



EYE OF SCOTA: CINÁED

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To all those who have the courage
to stand up for what they believe in.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Scota—In Irish mythology, Scottish mythology, and pseudohistory, the name given to two different mythological daughters of two different Egyptian Pharaohs to whom the Gaels traced their ancestry, allegedly explaining the name Scoti, applied by the Romans to Irish raiders, and later to the Irish invaders of Argyll and Caledonia, which became known as Scotland.

Eye of Scota—A fictional magical gateway between Earth and the planet Dálriata.

Dálriata—Dál Riata (also Dalriada or Dalriata) was a Gaelic overkingdom on the western coast of Scotland with some territory on the northern coast of Ireland. In the late sixth and early seventh century, it encompassed roughly what is now Argyll and Bute and Lochaber in Scotland and also County Antrim in Northern Ireland.

—A fictional planet in the Canis Major Dwarf Galaxy, 25,000 light-years from Earth.

Cináed MacAlpin—Based on the character of Cináed mac Ailpín (Modern Gaelic: Coinneach mac Ailpein), commonly Anglicised as Kenneth MacAlpin and known in most modern regnal lists as Kenneth I (died 13 February 858); was king of the Picts and, according to national myth, first king of Scots, earning him the posthumous nickname of An Ferbasach, meaning The Conqueror.

sùbh—Gaelic for “berry”

darach—Gaelic for “oak”

slànach—Gaelic for “healing”

Crìosdaidh—Gaelic for “Christian”

Bunádh—Gaelic for “origin”

—The fictional home of the Eye of Scota on the planet Dálriata.

CHAPTER ONE

“I CAN’T do this anymore.” Cináed MacAlpin covered his face with his hands in a futile attempt to hide from the reality of his dilemma.

“What? Heal people?”

Akir’s voice brought him back to reality. They weren’t alone but having lunch in the monastery’s common refectory. Not that he was hungry after yet another morning full of agonizing decisions.

“No, of course not.” Cináed gave up his brief attempt at ignoring the world and looked up at his boyhood friend and fellow healer priest. Even as close as they’d always been, Cináed had never dared speak to Akir about his doubts. He couldn’t put his best friend’s life in danger like that. The Council of Priests would be certain to send the Inquisition after both of them if they found out about his heretic thoughts. “I’m sorry, I’m just tired.”

“It’s been a long morning.” Akir nodded, but his frown didn’t lessen. “I think we could both do with some fresh air before our afternoon duties.”

“Fresh air?” Cináed wanted to lie down and sleep for a week, not go for a walk. Having to refuse treatment to the *unworthy* had mentally exhausted him. Knowing there was nothing he could do made him furious with helpless anger. He would have preferred to be able to rest before facing his rigorous afternoon warrior training. Blast his father for insisting Cináed didn’t give up that part of the MacAlpin family tradition, even though he was now officially a healer priest. The only

part he looked forward to was being able to get out of the stupid robes and don one of his kilts.

“Yes, out in the forest, where it’s nice and quiet.” Akir’s bright blue eyes sparkled as his gaze intensified.

“Fresh air it is.” A look like that from his friend meant that the other man was planning something.

The meal was finished quickly, Cináed forcing himself to eat at least part of the delicious fresh food on his plate. There was no point in deliberately reducing his strength. They returned their plates and eating utensils to the kitchen and made their way through the bare stone corridors to the exit. Though the guards gave them odd looks, they didn’t dare question the two white-robed healers, and let them pass unchallenged.

As soon as the heavy wooden double door closed behind them, Cináed breathed easier. One path led toward the sprawling city with its stone spires and broad alleyways at the foot of the hill, the other toward the wilds of the forest. Tall trees, overgrown by *sùbh* vines with their year-round red flowers, offered sanctuary from the glaring summer sunshine. The usual cacophony of multicolored birds greeted them as they approached the welcome shade. Soft moss replaced the prickly grass when they passed into the domain of the ancient *darach* trees.

They walked in silence for a while, making sure there was enough distance from the oppressive environment that had become their home when they’d left their families at age five. Both of them were supposed to have become warriors, but the tests all children had to go through had shown them to have the mental abilities required to work with the Slànach Stones. Since that always took precedence, it had made them wards of the Council of Priests, changing their lives forever.

“So, tell me what it is *exactly* that you can’t do anymore.” Akir had stopped walking and turned toward him.

“I told you that I was just tired.” Cináed wasn’t sure he’d be able to overcome twenty years of indoctrination. Talking about the doubts that had begun to plague him was risky, even though they were alone and nobody could possibly overhear their conversation. Voicing his

secret thoughts would somehow make them more real and would make returning to being an obedient believer and servant even more difficult.

“You didn’t really think I’d believe that, did you?” Akir raised his eyebrows.

“Well....” He’d hoped it might be enough.

“Look, I’ve known you ever since we were put into the same student group after passing those tests. Something’s been bothering you since we graduated into full service last summer, and today’s exclamation expressed whatever it is that’s wrong with you.” Akir looked around and pointed at a fallen tree. “I think it’s pretty serious if it’s got you down this much, and I want to know what it is so I can help you.”

“There’s nothing you can do.” Cináed followed his friend into the clearing and sat down next to him.

“Aha, so you admit it.” Akir grinned, his white teeth flashing in the semishade.

“Talking about it could get us both into trouble.” Cináed looked down, no longer able to resist the intense curiosity coming from his friend in waves.

“I’ve never seen you so depressed, so it seems to me that *not* talking about it isn’t working too well either.” Akir put a hand on Cináed’s knee, making him look up in shock. Touching between males was forbidden by the Council of Priests. With that one move, Akir had made himself as vulnerable as if he’d openly spoken out against the religious rulers of Dálriata. “I think it’s time we’re honest with each other.”

“What are you doing, Akir?” Cináed was well aware of his own forbidden urges, his longing to touch another man. But he’d never thought of Akir that way—and he was almost certain his friend didn’t see him like that either. What was going on?

“I’m trying to make you see that we’re both on the same side.” Akir withdrew his hand and sighed. “We’ve always trusted each other, and yet we can’t seem to talk about things like we used to. Something is obviously bothering you, but you can’t, or won’t, talk to me about it.

I think this religious indoctrination we've gone through has gotten between us, and I hate that."

"You do? You never said anything." As the words came out of his mouth, Cináed realized how stupid they were. "Of course you didn't. It would've been too dangerous, with the way everyone is spying on everyone else."

"That, and the fact that there never seemed to be any need. You seemed fine." Akir tilted his head. "But that's changed, hasn't it?"

