



Fireheart

Volume One of the Chay Trilogy

A Novel

Gloria H. Giroux

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This book is dedicated to my beloved mother, Helen Savinski Giroux.

Mom—you were and always will be my mother, father, confidant, life partner, and best friend. I am who and what I am because of you.

Thank you.

BOOK ONE

KINDLING

CHAPTER ONE

Pyke surveyed the bleak entry courtyard of the penal compound with a baleful eye. His jaw tightened at the unanticipated set of circumstances that had diverted him to this disquieting place, rather than keeping him on a promised and direct course back to his sanctuary at Thebes on Ptolem. He absently rubbed his lower lip as he grudgingly acknowledged how the often-inexplicable whims of his Supreme Commander had kept his level of adrenaline painfully high during this last lengthy campaign in the space between the Sisters. The capricious quality should be appreciated, and feared, and something that he might have to cultivate himself when he ascended from First Level Commander to Second Level High Commander upon his return to Ptolem.

He appraised the ancient buildings that had been converted from a discarded antiquity to a makeshift prison for Osiran warriors who had had the misfortune to be captured by their Ptolemii enemies. He knew little of the men and women incarcerated here, except that they must have fought furiously and well to have survived the various battles that saw their defeat. They must have had great strength to accept their capture, rather than doing what any Ptolemii would have done in the same situation. Ritual suicide was anathema to the Osirans, but generally expected of his own people, who scorned their survivalist opponents for daring to remain alive and hopeful. He silently applauded these survivors and others like them. Their courage and stamina would be a welcome augmentation to the Ptolemii when they were eventually re-assimilated into the empire.

He shook himself out of his wandering thoughts and concentrated on making an objective evaluation of his surroundings. He rarely tolerated subjective emotional weaknesses in himself, let alone in other people. If he were to take this assignment in hand and complete it quickly and efficiently, he needed to know exactly what he was up against. He needed to focus, and expedite, and make calculated decisions without remorse or self-doubt. His ability to do all three, on a consistent basis under any conditions, was the key factor in his rapid ascent through the military to a point where he expected at thirty-six to be the fifth-youngest High Commander ever invested by the Pharon. He smiled to himself,

never allowing any outward sign of his guilty pleasure at rising from such inauspicious beginnings to such a prominent place in the ruling military class.

Pyke scanned his physical surroundings critically. The compound was an old, pre-dynastic fortress that history said had been built and left by early settlers on the planet before they had developed better spacecraft to carry them to the Four Sisters. They had sufficient space travel capabilities to arrive here at Canaan, after a very long, tortuous journey from their seed planet. They had spent half a millennium trying to carve out a new civilization before their desire to build a glorious civilization and testament to painful lessons learned had mutated to the same set of circumstances that had set them on their original course. That, and a saturation of hostile and apparently immutable biological organisms and meteorological conditions that caused perpetual rain and a significant increase in female sterility, had sent them off their hoped-for paradise to a new unknown.

Many remnants of their unique architecture had remained, including this fortress. They had foregone familiar construction from wood, metals and synthetics to literally carve their buildings out of the unusually hard rock that comprised ninety percent of the planet. Their builders had wielded lasers instead of traditional construction instruments, and they left a legacy of huge, imposing, strangely disturbing monuments scattered about the planet. These structures still stood after five millennia, and would likely remain for many more.

The rock was cold, smooth and black, the edges of its voluminous corners, windows and outcroppings sharp enough to slice a man's flesh to the bone. The cloudy sky and minimal sun rays cast odd, shifting shadows across the ground from the sharp spirals and turrets that rose a good eighty meters above the soggy earth. Pyke walked slowly across the courtyard as his new contingent of guard warriors snapped to a respectful attention and crossed their forearms against their chests in the version of the salute required for one of his rank. He neither acknowledged their presence, nor returned the salute. Such a gesture would have been inappropriate.

Pyke and his sub-commanders, TutMose and Zandran, arrived at the massive double doors that loomed at the end of the courtyard. The yard itself was a rectangle, one hundred by two hundred meters. He surmised that it might have been used for special community gatherings or religious ceremonies. There were just not enough records left to shed much light on his ancestors before they left this place. He silently cursed the arrogance and stupidity of the Pharons of generations past who had deliberately destroyed or rewrote history for their own devious ends.

The four warders stationed at the door saluted, and one hit the tri-metal alloy lock with his encoded wristband. The doors swung open quickly and quietly. Pyke ran his hand over the rim of the door as they entered. The rough-looking black rock was as smooth as lucitium, and cool to the touch. He felt a slight, oily residue on his hand. As he passed into the main vestibule, he noticed that the walls of at least this part of the building were a meter thick. He mused that any man imprisoned in this structure had little if any chance of escape. Little hope. That apparently had also been the case for his immediate predecessor, who twelve days ago had completed his weekly missive to the Ptolemii High Command, downed a bottle of strong Xandrian papyron, and used a stilon passed down from generation to generation in his family to quietly and effectively disembowel himself in command quarters. Pyke hoped that all traces of this rit-su had been eliminated before he spent his first night there.

Pyke and his men were greeted by the senior officer in charge, Captain Rendor, who led them out of the vestibule and into the command chamber. A smaller set of double doors closed quietly after them as they left the dozen or so warders and motley Ptolemii warriors silently curious about the man known to be increasingly powerful despite his unimposing physical presence. The average-height, fairly plain man with a sharp chin, pale, heavy-lidded, almond-shaped, sad green eyes and nondescript, long, brown hair seemed so undistinguished. He certainly didn't fit into the mold expected for a warrior on the fast track to wealth and power.

CHAPTER TWO

Zandran glanced casually at the sparse furnishings in the command chamber. The runic symbols from old Ptolemii carved into the front of the door gave one the impression that this would be a chamber of power and consequence. Nothing he saw even remotely resembled those concepts. His only consolation was that Pyke was not the type of man or commander who would care about those trappings. He exchanged a look with TutMose, who rolled his eyes skyward to show that he felt the same way. Pyke saw the covert exchange, but, as usual, tolerantly ignored it. These older men had been with him through too many hard battles and emotional trials for him to care about or comment on what could be considered a show of vulnerability in front of Rendor, an unknown factor.

Pyke turned away from his scrutiny of a ransacked correlator station. Someone had managed to break the desk-embedded monitor and several peripheral components into pieces. He faced Rendor. The other man looked as though he were about to bolt. Pyke was used to being treated with caution. He quickly assessed the man as basically weak, desirous to keep a low profile, and hoping that his new commander would not expect so much out of him that he wouldn't make it home to retirement in Nubia with a military pension and his skin intact.

Pyke had two choices, consideration or discourtesy. As was his habit, he chose the former, but with an edge.

"I had expected, Captain, that all work and living areas would have been organized for my arrival so that my plans to inspect and revise the areas in question here would not be hindered by any undue waste of time."

Rendor paled visibly as he imagined his pension decreasing by significant numbers of chits as the minutes crawled by. "Ah, Commander, my apologies. We had every intention of arranging your quarters after Commander Dak's, um, um, demise, but then we experienced a number of incidents with the prisoners here, and, well, the time just got away from us."

"What kind of incidents?" Zandran demanded, his cold black eyes riveted on the nervous junior officer. Rendor acutely felt the eyes of all three men on him.

"Well, the senior officers are still demanding more so-called professional civility and respect from our people. More food. More this, more that. The usual. As

though they have the right to demand *anything* from their conquerors! At least Commander Dak had the good sense to dismiss their complaints—”

“Define ‘this and that,’ Captain. What exactly are these prisoners-of-war not getting that they believe they should? Start with the food.” Commander Pyke stared at the man intently, no perceivable emotion on his plain face. Rendor knew that regardless of his pension he had better start answering straightforwardly, or he had the feeling that this man would be serving up his manhood at the next evening meal, courtesy of the dangerous-looking war-machete that dangled from his techbelt. He squared his shoulders and looked Pyke directly in the eye. He noted the curious down slant of the commander’s pale eyes, which he thought gave the plain officer a perpetually sad, morose visage. He wondered if Pyke ever smiled, or laughed. He doubted it.

“This outpost is well off the beaten track, sir. We rarely get supply ships here to address our own men’s needs. The last shipment of any meat products was over two months ago. The commander was not about to feed enemies of the empire the better food when he hardly had any for his own men.”

“Vegetables? Bread products? Or are those in short supply, too?”

“Everything’s in short supply, sir. We feed them what we can, but it isn’t right to give them better than we give our own people.”

“What else?” Pyke snapped.

“This fortress wasn’t built for holding three hundred and fifty prisoners plus a contingent of empire warriors to keep them incarcerated. The facilities are either too old or non-existent. Drinking water is in short supply. Our hydro-corrs are outdated and inadequate. The weather is almost always cold and rainy. Our men are insulted to be here watching these traitors instead of being part of their glorious empire in some meaningful way. Sometimes they take it out on the prisoners and you can’t really blame them.”

“No?” Pyke replied with a raised eyebrow. “As I remember the oath we all swore when we were invested, we are supposed to act with personal and professional honor. At all times. Not when it simply suits us to do so. These people may be traitors in your eyes, but they were once part of our civilization, and they did not discard that honor on a whim. However we may disagree with their beliefs or many of their actions, we need to remember that they are warriors as we are, albeit less fortunate ones that happen to be in our charge for the duration of this war.”

“Yes, sir. I’m sorry. It’s been well over a year here for me, too, and sometimes—”

Pyke waved his hand in dismissal and Rendor wisely refrained from any further explanation of his own conduct.

"I want all of the records on each Osiran warrior incarcerated here linked into my portable correlator within one hour. Sub-Commander TutMose will give you the current access code. And I mean *all* records, Captain, including any relating to specific punishments or retaliation from your previous commander or any member of your remaining contingent. That includes you. I plan on meeting each of our prisoners, starting with the senior officers first thing in the morning, Zandran."

"Yes, sir?"

"I want you to select one of Rendor's lectors and make a detailed inspection of the physical premises. I want to know all of the problems from the confinement chambers, to the hygiene areas, to the refectory. Make sure you inspect the quarters of our own people as thoroughly. I want both sides of this problem out in the open, now. Dismissed."

"Sir."

"Sir."

Zandran and Rendor turned to leave while TutMose hung back. He raised his eyebrows to Pyke who nodded imperceptibly that he could remain. When the other two men had closed the double-doors behind them, TutMose sighed and slipped into an old familiarity and a rickety chair in front of his commander's battered desk.

"Something, Sub-Commander?" Pyke inquired neutrally. Even after five years of close combat and even more years of less battle-ridden experience with the man before him, Pyke could not permit himself to let down more than a slight guard. The necessary professional restraint bothered him. He wished he could tell TutMose how much he trusted and respected him, but right now he could only hope that the man would intuit the emotions, and understand the reasons for his reserve.

"May I be blunt, Commander?"

"To a point. But go ahead. I'll let you know if you cross the line." He allowed himself a quick smile.

"I imagine you will. But I'll try not to. Commander—why are we here? After that last battle the only place the High Command should have been sending any of us—especially you—is home for a while to recoup and to be honored for your strategy. We wouldn't have broken the Osiran satellite forces without it. Certainly not with our own exhausted troops. We're tired. We finished a lengthy battle and came out victorious. We need to rest."

"We are resting, Tut. Here. It may not be as 'meaningful,' as Rendor so eloquently put it, but it is necessary and, quite frankly, it was simply more or less on our way back to Ptolem through the Sophic Ellipse. Think of it as a strange furlough. One that will show your complete loyalty to the Pharon and your uncanny ability to adapt to unexpected change." Pyke allowed another slight smile to spread across his lips and reach his heavy-lidded eyes. TutMose hesitated for a moment, then grinned back, and shrugged before pushing his rangy frame out of the chair and towards the door. He turned around just before pulling it open and smiled at his younger superior.

"But we *are* going home soon, right?"

"Soon." *Soon*, Pyke thought. *Soon. It would be good to go home. But for how long?*

CHAPTER THREE

Pyke rose from his chair and stretched and yawned. He walked over to the window casement and tried to flip open the old-style, manual lock that would allow the hinged lucitium pane to swing out and let in some fresh air. He struggled with it for a few moments, then cursed in disgust and gave up. He'd have one of Rendor's warders fix the damnable thing tomorrow so that he could at least breathe in this afflicted place.

He had been here only one day and already he had stirrings of what had caused his predecessor to rit-su, and his contingent of penal guards to start taking out their frustrations on their prisoners.

The fortress was imposing on the outside: huge, dark, unsettling, covered with webs of spiky green vines that covered the surface like a living beard. The structure was worse inside, and seemed to hold moisture against the slick, black walls and make the air heavy. Musty. The enclosure had been built to minimize light from both within and without. There were only small windows in most of the chambers; some chambers were windowless. The lighting was recessed and muted, and the optic conductors of the light protons were not designed to increase the flow of power. It was going to remain dark, and make the walls close in even more as time went by.

Zandran was waiting to provide his report on the conditions of the institution and the populace. Pyke mused that he might not want to hear the report after reading many of the files provided by Rendor last night. He had spent the entire night staring at his correlator monitor as the various prisoner files had displayed. Three hundred and forty-eight Osiran warriors, forty of whom were women. Twenty commanders, forty sub-commanders, ninety captains, fifty-five lieutenants, and one hundred forty-three enlisted warriors. About a quarter came from the Panther-class starship *Remus*, half from the twin freighters *Bacchus* and *Dionysus*, and the remainder from several outposts decimated by Ptolemii forces on Spartana, the gravitized, mineral-rich former asteroid claimed as Osiran territory by the rebel planet. Pyke and his crew had been instrumental in securing Spartana as a Ptolemii satellite after the recent battle, and had sent their prisoners back to Ptolem via Canaan on one of their Serpent-class guardships, the *Sphinx*,

while the crew of Pyke's *Anaconda*, the *Sovereign*., The second guardship, the Serpent *Gryphon*, had completed orders to strip as much of the remaining mineral wealth, raze the abandoned or damaged settlements, and set a perimeter string of impregnable booby traps that would prevent Osiron from entering and reclaiming any of its former possession without massive casualties. The *Gryphon* had split off from Pyke's flagship shortly before entering Canaan orbit, and headed back to their motherworld with a vast hoard of precious minerals packed safely in the cargo hull; the Pharon's coffers would soon be overflowing with even more wealth.

Pyke dropped back in his chair and hit his wristcomm button. A split second later Zandran entered the command chamber and crossed his arms in formal salute. Pyke returned the gesture and thought to himself how formal was this comrade of his. Such different men, Zandran and TutMose, who shared the same devoted respect and loyalty towards their superior. Pyke inclined his head towards the same chair that TutMose had slouched into the previous night, and waited expectantly for Zandran to report.

"Commander." He paused. When Pyke remained silent, he went on. "It's not a pretty sight, sir. To say that this place is a disaster would be minimizing the situation."

"Go on."

"The detention cells are primitive at best. No windows, no light except from the corridors along the two tiers on either side of the main monitoring center. It seems that the cells were created by building divider walls within larger old nox-chambers and other various chambers along the first and second tiers of the fortress. There are also several odd interconnecting mazes of subterranean chambers that hold the majority of the enlisted warriors. The lieutenants on up are housed in the main tiers."

"Didn't any of these chambers have original windows?"

"Apparently the windows were covered with the same material as the dividers were made out of to deliberately eliminate any views of the outside world. It looks like the lighting was removed for the same purpose."

"Which was?"

"To ensure that whoever was incarcerated here would have the most abysmal conditions as possible. It's a sound psychological tactic, actually. Although a cruel one. I wouldn't do it."

"Continue."

"Bathing facilities are fairly primitive. Rendor 'assures' me that the prisoners are taken in well-guarded groups to shower once a week. After seeing and smell-

ing these warriors, I tend to think that the once-per-week theory is slightly exaggerated. The men have long hair and matted beards, and I'm pretty sure that lice are happily breeding in droves here. There is a community chamber for attending to bodily functions, but the men are taken there only every other day, so if a need occurs before that time, the cell becomes, well, the latrine." Zandran stopped for a moment as he saw Pyke's jaw tighten perceptibly.

"From the facial and other bruises I've seen, it's clear that a number of the prisoners have been physically abused. I doubt they have been abusing one another, so ... They are pale, thin, many are sick, but all still have a very obvious defiance to their situation and to us." He hesitated before going on. "I wish they were on our side instead of being our enemies."

Pyke stared at him for a moment, just long enough to make Zandran slightly uncomfortable. He moved his thumb across his lower lip, back and forth, and seemed to focus his eyes at some invisible point slightly to the side of his sub-commander. He was silent for a moment before meeting Zandran's eyes again.

"Go on."

"Sir?"

"That's half the report. What about our people?"

"Our contingent is fairly well-fed, compared to our prisoners. However, there is a dearth of decent, nutritious food, and mineral deposits below the fortress are contaminating the natural water supply. The imported water supply is critically low, and as Rendor said, the hydro-corrs are woefully outdated and inadequate. The living quarters are considerably better than the prisoners' cells. They are well lit and spacious, although rather sparse in terms of creature comforts. In short, they are not as well provided for as they would be on any of our starships, or even at the standard living quarters found in our military institutions back home. The men are short-tempered and homesick and angry, and are not even attempting to refrain from taking it out on representatives of the faction they hold responsible for their predicament."

"All right," Pyke said briskly. "This penal institution is about to come into this millennium right now. Tell TutMose to issue orders to send our ship on its way back to Ptolem. I will provide a set of orders and supply requests to be carried back with them, and I'm going to make it very clear that these requests will be complied with by our home command. How, is my problem. Yours, and Tut's, is to carry out the following tasks after I've made the rounds to see all of this for myself.

"One, I want the prisoners showered and their garments cleaned. Two, I want each one of them provided with cleansers and fortress water so that they can dis-

infect their living quarters and make them bearable. Three, I want a full list of existing food so that I can determine how to feed both the Osirans and our people over the next few weeks until supplies arrive from Ptolem and from the ships patrolling within range of this planet now.”

“Will they arrive? Because if they don’t and—”

“They’ll arrive. Again, my problem. Now, let’s take a walk together along the incarceration tiers so I can see all of this for myself. First, however, take me to the subterranean chambers.”

Pyke followed Zandran to the door but before leaving the chamber looked over his shoulder and said, “And get one of Rendor’s people to fix that ancient hinge so I can get some air into this chamber. And have him fix every other window in this damned fortress, starting with my noxchamber on down the line.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Zandran had not exaggerated the conditions under which all of the population of Canaan was living. As Pyke followed his subordinate through the prison, he had to employ all of his years of training and combat experience to hide his disgust and shock at how a supposedly civilized and advanced empire had reduced two factions of its own people to such primitive conditions and emotions. He was grateful that only he could hear his heart beating wildly as he passed the dank confinement cells and caught occasional glimpses of the brutalized men and women within, their eyes full of hate and contempt, but no fear. Zandran was right: he, too, wished that these warriors were on their side instead of being their enemies.

After he completed his assessment of the situation he sent his sub-commander off to complete his assigned tasks and returned to his command chamber, where he completed a set of orders to send back to Ptolem along with his ship and his crew. He selected a half dozen of his own trusted men to remain with TutMose, Zandran and him on Canaan.

Despite his observation that this planet was 'on the way' to their home world, he still felt uneasy about why the High Command had sent them to take care of what was, essentially, a minor matter in the large picture of the Ptolemii-Osiran civil war. He was a critical tactician and strategist, and it was out of the ordinary to send someone of his stature to deal with such a small situation. Nevertheless, as the seasoned warrior he was, he would never question his superiors or fail to carry out his assigned duty. In the fifteen years since he had graduated from the Ptolem Military Academy and assumed his first assignment as a sub-lieutenant on the cruiser *Praetor*, he had never disobeyed an order nor turned from the basic principles he had sworn to uphold at his investiture.

Perhaps this was just a 'test' for that very fact, as a precursor to his upcoming promotion. That would be the type of thing his capricious superior, Hitii, would do. He hoped that was all it was.

Pyke shrugged off his misgivings and noted with satisfaction that his window had been fixed, and that cool, refreshing air was wafting through the damp chamber. There was an old fireplace in the far corner, with an opening large enough

for man to walk into. He made a note to himself to have one of his men search for dried wood to kindle and maintain a fire. It wouldn't provide much warmth, but it would warm his spirit and inspire thoughts of home, where his own fireplace had lain dormant for too long.

He resumed his seat at the now-organized desk and began studying the records of the senior officers once again. The first and highest ranking officer, Commander Bak-Tii, was scheduled to be brought to him after he had been allowed to bathe and dress in clean garments. It didn't matter to Pyke if the man was not at his best during their meeting, but he was certain that it would matter to the Osiran. Dignity and respect could not be minimized in any circumstance, especially not one as stressful as this.

He worked his way through the senior officers' records and went on to the sub-commanders' profiles, then the captains' records. He was halfway through the lieutenants' records when the current one he was reviewing gave him pause. The man's picture on his screen had such startling blue eyes that pierced his own in an odd, emotional way. He hadn't seen such special blue eyes since—

Pyke shook himself out of his reverie and dismissed his fascination with a thought that he had been too long away from the things in his life that mattered. What was left of them, anyway. He stared at the picture for another moment, then switched off the monitor as a soft beep signaled the arrival of Zandran with his first interrogation.

The man who entered the command chamber in front of Zandran was two meters tall. His silver hair was nearly shoulder-length and swept back, still damp from his shower. His equally silver beard was straggly and long, and his gray eyes seemed to complete the picture of a steely warrior of superior bearing. His hands were restrained with titanium manacles, and his eyes registered a reserved disdain for the Ptolemii officer sitting behind the desk. He and Pyke eyed one another for a long moment before Pyke ordered Zandran to remove the restraints and leave the commchamber. His sub-commander complied wordlessly and the two enemies were left alone.

Pyke gestured to the empty chair in front of his desk, but Bak-Tii declined by remaining still and rigid. Pyke inclined his head in acceptance and ensured that his voice was level despite the clear slight. He was fairly fluent in the Osiran language and most of the primary dialects, but, like his own language, Osiran had odd inflections that could change the meanings of words. He wanted no misconceptions so he chose his words slowly and carefully.

"Commander Bak-Tii. I trust you understand at this point that the situation for both of our peoples will be different from now on?"

"Because you have allowed us the basic human privilege of bathing, Commander?" Bak-Tii replied coldly.

"Because I have acknowledged and rectified an unfortunate and inappropriate situation that benefits no one," Pyke answered in an equally chilly tone.

Bak-Tii paused. "Very well. I grant an acknowledgment of your basic humanity. Now what?"

"Now, we find a way of coexisting under these circumstances until our respective governments can come to a truce or peace," Pike said evenly. This man was testing his resolve.

"Peace? Your Pharon has made it very clear that only unconditional surrender will suffice. That will never happen. Unless your people can recognize this and accept it, there will be no peace."

"*Our* Pharon is exercising his duties as the rightful ruler of a single empire to expect all his people to obey his rules and work together to build a glorious future for our civilization." Pyke hoped that he didn't come across as uncharacteristically pompous and arrogant as he sounded to his own ears, but given his audience he knew that he had failed miserably in that hope. His fears were realized when Bak-Tii stiffened and the implacable look in his slate-colored eyes intensified as he raised his chin and responded stiffly.

"Is that all, Commander? I would like to be returned to my cell now. I have had enough of this cloying taste of freedom as you seem to define it."

Pyke stared him down for a moment then summoned Zandran back into the command chamber. "Sub-Commander, take Commander Bak-Tii back to his confinement cell and cancel the remaining interviews until further notice."

Zandran saluted and replaced Bak-Tii's manacles as the man kept his eyes locked on his captor. As the sub-commander and his prisoner started to exit the chamber, Pyke spoke mildly yet firmly to his enemy. "Commander, there will be a number of changes around here despite your contempt and unwillingness to meet me half-way. Don't make the mistake of trying to subvert my efforts. You'll find that does nothing except worsen your people's lots here when that is completely unnecessary and pointless. I think you'll see that if you allow yourself one moment to view the matter from an objective 'other side' instead of your own rather narrow viewpoint."

Bak-Tii casually swept his eyes away from Pyke as he left the chamber and the door closed quietly behind him. Pyke sighed. Hitii had a wonderful sense of humor.

CHAPTER FIVE

In the two weeks since Pyke had assumed command of the Canaan prisoner-of-war facility, both the Osiran men and women incarcerated there and their grudging Ptolemii guards expressed varying degrees of amazement and occasional displeasure at the changes wrought by their new commander.

The prisoners took a full fortnight to cleanse their bodies and cells adequately to permit the barest human living conditions that their windowless two-meter-by-three-meter confinement areas could support. Pyke's sway with the home command had obviously been adequate enough to send a supply ship bearing basic clothing, food and hygiene stores for Ptolemii and Osiran alike. The Ptolemii accepted their improved lot with relief and gratitude; their Osiran captives partook of the new conditions as a casual right but expressed not even a slight indication of appreciation. The attitude galled their guards, who were unfortunately not allowed by their Commander to exact any retribution on the ingrates. It made for a constant tense interaction between the two factions, but one held at bay from any overt actions by Pyke and his two ever-present sub-commanders.

Pyke instituted outdoors exercise time for the prisoners, in shifts of sixty each for two hours daily, to bring their physical and mental condition up to a reasonable level. He allowed them to communicate openly with one another instead of being confined only to the infrequent secret signs, gestures and words that had marked their previous attempts to interact in the rare times they were out of their cells. There were seats and small tables set up in the massive outdoor courtyard, and Pyke saw to it that there were several strategic boardgames made available for the prisoners to test their mental faculties as well as over which to converse. The gesture was not altogether totally altruistic on his part: he knew that occupied minds were less likely to foment hatred and dissension and act on these impulses. It was a way of protecting and directing both his men and his captive charges. He wondered how many of them were astute enough to realize this.

Pyke continued to interview each prisoner under his command, speaking with—or, more generally, to—at least eight to ten men and women each day, save when he was too occupied with other assignment matters to take the time.

Few of the Osirans would speak to him at all. Those who did imbued their communication with a common mixture of contempt and condescension, if not outright hatred. It was an uphill battle, but he persisted despite the obstacles.

He gazed down steadily at the current lot of men milling about in the courtyard beneath his second-tier window. He spotted the one who had originally taken his interest from the holograph with the bright blue eyes. A lieutenant from the *Remus*. He watched as Zandran crossed the courtyard and motioned for the prisoner to accompany him. As the two men started walking back towards the main building, Pyke turned back and brought up the man's records on his correlator and re-read the known facts of this particular prisoner-of-war. This special prisoner. He could not believe what he had been reading at first yesterday, and had to read and absorb it several times before he ruefully acknowledged the whimsy of fate in his life.

Lieutenant Prince Chay Vinetio DeGrec, familiar name Vin-Chay. Twenty-two years old, second son of Crown Prince Chay Shayne DeGrec of the Kindred of Chay on Osiron. A princeling rather than an Heir-Prince, due to that older brother. A member of one of several branches of the extended royal family that had abandoned their allegiance to the Pharon, and had thrown in their lot with other dissidents who had for generations of secret plotting called themselves the Separatae. They had founded a powerful renegade political faction that was now waging a furious and fairly successful war of independence against its mother civilization, whose own die-hard loyalists were called, in derision, the Fealtae.

Pyke studied the records further, although by this time he knew all of the information by heart. He was intrigued by the man he had not yet even met, and who part of him dreaded meeting—could he restrain himself in the presence of the Kindred of Chay? Should he? He would face those questions directly within a few moments when he faced the man. His history and family were quite different from most of his fellow prisoners, his royal blood notwithstanding.

One of the youngest men, at twenty, to graduate the prestigious Osiron Military Academy at Palermon, he had scored perfect evaluations in all courses, and received the highest honors with his degree in interstellar engineering. His father, uncle and older brother were regarded as fierce warriors in the rebellion. His father commanded the main Osiran flagship, *Victorion*, and his brother had served there as well for quite a while until he received a command of a Panther-class vessel that served as a key support to his father's Leopard-class craft. There would be no doubt that if the war progressed he would find himself in command of a more important starship, perhaps even one rivaling his father's. The uncle commanded the secondary Osiran flagship, *Liberty*. All three now fought in the

dead zone between their 'Sister,' Osiron, and the third 'Sister' in their star system, Sekmet, after their ships and several others from the Osiran fleet had been pushed back from their near-planetary encroachment of Spartana by Pyke's own fleet. Indeed, that had been the last flurry of battles that Pyke had directed and for which he was being rewarded by being summoned home to Ptolem for rest and promotion as the Osiran fleet licked its considerable wounds. *And the Ptolemii fleet theirs*, Pyke thought seditiously. Pyke admitted to himself a certain relief that at this time these Osirans were both far enough away from Ptolem to not pose an immediate threat to his own home planet.

Their kinsman—and now his prisoner, his special prisoner—was certain to follow in their command footsteps within only a few years had his own commander, Bak-Tii, not made a fatal tactical error in a heated battle seven months earlier, resulting in the deaths of most of his crew, and the capture and imprisonment of the remainder, including himself and this lieutenant.

A soft beep signaled Zandran's arrival with his anticipated interview and Pyke cued them to enter. He deliberately turned his back before the two men entered the chamber, and listened motionlessly as Zandran removed the young man's manacles and waited for Pyke to turn before leaving the chamber. Pyke turned to face a pair of intense, riveting eyes that showed not even the slightest trace of fear, intimidation or inferiority. Pyke smiled to himself. *A worthy opponent*. He casually took his seat behind his desk, knowing the man before him would rather rit-su than take one opposite him. He made a casual show of bringing up the prisoner's records on his correlator, studied them for a moment, then raised his eyes and arched his eyebrows as he thoughtfully weighed the man in front of him. He rose from his chair and came around the desk to perch lightly on its front, a scant meter from his captive. He studied the man's physical features for a long moment before speaking.

The prisoner was well over two meters tall—quite a few centimeters taller than Pyke himself—with startling, luminescent blue eyes framed by long, thick, curling lashes, and ebony black hair reaching slightly past his ears. Pyke had allowed his captives to have their hair trimmed in the style worn by their ethnic group on Osiron: short, neat, with beards trimmed to nearly skin level. His own people tended to wear their hair long—men and women both—and he himself had shoulder-length hair gathered in the back with an ornate clasp. His face, like that of all Ptolemii men, was clean-shaven.

He allowed himself the luxury of taking his time to appraise all aspects of the man in front of him. Although he was tall, he was far too slender for his height. Pyke attributed this to the lack of decent sustenance and exercise, and wondered

how the captive would look after an appropriate amount of well-fed time had passed. He needed to build up fat and muscle. He imagined that he would be able to see or feel the captive's ribs, were the opportunity to present itself. Well, see, at least. *He is exceptional-looking*, Pyke thought as he let his eyes roam critically over the high cheekbones and well-proportioned lips, eyes and aquiline nose. He could see some of the man's sire in him, but then again, the only holographs he had were from the Miliplex pre-war databanks, and they were neither up-to-date, nor of the best quality. Still, there was something in this man that bespoke the same confidence and arrogance of the Crown Prince, and that seemed to link them more than any random physicality. He finally decided to end the young man's disquiet and initiate what he hoped would be an interesting conversation. At least he was well armed with data records extracted from the *Remus's* correlator databanks before the ship had been destroyed by Ptolemii forces after they had removed their surviving prisoners. The implanted identichips removed from all of the captured prisoners provided additional personal, professional, and medical information.

"I see you spent a great deal of your unassigned time in Academy studying the effects of long-term separation between warrior regiments and their homes and families. I trust as a matter of potentially critical random knowledge as opposed to preparation for this particular instance?" Pyke hoped that he had kept his voice even and had not showed the mild agitation he felt in the presence of this Chay. He had years of perfecting a facade of cool, calculating indifference and efficiency, and it served him well in his chosen professional and personal lives. He hoped it would serve him well now. *Easy*, he thought. *Give away nothing*.

The Osiran neither blinked nor moved, nor gave any indication that his opponent's words or demeanor had affected him. Pyke deliberately waited a long minute before cocking his head and pursuing his distinctly non-military line of questioning. Other than his attempts at conciliation with Bak-Tii weeks before, he had ensured that his conversations with his other charges had remained formal and nondescript, a simple courtesy of treating them as individuals but yet not as equals. He decided to try another tactic to see if he could induce a reaction from his prisoner.

"I met your father once, many years ago," Pyke said casually. He was gratified to see the barest flicker of interest in the azure-blue eyes, a flicker that disappeared less than a second from its inception. *Good. I've hit a nerve. That's my opening*. He continued.

"An impressive man. Very articulate and imposing. He spoke at my academy sixteen years ago on ancient battle tactics of the pre-Dynasty. Before our people

colonized this very planet, as a matter of fact.” He smiled coolly. “It never occurred to me then that he would one day apply them to his traitorous rebellion against his Pharon.”

Direct hit, Pyke thought, as the fiery young man snapped, “My father is not a traitor. He’s a patriot to the values our civilization was based on, values your Pharon abandoned long ago.”

“Really? And his oath as an invested warrior was only a convenience until he decided that his was the better way? By the way, Lieutenant, aren’t you breaking some sort of Osiran rule by even speaking with me? As well as taking your life into your hands by denigrating the leader of our worlds?”

The Osiran’s eyes smoldered as he bit back a response. The Ptolemii was right, of course—he had no business dignifying his words with a response. It shamed his family and his command. He should never have let the man get under his skin. His many months of brutal captivity had weakened his resolve. It wouldn’t happen again. Unfortunately, he hadn’t reckoned on his opponent’s clever use of psychological warfare. Pyke raised his eyebrows again and smiled.

“Well, at least he’s in good company. Commander Bak-Tii was also well thought of before abandoning his commitments and proceeding on a self-destructive road of bad judgment and—” Pyke stopped in mid-sentence and tensed as the young lieutenant made the slightest move forward before stopping himself. He could conceivably reach and injure or kill the man in front of him, but the cost would be without doubt his own execution and most likely that of his fellow prisoners. He had no problem condemning himself to death for his actions, but he would not take the others with him. He fell back and stared silently at Pyke.

The Ptolemii commander reseated himself, and put his hands flat on the desk. He waited to see if there would be any further reaction from his captive; there was none. He was beginning to enjoy the game—it had been a long time since he was both mentally and, he now admitted, physically stimulated by anyone. He flexed his fingers and decided to throw his opponent off balance by switching to a completely different topic.

“Do you play Strategum, Vin-Chay?” He knew the use of the officer’s given name in a familiar tone would disconcert him for brief second, enough to probe into the man’s mind even further. “It’s an interesting boardgame of methodical warfare simulation that can stimulate the body as well as the mind.” He was rewarded with a slight frown and another response. *Score*.

"The body? How? It's a psychological game of strategy. It has nothing to do with the body," the Osiran lieutenant finally replied, more disconcerted by this man than he would show.

"Not true." Pyke paused, waiting to see how long it would take Vin-Chay to pursue an answer. It didn't take long. It was clear to Pyke that the man was starved for any kind of intellectual challenge, even if it required contact with the enemy.

Vin-Chay finally shrugged too casually. "I don't understand."

"The mind drives the body, Lieutenant. Doesn't fear make your heart beat faster? Doesn't it make you sweat and clench your fists together? Doesn't anticipation of a battle or a sexual experience make you salivate or bite your lower lip, or run your fingers through your hair? The same is true of a good game of simulated battle, like Strategum. Perhaps you and I will play a game or two one day. I don't imagine that would be considered treason by either one of our respective groups of companions." He allowed himself an enigmatic smile.

"I don't think so, Commander. Pass."

"We'll see. Right now, I think we've accomplished all we need to at this point."

"Accomplished?" Vin-Chay responded warily. What was this man up to?

"Sizing each other up. Evaluating the enemy, so to speak. And I promise I won't give your enthusiastic communication with me away to your command. We'll keep it between us."

Before Vin-Chay could respond, Pyke summoned Zandran to remove the officer, who stared intensely at his captor as the sub-commander re-manacled him and started to pull him out of the chamber.

Pyke sat down again and enjoyed the unexpected rush of excitement at his recent encounter. He had been interested in the man before, as both a worthy opponent in the military arena and as a personal opportunity. But now, after assessing him very closely, he was intrigued by the aristocratic warrior on a different level, one he had not experienced in a very long time. It had been too long since he had allowed himself to feel anything for anyone. The war alone was a more than adequate deterrent for any involvement, and any chance of an entanglement on an emotional or intellectual level should never, never include an enemy. Especially an implacable one who was a captive, not even on equal footing with him. Even so, he found himself not really caring about the consequences of what going down this road could bring. He just looked forward to going down this particular road. Carefully.

CHAPTER SIX

Vin-Chay noted Bak-Tii's eyes on him quizzically as his manacles were removed and he was allowed to return to his exercise group in the courtyard. He strode over to his commander and shrugged nonchalantly.

"Well?" Bak-Tii demanded tersely. "What exactly did he say to you, Lieutenant? You were in there somewhat longer than most of your peers."

Vin-Chay considered telling his senior officer that there was nothing out of the ordinary about his 'interview,' but thought better of it since their captor had made an odd excursion into personal territory rather than keeping the interrogation formal and standard for their respective positions. Nothing confidential had been said, of course, or could be misconstrued as such, but Vin-Chay thought it better that Bak-Tii find out any oddities from him rather than offhand from their enemy.

"Nothing relating to our fleet, if that's what you mean, sir. He did seem to have read my records carefully, and mentioned that he had met my father once in Academy."

"He knows the Crown Prince?" Bak-Tii asked, surprised.

"Not 'knows,' but met him at some lecture when he was a student. I don't imagine my father paid much more than a courteous attention to him."

"I see. Anything else?"

"Nothing."

"All right. Take advantage of the rest of our 'free' time while you can. They should be locking us back up in less than an hour." Bak-Tii didn't wait for an answer and moved off with his remaining command clique to what seemed to Vin-Chay to be an intense discussion. He wondered if he had interrupted the conversation, or precipitated it.

Vin-Chay forewent mingling with his fellow prisoners and found an unoccupied corner of the courtyard, where he backed up against the smooth rock wall and slid down into a sitting position. He watched his people talking quietly in small groups. He felt a pang of envy and frustration at their Ptolemii guards' standard military uniforms: dark brown to light tan, depending on rank, with black trim, boots, and techbelts, and a variety of rank-dependent accessories on

their chests and shoulders. Plus, they had neuralizer weaponry they carried prominently to assure that none of their prisoners would attempt an escape or bodily harm to their captors.

Their clothing and demeanor contrasted sharply with the thirty or so Osirans wearing shapeless, loose-fitting, pale-gray tunics, trousers, and shortboots—the new garments that Pyke had provided to replace their own filthy and ragged remains of uniforms. At least the clothing was clean and comfortable, although the pyramid designator on the left shoulder shouted their prisoner-of-war status out loudly. Vin-Chay, at least, planned to wear the embroidered mark as a badge of honor.

He closed his eyes for a moment against the welcome but bright sunlight breaking through the usual grayish-purple clouds that seemed to hang over the planet relentlessly. He tried to empty his mind of his anger and desperation and fill it with pleasant thoughts, thoughts of home and family and freedom. His pangs of homesickness only intensified as he pictured blurry images of his father, siblings and friends. It had been over a year since he had seen any of them, and he found to his chagrin that he could no longer remember sharp images and beloved faces. Before his battalion's inglorious defeat seven months earlier, he would have been able to retreat to his quarters and view his familial holographs. But those, along with the ship, were destroyed forever. And his only avenue remaining, his memories, was blurring as simple survival seemed to occupy more and more of his very essence.

Vin-Chay concentrated harder. He had to bring the other important things in his life back into focus, or he would truly be lost. He emptied his mind with the basic breathing techniques his father had taught him as a child. His father. He smiled painfully at the thought of his royal sire, Crown Prince Chay Shayne, and he let his mind roam softly back through a time and place where there were no guards and cells and defeat.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The current Kindred of Chay was ruled with a firm and increasingly intolerant hand by Vin-Chay's father, Crown Prince Chay Shayne, whose own great-great-grandfather, the first Vin-Chay of the male family line, had established one of the nine ruling royal branches of Osiron. A rebel in his youth and for most of his remaining years, this first Vin-Chay had chafed at the increasingly restrictive edicts of the past Pharon of their civilization.

When the opportunity had arisen to leave the First Sister, Ptolem, and colonize one of the other three planets in their star system (excluding Canaan, a generally dismissed, and until now, long-abandoned way station in their civilization's long trek from their original home planet of Terra to the star system Pyrra), he had given not a single thought to remaining on his birthworld. He had taken the family wealth, dispersed his other material possessions, uprooted his mother, sister, wife and sons, and joined other adventurers such as himself to board a fleet of colonial ships that settled after a year-long space trek on the fourth planet, Osiron. Vin-Chay and his fellow colonists then started to build what was to have been a branch of the Ptolemii culture; the reality turned out far differently.

As Vin-Chay and his community grew and prospered, so naturally did the seeds of diversity cultivated through the great physical distance of Osiron from its mother world, in conjunction with the actual geographical makeup of the two planets themselves. Ptolem was the closet planet to their sun, and as such was replete with barren deserts and craggy mountains of stone, with only a few habitable landmasses whose temperature supported the populace. This made for a lengthy challenge for the original settlers, but they had persevered and turned their 'ball of sand' into a thriving, albeit hot, world of cloistered cities all built to support a central capital in which their Pharon and his followers flourished. A new calendar, based on the four hundred ten planetary circumnavigation of their sun, was developed with thirteen months designated after the twelve signs of the ancient zodiac plus the one month named after the first Pharon, Khufu; that month began the Ptolemii year, and was the object of month-long festivities and religious observances.

Osiron was quite the opposite of its mother world. The farthest planet from their sun, it, too, possessed landmasses often too hot to support extensive inhabitation. However, it was generally a lush planet of greenery and moisture that encouraged agriculture and the expansion of both cities and recreational facilities for its people. It had a rich supply of minerals, as well as native fauna that were quickly assimilated into the culture for food, work and pleasure along with the animals brought by the colonists from Ptolem. Osiron was a planet of many and stark contrasts, and it suited well the character of the men and women who had left Ptolem to build a new future. On the whole they were a contentious lot, passionate about life and filled to the brim with long-suppressed ideas and needs and hopes. These were all free to blossom in a thousand different directions that the Pharon and his civilization would have considered profanities, simply because they were not conducive to the single purpose of perpetuating millennia-old concepts of obedience and uniformity for the glory of the totalitarian Pharonic dynasty.

Old traditions from a half-dozen millennia ago, before the original Ptolemii had left Terra, were long forgotten. The original colonists had found their concepts of democracy and multiple individual republics chaotic after years of world wars and destruction. When they left their polluted and dying home planet and traveled for three hundred years to eventually reach Canaan, they had decided to return to a traditional, totalitarian government under a single, autocratic ruler; the original Pharon, as their leaders were called to this day. He was selected through a personal contest of one-on-one battle skills rather than any well-conceived rationale. He subsequently disposed of dissenters, along with their primary families. The tone of the next hundred generations was thus set.

But no longer for the colonists of Osiron. True, they had decided to remain partially aligned to their aristocratic, authoritarian birthright, but they allocated the power and responsibilities amongst the nine leading families of colonists. They designated these lineages as 'Kindreds,' and drafted a simple set of laws and rules by which to govern their personal, moral, political and religious actions and needs. They abandoned the official Ptolemii linguistics of their mother world, and adopted as their official language the ethnic dialect of their founding and most powerful family, the Chays. The colonists were determined to be as different as possible in every way from their birthworld brethren. They developed their own four hundred eighty-five day calendar with twelve months base on their differing solar circumnavigation. Their language was now different, and they rejected most of the cultural aspects they had left behind. The people of Ptolem wore their hair long, and the men were clean-shaven; Osiran men cut their hair

very short, and almost uniformly grew beards. Ptolemii men and women thrived on decorative body piercing and tattoos on their flesh; Osirans never pierced or colored any part of their flesh, and would have been horrified at the suggestion. Ptolemii clothing was a fairly narrow band of 'desert' colors, with an occasional bright scarf or belt and jewelry to offset the consistency; Osirans thrived on colorful garments of vivid blues and reds and greens. There were many other natural and contrived differences, due not only to the desire to separate from the mother civilization, but also due to the different physical nature of the new world.

And the royal Osirans bred diligently while the common populace constrained themselves to one or two offspring. By the time the first Vin-Chay died, in his one hundred and twentieth year, he left behind four sons, six daughters, thirty-six grandchildren, and fourteen great-grandchildren spread across all six provinces. His compatriots proceeded in a similar enthusiastic vein, supplemented by an influx of other Ptolemii immigrants who also yearned for the 'paradise' their brethren had founded, and bolstered by a ready acceptance of an ancient practice of multiple marriages and concubinage. There were some antiquated practices well worth keeping, and although Vin-Chay chose to remain monogamous, many of his descendants did not.

Within six generations from the colonization of Osiron, the population of the small, lush planet boasted over a million inhabitants spread out in well-architected cities and towns. There was physical and emotional prosperity, and complete religious freedom. As in their Ptolemii past, same-sex marriages and informal bondings were accepted and commonplace. Most men and women were educated, most were productive members of their society, and soon almost all came to chafe at the taxes, philosophical restrictions, and increasing constraints against personal freedom and individuality that Ptolem and its ruler and his supporters were placing on their economy and persons. The people's language had transitioned from ancient Ptolemii to a variety of dialects; gradually, the Ptolemii language was rarely spoken and understood even less. Other than those forced to deal with their mother culture, few Osirans bothered to learn their ancient tongue. This divided the two worlds even further.

Discontent festered for generations, well into the adulthood of the current head of the Kindred of Chay, Chay Shayne. As most of his ancestors before him, Chay Shayne had entered the league of the military, expecting on the one hand to spend his tenure within at peace with all sectors of the mother civilization. The Interior Security of the planetary populace was a simple matter of course and prevention rather than the strict enforcement agency that Ptolem's had become to keep its own populace in check. He secretly hoped that someday the discontent

would blossom into a full separation between the two worlds. The second Sister, Isiin, was steadfastly devoted to the mother world; the third Sister, Sekmet, was a wasteland inhabited by only a few thousand berrillium miners who supplied the other planets with the clean fuel needed to maintain their homes, businesses and starships.

However, Chay Shayne expended most of his energies in his sociopolitical arena as High Prince of the Osiran Council of Nine, and the Supreme Commander of the strategic sector of the Osiron Military Academy. His brother, Prince Sar-Chay, was designated second-in-command, to keep the power as much within the Chay family as possible. In his thirty-third year Chay Shayne married the primary daughter of one of the other nine families, Tii Ciara. She bore him three sons over the course of seven years: Dom-Chay, Vin-Chay, and Nik-Chay. He also took as concubine the daughter of another council member, H'Elene, from the Kindred of Gir. She gave him a fourth son and two daughters. The extended family resided occasionally peacefully, occasionally with the tension of sexual and familial competition in the luxurious Chay compound near the capital city of Etrusca, overlooking the Meditteran Sea, until shortly after Vin-Chay's twelfth birthanniv.

The war of independence had started unexpectedly, although it was long anticipated by those in the established political loop and the widespread covert organization know as the Separatae. A unanimous refusal to accept any further immigrants from Ptolem earned the Council of Nine—newly rechristened the Crown Prince Circle—the enmity of the ruling families of the mother planet. The Pharon issued an embargo against diverting the usual share of mined berrillium from Sekmet; the Council retaliated by sending a fleet to take the needed fuel. The miners' military protective contingent from Ptolem put up a relatively uninspired fight to prevent the Osiran forces from landing and assuming control of berrillium distribution; the strategy was accomplished in less than ten days. Osiron received its fuel shipments and withdrew its ministers and ambassadors from Isiin and Sekmet. The Pharon and his council declared a civil war in effect between the two main Sisters and their populations less than one day later.

Martial law was declared on Ptolem, thus placing all inhabitants at the untender mercies of the Pharon and his military. The Ptolemii remained fairly well off, with the most unsettling factor simply being an increase in their mandatory financial allotments to their government. Their standard of living remained virtually the same, since all political maneuverings and star battles were fought well away from the planet itself. The prestige and fortunes of critical military officers, however, took a sharp upward turn. Their talents became the keystone of

the Pharon's plan for re-establishing an unequivocal single authoritarian rule, and eliminating the undesirable bent of the rogue Osiran populace. He wanted *all* of his people of one mind and under one rule: his. He was fortunate that the avarice that dominated his minions, the Fealtae, far outweighed any remnants of compassion or integrity buried under years of unbridled decadence.

The Osiran people who resided on Ptolem after decades of cross-immigration between the two worlds, however, as well as those taken in battle or from the other Sisters during preemptive campaigns, fared far worse. With no dissenting votes, the Pharonic council decreed the re-institution of the ancient practice of slavery, and proceeded in the greatest of haste to strip its Osiran citizens of their basic human rights, their property, and their freedom. Those who resisted too strenuously were executed as state enemies. The remaining 'enemies of the state' found themselves in servitude to the ruling classes, and any other Ptolemii person who could afford to purchase and maintain and restrain them. Some Osirans accepted their fate meekly, and prayed for deliverance by their god, and their own military; some died in escape attempts; and some bided their time, although during the ten years of war both their hope and their resolve were often put in jeopardy of ever surviving what had escalated to a vicious and elongated conflict.

This unexpected and horrific tactic of their home world stunned the people of Osiron. And then it inflamed them into a solidarity of rebellion that burned without abatement through the ten years of war that had since defined their world. Many found it difficult to refrain from retaliating in kind to their Ptolemii brethren's actions, but common sense and decency prevailed on Osiron. Although there were often hard feelings against the Ptolemii residing on that world, none suffered the indignity of slavery or of any other social or financial retribution. The two cultures on that world coexisted uneasily on occasion, but generally peacefully during the ten years of conflict between the two primary Sisters. It was clear after those ten years that both sides were at a stalemate in which neither would surrender or compromise unless something unknown and drastic took the stage to redefine the paths of destruction on which they were both set.

Chay Shayne's already prominent political and military position expanded rapidly as he led the battle against Osiron's mother world. His sons were destined to follow in their father's footsteps, and his two eldest sons entered the Osiron Military Academy at the earliest age possible, Dom-Chay at seventeen, followed three years later by his younger brother Vin-Chay, who matriculated two weeks short of his own seventeenth birthanniv. Vin-Chay's younger brothers would someday follow in his footsteps—as though they had any choice.

Both sons excelled at academics and political strategy. Both graduated first in their respective classes and left their graduation ceremonies directly to assume first-level lieutenant positions on battle-bound starships. Dom-Chay went to his father's ship, the *Victorion*, and Vin-Chay to the *Remus*, commanded by his distant cousin, Bak-Tii. But whereas Dom-Chay progressed naturally to his current rank as Sub-Captain, Vin-Chay's career and promise were interrupted by a failed battle decision from his Commander. Ptolemii forces captured him and many of his comrades as Bak-Tii surrendered the ship and crew to prevent their complete death and destruction. Communications had been rendered inoperative during the battle; there had been no way to let Osiron know that the ship hadn't been destroyed outright. The devious Ptolemii issued a credible fake transmission that the ship and all aboard had perished. The rebellion's High Command was under the natural assumption that no one survived the ship's destruction.

Silently, as he was manacled, beaten, and roughly dragged from his own vessel to the Ptolemii ship that would deposit its seventy-two prisoners-of-war to Canaan, Vin-Chay wished they had been destroyed rather than defeated. He would feel even more strongly about that as the months of increasingly brutal captivity at the penal fortress tried even the staunch beliefs and character with which he had been raised. But he was determined to honor his father, his family, and his uniform, in that order. Like his fellow prisoners, he struggled to survive the incarceration in the tiny, dark, almost airless damp cell, the nearly inedible food, the lack of basic human hygiene, and the frequent verbal and psychological abuse—and occasional physical beatings. They were administered by an increasingly frustrated contingent of Ptolemii officers and guards who were anything but pleased at their own penal assignments.

The most difficult aspect of the entire situation was the lack of communication allowed between the captured Osiran warriors. They were unable to exchange thoughts on how to subvert their captors and achieve a successful escape. Hopefully, this would no longer be the case as the new commander in charge of Canaan instituted relaxed humanitarian rules that permitted exercise time in groups in the outside courtyard. The prisoners were able to mingle and talk, albeit carefully, and it was in the first week that a number of potential escape plans were dispersed between the warriors. None were yet deemed effective or truly viable, but they were all committed to searching out the way in which they would be able to regain their freedom and re-join their compatriots in the battle for their future.

Vin-Chay opened his eyes and squinted against the rare bright sun. Out of the corner of his eye he caught Bak-Tii watching him with an oddly contemplative look on his face. He had never thought of his kinsman as a particularly incisive leader, although a fairly competent one until the disaster all those months ago. He wondered what Bak-Tii was thinking, and what part he might play in those unknown thoughts. He felt a chill run up his spine as the chief lector yelled for the prisoners to convene in the center of the courtyard so they could be returned to their cells for the remainder of the day.

Vin-Chay pushed himself off the ground and walked slowly over to his group. He still felt Bak-Tii's eyes on him as one of the lectors manacled his hands and shoved him towards the fortress entry.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Commander Pyke changed his password and ordered his correlator to shut down as he completed his daily transmission to the Ptolem High Command. The missive contained the usual supply requests and updates on the status of the penal fortress and its inhabitants. During the past two months his efforts had at the very least provided a fairly decent although still tense set of living conditions for his prisoners and their captors. And he had, oddly enough, found it almost peaceful to be off of a starship and away from the heat of battle, and stay in one place on a real rather than enclosed, artificial world. Even such a rainy one.

He made it a practice to be occasionally present in the courtyard when the prisoners were being exercised. He often attempted to initiate conversation, but with few exceptions, the Osirans were not disposed to any verbal interaction with their enemy. Bak-Tii, of course, was a polite exception, as were several of his senior officers. He was also successful in engaging the intriguing young lieutenant from the Kindred of Chay in sharp repartee. He seemed to be more and more adept at uncovering and exploiting the young man's 'hot buttons,' and had managed to entice him three times into participating in the boardgame Strategum. Several boards were set up under makeshift canopies for the prisoners, who, once they got over their initial mistrust of the motives behind this, relished the chance to exercise their military strategies in the psychological simulation.

Pyke planned on enticing Vin-Chay into another match today, and found himself looking forward to matching wits with the princeling. His first impression of the man, as anyone's would be, was of an extremely attractive male whose physical features were only enhanced by his quick and striking intelligence. His bearing and maturity were far beyond his years, and Pyke found himself grudgingly admiring a man whom fate had decreed a traitor and enemy. Pyke found himself deliberately provoking the warrior with contrary opinions simply to see what he would say. He developed a rapid and profound regret that matters completely out of their hands made them enemies rather than friends. He would have liked that.

Unfortunately, he also found himself developing much deeper and different feelings than friendship towards his prisoner. It had been a long time since he had

experienced these feelings. He thought of how the last such happenstance had ended nearly five years earlier, and he struggled to put his desires in check and deal with the matter objectively. The last thing he needed was to cultivate a sexual or emotional need with someone who was out of his reach. Even though he silently acknowledged that under these circumstances, Vin-Chay was definitely within his easy reach.

Pyke pushed back his chair and strode over to the window. He looked down at the bustle of people in the courtyard and fixed his gaze on Vin-Chay. The man was sitting opposite another warrior, Lieutenant Burran, and they were engaged in an intense game of Anagramia. He watched for a while as the two men moved their runic chits around the board, with several long pauses of contemplation on Burran's side before he made his move, and far fewer of those on Vin-Chay's side. Moments later, Burran again threw his hands up in exasperation as he lost another game to his younger opponent. Vin-Chay smiled and got up and stretched his arms above his head, then moved off to a group of junior officers to participate in whatever conversation they had going. Pyke assumed it related to the ever-present themes of escape and payback.

He sat back down and decided not to go outside today and pursue a game of skill. He was not emotionally prepared for it as he battled with his two conflicting needs, companionship and duty. In this case, he wasn't sure he could reconcile them. Perhaps he could. He didn't know what the repercussions would be for his career and personal life if he chose the wrong path. He always considered all aspects of a choice. This one simply wasn't as cut and dried as those he made in battle.

Be damned! Pyke rashly decided to throw caution to the wind and summoned TutMose, instructing him to bring the lieutenant to his office, now. TutMose looked at him thoughtfully, and then left the chamber with a salute. Pyke uncrossed his arms from his response and laid his hands flat on his desk as he directed his breathing to a more even level. He waited wordlessly and motionlessly as he anticipated seeing the object of what could be a fatal folly.

TutMose entered his commander's office with the desired prisoner. Pyke motioned him to unmanacle the man and leave. TutMose complied. Vin-Chay looked curiously at his captor. Pyke stared back silently for a long moment until Vin-Chay began to feel a little disquieted at the odd beginning to whatever they were going to converse about. Pyke got up from his chair and went around to the front of his desk, perching lightly at the edge. The men were less than two meters apart. Pyke could hear Vin-Chay's even breathing. He motioned towards a set of bottles on a counter near the wall.

"Would you care for a draught of spirits?" Pyke asked casually.

Vin-Chay immediately felt on edge as he declined quickly and coolly. "No, thank you, Commander. My particular sect on Osiron frowns on the use of intoxicants unless it relates to certain religious and social occasions."

"I see. Then it's not forbidden, only discouraged."

"Yes," Vin-Chay said hesitantly. Where was this man going?

Pyke moved to the counter, aware of the eyes that watched his every move. He poured a hefty measure of his favorite spiced red papyron into a small goblet, then filled another one slowly with the same beverage. He turned and extended the second goblet to his opponent. "Take it," he said flatly. Vin-Chay hesitated, then shrugged and took the goblet from his captor. Pyke took a long, pleasurable draught as his eyes remained on the Osiran, who simply held the goblet with moving it towards his compressed lips.

Pyke refilled his goblet and sat behind his desk, his eyes never leaving Vin-Chay's. Neither spoke for a few minutes as Pyke sipped his second serving of papyron. Vin-Chay abruptly put his goblet down on Pyke's desk and moved back to his previous safe distance from the commander before speaking.

"All right, Commander. What exactly is it that you want from me? What's going on here?"

Pyke let a slight smile change his neutral visage. "Can't it be that I am attempting to simulate a civilized interaction between two men who have a great deal in common? Or are you disposed to only holding pleasant conversations with your own kind?"

"We have nothing in common, Commander. Certainly nothing that would ever initiate a 'pleasant' conversation between us. May I go now?"

"No." Pyke hesitated, then decided to stop dancing around and broach the subject he had been struggling with for weeks. "I have a proposition for you." He sipped his spirits slowly and deliberately.

Vin-Chay felt an icy chill run up his spine. It was one of the few times in his career that he had ever felt fear. He forced himself to show nothing as he waited for Pyke to continue.

Pyke cocked his head to one side as he evaluated his next move. He thought it best to come straight out with it. The young man would see through any attempts to minimize the effects any agreement would have on both of them. He put his elbows on the desk and pressed his fingertips together, and locked eyes with the lieutenant.

"This is a grim place for all of us, Vin-Chay. Your people have the worst situation by far, but the Ptolemii fare little better in many ways. We are all far from

home. None of us want to be here. We miss our families and our lovers and our houses and everything else that makes for quality of life. We do what we can to deal with it, and look forward to a time when this all comes to an end.”

Pyke got up and went to the window and feigned looking out as he continued. “We learn to do things that make it all bearable. Sometimes we do the wrong thing, like the behavior of the guards before I assumed command of this place.” He turned back and looked directly at Vin-Chay, who was taken by surprise by Pyke’s next words, which were well off the course of this already strange conversation.

“I want a companion relationship with you. In return—”

“You mean a sexual relationship, don’t you?” Vin-Chay snapped, as he believed he understood clearly what all the past attention and interaction was about.

“Yes,” said Pyke flatly, “in part. In another part, a verbal sparring partner with whom I can converse about things other than the grayness and futility of our mutual residence here, and the war that has precipitated it. In return, I can grant you whatever you want *within reason* and the confines of this penal situation. A better cell, food, whatever. It’s a simple bargain.”

“Simple? And if I refuse?”

“Then you refuse. I mean you no harm. There are no consequences. This is not a threat, or a demand. It is a proposition to which you can agree or decline freely.”

“Freely,” Vin-Chay echoed bitterly. “Right. And my people pay the price in some unfathomable way if I reject your advances.”

“No, you’re wrong. This is between you and me. I admire your passion and commitment to your cause and your people. Your intelligence. In normal circumstances, had this conflict never happened, I would have felt the same way and pursued a normal course of action in developing a relationship. But we are under these circumstances, and neither of us has the chance to do what would be considered ‘normal.’ This agreement between us would be consensual and end when you want it to end, if you find you cannot tolerate it any more. I won’t hold you to it against your will, or retaliate against you or your people. You have my word as an officer, and I have never given my word lightly or betrayed it.”

Vin-Chay stared at Pyke disbelievingly. This situation had never entered his mind. He had thought that the Ptolemii’s attention was a prelude to extracting some military or other information from him. There had been absolutely no sexual overtones to their interaction. Or had there—the mental games, the deliber-

ate provocations. Perhaps it was there all the time. He looked Pyke defiantly in the eyes and spoke in an implacable tone. "No."

Pyke nodded his head silently. "As I said, your choice." He summoned TutMose to remove the prisoner. The sub-commander intuited quickly that the atmosphere in the chamber had changed significantly since he had last been there. Both Commander Pyke and the Osiran were stone-faced, giving off nothing but a rather icy chill. TutMose performed his task efficiently and left Pyke alone in his office to muse over the situation. He thought he had handled it badly, not that there was a 'good' way to handle this type of proposition. He didn't know if he would try again. He didn't know if he should.

CHAPTER NINE

Bak-Tii noted his kinsman's pale and tense demeanor immediately as the lieutenant was brought back to the courtyard for the remainder of his exercise time. Vin-Chay seemed to shift his eyes away from any direct contact with his people, which Bak-Tii thought odd. The young man was normally outgoing and enthusiastic and interactive even in the worst of conditions, and had seemed of late to regain much of that composure since conditions at Canaan had improved. It was out of the ordinary to have him summoned to Commander Pyke's office, and his face told Bak-Tii volumes—something had happened. The Osiran commander caught his breath and wondered if what he had suspected would come to pass really had, and how it could be used to turn the tables on their captors. He motioned Vin-Chay over and led the man to a private corner of the courtyard to question him. The light rain pelted their tense faces.

"You look unsettled, cousin. Has something happened that I should know about?" Bak-Tii asked, making his voice sound concerned and anxious.

Vin-Chay hesitated. He had never held back anything as a matter of duty, but this was something else entirely. He felt Bak-Tii's eyes boring into him intently as he found himself failing to meet them for the first time in their personal and professional association. He wanted to lie, but couldn't do it. He absently passed a hand over his wet face.

"Commander Pyke offered an unusual proposal to me, which I turned down. He—"

"You turned him down? Do you have any idea how beneficial an intimate relationship with this man could be to our cause? Which, in case it has escaped you, is to get the hell out of here and go back to our fleet and destroy that hellish regime on Ptolem?"

"How could you know?" Vin-Chay whispered, stunned. How could he *know*?

"God, man—do you think I'm stupid or blind? It was as clear as a sabbat day on Spartana that this man wants you. His eyes always sought you out here. His voice was different when he spoke to you. He obviously relished the games of Strategum you played. How could *you* not know before this?"

Vin-Chay was taken aback at Bak-Tii's scornful tone. He ran his tongue over his teeth and answered his superior evenly. "Apparently I didn't. Not that it matters. I turned him down. How could I do anything else? I don't have to remind a Provincial elder that our sect considers carnal relations between two people a sacred physical and emotional trust. It is not looked upon well to pervert that with base fraternization with our enemies for material gain. And besides, the man isn't stupid—he isn't going to tell me anything in the heat of passion, any more than I would if I were in his position!"

"This is not 'material gain' cousin—it is matter of survival," Bak-Tii said coldly.

"I am surviving quite well, *cousin*, without resorting to intemperate bodily contact with a Ptolemii."

"Don't take that tone with me, Lieutenant! Despite the cells and guards and daily humiliation of being in this place with these animals having the upper hand, I am still your commanding officer, and I expect you to treat that relationship with the respect it deserves."

"Yes, sir!" Vin-Chay replied stiffly.

Bak-Tii decided to ignore the obvious impertinent tone and go to the heart of the matter.

"I cannot order you to accept his proposal, but I strongly *urge* you to consider several facts here. One, your duty as an Osiran officer dictates that you do everything within your power to subvert and defeat the Ptolemii enemy, and promote the victory of your own civilization. Two, this is an immeasurable opportunity to garner information that may assist our people here in escaping this place—don't minimize the intrinsic benefits of bed-talk. Civilizations have been built and destroyed from time immemorial from such inauspicious beginnings. And three, this has nothing to do with your honor and purity. It is simply sex. As long as you don't fall into an inappropriate caring relationship with this man, or betray your people with loose lips of your own, you won't be doing anything that could ever be condemned by your family or your superiors in the military or society. Your sacrifice will be honored, regardless of what fruits it does or doesn't bear. You have the best chance of any of us to rectify this monstrous situation. It is up to you to decide if you want to take that opportunity—or wait for another one, perhaps many years down the line. That's all, Lieutenant."

Bak-Tii strode away without looking back as Vin-Chay stood stiffly where they had been conversing. He didn't move until the guards called for the prisoners to line up for removal back to their cells. He barely felt the manacles placed on his wrists or the standard shove towards the fortress doors.

CHAPTER TEN

A week had passed since Pyke made his audacious proposal to his Osiran captive, and during that time he had refrained from encountering the man in the exercise yard. When their paths did cross for brief moments in passing in the corridors or the courtyard, the Osiran averted his eyes and maintained a stony visage. Pyke determined that he would not press the issue or let it affect his behavior but, of course, it had, if only to make him reluctant to encounter a person whom he had previously found to be entertaining. Vin-Chay was a welcome change from his own single-minded and unengaging men, TutMose and Zandran excluded, naturally.

Pyke was completing a correlator program for a proposed new training strategy for the Ptolem Military Academy, where he occasionally taught ancient and modern battle tactics. He thoroughly enjoyed the mental challenge of building a scenario, resolving its tactical denouements, and creating a program to provide the results to a class of eager future tacticians. His office at the Miliplex was crammed with his existing, proposed and half-completed programs, along with reams of old-style, rare paper tomes and correlator file chips that he used for both work and relaxation. He couldn't wait to get back to that office and home. Someday. Soon.

Zandran entered the commchamber and saluted. Pyke smiled and returned the formal gesture. He waited expectantly for his sub-commander to state his purpose. Zandran seemed uneasy.

"Commander, one of the prisoners wishes to speak with you," Zandran said.

"Which one? Commander Bak-Tii?"

"No, sir. Lieutenant Vin-Chay." Zandran watched his Commander for any sign that would signal pleasure or disquiet. He received only a slightly raised eyebrow. Only the very briefest seconds of hesitation passed before the commander replied.

"Very well. I have some time now. Bring him."

"He's outside, Commander." Zandran left the chamber and returned immediately with his prisoner. Vin-Chay kept his eyes riveted to Pyke's as Zandran released his wrists, saluted and left the chamber. Pyke waited in anticipation.

Vin-Chay finally spoke, but with obvious difficulty. It was clear to Pyke that the young warrior was having difficulty in swallowing his considerable pride.

"I have reconsidered your proposal, Commander, and if the offer is still open, under the same terms, I will accept." Pyke smiled to himself—it sounded as though the Osiran was doing him a favor. *That royal upbringing and attitude, no doubt.* He let the young man wait for a few minutes as he considered him deliberately, then he rose from his desk and shrugged slightly.

"Why now, Vin-Chay? What has changed in the last week that would cause you to change your mind? Why honor me with your presence in my bed now?"

Vin-Chay stiffened at the unequivocal reference to his expected 'duties.' He clenched his jaw and forced himself to continue forward.

"I had time to consider your idea and found it was something, well, that I could do if I had to."

Pyke cocked his head and put on a quizzical look. "But you don't 'have to.' Didn't I make it clear through my words and actions that there was no pressure on you to agree to this? You are free to refuse. You did refuse. Nothing happened. Now I simply want to know why you're changing your mind. It wouldn't have anything to do with your senior officers thinking that you might be able to wheedle secrets out of me through bed-talk, would it?" Pyke allowed the smile to reach his eyes as he thought, *Score!*

Vin-Chay blinked and thought, *Am I the only one who isn't an involved player in this game of theirs? Well, that stops now.* He met Pyke's eyes directly before answering. "Yes."

"I see. And what did you say to them about that?"

"I said you weren't stupid."

"Correct: I'm not. But—if there is a one in a million chance of gaining the upper hand, you are supposed to take it, right?"

"Right."

"And if I were to *assure* you with absolute certainty that I will never allow you that upper hand, nor provide any useful discussion in bed, are you still willing to accept my proposal?"

"Yes," Vin-Chay said without hesitation.

"Why?" Pyke pressed.

"Because I *am!*" Vin-Chay snapped back. He immediately regretted his outburst and silently cursed Pyke even as he verbally retreated. "I'm sorry, I just don't know how to answer you."

"That's fine. And it doesn't really matter. Very well. I accept your acquiescence. Here are my ground rules. You will do whatever I tell you to do within the

confines of my quarters. Anything I want, period. If you refuse, the deal is off and you lose whatever it is that we've bargained for. Now, what is it that you want?"

"Two extra hours per day of courtyard time for my people."

"Agreed. And for yourself?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"I want nothing from you Commander. Except, perhaps, a reason for why you want me rather than one of the others. There are many young, attractive men and women amongst your prisoners. Why me?" His eyes challenged Pyke, who came around his desk and stood very close to his captive. Very close. He let his eyes roam over the younger man's face before choosing his answer as carefully and honestly as he could under the circumstances. His palms felt unexpectedly moist.

"You *are* attractive. And intelligent. Emotionally unattainable. All the things I desire in a temporary relationship where there is no expectation of deep feelings or permanence, or obligation other than what is stated categorically up front. I want no entanglement, simply a pleasant interlude in a very stressful situation. Something to make the time pass less slowly and painfully. When I leave this planet—and the sooner the better—I want no cause to look back and think that I made a mistake in leaving you here. I want to think of you only in passing, no disrespect intended, Lieutenant." Pyke knew that he had failed to answer his captive's question, and he hoped that the man missed the deliberate omission.

"None taken, Commander." Vin-Chay's cool, almost haughty reply nearly made Pyke smile, but he thought better of that and waited for his captive to continue, as he seemed to be about to do. "There is one thing I do want, though, besides your honest answer to my question," the Osiran said in a tense, firm tone.

"And that is?" Pyke responded curiously.

"I agree to do whatever you want when I am here. But—I will not do it with other people."

"Other people?"

"I won't be a whore passed around for the pleasure and usage of your military contingent. I won't agree to that," Vin-Chay answered tightly.

"You won't be a *whore*, period, and no one else will touch you while I am here. You have my word."

"Then we have a deal?" Vin-Chay put his right hand out, and waited for Pyke to nod and take it. Their agreement sealed, Pyke resumed his seat. He looked up at his new concubine and rubbed his bottom lip contemplatively before summoning Zandran back into the chamber. He nodded at the sub-commander to remove the prisoner, speaking just before the two men left the chamber.

“Zandran. Bring the lieutenant back to my quarters two hours before midnight. See to it that each exercise period for our inmates is extended by two hours from tomorrow on. That will require the overlapping of groups to accommodate the daylight hours, so increase the guard contingent accordingly. Also, increase their food rations by a third starting at today’s evening meal. That’s all.”

The sub-commander didn’t even attempt to hide his surprise at this turn of events, and his jaw actually dropped slightly before he was able to regain his normal composure and perform his acquiescent salute to his superior officer. He hurriedly motioned Vin-Chay out the door, and found his thoughts swirling as he managed to take the captive back to the small cell he would be taking him out of again in only a few hours for God knew what.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The two-meter-by-three-meter, windowless black cell never ceased to be physically confining and psychologically oppressive to him. At this particular moment, Vin-Chay just wished he could stay in it forever instead of leaving its peculiarly safe boundaries for the unknown awaiting him in Pyke's quarters. Not entirely unknown, of course—he knew what would be expected of him. He simply didn't know exactly how Pyke planned on exacting his portion of their hellish 'deal.' Pyke's "whatever I tell you to do" had sent a shiver up his back, but he had suppressed his dread as he did most unpleasant things these days. The Ptolemii had enough of an advantage without also having a dead certainty that their opponents were fearful rather than uncompromisingly defiant. Vin-Chay felt weak, since he *was* fearful, and that would have displeased his revered father. He would not disgrace the Kindred of Chay by showing that fear.

The minutes of time spent in his cell usually crawled by slowly. Not so the time since he had left Commander Pyke's office and returned to his confinement. If he would have had a window he could be certain when the night had come, but as things stood he could only concentrate and attempt to count the minutes and hours that the day had left. This visual sensory deprivation had always bothered him, and he had to circumvent its insidious mental consequences by playing against it with his own thoughts and mind games. He would go back years into his academic learnings and recite the many engineering formulas and test exercises in which he had excelled at the Academy. He would close his eyes and picture every centimeter of his family's household, from one chamber to the next, from holograph to holograph cluttering the living quarters and his father's cultur-chamber and Academy office. He would revisit conversations and laughter, and the promise that the inevitable end of this war would hold for all of them. The Osirans had to be victorious, for now they could never conceive of living again under the tyrannical auspices of the Pharon and his world.

Vin-Chay heard the approach of footsteps and he tensed. He felt his leg muscles constrict as he sat cross-legged on his thin sleep pallet. The footsteps passed by the door to his cell and continued on. He relaxed slightly, then started his breathing exercises to empty his mind and body of the fear he felt, and to prepare

himself for whatever was to come. He breathed slowly, in and out, in and out, and pushed all thoughts of home and family out of his mind. He emptied his mind of all images except that of the most beautiful sunrise he had ever seen on Osiron at his family's lodges in the Glacial Peakskills. In and out, in and—

The footsteps returned and stopped at the door to his cell. He pushed himself to his feet, barely able to stand straight in an area not made to support his full height. But he wanted to stand straight and tall, and face whoever had come for him. Zandran opened the door and wordlessly motioned for him to leave the cell. The icy sub-commander was accompanied by an armed lector, who watched curiously as the sub-commander manacled their prisoner then firmly moved him in front of them as the three men headed towards the command quarters.

Zandran dismissed the lector before they reached Pyke's quarters, then signaled their arrival. Pyke responded and the door to his office slid open. Vin-Chay and Zandran entered. They both noted that Pyke was wearing casual, off-duty military attire rather than his usual sharp uniform.

"Remove the restraints," Pyke said. Zandran hesitated for only the briefest instant before complying. Pyke nodded to him and confused his subordinate even further. "You may leave now. Return for him first thing in the morning, before his group's exercise period begins. It's fine, Zandran. Go." He modulated his tone to a familiar, rather gentle one upon seeing the concern on his sub-commander's face. He didn't want to provide any explanations, but neither did he wish to add to the man's discomfort and concern. He wasn't sure he could explain. Zandran saluted and left Pyke and Vin-Chay alone. The silence was a palpable thing as the two men eyed each other, sizing one another up, trying to determine how far each could go in this situation.

Pyke deliberately turned away from the unmanacled man, brushing against him slightly, feeling a rush of exhilaration as they barely touched. He could sense the other man's uneasiness, although to his trained eye the young officer was hiding it well. He picked up the goblet of papyron that he had been drinking, this time not bothering to offer a draught to Vin-Chay. That would come later. He waved a casual hand in the direction of the other door in his office before speaking to the young officer.

"My noxchamber and sanichamber are through there. I think starting tonight off with a long, hot shower might help you relax a little. I would join you, but I think it's a little too early in our relationship for that. There's a robe that should fit you. Take your time, but not all night, please."

Vin-Chay looked at him for a moment before turning towards the door. As he reached it, Pyke added unexpectedly, "And shave your beard off, too, please."

Vin-Chay whirled around, startled, and exclaimed, "What?! You can't be serious. This has nothing to do with—"

"As I believe you have already agreed to whatever I dictate in these quarters, this shouldn't be an issue. I am not disposed towards contact of an intimate nature with a heavily-bearded partner," Pyke said coolly. He cocked his head and locked eyes with his opponent, as though daring him to defy this first 'order.' Vin-Chay's eyes shot daggers at Pyke, but he bit back a reply and went into the proffered sanichamber through the noxchamber. He forced himself not to look at the noxchamber or the bed as he went through the connecting arched portal to a large bathing and hygiene area. He closed the door behind him and surveyed his immediate surroundings with a practiced warrior's eye.

The chamber was gray, stark and sterile, giving no indication of the essence of the man who used it on a daily basis. The bathing area consisted of an incongruously large, deep tub of the same black rock of which the fortress was made. The shower area was also large and open, and had very old-fashioned pressure handles rather than the dermal sensors that usually modulated water flow and temperature. There was a large, soft white robe thrown casually over a post near the deep, black rock sink. Shaving equipment was laid out carefully near the sink. He picked up a small, compact clipper, then raised his eyes to stare at his reflection in the mirror over the sink. He stared for what seemed a long time before going to work methodically on removing his heavy black beard.

The flecks of hair danced in the sink bowl as he swirled the water to drain them out. He raised his eyes again and stared quite curiously at the clean-shaven reflection that now looked back at him. He couldn't even remember looking that young for so long. The man who looked back was a stranger, in more ways than one. He studied the visage carefully, noting the dark circles under his eyes, a result of too little sleep for too long. He had his mother's electric blue eyes, albeit with a slight deformity in his left eye, an almost imperceptible sliver of brown; Dom-Chay had inherited their sire's dark brown eyes. Nik-Chay also had the same blue eyes, but without the imperfection. Vin-Chay's dark, winged eyebrows made his deep-set eyes even more pronounced, as did the high cheekbones and strong aquiline nose set above the square jaw and chin burnished with the faintest of clefts. All in all, a very handsome, interesting face that easily drew both men and women close enough on first glance to further be fascinated by his passion and intellect.

Vin-Chay disrobed quickly and started the water flow in the shower. He sighed audibly as the hot water nearly scalded his outstretched hand. It had been

so long since he had had a truly hot shower; the water in the communal penal sanichamber was tepid at best, and usually cold.

He adjusted the temperature to a bearable one, yet still very hot, and stepped under the cascade. He let the water rush over his face for a long time before taking up the soap and lathering his body to a point where he finally felt clean. He experienced a brief pang of guilt as he thought about his comrades, and how they were unable to cleanse themselves as well. The pang evaporated when he thought about the price that he would have to pay for this shower.

He had no idea how long he stayed under the stream of water, but he did realize that Pyke had not attempted to enter the sanichamber, nor call to him to stop and come out. At least the man was true to his word there. Vin-Chay stepped out of the shower and dried himself, enjoying the buffing of the luxurious towel as it brushed against his body. He dried his hair as best he could, then before donning the robe he used the commode in final preparation for what he assumed would occur in Pyke's noxchamber.

He had stalled long enough. He slid open the sanichamber door and entered Pyke's noxchamber. The Ptolemii commander was standing near the bed, garbed in a casual dressing robe. He had removed the clasp that held back his shoulder-length, light brown hair, and the straight locks flowed freely around his face. Pyke had lit several candles, and the flickering lights threw odd shadows on his enigmatic if rather ordinary face. Vin-Chay couldn't read his eyes.

The bed was yet another of the odd ancient designs that permeated the stark décor of the penal fortress. Unlike the usual Ptolemii noxchamber furniture characterized by simplistic, rectangular lines and stark functionality rather than luxuriant comfort, this bed was made of a heavy, dark wood. It had both a headboard and a footboard, the latter punctuated by two half-meter tall bedposts at either end. The Osiran mode was more ornate and usually contained a wide variety of carvings and structures, depending on the whims of its owner. The fireplace was similar to the one in the command chamber, but on a smaller scale.

Pyke handed him a goblet of spirits. This time he drank without hesitation, hoping the intoxicant would fortify him. Pyke seemed to read his mind and laughed. That knowing attitude infuriated him, and he drained the goblet before putting it down noisily on the table next to the bed. He waited for Pyke to make the next move. He had no intention of initiating anything himself unless directly ordered to.

Pyke moved close to Vin-Chay, less than an arm's length away. He experienced a momentary pang of guilt; the beardless man looked little more than a boy to him now. He pushed that thought away—the Osiran was a grown man,

despite his youthful appearance. He pulled at the sash that closed Vin-Chay's robe, allowing it to fall open. He slid his hands up the younger man's chest and across his shoulders, pushing the robe back and causing it to drift to the floor. He ran his eyes slowly up and down his unwilling partner, relishing an intimate, non-physical moment that he had not experienced for quite some time. He took startled note of his companion's uncircumcised state. His heartbeat increased, and it caused him to speak more harshly than he wanted to. "Turn around."

Vin-Chay slowly turned to his left, but before he could complete the circle and face Pyke once again, the Ptolemii grasped him by the shoulders, stared at his back, and uttered a disbelieving oath.

"God's Blood! How did you get these marks?"

Vin-Chay turned back towards the Ptolemii commander and met his eyes evenly. Pyke referred to the dozens of twenty-centimeter-long scars that crisscrossed the Osiran's back in a viciously random pattern. Vin-Chay replied casually, "Your men, Commander. They made their distaste for my people quite clear when we were brought here. A number of times. With a number of warriors. Starvation, confinement and mental anguish were not their only methods of brutality. I'm sure the Pharon would be pleased at their initiative." The acidic contempt in his voice echoed in the chamber as Pyke considered his response. He had none. He silently hoped that his predecessor had suffered at least in some measure at his rit-su. He managed to find his voice and kept his tone level and soft.

"That kind of thing won't happen again here, if that makes any difference to you. There are a number of things I disagree with, regarding common military and political practices. This is one of them."

"And the others?" Vin-Chay prompted. Perhaps Bak-Tii was right about this opportunity.

Pyke smiled again. "Nice try, Lieutenant, but nothing that isn't on record in the Ptolemaic archives. I suppose you would consider me a moderate, or even, God forbid, a liberal. I disapprove of slavery. I advocate a compromise resolution to this conflict of ours, rather than the complete subjugation of your people. But, this night is not for political discussions, nor subversive tactics. It is for consummating a bargain between two men. Let's get on with it."

Vin-Chay stiffened at Pyke's sexual reference, but he simply shrugged and gave the commander a what-now look. Pyke motioned him towards the bed, and the young man moved silently and quickly to the bed and slid under the covers. Pyke must have brought his own bed coverings with him, for the silken coverlets and pillow casements were incongruous with the previous overseer of the penal

fortress. He hated the fact that they felt relaxing and comfortable, like home, like the luxury in which he had been raised.

Pyke dropped his own robe and slid into the bed next to his captive partner, who kept his eyes averted from the man who held complete dominion over him. Up until this point, Pyke wasn't sure just how far he planned on taking their relationship this night, but something inside told him to go slowly if he wanted more than simple immediate physical gratification. But, he had to start somewhere.

"Face me," he said. Vin-Chay complied, and the two men found themselves lying on their sides, facing each other as the candlelight flickered across their faces and threw mesmerizing patterns on the walls of the noxchamber. Pyke reached out his hand and stroked Vin-Chay's clean-shaven cheek. He noted with satisfaction that the man didn't pull away, and seemed almost curious at what was taking place, rather than reluctant. *This could be interesting*, Pyke thought. He decided to probe further into his captive's psyche by stringing out the physical act with small talk. He slid his hand down Vin-Chay's throat and lightly across his thickly-haired chest before continuing.

"Have you ever been with a man before?" Pyke asked.

"No," Vin-Chay answered flatly.

"I see," Pyke mused. "Then you've only experienced women in bed?" He expected a rhetorical 'yes' and was taken aback by the answer.

"No."

"No?" Pyke pushed himself up on one elbow and stared hard into the Osiran's face. "Are you trying to tell me that you are chaste? You have never—"

"Never."

"Why? You are a man full-grown. Intelligent, attractive, a member of a royal household. And you have never bedded another person? I find that hard to believe." Pyke's stare clearly indicated to Vin-Chay that he was expected to provide more of an explanation than "No." He considered fabricating some reason that might prevent Pyke from wanting to bed him, but he couldn't for the life of him think of such an excuse in the next seven seconds. He decided to simply tell him the truth.

"I haven't really had the opportunity. It's true. My family is certainly very freethinking in its views towards sex. My father supports concubinage and I have siblings from his second consort. My uncle married another man, and one of my female first cousins has a common-law marriage with a third cousin who already has a wife. Uninhibited sex is part and parcel of my world as it is yours."

"Except for you," Pyke said, listening intently.

“As I said, Commander, it was a matter of opportunity and personal preference. I entered the Osiron Military Academy at sixteen, and I spent nearly four years studying intensive theoretical and field courses to support my indoctrination into my father’s military. I had no time for distractions, nor was I looking for any. That was also the case when I joined up with the *Remus*. Battle and other war-related activities were my primary concern, not my sex life. That was always going to be for later. Except that when the *Remus* went down, the ‘later’ was here. And I certainly didn’t expect, well, this.”

“Well, my young friend, given the occasion of your current residence in my bed, you don’t seem to be taking it too badly that you’ll lose your chastity at the hands of an enemy.”

Vin-Chay made a dismissive gesture with his hand. “I have made my peace with our bargain. And I won’t allow myself to feel any less chaste than if you were a chosen partner rather than one of circumstance. We both know that the sex act in itself is neither shameful nor unnatural. Only what may precipitate it.”

“I see,” Pyke said, then swiftly placed his hand behind Vin-Chay’s head and drew his face close enough to touch Vin-Chay’s lips harshly with his own, kissing him more and more deeply as he massaged the back of Vin-Chay’s neck. Vin-Chay tried to pull away for a brief second, but Pyke held his head firmly and the Osiran allowed himself to surrender to the inevitable and did nothing to prevent Pyke from taking his pleasure. After what seemed like an eternity, Pyke released him and studied his face. It showed nothing, not resistance, nor contempt, nor pleasure. Pyke wondered if his captive really had no feelings or compunctions about what was occurring, or if he was so incredibly strong of will that he could endure anything and not be broken by it. Pyke assumed the latter. The thought pleased him.

He pressed closer to the younger man and started running his hands along Vin-Chay’s chest and sides, and even on his scarred back. The hard ridges of the scar tissue angered the Ptolemii commander, and he compensated for his shame and guilt over his people’s actions and his own by making his touch gentler. The flickering candlelight threw intriguing shadows across both men, and Pyke noticed a curious expression on his captive’s face as the young Osiran stared at his captor’s torso. Pyke cocked his head in interest, and his captive raised his eyes to meet Pyke’s. Vin-Chay hesitated for a long moment before dropping his eyes and shrugging.

“I have never seen such an intricate tattoo before, Commander,” he said mildly as his eyes returned to the vividly colored pattern that started around Pyke’s left nipple and swept down and across his side towards his back. The com-

plexity of the intertwining runic symbols and pictures radiated colors of deep red, blue, green and gold. "Actually," he confessed somewhat reluctantly, "I have never seen any kind of tattoo, except in holographs. My people frown on unnatural body decorations."

Pyke let a half-smile cross his lips as he ran his fingers gently along his side. "The symbols and pictures denote my bloodline and ancestral professions, from agriculture to commerce. The gold star, here, represents my current warrior profession." He narrowed his eyes thoughtfully, then took his bed partner's hand and placed it on his side. "Look at it. Touch it," he commanded softly. Vin-Chay met his eyes for a brief second, then hesitantly began to trace the line of the tattoo. Pyke turned slightly to permit examination of the portion on his back, then moved back to his original reclining position after he decided that his captive had had enough time to peruse if not appreciate the dyed flesh. He smiled slyly again as his captive moved back and slightly away, then he pushed away the bed covers so that his unwilling consort could see the matching, smaller decoration that covered the soft inside of his right thigh. Vin-Chay's lips parted slightly in surprise as the new tattoo was revealed. He found himself morbidly fascinated with not only the basic concept of this 'desecration,' but also of the particular colors and symbols that seemed to mean a great deal to his enemy. He studied the patterns and symbols carefully, but could discern no comprehensible meaning. He studiously avoided eye contact with his captor's circumcised organ; his stomach twisted at the thought of such voluntary mutilation.

Pyke allowed Vin-Chay some time to scrutinize the tattoo. After a few minutes, he reached down for Vin-Chay's hand again, and placed it on his inner thigh, gently moving it across the colored flesh, back and forth rhythmically. He let go of his captive's hand, which ceased its erotic movements for a brief moment before Vin-Chay understood that Pyke wanted him to continue the stroking motions. He knew that Pyke expected him to massage his body, starting with the tattooed areas. Well, that was what he was there for, and had bargained for, so he began long, careful strokes along Pyke's inner thigh, then upward to his chest and sides. He fixed his gaze on a bright red area of the intricate canvas of flesh as he carefully avoided that area next to Pyke's inner thigh, that area which was showing clear signs of impressive arousal and anticipation. Suddenly, Pyke took his hand again and pushed it further down the front of his body.

Vin-Chay knew what Pyke wanted. He felt his composure slip momentarily, then abandoned his momentary hesitation and began to massage Pyke's sexual organ. Pyke breathed in deeply, gasping, as waves of unexpected pleasure started to sweep over him. Vin-Chay brought him as close to climax as he could possibly

go without exploding outward. Pyke shoved Vin-Chay's hand away and turned over on his back, gulping air as he lost his erection. He hadn't wanted to go any further than this on the first night, and he was relieved that he had the fortitude to stop when he did. He doubted that a second night would see that restraint.

Pyke turned his head. He smiled slightly at his confused bedmate and said, "In my own good time, Lieutenant, not yours. Turn over on your other side."

Vin-Chay did as he was told, expecting the worst. Pyke aligned his body with his bedmate's, slipping an arm around Vin-Chay's chest, as though symbolically holding him prisoner in the bed. He casually stretched against his new lover, and tightened his arm around Vin-Chay's body before speaking the last words of the evening. "Go to sleep."

Vin-Chay closed his eyes but was unable to fall asleep until he heard Pyke's even, deep breathing. He was thoroughly confused and agitated at this point with the Ptolemii's behavior, but it only took a few more minutes for him to drift off into a deep, oddly peaceful sleep of his own. The candles burned down around the chamber and plunged the sleeping men into blackness.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Pyke awoke earlier than usual. He was momentarily confused as he noted the indentation next to him in the bed. Then he remembered the previous night, and felt a cold ribbon of fear run through him as he cast about the chamber looking for his overnight guest. He felt a wave of relief as he saw Vin-Chay standing by the noxchamber window, staring out at the beautiful purple and gold sunrise that was radiating into the chamber. At the same time, Vin-Chay turned around and looked at him.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" Pyke murmured softly.

"Yes. Beautiful," Vin-Chay replied just as softly.

"It's been a while since you've seen a sunrise, hasn't it?" Pyke said thoughtfully, thinking that many of the basic things most people took for granted were denied to Vin-Chay and his fellow prisoners.

"A while." Vin-Chay walked back from the window and stood by the bed, waiting for Pyke's next move. He didn't have long to wait.

"It's still early. Get back into bed." Vin-Chay obeyed silently, and he and Pyke spent the next hour engaged in exploratory touching and caressing until he dozed off, only to be awakened a short time later by a fully dressed Pyke, who told him curtly to put his clothes back on.

Vin-Chay finished dressing as he heard Pyke admit Zandran to his office in the next chamber. He left the noxchamber to face the two men, neither of whom had any discernible expression on his face. Zandran performed the usual re-man-aging and took Vin-Chay from the command quarters silently. He returned him to his cell, where Vin-Chay awaited his time for the exercise yard. He gave a momentary thought to foregoing his period of time outdoors, but that was precious and would only provoke comment and speculation. He knew that at this point few of his fellow prisoners outside of Bak-Tii and his command clique would know where he had spent his night. He was more concerned about their reaction to his clean-shaven state, and that would induce an explanation from either him or his commander. Oh well, he thought, general knowledge was inevitable, and under the circumstances he had nothing about which to be ashamed or sensitive. Still, he was. He shrugged off his misgivings as a lector unlocked his cell

and took him to join the morning group of prisoners in the courtyard. By the man's smirk, he already knew that his night's activities were general knowledge amongst the Ptolemii.

The purple-gold sunrise had given way to an unusually bright, sunny morning with a sky full of huge, puffy white clouds. He entered the courtyard amid sudden stares from his fellow Osirans. They were used to surprises from their Ptolemii captors, but seeing one of their own looking so much like one of those captors—save the standard penal garb—was unexpected. Vin-Chay ignored the stares and walked over to Bak-Tii, who had an enigmatic look on his face as he discreetly dismissed the other two men standing with him. Vin-Chay faced him evenly.

"Well, cousin?" Bak-Tii said. "I trust you are not too much the worse for wear after your night with our Ptolemii friend?"

"Would it matter if I were?" Vin-Chay responded coldly, just now starting to be aware of how little regard his commander had for him as a pawn in this delicate game of war. He had started to lose respect for his cousin, but knew he couldn't show his feelings for the sake of their enforced solidarity.

"Not particularly, I expect. I wish you as little harm as possible, but this is war, and we need to win it any way we can. You understood that going into this. You aren't changing your mind, are you?"

"No. I'll go through with this, but again I caution you that nothing you expect will come of it. This man is intelligent and as committed to his cause as we are to ours. Anything he tells me in bed will not be confidential or used to further our plans."

"Then nothing is lost, is it? You may experience some physical discomfort, but even if nothing tactical comes of this, we have still gained, haven't we?" Bak-Tii arched his eyebrow as if to defy Vin-Chay to disagree with him. Both knew that Vin-Chay never would. Vin-Chay made a casual, dismissive gesture with his hand.

"True. Nothing of consequence. I'll let you know what we talk about every day if you desire, but if last night is any indication, this 'discussion' will basically consist of a series of explicit instructions by Commander Pyke to me. Do you wish to know these specifics?" Vin-Chay challenged.

"Not at all. It is, as you say, of no consequence. But you will inform me of any word or gesture that may apply to his running of this fortress or of the war in general. Understood?"

"Understood, Commander. May I go about enjoying my exercise period now?"

"Yes. Dismissed." Bak-Tii walked away from him and Vin-Chay noticed his frequent Strategum partner, Burran, waving him over to a bench where he had set up a fresh boardgame for them to play. Burran grinned at him and rubbed his own heavy beard as Vin-Chay seated himself and made a quick strike on the board against Burran's High-Command piece. Burran smiled at the audacity of the move as he studied his own pieces for a response. As he studied, he kept his eyes on the board but casually queried his friend on the new facial look.

"So, Vin-Chay. You have decided to sport Ptolemii mode today? Any particular reason, or are you simply too tired of scraping the lice off your beard as we are all forced to do in this unclean place?" He deftly moved his Pyramid down three, easily placing Vin-Chay's Basket of Rushes in immediate jeopardy.

"No, Burran, I would prefer the lice," Vin-Chay said quietly as he watched his opponent studying the board but, in truth, really studying him. Burran looked up as Vin-Chay continued. "I don't imagine it will be much of a secret for much longer. The truth is, I have made a bargain with the devil."

"You mean Commander Pyke, or," Burran grinned, "Commander Bak-Tii?"

"As I see it from this point, my friend, there is little difference, save that Pyke seems more honest and open of his desires than my devoted kinsman," Vin-Chay said bitterly. He relented quickly. "I shouldn't have said that. It's not my position to question my commander's tactics. Our lot is to obey."

"To obey, yes, within reason. Forcing you to bed the enemy is not my idea of acceptable military 'tactics' or common decency for a kinsman." Vin-Chay looked up in surprise. "It's not a secret, Vinetio, at least for many of us," Burran said gently, his heart constricting at how young and vulnerable his friend looked. "Bak-Tii isn't the paragon of discretion. There are few secrets here, anyway, in this place. Not to worry. Most who know are outraged at Bak-Tii, not at you. They know what a sacrifice this is for you."

"And the others?" Vin-Chay said as he casually moved his Unicorn two spots left to knock out Burran's Chariot. Burran shrugged.

"They're probably glad it's you and not them. I doubt few would have the strength or courage to do what you are doing. I know I wouldn't be able to do it."

Vin-Chay stared past his friend for a long moment before speaking softly and hesitantly. He couldn't imagine being able to confide this to anyone else.

"What I'm afraid of, Burran, is that I'll find it too easy to go through with this. Last night, well, last night was not as hard as I'd thought it would be. As it happens, he didn't go—he didn't—there was no full completion of the act. Just—touching. He was almost considerate." Vin-Chay paused. "He *was* considerate. It confused me. And—"

“Yes?” Burran prompted gently.

“I found myself not hating it. And hating it because of that.” Vin-Chay exhaled deeply and shook his head. “This doesn’t bode well if my duty is to approach this man methodically and unemotionally and do what is expected of me.”

“You are doing more than what should ever be expected of you! Never doubt your courage or your commitment or your strength. I don’t. Neither would your father. He would be proud of you.” Burran knew that this was what Vin-Chay needed to hear, and what was true anyway. He silently cursed both Bak-Tii and Pyke and hoped that he would someday have the opportunity to pay them back for their treatment of this special young man. He reached over and lightly patted Vin-Chay’s hand, then turned back to the boardgame and made his next move, putting Vin-Chay’s Trojhorse piece in dire jeopardy. The two men ignored the occasional stares they received from their people and the Ptolemii guards as they enjoyed a long, satisfying game of Strategum and some intimate, affectionate talk. Vin-Chay won the game, as he usually did, and by that time the lectors were rounding up their prisoners to return them to their cells.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Pyke reset the daily password and turned off his correlator. He had received verification back from his superior on Ptolem, Supreme Commander Hitii, that the High Command had no issues with Pyke's unexpected intimate activity with one of his Osiran prisoners. Pyke had sent the information of his expected liaison more than a week in advance, anticipating Vin-Chay's acceptance of his proposal. Hitii had ended his missive with an irreverent "Enjoy yourself!" Pyke shook his head at his old mentor's cavalier attitude towards the situation, but he was at least relieved that the circumstance was a matter of record and approved by his superiors. Actually, Pyke thought, Hitii and his associates at the Miliplex were most likely pleased that one of their own was administering an exceptionally intimate form of 'punishment' against not only one of their enemies, but also one from the Nine Kindreds of Traitors (as the Ptolemii High Command so deemed the Osiran ruling class).

He pushed his chair away from his desk and stored a few chips and handwritten notes that were lying in plain sight. Safer not to leave anything to chance for his 'guest' to find and perhaps use against him. Pyke smiled. He was definitely enjoying the mind games that he and Vin-Chay had started to play the night before, and would no doubt play right up until he had to leave this fortress for home. He frowned at the thought. He had been looking forward to home for so long, and now, when it was likely that he would be summoned back there within a month or two, he found himself reluctant to leave. He knew the reason, and it worried him.

Pyke had been physically attracted to his young captive ever since he had first laid eyes on him, but he had then dismissed that initial and surprising impression as a pointless hormonal one. He had been too long without 'companionship,' and that no doubt played a great part in his unexpected reaction despite the fact that he had exclusively bedded women in his adult life. However, as he continued to experience verbal and intellectual contact with the Osiran, his physical impressions had been enhanced by an intellectual and emotional stimulation that had been missing from his life for many years. That, plus what had transpired last night, had significantly complicated something that should never have reached

this level of complexity. He had no idea how it would end, but the likely scenario was for him to depart for Ptolem, and for Vin-Chay to remain for God knew how long here on Canaan as a prisoner-of-war. It could be years. Many years.

Zandran signaled his presence, and Pyke admitted him and Vin-Chay into his office. Wordlessly, Zandran removed Vin-Chay's manacles and left the chamber. Pyke gestured towards the noxchamber, and as Vin-Chay walked towards the door admonished, "Remember to shave again. Every time you're here." Vin-Chay nodded and went into the sanichamber.

Vin-Chay stripped quickly, and performed the facial ministrations as required. He used the commode, and took a long shower, luxuriating in the stream of hot water and steam that relaxed his muscles and helped to prepare him for the evening's 'work.' He donned the robe and entered Pyke's noxchamber.

Pyke was sitting at a small table near the huge stone fireplace. Pyke had started a fire on the hearth. Vin-Chay smelled the burning wood and watched mesmerized as the flames licked upwards and crackled and made dancing patterns against the chamber's walls. Pyke was setting up a game of Strategum on the table, and as Vin-Chay entered the chamber he had placed the last piece on the board. He motioned for the Osiran to sit opposite him. Vin-Chay seated himself, and Pyke made the first move, then took a long draught of his spirits. Vin-Chay took a long time to contemplate his opponent's move, which was an unusual one, and not generally used until the game was well into play. He believed that he could counteract the move with a standard one of his own, and did so. Pyke immediately moved another of his pieces and said, "Triumph," the typical verbal response to one's unequivocal victory.

Vin-Chay stared at the board and tried to figure out how the Ptolemii had accomplished his victory so quickly. As though he had read Vin-Chay's thoughts, Pyke said, "You are too quick to employ standard methods of tactical advantage. Too predictable. You need to open your mind to new strategies and concepts, and use them without fear of defeat. Or the defeat will come. Shall we try again?"

Vin-Chay nodded, and they began a second game, and then a third and fourth. Vin-Chay lost all but the last game, but he found himself not minding at all because he was occupied admiring and evaluating Pyke's unusual and successful tactics. By the fourth game he had started to employ the same types of moves, and his hesitant efforts paid off. He felt exhilarated when he was the one who was able to say "Triumph" at the game's conclusion.

Vin-Chay noted with surprise that the games had occupied several hours of their time. After the last game, however, Pyke stood up and stretched, and nodded towards the bed. Vin-Chay felt a tightening in his stomach again, but obeyed

the gesture and slid between the covers as Pyke stoked the fire before sliding into bed on his own side.

As they had done the night before, Pyke and Vin-Chay faced each other, Pyke on one elbow as he studied his reluctant consort's face. And as the night before, he started their physical communion with a deep, very intimate kiss to which, oddly enough, he found his Osiran captive responding, ever so slightly. *He's curious about this whole thing*, Pyke thought. *I need to be careful here if I'm going to be the first teacher for this man*. He frowned mentally at the thought that someday there might be someone else in his place in this man's bed, willingly or not. He didn't relish the thought of sharing Vin-Chay with anyone, and that surprised and disquieted him.

Pyke whispered to Vin-Chay, who balked at the request for a few brief seconds before yielding to it. Then, he started lightly using his mouth and tongue against Pyke's throat, and down his chest and to his belly, where he hesitated before proceeding even further downward.

Pyke groaned and arched his back slightly as the waves of pleasure he had experienced the night before paled in comparison to what he was feeling now. As Vin-Chay performed somewhat awkward but still stimulating oral rituals on Pyke's sexual organ, the commander clenched his hands into fists and fought to keep his verbal reactions to a subtle groan rather than the violent scream that he really wanted to let out. He reached down and grasped Vin-Chay's head and held it tightly to his lower body. When he finally climaxed and let go, he lay back gasping as his bed partner suddenly fled the bed for the sanichamber. Pyke lay in the bed breathing deeply for several moments until Vin-Chay returned, looking tense and pale. He tentatively returned to his position by Pyke's side and said nothing, caught up in his own emotional demons as he listened to Pyke's breathing return to its regular state.

Neither man spoke for several moments. Then Pyke reached over and took Vin-Chay's hand and guided it to his body. Vin-Chay understood, and spent the better part of an hour caressing every part of Pyke's body until the commander gave him a particular look, and Vin-Chay knew that his captor wanted a repeat of the previous oral sex. He complied then, and several hours later after they had slept for a while in between a great deal of physical exploration. By the time he had finished satisfying Pyke for the third time, he fell into a deep but restive sleep that lasted until well after sunrise the next morning.

Zandran noted the dark circles under Vin-Chay's eyes, and the tense, pale demeanor as he took him back to his cell. When the lector came to take him to the courtyard, Vin-Chay declined and remained for the rest of the day locked in

his dark, quiet cell, lying motionless on his pallet. He interrupted this only to kneel and place his outstretched palms upward, as he closed his eyes and uttered a childhood supplication to his God for forgiveness and deliverance. So far, the latter request had gone unheeded. He didn't know if the first could ever happen.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Two months had passed since Vin-Chay first entered Pyke's private chambers, and in that time he had experienced the full gamut of physical and emotional sensations that their relationship could generate. He was alternately full of guilt and full of exhilaration, angry, excited, bitter, remorseful, pleased. He had learned a great deal of military history and tactical maneuvering from the Ptolemii commander, who seemed to take as much pleasure from their verbal and boardgame sparring as he did from their sexual intimacy. More, in fact, Vin-Chay seemed to discern. He had thought that sex would be Pyke's primary concern, and it was clearly not.

Pyke explained many things about their common ancestors that Vin-Chay had never fully realized. How they had left their dying planet, Terra, and spent three hundred years traveling to the small planet of Canaan, only to find that its climate and geography would not support a robust rebirth of a new civilization. They had spent five hundred years refining their space travel capabilities before setting off to colonize at least one of the four other major planets in this star system. At the time of year that they had set out, the closest planet to them, Ptolem, was also the closest planet to their sun. When they had landed to discover a less than completely hospitable geography, but still one far more conducive to expanding their populace, they had decided to remain and build their mother civilization there. They were tired of traveling and false starts, and were ready to follow anyone who would lead them with a vision and iron hand.

The original colonists who had fled Terra were a small melting pot of only a few politically key countries and ethnic groups—those who could afford or demand inclusion into the exodus. When they had finally decided to rebuild their full civilization on Ptolem, they patterned it after an amalgamation of a few of the greatest ancient civilizations that Terra had ever known. The ancient Egyptian and Roman dynasties were the canvases on which they drew their new portraits. They colored them in as they saw fit, leaning away from fruitless democracy, and back towards a totalitarian dynasty that would keep its people in check through strict rules and religion and, when necessary, intimidation. Those characteristics held true to this very point in time.

The original colonists on Ptolem had expended their energies on building their planet, not further refining their space travel. So, after several millennia, when they were ready once again to send out new colonies to expand the empire, their ships and technology had progressed little. They were able to travel to the three other planets, Isiin, Sekmet and Osiron, where Vin-Chay's own ancestor had established his Kindred, but the travel was cumbersome and time-consuming. Even now, after Osiron had long been settled, their technology was still not advanced enough to prevent the necessity of months of travel to reach another planet. Or to conduct a war. And like the Ptolemii they now disdained and repudiated, the Osirans, too, indulged in the obliteration of some historical facts and the creative manipulation of others as they defined a cultural archive that would suit their political and social agendas.

Pyke had filled in many of the little details that Vin-Chay had not known, because of the slant of his own culture's historical references. There were few histories back before the colonization of Osiron, the elders having deemed the prehistory of Ptolem, Canaan and Terra to be merely a footnote that should not divert their people from moving only forward, without being captured and held back by the past. In that way, Osiron was no different than its mother civilization in its attempts to mold history and the future to its own special needs and viewpoints.

Although Pyke generally spoke very passable Osiran when he and Vin-Chay conversed, he made deliberate efforts to teach his captive his birth language, and his own geographical dialect. Vin-Chay often grew frustrated at his attempts because the language of Ptolem was complex and full of grammatical exceptions rather than rules. The syntax and inflections sounded guttural and disoriented. From the brief written words of the language that Pyke had shown him to supplement his verbal education, Vin-Chay thought it would be impossible to ever learn the language. Not that there was a reason to, since many of the Ptolemii at the prison spoke enough Osiran to make themselves understood, and their captives saw no reason to dignify their captors by trying to speak to them in their own language.

Vin-Chay thought this attitude narrow-minded and ultimately self-defeating: knowing one's enemy was the only way to defeat him. Believing that Pyke must also know this, he wondered why the commander bothered to take the time to teach him things that could only be detrimental to Pyke's own world. He realized that Pyke believed he would never be able to make use of them, as a captive for an indeterminate length of time. Pyke was probably teaching Vin-Chay these things

only to amuse himself, and perhaps psychologically torment the young man. That didn't seem to be his intent, though.

Vin-Chay reported dutifully to Bak-Tii each day, but there was nothing of consequence to report. He abstained from informing his commander of the sexual details or the mind games, since they were of consequence only to him. He was not about to tell Bak-Tii the details of the seventh night that he had spent with Pyke, when their physical relationship was fully consummated. Pyke had merely touched him and demanded to be touched in turn that first night. The second night, their intimate communion was deepened with Vin-Chay's introduction into oral stimulation. The third through sixth nights saw much of the same touching and sexual arousal, as well as the exciting intellectual games of Strategum and Anagramia, and provocative conversations. Vin-Chay thought it odd and unnecessary for Pyke to take his time indoctrinating his captive consort with what actually seemed to be consideration and care. He had anticipated a probable brutal rape against his vulnerable body that first night, and was surprised at the outcome. Relieved, but surprised.

Those emotions changed to confusion as the nights went by, and Pyke maintained his careful initiation procedures. By that seventh night, Vin-Chay was feeling almost comfortable with his place in Pyke's bed, and he was as ready as he would ever be for the ultimate expression of their odd bargain and relationship. His body was warm and relaxed with two goblets of annise, as well as with Pyke's unexpected, gentle stroking and kissing. They were in bed for over an hour when Pyke gently but firmly moved Vin-Chay onto his stomach, and Vin-Chay truly became the commander's intimate 'property' scant moments later. He was not about to tell Bak-Tii how he had felt as Pyke mounted him, nor of the steps that Pyke had taken to make it as easy and painless as possible. He was not about to tell him of how confused he had felt the next day, although Burran had certainly read it on his face.

The only thing that Vin-Chay had accidentally overheard between Pyke and TutMose one morning shortly before he had finished dressing was that there was still a lull in the war. The Osirans had fallen back to their planet and moons to regroup after several key defeats, one of which had been the *Remus*. This accounted for Pyke's recall to Ptolem and his four-month diversion to Canaan, and the leisurely way in which Pyke had treated his non-battle assignment. Things did not seem to be going well for Osiron, and Vin-Chay believed that his stay of nearly a year in this hellhole could well be extended for many more such years if the war did not conclude. He pushed these thoughts from his mind. He

made a subjective decision and decided not to inform Bak-Tii or the others. His people needed no further disheartening.

Vin-Chay's overnight stays in Pyke's chambers had become nearly daily. In fact, it was unusual for Pyke not to send for him. Vin-Chay didn't regret the lessened time in his tiny cell; it was a relief to leave it for any reason, for any length of time. He still felt guilty over his minor pleasures, such as the daily hot showers and, oddly, the now pleasant feel of his beardless face. He occasionally accepted Pyke's proffered spirits, but nothing else other than the spirited discussions and games they played by fire and candle light. Pyke tried to get Vin-Chay to sample culinary delicacies brought in on supply ships, but his Osiran captive steadfastly refused to even attempt a single morsel. Well, save a small piece of a very sweet and delectable confectionery that Pyke had literally shoved into his mouth.

Vin-Chay had come to respect Pyke as an extremely innately intelligent and well-educated man who had an obvious passion for history, particularly military history. He knew of many battles fought on their seed planet, Terra, and Vin-Chay would listen for hours, propped up on one elbow on the bed, fascinated by the history he had never known. He was still very cautious in his verbal dealings with Pyke, but he often lost the inner struggle to remain silent when he just had to know this or that about a great general or battle or civilization. He absorbed the knowledge eagerly, and when he was alone in his cell, or not otherwise distracted by his comrades during their outdoor periods together, he spent a great deal of time analyzing his new insights into science, war, philosophy and politics. He played alternate scenarios over and over in his mind as he sought to keep his mental faculties sharp and ready for whatever the future might bring. He was getting stronger by the day.

Pyke seemed to sense his enforced companion's desire for facts and theory, and he enjoyed providing them. Their edgy verbal sparring often gave way to unexpectedly intimate conversations on Pyke's interests and ideas. Vin-Chay, however, rarely gave back anything personal or familial, and certainly never broached areas relating to his Osiran fleet or its officers. He would tense whenever Pyke mentioned his father, and the older man learned to draw back from this topic to keep their relationship less stressful. However, he willingly, and guiltily, participated in the conversations Pyke would initiate on a seemingly random variety of subjects. One night, Pyke might insist on his opinion on classical literature; on another, the mythology of their ancient gods and goddesses. History, though, was their most common subject of discussion or, often as not, spirited argument. Both secretly relished the banter; neither would ever admit to it.

Their games of Strategum occurred nightly, preceding and often replacing their intimate physical relationship. Vin-Chay had been right when he assumed that sex was secondary to Pyke. The Ptolemii commander was interested more in companionship than exploring consensual or enforced sexuality, and this was just fine with his Osiran captive. Vin-Chay was more confused than ever, because this man was anything but the sadistic monster he had first assumed four months ago, and was anything but the common Ptolemii warrior who was arrogant, condescending and superior towards his colonial opponents. Pyke was strong and decisive, and arrogant in his own way, but he was also compassionate and fair. Vin-Chay wondered how long that would last, and what would happen to his people when Pyke was called back to his world.

Since their initial liaison, Pyke had also made changes in addition to the extra exercise time and food. He had provided better living conditions for his own men, which went a long way towards mitigating their attitudes towards their prisoners. All residents of Canaan were now well-fed, well-clothed, and treated better mentally and physically. He had done little for himself other than to keep his command quarters clean and fairly stark, but he had had a number of correlator and hard-copy volumes of history, literature and philosophy sent in on an early supply ship. When he had free time, and was not in Vin-Chay's presence, he comforted his psyche with favorite readings. Pyke wished that Vin-Chay could read Ptolemii so that he could enjoy the volumes as well, but the young man was having a hard enough time learning the verbal nuances of his language without attempting to learn the odd runes that characterized the Ptolemii written word. Besides, it was probably not appropriate that Pyke attempt to teach an enemy his language. Not that much of his behavior of late had been appropriate. It preyed on his mind daily.

Vin-Chay's fellow captives generally shied away from him, most not knowing how to approach someone who was involved in such a peculiar situation. Burran was the most obvious exception to this, since he had known Vin-Chay since childhood, having served in peacetime under his father, Chay Shayne. It was an unspoken fact that he had transferred to the *Remus* upon Vin-Chay's investiture not only to serve as best he could in the war, but also to keep an eye on the young princeling and do whatever he could to protect and support him. A lot of good that had done, he often mused ruefully.

Vin-Chay's other close compatriots, such as Lieutenants Cassian and Jor-Rue, also supported him and did their best to keep his spirits up. They were good friends, and Vin-Chay longed for the day when they would all walk out of this ill-conceived place together, free men.

Vin-Chay avoided Bak-Tii and his command clique whenever he could. He realized that other than their incarceration, he had very little in common with them save a common desire to defeat the Ptolemii and ensure the survival and prosperity of Osiron. Their personal hopes, dreams and moral and ethical considerations were far apart.

Bak-Tii, likewise, never sought out his subordinate kinsman unless he required clarification on something Pyke might have done or said. He was often frustrated by Vin-Chay's inability to explain something away, since he assumed that being an 'intimate' of the commander gave him special insight. Bak-Tii's other reason for the distance was his deeply buried guilt at propelling Vin-Chay into his unholy alliance with Pyke. But that was something he could never impart to the young man, for it would have made him seem uncertain and weak, something he could never be under these circumstances. He wanted out of Canaan so badly that it occupied his every waking moment. At the same time he dreaded returning to Osiron and facing Chay Shayne, and explaining why he had sent his favorite son into the Ptolemii's bed. Death would almost be preferable. Almost.

The two most bewildered persons in the whole scenario were Pyke's sub-commanders, TutMose and Zandran. They had served reverently with Pyke for years, watching him never miss a step in battle nor in his political and personal lives. This headlong foray into what they considered potential disaster was totally out of character. True, he could not have chosen a better consort under the circumstances, for they had arrived independently of one another at a decent respect for their princeling captive. And, true, this was not frowned upon by the Ptolemii High Command, but this diversion into long-dormant emotional territory for their commander was dangerous, and they feared for him. Both men had purposefully reviewed the prisoner's records and were more than just a little disquieted when they realized who he was. They never expressed their concern, but simply carried out Pyke's orders as they always had, alternating at night bringing the captive to command quarters. Vin-Chay never spoke to them nor evinced any fear or shame. He kept his bearing and demeanor steady and honorable and unemotional. He was well bred, they thought, and they wondered what would have occurred if he and Pyke had met under peaceful, different conditions. They both knew that Pyke would have still chosen Vin-Chay; they knew the Osiran would never have chosen Pyke.

It was TutMose's turn to escort the prisoner to command quarters. He went to Vin-Chay's cell and slid open the small window on the door to peer in. Pyke had implemented lighting in the cells, which had previously been nearly completely dark both day and night. Vin-Chay had his light turned on very low, and

sat cross-legged on his pallet, hands turned towards the ceiling in prayer. TutMose wondered for the first time about Osiran faiths and religious practices. He had always been taught that the Ptolemaic religions were the only true ones, and that the Osirans had perverted their solemnity and spirituality with irreverence and wickedness. Watching the quiet, intent look on the prisoner's face as his lips moved silently in some prayer, TutMose had his first disquieting inkling that perhaps this was no more true than the assertion that all Osirans were cowards and weak. Nothing could be further from the truth with this man, at least.

TutMose rapped on the door, and Vin-Chay slowly opened his eyes. He relaxed his body and dropped his arms to his side, arising in a swift movement without even uncrossing his legs. *He moves like a cat*, TutMose thought. He slid the door open and motioned Vin-Chay out. Pyke had told him to not manacle their captive's hands this time. The request seemed odd, but by then, TutMose was used to his commander's newly developed quirks. Vin-Chay seemed surprised, though, as the usual ritual was abandoned, but he quickly recovered and moved in front of TutMose towards the command quarters.

TutMose left Vin-Chay with Pyke as usual, then joined Zandran in the upper-tier officers' lounge area for a long draught of spiced papyron. Pyke had given him the bottle of thirty-year-old Nubian papyron a year ago, for the celebration of the summer solstice, and he had hoarded it carefully. After being on this planet for four months, the bottle was nearly empty.

Vin-Chay made a move towards Pyke's noxchamber, as he usually did, but Pyke stopped him.

"No, not tonight Vin-Chay," he said pleasantly. He gestured for the Osiran to sit, and Vin-Chay complied. He was neither worried nor concerned, but curious about the deviation from routine. Pyke looked at Vin-Chay intently before continuing. "I know what today is. Do you know what date it is?"

Vin-Chay shook his head. He had certainly been able to count the days since his incarceration had started, but he had long ago lost calendar sense since his capture, interrogation and captivity.

"It is the twenty-third anniversary of your birth, the sixteenth day of Leo, year of Ptolem Fifty-One Sixty-Four." He smiled slightly. "Converted to the official Ptolemaic calendar, of course."

Vin-Chay looked startled. He was immediately flooded with regret that he was away from his family again on his birthanniv. His twenty-second birthanniv had also passed away from home and hearth, but at least had taken place in a gathering of close *Remus* associates who drank to his continued health. This was a stunning contrast to that day, one year ago, shortly before his life had taken a

decidedly nasty turn. He wondered where he would be on his next birthanniv. Or if he would even be alive.

Pyke could almost read his thoughts. In many respects, Vin-Chay's face had become an open tome to him, although he never let on. Pyke removed a small box from his desk drawer and handed it to Vin-Chay, who took it reluctantly. "What is it?" he asked.

"Open it," Pyke replied.

Vin-Chay shook his head and tried to hand the package back to Pyke. "I cannot accept this. We both know that. Please don't force the issue, Commander. We both know the rules of this game, and I cannot be party to bending them any more. Please," he ended quietly.

Pyke nodded slowly, understanding the lieutenant's discomfort. He took the box back and summoned TutMose. Before the sub-commander entered the chamber, Pyke looked at Vin-Chay reflectively and said, "Well, at least I can provide you with a night of uninterrupted sleep and the pleasure of only your own company. Enjoy your birthanniv as best you can, Vin-Chay. I will not bother you tomorrow night, either. And you have no choice but to accept both of those 'gifts.'"

TutMose simply gave up trying to understand all of this as he escorted Vin-Chay back to the cell he had vacated barely a half hour before. He needed more papyron. Fast.

Vin-Chay resumed his prayer position and emptied his mind of all thoughts, all emotions. He started to repeat the standard, repetitious devotional that he had learned as a child by his parents' side at monthly services at their temple. The door opened and broke his concentration. He stood up to see Zandran meet his eyes coolly and toss two small packages into the cell at his feet. Zandran closed the door and Vin-Chay could hear the receding footsteps.

He stared at the packages for a few long moments, then opened them. The first contained a half-kilogram of that special confectionery that Pyke had forced him to sample. He felt his mouth water. The second contained an old-style hard-bound volume of philosophy written, surprisingly, in Osiran. How Pyke had ever laid his hands on it was a mystery. He put the tome down, then picked it back up. The tome's presence here was an accomplished fact that he couldn't change. He turned up the light to its highest luminosity, and eagerly devoured the confectionery and the volume from start to finish without putting either down. It was nearly dawn before he finished the beautiful writings, and he turned off the light and fell asleep with the tome still grasped firmly in his hands. His sleep was peaceful, and for the first time in many months, he dreamed without nightmares.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“So, are you ready to come home, Pyralis? Your ship is on the way to carry you home to Thebes!” Hitii’s craggy, amused face filled the holograph screen as Pyke reviewed this latest communication from his Supreme Commander. The words were unexpected, having followed a rambling, detailed message regarding administrative issues and war-related news. Pyke was startled, and immediately paid more attention to the recorded message as Hitii went on.

“I imagine you are! Despite your enjoyable carnal activities, it must be a *very* tedious place and far from what you’re used to in either your ship or home. Anyway, with this so-called semi-truce in effect, it is clear that we’re beating back the traitors handily. It’s time for you to stop lounging about and return home to help us derive some final strategy for ending this conflict once and for all. Oh yes—you’ll be returning as a Second-Level High Commander—congratulations! Well deserved, young man, *well* deserved!

“So, the Pharon has issued orders for all command personnel engaged in confining our Osiran friends at Canaan and other locations to return to Ptolem with their warriors. This order is to be complied with immediately. The prisoners will not be returning with you: they are to be executed. I look forward to seeing you and playing a few of our favorite boardgames over some very old spirits. Signing off.” The holographic image froze on the screen as the message ended.

Pyke was stunned. Hitii couldn’t have possibly meant what he said about executing the prisoners. Yet, even as he thought this he realized that it was something the Pharon would very likely have ordered at this point, considering how capriciously he had instituted slavery on their planet and stripped all rights from the resident Osirans virtually overnight. These prisoners meant nothing to him, and their deaths would have no more significance to him than their lives did.

He didn’t know if he could bring himself to carry out these orders. He had always harbored doubts about many of the tactics and directives that had come down during the war, but he was always able to carry out his orders because they had never digressed so sharply from his own moral beliefs. This random slaughter would be another matter. And there was a personal slant to it as well.

He wasn't sure just how long he sat at his desk and stared at the frozen holographic image of his superior, but he finally roused himself and recorded an urgent response and suggested an alternative, coding it for Hitii's eyes only. He issued the response and knew that if it reached Ptolem in the usual time, and Hitii responded to it right away, then he could look forward to a message back within ten days. Ten days. He would have to start making departure preparations covertly, without letting the prisoners know what was going on, or there could be chaos and immeasurable problems. If there was another option, or not, he wanted to have it in place before letting the general populace know anything. He would confine his confidences to TutMose and Zandran, of course, but that was all.

Pyke was more concerned about keeping this secret from Vin-Chay. If he treated the man any differently, Vin-Chay would pick up on it right away—he was extremely intuitive. Until this was resolved, Pyke would have to act towards his captive consort as he usually did to allay any suspicions on Vin-Chay's or anyone else's part.

He paced around his quarters for the rest of the day, trying, generally unsuccessfully, to refrain from snapping at anyone who entered his quarters for official reasons. He forewent his usual excursion to the exercise yard, and then realized that he would not be able to hide his disquiet from Vin-Chay and informed Zandran to not bring the lieutenant to his quarters that night. Then he changed his mind and summoned Zandran again, then changed his mind yet again and canceled the liaison. Zandran never uttered a word of frustration or query, but he was clearly concerned at his commander's state of mind. Pyke picked up on this during his last summoning, and asked Zandran to bring TutMose to his quarters. He had something to tell them.

Pyke faced his two sub-commanders and laid the situation out squarely.

"We have been ordered to close down and evacuate this fortress immediately. There will be a ship coming for us within two weeks or so, and we will be returning to Ptolem."

TutMose's and Zandran's wide grins faded at Pyke's next words.

"Supreme Commander Hitii has relayed as well the Pharon's orders to execute our Osiran prisoners immediately." Pyke's tight jaw and cold tone complemented the icy shivers that the horrific order had sent down their spines. Zandran shook his head vigorously.

"That can't be true, Commander! There's no reason to take that kind of final action against these men. They are dedicated warriors and are still a part of our civilization despite—"

"Despite what, Zandran? Despite their treason? Our history before and after interstellar colonization is full of executions for treason. Should this be any different?" Pyke said harshly.

"You don't really feel that way, do you Commander?" TutMose asked anxiously. "I've known you for too long to believe that you support this madness."

Pyke maintained eye contact with TutMose for a moment, then shifted his gaze to Zandran. His face softened as he replied. "Of course not. I needed to see your reactions to this edict, even though I knew what they would be. We may have no choice but to follow orders as we always have unless an alternative presents itself."

"Alternative?" asked TutMose.

"I have sent an urgent request to Hitii to consider and hopefully persuade the Pharon and High Command to consider an unpleasant option. Unpleasant, but one which will at least allow these men to live."

"Slavery," said Zandran quietly.

Pyke nodded. "In life there is at least hope, although I doubt that any of our Osiran captives will see it that way. I probably wouldn't. With any luck, I should receive an answer to my request within ten days."

"And if you don't?" said Zandran.

"I don't want to think about that. I'll know what to do only when the time comes to make the decision. Until then, please don't discuss this with anyone, and try to act as usual so that someone doesn't pick up on anything. The last thing I want is rumors and panic, and any problems with maintaining order."

"What about your Osiran lieutenant?" Zandran asked casually.

"Bring him to me tonight as you normally would. I don't want him or his comrades to start thinking anything's amiss if I break my normal patterns. Dismissed."

Zandran and TutMose saluted and left Pyke alone in his office. He was nervous and agitated for the remainder of the daylight time, which had quickly transformed into soft evening colors as the rain stopped and the sun set. Zandran and Vin-Chay appeared at his door at the regular time. The remainder of the evening went as it usually did, except that Vin-Chay noted that there was more tenderness and consideration in their physical coupling than was typical. He thought nothing of it; Pyke was probably simply in a more contemplative and affectionate mood. He fell asleep after a few hours, unaware of Pyke's steady gaze on him as he slept.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Bak-Tii knew that something was wrong when his lector failed to show up at the usual time to take him to morning exercise with his group. He listened closely to the sounds coming from outside his cell, and he heard nothing to suggest that anyone else was being taken out, either. He waited and listened, and counted the minutes carefully in his head, until an hour past the usual time. A lector slid his cell door open and motioned him out. Bak-Tii left the cell tentatively, turning his head either way to see if anyone else was being removed. He noticed that at least a dozen men on his tier were also outside of their cells, and were having their wrists tied behind their backs by pairs of heavily armed guards. He felt a cold chill as the lector jerked his hands behind his back and tied them tightly with a thin but unbreakable cord that cut into his wrists. He noticed that several men were manacled with the titanium wrist binders, while the others were bound as he was. An unbidden thought entered his mind: *They don't have enough manacles for all of us.* He knew then that all of his fellow prisoners were going to be bound and removed from their cells as he was. *But for what?* He felt his throat constrict involuntarily, and his mouth went dry.

The lector pushed him none too gently towards the stairs leading to the bottom tier. He found himself in a line of prisoners being herded down the stairs and through the common corridor to the door that led to the courtyard. There were already at least five score of Osirans waiting in the courtyard, all bound with metal or cord wrist restraints. Vin-Chay was amongst them, and by the look on his face he had no more an idea of what was going on than his Commander did.

It took another hour for all of the prisoners of the Canaan penal fortress to be bound and brought to the courtyard. When all were present, the guards formed them into twelve lines of thirty men and women across. Bak-Tii was in the first line, as were Vin-Chay, Burran, Cassian, and Jor-Rue. Bak-Tii knew each man was fearful or defiant, but his pride swelled as none showed their emotions on their faces. They stood erect and poised, ready to face whatever the new twist in their lives was going to be.

When the men were all assembled, Sub-Commander TutMose walked swiftly out of the courtyard and returned a few minutes later with Commander Pyke.

Pyke strode purposefully to the front of the assembled men and faced them, Tut-Mose and Zandran standing, ever vigilant, at his side. Bak-Tii observed uneasily that Pyke never made the slightest glance towards Vin-Chay. The lieutenant, however, focused his eyes directly on the Ptolemii and watched him intently.

Pyke paused for a moment, then turned to Bak-Tii and locked eyes with him, and spoke firmly and evenly.

"I have received orders from the Ptolem High Command that this compound is to be decommissioned permanently, and that all Ptolemii warriors are to return to Ptolem immediately."

There was an unmistakable murmur of mixed surprise and relief from the Ptolemii warriors, and out of the corner of his eye, Bak-Tii could detect more than a few grins of eased anxiety amongst their captors. He was completely unprepared for what Pyke said next.

"The High Command has also issued orders for the dispersal of the prisoner population. You are each to be given a choice of two options." He paused, and it seemed to Bak-Tii that Pyke was uncomfortable with the subject and didn't want to be saying the words. Bak-Tii's mouth dried again as Pyke went on. "Each of you will choose to either be dispatched to Sekmet to work in the berrillium mines for the duration of his or her life, or choose to be transported back to Ptolem and," he hesitated, "sold into lifelong bondage. No other options."

A number of the poised prisoners lost some composure and gasped at his words, gaping at the commander and then at each other. Even Pyke's warriors expressed surprise in their sounds and movements. Vin-Chay heard a roaring in his ears and for a brief moment he felt unfocused and confused, until this fleeting response gave way to a cold hatred that entirely consumed his body and mind. He fixed his bitter and implacable stare on Pyke, who ignored his Osiran captive and looked around at the men standing before him. They had all recouped and regained their composure. Few showed anything but contempt and defiance for him and for his empire. He didn't blame them. They had every right to feel this way. *Damn Hitii for not trying hard enough to keep Ptolemii honor*, he thought bitterly. *No more than I have in too many ways.*

Pyke paced back and forth in front of the captives for a moment, before addressing Bak-Tii directly. "You and your warriors will be taken back to your cells for two hours. In that time there will be no communication, no discussion. This is an individual choice for each man and woman. After that time, you will all be brought back out here and you will give me your answers. Our ships are in orbit as we speak, and within the remains of this day we will all be on board one or the other of them." He looked around at the men and raised his voice to

address them all. "You've heard what I've just told your commander. This is not much of a choice, but it is *your* choice, and each of you needs to think very carefully about the consequences of that choice. You have no doubt heard the stories about the berrillium mines: they are all true. The chance for survival there for six months let alone years is minimal at best. It is very likely that if you choose to be sent there, you will die there. Slavery may be an untenable concept for you upon first reflection, to put it mildly, but your chance of survival, and hence someday seeing your home planet and loved ones again, is significantly better should you choose this option. Think carefully, and do what is best for *you* and not necessarily for your commander and your people. TutMose."

"Sir?"

"Remand these people to their cells and re-assemble them in exactly two hours."

"Yes, Sir." TutMose nodded to the chief lectors and they began to herd the bound prisoners out of the courtyard. Pyke ignored the burning glare that Vin-Chay was throwing his way. He left the courtyard for the quiet solitude of his office, where he remained for the next two hours. He sat rigidly in his chair, ignoring the various sounds coming from outside his office and from the courtyard where his men quietly murmured about the latest unexpected turn of events. His only solace was that Hitii and his superiors had seen the benefit of keeping these men and women alive for use as beasts of burden by the empire rather than killing them and losing the windfall of manpower for the mines and the slaveowners back home. Pyke just barely managed to make it to his sanichamber to empty his stomach contents into the commode. He washed his face and stared at his pale reflection.

Vin-Chay was deposited back in his cell with his hands still tightly bound, as were all of his comrades. The cords were chafing his wrists raw as he moved them back and forth, trying uselessly to unbind himself. It was pointless, but he kept trying, concentrating and trying to drive Pyke's words out of his mind. There was nothing to waste time reflecting on: any Osiran worth his blood and heritage would choose the mines over being enthralled to subservience as the property of a Ptolemii master. He twisted his wrists back and forth, back and forth, until he felt slick blood lubricating his hands. He stared in the darkness and wondered what it would feel like to twist Pyke's throat between his hands.

The two hours passed for some like days and for others like a brief second. The Osirans were grouped outside in two hours to the minute from Pyke's directive to TutMose. The Ptolemii commander resumed his position in front of the assemblage and tried to read any of their faces. Other than Vin-Chay's, he was

unable to. He cocked his head slightly and said, "Those who choose to return with us to Ptolem will move to the right and gather next to Sub-Commander Zandran. Those who choose to be transported to Sekmet, remain where you are."

For several long minutes, none of the Osiran prisoners moved. Then, to the jeers and looks of disgust from those who remained in line, a dozen men and five women averted their eyes from their comrades and moved to the right of the group to signal their choice. Bak-Tii, Vin-Chay, Burran, Cassian and Jor-Rue, as well as the remaining seventeen score captives, remained standing rigidly and facing forward. Pyke waited a few moments after the defectors had gathered near Zandran before he spoke again. "This is your final chance to change your minds. I urge you to reconsider." No one else moved.

Pyke walked slowly and deliberately to stand directly in front of Vin-Chay. He met his angry eyes and said very quietly and slowly, "You have made the wrong choice. Change your mind."

"No," Vin-Chay stated flatly, maintaining eye contact. "Not a chance," he said softly.

Pyke stared hard at him for a moment, then turned away and signaled TutMose to come over. When the sub-commander stood next to Pyke, awaiting his next order, Pyke gestured towards Vin-Chay and said to TutMose, "Take him and put him with the others."

"No!" Bak-Tii shouted. "You gave him a choice and he made it! Keep to your word!"

"He made the wrong choice," Pyke said evenly, "as you all did. I cannot change that for all of you, but I have made a decision of my own to change that decision for him. And I never gave my word that I would respect your decisions. I will, however, for all but your kinsman. TutMose, take him."

TutMose motioned to the nearest lector, and they seized a furious Vin-Chay by his bound arms and forced him away from the rest of the group as he resisted, twisting angrily and trying to pull back. As the two men pulled him near where Pyke was standing, Vin-Chay looked directly at him and uttered a vulgar Ptolemii curse that he had learned during his captivity, then spat at Pyke, missing him by a good margin as he continued to struggle against TutMose and the other guard. TutMose cursed at the shocking disrespect that the Osiran had shown his commander, and he twisted Vin-Chay's arm harshly. Pyke held up a hand and TutMose stopped dragging his prisoner as Pyke moved directly in front of Vin-Chay, then delivered a stunning blow to his captive's left cheek, followed immediately by a backhand blow to the other side of his face.

The painful blows momentarily disoriented Vin-Chay, and he felt a slight trickle of blood from his nose and a cut in his lip. He was vaguely aware of the commotion in the background as the guards had to use their weapons to threaten several Osirans who took very verbal exception to Pyke's treatment of their comrade. The lectors pushed and hit several of the other prisoners as they restored order under Pyke's watchful eye. When the prisoners were again in order, Pyke motioned TutMose to continue removing Vin-Chay to the group of warriors who had chosen to return to Ptolem. None of them would look their reluctant comrade in the eye, and TutMose shoved him roughly into the group, nearly causing him to lose his balance and fall. TutMose took an odd pleasure in seeing him just barely able to maintain his balance.

Pyke turned back to the remaining prisoners and started to instruct his guards to move the new berrillium miners to the location outside of the fortress where they would be transported to the ship that would take them to Sekmet. Before he was able to speak, however, he was interrupted by one of the captives.

"Wait, Commander! I've changed my mind. I will go to Ptolem," Burran said. He ignored the savage glance that Bak-Tii threw at him. Bak-Tii's attention was interrupted by two of his other officers.

"And I," said Cassian.

"I will go, too," said Jor-Rue.

Pyke looked at the three men and then jerked his head towards the Ptolem group. The three men ignored the looks of surprise from their fellow prisoners and walked over to the group where Vin-Chay stood, his cheeks red from Pyke's blows and a thin line of blood staining his angry visage. He understood why they had chosen to go with him, but he wished for their sakes that they had not. There was no chance that they wouldn't be separated once they arrived at the slave planet to which they were bound. He took great pride in their friendship.

Pyke issued his final orders for boarding the two groups on their respective ships, then turned to prepare himself for the departure. As he turned, he was called back by Bak-Tii.

"Commander," Bak-Tii said. Pyke turned to face him. Bak-Tii looked at him and said, "There will be payment for this outrage. From you. From your Pharon. From your people. My people will not stop their quest for freedom and retribution until the last one of us takes a breath. We will exact punishment."

Pyke nodded and turned away, trying without success to suppress the sight of Bak-Tii's bold eyes and even bolder words as he passed through the doors of the fortress. He packed his final personal items and correlator and sent for a lector to take them to the shuttle pad. He looked around his quarters of the last five

months, then left the place without another thought. He never wanted to return to this dark, evil place, where he had surrendered some of his own priceless honor.

The shuttle *Simbel* took him to his ship. It felt good to be on the *Sovereign* again. He hadn't realized how much he had missed the familiar vessel. The ship's spacious, light corridors and quarters were in sharp contrast to the oppressive fortress that he had just abandoned. Even more, he was looking forward to home, for however long that experience turned out to be. With the lull in hostilities as the two sides licked their respective wounds and regrouped their forces, he might have the opportunity to spend a great deal of time at his long-vacant residence and his Academy office. He hoped, anyway.

After completing a few remaining tasks, Pyke turned control over to Zandran and retired to his quarters to rest. He smiled affectionately as he noticed an open bottle of Nubian papyron and a goblet on his desk. He poured himself a generous draught of spirits and drank it down in one long swallow. He unfastened his tunic and tossed it aside on a chair, then lay down on his bed. He closed his eyes and fell into a deep sleep in less than a minute. He didn't dream.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The Ptolemii separated their Osiran prisoners into several small groups and placed them in small holding cells aboard the *Sovereign*. Pyke had ordered Vin-Chay to be isolated from his comrades, and the young Osiran captive now occupied a small but clean and brightly lit cell on one of the lower tiers of the vessel. The guards had been instructed to not unbind any of the prisoners until further orders, so, like the other captives, Vin-Chay's wrists were still bound tightly. He had stopped trying to twist them free, and the blood had dried on his hands. His wrists were raw and sore, and they ached.

His cell had a compact bed bolted to the wall, a small commode, and a sink. There was a titanium goblet on the sink. *Too bad it isn't old-style glass or crystal*, he thought ruefully. He could then at least have tried to break it and use the slivers to cut his cords. He sat down on the bunk and rested his head back against the wall. He was dead tired. He wished he were home in his own quarters in the Chay compound in Etrusca, surrounded by the elegant comfort and his beloved store of music, holographs and books. Home. He pushed the mental pictures away and opened his eyes to survey the chamber again. *No, no way to get out of here unless they let me out*. The 'door' was a series of horizontal bars that slid out from one side of the wall to the other. Less than five centimeters between each intimidating bar. Even if he got out, where would he go on a ship in space filled with nearly three thousand hostile enemies?

His best bet for escape would come when they reached Ptolem and he was on solid ground again, where there were very real possibilities of ships, buildings, technology and other Osirans. Ptolem. Arriving there meant being changed from a princeling, warrior and free and independent man (albeit one recently held captive under supposed articles of war) to chattel. The physical property of another human being, to do with as that person saw fit. There was no hope of being 'purchased' by a decent person, he thought. What decent person would support slavery? He wondered what this person would expect of him. If it were what Pyke had expected of him through their hellish bargain, that man would be disappointed. Vin-Chay would go to his death rather than submit again in bed to another Ptolemii.

He found himself drifting off to sleep as his body gave in to its exhaustion, and he lay down on his side and dozed. The last thing he saw before nodding off was Pyke's pale, almost translucent green eyes staring at him in the Canaan courtyard, challenging him, defying him. And then he slept for eight hours without moving.

He awoke to noises from outside his cell, and when he opened his eyes he saw Zandran standing in front of the bars. A lector inserted the key chip to activate the lock. Zandran stared at him coldly and beckoned him to exit the cell. He pushed himself up off the bunk and stood, then walked out of the cell to stand next to the Ptolemii sub-commander. Zandran grasped his arm harshly and propelled him forward down the same corridor through which he had been brought to the cell. They passed a number of men and women walking through the corridors, all adorned in the crisp, tan or brown uniforms of the Ptolemii contingent; a few were wearing maroon uniforms, and he wondered what that color signified. He received a wide variety of glances from them, from disinterest to curiosity to blatant contempt and hostility. He ignored them all.

Zandran stopped at a verticulator and pushed him inside hard enough to slam him against the far wall. They ascended diagonally to an upper tier and the door slid open. Zandran pulled Vin-Chay out and shoved him roughly down another corridor. They walked a few steps before entering an empty communal sanichamber. Zandran set the occupancy light to 'on' and turned back towards him. He withdrew his ritual stilon from his techbelt. Vin-Chay tensed but remained still. Zandran turned him around and with a single rough slice cut away the cords that bound his wrists. He stepped back.

"Strip," Zandran said flatly. When Vin-Chay failed to comply, he repeated his command slowly and with distinct menace in his voice. "I said strip, princeling. Take off your clothes. Now."

Somehow Vin-Chay knew that whatever bad feelings this man might have for him, Zandran was not the kind to inflict any kind of non-regulation humiliation on him. He knew that he might endure rough handling from the sub-commander, and perhaps a frustrated blow here and there, but that would be the extent of the abuse. He started to remove his boots, then his tunic before he stopped.

"May I use the commode, Sub-Commander?" he asked politely. Zandran nodded tersely and Vin-Chay spent a couple of private minutes attending to his bodily functions before withdrawing back into the sanichamber. Under Zandran's watchful eye, he removed his tunic and loose-fitting trousers and stood

naked, waiting for the next instruction. Zandran extended his arm towards the shower. "Bathe."

Vin-Chay started to enter the shower area, but stopped and turned his head as he heard Zandran's exclaim, "What?!" He realized what had caused the Ptolemii to be taken aback: the scars on his back. He smiled slowly at him, then entered the shower without satisfying Zandran's unspoken question. As he lathered his body and washed away the grime and blood from his face and hands, he saw TutMose enter the sanichamber. He refused to be intimidated by the two men and enjoyed a long, hot shower like that of which he had partaken in Pyke's quarters. He noted that TutMose, too, had seen the scars: his eyes had narrowed and he watched intently as the Osiran bathed.

Vin-Chay stopped the water flow and was momentarily startled when TutMose tossed a towel at him. He started to dry himself off, keenly aware of their eyes on him. He turned his head and said casually, "Why don't you ask? You want to know." Neither man responded. Vin-Chay continued to dry himself slowly, then went on. "You're wondering if your beloved, compassionate commander inflicted those wounds. And when. And how." He paused, not eliciting any response from the men except a hardening of their eyes. He tossed the towel aside and turned towards them. "Now what?"

"Dress," Zandran said. Vin-Chay donned his trousers, then boots and tunic. Zandran took his arm and pulled him towards the sanichamber door, but before they could go through, Zandran stopped him. The Ptolemii grasped his other arm and pulled him close enough so that their faces were only centimeters apart. "Tell me," he demanded harshly. Vin-Chay looked at him for a few long seconds then shrugged. He could have lied, but that might serve him ill in the long run. "It wasn't Pyke. The other guards at Canaan inflicted the wounds on me as well as on many of the other prisoners. A pastime they enjoyed until you and your commander arrived to *civilize* the place."

Zandran released his arm and shoved him out of the door, deliberately slamming him into the wall opposite the sanichamber entrance. He stalked down one leg of the corridor as TutMose and Vin-Chay went down the other. TutMose deposited Vin-Chay back into his cell and left. Vin-Chay noted that someone had been there and placed a bowl of sliced fruit on the bunk. After TutMose left, Vin-Chay sat down and ravaged the fruit. He hadn't realized how hungry he was, though he vaguely remembered that he hadn't eaten for almost a full day. He was almost done with the food when he thought about his fellow prisoners, and wondered if they were being fed as well. He prayed so.

He slept again fitfully, awakening several times, twisting and turning. When he finally awakened, to a very darkened, quiet cell and noiseless corridor, he felt more tired than before he had fallen asleep. He put his hands behind his head and stared contemplatively at the ceiling for hours, unmoving.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Pyke deliberately waited three days before summoning Vin-Chay to his quarters. He was still seething from Vin-Chay's curse and his own unexpectedly brutal physical response, and he thought it necessary to have a cooling off period before they faced one another again. Despite his anger, he admired the young man's spirit and courage, and found himself frustrated at the new impasse that had arisen between them when it seemed that they were starting to glean a mutual if grudging appreciation of one another as men. All that had been destroyed in an instant with Pyke's edict and Vin-Chay's response.

TutMose signaled his presence and Pyke admitted him and their prisoner into his quarters. This time, he gave no instruction to TutMose to unmanacle the captive, preferring to leave the safety restraints on for both their sakes. Vin-Chay's hands were restrained tightly behind him. TutMose saluted and left the chamber.

Pyke observed that Vin-Chay's facial bruising had subsided a good deal. His cut lip was healing and the swelling in his left eye was still a dull purple, but was receding. He noted that the man's wrists were also healing, although they were still very chafed and red from the cords and his attempts at loosening them. He was clean, at least, which Pyke had seen to for all of the prisoners, and, like all of the prisoners, Vin-Chay was being fed well. Pyke doubted that this treatment would mitigate the man's feelings for him one single bit. He motioned towards the chair in front of his desk. "Sit," he said, as he took his own chair.

"I prefer to stand, Commander," Vin-Chay said, remaining motionless.

"As you wish, Lieutenant. Have the last three days of reflection and rest done anything to improve your attitude or outlook towards your situation?"

"Improve, sir? Are you asking if I've seen the error of my ways and should be grateful to accept a life of bondage under your world's tyranny?"

"I'm asking," Pyke said tightly, "if you are smart enough to accept that any life is better than none at all, and at least leaves the chance for hope."

"Hope for what? The Pharon has already decreed that this state of bondage will last a lifetime. Should I hope that I might have the privilege of seeing my family again when they are defeated and sold into slavery as well? Or that in some way I can take pleasure in serving the master race? What 'hope?'"

Pyke sighed heavily. "Sometimes I think you're not as mature as I'd thought you were. If you were as intelligent as you project on a normal basis, you would see the ... opportunities here. You would make the best of a situation that is out of your control and currently unchangeable, and you would adapt. And you would survive."

"I *will* survive, Commander. I won't let you take that away from me, too." His cold, glittering, unfathomable blue eyes punctuated the hard edge to his voice.

"Good. Then you have progressed beyond blind animal rage and regained some of your considerable senses."

"People who are treated like animals usually have that rage, Commander. And at least I have one consolation."

"And that is?" Pyke asked coldly, his hackles rising at the recalcitrance personified in front of him.

"That I will never have to couple with you again unless it is forcible rape, since our bargain is over and the only power you have over me is brute force. Filthy Fealtae!" Vin-Chay's eyes were implacable and radiated an odd passion that Pyke had never seen. He rose slowly from his desk and walked around it to face his captive. He grasped Vin-Chay's jaw hard in his right hand and met his eyes. He spoke slowly and deliberately.

"If I want you, Lieutenant, I'll take you. Any way I want to. And there is nothing you can do about that."

Before he could release Vin-Chay's face and move away, his young captive twisted his head sharply and sank his teeth into the fleshy part of Pyke's hand. Pyke yowled and uttered a filthy curse as he let go a brutal blow that knocked Vin-Chay backward. The startled Osiran crashed to the floor but barely made contact before a set of strong hands dragged him up by the tunic and slammed him face down across the desk.

Vin-Chay struggled to extricate himself but his opponent had the all the advantages. His skin turned clammy when he realized that Pyke was pressing against him from behind with an obvious, unyielding erection. The Ptolemii reached a hand under his captive's immobilized midsection and deftly unfastened his trousers. Vin-Chay panicked wildly at the thought of the impending rape and struggled maniacally, but to no avail. Pyke held him down firmly and thrust his groin against him as he forced Vin-Chay's legs apart with a hard knee. Vin-Chay gagged, and fought back the urge to vomit as he anticipated the violation.

Pyke stopped suddenly, and moved away from his heaving captive. He grabbed Vin-Chay and pulled him up and around, taking a guilty but ultimately pleasurable satisfaction from the wild look of fear in the young man's eyes. He

wrapped his hands around the top of Vin-Chay's tunic and drew him close enough to feel his hot, sour breath. His tone was icy and measured as he spoke slowly and allowed one hand to slowly refasten Vin-Chay's trousers.

"Like I said, Lieutenant: I'll take you any way I want to. Whenever I want to. However I want to. And you won't be able to do a damn thing about it."

Pyke shoved Vin-Chay back against the desk and slammed his injured hand down on the desk indent that brought TutMose back into his quarters. "Remove him," he said harshly. When he was alone, he picked up the tome that he had given Vin-Chay on his birthanniv, and which he had collected before leaving Canaan. He looked at it for a minute, then sent it crashing into a wall as he uttered the same curse with which Vin-Chay had provoked his ire in the fortress courtyard. *Damn him to hell*, he thought angrily as he bandaged the deep laceration.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The remaining weeks between his last meeting with Pyke and the *Sovereign's* arrival in orbit around Ptolem passed quickly and uneventfully for Vin-Chay. He remained isolated from his comrades, which he would not have minded if only Burran, Cassian and Jor-Rue had not been amongst them. He worried about their well-being, but assumed that they would be at least as well treated as he was. That meant they were being fed and allowed to bathe, and hopefully not being physically mistreated. He imagined that they were also being prepped for the heavier gravity of Ptolem through sessions in the gravimod chamber, which he endured twice daily; at least the sessions helped alleviate the boredom and took a bit of the edge off the anticipation of arriving on the enemy planet.

He heard over the ship-wide addressing system that the vessel had assumed orbit. He felt a ripple of fear pass through him as he realized just how close he was to his ultimate and despised fate. At least Pyke had not sent for him again for sexual or any other purposes. With any luck, their last conversation would have been their last contact as well. Vin-Chay couldn't understand why this thought both satisfied him and made him edgy.

The day after the vessel assumed orbit, Zandran came for him. As an armed lector watched them closely, he bound Vin-Chay's healed wrists and ushered him out of the cell impatiently and through the corridors. After a verticulator ride to the lowest landing tier, they arrived at the shuttle that sat waiting to transport him and the other prisoners gathered outside the shuttle door. It was the first time that Vin-Chay had seen of his companions since they had left Canaan, and he was relieved that they looked well. Under the circumstances.

Burran, looking anxious, spotted him and nudged Cassian. They both forced reassuring half-smiles, also relieved that he seemed to be in good physical health as well. Zandran brought him over to stand next to them, and then entered the shuttle to make sure that all was ready to transport the Osirans to the surface of Ptolem. The delay gave Vin-Chay a brief moment to attempt to speak to his friends, but he barely managed a single word when the chief lector frowned menacingly at him and told him to shut up. Cassian had an enigmatic look on his drawn face, then without warning he dove towards Vin-Chay and knocked him

down, climbing on top of him and grabbing him by the front of his tunic as best he could with his own bound hands.

The startled princeling didn't react to the totally unexpected action from his friend, who then snarled at him, "Ptolemii whore! Do you think we'd be in this spot if it weren't for your Ptolemii lover?! Traitor!" he hissed, then leaned as close to Vin-Chay's face as he could and whispered, "Find an Osiran temple. We'll try to link up there." Cassian was summarily pulled off of Vin-Chay by the lectors, and slammed into the side of the shuttle as he received several punishing blows from the guards. The abuse only ceased when Zandran exited the shuttle and yelled at them to stop. They complied immediately and shoved Cassian and the other prisoners into the shuttlecraft. Zandran grabbed Vin-Chay's arm and pulled him off the shuttlebay floor, and forced him to follow his people into the craft.

Once inside, Vin-Chay, like the others, was pushed to the floor to sit during the two-hour trip to the planet's surface. No one was allowed to speak, but he caught Cassian's eyes and gave the faintest of nods in understanding.

The shuttlecraft landed at the main bay at the rear of the Ptolem Miliplex. When the craft was secured the door hissed open, and the Osirans were hit with a wave of heat unlike any they had ever experienced. It was like being close to a raging fire. They were trooped out in a single line, and they all squinted against the bright sunlight that was streaming into the wide opening of the ground bay. A few of them looked around curiously, trying to see if there was a fire, until they realized that the heat was simply the temperature of the daylight on this Sister closest to the sun.

Their Ptolemii guards took them over to a quartet of men who appeared to be waiting for them. Zandran stiffly handed one of the men a small correlator chip. The man asked, "All of the information on them is in here?" Zandran grunted in the affirmative, seemingly unwilling to deal with the man in any more basic terms than he had to. The man slipped the chip into his portable hand correlator and scanned some of the information. He looked up occasionally at the group of prisoners, then snapped the correlator off and motioned to one of his companions, who went to the outside of the bay and returned with three armed men in some kind of non-military uniforms.

Zandran gave Vin-Chay a brief neutral look before he turned on his heel and walked away from the men, followed by his lectors. The man who had taken the chip motioned to the armed men, who started the line of prisoners moving out into the oppressive heat towards a ground transport. By the time they had reached the cargocraft, less than thirty meters away, they were all heavily perspir-

ing and most were starting to breathe raspily. The large cargocraft was quickly filled with the prisoners and their newest captors, and as soon as the rear portal was secure the vehicle ascended to two meters over the land and moved off in a southerly direction.

The cargocraft traveled for less than a half hour when it stopped slowly and descended to twenty centimeters off the ground. The armed escorts moved their prisoners out of the craft. Vin-Chay noted that they were in an industrial sector of some sort. There were a dozen large, sand-colored buildings of one or two tiers, clustered in a triangular pattern. There were strange runic symbols above the doors of the buildings, which had few windows and arch-shaped entryways. The roads were unsurfaced by any natural or made-made element, but seemed rather to be hard, packed earth that threw up occasional light clouds of dust when the dozen or so men milling about between the buildings walked from one to another.

Vin-Chay squinted and wished he could shield his eyes. The brightness was piercing his eyes like a knife. The sun's heat was burning him as though it was a fire, and he was soaked with sweat by the time he was pushed through one of the doors into a surprisingly cool interior. He surmised that the cooling was artificial, to be so immediate and in contrast with the air directly outside. The line of Osiran men and women was guided through an ante area. They drew bored stares from several men and women who seemed to be engaged in some kind of business dealings. A number of desk correlators were lit up brightly with words and pictures, and Vin-Chay noticed that the man who had addressed Zandran in the shuttle bay casually handed his chip to one of the women. She slid it wordlessly into one of the correlator ports and started to review the information that displayed on her monitor as she initiated several processes with quiet verbal commands.

As he was maneuvered through another arched door, Vin-Chay felt a cool, concentrated spray of something on the back of his neck. Before he had a chance to wonder about it or react, he started feeling disoriented and lethargic. His vision blurred, and he couldn't focus on the shifting people around him, or the disjointed words they were speaking to each other. He vaguely felt someone pull him apart from the others and start to carefully inspect him. He tried to push the hands away, but found his own limbs unable to move voluntarily, and his voice was gone. He managed only the briefest of impressions that his comrades were experiencing the same reactions to the drugs that had been injected into them by the aerosyringes.

One of the men slipped on a pair of thin, transparent gloves and held Vin-Chay's face carefully, turning his head back and forth to study his features. His scrutiny was strictly professional as he started to give a cursory examination to the rest of Vin-Chay's body. He unbound the captive's wrists and smoothly pulled off his tunic. Vin-Chay screamed in outrage inside his head, but he couldn't move or make his vocal cords work. He had to endure the cursory examination of his upper body only for a few minutes before the man who was touching him looked at one of his associates with disappointment.

"Damn, Lokii. Look at these scars. This decreases his value for a number of potential buyers. He's probably only good for hard, outdoors labor. Damaged goods," he finished in disgust. Despite his obvious disdain, he continued his examination of his mute but outraged subject as he instructed two nearby thralltechs to finish stripping the 'damaged' captive. The two bored men used practiced hands to quickly strip off Vin-Chay's remaining garments, discarding them on the floor by the drugged, naked man. The first man pointed a small holocam at his captive, moving around the Osiran as he recorded his physical statistics and appearance. Vin-Chay struggled to move or focus his eyes, but the drugs had totally immobilized him.

His examiner could see the slave's useless struggle to fight back, so he decided to use well-worn manual tactics to complete his inspection. He moved closer to Vin-Chay, grinned wickedly at him, and thrust his practiced hand down to Vin-Chay's genitals. He groped as hard as he could all around the sensitive area, enjoying his absolute power over the virtually immobilized man. He made crude, derogatory comments to his associates about Osiran warrior 'capabilities,' and let go only after he violently twisted the soft, sensitive foreskin he thought utterly repulsive. The men laughed, and one ran a rough hand over Vin-Chay's buttocks and brutally thrust a rough finger deep into him as the helpless young captive felt his skin turn to ice. Vin-Chay had never experienced such a cold hatred as he did now, but his drugged body could do nothing against the outrageous violation of his person. The other thralltech moved closer to partake of the 'fun,' but was stopped by the fourth man, who looked up from his administrative efforts and waved at them to stop.

"Doesn't matter about the scars," Lokii muttered as he scrutinized the data in the hand correlator to which the chip data and new holocam recordings had been transmitted seconds before. "He's already been dispensed in a private sale authorized by the High Command. Orders say to process him through the standard channels and ready him for his new owner by end of day. Take him to Rebonee and have her perform the implantation procedure, then get him tattooed while I

finish up the administrative details. When you're done, the orders say to hold him in one of the preprocessing cells until he's ready to be taken out."

Vin-Chay could only make out a few of the Ptolemii words, but between his lack of comprehension and the effects of the drug, he had no idea what was happening. He was vaguely aware of being taken out of the general examination chamber. He caught skewed glimpses of Burran, Cassian and the others being examined and touched and discussed. He yelled Burran's name but no sound came out.

He found himself in what appeared to be a medical area. The armed guard who escorted him there forced him to sit down in a chair with straps on the chair arms. The female medical technician swiftly strapped his arms down, then injected another spray in his left forearm. She waited a few minutes while the local anesthetic/blood disgorger took effect, then proceeded, under the bored gaze of the guard, to open the skin of his forearm, insert a smooth, half-centimeter-wide microchip deeply into the flesh near the large vein, and seal the skin. She checked her authorization orders, frowned, shrugged, then withdrew another tiny chip and deftly inserted it into Vin-Chay's right index finger.

She looked up at the guard and raised her eyebrows. "That's it. One minute and I'll input his code into the main repository and run a test, and then you can take him to Dillyne." She ran some sort of scanner over his arm, provoking a frightening neural disruption that ripped through every cell in his body. She tapped the instrument at two places on the sleek metal tube. She took several quick holographs of the new slave from front and back angles, then nodded to the guard.

The guard unstrapped his arms from the chair and pulled him up. Vin-Chay was desperate to focus, but he was as incapacitated as he had been when the drugs first entered his system. The guard pulled his arm and led him to an adjoining medical chamber, where they had to wait for attention by the second medtech. The man was already working on a naked, drugged woman, someone not from Vin-Chay's group of Osirans, and someone seemingly not of Osiran heritage.

After a few minutes the medtech nodded to the other guard, who escorted the woman out of the chamber. Vin-Chay felt himself being shoved down into yet another chair where he had his arms strapped down again. This time, the medtech worked on his right forearm. He used a thin laser to etch three intersecting red triangles and some sort of tiny runic letters or numbers along the side of the middle triangle into Vin-Chay's flesh. The effort took less than a minute; the man was obviously as skilled at his task as was the woman who had inserted the

microchip. He nodded wordlessly when he finished his task, then frowned at his correlator orders.

"What?" the guard asked.

"Says here he's scheduled for a special medical procedure in the Sexuality Sector." Dillyne grinned widely, and gave Vin-Chay a knowing smirk. "Take him to Chession."

