I imagine. I hear their hide is tough and stringy. If you're going to run out of food in the Ithaycan

desert, you better hope there's a tender young *alamut* in the herd."

Rayder grimaced. "I'd rather eat dragon meat."

"You have eaten it, haven't you?"

"Yep."

Marc shook his head. "But you have also killed dragons. Something I could never do. Not even one that wants to kill me."

Rayder didn't see jealousy or hatred in Marc's eyes. Only understanding and matter-of-fact reality. Rayder hated this adventure, his worry over Xandra's safety messing with his normally cool ability to fight without regrets or concerns.

"Damn it," Rayder said under his breath.

"What is wrong?"

"I've fought in the sands, but it's been a long time."

"So have I. We'll press on. We'll save your mate."

They sat on some rocks and retrieved food from their packs.

“Do you trust Aramus’ concubine?” Marc asked. “She seemed as tough as a boot.”

Rayder opened his pack and found the dried meat stored in a pocket. “Phili is a better person than I gave her credit for. She did not have to come and tell me what happened to Xandra, but she did.” He chewed the tough meat, hating the taste but understanding if he planned to fight for his mate he’d need strength. “And I’m grateful.”

Marc sighed. “I must be mad helping you with this.”

Anger sprouted in Rayder. “You didn’t have to help me. Why are you?”

“For your sister’s memory. Then I’ll do something I should have done a long time ago. I’ll help you kill Aramus.”

Rayder pinned the other man with a glare. “He’s mine to kill.”

“I have your back.”

“Why now? You could have killed him a long time ago. You know murderers who would do your bidding without question. I figured you didn’t give a shite.”

“Is that why you went after Aknada’s killer yourself?”



"I asked you to help me. You would not."

Regret etched Marc's face, a haunted and sorrowful look that Rayder doubted the man could fake. "I was mistaken. I should have helped you then. In my defense, I was not thinking correctly. I was thinking..."

"Yes?"

"Your sister was a bright planet in the sky. More beautiful than any woman I've beheld before or since. I could never replace her." He placed a hand on his chest. "When Aramus killed her, I knew I had failed her. Knew that I was to blame for her death."

Perhaps what he thought he knew about his sister's relationship with Marc did not resemble reality. Rayder finished off the meat and drank water from a water skin he'd stuffed in the pack. "Why didn't you help me before?"

Marc closed his pack. "I regret every day that I waited this long."

Rayder's doubt didn't budge. "What is different this time?"

Marc licked his lips, his expression restrained, as if he didn't want to tell Rayder anything. "Because I did have feelings for Aknada and I never told her. A hundred times a

day I regret not telling her. It's too late now to save Aknada, but I can atone for it by honoring her memory and saving Xandra. Your mate... Have you told her how you feel about her?"

Rayder had never heard a man talk about a woman in such sensitive terms. Though he understood his fellow Daryk Ones mated for life, he now understood feelings came into play and not just heightened primal need.

"I haven't told her," Rayder said.

"When you get her back, you should. Never let an opportunity go by. I was obsessed with your sister."

Rayder couldn't smile or laugh because his emotions scattered. He didn't know yet whether he liked or hated the idea. What did it matter? Aknada wasn't here. She couldn't be hurt by anyone anymore. "Obsessed how?"

"I wanted her for mine."

Rayder smirked. "You loved her?"

"I don't think I understand what love is."

"It wouldn't have mattered. She was betrothed to Braxis."

"I remember. I just wanted you to know why I hated Aramus. Why I'll help you bring him down now."

Marc's eyes held real pain. Rayder stood. He couldn't blame Marc, even if he wanted to dismiss the man. Maybe Marc could have some peace of mind.

"Very well." Rayder made certain his pack centered firmly on his back. "Let us go. It's not much farther now. I can hear the animals."

Marc shoved to his feet as he finished chewing and slung his pack over his shoulder. "Those smelly animals. They piss on everything and bite. But they can make it through the desert on little water."

Rayder smiled as they headed back into the jungle. "Tell me something I don't know. Come on. We will discuss this later. I will decide then whether to kick your arse or not."

Marc laughed. "You can try."

"I'm a Daryk One. You know I can do it." Rayder pushed into the heavy foliage in front of him. "Keep your voice low. The caravan is less than a hundred yards ahead."

They crouched low behind a thick tangle of bushes laden with red flowers. Pian's caravan of more than a

hundred people sat unmoving. They'd made camp.

Marc whispered, "Nightfall comes in two hours. I say we wait until then."

Rayder nodded. All of this was suicide. The two of them couldn't fight a hundred people at once. But by the god, they could cut a wide trough. Marc might not be a Daryk One, but Rayder acknowledged Marc could fight. He'd seen him do it.

"Very well. Let's rest."

## Chapter Twenty-Two

Xandra started as a man entered her tent. Tall, thin, with a red scarf partially draped over short black hair and narrow features tanned brown by relentless desert sun. Fiery blue eyes almost as pretty as Aknada's stared down at her. A long dark blue tunic ended at his knees but was belted at the waist with some sort of rope. Matching blue pants were tucked into knee-high black boots.

At least Aknada was with her, standing in the corner. Somehow she knew Aknada wouldn't allow anything to happen to her.

"Do not be alarmed," the man said as a smile broke over his face. His voice was deep, melodious and gentle. "I am Pian. I am sorry you are in this predicament. Aknada has told me much about you." He tossed a glance at Aknada and nodded. "She is well respected around our camp. Most in camp would do anything for her, including me. If she says you are trustworthy, I know it to be so."

“Thank you.” Xandra nodded. “I understand you are a kind man. I think you saved me from Taris Elian.”

Pian nodded, hands on his hips. “I gathered he’s an evil man. I was happy to buy you.”

Xandra winced. “Does this mean I’m your slave?”

“In a strict sense, yes, but I will not hold you to it. You are free to go at any time.”

Xandra couldn’t imagine a so-called slaver with morals like Pian. “You aren’t truly a slaver, are you?” She held out her hands. “I have no money to pay you back.”

Pian smiled, and the kindness in his eyes couldn’t be denied. “I prefer to think of myself as a rescuer. Once I buy people, they are free to escape, if you will. Or, as many do, they are free to stay with us in our safe desert haven.”

“You move around all the time.”

“Essentially we are nomadic. We’re safer this way.”

Nodding, Xandra tried to absorb her good fortune. Relief flowed through her in a wave. “Thank you. How can I repay you for such generosity?”

“No need. I do this for all the oppressed. I was once

treated as less than nothing because of my sexuality. Even in Dragonia it's not fully accepted. Someone once treated me with kindness and sheltered me from harm. This is my way of giving back."

"I'm fortunate Taris Elian didn't know that. Will you help me return to my mate?"

Pian nodded. "You will stay with us until we can find this Rayder Tyrus."

"He's with the *Beast*."

"That's what Aknada tells me. She explained he isn't so different from me. He wants to release slaves."

"And he does so at great peril."

"A commendable man. Sleep and rest. We leave in the morning."

Without another word, he slipped out of the tent. Xandra stared after him, amazed.

Aknada sat on the bed next to her. "You can trust him and you can trust me."

"I know." Xandra closed her eyes and soaked in the safety. "I cannot wait to see Rayder again."

Aknada slept on a pallet on the floor after insisting Xandra keep the bed to recover. Xandra fell asleep with peace of mind—the first time she'd experienced calmness since she'd last woken up in Rayder's arms. Her contentment lasted until morning.

Shouting jolted her out of sleep. Her heartbeat thumped in her ears as she shot straight upward in bed. The tent glowed with pale light—a lamp flickered at the far side of the room. Aknada sprang to her feet, grabbed a sword nearby and hurried to the tent flap.

“What’s happening?” Xandra shoved her feet into boots and sprang to her feet.

Aknada cautiously peeked through the tent flap. “Damn the hells! It’s a raid. Come on. Let’s go.”

“Where?”

“Follow me and stay close.”

Running into the pitch-black desert didn’t appeal to Xandra but what could she do? Xandra glanced around for a weapon and saw nothing she could use.

“Don’t dally.” Aknada gestured for her to hurry.

Xandra grabbed a pack nearby she knew held water



and food.

They rushed from the tent, Xandra hot on Aknada's heels. Sand sucked at Xandra's feet and slowed her down. She raced behind Aknada. Screams echoed in the camp, and a chill shot up Xandra's spine. Fear scalded as wind rustled the tents scattered over the sand. *Alamuts* broke loose from tethers and escaped. Men descended on Pian's camp, swords slashing, hacking, taking down whoever and whatever they could.

Aknada grabbed her arm and hauled her toward three dunes that connected and broke apart in a strange dance. A hallucination? Black, white and cream and colored the landscape with strange shadows. Nearby, fire engulfed one tent and screams of terror filled the air. Xandra's breath cut, tightening in her chest. Determined, Xandra forced her body to move, despite the terror ripping apart the land behind her. Once they reached the dunes, Aknada directed her to hunker down where no one could see them.

Amid the chaotic noises, Xandra heard the screams of women and trembled. By the god, were they being murdered?

In the darkness, Xandra couldn't see Aknada's face well, but she sensed the tension coming off her in waves.

Aknada turned toward her. "Stay here. I'm going to see

what's happening."

Aknada started to move, but Xandra caught her arm. "No. You'll be killed."

Aknada shook her head. "I am not that easy to kill. Remember, I am a Daryk One."

As Aknada left her cowering behind the sand dune, Xandra thought she'd never get her breath. She trembled, tired of fighting her way through situations of peril and strife. What choice did she have?

No.

Fear shoved aside her attempts to stay calm. Was Aknada safe? Then she saw people moving around. She had no idea if they were friendly.

She waited, hesitating to move in with no way to defend herself. That's when she saw two figures coming around the dunes at full speed as if they headed toward the chaos, ready to join in the mayhem. She stilled, holding her breath as they raced toward her. Before she could run, they were on her.

"Halt!" One man held his sword up, his voice harsh and sure.

“Please I’m—” she gasped.

“Xandra?” Rayder’s voice, incredulous, broke sharply through the air.

She didn’t pay attention to the man with him. Joy swept her. “Rayder?”

Rayder threw down his sword and snatched her into his arms. “Thank Draconus.”

His hoarse declaration and arms tight around her filled Xandra with boundless relief. She shook inside, her heart pounding. She opened her eyes long enough to note the man with him stood near. All she could see beyond his big body and the impression of sharp features was long hair around his shoulders.

Rayder pressed a hard kiss to her mouth and buried his face in her hair. “My beauty. I thought—”

He cut himself off, his breath puffing hard against her skin.

She managed to push words out of her tight throat. “How did you know I was here?”

“Phili.” He kept his voice low. “Come on, we must leave.”

“Hurry,” the other man said. “There’s no time to waste.”

“Wait. We can’t.” Xandra kept a tight grip on Rayder, fingers digging into his shoulders as she eyed the man next to him. “Aknada is still in there.”