"It's been gradual." How was he going to explain this to his friend? He'd only fairly recently begun to understand it himself. "Have you ever wondered why we're only supposed to heal the *worthy*?"

"No, not really. After all, the Slànach Stones are limited in number. Their energy gets used up over time and, until we find new ones, we'll have to be careful about how we use them." Akir frowned. "At least that's the official line."

"And that's only part of what's got me worried." But it was the easier one to focus on, so he would start there. "What I want to know is *why* there aren't any more of them when the history books tell us they've always been plentiful. From what I was able to find out by digging in the library records—once I had access to them after entering full service—the supply came to a sudden and unexplained stop about a thousand years ago."

"That was when the last major wave of fugitives from Earth came through the Eye of Scots." Akir scratched his head. "You think the two events are connected?"

"I don't know. I don't have any proof, but I think it's odd that the Stones stopped being found right around the time that those fugitives brought the Crìosdaidh religion and the English language with them. It looks like something about those events or their consequences interfered with the supply. Equally puzzling is that those with the mental abilities to use the Stones seem to be fewer in each generation." Cináed had done some careful checking of the numbers and had been shocked when he'd found out that healers had once been very numerous.

“You’re sure?” Akir narrowed his eyes. “Just because there’ve been fewer acolytes each year doesn’t mean there’s a big problem.”

“This annual reduction in numbers has been going on for at least nine hundred years. Healers apparently used to make up about a quarter of the population.” He sighed. “I can’t help but think that the spread of this new belief system has something to do with all those changes.”

“That would explain why the Council of Priests keeps such tight control over who can be healed and who can’t. Since they’re in charge of the spiritual and physical health of the population, they had to find a system of rationing the dwindling quantity of Stones and for dealing with the reduction in the number of healers.” Akir nodded.

“This is exactly where my problem starts. Since they’re in control of the decisions, they get to decide who’s *worthy*. That leads to them favoring those who can help them remain in power. Not those who really need our help.” He’d had to turn away so many people who really needed him because they weren’t a member of the upper clans and didn’t have the money to pay the fees. Using money was the only way someone with a lower status had access to the healers’ services.

“So that’s what you meant when you said that you can’t do this anymore.” Akir looked thoughtful.

“Exactly. It’s been bugging me ever since I started full service last year and was given the guidelines as to who can and who can’t be treated. Those criteria seemed arbitrary to me, wrong in principle and in what they make me do on a daily basis. Turning sick people away can’t be right, especially when they’re the ones who need our help most. That’s when I started digging into the history books and discovered this mess.” Sometimes he wished he hadn’t, because even though he knew the reasons, there still didn’t seem to be anything he could do to right this wrong.

Not being able to come up with a solution, Cináed decided it was time to go back. At least Akir was aware of the problem now, and hopefully, between the two of them, they’d be able to come up with some new ideas.

When they emerged from the forest's shade, one of the special guards waited for them. His uniform wasn't the simple black of the normal guards but decorated with gold tassels and buttons. He looked purposely intimidating. Cináed suddenly wished he'd taken his sword with him when they'd left the monastery. Not that there was any point in fighting this guard if he didn't want to risk severe punishment, but it might have made him feel less exposed.

"His Holiness the High Priest Makolm wishes to see you immediately, Cináed MacAlpin." The guard scowled. "I wouldn't want to be in your shoes. You've made him wait because you left the monastery, and now you're most definitely in trouble. Don't think that he'll be lenient just because you're a healer. You're insignificant compared to His Holiness."

Oh, shit. Being called into the High Priest's chambers couldn't be good. Had the powerful man somehow found out about Cináed's treacherous thoughts? Was the Inquisition going to get him for daring to challenge those in power?

CINÁED left Akir behind, his friend not being the one High Priest Makolm wanted to see. While he wasn't looking forward to facing the spiritual leader of Dálriata on his own, he was grateful that whatever trouble he was in didn't seem to affect Akir.

Entering the ostentatious chambers of the High Priest was an experience. He'd only been invited inside twice before, and both times had been routine, not a special situation like now. He didn't remember much about the first visit; he'd only been five and mainly worried about leaving his brothers, sisters, and parents behind. The second time had been just under a year ago, after he'd passed the exams and became an official healer priest.

The High Priest had informed him that his duties as a warrior were to continue, despite his new status. It had surprised Cináed and clearly annoyed Makolm. Cináed hadn't been given an explanation but had figured it was due to his father's influence as the chief of one of the

five most powerful clans on the planet. Why his father had wanted this was totally beyond him, and it wasn't as if he could go and ask the man. He hadn't seen him since he'd left home, his only point of contact the occasional letter from his mother or what he heard in the sparse news reports that made it into the isolation of the monastery. Contact with the outside world was *discouraged*.

The first sign that they were approaching the High Priest's chambers was the appearance of rugs on the stone floors and the occasional painting on the walls. As they progressed through the corridors, the rugs grew softer and the paintings more colorful. Decorations started appearing on the columns framing the doors leading off to the left and right, and soon the ceiling turned from the natural gray of the stone to a brilliant painted white. Finally they reached the double *darach* doors to the main chamber. The doors had gold decorations and jeweled inlays, announcing the importance of the person behind them.

The second of the special guards stood at the entrance, and upon seeing Cináed, he grinned maliciously and knocked on one of the doors. A loud "come in" gave the guards permission to open the doors, and it took both of them to accomplish the task. He was motioned inside, and the door was pulled closed with an echoing bang.

The inner chamber was even more lavishly decorated, white marble and gold the predominant elements. High Priest Makolm sat behind an ornate desk of precious mahogany, staring at some papers and making notes with an old-fashioned quill. Not a modern pen in sight. Living simply was one of the ways in which the religious leadership was trying to set themselves apart from the rest of the population.

Cináed walked up to the desk and stood quietly, as protocol demanded. Makolm pretended not to notice him, and anger burned within Cináed at the deliberate show of power. The man had requested his urgent attendance. What was the point in making him wait, other than showing his superiority?

When the High Priest finally looked up, his blazing blue eyes were as alert as ever. He may have been over eighty years old, but

you'd never be able to tell from looking at him. His hair was white and wavy, there was hardly a wrinkle on his face, and he held himself upright like a man twenty years his junior.

"Ah, Cináed, how kind of you to drop by." Makolm's lips twisted into a cruel smile. "My guards told me you had wandered off into the woods with your friend, and I can't help but wonder what the two of you were up to?"

"We were talking, Your Holiness." Cináed's knees had gone weak. Makolm was clearly not pleased, and this situation could easily turn into a disaster.