Vin-Chay found himself leaving the chamber the same way as the woman did. He wasn't sure if his fleeting impression that Cassian had been brought into the chamber behind him was real or not. He had seen his friend out of the corner of his eye—he thought—and he tried to turn around and make contact. The drug seemed to be wearing off, and he had a little more control over his functions. He pulled against the guard's strong grip. The guard snarled at his captive's swaying, irregular motion, and shoved him down a long, stark corridor before slamming him into a wall near a large entry portal. Vin-Chay swayed as the guard confirmed his presence to the medtech awaiting them. He couldn't focus on the hushed words, but he understood the derision in their laughter.

The guard showed his contempt for Vin-Chay's efforts by striking a hard open-hand blow against his face, then tripping him roughly to the ground. Vin-Chay understood the curse, "*Separatae traitor!*" as the guard kicked him hard in the ribs, then dragged him to his feet by his hair, slammed him into the wall, and thrust him into the chamber. He made it clear that he did not like anyone, especially a slave, challenging his authority in even the most innocuous way.

Vin-Chay squinted and could make out a few blurred human images, but a soft hiss against his bare neck sent him into blackness; he could feel himself falling, and then nothing. He awoke at some indeterminate time later as the same brutal guard dragged him out of a healing pod and pulled him out of the chamber and back along what appeared to be the same corridor.

By the time Vin-Chay arrived at the preprocessing cell to await his fate, he was aching and bleeding again. The guard looked around to make sure that no one was in the area watching, then left Vin-Chay on the floor of the cell after another painful blow to his ribs. He grinned at the man struggling to breathe as he tossed the garments he had been carrying on the floor, slid the cell door closed, and walked away laughing.

Vin-Chay pulled himself up off the floor and collapsed on the hard metal bunk attached to the wall of the cell. He forced himself to try to focus, and succeeded to a small degree. He attempted to assimilate in his mind what had just occurred. He had been designated sold, although he was apparently damaged goods to the professionals engaged in this heinous business. He had something

implanted in his body, which had been forcibly decorated with some kind of slave tattoo. He had been subjected to some kind of medical procedure of which he had no sense, other than soreness in his buttocks and rectum. He had been cursed, punched, kicked and tossed into a cell to await his new owner. As he breathed heavily and held his arms against his ribs, he wondered just how much worse it was going to get.

The hours passed quietly as Vin-Chay began to regain his faculties. He concentrated on focusing his eyes, and finally stopped seeing double. He flexed his fingers and hands and arms and legs and tried some stretching exercises, which seemed to increase his blood flow and sent tingling sensations throughout his body. His breathing was regular, and the panic that he had felt when he was out of control dissipated. He wondered vaguely why no one else was brought here, since the size of the chamber and the several bunks made it seem as though several persons were supposed to share the chamber.

He forced himself to calm down, and regulated his breathing, using the techniques his father had taught him. They had served him well on Canaan, and they were still true here in this foul place. He thought about spending a few moments in prayer position, but it somehow seemed too incongruous to do so in this place. He didn't know why.

He waited.

CHAPTER TWENTY

It must be nightfall, Vin-Chay thought as he raised his head from where it rested on his crossed legs. He had wrapped his arms around his legs as he sat on the bunk, hugging them tightly as he fought back repeated waves of anxiety and fear. He would never admit the fear to anyone, but it was there. It was always there. He guessed that it made him stronger in a way, but he couldn't help feeling ashamed of the fear. Chay Shayne would never feel it, nor would his older brother. He doubted he could ever be as strong as either of them.

He got off the bunk and stretched again. Suddenly he heard movement outside of the holding cell. The sound of men walking towards him. He straightened himself and faced the door. The roaring in his ears almost drowned out the sound of the footsteps. His heart beat wildly. He clenched and unclenched his hands, letting them fall loosely at his side. *No fear*, he thought.

His abusive guard appeared at the door and grinned wickedly at him as he unlocked the door and the bars slid back into one side of the door jam. He stepped in and dangled a set of manacles and an aerosyringe in front of him, a neuralizer in his other hand, as he said, "Your new master is here, slave. And he's anxious to take *you* home."

Vin-Chay's eyes moved from the guard to the man who had appeared at the door.

"Let's go," Pyke said.

BOOK TWO

THE FANNING OF FLAMES

CHAPTER ONE

The closest of the Four Sisters to their sun, Ptolem was by its proximity also the most consistently heated of the planets. Although it seemed in retrospect to many of its inhabitants to be an unusual choice for colonization and establishment of a permanent home planet, it had been deemed a far better choice than Canaan had proven to be. The latter planet was much smaller, thus precipitating a number of gravitational issues. There was far more water, but generally too much so: the two small land masses that floated on the planet were often inundated with heavy rains and constant high humidity, and this often frustrated agricultural efforts and social and architectural directions. Scientists determined that a large number of microorganisms and parasites replete in the water tables and throughout most of the flora were the frightening cause of an excessive number of sterile females within the highest ethnic orders; this was the final factor in abandoning the planet as the cradle of the new civilization, since lack of breeding into oblivion was counterproductive to long-term goals of survival. The first colonists had finally abandoned hopes of establishing a flourishing residence there, and had moved on to the next possible destination in their new star system.

At first glance, Ptolem seemed little better a choice. It was twice as large as Canaan, and had four large landmasses between very little oceanic and non-saline water. Its seventy-five-million-kilometer distance from the sun made it a constantly heated—and overheated—place around which to attempt to build a new world. Two of the landmasses were uninhabitable because of extreme temperatures, and the other two had only fifty percent of their environment able to be tamed and colonized.

However, the colonists found that once they had adjusted their bodies and minds to the constraints of this seemingly hostile world, there were a number of characteristics that allowed them to move forward. There was a solid mineral base to support the building of residential, commercial and military buildings, once their architects had devised new methodologies and materials for designing and building these structures. Few buildings taller than ten tiers, and most residences were one-story high and made to blend into the dry desert landscapes that were being supplanted by the new cities. The walls of these structures were at least a

meter thick to assist in the natural cooling of the interiors. The windows were recessed and minimized, and most residences had tall, thick back walls to maximize individual privacy as well as keep out the wide variety of desert animals that roamed freely about the planet. Virtually all homes had covered or enclosed rear patio areas facing the setting sun, which with only rare exception would fail to provide a natural expanse of nightly color and beauty for the occupants. During the last five decades a few daring and inventive architects directed their creativity towards a series of subterranean homes and commercial establishments; these were received with caution and derision at first, but gradually the benefits of living and working underground overcame initial resistance, and such endeavors were more and more common.

During the odd 'rainy' seasons where the purple-blue clouds would drop up to two centimeters of water on the ground over a period of a week, people had learned to remain indoors and wait out the dissipation of the brief humidity, which had become almost unnatural to them. Few appreciated the diversion of the 'wet' season.

The cities likewise were designed in compound-like structures that were clustered about common functions, whether they were familial, commercial or military. By design they were frequently in tri-clusters and often linked with enclosed corridors and entranceways. The cities were set out with a central ruling structure from which the remaining clusters of all types radiated outward in three directions. The material used to build the structures was unlike the old-style metal and glass buildings of yore, but were rather like those even farther back in time, comprised of rock-hard baked earth and rock, and mineral compounds whose color and texture blended in neatly with the surrounding deserts. Synthetic compounds comprised perhaps thirty percent of structural composition, but most eschewed the artificiality in favor of abundant and esthetically pleasing natural material.

There was little need for surfacing any road system, since few vehicles were disposed towards actual contact with the surface: hovenrafts sufficed for personal as well as business and military needs. Most terracrafts were commercial, although the military maintained a small but technologically advanced fleet of such vehicles for unusual contingencies. Time and resources were better spent on structures and other interior personal comforts, since the outdoors was not the first choice of any on which to spend time and effort.

The most temperature-tolerable and mineral-rich spot on the available land-masses was set aside for the establishment of the capital city of Thebes, and it was here that the latest Pharon and all of his successors would rule. And it was here

that the select group of men and women of power would reside and assist in his rule and their own aggrandizement of that power and wealth. They reserved the best residential locations and employed the best architects and material for their homes, academies and businesses. The less desirable locations were reserved for persons of lesser potential and power, and the other restricted cities that sprang up over the millennia were both physically and psychologically subservient to Thebes. No one of consequence would even dream of living anywhere but the capital city if he or she had any aspirations for advancement into one of the ruling classes. The elitists reigned and ruled in every sense of the word.

The rulers of the new world set about establishing a limited number of cities and residential areas, and accordingly a limited number of rights for their citizens. Conformity was the norm; individuality was tolerated at best and at worst seen as detrimental to the empire as a whole. The restraints would some day breed a number of cultural deviations that would ultimately result in the off-worlding of a branch of new colonists who would go on to inhabit and develop another Sister, Osiron, and against whom the Ptolemaic government would declare military and cultural war.

The days on Ptolem usually hovered between one hundred ten and one hundred fifteen degrees, save the three-month high summer season when the temperatures rose dramatically to one hundred thirty to one hundred forty degrees Fahrenheit. The nights' temperatures dropped radically once the sun disappeared beneath the western horizon, and generally dipped to the low forties to low sixties, again depending on the season. It was now the peak of the summer season at this lull in the war, and the day had reached an impressive one hundred thirty-five degrees as the latest group of Osiran slaves was processed through the Theban Thrallplex. The blast of fire-temperature heat that they had experienced was only the normal mid-day beating down of the sun.

The night was a temperate ninety-five degrees as the official commandcraft navigated by a junior officer maneuvered its way out of the Theban Thrallplex bay and past the Miliplex grounds to the edge of the Theban city limits. It continued on, carrying its two occupants in addition to the navigator, who was more than just a little perplexed at the persons he was transporting. He was used to ferrying about High Commanders such as one of his guests, Pyke, but having an Osiran slave in his vehicle was not only unusual but also insulting to his position. He couldn't fathom why this man was present and in the company of the High Commander (at least that was the rumor in the Miliplex, although the official promotion announcement had yet to be confirmed). It was a known fact that this particular commander, unlike most of his professional brethren, was on record as

being an opponent of the beneficial and warranted concept of slavery. Of course, he couldn't be sure that this man belonged to the commander, but, if not, what was he doing in a command vehicle with the man, en route to the commander's personal residence on the outskirts of the capital city? He shrugged to himself; it was none of his business, but it was a curious situation. He kept his eyes on the instrument panel and lost track of his inquisitive thoughts as he contemplated his off-duty plans for dropping off the vehicle at the Miliplex bay and hitting the officers' canteen for a draught of ale before going back to the single officers' quarters in the north wing.

The commandcraft flew quickly past the boundary limit sign at the edge of Thebes proper, pushing out into a darkness punctuated by fewer and fewer residences and other buildings as it counted ten, twenty, thirty and more kilometers outside of the city limits. By the time the navigator initiated a slowing of the commandcraft at its pre-determined coordinates, there had been no sighting of another residence for more than ten kilometers.

The navigator looked up from his instrument panel and through the front window of the craft. He spotted the dark shadow of Pyke's home on the swell of a ridge at the foot of the Sirrian Mountains. The residence was barely discernible; there were no lights on in the house nor was there any other building nearby to shed light from its own interior. The navigator flicked on his alternate front luminaries and flooded the exterior of Pyke's residence with light. He had never been here before and puzzled at the simplistic front entryway and facade of this high-ranking officer. Most other officers of Pyke's ilk had far more plush and ostentatious trophy homes. This one was almost plain, like the man himself. Perhaps it fit after all. He pulled the craft parallel to the front of the entryway door and descended it to ten centimeters. He set the controls in stationary motion as he hit the exit depression and the side door hissed softly open and the dropped a small ramp to the ground. He turned around to face Pyke.

"Do you need any assistance, Commander?" he asked as he eyed the man's slave companion warily.

"No, thank you," Pyke answered distractedly as he unfastened his shoulder belt and snapped off the lock on his companion's as well. He grasped the man's arm firmly and ushered him to the door of the craft. The navigator thought the man looked drugged or disoriented. He waited until they were both out of the craft, then saluted the commander, closed the craft side door, and raised the craft to traveling level. He checked his rear viewfinder and watched as Pyke maneuvered his companion towards the front gate, his small gear sack slung over his shoulder. The two men quickly receded in the distance as the navigator maxi-

mized his acceleration back towards Thebes, disappearing from view of the house in less than a minute.

Pyke issued the tactile, verbal and retinal commands to release the security sensors webbed around the entire exterior of his home. The front door that he hadn't used in over a year slid open soundlessly. The entryway light flickered on automatically as he tossed his gear bag on the floor and pulled Vin-Chay through the door. He shut it and locked it with one hand as his other remained firmly planted on the wrist of his dazed companion. Vin-Chay blinked several times, trying to focus on his surroundings and failing to muster enough physical strength to pull his wrist away from his captor. Pyke glanced at Vin-Chay then released his wrist as he moved to the control panel at the left side of the doorway and hit a combination of depressions that set other house lights on and initiated the heating system, hydro-corr and air recycler.

Pyke picked up his gear bag and gave Vin-Chay a none-too-gentle push down the short entryway hall and into a large living area to the left of the hallway. He left his charge slightly swaying in the middle of the hearthchamber as he strode over to a large set of draperies and pushed them open to reveal a set of large transparent doors that opened out to a view of the back section of the property. He could only see a few shadows of the rock and mountain formations; this was a moonless night and everything was dead still and dark.

He turned around to see Vin-Chay attempting again to focus in on him and he thought the man's eyes were a little less glazed than they had been. The depressant was starting to wear off, he thought, and he considered injecting Vin-Chay with another dose to keep him docile at least for the night. The last thing Pyke needed right now was a fully conscious, unfettered and furious enemy at his throat in this solitary house in a remote location. He felt the aerosyringe in his pocket and decided that he would reluctantly inject Vin-Chay once he had gotten him to their sleeping quarters. It was either that, or drop him here in the hearthchamber and let him sleep on the floor.

Pyke grasped Vin-Chay's arm and felt a momentary shiver of alarm as the resistance to his grip was stronger than it had been during these last few hours. He groped for the aerosyringe tightly and pulled Vin-Chay forcefully out of the hearthchamber and towards a set of spiral stairs that led to the second-tier loft and master noxchamber. Vin-Chay stumbled twice on the way up the stairs as Pyke gave him no slack in regaining his feet, no time to think.

The sprawling loft at the top of the stairs overlooked the entire hearthchamber. Three wide, floor-to-ceiling lucitium windows provided an unparalleled view of the northern vista and craggy peaks of the Sirrian Mountains. Its double-doors

opened to a huge noxchamber, twelve meters by fifteen. Another open, arched door led to the sanichamber beyond.

Vin-Chay managed to start focusing on evaluating his surroundings, but when he started to scan the chamber he felt a cool spray on the back of his neck, and he vaguely felt Pyke push him near the bed as he fell unconscious within five seconds.

Pyke moved the half-on-half-off man fully onto the bed and pulled his boots off, then left the chamber to check on the locks and lighting. He returned ten minutes later, shed his own outer garments quickly and quietly, dimmed the side-light to its bare minimum, and dropped down on the bed next to his unconscious companion. He fell asleep almost as soon as his head hit the pillow, with his last roiling thoughts adding to the uncertainty and loneliness of his thirty-seventh birthanniv. He slept, as his companion did, like the dead.

CHAPTER TWO

The mid-morning sun streamed painfully into his eyes as Vin-Chay struggled to open them and remember where exactly he was. He raised himself onto one elbow and looked towards the source of the bright light, then half climbed, half fell off the bed and stumbled to the large window and savagely pulled the blinds closed to shut out the sun.

The chamber was now in semi-darkness, and his vision adjusted. His head throbbed unmercifully and he clenched his fists against the stabbing pain. He seemed to remember, vaguely, that he was in a noxchamber, and it must have a sanichamber nearby. He scanned the chamber for a few seconds until his eyes fell on an arched doorway, and he propelled himself forward to enter it. It was indeed the expected sanichamber, and he hurried to the commode to relieve himself. When he was finished, he dropped to his knees and tried to empty the contents of his stomach as well, but all he could manage were waves of dry heaves, punctuated by choking and coughing noises. He stayed bent over the bowl for several minutes until he was sure that he wouldn't need to do this again. He gingerly pushed himself off the floor by grasping the bowl, then backed out of the small commode chamber into the main sanichamber.

He moved cautiously, trying not to exacerbate the pain in his head, and stood in front of the sink. He thrust his shaking hands under the hydro-sensor and splashed cold water over his face, drying himself with a soft blue towel that hung nearby. He felt better, and took a few moments to view his immediate surroundings, as his military training in objective evaluation kicked in.

The sanichamber was at least five times larger than the small cell he had occupied in Canaan. It was triangular in shape, obtuse rather than equilateral. The commode was at one sharp corner, with a large bath and inviting, open shower at the other corner, with the sink in between. The door to the chamber met the last of the three corners. He ran his hand over the sink counter, and found it smooth and cool to the touch. It seemed to be made out of some glittering, quartz-like material, light bronze in color. The same material with only slightly darker shading covered the floors and comprised the tub and shower. There were two windows in the chamber, one over the tub, and one just before the arched entryway.

They were niched outward to provide a small shelf in front of each. There were other niches in the wall, holding nothing, covered with a slight layer of dust indicating a lack of attention over a long period of time.

The tub was oval in shape, and was large enough to comfortably hold three full-grown men. There was a recessed, almost hidden cabinet above the sink. He touched one of the depressions and a mirror slid down and into view. He felt a shock at the reflection that stared back at him. Dark, slightly sunken eyes. A drawn, sullen face covered with dark beard stubble, slight bruising about the cheek. Hair askew. He didn't know the face. He didn't want to.

He pressed the second indentation and a concealed door shifted open to reveal a set of shelves. There were only a few items in the hidden cabinet, what appeared to be some old pharmics, and some personal hygiene accouterments. He ran his fingers lightly over them, but had no idea what the Ptolemii writing on them meant.

He closed the cabinet door and pressed the first indentation again to store the mirror. He cautiously left the sanichamber and entered the noxchamber again. His head was still throbbing but he could at least focus on his surroundings. His eyes trailed across the chamber from each of the three sides. The strangely old-style bed lined up against one wall. It was made out of wood and had both a headboard and footboard. A thick strip of wood that looked like it had storage cabinets in the bottom connected them. There were two short posts on the footboard, one at each end. The wood was dark, red-black in color, and looked dense and heavy.

There was a small side stand to the right of the bed. It had two drawers and was clearly made from the same wood as the bed. There was a large, two-meter-tall cabinet against one of the other walls, probably for clothing or other items, and he thought he saw the pale outline of a hidden closet to the side of it. There was an old, uncomfortable-looking chair against the other wall, close to an empty fireplace that abutted one corner of the chamber. The large, oval lucitium dome on the ceiling could obviously be retracted to present a view of the sky; his old noxchamber at the Chay compound had a similar feature. There was a door that he somehow knew led to the rest of the building.

He hesitated for a brief moment, then walked towards the door and slid it open. He found himself on a spacious but empty loft that overlooked a large, bright, open hearthchamber at the bottom of a set of spiral stairs. He smelled something, something like the scent of food. Rich food. His mouth filled with saliva and his stomach growled. He heard slight noises in the downstairs area, and

he descended slowly and carefully, holding onto a dark wood banister, still unsure about his movements as the pain in his head jabbed at him unmercifully.

Vin-Chay reached the bottom of the stairs without incident at the same time that Pyke entered the chamber from the area from which the food smell was wafting. They stared at one another for a few seconds, Pyke cautiously, Vin-Chay with an undisguised look of hostility on his face. Pyke tensed as he sensed possible danger. Vin-Chay did likewise, but he remained where he was and waited for Pyke to make the next move.

Pyke broke their stalemate and wordlessly nodded his head in the direction of the other chamber. He turned casually and went back into the nutrichamber area. He heard Vin-Chay follow him into the chamber, where he resumed his tasks of setting the food he had cooked on his plate, and filling a goblet with fresh juice that he took out of the refrigeration unit. He gestured towards an empty plate, which Vin-Chay took as an invitation to make food for himself. He felt a cramping in his stomach and wondered how long it had been since he had last eaten. Despite the hunger pains that now seemed to gnaw at him in full force, he ignored Pyke's invitation and stood his ground. Pyke shrugged, then seated himself nonchalantly at a small table near a honeycomb-chambered window that looked out on the back of the property. He started eating silently, and tensed when Vin-Chay moved deliberately behind and around him to stand next to the window and inspect the view.

Neither man moved or spoke for long moments. Pyke ate slowly and carefully, and Vin-Chay kept his eyes glued to the outside view of the desert and the beautiful mountain range not too far away. After ten minutes or so, he turned without warning to face Pyke, who reacted by standing abruptly, ready for whatever physical reaction his unwilling captive would present. To his surprise, Vin-Chay presented no physical threat, but raised his chin slightly and finally spoke to him.

"Where exactly am I, Commander?" he challenged.

"You are at my residence outside of Thebes. In the province of Sirria, to be exact," Pyke said.

"Your residence."

"Yes."

"As your slave," Vin-Chay spat out.

"Yes," Pyke answered coldly, his ire raised by the young man's tone. *This Osiran can get under my skin with fewer words or actions than any man I've ever met*, he thought angrily. He felt oddly exhilarated. "As my slave. Bought. Paid for. Registered as my legal chattel. That should be fairly clear to even a stubborn Separatae like you." Vin-Chay's eyes flashed angrily at Pyke's deliberate instigation, but he

stayed unmoving and as calm as possible. Pyke was pleased at his restraint, but he thought it was probably going to be a short-lived one if past history was any indication. For both their sakes, he was going to have to ensure somehow that this restraint was more than just temporary.

Vin-Chay was silent. Pyke waited. Then Vin-Chay challenged him again. "And what exactly would be my duties ... *master*?"

Pyke flared but managed to keep his head, knowing he could only go so far at this point in time. He stared at Vin-Chay coldly, answering in an icy tone that left little to the imagination as far as his position and power went on this planet and in this household.

"Your 'duties,' Lieutenant? Your duties are this: you will diligently service me in bed as you did on Canaan. You will take care of this household and see to all of my personal needs—clothing, food, everything. You will do anything I tell you to do, when I tell you, how I tell you. You will anticipate and see to my every need. You will keep a civil tongue in your head, and you will *not* go out of your way to antagonize me. You will eat when I tell you to eat, and sleep when I tell you to sleep. You will learn to be an accommodating, effective slave, and you will *not* do anything to make me believe that I made a mistake in not sending you to the berillium mines."

Pyke shoved his chair back and rose angrily, his empty plate in his hand. As he walked past a rigid Vin-Chay he thrust the plate into his hands and snapped, "Wash this, and the others, eat something, and then come into the hearthchamber. Ten minutes. Don't make the mistake of keeping me waiting." He left his equally furious slave alone in the nutrichamber as he stalked into the hearthchamber to calm down and focus on his next move.

Exactly ten minutes later Vin-Chay entered the hearthchamber and stood a meter away from Pyke, who was poised in a chair, his arms resting lightly and comfortably on the chair arms, his demeanor neutral. "Did you have something to eat?" he asked calmly.

"No," Vin-Chay answered flatly. Pyke tensed, the only visible mark of which was a slight clenching of his right hand, as he thought to himself, *One, two, three, four* ... He ran his tongue lightly across his upper lip then said slowly, "I told you to eat something. It was a simple order, and yet you failed to obey it. I assume that the plates are also unwashed?"

Vin-Chay started to shrug, but he was interrupted as Pyke launched himself off the chair smoothly, grabbed Vin-Chay's wrist and whirled him around as he continued into the nutrichamber, dragging his stubborn companion behind him. Once inside, he shoved him to the middle of the chamber and scanned the wash

area. The plates were there, clean and dried. He felt a flush come to his ears and cheeks and was certain that he saw a satisfied look on Vin-Chay's face. Or he could have been mistaken, since it was only there for the fleetest of seconds. He turned slowly and looked at him hard. "I will tell you this once again. Prepare a meal, then—"

Vin-Chay interrupted him. "There are no *scraps* from your meal, Commander, and I have neither any idea where your various food stores are located, nor how to prepare them even if I were to find them. And besides, I am not hungry and would prefer not to eat."

"Too bad. The breadstuffs are located there," Pyke said as he motioned towards the main larder, "and the dairy is right next to it. There are a variety of meats and poultry that can be cooked quickly and easily. I had my adjutant stock this nutrichamber before my return with everything we need to start off—"

"I do *not* know how to prepare food," Vin-Chay exclaimed loudly, his eyes glittering in barely controlled anger. Pyke was startled, not at the tone but at the words themselves.

"Are you telling me that you have never prepared a meal for yourself? Ever?" he questioned skeptically. Vin-Chay reluctantly nodded, then explained.

"You are aware of my background, Commander. I was raised in a royal household that had ... servants who were paid to attend to my family's needs. This included the preparation of our meals. There was neither reason nor desire to prepare our own. Food was also prepared for us in Academy and on board the *Remus*, as well as in Canaan. Such as it was."

"I see," Pyke said thoughtfully. It hadn't occurred to him that his new full-time companion would be lacking in some basic skills required of his new position in life. It dawned on him that there were a lot of things that he hadn't stopped to consider when he impulsively initiated this particular situation. This would require a re-thinking of a number of things. "Well, Lieutenant, you are going to have to learn to prepare food for both of us. You will learn all of the skills necessary to maintain this household in the manner that I expect it to be maintained. Unlike most of my people, I prefer my meals freshly prepared. There will be no prefabricated foodstuffs in this household, so you *will* learn to cook for me, and cook *well*. There are standard sanibots and purification channels in all chambers, so there will be no need for manual cleansing of this home. I will arrange for instruction in whatever skills you are lacking, but you *will* learn—I promise you that. Now sit down there and wait."

Vin-Chay seated himself at the place Pyke had recently vacated, as he silently watched the commander pull out some prepared breads and fruit jams and set

them down noisily in front of him. Pyke extracted two fresh fruits from the bottom of the larder and put them down as well, with a single and very clear command: "Eat." Vin-Chay wordlessly used Pyke's knife to spread the jam on the bread, and he started eating, gaining in enthusiasm with every bite, and realizing slowly just how hungry he truly was. Under Pyke's steady gaze he finished the bread and the fruit, then got up and rinsed the plate and placed it next to the ones he had cleaned for Pyke. He wasn't about to try opening or utilizing the puri-corr recessed under the sink into the lower wall panel. He turned to face the Ptolemii and waited.

Pyke turned on his heel and went back into the hearthchamber, followed closely by Vin-Chay. He reseated himself in his chair, deliberately allowing Vin-Chay to remain standing as he kept a contemplative gaze on the younger man. Vin-Chay felt uneasy as he waited on Pyke's next move, wondering what was coming next. Pyke didn't keep him waiting long. He spoke deliberately and slowly.

"Vin-Chay," he started, his tone almost gentle. "Through no fault of your own, but through a set of circumstances defined by war, politics and misfortune, you have left your Osiran world of privilege and freedom for one here, where you are designated the property of another man. You legally have no rights other than those that I choose to give you, within the realm of laws and customs under which I, too, have to operate. Understand something: I can do anything I want with you. *Anything*. I can bed you, and beat you, and starve you, and even kill you if I so desire. None of those things would result in any consequences for me because they our government sanctions them.

"I am not going to attempt to justify them to you, nor attempt to make you believe that I have no desire to inflict any unnecessary pain or humiliation or abuse on you, even though that is the case. I need to make you understand fully what your life and world are going to be like here because you're here and that is a hard, cold fact. You cannot leave here. You cannot escape. Besides the very visible tattoo that marks you as a slave without rights, there is a locator chip imbedded deeply in your arm, and the main correlator at the Thrallplex can pinpoint your exact location at any time. There is a neural disrupter built into the chip, and it can be activated by my hand or by the Thrallplex personnel to immediately disable or kill you, as needs dictate. That means if you try to leave, I can find you, or they can find you, and the penalties for attempted escape are not something you want to find out about. Trust me on this if on nothing else. In addition, I have had them insert a finaccess chip into your right index finger. It is linked to my financial accounts in Lucretus and has a preset threshold of funds you can use

to purchase food or supplies as I will need you to. I will have regular access to a listing of your allowance accruals, so don't think you can put anything over on me by purchasing weapons or any means to escape.

"You and I can coexist in this house if you understand these rules. I can't or won't change any of them. I can only say that your life here will be tolerable as long as you understand and obey, and are willing to accept the new life that has been thrust upon you. If you cannot, then eventually, probably after much pain and grief, you will die. Not by my hand, but by the hand of this civilization, which has taken away your rights and your birth life. I am asking you to make the considered choice to live and not to commit slow suicide by fighting them and me at every chance possible. There is nothing to be gained by that. This is not a matter of honor—it is a matter of survival. I am asking you to choose to *survive*."

Vin-Chay didn't move, didn't speak. He had kept his eyes riveted on Pyke's throughout the commander's discourse, never showing even the barest flicker of his feelings. He thought it had to be one of the hardest things he had ever done, to keep these thoughts to himself when he was screaming inside to react, to go for Pyke's throat, to run and escape from this Ptolemii prison. But he kept still, and he kept quiet.

Pyke wasn't deceived. He knew the man well enough to realize that his words had barely made a dent, if that, in Vin-Chay's hatred and resolve. But at least he had had the intelligence to try to hide his true self from Pyke, and Pyke thought that that was at least a start. He rose from his chair and beckoned Vin-Chay to follow him up the stairs.

When the two men entered the noxchamber, Pyke turned to Vin-Chay and said, "Strip." He reached into the top drawer of the bed table and withdrew a small, black, cylindrical device of some sort as Vin-Chay silently complied with his order. He assumed that Pyke was going to reinforce his authority and warnings with sex, a common weapon of subjugation in such an instance. He flashed back momentarily to that day in Pyke's *Sovereign* quarters where he had been so helpless and vulnerable. He realized that now was not the time to resist. He would bide his time and then strike when he could be assured of a reasonable chance of success. But not now. Not just now. This was nothing he hadn't done before, and he could handle it. He finished stripping off his trousers and stood waiting, naked, as Pyke adjusted the device he was holding.

Pyke raised his eyes but barely gave a glance to the naked state of his companion. He did note with concern the obvious set of fresh bruises all over Vin-Chay's body, as though he had been subjected to a recent beating. He knew it had not happened on the ship, so it must have occurred at the hands of the Thrallplex

employees. Pyke made a mental note to investigate and take action if this was the case. He assumed that Vin-Chay would not cooperate in identifying his probable abusers if only to frustrate Pyke's efforts.

He moved within an arm's length of Vin-Chay and pressed the device. He moved it all around Vin-Chay, up and down his front, side, back, arms, legs and feet, then checked a small display on the front of it and turned it off. "Get dressed," he said as he left the chamber and went downstairs, leaving a very confused man in his wake.

Vin-Chay dressed and followed Pyke downstairs to the Ptolemii's culturchamber. Pyke attached the small device to his main correlator, and a data transmission was completed in seconds. Pyke turned and looked at him dispassionately. "I'm transmitting your measurements to our main garment vendor so that I can order suitable clothing for you. That prison garb is worn down and hardly appropriate for someone in my service. It should be delivered within two days, so until then you'll have to make due with what you've got." He snapped off the transmission after receiving a confirmation and reference number. He turned back to Vin-Chay.

"You'll need to start learning the layout and contents of this house. You've already familiarized yourself with our noxchamber and adjacent chambers. There'll be a section in the garment closet for your things, and a place in the sancabinet for your hygiene items. We'll forego the nutrichamber now since you've already seen part of it. Let's go."

Vin-Chay followed Pyke through the house wordlessly. Pyke kept his commentary to a bare minimum, and Vin-Chay was able to ascertain a great deal about his captor from the brief tour alone. A great deal.

Pyke's house was set out in a typical triangular shape of many of the buildings on Ptolem, although Vin-Chay's current experience was only with those located next to the landing area and Thrallplex. It was similar to the layout of the sancabinet, obtuse in design, single-story in all parts except for the one end above which the master noxchamber sat. The living quarters encompassed at least seven hundred square meters. The home was spacious, light and airy, with high ceilings and numerous windows of varying shapes and sizes, the triangle again being the most prevalent. A long, colorfully stained window ran across the top of the eastern wall, and Vin-Chay thought the rising sun would stream through and bathe the chamber in a rainbow of beautiful colors. He wondered who had designed the house; surely not Pyke, a sterile, colorless creature if ever there was one.

There were two other smaller noxchambers on the ground tier, as well as the large culturchamber, which, like the hearthchamber and the main noxchamber,

also contained a large fireplace. It was clear that none had been used, or else they had been immaculately cleaned. Vin-Chay thought the former.

Pyke took him out through the large, sliding double doors in the hearthchamber to the rear of his property. The geography was all desert, rock and strange flora, and there was an impressive view of the huge, craggy mountain range directly behind the house, at a distance of perhaps three thousand meters. There were no other residences or buildings as far as Vin-Chay could see. They were isolated in a magnificent location in a beautiful, empty house.

One of the things that Vin-Chay had noticed was the odd lack of personal items in the house. There were no paintings or holographs on the walls. There was little furniture; the few items scattered about the chamber seemed only to be serviceable rather than homey or comfortable. There was little wear and tear on the carpeting, tile, furniture, and nutrichamber accouterments. The emptiness shouted that no one really lived there.

From the house alone Vin-Chay could tell much. It told him that Pyke was alone, probably without family or family that meant anything to him. He was obviously a man of little artistic imagination for whom individual expression was alien. Like his house, he was cold and sterile. He might fly into a rage at Vin-Chay's disobedience or contempt, but other than that he was a passionless man who lived for his Pharon and his military duties and advancements. He would never be able to understand the bold passions and colorful creativity and reverence for individuality and freedom that characterized Vin-Chay's own family and people. The two men were as different as night and day.

Pyke ordered him to remain in the noxchamber for the rest of the day. Vin-Chay was shocked when Pyke informed him that he had not simply slept through the night, but had actually been unconscious for a day and a half as the drugs and emotional exhaustion had taken their toll. Truth to tell, he was still feeling light-headed and uncertain on his feet, and he welcomed the respite from Pyke's unwelcome company. The commander remained downstairs for the rest of the afternoon, apparently attending to military business and any other functions relating to re-opening his long-dormant house. He would ordinarily have used the time alone to try to ferret out information by searching through Pyke's personal possessions. He started rooting about, going through drawers and the closet, but he found absolutely nothing but a few items of Ptolemii clothing. He quickly lost interest as his head started to throb again. He pulled off his boots, laid down on the rumpled bed covers, and fell asleep.

Vin-Chay awoke to a darkness in which he could hardly make out shadows. He was aware that Pyke was lying next to him, breathing deeply and evenly in a

sound state of sleep. The Ptolemii was completely vulnerable now, and Vin-Chay could have dispatched him easily. He dispelled the thought; now was not the time. He would wait. He drifted off again to a restive sleep just as Pyke murmured something unintelligible and turned over on his side towards Vin-Chay, unconsciously slinging an arm across the Osiran's chest. They slept that way for the rest of the night, Pyke unknowingly holding his captive close, the captive too tired to even attempt to push him away.

CHAPTER THREE

TutMose set his reccraft down lightly in front of Pyke's home. Zandran shot out of the vehicle and motioned impatiently for his friend to catch up as they approached the front door to their commander's home. They hadn't been here since Pyke had originally designed and built it years ago. They understood why he was always reluctant to come back, and although they were tentatively hopeful that he seemed to be settling in for a long stretch, they were also concerned about the strange companion with whom that long stretch was apparently going to take place.

Both men were completely confused at their commander's recent actions. He had started to act totally out of character back in the prison fortress when he had initiated his unexpected bargain with the Osiran lieutenant. Not that such a thing was unheard of—although it was generally an effort engendered more by force than consent for most—but it was unheard of for Pyke. He had *never* strayed from his scrupulous morals or values, and he placed a high premium on honor and fairness. He had always been on record as being opposed to slavery—as they were—yet in the space of a few short months he had taken an Osiran lover, enslaved him, and set up a residence with him in his special house.

They were baffled. And worried about his safety. This Osiran was neither a typical warrior nor a typical man. He was bred of royal stock, and was intelligent, strong-willed and dangerous. He was not the kind who would spend a lifetime as a subservient slave to his enemy. He had to be planning either escape or revenge or both against the empire and Pyke, and they had every reason to be worried about their commander's—and their friend's—safety.

TutMose hailed the recognition indent on the front door and moments later their faces settled into mutual guarded looks as Vin-Chay opened the front door to receive Pyke's guests. He stepped aside to let them pass into the entryway. None of the men spoke to each other as Vin-Chay closed the door and turned silently to lead them into the hearthchamber where their host waited. Pyke smiled and greeted them warmly. Vin-Chay left the chamber wordlessly as the sub-commanders seated themselves opposite Pyke, who reached down to the low

table in front of the divan and picked up a flask of spiced papyron. Zandran grinned enthusiastically and nodded.

"Vin-Chay," Pyke called. TutMose raised his eyebrows as Vin-Chay reappeared before Pyke had finished calling for him, bringing two more goblets into the chamber and setting them down in front of the guests before leaving again through the nutrichamber archway.

"God's Blood, Commander," TutMose said carefully as Pyke poured out two goblets of papyron for them. "I don't believe I've ever seen him so docile. He isn't still suffering from the Thrallplex pharmics, is he?"

"No, he hasn't been on any pharmics for the past week," Pyke said. "And docile he's not. He's simply expediting his need to be doing something else but attending to my needs quickly and without comment, while at the same time ignoring you both. Whether you realize it or not, my friend, you've simply been dismissed as inconsequential to the moment."

"What exactly is he doing that he doesn't want to be distracted from?" Zandran asked curiously, as he sipped his spirits.

"He's building a wall," Pyke answered.

"A wall?" TutMose said disbelievably. "What wall? Where?"

"Out back," Pyke said. "I never had the area behind the back of the house enclosed. I've always wanted a proper enclosure for privacy's sake as well as keeping the desert out. An outdoor hearth, some textured landscaping. Something ... to make it complete," he finished.

Pyke went on before they could ask their questions. "He actually suggested it, not for my sake but for his, to keep his mind occupied and strengthen his body and muscles by working outdoors. In between occasional fainting from the heat he's not used to yet, but of course won't admit he's not used to, he figured out the calculations for the angles and volume needed to build the wall. I ordered the raw materials delivered, and he's set about building a fairly large enclosure, block by block. He started a week ago and I believe it's already done a good deal for his physical and mental state. It's something tangible to focus on and attain, and he needed that at this moment in time. And, I get a new enclosure out of it." Pyke lifted his goblet to them and drained the spirits before refilling. "Now," he said, "let's get down to those reports on the last battle simulations that our next graduating class just completed."

The three men spent the next hour reviewing the simulation results. Pyke asked a number of incisive questions about certain warriors who scored highly in the Individually-Creative category, paying less attention to those scores and personnel who approached the exercise with more traditional methods. They dis-

cussed and evaluated, and Pyke issued a few requests for specific cadets who showed promise in their strategies. Pyke made a mental note to give the simulation test to Vin-Chay to see how he would score. *Just for amusement, of course*, he convinced himself.

As Pyke and TutMose engaged in some post-review small talk, Zandran wandered over to the doors that opened to the back area. He watched Vin-Chay for several minutes as he sipped his remaining papyron. He glanced back at the two men deep in conversation, then he slid the doors quietly open and stepped out into the bright mid-day sun. He slid the doors closed again to prevent the cool air of the house from escaping, then walked over to where the Osiran was lifting a large block of baked clay onto the top of another covered with thick wet sealant. He scraped off the excess sealant with a trowel, then looked up at Zandran, who was watching him intently.

Zandran took in the important details as he had been taught to evaluate precisely in the Academy so many years before. The Osiran was wearing light, loose-fitting trousers, the bottoms gathered at the top of the mid-calf desert boots designed to retain moisture and provide the most comfort for the feet in the hot, unforgiving land. He had on a sleeveless white, high-necked tunic, and there was a glistening sheen of perspiration along his lean but muscular arms, his throat and his face. He must have shaved very recently; there was no discernible stubble. His hair was getting longer, and it was clasped back, just barely, well away from his face. The dark circles that had been under his eyes constantly were all but gone, and his high-cheekboned face looked calm and regal. The interlocking slave tattoo on his bare right arm was incongruous to the poise that he radiated effortlessly. Zandran could well understand on a physical level why Pyke found the man appealing.

Vin-Chay crossed his arms casually and cocked his head. "May I help you, Sub-Commander?" His polite words were belied by a slightly cool, arrogant tone. *Now I remember why I enjoyed shoving him up against walls*, Zandran thought sourly. He regrouped and nodded his head instead towards the large pile of blocks awaiting placement.

"This will take you quite a while to finish, won't it—well, it really isn't 'Lieutenant' any more is it?" Zandran smiled slyly, thoroughly enjoying the jab. Much to his surprise and disappointment, Vin-Chay didn't rise to the bait, reacting instead with a half-smile. Zandran was enjoying himself too much and pressed on.

"Let's see, what exactly is it that we should call you now? Just plain 'Slave' seems too generic. 'Thrall?' Any suggestions?" he asked wickedly.

“Ptolemii Whore’ would be one suggestion if you queried some of my former comrades in arms ... sir,” Vin-Chay answered mildly, enjoying the angry flush that suddenly spread from Zandran’s cheeks to his ears at the implied slight to his commander. Vin-Chay was starting to enjoy himself, too, as he bent down to spread a coat of sealant on the top block. He was very much aware of Zandran’s eyes watching him as he spread the material carefully, then lifted another block and set it down on the sealant, checking with a critical eye that all of the block’s sides lined up evenly. He wiped away the excess sealant then started to repeat the process, conscious of the gleam of sweat covering the bare parts of his body as the Ptolemii who stood behind him remained dry and breathing easily. Vin-Chay tried to minimize his heavy breathing; he was still barely able to function effectively for long periods in this heat and denser gravity. He was all too conscious of the rivulets of perspiration running down his face and arms.

Zandran decided to strike. “Of course,” he said casually, “I suppose the most appropriate thing to call you would be your slave name. I’ll have to check the Thrallplex Registry and see what the commander decided to call you.” He grinned widely. “Or I could just check the runes on your forearm.” *Score*—he was rewarded with the barest flicker of reaction on Vin-Chay’s part, but it was there as the Osiran hesitated in his tasks for the briefest of seconds at Zandran’s unexpected words. He continued to work as Zandran continued to jab.

“You knew, of course, that all slaves are designated new names as well as being loc-chipped and tattooed? It’s logical: since your people have had their freedom eliminated as well as their rights and property, why should their birth names remain as a last vestige of who they once were? Most slaveowners try to rename their chattel appropriately, but I suppose in the long run it’s all a matter of personal whim. I shall be interested in seeing how the commander has designated you. Very interested. At least then I will be able to address you adequately ... slave.” Zandran turned and strolled back to the house without casting a backward glance, knowing he had scored a minor victory against the arrogant Osiran, yet strangely disquieted with himself for doing so. *No reason to be*, he mused as he slid the doors closed and welcomed the cool indoors air while rejoining the conversation between TutMose and Pyke.

The three men ended their discussions and Pyke walked them to the front entrance after extracting their commitment to return in a few weeks for a quiet, private evening meal. It was something of a struggle for him to initiate a personal interaction like this; he wasn’t used to being in his residence let alone entertaining in it. Although he genuinely wanted his close comrades to enjoy his hospitality, it still felt alien and slightly uncomfortable to have them or anyone there. He

was used to being wrapped in his personal solitude. He felt oddly content that having Vin-Chay so close and intimate did not feel particularly alien or uncomfortable; quite the opposite. When he wasn't worried about having his throat cut.

When his sub-commanders' reccraft departed he returned to the hearthchamber and sifted through his chip documents again, filing some data away in his correlator and shoving others in the desk drawer in his culturchamber. He walked over to the doors in the hearthchamber and watched Vin-Chay working for a while. He watched the rhythmic movements of spreading sealant, lifting and positioning blocks, scraping off sealant, wiping away streams of perspiration. *He's not taking in enough water*, Pyke thought. *He's going to dehydrate and collapse again.* He opened the doors and went out to where the man was working.

Vin-Chay stopped when he heard Pyke approach, and waited for him to say something. Pyke picked up the flask of water and handed it to him, and he took a long draught before putting it back down. "Thank you," he said. Pyke crossed his arms and frowned.

"I've told you before that you need to drink constantly until your body becomes acclimated to this environment. We don't need a repeat of last week when you passed out for over an hour because you weren't drinking nearly enough liquids, and were staying outdoors for too long. I made it clear that the contingency for you to engage in this effort was to take appropriate precautions against physical injury by limiting your activity out here and drinking enough water, didn't I?" Pyke said.

Vin-Chay nodded. "You did. This was not deliberate disobedience, Commander. I simply became engrossed in what I was doing and forgot to keep drinking. It won't happen again."

"Fine. Now, what were you and Zandran talking about out here for all that time?"

Vin-Chay shrugged. "He asked about the wall and said it would probably take a long time to complete. Nothing much. We don't have a great deal to talk about, do we?"

"Probably not. Very well. Finish up with this section only then come into the house and prepare the mid-day meal. Nothing heavy, no meats. I'll be in my culturchamber working so come in and get me when the food is ready. Bathe and change before we eat." Pyke turned to go back into the house when he was stopped with Vin-Chay's next words.

"What is my slave name, Commander?" he asked quietly. Pyke turned and looked at him. *Zandran, of course.* He was going to have to set some ground rules

for all four of them to follow very soon. He decided to forego any explanations and simply answer the question.

"I registered you under the old Ptolemii name of 'Shah-Quin,'" Pyke responded.

"What does that mean?" Vin-Chay asked.

"Princeling."

CHAPTER FOUR

Vin-Chay's week had been particularly strenuous both physically and mentally. The stress was going to be capped off with this evening's meal with Pyke's sub-commanders. The only saving grace was that he would get to interact with people other than Pyke, who was essentially his only companion in the two months since he had been brought to this remote location. Considering that the people were TutMose and Zandran, perhaps it wasn't a saving grace after all. TutMose he could tolerate, but Zandran was another matter.

He tried to concentrate on the displays on the correlator monitor in front of him. Pyke had set up a small tutorial correlator on a second desk in his cultur-chamber, and had installed and linked up Vin-Chay's station with specific and limited interaction with the main correlator at the Culturplex. He was only able to access the programs and information that Pyke had programmed in for him; specifically, academic data to teach him the spoken and written Ptolemii language, and historical and literary references to assist in his assimilation into the Ptolemii culture. He was required by Pyke to access and study the requisite data for at least three hours per day, and Pyke ensured his careful attendance and attention by verifying the access and his interactive responses to the courses as well as by quizzing him on specific areas. If he failed to comply with the enforced education, there were punishments: a restriction on his outside activity, or a redirection of his outdoor exertions to abandon his efforts on the enclosure and instead work around the hateful, hot yard cleaning up bushes and rocks, menial little tasks that he disdained. Pyke never really used physical punishment, although there had been a few minor slaps on the occasions when Vin-Chay pushed the Ptolemii past his low tolerance limit. Neither could he threaten to confine Vin-Chay to the house, since he had not been allowed outside of the boundaries of Pyke's property since his arrival.

He was distracted and couldn't concentrate on the peculiar lines and symbols flashing across the screen. He had yet to be able to determine any real pattern to the runic written language of the Ptolemii. He was frustrated with the verbal translations emanating from his earpiece, but he just cursed softly, issued another syntactical query, and relaxed when the results improved significantly. He had

realized almost immediately what an opportunity it was to be able to learn the enemy's means of communication, and he had been applying himself rigorously. His proficiency with the spoken language was coming along quite well, but the written word was another matter. He was nearly clueless.

He had also been unable to bypass Pyke's security restrictions on the correlator link and tap into any of the other key central databanks in the Culturplex or the Miliplex. Pyke's correlator was tapped into both, but it worked on some personal recognition factor associated only with Pyke, and he couldn't get past it. He had also at first failed to realize that any unsuccessful attempts to bypass his own or Pyke's units silently logged the security breach to Pyke's other correlator at his Miliplex quarters. One evening early into their cohabitation, Pyke had returned home rather early and coldly listed his transgressions one by one. The Ptolemii stated unequivocally that he would break both of Vin-Chay's arms if he ever tried breaching security again, punctuating his anger with a well-placed backhand. By the look on his captor's face, Vin-Chay didn't doubt Pyke for a single second. He would have to find another way, he thought as he rubbed his stinging cheek. His efforts were further hindered when Pyke installed a web of holocam stations in every chamber and at strategic outdoors points; transmissions of activity within the house and outside for a radius of fifty meters were broadcast to Pyke's personal correlator in the Miliplex.

He disconnected the Culturplex link and turned the unit off. He thought about working outside in the back for a while, but the summer heat had sent the temperatures soaring to nearly one-thirty, and he was still not accustomed to the environment. He had pushed his physical limits too far several times in the past week, fainting twice only to be revived by having cold water thrown in his face, accompanied by a terse lecture.

He thought about starting preparations for the evening meal, but Pyke had told him to wait until he returned from the Miliplex. He checked the chronometer and the perpetually punctual Ptolemii commander wouldn't be returning for another hour. He was usually picked up by his regular navigator first thing in the morning, and returned in early evening. On occasion he returned during mid-day for short periods, ostensibly to relax but obviously to check up on his reluctant housemate.

His stomach tightened at the thought of his captor. Although his rage and desire for freedom and retribution hadn't abated in any measure since his arrival on Ptolem, he had mollified at least his attitude towards his Ptolemii 'owner' for brief periods of time. It rarely took long for one or the other of them to initiate some kind of verbal or psychological conflict, and his temperate attitude would

always dissolve into silent curses and promises of payback. He wished that he could maintain that attitude consistently, for any breaches in resolve would only undermine what had to be his ultimate goals of freedom and supporting an Osiran victory.

Last night was one of those dark periods where his resolve was tested. He had no idea as to the motivation, but Pyke had been aggressively passionate, demanding, acquiescent and considerate in bed. He was never brutal or unfeeling, but he had seldom seemed to put a great deal of emphasis on any pleasure or need except his own. Last night he seemed to be keyed up and unusually sensual, and Vin-Chay had found himself nearly without sleep for the entire night. Pyke had made Vin-Chay accommodate him with hours of non-stop touching, caressing, kissing, tasting, but he had been far more prone to returning those actions towards Vin-Chay than he usually was. He had actually seemed to go out of his way to give pleasure back, and that confused his unwilling consort even as he gave in to the physical sensations that brought him to near-climax when Pyke ended their sex play with its full consummation. They had lain next to one another afterwards, bathed in a light sweat, breathing heavily, not speaking until Pyke left the bed to wash, and then returned to wrap himself around his bedmate and say, "Go to sleep." Pyke had fallen asleep almost immediately, but Vin-Chay had lain awake for hours, his body tightly secured by his captor, as he tried to understand exactly what had happened and why. He had no answers by the time dawn's light had started streaming into the noxchamber and he drifted off to sleep.

Pyke left earlier than usual the next morning, and didn't even bother to awaken him to fix the morning meal. He left a brief note reminding Vin-Chay of the expected company and indicating when he would return that afternoon. Vin-Chay had occupied himself with the Culturplex link, but he was anxious and unsettled for most of the day.

Vin-Chay was in the nutrichamber gathering the evening meal's preparations when he heard the commandcraft arrive and deposit Pyke in the front of the house. He started slicing scallons for the bakkava when Pyke entered the nutrichamber area and nodded to him wordlessly. Vin-Chay then understood that the previous night had also affected the Ptolemii commander differently than usual. He had no idea if that was going to be good or bad.

Pyke watched Vin-Chay slice the scallons for a moment before shaking his head in despair and moving behind the young man. Vin-Chay tensed as Pyke slid one of his hands over the hand Vin-Chay was using to hold down the scallons, moving Vin-Chay's hand on an angle. Pyke slid the other hand over the one Vin-Chay was using to slice the vegetable. He thought for a second how dangerous it

was to allow this man to have a knife in his hand, and he wondered if Vin-Chay was thinking how the knife would feel if it were slicing across Pyke's throat instead. Pyke began to move Vin-Chay's slicing hand across the scallions on an angle, showing him by example how to slice them correctly and quickly. Vin-Chay nodded and Pyke released his hands as the young man completed the preparations.

Pyke left the chamber and went upstairs. He tossed his cloak on the bed. He looked at the bed for a long moment, then went into the sanichamber to wash his face and hands. He changed quickly into casual trousers, tunic and softboots, then brushed his hair and tied it back neatly with an ornate silken band, finishing his efforts by affixing a single red jewel stud earring in his left ear. He descended and went into the culturchamber, where he checked the activity log on Vin-Chay's correlator. He was satisfied that his Osiran had spent a good deal of time on the main topic of the day, the Ptolemii alphabet. He had to force back a smile as he listened to Vin-Chay's recorded attempts at pronouncing certain complex nouns and verbs. Technically, the Osiran had the syllables down quite well, but his inflections were grating to the ear at best. He was going to have to start supporting this effort by writing his notes to Vin-Chay in Ptolemii rather than Osiran. Vin-Chay was doing fairly very well in verbalizing colloquial Ptolemii, and Pyke decided to stop speaking to him in his birth language starting now. His captive had to accept the inevitable and commit himself wholly to his new world, like it or not. Ptolemii was his new language, period.

He re-entered the nutrichamber and started to show Vin-Chay how to prepare the bakkava, by mixing the vegetables and spices, and grating in the pungent cheeses. For someone who had no previous experience with food preparation, Vin-Chay, once he had restrained his attitude, had picked up the basics fairly quickly and was able to prepare simple yet nutritious meals for them. The more complex repasts would come later, and Pyke was looking forward to showing his pupil these skills.

Vin-Chay followed Pyke's instructions carefully, and after an hour the final meal was put into the oven to bake. He turned to Pyke and asked curiously, "Where did you learn to prepare food like this? I would assume that Ptolemii officers have their meals prepared for them on demand."

"I wasn't always a Ptolemii officer, Vin-Chay. I had a life as a child and young adult before I entered Academy all those years ago," Pyke said, amused. He wondered how much he should tell him about his background. He thought, *Why not, we'll be living together for a long time and I can't keep all of my life a mystery to him.* He washed his hands and turned back to Vin-Chay as he dried them.

"I came from a small outpost a few hundred kilometers from here. My parents had a small agriplex that barely kept us going. My mother was an excellent cook and she showed me how to prepare food from the time I could hold a utensil." He hesitated for a few seconds before going on. "They died when I was young, and I spent time shuffling between foster care and various families. There were no chits, so I earned them for extra food and clothing by working as a cook in various small establishments in my town and then in Thebes when I started at Academy."

"At Academy? Why?" Vin-Chay asked.

"Academy is exclusive and expensive. I got in on a partial academic scholarship from my secondary academy, based on my grades and potential, but I had to find a way to supplement the cost and keep myself fed and clothed—for clothes other than the standard uniforms which were provided. I also needed luxuries such as pleasure tomes, and occasional draughts of ale. Things you probably took for granted, I assume?" he finished mildly, barely managing to keep a touch of unbidden envy out of his voice.

"My education was a foregone conclusion. It was set from the time I was born," Vin-Chay admitted. "My only concern was studying and learning and keeping my grades high enough to honor my family and acquire an investiture on a good ship."

"The *Remus*," Pyke said as he reached for a small, hot biscuit resting in the new ceramic breadbasket. He dropped a few crumbs on the floor. Before he could retrieve them a small, flat, circular sanibot skittered out from under the cabinets, efficiently sucked in and absorbed the organic crumbs. The deft little helper then whirled around and settled itself back into its safe compartment to await the next invasion of germs on the slick, clean tile surface.

Vin-Chay shrugged. "Fine. So that part didn't work out."

Pyke almost grinned at the unexpected flippancy but held his solemn facade, enjoying an oddly intimate moment between the two as they waited for the bakkava to finish baking. Vin-Chay pulled the meal plates and utensils from their cabinets and went to set the dining table in the hearthchamber. When he had finished he selected some kindling wood and started a small blaze in the fireplace, stoking it to a decent flame and putting two logs on it. He stood and looked out the patio doors as the sun melted into the distance, and the temperature of the air outside quickly cooled. He checked on the fire and enjoyed a moment's mesmerizing by the crackling flames. It made him think of his father's recreational lodge in the Glacial Peakskills on Osiron, and he felt an unbearable pang of homesickness.

He turned to see Pyke watching him from the nutrichamber archway. He moved towards him as they both heard the sound of a reccraft settling down near the front entrance. Pyke motioned him to go into the nutrichamber as he walked to the door to greet his friends.

TutMose noticed the warm, homey atmosphere as soon as they entered the hearthchamber. Unlike the times they had been here before, the chamber no longer seemed sterile and unwelcoming. He and Zandran exchanged glances as Pyke turned away for a moment to open the bottle of spirits they had brought, a twenty-year-old bottle of annise from one of the neighboring provinces. He set it on the dining table and gestured them to make themselves comfortable in the hearthchamber proper as they waited for the meal to be completed.

They settled themselves on a new divan positioned in front of the fireplace. It was large and soft and comfortable, and it was part of a new set of furniture that included two chairs and several low tables made from barken wood. Zandran pointed to a painting on the wall and neither man could entirely hide his surprise at the subtle yet perceptible change that had been effected in the chamber in the last few weeks. Both wondered if the initiative was Pyke's or the slave's. In either case, they both liked it. The timing concerned them; they both knew what yesterday had been.

Pyke came into the chamber and summoned them to the dining table as Vin-Chay entered and placed the hot bakkava dish in the middle, then left to retrieve the remainder of the meal and beverages. He ignored both men and Pyke thought silently, *So much for intimate moments. Here we go again.* He shook off his concern and seated himself, facing TutMose. He realized too late that that would put Vin-Chay squarely opposite Zandran, but he thought he would only exacerbate the situation if he rose and re-seated himself. He stayed where he was.

Vin-Chay returned and deposited a pitcher of fresh fruit juice on the table, as well as the dish of sliced fruits and raw vegetables that Pyke had requested. He seated himself opposite Zandran, his face neutral, like Zandran's. Pyke offered a silent prayer for an unspoken truce between the two men. He noticed a twinkle in TutMose's eye, as though he was enjoying the entire situation, and rather than dreading it was looking forward to it. Pyke began to relax.

TutMose poured himself a goblet of juice and raised it to Pyke. "So, Commander, there has been quite a change in this chamber alone since the last time we were here. It's lovely."

"Thank you, Tut. It needed something ... personal to start making it a home rather than just a house. Little by little, it will become more accommodating." Pyke drained his own goblet, which Vin-Chay had absently filled without

request, to Zandran's surprise. Vin-Chay filled his own goblet and sipped it slowly as he considered that this would never be his home, no matter how long Pyke managed to keep him captive here.

"Gentlemen," Pyke urged, "Dig in." He started the meal by helping himself to a generous serving of the bakkava, then passed the dish to his left to Zandran, who took his own hefty portion. TutMose and Vin-Chay filled their plates, and the men began to eat leisurely. TutMose grinned after the first bite and commended Pyke on the meal, a favorite dish of most Ptolemii.

"Excellent, Commander. Yours, or Vin-Chay's?"

"Mine. He isn't quite up to this level in his nutrichamber skills although he has managed to master the art of boiling water and slicing raw vegetables." Pyke grinned at TutMose, enjoying the warmth of their long friendship.

Vin-Chay stiffened slightly even though he knew the words were simple teasing and that Pyke had meant no disrespect. It was one thing for Pyke to jab at him good-naturedly when they were alone, but quite another thing when they were in the presence of two military officers, neither of whom held much if any respect for him now, he assumed. Pyke noticed the look on his face and said mildly, "I'm joking." Vin-Chay shrugged it off and continued doing justice to the meal. Pyke did prepare food well.

The remainder of the meal passed without incident as Pyke and his associates discussed a variety of topics, most non-work related and nothing confidential. On occasion Vin-Chay was called upon to respond to someone's question or comment, and he generally answered in monosyllables without being overtly disrespectful. Zandran managed to throw in a subtle barb or two, and Pyke was frustrated with the two men although he kept silent. He was going to have to put a stop to this on both sides very soon.

Vin-Chay cleared the plates and put a carafe of hot java on the hearthchamber table in front of the other three men. He turned to Pyke and said, "If it's all right with you I'd like to finish up that section out back before it gets too cold."

"Fine," Pyke said, pouring himself a cup. "No more than an hour, though."

Vin-Chay nodded and went through the nutrichamber arch to leave by the other back doors so that he wouldn't let the cool air into the hearthchamber. Pyke sat back and gestured to TutMose and Zandran to help themselves to the java.

He leaned back, smiled slightly and mused, "My restless warrior. He can never be still for any length of time." He sipped the hot beverage. "It makes for an interesting home life."

"A dangerous home life, Commander," Zandran frowned. "May I speak freely?" Pyke nodded cautiously. "This is not a safe situation for you. He is an enemy waiting to strike. And you are here alone with him."

"I am not without skill or resources, Zandran," Pyke said. "I am well aware that his silence and acquiescence to many things is a simple matter of biding his time. I am on my guard. Trust me."

"It's not you I don't trust, Commander. It's the Osiran. It's obvious that you have some kind of feelings for him—"

"Zandran," cautioned TutMose, but his friend went on as Pyke held his hand up to silence TutMose and allow Zandran to finish.

"But no matter how much you may want it, he will never be another Coba and this is not his house. He—" Zandran stopped speaking abruptly as he simultaneously saw the cold look on Pyke's face, and knew he had gone too far, and saw Vin-Chay enter the chamber with a plate of dessert cappassi, which he placed silently on the table in front of Pyke before leaving again.

Pyke leaned back against the chair and took a deep breath as he considered his friends. He understood Zandran's concern, but he had gone too far this time and it was better that the evening come to a conclusion now before other unfortunate things were said. He rose from the divan and the other two men followed suit.

"I find myself suddenly very tired," he said evenly. "I think we need to call this evening over, if you don't mind." Zandran and TutMose rose together and exchanged weak good-byes with their commander as he escorted them to the door.

"Fool," TutMose said disgustedly to his companion as they entered their recraft. He muttered a variety of uncomplimentary comments to Zandran during the journey back to Thebes, as his friend sulked silently and cursed the Osiran for precipitating this whole situation.

Pyke stoked the hearth fire slowly, enjoying the quiet solitude and the heat and crackle of the flames and embers. He wasn't certain how long he stood over it, idly pushing the burning logs around, deliberately keeping his mind empty and thoughts away from old, painful memories and new, uncertain ones. He walked over to the doors and pushed back the drapery to watch Vin-Chay working on his enclosure wall under the bright moonlight and luminescence from the artificial lights attached to the outside of the back door. Pyke watched him for several minutes, admiring his well-muscled body, deft movements and concentration. There was no wasted energy there, and he was tenacious.

Pyke slipped back into his new, comfortable chair and sipped his tepid java absently. He had never stopped being conflicted about this entire situation, right

from the start at Canaan when he had made his audacious proposal to Vin-Chay, hoping and fearing at the same time that it would be accepted. He had always had his qualms about this civil war although he had pushed those doubts to the back of his mind and had gone about his business of being a good warrior. He had swallowed his pride and gone completely against his grain regarding the abomination of slavery when he had arranged to take Vin-Chay home as his legal slave. He knew his actions were wrong, but he had justified his actions to himself by knowing that Vin-Chay would have unlikely survived the mines, and would likely have been sold to someone else who would probably abuse and mistreat him. Still, he felt guilty.

He thought about Zandran's words and how this would never be Vin-Chay's house. That was probably true, he thought ruefully, but there was always a chance. A very small chance that he was compelled to take, for God knows what reason. He rose and went to the door to call Vin-Chay into the house for the evening. *Enough work*, he thought. *Time for pleasure and rousting these disquieting thoughts.*

After another stunningly ferocious bout of lovemaking, Pyke lay back spent and heaving. His companion was silent, as usual; he rarely spoke after their encounters, although he didn't seem particularly disturbed by them. Vin-Chay had been incensed when a few days into their cohabitation Pyke had explained the Thrallplex medical procedure that he had ordered performed on his new slave: a colonsphincterectomy that elasticized and reinforced the young man's anal canal to prevent damage due to extended and often vigorous penetration. Pyke had minimized his full sexual dominance and activity when they were on Canaan, to prevent any excessive pain or damage to his captive, but he had every intention of indulging his desires now that they were on Ptolem. Vin-Chay grudgingly admitted that there was far less discomfort, and no bleeding.

Pyke left the bed and went into the sanichamber to wash, deciding to take a long, hot shower instead. He let the recycled water stream down his face and body as he moved the soap leisurely over himself, enjoying the subtle physical pleasures of good bathing. He thought it would be pleasing to have Vin-Chay in the shower with him, taking his pleasure from a mutual bathing instead of a solitary one. Perhaps tomorrow morning.

He dried himself off and slipped back into bed. Vin-Chay was still awake but turned on his side, as he usually slept. Pyke wrapped himself around his bedmate and rubbed his hand lightly across Vin-Chay's chest, playing with the thick, dark hair that swirled across it and down nearly to his belly. Pyke had just started to drift off when Vin-Chay broke the dark silence.

“Who is Coba?” he asked softly. He felt Pyke stiffen and waited for several long, tense moments before his captor answered him.

“My wife,” Pyke said quietly.

CHAPTER FIVE

Vin-Chay felt a dull roaring in his ears. *My wife*. He was vaguely aware of Pyke releasing his hold on him. The Ptolemii turned to dimly illuminate the chamber from his bed table. Vin-Chay turned over to face Pyke, raising himself up on his elbow to meet Pyke's intense gaze. He regrouped quickly and managed to make his response even and almost casual. Pyke knew better than to believe the tone, and Vin-Chay sensed this.

"Your wife?" he asked. "I was ... not aware that you were married, Commander."

"*Was* married," Pyke replied. "I may be doing a lot of things to you and with you, Vin-Chay, but adultery is not one of them. She's dead. She died five years ago yesterday."

"Yesterday," Vin-Chay said softly.

"Yes. It's ancient history now, not something I really want to discuss." Pyke's icy voice would have stopped anyone else from pursuing the delicate subject, but his words and tone seemed to have no effect on his contentious captive.

"How did she die?" Vin-Chay persisted.

"Did you hear what I just said? It's not something I care to discuss. Let it go," Pyke snapped. He shoved off his bed covers, swung his legs angrily over the side and walked over to the spirits store against the far wall opposite the bed. He poured himself a draught of annise, and swallowed it in one smooth action. He was very aware of Vin-Chay's eyes on him.

Vin-Chay never let his eyes off of his Ptolemii captor as the man drank down the spirits. He let his eyes roam over Pyke's pale, slender, but well-proportioned naked body. He was a number of centimeters taller than Pyke, and quite a few kilograms heavier than the man as well. He knew that in an even contest of physical strength he could disable Pyke quickly. Then again, perhaps not, because the smaller man would undoubtedly make up in tenacity and cunning what he lacked in body mass. Vin-Chay ran his fingers through his thick, dark hair—now much longer than he had ever worn it—and took a small satisfaction in the fact that Pyke's hair was thinner and definitely starting to recede. The knowledge gave him a savage pleasure.

He let his gaze rest for a moment on the body part that Pyke used to give himself such pleasure at Vin-Chay's expense. And now he knew that Pyke had also used it on a woman, a woman he had married and possibly loved. And lost. There was something else, something that was hidden here, he sensed, and Vin-Chay was determined to root it out. He knew that persisting could prove to be dangerous but he didn't care.

He pulled himself up to a sitting position on the bed, resting his back firmly against the headboard as he and Pyke faced each other, challenge in both their eyes. Pyke sipped at his second helping of annise, and thought that sidestepping this issue was only postponing the inevitable. It was just a matter of time before Vin-Chay knew the story and would probably jump to the wrong conclusions. He put down the goblet and crossed his arms as he studied his opponent a moment before speaking.

"My wife was an educator for children with special psychological needs. She was on an assignment to assist in an emergency evacuation of the secondary academy on Telluron, the second moon of Sekmet. There were a number of miners' children there, with various afflictions and disabilities, and the war was starting to rage too furiously in that quadrant. The Academic Ministry decided to remove the population to Ptolem for the duration of what was supposed to be a relatively short war. Not that it has been." He poured himself another draught of annise and sipped it slowly and deliberately, both to punish Vin-Chay with anticipation, and to avoid the unpleasant information that he was about to reveal. He went on.

"The evacuation went as planned. Her ship was on the way out of the moon's orbit when it became a casualty of war. The ship's captain tried to prevent any delays in returning to Ptolem, and ignored official warnings that both Ptolemii and Osiran warships were moving towards one another with an anticipated clash just outside of the Telluron neutral zone. My wife's ship entered the zone at the same time as the two ships, which opened fire on one another. Her ship was hit and disabled and drifted in orbit as our two sides engaged in a furious battle which eventually saw the Osiran vessel pushed back past Sekmet. It was a mutual retreat for the sake of both ships' survival. Our ship evacuated my wife's and brought the survivors back to Ptolem. Eighty-two people on her vessel died, including my wife, and that arrogant captain, and thirty-six children. She survived for nearly half of the voyage home, but died before she could reach the Theban Mediplex." He paused. "We had been married a year on the day before she left for Telluron."

Vin-Chay had gone very still during Pyke's story, the details of which had sent him into a cold sweat. Sekmet. Telluron. An academy ship inadvertently fired

upon, causing the death of scores of people, including children. Including Pyke's wife of one short year.

"A year," Vin-Chay repeated absently. He looked at Pyke with a glint of compassion in his bright blue eyes. "Then you had no children. No time to build a life and family together."

"We had a life together," Pyke corrected coldly. "A short one. And yes, my wife died before she had the joy of giving birth to what would have been the first of our many children." His chilly green eyes bored into Vin-Chay's.

He was painfully conscious of Pyke's intense gaze on him, but he knew he had to ask the next question.

"What was the name of the ship that your wife was on, Commander?" he asked quietly, already knowing.

"The *Vallerian*," Pyke answered. "It was fired upon by the *Victorion*. Your father's flagship. And you are wrong."

"Wrong?" Vin-Chay whispered.

"Your being here is not a consequence of that action. This is not retribution for my wife's death against you or your father. But you don't believe that, do you?"

Vin-Chay shook his head. How could he not believe that? Of course it was true. His father's flagship had caused the death of Pyke's wife. Pyke had reviewed his files at Canaan and realized that he had the son of a very personal enemy at his mercy. And he had acted. He had taken to his bed and enslavement the son of the man who had taken his wife and their life together away forever. Perfect. Even in his bitterness Vin-Chay could appreciate the irony of his present situation. He raised his eyes to Pyke, who could see the bitterness in the young man's expressive face. Pyke's stomach clenched, and he wondered how long it would take to undo the damage that had just been done to their already fragile relationship. A long time, he surmised. Possibly never. He spoke in a slow tone tinged with a defensive arrogance that he realized even as the words came out with a tone he hadn't meant.

"This is *not* 'an eye for an eye,' Vin-Chay. I have not taken you as my slave to punish your father for the order he gave that wound up killing my wife. I recognize that you had nothing to do with it and that it was an unfortunate act of war that took her life. I am *not* taking her death out on you."

"How could you think I would believe that," Vin-Chay said softly, as his rage grew, "after all that's happened since you first laid eyes on me at Canaan? It all makes so much sense now—the interest, the mind games, the proposition. How much longer would you have waited for me to agree to it before you had me

dragged to your quarters and forcibly raped me? You probably wished that I hadn't acquiesced so that you would have your justification for a violent assault. In that I'm glad I disappointed you, *master!*" he spat out angrily, making a slight, unconscious move on the bed towards Pyke.

"I wish that right now!" Pyke shot back as he pushed himself away from the chest he was leaning on, launching himself towards his contentious captive then holding himself in check. He clenched his hand into a fist and rubbed it nervously against his chin and mouth, which had suddenly dried as this latest eruption took place. Vin-Chay had reacted to Pyke's movement by swinging his own legs over the edge of the bed and standing, facing the Ptolemii with growing fury at how he was being used for revenge. His eyes blazed, matching Pyke's in intensity, and the two men stood motionless, less than two meters apart, glaring at one another in a passionate anger. Pyke was the first to break the silence.

"Get back into bed, *slave,*" he said harshly, clenching and unclenching his balled fists. *God's Blood,* he thought. *I'm acting just as he expects me to. Damn him!*

"Yes, *master,*" Vin-Chay said sarcastically, inclining his head and returning to their bed. He slid under the covers and waited for Pyke to join him and inflict more of his vengeance on his enemy's son. Pyke cursed him softly, getting into bed with him and dimming the light to near darkness. He turned over on his side, away from Vin-Chay. In less than a minute he felt Vin-Chay move against his back and start to caress him. He turned over rapidly and shoved the young man's hand away from his hot thigh.

"What are you doing?" he asked harshly.

"Trying to please you, master," Vin-Chay answered silkily. "Is this not what I'm here for?" He reached again for Pyke, clearly not realizing that he was pushing the line as far as Zandran had managed to do earlier in the evening. He had barely touched Pyke when he was slammed away by a powerful backhand blow to his face. Pyke snarled, "Go to sleep," before he turned his back to Vin-Chay again and dimmed the light entirely, leaving the chamber in darkness.

Both men lay awake for hours, neither moving nor sleeping. Vin-Chay relished the pain that throbbed through his split lip, and the taste of his blood was oddly sweet. They served to give him purpose and reinforced his hatred of all Ptolemii and this one in particular. He had been less than diligent in his resolve of late, and this evening had been good for him. Very good. He longed for the day when his Ptolemii captor would join his lost wife in death. It didn't matter what the cost would be to him. He would gladly pay it.

CHAPTER SIX

“Pack two bags for us. Make sure you have enough clothing and personal items for at least two weeks. We’re going into Thebes.”

Pyke tossed the unexpected words out over his shoulder as he scraped the last of his morning meal off his plate and got up to leave the nutrichamber. It was the most he had spoken to Vin-Chay in the week since their eventful night when Vin-Chay had learned the truth about Pyke’s dead wife and his own part in the Ptolemii’s retribution. Their time together was now punctuated by long silences and chilly stares. Vin-Chay found himself spending as much time outdoors as he could, working on his wall, keeping his mind and body occupied, and to avoid contact with the man who held him captive. Thankfully, Pyke hadn’t touched him since that night, but the nights were longer than usual as they lay side-by-side, unspeaking, awake for hours before they both fell into restive sleeps.

Vin-Chay finished his duties in the nutrichamber and went up to the noxchamber to pack. He passed Pyke in the hearthchamber. His captor was standing at the back doors, staring out at the half-completed enclosure and the mountains beyond. He neither moved nor acknowledged Vin-Chay’s presence as his slave walked past him to the stairs.

Thebes, Vin-Chay thought as he deftly selected clothing and packed the garments carefully in the two bags. His anticipation was building. This was a chance to scope out the capital city, and gather intelligence that could be useful for his escape efforts and for his people’s war efforts. He also had to try to find an Osiran temple and see if he could establish a link to Cassian and any other of his fellow Osirans. He had to find out what the military capacity was in the city, where the warriors were located, where the ships and weapons were, and if they could be taken or disabled. His crowded mind raced with a dozen stimulating thoughts. He turned to pick up a tunic and found Pyke standing in the doorway, appraising him silently. He was certain at that moment that the man could see right through him, that he knew exactly what Vin-Chay was thinking and was intrigued rather than alarmed. Vin-Chay ignored him and finished packing, and when he turned again Pyke was gone.

He descended the stairs and dropped the bags next to the cold fireplace. Pyke was out back; he seemed to be just staring at the mountains, reluctant to leave them. He turned around and saw Vin-Chay watching him, and he walked back to the house and re-entered it, sliding the doors closed and locking them. At the same time Vin-Chay heard the commandcraft approach the house and descend, and Pyke motioned wordlessly to him to take the bags out.

Pyke's usual navigator watched him with arms folded as Vin-Chay came out of the house and brought the bags to the commandcraft. He dropped them by the side of the craft and waited, as the officer slowly unfolded his arms and walked to the rear portal, and slid it open. He didn't offer to assist in storing the bags, and Vin-Chay didn't wait for him. He pushed them into a far corner of the craftstor and backed away, awaiting Pyke's exit from the house.

Pyke came out a few minutes later and initiated the security systems. He moved past Vin-Chay and entered the craft, followed by his anxious captive. The navigator set his coordinates and the craft ascended and moved quickly away from the solitary residence. Pyke remained silent throughout the trip, although Vin-Chay was pleasantly occupied by watching the views of the desert and mountains as they receded and were replaced by a heavier residential population, then by the outline of Thebes proper. The sprawling city stretched out lazily across valleys, hills and flatlands, esthetically blending in with the natural desert landscape.

Vin-Chay was so engrossed in his appraisal of his surroundings that he was unaware of Pyke's intense gaze on him as they entered the restricted limits of the capital city. He had only seen a tiny part of it when he was processed as a slave, and he was barely conscious on the night that Pyke had brought him from the city to his home. He had been isolated at the house since then, and had no concept of what the city was like. He wondered just how much of a chance he would have to explore it. He had no idea where they would be staying, or for how long, or what limits would be placed on his movements. He thought he'd better not get his hopes up too high, but at this point anything was a start.

The center of Thebes rose leisurely out of the desert in a wide sprawl of sand-colored buildings. There were a variety of shapes and sizes, but the prevalent structure was clearly the tri-sided pyramid shape that dominated Ptolemii culture. There were a number of structures in a variety of dome and rectangular shapes as well, and all but a few had recessed doorways and windows built to blend in with their structures and the desert. None were architecturally obtrusive. Pyke interrupted his thoughts unexpectedly.

"This section of the city is called Lower Cairon," Pyke explained nonchalantly, as Vin-Chay turned towards him. "The Miliplex is on the other side of the city near the government offices and the Pharon's compound. I own a small apartment near here for the times I need to stay in the city for a while." He noticed Vin-Chay's interested gaze and went on. "It's not considered an especially fashionable area for military or professional personnel, but I enjoy the color and ambiance of the people and houses." Pyke hoped that the silent stalemate between them would be alleviated if he made the effort to break the silence, but Vin-Chay merely listened to him quietly then turned back to watch the sights go by. *Damned stubborn Osiran*, Pyke thought angrily. *No, I'm not going to let him antagonize me. That's his whole point.*

Pyke's navigator obviously knew where to go, and maneuvered the craft down over several narrow side streets and past a number of street vendors selling food and clothing. There seemed to be a cacophony of voices arguing about quality and prices as the craft passed them, and people were dressed in a colorful variety of clothes and styles that somehow seemed perfectly suited for their city and houses. The men were almost all dressed in loose-fitting trousers and tunics, most of which were light-colored or sandy-brown, adorned with red, blue and green sashes, gloves and boots. Quite a few people were dressed in plain white skorts with ornate codpieces, their chests occasionally bare, but more often covered with sleeveless tunics that revealed their burnished arms. The women were dressed similarly, except for the skorts, although most of them wore flowing dresses or robes rather than trousers. With few exceptions, the people wore tasteful or outlandish jewelry on their heads and hands; many of the men had at least one ear pierced, like Pyke.

The commandcraft docked near a two-tier building with a unique ornamental metal balcony overlooking a large, bright, open square. Pyke gestured to him to get out, and Vin-Chay opened the craftstor and pulled out the two bags. Pyke gave some instructions to his navigator, who nodded then departed with the craft. Vin-Chay waited patiently as Pyke accessed the security panel and opened one of the two side-by-side doors. He held it open as Vin-Chay moved past him and deposited the bags on the entryway floor. Pyke pressed the lumiswitch and bathed the entryway in a soft gold light from the vaulted ceiling above them.

The apartment was far different from Pyke's house. Whereas the latter was open and spacious, this residence was far smaller and compact. There was no wasted space, and far less room in which to move about. As he followed Pyke through the small residence, he noted that there was a small nutrichamber in the rear of the first tier, behind the comfortable but small hearthchamber that con-

tained one large window that opened out to the square, and a small fireplace. As they ascended the stairs that abutted the side of the house near the entryway, Vin-Chay noted that this residence spoke much more of the man who owned it: there were pictures and military items on the walls and furniture, and the place definitely looked lived-in. *And warm*, Vin-Chay thought reflectively. He stared curiously at the large, lucitium-encased suite of ancient battle weapons and artifacts affixed to the east wall.

The second tier was simply one large noxchamber area with a tiny but functional sanichamber with a compact shower, barely big enough for one man let alone two, and no bathtub. The noxchamber double-doors opened out to that large decorative metal balcony furnished with only two chairs and a small table. *A good place to relax and sip evening java*, Vin-Chay thought, and imagined that that was just what Pyke had done whenever he was in residence. The balcony faced the setting sun and had few obstructions to a beautiful view. Pyke had chosen his city home well.

Pyke told him to unpack then come downstairs. When he left the chamber Vin-Chay removed their clothes and started to put them away in the single large dresser and freestanding closet that already had a number of clothing articles in them. Vin-Chay moved them around to free up space for his own personal items, then when he finished he stuffed the garment bags in a far corner of the closet and descended to the hearthchamber.

Pyke was talking quietly to someone on his cy-comm, but clicked it off when Vin-Chay came into the chamber. Vin-Chay was dying to get his hands on the small multi-purpose mechanism that seemed far more advanced than similar instruments on Osiron. Shaped like a flat, equilaterally tri-sided pyramid a scant six centimeters in length, the cy-comm contained a plethora of functions, including voice and visual communications linked into Pyke's cochlear implant and the sensor chips subdermal in his right fingertips. Pyke had immense flexibility in accessing data from the Miliplex and other institutions, as well as the ability to display them on a tiny retractable monitor that had the capacity to expand to a square 20 centimeters if its owner wanted to watch a recorded Artplex opera, display a topographical map, or engage in a tactical simulation. Pyke could also use the instrument to track, and neurologically disable or kill Vin-Chay through his link to the slave's own implanted loc-chip. And for those situations requiring deadly force against any other enemy, there was the microscopic but deadly pulsar duct that on verbal command could incinerate an opponent in a split second. Vin-Chay wanted nothing more than to dissect the tiny mechanism and put his long dormant engineering talents to use. He doubted he'd get the chance, what

with Pyke's security measures restricting any 'dangerous' actions he might take. He had found that out the hard way during his aborted correlator breaches. But still he wondered about and craved to uncover any more advanced technological secrets that he could bring home to his people. Someday ...

Pyke motioned for him to sit down. Vin-Chay's first inclination was to keep standing simply to be contrary, but he decided to forego this particular instance of insubordination, and complied with Pyke's request. Pyke seated himself opposite Vin-Chay and looked at him for a long, silent moment before choosing his words carefully.

"Vin-Chay," Pyke began slowly, speaking in Osiran so that no words or meanings were lost on the man who was not yet fluent in the language of the planet. "We have a situation here, you and I. It is not of your making, but you have no choice but to be a part of it because of my wishes and because of this war. That is a fact. Another fact is that I cannot keep you an isolated prisoner with absolutely no rights in my household without causing significant repercussions for both of us at one point or another. As stressful as this may be for you, it is equally as stressful for me to have a home life that is fraught with tension, anger and danger. I don't want to live like that, and I don't deserve to live like that. Therefore, as I see it, I have three choices: one, I can kill you and end this entirely. I'm not willing to do that, certainly not now." He saw the Osiran stiffen and tense as though he were about to spring, then slightly relax and keep listening. *Good*, Pyke thought. *He's willing to listen. Half the battle.* He continued.

"Two, I can sell you off to some other Ptolemii who would do God knows what with you, and who would most likely provoke you to do God knows what in return. That would be putting someone else's life in danger, and I'm not willing to do that, either. That leaves one viable option."

"And that is, Commander?" Vin-Chay asked cautiously, keeping his eyes locked with Pyke's as he had done through the entire conversation thus far.

"And that is to allow you certain freedoms that will make our living together much less strenuous on both of us. Under the restraints imposed by this society, and under the guidelines of my own needs. If I set these guidelines and you break them, then you lose the privileges I have granted you, and we start back at square one. And I assure you that it will be far harder in some respects and impossible in others to regain those privileges. Am I making myself clear?" Pyke asked evenly.

"Very clear, Commander," Vin-Chay answered in the same tone. He waited for Pyke to go on.

"Good. Then here are my guidelines. Your duties are the same as I stated to you that first day in my home. They apply here as well, but to a greater degree.

You will need to go out and purchase food and other items as the need arises. You may need to run errands for me. You will continue your studies. You will also be allowed to go out in the city and have some free time to learn about this culture and this place, and to initiate contact with other persons, preferably Ptolemii, but not limited to.”

“I don’t understand,” Vin-Chay said.

“I am saying that you may have contact with other of your people as long as it is not for, shall we say, nefarious purposes bent on escape or harm to me or my people, or anything whatsoever to do with this war. You are out of this war, period, and I will brook no involvement from you. I recognize your need to socialize with your own kind. I understand your need to hold on to something that is ‘home.’ But your home is here now, and that urge must be mitigated with a concerted effort to adapt to this world. If I see that you are not making a genuine effort to do so, then I will have no choice but to curtail your outside activities. And possibly exact punishment,” he ended ominously. He tried to determine if his words had sunk in, but Vin-Chay’s face was unreadable. He went on.

“You already have finaccess to a special house account for purchases. I will review everything you buy, so don’t attempt to use the chits for anything that I do not authorize. I will provide manual chits for miscellaneous items, such as tomes or meals, or personal things you would like to buy. When I am certain that you know the layout and restrictions of the city, I will consider permitting you to use my personal reccraft for authorized uses as long as I’m satisfied that you can navigate a Sidewinder without killing anyone. I have no problem with you attending religious services in an Osiran temple, although they are few and far between here. Be aware, though, that the government does not sanction your religion, although it is not yet banned outright. Be careful.” Pyke noticed that Vin-Chay seemed to perk up at the mention of allowing him religious freedom. Pyke thought that that might very well be a factor in making his transition to this culture easier if he were able to rely on his faith to get him through the more difficult areas. He felt the tightness in his chest loosening a little.

“Now,” said Pyke, switching back to Ptolemii, “we will be here in the city for two weeks while I attend to business. Then we’ll return to the main house. That’s how it’s likely to be from this point on, moving between households for different periods of time. There will be times that I may stay here without you, and I expect you to show the same restraint alone back there as you would if I were present. Any questions?”

“Am I allowed to go out during the day at any time when you are away? And for how long? Are there any limits as to where I can travel?”

"I will allow you to leave the premises providing you are back to prepare meals and take care of any other tasks I set for you. You will *never* be out after dark unless I give you explicit authorization. You need to remember that you are a slave on this planet, and in the eyes of virtually everyone on it you have no rights. You will not be treated as a free Ptolemii citizen if you should have the misfortune to be detained by the military authorities, or run afoul of any citizen. Under no circumstances are you to trespass on any military installation or go near a ship or any Ptolemii warriors. And lastly, do not even consider escape. There is no place to go. Remember that loc-chip in your body and the fact that you can be pinpointed in minutes and apprehended or neutralized. The punishments for escaping slaves who are caught are severe."

"Such as?" Vin-Chay asked evenly. He had to know what he would be up against.

"Such as execution in extreme instances. At the discretion of the state or the master. Lesser punishments include public floggings, dismemberment, and castration." Pyke noted the querying look on Vin-Chay's face and repeated the punishments slowly since they were not words that Vin-Chay was yet used to in his pursuit of fluency in his new language.

Vin-Chay felt his stomach turn violently as he read the truth in Pyke's eyes. The commander wasn't inventing or embellishing this; he was telling the truth. His mouth felt dry as he tried to keep his face neutral, but he could see by the oddly sympathetic look on Pyke's face that he hadn't succeeded. He shook his head slowly, disbelievingly.

"How can a civilization as advanced as both of ours be so ... barbaric? How can human beings treat one another like this? How can you buy into that, Commander?" he ended angrily. He disregarded the cautionary look on Pyke's face and pushed on, rising from the chair and pacing nervously towards the fireplace. He turned and faced Pyke defiantly and went on. "You are an educated, intelligent man. Whatever may have transpired between us in these last months, I cannot say in all honesty that you are a monster, yet you support a monstrous ruler and government."

"Careful, Vin-Chay," Pyke cautioned, to no avail.

"No, I won't be 'careful,' sir! You can punish me however you want, but I'll finish what I'm saying, regardless of the consequences."

"Fine," Pyke responded coolly. "I'm listening. Finish."

Vin-Chay stared at him hard. "How can you do this? To me? To my people? To *your* people? You aren't building a future—you're helping to destroy it!"

"Standards of basic human decency are not always compatible with accepted practices within this empire," Pyke said coldly. He could feel his blood rising, but his flair of anger at his slave's words and tone was mitigated by the fact that he reluctantly but silently agreed with much of what Vin-Chay said. In the past few years he had gradually come to a crossroads with many of the actions of the Pharon and government, although he held to his oath as a warrior, and upheld their directives. But it had become so much more difficult than it had eleven years earlier when the war had started. And he did not appreciate his guilt and doubts being challenged so adamantly and openly by a person whom he had tried to treat decently despite the differences in their statuses. He rose angrily and faced his heated companion. Despite the dressing down he planned on giving the young man, he couldn't help but admire his passion and courage and sense of honor, and he had to suppress a surge of desire as he stared into Vin-Chay's fiery blue eyes.

"Enough!" he snapped. "I won't debate state policy with you, and I certainly see no need to justify my own actions. I am not accountable to you—only to my Pharon. You will accept my rules or you will suffer the consequences. That's all there is to it, so this conversation ends *now!*" Pyke took a deep breath, expecting a tart response, but he received none. Vin-Chay held his tongue for once. Pyke relaxed a little, then waved a dismissive hand at his slave.

"Get out of my sight while I finish my business. We'll go out to eat since the larder here has no supplies. You can pick them up tomorrow when I leave for the Miliplex. Go." Pyke turned away dismissively as he reconnected his commlink with whomever it was that he had been talking to shortly before.

Vin-Chay decided to explore the nutrichamber and found it well stocked with cooking implements and some basic staples. There was a small, arched door that opened to a small, enclosed back yard. The fence was fairly high, at least three meters, and the height gave the enclosure an almost stifling sense of security and constraint. There were niches in the wall, and they held stone flower boxes containing dead leaves and old soil. Dead leaves littered the ground, and it was clear that the place had not been maintained very well since Pyke had last been here. He had noticed a slightly musty smell as well to the inside of the house. It needed a good cleaning.

God, he thought. *I'm starting to think like a servant. He may treat me like one and expect me to act like one, but I will not start thinking like one! The Ptolemii be damned!* he thought savagely as he entered the house and left the nutrichamber to walk past Pyke, who was still engrossed in his conversation. He strode up the stairs to mark time by exploring the noxchamber and closets. He had barely

started when Pyke yelled for him to come down. He deliberately waited a couple of minutes for the next yell, then descended to a stone-faced Pyke, who wordlessly led him out the front door and into the bustling street.

The mid-day sun poured down over the people and streets. Vin-Chay followed Pyke at a leisurely pace through several side streets, past vendors and stores and people walking just as casually as they were. He had learned the hard way that the only way to survive the intense heat of this planet was to slow down his natural inclination to walk and move quickly, and pace himself. He was satisfied to note that he perspired far less than he had at the start of his captivity on Ptolem, although he had not attained a complete lack of perspiration. Still, his breathing was easier, and he felt more active and able to achieve the basics of outdoor activity that he relished.

Pyke stopped at a small outdoor eatery located on one side of a large open mall area. A turbaned man who appeared to be the proprietor, and who obviously knew him well greeted him warmly. They were seated at a round table under a shade awning, where they had a good view of the street and passing people. The vendor placed two goblets of cold water in front of them as Pyke ordered food for them without consulting Vin-Chay as to what he would prefer to eat. They waited in silence as the food was prepared, taking in the sights, sounds and smells.

Vin-Chay studied the men, women and children who passed them. With few exceptions the men had shoulder-length or longer hair that either flowed freely, or was clasped back with an ornate band. Most sported the ritual six side braids that Pyke had woven into his own locks since their arrival on Ptolem. The women without exception had long hair that flowed from their shoulders to well past their waists. Vin-Chay wondered why in this heat they didn't crop their hair closely, as was the Osiran custom. It seemed that the hair that his and Pyke's respective peoples sported should have been in reverse. Odd. His own hair now reached well past his ears and fell in a layered cut across his forehead and down the sides of his face. It wouldn't be too much longer before it reached his shoulders as Pyke's did. He wondered how long the locks needed to grow before Pyke would consent to allowing him to cut them. He missed the close-cropped, short, neat hairstyles of his birthworld, and ran his fingers absently across his chin as he contemplated his missing beard. That, strangely, he didn't miss at all. He enjoyed the barefaced look that he had worn in his youth.

It was clear that the Ptolemii mode of garb tended towards loose-fitting garments for both sexes, both adults and children. At first glance he had thought that the colors they wore were mostly the same, but upon further examination

there were clearly a large number of shades of color in their multi-layered clothing, most of which were variations on the sandy hues that permeated the geography of their planet. He noted the variations from white to very light brown, to tan to rust, with their clean color lines being broken only by the occasional decorative sash, headband or gloves. Most of their softboots were dark brown and reached to mid-calf, although quite a few people seemed to wear thick-soled sandals with braided straps to the knees. Their jewelry sparkled brightly under the sun's unflinching rays, gold and silver and encrusted with multicolored stones. Most of the women wore large, hooped or dangling earrings that jangled softly as they walked. Every so often he would get a slight smell of sweet perfume, like wildflowers in the forests back on Osiron.

He concentrated on listening to the voices and words coming from the people who passed by. He had become fairly fluent in basic conversational Ptolemii since Pyke had stopped speaking any Osiran at home, but there were still considerable syntactical structures and nuances that he had yet to grasp. He would at least now be able to supplement his linguistic education by interacting with the large number of people at his disposal. The more he learned, the better it would be for his ultimate purposes. The written language was still going to be a trial, though.

There were a number of Ptolemii warriors who passed through the square, and they saluted smartly when they spied Pyke. He returned their gestures with his own salute and a nod. Vin-Chay felt a pang of regret at his own civilian clothes. He missed the sharp uniforms that he had worn throughout the academy and on the *Remus*. *Days long gone*, he thought bitterly, remembering the close-fitting, dark-blue tunics and trousers, knee-high black boots, and crisp red and gold embellishments denoting his rank and accomplishments. He especially had enjoyed the rare times when dress uniforms were mandated, and the floor-length silken red cape that draped over his shoulders and cascaded down his back in regal style enhanced his regular wardrobe.

Pyke was watching him closely and seemed to sense his feelings when the Ptolemii warriors passed by. He was wearing casual civilian clothes himself, but knew the feeling of pride and accomplishment of an honored uniform. He would not have liked to lose the ability to wear his own, and he sympathized with his arrogant yet vulnerable captive. He knew how hard this all was for him, but he couldn't let his compassion blind him to the rules he had to set down and maintain for both their sakes. He sipped his water slowly and wondered what Vin-Chay would have looked like in full-dress uniform. He noted to himself that he would have to check the main Miliplex correlator for holographs of Osiran officers in full dress so that he could picture it more adequately. He knew that a

decent but dated picture of Chay Shayne was resident in the databanks. That gave him another idea.

Both men finished their musings when the vendor returned with two generous helpings of bakkava and two more goblets of iced water. They began to eat at once, and Vin-Chay noted that the bakkava here was not quite up to the standards of the one that Pyke made at home. *Not enough scallons*, he mused as he chewed slowly. Still, he was hungry and ate the entire portion, declining a second helping when the vendor queried him. Pyke declined as well, then offered Vin-Chay a sample of an intriguing-looking bread-based foodstuff Pyke called Gekk'Ta'Gua. Vin-Chay missed the amusement in Pyke's eyes as he wolfed down a half dozen of the small delicacies that Pyke said were from the southern Bed'Wan caste. He'd have to query the commander on the contents and preparation at some point if he'd be expected to cook the food at Pyke's residences. As Vin-Chay finished his remaining iced java, Pyke took a moment to speak with the vendor privately before joining Vin-Chay for the walk back to the apartment.

"I've arranged for you to have access to my house account here any time you need to stop by to eat or drink. He understands that you are my companion and that you will be treated with courtesy and respect. I expect you to treat him the same, understood?" Pyke said.

"Understood," Vin-Chay replied without hesitation.

"Good. Let's go back to the apartment. We'll take the long route around so that you can get some more of your bearings. Then, tomorrow, you can start exploring on your own when I go to work. Come." Pyke rose and Vin-Chay followed him out through the streets and back towards the apartment. For the first time since his long captivity began, he was experiencing a sense of careful freedom and exhilaration in what the future would hold. Hopefully, he thought, a brief stay here before he could escape and return to his people and resume the life he once knew. Hopefully.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Chakrah was an impressively handsome woman of forty-five, still in the blush of her prime, still with a mass of natural, luxurious red hair that fell to the middle of her back. The soft waves framed her creamy oval face, and set off the deep green eyes perhaps just a trifle too wide-set. Her wide red lips were generous and nearly always framed into a soft smile above a sharp, set jaw that bespoke of a stubborn and willful nature. Her long, well-proportioned figure only complemented her facial features rather than taking away from them. Her slender hands ended in long, tapered fingernails that were never without perfectly-applied color, usually bright red or gold.

She had started out as an aspiring thespian on the streets of Thebes, imbued with talent only and not a chit to her name after the untimely death of her parents in the viral epidemic of thirty years earlier. The government had taken her father's store for past-due taxes, and she needed to find a way to make a living quickly. When her artistic aspirations exceeded her talent and professional potential, she regrouped easily and turned her energies to a profession suited for her circumstances and temperament. She gradually worked her way into a position as a high-class courtesan first on the streets of the city and then in several of its more prominent brothels. By the age of twenty-five she had earned enough in chits, prestige and contacts to open her own enterprise which, after twenty years, had become the acknowledged premiere establishment of sensual pleasure and discretion in the city.

Her clients included all manners of government officials, very nearly to the top level of the Pharon himself (whom she had yet to ensnare as a client, and would very nearly kill for as one), plus every well-considered profession from the legal to the medical to the commercial. Her women and men provided the finest sexual and conversational services available, and all clients were treated with complete respect, discretion and devotion both for the time that they were resident in her household, as well as when they departed; gossip, innuendo and disrespect were not tolerated for even a moment. This was not, unfortunately, the method of operation of many of her competitors, particularly of those created in the last ten years when slavery was instituted. Entrepreneurs with enough chits could

purchase unfortunate Osirans for sexual servitude, and afford to charge fewer chits for far more aggressive activity. This occasionally cut into her client base, but that happenstance was rare: the quality that her employees provided far out-matched any competition. And she would never allow an Osiran slave to work at her establishment. Never. Well, unless he or she provided some immensely profitable specialty.

She preened unconsciously and surveyed the lounge area below the second-tier balcony, where she reigned as though she were a queen. She noted the unusually high number of Ptolemii military officers engaged in light conversation or awaiting their selections of the evening. Ever since the lull in the war, there had been more warriors present on Ptolem and especially in Thebes, the seat of government and of the Miliplex. The break in the war was good for business, and she absently hoped that it would keep up for a while longer. She had seen a mountain retreat that appealed to her, and she would soon be able to purchase it to supplement her considerable real estate holdings. Perhaps she would even purchase a slavewoman of her own; paid servants could be troublesome at times, and she was getting to an age where she wanted to brook no emotional or financial strife as she glided gracefully into her late youth.

She noticed a familiar sub-commander engaged in a heated conversation with a junior officer as he waited for Serine to free up for the evening. A tall man who radiated arrogance and competence in equal measure, Zandran was a familiar sight here when his vessel was in port. She cocked her head and objectively admired his tall, broad frame and well-fitting uniform. His square-jawed face was offset by thick, unruly black hair, and his black eyes were usually unreadable. He was a creature of habit, though, and he always selected Serine or another petite, blue-eyed blonde woman for his pleasure. In his late forties, he was set in his ways and very unlikely to change. His world seemed to consist of his military duty, his known devotion to his younger commander, his taste for well-aged papyrus, and his love of hand-to-hand combat. He never selected a woman who could not hold her own in a conversation regarding the great writers or athletes of their world, or consequently one who had the audacity to hold an opinion totally contrary to his own. He was always willing to listen to a somewhat variable opinion, but he always discounted it as wrong when all was said and done.

She then thought of his frequent companion at her establishment, his fellow sub-commander TutMose, who was as different physically as he was personally from Zandran. Slightly older than the other sub-commander, TutMose had also apparently reached the zenith of his potential in the Ptolemii military, and served High Commander Pyke with a dedication equal to that of Zandran. A tall, slen-

der man with silver hair and unfashionably long sideburns, he almost always had a cheerful expression to counteract Zandran's fierce one. He enjoyed tall redheads of either sex—preferring women—and couldn't have cared less about their intellectual abilities. He was known to enjoy a really good bottle of aged papyron, the occasional concerts put on in the Artplex, and a boisterous romp in the noxchamber with his selection of the evening. He was an excellent customer, as much so as Zandran or their revered superior officer.

Her thoughts turned to that object of their devotion, High Commander Pyke. Strangely enough, Pyke was here tonight as a client as well. That was rare. Very rare. He had not been here for over two years. She thought that was a shame. He was a very private, quiet man who always treated her and her employees with the utmost consideration and respect. He had no unusual sexual inclinations. He was always simply interested in obtaining an intelligent partner for the evening. Although he was never overly loquacious and did enjoy his physical pleasures, he was a reserved, quiet, often unfathomable man with a sense of mystery and sadness about him. But there was never any problem with his payment, and he always provided a generous gratuity to his partner of the evening. He was well thought of amongst her staff. She wished more of the Ptolemii warriors were like him.

He had arrived early in the evening, well before the usual time when the majority of her clients appeared. After a brief but cordial round of innocuous but pleasant small talk, he had requested a very specific sort of woman for his needs: quiet, quick to please, late twenties, light blonde hair, blue eyes. Neither he nor any of her clients would have to specify beauty: that was a given. She sensed that he simply wanted a quiet night of physical gratification with no distractions or unwanted discussion or stress. He simply wanted to commune with another person on an easy and relaxing but base and impersonal sensual level.

She had selected Irrini, a slender, high-cheekboned silver-blond who had been working there for over a year and had become a favorite of many regulars. Irrini would be new for Pyke, who had last left Ptolem on assignment before Irrini had been employed. She had Pyke escorted to the Empire Chamber, which was only used for very special guests, and sent Irrini to him. They had been together now for over three hours and she was anxious to know if her employee was performing in an acceptable way for this puzzling man.

From what she had heard through unsanctioned gossip in her establishment and on the streets, High Commander Pyke was even more puzzling than she remembered him. He was known as an excellent commander and tactician, although he was on record as disagreeing respectfully with some policies of the

government, such as the Osiran slavery issue and the over-burdened taxes that the government was imposing on many small agriplexes and other businesses to support its administration and ambition. Even so, she had heard that he had taken an Osiran slave into his household, and, it was rumored, into his bed as well. An attractive male, at that. That simply didn't mesh with her knowledge of the man in their past dealings. And, if the latter were true, then why was he here this evening availing himself of the pleasures of Irrini instead of being home and availing himself of his slave? She shook her head slowly. It didn't make sense. But, she had no qualms about conducting profitable business with the man, and left her concerns behind as she descended the stairs and greeted several familiar and prominent clients. She smiled and waved at Zandran as he put an arm around the waist of the long-awaited Serine and walked with her towards the staircase to the second tier to enjoy his own evening of sexual enticement and satisfaction. Chakrah smiled, knowing that Serine could look forward to sore muscles and very tender body parts the next morning.

An hour later Chakrah saw Irrini descend into the main lounge and skirt the chamber as she sought her next client. She caught Chakrah's eye, and then Chakrah signaled for her to meet her in the ante-lounge. Chakrah made her apologies to the High Scribe whom she was entertaining, then deftly moved through the chamber and joined Irrini. She shut the door and looked expectantly at the younger woman, who looked at her quizzically. *Is there a problem?* Irrini's look said. Chakrah answered with a reassuring smile before speaking.

"There is nothing amiss, Irrini. I simply want to know if your session with High Commander Pyke went well."

"Quite well, madam. He is a very considerate man. There was nothing unusual about our session." Irrini frowned slightly. *What's the issue here?* she wondered.

"Good. Good. I take it then that there was full consummation of his pleasures?" Chakrah prompted.

"Yes, full. Several times, as a matter of fact. He seemed to be in need of a good deal of sexual gratification. He is not married, I take it?"

"No, he is not. He has a ... companion, but I am not certain of the exact nature of that relationship," Chakrah reflected as she absently stroked her chin and neck.

Irrini shrugged. "Well, I would say that companion is not fulfilling his needs or he would not be seeking companionship elsewhere. At any rate, I hope he returns as he gave me an excellent gratuity and was most appreciative. I need to go, madam. High Scribe D'Nar is waiting?"

Chakrah dismissed her and poured a small draught of annise, sipping it slowly and musing over the odd situation. After a while she shrugged and abandoned her curious thoughts to another matter, and the Pyke situation was forgotten for the moment.

Pyke exited Chakrah's brothel through the discreet rear door as he usually did. He had no desire for his privacy to be disturbed by meeting and interacting with the other clients in the general lounge area, and he knew that Zandran was likely to be there, too. He had heard him make such plans with TutMose earlier that afternoon as they were leaving Pyke's office after a strategy review meeting with a number of other sub-commanders and captains under Pyke's control. He was slightly disinclined to go to Chakrah's after that, but his frustrated needs drove him to discount his reservations and go anyway. He was worried that if he did not seek and receive some relief, he would do something with Vin-Chay for which he would later be sorry, as if there weren't enough incidents like that to already regret.

He expelled a heavy breath, and let himself relax a little as he enjoyed the dark, cool evening. The two moons of Ptolem were in perfect full-alignment tonight, and the sky was blanketed with brilliant stars. Irrini had been an excellent diversion for those few hours, and he had badly needed her ministrations. His body and mind felt far less stressed than they had in some time, and he cursed his luck for selecting a companion who proved to be nothing but a difficult creature at best, and at worst the bane of his existence. Not that he could hold him totally accountable, under the circumstances, but it didn't make it any easier on him, either.

Pyke walked the hundred meters to the underground transport station. He waited a few minutes for the next tram, then entered one of the cabins reserved especially for high-ranking officers. There was no one else in the cabin, and he was able to sit back and relax as the vehicle rushed swiftly through the bowels of the city and deposited him at the receiving station a few blocks from his apartment. There were quite a number of people milling about the streets, and several familiar neighbors and vendors waved to him. He acknowledged them courteously before entering his apartment.

The house was dark and quiet, and he assumed that Vin-Chay had already gone to bed. He secured the door lock and mounted the stairs to the second tier. He was careful to make little noise, and he heard Vin-Chay's deep, even breathing as he entered the dimly lit noxchamber. He placed his cloak over a chair and sat down and pulled his boots off. He had already enjoyed a ritual oil bath at Chakrah's establishment under Irrini's deft hands, but he felt a need to bathe

again. He quickly and quietly stripped off his remaining garments and entered the sanichamber shower. He slid the hidden door between that chamber and the noxchamber closed so as not to disturb his sleeping companion.

He let the hot water rush over him for a long time, reluctant to end the shower. He soaped himself repeatedly and let the strong shower batter the suds off until his skin fairly squeaked of cleanliness. After nearly a half hour he turned off the water and dried himself. He entered the noxchamber and noted that Vin-Chay's even sleep breathing had stopped, and that he was awake but unmoving and silent. The silence in the chamber was the typical loud one that seemed to characterize their tense home life lately. Pyke sighed, and slipped naked into bed, enjoying the feel of his own bed and sheets.

The bed, as the chamber in general, was much smaller than the one they shared in Pyke's main residence, although the old-fashioned style and wood composition were much the same. There was barely enough room there for two people, and Pyke's body brushed well up against Vin-Chay's. The Osiran turned away, on his side, saying nothing. Pyke waited a few moments, then turned over on his same side and wrapped himself tightly around his reluctant companion, who tensed for a few seconds then relaxed. *This feels right*, he thought, as the remembrance of Irrini faded from his consciousness as easily as he had washed off her scent. He drifted off to sleep comfortable and content in familiar and genuinely desired territory rather than the poor substitute he had experienced a few hours earlier.

Pyke awoke alone in bed the next morning, but he could hear faint sounds from the first tier, and the smell of fresh breadstuffs wafted upstairs and made his stomach growl in hunger. He pushed back the bed covers and swung his legs over the side, noting for the first time that he had vivid red scratches on one of his legs from Irrini's nails. He hadn't seen them the night before in the shower, but then he hadn't been concentrating on examining his body for signs of his evening, either. He dressed quickly in his day uniform and went downstairs, where he found Vin-Chay putting food on a plate and placing it at his regular place at the table. He smiled at the young man and seated himself, and Vin-Chay placed a large goblet of fruit juice in front of him as well before taking food for himself and seating himself opposite Pyke.

They both started eating quietly, and it was an oddly peaceful and serene mealtime for both of them. This time, the silence was more natural, not fraught with tension and unspoken anger. Pyke wished it could be like this every day. Vin-Chay wondered where Pyke had gotten the scratches on his leg that he had seen when he had awakened and found that Pyke had kicked off his own covers

and lay sprawled on his side of the bed with the lacerations in clear view. He had his suspicions, for the marks were clearly the same as the ones that Pyke had inflicted on his body more than once in the heat of passion. If Pyke had another lover, then that would explain why he hadn't touched him in over three weeks, a situation Vin-Chay found relieving, but also strangely disquieting. Not that he wanted Pyke to touch him, of course, but it was something that he was used to, and it had actually gotten to a point where he didn't mind it very much. Usually, not at all. And if Pyke had taken another lover, a willing one, what did that mean for his future in the commander's life and on this hateful planet?

He had no way of knowing that his deep thoughts were misinterpreted by his Ptolemii companion, who assumed that he was somehow content and relaxed, and possibly even well-disposed towards Pyke, rather than musing over the effects that his recent liaison might have for the Osiran's future. Pyke had already dismissed his activities of the previous night as long gone and inconsequential. He had determined that this night he would pleasure himself in the arms of his Osiran captive, where he wanted to be anyway, as he could finally admit to himself. He had had five months of intimate physical, emotional and psychological contact with the man who was his sworn enemy and also his captive. He reluctantly admitted to himself that the relationship was far more than a convenient one or one born of the need to conquer, dominate and punish. He cared for this man, and wanted this man to care for him. He knew that the latter could be nearly impossible, but not entirely so. He would simply have to modify some of his behavior and put them on a more even keel in their relationship. Well, as far as the constraints of Ptolem would allow.

Pyke finished his meal and swallowed the last of the juice, then stood and stretched. He walked over to the pot of fresh java that Vin-Chay had cooked and poured himself another cup of the steaming liquid. He watched as Vin-Chay took the plates and started to load them into the puri-corr. He selected a small plate and forked the last piece of the fried bread onto it, then reseated himself. As he started to finish the last of the meal, he looked at Vin-Chay and spoke between bites.

"And what are your plans for today? I have duties that will only occupy me for the morning and early afternoon, then I have the late afternoon and evening free. Perhaps you'd like me to take you to the Pharon's compound so that you can see what the seat of our government is like? I think you'll like the architecture if nothing else. We won't be able to enter the royal compound itself, but at least you'll get a sense of the heart of Thebes and the Ptolemii in general. Your exposure has been mainly me and my immediate subordinates and a few of the people

around here, and I'd like you to become more familiar with our world as whole. Interested?"

Vin-Chay washed his hands and turned to face Pyke. "Yes, very. Since I'm still learning your language and customs it's not that easy for me to fully understand the educational volumes I've been reading. Seeing some of what they describe in person would be helpful." *And give me a better layout of the land so that I can eventually use the information against you*, he thought.

"Good." Pyke was relieved and pleased to have a completely positive reaction from Vin-Chay; that was rare. And promising. Irrini faded further into the historical recesses of his mind. "Fine. I'll be home around eighteen bells and we can go then. What will you be doing until then?"

"I thought I'd go to the Osiran temple I found last week," Vin-Chay said casually. "I enjoy the priest's counsel and his company, and I've met a few other of my people there as well."

"Slaves?" Pyke asked, curiously.

"Yes. Only the priest is a free man, courtesy of a decent Ptolemii who had known him before the war and purchased him for the express purpose of freeing him. As I understand the law, emancipation is a viable option." He paused. "If the slaveowner so chooses it, that is," he ended evenly.

Pyke arched his eyebrows at the implicit challenge but decided not to give Vin-Chay the satisfaction of a response. Instead he finished his meal slowly and pushed the plate away as he picked up his cup of java and blew on it to cool it down. Vin-Chay always prepared the beverage too hot, apparently an Osiran custom. He hadn't the time to wait until it cooled off, so he would have to forego the delicious brew and find a cup at the Miliplex.

Vin-Chay leaned casually back against the sink and sipped his java as he watched Pyke pour the remainder of his down the drain and rinse the cup. As Pyke turned to leave and neared the nutrichamber entryway, Vin-Chay threw caution to the wind and asked evenly, "Male or female?"

Pyke turned with a quizzical look on his face. Vin-Chay repeated the question. "Male or female?"

"What are you talking about?" Pyke replied, confused.

Vin-Chay put down his cup and cocked his head to one side. "I was just wondering who put those scratches on your leg, that's all." He turned around and started washing his own cup out as Pyke stared at his back for a few long moments before deciding that he would answer the question that the Osiran had no damned right to ask.

"Female," Pyke said. "A pleasant, lovely, accommodating young woman who understands how to make another person feel wanted and desired, not like he has to wear body armor to bed as protection and resort to rape to get even the slightest intimate contact from his bed partner," Pyke snapped as he whirled around angrily and left the chamber. That damned Osiran could ruin what had promised to be a perfectly fine day with few words and even smaller consideration for Pyke's feelings and needs. *Osiran bastard*, Pyke seethed, feeling his blood rising as he grabbed his techbelt and strapped it on. He threw out one last incendiary jab. "I should sell you to Chakrah. Her trainers would see to your education in a variety of creative ways, and then you would finally understand your place on this world." He stormed out of the apartment.

Vin-Chay continued his washing efforts until he had finished, then slowly and deliberately dried his hands. He straightened out the dining table, then left the chamber to make his final preparations for his day out, pushing Pyke's stinging words as far back in his mind as he could. Words that were totally unfair and unwarranted and true. *Ptolemii bastard*, Vin-Chay thought savagely as he packed his techbelt with a few chits and hygiene items. He muttered a few more choice descriptions of his hated captor before setting the security system and leaving the apartment. His ears were still burning from Pyke's threat.

The bright morning sun was already heating up the air even at this early hour. Pyke had warned him that as they entered the summer season on Ptolem he would find that the blast of heat that he had encountered on his first day on the planet would be nothing compared to the full hot season. Pyke had instructed him on how to choose and wear proper layered attire to minimize the effects of the heat on his body, and Vin-Chay entered the outdoor square dressed in light, layered upper tunics, and loose-fitting trousers with low softboots that gathered at mid-calf. He had allowed his front bangs and side hair to grow to his eyebrows and cheeks, but his longer back hair was pulled to the nape of his neck with one of Pyke's clasps. The short side braids dangled loosely around his ears. Many Ptolemii chose to wear head coverings called kufiyyeh that draped down to mid-back and held in the moisture from their upper bodies, but neither Pyke nor Vin-Chay was inclined to this garment.

Vin-Chay walked easily through the now-familiar streets, enjoying the sun on his face even though the heat still caused a slight sheen of perspiration; his body hadn't fully acclimatized enough to allow him to remain as dry as Pyke in this climate. Even after months of 'freedom' on this planet, he remembered vividly the dark confines of his cell on Canaan and appreciated every second of being in the sunlit open air, enjoying the heat and occasional breeze. As he passed a familiar

vendor a few streets away he made a mental note to purchase additional food stores for the apartment that evening or the next day; they were running low and Pyke didn't like to eat out.

He walked for nearly an hour through the twisting streets of the north section of Thebes until he reached the nondescript building that he had found a week before, on his first day of Theban exploration. Only a small odd symbol above the arched door gave any indication that it was connected to Osiran rather than Ptolemii interests. Vin-Chay smiled ruefully to himself as he felt the stirring for home and culture that the religious symbol always brought. He pressed the entry indents and a moment later the door opened to a smiling face that greeted him warmly. Vin-Chay returned the grin and entered the cool darkness of the temple as the door was shut behind him. The man was nearly as tall as Vin-Chay, but more than thrice his age, with more white than black running through his short hair and close-cropped beard. His face was wide and open and creased with lines that bespoke of years of hard living and stress that still couldn't completely remove the innate optimism and joy that colored the way he had always approached his life and calling.

"I was hoping you would be able to come today," the priest said pleasantly as he led Vin-Chay through the darkened prayer chamber and into his private vestibule. He motioned for the young man to sit across from him as he poured two cups of herbal Osiran tea for them and seated himself across from Vin-Chay, who grinned at the aroma and flavor. "Perfect," he said. "Just like home." The priest reached up to a shelf for the honiberry syrup, and the loose sleeve of his flowing red robe slid down to reveal the three-triangle tattoo of a slave. The mark was identical to Vin-Chay's own save the lightning bolt slash through the central one that indicated his freedman's status. The priest poured a few sweet drops into his cup and Vin-Chay's, replaced the container, and sat opposite the young man. They sipped quietly for a few minutes before Patri Julian put down his cup and looked at Vin-Chay curiously. "You seem disturbed today. Problems at home?" he said kindly.

"The problem is I'm not *at* 'home,'" Vin-Chay replied, putting his own cup down. He shook his head. "This situation with the Ptolemii goes from bad to worse as time goes on. The word 'incompatible' doesn't even begin to cover it. It's only a matter of time before one of us kills the other."

"Don't even say that in jest, Vin-Chay," Patri Julian chided. "Our religion frowns on taking another's life even in the most dire of circumstances, and as difficult as yours may be, they do not qualify for homicidal dispensation. You need

to find a way to endure and survive. That is your obligation to yourself, your family and God."

Vin-Chay shrugged contritely. "I know. But sometimes it's just too hard. It's bad enough going from my background to being the slave of an enemy, but when this enemy knows exactly how to get under my skin and takes every opportunity to do it, it only makes the situation worse. Like this morning. He came home last night with a new scent on him, and I saw marks on his body that would only have been made by another person during lovemaking. I called him on it this morning and not only didn't he deny it, he implied that it was *my* fault that he sought out another bed partner. A female one. A *pleasant* one."

"Why should you care?" the priest asked mildly. "Any sexual contact he has with another person is one less he will then force on you. Shouldn't this be something you are relieved about rather than distressed about?" he said, raising his eyebrows.

"I don't 'care' Patri, but it simply another unknown factor that may or may not have a bearing on my status here, which is precarious enough at any given moment. I don't need any more obstacles to survival than already exist. He can bed whom he pleases whenever he pleases as long as I don't wind up on the receiving end of any associated frustrations or anger."

"And have you, from this?"

"Aside from intimating that it was my fault for his indiscretion, he stormed out of the apartment in anger. That usually means he'll be snapping at me for days and forcing me to do a variety of menial things that reinforce my slave status and his power, both in bed and out."

"You said he hasn't touched you recently, though?"

"He hasn't, but it's only a matter of time, and the scene this morning is only likely to prompt it."

"But you prompted the issue this morning, right?"

"I suppose so, but what was I supposed to do?"

"Keep quiet about it?" the priest said, an amused look in his light hazel eyes. Vin-Chay missed the glint as he tightened his jaw and responded.

"It's not in my nature to keep quiet, Patri. It never will be," Vin-Chay said in what the priest perceived as a slightly arrogant, regal tone that told of a lifetime of special breeding and treatment, now a thing of the past.

"Then I foresee a difficult and long road ahead for you, my son. You are both men of strong will and character, and I think neither will bend easily. But you may have to, to survive. You've already made a number of intelligent compromises to survive this life you've been forced into through fate and misfortune, and

you will have to make more. How far you go without surrendering your basic integrity and honor is up to you, and I would never suggest that you do absolutely anything to survive. There are limits to what we can and should do to simply stay alive. But you have not reached those limits by any stretch of the imagination, and I caution you to think before you speak and act. Look at the other side. Look at his side."

"*His* side?! He is an instrument of a tyrannical government and a man who has sent other men into slavery—myself included—without a moment's thought or concern for basic human rights and decency. He *bought* me as though I were an animal or a piece of furniture, and took me into his household to be his slave and whore. I am not inclined to see 'his' side, Patri," Vin-Chay finished angrily, rising from his seat and pacing back and forth across the small vestibule.

"He is guilty of most of these things you say, Vin-Chay," the priest agreed easily, "but, there is another side that I think you see but refuse to acknowledge to me or to yourself."

"And that is?" Vin-Chay frowned.

"Has he provided you with decent food, clothing and living conditions?"

"Well, yes."

"Has he ever beaten you? I don't mean slaps or pushes, but *beaten* you?"

"No."

"Has he ever brutalized you sexually? Not normal sex between two men, but cruel or humiliating sexual contact that you wouldn't even consider with another person if you had the choice?"

"No, not really. He presses the issue sometimes. He's never been brutal." He had an uneasy flashback to those frightening moments in Pyke's quarters on the *Sovereign*. He admitted to himself that he had provoked the commander's retaliation; Pyke still had faint pink scars on his hand where Vin-Chay's teeth had broken the skin.

"Allowed you a certain freedom here to go where you can meet people?"

"Yes," Vin-Chay said impatiently as he reseated himself. "I see the point you are trying to make, Patri, and I can't argue with it, but I am still a slave and have no rights other than those he chooses to give me for whatever reason, whether it be for his own pleasure or simply on a whim. Any freedom I may seem to have is just an illusion."

"Perhaps, but sometimes illusions can be very real. You are far better off than most of our people under Ptolemii rule here, and I know you know that. Perhaps your pride is what is truly in the way of your accepting and dealing with this situation in a more productive way. And that is a problem that only you can resolve.

I urge you to find some kind of truce with this man for as long as you need to while this war and your captivity last. You are too valuable to our people and your family to throw your life away on either pride or ineffective actions that benefit no one, least of all you. Make the most of your situation, not the least of it," he finished as he drained the last bit of tea and set the cup down carefully, watching for Vin-Chay's reaction.

Vin-Chay thoughtfully watched his confessor speak and hated to admit the truth or good sense of the words, but he had to. Patri Julian was right. He had let his pride get in the way of accomplishing anything meaningful during his enforced captivity on this hateful planet. He had made a halfhearted effort to learn the language and history, but had not pursued doing anything truly constructive with the knowledge other than a cursory attempt to break into Pyke's correlator files. That defeatist attitude would stop now. His eyes rose to meet the priest's, who saw the understanding and revelation in them. Patri Julian smiled and nodded quietly. Vin-Chay smiled back and had the sense to look contrite.

"You're right, of course, Patri," Vin-Chay said. "I will look at things differently from now on and make the most of this, well, challenge. I apologize to you for the unacceptable wallow in self-pity and arrogance that I've been indulging in these past months. It's unproductive."

"But understandable and acceptable within reason. Don't apologize to me. I admire how you've been able to handle everything that's been thrown at you through circumstance and fate. Many people would never have been able to handle it as well as you. You have nothing to apologize for. Now. That's done. Are you ready to start helping me with the work I need done around here? I have lots of chores which are waiting for a strong, capable young man such as yourself to tackle—starting with that crumbling west wall."

"My pleasure, Patri," Vin-Chay said as both men rose simultaneously, and the priest led Vin-Chay out of his chamber and to the back of the building where an old retaining wall had been waiting for repair for years. Patri Julian smiled ruefully as he waved a hand over the wall area and the supplies that Vin-Chay's expense chits had purchased a few days before. Vin-Chay began to remove the outer layer of his tunics to prepare for the hot work that he was about to do, when the priest put a hand on his shoulder and Vin-Chay looked at him inquiringly. The priest hesitated a moment before speaking.

"Vin-Chay, one more thing. I have been making covert inquiries about your *Remus* comrades amongst my constituents." Vin-Chay straightened and looked at him intently, waiting patiently for him to go on. "I have had no success yet in locating either Burran or Jor-Rue, but I may have a line on Cassian."

"Is he alive?" Vin-Chay asked softly.

Patri Julian shook his head. "I can't say for sure, but one slave couple knows another slave couple who says that an associate of their captors may have purchased an Osiran around the time you arrived, and who matches your friend's description. This man was apparently bought for hard labor in the quarries south of Thebes near the Noor Valley. If that's the case, then he has little chance of being allowed to come into Thebes let alone to go to an Osiran temple for 'radical' worship."

"I'm surprised that the Pharon and his band of government terrorists allow any Osiran temples to remain standing at all," Vin-Chay said bitterly.

"I'm sure he'd rather obliterate any traces of Osiran culture, but he's also cunning enough to know that if you try to take away a person's religion, that is the most likely trigger to rebellion and he wants to forestall that issue as long as possible. He would rather have people praying for deliverance than taking up arms, and few people are likely to as long as they have that first option. It's only a matter of time until he outlaws our temples entirely, but until then, they—and I—will be here to reinforce our spiritual and cultural life." He clapped Vin-Chay on the back. "So enjoy me while you have me, princeling!" Vin-Chay smiled at him, pushing the priest's disquieting thoughts to the back of his mind as he began his labors.

Vin-Chay worked well into the afternoon, pulling out old blocks and sanding down sharp edges, and mixing mortar to put new blocks in place. His efforts were only disturbed by the priest bringing him cold water and juice every hour, and a decent meal of breadstuffs filled with meat for his mid-day meal. He decided that he had better quit in order to get back to the apartment before the commander, so that he could wash properly and prepare an early evening meal for his captor. He washed his face and hands from the dirt of his efforts, then spoke briefly with the priest, promising to return to continue the job as soon as he was able. He had no idea when the commander would wish to return to his primary residence and leave Thebes, but he would get word to the priest somehow if that turned out to be the case anytime soon. They prayed together for a few moments, Vin-Chay assuming the usual kneeling-sitting position on the prayer chamber floor, palms turned upwards, eyes closed, as the priest intoned a common prayer from his childhood and invoked a special blessing for his health. Vin-Chay rose and bid the priest good-bye, then left the temple by the side door.

He stopped at a vendor's kiosk to purchase fresh vegetables and fruits, and waited patiently as the man deliberately and slowly validated the manual chits he used for the purchase; the newly established small vendor had no technological

link with Pyke's financial institution, and, thankfully, Pyke had followed through on providing him with manual voucher chits for such a contingency. All the vendors and most people in the neighborhood knew his status as a slave. Some treated him decently, but some, like this vendor, clearly despised Osiran slaves. Although he had no intention of losing business and failing to make a profit, the man nevertheless determined to make it equally clear that Vin-Chay would not be treated as a regular Ptolemii customer. After a good ten minutes of waiting, the vendor nodded tersely that the chits had cleared, and shoved the package of goods into Vin-Chay's hands, taking care to not touch the slave in any way. Vin-Chay stared at him coldly, then turned to resume his trip back to the apartment.

As he reached the apartment he saw that the commandcraft had just pulled away, and he knew that Pyke had arrived before him. He wondered how the commander was going to react to that, when he had clearly told Vin-Chay that he expected him to always be at home and ready to serve him whenever he returned from the Miliplex. And after this morning's clash, Pyke was even less likely to be in a conciliatory mood. Vin-Chay's stomach tightened as he silently cursed the vendor who had caused him to be late through sheer spite.

He opened the front door and found himself face to face with Pyke, who was stripping off his techbelt and light cloak. He gave a Vin-Chay a neutral look. Vin-Chay's stomach eased a little, since at least Pyke wasn't glaring at him angrily. He carefully walked past the High Commander to store the food. Pyke followed him into the nutrichamber. Vin-Chay tensed again. He could wait for Pyke to admonish him about being late, or he could launch a preemptive strike. He chose the latter.

"I apologize for being late, Commander, but—"

"But you stopped for supplies. I see that. It's not a problem," Pyke ended evenly.

"I can have your meal prepared within a half hour, if that's all right?" Vin-Chay continued.

"Fine," Pyke said. He seemed to hesitate for a moment, as though he did and didn't want to say something. Vin-Chay waited patiently until Pyke decided that he would speak. He looked at Vin-Chay intently, directly into his eyes. Their eyes held for long seconds before Pyke went on.

"I didn't like your questioning of me this morning," he said tersely. "Nevertheless, my reaction may have been excessive and probably unfair in some respects. I apologize to you." He gave Vin-Chay credit for hiding the surprise he must have been feeling. He ruefully thought that they were two very similar men in many ways, including, unfortunately, stubbornness. He didn't wait for any

further response and left the chamber to wash and change into casual attire while Vin-Chay prepared their meal.

When he returned he found a light meal waiting for him. He allowed Vin-Chay to go upstairs and take a quick shower and change clothes. He sipped a soothing goblet of papyrus as he waited for his companion to descend. Vin-Chay completed his cleansing in fifteen minutes flat, and the two men sat down to eat in the same comfortable silence that they had enjoyed just that morning before their clash. Neither knew it, of course, but each was ruminating on how their relationship seemed to swing wildly from one moment to the next from mutual acceptance and peacefulness, to anger and hatred and back within hours or even minutes. It was frustrating. And made their blood rush.

Pyke rose from the table and left the chamber to commlink with his office as Vin-Chay cleaned up, wondering if they were going to go to the Pharonic compound as Pyke had suggested that morning, or if the offer was being rescinded due to their conflict. He had his answer when Pyke returned a few minutes later.

"I've decided that it's best if we go to the compound tomorrow morning. I have no pressing duties tomorrow and can spend as much time as you like there. It's getting late today and there are a number of functions taking place this evening. You may feel uncomfortable being surrounded by too many Ptolemaic officers and subordinates at one time and place. The morning is the best time to see the various offices and structures without the crowds. Fine?"

"Fine, thank you, Commander. And your plans for this evening, if I may ask?"

Pyke smiled. "You're very conciliatory this evening, Vin-Chay. Trying to lull me into a false sense of security?"

"No, Commander. Just trying to be pleasant. Am I going about it the wrong way?"

"No. I'm just not used to it. But it's nice," he added, just before he felt an unexpected surge of desire for the man in front of him. He wondered very briefly if he should ease his needs with Irrini again or pursue the point with Vin-Chay. He hadn't touched the young man for weeks. He wanted to. God's Blood, he wanted to more than anything. He had the power to do so, but was conflicted about exercising it again. Still, there were many times in bed when he was certain that Vin-Chay was genuinely responding, and not angry or ashamed or reluctant about their sexual contact. Would tonight be one of those times? Did the man even feel the same desires that he did? If so, he hid them very well. No, he would wait a little while longer. Just a little while.

"I plan on staying in this evening and reviewing your progress with the philosophy volumes I provided you last week. You have been studying them?" Pyke asked.

"Yes. I am ready to discuss whatever you like. They were very interesting—for that much of the writing I could decipher without invoking the verbal interpreter."

"Then get them and we'll proceed."

"Very well," Vin-Chay responded as he left the chamber and went upstairs for the volumes.

Only a little while longer, Pyke thought, as he watched the object of his desire and insanity ascend the stairs. *A very little while.*

CHAPTER EIGHT

Pyke was tense and anxious after the morning assembly of all ranking officers at the Miliplex. The conflict between Ptolem and Osiron was renewing. He and the *Sovereign*, as well as the two other flagships and five battlecraft that were the mainstay of the Ptolemii contingent, had been responsible for beating back the Osiran flagships at the outer perimeter of Sekmet over a year earlier. The Osirans, however, were fierce enough and well-armed and well manned enough to prevent the Ptolemii forces from moving past that perimeter and into their own planetary space, and the two forces seemed to be at a stalemate. The Ptolemii military was distressed at being unable to push past the Osiran battle line and win a clear victory for the Pharon. The senior officers and government officials were also under the gleeful and arrogant assumption that once Osiron ran out of berrillium fuel that was mined on Sekmet and now out of its reach, the war would soon end through complete capitulation by the rebellious colonial planet.

That assumption allowed the dispersal of some Ptolemii forces back to Ptolem and Isiin—including Pyke's vessel—with the remainder being scattered along the Sekmet-Osiron perimeter to prevent an incursion by Osiran forces. It also allowed Sekmet to be used as a dumping ground for Osiran prisoners, taken in battle and from Isiin and many of the Sisters' satellite colonies and moons. They were forced to mine the fuel that would support their enemies and the lack of which would hasten their comrades' ultimate defeat. Many prisoners were still taken back to Ptolem for enslavement, since the general population under the Pharon's encouragement seemed to relish the revived concept of slavery, and cried for more 'product' to purchase and use. There was even a growing ocean of enslavement washing over those who were foolish enough to oppose the government policies, even if they were Ptolemii citizens. Pyke thought that no one was safe anywhere any more, regardless of the planet and culture from which he or she came.

This direction by the Ptolemii should have worked. However, after a number of months it was determined through covert intelligence that the Osirans had been working on alternate fuel sources for decades—well before the start of the conflict—and were able to power their planetary military, commercial, and resi-

dential buildings and vehicles to a great extent. They were in the process of converting their starships to this new source while using what was left of their berrillium to keep the Ptolemii at bay on the neutral perimeter. Pyke and his fellow commanders were informed that the stalemate was about to end and the hostilities resume. All personnel were on alert and could be recalled to their vessels and space battle at any time.

As if that were not problem enough for the Pharon and his military, there were a growing number of sporadic uprisings and protests in many of the Ptolemaic provinces. Ptolemii citizens were growing tired of the war and the undue economic and social pressures it was putting on the provincial governments and their populace. These upheavals, initiated and manned by Ptolemii who both sympathized with their Osiran brethren as well as those who were concerned with only their own welfare, were increasing in intensity. Violence had erupted in several key cities and smaller towns over the past few months. The Pharon had dealt harshly with his internal problems, and for the first time in the eleven years of the civil conflict, Ptolemii were finding themselves meeting the same enslavement and execution fates as the Osirans. As in the case of the latter, this seemed to only increase rebellion, and the Pharon now found himself fighting a battle on two fronts. The situation only made him more determined to keep a crushing grip on both.

Pyke's stomach tightened at the thought. He had no fear of battle, or death, but he had always rebelled inside against the sickening need to fight against what were in essence his own people, and the taking of human lives. This did not come easy, and although he could and would do what was required of him as a Ptolemii officer and loyal subject of the Pharon, he prayed silently that some other means of reconciliation could come to pass. His hopes not in some small measure were also prompted by his unsettled personal life; he couldn't blame the renewed hostilities and domestic unrest for all of his anxiety. Things had been slowly deteriorating at home as well. Three months had passed since he and Vin-Chay had returned to the Sirrian house from the Thebes apartment. They had been back in the city a few times for brief periods, but for the most part they were in residence at the isolated house, and this isolation seemed to contribute to their problems.

During his stay in Thebes, Vin-Chay had worked as often as possible at the Osiran temple he had discovered. Pyke had allowed him to take his personal recraft into Thebes several times a week when they returned to their primary residence. He had been leery of allowing Vin-Chay access to the vehicle, but so far he had proven trustworthy and only used it to go back and forth between home and the temple. He performed all sorts of menial work and hard labor for the ex-slave

priest who seemed to be his confidant. Pyke didn't like the emotional intimacy that Vin-Chay seemed to have found with this man. It irritated him, and he thought that the priest was taking advantage of his young captive with all of the unpaid work that Vin-Chay was doing for him. Slaves could earn chits, of course, but they automatically went to the legal owner's financial accounts rather than to the slave. Pyke had made it clear to Vin-Chay that if he could find work that paid—and he would use his influence in that respect—he could keep the chits. Vin-Chay had thanked him politely, but had opted to keep working at the temple. Pyke admired that and understood it, but it still frustrated him. He had increased Vin-Chay's household allowance, and never questioned him about what he did with the excess chits after the remainder was used to maintain the larder and household items. He had managed to find out accidentally in a casual conversation with a vendor near the Thebes apartment that Vin-Chay had been buying extra food. Since it wasn't coming into their household, he realized that Vin-Chay was using the chits to purchase food for the temple and for the slaves and homeless people that it served.

The relationship with the priest had another fallout. Vin-Chay learned that slaves could be emancipated, and that there was actually a section of Thebes in which a community of freed Osiran slaves had taken up residence. This ghetto, known as Tuscan, after the village on Osiron in which the founder ex-slave had been born, was located at the western outskirts of the city in a desolate part of the Theban desert, a short distance before the Great Wasteland started. It was a cluster of makeshift buildings that were not serviced by the main Theban utilities. It was primitive, poor and shunned by virtually all Ptolemii save those who either covertly or overtly sympathized with the plight of their discarded brethren. These few men and women were able to provide scattered food, resources and sustenance, but it was never enough. The Osirans who resided in Tuscan were amongst the worst off of all of their people, save those condemned to Sekmet. Ptolemii who needed labor and knew that they could pay the smallest percentage of wages to these desperate people employed some of them occasionally. Pyke abhorred this evil place and refused to discuss it with Vin-Chay, who pointed out that it was better to be 'free' there than enslaved in the Pharon's palace. Pyke disagreed and his word was law in their house. This philosophical disagreement was a sore point of contention, and each man chafed at the unreasonableness of the other on this subject.

Vin-Chay had used some of his spare time to visit Tuscan, although Ptolemii warriors, one of whom dutifully reported him to Pyke, initially stopped him several times during his attempts to find and then enter the perimeter. Pyke had left

the Miliplex seething, and arrived at the gate to Tuscan's entrance, where Vin-Chay waited, stone-faced and manacled by the warriors who had stopped him. Pyke glared at him furiously, then ordered the manacles removed and the perimeter gate opened. He grabbed Vin-Chay's arm painfully and dragged him into the boundaries of the ghetto, determined to take him on a 'tour' and end his foolishness once and for all. The visit was an eye-opener for both of them.

The hollow and hostile eyes that watched them warily as they moved through the filthy and ramshackle streets were haunting. The smells of unwashed bodies and untreated sewage, and the sights of proud people garbed in well-worn clothing at best and rags at worst, turned both of their stomachs. At least a half hour of exploration passed before Vin-Chay realized that the tight and painful clenching of his jaws caused the pains shooting through his face; he wanted to scream. Pyke's reaction was much the same, along with a burning shame that his people were responsible for this outrage. Still, his position as a High Commander in the Pharon's military forced him to keep his opinions to himself, and he did for the most part, and he burned with shame about that, too. He also figured out where most if not all of Vin-Chay's chit allowance would be going from this point on, if not to the temple.

The leader of the Tuscanites met them in the middle of one of the streets. He stiffly invited the commander and his companion into his small house, a one-chamber, four-meter-by-four-meter enclosure in which he, his wife and one of their children resided. The other two children, both in their mid-teens, were somewhere unknown with their slaveowners, he explained coolly. Vin-Chay stood silent and unmoving by Pyke's side as the commander curtly explained to the man, who gave his name as Tarqua, that they were there to cause no harm or problems, but to make Vin-Chay aware of an unfortunate aspect of Ptolemii culture as he acclimated to his own captivity. Tarqua had looked the young man up and down, saw the quiet rage in his eyes, and relaxed slightly as he realized that there was no harm in the offing and his only remaining child was under no threat. He offered them water; Pyke declined, then thanked him for his hospitality and motioned for Vin-Chay to leave with him. As they turned to leave, Tarqua impulsively said that they were welcome back at any time, and they both knew that he meant that Vin-Chay only was welcome to return. It seemed to Pyke more of a challenge than an invitation, and he wondered uneasily what wheels were turning in Vin-Chay's mind.

A second, more devastating wedge split them even further apart, exacerbating the tension and anger inundating the two willful men. The day after the Tuscan experience, Vin-Chay ran an errand for Pyke in a hitherto unknown section of

Thebes, close to the infamous Thrallplex. A quarter kilometer to the east he caught sight of a large, open courtyard around which several hundred men and women were gathered, milling about, shouting, laughing and obviously enjoying themselves. He thought the event might be a fair; he moved closer, and nearly retched in sickened outrage as he realized these Ptolemii citizens were bidding on exhibited slaves. The frightened, chained men and women were standing naked on a platform as people shouted bids and moved forward to claim their new possessions. Vin-Chay stared in disbelief. He caught the eye of one young slave-woman who was being dragged off the platform by a leash around her slender neck. Her new master, a broad, coarse man with callous hands and a lascivious grin, pulled her to his body and ran a rough, exploratory hand over her shivering body as several people laughed and cheered him on. Vin-Chay turned and fled to a dark corner of a nearby alley where he vomited his recent meal onto the street. Pyke pried the details out of him after a chilly evening meal, but gave no indication that he disapproved of the inhumane process.

Since that day two months earlier, relations between the two men had been decidedly cool. It was clear that Vin-Chay held Pyke as responsible as any Ptolemii for his people's plight, and Pyke was angry at the unfair assessment. After the incident with Irrini, Pyke had tried to be especially considerate of his Osiran companion. For a brief while after that they had an unspoken truce in the noxchamber, and their physical relationship had resumed on an even and occasionally pleasant and mutual keel. That had changed sharply, however, after the visit to Tuscan, and Vin-Chay's responses to Pyke's sexual overtures ranged from clear resistance on a bad day to unmotivated, complacent submission on a good one. He frequently injected subtle jabs at Pyke regarding the possibility of emancipation. Pyke either ignored him, or snapped out a clear-cut 'no' followed by a sharp slap. Vin-Chay persisted, and Pyke grew more and more frustrated. The Ptolemii reluctantly sought soothing companionship at Chakrah's on several occasions, and suffered from guilt, regret and self-condemnation each time he did so. He was under no illusions that Vin-Chay was ignorant of his indiscretions. In truth, Pyke didn't even attempt to hide his 'infidelity.'

Now, with the possibility of renewed hostilities looming, and the associated possibility of his having to leave Thebes for an undetermined period of time to assume command of his vessel against Vin-Chay's people, a new and potentially disastrous complication had entered their fragile coexistence. And if he had to leave Thebes, what was he going to do with his obstinate captive? He dreaded the concept of leaving him alone in the house or apartment by himself, since there

was little doubt that without constant monitoring he would try something insane and possibly fatal to change his circumstances or those of his people.

Pyke blew out a long breath as he changed his password and shut down his correlator. He waffled about spending the night in Thebes or returning home. There could be a definite pleasurable evening in the offing if he followed his recent inclinations and paid another visit to Chakrah's establishment. She had sent him a missive notifying him of a new employee, Salomine, who supposedly was not only everything physically that a man could want, but who had a degree from University and could discourse on a wide variety of intellectual subjects. It would be a pleasant way to spend a few hours, stress-free and uninhibited. Still, he had to admit to himself that even though this was a tempting scenario, he preferred the unpredictable and generally prickly companionship of his Osiran. He shrugged. What was the point of even pretending that there was an acceptable substitute for Vin-Chay? Things had gone long past that illusion. Long past. He closed his eyes and pictured himself standing at the very edge of the huge cliff at the edge of the Sirrian Mountain Gorge. That was how he felt with this situation, and he wouldn't change it for all the comfort and security that a traditional relationship would have brought. Not for a moment.

He called for the commandcraft and within twenty minutes was traveling rapidly towards his Sirrian retreat. As he entered the front door he smelled baking bakkava, and he smiled at the thought that after six months his pampered princeling had turned into a decent domestic partner in many respects. If only they could get past the few that weren't. He dropped his techbelt on the divan, and noticed that the dining table had been set with the best plates and eating utensils. His favorite bottle of annise and a small crystal goblet were placed next to his setting. There were a dozen lit candles strewn about the chamber, and a perfect fire was burning in the hearth. It was almost too good to be true, and he felt a ripple of uneasiness until Vin-Chay entered from the nutrichamber with a basket of fresh bread and gave him what appeared to be a genuine warm and welcoming smile as he placed the food on the table. He was dressed in a simple white sleeveless tunic and skort, and Pyke admired his well-muscled and tanned arms and legs. He thought that at least Vin-Chay had recovered physically from his long months of imprisonment, harsh treatment and lack of food, and hoped that his mental recovery was as well underway, given the circumstances. He ruefully remembered a time when they were just beginning to be intimate on Canaan. Pyke could feel Vin-Chay's ribs and hip bones, before time passed and he was better fed and able to build back his fat and muscle. Even then, he was a unique

and glorious physical specimen whose body turned out to be evenly matched by his intellect and emotional passion.

Pyke smiled back and waved his hand over the table. "So what's all this? Free day from your temple labors and filled with nervous energy?" he asked lightly.

Vin-Chay shook his head. "No, I simply gave some real thought about how I've been acting lately. I decided some gesture of appeasement might be appropriate, and, well, I know how much you like a good, peaceful meal at home, so here it is. I could start an argument if it would make you feel better?" he ended on the same light note with which Pyke had just spoken.

Pyke grinned. "No, no. This is just fine. I think I can handle the lack of conflict for one evening. Let me change into something comfortable and I'll be right back." Pyke went upstairs and changed into a casual robe, noting that Vin-Chay had left a number of unlit candles on the dresser, and he wondered what purpose they might serve as the evening went on. He descended to the hearthchamber as Vin-Chay was arranging the last of the evening meal and seating himself. Pyke sat opposite him and took the proffered bowls of breads and bakkava, and filled his plate. He and Vin-Chay started eating quietly. Pyke felt more relaxed than he had in a long time. He offered thanks that he had foregone Chakrah's this night.

"Spend much time at the temple today?" Pyke asked as he chewed a crusty end of the bakkava and washed it down with juice and java. He noted that Vin-Chay had cooled the drink considerably from the over-heated manner in which he usually prepared it. Vin-Chay liked it too hot; Pyke liked it cooler, and Vin-Chay had made an effort to address Pyke's desires instead of his own in this minor way. Pyke was pleased, but still a bit leery.

"Some," Vin-Chay conceded, then headed off Pyke's next anticipated question. "I also spent an hour or so in Tuscan. We both know I've been spending some of my expense chits on food, and I brought some there. Along with some medical supplies."

Pyke raised his hand slightly in a conciliatory motion. "I have no issue with your humanitarian gestures, Vin-Chay. Point of fact, I plan on raising your chit allowance so that you will have more to spend as you see fit on your outside ventures. It's a worthwhile effort, and whether you believe it or not I share your outrage at this situation."

"But you can't do anything about it, right?" Vin-Chay said evenly. *Here we go again*, Pyke thought sourly as he saw the evening start to evaporate into the standard psychological conflict they had had of late. But he was surprised and grateful when Vin-Chay headed off this direction unexpectedly. "I'm sorry, Commander.

The last thing I wanted to do tonight is cause any more friction between us. I'll drop the subject now and hope you can put it out of your mind as well."

Pyke nodded and even managed a slight smile as the two men resumed eating. Vin-Chay drove the conversation, which was unusual, since it was generally Pyke who had to force their communication during stressful times. Vin-Chay was uncharacteristically loquacious about the work he was doing at the temple, rebuilding one of the confessional chambers that had been vandalized several months earlier. The priest had initiated a food line for destitute freed slaves and equally homeless Ptolemii who needed a meal to just get through the day. He admitted to Pyke that he had been using as much of his expense chits as possible to purchase food for this effort, and he had also—he smiled here—been able to put his cooking skills to work by helping to prepare the food and serving it. He hesitated, then went on and told Pyke that he was doing much the same in Tuscan, splitting his time between the ghetto and temple. His words seemed slow and carefully chosen, and Pyke could sense the pain behind them. His instinct was to reach out and touch Vin-Chay, but he held back. He wasn't sure if it was because he didn't want to be perceived as too vulnerable to both Vin-Chay and the plight of the Osirans. He wasn't sure why.

When the meal was finished he helped Vin-Chay load the plates and utensils into the *nutrichamber puri-corr*, and then while his companion finished cleaning the table he set up a *Strategum* game in front of the now-roaring fire. He poured them both a draught of annise and Vin-Chay joined him at the board, sitting cross-legged on the floor as he studied Pyke's first move. It took him a few minutes to respond, but when he did he was rewarded with an appreciative look from the Ptolemii, who required more than just a few minutes to get his Pyramid out of danger. The game lasted nearly an hour, with Pyke winning as he usually did. Vin-Chay set up the board again for a rematch, which after an hour he succeeded in winning. Pyke raised his goblet of annise to Vin-Chay in acknowledgment of his growing tactical prowess.

Pyke rose and stretched, and Vin-Chay took it as a sign that he was tired of the game, so he put the board and pieces away and then stored the annise. He turned to Pyke, who was standing by the back doors and admiring the bright blanket of stars that were sparkling over the mountain and desert. Only one moon was showing tonight, but it was vivid and streamed its light down on the desert floor to illuminate the flora and occasional animal that scurried across the sand and rocks. Pyke could see Osiron glittering in the western sky, and he knew that Vin-Chay spent many long hours staring out into that sky at his faraway home. He sensed Vin-Chay's close presence.

"Tired, Commander? Tense?" Vin-Chay asked softly as he massaged Pyke's neck and shoulders gently, and pressed his knuckles into the small of Pyke's back.

"A little," Pyke admitted, as his body started to loosen up and be soothed under Vin-Chay's tactile ministrations.

"Give me a few moments upstairs, Commander, and I promise to relieve some of your physical discomfort. I will ... pleasure you, master," he ended softly, and with no trace of the sarcasm that usually accompanied that hated word. Pyke caught his breath as he nodded wordlessly and let his eyes follow Vin-Chay as he ascended the spiral staircase. He busied himself closing up the house and setting the security system, but his mind was on the man upstairs and he could barely concentrate. He finished just as the familiar voice called down to him. "Commander?"

Pyke walked slowly up the stairs, the military side of him urging caution, but the human side of him wanting to sprint the stairs and be there in a second.

He entered the noxchamber and his lips parted slightly. The dozens of flickering candles that Vin-Chay had set on the window ledges, furniture and floor took him aback. All different sizes and colors and some with aromas, they cast strange and sensuous shadows on the walls and ceiling as the flames danced and swirled from their burning wicks. He noted that there were similar flickerings coming from the entry to the sanichamber, but before he could move towards it Vin-Chay entered the noxchamber from the arch.

You take my breath away, Pyke thought as the naked young Osiran stood before him, a few meters away, his eyes locked on Pyke's face. The Ptolemii took in the tall, perfectly proportioned body, and the skin darkened by outdoor labors and burnished by a healthy sheen resulting from his good diet and regular exercise. He had let his near-shoulder-length layered hair fall loose, and the bangs and side hair fell softly around his face, framing the high cheekbones and stunning blue eyes. He stood casually, arms crossed, leaning with one shoulder against the sanichamber doorjamb, with just the slightest touch of haughtiness. Pyke found that enticing on this particular occasion, rather than annoying. Vin-Chay deliberately waited a few long seconds before walking towards Pyke. He opened his lips slightly, sensuously, and let his own eyes roam over Pyke's face as he tugged on the robe sash and let it drop as the robe opened slightly. He slid his hands under the front opening of Pyke's robe and pushed the two sides apart to let it drop silently to the floor.

Pyke took Vin-Chay's face in his hands and murmured softly, "Pleasure me, slave," hoping that the tone would belay any misinterpretations that Vin-Chay would have about the words themselves. He hoped silently that Vin-Chay would

understand by now that he was a companion and lover in truth, and a slave in name only because of the charade that was necessary for them both to survive on Ptolem. It was on the tip of his tongue to abandon all sanity and tell Vin-Chay how he really felt, but before he could get the words out Vin-Chay forcefully crushed his lips against Pyke's own and thrust his probing tongue into Pyke's mouth. Pyke returned his passion and for several long moments they were both locked in a passionate embrace of bodies and arms and hands and lips and mouths. Pyke couldn't stand it any longer, and broke away so that he could pull Vin-Chay down on the bed with him.

Vin-Chay resisted, which surprised Pyke. Vin-Chay shook his head and grasped Pyke's right hand tightly in his own, and started pulling him towards the sanichamber. Pyke allowed himself to be led and when they entered the bathing area he saw that Vin-Chay had lit dozens more candles and that a steaming bath of scented, bluish oiled water was awaiting him. Vin-Chay motioned him to get into the bath. Pyke slid into the soothing water and rested his head back against the rear edge of the tub. He closed his eyes and enjoyed the sensations that the water and the previous sensuous passion had melted throughout his entire body. He turned his head and opened his eyes to see Vin-Chay standing over him, holding something that glinted in the candlelight. He recognized his sleek, sharp, old-style shaving razor when Vin-Chay knelt down beside the tub and placed a small dish of creamy shaving soap on the edge. He met Pyke's eyes knowingly and smiled enigmatically.

"Worried, Commander? I can understand a Ptolemii's concern to see his Osiran slave standing over him with a sharp instrument in hand."

"Not worried, just curious," Pyke replied, trying to appear unconcerned and casual as he wondered about the words that had just matched his exact thoughts. He leaned back against the tub.

"Nothing to be curious about, Commander. I simply want to pleasure your body from head to toe tonight, and the act of drawing a razor across one's throat can be as sensual as consummated sex under the proper circumstances." He cocked his head to one side, his eyes never leaving Pyke's, and said seriously, "I could have killed you at any time during these past six months without you ever seeing it coming."

"Perhaps it's more enticing to you that I do see it coming?"

"Perhaps," Vin-Chay grinned, "but tonight is not that night, either. Lie back and try to relax. Turn your head." Vin-Chay used two fingers to move Pyke's head to the right as he gently lathered the left side of his face. Pyke tensed perceptibly as he felt the edge of the razor lightly touch his upper cheekbone. Vin-Chay

drew it downwards in a deft, gentle motion, then repeated the process until Pyke's cheek was clean and smooth. He lathered Pyke's chin and upper lip and shaved them, too, then drew Pyke's face around to face him and lathered the right side as Pyke's eyes never left the Osiran's face. He deliberately took longer with that side of Pyke's face, drawing the blade farther down Pyke's throat on both sides, and then back up again. Pyke closed his eyes about halfway through this last section and pushed his fears aside to enjoy what actually were soothing, sensual actions. If anything was to build between them, it had to start with trust.

When he finished, Vin-Chay put the razor down on the sink along with the soap and cupped some bath water and rinsed Pyke's face with it. Pyke opened his eyes and felt his smooth face and grinned. Vin-Chay nodded his head. "Move forward." Pyke looked at him. "Move forward," Vin-Chay repeated firmly, lightly putting his hand behind Pyke's back and urging him forward to the front of the tub. Pyke slid towards the front and Vin-Chay stepped into the tub and slid down, leaning his back against the tub and pulling Pyke back to rest against him. He held Pyke's body firmly between his strong thighs. He picked up the special oiled soap he had bought from a Theban vendor earlier in the week, and began running it in circular motions along Pyke's chest and belly, and up along his arms and down along his legs. Pyke was leaning back against him, eyes closed, enjoying the quiet intimacy as Vin-Chay's hands and fingers washed and massaged and aroused him. Vin-Chay's tongue and lips caressed and nibbled on and gently bit his shoulders and neck and face. He was almost certain that he had groaned several times when it became too difficult to hide the pleasure.

The erotic bathing went on for nearly an hour. Pyke came close to climax several times when Vin-Chay's hands took slow pains to massage his genitals and the nipples on his chest. Vin-Chay always stopped short of bringing him to that climax, as though teasing him with things to come as he ran light fingers back and forth across Pyke's tattoos and nipples. Pyke didn't mind, however, since the point to which he was brought was already far past anything he had ever experienced at his consort's hands. True, he had climaxed innumerable times during their sexual consummations when he had penetrated his bedmate, and also when Vin-Chay had satisfied him orally, but this was another matter altogether.

Gradually Pyke realized that Vin-Chay had decreased his movements and this portion of their evening was winding down. Vin-Chay pushed him lightly forward with his upper body, and Pyke moved, and Vin-Chay rose from the tub and reached for a large, plush towel. Pyke stepped out of the tub, dripping, as Vin-Chay knelt down and began to towel him dry from the feet up. When he finished he dried himself and tossed the wet towel over the tub as he activated the drain-

age sensor. Vin-Chay followed Pyke out of the sanichamber. They left the candles burning. Vin-Chay stopped at the entrance to the noxchamber and poured a draught of annise for Pyke, who swallowed it quickly and made a negative motion with his hand when Vin-Chay offered more. Vin-Chay hesitated a moment, then put down the decanter as Pyke reached out for him.

Pyke was more than ready for the next step and pulled Vin-Chay down on the bed with him eagerly. The younger man laughed and maneuvered his body so that he could push Pyke backwards and loom over him. Pyke lay back, waiting quietly. Vin-Chay looked down at him for a moment as he sat back on Pyke's legs. Then he smiled and leaned over Pyke, and started to kiss him lightly on his lips and face and throat, working his way down and increasing the intensity of his oral exertions as he reached the Ptolemii's chest and stomach, and descended further to where he knew Pyke wanted him to be. But he stopped just short of performing the oral sex that Pyke wanted and instead rose up and sat back on Pyke's legs. He smiled, then reached down to the nightstand and retrieved a few bright red leaves resting by a thick, aromatic candle. At Pyke's inquisitive look he said silkily, "Bloodfire. A very sought-after, effective tactile aphrodisiac that comes from the western rain forests on Osiron. It was imported here years ago in minute quantities. Lie back." Pyke complied, and Vin-Chay deftly ran a fingernail through the leaves. A surprising amount of vermilion sap beaded up on the soft leaves. Vin-Chay smeared as much of the sap as he could entice out of their precious vessels onto his left hand. He tossed the depleted leaves onto the nightstand and rubbed the sap into the palms of both hands.

Vin-Chay reached down and pushed his thumbs into the high insides of Pyke's thighs, then drew them down hard and slowly for the full length of his thighs as his slick palms caressed the tops of Pyke's legs. Pyke arched his back involuntarily at the fiery sensations rippling through his legs and lower body. Only years of training and emotional restraint prevented him from screaming out at the exquisitely painful pleasure that Vin-Chay's hands were providing. He had never known that this portion of his anatomy was so sensitive, and wondered vaguely how Vin-Chay had discovered this erogenous zone. He didn't care, as long as he kept doing what he was doing. Vin-Chay rubbed his thumbs and fingers up and down Pyke's thighs until the Ptolemii gasped for him to stop. He smiled in the flickering light and let his hands rest unmoving and lightly on Pyke's legs, enjoying the power he had over the man as he watched his master's closed eyes flutter as Pyke regained his normal breathing and licked his dry lips. It seemed that experimenting with his own body to find sensitive and erotic places had paid off. He also had begun to understand now why many men seemed to

seek out lovers of their own sex rather than female mates: who but another man could know exactly how to pleasure his same-sex lover by knowing what would pleasure himself? He imagined that it might be the same way with some women.

Vin-Chay bent over Pyke and restarted his oral exertions on his stomach, licking and nipping and teasing. He moved downward and let his lips and tongue and teeth provide the Ptolemii with what he hoped would be an unparalleled experience in oral genital stimulation. As Vin-Chay performed his deft movements Pyke could no longer suppress his groans, and his lover was gratified to know that he had succeeded in bringing Pyke at least to his emotional knees. Pyke reached down and grasped Vin-Chay's hair, forcibly holding him down as though to prevent him from stopping what he had started.

He let his mouth massage Pyke for at least five long minutes, stopping when he thought the Ptolemii was too close to climax, then starting again with even more fervor. He stopped and started several times until he felt Pyke clutching his hair too tightly with his reflexive response to the physical sensations. He finished his exertions almost violently until Pyke yelled out and arched his back and climaxed and fell back panting on the bed, gradually releasing Vin-Chay's hair and head from his grasp. Vin-Chay sat back on Pyke's legs, gasping as both men took a long while to regain their even breathing and composure. Vin-Chay opened his eyes to meet Pyke's own. His lips felt dry and he slowly licked them before speaking.

"Again, master?" he asked softly as the tips of his fingernails stroked Pyke's inner thighs.

"Yes. God, yes," Pyke answered feverishly as Vin-Chay immediately started to perform the same actions again. It took a few minutes longer this time for Pyke to climax, but when he did he felt as though his head and chest had exploded, and at that point if Vin-Chay had taken the razor and run it across his throat he wouldn't have even cared. He would have had all that a man could ask for before that moment of death.