Both men went silent, but she couldn’t see their expressions.

“Aknada?” The other man’s deep voice broke with emotion. “It cannot be.”

She cupped Rayder’s face. “Your sister is alive, Rayder. I swear to you.”

“Draconus,” the other man whispered.

“She took care of me. Pian, the slaver—he isn’t a bad man. He’s taken care of her all this time. We have to help these people.”

“Shite.” Rayder’s harsh curse cut the air. “My sister? Alive all this time. How?”

Xandra kissed his lips. “It is a long story we don’t have time for.”

The man with him gripped his arm and Rayder released Xandra. “You stay here. I’ll go in for her.”

“By the god, you will not.” Rayder’s voice was equally determined.

“We’ll all go,” Xandra said. “And don’t try to tell me we aren’t in this together.”

“It is too dangerous,” the other man said.

Rayder retrieved his sword and slipped his arm around her. “Marc, there’s little use in arguing with her.”

Xandra stared at the man in shock. “Marc? Marc Gampia?”

The man stepped forward. “How did you know my name?”

“Aknada said she didn’t want to see you, but I have a feeling that isn’t true.”

“By the god, she will see me.” Marc’s voice rasped with indignation. “She will see me.”

“Time’s a wasting. Let’s go.” Rayder pulled a dagger from his belt and handed it to Xandra.

The skirted the dunes and approached the scene with caution. Although her heart beat so loudly in her ears Xandra thought everyone else could hear it, she pressed

forward. The men didn't need a coward along for the ride. She stayed a pace behind them on Rayder's insistence but made certain to look behind her on occasion.

They entered the scene and a cold sweat broke out over Xandra. Bodies littered the area here and there. Most were men, though she saw a woman lying nearby. They checked the bodies for signs of life but found none.

"These two are from the *Beast*," Xandra said to Rayder as he checked two men lying facedown in bloody sand.

"The *Beast*?" Marc's question hung in the air. "They came all the way from the ship?"

"No. They were with Taris Elian," she said. "They must have plotted to come back and pillage. I thought Taris just wanted to sell me."

"Apparently not," Rayder said as several men with torches came toward them. "Stay on guard."

She touched his forearm. "It's all right. They're a part of this camp." She waved to show their friendly intentions. "I don't think they'll hurt us."

"You don't think they'll hurt us." Marc didn't sound convinced.

“Pian.” She recognized him striding toward them. “Pian is with them.”

Rayder slipped an arm around her. “The slaver?”

She glanced up into his face. “I told you, he’s not like you think. He’s a kind man who took care of Aknada these three years.”

Rayder shook his head. “I can’t believe it. Aknada is alive.” Rayder’s voice filled with joy and disbelief.

“Come on.” She moved forward.

They headed toward Pian. When they reached him and the two other men, Pian held his hand up in a gesture of welcome. His face was smeared with blood, and his expression was grim.

“My dear Xandra. Are these men friend or foe?” Pian asked as they came to a stop.

She smiled, but it was weak. “This is Rayder Tyrus, my husband, and Marc Gampia.”

Pian smiled despite everything that had happened. “You are welcome here.”

Rayder’s face gave away nothing as he assessed

Pian. "Thank you for taking care of my mate. I owe you."

Pain shook his head. "You owe me nothing. We've been raided. First time in years."

Rayder said, "We heard that Xandra had been taken and knew that Taris Elian would probably try to sell her. We saw the men attacking your camp."

"I recognized them. They're from the *Beast*." Xandra had to let them know. "Men who came with Taris to sell me."

"Where is Aknada?" Rayder and Marc spoke at the same time.

Pian's expression sent cold chills through Xandra. "She is injured."

"Oh Magon." Xandra whispered the prayer under her breath.

Marc stepped toward Pian. "Take us to her now."



## Chapter Twenty-Three

Aknada lay on a bed in a tent that hadn't been burned. Rayder sat on one side of the bed with Xandra at his side while Marc sat on the other. Rayder wanted to reach out and beg Aknada to waken, to explain why she'd hidden with Pian's people for three years. He burned for answers. He burned with anger at her. He also begged Draconus to save her life.

Pian entered the tent and stood without saying a word. Pian had brought the healer who traveled with his group, and the woman had declared that Aknada's injuries were grave and would take special care.

"Her head is injured, her arm is broken. I'll set this arm, but she must be taken someplace stable and safe to recover in full. With head injuries it is never certain the person will recover. She may not wake."

The healer's words had sent everyone into total silence, stunned and grieving. It was like losing her a second time,

and it decimated Rayder. After the healer left, they'd remained silent for a long time. All seemed unable or unwilling to voice their concerns and confusion.

"She's a Daryk One," Marc had finally said. "She has healing ability unlike the average person. She must live."

His voice had held fear and genuine grief. Genuine regret. Rayder understood fully what he hadn't before. Marc loved Aknada and probably always had.

Soaked in misery, Rayder did not respond when Xandra stood slowly and stretched. "I must walk a little."

Rayder nodded then stood. He wasn't letting her out of his sight.

Marc glanced up at them. "I will stay with Aknada."

So many had lost their lives at the camp, but many had also survived. As it turned out, the two men who tried to kill so many met their death at Pian's hand. Rayder recognized the attackers as men from the *Beast*. Taris Elian was also among the dead, according to Pian, but it was unclear who had killed him.

Xandra reached for Rayder's hand and he enveloped her fingers. Despite his elation at having her back with him, he worried for his sister and his mind roiled with questions

and anger.

As Xandra and Rayder stood in the breaking dawn, just outside the tent where Aknada lay, sand shifted around their feet. Black and cream, the ground swirled as wind moaned around them.

Rayder turned her toward him, his hands on her shoulders at first as he stared into her eyes. His handsome features, so beautiful and yet harsh, made her heartbeat quicken. By all that was holy, the joy of seeing him filled her and overwhelmed her fear for Aknada.

Before she could speak, he snatched her against him and covered her mouth with his. Instantly she fell into heated, liquid desire. Desperate and aggressive, his mouth took hers. His tongue plunged deep, stroking over hers until the rasp and caress sent swirls of liquid heat pouring into her loins. She squirmed against him, hips pressing to his. His long, erect cock grew harder against her belly. She ached to have it thrusting inside her, stroking her core until she spasmed in orgasm around all that thick hardness. Ah, how far had she changed? From a woman who believed—however tenuously—in the Chronicles of Magon, to a woman whose desire for a man outstretched any concern about sin.

Startled, she drew back from his kiss. “Rayder. I was

so... I didn't think you'd ever know where to find me."

He explained more about being at Marc Gampia's compound and Phili's appearance. "If she hadn't seen those men take you off the ship, perhaps I still wouldn't know where you were." He cupped her cheek. "But no matter what, I would have found you. If it took all my life."

His reassurance warmed her inside as nothing else could have. Perhaps he'd forgotten that she couldn't have children?

Wind flowed through the dunes with more furious gusts. Glad for the long tunic and pants she wore which protected her from the elements, she also wished to shelter Rayder. The big, tough, wonderful man could still hurt. He could still lose his sister—a second time.

Xandra touched his face, enjoying the bristle of more than a day's worth of beard. "Your sister will survive this."

"Yes. I know." His voice was bleak, even a bit confused as he released her. "What did she tell you? Why has she been here all this time?"

Grief filled his eyes, and Xandra hastened to tell him everything she knew. When she finished, he looked deep in thought.

“This is amazing.” Wind blew through his night-dark hair. “It still does not explain why she stayed away so long. Why she let me believe she was dead.”

“She was angry. I think she believed...”

“That I was responsible for her betrothed dying. Yes, I know. As we’ve said before.”

“From what you told me, you couldn’t have been responsible. It was a horrible accident. Maybe her guilt is misplaced. She blames herself for what happened.” She clasped his biceps, drawing strength from his solid muscle. “After she’d been away so long and made you believe she was dead, perhaps she couldn’t face you. This Marc Gampia, she said she didn’t want to see him. I have the feeling their relationship was more complicated than we know.”

Rayder’s eyes narrowed. “I think he loves my sister.”

“He certainly appears to.”

He scrubbed a hand over his face. “My guess is that he feels guilt too.”

“For believing that he should have rescued her. For not knowing she was so near. Three years is a long time to believe your loved one is dead.”

Rayder's eyes filled with dark intensity. "If he feels anything like I do at this moment, I can understand."

"What do we do now?"

"Take my sister back to Marc's compound to recover."

He brought her close again, and as they stood together, her head on his shoulder, she drew strength from him. "Aknada is an extraordinary woman. I see a lot of her in you."

He drew back far enough to cup her face. "Come, let us tend to Aknada."

\* \* \* \* \*

Rayder stared down at his sister for a while longer as she lay on the bed in Marc's quarters at the compound. They'd taken turns carrying her through the jungle back to the compound. Marc had insisted on putting her in his rooms, an expanse of luxury even Felican Castle couldn't boast. He'd ensconced her in his own bed. Rayder didn't know what to think of that. When Aknada awakened, she'd either be relieved to see where she'd landed or mad as all the levels of the hells. After all, she'd told Xandra the last man she wanted to see was Marc.

Rayder glanced at his sister's face and saw three years had changed her. She was younger than Xandra anyway, and that youthfulness hadn't faded though she'd lived in the desert. Her high cheekbones, full lips and much longer hair gave her a femininity she hadn't possessed before. Long muscles and tall body held a Daryk One's strength and the capability to fight. Or had it?

How had two men managed to break her arm and cause a head injury? She should have been able to cut them down. She'd had a sword according to Xandra. He shook his head. It did not matter. Love pierced his heart as he looked down at her. Yes, he wanted to throttle her for allowing him to believe she was dead for three years. But if she blamed him for her betrothed's death, then her attitude stood to reason. She didn't want to be a part of his life. Perhaps she still did not. His heart ached at the thought. Maybe if he was fortunate, he could let Aknada know that he forgave her. And if she forgave him, he could ask for nothing more.

He gathered her hand in his and gently pressed. "Aknada, can you hear me? It's Rayder. I am here now. You need to wake up. I'm happy to see you. Marc is dying to see you."

Rayder and Xandra had practically had to drag Marc from Aknada's bedside. He'd protested, but once on a bed

in the room next door, he'd fallen asleep in an instant.

Above all this, Rayder was grateful to Pian. Under the guise of slavery, Aknada actually lived a better life. Rayder had vowed he'd protect Pian's secret.

Xandra was also exhausted, and she'd fallen asleep in a room down the hall. Every time he realized how close he'd come to losing her, he went to her room and checked on her. She always lay sleeping, alive and well. By the god, he had to stop obsessing.

Two more hours passed, and Aknada didn't stir. Marc arrived at the door, looking far more rested and cheerful than Rayder expected. As soon as he saw Aknada resting on the bed, Marc's features softened.

"Any change?" Marc asked as he moved toward Aknada and stood by Rayder.

Rayder hated saying it. "None."