"Never mind, that's a minor matter not worth our attention right now." Makolm waved a hand dismissively.

Huh? If this was a minor matter, he'd hate to find out what trouble he was really in.

"Please, have a seat." Makolm pointed at one of the gilded visitor chairs. "We have much to discuss."

He was being offered a seat? That was unusual. The whole situation was way outside his expectations. He quietly sat down and hoped he'd find out what was going on before he collapsed from the tension.

"What do you know about the Eye of Scots?" Makolm leaned back in his seat, putting his elbows onto the cushioned armrests and steepling his fingers.

"It's the stone circle that has periodically transported fugitives from Earth to Dálriata over the centuries that we've been living on this new planet." Was this a trap to find out how much he really knew?

"And?" Makolm raised his eyebrows, clearly expecting more.

"Nobody has ever been able to explain how it works, but it seems to be a gateway between the two worlds that appears when the need for safety is greatest." Cináed frowned. "The other side of the circle is said to have appeared on Earth whenever the inhabitants of Scotland were threatened by various invading forces, offering the suppressed refuge

and safety from persecution. But the one at this end has always been stationary, in the land of Bunádh.”

“Very good. That understanding is an excellent starting point for your mission.” Makolm lowered his hands, folding them across his belly. “What I’m about to tell you is not general knowledge and will require the utmost discretion on your part.”

“Of course, Your Holiness.” Cináed didn’t feel half as confident as he sounded. Being drawn into the High Priest’s confidence was not a good thing. The man clearly wanted something from him, but what would happen once he had completed his task? If this knowledge was dangerous, there was no guarantee that he’d survive.

“Very good.” Makolm nodded. “What isn’t generally known is that the Eye of Scota is also the source of the Slánach Stones. However, the supply seems to have dried up several years ago, and we now need to return to the Eye to obtain more.”

Cináed took a calming breath, focusing on not moving a muscle. Letting Makolm know that he’d figured this out himself wasn’t a good idea. And quite clearly the High Priest didn’t want him to know the whole truth—admitting to the lack of new Stones for “several years” was quite different from what Cináed knew to be true, based on his research.

“The Council of Priests has accepted my recommendation that you be the one to travel to the land of Bunádh to retrieve more Stones for us.” Makolm smiled benignly. “That is quite an honor, young man, and I’ll have you know that I expect you to keep the interests of the Council of Priests at heart at all times. You well know the punishment for disobedience.”

And there it was: the thinly veiled threat of what would happen if he disobeyed. It wasn’t quite clear to him at this point what form such disobedience could take, but that didn’t stop him from almost panicking.

“Why me?” Cináed focused on keeping his voice even. “I know how to use the Stones, but I have no idea how to retrieve more.”

“Then you will figure it out.” Makolm had stopped smiling. “You’re an able healer and a warrior to boot, so you are the ideal person for this mission. Do not make me ask you twice.”

“Surely there are better warriors than me.” Cináed was curious about the outside world, but the price of not being able to fulfill the expectations was a little high for him.

“There may be better warriors, but their allegiance will not be with the Council of Priests, will it?” Makolm’s smile turned cunning. “So far we’ve been dependent on the Warrior Council to select one of theirs to attempt finding more Stones. The nature of the mission demands someone who is able to travel long distances through sometimes dangerous areas. Now that we have you, a priest who is also a warrior, we can finally keep control of everything within the Council of Priests.”

That was not going to go down well with the Warrior Council. On top of which, it set Cináed up to be the person both sides would blame if anything went wrong. *Shit!* He’d ended up right in the middle of a major battle for power. He had to find a way out of this before it was too late.

“The fact that you are also a descendant of the powerful MacAlpin clan will silence any potential disagreement from the Warrior Council.” Makolm grinned. “I expect them to argue against sending a priest. They will want to keep trying to gain control over the Stones themselves. Having you on our side will nullify their arguments.”

Cináed wasn’t going to say anything to contradict High Priest Makolm, but he doubted that it would be that easy. If what he knew about his father was anything to go by, the Warrior Council wasn’t going to accept this lying down.

“YOU’VE got no right to accept this mission.” Cináed’s older brother Gordan’s face was red, his brown eyes sparking with anger.

“It isn’t my choice to make.” Cináed had wondered what a reunion with his family would be like. He’d never imagined a scene like this.

His father and older brother had come to the monastery on the evening before the big intercouncil meeting. They’d said they wanted to talk some sense into him before it was too late, but so far Gordan had only yelled at him. His father hadn’t even spoken yet, his face dispassionate but his body language clearly disapproving.

“Nonsense. All you need to do is refuse to go. Even you should be able to do that.” Gordan got up from the uncomfortable wooden bench on the opposite side of the small table. They were in one of the visitor rooms set aside for the reception of outside guests. Gordan started pacing, throwing the odd disapproving glance at Cináed.

“You’re wrong. I can’t refuse this mission.” He closed his eyes for a minute to calm himself down. Why wouldn’t these people, his family, listen to him? “I’m a healer priest, and I have to obey my superior’s orders. The High Priest has made it very clear that he expects me to take this assignment and be successful.”

“You’re also a warrior.” His father’s deep voice rang out in the small room, almost making Cináed flinch. Lornell MacAlpin was still an imposing figure, even though he was in his late fifties. There wasn’t a gray hair in sight, and he looked as physically fit as ever. “Or have you forgotten?”

“No, Father, I haven’t forgotten.” Although it had seemed to him that his father had forgotten *him* all these years. Family visits were restricted, but they weren’t impossible. Despite this, his father hadn’t been to see Cináed once in twenty years. “After all, it was you who insisted that I keep up the training, much to everyone’s disapproval. I still don’t understand how you were able to make the Council of Priests agree to that stipulation.”

“Politics, my son.” His father’s grin grew almost evil. “Something you might not understand, having grown up behind these walls, but essential to our family’s and our clan’s survival.”

“Politics, my ass. I’m sure you blackmailed them into it.” Gordan had stopped his pacing and glared at their father.

“Gordan! I won’t have you speak to me like this.” His father hadn’t moved a muscle, but the threat was clear in his voice. “I’m still head of our family and chief of the MacAlpin clan, and we have certain standards to maintain.”

Gordan didn’t react and instead moved to stand next to Cináed, towering over him in a very transparent attempt at intimidation. It looked like his brother had yet to learn the finer art of politics.

“Look, the MacAlpin clan has been chosen for *this* attempt at retrieving the Stones, as per the decision of last week’s Warrior Council meeting. That means I, as the eldest son, have the duty and honor to represent the clan.” Gordan’s attempt at being reasonable was short-lived. He hit the wooden table with a fist. “Don’t you understand anything?”