After the second time, Vin-Chay stretched his body out along side Pyke's on the bed and the Ptolemii grasped his face. The two men were locked in a long and passionate bout of kissing and touching and unintelligible murmurs and sounds until Pyke was sufficiently aroused. Even in the throes of his passion he thought of Vin-Chay's safety and comfort, and reached for the small jar of scented oils he kept on the nightstand, the same substance he had used back on Canaan. He quickly smeared himself with one hand before he pushed Vin-Chay over onto his stomach and wordlessly and desperately thrust himself into the young Osiran. Vin-Chay groaned and arched his own back as he grasped the pil-

low with his fists and bit into it. Pyke, oblivious to anything except the erotic act in which he was engaged, moaned and thrust and raked his fingernails across Vin-Chay's scarred back until he cried out his ultimate pleasure and collapsed on top of his consort.

Neither man moved for what seemed a long time until Pyke regained his even breathing. He stroked Vin-Chay's back with his cheeks and lips and tongue. Vin-Chay didn't try to move Pyke's weight off of him but instead let the man enjoy himself and come to the end of this coupling in his own time and way. After a while, Pyke groaned and withdrew and fell on his back next to Vin-Chay, gasping for a few moments before he reluctantly left the bed to wash. When he returned Vin-Chay was lying on his side, his arms wrapped around the pillow, his eyes lightly closed as he waited for his bedmate to return. Pyke slid into bed beside him and wrapped himself around Vin-Chay, and both men fell asleep for an hour, contented and relaxed and spent.

Pyke awoke first, still tightly wrapped around his mate. His movements startled Vin-Chay, who was awake and alert. He disengaged himself from Pyke and rolled over on his other side lazily, smiling and yawning at the same time as his Ptolemii captor took in his face and movements. They watched each other for a few minutes until Pyke leaned closer and kissed him gently and affectionately, then turned to lie on his back as Vin-Chay raised himself up on his elbow and looked at the Ptolemii almost curiously. He let his fingers run lightly across Pyke's chest as Pyke closed his eyes and smiled slightly.

"What are your thoughts, master?" Vin-Chay inquired softly, as his hand continued caressing Pyke's chest, playfully teasing an erect nipple.

"I was thinking that in all the time we've been together, you've never called me by my name. Why is that?" he asked as he opened his eyes to gauge Vin-Chay's reaction.

"Perhaps it has always seemed inappropriate to me for whatever the circumstances. Perhaps 'Commander' seems safer for all concerned."

"And 'master?'" Pyke asked.

"Only for special occasions, such as this one, or when I am particularly displeased with you and wish to get under your skin."

"And you do that very well, my young Osiran."

"Thank you—whether that was a compliment or not."

Pyke opened his eyes and looked deeply into Vin-Chay's, as though trying to determine where to go from there. He could still not bring himself to trust his captive entirely, but he thought they had reached at least some level of understanding and compromise under their strange situation. He had planned on giv-

ing Vin-Chay a special gift on his next birthanniv, but that was several months away and Pyke felt that tonight warranted that something special. He got out of bed and opened a drawer to his clothes chest, and took out a small square package, neatly wrapped. He slipped back into bed and handed it to Vin-Chay, who took it tentatively and looked at him inquiringly. Pyke shrugged and motioned for him to open it. As Vin-Chay unwrapped the package, Pyke explained.

"I had planned on giving this to you for your birthanniv, but I thought perhaps you'd enjoy it a little sooner. It's a little dated, but it was the only decent one I could find in the pre-war correlator databanks."

Vin-Chay stared at the holograph wordlessly. It was a starkly framed picture of his father, Chay Shayne, taken at least twelve or thirteen years earlier, before the Ptolem-Osiron conflict had erupted. He was wearing his official black-and-silver dress uniform and cloak, and was facing front, a slight smile on his lips, a complete regal bearing surrounding his entire form. His beard was close-cropped, as was his hair, and there were few of the white hairs streaked throughout that had been there when Vin-Chay had last seen his father nearly a year before his capture on the *Remus*. Chay Shayne's brown eyes burned brightly, alit with arrogance and intelligence, a sly cast to his half-smile. Vin-Chay's chest tightened unbearably, his eyes moist as he gazed on a face that he hadn't seen in years, and which had almost disappeared from his consciousness in a haze of lost memories.

After a few moments he raised his eyes to Pyke, who was watching him intently. He seemed to be unable to formulate his words easily, but Pyke waited patiently, understanding the conflicting emotions that the young man had to be feeling. Vin-Chay was finally able to speak and seemed to choose his words carefully.

"Commander, I—thank you. I don't understand how you could bring yourself to do this, but thank you. I don't think you really have any idea how much this means to me," he finished quietly as he clutched the holograph tightly in his trembling hands.

"I think I do," Pyke replied quietly. "I never had a big family that I was attached to, but I think I know enough about you to understand how you might feel about yours."

"I just—I cannot fathom how difficult it must be for you to have a picture in your house of the man who was responsible for the death of your wife. I cannot imagine how hard it would be for you to have his face looking out at you every day." Vin-Chay's soft eyes were riveted on Pyke's face as he silently sought an answer.

Pyke pursed his lips together, trying to think how best to answer this incisive observation. He wasn't sure he could explain to Vin-Chay, let alone himself, but he could try.

"It isn't easy, Vin-Chay. I loved my wife very much. I was devastated when she died, but I had to attribute it to her being a casualty of war, and I had to go on with my life. She's been dead over five years. She is gone, and you are here. You had nothing to do with what happened, and, again, I will try to make you understand that it had nothing to do with your being here. You've had a hard time of it, and I'm in some ways a cause of that. I would like to think that I could also be a cause of some of your happiness as well, if even in a small measure. I can get past my pain and anger if you can try to do the same. If we try to meet at least half way, this can be a healthier, more sedate household, and that benefits both of us. Are you willing to try?"

Vin-Chay looked down at the picture and took a deep breath. "Yes," he said, cursing himself silently for the hypocrite he knew he was. *Damn Pyke for doing this now, of all times. Damn him.*

Pyke yawned widely and reached over and stroked Vin-Chay's cheek gently. "Put the holograph on the dresser," he said, "then come back to bed. I think we both need to get a good night's sleep after tonight's exertions, or neither of us will be able to function at our work tomorrow."

Vin-Chay pushed the bed covers off his long legs and walked over to the dresser opposite the bed. He put the holograph down near the corner and stood there looking at it for a few moments before rejoining Pyke. He turned over on his side and let Pyke wrap himself around him as he nuzzled Vin-Chay's neck and murmured a good night. Pyke fell asleep quickly, but Vin-Chay stayed awake for more than an hour as the dying candles flickered their patterns over his face and the walls of the noxchamber. He felt as though they were closing in on him as he reflected on Pyke's untimely kindness, and his own unkind plans. He finally fell into a restive sleep which would have disturbed Pyke for most of the night with the tossing and turning and bad dreams of a faceless dead wife being strangled by his father, if the annise that Pyke consumed hadn't been laced with the sedative the Vin-Chay had also procured from the Theban vendor. Vin-Chay's last thoughts before drifting off were of the razor lying on the sanichamber sink, and what he planned on doing with it when he awakened well before dawn after a brief sleep to fortify him for what lay ahead.

CHAPTER NINE

Pyke awoke at mid-day with his head throbbing from the drugged annise. He hadn't realized this yet, of course, as he stumbled painfully to the sanichamber to relieve himself and search for a remedy for the head pain. He noticed that the candles had all burned down, then the corner of his eye caught a trail of red on the sink tile. He blinked to try to focus his eyes and stopped a moment to rinse his dry mouth with water before exploring the strange color on the sink.

He saw a large red patch near the open razor, and a line of red across the sink leading down the drain. *What is that?* he thought, as he picked up the razor and saw that it was covered with dried blood. He immediately became alert and panic set in as he examined himself in the recessed mirror for any telltale signs of injury. There were none. He squinted at the red spot on the sink and realized that it was dried blood surrounding something small and square. Very small. He put down the razor and picked up the sticky square, and a knowing chill run through his body as he recognized the loc-chip that had been implanted in Vin-Chay's left arm. *He's managed to cut it out*, Pyke thought wildly. *He's trying to run. God's Blood.* He stared at the tiny implement lying next to the razor, and recognized a crude and illegal but obviously effective absorptiometron that had allowed Vin-Chay to locate the hated chip and remove it with the razor. The penalty for selling or using such an instrument was death; he'd have to dispose of it quickly. Later.

Pyke grasped the loc-chip in his hand and rushed back into the noxchamber, now oblivious to the throb in his head. The candles had burned down there as well, and he checked the chronometer on the nightstand, reading the mid-day time and vaguely wondering why no one in the Miliplex had bothered to call or investigate why he hadn't been to the complex at his regular early morning time.

He noticed that the holograph that he had given Vin-Chay the night before was gone, and a quick check of the chests and closets revealed that Vin-Chay had taken only a few clothes and items with him. *Fool*, Pyke thought. *You can't make it. You can't get away. Where would you go? How am I supposed to keep this from the authorities? You'll be executed.* A hundred thoughts crashed around inside Pyke's brain as he managed to pull on his own clothes and stumble down the stairs to

the first tier. He wrapped the chip in a piece of cloth and stuck it in his tunic pocket. He made a cursory search of the house, knowing he wouldn't find his fleeing slave, but hoping against hope that he was wrong. He wondered how he could buy time before he would have no choice but to contact the Thrallplex to have their slave-retrieval team sent out.

Pyke entered his private culturchamber and noticed that his correlator was active. He saw a chip lying near the security indents, and he slid it into the private drive opening. He hit a few indents and he was startled to see his own image display, speaking a short, terse message that indicated that he wouldn't be coming into the Miliplex that day for personal reasons. He knew immediately that this image was the compilation of bits and pieces of other messages that had been logged into his correlator. Vin-Chay had obviously broken in somehow and pieced together words and images he needed to provide the bogus message. *Clever. Smart.* He had underestimated his intelligent opponent and that had bred this potentially deadly situation. Vin-Chay had clearly left the message for him to find, as he had left the loc-chip. *Still the arrogant princeling,* he thought as his anger built. *I should just let them have him. I know I can't.*

Where would he go? Pyke knew that he had no chance of finding a ship that would take him off the planet. Or would he? At this point Pyke was becoming aware that the Osiran was far more cunning and inventive than he had thought. He was also not as dangerous to Pyke as might be assumed, since he had had every opportunity to effect serious physical harm or death against his Ptolemii master, yet had chosen not to. And Pyke didn't believe for a moment that this was due to fear. He needed to believe that it was due to some feeling or at least compassion and understanding that his captive must have felt for him. That knowledge mitigated Pyke's anger somewhat, but he was still furious and fearful of what this insane action would precipitate.

Tuscan. Of course. He might try to seek refuge or at least a way station there with his own people, people he had helped and come to trust. He would know that Pyke would assume this, and it was doubtful that he would be there, but it was a place to start searching. And fast.

Pyke contacted the Miliplex and reinforced his earlier 'message.' He told the administrative duty officer that he wouldn't be at his office for a day or two but would work from home and to contact him there. No, nothing was wrong, but he was feeling a little under the weather and preferred to work in a secluded, private atmosphere for a couple of days. As he signed off he was certain that the officer had no suspicions that anything was wrong.

Pyke checked the craftport and found what he had expected: the recraft was missing. He cursed out loud, trying to figure out how he could get into Thebes without it and without anyone knowing that he required transportation. He realized that he had no choice but to involve one of his sub-commanders. He chose TutMose. He contacted TutMose on the latter's private cy-comm and briefly told him that a situation had arisen and he needed transport into the city. TutMose asked no questions, and thirty minutes later appeared in his private craft at Pyke's door. The two men were silent for different reasons as TutMose's craft glided quickly into Thebes and dropped Pyke off at his city apartment. Pyke checked his craftport there and found his vehicle. Vin-Chay had left it where it could be easily reclaimed. Pyke thanked and dismissed TutMose without any explanation or warning, for the sub-commander would always be discreet and silent unless ordered otherwise. Pyke only hoped that a word from him didn't slip to Zandran, who would have jumped at the chance to make trouble for Vin-Chay, possibly even at Pyke's expense.

Pyke entered the apartment and checked it out. Nothing was disturbed since he had been there last, and he assumed that Vin-Chay hadn't entered—that he had simply dropped off the recraft and then fled to wherever it was that he had planned to go during this escape attempt. Tuscan. It had to be. Pyke gathered a few extra items for his techbelt, and included a small neuralizer that he concealed under his tunic. He knew that his duty was to report the escape attempt immediately to the authorities, but that would have ultimately resulted in Vin-Chay's death at the outside, and at best his torture and possibly incarceration in some godforsaken place. Pyke wasn't willing to do that, even though his own position would be in serious danger if he failed to act properly and was caught. He had to risk it. *I must be crazy*, he thought savagely, *to put everything I've worked for in jeopardy for that bastard Osiran. Damn him.*

He briefly scanned the craft to see if Vin-Chay had left anything in it or if it provided any clues as to what he planned to do. Nothing. He maneuvered it out of the craftport and headed over the twisting back streets of Thebes to the outskirts where the perimeter gate of Tuscan came into solemn view. Three Ptolemii warriors who monitored people leaving and entering the ghetto area always guarded it. At least one of them had been present when Vin-Chay had been detained that first time, and Pyke greeted him cordially as the three men saluted the High Commander.

"Good afternoon, Lieutenant," Pyke said easily.

"Sir!" the lieutenant replied, snapping to attention.

"I was supposed to meet my slave here this afternoon. The one you stopped a couple of months ago, remember? Has he entered yet?" Pyke believed that he succeeded in making his voice and words casual, but he was tense and anxious inside and hoped he hadn't started sweating.

"I haven't seen him, sir. Terras? Jobida? Have you seen a well-dressed young male slave enter the premises today?"

"No, sir," they chorused together.

"They've been here since before dawn and seen no one, so I believe your slave has not yet arrived. It would be impossible for him to get in without one of us seeing him, sir."

"Of course. Very well. He may come soon so let him through. I'll be inside for a while. That's all." *Impossible?* thought Pyke. *Not likely. He probably came over or under the gate at some other section of the perimeter.* Pyke returned their dismissal salutes and entered Tuscan.

He met with the same hostile and wary stares that he had that first time he entered, but he felt no sense of danger. These people were not about to destroy their lives and freedom by harming a high-ranking military officer no matter how much they may have hated the very sight of him.

He walked down the crowded street to a ramshackle house. As though expecting him, the Osiran Tarqua came out of the house and greeted him stiffly.

"How can I help you today, Commander?" he asked formally, barely holding back his mistrust and contempt.

Pyke let the silence linger for a few moments before responding. "A word with you in private, for starters, sir," he answered equally formally. Tarqua obviously didn't want Pyke in his house, but he was forced to remember that this man could inflict significant damage to his family and people if he chose to. He reluctantly moved aside and motioned an invitation with his arm. Pyke could see the three-triangle tattoo on his forearm; even when freed, Osirans were not allowed to have it removed except under particular circumstances.

Tarqua followed Pyke into the dark single chamber of his home. His wife and child were not present, and he closed the door to allow them as much privacy as possible. Pyke wasted no time in coming to the point. He faced Tarqua directly and met his eyes coldly.

"I know he is here," he said flatly.

"Commander?" Tarqua replied blandly. Pyke could see the barest trace of perspiration on his forehead as the man attempted in vain to keep calm under Pyke's unwavering scrutiny.

"I know he is here," Pyke repeated slowly, then went on before Tarqua could protest. "Listen to me closely, elder. I know he is here. There isn't even the slightest doubt in my mind. You have twenty-four hours to turn him over to me at my apartment in Thebes. *Twenty-four hours*. If he is not in my possession after that time, I will bring a contingent of Ptolemii warriors here and raze each and every building in Tuscan, one by one, starting with yours, until I find him or I determine absolutely that he cannot possibly be here. Your freedman's town will be reduced to rubble, and if the Pharon gets wind of why it was reduced so, it is very likely that there will be other significant repercussions to you and your people, regardless of whether you have done anything wrong or not. Do I make myself clear?" he ended coldly, his voice and face sheathed in an icy finality that sent a sickening ripple of fear down Tarqua's spine. Before he had a chance to reply, Pyke turned on his heel and left the chamber and a terrified man in his wake.

Pyke kept his face rigid and eyes front as he walked through the streets of Tuscan and exited the perimeter gate. He returned to the apartment and sat down in his favorite chair, trembling. He tried to calm himself and figure out what he was going to do if he was wrong. He was sickened at the empty threat he had made. He wondered if the Osiran was astute enough to realize that he was bluffing. Vin-Chay would know that, but this man was unlikely to. He hoped.

A few moments after Pyke left, Vin-Chay entered Tarqua's chamber through a hidden door at the back. He had heard everything and saw the effect that Pyke had had on the white-faced man in front of him. Vin-Chay felt a rush of sympathy for the man, who had so much to lose if he did the right thing. Vin-Chay reached out a comforting hand to touch Tarqua's shoulder, but was roughly rebuffed as the man glared at him with fury. Vin-Chay was taken aback at the anger in his face, anger directed at Vin-Chay and not at Pyke. He tensed.

"Tarqua—" he began, but the elder cut him off.

"See the trouble you have brought to us, princeling?" he said sharply. The title was obviously a term of derision for him rather than honor in this situation. Vin-Chay tensed even more and a sense of foreboding started to fall over him as Tarqua continued angrily. "We were safe here, at peace in this place until you came. Now we're in danger of losing everything—our lives, our property, our freedom, because you decided to come here and bring that animal after you. Why did you come?!"

Vin-Chay studied the man for a few brief seconds before he could find his voice and answer. "I came because you are my people. You are the people that I am supposed to be able to trust. The people," he said harshly, "that I have been bringing food and medicine to and have been working with for months. *My* peo-

ple!” He nearly shouted the last few words and glared back at Tarqua, disbelieving what was occurring yet realizing that he had made a serious mistake in trusting anyone on this planet. Anyone.

“We are not *your* people,” Tarqua spat out contemptuously. “We are common Osirans, not over-indulged, selfish people of royal blood, raised in a luxurious compound and treated as the royalty they are, raised to believe they are better than the common folk that serve them. It was *your* kind that started this war and *our* kind who are paying for that arrogance! You think you are a slave? You live in a clean, beautiful home and wear good clothes and eat the best food, and if you have to pay for that with some casual sex you consider that being mistreated? Arrogant! And you would visit that arrogance on us and have our world destroyed because you find it inconvenient to bed your Ptolemii master? I think not. No. I cannot bring my people to ruin for one man who is not even truly part of us.”

“Don’t be a fool, Tarqua!” Vin-Chay said angrily, ignoring the stinging and unfair words. He tried to keep on track with rational thought, which had deserted the man across from him as fear and hatred replaced it in front of his very eyes. “You are in no danger. Pyke is bluffing. I *know* this man—he will not harm anyone in this place—anyone! Have some backbone and intelligent thought and call his bluff. I swear to you that nothing will come of not turning me over to him. I swear it!” Even as he finished the words Vin-Chay could see that they were having no effect on Tarqua, who was thoroughly cowed and convinced that Pyke would take action if he failed to betray Vin-Chay. There was really no choice for Tarqua; he only had one child left.

Vin-Chay swore under his breath and turned to go back into the hidden chamber and gather his belongings to flee. As he turned he came face to face with Dorran and Farouk, two freedmen who had been listening to the conversation and had moved into the chamber silently to support Tarqua’s decision. Before Vin-Chay could attempt to get past them, each man grabbed one of his arms and the three of them wrestled to the floor. The result was a foregone conclusion as they managed to get him on his stomach and put their knees in his back. They pulled his arms behind his back and held him tightly. Tarqua bound his wrists and forearms with a strong cord. They dragged him to his feet and waited for the elder’s next command. Vin-Chay glared at him with a mixture of contempt and compassionate understanding, which infuriated Tarqua.

“Take him to the underground pit. We’ll wait until tonight when the guards change and then take him to the Ptolemii. Tell no one of this. Take him,” Tarqua ended, turning his face away from his shame. *I am doing the right thing*, he thought. *I am*.

As the two men pulled Vin-Chay off to the hidden door and the place where they would hold him until night fell, he tried once more to make Tarqua see the consequences of his actions as he strained against his captors.

"Tarqua! Listen to me. This is not a matter of my being confined for a week in my 'beautiful' Ptolemii house, or deprived of a good draught of annise at meal-time! At worst I will be executed for trying to escape. At best, I don't know what he'll do to me. I want to live. I want to escape and get back into the fight that will end this for all of us. Just let me go into the Great Wasteland and you need never see me again. I know you don't care what happens to me but what about you and your people? I know you're frightened, but do you really believe you're doing the right thing? If you do this, what sets you apart from the Ptolemii and their disregard for honor and brotherhood? How are you different from them?" Vin-Chay barely had time to get the last words out before Tarqua unexpectedly cried out and smashed his hand across Vin-Chay's face, stunning him and drawing blood from a split lip.

"Take him!" Tarqua shouted as he turned his back. Dorran and Farouk pulled their stunned captive through the door and dragged him through several connecting shanties to a small lean-to. Farouk pulled open the trapdoor to the hidden cellar, where Vin-Chay was unceremoniously dumped to await nightfall. Vin-Chay tried to twist his wrists out of the cords, but they were too tight and he only succeeded in scraping his skin enough to make them bleed. He finally gave up and leaned back against a packed earth wall in the complete darkness as he waited with a strange calm to die.

CHAPTER TEN

The night was unusually still. Stars blanketed the sky, and the moon shone down on the streets nearly as bright as daylight in some open areas. The buildings that lined the streets in the vicinity of Pyke's apartment blotted out much of the light, and the four men who walked silently and purposefully along the deserted streets were amongst the few who were out at that late hour. It was well past midnight and the streets were nearly empty. The men were cloaked, with their hoods pulled over their heads to obscure their faces. Two of them walked unusually close to a third, one on each side, as they followed the fourth man, whose eyes were locked on the path, never glancing to the right or the left.

They arrived at Pyke's apartment and the front man hesitated only a brief second before pressing the entry sensor. They waited for a few moments until Pyke opened the door and stared balefully at the man he had expected and also had hoped would not come. He glanced behind Tarqua and saw Vin-Chay's face nearly obscured by the cloak hood. He was wedged between Dorran and Farouk, who stared straight ahead, not making eye contact with the Ptolemii. Pyke moved to the side to allow Tarqua to enter. Vin-Chay was pushed by one of the men to follow, but as Dorran and Farouk made to enter as well, Pyke halted them with a few words. "Get out," he said coldly, and shut the door in their faces. The two men looked at one another, trying to decide if they should wait for Tarqua or not. Since they had no idea if he would even be allowed to return to Tuscan, they reluctantly decided to return themselves and hope that the elder would soon follow.

Pyke turned to face Tarqua, ignoring Vin-Chay, who stood rigid and still. Tarqua burned with a mixture of anger and shame at the contemptuous look that Pyke was giving him, a look he realized that he well deserved. He regrouped his pride for a moment and raised his chin as he addressed Pyke after bending down and dropping Vin-Chay's clothing bag near the wall. "I have delivered what you demanded. May I go now?"

"No," Pyke replied coolly. "Not yet. We aren't finished here, elder." He turned and pulled Vin-Chay's hood back and was surprised to see the large bruise on his left cheek, the cut lip, and the small trail of dried blood from the lip down

the chin. He felt a rush of rage that someone had injured *his* Osiran, although he planned on inflicting even more pain in just a few moments himself. He turned back to Tarqua.

"So I assume that he didn't come quite willingly, or appreciate your need to preserve your precious hovel?" Pyke said sarcastically. He didn't wait for a reply and turned back to Vin-Chay, pulling off the cloak to reveal his hands bound behind his back. He raised his eyes and saw that Vin-Chay was staring straight ahead into space, patiently awaiting his fate. "Look at me," Pyke said. When Vin-Chay didn't move, Pyke grasped his chin painfully in his hand and twisted his head towards him. "Look at me," he repeated slowly. As Vin-Chay focused his eyes on Pyke's, Pyke released his face and threw a brutal left cross against the undamaged side of his face. Vin-Chay rocked backwards for a second but didn't lose his balance despite the ferocity of the blow. The blow caused him to bite down hard on the inside of his cheek and tongue, and he felt something sharp pressing against the latter. He nearly choked on—something? He gagged and swallowed involuntarily as the blood flooded his mouth and seeped out of the corners of his lips. He didn't make a sound or give Pyke the satisfaction of seeing him wince.

Pyke turned back towards Tarqua as he grasped Vin-Chay's left arm and started pulling him towards then stairs. "Come," he threw back at Tarqua as he started to ascend the stairs with his bound captive. Tarqua hesitated.

"Commander ... please. I have done what you ask. Let me return—"

"When I say you can leave, you can leave. I am not done with either of you, elder. Follow us upstairs. Now." He turned back and continued pulling Vin-Chay up the stairs to the noxchamber. He could hear Tarqua slowly following them.

When they were on the second tier in the well-lit noxchamber, Pyke pulled Vin-Chay close enough to him so that he could whisper to him and not be heard by Tarqua.

"Resist me in any way, and he and his people will suffer. That is not a bluff," he said softly as he released Vin-Chay's arm and turned to a waiting, pale-faced Tarqua.

"Unbind his wrists," Pyke snapped at the elder. Tarqua hesitated, but the look on Pyke's face made him shiver and comply immediately. Vin-Chay rubbed his unbound wrists gently, and Pyke noticed the lacerations and dried blood on them. *He must have struggled for hours to try to free himself.* Vin-Chay looked up from rubbing his wrists and met Pyke's eyes. The Ptolemii told him icily, "Take off your tunic. Strip."

Vin-Chay slowly removed his top tunic, and Tarqua saw the scars on his back for the first time. He felt a sickening sense of guilt over his actions and words and wished he could turn back time, just to this afternoon when he made such a terrible mistake. *I am so sorry, princeling*, he thought. Vin-Chay dropped the tunic over a chair and waited as Pyke went to a chest and opened a drawer. He removed two strong, thin leather belts and tossed them at Tarqua, motioning his hand towards the bedposts as he removed a large, thick belt from the same drawer.

“Bind his wrists, one to each post. Do it.”

Vin-Chay remembered Pyke’s words about making Tarqua pay for any of his resistance. He moved slowly to the foot of the bed, dropping to his knees and spreading his arms out, one towards each post. Tarqua used the belts to bind his wrists to the old-fashioned but strong wooden posts. Tarqua’s breathing was heavy, and Vin-Chay felt his hands trembling as he performed his odious task. He almost felt sorry for the man again. Almost. He felt the belts tighten against his chafed skin. A ripple of panic raced through him for a brief second before a deadly calm settled throughout his whole body.

Tarqua stepped back from the bound man and faced Pyke. There was an unmistakable trace of tears in his eyes as he pleaded with Pyke. “Please, Commander. Don’t do this. Punish me instead. I—”

“This *is* your punishment, Tarqua. To stand here and watch helplessly as I beat a man who has gone out of his way to help you and your people, and has been repaid for it with cowardice and betrayal. I want you to watch and feel his pain and remember your own shame always, long after his wounds have healed. So stand there quietly and appreciate what you have done to one of your own people.” Pyke then almost casually turned away from Tarqua and towards Vin-Chay, raising his arm and bringing the full force of the belt down on Vin-Chay’s back with the most powerful blow he could muster.

Vin-Chay gasped but didn’t scream out as he involuntarily pulled and twisted his bound wrists and arched his body against the footboard of the bed. His wrist lacerations began to bleed again as a long, deep cut opened down his back, and a flood of blood began to seep out across the scarred flesh. Tarqua groaned helplessly and closed his eyes for a second, opening them just as Pyke brought his arm down a second time to open another long cut criss-cross against the first. This time, Vin-Chay’s body flexed reactively, but he emitted no sound, his teeth tightly clenched as he summoned all of his strength to stop himself from crying out. Silently, he screamed for his father and God, in that particular order.

Pyke raised and struck with the belt thirty times. The only sounds in the chamber were the men’s heavy breathing and the belt striking flesh. When the

last blow had been struck and Pyke dropped the slick, bloody belt to the floor, Vin-Chay's back was completely drenched in red. The blood ran in rivulets down his shredded back and across his legs, soaking the trousers, and starting to puddle on the carpeted floor. He was barely conscious and struggled to keep his eyes open and his thoughts clear.

Pyke stared at his handiwork for a moment before turning stone-faced to Tarqua. "Get out. Speak of this escape attempt to no one, or I'll come for you and take my vengeance on your family. Get out, coward."

Tarqua fled the chamber, stumbling down the stairs and out into the cool, dark night, where he tried to gulp lungfuls of air. He sobbed openly. He blindly ran down the streets towards Tuscan where he hoped to God he could find some measure of safety and peace, but he didn't think he would ever feel safe or at peace again.

Pyke stood rigid and unmoving for a long time after Tarqua fled the chamber. Then he walked calmly over to Vin-Chay and grasped his moist hair, pulling his head back. The Osiran's eyes were barely open, and there was blood flowing from his lips. Pyke released his hair, then twisted his left arm so that the soft inner forearm was showing upwards. Pyke pulled off the bandage that Vin-Chay had placed over the ragged cut where he had removed the loc-chip. He tossed it on the floor. He reached down and slowly picked up the bloody belt again, running his hand over it, covering his own flesh with Vin-Chay's blood. He stood over Vin-Chay, closer than he had been when he was beating him, and raised the belt one last time, aiming carefully at the cut on Vin-Chay's arm. He brought the belt down and Vin-Chay, not expecting this blow, lost his composure and screamed as the leather sliced into his forearm and sent a shower of blood back towards Pyke and onto the bed covers. Pyke dropped the belt again, and dropped into a nearby chair, exhausted, spent, sick.

He didn't know how long he sat there. Nothing seemed real. He was vaguely aware that Vin-Chay seemed to have lost consciousness as his body sagged after the final blow. He managed to push his leaden body up off the chair and check to see if Vin-Chay was conscious. He wasn't. Pyke tried to untie the wrist restraints but the twisting had tightened them. He went into the sanichamber and retrieved one of his razors, which he used to cut away the right wrist belt. He managed to catch Vin-Chay as he fell sideways, and he held him with one arm as he cut away the second belt. He gently lowered Vin-Chay onto the blood-soaked carpet. *He'll be all right*, Pyke thought. *He'll be all right. More blood than life-threatening damage.* He rose and looked around the chamber, strangely panicked. *I have to get out of here. I have to. I have to leave.* He checked Vin-Chay's pulse, which was strong,

and put a pillow under his head, then blindly fled the chamber as Tarqua had done shortly before.

At the foot of the stairs Pyke realized that his hands were covered with blood, and there was blood on his clothes. He hated to return upstairs but had to clean himself. Vin-Chay was still unmoving on the floor. Pyke stripped his clothes off and left them where they dropped. He washed and washed his hands in icy cold water and quickly clad himself in a nondescript tunic and trousers and left the chamber again without looking at the man on the floor. His head was pounding and he couldn't see in front of him as he stumbled down the stairs again and out into the cool darkness of night. He had no idea where he was going. He just had to go. He ran.

Vin-Chay lay semi-conscious on the floor for nearly an hour before he was able to gather the strength to open his eyes and rationally make a decision to get off the floor. His slow, uncertain movements brought fresh pain and he groaned as he pushed himself into a sitting position, where he remained for a few moments until the dizziness stopped. He reached over and grasped the edge of the footboard where he had been recently bound, and pulled himself off the floor, wincing as the movement brought new waves of pain.

His back was on fire and his face throbbed. He knew he was bleeding, but he had no idea how badly he was injured. He groped from bed to wall to chest to reach the entrance to the sanichamber, leaving bloody handprints on the walls and furniture. He knew he needed to dress his wounds. He leaned over the sink and looked down and saw that his hands and arms were stained with blood. He pushed the indent that opened the recessed mirror, and looked up. He was shocked and speechless as he stared at the man in the mirror, this badly bruised stranger who had nothing to do with him. Couldn't be him.

The man who stared back with wild eyes had deepening, savage bruises on both sides of his face. Both eyes were swollen, the right one more so than the left. The face was streaked with blood and the gashed lip was swollen to twice its size on one side. As his lips parted in stunned disbelief, he saw that his teeth were stained with the blood from his bitten cheek. He slowly twisted his upper body, keeping his eyes on the mirror, so that he could see his back. He saw bloody, ravaged flesh, and deep cuts. He looked down at his left arm and saw the deep gash and the dripping blood from that wound. He saw that his trousers were blood-stained. He swayed lifelessly for a moment as he gripped the edge of the sink to steady himself. Even in the haze of semi-consciousness and pain he knew he needed help; he couldn't fix this himself. He managed to turn on the water and cup some in his shaking hands. He rinsed out his mouth, squeezing his eyes shut

at the pain as the water washed over his wounds. He spat the water out and rinsed several times until there was no more bloody water coming out of his mouth, then drank deeply. He shakily washed his hands, then used the walls to steady himself as he moved out of the sanichamber and down the stairs. He panicked when he couldn't find the household cy-comm right away, but then found it on a desk and whispered the codes he knew so well.

When the man at the other end of the commlink answered, Vin-Chay could barely get out any words. His throat was dry and raw, and he still wasn't thinking very coherently. He managed somehow to make the man understand that he needed help and where he was before the cy-comm slipped from his hand and he lost consciousness. He crashed to the floor, left hand connecting hard as his wrist snapped. He couldn't hear the man calling to him from the other end of the open line.

Pyke had wandered for hours and it was nearly dawn when his head had cleared enough for him to attempt to return to the apartment. He had no idea what he would find or wanted to find or didn't want to find. When he got to his door he saw that he had left it unsecured. He took a deep breath and went inside. He heard movement upstairs and voices. More than one. Vin-Chay's for a few words, then an unfamiliar voice. He checked his concealed weapon and quietly mounted the stairs, entering the noxchamber.

Pyke saw Vin-Chay lying on the bed, face down, one limp arm draped over the edge. A man in Osiran priest's garb was sitting next to him, attempting to staunch the blood seepage on his back with a wet towel. He turned as Pyke entered. Pyke read the recognition and hatred in the man's eyes. The priest stood up at once, at the same time that Vin-Chay turned his head and looked up at Pyke with glassy eyes. He turned away, knowing that at that moment he wouldn't be able to control his emotions. He wasn't going to give Pyke the satisfaction of seeing his fear and pain.

The priest stared at Pyke, a practiced look of neutrality on his face. He held the wet, blood-soaked towel in his hand limply, waiting for the Ptolemii commander to speak. When Pyke waited too long, in the priest's estimation, he took it on himself to say the obvious.

"He needs a physician, Commander. Right away." He hesitated. "Please."

Pyke kept his eyes on the priest's as he walked over to the bed and looked down at the damage he had inflicted on his bound captive. He felt his stomach violently turn over as he let his eyes roam over the lacerated, bleeding flesh. Then he let his eyes roam over the noxchamber, seeing the handprints on the walls and the drying blood on the carpet and the blood-slicked belt lying on the floor where

he had left it. His eyes returned to the priest's impassive face. He said nothing to the man but left the chamber to commlink with the Mediplex. He returned to the chamber to find the priest still attempting to staunch the blood flow. He pulled a blanket out of the bedchest and laid it over Vin-Chay's back. Pyke looked at them for a few seconds before he seemed to recall something and looked around for his discarded clothes. He saw them on the floor, where they had fallen. He picked up the stained tunic and reached into the pocket to retrieve a piece of folded cloth. Then he turned again to the priest and his semi-conscious patient.

"Help me get him downstairs," Pyke commanded. He and the priest managed to get Vin-Chay to his feet. They maneuvered the injured man down to the first tier, nearly stumbling and falling several times under his dead weight. Pyke motioned the priest towards the entry door to the craftport from the nutrichamber, and they got Vin-Chay into the reccraft. Pyke slid the door open to allow the craft access to the street. Patri Julan made a move to try to enter next to Vin-Chay, but Pyke stopped him.

"You aren't needed from here on in, Patri. Go back to your temple and do what you do best—pray for salvation." He secured the craftport door and got in, checking his pocket for the item he needed. He guided the craft through official airspace until he reached the major Mediplex center in east Thebes. He descended the craft near a rear entrance used for special occasions and patients. A physician and two attendants were waiting for him. He motioned them over and they extracted Vin-Chay from the vehicle and onto a hovencart. As they moved him onto the cart the blanket fell back enough for the physician to see the triangle tattoo on his right arm. He raised his eyebrows in surprise at Pyke as the attendants took Vin-Chay into the medical complex. He identified himself as Asclepian Desdemonus, then incautiously blurted out his protest.

"Commander, a slave? I had no idea. It is not usual—"

"*My* slave, Asclepian, so listen closely. You will treat this man with all of your compassion and skills as though you were treating me. If I see or hear one word or action that is not in compliance with this directive, I emphatically assure you that I will make your professional and personal lives an absolute hell. I have the power to do it. I *will* do it unless this man is healed quickly and efficiently and without condescension, contempt, anger or attitude. Have I made myself clear, Asclepian?" Pyke's imperious and deadly tone turned the physician's blood to ice and he nodded quickly and wordlessly. As he started to turn nervously to follow his special new patient into the depths of the trauma unit, Pyke stopped him sharply.

"Asclepian Desdemonus," The pale man turned and Pyke reached into his tunic pocket and held out a small, folded cloth that the physician reluctantly took from him. He opened the cloth and saw the small, bloody loc-chip that Pyke had been carrying with him. He looked up inquiringly and Pyke put on his best arrogant face.

"One of the blows I struck was not completely on target and ripped into his arm, tearing this out. Re-implant it while you're attending him. Better yet, re-implant it in another physical location in his body that is not easily detectable in case the ease with which it was extracted gives him any stupid ideas. Any problem with that?" he ended, an eyebrow raised menacingly as though daring the physician to disagree with him.

"No sir, none at all. It's, it's not a problem. I can implant it in his right femur, deep within the bone. We've done that before. Actually—"

"Asclepian. Your patient?" Pyke said in a voice that brooked no further delays.

The physician ducked his head and turned to leave. Pyke followed slowly and was directed by a medtech to a comfortable chamber on the fourth tier where he could await the physician's prognosis.

Two hours passed before the pale physician entered the chamber. Pyke turned from the window. He had been staring out at the view for those two hours, only just becoming aware of how brightly the new morning sun was shining. People were starting to come and go in normal patterns of work and academy and play. The innocuous activities all seemed natural and completely out of place. Pyke cocked his head and waited for the physician to speak. The man cleared his throat a couple of times nervously; this Ptolemii commander terrified him and he didn't want to make any mistakes. He had too good a life to throw away on his personal prejudices, and would treat this slave as though he were the Pharon's son himself.

"Um, well, Commander. He is stabilized and resting quietly in a private chamber on the fifth tier. We've sealed the deeper cuts on his back and the one on his arm, and the lesser ones will heal naturally without intervention. Of course, there will be significant scarring on his back and arm, but the wounds to his face will heal without any permanent damage to the skin or skull. His wrist was broken—"

"Broken?" Pyke snapped. *How the hell did his wrist get broken?* He didn't suppose it mattered, but that injury came as a surprise.

"Yes, sir. A simple fracture. Easily set and it will heal quickly. No damage to his digital mobility. He required accelerated platelet therapy since he lost a great deal of blood from the deeper wounds. Anyway, we have applied healant to his lacerated wrists and lip and the inside of his mouth—"

“His mouth? What happened there?” *God’s Blood*.

“He seems to have bitten down extremely hard on the inside of his right cheek and on part of his tongue, and he tore a chunk of inner cheek lining off. It had to be removed from the skin threads holding it to the rest of the cheek and then the wound sealed. The tongue sustained a deep gash from his teeth, and it’s swollen, but that will subside and heal naturally as well. His rear right molar was knocked out and he apparently swallowed it—we scanned his stomach and it’s there. He’s in no danger from that so I recommend letting it come out the natural way instead of having an invasive procedure in his condition. He may not be able to eat much solid food for a few days, but there are many liquid nutrients that can supplement his diet. He’ll get the best nutrition and care here, sir, I assure you.” The physician looked anxious, as if for acceptance that he had done the best job possible. He did not want to antagonize this man. Ever. He wondered how the slave had antagonized his master enough to make the man ravage his body the way he had. He felt a shudder run up and down his spine and just wanted to leave the chamber, but he held steady and waited for Pyke to respond.

Pyke started pacing back and forth as the physician described Vin-Chay’s injuries and treatments. He felt as though the walls were crashing in on him, and he rubbed his hand harshly across his mouth before he realized that the other man was still in the same chamber with him. He whirled around and snapped at him, “Anything else? When can he be released?”

“No, sir! Well, we do have to fill out administrative reports to go with the holographs we took in the trauma chamber and I just need to know—you understand, for the record—how the patient was, um, injured, so that—”

“Fine. Just put down that my slave displeased me and I beat him. Will that suffice?” Pyke asked cuttingly, glaring at the shrinking man in front of him.

“Um, yes sir, that, that will suffice. Um, if you want to have him heal as best as possible, then he should remain here for treatment and observation for a few days. No more than two or three, I would say. Is that all right, Commander?” the nervous physician pleaded in an anxious tone.

“Fine. I will expect to have him discharged in three days’ time, first thing in the morning. Until then he is to receive no visitors except for myself, and you will not discuss his case with anyone except medical personnel required to treat him. Is that understood?”

“Perfectly, sir. Not a problem. Did you, did you want to see him? I didn’t think so, but—”

“Where is he?” Pyke asked.

"I'll take you to him. Please follow me, Commander." The physician left the chamber with Pyke on his heels. They took the verticator up a tier and walked down a quiet corridor to a chamber at the very end. The physician slid the door open and stepped aside to let Pyke enter the dark, peaceful chamber. A medtech was monitoring a nutrient drip attached to Vin-Chay's right arm and she looked up as they entered. The physician anticipated Pyke this time and nodded to the woman to follow him out. Pyke was alone with his slave and moved close to the bed.

Vin-Chay was sleeping peacefully on his stomach, courtesy of the heavy sedation. His left arm was propped up on a pillow by his side, the forearm bandaged, and the wrist encased in a tritium mold to immobilize the limb until the fracture could start to heal sufficiently for it to be removed. A week or two, Pyke estimated. His right wrist was bandaged and his back was covered with a healant pack to aid in the generation of surface scar tissue. Pyke closed his eyes at the memory of how the flesh on his back had looked as the priest was trying to stem the blood flow. He didn't want to imagine how it would look when the wounds healed and the scar tissue settled in. At least that could be rectified with the dermal regeneration therapy available to anyone with the chits to pay for it. He had those chits. He simply needed to allow Vin-Chay's mind and soul to heal a little first before he broached the subject.

Pyke stood over the sleeping man for a long time. Finally, he reached down and touched Vin-Chay's hair lightly as he fought back his guilt and shame. He regained the composure legendary in his military victories and the rest of the professional man he allowed people to see. He had allowed so few people to see some of what lay underneath. Coba had been the first, probably; no, the second. He showed a little of himself to TutMose and Zandran. And he had let far too much show to this man, this enemy, this lover, and so had become vulnerable. *What a fool*, he thought. *I can't ever do that again. But I will unless I distance myself from him. Soon.*

He left the chamber and walked past the physician without another word, and the beleaguered man breathed a sigh of relief that this dangerous and edgy man was on his way out of the Mediplex. For the time being, at least. He turned to the medtech and made it very clear that this patient was to receive only the best of care in word and deed, and to come directly to him if there was *any* problem from *anyone* in those respects. He left the Mediplex shortly after and enjoyed several lengthy draughts of papyron at a nearby spirits establishment. Several *very* lengthy draughts, despite the early hour of the day.

Pyke returned to the apartment, which was strangely alien and hollow to him, as it once been so comfortable and inviting. That had all changed last night. He would have to have it cleaned and sold. He couldn't see living there again. He couldn't imagine Vin-Chay wanting to sleep in that noxchamber again. He didn't want to sleep in it again.

He was exhausted and drained, and collapsed into his favorite chair in the hearthchamber. An hour passed, then two. It was mid-morning. He decided on a course of action and opened an inter-province commlink he hadn't used in nearly three years. When the man answered he curtly identified himself, and before the man could converse he tersely told him that he needed a favor and would send the man a cross-desert tram reservation so that he could arrive at Thebes in three days, at a specified time. He broke off the one-sided conversation before the man could ask questions, or refuse, or simply greet him properly. Pyke didn't have the time or inclination for pointless amenities, even with this man. He linked into the Miliplex and received the twenty-five messages awaiting him. He answered each one thoroughly, then showered and changed into his uniform. Despite the lack of sleep for over twenty-four hours he arrived at his office and attended to a full day of duties. He didn't think of Vin-Chay once. Not once, he told himself several hundred times during the day. Not once.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Vin-Chay awoke after sleeping for nearly thirty-six hours. The physician had kept him deliberately unconscious to aid in the healing process, and when he awoke he felt a little lethargic but well rested. He opened his eyes to a spacious healing chamber, the window coverings opened wide to let in the late mid-day sunlight. He tried to turn over onto his back but realized that he was restrained by safety belts around his lower waist and legs, as well as a nutrient drip attached to his right arm. His neck felt stiff from being in one position for too long and he raised his head up slightly and moved it from side to side to work out the stiffness. He scanned the chamber as best he could without much mobility, then rested his head back. He wasn't in much pain, although he could still feel the results of the severe beating on his back. His left wrist was immobilized and he wondered vaguely what had happened to it; he didn't remember it being injured during that terrible night.

He lay quietly for about a half hour before a medtech entered the chamber, saw he was awake, then left again. A few moments later the medtech returned with a man wearing physician's garb. He wordlessly checked the monitors and his portable medi-corr for Vin-Chay's vital signs, and seemed satisfied. He dismissed the medtech and turned to his patient. His voice was professionally neutral, but even in his befuddled state of mind Vin-Chay could detect an undercurrent of resentment. He assumed it was because the man didn't like treating an Osiran slave.

"Can you understand what I'm saying, Vin-Chay?" Vin-Chay was surprised that the man addressed him by name rather than as 'slave.'

"Yes," Vin-Chay responded softly and hoarsely. He realized that the inside of his throat still ached and was very dry. He wanted water, but wasn't about to ask for it. The physician apparently understood the problem and pulled out the hydrotube from the side of the bed, assisting him in holding his head up so that he could drink. When he finished the much-needed drink he said quietly, "Thank you."

The physician shrugged. "It's my job. If you need more water or pharmics, press the indents by the bedside and a medtech will come in and provide it. Now, I need to check a few things. Do you have a headache?"

"No. I'm just, I'm just a little ... disoriented, I guess. It doesn't hurt, though."

"Does the wrist throb?"

"No. What happened to—"

"It was broken. I have no idea how—I just repair the injuries. It was a simple break and will heal without any problems in a week or so. How badly does the back hurt?"

"Some. Not like ... last night?"

"Two nights ago. You've been sleeping for nearly a day and a half. It will take another few days before the majority of the pain desists, although you will obviously have some discomfort as the wounds heal over and the scar tissue grows."

"Badly scarred?" Vin-Chay managed softly.

"Very," the physician said curtly. "Most of the lacerations were very deep and two cut into the muscles. We had to seal at least a dozen rather than allowing them to heal naturally. The cut on your arm was deep as well, but under orders from your master we've repaired that with preliminary dermal regen surgery. There will be a scar, of course, but it will fade into a reasonable reddish patch of skin as time progresses. Your external facial bruises will heal without any lingering effects and we've repaired your inside mouth as best we can. The missing tooth can be replaced if that's what High Commander Pyke dictates at some future point." The physician stopped for a minute and dropped his professional façade. "If I were you, slave, I wouldn't displease that man any more than you already have if you want to keep what undamaged skin you have left."

Vin-Chay didn't respond, and the physician didn't seem inclined to spend any more time with his patient than he had. He left the chamber without another word. Vin-Chay absorbed his words and warning for a while before he closed his eyes and slept again.

He awoke and fell back asleep several times over the next twenty-four hours, vaguely noting the change from daylight to night and back. At some point he found himself lying on his back; a medtech must have turned him over on the physician's orders. They had awakened him sometime in the early evening of the second night and provided semi-solid food for him after they'd removed the nutrient drip. As he drifted in and out of sleep he thought that at one point he had seen Pyke at the door, but he dismissed this as a weird hallucination brought on by the pain and pharmics. He saw no one else except the cold physician and several different medtechs. None treated him with any more courtesy and profes-

sionalism than was absolutely necessary. There was a thinly-veiled sense of resentment and contempt emanating from the medical personnel. He preferred Pyke's direct approach.

He was awakened on the third morning by a medtech who was unfastening his bed restraints. The man told him that he had brought clothes provided by his master. The medtech couldn't keep the contempt out of his voice as he indicated the pile of clothing lying on a chair next to the bed. He ordered Vin-Chay to get dressed except for his tunic, and then left the chamber. Vin-Chay pulled himself off the bed gingerly, still unsure of his movements; he had nearly fallen while attempting the commode the day before. He dropped his Mediplex garb and slowly pulled on his lower clothes, wincing at the pain his shoulder movements caused his back. He had barely finished pulling on his softboots when the familiar physician entered. Vin-Chay straightened as the man turned him firmly around and carefully removed the healant pack covering his back.

Vin-Chay waited silently and patiently, hoping the man would provide some measure of hope that it wasn't as bad as he knew it would be. Instead, the man simply hmm'd and spoke grudgingly before reapplying the pack. Vin-Chay felt his patience and restraint slipping away as he thought of how compassionately his own cousin Ren-Chay treated the patients at his clinic in Etrusca.

"It's coming along as well as can be expected. I've provided the commander with several progressive healant packs that should be used over the next few weeks to aid in the healing. They're numbered, so use each one in turn for three days until the last one is finished, then the rest of the healing will take place naturally. Don't bathe your back with water until then—the packs are self-cleansing and the water would only irritate it. Put on your tunic. Questions?"

"Yes, one," Vin-Chay answered as he manipulated his tunic on to cause as little discomfort as possible. He was not entirely successful. "What exactly is your problem with me? That I'm Osiran, or a slave, or both? On my planet, my people are treated with compassion and professionalism by their physicians, not unwarranted contempt. I'm realizing that things are different here, but I had hoped that this might be one place where any differences would be lost." *Damn*, he thought. *What am I going to bring down on my head now?*

The physician looked at him coldly. "I do not like being threatened, Osiran."

"I haven't threatened you. I was simply—"

"I'm not talking about you. I'm talking about your master. He made it *very* clear what would happen to me if I failed to provide anything but excellent treatment for you. A slave," he ended in disgust. "You shouldn't be treated at this facility at all—I don't care what you tell your master. That's a fact. To hell with

both of you," he ended savagely as he stormed out of the chamber, leaving Vin-Chay alone, staring after him. He didn't have time to collect his thoughts before his a medtech entered and beckoned him to follow.

"Where are we going?" Vin-Chay asked.

"You're being discharged. We need to take some final holographs of you in your release condition then you're out of here." The medtech led him out into the corridor, where he received a few curious glances from the various personnel. He kept his eyes forward and followed the man down the verticulator to the second tier and into a holograph chamber. The medtech in charge positioned him in front of the holocam and took several pictures from various angles. Vin-Chay felt his face burn as his healant pack was removed to reveal the badly damaged, raw skin on his back, which was holographed from several angles before the pack could be reapplied. The medtech barked several notes into the correlator, then nodded to the other man that he was finished. He led Vin-Chay out and down another verticulator to a secluded lower area and a door that led to the side of the Mediplex. The medtech pushed the security indents and ushered Vin-Chay out the door, closing it behind him before Vin-Chay could turn around or speak to him and ask where they were.

Vin-Chay turned around to face a small courtyard where Pyke rested a hip against his recraft as he waited for his Osiran to be discharged. Vin-Chay's entire body tensed at seeing him, and Pyke looked at him noncommittally for a few seconds before he slid open the passenger door of the craft then walked around to his own door and entered the vehicle. Vin-Chay hesitated a moment before he walked over to the craft and got in. He barely had time to slide the door shut before Pyke hit the navigation keys and the craft raised and started to glide off through and above the narrow alleys between the cluster of buildings in this part of the Mediplex. Neither man spoke then, or for the duration of the trip.

Pyke faced forward and kept the craft on a steady pace out towards the southern border of Thebes. He didn't look at Vin-Chay, or speak to him, or give any indication that another person was even in the craft with him. For his part, Vin-Chay was equally quiet, tense, and uncertain as to what was going on, where they were going, and if he would even be alive at this time tomorrow. *Crazy*, he thought. *He didn't get me decent medical treatment to have me executed in good health. Did he?* For the most part, though, he emptied his mind and concentrated on being glad to be alive. For now.

They traveled thirty minutes, weaving in and out of a heavy mid-morning traffic until Pyke cursed softly at the clutter of crafts and maneuvered into the command space reserved for high-ranking officers and government officials. The

clusters of city buildings started to decrease significantly and it seemed to Vin-Chay that they were reaching the outskirts of Thebes where there were more industrial structures. Pyke slowed the vehicle as they approached what appeared to be an open-air tram station, and Vin-Chay could see the single three-meter high tramrail stretching out into the desert as far as the eye could see.

Pyke parked the craft in a slot near the main station entry and got out wordlessly. Vin-Chay was hesitant, but not knowing exactly what was expected of him, he followed suit as Pyke reached into the craftstor and withdrew a full clothing bag. He tossed it casually to Vin-Chay, who just managed to catch it against his chest. Pyke walked towards the station and Vin-Chay followed. No words passed between them, and Vin-Chay was becoming more distressed at the strangeness and uncertainty of the situation.

They walked through the large, ornate tram station to the other side, which opened near the tramrail and had a long, wide outdoor platform on which a number of Ptolemii were milling about or sitting on rough stucco benches. Pyke checked his chronometer, then sat on one of the benches, facing forward, waiting, back straight. After a moment Vin-Chay sat near him, but a careful meter away, out of arm's length. They waited for nearly a half hour, wordlessly, neither moving nor acknowledging the other's presence. The hot sun beat down despite the tram station's overhang, and Vin-Chay found himself starting to perspire. He usually didn't, having acclimatized himself to the oppressive Ptolem heat, but he realized that his body's resistance was down after the physical and mental trauma of the last few days, and he had to wipe his tunic sleeve across his forehead several times as they sat waiting. Pyke never broke a sweat.

After the half hour ended Vin-Chay could see an approaching tram from the far south and Pyke stood. Apparently this was what they were waiting for, Vin-Chay thought, as Pyke moved towards the rail and stood waiting as the desert tram slowed and stopped. People started exiting from the dozen or so tram doors before the tram would continue on past Thebes towards Nubia. Pyke was clearly searching for someone. Finally, one of the last people out at the end of the tram was a stocky, older man, perhaps in his sixties, of average height, with a healthy, ruddy complexion and thick, pure white hair flowing to his shoulders. He spotted Pyke and waved. Pyke responded with a curt nod, but no other trace of friendliness or recognition. Nevertheless, the man had a half-cautious, expectant look on his pleasant face as he approached Pyke and Vin-Chay. He put a tentative hand out in greeting, and Vin-Chay could see Pyke almost flinch with reluctance as he made a halfhearted gesture to take the man's hand. Vin-Chay frowned and wondered who this man was, and what he had to do with either of them.

"Pyke. It's—good to see you after all this time. Who is your young friend?" He turned to look directly at Vin-Chay and smiled pleasantly at him, a look so unaffected and kind that Vin-Chay almost found himself returning the expression. But he remained silent and neutral, following Pyke's lead. *Who is this man?*

Pyke handed the man a small packet. "Everything you'll need is inside, including financial and medical instructions. If there are any problems you can contact me in an emergency through the Miliplex. But *only* in the event of an emergency. I will be out of Thebes for the next few months (Vin-Chay raised an eyebrow at this piece of information) in the southern provinces and cannot be disturbed unless it is critical. Period. Do with him as you will."

With that he turned unceremoniously and walked away from Vin-Chay and the stranger without another word of explanation or good-bye. *Do with him as you will.* The words sent a chill through Vin-Chay as he regarded the man next to him. The man gave him an exasperated look and then shrugged, a sheepish expression on his face as though to say, *He's Pyke—what can you do?* He took Vin-Chay's arm gently and urged him into the tram station.

"We'll wait inside where it's cooler and figure out what's next. I'd better open this packet and see what's in it, don't you think?" He didn't seem to really expect an answer and Vin-Chay remained silent. He let the man lead him to an unoccupied bench inside and they both sat as the man broke open the packet and started looking at the documents and items inside. He raised his eyebrows after a moment.

"Hmm. I see we have paid reservations on the next tram out of here back to Ammurabbi. It leaves in thirty minutes. Luxury-class, too. Of course. At least we'll be comfortable for the trip home. It would have been nice to spend a few days in Thebes, but I don't think that's exactly what Pyke had in mind. Of course at this point, I really have no idea what Pyke had in mind." He looked up from his lap, where the packet rested, and looked at Vin-Chay inquiringly. "I don't even know your name." He reached out his hand. "Greetings. I'm Bahrtok."

Vin-Chay stared at the man's outstretched hand for several interminable seconds before he reluctantly and barely touched it. "Vin-Chay." He withdrew his own hand quickly and averted his eyes, returning them to a blank gaze out at nowhere. The man stared at him curiously when no more information was forthcoming, and turned back to the packet. Perhaps—hopefully—Pyke had put something more inside to tell him what was going on and what part he was supposed to play in it. He had known Pyke for many years and the man had always been direct and forthcoming, never obscure and mysterious. This was a new Pyke, not the one he had last seen three years before.

Bahrtok withdrew a thin, square expense chit that was linked to some account in the main financial institution in Thebes. There was a brief note on it that stated tersely that the chits in the account were available for maintaining Vin-Chay as necessary—food, clothing, and pharmics. At least Pyke had put the young man's name somewhere, although details were still scant at this point. Bahrtok replaced the voucher and dug further into the packet. He withdrew a small portable doc-corr and turned it on. It immediately displayed what appeared to be an official document of some sort. Bahrtok scanned the document until he stopped suddenly at something he had read. He read it again and frowned as he looked up at his strange companion.

"This can't be right," he said. Vin-Chay turned to look at him, no expression on his face. Bahrtok frowned again and went on. "This document is a transfer of ownership to me of a slave from High Commander Pyke." He looked down and read a few more lines then snapped his head up suddenly, staring at Vin-Chay. "You?! This can't be right. Pyke knows I don't believe in slavery. Neither does he for that matter. What's going on here?" His face told Vin-Chay that this time a response rather than silence should be forthcoming. When he didn't immediately reply, Bahrtok tentatively reached down to Vin-Chay's right arm and pushed back the loose tunic sleeve to reveal the triangular tattoos. He looked up to see the young man watching him in a strangely detached way. He didn't have a chance to speak again before the young man replied to his last questions.

"I would say from the past six months' experience that Commander Pyke may have changed his mind on that subject," Vin-Chay answered neutrally, his face impassive.

"Six months? Are you telling me that Pyke has held you in slavery for six months?"

"Yes. But now I assume that I will be calling you master instead?" Vin-Chay asked casually, hiding his shock at this turn of events. Pyke had sold him. He had sold him like an animal to this stranger who would take him somewhere and force him to be—what? *No matter what he does, I won't give him the satisfaction of seeing inside me any more than I let Pyke. Never.*

"Master?" I think not, young man. I won't be called that by anyone. It's an abomination."

Vin-Chay didn't know what possessed him to try to provoke this kind stranger, but his mind and soul were in roiling turmoil and he didn't stop to think or care. "Then how should I address you, sir, particularly in bed? Assuming that you wish me to service you as I have the commander?"

Bahrtok felt as though someone had thrown a tub of ice water over his entire body as he stared wordlessly at the man next to him. For some reason—either the young man’s impassive demeanor or tone or words—he suddenly had no doubt that what he was saying was true. He was shocked into speechlessness for a long time as his eyes held those of the man before him. Vin-Chay’s gaze never wavered. It was as though, Bahrtok thought as he regained his composure, that there was nothing behind the eyes to care or feel. Eyes that were nearly dead.

It took the older man a long time to respond as carefully and calmly as he could while trying to absorb everything that he had read and heard over less than a half hour of time that suddenly seemed like an eternity. He shook his head as though to clear out the clouds inside. He rose, rubbing his hands together nervously as he tried to imagine what he was going to do. This situation was nothing he would have ever expected, not in a millennium. He took a few deep breaths. Vin-Chay felt a slight pang of guilt at the discomfort he had caused this man, who had appeared out of nowhere with kind blue eyes, unsuspecting of the firestorm into which he had inadvertently wandered.

Bahrtok finally stopped his nervous movements and made some snap decisions. He motioned Vin-Chay to rise and face him. The Osiran complied, a mild curiosity rising inside him to dispel the malaise he had been operating under for most of the day.

“All right,” Bahrtok started. “We need to sort this out, but I have a feeling that it can’t be done here and now. I think the best thing is to take you back with me until I can contact Pyke and make him tell me what’s going on. The tram will be here momentarily. We’ll get on it, we’ll go home to my agriplex in Ammurabbi, and we’ll sort this out. All right?”

“I have no choice in the matter, sir. It’s up to you,” Vin-Chay answered coolly.

Bahrtok looked at him hard. “Yes, I guess it is up to me. At least you didn’t just call me by that hideous term, ‘master.’ However, since I seem to have some sort of control over you until we do sort it out, I would prefer if you call me by my name—only by my name. Understand?”

“I understand,” Vin-Chay conceded.

“Good. Now, before we go I’d better see what else is in this interesting little packet before we get on the tram. See? Down there? It’s coming and we only have about ten more minutes before this one reverses and we’re off. Now, what else is in here?” Bahrtok pulled out some written instructions for pharmics for Vin-Chay. The note said that the pharmics were in Vin-Chay’s bag, and listed each one, and when they should be administered. The ownership document, the

expense voucher and the reservations to Ammurabbi were the only other contents of the packet. There was nothing in it to explain who this young man was, how he had come to be with Pyke, or anything of a personal nature. There was no note to greet Bahrtok's other family members or inquire about anything special in his household. *Cold man*, Bahrtok thought. *I'll never understand how—well, it doesn't matter now. Perhaps it never did.*

He turned to Vin-Chay as the tram stopped and disgorged its passengers. He led the young man into the tram and located the luxury-class compartment that Pyke had reserved. It was comfortable and spacious, with a large window that would present an exceptional view of the desert as they traversed the rail course, and had a stock of drinks and fruits. Vin-Chay dropped his bag on the floor next to one of the facing seats and sat down, suddenly exhausted. He attributed it to the pharmlings and strangeness of the day. Bahrtok sat down opposite him and both men were quiet well after the tram had reversed direction and started back down the rail towards the southern province where Bahrtok's agriplex was located. The trip would take the better part of the day, with a few stops on outposts that dotted the landscape before the main agritown of Ammurabbi.

It was more than an hour after the tram had departed that Bahrtok spoke to Vin-Chay. He wasn't sure how to begin his questions or even if he should, but he had to know something about all this before he brought it home to his family. Perhaps it would be best to start with innocuous questions and work up to the difficult ones. He caught Vin-Chay's eyes and smiled at him.

"So, how old are you young man?"

"Twenty-three." *All right*, Bahrtok thought. *He's not going to volunteer any information.*

"You've been with Pyke for six months?"

"Yes." *This isn't going to be easy.*

"You are Osiran, then?"

"Yes." *Not easy at all.*

"Were you enslaved before that?"

"No." Bahrtok sighed in frustration but went on, more than just a little hesitant at the thought of the next subject he had to pursue.

"Before, when you, well, intimated that you were, you were—"

"Servicing," Vin-Chay interjected flatly.

"Servicing Pyke, were you being truthful? Or trying to shock me?"

"Both." *Ah*, Bahrtok thought. *Better. He's being honest.*

"Well, that surprises me, since I've never known Pyke to appreciate a same-sex relationship before. He's always been involved with women or fairly celibate,

given his military duties and assignments. But I can see how he might be attracted to you.” He cocked his head from one side to the other. “I think there’s a fairly good-looking young man under those facial bruises.” He made a valiant effort to keep his voice casual as he went on. “I hope those were not inflicted by Commander Pyke?”

“They were.”

“I see. The instructions for your pharmics seem to indicate that they are required for more than just a few bruises.” Bahrtok stopped and waited. *I’ll force him to get involved in this conversation.* His efforts paid off, for after a few moments Vin-Chay shook his head and elaborated, somewhat.

“I was just released from the Mediplex for a variety of reasons. The pharmics are to heal several injuries.”

“Such as?” Bahrtok asked softly, not sure he wanted to know.

Vin-Chay hesitated. This seemed to be a decent man with some unknown connection to Pyke. He really had no reason to be cruel other than to try to strike out at anybody to alleviate his own pain. But he also sensed that this man would want honesty, whatever that was. Well, if this man now owned him, perhaps they had better start out with that honesty.

“My back is severely lacerated and as you can see,” he said motioning with his left hand, “my wrist is healing from a fracture. There is some damage to the inside of my mouth, and a deep cut on my left arm. I think that about covers it.”

“Lacerated,” Bahrtok repeated softly. “Lacerated how?”

Vin-Chay stared straight at him. “Commander Pyke inflicted thirty lashes with a thick leather belt while I was tied to his bed. A thirty-first lash cut my arm. The facial bruises came from a fairly decent left cross. I have no idea how my wrist was broken.” He spoke with an almost clinical, detached tone, and his dead eyes as much as the terrible words caused Bahrtok’s face to drain of color. He turned away and stared out the window as the desert rolled past and he attempted to control his urge to vomit. When he looked back at Vin-Chay after a long time, the young man’s eyes were still watching him curiously and intently. He shook his head and raised his hands in a gesture of frustrated helplessness and bewilderment.

“This, this isn’t the man I have known for such a long time. It isn’t anything like him. I don’t understand any of this. I just—need to think. Please forgive me for my silence, but I need to think.” Bahrtok turned his attention back to watching but not seeing the desert views, and Vin-Chay did the same.

The next few hours passed in an oddly comfortable silence for Vin-Chay, who began to suspect that this man would do him no harm. Whoever he was, wher-

ever they were going. The time passed far less agreeably for Bahrtok, who was trying to absorb all that he had seen and heard, and reconcile it with the past. His stomach was nauseous and his head had started to throb, and he was anxious and angry and confused, and he had no idea what to do. Only after a few hours of this internal conflict did he determine that the only thing he knew he needed to do was take his new charge home and at least provide him with a safe place to heal. He had no idea what he would tell Colyn.

The tram stopped at several outposts, with an unexpected delay at the next to last, and didn't reach Ammurabbi until night had fallen. When the tram stopped, Bahrtok smiled warmly at Vin-Chay and nodded for them to disembark. Vin-Chay reached down for his bag but Bahrtok grabbed it and led the young man off the tram and into the cool night. There were few people out near the station at that late hour, and the area where Bahrtok had stored his agricraft was deserted. Vin-Chay had a fleeting thought of trying to escape, but dismissed it; he was too tired. Within a few minutes the two men were ensconced in the craft and Bahrtok headed it out south of the town.

Vin-Chay leaned his head back against the seat rest as Bahrtok navigated, and he actually dozed for an indeterminate amount of time, only to awaken with a start as a bad dream came into play. Bahrtok glanced over at him and patted his arm and said they'd be home soon. *Home*, Vin-Chay thought. *I would sell my soul to be home. I would do anything—anything—to get home. But not tonight.* He drifted off again.

He awakened as Bahrtok was storing the craft in what seemed to be a residential craftport. He twisted his neck around a few times to work out the kinks then got out of the craft and followed Bahrtok, who was carrying his bag, through a door and into a surprisingly large and warm nutrichamber. The smell of bread wafted throughout the chamber, and Vin-Chay realized how hungry he was despite snacking on the fruits and juices in the tram compartment.

Bahrtok beckoned him to follow, and they left the nutrichamber to enter an equally large and warm hearthchamber. A crackling red fire was blazing and scenting the chamber with the fresh smell of wood burning. Bahrtok turned to him.

"My wife must be with our grandson. You can meet them tomorrow when you've rested. I'm exhausted myself after two trips between provincial Ammurabbi and glorious Thebes." His facetious tone almost made Vin-Chay smile. The man led him to a small, stark chamber at the end of the house. He looked apologetic.

"It's small and unimpressive, but you have all the comforts you'll need for the night. We'll work on customizing it for you tomorrow. I'll bring you some food and drink because I know you must be as hungry as I am. You can wash up in the adjoining sanichamber. Sleep as late as you like and we'll talk tomorrow. Good night." He turned to leave.

"Good night. And—thank you, Bahrtok. For all your kindnesses today. They were not unnoticed." Bahrtok was surprised at this turn of events, but pleased. He hoped it would last. He smiled at the young Osiran and gently closed the door.

Bahrtok went back into the nutrichamber where his wife Colyn was waiting for him with a draught of ale in her hand. He kissed her on the lips and sipped the cold drink gratefully.

"I heard your craft approach and voices in here. Is Pyke with you?" She looked half-expectant, half-concerned.

"No, not Pyke," he answered quietly, "but something and someone else entirely. I don't even know where to start," he said as he put the cup down and started slicing bread to prepare a light meal for their 'guest.'

Colyn put a soft hand over her husband's. "Start at the beginning, love. I have all night to listen."

He smiled at her and wondered how he could ever have spent a lifetime without this woman at his side as she had been for forty years. He rubbed her hand and nodded. "Let me get this food for our houseguest, and I'll tell you everything. I promise." *Even if it's something you can't bear to hear, beloved.*

CHAPTER TWELVE

Vin-Chay slept undisturbed and peacefully for twelve hours, without the usual tossing and turning and nightmares. He was lying on his side when he awoke, and when he blinked his eyes open he noticed two things: the brightness of the chamber as the mid-day sun streamed pleasantly through the small eastern window, and a pair of inquisitive light blue eyes staring at him relentlessly from the side of the bed. He raised himself up on his elbow and inspected the small child who grinned back at him from under unruly bangs that reached nearly to eyes framed by long, curling lashes. His golden blond hair was unkempt and long, and looked as though he had just gotten out of his own bed. His sweet, silly smile was instantly endearing, and unconsciously Vin-Chay found himself smiling back. The child was small and looked to be two or three years old. He would have guessed the former if pressed. *This must be the grandson that Bahrtok was talking about last night.*

“Good morning,” Vin-Chay said cautiously. Instead of replying the boy giggled and ran out of the chamber through the open door, then ducked back quickly and pulled it closed after him. Vin-Chay shook his head in amusement, then threw the bed covers off and sat at the edge of the bed, stretching. He hadn’t felt this good in a long time. He wondered if it was due to the good night’s sleep or his new, although unexplored surroundings. Maybe it was just being hundreds of kilometers away from Pyke.

He rose and stretched some more, noting that the twisting actions of his upper body didn’t hurt his back lacerations quite so much. He didn’t have to change the healant pack for a day or two. He needed to check the recorded instructions. He was naked, and realized that he needed to clothe himself, especially if the little boy was going to come into his chamber unexpectedly and unannounced. He dipped into the bag lying on the floor to examine the clothes Pyke had packed. He had no casual robe, so he pulled on a pair of loose tan trousers and a fresh white tunic, and slipped on his softboots. He opened the door to his noxchamber as he ran his fingers through his long hair to straighten the wild locks as best as possible.

He detected the same bread smell from last night, along with other food aromas, and he found he was hungry again. He stopped at the sanichamber and splashed some cool water on his face. He used the commode and washed his hands, then took a deep breath as he prepared to face Bahrtok again and meet the rest of his family. He walked down the short hallway towards the nutrichamber, and heard voices coming from the direction of the tantalizing odors. He entered the nutrichamber to find a happy domestic scene that brought instant pangs of homesickness and regret. He suppressed the unwanted feelings as Bahrtok looked up from the table where he was engaged in playing with the child, who held a small wooden toy in his hand. He was turning it over and over as he inspected it with an intense frown only a child could muster. He reminded Vin-Chay of his younger brother, Nikkola, when they were children. Bahrtok greeted him cordially as the woman at the oven turned and rose with a hot loaf of bread whose scent made Vin-Chay's mouth water.

"Good morning, Vin-Chay. I trust you slept well?"

Vin-Chay nodded. "Very well, thank you. It's a comfortable bed and chamber."

Bahrtok rose and took his wife's hand affectionately. "Let me introduce you properly. Vin-Chay, this is my wife, Colyn. Colyn, Vin-Chay."

The woman smiled at him warmly, and Vin-Chay thought briefly that this situation was going to take some getting used to. It had been a long time since he had had any close contact with such kind people.

"Vin-Chay," she smiled, holding out her hand. He took it gently and managed a half-smile back when she gripped it firmly.

"Madam," he said.

"Colyn, please. 'Madam' is far too formal for our purposes."

Vin-Chay appraised her carefully, unaware that Bahrtok was watching his every move and facial expression keenly. She was Bahrtok's age, or at least close, perhaps in her early sixties. Her silver-blond hair matched her husband's, and was quite long although it was pulled back severely from her face and tightened into a large bun at the top of her head. A colorful blue scarf was wrapped around the base of the bun and hung down her back. She was slender, and taller than her husband. A physical opposite. She wore traditional layered garb, her skirts flowing nearly to the floor, her softboots barely visible. A blue sash gathered her top tunic at the waist. She wore the two common marriage rings on her right hand.

Bahrtok broke his concentration by walking over to the table and caressing the child's soft blond hair. The boy looked up and grinned at him, and squirmed around to look at the stranger who had been sleeping in his playchamber.

"And this is our grandson, Sprite." He looked down and tugged at the boy's ear, causing a spree of giggles. "Our mischievous little elf." He grinned.

"How old is he?" Vin-Chay asked.

"Almost three!" the boy piped up before his grandfather could answer.

"Three next month," Bahrtok elaborated.

"Ah," Vin-Chay replied. "I would have guessed perhaps two."

"He's small for his age, but he makes up for it in energy and exhaustion. I can't imagine what he'll be like when he reaches his teens." Bahrtok was clearly devoted to the child, and again Vin-Chay felt an overwhelming rush of homesickness as he missed his own younger siblings unbearably.

His reverie vanished when the boy slid out of his chair and came over to touch his left wrist. He looked down to see the child looking up with wide, guileless eyes.

"Did you hurt your hand?" the boy asked.

"Yes. But it'll be better soon and I can remove the wrapping," Vin-Chay replied as innocuously as possible.

"What happened to your face?" the boy persisted.

"I had an accident and fell. That'll be fine, too, very soon."

"Enough, Sprite! Let Vin-Chay sit down and eat a meal before you talk his ear off! Why don't you take Tugger outside and play in the back yard for a while? We'll come out later and maybe you can come with us to the groves. Deal?" Bahrtok aimed the child back towards the table, where the boy nodded his head vigorously and grabbed the wooden 'pet' he had been playing with. He rushed past Vin-Chay and out of the nutrichamber as he threw a fast "See you!" over his shoulder. Bahrtok motioned Vin-Chay to sit, and Colyn brought over a plate of the fresh bread she had been slicing, along with a dish of sweet butter and fruit jams.

"Help yourself," Bahrtok said as he did the same, and both men quickly filled their plates with the good food. Vin-Chay smeared the butter and jam on his bread and thought as he chewed that he had never tasted anything quite as good. Colyn joined the men, putting down a plate of hot sliced meat, which Vin-Chay and Bahrtok helped themselves to immediately, then helped herself to a thick end of the bread crust as well. It was peaceful for a few minutes as the three adults enjoyed an undisturbed domestic scene. Bahrtok broke the silence and looked at Vin-Chay.

"You should know that my wife and I share everything, the good and the bad. So last night, I had to tell her all that I know about your situation. It was the only fair thing for everyone concerned." He waited for Vin-Chay's reaction, noting

that the young man had stopped chewing and rested back lightly against his chair, averting his eyes from both of them. Colyn reached out and touched his hand gently.

"I have no more idea what is going on with the commander than Bahrtok does, Vin-Chay, but whatever the man has done, it does not reflect on you as a person. You are welcome in this house for as long as you stay, and you will not be treated in any way as you have been in the recent past. Neither my husband nor I believe in any aspect of that appalling institution, and as long as you are here you will be considered a respected member of this household." Vin-Chay met her kind eyes and struggled for a moment to find appropriate words. Instead, he simply said what was in his heart. "Thank you."

Bahrtok swallowed a large chunk of bread and seemed to be trying to formulate what he had to say next. Vin-Chay tensed as he saw the man's discomfort. *Oh God, now what?* he thought.

"Vin-Chay," Bahrtok began slowly, "there is something you need to know. I don't know whether it will please you or upset you, but you need to know." He paused.

"Go on, please," Vin-Chay answered, waiting with a patience that his beating heart belied.

Bahrtok drew his brows together. "I read that ... ownership document carefully, and it is not any permanent bill of sale or transfer. It's a temporary proxy ownership for an indefinite period of time, to be determined by High Commander Pyke. What that means is that he retains full legal ... possession of you. I am simply a caretaker while he is indisposed during his latest assignment away from Thebes. I have financial access to an account to support you while you are here, and can make any decision required other than ... selling you to someone else. Or freeing you—I can't do that, or I simply would."

"Meaning he can come here at any time and take me back," Vin-Chay said evenly as he tried to quell the queasy feeling in his stomach.

"Meaning that," Bahrtok nodded. "It could be a day, a month, or a year. He gave no indication as to how long this might be in effect, so all of our lives are going to be filled with some degree of uncertainty and upheaval while this situation lasts. All I can say is that for however long you are here, you will be safe and well-treated."

"Safe," Vin-Chay said softly, shaking his head. "I haven't been 'safe' in years. No reason to start now." He looked directly at Bahrtok. "I want to apologize to you—both of you—up front for my behavior yesterday. You walked into a hellish situation that you had no clue about, and I exacerbated that by my mean-spir-

ited and unnecessarily brutal way of informing you about certain aspects of my relationship with the commander. That was cruel and unwarranted, and again, I apologize. That behavior won't be repeated, I assure you."

"Your apology is unnecessary, but accepted," Bahrtok replied easily. "Under the circumstances, your feelings and actions are understandable. Come. Finish your food and we'll take a little excursion outside so that I can show you what we do here and how you can help, if you like."

"I would like that very much. Thank you." He paused before going on. "May I ask you a personal question?"

"Go ahead," Bahrtok said.

"Why did Pyke contact you for this privilege? He's never mentioned your names or made any reference to knowing anyone in this province."

Vin-Chay was watching Bahrtok, and missed the odd look in Colyn's eyes. Bahrtok considered how much he should tell the young man. He decided to be as honest as he could under the circumstances, while still maintaining a caution about a man he had just met. He couldn't completely trust him until there had been more interaction, and give and take on both parts. He leaned back in his chair and took a swallow of juice before answering.

"We have known Pyke and his family for many years. His parents worked an agriplex near here before their untimely deaths when he was a young boy. His father and I often brought our crops to the same vendor and split maintenance resources and costs. Pyke doesn't maintain contact with many people from his old life, but we had enough history there to warrant his assistance a few times when chits were scarce and we needed a hand. I also believe that despite his success in the Pharon's military and his life in Thebes, he still wants to feel somehow connected to his old life and we are probably that last connection. I imagine that he felt he could turn to us for a special favor, and of course, he was right."

"So he came from here?"

"Yes. The family agriplex was about, oh, say twenty kilometers west of this one. A government cooperative runs it now. Ours is one of the few independent agriplexes remaining in this part of the province. Actually, probably one of the last, period. In the last ten years the Pharon and his government have been either buying or otherwise appropriating 'plexes and consolidating them into huge ones under the guidance of the Interior Ministry. It makes it hard for us independents to get adequate financial backing and technology and help to make a living, let alone build something for future generations. I don't imagine this will even exist as it does today by the time our Sprite is old enough to assume the responsibilities of running it. And perhaps we shouldn't even aim for that. I just don't know.

Anyway, Pyke has helped us in the past with government bureaucracy and finances, and never asked for a thing, even a thank-you. That's why it's so difficult to reconcile that man with the one you have been subjected to."

Vin-Chay quickly re-directed the subject. "Does he have any family left down here? I think he mentioned once staying with relatives after his parents' deaths."

"No, no family. They passed away long ago. He's ... alone. Perhaps that's the root of the problem. He doesn't know how to act in a close personal situation. At best he is reserved, and at worst, well, you've obviously seen his worst so there's nothing I can tell you about that. Let's finish up here and go outside and enjoy this glorious day, eh?"

"Sounds good, sir."

The men finished their meal and rose. Vin-Chay picked up his plate and headed towards the puri-corr, but Colyn smiled and took it from him and ushered them out of her domain.

He followed Bahrtok out of the nutrichamber door and into the hot sun. He was struck at once by the heat and was surprised that it was far hotter here in the province than back in Thebes. Or perhaps the buildings had contributed to some cooling effect that was not present here. Bahrtok nodded. "It will be much hotter here than back in the city and its immediate outskirts. Also, we are getting into the summer season and the temperatures will push upwards of anywhere near one-forty to one-fifty." He grinned at Vin-Chay's shocked look. "You'll have to re-acclimate yourself to this geography and learn to make all kinds of concessions to adjust. Starting with clothes. You need lighter, more layered clothing. And a kufiyyeh. We'll pick some up in Ammurabbi when we go in for supplies. Come."

Bahrtok led him through a small rear enclosed courtyard where the child Sprite was playing with a motley collection of handmade toys. He was sitting under a large protective canopy in the middle of his treasures, and had built a haphazard castle of sand and rocks, positioning his toys around it. He was studying Tugger intently and talking to himself. He looked up, and seeing the two men approach, he scampered to his feet and ran to Bahrtok with arms outstretched. The old man picked him up and hugged him tightly as the boy slid his small arms around the man's neck. Vin-Chay's heart clutched.

The boy looked past his grandfather's shoulder at Vin-Chay, and squirmed out of Bahrtok's grasp to get down. He reached up to take Vin-Chay's hand. Vin-Chay was uncertain as to what he should do with this strange child. The boy beamed up at him.

"Can he play with me Gran-Ba?" the child piped.

"Maybe later, Sprite. I need to show him around first and he's also had a long trip and needs to rest a while. Maybe you can play alone today or have Gram-Co play with you, all right?"

"Oh, all right," he sighed, releasing Vin-Chay's hand reluctantly and going back to his sand castle. He plopped down unceremoniously in the middle, knocking half of it over. Within a few seconds he forgot they were there as he focused on rebuilding his castle and moving his toys around it in child-random positions.

Bahrtok grinned apologetically at Vin-Chay. "He's not used to guests. We rarely have anyone out here so he's confined to the company of me and my wife, and anything out of the ordinary excites him."

"Understandable," Vin-Chay replied. He hesitated before going on, but he was curious. "May I ask, where are his parents?"

"Dead," Bahrtok answered flatly. Vin-Chay sensed the other man's unspoken grief and had no plans to pursue this line of questioning, but surprisingly, Bahrtok went on. "My daughter and her husband died years ago. He died before Sprite was born and she died shortly after. Colyn and I have raised him by ourselves. He is our one true joy," he ended quietly, his eyes focused on some invisible point out in the desert, and unmistakably sad. Vin-Chay impulsively reached out and gripped his shoulder in a sympathetic show, and Bahrtok turned slightly with an appreciative look on his face.

"Come," Bahrtok said. "Let's walk to the agrifields and I can show you what we grow here and what we have to do. Are you up to it?" he finished, noting the light sheen on Vin-Chay's face. It would take some time for him to get used to the excessive heat.

"I'm fine. Let's go," Vin-Chay said as he wiped his forehead on his sleeve.

Bahrtok led him out through the gate, which had a high and complex lock that Vin-Chay was certain the child could never reach or manipulate. That and the canopy were obvious signs of the care that Bahrtok and his wife took with their precious charge. They walked past a large utility structure that attached to the craftport that Vin-Chay remembered from the previous night, which in itself angled to the corner of the house. The three distinct structures formed a three-sided complex similar to ones Vin-Chay had viewed from the tram as they traveled to Ammurabbi.

Past the utility building Vin-Chay could see a large section—several dozen hectares, at least—of vegetation and trees of some sort. Bahrtok pointed to an empty open section to the west of the vegetation and explained. "We've left that area fallow for a year or two to replenish the nutrients in the ground. You need to

alternate which plots you plant and which you let ‘rest’ if you want to keep the land as pliable and productive for as long as possible.”

Vin-Chay shielded his eyes from the sun and squinted. “What’s planted over there—the trees?”

“Hybrid citrine,” Bahrtok said. “As strange as it may seem, this hot and dry climate is excellent for the citrine hybrids that were developed several hundred years after Ptolem was colonized. The original seeds and plants were brought from Canaan by way of Terra millennia ago. We’ve also been able to develop a wide variety of vegetables such as desert scallons and quite a few species of nutmeats that now make up a great deal of the diet on this planet.” He saw an opening to smoothly explore the mysteries behind his young companion and took it. “You would know that if you were from this planet or had spent most of your life on it.” He didn’t quite make it a question, but at any rate, Vin-Chay either didn’t pick up on it or ignored the unspoken query, and replied with a noncommittal sound. Bahrtok decided to abandon this pursuit and pick it up at a more convenient time.

The men walked up to the start of the citrine groves and Vin-Chay reached up to examine what appeared to be a ripe and ready fruit. He glanced at Bahrtok, who nodded, and Vin-Chay picked the fruit and started peeling it. He bit into it and was surprised at the juicy sweetness that filled his mouth. It was far better than the same variety that he had purchased from the vendors in Thebes. He enjoyed the richness of the fruit as they walked through the groves and into the vegetation section, where Bahrtok explained the various plants that seemed to be growing well.

They spent a good two hours in the groves, with Bahrtok explaining how the crops were planted, harvested and sold to market. Bahrtok had a rare exclusive contract to provide nearly his entire crop to the royal house and select government officials and establishments. He implied that Pyke was responsible for this bit of good economic and marketing fortune. It would explain why this quality of citrine was not readily if at all available to the street vendors. It would also explain—along with the past history he had learned earlier—why Bahrtok felt some indebtedness to Pyke and had readily seemed to accept Pyke’s imperious and unexpected invasion into his home life by thrusting Vin-Chay and their conflict on the family.

Bahrtok told him that the harvest season was approaching, and it would be particularly hard this year because of a lack of available resources to take part in it, as well as the scarce supply of automated machinery to do the majority of the harvesting. The war had impacted most if not all areas of Ptolemaic business and

commerce, from excessive taxes in many regions—including this one—to a shifting in many labor pools, including agrilabor, which was not a very enticing employment opportunity to begin with. Life here had lost what little appeal it had when new avenues of employment opened up to support the war effort and the growing cities. He was having trouble reserving the proper machinery and labor, and had been forced to make many manual concessions to the situation. He was not alone in this, he added quickly, making sure Vin-Chay understood that it was not something he cared to complain about, just something he had to deal with as a matter of his chosen vocation.

Vin-Chay drew his brows together and spoke carefully, since he was still trying to gauge the exact extent of Bahrtok's relationship with Pyke. "Can't you contact the commander for assistance in getting the tools and men you need? It's obvious that he's helped you in other ways, and I'd find it difficult to believe that he wouldn't be able to help you with this." It was on the tip of his tongue to go on, but he saw Bahrtok's jaw tighten. He was about to change the subject as deftly as he could, but Bahrtok spoke first.

"I don't like to ask any man for help, and for a lot of reasons it's harder to ask Pyke. I would do it if it was a matter of absolute necessity, but as long as Colyn and I can put in an acceptable amount of labor to keep this place going, I don't plan on doing that."

"Well," Vin-Chay said, "I'm here, for better or worse, and for whatever reason, and for however long, so you have at least one strong back to help. If you'll let me," he finished. He realized that he never meant anything as much in his life. This family's brief hours of kindness has touched him much more than he could tell them. He fleetingly wondered if Pyke had sent him here for just this reason. *No*, he decided. *Pyke just wanted to get me out of his sight so that he wouldn't act on an urge to kill me. He probably thought this was going to be a punishment, when in truth it's a godsend.* He felt like he was ripping his way out of a smothering cocoon.

Bahrtok was silent for a few moments before looking Vin-Chay in the eyes and repeating the young man's earlier words. "Thank you," he said quietly.

"You're welcome," Vin-Chay said, smiling. He felt more alive at this moment than he had in a long time. "Where do I start?"

Bahrtok clapped him on the back before realizing that it would be painful, but Vin-Chay didn't flinch. *He's a strong man*, Bahrtok thought as they walked back to the house while he explained the pre-harvest procedures that they needed to do. He had managed to reserve at least one automated harvester and had to go into Ammurabbi to retrieve it. They needed this before they could proceed. Also,

he mentioned, that would be a good opportunity for Vin-Chay to get the lay of the land and for them to purchase more appropriate clothing for his stay. Bahrtok silently determined to use as little of Pyke's voucher chits as possible; he would rather spend his own finances on his new employee and be as little dependent on Pyke as possible. He was certain that Vin-Chay would like this, although he would be concerned about the drain on Bahrtok's finances. He decided not to tell him.

When they returned to the house Colyn was waiting for them with a large pitcher of iced water, and Vin-Chay drank down two full cups before he and Bahrtok boarded the family aircraft and headed towards Ammurabbi to supply up. Vin-Chay looked back when they started off and saw Sprite waving wildly after them as he and his grandmother watched the craft recede into the desert.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Pyke's last day in the Miliplex before embarking on his assignment was not a pleasant one. The morning had started out badly with a problem in the engineering components of his flagship that had caused a minor explosion and several painful but non-fatal injuries amongst his crew. He had to deal with a problematic Zandran, who was not anxious to attend to his new duties as the temporary captain of one of the four ships leaving the planet for the Osiron perimeter under High Commander Sheban's command. Their charge was to determine the state of Osiran readiness, and whether resumption of active battle was imminent. Zandran would be on his own for months at the very least, since Pyke and TutMose were scheduled to assume the lead roles in quelling the several rebellions in the lower provinces on Ptolem. Zandran hadn't realized what an opportunity the assignment was for his possible advancement, and was contentious and noisy and quarrelsome. Pyke finally had to raise his voice and words to their harshest level ever with his cantankerous sub-commander, who left their pre-boarding meeting in a surly mood. He had left Pyke in the same state, and with the beginnings of what promised to be an outstanding headache. Moments later the security officer announced to Pyke that some Osiran priest was forcefully demanding to see him, and should he be removed or arrested?

Pyke snapped back to have an armed officer bring the man to Pyke's office in an hour. He assumed that the priest was in fact the troublesome Patri Julian, and at least he planned on making the man cool his heels for his audacious attitude. He swallowed a painkiller and savagely attacked the remaining administrative duties that required completion before his phalanx could depart for the first hot spot of unrest, Hartan. It was nearly time for the priest's arrival, but he was able to switch commlinks to his private channel and review any activity associated with his damned and treacherous Osiran slave. He frowned as he saw no debits against the expense account. Didn't Bahrtok require any food or clothing for the man? Vin-Chay had been with him for two weeks now and must have required something. He made a note to set up an automatic trigger to his personal commlink when any activity occurred so that he would be immediately informed of it.

The security officer signaled his presence and Pyke summoned him to enter. Patri Julian followed the officer in. Pyke dismissed his subordinate and stared at the priest without indulging in any amenities such as inviting him to sit down. The priest stared back without even trying to hide his anger and contempt, a far cry from his conciliatory behavior on that night. The priest finally broke the heavy silence between them. He gave a slight, stiff bow of greeting.

"Commander. I regret disturbing you at your office but I have been naturally concerned over the last several weeks about Vin-Chay. I have heard nothing from him. I realize that I have no right to question you—"

"That is correct, Patri," Pyke said coldly. He could see that his tone flustered the priest, but to his credit the man continued on even though he knew he might be antagonizing a very dangerous enemy.

"I understand. Still, I am concerned and ask respectfully if you can tell me if he is ... well, and if I can ever expect to see him again."

"I expect he is well. Your future interaction with him is something that will be determined in the future, not now."

"Then he is alive," Patri Julian said softly.

"Yes," Pyke answered shortly. He was going to give this man no leeway.

Patri Julian frowned slightly. "You ... 'expect' he is well? I ... don't understand?"

Pyke stared at the man without responding, to make him uncomfortable and because he wasn't certain at that point if he should or would answer his question. On a whim he decided to.

"He is currently residing elsewhere and I have desired no contact with him so I can only make the assumption that he is well." Pyke held up his hand. "Before you ask, he is no longer in Thebes nor," he added with an uncharacteristically cruel tone, "is he in my possession." He let the words sink in and waited for the priest to draw the wrong conclusions. Julian did, by the shocked look on his face.

"You have, you have *sold* him?" Julian exclaimed, stunned. Pyke remained silent to reinforce the misconception. He felt no pity for this man's agitation.

"If that is all, Patri, I have work to do, and have no more time for pointless interruptions. My aide will show you out. Good day." Pyke reached down to summon his aide when Julian's voice stopped him in mid reach.

"This will all come back to you and your people, Commander. You cannot perpetuate these outrages and hope for no consequence. Our people—and decent Ptolemii people—will brook only so much before they take unavoidable action. You are seeing that now in your provinces, and I assure you, this will grow until it sweeps over you and your Pharon like an unstoppable tidal wave." He had begun

softly but his voice grew in conviction and he faced Pyke unafraid and fiercely. Pyke would have admired his courage had he not been at a point where the very sight of the man provoked anger and resentment for whatever part he may or may not have played in Vin-Chay's abortive escape attempt. He rose slowly from behind his desk and walked around it to face the priest. Julian tensed, but stood his ground. He had the same strength that his young acolyte possessed.

Pyke stared at him unemotionally for a moment, then coldly said, "Get out," and returned to his desk to summon his aide. The man appeared instantly and physically urged the priest from Pyke's presence as the commander watched him go wordlessly. He knew the priest's threat was a true one; the dissension had already begun on Ptolem, thus forcing his presence and action in a very short time. Action against his own people, a situation even less tenable than the one involving the Osirans. Where was it going to end?

He completed his correlator tasks and shut down the link after checking to see if his automatic trigger was set for the voucher activity. He left the office and took the mid-plex verticulator to TutMose's sector. He entered the office that TutMose and Zandran shared and watched as his friend completed his own preparations for their journey. They both hoped that they would be back soon and would not have any regrettable actions to account for in this life and the later one. TutMose followed Pyke out of the Miliplex to their phalanx warriorcrafts, which they boarded separately. Within an hour the two large warriorcrafts departed Thebes, accompanied by the ten smaller patrolcrafts, all twelve heading with the combined force of well over a thousand warriors south towards Hartan. The trip would take the better part of a day, giving Pyke too much time to think.

He remained isolated in his quarters, adding to the usual air of detachment that his troops were used to by this time. Few people wanted to converse or interact with him unless necessary. He was considered a generally excellent commander and tactician, and had proven himself time and again in both real battle and in key training simulations. His personality was closed and perceived as cold, and he encouraged no unwarranted contact or overtures of friendship. It had taken both TutMose and Zandran a long time to penetrate even the first layer of his emotional armor, and even then he let them in only so far. He had let Coba and then the Osiran in past that point, and so far both relationships had ultimately generated only pain and regret. The latter relationship with Vin-Chay still existed to some degree, but its future was precarious at best and doomed at worst. If he were a wagering man, he would have put chits down on doomed.

Pyke passed the time in his quarters obsessing over a new tactical simulation he was developing for the Academy. It was in its rudimentary stages and needed a

great deal of refinement. He wondered how his treacherous companion would work it, given the chance. He had slipped several simulation chips into Vin-Chay's clothing bag, along with a few holotomes and a couple of the Osiran's favorite hard-copy volumes as well. He wasn't sure why he made the generous gesture except that—well, he wasn't sure why. Perhaps he realized that if Vin-Chay's mind could be constructively occupied, he would be less trouble to Bahrtok and Colyn. Yes, that was the reason.

He wondered if Vin-Chay was well and if the healing had progressed as expected. He was not about to contact Bahrtok and ask, and apparently Bahrtok needed nothing from him, either. The man was stubborn and had little use for compromise, even a grudging one. He wondered how they had ever managed to converse without coming to blows. He had no doubt that Bahrtok would be sympathetic to Vin-Chay if only on principle. It didn't matter, as long as he provided a temporary and acceptable shelter for the Osiran until Pyke had the opportunity and stamina to take him back.

And he intended to take him back, although he had given anything but that impression to the priest. If anyone had known all of the facts behind their last nine months together, including the time in Canaan, they would have thought him completely mad for even considering it. Their relationship was fraught with tension, conflict, lies and danger on bad days, and slightly less intense versions of those aspects on good ones. He tried to force himself to believe that the times that Vin-Chay had shown him respect and even consideration and occasional pleasure and affection were simply ploys to lull him into a false security so that he could plot his escape. He tried to force himself to believe that, but in his heart he couldn't believe that was all true. Would Vin-Chay confirm it was or wasn't if confronted? Would he lie or tell the truth either way? Pyke had no idea if and when he could ever trust his young captive again, or if he should even try. But he was going to take him back when he could, whenever that would turn out to be. This assignment in Hartan and beyond could extend indefinitely.

He clicked off the simulator and fell back on his bed. He kicked off his boots and relaxed with his hands laced behind his head, eyes closed. He couldn't get the last images of Vin-Chay out of his mind, since the time he had clearly seen the damage he had done in his rage and desire to punish. He was haunted by the blood, slashed flesh and battered face, haunted by the nightmarish stranger he had created with his own brutal hands. He clenched his fists shut behind his head, trying to block out the scene. At least he could have much of the damage repaired at the Mediplex when Vin-Chay returned to Thebes, although the scars inside might never heal. All he could do about those was wait and see.

Pyke rubbed his eyes furiously until they were red. He thought about what Vin-Chay could easily have done after following through with all of his escape plans. He obviously thought he could get away to—where? Somewhere? Perhaps the Great Wasteland where it was rumored that some escaped slaves (although the official government line was that such people did not exist) had fled to so they could marshal their forces and action some sort of rebellion or terrorism against the Ptolemii when the time came. The land there was totally inhospitable, but desperate men and women could survive almost anything if need be. He thought Vin-Chay could survive almost anything except direct execution, which would have likely been his lot if Pyke had reported his transgression as was required by law. Of course Vin-Chay would have been caught, given the cowards with whom he had aligned himself. Pyke had known that this was inevitable and had risked his own life and future by covering up the escape attempt with the mutilation of Vin-Chay's forearm and the dire threats against Tarqua and his pathetic band of followers. He didn't imagine that Vin-Chay would see the reasons behind his actions including the brutal but non-fatal punishment. Had he done nothing it would have sent a message to Vin-Chay that there would be no consequences to any dangerous or illegal actions. Tarqua would have inferred the same message, and that was equally as dangerous. And, of course, if the escape attempt had been uncovered in the future, at least Pyke would have covered himself with an excuse that although he had technically broken the law he had still significantly punished his offending slave and so possibly escaped punishment of his own. His failure to act accordingly was a gamble, but one he had to take.

He thought that it would probably be a cold day in the Wasteland before Vin-Chay would see those aspects of it, but perhaps in the future ... He was not totally unreachable or implacable, as his actions had proven. Despite his supposed hatred of Pyke and his belief that he would escape—or die trying—he hadn't injured Pyke in any way. He could have easily used that razor when Pyke was unconscious to slit his throat and leave him to die in his own blood. Or he could have raped him. And he didn't. That had to mean something.

Pyke turned over on his side and wrapped his arms around his pillow. He had had trouble sleeping lately, not only because of his emotional state, but because he had come to enjoy and rely on his companion being in his bed every night. He missed the physical closeness and warmth of that body, the sound of his breathing, the feel of his skin as it brushed Pyke's own in sleep or during their lovemaking. A familiar body. He had taken no real pleasure from his recent encounters at Chakrah's, especially with the young man that Chakrah had provided for him shortly after he had deposited Vin-Chay in Bahrtok's care. He needed something

to take his mind off his painful thoughts and actions. The man resembled Vin-Chay physically, as Pyke requested, but he wasn't Vin-Chay by any stretch of the imagination. It was immediately apparent to Pyke that he had made a stupid mistake. He finished quickly at Chakrah's and provided a large gratuity to the man, but he was desperate to be out of that place. He swore he wouldn't return simply in anger or for payback or pretty much for any other reason. A fleeting physical encounter, no matter how pleasurable, wasn't what he craved. He craved Vin-Chay. And as he had never craved Cobra.

His turned his thoughts to his dead wife, and he felt a pang of intense regret and loneliness for her, even after all this time. He had truly loved her, and theirs would have been a joyous lifetime commitment, but fate took a hand and removed her from his life. The year they had shared was a year only in terms of chronology; they had spent less than two months total living together as husband and wife because of his commitments and because of hers as well. Then she died, and all of the plans they hoped to make for that long future had shattered. They had never even realized the details of these plans because of their constant separations. Oddly enough, given even their courtship, engagement, and marriage over a long period of time, he and Vin-Chay had actually spent far more time together in close quarters than he and Cobra had. Perhaps that was the reason for the disparate way in which he perceived the two relationships, the last two loves of his life. He felt closer to Vin-Chay than he had to Cobra, and was wracked with guilt over it.

He kept his eyes shut tightly and concentrated on trying to remember each and every feature of his late wife. When he had first lost her, her face and body and scent and feel were fresh in his mind and remained so for a long time. Months had passed, and one by one these features had blurred until he could no longer picture her adequately. He had put away her holographs; they were too painful. In all the time since she had died he had never removed them from their resting place in his hidden chest of life memories. He understood how painful this state of affairs could be, to not really remember a loved one, which was why he had acquired and given the holograph of Chay Shayne to Vin-Chay, even though the sight of that man in his household would not be easy for him to adjust to. That point was moot, at least temporarily: he had sent the holograph along with Vin-Chay's other possessions. He wondered what his captive would think when he unpacked the contents of the bag and found the holograph, tomes and tactical simulations. He wondered if they would mitigate the Osiran's feelings towards him. Probably not.

Pyke finally fell into a light, restive sleep until his aide awakened him to notify him that they were within an hour of the Hartan outskirts. TutMose appeared on the inter-ship commlink. Pyke half-yawned a greeting and asked if the Hartan milipost was ready to receive their ships. TutMose affirmed this. Pyke had him confirm the security for the docking and then requested that the leaders of the unrest be prepared to meet with him to air their grievances and discuss the details of just how grave their situation was should they pursue their small yet growing insurrection activities. Although Pyke may have silently agreed in principle with some of their issues, he was not at liberty to make unauthorized concessions, nor sympathize openly, and the Pharon had made it clear to all of the high-ranking officers that he would tolerate absolutely no intervention on his civil and economic actions. *So be it*, Pyke thought. *I'll carry out my orders.*

His contingent of warriorcrafts docked, and TutMose joined him as they were greeted by the commanding officer, Captain Darius. Pyke quickly assessed the man as concise, competent, and not especially pleased that the resolution of issues in his province had been re-directed to anyone, let alone the well-known High Commander Pyke. He hid his disquiet fairly well, though, Pyke thought, as the three men entered the milipost complex to discuss particulars.

Darius led them to his office, a well-appointed but compact cubicle close to the entrance of the milipost. He gestured towards his desk, ready to surrender it to Pyke for the sake of propriety, but Pyke declined and seated himself in a chair opposite Darius's desk. This surprised Darius, but it also alleviated some of his tension and raised Pyke more than a few notches in his estimation. He seated himself and prepared to give the commander and his associate an overview of the situation.

"Where do you wish me to begin, sir?" he queried politely, still a little skittish about the entire situation, but planning on doing his job well, no matter what.

"How many provincials are located here, and how many of them are involved in the problem cults?" Pyke started with a direct question that he felt would assist in his evaluation and provide an objective basis for Darius to engage in official conversation that would not appear to undermine his now-tenuous authority.

"Forty thousand, give or take, spread out over approximately three thousand hectares. Nearly fifty percent reside in the main hub of Hartan, which is around a thousand hectares. We have no true way of knowing how many are involved, but we've uncovered evidence of at least three separate dissident cults, all of which seem to be comprised of layers of cells. This started out as random protest well over a year ago, but since then it's become more organized. And, of course, more

dangerous. We estimate that between the three cults there may be as many as two or three hundred people involved, but we can't know for sure."

"Estimate?" TutMose said, arching an eyebrow.

"They operate under quite covert methods and some elaborate security. We've arrested several dozen persons suspected of being part of these groups or at least supporting them, but unfortunately we've been unable to procure any relevant information from them despite our best efforts."

"You tortured them," Pyke stated flatly.

Darius reluctantly nodded. "We were under orders to do so from the High Council, who sent some people down here to supervise the interrogations."

"Some people," Pyke repeated. This was news. Why had he never heard about this through official channels or the rumor mill? He was going to make it his business to find out what was going on, but first he needed to talk to these people himself after this discussion. "I'd like to see them after we finish here, Captain. Now—"

"That won't be possible sir," Darius interrupted hastily. "This delegation from the High Council has removed all of those so detained. None of them remain here."

Pyke felt a chill. Removed them. He had a feeling these people were either being held for further torture, probably in Thebes, or were dead. He would bet on the latter. He was more than just a little disquieted by this, but he kept his feelings well hidden from this unknown officer, who was what—what he appeared to be? Or something else? He decided to proceed with more caution than he normally would in the presence of a fellow officer. He knew that TutMose would pick up on the same feelings and conduct himself accordingly. He nodded at the captain, keeping a neutral look on his face. "Tell me the types of activities that have been occurring. Leave out no details, however minor."

"It began with simple things, like public grumbling about increased taxes and repudiation of Pharonic directives such as slavery. It increased to occasional verbal rantings about possible secession from Thebes to establish a separate empire as it were, completely separate from our Pharonic one, like Osiron, but on the same planet. Written missives began to appear on correlators and on hand-written notes posted within the township where they were available to everyone. Whoever began doing this was very technologically literate and so far no physical clues exist to trace back to the perpetrators." He paused for any questions, but Pyke was listening intently, his fingertips pressed lightly together as he concentrated on the captain's words. Pyke's sub-commander's stare had never wavered,

and it was starting to disconcert him. When no comments were forthcoming, Darius resumed his narrative.

"Then it started getting ugly. There was sabotage of military equipment and buildings and technology associated with supporting the Theban government. The vandalism increased to a point where it caused significant financial damage. Then it accelerated to where the sabotage became more violent, and there were injuries as well. Several warriors were injured in a night attack against the imperial granary two months ago, and last week two of my men were killed in an explosion that took out the rear craftports that housed our patrol vehicles. Eight craft were lost as well. After that, per the High Command, we instituted total martial law, and Hartan has been virtually locked down ever since. Tensions are high and rising, and I know something is going to happen. I just don't know when." He waited a moment before adding, "And then I was informed that Thebes was sending in a special phalanx to deal with the matter, as well as with similar ones occurring down in Moab and Corso." *That's it*, he thought. *Apparently it's your problem now, Commander.*

If he was waiting for an agitated response from Pyke, he was disappointed. The commander seemed to take a few moments to absorb what he had been told, then he stood, followed immediately by Darius. Pyke extended his hand cordially, for the first time, and Darius took it.

"Excellent report, Captain. You are making my job all the easier by being so detailed and forthcoming. Now, my sub-commander and I—along with a small contingent of my own security—will need to have a concise tour of central Hartan, starting with this post and including all government and government-related commercial structures. I will also need the names of the top one hundred residents of influence here, including full correlator files on them, their families, their business associates, and any links to the Theban government. I'll need that by this evening. Any problem?"

"None, sir," Darius answered. "If you'll give me a few minutes I can have my aide get started on the data you need and then I'll take you to see what you've requested."

"I'm sure an hour will suffice. That will also give me time to initiate some of my own tasks to my phalanx, and I need to confer with my sub-commander about some issues we left unfinished before we departed Thebes. So while you attend to your duties, TutMose and I will retire to my ship to complete ours. Back here in an hour?" It was a statement, not a question, and Darius nodded quickly.

Pyke and TutMose left the captain's office and walked back to Pyke's vessel silently. They entered the craft, and then a few minutes later Pyke's quarters. The commander stopped to give several orders to his security chief regarding their tour and the posting of warrior and automated guard beacons around the phalanx perimeters. Pyke intended to take no chances with his crafts or men.

When they entered Pyke's quarters TutMose started to speak, but Pyke silenced him with a hand motion. TutMose watched him curiously, then realized he was running a security sweep of his quarters to ensure that their conversation was not being monitored. When he finished and nodded satisfactorily, he told TutMose that they needed to follow this procedure whenever they needed to converse privately, because whatever they had walked into was not exactly conducive to privacy. Or safety.

"We are not safe here, and I'm not sure that the danger is completely external," Pyke said. TutMose nodded. "Until we have a better grasp on this, I want to trust no one, except each other. That goes for our personnel as well. Tell them only what they need to know to do their jobs, nothing more."

"Understood, Commander. What's your measure of Darius?"

"Too soon to tell. At first impression he seems on the level and honest, but after he described what occurred with the detainees, I don't want to take any chances that he's been recruited into some sort of covert organization that the High Council may be using for God knows what purposes."

"That scares me, too, Commander. The fact that our government has employed tactics such as secret squads and torture to maintain our rule."

"Why should we be surprised at that, Tut? Our Pharon and his willing cohorts have enslaved our own people, Osiran and Ptolemii alike. If they can strip human beings of their freedom and identities and basic human rights, why would the concept of torture bother them?"

"They both bother me, and I know they bother you, despite, well—"

"Despite the fact that I have done a turnaround and bought a slave myself?" Pyke asked archly.

"Yes, sir," TutMose answered, keeping his eyes directly on Pyke's. He knew he could go on and did. "What you've done just isn't who you are. I couldn't figure it out for a while, but then—"

"Then you did, right?"

"I think so, Commander," TutMose responded slowly. "It was a matter of employing the only way available to protect the man." He shrugged nonchalantly. "For whatever reason."

"But you think you know the reason, don't you Tut?" Pyke asked kindly, feeling a rush of affection for his friend.

"I've seen the two of you together. I've seen you watching him when you didn't know anyone was watching you. Yes, sir, I understand why you have him with you," he finished.

"Do you disapprove, Tut? Truth."

"Truth? All right, truth. No, I don't disapprove. I worry, because I don't believe he returns your feelings and sees you as an enemy and that puts you in danger, but I don't disapprove. If the circumstances were different—" He trailed off, unsure as how to proceed in such dangerous emotional territory.

"Yes?" Pyke prompted.

"If they were different, I would say that the two of you were well-matched." He smiled. "And that you couldn't do much better. Nor could he."

Pyke returned TutMose's smile with a rueful one of his own. His friend had no idea what had transpired on the night before he had been summoned to transport Pyke into Thebes, nor did he know why Vin-Chay was not currently resident in his household or where he was. He knew from a few conversations over the last two weeks that the Osiran was elsewhere, but Pyke had not elaborated and TutMose had not asked. He would wait for Pyke to tell him or not tell him in his own time. That was how they were.

Pyke grasped Tut's shoulder in an intimate way and the two men ended their talk and returned to the matters at hand. They conferred with their ranking officers and met their security contingent at the phalanx's craftport, then moved out into the darkening evening to proceed with the tour that Darius had promised them. It was a long day and at the moment no end was in sight. TutMose mused that it would probably be dawn before Pyke had seen and discussed everything he needed to this first day, and that any sleep afterwards was going to be abbreviated and intermittent. Just the way he liked it.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"I tried to escape," Vin-Chay said unexpectedly late one afternoon as he and Bahrtok labored amongst the far groves in a decidedly backbreaking manual effort to fertilize a cluster of citrine trees in danger of developing desert rot. He was kneeling down and breaking the baked earth with a hand drill so that he could inject a dose of nutrients into the tree roots with a high-powered aerosyringe. The growing season had been plagued by an unusually dry climate and although the crops were developed to thrive in hot, dry weather, the temperatures and lack of humidity had far surpassed the degree at which the crops would be reasonably safe and rich. Bahrtok could only remember one such similar season, twenty-five years earlier, and most agriplexes had suffered significant losses and in some cases had shut down entirely. Pyke's family's enterprise was one such casualty. Bahrtok had been trying desperately to compensate for and anticipate the effects of this season, and he and Vin-Chay had been out every morning before dawn to manually tend the crop sections that were in danger. So far their efforts had paid off, but although sector one of the citrine crop was ready to be harvested, the remaining staggered sectors through the still-growing number ten were in various stages of vegetative problems. The shortage of employable resources and technology was forcing extensive labor on the part of the two men as well as Colyn, who joined them whenever circumstance allowed.

Bahrtok looked up from the root he was inspecting and absorbed Vin-Chay's words. He sat back on his heels from the kneeling position he had assumed an hour earlier, and he felt the muscles in his thighs constrict painfully. He rubbed them for a few moments as Vin-Chay waited for the inevitable response of concern and questions. It had taken him weeks to build up the courage and trust to discuss personal matters with Bahrtok despite the man's kindness and obvious decency and honesty. He had little cause recently to trust anyone, or to even trust his own judgment. He had let nothing slip of his past, who he was, where he had come from, and how he had come to be with Pyke. He knew that Bahrtok and Colyn were curious, but they never pressed, never forced the issue, and he almost felt guilty for keeping his secrets.

"So," Bahrtok finally said. "I'm not surprised. You don't strike me as the type who'll accept such a lot with passivity and resignation. Can I assume that this action occurred just before you were turned over to my care?"

"Yes," Vin-Chay said, nodding as he sat back on the hard ground and turned off the drill. He took a large swig of water from his daily allotment before elaborating. "It happened a few days before we met. I'd been planning an escape ever since I was enslaved by the commander, but the opportunities were considerably limited, especially given the loc-chip in my arm, and the tattoo, and the obvious fact that there may have been nowhere to go. I bided my time, then through an Osiran priest I had met I learned of Tuscan and the Great Wasteland, and I guess I pinned my hopes on being able to escape to the latter and find others like me." He blew out a deep breath. "So I purchased a sedative from an easily bought Theban street vendor, drugged Pyke's annise one night, cut the loc-chip out of my arm, and fled." He saw a mixed look of shock and admiration on Bahrtok's face, and he relaxed with the knowledge that he could trust this sympathetic man. God, he was glad to be able to tell this to someone.

"What provoked this particular timing?" Bahrtok asked as he drew off the hot moisture gloves and tossed them on the ground, taking his own drink of water as he patted the moisture off his face with his sleeve. It was damnably hot, he thought. Close to one-fifty at least.

"Nothing by itself. It was a build-up of things over the months until it got to a point where I couldn't live with myself if I didn't do something. I had started to, to forget who I was, the person I had been. I looked in the mirror and didn't know the person looking back. And I became desperate to find my way back. I probably acted too precipitously, and I learned the hard way that I trusted too quickly and not well."

"Who abused your trust, Vin-Chay?" Bahrtok asked curiously. It couldn't have been Pyke—Vin-Chay would never have trusted him in the first place. *The priest?* he wondered.

Vin-Chay snorted derisively. "My own people, as it turned out. I had been involved with the freedmen in Tuscan for a couple of months, and went there as a temporary stopping off place until I could keep going into the Wasteland. Pyke came there, and threatened them with dire consequences unless they turned me over to him. And they did. Without batting an eye. Without even five moments of consideration of my consequences and theirs and that perhaps Pyke was bluffing. Which he was. I know he was if I know him at all," he ended firmly.

There was a long silence between the men as Bahrtok mulled over his companion's story. He wondered fleetingly about Tuscan. He had heard of its exist-

ence, but he knew little if anything about it. He wasn't sure he wanted to. His thoughts were interrupted as Vin-Chay continued to fill in the rest of the story.

"That was the reason behind Pyke's brutal punishment. The Tuscanites bound me and turned me over to him, and he—beat me. In front of the Tuscan leader, as a punishment for him. I couldn't resist the beating because Pyke told me that he would take measures against Tuscan, and I knew that that was no bluff. At least, I think so. Perhaps it was. I don't know much any more as far as trusting my own instincts or other people's actions. Anyway, when it was over and the Tuscanite left, Pyke left me there after he cut my bindings. I think I drifted in and out of consciousness for a while, but when I was able to react coherently, I contacted the priest and he came to try to help me."

Vin-Chay had an intense look on his face. "There was a lot of blood. I felt slippery with it. The priest was there for a few hours and then Pyke came home and took me to the Mediplex. I was there for three days while they healed my more significant wounds. On the day I was discharged Pyke picked me up and took me to the tram station, and that's where you came in." He paused a moment. "Thank God. I thought it was an even bet that he was going to have me killed, although my Mediplex time would make you think the opposite—why heal me to simply kill me? I wondered why he didn't turn me over to the authorities, because attempted escape is a serious matter and the law requires slaveowners to inform authorities of any such attempts. For what it's worth to both of us—and to you—Pyke may have put his career and life in jeopardy by hiding my escape attempt."

"How did he hide it? You said you cut the chip out."

Vin-Chay nodded. "Yes, and I realize now that that was the reason behind that last cut of the belt, where he deliberately mutilated my arm to make it look as though in his frenzy he had hit me there and the chip was 'accidentally' dislodged. The physician at the Mediplex re-inserted it, but I believe from hearing bits and pieces of conversations that he didn't replace it in its original location, and I left the absorptiometron I bought back at Pyke's house. So at this point I couldn't re-cut the chip out unless I want to slice open a whole lot of body flesh searching for it. That was a smart move on Pyke's part. I never anticipated it."

"You could have injured or killed Pyke after you drugged him," Bahrtok said thoughtfully.

"I could have, but—" He trailed off, looking far away at some indeterminate spot on the desert horizon.

"But?" Bahrtok prompted.

"But what was the point? Whatever he had done to me over the time we were together didn't warrant death. And if I stooped to that, or to some gratuitous injury or humiliation, then I wouldn't be any better than the Ptolemii who have enslaved both our peoples with their madness and war. I guess I wasn't ready to descend to that level." He shrugged. "But who knows if I would have changed to that mindset as time went by? Perhaps I wasn't ready to let that happen. Perhaps I was afraid it would if I stayed any longer. I really don't know."

Bahrtok wondered if there wasn't another reason that Vin-Chay had stalled his hand at harming Pyke, but the one he gave was plausible and he decided not to pursue it. Vin-Chay had opened up significantly today, and he had learned a great deal about both the young Osiran and the Ptolemii commander who had held and still held him in enslavement. He reached over and slapped Vin-Chay affectionately on the arm as he pushed himself off the ground. He groaned inwardly at his creaking bones. He rubbed his lower back as he stood and stretched. Vin-Chay waited on the ground to see what he wanted to do as far as their workload went for the rest of the day. Bahrtok twisted around, trying to work the aches out. He blew out a heavy breath.

"Enough," he said. "We have worked non-stop for ten days and we both need a good rest. The trees will have to wait a day or two before we continue. Now, we go home. Tomorrow, we relax and revive. Perhaps you can go into Ammurabbi and have a few cold ales at the tavern and pick up some clothes or personal items you may need at the barterpost."

Vin-Chay stood up. "That really isn't necessary, Bahrtok. I have all the clothes I need and I never developed a true taste for ale or other spirits. I'd prefer to spend the time around the 'plex, even if it's just relaxing. I have reading material that the commander unexpectedly included in my belongings, and a few correlator simulations he put in as well. If I could use your recreational 'lator, that would be more than adequate for my needs."

"Whatever you want to do is fine with me, as long as you don't think you can't do the other things because you have no chits. I have some for you at the house for all your efforts here. It isn't much, but it will at least give you some freedom to engage in activities that aren't free."

"Bahrtok, you owe me nothing for my efforts," Vin-Chay said seriously. "I have everything I need here without chits—food, clothing, a bed and excellent company. Nothing more is required or desired. Please use the chits for something for Sprite or Colyn or the 'plex. Or yourself, since it appears to my untrained eye that you routinely deprive yourself of even basics to keep this place and family going."

“Thank you, but I need to do this. If you don’t want to use the chits now, I’ll simply store them along with future ones until you do need them. No argument. Now, let’s go home and start our day of rest immediately after one of Colyn’s exemplary meals.”

The two men stored their tools in a special heat-resistant chest that they left near their current work area. There was no point in carrying the tools back to the house and then back to the grove when they did resume their efforts.

Colyn greeted them as usual with cold drinks that were imbibed in seconds by both men, who then departed the nutrichamber to wash up for their meal, which was on the table when they returned. Sprite was already nibbling on a bakkava crust when they sat down. He grinned at Vin-Chay and dribbled some of the bakkava out of the corner of his mouth. He slid down from his own chair, and climbed up on Vin-Chay’s lap as he precariously pulled his plate across from his table place to Vin-Chay’s. Vin-Chay wiped the dribble away with a cloth, then maneuvered his own food into his mouth while the boy on his lap did the same. Sprite chattered endlessly during the meal as the adults passed the time with leisurely eating and conversation. Bahrtok watched the interaction between Vin-Chay and his grandson thoughtfully, grateful to the young man for filling a void in the child’s life with his genuine affection and attention. Bahrtok wondered if Vin-Chay had any brothers or sisters, or if he might even have young children of his own. Someday, Vin-Chay would tell him.

Vin-Chay played with Sprite on the floor in front of the fireplace for an hour after the meal, then Colyn put the child to bed. Vin-Chay excused himself for the remainder of the evening and went to his own noxchamber, where he relaxed on the bed with one of his favorite hard-copy volumes. He had read it several times, but he enjoyed reading his own Osiran language and it made him feel closer to home. He fell asleep with the book in his hand, and when he awoke for a few moments hours later he saw that the lights had been dimmed, and a plate of breadsweets and a cup of juice had been placed on his bedstand. Colyn. He ate the sweets quickly and downed the juice, then fell back asleep until early morning.

Bahrtok slept the sleep of the completely exhausted, not awakening until midday. When he realized the time he planned on mildly chastising Colyn for letting him sleep so long. That plan fell through the moment he saw her smiling at him in the hearthchamber, where she had set up for his mid-day meal rather than in the nutrichamber area. She sat with him as he ate the roasted meat she had prepared. He wondered how much longer they would be able to afford meat on a regular basis. She nodded to the scene outside. They could see the back enclosure,

where Vin-Chay and Sprite sat cross-legged and facing each other under the protective canopy. They had built two sand castles and positioned toy men and animals around them, and Vin-Chay seemed to be teaching the boy how to play a simple game of strategy. Sprite picked up and rammed Vin-Chay's castle with Tugger, and Vin-Chay threw his arms up in mock exasperation. Sprite laughed as Vin-Chay knocked over his castle and the strategy quickly descended into a shapeless pile of sand and toys askew.

Colyn smiled at her husband. "He is so good with the child. Patient, no matter what. He takes the time to explain things and never treats him as a mindless three-year-old as most people would."

"True," Bahrtok nodded. "I have seen them together often enough to know that our guest has a true appreciation and affection for our grandson." He waited a moment before saying what had been on his mind for a long time. "And that worries me."

Colyn raised a surprised eyebrow. "Worries you? Why should that be a worry? It should be a relief and a pleasure."

"It worries me because there are still many things that Vin-Chay doesn't know about us and I'm not sure how he would react if he did find out. And I would hate to see that change his feelings after he has made Sprite love him. Children take rejection very painfully and I don't want to see our grandson hurt."

"He wouldn't take it out on Sprite, Bahrtok! You know the man better than I, but have you seen any malice or unfair actions on his part regarding anything?"

"No, but we aren't talking about any situation that has occurred, but one that may, and the future is always an unknown."

"Have faith, husband. Faith in your judgments, and faith in him. Do you know what he did this morning when he got up at dawn? He went out to the groves for five hours and continued working. His hands were chafed and blistered when he came inside and yet he never complained, simply washed up, downed a fast meal, and then went out to play with our grandson, where he has been for two hours. This is not a man who will turn on us for no fault of our own. Trust him," she ended, placing her blister-scarred hands on his own worn ones. He nodded at her and reached out to pull her close. They held one another for a long time before breaking apart as Colyn went about her household duties and left her husband to contemplate placing his own trust in the man playing outside with their cherished grandchild. Perhaps he would very soon. But not today. It was a day of rest.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

TutMose finished a fourteen-hour shift at the Hartan milipost. He was cranky, tired, hot, and dispirited. The things he had seen in the last few weeks tore at his honor and soul, and he was sick of playing the ‘good warrior’ who followed orders blindly. He had been at that game for nearly thirty years, and it was wearing thin. He knew his commander felt the same way, but protocol and caution prevented either of them from discussing their true feelings openly, or even covertly. There was an atmosphere of tension and distrust in this place, and that dictated a discreet silence on both their parts, although each generally knew what the other was thinking at any given time.

Three days after they arrived, one of the dissident cults had sabotaged three key civilian buildings and four patrolcrafts. Two of the patrolcrafts were from their phalanx and four men had been injured, one killed: a twenty-two-year-old sub-lieutenant whom TutMose had known since the man’s cadet days. A fine young man with promise and hopes and a family who would now have to make burial arrangements. Parents who would never see grandchildren from their only child. At that moment TutMose was glad that he had never married nor fathered children that he might someday have had the grief of burying.

He had directed the investigation into the sabotage and as a result six people had been arrested, two men and four women. Despite his outrage at their alleged actions (for they were yet to be proven guilty of anything other than spitting on him and his men when they were detained) he conducted their interrogations with decorum and common decency. He refused to allow Darius’s personnel the satisfaction of any brutality in retribution. The prisoners had refused to speak, or to deny or confirm; all they provided was unspoken contempt for their captors. TutMose had no doubts himself that they were guilty of their accused crimes, but he couldn’t extract any confessions or information. When he relayed this to Pyke the commander made the only decision he could: transport them back to Thebes for trial and judgment. Both men knew that the chance of these people reaching a fair judgment was next to none, but their only other choice was to employ torture and possible execution themselves. Pyke wouldn’t do this, and TutMose was

glad that he didn't have to make a decision to do it either had his superior officer ordered him to.

The detainees were dispatched to Thebes with a small security contingent. They were out of Hartan for two hours when their party was ambushed, and all were killed by a well-executed berrillium explosion. The startling action brought home to Pyke and TutMose exactly how dedicated these dissident cults could be, to kill their own people rather than chancing betrayal that could bring their cells and efforts crashing down. They made the Osirans look easy.

TutMose wondered how Vin-Chay would have behaved had he been a member of such a cult. He had no doubts about the man's strength, courage, and dedication to his people and cause, but to indulge in the ruthless killing of his own comrades? TutMose didn't think the young lieutenant had it in him. He was dangerous enough as it was to Pyke. TutMose wondered where exactly the young slave was now. He was certain that he didn't wait for Pyke back at the commander's Theban residences. He was certain that he wasn't dead. So where was he? TutMose had his suspicions that the young slave had made an aborted escape attempt. He longed to ask Pyke but knew better. Still, it was a puzzle he felt compelled to solve. When he had time and was not too exhausted.

He completed all of his required turnover duties to Sub-Commander Tahl-Dar and retired to the quarters that Darius had provided in the safest tier of the mili-post. He was not close to Pyke's quarters, since it was tactically dangerous to lodge the two top officers close to one another, in the event of an attack. The quarters were compact and stark, but acceptable. He wasn't here for a holiday. He stripped his clothes off and washed his face before lying down, turning off the lights, and closing his eyes. He pictured his small, comfortable apartment back in Thebes, with the small herb garden and thick, bushy fruit trees which gave his back balcony a great deal of privacy and shade. He should have brought some of his music with him to keep him company, but he had packed sparsely and quickly and that pleasure was inadvertently foregone. He wasn't much of a reader, unlike the voraciously intellectual Pyke, and even Zandran. His pleasures ran to the physical—music, good food, and sex. None of which he was likely to get during this tour of duty, he thought ruefully.

Sleep came in minutes after he closed his eyes, and he slept straight through until the next morning. He felt leaden and achy. He wished he could stay in bed, but he had to get up and take a small contingent of men south to the quarry lands to perform a cursory inspection of the mining efforts that were providing a good deal of raw material for several new Theban buildings. There was no potential cult activity suspected; this was just a menial side-trip to appease a few high-rank-

ing government officials who were concerned that the insurrections might impede their own self-serving architectural and political agendas. TutMose swore softly when he thought about it. What a waste of time and energy.

He washed and dressed quickly and left his quarters to meet the commander for their morning meal. He could see the dark circles under Pyke's eyes and thought that he was just as tired as TutMose was. Pyke didn't seem in the mood for much small talk, and he seemed a little distracted. TutMose wondered if it was everything in general or if Pyke was upset about a particular problem. Vin-Chay, perhaps? He wished he could ask, but kept silent, finished his meal, then gathered his contingent and headed off towards the quarry fifty kilometers south.

They reached the quarry sooner than expected. It was still mid-morning, but the sun was heating things up quickly. It had to be one-forty at least. The QuarryMaster, Belchak, came out to greet him pleasantly and offer cool refreshments. TutMose declined. Belchak then took him on a tour of the quarry as he explained the various contracts they were working to fill, the type of work, the personnel, and a variety of other details that TutMose tuned out. He did, however, pick up on the fact that there were a good number of slaves working the more dangerous tasks. He asked to see those areas and the man eagerly took him to the active excavation areas at the west end of the complex.

Specialized technology was used to excavate most of the raw material, but the refinement of much of the completed material could either be done technologically or manually. With the high cost of technology, as well as the high demand coming from Thebes, Alexandria and other key Ptolemii cities in the last few years, they had to supplement these technological efforts with old-fashioned manpower. It was a good thing, Belchak said, laughing, that the Pharon had instituted slavery and so provided a wealth of opportunities to cut costs and increase production. When he said this, he was rewarded by a cold stare from TutMose that didn't seem to faze him.

TutMose looked over the vast open cut area where dozens of half-clad men were laboring over huge stones with hand tools. The men were uniformly thin and burned dark by the oppressive sun, their faces drawn and etched with hopelessness or no expression at all. They had apparently learned to conceal any overt feelings of anger and contempt and simply work as they were told. The fresh striped welts and healed-over scars on their backs and on some faces told him how they were motivated.

Over the QuarryMaster's half-hearted objections, TutMose proceeded down closer to the work area, where a few brave men managed to look up at him in

curiosity. Upon seeing the uniform of a Ptolemii sub-commander, they turned their eyes away before anyone could see the hate or fear in them.

TutMose walked carefully throughout the work area as Belchak and his security guard followed him. He was almost ready to turn around and return to his contingent when one of the men caught his eye. The man was turned away from him, but his bearing and straggly blond hair made TutMose think he knew him. He moved closer to the man, who turned towards him as he struggled with a sharp block of stone, and their eyes met. TutMose saw the recognition and then contempt in the man's eyes as he tried to place him. It took a few moments for it to sink in, then TutMose realized that he was looking at one of the officers from Canaan who had accompanied Vin-Chay back to Ptolem. *What was the man's name?* he thought, then remembered. Cassian. Lieutenant Cassian. *My God*, he thought, staring at him. *He looks so different.*

The Cassian that TutMose remembered was tall, straight and well-built, with thick blond hair and bright green eyes. The half-naked man before him was many kilograms lighter, to a point where his ribs were quite visible. His straggly, unkempt hair and beard were bleached near white by the sun. There was little life in his eyes. TutMose could see the scars on his back, wrists and ankles, where he must have been bound tightly for long periods of time to achieve scarring that deep. There was a long, thin white scar on the left side of his face, starting near the eye and curving downwards over his jawbone to end at his chin. It was prominent enough to show through his ragged beard.

Cassian risked extreme punishment by stopping his labors for a few minutes to lock eyes with the sub-commander he remembered from Canaan. He didn't bother to try to hide his contempt, a habit that had resulted in more beatings than he could count over the four months he had been imprisoned in this hell-hole. His first master had lost him in a game of chance to the QuarryMaster, who had been holidaying in Thebes. The quarryguard started to yell at him to get back to work, but TutMose held up a hand, which immediately silenced the man. He ordered the slave be brought to him, and when the guard roughly shoved Cassian towards TutMose, the sub-commander waved the others off and motioned him to the side where they could have privacy. Cassian remained silent but glared at TutMose. The sub-commander was strangely glad to see that there was some fight left in this Osiran warrior.

"So, Lieutenant, this is where you wound up," TutMose said mildly.

"Yes," Cassian replied bitterly. "In service to your master race, helping to build monuments to your insane self-aggrandizement."

"Careful," TutMose warned. "Your words could get you killed around here."

"I doubt it," the slave answered. "Only very badly beaten. They wouldn't want to kill a work animal they can still squeeze a little more effort out of. Or perhaps they would. You Ptolemii seem to act on whim rather than rationale."

TutMose smiled at Cassian, which irritated the Osiran. He was about to throw out a few more choice words when it occurred to him that if anyone knew where Vin-Chay, Burran and the others were, it might be this man. He might have to bite back his tongue to get information out of this man, for whatever good it would do him at this point. He had nothing to lose by trying. He forced his head high and kept his gaze level with the Ptolemii's.

"I don't suppose you would tell me if you knew where Vin-Chay and Burran and the others are, would you, *sir*?" He had managed to keep sarcasm out of all but the last word.

"It's not my habit to keep track of slaves, Lieutenant. But, if I was so inclined, I could always link into the Thrallplex and check the registration records. That is, if I was so inclined. But of course, I'm not." He thought he'd let Cassian sweat a little before deciding whether he should mention Vin-Chay's status or not.

Cassian glared at him wordlessly, not knowing if he should press his luck. The Ptolemii could lose interest in simply toying with him and direct the quarryguard to beat him for his audacity in questioning one of the chosen people. As though that would be something new. *Ah, what's the point?* he thought, as he began to turn and return to his hated block of stone. TutMose stopped him with a hand on his thin arm.

"Vin-Chay is alive and well," he said. *I think*. "I don't know about the others."

Cassian eyed him skeptically. How would he know about Vin-Chay and not the others unless he had recent contact with him? What kind of contact? He decided to press his luck a bit further.

"Where is he? Who's he with?" He couldn't be with—no, that wasn't possible. Was it? It was, as confirmed by TutMose seconds later.

"High Commander Pyke purchased him when you arrived on Ptolem. He has owned him ever since and your fellow traitor has been residing at the commander's home in Thebes." Which was true, until at least recently. *God knows where he is now, but I have a feeling he'll be back in Thebes soon if Pyke has his way.*

"Pyke," Cassian repeated softly. That could only mean that his friend was being subjected to the same sexual abuse that he had endured at Canaan. And who knew what else. At least he had been spared that; his first 'master' had simply wanted him as endless labor in his granary business, and the QuarryMaster was only interested in working him to death in this evil place. He had endured beatings and starvation and filth but at least had not been subjected to bedding a

hated enemy. He looked up at TutMose, who was watching him intently, and he thought that the Ptolemii could read his mind. *Damn him. Damn them all!* He remained silent rather than saying what he thought of Pyke and his comrades, and TutMose's slow smile confirmed that the man probably assumed this and found it amusing. It gave him the needed strength to straighten and try to recapture some of his dignity.

"If I may return to my work now, Sub-Commander?" he asked stiffly.

TutMose waved him off, and the quarryguard nearby shoved him back towards his work area, roughly enough to knock him off his feet and down onto the baked sand. Cassian pushed himself off the ground without batting an eye and walked back to his stone-gang amidst the shoving and cursing from the guard. TutMose watched the spectacle and had to restrain himself from knocking the guard down himself. On a sudden, inexplicable notion, TutMose approached the QuarryMaster quickly and drew him aside.

"I will be taking this slave back when I leave shortly," he said, to Belchak's surprise and consternation. Taking his slave? His legally-owned property? Could this Ptolemii officer do that? Of course he could. *Damn it all to hell.* He had to put up something of a protest.

"But, but, sir—this slave cost me a *great* deal of chits and his loss will impact my production schedule and, and—begging your pardon, sir, but it's simply not *fair!*" he ended on a note of outrage, hoping it wasn't too blatant and wouldn't cause him more trouble than the mangy, half-dead slave was worth. He felt his stomach doing turns as the Ptolemii officer stared at him balefully and wordlessly.

"I understand your concern, Belchak, but I assure you there will be adequate financial compensation for the loss of this exceptionally healthy and productive specimen. This man will be needed by High Commander Pyke, and I wouldn't want to have to tell him that you were standing in the way of one of his needs." TutMose paused deliberately, letting the man in front of him draw his own conclusions.

"High Commander Pyke?" Belchak swallowed hard. The man who had been sent to quell the rebellions here in the provinces and who had already detained a number of people for interrogation and possible confinement at Thebes. People who were already dead, although he didn't know all of the details. He was not going to make the assumption that the High Commander was not involved in their deaths. And he was not going to be someone to cross the man no matter in how small and insignificant a way. This sub-commander could take the wretched slave. He made the only decision he could.

"Well, then, of course you can take the slave! I didn't mean to imply that you couldn't. I was just concerned about my timetables and quotas and didn't want to chance disappointing my government contractors. But we'll get along without him especially ..." He hoped the sub-commander would pick up on his thoughts, and apparently he did.

"I assure you that you will be compensated. Let's go into your office and do this legally. You'll commlink with the Thrallplex and transfer ownership to the commander, and we'll see that the appropriate number of chits is transferred to your private account. Does that sound acceptable?" TutMose raised an eyebrow as if daring him to disagree. Of course, he didn't.

"It sounds just fine, sir," Belchak said in his heartiest voice. TutMose clapped him on the back and drew him off towards his office to complete the deal. Cassian watched them go as he struggled to chip off a rough block edge with his primitive tool, not too obviously so as not to give the guard an excuse for bringing down his well-used whip on Cassian's raw back.

Twenty minutes later TutMose and the QuarryMaster came out of the latter's office, and TutMose directed one of his security guards to get Cassian. The lector went over to the quarryguard and briefly explained that the slave was coming with them, and before the confused man could reply, the lector motioned to Cassian to follow him. The guard didn't seem to be putting up a protest, so Cassian dropped his tool and followed the lector to stand in front of TutMose. He eyed the Ptolemii warily. TutMose eyed him back skeptically, trying to figure out what Pyke was going to say about all this.

Cassian followed TutMose and his men back to their craft and moments later found himself belted down in a rear seat as the craft rose and started gliding back towards Hartan. He ignored the looks of disgust and confusion amongst the security warriors, secretly glad his strong unwashed scent was giving them displeasure. He wished he could convince some of the lice that inhabited the crevices of his body to jump ship and roost in his indiscreet companions. The thought of that made him smile, which added to the guards' confusion about this foul-smelling, filthy, emaciated slave. Most of them had given up trying to fathom their superiors' actions, but this was a little beyond the usual odd behavior.

When the craft landed in Hartan, TutMose instructed his senior security guard to take the slave to the infirmary and have him de-loused and bathed, and provided with clean clothing. Any injuries should be tended. They were then to take him to the refectory where a variety of fattening and healthy foods were to be provided for him, as well as fruit juices and clean water. The guard ushered Cas-

sian off without touching him. TutMose watched them enter the milipost, then decided to confront the inevitable and find Pyke. He managed to dawdle for a while with a few last-minute security details before approaching Pyke in his borrowed milipost office.

"You *what?!?*" Pyke exclaimed in disbelief, half-rising from the desk he had borrowed from Darius. Had the last bastion of sanity in his life gone completely mad?

TutMose stood his ground. "It was a judgment call, Commander. I—"

"Bad judgment! You're telling me that I now have *two* Osiran ex-warrior slaves in my possession? As though one problem isn't enough? What were you *thinking?!?*" he ended sharply.

"I was thinking, Commander," TutMose said rather stiffly, "that I was standing in front of a man who was once like me, a warrior fighting for something he believed in, only to have his cause and faith stripped from him and to be thrust into a nightmare from which he probably saw no escape. I saw a man who after going through hell still retained a sense of life and dignity, and I wondered if I would have acted the same in his place. I wondered if I could or should change a set of abominable circumstances for this one man, who I certainly never gave a damn about, since it would make not a dent in the problem as a whole. And then I thought that someone had to start somewhere," he ended quietly, his eyes never leaving Pyke's.

Pyke leaned back in his chair and studied his friend. "So," he said softly, "you thought about all of this in the split second it took you to make this insane decision?"

"Well, perhaps not in that exact moment, but upon reflection ..."

"Upon reflection, it seemed like a good idea at the time?"

"I guess you could say that, sir." He paused. "Would you say that, Commander?" he asked hopefully.

Pyke was silent for a brief time, only to make his friend squirm. When it was clear that he had succeeded, he decided to let TutMose off the hook, at least partially. He pressed his fingertips together and seemed to contemplate them before looking up.

"And where exactly is my new possession at this moment?"

"I checked before coming in. He's been cleaned, clothed, and is currently in the refectory eating everything in sight. Do you want to see him?"

"No thank you, not right now," Pyke said too politely. He had a sudden thought. "Does he know that Vin-Chay is in my possession?"

"I—may have mentioned that, sir." TutMose suddenly felt very warm.

"I see. Well, Sub-Commander, this slave is now *your* possession and problem, not mine."

"Sir?" TutMose asked. Very warm.

"You heard me. You bought him, he's yours. I am going to transfer ownership to you once we return to Thebes. Cancel that—I'm going to do it now. And you don't even have to reimburse me for whatever it is I'm going to wind up paying for him. Consider him an early birthanniv present." He smiled sweetly at TutMose as his friend grasped the fact that he was not speaking in jest.

"But, Commander—what am I supposed to *do* with him? I don't, I don't have any desire for him the way you do for—well, you know. I don't have a spacious house. I can't—"

"Oh, yes you can, Tut. And you will not solve your problem by passing him off on anyone else either, or by freeing him. That would be too dangerous, to let an angry ex-warrior free to roam amongst Theban Osirans and Ptolemii alike. You are going to keep him, and figure out something constructive to do with him. Got it, Sub-Commander?" he ended pleasantly. He was actually enjoying this. *Let Tut find out firsthand how difficult it is to keep and live with one of these headstrong and damnable Osiran slaves.*

TutMose swallowed hard and nodded. He had gotten himself into this on a whim, and now he was going to have to pay for his indiscretion. What the hell was he going to do with the man? Where was he going to house him? How was—

"Sub-Commander?" Pyke interrupted his thoughts.

"Sir?"

"Dismissed. Have a lovely evening. I have a Thrallplex commlink to make."

TutMose left the office and walked slowly down to the refectory reflecting on his folly. Cassian was still there with his guard, finishing off what had been an entire loaf of bread. From the crumbs and plates and empty cups, TutMose's off-hand remark to Pyke about the slave eating everything in sight was not far off the mark. At least he was clean. His hair and beard were lice-free and washed thoroughly, and still a little damp. He was wearing a standard penal-issue loose tunic, trousers, and softboots. His formerly wild hair was pulled back from his face and tied, and this only showed the thinness and wear on his face, and the exhaustion in his wary eyes. Still, the eyes were alert and alive, and that was something. TutMose was not exactly sure what. But the beard was definitely going to have to go.

He dismissed the guard and sat down opposite his new slave. He suddenly found himself very hungry and helped himself to a fresh loaf of bread that Cassian hadn't gotten to yet, and poured some juice in a clean cup. He chewed and

swallowed silently as his leery companion finished the remnants of his own meal. When TutMose was done he wiped his hands on a towel and said, "Let's go."

"Where?" Cassian asked immediately.

"What do you care as long as it's not back to your holiday spot in the royal quarry?" TutMose snapped back. This effectively silenced Cassian, who grudgingly followed the sub-commander out of the refectory and down the corridor past several sets of curious eyes.

TutMose arrived at his quarters and pressed the proper indents, careful to shield the exact sequence from his unexpected guest. The door slid open and TutMose gestured for Cassian to enter. All of a sudden the young Osiran felt uneasy, but he entered and stood in the center of the small chamber while TutMose entered and shut and locked the door. Cassian scanned the chamber with an objective eye. Small. Sparse. One bed. Small open commode and washbasin. Small window, security shade locked down. He waited. One bed.

TutMose ignored him for a few minutes as he discarded his gloves, techbelt and cloak. He turned to Cassian and shook his head.

"My folly is going to cause us both to make some concessions in these living quarters." He nodded his head towards an empty corner of space as far from the bed as possible. Cassian turned to look and before he could ask what TutMose meant, the sub-commander tossed him one of the pillows from his bed and the top blanket. "You sleep there, on the floor. Don't even think about trying to escape, or trying to kill or injure me. I sleep very lightly and if something should happen to me, you won't survive the act for much longer than it would take me to die. You've been strong enough and smart enough to survive this long. Don't throw that away for a moment's gratification. And," he added, playing his top card, "you *do* want to see Vin-Chay again, don't you?"

"Yes," Cassian said slowly. "I do."

"Good. Then get some sleep and I'll figure out tomorrow what to do with you." With that TutMose broke off any further conversation and stripped his outer clothes off, lying down on the bed and switching off the light before Cassian had a chance to move. The Osiran felt his way over to the corner carefully, and slid down on the floor to sleep. Both men were dead asleep within minutes. Neither moved for the entire night.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Bahrtok had been edgy for the better part of a week. Vin-Chay was more than a little concerned at his new friend's uncharacteristic silences, half-spoken starts to discarded conversations, and distant gazes whenever he was unaware of Vin-Chay's scrutiny. Vin-Chay had been obsessing over whether it was something that he had done or said that had precipitated this behavior, but he came to the conclusion that it was not, that it was something else entirely. He had relaxed a little at this deduction, but the odd behavior still worried him if only because he had come to care so much for his temporary 'family.' Anything that would make them unhappy or upset was likely to cause him the same discomfort because he didn't want them to be that way. If he knew what 'it' was, perhaps he could help. Although communication with Bahrtok was open and easy, Vin-Chay still did not feel comfortable imposing on Bahrtok's privacy and personal matters, and reluctantly decided to wait until Bahrtok was ready to confide. Or not.

As Vin-Chay mused over the possibilities, he waited for the barterpost vendor to complete the supply order that he had come into Ammurabbi to fill. The town was far smaller than Thebes and as such so much more comfortable in terms of space and crowds of people. Vin-Chay had declined outings into the town for the first two months of his tenure at the agriplex, going only when Bahrtok or Colyn required something, but in the last month he had gone into the town several times on his own and for non-agriplex related matters. He had taken Bahrtok up on his suggestion for an occasional draught of ale, and he had acquired a pleasant appreciation and taste for the beverages served at Bahrtok's favorite tavern. The proprietor and customers there, and in Ammurabbi in general, believed him to be only a hired employee of the well-liked agriman, and he was treated with courtesy and a casual consideration. He wondered how much of that treatment would change or evaporate if these same people saw the tattoo on his arm and recognized him as the chattel of another. He doubted that he would receive the same attitude from most.

He had no reason to take others into his confidence and maintained a cordial but standoffish manner that seemed to suit both himself and the people with

whom he interacted. He bothered no one, and was not bothered in return. It was a pleasant and safe anonymity.

The vendor returned from his chit validation process and smiled at Vin-Chay as he handed him two boxes of supplies, and directed his assistant to help take the other boxes out to the aircraft. Vin-Chay gave the eager boy a small gratuity and was rewarded with a bright thank-you and smile as the lad sped back into the outpost for any other such profitable efforts.

Vin-Chay locked down the craftstor and left the vehicle safely in its temporary port. There was plenty of time for a quick draught of ice-cold ale before he had to head back to the 'plex. It was mid-summer now, and the temperatures were regularly up around one-fifty. He was fairly used to the heat, but it did tend to dry out his mouth and the thought of the drink made it water. He pushed open the door of the tavern next to the vendor and was instantly gratified by the cool rush of air that greeted him. The tavern tender waved to him and drew an ale, knowing that the young man who worked for Bahrtok never drank anything else when he came here. Vin-Chay paid for the drink and settled down at a lone table to take his time and enjoy it. It was so good.

He had been sipping at his second and last drink for a few minutes when two other agrimen he had seen around the town stopped in for the same purpose as he. They received their drinks and one turned to search for a table when he spotted Vin-Chay. He made a just-a-moment hand gesture to his companion, who nodded and went in search of a table at the rear of the tavern while the man started walking over to Vin-Chay, who tensed for a moment then relaxed. This man didn't know who he was; he was probably just being friendly. When he reached Vin-Chay's table he motioned towards the chair and Vin-Chay did the polite thing and asked him to sit. The man seated himself and took a long draught of his own cold drink as he wiped the sheen of sweat off his face.

"Ah," he said as he slaked at least some of his thirst. "This has to be one of the hottest summers on record. Not too good for most crops. My name is Devvon." He stuck out his hand and Vin-Chay shook it firmly.

"Vin-Chay. I work—"

"For Bahrtok," the man finished. "Aye. I've seen the two of you around. You don't socialize much, do you?" he ended pleasantly. Vin-Chay realized the man had no hidden agenda; he was simply being friendly. Vin-Chay had to stop distrusting everyone he met. He grinned back ruefully.

"We're just so busy harvesting. Sometimes you're just too tired to think, let alone talk."

"That's a fact! Lately I can't even remember the last time I didn't have to get up at dawn to pamper my crops in hopes of not losing the whole thing, including the 'plex. Too much to do, too little time to do it. Too little decent help, too." He nodded over to where his companion had seated himself, rolling his eyes in a derogatory manner. Vin-Chay wasn't about to make any overt value judgments on a man he hadn't even met, so he put on a non-committal face and shrugged neutrally.

"True. It's much the same at our 'plex. At least the harvest will be over in a few months and we can rest then. At least until preparations for the next planting," Vin-Chay finished, also downing the last of his ale as he rose from his seat. Devvon followed suit as he caught his first companion's eye across the chamber and motioned that he would be right there. He stood as he prepared to get another ale and join his friend.

"Ah, well, perhaps we can converse another time. I need to get another ale and relax with Carak for a while before we get back to our labors. I sure do envy Bahrtok, though!" he grinned, shaking his head.

"Why?" asked Vin-Chay curiously. Bahrtok didn't have it any better than this man.

"Well, for one thing he has a strong young man like you working for him, and from what I've seen and heard that's several steps above most of the independent agriplexes around here, mine included. And then, of course, he has that special link with the government that's as much of a sure guarantee of a prosperous crop sale as you can get nowadays."

Vin-Chay raised an eyebrow at the slight touch of jealousy in the man's voice, but he thought he understood. The life was hard and could often produce little or no results, and anything that might seem to give one man the edge over another was something to be coveted.

"Well," Vin-Chay said, "he still has to put in the same hard work to bring in the crops and no amount of contacts will help during drought or natural disaster, or the risk of personal injury. He's a hard worker and a good man," he finished forcefully, protective of his protector.

Devvon put his hands up in a conciliatory motion. "Absolutely! I just meant that I wish I had a son-in-law that could intervene when I needed a hand. Even once."

"Son-in-law?" Vin-Chay asked, confused. What was he talking about? Bahrtok's son-in-law was dead. He had died before Sprite was born.

"Aye," Devvon replied. "I've never met the man and I barely remember him from his childhood. I don't think he ever spends time here, but everyone knows

he's intervened to assist Bahrtok in a few critical instances. Not that Bahrtok doesn't deserve that!" he ended quickly, suddenly worried about what this man might say to Bahrtok, and if it would then get back to the wrong people. It was becoming dangerous to express any opinions in public that might be even remotely construed as critical of the government or its officious leaders. Damn. Why had he said anything at all?

Vin-Chay stared at the man for a moment before asking, "What's this man's name? How exactly is he related to Bahrtok?" His intense stare and words unnerved Devvon, who now wished wholeheartedly that he had never engaged the young man in what was just meant to be innocuous and polite conversation. He started to sweat again as he faltered to give Vin-Chay an answer.

"Ah, I forget his name, just that he's a very highly-placed commander in the Ptolemii military. His family had a 'plex here years ago. What was his name? What? Pyrrik? Pittan? Something like that. I'm sorry, I can't remember. I don't pay much attention to what goes on outside of my 'plex. Why don't you just ask Bahrtok? I don't think he'll mind. It all happened a long time ago. I really need to go now."

"What happened?" Vin-Chay asked. When he saw that the other man was sweating and didn't seem likely to provide any more helpful information, he decided to let him go without further badgering. He shook the man's hand again—noticing the now-limp grip with which he responded—and excused himself as he quickly left the tavern.

Vin-Chay felt himself gasping for air as his eyes adjusted to the bright sunlight. He waited a few moments for his heartbeat to go down before he pulled his kufiyyeh from his belt and donned it. He mechanically unlocked the aircraft and got in, and his fingers touched the navigational instruments that sent the craft off on a direction back to the agriplex and the household of Pyke's in-laws.

He overrode the autonav a few kilometers from the 'plex and stopped the craft. He tumbled out gasping and slipped down to sit against a large desert rock as he tried to make sense of it all and to wonder what he was going to do next. The revelation made sense and it didn't make sense. It would explain a lot about Bahrtok and Colyn, but it also left too many unanswered questions, questions he knew he couldn't keep from asking at some point. Some point very soon. He rested a bit before embarking on the last leg of his trip. He pulled into the 'plex craftport in late afternoon, wondering if he was going to be able to put on a face that wouldn't give away his inner turmoil. He relaxed and breathed, then started unloading the supplies.

Fortunately, neither Bahrtok nor Colyn was in the house when he arrived; she had probably taken him a mid-day meal in sector seven. He put away the stores then went into his noxchamber to think.

He lay on his bed and shut his eyes. He tried to rationalize the questions and possible answers. All right, Pyke could be their son-in-law. But Bahrtok had said that his daughter and son-in-law were dead. Of course, he hadn't said directly that there wasn't another daughter to whom Pyke had been married. If there was, where was she? He had also assumed that Pyke had only been married once, but he could have been married more than once and perhaps these were the parents of that other wife, a wife who didn't die in a battle between the *Victorion* and a Ptolemii vessel. And how did Sprite fit in? He couldn't be Pyke's child; he was too young. Well, he was too young to be the child of the dead wife, but perhaps not of a second wife (third?) who happened to be dead, too. And Pyke had told him that he and his wife didn't have children, didn't he?

He groaned and rubbed his eyes painfully as the insistent throb of a headache began to take hold. Too many assumptions and theories, too little information. He had to ask Bahrtok to get to the bottom of this. Or should he? Bahrtok didn't seem to know what part he played in Pyke's life or in the death of Pyke's wife, who may or may not have been Bahrtok's daughter. This was crazy.

He let the questions and fears and possibilities run rampant inside his head for nearly an hour before he heard voices in the house and he knew that the family was back. Confront them now, or later? Later when? He reluctantly pushed himself off the bed and entered the hearthchamber, where he saw Colyn standing hand-in-hand with Sprite as Bahrtok was in the process of dumping an armful of fire kindling near the hearth. Despite the intense day heat, the nights often dropped by at least eighty degrees, and having the fire burn was both physically and emotionally comforting. They all smiled at him as he entered. Sprite disengaged himself from his grandmother and ran to Vin-Chay with raised arms. Vin-Chay automatically picked him up and gave him the demanded hug.

Colyn's eyebrows drew together. She was very attuned to the men in her life and sensed right away that something was bothering Vin-Chay. Bahrtok picked up on it, too, and suddenly motioned Colyn to take the child. She understood and took Sprite out of Vin-Chay's arms and carried him into the nutrichamber as Bahrtok said to Vin-Chay, "Let's take a walk." Vin-Chay nodded and followed him out into the back enclosure, where they exited the rear gate and started walking down to the groves silently. It was a peaceful silence, and one both men relished despite their mutual disquiet.

After ten minutes or so, when they had reached the groves and were walking slowly through the rows, giving cursory checks to the trees and ground, Bahrtok decided it was time to broach whatever was bothering Vin-Chay. It was also time for him to discuss what had been worrying him for the past week. He squatted down to inspect an exposed root and spoke without looking up.

"So, my friend. What's bothering you that wasn't bothering you this morning?"

Vin-Chay remained standing. He waited. He wasn't sure exactly how to form his thousand questions tactfully, so he decided to just ask straight out.

"Is Commander Pyke your son-in-law?" he asked quietly.

Bahrtok continued to study the root before answering. "Yes."

"He was married to your daughter? *One* of your daughters?"

"I've only had one daughter, Vin-Chay. You never asked, and we never mention her name, but it was Coba. The only holographs of her are kept in Colyn's and my noxchamber, so you have never been privy to her face, either." He looked up to gauge Vin-Chay's reaction. He was alarmed when he saw that the Osiran's face was drained of all color, his lips parted slightly, a look of disbelief on his white visage. He remained motionless and trance-like for a few interminable seconds before shaking his head as though to clear his thoughts.

"That, that can't be. Unless she wasn't Sprite's mother."

"She was," Bahrtok said solemnly. "As true as I was her father."

"You said your son-in-law was dead—that he died before Sprite was born. Pyke is very much alive."

"He is dead to us as far as being a son-in-law and a true member of our family." He shrugged more nonchalantly than he felt. "Semantics. And that is why there are no holographs of him in our house."

"It's still not possible. Pyke said that his wife died over five years ago. He never mentioned a child. Sprite just turned three."

"Vin-Chay," Bahrtok said gently. "We may seem to live in an uncivilized world, but we do have some excellent technology."

"I don't understand."

Bahrtok rose to face him and put a hand on his shoulder for a moment. He looked deeply into Vin-Chay's eyes as he pressed his lips together tightly, trying to figure out where to begin. At the beginning, as Colyn would say.

"Come. Sit with me here in our favorite spot, and I'll tell you everything, including why I have been so distant lately. Sit." The men sat under the largest, oldest citrine tree in the grove, well shielded from the sun. They sat cross-legged,

facing each other, a look of intensity and expectation on Vin-Chay's face, a look of resignation and pain on Bahrtok's.

"Much of what I told you is true. We have known Pyke and his family for many years. He did come from an agriplex near here, and his parents did die when he was young. They died of natural causes that I believe were aggravated by an unusually harsh season overburdened with bad weather and hard work, and little hope that the 'plex could hold out. Pyke's father died in his crops one day of a heart attack. His mother died two months later. I think her body and soul just gave out. The government took the 'plex for back taxes, and Pyke, who was eleven or twelve at the time, was shuffled between indifferent relatives and paid foster care for several years. I think it made him withdraw, and it made him hard to reach. Ultimately, I expect, it made it difficult for him to reach out and touch or be touched. His only refuge was his intellect and strength of will. They both serve him well today, but they also do not make him a very demonstrative or warm person. I think the desire to be so is there, but it's buried under too many layers of pain and regret and mistrust. I use to see him as a young man and think, how cold. How would anyone get past that, and why would anyone want to try?"

"At any rate, he excelled at his educational endeavors and was granted a scholarship to the Ptolem Military Academy, where he'd have a chance at a decent career and life. This was at a time, remember, when the military was only used as an internal law enforcement tool and not as a true warrior force that's now battling your people offworld and, it would seem, our own here in many provinces. I'm sorry, I've digressed."

"Anything you care to say to me, I would be grateful to listen to, Bahrtok," Vin-Chay said gently and gratefully as he pressed the older man's hand. Bahrtok smiled appreciatively and went on.

"From scattered reports we heard that Pyke was doing well. His career progressed, although I'd heard rumors of a love affair that ended badly. The war started, and life changed for all of us. Working the 'plex was so much harder, and had so much less of a future than it did in generations past. Colyn and I married young and had great hopes for a life together, for a litter of children to love and cherish, and to whom we could pass on our legacy.

"Colyn miscarried eight times in the first ten years of our marriage. The physicians couldn't explain it. We kept trying. Then during her ninth pregnancy we managed to pass the point where the other babies had been lost. And we dared to hope. Neither of us knew if the child would be a boy or a girl because we didn't want to know in case what we had thought was the inevitable would happen. She was confined to a Mediplex for the last month of her pregnancy, pretty much

depleting what was left of our financial resources. On the eleventh anniversary of our blessed marriage she gave birth to a beautiful daughter. She was so cherished and desired! We named her after both of us by taking the first two letters of each of our names.”

“Coba,” Vin-Chay said softly.

“Aye, Coba. She was the joy of our lives. She grew up to be a blonde-haired, blue-eyed beauty, much as her mother was forty years ago.” Bahrtok cocked his head to one side and looked at Vin-Chay critically. “I would say she had eyes very much like yours. Not as striking blue, but with the same fire and life and occasional irreverence. Laughing eyes. She was smart and gentle and went out of her way to help people. She was a natural educator, and we scraped enough chits together to supplement the scholarship she received to the University of Thebes. She earned an educational degree and interned in several unique institutions. I was torn between losing my daughter to a different life, and knowing that she would have a far better life than the one we could provide here on the agriplex. But we encouraged and supported her, and she prospered.”

“And then she met Pyke,” Vin-Chay inferred. Bahrtok nodded.

“And then she met Pyke. Well, again, anyway. She had crossed paths with him while he grew up here, although she was several years younger, and we knew him, of course. But, yes, she met him one day at a political function in Thebes at which she was trying to raise private funds for a special educational program. He was a young, up-and-coming officer who was becoming known as a tactician and educator. Somehow, she engaged him in a meaningful conversation and he responded. They began seeing each other. She brought him here a few times, but he always seemed reluctant and uncomfortable. I expect it was a painful part of his past that he would rather have left behind, but she tried to make him see the good sides to the ‘plexes and this part of the province, and I think that although he may have not truly seen that, he saw something in her.