Marc clapped one hand on Rayder's shoulder. "She's strong. She will come out of this."

Rayder cleared his throat. "It is my truest hope right now." Shifting out from under Marc's hand, Rayder stood and headed for the door. At the open threshold, he said, "I never thanked you for helping find Xandra."



“It was the least I could do.”

“I’ll be with Xandra if there’s any change.”

Rayder left the room and closed the door, his body and thoughts more drained than he could remember experiencing before. His footsteps echoed on the stone floor as he traversed the wide hallway. Marc had built a strong, solid structure sure to keep them safe while they recovered from their ordeal.

Rayder looked forward to seeing Xandra and giving her a gift he’d obtained from a special vendor in the compound. He’d tucked the gift in his pack. He hoped she’d like it.

He smiled. Of course she’d like it, once she got over the shock of seeing the thing.

When he reached Xandra’s room a few steps down the hall, he hesitated. He didn’t want to frighten her when she’d been through so much. Out of respect, he rapped softly on the door.

Quicker than he expected, the door eased open and Xandra peered cautiously around the corner. She wore a diaphanous gown of white that drifted across her body like a soft cloud. It didn’t cling to her shape but teased by

covering her arms and down to her toes. In contrast, the bodice dipped down and revealed cleavage. His hungry gaze took in every sweet inch of soft, white skin.

Beyond her, a bed draped in silky, brightly colored materials stood against one wall. Two large windows were half covered.

“Rayder.” She smiled but faint dark circles marred her pretty eyes. She stepped back from the door to let him inside and yawned. “Pardon my rudeness.”

“Not at all.”

He glanced around area. Various amenities such as a desk, a long lounging couch and a private bathing room gave luxury and comfort.

“Did you sleep well?” he asked.

“Some. I keep thinking about...things.”

“Such as?”

“I... Everything. My thoughts are scattered in so many directions.”

“You’ve been through a great deal since your ship was destroyed. It will take time to feel normal again.”

She laughed softly, her smile almost mocking. “What is normal? I cannot even imagine it.”

He returned her smile, eager to reassure her. He eased his pack to the floor. “You will find it and know it when you see it.”

She stared at him for some time before she spoke. “Rayder, I’m so glad you’re with me.”

Before he could move, she leaned into him, arms around his neck. As his arms came around her and their lips met, heat bolted through him. Without hesitation he knew what he wanted and needed. As her fingers speared into his hair and held him tightly, he tangled his tongue with hers. Stroke after stroke, he took and gave. She tasted delicious, like some fruit. He groaned as arousal hardened his cock instantly. He broke their kiss and started to remove his clothing bit by bit. He stripped quickly, tossing items this way and that in eagerness. Her mouth popped open—he didn’t think she’d ever seen him undress this quickly. Before long he was naked.

She glanced down at his cock and her attention made heat rush to his groin.

Her gaze traveled over his chest, and when she licked her lips, his body reacted with burning need.

Aware of her delicate state and not wanting to frighten her with his growing passion, he cupped her shoulders and brought her against him slowly. When their bodies touched, she gasped. Her hand slipped upward over his chest, exploring with definite purpose.

“What were you going to say?” he asked softly, aware of her slim body beneath his touch.

“I understand Aknada’s poetry now. I read the entire book when I was with you on the *Beast*. She spoke of more than mountains and shores and beauty. Aknada understood...love. When a man and woman are so connected they cannot imagine it any other way. Did she feel about her betrothed that way?”

Rayder shook his head. “I don’t remember seeing any passion between them, but I assumed that meant they hid it. Some people do.”

Warmth spread through him as Xandra’s fingers caressed his naked chest. “Do you know why she didn’t want to see Marc Gampia?”

“No. And yes. There was something between them, but I’ll damned if I know what it is.”

She sighed, and his heart clenched at the woebegone expression marring her face. He tilted her chin up. “What is

wrong? Are you all right?"

"I'm well." She stretched upward and slipped her arms around his neck. "I am here with you. All is very well."

"You're not smiling when you say that."

"You're not either."

He cupped her face and kissed her nose. "We've been through a lot."

A deep frown placed furrows between her brows. "What will happen next? You're not planning on returning to the *Beast*, are you?"

Indecision rattled him. Several things jumbled around in his mind on what to do, and he was compelled to tell her. He lifted her into his arms and laid her down on the bed.

Naked and aching to take her, he hovered over her. She slipped her warm hands up over his biceps, and he considered kissing her instead of talking. He smiled. It was possible to experience both pleasure and conversation.

"First, I don't want to leave you again." His throat tightened as emotion rose swiftly. "I want you with me. Safe. But I know I cannot always be with you. Second, I refuse to leave the rest of the slaves behind on the ship. We need to

free them somehow. Marc and I will plan it.”

She smiled, her soft lips tempting him. “Are you sure Marc will want to help? After all, isn’t he a type of slaver?”

His hand trailed up her side, teasing the side of her breast with a light stroke. Her breath hitched, and he smiled in satisfaction. “Not so much a slaver as a rogue.”

Her eyes went warm and languid as she caressed his shoulders. “Like you?”

“Of a sort. Marc is a different man than I thought he was. He said he’d help me.”

“After Aknada is well?”

Rayder nodded. “I don’t want to leave her either.” Worry carved a hole in his gut, but he had to believe Aknada would recover.

“She’s strong.” Xandra cupped his cheek with one hand and brushed her thumb over his mouth. “I predict she will open her eyes soon and tell us we are all silly for worrying about her.”

“I doubt she’d let us off that easy. She always worded things a lot stronger.”

A soft smile curved her mouth and made two aches fill him—his cock and his heart. Xandra had entered his life in a rush, in a chance meeting. A few moments one way or the other and they wouldn't have met. She would, most likely, have died. The thought made his blood run thick and cold.

Then he recalled how he'd left her, the rough and tempestuous sex they'd shared. What did it mean? Why had they gone at each other like mad beasts?

She yawned, and he lay back on the bed. He pulled her into his arms. Nestling her close made him feel as if he could protect her—at one time he thought he could. Now he understood that he couldn't save her from everything. Fear slid through him like the thrust of a cold sword.

Her warm palm slid over his chest, brushing his nipples with a sweet touch that sizzled through him. "Are you all right?"

"Of course." He tightened his arms around her, brushing one hand down until he could squeeze her bottom.

She wriggled and sighed. "Please, Rayder."

Temptation scaled him.

He sighed, drew in her fresh, enticing scent. By the god Draconus she smelled good. She felt even better. All silky

skin and warmth. His hands started to caress, to feel each curve and dip in her form. He kissed her temple, ready to murmur whatever endearments she required. Each full breast under that gown drove him mad. He wanted to touch. To cup. To lick with ravenous attention. He traced the plump line of one breast just peeking from under the neckline. Her breath hitched and she shivered. Good. She liked that. Her hand came up to caress his neck and his face, rasping over the stubble. A woman's touch relaxed him, but her touch did more. She turned him into something he'd never been before. Maleness inside him tried to rebel, to refuse softer emotions. But it did him no good. His mind went toward the emotions without asking his permission or giving him time to erect other harder emotions.

For the first time he realized fear so different and heady. He feared her abandonment. If she left him, what would he do? She needed his protection, yet she'd shown such strength and bravery. More than ever he understood how Dane Charger must feel about Ketera Aldrancos. *This* was it. *This* was the feeling.

He wanted her with a rush of hard feeling. She was precious. That was the only word he had to describe the strong emotions bombarding him. She belonged in his life, in his home. More than a mate, she completed a part of him he'd never known existed until he met her.



By the god, he would have her. He would feast and take and show her his strength. She would know again and again that he was her mate and no other man would ever have her. She would never want another man.

Unable to resist her, he tilted her chin up and kissed her.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

Xandra sighed in contentment as Rayder's mouth covered hers. She'd longed for the touch of his mouth, even through the hectic and hurried excursion back to Marc's compound.

As Rayder released her from the kiss, she shifted from his arms and crawled over him. He grinned, and her heart warmed with joy. Something different entered that smile and had changed in only the last few moments. She didn't know how or why, but it resonated inside her like the key to a question.

The key to everything within Rayder that had seemed closed off to her before now.

"What are you thinking?" she asked, hoping to solve the mystery.

"That you are the finest woman I've ever met, and there will never be another for me."

Joy broke over her in a potent wave. Tears welled in her eyes. “Rayder. But I took that potion. I can never have children. How could you want me? It’s so important for Dragonia to repopulate.”

He swallowed hard, and she saw the naked pain in his eyes. “It is true. I want children. I...I promised to my dying mother that I wanted children. She made me promise because she believed Aknada was dead. Right after you told me about the potion I was angry and hurt. But I understand now why you did it.”

Hope blossomed inside her. “And you still want me? I have so much to atone for. If I hadn’t done it, my parents and my brother would still be alive.”

He cupped her face, his voice as fierce as his touch was tender. “Listen to me. Taris Elian was an evil piece of shite. He would have found another excuse to murder them because he wanted power over you. When you took the potion and denied him children, he had the excuse. But he would have found another reason regardless. Their deaths aren’t your fault.”

Perhaps she should have reasoned that out, should have known. But something in his understanding and forgiveness set her free.

She met his kiss halfway, diving into the moment. As his tongue took her, she gasped into his mouth. His hands landed on her bottom, squeezing and caressing. They moved in unison, in a dance that had never felt as right as it did now.

Powerful muscles moved beneath her. Skin slipped against skin. She was intoxicated. Breaking from his kiss again, she opened her eyes and sat up.

She undid the tie at her neck and hurried to lift the long garment over her head. He grabbed the material and jerked it over her head. She dropped it on the stone floor. His gaze smoothed over Xandra, features sharp in the fading light. Blistering desire etched his face, those eyes glowing again in that primitive sign of arousal or aggression. She knew he'd never hurt her, gloried in the passion she knew would come.

Heat sliced through Xandra as she enjoyed his long thickness pressing like a hot bar between her legs. His dark eyes so intent, so warm and filled with desire. She loved the sensation. Loved knowing he wanted her. Ownership filled her. This was her man. Her lover, and all the sins she'd once believed about sex had disappeared. Freedom engulfed her in happiness. Despite all they'd gone through, it no longer mattered if she returned to Magonia. There was nothing there for her. Everything she

cared for and loved resided in Dragonia.

Loved.

"I love you." The words left her mouth before she could stop them.

His eyes widened slightly then turned ferocious. He reached behind her neck and drew her down to him, breasts against chest, mouth against mouth. His tongue plundered, stroking inside her. Her body reacted, her pussy clenching and releasing with need, damp and aching. Rayder let her go long enough to prop up on one elbow and to lash the tip of one nipple with his tongue. She gasped in delight as his tongue flicked and tasted. The tip beaded, hardened even more as he suckled strongly. He tormented that breast for an eternity before moving to the next. With every caress she writhed, squirmed as elemental craving flashed to life.