“I understand that High Priest Makolm has chosen me to go on the mission. I also understand that I can’t refuse his orders.” Cináed swallowed. Having both his older brother and his father against him was hard. “What I don’t understand is your reference to ‘*this* attempt at retrieving more Stones’. Have there been others?”

“What? They haven’t told you?” Gordan stepped back, his mouth open.

“Told me what?” Cináed glanced at his father, hoping the older man would tell him what was going on.

“That’s just typical! Trying to withhold information to make people do what they want. The Council of Priests has no honor whatsoever.” His father shook his head. “What your High Priest clearly neglected to tell you is that this shortage of Stones has been going on for a long time. There has been a mission like this about every ten years for the last few hundred years. None of the warriors sent have ever returned, not even to report that there are no longer any Stones or that the Eye of Scots has vanished.”

“What are you saying?” Cináed refused to believe that he was being sent on what was starting to sound like a hopeless mission.

“You heard what Father said.” Gordan smirked. “None of the last however many missions have been successful. You’re not likely to change that. Hell, you’re not even a full warrior!”

“What makes you think that *you* would be successful where so many have already failed?” His brother was certainly arrogant enough to become a clan leader.

“They’ve never asked a MacAlpin before.” Gordan sat down.

“Really?” Cináed almost rolled his eyes at his brother’s belief in his own superiority.

“Really.” Gordan crossed his massive arms over his chest.

“If this is true, I should be as able to fulfill this mission as you are. After all, I’m no less a MacAlpin than you.” Cináed suppressed his grin with an effort.

Gordan’s eyes widened, and his brother opened his mouth but nothing came out.

“Touché!” His father grinned.

“What? Are you taking his side now?” Gordan turned toward their father, expression incredulous.

“No, I’m not taking anyone’s side.” His father tilted his head. “All I’m saying is that Cináed made a good point. He is, after all, also a MacAlpin.”

“But—but he’s a healer! He can’t possibly succeed where so many warriors have failed.” Gordan slumped in his seat.

“I think there’s a very easy way to determine who will go on the mission. It’s a method steeped in tradition and proven successful across the centuries.” His father rose and stood so he could look at both of them at the same time. “This is no longer a matter for the Warrior Council to decide, since it only involves our family.”

“What are you saying, Father?” Gordan sat up.

Cináed felt his heart stutter. He was pretty sure he knew what was coming.

“I’m saying that the decision as to who will go on the mission will be made based on who can best the other in a sword fight.” His father looked triumphant.

Cináed just shook his head. He didn’t know much about his brother, but he’d certainly had more training than Cináed over the years. He also had his doubts whether the High Priest was going to accept this challenge to his authority. But then, this was apparently politics, and different rules might apply.

“Well, I can certainly live with that decision.” Gordan looked smug. “Can you, little brother?”

“Sure.” Considering the fact that he didn’t really want to go in the first place, this looked like a good way out of his predicament. All he needed to do was lose the sword fight—not that that would be difficult to do—and his problem was solved. Well, almost. There was still the matter of High Priest Makolm’s reaction to all this.

TWO days later Cináed stood in the center of the city’s largest arena and wondered how he’d gotten here. High Priest Makolm hadn’t been happy about Gordan’s challenge, nor did he agree with the terms of making the decision. But there hadn’t been anything he could do about it, because the law confirmed that this was a family matter, and this gave Lornell MacAlpin the right to set the conditions.

To Cináed’s horror, his father had also made this a major public event, wanting to draw as much benefit from the situation as possible. Sword fights were an important part of their heritage, but had become very rare and were usually enactments of historical events. Having the opportunity to watch a real one had drawn thousands of people to the city’s largest arena, despite the short notice.

The tension was palpable. Sweat beaded on Cináed’s brow and ran down his naked back in small rivulets. It was early afternoon, and for the first time he was grateful that his trainers had insisted on practicing in difficult situations like this. He still felt totally out of his depth.

Only his kilt and favorite sword were familiar. Gordan was an unknown opponent who was determined to win.

Within minutes of the signal for them to start, Cináed was too busy fighting to keep thinking. His brother's blows came hard and fast, Gordan obviously determined to get this over with as quickly as possible. He had strength on his side and was pushing Cináed toward the edge of the fighting area. With his back to the metaphorical wall, something snapped inside him.

There was no reason he couldn't fight back. He might not have wanted to go on the mission, but there was no point in sending a hothead like Gordan. And there must have been a reason for High Priest Makolm to choose him. Maybe it was the fact that no healer had ever attempted to retrieve the Stones. Maybe it was the fact that Cináed combined the abilities of a healer with those of a warrior that gave the High Priest hope for success.

Maybe he just didn't want to lose the fight in front of his father, the rest of his family, and most of the city's inhabitants.

Decision made, Cináed started watching for a weakness he could use. Gordan's temper and the certainty that he was the superior fighter were a disadvantage his brother wasn't even aware of. Cináed had also discovered that he was a lot faster than his somewhat bigger and more muscular brother.

Cináed started getting little stabs in here and there, moving too fast for his brother to follow. His best strategy was probably to let Gordan tire himself out and then somehow disarm him.

Half an hour later he was beginning to question the wisdom of his decision. Even though his brother was clearly getting tired, Cináed was nearing the end of his endurance as well. The sun was beating down on them mercilessly, and he was ready to give up when his brother suddenly stumbled. He quickly righted himself again, but this was a clear sign that Gordan's strength was beginning to run out.

Cináed followed with a few quick blows that were too fast for Gordan to avoid. Slowly but surely, he beat his brother back. With a last desperate lunge, he finally made him step outside the fighting area.

Gordan sank to his knees, lowering his head in the classic gesture of surrender. Cináed touched his neck with the flat side of his sword in ritual acknowledgement and stepped back to the applause of the huge crowd. They didn't know why they'd fought or what was at stake. Like any crowd out for a sensation, all they'd wanted was to be entertained.

Cináed had delivered.

But this was only the first stage, he was sure. The biggest fight was yet to come. His chances for success were much smaller than they'd been for the sword fight, but he was no longer going to worry about that. He had a mission, and he was going to do his best to fulfill it. They urgently needed more Stones, and he would do his best to retrieve them. After all, if there were enough Stones, he wouldn't have to turn sick people away anymore.

That was a cause truly worth fighting for.