“They courted for a year. I know it was a chaste courtship, for she told me so. And then he proposed marriage, and she accepted. He traveled here to attempt to acquire our approval, which we grudgingly gave. I know inside he resented the grudging part, but he never said so.”

“Why grudging? Did you doubt that he loved her?”

“No, never. I could see it, even though he tried to hide it well. No, I just thought that their lives and the war and their disparate way of looking at life would eventually tear them apart, or at least make for a very difficult marriage. And I wanted better for my daughter. I wanted her life to be perfect, although I knew that concept doesn’t exist. Still, I gave my consent. They were married here

at the 'plex, with only Colyn and me and a couple of Pyke's friends and the priest present. They settled in his apartment in Thebes, and life went along quite well for that first year. He had started building her a real home outside of Thebes proper. It was nearly done as they prepared to celebrate their first marriage anniversary. And then ..." His voice had started to trail off as he recollected the painful memories. He stopped for a few moments.

"I know what happened after that," Vin-Chay said quietly as Bahrtok looked up at him, surprised. Vin-Chay answered the look. "Pyke told me in detail what happened, about the trip to Telluron and the battle and her ship being hit. And her death."

Bahrtok nodded. "Yes, her death." He stopped again for a few moments. Vin-Chay was about to prompt him when he suddenly continued. "You want to know about Sprite, don't you?"

"Yes," Vin-Chay said slowly. "You said something about technology? And Pyke, well, he said that he and his wife didn't have children." *And yes, my wife died before she had the joy of giving birth to what would have been the first of our many children.*

"Did he?" Bahrtok replied in a chilly voice. "I see. At any rate, Coba was three months' pregnant when her ship was hit. We didn't even know. She didn't want us to worry any more than we already would about her trip, so she kept her condition a secret from us and from Pyke. The physicians on board the Ptolemii ship that rescued the survivors and the dying found that she was pregnant. They ran a check on her and saw that she was married to a Ptolemii officer very much on the way up. They couldn't contact him because their communications had been disrupted by the battle damage, so they made a command decision and removed the embryo from her womb moments before she died, and put it into cryogenic suspension. It's a common procedure, nothing difficult or special about it.

"From what I've heard, Pyke was furious. I think he felt it a desecration of her body, and the last thing on his grief-stricken mind was that he might still be able to have their child. We were more devastated than her husband, but when we learned that her child was safe and could be born, we were renewed and grateful to God for the second chance to have a part of our daughter back. We hadn't reckoned on Pyke's feelings or obstinacy."

"Didn't he calm down when he realized that he could have a part of her back, too? That doesn't make sense. It was a second chance for him, too."

"A lot of things Pyke does don't make sense, as you of all people should know. It's almost as though he doesn't have the same thought connections as we do. He can't show his feelings. Or if he does, he shows them differently than most of us

do. Anyway, he resisted having the child implanted into a surrogate female for gestation and birth. He was the legal father and had the only right to decide this. We went back and forth bitterly for a year and a half. A lot of bad feeling developed on both sides. I think we finally wore him down, and he resented that but relented, under certain conditions. The embryo was removed from suspension and implanted into a surrogate, and my grandson was born three years ago. By the way, I know you don't know this, or it would have triggered your curiosity earlier, but 'Sprite' is just a nickname." He smiled.

"A nickname? I didn't know. I thought you were just being whimsical when you named him. What's his true name?" Vin-Chay managed a slight smile.

Bahrtok hesitated. "We wanted him named after his beloved mother, as an added means of keeping her name and spirit alive. We named him Cobahr. And, actually, I think we had better start calling him that since he's getting older, or he'll probably wind up having more than a bit of trouble when he starts to interact with other children."

"Cobahr," Vin-Chay said reflectively. "I like it. May I start using that name for him?"

"Absolutely, but first I want to explain to him that he has a 'new' name so that it doesn't confuse him."

They were silent for a few minutes until Vin-Chay broke the silence. "What were the conditions? The ones Pyke put on his decision to allow the birth?"

"That we never discuss this matter with anyone. Also, he willingly gave us physical custody, but he retains legal custody. So he can take the boy any time he wants to."

"God," Vin-Chay breathed. "What an awful cloud to live under." He thought of his own situation as Pyke's legal possession. From the look on Bahrtok's face, he knew the older man had read his thoughts.

"True, but we're not too worried. Pyke has never even seen the child, and has expressed no interest in doing so. Oh, he set up a very generous trust fund for Cobahr's maintenance and education, and he applies chits to it every month without fail. He's also seen to it that our 'plex has adequate government contracts to maintain the crops and so the family. I know that if we needed something he would provide it, but I don't want to ask. And up to now, he has never asked for anything. That was why I was so surprised when he contacted me and you appeared in our lives. Just when I thought I had the man figured out to a point where he couldn't surprise me, he acts in a completely unexpected and contrary manner. I feel like I'm back to square one with him, and naturally that worries me, because up to this point neither Colyn nor I had any worries about losing

Cobahr.” He paused and saw his opening to relate to Vin-Chay why he seemed to be in turmoil lately.

“And both Colyn and I worried about your reaction to learning our relationship to Pyke. Learning that you were living in a household with his in-laws and his son. We were worried that it might impact how you felt about us. How you felt about Cobahr. We didn’t want him to get rejected and hurt if you found you couldn’t bear to be close to or play with or care for the son of the man who has treated you so badly,” he finished. He felt relieved that it was all out in the open. He didn’t know that it wasn’t quite all out in the open.

Vin-Chay didn’t respond to Bahrtok’s unspoken desire for him to adamantly deny that the situation would impact his feelings for the family. When the silence became too long, Bahrtok began to fear the worst—that it had, and that he may have lost a fine new friend, and his grandson a much-needed companion and father-figure. His bitter feelings for Pyke resurfaced. The man had treated them all so badly. His indifference and cruelty might have had even farther-reaching consequences than he had ever thought. His thoughts were broken by Vin-Chay’s soft words, words that had a definite edge of anger in them.

“I cannot believe he would do this,” Vin-Chay said softly. “That he would send me here under these circumstances. That unfeeling bastard,” he ended angrily. Bahrtok assumed that he was furious about being confined to the household of his brutal master’s extended family, and he felt his hopes for Vin-Chay retaining his former feelings sink quickly. He impulsively reached out to try to change his mind, to make him see that they weren’t like Pyke, that they cared for him, that they would do whatever they could to put the situation right. He touched Vin-Chay’s arm. The young man’s head snapped up to look at him, and he could see a strange mixture of anger and shame and fear in his eyes. Vin-Chay shook his hand off and rose quickly. Bahrtok stood, too.

“Vin-Chay,” Bahrtok began, “I know this is a shock to you and that perhaps you see us differently now, but our feelings for you are true, and you—”

“No!” Vin-Chay nearly shouted, taking Bahrtok aback. “You don’t understand! It isn’t what Pyke has done to *me* by sending me here. This has been the best thing that has happened to me for God knows how long. I think it’s saved my life. You people have become my substitute family. I cherish you, and now I may lose you.”

“Lose us?” Bahrtok said, bewildered. *What’s going on here?*

“Yes, lose you, because there’s another part of this deceitful web that you don’t know, and that will likely make you want me out of your house. I wish I could

keep it a secret, but I can't. You have a right to know who you are sheltering at your hearth."

"We believe we are sheltering a fine young man who would be welcome in any household. Who do you believe we are sheltering?" Bahrtok asked quietly.

"The son of the man who was responsible for your daughter's death," Vin-Chay replied just as quietly and evenly. The shocked look on Bahrtok's face made him want to crawl away and die. Perhaps he should and just get it all over with. The nightmare of his life had seemed to be ebbing away, but it had returned full force. And engulfed innocents as well.

Bahrtok stared hard at Vin-Chay before saying one word: "Explain."

Vin-Chay nodded slowly. "Your daughter's vessel was hit by fire from the Osiran flagship *Victorian*. That ship was—and is—commanded by my father, Supreme Commander Chay Shayne, Crown Prince of the Kindred of Chay on Osiron."

Bahrtok didn't react at first. His eyes narrowed as he studied the nervous young man in front of him for several long moments before speaking slowly and deliberately. "You are the son of Crown Prince Chay Shayne of Osiron?"

"Yes."

"You are an Osiran prince," Bahrtok stated flatly.

"Yes. A princeling. I have an older brother who is my father's heir."

"And you came into Pyke's possession how?" Bahrtok demanded.

"I was a warrior lieutenant aboard an Osiran war vessel, the *Remus*. It was defeated in battle after a disastrous decision by our commander. Many of us died. The others were taken prisoner and removed to the war facility on Canaan where we were interrogated and confined as prisoners-of-war. After about six months the commander of that facility committed rit-su, and Pyke's returning flagship was diverted to the fortress to assume command for an indeterminate period. It turned out to be a fateful five months. After that, your High Command decided to close down all prisoner facilities and send the inmates to either the berrillium mines on Sekmet, or to Ptolem to be sold into slavery. I was sent to Ptolem nine months ago, where Pyke bought me."

"He knew who you were," Bahrtok said slowly, beginning to get an uneasy feeling about the answer.

"Yes. He had access to all of the correlator files extracted from the *Remus* before it was destroyed. He knew who I was right away. And, well, it doesn't matter now."

"What doesn't matter?"

Vin-Chay hesitated, but decided that he had no right to be anything but honest with this man. "I didn't know then about his wife or my father's part in her death. But it all became clear when I did find out about Coba a few months after I arrived on Ptolem. Why he singled me out in Canaan, why he initiated a relationship with me at the fortress, why he took me as his slave and bedmate after we arrived here." He paused before finishing. "I was his revenge against my father. I was the means by which he was going to pay my father back for the death of his wife. I was the one who was going to be punished since he couldn't get his hands on the man he really wanted to hurt. He's denied this, but I can't help believing it. Nothing else seems to make much sense."

The silence that followed stretched out to what seemed to Vin-Chay a lifetime. Bahrtok's eyes never left his as he absorbed all that the younger man had told him. Bahrtok finally broke eye contact with Vin-Chay and turned away from him to stare unseeing out at the desert horizon. The sun was starting to set and the air cool down. The melting gold across the far-distant Greco Mountains was beautiful and peaceful. The desert night insects had started to awaken and cry out in a symphony of sounds. Bahrtok heard none of it, saw none of it. He murmured something that Vin-Chay couldn't quite catch.

"Bahrtok?" Vin-Chay said softly. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry that Coba is dead. I'm sorry for the part my family played it. I'm sorry that I was foisted on you without you knowing the facts. I—"

"Bastard," Bahrtok interrupted forcefully. Vin-Chay thought the man was referring to him until he continued, turning to face Vin-Chay once again. "That cold-blooded bastard! To take some kind of sick revenge on you for something you had absolutely nothing to do with, something that no one in his right mind could hold you accountable for. God's Blood!"

Vin-Chay felt a flicker of hope. "Then you, you don't hold me accountable for Coba's death? You aren't furious that I would be sent to reside in your house?"

"Accountable for her death? God, no! And I am furious at a man who would inflict the kind of abuse on you that he has for any reason, let alone for some unwarranted desire for revenge! And to send you here without either of us knowing the true story, perhaps to uncover it accidentally as we have with all the possible repercussions that could have occurred if we were both different men. I can't help wondering if this was another attempt at abuse or—I don't know *what* it was! Other than clear insanity. But I am not insane. Or irrational. And I hold nothing against you. I hold you in high esteem and pray that you have retained your own good impressions of me and my family." He hesitated. "Have you?"

"God yes," Vin-Chay breathed. *Thank you.*

“Good!” Bahrtok said heartily. “We still have much to talk about because I just feel a need to know the whole story and Colyn needs to know as well. Can you tell me everything, or would it be too painful? If it is, that’s all right, because I accept you as you are. I guess I’m just curious. Can you indulge me?” His rush of words matched the wild beating of his heart as he anticipated and dreaded what he might hear from his young friend.

“I can. I want to. There’s so much I’ve never been able to tell anyone, even my priest, and right now I just want to talk and let it out. Thank you for the opportunity.”

The two men sat back down as the night encroached. They were oblivious to the cooling temperatures and the stirring of the night creatures. Vin-Chay told Bahrtok everything. He told him of the torture and abuse on Canaan before Pyke came, the dark cells, the filth, and the starvation. He told him how Pyke improved the prisoners’ lots when he arrived, because he wanted the truth to include the decent treatment as well as the bad. He told him about the mind games that Pyke liked to play, and their unholy bargain and the nights that Vin-Chay spent in Pyke’s quarters, and the moments of consideration and almost gentleness that Pyke could show at times. He told him how Pyke overrode his decision to go to Sekmet and forced him to return to Ptolem and slavery. He told him with great difficulty about the humiliating, dehumanizing processing at the Thrallplex.

Vin-Chay went into detail about his duties in Pyke’s household, and how he had been granted some freedom and contacted his priest, and began working at the temple and then later in Tuscan. He told him about his plan to escape and how he had finally managed to break into Pyke’s correlator. His voice cracked slightly when he told Bahrtok about how he had set up that last evening to distract and then drug Pyke, and flee to Tuscan—how he had used sex to lull the man into a false sense of trust, then betrayed that trust when he gave him the annise. And how Pyke followed him to Tuscan, and threatened the elder, and easily persuaded his own people to betray him. He told him what had happened in Pyke’s apartment that terrible, terrible night.

When Vin-Chay finally managed to get the last detail out, he was out of breath. He saw tears in Bahrtok’s eyes and tried to remember how long it had been since he had allowed himself to shed any tears of his own, for himself or for anyone. The sight of Bahrtok’s compassion finally pushed him over the edge, and the next thing he knew he was being held tightly in Bahrtok’s arms as he sobbed for a very long time. After his tears had subsided and his heartbeat had returned to normal, Bahrtok pulled them both off the ground and they followed the trail

of ground lights back through the grove to the house. Bahrtok sat his wife and friend down at the nutrichamber table, and he and Vin-Chay told her everything. When the story was finished a second time, Vin-Chay found himself swallowed up in Colyn's arms, and he thought that the darkness that had engulfed him for so long was starting to lift.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Sub-Commander TutMose stormed into the officers' refectory, his face red and his mouth as tight as anyone had ever seen it. The two sub-captains and three lieutenants who were finishing their mid-day meal saw the black look on his face and all simultaneously abandoned the remnants of their meals and quickly exited the chamber. This successful effort at self-preservation left the sub-commander alone with the slave who was scrubbing the rear section of the floor. He was down on his hands and knees and turned casually around to see the man he had expected at any moment. The Ptolemii was too predictable. There was no challenge in trying to irritate him, but at least it kept his own mind lively and occupied, thought Cassian. He turned back to his work as he tried to get a particularly stubborn stain out of the tile as TutMose strode up to him and stood centimeters away. Cassian turned his face up to look at the Ptolemii and said casually, "Yes, master?"

"Are you *insane*?" TutMose exclaimed angrily. "I send you to the granary on a *simple errand* and you manage to *completely* antagonize the lector in charge to a point where he contacts *High* Commander Pyke, who of course drags *me* into his office and away from critical duties so that I can explain why *you* are running amuck in this milipost!"

"Sir?" Cassian responded blandly. "I don't understand. I completed the task you assigned me. I believe I treated your fellow warrior with all the respect due him when I provided him with your latest supply requests. I can't imagine what would have antagonized him so—"

"See! There! That's *exactly* what I mean. It isn't your words or actions but the way in which you, you *say* them! And *do* them! 'Respect due him' indeed! You think I don't know how little you respect any of us, you damnable Osiran slave! I ought to, ought to—*beat* you!" At that TutMose let go with a familiar Ptolemii expletive quite uncomplimentary to Cassian's ancestors, then whirled around and stormed back out of the chamber. Cassian sighed audibly and returned to his scrub efforts, finally removing the ugly stain left by a young Ptolemii warrior who had too much to drink the previous night and proceeded to regurgitate it after a greasy, hot meal.

He completed his task in silence and alone, assuming that the furious sub-commander's presence in the refectory had kept anyone within earshot out of the place and away from possible physical harm. He put away his tools, then collected the remaining food plates and cups from the table that the officers had recently vacated. He selected a few choice, untouched scraps of meat from the plates and chewed them slowly, enjoying the savory taste of the well-cooked food as he washed them down with a half glass of papyron abandoned by one of the lieutenants. He had more than enough meat and other decent food to eat as part of his own dietary allowances, but the starvation and often repulsive 'food' provided in his previous slave life at the quarry had left him with an uncontrollable urge to eat decent food whenever it was within his reach. He never knew when such a luxury might be taken away.

He scraped the leftovers off the plates and loaded them into the puri-corr. He finished cleaning up in the refectory and the nutrichamber, which were his main areas of responsibility since the Ptolemii sub-commander had returned with him to Hartan a month earlier. He had been assigned a number of such menial tasks, which also included the laundry and the cleaning of the officers' quarters and outside areas of the milipost complex. He didn't mind at all, since it allowed him a certain freedom and he was able to covertly examine and store information related to the enemy. It was an opportunity, and he wasn't about to discard such a windfall for acquiring useful knowledge.

He realized that he should have been more careful about his tendency to incur TutMose's anger, but he couldn't resist most of the time. It was so easy to get under the man's skin in any number of ways, from deliberately misinterpreting some instructions, to using 'that tone' to which the sub-commander had alluded, to overt confrontation with him either in the chamber they uneasily cohabited or when they were alone in other circumstances. He was careful to never have such confrontations in front of anyone else, if only to prevent any undue disrespect from others to his 'master' if they saw the Ptolemii being verbally and psychologically challenged by a common Osiran slave. He had a certain grudging respect for the sub-commander, and he wouldn't go that route. Not now, at any rate.

Cassian had no more tasks assigned to him for the duration of the afternoon. His movements were restricted after his work hours, and he was confined to the milipost only. He wished he could get into the databank complex somehow, but from what he had seen that was becoming more and more unlikely. As the dissident protests escalated, more stringent security and restrictions were imposed on all personnel, Ptolemii warrior, civilian and slave. He stood no chance of either getting into the complex or breaking into the databanks even he could breach the

building. He decided to return to his chamber and try to figure out where he should go from here. He took a leftover loaf of fresh bread with him, to finish to the last crumb as he awaited his master's imminent return.

He passed the two security checkpoints set up before the command quarters. The guards knew him but were still required to make certain checks to let him pass, and it was a few moments before he could enter TutMose's and his nox-chamber. He stripped off the dirty, hot work tunic, and washed his face and hands and upper body before lying down on the floor in 'his' corner. He had initially been worried about what the Ptolemii would and wouldn't expect of him even though he was consigned to the floor on that first night. Fortunately, it became clear right away that TutMose had absolutely no desire to bed him or have him perform any type of sexual act. After a few days he began to relax whenever the Ptolemii doused the chamber light so that they could both sleep. He was able to get a good night's sleep each night, and that plus the lack of abuse and beatings and the decent nutrition had allowed him to lose much of his strained, half-dead appearance and recover some of his former health.

He had put on a good number of kilograms of weight and his body was starting to flesh out. He could still see and feel his ribs, but they were much less prominent. His hair had regained some of its former body and luster and his now clean-shaven face had become fuller. Several of his teeth had been damaged or knocked out during his quarry captivity, and unexpectedly TutMose had had the damage repaired by the milipost infirmary. The scars still remained vividly on his back, wrists and ankles, but he didn't think twice about that. He was just glad to be alive and out of his former living hell. He linked his hands behind his head and closed his eyes, breathing regularly as he relaxed. His most pressing concern at this point was trying to find out about Vin-Chay, and hopefully the others with whom he had arrived on Ptolem. TutMose had been very closemouthed about his friend, and it frustrated him. He wondered suddenly if this reticence was the Ptolemii's way of paying him back for all the little things he had been doing to drive the man crazy. Somehow, he didn't think so.

His path rarely crossed with High Commander Pyke's, but on those few occasions he noticed the man's eyes on him and he felt unnerved by his appraising looks. He always had the impression that in Pyke's eyes he somehow came up short. *Short how?* he wondered. *In comparison to Vin-Chay? That wouldn't be a surprise.* He had never come up to the princeling's standards by his own measure, although Vin-Chay had certainly never said or intimated any such thing. It was Cassian's own insecurities that precipitated that evaluation. Born of a common background and with a checkered academic history that required a great deal of

concentration and effort, unlike the easy progress that his friend seemed to make through any situation up to this point, Cassian always harbored doubts about his worth and potential. He had never voiced these concerns to anyone, since it would have made him look weak, and thus be weak, in the eyes of those who mattered to him. *But not Vin-Chay*, he thought. Vin-Chay was a steadfast and loyal friend, through both their years at Academy and then on the *Remus*. Cassian felt compelled to make the best effort to find him before he could make any final plans to escape or try to subvert the Ptolemii war effort, even if that futile action might cost him his own life. That was his duty.

Someone signaling a desire to enter the chamber interrupted his thoughts. He scrambled to his feet just as the door slid open and he found himself staring at High Commander Pyke. The man had an enigmatic look on his face and Cassian felt disquieted for no particular reason. He wondered why he was here and decided to speak first, even if that was out of line and could prove dangerous.

"Sub-Commander TutMose isn't here, sir. I believe he's—"

"I am well aware of the sub-commander's location. I sent him there myself on assignment so he won't be back for a few hours at best. I am here to see you."

Oh, God, Cassian thought, wondering if his time was up at last. Pyke seemed to read his thoughts and smiled slyly, raising his hand. "No need for concern, Lieutenant. I haven't come to harm you in any way. Just to see your status for myself and to perhaps discuss a mutual acquaintance."

Vin-Chay, Cassian thought immediately, and immediately felt on guard. Still, this time he restrained his words and bad attitude and waited for Pyke to go on. The commander seated himself at TutMose's small desk and gestured for Cassian to sit on the bed nearby. Cassian complied edgily. Pyke cocked his head and looked over Cassian appraisingly before nodding with approval.

"I see that your physical state has significantly improved in the past month. I trust you are eating and sleeping well?"

Cassian picked up on the tone and raised eyebrow associated with the last few words and wondered if Pyke believed that TutMose was bedding him. He wondered if he should confirm or deny that implied question—or was it implied?—and decided to let it pass. "I am quite well, sir, thank you. Your sub-commander has treated me most decently."

"Good. I assumed he would. TutMose is a good man."

"Yes, sir."

"Which is why I would hate to see his decency and patience abused by anyone for whatever reason. Wouldn't you agree?"

"Yes, sir, I guess I would," Cassian replied somewhat nervously. *He's telling me to stop the attitude or else. I get the message, Commander, believe me.*

"Good. Because he took quite a chance on bringing you here to me, not knowing what my reaction would be to having to take unexpected possession of a second Osiran slave in less than ideal circumstances." Pyke smiled to himself at the confused look on Cassian's face.

"Possession, sir? I don't, I don't understand. Tut—Sub-Commander Tut-Mose purchased me from the QuarryMaster—"

"Under my name. So, legally, when he brought you here, you were my property. Did he forget to mention that to you?" Pyke's eyes bored relentlessly into Cassian's.

Cassian felt a chill. He belonged to this man, this High Commander who had taken and abused and enslaved his friend and now had him in his possession, not the blustery but essentially decent sub-commander who had taken him away from hell. He suddenly felt naked and exposed and chilled to the bone. What was this Ptolemii planning to do with him now and in the future? Did he plan on taking him back to Thebes and using him as he had Vin-Chay? Where was Vin-Chay? His thoughts caused him to miss the amused look in Pyke's eyes as the commander abruptly stood. Cassian quickly stood as well. Pyke walked to the door then turned back to the Osiran.

"Of course, having one Osiran slave is more than enough to keep me satisfied, so I reluctantly had to transfer your ownership to TutMose. I will be sure to give Vin-Chay your best when next I see him." He started to leave when Cassian decided to forego a safe restraint and stopped him.

"Commander?"

"Yes?" Pyke said casually.

"Is he all right?"

"Who?"

"Vin-Chay!" Cassian said in exasperation, immediately regretting his tone and biting back anything else he might say to annoy this dangerous man. *Stupid. I've got to control myself.*

"He's fine. He should be back in Thebes along the same time that my men and I return. If you behave yourself I'm sure you'll have the chance to see him again. If not ..." He let the words trail off. Cassian got the meaning and nodded in silent acquiescence and understanding as Pyke left him standing in the middle of the chamber.

Pyke was gratified to see that the Osiran had progressed so well. When he had first laid eyes on him he thought it was an even bet that the man would expire in

days. He was emaciated and hollow-eyed and near dead, and Pyke was outraged yet again at the lengths his people had gone to subdue any Osiran in sight. He had silently understood and approved of TutMose's whimsical purchase of the man they had once held captive on Canaan. He hated to see anyone in that set of conditions, but especially a warrior like himself who had only had the bad fortune to be on the losing side at one critical point in time.

His thoughts then turned to his own Osiran captive, and once again he found himself getting angry at the slave's attitude and actions. Yes, he had enslaved him and forced him to Ptolem, and yes, he had used him in and out of bed as he would never have done with a free Ptolemii, but that was only half the story. He had gone out of his way to be considerate and decent and gentle and to treat him as much of an equal as he could under their strange situation. And how had he been repaid? With even a bare minimum of appreciation? Hardly. The slave had been contentious and irritating and arrogant, and had ultimately seduced and drugged and betrayed his trust by that demented escape attempt. Well, perhaps not so demented—it could have worked if only he hadn't in turn been betrayed by his own people. But it was still the work of a fool and ingrate. He really shouldn't take him back. Another time, and his actions could bring death rather than a bad headache and private humiliation.

He tried to shake the thoughts from his mind. He had far more urgent matters on which to obsess rather than Vin-Chay. Things were coming to a head very quickly here and the milipost was on Red-One alert after the last dissident attack two nights ago. Four dead, all warriors, but one dissident had been captured alive and he was awaiting the Theban interrogation team that was due to arrive at any minute. Pyke had been hoping that he could persuade the man to cooperate before the team arrived, since he knew what they would do to the dissident. He wanted if at all possible to forestall that, despite his anger at his dead comrades. He wasn't ready to surrender his humanity yet and do anything to preserve the empire. Not just yet.

Pyke went down to the lower tier where TutMose was waiting for him near the solitary confinement section. The dissident, a man named Tarrok, was being held under close guard. He was watched every minute and was restrained with manacles at all times. Pyke was not about to chance a suicide, especially since he believed that this man might be a key member of the central cult that was driving the rebellion in the provinces. He had reviewed the data files on Tarrok and there was something in them that just made him believe that this was the one. And there was something that told him that Tarrok was just one strand in a very com-

plex web. Intuition, perhaps, but relying on that intangible ability had always served him well.

TutMose was standing by the observation panel and nodded as Pyke approached.

"I assume he hasn't said anything other than 'Pharon's lackey' lately?" Pyke asked mildly. TutMose shook his head.

"He hasn't said anything since yesterday unless you count the noise he made spitting on the guard who brought his meal last night," TutMose replied edgily. He shared his superior's concern over the pending arrival of the Theban team.

"You reviewed his files again? Anything new?"

"No, sir. I've read them a half dozen times over but nothing jumps out at me. He's a dealer in commodities and has business interests in several provinces. That allows him to be a good candidate for promoting dissension over a large area by virtue of his travel visa."

"Agreed. I saw nothing else sinister about the files myself. But there's got to be something there. We're just missing it." Pyke thought a moment. "What about his contacts in Thebes? Did you check to see if there were any questionable administrations of his documents or contracts? Any unexpected or large vouchers in his financial accounts?"

"I can contact one of our 'friends' in central affairs, and run a scan on his current and past business associates."

"Do the same for the other dissidents we've captured, including the ones who were interrogated before we got here. See if you can find any links. Check the visa files to see if all of his travel documents match the dates on the visas and see if they were authorized by the same people."

"Yes, sir." TutMose saluted and left as Pyke watched the unmoving Tarrok in his cell. The man sat rigidly and with eyes faced forward as though he were in a trance. There was a brace forced in his mouth to prevent him from swallowing his tongue. Pyke thought he looked as though he were resigned to death, although at this point it was far from a certainty. Pyke's eyebrows drew together. Or was it? He gave up musing on the man. It was pointless to try to talk to him again. Nothing Pyke had said over the last two days had made any impact, and he hadn't even received the barest response as he tried to alternately reason with and threaten the man. There was nothing left to do except let the Theban team have him and do their best. Or worst, as the case might be.

TutMose coordinated the results of his Theban friend's data scans and provided Pyke with the documents on his personal correlator. He had stayed in the commander's office for hours reviewing the documents with him, but nothing

had come of it. The team from Thebes had arrived barely an hour after he and Pyke had met in solitary, and Tarrok was now on his way to Thebes, if his comrades didn't get him. So far, there had been no word of any ambush. Pyke was as exhausted as he was but continued his review, sending TutMose away for the night to get some sleep.

The sub-commander entered his darkened noxchamber and flicked on a light, awakening the slave who was curled up on the floor in a corner, wrapped tightly in a blanket. TutMose realized that it was chilly in the chamber and he bypassed the security system to turn up the heat. Cassian gave him a half-awake glance and turned over on his other side facing the wall. He was fully awake then and listened as the Ptolemii undressed and washed then got into bed and turned off the light. They were both awake for about ten minutes when Cassian decided to converse.

"Commander Pyke came to see me today."

TutMose groaned. He had nearly fallen asleep before the slave had aroused him. "Cassian," he said in exasperation, "go to sleep! Don't torment me any more today. It's been a long one."

"I'm not trying to torment you, master. I was just trying to converse politely," he said, politely.

"At this hour? Be polite tomorrow. Be asleep now. Good *night*."

There was silence for a few long minutes and TutMose started to drift off again.

"He made it very clear that I was to stop trying your patience," Cassian continued. TutMose groaned loudly and angrily turned on the light, raising himself up on one elbow so that he could see the man lying on the floor. He found Cassian propped up on one elbow, staring at him curiously.

"Shut *up* and go to sleep!" TutMose shouted before turning the light back off and falling back on the bed with a definitive thump. A few more minutes passed in the dark as TutMose waited tensely for Cassian to dare to speak again. When he was certain that he had finally shut the damned slave up he relaxed and drifted off again. He was nearly asleep when Cassian said, "Good night, master," then turned back on his side, smiled to himself and fell asleep in record time, hoping he wouldn't get a swift kick in the ribs. TutMose was too tired for that. *Tomorrow*, he thought, *I'll beat the hell out of that damned slave Pyke saddled me with*. Then he really did drift off as he heard Cassian's even breathing in the corner.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Bahrtok had one of Cobahr's hands and Vin-Chay had the other, and the two men swung the child up and back and forth as he giggled and laughed and enjoyed the play with them. They had spent the better part of an hour playing with him after he had disturbed their work efforts with his unwavering demand for attention. Bahrtok had cast down his tools in mock frustration and scooped the boy up in his arms, tossing him high in the air and catching him. He tossed Cobahr to Vin-Chay who swung him around until they were both dizzy and collapsed on the ground laughing. The nutrients that sector ten needed would have to wait another day as work plans changed to play and enjoyment.

The men and boy enjoyed their physical and emotional communion until the sun began to set, then reluctantly started back to the house. Cobahr scrambled up eagerly into Vin-Chay's arms as the young man carried him to the house. Cobahr was fascinated by the shiny medallion that Vin-Chay wore over his work tunic, a present from Bahrtok and Colyn for his twenty-fourth birthanniv two weeks earlier. It was a small silver ankh, the symbol of eternal life. The gift meant the world to him. For the first time he thought about getting his left ear pierced so that he could wear an accompanying ear ornament. He smiled at the thought of the looks of horror that his family would have thrown his way if they ever knew he was contemplating this, let alone actually getting it done. He'd discuss it with Bahrtok and perhaps do it the next time he was in Ammurabbi.

As they approached the house Bahrtok tapped him on the arm and brought his attention to a reccraft parked near their own craftport. The vehicle was an older model and gave no hint as to its owner. They passed it without an examination and entered the nutrichamber. Vin-Chay let Cobahr slide down from his arms to the floor. As he looked up he stopped cold and his face drained of color as he faced Pyke, standing next to Colyn near the oven, a cup in his hand. The commander raised the cup to his lips and drank as his eyes looked through Vin-Chay as though he didn't exist. Vin-Chay could sense a palpable tension emanating from Bahrtok, who had stopped short as well. For a few interminable seconds no one spoke, until Bahrtok broke the silence.

"Pyke. We weren't aware that you planned to visit," he said evenly. *Easy now*, Bahrtok thought. *Don't panic. It doesn't mean he came for them.*

"Problem?" Pyke asked coolly. He had expected nothing less than a cold reception from his father-in-law, and was not disappointed.

"Not at all. If we had known we simply would have been better prepared to receive you for a visit. You are staying?"

"If it's not especially inconvenient, yes. I have a few days furlough from my work in Corso, and thought I'd see how things were going here since the 'plex isn't too far from that province." He turned to Colyn and inclined his head as he handed her the empty cup. "Excellent quality, as usual. It's good to see that the crops are doing so well in a bad season." He turned back to Bahrtok, continuing to ignore Vin-Chay's presence, as well as that of the small child who was looking up at him with large, curious eyes. "If I may, I'd like to settle in and unpack. I assume that the chamber above the craftport is suitable for a guest?"

Bahrtok tensed. Coba's old chamber, built above the 'port to provide her with private quarters as she grew past childhood into a young woman who craved independence. He hated to see Pyke reside there for a second, let alone a few days. "Yes," he said tersely. "I'll bring up fresh bed coverings shortly so that you can rest before the evening meal. Everything else you'll need is already there."

"Fine." He turned back to Colyn. "Thank you for your hospitality. I realize that it was unexpected and not necessarily the best timing, considering the harvest." He nodded to Bahrtok formally then walked out of the nutrichamber past Vin-Chay, as though the younger man didn't even exist. He left the three adults standing very still, wondering what his visit meant for each of them, and how they were going to get through the upcoming meal together.

Pyke mounted the stairs to the small, isolated craftport apartment. He remembered the security sequence on the door from the few times that he and Coba had stayed there when visiting her parents. He pressed the indents and pushed open the door, and surveyed the large, spacious chamber. It was exactly as it had been all those years ago. Bahrtok and Colyn had changed nothing. Nothing. It was a chamber stopped in time. He dropped his garment bag on the bed. There was no dust or disarray anywhere. Colyn obviously kept it clean and ready. Perhaps for the child if he grew and needed such a chamber of his own.

A few moments later he heard a knock on the door and Bahrtok entered, carrying bed coverings, which he placed on the bed. He faced Pyke.

"Why are you here?" he asked directly.

"Can't it be for the reason I've already given you?" Pyke replied evenly.

"No, it can't. I know you too well, and better than I ever wanted to over the last few months of revelations to think that anything you do could be as uncalculated as a simple visit because you were in the area. Which one have you come for? Or is it both?" There. It was out in the open.

Pyke knew what the old man was talking about, of course, but wasn't about to give him a direct answer. Bahrtok's tone irritated him. In general, Bahrtok irritated him. *Nothing changes.*

"Perhaps both. Perhaps neither. My plans are flexible at this point in time, and I haven't made any decisions. Why? Have you become unduly attached to my Osiran slave? I must admit he does have a way of insinuating himself into a person's life—"

Bahrtok cut him off angrily. "I know about the things you've done to him! I know about your sick plan for revenge against Chay Shayne. I know about your brutality. I know—"

"You know *nothing!*" Pyke interrupted hotly. "I have no doubt that he has honestly recounted the basic *facts* surrounding our unusual relationship, but you haven't the faintest clue about my thoughts or motives or plans. As usual you're making a one-sided judgment of me as you've done ever since your daughter brought me home. As far as Vin-Chay goes, you don't have a clue, and I won't allow myself to be judged by you any longer. That ends now. Now, as far as the child goes—"

"He has a name," Bahrtok snapped coldly.

Pyke took a deep breath. "As far as *Cobahr* goes, I have made no decisions regarding him, but when I do I'll inform you as I see fit!" *Damn.* He hadn't wanted to start this visit off on a hostile basis, but Bahrtok had provoked him, and he had reacted. *Bahrtok and Vin-Chay have a great deal in common,* he thought ruefully.

The two men stared antagonistically at each other for several long minutes until Bahrtok swung around to leave. Pyke's next icy words stopped him cold.

"Send the slave to me after mealtime. Expect him to spend the night and not join you at dawn for your crop work." He deliberately paused. "He will be too tired."

Bahrtok turned around slowly to face his son-in-law again. "You will not abuse that man in this household. Is that understood? This is *my* home, and I will not permit it." He spat out each word slowly and with enough contempt to ensure that Pyke knew exactly how he felt about him at this moment.

"Very well," Pyke replied easily. "I appreciate that you set the rules in your household and I will abide by them. Please tell him to get his things together now

and we will both be out of your household within the hour. I'll wait for him in the craft."

They stared at one another bitterly, each hating the other at that moment in time more than he could ever have believed. For both, it was a long-simmering eruption of emotions that had built up over the years. One of them was going to have to back down, and Pyke knew it couldn't be him this time.

"I will send him to you tonight," Bahrtok finally said in a resigned tone. To Pyke's credit, he showed neither pleasure nor a sense of victory over the other man, and simply gave a curt nod. Bahrtok left the chamber, and Pyke busied himself unpacking and readying the bed that he planned to use in good measure that night. He lay down on the covers and counted the time until he would have to face what would surely be an unpleasant repast.

Bahrtok returned to the nutrichamber where he found his wife engaged in meal preparations. She was alone. He kissed her cheek and put his arm around her, more for his own comfort than hers.

"Where are Vin-Chay and Cobahr?"

"Vin-Chay's getting him washed for the meal. I think he's trying to take his mind off our unexpected guest." She turned around and faced him. "What does he want?" she asked anxiously.

Bahrtok shook his head. "I'm not sure. I came right out and asked and got no real answer." He hesitated. "He did tell me to send Vin-Chay to him tonight, or he would simply leave and take our young friend with him. As bad as it may seem, at least Vin-Chay will still be here if I oblige him instead of somewhere away where we have absolutely no control over what's going on."

Colyn remained silent and simply hugged her husband tightly before turning back to her work. Bahrtok went off to find Vin-Chay, who was just finishing up getting Cobahr changed into clean clothes for the meal. He saw the look on Bahrtok's face and quickly shooed the child out of his chamber to go and play until he could join him. Cobahr scampered past his grandfather, who closed the noxchamber door after him. He came right to the point.

"He wants you to go to him tonight. I tried to reason with him, but he made it clear he would have just taken you away from the house if I refused. I was afraid of what would happen if he did that. I'm sorry."

"Don't be," Vin-Chay smiled gently at his friend. "What is he going to do to me that he hasn't done many times before? It's nothing I can't endure. Don't even think about it, please. It isn't worth the grief that you're going through. We'll just get it over with, and hope he leaves soon and alone. Everything will be all right. I promise."

Bahrtok had no good reply and nodded in a distracted manner before leaving Vin-Chay alone. The young Osiran went into the hearthchamber and occupied himself with Cobahr until Colyn called them in to eat. Pyke was already there and seated at the table opposite a stiff Bahrtok. The table was really made only for four people, so Vin-Chay took a seat opposite Colyn and pulled Cobahr onto his lap. They all began to eat in silence, and the meal was badly strained. Even the little boy felt the difference in mood and was uncharacteristically quiet. Vin-Chay missed the curious look Pyke gave him as the commander watched his slave carefully cut the child's meat into small, safe pieces. Cobahr patiently and slowly selected each one from the plate and chewed carefully as his Osiran companion listlessly picked at his own meal.

When they finished eating, Vin-Chay looked at Bahrtok and excused himself to read Cobahr a story before putting him to bed. Bahrtok nodded and Vin-Chay left the nutrichamber. He wondered later if he should have asked Pyke's permission to leave, since the commander was his true owner and had sway over all he did. Perhaps he wouldn't even want Vin-Chay to have such a close relationship with his son. Not that he treated him as a son, or as anything at all. He hadn't even looked at the child during the meal. His unfathomable attitude and actions were appalling.

Pyke excused himself right after Vin-Chay left and retired to his noxchamber to wait. Less than an hour later he heard a knock and said, "Come."

Vin-Chay opened the door and then closed it behind him. He waited for his Ptolemii master to make the next move. They hadn't been alone in such a closed, intimate place since the night of the beating. Vin-Chay's heart throbbed faster.

Pyke turned an appraising look on the younger man. "You're looking very well. It seems that backbreaking, hard agriplex work agrees with you. If I had known that it would keep you out of trouble for so long, I would have considered sending you here much sooner. Of course, that would have also meant a much longer period of celibacy for me, and these last four months have been quite enough. *Quite* enough." He left nothing to Vin-Chay's imagination with that last jab, and waited to see what results it would produce. God, he missed their sparring. He didn't have long to wait.

"You could have always gone to your favorite whorehouse for satisfaction, Commander. I'm sure you're well-known there," Vin-Chay shot back before thinking that he should have been a little more circumspect given their recent history and Pyke's current intentions. *Ah, well, what does it matter? Pyke will do whatever he wants with me.* Vin-Chay couldn't even begin to figure out at this point what would set him off and what wouldn't. He was beginning to think he

was clueless as far as Pyke went. And that made him powerless. His ire was raised when Pyke smiled instead of hitting him. It was an infuriating smile and Vin-Chay felt all caution slipping away from him.

"True," Pyke nodded, "but as accommodating as the employees are there I still don't have the complete control and discretion that I would have in bed with my favorite chattel. Wouldn't you agree?" He raised an eyebrow and waited for the answer he knew wouldn't come. His heartbeat increased and the urge to touch the man across from him was almost unbearable. Was it possible that there was just the slightest bit of jealousy in Vin-Chay's tone?

The fire in Vin-Chay's eyes told Pyke that he had scored well, and he decided to continue his offensive before his opponent could regroup. He decided to go with a completely different subject to disconcert the arrogant Osiran.

"Take off your tunic. I want to see your back."

Vin-Chay didn't obey Pyke right away, and somehow this surprised Pyke. He knew that the back would be scarred, but Vin-Chay hadn't really seemed to care much about his previous scars, and Pyke had assumed that he would treat these as much the same. He patiently waited a few minutes as Vin-Chay stayed very still, then repeated his order slowly and carefully. "Take off your tunic."

"Commander," Vin-Chay began, then stopped, and slowly unbelted the rough-hewn tunic and pulled it over his head, tossing it carelessly on the bed. He was wearing a close-fitting, sleeveless undertunic, which he pulled off as well. He hesitated, then passed his hand absently across his mouth and turned slowly around.

Pyke felt as though he had been punched in the stomach. He suppressed a stunned gasp as he stared at the scars that were far worse than he could ever have imagined. All of the lacerations were long healed by this time, but other than seal the deep cuts, the physicians had done nothing to minimize the scarring of any of the wounds. Vin-Chay's back was a mass of criss-crossed long scars that covered nearly every centimeter of skin. There was so little skin that wasn't damaged from below his neckline down to the small of his back. The scars ranged from light red ones to raised, thick ridges of dead white skin. Pyke felt sick. He had done this, and no matter what reconstructive surgery he would be able to have done, he could never undo the pain he had caused while inflicting the wounds, or the pain that Vin-Chay must have felt every time he was forced to see them in a mirror. He wondered if Bahrtok or Colyn had seen these scars. If so, it would go a long way in explaining the intense anger that his father-in-law had shown towards him in their confrontation.

He stared at the unmoving man's back for a long time before saying, "Put your undertunic back on." Vin-Chay retrieved the undertunic casually from the bed and slipped it on as he turned to face Pyke and wait for the next cold word or command. He was starting to feel dispirited, starting to feel as though he were slipping away again. He couldn't let that happen. He wouldn't let that happen. He suddenly felt stronger, and his dispirit faded away as he faced Pyke, now unafraid.

Pyke wanted to tell him how sorry he was, how he regretted his actions, how he wanted to help him heal. He wanted to tell him about his anger, and why he had acted that way when he could have in truth acted less brutally, that he was feeling betrayed and wanted to punish Vin-Chay and yet protect him as well. He wanted to tell his captive consort that he was sorry for his lack of character in choosing a path of savagery, that he had thought about him every day. He wanted to tell him how he really felt about him. Instead, he said abruptly, "Prepare my bath." He turned away from Vin-Chay to disrobe, as his Osiran slave wordlessly entered the small sanichamber and began to fill the one-person tub with warm water.

When he heard the water stop, Pyke entered the sanichamber naked and moved past Vin-Chay to slip into the tub. He had a flash of memory of Coba in this tub, laughing as he lathered and shaved her long, slender legs. Her laughter was like music. He couldn't remember a time when he had heard Vin-Chay laugh. He hadn't given him any reason to. Vin-Chay knelt beside the tub and kept his eyes averted from Pyke's as he lathered a washcloth and began mechanically moving it over Pyke's neck and chest and arms then down along his legs. He avoided the one area he didn't want to arouse any sooner than necessary, but his hand was literally forced when Pyke pushed it downwards between his legs. Vin-Chay complied with the unspoken command. He could feel Pyke's arousal, and his stomach tightened at the thought of what would come all too soon. He felt almost as though he was chaste once again, and this would be his first time. *That's crazy*, he thought. *I could probably teach some tricks to Pyke's whores at this point.*

As Vin-Chay mused about his talents, Pyke pushed his hand away and turned his head to face the kneeling slave. "My back," he snapped as he leaned forward and Vin-Chay moved the soapy cloth in the circular patterns that Pyke enjoyed across the Ptolemii's undamaged, colorfully-patterned back. He had a fleeting sense of loss for his own smooth skin but shook that pointless thought away and completed the cleansing of his master until Pyke told him to stop and stood up in the tub. Vin-Chay was still kneeling and reached over to get a towel, which Pyke snatched from his hands as he stepped away from the tub to dry himself in

another section of the small sanichamber. Vin-Chay was perplexed, but was about to let the water drain when Pyke stopped him and told him to bathe in the water first, then dry himself and come into the noxchamber. Pyke left the sanichamber and a confused, edgy slave who shrugged and dropped the rest of his clothes on a dry spot of the floor and took a quick bath in Pyke's water before drying himself off with the used, damp towel.

Pyke was waiting for him in bed, the covering draped to his waist as he sat up against the headboard and watched his clean, naked slave enter the chamber.

"Turn the light down, but leave it on," he said. Vin-Chay did as he was told, then waited. "Get into bed," Pyke said. Vin-Chay moved back the bed covers and got into bed next to Pyke, leaning casually on one elbow as he waited for the next capricious order. At this point, he was no longer intimidated or fearful, but curious. He wasn't sure what he had expected, but this wasn't it.

Pyke turned away from him and lay on his back, his hands behind his head, fingers laced together. He seemed to be contemplating the vaulted ceiling intensely, ignoring his bed companion. After a while Vin-Chay relaxed and lay on his own back, centimeters from the warm body of the Ptolemii. He waited.

"You seem to have a close relationship with the child," Pyke said suddenly.

"Your son, you mean?" Vin-Chay chastised evenly.

"Yes. My *son*. The child of the woman your father murdered," he ended brutally, knowing without seeing the look on the Osiran's face that he had scored a significant hit when he heard the sharp intake of breath. *Good. That will keep him off balance.*

"Yes," Vin-Chay finally replied. "We get along well. He's a very sweet, nice boy. I enjoy his company."

"You care for him?"

Vin-Chay hesitated. "Yes."

"Even though he's the child of the man who's enslaved and abused you repeatedly over the last year?" Pyke asked harshly. He wanted to know. He needed to know.

"Cobahr has nothing to do with that! He is an innocent. There's no way I would ever hold him to account for your actions, or anyone else's."

"I see. And apparently you hold nothing against Bahrtok and his wife for their relationship to me, either."

"Of course not. And—"

"And what?"

"And they don't hold their daughter's death against me, either. They're not irrationally inclined towards that mindset."

"Unlike me?"

"I didn't say that. You did."

"But you wouldn't disagree?"

"No!"

Pyke turned on his side to face the man next to him. His sudden action caused Vin-Chay to do the same. They stared at one another intently, each waiting for the other to make the next move. Pyke made a decision, and unexpectedly pushed back the bed covers and got off the bed. Vin-Chay followed his instincts and did the same, and the two men faced each other a meter apart at the foot of the bed in the dimmed light. *All right*, Pyke thought. *Caution be damned. I need to know the truth now, or I may make the worst mistake of my life instead of the best move.* His lips parted slightly, and he ran his tongue absently along his teeth before speaking.

"I need the truth from you," he said.

"What truth?" Vin-Chay asked suspiciously. Pyke's whole demeanor had changed, and he stood across from his slave with an air of cautious anticipation and, strangely, uncertainty. He had never seen Pyke uncertain before.

"Before I ask, and before you answer, I want you to give me your word of honor that you will answer truthfully and completely, no matter what the answer, no matter what the consequences for either of us. I want your word on that. Do I have it?"

Vin-Chay contemplated Pyke's strange request for a moment before answering. "Yes. You have my word."

"Your word of honor on your father's honor."

"My word of honor on my father's honor. I will not betray *that*," he ended firmly.

"No," Pyke said softly, "I don't believe you would. All right, this is what I want to know. The night of the candles. Was any of it real, or was it all a lie to seduce me into some false sense of security just so that you could make your escape, and leave me humiliated and shamed?"

Vin-Chay covered his mouth with his hand, and rubbed it against his face and chin nervously. He *would* have to ask that. God, he wanted to lie to Pyke, to hurt him just to get back at him and make him feel some of his own pain. He could justify to himself the breaking of his word in this instance. Or could he? Then who would he be? Not the son of his honorable father. He should never have given his word. He had to answer Pyke honestly, even though he dreaded whatever consequences the answer might bring, the least of which would be to undermine much of his minimal power in their household. *Damn Pyke.*

"It was real," he said finally and quietly, feeling the heat rise to his cheeks as he surrendered some of his edge to the Ptolemii commander. *Damn fool*, he thought. *I should have lied. I should have lied.*

"If we had the candles here tonight, and the same noxchamber, and the same annise—undrugged, of course—would it still be real?" Pyke asked softly, his stomach turning in knots as he awaited the second answer, which took a long time in coming.

"Yes," Vin-Chay answered almost inaudibly. *Damn Pyke. Why couldn't he have just sent me to the mines?*

"Then you have feelings for me other than hate?"

"I don't hate you," Vin-Chay said in a strange, unfathomable tone as he dropped his eyes away from Pyke to the floor. *Fool.*

He felt Pyke move closer to him, and the Ptolemii gently put his hand under Vin-Chay's chin and brought his face up to look intently into his eyes for moments that seemed like an hour. He seemed to be searching Vin-Chay's face for any duplicity in his answers, but could find none. The Osiran was telling him a painful truth—painful to Vin-Chay, who had previously prided himself on his contempt for his Ptolemii master only to see it change over time against his will and better judgment. Pyke understood that problem very well. He parted his lips and let his hand drop. It was time to be honest himself.

"I love you," Pyke said in the same almost inaudible but firm tone.

"Wh—what?" Vin-Chay faltered. He couldn't have heard that declaration correctly. It wasn't possible.

"I love you," Pyke repeated, carefully enunciating each word. "And if I have to be even more honest, I wish to God I didn't, for this only complicates my life immeasurably, if you think that *you* have a problem with it." He half-smiled.

"How how long have you felt this way?" Vin-Chay asked as he tried to clear his head.

"A long time, although it was probably only a few months ago that I finally admitted it to myself. I had planned to admit it to you that night, but the passion took over and the moment was lost, and then—you were gone. It took the past four months to garner the courage to admit to myself that I still felt the same way and had to do something about it, even if it meant losing you permanently."

"Would you have told me if I had said that night was a lie?"

"No, I wouldn't. I would have kept my feelings to myself, and taken some other course to deal with you. I don't mean punish you or harm you, but probably just left you here as you are. Even though I wanted you back." He reached up and caressed Vin-Chay's cheek lightly, brushing the long hair that fell against his

cheek away and back over his shoulder. "Listen to me. This does not obligate you to return my feelings or even try to. It's just that we have to figure out where we go from here. I don't want to go back to the exact situation we had four months ago. It was too stressful for both of us, and nothing can be gained by moving backward instead of forward." He dropped his hand from the other man's face and moved away from him as he tried to gather his thoughts. He faced Vin-Chay with determination.

"I think we can coexist together more peacefully if we each try to respect the other more, and have a little more understanding on a consistent basis rather than in bursts of honesty that usually follow painful confrontations. I'm willing to try. I swear to you now, on my word of honor, that I will never, *never* strike you again in any way no matter what. I will do everything I can to treat you as an equal partner in my life, and make your life on this world as tenable as possible."

"Will you emancipate me?" Vin-Chay asked harshly.

"No," Pyke said flatly, having expected this subject eventually, but not quite as quickly as it came. "No, because a freed Osiran slave on this planet is far worse off than a captive one. You would have few rights and absolutely no protection from the many factions that would seek to subjugate you. I can protect you as best as anyone can, and I will, even if that means continuing to hold you in bondage. That subject is closed. It has to be."

"I see," Vin-Chay said reflectively. "Then are you saying that you will consider me a true life partner in every way, and in your eyes I will only be a 'slave' legally for expediency's sake?"

"Yes. I know that's not what you want, but remember that we are *both* bound by the restrictions of this world and government. I cannot change them and you cannot change them. We can get around them in our private lives, but right now that's the best that I can do."

"If I wanted to stay here and work for Bahrtok, would you allow that?"

Pyke stared hard. Was this a rhetorical question, or was this what he wanted? "Yes."

"Then I would like to stay for a couple more months before coming home to get the harvest in and make sure all the work he needs is done. I'd also like to come back when he needs help and provide that. Is that acceptable?"

"More than acceptable." Pyke blew out the breath he had been holding. "Then I take it you want to come back with me to Thebes? That you feel you can live with me again even after that night?"

Vin-Chay paced away from him, and now it was his turn to formulate his scattered thoughts. He drew his brows together as he tried to explain.

"I understand that under the circumstances you had no choice but to punish me. You also had to punish Tarqua in some way for his part in it, and you had to cover yourself if you weren't going to turn me in to the authorities for my transgression. You broke the law for me and put yourself at risk. It took me a while to figure out all these things, but when I did, it alleviated some of the anger and bitterness. I knew the rules, and I broke them, and I had to suffer the consequences. I also knew that I had done a cold and dishonorable thing by that whole seduction scene which, although it was true in the desire and feelings behind it, was used to distract you so that I could go through with my plan. I wasn't very proud of myself afterwards, especially after you gave me the holograph. I regret the pain and any personal humiliation I may have caused you. If it matters to you, that was one of the few times in my life that I felt true shame."

"But you didn't hurt me, when you could have."

Vin-Chay shook his head sadly. "I didn't want to hurt you, Commander. I just wanted to get away. I just wanted to be free."

"Anyone else under those circumstances would probably have cut my throat." Pyke's incisive words actually made Vin-Chay smile.

"Maybe. But not me. And then, even when you realized how I had used you that night, you still got me medical aid and then sent me here to this place, where I had special, humane people to help take care of me and help me heal. I think you knew that they would. I think you did it so that I could heal, in more ways than one."

"Have you?" Pyke asked carefully.

"Oh, yes. I have come out of the darkness. I am not the same person who first came here. I am well now. I can face anything."

"Even a return to Thebes?"

"Under the conditions you have stated? Yes. I can face that."

"Good," came the obviously relieved reply. "Then stay another two months and return when you feel you're ready. I'll let you discuss this with Bahrtok tomorrow since neither of us is disposed towards conversing with the other at this particular time."

"Can you tell me more about your strained relationship? There are so many things I don't understand," Vin-Chay asked curiously.

"I can, and I will. But not tonight. I'm exhausted from the past four months and I need some time to relax. Let's talk tomorrow, and I'll tell you everything I can. Come." Pyke pulled Vin-Chay back to the bed, and they lay down next to one another. Vin-Chay expected Pyke to initiate some of their normal sex, but he didn't. He seemed to just want close body contact, and wrapped himself around

his consort. Vin-Chay's own body relaxed at the familiar touch. He had once dreaded the possibility of having this close contact with Pyke again, but right now it seemed perfectly natural and satisfying. Odd. He should have felt guilty but he didn't. He drifted off with his head resting against Pyke's chest, which rose and fell with even breathing that lulled Vin-Chay to sleep.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Colyn was as exhausted as her husband, and she moved slower than usual while fixing his morning meal. The sky was still dark and the temperature quite cold outside in the pre-dawn hours, but Bahrtok had arisen as usual to attend to sector ten, the only evidence of his sleepless night the dark circles under his eyes and the tightness about his mouth. He couldn't sleep any more than she could as they both lay awake worrying about Vin-Chay and what Pyke may have been doing with his unfortunate 'property' during the long hours since their unwelcome son-in-law had retired from the evening meal to await his young slave. Bahrtok had started to go to the craftport chamber several times, but had either reluctantly stopped himself or had been stopped by his equally nervous wife; neither of them wanted to chance losing the Osiran to an angry whim by their unpredictable relative.

She looked up as Bahrtok entered the nutrichamber, fully dressed and ready to eat a quick meal before he would go alone to the last harvest sector. He was dressed warmly, she noticed with satisfaction. She knew the layers of clothing would come off as the day encroached and the sun heated the air to its typical late-summer temperature. She felt a pang of regret seeing him there at the table alone. They were now both too used to having their housemate present at their table, in the sectors, and in their lives. Both wondered silently how long his residence would last, and if it would even last past today.

Colyn smiled gently at her husband and kissed the top of his head as she placed a plate of food in front of him. As she left to get her own food he grasped her hand and pulled her back. She pulled his head against her waist and hugged him tightly as he encircled her with his strong arms. Neither had to say anything; they had been together long enough to never need words. Bahrtok finally let go of her and she moved off slowly just as Vin-Chay entered the nutrichamber from the craftport, a hesitant, shy look on his face. Bahrtok looked at him in surprise and relief; he seemed to be physically unharmed, at least from his face. Vin-Chay went over to Colyn, kissed her lightly on the cheek, and filled two plates of food for them before seating himself at the table opposite Bahrtok.

"You are well?" Bahrtok asked cautiously, eyeing the young man, who nodded in response as he took a hearty bite of his meal.

"I'm all right. He's still sleeping and there's no point in my lying around watching him sleep while there's work that needs to be done," Vin-Chay answered. "I just need to change. It'll only take me a few minutes," he finished as he swallowed the last of his meal and washed it down with the fresh citrine juice that Colyn had placed in front of him. He rose and took the plate to the sink and hurried out of the nutrichamber towards his noxchamber as Pyke's in-laws watched him with relief in their eyes and hearts.

"He looks unharmed," Colyn said hopefully, reaching over to put her hand on Bahrtok's. He nodded slowly.

"Perhaps. But it's also likely that any harm Pyke has done can't be seen on his face. Even if it's not physical harm, it could still have been done. I don't like prying, but I'm going to query him when we start working. I need to know exactly what we're up against, not only for his sake but for Cobahr's and ours as well. This is not just a casual visit, I assure you." Bahrtok dropped his eyes to his plate and dawdled over his meal while waiting for Vin-Chay to return. His workmate did so in less than five minutes, and the two of them left the house for sector ten.

The two men worked for nearly four hours on the roots of the citrine trees. The sun rose and the temperature heated up significantly, and both men discarded two layers of clothing during their work. Bahrtok dropped down under a large, old tree as his heavy breathing told him that they needed a break. Vin-Chay joined him and broke open the light snack that Colyn always prepared for them before they left the house, just so they wouldn't get too hungry before they came home for the mid-day meal.

"So, my friend," Bahrtok said as casually as possible while pulling off his work gloves, "has he given you any hint as to why he's here or what he really wants? I don't like to ask, but it seems that whatever there is between the two of you has an impact on all five of us to some degree."

Vin-Chay shook his head as he bit off a piece of bread. "No need to explain. You have every right to know. I'm just not sure what to tell you, because what happened last night is still baffling to me, and I was there."

"Did he hurt you in some way?" Bahrtok asked hesitantly, not sure if he really wanted to know.

"He didn't hurt me. I assumed he would. It was starting to look like one of our typical I'm-going-to-show-you-who's-the-master nights, but then it changed. Actually, it went off in a totally unexpected direction that I'm still trying to figure out this morning."

"What do you mean?" Bahrtok asked, now curious rather than hesitant.

Vin-Chay had a strange, distant look on his face as he struggled with how to explain last night to Bahrtok. It had confused him and disconcerted him not only because of what Pyke had done and said, but also because of his own conflicting feelings. He wasn't sure he could explain it to himself, let alone another person who had his own reasons for disliking the commander.

"He wanted to know about that night—the night before I ran off. He called it 'the night of the candles.' Strange. That seems so appropriate. I guess from now on I'll always think of it that way. He wanted to know if it was 'real' or just a ploy to throw him off guard and make my escape."

"What did you tell him?"

"The truth." Vin-Chay smiled regretfully. "He made me swear to tell him the truth, no matter what, on my father's honor. Pyke knows all the right ways to manipulate me. So I told him the truth. That it was real. And then he did something completely unexpected. Something I would have bet against as sure as I am about anything in my life. Not that I'm sure about most things these days, especially when it comes to your son-in-law."

"What did he do?" Bahrtok asked anxiously. At this point, with all of the recent history between these two men, he wasn't about to second-guess anything.

"He told me he loved me," Vin-Chay answered quietly.

"What?" Bahrtok exclaimed in total disbelief. It was the absolute last thing on the planet that he would have expected.

Vin-Chay nodded, somewhat in disbelief himself. "He told me he loved me, and had for a long time. He also said that he wouldn't have told me if I had answered differently about that night—that he would have kept it to himself."

"Do you believe him?"

"Yes," Vin-Chay said, knowing for the first time that he really did. "Before that he asked me in a roundabout way what my feelings were."

"And you said?"

"That I didn't hate him. That's really all I can say to him at this point."

"How can you *not* hate him after all of the things that have gone on in the past year?!" There was no mistaking the shock in Bahrtok's voice. "He has used you as an instrument of revenge. He has enslaved you. He has *beaten* you. He nearly killed you this last time! You should hate him with every fiber of your being. I don't understand at all." Bahrtok stood up quickly and blew out a deep breath as he stared down at Vin-Chay, who remained motionless on the ground. Bahrtok paced over to a nearby tree and leaned back against it, folding his arms and look-

ing as though he wanted to continue but couldn't find the words. Instead he just shook his head in bewilderment, leaving it up to Vin-Chay to continue.

"Bahrtok," Vin-Chay said gently. "All you say is true. But we both know that there's another side to this story. I've told you about the many kindnesses and instances of basic decency. And I've told you about my part in instigating many of his responses. If I wanted to, I could probably justify all of my actions based on the assumption that someone in my position can and should do anything to subvert his captor. But I can't justify everything I've done. And I know that some things that he's done have been unavoidable consequences of my actions. I need to take responsibility for that, and I do. Now. I didn't four months ago. Maybe I've just grown up. Maybe I've just had some of the arrogance and pride knocked out of me, and perhaps that's a good thing. I'm not excusing all of his actions, or even trying to explain some of them, but I can't put all the blame on his head for all the things that have gone between us in this past year. It isn't fair to him, and it isn't fair to me if I want to be true to myself and honor who I really am."

Vin-Chay fell silent after that and Bahrtok stared hard at him for a very long time as he tried to absorb what the young slave had just said. It took him a while to forcibly get past his own dislike for Pyke and see the man from this man's unusual position and viewpoint. *My God*, he thought finally. *This man has strength of character and integrity and will that I've never come across before and don't think I ever will again. I wonder if Pyke has any idea of what he possesses and how he should treat it. I wish, I wish this man were my son.* He squatted down near Vin-Chay and looked him directly in the eyes.

"And where do the two of you go from here, and how does my family fit into his plans?" Bahrtok asked directly.

"He wants me to return to Thebes after the harvest is finished in about two months. I guess we'll have to find some way to coexist peacefully, because he's refused to emancipate me. He made it clear that there would be no further discussion on that. He's also agreed to let me come back here and help you with the work whenever you need it." Vin-Chay hesitated. "He never mentioned any plans for Cobahr. I'm not sure how to broach the subject, or even if I should. I don't want to say something inadvertently that would cause him to take your grandchild away. I just don't understand what's going on inside his head about his only child, especially since I come from a large family where children and siblings are cherished and desired. He promised to talk to me about your whole relationship from his viewpoint today."

Bahrtok grunted derisively. "There's a tenuous relationship at best. He knows I was never happy about the marriage, and his obstinacy about bringing Cobahr

to term has left a permanent rift between us. I always felt that someday, for some reason, he would take the boy, despite his apparent lack of interest. It was less of a fear when he was offworld in battle, or elsewhere, but now that he's come back to Ptolem and settled into a life here, I don't know what he thinks about his latent parental inclinations. If they exist. I have my doubts on that."

"I'm sure you do," Pyke said coolly as he walked up to them, surprising both men. They had been so engrossed in their heated conversation that they had failed to hear or see the Ptolemii commander approach them from the direction of the house.

Bahrtok's jaw tightened at the unwelcome intrusion. He stood. Vin-Chay tensed mildly as he rose from the ground to face his capricious owner. Pyke's face was neutral. Within seconds the easy atmosphere in the grove had changed to one of thick tension. Only a matter of seconds passed before Vin-Chay felt that he was the odd man out as Pyke and Bahrtok faced each other defiantly. Bahrtok's voice was glacial as he finally opened up his true feelings to his son-in-law.

"You've more than earned my enmity, Pyke, for the way you treated my daughter and grandson. I won't even get into the way you've treated this man here, which makes your earlier actions pale in comparison. Let's be honest. I tolerate you because of Cobahr, but for no other reason. If it were not for him I wouldn't accept a single chit from you, let alone your unsolicited help in the government contracts. I can only hope you have enough remnants of humanity left to not take him away from a decent home and thrust him into your world of oppression and intolerance." The final words he spat out cut into Pyke's soul but the Ptolemii commander showed no trace of reaction on his face or in his words of response.

"I loved your daughter, Bahrtok," Pyke said slowly and carefully, "and I treated her with all the respect and care I could. You made me feel for years that I wasn't good enough for her. And for years you made me believe that I had contributed to her death because I didn't accompany her to Telluron, or because I let her go in the first place. And I let you make me feel that way for too long out of my own sense of guilt and impotence at being unable to save her. But I know that I did not cause her death, nor could I have prevented it. Any guilt that you made every effort to impose on me for my 'failures' ends now." He nodded towards Vin-Chay. "And I know that this man can be held in no way responsible for any aspect of this tragedy despite the part his father played in her death." He turned to look directly at Vin-Chay, licking his lips slightly as difficult words followed.

"I lied to you. Not intentionally, but because I was lying to myself and wanted to believe what I was saying was true. I told you that initiating our relationship

back on Canaan had nothing to do with any attempt to gain revenge against your father. That wasn't true, not in the beginning. I acknowledge now that that was part of it. I did plan on taking you as my revenge against Chay Shayne. There was no way I could get at him, but I could get at you. And I did. I had the power to make you pay for your father's actions. It was an ignoble act, and I convinced myself that there were only other reasons for taking you first as my reluctant consort and then as my unwilling slave. Those reasons were true, and became truer as time passed, and then they became the only reasons. But I know now that there was that despicable first motive that started this whole thing. And I have nothing but shame for that for myself, and a heartfelt apology to you. I'm sorry."

Pyke immediately turned back to Bahrtok so that he wouldn't have the chance to see any reaction on Vin-Chay's face or elicit any response that he might not want to hear. "I will not apologize to you for anything having to do with my marriage or my feelings for your daughter. It was a true, loving marriage, and I acted with respect and honor for my wife every second of every day while she lived and after she died. I will not try to make you understand my reluctance regarding Cobahr, but I will admit that you were right and I was wrong in resisting his birth. I should never have resisted, and although he has grown and thrived under your care, I should never have abandoned my responsibilities to accept him as my son. I should have done my best to raise him myself." He noted the alarmed look on Bahrtok's face and made a dismissive gesture with his hand as he frowned at the older man. "No, don't worry. I'm not going to assert my legal rights and take him from your house. He's yours to raise for as long as you see fit, and I will absent myself from your lives so that he won't be confused or hurt. I have that much *humanity* left."

He turned back to Vin-Chay. "I'll be leaving soon but would like to spend some time with you. So, if you can be spared from your work for an hour or two, I'd like you to walk with me so that we can talk some things out." Pyke raised his eyebrows in an unspoken query at Bahrtok, who nodded tersely and stooped to gather his discarded garments before he headed off to the house. His thoughts were jumbled and confused as he tried to make sense of what he was feeling and thinking about the man who had just bared his soul to a scornful father-in-law and an enemy slave.

Pyke watched Bahrtok walk off, then he turned back to a waiting Vin-Chay and motioned towards the crop. The two men started walking slowly through the citrine grove as the sun rose higher and hotter in the clear blue sky. Vin-Chay squinted, pulled his kufiyyeh from his belt, and fastened it on his head, hiding

most of his forehead and hair. Pyke looked at his companion appraisingly, then grinned widely.

"Don't take this as an insult, Vin-Chay, but you look very much like any common agriman working a 'plex in these parts."

"I take that as a compliment, sir," Vin-Chay replied to Pyke's pleased surprise. "This is honest, decent work, and I have genuinely enjoyed my labors here. It's been good for my body, mind, and soul. I'd like to think that might have been what you had in mind by sending me here. Other than to get me out of harm's way while you were still enraged at my actions."

"You're very perceptive, princeling. That may have had something to do with my decision." He gave an amused grunt as a thought came to mind. "I wonder what your family would think of your tenure here?" he mused.

"Most of them would be horrified," Vin-Chay confessed readily. "Especially my older brother, Dom-Chay. He has an exceptionally high opinion of our family and its royal traditions, and spending time on one's hands and knees injecting nutrients into citrine roots would seem to be just about as low as you could get. Other than doing that and being a slave at the same time," he finished archly.

"A rather cunning and inventive slave, I would say. By the way—how *did* you get into my correlator to patch together that phony message the morning you left? I change the password every day and we both know from past experience that I have a trigger that tells me when someone has tried unsuccessfully to break the security. And, of course, the omnipresent holocam."

Vin-Chay flashed a shy, rueful grin. "I wish I could tell you it was cleverness that did the trick, Commander, but it was more sheer luck than anything. A few days before ... the night of the candles, I entered your culturchamber. I saw you tapping a few security indents on your 'lator before you moved away from your desk. I knew by past experience that you change your password every day manually rather than verbally so I couldn't hear anything that might help me breach your security. I believe you were particularly displeased with me that day since you didn't say a word and brushed past me."

"You do bring out the worst in me," Pyke interjected.

Vin-Chay's smile widened. "I expect so. Anyway, I had just come in from the hot back enclosure and was still perspiring. As I stood there cursing your soul, I rubbed my damp hands across my tunic. I suddenly realized that virtually any tactile contact with an inanimate surface would leave some trace of cell sloughing. I retrieved your portable medi-corr from the sanichamber, and fumbled my way through programming a command to scan the security indents you'd have touched. I took the chance that you wouldn't view the holocam record of that

brief period of time. I told the scanner to locate and list the order of indents with the least decomposed cell sloughing on back for a hundred strokes.

"When I checked each indent that translated to a letter of your alphabet, I started to see words forming. A pattern emerged, and it was clear that you were using the names of Strategum board pieces as security codes, changing the code each day to move up one rank in board piece. I think ... I think that's when I decided to run. That day, before we ate and I ... seduced you, I broke in on the first try and used pieces of your history files to create a phony image of you to transmit to the Miliplex. It probably wouldn't have stood close scrutiny but it looked good enough to buy me some time. I guess it did. I made sure to keep you occupied and away from your correlator for the rest of the evening."

"Hmm," Pyke said, and then was silent as they continued walking. Vin-Chay pointed out several trees that his particular efforts had saved, and he provided the commander with a summary of the harvest progress in the other nine sectors. Pyke watched his face closely as he spoke, and both his expressions and words showed a genuinely enthusiastic young man who appreciated the way of life into which he had been thrust through a strange set of circumstances. It was also clear to Pyke that Vin-Chay held both Bahrtok and Colyn in very high esteem and affection. Pyke was silently grateful that he had made the right decision in sending Vin-Chay to this place when he did. It may have saved both of their lives. After an hour of walking and interesting but impersonal discussion, Pyke decided to broach a few more sensitive subjects.

"Vin-Chay," he began carefully, "we need to get back into a few things we started last night. I know we've decided the basics of your return to Thebes, but there are some things I need to make you understand."

"I'm listening, Commander." And Pyke could see that he was, closely.

"What I told you about my feelings are true. But you need to understand that although I do have strong feelings for you, that *cannot* eliminate my obligations as a Ptolemii and as a High Commander in the Pharon's military. Those obligations must come first. I cannot—will not—tolerate any attempts at escape. I cannot allow any behavior that could compromise my position or the security of my government or Pharon. Our respective worlds and cultures are still at odds. They are still enemies. In that sense, we are still enemies despite our feelings and our home life. That is an inescapable fact, and until our peoples' conflicts are resolved, that will always have a direct bearing on our relationship and what you can and can't do in our private lives and out in public."

"Meaning, behave myself or else."

"Meaning neither of us has free rein. We are both bound by certain rules and obligations that we cannot escape. Can you understand that and accept it?"

"I can accept much of what you're saying, Commander, and act accordingly, but as you have certain obligations, so have I. You are trying to be truthful, so I will be, too."

"Continue," Pyke said mildly.

"I am your legal slave here. We both know that. But we also both know that despite that abhorrent state of affairs, I am still an Osiran warrior and I always will be. I took a consecrated oath when I was invested to hold to my people's values and needs, and do my best to promote the victory of my birthworld. I cannot and will not abandon my duties to my people, my family and my world. You can't expect me to do that. If you did, then I can't imagine why you would respect or want me, given your own sense of honor. I will do my best to attend to your needs and rules, but there may come a time when I have no choice but to follow my own destiny and do something that is in direct conflict with your dictates. It may not be for months or even years, but it is likely that that time will come."

"So I take it," Pyke said casually, "that given half a chance, you will try to escape again?"

Vin-Chay hesitated. "Yes." He paused before elaborating. "If there is a reasonable chance of success."

"I see. Well, then, I *strongly* recommend that your next attempt be successful, because it's unlikely that I'll be able to cover up or mitigate a second failed attempt as I did the first. But until then I will take it on faith that you and I will both make every effort to coexist peacefully and honorably. Can I make that assumption?"

Vin-Chay looked slightly pained. "'Peacefully' is probably not a state of coexistence that will be the norm, Commander. I think we're both too headstrong and opinionated for that."

Pyke sighed. "Well, let's see what happens, anyway. I'm too tired to argue with you any more today. I had hoped for a couple of days of relative relaxation after four months of battling Ptolemii subversives, but it looks like my strife with Bahrtok is going to preclude that. I'm already packed and I'll leave when we get back to the house."

Vin-Chay frowned. "What battles? I mean, if you can tell me. If it's not confidential."

"It probably should be, since it's related to Interior Security, but it's not something you can do anything about, and it would be nice to have someone to talk to

about it, aside from TutMose, who is more than just a little harried right now.” Pyke grinned unexpectedly. “By the way, I have a surprise for you when you return to Thebes. I think it will be a very pleasant surprise, too.”

“I don’t suppose I’ll get any clues before I return, though. Right?”

“None. It would ruin the surprise.”

“So, what battles?” Vin-Chay persisted.

“We’ve had a number of incidents in the provinces from Ptolemii dissidents who are protesting the war and the various Pharonic and government edicts and taxes and restrictions. They’ve gotten rather violent, and rather organized. There’ve been incidents of sabotage, and a number of Ptolemii warriors have been killed or injured. A lot of government-related installations have also been hit. I was sent to the southern provinces to investigate and stop the incidents. I took TutMose and a phalanx of my best men and women with me and we went to Hartan first. That’s northeast of here by a hundred and fifty kilometers.”

“Did you stop them?”

“Not at first. As I said, they’re very organized. And dedicated. They’ve actually killed their own people rather than letting them fall into military hands and possibly betray the organization as a whole. That takes a lot of strength and ruthlessness, and those are very formidable odds to be up against. Anyway, we finally managed to locate a central link in Thebes by cross-referencing visa activity in which one suspect was engaged. Turns out his contact in InterAdmin was falsifying his travel documents. I had Tut check dates and times over and over again with me, and I finally found that the falsifications were off by several hours in historical draft states because of provincial time differences from central Thebes. The Theban contact was using the time equivalent in his location, and the suspect was using the one from his. There was a two-hour difference in several doc-corrs, and that led us to other minor inconsistencies that otherwise would have been very easy to overlook.

“Bottom line is that we found the traitor in Thebes and broke him, and he led us to the leaders in several dissident cells in all four southern provinces. They’ve been rounded up and taken to Thebes for interrogation and trial. The rest of their bands are minor characters in this play and we’ll root them out eventually, but right now the heads of the cults have been cut off and order is more or less restored. It’s a matter of cleanup for a few weeks, then the phalanx returns home.”

“What are cells?” Vin-Chay asked curiously. This Ptolemii word was new to him and he wondered if there was an Osiran equivalent.

"It's a compartmentalized group of people who act together but independently from others of a similar ilk. It's a chain of these groups that act alone yet ultimately together to accomplish some kind of activity, in this case internal seditious activity. I'll give you more insight some other time."

"Sounds complicated." *Complicated*, Vin-Chay thought, *but intriguing*. He had to think about this, and perhaps do some research on Bahrtok's rec-corr.

"It is. No more on this. I've had months of it and just want to get home. Any more questions before we go back to the house and I bid a fond farewell to my devoted in-laws?"

"Just curious. You said TutMose accompanied you. I would have rather thought that Sub-Commander Zandran would have been a more suitable, aggressive choice," Vin-Chay said with just the slightest tone of sarcasm in his words, directed not at Pyke but at his subordinate.

Pyke was silent for a moment, debating with himself whether he should tell Vin-Chay or not where his other sub-commander had been for the last few months. He sighed. He might as well, for the Osiran would find out sooner or later.

"Zandran was sent offworld towards Osiron to help evaluate the situation near the neutral zone." He could see the sudden alertness in Vin-Chay's eyes and decided to elaborate. "There've been a few skirmishes between our peoples, but no major battles. We—Ptolem—had been hoping that cutting off Osiron's berillium supply would hasten the end of the war in our favor, but it seems like your people may be developing an alternate fuel source that could preclude that. If they have, it apparently isn't good enough to fuel their major flagships, like the *Victorion*, because they haven't, so to speak, come out fighting and pushing past the neutral zone.

"And we haven't pushed forward, either, because at this point we're still recovering from our own losses and fighting these damnable internal battles, and we don't have a clear picture of our enemies' new or revised capabilities. It's still at a stalemate, but that can't last forever. I often wonder how much easier or harder it would have been if our ancestors had concentrated a little more on perfecting space travel instead of abandoning that branch of technological development in favor of building their planet-bound civilizations, both on Ptolem and on Osiron when the colonists landed. Well, at least that oversight has prevented us from completely destroying one another's worlds. I hope it never comes to that. There are indications from Osiron that they may want to try some kind of diplomatic reconciliation under the right conditions, but I'm not sure our government is inclined to do that. Right now we still have the upper hand in terms of resources,

fuel, and technology, and no one here is willing to undermine those odds unless it becomes necessary.”

“I see,” Vin-Chay answered reflectively as they started walking back to the house. He fell silent and Pyke hoped he was not overly distressed at the news of the war. Pyke wondered how long it would take to resolve this conflict and how it would end. He didn’t want defeat for either side, but with the Pharon and government currently in power, compromise seemed unlikely, and a lengthy continuation of this long-distance and sporadic war seemed inevitable. An unbidden thought then came to mind: the longer the war waged, the longer the opportunity to hold on to Vin-Chay. A victory by his people could wind up freeing him and taking him away. But a defeat could seal his fate as Pyke’s slave forever. Pyke shook away the evil thought, ashamed that it had ever entered his mind.

They reached the house and entered through the nutrichamber. Neither Colyn nor Bahrtok was in the chamber, but she had left hearty meals for both men on the table. Vin-Chay could hear their voices in the hearthchamber, along with a giggling Cobahr. Pyke could hear them, too, but chose to ignore them. Vin-Chay wanted to query Pyke on the little boy, but he decided this was not the best time, and he didn’t want to upset the delicate truce they seemed to have reached in the last day. He would wait until he was back in Thebes to bring up that subject.

The two men ate quietly, each engaged in his own thoughts and concerns. Vin-Chay accompanied Pyke up to the chamber above the craftport, where Pyke gathered his belongings for the trip back to Corso. Pyke looked around the chamber one last time, remembering Coba and the times they had spent there. When he turned back towards the door, he met Vin-Chay’s eyes. He sensed that the younger man knew what he was thinking about, and he was touched to see compassion on Vin-Chay’s face. He gave him a half-smile and ushered him out the door. They descended to the first-tier craftport, and Vin-Chay walked Pyke to his reccraft. He grinned as he ran his hand over the side of the old craft.

“Nice model. I would think a High Commander would have something a little better to whisk around in. If only to keep up appearances.”

“Borrowed. I wanted something unremarkable to travel in just in case any dangerous eyes were watching travel movement between here and Corso.”

“Are you in danger?” Vin-Chay asked, genuinely concerned, and surprised that he was genuinely concerned.

“Always,” Pyke answered lightly. “But not especially in this regard. Just taking precautions, and, besides, I like this model. It’s reliable.” He ran his own hand

over the side as he slid the door open and got in. He initiated the nav-corr, then looked at Vin-Chay once more before taking off.

"I'll see you back in Thebes in two months. You have the expense voucher I gave Bahrtok. Use that for tram reservations and any transport you need in Thebes to get home. Or, just call me at the Miliplex when you arrive and I'll come and get you. Two months, remember?"

"Two months," Vin-Chay nodded as Pyke raised the craft and took off towards Corso without another word. Vin-Chay watched him go until he was a dot in the distance, then turned back to the house. He saw Bahrtok standing at the door watching him curiously, intently, as though he were seeing things in a different light.

CHAPTER TWENTY

The neighborhood hasn't changed, Vin-Chay thought as he walked through the familiar Theban streets near Pyke's apartment. Same people, same vendors, same wall of sound. He hated to admit that he was thrilled to be back here after the quiet solitude of the agriplex and Ammurabbi. He felt disloyal to Bahrtok and Colyn, but the vibrant sounds and smells and views of the crowded city made him feel as though he were coming more alive each moment.

He took the underground tram from the station where he had disembarked, and it let him off five blocks from the apartment. He looked down at Cobahr, who was smiling up at him and holding his hand tightly. The wide-eyed child was in awe of the strange crowds of people and large buildings, and clung tightly to the safe hand of his tall companion. Vin-Chay had a large garment bag slung over his shoulder. Cobahr had Tugger clutched in his other hand as his head turned first this way and then that way as he tried to take in all of the new and frightening sights. The little boy was clearly exhausted from the long, tiring journey. Vin-Chay knew that he had to get him to the apartment soon, and get him washed and put to bed so that he could recuperate in sleep.

When he reached the apartment, Vin-Chay engaged the usual security sequence to open the door. He frowned when the sequence failed. *Why would Pyke have changed the security when we were the only ones who knew it?* He tried again, and again the sequence failed. As he was about to attempt a third try he heard a sound behind the door, which then slid open to reveal the wary face of a woman about his own age. She looked at him with a mixture of curiosity and concern, letting her eyes drop to the child next to him as her pretty face softened.

"Can I help you, sir?" she asked politely. Vin-Chay thought that she would probably be less mannerly if she were aware of the tattoo on his arm.

"Thank you, yes. I don't mean to alarm you, but I'm a little confused here. I thought this was Commander Pyke's apartment? He was expecting me." *Well, not expecting me here*, he thought, *but at the main house*. He wanted to ask who the hell she was but remained silent, hoping she would volunteer the information. She did.

"Oh, I see. Well, you must not have spoken to the commander recently because we purchased this apartment from him five months ago. My husband and I, that is. We got it at a very reasonable price for this section of town."

"He sold this apartment?" Vin-Chay said, surprised. Pyke loved this apartment and it reflected so much of him inside. He had the strong desire to see the inside now that it seemed to belong to someone else. This woman and her mate.

"Yes, as I said, five months ago. It came with a great deal of furniture, too, but, well, we had to get rid of much of it because it was so old-fashioned and just didn't fit us." She sounded apologetic and looked concerned as she noticed the little boy fidgeting and yawning. Her face brightened.

"Perhaps you would like to come in and call Commander Pyke to see where his new location is?" She swept her arm back, inviting them in. Vin-Chay thanked her and pulled Cobahr gently into the apartment. He thought the woman was too trusting of a total stranger, but her nature served him well at the moment.

Vin-Chay noticed the vast differences in the house. Gone were Pyke's 'old-fashioned' furniture and personal pictures and holographs. The walls were painted a much lighter color, and flowers and bright-colored divans, blankets, and tables dotted the hearthchamber. He imagined the upstairs changes were much of the same. He turned to the woman, who was watching him expectantly.

"Could I please trouble you for a cup of water for the child while I make the commlink?"

"No trouble at all," she said, handing him the cy-comm. She excused herself to get the water for Cobahr.

Vin-Chay commlinked into the private code for Pyke's office, hoping it hadn't changed in the six months that he had been gone. He was immediately connected with Pyke's adjutant, whom he remembered from a few terse calls as an officious, unpleasant man—at least to him. He identified himself by name only and asked to speak to the commander.

"Commander Pyke isn't in the Miliplex today. Any message?" the man asked curtly.

"Where is he? Can he be reached at all?" Vin-Chay wouldn't have ordinarily pressed the point with this man but he had a tired, slightly cranky child on his hands. He needed to find out where to go, whether to another apartment, or somehow to the main house more than thirty kilometers away. Well, he could always engage a hirecraft.

"I am not in the habit of giving out confidential information to slaves," the man snapped. *Yes, Vin-Chay thought, it's lovely to be 'home.'*

"Captain, I'm not trying to be difficult here, but High Commander Pyke *requested* that I contact him so that he could take appropriate action, and I am simply following his orders. Now, if you want me to tell him when I do see him that you were unable to support those orders ..." Vin-Chay let his voice trail off so that the man's innate sense of survival could kick in. It did.

"Hold on," he said. Several minutes passed, during which time the young woman brought back two cups of cold water. Vin-Chay gratefully accepted the drinks. Cobahr held the cup in both hands and drained his much-needed refreshment without taking a breath. He smiled up at Vin-Chay when he finished as the Osiran gently stroked his hair. The young woman left him in privacy for a few moments as someone came back on the link.

"Vin-Chay?" The Osiran recognized TutMose's voice immediately, and was relieved that the captain hadn't returned. He put down his own empty cup.

"Sub-Commander TutMose. Good day. Commander Pyke asked me to contact him when I returned so that he could bring me back to the main house. I went to his apartment only to find it occupied by a new owner. She was kind enough to let me call. Is the commander available to pick us up, or should I try to make arrangements to get home some other way?"

"Commander Pyke is in north Thebes reviewing an academy training exercise. I'd rather not call him away from that, so here's what we'll do instead. Go to my apartment and wait there, and I'll come for you in a couple of hours and take you to the house." TutMose gave Vin-Chay the address; the young man was relieved at the quick six blocks' walking distance.

"Thank you, Sub-Commander. My only concern is waiting outside in the heat for you. It's not me that I'm worried about, but—"

"You won't have to wait outside. Press for entry and someone inside will let you in." He paused for a brief second. "Us?"

"Sir?"

"You said 'us.' Is someone else with you? The commander was expecting only you."

Vin-Chay took a deep breath. "I have his son Cobahr with me. He's had a long day and is pretty tired, so if it's all right I'd like to get him something to eat and put him down for a nap while we wait for you."

Vin-Chay heard an unmistakable intake of breath from TutMose when he mentioned Cobahr, and he held his own breath as he waited for the Ptolemii's response.

"There's plenty of food and a comfortable bed for his nap. I'll try to be there as soon as possible, but until then my housemate will entertain you. See you in a

couple of hours.” TutMose broke the commlink just as the apartment owner returned. Vin-Chay thanked her again for her kindness. He took one last look around the changed hearthchamber, then led Cobahr outside. He picked the boy up in his arms to carry him to TutMose’s residence. Cobahr put his arms around Vin-Chay’s neck and laid his head down on his shoulder. Vin-Chay, exhausted himself, struggled to carry him and the heavy garment bag through the bustling streets. It took them a good half hour to reach the address that TutMose had given him; Vin-Chay’s step slowed even more as he carried the dozing child. *Idiot*. He should have engaged a hirecraft.

TutMose’s apartment was located in a similar area as Pyke’s old one, except that the front door didn’t overlook a large square but rather was nearly hidden part way down a narrow alley, facing another apartment door just two meters away. Vin-Chay nudged Cobahr gently and let him slide down. The little boy leaned against Vin-Chay’s leg and wrapped his arm around it possessively as Vin-Chay pressed the entrance indents. A few seconds later the door slid open, and Vin-Chay and the occupant within stared at one another dumbfounded before breaking into shouts and throwing their arms around one another.

“Easy! Easy! You’re breaking my ribs, princeling!” Cassian laughed as they finally broke apart from their hugging and back-pounding. His own eyes misted as he saw the tears in Vin-Chay’s. He pulled him into the apartment along with his now wide-awake little companion. Cassian slid the door closed and turned only to find himself engulfed in another crushing hug, which he returned just as intensely. They both quieted after a few seconds, leaving their bodies wrapped tightly around one another as each gave silent thanks for the presence and well-being of the other. When they finally let go, Vin-Chay reached out to grip Cassian’s shoulder, and his friend, knowing what he was feeling, nodded and smiled gently at him. Vin-Chay dropped his arm after a moment and remembered the child at his side. Cobahr was looking up at them with big, curious eyes, his one arm still wrapped around Vin-Chay’s leg. Vin-Chay picked him up and looked at Cassian.

“This is my very special friend, Cobahr. He’s pretty hungry and tired about now, so before we start filling each other in on the past year, I need to get some food into him and put him down for a nap.”

“As it so happens, I was preparing a meal for myself, and I think I may have some extra carrolan cake and citrine juice. Would you like some of that, Cobahr?” Cassian asked the child kindly. Cobahr nodded shyly and Cassian led them into the nutrichamber, where he sliced the warm cake and filled a small cup with cold juice. The child ate ravenously as Vin-Chay picked at another piece

himself, then Cassian nodded to Vin-Chay, who picked the boy up and followed Cassian to the second-tier noxchamber. He placed the already dozing child on the large bed in the center of the chamber. He covered him with a soft blanket that Cassian handed to him, then quietly closed the door behind them as the two men descended to the hearthchamber to talk.

They sat on the large, comfortable divan that rested in the middle of the chamber, facing the fireplace. As they both calmed down and collected their thoughts, neither seemed to know where to begin until Vin-Chay broke the silence.

"How in God's name did you come to be with TutMose of all people? How long have you been with him? It can't be more than the six months I've been gone?"

"Gone? Gone where? Never mind. One thing at a time. I've been with him about five months. He and that commander of yours were stationed down in Hartan for some Interior Security matter, and that wasn't very far from a royal quarry where I was enslaved."

"I heard a rumor that you were sent to some quarry, but before I could get any more information, well, never mind. Later. I want to hear what happened." Vin-Chay leaned forward to listen intently as his friend went on.

"He visited the quarry on some assignment and saw me there. We spoke for a few hostile moments before I was shoved back to work, then before I knew what was happening, I was being taken from that hellhole to Hartan as the sub-commander's new slave. I think he did it on a whim, but truth to tell I'm glad he was momentarily capricious, or I'd be dead by now." Cassian had an odd, faraway look in his eyes and frowned. "I thought at first he wanted me for the same thing the commander wanted you for. That first night in his quarters, after I'd been fed and cleaned, I thought that he planned on raping me. And in my condition I wouldn't have been able to stop him. But it didn't take long to figure out that that was the last thing on his mind. As it turned out, he hadn't even bought me as his own slave, but under the commander's name." Vin-Chay's eyebrows shot up and his mouth open slightly, but Cassian cut him off before he could speak. "The commander knew nothing about it. TutMose just used his name for the purchase to prevent any real protest from the QuarryMaster. Anyway, Pyke signed me over to TutMose immediately and told him that I was *his* problem now. TutMose told me this over the next few weeks whenever he wasn't cursing me for insanity or insubordination, or threatening to beat me."

"Has he? Beaten you? Is he the one who put that scar on your face?" Vin-Chay asked anxiously, hoping his friend wasn't being mistreated any more than he

must have been during his quarry captivity. He didn't even want to think about that. Cassian was far more slender than he remembered, his face thinner, but besides that and the scar he looked as well as any slave could be expected to after many months under such harsh conditions.

Cassian shook his head. "He's never laid a hand on me, angry or otherwise. He blusters a lot about doing something to me, but I've pretty much figured out by now that the man isn't made that way. He's not a cruel or hurtful man. He hates the idea of slavery, and he hates even more that he's forced to live with a slave. Or anyone, I think. He's a very solitary man with a very structured life, and he doesn't appreciate anything invading his carefully designed world."

"Why forced? If he didn't want you here, couldn't he just sell you?"

"Doesn't appear that way, courtesy of Commander Pyke, who's told him that I'm *his* problem, period, and he's not to turn me over to any other unsuspecting owner or let me roam around Thebes angry and free to do any Osiran-like damage to the Ptolemii. So, for right now, he and I are stuck with each other. We've come to somewhat of a truce for both our sakes, and there are worst ways to live. I know—I've been there." He patted the divan they were sitting on. "I'm perfectly happy to be sleeping here until I can figure out how to get home. It's certainly better than the floor I resided on at Hartan, or the odorous hovel I shared with a few dozen others at the quarry."

"If he doesn't want to bed you—what do you do here for him, then? Does he allow you to work outside of the house or are you confined to it?"

"I take care of the apartment, what there is to take care of. I cook for him and clean what needs to be cleaned, and act as a sounding board for his rantings about our ungrateful, treacherous people. We talk a lot, and I think he secretly enjoys most of it or he wouldn't initiate conversation when he really doesn't have to. He'll never admit that, though. He lets me go out but I'm restricted to a few blocks' radius. I try to stretch the boundaries as much as I can without bringing down his wrath. I did find an Osiran temple not too far from here but I haven't been allowed to go there yet."

"Patri Julian's temple," Vin-Chay said softly.

"You know it?" Cassian said in surprise.

"Aye, I know it well. He's a good man. I've done a lot of work for him around the temple until ..." Vin-Chay let his words trail off as the memory of that night came back unbidden. The remembrance still pained him, and he wondered if it always would despite the understanding to which he and Pyke had seemed to come.

"Until?" Cassian prompted, sensing a story that he felt he probably needed to know.

"Until things happened and I was sent away from Thebes six months ago. Long story, my friend. An ugly one, too. Are you sure you want to hear it?"

"I need to hear it," Cassian said quietly.

"All right, I'll tell you everything. Just let me check on Cobahr first. I want to make sure he's sleeping well. I'll be right back." Vin-Chay stood and turned to go upstairs.

"Who is this child, Vin-Chay? I know he's not yours—too old," Cassian said lightly.

Vin-Chay looked at Cassian a long moment before answering. "He's Pyke's son. His mother is dead. Killed by my father. I'll tell you the whole story when I get back," he finished as he mounted the stairs and his stunned friend sat motionless awaiting his return.

Vin-Chay came downstairs after five minutes and reseated himself. He took a deep breath and told Cassian everything, from the moment he had first entered Pyke's quarters on Canaan, through his uneasy early tenure in Pyke's household, to the discovery of the death of Pyke's wife and the part his father played in it, and the part he played in Pyke's revenge. He faltered a little when he got to the night of the candles, but forced himself to provide the details of the seduction and escape and capture and beating and banishment to Ammurabbi. He told him about the kind people, and the hard work on the agriplex that started before dawn and usually lasted until sunset. He told him of the discovery of Pyke's relationship to Bahrtok and Colyn, and the strange gestation and birth of Pyke's son. He told him that Pyke had come to summon him back to Thebes after four months, but left out only one detail: Pyke's confession of love. Vin-Chay trusted Cassian as much as he did anyone, but he somehow felt that this intimacy between him and Pyke should remain only between them for the time being. Perhaps forever.

When he finished, he felt more tired than he had in a long time, and he saw that his story had equally exhausted his friend and comrade. He waited for Cassian to comment on anything he said, but it was a long time before the other warrior even managed to shake his head in wonderment.

"I can't even imagine how painful it must have been for you to learn all that and be subjected to that man's mistreatment as some evil means of revenge on your father. My God—to have to be subjected day after day to his sexual as well as physical abuse—"

"No," Vin-Chay corrected quickly. "He never abused me sexually, not on Canaan and not at his home. On Canaan it was consensual, whether the reason was valid or not. At his home—it was either expedient, or—" He let the thought hang. He wasn't sure if he could explain his jumbled feelings and thoughts to himself, let alone to Cassian. He dismissed that aberration on the *Sovereign*.

"Or what? Are you saying that you wanted him to take you? I don't believe that!" Cassian finished forcefully.

"I don't know if 'wanted' is the proper term," Vin-Chay replied in a thoughtful, reflective manner. "There were times when I responded to my body's needs, and so responded to him. I'm not going to apologize for having normal urges and needs, even in that situation."

"As you shouldn't. I'm sorry, Vin-Chay. I'm just still angry at all this, at being on this planet as a slave, as being treated by most people as a piece of property with no feelings or rights. It makes me see or say things I shouldn't. I just hate the idea of you being in that situation. I thought I had it pretty bad, but after what you've told me, I feel ashamed of my own selfish self-pity."

"Don't. I've wallowed there myself, until my priest gave me a little eye-opening talk, and I started growing up when I was working at the 'plex. It's very easy to go there, but it doesn't get you any place." He stood up and looked at Cassian intently. "What may get us someplace, maybe even home, is some kind of plan, some kind of undertaking worthy of Osiran warriors. I think I may have one, but it will probably take a long time to effect, and it may be fatal in the end if we fail. Are you game?"

Cassian stood up and looked Vin-Chay directly in the eye. "Primed and ready, brother. When do we start?"

Vin-Chay smiled and clasped Cassian's shoulder. "Right here and now. You and I are the first two cells in what will be a web of Osiran warriors that will strike back at the Pharonic government."

"Cells? I don't understand," Cassian responded.

"Let me explain what they are, and what we're going to do, and how." And Vin-Chay explained his plan slowly and carefully to Cassian, who listened avidly until a grin spread over his thin face and he nodded his understanding and support.

"Just one thing, Cassian," Vin-Chay said as he finished his explanation. "No harm is to come to either Pyke or Cobahr. I want it clear that there is to be no retribution against either of them regardless of whether this plan works or not."

"Agreed. As long as we add TutMose's name to that short list of non-targets. Like I said, he's a decent man and I bear him no malice. In truth, I owe him and won't repay that in blood."

"Agreed." Vin-Chay was about to discuss plans further when they both heard the front door open and in a few seconds found themselves facing Sub-Commander TutMose. The Ptolemii looked Vin-Chay up and down for a moment before grunting.

"You look well, slave. Wherever Commander Pyke has been keeping you seems to have agreed with you. Where is the boy?"

"Upstairs sleeping on your bed. You did say that was all right?"

TutMose grunted again. "Get the child so I can take you both back to the house. I haven't contacted Pyke to tell him that you're here, let alone that you have an unexpected companion. I think I'll let the two of you sort that out when he returns home tonight after exercises." He turned to Cassian as Vin-Chay started up the stairs. "Get me a draught of ale while I wait or I'll take what's left of your skin off your back."

"Yes, master," Cassian said as he deliberately walked slowly towards the nutr-chamber. He had just brought back the ale, which TutMose started to drink, when Vin-Chay came back downstairs carrying Cobahr. TutMose drained the goblet, then looked intently at the sleeping boy before raising his eyes to meet Vin-Chay's. He spoke noncommittally. "He looks like his mother. I doubt the commander is going to be very happy about this, but that's your problem, Lieutenant, so I suggest you give some thought to your explanation while we travel. Let's go."

Vin-Chay nodded to Cassian, who watched the two men and child leave the apartment. He sank down onto the divan as a slow smile spread across his face. He hadn't felt this alive in two years. He felt good. He couldn't wait to start.

TutMose deposited Vin-Chay and Cobahr at Pyke's house, making sure they were settled in before he departed for Thebes again. He couldn't imagine what Pyke was going to do when he found both an expected and a small, unexpected resident in his house. He wished he could be around to watch the explosion—now that would be a sight. Ah, well, he thought that was probably one scene he should miss, so he'd just have to go back to his own home and verbally berate his slave for something so that they could have a clash of their own. He switched the autonav to a higher speed.

Pyke's commandcraft arrived several hours later, well after dark. He noted the lights on in the house and he immediately thought, *He's home*. He dismissed his navigator and restrained himself from entering the house too eagerly. When he

reached the entryway he smelled fresh bread and java coming from the nutrichamber, and the distinctive scent of well-aged wood burning in the fireplace. He tossed his cloak over the divan along with his techbelt, and followed his nose into the nutrichamber. No one was there, but two places were set at the table, awaiting his presence. He picked at the still-warm fresh bread, and went back into the hearthchamber just as Vin-Chay appeared at the top of the loft. He chewed slowly and swallowed as Vin-Chay descended to the hearthchamber.

"Welcome home," Pyke said evenly, still unsure of his consort's demeanor, which seemed neither welcoming nor dismissive. Pyke became alert immediately. Something was going on. He knew his slave too well to think this would be a simple homecoming.

"Thank you," Vin-Chay answered mildly. "I didn't know when you would be back so I prepared a light meal. It's warming in the oven. I'll get it for you." He moved to pass Pyke, but the Ptolemii stopped him with a strong grip on his upper arm and pulled him around to face him. *What the hell*, Pyke thought. *Why pretend?* He pulled Vin-Chay close and reached behind his head to pull the Osiran's face to his own, and kissed him deeply and warmly. Vin-Chay didn't resist. He let himself respond, and was surprised at the depth of his own passion and response. They finally broke apart and Pyke searched Vin-Chay's eyes. He found no pretense or dislike or resistance, and he relaxed. It was going to be all right. He nodded towards the nutrichamber.

"I'm starved," Pyke said, hoping Vin-Chay would understand the double meaning.

"I know," Vin-Chay said, understanding clearly.

Vin-Chay joined Pyke for a quiet meal in the nutrichamber. It lasted nearly an hour, during which time they barely spoke except about meaningless things, wanting to enjoy the quiet communion of two people who knew each other too well and didn't always need words. After they finished, Vin-Chay closed down the nutrichamber and joined Pyke in front of the roaring fire. He had to tell Pyke now about Cobahr, and hope the commander wouldn't explode in anger or frustration and perhaps send the boy back. If he did, Vin-Chay had vowed to himself that he would go with him, but he wasn't going to put that ultimatum to Pyke. He started to tell Pyke, but the first few words were barely out when they were both distracted by a small, tired voice from upstairs calling for Vin-Chay.

Pyke knew the voice, knew immediately what it meant, and he whirled back to stare furiously at his companion.

"Explain! No, don't bother. I think I can pretty much figure it out for myself. You somehow convinced Bahrtok to let the child come here for whatever reason,

hoping I would miraculously change my mind about fatherhood and allow him to stay. I cannot believe—”

“I didn’t convince Bahrtok. I tried to talk him out of it,” Vin-Chay countered flatly.

“What?” Pyke said, confused. “Are you saying that Bahrtok wanted the child to come here and you didn’t?”

“The ‘child’ has a name. It’s Cobahr. After his mother, your wife. Yes, since you were probably about to say it, the woman my father killed,” Vin-Chay snapped tersely. *Wonderful*. This situation was deteriorating at an even faster rate than their usual arguments did.

Pyke didn’t respond right away. Instead he fixed a stony gaze on Vin-Chay in an effort to disconcert the young man. It didn’t work. Vin-Chay held his ground. Pyke found himself relenting, and wanting to relent.

“Why did Bahrtok want him to leave the ‘plex and come here, of all places? Considering how little esteem he holds me in,” Pyke asked evenly.

“Where else should a child go but to his parent? Bahrtok and Colyn love that boy more than life itself. And that means they want the best for him. The life on an agriplex is a hard, demanding one with fewer choices and opportunities as the years pass and life changes in this civilization. The educational opportunities in Ammurabbi are limited. The ‘plex is isolated, and Cobahr has few chances to have friends and grow into a happy, healthy young man. And they are both aging and know it, although they are far from old and infirm. They know all these things, and their choices to address them are limited. They love the child enough to give him up.”

“And they felt that at least *you* would be here to nurture him and see to the needs that I don’t have a clue about, right?”

“Right,” Vin-Chay replied, grudgingly admiring Pyke’s intuitiveness. *Maybe there is hope*.

“Then why did you try to talk him out of it? It’s clear you have a fondness for the child and would probably enjoy having him here—where you think he belongs, anyway.”

“Because I’m not too sure you’re ready to assume *any* parental duties, and I don’t want to see Cobahr pay for your insecurities or inabilities.” *I’m glad he doesn’t have a knife in his hand right now*, Vin-Chay thought as he tensed, waiting for Pyke’s reaction to his brutal honesty.

Pyke fell silent but kept staring at Vin-Chay. Then he turned and mounted the stairs with his recalcitrant slave following. He entered the dimmed noxchamber and stared down at the now peacefully sleeping child in the middle of his bed.

He looked at the child for a long, silent time before he turned back to face the Osiran, an unreadable look on his face.

"He can sleep here tonight, since I'm assuming that in a strange house he'll want to curl up next to someone he's familiar with and trusts. That would be you. I'll sleep on the divan. Tomorrow you'll have to set up an appropriate nox-chamber for him downstairs. After that, we'll have to figure out how we are all going to cohabit this increasingly crowded household." Pyke hoped his clipped words masked the insecurity and nervousness that was turning his stomach into knots.

"Then he can stay?" Vin-Chay asked cautiously.

"As though I have a choice at this point. But he's *your* responsibility on a day to day basis, so *you* are going to have to figure out what parenting is all about and take the lead on this."

"You're his father."

"Technically. But I know nothing about that role or about this child, and I don't plan on putting the rest of my life on hold to address those complex issues overnight. You brought him here, so you are taking the lead on this. I'll support him financially, and physically in this house, and ensure that his education is the best possible, but don't expect miracles. I'll try, but that's all I can promise."

"That's all I'm asking. That's all he's asking. Thank you, Commander," Vin-Chay said sincerely, breathing a sigh of relief as Pyke moved towards the closet to get a night robe. Pyke turned back to him quietly, so as not to wake the sleeping child. He gave the boy another quick glance before he returned his attention to his consort.

"One more thing. I have a name. After more than a year together, I think you should start using it," he snapped as he began pulling off his day clothes.

"Thank you, Pyke," Vin-Chay responded softly.

BOOK THREE

FULL BURN

CHAPTER ONE

Preparations for the Pharon's thirtieth anniversary of rule had been underway for the better part of two years, nearly since the time that Vin-Chay had been sent to Ammurabbi. The Pharon and his close circle of trusted advisors had spent that time carefully crafting the festivities. The result was destined to be an extravaganza of the senses for themselves and the masses. The celebration would serve to extol the ruler of Ptolem for his length of tenure as well as his accomplishments. The war with Osiron, and its associated consequences, such as the reinstitution of slavery, were non-issues. They would never be mentioned or in any way alluded to by anyone who wished to retain his or her place in Ptolemii society. There was no place for dissension, or negativity, or any illusions other than those promoted by official government protocol and propaganda.

Amun IV had succeeded his father, Amun III, in Fifty-One Thirty-Seven. Amun III had ruled Ptolem and its three Sisters for forty-seven years after inheriting the throne from his own father, who had seized power in a military coup after dispatching his ruler and the immediate royal family. He had officially succumbed to the ravages that old age and a decadent lifestyle had perpetrated on his body. However, close family members, including his second-born son, knew that the son's mother, his secondary wife, had decided to secure the throne for her son by eliminating the father before he could choose a more appropriate successor. Those in line for that appropriate succession, a son by Amun III's first wife and a favorite son by his youngest concubine, met with sad and unfortunate accidents shortly after their father's demise. Amidst great grief and a with heavy heart, remaining heir Ahmose, renamed Amun IV, assumed the Pharoncy and remained there healthy and hearty for the past thirty years. His scheming mother never saw her son's ascension nor participated in his rule; she, too, met with an unfortunate accident the day before his coronation. He honored her memory by naming his next daughter after her.

The Pharon, upon his ascendancy to the throne, quickly divorced his first wife, the partner of an arranged marriage. She was fortunate that he had acquired a mild affection for her, and so permitted her and her two daughters to retire to a large and well-maintained estate in Nubia. They wanted for nothing, but were

not permitted within the boundaries of Thebes. He remarried immediately to the daughter of an older trusted cohort; she provided him with two more daughters and a son. He took two more wives and had countless liaisons and concubines, and had fathered many children, some acknowledged, some not, depending on the status of their mothers or of their father's whims. It was a well-founded rumor that he had sired at least three children by slaves. It was also rumored, although unproved, that at least one concubine and her child had fallen into such displeasure with the Pharon that he had sold both into slavery. Their identities were erased from state records. No one attempted to verify this, for no one really cared.

Amun IV had weathered significant social and political upheavals during his rule, the most conspicuous of which was the Ptolem-Osiron civil war, or 'war of independence' as the damned Separatae called the conflict. He took no responsibility for any actions that may have exacerbated the situation that pre-dated the actual breakout of hostilities. His economic and philosophical stranglehold on Ptolem, Osiron, Isiin and Sekmet was clearly justified to support his God-given rule. He brooked no interference in his reign, and he was bolstered and encouraged by a circle of men and women who sought to consolidate and enhance their own positions and power at anyone's expense; he had chosen his entourage well. Neither he nor they had paid any price up to this point for their actions, and they were well ensconced in their power and arrogance. The festivities that had been prepared for two years and that were about to take place were an ostentatious monument to them all.

Several new buildings, including a massive Ptolemii religious temple dedicated to the Pharon, had been designed, built and staffed. Special clothing had been designed and prepared for all official participants. A lengthy pageant was scheduled for the exact anniversary of Amun IV's ascendance to the Pharoncy, and the pageantry itself would be preceded by three days of carefully-scripted celebrations, and succeeded by three more. The latter period would be far more relaxed and dedicated to the senses rather than to politics and ritual; there would be much drinking, music, merriment, and games of skill and bloody death in the five-year-old gladiatorial coliseum.

And sex—Amun IV looked particularly forward to *that*. His appetites were legend.

During the initial three days of celebrations a number of military and political accolades were scheduled. High-ranking politicians and officers who were being further rewarded for their efforts and successes were to be singled out for decorations and reward. Pyke fell into this category. He had been promoted to First-Level High Commander eighteen months earlier upon his return from quelling

the rebellions in the provinces. His quick action, analysis of the dissidents, and the breaking of the cult leaders had inadvertently increased his visibility and worth. The Pharon already recognized him as an excellent military commander, and practical and theoretical tactician, and a tool to use against his own rebellious people. He watched Pyke even more closely than he had in the past when the man was only one of many strong, intelligent officers in his employ. He recognized Pyke's potential, and after months of spirited debate with his advisors he decided to appoint him High Commander of all Interior Security, or InterSec, as it was colloquially called.

Despite Pyke's tactical prowess offworld and the benefit of having him at the forefront of any battles with Osiran forces, Amun was shrewd enough to understand that the primary linchpin of his reign was to maintain control of his own world's populace. There was the possibility that Osiron could either hold Ptolem off indefinitely or actually win a head-on conflict. If that would ever be the case, then holding on to his own resident world was even more critical to his continued reign and continued line. He saw Pyke, amongst many others, as a means of doing just that. Perhaps he could even solidify the man's loyalty and results by finagling a marriage with one of his bastard daughters. He'd mention the matter to Hitii.

Pyke was astute enough to realize his value and the reasons for his promotion, but there was little that he could or should do to prevent it. When he had been summoned to the Pharonic compound a month earlier, he was a little disquieted about being singled out for such an audience, but he knew that he had done nothing to warrant any discipline. The Pharon had commended him for his eighteen years of service and informed him of his new position. Pyke had hidden both his pleasure and concern well. He was properly appreciative and respectful, but he knew that neither Amun nor his advisors had any inkling of the issues with which he was struggling. He would have to deal with them somehow, naturally with his family's help.

Amun had requested that Pyke maintain silence about the promotion until it could be officially announced during the anniversary celebrations. Of course, he added, Pyke could let it slip discreetly to his closest family members if he so desired, providing they were as closemouthed about it as he. Amun had no way of knowing that Pyke considered his closest 'family' member his Osiran slave. He wondered what the Pharon would think about that state of affairs—and, if he had known about it, how it would have affected his decision to advance Pyke's career.

Pyke was naturally pleased that, for whatever reasons, he was being recognized and rewarded for his many years of hard work. He had to admit to himself that despite his willingness to go where he was needed offworld, he was more than just a little relieved to be able to assume a role that would allow him to remain permanently on Ptolem. He had gotten used to being in a routine of personal and professional stability, and he had absolutely no desire to leave his Theban home or his Osiran consort and his son for any length of time. Although he enjoyed his work and even the often-frustrating challenges it could present, he couldn't wait to get to his home and be with the people who truly mattered.

So much had changed in the eighteen months since Vin-Chay had returned from Ammurabbi, he thought as his commandcraft headed out of Thebes three weeks before the celebrations were about to begin. Although he had known about his new position for a month, he had maintained a complete silence about it even with Vin-Chay. He wasn't sure about how to approach the subject or how his companion would react to the news that Pyke was now going to be the mainstay in keeping the Ptolemii people under control. He knew Vin-Chay's opinion of the Pharon and his government, and Pyke couldn't blame him for his harsh feelings, especially given his own circumstances. It was already difficult enough for the two of them to reconcile Pyke's established position under the Pharoncy with their life together; it would be even harder now that that position was significantly enhanced.

The commandcraft raced towards Pyke's residence under the cover of the moonless darkness. Pyke was disconcerted to see a number of new residences lighting the night as they progressed, but he was comforted by the fact that he had at least forestalled any building or people encroachment near his own residence. He had used some of his considerable finances to purchase as much raw land surrounding his own home as possible to prevent unwanted neighbors. As it stood, his home was now at the center of a twenty-kilometer radius of land that he owned and that would not be invaded by other people and homes. It seemed lonely sometimes to all three of the people residing in Pyke's house, but it was generally a welcome loneliness, and one that caused none of them any undue concern.

The navigator dropped Pyke off at his door, or rather at the entrance of the front walled courtyard that Vin-Chay had completed six months earlier, with Cassian's help. Pyke smiled at the thought of the two Osirans working in concert to build the wall and attempting, usually unsuccessfully, to keep Cobahr from 'helping' with their efforts. He knew that they would have finished weeks sooner had the child not participated, but that was not an option with Vin-Chay, who

religiously included the boy in their life at the house and in the new apartment in Thebes. Vin-Chay was a devoted parent to Cobahr, who was thriving, and Pyke felt a pang of guilt and regret that he hadn't been able to maximize his own part in his son's upbringing. He was trying, but years of denial about the child's very existence, and his own responsibilities, had taken their toll. He remained too aloof and detached from the day-to-day efforts of raising a happy, healthy human being. Thank God that Vin-Chay was there.

Pyke felt all of the day's tension melt out of his body as he opened the door to the house and entered a sensory symphony of smells and sounds and feelings. The aromas of the evening meal hit him first, then the sounds of a child's laughter, and then the warmth of the crackling fireplace as he entered the hearthchamber. Vin-Chay was on the floor attempting to show the five-year-old how to build a complex castle of interlocking wooden blocks. Cobahr was in a giggling mood and was not responding well to any instruction. He had apparently been throwing them all over the floor in a mischievous fashion. They both looked up as he entered the chamber. Vin-Chay gave him a warm look, the child a reserved one. Pyke thought with a pang that whenever Vin-Chay entered a chamber, Cobahr would run to him immediately; when Pyke entered a chamber, the child seemed to tense. Pyke, try as he might, never seemed to know how to get around this despite Vin-Chay's suggestions and urgings. Well, at least the boy didn't hide behind Vin-Chay when Pyke came into view as he did for the first six months of his new life in Thebes. This was going to take a long time, if ever.

Vin-Chay rose from the floor and pulled Cobahr up by the hand. He nudged him towards Pyke gently, and the boy shyly and reluctantly moved a little closer to the commander as Vin-Chay had tried to instruct him to numerous times. He kept his eyes wandering about the chamber as he shyly said, "Good evening, Father."

Pyke smiled at him and returned the greeting warmly. "Good evening, Cobahr. I'm starved. Are you ready to eat?"

Cobahr nodded wordlessly, but seemed to relax just a little, and his eyes rested on Pyke instead of wandering about the chamber. *Progress*, Pyke thought. *One step at a time.*

"Why don't you go and wash up before we eat, Sprite?" Vin-Chay said as he ruffled the child's hair. Cobahr nodded vigorously and rushed out of the chamber, leaving Vin-Chay the task of collecting the scattered blocks as Pyke pulled off his cloak and techbelt and draped them over the divan. As Vin-Chay walked about the chamber Pyke admired the man anew, as he did constantly. In the nearly three years that they had been together, he had only improved with age as

he passed the remaining stage of what Pyke considered late boyhood, his early twenties. He was nearly twenty-six now, and the maturity that he had always shown in his intellect and poise also showed in his face. He had never looked more handsome or appealing.

Pyke thought about the many factors that had contributed to this new maturity. Vin-Chay had returned from the agriplex much different than when he had first been sent there. He saw things in new lights, and had acknowledged Pyke's needs in the relationship as well as his own. Pyke believed that Vin-Chay genuinely did not hold that awful night in Thebes against him, nor did he desire any retribution. They had managed to talk about it several very emotional times. By this point in time, both were convinced that they had put it where it belonged, in the distant past. Pyke had held easily true to his promise to never strike Vin-Chay again, although his easily provoked temper and his consort's naturally contentious nature and contrary opinions occasionally made that a difficult promise to keep. But kept it was, as was Pyke's unspoken vow to never stray from his consort's bed as he had in their early days together.

Vin-Chay had 'grown up' in Pyke's estimation after his six months with Bahr-tok and Colyn. He was stronger physically and emotionally, and more willing to see two sides of every issue rather than his previous one narrow view of life, and of the Ptolemii-Osiran conflict. His basic opinions and prejudices hadn't changed, but he would on occasion agree with Pyke—albeit reluctantly—about some of the philosophies and actions of his own people, which had precipitated and inflamed the hostilities. Pyke, too, was more conducive towards admitting his own people's mistakes, and the two men were able to discuss politics without coming to either real or emotional blows. They respected each other's opinions, and gave each other the leeway to disagree without upsetting the balance of the rest of their personal lives.

Part of the change in Vin-Chay's feelings and demeanor had also been caused by the distinctive change in their home life and in the associated freedom accorded the Osiran after his return. Again, Pyke had held true to his word and treated Vin-Chay as his chosen consort. The concepts of 'slave' and 'master' had receded from their private lives and only surfaced in their public ones when it was unavoidable, such as when they encountered other Ptolemii who would not have approved of such an unusual relationship. Despite Pyke's feelings and actions, he was shackled by the constraints of Ptolemii society and could do only so much to improve Vin-Chay's lot outside of their residences. Pyke hated his inability to take Vin-Chay to public gatherings or cultural events that forbade the attendance of slaves. He never dared show the slightest respect or affection for his consort in

public. He had to watch every touch, every movement—anything that might cause suspicions and hence possible danger to Vin-Chay. Strangely enough, it barely seemed to bother his young companion, who took virtually all such problems in stride. Vin-Chay seemed genuinely content with having a cloistered yet warm home life with Pyke and the child he had come to consider ‘their’ son.

Yet Pyke did what he could. He provided Vin-Chay with a larger household chit allowance that let him purchase more ‘luxury’ items for his pleasure or, as the case turned out, went to the temple or on occasion to Cassian for his own benefit. Vin-Chay also provided clothing for his warrior compatriot, and spent as much time with him as he could, simply as a good friend. Pyke pretended to not know that Vin-Chay covertly and anonymously funneled chits and medical supplies to Tuscan through Patri Julian’s temple.

Pyke had flatly forbidden Vin-Chay to visit or associate in any way with Tuscan or its residents, but he had allowed him to resume working at the temple. TutMose also allowed Cassian the same privilege, and let him accompany Vin-Chay to Ammurabbi every six months to spend a month or two assisting Bahrtok in working the ‘plex. Pyke smiled to himself. Tut and Cassian were a pair, and he never failed to enjoy watching their interaction. He, too, had come to appreciate the many qualities and even the barbed wit of the other Osiran warrior, and he was secretly glad that TutMose’s whimsical purchase of the slave had injected the man back into Vin-Chay’s life as well as TutMose’s. The sub-commander needed a close friend, and he could see Cassian becoming that, however initially reluctantly for both him and his captor.

Vin-Chay spent his days balancing his duties as primary parent to Cobahr with his work at the temple and his part-time work at the Culturplex, where he assisted the primary historian in the research department. Pyke knew the man from his academy days, and he was quite willing to do the High Commander a favor by providing occasional intellectual stimulation and employment to his consort, even if he was a slave—a slave, however, who easily mastered the intricacies of the most sophisticated cultur-corr available in the complex. The chits that Vin-Chay earned went into Pyke’s account, by law, but Pyke simply funneled them back to his consort as soon as they were applied. Vin-Chay was restricted, of course, from any confidential government or military files, but he was able to access volumes of historical, cultural and commercial material that fed his voracious appetite for learning, and supplemented his educational instruction of Cobahr. Vin-Chay had applied himself rigorously to mastering the Ptolemii written word and had finally succeeded, and he was more than an adequate tutor for Pyke’s son prior to his eventual matriculation into the Theban educational sys-

tem in the next year or so. Cobahr probably should have already been attending a private Theban educational institution, but both his father and Osiran parent were reluctant to let go until absolutely necessary. Their frequent forays into Thebes for either the day or for longer periods at the apartment permitted Cobahr a chance to make new child friends and interact with them. He was a happy child, bright, smart, and alert. Vin-Chay adored him; Pyke held himself back, but couldn't deny to himself that he was becoming more and more attached to the child he once refused to allow to be born or to even acknowledge once he was. Pyke spent a good deal of his emotional energies pushing away the guilt from his long-ago actions.

Pyke gazed thoughtfully and fondly at his consort as Vin-Chay finished gathering the blocks and depositing them in Cobahr's hearthchamber toy chest. The commander grinned at how his Osiran looked. In addition to the maturity in his face and bearing, he looked very much as though he had been born and bred on Ptolem rather than on Osiron. He had always been forced to wear Ptolemii garments, but he had never seemed to look quite 'right' in them. He did now. His hair had grown to well past his shoulders, and he kept it at this length, occasionally braiding the long side hair or pulling it back to gather in a knot and fall into the rest of the thick black mane spilling down his back. His bangs were fairly long, and his sideburns rivaled those of the unfashionable TutMose. When he accompanied Pyke and Cobahr to monthly Ptolemii religious services at Pyke's previously unattended temple, he wore the common ceremonial black kohl around his eyes, which served to accentuate their stunning blue color.

Vin-Chay had gotten a surprised Pyke's agreement to have his left upper arm tattooed. He chose a ring of linked ankhs enhanced by vivid red and orange flames crawling up and over his shoulder. He had his left ear pierced, and he always wore the blue jewel set in silver that Pyke had purchased for him as a gift, or the silver ankh given to him on his twenty-fifth birthanniv by Bahrtok and Colyn. He also wore the two jewel-encrusted platinum companion rings that Pyke had purchased for his right hand. Pyke wore a matching set on his own hand. He secretly hoped some day to exchange them for true marriage rings, but he didn't feel the time was ready yet to mention this possibility to Vin-Chay.

Vin-Chay closed the toy chest and turned to Pyke, who had poured himself a draught of annise and held another out to his companion. Vin-Chay took the spirits gratefully and the two men drank in quiet communion. Vin-Chay finished first, and put his goblet down and crossed his arms before speaking.

"Long day?" he asked in genuine solicitation.

"No more so than usual, this close to the pageant," Pyke replied. He could see Vin-Chay tense perceptibly at the mention of the expected celebration, which Pyke had made clear that he was to attend. He hadn't told Vin-Chay yet about his own part in the festivities for his hitherto unknown promotion. It was the one sore point between them at this time. Perhaps it was time to let his consort in on the news. He put his own goblet down and drew his eyebrows together as he tried to decide how to approach the matter, but Vin-Chay shocked him with his next words.

"But with a definite personal twist since you have to participate so publicly because of your appointment as High Commander of all Interior Security, right?" Vin-Chay gazed at him steadily.

Pyke regrouped immediately and returned Vin-Chay's even gaze, speaking casually. "And you found this out how?"

Vin-Chay smiled unaffectedly. "We slaves have an excellent gossip and rumor underground. A slave of this scribe told a slave of that vendor, who told a slave in the temple—"

"All right, all right—I get the picture. How long have you known?" Pyke asked irritably.

"Two weeks. I would have *preferred* to hear it from you, but the end result is the same, wouldn't you agree?" Vin-Chay paused. "And by the way—congratulations. I mean it. You've worked hard to get where you are, however I may disapprove of some of your past and probably future assignments."

"Thank you. I think. And by the way—I was going to tell you about it tonight."

"I assumed so by the look on your face. So, what does this mean in regards to our home life?" Vin-Chay tried to make his voice sound nonchalant, but Pyke detected an undercurrent of concern and uncertainty. *Why?* He thought. *This means no change to us.*

"Why should it mean anything different to us?" Pyke answered with more conviction than he felt at the moment.

Vin-Chay shrugged. "Your own Pharon is a good example of changes that can come when one's life station accelerates. Didn't he discard a wife in favor of a more appropriate mate when he ascended the throne?"

Pyke burst out laughing, much to Vin-Chay's annoyance. He rubbed his chin and grinned at his consort. "So, that's what this is all about? You're afraid I might replace you with someone more appropriate?"

"It's not unheard of," Vin-Chay said seriously. "And, even if you weren't to take a spouse, how well would it be viewed amongst your higher-ranking com-

rades if you were to remain bedded with an Osiran slave rather than a free Ptolemii woman or man? We both need to admit to ourselves that such a situation is not appropriate for someone of your stature. Don't we?" he ended evenly, watching Pyke's reaction intently. He could see that his words had an effect as Pyke's brow knitted while he contemplated his companion's incisive words.

Pyke took a few moments to gather his thoughts before responding, but before he could Vin-Chay moved off towards the nutrichamber to get the evening meal as Cobahr bounded back into the chamber, washed and ready to eat. The places were set on the nutrichamber table and the two men and boy seated themselves and started to fill their plates and cups, and for the moment the subject was pended until they could be alone again. That took a couple of hours as the meal progressed, and then as Vin-Chay did his usual late-evening tutoring of Cobahr in basic mathematics and biology. He told the boy a familiar but favorite story before putting him down for the night. Pyke sat in at the storytelling and managed to inject a few comments, eliciting a pleasant response from his son, who sat cuddled on his bed next to Vin-Chay. The Ptolemii smiled wistfully at the holographs of Coba, which occupied a prominent place on Cobahr's clothes chest, along with the recent ones of the boy and his current parents. The central holograph was still bittersweet to Pyke: his and Coba's wedding picture. Her long blonde hair cascaded over her shoulders in shimmering waves. Her light blue eyes glistened with happiness, as did the turned-down, pale green eyes of the young husband whose crisp, formal sub-commander's uniform made a stark contrast to her silken pink wedding gown. Their faces were filled with the promise of a bright, long, happy future together where the possibilities were endless.

She was so young, Pyke thought sadly, but at least by now he could think of her, and remember her, instead of pushing her and their life together away. When Cobahr was tucked in for the night and the lights dimmed, Vin-Chay and Pyke left the first-tier noxchamber and ascended to their own chamber above Cobahr's.

Vin-Chay forestalled the conversation from continuing by heading directly into the sanichamber to shower. He knew he was only postponing the inevitable by a few moments, but he felt unsettled and distant, for whatever reason, and didn't want to push the situation. He was surprised when Pyke joined him in the shower and began lathering his body sensuously, back and front. *He knows how to get to me*, Vin-Chay thought as he returned the cleansing motions on Pyke's body while the hot water streamed over them, relaxing, soothing. Pyke ran the soap up and down Vin-Chay's back, disquieted as usual by the web of scars that he was forced to see nearly every day. He was going to push the discussion on this matter

again very soon, and planned on overcoming his consort's reluctance to correct the situation. But until then ... Each man relished the enjoyment he was taking from the other's body, and the bathing turned into more intense physical gratification as Pyke pulled his wet companion close to his body and used his mouth to invade Vin-Chay's own. They remained locked in passion for a few moments before Vin-Chay broke the embrace and laughed and moved out of the stream of water. Pyke grinned, shut the water off, and followed him onto the tile floor where they dried each other vigorously before re-entering the noxchamber.

Vin-Chay threw himself down on the top of the bed, lying on his side, propped up on one elbow, watching as Pyke lit one of the dresser candles. The Ptolemii joined him, propping himself up on his own elbow. He reached over and stroked Vin-Chay's cheek affectionately.

"All right, we have two subjects to discuss right now. One is what we abandoned earlier this evening, and the other is the one we've been going around and around on for, oh, say, months now. Your choice as to which one we deal with first," Pyke said lightly, although this was far from how he felt. Vin-Chay groaned in mock exasperation and turned over on his back, lacing his fingers together under his head. Pyke waited patiently, his eyes never leaving Vin-Chay's face. Finally, the Osiran turned his head back towards Pyke and sighed.

"You're relentless—*Commander*." He knew that using Pyke's title instead of his name would get under his skin. "Very well. Let's deal with tonight's problem first."

"It isn't a problem. That's what I'm trying to tell you," Pyke interjected.

"Perhaps not to you. Not yet. But I can almost guarantee that it will be. I'm being honest with you and myself. You're not. The bottom line is that someone in your new position is very visible, very much under scrutiny by the Pharon and key members of the government. None of them are going to be happy that you're sharing your life and bed with an enslaved enemy. And you dare not even attempt to explain what goes on in this house because that would be even more disastrous to your professional future. And possibly your personal future. It's only a matter of time before you're called on this, and probably only a matter of time before someone in power suggests an alternative. An arranged marriage, perhaps, with the daughter or son or sister of a High Scribe. Or something like that." He looked directly into Pyke's eyes. "Can you deny that possibility?"

Pyke didn't respond right away as he absorbed the words. Vin-Chay was very intuitive and very smart. He knew that the scenario he had suggested was more than likely. It was up to him to decide how far he would go to keep his power, and his life. His first impulse was to deny that he would ever abandon Vin-Chay

for another ‘appropriate’ mate. But he also knew the political maneuverings that abounded in the cutthroat world of the Pharoncy. Being too close to the light, he and those around him could very easily get incinerated. It wasn’t something he had really considered before, because there was no need to. He’d had only himself to consider. Now, there were two other people significantly involved. More, he thought, if he counted the extended ‘family’ of his in-laws and friends. He was aware of Vin-Chay’s intense gaze on his face as he contemplated the true situation. He shook his head slowly as the truth came to him.

“No,” he said slowly. “I guess I can’t deny the possibility, even though it isn’t something I’ve really considered up to now. And I should have—for all our sakes.” He looked directly into Vin-Chay’s eyes. “I wish I could tell you that there’s no chance that I would betray you, but I won’t do that, even though it’s my first inclination. I don’t want you to base your life and actions on something that isn’t a certainty. All I can tell you is that my feelings for you have only strengthened, and it would take something extraordinary for me to abandon them. And you. Do you believe that?”

“Yes, of course I believe that. It’s just that someday you may have no more of a choice in abandoning me than—” He stopped the obvious train of thought and let the difficult words hang in the thick air that had developed between them.

“Than you may have in abandoning me, right?”

“Yes.” Vin-Chay dropped his eyes as he tried to formulate his next thoughts. He and Pyke had never discussed that conversation more than eighteen months ago when Vin-Chay had stated honestly that there could be a time when he would have to be true to his Osiran warrior obligations and try to escape and rejoin his people. After the last year and a half together, neither of them wanted to even think about this possibility.

“Fair enough,” Pyke said. “Why don’t we just see what happens or doesn’t, as the case may be. You know I’ll do everything I can to protect you and see to your future?”

“I know.”

“Good. Then we’re where we should be and can be, under the circumstances. Now, let’s put that topic to bed and move on to the next.”

Vin-Chay groaned. “Pyke, please, not again. I have—”

“Yes, again, until you become reasonable about this matter. There is absolutely no reason to retain those scars on your back. I can schedule dermal regeneration therapy at the Mediplex to begin tomorrow and you can have back the body you possessed before—”

“Before I became a captive of your military and your world?”

"Yes! Why are you being so stubborn?!" Pyke asked in exasperation.

"Why are *you*? I thought we had an agreement that my body was free in this household and I could make the decisions regarding it."

"Fine. Then make the right decision, not the one you've been making!"

"You're impossible, Commander! Can we just drop this?" Vin-Chay demanded heatedly.

"No, we can't just drop this. You know, I have to look at those scars every day, too."

"So this is about you?"

"No, this is about both of us. And Cobahr," Pyke added, unfairly playing his high card.

"Cobahr? This has nothing to do with him."

"Doesn't it? What happens the first time he sees the scars and asks you why you have them? What are you going to tell him? That his *evil* father beat his beloved parent and caregiver? That will do wonders for our fragile relationship! Or, you could lie to him. Even better. Or hadn't you even *thought* of that?"

"Yes, I'd *thought* about it," Vin-Chay snapped. He paused and glared at his bedmate. "You can be such a bastard sometimes, you know that?"

"What's your point? If calling me names will get you to agree to the procedure, then fine, I'll be a bastard for trying to heal you."

"I don't need healing. I've healed. The scars don't need to be healed."

"They don't need to be revered as marks of honor in surviving the evil Ptolemii, either!" Pyke softened his voice as he pressed his fingers against Vin-Chay's lips to prevent a tart response. "Vin-Chay. You will lose no badge of honor or courage by removing the scars. The scars will always be on your soul. They will simply not be visible any longer to our eyes. They hurt me. Seeing them *hurts* me because of the pain I once inflicted on you. I know despite any protestations on your part that they hurt you as well when you see them in the mirror, or feel them when you touch your skin. I can stop that pain for both of us. Why won't you let me?" he finished gently.

Vin-Chay blew out the breath he'd been holding during Pyke's last thoughts. He stared at the ceiling for a while, conscious that Pyke was letting him think and not pushing for an immediate answer. He turned back to Pyke, bit his lower lip, and then answered.

"I don't know," he said slowly. "I, I'm not sure why I'm resisting you. Maybe I do consider them a badge of honor. Maybe I'm afraid that if they're gone from my sight they'll fade from my heart and that would weaken me, weaken my resolve. I don't know."

"They won't fade from your heart, Vin-Chay," Pyke said softly. "They won't fade from either of our hearts, ever. We both have to live with that night. I think it can be a little easier for both of us, and it's something I really want to do. Would you please let me?"

"There's another consideration," Vin-Chay responded after a moment, looking at Pyke expectantly.

"And that would be?" Pyke asked.

"How am I supposed to explain to Cassian—my friend—that I'm having my scars removed while his—which are significantly worse than mine—need to remain on his body? I already have so much more than he, and he's my comrade. I don't think I can add to his burden of slavery by blithely going off to have my body fixed while his remains damaged."

"Vin-Chay—is that your concern? God's Blood! All right. All *right*! I'll have Cassian go through the procedure as well and pay for it, as long as TutMose has no objections. And I can't see why he would. It's up to you to convince Cassian to not be as stubborn as his princeling friend. But—if you can't convince him, I still want you to go through with it. Will you agree to that? Hmm?"

Vin-Chay nodded slowly, and smiled slightly at the comical look of relief on Pyke's face.

"Good. Then I'll contact the Mediplex tomorrow to begin the procedures and with any luck and timing you will be back to as you were, skin-wise, within a week or two. Stubborn Osiran," he finished as he reached over and dimmed his bed light so that they could get some sleep. After the emotional conversation and feelings they had experienced tonight, he doubted that his consort would be too interested in a strenuous bout of lovemaking. Pyke yawned and turned over on his side to sleep, and was pleased when Vin-Chay wrapped himself around him to sleep in their usual intimate manner. After a few moments Vin-Chay nuzzled Pyke's throat and back, and ran a demanding, skillful hand along the inside of Pyke's right thigh, firmly encircling and stroking the Ptolemii's impressively erect love warrior. Pyke laughed out loud as he turned and they began a heated coupling that lasted for hours.

CHAPTER TWO

“Hell, yes, I’ll go through with it. I’m not crazy, princeling,” Cassian declared without a second’s hesitation when Vin-Chay proposed the surgical procedure. Vin-Chay had expected some kind of resistance, and was momentarily taken by surprise at his friend’s eager agreement to the therapy that Pyke had proposed. He narrowed his eyes and cocked his head at Cassian, who sighed and put down his sander, pausing at the smoothing of the wooden tabletop he was creating in the back yard enclosure of TutMose’s apartment. He rose from his squatting position and faced Vin-Chay with arms crossed and a semi-exasperated look on his face.

“Do you think I enjoy having my body covered with these scars any more than you do?” Cassian asked easily.

“No, of course not. I just thought—”

“You just thought that I’d get my pride and warrior arrogance up at the thought of accepting some kind of charity from a Ptolemii enemy who already has too much power over us?” Cassian replied pointedly.

“I suppose I did. I suppose I’d based your response on my own, and this has been a sticky issue between Pyke and me for a long time now. I had my own ‘pride and warrior arrogance’ to get past to accept his offer,” Vin-Chay reluctantly admitted to his now-grinning friend.

“But I don’t have the same issues as you do, or the same measure of pride, perhaps. And perhaps I feel that the Ptolemii owe me for the undue pain and suffering and dishonorable treatment that they’ve inflicted over a couple of years. I’m not averse to collecting on that debt, one way or another.”

“Pyke wasn’t part of that dishonorable treatment, though,” Vin-Chay said carefully. He momentarily contemplated telling Cassian about the secret missive that Pyke had sent to Hitii back on Canaan. That alternative to execution may have thrust the two men and their companions into bondage, but it had saved their lives. He let the moment pass.

Cassian shrugged casually. “Probably not. And it’s probably not the time to get into his part in dispersing our people here or to Sekmet, either. So I’ll just let that drop and ask—when do we start?”

"Tomorrow. He's made an appointment at the Mediplex to have skin samples harvested for growth and we'll be able to get some idea of when the full procedure can take place. He talked to TutMose about it and the sub-commander has no problem with this." Vin-Chay looked directly at Cassian, an eyebrow raised. "He even requested to pay part of the cost because he doesn't feel it's right for Pyke—"

"To have to pay any costs for maintaining *his* slave, right?"

"I won't try to fathom TutMose's reasons for anything. You know him better than I do. Whatever his reasons are, and whatever his failings are, I would say he's doing as right as he can by you under these circumstances."

"I suppose so," Cassian agreed reluctantly, feeling suddenly disquieted by the whole subject of TutMose. Vin-Chay could sense his anxiety, and decided to leave soon and let his friend finish his work. He needed to pick Cobahr up at the Pre-Academy in an hour so that they could make it home before Pyke returned for the day. Unlike most high-ranking Ptolemii, Pyke had agreed to Vin-Chay's request that Cobahr should attend a communal academy with a variety of other children. They selected that less common method of educational indoctrination rather than engaging a solitary virtual academy at home. That more common choice would have served the little boy's educational needs fairly well, but would have denied him the necessary company of other children and adults at an impressionable time in his life. And, they both knew, their cloistered family existence far from the central hub of civilization wasn't necessarily the best environment in which Cobahr would thrive.

But first Vin-Chay needed to check on Cassian's progress with the web. As his fellow Osiran turned to retrieve his sander he asked casually, "Any luck in finding potential medtechs for the two remaining quatra-cells?"

Cassian shook his head as he carefully adjusted the smoothing level of his sander and turned back to Vin-Chay. "No, but Patri Julan is still making covert inquiries and may have something by next week's sabbat ceremony. You'll be there? We'll get a chance to see Jor-Rue and Burran and see what they've managed since last month."

Vin-Chay felt his spirits rise at the mention of their other two *Remus* comrades. Two months after he had first returned from Ammurabbi Pyke had surprised him one night in bed by telling him that he had checked the Thrallplex Registry and found that both Jor-Rue and Burran were located in Thebes. Further inquiries had found the two men in good health and being fairly well treated in their respective enslavements. Jor-Rue employed his engineering skills as a harried tram mechanism renovator under his owner, an overseer for the government

facility that ran the underground system. Burran was using his skills of patience and talent for languages to tutor the three children of his owner, a widow with a high-pressure job in the government and no time to expend on her intelligent but rowdy children. Patri Julan contacted the two men, and with varying degrees of difficulty they had persuaded their slaveowners to allow them to attend religious services at the temple where the four warriors now met to converse and attend to 'the plan.' The contact had done much for all involved, and Burran in particular was relieved beyond measure to find Vin-Chay in good health and circumstances. Neither he nor Jor-Rue was ever told by Vin-Chay or Cassian of any of the painful details of either of the latter two men's early captivity. It was pointless, and could divert them from their goals.

"I'll be there," Vin-Chay replied as Cassian led him back through the house and bid him good-bye at the front door before returning to his work.

Cassian sanded the hard, red wood for more than an hour, occasionally running his hand over the completed areas until he was satisfied that the finish was as smooth as lucitium, and that all the corners of the nine-sided slab were perfectly aligned. He measured and eyed the slab critically until he was certain that it was faultless, then turned it over and marked out the nine spaces where the leg holes would be located. He used the new drill that TutMose had purchased for him the previous week to dig out the holes, then he sanded and corrected them for another hour until he was satisfied that they, too, were up to his standards. He would work on the legs tomorrow.

He checked the chronometer and realized that his beleaguered master would be home soon. He put away his tools and covered the tabletop with a soft protective cloth, then ascended to the second tier of the apartment. He removed his damp, dirty work clothes so that he could bathe off the effects of his day's work. This new apartment, which TutMose had bought and moved them into six months earlier, was far more spacious than the Ptolemii's old residence, and Cassian had his own second-tier noxchamber and sanichamber down a short hallway from TutMose's. He stripped and tossed his clothes on the floor then moved quickly into the shower, and let the hot water stream down his body for a long time. Ever since his time in the filthy 'living' quarters of the quarry, he had a passion for being clean. He spent as much time as possible cleansing himself, often to the annoyed grumbling of his housemate, who couldn't understand the concept of bathing three or four times each day. He completed his shower and changed into a simple, casual skort, tunic and softboots, then descended to the nutrichamber to prepare the evening meal.

Cassian found himself contemplating the technical work he needed to complete the table and matching chairs, as commissioned by a High Scribe in the Pharonic compound. He had other furniture orders to fill afterwards, and thought again how the strange twists of fate had manipulated his life into something he had never expected nor wanted. *How odd*, he thought as he sliced the succulent meat for baking. *I have turned into my father, only not*. He smiled, thinking about how TutMose of all people had been his curse and his savior.

Vin-Chay had been back only a month when he appeared one day at the old apartment, asking if Cassian could make some kind of toy chest for Cobahr. He knew from academy days that Cassian had covertly dabbled in woodworking as a hobby, and he preferred to have something special and distinctive for the little boy's toys rather than purchasing a pre-fabricated item from some Theban vendor. He didn't add that he thought that Cassian also needed some kind of challenge, besides taking care of the sub-commander's household and thinking about 'the plan,' to keep his mind and body active. Cassian was reluctant at first, but then agreed and provided Vin-Chay with a list of raw materials. They were delivered the next day. Cassian moved them to a spare corner in the back yard enclosure and ignored them for a few days before he decided that he did need something to occupy his free time, and checked them out. They met his needs, and cautiously he began preparing the materials and designing the chest that Vin-Chay had in mind.

TutMose was completely oblivious to the handicraft activity taking place under his roof until he came home early one day and found Cassian out back sanding and measuring, completely unaware of his owner's careful scrutiny of his efforts. It took a good fifteen minutes for Cassian to become aware that he was being watched. When he did become aware, TutMose saw that he was upset and embarrassed by his efforts being observed by the Ptolemii. He seemed as though he was going to stop what he was doing, but TutMose shook his head and waved his hand, indicating that he should continue. Cassian hesitated, half-rising from the ground where he had been finishing a chest side, then stayed where he was and continued working as TutMose went into the apartment to change, get a draught of ale, and join him in the yard to watch his work. The Ptolemii sat in a chair under his favorite tree as Cassian, although feeling somewhat conspicuous, went on with his work. They stayed in what was actually a relaxed and pleasant silence for a while until TutMose casually started a conversation.

"Did you learn this skill at the Osiron Military Academy? No wonder your people lose battles. You were supposed to be learning military skills," TutMose said with a sly glint in his eye as he downed the last of his ale and licked his lips.

Cassian looked up at him but decided not to rise to the bait and didn't answer. TutMose waited a few moments before pressing the issue. He was genuinely interested, and only used the bantering tone and words to provoke a response from his slave. He found Cassian to be an intelligent conversationalist and intellectually stimulating. He had always found such interpersonal characteristics to be pointless until his unexpected, long-term cohabitation with the Osiran. He loved baiting Cassian and spent a good deal of time trying to figure new ways to do it. He was generally rewarded with a sharp response, which only provoked back one of his own. This time, however, he failed to generate any response other than a very perceptible tensing of the man's jaw. It made him curious, so he pressed on.

"It is considered appropriate to answer your master's questions within a reasonable time," he said mildly.

"Or you'll beat me?" Cassian snapped, immediately regretting his response. TutMose was only joking with him. He had no idea what the problem was.

"Within a centimeter of your life, Osiran," TutMose answered casually, sensing something wrong here. He was more than curious now as he locked eyes with Cassian, who rarely dropped his own first. He did so now and seemed to bite his lower lip before answering.

"My father," he said curtly.

"Your father what?" TutMose said.

Cassian blew out a deep breath. "My father was a carpenter all his life. I learned some techniques from him."

"Really? What kind of work did he do? Furniture? Buildings?" *This is informative*, TutMose thought. *I know so little about this man's past. Perhaps this is the time to learn some new ways of getting to him. I sense potential here*, he thought, barely able to suppress a grin.

"Anything that would keep him in cups of ale and sensory-altering intoxicants," Cassian replied tightly. He could see that TutMose was surprised at his answer, and he wondered how far he should go to enlighten the Ptolemii. *Well, he probably couldn't think any less of me than he does now, so why not?*

"He wasn't a very good man," Cassian explained quietly.

TutMose cocked his head to one side, appraising his slave before asking incisively, "Did he beat you?"

Cassian smiled slightly. "Never more than three or four times a week. He needed to conserve his energies for my mother and sister, too."

TutMose was silent for a while as Cassian turned back towards his work and stared far off as he mechanically sanded the board smoothly and rhythmically. He watched the Osiran work intently, carefully avoiding his Ptolemii master's eyes. The sub-commander finally spoke in an almost gentle tone.

"Is he still alive? What about the rest of your family?"

"He's dead," Cassian answered in a flat tone. "He died of a pharomic overdose when I was in my second year at the academy. My mother died the year before. My older sister left home before that when she was seventeen and married the first abusive older male she could find. I think they had a couple of children by the time I shipped out on the *Remus*." The Osiran continued his smoothing movements with his left hand for a few minutes before putting down the sander and staring out into space without really seeing anything. He continued, almost as though to himself.

"He couldn't believe that I could actually get into the academy. He thought I was too stupid. He made it very clear that there wasn't any chance I would end up any better than he was. He demanded that I retract my application and find employment so that I could support him like he supported me for my life. If you could call it support. I refused. He beat the hell out of me that night for the last time, all the time telling me that I was going to be as much of a failure as he was. I left the house and never looked back. I had to hide out until the bruises healed because I was afraid some of my future classmates might see them and figure out that I really didn't belong there beside them."

Cassian absently rubbed his lower lip with his left hand as he went on. "I knew I wasn't stupid, but the academy was harder than I'd ever thought. It came easy to some people, like Vin-Chay, who just seemed to pull high grades without any effort. Maybe there was effort on his part, but it just didn't seem that way to me." Cassian smiled and nodded his head. "He helped me a lot. I was a year older but we were in the same class. He spent many hours tutoring me and getting me over the rough spots." He looked up at TutMose, locking eyes, ignoring the hint of sympathy in the older man's face.

"And I did make it. Not at the top of the class, but in the respectable middle. And I was invested in what was considered a good ship. I made it out of my old life, and I was going to have a better life than my father. I was never, *never* going to be my father." He paused and the faraway look intensified. "I was going to have a decent career, and marry a fine woman who wanted a good life, and we were going to have two children. A boy and a girl. The boy first. And I was going

to be a good father and husband to my family and keep them safe.” He finished quietly. “Funny how things turn out. My father would be thrilled beyond words that his arrogant son not only fell to his level but *surpassed* it in his status as a slave. I don’t think I could have come to any end that would have pleased him more or justified his lack of faith in me.” He smiled again and gave a soft laugh. “If there truly is an Afterlife, then my father is enjoying himself immensely right now.”

There was a long, uncomfortable silence as TutMose tried to determine how to respond to this painful honesty on Cassian’s part. The sympathy that Cassian had seen in his face was genuine, and he started seeing his slave in a new light. A very favorable light, TutMose mused as he contemplated the adversity that Cassian had overcome in both his free life and slave life to still remain what the Ptolemii now perceived as an unusual and strong person. He looked at the pieces of the chest that the Osiran was making and thought they looked very professional. That was something to be proud of.

“There’s nothing wrong with being a carpenter,” TutMose said sincerely, noting that Cassian seemed to groan inwardly at the words. “Being able to craft something from your imagination with your hands is—”

“Sub-Commander, please,” Cassian said shortly, looking up at him. “I would *honestly* rather you *do* beat me than try to torture me with false praise and make me believe that I’m anything more than a piece of chattel in this world or ever will be. I just don’t want to deal with that now. Or ever. Please?”

TutMose decided that now was not the right time to further his opinions, so he nodded and went into the apartment. As Cassian prepared their evening meal he contemplated what he could and couldn’t do to help this situation. He started to formulate a plan and found himself very pleased at his ingenuity. After they finished their meal—with barely a few sentences between them as Cassian told TutMose who the chest was for in monosyllabic responses to the Ptolemii’s questions—and Cassian was clearing away the plates, TutMose spoke.

“After you’ve finished that toy chest for Cobahr, I have another project for you.”

Cassian stopped short and looked at his Ptolemii master cautiously, waiting for whatever hellish request was about to be issued.

“I’ve needed a new dining table and chairs for quite a while, but I can’t find what I like from any of the vendors, and I’d rather have them custom-made anyway. So, I’ll describe to you what I want and you’ll make it.” TutMose grinned. “Since I own you, I won’t have to pay you, just buy the materials, and it’ll keep you occupied and out of my hair for a goodly time. Problem with that?”

"Would it matter if there were?" Cassian said in resignation. "As you said, you own me. You can dictate what I do every minute of every day. My problems aren't an issue, are they?"

"Excellent!" TutMose replied. "I'll draw pictures of what I want and you look them over and let me know what materials to order. You can start on it when you finish your current project. Oh, and I'll need candleholders, too. Maybe some hearthchamber tables." He looked at Cassian pointedly. "You're going to be very busy."

That night TutMose slept peacefully in his comfortable second-tier noxchamber and Cassian tossed and turned on the hearthchamber divan. The Osiran cursed the respective souls of his father, Vin-Chay and TutMose for visiting this latest indignity on him. He determined to do a miserable job on the toy chest but found that when he tried to, he couldn't, and he cursed Vin-Chay again as he worked for several days to produce a beautifully realized chest. It had no sharp edges, a smooth veneer, several hidden compartments, and a set of carved Osiran symbols on the front denoting Cobahr's name and lineage. It was truly a special item for the sweet child, and one that had been made by an Osiran craftsman proud of his own culture.

He had barely finished the chest when the raw materials for the table and chairs were delivered to the back enclosure. He tried to visualize from the crude drawings exactly what TutMose really wanted. He found himself reluctantly challenged by the design effort. He also found himself engaged in heated discussions with his Ptolemii master when he tried to suggest alternatives, and the headstrong TutMose proved to be a demanding but ultimately appreciative 'customer' who was more than pleased with the end result. TutMose also surprised Cassian when he gave him a decent amount of chits for his efforts and actually took him out to a hitherto unknown section of Thebes to browse and shop for personal items that he could now afford to choose and buy. The unexpected actions of the Ptolemii made Cassian a little less reluctant to work on the other items that TutMose wanted, not for the chits, but for the genuine consideration and appreciation that the man had shown him.

Cassian had no idea that TutMose had told some of his fellow warriors about his slave's woodworking abilities until the sub-commander started coming home with more 'projects' for him. TutMose always bargained with the 'customer' for an acceptable price for labor, and Cassian was surprised when his master turned over some of the chits to him, as he had for his own table and chairs. He put the remainder of the chits away for Cassian for "a non-nefarious emergency," and Cassian had no doubt that the Ptolemii was truly holding the chits for him if the

time came when he needed them. This state of affairs had gained TutMose a good deal of respect and appreciation in Cassian's eyes, and their odd home life became more settled, although the verbal sparring continued and increased to both of their unspoken enjoyments.

As Cassian removed the baked meat and vegetables from the oven he heard the front door open as TutMose entered the apartment. He heard the heavy sighing and dropping of a techbelt and pair of boots on the slick tile floor of the entryway, and he shook his head in frustration that his Ptolemii housemate would never simply place anything where it should be. TutMose just dropped his clothes wherever he happened to be, knowing that his slave was going to have to pick up after him every night. It was one of their games, predictable and harmless.

TutMose entered the nutrichamber and gave Cassian a satisfied look as the aromas of his evening meal hit him full force. He wondered if Pyke had managed to teach Vin-Chay to prepare food as decently as his own Osiran slave did. He'd have to wrangle another invitation to Pyke's home soon to check the situation out. Cassian watched him carefully as TutMose checked the meat by breaking off a piece and chewing it down quickly. He nodded his approval and sat down at the nutrichamber table to wait for Cassian to place the food on the plate and the plate in front of him. *God forbid he'd fill his own plate*, Cassian growled inwardly for the hundredth time as he complied with the unspoken expectations, then seated himself opposite his master. They began eating in quiet harmony as they always did. Meal times were peaceful in their Ptolemii-Osiran household. TutMose finished most of his meal before delving into their first topic of conversation for the night.

"I assume Pyke's slave has spoken to you about that medical procedure?" he queried. TutMose usually referred to Vin-Chay by his name and only used the derogatory title when he felt like starting some verbal sparring. Cassian usually rose to the bait but didn't tonight. He shrugged instead.

"He was here today and I agreed to it since you seemed to have no issues with it," he responded evenly. *At least I hope you have no issues with it*, he thought, suddenly wanting the reconstructive procedure more than anything at the moment. He wasn't sure why.

TutMose shook his head as he chewed the last creamed scallion and scraped his plate. "Hardly. It isn't very pleasant for me to have to see those damnable scars any more than it is for you. And since the commander wants to pay for most of it, I couldn't be happier." He looked at Cassian and raised an eyebrow. "Hopefully,

it will be done by the time the pageant starts so you can attend without your customary wristbands and long-sleeved, high-necked tunics.” Unlike Vin-Chay’s scars, which were confined to his back, Cassian’s extended past that and across his upper shoulders and arms, with several slashing across his chest and neck. He pretended to not particularly care about them, but he seldom wore any clothing that revealed even the smallest trace of the damage. He only looked in the mirror for as long as was necessary to maintain his clean-shaven looks.

“Attend the pageant?” he replied curiously. This was new. TutMose never mentioned wanting him to attend the Pharon’s festivities before. Unlike Vin-Chay, who balked at the idea of attending, Cassian was more than just a little curious and eager to see all of the planned, colorful celebration, but never thought it appropriate or possible that TutMose would want him to attend. He supposed it went back to his insecurities about growing up a commoner and never really being a part of any regal celebrations, unlike Vin-Chay and Jor-Rue, a distant cousin in one of the other Nine Kindreds, who had taken such things for granted.

“Why not?” TutMose answered as he reached for a cup of ale and met his slave’s eyes. “As a semi-high-ranking officer I’ll be there, and it’s customary for members of an attendee’s household to accompany him. There aren’t any regulations against that person being a slave as long as that slave promises to *behave himself*. Would there be any *problem* in that respect slave?”

“No,” Cassian said slowly. “None.”

“Good. Then it’s settled. Tomorrow after you get out of the Mediplex you can go to my tailor, who is expecting you, and be fitted for appropriate formal attire for the celebrations. There’s no reason for you to have to borrow any garments from your friend for this occasion, or at any time, for that matter. I can clothe you as needed.” TutMose pushed his chair away from the table noisily. “Now, I need to bathe and change since I have an important appointment in another part of town.”

“Chakrah’s?” Cassian asked casually as he rose to remove their plates, deliberately not meeting the Ptolemii’s eyes as he deposited them in the puri-corr. After nearly two years together, TutMose was as predictable as he was in that first month at Hartan. He enjoyed his volumes of neo-classical music; he relished the finest meals that his slave could prepare or that he could get in any of the prominent eateries in Thebes; and he loved the best sensual experiences his well-compensated position as a sub-commander could purchase at Chakrah’s. He rarely visited the brothel less than once per week, often in the company of the self-

important Zandran, who had returned from the Sekmet zone a year earlier after several minor skirmishes with Osiran forces.

TutMose rarely alluded to these visits and never elaborated on his experiences, and Cassian never inquired, as much for his own benefit as for his respect for TutMose's rightful privacy. It had been years since Cassian had had the opportunity to experience the pleasures of the flesh, between his assignment on the *Remus*, the incarceration on Canaan, and the enslavement on Ptolem. He pushed away any longings for such an encounter, which seemed unlikely under his present circumstances. He had to admit to himself that there were increasing periods of sexual cravings that at times he would have given anything to satisfy. He sometimes envied Vin-Chay his regular lovemaking with High Commander Pyke. He and Vin-Chay seldom spoke of the details, but Cassian was left with the general impression that Vin-Chay actually enjoyed his physical relationship with his captor. Vin-Chay seemed more than satisfied in his private life and desired no other partner in his bed, as incomprehensible as that would have appeared to just about anyone who knew of their situation. It was incomprehensible to Cassian for a long time until he had had time to observe the two of them together, when they were unaware of his scrutiny. And he listened beyond the mere words whenever Vin-Chay talked about his consort.

Cassian was left with even more unsettled feelings and needs, and on rare occasion he almost—almost—wished that TutMose would initiate an encounter that would relieve him of the increasing need and stress. But he had to admit that although he admired and actually liked TutMose, and enjoyed their bantering and strange coexistence, he desired what he had always desired—a woman. *God*, he thought—at *this point*, *any woman!* It was a given that tonight he would be bathing under an icy cold stream of water.

TutMose, who was gazing at him intently and thoughtfully, dragged him out of his reverie. *He wants what I'm going to have tonight*, TutMose realized. *How long has it been since he's had a woman, I wonder? If he ever has. No, he can't be chaste. Well, Vin-Chay was before Pyke. But something tells me Cassian wasn't and doesn't want to continue his enforced celibacy. I wonder.*

"That's none of your business, slave," TutMose answered snappishly. "Where I choose to go and what I choose to do and who I choose to do it with is only my concern. Understood?"

"Understood, master," Cassian replied, angry with himself for invading TutMose's privacy. *Stupid. Now I've offended him and that was the last thing on my mind. I'd better concentrate on thinking with my brain instead of my—*

“Good. I’ll be home in a few hours. Or not. At any rate I expect *you* to be in bed and get a good night’s sleep before your medical appointment and the rest of your daily chores around here, which seem to be suffering more than just a little because of your woodworking efforts.”

“But you encouraged those efforts,” Cassian said in a completely exasperated tone.

“Are you questioning my instructions, slave?” TutMose asked archly, hands on hips and a firm glare directed at the Osiran.