As she leaned over him, he clenched her hips and drew her down. His cock head teased her pussy lips. She couldn't stop the moan that left her lips. With a growl and one hard thrust, his cock plunged inside her. Pleasure streaked straight up from the point where they joined. Buried deep, his cock was a firebrand inside, and she pulsed around his strength. He felt so good. So right.

She closed her eyes and savored the sensation of his

thickness sliding in and out, caressing her with a motion that made her catch her breath. She wanted more and she wanted it fast.

His hips lifted, gyrating in a slow but steady motion. Her body didn't understand anything but this, didn't want anything but this. Groaning, she plunged into the sensations bombarding her. Their breaths coming fast, her heartbeat pounding, her body rushing toward a climactic explosion. They groaned like animals as their bodies came together hard thrust after hard thrust. The silken bed covers shifted against her skin, cool in contrast to the heat spreading along their skin. Frantic to reach a peak, she moved with him. Wanting. Undeniable.

Instinctively she sat up, forcing his hips to the bed. Another masculine growl issued from deep in his throat. Her eyes flew open as he gripped her hips again and tried to grind his hips upward between her thighs. She smiled, ready to tease for only a moment. Her body wouldn't allow any more than that.

Rayder's rough voice echoed in the chamber. "Fuck me, woman."

She laughed and panted. "Your language is horrible, sir. Is that any way to speak to a lady?"

"You are killing me," he gritted between his teeth.

Sweat beaded on his brow, his muscles taut with tension and probably burning with a need for action. She loved this control over him. She smiled slowly, holding back the driving urge to do as he demanded. Her flesh throbbed around his cock, and as she clenched her muscles around him, he moaned.

“Please, my beauty.” His eyes hadn’t softened but his words had.

“Please? The warrior begging his woman?” By Magon, it pleased her to tease him.

His jaw clenched. Without warming he sat up and in a quick maneuver, he flipped her onto her back. His cock slipped from her, slick with her juices and as hard as she’d ever seen it. She expected him to plunge back inside her. Instead, he lowered himself to the bed with his head between her legs. *Oh.*

Though he’d tasted her before, heat rushed into her face. She closed her eyes as he started to feast.

A loud gasp left her throat as his tongue brushed over her folds with slow deliberation. She ached, wanting so much more. He gave it. He licked, his tongue a hot invader as it caressed her folds with a gentleness she hadn’t expected. But he didn’t touch her where she needed it the

most. She needed him to touch her pleasure button. Over and over he tantalized her. He dipped into her folds, thrusting his tongue inside and wiggling against sensitive flesh. A shocked, appreciative moan left her.

His relentless touches threatened to drive her over the edge, but she could never quite reach that pinnacle of pleasure.

“Please, Rayder.” A moan of need left her throat.

He lifted his head and stared at her. His eyes glowed, his smile wicked. “See what happens to a woman who taunts her lover?”

Before she could answer, he shifted off her and held his hand out. “Come.”

“What?” She slipped her hand into his. “You don’t mean to stop?”

He chuckled as he urged her to her feet. “By the god, absolutely not. I have more punishment for you.”

A twinge of alarm raced through her. “Punishment?”

“I am teasing you. I bought something earlier that I thought you’d like.”



“That sounds like a gift. Not punishment.”

“It can be both.”

Curious, she watched as he dug into a pack he'd laid on the floor earlier. He extracted a bottle of clear liquid. He placed it on a small table near the bed. Then he reached in the pack and extracted a long tubular device that resembled in almost every way a man's—

“By the god,” she whispered. “It is a man's...”

He laughed softly, the glow in his eyes increasing. “It is made for a woman's pleasure. We can insert it into your sweet cunny.”

“Oh.”

*Oh my.*

“If you are afraid, we will not use it.”

“No. I...I want to use it.” She did, and that shocked her a smidgen. She watched him spread the clear liquid over the device. “But I do not understand one thing. Why would you want to put that inside me when you could put your...” She gestured at his cock and shrugged.

“Ah, but this can be used inside you in other ways too.”

His smile was even more wicked, if that was possible. He walked toward her. "In your other sweet little hole too."

Her mouth opened in surprise, but she didn't know what to say.

"Tonight I have the privilege of tucking inside your sweet little hole, my beauty."

Thrilled, a little scared and filled with extreme desire, she waited for instruction.

"Turn around and place your palms on the bed. Spread your legs," he said.

She did as he asked, trembling in anticipation. When the tubular object touched her pussy lips, it was warm. Surprised, she almost purred in pleasure as the wide device parted her and Rayder slid it inside slowly. As the cock pushed through her folds, it caressed her much as Rayder always did.

"Oh Rayder. That feels wonderful."

And it did. The heat spread her wide like Rayder's cock, and as the length plunged all the way inside her, his husky voice said, "Now hold it. If you tighten and release, the pleasure will increase."

She closed her eyes and did as he suggested. The rhythm of her muscles contracting around the device felt exquisite. Within a few seconds the pleasure started to build exponentially.

“Now I need you, my beauty,” Rayder said.

She expected him to withdraw the false cock. Instead his fingers touched between her butt cheeks. She gasped. “Rayder, what are you doing?”

“Preparing you for me.”

Rayder applied the warm liquid to her back hole, and with excitement and wonder, she gloried in what he intended to do. The Chronicles of Magon forbade such sex. Xandra didn't care and longed for that forbidden experience he'd introduced her to not so long ago.

Rayder's breathing had quickened as he slid one and then two fingers into her tightness. She moaned softly as his fingers slipped in and out of her. Each dip into her tight well and every tightening of her muscles around the false cock sent firebolts of pleasure streaking like lightning straight to her core. She didn't think she could take much more before the peak broke her apart.

His cock touched her back entrance, and with deliberation but gentleness, he tucked just the head inside.

And began to move.

A low moan of bliss left her throat as she closed her eyes and clenched at the bed covers. He worked her with the tip of his cock as she allowed her muscles to work the cock she held deep within her pussy. Relentless, with his breathing coming faster and hashier, he thrust just the tip of his cock in and out of her.

“Rayder, I need...”

“What do you need?”

“All of it.”

“Are you certain?”

“Yes. By the god Magon, yes.”

She could feel him trembling with his need. Shaking as he eased his cock deeper, deeper, going farther with each thrust until his entire length plundered her channel. He pumped, swaying back and forth with steady motion that sent new strokes of pleasure igniting into a firestorm. She couldn't take anymore.

Bliss threw her over the edge. Tumbling. Falling.

She repressed a scream. Her pussy throbbed around

the cock as her forbidden channel rippled around him in ecstasy.

Rayder gave one last thrust, breath rasping in his throat, then shuddered and shook as a guttural sound left his throat. "I need more."

More?

He drew his cock from her and pulled the false cock from her pussy. He left the bed long enough to pour more liquid on the false cock. He washed his own body then returned to her. He guided her to place her hands on the bed again. The false cock touched between her butt checks and he inserted it with determination into her forbidden channel. She'd thought she'd be sore, but the hard, unrelenting object buried within felt exciting. Sinful.

His fingers slid over her hips, and with one lunge, he buried himself in her pussy. She cried out, grappling for control as the first spear brought her to the edge.

Rayder didn't wait. He withdrew and then fed his length into her wetness, down to the core. She shivered and sighed. The two cocks added to her excitement, bringing her more pleasure than she could have expected.

Rayder thrust hard, picking up the pace until his groans of animalistic power fueled her exhilaration. She

whimpered, she cried out, tried to keep her voice lower but couldn't. The pleasure was too stark to contain.

Climax slammed her, pulsing outward from her pussy to her belly, to her breasts until the bliss tingled in her nipples with sharp stings.

Rayder exploded inside her, a hot rush of his life force flooding within her, a rough cry ripping from his throat. He leaned over her, his arms coming around her, pressing small kisses to her back.

"That was wonderful, my beauty," he managed to say as he caught his breath.

Later on, as he held her close and they drifted to sleep, she pondered one aspect of the night that concerned her. Actually, it stung her deeply, if she thought too much about it.

He'd never said he loved her in return.

## Chapter Twenty-Five

Xandra rose early in the morning, when the sun barely awakened. She lay quietly next to Rayder, who was turned away on his right side. She eased from bed and dressed. Aches twinged through her muscles, and tenderness in certain parts of her body reminded Xandra what they'd done before. She wouldn't complain or forget the excitement.

She considered going outside to see Arcos. While the creature had initially frightened her, she was amazed at how gentle it seemed to be with women and how much it was devoted to Marc. No, she wanted to see Aknada more.

Xandra slipped into her boots and left the room, closing the door slow and easy. She wandered toward Aknada's room, intent on seeing how she faired. Before she reached the door, she saw it cracked open and heard low voices. She almost pushed the door open all the way, but she listened instead, captured by the conversation.

“Why did you bring me here?” Aknada’s voice held strength.

Xandra pressed her hands to her mouth. This was wonderful.

“Because I can take care of you,” Marc said.

“I don’t need you to take care of me.” Her announcement sounded clear.

“You’d rather I left you with Pian?” Marc’s voice sounded incredulous. “Did you plan to wander with those desert people forever?”

“I don’t see the problem.”

“You were almost killed.” His strident tone was a little louder.

“You know better than that. I’m a Daryk One. I’m not easy to kill. Five men jumped me and I killed all but two.”

The room went silent.

Marc spoke next. “I understand that Pian isn’t a true slave trader.”

“Like you are?” she said with heat.



“I may not release people at will as Pian does, but I treat all my people well. No one has tried to escape and all are loyal because they respect me. They are paid a wage.”

Aknada was quiet for a moment and Xandra wished she could see her face. Finally Aknada said, “I did not realize you paid them.”

“You could call it indentured servitude. Not true slavery. You knew that about me before Aramus took you. You know me better than anyone ever has, Aknada.”

Aknada snorted. “You did not answer my most vital questions about you before...”

“I know. Before you betrothed to Braxis. I should have. Draconus knows I have regretted that every moment of every day since Aramus took you.”

Xandra dared to edge closer to the door opening and gazed through. Marc sat on a chair next to the bed. His right hand close to Aknada’s where it lay on the covers. In profile, his mouth held a stubborn line and so did hers. Her arm was no longer bandaged and she appeared to move it with ease. Perhaps she was completely mended.

He reached out and placed his hand over Aknada’s, and his big fingers covered hers. “Five men?”

Her expression eased to dismay. “Yes. But I don’t enjoy killing.”

“You have before?” His voice softened.

“For Pian. To protect the caravan.”

Xandra saw tears roll down Aknada’s face. “You know Daryk Ones. They can singlehandedly kill several men without trying. I was the head warrior with the caravan. I trained some of the men.”

“The slaves.”

“Slaves only in others’ imaginations. They stay with Pian willingly, just like I did. Now his camp is devastated, some of his people killed.” Tears started to creep down her face.

“Don’t cry, Aknada.” Marc’s voice resonated with deep feeling. “You are safe forever now.”