CHAPTER TWO

“HOW do you plead?” The judge looked straight at Tadeo Banderas as if she were trying to read his mind. Maybe she was. Admiral Amelia Forrester of the Solar Exploration Fleet, or SEF, was a stern woman of Egyptian descent in her late sixties, dark hair pulled back into a severe bun. Her credentials as a legal expert and judge for the SEF were impeccable. She wasn’t known for leniency. It was just his luck that she’d be the one presiding over his disciplinary hearing at the SEF’s main court on Earth.

“Not guilty.” He hadn’t done anything wrong, even if the rules apparently said otherwise. Fleet Command’s interpretation of those rules had caused them to call for this hearing. He was going to do his best to challenge them; it was his career that was now at stake.

“So noted.” Admiral Forrester tapped her data pad and cleared her throat before looking back at him. “Do you understand that the outcome will be binding unless you decide to push for a full trial, Captain Banderas?”

“I do.” Tadeo almost snorted. That was a very theoretical alternative. A full trial wasn’t something he wanted in his files if he could possibly avoid it. Not even if they cleared him. The fact that he’d asked for a full trial, costing the SEF time and money, would be a permanent black spot marking him as a *difficult employee*. He might be the youngest captain of the SEF, but even he wasn’t that stupid.

“Now, since this is a hearing and not a trial, we will forego the usual formalities to some degree. Both sides will present their case, followed by questioning and any further statements anyone wishes to

make. Once that is completed, the judges will retire for deliberation. Is that agreeable?" Admiral Forrester looked at the other two judges, clearly not expecting any disagreement.

When the second admiral and the senior captain nodded, she gave the signal to proceed by banging her desk with the ceremonial gavel. The number of participants was small enough to fit into her expansive office with its chrome and glass furniture. Star charts lined the walls, and several of the Fleet's ships were represented in model form, safely behind glass in various display cases.

It didn't take long for the grim-faced prosecutor to give his side of the argument. It wasn't really a complicated case. Tadeo's first mission after his promotion to captain was to land on Mira IV. The resident species there had recently discovered significant deposits of much needed trisilicone. His job was to obtain a mining treaty that was advantageous to the Solar system. It wasn't as exciting to him as exploring the total unknown or making first contact, but it was a prestigious mission. The primary objective of the SEF was to find the resources that had begun to become scarce in the Solar system.

What he had found on Mira IV had appalled him. Their society consisted of a rich minority that ruthlessly exploited the impoverished majority. Slavery was legal and heavily regulated. The complicated and cruel system made the Terran corporate capitalists of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries look like angels. When the Miran overlord, a cruel dictator by anyone's standards, had asked him to suggest any further improvements that might be needed in light of the new treaty, Tadeo had lost his temper.

Instead of toeing the Fleet line and replying with empty diplomatic phrases, he had given his honest opinion. Of course this caused a major interstellar diplomatic incident, and even worse, the treaty wasn't signed. His superiors hadn't been pleased, and from the look of things, neither were the judges he'd just presented his case to.

"Let me ask you this one last time." Admiral Forrester was frowning. "You stand by your decision that it was right to answer the Miran overlord's question by stating your personal political convictions?"

“I do. They’re not only my personal political convictions; in this case they’re supported by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.” Tadeo wanted a career in the SEF badly enough to make his teeth hurt, but he wasn’t going to sacrifice his principles.

“As you well know, politics has no place in ensuring the Solar system obtains the material, personnel, and other resources it needs to grow and flourish. Answering a legitimate question from a potential trade partner with humanitarian principles was therefore not appropriate. Economic necessity overrides any principles we might hold in an ideal world. Surely you were aware of this?” Admiral Forrester sounded like she really believed this.

“Then we are no better than the Mirans.” Tadeo was more disappointed than he could say. It was probably his own fault for wanting to believe that basic human decency would win if the SEF was ever presented with a choice between obtaining a much-needed resource and doing the right thing. How could he have been so wrong?

“We are not here to have a philosophical debate about right and wrong, so I’m going to ignore your last statement.” Admiral Forrester raised her eyebrows. “I am, however, going to give you an unofficial warning. If you don’t change your attitude to reflect the official position on economic priorities, your career with the SEF will be extremely short-lived.”

Tadeo nodded. He was beginning to see that.

“If nobody has anything further to say, we will adjourn the meeting and reconvene tomorrow morning at ten a.m. to pronounce our verdict.” Admiral Forrester looked toward the other two judges before lifting the gavel and banging the desk.

Tadeo returned to the admiral’s office the next morning bleary-eyed and with a pounding headache. He’d had almost no sleep and was expecting the worst. After greeting everyone in the room, Admiral Forrester sat down.

“Captain Banderas, please rise.” Admiral Forrester leaned back in her chair and looked relaxed. Could she be any more infuriating?

“We have carefully discussed the situation and have come to the conclusion that your actions were not in the best interest of the SEF. However, we also believe that you did not set out to deliberately sabotage your mission. With that in mind, we will recommend your transfer away from the primary Economic Unit. We feel that you might be better suited to serve in the exploratory branch of the SEF.” Admiral Forrester almost smiled.

Fuck! That was a demotion of the worst kind. Even though he suspected that he might feel more at home looking for new planets than negotiating with existing partners, this would not look good in his file. Exploration was a secondary goal of the SEF, and all the best people were assigned to the Economic Unit. His contemporaries, so envious when he’d been promoted to captain before they were, were getting the last laugh after all.

“WE’RE going *where*?” Jerzy Podmore, his new first officer, looked at Tadeo with undisguised shock in his bright green eyes. His dark red hair was short enough to pass inspection, but remarkably unkempt for an officer of his seniority. Tadeo liked that about the man. He’d never found it easy to get along with those who slavishly followed rules and regulations. He’d much rather work with people who’d retained some of their personality as well as an ability to think independently. He’d found that often saved lives in a crisis.

“You heard me. The Canis Major Dwarf Galaxy is the SEF’s next major project for exploration, and we are to study it for future colonization. With around a billion stars to choose from, we should be able to discover something of interest.” Tadeo rubbed his aching temples. His punishment had gone from bad to worse when he’d received his detailed orders to take command of the *Valiant* and take her for a ten-year exploratory mission to the other end of the galaxy. Hell, their goal was actually outside the galaxy proper, if he wanted to be technical about it. The message from Fleet Command couldn’t have been any clearer if they’d told him in writing: he was now considered an undesirable element.

“But that’s 25,000 light-years from here. That means we’ll be totally out of touch with the rest of the SEF.” Jerzy finally sat back down into the well-padded visitor chair of the captain’s office.

“That’s why we’ll be traveling in a minifleet of ten ships.” Tadeo sighed. It wasn’t much, but at least they’d be able to give each other some assistance in an emergency. “Captain Wasabi of the *Maru* will be acting admiral, since he’s got seniority.”