“No, master,” Cassian answered wearily. *I give up.*

“Good.” TutMose turned and left the chamber and the house shortly thereafter, making sure the front door closed as loudly as possible. Cassian winced at the sound then threw up his hands, completed his nightly chores, showered in ice cold water, and slid naked beneath his bed covers. He fell asleep after an hour of twisting and turning and groaning as he pushed long-forgotten memories of pleasant nightly interludes away from his mind and heart for the thousandth time.

Cassian was in a deep sleep when he felt someone sit down on the edge of his bed and shake him awake. A split second after he opened his eyes the light went on, and he saw that it was TutMose who had awakened him. He tried to focus his sleep-filled eyes on the Ptolemii, who was giving him an odd half-smile as he swallowed down the last of the goblet of annise that he was drinking. Cassian felt no fear or annoyance, only curiosity. He could smell the sweet scent of perfume on TutMose, who must just have returned from Chakrah’s. He surmised that TutMose was more than just a little intoxicated, and that concerned him, since the sub-commander rarely over-imbibed and when he did, he always awoke to an impressive headache and snappish behavior the next day.

“Can I—get something for you, master?” Cassian asked cautiously, wondering if he was going to have to undress TutMose and push him under a cold shower and how he was ever going to manage that.

TutMose’s smile widened. “No, but I have something for you. Something you’ve been wanting for a long time and that I should’ve given to you sooner.” His words were a little slurred and for the first time Cassian felt alarmed, but he remained alert and unmoving on the bed as he eyed the Ptolemii warily. TutMose rose unsteadily from the bed and tried to drain his already empty goblet. When he realized it was empty, he put it down awkwardly on the stand next to Cassian’s bed and weaved to the door of the noxchamber. He left the chamber for a few seconds then returned, pulling someone back into the chamber with him.

Cassian's jaw dropped. It was a young woman. A stunningly beautiful woman in her early twenties, with waist-length red hair, a heart-shaped face, flawless skin, and eyes like sparkling green jewels. She gave him a professional smile as Tut-Mose gently urged her towards the bed. He grinned at Cassian and said, "Enjoy," before he left the chamber, shutting the door definitively behind him. Cassian and the woman stared at one another for a few awkward moments. He felt her appraising eyes on his obvious scars and a brief moment of shame passed over him. She smiled gently and unfastened a single clasp at the top of her robe, dropped it to the floor, and walked over to his bed. In a smooth movement she turned off the light and slid under the covers next to him and began the well-compensated and skillful exertions that would last until dawn.

CHAPTER THREE

Retirement had been a long time in coming, but the exceptionally generous pension and residence in the coveted Nubian Valley made Supreme Commander Hititian DeMumahd believe that it was well worth the years of service under this Pharon and his father. No other profession would have garnered him such recognition, wealth and power. He hoped that Pyke understood just what opportunities were available to him and how he could make the most out of them. He had tried to be a good mentor to the young High Commander and thought that he had succeeded well. Pyke's victories and potential had benefited them both. That was the key: mutual benefit. Pyke still needed to learn that, and probably would after a few mistakes along the line. He still had a far ways to go, and Hitii hoped he would know which were the right roads to choose to get to wherever his ultimate destination might be, as well as to which persons he should be eternally grateful.

The duties he had been performing for eight months as unofficial head of Interior Security—a position that was about to become officially and visibly recognized during the upcoming celebrations—had shown that Pyke had been a wise choice to oversee the Ptolemii population. Once given the power to make changes, he had restructured the administrative organization of the internal military, established several dozen more key miliposts in strategic locations, and replaced a number of underachieving officers with those from his own command and from recent graduating classes at the academy. He had dealt swiftly and efficiently with a few more dissident and other unrelated problems in Thebes and in the provinces, and had managed to quell the internal disturbances. Since the off-world situation was still so unsettled, the smoothing of the Ptolemaic waters was considered a major accomplishment. The Pharon had a well-deserved sense of security and order.

Yes, Hitii thought as he stared out at the lovely view from his immense Miliplex office, *Pyke will go far—if only he can get past his unreasonable attachment to his Osiran slave*. A minor thing, in the general scheme of life, but still one that was an obstacle to Pyke's smooth ascension to a powerful and financially rewarding lifestyle such as the one Hitii had enjoyed for well over forty years. Thank-

fully, it wasn't a situation known to most people, who were only aware that Pyke had taken an Osiran warrior slave to serve in his household. Most outsiders simply thought it was a simple relationship wherein Pyke was administering a very personal punishment against a warrior rebel who opposed the Pharoncy. Although most people were surprised at Pyke's taking of a slave, since he had been known to respectfully oppose the institution, they approved and even applauded such retribution against an enemy. Few knew the true personal matter that bound them, that the Osiran was the son of the man who had been responsible for the death of Pyke's wife. It wasn't uncommon knowledge that the Osiran was from a royal house, but there were many warriors who were so related in one distant way or another.

But few knew that Vin-Chay was actually the son of Crown Prince Chay Shayne. Hitii did, of course, and Pyke's trusted sub-commanders, and several of Pyke's ranking peers in the military. And, of course, the Pharon knew as well. The ruler of Ptolem had thoroughly enjoyed the irony of the situation when Hitii had informed him of the details, and Amun seemed to gleefully relish the possibility of abuse, humiliation and retribution that one of his own could inflict on a despised member of the Osiran Separatae rebellion.

Hitii never pressed Pyke for any details of his relationship with the Osiran, but he knew that Pyke was bedding him and had been since their time together on Canaan. He had never told Pyke the truth about his flagship's diversion to Canaan while on its way home to Ptolem. He had never told him that upon reviewing the records of the warrior prisoners there he had stumbled upon the Crown Prince's son, and had seen the possibilities in throwing him together with the commander whose wife had been killed by his father's aggressive battle commands. He liked Pyke and thought he'd give him a chance at revenge by putting him together with a personal enemy. He knew Pyke would find out the prisoner's relationship to Chay Shayne with his usual methodical means of evaluating a situation; Pyke would read the warriors' files and find the connection.

Pyke had not disappointed him, but the game had taken a strange turn. Hitii had thought that Pyke might either beat or torture or kill the young man; he had never expected him to take the prisoner to his bed and then later his household. But, perhaps, that had worked out even better in the long run. Now, if only there was a way that he could get word to the Crown Prince that one of his precious offspring was the slave and whore of a Ptolemii High Commander, that would be perfect. And, he would love to send along the medical holographs from the Osiran's stay at the Mediplex. If the sight of his ravaged, brutalized son didn't spark rage and horror in Chay Shayne, nothing would. The Crown Prince would be

devastated. Too bad there was no way to exchange databank files between the two opposing factions. Hitii would have to keep this plan in mind in case he ever figured a way to accomplish this in his retirement household in Nubia.

Hitii grunted in satisfaction at the pleasant thoughts. He would have a great deal of free time to scheme and plot in a few weeks. He didn't intend to keep his hands entirely out of politics and the security forces he had helped to mold over nearly a half century. There was no reason he couldn't continue to support Pyke and his other protégés from afar, and it would keep his mind active. Given the current state of war affairs, he believed that his assistance would always be welcomed. In between such sought-after consultations, he would keep himself occupied enjoying the rare pleasures of his own young slave. Perhaps he would purchase another, and have them engage in special performances for his amusement. His friends and family would attend, of course, and partake of the bounty of sensuality that a wealth of chits and depraved creativity could purchase. He licked his lips; he couldn't wait to return to his residence that night and reinforce his ownership of his chattel. He had a few new ideas that he wanted to try, and perhaps he'd have his inept son assist. The teenager was hopeless; he'd be better off pinning his aspirations for immortality on his smart young daughter. He had to force himself to return his concentration to the urgent matters at hand, though.

The rebel forces breached the perimeter line near Osiron several times, and Ptolemii contingents had been pushed farther back, nearly to Sekmet. They had managed to hold the mineral planet, however, and kept the Osirans at bay and unable to procure any additional berrillium fuel, although Ptolem had been stockpiling it for years. The alternate fuel that Osiron had seemed to have developed wasn't as powerful as berrillium, but it did seem to serve the needs of propelling the rebellious forces towards their offworld conflict. Three Ptolemii vessels and four Osiran ones had been destroyed in the fighting of the last eight months, with upwards of two thousand Ptolemii warriors killed and an estimated likewise number of Osirans. There were rumors that some Ptolemii warriors had been taken prisoner from at least one disabled ship and taken to Osiron for incarceration, but these rumors were not confirmed. Hitii believed this to be true, as well as the fact that the commander of the ship had been able to destroy all databank records so as not to provide the enemy with any key data that would aid the cause of the rebellion. Osirans had also been taken in battle and brought to Ptolem for enslavement; at least well over a hundred warriors were processed and purchased. Hitii had checked their records, but unfortunately there were no other members of Chay Shayne's family taken. *Pity*, he thought. *I wonder what it would*

have been like to bed one of Pyke's princeling's brothers or sisters, the younger the better. Ah, well, the war isn't over yet.

Hitii's one regret was that he wasn't able to be part of a diplomatic delegation that was going to meet with a similar Osiran one at a neutral location on Isiin. Although the Pharon was not well disposed towards this conciliatory direction, and apparently neither were most of the Council of Nine on Osiron, the frustrated populations of both planets had been clamoring for some kind of resolution. Osiron proposed a diplomatic meeting six months earlier, through a cumbersome relay of intermediary ships. After much consideration and plotting and stalling and maneuvering, the Pharon had agreed to have his representatives meet with Osiran ones to discuss issues and potential treaties. Hitii was one of the few people in the royal ring of power who knew that this was just a tactic on Amun's part to bide his time and plan for an eventual strike that would resolve the conflict totally in his favor—complete subjugation of Osiron and its people. The Pharon was not about to give up his hold on any of his planets. He might pretend to placate his people and his enemies by appearing reasonable, but that was not the true case. It never would be. Amun would never surrender the slightest degree of his power. Covert actions were already underway to advance that directive.

Hitii knew that Pyke had no idea of this, and he wondered what the High Commander would think if he did know. And what he would do. He had no doubt of Pyke's loyalty to his Pharon, but he also knew that Pyke believed in his heart that perhaps the two worlds should *be* two separate worlds and only have independent relations with each other through diplomacy, treaties, and free trade. He wondered if Pyke realized the consequences of this as they would pertain to his personal life. Undoubtedly, the Osirans would demand the emancipation and return of their Ptolem-bound citizens. That would mean that Pyke would have to give up his own slave. And Hitii doubted at this point if that was something that Pyke even wanted to consider. Perhaps that fear alone would keep the man in line. Hitii hoped so. There was discussion recently that perhaps Pyke should take part in this delegation of facade that was scheduled to leave Ptolem a few days after the celebrations. Interior Security was well in hand, and Hitii and his superiors trusted that the High Commander would acquit himself well in dealing with these rebels. Perhaps Hitii should push for this. Or not. There was still the unknown factor of Pyke's reaction to meeting Crown Prince Chay Shayne in person. *But*, Hitii grinned, *that might be fun*. His comrades had left the final decision up to him, and on a whim Hitii decided to send Pyke to Isiin. He wished he could be at the meeting between the two men. He would surrender a

year's pension to watch that meeting. Two years' pension if Pyke's slave-whore could also be present.

He finished his daily administrative work before summoning Pyke to his office very late in the day. He gave the younger officer a wide grin as Pyke entered and formally saluted his mentor before seating himself in front of Hitii's huge desk. Pyke respected Hitii despite his qualms at the old man's often-capricious attitudes towards just about everything. He waited patiently for his mentor to get to whatever the point of this meeting was going to be. Part of Pyke wished guiltily that Hitii's retirement would come quickly. Hitii grinned at Pyke, cocked his head to one side, and rubbed his hands together almost theatrically.

"I hope you have no special plans for a month or two after the Pharon's celebration next week, my friend," Hitii said pleasantly.

"No," Pyke answered cautiously, suddenly alert as he recognized Hitii's too-often heard tone of voice. "*Will* I have, My Lord?" He waited uneasily as Hitii paused dramatically.

"You will shortly. You have had the good fortune to be appointed to the Isiin delegation that will leave after the festivities. I have no doubt you will acquit yourself well in this critical mission—this very *visible*, critical mission."

Pyke was stunned. He had never expected this. He had severe qualms about this entire diplomatic process, because something inside told him that it wasn't what it seemed to be on the surface, a genuine attempt by Ptolem to pursue the cessation of hostilities with Osiron. That, and the fact that one of the key negotiators for Osiron was a hated enemy. And Vin-Chay's father. He felt his stomach turn into knots as he fought to maintain a neutral face for his superior officer, who seemed to see straight through him. There was no way he could win in a situation like this. He couldn't refuse to go, or even put up the slightest protest. And if he went, there was only the barest chance that he wouldn't do something to incite a confrontation with Chay Shayne. Hitii knew this. And that was undoubtedly why Hitii chose him to go. *Manipulative old bastard*, he thought before inclining his head in acceptance.

"I will do my best to represent my Pharon and my world. You should have no doubts that I will perform objectively and professionally and do what you want me to do. I am honored. Thank you."

"Excellent," Hitii replied, enjoying himself immensely. Three years' worth. "We will meet tomorrow with Sheban and the other participants to discuss issues and strategy, so keep your entire day free." Hitii rose in a dismissive gesture, and Pyke followed suit. As he started to leave Hitii stopped him with a few well-cho-

sen, casual words. "How is your son doing? He must be what now—four? Five?" *A beautiful, perfect age for ... training.*

"Five, sir," Pyke replied warily, immediately on guard.

"How time goes by! It must be a pleasure for you to have him with you at long last." *No doubt his skin is as soft as silk ...*

"Yes," Pyke said evenly. "Very much of a pleasure. He's a fine child. Very intelligent. Very nice."

"And very well taken care of, I dare say. I understand your slave is a constant tutor and companion for the boy." Hitii's eyes twinkled. "As well as a special, *intimate* companion for you."

Pyke stiffened. "Yes, My Lord," he said flatly.

"Good. It's nice to have constant companionship. It would be a shame to have that taken away by some unfortunate set of circumstances—like unreasonable demands in some unwarranted peace treaty. Fortunately, that's not something you really have to worry about, is it?"

Pyke understood completely. "No. No, it isn't, sir. Well, good day. I will attend you as required first thing in the morning." Pyke inclined his head and left Hitii's office, feeling nauseous at any affection or respect he had ever felt for the hateful old man. *I've been a stupid fool in too many ways*, he thought savagely as he broke into the fresh, hot air outside the Miliplex and entered the commandcraft that headed him towards home.

When his navigator dropped him off he waited outside a few moments before entering, just enough time to collect his thoughts and put on his personal neutral face to prevent Vin-Chay from inferring any problem. He had absolutely no idea how he was going to approach this with his consort, who was already agitated about the diplomatic mission and what results it might or might not produce. Despite their close relationship for nearly three years, and the fact that he felt he could read Vin-Chay extremely well under almost any circumstance, he had no idea whatsoever how his princeling was going to react upon learning that his captor was going to come face to face with his father. Pyke was going to be in the presence of a man whom Vin-Chay would have sold his soul to be in the same chamber with for five seconds.

He entered the house and found it silent, which was unusual. He relaxed when he looked out of the hearthchamber doors and saw Vin-Chay and Cobahr in the back enclosure under a shaded canopy. Vin-Chay was practicing some relaxation and exercise techniques and was teaching Cobahr the basics. Pyke watched them move slowly and methodically and took a great deal of satisfaction from the concentration and effort that his young son was making at such a com-

plex activity. Vin-Chay was as patient as usual, and only had to move to correct Cobahr's movements a couple of times. He noticed Pyke watching them and motioned that they would be only a moment, then led Cobahr in finishing the set of exercises before he pointed to the house so the boy could see his father watching. Cobahr gave Pyke an unaffected smile, which made the commander's heart clutch painfully. He thought, in wonder, how much he had come to love his son. His life was so full now, and unless he was very careful and did what was expected of him, he could lose it all. At the very least, half of his life.

"Father!" Cobahr yelled excitedly, abandoning his usual reserve around his distant and occasionally frightening parent as Vin-Chay slid the door open to admit them to the hearthchamber. "Did you see us?! I didn't fall *once* this time!"

Pyke smiled. He picked the boy up and kissed his flushed cheek. "I saw. You were very good." He looked at Vin-Chay and spoke in Osiran so that Cobahr wouldn't understand him. "So were you. Very well coordinated. I'm assuming you aren't overdoing the stretching while your back heals," he said pointedly.

Vin-Chay shook his head and answered back in his birth language. "The skin's still pretty tender, but it's pliable and the physicians told me I needed to 'exercise' it to ensure the flexibility and healing. I won't overdo it, I promise." He grinned widely. "I dare say I'll be able to best you quite soon in one of our sword-play contests in the back enclosure." During the past year Pyke had instituted a number of physical contests between them to challenge their bodies and minds. Vin-Chay's favorite exercise involved wielding the heavy, old-style swords in Pyke's ancient weaponry collection. Their intense, exhilarating clashes of skill and cunning were a mainstay in their exciting relationship. Up to this point Pyke was always the winner in this particular 'game,' but they both knew that Vin-Chay's growing prowess with the deadly, ancient weapon would supersede his consort's in only a very short time. They both looked forward to the time when they would be able to teach Cobahr the basics of this time-honored method of self-defense. Vin-Chay refused to watch the so-called 'contests of skill and honor' transmitted nightly from the coliseum. Neither he nor Pyke could stomach the brutality and bloodshed meant to both pacify and fire up the pernicious masses, and what they said about the current Ptolemii civilization.

"Good," said Pyke, switching back to Ptolemii as he put Cobahr down and smiled at the pleasant reference to one of their enjoyable pastimes. "I know I'm later than usual, so I expect you two have already eaten?"

"Cobahr has, but I thought I'd wait for you," Vin-Chay answered.

"Good. Cobahr, why don't you go to your chamber and play while Papa and I eat? We can read together later and maybe play a game or two?"

Cobahr grinned, and Pyke thought that his son looked so much like his beautiful mother. He forced back a welling of sorrow and loss as the boy ran off to his noxchamber, leaving the two men alone. Vin-Chay followed Pyke into the nutrichamber as the commander filled two plates for them and sat opposite his consort at the nutrichamber table. They ate quietly, each enjoying the sole company of the other. As much as they loved and wanted Cobahr to be with them, there were times when they enjoyed being alone together other than in their noxchamber.

Despite Pyke's best efforts, Vin-Chay realized almost immediately that the Ptolemii had something disquieting on his mind. He could read Pyke's face easily. He decided to let his companion approach the matter in his own way and his own time. He didn't sense any upset directed at him, so he relaxed as he finished his food before Pyke did. He refilled Pyke's cup with citrine juice and watched him eat.

Pyke chewed slowly as though prolonging the meal would make the problem go away. He decided to skirt the issue for a little while longer. He swallowed the last of his bread and queried Vin-Chay on a favorite subject.

"So how is Cassian's healing progressing? You saw him today, I assume?" he asked, knowing that this was a standard day of work for the two of them at the temple.

"Aye," Vin-Chay replied. "He's doing well." Vin-Chay smiled. "He's started studying his face in the mirror now that the scar there is just barely visible. It should blend in with the rest of his cheek within a month or two. It makes more difference to him than you could imagine, although I don't think he'd ever admit that." He paused. "Any more than I would."

"A stubborn Osiran?" Pyke raised his eyebrows. "How *unusual*."

Vin-Chay raised his own eyebrows at the good-natured jab, but decided to not retaliate. Pyke was stalling, and he was curious now about what. He wasn't going to add to the postponement of whatever conversation was on the immediate horizon for them. Instead he just grinned and took their plates away as Pyke finished his steaming java. They loaded the puri-corr together then left the nutrichamber and went into the hearthchamber, where Cobahr had taken up residence as he studied a child's version of the Strategum boardgame he had set down in front of the fireplace. Vin-Chay dropped down on his stomach beside him and moved the board pieces slowly to their proper locations for one side of the contest, allowing Cobahr to do the same for the other side. The child only made two placement mistakes, which was exceptional for one of his age. Vin-Chay marveled anew at the child's innate intelligence and at how quickly he picked up on even difficult theoretical and actual challenges. He was his father's son.

Pyke settled himself in his favorite chair and watched the man and boy on the floor engage in the simple contest. Like Vin-Chay, he, too, marveled at his son's abilities, but attributed them mainly to the constant mentoring and patience of the child's beloved companion. Vin-Chay was doing an excellent job of raising Cobahr. This thought brought another wave of anxiety over Pyke as he considered what he and his son stood to lose. At one point Vin-Chay looked up at him and caught the disquiet in his eyes, and Pyke knew he had caught it. Pyke sighed inwardly. They'd have to get it out into the open right away. Vin-Chay sensed this, too, and ended the game with Cobahr as soon as possible and decided to forego their nightly lessons and story. Cobahr was tired anyway and so didn't protest when Vin-Chay gave him his bath and then put him down for the night a little earlier than usual. He was asleep almost as soon as Vin-Chay dimmed the noxchamber light and gently closed the door.

Pyke was still in his chair in front of the fireplace, sipping a third small goblet of annise. Vin-Chay frowned. Pyke usually didn't drink that much spirits in such a short time. He smoothly took the goblet from Pyke's hand and finished the annise himself before sitting down cross-legged on the floor in front of his Ptolemii owner. He admired the way the firelight flickered across Pyke's pale eyes, sending ribbons of color across them, and making them seem even more animated than usual. Pyke's eyes were the one place where his passion was nearly always visible. The rest of his face was rarely anything but closed.

"So," Vin-Chay asked softly, "what's preying on your mind tonight, master?"

Pyke smiled. "You know me too well, princeling."

"In more ways than one, Commander," Vin-Chay smiled back. He pulled off Pyke's boots and stockings, and began gently kneading his consort's tired, swollen feet.

Pyke signed in audible pleasure at his mate's tactile ministrations. He nodded. "Very well. I could skirt the issue but you already know that something is up, and in the spirit of our professed mutual honesty, I suppose I should just come right out with it." He paused for the briefest of moments before going on. "I have just been appointed to the Isiin delegation. I should be leaving Ptolem for a month or two shortly and—"

Vin-Chay released Pyke's feet and stood up quickly, his lips parted slightly. "You are going?" He stared hard at his silent companion. "You will be meeting with the Osiran delegation. With my father," he ended slowly, meeting Pyke's eyes directly. Pyke nodded wordlessly, allowing Vin-Chay to get together the hundred thoughts that had to be crashing around in his mind at the moment. Vin-Chay was momentarily disoriented as he absorbed the implications of this

new development. He sat back down and both men remained unspeaking until Vin-Chay was able to ask his first question.

"What are you going to do when you meet him?" he asked evenly.

Pyke met the challenge in his eyes. "Vin-Chay, I simply won't know that until it happens. I can think of a thousand scenarios that could or should happen, but these are all pointless mind games until the moment in time happens when one such scenario becomes a reality. I don't know what I'm going to do."

"Will you tell him that I'm alive?" Vin-Chay asked pointedly.

"I don't know if I will or if I even should," Pyke replied.

"*Should?*" Vin-Chay snapped heatedly. "My father has probably been under the impression that I have been dead for almost four years and you have the opportunity to tell him the truth and alleviate that pain, and you need to think about whether you *should* do it or not?"

"And replace that pain with the knowledge of your captivity and the current circumstances of your life? That is more humane in your opinion?"

"The truth is often inhumane, but it is still the truth. I prefer it, and my father would prefer it, and you and I had an agreement on it."

"An agreement between us—that never included your father, or anyone else." Pyke stood up suddenly. "It's pointless to argue about this. My participation is a given. I have no choice in the matter. What I will or won't do when I get there is not something that has to be decided tonight. I could have kept this from you, you know. At least for a while. You would be leaving for Ammurabbi just before I had to leave and wouldn't have known anything about it until I returned. Probably."

"Possibly. And there would have been an even bigger issue between us over that once you did return. So I guess I should be grateful that you brought it up now. But we do need to talk about this. It's important to me," Vin-Chay ended softly.

Pyke nodded. "I know it is. It's important to me, too. But I warned you a long time ago that my duties to my ruler had to supersede my obligations to you, and this may be one of those times. If I can balance them both and act honorably within the boundaries of my duties, I may be able to address your desires and needs. But maybe not. I won't promise anything until we've both thought this out. Agreed? *Agreed?*"

"Agreed," Vin-Chay said, reluctantly.

"Good," Pyke said, relieved. "I know you want to discuss this more tonight, but I'm just too tired and I don't want to. So let's pick this matter up tomorrow after I get home."

"Very well," Vin-Chay conceded, and followed Pyke upstairs to the noxchamber, where both men silently prepared for bed. They were both tired and the new issue that had just arisen between them made both of them tense and anxious. They lay next to one another for an hour before Vin-Chay fell into a restive sleep.

Pyke stayed awake for another hour, hoping that he wouldn't show his stress to Hitii and his other comrades at their meeting tomorrow. He ran the questions and answers and problems over and over in his mind for most of the night until he came to a decision and at last was able to sleep.

Vin-Chay awoke alone in bed the next morning, and he surmised that Pyke had deliberately left earlier than usual to prevent a resurgence of their conflict. He was glad in a way, because he needed the time alone to gather his own thoughts. He deposited Cobahr in Pre-Academy early in the morning, and then commlinked with Cassian to say that he wouldn't be able to meet him as planned at the temple. He spent most of the day in quiet contemplation at the Thebes apartment before picking up Cobahr and returning home late in the day. Pyke was already there and Vin-Chay ushered Cobahr into his noxchamber for a while so the two men could continue their discussion. He didn't have a chance to start in again before Pyke held up a hand for silence and addressed him.

"First, I want your word that no one will know of this," Pyke said evenly.

"Know of what?" Vin-Chay asked.

"Never mind what. I just want your word before we go any further." Pyke looked Vin-Chay directly in the eyes. "Trust me."

"You have my word that whatever transpires during and after this conversation will remain only between us," Vin-Chay replied carefully.

Pyke seemed to be appraising him before he nodded in acceptance of Vin-Chay's word and continued. "Here is what I will do. I'll let you record a personal message to your father, and I'll carry it to him on Isiin. I will expect the same promise of discretion from him when I'm ready to give it to him, and if I do not get that, or if I feel that he is lying to me, I will not inform him of your status or give him the message. He will remain under the impression that you are dead, perhaps forever. That all depends on him. You will speak of this to no one, and we will not speak of it again unless I initiate the conversation. Agreed?"

"Agreed. Thank you, Pyke. And I do trust you," Vin-Chay finished quietly.

"And I trust you enough to allow you to record the message in privacy. I will not view it. I want your word that you will not impart any information that will tell him specifically where you are located. You will not reveal any facts relating to what you may have seen or heard about anything military. This message must be a strictly personal one and have no trace of anything that could be seen from any-

one's viewpoint as a betrayal of confidences or treason." Pyke paused. "I need you to understand that what I am doing could be accurately construed in most quarters as treason, and the penalty for that is execution. Both of us could be executed. You need to understand that. Do you?"

Vin-Chay nodded. "I understand that very well. I will not betray your trust, not because I have any fear of consequences for myself, but I won't provoke any act of retaliation against you for your simple act of humanity. And I won't put Cobahr's life in jeopardy, ever."

"Very well," Pyke said. "You can use my correlator to record your message any time within the next week or so. I'll be leaving in ten days aboard the *Sovereign*." He turned to ascend to the second tier when Vin-Chay stopped him.

"What are you going to say to my father?" Vin-Chay asked mildly.

Pyke stared at him for a long moment. "I have absolutely no idea," he said as he went into their noxchamber to change clothes for their evening meal, leaving his unsettled consort staring at the empty stairs in a chamber that had suddenly turned very cold.

CHAPTER FOUR

The day of the Pharon's thirtieth anniversary of rule dawned as one of the fairest of the summer season. The weather was blessedly mild; temperatures were only expected to rise to the one-twenties by mid-day. All government agencies and commercial establishments had been shut down the previous two days. The Pharon's subjects had filled the preceding week with controlled revelries both for scheduled festivities and for those of a personal nature. During the days the streets filled with colorful, chattering people wearing their best clothes and putting on their best faces for their family, friends and any persons of consequence who might see them and remember their appropriate show of support for their omnipotent ruler. The nights saw an even more enlivened populace that was enjoying a constant stream of street musicians, thespians and hours of fireworks that lit the skies about the capital city with a constant pounding noise and explosion of every color under the sun. Only a few minor incidents of protest and discord marred the perfection of the event; those involved were summarily apprehended and punished either financially or more personally, according to degree of their 'crime.' Six particularly verbal dissenters disappeared from the city by the time the celebrations were over. They were never seen again, and their families knew better than to search for them.

Pyke and his family had been resident in their Thebes apartment for a week to accommodate his increased duties in preparation for both the celebration and the departure of the Isiin delegation. Vin-Chay rarely saw him during this period; the High Commander left for the Miliplex before dawn and would return well after dark, leaving his consort and son to their own devices for the entire day. He had requested only that Vin-Chay try to restrict his excursions into the city streets because of the extra number of citizens and military warriors that abounded day and night. The Osiran had no issue with that, since his main concern was Cobahr's safety, and he preferred to exclude himself from as much contact with the festivities as possible. He and Cobahr spent most of the time at the apartment preparing for their own journey to the agriplex, with one visit to Cassian to ensure he was prepared for the Ammurabbi trip, and a couple of visits to Patri Julian's temple. As Cobahr played in the temple's back enclosure under the

watchful eye of his surrogate parent, Vin-Chay met separately with Jor-Rue and Burran to ascertain their progress in contacting useful Osiran slaves who would fit their mutual needs. He was satisfied with their progress.

Burran had found a medtech from the last group of warriors captured during a skirmish outside of Sekmet six months earlier, and he swore that she would be able to continue on with her own web. Jor-Rue had recruited two associates as well, a woman who had been enslaved for eight years after her underground counterfeit identity chip operation had been betrayed and raided; and a male warrior from the same group of captives as Burran's recruit. The warrior excelled in weaponry; Vin-Chay was excited about that capability. He trusted Burran and Jor-Rue without question and had no qualms about their three new comrades. There were thirty-six of them now; they needed at least seventy. Vin-Chay had only been successful in finding two other fellow warriors from the *Remus*, although he doggedly pursued his efforts to reclaim as many of the two dozen as possible.

The night before the official anniversary festivities, which would include the pageant and the accolades for the various warriors who were to be promoted or otherwise honored, Pyke was able to make it to the apartment before darkness fell. Vin-Chay could read the exhaustion in his eyes and he deftly managed to get them through a fairly quick evening meal and put Cobahr down for the night. The child was too agitated anyway; the nightly fireworks noise disturbed his regular sleep patterns. Pyke's absences and the extended stay in the apartment under unsettled conditions equally disrupted his stable routine with his parents. Vin-Chay was glad that they were leaving for the 'plex in three days; the two-month visit with his grandparents well outside of the chaos of Thebes would be good for Cobahr's mind and body. For both of them, Vin-Chay thought as he sought to get his mind off of the celebration and the Isiin delegation. He and Pyke hadn't spoken of Pyke's assignment since the day Pyke agreed to take a message from Vin-Chay to his father. It was a source of tension between them. Vin-Chay had recorded the difficult message only the day before they had left for Thebes, but during their stay at the apartment he had foregone putting the chip in Pyke's travel gear. Instead, he hid a handwritten note addressed to Pyke. He had agonized over whether he had done the right thing, but when he had placed the note there, everything fell into place. He knew he had made the right decision, for him and for Pyke. Perhaps even for his father.

Pyke was lying down on the divan in front of the roaring fire as Vin-Chay descended from the second tier after putting Cobahr to bed. One arm was under his head and his eyes were closed, his lips parted slightly as his even, light snoring

told Vin-Chay that he had given in to his fatigue and fallen asleep at the first chance. *He's drained*, Vin-Chay thought as he quietly moved into the hearthchamber and sat on the other divan across from his sleeping mate. He watched Pyke for at least fifteen minutes before the Ptolemii awoke suddenly as though from a bad dream. Pyke seemed disoriented for a few seconds before he realized where he was and saw Vin-Chay across from him. He relaxed and smiled slightly at the concerned look on his consort's face.

"I'm fine," he assured Vin-Chay. "Just a little too much to think about and do in these last few weeks. And the next couple of months."

"And the last couple of years," Vin-Chay added gently.

"Umm," Pyke responded dreamily, not really hearing as he started to drift off again. Vin-Chay rose and went over to the divan and maneuvered Pyke's head and shoulders onto his lap. The Ptolemii barely noticed as he fell back asleep. Vin-Chay stayed with Pyke on the divan for two hours, gently stroking his hair and shoulders and throat as he massaged the tension out of the sleeping man until he reluctantly acknowledged his own exhaustion. He shook his companion awake so that they could both ascend to their noxchamber and get a comfortable night's sleep before the expected fanfare of the next day.

Despite the fact that he was still too tired to think straight, Pyke was up at dawn to shower, dress and contact the Miliplex from his first-tier culturchamber to deal with last minute details for the security procedures. The official festivities would start in three hours. He could hear Vin-Chay and Cobahr moving about upstairs as he finished preparing their morning meal and setting their places at the table. He grinned as he ran his hand across the carved tabletop; Cassian did excellent work. And, he was genuinely kind and attentive to Cobahr.

Cobahr bounded past Vin-Chay into the nutrighamber. The child seated himself at 'his' side of the table as Pyke placed a plate of fresh bread and jam in front of him. He allowed the child to spread the jam himself as Vin-Chay had insisted upon. Cobahr was getting old enough to learn how to handle more complex utensils, including knives, and they needed to give him the leeway to learn. Pyke suppressed a mild groan as the first smear of jam produced a stain on the boy's new celebration tunic. He threw Vin-Chay an accusatory look, but the Osiran felt not even the slightest guilt—he had insisted on purchasing more than one set of celebration garments for Cobahr, just in case. He gave Pyke a smug look back.

Vin-Chay couldn't help but admire on a personal and objective level how his Ptolemii consort looked. Pyke was in full-dress uniform; only the floor-length red cape was missing, draped over the divan in the hearthchamber until they left for the festivities. Pyke's shoulder-length hair was braided and swept back tightly

away from his face, clasped by an ornate gold band. Fortunately, his hairline hadn't receded any more in the last two years and the barest hint of high forehead was becoming, and gave him a regal air. Despite Pyke's weariness there was little evidence of it in his face; he had perfected disguising his inner tension and feelings too many years ago for anyone but his closest confidants to know his true state of mind. His plain face was closed and calm, and only the barest twinkle of humor showed in his green eyes as he observed his young son's futile efforts at not getting any more food on his new clothing. He was poised, and ready for the day, and appeared every centimeter the High Commander who was respected and admired by virtually all of his peers.

And by Vin-Chay, who gave the Ptolemii an appreciative nod of approval. He appraised the bearing of the man clad in the tight, light gold tunic and trousers made of soft, shiny thick pile; the wide, tooled black leather belt with the gold buckle bearing the Pharonic crest in the middle; and the high black leather boots. Pyke strapped on the short war-machete housed in a well-worn, black leather scabbard, a weapon rarely used for defense but as more of an affectation by senior officers during ceremonial or social occasions. The sharp instrument was still dangerous, however, and Pyke always took great pains to keep it away from Cobahr.

A wide swath of military decorations lined the left side of his upper chest and continued over to the right, where the next garnishment denoting his new position would reside after the day had ended. Vin-Chay thought guiltily that they rivaled the decorations his own father would wear at formal occasions back home—and that he had hoped someday to possess himself as his career progressed. *Former career*, he thought. He wondered why his stalled life course didn't bother him as much as it probably should have. *Different priorities*, he mused as he finished the last of his meal then put his hand out to Cobahr.

"Let's go, Sprite," Vin-Chay said lightly as the child grasped his hand and slid off the chair. "I think your father would like you to wear the blue outfit instead of this one. Will you do that?"

Cobahr nodded and Vin-Chay led him out of the chamber to change clothes. Pyke cleared the table and made another commlink with the Miliplex to check on things he had already checked on several times that morning, and to summon the commandcraft. The man and boy returned to the hearthchamber after fifteen minutes and both were dressed differently. Pyke was certain that Vin-Chay had to change to get Cobahr to change; his son was showing a very strong will and obstinacy. *He must have gotten it from Cobra*, Pyke thought.

Pyke nodded his own approval at Vin-Chay's garments, which were similar to his own: a tight-fitting light blue tunic and trousers, but with high, brown, laced softboots and a matching brown half-cape that draped carefully over one shoulder. The wavy cascade of his ebony hair was enhanced by a dozen intricate, beaded sidebraids dangling across each ear. He wore the silver ankh medallion and earring that Bahrtok and Colyn had given him, and the two companion rings. Pyke absently touched his own rings, and didn't give a damn if anyone at the ceremonies would think them inappropriate.

Cobahr was holding Vin-Chay's hand. Pyke took the boy's other hand and said, "Ready?" and the three of them left the apartment and entered the craft that would take them to the pageantry point in north Thebes, near the Pharonic compound. The trip took less than fifteen minutes; airspace was relatively clear of traffic due to security constraints. The craft deposited Vin-Chay and Cobahr at the special officers' pavilion built for family members of high-ranking Miliplex personnel. Pyke continued on to the Miliplex to review final security preparations and attend to last-minute duties for the delegation.

The pavilion's retractable dome was down, allowing the spectators the full benefit of the bright sun and light breeze, and an unobstructed view of the street below and the new temple, which was the designated starting point of the Pharon's entrance into the pageant. The pavilion was sectioned into individual compartments containing comfortable seating and small cabinets for refreshments; no expense had been spared for the festivities and the comfort of the participants. Vin-Chay found the compartment designated for Pyke, TutMose, Zandran and their 'families' near the middle of the pavilion. He maneuvered Cobahr into the booth and down onto the front seat in a cluster of nine three-by-three seats reserved for the three officers and their guests. Only a few people were yet at the pavilion at this early hour, and the man and child attracted little attention. Although it would be a longer wait for the festivities to begin, Vin-Chay was glad to be there early to view all of the activities and people milling about and taking their places for the celebration. Cobahr was excited but not anxious, and he was behaving extremely well, a relief for his stressed guardian.

Vin-Chay watched in cautious pleasure as people below them took their places along the pageant route as well as in the other booths. It had been a long time since he had seen such finery in clothing, accessories and the physical decorations of the buildings and streets decked out to honor the ruler of Ptolem. He searched his memory and could only come up with a similar celebration fifteen years earlier as the Kindred of Tii on Osiron passed from the previous elder to his distant cousin, Sahr-Tii, a third cousin of his forsaken former commander, Bak-Tii. Vin-

Chay's father and uncle had participated in that pageant, but it hadn't been even remotely as ornate and impressive as this one appeared to be. As much as he detested the Pharon and his oppressive government, he couldn't help but appreciate the aesthetic beauty of what was taking place. He regretted intensely that his favorite brother, Nik-Chay, wasn't sitting next to him so they could converse and comment in irreverent whispers as they watched the celebration progress. He missed his brother more than he ever had at this moment.

"Lost in another time and place, princeling?" Vin-Chay looked up, startled, then gave Cassian a wide, open smile as his fellow Osiran sat down next to Cobahr and gave the street below a quick, casual glance before giving a non-committal shrug. "Impressive, I expect, but consider the reason." He gave Vin-Chay an arched look that told his friend that he shared the same ambiguous, reserved appreciation for the day's activities.

Vin-Chay leaned close to his friend's ear and whispered, "Remember who and what is surrounding us and be careful of words we don't want to get back to anyone. You could lose your head around here—literally." Cassian grinned and nodded as he gave Cobahr an affectionate pat on his head.

Vin-Chay turned a critical eye on Cassian's garments. It had been years since he had seen his friend in well-designed, formal garb, and it turned him from a simple, good-looking man into someone who was poised, balanced and sure of himself. TutMose had spared no expense clothing his slave for the festivities. Cassian's garments resembled Vin-Chay's in style and quality save that his colors were soft green to match his alert eyes, with black belt and boots and short-cape. He wore no jewelry save a simple gold-colored, engraved bracelet on his left wrist. Like Pyke, his long, blond hair was pulled back from his face and clasped; he had never favored the bangs and long, loose side hair of his princeling comrade.

"So, I understand the official ceremonies for Miliplex promotions and assignments are to take place inside the temple before the pageant. And we weren't invited," Cassian said lightly.

Vin-Chay shook his head. "They have to draw the class line somewhere, my friend. Pyke's investiture as High Commander of Interior Security will take place as the fourth ceremony after the other higher-ranking personnel are accorded their own accolades. TutMose's and Zandran's investitures will take place a few steps after that, then—"

"TutMose and Zandran? What are you talking about?" Cassian asked, taken by surprise.

Vin-Chay raised his eyebrows in equal surprise. "TutMose didn't tell you? He and Zandran are being promoted to Second-Level Commanders and will assume

key positions in Pyke's InterSec organization. Pyke needs men around him he can trust and rely on, and when he has that and they perform, he's going to take care of them professionally. Even though I can't stand Zandran, he and TutMose have been loyal to Pyke and helped him get where he is by their efforts. He's not likely to forget or ignore that."

"So," Cassian said slowly, "what does that mean for TutMose? Is he going to be stationed in Thebes or one of the outlying provinces?"

"Thebes. He'll be Pyke's mainstay in the capital and this province, and Zandran will split his time between here and the southern provinces. So, you don't have to worry about moving away or being removed from TutMose's life," Vin-Chay said. He smiled affectionately. "Or mine." He could see the relief on Cassian's face. It matched his own when Pyke had told him the details, not only because he didn't want to lose his personal proximity to his friend, but also because of the repercussions it would have on their future plans. *If they were necessary after the Isiin summit.*

The two men continued conversing quietly as the pavilion and the streets filled with people. They were the only people in their booth, since Pyke had no one else to attend; Colyn and Bahrtok, despite their tentative reconciliation with their grandson's father, were immersed in difficult harvest efforts at the 'plex. Other than Cassian, TutMose was without family, and Zandran had no one, either, with whom to share his successes or failures. The two new commanders would join them after their investiture ceremony, but Pyke was required to participate as head of InterSec and would walk along the pageant route in front of the Pharonic cavalcade.

As the official time for the investitures rolled around, the public visual systems placed at strategic locations in front of the pavilion and throughout the streets of Thebes relayed the details of the temple ceremonies to all who were present. Vin-Chay drew Cobahr's attention to the screen as Pyke's part of the investitures occurred, and he and the child and Cassian watched in respectful silence as Pyke was given accolades for his accomplishments and invested into his new rank and position by the Pharon himself. Vin-Chay felt a surge of pride in his consort, who accepted his part in the procedures with grace and dignity. *He could fit easily into any of the Nine Kindreds on Osiron*, Vin-Chay thought. A slight smile crossed his lips as he thought that his father might even see the High Commander as a suitable mate for his second son. That brought thoughts of the delegation, but Vin-Chay quickly pushed them away to concentrate on the matters at hand. This was Pyke's day, and he wasn't going to ruin it with attitude or painful thoughts, or his own selfish needs.

The investitures and religious rituals progressed according to strict Ptolemii protocols and lasted for over two hours. The sun had heated up the day significantly, and the slight breeze had died down. Vin-Chay wondered why the pavilion dome was still retracted, considering the high temperatures. Perhaps it would be closed when the pageant began. He could see that Cobahr was getting a little overheated, and he became concerned that they might have to leave the festivities early. He felt Cobahr's forehead, and was concerned that the boy was a bit warm.

The internal ceremonies concluded at mid-day and the screens went dark as the pageant was about to start. Around twenty minutes after the rituals had concluded, TutMose and Zandran joined Vin-Chay, Cassian, and Cobahr at their booth. TutMose sat behind Cassian, and Zandran sat in the third and last row, as far from the Osirans as possible. He merely grunted a greeting although TutMose's face was wide open and happy. He fluffed Cobahr's hair as Cassian had done and was rewarded with a wan smile. TutMose frowned and looked at Vin-Chay.

"He's getting hot and tired," Vin-Chay replied to TutMose's unasked question. "I may have to take him home after the pageant passes by." TutMose nodded, then clasped Cassian on the shoulder. He missed the sulky look that Zandran threw him at the gesture of familiarity.

"So. You are now the slave of a full commander. What do you think of *that*, warrior?" TutMose asked agreeably.

"I am even more honored to be your chattel, master. I look forward to the time when I can boast to people that I am the slave of a High Commander as well," Cassian answered in a mock-awed tone. He caught a glimpse of the shocked and disapproving look on Zandran's face at the playful tone, but ignored it. He couldn't stand Zandran, either.

TutMose guffawed. "I'll work towards that goal just to make you eat your words."

Vin-Chay turned to TutMose and said sincerely, "Congratulations, Commander. I know how pleased High Commander Pyke is to be able to invest you in your new position." He paused for a brief second before glancing up at Zandran and speaking with only the barest trace of reluctance in his voice. "Congratulations to you, too, Commander," he said before turning back to search the streets for any sign that the pageant was about to begin. Cobahr was getting tired.

TutMose nudged Cassian, who added his equally reluctant congratulations to Zandran. *Well*, he thought afterwards, *if Vin-Chay can be gracious and act like a warrior, then I can, too.*

There were a few seconds of silence before the men heard a terse but audible reply from the third row. "Thank you." Vin-Chay and Cassian looked at one another then turned away quickly so they wouldn't show their amused smiles to anyone. Vin-Chay gazed about the streets and watched the restless people. He scanned the faces for anyone familiar, but other than the people he was sitting with, it was unlikely that anyone of his acquaintance would be there. There were few slaves about.

Cassian also viewed the people with a practiced eye. He had been training aboard the *Remus* in the security section and had learned to observe, evaluate, and react. His eyes fell on a pair of women not too far away on the opposite smaller pavilion reserved for minor dignitaries. One seemed familiar; he believed he had seen TutMose greet her once or twice on the streets when they were together. He was curious and leaned back to his Ptolemii master and whispered, "Commander, who are those women down there?" He pointed to the pair and TutMose squinted, and then nodded in recognition.

"The redhead is Chakrah. I think the woman with her is a slave she bought a few months ago," the Ptolemii answered.

"Osiran?" Cassian asked, but TutMose shrugged that he didn't know. Cassian was oddly intrigued by the young woman's tight-lipped facial expression and rigid stance at her mistress's side. She clearly didn't want to be there; something also told Cassian that she had no love lost with her beautiful mistress. Cassian wondered if it was simply a matter of being enslaved to anyone, or if Chakrah's unusual and striking beauty was a source of envy for the relatively plain woman at her side. Not plain, exactly, Cassian thought. She was petite and slender, but very well proportioned, or as much as he could see from the simple, nondescript ankle-length dress she was wearing. Her straight, waist-length blonde hair was shiny and thick. Her face was a series of ovals—oval face, oval eyes. He couldn't see their color. Her lips were compressed and her jaw clenched, and she looked ready to spring away at the slightest provocation. She barely glanced around, but for a moment she did and one glance brought her eyes into contact with Cassian's. There was no mistaking the look of utter contempt and derision she gave him. *She couldn't know I'm a slave, could she?* He thought. *She must just think I'm a Ptolemii. So, she must be an Osiran. I wonder what her name is.* He was brought out of his musings by a nudge from Vin-Chay, who wanted to move to the outside seat of the booth in case he had to leave with Cobahr before the pageantry started or finished.

Vin-Chay changed seats with Cassian, positioning himself on the outside with Cobahr in between the two men. He was getting restless himself as the pageant

music began blaring and the huge doors to the temple began to open slowly. People in the streets and pavilions seemed to surge forward to get the best views as the Pharonic procession began to exit the temple and move into the streets. A contingent of one hundred Ptolemii warriors in full dress preceded the royal float on which the Pharon and his primary wife and children resided under an impenetrable clear dome to protect them from any danger. Vin-Chay saw Pyke amongst a dozen equally high-ranking officers walking behind the contingent and in front of the float. Vin-Chay drew Cobahr's attention to his father as he let his own gaze wander briefly to watch the crowds.

Something caught his eye near the end of the pavilion, perhaps twenty meters away. He had noticed the Ptolemii warrior—a captain—when he arrived and seated himself, only because the man had seemed uncomfortable and edgy, and actually seemed to be perspiring. Vin-Chay had let his attention wander from him after that initial impression when everyone else started arriving and the celebrations had begun, but since he had to look in that direction to see the start of the pageant, he had once again noticed the man. He seemed more agitated and was looking around as though searching for someone. Vin-Chay let his own gaze wander for a moment to see if anyone was looking towards the man. He could spot no one. He bent down to answer a question from Cobahr before glancing up again and finding the man in his line of vision. The man was now calm and just seemed to be ... waiting. *Waiting for what?* Vin-Chay thought absently as the procession in the street below started moving slowly towards the pavilion.

Waiting for it to reach the pavilion, Vin-Chay suddenly thought as the warrior contingent below was passing by and Pyke and his peers were nearly below the pavilion. Vin-Chay realized that the captain had risen slightly from his seat as though to get a better view. He turned briefly and Vin-Chay caught a glimpse of his face. It was full of purpose and determination, and was implacable. Alarms went off in Vin-Chay's head as he realized what was about to happen, and he reacted instinctively as his own military training came back in full force. The only word going through his mind was *Pyke*.

Vin-Chay rose and flung Cobahr out of his seat and into Cassian arms and yelled, "Cassian—*down!*" The other warrior reacted instantly and pulled the startled child down to the floor of the booth and covered him with his own trembling body. Vin-Chay threw himself at TutMose and ripped off the commander's weapon from his techbelt. He raised it swiftly with an aim directed at the captain at the same time the man was raising his own weapon and aiming it down at the passing High Commander Pyke.

Zandran had been idly watching Vin-Chay as he had several times during the past half hour. He had never trusted the warrior slave and resolved to keep a close eye on him whenever they were in unfortunate proximity to one another. He had followed Vin-Chay's eye movements of the past few minutes and saw the captain with the same look on his face that Vin-Chay had seen. When he saw Vin-Chay start to react, he, too, understood what was happening and had started to draw his own weapon at the same time that Vin-Chay had pulled TutMose's weapon from his belt and aimed. Both men were aimed at the captain, but Vin-Chay fired first in nearly the exact same moment as the sub-captain two booths away, who had seen him grab TutMose's weapon, and reacted quickly to fire at the man who was clearly threatening the pageant participants.

A split second after Vin-Chay felt his own weapon discharge, he felt a blinding pain rip through his entire body as everything went black and he crashed to the floor of the pavilion near Cassian and Cobahr. He didn't hear the yelling and Cobahr screaming his name as Cassian pulled the child away from his body and out of the pavilion compartment amid the chaos that surrounded them.

CHAPTER FIVE

The *Sovereign* had assumed orbit around Isiin the previous day after a four-week voyage of the flagship and her two smaller companion ships. The key members of the delegation from Ptolem had been split up amongst the three ships as a safety measure. Pyke, naturally, had resided aboard his old vessel, although High Commander Savins, who had been invested as its captain two years earlier, now commanded it. Pyke had felt strong pangs of regret and guilt at relinquishing his command of the vessel. However, that change was an inevitable part of the changes in his life, and well compensated for in his professional and personal growth.

Ambassador High Scribe D’Nar requested an assembly of the key players from Ptolem’s delegation in the *Sovereign*’s statechamber. He, Pyke and Savins were joined by the other members of the team: Jocasta, a close cousin of the Pharon and the Minister of Administrative Affairs responsible for the original subjugation of the Ptolemaic Osirans; her brother Orestes, a high-ranking member of the Interior Cabinet; and High Commander Sheban, who was Pyke’s equivalent in her duties of overseeing the offworld military contingents, including those stationed on Sekmet and Isiin. Pyke was always edgy around Jocasta since Hitii had tried several times to match him up with her daughter, Electra. The young woman was a beautiful but insipid creature who couldn’t put two cohesive thoughts together; Vin-Chay had been right. Pyke was far more uncomfortable around Sheban, given their checkered history. He had never spoken of her to Vin-Chay; he hoped he never needed to.

D’Nar and Jocasta took the lead in the discussions, which were basically reiterations of ones they had had for the past month both on the ship and on Ptolem. Their instructions from the Pharon were explicit and immovable: no concessions were to be made to Osiron; the only acceptable resolution was complete capitulation and then acknowledgment of Amun’s immutable rule of all four Sisters. Then, there could be discussions as to what reparations would be made by Osiron to Ptolem, and what measures Ptolem would take against the leaders of the rebellion. The issue of slavery was to be downplayed; Amun did not want Osiron to know that he and his advisors not only planned on maintaining the institution,

but on expanding it once he had a new supply of Osirans available for processing. He was looking forward to personally overseeing the dispersal of the members of the Nine Kindreds himself, in as public a forum as possible. Only his closest advisors knew of his plan. Pyke was not one of them.

The meeting finished and Pyke returned to his quarters to gather his last items for the trip down to Isiin's surface. He and Orestes were scheduled to arrive first and verify the site conditions for the remaining delegates before D'Nar, Jocasta, and Sheban departed the ship. Pyke was anxious and tense as he prepared to arrive in close proximity to the Osiran delegates, including their primary negotiator, Supreme Commander Crown Prince Chay Shayne. D'Nar and Jocasta were the primary Ptolemii delegates; Pyke was only there as support and backup and would not have the power to negotiate for any concessions on either side. He was a military and tactical advisor, and knew his place at these discussions.

He slowly opened the note that Vin-Chay had put in his travel bag. After he had departed from Ptolem in a haze of conflicting emotions and turmoil, he unpacked in his quarters and searched for the message chip that Vin-Chay was supposed to have stored in a safe place. He checked the location and found a hand-written note instead of the chip. The note was written in Vin-Chay's bold hand and in Osiran. It was unsigned, and brief:

"I destroyed the chip. I won't take any chances with your safety by having you carry it with you. Please do not contact him. Be safe and come home soon. We will be waiting."

Pyke read the note over and over again, a swelling of emotion in his soul over his consort's selfless act. He knew just how much it mattered to Vin-Chay to communicate with his father, and to abandon this one chance for Pyke's sake spoke volumes. *Be safe and come home soon. We will be waiting.* The simple words and sentiment made Pyke's heart clutch. He wondered how he was ever going to get through the next month with everything churning in his heart and soul. He read the note one last time before he held the paper over a burning candle and changed the treasure into ash. He gathered his techbelt and headed towards the lower shuttlebay where Orestes waited impatiently.

The trip down to Isiin's surface seemed shorter than it should have been, perhaps because of Pyke's reluctance to confront the situation that awaited him on the planet. When the shuttle docked and he, Orestes, and their security contingent disembarked at the Miliplex at Horan, the short bout of daylight was ending and twilight was falling quickly. Isiin had the shortest days during this season of any of the planets, and much of the planet found itself in darkness for extended periods of time and for all but twenty-five percent of the day's time period.

Everything seemed dark there to Pyke—the sky, the buildings, the black uniforms worn by the Isiin warriors. He found it as oppressive a planet as Canaan had been. Canaan, where he had first met Vin-Chay, and his life had been changed forever.

Pyke pushed away thoughts of his Osiran and concentrated on greeting and querying his Isiin counterpart. He spent a good two hours verifying the preparations, living quarters and security precautions before he gave the signal to his adjutant to have the second delegation party from the *Sovereign* sent down. They arrived in two hours, and Pyke accompanied each of the delegates to his or her own secured quarters. He managed to avoid exchanging more than a few awkward words with Sheban. His Isiin counterpart informed him that the entire Osiran delegation had arrived first and were ensconced in their own quarters. All was ready for the negotiations to begin first thing in the morning.

Six hours after he arrived on Isiin Pyke was able to retire to his own assigned quarters. Two of his trusted associates, Captains Jaylan and Sharra, stood guard outside his door, and he relaxed with complete confidence that the women could handle any situation that would arise. Nevertheless, he placed his weapon set at full stun on his bed stand just as a precaution. He stripped and bathed before slipping under the covers naked and exhausted. He forced himself to empty his mind of everything except his upcoming duties. He expected a restive, difficult night, but fell asleep in minutes. His sleep was dreamless, his mind as black as the Isiin night.

Pyke arose from his slumbers feeling achy and drained, and a long, hot shower did nothing to help refresh him. He dressed carefully, taking special pains with his appearance for—for what? For the dreaded first meeting with his sworn enemy? Or just because he needed to represent his Pharon as best as possible? He appraised his reflection in the mirror before leaving the quarters. The last thing he did was to remove his two companion rings from his right hand and leave them on the nightstand. They were a distraction, and he needed no distractions today.

Jaylan and Sharra saluted him as he exited his quarters. They had been there all night without relief; both women felt very strongly that they were the best guards High Commander Pyke could have under the circumstances, and neither was willing to relinquish even a small part of that charge to another warrior. He understood this and saluted them back respectfully, and motioned for them to accompany him to the rendezvous with the other delegates. He should have requested a fresh set of guards, but this protocol didn't address their needs or honor, and he chose to respect that rather than an expected convention.

Pyke and his security detail arrived exactly at the designated time at the Ptolem conference chamber, where all but Sheban awaited him. He could see they were all tense and apprehensive to some degree, but like him, they hid it fairly well. Sheban arrived a few moments later, apologizing for her tardiness and offering as an explanation that she was attending to last-minute security checks. D’Nar nodded coolly, ensuring that she understood that although this was an acceptable reason, he was not especially pleased with her lateness. She accepted the unspoken rebuke gracefully as she inclined her head and addressed the head delegate.

“High Scribe, are we ready to proceed to the main conference chamber?” Her rich, sultry, lightly accented voice sent Pyke back in time to a life best forgotten.

“No, Commander, we are not,” D’Nar said flatly.

“Sir? If we do not proceed there now we will arrive belatedly from the hour at which the opening commentary is to commence, per my instructions.” Sheban managed to keep her voice neutral and hoped that the High Scribe was unable to perceive any implied criticism. That was not her right, but she had the obligation to ensure that the scheduled activities did not encounter any problems. Sheban knew all too well what could come of failing in one’s duty. Her subordinate, Sub-Commander Terrok, had been responsible for security in the officers’ pavilion on that disastrous day; the twenty-year veteran of the Ptolem military had been stripped of his position, pension and savings, and had left Thebes in disgrace. *Or had he?* Sheban wondered nervously. No one had heard from him or seen him since that day.

“Precisely the point, Commander. Punctuality regarding these rebellious dissidents reflects an attitude of equality and respect, neither of which are due in this case. I want to ensure that they realize this and understand their true place in these negotiations. Any problems with that?” D’Nar arched one eyebrow as if daring her or anyone else in the chamber to disagree. None did.

“No, sir. No problems,” she answered evenly. She caught Pyke’s eye and saw a glint of sympathy in it, as well as caution. She was surprised at the supportive reaction. She decided to follow his lead, and simply forego standard diplomatic convention and do whatever D’Nar and his band of political egotists dictated. She had no intention of leaving Thebes in disgrace. Or in a burial urn. Her long-term professional and personal plans had no room in them for any kind of failure, certainly not a fatal miscarriage of her duties. Too much depended on her survival and success. Far too much. She threw an appraising glance at Pyke before she addressed Savins on some minor matter regarding their starship.

The Ptolemii delegation waited for D’Nar’s signal to attend the main conference chamber. No one spoke or moved for a half hour, and then D’Nar casually rose from his seat and swallowed the last of his java. He nodded to Pyke, who then moved to the door and led the delegation out of the Ptolem conference chamber towards the mutual one where all of the delegates would meet. Jaylan flanked him on one side and Sharra on the other. The two women stared hostilely at the Osiran guards who were already positioned on one side of the main conference chamber door. They assumed positions on the other as Jaylan held the door open for the Ptolemii delegation to enter. When the delegation entered and Jaylan closed the door, she and Sharra stared at the two male Osiran guards with undisguised contempt and hostility. Their stares were met in kind.

The Isiin mediators had set up two long tables parallel to each other, six meters apart. The Osiran delegation was already seated at their table, patiently waiting for their Ptolemii counterparts to arrive and initiate what they hoped would be true and fruitful discussions. Pyke and Sheban allowed D’Nar and his associates to seat themselves at the middle of their table, spreading out to both ends. When they were seated, Pyke assumed the last seat to D’Nar’s right, and Sheban the last seat to his left. It was then that Pyke allowed himself a good look at his enemies, particularly the one seated at the middle of the Osiran table, Crown Prince Chay Shayne, the Supreme Commander of all Osiran forces, and arguably the most powerful man on his planet.

Even if he had not been privy to the holograph of the Osiran leader of the Kindred of Chay, he would have known him in a second. An impressively handsome man in his early sixties, he shared many facial characteristics with his second son, from the luxuriant black hair, now streaked with silver like his thick but close-cropped beard, to the high cheekbones and strong, straight nose. His eyes were not the startling blue that Vin-Chay’s were, but rather wide-set, deep pools of brown that were fathomless. He was relaxed and poised, and radiated nothing but the royalty to which he had been born of so many previous generations. He was dressed simply but elegantly in a formal dark blue military uniform devoid of decorations save the rare platinum pin denoting his rank of Supreme Commander. He wore only a single silver signet ring on his right hand. His bearing stated matter-of-factly that he was bred of royal stock, that he was in control, and that he feared nothing. Pyke wondered if he wore the same expression that day long ago when he had given the order to fire that had destroyed the *Vallerian* and *Coba*. Pyke pushed that thought away with less difficulty than he would have imagined. He was surprised when he found that being in the same chamber with the man he had hated for so long proved to be easier than he could ever have con-

ceived. He realized that some of his hate and bitterness had receded to the historical chambers of his mind, to be replaced with feelings from the here and now, feelings generally attached to his enemy's son.

Pyke proceeded to appraise and evaluate the remaining Osiran delegates from one end of their table to another. None of them caused him a moment's thought as Chay Shayne naturally did, until his eyes rested on the last man at the table, on a far diagonal to him. He froze and felt his limbs change to ice as he stared at a young man who was nearly a double of Vin-Chay. A few years younger than the Osiran slave, the man matched him nearly feature for feature save the short black hair and beard that served to hide his youth. His eyes were the same striking blue, and Pyke thought that if he stood his height would be similar. *This must be Nik-Chay*, he thought, since he was younger than Vin-Chay. Through bits and pieces of often reluctant conversation with his slave, Pyke had determined that this Chay was his own's favorite sibling. He wondered if the brother had reciprocated the feelings. He guessed they would be, given the fact that after their mother's death when Vin-Chay was eleven, he had basically taken over the 'raising' of his younger brother until the time he had entered Academy. Pyke, an only child, felt a tinge of envy at the closeness they must have felt. He felt a strong pang of sympathy for his consort's natural grief at his long separation from his deeply loved family members. He prayed that someday in the future, he could alleviate that painful state of affairs. Somehow.

Each side waited for the other to speak first. D'Nar clearly was not about to do that, either, and after a few moments of mutual staring between the delegates from each of the opposing tables, Chay Shayne broke the silence. Pyke noticed that his neutral expression never changed; no one could ever tell if he were frustrated or contemptuous or angry. His voice was well modulated and deep, with no hint of negative emotion in it. He inclined his head slightly in professional respect as he addressed the main Ptolemii delegate.

"High Scribe D'Nar. May we first express our appreciation for your presence here at these negotiations? We are gratified to know that one of the finest members of the royal administration was chosen to lead this important effort." Pyke smiled to himself at the mixed praise and jab. Chay Shayne had intimated at the same time that D'Nar was 'fine' but only 'one' of the finest participants possible, not *the* finest participant. Pyke wondered if D'Nar picked up on that or was distracted by the laudatory part of the introduction.

With no immediate response from D'Nar—and Pyke thought this a severe breach of political etiquette—Chay Shayne continued on. Pyke could detect an unmistakable tightening of the jaw in the prince's son, who recognized the slight

to his father as well. For a brief second the young man locked eyes with Pyke, but then casually looked away as though the contact was of no consequence. *Yes*, Pyke thought, fighting back a grin, *definitely Vin-Chay's brother*.

"Since there has been no exchange of ideas prior to this meeting about where our peoples' differences and reconciliation truly lies, perhaps we can begin this conference by having each side providing a brief summary of proposals for ending this conflict. That way we can see how far apart we are on the subject. Would you care to begin?" he asked graciously.

D'Nar forced them all to wait a long moment before he condescended to respond to his traitorous nemesis. He stared straight into Chay Shayne's eyes and provided a clipped, concise answer whose tone left nothing to the imagination.

"Ptolem is prepared to accept Osiron's unconditional surrender. Your military will be disbanded and ours will assume security responsibilities on your planet. We will determine your financial and social reparations to account for the time, lives and cost your rebellion has incurred amongst all of the Sisters. You will comply with them immediately. Judicial consequences for your particularly influential leaders will be determined after all previous compliances have occurred. There will be no compromise on our part as regards these dictates. Lack of compliance will result in the eventual failure of your rebellion but with far more serious consequences. I am prepared to accept your agreement to these conditions now," he finished coldly. There was no doubt in D'Nar's mind that Amun would have been exceptionally proud of his performance here. They had rehearsed that speech together many times.

Pyke cringed inwardly at the shocking disregard for any kind of reason. He thought he had managed to keep his own face neutral, but he saw clearly that this meeting was doomed even before they had left Ptolem. It was all a setup to antagonize the Osirans and pacify the Ptolemii. He felt a surge of shame at his people for their duplicity.

None of the Osirans reacted even slightly. Pyke approved of their response, and his respect grew when Chay Shayne answered the officious High Scribe.

"I believe, sir, that it is clear that our respective governments may be facing a lengthy period of negotiations based upon your perception of the situation versus ours. If I may provide you with our own summary—"

"That will not be necessary, Your Highness. Our position is non-negotiable. If yours does not correspond exactly, then hearing your position is pointless." D'Nar's dismissive tone provoked reactions from other members of the Osiran delegation. The stocky, balding man to the right of Chay Shayne rose and leaned his hands on the table, and responded with a dangerous fire in his pale gray eyes.

"You insult us, sir! We came here in good faith to attempt a genuine negotiation to end nearly fourteen years of agonizing conflict for all of our worlds. You *dare* dismiss us as though we had no right to demand anything but what you deem is our lot in life? You are *not* bargaining in good faith!" Crown Prince Rue Dann said loudly as his eyes blazed in hatred for the Pharon's lackey in front of him. Chay Shayne put an unobtrusive hand on the man's arm in mild admonishment, and Rue Dann sat back down as his breathing started to return to normal.

The heavy silence in the chamber lasted for moments that seemed like hours as the two sides watched one another for any sign that there would be a point to continuing. Pyke knew there was none, but Chay Shayne was not about to let the insults, slights, and contempt sway him from making the best possible try at saving both of their worlds. He had already lost one son, and many friends and warriors, and he wanted this to stop before they all lost everything. It was only a matter of time before the Ptolemii forces pushed past their line and could reach Osiron and devastate its cities and people. The opposite was also possible, though less so, but he wanted to attack Ptolem—or Isiin or Sekmet—no more than he wanted Osiron to be attacked. He had to force away his anger and push his restraint and conciliation to the limit. For Vin-Chay's memory, for his other sons' and daughters' futures. For the hope of continuing his line.

Chay Shayne rose and met D'Nar's eyes evenly. Pyke couldn't detect the slightest anger or reaction in him, although he knew the churning emotions had to be there. Vin-Chay had gotten more than just his looks from his sire.

"High Scribe D'Nar. Although I had high hopes that this initial meeting would proceed on an even, fruitful path, it is clear that both of our delegations need additional time to prepare and deal with one another on a more productive level. I recommend that we adjourn for the day so that we can all regain our balance from the long trip here and the unforeseen conflict in this chamber. So, if we may reconvene tomorrow morning at the same time, I believe we will all be better able to go forward with these necessary and worthy efforts. Will that suffice for you?"

D'Nar didn't bother with an answer but stood up abruptly, followed in turn by all members of his delegation. He left the chamber without a backward glance at the Osirans, who stared at their Ptolemii counterparts in disbelief at their unseemly rudeness and irrationality.

D'Nar led his people to the Ptolem conference chamber. After they entered Pyke and Sheban made a careful search and evaluation to ensure they were not being monitored in any way. Pyke signaled to D'Nar that they were free to speak.

"I think that went very well," D'Nar said, obviously pleased with himself. No one answered. They all understood now how these negotiations were intended to go from the very first.

"Well," he continued, "we can all just relax for a day or two until the Osirans figure out that this is not going to be a 'fruitful path,' and then we can return home knowing we have accomplished what we were sent here to do."

"And that was?" Orestes asked, throwing caution to the wind as Jocasta shook her head at her younger brother's stupidity and carelessness. No doubt when they returned home there was probably going to be one less member of their family employed by the Pharon.

"And that was to ensure that everyone is aware that there is only one ruler and only one way—Amun's rule and Amun's way. I hope you are as clear on that, Orestes, as the Osirans are by now," D'Nar snapped. A pity the man wasn't as savvy as his sister, although part of her shrewdness came from sharing the Pharon's bed in a variety of interesting ways on frequent occasions. Orestes nodded quickly and kept his mouth shut after that.

D'Nar dismissed the Ptolem delegation and Pyke accompanied Sheban on her security rounds. He was able to spend some time with his Isiin counterpart, reviewing Isiin Interior Security measures, making suggestions, and absorbing some ideas for InterSec that he hadn't considered before. During the course of their day together the man informed him covertly that he had heard that the Osiran delegation was livid at their treatment and didn't hold out much hope for any further negotiations. Pyke silently agreed. He retired to his quarters quite late. Jaylan and Sharra had gotten some much-needed rest during the day and were back on guard at his door when he retired for the night. He thanked them for their attention and bid them a warm good night. After he entered his quarters Jaylan playfully nudged Sharra, who blushed at the familiar implication and shoved her back; Jaylan knew that her fellow warrior coveted Pyke, but was resigned to the fact that he was 'taken.' The two smart young women had been friends since they were five years old, when their families had succumbed to a devastating Kali Fever plague. They were both sent to the same reeducation institution and assigned to the same bleak barracks, where they bound together in emotional loss and solidarity. Jaylan followed Sharra into the Ptolem Military Academy, where their affectionate but competitive natures drew them quickly along the same career paths and promotions. No identical twin sisters could have been closer.

Pyke managed to get some sleep during a night filled with tossing and turning and agonizing over what to do. He completed the same morning ablutions as he

did the day before and joined his companions in the Ptolem conference chamber. Sheban was there before him, looking tired and drawn. She waved off his half-hearted attempt at concern, and seemed distracted. D’Nar arrived exactly on the hour, and Pyke assumed that he would make the Osiran delegation wait at least another half hour before joining them. He was wrong; D’Nar had no intention of joining the enemy today. He had stated the Pharon’s position, and there was to be no discussion. He instructed Pyke, Sheban, and Savins to prepare for the voyage home, which would commence in four hours. He was willing to wait not a second longer for word of the Osirans’ capitulation, which he knew would not come. The delegation dispersed to prepare for the departure. Pyke packed his gear quickly and had Jaylan take it to the shuttle. He waited for three hours, occupying himself with last-minute security preparations, and scheduling which delegates would depart on which shuttle; he scheduled himself to leave last, on a third shuttle that would depart two hours after the second one had taken Jocasta and Sheban offworld. He wanted those hours alone on Isiin. He needed those hours.

No word came from the Osirans, as expected. Four hours after their morning gathering, D’Nar, Orestes, and Savins departed on the first shuttle. After word came of their safe arrival on the *Sovereign*, the second shuttle departed with Jocasta and Sheban. Immediately after the shuttle took off, Pyke left the bay and headed back into the Miliplex. He met with the Isiin commander and smoothly engaged him in innocuous discussion as he maneuvered them in the general direction of the Osiran delegation’s quarters. He had gambled on the hope that some of the Osirans—one in particular—would be milling about the area preparing for their own departure the next day. If he was wrong, he had lost nothing save his chance to confront a man he should have nothing to do with; if he was right, he had a chance to meet with that man. As he and the Isiin commander walked down the corridor past the Osirans’ quarters, his gamble paid off. Chay Shayne’s younger son was coming out of his quarters and saw the two commanders. He reacted with an utterly contemptuous look at Pyke, which gave the Ptolemii an opening.

“Something you’d like to say to me, Separatae?” Pyke asked in his haughtiest voice. His ploy worked. He saw the young man’s eyes flare in the same way as his brother’s had so many times over the past three years. He waited for the well-known temper to burst out; it did, loudly.

“What I’d like to say to you, *Fealtae*, is not an option of my breeding and honor—concepts your people have little if any familiarity with!” Nik-Chay spat out contemptuously. *Score*, Pyke thought. *He’s his brother all over again. This*

could be too easy. His unaffected grin at the princeling's response infuriated the young lieutenant, who made an unconscious movement towards him just as his father came out of the chamber opposite where the two men stood. Chay Shayne had heard heated words outside his door and recognized only one of the voices. Upon seeing Pyke his inquisitive face closed to a neutral one as he threw a sharp, disapproving glance at his son. Nik-Chay restrained himself, and had the humility to look guilty under his father's cool gaze at his outburst.

Chay Shayne turned to look directly at Pyke. It took him only seconds to recognize the man as a formidable and worthy adversary. He had the impression from Pyke's poised presence here as well as at the one brief meeting between the delegations that he might be a man of honor. Perhaps he could determine that with a simple conversation. He inclined his head to the Ptolemii.

"Permit me to apologize for my son's inappropriate behavior." Chay Shayne gave Nik-Chay a withering glance. "He is newly invested and still learning the protocol of military behavior on and off the battlefield." The Crown Prince noted that Pyke didn't seem to be in a particular hurry to remove himself from the presence of Osirans as his people's key negotiator did. He decided to act on one last impulse, one last chance to get through to the people of Ptolem.

"Would you care to join me for a cup of java while you await the departure of your shuttle, High Commander Pyralis-Keegan?" Chay Shayne asked cordially. The drink was a favorite of both cultures, and one of the few that had survived the colonial transition; annise and papyron were two others.

Pyke smiled. "I see you know my name. I prefer the less formal version, however."

"Of course. And it is wise to know the names of the people with whom you expect to be negotiating, sir. We were informed of all names and ranks of personnel attending this conference when you arrived. Were you not so informed about us?" The Crown Prince raised a curious eyebrow.

"No, not at all," Pyke answered casually, aware of the Isiin commander's eyes on him. *Careful*, he thought. *Make this seem unplanned and innocuous.* "High Scribe D'Nar didn't feel it was necessary. Although, naturally, we knew that you would be one of the delegates."

"Of course," Chay Shayne said softly, understanding the perceived slight from the High Scribe, and also sensing that this man didn't share that mindset. "Why would he? So, Commander Pyke, that cup of java?"

Pyke nodded his assent, giving the appearance that it was a reluctant assent as he purposely checked his chronometer. He tossed off an unequivocal good-bye to the Isiin commander, who meandered as quickly away from the two prospective

combatants as he could. Pyke entered Chay Shayne's quarters, followed by the Crown Prince and his son, who was beckoned by his father to join. He did so unwillingly, but kept silent as his father shut the door and indicated a seat to the Ptolemii. Chay Shayne poured a cup of java for himself and one for Pyke as his son remained standing at the door, watching his father and the Ptolemii begin a strange dance of conversation. The Chay patriarch was about to speak when Pyke held up a hand and took out a small secu-corr. The Osirans watched curiously as Pyke gave the chamber a thorough scan, nodded his head in satisfaction that they weren't being monitored, and put the instrument away.

Chay Shayne sipped his java thoughtfully after Pyke stowed his secu-corr. This seemed to be a little bit more than just standard care in ensuring privacy. What didn't the Ptolemii want anyone to hear? He was about to find out as Pyke stared at him intently for a long moment as though trying to decide if he should tell him something or not. Chay Shayne waited patiently, taking in all of the Ptolemii's physical characteristics—the very plain visage, the alert green eyes, the long brown hair clasped back with a gold band, the well-tailored uniform and cloak, the simple jeweled stud in his left ear, the lovely, jewel-encrusted set of double platinum rings on his right hand. Chay Shayne wondered idly what the bands represented.

"I haven't much time," Pyke said finally. "I would like your word of honor, and your son's, that what I tell you in this chamber will remain confidential between the three of us until such a time in the future that it can become public knowledge. Which may not happen for a very long time given the current state of our worlds' conflict." Pyke waited for a response. He watched as the two Osirans looked at one another in curiosity for a moment before Chay Shayne turned back to him and nodded.

"You have my word, Commander," Chay Shayne stated firmly. Pyke looked up at the young princeling. "And yours?" he asked pointedly. Nik-Chay hesitated for a split second before he nodded. "You have my word as well, Commander." The two princes watched Pyke closely, and waited as he decided that he could take their words as he could take Vin-Chay's. He blew out a deep breath.

"It is about your son, Your Highness," Pyke said evenly.

"Which son, Commander? I have three." Chay Shayne frowned. *What could this man have to say about my sons? He doesn't know any of them except Nikkola.* His thoughts were interrupted by Pyke's next words.

Pyke shook his head slowly. "No, you have four sons."

"My second son is dead, sir," Chay Shayne answered coldly. "Killed in battle nearly four years ago. He lives only in my heart."

"Vin-Chay lives in my household on Ptolem and has for nearly three years. He is very much alive." Pyke felt an oddly victorious thrill as he watched the stunned looks on the two men's faces. Chay Shayne's lips parted slightly and his son moved forward almost menacingly. There was dead silence in the chamber for what seemed to all three men an eternity that actually only lasted for a few seconds as the Osirans absorbed the implications of the Ptolemii's claim.

"You are lying, Ptolemii!" Nik-Chay snarled finally.

"Nik-Chay! Silence!" Chay Shayne looked at Pyke and the calmness had returned to his face and voice. "Prove it," he said flatly.

"Not all warriors aboard the *Remus* were killed when it was defeated in battle. Seventy-two survived. The ship was boarded by her Ptolemii conquerors. The survivors were removed before the damaged ship was destroyed, and a false transmission indicating her imminent destruction was issued. They were taken to a prisoner-of-war facility on Canaan and incarcerated there. Several died, but sixty-eight lived, and they joined captives from several other Osiran vessels. My ship was diverted there after Spartana to take temporary charge when the original commander died. There I met your son and his comrades. You want names? Bak-Tii. Cassian. Burran. Jor-Rue. They, too, are all on Ptolem, except for Commander Bak-Tii. Shall I go on?" Pyke asked coolly as he watched the men's stunned reactions. He waited until Chay Shayne nodded wordlessly for him to continue.

"Vin-Chay and his comrades were there for six months when I assumed command. I remained there for another five months. The Ptolemii High Command decided to decommission that facility and other similar ones on various Sister satellites. The prisoners were dispersed. That was nearly three years ago." Pyke wasn't sure how much detail to go into. At one point in his life he would have sold his soul to tell the Crown Prince every single detail of his relationship with Vin-Chay; it seemed cruel and pointless now, and disrespectful to his cherished consort, who had come so close to death to protect him. He prayed that Chay Shayne wouldn't provoke an emotional reaction from him about Vin-Chay, and he hoped he could keep his history with Coba out of this, too.

Chay Shayne stood and stared down at the Ptolemii, searching his face for any trace of a lie. He could find none, but he needed more information before he could even start to believe. Or hope.

"Tell me something personal about my son. Make me believe," Chay Shayne commanded in an imperious voice. *Careful*, Pyke thought. *Don't let him antagonize you.* Pyke stood and faced the man.

"He is a double for this son," he said, nodding towards the young warrior who looked as though he was ready to pounce on Pyke. "Without the beard, of course. And his hair is very long now. He sports Ptolemii style as a natural consequence of his long residence on my birthworld. He has this one's eyes rather than yours, but there is a slight imperfection in the left one, a tiny streak of brown one can barely see. He has an old jagged scar on his left knee. I believe he said it was from climbing over rocks near the lodge you have in the Glacial Peakskills. There's another slight scar on his lower right hip from a shuttle accident during academy training. He can be arrogant, stubborn, contentious, and—"

"Enough," Chay Shayne snapped. "I have heard enough." He stared at Pyke hard. "You said he resides in your household. And that the prisoners had been 'dispersed.' Dispersed how?"

Pyke hesitated. *The truth is often inhumane, but it is still the truth. I prefer it, and my father would prefer it.*

"The Ptolemii High Command decreed that prisoners in the war facilities be remanded either to Sekmet to work in the berrillium mines for the rest of their lives ..." Pyke trailed off and paused for a second as he heard the shocked gasp from Nik-Chay, then went on. "Or sent to Ptolem—" Pyke paused again, but Chay Shayne finished the sentence for him.

"To be sold into the abomination of slavery," the Crown Prince finished quietly. Pyke looked him straight in the eyes and nodded. "And *you* took my son as your slave and chattel," Chay Shayne finished in a deadly quiet voice, waiting for Pyke to confirm or deny it.

"Yes," Pyke answered in the strongest voice he could muster. He cocked his head to one side and went on evenly. "According to the laws of Ptolem, he belongs to me." Pyke paused for a second. He wasn't sure why he threw out the next incendiary word. "Forever."

Nik-Chay gave a strangled cry and tried to throw himself on the Ptolemii to throttle him, but his father held him back. Chay Shayne stared at Pyke relentlessly, just as Pyke stared back at him. The Crown Prince turned his son around harshly and thrust him roughly towards the door.

"Go to your chamber and do *nothing* and speak to *no one* about this. Wait for me there. Go!" Chay Shayne said angrily to his son as he pushed him out the door and closed it, then turned back to the man on whom he had just focused all of his hatred bare moments before. The two men locked eyes and remained motionless for a moment stopped in time before Chay Shayne managed to speak again in a controlled, almost detached tone.

"You seem to know my son's body well, from your accurate descriptions. Why is that, Commander?"

He'll have to know someday, Pyke thought. "Because your son is also my consort, Your Highness. He shares my bed and has since his incarceration at Canaan. I don't believe I'll go into all of the details here and now. Perhaps you can discuss this with him some day. Suffice to say, he belongs to me in every possible way since that first moment when I relieved him of his chastity. That is all I have to tell you, sir. Now, if you will excuse me, I have to rejoin my delegation." Pyke knew the conversation had to end now before everything came out and made a horrible situation even worse for Vin-Chay's father. He tried to move past him to the door but Chay Shayne grabbed his arm painfully, and before Pyke could react pulled him close so that their faces were centimeters apart. Pyke had never seen such implacable hatred in any man's eyes as in this one's. Rather than experiencing fear, he found himself getting angry and allowing all of his old feelings to surface.

"You will die for this, Ptolemii," Chay Shayne said tonelessly. "Your evil will be repaid in kind. I swear that on my son's—"

"Body?" snapped Pyke as he violently pulled his arm away from the Osiran. "I have his body," Pyke said coldly. "Nightly, as a matter of fact. In a very, very—*intimate* manner. To replace the one you took from me nearly eight years ago."

Chay Shayne's eyes narrowed. "What are you talking about?"

"The *Vallerian*, Your Highness. You remember the *Vallerian*, don't you?"

"What in the name of God does that tragedy have to do with your abuse of my son?" Chay Shayne replied in a mixture of anger and confusion. The *Vallerian*? His one horrible miscalculation in a stellar suite of command decisions.

Pyke moved to the door and turned just before he opened it to leave. "My wife, sir, was on that vessel. And she died. And years later, when I encountered your son, I saw an opportunity to make you pay for your actions, actions that took my world from me. Or rather, *he* paid for your actions. As he will when I return to my home and enjoy my complete domination over him." He felt an unexpected thrill at seeing the sick look of understanding and pain dawn on the Osiran's face. He felt both shame and exhilaration as he finished his unplanned attack on Chay Shayne. "Retribution, sir. You took my wife from me. I took your son to replace her in my bed." He cocked his head and looked at Chay Shayne, whose eyes were boring into him. "He proved difficult to train at first, but has since become an adequate slave and concubine." He flashed a cold smile. "Under my ... creative tutelage."

With those final cutting words Pyke left the chamber and the man within, who remained unmoving and focused on the closed door for a long time.

CHAPTER SIX

“How long is this behavior going to continue?”

Vin-Chay opened his eyes and looked up at Pyke, who was standing over him as he slept—or tried to—on the hearthchamber divan. It was the middle of the night, and the fire had died down to mere embers. He couldn’t see the Ptolemii’s eyes or expression, just his outline as he waited impatiently for an answer. Vin-Chay had spent the last two weeks sleeping on the divan after Pyke had returned to Ptolem and confessed the details of his encounter with Vin-Chay’s father and brother. They’d had their loudest, angriest argument in all the time they had been together. The confrontation ended with Vin-Chay storming out of their noxchamber, and taking up residence on the first tier. Their communication since that first night had consisted of silences, snappish retorts, jabs and heated innuendoes as they attempted in vain to keep their conflict as much away from Cobahr as possible. They had both failed miserably in that respect, and their tension had taken its toll on the boy as well as on the two unyielding men. Vin-Chay assumed that Pyke’s appearance at his ‘bedside’ was in reaction to the child’s outburst of tears at last night’s evening meal. In the middle of the icy meal Cobahr ran away from the dining table, and locked himself in his chamber for over an hour. The two men pleaded unsuccessfully with him to open the door. He finally relented, and they could see the wetness and redness in his eyes as he ran into Vin-Chay’s arms and sobbed openly as his Osiran parent softly repeated, “I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” over and over again. Pyke watched his mate and child in anguish for a few hellish moments, then turned on his heel and left the first tier for his noxchamber. Vin-Chay hadn’t seen him since until he appeared over the divan a moment ago.

Vin-Chay pushed himself up on an elbow and stared at Pyke while trying to figure out how to answer him. He didn’t want this conflict either, but he was furious at his Ptolemii consort for the emotional abuse he had inflicted on Vin-Chay’s family. Pyke’s intentions may have started out honorable, but he had let his temper get the better of him yet again. He had thrown the painful details of their relationship into his father’s and brother’s faces without mitigating the information with the other truths that would have assuaged their pain.

He didn't have a chance to formulate an answer. Pyke waited a bare few seconds before he let out a sigh of disgust and stalked back up the stairs to their nox-chamber. Vin-Chay relaxed back onto the divan, relieved at the momentary reprieve. They still had to resolve this, and very soon, but not tonight. *Not tonight*, Vin-Chay thought angrily as he cursed Pyke for his temper and for ruining his homecoming, which Vin-Chay had carefully planned from the time he left the Mediplex and went to Ammurabbi.

Vin-Chay had awakened at the Mediplex in a chamber similar to the one in which he had spent three days two years earlier. It was larger, however, and more comfortable, but he wouldn't realize this for a few days until the throbbing pain in every cell of his body from the high-stun neuralizer had subsided enough for him to think straight. He was fortunate that the warriors at the pageant, security and spectators alike, had been ordered to place all weapons on high-stun, extremely painful and debilitating, but not fatal. If there were any incidents, the High Command wanted those responsible alive and able to be interrogated. That was the fate of the captain Vin-Chay had stopped from assassinating Pyke, although by the time Vin-Chay was recovered enough to leave the Mediplex, that man was no longer alive. Nor were a half dozen of his co-conspirators, including the lector responsible for keeping the pavilion dome retracted, nor any of their immediate families.

Vin-Chay was unconscious for two days. He awoke just barely to see Pyke sitting by his bedside, but he lost consciousness again and when he awoke a second time a day later, he was surprised and confused to see Zandran sitting there instead. The commander wore a neutral expression rather than his usual one of disdain. It took Vin-Chay a few moments to focus his eyes and clear his head. The first thing he realized was Zandran's presence; the second was the waves of pain still throbbing through his body. His mouth was dry and he was disoriented. He needed water and remembered that the medtech contact button was located on his left. He tried reaching for it weakly. Zandran frowned at his efforts and pushed his hand away.

"What are you trying to do, Osiran? Cause yourself even more pain? Tell me what you want," the commander snapped more curtly than he had meant to.

Vin-Chay ignored him and tried reaching again for the button. The slightest movement brought waves of pain and by the time his numb finger had reached the button he felt as though he were going to vomit from the excruciating discomfort. Zandran looked exasperated but didn't try to stop him.

A medtech entered the chamber immediately and came over to the bed. "Water, please," Vin-Chay managed to say thickly. The medtech looked critically at Zandran as she turned to pull the hydrotube from the side of the bed and bring it to Vin-Chay's lips. He drank deeply and felt a little revived. The medtech removed the tube and turned to leave. Before she did she gave Zandran a scathing look.

"You couldn't get the water for him, Commander? Very compassionate," she threw at him derisively as she left the chamber. Zandran rolled his eyes. He couldn't win with this damned Osiran no matter what he did. He watched Vin-Chay try to focus his eyes and thoughts.

"Do you remember what happened, princeling?" Zandran asked.

"I think, I remember—I remember aiming at someone who was going to shoot Pyke. Then—just pain and blackness. Then—here," Vin-Chay answered weakly as he tried to remember the details. He tried to concentrate. Did the Ptolemii just call him 'princeling' instead of 'slave?' He was feeling a bit more alert and able to gather his scattered thoughts. He looked at Zandran cautiously.

"Is Pyke all right?" he asked softly.

"He's fine," Zandran answered. "So are Cobahr and your friend Cassian and TutMose. The only casualty was the assassin. And his cohorts." *And their innocent wives and children.*

"Who was he?"

"A captain in the eighth phalanx with ties to dissident activity in Corso. Or so we found out during an intense interrogation after he regained consciousness. He was only out a day since Tut had his weapon set on mid-stun, not high like the warrior who shot you. You were luckier than you could ever know, princeling. Anyway, seems that the remaining dissidents are more than a little concerned at the effective and stringent InterSec measures that have been taken to keep Ptolem's populace under control. They decided to try to strike at the architect of these measures, your master, hoping it would have a disruptive effect and give them a little more maneuvering room now and in the future. Bastards," Zandran said coldly, pushing away his fury at the attempt on the life of his commander and friend. He saw that Vin-Chay was watching him alertly and had unspoken questions in his eyes. Zandran could pretty much figure out what they were.

"Pyke left Ptolem yesterday with the Isiin delegation. He had no choice. He didn't want to leave while you were still unconscious, but his duty must come first. You know that," Zandran said pointedly.

"I know that," Vin-Chay replied softly. "I would have done the same thing."

"Would you? No matter. He left it to me and TutMose to ensure that you were well taken care of and got to Ammurabbi when you were ready to travel. Cassian's already taken Cobahr there to get him away from Thebes, but Pyke's mother-in-law is here at his apartment to take care of you and accompany you to the agriplex. According to the physicians, you should be able to leave the Mediplex in three or four days. You're going to be going through some intensive neural therapy to get your muscles and limbs back in working order, but they don't anticipate any complications. You'll probably be stiff for a week or two." Zandran stood and looked down at the supine man.

"TutMose will be here in a couple of hours to sit with you for a while. One more thing before I leave." Zandran paused. Vin-Chay could see he was struggling with whether or not to go on. He apparently came to a decision that he was going to finish his reluctant thoughts. He looked straight into Vin-Chay's curious eyes.

"You saved the life of my commander and my friend at the risk of your own. I am not likely to forget that, Osiran." Zandran turned on his heel and made it to the door to leave as Vin-Chay responded.

"You're welcome." He and Zandran made eye contact for one last brief second before the gruff Ptolemii grunted, and turned quickly to hide his amused look as he left the medichamber.

The next four days consisted of long, affectionate visits by Colyn, shorter but pleasant ones by TutMose, and a non-stop round of neural and physical therapy to address Vin-Chay's throbbing body. In an unexpected gesture of generosity, Zandran took him late one night to the Miliplex aquaplex. The commander had evicted all of the warriors and cadets, and allowed Vin-Chay to swim alone in total enjoyment and relaxation for two wonderful hours. Vin-Chay tried to thank Zandran, but the embarrassed man waved him off irritably, made a derogatory comment about Osirans in general, and nearly dragged Vin-Chay back to the patrolcraft for the trip back to the Mediplex. Vin-Chay understood, said nothing, and knew that he had learned a great deal about a complex man in this simple but telling experience.

There were a few interviews with military investigators regarding the incident at the pageant. Vin-Chay repeated his story a dozen times to steely-eyed men who treated him with only the barest of courtesy. He began to feel nostalgic for Zandran. He was to learn later from TutMose that there had been no 'incident' at the pageant; the excitement near his booth was the result of several people being overcome by the heat and celebration. There had been no captain with a deadly weapon, bent on a suicide mission for his 'cause,' no Osiran slave with a weapon

of his own in hand, no threat to the peace and security of the Pharon or his festivities. No one would ever say differently. Vin-Chay understood completely. He didn't give a damn about their re-invention of the facts; he cared only that Pyke was unharmed.

He was relieved when the therapy seemed to work quickly. By the fourth morning he was discharged and walked out of the Mediplex stiffly with Colyn and TutMose by his side. TutMose unexpectedly took them to the Miliplex rather than the tram station, and within the hour Vin-Chay and Colyn were traveling south by special commandcraft. They were greeted by a relieved Bahrtok and Cassian and an ecstatic Cobahr, who threw himself at Vin-Chay and literally wouldn't let him out of his sight for two days.

Vin-Chay immersed himself in the work at the 'plex as well as the private time that he and Cassian spent together refining their plans and needs when they returned to Thebes. If the Isiin negotiations went well, the plans might be moot; they might be returned to their home as a matter of treaty rather than force. Both of the young Osirans prayed for that, and dreaded it at the same time. Each man had his own reasons for being reluctant to leave Ptolem; each was conflicted. They never spoke of it to each other, but the matter was always there like a silent third conspirator.

The day before Vin-Chay, Cassian and Cobahr left the 'plex to return to Thebes, Vin-Chay celebrated his twenty-sixth birthanniv. The evening was joyous for the five people gathered in the 'plex's hearthchamber. Colyn and Bahrtok gave him an ancient hard-bound tome they had found in an antiquarian shop in neighboring Hammarra; Cassian presented him with a small, carved jewelry chest for his earrings, rings, and medallions; and Cobahr gave him a surprisingly well-executed drawing of Vin-Chay, Cobahr and Pyke sitting in front of their hearthchamber fire. They laughed, and talked, and enjoyed quiet communion, and the next day the two men and their young companion traveled by tram to Thebes and went to their respective homes.

Pyke was due back three days later, and Vin-Chay was anxious to see him for many reasons. He needed to know the outcome of the negotiations; no word was made public to this point, and no one except those in the Pharon's inner circle had any inkling of what transpired. Vin-Chay also needed to see that Pyke was all right even though he knew rationally that he was healthy and unharmed. And he had something to tell the Ptolemii that he had been postponing for too long. It probably should wait until Pyke's fortieth birthanniv some two months hence, but Vin-Chay wanted to tell him now. Needed to tell him now.

The *Sovereign* docked on schedule. The delegation disembarked immediately and went to the Pharonic compound for debriefing. Pyke was closeted with the Pharon and his fellow delegates for eight hours and only managed to return to his Sirrian residence well after dark. Cobahr was asleep, but Vin-Chay was waiting for him expectantly in the hearthchamber. Neither man spoke for a long moment, each simply drinking in the face and presence of the other until Pyke moved forward and put his arms around his consort and held him close for a long time. Vin-Chay returned the embrace in peaceful silence. No words were needed.

But then Pyke told Vin-Chay in detail about the negotiations, and of his encounter with Chay Shayne and Nik-Chay. Vin-Chay listened in stunned silence as his consort told him of the angry and hurtful words that had passed between his father and Pyke. He ignored the fact that Pyke had gone out of his way to bring word of Vin-Chay's survival to his family, and that he had *attempted* to not inject any of his past anger into the conversation, and that he was trying to be as honest and forthcoming with his Osiran consort as he had promised so long ago. He ignored the fact that his father had threatened to kill Pyke. Vin-Chay listened, then exploded in anger long pent up, which set off Pyke's own repressed passion. They went at each other in a loud, bitter and painful argument that lasted for two hours, and went from chamber to chamber in the house. Only Cobahr's chamber was excluded, but the sensitive young child cowered and cried under his covers as he listened to his parents' verbal assault on each other.

That was the night that Vin-Chay ended the fight by storming out of their noxchamber and ensconcing himself on the hearthchamber divan.

Vin-Chay stared at the ceiling for a while as the remaining embers died down to give off a soft, dim glow in the large hearthchamber. He suddenly threw off his covers, checked briefly on the sleeping Cobahr, and climbed the stairs to the second tier. He quietly opened the door. He sensed that Pyke wasn't sleeping. The chamber was dark. Vin-Chay turned on the light by Pyke's bed to its dimmest setting, and then sat down on the edge of the bed, turning towards Pyke's rigid back. He waited. Pyke waited. Neither wanted to be the first to give in. Vin-Chay sighed audibly.

"I'm sorry. Let's end this now and get past it for everyone's sake," Vin-Chay said.

Pyke turned suddenly towards him. "You *ought* to be sorry!" he said angrily.

Vin-Chay stood up and glared at him. "You are *incredible*! And I don't mean that as a compliment," he finished as he stalked off towards the noxchamber door.

"Stop right there!" Pyke commanded as Vin-Chay reached the door and turned back towards him at the sharp retort. Pyke threw off his own covers and strode over to his Osiran until they were less than a meter apart. Their flashing eyes locked and each could feel the passion and anger and frustration in the other.

"Yes, *master*?" Vin-Chay finally said, and Pyke snapped. Before he could stop himself he lashed out and slapped Vin-Chay hard across the face, horrified at the instant his hand connected with the other man's cheek. He saw the startled look in Vin-Chay's eyes; the Osiran had never expected the slap despite his attitude and tone.

The ten seconds that elapsed before Pyke's apology were the longest either man had ever experienced. "I'm sorry," Pyke said softly, his face drained of all color. "Vin-Chay, I am so sorry. I never meant—"

"It seems that any member of my family can provoke a reaction from you, Commander, doesn't it?" Vin-Chay interrupted coolly. Pyke didn't answer, but he was surprised when the stiff demeanor of his consort changed to a more relaxed one in a few seconds.

"I imagine my father and brother can be as provocative as I under the right conditions. And we both know you can be provoked beyond endurance with very little effort. So I would say that blaming you alone for that confrontation on Isiin is probably unrealistic. And unfair." He blew out a breath. "So can we just go back to a few minutes ago when I sat down on the bed and said 'I'm sorry' and go on from there?"

"Yes," Pyke breathed in immeasurable relief that what had just transpired wasn't the utter disaster it could have been. "Yes. I'm sorry, too. I said that the night I came home. I meant it then and I mean it now. I never intended to hurt your family. I was trying to do something I knew you wanted. I just didn't go about it the right way."

"There probably wasn't a 'right way' under the circumstances," Vin-Chay shrugged. "Well, on the positive side, at least they know I'm alive and there's the hope we can be reunited some day in the future." Vin-Chay arched an eyebrow at Pyke's look of relief. "But, on the other hand, they believe I have been physically and sexually abused for years as part of your plan of revenge, and that must be emotional torture for them. I'm not sure that the two sides balance out."

"They don't," Pyke agreed contritely. "And I can't change that for them right now, but someday in the future I will. All I can do is try to make it up to you somehow. Any ideas on that?"

"Not at the moment. Let's just take that one step at a time. Let's let the first step be getting back to where we were in this house so Cobahr can have his family back again."

"Does that mean you won't be sleeping on the divan any more?" Pyke asked as casually as he could. His heart thumped rapidly.

Vin-Chay opened the door to the noxchamber, and as he started to leave threw back, "I guess we'll see after tonight, won't we?" He was almost through the door when he paused and turned slowly to meet Pyke's eyes.

"Think about this, Pyke," he said evenly. "You have a man with honor and passion and the deepest sense of value of his family. He has sired and raised sons who are his heart and soul, one in particular. He has raised that son, and cherished him and watched him grow from child into man. And then he loses that son and grieves beyond measure, but his strength and commitments to his family and people force him to cope and put that grief into the farthest recesses of his mind. And then one day, he is told that that son lives, and for the briefest of seconds his soul revives until it is crushed by the knowledge that his beloved child is enslaved and to all appearances physically and sexually abused. He cannot get to him. He cannot stop the abuse. He is impotent to help his child and get him away from a vengeful man who clearly relishes both his pain and his son's." Vin-Chay paused to let his words sink in, and then finished quietly just before he left the chamber and Pyke alone in it.

"And think what you would feel if you were that man, and the beloved child was Cobahr. What would you want to do to that other man?"

As the door closed behind Vin-Chay, Pyke stood rigid in the middle of the noxchamber for a long time before he said softly, "I would kill him."

CHAPTER SEVEN

On a few infrequent occasions TutMose allowed Cassian to accompany him to Chakrah's establishment ostensibly as an attendant slave, but in actuality to partake of the wide variety of sexual flavors available to anyone with the chits to pay for them. TutMose had the resources and was willing to share them with his slave, because he liked his slave and he knew that men needed sexual activity to remain healthy men. Or so he had always believed. He shuddered at the thought of years of enforced celibacy such as Cassian and other captives had endured; he didn't think he could stand it.

They arrived at Chakrah's two nights after Cassian had returned to Thebes from Ammurabbi. It was Cassian's welcome-home present from his boisterous master, and Cassian was very ready for such an encounter. They entered through one of the special doors reserved for ultimate discretion. Although TutMose was fond of his slave and regarded him highly as both a warrior and a person, he was all too aware that the majority of his military peers and most of the general Ptolemii population did not necessarily sanction his impressions and actions. He didn't want to subject Cassian to any undue disrespect or problematic confrontations, so he stressed and maintained discretion in their visits to the brothel.

TutMose installed Cassian in a nearly deserted lounge area to await Serine, his selection for the evening. TutMose ascended to the Empire Chamber with Mattara, the beautiful redhead who had re-introduced Cassian to the pleasures of the flesh in his noxchamber that fateful night. A youthful-looking Ptolemii lieutenant was waiting nervously until her handsome selection entered, took her arm, and escorted her out of the lounge. There was one other person in the lounge after that, and Cassian recognized her right away from the day of the pageant. It was the blonde slavewoman attending Chakrah in her pavilion booth. The woman was sitting on a divan in a corner of the chamber. She sat rigid and straight and unmoving, her hands resting lightly in her lap, and her head held high and facing forward. Her eyes—they were gray, Cassian realized—were focused on some invisible point against the opposite wall. She had been staring at that point since he had arrived, and her eyes and body never moved once as Tut-

Mose left and the lieutenant left, leaving her and the Osiran slave alone in the chamber.

He decided to approach her. She peaked his curiosity with her rigid stance and her contemptuous look flung at him during the pageant. He walked up to her and stood in front of her. She didn't move or even blink.

"Good evening," Cassian said politely. She completely ignored him. He repeated his greeting slowly and patiently. She continued to ignore him. He narrowed his eyes at the frustrating response and sat down next to her. He was rewarded with an almost imperceptible tensing of her body, but anyone would have had to look very hard to see any movement. He waved his hand in front of her face.

"Can you hear me? See me? I'm right here, next to you," he said mildly. This time his efforts paid off as she turned her head slowly and gave him a withering look. *Beautiful silver-gray eyes*, he thought.

"I am not a whore, warrior. You will have to make another selection." She turned her head and re-focused her eyes on the far wall.

I was right, Cassian thought. *She thinks I'm a Ptolemii warrior, so she must be Osiran.* He pushed his right sleeve up past his elbow and put his arm out to show a very visible slave tattoo. Although both Osiran and Ptolemii slaves had the common triple-triangle interlocking tattoo on their forearms, those Ptolemii unfortunate enough to join their Osiran brethren in bondage had the triangle in the middle colored black; Osiran slaves had three red triangles. She glanced down at his arm casually then looked at him as though he were a particularly loathsome insect crawling on the ground.

"I am not a whore, slave. You will have to make another selection." She turned her head away again.

Before Cassian had a chance to respond, Serine entered the chamber and smiled at him. She didn't especially care to be servicing Osiran slaves, but his master paid extra and one man was as unpleasant as the next, so she swallowed her distaste and always did her best work no matter who was mounting her. She put out her hand to Cassian, who took it reluctantly, since he would rather have stayed where he was and continued his odd non-conversation with the intriguing slavewoman. As they prepared to exit the chamber, he turned back towards the rigid woman in the corner and said politely, "Good night." She didn't move or acknowledge his words in any way.

As they mounted the stairs to the second-tier noxchamber, Cassian asked Serine who the woman was. Her response was one of dismissal and derision.

"Oh, she's a slave Chakrah bought five months ago to attend her and make it clear to everyone that Madam is an important, wealthy person."

Cassian caught her tone very clearly as they entered the noxchamber. "She is Osiran?" he asked as he began to disrobe while Serine lit incense and several candles and dimmed the lights.

"No, she's not. Ptolemii. Even worse. No offense," she added quickly, seeing the expression on his face. "What I meant was that whatever a Ptolemii has done to become enslaved must be infinitely worse than simply being an unfortunate Osiran."

"What did she do to cause her enslavement?" the unfortunate Osiran asked casually as he stripped off his trousers and slipped into Serine's bed.

"I have no idea," she answered as she joined him. "She's a hateful little thing, though. None of us like her. Despite her slave status she always acts like she's better than us and won't even speak to us unless she's forced to." Serine began stroking Cassian's chest and stomach and moved her artful hand even farther down the front of his body. "Chakrah has to beat her and punish her constantly to get her to do even the slightest duties she was purchased for. I don't think she'll last too long here. Apparently she didn't last too long with her other four masters either."

"What's her name?" Cassian asked as Serine worked her mouth down the front of his body.

"Zulikka," Serine answered just before she grasped him in her well-experienced mouth and caused him to gasp in pleasure at her skill. Their three hours together went quickly and Cassian took full advantage of the time; Serine earned her chits that night.

Cassian descended to the lounge to await TutMose. He was curious to see if the young slavewoman was still there, but she was not. TutMose came down several minutes later and the two men left for their apartment.

Cassian was working in TutMose's hearthchamber two mornings later, measuring the west wall for a series of shelves that would occupy the entire wall for holographs and pottery and whatever else the Ptolemii commander chose to use them for. He finished painting the wall light amber to contrast with the other white walls, since the amber wall would be visible behind the shelves. He completed his measurements and transmitted the required supply order for the best red-brown wood available from his regular supplier when someone signaling a request for entrance at the front door interrupted him.

He opened the door and found himself staring at the young slavewoman from Chakrah's. The only difference in her emotionless, implacable face was the left

black eye and purplish facial bruise on that side of the face. There was also a slight swelling of her lips. *Chakrah has to beat her and punish her constantly.* He wasn't sure just how to react to his unexpected guest, so he instinctively decided on polite courtesy.

"Good morning, Zulikka," he said cordially, seeing a flicker of surprise in her gray eyes that he knew her name. He motioned with his arm towards the inside of the apartment. "Would you like to come in for a refreshment?"

The woman stared at him balefully for a moment before she swept past him into the apartment entryway and he closed the door. He turned towards her and found himself staring into her unreadable eyes. He was about to say something—he didn't know what—when she spoke in a cold, emotionless voice.

"I am here to apologize for my unseemly behavior two nights ago. I was rude and treated you, a guest of my mistress, with disrespect. That is all." She started to move past him to leave but he gently took her arm. He was rewarded with a tense jerk of her body as she pulled away from him with an unmistakable glare of hatred and revulsion at his touch. The intensity of her response took him aback for a moment. He put his hands up in a conciliatory gesture indicating that he wouldn't try to touch her again. She lost just the slightest bit of her tension and tried to move past him again, this time successfully as she reached the door and started to open it.

"It wasn't me," Cassian said. She looked at him. "I didn't complain about you. I'm sorry if someone did because I took no offense at your attitude." He grinned unaffectedly at her. "If I was a Ptolemii slavewoman shut up in a brothel lounge and was approached by a worthless Osiran slave, I wouldn't want to have anything to do with me, either. Please accept my apology if my attempt at conversation had such unfortunate consequences for you. I'm sorry." He opened the door for her and moved aside to let her leave. She stared at him for a few seconds before she swept out, and he watched her walk down the street back towards the general direction of Chakrah's.

During their evening meal that night TutMose thought that Cassian seemed to be brooding, which was very uncharacteristic. Since they had come to terms with cohabiting, and Cassian had come to terms with his lifestyle and restrictions, the Osiran had seemed fairly complacent and content in his everyday life. Brooding had never been part of it. TutMose wondered what the problem was, but hesitated to invade his slave's privacy. *Perhaps in another day or two if this continues,* he thought. They ate their meal in relative silence, and then Cassian cleaned their table and plates and retired to the hearthchamber to start working on the preliminary aspects of the shelving. TutMose left the apartment to meet

Zandran at Chakrah's; both commanders had been unusually inclined recently towards communing there, Zandran particularly so, since he had no family and home life of which to speak.

Cassian shook off most of his strange melancholy a day or two later, and Tut-Mose forgot about his odd behavior. Cassian couldn't figure out what was wrong with him. Everything had been going well, with the exception of that frightening incident at the pavilion. He was confident and content in his unanticipated role as carpenter; he enjoyed the work and admitted that he always had. It was only his hatred of his father that had prevented him from indulging in a pastime that had always attracted him. Where he once cursed Vin-Chay and Tut-Mose for their roles in his new life, he now secretly thanked them.

His role in Vin-Chay's plan was also well on track. Although they were still short quite a number of comrades and had yet to uncover a good deal of necessary information to support their efforts, they had all progressed to a point where they were almost confident that they had a real chance at success. Jor-Rue had managed to secure a set of blueprints out of his master's correlator for the routes of all underground trams, as well as a set of very high-level maps for the positioning of key Miliplex craft bays serviced by the trams along the Theban corridor. Other locations for the main craft bays were as yet out of their reach, and Vin-Chay had been unable to locate or access them in his work at the Culturplex. Burran was trying to follow up on the unsubstantiated rumors of secret craft factories on the outskirts of Thebes and Corso, but neither their actual existence nor exact locations could be determined. They might not even exist, but it was Burran's task to try to verify the matter either way.

Cassian, like Vin-Chay, had hoped against hope that their plans would no longer be necessary. The failure—or success, depending on any given viewpoint—of the Isiin negotiations had made it clear to the Osirans that they were not in danger of being returned home soon as part of any peace treaty. Indeed, it was beginning to look as though they were all destined to remain on Ptolem for life. Cassian felt intense guilt that he was torn about this. He knew that he should want without equivocation to return to Osiron a free man and resume his position as a warrior. Yet, in many respects, he had a better life here on Ptolem than he had had on his own planet. He wasn't happy about being a slave, but he had a relatively peaceful coexistence with someone whom he was certain cared for him as a person, and he enjoyed the work he was doing, and the inner satisfaction it brought to his soul. His body's needs were being met adequately at home and at Chakrah's, but he couldn't quite put his finger on what was missing yet. He only knew he was restless, and somewhat dissatisfied, and longing for something else.

He pushed away thoughts of those cold, gray eyes. He pushed the same thoughts away several times during the morning until he left the apartment to meet Vin-Chay at Patri Julian's temple for one of their regular days of work. This was one of the days that the Patri had set aside for ministering to the homeless and downtrodden of Thebes, Osiran or Ptolemii. He managed to occupy his time and energy along side his princeling friend as they prepared food and helped serve the bare sustenance to the growing ranks of destitute men, women and children who looked at them with grateful and sad and hopeless eyes.

Vin-Chay could sense his friend's restlessness, but kept silent about it until they had finished cleaning up in the temple nutrichamber and sat down together to share a cup of java before each returned home.

"So, are you going to make me drag whatever's wrong out of you?" Vin-Chay asked as he blew on the steaming liquid before he took a first sip.

Cassian shrugged. "I don't know what's wrong. Maybe I'm just depressed about Isiin. You said not to get our hopes up, but I guess I did."

"Easy to do. We all want to go home," Vin-Chay said.

"Do you?" Cassian asked suddenly. Vin-Chay drew his eyebrows together inquiringly.

"What do you mean? Of course I want to go home."

"And leave Pyke and Cobahr?"

Vin-Chay studied his incisive friend before replying. "Of course I don't want to leave them. You know that. But I have another family who needs me and whom I need, and I have to make that take precedence over my feelings for Pyke and Cobahr."

"Who are your mate and child?" Cassian paused and gave Vin-Chay a thoughtful look. "Ever just think you might give up your plans of going home and just stay here? Just stay mated to a man who loves you in his own rather peculiar way, and a son—yes, a son—who is now part of your heart and soul? I don't think you can leave them at this point, my friend."

"I *will* leave them," Vin-Chay said evenly, "because I have to. I have duties and obligations that take priority over them, as much as that may rip my heart out. I will do my duty, Lieutenant, as you need to do *yours* when the time comes." He rose abruptly and slammed down his cup, spilling some of the hot java on the table. He stormed out of the nutrichamber as Cassian finished his drink quietly, contemplating his friend's situation as well as his own. Yes, he would do his duty, too, no matter what. He had no right to do anything else. He had just finished washing out their cups and was turning to leave as Vin-Chay stormed back into the nutrichamber.

"What exactly is your problem?!" he threw at Cassian belligerently.

"I don't know," the other Osiran answered slowly as he met his friend's eyes. "I think—do you believe in love at first sight?" he asked hesitantly.

Vin-Chay stared at him. "Are you insane? What—have you fallen in lust with one of Chakrah's beauties? Please tell me you haven't!"

"I haven't."

"Good."

"I think I may have fallen in love with a slavewoman who works there, though."

Vin-Chay's lips parted slightly as he stared at his friend, then he seemed to relax a bit as he asked casually, "She's Osiran, then, I take it?"

"No, Ptoleiii, strange as that may seem. And she's cold and arrogant and treats me as though I were a repulsive, worthless sandsnail that shouldn't even be on the same planet with her. She has the most beautiful gray eyes, though," Cassian ended easily with a slight, dreamy smile on his face.

"You *are* insane. But—I'm one to talk." Vin-Chay found his eyes straying away from Cassian's and felt a sheepish look cross his face. He smiled weakly at his companion. "I've actually fallen in love with a man who's enslaved me, and is a sworn enemy of my people and particularly of my family. You couldn't find a more unsuitable match if you scoured every surface centimeter of the Four Sisters." He had a twinkle in his eye as he added, "Although I think you may come in a close second. All right. Tell me her name and I'll see what I can dig up on her for you."

"Zulikka. She's blonde, about twenty or twenty-one, and according to one of Chakrah's women she's had four other masters before the Madam. When can you get the information?"

"I don't know. I'll try to start tomorrow at the Culturplex. *Don't* hold your breath though, all right?"

"All right. But I'll be waiting," Cassian warned.

"I'm sure you will, brother. Speak to you soon." Vin-Chay left but not before he saw the ridiculously happy look on his friend's face. *Wonderful*, he thought. *The two top cells in our plan are driven by their glands instead of their brains. There's no hope.*

CHAPTER EIGHT

Vin-Chay spent the day in Thebes at the apartment with Colyn and Bahrtok, who were combining a rare holiday outing in the capital city with the quiet and intimate fortieth birthanniv celebration that Vin-Chay had planned for Pyke. A traditional milestone anniversary in the Ptolemii culture, the celebration usually included a special rite at the religious temple, and then festivities with a select group of persons who were close to the celebrant. Pyke had made it clear that he wanted *no* fanfare, but Vin-Chay had persuaded him to accept a quiet evening meal at home with their closest family and associates. Besides Colyn and Bahrtok, Zandran, TutMose and Cassian would be joining Vin-Chay, Pyke and Cobahr at their Sirrian home for a quiet, relaxed meal and conversation. Pyke had absolutely forbidden gifts, period.

In the few weeks since Pyke and Vin-Chay had reconciled over the Isiin debacle, their relationship had returned to its even keel. Vin-Chay moved back into their noxchamber, to Pyke's vast relief, and they carefully resumed both their emotional and physical communion. That went a long way to relieving Cobahr of his stress and anxiety, and by the time Pyke's birthanniv rolled around, the little boy was back to his happy, affectionate self. Both men swore to themselves that no matter what, they would never again cause that kind of heartbreak to their child. Pyke especially made a silent commitment to learn to control his temper. He didn't know how long his resolution would last, however, given the volatility of his consort and the uncanny ability of that consort to get under his skin. Sometimes he wished he had simply chosen a more traditional mate, but those feelings were fleeting and half-hearted. He never gave the slightest consideration to the several 'suitable' young men and women that his military associates attempted to thrust upon him.

Vin-Chay had accompanied Pyke to their temple on the previous night for the traditional religious ablutions that preceded the actual birthanniv by two days. Only he, Pyke and the Ptolemii priests were present; Cobahr had stayed the night with his grandparents. The rituals lasted two hours, and he was required as consort to participate in anointing Pyke, clad only in a simple, high white skort, with a series of scented oils as the priests offered prayers and chants for health and

prosperity. Vin-Chay was both surprised and relieved when he encountered not even the slightest condescension or contempt from any of the priests. He obeyed their commands without question or hesitation. They told him to kneel in front of Pyke, and he did so in a heartbeat. One priest handed him the jar of oils and commanded him to rub the aromatic, greasy material onto Pyke's exposed limbs. He smeared his hand with the pungent-smelling liquid and gently massaged it onto Pyke's legs and feet and upper body and arms, moving his hands in gentle circular motions meant to soothe and relax. He had seen similar rituals in the monthly temple services. When he finished oiling Pyke's body, he took his Ptolemii master's hands in his own, kissed the tops of them, and put them to his forehead in willing supplication. One priest bid him firmly but respectfully to stand and move to the side, as another priest finished a set of blessings and touched Pyke's forehead with a smear of hot ash.

The only part of the ceremony at which Vin-Chay had slightly balked was the letting of his blood into the golden, jewel-encrusted ceremonial goblet, which held a mixture of spirits, oils and spices. Pyke would consume the brew as the final ritual act after the Chant of God had ended. Pyke explained to him after they left the temple that it was a common practice in his sect to add the lifeblood of the acolyte's most cherished mate to the drink to bind them closer in spirit and time.

Cobahr remained with his grandparents and would accompany them to Pyke's house the following evening for the meal, then go back with them to the apartment. Vin-Chay wanted their time together to be as extensive as possible since they only saw Colyn and Bahrtok a few times each year, and he also wanted the evening alone with Pyke after all the guests had left.

Vin-Chay left the apartment and headed towards TutMose's home to spend some time with Cassian, who was still acting peculiarly. He had seemed so distracted recently and unfocused on their plans. He hadn't become ineffective, but it was clearly heading that way and Vin-Chay was determined to cut the problem off now. Too much depended on their precision and fortitude, and Cassian's glandular problem wasn't getting any better. The warrior had been spending time trying to unsuccessfully woo the young slavewoman at Chakrah's, and had used every opportunity to go to the brothel to see her. So far, according to his painful detail, Cassian had made little if any progress in softening her attitude towards him. Vin-Chay hadn't seen Cassian in over a week, and he wondered what excruciating details he would soon hear about his comrade's non-existent love life.

She was a puzzle, Vin-Chay mused. He had managed to link into the Thrallplex correlator from the Culturplex and trace her back from Chakrah's. Cassian

was accurate in his assumption about her age; she was twenty-one, and Chakrah was her fifth recorded owner. Her previous four owners included a scribe, a vendor, an agriman, and her last master, a junior warrior in the third phalanx. That last owner possessed her for a period of six months before he abruptly sold her to Chakrah, complete with a relatively inexpensive price and a fresh set of bruises on most of her body. Vin-Chay was enraged when he read the details and saw the holographs of her severe beating and displacement before she had even stopped bleeding. The Thrallplex databanks were brutally detailed and accurate. Vin-Chay wondered if his own painful records were there, too. He managed to pull up his files and saw the old holographs of the beating he had suffered at Pyke's hands years ago. His stomach turned as he wondered if he could get them destroyed somehow. He never wanted the chance for his family to ever see those images. He never wanted his son to see those images.

He had shaken off his disquiet and tried to trace the woman back to the child who was sold into slavery at the age of ten. She was apparently an orphan of no family and distinction, but even from that early age she was obstinate and haughty, and it was easy to see the woman who would grow from the child. She had not seemed to submit meekly to her status any more than Vin-Chay and Cassian had, but he thought that it had taken much more strength of will for a child to not bend than for grown men. He didn't know her, but he felt a rush of admiration for the woman who had bewitched his unfortunate friend. He wondered what he could do to further Cassian's cause with the woman. Cassian needed a companion besides his Ptolemii owner and his Osiran comrades.

Vin-Chay reached TutMose's apartment and signaled for entry. He expected Cassian to open the door and had a ready smile for him, but it faded to surprise as the brothel slavewoman opened the door and gave him a frosty look. He recognized her right away from the holographs, but she was even prettier in person. Cassian was dead-on about the gray eyes. She stared at him coldly without speaking until he regained his composure and let the smile beam out again.

"Good day. Is Cassian home?" Vin-Chay asked pleasantly.

She stared at him for a few more seconds before she stiffly moved out of his way to allow him entrance. Vin-Chay moved past her carefully, concerned that if he accidentally touched the woman she might rip his eyes out. She closed the door and led him to the hearthchamber, where Cassian was finishing up the last touches on his wall of shelves. He turned and grinned at his friend as the woman watched the two of them obliquely as they interacted.

"Nice," Vin-Chay said, nodding at the shelves. "Maybe I'll have you come over and do a set in Cobahr's chamber when you have time."

"My pleasure. I have a desk and a couple of chests scheduled after this, but I can do it in between or right after," Cassian said as he dropped to a chair and motioned his friend to sit down. Vin-Chay hesitated and looked at the woman as though to bid her to sit first. She stayed rigid and he reluctantly seated himself across from Cassian, one eye on the woman. Cassian saw his look and waved a dismissive hand towards the woman.

"She'd prefer dying of slow thirst in the Kalihar Desert before accepting any courtesy from either of us, my friend. Wouldn't you, Zulikka?" Cassian asked lightly, receiving a stony stare in response. He turned back to Vin-Chay. "See? You're more likely to get an invitation to the Pharon's compound for an evening meal than get the slightest bit of friendliness out of this lady."

That lady turned abruptly on her heel and left the chamber, bringing the temperature up by significant degrees. Cassian sighed and Vin-Chay grinned at his friend.

"All right—what's the story here? Why is she answering your door instead of Chakrah's?" Vin-Chay asked in amusement, although he could pretty much guess the answer at this point.

"Because in his misguided attempt to be nice and see to my needs, TutMose persuaded the Madam to sell her to him and he brought her here to torment me," Cassian replied seriously.

"He bought her for you?!" Vin-Chay exclaimed in surprise.

"Unfortunately," Cassian nodded.

"Why unfortunately?" Vin-Chay asked. "You've been pining over her for weeks. I would think you'd be happy to have her at arm's length."

Cassian looked frustrated. "I don't want a woman who doesn't want me—for chits or desire. I'm not about to force any woman to submit to my desires when she doesn't want to. And believe me, this one *doesn't* want to. So now I'm stuck with a woman who *won't* let me within arm's length, and a master who thinks because I 'have' a woman I don't need to partake of Chakrah's any more. I foresee an indefinite period of cold showers—again!" He sighed and threw up his hands. "I have a curse on me. I must have, from birth. Nothing else explains the course of my life."

Vin-Chay laughed out loud at the look on his friend's face and clapped him sympathetically on the back. He was about to commiserate with him when Zulikka entered the chamber and placed a tray of cake, bread and citrine juice in front of them on a table and left the chamber again without a word. Cassian looked surprised, then looked at Vin-Chay and narrowed his eyes.

"She never acts this way when we're alone," he said. "It must be you. She's probably dazzled by your royal looks. Perfect," he ended sourly. His disposition didn't improve appreciably during their conversation and light snack, so Vin-Chay beat a hasty retreat out of the apartment and headed home to prepare for the next evening's celebration. He prayed that TutMose wouldn't feel sorry for the woman and bring her; her dour presence would put a pall on the affair and he didn't need that. He considered contacting the commander and requesting that she not attend, but thought better of it and decided to leave it to TutMose's discretion.

Cassian stayed on the chair as he absently nibbled on the cake. He looked up after a few moments and noticed Zulikka standing silently by the entrance to the hearthchamber, staring at him with those eerie eyes. He decided to stare back. She wouldn't drop her eyes and he gave up after a few minutes. He was out-matched. He decided to go back to his work and picked up his sander. He started in on the bottom shelves and nearly dropped his tool as he heard an unexpected question directed imperiously at him.

"What is your friend's name and who is he?" Zulikka demanded, abandoning as usual any pretense of polite conversation with her fellow slave.

Cassian turned towards her with surprise in his eyes. She had actually spoken to him. He raised his eyebrows in exaggeration. "Are you actually speaking to me, a lowly Osiran slave? I am *honored*, princess."

Zulikka stiffened and spun around to leave but Cassian grabbed her arm and forced her to turn back to him. She pulled her arm away from him violently and glared at him. "Don't ever do that again, slave, or I'll tear your heart out with my bare hands," she said coldly. Cassian stared at her wordlessly. He could give up, yell back at her, or answer her question. He decided he would love to yell back, but shrugged the impulse off as usual and answered her question.

"His name is Vin-Chay. He's a fellow enslaved Osiran warrior and my best friend. The best friend I've ever had," he ended softly. He looked at her evenly. "And don't get any ideas about him—he's taken. And you don't want to antagonize his owner, either. Trust me on that if nothing else, Zulikka."

She stared at him before responding. "And his slaveowner would be?"

"High Commander Pyke, head of InterSec. And he's more than just his owner, if you get my meaning."

Her face showed not the slightest trace of awe or surprise at his words. *Ice maiden*, Cassian thought.

"Meaning he beds the slave?" she asked coolly.

"As often as possible," Cassian snapped back. "High Commander Pyke is an extremely possessive and I would say jealous man, and would not take kindly to anyone trying to move in on his legal and well-staked-out territory. Vin-Chay is off limits to everyone, including you, Your Royal Highness," he ended just as coolly. *Two can play at this game*, he thought.

"I have no interest in your friend, slave. The last thing I want is to bed a *common* Osiran slave," she replied haughtily.

Cassian grinned. "Hardly a *common* Osiran slave. Vin-Chay has the finest royal blood. He's a princeling from one of the Nine Kindreds and is the superior of any inbred prince you may find in the royal compounds of this hellish planet." He looked at her critically. "He is well above you, lady, in his breeding and bloodline. He wouldn't want *you* even he weren't the consort of one of the most powerful men in the Theban government."

Zulikka usually left chambers in controlled, arrogant movements; this time, she stormed out and left a satisfied slave in her wake.

TutMose returned home late from his Miliplex duties but found that Cassian had held the evening meal for them. Zulikka had apparently eaten earlier, which was fine with TutMose. The icy slavewoman always gave him the chills with her relentlessly hostile stare and unspoken contempt. He thought that Cassian had better learn to control her before he sold her out from under him and returned their household to the peaceful one it once was. She had been here for over a week now and the situation wasn't getting any better. TutMose and Cassian had several cups of java in the hearthchamber. TutMose complimented Cassian on the fine shelving job. His slave friend's efforts all through the apartment had produced a comfortable, homey place to live for both of them, and TutMose had never felt so settled and peaceful. He decided to forego Chakrah's tonight and listen to his favorite music in his noxchamber. He bid Cassian a good night and retired early. He smiled when he entered his noxchamber; Cassian had already set his neoclassical music on softly, lit a half dozen scented candles, and left a goblet and a small flask of annise on his bed table. His bed covers were turned down, and his nightclothes were laid out neatly. His slave was a very considerate friend.

Cassian cleaned up from their meal and ascended to his own noxchamber. Zulikka was already settled on her pallet on the floor in a far corner. She had resided there since her arrival. He had tried in vain to convince her that he would not touch her if she wanted to reside comfortably in the large bed with him, but her look told him that she would have preferred to be ripped into little, bloody pieces by hot pincers in a public courtyard rather than risk the barest touch of his unwelcome body. He was not about to be evicted from his bed, and so she slept

on the floor. He hoped it was hard and uncomfortable. At least she didn't snore like TutMose did.

He bid her a cool good night and turned the light off. They lay as usual in the darkness, each waiting for the other to fall asleep first. After a few minutes Cassian heard slight rustling noises coming from her corner, and then he stiffened as he felt her get into the bed next to him.

"Move over. As far as you can," she said evenly.

"My pleasure," he replied sarcastically as he shifted to the other side of the bed.

She settled in and they resumed their silence for nearly a half hour before she spoke to him again.

"So your Osiran slavemate is a princeling. That would probably have made it difficult for him to adjust to slavery," she mused almost absently.

"Unlike me, you mean—a commoner," Cassian said tersely.

"Yes, of course," she answered in an offhand voice.

"That does it!" Cassian said angrily as he let loose a familiar Osiran curse and turned his bed light on. He looked over at her as she stared at him with curious but unafraid eyes. He waited the barest of seconds before he slid both hands under her and shoved her off the bed onto the floor, wrapped in a tangle of blankets, leaving the man on the bed naked and exposed and furious.

Zulikka looked up at him as though he were a strange but harmless insect. She deliberately swept her eyes over his naked body and gave him an unimpressed look before she scuttled over to her pallet, still wrapped in the blankets, turned her back to him, and went to sleep.

CHAPTER NINE

The evening of Pyke's fortieth birthanniv fell in the last days of the high summer season on the eighth day of Scorpio, when the two moons of Ptolem were fully alight and in alignment with each other. Each glowed with a hazy ring around its outline, and a full blanket of stars from one end of the horizon to the other surrounded them. Osiron was brightly visible in the far distance, and Sekmet could barely be made out. Isiin was invisible for all intents and purposes during this period of the year.

The evening had cooled down considerably as the sun set and left a chill on the desert surrounding Pyke's house and property. Vin-Chay started a fire and it was at full burn by the appointed time of their guests' arrival. Pyke was uncharacteristically introspective and quiet, but he had to admit that he did look forward to sharing the evening with his extended family. He had assisted Vin-Chay in preparing a sumptuous meal for their guests after his consort returned from some afternoon appointment in Thebes. He readied the dining table himself with the best plates and silver utensils his consort had purchased especially for the celebration. He set out bottles of the finest annise and papyron, aged at least thirty years. TutMose, he knew, would be more than happy at his choice of spirits.

Pyke dressed simply but elegantly for the occasion, as did Vin-Chay. Neither man ever desired to affect a flashy appearance; both preferred the understated look. Pyke smiled to himself at the thought that he and his Osiran consort had so much more in common than he could ever have thought at the inauspicious beginning of their long and turbulent relationship. He remembered a time when Vin-Chay had very adamantly declared that they had nothing in common. He wondered what his princeling would say if he reminded him of that long-ago conversation.

Pyke nodded in approval and appreciation as Vin-Chay descended to the hearthchamber fully dressed, wearing plain, close-fitting sand-colored trousers and mid-calf softboots. His white tunic was belted with a long red sash; the loose sleeves were gathered at the wrist and fastened at the high left neck with old-fashioned silver clasps. He wore his favorite ankh medallion and earring, and his companion rings. His hair was loose and flowing past his shoulders, with six

tight, perfect braids threaded through with webs of spun silver. He inclined his head at Pyke's similar garments and thought they made an exceptionally well-matched pair that evening.

Zandran, TutMose and Cassian arrived first and settled into easy conversation with Pyke and Vin-Chay. At least TutMose and Cassian did; Zandran, despite his grudging gratitude towards Vin-Chay for saving Pyke's life, still felt uncomfortable and stiff around his commander's slave consort. Still, he seemed to attempt civil conversation and Vin-Chay replied in kind. Pyke felt the tension at their possible conflict melt away as he thought, *Finally, they've come to a truce.*

Colyn and Bahrtok arrived with Cobahr twenty minutes later, deposited at the house by the official commandcraft Pyke had put at their disposal. One of the fairly harmless gratuities that he received and was able to share in his exalted position, he imparted lightly. He didn't have to convince Bahrtok to take advantage of the craft when he had Cobahr with him; the agriman felt it was the safest method of transportation available, and he would never take chances with his beloved grandchild.

The group of seven adults and one excited child spent some relaxed time before they sat down to eat. Both Vin-Chay and Pyke served the meal. TutMose smiled to himself, remembering a time when Vin-Chay alone was wont to serve Pyke's infrequent guests with an attitude and a sullen manner. *So long ago*, TutMose thought. *Almost a different lifetime away for all of us.* The celebrants ate heartily, and the mealtime was peppered with interesting and easy conversation as well as good food and drink, and even the reclusive Zandran was obviously having a good time. The meal took two hours to complete, down to the carrolan cake and not-too-hot java. Then the guests and hosts dispersed through the hearthchamber to fill the rest of the evening with quiet and personable conversation.

As Zandran and TutMose argued quietly about some innocuous subject they had obviously been discussing earlier in the day, Cassian stood by his passionate master and watched them with a skeptical eye. He was glad TutMose hadn't decided to bring the insufferable slavewoman with them; it would have cast a cold shadow on the proceedings. He listed to them go back and forth for a few moments before he lost interest and meandered over to Vin-Chay and whispered to him. They left the guests and went into Cobahr's playchamber so that Cassian could evaluate what would be needed to make a wall of shelves for the boy. He groaned inwardly at Vin-Chay's enthusiastic suggestions; amateurs at woodworking had no concept of what was needed. He smiled and nodded and dismissed his

friend's obtuse suggestions as he cast a critical eye on the project and made the calculations in his head for the efforts that needed to be done.

Colyn put a light cloak on Cobahr and took him out to the back enclosure to see the stars. *He's always looking at the stars*, she thought sadly. *He'll want to go to them someday and leave here*. She held his hand tightly as he chattered away and pointed and giggled and did all of the things that made her grandmother's heart swell. *He's growing up too fast*.

Pyke brought the last of the plates into the nutrichamber as Bahrtok followed him in and sipped his annise slowly. He watched his once-distant son-in-law perform commonplace domestic tasks with practiced ease. The change in the man over the last couple of years had been difficult to accept at first. Bahrtok had thought any such change would be temporary, an aberration, but he found that Pyke had genuinely changed, and for the better. He knew it had everything to do with Vin-Chay, whom Bahrtok regarded fondly as a foster son. He wondered how far Pyke would go with the relationship, especially in light of the outcome of Isiin. He decided to throw the subject out into the open just to see his son-in-law's reaction.

"So when are you going to marry him, Pyke?" he asked casually. Pyke rewarded him with a surprised look mixed with amusement rather than annoyance. Bahrtok knew he hadn't crossed the line with his prickly son-in-law.

"Who? The Osiran?" Pyke replied just as casually. He shrugged his shoulders just to annoy Bahrtok, just in case the old man thought he had figured him out too easily. "Why should I marry a slave I will have at my beck and call for a lifetime anyway? Wouldn't that be a pointless exercise in legality?"

"Perhaps for some, Commander, but not for you, I think. You wouldn't have been content simply cohabiting with my daughter any more than you are with this man."

"Your daughter would have cohabited with me freely. This man, as you put it, really has no choice."

"Doesn't he? Despite his legal status here I don't believe for an instant that you would force him to live intimately with you if he resisted. Perhaps in the beginning, but not now. And I think you want more. I think," he finished slowly, "that you would give almost anything to have him come to you as a free and willing partner." He looked directly into Pyke's eyes. "Which, as we both know, you could make him any time you choose to. And since Cobahr has started calling him 'Papa' in the past six months, what's the point in pretending he's anything else but your true mate and my grandson's true parent? I approve of the new name, by the way." Vin-Chay had of course conferred with Bahrtok and Colyn

before permitting an eager Cobahr to call him by the familiar parental designation rather than his name.

"Perhaps I like things the way they are, for now. Perhaps he does, too. Who knows what the future will bring? Right now, we're fine as we are and I don't want to complicate things," Pyke said lightly, although Bahrtok could sense that he'd hit a nerve. He realized that his suggestion was exactly what Pyke wanted to do. He was a little surprised, but pleased at the prospect. Very pleased. Cobahr couldn't have a better parent than Vin-Chay. Other than Coda.

Bahrtok gave Pyke an enigmatic smile and nonchalant 'hmm' before he strolled out of the nutrichamber to return to the other guests. Pyke stayed in the nutrichamber for a few more moments, mulling over his father-in-law's words.

The guests left late when it was clear that Cobahr was tiring. Vin-Chay carried him out to the commandcraft and strapped him safely into the rear seat. He kissed him on the forehead, then embraced Colyn and Bahrtok before they entered the vehicle and the craft departed for Thebes. The remaining three guests made their good-byes as well and departed as Vin-Chay and Pyke watched the craft take off from their front enclosure. They were tired, too, but both were satisfied that the evening couldn't have been better. Vin-Chay followed Pyke up to their noxchamber after they set the security system and doused the fire, leaving only bare embers glowing in the hearthchamber.

"Bath or shower?" Vin-Chay asked him as they started to disrobe.

"Bath," Pyke replied as he finished lighting the dresser candles and stripped off the last of his clothing. Vin-Chay nodded and left him for the sanichamber where he proceeded to create a repeat scene of their night of the candles from so long ago. They had indulged in such cleansing and eroticism many times since that first night, but the experience was always soothing and comforting; it seemed anew each time they pampered themselves with the intimate rituals. Vin-Chay oiled and scented the hot water, then slid down into the tub when it was ready. Pyke joined him moments later, sliding down with his own back against the tub and pulling Vin-Chay against him. He began the rhythmic washing of his consort as Vin-Chay kept his eyes lightly closed and let the sensations of the water and soap and Pyke's skilled hands take him to another plane of feeling and emotion. Pyke noticed something different about his consort as soon as he began bathing him: a brand new tattoo along the full inside of Vin-Chay's right thigh. Pyke grinned at the pattern that matched his own colorful decoration, and thought about how his consort had once viewed such coloring of the flesh as 'desecration' rather than adornment. That his Osiran mate had willingly chosen to embellish his flawless flesh with colors and symbols denoting his Ptolemii mas-

ter's bloodline was a true, unexpected honor. Pyke felt his heart clutch in gratitude and love.

Pyke murmured lightly to him, unintelligible things as he caressed and lathered and washed. Vin-Chay almost dozed under the relaxing ministrations and could not have told himself how much time had passed when he sensed that Pyke wanted them to finish their bathing and return to the noxchamber. When they were dry they retreated to their bed and Pyke pulled him close and locked him in a tight, passionate embrace as their mouths met in a feverish desire.

As always, their passion excited and frightened Pyke. He had never known such abandon in a relationship as he had with the years of knowing this man. He had always carefully cultivated a chilled, reserved exterior, and even with Coba, his various partners at Chakrah's, and his other brief liaisons before his marriage and after his wife's death. He had never let down his control and guard as much as he did with the Osiran. He knew it was dangerous to his soul, but he didn't care. He would have paid any price for one such moment with his consort. He pushed Vin-Chay back so that he was reclining under Pyke as their mouths remained locked. He could barely breathe. He barely let Vin-Chay breathe as he kept his probing tongue thrust into his consort's mouth, moving and caressing and full of proprietary desire. He owned this man, and sometimes he let himself act that way.

Vin-Chay returned his master's passion willingly. His fever matched Pyke's own and despite other such nights like this, tonight was filled with an unbridled, fervent ardor that came from some unbidden place and would not leave despite his best efforts at suppressing some of his lost control. Unlike Pyke, his life and relationships had been filled with passion and intensity. His exhilaration at life extended from the heat of battle to play with his brothers and friends, or as he absorbed his treasured history tomes and exercised his mind and body in pleasurable ways in quiet solitude.

He had a fleeting thought of how he might be with another person. He wondered if he would prefer a woman or man, and had a moment of regret that he was so inexperienced. If he knew no other, how could he know his feelings for Pyke were true, or were just the result of a cloistered, limited existence where he had no other opportunities? He had only been attracted to females during his chaste youth. Pyke had broached the subject of expanding his sexual experience with a woman at Chakrah's a couple of times, but each time Vin-Chay had felt uneasy and had declined. That had pleased Pyke, and had made Vin-Chay wonder if his refusal had been done unconsciously to please Pyke, or because he truly

was uninterested. But he had finally come to realize that he wasn't attracted to men, but simply to Pyke, whose gender was incidental.

Pyke stroked and caressed him and murmured things neither of them could understand or needed to. It wasn't long before their exertions with their mouths and hands weren't enough, and it became a matter of who would be primary that night. Since Vin-Chay's original return from Ammurabbi everything about their relationship had changed, including the unspoken matter of sexual dominance in their lovemaking. Pyke had always been the only one who mounted; after Vin-Chay returned, he had gently guided the younger man into assuming that role on occasion, and had even undergone his own rectal colonsphincterectomy. The younger Osiran had assumed a primary role so hesitantly, tentative at his own inexperience and concerned about hurting his Ptolemii lover. Gradually, however, he had become a considerate, accomplished partner who was able to match Pyke's passion and thoughtfulness and take the lead in their often exhaustive and always fulfilling sexual bouts.

Tonight is Pyke's night, Vin-Chay thought as he silently rolled over and waited for the inevitable consummation of their passion. Pyke stroked and kissed and mounted him and abandoned himself to the sensations of the penultimate joining of his body to his consort's rippling through his own body. He felt as though his blood and skin were on fire as he moved rhythmically until he exploded in a wave of rapture, his body slicked with a gleam of sweat that matched his partner's. They both lay immobile for what seemed hours but were really only endless moments, until Pyke regained his composure and the two men were able to break apart. They managed to reach the shower where they cleansed their bodies and continued their feverish passion.

It was another hour—or perhaps two—before they relaxed peacefully in their bed, next to each other, not touching physically but wrapped around each other inside their minds and hearts, silently communing. *It's time*, Vin-Chay thought as he pushed himself over to his side and up on his elbow. Pyke felt the movement and opened his eyes to look at him. He smiled sleepily at his consort and was about to close his eyes when Vin-Chay spoke.

"I have a special birthanniv gift for you, master," Vin-Chay said softly.

"Umm?" Pyke responded, half-awake.

Vin-Chay stroked his bedmate's chest gently, and Pyke opened his eyes and focused on his princeling. He smiled at Vin-Chay and said lightly, "No gifts, remember?"

"Even special ones?" Vin-Chay replied as he let his practiced hand wander between Pyke's warm thighs.

"Well, perhaps just one special one. Where is it?" *Other than encircling my manhood.*

"Right here," Vin-Chay said, taking Pyke's hand and placing it on his chest and holding it there with his own. Pyke looked at him with a question in his eyes. It was a long moment before Vin-Chay answered the unspoken question.

"I love you," he said quietly.

Pyke stared at him for what seemed an eternity, until Vin-Chay started to feel almost uneasy at the length of the silence and stare. It wasn't quite the reaction he had expected whenever he had rehearsed his confession repeatedly in front of a mirror. Pyke pushed himself up and faced his consort and reached his hand to the back of Vin-Chay's head and grasped him firmly. "Say it again," he commanded, locking eyes with the other man.

"I *love* you," Vin-Chay responded in the same firm tone. "What?" he continued, grinning. "Does that come as some sort of surprise after these past three years? You couldn't figure it out?"

Pyke expelled the breath he had been holding and fell back on his pillow, closing his eyes and letting a sly smile spread slowly across his placid face. He opened his eyes and gazed contentedly at his lover. "I assumed, even though you've taken one hell of a long time to say it. If I had one wish right now," he grinned, "it would be to record this moment, go back in time a few years, and play it for you. I would literally give ten years of my life to do that."

Vin-Chay looked at him thoughtfully. "Even if I had seen it I wouldn't have believed it possible. Certainly not after our rather unique and troubled beginnings."

Pyke smiled at him. "Do you remember what I said to you right after I said those very same words?"

"I do," Vin-Chay replied. "You said you wished you didn't feel that way because it would only complicate your life."

"And it has, thank God. I can't even begin to imagine a life with an acquiescent, pleasant mate whose only thought would be to please me and honor me above all others. Boring," he said lightly, before his voice took on a serious tone. "Has this complicated your life?"

"Immeasurably," Vin-Chay said, repeating Pyke's own word of long ago. "But I revel in that. Love doesn't have to be serene and without problems and conflict and issues. I wouldn't want that kind of relationship myself, so I guess we're well-matched after all."

"TutMose would agree with you—he used those very words once. He's not the only one who feels that way," Pyke said.

"Oh? You mean Zandran agrees with him?" Vin-Chay said with a glint in his eye.

"That particular approval may take a few more years. Bahrtok approves, though. And Colyn, I'm sure. Cobahr is a given. Cassian?"

Vin-Chay shook his head ruefully. "He's baffled, I think. So's Burran, but probably less so. He's known me longer and I'm not sure the odd twists and turns of my heart would surprise him at this point."

"So, my Osiran consort. Where should we go from here?"

"What do you mean? We're there as far as our feelings go. Given the situation that still exists between our peoples, there isn't any other place we can go at this point. And you know we both still have unspoken obligations," Vin-Chay finished, tacitly reminding Pyke of their long-ago conversation. He knew Pyke didn't want to hear it, and he didn't want to say it, but he had to. They had to be in this with their eyes open.

"That's not necessarily true. We can adjust. We have in other ways. We can make compromises with ourselves."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning," Pyke said slowly, "marry me."

Vin-Chay was stunned into speechlessness as Pyke kept his eyes riveted on the Osiran's face, searching it for his true feelings. He saw the shock pass across Vin-Chay's face, along with pain and sadness and more than just a touch of longing. He waited for Vin-Chay's answer, although he knew what it had to be.

Vin-Chay shook his head slowly. "I cannot. We both know that. Emancipation for marriage requires taking an oath of allegiance to the Pharon, and I will never do that. You can't have expected me to say yes to that proposal."

"I had *hoped* you would say yes. Such a commitment is a sacrament, and I think I know us both well enough to know that we both hold such a commitment in the highest regard. I don't think that ultimately there can be anything but such a final, lifelong pledge for either of us. I'd like to get us there. I believe you would as well. If we can get past the obstacles—"

"*Obstacles?* That word doesn't *begin* to cover the situation we're in! Our people are at war. My people are enslaved here by yours. I am your legal chattel. My family hates you with a passion you can't even imagine. Those aren't merely 'obstacles,' Pyke—those are *significant* barriers!" Vin-Chay said passionately.

"Agreed, but perhaps we can get past them one at a time. Our people are at war, but could be for a long time. Are we supposed to put our lives on hold indefinitely for that reason?"

"We may have to. Maybe not, but that's only the first reason."

"I can't change the second situation, only for you. I can emancipate you for marriage. Others have done so."

"But you won't emancipate me without marriage, right?" Vin-Chay said tightly.

"That's right. I won't change my mind on that, period. You know why."

"All right. The last thing I want to do tonight is start an argument on one of our hot topics, regardless of how unreasonable you may be," he shot back.

Pyke smiled. "And the last reason? Would you not marry if your family disapproved of your prospective mate?"

"That may be the toughest one in the long run," Vin-Chay acknowledged quietly. "It never occurred to me that there would ever be a situation where I might wind up mated with someone considered unsuitable by my family. I was never exposed to a suite of potential mates who weren't appropriate by virtue of the fact that they were part of our world. And remember," he said pointedly, "you didn't do anything on Isiin to endear yourself to my father and brother—quite the opposite."

"Then you wouldn't go against your family's wishes?" Pyke asked tensely, ignoring the jibe.

"I didn't say that. Are you asking me if I would ever marry you despite my family's objections?"

"Yes."

Vin-Chay looked Pyke directly in the eyes. "I would marry you in a heartbeat if all of those other obstacles didn't exist, regardless of what my family wished. I would marry you tonight."

"Maybe that's enough for now," Pyke mused as he stared at the ceiling.

"I'm sorry. It's going to have to be for both of us," Vin-Chay said as he moved closer to Pyke and wrapped his arms around him. He nuzzled Pyke's cheek. He was nearly asleep when Pyke murmured softly, "Well, if you won't marry me now, perhaps we can at least discuss giving Cobahr a brother or sister to grow up with." Vin-Chay's eyes snapped open and he looked at his consort, who had his eyes closed and another sly smile on his face.

CHAPTER TEN

Cassian yawned and stretched and reveled in the simple pleasure of sleeping late on the mid-winter solstice sabbat, one of the most sacred days in the Osiran religion. He knew the early morning would be cool and inviting, although years ago he would never have thought a temperature of one hundred as ‘cool.’ *How perceptions change*, he mused as he turned over in bed carefully so as not to disturb his sleeping mate. Zulikka was resting soundly on her back, which she hated, preferring to sleep on her side wrapped around Cassian, or on her stomach, with her arms wrapped around one of their soft pillows. She had no choice in the matter at the moment, Cassian thought sympathetically, as he gazed lovingly at her swollen stomach, which bespoke of a pregnancy well overdue. The physician at the Mediplex had stated without question that the babies would be born in four days hence, but Zulikka had turned a chilly eye to him and announced that ‘she’ wasn’t ready yet and so ‘they’ would have to wait a little longer. She had swept out of the Mediplex in her usual haughty way. Cassian knew she would never have been allowed there in the first place if it were not for the influence of High Commander Pyke, whose ability to terrorize did serve well in some instances.

He slipped out of bed quietly and grabbed his clothing and left the chamber. She was lightly snoring, having started the unpleasant habit around mid-term of her pregnancy. She was still not as bad as TutMose though, Cassian thought gratefully. He donned his clothes in the hallway, checked TutMose’s chamber to see if the commander was still sleeping—he was—then grabbed a half loaf of bread to eat on the way to the temple to prepare for sabbat services. He planned on meeting his comrades there in an hour or two, but wanted to get there early to assist Patri Julian with his preparations for the complex yearly rituals associated with the winter rites. And to be alone with his own thoughts.

He reached the temple and let himself in, then took a few moments to sit in the quiet, dark main hall after he had knelt at the front altar and offered a special prayer and thanks of his own. Many Osirans believed that their God had deserted them. Cassian had believed this at one time, too, but had since come to realize that perhaps the deity they prayed to simply worked at his own pace and in his own way. Cassian, if anyone, was proof of that. He could never have fallen any

lower than when he was enslaved at that unspeakable quarry, and now he had nearly everything he could ever have imagined, save his freedom—a profession he loved, people who cared about him, a woman who let him touch her on rare and special occasions, and a baby daughter on the way. Four years on Ptolem had changed him beyond measure, and he was grateful that it had.

More than anything, he was grateful for that woman. In her own prickly way she had filled the remaining void in his life, although for so many months he had despaired of her ever saying a kind word, let alone sharing his bed and life. It had been gradual, true, and it seemed to stem from the night he had shoved her off his bed and cursed her ancestors. The morning after, he had awakened to find that she had covered him while he slept with the blankets he had lost to her the night before. She didn't slam his plate of food quite so soundly on the table that morning or evening. She was even nearly civil to poor TutMose.

Two weeks after the bed incident, she surprised him with a mid-day meal out in the back enclosure where he was finishing up a beautiful black wood desk for a military jurist. He had thanked her cautiously; she had retreated back into the house without a word. Three days later he and TutMose had descended together to the first tier of the apartment, and stopped dead in their tracks in the hearth-chamber as they heard an unfamiliar and mind-boggling noise: Zulikka was humming as she prepared their morning meal. No plates had been slammed down that day, and she had filled them with excellent, hot food without any instruction or entreaty. It unnerved TutMose and he ate quickly and seemed to flee the house. Cassian chewed slowly, and found himself almost enjoying a peaceful meal with the gray-eyed woman opposite him. Truth to tell, it had unnerved him as well.

Over the next month she had done odd things, like brush up against him 'accidentally,' or reach over him as she placed a pitcher of citrine juice in front of him, giving him a fine view of her low-cut though otherwise modest dress. She would groan almost—almost—inadvisably as she tossed and turned on her pallet, causing him to grit his teeth and tell himself to have strength. He caught 'accidental' glimpses of portions of her body as she dressed and bathed. She would look at him with those unfathomable eyes until he couldn't meet them any more. She watched him work, and talk with Vin-Chay, and ruffle Cobahr's hair, and engage in pleasing conversation with TutMose as they played games of Strategum and conversed over cups of papyron. He had received permission from High Commander Pyke once to have her accompany him to Pyke's Sirrian residence to work on Cobahr's shelves, and her eyes never left him as he worked diligently on his tasks to create a beautiful set of east-wall shelves for the little boy. He had

been gratified when she barely gave Vin-Chay a glance when he joined them for an hour after he and Cobahr had returned from the boy's Pre-Academy; she was clearly disinterested in the princeling at this point, and Cassian had breathed a silent sigh of relief.

He knew she was playing him, but he couldn't figure out why. It wasn't as though she could gain anything from seducing him; he was lower on the social chain than she was. If she had any common sense, she would have been trying to seduce TutMose, but there was no movement whatsoever in that direction. If anything, she now treated her official master with a genuine deference and politeness which baffled the commander completely—not that he was about to question it or complain.

And then one fateful night ten months ago, when he was lying in bed and about to turn off the light, she stood up from her pallet, stared hard at him as he stared back uncertainly, unfastened her night dress and dropped it to the floor, then slipped into bed with him. He reached for the light to turn it off but she stopped him with a soft hand and shook her head. "I want us to see each other," she said. And then she said softly, "Be gentle, warrior," as she met his mouth and they came together in a fire Cassian had never known.

Despite his heat and fervor he suddenly became aware that her passion, though far from muted, was a little hesitant and fearful. He attributed it to her probable past bad experiences, and resolved to be as considerate as possible, but it soon became clear where her hesitancy came from: she was chaste. He was shocked that he could be her first, but the time was later to query her on it. He managed to consummate their first and her first lovemaking as patiently and gently as his own needs would allow. When he had finished and they lay spent and tangled in bodies slicked with sweat, he realized that she was bleeding and he had stinging fingernail marks all down his back. He made her lie on her pallet, then got water to bathe her, changed his bed coverings, and carried her back to what was now their bed. He held her close for a long time, nuzzling her cheek and throat and murmuring, before he decided to broach the subject of her chastity. And there was something else in the back of his mind, something he couldn't quite put his finger on. *Later*, he thought.

"Why didn't you tell me it would be your first time?" he asked softly.

"You knew soon enough, Osiran. What would be the point?" she replied blandly. He couldn't quite gauge her state of mind by the tone of her voice.

"I could have been a little gentler early on, to make it easier on you."

"You were fine. I think," she said softly, almost smiling but not quite. He smiled at her and kissed her cheek.

"Does this mean my days of cold showers are over?" he asked lightly.

"Umm, I would say so," she said as she turned towards him, threw an arm around his chest, and went immediately to sleep.

The atmosphere in the apartment changed dramatically from that night onward, and although their relationship could never be considered outwardly warm and affectionate and loving, it was more than enough for him. She never seemed to mind making love, or having him touch her. She never initiated contact after that first night, but she never pushed him away or gave any hint that she was displeased to have him as her mate. She retained her haughtiness and sharp tongue, and he didn't want it any other way.

Two months after their first night she informed him that she was pregnant, and that it would be a daughter. She was clearly unprepared for his reaction, when he grabbed her around the waist and whirled her around to a loud whoop. He kissed her over and over until she pushed him away and gave him a cross look and left the chamber with an exasperated, "Men!" Cassian was worried about TutMose's reaction, but the Ptolemii seemed equally thrilled. His little makeshift family was increasing.

And then, of course, the bizarre direction of his life took another odd turn a few nights later. Zulikka was examining her naked body in a long mirror when he entered the chamber. She looked up at him nonchalantly; he smiled back warmly as his eyes roamed over her well-proportioned form. Then he saw something that made him remember their first night and the thought he couldn't remember: a small, nearly hidden triangular tattoo near her groin. It was gold-colored and tiny, but not the interlocking slave tattoo they both wore on their arms. She saw that he had seen it and met his eyes evenly, assuming he knew what it was. By the look on his face, he had no idea. She could either tell him the truth or lie to him. She chose not to lie, but her stomach turned at the thought of him knowing the full truth. Would he even want her after this? It didn't matter. She would not live with any more lies or half-truths.

"You don't know what it is, do you?" she said quietly. He shook his head. She raised her chin just a little and looked at him intently.

"Your friend, Vin-Chay," she began slowly. "He is of one the Nine Kindreds. How does his family mark their inclusion into such a royal family?"

"What do you mean?" Cassian asked curiously. What was she getting at?

"Is there no sign that shows which family he belongs to?"

"Well, his people all wear specially-carved silver signet rings on their right hands. His was taken when we were dragged off the *Remus*. Is that what you meant?"

"Yes. It is done differently here. Here, children born of a royal household are marked forever as belonging to that household. They are marked with an irreversible golden tattoo in a place as invisible as possible to the naked eye. Generally near the groin for women, and under the hair at the back of the neck for men. Such as this tattoo," she finished, gesturing at it with her hand while maintaining eye contact with her confused lover. He stared at it. He stared at her, until the dawning realization that he was partially trying to push away came to him full force. He looked at her hard, eyes narrowed.

"You are a member of the royal house? Is that what you're saying? Who is your father?" he demanded, his voice a little louder and harder than he meant it to be.

She paused for what seemed an interminable amount of time before she answered almost inaudibly, "Amun IV."

"That's not possible!" he whispered in a stunned voice. "No daughter of the Pharon is going to wind up as a mistreated slave who beds—*me!*"

"Only a daughter of a favorite concubine who made the mistake of betraying her royal lover with a handsome but faithless High Scribe, who then betrayed her to his ruler. My mother and I both paid the price for her infidelity. I was ten; she was twenty-eight. She was—circumcised, and then sent to Sekmet to service the free berrillium miners." Zulikka shook her head. "I heard years later that she had survived three years of such abuse before she died. I always wished she had been less strong so her torment could have ended sooner."

"And you?" Cassian said in a choked voice.

She looked straight in his eyes. It was the hardest thing she had ever had to do. "I was sent into slavery. My name and existence were erased from the archives, and I became simply a no-name slave who could be bought and sold and used however my master or masters saw fit." She couldn't meet his eyes any more and turned away, staring unseeing into some distant point on the far wall. "I was born and raised for ten years in the royal compound, with the finest food and clothes and education and care a seed of His Royal Majesty could ever hope to have. Had things not gone as they had, by now I would have been married to a minor cousin prince or son of a High Scribe. Instead, I was stripped of my mother and my blood and my name and thrust into the evil institution my father had imposed on your people."

She looked at Cassian again. "My first three 'masters' were fairly decent men who only wanted a lifetime of free labor. But I couldn't adjust, and time and again I was sold. The fourth was a handsome young Ptolemii warrior who wanted someone to warm his bed. I refused to surrender my chastity. He persisted and tried to rape me. I fought back tooth and nail, and he beat me within a centime-

ter of my life, and then went to Chakrah's for some satisfaction. She commiserated with him, and the next day I found myself with a fifth master—or mistress, as the case may be—and you know the story from there.”

Cassian stared at her for a long moment, and then moved to put his arms around her. She resisted, to his surprise, and shook her head forcefully, keeping him at bay with a hand against his chest.

“No,” she said evenly. “There is one more thing you must know.”

“It doesn't mat—” he began.

“It might. I told you what they did to my mother before they sent her to Sek-met?”

“Yes?” he replied, starting to get an uneasy feeling.

“They did it to me, too,” she said quietly, waiting for the impact to dawn on him. She could see it starting to in his eyes, and she braced herself for possible revulsion and rejection. What man would truly want a woman who could never be aroused by him, never climax with him, never be a full woman?

Cassian answered that in a few seconds when he put his arms around her tightly and held her closer than he had ever touched anyone. She slowly raised her arms and hugged him back, closing her eyes, and offering a silent prayer for her Osiran slave mate. They held one another for a very long time before Cassian carried her to the bed and made exceptionally gentle and passionate love to her. *Whatever she can give back*, he thought, *is more than enough for me.*

Cassian shook himself out of his reverie as he heard the noises coming from the back of the temple, and a few moments later Vin-Chay came into view. He grinned and waved at his friend then knelt before the alter for a few seconds, raised his arms, palms up, bowed his head, then rose to join his friend on the dark, hard bench.

“How is Zulikka?” Vin-Chay asked anxiously. He was more than just a little concerned at the duration of her pregnancy. It was supposed to be well over by now.

“She's fine, Vin-Chay,” Cassian said patiently. “There's nothing wrong with the babies and I'm sure they'll pop out any time now, so *stop worrying.*”

“I'm not worried,” Vin-Chay said in a worried tone. “Neither is Pyke. We're just—”

“Worried. Everything is fine. Trust me. Your son will arrive shortly. He'll be healthy and squalling and prince-perfect in every way, so—”

“Stop worrying. Got it,” Vin-Chay said. “All right. Change of subject. Has Jor-Rue's weapons' expert figured out the coordinates yet?” Vin-Chay couldn't

refer to the man by name, since the entire point of the cell layers was that only the immediate layer above a person knew his or her name. Vin-Chay had no idea what Cassian's, Jor-Rue's and Burran's people were called; those three men had no idea of the names of the people under their own layers. It made for a difficult coordination sometimes, but was also the maximum safety they could all ensure one another if someone was caught and tortured.