She sniffed then laughed. Her smile wasn’t real. “Whatever makes you think that? I’ve never been safe in our society. I’m an outcast and a...a freak.” She pulled her hand out from under his. “With Pian’s camp, I was with everyone else who is an outcast. With people who understand me. In Dragonian society, I have no place. I belonged in the caravan.”

“You belong with people who care about you.”

She glanced away, eyes swimming with pain and tears. “Pian and his people care about me more than anyone else ever has.”

Marc’s face twisted. “That isn’t true.”

Aknada didn’t look at him.

Marc shook his head and stood. He paced the floor, hands on his hips. “I’m grateful.”

“Why?”

“Because your skills have kept you alive all this time. Because you could have drowned like Aramus said. But you’re strong and can take care of yourself.” He returned to the bed, looking down on her. “I didn’t protect you when Braxis was killed. Maybe I *cannot* protect you. But it doesn’t keep me from wanting to try.”

“Why?” Aknada’s voice turned sweeter and more feminine. “Why?”

Xandra’s feet were glued to the floor. She couldn’t move.

A hand came down on Xandra’s shoulder, and she

squeaked in surprise and jumped. She swung to the left, ready to hit whoever touched her.

“Whoa, my beauty. It’s just me.” Rayder stood there with hands up, a grin flirting with his mouth.

Marc came to the door and opened it all the way. Xandra half-expected anger, but he smiled instead. “How long were you standing there?”

“Long enough,” Xandra said softly.

“In my case, not long enough.” Rayder frowned at them both as he walked passed them to his sister. “Aknada.”

Rayder’s quick steps took him straight to the bed, and he occupied the chair. He didn’t reach for her hand, but he smiled.

Aknada’s expression remained conflicted, as if she couldn’t decide whether his presence was welcome or not. Her gaze flickered to Xandra and relief altered her face. “Xandra, you’re safe.”

Xandra crossed to the other side of the bed. “We were worried about you.”

“Me? No one should ever worry about me.”

“Stubborn woman,” Marc said with exasperation. “When we found you were alive, can you imagine in any way how that made us feel? The relief and joy?”

Aknada swallowed hard. “Your concern is generous—”

“Forget it.” Marc glared and threw up his hands. “I have tasks to complete. I’ll return later.” Marc stomped from the room, boot steps tromping down the hallway and downstairs.

Silence enveloped the room for a few moments, awkward and telling. Aknada turned her gaze to Rayder. “Rayder, why are you here?”

Rayder frowned, his gaze flicking to Xandra momentarily. “Why? Are you daft, Aknada? When I realized you were alive, it was as Marc said. I was stunned. Relieved. Do you know what it means to see you awake and speaking? To know that you’ll recover?”

Aknada blinked, surprise a part of her eyes. “I thought after knowing that I’ve deceived you for three years and let you think I was dead—”

“All is forgiven.” Rayder leaned closer and reached for her hand.

Aknada’s eyes widened a little. “How can you forgive

me so easily? You don't even know why I stayed away three years."

"I will withhold my forgiveness if it makes you happy." Teasing filled his tone, his eyes lighter and warm. "At least until you explain. Then I'll forgive you anyway."

More tears filled Aknada's eyes. "You shouldn't forgive me. You shouldn't."

Rayder brought his sister's hand up to his lips and kissed it. "Please, Aknada, I hate to see you in such pain. Tell me what happened to you these three years. Tell me why you let me think you were dead."

Xandra knew she needed to give them time and space to sort out their family business, and perhaps if she departed for a time, they'd both feel comfortable explaining their feelings. "I'll find breakfast for us all and return some time later. Give you a chance to talk."

Rayder glanced up at Xandra. "Thank you."

Xandra left the room and closed the door. As she wandered downstairs in search of nourishment, she wondered if Aknada would soak in Rayder's forgiveness and if she would honor Marc with that same absolution. Xandra's curiosity remained. Why exactly did Aknada want to bait and annoy Marc? Obviously Marc and Aknada had

unresolved feelings for each other—even Xandra could see that in their glances. Heat lay between them. And why did Aknada think Rayder shouldn't forgive her? Aknada had told Xandra while they were in Pian's camp that she didn't want to see Marc either, but Xandra didn't think it was from genuine loathing. No, Aknada's feelings ran deep for Marc.

Though curious, Xandra decided to resist placing her nose in their business. Rayder would tell her what he found out if chose to share. She wouldn't press Marc, Aknada or Rayder for answers.

Xandra's stomach growled and hurried her toward the kitchen.

## Chapter Twenty-Six

Rayder watched his sister's face grow more apprehensive after Xandra left. He sat in the chair beside her bed. She pulled her hand from his and sat up with a grimace. He knew better than to express more concern. She wouldn't welcome it and would see it as weakness if she admitted to it. All Daryk Ones saw physical injury to themselves in this way. Rapid healing ensured she'd be up and around within no time. Marc had never understood this—he'd always treated Aknada as if he needed to protect her, and that drove Aknada mad. If Marc intended to keep Aknada close, and Rayder believed he did, Marc would have to break down her suspicious nature. She didn't want coddling or pampering. She wanted the one thing most Dragonian men had difficulty accepting. She was unique. Strong. Capable without a man in every way. In no need of protection whatsoever.

Bollocks. She would have to give a little if she expected Marc to...



What?

Rayder shook his head. He didn't know. He had no business attempting to matchmake, and how or why it came into the picture baffled him. His sister was vulnerable despite her outward bravado. He doubted she comprehended that. If Marc hurt her in any way, Rayder would make him pay.

Then again, perhaps he'd already hurt her.

"Tell me," Rayder said to Aknada, watching his sister's face rapidly echo apprehension and resignation. "We're alone and you can tell me everything that happened these three years."

She laughed softly. "You were always very direct Rayder."

"It runs in the family."

She sighed and pursed her lips. "You're right."

He snorted softly. "You honor me."

With a laugh, she flashed a smile. "I know. I was always a handful as a child."

"Who says you've grown out of it?"

She laughed—a high, feminine sound filled with genuine mirth. “You haven’t changed much.”

“Have you?”

“Yes. In so many ways.”

“Can you ever forgive me for failing you? For not saving Braxis?”

She shook her head. “I can’t forgive you.”

His heart sank, sadness seeping into his soul.

“No, I can see you misunderstand me. I can’t forgive you because there’s nothing to forgive. Two days before my betrothed was killed, I realized I didn’t love him. I had... feelings for someone else. Someone who has haunted my nights for years.”

Rayder’s relief that she didn’t blame him for her betrothed’s death didn’t diminish his concern. “You mean Marc Gampia.”

She bit her lip. “None of your business.”

He smiled. “Perhaps not.”

“All you need to understand is that I don’t blame you for

Braxis. You couldn't have stopped his death. No one, not even I could have helped him. I learned right before Aramus slew him that he planned to join the slave trade. But not the way Pian or even Marc trades in slaves. He was Aramus' friend and I didn't even know it. I almost wish I would have killed him before Aramus did."

"Why did Aramus kill him?"

"Aramus saw me with Braxis one day and decided he wanted me for a concubine. Braxis decided that Aramus couldn't have me. At least he had that many scruples. That's why Aramus killed Braxis."

Rayder groaned and squeezed her fingers. "By the god, Aknada... I am so sorry. You've been let down by so many men, haven't you?"

"Braxis betrayed me, and then Aramus took something else from me. I know you feel responsible for me because I'm your only sister. But you aren't responsible for anything that happened to me. If anyone is responsible for what occurred, it's Marc."

Rayder blinked in confusion. "How?"

She rubbed her hands over her face. "Never mind. It's complicated and I don't want to talk about it now."

“You cannot tell me that you hate him. I can see you don’t.”

She sneered. “Hate? Perhaps not. Please, Rayder, I don’t want to talk about him anymore.”

Discomfort gnawed at his gut. Instinct told him she’d left an important detail out. “There’s more, Aknada. Don’t deny it. You still haven’t explained why you let me think you were dead.”

Her eyes were sad. “I know you said you forgive me for that. I didn’t expect it. I stayed away because I didn’t want you to know that I was...” She gulped, clear sorrow darkening her eyes. “Several men on Aramus’ ship raped me.”

Pain lacerated him. Anger slammed his gut with equal force. “What?”

“Aramus raped me. Several men helped him hold me down and then took their turns.”

Excruciating didn’t describe his reaction. His fists opened and closed. “Draconus. I shall kill Aramus with my bare hands.”

“I’ll help you.”

He glanced at her, absorbing his anguish, imagining her pain and sorrow. "It must have been... I cannot imagine, Aknada. That you could trust any man would be a miracle. Have you told Marc about this?"

"No. Aramus took my virginity and destroyed trust. The only man I trust is Pian and you. The rest of your bloody kind can go to the hells."

Tears spilled from her eyes. She sobbed. He moved to the bed and reached for her, wanting to comfort her and himself.

"No," she said. "Let it be. Any man's embrace, even my brother's... It is still too much."

He nodded but stayed. "Of course. What can I do, Aknada?" He jammed one hand into his hair. "What can I do?"

"Give me time, Rayder. I don't know if I can ever trust a man again. But I know what you can do for me. Help me get revenge on Aramus."

He nodded. "That has been my whole life for three years, wanting to destroy his slave empire. By now he has to know something is wrong. He may have sailed from shore."

She wiped at her tears and sniffed. "I will help you find him, no matter how long it takes."

Though he knew she had far to go emotionally, he also knew he couldn't stop her. She would do what she must do.

"We will have a meal and plot and plan, my sister. I vow to you this day, we will make Aramus pay."

\* \* \* \* \*

Xandra barely heard Rayder planning the next step of the battle plan. Rayder, Xandra, Aknada and Marc sat around a huge table capable of seating twenty. The dining hall ceiling rose high, wood rafters scarred with age. The long room was decorated with shields, swords, helmets and other war implements. Aknada had made a snide comment on not much changing as she'd entered the dining hall.

Two days had passed since Rayder and Aknada had announced plans to attack Aramus' ship. Xandra's stomach had knotted when she'd heard their decision. Two days would be enough, Marc had assured, to gather enough men to their side. Since they'd come to the compound, Xandra realized all of the men, slave or no, held Marc in the highest of esteem. Except by Aknada.

“How I’ve changed,” Xandra had said to Rayder as he’d held her last night in his arms.

“How?”

Tears had prickled her eyes. “I’ve accepted killing another man. It goes against all I was taught in Magonia. Murder is not done.”

“But it was done to your family, my beauty. Murder has marked you. You cannot run from it.”

She’d cried again, damning the tears. She wanted to banish all signs of weakness, and yet the ache in her heart wouldn’t allow it.

“You musn’t despair,” he’d said. “You will never be a murderer. Our revenge is just. Aramus gives us no other choice.”

“What if he does?” Had she honestly expressed such an opinion?

Rayder had glared at her in the semidarkness, candlelight throwing menacing shadows over his face. “You would let him go? After all he did to you and Aknada and Draconus only knows how many other women?”