“What about crew members with extended families?” According to Jerzy’s file, he wasn’t one of them, but it was the mark of a good first officer to consider the crew’s well-being. Tadeo approved.

“As far as I know, everyone who signed on was aware that they were going out for an extended period of time. Was I misinformed?” He wouldn’t be surprised if Fleet Command had decided to add yet another obstacle to this impossible mission. Why didn’t they just dismiss him if they wanted to get rid of him?

“No, you weren’t. But ten years is twice the normal time, so I expect some crew members will have issues.” Jerzy frowned. “They may have their immediate families with them, as is usual for long-term exploratory ships, but that doesn’t solve the problem of contact with other family members.”

“Then we should let them know so that they can make their decisions accordingly. If anybody wants to apply for a transfer to another ship, they will have a chance to do so before we leave.” Tadeo shook his head. “I just hope that Fleet Command will be able to come up with replacements on such short notice. We can’t start a mission like this understaffed.”

“Agreed, sir. Will there be anything else?” Jerzy moved to the edge of the seat, ready to get up and let the other members of the command team know they were about to have their first briefing from their new captain.

“No, not for the moment. I’ll meet you in the main conference room at eleven hundred hours, as agreed.” Tadeo wanted half an hour to himself to try and come to terms with his situation.

He'd not been given any time to adjust after yesterday's verdict. It made him wonder how much preplanning had gone into his punishment. It seemed as though Fleet Command had decided the outcome before the hearing even started. How else was it possible for there to be a ship ready and available, just waiting for him to take command the next morning?

Not that it really mattered. The longer he thought about it, the better he felt about going out to explore the far reaches of the galaxy. Even though the status of his new position was lower, he'd actually be doing what he'd dreamed of before joining the Fleet Academy. Discovering new planets and potentially making contact with new civilizations was far more exciting than negotiating the next trade agreement.

Being 25,000 light-years away from Fleet headquarters with potentially unreliable communication also had its advantages. In new situations like the ones they'd be facing, he'd have more decision-making power. On the whole, his "punishment" hadn't turned out to be as bad as expected.

A YEAR and a mostly boring trip later, not only had they arrived at their destination but they were making headway on discovering potentially habitable planets. They'd divided the large, irregular star cluster into ten sections, one for each of the ships in their minifleet. Another few months had passed with charting the stellar systems in their section, using scanning technology to decide the most likely candidates for further examination.

The first four systems they'd visited turned out to be uninhabited and unlikely to support any life. Their planets were either too close to their suns, too far away, or gas giants not suitable for any of the species that had so far been discovered in the rest of the galaxy. They'd dutifully mapped everything, reporting chemical compositions and major resources to Fleet Command for the Economic Unit to have a look at. If enough interesting resources and materials were discovered, it might make a follow-up trip worth SEF's while.

They were about to get the initial report on their next target system, and Tadeo was trying hard not to be too excited. He didn't want to be disappointed if this turned out to be yet another uninteresting target.

Tadeo took his seat at the head of the table in the main conference room and waited for the other officers to arrive. So far this solar system had only been given a number, and the chief astronomer was one of the few people who knew whether this was likely to change. Only habitable systems were given a name in addition to their number. Tadeo would be the one to choose that name, and he couldn't wait to perform this duty for the first time.

"Now that everyone is here, let's begin." Tadeo nodded at Will Hansen, their head astronomer—a small, balding man with a penchant for bad jokes.

"The initial reports show that this system has a yellow-white sun, type F9V. This makes it somewhat hotter than Sol, which is a G2V, but not dangerously so." Will pointed the remote control at the projector to illustrate his statement. "The system has a total of seven planets, of which two are within the habitable zone for humans. The one closer to its sun is the one of primary interest to us, I believe."

A picture of a green planet with a comparatively small amount of ocean surface came up on the screen.

"This planet has an average surface temperature of nineteen degrees Celsius, which is three degrees above that of Earth today or five degrees above the pre-global-warming level. About one-third of its surface is covered with ocean and there seems to be an abundance of vegetation." Will grinned. "While we're still too far away to make a closer determination, I believe we may have found our first candidate for closer inspection."

"Excellent!" Tadeo did his best to contain his enthusiasm, but couldn't quite avoid a small smile escaping his control. "What about the second planet you mentioned?"

"It's at the very limit of the habitable zone and has an average surface temperature of only ten degrees. However, three-quarters of its

surface is covered by ocean, so there is the possibility of marine life. Only closer examination will tell us whether it will be worth a detailed survey.” Will returned to his seat at the table.

“Have you found any signs of intelligent life on either of the planets?” Tadeo held his breath, not knowing what answer to hope for. Discovering a new civilization would be exciting, but they’d have to be a whole lot more careful in their approach. Being able to land on an uninhabited planet to “stretch their legs” would be a major benefit at this point.

“No, we’ve found no indication of intelligent life as we currently define it on either planet. Of course, we’re still too far way to make a detailed determination, but we’d be able to detect any civilization with a significant level of technology.” Will shrugged. “If there is intelligent life down there, it is likely to be very primitive or in the very first stages of development.”

“That is excellent work, Mr. Hansen. Please convey my thanks to your team.” Tadeo sat back in his chair to consider their next steps. “It looks like we’ll finally go to stage two of the planetary exploration process. We’ll focus on the planet closer to its sun first. I expect everyone’s detailed reports to be available at ten hundred hours in three days’ time. Dismissed.”

Having done as much as they could for now, the next three days were going to be loaded with frantic activity for his department heads and anxious waiting for him. Sometimes he regretted being a captain, with nothing more to do than supervise everybody else’s efforts. He grinned at himself. He’d never thought he would bemoan the fact that there was no real work for him to do.

The only thing he did have to get accomplished was to come up with a name for the planet. Just in case it turned out to be as potentially lucrative as the initial reports indicated. He should also start thinking about potential scenarios for exploration, composition of landing teams, and backup plans in case anything went wrong. There was the initial report for Fleet Command to think of, as well as brief messages to their nine sister ships.

At least this time he’d have something significant to report.

“THERE are humans on this planet?” Tadeo didn’t even try to hide his shock. He’d expected the geologists or the biologists to take the lead during the second meeting three days later, not the xenopsychologist. Even though, strictly speaking, they needed an anthropologist to deal with this situation, Lieutenant Marjorie Fletcher was the closest match.