"He's come up with several schematics that Jor-Rue is verifying with his own calculations. It would be a lot easier if we could use a correlator, but that might leave traces of our activity and what we'd need to use it for would look too suspicious and difficult to explain. So, they're manually putting the calcs together."

"That's all we can do, then. I'm still worried about the rumors I've been hearing about the secret craft factories somewhere in the southern provinces. What are they building there? Burran's made no progress?" Vin-Chay asked distractedly. Cassian could tell he still had part of his thoughts on Zulikka and the babies.

Cassian shook his head. "No, none."

"Hmm. I'll have to pursue it then somehow. We have forty-nine now, and it won't be long before we have the minimum contingent. The quatra-cells have made initial contacts with the passengers, right?"

"With most of them. That's the part we have to take the most care on, the non-warriors and passive participants—the ones along for the ride. I think we're all right, though."

"They understand that all of Tuscan goes or none of Tuscan goes, right? Because if this fails or we have to leave some there, there isn't the least chance that sector won't be razed and—"

"They *understand*," Cassian said evenly. *Damned expectant father.*

"Good. If all goes well, then I anticipate eight months or so before we activate the plan." Vin-Chay cocked his head at his pensive friend. "No last-minute change of heart, right?"

Cassian snorted. "You're more likely to have it than me."

"Don't start."

Cassian threw up his hands and rose. "No arguments today, princeling. I'm going out back to help the Patri prepare the sabbat meal. Coming?"

"Soon. I think I'll just stay here a few moments."

Vin-Chay watched Cassian leave as he sat back and enjoyed the quiet solitude. He was anxious for his son to be born. Any day now. Any day now he and Pyke would have another child in the house and Cobahr would have a little brother. A little brother to not grow up with, if things went according to plan. Cassian was

right to cast doubts on his resolve, which had been tested sorely in the past. This new incursion of more Ptolemii family into his life was making the possibility of leaving even more difficult.

It had taken Pyke weeks of aggressive, intense efforts of persuasion to get Vin-Chay to agree to have a brother conceived for Cobahr. Mated males used the technique all the time to have children. His own uncle, Sar-Chay, and his spouse, Georn, had conceived their son and daughter by this method, the son by Sar-Chay, and the daughter by Georn. A simple procedure, really: the chosen genetic male would fertilize a donor egg in the Mediplex, and that egg would be transplanted into the uterus of a surrogate female who would carry the child to term. Much as the surrogate who carried Cobahr, although he had been conceived the 'natural' way between Pyke and Coba.

Pyke and Vin-Chay had easily decided upon a brother rather than a sister. Vin-Chay had fond memories of growing up with his own close male siblings, and he knew that would be the best thing for Cobahr. The sticky issue had been which of the two men would provide the genetics. Vin-Chay wanted Pyke to be the biological father, for many reasons, not the least of which was that if Vin-Chay's 'plan' did succeed and he was able to leave Ptolem, he would have to take a blood child with him and away from Pyke and Cobahr. That was not a pleasant prospect. He wasn't hard and fast like some men might be, wanting a blood child. He loved Cobahr as much as if the boy had been born to him, and would love a second child by Pyke no less.

But Pyke had persisted and worn him down, and Vin-Chay finally agreed to provide the genetic link to their second child. He was filled with disquiet about the future of the child, but he also acknowledged that the future was uncertain and some part of him had to deal with their lives as normally as possible. In truth, he might reside on Ptolem forever, and if so, he wanted more children. Pyke did relieve his tensions about the child being born a slave: any child conceived and born to the High Commander would be considered legally his child, with all the freedoms and rights and inheritance that Cobahr possessed. That was the last reservation Vin-Chay had, and when it was allayed, he agreed to Pyke's entreaties. He remembered the day in this very temple when he had reluctantly informed his Osiran comrades of his decision. Jor-Rue had asked him outright if he were mad. Burran had carefully suggested that this might not be a good decision, under his precarious circumstances. Patri Julan had counseled him to reconsider. Only Cassian had given a careful approval in front of their disbelieving colleagues; when the two men were alone, Cassian embraced him tightly and said that this child couldn't help but be a special, unique human being, and Vin-Chay had made a

good decision. Vin-Chay would always be grateful for that encouragement. He wondered briefly how his family back on Osiron would feel about his decision. He decided not to dwell on that.

The initial procedure had gone smoothly, except for a minor accident in the fertility chambers that had corrupted the seed that Vin-Chay had provided in the laboratory. A second extraction was required, and the stored seed was logged and cared for diligently until fertilization. Pyke and Vin-Chay had selected an anonymous Ptolemii donor whose genetic characteristics matched many of Vin-Chay's. Her other recessive qualities would allow the Osiran's genetics to prevail. Her harvested egg was fertilized, and then implanted into an available surrogate for gestation.

Then an unexpected complication had arisen. Somehow, the surrogate, who was also supposed to be anonymous and who was supposed to know nothing about the male who fathered the child, found out in her third month that the sire of the child she was carrying was an Osiran slave. She was naturally outraged, and her contractual obligations allowed her to refuse to carry the embryo to term. She demanded the removal of the embryo and would not be swayed. She had also notified several other potential candidates of the situation, and none of them would allow the re-implantation of the unborn child. At best, the child would be placed in cryogenic suspension until an agreeable surrogate could be found, but that might take a very long time; at worst, anything could go wrong and the child might die or be permanently damaged.

Pyke was furious, and although he maintained a cold facade to the clinic personnel about this, he was livid at home and swore retribution. Vin-Chay tried to calm him, but he was sick about the matter, too. It only served to reinforce his position on Ptolem and the fragility of his future and his child's. He and his consort were at their wits' end when Cassian and Zulikka came to their apartment the day before the embryo was to be removed. In a firm, soothing voice, Cassian said that he and his mate had discussed the matter, and were willing to have the embryo implanted into Zulikka's womb. She was carrying one child; there was no reason she couldn't carry and bear two at the same time.

Vin-Chay and Pyke were speechless at their compassion and sacrifice, but they were also concerned about Zulikka's health and the added physical burden it would place on her. They met with the fertility clinic physician an hour later, and within another hour all four people were convinced that no harm would come to either Zulikka or her daughter if she shared her womb with Vin-Chay's son. The procedure was effected the next day, and during the past six months an unusual situation bound them all together as the three fathers hovered over the expectant

mother, who seemed to bask not only in their attention but in the power she wielded over these strong men. Cassian knew what was in her mind, and he enjoyed every minute of watching Vin-Chay and Pyke anxiously monitoring her progress.

Pyke ensured that Zulikka received only the most superior medical care, and her pregnancy progressed easily. Of course, she made Cassian's life exhaustive by her fluctuating moods and demands, but he didn't care and attended her every need. TutMose watched the entire spectacle with undisguised amusement. He had never been happier in his personal life.

But she was overdue, and all her men were anxious. Vin-Chay mused over the matter but all of a sudden Cassian rushed back into the darkened temple area yelling, "It's time!" Vin-Chay didn't have to ask. The two men left the temple hurriedly for the apartment, where they encountered TutMose helping a drenched Zulikka into his two-person Mamba so they could get to the Mediplex. The two young Osirans were left to their own devices to get there. Vin-Chay held them back long enough to contact Pyke and tell him that it was time.

Cassian spent fourteen hours holding Zulikka's hand and washing her face while she went through the initial stages of labor and cursed him, Vin-Chay, their ancestors, and men in general soundly. Pyke and Vin-Chay waited anxiously and safely in the special lounge. When the physician sent word that it was time for the true birth, the two men joined the expectant mother, her mate and the medical crew in her luxurious birthing chamber. TutMose waited in the lounge, nervously pacing, his stomach twisting into knots.

An hour later, with Vin-Chay holding one of her hands and Cassian the other, and Pyke hovering centimeters from the three entwined people, Zulikka gave birth to a strong, healthy boy with a head full of black hair, screaming at the top of his lungs. Six minutes later, Cassian's blonde daughter made a quiet but healthy entrance into the world. Both were born on the mid-winter solstice sabbat day by ten minutes, which made them even more special to their parents than they naturally were.

Zulikka was washed and medicated, the babies cleansed and swaddled, and then placed in her arms as the three amazed men stared down at the two children. A moment later the door opened and TutMose stepped in and gazed down at the two beautiful babies.

"What are you going to name them?" he asked, in awe of the two new, special, tiny beings that had just entered the world.

Vin-Chay smiled gently. "Pyco-Chay."

Cassian grinned at his Ptolemii master. "TutMi."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

A harried Sheban had spent the last two days without sleep as the repercussions of the latest furious offworld fighting between Ptolem and Osiron had peaked. Under High Commander Savins' plan of attack, the Ptolemii vessels had matched evenly with the Osiran ones defending the perimeter of their planet. They succeeded in punching through the perimeter to reach the atmosphere of Osiron, and launching a devastating strike against the planet's cities. The *Sovereign's* correlators recorded key strikes against Etrusca, Veron, and Millan before the *Victorion* was able to arrive from the far perimeter close to Sekmet and beat back the Ptolemii flagship. Both vessels sustained considerable damage, but the Ptolemii ship was able to retreat and rejoin her support contingent, which had been aggressively attacking and fending off Osiran Panthers.

Five Ptolemii Serpents and six Osiran Panthers were either destroyed or badly damaged. The *Sovereign's* sister flagship, the *Empire*, was destroyed outright, leaving the Ptolemii now with only two Anaconda flagships to lead their side of the war. The *Sovereign* was immediately dispatched back to Ptolem, for repairs and debriefing, with a brief stopover at Sekmet for refueling and to take on an extra load of berrillium for the planet. Four of the Ptolemii's secondary Serpents remained stationed at the very outskirts of the Osiron perimeter to prevent any possible incursion by the rebels. At that moment, their commanders needn't have worried.

The Osirans lost four secondary Panthers, but their two remaining flagships, the *Victorion* and her sister, the *Liberty*, were in need of only minor repairs, and docked at the Miliplex craft bay in Etrusca. Although the Osirans were cautiously relieved that the flagships had survived, they were disheartened by the sluggish maneuvering response of the vessels that still could not maximize their alternate fuel source. That, and the eight thousand lives that were lost by the planetary attacks that Chay Shayne had known were just a matter of time. A general despondency descended on both the military and the populace as they buried their dead and started to rebuild their damaged structures, and regrouped to determine what the next steps would be. Several elders of the Crown Prince Circle were openly advocating unconditional surrender, but they were not in the

majority and couldn't act on their proposals. Yet. Their chief opposition to this proposal was Crown Prince Chay Shayne, who seemed possessed of an implacable, passionate hatred of the Ptolemii. He was adamantly against anything but complete victory for their side. Few knew what demons drove him.

Immediately upon Savins' return, a war council of all senior-level warrior commanders was assembled to review the battle and formulate strategy. Sheban, Pyke, Savins, Aristine, and twenty of their ranking associates spent sleepless days and nights reviewing and explaining and second-guessing the various tactics, successful and not, which both they and their enemies had invoked during the fray. Pyke kept his opinions on some of the tactics to himself; he was not about to compliment Chay Shayne's clever maneuverings early on in the battle to his Ptolemii brethren. He wondered how he would fare meeting the Crown Prince in battle; he was uneasy about that very real possibility.

The heated discussions and occasional condemnations abounding in the war council chamber exhausted, enraged, and frustrated most if not all of the participants. There were few congratulatory attempts by the Pharon and his High Scribes and Ministers, who had joined the council on the second day, demanding an explanation for the lack of surrender by Osiron despite the damage done to the planet. There seemed to be no appreciation on their parts for the excellent fight put up by the Ptolemii, and the fact that Savins had succeeded where others had failed by attacking the planet itself. High Commander Aristine, who was in secondary charge of InterSec but who spent a great deal of time away from Thebes in the various provinces, pointed this out carefully. He was thoroughly dressed down in a rather high-volume manner by Minister Orestes, and then again by the Pharon. Pyke wondered what his comrade's indiscretion might mean for his long-term military career. Aristine was a good man. They had been casual friends and colleagues for a long time, and Pyke respected and admired him. One of Aristine's daughters was even a promising young cadet, and Pyke had had the privilege of encountering her in one of his recent rare excursions into teaching a battle tactics course.

An unanticipated word here and there dropped by the various Ministers caused a strange, unsettling feeling in both Pyke and Sheban. There were inexplicable words such as 'new crafts' and 'more capabilities' that set both of the seasoned warriors to wondering. They each managed to meet Savins' eyes and could see that he, too, had picked up on something, something previously hidden. Each of the commanders silently resolved to find out what was going on, and why he or she was not privy to full disclosure if there was something going on. Neither Pyke nor Sheban planned on involving the other unless absolutely necessary,

given their long-buried past history and the tension and unresolved feelings that had haunted their professional relationship for too many years.

Three days after he had been summoned to the Miliplex, Pyke was able to leave and return to his apartment. Lately he and his family had been spending more time there than at their Sirrian residence, especially since Cobahr had started his advanced courses at academy, and Pyco-Chay was still young enough to need an occasional visit by his surrogate to ensure his health and well-being, and revel in the attention of a nurturing female. As his commandcraft moved through the near-deserted streets of Thebes, Pyke was disquieted by the number of warriors he saw patrolling, and the number of residents who were missing from the usual bustle. He had been ordered by Orestes to increase military patrols and tighten security, and he had, but it bothered him. His people were not the problem, but they were again paying for this hellish conflict with restrictions that on the surface seemed pointless.

His navigator dropped him off at his apartment and he saluted the two warriors who stood guard at his door. He sighed; they were going to be a constant presence from now on, per instructions, and neither he nor Vin-Chay was going to be very happy about their hovering proximity. He accepted the distant warriors who had been guarding his Sirrian home since the assassination attempt, but they were not in as close as were these two. *Ah, well*, he thought, *better to be safe, as long as they present no disruption to the family's routine or impose any unwarranted attitude on my consort.*

Pyke entered the apartment and immediately relaxed. He heard Vin-Chay moving around upstairs with Cobahr, so he dropped his techbelt and cloak on the entryway table and entered the hearthchamber. The fire Vin-Chay had set was a gentle one, just enough to provide a glowing light. Soft neo-classical music was playing. Pyke smiled—Vin-Chay had picked up that bad pleasure from Tut-Mose. Anyway, he wasn't interested in either the fireplace or the music, just in what was in the center of the chamber, close to the divan.

He bent down over the cradle and smiled at the four-month-old who was lying quietly on his back and gazing up at him with calm, curious, luminescent blue eyes. Vin-Chay's eyes. Pyke could see other characteristics of his consort in the baby, from the eyes to the thick, dark hair, to the curious nature. He reached down and picked the child up gently, and sat down on the divan holding him firmly in his lap. He let the baby grasp one of his fingers tightly, and thought he had a lot of strength. *Truly his father's son.* He didn't have to say anything; he simply wanted to commune silently with his cherished second son. He gently touched the baby's soft hair and cheeks, and examined in fascination his perfect

tiny hands and fingers, then kissed his forehead gently. His throat constricted as it always did whenever he was close enough to see and touch his son.

He had missed out on—no, thrown away—these precious childhood moments with Cobahr, but he was determined that that wouldn't happen with this child, nor with any others that definitely would be forthcoming down the line. He hadn't yet mentioned the matter to Vin-Chay, of course, but in a year or so, when the time was right, he planned on talking his consort into providing him with a third son, and quite probably a fourth a few years later. Perhaps even a daughter. Pyke had grown up as a lonely only-child, and now that he knew the joy of a true family and future, he wanted that future to include a large number of offspring of both bloodlines. And, the related parental duties would keep his consort quite occupied and out of potential trouble on a daily basis. He smiled at the thought of Vin-Chay juggling several young children at the same time, as well as taking care of his demanding consort's needs.

Little Prince Chay PyCoTok DeGael-DeGrec, he thought lovingly as he toyed with the baby's inquisitive fingers and intoned the secret name that only his fathers could call him under their particular circumstances. Someday, everyone would know this special child's name, a mixture of the names of his Ptolemii father, grandmother and grandfather.

Pyke cuddled the quiet baby and grinned gently at him. He chucked him under the chin and said softly, "You know, you are a very special little boy. It's true. You have two parents who love you so very much, and a devoted older brother, and grandparents who would spoil you just terribly if we allowed them to do so. But Papa and I intend to be the ones to spoil you the most in this home. You are going to have everything, PyCoTok," he said quietly, his voice changing from light to serious. "Everything. The best education, the best home, and the best life we can give you and your brother. And I will never let anyone hurt you. Never. I will always keep you safe. That is my promise to you." He kissed the baby again on the forehead as he heard a slight movement behind him. Before he could turn his head he heard his consort's amused voice.

"If I could send a holograph of this scene to your superiors at the Miliplex, you would probably be relieved of your investiture posthaste," Vin-Chay said casually. Pyke hadn't even heard him descend from the second tier. He grinned at his Osiran consort, who was leaning against the hearthchamber arch with his arms crossed and a smile on his thoughtful face.

"Then I guess we would both be working from dawn to dusk under Bahrtok's harsh instructions at the 'plex," Pyke responded tartly. "Or, I could simply send you out to work to support the family."

"Perhaps I'll forego the holograph, then. For the time being," Vin-Chay sat down next to Pyke and played with Pyco-Chay's other hand. His son rewarded him with a quick smile and turn of the head. He looked at Pyke closely and saw the complete exhaustion in his face. He carefully extracted the baby from Pyke's firm hold and placed him back in the cradle before he reseated himself.

"You are so tired," he said softly as he brushed a long lock of Pyke's lank hair back behind his ear. "Let me prepare a bath for you so you can go to bed right away. I'll bring up some food—"

"No, not yet. I want to spend a little more time with you and our son. I haven't seen any of you for three days. Is Cobahr in bed?"

"Yes. Dead to the world. As you should be," he added pointedly.

"Good. I'm glad. Are you all right?" Pyke asked as he touched Vin-Chay's cheek lightly, noting the strained look on the other man's face. Not exhausted, but certainly tense and tired.

Vin-Chay shrugged. "Not really. It's pretty much all over the unofficial grapevine about the battle and how much damage was done to my people and our planet. But it's all just rumor. Anything you can tell me about what happened?"

Pyke briefed him on the overall battle, hesitating only a moment before telling him of the estimated damage done to the three major cities on Osiron. He made sure Vin-Chay knew that his father's vessel was not destroyed, or, apparently, badly damaged, but there was no way to reassure Vin-Chay that none of his family were killed or injured either on their ships or down in Etrusca.

"At least the fighting is over for a while," Pyke finished up. "Both sides sustained some significant damage and losses, and entering into another fray like that one isn't going to happen immediately."

"But it will happen," Vin-Chay said distractedly.

"Yes, it will happen," Pyke agreed. Vin-Chay was silent after that, as was Pyke. Both men were lost in their thoughts for a long time as the fire flickered and they watched the baby yawn, close his eyes, and go to sleep.

"I love you," Vin-Chay said suddenly and passionately.

Pyke looked at him in surprise. "I know that."

"I just wanted to say it, in case you had any doubts, or just needed to hear it tonight," Vin-Chay said softly.

"I don't have any doubts," Pyke answered quietly. "None," he said firmly. He looked at the sleeping baby, and then turned back to his consort intently. "Do you have any idea," he began slowly, "just how much you and our sons mean to me? I would gladly spend the rest of my life in peace and joy working dawn to dusk on an agriplex for bare sustenance chits if you were there by my side. The

wealth, the power—all of this I would sacrifice gladly for one single moment of our life together. I know you love me, but I did need to hear you say that tonight.” Once Pyke accepted and understood the complex intricacies of domesticity, he threw himself into them with passionate abandon. He had never had the opportunity to dissect, relish and nourish his time with Coba, but his life with Vin-Chay and their sons was another matter. He wouldn’t squander a nanosecond.

He sighed. “We’re both tired. Let’s take a lesson from Pyco-Chay and get some sleep. I could sleep a whole day, right now.”

Vin-Chay nodded and picked up the baby as Pyke doused the fire then followed him to their noxchamber. Vin-Chay placed the baby down gently in his other crib and joined Pyke for a quick, hot shower. He lathered and cleansed his mate’s exhausted body, then made him lie down on their bed as he massaged the sweet-smelling semillon oil into his flesh to soothe the dry skin and tense muscles. Pyke fell asleep under his consort’s gentle, firm touch. When Vin-Chay finished he slipped into bed beside his mate, wrapped himself around Pyke tightly, and dropped off within minutes. Pyke did manage to sleep nearly half a day without interruption. Vin-Chay tossed and turned all night as he awakened repeatedly and listened to the even breathing of his consort and his son, and agonized over a million thoughts that burned him like white fire.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The air in Thebes seemed to change after that. Full martial law was invoked despite Pyke's fervent protestations that it served no purpose and would only inflame some factions of the populace while dispiriting others. His warnings went unheeded and he was ordered to comply. The Pharon's Ministers invoked a number of other restrictions on the populace of Thebes and its provinces, seemingly to 'punish' the resident Osirans for their people's aggressive showing and failure to surrender in the latest battle. Slaves were not allowed out past dark now, no matter what the reason. There were frequent and hostile identification chip checks during daylight hours. The remotest impropriety or inaccuracy in a slave's chip would result in arrest, and an unusually heavy fine against his or her master for the infraction. Ptolemii with similar identification irregularities also suffered the same military and financial repercussions. The populace was growing unhappier and angrier as the weeks wore on; even the increased daily transmissions of bloody gladiatorial combats and executions couldn't soothe the restless citizens.

Pyke was also angry and frustrated at these new restrictions, and not only because he had to worry about Vin-Chay. The increased restraints were malicious and unwarranted, and a symptom of the insidious creep of political and social insanity that had been encroaching on Ptolem for over fifteen years. He was also powerless to do anything but comply, so in order to protect his family as best he could under the circumstances, he reluctantly ordered Vin-Chay to remain at the Sirrian residence with only pre-approved excursions into Thebes during the daylight hours. This reduced his consort's access to his friends and the temple, but it was the best way to protect him. Desperately frustrated at his own inability to improve life for his mate or his people, Pyke covertly sought advice from one of the mystical oracles at the Temple Of Delphi in eastern Mycenae. The mystics there used ancient methods to 'see' into his past and future; all they could tell him was that "the last chapter shall not be written for two-score and eight."

Vin-Chay chafed at the restrictions but understood them. They complicated his plan, but he and Cassian would have to figure a way around that. Pyke had also removed Cobahr from his academy and returned him to Vin-Chay's tute-

lage, which although it may not necessarily have been the best thing in the long run for the boy, served the family's needs as a whole. Vin-Chay insisted on special tutors for Cobahr to address his growing artistic and intellectual talents, and Pyke complied. During the two months after the *Sovereign* had returned to Ptolem, Pyke and his family had become a very isolated, self-contained unit similar to the situation that he and Vin-Chay had found themselves in the first few months of Vin-Chay's residence on Ptolem. But, they both agreed, with far more pleasant twists.

Cassian was frustrated at his unexpected restrictions and his limited access to Vin-Chay. As in the case of Pyke's family, his had also become very close-knit and reclusive. He was reluctant to let Zulikka and their baby go out without his presence to guide and protect them, and more times than not they spent the days inside their apartment rather than out amongst the Thebans. Zulikka never seemed to mind, though. She was devoted to and preoccupied with their daughter, and seemed to have no problem spending much more time inside with her child and mate. Cassian was fortunate that he could work at home and not need to go out, save infrequently. This placid attitude of hers was a relief to TutMose, who was overly protective of the new baby, as well as her parents, and who wanted them to take every precaution to not incur any consequences from the over-zealous warriors patrolling the city.

The one thing that the situation brought home to both Vin-Chay and Cassian was that they needed to strengthen their resolve and move forward as quickly as possible with their plans. It was clear that circumstances for the Osiran people on Ptolem were only going to get worse, and that the people on their home world were in serious jeopardy from their enemies. It had come to a point where there was no choice as warriors but to go forward, regardless of how much each man may have preferred to remain where he was, for whatever reason.

Cassian and Vin-Chay were able to meet infrequently over the next few months, occasionally at TutMose's apartment but generally at the temple, where their presence had some air of legitimacy. Both families met there when the babies were six months old for the official naming and baptismal ceremony performed by Patri Julian. Even the dour Zandran attended; he had actually seemed extremely put out before he was finally issued an invitation. Pyke and Vin-Chay stood as godparents to TutMi, and Cassian and Zulikka performed the same function for Pyco-Chay. After the ceremony the two families returned to Pyke's larger apartment for a ritual Osiran meal, prepared by Vin-Chay and Cassian. For the first time in a long time everyone was able to spend a few hours in easy, peaceful friendship and relaxation.

The two Osiran warriors were able to converse extensively on their plans and what remained to be done. Despite the restrictions of everyday life in Thebes, Jor-Rue and Burran and their sub-cells were able to accomplish a great deal. By the time of the baptism, the four men had a full contingent of required personnel, as well as a large number of counterfeit doc-corrs, clothing and other items in place for finalizing their escape plan. There were still a few key issues to be addressed, but it looked as though there was a chance that they could proceed in the next few months. Hopefully, Osiron could hold out, and the Ptolemii wouldn't be able to make any significant headway in rebuilding their fleet and making attack plans.

Or so Vin-Chay and Cassian hoped as they struggled silently with their own doubts and conflicts, which they rarely shared with each other any more, let alone with their warrior comrades. Vin-Chay especially was conflicted more and more each day as he and Pyke settled into an even deeper and intense relationship driven now by their bond of nearly five years, two sons, and a lifetime of emotions compressed into only those few years.

He struggled with his obligations to his people and his desire to be with his birth family again, and with his strengthening need to remain with Pyke, Cobahr, and Pyco-Chay as their family unit now stood. He could never share these feelings with Pyke, who naturally had to remain ignorant of his plans and the emotional agonies they bred. He couldn't share them with Cassian, either, after spending so much time and effort encouraging that man towards their common goal, and constantly reminding him of their duty. Burran and Jor-Rue wouldn't understand, and he didn't want to burden them with unnecessary emotional baggage anyway. They deserved better than that.

He had to deal with his issues and resolve them himself, and one day, short weeks from the Osirans' planned date for going into their long-awaited action, and for no discernible reason that he could think of, he awoke knowing the answer. The course of action was suddenly clear, and he felt surer of himself than he had in a very long time. He knew the decision was the right one for him. It was only a matter of how to deal with it in relation to the other people in his life. *Straight out and no looking back*, he thought ruefully, as he dressed and prepared to meet his four co-conspirators at the temple on that bright late summer day.

Vin-Chay dropped Cobahr and Pyco-Chay off at TutMose's apartment so they could spend the morning under the watchful eye of Zulikka. She revealed a hitherto unknown soft spot for the children but never strayed from her acerbic, sharp-tongued attitude towards the adults in her life. At this point, however, Vin-Chay was fairly certain that he didn't have to worry about having his eyes ripped

out if he looked at her the wrong way or said something that might set her off. He would never voice it—as a matter of personal safety—but he thought that Cassian had managed to tame some of her wild, willful streak. And she had managed to soothe her own restless mate's soul as well. *In their own way they're as well-matched as Pyke and I are*, Vin-Chay thought in amusement as he and Cassian left the apartment together to walk to the temple.

The men were stopped twice by patrolling warriors who checked their slave identifications and roughly bid them on when their identikit displayed Vin-Chay's powerful slaveowner. The warriors would have deliberately made their excursion out in the streets more difficult had anyone but Pyke—and Tut-Mose—been involved, but the warriors were savvy enough to know better than to tangle in even the minutest way with the well-known and touchy High Commander. His reputation preceded him, and this served the Osirans well in these types of instances, although it tested their patience and restraint to have to deal with the common and pointless harassment that seemed to permeate daily life in Thebes for so many months now.

They arrived at the temple later than expected. Burran was already there, talking with Patri Julian, but Jor-Rue was still missing. Vin-Chay was very concerned, although he made an effort to hide it. He was immensely relieved when the younger warrior arrived ten minutes later, out of breath and with a disgusted look on his boyish face. He, too, had been stopped and subjected to badgering scrutiny from a set of Ptolemii warriors, and no doubt would have wound up arrested had his identification not been in perfect order. It only drove home to the five men gathered that the time frame had to be religiously adhered to before something—anything—happened that might make their plans impossible to complete.

The men spent three hours going over exact details of when each action would occur, who was to initiate and participate in it, and any contingency plans for failure or unexpected emergencies, or changes in personnel. They had done this many times before, but this would be one of the last times before their theoretical plans became a reality. Vin-Chay was satisfied that everything was in order. They were as ready as they ever would be; the time to act was now and there was no turning back, regardless of the consequences.

When they finished running through the final scenario for Sekmet, Vin-Chay narrowed his eyes and nodded slowly. "Good. We're ready. We go in two weeks from this date, the night of the Festival of Bastet."

Cassian watched his best friend closely and anxiously. He knew Vin-Chay too damn well. Something was wrong. He knew his friend's conflicted emotions and

sympathized, but he couldn't really do anything to allay his fears and doubts. He knew that some things Vin-Chay had to resolve himself. *Has he?* Cassian thought hopefully. *Perhaps he's finally aware that he has no more choice in this matter than I have. We have our duty. As painful as that might be in some circumstances. I don't especially want to leave TutMose behind, either, but I have no choice.* He kept his eyes on the Osiran princeling as he straightened up from his leaning position on Patri Julian's desk and raised his eyes to meet Cassian's. Cassian recognized the look and thought, *Oh no. Now what?*

Vin-Chay sensed his friend's anxiety. *He knows me too well,* he thought sadly. *Too well. It's time to tell them.* He looked at the men standing before him. *Fine men,* he thought. *Men who should be home with their families and people, and, God willing, soon will be. Good friends.*

"There is one more thing," Vin-Chay began softly and slowly. He could see Cassian's jaw clench involuntarily. He paused before going on. "Everything is as ready as it could be. You have all done such an outstanding job. Thank you. I am honored to call you my friends and comrades no matter what the future brings."

The freckled, redheaded Jor-Rue grinned at him unaffectedly as he unconsciously tossed his long single braid back over his shoulder. "We're fond of you, too, princeling. And the future is going to bring Osiran family, hearth, and, God willing, long-overdue promotions to certain warriors in this chamber. And hopefully back pay as well." Burran rolled his eyes and clapped Jor-Rue on the shoulder as he shook his head. Vin-Chay, Cassian, and Patri Julian couldn't suppress grins either at the young man's irreverent enthusiasm.

"I hope that's true," Vin-Chay said through a smile before his face and tone turned back to serious. "And I hope to see that for myself someday."

"Someday?" Burran replied. "You'll see it soon enough when we arrive on Osiron and your father has the pleasure of investing you as a sub-commander on one of our ships."

Vin-Chay looked at Burran with a regretful affection and decided to come right out with what he had to tell them. "I'm not going with you," he said quietly. "I'll be remaining here on Ptolem."

The other four men were stunned into speechlessness by the few simple words with such shocking implications. Cassian was the first to regain his power of speech. His worst fears were realized and he felt himself getting enraged not at the situation but at his friend. His furious eyes bored into Vin-Chay's. The princeling never let his gaze waiver as he faced his friend's justified wrath.

"You are mad," Cassian said in a cold, tight voice. "You cannot remain here, especially if we go through with this plan—"

"You *will* go through with this plan, Lieutenant! *You* have no other option at this point," Vin-Chay replied heatedly.

"We can't go through with this without you!" Jor-Rue said in a shocked voice.

"You *can* and you *will*," Vin-Chay replied. "You all know what to do and you all have your parts in it. If I had *one split second's* doubt that this couldn't take place without me, we wouldn't be having this conversation. But I know it can be done without me, and I am electing of my own free will to remain here on this planet and not accompany you back to Osiron."

"Because of Pyke," Cassian spat out in disgust. Burran and Jor-Rue turned quickly to look at Cassian, then back to look at Vin-Chay for confirmation or denial. Patri Julian's eyes had never left the princeling as he watched him reflectively. A fleeting image of a battered, bleeding younger man crossed his mind and he felt a chill.

"Yes. Because of Pyke. And because of our children and the life we have here. I choose to remain here with them," Vin-Chay said slowly and carefully as he kept eye contact with Cassian. He continued in a strong voice. "I have *chosen* to not split our family in two, and to not put Pyke's life in serious jeopardy if I were to succeed in leaving. I have chosen to not tear my firstborn son's heart out by removing his brother and one of his parents from his young life. I can make that choice because I know that you'll all succeed and get our people the edge they need for victory against the tyrannical powers that rule this world."

"How would Pyke's life be in jeopardy if you left?" Burran asked in confusion.

"How would it look for the inferior Osiran *slave* of the High Commander of InterSec to devise and carry out such a major, radical plan against the Pharon and his government right under the nose of that high-ranking warrior?" Cassian said coldly. "He would at best be considered a fool, and at worst a possible conspirator."

"That's right," Vin-Chay said evenly. "But if his slave isn't a perceivable part of this plot, then there is no reason to condemn him or take retribution against him or his family. He will be safe, and our family will be whole."

"Well, that works out very *nice*ly for you, doesn't it, except for the fact that you'll probably remain a slave here for the rest of your life. Unless, of course, he emancipates you and marries you. That is, if his superiors allow that after they take whatever inevitable punitive action against the remaining Osiran slaves here. And if they don't arrest and torture you simply on the basis of guilt by association—or hadn't you thought of that?" Cassian said sarcastically.

"We all knew that there would be some retribution against remaining Osirans, but we realized that it was a price we all had to pay for our necessary actions. I'll

risk the possible arrest and torture. If nothing I'll look 'innocent' by virtue of the fact that I did stay here. And it's not a matter of nice—" Vin-Chay began, but Cassian cut him off.

"You are such a liar," Cassian said acidly. "And a coward as well."

"Cassian!" Burran said angrily.

Cassian ignored the older warrior and went on relentlessly as Vin-Chay did nothing to defend himself or stop his friend from releasing all of his pent-up frustration and anger. He needed to let go.

"You don't want to face your real family after all these years and have to explain how you've conducted your life here, do you? You don't want them to know that you had the audacity to survive *and* thrive in this enemy world, when they probably would be happier if you had been sent to the mines or executed. You want us to remain silent on your survival so they can continue thinking you're dead and they have a legitimate martyr in their family instead of a, of a—Ptolemii slave and whore!" Cassian ended angrily to the shocked and disapproving looks of his fellow warriors. Burran made a slight move towards him but stopped when Vin-Chay held up a hand to warn him off.

"My family knows I am alive," Vin-Chay said quietly. "And they know I am Pyke's slave as well as his consort. They've known since Isiin, when Pyke met with and informed my father and brother of my survival and status."

Cassian felt that the breath had been knocked out of him. "They know?" he whispered in a detached voice as he absorbed the implications. *My God*, he thought—the emotional turmoil the whole Chay family—including Vin-Chay—must have been going through for one reason or another for so many years. He stared at Vin-Chay.

"I miss my family," Vin-Chay continued on in a gentle voice. "I miss them unbearably. But I—we—are in a situation where there are no easy answers and no perfect solutions to make everyone happy. I want to see my family again. I *will* see them again—I have to believe that. But not now. I have other family and other obligations and needs, and right now they take precedence over my birth family." He moved close to a rigid Cassian and reached to touch his shoulder tentatively. Cassian didn't pull away.

"I need you to go through with this and get home, Cassian. What I said before was true—we wouldn't be having this conversation if I thought for even a second that you couldn't do it. As much as I might want to protect and be with Pyke, I wouldn't let that override my duty to protect my people and my world. But my duty to my people will be discharged when you and Burran and Jor-Rue and everyone else leave Ptolem. I haven't abandoned my duty, my friend, and I

haven't abandoned you. I've simply had to make a very difficult choice for the course of my own life, and I assure you it didn't come easy or overnight."

Vin-Chay looked Cassian directly in the eyes, ignoring the other men in the chamber. "You have every right to be angry with me, and even hate and resent me, maybe for a long time. I hope you'll get past that someday when we're reunited. I hope you can get past that long enough to try to make my father understand why I couldn't go home yet. Try to make him understand that all the things Pyke told him that day on Isiin were true, but only a small part of the truth. Make him understand that his son is mated to a man whom he loves and who loves him, and that they share a strong bond that can sustain through even this war of independence of ours, however long it lasts."

No one moved or spoke for long moments. Vin-Chay saw no hoped-for response in Cassian's face, and finally dropped his hand off his friend's shoulder. He resigned himself to a possible life-long loss of his dearest friendship, but he couldn't let that sway him from the path he had chosen. He took a few steps backward and picked up his cloak as he prepared to leave the temple chamber and return to the apartment. He looked back at the men.

"As planned, we'll meet here in one week at the usual time to finalize any last-minute details. Then," he paused for a few long seconds, "you all go home. At long last." He turned and left the chamber.

Jor-Rue and Burran met one another's eyes uneasily and hesitantly shifted them towards Cassian, who was still standing rigidly in the center of the chamber. Burran looked to Patri Julian for help, but the priest looked as uncertain and helpless as the older warrior felt at that moment. Burran turned back to Cassian, who still hadn't moved. He tentatively touched Cassian's shoulder, but the younger man shrugged his hand off violently and whirled around to face him, his face suffused with fire and anger.

"All right!" he snapped. "The selfish bastard doesn't want to be part of the final action, fine. He's right about one thing—we *can* do this without him. And we will. I'll pick up his part in the Festival night and we go as planned."

"We can't leave him here, Cassian," Jor-Rue said.

"What would you suggest? We hit him over the head with a rock and drag him along with us?" Cassian asked derisively as Jor-Rue shrank back under his scornful stare. He had never seen Cassian so full of determination and rage.

"If necessary," Burran said mildly.

"Unacceptable," Cassian said coldly. "Any diversion to take an unwilling and uncooperative passenger with us is a pointless risk. He's made his choice. We've made ours. And in case any of you need reminding, failure to succeed risks not

only our lives but also the lives of nearly five thousand people who will be depending on us. Not to mention a million or so on our home world. Risking that for one man is not going to happen. He can just stay here with his Ptolemii lover and children and slave tattoo. He made that choice. We're not going to unmake it for him. This subject is *closed*," Cassian finished as he grabbed his own cloak and slammed out of the chamber in a cold rage.

The two remaining warriors had no idea what to do next as the silence hung heavy about the chamber and the taste of close victory seemed stale.

Cassian walked for hours, barely able to see straight. He managed to keep his head and temper when he was accosted by three different sets of patrolling warriors who questioned him and ran lengthy identifications against him. The third set of Ptolemii warriors stopped him within a hundred meters from the Miliplex. As he waited for them to verify his status, he wondered briefly why he had wandered so close to the main warrior compound. He realized that he needed to be there. He informed the commanding warrior that he was there at the request of his master, Commander TutMose, who was waiting for him in his office. He prayed that TutMose would back up his story if he was queried, but he didn't need to find that out as he was carefully escorted into the Miliplex and to a secured waiting chamber where two Ptolemii stood over him for a half hour until TutMose appeared at the door and summarily dismissed the guards.

TutMose looked at Cassian's tight face and hard eyes and became alarmed. "Is everything all right at home?" he asked anxiously. "Are TutMi and Zulikka—"

"They're fine," Cassian said quickly.

"Then what's wrong? Why are you here? You never come near this place," TutMose replied.

Cassian hesitated before speaking with great difficulty. "I need to speak privately with you and High Commander Pyke. Now. Please."

TutMose squinted at his slave friend for only a brief second. He beckoned without a word for Cassian to follow him out of the holding area. Cassian followed his master through several long corridors until they reached a verticulator that took them three tiers up. TutMose brought him to a large, spacious corner office where Pyke's adjutant in the ante-chamber admitted them to the High Commander's office after giving a disapproving look to the slave following Pyke's favorite commander.

Pyke looked at his unexpected guests in surprise and curiosity. Both TutMose and Cassian had strange looks on their faces—with Cassian's drained of all color—and this immediately set Pyke on alert. He rose from his chair and smiled at them as he gestured for them to be seated. TutMose was about to sit when

Cassian shook his head at Pyke's invitation and made a motion near his ears with his hand, indicating that he needed to talk with no one possibly monitoring them. Pyke looked hard at him for a moment but understood, and motioned for the two men to follow him.

Pyke led them through a side door and down a corridor to a 'safe' chamber, which he swept with his own security device before indicating that they were free to speak. He and TutMose waited expectantly. It was clear that Cassian was having difficulty speaking. They waited patiently. The Osiran was not one to deal with frivolous subjects, and they gave him the attention and respect he was due as a man and a warrior.

"Commanders," he began, "I won't ask you for your words of honor that what I'm about to tell you won't go any farther than this chamber, but I do need to tell you that what I'm about to say could rightly be called treason by my people, and it has to be the hardest thing I've ever done."

Pyke smiled curiously at him. "I seriously doubt that you could ever do anything to betray your people, Cassian, any more than your princeling friend would."

Cassian shook his head vigorously. "So I would always have thought, Commander. But these are strange times, and I find myself on the edge of betraying myself and my people for a madman."

Pyke and TutMose looked at one another uncomprehendingly then returned their intense gazes towards the Osiran warrior before them.

"Anyone of our acquaintance, Lieutenant?" Pyke asked more casually than he felt.

Cassian nodded tersely. "Your consort, sir."

Pyke paused briefly before saying, "Speak."

And Cassian did, for two hours without stopping, and in great detail.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Vin-Chay was nervous and agitated all week after he delivered his news to his comrades, although he was fairly certain that he had hidden his anxiety well from his family. Pyke hadn't been home much during the week anyway, having made a day trip down to Bahrtok's agriplex to check on some contractual problems with the citrine crop, as well as spending several late evenings in Thebes on InterSec business. When he came home late at night he was too tired to do anything but halfheartedly pick at the meals Vin-Chay had prepared for him. There had been very little conversation and, stranger, no lovemaking, although the Ptolemii did sleep wrapped tightly around his consort each night as usual, with affectionate touches and glances here and there.

Vin-Chay didn't think anything of it; he knew Pyke was just tired, and he was too preoccupied with his own problems to pay much attention to intimate details that would have seemed out of place in any other circumstances. He had tried to contact Cassian a few times during the week, but Zulikka, who informed him coolly that her mate had no desire to converse with him, always intercepted his commlinks. Vin-Chay assumed that Zulikka understood the problem; he knew that Cassian had informed her of their plan early in her pregnancy, and she had supported it without reservation. Enthusiastically, even. She seemed anxious to see someone—anyone—strike back at her “ex-father,” and if she could play even the minutest part in it, she would do whatever was necessary.

On the night before he was to meet with his friends for the last time, Vin-Chay played with Cobahr and Pyco-Chay in front of the fireplace while they waited for Pyke to arrive home. He assumed Pyke would be late again, but was pleased when his mate came through the entryway at a decent, early hour. Pyke smiled at them and picked up the nine-month-old baby, and held him on his lap during their evening meal. He watched Vin-Chay intently as the Osiran tutored Cobahr in front of the boy's correlator for an hour, concentrating on mathematics. Pyke played a favorite boardgame with the boy, who whooped with delight when he bested his father in a very short time.

Pyke put the children down for the night and joined Vin-Chay in their shower. Vin-Chay subsequently found himself the surprised but enthusiastic

recipient of several hours of passionate coupling with his consort, who had an air of tentativeness and urgency about him that he had only evinced during the early months of their relationship. After a long time they lay side by side in bed, satisfied, tired, but soothed by each other's presence; a comfortable relationship born of years together, and a myriad of emotions and needs that surely no one else could ever have experienced. Pyke regarded his mate reflectively.

"I think we all need some time away from here. Let's go down to Ammurabbi tomorrow and spend a couple of weeks at the 'plex," Pyke said languidly as he stretched and closed his eyes for a moment.

Vin-Chay tensed. He had to meet his friends tomorrow to finalize matters. "How about the day after instead?" he replied as evenly as he could. *Don't let anything show*, he thought. *Careful*.

"Why?" Pyke yawned. "You don't have any pressing work to be done, and I can take off any time I need to. No sense postponing the trip. We'll leave at dawn, all right?" He leisurely stroked Vin-Chay's chest and stomach, making gentle, circular motions meant to soothe rather than arouse. He moved his practiced hand slowly down the lower half of his mate's body, and smiled at the immediate response.

Vin-Chay's head was whirling. How could he get Pyke to postpone the trip until after he met with Cassian and the others? He tensed and tried to come up with a good excuse, unaware of Pyke's intense stare as his eyes closed and his mind reeled.

"On the other hand, we can wait a day or two. Nothing urgent about the trip, I guess," Pyke said, and smiled to himself as he heard an almost inaudible sigh. After all these years, he could manipulate his Osiran as though he were still a green boy fresh out of a prison cell. He yawned and rubbed his hand absently over Vin-Chay's chest as he turned over and closed his eyes again. "Let's get some sleep," he said a scant few moments before he drifted off into a deep, restful slumber, leaving his consort to stare at the ceiling for an hour before he, too, managed to nod off.

Pyke left the house early. Vin-Chay arose when Cobahr entered the noxchamber and jumped on the bed, awakening him. He blinked as he watched Cobahr go over to Pyco-Chay's crib and lift his brother out of it. Vin-Chay supervised Cobahr's changing of the wet baby before they all went downstairs to eat. They left the house at mid-morning to go into Thebes. Vin-Chay nodded an acknowledgment to the distant warrior guards who watched the Sirrian house throughout the day and night, ever since the assassination attempt so long ago. He was used to them now and was actually glad they were there as added protection for the

children. One of the guards followed him in a milicraft to the outskirts of Thebes proper before determining that the High Commander's consort and children were safely in the next layer of protection, and then turned around to return to his partner's location at the Sirrian household.

Vin-Chay arrived at TutMose's apartment, filled with anxiety. Zulikka answered the door and gave a wide smile to the children and an unmistakably frosty, disapproving glare to their parent. She took Pyco-Chay in her arms and gestured for Cobahr to follow her in. She slammed the door in Vin-Chay's face and he took a deep breath and waited patiently for several long minutes before Cassian opened the door, gave him a cold, hostile stare, and started walking towards the temple wordlessly. Vin-Chay followed him in silence. It was neither the time nor place to get into an argument, although he thought it would be a good bet that that would happen once they were in a safe temple chamber and could speak freely.

The two men arrived at the temple to find Jor-Rue and Burran already there with Patri Julian. Clearly none of the three men had any idea what to say to their comrade, so he guessed that he would have to initiate the conversation. Before he could, Cassian spoke.

"It's unnecessary at this point to go over the details again. We've done that a hundred times already. So, if there is nothing else to be discussed, I think we should adjourn, and those of us who will be leaving the planet will reconvene at the appointed time on the Festival day so we can do what needs to be done," Cassian said stiffly.

He's still furious, Vin-Chay thought regretfully. *I don't want our last meeting to end with pain and anger. I need to make him understand that.* "Cassian," Vin-Chay began, but his comrade cut him off.

"You are out of this, remember? I have been forced to assume command of this plan. So at this point your opinions are extraneous. If you want to say goodbye to your fellow warriors, then I suggest you get it over with and then go back to your Ptolemii master and pick up wherever you and he left off this morning. We can handle it from here," Cassian said coldly, his hard eyes meeting Vin-Chay's sad ones.

"Cassian! You have no right to speak to him like that," Burran said angrily. "We wouldn't even be here if it weren't for him! This has been his plan and his struggle far more than all of ours combined!"

"Was his plan—past tense. He has abandoned us and our people, and I think that gives me the right to—"

"I *never* abandoned you or our people!" Vin-Chay replied hotly. *Damn Cassian—he has no right to treat me like a traitor!*

"Haven't you?" Cassian responded coolly, sounding very much like his prickly Ptolemii consort at that moment. Perhaps Zulikka had changed him in other ways, Vin-Chay thought absently. "You decide to follow your heart instead of your head and stay here. That is not the mark of a true warrior, and you shame your family by doing so!"

Vin-Chay's eyes shot fire at his friend as he moved towards him to—what? Hit him? *I'd love to, but I won't do that*, Vin-Chay thought as he stopped and deliberately tried to regain his composure and deal with the situation rationally—unlike his friend.

"I'll forget you ever said that, my friend, for both our sakes, because I know what you're going through. Someday you'll understand my motives, and I hope you'll soften your anger towards me so that we can meet again in happier times and under reconciled circumstances. Until then, I just want to say I am honored by your friendship—all of you—and I hope and wish for success in what you are about to do. I will be there with you in spirit, although I doubt that that makes much difference to any of you right now. Maybe someday it will."

"So you won't change your mind?" Cassian said.

"No, I cannot. You know my reasons better than anyone."

Vin-Chay moved away from Cassian, whose eyes bored through him. "I guess now I will return to my Ptolemii master as I planned to." He smiled ruefully. "I dare say he would be as disbelieving as all of you at this turn of events, but—"

"More than disbelieving, I would say," Pyke said evenly as he, TutMose and Zandran stepped from the side shadows by the door to the temple prayer chamber. Burran, Jor-Rue and Patri Julian gasped out loud as their faces drained of color at the sight of the armed, high-ranking Ptolemii warriors. Cassian didn't turn around; he was still riveted on Vin-Chay, whose shocked expression at the entrance of the three men gave Cassian a savage sense of satisfaction.

Zandran positioned himself rigidly in front of the prayer chamber door; TutMose in front of the main door to the temple chamber. Both commanders wore unreadable expressions on their faces. Pyke walked slowly into the middle of the chamber, past Cassian, to face Vin-Chay directly. His eyes locked onto his consort's.

"So," he began in a deceptively mild voice. "You conspired to take my second son away from me and leave my family cleaved in two, and my eldest son's heart broken, to say nothing of doing extensive damage to a variety of my Pharon's properties and institutions. You've been busy these past few years, princeling."

"How could you know?" Vin-Chay whispered in shock. "I was so careful. How could you *know*?"

"Aye. You were a careful, meticulous schemer. I'll give you that. If it's any consolation, I didn't find out from any mistake you made, any misstep in your plans or security. You were discreet, and thorough. I've wished for many years that you had been on 'our' side of the conflict rather than an enemy. This only confirms my belief that you were—are—a superior warrior. You take my breath away, princeling. Well done." Pyke's satisfied look told Vin-Chay that the Ptolemii meant every word of what he was saying, as small a consolation as that was at this point.

"Then—how?" Vin-Chay repeated softly. Pyke stood silent, unmoving, as did Cassian. It took a few moments before Vin-Chay's gaze strayed from Pyke to the man on his right and fell on Cassian's face, a face that said everything to him. Time stopped while Vin-Chay absorbed the knowledge that Cassian had told Pyke everything.

"You," Vin-Chay said slowly to Cassian. "You told him." There wasn't the slightest doubt in his words or tone. He read the confirmation in Cassian's eyes.

"No," said Jor-Rue in a shocked voice. "That can't be. Neither of you would have betrayed us!"

"Cassian has *betrayed* no one," Pyke stated flatly, turning to the other warriors and the priest. "He came to me to try to rectify a totally untenable situation, and to do that he had to let me in on your plans."

"And that's not betrayal?" Burran said angrily as he threw an accusatory glare at Cassian.

"No," Pyke said quietly, turning back and staring straight into Vin-Chay's eyes. "That was extreme courage and strength."

There wasn't a sound in the chamber for a long time—or only a few seconds, by the chronometer—before Pyke turned again to the shocked men awaiting their fates. "You have a good plan. There is a very good chance it will succeed, but also a chance that it will fail. I can increase the odds of success significantly, and plan on doing just that."

"You're, you're going to *help* us?" Patri Julan asked in wonderment. Burran's jaw dropped, and Jor-Rue just stared wordlessly.

"I have few choices at this point in time," Pyke said mildly. "My options are limited. I can do the appropriate thing and turn you all over for torture and execution by the High Command." He looked askance at Vin-Chay. "That would leave my children without their primary parent, and me without a convenient bedmate. And it takes so long to train a headstrong Osiran slave adequately. I'm

not sure I'm up to doing it a second time." Zandran snorted in amusement and TutMose's eyes twinkled. Vin-Chay flushed.

"Or," Pyke went on, "I could let you proceed with your plan, knowing that the end result could be substantial damage to the Ptolemii people in terms of both lives and crafts and a variety of structures within the capital city if the plan wasn't executed properly, or unexpected contingencies occurred. That would be a severe dereliction of duty, to put it mildly. And, I would also have no guarantee that there would be no repercussions against Osirans, and that they would not impact my consort as well.

"Or, I could acknowledge the fact that this political and social insanity that has been foisted on both our peoples by the Pharancy has gotten to a point where radical action must be taken regardless of the consequences, and someone must be a reluctant part of that. It seems through circumstance, and both good and bad decisions on my part, that I am going to wind up being that someone as far as the Ptolemii High Command goes."

"Well, one of three 'someones,'" TutMose said easily, catching Cassian's surprised glance. Pyke hadn't told Cassian anything since that day the Osiran had come to the Miliplex, and the young warrior had no idea what the High Commander had decided to do. TutMose had given him no hint at home over the past week—just to make sure the slave didn't take his Ptolemii master too much for granted.

"Yes, one of several," Pyke agreed. "Along with my commanders here, I have recruited a number of Ptolemii officers to participate in our collective insanity. There are not enough of us to stage any chance of a successful coup against the Pharancy, but there are enough of us to support a secondary plan."

"Which is?" Vin-Chay asked as he regained his composure.

"Which is, we will all be leaving Ptolem for Osiron to bring a more even edge to the conflict," Pyke said.

"You're coming with us?" Jor-Rue said in disbelief.

"As I said, I have few choices at this point. I am as loathe to leave my home planet as you would be to leave yours, but that is the course this situation dictates in the here and now. As you have longed for returning to your home, I imagine I will hold the same desire once I leave here as well." He looked closely at Vin-Chay, trying to read his thoughts. He couldn't.

"There will need to be a few changes to the plan, however, for the sake of both short-term and long-term success," Pyke continued mildly.

"Such as?" his consort asked in an objective, professional tone. *Good, both Cassian and Pyke thought. He's back to where he should be. Focused, and ready, and in control.*

"Such as stealing the *Monarch*. That's out," Pyke said flatly.

"Why?" Vin-Chay demanded, his mind turning over the possibilities.

"Because it's an inferior ship to the three new ones that have been built near Corso," Pyke explained evenly, stunning the men in the chamber, including Tut-Mose and Zandran.

"New ships?" Zandran said skeptically. "I've heard nothing about them."

"Few have," Pyke agreed, looking at his confused commander, "including me. It's been a secret developed and kept by only the closest advisors to the Pharon. Anyone working on the project has been sworn to secrecy under penalty of death. Which, I believe, has been invoked more than once in this particular instance. I only found out a few months ago after the post-battle debriefing when a few words were dropped, and this sent Sheban and me on our own separate investigations. Three ships are being built under the designation of a new Cobra class. One is virtually ready; two will be within four months. They are larger, faster, and more deadly than the two flagships we have now. And they will be sent to Osiron to end the conflict if they aren't stopped. And we are going to stop them by stealing one and disabling the others similar to the method Jor-Rue's weapons' expert planned on using against the *Sovereign* after you had taken the *Monarch*."

"The other aspects of your plan are all sound, with a few tweaks, perhaps. Disrupting the underground tram system after using it to transport your 'passengers' to the various shuttles and the *Monarch* will require modification, naturally. Blowing up the Thrallplex and several craft bays at the Miliplex after taking enough shuttlecrafts to transport the populace of Tuscan and your fellow conspirators will work better with a few more strategic placements of the explosives. Disrupting the satellite web orbiting the planet needs a bit more work, but it's still inventive and doable." He looked at Vin-Chay admiringly. "I am especially impressed by your plan for Sekmet. Tricky, but if Jor-Rue's calculations are sound—and Zandran will confirm that—it could work and be a major turning point for all of us. And set both of our planets on a new course for the future."

Pyke turned back to the priest and the other warriors. "It's enough for today that we all know that you have new associates and changes in the plan. I know you all had planned on leaving during the Festival of Bastet, when most of the warrior and civilian populace would be otherwise engaged in celebration and less prepared for your actions, but that may not leave us enough time to take the new ship. Then again, perhaps it does. I have some ideas I'll run by Vin-Chay first,

then we'll meet back here in two days to review and discuss. Until then, say nothing to any of your other associates, and just stay calm. This is neither a trick, nor a stalling tactic. This plan will go forward with all of us—Osiran and Ptolemii alike—and will succeed. It has to, or both of our cultures may be doomed in one way or another. TutMose?"

"Sir?"

"Take Cassian home. Zandran, please escort Jor-Rue and Burran back to their respective homes as well, but be discreet, and don't let any warriors see you in close contact with them or it would be difficult to explain."

"Yes, sir," Zandran answered, gesturing impatiently to the two men to follow him from the chamber. They did, casting a backward glance at Vin-Chay and Cassian, their leaders, who were standing still, and closely watching their respective Ptolemii masters. TutMose took Cassian's arm gently and urged him from the chamber. Cassian halted for a moment to try to speak to Vin-Chay, who refused to look at him and kept his gaze fastened to Pyke's face. Cassian knew it wasn't the time to talk to him, and followed TutMose out of the chamber.

"Patri, I need a moment's privacy with Vin-Chay," Pyke said politely. The priest nodded and left the two men alone. He would very nearly have sold his soul to hear what was going to transpire between the two men.

The silence in the chamber was palpable and crackled with the tension of two strong, willful men who could be at odds even when they were engaged in their most intimate moments. Pyke decided to break the stalemate. He cocked his head and gave Vin-Chay a rueful half-grin.

"Do you have any clue as to how significantly you have changed my life over the last five years, princeling? You have caused me to abandon or change beyond recognition my very values and beliefs and commitments. You have caused me to act time and again in my worst interests, and yet be grateful that I have. You have turned me into a man who would beat another, and a father, and a lover, and a traitor. And I regret none of it—nothing. Not even the fact that I have to abandon my home and take my children and in-laws away from their homes for safety reasons to an unknown planet of people who may or may not want to shelter them—if they survive the journey."

Vin-Chay stared at him as Pyke waited for an answer. Vin-Chay decided to give him one, to another question from long ago. "Yes," he said in a strong, certain voice.

Pyke narrowed his eyes. "Yes what?"

“Yes,” Vin-Chay replied, “I’ll marry you.” He grinned at the look of disbelief on Pyke’s face, and then added, “When we reach Osiron—just as an added incentive. And I will shelter you all forever.”

“Bastard,” Pyke said softly, and then smiled.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Cassian watched TutMose's placid face as the commander relaxed on the divan, and listened to his favorite music while the logs in the fireplace snapped and crackled. The Ptolemii obviously enjoyed such simple pleasures so much, and Cassian wondered how long it would be before he would have the opportunity to have his predictable, uncomplicated life back after it would be forever disrupted when they all left Ptolem tomorrow. He felt guilty and upset that his needs and actions would have such a significant and difficult impact on his friend. Four years ago he wouldn't have cared, but today was a different matter. TutMose had become more than a friend in many ways. He generally treated Cassian like a son, and was nothing if not a grandfather to TutMi.

Cassian squatted down next to the divan, causing TutMose to open his eyes and turn his head, and smile at him. Cassian smiled back gently, and put his hand lightly on the Ptolemii's arm.

"I never wanted any of my actions to harm you. It had never occurred to me those long years ago when Vin-Chay and I first started the plan that it would ever have such repercussions to your life. I made it clear even back then that you weren't to be harmed, but I never gave a thought as to how it could impact you if your slave was part of a successful plot against your world until it was too late to go back. I'm sorry," Cassian finished softly.

TutMose smiled sadly. "Don't be. You and those dear to you have enriched my life beyond measure. I used to live in a tight, cloistered world with very narrow borders and little joy. You changed all that. I'm eternally grateful, Osiran. I wouldn't change a moment of it."

"You know that you are family and always will be, even on another planet? Zulikka and TutMi and I will never be very far away—I promise you that on my honor as a warrior," Cassian said quietly.

"I know. I look forward to some kind of retirement somewhere someday where I can spoil my 'grandchildren,' and regale them with tales of our exploits when we all changed the course of the Sisters' history—and my own glorious part in it," he finished lightly, grinning at his friend. Cassian grinned back widely and thought that maybe everything really would work out. Cassian sat down next to

the divan as TutMose remained reclining, and the two men watched the fire's embers until they finally died out. They ascended to the second tier to get a good night's sleep before they ran head on into their fates during the Festival of Bastet.

Jor-Rue contemplated the sleeping woman beside him, and wondered for the thousandth time if he should tell her the truth or not, ask her to come with him or not. He liked the Ptolemii engineer a great deal, and took immense pleasure from sharing her bed these last two years when he could escape the careful eye of his master. She was lovely to look at, intelligent, skilled in the pleasures of the flesh, and undemanding in her expectations of him and their relationship. She never treated him as an inferior, which, outside of his special circle of Osiran and Ptolemii comrades, was a novelty in itself on this benighted planet.

Still, he reluctantly admitted to himself that although he liked her, and enjoyed her, and gave her the respect she was certainly due, he experienced none of the deep commitment and unbridled passion that he saw in the mating of Vin-Chay and his Ptolemii lover, and in Cassian and his mate Zulikka. From what he had seen and heard of those two pairings, his feelings and relationship with Mirrada paled in comparison. He thought that almost any other relationship would seem to fall far short if matched against those four people. Perhaps that was unfair to Mirrada, and to himself. Perhaps he just expected too much.

He stared at the ceiling for an hour or so before he turned over in bed suddenly, and gazed at Mirrada fiercely for a few moments before he shook her awake and found himself locking his alert eyes with her sleepy ones.

"Mirrada! You need to wake up. I need to ask you something," he said forcefully.

"Umm?" she responded drowsily, then turned over on her side and muttered, "Go to sleep, Jor-Rue. I have an important meeting first thing in the morning and dare not be late. We'll talk tomorrow night. I'm tired."

"Me too," he said softly, knowing for certain at that moment that he wasn't expecting too much. He swore to himself that he would find what he was searching for when he reached Osiron. He turned over on his other side and went to sleep. He slept through the night and awoke alone in bed, refreshed and ready.

Burran turned over on his side in bed and smiled at his mistress, Arsinoe, who had purchased him two days after his arrival on Ptolem as a final attempt to maintain some control over her three young, high-spirited and disorderly children. He had taken them in hand and tutored them, and calmed them down to where they were actually respectful to both him and their mother. They had

come to adore him, and she had come to love him and became his lover in their second year together. It was very discreet, as she held a high position in the government, but not as high as Pyke to be able to discount most people's disapproval or condemnation. Both she and Burran would have liked to conduct themselves openly but could not, and it frustrated both of them.

He hadn't broached the subject of the Osirans' plan until close to its completion, six months earlier. By then he was unequivocally certain that she would not betray him, and he thought that he had a better than even chance to convince her to accompany him to Osiron. He was right; despite her qualms about the daring plan and the potential impact it would have on her and her children, they had talked out the issues and agreed to leave the planet together, with the three children in tow. They had sat down with the children two months earlier and laid out the situation, having previously agreed that if there was not wholehearted consensus by all five people, Burran would have to leave Ptolem in only the company of his comrades.

The twelve-year-old boy, Virgon, was a little hesitant at first, but came around fairly quickly when Burran swore his undying faithfulness to them and their mother, and expounded on the pleasurable aspects of their new world—the oceans, the forests, the different social and cultural events that a male youth had at his beck and call. He assented, and found himself actually anticipating the journey despite the obvious dangers and unknowns. He was more than fond of Burran, who had been far more of a father to him than the sire that had died when he was five.

The eight-year-old twins, Camina and Carrida, shouted their happiness and approval in one voice, as they usually spoke. The girls loved Burran, too, and were ready to follow him anywhere.

Burran had always planned on making the military his career and 'wife,' and the thought of settling down with a family had been thrust well into the back of his mind long before he had been dragged off the *Remus* and deposited into his new and painful life on Canaan and then Ptolem. He was anxious and worried that he might not be able to give the woman and children what they needed and deserved, but when he looked at her, and at them, all his doubts fell away and were replaced by a solid determination. They would all make it 'home' and he would have the life he had never dared dream of until now. He had been saving chits all through his career, and knew he'd have more coming when they arrived on Osiron. He would be able to provide a comfortable life for his loved ones, even without the chits that would come from the jewels that Arsinoe was bringing with her as part of their plan for the future.

"No last-minute doubts or fears, love?" he asked Arsinoe tenderly as he stroked her soft cheek and was rewarded with a smile and shake of her head. He ran his fingers through her long, silky brown hair, and then kissed her full lips for a long, deep moment.

"None," she replied firmly, as their embrace ended. "I am anxious for our new life to begin."

"Even on a new, maybe hostile planet, with an old warhorse like me?" he asked lightly, joking about the twenty-five-year difference in their ages.

"Not so old," she laughed, as she thrust her body hard against his, and began yet another passionate bout of lovemaking to follow the previous two of that evening. Perhaps tomorrow she'd tell him that she'd disabled her conception inhibitor chip in anticipation of literally starting a new life on his birthworld.

As they consummated their passion yet again, Burran thought ruefully that it had better be the last of the night, or he would be too tired to take on the world tomorrow. His thoughts dissolved away as his younger lover drew him into her sweet, safe ardor, where he knew he could do and be anything. Anything.

Zandran finished packing a travel bag with his important personal items. The bag was half full. It contained only a few holographs, and a few more professional commendations. It also contained the jewels that he had purchased over the last week with much of his saved chits. Since there was no chance of transferring finances from one planet to another, Vin-Chay had suggested to all of them that they convert as many of their stored chits as possible to portable items that could then be exchanged on Osiron for chits from that culture. Vin-Chay had informed them which gems were considered valuable on his home planet, and the various Ptolemii who were now part of the plan had been covertly purchasing what they could during the time they had left before the Festival of Bastet. They had to be discreet so as not to provoke suspicions if there was a random scan of large purchases by any key Ptolemii personnel. It was unlikely, but these days one never knew where monitoring and observation would occur.

Zandran finished tidying up the small apartment. He was a meticulous person, and despite the fact that he would never see his home again, and it would probably be seized and dispersed to some other Ptolemii officer, he still needed to attend to the routine, daily tasks that made him feel comfortable and in control.

The apartment was quiet and still. As it always was. Zandran felt yet another momentary pang of envy and longing for what his two friends, Pyke and Tut-Mose, had in their homes, which were truly homes. He had no one to blame but himself for that. He was contentious, and critical, and demanding, and judgmental.

tal, qualities that did not lend themselves easily to anyone's desiring to get close to him. He had always put out do-not-touch signals, holding back rarely, as with those two comrades. He wondered for the millionth time why those men had even attempted to breach his wall of exclusion. What they could have seen in him to make them expend that often unrewarding effort? No matter, they had, and he would be forever loyal to them despite his severe misgivings about this latest course of action from his commander.

He had been taken aback when Pyke informed him of the Osiran plot, and then absolutely stunned when his commander also informed him that he and TutMose would be joining the plot and leaving Ptolem with their slaves. His first instinct was to run to the High Command and turn the Osirans in, but that would have sealed his friends' fates. He could never do that. His two choices then were to remain silent and let them all leave—if they succeeded—or join them. Since he had absolutely nothing on Ptolem other than those cherished friendships and his increasingly irritating duties as a warrior, it was an oddly easy choice to make. Once he could get past his resentment of that damned slave of Pyke's.

Despite what Vin-Chay may have thought, Zandran had never hated him. He had at first viewed him with the same resentful condescension that he would have viewed any Osiran 'traitor.' But then, he had seen the effect that the captive, then slave was having on his commander and friend. Zandran was resentful—all right, jealous—of the closeness of those two men, as well as genuinely worried about the danger that Pyke had to be in, certainly at the start of their relationship. That, and the fact that the damned Osiran was everything that Zandran wanted to be and wasn't—royal and handsome and passionate and obviously worthy of the affection and loyalty of many people.

Other than being all those things, Vin-Chay wasn't that bad, and Zandran actually found himself experiencing intermittent moments of admiring and liking him. He would never admit that, though, to anyone. Ever. On Ptolem or Osiron, where he hoped that the gems he was carrying would provide at least a comfortable lifestyle for someone who was bound to be the outsider there. He wondered if he would be treated the same way he had treated Vin-Chay. He supposed he would deserve that.

He laid down fully dressed on his bed, and waited patiently for sleep to bring the morning.

Patri Julan dowsed the altar's ritual candles one last time after he offered a lengthy prayer for the safe and successful completion of his comrades' plans. He had never planned on leaving with them, but Vin-Chay and his own reasoning

had convinced him otherwise. The Pharon had already started cracking down on the Osiran temples, and all but his own and two others were closed down. There was no doubt that his would be whether the plan succeeded or not.

And it was common knowledge that Vin-Chay and Cassian were an integral part of his temple. He would be under suspicion immediately as a conspirator. Arrest, torture, and probable execution were his likely fate. He didn't fear death, but it was pointless in this situation, as Vin-Chay had pointed out. He could serve his God and his people better by surviving and ministering to them on their journey home and when they arrived on Osiron. No other priest would have the insight to the demons that would haunt anyone who had been enslaved on Ptolem, and be able to help soothe them and ease the people's assimilation back into Osiran society.

This was all true, and was the main reason that he agreed to leave with them. His other reason was his affectionate attachment to the Osiran princeling, who had become his good friend and mutual confessor over the years they had known one another. And, he knew that Vin-Chay planned on marrying Pyke when the time was right. He planned on officiating at that ceremony. It was the last thing he would ever have considered feasible after that terrible time over four years ago, but somehow Pyke and Vin-Chay had put their conflicts and internal pain to rest, and moved forward with their lives. He wanted to be part of that. He would be, for Vin-Chay's sake.

Patri Julian genuflected one final time at the alter and ran his hand gently over the worn pews that had seen many of his people seeking solace and answers over these past fifteen years. Hopefully, the actions of tomorrow would provide at least some of the solace.

Colyn put Cobahr to bed in Pyke's apartment. She and Bahrtok had arrived there two days ago on schedule, bringing with them only discreet personal items they would carry offworld. The couple was nervous and uncertain about the whole plan, but never surer that they belonged wherever Pyke, Vin-Chay and the children were. If that was to be Osiron, then they would go there, too.

She entered the hearthchamber and smiled at Bahrtok, who was sitting in Pyke's favorite chair and cuddling Pyco-Chay, who was teething and thus unusually anxious. The baby had fought sleep all evening. He was the most restful in Bahrtok's arms, and that suited the agriman just fine. He considered this child a grandson, and looked forward to every moment he could spend with both Cobahr and the baby, as did Colyn.

He looked up to see his wife smiling at him. He grinned.

"He looks more and more like Vin-Chay, doesn't he?" Bahrtok said.

"Aye, every day," Colyn agreed, kneeling on the floor next to her husband and grandson, stroking the child's silky black hair. "Especially the eyes. And from tonight alone I would say he has his father's strong will as well."

"That will serve him in the long run, unless," Bahrtok grinned slyly, "he manages to link up with an equally strong-willed mate like Pyke. Then, I dare say, we'll see sparks flying from all different directions, child and parents and lover to boot."

Colyn cocked her head to one side and looked at her husband. "Do you think there will be more children? Granddaughters, perhaps?"

"Unquestionably. It's simply a matter of when Pyke can talk Vin-Chay into it. Although, from recent events, I would say that our foster son is passionately devoted enough to our touchy son-in-law to grant him any wish under the sun. It should be interesting to watch them in a totally new situation, though. If Osiron can survive that."

Vin-Chay and Pyke finished one last passionate and long night of lovemaking in the home they believed they would never see again. Both men were tender and considerate, and gentle and aggressive, and after hours of fevered coupling fell into a deep, restful sleep, clinging tightly to each other until the dawn brought them to the start of their new destiny. They left the house at mid-morning, neither man daring to look back.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Pyke finished up his correlator trail of false information that would point to Supreme Commander Hitii and his clique as the weak spots in security that would have allowed much of the escape plan to come to fruition. The wily old man might prevaricate his way out of the mess with his skin intact, but his pension and prestige would all but vanish, and it was also possible that he could be imprisoned or executed. As Pyke's admiration of and affection for the man once characterized their relationship, now his contempt and rage at the old Ptolemii occupied his last-minute Miliplex details before he could join his comrades.

It had taken several instances of Hitii's manipulation, and a great deal of diligent investigation on Pyke's part, but he had finally pieced together all of the vile things that Hitii had done to his pawn, as Pyke realized he had been all along.

He had traced back the accesses to the Canaan prisoners' files, and saw that Hitii had accessed Vin-Chay's data well before Pyke's ship had been diverted to the prison. He knew now that he had been sent there to deliberately encounter the Osiran prisoner, and wreak whatever vengeance he might against a powerless, innocent man. And he had, in a special way, although matters had turned out quite differently in the long run than his old mentor had anticipated. But to send a grief-stricken, lonely man to what was essentially a helpless victim to cause him what could have been fatal harm was despicable. *Did he hope I'd torture him?* Pyke thought bitterly. *Kill him? Bastard.*

Hitii hadn't stopped there, of course. He had deliberately sent Pyke on the Isiin delegation, although he wasn't truly needed, in hopes of having him meet up with his enemy, Chay Shayne, the father of his captive consort, and the man he knew was responsible for the death of Pyke's wife. There had to be little doubt in Hitii's mind that such a meeting would provoke some sort of confrontation, which could have even jeopardized the entire purpose of the mission—had the mission not been rigged from the start. It was clearly inconsequential that such a meeting would have been emotional hell for Pyke.

Pyke had also tracked down several confidential correlator messages between Hitii and Orestes, mentioning that Pyke might encounter his 'slave-whore's' sire,

and to not interfere if there was a confrontation—unless he could exacerbate the situation.

Those instances had been bad enough—and there were no doubt many more unrelated instances of gross manipulation over the years—but the final outrage that Hitii had attempted to perpetrate on Pyke and Vin-Chay had to do with Pyco-Chay. After finding the other trails that Hitii had inadvertently left behind, Pyke had a nagging thought that the old man may have had something to do with the original surrogate's knowledge that she was carrying a slave's child. Pyke sifted through several chips' worth of data before he found what he was looking for: a covert, anonymous note to the surrogate, whose embedded audit registration codes led back to Hitii's correlator, notifying her of the 'outrage' being perpetrated on her unsuspecting body. The old man had made an almost successful attempt to have the unborn child eliminated for no other reason than his own need to satisfy his whimsical evil.

Had Cassian and Zulikka not been there, Pyco-Chay might possibly have died during transference as a three-month-old embryo into cryogenic suspension indefinitely rather than coming to term as a beautiful, special child. Pyke's second son by his beloved consort could have been destroyed rather than bringing life and joy to his parents and the rest of his family. An innocent baby eliminated for no other reason than indifferent cruelty. Pyke wondered if the evil old man had had anything to do with that initial accident in the laboratory, in which the first seed extraction had been corrupted. He snorted; who else? No one else had anything to gain by interrupting the planned conception of his consort's blood child.

Pyke snapped the activity indent on his correlator off after he finished verifying the false trail he had set—his revenge against his former mentor. He had also spent several hours that day—as he had on the previous few—transferring Mili-plex and Culturplex data files to dozens of chips that he would carry offworld in a very short time. He planned on giving away no more critical military secrets to the enemy than was necessary, but there were a number of personal files and other ones that would benefit the Osirans without giving them the complete advantage over the Ptolemii. He was still a Ptolemii, and had no intention of completely betraying his people and world despite his current path of insanity. However, he wanted to bring a list of Osiran slaves with him to notify their families and friends that they survived, as well as any related medical or financial data. He had initiated a search of a long list of specific Osiran names as well as the full list of those Osirans registered in the Thrallplex, and downloaded all associated data to several chips.

He pocketed the last of the chips and set his correlator on file-destruct, to be activated in four hours. He left the office without looking back. He couldn't.

He casually attended to last-minute questions from members of his phalanx as he walked through the Miliplex corridors one last time, and out into the bright, hot sun. He declined his commandcraft, stating he preferred to walk a while. TutMose joined him outside and the two men left the Miliplex compound walking slowly and easily towards the inner section of Thebes. They walked without speaking, both alert, and keeping their eyes open for any unexpected problems that might arise. None did; the walk was leisurely and fairly quick.

They arrived at the temple late in the afternoon, shortly before the sun started to set. The streets were already starting to crowd with Festival revelers who would provide good cover for their actions. Fortunately, they were able to stay with the original timeframe instead of postponing for a week, which would have offered them less cover. The new flagship was ahead of schedule and was already in preparatory stages for lifting off the planet on a trial orbit. It was in prep-hover mode in Corso, maintaining a thousand-meter distance from the surface as its skeleton crew of specialists performed their remaining tasks to ensure its readiness for the orbit. A full complement of Ptolemii warriors was scheduled to board the vessel in a few days.

The situation was still uncertain, but all of the key Osiran and Ptolemii participants had discussed and agreed that this was the better ship to take than the docked *Monarch*. The *Sovereign* was also docked in thousand-meter hover for routine repairs, which was a stroke of luck. The conspirators had anticipated that it would be in orbit and possibly require a confrontation as the stolen ship would leave orbit. That concern was gone now, and the plotters had had to make an unexpected change of plan to attack and disable that vessel as well. Jor-Rue's weapons' expert had declared to the young warrior that he would handle it, and Pyke didn't doubt for a moment that he would.

A sign on the temple door indicated that it was closed for the festival, to discourage any unexpected acolytes who might interfere with the tight actions and timeframes that had begun that morning. Pyke hit the new security sequence and the temple door opened. He and TutMose made their way swiftly to the back of the alter, and to Patri Julian's private quarters.

TutMose grinned widely at the sight that awaited them: the four main Osiran warriors, plus two others neither man had seen before, waiting, dressed in crisp new Ptolemii officer uniforms. All of them except Vin-Chay and Cassian looked distinctly uncomfortable in the well-fitting clothes; the two Osiran lieuten-

ants—now Ptolemii captains—looked poised in their garb, as though they had always worn it. Vin-Chay grinned back.

“If my father could see me now,” he said sheepishly as he adjusted the new cymcomm on his techbelt. His ‘good-luck’ gift from Pyke had been two units of the most updated version of the small device. Vin-Chay had eagerly mastered the functionality of one, and had dissected, comprehended, and documented the various components of the other. The head start on the research would give the Osiran Miliplex scientists an edge in reproducing the instruments on a mass scale.

“He will soon enough,” Pyke answered lightly, his tone far more casual than he felt at the moment. He looked at the two new warriors standing next to Jor-Rue. “And you are?” he asked.

“Octavian,” the tall, thin, black-haired young man answered laconically. “Weapons’ expert.”

“Celine,” the short, blonde woman answered crisply as she nervously shifted foot to foot. “Passenger and shuttle coordinator.”

“Very good,” Pyke nodded. He checked the chronometer. “We disrupt the tram operations in three hours. Are the charges in place?”

“Ready to go,” Octavian answered.

“The one in the Thrallplex?”

“Set. Commander Zandran rigged it yesterday when he went to ‘check’ on some recent slave placements. He also made sure that as planned they’re shutting down the complex in less than two hours for the festival. There’ll be only a minimum contingent of workers after that, and they should leave when the false alarm goes off ten minutes before it blows. We know we have to destroy that evil place before the rest of the plan so we eliminate the tracking correlators that our loc-chips are linked to—and give any slaves left behind the opportunity to escape if they can since they can’t be tracked down. One of my people has a city-wide message set to transmit after this all goes down to let them know they can try,” Octavian said.

“Good,” Pyke said. He turned to Celine. “Is Tuscan ready?”

She nodded. “Everyone is waiting for our signal before they exit and board the special trams to the shuttle areas. We made it clear they could only bring one small bag of personal items, but I doubt there’ll be a problem in that respect. Most don’t even have that.”

“The remaining contingent of our Osiran warriors is awaiting the signal to leave their homes or workplaces, and meet at the designated points around the city,” Vin-Chay said. “That’s over one hundred men and women, plus the two thousand or so from Tuscan. Then, there are the several dozen Ptolemii who’ll be

coming with us, and the random slaves we can pluck off the streets and out of the houses as we move through the trams and streets to shuttle up to the ship. Which, by the way, needs a name—we can't just keep calling it 'the ship,'" he finished, raising an eyebrow at Pyke. All of the people in the chamber looked at the High Commander expectantly. He sighed and stared back. Yes, their vessel did need a name. Then, he realized the one that would be the most appropriate for all who would be aboard. He smiled.

"I think we need a name that says something about us all, and this crazy thing we're trying to do, and isn't something that's either 'Osiran' or 'Ptolemii' alone. So I recommend ... *Renegade*. Any other suggestions?" Everyone shook their head and most were smiling. "Good," Pyke said. "Then our boarding party will start off now to Corso and board and take the *Renegade* while you all wait for your parts in this, and get the rest of her crew and passengers safely ready for their own boarding."

Pyke turned to face the two new warriors directly. "Octavian, Celine, everything depends on you now here in Thebes. Our targets must be destroyed on time and completely for this to succeed, and we cannot have a moment's delay in getting our people to the shuttles. Burran will be here with you, and TutMose for part of the time." He moved cautiously to the small window and looked outside before turning back to the others. "It's nearly dark now. Vin-Chay, you, Cassian, Jor-Rue and I will leave now and meet Zandran, Sharra and the Osiran warriors who will board the ship with us. They're waiting near the main tram station with one of the larger, well-armed warriorcrafts. If all goes well the twenty of us should arrive at Corso in two hours and meet up there with the other Ptolemii cell under Jaylan. Patri Julian?"

"Yes, sir?" the priest answered quickly, flush with the excitement of the dangerous undertaking. He could swear he heard his blood pounding in his old veins—still life in them yet.

"You and TutMose have the most important function at this point, at least for me. You'll both be responsible for bringing all of our immediate families to the primary pickup place in three hours. My in-laws and children are waiting with Cassian's mate and child. TutMose will gather them. You know where Burran's family is waiting, so you need to get them to the meeting place on time. Can you do that?" Pyke asked, his voice unmistakably anxious.

The priest nodded shortly. He was ready.

"Good. Thank you. Warriors ... it's time to go. Good luck to us all."

The company chorused their own hopes for that luck, and Pyke, Vin-Chay, and their group left the temple and headed towards the place where Zandran and

the commandcraft waited. The full night had fallen but the streets were alight and alive with color and people heading to and from different rituals associated with the Festival of Bastet. No one paid much attention to the small group of Ptolemii warriors, and it certainly would never have occurred to anyone that an Osiran slave would be wearing the feared and coveted uniform. They made it to where the large warriorcraft waited, with an anxious, dour-faced Zandran outside of it waiting for his comrades. Pyke was amused at the comical look of relief on his commander's face when he caught sight of them. Sharra came out of the craft, and smiled at her High Commander and his motley band of renegades.

"The others are waiting inside, Commander," she said, after a quick salute. Leave it to Sharra to perform a formal task when they were engaged in such an action contrary to their invested duties. He saluted back and entered the craft in front of his warriors, who followed suit. Zandran entered last, shutting and locking the door seconds before Sharra raised the craft and headed it off at maximum speed towards Corso. He sat down next to her in the secondary navigator seat and watched in admiration at her deft handling of the craft and the situation. He had never really appreciated before how competent she was as a Ptolemii officer of ten years. She was blonde, too ...

Most of the Ptolemii and Osirans aboard the warriorcraft were unusually restrained as it raced south towards Corso. Vin-Chay and Pyke were especially quiet, and both men's thoughts were occupied with their natural worries about their family's safety. Cassian, too, was introspective as he stared out at the dark desert racing past. He thought about TutMi and Zulikka and the new daughter she was carrying, barely two weeks in gestation. He knew that TutMose would give his life to protect their families, and he relaxed a little and forced himself to concentrate on the immediate future, when he would be expected to perform once again as a focused, professional warrior—a way of life so distant in time from the here and now. He glanced over next to him at Jor-Rue, who had a peaceful look on his face. *He isn't worried at all*, Cassian thought. *So why should I be? I am good enough to pull this off—and if I don't my family will die.* He straightened in his seat, and felt a calm resolve set in. He was anxious to reach the new ship—the large, new, technologically-superior ship where at least for a time he would be fifth in command, after Pyke, Zandran, TutMose and Vin-Chay. Pretty damn good for a slave and ex-abused son of a hopeless, bitter drug addict who had made the Pharon seem like a decent man.

The craft reached Corso in less than two hours, well on schedule. Those at the windows of the craft could see the huge, impressive new flagship as it hovered a thousand meters above the small city, its bottom lights flickering as its small crew

tested and checked its communication and weaponry components. Sharra docked the craft near the east milipost bay after receiving permission to land with High Commander Pyke for the unscheduled inspection of the new vessel. It would take them at least a half hour to verify that there was no such inspection, but by that time, God willing, the motley group of warriors would have secured the sparse crew of the post and started to shuttle to the flagship.

The disarming and imprisoning of the milipost crew went with barely a hitch. Two unseen Ptolemii warriors had come across the Osirans immobilizing their comrades and started stun fire, but Zandran and Sharra had knocked them out. Unfortunately, not before they had seriously stunned one of the Osiran warriors into unconsciousness. He would have to be hauled aboard the shuttle; Pyke made it clear that nobody was going to be left behind.

By the time the milipost was secure and its databanks and communications disabled, Jaylan and her Ptolemii-Osiran contingent had arrived to join Pyke and his crew. They were sixty strong now, and as one of the designated Ptolemii officers played her part in assuming communication with the crew on board the *Renegade*, to notify them of the unexpected visit by High Commander Pyke, the other forty men and women boarded two shuttles and lifted off to dock in one of the two the huge new flagship bays. They were met by six Ptolemii warriors, who in moments found themselves unconscious and on the floor as their arms and legs were tied, and they were dragged onto the shuttles for return to Corso's surface, when time permitted.

Pyke had been able to obtain the vessel's blueprints, and the forty split off into five groups, each designated a certain sector to secure. Despite their care and the vessel's crew's surprise at the quick and decisive occupation of the ship, heavy stun and kill fire was exchanged. Eight Ptolemii from the testing crew and five Osirans died.

The remainder of the crew, dazed by the inconceivable assault and the fact that it was led in part by the head of InterSec, surrendered quickly and joined their bound comrades in the shuttle bay. Most were stunned and disbelieving; several were outraged and seethed impotently as they were roughly bound and shoved to the ground to await ship-to-surface transport.

The Ptolemii-Osiran contingent was dispersed to pre-designated areas aboard the flagship to secure each of the critical sections. Zandran was put in charge of weapons and navigation, with Jor-Rue as his second-in-command; Vin-Chay and Cassian were designated to oversee all ship security; and Sharra and Jaylan were assigned to coordinate the incoming refugees and personnel, and disperse them to appropriate areas of the ship. The new commanders of the various areas were

assisted by pre-designated groups of Ptolemii and Osiran personnel, and all the men and women snapped to as they secured and readied the flagship for pre-flight.

The coup took less than an hour, although every moment felt like a day to each of the warriors. Pyke checked his chronometer relentlessly as he tried to stop obsessing on what could go wrong back in Thebes, and if he and Vin-Chay would ever see their family again. He barked orders and made split-second decisions from his well of experience and composure deep inside, and he was mildly stunned himself when all of his reports announced ship readiness to lift off.

Pyke looked around the con-center critically. It was a huge, technologically superior chamber at the front of the ship, luxurious and heady for anyone who would be fortunate to command it. He slipped easily into the command chair as Vin-Chay stood by his right side and Zandran by his left. Jor-Rue assumed his navigational position out front and waited for Pyke's direction. He locked onto the milipost beneath them. Pyke ordered him to fire, and he casually initiated the proper sequence and destroyed the unoccupied buildings—their captives had been removed to a safe distance before they boarded the *Renegade*. All were in awe of the firing capability of the new vessel. Jor-Rue confirmed that the communications center had been knocked out. He then deftly loaded the special chip he had created using Vin-Chay's calculations and directions. Zandran had modified the comm-corr to accept the special chip override. Jor-Rue bit his lip hard, and issued the infiltration sequence. Three seconds later the intricate series of saturate-destruct commands ripped through the main hub of the orbital satellite web and rerouted all relationships and communication into a series of loops and dead ends. The effective disruption immediately ceased all functions within the two thousand orbiting drones that directed all inter-province and intra-urban relay channels.

Jor-Rue fed the coordinates of the other two new flagships into the correlator at the same time that he had transferred in the other chip data provided by the High Commander. They had sent a warning to the personnel in the two locations to abandon their operations fifteen minutes earlier. Jor-Rue looked at Pyke with raised eyebrows, and Pyke nodded slowly. Jor-Rue sent two bursts of fire down to the surface and effectively damaged the remaining new crafts in exactly the ship locations designated by Pyke: near the front, where damage would be adequate but repairable. Pyke was not about to totally incapacitate his own people when he was bringing a significant weapon to their enemies.

Pyke issued orders to move the captives to the two shuttles and send them down to the surface on autonav. When the Ptolemii captives were safely off the ship, Pyke spoke to Jor-Rue.

“Sub-Captain,” he said mildly.

“Sir?” Jor-Rue responded eagerly, fully accepting the once-feared and hated Ptolemii as his new commander.

“Take us back to Thebes.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

TutMose grinned and winked at Zulikka as he entered their apartment and saw her tense look of concern. She was standing in the middle of the hearthchamber holding TutMi, while Colyn was sitting on the divan holding a sleeping Pyco-Chay. Bahrtok was pacing back and forth in front of the fireplace, and Cobahr was sitting on the floor quietly, cross-legged and patient as he played a solitary game of tarotdice. The fortune-telling exercise was some Osiran amusement that Vin-Chay had taught his son. Cassian had carved the ornate, small blocks that the boy was tossing onto the floor from their wooden box. He frowned in concentration as he studied the resulting symbols and numbers. TutMose wondered if the results boded well for their efforts, or if not. He decided to not ask the child about his interpretation. He smiled at the intense but peaceful look on the child's face. *Vin-Chay has trained the boy well*, TutMose thought as he widened his smile, eliciting a response in kind. The little boy scrambled to his feet and faced TutMose seriously.

"Where are my parents, Commander?" he asked curiously. Despite the strangeness of the situation, the young child was calm and polite.

TutMose thought for a brief second about shading the truth, but he realized that neither of Cobahr's parents would have approved of that. He saw the look of anticipation on the grandparents' faces and on Zulikka's, and decided to simply be honest. He squatted down to be eye level with the child.

"They're down in Corso, Cobahr," he said.

"What are they doing there?" The boy frowned. Where was Corso anyway?

"They're stealing a starship," TutMose answered kindly.

"Really?!" Cobahr replied excitedly. "Can we go on it?!"

"That's the whole point, boy," TutMose said gruffly, as he patted the child's head and rose, turning to the adults in the chamber. "Ready?" he said. Colyn and Bahrtok nodded as the agriman picked up a single travel bag which held all of their most precious and portable possessions—holographs of their long-dead daughter, and small but treasured keepsakes of their forty-five years together. A lifetime packed into a single bag that also contained Pyke's and Vin-Chay's chosen items, including Cobahr's beloved Tugger.

Zulikka gave TutMose a hard stare. "This had *better* succeed," she said coolly as she adjusted her baby to her other arm while she swept past TutMose towards the door. *Poor Cassian*, TutMose thought as he ushered the others out of the door and into the milicraft that would take them to the agreed-upon meeting point with Patri Julian.

TutMose maneuvered the craft above the crowded streets of noisy revelers until he reached a less crowded airspace that took them to the main desert tram station. It was fairly deserted, since those who had come into Thebes for the Festival had arrived long before this point in time. He felt relieved when he saw the Patri waiting near the entrance with a woman and three children. *Burran's new family*, TutMose thought. He stowed the craft, and his group joined the other five people on the platform. Vin-Chay had chosen this location because it was outside of Thebes proper and would be fairly well isolated at this time of day during the Festival of Bastet. His hope that there would be few if any warriors around proved true; there were none, just a half dozen or so late passengers who were waiting for the Nubia tram and had no idea about what would occur in less than an hour.

The twelve people waited silently while TutMose relentlessly checked his chronometer every few minutes.

Tarqua's wife pleaded and begged him to reconsider. Someone else could do this, someone without a wife and child. He wouldn't listen to her. He was determined, and implacable. He had spent far too long as a meticulous coward to let her painful entreaties stand in the way of what he knew he had to do to make this succeed and get his people to freedom and safety. He was a physician once, in another life. He healed people. Now it was time to heal again in the only way he could. He strapped on the last of the packets and draped a long cloak over his Ptolemii warrior captain uniform. He kissed his wife good-bye on her tear-stained cheeks, and did the same to his daughter. He left his one-chamber home of ten years and strode through the dark streets of Tuscan, aware of the hundreds of eyes watching him from the dark houses and shadows as they waited for his signal to leave their hated ghetto for the last time.

He arrived at the perimeter gate where a single Ptolemii warrior guarded it lackadaisically; his comrades were at the various celebrations and he was left through lack of seniority to guard the freedmen's town. He was not pleased. He frowned as he saw Tarqua approach but perked up at the thought that he could at least harass one Osiran this night. He put a hand up as Tarqua approached.

“Stop right there, Osiran. No one leaves here after dark now—you know that. Turn back now before I have to arrest you,” the guard said, hoping silently that he would have to do exactly that. His eyes narrowed even further as he realized under the dim light that what the Osiran was wearing looked almost like a Ptolemii uniform. He stepped closer to inspect Tarqua, who smoothly drew a long, sharp knife from his techbelt and pulled it casually across the warrior’s throat. The man blinked, gurgled, and then died.

Tarqua signaled for Farouk, who would be responsible for getting their people to the tram stations as Celine had instructed. He waited a few moments to ensure that his people were on the move. Tarqua then moved silently into Thebes proper to meet with Octavian, who would assist him on getting aboard the docked *Sovereign*. There he would be able to regain his dignity and make up in some small way to Vin-Chay for his lack of courage and commitment from that time so long ago. He was a man of honor once, and he would be again.

Octavian, dressed as a Ptolemii sub-captain, waited patiently for the Tuscanite who would perform one last selfless act. Octavian himself would have done what was necessary, but when another option presented itself he elected to allow the substitution and subsequently take his place alongside his other comrades on the *Renegade*. He had waited a long time for the opportunity to strike back at the Pharon and his minions. His enslavement had been difficult, but he had always focused on his training as a warrior and knew that someday he would again be able to act in that capacity. That day was now. The day had certainly started off very well when he had casually garroted his abusive slaveowner at their morning meal. He leisurely finished the well-cooked food, leaving his dead owner on the floor of the nutrichamber as he ascended to the second tier to pack his few possessions. He scanned the loathsome noxchamber where he had endured his share of sexual and physical abuse, realizing that he desired to take nothing with him from this hated life. He finished dressing, and left the apartment for the last time.

He watched as Tarqua approached. *Right on time*. He squinted at the man’s uniform. It had a few tiny drops of blood on it, but they were barely visible unless someone was scrutinizing the man in depth, as he was wont to do with anyone he encountered. He wondered vaguely how the blood had gotten there, but basically he didn’t care as long as it didn’t impact the plan. From the look on Tarqua’s face, he didn’t think it would.

“No second thoughts?” Octavian snapped as the man stood in front of him. Tarqua shook his head. Octavian checked his chronometer. The Thrallplex was

set to blow in thirty minutes—just enough time to shuttle Tarqua up to the *Sovereign* and take off again alone.

“All you have to do is press those two indents in sequence and it’s done,” he said as he turned to enter the appropriated shuttlecraft—courtesy of Commander Zandran—and Tarqua followed wordlessly. Despite his resolve, the Tuscanite was terrified that he wouldn’t have the courage to go through with his part in the plan. Then, he thought of his wife and daughter and the two children lost to him forever, and he felt a cool calm descend over his whole body. He relaxed as he buckled into the passenger seat of the two-person craft. Octavian set the coordinates to launch and ascended a thousand meters to the *Sovereign*.

Ten minutes later the shuttle docked inside the flagship’s main bay after Octavian had provided the clearance sequence also given to him by Zandran. It matched the sequence that Jor-Rue had managed to acquire before the Ptolemii had joined the Osirans’ efforts. Tarqua exited the craft and saluted the two warriors who met him. They had puzzled looks on their faces as they faced this unknown captain and wondered why the shuttle was immediately departing with the tight-lipped navigator who had deposited the officer on the ship. The captain had held up a quieting hand to stave off their questions as they watched the shuttle head off very quickly towards east Thebes.

The two guards were getting suspicious of this odd officer, who then turned back to them with an infinitely sad expression on his face. One of the guards drew his weapon and started to question him as to the specific nature of his visit—although it had been clearly approved by a commander in InterSec—when the officer gave them a half-smile.

“I’m sorry,” he said softly, as he reached inside his cloak. They could see a couple of bulky packets of some sort strapped to his chest, but before they could react he pressed first the gold indent then the red one, and the ten kilograms of solid berrillium detonated a split second later, vaporizing the three men instantly and taking out the side of the flagship where the shuttlebays once resided.

The *Sovereign* rocked with the reverberations from the explosion as its skeleton crew reacted to the unexpected disaster and tried to stabilize the vessel. Only the alertness of the engineering crew allowed them to descend the flagship to the surface before it could crash and incur even more damage. The chaos resulting from the explosion and frantic efforts of the crew only increased as several distant explosions in Thebes rocked the city, as well as the similar one from the *Monarch*, which was prep-hovering three thousand meters away from the ill-fated *Sovereign*. Zandran had been able to board and set a charge on that flagship, but not on its

sister, which had docked only the day before and which required the unfortunate sacrifice of one of the conspirators.

The *Monarch* was not as lucky as its sister ship; despite the valiant efforts of its crew, it crashed to the surface of Ptolem and sustained far more damage than the other flagship. Several dozen Ptolemii were killed or injured, but that number was far less than it could have been due to the careful planning of when and where to set the explosives. Casualties were inevitable, but Vin-Chay and his Osiran conspirators, and then his Ptolemii associates, had done everything possible to minimize the loss of life. They all agreed reluctantly that there were casualties in war, and this was war. No one, however, was willing to completely abandon his humanity, and every precaution was taken.

Celine counted down the last ten seconds before the Thrallplex blew. When the roar subsided from the explosion and the collapse of the building she threw herself into action and contacted her three sub-cells on the secure commlink channel and told them, "Go!"

The Tuscanites began moving into the trams that would carry them to the main desert tram station, where TutMose and his party waited. They entered the system at nine underground locations, taking different routes that would carry them to the same destination.

Octavian landed his two-person craft at the Miliplex shuttlebay, which was already in chaos in the aftermath of the explosions. He exited the craft swiftly to confront three armed guards. Had their own weapons been drawn, he would have ceased to be a part of the mass exodus of Osirans, but they thought they were merely confronting a fellow officer and lost consciousness that way as he aimed and fired on high stun, dropping them neatly in a row. He stepped over them and entered the large shuttle that would carry the High Commander's family and friends aboard the *Renegade*. With any luck and a lot of planning, the six other large shuttles in the far Miliplex bay would already be under the command of several Ptolemii co-conspirators.

They were. Ten of Jaylan's people and six of Burran's sub-cells acted swiftly and dispatched the dozen guards at that bay. One guard was killed, as were six of Burran's men. The six shuttles would hold a total of two hundred and eighty people; Octavian's would hold another sixty. That would require multiple trips for each from surface to ship to transport the refugees, but it couldn't be helped—there were no more available shuttles in close proximity.

The three shuttles commandeered by Burran's sub-cells took a different route to the tram station than their sister vessels. The navigators had a list of addresses

and personnel on the way from the Miliplex to the station. They made numerous quick stops to pick up known Osiran slaves who may not have been a part of the original plan, but were available for 'emancipation' and would be given the chance to flee with the conspirators. They plucked men, women and children lucky enough to be in the streets during their flight. Only a few slaves refused to go, out of fear or a new life that they were unwilling to leave. By the time the three 'Osiran' shuttles reached the tram station, they were crammed with nearly a thousand anxious, fleeing slaves who were willing to risk death to get away.

The three shuttles piloted by the Ptolemii navigators also made stops and were filled with Ptolemii and Osirans alike who wanted offworld regardless of the dangers—close to six hundred people. Those Osirans who were already part of the passenger and technical flagship support contingent had made their way to the station independently, including the dozen Osirans whose task it was to bring staple food supplies. They had managed to stock and transport enough basic food supplies to nourish three thousand people for a month; it was likely that the new ship would also have been stocked with basics as well to supplement their efforts. If not, they would have to carefully ration until they reached Isiin. Hopefully, the hydrosystem was active and working properly, and would provide water for the journey.

Within a half hour of the time expected for the *Renegade's* arrival, nearly five thousand people were gathered from all over Thebes, awaiting the flagship. Despite the fear and terror that most of them felt, the large group remained outwardly calm and restful, and simply waited as a contingent of armed Osiran and Ptolemii comrades patrolled and kept their eyes out for 'enemy' warriors or other trouble. In the distance in central Thebes they could hear several muffled explosions as the end receptacles of the underground trams were detonated to shut down that transportation system entirely and prevent Ptolemii warriors from using the system to traverse the city.

TutMose watched the sky anxiously as he checked his chronometer every two seconds. He noticed Zulikka's appraising gray eyes on him relentlessly as she cuddled and calmed a restless TutMi. Cobahr was sitting on the ground cross-legged, gently holding his sleeping brother. Colyn and Bahrtok were holding hands and watching the dark sky as well. The commander scanned the swell of desperate people who were waiting for their salvation, and at that moment he couldn't have been more certain that he and Pyke and Zandran were doing the right thing.

Every moment passed by like an hour, and the anxiety and fear was a palpable thing. TutMose started to pace when Cobahr interrupted him.

"Look, Commander!" the boy yelled, awakening his baby brother. He pointed to the distant sky. TutMose squinted and felt a flood of relief as a web of lights two thousand meters above the planet surface appeared in the far horizon and moved closer at a rapid speed. In moments, as the hoard of refugees rose to their feet, the *Renegade* appeared directly overhead and hovered over the tram station at the thousand-meter level to which it had descended.

Everyone stared at it in awe. It was huge, at least twice the size of the *Sovereign*. Nonagonal in shape, it was a radical departure from the triangular shape of the current flagships. Two huge shuttle bays extended downwards from the bottom of the nonagon, and the doors of one slowly opened to prepare for accepting the surface craft. A small craft started to descend from the flagship to the surface as TutMose went into action.

"All right, everyone," TutMose said as calmly as he could. "We need to board the shuttles in a quick but orderly fashion. Osiran warrior contingent—into the first two. You're critical to the *Renegade* and we need to make sure you're on board. The rest of you know your boarding sequence and vessel, so start getting on *now*!"

Despite their anxiousness, the people were surprisingly orderly as they started boarding the seven shuttles. By that time the small craft from the flagship had landed and the door hissed open to reveal Vin-Chay and Cassian.

"Papa!" Cobahr yelled happily as he scrambled to his feet, managing to keep a precarious hold of his brother, and started running towards his parent. Vin-Chay ran to meet him and laughed and scooped them both up in his arms as Cassian walked past them and put his arms around his mate and daughter.

"Damn well about time," Zulikka said airily as Cassian kissed her cheek and reached back to grasp TutMose's offered hand.

"You look like a warrior, Papa!" Cobahr exclaimed in awe as he touched the officer decorations on Vin-Chay's chest.

"I am a warrior, Sprite. I always have been," his parent responded quietly as he touched the boy's cheek lovingly.

"All right," Vin-Chay said as he started carrying his sons towards the small shuttle. "Time for reunions later. We've got to get everyone on board *now*. Sensors detect a phalanx moving towards us and we'd like to prevent any confrontation we can at this point." He handed the children to Bahrtok, who followed Colyn into the shuttle. Cassian settled his family in and once TutMose was seated next to Zulikka he slid down into the navigator's seat and hit the start sequence to lift the shuttle offworld. Vin-Chay nodded at him from outside the shuttle as it took off for the *Renegade*'s bay, then turned to help supervise the exodus from

the planet's surface. The shuttles were filled by that time and he motioned to the navigators to ascend. He anxiously watched the distance near Thebes for any sign of the phalanx.

Cassian landed in the bay and the occupants disembarked. Pyke was waiting for them and Cobahr ran to him and threw his arms around him. Pyke hugged him tightly then let go as he directed Jaylan to escort his family to their quarters. The other shuttles started arriving, and the passengers spilled out as quickly as possible so the crafts could descend and pick up their next loads. Pyke quelled his fear of Vin-Chay remaining on the surface until all of the passengers had boarded. Vin-Chay had made it clear that this was non-negotiable.

Pyke had left Zandran and Jor-Rue at the con-center. He had no doubts that the two men and their two dozen support personnel could maneuver the ship as needed. He ordered Jor-Rue to activate and lock the weapons' system in preparation for any approaching phalanx. The system had proved more than adequate when he aimed and fired on the two incomplete flagships, damaging their front sections significantly. They would take months to repair, possibly longer. Their main safety concerns now were the dozen secondary vessels docked at the Mili-plex, and the surface-to-air weapons' systems located in strategic areas around Thebes. These would all have been a possibly fatal threat if they had attempted to attack and destroy Thebes or at least the Pharonic compound. At any rate, Pyke had no intention of attacking his own civilian populace; the main point of this effort was to effect an escape for as many Osirans as possible, and bring a leveling factor to the conflict to prevent the complete subjugation of hundreds of thousands of people.

Cassian landed the small shuttle again at the tram station and joined Vin-Chay in getting the refugees on board their shuttles. Six trips had been made and nearly all of the population and supplies were transported when the *Renegade* commlinked to notify them of a phalanx approaching in five heavily-armed warriorcrafts, only five kilometers away and closing. The two Osiran warriors tried to speed up the exodus. Vin-Chay attempted to get Cassian offworld but his friend refused to leave the surface without him.

The last shuttle transport was about to lift off when the point warriorcraft came into view. The two warriors were startled when a loud sound was followed by an explosion of berrillium that was lobbed close enough to the tram station to light up the area as though it were day. Both men and the few Ptolemii around them hit the ground as another explosive missile was fired. Vin-Chay tried to cover his head as a painful spray of rocks and debris dropped down on him from where the tram station used to be. He turned around to yell for Cassian, but froze

when he saw his friend lying on the ground nearby, unmoving and covered with blood. He crawled over to the prone man and felt for a pulse. Faint. He yelled to his other comrades, who were trying to scramble into the last shuttle. He cursed loudly and pulled Cassian onto his own back and struggled to carry him to the small shuttle.

Vin-Chay looked up at the *Renegade* and saw the lower weapons' system light up in preparation for firing. He managed to get Cassian into the small shuttle and on the floor as he seated himself in the navigator seat and frantically hit the initiators to lift off. If the flagship fired and they were in the fire perimeter, they were done for. Out of the corner of his eye he could see the last large shuttle lift off, and his own craft immediately followed suit, rocking severely as the shock waves from another berrillium missile battered both crafts. The intense shock waves automatically triggered the *Renegade's* auxiliary systems to engage, generating immediate backups of all correlator files and programs and setting off a chain reaction of catalysts to stabilize the weapons' system.

The two shuttles were both nearly to the bay when the *Renegade* fired at a point directly in front of the phalanx. Jor-Rue's accurate aim seared a hundred-meter-wide, thirty-meter-deep trench in front of the shocked phalanx, but killed only twelve warriors and injured thirty, giving the two shuttles the time they needed to get safely into the flagship. The *Renegade* immediately closed her shuttle doors and deactivated her weapons' system. The ship ascended to ten thousand-meter altitude as the pre-orbiting systems activated to take it out of Ptolem's atmosphere and into space towards the other Sisters.

Vin-Chay landed the shuttle and scrambled to get Cassian out of the craft. TutMose was in the bay waiting and paled when he saw the unconscious, bloody friend he had come to love. He realized that Zulikka was standing beside him, impatiently waiting for her mate to return. He glanced at her for a second before running to help Vin-Chay, and thought he had never seen such a look on anyone's face. The two men and two others from the bay struggled to move Cassian as gently as possible out to the corridors and towards the ship's infirmary. Vin-Chay tried to throw a reassuring look towards Cassian's mate, but his own sick, overriding fear prevented him from doing so. He was vaguely aware of blood flowing from a gash in his head, covering his own face with sticky, warm blood. He had to fight back waves of pain and dizziness as he forced himself to focus on getting his friend to one of their physicians.

Zulikka calmly followed the men and the trail of blood down the corridor as they headed for the infirmary, her back stiff and her face closed as she screamed inside.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Sheban and Savins stared in mute shock at the damage to the two Ptolemii flagships that were lying on the ground close to the Miliplex. The light of day brought home the full extent of the damage not only to the vessels, but also to the variety of craft bays and tram stations ravaged by the well-placed berrillium explosions that had rocked the city three nights before. Fifteen warriorcrafts had been demolished or very badly damaged, a significant blow to the mainstay of InterSec's immediate Theban security. Thirty warriorcrafts existed undamaged in other provinces, and most of them had been directed to return to Thebes post-haste, with only a dangerous few left to address possible provincial problems.

The underground system was virtually unusable, with well over fifty percent of the receiving stations in rubble, and the rest damaged enough to prevent any trams from traversing the routes for at least a month's worth of repairs. All inter-province and intra-urban military and commercial communication channels were rendered useless thanks to the badly damaged satellite system; the only reliable communications were going through cumbersome personal cy-comms as the Scienplex worked feverishly to restore access. A frustrated and unfortunately irreverent captain made an offhand remark about employing telepathic oracles; he was executed seconds later by an enraged commander who saw no humor in the horrific assault on the Pharoncy.

The Thrallplex was leveled, its correlators and backup files completely destroyed. Although neither would ever voice it, both warriors were not exactly displeased at *that* turn of events despite the fact that thousands of slaves who could no longer be located or immobilized were now roaming the city streets as they escaped from their captors. It would be only a short matter of time before they could arrange for the removal of their tattoos and then blend carefully back into Ptolemii society in other cities or outlying areas and perhaps regain their freedom permanently. Reports were already coming in of agitated Ptolemii who were losing not only their chattel but also some of their chits and possessions as the Osirans absconded with resources they needed to re-establish new lives elsewhere. Both Sheban and Savins had put retrieving the slaves and their booty at the very bottom of their list of recovery tasks.

Sheban and Savins had been up for three days and foresaw no immediate respite to their exhaustion as they struggled to direct whatever efforts they could to calm the population and restore order. They were relieved when the final count of dead and injured came in; it was far less than it could have been considering the people involved and the property damage. Clearly, Pyke and his people had strived to minimize any loss of life and had succeeded admirably—although few others of their profession might consider that term appropriate.

Savins had been appointed temporary new head of InterSec since his flagship and its sister were currently under repairs that would take months, although these vessels would be readied sooner than the two new flagships that had sustained far more damage. He sent a contingent out to both Pyke's Theban apartment and Sirrian residence, but they reported back that they had found no one and nothing of significance there, although they were still searching. Pyke's correlators at the Miliplex and at his homes had been set to self-destruct, and all files were gone. Savins sent a small party from the Ammurabbi milipost to the agriplex of Pyke's in-laws, who were also missing and presumed to be with the rogue commander and his warriors. Pyke's two close commanders were gone as well, as were captains Sharra and Jaylan; and several dozen more key, competent personnel were also unaccounted for.

Tuscan was deserted, and there were hundreds of other Osiran slaves and free Ptolemii unaccounted for. Savins was certain they all now resided on the new flagship that had left Ptolem's atmosphere and was headed out towards Isiin. Sheban had issued a desperate communiqué to that Sister's Miliplex, but it was a strong possibility that the rogue flagship could intercept the message and Isiin would be unprepared for the encounter. Sheban wondered what Pyke and his band of renegades might have in mind for both Isiin and Sekmet. They were obviously bound for Osiron.

The Pharon and his ministers were apoplectic. Everyone was stunned at the audacious and successful escape engineered by the Osirans and their Ptolemii allies, but the fact that one of the highest-ranking members of the military—and the head of Interior Security—had participated was unthinkable and considered the highest form of treason. Sheban thought in silent amazement that what Pyke had done was courage and commitment of the highest sort, but she could never voice that. Not now.

Amun ordered the immediate razing of Tuscan. It seemed like a moot point to Sheban given the lack of residents, but she complied wearily and the destruction was underway. All of Pyke's financial and property assets were seized; correlator files indicated that Pyke had withdrawn large sums of chits during the week

before the escape, as had TutMose and Zandran. Sheban assumed that the other Ptolemii conspirators would have done the same thing, and wondered if they took the chits with them and what good they would do on a planet with a different financial basis and structure. They obviously had some sort of plan for their futures.

The Interior Ministry was desperate to maintain control of the population. Word had spread like wildfire throughout Thebes as well as the provinces, and there was an immediate resurgence of strong dissident activity to complement the flurry of escaping and rebellious slaves. There was little that the Ministry could do for the Osiran situation, since there were already stringent restrictions on their activities, and anything else would alienate their tax-paying slaveowners. However, it was clear that a new loc-chip procedure had to replace the lost one quickly before the Ptolemii population was overrun with assimilated slaves and lost revenue and labor. Orestes was designated to drive this direction, and he was harried and frustrated to an almost unproductive state. Jocasta was disgusted, but refused to assist and let him succeed or fail on his own. She had her own problems with the enraged Pharon and was scrambling like everyone else to keep her head and her position in the government. She had no plans to be stripped of pension and property and banished to the outskirts near the Great Wasteland as Pyke's old mentor, Hitii, had been the day before, when it appeared that his fallacious security measures and people had contributed to the success of the escape.

Savins joined Sheban at her apartment after the last of the continuous meetings held amongst the remaining key military warriors and politicians. Amun had attended and raged endlessly about traitors and destruction and retribution, and something about a whore-child who would meet the same fate as her whore-mother. They had no idea what he was talking about, but then again, he had been given to ranting and threats ever since the night of the festival. Unfortunately, it wasn't the start of his ravings and threats and incomprehensible directives for his people. They had been going on for years as their whole society had fallen from its once lofty heights and aspirations to a place of desperation and shame and uncertainty about their survival as a decent, productive people. No wonder Pyke had been able to entice so many well-thought-of warriors to join his madness. *Or was it madness?* Sheban mused as she set down two cups of java for herself and her fellow warrior. She seated herself opposite him and sipped slowly as he finished scanning her apartment for any covert monitoring. He smiled in relief when he found none and put his scanner away.

"One can never be too careful nowadays," he said as he picked up his cup and drained most of it in one long swallow. He refilled the cup as she nodded.

"Indeed. It's only a matter of time before we are all monitored routinely, especially after this latest debacle," she replied.

Savins paused and looked hard at her. "Do you think he's mad?"

"Who? Pyke?"

"Yes, of course. We *know* the Pharon's mad," Savins answered more easily than he felt. "And you know him far better than I," he ended mildly, with one curious eyebrow raised. A thread of jealousy ran through his insecure heart.

"No," she said thoughtfully, oblivious to his jab and discomfort. "I don't think he's mad. I think he couldn't abide the situation on our world any more. And I think he's inexplicably in love, and both of those combined to make him act in the only way he could at this point. Perhaps that makes him mad. I just don't know." How the hell could he be so in love with an enemy male? Her contempt and rage bubbled, and she forced herself to be calm and think. Think. Think this through.

Savins nodded. "Hitii said to me one time that he thought Pyke had a potentially disastrous attachment to his Osiran slave and that it would bring him down if he wasn't careful. I guess it has in a way. Yet in another way, he has managed to salvage it all—his mate, his children, much of his fortune, and perhaps even a viable future. You know, he might have been able to stage a full coup and overthrow the Pharon if he'd attacked Thebes."

Sheban shook her head. "The whole point was to do as little damage as possible, clearly. Had he attacked Thebes he might have killed thousands. What he's done is to free a great number of people and give Osiron a true fighting chance to establish itself as an independent world."

They were both silent for a while as they sipped their drinks. Savins looked at her quizzically.

"Why do you think he didn't try to recruit us for his mad plan?"

She shrugged more casually than she felt. "I don't know. Perhaps he realized he would only have a slight chance at success there."

"Would it have been slight?" Savins asked casually, keeping his eyes on hers.

She smiled at him. "You tell me." They both half-smiled at one another, neither answering nor voicing their thoughts. They were dragged out of their reverie by a sharp beep that indicated an incoming commlink for Sheban. She initiated her video monitor so Savins could see the exchange. She trusted him almost completely, even before they had started an intimate relationship so long ago on Isiin. Sub-Commander Ybarr's saturnine face appeared on the screen, tight, angry, and frustrated.

"Commander," he nodded courteously to her.

"Sub-Commander," she responded formally. He was not a man with whom to let down one's professionalism. "What can I do for you?"

"Not for me, Commander. I am simply relaying a directive to you and High Commander Savins that has come down from the Pharon through Minister Orestes," he explained tersely, appearing more than just a little uncomfortable.

"And that would be, Sub-Commander?" she replied patiently, as she sipped the last of her java.

"The Osiran problem is to be eliminated permanently."

"Problem? I would say the Osiran 'problem' has left the planet at this point, Sub-Commander," she replied mildly, arching her eyebrows at her companion, who returned the confused look.

"Not according to the Pharon and his Ministers," Ybarr stated in a clipped tone. "The problem will continue to exist as long as the Osirans exist. Therefore, the Osirans are to cease existing," he finished flatly.

Sheban felt a cold chill run up her spine. "And that means?" she asked evenly.

"That means that all Osiran slaves and freedmen are to be rounded up immediately and executed. Financial compensation will be issued to their owners—"

"What?!" Sheban and Savins exploded simultaneously in disbelief.

Ybarr nodded tightly. There was no doubt at this point that he disapproved of this but had no power to change the order. He could simply relay it to the appropriate personnel and wait for orders. And that was just what he planned on doing.

"That is the order. The Pharon is giving you one week to complete this directive, or ... he will find someone else to comply. Ybarr out," he finished and abruptly cut off the commlink.

Sheban and Savins stared at one another for a long time. Then, Savins poured them both another cup of java and smiled.

"Perhaps Pyke left us here for a reason," he said as he sipped his drink and met her eyes over the rim of the cup. She nodded.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Cassian awakened three days after his injuries had rendered him unconscious on the surface of Ptolem. He remembered nothing of what had taken place immediately before the bright flash and deafening noise had knocked him to the ground and the world had gone black. He vaguely recalled disjointed dreams that seemed to blend with reality as he drifted in and out of consciousness in the *Renegade's* infirmary. He was somewhat aware of Zulikka's presence, and Vin-Chay's, and TutMose's, but he couldn't focus or stay awake long enough to verify that they weren't dreams or visions in the Afterlife.

When he finally regained his wakeful state, he opened his eyes and saw a dozing Zulikka half sitting, half slouched in a chair beside his bed. He tried to focus but something was wrong and he couldn't see her clearly, nor see part of the chamber—the part to his right. He couldn't put it together and simply decided to bask in the fact that he was alive and with his mate, and that was enough for the here and now. He watched her for a long time until she came awake unexpectedly, as though shaken from a bad dream. She looked at him sleepily and saw that he was awake, and reached over to summon the physician. She rose and bent over him to kiss him gently on the forehead and stroke his hair. She took his hand; her grip was strong and reassuring, and he forced a slight smile despite his disorientation.

"I guess we made it, hmm?" he murmured drowsily as he squeezed her hand.

She nodded without smiling. She rarely smiled; this was a good sign—she was acting normally. "We did. The ship is well on its way to Isiin."

"Vin-Chay is safe?"

"He is safe. He will be here soon. Don't talk any more," she commanded as her eyes drank in his face—his living face. She would never tell him of the sickening fear of his death when Vin-Chay had dragged the bloody and lifeless-looking man from the shuttle those three short days ago.

He muttered something unintelligible and tried to nod as the physician came into the infirmary, followed closely by his best friend. Zulikka moved back and stood by Vin-Chay as the physician checked the vital monitors and gave Cassian

a cursory anatomical checkup as his mate and friend watched anxiously. He turned to them and nodded reassuringly. He turned back to the prone man.

"I suppose you want to know the extent of the damages, Captain?" the physician asked briskly. Vin-Chay had made it clear to him earlier that he was to treat Cassian as a capable warrior and provide him with all of the details. Zulikka had agreed.

Cassian nodded and waited expectantly. "All right," the physician said. "You've probably determined for yourself that you can't see out of the right eye." *So that's it, Cassian thought. That's why I can't see that part of the chamber. Something's wrong with my eye.*

The physician continued in a professional tone. "You suffered severe damage to the right eye and we had to remove it." He immediately saw Cassian's agitation but shook his head. "It's not as bad as it sounds. I mean, it is, but these aren't ancient days, Captain, and we can simply create a prosthetic eye that will appear and function as a normal one. When the opportunity arises we can perform a transplantation procedure if that's what you desire. That will have to wait until we can harvest an available eye, which is not an option at this moment on board this vessel. The prosthetic is ready now and we can perform the procedure in the next day or so, depending on your mental and physical health. When we're done, the eye will look as though you had been born with it.

"Now, as far as the rest of your injuries go, they were serious but not fatal, obviously. You have four broken ribs, and we had to remove your spleen and one kidney. Your right arm was also broken but is well on its way to being healed. You have minor cuts and deep lacerations on your back from flying debris, and a mild concussion, like your friend here." He nodded towards Vin-Chay. Cassian turned his head slightly to look at his friend, who grinned at him boyishly. "And, that's about it. You were very lucky considering the firestorm that was going on down on the surface. If your friend hadn't gotten you back here as quickly as he did, you would probably have bled to death. Well, I have some other patients to attend to, so I'll leave you with your wife and Captain Vin-Chay. If you will excuse me." The physician bowed slightly and left the chamber as Zulikka stiffly resumed her seat next to her mate. Vin-Chay perched lightly on the bed and took Cassian's hand, and smiled gently at him.

"You had us worried there, brother," Vin-Chay said more lightly than he felt as he squeezed Cassian's hand. Cassian squeezed back; he didn't need any more words than his friend did.

"You had a concussion?" Cassian said. He was fully awake now and able to focus on the people in the chamber as well as his own thoughts. Vin-Chay nodded and grinned.

"Aye—a fine one. Lots of blood, and they tell me I passed out after we got you here to the infirmary. I was out for a few hours while they sealed the gash and got me all cleaned up." Vin-Chay could see how tired Cassian still looked so he cut his visit short and rose from the bed. "I'll leave you to the tender mercies of your mate while I check on a few things at con-center. I'll be back soon and we can talk. Rest." He bent down and kissed his friend on the cheek, then left quickly, noting that 'that look' had come over Zulikka's face. Whatever she was going to get into with Cassian was probably not something for which she wanted an audience.

Cassian noted her chilly stare as well. *Now what?* He thought. *Isn't she happy that I'm going to be all right?* He was resigned to the fact that she was not pleased about something, and he sighed audibly. "All right. What is it? You're angry that I had the audacity to get injured during our flight? What?"

She stared balefully at him. "I want to get married. Now. *Right* now."

His mouth dropped open. "*Now?!*" he exclaimed in disbelief. "I'm barely conscious. I'm flat on my back, missing an eye and with lots of broken bones and other injuries, and you want to get *married?!*"

She nodded coolly. "Immediately. Or, you can find yourself another mate. I know *I* can. Your choice. You have five minutes to decide." She started to rise from the chair and move towards the chamber door, but he reached out and grabbed her arm.

"Get the Patri," he said mildly. She raised an eyebrow at him then swept imperiously out of the chamber.

One hour later, flanked by their friends, and as Zulikka held TutMi with her left arm, Patri Julian performed the sacrament version of the Osiran marriage rites at Cassian's bedside, and joined them in body and spirit as one soul for all eternity. For some reason, TutMose had a ready set of marriage rings in his possession, and he seemed pleased and proud to be able to hand them over at the correct moment. The wedding party attendees offered their heartfelt congratulations but left quickly, knowing that Cassian still needed a lot of rest, and also leery of provoking in any way his temperamental wife. Zulikka handed TutMi over to TutMose. When she and her new husband were alone in the infirmary, she gave him an appraising look. She moved purposefully to his bed and began to climb up on it and on him. She saw the surprise in his eyes and gave him a wicked smile.

“Let’s just see how well those ribs are healing, *husband*,” she said evenly, as she proceeded to do just that for the next hour. When she finally left the chamber, Cassian was sleeping deeply with an utterly peaceful look on his face.

Sheban had been correct in her assumption that the *Renegade* would attempt to intercept Ptolem’s message to Isiin. The rogue ship did so easily, anticipating the move on the High Commander’s part. Communication sensor systems were set in permanent intercept mode in case there were further attempts to contact Isiin’s High Command. There were two; both were intercepted as Pyke had Jor-Rue navigate the flagship towards the next Sister on half-speed. It would take a month to reach Isiin at that speed, but Pyke saw no urgency in pushing the new vessel forward until all of its capabilities could be verified as working properly. And, it would give the command clique—Pyke, Vin-Chay, TutMose, Zandran and Cassian—time to refine their plans for the planet and for the final legs of their journey. Pyke had made it very clear that neither his injuries nor healing time would preclude Cassian from his designated role, which heartened the new husband.

Vin-Chay and his cells had carefully selected excellent personnel for their escape attempt. Pyke and his two commanders were more than impressed at the men and women who were able to assimilate easily back into warrior status and handle the technology of the new ship. The resident Ptolemii personnel supplemented their efforts, but there was little doubt that had the Osiran-only plot succeeded in stealing the *Monarch*, these former slaves could have guided the vessel ‘home’ safely, and met any resistance with the capabilities of formidable enemies.

It was a strange ship, Pyke mused more than once as he drove the voyage from the con-center or his command quarters, usually with Vin-Chay at his side. The passengers were a motley lot but generally maintained a very good attitude and order despite some trepidation about their Ptolemii associates. Many were put to work on the flagship doing necessary maintenance and other routine work; even the older children were used, not only because manpower was needed, but because many of them needed to feel useful and a vital part of the voyage. All assigned personnel took their roles seriously and pulled together. Zulikka was put in charge of the children, and she ran a no-nonsense, informal ‘academy’ for babies through young teens; Cobahr was her main ‘helper’ and took his assignment *very* seriously. He was by her side constantly.

Fortunately, there was enough food, water, and medical supplies to reach Isiin and even beyond, but they would take more supplies aboard there as needed. Pyke hoped that Isiin could be taken without a fight. The planet had no way of

knowing what had transpired on Ptolem, and who and what commanded the flagship that would assume orbit in a few weeks. There were no flagships there, nor at the moment any secondary vessels, but there were at least a dozen fuel tankers awaiting orders to Sekmet, and that fit nicely into 'the plan.'

The voyage to Isiin went smoothly, and the mixed Ptolemii-Osiran crew seemed to blend together and respect each other's abilities and purpose on the journey. There were a few incidents, such as the knockdown, drag-out fight between Sharra and a contentious Osiran woman engineer, but they were minor and dealt with swiftly by Vin-Chay or Zandran. Vin-Chay noted with interest the amused, appreciative look that Zandran gave Sharra as he helped Vin-Chay forcibly pull her off her flailing Osiran opponent.

Pyke was continually amazed by the incisiveness of his young consort and subordinate warrior. Whenever they discussed strategy for the journey, or even general theory, the younger Osiran could pick apart problem points or make creative suggestions that even his more experienced Ptolemii commander hadn't thought of. Vin-Chay could easily have commanded a vessel of his own, and probably would have had he gone through with his original plan and abandoned Pyke for his people's escape and desperate voyage. Had he not been captured after the *Remus*, he would also have undoubtedly been a captain by this point in time, commanding a smaller vessel. Pyke had no qualms in naming him a 'captain' of the *Renegade*, and would ensure that the position was permanent when they reached Osiron and hammered out a truce with the Council of Nine, or Crown Prince Circle, or whatever the hell it was called these days. He would also ensure that Cassian and Jor-Rue, and the other 'officers' temporarily designated as such retained their titles and duties. This was, for all intents and purposes, *his* flagship, and he had every intention of investing officers where needed and applicable as part of his command duties.

Cassian, too, Pyke acknowledged, was an excellent warrior, almost on the same level with his best friend and comrade. Pyke recognized and understood from personal experience the man's insecurities about his background, but discounted them as minor obstacles to the his eventual progression up the military ladder—if he so chose. Cassian was conflicted about his future and what it should hold, as Vin-Chay would discuss with Pyke in the privacy of their quarters. Part of Cassian wanted the military career progression, and part of him wanted to leave the whole warrior world behind when they reached Osiron, and build his family and life as a simple albeit talented woodworker. Zulikka was lobbying for the latter career choice, but never obtrusively, and she would be content regardless of the path her husband might choose.

Pyke wondered silently about their new life on Osiron and what it would hold for all of them, but especially for him and his consort. He had every intention of holding Vin-Chay to his marriage promise and planned to push the point as soon as was reasonably possible. He doubted that the Chay family was going to either understand or approve, but he also had no intention of letting that impact their plans. He had waited too long for this.

The *Renegade* assumed orbit around Isiin four weeks after it left Ptolem. Pyke contacted the familiar security commander who had shadowed him during the old negotiations. High Commander Pushkin naturally expressed surprise and concern at the unexpected arrival of the new flagship, but he had no inkling of the plans of its rogue commander or crew. Pyke instructed Jor-Rue to lock the weapons' system coordinates onto the capital city's Miliplex, main industrial complex, and main financial institution. He ordered the standard descent of the vessel to its secondary prep-hover distance of ten thousand meters from the surface, and then boarded the two largest shuttles with Vin-Chay, Cassian, Tut-Mose, Sharra, and four dozen support warriors. Zandran was left in command of the *Renegade*, ably supported by Jaylan and Jor-Rue.

Pushkin and his security contingent met the two shuttles at the main Miliplex bay, still confused and disquieted by the strange and unannounced visit. As Pyke disembarked from his vessel with the tall, purposeful captains by his side, Pushkin's disquiet somehow increased, and he signaled his people to stand ready. Pyke strode over to him, eyes never wavering, and gave the man a respectful salute. Pushkin eased a little and returned the salute. Out of the corner of his eye he saw TutMose and Sharra disembark from the second shuttle, along with a half score of armed warriors. Pushkin looked questioningly at Pyke, but waited for the superior officer to speak.

"Commander Pushkin," Pyke said formally. "I am certain this unexpected visit has left you concerned about its purpose."

"To say the least, Commander," Pushkin replied mildly, not wanting to either antagonize this powerful man or appear uncertain in his critical eyes. "We are generally apprised of visiting flagships, and certainly never expected to have one like this appear without any warning."

Pyke half-smiled. "Yes. Warning would have been appropriate, but not possible under the circumstances."

"Circumstances?"

"Yes. Very unusual ones, Commander," Pyke replied easily as he focused a hard look at his fellow commander. "I regret any difficulty this may cause you now or in the future, but it is unavoidable."

"What's unavoidable, sir?" Pushkin asked, suddenly very tense and anxious. *Why are Pyke's people so well armed?*

"The temporary usurping of your authority here, and the appropriation of your fuel tankers."

"Sir?" He couldn't have heard that correctly.

"Please have your adjutant scan my ship's weapons' system and inform you of its capabilities and its current set of targets, Commander." Pyke paused for a split second before he changed his voice to one sheathed in purpose and ice. "Now."

Pushkin kept his eyes on Pyke as he ordered Captain Lona to action Pyke's request. While they waited for her return there was a distinctly uncomfortable silence; it was clear that Pyke had nothing to say to him until the requested information was relayed. Captain Lona returned fifteen minutes later in an agitated state, and whispered something to Pushkin that made his face drain of color. The captain backed away, and Pushkin met Pyke's chilly eyes.

"What's going on here, sir?" Pushkin demanded in his most authoritative voice. He knew the facade was lost on Pyke, who had his planet's major complexes targeted with what was an apparently new and technologically superior weapons' system. He knew that Lona would have given orders to arm their surface weaponry, but it would be no match for the flagship, and any damage that might be done to the latter would not prevent the vessel from striking its designated targets with devastating results. They could put up a fight, but ultimately it would be a fatal one.

"As I stated before, Commander, I am taking control of Isiin in order to procure your fuel tankers as well as supplies for the *Renegade*."

"And any Osiran slaves you may be holding captive here," Cassian interjected coolly, fixing his prosthetic eye on the perspiring Pushkin.

Pyke nodded. "Exactly. Captain Cassian will accompany your adjutant to the administrative center, and she will provide a list of captives and locations as required. Your men will then have twelve hours to bring those people here for transference to my ship. Captain Vin-Chay will oversee the staffing of the fuel tankers by our people, and the Osiran captives will be brought aboard them as needed for leaving this planet."

"What?!" Pushkin replied in a stunned voice. "You can't be serious! You're a Ptolemii warrior sworn to uphold the Pharon's—"

"I am a warrior, sir, but my loyalties have shifted through circumstance. The path I have chosen is not open for discussion with you now or at any other time. You will simply comply. Or, your planet will suffer a most damaging retribution. And if you think that an attempt to overpower me and my people here will allevi-

ate that danger, you are very much mistaken. The personnel currently in command of the *Renegade* are under strict orders to attack in fifteen hours whether or not we are back on board the flagship. If we return, and you comply with our requests, the attack will be aborted and we will simply leave you as we came—albeit a few slaves and fuel tankers short.”

Pushkin fell silent, contemplating his options. He had no choice but to comply; he knew it, and Pyke knew it. Any stalling on his part could only be harmful, if not fatal. There was no point in that; this was never really Isiin’s war, and he had no intention of surrendering his life and the lives of his men and women on a fruitless pursuit of warrior ‘honor.’ The honor in this battle had been lost long ago. He nodded stiffly and signaled Captain Lona to attend to Pyke’s demands. Cassian followed the hostile woman past a gauntlet of furious, stunned, and impotent warriors who gaped at his audacity and his commander’s. Cassian just loved it. He wished Zulikka could be here to watch.

Pyke ordered Pushkin to support the acquisition of the fuel tankers; Vin-Chay and his contingent would board all twelve of them and take command, then leave the planet on Pyke’s signal. TutMose and Sharra were accompanied by a half dozen of Pushkin’s warriors to the stores’ complex, where they and their people appropriated enough food and medical supplies for the remainder of the journey.

The loading of the supplies and the changing of tanker crews to the Osiran personnel took well over eight hours, during which time Pushkin sweated out the fear that Pyke would not hold to his promise and leave the Isiins in safety once his demands were met. The rogue commander had been in commlink with his vessel frequently, but never to issue orders suspending the possible attack. Pyke knew how to play the psychological game, and he played it well with his edgy Isiin counterpart.

Cassian returned ten hours after Pushkin’s capitulation with over four thousand new passengers. Most were Osiran slaves, now free men and women again, but there were several hundred Isiins in the group as well. Many slaves encountered similar circumstances to Vin-Chay’s, where their ‘owners’ had become true mates and co-parents and refused to leave them, even if it meant abandoning their safe lives for a journey that might prove fatal. They all had generally bewildered looks on their faces, alternating with hope and exhilaration and joy. TutMose ushered as many as he could onto the two shuttles, then directed Sharra to take the others to be dispersed amongst the tankers.

The first shuttle lifted off and Pyke gave the order for the tankers to depart. Vin-Chay acknowledged his order and his first tanker left the surface, closely fol-

lowed by eleven more manned by the skeleton crews of Osiran and Ptolemii warriors from the *Renegade*.

Pyke waited until the first shuttle and tankers had cleared the first layer of atmosphere, and Zandran confirmed that the now-growing rogue fleet was prepped and ready to continue to Osiron. Pyke snapped off his commlink and met Pushkin's eyes for the last time.

"Commander," he said evenly, "we are ready to leave now. Again, although it probably means nothing to you, I apologize for any problems this might cause you with the Ptolem High Command. Please remind them that under the circumstances you had no choice but to comply, since they left you with no protective starships or warning to forestall this action."

Pushkin nodded stiffly, and Pyke turned and strode to his shuttle without another word. Sharra followed him in and locked the door, and Pushkin and his men were left to watch the craft take off and return to its flagship. He felt a guilty moment of disappointment that he hadn't accompanied Pyke and his renegades. At least Pyke had given him an idea as to how to placate the Ptolem High Command whenever its flagships did manage to make an appearance on Isiin. He wondered where they were and why Pyke didn't seem to be in a desperate hurry to outrun vessels that had to be after them. He assumed those questions would be answered in the near future. Perhaps sooner than he'd like. Right now, he had to attend to quieting the Isiin population from this unexpected intrusion into its military, financial and social lives. But first he needed a drink of annise to calm his nerves.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The huge Ptolemii flagship that had appeared in orbit around Sekmet, accompanied by a large fleet of fuel tankers, originally gave no cause for concern to the High Command of the planet's Miliplex. True, the flagship was far larger and shaped differently than its predecessors, but its Ptolemii markings, and the fact that the well-known officer High Commander Pyke commanded it, barely produced a ripple of concern amongst the key officers who oversaw the daily operations of the berrillium mines. The tankers were expected, although original orders that had arrived two months earlier only indicated a maximum of six; twelve had descended to prep-hover over the main fueling station and were waiting for orders and procedures to descend and fill their coffers with the mined fuel.

Two large shuttles arrived at the main craft bay at Thoth, the only city on the planet. Many generations ago, when the first colonists had landed on Sekmet, they had discovered two things: one, the planet was a virtual mineral wealth of berrillium needed to fuel their civilization; and two, it was an almost totally inhospitable planet of cold and darkness and dampness that made its colonization of anything more than a sterile mining environment totally untenable.

Daylight only occurred for a bare hour each revolution, and during that time gray clouds poured down a constant drizzle of water. The air was barely breathable, polluted for far too many decades with residue fumes from the mining efforts. The main body of the Miliplex, and all living and working quarters, were located underground. Few were comfortable, save those occupied by high-ranking officers and engineering officials; the miners were housed in crowded barracks with little comfort and the bare minimum of heat needed to keep them alive. The free miners fared better than the enslaved ones, but all were subjected to nearly unbearable living conditions and little motivation—other than whips and neural disrupters used on the Osiran slaves. Only the dregs of Ptolemii society sought and found employment there.

As on Isiin, the commander of the mining planet was taken completely by surprise by the arrival, purpose and demands of the *Renegade's* High Commander. Pyke's orders and demands for Sekmet differed radically, though, from those he gave on Isiin in one key respect: all military and civilian personnel who would not

be accompanying his fleet to Osiron were to board the three passenger ships docked on Sekmet or the two extra tankers that would not be fueling. No one was to be left on the planet when the *Renegade* and her fleet left orbit. The Sekmetian commander balked and refused; Pyke pressed an indent on his cy-comm, and moments later Jor-Rue sent down a burst of fire that obliterated a small mountain near the primary mine. The commander and his unwelcome guests felt the immense reverberations of the blast. The Sekmetian capitulated when Pyke gave him an eyebrows-raised look, and placed his finger near the same commlink indent.

The evacuation and tanker fuelings took over a week. Six thousand men, women, and children resided on Sekmet; three thousand were Osiran or Ptolemii slaves, all registered in the databanks. Cassian and Vin-Chay scanned the names for Bak-Tii and their other *Remus* comrades, although they knew it was unlikely that any survived. They were relieved to find that they were wrong, although not by very much: eleven of their comrades had survived their five years of captivity. Bak-Tii was not one of them. According to the emaciated, ill Captain Carr, whom they had found in a bottom-tier hovel with the other ten warriors, Bak-Tii had died a year into his mining servitude. Like all of the dead, he had been cremated and his ashes disposed of in the inhospitable environment on the surface. Carr hesitatingly told Vin-Chay that Bak-Tii had expressed his regret and guilt over and over again for his treatment of the princeling, for sending him to the bed of an enemy. Bak-Tii had felt dishonored, and struggled valiantly to survive his captivity so that he might have the opportunity to tell Vin-Chay himself how sorry he was. He failed in that respect when an avalanche of rocks that had come loose during an earth tremor in the fourth tier crushed him.

Vin-Chay was silent for much of the rest of that day. Pyke was concerned at his uncharacteristic reticence until Cassian explained what had happened. Pyke knew that Vin-Chay felt his own regret and guilt at his comrades' fates, especially when his own had turned out so differently. He didn't press the point with his young consort; he knew the man had to find his own way in this matter. Vin-Chay had spent a good deal of time in the past five years obsessing over his comrades' misfortunes as he enjoyed the benefits of his own unusual life. It had always been the source of an invisible barrier between the two men, even in their closest moments. Pyke hoped that Vin-Chay would at least realize that his own circumstances had not only changed for the better those of so many of his fellow refugees, but also for an entire civilization—perhaps two. Time would tell, and perhaps some of his guilt would be assuaged.

Cassian located the databank records that confirmed the captivity and death of Zulikka's mother, Anemone. She had survived nearly three years in her monstrous existence before succumbing to a fatal beating by an unsatisfied client. Cassian was torn about whether or not to bring up the subject with his wife, but he knew that for her sake he had to confirm her loss so that she would never have any doubts about the past, and so none about the future. After they talked, she spent the rest of her day in quiet solitude in their quarters, cuddling her daughter, and crying softly. Cassian left her alone; he never saw her tears.

The details of the exodus occupied nearly every moment of the day for the *Renegade* principals. Vin-Chay assumed personal responsibility for moving his old *Remus* comrades onto the ship, and into adequate medical care that would allow them to start reviving and healing. Cassian and Burran were the mainstays in seeing that the remaining Osiran captives being liberated from the mining planet were settled in and provided with decent food, clothing, and shelter after too many years and hardships. Sharra and Jaylan supervised the fueling of the ten tankers that would continue on with the flagship to Osiron. The remaining free miners and their military and administrative contingent were moved onto the remaining two tankers and passenger ships awaiting departure for Isiin and Ptolem.

Jor-Rue, Zandran, and Octavian spent most of the week verifying coordinates and carefully placing the charges that would set off the expected chain reaction throughout the body of the planet. Jor-Rue was uncharacteristically nervous during the procedure; too much depended on his accuracy. He would never admit it to anyone, but he doubted his abilities almost as much as Cassian did his own; he simply hid his insecurities better under an affable smile and face. The dour Zandran never smiled, nor did Octavian—they simply concentrated on their work and put in the sixteen-hour days needed to complete the critical tasks. The three men fell into an easy routine of a few cold ales after the workday, and began a strangely comfortable camaraderie of technical discussions that bound them even closer.

Pyke and Vin-Chay spent their free time cloistered in the quarters that they shared, or in those occupied by Colyn, Bahrtok and the children. The six people developed a closer bond than ever, and both warriors took great pains to show affection to and provide a sense of security for their sons. Although Pyco-Chay was too young to understand their abandonment of their home and the purposeful flight towards Osiron, Cobahr was old enough to understand and react to the stressful situation once his excitement at the voyage in the new flagship had leveled off. He had become agitated and nervous, and was starting to exhibit stub-

born, angry and contentious behavior that was trying even Vin-Chay's nearly unlimited patience. Even Bahrtok and Colyn were at a loss as to how to comfort their grandson, and the pain showed on their faces despite brave attempts to hide it from the children and their parents.

Surprisingly, it was Pyke who managed to achieve and sustain a constant comforting and nurturing presence to his aggrieved son. He reached out to the boy and would spend many of his spare hours talking to him and holding him and reassuring him. On the night before the *Renegade* was scheduled to leave Sekmet for the final and most dangerous part of the journey, Pyke evicted Vin-Chay from their noxchamber. He spent almost the entire night cuddling and talking to and whispering with his son until they fell asleep in one another's arms barely two hours before the departure. When he awakened to attend to his command duties after carrying the sleeping child back to his grandparents, Pyke knew that after so many years he had reached the point in fatherhood where he had always wanted to be, and where Cobahr needed him. He had never felt as confident, and as worthwhile, and as certain of the future as he did on that day.

Vin-Chay read it all in his eyes when the commander entered the con-center, and gave him a knowing smile. Pyke nodded at him, slipped into the command chair, and gave Jor-Rue the final orders for their departure and the final solution to Sekmet. The ten berrillium-filled tankers had left orbit the day before and were on their way to Osiron; the *Renegade* would catch up with them easily once it left orbit. The other two tankers and passenger ships carrying the Ptolemii miners and personnel back towards Isiin had left two days earlier at maximum speed, and with their communication correlators disabled.

Pyke's flagship left orbit on schedule and headed out on the course that Zandran had confirmed as safe—if the planetary coordinates were accurate, as they all prayed. Isiin's orbital and rotational positioning would be in precise coordination with the timings of the chain of charges.

Four hundred thousand kilometers away from Sekmet's atmosphere, the *Renegade's* auxiliary systems were set on alert. All non-essential personnel were confined to quarters.

Colyn hummed softly to Pyco-Chay as she lulled him to sleep in her arms. She met Bahrtok's eyes as he distracted Cobahr with a dice game on the floor of their quarters.

Zulikka held TutMi tightly as Cassian smiled at her reassuringly. He had opted to remove himself from the con-center and remain with his family. Tut-Mose sat by his side.

Vin-Chay stood closely by Pyke's side at con-center. His eyes swept casually across the command chamber. Burran was fixed on the instruments measuring the distance from Sekmet's surface. Zandran was leaning over Jor-Rue's console and verifying for the thousandth time the coordinates the two men had developed over the journey and implemented down on the surface of the mining planet. Sharra had her eyes fixed curiously on Zandran, who had been oddly attentive to her during the voyage, and especially during the evacuation of Sekmet, when he had seemed to shadow her every move. Jaylan had a sly smile on her face as she watched the conflicting emotions play across her friend's puzzled visage. She also cast an occasional and covert eye on the deft young Osiran navigator who had, oddly, started her blood rushing during the time they had worked so closely in the theft and flight of the *Renegade*. She wondered what he would look like under a cascading, hot shower, and she felt the tips of her ears blush furiously as she forced her concentration back on her duties.

Zandran straightened and faced Pyke.

"Ready, Commander," he said evenly, nodding curtly.

Pyke nodded as Jor-Rue turned towards him. "Sub-Captain," he said to his anxious navigator, "let's hope you're as good as we all think you are. Initiate the combustion sequence."

"Aye, Sir," Jor-Rue nodded as he casually turned back to his console and hit the proper sequence of indents. When he completed the process he leaned back in his seat and rested his hands lightly on the console. His eyes closed, and a slight smile spread across his lips.

They waited.

CHAPTER TWENTY

The first explosion was positioned directly under the main processing generator at Bastet. It was linked to a series of charges extending outward in a fifty-kilometer-long set of tentacles that formed an imperfect wheel with the generator as its hub. The positions followed the main berrillium veins which had been processed or were in progress during the evacuation. Secondary sets of charges had been placed in similar positions on the other side of the small planet, radiating out and downward in the same fashion.

The primary explosion set off the next one down the line, then the next, and the next. The released energy in the compressed and violent manner set off the anticipated chain reaction of related explosions in the unexplored pockets of raw fuel throughout the interior crust then core of Sekmet. The planet began to burst apart as its core heat rose to unnatural levels. The roar of the reverberations and ripping apart of rock would have deafened anyone left on the surface, had they survived the initial blasts.

The destruction was over quickly. Sekmet blew apart and sent trillions of pieces of hot, sharp rocks and debris across wide arcs in all directions. The number, size, and placement of the charges had ensured that the debris would be of a size less likely to cause extensive damage had any of it had the bad fortune to reach one of the other three remaining Sisters. Some might, but that was a calculated risk that Vin-Chay had been willing to take when he had conceived the idea of destroying the source of fuel for his planet's enemies.

The *Renegade* sped on its way towards Osiron after the con-center crew watched the explosive spectacle in fascinated trepidation. They snapped to as the flagship's speed increased to maximum to both outrun any hurtling, deadly debris, and to reach its ultimate destination as soon as it could. All aboard were anxious to get 'home,' and at their current speed, barring any unexpected encounters with the remnants of Sekmet, they would make it there in three weeks.

Home, Vin-Chay thought, as he stared out at the dark space in front of them. Home. Then a sudden thought hit him, and he grinned. Today was the twenty-eighth anniversary of his birth. He couldn't have asked for a better gift.

BOOK FOUR

CONFLAGRATION

CHAPTER ONE

“Your Highness?” Sub-Commander Qing-Chay prompted his distant cousin and Crown Prince in an uncertain voice. The subordinate officer was more than just a little reluctant to disturb his patriarch, but this couldn’t wait. The man was staring out of his Miliplex office window as though in a trance, a common occurrence in the past couple of years. He was about to try to get the Prince’s attention again, but a soft tap on the shoulder from behind by Prince Sar-Chay halted him. The patriarch’s brother motioned him to leave the chamber, which he did gladly. *Let Sarashi deal with this*, he thought in relief.

Sar-Chay watched his unmoving brother for a few silent moments before he decided that he, too, needed his attention regardless of how disruptive it would be to the tormented man who ruled their Kindred. Not that his own torment was that much less. How their souls and lives had changed since that day two years earlier when Chay Shayne and his younger son had returned from the Isiin negotiations.

Crown Prince Chay Shayne had returned from the ruinous collapse of the Isiin negotiations a man obsessed. He had always held an implacable determination to secure his planet’s succession from its mother world, but he had tempered that with a genuine respect for the civilization that had spawned his own, and for the people of that world—save the mad ruler, Amun. Now, that determination and respect were supplanted by a strange, fervent hatred of the Ptolemii, and a bitter commitment to achieve his planet’s independence with the destruction of the Pharancy and the military men and politicians who supported it. Sar-Chay was at a loss to understand his brother’s new attitude, as was the rest of the family. Only Nik-Chay seemed to understand the demons that drove his father, but he was tight-lipped and could not—or would not—shed any light on the Crown Prince’s obsession. Sar-Chay sensed that the young princeling shared his father’s revised passions, but his nephew wouldn’t shed any light on his change of heart, either.

Chay Shayne initiated a passionate campaign to revive the offensive rather than defensive position of Osiron in the conflict. He wanted to see his people

push forward offworld and eventually attack Ptolem and win a decisive victory rather than a mediated one. This about-face won him few new admirers from the other Kindreds, which were reeling from their various defeats and setbacks. Many were openly advocating a capitulation or severe compromises to Ptolem; Chay Shayne fought them at every opportunity. Sar-Chay watched his brother and best friend closely as he would argue in front of the Crown Prince Circle, and the mad fire in his eyes alarmed him. Sar-Chay queried him repeatedly to explain and confide, but although it was clear that the Crown Prince was desperate to do so, something held him back. Sar-Chay couldn't know that his brother had given his word to a man he now hated, but to whom he couldn't break that word no matter what the circumstances.

Chay Shayne had visited the Ptolemii incarceration unit at the Miliplex's penal institution in order to personally interrogate the captured warriors. Unlike the fortress at Canaan, and the other antiquated penal compounds in which the Ptolemii incarcerated their Osiran prisoners, the prison in which the Ptolemii enemies were housed was modern. The inmates were well treated with decent food, clothing, and shelter. They were interrogated, true, as they needed to be, but there was no physical or psychological torture. They were treated as men and women, not as animals.

Sar-Chay accompanied his brother on these new rounds of questioning and watched him carefully. He was clueless as to his brother's motivation for the revisited interrogations. These prisoners had been on Osiron for quite a while and couldn't offer any more information than they already had. Chay Shayne's line of questioning seemed strange, even in the beginning. He seemed to try to elicit personal information on a number of high-ranking warriors in the Ptolem High Command. But Sar-Chay was alert enough to pick up on his brother's body language and careful phrasing, and it became clear that he was mainly interested in one particular officer, a High Commander Pyke. Sar-Chay knew that the man had been part of the Ptolem delegation. He had seen the visual record of the single disastrous negotiating session, and wondered how such a plain, seemingly unassuming man had risen to such a position of power and respect in the Ptolemii military. He wondered if the warrior had offended or antagonized his brother in some way. He queried Chay Shayne and was rewarded with cold, terse denials, and one unexpected warning to mind his own damned business.

From participating in the interrogations he learned as Chay Shayne did that the High Commander in question was a fairly young, well-thought-of warrior who had progressed rapidly in his career and was now the head of the Ptolemii Interior Security forces. He was a respected tactician, and had had a great deal to

do with several Ptolemii battle victories several years earlier, although now his primary duties kept him bound to Ptolem rather than a flagship. He was apparently unmarried; it was unknown if he had any children. He lived a generally quiet, private life outside of the capital city of Thebes, attended only by a slave he had purchased some years before. Sar-Chay felt contempt when he heard this bit of information—any man who would enslave another had no soul or common human decency. He assumed the slave would be an Osiran, probably a woman to satisfy all of the warrior's needs. Slavery was an abominable institution, one that needed obliteration if indeed Osiron could push forth and win a decisive victory, or negotiated into oblivion if a treaty would end the war.

Sar-Chay noticed his nephew's equally hard eyes whenever the Ptolemii's name was mentioned. He had asked Nik-Chay if he and his father had met the warrior personally on Isiin. Nik-Chay grudgingly admitted they had, but only briefly. His clipped tone ended any further discussion on the matter.

As the months after the return from Isiin progressed, Chay Shayne's emotional state worsened. His family received the brunt of his behavior, and he could only seem to turn to Nik-Chay for any confidence or solace. This worried their close-knit family immeasurably, but no one was able to penetrate whatever barrier had arisen. The Heir-Prince, Dom-Chay, was completely frustrated by his father's and younger brother's behavior, and he ranted endlessly to Sar-Chay about their unreasonableness. Sar-Chay agreed silently, but didn't want to encourage the immature firstborn's reactive behavior.

Matters came to a head on the evening that the family held intimate festivities for Chay Shayne's sixty-fifth birthanniv. The Crown Prince clearly wanted no celebration, but he was reluctantly persuaded by his consort H'Elene and his children to go forward with the evening at their compound outside of Etrusca. He was as tense as usual; so was Nik-Chay. Dom-Chay was barely restraining his frustration, and the mixture of conflict, emotion, and chill had put a pall on the meal and presentation of gifts. It seemed that Chay Shayne could barely manage to get through the evening, and when it was decently possible he gruffly excused himself from his family, and closeted himself in his private culturchamber to brood.

Dom-Chay followed his father into the chamber; Nik-Chay was close on his heels to apparently forestall any unwanted confrontation. Sar-Chay entered the culturchamber after his nephews and closed and locked the door. Perhaps it was time to find out exactly what was going on. He decided to let his nephew's anger play out first while he leaned back against the door and watched his brother and his brother's two sons initiate the scene.

The Heir-Prince had never been known for his patience any more than for his discretion. He made the mistake of misjudging his father's own patience as he strode up to him in an antagonistic manner, stopping a bare meter short of the imploding man and confronting him with his own anger.

"This has gone far enough, Father!" Dom-Chay exclaimed angrily. Sar-Chay suppressed a groan at his lack of good sense. His nephew was an intelligent, decent man at heart, but too often let his actions be ruled by his heart rather than his head. This was one of those times.

Chay Shayne stared coldly at his eldest son. His silent, icy stares usually backed down his most ardent opponents, but to his credit, Dom-Chay refused to withdraw. Sar-Chay glanced at his younger nephew, who seemed to be struggling with whether or not to speak.

"Father," Dom-Chay continued, just a little more gently, "whatever it is, we can help. Just tell us what it is." He paused. "Please."

The Crown Prince relaxed his rigid stance slightly. His eye caught Nik-Chay's, and a flash of warning came into it, effectively silencing his younger son, Sar-Chay noted. *What's going on?* Dom-Chay was right: this *had* gone far enough. He pushed himself away from the door to confront his brother. Dom-Chay moved back and allowed his uncle to stand in front of his father. Sar-Chay put a gentle hand on his brother's shoulder.

"Your son is right, Shayne. This must stop. We need to deal with it, and we cannot unless you tell us what it is we *are* dealing with. For everyone's sake—you must."

Chay Shayne met his brother's eyes and almost spoke, but then he roughly pushed Sar-Chay's hand away and shook his head. "I cannot," he said flatly. "I have given my word and will not break that, brother."

"To an evil, inhuman man, Father, who has no concept of honor!" Nik-Chay interjected angrily. He was rewarded with a savage look from his father.

"You will not speak, Nikkola! You have given your word as well, and you will not break that any more than I will. I will not have you dishonor our family."

"I see no honor in keeping my word to such a man! I will take the sin of breaking my word for all our sakes, Father, despite—"

"Silence!" Chay Shayne roared suddenly, his red face suffused with fury. Sar-Chay and Dom-Chay tensed, and neither knew how to proceed. Chay Shayne turned to his brother and started to speak.

"Sarashi," he said quietly. He turned to his firstborn. "Domenico. I know you both want to help but you cannot. This is something only I can deal with right now, and—"

"Vin-Chay is alive," Nik-Chay said suddenly. Chay Shayne turned his head slowly towards his younger son, a shocked look of disbelief in the chilly eyes that met the defiant ones of his son. He had to turn away from his son quickly so that the young man wouldn't also see the guilty relief in his father's impassive face.

Sar-Chay and Dom-Chay were stunned into absolute speechlessness for what seemed to all four men an eternity. No one spoke. Sar-Chay met his older brother's eyes and read in them the truth of what Nik-Chay had just imparted. He shook his head to clear it. He had always prayed for such a miracle, and now that might be a reality.

"H—how is that possible?" he whispered softly as his older nephew stood rigid, his eyes fixed on his father's face, where he also read the truth.

"Perhaps you should ask my dishonorable son, brother. He seems to be willing to divest himself of all discretion and principles of integrity quite easily. I'm sure he can answer your questions." Chay Shayne turned his back and walked to the window. He stood silently looking out at the crashing waves of the Meditteran Sea as they pounded the surf far below the cliff on which the Chay compound resided.

Sar-Chay and Dom-Chay faced Nik-Chay, staring at him intently, waiting. Nik-Chay cast a brief glance at his father's back and wondered just how much worse he could make things by speaking. Or perhaps Chay Shayne wanted him to speak because he could not.

"We learned the truth at Isiin," he began. "We were approached by one of the delegates just before he left on the last shuttle after the negotiations' fiasco. High Commander Pyke." He paused. "A devil. A man without honor."

"Pyke?" Sar-Chay echoed, looking at his brother's rigid back. So that would explain his interest in the man.

Nik-Chay nodded. "He wheedled his way into Father's chamber to confront us. He made it seem as though it was Father's idea, but looking back it's clear that the man maneuvered the situation. At any rate, he told us that Vin-Chay was alive and resided in his household on Ptolem, and had for three years."

"What?!" Dom-Chay interjected. Nik-Chay nodded again.

"He provided us with details that made it obvious he was telling the truth. The *Remus* was not destroyed outright, but badly damaged then boarded by the Ptolemii. They took over seventy of our warriors captive, including my brother. They were all taken to a penal fortress on Canaan with other captives, and held there for nearly a year before some of them were sent to Ptolem and some to Sek-met to work in the mines."

"Slave labor," Sar-Chay said softly.

"Yes," Nik-Chay said in disgust. "The Ptolemii enslaved their own Osiran citizens easily enough—why not their captured enemies?"

"And this Pyke enslaved our brother? Is that what you're saying?" Dom-Chay asked, still disbelieving this entire turn of events.

"He took great pleasure in telling us that," Nik-Chay replied, his hatred of Pyke rising again to the surface like rancid bile.

"Tell them the rest," Chay Shayne said casually as he turned back to face his family. "Tell them why he selected my son for his evil intentions." He fixed his intense brown eyes on his younger son and waited. He had told his hotheaded younger son a few of the incendiary facts after Pyke left his Isiin chamber.

Nik-Chay complied. "This monster, Pyke—he wanted revenge. So he took it."

"Revenge?" Dom-Chay asked curiously.

"Yes. Revenge," Chay Shayne replied easily. "For an injury done to him by me."

"By you?" Sar-Chay said in confusion.

"His wife was on the *Vallerian*. She died. He holds me responsible for her death, and saw an opportunity to repay me for my actions by enslaving and abusing my son. Clear enough, brother? Or would you like more details?"

A deadly silence fell over the chamber as Chay Shayne's eldest son and brother tried to absorb the implications of what had just transpired. They couldn't; it was too monstrous. Was it any wonder that the Crown Prince had been close to breaking these past months as he tried to cope with his new knowledge and what it meant for his family? His most beloved son, now back amongst the living, was held in thrall by a vengeful enemy.

Chay Shayne watched his family's reactions closely. *If they knew the whole truth, they would understand why I am so close to madness.* But he had never told Nik-Chay the whole truth, the part about Vin-Chay being forced to act as his captor's consort for these past years ("*He proved difficult to train at first, but has since become an adequate slave and concubine. Under my ... creative tutelage.*"). He would not impose that pain on his younger son. He would bear that alone until such time as he could free his second son from the clutches of his diabolical captor. Until such time as he could take that man's life.