“No... I would let his hate and evil destroy him. Instead, I

am planning with you to hasten his demise.”

“To save others.”

“That is the only way I can think of it and approve, Rayder. If we must kill him to save those women in the ship’s hold...I will go with you.”

“You are staying here. I won’t let you face danger again.” Rayder’s demand had been fierce in its denial.

She’d rolled him over on his back, but of course he’d let her. She’d straddled his hips, coming down on his cock and holding the hard, thick length within her folds. She’d hissed in a breath the pleasure was so staggering. Before long she moved, and hips echoed her need. Each thrust and drag of his hardness inside Xandra had sent her to the edge, hovering there. Breathless. Drugged with craving and need so acute her heart felt as if it might pound from her chest.

“No,” he’d gasped the word. “You are staying here.”

She moved faster, planting her palms near his shoulders and using her lower body to work him, to screw him deep inside her. “Going.”

He sucked in a breath as she’d taken him harder. She’d looked down on him as she gloried in Rayder’s



vulnerability. She'd taken control, battered at him with everything she had. He would, on this point at least, give in to her.

"I'm going." She'd gasped her words, frantic to make him understand. "I won't leave you. I won't sit here and wonder what's happening to you."

His eyes, glowing with a combination of anger and arousal, had latched on to hers. With a snarl, Rayder had thrown his hips upward. The sharp thrust had hit deep within her. Orgasm had erupted, burning her in sweet pleasure. The violence and strength of her reaction had stunned her to the core. He'd followed, a guttural cry ripping from his throat. Breathless and sated, she'd fallen into his arms and slept soundly.

As Rayder and the others planned now, she didn't know what to say. She didn't know if she cared for the feeling, for the darkness it brought to her life. What choice did she have? She wouldn't abandon them.

"Xandra?" Aknada sat across from her.

Xandra's gaze snapped up and collided with Rayder's. "I am fine. I was just thinking."

"Then you missed the entire plan," Marc said with teasing in his blue eyes.

She smiled, charmed by Marc's kindness. Over two days Aknada had fully recovered, yet Marc hovered her as if he was afraid someone would harm her. His attention wasn't fawning, but no one could miss Marc's devotion. Well, accept for Aknada. Xandra witnessed Aknada glancing at Marc longingly when Aknada didn't think anyone was watching.

Aknada seemed determined to dislike him against her own will. Xandra couldn't blame Aknada's caution. She'd felt the same about Rayder. Felt? Perhaps there was a small part of her still unopened to Rayder because he hadn't said he loved her.

"He is playing with you, Xandra." Aknada threw her brother a glare. "We've barely reached any conclusion."

Rayder launched into discussion. "Xandra insists on coming with with us."

"That isn't wise." Aknada tucked hair behind her ears, but the thick cascade refused restraint. It flopped over the side of her face. "Rayder and I are Daryk Ones. If we're worried about you, we cannot perform our duty."

Marc, who sat next to Xandra, said, "Perhaps it would be better if I team up with Aknada. She can protect me if the need arises."

Aknada threw him a contemptuous look. "Protect you?"

His eyebrows rose. "Like you said, you are a Daryk One. I am not. I need protection."

Though he said it with a straight face, no one could mistake the tone. He was goading her into a confrontation.

"Be that as it may," Rayder said as he shoved back his chair and started to pace, "Xandra is under my protection and will remain with me at all times. Aknada, if you can restrain your intense distaste for Marc and work with him, I think it would make sense."

Aknada glanced quickly at Marc. She pursed her lips slightly. "I suppose."

Rayder made a scoffing noise. "Do not suppose. Know for certain."

Aknada's cheeks went pink. Was she embarrassed or angry or both? "Very well. Marc will go with me."

Marc shifted in his chair and kept his expression neutral. "Good. Back to the mission. Sixty men have consented to help."

"Sixty?" Surprise colored Aknada's voice. "That is

excellent.”

“Indeed. The ship probably has about that many men working on it. Possibly less,” Rayder said.

“Is that enough?” Xandra couldn’t suppress worry. “I mean, enough men on our side?”

Marc cleared his throat. “It will have to be enough. It’s all we have. We have an advantage. Arcos will accompany us.”

Xandra’s eyebrows shot up. “We won’t be able to sneak up on anyone with a dragon clomping along, will we?”

Marc smiled. “Normally we wouldn’t. Arcos will fly overhead as protection. When the time is right, he will use fire.”

Aknada sniffed. “Are you sure you can control him?”

Marc’s threw an angry glance at Aknada. “Yes. He’s been with me for two years.”

“Your first pet dragon,” Aknada said.

“The first. A rare exception.”

Rayder cleared his throat, obviously tired of the tension. "Very well. The dragon goes with us."

Tension remained even as they retired to their quarters to dress for the trip. Each of them would wear a pack with essentials. Rayder insisted Xandra give him some of her supplies.

She smiled at him indulgently, half tempted to challenge him to see the spark in his eyes. "I can carry it all."

His eyes flashed to hers. "You cannot."

She lifted the pack sitting on the bed and sighed. "It barely has anything in it. Water, food, a knife—"

"That's all you need."

She rolled her gaze to the ceiling. "You're stubborn."

He slipped his arm around her waist and brought her flush against his body. Red filled his eyes. Pushed to the edge, his gaze conveyed lack of patience and hunger. He wanted her. His cock hardened as he pressed against her. She thrilled to the sensation. Gently he walked her back toward the door.

"What are you doing?" She gripped his shoulders to keep steady.

“You’ll see.”

Without force he held her against the wall.

Her breath caught as she looped her arms around his neck. “We don’t have time for this, Rayder.”

“I think we do.” His voice held husky promise, his eyes flaming with instant need.

His mouth covered hers, hungry and hot and filled with purpose. She gasped into his mouth as he undid the ties on his trousers.

“Rayder,” she whispered.

“Are you wet for me?” He slid her flowing trousers down her legs. She stepped out of them.

“Yes.” Her throat was tight with passion, her voice thin and raspy. When he touched her wetness and drew it up to smooth over her clit, she gasped in sweet pleasure.

“Rayder, now.”

“As you wish.” Male cockiness touched his smile. He kissed her, tongue deep in her mouth.

Seconds later he lifted her against the door and she wrapped her legs around him as his cock thrust deep

between her legs. She shivered in ecstasy. He was hot, hard, spreading her wide. Kissing him with heated passion, she spurred him on.

“Harder,” she gasped her demand.

He complied. Thrusting with steady, deep thrusts, he picked up the pace. The door started to rattle as the speed of their explosive sex increased.

Knocking on the door stopped Rayder cold, his cock pressed deep.

“Hey, are you guys ready?” Marc’s deep voice asked.

“Go away.” Rayder growled his words. “We’ll be out shortly.”

Xandra thought she heard a chuckle and a female voice responding then footsteps walking away. Heat flushed her face.

“By the god, Rayder, they heard us.”

He panted. His body hard and dominating in hers. “So?”

Heat still pulsed deep in her core, and she ached for him to continue. “Hurry. They’re waiting.”

He smiled. "With pleasure."

He thrust again, his eyes red, his cheeks flushed, his expression tight with furious need.

Xandra's body erupted into hot, pulsing ecstasy as he continued to drive, pushing, giving her more. She muffled her scream against his shoulder. Rayder pounded harder, sounds of pleasure unmistakable.

A scant moment later Rayder thrust to the limit and growled, a guttural, animal sound of pure male pleasure. He shuddered and shook against her, hands squeezing her buttocks tight. He leaned against her, still holding her to the door.

As he drew back and settled her gently on her feet, Xandra smiled. "Rayder." With reverence she cupped his face. "You are..."

He smiled, his face still reflecting their powerful connection. "Yes?"

"You're the most amazing man I've ever known." Tears welled in her eyes.

He cupped her face in both his big hands and kissed her nose. "By the god, Xandra. No crying. You'll break me."



That he could be broken amazed her. "Then let us go before I start truly to cry."

"My beauty, when we reach the ship, things will become dangerous. Do not try anything without me."

She smiled to deflect him. "We are a strange pair."

"Why?"

"Because we started off hating each other."

His eyebrows lifted. "You hated me?"

"Of course. You were my captor." Then she shook her head. "No. You were so startling. So masculine. I'd never seen a man as handsome and powerful as you."

Cockiness returned to his expression. "You felt something physical for me."

"Yes."

He kissed her forehead and released her. "I never hated you, Xandra. Not one minute. You were amazing from the first moment I saw you. Come, let us go. We are late."

"Whose fault is that?" she asked with a teasing tone.

As they rearranged their clothes, his wide smile

promised retribution some time in the near future. “Yours.”

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

Rayder, Xandra, Marc, Aknada and a contingent of sixty men made their way through the jungle at night. Though she'd endured it before, the jungle trek this time seemed harder and harsher. The night was hot and sweat dripped into her face. Though she drank water, the arduous walk made her ache with longing for a soft bed and sleep.

At the same time she couldn't say staying back at Marc's compound would have proved easier. She would have worried too much. Here, if she decided to worry, at least she knew what was happening.

Xandra marveled at how long it took to traverse the area with a large component of fighting force. They didn't camp for the night, and as one unfortunate man discovered, the dark was fraught with more perils than expected. He was severely bitten on the leg by a poisonous plant. Luckily for him they had a kit with an antidote, a salve concocted by a wise woman at Marc's compound. The man felt better, but two other men accompanied him back to the

compound. He wouldn't be much use to fight for at least a few days, and Marc didn't want to send the man back alone.

"Stay close to me," Rayder had said to her softly.

"What if I'm bitten by something?"

"You should be immune. I've kissed you."

She'd frowned in confusion. "A kiss protects me?"

"A kiss, and since I've made love to you, you are virtually immune to all poisons here. Unless you refuse to kiss me for a very long time. Your immunity wears out."

She'd smiled. "Then remind me to kiss you daily."

"Hourly." His rejoinder had made her laugh softly.

One aspect of their trip brought her more security.

The dragon Arcos kept watch. He flew the skies, never far away, always understanding what Marc wanted him to do. She didn't ask Marc or anyone else how the dragon could know so much—she'd heard more than a couple of times since arriving on the *Beast* and Dragonia that dragons were mostly dangerous, stubborn and hard to train. Apparently Drakus' followers and Drakus himself had

trained dragons to destroy Daryk Ones and their fortresses. Arcos seemed positively sweet. Not that she'd ever say so to Marc or anyone else.

Once they reached a high ridge not far from shore, runners were sent out to scout for the *Beast*. The rest of the group stayed behind the jungle ridge to prevent being seen from the ship. After more than an hour, the runners returned with good news. The ship hadn't moved. Perhaps Aramus still believed Rayder would return with good news on selling slaves to Marc.