“It seems so, sir.” Marjorie raked her long blonde hair nervously. “Their technology is so primitive that we didn’t pick up any traces while still outside their system. As soon as we entered orbit, we picked up two locations with strange energy emanations. One of them turned out to be a major city at one end of the biggest continent. The other seems to come from what appears to be a ceremonial stone circle in an uninhabited area in the central area of the same continent. That latter is the stronger of the two sources.”

“Hold on.” Tadeo tried to put some sort of order into his chaotic thoughts. “I’m still trying to deal with the fact that there are humans 25,000 light-years from Earth in an area of space that, according to Fleet records, has never been visited by humans in the last five hundred years, since we started exploring space. How did they get here?”

“We have no idea, sir.” Marjorie gripped her datapad more tightly.

“Okay, I guess we’re going to have to ask them.” Tadeo looked around the table, but nobody was smiling. Oh well—officers weren’t required to have a sense of humor.

“Yes, sir.” Marjorie didn’t look at him. She was probably reciting the “Principles of First Contact” in her mind and was too timid to point out that they weren’t supposed to just walk up to these people and talk to them. There were procedures to follow.

“Okay, my next question is why we didn’t detect these energy signatures before we entered the system. Isn’t that what we’re looking for when trying to determine if there’s a civilization on a planet we’re about to explore?” Tadeo wasn’t a physicist, but surely one type of energy was pretty much the same as the next.

“Actually, sir, this energy type is not one we even knew to look for.” The science officer was an older man with short brown hair. “It is much more closely related to psychic energy than it is to a natural or artificial type.”

“Psychic energy?” Tadeo leaned back in his chair. “That would certainly explain why we didn’t look for it. We may need to adapt our protocols for First Approach.”

“I have already sent you a suggestion to do just that with my daily report.” The science officer looked smug. He certainly knew his business.

“Okay, let me summarize the situation: we have a planet inhabited by humans, but we don’t know how they got here. They have a very primitive level of technology but seem to work with psychic energy. There is a major city and what seems like a ceremonial object in a remote area. Both of them emit this psychic energy, but the potential ceremonial object is the stronger source. Am I correct so far?” Tadeo looked around the table and saw his team members nod. “That means we should probably explore the stone circle and its surroundings before attempting to make contact with the denizens of the city. Anyone disagree?”

Nobody had a problem with that.

They spent another week in close observation, familiarizing themselves with the main continent, the only one that was inhabited. There were a handful of smaller cities and a multitude of outlying villages, but none of their energy levels even came close to that of what they had started to refer to as the capital. There were no signs of technology beyond a horse-drawn carriage and the occasional primitive factory.

Tadeo hoped that a closer examination of the stone circle would teach them something about the inhabitants’ culture, which would make first contact easier. He put together a landing team of five, himself included, and they took one of the shuttles to the surface. They landed about a hundred meters from the stone circle and the five simple stone structures that they’d discovered from orbit.

Stepping out into the fresh air and feeling the local variant of grass under his feet was a major relief after being cooped up in the spaceship for sixteen months. He took a deep breath and enjoyed the fragrant scent that wasn't very different from the one he'd grown up with in southern Spain. The air was warm on his skin, and the colorful birds that were apparently present across this continent greeted them with a cacophony of sounds.

"Okay, let's see what we can learn from examining this area. We've got another eight hours of daylight; let's make good use of it." Tadeo and the science officer walked over to the stone circle, while the biologist started taking samples of every plant in sight. The two other members of their team went to check out the buildings.

When Tadeo was close enough to the circle to touch it, he couldn't resist and reached out. A slight tingling sensation startled him. His science officer looked up from his portable energy detector.

"What was that?" The science officer frowned.

"What was what?" Tadeo had let go of the circle almost immediately.

"That energy spike when you touched the circle." The science officer shook his instrument and glared at it as though it was its fault. "Could you try that again, please?"

Tadeo reached out and touched the circle again. The tingling sensation was back. This time there were images in his head, like flashes of memory. A tall, muscular warrior in a kilt. A bustling city with stone spires. An old man in white robes. What the hell? Tadeo cringed with an intensity that caused an immediate headache.

"We have another spike." The science officer handed Tadeo the detector. "Please hold this for a moment and let me know if anything happens when I touch the circle."

Tadeo did as asked, but no matter how often the science officer touched the circle, he couldn't get the energy spike to repeat. As soon as they exchanged roles and Tadeo was the one to touch the circle, the energy spike was back. So was Tadeo's intense headache. They repeated the experiment with the other three members of their team, but

none of them was able to produce the same results that Tadeo did. None of them felt a tingling sensation either.

The primitive stone houses didn't yield any interesting information. Thick layers of dust indicated that they hadn't been inhabited in many years. The vegetation was lush and provided them with four different kinds of berries, all of them safe for human consumption. They discovered a primitive well near one of the houses, and the water proved drinkable.

Not having discovered anything that could be a danger to them, they decided to spend the night on the planet's surface. Even though their instruments would be able to warn them of any potential danger, they decided to post a guard outside the shuttle, just in case. When it was Tadeo's turn to guard the others, he decided to sit at the base of the stone circle because it gave him a good view of the entire area. There was also an inexplicable attraction that made him want to be close to this mysterious object.

Just before sunrise, the circle seemed to come to life. The hair on Tadeo's neck stood on end, and there was a crackling noise in the air, originating from the circle. He jumped up and moved toward the shuttle, trying to gain a safe distance while still watching what was going on.

"Wake up. We have a situation," he yelled into the shuttle, relieved when rustling sounds told him his crew members were getting up.

Weapons drawn, they exited the shuttle, gaining their bearings as they took up defensive positions around their only refuge. What the hell was going on?

An eerie blue light filled the circle, ripples traveling across it making it look like a pond stood up on its side.

"Your presence is not required." The deep male voice came from the center of the circle and was loud enough to make Tadeo want to cover his ears. "You will remove yourselves from the surface of this planet, or I will do it for you."

“Who are you?” Tadeo’s limbs were heavy and he was unable to move.

“That is irrelevant.” The booming voice chuckled. “Since you are the only one who will be allowed to stay, I suspect you will have enough time to think about it and pester me with irrelevant questions.”

“What do you mean, I will be the only one allowed to stay?” Tadeo was still unable to move.

“Just that—your colleagues are required to leave. They will not be allowed to come back or otherwise interfere in what is about to happen.” The surface of the circle deepened in color.

“What do you want from me?” Tadeo wasn’t about to do what this strange being told him to do without a little more information. Well, actually a lot more information, but he had to make a start somewhere.

“What I just said. I want you to stay and your colleagues to leave.” The voice sighed. “Why is this so difficult to understand? It is a simple enough request.”