Chay Shayne went on. "There are other warriors held captive on Ptolem—Cassian, Burran, Jor-Rue at the very least. Our cousin Bak-Tii was sent to Sekmet. He is most likely dead, along with most of the others. How many others have survived to this point, and where exactly they are, is unknown. Neither Cassian nor Burran has any real family to inform, although at some point I would

like to let Rue Dann know that his kinsman lives. Nevertheless, I believe that we need to maintain silence on this matter, including amongst the rest of our family. The knowledge would only cause more pain than relief, and it is already difficult enough to bear for the two of us." He looked askance at his younger son. "Or, should I say, the *four* of us." Nik-Chay had the sense to look contrite.

"What are we going to do?" asked Dom-Chay in a strange voice. Sar-Chay could pretty much figure out his older nephew's problem: despite his affection for his missing brother, he had always been third in line in their father's affection, behind Vin-Chay and Nik-Chay. A moment ago, he was second. Now he was back to a distant third again.

"We are going to proceed as best we can in fighting this war, and pray we can emancipate my son and all of our Osiran comrades eventually when the Pharon's empire is defeated. No one is to know what we know. *No one*," he finished firmly, looking at Nik-Chay, who nodded quickly. He met Sar-Chay's eyes evenly. "I will get my son back. No matter what I have to do. And his captor will pay for his actions in blood."

Sar-Chay nodded, and then turned to Dom-Chay. "Will you and your brother please allow us a moment alone? There are things I need to say to your father." Dom-Chay reluctantly left the chamber, followed by his younger brother, who cast a last, quick, guilty look at his father. Chay Shayne ignored him; his eyes were riveted on his own brother. Nik-Chay wondered what the two men were going to discuss, but knew it wasn't any of his business. He was probably going to have an intense discussion of his own with the Heir-Prince, who was giving him a typical furious look as he closed the door, grabbed his arm, and started to drag him into another private chamber for additional enlightenment.

Chay Shayne and his brother faced one another for a few quiet moments before the younger prince spoke. "What is it you are not telling anyone, brother, including Nik-Chay?" he asked quietly.

Chay Shayne smiled slightly. "You know me too well, Sari."

"As no one else can, Shayne. Tell me. Please."

The Crown Prince nodded slowly. He couldn't keep everything to himself without setting himself on a course of self-destruction. That would benefit no one, least of all his cherished second son, whom he would reclaim at any cost. He needed a confidant. Sarashi was his closest sibling, and he could trust him completely. He needed him now more than ever. Chay Shayne moved slowly back towards the window and spent a quiet moment staring out at the view before turning back to his brother, who was waiting patiently.

"This vengeful man has not only enslaved my son, but has abused him as well."

"All slaves are abused by the very fact of their captivity, Shayne. But you are referring to something specific, aren't you? Something more." His breath caught.

Chay Shayne took a deep breath. "He has forced my son to act as his consort these past years. As a 'replacement' for his dead wife, he said. He took great pleasure in informing me of that little fact. He used few words, but his tone and manner spoke volumes about how he has been torturing my son—my child," he ended softly. He slumped into a chair by his desk, clenching his hands and giving his brother a look of impotent rage. Sar-Chay moved swiftly to his brother and knelt in front of him, grasping his hands and forcing him to look directly at him.

"Vin-Chay is your strongest child, Shayne. He always has been. He will survive this and be returned to us. He will *survive* this. Trust in him and in our blood. It is stronger than a thousand Ptolemii flagships. Do you believe that? *Do you?*" Sar-Chay asked fervently as he clutched his brother's balled fists.

"Yes. He is strong. He will survive this. As will we." He raised his eyes to meet Sar-Chay's. "And I will have my revenge on his tormentor," he ended quietly. Sar-Chay nodded. So would he. Oh, yes—so would he.

Sar-Chay remembered that night as though it had happened only yesterday. The four men had rarely spoken of it together; Dom-Chay was more inclined to badger his brother about details than their touchy father, and Sar-Chay spoke more easily about the matter to Chay Shayne. The Crown Prince's brother wondered how this latest strange development was going to impact them all—whatever it turned out to be.

"Shayne," he said firmly. No response. He repeated his brother's name. "*Shayne.*"

The Crown Prince seemed to shake himself out of his reverie and gave an inquiring look to Sar-Chay. The younger Chay continued. "Something has happened offworld. I have put our forces on Code One alert and ordered pre-boarding procedures for the *Victorion* and the *Liberty*."

"What's happened?" Chay Shayne asked tensely, now fully focused.

Sar-Chay paused. "Our long-range scanners have been picking up vessel activity near Sekmet for a week now. Nothing unusual, probably just Ptolemii or Isiin refueling tankers. But there was one extremely large vessel we assumed was a Ptolemii flagship. That was why we had our forces on Code Two for the past few days."

"I know that," Chay Shayne replied irritably. Why was his brother just wasting his time rehashing what he already knew? He was about to voice his irritation when Sar-Chay continued.

"Agreed, but since the large ship wasn't making any move towards Osiron, we had no immediate cause for concern."

"But now it is?"

"To say the least. Not only has it assumed a course directly for us, but it's being followed by at least ten other smaller ships that seem to have tanker configuration. They are moving fast. They'll reach us in three weeks or so, perhaps sooner. But that's not quite all." Sar-Chay paused again. "Sekmet has exploded."

"*Exploded?* What the hell are you talking about? Planets don't simply 'explode' without warning." Shayne shot out of his chair, every cell in his body electrified.

"This one did—about two hours ago. The explosion that ripped it apart has sent a huge arc of fragments outward in two main directions, neither of which is on a direct course towards Osiron, thank God. It's unlikely, however, that we won't encounter some contact activity, and the populace needs to be warned and our scientists are on the matter now."

"And these ten—eleven—ships are on a course to here?"

"Yes. I've convened an emergency meeting of the Crown Prince Circle, and our elders are gathering now in the councilchamber."

Chay Shayne was silent for a few seconds. "This could be a final push by Ptolem to attack us and end this war once and for all."

"Yes, it could very well be. But ..." Sar-Chay trailed off.

"But what? Do you think they are coming to surrender?" Chay Shayne snapped caustically.

"No," his brother responded carefully, "but something inside tells me this is something entirely different. I don't know why, but I don't sense any danger here."

"You're quite mad, brother. Anything to do with Ptolem is dangerous. No matter. We'll find out soon enough. Right now, we need to evaluate and strategize, and we can't do that here, so let's go to the Circle and deal with it as a united people."

Sar-Chay nodded and followed his brother out of the chamber. He made a mental note to himself to contact Georn as soon as possible and ensure that his spouse of thirty-five years was apprised of the situation in his office at the Mediplex, which could eventually wind up with incoming patients if the Sekmet debris managed to penetrate Osiron's atmosphere. If so, he and their son Ren-Chay would be more than just a little busy. As he and his brother would likely be

offworld. Sar-Chay wondered just what this new and unexpected twist in the sixteen-year-old war of independence would turn out to be.

CHAPTER TWO

Four Ptolemii secondary vessels that secured the Osiron perimeter to prevent that planet's forces from pushing through and towards the other three Sisters were on Red Alert. They detected the explosion that obliterated Sekmet. Their commanders and crews were shocked at the turn of events, but regrouped quickly and took measures to reinforce their positions in case Osiron used the situation to its own advantage. They repositioned themselves at three hundred thousand kilometers from Osiron in a line spread across another hundred thousand kilometers. The commander in charge, Antigone, sent an urgent communication to Isiin and to Ptolem even as she realized that a Ptolemii flagship of some new design and a small support fleet seemed to be approaching the last Sister and would reach them in a few short weeks. She had no way of knowing that her message had been intercepted by the *Renegade*, to which she had also sent a missive requesting identification and purpose. She soon received confirmation from its con-center that it was indeed the newest Ptolemii flagship, bearing High Commander Pyke and his crew, and would arrive at the perimeter shortly with new orders for the secondary vessels. Antigone was told to wait, and take no action unless fired upon.

Antigone also scanned activity down on the planet's surface, revealing a scramble of preparation activity by the two remaining Osiran flagships and several of their secondary vessels. The flagships achieved orbit but maintained a discreet distance from their Ptolemii enemies, and made no move towards engaging them or attempting to circumvent them. Osiran and Ptolemii vessels alike were in 'ready' mode, but all remained at a hostile distance as the new, large flagship and its fleet inexorably approached from what had been the mineral planet.

Pyke hoped that there would have to be little or no engagement with the Ptolemii vessels. He had directed the *Renegade* to the forefront of the fleet and positioned the tankers behind him in a pyramid pattern. Vin-Chay disputed this directive and argued that several tankers needed to be positioned in front of the flagship as protection against attack. Any vessel close enough to fire on them would think twice about risking its own destruction by blowing apart a full berrillium tanker whose blast could vaporize the attacker as well. Zandran agreed with Vin-Chay's suggestion and Pyke revised his orders, placing four tankers in

strategic frontal positions. He was not pleased with the fact that TutMose and Cassian were currently in command of two of those vessels, but he couldn't let that impact his decision. He was secretly glad that Vin-Chay had remained aboard his flagship as third in command.

The rogue fleet reached the Osiron perimeter three weeks after it fled Sekmet. Pyke commlinked with Antigone to provide new orders: the Ptolemii vessels were to depart the perimeter and return to Isiin immediately; his fleet would replace them. Antigone balked at the inexplicable orders. Normally, she would have simply complied as a well-trained officer responding to a superior. But too many things were out of place. Sekmet was gone. There was no response from the Ptolem or Isiin High Commands. Pyke was supposed to be the head of Interior Security: where was Sheban? Savins? Aristine? Why was Pyke's 'fleet' comprised of one huge new flagship and ten burgeoning tankers? There were too many unanswered questions, and Antigone made a command decision and rejected her orders. She ordered her ship's weapons and those of the other three subordinate vessels to lock onto the four tankers, which were shielding the *Renegade* too well.

Pyke issued his official commands again and prayed Antigone would comply; she didn't. The *Renegade* locked its own weapons' systems but was hindered by its tankers' shield—it couldn't fire yet, either. The two commanders were at a standoff. They were being carefully monitored at a distance by the Osiran flagships and the planet's Miliplex. Neither Chay Shayne, nor Rue Dann, nor Sar-Chay had any inkling of what was going on between their enemies' forces. They just watched, and waited.

On the third day of the standoff Antigone broke it and decided to make a clever move around one of the tankers to try to fire on the large flagship. Her maneuver gained her position, but as she initiated fire to 'wing' one of the nonagon's now-vulnerable sides, her ship was hit by an unexpected burst of fire from the side of one of the tankers. The blast blew apart her shuttlebay pods, and set off a chain reaction that took less than sixty seconds to reach the ship's main fueling pods and ignite an explosion that destroyed Antigone and her crew before they could react to either save themselves or return fire. Octavian smiled slightly as he watched the shower of light that accompanied the destruction of the enemy ship. He had enjoyed the challenge of rerouting certain tanker fuel lines into vent systems that would allow the compression of raw berrillium to forcefully eject and hit targets at close distances. The Ptolemii vessel had never expected a threat from a mere tanker. He wondered if they had figured out that more of the tankers had been redesigned that way. If not, they would find out the hard way. He

hoped that his temporary ship commander, Cassian, would give another order to fire. Payback was sweet.

The unexpected destruction of their lead secondary vessel gave the remaining Ptolemii commanders a strong desire to not test out the capabilities of any of the other tankers or of the large flagship. When Pyke firmly reiterated his departure command to the Ptolemii vessels, their officers determined that careful discretion was in everyone's best interests. The three surviving ships plotted a course back to Ptolem and embarked on that course in less than an hour. Pyke and his officers watched them leave; a deafening, impromptu cheer went up in the *Renegade's* con-center when the ships departed. For all of the Osiran warriors aboard the rogue ship, victory of any kind was as sweet as Octavian's payback.

The Osiran leaders and warriors on their own ships and on the planet below had been monitoring the strange confrontation with growing disbelief mixed with concern and caution. The new flagship was clearly of Ptolemii configuration, as were the tankers. The officer in command was a known, high-ranking Ptolemii warrior loyal to the Pharon. So why had he acted contrary to his duties, and been involved in an action that had seen the destruction of one of his own ships? Chay Shayne was less concerned about the answers to these questions than about the fact that a long-hated enemy had appeared within his own reach. Only his strong commitment to his people and his duties kept him from ordering the *Victorion* to fire at Pyke's flagship. Sar-Chay commanded the *Liberty*, and kept a close eye on his brother's actions, praying he wouldn't abandon his honor and duty just yet to reach the enemy he wanted so badly. That, and the fact that if there was the opportunity to meet the man face to face, there was also the opportunity to learn Vin-Chay's ultimate fate. Sar-Chay knew the same thoughts were playing through his brother's tormented mind.

Pyke held back contact with the Osiron High Command until the three Ptolemii secondary vessels had put significant distance between themselves and the planet. He also knew that he would have given himself a better tactical advantage by stringing out the Osirans' uncertainty and disquiet. Vin-Chay was not especially pleased at this move, but he understood it, and silently applauded his consort for his military proficiency. Pyke let the Osirans sweat for a full day before he opened communication with the High Command located in the Etrusca Miliplex.

The Osirans acknowledged immediately. Vin-Chay thought this an unwise move; they should have stalled for at least a brief period. He read in Pyke's amused eyes his consort's agreement. Pyke nodded at him knowingly, then turned back to open a dialogue. He had opted to disallow visual contact between

the Osiron High Command and his con-center both as a tactical and a cautionary measure. Also, he didn't want this to be the moment when it was learned that Vin-Chay, Jor-Rue and other Osiran captives were resident on the flagship.

"This is High Commander Pyralis-Keegan. To whom am I speaking?" Pyke asked in his most authoritative voice, his Osiran syntax and inflections perfect.

"This is Crown Prince Rue Dann, delegated head of the Crown Prince Circle. I'm sure you remember me from Isiin, Commander?" Jor-Rue sat up alert and anxious as the voice of his fourth-cousin boomed over the auditory system on the *Renegade's* con-center.

"Vaguely, sir. I take it the official head of the Council of Nine is indisposed?" Pyke deliberately used the older designation of the ruling heads of state to inflict a minor but obvious disregard.

"Crown Prince Chay Shayne is not very far from you, Commander, if you will locate the *Victorian* on your scanners. I have full authority to deal with you." He paused before going on coldly. "Unless your intentions are hostile, in which case you will be facing immediate contact with Chay Shayne." There was just the barest hint in his voice of hope that this would not be the case. Pyke decided to stop tormenting his opponents—for the moment.

"If my intentions were hostile, Your Highness, your capital city would already be a pile of steaming rubble. I'm sure your operations center has scanned my weapons' system and you are aware that not only is it a radical design, but a deadly one. Supplemented by my unusual contingent of tankers. And I am sure you have also ascertained that we have targeted nearly a dozen of your most valuable positions—Etrusca included. Now, shall we continue with discussions relating to a truce and peaceful negotiations, or return to a pointless exercise in one-upmanship?" he finished coolly. Were all these damned Osirans so contentious by birth, or training, or both? He glanced at Vin-Chay, who threw him an amused look, as though knowing exactly what he was thinking.

Rue Dann paused briefly before answering. "We shall continue. What exactly is it that you want from us, Commander?"

"One. No hostile actions from your flagships or secondary vessels. That would prove to be a fatal mistake. Two. A delegation from my flagship will shuttle down to Etrusca for discussions as to our exact intentions and demands. My primary commander and captains will lead this delegation while I remain aboard this ship. Our weapons' systems will remain locked on our targets. Any attempt to initiate offensive action on your part will result in our immediate firing." Pyke hesitated a moment before deciding that some conciliation might be warranted. "Your Highness. If I or any member of my crew were disposed towards hostile actions

against Osiron, they would already have been initiated, and I would not have had to destroy a Ptolemii ship and discard the others. This vessel—this fleet—is not a part of the official military contingent of the Pharoncy. It is, shall we say, a rogue operation, and one quite sympathetic to your cause. I suggest you consider this possibility strongly and act accordingly—for all our sakes.”

There was a heavy silence at the other end of the commlink. It was clear to all aboard the *Renegade* that the Osiron High Command and its flagships and council elders were conversing furiously on the matter. Cassian entered the con-center; he had returned to the flagship from his tanker an hour before. He stood next to Vin-Chay, behind Pyke, as they all waited patiently for the Osiran response. Vin-Chay hoped to God that it wasn't going to be a burst of fire from the *Victorian*. Rue Dann came back on commlink after a good twenty minutes.

“Very well, Commander. We accept your proposal. We will be ready to have your delegates' shuttle dock at our Miliplex in four hours. We will provide the coordinates—”

“Thank you, that won't be necessary. We have the coordinates. *Six* hours. Pyke out.” He signaled Jor-Rue to snap off the communication; the sub-captain complied without hesitation. Pyke knew that he had left the High Command wondering how an enemy flagship had acquired the Miliplex docking coordinates since the 'plex had been relocated after the war had begun. The High Command couldn't know that one of its warriors had provided the coordinates as part of his navigational duties.

Pyke turned to Zandran. “As we've discussed, you, Vin-Chay and Cassian will take a support contingent of twelve other warriors down to the surface. You know what to present to them. Make certain they understand how critical it is that we come to an understanding, especially given the fact that two other vessels such as this one exist and will likely be coming here in only a matter of months. We need a truce for the sake of everyone's survival.”

“Understood, Commander.” Zandran saluted, and then motioned for Vin-Chay and Cassian to follow him off con-center for last-minute preparations. The young captains started to follow him, but Pyke gestured for them to remain. Zandran nodded, and then left by himself. Pyke motioned Cassian closer.

“Captain. You made the right decision in firing on that ship. As a warrior, you had no other alternative under the circumstances. You performed your duty in the only manner possible. Please remember that.”

“Yes, sir,” Cassian answered quietly, gratitude in his green eyes. He half-smiled and nodded at Vin-Chay as he left the con-center.

Vin-Chay cocked his head to one side and smiled at his commander and consort. "Worried that I might not come back once I'm down there?" he asked lightly.

Pyke shook his head. "Not likely. Your sons are still here. You'll be back. And if you didn't come back—I'd simply come and get you." Pyke lowered his voice so that only Vin-Chay could hear his next words. "I still own you, remember? That's not going to change simply because we've relocated."

"I'll try to remember that, master," Vin-Chay replied softly as he grinned, then moved off to follow his fellow delegates.

Zandran revisited their duties and expectations with Vin-Chay and Cassian in his quarters. The two younger men listened patiently, although he repeated their instructions several times before he let them go for an hour to do whatever personal business they needed to before they departed. Cassian spent the next hour playing with TutMi and reassuring Zulikka of his safety and their future. Vin-Chay held and cuddled Cobahr and Pyco-Chay under Bahrtok's and Colyn's anxious gaze. He hugged his children and their grandparents before he reluctantly left them to finally go to the home he had fought to get back to for so long.

Home.

CHAPTER THREE

The aura of tension in the Osiron Miliplex main shuttlebay couldn't have been greater. The six-hour timeframe for the arrival of the Ptolemii shuttle had been extended at the last minute by two hours so that Chay Shayne and his brother could arrive from their flagships and participate in the meetings and negotiations. It was risky to leave the *Victorion* and the *Liberty* to their second-in-commands, but under the circumstances it was necessary; neither of the Chays was about to be left out of this preliminary encounter. In addition, it was clear that the new flagship could effectively disable or destroy both of the Osiran vessels regardless of who was in command.

Chay Shayne disembarked from his command shuttle and was greeted by his two officer sons; his youngest son, Bru-Chay, was matriculated as a first-level cadet at the Academy and would not be allowed to participate. A half hour later, Sar-Chay arrived and joined his family, Rue Dann, Gir Pompey and a large contingent of support warriors and several political elders on the landing bay. They awaited the arrival of the shuttle from the—*What is the name of the ship anyway?* Sar-Chay thought, as he realized that Pyke had not identified the vessel by name. Sar-Chay noted that his nephews were somewhat nervous, as was Rue Dann. Chay Shayne maintained a cold, unemotional facade that belied the passions simmering just below the surface.

A cautious quiet fell over the shuttlebay as the craft from the Ptolemii flagship descended and docked. Chay Shayne was flanked on his right by his brother, and on his left by his two sons as they waited for the delegation to disembark. The shuttle door slid open soundlessly, and four female Ptolemii lieutenants exited, scanned the bay, and then positioned themselves two to each side of the portal.

A tall, poised warrior commander in his early fifties exited the shuttle. He had a cool, contemptuous look on his chiseled face. His black eyes were unreadable as they scanned the dozens of Osiran warriors and civilians gathered to meet their enemies. Zandran's gaze fell on Chay Shayne, who met his eyes coldly. *A worthy opponent—just like his son*, Zandran thought. The barest smile crossed his lips, and Chay Shayne wondered what the Ptolemii officer found so amusing in this particular situation.

Zandran moved away from the shuttle door and waited for a brief moment for his two companions to take their leave of the craft. The Osirans watched in silence as a tall, blond captain left the craft. There were a few startled, unsure exclamations as some of the observers thought they recognized the officer. They had little time to regroup before his companion, another tall, young captain with long, flowing ebony hair and bright blue eyes left the shuttle to stand on the other side of his commander.

This time, there were shocked gasps all around at the same time that Nik-Chay broke away from his family and ran very un-officer-like towards the three Ptolemii warriors, reaching them in seconds and flinging his arms around his brother with a loud whoop. Vin-Chay laughed out loud and crushed his younger brother in his own desperate hug until neither of them could breathe.

Vin-Chay forcefully pushed Nik-Chay away from his body so that he could breathe. He grinned at the younger man. "Miss me?" he asked easily, his eyes dancing with a joy to match his brother's.

"A little," Nik-Chay managed to get out before he found himself pulled away from his long-lost brother so that the Chay Heir-Prince could get in a greeting of his own. The three brothers found themselves wrapped around each other as the remaining stunned Osirans and the amused Ptolemii stood where they were, watching the reunion scene unfold.

After a few moments, Vin-Chay disengaged himself from his brothers, and walked briskly towards his rigid father and uncle, ignoring the various hands that reached out to touch him, the various faces that welcomed him home. He felt his heart constrict at the sight of the emotions playing across his father's face, a face he hadn't seen in person for seven years. He stopped less than a meter from his sire, his lips parted slightly as he searched for the right words. There weren't any.

"Father," he began softly, but any other words were cut off when Chay Shayne slowly and firmly wrapped his arms around his son and held him tightly without speaking. Vin-Chay returned the silent embrace, never wanting to let go. After moments that seemed like hours, Chay Shayne finally released his son enough to allow them both to breathe, and to be able to drink in every physical aspect of his favorite child, back from the dead. Vin-Chay felt Sar-Chay behind him as his uncle ran a badly trembling, affectionate hand over his silky hair. He turned and smiled at his uncle, whose misty-eyed face said everything.

Vin-Chay turned back to his father as his breathing relaxed. "Father," he began again, gently, as he grasped his father's forearms tightly. "We have come home to bring you a weapon against our enemies. A weapon that can help our people to victory and freedom. Our vessel, the *Renegade*, is a leveling factor in this

conflict, and it can turn the tide of this conflict for all of us, Osiran and Ptolemii alike, if—”

“Enough of this maudlin sentimentality,” Zandran snapped suddenly, breaking the mood. “You can have your little family reunion later, after we have discussed important issues relating to a bargain between our factions. That is why we are here, *Captain*, in case it has escaped you.” His fluent Osiran seemed to surprise a few of his antagonists.

Chay Shayne’s eyes hardened at the manner in which his son was interrupted, but Vin-Chay simply sighed; he knew Zandran too well to take offense, and understood that despite the harsh words, he was right. He nodded and fell silent as the Ptolemii commander strode up to Chay Shayne and stared at him coldly. Zandran received a stare in kind.

“Are you and your Council prepared to discuss our terms for an alliance—*Your Highness?*” Zandran asked with as little respect in his voice as he could muster. Vin-Chay groaned inwardly; Zandran would never really change despite his recent minor brushes with congeniality.

“We are prepared to consider your proposals, Commander,” Chay Shayne replied coolly as he gently but firmly moved Vin-Chay away from the Ptolemii to a point near his rear, as though to protect him. This amused Zandran, who knew that the princeling needed no such protection from anyone, much less from him.

“Good,” Zandran replied. “Then I suggest we adjourn to a private chamber with the appropriate personnel to consider this matter.” He raised an eyebrow at Vin-Chay, who nodded silently in agreement. Chay Shayne signaled Rue Dann and Gir Pompey as he took his reclaimed son’s arm and ushered him firmly out of the shuttlebay. Cassian followed Vin-Chay’s brothers, who had greeted him warmly after they had released their hold on their sibling. He felt gratified that they had even remembered him.

Chay Shayne led his sons, their Ptolemii comrades, and his own designated Circle elders into the sealed Miliplex chamber used for confidential conversations. The gathering place was large and open, with a round table that could seat two dozen people easily. Chay Shayne pulled Vin-Chay down into a seat next to his primary one. He clasped Vin-Chay’s hand under the table as the other participants seated themselves; he kept his hand on his son’s for most of the discussion.

Nik-Chay seated himself on the other side of his newly recovered brother, with Cassian to his right. Zandran sat opposite Chay Shayne as the other men took their places.

“Please begin, Commander,” Chay Shayne said evenly as his eyes met Zandran’s. The Ptolemii commander made him wait a long moment before answer-

ing. He had learned a great deal of psychological tactics from his High Commander, although at the moment they didn't seem to be disconcerting the tough Crown Prince.

"As you can see, Your Highness, we have brought you many items of good faith to ensure that you realize our intentions are not necessarily hostile towards you."

"Necessarily?" Chay Shayne echoed mildly.

"Correct. As long as we can come to an agreement satisfactory to all concerned."

"Then perhaps we had better stop dancing around one another, and you'll just lay out the exact situation, sir," Chay Shayne stated flatly. Vin-Chay squeezed his hand under the table, and his father relaxed a little. His son would let him know if they were in any danger, and he received no such signals from him.

"Very well. This is the situation. This new flagship was commandeered by our combined Osiran and Ptolemii forces, per an intriguing if *slightly* flawed plan by your son." He inclined his head towards Vin-Chay as the Osirans in the chamber all looked at the long-lost princeling in surprise and curiosity mixed with respect. Zandran continued.

"The *Renegade* is commanded by High Commander Pyke. I am second in command. Your son is fourth, after my associate Commander TutMose. Captain Cassian here follows." Zandran paused and raised an eyebrow. "The Osirans are not really Ptolemii warriors, of course, but it was expeditious to allow them the privilege of wearing our uniforms for a brief period. And, up to now, they have usually performed adequately." Zandran saw the amused look on Vin-Chay's face; he almost smiled back, but not quite. He noted with satisfaction the stiff demeanor of the Crown Prince when his son was dismissed as being merely 'adequate.' Pyke was right—this could be fun if handled properly. He was starting to enjoy himself as he proceeded.

"Nevertheless, we have gotten used to them, and our commander is willing to let them stand as *Renegade* officers holding their current ranks. Indeed, that is one of the conditions of our truce."

"And the others?" Rue Dann interjected quickly.

"The others are this. One. High Commander Pyke will remain in command of the vessel and participate in any future Osiran military endeavors as a full member commensurate with his rank and abilities. Two. Our joint Osiran-Ptolemii flagship will remain just that—a blending of our peoples and cultures. Whosoever currently resides on the vessel as an active crewmember may choose to remain so, with all of the benefits and compensation of any similar warrior in

your fleet, regardless of whether they are Ptolemii or Osiran. Three. Any Ptolemii warriors or civilians you may be holding as prisoners-of-war will be released and repatriated to Ptolem on the first available vessel that can make the journey. Four. There will be no punitive measures in any official, judicial, or social connotations against current Ptolemii residing aboard the *Renegade*. We will retain all legal rights and parameters as Ptolemii citizens unless individuals voluntarily surrender these rights and accept Osiran jurisdiction. We will not be treated as second-class citizens on this world."

"As you treat our people on your own world?" Dom-Chay snapped coldly.

"Dom-Chay," Chay Shayne admonished quietly. His eldest son bit back another tart response.

"Correct," Zandran responded, unfazed. "I will not debate the propriety of my government's actions in that matter. I will simply impart that we will tolerate none such from *you*." He threw the Heir-Prince a bored, dismissive look that quite obviously raised the young man's hackles.

"Please continue, Commander," Chay Shayne said.

"That is all as far as our demands go. Once you have agreed to them, and it has been officially recorded in the archives as such, we will effect a migration to your planet of our passengers and any crewmembers who desire repatriation. You have four hours to make your decision."

"Passengers?" Nik-Chay asked curiously.

"Aye," Vin-Chay answered. "We really have only a skeleton crew of Osiran and Ptolemii warriors. The bulk of our people are refugees from Thebes, Isiin and Sekmet. Slaves and ex-slaves we managed to snatch out from under the Pharon's nose during our starship theft and flight."

"How many?" Sar-Chay asked as his admiration for his beloved kinsman grew palpably by leaps and bounds in merely a few seconds. He ached to throw his arms around Vin-Chay. Literally ached.

Vin-Chay looked at Cassian and drew his eyebrows together. "Around twelve thousand or so?"

Cassian nodded and grinned widely. "Twelve thousand, two hundred and sixty one. And one hundred fourteen unborn Osiran babies."

"Twelve thousand?!" Sar-Chay exclaimed.

"Well done," Chay Shayne said quietly as he squeezed Vin-Chay's hand under the table. There had never been a moment when he had been prouder of his second-born son. He knew now that he had made the right decision all those years ago.

"It was a well-coordinated effort between many people, Father," Vin-Chay replied. He inclined his head towards Commander Zandran. "And the extent and success would likely not have been possible without our Ptolemii comrades."

Rue Dann spoke in a hesitant tone. "My kinsman, Jor-Rue ... did he survive ..."

Cassian nodded. "He survived Ptolem very well, sir. He is our navigator and the driving force behind realizing the destruction of Sekmet. Vin-Chay's idea, but Jor-Rue's calculations resulted in the successful detonation of that miserable planet."

"Why did you blow up Sekmet?" Dom-Chay asked his brother.

"To level off our two worlds once and for all," Vin-Chay replied. "As long as either of us has an apparently inexhaustible supply of fuel, we can continue on with our battles and problems. I thought perhaps that if we all lost that source, we would have to re-evaluate the matter and re-direct our efforts towards more productive ones. It is no secret that Osiron has been developing alternate fuel sources, and perhaps that is also true of Ptolem. Ptolem has been stockpiling berillium for years, and at least these ten tankers full of the fuel will give Osiron an adequate backup for a long time while we refine our alternatives. Hopefully, the loss of the planet may give a lengthy pause to both sides and prevent any outright confrontations for many months, perhaps years. And perhaps in that time we can all grow as a race and put a stop to this madness."

The Circle members and their guests were silent for several long moments after he finished, as they tried to absorb the enormity of the recent developments. After a time, Chay Shayne stood up slowly and rested his fingers lightly on the table before he spoke carefully to Zandran.

"We will now adjourn from you to discuss this matter. But before we do, I would like to know what will result if we decline any or all of your requests, Commander."

Zandran stood as well. "If you decline *any* of our requests, sir, then you will receive back only our passengers who wish to leave. Those who do not, and those Ptolemii who reside on the ship, will leave your planet and strike out on our own. Canaan, perhaps, or back to Isiin to appropriate that world. We may very well wind up being refugees ourselves, but we will be well-armed ones, since you will receive neither our flagship nor our tankers. Should you make the mistake of attempting to prevent our departure under these circumstances, or should you open fire on us, then you will have sealed your own unpleasant fate, sir." He looked at Vin-Chay and nodded. "Let's go." Vin-Chay and Cassian started to rise automatically but stopped at Chay Shayne's icy retort.

"They stay," Shayne said bluntly, his flashing eyes daring the lower-ranking Ptolemii to argue.

"These men are under my command. They'll go when and where I dictate," Zandran replied flatly. He could see that the Crown Prince wanted to resist, but that the Osiran grudgingly acknowledged the veracity of his comments. He knew he'd won the battle. Sweet. He compressed his lips into a tight, mirthless smile and shrugged nonchalantly. "On the other hand, they're fairly extraneous to any requisite *Renegade* duties right now, so they can stay."

Zandran turned without another word or backward glance and followed an Osiran sub-commander out of the secured councilchamber. Pyke had told him to make sure that Vin-Chay remained in any Osiran discussions, as he would look after their best interests. Zandran decided to leave Cassian there as well, as a well-deserved mark of respect.

As soon as the Ptolemii commander left the chamber, Gir Pompey turned to Vin-Chay.

"Is all of this true?" he asked anxiously.

Vin-Chay nodded. "It is all true. There are no hidden agendas here, Your Highness. No one on board our ship means the slightest harm to Osiron. We have just ... come home, and brought what we believe is our planet's best hope for independence along with us."

"Including Pyke?" Dom-Chay asked harshly.

"Yes," Vin-Chay answered carefully. "Including Pyke. Without his assistance, and that of his people, we would either have failed at our escape attempt, or succeeded far less than we have. He is not our enemy now," Vin-Chay finished quietly as he met his father's unreadable eyes.

"I find that hard to believe," Nik-Chay responded.

"Believe it," Cassian said softly as he met Vin-Chay's eyes.

"No matter," Chay Shayne said briskly. "We need to take certain things on faith and on the words of our officers here, and come to a decision quickly. We elders here have the authority to debate and resolve this, and I suggest we do so."

The Osirans carried on a spirited and passionate debate on Zandran's demands and their options. Vin-Chay and Cassian were full participants, since no one knew the true situation better than either of the reclaimed warriors. Chay Shayne carefully steered any conversation away from personal details about his son or the other warrior; that was best dealt with alone and with only family present.

None of the Osiran elders were warmly disposed towards any of the demands, particularly those surrounding the assimilation of the rogue Ptolemii into their

military. It was only through great effort that Chay Shayne was able to keep his hatred of Pyke out of the discussion as much as possible, but Vin-Chay could sense his father's rage. He was anxious to get his sire alone and dispel the misconceptions he had been under for two years.

Three hours into the debate the elders had reluctantly agreed to all demands except allowing High Commander Pyke to retain his flagship and an equal position in the now-combined Osiran-Ptolemii military. It was a sticking point not only with Chay Shayne and his brother, but also with the other elders who balked at allowing any high-ranking enemy warrior access to their inner circle. Vin-Chay was discreet enough to fight for this concession with subtlety, but fight for it he did to the disbelief of his brothers and the careful observation of his father and uncle.

Five minutes from the deadline, the elders gave way and agreed to all demands. The deciding factor was undoubtedly the information from Vin-Chay that two other new flagships existed on Ptolem and would be repaired within months, and were a distinct threat to Osiron. Even with the *Renegade*, the Osirans could very well be outmatched; without it, they would be doomed. Vin-Chay and Cassian relaxed a little; each would have had too hard a decision to make if the debate had gone another way. Chay Shayne sent word to Zandran that the demands were met, and that the Circle would initiate repatriation procedures for their people in the morning. He also unequivocally stated that Vin-Chay and Cassian would be remaining in Etrusca's Miliplex that night. He had no intention of letting his son go yet for even a moment.

Zandran accepted their concessions and boarded his shuttle for the trip back to the *Renegade*. He was a little leery of leaving Vin-Chay behind, but Pyke warned him that that would most likely occur and not to argue against it.

Chay Shayne, his brother and his three sons retired to one of the command apartments in the Miliplex after Vin-Chay had ensured that Cassian would be well taken care of. Nik-Chay found himself annoyed at how close the two men seemed. He had never liked the slightest bit of competition for his older brother's affections, and it was clear that Cassian presented that now.

When the five men were finally alone, Vin-Chay found himself the joyous recipient of warm hugs and touches and words from his family. It still didn't seem real to him; he wondered if it were a dream and he would wake up back in his dark cell at Canaan, a recurring nightmare all through these past five years. He found himself touching back and just basking in the sounds and smells and sights of his siblings, father and uncle. He longed to see the rest of his family and be filled in on what had occurred with them over the last seven years. Sar-Chay

managed to tell him that there were no fatalities in the family; all were well and would be anxious to see him. His uncle grinned when he told him that he was now a grandfather—his son Ren-Chay and his wife had recently been blessed with twin daughters.

And he was an uncle, Dom-Chay exclaimed, as he told Vin-Chay of his own marriage to their distant cousin Mandara, and the birth of his son Warrick two years earlier. A strange flicker of disquiet passed over Vin-Chay's face when his brother told him of his son, and Chay Shayne felt an anger and sadness at the things that his son had lost because of his captivity and enslavement by the devil Pyke. He would find some way to pay that man back regardless of their truce and bargains.

The men spent hours into the night discussing general topics of how Vin-Chay had conceived his plan and effected it with the help of his *Remus* comrades; common life on the hot planet Ptolem; sketchy details of the incarceration on Canaan; and how the warriors had taken their starship, plundered Isiin and destroyed Sekmet, and then returned home. Vin-Chay carefully skirted any personal information about his relationship with Pyke or the existence of their two sons, or many of the more unpleasant aspects of Canaan captivity and Ptolem slavery. He didn't get into the issue of his initial bargain with Pyke, and how it had ultimately led to their long-term relationship. He didn't think at this point they could stand to hear the details of loc-chips and slave tattoos and the penalties for attempted escape. It wasn't quite the time to tell them everything. It certainly wasn't the time to tell them that he and Pyke were betrothed, although they all had to be aware that he had been Pyke's consort for years.

It was the middle of the night before Chay Shayne could see his son tiring and called a halt to the evening. Vin-Chay's brothers and uncle reluctantly started to leave; Chay Shayne would spend the night with his son in the apartment.

Dom-Chay turned to him for one last embrace and smiled warmly at his younger brother. "Well, at least you'll be able to spend your first night away from your malevolent *ex*-captor—and every day after that, when you get off that damnable ship and come back to one of ours. And not soon enough. Just like cutting that abominably long hair and growing your beard back!"

Vin-Chay hesitated. Should he say something about Pyke or not? It wasn't right that his family had so many misconceptions about their son and brother and the man with whom he had spent so many years. Before he could decide to be open or discreet, Nik-Chay spoke up.

"Yes. At least you won't have to suffer his presence any more than we will very soon. That nightmare is over, thank God."

"It isn't a nightmare, Nikkola," Vin-Chay said carefully, "and I'm not 'suffering' his presence. I know you think that being Pyke's consort is some sort of fate worse than death, but—"

"Consort! What?!" Dom-Chay exclaimed, and the look in his eyes and in Nik-Chay's told a shocked Vin-Chay that his brothers had no knowledge of the true state of affairs. Pyke had told his father and brother of his status—no, Pyke had told his *father*. And Chay Shayne had not told his son. A white-faced Vin-Chay turned to his father, whose look confirmed his assumption.

"I didn't tell them," Chay Shayne said gently. "I only told Sar-Chay after I could bear the knowledge by myself no longer."

"You were his *consort*?" Nik-Chay exclaimed.

"Not 'were' brother—*am*. I have been Pyke's consort for the past five years," Vin-Chay imparted quietly as he watched the shocked expressions on his brothers' faces. Sar-Chay was watching him very alertly; Chay Shayne had retreated behind a closed face and impassive gaze.

"Not willingly?" Dom-Chay asked in hopeful anticipation.

Vin-Chay shook his head. "Not at first, no. But later—as the years went by and I got used to him—yes, I was and am his 'willing' consort." Vin-Chay met his father's eyes directly. "We are mated of our own free will. That will not change because we have relocated here to Osiron."

"You can't be serious!" Nik-Chay said vehemently. "You would stay with a man who has enslaved you for years—who has gone out of his way to hurt our family?"

"Nik-Chay. You have no true concept of what has transpired between this man and me for these many years. I will tell you most of it, when the time is right, but all I can say now is that you have misjudged this man in many ways and I need to set the record straight. I will, but not here, and not tonight." Vin-Chay turned to his father. "I am exhausted, Father. I would like to sleep and deal with this in the morning. Can we do that?"

Chay Shayne nodded tersely. The man was even more diabolical than he had thought. He had completely brainwashed his son to a point where he couldn't see the man's evil and the need for his immediate emancipation from it. Well, blood would tell—Vin-Chay was a true Chay to his very core. He would ensure that the young ex-captive saw the true light and came back to his family in every way. But, as Vin-Chay rightly said, not tonight.

"We can. Your brothers and uncle also understand your need for rest and will take their leave now," he said pointedly. Sar-Chay and his two nephews reluc-

tantly abandoned any more conversation and left Chay Shayne alone in the apartment with his son.

The Crown Prince put his arms around his son and held him silently and tightly for a long time before ushering him into his temporary noxchamber and watching him fall fully clothed into an exhausted sleep on top of the bed covers. He dropped into a chair next to the bed, listening to Vin-Chay breathe, and savoring the presence of the most beloved person in his life. He fell into a deep, restful sleep for the first time in many years.

CHAPTER FOUR

“You can’t keep avoiding this matter,” Vin-Chay said impatiently to Pyke as they dressed in their *Renegade* quarters on the fourth morning after Vin-Chay had returned from Osiron’s surface. He finished fastening his techbelt and faced Pyke, hands on hips, and with a look in his eyes that told his consort that they were going to deal with this issue *now*.

Pyke gave him an ominous look as he pulled on his left boot and stood to adjust his tunic. “I’m not avoiding anything,” he replied in his most convincing tone. “I’ve met with the other members of the Circle, worked out the alliance details, signed the agreements, and done everything to expedite the official truce between our peoples. And I’ve been more than just a *little* busy trying to direct this whole repatriation process without abandoning my duties as an officer aboard this ship. *And*, point of fact—your father hasn’t exactly made any moves towards initiating contact between us, either.”

“Well, this is a moot point anyway since he and my brothers and uncle will be docking soon to inspect the ship and see their new flagship and allies for themselves. It’s a very good time to put all of the misconceptions and anger to bed once and for all,” Vin-Chay replied smoothly as he absently finished entwining the sixth braid on the left side of his head.

Pyke decided to stall the issue and disconcert his contentious consort for a moment yet again. He had done so the previous night with a passionate round of sex, which had succeeded in diverting his consort’s attention for hours before they fell asleep. This time, he would go on the verbal offensive. “You haven’t told them yet about the children or our betrothal, have you?” he asked pointedly as he strapped on his comforting war-machete.

Vin-Chay was silent for a long moment before responding reluctantly. “No, I haven’t. But I will today, and I’ll do it in front of you if you greet them with me at the shuttlebay.” He raised a challenging eyebrow at Pyke, who turned away casually to affix his own techbelt around his waist. He turned back to his waiting consort as he clasped back his hair.

“I won’t be able to make that little meeting. Sorry. I need to attend TutMose down in engineering to review a problem with the fuel pods. I’ll have to greet

them later when ship's business is taken care of." He turned to leave their quarters before he could hear the expected retort from the Osiran. Pyke exited the chamber quickly and the door slid closed. Vin-Chay cursed him softly under his breath, and then cursed himself for having no more stomach for facing the difficult personal issues. He would today, though. He had to before he traveled to the Chay compound for a full family reunion. He needed to go there with his sons, and, hopefully, his betrothed, but at this point it was likely that he would only be going with the children. He left his quarters and took the verticulator down to the main shuttlebay, where his family was set to disembark in less than a half hour.

He wished that Cassian could be with him for support, but the other warrior was down on the surface settling his wife and daughter into a temporary apartment at the Miliplex. It adjoined the one assigned to TutMose, naturally, who would not have been very happy to be located too far away from his adopted family. Zandran would share the apartment with him temporarily. A third apartment, the largest at the Miliplex, had been assigned for Pyke's use, although no one was aware that it would be occupied by his in-laws and children as well. Amongst the thousand thoughts racing through Vin-Chay's mind was the need to find a suitable home for himself, his consort, their children, and his in-laws as soon as possible. They'd need to establish themselves in a true home if they were going to assimilate into society and build some kind of future.

Vin-Chay made inane small talk with a few of the technical workers in the shuttlebay as he waited. The three men and teenage boy had been enslaved and freed in Thebes during their flight. He tried to be particularly considerate of the boy, a bright, intelligent, but solemn orphan slave who had suffered unspeakable abuse at the hands of his slaveowner. Despite the long years of physical and sexual battery he had endured, the young man was able to function in as good a capacity as much older workers. He had spoken briefly only once about his long years of captivity and abuse during his archival interview early in the voyage. As he absently stroked the long, deep, jagged scar that spread across his left cheek, he related in an emotionless tone the details of his parents' and sister's brutal murders, and his purchase by a high-ranking Miliplex officer who routinely beat and raped him over a period of seven years. He could never bring himself to speak the animal's name, but his details made it painfully clear that Supreme Commander Hitii had more than simply manipulated his junior officers and their lives. Vin-Chay made a mental note to see what he could do for the boy when it came time to repatriate him down on Osiron. The teenager's sad gray eyes haunted him, and seemed to follow him everywhere he moved.

The Command shuttle docked on time. Vin-Chay felt his anxiety melt away as his family disembarked and he knew the only thing that really mattered to them was that he was alive and safe and home. They would come to accept his personal circumstances as a matter of course—what else could they do? His uncle greeted him with a rib-crushing hug, and they all started talking at once as Vin-Chay led them out of the bay and into the verticulator that ascended them to the primary tiers. He could see in their faces that they were more than impressed with the Ptolemii flagship, and they took turns asking him dozens of questions about its functions and capabilities. Fortunately, he had been studying the vessel intensively for the months he had been aboard, and was familiar with virtually every new and modified component. He was able to impress them with his genuine knowledge and appreciation of the nonagon.

Vin-Chay walked them through the primary engineering pods before taking them to the con-center. He had hoped to encounter Pyke there, but the elusive High Commander had absconded prior to their arrival. As the doors slid open to admit them, Vin-Chay was gratified to hear a gasp of awe from his brothers as they saw the state-of-the-art technology in the con-center. Jor-Rue was down on the surface being reunited with his parents; Octavian had the navigational duties for this shift. He turned to them when they entered and gave Vin-Chay a formal nod of his head before turning back to his control panels. *The man never smiles*, Vin-Chay thought. *Another Zandran*.

Chay Shayne's eyes fell on the command chair in the center of the con. It made him think of Pyke, and his jaw tensed. At least he didn't have to meet and converse with the man yet. He had no idea of what would occur when he did. He needed to press the point with his son to abandon his ex-captor and realize that he was truly free of him. Soon. There was nothing to hold Vin-Chay to the man except a misguided sense of—what? Loyalty? Gratitude? Or was it weakness? That he couldn't believe. He was caught up in these thoughts when a very young, freckled, red-haired lieutenant—surely no more than eighteen or nineteen—entered the con-center and walked over to Vin-Chay. She gave the captain a brief salute, which he returned with a smile. He turned to his father.

"This is Lieutenant Ligeia, Father. She joined us at Isiin and has been assisting Captain Sharra with the passenger coordination—keeping things in order, documenting family names and history, and doing just about anything that needs to be done. We'd be lost without her," he said, grinning at the young officer. Her heart clutched—she'd have given her right arm for one night with the kind, handsome young captain. Too bad he was committed to someone else. She managed to find her voice.

"Sir, the next group of passengers is ready to be transported down to the surface, but there seems to be some holdup at that end. I can't make any headway in getting the matter resolved, and Captain Sharra is nowhere to be found," she said anxiously.

"Contact Commander Zandran and see if he can assist you with finding her or resolving your problems," Vin-Chay replied.

"Sir," she said nervously, "he—scares me."

"He scares me, too, Lieutenant, but just stand your ground and he'll work with you. If you back down once you'll never get anything out of him. Try, all right?" Chay Shayne noted with satisfaction the ease with which his son gave direction and dealt with a subordinate. If only he had been the firstborn.

"Yes, sir," she said, still clearly not convinced. She gave him a smart salute, nodded politely at his family, and then turned to leave. She turned back as though she had forgotten something.

"Oh! One more thing, Captain. Your family." Vin-Chay froze when he realized that she was going to say something about his Ptolemii family, but before he could cut her off she went on.

"Your in-laws and children have decided to wait for you in their quarters so that you can accompany them down to the surface rather than following on a later shuttle. I didn't think there'd be a problem with that so I assigned their places to Farouk's family, but I thought I'd let you know they're waiting." She gave him a bright smile and left the con-center. Vin-Chay slowly turned from the empty space she had occupied to find his father, uncle, and brothers staring at him wordlessly. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see a sly half-smile cross the nearby Octavian's thin lips. As usual, Dom-Chay was the first to find his voice.

"Children?! You have *children*?! You're a *father*!?" the Heir-Prince exclaimed in shock, echoing the thoughts of the rest of the Chay family members watching Vin-Chay closely.

"Yes," Vin-Chay answered slowly. "Pyke and I have children. Two sons. One of his bloodline, and one of mine. Cobahr is seven and a half. Pyco-Chay is nearly a year. And I had planned to tell you all this today, but in a private, personal environment. It seems that circumstance has precluded that. However, I think we need to retire to such a chamber so that we can deal with this in private." He inclined his head towards the con-center door, and led his silent, disbelieving family out of the con and down to his and Pyke's quarters on the third tier. He issued orders to the con that he was not to be disturbed unless there was an emergency, and then looked at the four relentless sets of eyes waiting for his

explanation. *Pyke was right*, he thought. *I should have told them about this sooner.* He sighed and sat back against the edge of Pyke's desk, then met his father's eyes.

"You all know that I have been Pyke's consort since I arrived on Ptolem. We haven't discussed the particulars, so you've only been able to make assumptions—some accurate, some not—about that relationship and what may have occurred over the five years we were together."

"You didn't go to him willingly," Nik-Chay interjected with a touch of hope in his voice.

"No, of course not. I was forcibly shipped to Ptolem to be sold into bondage. At Canaan the prisoners were given a choice of Ptolem or Sekmet."

"And you chose Ptolem over the mine planet," Dom-Chay said.

"No, I did not," Vin-Chay replied firmly. "Only a few dozen or so men and women chose slavery over the mines. Pyke overrode my choice to go to Sekmet with the rest of my comrades. Cassian, Jor-Rue and Burran chose Ptolem only to follow me, and as things turned out, thank God they did."

"Why would Pyke override your decision?" Sar-Chay asked.

"To have his enemy's son at his beck and call, of course," Chay Shayne snapped. He focused his dark brown eyes back on his second son. "Go on."

"I was processed at the Thrallplex, and Pyke had apparently arranged to buy me well before we arrived on Ptolem. He took me to his isolated home on the outskirts of Thebes. The first six months there were difficult. For both of us. I fought him at every opportunity. I provoked him whenever I could. I was contentious, and arrogant, and wildly without purpose. I drove him crazy. And he responded in many different ways."

"Did he ever hit you?" Chay Shayne asked flatly.

Vin-Chay hesitated. "Yes."

"More than once?" His father's voice was getting progressively colder.

"Yes. I'm not saying that he wasn't abusive in the beginning, but I am saying that most if not all of the time I provoked him, and he retaliated physically and psychologically. I'm not excusing his initial behavior. I'm simply saying that neither of us was without blame for the tension and anger in our household. Of course I never took responsibility for that until much later. He acknowledged to me that he had used me at first as a means of revenge against you, and he apologized for it and changed his ways, and we got past it. At any rate, it once came to a point where he reached the end of his patience with me and sent me away for safety's sake to live in Ammurabbi with his in-laws. I lived and worked there with them for six months on their agriplex, and that was where I came to love three of the most special people in my life."

"Three?" asked Sar-Chay.

"Yes, three. His in-laws, Bahrtok and Colyn, and his three-year-old son, Cobahr. His mother was Coba, the wife that Pyke lost on the *Vallerian*. Over the months that I lived and worked there, I came to love them and be loved by them, and became a true part of their family. They didn't care whose son I was and how I might be linked to the loss of their only child. They simply accepted me for myself, and unlike most Ptolemii treated me with honor and respect. I began to ... heal, and grow up quite a lot. After six months I returned to Thebes and Pyke along with Cobahr. I had changed. He had changed. It was the start of us becoming true mates, and of my becoming Cobahr's primary parent." He looked directly into Chay Shayne's eyes. "I consider that child my firstborn, and no blood child could be dearer to me. He is my son.

"But I didn't forget my duty and obligation to my people and my warrior heritage. I had devised a plan of escape and retribution, and with the help of Cassian and our other comrades, old and new, we built a web of warriors and support people and put our plan into action. Pyke found out about the plan shortly before we were going to effect it, and he opted—along with a number of his own associates—to acknowledge that things had gone too far on Ptolem, and join our flight and bring assistance to Osiron. He gave up quite a lot, and risked his life and the lives of our entire family to come with us when he knew the journey could well be fatal to us all."

"Tell me about the second child," Chay Shayne said tersely. Sar-Chay and his two nephews remained silent, watching the interaction between Chay Shayne and his other son, understanding that no matter what they were feeling, the true core of this matter rested between those two men.

Vin-Chay nodded. "As I said, Pyke and I became true mates. We had built a life together, and there was the possibility that the plan would never come to fruition, and I would remain on Ptolem for the rest of my life." He paused. "And by that time—I loved Pyke. He wanted a second child; I gave him one, the same way my uncle and his spouse conceived their son and daughter. Pyco-Chay was born nearly a year ago on the mid-winter solstice sabbat day. Both of our sons are healthy, beautiful children. They are our lives." He paused, and then plunged ahead. "And, hopefully, someday they will be joined by other brothers or sisters after Pyke and I are married."

"Married?" Chay Shayne echoed in a deadly quiet voice.

"Yes. Pyke and I are betrothed. Why wouldn't we be? We have been together for over five years and have two children. We were simply waiting to return to Osiron so that both of our families could be present for the ceremony." Vin-

Chay's heart had been racing, but had quieted down considerably after he finished his story. There. It was all out in the open now. Except for that terrible night; his family would never know about that. Never. And perhaps they didn't need to learn about the unholy bargain on Canaan that started this entire, tumultuous course of their lives. Pyke would surely never mention it.

No one said a single word for a long time after Vin-Chay finished his brief but stunning explanations. He grew very uneasy at the way his father's eyes were boring into his. He needed to make them understand that this was all going to be all right. Perhaps if they saw the children. He motioned to them to wait for a moment, and went into the noxchamber, returning a few seconds later with two holographs he wordlessly handed to his father. Chay Shayne took them mechanically without his eyes leaving his son's face, and then slowly looked down. The first holograph had been taken when Pyco-Chay was six months' old, the day of his baptismal ceremony. It showed a happy, content, well-mated pair of men and their two children. Pyke was garbed in his formal uniform and cloak, and he was standing straight and holding Pyco-Chay tightly in his arms; Vin-Chay was on one knee, his arm wrapped around a saucy, grinning Cobahr. The second holograph showed Vin-Chay smiling happily and holding a week-old Pyco-Chay. The baby's tiny face was scrunched up into an appealing frown, his silky black hair splayed over his forehead and ears.

Sar-Chay and his two nephews leaned over Chay Shayne's shoulder to get a look at the holograph. Sar-Chay's eyes misted; the baby looked just like Vin-Chay when he was that same age.

Nik-Chay looked up at his brother and grinned. "They're beautiful, Vinetio. They look healthy and happy, too."

"They are," his brother nodded in relief. He smiled. "Cobahr is an exceptionally bright child with a talent for art. He's very methodical and focused, like his sire, and he is so gentle and loving. Pyco-Chay is very inquisitive and fearless—you have to watch him every moment, or he gets away from you and starts exploring. They're both going to have to learn to speak and understand Osiran, as are their grandparents, but there's time for that, and it shouldn't be a problem."

"That lieutenant referred to your 'in-laws.' Did she mean that Pyke's parents have accompanied you here?" Sar-Chay asked as he raised his eyes from the holograph. Chay Shayne was still staring at the image of his new grandson, wrapped in the arms of a man he hated now even more than he had. He could barely see his grandson's image as the emotion of rage ripped across his mind and through his entire body, down to the cold, white fingers clutching the holograph.

Vin-Chay shook his head. "No. Pyke's parents are dead. She meant his in-laws, his late wife's parents, who have become my in-laws by default through our relationship. Although they have acted as foster parents for me for over four years and I hold them as dear as any blood kin."

"Why didn't you marry him on Ptolem?" Dom-Chay asked peevishly. "Or weren't slaves allowed to marry free Ptolemii?" he went on with a trace of sarcasm in his voice. Vin-Chay chose to ignore it.

"He asked years ago. I declined. The situation wasn't conducive to that type of relationship, but naturally things changed when we were able to leave Ptolem together to come here to start a new life. It wasn't that I didn't want to, but there were too many obstacles, including the taking of an oath to the Pharon. Naturally I could never have done that. Now, most of those obstacles are gone or moot."

"If he loved you, why didn't he emancipate you?" Sar-Chay asked. Dom-Chay nodded.

"Because a freed slave on Ptolem was far worse off than an enthralled one. I would have had no more rights and far less protection than if I were still legally bound to Pyke. He knew that, and refused to put me in that position, although it was certainly a very contentious point between us for years. I stopped pushing the point because I knew he was right, and I trusted him completely to ensure my safety and future under those difficult circumstances."

Vin-Chay waited for his father to say something—anything. He had seen his uncle's face relax a little, and Nik-Chay didn't seem too upset about the matter. One could never really tell what Dom-Chay was thinking—his face always seemed fierce even when his heart wasn't. His father looked up from the holograph and handed it back without a word. Vin-Chay was going to elaborate on the children, but before he could do so, the door to the chamber slid open and Pyke walked in. He stopped in mid-stride, obviously taken aback by finding the five men when he expected to find his quarters empty.

Vin-Chay tensed as his family faced the man they had hated for so long, and Pyke faced the family of the man he had held captive in one way or another for so long. There was a heavy silence before Pyke broke it and greeted the Chay family carefully.

"Your Highnesses," he said, inclining his head slightly in a stiff greeting. "Welcome aboard our vessel. I trust Vin-Chay has been suitable as a guide up to this point?"

Chay Shayne stared at him with undisguised hostility. The looks from the rest of Vin-Chay's family were only slightly less intense and belligerent.

When it didn't seem as though his father was going to answer his consort, Vin-Chay stepped in. "I've been showing my family our favorite holograph of us and the children. As well as letting them in on our plans for marriage." He saw a slight easing of the tension in his consort's face at the knowledge that he had finally been honest with his family about their relationship.

Pyke nodded, and then looked directly at Chay Shayne. "I'm glad that Vin-Chay has been able to confide the true nature of our life together to you and your family. There are natural bad feelings between us because of his captivity and my wife's death, and the misconceptions I left you under on Isiin. I especially regret that. I hope it is also clear to you that he and I have put my part in this behind us and wish to proceed with a new future for all of our sakes—especially for the sakes of our children. Your grandchildren," he ended easily, hoping that the Crown Prince's hatred would be somewhat mitigated at the return of his son and the discovery of his son's children. It was also the closest he could come at this time to any sort of offered reconciliation to people who were likely to become his next set of in-laws.

Chay Shayne finally spoke. "The future is yet to be determined, Commander Pyke. It may proceed from many unexpected directions. We will see." He turned to Vin-Chay. "May we continue our inspection of this vessel so that we can proceed to personal matters and decide when you and your children will arrive at our compound for a true reunion with our family?" His words and tone made it clear that he did not expect Pyke to accompany Vin-Chay to that reunion. Pyke tensed, but said nothing. Vin-Chay carefully nodded and extended his arm to motion his family out of the chamber and back into the main body of the ship.

As the Chays filed wordlessly out of the chamber past Pyke, the High Commander put a gentle hand on his consort's arm. "A moment, please, before you continue." Vin-Chay nodded and remained behind as his family exited the chamber. He looked at Pyke warily.

"He will never agree to our marriage," Pyke said flatly. "You know that."

"Not necessarily true, Pyke. He simply needs to understand better and adjust. You know as well as I do that he and my whole family has been under a very painful misconception about our relationship—mainly fostered by *your* behavior on Isiin. Give them a chance to accept this. I know they will eventually."

"And if they don't?" Pyke asked carefully.

Vin-Chay took a deep breath. "If they don't—I made a promise to you long ago on Ptolem, and I will keep that promise. I will marry you in a heartbeat. Satisfied?"

“As much as I can be under the circumstances. It’s not you I don’t trust, but your father. That’s the truth of it, and you know it. All I ask is that you stay true to yourself, whatever course that dictates.”

“I will,” Vin-Chay replied softly. Before turning to leave, he touched Pyke’s cheek gently, and kissed him lightly on the lips.

Pyke watched him go and thought, *They’ll never let us be together. Never.*

CHAPTER FIVE

The entire evening seemed surreal. Vin-Chay felt as though he was looking at the familiar chambers and furniture and people of the Chay compound from outside of himself, a detached stranger who moved amongst his family and smiled and spoke, but wasn't really there. Too many people, too many sounds, too much to absorb and react to at one time while trying to ensure that Cobahr wasn't overwhelmed as well. The two children had accompanied him to the compound that day. Pyke wasn't especially pleased with that situation, but he understood Vin-Chay's need to reunite with his full family and introduce his sons into the clan. Introduction of his despised consort was going to have to wait for another day; neither man wanted to impose that inevitable tense situation on their children.

All of his siblings were there to greet him, along with his father's second consort, H'Elene, and Sar-Chay and his family. He was shocked at how much his youngest brother and his sisters had grown in the seven years he had been gone. The girls were on the verge of young womanhood now, with both the fifteen-year-old, impudent, saucy, red-haired Alyssine and the thirteen-year-old, gentle, thoughtful, blonde Rosaline promising to become outstanding beauties in their looming adulthood. Seventeen-year-old Bru-Chay looked very grown-up in his cadet uniform, and a scant growth of golden beard complemented his short, neat, blond hair. Dom-Chay's two-year-old son, Warri-Chay, was adorable and sweet-tempered. Vin-Chay wondered how that managed to happen with his sire's temperament, but didn't voice that opinion. Everyone started touching him and talking all at once, and he could feel Cobahr shrink back against him as the child tensed at the unrecognizable language and people. Cobahr was normally very calm and collected, even in a strange situation, but this was a little too much for the child. When Pyco-Chay started to cry after being touched and handled by far too many frightening new relatives, Vin-Chay quickly excused himself and took his sons up to his old third-tier noxchamber.

The noxchamber in which he had grown up was exactly as he remembered it from all those years ago, although it seemed a bit smaller. It had obviously been kept up over the years, and there were fresh flowers all around. *H'Elene, no doubt*, Vin-Chay thought affectionately. His second mother was always kind and

thoughtful, even when his own mother wasn't treating her especially well, which was most of the time. He put Pyco-Chay down on the bed, and then went to the large window that overlooked the sea and threw it open. He closed his eyes in pleasure as he smelled the clean salt air and felt the cool breeze hit his face and tease his long, loose locks. It was so much cooler than he remembered; his body had acclimated to the heat of Ptolem and right now it wasn't as tolerant of the normal weather as it had been. He realized it must feel even colder to his sons and consort, as well as to all of the Ptolemii and repatriated Osirans. They all had a lot to get used to again.

Cobahr climbed up on the bed and tussled with his baby brother, who was soothed by his older sibling's attention. The baby stopped crying, and watched the young boy with intense blue eyes as he babbled happily and incoherently. Vin-Chay smiled at how close his sons were even at Pyco-Chay's young age. He knew they would grow even closer as the years passed, and the lack of genetic bond would never be an issue. He was determined that they would grow up in a single, safe household with two devoted parents. He spent the three hours before the evening meal playing with his sons until the baby fell asleep, and Cobahr dozed in his parent's arms. Vin-Chay held the sleeping child as he sat by the open window, simply taking in the beautiful view of the sun setting over the sea and enjoying the invigorating breeze on his face. He wished Pyke could be there to enjoy the same sights and smells. Colyn and Bahrtok, too. Now that he was back amongst his birth family, he found himself missing his Ptolemii family terribly.

The evening meal took place in the main banquet hall rather than the usual smaller, intimate dining chamber; there were simply too many Chays. In addition to his five siblings, his father and H'Elene, there were also Sar-Chay and Georn, their son and daughter-in-law, their daughter, Dom-Chay's wife Mandara, and Cobahr. Traditionally, Osiran royal households didn't allow children younger than ten to dine with their elders, but Vin-Chay had been adamant about his son joining the meal, as was the custom on Ptolem. The boy was seated to his parent's left, next to Chay Shayne, who carefully ignored the child, but not obviously enough to cause Vin-Chay any concern. The Chay patriarch was less than pleased to have Pyke's child in his home, let alone at his table, but he didn't want to alienate his reclaimed son at this early stage of their reunion.

The hall was bathed in muted, recessed lights, and scented candles decorated the dining table. They threw off a soft, soothing glow, and Vin-Chay relaxed as he conversed with his family. He interpreted several questions and statements to Cobahr so that the child would feel at least a part of the gathering, but he could see that the boy was still tense and confused. His son was handling it well,

though, as usual, but he slipped his hand into Vin-Chay's several times during the meal, and received a reassuring squeeze back each time. Vin-Chay noted that Cobahr barely touched his food, Osiran dishes quite alien to him and undoubtedly unappetizing. He whispered to Cobahr halfway through the meal that he would prepare a special dish of bakkava for him the next day. Cobahr rewarded him with a bright, unaffected grin. Vin-Chay realized that his promise wasn't altogether altruistic; he found himself without much of an appetite for the delicious meal before him. His tastes had changed. He wondered if they'd change back. He wondered if he wanted them to.

His sister-in-law's gentle, insistent voice shook him out of his reverie by. "Vin-Chay," repeated Mandara for the third time, a curious note in her voice.

"I'm sorry, Mandara. I wasn't listening. What were you asking?" Vin-Chay replied. He noticed the strange looks most of his family was throwing his way. Dom-Chay was scowling, and responded tersely.

"You're speaking in Ptolemii, brother. We can't understand what you're saying," the Heir-Prince said pointedly, an obvious note of disapproval in his voice. Only Chay Shayne and Sar-Chay were fairly conversant in Ptolemii; Nik-Chay had begun studying the language six months earlier, but Dom-Chay flat-out refused to do so. Vin-Chay himself had only begun to pick up the language during his incarceration on Canaan. After his long consortium with Pyke and the Ptolemii people, he was now easily conversant in fourteen complex, twisting dialects.

"Sorry," Vin-Chay replied coolly in his birth language, his ire immediately raised by his brother's unconcealed attitude. "Force of habit. What was it you were asking, Mandara?"

"I was asking if the little boy was all right. He doesn't seem to have much of an appetite." The sweet, doe-eyed young woman was smiling patiently as she spoke in a measured but genuinely solicitous, melodious tone.

"My son, *Cobahr*, is fine. He simply isn't used to Osiran cuisine, or to being surrounded by so many strange people."

"Then perhaps he should leave the table. Children that young shouldn't dine with adults anyway," Dom-Chay said irritably. He felt his wife's gentle hand on his thigh, and he released some of the tension that had been building since his missing brother had come home. Chay Shayne barely noticed Dom-Chay's existence since Vin-Chay returned to assume his 'first' son place in their father's life and heart. The Chay patriarch also seemed to focus his attention on his new grandson, to Warri-Chay's immediate exclusion. Dom-Chay pushed away a familiar resentment he thought long dead, like his brother.

"That is not the case on Ptolem," Vin-Chay replied evenly, locking cold, blue eyes with his older brother. "And certainly not in our household. However, if it bothers you that he is here, I can very easily remove both of us from the table and return the meal to one of respectable maturity and linguistics."

All conversation stopped at that point, and the tension in the air was thicker than anyone could ever remember it. Everyone seemed to be waiting for someone to say something. Cobahr was squeezing Vin-Chay's hand painfully. After a few long, very uncomfortable moments, Chay Shayne fixed a chilly, pointed look on his firstborn before turning to his second son.

"That won't be necessary, Vinetio. Your son is most welcome at this table despite his youth. It is simply a matter of all of us adjusting to a situation very different from one we are used to. Is there any kind of food that you feel would better suit Cobahr than what he is unable to eat here?"

"No, Father, thank you. He isn't that hungry, and he can wait until tomorrow when I can prepare something more familiar for him."

"You prepare?" Nik-Chay asked, eyebrows raised in amusement. "When did you learn to cook?" he laughed, breaking some of the tension in the chamber, and producing more than just a few smiles from other family members.

"My first month on Ptolem," Vin-Chay replied easily, smiling, sensing nothing but warm affection in his younger brother's words and tone. He relaxed a little. "I do quite well in the nutrichamber, and have actually started teaching Cobahr some food preparation basics. I look forward to the day when he can prepare a meal for me," he said as he smoothed Cobahr's long, golden hair, and then repeated the gist of the conversation in Ptolemii for his son. The wide, toothy grin annoyed Chay Shayne. He couldn't understand how his son and the Pyke-child could enjoy a relationship as close and loving as he had with Vin-Chay.

"What else did you do to fill your time besides establishing an ungodly familiarity with a Ptolemii nutrichamber?" Nik-Chay asked in an amused tone. He received an unexpected cross look from his father. Vin-Chay either missed or ignored the look.

Vin-Chay chewed and swallowed before answering carefully. "I took care of the household. Raised the children. Planned the demolition of the Thrallplex. Directed the building of our network of people to steal our new flagship. Worked in Patri Julian's temple. Helped my father-in-law to work his 'plex. Assisted the lexographer in the historical archives at the Culturplex." He shrugged and smiled. "The usual. I had a busy if somewhat strange life." Cobahr had been looking up at him during his explanation, as though trying to understand what his parent was saying in that strange language. Vin-Chay smiled down at him and stroked

his cheek, then whispered something that made the boy laugh. Chay Shayne watched the tender physical exchange carefully. He did not like his son's attention and affection being directed towards the son of his enemy. Despite Vin-Chay's obvious belief that this was his 'son,' he would *never* consider the boy a grandson. And he needed to separate his true grandson from that damnable Ptolemii child as soon as possible. Very soon.

"You're very attached to that little boy—I mean, Cobahr—aren't you?" Mandara asked politely.

"Yes, of course," Vin-Chay replied curiously. "I've raised him since he was three. At this point he probably doesn't even remember a time when I haven't been in his life." He smiled wistfully. "And I can't even imagine a time when he wasn't in mine. Yes. We're very close. As I am with my second son." He suddenly missed Pyco-Chay very much, although the baby was only on the third tier, sleeping peacefully. He preferred having his youngest son also at the table, usually on Pyke's lap, as they all enjoyed a typical, close-knit family meal. His younger sister, who had been shamelessly staring at him throughout the meal, interrupted his peaceful thoughts.

"Are you going to stay that color?" Alyssine asked abruptly. She had the grace to look contrite as her mortified mother shushed her immediately. Vin-Chay raised his eyebrows thoughtfully as he cast a glance at his burnished, dark left hand. He hadn't even realized that his physical appearance was radically different from his birth family's in ways relating to more than just the decorative or fashionable. The change in his complexion had been gradual over the five years on his former slave planet, and he truly hadn't even noticed it. He smiled at her affably.

"Quite possibly so, little sister. Ptolem is far closer to our sun, and I have spent a great deal of time outdoors. I expect that I won't be quite as pale as I had been before my long residence there. Time will tell," he finished placidly as he swallowed a particularly succulent, well-seasoned piece of seastriper. He made a mental note to learn how to prepare this food for his Ptolemii family. Bahrtok would enjoy the fish thoroughly.

"At least you were able to make something of a normal life on that hateful planet," Ren-Chay offered as he sipped his annise and tried to deflect the conversation from one of many uneasy subjects. His father, Sar-Chay, shot him a cautionary look, which Vin-Chay couldn't fail to see.

"Not so hateful, cousin," Vin-Chay answered easily. "True, it's a very different climate and landscape than we're used to here, but when you become accustomed to it, you realize it has its own true beauty. You can learn to appreciate it if you put your arrogance and prejudices aside. There are excellent cultural opportuni-

ties in art and music, and quite a number of interesting culinary experiences to be had. As far as the people go, there were good and bad—as there are on our planet. You learn to deal with each one as an individual. There are quite a number of very fine people there who disagree with government policies and directions. Many of them accompanied us back here to attempt to change those untenable situations and make a difference in all of our futures. It's simply a matter of balance. It could be a good life." He hesitated. "At times it wasn't such a good life. It evened out in the end. I gained far more than I lost. Far more."

Dom-Chay snorted and answered irritably. "Including a pierced ear. How could you stand to have that done? And wear something in it in public?" He wanted to continue criticizing his younger brother for the outrageously long hair and bangs, and the six thin side braids that draped over each ear and onto his shoulders. How could Vin-Chay have tolerated wearing such an appalling style for all those years? And why in God's name hadn't he cut the offensive locks off as soon as he returned to his birthworld? The devil Pyke's insidious influence, no doubt. The little boy was just as bad. Like his father, Dom-Chay wanted nothing to do with the Pyke-child.

Vin-Chay laughed out loud at his brother's frowning face, which only served to irritate his older sibling even more. He absently touched the silver ankh residing in his left earlobe. "I've lived as a Ptolemii for five years, so I've naturally adopted some of their customs and affectations—of my own free will," he said pointedly. "It's common to have body piercing on Ptolem, as it is to have one's flesh decorated with tattoos. It's all a matter of appreciating and acclimating oneself to a different culture," he finished smoothly as he sipped his steaming java.

"*Tattoos?! Please tell me you don't have any of those!*" Dom-Chay exclaimed, utterly shocked.

"None that you can see right now, at any rate," Vin-Chay said mildly, deliberately leaving his older brother wondering if that meant there were none, or some that he couldn't see. *Ah, well*, Vin-Chay thought. *They'll see them soon enough when I wear something without sleeves. God forbid they ever see the one on my leg and find out what the symbols mean.* He found himself actually looking forward to the inevitable shocked looks that would follow the first discovery.

"What do those rings signify?" Vin-Chay's youngest brother Bru-Chay asked suddenly. Like his sister, Bru-Chay had been staring at his older brother's physical changes before and during the meal. Everything about the brother he remembered had changed—his skin, his hair, his clothing—everything. The changes made Bru-Chay uneasy, as he knew they did most of the family, although noth-

ing had been said in Vin-Chay's presence. Certainly not in their father's presence; such indiscretion would have been tantamount to rit-su.

Vin-Chay held up his right hand so his younger brother could get a better look at the gold, jewel-encrusted bands on his third and fourth fingers. "These are companion rings. They signify a covenant between two people who have pledged fidelity and commitment to one another. They are generally a precursor to the exchanging of similar marriage rings in a formal ceremony. Pyke and I have worn identical sets of these special tokens for three years now. He offered them to me on my twenty-fifth birthanniv, and I unreservedly accepted." Out of the corner of his eye, Vin-Chay caught a brief glimpse of his father's icy demeanor as the name of his hated enemy was mentioned at his dining table. Vin-Chay certainly had had no intention of bringing up the delicate subject, but Bru-Chay had asked, and Vin-Chay was determined to be forthright and honest about his relationship and plans. His family had to accept the matter one way or another. They simply had no other option. This was his life, and he would live it as he chose to, sensitive to their feelings and needs, but ultimately the only one who could make the decisions that would define his future.

Sar-Chay's pride in Vin-Chay swelled. Despite his captivity and trials and the odds he had faced, the young man had come through them as a decent, mature individual without malice, even for his long-time captor. He felt uneasy about his brother's hard and fast hatred of Pyke, and his own resentment as well. Vin-Chay was not a weak fool. He wouldn't love someone if that person weren't worth loving. Perhaps there was more to this Ptolemii than their emotional reactions could discern. He would have to discuss this with Shayne and see if they could all come to an acceptance or at least an understanding for Vin-Chay's sake.

The remainder of the meal was easy and peaceful, and Vin-Chay finally began to relax. There were no more awkward questions or comments, and he felt as though he had been right all along—his family simply cared that he was home. When the meal ended, he and Nik-Chay decided to take Cobahr for a short walk along the beach before Vin-Chay put his son down for the evening next to his baby brother, and join his family in their hearthchamber for java and conversation.

Chay Shayne watched from his culturchamber as his two sons held the boy's hands while they walked along the beach. He thought about Vin-Chay's explanation of the companion rings, and suddenly remembered that Pyke had worn his rings during that confrontation on Isiin. He barely heard his brother enter the chamber and walk up behind him to join in his observation. They watched the

three people walk along the sand for a few quiet moments before Sar-Chay put a gentle hand on his brother's shoulder.

"He is well, Shayne. Truly well. He has become a fine man of courage and strength. An excellent warrior. A loving and devoted son and father. We should be eternally grateful for that," Sar-Chay said.

"No thanks to that hellish Fealtae he's been living with," Chay Shayne replied icily. Sar-Chay felt a chill as his brother made very clear his relentless position on Vin-Chay's consort. This did not bode well for any sort of reconciliation between two of the most important people in Vin-Chay's life.

"I wouldn't necessarily say that, Shayne," Sar-Chay responded carefully. The Crown Prince turned to him with a disapproving look, but his brother went on. "Even a man as strong as your son couldn't have survived years of brutal treatment from an enemy who had absolute power over his body and mind. Had Pyke wanted to destroy or badly damage him, he could very easily have done so. I'm not debating that he was initially abusive—Vin-Chay has confirmed that—but it is also clear that things changed between them, and both have resolved their issues. Perhaps we need to respect that and resolve ours as well. For all our sakes," he finished.

Chay Shayne looked his brother directly in the eyes, his own dark, brown eyes glittering madly with absolute hatred and implacability. "Never," he hissed quietly before leaving the chamber without another word.

CHAPTER SIX

Pyke and his two commanders experienced a busy five days after they relocated to their quarters in the Etrusca Miliplex. A myriad of tasks occupied each day as they established themselves and their Ptolemii and Osiran warriors as members of the Osiran military. Pyke's busy duties kept his mind off his consort and children for much of the time. He had commlinked with Vin-Chay at the Chay compound, and had spoken with Cobahr, but he was irritated that he couldn't see his family. He missed them terribly, as did Colyn and Bahrtok, who shared his spacious quarters, ensconced in the second noxchamber. They longed to wrap their arms around their grandsons, and soothe their own anxieties over their relocation to a strange new planet and living quarters.

Pyke and his in-laws were finishing an odd-tasting morning meal at the small dining table that overlooked the Miliplex courtyard ten tiers below their apartment. None of them had gotten used to the strange new foods they were learning to digest—some with success, some not—and they certainly hadn't gotten used to the chilly weather. Vin-Chay told them that this was the hot period of the Osiron summer, but the temperature was barely near ninety. They would also have to get used to the fact that the timing of the elongated seasons was reversed on Osiron. Pyke received a shipment of tasteful, expensive, appropriate clothing for himself and his in-laws, courtesy of his consort; he knew that Vin-Chay would have taken care of that matter for the children and himself.

The frustrated people had just about given up trying to finish the peculiar dairy-based products residing on their plates when the door to the apartment slid open. Cobahr bounded in, followed by Vin-Chay, who was carrying Pyco-Chay. The boy gave a whoop and threw himself into his grandmother's arms; Colyn clasped him tightly, her eyes closed in joy. Vin-Chay deposited Pyco-Chay into Bahrtok's waiting arms, and then slid down into a chair beside his consort.

"Miss us?" he asked Pyke mildly, a sly look on his handsome face.

"Barely knew you were gone," Pyke answered airily. Vin-Chay wasn't fooled, and Pyke knew it.

Cobahr disengaged himself from his grandmother's tight hug and slid down to put his arms around Bahrtok for a quick embrace before he climbed up on his

father's lap. Pyke kissed him and held him very tightly. When Cobahr pulled away his eyes were bright and excited.

"Father! You should see my chamber at the compound. It's *huge!*" the boy exclaimed, putting his arms out widely.

"That big, hmm?" Pyke answered, watching his older son's animated face. Cobahr nodded happily.

"Huge! And I can walk on the beach with Papa and Uncle Nik-Chay! The water's salty, though. You can't drink it and it's kind of cold, but I like to play in it. It feels good."

Pyke released his son and stood. "I'm glad you were able to come early today. I need to discuss a few business items with you now before we take that meeting at my new office," Pyke said to his consort. He nodded towards the door of his small culturchamber, and Vin-Chay followed him as Colyn and Bahrtok cuddled and enjoyed their two grandsons.

Vin-Chay barely managed to close the door behind him when Pyke roughly shoved him up against it and violently crushed his mouth to his consort's. Vin-Chay returned the passion heatedly, and long moments passed before they could break away and gasp for breath.

"I guess you did miss me more than you'll admit," Vin-Chay said as he caught his breath and as Pyke struggled to return his own breathing to normal.

"Just a little," Pyke admitted flippantly, as he adjusted his tunic and then looked at his consort with narrowed eyes. "Have much trouble getting out of the compound to come here?"

"Not much. Admittedly, my family wasn't thrilled that I planned on spending a few days in close quarters with someone they still consider an enemy, but they didn't try to stop me. I think they're beginning to understand that I have to balance two families and lives now, and I think many of them accept that."

"Your father?"

Vin-Chay paused a moment. "No, not my father. It's going to take time, Pyke. Give it time. Please."

"I'm willing to try. I just hope he is. Enough. The children should spend some time with their grandparents while we attend to business matters. Let's go." Pyke led Vin-Chay out of his culturchamber and into the main dining area, where Bahrtok threw them a knowing look. Vin-Chay grinned back at him as Pyke promised his in-laws they'd be back later in the day, and that Vin-Chay and the children would be spending a few days at the Miliplex with them. The two warriors left the apartment and took the verticulatator down to the second tier, where his new command offices resided.

They met Cassian coming towards Pyke's office from the other direction. The blond warrior smiled broadly as he spied the two men, who greeted him with handshakes as they entered Pyke's antechamber. His eager new adjutant, Lieutenant Ligeia, beamed at them in pleasure as she prepared to assume her duties. Pyke motioned Vin-Chay and Cassian into his office while he stayed behind to give a few orders to his kinetic and loquacious lieutenant.

Vin-Chay seated himself at the council table in Pyke's office. Cassian sat down opposite him and glanced around. "Nice," he commented, nodding. "Very appropriate for someone of Pyke's rank, although his office in Thebes was larger."

"He had a higher position on Ptolem," Vin-Chay answered. "But I don't think he really cares too much for the trappings of success as most people would believe. He's a very plain man in many ways."

"You like that about him, though, don't you?" Cassian asked reflectively.

Vin-Chay nodded. "Yes. He's honest and plain in the ways that count." He smiled. "I like him very much. And admire him. Perhaps that's why we were able to get past so many things in our lives—our relationship isn't just based on passion or emotion."

"But there is that passion," Cassian said slowly.

"Yes," Vin-Chay acknowledged. "There is that." He smiled just as Pyke came into the office followed by Zandran, TutMose, Sharra and Jaylan, and a few other officers from the *Renegade*. Their meeting lasted for five hours as each of the officers recounted his or her progress in assigned tasks for the repatriation and the efforts to supplement Pyke's crew with new Osiran and Ptolemii warriors. Although Pyke trusted his officer clique completely, he still wanted to interview as many potential candidates as he could himself to ensure that he sensed no detrimental hostility or hidden agendas amongst the new warriors. He would understand some degree of hostility or mistrust, but he wanted to ensure that it was tempered with a clear understanding of the situation, and a professional attitude.

When the meeting concluded, all rose to leave for their duties. Vin-Chay was scheduled to take Zandran, TutMose, Sharra, and Jaylan to the main Miliplex administrative pods to deal with the routine issues of compensation and lodging. Cassian was scheduled to interview the first round of potential crew candidates, and left for the third tier to deal with his assignment. Pyke was alone in his office when Lieutenant Ligeia entered with a small doc-corr that she placed in front of him.

"Thank you, Lieutenant," Pyke said. "Shouldn't you be leaving for your afternoon meal? It's well past normal dining hours."

Ligeia smiled. The man was so considerate to her. *To everyone on the ship*, she thought. “Yes, sir, but first I wanted to get a few details out of the way. I knew you’d want them taken care of, especially since they dealt with your—with Captain Vin-Chay.”

“Details?”

“Yes, sir. His transfer orders to the *Victorion*.”

“Transfer orders?” Pyke echoed ominously. *The Victorion? What the hell is this all about?* “Where did these orders come from, Lieutenant?” He forced himself to be calm.

“I believe from his father’s office, sir. They came down late yesterday, but you had already left. There didn’t seem to be any urgency to the matter, so I didn’t think to contact you. I’m sorry, sir. Should I have—”

Pyke waved a conciliatory hand. “You did just fine, Lieutenant. Nothing’s wrong. Please go and have your meal now, and we’ll finish discussing any administrative details when you return. Take your time.”

Ligeia saluted and left the office. Pyke picked up the doc-corr slowly and read everything on it. A cold rage grew as he snapped it off and placed it down carefully on his desk. He breathed in and out for a few moments before he picked up the doc-corr again and left the office. He headed down the south corridor and took the secured verticator to Chay Shayne’s wing of the Miliplex.

Pyke didn’t bother with professional amenities and walked past Chay Shayne’s adjutant into the Crown Prince’s office. The man was obviously expecting him and waved away his adjutant, who left the office quietly, although he would have given a year’s pay to stay and listen to whatever was going to transpire.

Dead silence extended the long moments as the two enemies’ eyes locked in hate and challenge. Pyke broke the stalemate when he casually tossed the doc-corr onto Chay Shayne’s desk.

“He won’t be joining your crew, Your Highness. Don’t try to pull anything like that ever again. I won’t stand for it, and he won’t stand for it,” Pyke said coldly.

“How do you know he doesn’t know about this and desire it?” Chay Shayne asked casually.

“Because I know him. And if this were true, I would have found it out from him, not through an impersonal document.” Pyke’s eyes narrowed and he abandoned any pretense of professional courtesy. “If you want to persist with some sort of vendetta against me, then please do so—but keep Vin-Chay out of the line of fire, and let it just be between us. He doesn’t deserve that lack of consideration, and I won’t stand for it.”

"Vendetta?" Chay Shayne said slowly as he rose from his chair. "You dare speak to me about *vendettas*? After you rape and enslave my son, and abuse him for years to pay me back for your wife's unfortunate death? You don't know the true meaning of the word, Commander, but I assure you that I will teach it to you unless you let him go."

"I never raped your son," Pyke retorted angrily. "I don't believe for a moment that he would have told you anything like that because it simply isn't true."

"He didn't have to tell me! It was obvious. He would never have gone to your bed willingly, and if not willingly—then he went by force. And I know you've hit him more than once—I asked him directly and he confirmed that. I *swear* I will find out every evil thing you've done to him, and pay you back for each and every one. You have my word on that. Just as you have my word that I will see you *dead* before I would let you defile my son any more than you already have by *marrying* him!"

The passionate hatred in Chay Shayne's eyes sent a chill down Pyke's spine. For the first time in his life he felt an overwhelming fear of another human being—not for himself, but for the people he loved. He didn't think this man would stop at anything to get what he wanted, no matter who he had to hurt. The first thing Pyke thought of after the ripple of fear subsided was that he had to get his children away from that compound and this man *now*. Only he didn't know if he could do that without relating to Vin-Chay everything that had just been said. Would his consort believe him? Or not?

There was nothing left to say between the two men. Pyke couldn't or wouldn't fill him in on all of the details of his relationship with Vin-Chay. He felt a flicker of relief that he had at least deleted Vin-Chay's Mediplex records from the *Renegade's* correlator before they had arrived on Osiron. At least Chay Shayne would never be able to see the damage that Pyke had inflicted on his son that one terrible night, or the subsequent dermal regeneration therapy. Those images would have sent the man over the edge, and he was close enough to it now. Pyke met his enemy's eyes one more time before he left the office wordlessly, and stalked back to his own office, where he sat down in his chair, trembling.

He managed to regain his composure before Lieutenant Ligeia returned from her meal, and they settled in to attend to the remaining duties he had scheduled for that day. He finished late, deliberately, so that it was likely that Cobahr and Pyco-Chay would be in bed by the time he returned to the apartment. He didn't want the children to pick up on his disquiet; it would be difficult enough to hide it from his consort and in-laws.

He breathed a silent sigh of relief when he entered the apartment and Colyn told him that the children were abed. She and Bahrtok had already eaten and were about to retire to their noxchamber, where the children also slept. Vin-Chay had waited for him so they could eat together.

Vin-Chay noted that his consort was unusually quiet and without appetite. Normally he would have attributed it to the currently unappetizing Osiran cuisine, but he sensed it was something else. He waited for Pyke to tell him in his own time; he didn't doubt for a moment that it had something to do with his family, most likely his father. He had found out by accident—a loquacious Lieutenant Ligeia—about the transfer orders, Pyke's surprise at them, and the subsequent withdrawal of those orders shortly after Pyke had learned of them and left his office. Vin-Chay prayed there hadn't been a significant confrontation between his mate and his father.

Pyke was quiet and reserved after mealtime as they retired to their noxchamber. The Ptolemii undressed wordlessly, and showered and slipped into bed before his consort. When Vin-Chay slid in next to him, he sensed quickly that the passion they had briefly shared earlier that morning was not going to be repeated. He wasn't too pleased after being away from his mate for several celibate days. He gently nuzzled and stroked Pyke, who surprised him by murmuring that he was too tired, and turning away from him to go to sleep. Vin-Chay lay awake for an hour trying to fathom what was going on. He realized that he was going to have to go to his father for any answers; his mate was too closed to him now.

Vin-Chay awoke alone in bed. He knew that Pyke had risen early to forestall any discussion between them about what was wrong. He dressed quickly. Colyn and Bahrtok and the children were at the dining table laughing and talking. Cobahr ran to him and gave him an affectionate hug before running back to the table to hungrily gobble down the special fried bread that Colyn had cooked for his morning meal. *At least he'll have familiar food here since Colyn's learning to use the food stores and Osiran cooking implements in the apartment*, Vin-Chay thought. He found himself looking forward to some decent home-cooked meals by his mother-in-law. He grinned at the savory thought. After a few brief words he left the four happy people and made his way to his father's office.

Chay Shayne was involved with Rue Dann and another elder on some Circle business, but Vin-Chay didn't mind waiting. He hadn't had much time to relax over the last two weeks, and it came as a relief to just sit and think for a moment. His father's meeting lasted nearly another hour before the Crown Prince and his guests left his office. Rue Dann and Tii Sahrđan greeted Vin-Chay warmly, then

left. Chay Shayne smiled at his son and ushered him into his office. He sat behind his desk as his son seated himself in front of him.

"You've only been gone one night, and already I miss you and Pyco-Chay terribly," Chay Shayne said.

"I know," Vin-Chay answered gently, patiently ignoring the implied slight to Cobahr. Now was not the time to deal with that problematic issue. "But you understand I'm trying to balance two sets of obligations and family. It's not easy on anyone."

"True. You're doing a fine job in a hard situation. But—what about some pleasant news for a change? My meeting just now had to do with you," he said pointedly.

"Oh?"

"Indeed. We have decided unanimously to bestow upon you the Honor of the Crown Prince Circle for your outstanding accomplishments. It's a rare accolade, but exceptionally well deserved in this case. You will be only the third member of our family to receive such an honor—after me, and our great ancestor, the original Vin-Chay."

"I am honored, Father, but I'm not sure I feel very comfortable about this. There were many of us who worked together to accomplish what we did, and—"

"Yes, true, but it was a plan of your conception and drive and passion. It would not have happened without you. This is an honor due you, Vine-tio—please accept it graciously as a prince and as my son."

Vin-Chay paused. "Of course, Father. I *am* honored. Thank you."

"Excellent! We will schedule the ceremony for early next week. Afterwards—"

"Father, I apologize for interrupting, but I came here for an important reason. I need—I need to know if you and Pyke had some kind of confrontation yesterday." He looked directly into his father's eyes. "After he found out you arranged to have me transferred to your ship without his knowledge or my consent."

Chay Shayne was silent for a few seconds before shrugging. "It was always my understanding that you *wanted* to serve on the *Victorian*. I had no reason to assume you had changed your viewpoint on that. I apologize if I've upset you with my peremptory tactics, but I was acting in what I believed to be your best interests."

"I know that, sir. I'm not upset. I just need you—everyone—to understand that I'm not the same green twenty-one-year-old you last saw before all our lives changed so drastically. I am a man grown. I've been through a great deal. I have children, and a mate, and responsibilities that may preclude old desires and needs."

Chay Shayne inclined his head respectfully. "I understand. And I approve. We need speak no more about it."

"Thank you, Father." Vin-Chay paused. He wasn't sure he should go on, but he did. "But you didn't answer my question. Did you and Pyke have a confrontation?"

The Crown Prince stared at his son for a long time before speaking. "Yes. We did. One long overdue, and one for which I will not apologize or defend myself. Perhaps it is time you and I stopped sidestepping this issue and simply deal with it."

"Go on," Vin-Chay said cautiously.

"Very well," Chay Shayne said in a hard voice quite different from the affectionate one he had been using in their prior conversation. Vin-Chay tensed at the tone as his father rose from his chair and went on. "This is the gist of the matter. That man is completely unsuitable for you as a spouse, a mate, or a commander. I will *tolerate* your assignment under him on the *Renegade*, or down here in the Miliplex, for the sake of all of our people. However, under *no* conditions will I condone or accept any personal relationship with him."

"Meaning?" Vin-Chay interjected. He could hear his own voice growing cold and hard as he rose to face his father.

"Meaning you will *not* marry this man. Meaning you will no longer cohabit with this man. Meaning you will remove yourself and your children from his presence, and take up residence and duties where you belong—in our compound. I am willing to accept the child Cobahr into our household because you love him, but you cannot expect me to accept him as a grandchild. He will receive all of the benefits of growing up in a royal household except the title that can only belong to Pyco-Chay. It is my fervent hope that you will meet a suitable mate and marry and have more children, but that cannot happen if you remain with that devil. And I will not tolerate that. I cannot."

Vin-Chay stared in shock at the relentless hatred in his father's eyes. He was mute for a long time as he silently cursed himself for not setting the record straight before, and for Pyke's contribution to this disastrous situation.

"Father," he began softly, "you need to know certain things. And to accept others. Pyke is no devil. He is a decent man who has made many mistakes and paid for them. He has not—"

"*Decent?! He raped you at Canaan!* And continued to physically and sexually and emotionally abuse you for years afterwards. He has brainwashed you into believing you care for him!"

"Raped me?! Never! He never raped me—it didn't happen!" Vin-Chay exclaimed.

"At Isiin he told me he took your chastity at Canaan! What—did you walk into his noxchamber and offer it up to him?" Chay Shayne exclaimed furiously as he slammed his fist down on his desk.

"I made a bargain with him!" Vin-Chay retorted. "He made me an offer. I refused it. He took no action against me. Then our cousin Bak-Tii pressured me into accepting so that I could try to maneuver him into disclosing military secrets or any information that could help free us. It didn't work out—he never told me anything confidential. And although he used me—after I agreed to our bargain—he was never brutal, or even unkind. He wanted to make me pay for your actions, but his conscience and common decency wouldn't let him inflict the harm he easily could have.

"And he came to care for me. That was why he overrode my decision to go to Sekmet. And why he bought me and took me to his home. Yes, in the early days he was at times abusive, and he treated me badly in some instances, but I take responsibility for precipitating some of those actions, and others I have forgiven. I am the only one who has the right to forgive him for anything he has done to me. I know he's inflicted emotional harm on you and others of our family, but he's genuinely regretful of that. And he's still trying to balance those actions and his pain against the knowledge that the person he perhaps loves most in the world is the son of the man who inadvertently took his wife away. He's tried to put that anger and desire for revenge away so that we can go on with our lives. And up to now, we have. We have a special relationship and life together. Please, Father—don't take that away when there is absolutely no reason to."

Chay Shayne stared at his trembling son for a long time. Both were silent. The Crown Prince walked around his desk to face his son. His face was a mask of bitterness and hatred as he spoke in an icy, very controlled tone.

"Listen to me very carefully. This man may not have technically raped you, but what he did was even worse. He took great advantage of a powerless, innocent victim over and over again, and then coated his unconscionable actions with a fraudulent veneer of compassion and affection and your so-called common decency. You will abandon this man. Now. If you refuse, you are telling me that you choose instead to abandon me and your birth family, and every value instilled in you during your upbringing as a prince of the Kindred of Chay. If you refuse, you will no longer be a member of our family. Not only will I disinherit you, I will disenfranchise you as well—you will lose your right to retain your royal title and the benefits it brings. This will extend to Pyco-Chay and any other

children of your bloodline. You will be dead to me. You will be dead to all of us. There is no room for compromise in this matter. You *must choose*.”

Chay Shayne turned away from his stunned son and walked to his window to stare out, unseeing, at the view below. A few minutes later he heard Vin-Chay leave his office.

He'll be back, Chay Shayne thought. *He is no fool, and he is my son in every way that counts.*

CHAPTER SEVEN

Zulikha hadn't been much comfort and help lately, Cassian thought crossly as he finished scheduling the assignments for the latest batch of new *Renegade* crewmembers. He snapped off his correlator angrily and blew out an exhausted breath. This pregnancy was progressing far less smoothly than her first, and he was feeling the brunt of her wildly changing moods, peevish demands, and chilly stares and silences. And whenever he was at the point of exploding, she would sweetly diffuse his mood with an affectionate turnaround of nuzzling and cuddling and understanding. She was driving him crazy. God, he loved her.

In the month since they had relocated to Osiron, so much had happened, and so quickly. Cassian found a spacious tri-tier in mid-Etrusca and moved his wife and daughter into it. He was able to buy the apartment easily with the six years' of back pay that had been applied to his financial accounts—courtesy of aggressive action by Vin-Chay, who ensured that his warrior comrades were able to move forward quickly with their new lives. His new home connected to a second apartment that housed TutMose. Zandran currently shared his comrade's domicile, but was soon expected to vacate that residence and establish a new one with the strong-willed Captain Sharra. Now *that* happenstance was a little disconcerting, but Cassian acknowledged that only the unexpected could be expected at this point, for any of them. Still, he was happy to be home—he thought—and despite the few bumps along the way he felt that he and his family could build something special in their new lives.

He had a workchamber in the lower tier of his apartment, and he plunged back into his enjoyable calling by starting a new toy chest for Cobahr and Pyco-Chay as a surprise for his friend's two sons. Cobahr had to leave his first one back on Ptolem, and Cassian knew the child missed the familiar trappings of his old life. Cassian missed his old life most of the time, although Vin-Chay was the only one to whom he would ever admit this. Some of his old life, anyway.

Sometimes when he closed his eyes to sleep, Cassian would suffer unbidden memories of his own brutal captivity before TutMose liberated him. There were too many times, even after all these years, when he could still feel the agonizing lash of the whips and fists beating against his flesh, the vicious leather tearing into

his skin and causing his blood to run down his ravaged flesh in thick streams. Several times a month he would wake up in a cold sweat, breathing heavily. It took him hours to fall back asleep, and usually only after a cleansing, hot shower. Zulikka was used to this sleep disruption by now, but he wondered how long it would go on. Forever? How could he ever hope to establish a normal life if he couldn't control his own mind? He wondered if Vin-Chay ever had the same problems, remembering his one savage beating, or if he had really been able to get past that and put the painful memory away forever.

Vin-Chay. Thoughts of his best friend upset him. If there was one person who should be enjoying the hard-won fruits of their victory and his reunion with a beloved family, it was the princeling. After the first couple of weeks, however, nothing could have been further from the truth. In the very beginning it was obvious that the Chay clan was grateful and relieved to have the missing son back. But then things changed, quite perceptibly. There was very obvious tension and conflict between Vin-Chay and his father. They had had some sort of falling out, and Cassian believed that it could only have had to do with Vin-Chay's relationship and plans with Pyke. It was natural that the Chay family would be reluctant to accept any relationship between the two men. Cassian assumed, however, that once Vin-Chay made his feelings clear and also cleared up a few misconceptions, his family would come to accept although probably not approve of the unusual pairing.

That was not the case. Vin-Chay had finally confided in him the previous evening as they relaxed together over cold ales. He told him about his father's ultimatum and his implacable hatred of Pyke. He hadn't given his father a direct answer yet—and he had not told Pyke about the ultimatum—but the Chay patriarch had been relentlessly pressuring his son to abandon his mate and return to the fold. Vin-Chay's other family members had been recruited by the Crown Prince to assist in the pressure. Cassian witnessed firsthand the cold attitudes and remarks that Vin-Chay's brothers directed towards him in both professional and personal circumstances. He thought it outrageous that they treated the princeling in that manner. They completely ignored Pyke unless it was absolutely necessary to address him in a professional capacity. And Cassian had heard a disturbing rumor that a projected ceremony to present Vin-Chay with a well-overdue Honor of the Crown Prince Circle had been pended indefinitely.

Vin-Chay had spent a few more nights at the Chay compound, but after the first time refrained from taking the children with him, opting to leave them with their affectionate and non-judgmental grandparents instead. The Miliplex apartment was fairly small for six people, but none of them seemed to care as long as

they were together. Cassian cursed the Chay family silently for not having the same attitude.

Vin-Chay was in the process of arranging alternate living quarters for his Ptolemii family. He, Cassian and Bahrtok were going to spend the afternoon in the outskirts of Etrusca, where the main agricultural regions sprawled over a hilly, lush green countryside for tens of thousands of hectares. Vin-Chay hadn't told Bahrtok yet, but he had been looking for an available agriplex to purchase as the family's main home and business. He knew that his father-in-law very much missed his work and the sense of stability that it gave him and his wife. Vin-Chay confessed that he, too, missed the peace and satisfaction of the life he had led at the 'plex.

He had also confessed to Cassian after four cups of spiced papyron—and Cassian had never seen him drink that much at one time—that he and Pyke hadn't made love in weeks, not since before he had first gone to the compound for his reunion. He had expected to when he returned to the Miliplex and Pyke's apartment, but something had happened, and Pyke hadn't touched him. Indeed, he had pushed him away several times when Vin-Chay tried to initiate any kind of physical communion. It hurt and baffled the young Osiran. He assumed it had something to do with his father. He didn't think that Pyke knew about the ultimatum, but rather had simply had a nasty confrontation with Chay Shayne. Pyke wouldn't provide any particulars to Vin-Chay, but the Osiran knew it had been a significantly bad clash, and had occurred the day before his own. He assumed the subject matter ran along the same lines as his 'discussion' with his father.

Vin-Chay picked Cassian up at the front of the Miliplex with his new, sleek, silver, four-person Wildcat, a deliciously decadent and state-of-the-art reccraft that he finally allowed himself to purchase. Bahrtok was with him, and the three men headed to the Etruscan outskirts of Tuscany. They traveled past lush, green, rolling hills planted with every type of fruit and vegetable able to be cultivated on the planet. Bahrtok was clearly impressed at the planet's agriculture, and found himself warming up to the possibility of starting over again in this fertile land. Vin-Chay set the autonav to the set of coordinates given to him by the agrisolicitor with whom he had been in contact almost since his return to Osiron. In less than an hour of twisting and turning directions, the reccraft arrived at their predestined location in the middle of a wide, green valley whose cultivated vegetation stretched for hectares as far as the eye could see.

The three men disembarked, and Cassian ambled down a glen that ran past a narrow, blue river winding through the valley and off into the distance. Bahrtok let his eyes roam over the valley and hills and the wide, rushing river as he squat-

ted down and touched the earth beneath him, running the rich, black soil through his experienced fingers. He looked up at his foster son and smiled.

"Good soil. You could grow just about anything here. What's the particular crop this area's been used for?"

"Our own version of citrine over there," Vin-Chay replied, pointing to several dozen hectares of large, bushy trees in the distant west. "And over there they've been cultivating a few varieties of bush fruits used to make delicious and intoxicating beverages for special religious and social occasions. There's a good deal of uncultivated land left, and it could be used for any number of crops. The river provides an infinite source of irrigation and there are already a series of underground pipes throughout the surrounding hundred hectares set up for timed hydration." He grinned widely. "And several calm side pools for swimming."

"How big is the property?"

"Around five hundred or so hectares." Bahrtok whistled—it was more than five times as large as his old 'plex in Ammurabbi.

"Where's the house?" Bahrtok asked as Cassian walked back towards them.

"Over that hill."

"Let's go see it," Cassian said as he walked up to the two men. He shook his head. "This has got to be one of the most peaceful places I've ever seen. No crowded buildings, or crowds of people. Beautiful country. Quiet. I'll bet Zulikka would love to be here."

"So think about settling around here yourself, my friend. With your work you could live anywhere, and I guess I wouldn't mind having you that close to my family. That is," Vin-Chay said, looking at Bahrtok, "if it turns out to be what we need as well." Bahrtok gave a non-committal 'hmm' as they started walking down the glen and towards the hill on which the agrihouse rested.

It took them twenty minutes to get to the rise from which they could view the house. Bahrtok enjoyed the feel of the cool breeze on his face, and the feeling of being out of a city. It was a very different country from his own desert world, but the silence was the same, and the peacefulness, and the soothing of the soul. He knew even before they saw the house that he would agree to settle here. They could see the house and the conjoining utility buildings from the ridge as they descended. It was large enough to hold a big family comfortably, and there were enough support structures to house equipment, and for storage. The compound of structures angled inward, forming a large private courtyard replete with a sprawling garden desperately in need of a devoted touch.

Vin-Chay opened the locked entryway, and they entered the house. They roamed through a large, spacious, well maintained home with an outstanding

nutrichamber. Vin-Chay envisioned many delectable home-cooked meals from Colyn. They proceeded to inspect the large hearthchamber, five noxchambers, and assorted antechambers and storage areas. The house was partially furnished, but not overly so; there was much opportunity for imparting their own style and decor. The central hearthchamber rested under an immense, oval, faceted lucitium dome that provided ample light in the day, and a stunning view of the stars and moon at night.

"I have seen enough," Bahrtok declared suddenly as they stepped into the back enclosure. He faced Vin-Chay. "Yes. This will be a suitable home for all of us. When can we move in?"

Vin-Chay's grin widened. "Right now. I figured you'd want it—*hoped* you'd want it—so I went ahead with the purchase, and by tomorrow it'll be registered in your name and Colyn's as an entitled property. No mortgage, and the taxes are paid for the next three years to boot. I've arranged for an architect to meet with you next week to discuss renovations and furnishings. The larder is already stocked, and the utilities are on, so when we get back to Etrusca we can put Colyn and the children in the reccraft, come back out here, and start our new lives."

"How can you afford this?" Bahrtok asked naively as he surveyed the obviously expensive land and house that he could never have imagined residing in before the unexpected turn in his life.

Vin-Chay grinned widely. "Years of back pay, plus a very well-endowed trust fund from both of my grandfathers. What else would I spend those chits on but comfort and a future for my family?"

Bahrtok looked Vin-Chay in the eyes, and gently touched his face. "No man could have a finer foster son," he said softly. Vin-Chay closed his eyes for a second, then put his arms around his father-in-law and held him tightly. Cassian watched the two men and felt a pang of envy at their closeness, something he could have only dreamed about with his own father. Although TutMose came close to this, and he was grateful about that. He knew that when he returned to the tri-tier that afternoon the first thing he would do would be to hold TutMi tightly and show her all the love he had never had as a child. And then he would talk to Zulikka about possibly selling the tri-tier and finding a place close by here. *If* her hormones weren't acting up.

The three men chatted endlessly on the ride back to the city, where Vin-Chay dropped Cassian off at his home and proceeded on to the Miliplex. When they arrived Pyke was already there, having ended his workday earlier than usual. He watched Bahrtok's animated face as his father-in-law expounded enthusiastically

to his wife and grandson on their new home. He had never seen him so carefree and excited. Vin-Chay was a man of his word; he had said he would shelter them forever, and this was proof of that if nothing else. He glanced over at Vin-Chay, who was watching him carefully.

The family decided that it would be best if they relocated in the morning. It would give them time to pack their new clothes and make some plans, and just relax for one last evening in the apartment. Vin-Chay was surprised but pleased that Pyke had decided to relocate with his in-laws immediately rather than maintaining residence in the Miliplex. It could be a sign that he was getting over his reservations and willing to move on with their lives. He would bring that subject up when they retired for the night, as well as the other matter relating to their current celibate state.

After a large, tasty evening meal of Vin-Chay's bakkava, the family retired to their respective noxchambers for the night. Pyke took a long, soothing shower and seemed not at all put off or edgy when his Osiran consort joined him. They fell into their old routine of mutual lathering and sensuous cleansing, and both men started to relax. Vin-Chay left the shower first and allowed Pyke to finish bathing alone. When Pyke entered their noxchamber he saw that Vin-Chay had lit several candles, and put some of Pyke's favorite classical music on very softly. Pyke tensed; he knew now that Vin-Chay expected some kind of sexual communion between them that night, and he wasn't sure if he could, or should.

Pyke sensed that he wasn't going to get away with pleading exhaustion this time around. He wasn't sure he even wanted to. He was as desperate to abandon their celibate relationship as Vin-Chay seemed to be, but he just couldn't get past the guilt and anger that erupted after his confrontation with Chay Shayne. Vin-Chay slipped into bed beside him after dousing the lights and leaving the noxchamber lit with only the flickering candles. Pyke felt his Osiran consort move against him and start caressing him. He tensed, but let the younger man continue. He could feel himself starting to respond and he began to caress Vin-Chay back until suddenly and unexpectedly a picture of Vin-Chay's angry father came into his mind, and he shoved his consort away yet again.

Vin-Chay swore angrily and got out of bed. He put the light on and glared down at his mate, who was white-faced and flustered. Vin-Chay's face softened; he could see that something was tearing Pyke apart.

"You have to tell me what's wrong," Vin-Chay urged gently. "I would have thought at this point that we'd gotten past all of our demons, but that's clearly not the case. What's happened to make you angry with me?"

"Angry with you?" Pyke replied. "God's Blood, Vin-Chay—you're the last person I'd be angry with. This doesn't have anything to do with you. I mean, of course it does, but—look, never mind. Can we just get some sleep now? We have a big day tomorrow and—"

"Not a chance, Commander. It's always one excuse or another lately. That stops now. You either tell me what's going on with you, or I walk out of that door and perhaps I don't walk back."

Pyke didn't reply. Vin-Chay waited patiently, then after a few moments turned to grab his clothes and leave. He was stopped at the door by Pyke's next words.

"Your father hates me for a lot of things, but especially for the fact that I raped you," he said quietly.

Vin-Chay turned slowly to look aghast at his consort. "Raped me? You never raped me. I told him that. I told him the whole story. But you're right—it didn't seem to make a difference. Maybe I can understand that from him, but I wouldn't even try to fathom how you've bought into that insane idea. How can you think anything we had together even came close to rape?" he asked in disbelief, ignoring as he always did that episode on the *Sovereign*. Pyke hadn't completed the act; it wasn't rape.

Pyke sat up in bed and swung his legs over the edge. He looked directly into Vin-Chay's eyes as he stood. "Because it's a true statement," he answered quietly. "I may not have tied you to the bed and beaten you and brutally forced myself on you, but what I did was to take advantage of a powerless man in many circumstances. Rape isn't about sex, Vin-Chay—it's about power. I used you on Canaan, and I used you on Ptolem when you had no power to resist me. Or can you honestly say that every time we had sex in our home in Thebes in the beginning, you *wanted* to be doing that with me, rather than feeling you had to do it to stay alive and survive your captivity?"

"I never looked at it as rape," Vin-Chay replied softly. "I still don't. I only wish I could get you to believe that, and make my father believe it as well." He paused. "He told you that he would never let us be married, and that you were unsuitable for me, didn't he?"

"Basically. He didn't want you—"

"Want me what?" Vin-Chay snapped, seeing Pyke's hesitation to go on.

Pyke looked directly at him. "He didn't want you defiled any more than you had been by me."

"I don't consider myself 'defiled.' Do you?" Vin-Chay raised a challenging eyebrow.

Pyke shook his head. "Of course not. I can't think of anyone who would out-side of your father and the rest of your family. But that's a whole lot of special people whom you have to consider—considering how much effort and pain you went through to get back to them. I wouldn't want you to discount their opinions and feelings."

"I'm not. But I'm trying to balance them with reality and what I need in my life. And I need you. And the children. And Colyn and Bahrtok. And I'm not willing to give any of you up, even for my birth family. There's no reason to. They have to see that someday."

"I don't think they will," Pyke replied slowly.

"Then that, unfortunately, is their problem, but I'm not going to let them make it ours. And neither are *you*. So can we just please get back into bed and get a good night's sleep for our move tomorrow ... and our marriage within a fortnight," Vin-Chay finished carefully. Pyke looked at him hard.

"A fortnight?" Pyke paused. *Chay Shayne be damned.* "Are you *absolutely certain?*"

"I've never been more certain of anything in my life. I want the ceremony at the new 'plex with as many of our family and friends present as will come. My family will be invited, but if they refuse, the marriage will still take place. Deal?"

"Deal," Pyke said softly, then grinned and moved purposefully back into their bed. Vin-Chay smiled, and joined him, and for the moment the precariousness of their family relationships was lost in a passionate tangle of bodies and souls. The next day, Vin-Chay and his Ptolemii family moved joyfully out of the crowded Miliplex apartment and into their new home. Vin-Chay sent word to his family of his impending nuptials, and waited. He waited all day, but there was no response.

Chay Shayne stared down at the holographic images looking back at him. One of the first things he had done when he had access to the *Renegade* was to download all of the main correlator files to his personal databanks in the Miliplex, and review the files associated with his son. There was nothing unexpected in them, but his analysis and then further analysis by Sar-Chay's daughter Roana, correlator chief of the Miliplex, had pinpointed a binary inconsistency in the files' sequence numbers. It was her opinion that Vin-Chay's files had been loaded sequentially, thus appending a sequence number to each set of data, but there were two numeric gaps in the information that indicated a possible data deletion.

Roana was unable to restore the erased data. Chay Shayne was utterly frustrated. He just knew that there was something in that missing data that he should

know about. Then Roana suggested that perhaps there were backups of the data files. The Crown Prince told her to forget about the matter; it wasn't important. She complied and left his office. He then covertly initiated a download of any backup files aboard the flagship. When the transfer was complete, he reviewed the data file locations where the original gaps occurred. There were two medical procedures involved in the deletions. He stared wordlessly at the images of his son as Vin-Chay was admitted to the Theban Mediplex after his severe beating, and then subsequently discharged. The second set of images related to the skin-replacement therapy two years later.

His eyes riveted to the first set of holographs, which showed his son's battered, bruised face and dead eyes on a frontal view, and the brutally-lacerated, raw, bleeding flesh of what had been his back from the rear view. The final set of holographs showed the healing skin three days later, just before Vin-Chay left the Mediplex. Chay Shayne read the associated documentation. He read one line over and over again: the cause of injury denoted by the primary physician on the night Vin-Chay was admitted.

"My slave displeased me and I beat him."

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Chay Shayne snapped off his correlator after an hour of staring at the images and documentation. He sat for another hour, unmoving and unfocused as silent tears streamed down his face. He turned his system back on and initiated a sequence of processes he needed to complete before the scheduled wedding.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“A moment of your time, Lieutenant?” Pyke asked Nik-Chay as the young man walked wordlessly past him in the Miliplex corridor. His future brother-in-law’s face was cold and his demeanor stiff as he reluctantly nodded and waited for the Ptolemii to speak.

“I’ll come right to the point. Do you plan on attending your brother’s wedding ceremony or not?” Pyke asked as neutrally as he could. He didn’t want to set the young man off with a belligerent tone, although he felt that this situation certainly warranted it.

Nik-Chay nodded. “Absolutely.” Pyke managed not to show the surprise he felt, and he relaxed just a bit—until the Osiran’s next words. “Just as soon as he comes to his senses and selects an appropriate mate, Commander. Now, if you will excuse me, I have duties to perform.” As he started to move past Pyke, the angry Ptolemii grabbed his arm and forced the young man to face him. Nik-Chay didn’t pull away, but simply looked at Pyke as though he was a loathsome insect that had crawled out from under a rock. Pyke could see his feelings clearly, and he let go of his arm. Nik-Chay moved off again as Pyke threw a few words after him.

“He loves you, you know. More than any of the others, except perhaps your *devoted* sire. There was nothing he wanted more than to get back to all of you. That desire sustained him through his trials over the years. It’s unfortunate that his love and trust were so misguided.” Pyke could see Nik-Chay’s back stiffen, but the Osiran didn’t stop or look back.

Pyke cursed the entire Chay family for the thousandth time that day alone as he stalked into his office and told Lieutenant Ligeia tersely that he didn’t want to be disturbed. He had been unusually busy all day as he tried to fit his remaining critical tasks into his tight schedule. The ceremony was this evening at the ‘plex, and tomorrow he and his new spouse would depart for a week of conjugal solitude in a mountain lodge close to the Chay residence in the Glacial Peakskills. Using the family lodge wasn’t an option. Until then he was occupied finalizing the *Renegade’s* completed crew. He was pleased with that, at least. His command clique had selected an excellent contingent of warriors to supplement their skele-

ton crew, and it was comprised of both Osiran and Ptolemii men and women. There were even a few officers who had previously been incarcerated as prisoners-of-war, and who had elected to remain on Osiron and join the rogue commander. The remaining ones were awaiting offworlding on a small passenger vessel that would be leaving the planet next month for Isiin on its journey towards Ptolem.

He was relieved at least that Chay Shayne and his Circle were keeping to their words in terms of the truce and agreement that they had made over a month ago. There had been no stalling or changes in their bargain, and Pyke could even sense some of his newly enforced Osiran colleagues starting to grudgingly accept him and his crew. Of course, a lot of it had to do with the powerful weapon they had brought with them, and whose control they retained. Still, the Crown Prince and his associates could have made things more difficult if they had tried. *Perhaps there is hope*, Pyke thought as he finished his work and shut off his correlator. He rose and stretched. Four hours. Four hours, and he and Vin-Chay would finally be married after the long and twisting paths of the last nearly six years.

Pyke summoned the commandcraft to take him home to the 'plex. Vin-Chay was already there, having opted to not work today at the Miliplex and instead assist Colyn and Bahrtok with the ceremony preparations. He was also nervous, although he hid it very well—almost as well as Pyke. They had both expected that Chay Shayne would try to stop the ceremony somehow, but so far nothing like that had occurred. There hadn't been one single word from the Chay compound about the marriage, other than Nik-Chay's scathing remarks earlier in the day. Pyke cursed his consort's family again, and then stopped himself short. He had to do his part in making peace with this clan whether he wanted to or not at this point—for Vin-Chay's sake.

His mind wandered as the craft sped out of Etrusca and down into the fertile green valleys of his new home. It would be a good home, for all of them. Cobahr was already having a marvelous time exploring the hills and dales, and was very meticulous about not going near the river. Colyn was overjoyed to be in a true home and a real nutrichamber, and she had been stuffing them with excellent meals for days. Her wedding banquet promised to be the best yet. Bahrtok had been readying his new equipment and familiarizing himself with the land and crops, and the small agritown nearby. None of them were used to the cooler weather yet, but that would come.

The craft dropped him off and left immediately. He noted that Cassian's craft was parked near the craftport; the other warrior had come early to provide support for his friend and help him get ready. Pyke entered the house and was imme-

diately attacked by an enthusiastic Cobahr, who threw his arms around him as Pyke lifted him up and swung him around before putting him back on the floor.

"Zulikka's here!" Cobahr yelled happily.

"I know!" Pyke replied, clapping his hands over his ears in mock horror. Cobahr adored Cassian's wife for some unfathomable reason. He had to admit, she was good with all the children, even as she drove the adults in her life occasionally beyond the breaking point. He felt a pang of guilt that his life's course and choices hadn't provided Cobahr with a second mother rather than a second father, but there were no perfect situations in life. What he and Vin-Chay might lack in parenting resources for their children would have to be compensated for as best as possible through unique solutions and other people.

"Father! Come into the hearthchamber and see how Gram-Co's got it decorated for tonight!" Cobahr started pulling him towards the other chamber but he held back and shook his head at his son's querying look.

"Can't, Sprite. The wedding mates aren't supposed to see the ceremonial chamber until the time comes to say the vows. Is Patri Julian here yet?"

"He's outside with Gran-Ba looking at some trees or something."

"Is Cassian upstairs with Papa?"

Cobahr nodded. "They're doing something. They were real noisy until the man came with the gift."

Pyke looked at his son oddly. "Man? What gift?"

"I don't know," Cobahr shrugged. "Some man came from the compound with a wedding gift for you and Papa. I heard him say it had to be opened before you got married."

"Was this man a family member, Cobahr? Do you remember seeing him at the compound when you were there?"

"I don't think so." Pyke could see the boy had lost interest in the subject so he ushered him towards the nutrichamber before he turned to ascend to the second tier. He stopped at the door of his noxchamber, and listened to see if he could hear the two men inside. He hesitated, and then knocked.

"Vin-Chay? I'm home. Everything all right in there?" There was no answer for a few long seconds before the door slid open and Cassian stood in front of him, looking upset. Pyke moved back as Cassian came into the hall and shut the door quietly.

"What is it?" Pyke asked tersely.

"I don't know," Cassian replied. "One of Vin-Chay's cousins came here an hour ago and brought some sort of wedding gift for Vin-Chay and you from his father. His cousin said it was imperative that he opens the gift before the cere-

mony. Vin-Chay opened this beautifully decorated box and started looking at what was inside, and ...”

“And what?” Pyke snapped, suddenly feeling an overwhelming fear.

“And he just froze. His face drained of all color and he didn’t say a word for a long time. I asked what was wrong but he wouldn’t tell me, and he wouldn’t show me what was in the box. Commander ... I think he’s thinking of not going through with the wedding. He needs you, please,” Cassian finished softly.

Pyke nodded. “Go downstairs and don’t do or say anything about postponing this ceremony. I’ll handle this.” Cassian left and Pyke took a deep breath before he opened the door and entered his noxchamber. Vin-Chay was sitting quietly on the edge of their bed, looking down at something in an ornately engraved silver box that bore the official seal of the Chay Kindred. He looked up at Pyke, who felt an icy chill at the look on his consort’s absolutely white face. He had a stunned, dead look in his eyes that Pyke had only seen one other time in their years together.

Pyke walked slowly over to the bed and looked down at the box Vin-Chay was holding. He couldn’t really see what was in it—something silvery. Metal. He reached down gently and took the box from Vin-Chay’s limp hands and picked up what was inside. It was some kind of silver, three-fold holograph frame, ornately carved with the royal seal of the Chay Kindred. Pyke carefully unfolded the two sides to view the three holographs within. He took a sharp intake of breath, but made no other sound as he stared down at the pictures in sick disbelief.

There were three very vivid holographs of Vin-Chay. The two on the sides were the most graphic holographs from the night of his admission to the Mediplex after the beating that Pyke had administered; the third one, in the middle, was taken on the day of his discharge, showing the final damage to his back, only in its early healing stages. At the bottom of the frame were a few engraved words in Ptolemii:

“My slave displeased me and I beat him.”

Time stopped as Pyke tried to absorb the enormity of the cruelty involved in sending the box and its contents. Before he could find his voice he noticed a piece of parchment that rested beneath the frame. He picked it up mechanically and read the terse, unsigned note. The bold handwriting was similar to Vin-Chay’s, and Pyke knew right away that Chay Shayne had written it.

“Proceed with this travesty of a marriage and I will ensure that every member of our family receives copies of these holographs—that includes your sons and ‘in-laws’ and any friends you hold dear.”

Pyke put the note back in the box, gently closed the frame, and replaced it in the box as well. He put the box down on the bed next to an unmoving Vin-Chay, who was staring out at some point in space, not really seeing anything. Pyke touched his hair lightly and turned to leave. He knew without question that Chay Shayne had finally found both a way to pay him back and to stop the marriage. It didn't matter that that way involved destroying his son, whom he professed to love more than anything. He nearly reached the door when he heard Vin-Chay speak quietly.

"The backups," he said softly. He looked up to meet Pyke's inquiring eyes. "You deleted the original files. There must have been backups somehow. He must have scanned the databanks to find anything he could to destroy us." Pyke nodded. *Backups. Of course. Stupid. Stupid mistake.*

"I can't ... I can't even begin to understand exactly how much he hates me to do something like this—to hurt *you* so badly simply to get at me. I never thought he'd go that far. I'm sorry." Pyke paused. "I'll go downstairs and let everyone know we won't be holding the ceremony. I won't tell them why, just that—"

"You've changed your mind about marrying me? I can understand not wanting to join my so-called family, but I guess I always thought you were stronger than that," Vin-Chay said in a hard voice as he rose from the bed and fixed an implacable stare at his consort.

"Changed my mind?!" Pyke exclaimed. "He's changed everything for us! You want your family to see those holographs? He isn't bluffing, you know!"

"I know. And no, I don't want my family to see those holographs. But I want even less to lose something I've fought too damn long and hard for—*you*! And the life we've built together. Yes, I'll agree to calling this wedding off if that's what you want because you don't want me. If there's any other reason—then we proceed. If you have the courage," he ended evenly.

Pyke stared at Vin-Chay for a long time before answering with his heart instead of his head. "Yes," he said softly, "I have the courage if you do. But it means we need to tell Cobahr and my in-laws and our friends what's transpired—to a point. I don't want them learning of this by opening surprise boxes of their own."

Vin-Chay nodded. "Agreed. But let's do it after the fact. I don't want any more obstacles to arise before we complete the ceremony. The last thing we need is for any of our family or friends to try to put a halt to our plans, however well-meaning they might be."

Pyke shook his head. "No. We need to at least tell Cobahr and his grandparents what's going on now. It's only right. They'll be the ones left here after

tomorrow to possibly deal with any fallout from this. They need to accept this, and be prepared. We need to be honest with them up front or we risk alienating the people closest to us. Agreed?”

“Agreed,” Vin-Chay conceded reluctantly. “But I need to add Cassian to that discussion. He and I have been too close for too long to exclude him.”

Pyke nodded. “Of course. I’ll bring them up and we’ll tell them—without too much detail, though. That isn’t necessary. Less complications.”

Vin-Chay smiled wanly. “Master, our lives are nothing *but* complications.” Pyke couldn’t disagree as he left the noxchamber. He discreetly gathered his son, in-laws and Cassian, carefully and not obviously excluding Zulikka and Patri Julian, and returned with them to the noxchamber where Vin-Chay waited with a strange calm. Pyke moved to his side as the two men faced their family and friend, who were curious but waited patiently for whatever was to come. Pyke began.

“I think everyone knows that there’s been some opposition to our proposed marriage, and a lot of hard feelings—many justifiable—on the part of Vin-Chay’s birth family,” Pyke said.

“What’s opposition?” Cobahr interrupted.

“It means they don’t like it, Sprite,” Vin-Chay answered gently. “Come here.” He motioned his son over as he sat down on the bed and let Cobahr climb on his lap.

“Why don’t they like it?” Cobahr asked, his light blue eyes wide with innocence.

“Because a lot of things have happened in the past that make them sad and angry, and for some people it’s hard to let go of some of those bad feelings even when they know they should.”

“What are they angry about?”

Vin-Chay looked up at Pyke for a second, and carefully avoided looking at Cassian or his in-laws. “They’re angry about some of the things—some of the things—”

“Some of the things I’ve done in the past that have hurt Papa,” Pyke said gently.

“You never hurt Papa!” Cobahr exclaimed. “You yell sometimes, but he does, too.”

Pyke smiled. “Sometimes we yell at each other but we try not to. But—there was a time, long ago, when Papa and I didn’t live together so peacefully. Before you came to be with us. And, I did some things that weren’t right and that hurt

him, and that's very hard for his family to forgive because they love him. And they think that maybe we shouldn't be together any more."

"What kinds of things?"

Vin-Chay hugged Cobahr tightly. "That doesn't matter now, Cobahr. What matters is that they're wrong, and your father and I know like you do that we should be married, and we're going to be tonight. And forever. And you need to remember that, no matter what anyone says to you, or what you hear or see, because the things you might see are long gone and have no meaning in our lives now or in the future. Can you understand that?"

"I don't—I don't know," the boy said in confusion.

Vin-Chay looked up at Pyke for assistance, but before Pyke could respond, Bahrtok intervened.

"Sprite, what your parents are saying is simply that you need to know that they love each other, and they love you and your brother, and that's all that really matters regardless of what anyone outside this family might say or do. Now, why don't you go downstairs and help Zulikka with the desserts, and show Patri Julian your special place out back?"

Cobahr nodded and slid off Vin-Chay's lap and ran happily out of the chamber. Bahrtok turned back to Pyke and Vin-Chay.

"Now, what exactly is going on that you weren't able to articulate to your son?"

Pyke took a deep breath and decided to plunge in. "Chay Shayne has made a last-ditch attempt to stop our marriage, and he very nearly succeeded. Because he failed, it's likely that some ugly facts about our previous relationship may come out very publicly, at the very least to all of Vin-Chay's family and to all of you. Including Cobahr. We wanted to prepare you for it, but I guess we've failed miserably at that with our son."

"Miserably may be a little harsh," Bahrtok said. "But I think we need to know now exactly what's happened. Vin-Chay?"

Vin-Chay nodded. "My father somehow managed to get a hold of some backup correlator files that had some very painful, graphic holographs attached to them."

"What kind of holographs?" Colyn asked nervously as she clasped her husband's hand.

Vin-Chay paused and looked at Pyke, who answered his mother-in-law's question. "Mediplex holographs of the night Vin-Chay was admitted after his escape attempt and my punishment. Very explicit ones," he said quietly.

"Oh, God," Bahrtok said.

Pyke nodded. "Oh God, indeed. He sent copies to Vin-Chay today as a 'wedding gift,' along with a note that said if we went through with the ceremony, he would provide copies to the whole family, including you and the children."

"Bastard!" Cassian exclaimed in shock as his jaw dropped.

"I don't imagine he's bluffing," Vin-Chay said too casually, "but whether he is or not, we've decided to do what our hearts are telling us to, and go through with the marriage."

"As you must!" Bahrtok stated firmly. "He has no right to dictate your lives. That is for you to decide. If this ugly thing comes out, well, we will simply have to deal with it. But we will, as we have with everything else that has occurred these many years past." He turned to Pyke and looked him squarely in the eye. "There was a time when I would have agreed with Chay Shayne, but no longer, and not for many years. There is no doubt in my mind that you are true mates, and to abandon each other and what you owe to your children would be unconscionable. We will deal with this tomorrow. Tonight, we have a wedding to attend. So I suggest that you retire to separate chambers to prepare for your ceremony, and we speak no more about this. Colyn, come. Pyke—find another chamber and perform your necessary preparations. Cassian will remain and attend his friend." Bahrtok's tone left no room for protest, and his wife and son-in-law followed him out of the noxchamber, but not before Pyke threw Vin-Chay a genuine smile of affection and amusement.

When they were alone Cassian faced his friend with a look of compassion on his face. He grasped Vin-Chay's shoulder in silent communion, and then pulled him close for a tight embrace. They broke apart after long moments.

"All right," Cassian said heartily. "Let's get you dressed and prepared for your wedding. The way you look now, I don't think even a desperate man like Pyke would want you."

Vin-Chay grinned, and then turned serious. "You are a good friend, Cassian. I've never had better, even amongst my own family. Thank you for being here for me now, and when we were on the *Remus*, and when we were on Canaan and on Ptolem. I don't think I ever properly told you how grateful I was that you found a way to get me off that planet with my mate and children and friends. You saved my life, and my soul. I will always be grateful to you, and cherish your friendship. Thank you."

Cassian thought for a second about making a flippant response to hide the immense pride and love he was feeling, but instead he just nodded and turned away quickly to move to the closet to get Vin-Chay's royal garments. He hoped

his friend wouldn't see the tears in his eyes. Vin-Chay knew they were there, to match his own.

As Cassian braided Vin-Chay's long side hair and applied the ceremonial kohl around his eyes, they talked about meaningless things to prevent them from delving into maudlin or dangerous territory. They could hear the arrival of the other guests on the first tier. TutMose, Zandran, and Sharra arrived together. Burran and his new wife arrived shortly after, followed by Jor-Rue and Jaylan. Vin-Chay finished donning his rich, black, plush trousers and silver-trimmed tunic, then buckled on his wide, silver belt and pulled on his knee-length black leather boots. The thick, silken, floor-length silver-and-black cape would go on last, after he affixed the various royal decorations of his Kindred on his tunic and belt. He had chosen to add the customary Ptolemii hair braiding and eye color as a mark of respect for his betrothed's culture, as well as the set of ankh jewelry presented to him over the years by his in-laws. He removed his companion rings in preparation for receiving his marriage rings.

Lastly, although he hesitated, he placed the shimmering, gold princeling coronet on his forehead. The ornate metal banding fit snugly across his forehead near the hairline, its engraved, curved sides descending along the sides of his face and ending at mid-jaw in a sharp point. He knew this would be the last time he'd be allowed to wear the mark of his status, which would change once his father learned of the ceremony and went through with his threat of disenfranchisement. Vin-Chay didn't doubt for a moment that he would. He met Cassian's eyes, and his friend knew instantly that he still hadn't told Pyke about that ultimatum. *Oh well*, Cassian thought—*Pyke will just have to get used to having a commoner as a consort instead of a princeling!*

Night had completely fallen by the time Cassian finished donning his dress uniform. Out of the corner of his eye he could see the lights out back in the enclosure, where Colyn's wedding feast would take place. The evening was cool, but not terribly so. The sky was a rich blanket of stars and moon to set the mood and provide atmosphere and light in addition to the dozens of ground and pole lights that encircled the yard. They heard a soft knock at the door, then Colyn's voice telling them that everything was ready. She left as quietly as she had come.

Cassian turned to leave the chamber but Vin-Chay stopped him with a gentle hand. "I want you to know," the princeling said quietly, "that even if my father and brothers had turned up for this ceremony, you would still be the one standing beside me when I spoke my vows ... brother." Cassian paused a bare second, his face saying everything they both felt. They, too, had come to a point where words weren't really needed.

Vin-Chay nodded at his friend, and they left the noxchamber and descended to the hearthchamber where their family and friends waited. Vin-Chay's lips parted in an unaffected smile as they entered the chamber. Colyn had done a beautiful job of preparing it. The guests all stood near a makeshift alter, where Patri Julan waited in full ceremonial robes with Pyke and Cobahr. The chamber was lit with hundreds of colored, scented candles; there was no other artificial light. Vin-Chay walked purposefully to where his consort and son stood. He took a moment to reach out and touch Pyco-Chay as he passed Bahrtok, who was holding his unusually well behaved grandson.

Pyke was dressed in his formal Ptolemii uniform, and he looked as regal as he had on that day long ago when he was invested as head of InterSec—more so. Vin-Chay smiled at Cobahr, who was dressed in a miniature version of his father's uniform. The boy stood by his father's right side and was carefully holding a small wooden box that Cassian had carved, and which held the two sets of marriage rings. Vin-Chay stood next to Pyke, and they faced Patri Julan. Cassian positioned himself to Vin-Chay's left.

"Well," the priest began. "This has certainly been an ... *interesting* courtship for all of us." There was general laughter from the wedding guests, which broke the remaining tension in the chamber. The two betrothed men managed identical sheepish looks as the laughter died down and the Patri continued in a serious tone, as befit his role and the occasion.

"But the courtship has completed its course, and over many, many harsh and at times seemingly unsurpassable obstacles. Still, these men have persevered, and it is well past time to join Prince Chay Vinetio DeGrec and High Commander Pyralis-Keegan DeGael in the binding vows of marriage. They have chosen a sacrament marriage. For our Ptolemii brethren who are unfamiliar with Osiran customs, this means that the joining is for eternity in this life and the next. There is no abandonment of vows through divorce, and no secondary mates. These two men will be joined as one soul and one body for as long as they live. They will cleave only unto each other. This ceremony and commitment are true covenants of love, faith, respect, and hope, the very basic tenets of our religious and social beliefs. Such passion of the mind and heart is the foundation upon which our civilization is based. There is no more honorable institution than the one that I have the joy of consecrating this day. Let us begin."

The ceremony lasted a full hour as the Patri intoned the ritual blessings and as the celebrants repeated the ancient vows. At the appropriate time Cobahr offered up the marriage rings, which Vin-Chay and Pyke slipped onto each other's right hands. When the priest ended the ritual by declaring that the two men were mar-

ried, the guests burst into spontaneous applause and congratulations as they engulfed the men with their affection and love and well wishes.

Bahrtok finally managed to get everyone's attention and tell them to move out into the back enclosure for food and the raising goblets of annise to honor the newly married pair. Vin-Chay and Pyke held back a moment as their family and friends crowded out of the hearthchamber and into the lush evening air.

Vin-Chay looked at his new spouse. "I know we had planned to spend a week in the mountains, but—"

"But you'd rather spend it here with our family, right?" Pyke asked in amusement.

"You know me too well, master," Vin-Chay replied.

"Not as well as I plan on knowing you tonight, princeling," Pyke said meaningfully. He nodded towards the back enclosure. "Let's spend some time communing with our family and friends before we retire to what should prove to be an *exhausting* night." Vin-Chay grinned. He had a special cache of bloodfire leaves that he planned on using quite extensively before dawn cracked and his new spouse's stamina gave out.

CHAPTER NINE

The eighteen months following their marriage were busy ones for Pyke and Vin-Chay, as well as for all of Osiron. A massive effort had been underway nearly since the first moment that the truce with the *Renegade* had been finalized to examine and recreate the new starship to supplement current Osiran forces. Had the scientists and technicians been required to design and develop the vessel from scratch, it would have easily taken three or more years to build one such ship, let alone the several needed to equal or overtake the power of Ptolem. The unexpected arrival of a fully-developed vessel, along with its blueprints and most of its historical technical files, allowed the Osirans to start building immediately at the craft production facilities being used to build new but now outdated vessels. The Crown Prince Circle unanimously voted to abandon primary work on the Leopard class vessels in progress, and put forth a concentrated effort towards building two new starships of the nonagon design, for which they too created a new class, CoeurDeLion. Construction of the first began within weeks of the truce; the start of the second followed by three months. By the end of the eighteen months, the first vessel was nearing completion, and preliminary shakedown of the main systems were scheduled for the coming weeks.

Chay Shayne ensured that he was assigned to oversee the construction, but to his bitter dismay the Circle also assigned Pyke as a ‘consultant’ to the project, and gave him a very visible and influential position to assist in the timely completion of the ships. It was hardly an altruistic or conciliatory gesture from the Circle—they knew that he and his people were the best hope for emerging victorious in the ultimate battle for their independence. Pyke was also given the power to assign a large number of his own people to the project, including Zandran, Sharra, and Vin-Chay. TutMose, Cassian, and Jaylan were remanded to the *Renegade* as the mainstays of that ship’s command while the High Commander and his three trusted associates were involved with the construction project. Vin-Chay snagged the plum assignment to minutely research, duplicate, and enhance the cy-comms brought along on the *Renegade*. With both Ptolemii and Osiran technology at his disposal, he devised several enhancements to the handheld mechanisms to increase their power output and ability to link into planet-bound

databases. He and Octavian worked together to create a new, larger version that was integrated into the nonagons' weapons' systems to expedite communication in the engineering pods and con-center.

The enforced professional coexistence between Chay Shayne, his enemy, and his "ex-son" made for frequent tense situations despite everyone's efforts to remain focused on the critical project at hand. The Crown Prince sought a variety of successful ways to avoid contact with the married pair, even when it conflicted with his official duties. The Circle tolerated his behavior for only a very brief time; Chay Shayne's powerful associates quickly made it clear that personal feelings were to be abandoned, or he would be removed from the project. This ultimatum worked, but embittered the Crown Prince even more, particularly since his son and his despised spouse employed none of the dismissive or disrespectful tactics that he did. Both Pyke and Vin-Chay maintained respectful and professional attitudes regardless of Chay Shayne's behavior, frustrating the Crown Prince immensely. He tightened his directive to his family to have no personal and only necessary professional contact with Vin-Chay and his hated spouse. Nik-Chay and Sar-Chay especially chafed under this unfair demand, yet had little choice but to obey the family patriarch. The rest of the family fell into line more easily, although none of them were happy with the situation.

Chay Shayne had fortunately carried out only part of his dire threats to Vin-Chay. The princeling and his spouse and their Ptolemii family waited tensely for the Crown Prince to go through with his promise to provide copies of the damning holographs to the Chay family and friends. Chay Shayne forwent that intimidating promise unexpectedly, but upon learning of the marriage—and utterly shocked and furious that it had been an irrevocable sacrament ceremony—immediately disinherited and disenfranchised his errant son. Two days after the wedding, the same cousin who had delivered the 'gift' arrived at the agriplex with an official doc-corr relieving Vin-Chay of his title and family attachments. He requested and received back the princeling coronet and family signet ring from the now commoner Vin-Chay. Up to this point Vin-Chay had still not told Pyke of his father's ultimatum. When Pyke learned of it while watching his spouse hand over the symbols of his heritage, he waited until the cousin left, then exploded in anger at the ultimatum and Vin-Chay's secret knowledge. Their first heated argument as a married pair ended an hour later in an equally heated coupling in their noxchamber.

Despite the unavoidable problems associated with their mutual duties in regards to the new vessels, Pyke and Vin-Chay found themselves and their nuclear family involved in an oddly peaceful, happy time of their lives. Bahrtok

and Colyn had thrown themselves into their new agriplex with all the passion with which they had first started their life together back on Ptolem. The land and crops were rich, and Bahrtok had rarely seemed happier or more fulfilled while working his new 'plex, often from dawn to dusk. He was frequently joined in his efforts by his son-in-law and foster son whenever they were able to divest themselves of their official duties at the Miliplex or the craft facilities. Cassian would also make frequent appearances at the 'plex to assist the three men, and give himself a much-needed break from the three females who ruled his household. TutMi and his new daughter, Cassiopeia, were proving to be as strong-willed as their ubiquitous mother. He relieved himself of familial and professional tensions by retreating into his enjoyable woodworking efforts, and his results could be seen all around the 'plex, from the boys' new toy chest to Pyke's elaborate cultur-chamber desk.

Cobahr and Pyco-Chay were growing up strong, healthy, and happy. They were constant companions when Cobahr was not spending time in the private academy in which his parents had enrolled him. When the time came for him to matriculate into one of the academies in Etrusca, it was clear to his parents and the educators that the boy was too far ahead of other children of his age, and would require special, advanced education. Vin-Chay selected a premiere institution that could address his voracious knowledge for learning three days per week; the remainder of his education would be directed by his parents at the 'plex. Vin-Chay also wanted to ensure that despite his advanced intellect, Cobahr still had the opportunity to be a child and enjoy his family. To ensure Cobahr's emotional and academic senses of stability and comfort, Vin-Chay expedited the necessary legalities to adopt the child as his firstborn son and heir. He had no problem getting Bahrtok's and Colyn's approval for this, and certainly no hesitation from Pyke or their son. The day was a proud and happy one for Cobahr when his newly legal parent had presented him with the official doc-corr, which the boy had carefully stored in his 'special place' in his noxchamber. His clan name was modified to Pyco-Chay's joint one, DeGael-DeGrec, and both of his parents modified their own designations as well to correspond with their sons' appellations.

Pyco-Chay was also showing visible signs of an above-average intellect, and his parents spent as much time addressing the toddler's needs as they had his brother's years before when Cobahr was of a similar age. The two men and their children—on occasion accompanied by the grandparents—attended cultural and sporting events in and around Etrusca, and made sure that there was as much interaction with both Osiran and Ptolemii children as possible. Cobahr easily

became fluent in conversational Osiran, and Pyco-Chay was able to respond to both of his fathers' birth languages by the time he was two.

Despite the lull in the conflict, the future of Osiron was still uncertain, making the future of Vin-Chay and Pyke equally uncertain. There was no current evidence of any starships approaching from the general direction of Ptolem or Isiin, although it was only a matter of time. Nevertheless, they decided to give their sons a new brother, and nine months into their marriage they initiated the necessary procedures. All genetic issues were up front, so there would be no repeat of any similar problems as they had encountered with Pyco-Chay. They selected an Osiran donor and surrogate; Pyke would provide the genetic link to their third child, a son who was due any day. Vin-Chay made Colyn a firm promise that any following child would be a granddaughter, and she seemed satisfied at this.

Vin-Chay's and Pyke's new son was born eight days after Cobahr's ninth birthanniv. Both men were present at the birth, as they had been with Pyco-Chay. The baby made a virtually silent entrance into the world, barely two and a half kilograms, with wispy, light brown hair, and heavy-lidded, down-turned, pale green eyes. The medtech placed the tiny baby in Vin-Chay's waiting arms. The Osiran stared down at his new son for a long moment before he gave his spouse a thoughtful look. He declared that he somehow thought this child would be a little more of a trial than his brothers. He couldn't explain why, but he felt that the new baby was somehow unusual, and might not fit into their lives as easily as their other sons did. Pyke gave him a curious look and just shrugged; Vin-Chay was usually right about these things. The baby, although small, was perfectly healthy, and needed to spend only one night at the Mediplex for circumcision and observation before returning home with them. Vin-Chay arranged to take a three-week leave of absence, and Pyke one week, so that they could bond with the baby. The lull in the war allowed them that luxury.

Vin-Chay spent the morning finishing up his Miliplex duties. He was dressed in civilian clothes, as was Pyke. They and their two boys picked up the new baby at the Mediplex before remembering a few remaining details that required them to go to the Miliplex before returning home. Pyke volunteered to keep the baby with him while he finished the forgotten reports. That pleasantly surprised Vin-Chay, and he kept Cobahr and Pyco-Chay with him as he finalized a few details of his own.

Vin-Chay wrapped up his scheduled tasks, then took a few minutes to log into the secured psy-corr of the Palermon Institute of Psychological Theory. He had been given special access to confidential archives related to several refugees in whom he had taken a special interest. He checked the teenager's files as he did

every month, and was relieved that the boy was progressing nicely in his academic pursuits. He was concerned that the psychological evaluations indicated an inclination towards internalized anger and low self-esteem. Vin-Chay frowned, issued a few commands, and brought up the summarized battery of tests and courses. He sent a few incisive suggestions to the boy's life-counselor, and set a trigger to his personal channel for any responses or rescheduling. He thought that the teenager had a great deal of strength and potential, but knew that the horrific enslavement experiences would never truly heal, and would take a great deal of time to overcome enough to move forward with a viable future. He thought about his youngest sister, Rosaline, who was scheduled to matriculate in accelerated courses at the same complex. She was a bright, compassionate young teenager herself, but with none of the emotional demons that plagued Japheth. She had already decided on a career path, and planned on devoting her professional life to helping damaged children. He had no doubts that she would have a life-affirming affect on any child who was fortunate to have her as an advocate. He smiled sadly at the thought of his kind, gentle sister, now lost to him because of their father's edict.

He rounded up his sons from their obvious hiding place under the left arc of his circular desk, and they left his office to meet Pyke. Vin-Chay had to stop Pyco-Chay from running off down the corridors several times. Sometimes his second son was too inquisitive and impulsive for his own good, he mused as he grasped the toddler's hand firmly after one aborted 'escape' attempt. As he pulled him up short, they nearly collided with Vin-Chay's three brothers, who were coming around a bend in the corridor from the opposite direction. Vin-Chay's smile at his son's antics faded when he recognized his brothers. He saw a quick look of affectionate desire on Nik-Chay's face before it, too, faded into painful neutrality. He nodded his head tersely at the three men, and motioned Cobahr to continue on with him.

Cobahr sensed his parent's tension, but gave Nik-Chay an unaffected smile. He had always remembered how nice his parent's younger brother was to him when he was at the compound; Nik-Chay was the only one who really was nice to him. And he looked so much like Papa. Cobahr had started to like him before that relationship was lost to them both. Nik-Chay smiled back; Dom-Chay and Bru-Chay remained impassive, as their father had instructed them to. Neither was happy about having to act that way, but Chay Shayne's word was law in their family.

"Let's go, Sprite," Vin-Chay said evenly as he put his other hand out to his elder son. Cobahr took his hand and they started to pass the Chay men. Nik-Chay impulsively broke his father's rules.

"Where are you off to in such a hurry, Cobahr?" Nik-Chay asked easily, ignoring a disapproving look from Dom-Chay. He hadn't seen either of his nephews in eighteen months; they had grown so much, and he had missed out on that. He had to forcefully push away a welling of resentment against his father, and a swelling of his own guilt at not having the backbone to defy him.

Cobahr grinned and pulled his parent up short. "We're taking my new brother home! Father's got him in his office and we're going to get them."

Nik-Chay raised his eyebrows and bent down to make eye contact with his nephew. "New brother? That must be exciting!" He straightened and looked directly at Vin-Chay. "When was he born?" All the Chays knew that Pyke and Vin-Chay were expecting another child, but they were unaware of the exact timing of the birth.

Vin-Chay looked at his younger brother as though he were crazy. He expelled a disbelieving breath. "Why the hell would you care?" he replied coldly. "Let's go, Cobahr. Now." His voice made it clear that there would be no more delays. Cobahr nodded silently just as Pyke came around the other corner, carrying the baby in one arm as he tried to balance a thick box of correlator simulation chips, holotomes and doc-corrs he had decided to bring home to work on. He saw the four men and two children standing in front of him. At the sight of the three Chays his face closed to an indeterminate, neutral look to match his spouse's. He ignored the men and directed his words to Vin-Chay.

"Ready?" he asked flatly. Vin-Chay nodded and transferred Pyco-Chay's hand into Cobahr's as he smoothly removed the baby from Pyke's precarious grip. They started off in the direction from which Pyke had just come without another word to Vin-Chay's brothers.

"What's his name?" Nik-Chay called after them, ignoring Dom-Chay's fierce glare.

Cobahr turned around for a brief second and flashed him a grin. "Constantine," he said as he and his family disappeared around the bend.

"Constantine," Nik-Chay repeated softly. "I like it." He didn't have any more time to ruminate on the matter as his older brother pulled him down the other end of the corridor. He kept his eyes averted so that neither of his brothers would see the shame or longing in them. He had a fleeting thought that those emotions would probably match their own.

Bahrtok and Colyn were waiting anxiously as their family returned with its newest member. Colyn appropriated the baby from Vin-Chay as soon as they entered the house, and cooed and clucked over him for an hour before allowing her husband access to his new grandson. The baby was awake but very quiet, and

it seemed that despite his very young age, he was trying to focus on the swarm of people milling about him. He gave up after a few moments, closed his eyes, and went peacefully to sleep. Pyke carefully extracted the baby from his mother-in-law's embrace, and carried him up to his noxchamber to place him in the new crib by his and Vin-Chay's bed. When he was sure the baby was asleep and comfortable and safe, he descended and joined the family for a celebratory mid-day meal.

Later that evening Pyke and Vin-Chay enjoyed their first solitary, quiet communion with their new son in the hearthchamber. Pyke rested himself in his favorite chair and braced his stockinged feet up against one of Cassian's carved tables. The baby rested on his back against his father's thighs. Vin-Chay sat close enough to brush up against his spouse as he watched Pyke stare in fascination, yet concern at his young son. Both men were silent, each for his own reasons. Vin-Chay decided to break the silence as he gently played with one of the baby's tiny, soft hands. He looked at Pyke and smiled.

Pyke looked back intently at his spouse, and Vin-Chay thought that he seemed to be trying to formulate something difficult for him. Even after all these years, and despite how very much Pyke had opened up not only to his spouse but also as a person, the Ptolemii still found some things hard to discuss or express. Vin-Chay was patient, though, and waited instead of speaking. Pyke glanced down once more at the sleeping baby before giving his spouse a slight smile. He spoke softly.

"When I was growing up," he began quietly, "there wasn't much opportunity in our house for affection or patience. My parents had to work from dawn to dusk just to keep the bare minimum of food on the table, and the government away from our door. I was barely five years old before I joined my father in tending our crops, and as much as they tried to have them, there were no other sons to be born and help with the workload. My parents were decent people, but they just didn't have the time or inclination to ... nurture me as I might have liked. I think they loved me. We never spoke of those things, so I don't really know. But I think so. I know I loved them."

He closed his eyes and rested his head back against the divan before continuing. "It was a thankless, lonely life. Few friends, few chances to make any. My only refuge was in my tomes and my thirst for learning. To their credit my parents did what they could to support and encourage that. Then one year they died, so close together. The government took the 'plex, and I was shuttled between families who really didn't want me and couldn't adequately care for me even if they did. They weren't unkind, just indifferent. I closed myself to everyone even

further. It was safer that way for me, and it let me concentrate on doing whatever I had to do to get out of that life of desperation and into a decent life where I wouldn't have to worry about where my next meal was coming from.

"I drove myself to excel at my education, and it paid off. I saw myself building a good life in the military. I never thought I'd go as far as I have, but any life there would have been better than the years preceding it. I made a conscious decision to not get close to anyone, to never let my guard down and make myself vulnerable. Ever. I had no intentions of ever marrying or having children. There were—experiences in my early days at the Miliplex that reinforced my personal mandate."

Pyke opened his eyes and looked at Vin-Chay. "And then Coba came along, and I thought, well, just maybe there was a chance for more. Just a chance. It took a while for her to get past my guard, and somehow she wormed her way into my life and heart. Then the day came when I realized I needed to throw caution to the wind and let her all the way in. For a year there was promise, and hope, and more joy than I'd ever experienced." He looked down at the baby and gently touched his tiny, curled hand. Constantine mewed softly in his sleep and stretched and settled back against his father's thighs. Pyke studied his youngest son curiously, absently stroking his hand and wispy hair.

"And then she died," he said softly, "and I thought what a terrible mistake I'd made ever thinking it would last, ever letting her into my life in the first place. I swore I'd never let anyone in again. I swore I'd never open myself up to that kind of grief and pain again, not with a spouse, or a child, or with anyone. Ever."

He glanced up at Vin-Chay and smiled ruefully. "And then years later you came along. And you were absolutely the *worst* thing that could have happened to me in the beginning, until you started worming *your* way insidiously into my life."

"Not by choice," Vin-Chay grinned, eliciting a smile from his spouse.

"No," Pyke agreed, "definitely not by choice. But once it started, I found myself getting more and more overwhelmed with the possibility that I might love again, and have another chance at a real future, with meaning and with—everything. I knew what I was doing was wrong in so many ways, but I couldn't or wouldn't stop myself. I felt like I was ... standing at the edge of a huge abyss, and there was nothing to prevent me from throwing myself into it. And I didn't want to stop. Even though I knew what I was doing was wrong."

"It turned out right," Vin-Chay said gently. Pyke nodded.

"It did," he said, "but I think some of that was sheer luck."

"Do you?" Vin-Chay said reflectively. "I wonder. Too much has happened for it all to be 'luck.' If we weren't meant for one another, and had so much in common, it never would have worked. Too much has happened to discount fate and destiny. That's what I think, anyway."

Pyke stared at his spouse passionately for a moment before replying. "Perhaps. Regardless, I will always be grateful to you for what you've given me. You gave me back my son, and my joy at Coba's memory, and a whole, complete life, and the promise of a future. You gave me love when I thought that would always be only a distant memory. I love you, and ... thank you," he ended quietly, looking down quickly at the baby so that his spouse wouldn't see the moisture that was welling in his eyes. He wondered fleetingly what his crew and other associates would think of the complete vulnerability their hard-edged commander was showing now. He knew the only one to whom he could ever show that side of him was Vin-Chay, his soulmate.

Vin-Chay didn't answer his spouse; he knew how hard it was for Pyke to bare his soul in such a raw way, even to him. Any flippant or affectionate response would only embarrass or disconcert him. He let the moment pass, and instead spent a few silent moments watching his mate study their new son intently before he spoke again.

"Now what are you thinking about, master?" he asked softly.

Pyke looked at him and gave him a half-smile. "I was wondering if Constantine here would have the misfortune to grow up looking like me."

Vin-Chay raised his eyebrows in surprise. "I wouldn't say that would be a misfortune," he gently admonished.

"You probably wouldn't, but I think we both know that the kindest thing anyone could say about this visage is that it's unbearably plain. There are a lot of less kind words that could be aptly applied as well."

"I like the way you look," Vin-Chay said as he stroked his mate's left cheek and smiled at him.

"I know," Pyke replied. "But you aren't exactly unbiased. I've never fooled myself about my less than stunning physical attributes. I've always been eternally grateful that Cobahr acquired only his mother's characteristics. And thank God Pyco-Chay looks just like you. This one here is another matter."

"Would you love him any less because of what he might or might not look like?"

"Of course not. It's just—" Pyke stopped short, unsure of how to explain.

"It's just that you were always sensitive about your perceived lack of beauty, and you worry that our son will go through the same insecurities. That won't

happen. We have a different family life than you had. One that nurtures and doesn't judge, and is safe and loving. Constantine will be fine no matter how his face or body turn out. The only thing that can prevent that is your own insecurities, so you need to abandon those right now for all our sakes. Agreed?"

Pyke smiled and leaned over to kiss his spouse. "Agreed." He looked down at the baby, whose eyes were tightly closed. "He's already asleep. And I'm exhausted, too, so let's put him down for the night and get some rest. I have a feeling he'll be keeping us up most nights and during the days from this point on, so we'd better sleep when we can." Pyke handed the baby carefully to his spouse and followed them up to their noxchamber, where all three managed to sleep undisturbed through the dark winter night that fell softly across the 'plex.

The scientists at the Miliplex had been linked into the remote space stations orbiting Osiron's farthest moon, Cygna, a remote six hundred thousand kilometers from the planet. The stations had been abandoned when the Ptolemii secondary Serpents were patrolling the perimeter and ensuring that no ships left Osiron's orbit. Their hasty retreat after the appearance of the *Renegade* allowed the stations to be repopulated almost immediately. They had been occupied for the past eighteen months by a full contingent of scientists and warriors whose job it was to monitor any possible incursion of enemy forces from Ptolem or Isiin. Up until now, there had been no activity. Two hours after Pyke, Vin-Chay and their newest son retired for the night, the scientist in charge of the alpha station hit the Circle notification indent to signal the apparent flow of a number of large, swift moving starships from the direction of Osiron's mother planet. The Circle in turn triggered a full alert for its military and civilian populations.

CHAPTER TEN

Bahrtok stared in surprise at the man who stood in the entryway to his home. He had never met any of his foster son's birth family, but this man was clearly a sibling; undoubtedly, his formerly favorite brother, Nik-Chay. Although the young warrior standing before him shared many of his older brother's physical characteristics, there were subtle differences that the Ptolemii found interesting. The eyes weren't quite as bright a blue, and even with the thick, close-cropped dark beard, the jaw line seemed lighter. He was only the barest of centimeters shorter than Vin-Chay, and a few kilograms more slender. *Close enough, though*, Bahrtok thought as he patiently waited for the man to state his business. He seemed to be struggling with himself as to whether he should speak, or simply flee from this alien Ptolemii household. Nik-Chay finally managed to curtly incline his head in a stiff greeting. He cleared his throat and spoke in what he considered very passable Ptolemii, which he had been studying secretly for over a year.

"Good night, sir. If Vin-Chay is sleeping I would like to strike his face." He waited expectantly.

Bahrtok stared in confusion at the formal yet somehow vulnerable young man, uncertain how to respond to such a peculiar request. Nik-Chay frowned, held up his hand, and ran the words and sentiments over in his head. He groaned, cursed, and corrected the pathetic attempt at proper verbiage.

"Good day, sir. If Vin-Chay is home, I would—I would like to speak with him."

Bahrtok raised an eyebrow and forced back an amused smile. "He isn't here at the moment," he said mildly. "May I give him a message?"

Nik-Chay frowned. He seemed to be thinking hard, and retained the look of someone who just wanted to flee from this man and house and agriplex. But he remained, and met Bahrtok's quizzical eyes. He shook his head tersely.

"No thank you, sir. No sounds on my feet." He expelled another frustrated breath at his gaff, and repeated the words slowly and correctly. "No message." He turned quickly to leave, and as he started off towards his reccraft, Bahrtok took pity on the skittish young man and called after him.

"Wait," Bahrtok said. Nik-Chay turned, an expectant look on his face. The older man continued. "Vin-Chay should return very shortly. If you'd like, you may come in and wait for him. We've just finished our evening meal, but I'm sure my wife could find some refreshment for you while you wait." He saw the uncertainty in the warrior's eyes, and his voice softened. "Please. Come inside." He gestured towards the door with an open arm. Nik-Chay hesitated only the barest of seconds before nodding his acceptance and following Bahrtok into the house.