Aknada and Marc headed out toward the ship first, on their insistence, and took half the men. Aknada wanted to take the lead, and although Rayder knew she wasn't a war planner, he also knew she could fight. If she believed this was the only way to slay the bad memories in her thoughts, he couldn't stop her. High in the sky, Arcos followed, always circling and watching. Xandra found it comforting, and that wasn't something she ever believed she'd feel about a dragon.

Rayder and Xandra headed up the other group of men. She knew Rayder didn't feel completely confident about leading so many men he didn't know, but he'd taken Marc's word for it that they could all be trusted.

Terrain gradually became steeper as they moved up

the ridge. Tangled vines slapped her in the face, and creepers trailing along the ground threatened to trip her. Exhaustion threatened. She'd made a similar trip with Taris Elian, but not in this direction. She imagined making this same trip again so soon after her first trek would have almost been impossible. Her heart pounded, her body was flushed, her breath coming quickly. She drank more water at the next stop, drinking prudently—she took enough to keep her going, but not enough to pretend the supply could be replenished at any time. Men behind them traversed the same steep, winding path through the undergrowth with just enough space to hack their way through. The path was barely worn from someone else's trip this direction. Vines already grew from the ground and threatened to obscure any trace of their passage.

Above creature sounds of chirping and clicking and the far off call of a dragon, she heard another sound.

"What is that noise?" she asked Rayder with trepidation.

He didn't stop as he led them all from the front. "The Vion River. It's the waterfall."

As they walked, the waterfall's roar became louder until conversation became harder. Not that she spoke often. She saved her breath for the climb. Finally they arrived at

the top of the ridge, a vantage point where the jungle canopy fell away. The remarkable view in the spreading dawn stole Xandra's breath. To the northwest and in every direction the jungle spread out in its glorious thickness, a profusion of lush growth that proved hard to conquer. Roaring eastward, a huge river along a plateau flowed over a dramatic waterfall. Spray sent a cloud of mist into the air. In the distance but to the southwest, she saw the beach and the *Beast* at the busy dock they'd left days before.

As they stood on the ridge, she heard a strange bird's call. Or was it another animal among the hundreds that crept and crawled and dominated this land? Standing so high above the canopy, the lush waterfall and the sound of pounding water made her life seem simple. Insignificant in comparison to all that Dragonia offered. Her world had been so small on Magonia. This continent and the people here had shown her so much more.

But the man next to her had given her more life and love than she could have imagined when she woke up on the *Beast*.

Rayder gestured to the first few men in the long snake of humans trailing behind them. "We'll take the slope down to the beach. It's easier from here." He gave instructions for the battle plan then pulled Xandra to the side for a moment. "This is beauty." Rayder's voice held awe, something she'd

never heard in his voice before. “Not as beautiful as you, but still beautiful. It’s my home, and I don’t want to leave it. But I’d leave it for you.”

She gazed at him in wonder, a rush of happiness flooding Xandra. She’d never felt this light and unconcerned in her life. No man had done as much for her, nor had they treated her as a precious jewel like Rayder had. Love surged and overflowed within her.

Her heart in her throat, she smiled and blinked back tears.

His eyes widened slightly, their softness flaring into a soft red. A sign of his feelings, his physical and emotional need. He stepped forward and snatched her into his arms, his mouth finding hers. His kiss was hot, probing, tongue sinking deep to possess. She drowned in his power as it flowed through her and gave her more strength.

He drew back just enough to gaze into her eyes. “Stay behind me. Don’t try to engage the enemy if they come at us.”

She placed one hand on the hilt of her sword as it hung from her belt. It had taken some time for her convince him she could handle the sword if she had to. There was nothing feminine in her garb. Hidden under her flowing tunic and pants she’d worn leather and protective pads just as a



man would. "I'm protected and you showed me how to use this. I'm not defenseless. You know I have to do this too."

"Still..."

"I'll be careful."

Resignation sealed his expression and he nodded, and as they started down the other side of the ridge, the waterfall pounding relentlessly, she wondered if her excruciating fear showed. It eviscerated her. Lanced her courage until she hung by a thread. But she'd do this for him. And for her own freedom. She'd once heard a woman say that courage was nothing more than being scared spitless and doing it anyway. So here she was, dry mouthed, heart pounding, body tired. Ready to take on god only knew what.

A few moments later they heard explosions in the distance and plumes of smoke started to rise from the side of the ship.

"They've made it," Rayder said.

She knew he meant Aknada and Marc had successfully created explosions near the ship. Xandra hoped to the hells the slaves on board could escape quickly. Aknada and Marc had planned to sneak on the ship and unlock the slave quarters. A risky proposition but one they'd insisted

they could accomplish.

It took considerable time to reach the area where jungle edge met the beach. She felt as if it had been ages since she'd seen the ship, even though it hadn't. Fear had left, and in its wake came a sensation of inevitability. No turning back now.

As Rayder's group descended on the ship, her stomach tumbled as she witness the violence erupting on the deck.

"Rayder..." She grabbed his arm.

"The men will look after the slaves."

"How did you know what I was thinking?"

"I was thinking the same."

Smoke drifted up from the deck. Shouts echoed as men fought with swords, with fists and feet.

"They're good men," Rayder said, as if she needed more assurance.

Perhaps she did. All she could do is hope for the best.

"I don't see Aknada or Marc," Xandra said.

Rayder remained silent as he stared with full concentration on the scene below. "They should be appearing on deck with the women by now." Rayder threw Xandra a concerned glance. "Let's go."

\* \* \* \* \*

As they ran toward the ship, Xandra could see chaos continued on the deck. A full-scale fight for the ship raged.

Hurrying toward the mess unfolding in front of them, Xandra feared so many things. For Rayder's safety. For Aknada and Marc. But she charged ahead, determination giving her courage though she wanted nothing more than for this to be all over. Sword in hand, she tried to keep up with Rayder's tremendous stride. As his muscles glistened with sweat, bunching and contracting, she admired everything that made him a Daryk One.

Just as they reached the ship dock, a shout went up.

One of the slaver's ran down the plank toward them, no sign of a weapon at hand.

She recognized the man, and he came to a halt beside them. "Rayder Tyrus. We thought Gampia killed you. Now you're here to destroy us. Aramus is locked in his cabin and won't come out to face your hoard."

Rayder growled his words at the man. "Leave this place or die."

The man complied, running as fast as he could into the jungle.

Screams erupted from the bowels of the ship. Female cries of terror.

"Rayder," Xandra gasped his name. "The slaves."

Fierce worry filled his expression, and he raced up the plank with her following close. Her breath caught in her throat as smoke obscured the view. They couldn't last in this long, and that worried her. How could the slaves survive? She shuddered with revulsion at the thought of them being trapped below. She knew what she and Rayder must do, no matter what. Save the women. Find Aramus second if it came to that.

Before they could move, Aknada came out of the smoke helping a limping Marc to walk. Malena Humbola came from the smoke and assisted another woman as they stumbled through the chaos.

Xandra waved. "This way, Malena."

No time to hug or shout for joy that they'd been freed.

“Get off the ship!” Rayder gestured toward the ramp.  
“Now!”

Without arguing, Aknada, Marc, Malena and the other woman hurried down the ramp.

Rayder grabbed Xandra’s hand. “Aramus.”

They ran toward Admiral Aramus’ quarters and reached it quickly. Rayder kicked at the door and it held. He kicked again. The door broke away from the hinges and fell inward under the force.

Aramus lay in the middle of the floor, his face carved by horrible slashes and his torso blood-red. His eyes stared at the ceiling, his body motionless.

Rayder hesitated at the same time she did, and the noise and chaos outside seemed to silence for one moment.

Something close to rage filled Rayder’s handsome face. “By the god.”

Suddenly from behind, a man dashed into the room and engaged Rayder, ramming him full force out of nowhere. The men crashed to the floor. Xandra scanned the area frantically for more attackers as Rayder and the man grappled on the floor. Heart pounding, she backed a

few steps away. She bumped into the demolished doorway.

Before Xandra could move, an arm lifted her off her feet and a hand covered her mouth. She lashed backward, bringing her heel up. The hand over her mouth closed off her air, and she struggled harder, ramming her elbow into her assailant's ribs. A groan and grunt greeted her ears, but the person dragged her backward through the doorway and into cloaking smoke. A million thoughts shot through her head. She wanted this to be over...over...

The grip around her throat cut her air and smoke made it worse. Weakness assaulted the strength in her limbs.

*No. Fight. Fight.*

She aimed backward with her elbow and the person cried out as Xandra's elbow made contact. Xandra yanked from the grip and turned swiftly, her grip tight as she aimed downward with the sword, a growl of pure rage filling her. A scream pierced her ear, sharp and high.

A woman.

Shock reverberated through Xandra. Yoanda clutched at her side as blood seeped through her fingers.

"Yoanda."

Yoanda's eyes glazed. She stared at Xandra with surprise, with amazement. "You cut me."

Xandra choked as smoke filled her lungs. "Yoanda, we have to get off the ship. It's burning."

Xandra struggled with her breath and tried to keep her balance. Behind her, she heard the men still fighting, the grunts, groans the sounds of flesh hitting flesh.

"We'll die here." Yoanda's pristine white dress grew redder as blood flowed freely. "Both of us."

"No." Xandra refused to end it here.

Yoanda sank to her knees. "I had to destroy Aramus. He turned me into a freak. I wasn't always like this, Xandra. I was good and true until that animal took me. I shouldn't have poisoned you, but I had to get money to get far away from here when I escaped. You have to understand, it's the only thing I could do. I was almost off the ship and the admiral caught me and brought me back. I couldn't take it any longer and I just killed him! I was so angry. It was all I could do."

Yoanda's face drained of color, and she dropped like a stone to her knees.

“Xandra!” Rayder’s voice ripped Xandra from her trance. Rayder rushed to her side. “Come on. The whole ship is going up.”

“Forgive me!” Yoanda cried out.

“We can’t leave her here.” Xandra resisted Rayder’s pull.

Yoanda fell to the deck on her side, eyes wide open and unmoving. Xandra had killed her.

Xandra dropped her sword as she choked again. “Oh Magon.”

Rayder picked Xandra up in his arms and ran. Apparently he could see through the rapidly thickening smoke. Flames crackled around them, the air clogged with death. She held on to Rayder and buried her face in his neck. More screams echoed around her, but she didn’t look. She couldn’t. Fear sucked her dry and made a mockery of her attempt at courage. She hated herself in that moment. She’d killed a human being.

Rayder’s feet thudded over wood, and before she knew it, they’d left the burning ship and crossed over the sand. Still she kept her eyes closed.

“It’s over, my beauty.” Rayder said the words softly, his



voice husky with promise.

She peeled herself away from his neck and turned her head to see dozens of the slaves, including Malena, huddling on the ground coughing the noxious smoke from their lungs. Most of Rayder's team of men, as well as the ones Marc and Aknada had led appeared relatively unscathed. Relief filled Xandra.

Only a few feet away Aknada kneeled in the sand near Marc. Marc lay on his back, eyes closed and unmoving.