Bahrtok led the young man into the hearthchamber, where Cobahr was playing with Pyco-Chay in front of the gently lit fireplace. A shortcrib was placed two meters from them, near the divan. Constantine dozed peacefully on his stomach as his brothers occupied each other and cast occasional glances towards their tiny sibling. Nik-Chay could hear a woman softly humming from another chamber, as wonderful food smells wafted from the same general direction. *So warm and comfortable*, Nik-Chay thought with a pang of guilt, and longing.

Cobahr looked up from the floor and grinned at his uncle. "Uncle Nik-Chay!" he exclaimed as he launched himself off the floor and ran to his grandfather's side, a scant meter from his Osiran parent's brother. Nik-Chay smiled down at him and seemed to want to hug him, but held himself back. Bahrtok felt a stab of sadness at the schism between Vin-Chay and his family, and especially between him and this special younger brother about whom he had spoken so often. *Well, this can't go on*, he thought angrily. *Not when it's the children who are suffering an unnecessary loss. Vin-Chay can be as stubborn as his spouse.*

"Colyn," Bahrtok called. His wife appeared a moment later, her loose, waist-length silver hair cascading around her shoulders like a silver veil, a querying smile on her kind face. She saw their unexpected guest but never showed any surprise or distaste, and simply widened her smile to include her foster son's brother. Bahrtok nodded towards Nik-Chay.

"This is Vin-Chay's brother, Nik-Chay, beloved. Do we have any java and cake left after the boys ravaged the dessert pan tonight?" he asked lightly. The woman nodded tolerantly.

"Aye. Just barely. Would you care for some refreshment, Nik-Chay? You do have time to stay and visit with our family for a while, don't you?" Her gentle face and compassionate words nipped at his conscience. He nodded wordlessly, afraid to speak, and she retreated into the nutrichamber to bring the food.

Bahrtok motioned to a comfortable chair near the baby's crib. "Seat yourself, young man. I'll tell your brother-in-law that you're here. Vin-Chay went out to check on some sector four crops and should be back within the hour. Until then,

just make yourself comfortable, and enjoy your nephews, if they don't exhaust you too much." He cast a backward glance as he left the chamber. Nik-Chay was seating himself as an inquisitive Pyco-Chay climbed onto the chair with him, cautiously examining the strange, hairy man who looked rather like Papa.

Bahrtok knocked gently on the door of Pyke's culturchamber, and then let himself in without waiting for an invitation. Pyke was thoroughly occupied at his correlator, and hadn't even heard the soft knock. He was studying the latest reports and projections of the starships that were approaching Osiron inexorably, and had been for the past month. They would be here within a week's time. Osiron's military and civilian populations had been on alert and preparing for an eventual and perhaps final clash during that time. He and his spouse and their *Renegade* associates had had little free time in that month, and had often spent overnight shifts at the Miliplex or the craft factories in their attempts to escalate their preparations. When he and Vin-Chay were able to return to the 'plex and their family, they rarely spent a night without working on tactical scenarios or technical improvements. Exhaustion had become a way of life.

Pyke suddenly realized that he wasn't alone, and looked up at his father-in-law. The tentative look on Bahrtok's face put him on alert. "Are the children all right?" he asked quickly.

Bahrtok nodded and waved a dismissive hand. "They're fine. No problem. We have a visitor, though."

"A visitor?" Pyke said curiously. "Miliplex business?"

"I doubt it," Bahrtok replied easily. He paused. "Your brother-in-law Nik-Chay has paid us a visit. Or, rather, I should say he requested to speak to Vin-Chay." He grinned. "In a manner of speaking."

"Nik-Chay?" Pyke said, rising. "What the hell does he want?" he asked coldly. His bile rose at the thought of the last gambit Chay Shayne had employed to disrupt their family with the vicious attempt to gain custody of Pyco-Chay. Only anticipatory planning long ago on his part had prevented the possible loss of his second son.

Bahrtok was slightly taken aback by the hard, angry tone. He understood it, but, again, he knew this had to stop somewhere. If there was any chance at reconciliation between the Chays, he wasn't going to let Pyke's temper get in the way.

"I don't know. I imagine he will discuss that shortly with his brother when Vin-Chay returns. And you, Pyke, will not do anything to interfere with that. This is my household, and I won't permit it. Understood?" The old words once said in a much different situation caught Pyke up short. He saw the immovable look on his father-in-law's face, and after a brief moment reluctantly nodded in

agreement. He made a move towards the door but Bahrtok held up a hand. "Let him spend some time alone with the children. That will be good for all of them."

"Unless he simply abandons them after tonight and tears their little hearts out when they can't understand why he doesn't come back," Pyke snapped peevishly as he reseated himself in front of his correlator and returned to a perfunctory review of his reports. He was well aware of Bahrtok's eyes boring into him as he busied himself with his duties while he wondered what the damned Chay was doing here, and what was going on in the hearthchamber with his children and their long-estranged uncle.

Pyke met Vin-Chay at the door to the house less than an hour later. Vin-Chay smiled at his spouse and nodded his head at the unfamiliar recraft as he pulled off his work gloves. There were no markings on the vehicle, and they weren't expecting company. Pyke gave him a cool look and said, "Your brother is inside. He wants to converse with you. Imagine that." Vin-Chay stiffened in surprise. His emotions clearly matched Pyke's own, although Pyke made a supreme effort to bite back any subjective remarks about the younger Chay.

The two men entered the hearthchamber quietly. Nik-Chay was sitting in that same chair, and Pyco-Chay was settled casually on his lap, ignoring his comfortable uncle. He looked down at his hands, and frowned in concentration at the wooden puzzle toy carved by his Uncle Cassian. Cobahr was sitting at Nik-Chay's feet, looking up at his uncle, and chattering away. Constantine was still sleeping. Bahrtok was seated opposite their guest, sipping a cup of java, and carefully watching the interplay between his grandsons and their uncle. He looked up to see the two men enter, and Nik-Chay caught his eye and looked up to see the closed, distant faces of his brother and brother-in-law. He rose awkwardly as he tried to maneuver a determined Pyco-Chay off his lap. He was unsuccessful, and had to hold the boy in his arms as he stood to face Vin-Chay.

Pyke moved purposefully to his unwelcome guest, and extracted his son from Nik-Chay's grip. The young warrior seemed reluctant to let go, and turned to face his brother. He inclined his head in a tentative greeting.

"May I speak wildly with you?" he asked Vin-Chay in stilted, well-inflected, and formal but slightly inaccurate Ptolemii. He looked at Pyke. "Eight of you?" Pyke could see that even the few words were made at a great effort, and he felt himself softening just a little. A very little. He waited for his spouse's response, since any matter dealing with this or any other Chay basically rested with Vin-Chay. He was only a secondary player. Vin-Chay looked at Pyke, who nodded as he let Pyco-Chay slide down and run to his grandfather. Vin-Chay finally nod-

ded at his younger brother and led him and his spouse to Pyke's culturchamber. He closed the door for privacy, and then both he and Pyke waited.

Nik-Chay hesitated. Now that he was here, facing the two men he had coldly snubbed for nearly two years, he was uncertain that he should even be here at all. *What did I even plan on saying to them? Why would they even want to listen? They've made a good life together and—*

His thoughts were interrupted by Vin-Chay's cold voice. "Does Father know you're here?" he asked in Osiran.

Nik-Chay shook his head and reverted to his birth tongue. "No. If he ever finds out, I'll be disinherited and disenfranchised as you were."

"Is that supposed to make us feel warm and affectionate towards you after all this time, and after the way you've treated your brother here?" Pyke snapped.

"No," Nik-Chay answered quietly. "There's no reason for either of you to feel that way. There's no reason for you to even want to speak with me, or let me into your home. But you did, and I'd like to finish what I came here to say." Pyke's closed face didn't show the appreciation he had for the backbone it took to both come here and stand up to him the way his brother-in-law just had. He felt a slight rippling of hope that perhaps Vin-Chay could get back something of what had been taken away from him. He'd tolerate the younger Chay for just that reason alone. *Well, I'll try to.*

"Nik-Chay, what do you want?" Vin-Chay responded in a very tired voice.

"I want ... I want to tell you that I *do* care," his sibling answered softly.

"What are you talking about?" Vin-Chay asked in confusion.

"Remember that day you brought Constantine home? In the Miliplex corridor? You asked why the hell I'd care when he was born. And I never answered, but I do care. I just wanted you to know that. We all care. It's just—"

"It's just that none of you have the courage to defy your compassionate and fair patriarch and do something about it," Pyke interjected coolly as Vin-Chay shot him a disapproving look. He ignored it and went on relentlessly, letting his pent-up frustrations out on the silent young man before him. "You and your family have shamed yourselves so thoroughly in how you've treated your brother! If you had any clue as to how much he endured mentally and physically for years to just try to survive, let alone get back to his birth family, you wouldn't even dare face him to say you're sorry. Do you even *understand* that his strength and courage and intelligence alone may have saved your very civilization? And you've repaid him with anger, pain, and abandonment. Nothing I have ever done to him has matched the unjust cruelty of the mighty Chay clan. You and your family

sicken me!” Pyke whirled around and stormed out of the chamber, leaving the two Chays alone and wordless for a few long moments.

Vin-Chay understood and shared most of his spouse’s feelings, although he had never voiced them. He was torn between following Pyke out to castigate him for his uncharitable attitude and words, or holding him close and thanking him for sticking up for him when he was so unable to articulate those same thoughts. He decided he’d do the latter when he and his younger brother finished their uncomfortable discussion. He turned back towards Nik-Chay, and studied him silently for a long moment before speaking.

“Go home, Nik-Chay,” he said quietly. He turned to lead his brother from the chamber. Nik-Chay stopped him with a firm but gentle hand on his arm. Their eyes met.

“I’m sorry,” Nik-Chay said simply. “The last thing I ever wanted to do was lose my brother again once I’d gotten him back.”

“You didn’t ‘lose’ me, Nik-Chay. You and the rest of the family threw me away.” He paused, a neutral look on his face. “I’ll see you out now. Come.” He led his silent sibling out of the culturchamber to the front door of the house, and opened it and stepped aside to let his brother pass. Nik-Chay stepped outside and turned back for a moment.

“May I see the children again sometime?” he asked hesitantly.

“That’s probably not a good idea,” Vin-Chay answered evenly. “I wouldn’t want them to get used to someone who really isn’t a part of their family or lives, and who may abandon them at a moment’s notice when they fail to live up to expectations. Good night.” He closed the door, and the younger Chay was left standing alone and rigid in the agrihouse courtyard before he could rouse himself to board his craft and numbly set the autonav on a course back to the Chay compound.

Pyke was waiting for Vin-Chay when he entered the hearthchamber. The Osiran said nothing but strode to the fireplace to warm his hands over the gentle heat. He felt so cold. The children were gone; Colyn and Bahrtok had evidently taken them to the nutrichamber or the second tier. After a few moments, Pyke came up from behind him and wrapped his arms tightly around his disturbed consort. Vin-Chay took pleasure and comfort from the familiar touch, and just let the physical sensations of their close bond soothe his troubled mind and heart. Pyke rubbed his cheek against Vin-Chay’s shoulder, his consort’s silky, long hair brushing his own face.

“I’m the last person who would ever want any contact with a member of your family,” Pyke began softly, “but perhaps your brother’s tentative overture is

something you both need at this point. Even I can see that he's really hurting and he's sincere. You can try to make other people believe that it isn't important to have some member of your birth family in your life, but I know better. And I don't want to see you in this kind of pain."

Vin-Chay remained silent, and Pyke nuzzled and caressed him with gentle, soothing motions. His spouse did know him too well, as no one ever had. Except perhaps his father and Nik-Chay. He loosened himself from Pyke's grasp and faced him.

"Part of me wants my brother back, but part of me is so ... angry, and I don't know how to get past that," Vin-Chay replied.

"We both know what anger and bitterness and implacability can cause, Vin-Chay. If I had not been so consumed by those emotions, we wouldn't be together. We *should* be, but those were all the wrong reasons for starting our relationship. It was a miracle that we built a life with one another. But those feelings, for whatever valid reasons, sometimes need to be put aside for forgiveness and understanding. I think ... I think in the long run you would lose far too much if you persist in rejecting a reconciliation with someone you truly love and need. And who could benefit your sons by being a part of their lives."

"And you?" Vin-Chay smiled.

"And I can tolerate just about anything if it makes your life and our sons' lives better. Even one of your relatives," Pyke ended easily.

"We'll see," Vin-Chay said gently, just as the security system signaled another visitor. Pyke looked at his spouse curiously as they walked to the front door to see who was visiting now.

Vin-Chay slid the door open and stared at the agitated face of his younger brother. Nik-Chay stepped inside purposefully and faced his older sibling, a determined look on his face and his arms defiantly akimbo.

"I'm not giving up that easily, big brother!" Nik-Chay said angrily in perfect Ptolemii. He stood his ground, missing the amused look on his brother-in-law's plain face.

Vin-Chay gave Nik-Chay a hard look, and then let his face soften as he put his arms around his brother and said, "I love you."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“All is in place,” Crown Prince Chay Shayne stated decisively to the high-ranking warriors and statesmen gathered in the Miliplex’s main assembly hall. From his position at the main speaker podium he could see the sea of tense yet determined faces that stared back at him from their seats. He and the primary commanders of the Osiran fleet—including his hated Ptolemii son-in-law—were clustered at the front of the assembly. They had driven the review of the tactical and civilian-defensive procedures they would no doubt have to implement in a very short time. The approaching Ptolemii fleet would arrive at the Osiron perimeter in two days; a battle was imminent.

Cassian noted the intense look on his friend’s face as Vin-Chay’s eyes remained riveted on his father. The two young warriors were seated in the front row, along with the other primary warriors who would be on the starships that would lead the defense of their world. Pyke would naturally be in command of the *Renegade*, along with his firmly entrenched command clique. Chay Shayne would assume command of the new, Ptolemii-based flagship, the *Independence*. Sar-Chay would retain command of the *Liberty*. Although it chafed at his ego, Dom-Chay was still too junior an officer to assume his father’s previous command of the *Victorion*, despite the fact that four months earlier he had been promoted to sub-commander. The *Victorion* was now under the command of the renowned Commander Tay-Rue, a close cousin of Jor-Rue. Her fearlessness had been instrumental in pushing High Commander Savins back from his attack on Osiron years before. Dom-Chay retained command of the Panther *Starchaser*, and the commanders and captains of the three remaining secondary starships maintained their positions as well.

The blond warrior shifted uncomfortably in his seat as he tried to keep focused on the discussion and questions between the people near the podium and those in the main assembly. He felt unfocused and nervous, worried about his family’s safety. He had moved Zulikka and his daughters into a spare chamber at Bahrtok’s agriplex, believing they would be safer there than in their tri-tier in the heart of Etrusca. The capital city was undeniably a prime target for any enemy fire if the Ptolemii managed to push that far beyond the Osiron perimeter. He

felt they would be as safe as possible located so many kilometers from Etrusca in the Tuscany countryside. Or so he hoped, as did Vin-Chay, who was equally concerned about his family's safety. Both of his families—the Ptolemii naturally had the pre-war coordinates of all of the royal compounds, and these would also be attractive targets for any enemy commander who wanted to score a very personal victory against the recalcitrant Separatae.

He noticed Dom-Chay's eyes on them from a far position in the third row. The Heir-Prince obviously resented the fact that he barely outranked his younger, estranged brother, who would be resident on a ship far superior to his own, and in a position of power as well. The older Chay had always been torn between jealousy and affection, and the current situation did nothing to nurture the latter emotion. Nik-Chay sat beside him, stealing covert glances at the brother with whom he'd recently reconciled, although their renewed relationship was known only to Vin-Chay's Ptolemii family and Cassian. Cassian was glad that his friend had at least one sibling back.

Vin-Chay leaned close to Cassian and whispered a comment about the last question Sar-Chay had answered. Cassian nodded absently, hoping his friend wouldn't notice his lack of concentration. He was still worried about Zulikka and the girls. He savored the memory of the previous night, when he and his wife had made love as the full moon's light streamed into their temporary noxchamber and illuminated their intertwined bodies. He thought of her feel and touch and taste and smell, and he couldn't imagine life without her.

Vin-Chay picked up on his disquiet, and squeezed his hand reassuringly. He knew what his friend was feeling. He was worried sick about his Ptolemii family as well as his warrior relatives, who would be meeting an unknown all too soon. And he was concerned about Pyke. The commander was as competent and seasoned as any warrior on their planet, but his life was still at risk in any confrontation. Vin-Chay had no desire to lose the second father to his children, and the spouse with whom he planned on spending a lifetime. He knew his mate's fears matched his own; they were well suited in good times and bad. Pyke had tried to get him to agree to remain on Osiron in a backup position. Vin-Chay had refused: his place was with Pyke, and if that was on the *Renegade*, then that's where he would face the enemy and whatever future awaited them both. They both had an unspoken, gnawing fear of having their sons lose both parents at once at such a young age. They had put their legal affairs in order for just such a contingency: Bahrtok and Colyn were named as primary guardians, with Cassian named subsequently in the event of the loss of the children's grandparents. Nik-Chay was added only the day before as a third potential guardian.

The conference disbanded, and the warriors migrated towards their specific comrades as a prelude to the starship boarding procedures that would commence immediately. All of the men and women had made their farewells to their families by this time. There was nothing left to do but board, position, and wait.

As Vin-Chay waited for Pyke to descend from the podium, Chay Shayne brushed past him as wordlessly as usual, followed by Sar-Chay, who gave his nephew a slight smile and affectionate wink. The young warrior was surprised by the unexpected acknowledgment, and he felt a quick rush of affection and anticipation. He smiled at Pyke as his mate approached him.

"What's so amusing?" Pyke asked curiously.

"Nothing," Vin-Chay replied with a grin. "Just musing over the twists and turns of my family life, that's all."

Zandran grunted from behind them. "The term 'family' being a loose one, in most respects." He would never admit to his healthy respect or mild liking for his commander's Osiran spouse, but he was appalled at the manner in which the former princeling had been treated by his birth family.

"Zandran," Sharra said sharply as she came up from behind Cassian and frowned at her touchy mate. "Enough. We've discussed your unfortunate propensity for inappropriate remarks, haven't we?" Her raised eyebrow defied him to disagree or start an argument, but the commander thought better of antagonizing the woman who would become his wife in less than an hour. How had he ever gotten into this? He could feel the hairs on the back of his neck rising as he saw the amused grins and looks from his *Renegade* comrades. Well, he would put up with her challenging attitude this time, but once they were properly wed and he could assert his naturally superior husbandly rights, she would be put well in check. But for the moment, he shrugged stiffly and bit back a tart response.

Pyke smiled at the uncomfortable man and slapped him on the back. "Come," he said. "I believe we have a wedding ceremony to attend."

Zandran and Sharra were married shortly thereafter in the Miliplex temple by a Ptolemii priest, and blessed by Patri Julan as a sign of respect for their adopted culture. A very brief round of toasts followed, and then the *Renegade* contingent took its scheduled shuttle to the starship.

Pyke settled into his command quarters as Vin-Chay stowed the few personal items he had brought with him. The High Commander reviewed the strategic placements of the various Osiran vessels yet again, at least the tenth time he had done so since he had risen from bed at the 'plex before dawn. He was thoroughly preoccupied then with his tactical contemplation. He hadn't noticed his still-bedded spouse's keen observation of his careful movements as he dressed and ran a

thousand thoughts over and over in his mind. He had left their noxchamber still unaware of Vin-Chay's steady gaze. His spouse rose immediately after he left and dressed carefully in his own uniform. He studied his reflection in the mirror, and was pleased with the crisp, tan-and-blue uniform designed a year previously to blend the colors and designs of the two cultures that served on the *Renegade*. Theirs was the only vessel in the fleet that sported the new design; the style fit the personnel perfectly, and Vin-Chay felt only a sense of pride at what the uniform represented. He doubted his father would have felt the same way.

Vin-Chay stowed his gear and placed the new holographs of the children on Pyke's desk. He turned to see his spouse gazing at him affectionately. He smiled back, and then turned serious.

"We'll see them again, Pyke. Neither of us can ever allow ourselves to doubt that."

"I don't," Pyke said softly. "I can't allow myself to any more than you can."

Vin-Chay was about to respond, but was interrupted by a beep from the door to their quarters. Pyke signaled entry, and TutMose entered and saluted.

"Prepared to achieve orbit, sir. Jor-Rue has set the coordinates for the perimeter. At your command?" the commander said evenly, masking his own nervousness as well as his close comrades did.

Pyke nodded. "So ordered. Notify me when we've left Osiron's atmosphere. Octavian's crown ducts *are* operational? The kinks have been resolved?"

"Resolved and verified, sir. By your leave." TutMose saluted again and left as quietly as he had come. Vin-Chay met Pyke's eyes.

"I still think we should have notified the High Command of our system modification," Vin-Chay said mildly. Pyke shook his head.

"As much as I may want to trust your leaders, I still believe all our interests are best served in the long run by having at least one 'surprise' element in reserve. And I reserve the right to make some autocratic decisions about my ship. Anyway, Octavian hadn't even conceived of the enhancement until three months ago, and we wouldn't have been able to interrupt construction and implement it on the *Independence* by now—that vessel is barely finished as it is."

"All right," Vin-Chay said wearily. They had been over this before. His mate was being stubborn, but he wasn't entirely sure he should try very hard to sway him and hadn't really pushed the point. He left to check the engineering operations himself. Pyke watched him go. He looked at the holographs of their children for a long time.

Chay Shayne was as heavily involved as his Ptolemii enemy in verifying his own vessel's readiness. There had been a significant push to finish the new starship, and it was only a few months away from full operations when the planetary alert had been triggered. In the month since that had happened, work had been accelerated through non-stop shifts and doubled personnel, but there were still outstanding tasks remaining to be completed. Key technicians had reviewed critical abilities, simulations, and known gaps multiple times. They had determined that none of the functional disparities were critical to the basic performance of the ship, and the decision was made to launch it. No other decision could have been made at that point. Sensors confirmed that there were four of the modified-design starships approaching from Ptolem, along with several secondary Serpents. The two additional new nonagons were a stunning surprise to everyone; their development was apparently a much better kept secret than the three developed at Corso. Pyke had cursed himself silently when he learned of this—he should have done better research and uncovered and dealt with these new threats before they had left Ptolem, not now. God, not now.

His antagonist, Crown Prince Chay Shayne, also cursed him for the failure to learn of and disable the unexpected threat. It meant nothing to him that Pyke had managed to bring the Osirans a weapon that would give them a fighting chance; the oversight was simply one more thing for which to hate him. But he pushed most of the anger away and dealt with the matter as best he could. He worked closely with all of the primary commanders to formulate some kind of strategy to stave off the destruction or subjugation of their people. He and Rue Dann had directed carefully designed evacuations of many of their key cities' residents. They had also designed the extraction and storing of critical databank information in remote areas that were not likely to be attacked, such as the subterranean milipost at the bottom of the frigid Diluvian Gorge.

Shayne watched as Pyke and Vin-Chay supervised the completion of the *Independence*, and hated the fact that his errant son was handling his stressful professional and personal lives with grace, honor, and extreme competence. Part of him wanted Vin-Chay to fail without him; the other part was unbearably proud of the son who had reinvigorated then broken his heart.

His mind flashed to an incident only three months earlier, when he and his brother had passed through the Miliplex sector reserved for warriors' physical training. Commander Zandran was holding an intensive set of exercises for the some of the joint Ptolemii-Osiran *Renegade* crew in the main combat pod. Vin-Chay was present, as well as Cassian, Jor-Rue, Sharra, and Jaylan. He stopped and watched silently, well aware of Sar-Chay's hawkish eyes on him, as the war-

riors in the pod below the encased observation pavilion were put through a series of difficult, physically draining athletic exertions in hand-to-hand combat. He was gratified that his son appeared in obvious top physical and mental form; Vin-Chay's tall, well-muscled body was shown off to its best effect in the sleeveless, low-cut exercise tunic and high-cut skort, and mid-calf softboots. Chay Shayne's eyes darkened when he caught sight of the colorful, intricate tattoo on the inside of Vin-Chay's right leg—it was bad enough that his son had desecrated his left arm and shoulder with the so-called 'decoration.' Vin-Chay took the lead in several contests, and bested each of his unfortunate opponents very quickly.

Chay Shayne was about to leave with his brother when Pyke arrived in the training pod, carrying what appeared to be old-style, heavy swords. He noted with anger that the Ptolemii had the same leg tattoo as his son. His enmity was restrained by his curiosity, however, and he motioned Sar-Chay to wait as he watched the scene unfolding below. Pyke laid down the six swords, and selected a particularly lethal-looking blade. He grinned at his spouse, who groaned and picked up one of his own with resignation. The rest of the warriors moved back as far as they could and encircled the two sword-wielding combatants; it seemed that they had participated in this 'exercise' more than once. All of a sudden, without warning, Pyke thrust forward and brought his sharp, dangerous weapon in a downward arc towards his spouse and opponent. Chay Shayne's breath caught sharply, and he tensed as he watched his son focus and deflect the savage blow, then swing his own weapon towards Pyke as a loud screech of metal striking metal echoed throughout the pod.

The two spouse-warriors continued their heated battle for an interminable ten minutes as Chay Shayne and his brother watched, enthralled. They hadn't even realized that Dom-Chay and Nik-Chay had entered the pavilion, and were standing slightly behind their father and uncle as they, too, were engrossed in the stunning battle of wills and physical acumen. Pyke and Vin-Chay thrust and swung and parried as though they were true enemies, and the contest was one of life-and-death rather than simply one of training. Both men glistened under the perspiration of their exertions, their long hair loose and flying as they moved and ducked and battled. The warriors encircling them had gradually moved away into a half-circle.

Without warning, Vin-Chay changed a defensive parry into a brutal offensive maneuver as he began a non-stop, repetitive swinging at his opponent. At that point, all Pyke could do was protect his flank and deflect the constant blows. One last swing with all of his strength gained Vin-Chay a definitive victory when the screaming metal of his sword ripped Pyke's weapon from his hands. The hard

action sent the Ptolemii's weapon flying through the air and crashing into a pod wall ten meters away, its blade embedded into the wall for a good six or seven centimeters. A roar of victory went up from the Osiran warriors, and even the Ptolemii beside them clapped and shouted their approval. Pyke was anything but nonplused about the defeat; he flashed his spouse a genuinely appreciative grin and nod, and made a standard hand gesture signaling surrender.

As Vin-Chay stood in the middle of his congratulatory companions, glistening and slick, his wild, dark hair cascading over his shoulders to halfway down his back, his deadly sword's blade lightly touching the floor, Chay Shayne could barely breathe. "Magnificent," he whispered softly, his glittering brown eyes riveted on his middle son. He was completely unaware of his brother and other two sons. He couldn't see the equally appreciative and proud looks on Sar-Chay's and Nik-Chay's faces, or the depressed one on Dom-Chay's tense visage. The Heir-Prince watched his father give verbal and visual affirmation to his younger brother in a depth that he had never experienced as the Chay heir. Dom-Chay swallowed his bitterness as he followed his kinsmen out of the pavilion, while Pyke and the other warriors began a second round of training with the sharp, noisy weaponry.

Chay Shayne still harbored a secret hope that someday, for some reason, Vin-Chay would return to him. He would forgive his son, and they could return to the way they had always been. And that would alleviate the stress in his relationship with his younger son, Nik-Chay, who also served aboard the *Independence*. He was well aware of that young man's covert reconciliation with his brother, and the visit to the 'plex the day before. He had had surveillance on Vin-Chay and Pyke ever since they married, and nothing they did escaped his scrutiny. He had decided to let Nik-Chay continue his brotherly endeavors to smooth the way for their eventual reunion as a true family. And, he would run out of heirs if he persisted in disinheriting and disenfranchising his contentious offspring, even though Vin-Chay was still technically available for a reconciliation.

The arrival of his senior officers disrupted Chay Shayne's thoughts. They engaged in final preparations as they departed from Osiron and achieved orbit. The *Independence* was slightly sluggish; there had been no time to test its full capacity. Still, it was functioning more than adequately, and the remaining ships in the fleet were also at their maximum effectiveness thanks to their berrillium rather than alternate fuel source. The ten storage tankers of the fuel were priceless now. Chay Shayne reluctantly allowed that this tactic of his son's had given their people a much-needed edge in matching forces with the Ptolemii.

Sar-Chay's starship, the *Liberty*, flanked by his nephew's vessel, the *Starchaser*, moved swiftly into position near the two secondary vessels. The *Sacrament* and the *Sentinel* guarded the perimeter. The four ships positioned themselves in a line between Osiron and the direction from which the Ptolemii fleet approached. His brother's starship and Pyke's would move past the line to the forefront as the first line of defense. The *Victorian* and the fourth Panther, the *Legion*, were positioned closest to the planet as a final protection, should the Ptolemii forces break past the main Osiran contingent.

Sar-Chay thought of his son's and daughter's safety, and felt the same fear that cascaded through all of his family members, and everyone else on Osiron. Ren-Chay and Georn were on alert at the Mediplex; Roana was ensconced at the Miliplex, directing the monitoring and recording all activity and transmissions on the starships and on the surface. He was proud of his son and daughter, and again couldn't fathom his brother's infuriating attitude towards Vin-Chay. He regretted that he hadn't shown the courage to defy his patriarch and establish contact with the young man he so loved. Well, should the tide of this conflict turn in all their favors, he would rectify that situation once they were back on the planet. He knew what he had to do to protect the young man and his family, and he had every intention of carrying through his resolve, a resolve that would free him from the past as well.

He thought of his twin granddaughters, safely tucked away with Dom-Chay's son at the compound. He thought of Georn, whom he loved and respected deeply. He barked terse orders for another check of the ship's systems. He offered a brief prayer for his family and his people.

Dom-Chay's navigator verified the vessel alignment between the *Starchaser* and the *Liberty*. He confirmed that the *Renegade* and the *Independence* were moving up swiftly and would pass the perimeter line within the hour. Then all there was left to do was wait. And think.

Vin-Chay. A captain, and a well-thought-of one who had more than earned the rank, and had accomplished extraordinary things despite unimaginable odds. His pride in his brother was tempered with his lifelong jealousy and resentment of the place his younger sibling had always held in their father's heart. Dom-Chay had never understood why he couldn't manage to achieve the same level of affection and pride from his sire that Vin-Chay had. His intelligence and accomplishments were on the same level, and he had worked tirelessly to gain his parent's approval. And still his two younger brothers had managed effortlessly what he had not. He would never understand it, but he had come to accept it for the most

part. His peaceful, fruitful marriage with the gentle, loving Mandara had soothed some of his pain, and he thought that perhaps he was simply growing up. He was the father of a beautiful son, and his new daughter was only one month away from enriching his life even more. His brother did still chafe on his nerves. But he missed him so ... He damned his father, and promised himself that he'd get his brother back just as soon as the last conflict was over.

He shifted anxiously in the command chair on his con-center and watched the activity emanating from his support warriors. His new rank was heady, but he wouldn't allow his thrill at overtaking his younger brother's career path to divert his attention to his life-and-death duties.

Bahrtok stowed the last of his harvesting equipment in the utility buildings. Harvesting wasn't complete yet, but he thought it best to suspend operations until some direction had been determined in the anticipated conflict. He wanted to spend time with Colyn and the children. His wife was well aware of what was about to transpire in the skies above, but the children had been kept as sheltered as possible from knowledge of their precarious future, and the location of their parents. Constantine was too young to be affected, and Pyco-Chay was still young enough to only know that something was different in the house, but not what was going on and how it might impact him.

Cobahr was another matter. His parents had sat him down three days ago and explained in as much detail as possible what was happening, and what part they were to play in the unfolding story. He had handled the news well, but he was still clearly agitated and nervous. He had broken into tears several times in the last few days, most notably as he bid his parents good-bye that morning when they left for the Miliplex. He had spent the better part of the day trailing Bahrtok around the house and property, and the agriman had put the boy to work on minor tasks to keep him occupied. Zulikka, now resident at the 'plex for the duration of the conflict, finally took the child in hand and even managed to cuddle him into a peaceful nap late in the day. She hummed absently as he dozed in her arms. She watched her own daughters napping on the divan while Pyco-Chay played quietly on the floor. She was good with the children, and Bahrtok was grateful to her, and said a silent prayer that her husband would come home safely.

Dusk fell, and the combined families ate a silent meal in the hearthchamber. When the meal concluded, Bahrtok put a cloak on Cobahr, and took him out to the back yard enclosure so that they could watch the skies together. Cobahr held his grandfather's hand tightly.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Supreme Commander Sheban ordered her primary commanders, Savins, Aristine, Addrian, and Bartolomai, to align and station their nonagons directly parallel to the primary Osiran flagships, at a safe distance of fifty kilometers. She directed the action from her con-center aboard the *Triumvirate*, which under ordinary circumstances only Savins would have commanded. Their mutual residence on the same vessel made for occasional tense moments between them, given their personal relationship. Savins, however, unequivocally respected her power, authority, and abilities, and never let any such issues rise to the surface when they were amongst subordinates.

She ordered the *Monarch* and the *Sovereign* to remain in orbit at Ptolem, just in case the conflict turned against their forces at Osiron and their home planet became jeopardized. She would never leave Ptolem unprotected. Two secondary vessels patrolled the skies above Ptolem, as well as one above Isiin. She had brought three others with her to support the flagships: the *AmunRa*, the *Augustine* and the *A'Lexxa*. She knew well enough that Osiron had at least one new ship, and assumed that in the time since Pyke's mad flight, her opponents would be able to build at least one more. Her assumptions were confirmed when the two Osiran nonagons moved past the standard Osiran flagships and aligned themselves as the first line of defense. She assumed also that Pyke would command one; she believed that his slave consort's father would command the other.

She smiled at the thought of those two former—still?—enemies working in concert against their mother world. She wondered what part Pyke's slave-whore consort would be playing in this final scene. She was determined to find out. The measure of these men nagged at her and had for years, but especially now since their actions had so drastically changed her professional and personal lives and options, and her world. She resolved to find her answers, one way or another. Intimidation was certainly an option, as was striking without warning or negotiation. She had learned that tactic in bed so very long ago with a young fellow warrior who now commanded an enemy flagship not so very far away. She wondered what he would think if he had any gleaning of the dark places in her life and soul.

Her secrets. The fact that his unexpected defection had inadvertently saved his life.

Savins' gentle tap on her shoulder interrupted her musings. She looked at him curiously, and he nodded towards the main con-center monitor, which showed the positions of their enemies' fleet. The two Osiran nonagons were directly parallel to the line of Ptolemii vessels; one of the older Osiran flagships and three secondary vessels were in a second parallel line between the nonagons and Osiron. The second older flagship and another secondary vessel remained close to Osiron's atmosphere.

"They are in the standard primed positions. Odd, that. I would have thought that Pyke would choose a less traditional method of deployment," Savins said mildly. Sheban's own positioning was similar; it was odd of her, too, to present such a typical front to a dangerous foe. He hoped the mild rebuke in his voice was evident only to her.

She understood his concern, but also ignored it. She nodded. "Don't underestimate him. We've already done that, and look where it's gotten us. Besides, it may not be his call. I doubt the Osiran High Command has appointed a treacherous Ptolemii enemy to a decision-making position amongst the Council of Nine."

"True. But knowing Pyke, and his—shall we say—*unique* relationship with a valued member of the Nine Kindreds, I don't doubt that he is well placed. And he did bring them a critical weapon for their cause."

"Indeed. But they are still outmatched. There is every likelihood that we can prevail if we attack." Her face was frozen in utter determination, so much so that it sent a slight chill up Savins' spine. He had seen that look a number of times in bed when she had aggressively mounted and dominated him.

"And also the possibility of failure," he replied carefully. "They are a contentious, stubborn people. Something tells me they would prefer to perish as a race rather than live again under the auspices of their hated Pharoncy. A military victory would not mitigate that human loss."

"Failure is not an option here, Commander. Neither is excessive human loss. We will proceed as planned. Please run another check on systems and verify that we are at maximum capacity. Thank you."

Savins realized that he had been dismissed, in more ways than one. She wasn't easy. Worthwhile, in every sense of the word, but not easy. He nodded neutrally and removed himself to carry out her orders.

Sheban returned to her cursory review of the monitors and con-center activity. She wasn't worried; her people were as competent and as prepared as they came.

She assumed the Osirans would be as well. She unconsciously smoothed back the long, tightly clasped black hair that framed her delicate but determined oval face. Her light brown, almond-shaped eyes stared straight ahead at some unknown point near the Osiran perimeter. She smiled slightly to herself. It would be an interesting contest of strategy and wills. She had no doubt of the outcome, but getting there ... that would be the exhilarating part. She wondered who would blink first. In bed, it had never been Pyke. But would his obvious weaknesses associated with his inappropriate relationship with the Osiran slave make him do so now? She looked forward to finding out, and prevailing. There was no doubt of that matter at all.

Chay Shayne stood behind his *Independence* quarters' desk and stared coldly at his son. Nik-Chay had been antagonistic and reticent for weeks, and his attitude hadn't improved even as they boarded the same shuttle for the flight to their flagship. The Crown Prince was certain his younger son's attitude had to do with his disapproval regarding his father's treatment of Vin-Chay. He pushed away his own disquiet at his actions so that he could face his son with an air of righteousness and determination. Still, he acknowledged to himself that he missed his second son, and held a grudging if silent admiration for him, and wanted him back. But he would not tolerate any more overt disobedience from Vin-Chay's brother. It was bad enough that the young man had gone against his dictates and re-established a relationship with his sibling. Chay Shayne was tolerant to a point and glad in a way, but in another, it chafed that two of his heirs were so obstinate and disrespectful to him. One more undue act of disobedience on Nik-Chay's part would be his last as a prince of the Kindred of Chay. He had to impart that now, before they all became engaged in a life-and-death struggle. The moment to assert his authority might pass; he couldn't let that happen.

He decided to deal directly with the matter after he ascertained that all systems were ready for any confrontation. As the flagship moved towards its final position, he ordered his son to his quarters so that he could make his own position as a father and commander very clear. He was well aware of the many sets of eyes on them as they left the con-center and took a painfully long, silent verticulator ride to the command quarters' tier. Nik-Chay followed his father into his quarters, and he stood rigidly in front of Chay Shayne's desk, as the Crown Prince stared at him coldly and relentlessly. To his credit, the young princeling didn't flinch. This gave his father a great deal of satisfaction. He had his brother's strength. That was why Chay Shayne loved them both so.

"I know," Chay Shayne stated flatly as he locked eyes with the younger man.

"Know?" Nik-Chay responded evenly. "Know what?" *He knows.*

"I know," his father explained slowly, "that you have been in contact with your treacherous brother. Don't even bother trying to deny it—I have had him under surveillance since his arrival, and I have seen—"

"You have been *watching* him all this time?!" Nik-Chay exclaimed, shocked at his father's actions rather than at the fact that his actions had been rooted out. He stared at his father in disbelief at his unwarranted invasion of Vin-Chay's life. It was bad enough that Chay Shayne had disclaimed him as a son, but to treat him with such complete disregard for his rights of privacy—

"Of course," his father growled irritably. "I needed to ensure that he was not acting in any more of a contrary fashion than his insane attachment to that devil has already prompted. As well as ensuring that my grandson is being raised properly—"

"Grandsons—you have *three* by Vin-Chay, remember?" Nik-Chay interrupted icily.

Chay Shayne felt his heart start to race angrily as his face turned to stone at the outrageous suggestion that he should consider the two whelps of the devil's bloodline *his* grandsons. "I remember many things," he answered coldly. "I remember that not only am I your father, but your Crown Prince and your commander as well. You will respect that and act accordingly, or you, too, will suffer the consequences."

"Meaning you will disinherit and disenfranchise me as you have my brother? Well, Father, right now that couldn't mean less to me." Nik-Chay paused for a brief second as he realized that he meant every word. He met his father's eyes with determination and went on. "You had no right or call to treat him as you have. He has done nothing to warrant it—*nothing!* He is an exceptional man and son and brother, and deserves far better than his own family has given him. Far better. At least he's getting that love and appreciation from his spouse, who, by the way, is *not* a devil, as much as I hate to admit that. Why can't you just accept him as he is, and be grateful to have him back in our lives? And before it's too late, if anything happens in this conflict that would end any chance for us to be a family again."

Chay Shayne swept from behind his desk to stand centimeters from his quarrelsome offspring. He did not like being challenged by anybody, but particularly by a child on whom he had lavished love and care all of his life. *How dare he?*

"Do not ever question my authority or actions again," Chay Shayne said slowly. "Ever. Or I will take the same action against you as I did your brother. I guarantee that."

"Then do it!" Nik-Chay snapped. "Because I intend to continue seeing my brother and his family. I will do everything in my power to rebuild the love and trust that used to be there before you and Pyke and your passions and tempers tore us all apart! Pyke at least has seen his folly and tried to make amends, but you—you are so, so ... *arrogant* and righteous in your belief that only you can be right, that I don't think—"

Nik-Chay's heated words were stopped abruptly when his father delivered a stunning open-hand blow to the left side of his face. The young man rocked backwards and nearly lost his balance as the shock of his sire's actions stopped him cold. He stared at his father in disbelief as he wiped away a small trickle of blood from his split lip with the back of his hand. His eyes were still defiant; his sire's still furious. Neither said a word for long seconds that forever redefined their lives.

"Get out," Chay Shayne said quietly. As Nik-Chay turned slowly to leave his father's quarters, the Crown Prince went on. "And I mean out in the most complete sense of the word, Lieutenant. I don't want you in my life, and I don't want you on this ship. I will let the shuttlebay know that you will be departing as soon as you can arrive there."

Nik-Chay whirled around and stared at him. "You can't be serious. You're evicting me from this ship? Now? Am I supposed to return to Osiron and be removed from our fight at a critical time? You can't do this!"

"I most certainly can," Chay Shayne replied coolly. "As well as relieving you of your investiture. Consider that done as well. You have no business wearing that uniform, and being on this ship. You will board a shuttle and remove yourself back to our planet as the civilian you now are. Do not force me to further jeopardize this vessel by requiring me to enlist an armed escort to see that you carry out that simple order. *Will that be necessary?*" he finished evenly. *Please, please, Nik-Chay—do not defy me this one important time.*

Nik-Chay stared hard at his former commander for a moment. He shook his head slowly. "No, that won't be necessary, sir. I will be able to board the shuttle and transport myself to a more suitable location than your presence." He nodded his head stiffly and turned on his heel to leave, wiping away another small trickle of blood which oozed from his cut lip. He winced at the swelling across his cheek and up to his left eye. He fought back any show of tears that would indicate how badly his father had just hurt him, physical pain notwithstanding. *God—this must be what Vin-Chay felt all those months ago and ever since. I'm so sorry, brother.*

Chay Shayne closed his eyes once his son had left the chamber. *Thank God. At least one of my sons will be safe and away from what may come. Vin-Chay, Dom-Chay—if only I could protect you as easily, my sons.*

Pyke's eyes were riveted on his own con-center monitors as Jor-Rue completed his maneuverings into position. All weapons' systems were activated. Octavian was standing rigidly beside his modified correlators, his eyes never leaving the flash of numbers and information that rippled across his monitor as he ran and reran checks to ensure that all shields and weapons were in place. There was an anticipatory tension in the air, but also one of excitement and determination. Pyke's crew was primed and ready. Sub-Captain Burran broke his concentration.

"Sir," the older officer said. "It appears that a shuttle has launched from the *Independence*. Its initial course was back towards Osiron, but it has suddenly changed course and is heading towards us instead."

"How many aboard?" Pyke asked curiously.

"One, sir. Shall we hail?"

Pyke nodded, and Burran opened a frequency to the shuttle. Whoever was piloting it refused to acknowledge or respond. This breach of procedure would normally have put Pyke on edge, but something inside him said there was no danger in the offing. He waved a hand of dismissal at Burran when the second attempt failed to evoke an answer.

"Let the shuttle dock and bring the pilot to my quarters immediately. Any information forthcoming from the *Independence*?"

"None, sir," Burran answered, frowning. Supreme Commander Chay Shayne must be aware of the lone shuttle and the failed attempts of the *Renegade* to contact the pilot, but he had neither taken action nor issued any informational communiqués. Strange, and unlike him. Burran watched Pyke leave the con-center after he had contacted Zandran and Vin-Chay and issued orders for them to attend him in his quarters.

When Pyke arrived at his quarters, Vin-Chay and Zandran were already there and waiting for him within.

"Jor-Rue told me about the shuttle that's about to dock. What's going on?" Vin-Chay said by way of greeting. Pyke shrugged and seated himself behind his desk, motioning for the two men to be seated. They complied, and Pyke gave Vin-Chay a strange half-smile.

"No idea. Your father hasn't been exactly forthcoming in explaining his unknown pilot or said pilot's mission in coming on board. I expect we'll know

shortly, though. Until then, however, I want updates from both of you on your evaluations of the *Independence's* functional capabilities."

"She's sluggish," Zandran said promptly. "She doesn't have the full acceleration or maneuvering capabilities of our ship. That makes her an unknown. And *that* makes her somewhat of a liability. We're outmatched as it is, and we can't even fully depend on one of our own to perform up to full potential." He cast a sideways glance at Vin-Chay, expecting a sharp retort. There was none; Vin-Chay agreed with Zandran and felt guilty about being disloyal to his father. But Zandran was right; the situation was precarious for all of them.

In the silence that followed Pyke contemplated their options. He queried both men about contingencies and alternate tactics for nearly an hour until someone signaled for entrance. An angry-faced Burran entered his quarters, saluted, and stepped aside to allow their unexpected guest to enter after him.

Vin-Chay's lips parted slightly as he rose. "Nik-Chay! What are you doing—my *God*," he ended abruptly as he saw the purplish swelling and cut lip his younger brother was sporting. He moved closer to the younger man and impulsively reached out to gently touch the damaged cheek, but Nik-Chay waved his hand away irritably.

"I'm fine. It's nothing to be concerned about." He faced Pyke directly and gave a terse nod of his head. "Commander. I am requesting assignment to your vessel, effective immediately. I am no longer in possession of a lieutenant's investiture, so any position will do. I simply wish to participate in the conclusion to this conflict. Will you consider my request?"

"No," Pyke said flatly. Vin-Chay turned sharply to stare at his spouse. Pyke ignored him and went on. "I don't have to consider it. I can always use a good warrior on my flagship. Commander Zandran will take you to stores so that you can exchange those civilian garments you're wearing for a proper *Renegade* uniform. Did you bring any gear with you?"

Nik-Chay shook his head. "No, sir, just what I'm wearing."

"Fine, then," Pyke said. "Zandran, after the Lieutenant is suited up, settle him in one of our spare quarters and procure an assignment for him commensurate with his engineering talents." Pyke smiled at an unbidden, evil thought. "Assign him to work with Octavian on the activation procedures for the crown ducts."

"Aye, sir," Zandran acknowledged as he impatiently motioned for the new *Renegade* warrior and Burran to follow him out of Pyke's quarters. Nik-Chay saluted Pyke stiffly and met his brother's eyes for one brief moment. The compassion and acceptance he saw in them tugged at his heart, and rather than assuage the guilt, they only made it worse. Pray God that would change in time. Pray

God he would have the chance to make it truly right with his brother and Pyke and their children. And someday with his father.

When the three men had left the chamber, Vin-Chay turned to his spouse and gave him a mock glare, then a soft smile.

"Thank you," he said.

"For what?" Pyke replied airily. "Good warriors are hard to come by, and I'm not about to turn one away when he can clearly add to the glory I plan on acquiring in our unequivocal victory." Pyke's light tone and amused look changed to serious ones a moment later.

"I don't understand your father, Vin-Chay," Pyke said softly. "It was unfair and painful enough with what he did to you, but now he turns on another son? What has Nik-Chay done except to return to being a brother to you? I just don't understand."

"Neither do I. I always thought I had a good handle on what drove my father, his passions, his—aversions. But now it seems I really didn't know the man at all."

"It's hard to know the soul of another human being. We are such complex creatures. Who can ever say what drives any one of us?" Pyke stared hard into his spouse's eyes. "I think I know your soul as well as any man or woman ever could, or will. Even so, I know there are deep, sometimes dark places within you that I will never know. Nor will you know mine. And perhaps that's all right, too. As long as the darkness and solitude don't hurt the people we love."

"I will never hurt you, or our children," Vin-Chay said quietly as he reached out to touch his mate's face. Pyke closed his eyes and let the soothing stroking of his spouse's hand ease his longtime guilt and regrets and pain. Only Vin-Chay could do this. For the rest of his life, only Vin-Chay ever would.

Their peaceful moment was shattered by a signal from the con-center. They left their quarters hurriedly as Jor-Rue notified them that the Ptolemii nonagons were moving in synch towards their perimeter.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Ptolemii vessels and the opposing Osiran vessels were now in tense alignment at a distance of twenty kilometers from each other. They had been in this proximity for over forty-eight hours, with no offensive action or any communication forthcoming from the Ptolemii flagships. Pyke wondered who was in command—Savins or Sheban? An unbidden, long-dormant thought of a twenty-year-old Sheban combing her waist-length, black hair while he dressed to leave her academy quarters interrupted his concentration. He pushed back a guilty thought of pleasure, and returned his thoughts to where they should be—on the present, very possibly deadly matter at hand. He caught Vin-Chay's eye. His spouse was looking at him with a curious gaze. Pyke realized that his intuitive young mate had undoubtedly caught him daydreaming, and probably wondered about the cause. Perhaps he would tell Vin-Chay someday about Sheban and what they had meant to each other in those days so long past. Perhaps not. Vin-Chay did have a jealous streak, almost as wide as his own.

Pyke realized that TutMose was trying to get his attention. He forced himself back to the *Renegade's* con-center and asked his commander to repeat his query.

"The *Independence* hasn't been able to elicit a response from our—I mean the Ptolemii—main ship. Should we try, sir? They haven't made any threats or demands. We have to know what their exact intentions are if we're to respond effectively," TutMose asked mildly, aghast that he had made the 'our' mistake. He hoped no one had really caught it, but he doubted that was the case. Many of the Osirans still viewed their *Renegade* Ptolemii comrades with a skeptical eye, and his mistaken word wouldn't have put any of those qualms at ease.

Pyke hesitated. Officially, Chay Shayne was in command of the Osiran fleet, and had the only legitimate power to make that decision. But he hadn't elicited any response. That worried Pyke. The stationary silence was a sound psychological tactic on the part of the Ptolemii fleet, but the enemies couldn't stay in a state of hedging forever. Pyke wanted to try, but unless it was necessary, he wouldn't try to subvert his father-in-law's authority without warrant. The restraint chafed mercilessly at him. He glanced over at the con-center engineering station, where Nik-Chay stood close to Octavian as the two men intently studied the crown

duct verification coordinates. His brother-in-law was a fine officer. Given the right set of circumstances and time, he might even acquire a mild liking for him. Possibly. Vin-Chay was standing next to Jor-Rue and resetting a few scan procedures against the main Ptolemii flagship. So far, they had produced no new information other than verifying the number of warriors aboard, and the weapons' systems coordinates' readiness mode.

He made a decision. "Contact the *Independence* and request permission to attempt a communication of our own."

TutMose nodded and started to comply, but before he could open a channel to Chay Shayne's vessel, the quiet on the con-center was broken by Jor-Rue's shout.

"Commander! The—"

"I see it," Pyke interrupted sharply as he leaned forward in his chair and stared at the focused scene on the main monitor. One of the outer Ptolemii nonagons had made an unexpected and fast move away from the flagship line. It headed at maximum speed towards the Osiran line. Seconds later, as the alarms on the *Renegade* issued a Code One warning to all personnel, the second outer Ptolemii nonagon broke away. It headed on an elliptical course towards Osiron's far side, around the *Independence*. Nanoseconds after that maneuver, the remaining two Ptolemii flagships broke diagonally at ninety-degree angles to position themselves at the respective fronts of the *Renegade* and the *Independence*. The Ptolemii secondary vessels remained stationary, waiting.

"Reverse and forty-five down!" Pyke shouted to Jor-Rue. The sub-captain immediately set their vessel on a backwards course towards Osiron, as it dipped lower and on an angle from the Ptolemii flagship heading directly towards it. Jor-Rue's eye caught a flash on the scanning correlator and saw that the third Ptolemii vessel was heading directly for the *Independence*. Both Pyke's and Chay Shayne's flagships would be engaged within moments; the two older Osiran flagships would be left on their own to deal with the remaining nonagons as best they could. He had no more time to muse as they all realized that the closest Ptolemii nonagon had opened fire.

Sar-Chay reacted as quickly as he could to the sudden Ptolemii maneuvers. The *Sentinel* was the closest vessel to the Ptolemii nonagon. It had moved to intercept but was quickly disabled by four concentrated blasts from the enemy vessel. Sar-Chay ordered the *Liberty* to intercept the vessel, which was heading around the perimeter and towards Osiron. His navigator informed him hurriedly that if the Ptolemii vessel maintained its course and wasn't intercepted, it would

reach the atmosphere directly over Etrusca within two hours. Sar-Chay fired off a command to the *StarChaser* to let his nephew know the situation so that he could act as a secondary interceptor, should the *Liberty* be unable to intercept. This would most likely occur, as the *Liberty* struggled to match the rapid, agile maneuvering of the Ptolemii nonagon. The *Victorion* was already on a course to intercept the fourth enemy nonagon. It wouldn't be able to assist Sar-Chay's vessel in its desperate bid to stop the swift enemy ship from reaching their home planet and capital city. Sar-Chay saw that his nephew's craft was already speeding to catch up with the Ptolemii ship. He made a command decision to cease pursuit, turn, and move back to support the *Victorion* in her battle.

High Commander Bartolomai kept the *NovoOrdo* on a course around the Osiran secondary vessels and towards a specific rendezvous time and point, as calculated by the planet's revolutions and his vessel's own maximum speed. His orders were clear: score a direct, definitive hit on central Etrusca. Supreme Commander Sheban had also made it clear that there were no secondary targets, even should this tactic fail. Bartolomai silently refused to discount this option. The Separatae had to be made aware of who was in the primary bargaining position, and failure to attack any target would weaken the Ptolemii position. He respected Sheban, but as he and Savins had discussed, he wasn't about to let that happen. He felt a thrill of eventual victory as he badly damaged the Osiran vessel *Sentinel*, which had tried to intercept him and had paid for its miscalculations and inferior technology dearly. The Osiran ship drifted in space as the remaining eighty-six warriors aboard it tried to seal the damage and hang on instead of joining their nine hundred comrades in death.

Dom-Chay had seen the Ptolemii actions for himself even before his uncle had signaled the request for backup. The nonagon moved relentlessly around the Osiran perimeter. It headed unwaveringly towards a position that would place it directly above Etrusca as Osiron completed its latest axis revolution. The Chay sub-commander desperately requested projected coordinates if his vessel was or was not able to intercept. If he intercepted within an hour of the enemy reaching Osiron's atmosphere, he would be able to at least fire on it before it could fire its own weapons on Etrusca. If he intercepted it earlier, and it recognized that, the enemy ship could fire its weapons earlier, to at least inflict some damage. Depending on the timing, the Ptolemii vessel would likely fire at either the eastern or western outskirts of the capital city. The Chay compound lay in the eastern outskirts. He had to prevent either action. A fleeting thought darted through

his roiling mind: Vin-Chay's Ptolemii family resided in the western outskirts. He ordered his navigator to activate the booster power that would increase their speed to a dangerous level. He had to stop that ship no matter what.

Tay-Rue was nearly thrown from her con-center position as the blast from the Ptolemii nonagon managed a glancing strike against her right flank. She opened fire and just missed returning the damage. The *Victorian* careened left and moved swiftly away from the attacking Ptolemii vessel to be able to survive and continue returning fire. Its commander and crew suddenly found themselves in the middle of a blasting firestorm between their vessel and the *DemosKratein*, High Commander Addrian's flagship, which had already destroyed the secondary vessel *Sacrament*. She noted that the *Legion* had pulled back from the fray after it had witnessed the situations faced by its sister ships. It needed to conserve itself for the possible eventuality that it would be the last bastion of rebellion if those ships were destroyed. She knew the agony its commander must have felt in making that painful decision. She also knew that if Sar-Chay's sudden turn towards her proved too late, she and her crew were on their own against the more powerful enemy.

"Fire!" Sheban said heatedly. Her weapons' officer complied, and minutes later the *Triumvirate* registered a direct hit on one of the Osiran nonagons. Sheban wondered fleetingly if it was the stolen one or the new one; the markings on both reflected the Osiran culture now. She believed it was the new one, since the ship seemed to be reacting slightly more sluggishly than her own ever would. That could mean it wasn't completely up to capabilities. She hesitated only for a split second. Although she professed to be on an eventual bent of appeasement with these contentious people, part of her still wanted to *win*—needed to win against *him*. Her blood was rushing as the heat of battle fueled her passion. She gave in to her desire to be the ultimate victor, letting her passion override any vestiges of conciliatory intentions.

"Fire again!"

Chay Shayne angrily snapped orders to his con-center crew as the *Independence* re-stabilized and his crew picked themselves up off the floors. The damage reports started feeding into the con-center correlator, but there was no time to assess the damage before a second hit from the Ptolemii flagship blew apart the main shuttlebay. The crew desperately tried to seal the pods that had been ripped

open even as Chay Shayne's weapons' officer scored a minor hit against the relentless enemy. The Ptolemii vessel didn't even slow down.

Pyke managed to elude a direct hit from the Ptolemii vessel that dogged his own. Jor-Rue interrupted his concentration on his own defensive and offensive tactics.

"Sir! The *Independence* has been hit again!"

Vin-Chay's jaw tightened. He watched helplessly as his father's flagship took the second, damaging hit. He avoided looking around for his brother, who was no doubt immersed in his own agony at their father's precarious position, and his guilt at not being there by his side. If Vin-Chay had looked at his younger brother, he would have seen that the man was clenching his fists so tightly that his hands were white—as white as his distraught face.

Pyke made a split-second command decision that he knew probably wasn't in his best interests even as he voiced it.

"Octavian! Random fire pattern at the one that's after us. Now! Jor-Rue—get us under the one that's firing on the *Independence*. Now!" he yelled.

The *Renegade* fired twenty simultaneous bursts of its compressed berrillium in a spread aimed at High Commander Aristine's flagship, the *Rising Sun*. A half dozen of the bursts hit, momentarily diverting the ship from its single-minded pursuit of Pyke's vessel, although its shields prevented any substantial damage. Those moments were all Pyke needed to move his vessel away from his own fight and towards Chay Shayne's ship. Out of the corner of his eye he caught the fleeting image of Vin-Chay, Nik-Chay, TutMose, and Octavian running towards the verticulator door on their way down to the main crown duct engineering pod. The main circuitry pod was the best place to engage the *Renegade's* new, untried maneuver, just in case something went wrong and an immediate fix was required. It was also the most dangerous place to be—the pod abutted the main engineering pods, which were at maximum level now as the ship raced towards the damaged *Independence*.

The *Independence* was down to half power. The first hit had damaged its shields; they wavered, and then dropped enough for the second hit to have a devastating impact. The severe damage to the shuttlebay had sent a chain reaction through the right flank of the ship and into the engineering pods. Four of the nine pods had to be sealed off. That significantly decreased not only maneuvering but also firing capabilities. The pre-launch systems' check had identified this as one of the potential areas of damage should such a hit have occurred. At the time

it was deemed a minor risk and an acceptable one, especially in light of the critical timing of the launch. The decision was also based on the original Ptolemii nonagon design: the two new ships seemed to have more sophisticated weapons and capabilities.

Chay Shayne's vessel still had three-quarter' weapons' capabilities, and he ordered the same type of scatter-burst firing that his son-in-law had. Three of the remaining five pods' ducts jammed. He knew in a split second, even as the remaining two ducts sent their berrillium bursts out towards the enemy, that the *Independence* would be destroyed in the next return of fire from the Ptolemii.

He watched the bursts strike minor areas of the attacking Ptolemii flagship. He felt a strange calm descend over him as he smiled slightly to himself, thinking that at least he had gotten his son off the doomed vessel. Nik-Chay would have been safe had he returned to Osiron, but at least he was on Pyke's flagship. That, right now, was the safest and truest of the Osiran vessels—and that was all that mattered to him. He watched as the Ptolemii nonagon turned its main forward firing bay towards the *Independence*. He braced himself for the destructive impact that would come momentarily. He felt himself being thrown to the floor of the con-center as the *Independence* was engulfed in a brilliant shower of fiery sparks that obliterated the view on the monitor, and his own private world went dark.

Sub-Commander Dom-Chay ordered his navigator to veer off the elliptical course from their pursuit of the relentless Ptolemii vessel. The maneuver would bring them dangerously close to Osiron's atmosphere at an even more dangerous speed. It was the only way they had the barest chance to overtake the far superior nonagon and prevent it from striking their planet.

Four of their ten heat shields failed as the *Starchaser* raced to cut off the enemy vessel, but the other six held despite the excessive heating of the ship's skin. Nearly all of their protective shields were rendered inoperative by the drain on the power systems. Dom-Chay heart raced in anticipation as his vessel neared its Ptolemii target. Both ships entered Osiron's ionosphere as the continued revolution of the planet and their speeds brought them closer and closer to the capital city. Dom-Chay realized that he couldn't catch the other vessel unless he descended as far down into the stratosphere as he dared. By his calculations, pushing the *Starchaser* to the limit in this way would intercept the enemy before the flagship reached Etrusca. He ordered the limit to be pushed and ordered full forward weapons' readiness for firing on his order.

It was now or never. The Ptolemii vessel was a bare one hundred kilometers west of Etrusca when Dom-Chay had no choice but to give the order to fire. The

Starchaser's burst of fire barely managed to reach the enemy ship, but it did. The *NovoOrdo* rocked with the reverberations from the glancing hit. Its systems were preparing for firing on Etrusca, but the strike from Dom-Chay's vessel triggered them immediately and several of the blasts that would have been aimed directly at mid-Etrusca were released in a random spread of bursts throughout the Tuscany countryside.

Bartolomai swore in anger and ordered the ship to turn and take out the rogue Osiran vessel that had temporarily altered his plans. The *NovoOrdo* slowed, turned, and faced the smaller Osiran secondary ship that had the audacity to attack it. Its forward shields were at full power, unlike the aft shields, and unlike the *Starchaser's*. The Ptolemii commander smiled slowly as he ordered the destruction of Dom-Chay's vessel, which was speeding directly towards him in a straight line. Even though it was clear that the Ptolemii vessel was going to fire, the smaller vessel kept coming straight and true, as though bent on ramming Bartolomai's ship. He couldn't know that this was, indeed, a desperate Dom-Chay's final order.

Bartolomai's weapons' officer complied with the order, dropped the shields, and aimed a concentrated burst of fire at the *Starchaser*. Split seconds later, the Chay Heir-Prince and his crew died without ever really knowing what had hit them. Dom-Chay had expected nothing less, but it was the only way left to stop the Ptolemii vessel. His last thought was, *Warrick, I love you.*

Unfortunately for Bartolomai and his crew, the *Starchaser* had been close enough, and had enough unexpended, concentrated berrillium left in its pods to send showers of the deadly fuel back towards its unshielded destroyer. The Ptolemii commander realized too late what the effect would be. His last breath was a curse on all Osirans as the berrillium missile bursts hit his ship. They pierced thousands of holes in the ship's skin and raced through the ducts and inner linings, causing the *NovoOrdo's* own fuel reserves to explode the vessel into millions of pieces. The fiery shrapnel rained down on Etrusca and its countryside for a radius of one hundred kilometers in all directions.

The impact had come with almost no warning, save a few seconds of roaring noise that accelerated as it approached the house. One moment, Bahrtok was standing in the hearthchamber staring idly out of the sliding doors, and the next, he was brutally thrown to the floor as the roof and walls of the house caved in on him.

When he regained consciousness two hours later, his head throbbed in agony. He could feel a damp, sticky warmth covering the left side of his face. He tried to

move, and screamed as a sharp, deep pain ripped through his lower leg, and another simultaneously through his ribcage. He looked down at his leg, which seemed to be on an unnatural angle. *It's broken*, he thought. He tried to focus, and scanned the remains of the hearthchamber, which now sat below an open sky; the roof was gone. Bahrtok dragged himself to his feet, gritting his teeth to keep from screaming again as his broken leg sent waves of numbing pain through his left leg and up to the hip.

"Colyn!" he yelled hoarsely. "Cobahr! Where are you?" He heard Pyco-Chay sobbing and frantically tried to follow the soft sounds as he shoved and tossed debris around the hearthchamber, ignoring his leg as he desperately tried to find his grandsons. He managed to find the toddler under a jagged beam. He groaned and pushed the beam away and dragged the child out by his arm. The boy was sobbing openly, and covered with dirt and splinters and lacerations, but seemed to be in fairly good shape. He hugged his grandfather tightly. Bahrtok hugged him back. When he opened his eyes he spotted Constantine nearby, lying absolutely motionless on the floor next to an equally motionless Zulikka. Her body partially covered the small baby's; her daughters, who had been playing near her on the floor, were nowhere to be seen. Neither were Cobahr and Colyn, who had been in the nutrichamber when the house had been blasted. He hushed Pyco-Chay and struggled, wheezing, to maneuver his broken body towards the silent baby and woman a few meters from him.

Mandara screamed and screamed as she held the small, lifeless body of her four-year-old son in her arms. She barely felt the healthy baby daughter kicking in her womb as she wailed over her beloved, lost child. The deadly shards of the exploded *NovoOrdo* had shot through the walls of the Chay compound, as they had through the walls and roofs of many nearby residences. They ripped through her shoulder and side like liquid fire, and through her youngest sister-in-law Rosaline's thigh and hand. Warri-Chay had been playing with his twin cousins in front of the wide lucitium window that overlooked the sea. Both girls survived with minor cuts and bruises, but the little boy hadn't stood a chance between the metal and glass shards that ended his life as quickly as the commander of the destroyed vessel had ended his father's. Mandara screamed again, but at a sharp, unexpected pain in her lower body. *No! Oh, no—not now! Dom-Chay!*

Many large pieces of fiery, berrillium-covered scraps of the *NovoOrdo*, along with the thousands of sharp metal shards, rained down on Etrusca, mainly in the central part of the city. The Mediplex survived only minor hits; none of the criti-

cal medical facilities or procedures were disrupted. A direct hit on the Culturplex took out most of the historical archives, and nearly six dozen central residence buildings were demolished entirely or damaged beyond repair. This included the tri-tier where Cassian's family would have been resident had they not relocated to the agriplex, where Bahrtok now desperately searched for them. Georn, Ren-Chay, and their team of physicians and medtechs became immediately inundated with casualties that started to stream in from the center of the capital city, and then the outskirts. Neither man had any more than a few brief seconds to consider the sickening possibility of how many of his own family members, in their homes and in the skies above, may have been injured or killed in the fighting. All they could do was hope.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Cassian was already in the main engineering station with Sharra's support contingent when the four con-center officers burst through the door. Octavian ignored everyone else and went straight to the main coordinate correlator. He wordlessly pushed aside the lieutenant scanning the activation procedures, and began verifying and modulating the initiation sequence as Vin-Chay stood over him anxiously. Nik-Chay firmly moved his brother aside as he maneuvered next to Octavian and activated the second coordination correlator. He riveted his eyes on the procedures as they completed in sequence, and, so far, flawlessly. He had been more than just a little impressed with the system enhancement when Octavian had taken him in hand two days earlier and had given him a crash course in the crown ducts. Neither man had slept more than an hour or two since then as they readied the system for possible use. That time appeared to be now.

Cassian looked at TutMose anxiously. "I'm almost afraid to ask," he said, "but how is our fleet doing?"

TutMose shook his head. "Not good. The *Independence* is damaged and needs reinforcing now. We've got our own nonagon dogging us, but Pyke temporarily blindsided her and we're heading towards Chay Shayne's ship to assist."

"What about the others? They haven't broken through our line?" he finished as calmly as he could, although a brief thought of Zulikka and the girls raced across his mind.

"They have," Vin-Chay said evenly as he looked towards his friend. "One of them is heading on a course around Osiron and the *Starchaser's* in pursuit. I wouldn't put chits on her catching the ship, though," he finished. An unbidden fear for his older brother's safety was immediately pushed away. *No distractions*, he thought angrily as he watched his younger brother and Octavian complete their preparations.

Octavian turned to TutMose. "We're ready," he said flatly.

TutMose nodded and signaled Pyke at the con-center. "Ready to engage, sir."

"Stand by," Pyke snapped as he ended the link. He stared at the forward monitor as he watched the *Independence* and her Ptolemii opponent. The *Renegade* was closing in on them rapidly as Jor-Rue's navigation coordinates aimed them

towards the underbelly of the Ptolemii flagship. Their opponent had sent several bursts of fire back towards them, but only two had glanced the vessel in a minor way. The commander of the Ptolemii ship clearly saw that Pyke's vessel was undamaged, and seemed to turn its focus back on the *Independence*. It would only be a matter of minutes or even seconds before the Ptolemii vessel fired, and Chay Shayne's ship would be obliterated. Pyke wasn't going to let that happen.

The *Renegade* changed course and swerved towards the Ptolemii ship's underside, her own determined Ptolemii nonagon following relentlessly. The *Renegade's* external nine-sided weapons' turrets spun around the body of the ship, throwing off their berrillium fire in three-hundred-and-sixty-degree spiral patterns, keeping the Ptolemii ship at bay. Pyke knew that the shields of both Ptolemii vessels would be active, but he also knew that the weakest point of the shields was in the direct, lower center of the ship's underside. This was where the residue from the fuel pods exited the ship on regular schedules. Pyke's vessel and Chay Shayne's had made design changes to provide more protection for this minutely vulnerable area; Pyke hoped his former comrades hadn't. He'd know momentarily.

Jor-Rue maneuvered the ship under the Ptolemii nonagon. His navigational correlator automatically fed the enemy's location and statistics into the crown duct pod correlator eight tiers below the con-center. Octavian's bright, alert eyes registered the moment of synchronization when the Ptolemii ship's residue dispersal ducts aligned with the *Renegade's* expulsion crown ducts. At that second, a large, concentrated burst of pure berrillium automatically shot through the cylindrical ducts leading to the top of the *Renegade* and out into space, directly at the other nonagon's dispersal point. The *Renegade* shifted into maximum speed during the critical seconds it took for the berrillium to pierce the weak lower shields of the Ptolemii vessel and thrust into the ducts as it began rapidly flashing through the Ptolemii ship.

The *Renegade* cleared the Ptolemii ship before the latter began to explode, but not before a minute ricochet of the weapon fuel re-entered the expulsion ducts of the *Renegade* and flashed back down into the flagship's own ducts and firing tubes. Octavian saw the unexpected reaction and cursed under his breath.

"Backflash!" he yelled as he started to seal off the expulsion ducts. "Shut down the secondary engineering initiators *now!*" he threw at Nik-Chay, who whirled around to run towards the pods on the far side of the station. Vin-Chay followed his focused brother over to the pods as Cassian and TutMose started evacuating as many of the pods' support personnel as possible. Octavian desperately rerouted or shut down various components and threads throughout the internal primary

engineering system for the crown ducts. Nik-Chay performed the same functions for the secondary systems while his brother watched tensely, wanting to help, but not daring to break his focused sibling's concentration. *He knows what he's doing*, Vin-Chay thought in virtually the same second that an explosion rocked the engineering region, and the men and women present were inundated with flying metal debris and shards and smoke and fire.

Pyke watched the monitor expectantly as the direct crown duct hit on the Ptolemii flagship caused it to explode within what seemed interminable moments. The explosion sent a brilliant flash of light in a five-thousand-meter arc between the *Renegade* and the *Independence*. The High Commander barely had time to register that Chay Shayne's flagship had survived the blast before he and his con-center crew were rocked with a savage reverberation. He thought for a moment that the rocking was due to shockwaves from the exploded Ptolemii vessel. Seconds later as the con-center correlators started to receive data from the ship's systems, he understood that something had happened in his own engineering section. *Vin-Chay*, he thought desperately. *No!*

Vin-Chay regained consciousness and struggled to push himself off the floor. He noted that Nik-Chay was also all right and scrambling up as well. The brothers could barely see through the smoke until the exhaust ducts kicked in and started sucking out the bad air and haze. Vin-Chay could see TutMose pulling Cassian off the floor. Octavian was lying face down near his pod station; at least a dozen other warriors were also down. Nik-Chay reached Octavian and gently turned him over. His face and upper uniform were covered with blood and he was unconscious, but still breathing. Nik-Chay struggled to pull the man onto his back. Vin-Chay managed to maneuver the injured sub-captain onto his brother, and Nik-Chay moved towards the exit as Vin-Chay went back to help his comrades evacuate the station until it could be shut down and secured. Octavian had managed to secure nearly all of the functions and reroute the critical ones to the secondary station and pods two tiers above.

Cassian and TutMose were already attending other downed warriors who survived and needed help leaving the station. The three men moved injured warriors out of the station and into the corridors where other warriors who evacuated the injured to the infirmary met them. As Nik-Chay worked feverishly to finish the shutdown procedures, Vin-Chay commlinked with Pyke on the con-center. He let him know they were all right and the damage was being contained. He could hear the relief in Pyke's voice as he acknowledged. As Vin-Chay turned away

from the link he was nearly deafened by an explosion from the station that knocked everyone in the corridor to the floor. He was stunned from the vicious crack of his head against the corridor wall opposite from where he had been standing. He couldn't hear in his right ear; the eardrum had been shattered. He swayed when he managed to get to his feet. He was dizzy and disoriented, and his head throbbed. He ignored the other warriors around him and pushed his way into what was left of the engineering pods' station.

"Nik-Chay!" he screamed. "Cassian! Nik-Chay!" He saw a bloody, disheveled TutMose a few meters away, kneeling near a supine body. Vin-Chay ran to him and saw that the sub-commander was kneeling over Cassian. Vin-Chay wordlessly checked for his friend's pulse; it was there, and it was strong. He looked at TutMose.

"Get him out of here, sir. I've got to find my brother." TutMose nodded wordlessly, grasped Cassian's arms, and pulled the man out of the station and into the corridor. Then he re-entered the pod and began helping to get out other wounded warriors.

Vin-Chay aimed for the secondary station where he had last seen Nik-Chay. As he ran to the correlator he felt himself slide on something wet and very slippery, and he went down hard on his right side. He heard a sharp crack and vaguely wondered which bone he may have broken now. He didn't have time to mull over his latest injury as he looked to his right and saw his brother lying a scant meter away from where he had landed. Nik-Chay's eyes were closed. He was lying on his back. His left arm was missing; it had been ripped off near the shoulder from the blast that had occurred only two meters from him as the expulsion ducts had buckled under the compressed backflash. Blood was pumping out of the stump of the missing arm in an alarming stream. Vin-Chay crawled over to his brother and ripped off his techbelt. He fastened it onto the stump as a tourniquet even as his mind registered the location of the missing arm, three meters away. The limb was shredded beyond repair; the physicians wouldn't be able to re-attach it.

He had to get his brother to the infirmary, but he also had to complete the duct shutdown procedures or they risked another explosion and even more loss of life and damage. He had no choice. He left Nik-Chay on the floor and pulled himself up to the correlator station, ignoring the sharp pains that ripped through his head and hip. The main duct correlator was damaged; he had to move to the secondary ones until he found one that could receive the final shutdown commands. It took less than two minutes, but it seemed like an eternity as the sight of his badly injured brother occupied the forefront of his thoughts. He was vaguely

aware of TutMose, who had returned to the station to pull more warriors out. The commander saw Nik-Chay on the floor and his face blanched. He made a move towards the Chays, but Vin-Chay waved him off towards another warrior moaning closer to the older man.

"I've got him!" Vin-Chay called as he completed the shutdown procedures and bent down to pull his brother onto his back. He struggled under Nik-Chay's dead weight as his own injuries slowed down his reactions. The dizziness was making him nauseous as he finally managed to drop his brother into the corridor, where a medtech waited and started checking the young man's vital signs. He looked up at Vin-Chay. "We've got to get him to the infirmary now, sir," he said. Vin-Chay nodded and signaled another lieutenant over to assist the medtech.

"I have to go back. Take him now," Vin-Chay said, turning away without giving his brother a backward glance. He couldn't. *Please let him be all right*, he thought as he started to run back into the pod station. He saw TutMose directly in his line of vision for a split second, standing and carrying a seemingly familiar wounded woman towards the door. Then an aftershock from the last explosion rocked the station one last time, and the commander and the unconscious woman he was carrying were crushed under the weight of a pod retaining wall that collapsed on them in a single second.

Vin-Chay gave a strangled cry and rushed to the tumble of flesh and metal. TutMose's face was undamaged and visible; it was oddly peaceful. Vin-Chay checked his neck pulse; there was none. He numbly checked the wrist pulse of the woman who was all but invisible under the commander and wall. She, too, was dead. Something registered far back in his mind as he stared at the rings on her limp right hand. *Oh, no*, he thought. *Oh God, no*. He sat back on his heels and stared unseeing at them for a long moment before he was able to rouse himself and scan the chamber for any more survivors. He saw two more downed warriors moving, and he ran to them. He grasped each one by a wrist and dragged them out of the station before a second aftershock rumbled through and two more walls collapsed. Vin-Chay hit the security indents near the station door and sealed the entire station off. He closed his eyes and turned around, his back against the wall. He slid down to the floor. He allowed himself a few brief moments to mourn the dead and fear for the living. Then he propelled himself off the floor and towards the infirmary.

Chay Shayne reseated himself after the lighting in the con-center resumed and he realized in mild shock that his flagship hadn't been destroyed—the shower of lights and shocks had come from the destruction of the Ptolemii vessel that had

been about to open fire on the *Independence*. He barely gave a thought as to the cause of his salvation, but he knew it had been the *Renegade*. It had to be. That damned Pyke did know how to fight.

He barked orders to his officers and they responded with the damage reports pouring in. The sluggish flagship was badly damaged, but still serviceable and maneuverable. He snapped for an update on the battle between Sar-Chay's ship and its Ptolemii opponent. The *Liberty* was in trouble. Two of the secondary Ptolemii vessels, the *AmunRa* and the *Augustine*, had joined the battle against the ship and her sister, the *Victorion*. Chay Shayne was informed that the *Renegade* appeared to have only minor damage, and was more than capable of engaging in its battle with the nonagon that had been pursuing it. As far as he knew, his sons were safe; his brother was not. He immediately ordered a change of course, and the *Independence* veered away from the *Renegade* and the *Rising Sun*. His flagship raced towards the *Liberty* and the *Victorion* to join their fray. He wondered briefly about the fourth nonagon, and where it was over his home planet.

Pyke watched as his father-in-law's ship changed course and headed towards the other Osiran flagship. He planned on doing the same if he could vanquish the relentless nonagon firing on him furiously as it reacted angrily to the destruction of its sister ship. Zandran directed the *Renegade's* return fire from the weapons' pods as he tried to push away his concern about his friends attending to the engineering situation. Sharra was down on the eighth tier as well. He felt his soul twisting into knots as he pushed away his fears for his wife of less than a week. His beloved wife, he thought in wonder, who was carrying his two-week-old, embryonic son. He pushed the limit furiously as he ordered his various firing tactics.

Sar-Chay was informed that his brother's vessel had survived and was racing to join his own battle. He felt a sudden lightness of heart as he anxiously waited for Chay Shayne's vessel to reach his own and help destroy the enemy. All three Osiran ships together had to be able to do that, hadn't they? The con-center was rocked by another direct hit by one of the Ptolemii secondary vessels. The reverberations brought the warrior out of his musings as he focused on the attacking enemy, and the approaching help.

High Commander Addrian of the *DemosKratein* noted the approach of the Osiran nonagon as his ship's weapons' turrets whirled again to spin off another round of berrillium blasts at the *Liberty* and the *Victorion*. The commanders of

the older flagships were tenacious, he thought in silent admiration. He would hate to have to destroy them or any vessel containing such warriors. He wished that Sheban and Savins had not been so hard and fast about attempting an unequivocal victory against the Osirans; the matter could very well have been settled in compromise. They had seemed bent on that originally, but it appeared that the power they had achieved back on Ptolem had corrupted them. He never would have expected that. The point of those officers' actions was now mute, he thought, as he acknowledged that the destruction of the *Triumvirate* now placed him in the second highest command in the fleet, right after High Commander Aristine of the *Rising Sun*. He wondered if Aristine was feeling the same way as he battled the other Osiran nonagon. Aristine was the only one on their side who could make a decision now to end this. *Would he?* Addrian wondered as another blast from the *Liberty* glanced off his left shields.

Aristine assumed that the commander of the Osiran nonagon he was now battling was Pyke. The unexpected, audacious moves and crown duct maneuver was characteristic of the sometimes unpredictable, always novel High Commander. He wondered what else the rogue warrior might have in store for him. He wondered briefly if he should just end this now for all of them and count himself lucky that his fleet had only lost one nonagon. True, their three secondary vessels were still viable support, as two of them assisted in the battle against the three Osiran flagships. He thought that using them might result not in complete victory, but possibly even more casualties and an extended conflict. It had gone on long enough—too damn close to twenty years. This had to stop. He could stop it ...

Chay Shayne's vessel moved purposefully towards his brother's ship, and as soon as he was within firing range he ordered a non-stop round of spiral blasts to commence. They whirled out of his turrets and towards the Ptolemii nonagon. The Ptolemii vessel was now being fired upon by three Osiran flagships, and was returning fire relentlessly. The *Independence* was still sluggish, even more so since its damage from the destroyed Ptolemii vessel. Still, it could fire and support its sister ships. The Osiran nonagon presented a clear-cut threat to the enemy. Chay Shayne maintained a non-stop round of firing to give the *Liberty* and *Victorion* time to regroup and maneuver. The spiral blasts continued even as they drained the power and flexibility of the *Independence*. After a few moments of the concentrated activity, the shields dropped from all flanks of the *Independence*.

The threat from the Osiran nonagon was not acceptable. Addrian had the obligation to stop it. He ordered only secondary firing on the smaller *Victorian* and *Liberty*, and directed his weapons' officer to train on the *Independence* with a full forward firing burst from seven of the nine weapons' fuel pods. The officer complied; Addrian gave the order to fire. The *DemosKratein* opened fire on the *Independence*. The first and only burst blew the Osiran nonagon into infinity as the stunned commander of the *Liberty* watched in horror and felt his soul shatter into an equal number of pieces.

Commander Aristine signaled the standard "Truce" message to Pyke's vessel bare seconds after the *Independence* met its fate. Pyke signaled back: "Yes." Aristine contacted the *DemosKratein*, *AmunRa* and *Augustine* to cease fire, and issued the same message to its last waiting secondary vessel, the *A'Lexxa*. Pyke did the same for the members of the Osiran fleet that he could reach.

All ships from both opposing sides stopped, and waited.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Pyke and Crown Prince Rue Dann waited quietly and tensely in the *Renegade's* shuttlebay. The Ptolemii delegation, headed by Aristine, would dock at any moment. Over the past twenty-four hours, a tentative truce had been called. Preparations had been made to allow the highest ranking available representatives of the two opposing sides to meet, and determine if a final peace could be hammered out. Or, if the conflict and all the pointlessness and agony it bred would go on. No one wanted that.

Pyke turned as Vin-Chay came up from behind him. His limping spouse's face was a mask of neutrality, more so, even, than his own. The Osiran hid the depth of his pain well. The known loss of his father and older brother had sent him into a deep well of shock, grief and guilt. Pyke had seen the depth of his pain only for a few brief seconds as he had informed the young man in the infirmary of his lost relatives. Then, Vin-Chay's face had closed, and a chilly demeanor that showed not a whit of the man within replaced the emotion. Pyke hoped that his consort's pain would be assuaged at least by his younger brother's survival. The still unknown factor was the fate of their extended family. No information had been forthcoming as to the safety of their children and in-laws, nor of Cassian's family, and of the relatives located in the Chay compound. Standard communication channels threaded through the complex satellite system were wildly disrupted and unpredictable. Toxic berrillium residue saturated the layers of orbit where the webs encircled the planet, and technicians were feverishly trying to correct and reroute critical lines of communication. Several ships were sending shuttles back and forth from Osiron's surface to carry and retrieve urgent communicués as well as transport the injured.

All Pyke and Vin-Chay wanted to do was flee to Osiron and find their loved ones; neither had the luxury of doing so at this point in time. Pyke did find an excuse to send a grief-stricken Cassian down to the planet on a shuttle. He hoped the warrior would be able to find out everything they needed to know, and have his own pain of losing TutMose muted by the survival of his wife and daughters.

The Ptolemii High Commander, Aristine, had specifically requested that Vin-Chay participate in the negotiations not only as a representative of the powerful

Kindred of Chay, but as one of the men who had changed the course of their worlds. And, although Pyke was not a ruling member of one of the Nine Kindreds, Aristine would simply not consider any negotiations without his input. Aristine trusted Pyke's honor and integrity, whereas he had no measure of the other men or women who might participate in the critical discussions. He showed his trust by volunteering to board Pyke's vessel for negotiations rather than demanding that Pyke board his.

Pyke and his mate stood silently as the shuttle from the *Rising Sun* docked. Pyke motioned his warrior guard contingent to line the path from the shuttle to where he and his comrades stood. The shuttle door slid open soundlessly. Pyke saw Aristine standing calmly and poised as his unfathomable emerald eyes swept across Pyke, Vin-Chay, Rue Dann and the rest of the Osirans in the shuttlebay. He descended the few steps down from his shuttle and walked towards Pyke, his eyes never leaving those of his former comrade in arms. He reached Pyke and gave him a quick but respectful salute. Pyke returned the gesture.

Aristine allowed a moment to appraise Pyke's former slave consort. *Well*, he thought, *former slave. Probably still his consort.* He decided it would be appropriate to address the former chattel. He nodded his head formally at Vin-Chay.

"Please allow me to extend my genuine condolences on the loss of your father and brother ... Captain?" Aristine assumed the markings on the new uniform indicated the rank. "The Crown Prince was an excellent warrior and a fine man. His loss is substantial to all our people, not only to your family."

"The loss of any of our people is substantial, Commander," Vin-Chay responded coolly. "Hopefully, we can all end any more such loss in this meeting." His startling blue eyes glittered with an icy reserve that actually sent a chill up Aristine's spine. He would not want to meet this man in hand-to-hand combat, or cross him in any significant way.

Aristine smiled. Pyke's slave was a tough, intelligent opponent. A worthy one. *It should be an interesting discussion.* "Indeed," he answered mildly. He looked at Rue Dann and nodded his head.

"Your Highness, I assume?"

"Yes," Rue Dann answered flatly. He stared in cold antagonism at the Ptolemii, not bothering to hide most of his anger and hard feelings. Pyke thought it was detrimental to the proceedings; he might have to curb the Osiran's unproductive bent if it erupted to anything more vivid. A second later, however, Rue Dann caught his own attitude and mollified it; he, too, wanted this conflict over.

Rue Dann inclined his head towards the exit of the shuttlebay. "We have set up a councilchamber so that we can expedite this matter, Commander. If you and your associates will follow us, we can begin."

Aristine nodded and followed Rue Dann out of the shuttlebay. Pyke and Vin-Chay allowed the Ptolemii's two associates to follow—commanders both—then brought up the rear. The six men adjourned to a temporary councilchamber located near Pyke's quarters. Pyke noted with sadness the two guards at the door: Jaylan, who had insisted, much as she had at Isiin; and Burran, who replaced the once-present Sharra. Pain touched Pyke's heart as he thought of Zandran's loss. Like Pyke, Zandran would never be the same. He only hoped his cloistered, reserved friend didn't abandon as much of his life as Pyke had when he lost Coba. Pyke smiled gently at Jaylan as he passed her. The captain saw the compassion in her commander's face, and her heart clutched painfully as she fought back tears at the loss of her best friend.

The three warriors of Ptolem and the two warriors and Crown Prince from Osiron sat opposite each other at the rectangular bargaining table. Once Pyke initiated the holocam to record the proceedings, Aristine plowed ahead.

"Permit me to start, gentlemen. I assume that none of you wants to waste time by exploring the niceties of traditional negotiations, so I will simply lay out the situation. Will that be acceptable?"

"It will," Pyke answered evenly. He had known Aristine for many years. The man was smart, dedicated, and had honor. He was ambitious, but had never in the past seemed to allow that character trait to impact his considerable integrity. He imagined he could trust the commander as much as he could trust anyone in the Ptolemii fleet at this point. He wondered if the Pharon would honor whatever Aristine promised—that was the unsettling part.

"Fine. I think we can all agree that this final meeting of our forces must result in a definitive end to this conflict—one way or another. There is the very good chance that our forces will win. However, there is also the chance that your forces may prevail. In either case, in the long run, we both lose. This must stop now. As the ranking commander of our forces, I am assuming the position of decision-making for my world. Ptolem wishes an unconditional peace with Osiron, which it will now recognize as a separate, independent world rather than a colony of our mother planet. Your people resident on Ptolem and Isiin have already been freed, and those who wish to be repatriated to Osiron will be allowed to at the conclusion of this process. We will need to establish a mechanism for future negotiations to derive immigration, trade and financial agreements between our two separate peoples, and—"

"Just a moment, Commander," Rue Dann interrupted, an unmistakably shocked look on his face. "Are you saying the Pharon will be *reasonable* about this whole matter when he learns of your actions? That would be quite a turnaround, considering his rather implacable history."

"There is no Pharon," Aristine answered evenly, waiting for the stunned expressions he knew would come. The reaction he had expected only came from Rue Dann; Pyke and Vin-Chay remained completely impassive. *God's Blood, they're good warriors*, thought Aristine enviously. He was glad he didn't have to kill them.

"What are you talking about?" Rue Dann asked slowly.

Aristine nodded at Pyke and Vin-Chay. "After your comrades here left Ptolem, things, shall we say, changed radically. The Pharon had dragged us all down to a barbaric level as it was with slavery. He seemed determined to complete that sad state of affairs with genocide."

"Genocide?" Vin-Chay asked sharply as he leaned forward.

Aristine nodded. "He ordered the annihilation of the remaining slave and free Osiran populace."

"God's Blood," Pyke said softly. He cast a covert glance at his spouse, who was rigid and tight-lipped as he contemplated what his plan and actions had precipitated for the people left behind. The people *he* had left behind.

"Yes," Aristine continued. "However, that was, unfortunately for him, the last mad directive his military or his people would take. Sheban and Savins organized a military coup of the Pharoncy. There wasn't much opposition at that point, except, of course, from the Pharon and his inner circle. They managed to gather a small, loyal contingent around the Pharonic compound, but that fell easily enough under Savins' assault. The contingent surrendered in less than a day. Naturally," he finished coolly, "they were executed."

"And the Pharon?" Pyke asked.

"Rit-su. A painless one, of course—the man was a coward at heart. He swallowed poison, but not before he had ordered the deaths of his wives, concubines and children. Several of his ministers followed suit, including Orestes and D'Nar. To Jocasta's credit, she chose to remain alive and be taken for trial. It was the desire of a madman to subjugate your people once and for all, but that madman and that desire no longer exist."

"If the Pharon is dead, then who is ruling Ptolem?" Vin-Chay asked.

"Well," Aristine said with an odd half-smile, "it would to an extent have been Sheban and Savins, but their deaths have made it necessary to effect yet another rearrangement of power."

"Sheban?" Pyke said. The odd tone of his voice generated a curious look from his spouse.

Aristine nodded. "She and Savins formed a triumvirate of power after she declared herself Supreme Commander of our forces." His eyebrow arched. "I am the third side to that triangle. And now the only side. That is another matter."

"You said 'to an extent.' What did you mean by that?" Rue Dann asked.

"I believe everyone at that point had had enough of a singular tyranny. We were all ready to try something new, or old, as the case may be. It was simply a matter of having a catalyst to the process." He looked directly at Vin-Chay. "That would seem to have been you, Captain," he said evenly.

He continued. "After the Pharoncy and inner circle had been disposed of, the three of us established ourselves as the ruling body of an embryonic republic. We defined a secondary body of representatives from each of the provinces as our new senate. This has been a long, grueling process, and is still being refined even as we negotiate here. We will be revisiting virtually all of our laws, and commercial and social practices to see where we can improve the quality of our civilization. It has been far, far too long, our descent from the ideals we once had. We need to get back to them."

"That doesn't explain your initiation of a battle with our forces," Vin-Chay said coldly. "Does it?"

Aristine shook his head. "No, it doesn't. That wasn't completely expected by many of us, either. Sheban and Savins started out with the best of intentions, for all concerned. They were focused, and honorable. And then I think they changed as they grew closer as mates—"

"Mates?" Pyke said sharply. *What the hell else did I miss back there?*

"Indeed. It was a well-kept secret for many months after the coup. I think their personal relationship, combined with their military and political power, made them more conducive to trying to placate many of the old hard-liners in power. Those people still wanted to attempt a victory over Osiron, so that they could reincorporate the people and resources of the planet back into the mother world. I believe that was why Sheban made a last attempt at a final victory. I *must* believe that she would have been here now instead of me had the heat of battle and the furious fighting on your side not resulted in the destruction of the *Triumvirate*. She was a decent commander, if not a decent person. The situation simply got away from her, much as it did over time on Ptolem. And you of all people should know how focused and passionate she could be about a relationship and its expectations," Aristine finished quietly. Vin-Chay stiffened at the last words, and didn't look at Pyke. This was a subject that they would deal with pri-

vately. He wondered just when Pyke had bedded the woman. *While we were together? Does that really matter now?*

The men in the councilchamber fell silent for several long moments as each mused over issues important to him. Pyke thought of Sheban, and her lost promise. Vin-Chay thought of his father, who had not lived to see this moment in time, and should have. Rue Dann thought of the restructuring that might have to occur on Osiron after the peace had been signed. Aristine was anxious to get Pyke alone to make his proposal.

Rue Dann broke the silence. "All right, then. You have stated your position quite clearly. However, you have stated no details as to reparations, timelines, or anything else related to defining the final result."

"No. Those are issues that need to be hammered out by representatives of our respective worlds once a treaty has been signed. We expect from you an honorable response to our proposal. There will be no retribution against any Ptolemii resident on your planet, or any forthcoming attempts to conquer *our* world. We wish peace, and prosperity for all of our Sisters. There *are* many details. I suggest another set of negotiations at Isiin, but this time, genuine negotiations and a firm resolution to all issues. The sooner, the better, although we understand your need to address the devastation on your world resulting from Bartolomai's attack on Etrusca, and the loss of many of your key citizens."

"But we *do* have a true peace now, don't we?" Rue Dann confirmed.

"We do," Aristine answered quietly, as he put out his hand across the table towards the Crown Prince. Rue Dann hesitated only the barest of seconds before he grasped the Ptolemii's hand, and their conflict ended.

Aristine stood. All of his fellow negotiators followed suit. "I would like a few private moments of time with High Commander Pyke before I return to my flagship, Your Highness." He decided a conciliatory approach to the royal delegate would show the man that his intentions were genuinely honorable. Rue Dann inclined his head in agreement.

"By all means, Commander. I have a planet-wide announcement to make that has been long awaited." He hesitated. "I am grateful to be able to make this, for all of our sakes. I am grateful to you for the part you have played in it." He nodded and left the chamber, along with the two Ptolemii warriors that Aristine motioned out after him. Vin-Chay started to leave Pyke to his private conference when Aristine shook his head.

"Please stay, Captain. I would assume that what I have to say would be relevant to you, all things considered." He turned to meet Pyke's eyes and gave him an enigmatic smile. "I have a proposal for you, Pyke."

"Do you?" Pyke answered noncommittally.

"Yes. As I noted before, I am the remaining third of a ruling triumvirate back on Ptolem."

"Will you be when you return without a victory over Osiron?" Vin-Chay interjected evenly.

Aristine smiled at him. "I believe so. The *Monarch* and the *Sovereign* are still guarding Ptolem, and are commanded by officers quite loyal to me. There will be no further coups while I am away, nor insurrections. As it is, our new senate is quite occupied with revisions to our rules of government and commerce. I'm certain they are disinclined towards starting up any kind of internal conflict at this or any foreseeable point. The populace is well in hand. And they will be happy to have the war over no matter who wins, at this point, and as long as it doesn't mean that Ptolem has lost anything substantial."

"Except its honor," Vin-Chay responded coolly. He felt Pyke's eyes on him, but his spouse didn't chastise or interrupt him.

"Indeed," Aristine nodded. "Except our honor. We are trying to regain that, however, and I believe we have made a good start here." He turned to Pyke. "We can improve on that with the right people in power. I need two associates I can trust to hold faith with me and with our people. I would like one of them to be you, Pyke. Will you consider becoming one of the three Triumvirii who will help lead our people back from the darkness?"

Pyke's neutrality failed for a brief second as his eyebrows shot up at the unexpected proposal. Vin-Chay's face remained impassive. Aristine had a fleeting thought: *Perhaps I should have asked him.*

"I would tend to assume that that type of appointment would not sit well with many of our former comrades—especially given my actions on Ptolem and here on Osiron as well," Pyke responded mildly.

Aristine shrugged. "As I said, the populace is under control. And, I think most people recognize that you betrayed only the mad Pharon, not your people. You held true to the values our civilization was based on—values to which we wish to return. That is in your favor. Also in your favor are your strength, your intelligence, and your commitment. I cannot think of any values more needed or desired by our mother world. Can you?"

"And my spouse?" Pyke replied as he inclined his head towards a rigid Vin-Chay. *Ah*, Aristine thought. *He married the slave. Well done, Pyke—a member of the premiere royal Kindred!*

"Your spouse is to be valued almost as much as you. I take it the plan was of his conception, not yours?"

"Very true," Pyke said.

"Well done, Your Highness," Aristine said to Vin-Chay, tacitly acknowledging the former slave's exalted position as well as his cunning and skill. Vin-Chay nodded his head in acceptance of the compliment, but didn't correct Aristine's mistake in thinking him still of a royal lineage. The thought of his father's disenfranchisement stabbed at him.

Aristine continued. "I would consider it a wise move to appoint your spouse to a key position in the new order. If we are to reconcile with Osiron, it would be most beneficial to have a member of the ruling circle in close proximity to the Triumvirii. Such a trusted diplomat would be of invaluable assistance in negotiating the rough waters that we will traverse as we re-establish an interplanetary relationship. I would leave it up to the two of you to design an appropriate role for him, and any other of your trusted associates who would return with you. Naturally, your property and estate will be returned to you, along with a substantial compensation for the loss of anything due to your actions. Your in-laws' estate as well," he added quickly.

While Pyke seemed to mull the proposal over, Vin-Chay responded. "Who would be the third member of your ruling body? Not a member of the old order?"

"Not exactly. I was considering one of the remaining ministers, but one not particularly close to the Pharon's policies. She has never been associated with any reckless or inhuman activities."

"Vashira?" Pyke asked promptly.

Aristine nodded. "She is well thought of, and politically astute without having surrendered her humanity. I believe she would be most beneficial, and true to our needs. Would you agree?"

"Yes," Pyke said. The woman would be an excellent choice. As would have Sheban, had she sadly not lost her perspective at the worst possible time. *Ah, Sheban* ... Pyke looked Aristine directly in the eyes before he spoke. "I will need time to consider this matter, Commander. I trust an answer is not required immediately?"

"No, of course not. Our fleet will remain in Osiron's perimeter for a few weeks as we finish defining a peace treaty and make preparations to return to Ptolem. There is no hurry to make a decision. I realize that you have personal concerns that you need to attend to, and you need to discuss this between yourselves and with your family. Take your time, please."

Aristine put his hand out to Pyke, who grasped and shook it firmly. The Ptolemii commander then put his hand out to Vin-Chay, who hesitated only the

barest of seconds before he, too, took his former enemy's hand and ended his private war against the man's people. Aristine inclined his head and exited the councilchamber, leaving Pyke and Vin-Chay alone.

"Do you trust him?" Vin-Chay asked.

"I do," Pyke replied. "He has always been a man of honor. I see nothing to counteract that belief. His fleet still had the upper hand in ships and firepower. Had he wanted to pursue an absolute defeat, I believe he very well could have."

"Then I will trust him, too," Vin-Chay answered quietly. "But now, I must return to Osiron and find our family. Can you come with me?" he asked hopefully.

"I cannot," Pyke said softly. "I still need to assist Sar-Chay once he shuttles back and secure all of our fleet before I can turn over command and follow my own needs. You understand that?" He silently cursed his uncle-in-law for the unexpected quick trip back to the planet.

"Of course. But you don't need me for that right now, and I have to go home and find our children. I can't wait any longer. I know I'm abandoning my duty—"

"You have *never* abandoned your duty, and you're not doing so now. Go. Find them," Pyke said gently. He touched Vin-Chay's cheek for a brief second, and then his spouse was gone on his desperate hunt for their family. *Please find them. Please.*

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Cassian rested on the grassy knoll above the place where Bahrtok's agrihouse once sat. The building was a charred ruin now, with only two walls still standing. A hundred-meter-wide swath of burned grassland ran through the center of the house. Similar scenes of destruction dotted the surrounding countryside. He had raced his milicraft through the valley, past other charred ruins, past the swarms of people milling about in shock and hope and purpose as they desperately tried to find their own loved ones. Part of him hated to pass them by when he wanted to help, but he had to get to his family. He had done his duty in battle, and now nothing mattered except to find *them*.

His shuttle had been set at maximum speed to reach the Miliplex as soon as possible. He commandeered a commandcraft and sped it on a course to Etrusca's western outskirts. He arrived at the agrihouse at mid-day. The sun was at full peak in the blue sky, and everything was as it should be in so many ways, yet nothing was. He suppressed a strangled cry when he saw the remnants of the house. He barely stopped the craft when he flew out of it and started searching and screaming for the people he had left within. No one answered. He found no one, nor any trace of what had happened to them or where they might be. He climbed to the top of the knoll, where he could get a better look at the valley, and he called and called their names. Silence. He dropped down to the ground, exhausted, spent, sick with the fear that the loss of TutMose would only be compounded with that of the rest of his family. And Vin-Chay's as well.

Cassian wasn't certain as to how long he remained nearly motionless on the grass. Time seemed suspended; he felt disoriented. After a few moments, he got to his feet and set the craft on a course towards the neighboring town of Corsica. He arrived there to see hundreds of people trying to make the same sense out of what happened as he did. He tried to talk to some, to ask them if they knew anything about Bahrtok's family, but the dazed looks and stunned eyes held no answers.

He finally found a tavern owner he knew. Although the man didn't know what had happened to his family, he did manage to tell him that over a hundred people had been transferred by medtechs to the Mediplex in Etrusca. Cassian

navigated the craft at breakneck speed back to the capital city and the Mediplex. He had nearly a dozen close encounters with other craft illegally frequenting the Command airspace as they sought their own answers. He finally reached the Mediplex, where he had to push and shove his way past hundreds of frightened, often injured people who were trying to gain entrance. He didn't care about priorities at that point. He flashed his identification to security and was ushered past the hoards and into the complex.

Once inside, he demanded to see Georn, who administered the complex as well as being the Chief Surgeon. After a few moments that seemed like hours, the young officer expelled a sigh of frustration and relief as he spotted the older physician walking towards him from the verticulator banks. Cassian rushed towards him.

"Sir," he said, trying to catch his breath and trying to maintain some sense of calm. "I'm trying to find my family and Vin-Chay's. The agrihouse was—"

"They are here," Georn interrupted. He saw the look of absolute relief on Cassian's face, and felt a pang of regret that he would have to qualify that statement, and change that look. He was grateful that at the moment Vin-Chay was not with his friend.

"Sit down," Georn said gently, motioning Cassian towards a divan in the antechamber. He tried to take the officer's arm, but Cassian resisted and shook his head.

"No, please—are my wife and daughters all right? Vin-Chay's family? You need to tell me now, sir—please!" Cassian's desperate, expectant eyes tore at Georn's heart. He wondered how much more he could take after dealing with the casualties he had attending been for over twenty-four hours. He decided to approach the 'good' news first.

"Your daughters are fine, Captain. Minor cuts and bruises, and the older one has level-two burns on her back and legs, but they will be *fine* after treatment and rest. Your wife managed somehow to shield them with her body when the blast struck. She only had a few seconds, but the mother in her responded quickly, and because of that your children are alive and relatively well."

"Thank God," Cassian breathed softly. "Can I see them and my wife now?"

Georn paused for only a second. "I'm sorry, Captain. Your wife did not survive. I'm very sorry."

Cassian stared at him. What the physician said didn't register. Zulikka couldn't be dead; there was some mistake. She was too strong not to survive. She wouldn't leave her daughters without a mother, as she had been left without one. She wouldn't do that. He shook his head.

"There's been some mistake. Zulikka wouldn't leave us. She just wouldn't do that."

"Her identity has been verified, Captain. Vin-Chay's father-in-law confirmed her identity. There is no mistake. Again, I'm truly sorry."

Cassian stared at him dully before rousing himself. "Bahrtok? He is alive then? The others?" he said softly, terrified to know.

"He survived as well. A badly broken hip and leg, four cracked ribs and a dislocated shoulder, but he will recover. His wife was badly burned—level-three injuries. She is in our burnchamber in critical condition. She has an even chance of survival. Should she survive, she will need to go through intense dermal regeneration therapy."

"The children? Vin-Chay's sons?" Cassian said tightly. *Please, please.*

"Pyco-Chay will be fine. He has a lot of bruises and lacerations, and a broken wrist, but he will be just fine. He's in our standard-care unit being fussed over right now by my son." Georn hedged, and then went on. "Cobahr received substantial burns as well on his back and left leg. He was with his grandmother when the blast occurred. His injuries aren't as critical as hers, but there is level-three damage as well as level-two. He's awake and alert right now, and has been asking for his parents. He likes to chatter, doesn't he?" Georn said smiling, trying to put something of a positive spin on a painful situation.

Cassian nodded absently. "The baby?"

"The baby," Georn echoed quietly, rubbing his silver and blond beard roughly. "The baby is alive, but in extremely critical condition with serious brain and skull injuries. If he had received even minor burns, he'd be dead now, but your wife managed to shield him partially as well. He had apparently stopped breathing shortly before Bahrtok regained consciousness. His grandfather started him breathing again. Three times, actually, before help arrived to transfer them all here. I'll be honest. There's brain damage, but we won't know the extent for a while. My team is considering whether or not to remove the most badly damaged part of his brain and invoke neural regeneration pharmics and procedures. If we do that, his chance at surviving an operation is minuscule at best. I'd like to be able to wait and discuss options with his parents, but under the circumstances, I don't know when I'd be able to confer with them. This decision can't wait for very long. If I can't reach his parents, then I'll make the decision myself, and, quite frankly, the only one I can make is to operate."

Cassian stared hard at the physician. His own loss of TutMose and Zulikka was substantial, and the pain hadn't truly even set in yet. And to add to that, his

best friend had lost so much and could lose so much more. Chay Shayne. Dom-Chay. Perhaps Colyn and Constantine. What else? Who else?

"Any other bad news about our families you need to impart, sir?" Cassian asked in a hard, detached voice. He hadn't expected any, but the look on the physician's face set him immediately on edge: there was something else.

Georn nodded slowly. "Yes," he said quietly. "There was substantial fallout from the destruction of the Ptolemii nonagon while it was close to Etrusca. It rained debris and berrillium over a large radius not only in the western area, but in the eastern as well. The Chay compound was hit."

"How bad?" Cassian asked in disbelief.

"Several non-life-threatening injuries, but—one fatality. Dom-Chay's little boy, Warri-Chay. My granddaughters survived," he finished as he shook his head in wonderment of the randomness of it all.

Cassian closed his eyes and groaned as Georn went on.

"His mother, Mandara, went into labor from the shock. She delivered a premature but relatively healthy baby girl. They're both here. There is no doubt the baby will be well, but Mandara is another matter. Physically, she will be fine. Psychologically—at this point I'm not sure she'll ever recover. We just have to wait and see."

Georn put a gentle hand on Cassian's arm. "I know you want to see your children, so please come with me." He led the stunned young officer to the verticulator and took him to the fifth-tier children's section. The girls were in a private chamber, and shared a bed for mutual comfort. They were awake, and when they saw their father they cried out for him and stretched their arms out. Cassian pulled them close and cried for a long time.

Vin-Chay arrived at the Mediplex six hours after Cassian did. His cousin Ren-Chay greeted him and took him to a private chamber and told him everything. Ren-Chay felt a cold ripple of fear as his cousin showed no emotion or reaction while he delivered the painful news. He had seen that kind of shock before; some people never came out of it. Vin-Chay asked to be taken to Cobahr first, and Ren-Chay complied.

The nine-year-old was in a small, private burnchamber. He was half-awake when Vin-Chay quietly entered the chamber and stood over the transparent, domed healing pod that enclosed the boy. Vin-Chay rested his hands lightly on the dome as he stared down at his son. Cobahr's eyes fluttered open, and he looked up at his parent and grinned. The left side of his face was bright red with level-two burns, but the injury didn't detract from the beauty of that smile. He reached his bandaged hand up to touch the dome. Vin-Chay touched the same

place and felt a tug at his heart at the necessary barrier that prevented them from touching. *But only for a little while, my son*, Vin-Chay thought. *You will be fine. You must be fine. I can't possibly live without you. Oh, Father—I understand you so much better now.*

Vin-Chay stayed for only a brief time, talking to Cobahr and reassuring him. He watched Cobahr's eyes flutter closed as he told him an old bedtime story that he had related many times. It had always soothed the child, and it soothed him now. When Cobahr fell asleep, Vin-Chay left the chamber. Ren-Chay waited for him, and took him to see Bahrtok, then Colyn, then Pyco-Chay. He spent only a few moments with each, since the critical matter was Constantine. Georn had had to make the decision to operate or not; he couldn't wait any longer. The team of surgeons had completed the removal of the badly damaged portion of Constantine's brain an hour before Vin-Chay arrived. The baby now lay unconscious in the neural regeneration unit of the Mediplex. No one voiced the opinion, but the baby was not expected to live through the night.

As Vin-Chay stared down at the domed pod that held the tiny, frail body of his youngest son, Cassian came up from behind him quietly. He turned to see his best friend's distraught face. Cassian had lost a loved father figure and the mate of his soul, and yet he still had the compassion to put his arms around Vin-Chay and try to comfort him. Vin-Chay offered a silent prayer of thanks for his friend. And a curse on their God, who had allowed all of this to happen.

Vin-Chay spent the night by Constantine's pod as Ren-Chay, Georn, the other physicians, and the medtechs came and went routinely. He left only for a few moments when the commlink channels to the flagships had been re-established, and he could contact Pyke to apprise him of their family's situation. Pyke swore he'd shuttle down as soon as possible; Vin-Chay could see that the necessity of his duty was tearing the commander apart. He knew that feeling well.

His uncle and cousin tried to offer encouragement and comfort, but Vin-Chay was distracted and too focused on his son to pay much attention. They gave up after a while and simply let him be. His eyes only left Constantine when they roamed to the vast array of instruments monitoring and attending to the baby. Ren-Chay caught him murmuring a few times to the unconscious child. The physician could only catch a few words, such as "like your father." Vin-Chay's father-in-law had stubbornly insisted on seeing his youngest grandson, and Georn allowed him an unsanctioned visit. He left the old man alone with Vin-Chay. The two men sat side by side, holding hands, and watching wordlessly as the baby took labored, ragged breaths. Georn gently but firmly forced the older

man back to his healing chamber after an hour. Vin-Chay remained rooted to his son's pod.

Twelve hours after the baby's operation dawn broke, and he was still alive. This amazed the physicians, but they cautioned Vin-Chay against hoping for the best. The baby's vital signs hadn't improved, although they hadn't worsened. Georn tried to impress upon Vin-Chay that even should the baby survive, there was no way of telling how badly impaired he might be intellectually or physically. There was no way of telling what kind of quality of life he might have. Vin-Chay had simply raised an eyebrow, made a non-committal, dismissive sound, and turned back towards his son. Georn shrugged in frustration at his nephew's inability to deal with reality. As he left the chamber, Pyke barreled through the door, gave him a frosty look, and went to his spouse's side to join the vigil.

The next five days were a blur to the two men. At least one of Constantine's parents was always in the chamber with him. When the other parent was not, it was because he was with one of the other children or with their grandparents. Vin-Chay did take time to see Mandara, who was listless and unresponsive, and his new baby niece. The child was a black-haired, brown-eyed beauty with an impressive set of lungs. Glancing down at her was the only time Vin-Chay ever really smiled. It ripped at his heart that her father would never see her, or she him. He wondered what Mandara would choose to name her daughter.

Nik-Chay and the equally critically injured warriors aboard the *Renegade* had been transported down to the Mediplex two days after Vin-Chay had arrived. Ren-Chay assumed primary duties for his cousin's treatment. He assured Nik-Chay that a prosthetic arm would be created and attached as soon as his health allowed. The young lieutenant would never know the difference between that arm and his lost biological one. Nik-Chay couldn't have cared less about his missing arm; he would have cut off the other one himself if it would have given any of his lost relatives a single moment longer of life. Both Vin-Chay and Pyke spent a few periods of time with the young man when they weren't with their other family. Like Bahrtok, Nik-Chay was stubborn, too, and forced his physician cousin to permit an unsanctioned visit with Cobahr and Pyco-Chay. Ren-Chay flatly refused to allow any more persons into Constantine's chamber. Nevertheless, Vin-Chay sneaked his younger brother into the chamber when Ren-Chay was otherwise occupied. The younger Chay sat next to Pyke as they all watched the baby silently. Nik-Chay put his hand over Pyke's, and they made an equally silent peace. Vin-Chay took careful note of that special moment.

On the sixth day of his parents' vigil, Constantine's vital signs improved slightly. Twelve hours later, they improved significantly and unexpectedly. Georn

and his staff were at a loss to explain the change in the baby's status; Vin-Chay and Pyke seemed to just take it as a natural course. Neither man seemed particularly surprised.

On the seventh day, Georn entered the neural pod chamber and Constantine's parents looked up at him expectantly. The physician sighed.

"I have no idea why," he began, "but your son is an amazing little boy. A real fighter. Bottom line—he should not have survived. Bottom line—we think he's going to live. We still have no true idea as to what his limitations will be, but—"

"My son will have no limitations, Uncle," Vin-Chay replied coolly. "Any more than his brothers will. Now, when can our family be released from here? We have a future to start rebuilding."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“The *Independence*—two thousand, four hundred, seventy-six. The *Starchaser*—eleven hundred, fourteen. The *Sentinel*—nine hundred, forty-nine. The *Sacrament*—twelve hundred, sixty-two. The *Renegade*—three hundred, eighty-seven. The *Victorion*—two hundred, thirteen. The *Liberty*—seventy-four. Etrusca proper—four thousand, three hundred, ninety-six. Corsica—five hundred, thirty.”

Vin-Chay stopped listening at that point to the count of casualties that the Miliplex announcer was relaying to Osiron’s population after the formal peace treaty between that planet and Ptolem had been signed by Aristine and Rue Dann. Vin-Chay knew the numbers by heart; they were burned on his soul as his slave tattoo was burned on his arm. Well over six thousand warriors dead and gone, another six thousand civilians lost as well. And that was only from this final engagement. So many more had been lost over the last eighteen years, and so many lives damaged for the survivors.

But the battles were over, and it was time for all to start again. Vin-Chay and his family would face that daunting task as they made the difficult decisions facing them. The proposal that Aristine had made to Pyke that fateful day was still unanswered. It was kept private between the three men, and in the first few days afterwards Vin-Chay and Pyke hadn’t spoken of it—they were too occupied securing their forces and watching their injured family members struggle to survive and heal.

When it was clear that Constantine was out of danger, the two men allowed themselves the luxury of a decent night’s sleep together in Pyke’s old Miliplex apartment. That place would be their temporary home once again until the agriplex was rebuilt. If it was rebuilt—that was another decision. If they returned to Ptolem, Bahrtok and Colyn would go with them, and their life on Osiron would be simply a footnote in the family’s twisting, turning history.

When they entered the apartment, Pyke headed directly towards the annise store and poured them both a strong drink. Vin-Chay closed his eyes and sipped the strong intoxicant. The warm, soothing sensations of the beverage started immediately and flowed through his body. From the look on Pyke’s face, his

spouse was feeling the same way. Their eyes met in silent communion, and Pyke smiled slightly. They put their goblets down and headed towards the sanichamber shower, discarding their well-worn clothes about the apartment floor. They came together and pulled each other into the hot cascade of shower water that soothed their bodies as much as the annise had.

They bathed each other, lathering one another over and over again as the hot stream of cleansing liquid rushed over them. Their mouths met over and over again, each man desperate to join the other in a feverish passion that had been absent for a long month. As Pyke kissed and caressed him, Vin-Chay tried to remember the last time they had made love—sometime after Constantine's birth, in the midst of the flurry of preparations for the approaching Ptolemii fleet. He couldn't remember, he didn't care—the passion they had always shared was still very much present.

Pyke pulled his wet consort out of the shower and towards the bed. They didn't bother drying themselves, or removing the bed covers. They fell together in a heated pitch of desire and need, and the next hour was a blur of unintelligible sounds and erotic touches and soothing murmurs. After a long hour, Pyke lay back, breathing heavily, content, as Vin-Chay showered again, then joined his mate under the damp covers. He wrapped himself tightly around his consort and nuzzled his throat and cheek. He brushed back Pyke's wet hair and kissed him gently.

"You still desire me, master?" Vin-Chay teased, eliciting a sly smile from his spouse.

"Umm," Pyke murmured. "I'm too tired to seek out another. You'll do, slave." Pyke expected a sharp retort, or some response, but Vin-Chay was oddly silent. Pyke opened his eyes and saw his spouse looking at him intently. "What?" he asked gently.

Vin-Chay pulled away from their tight embrace. He stared at the ceiling. Pyke raised himself up on one elbow and drew his eyebrows together. "What?" he repeated softly. Vin-Chay turned his head and looked at him.

"Don't you feel guilty that we can come together in such a heated manner right now, of all times? We've lost family, and have loved ones in the Mediplex struggling to recover. Is this passion not out of place under such circumstances?" Vin-Chay asked quietly.

"Vin-Chay," Pyke said as he stroked his mate's face, "what we have just done is an affirmation of life. It is more than appropriate that we show our love and our hope for the future. If we gave in to our despair or our doubts, what good would that do us or our loved ones?"

"I suppose you're right. I just can't help thinking of those who will never experience such passion again. Dom-Chay and Mandara. Cassian and Zulikka. Zandrán and Sharra. My father and H'Elene. So many others." He shook his head, and suddenly changed the subject. He looked at Pyke expectantly. "And so, master, where will our future passion be spent—here, or back on Ptolem?"

"Ah," said Pyke as he lay on his own back and stared at the same ceiling that had occupied Vin-Chay's concentration a few moments before. "That is the question, isn't it? It's a stunning opportunity to accomplish much good."

"And to acquire and employ a great deal of personal and political power," Vin-Chay added incisively as he let his hand wander between Pyke's legs.

"Indeed. And for one of such a decidedly humble background, quite tempting. Power is not necessarily a bad thing, is it? It's the misuse of power that's the bad thing. I would never misuse the power," he promised quietly, looking directly into his mate's eyes. Vin-Chay smiled slightly and nodded.

"I know you wouldn't. That doesn't concern me. What concerns me is the effect it would have on our personal lives. On our children, and their future. They see so little of you now."

"I would make time. And if it proved to be too detrimental to them, I would resign. I promise you that."

"I know," Vin-Chay said softly. "And I'll tell you now that whatever decision you make, I'll support it completely. If you want to return to Ptolem—even if it is not for this opportunity—then I will go with you."

"You would return to a planet that enslaved you? That for years treated you as less than a man?" Pyke asked carefully.

"I would return to the place I found my destiny, and a lifelong love, and a beloved family," Vin-Chay answered evenly. "The rest of it doesn't matter."

Pyke stared into his mate's eyes for a long moment, and then kissed him gently before gazing at him reflectively. "You would rather remain here, though, wouldn't you?"

Vin-Chay shook his head. "Not necessarily. Much of what drew me back here is gone. My father, my brother, the life I led before I left here at twenty-one to embark on what turned out to be a very strange and unexpected fate. There's still much to keep me here, but I can let go for all of our sakes. It's not a self-sacrificing, difficult decision to leave again and follow you to your own destiny. I wish to be with you, and with our sons. The place doesn't really matter. It never will." He smiled. "I would even follow you back to Canaan."

Pyke didn't answer him, but idly stroked the slave tattoo on his mate's forearm. He hated the evil mark, and his part in causing it to be placed there. Vin-

Chay had decided to let the mark remain until the war had ended. Now that the conflict was over, Pyke wondered if his mate would have the tattoo removed. Somehow, he thought not.

Both men were silent after that, each lost in a jumble of complicated thoughts and feelings. After a while, Vin-Chay turned over on his side. Pyke followed suit, and wrapped himself around his spouse in their usual method of sleep. Both men drifted off immediately. They slept unmoving and undisturbed for the remainder of the night.

Pyke awoke alone the next morning. He dressed quickly and found a note from Vin-Chay. His spouse had, of course, gone to the Mediplex to check on their family. Pyke would follow soon, but he needed first to attend to some duties at the Miliplex. Aristine would be there, along with several of his officers, as they finalized some of their own details. Aristine needed to make arrangements to convene with Osiran delegates at Isiin to begin the long negotiations that would deal with the hundreds of financial, military, commercial, and political details that would get both sides on a true road back to normalcy.

As Pyke entered the Miliplex, he found himself greeted with far less reserve and animosity than he had encountered on most previous occasions. The faces of a number of men and women reflected gratitude, or at least appreciation for the part he had played in ending the war of independence. A fleeting thought of how his late father-in-law might have reacted passed across his mind. He doubted that the man's attitude would have been mitigated in any way. He hoped that in that case the Crown Prince would have at least acknowledged his son's critical contributions, and started them on a road to reconciliation. Neither he nor Vin-Chay would ever know now. Another opportunity lost.

Pyke met with Gir Pompey and other council members in his office. The men seemed to need reassurance that the Ptolemii would hold true to their end of the peace treaty. Pyke assured them of Aristine's integrity, and they seemed satisfied as they left his office. He finished some minor details, with Lieutenant Ligeia's able assistance, then left to join his spouse at the Mediplex. He had a fleeting glimpse of High Commander Sar-Chay entering his office, along with a man Pyke didn't recognize. He hadn't had a chance to speak to his spouse's uncle since the cessation of hostilities. The prince was busily engaged in directing the securing of the Osiran forces and perimeter, as well as dealing with the fallout from his family's losses. Pyke wondered fleetingly how their first post-battle meeting might go, but it wasn't something he cared to concentrate on just now. He would be too busy himself watching the initial dermal regeneration proce-

dures that were to commence on Cobahr that morning. He left the Miliplex and headed to the Mediplex.

Sar-Chay was joined by his spouse, Georn, and their solicitor, Hakkobi. He had asked Vin-Chay to attend the meeting as well, once the younger man had visited his family and was reassured that they were still as healthy as they had been the night before. Vin-Chay agreed reluctantly, and Sar-Chay told him that Ren-Chay would accompany him to the Miliplex. Vin-Chay hadn't even asked why; he seemed distracted.

Hakkobi placed a small doc-corr down on Sar-Chay's desk. "I have re-verified the matter, and it is as you said. There is nothing amiss in your assumptions. The situation is clear."

"Good," Sar-Chay said. "Then it is simply a matter of convincing a very stubborn young man that this is what should transpire." Any further thoughts were cut off as Vin-Chay and Ren-Chay were ushered into Sar-Chay's office. Vin-Chay had a curious, reserved look on his face as his uncle smiled at him and motioned him to sit. Vin-Chay shook his head and remained standing.

"No thank you, Uncle. I won't be staying for very long. What is it you need from me?" Vin-Chay asked evenly. Despite his uncle's pleasant demeanor and conciliatory overture, Vin-Chay was still hesitant about returning the pleasantries after well over a year and a half of shunning, and the unwarranted withdrawal of his family's affection.

"You are as stubborn as your father, nephew. You realize that, of course? No matter. This is a new beginning for all of us. And as such there are many details that need to be addressed, not only as a people, but specifically within our family."

"Such as?" Vin-Chay responded in a no-nonsense, clipped tone. His mind was still on the skin therapy Cobahr was undergoing. Nothing else seemed to matter right now.

"Such as the transfer of duty and power within the Kindred of Chay."

"Then you are talking to the wrong person, Uncle. As you very well know, I am no longer an official member of this exalted family. With the loss of Dom-Chay and his son, the crown will pass to the next son in line. That would be Nik-Chay, once he is recovered enough to leave his Mediplex bed. Now, I apologize for seeming abrupt, but this does not concern me, and my son is undergoing some crucial therapy right now. That is where I should be, not here. Good day." Vin-Chay turned to leave and made it to the door of the office when Sar-Chay's voice stopped him cold.

"Your father never went through with the disenfranchisement. I found this out yesterday as I went through his testament documents." The slight twist to the truth didn't bother Sar-Chay; he had made his peace with expediency decades ago.

Vin-Chay turned slowly and narrowed his eyes at his uncle. Sar-Chay nodded slowly. "He never registered the doc-corr with the Crown Prince Circle archives. He always held to the belief that someday, somehow, you would come to your senses, and return to him. He wanted to make that return as easy as possible, since it is very nearly impossible to invalidate such an action once it has been completed."

"Exactly so," Hakkobi nodded. "Despite the presence of a doc-corr, it is not in effect legally until it has been registered with the Archivesolicitor—that would be me—and this was never done. The doc-corr has no meaning."

"You *are* your father's heir, and the legitimate claimant to the Crown of Chay," Sar-Chay said quietly as he took in the absolutely unfathomable look that had settled over his nephew's face.

There was a silent but palpable tension in the chamber as the men all waited for Vin-Chay's reaction. It came in a scant minute.

"Not interested," Vin-Chay said evenly, and turned again to leave.

Sar-Chay moved quickly around his desk and strode to his recalcitrant nephew before Vin-Chay could leave the chamber. He grabbed his nephew's arm and forced Vin-Chay to face him.

"You have no choice—it is your duty," Sar-Chay said more harshly than he meant to. *God's Blood—that's not what I wanted to say!* He was rewarded by an icy look from Vin-Chay. He released the younger man's arm slowly as Vin-Chay started to speak in a cold, measured tone. He locked eyes with Sar-Chay.

"You are wrong, Uncle. I have every choice. I can choose to abdicate this glorious position in favor of my younger brother, and I am going to do just that. And how *dare* you talk to me about duty? I have discharged my duty to my family, my profession, and my people in every way possible. My reward from the people who meant the most to me was disdain, disregard for my wishes and needs, and ultimate abandonment. The person who never abandoned me is the one you have all treated even worse than you have treated me. I owe you, and this family, nothing. Absolutely nothing. Do not *ever* speak to me again about duty."

Vin-Chay turned to leave, then had a sudden thought and turned back one last time to Sar-Chay.

"And you will *not* mention this matter to my spouse. I will not allow this to affect the decisions that he and I need to make for the future. Those are private

matters, and will remain between us, with no interference from the Kindred of Chay. I hope I have made myself clear.” Vin-Chay left the chamber a second later without looking back.

“He’s, ah, rather like his father, isn’t he?” Hakkobi asked nervously.

“Exactly so,” Sar-Chay answered quietly, as a slow smile spread across his face. Vin-Chay would make a fine Crown Prince. Finer, even, than Sar-Chay’s beloved, lost brother.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Vin-Chay looked down at his sleeping brother. Nik-Chay was stretched out on the divan in the Miliplex apartment, where he had resided for the past two weeks. He was still constantly exhausted from the stress and pharmlics. Due to the high level of more critically injured casualties that had flooded the Mediplex and its satellite clinics, his prosthetic arm attachment procedure had to be postponed. He didn't seem to care; after a few days, he had fallen into a malaise that he couldn't seem to shake off. Vin-Chay had decided to move him into the apartment rather than to the Chay compound or any other location. He wanted to take care of his brother, as he had when they were children.

He sat down carefully beside Nik-Chay so as not to awaken him. He lightly reached down and brushed some errant hair away from his brother's eyes. Nik-Chay murmured something in his sleep and turned over. Vin-Chay looked up as Pyke exited their noxchamber. He had just awakened after a restless night of trying to soothe Pyco-Chay's night fears. The toddler had been sleeping with them since he was released from the Mediplex. He was terrified of the darkness now, no doubt remembering the hours he had spent sobbing and cowering under the heavy beam before Bahrtok had found him and pulled him out. He awakened several times each night, crying and clutching at his parents. Cobahr and Constantine were still in the Mediplex. The baby would be there for at least another month, although his brother would be coming home within a week, since the dermal regeneration therapy had gone better than expected. Colyn needed to remain there a few weeks longer, but Bahrtok was home and hobbling around nervously as he constantly hovered over Pyco-Chay, Vin-Chay, and Pyke. And Nik-Chay—the old man had taken a liking to his foster son's younger brother, and he had spent a good deal of time talking with him and reassuring him. He mentioned something to the young warrior about teaching him the finer points of harvesting a crop; it was the only time that Pyke had seen an alert reaction in his brother-in-law's eyes. He wasn't sure if it had signaled fear or anticipation, but at least it was a reaction.

Pyke watched Vin-Chay stroke his brother's hot forehead for a few moments. He had already made his decision regarding Aristine's proposal, but the scene in

front of him reassured him that he had made the right decision. He needed to meet with the Ptolemii commander before he left tomorrow for his flagship, which would then lead his fleet back to their home world. Vin-Chay made to rise but Pyke motioned him to remain seated. He walked over quietly to the divan, and stroked his mate's hair affectionately.

"Pyco-Chay's finally sleeping. Just check on him every hour or so," Pyke said very softly as Vin-Chay nodded. The Ptolemii picked up his techbelt and cloak, and left the apartment without a backward glance. He suppressed a feeling of mixed guilt, sadness, and gratefulness that Vin-Chay had resigned his military investiture two days earlier, only one hour after his official promotion to sub-commander had been registered. His spouse now had all the time in the world to spend with their family. Cassian had resigned that same day. He was now ensconced on the same Miliplex tier in a small apartment with his two motherless daughters. He had barely let them out of his sight since the day he had found himself widowed. *So much loss*, Pyke thought ruefully. *But so much to be thankful for as well*. He knew he could improve his family's and people's lots with investiture as a Triumvirii. Yet, he knew he could serve in other ways as well, ways that would not require the level of sacrifice and absence the proffered position would entail.

And if he accepted, it meant a return to Ptolem permanently for all of them. He knew Vin-Chay meant what he said about following Pyke anywhere. That self-sacrificing attitude just made the decision harder somehow. He thought that perhaps Bahrtok and Colyn might prefer to return—but not without their grandsons. He understood, too, that they had built a satisfying life on Osiron. Cobahr was fully acclimated to his new world; Pyco-Chay and Constantine had known virtually nothing else. It really all came down to Pyke and his spouse.

He knew that Vin-Chay was genuinely conflicted about remaining on Osiron, but there was that undeniable pull of his birthworld. Pyke knew that feeling well; despite the life they had, he often found himself unbearably homesick for Ptolem.

Pyke arrived at the Miliplex at mid-day, and went directly to his office. Aristine was already waiting, and apparently being charmed by Lieutenant Ligeia. She smiled widely at her superior as Pyke led Aristine into his office and closed the door.

"How are your children, Pyke?" Aristine asked in genuine solicitation. He had two daughters of his own and could not consider life without them. Persephone was his heart, and Phaedra was his very soul.

"They are improving each day, thank you. My middle son is home now, and my eldest will be shortly. The baby will return to us eventually."

"Very good. I will offer a prayer to God for their continued good health." Aristine paused, and then continued casually. "Will your sons be recuperating and enjoying their childhood on Ptolem eventually?"

Pyke smiled at his former antagonist. "A most tempting offer, Aristine, but one, unfortunately, I must decline."

"Surely you have no doubts about your ability to discharge your responsibilities? I certainly have none, or would not have asked," Aristine replied curiously. He had half expected Pyke to decline, but he then assumed that the other man's common sense and ambition would override his legitimate concerns.

"Not doubts, Aristine, simply a consideration of priorities. I have spent many years progressing my career, to some significant detriments as well as some significant successes. At this point, I have only one desire, and that is to keep my family safe and close, and well taken care of. As a Triumvirii, I would need to expend a great deal of time and effort away from them, and I choose not to."

"Would it have anything to do with your spouse wanting to remain on Osiron?"

"Of course, that's part of it, but I know Vin-Chay would willingly return with me to Ptolem," Pyke said with a thoughtful half-smile.

"Doubtful that he could return with you, under the circumstances," Aristine said mildly. "I may be a foreigner here, but I have always had a way of rooting out important information. My people and I have had our ears to the ground since we arrived. I have learned of his situation."

"His situation?" Pyke said. "If you are referring to his disenfranchisement as effected by his father upon our marriage, then you should know that's something that would hardly preclude him from returning with me."

Aristine looked at Pyke thoughtfully for a moment before responding carefully. "His disenfranchisement? Meaning that he would not inherit the crown now that his older brother is dead?"

"Exactly. That duty would pass to his younger brother, Nik-Chay."

"Unless, of course, there was no disenfranchisement."

"Yes, but that is not the case."

"I see," Aristine murmured reflectively. *He doesn't know. He made his decision without knowing. He must truly love the Osiran. And the Osiran didn't want to tell him and influence his decision. Fascinating men. I'd love to know them better.*

Aristine rose from his chair and reached out to shake Pyke's hand. Pyke grasped the hand firmly, clasping it with his other as well.

"Well then," Aristine concluded, "although you may not be joining me immediately in Ptolem's new voyage to the future, I would like your assurance that you will play a primary role in our negotiations. That is acceptable?"

"I would like that very much."

"Good. Then I will meet with the Crown Princes of Rue and Gir and make them aware of my strong desires in this matter. Is there anything personally that I can do for you to show my appreciation?"

Pyke paused a bare second. "Yes, as a matter of fact there is. I would like my estate and my in-laws' agriplex returned to us, and a conservator appointed to oversee their care. I don't doubt that I will return to my home world someday in the future, and I would like to return to something familiar and special to me."

"Consider it done. I'll send you the details when I return to Ptolem. Until then, be well, and keep faith with your family. In the long run, that is only what truly matters." Aristine saluted Pyke respectfully. Pyke returned the gesture, and his former enemy left his office. Pyke seated himself and mulled over the strange turn their conversation had taken in regards to Vin-Chay's situation. After a few moments, he commlinked with the Circle Archives to request information. Then he contacted Sar-Chay.

Pyke returned to the apartment late in the day. As he entered, he saw that Vin-Chay was sitting at one end of the divan, with his brother's head in his lap. He was stroking Nik-Chay's forehead gently, as a sleeping Pyco-Chay dozed peacefully, curled up at his reclining uncle's side, one small arm thrown over the man's chest. Bahrtok was resting in his chair, his leg propped up, his eyes half-closed as he listened to soothing classical music that melted into the background. Vin-Chay smiled lazily at Pyke as he sipped a small goblet of annise and maintained the soothing motions on his brother's face.

"Bahrtok," Pyke said quietly, "could you please take Pyco-Chay into the nox-chamber for a little while?"

Bahrtok nodded and struggled to raise himself from the chair. Vin-Chay slid out from under Nik-Chay and carefully picked up his sleeping son and deposited him in Bahrtok's waiting arms. After the man and boy left the chamber, and Vin-Chay moved himself back into his comforting position, Pyke gave him a hard look. Vin-Chay and Nik-Chay returned curious looks as they waited for whatever he obviously had to say.

"I thought we had no more secrets from one another," Pyke started coolly.

"Secrets?" Vin-Chay replied.

"Yes. It seems I constantly find out from other people what I should be finding out firsthand from my consort. The plan to escape from Ptolem. The disen-

franchisement from your family and heritage. And now the invalidation of that action."

Vin-Chay took a deep breath as Nik-Chay pushed himself into a sitting position on the divan and addressed his brother-in-law. "What are you talking about?" he asked sharply, as he cast a glance at his older brother, whose face had turned tense and flushed.

"The disenfranchisement was never registered, apparently. Your father couldn't go through with it, could he?" Pyke said evenly, his eyes locked on his consort's. Nik-Chay looked at his brother quickly, and saw that what Pyke was saying was true. He sat back in shock, and then a relief seemed to settle over his face as he closed his eyes for a moment before saying softly, "Thank God."

Vin-Chay shook his head. "It doesn't matter. I have already told my uncle that I am not interested in assuming that position, and will abdicate in favor of my brother here."

"No!" Nik-Chay said heatedly. "I don't want you to abdicate in my favor! I do *not* want the Crown of Chay, and even if I did—it's rightfully yours, by birth, by tradition, and by consequence. You must assume your rightful place in our family, brother."

Vin-Chay stood angrily. "As I have already made clear to our uncle, *I* do not want this obligation. The matter of registration is a mere technical one, and should not preclude your assumption of the crown. This is your right, *brother*, and I will not stand in your way."

"I *want* you to stand in my way!" Nik-Chay said. His eyes flashed, and he waved his one arm in animated disgust. "You are so stubborn—just like Father! Can't you see that if he ever had any true intention of eliminating you as a contender for his crown, he would have registered the doc-corr? He wanted you back—he *always* wanted you back. He thought you would come back someday, and he prepared the way. That *has* to mean something to you."

"It means he hoped that someday I would abandon the person I loved because *he* was being unreasonable! And all of you supported him—need I remind you of that?" Vin-Chay's hard words and tone caused a guilty flush to fall over his brother's face.

"No, you need not. I am reminded of it every time I look at my reflection. It will always be a source of pain to me." Nik-Chay turned suddenly to Pyke. "What is your opinion of this, Commander?"

Pyke smiled to himself. He wondered how long it was going to take this Chay to stop calling him by his title and call him by his name instead. Before Pyke could answer, Vin-Chay waved his own arm in a dismissive gesture.

"The point is moot, anyway. I will be returning to Ptolem with my spouse and family very soon. It's certainly not general knowledge yet, but Pyke has been offered a position as one of the three Triumvirii who will guide Ptolem back from the abyss. Naturally, he won't be able to perform those duties from here."

"I won't be performing those duties at all," Pyke interrupted mildly. Vin-Chay's head snapped around to look at him, as did his brother's.

"What?" Vin-Chay exclaimed.

"I declined Aristine's proposal."

"Declined? Why—because of this so-called technical issue that erroneously sees me as the heir to my father's crown?" Vin-Chay blew out a deep breath and swore softly. "Damn Sar-Chay! I made it very clear to him that he was not to inform you—"

"He did not. I found out in a very roundabout way, which isn't important right now. And, no, my declining of that position was made before I knew about your peculiar situation."

"You decided to refuse and stay here before you knew?" Vin-Chay said softly.

Pyke nodded. "Yes. And if you don't believe me, we can contact Aristine and confirm that." His face softened. He let his fingers gently brush his spouse's cheek. "Vin-Chay—this is your home, with all the pain and sadness and problems in the past and in the future. If this is your home, then it is mine, too. Don't you understand that by now? Why would you think that I would hesitate any more to give up this Ptolemii 'throne' than you would to give up yours? Besides," he continued in a cavalier tone, "you have resigned your investiture, so you really have nothing else to do right now other than care for your family and raise your children. And as much as that means to you, it will never truly satisfy you. Nik-Chay is right—you *are* your father's son. *Be* your father's son, and be grateful that you are. I am."

Vin-Chay just stared at his spouse. He looked at his smug brother, who was nodding in agreement, and then he stormed wordlessly out of the apartment. He was angry, and he didn't know why. He found himself wandering aimlessly at a fast pace through the streets of central Etrusca. He barely noticed the many people who were engaged in reconstruction and cleanup procedures. It had been a beautiful day—bright, sunny, warm, and it was fading into an equally beautiful evening as Vin-Chay enjoyed the setting sun on his face. He had a momentary pang of missing the warmer sun and days back on Ptolem. Oddly, he had actually looked forward in some ways to returning. He didn't think that would have been hard at all. Pyke had put a quick end to that, though. They hadn't talked too

much about the Triumvirii position, but it hadn't really occurred to Vin-Chay that his spouse would pass up that chance of a lifetime.

He found himself in front of the Mediplex. He had spent so much time there lately. He hated the very sight of the building, and wanted the remainder of his family out of it as soon as possible. He felt a strong pull to see his eldest son, and he entered the building.

Cobahr was sleeping peacefully in a private chamber on the ninth tier. After the successful dermal regen therapy, he had been removed from his healant pod and relocated to that chamber. The bright red burns on his face had faded significantly, and his new skin and pharmlics had stopped most of the discomfort and pain. In time, the remainder of the scarring would fade, and Cobahr would be physically as he once had been. This was true of Colyn's injuries as well, although her healing would take a longer time due to the severity of her initial condition. Despite Vin-Chay's attempt to be quiet, Cobahr sensed his parent's presence, and opened his eyes and smiled at him. Vin-Chay smiled back and perched gently on the edge of Cobahr's bed. He took his son's hand and kissed it, then held it tightly as the boy squeezed back.

"When can I come home, Papa?" Cobahr asked softly, as he did every day.

"Soon. In a few days, I promise," Vin-Chay said as his heart nearly broke at the hopeful, expectant look on his son's face.

"Will Constantine and Gram-Co come home then, too? Where are we going to live?"

"Constantine and Gram-Co will have to stay here a little while longer, but they'll be home soon, too. Promise. We're going to have to stay at Father's old apartment until we can rebuild the agrihouse. Uncle Nik-Chay will be living with us, too." Cobahr smiled. *He's so trusting*, Vin-Chay thought. *He depends on us so much to make his little world safe and happy. Pyke was right about declining such a powerful position. Was he right about me assuming one? What would be the difference?*

"Cobahr," Vin-Chay began slowly, "do you want to stay here, on Osiron, or do you want to go back to Ptolem? Because we can go anywhere you want. It doesn't matter to your father or me. What do *you* want?"

"I want to stay here! I like the ocean and mountains and everything. Can we stay here? Can we visit Ptolem?"

"Yes, we can, to both questions." Vin-Chay paused a moment. "Sprite, how would you feel about me assuming more contact with my family and its responsibilities? I mean, you know that my father had a great deal to do as Crown Prince, and now that he's gone, someone has to ... pick up where he left off. Some peo-

ple want it to be me. It would mean that I'd be as busy as I was before I stopped being a warrior, but in a different way. What do you think about that?"

Cobahr looked at his parent calmly and seemed to be genuinely contemplating the question for a few moments. He drew his eyebrows together; Vin-Chay thought that at that particular moment, Cobahr very much resembled his father rather than his mother.

"Will you have a title?" the boy.

Vin-Chay smiled and nodded. "Crown Prince of the Kindred of Chay."

"Is that better than Pharon?"

"Absolutely."

"Will Father have a title?"

Vin-Chay's grin widened. "Certainly, but not the usual one of Crown Princess of Chay. Your father will be known as the Royal Chay Consort."

Cobahr cocked his head to one side, and contemplated his waiting parent thoughtfully. "Will I have a title? And Pyco-Chay and Constantine?"

Vin-Chay brushed a lock of Cobahr's long bangs away from his forehead, and then stroked the boy's cheek with the back of his hand. "You will be the Chay Heir-Prince, since you are my firstborn son. Your brothers will be princelings. Some day, you may succeed me as Crown Prince, but not for a long, long time."

Cobahr paused and grinned. "I think you should do it, Papa." Vin-Chay grinned back.

"Then perhaps I will, Sprite."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Cassian stared in surprise when Vin-Chay opened the door to his apartment. He had expected his friend to answer his entrance signal, but not to be standing in front of him juggling a squirming, crying baby as the sounds of Cobahr and Pyco-Chay pounded in the background. Vin-Chay grinned at him ruefully and motioned him in. Cassian looked at Vin-Chay curiously. The baby he was holding wasn't Constantine, who wasn't due home from the Mediplex for another week.

Vin-Chay successfully calmed the crying baby before he looked up at Cassian and said quietly, "My new daughter."

"Daughter?" Cassian replied in confusion. Although Vin-Chay and Pyke had planned on having a daughter or two down the road, his friend hadn't mentioned stepping up their plan. It was especially unlikely in terms of recent events. Vin-Chay and his spouse would have their hands full with Constantine when the baby was discharged, to say nothing of the two healthy, growing boys who were shouting in another chamber at the moment. Cassian hoped there would still be a little time, space and acquiescence left for the special favor he was about to ask.

Vin-Chay explained. "She's Dom-Chay's and Mandara's little girl. H'Elene had her at the compound until today. Mandara brought her to me an hour ago."

"Why?" Cassian asked, perplexed.

"Because Mandara doesn't think she can handle raising her baby and trying to recover emotionally from her losses. You know she hadn't even named the baby yet, and even in the Mediplex she hardly ever visited her. That's why H'Elene took her to the compound as soon as possible. When Mandara was released last week, even my second mother's tender attention couldn't bring her out of her malaise."

Vin-Chay's mind traveled back to that short hour ago when he had answered an earlier entrance signal. He was taken by surprise by the sad, pale, yet beautiful face of his sister-in-law, who was holding a small, precious bundle tightly. Standing beside her was her gaunt older brother Mannon, who looked distinctly uncomfortable. Before Vin-Chay could invite them in, Mandara literally thrust her baby into his arms.

"Take her," Mandara said tersely. "She's yours now." She turned to leave without another word, but Vin-Chay regained his composure and reached out a tentative hand to stop her. He grasped her arm firmly but gently.

"Mandara, what are you talking about?" he asked gently. He shifted his eyes to her brother, but the man merely shrugged helplessly as he waited for his sister to answer.

"Mandara?" Vin-Chay repeated in the same gentle tone.

His sister-in-law met his eyes, and for the only time that day he saw a spark in them. "I cannot raise her now. There is nothing left in me to raise her. Her father is gone. You will be the family patriarch now, and it is your duty to assume her parenthood. If you wish to honor her father, your brother, you will not decline," she finished in a distinctly challenging tone that bespoke more of the late Dom-Chay than of his always gentle and self-effacing wife.

"Mandara," Vin-Chay began in a hesitant tone. "I will do everything I can for both of you, but you are her mother. She needs you. You will rise to the challenge. My brother would never have married a woman whom he didn't believe would be a strong wife and mother and Crown Princess."

"Two of those roles are lost to me, Vin-Chay. I choose to not accept the third, because I know the alternative is more suitable at this moment in time. The time may come when I can be her mother, but not now, and not for a long time. The choice is yours, naturally. If you will not take her, then I will find another, but not another Chay—there is none. She is a primary Chay, and should be raised as one. Will you do this for me?" Her eyes were riveted on Vin-Chay, who slowly nodded in the inevitable acquiescence.

"I will do it for you, and for her, and for my brother. For as long as you want. And when you are well enough to return to her—she will be waiting."

"Thank you," Mandara said quietly as she started to leave again.

"Wait," Vin-Chay said. She turned and looked at him curiously.

"What have you named her?"

"I have not. That is up to her new father." And then she and her brother were gone.

Vin-Chay was brought back to the present by Cassian's sympathetic voice.

"I know," Cassian said. "I visited her a few times myself in the Mediplex when I saw my own children, and there was that desperate, sad look in her eyes." He paused before adding softly. "I recognized it from my own mirror."

Vin-Chay reached out and grasped Cassian's shoulder. The blond ex-warrior smiled weakly as his friend gestured for him to sit on the divan. Vin-Chay settled himself next to Cassian as he murmured to the baby. She had started to doze off,

thankfully. The roar from his eldest sons in Bahrtoke's noxchamber had died down enough to allow the men to enjoy a relaxed, fairly quiet conversation. Or so Vin-Chay thought.

Cassian locked eyes with his best friend. "It may not be the best time, princeling, but I need to ask a special favor of you."

"Anything," Vin-Chay responded immediately. "You know that."

"I know you mean that, but this is really not an opportune time to ask what I'm going to be asking, my friend."

"Anything," Vin-Chay reiterated strongly.

Cassian looked at him intently and said, simply, "I need you to raise *my* daughters. Until I am capable of taking care of them myself."

Vin-Chay sat back in shock as he stared at his sad friend. First Mandara, now Cassian? He shook his head.

"You can't mean that. You are as capable as Mandara is—"

"No," Cassian said quietly. "I am not, any more than she is. Oh, I would do my very best to be a father and mother to them, but there is such a part of me missing with the loss of Zulikka and TutMose. I need time to heal. I recognize that at least. I cannot give them the selfless love, devotion, and care that a healthy man would. It tears me apart to leave them, and you, but I must. I have to, to survive, for me and for them." He paused. "And it isn't just that. Part of it is a selfish reason that's very hard to reconcile with my role as a father. I just don't really know who I am any more, or who I've ever been. I went into the military as a means of escaping a dreary life without promise. That decision led me through circumstance and misfortune to my destiny as your friend, Zulikka's husband, and my daughters' father. But I don't—I don't really know what the man inside me wants outside of those identities. I need to find out, even if it turns out that there is nothing else I want."

"Where will you go?" Vin-Chay said tensely. "Away from here? Cassian—away from me?" he said softly. He had already lost one brother, and now he was about to lose another—also his best friend, outside of Pyke—for a long time. Perhaps forever.

Cassian nodded. "For a time. I don't want to leave any of you, but I have to. Please give me the freedom to leave and to come back."

"When will you come back?" Vin-Chay asked in a tone that showed his obvious pain and distress.

"I don't know. A month. A year. Five years. I just don't know."

"Where will you go? How will you live? You can't—"

"I can, and I must. I have no answers for you, brother, only a deep love and a deeper regret that my own circumstances will impact yours and cause you pain. I wouldn't ask this of you if I thought there was any other way to deal with the situation. I know it will be hard on you and Pyke and your family to add more children to it, especially now, but—"

"The only thing that will be hard is looking into their faces and seeing you, and you won't be there." Vin-Chay paused, and then set Cassian free. "But you will be there, in them, and that will be enough until you return to us forever. When—when are you leaving?"

"Now. Today. The children are ready to join you and your other new daughter." Cassian smiled. "Whose name is?"

Vin-Chay smiled back. "Domenica—after her father." He cocked his head and looked down at the sleeping baby. "We'll call her Domii." He looked up at Cassian and tried to put on a positive face. "I guess this means that we'll have to increase the size of the rebuilt agrihouse significantly, since the child quotient in the family has just doubled."

"What will Pyke think when he returns home tonight?"

"He'll think me mad, but that wouldn't be anything new in our relationship." He turned serious for a moment. "You won't be staying for the investiture?"

Cassian shook his head as he stood up. "Truth? Seeing you thus would only make me want to stay, and I cannot. Please understand."

"I do. And I'll raise the girls with as much care as I will Domii and the boys. You have my word on that."

"I didn't need it, but thank you." Cassian watched his friend as Vin-Chay carefully laid the sleeping baby on the divan. He straightened, and the two men embraced tightly, holding onto each other for a brief eternity. Cassian pulled away and turned his head so that Vin-Chay wouldn't see the moistness in his eyes, then he moved towards the door. He turned back one last time and nodded silently to his friend, who returned the unspoken love, friendship, and trust. Then Cassian left to bring his children to their new home, and start on his own unknown and frightening journey of healing and self-discovery.

"I'll wait for you forever, my friend," Vin-Chay said quietly after Cassian left the apartment.

When Pyke returned home late that evening, he was greeted by a cacophony of child noises, from babies crying to toddlers shouting to his eldest son's calming voice. Bahrtok was sitting in his chair, playing with Cassiopeia; Nik-Chay and Pyco-Chay were reclining together on the divan; Cobahr was attempting to divert TutMi's attention from one section of the chamber to another; and Vin-

Chay was failing to maneuver liquid nutrients into Domii's reluctant mouth. When his spouse looked at him and seemed about to speak, Pyke held up a hand.

"I don't even want to know," he said mildly as he went into his noxchamber to change, and before his family could see the look of mixed exasperation and amusement on his face.

After the scene in the antechamber abated, through adult exhaustion and children falling asleep one after another in a very short time, Vin-Chay filled his mate in on the new additions to their family. He waited for an admonishment or show of temper, but Pyke seemed to take the new responsibilities in both good spirits and grace. His only comment mirrored the one Vin-Chay had made earlier: "We're going to need a much bigger house." Then he picked up a sleeping Domenica and carried her into their noxchamber, where Vin-Chay watched his spouse lay the baby down gently in Constantine's crib. A thought occurred to Vin-Chay that the two babies were nearly identical in age—Constantine the older by little more than a month. They would have to procure a larger crib to hold the two babies—amongst the many, many other changes they needed to make to their lives. Vin-Chay smiled—nothing had been constant in their lives over the past few years except their passion for and devotion to one another. Those feelings only seemed to intensify as the years passed.

After they had been in bed for a short while—with two soothings and one changing required for a crying Domenica—they both felt a peaceful, comforting feeling melt over them. There was no sexual desire, only the long-time solace of their physical closeness, and their silent emotional communion.

Pyke looked thoughtful as he said, "I wish Cassian would stay. I understand his need to heal, probably better than anyone, but he has so much more of a support system here to help him than I ever had."

"I know," Vin-Chay replied gently, "but he had to go. He'll be back, whole again, and he can start anew, much as you did. Until then, we have his daughters to raise, and Domenica."

"Aye," Pyke said sleepily. "Anew." Then he curled around his spouse and they both fell asleep within moments, resting undisturbed until Domenica cried out to be fed in the middle of the night.

Colyn was discharged from the Mediplex a week later, the same day as Constantine was. She was thinner than she had been before her injuries, and her waist-length silver hair was now short and neat as it started to grow back. Vin-Chay thought she looked very much like the mischievous elf of his eldest son's nickname. He kept this amused opinion to himself as he settled his mother-in-law back into the apartment, along with his youngest son. With eleven people

now inhabiting the three-chamber apartment, Vin-Chay stepped up efforts to have the agrihouse rebuilt. It would be a long and slow process, though, as much of Osiron struggled to do the same. Until then, they would all simply make due. Nik-Chay and Pyco-Chay had basically staked out the divan as their own, and the arrangement seemed to have considerably lessened Pyco-Chay's night fears and awakenings. Cobahr slept on a thin mattress near his uncle's 'bed.' TutMi and Cassiopeia slept on their own mattress in Bahrtok's and Colyn's noxchamber, and the two babies shared a crib in Pyke's and Vin-Chay's noxchamber.

On the night before Vin-Chay's investiture, the family enjoyed an indoor, makeshift celebration on the floor of the apartment's central chamber. It was crowded, and noisy, and no one would have traded a second of it for an hour of quiet. After they had finished eating—or, rather, throwing food, as in the case of the two toddlers and Cassiopeia—Bahrtok raised a glass of annise towards Vin-Chay, smiled, and inclined his head.

"To my foster son—health, prosperity, and a peaceful, fulfilling future for all of our families." He raised an eyebrow. "I think we're all well-overdue for that."

Vin-Chay smiled back at his beloved father figure and raised his own goblet back to him. "Aye, we are." He was sitting cross-legged on the floor, his back against the divan. He looked down at his lap, where Constantine dozed. The baby had been a little lethargic since his return, but he was responding much better to his parents and siblings than his physicians had thought he ever could. He was attempting to focus his pale green eyes again. He seemed most restful in Vin-Chay's arms. Vin-Chay stroked the baby's wispy, soft hair. Constantine murmured some sound, which heartened his parent.

There was a comfortable silence for a few moments as the rest of the family was loathe to disrupt the quiet communion between Vin-Chay and his son. Cobahr reached over and gently touched the baby's hand, then smiled at his father.

"I can't wait to teach him how to climb trees at the 'plex, Papa," the boy said eagerly.

"It'll be a few years yet for that, Sprite," Pyke said in amusement. "You'd best refine your skills with Pyco-Chay and TutMi first."

"Can girls climb trees?" the boy replied in confusion. He had had very little contact with members of the opposite sex, and this was going to be the start of many new experiences for him. He wasn't sure at this point if he was going to like that. Girls were just too strange.

“This one will, Sprite. She’ll be able to do anything you can. So will your other sisters. But it’s up to you to be patient and help them grow. Think you can do that?” Vin-Chay asked. Cobahr smiled and nodded vigorously.

Pyke watched his family carefully, thinking how incredibly lucky he was to have them all, and have them safe and whole. He knew his spouse felt the same way, although his thankfulness was tempered by his grief over losing beloved members of his birth family. The loss, compounded by the failure to resolve some important differences that would now never be resolved, mitigated his joy. *He hides the sorrow and pain well, though*, Pyke thought. He had always felt a strong sense of pride in his consort, but never more so than at this moment.

He thought of the future, and what it would hold, and he smiled.

CHAPTER TWENTY

The sixteenth day of Leo, year Fifty-One Seventy-One, broke as a warm, bright, sunny day. The deep sapphire sky was filled with slow-moving, huge, white puffy clouds. The green-blue sea beneath the bluff on which the Chay compound resided complemented the deep, clear color of the sky. White waves crashed and hissed against the rocks as the seabirds screamed and circled. A light, cool breeze wafted through the salty air.

Vin-Chay had chosen to break with several investiture traditions, as he had broken with so many customs and accepted practices in the years past. The ceremonies had always taken place in elaborate indoor and outdoor surroundings, with a great deal of ritual and circumstance. Vin-Chay had chosen a small, intimate ceremony atop the Chay bluff, with no initial pageantry or fuss. The rituals were always presided over by the highest-ranking member of the main Osiran temple; Vin-Chay had insisted that his friend, Patri Julian, perform his investiture. Only the Chay family, a few close friends and associates such as Jor-Rue, Burran, Jaylan, and Zandran, and the Crown Princes of the other eight Kindreds of Osiron would attend the investiture Pyke selected the date, Vin-Chay's thirtieth birthanniv; the stubborn Ptolemii would not be swayed from this demand.

The final change to tradition involved Cobahr, who, as Vin-Chay's legally adopted son, was designated as the Chay Heir-Prince. Investiture of the heir son was never done before the child's tenth birthanniv. Cobahr was short of his by a number of months, but as Vin-Chay had pointed out to the Archivists, the timing was not mandated, only traditional.

Pyke watched in silent, almost unbearable pride as his consort and son knelt side by side before Patri Julian on the bluff. He watched as the priest intoned the ancient investiture chants and words that would change Vin-Chay from a prince-ling into the seventh Crown Prince of Chay, and their son into the seventh Heir-Prince of Chay. Pyke stood beside Bahrtok, who was holding Pyco-Chay, and Colyn, who was holding Cassiopeia. Nik-Chay was unable to suppress a grin as he watched his brother's ceremony. His two arms—one prosthetic—were wrapped around TutMi. The babies, Constantine and Domenica, were sleeping beside one another at their uncle's feet in a large, hand-woven basket.

Sar-Chay and his family stood close by, and the older man watched in profound satisfaction as his stubborn but capable kinsman assumed his rightful place in their family. *You would be proud, brother*, he thought, as a painful, unbidden memory of Chay Shayne invaded his composure. *Of all of your sons.*

There was respectful silence from all spectators as Patri Julan completed his prayers. He nodded to his acolyte, who bowed and presented him with the two coronets. No one spoke or moved as the priest placed the Crown of Chay on Vin-Chay's forehead, officially changing him into Crown Prince Chay Vinetio DeGael-DeGrec. The priest then placed the small coronet of the Heir-Prince on Cobahr's forehead. The child would someday be invested as Crown Prince Chay Cobahr DeGael-DeGrec. Patri Julan, too, broke with solemn tradition as he gave the child a quick, affectionate wink, which elicited a grin and a giggle from the new Heir-Prince.

Pyke let his attention wander for a moment as Patri Julan spoke of the future and the promise of the Kindred of Chay. He noticed a solitary figure a good distance off on a rolling inland hill. He knew that Cassian hadn't been able to bear not being in some proximity to his friend's greatest moment. Pyke smiled; he looked forward to Cassian's return at that time somewhere in the future. He turned his attention back to his companions as a round of applause and congratulations broke out when the priest finished speaking. When he looked around again, Cassian was gone.

He turned back to see Vin-Chay smiling at him. He smiled back, and moved forward to embrace his spouse, but not before he closed his eyes and enjoyed a fleeting second of the soft breeze on his cheek. It made him think that Coba was there, somehow, and very much approved. The feeling gave him a sense of complete peace that he hadn't ever really known until now.

He couldn't wait to start his new future with Vin-Chay. He hoped it would be as full of passion and unpredictability and problems as their past had been. He didn't doubt for a moment that it would.

THE END