Aknada's dark eyes were filled with twisted pain.

Before Xandra could speak, she saw Arcos descend on the ship, a scream of pure rage coming from the creature. Perhaps it new Marc was injured. Faster than she could blink, the dragon hovered over the ship, wings a sparkling radiance in the sunlight. The dragon's sharp mouth opened and fire shot free, fueling the raging fire consuming the deck fore and aft. Sails were consumed and destroyed in the orange and yellow flames. The dragon rose higher in to the sky and away from the ship.

"It is done," Xandra whispered.

A blinding flash lit up the sky. Rayder shoved her to the ground and covered her with his body, his arms shielding her head. The ship splintered outward in a horrendous

blast, rocking the ground beneath them.

It seemed forever before the explosion subsided, and Rayder levered himself off her body. "Are you hurt?"

She coughed. "I'm fine." She cupped his face, concern punching her in the gut when she saw the blood dripping down his face. "You're bleeding."

"No matter. Whatever it is, I'll heal." He smiled, as if humor was the only emotion he could find at the moment.

"Marc." Aknada's panicked voice rose above the other women chattering and the men who'd fought on the ship and huddled around them. "Marc. Answer me, you bastard!"

Above them, Xandra heard Arcos' cry. The slave women cowered.

"Don't fear him!" Xandra gestured at the women and stood up. "He is Marc's dragon and won't hurt you."

Looking doubtful, the women continued to eyeball the animal. Xandra turned away from them, her concern for Marc building.

Rayder had moved to kneel next to the man. "He's unconscious." Rayder checked for a pulse and breath. "Where else is he hurt?"

“He’s been stabbed.” Aknada’s dark eyes swam with tears. “When we broke into the slave quarters, two of Aramus’ men attacked. Marc jumped one and killed him, but not before the man stabbed him in the side.”

Rayder hastily ripped the bottom of his tunic and used it for a bandage. “Xandra, hold pressure to his side as tight as you can.”

Xandra didn’t hesitate.

“We have to get him back to the healer at Marc’s compound,” Aknada said. “But the jungle trip will take too long.”

Xandra had an idea. “Could we tie Marc to Arcos? Could both of you ride him?”

“Yes.” Marc’s eyes popped open and he smiled. “I can ride him. Aknada can make sure I don’t fall off.”

Aknada didn’t look amused. “Bastard. You scared the shite out of us.”

Rayder laughed. “Abuse him after he’s healed.”

Marc smiled broadly and gave a loud whistle. “Let’s get Arcos and get the hell out of here.”

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

*One week later*  
*Marc Gampia's compound*

Xandra couldn't hold on to her control any longer. She'd wanted to taunt and torment Rayder, but his achingly slow thrusts were driving her to the edge of madness. He lay behind her on their bed, his cock moving slowly and deeply inside her channel. She throbbed, frantic as an orgasm teased her. He'd kept her this way for long minutes, refusing to thrust harder, drawing out the insanity as his thickness pushed deep to touch her womb then drew back to caress her.

"Come," he said, his voice a rough command.

She'd already come twice.

Shaking with need, she whispered, "Yes."

As if that was all the incentive he needed, Rayder thrust

harder, one hand clutching her hip to anchor her. The headboard banged against the wall as he powered into his motions. Climax hurled her upward, erupting through her body with furious speed. She cried out, uninhibited as her body clenched tightly over the cock still thrusting hard inside her. With one last push, Rayder stayed deep inside her, growling as his body shook. His hot cream flooded her. She gasped as the pleasure swirled in her belly and tingled with ever-spiraling intensity.

They lay for a long time, breathing hard, not moving, his cock still hard and buried within her. Instead of pulling from her, he kissed her neck and snuggled closer. He reached between her legs and softly caressed her tender button with the gentlest of caresses.

She gasped as the soft touch sent new sparklers of pleasure darting from her. "Rayder."

"Mmm," he murmured against her ear. "I think there is another one in there."

"Another one?"

"If you were finished, if it were too much, you wouldn't want me to touch you here right now." He swirled his fingers over her spot and moved his hips. Excitement rioted in her belly and her pussy. "I think you need another release."

“Oh my god.”

“Yes.” His deep voice whispered in her ear. “Do you want this?”

She could barely speak as his hips pumped against her with the barest stroke, caressing a spot inside her that sent pleasure dancing inside and made her flesh tremble around his cock. “Yes.”

His sex teased her, refusing to allow her rest. She’d never imagined such pleasure until she met this man—never understood any touch could destroy her and bring her together again. She released all inhibition and opened her body and mind to the beauty of their lovemaking. It didn’t take long. She climaxed, screaming harshly. With a soft groan he shuddered and came.

For long moments they relaxed, and she almost fell asleep. Eventually he pulled from inside her, and Xandra turned toward Rayder. She curled into his side and allowed a smile of sexual satisfaction to bloom across her face. It had been luxury to sleep at his side without worry. A week had passed since the events on Aramus’ ship. So many things had changed, and most of them for the good.

Rayder’s arms came around her and he kissed her forehead. “Happy?”

“More than I could ever have imagined.” She sighed.

“Good.”

“I am concerned about Aknada though.”

Silence surrounded them until he cleared his throat.

“She’s all right.”

“She is not. She is morose and quiet and... Ever since Marc was injured she hasn’t been the same.”

“Marc is healing. He’ll be fine.”

“That’s what I told her. He should be well in no time at all.”

“My sister has much healing to do. She needs time to work through everything that happened to her three years ago.”

“Have you healed from knowing what Aramus and those men did to her?”

“Aramus’ death gave me peace.”

“Even though Yoanda killed him instead of you?”

Rayder sighed. “More so. There has been so much death, Xandra. For once justice was served and it came

from somewhere else besides me. A Daryk One didn't have to take Aramus' life in retribution. I feel the better for it."

Satisfied, she said, "Marc and Aknada love each other."

He laughed softly. "My beauty, are you sure? They certainly do not act like they are in love."

She snorted softly. "You do not see it because you are..."

"Yes?"

"A man."

He chuckled and his arms tightened. "All right, I admit it. I know there's something between them. I saw it in my sister's eyes when Marc was hurt. I saw how she hovered around him. How she bullied him to drink and eat and not exert himself. And when she was hurt, he did the same. But I don't know if they can overcome their differences."

She didn't know either. Only time would answer that question.

Rayder said, "On another matter entirely, I heard news today."



“Oh?”

“Grimnald Castle suffered a great loss. Their ruler was killed.”

She levered up on one elbow and looked down into his serious face. “How does that affect us?”

“The new leader is Dane Charger.”

Her interest leapt. “Ketera Aldrancos’ Daryk One.”

“The very same. They are to rule the castle and its people from now on.”

“But this is a good thing, isn’t it?”

“It is, and I hope we can visit them soon. But I also heard other news.”

Even in the short time she’d actually known him, she’d learned to read his expressions well. He looked concerned. Her heart sank. “What is it?”

“There is much talk of war.”

“Isn’t it always that way?”

“This time I fear it’s more serious. A messenger from

Bardannia Castle arrived. They were attacked by Leadios Castle, which is in the Imekland region. There were many casualties.”

She frowned. “That’s where Eryk Gauth is, correct? He’s your friend?”

“Whether he thinks of me as a friend is doubtful. Perhaps he heard that we destroyed Aramus and his minions and thinks better of me.” He gazed into her eyes with an intensity that told her what he had to say next serious indeed. “He sent a message asking for my help if I would give it. Your friend Mia Griffi was with Eryk at the castle.”

She sat upright, excitement at hearing that her other friend was alive erasing other concerns. “She’s alive?”

“She is. But when the castle was overtaken, Eryk wasn’t there. Mia is in the castle alone with the men who took over Leadios Castle. Eryk needs our help to rescue her.”

Her heart sank. “Oh no.”

“It will be a hard fight. We’ve also heard that Drakus is mobilizing his men and intends to destroy Felican Castle before joining with Leadios Castle. He’ll reinforce with the men who control Bardannia Castle.”

“Overall war and domination.”

“Yes.”

“And if Drakus succeeds, his forces will attack Magonia and enslave the entire population.” He drew her down into his arms and kissed her softly. “I sent a message back to Eryk. I know how much Mia means to you. I will help him save her. And if I know Dane, he’ll want to help too.”

Her heart warmed at the same time new fear rose. “It will be dangerous.”

“Yes.”

What else could he say? Perilous times lay ahead. The beauty of the moments they’d shared started to fade and she fought with worry.

Perhaps she should tell him her news in light of what he’d revealed about Mia. Happiness soared inside her, because this news was better than anything she could have imagined. “Rayder, I have to tell you something.”

He kissed her forehead softly. “What is it, my beauty?”

“My...courses are very late, and they are never late.”

The silence was deafening.

Rayder released her and sat up. His eyes had widened, his mouth open. She hoped that was happiness she saw in his eyes. "You're with child?"

"Yes."

Disbelief colored his face. "It's not possible. You drank the potion. How could it be?"

"The healer told me that in a small number of cases the potions don't work." She waited as dawning happiness replaced his amazement. She couldn't contain her next words. "I feared you wouldn't want me after you learned I drank the potion. Even though you haven't said anything to prove it, I still worried."

"You did what you had to do, Xandra. You were saving yourself and any children from that evil man." He scooped her up, a whoop of joy escaping his throat as he crushed her close. "By Draconus and all that is good. I never believed it possible." He kissed her deep and hard until she was breathless. "My life is complete. I want for nothing more. I would have gone anywhere and anyplace for you when I thought we couldn't have a child. You are what matters. But this makes our time together that much more precious."

“Peace on Dragonia and Magonia perhaps?”

“We’ll have that and our lives too. I swear it to you.”

Tears shimmered in his eyes, and wonder glowed in her heart. In a thousand years she never imagined seeing this big, tough warrior melting like this. Guilt she’d harbored for so long disappeared. Tears fell from her eyes. “Rayder, I am so happy. No matter what comes, I am so happy.”

“I love you, my beauty.” He cupped her face. “No matter what happens, don’t ever forget that. You’re my wife. My love. Forever.”

## About the Author

Suspenseful, erotic, edgy, thrilling, romantic, adventurous. All these words are used to describe award-winning, bestselling novelist Denise A. Agnew's novels. *Romantic Times Magazine* called her romantic suspense novels *Dangerous Intentions* and *Treacherous Wishes* "top-notch romantic suspense". With paranormal, time travel, romantic comedy, contemporary, historical, erotica and romantic suspense novels under her belt, she proves her gift for writing about a diverse range of subjects. (Writing tales that scare the reader is her ultimate thrill.)

Denise's inspiration for her novels comes from innumerable sources, but the fact that she has lived in Colorado, Hawaii and the United Kingdom has given her a lifetime of ideas. Her experiences with archaeology have crept into her work, as well as numerous travels throughout England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Denise currently lives in Arizona with her real life hero, her husband.

Denise welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#)

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