“We’re not going to leave our captain behind.” The science officer stepped forward. Interesting that he was able to move.

“You do not have that choice.” The voice sounded angry. “I have asked politely, and you have chosen to ignore my request. That is not acceptable.”

Four fingers of dark blue light reached from the center of the circle toward each of Tadeo’s crew members. Before anyone could react, all four of them fainted. The blue light pushed underneath each of them and lifted them back into the shuttle, then closed the door with a bang. The shuttle lifted off the ground within seconds, taking off into the sky and leaving an open-mouthed Tadeo behind.

“How did you just do that?” Tadeo was finally able to move again.

“That is irrelevant. All you need to know is that they are safe, as is the rest of your crew. They will spend the next few weeks and months, if necessary, exploring the other planet you seemed interested

in. My posthypnotic suggestions have made them believe that your first officer is their captain, so they will not notice that you are missing.” The voice sounded almost smug.

“Why are you doing this? What do you want from me?” Tadeo had wanted an adventure; now it looked suspiciously as though he was getting one.

“You will see. All will become clear in time.” The blue circle of light dimmed, looking as though whoever was speaking was ready to retreat. “All I ask of you is to stay here and to keep an open mind. You have an important task ahead of you, so I suggest you get some rest while you are waiting.”

“What am I waiting for?” Tadeo frowned at the quickly vanishing light.

“You will see.” The voice was whisper-soft now and the light stopped, as though a switch had been turned somewhere.

What the hell was he going to do now?

LIVING on water and berries was no fun. Tadeo had already spent two days in total isolation, and he was really getting fed up with his situation. His communicator had mysteriously vanished, so there was no way to contact the ship. Somehow he doubted it would have made a difference even if he had—the strange being had indicated some sort of mind-control abilities. He had nothing to do but watch the clouds in the sky and listen to the birds. Finding berries to eat wasn’t difficult, but he’d grown tired of eating nothing else after the first day.

The voice had told him to stay here, and since the next sign of civilization was several days’ travel on foot away, he wasn’t about to try and walk out of here. Not knowing what was going on was slowly driving Tadeo crazy. He’d explored all five buildings in detail and had found nothing more interesting than his crew members had when they first searched them. The stone circle itself was covered in interesting signs and drawings that looked suspiciously like hieroglyphics, but he wasn’t a linguist, so he had no idea what they might say.

Everything changed during the third night. One minute he was asleep in the main room of one of the stone houses, the next there was a loud growling sound and a dark, lumbering shape standing in the doorframe of the building he had chosen as his temporary quarters.

The light from the three moons was enough for him to see the approaching threat quite clearly. The bearlike beast walked on all fours and smelled of rotten meat. *Shit*. He hadn't even thought to take precautions. Living on a spaceship didn't exactly prepare him for existing in the current wilderness, and survival training had apparently been too long ago.

He grabbed his handlaser, which he'd luckily carried with him when on guard duty, and aimed at the animal's head. The blinding light when the beam made contact with the animal's eye was enough to completely awaken him.

The bear or whatever it was roared and pawed its muzzle. It didn't stop moving despite the blood oozing from the burnt flesh that showed Tadeo he had hit it as planned. His only way of escape was out the front door of the building. He'd have to be really quick to make it around the wounded animal, but he had to try.

He jumped up from his primitive bed of moss and leaves and sprinted toward the exit. Just as he thought he might make it, a sharp pain in his calf told him otherwise. He stumbled and rolled onto his side to try to place another shot. He lifted his hand, but the animal lifted its paw and slapped the laser out of his hand. The roaring sound it made was deafening. The beast kept advancing toward him, and Tadeo started moving backward, trying to shuffle out of its reach without putting any weight on his injured leg. He wasn't quite fast enough. With a last devastating blow, the animal's paw made contact with his head. He felt the claws rake the side of his throat before everything went black.

CHAPTER THREE

THE first glimpse of the Eye of Scots, even from a long distance, had stopped Cináed in his tracks. He'd only seen pictures of it when he'd studied its history, but to be able to see it with his own eyes was very different. The stone circle looked imposing, almost magical, and was surrounded by trees and bushes in a half circle. Cináed squinted. There seemed to be some buildings there as well. Strange that they hadn't been mentioned in the records he'd studied.

It took him a good half-day to cross the vast plain that was devoid of any plant life other than grass. The only major vegetation to be seen for miles was what grew around the Eye.

He'd had to leave his horse behind at the border to Bunádh. It had refused to move forward from one moment to the next, as if there'd been some invisible wall. Whatever it was that had stopped the horse had also stopped Akir. While his friend had been able to press ahead a few paces beyond the invisible barrier, he'd felt so nauseous and dizzy that Cináed had begged him to return and stay behind. Akir had raged and ranted, but in the end had given in after the third unsuccessful attempt. They'd agreed he would wait for Cináed's return in the small village that was a few miles from the border. At least there was a comfortable inn and Akir wouldn't be alone.

It had made Cináed wonder why he was allowed through and Akir wasn't. They were both healers, so it couldn't be their mental abilities. He was also a warrior, and so far only warriors had been sent on these missions. Maybe because they were the only ones who were supposed to approach the Eye? But then why had none of them

returned? Had they been too ashamed, not willing to admit defeat? And if they hadn't made it, where had they ended up?

Cináed hadn't seen a single human being since passing through the invisible barrier. The entire land of Bunádh proved to be empty and deserted. He was very tired of his own company after nearly a week of walking along a path that was mostly overgrown with low bushes. Berries and small animals were plentiful, as was water in the form of rivers and small lakes, so at least he didn't starve.

When he caught his first glimpse of the Eye, he was ready for his adventure to be over. Not that he knew what to do once he'd reached the Eye—the historical documents hadn't been very clear on that part. He was hoping he'd be able to figure it out or to find some sort of hint once he arrived.

When Cináed finally stood in front of the ancient monument, he stared at it in wonder. It was rough-hewn and about the height of two grown men. Some sort of writing wound across its surface in wavelike movements. It was breathtakingly beautiful.

Hesitant but inexorably drawn to it, Cináed lifted his hand and touched the outer ring. There was an immediate tingling sensation, and he pulled his hand back so fast that he almost fell to the ground. Nothing else happened, so he stepped forward again and reached out. Images assaulted him like unknown memories. A tall, lean man with wavy, black hair, wearing strange clothing. A cold room, all straight lines and weird lights blinking on what looked like a desk. High Priest Makolm in his chambers.

What the hell?

This time Cináed did pull back his hand with enough force to make himself stumble. It was almost as if the Eye didn't want to let him go.

He looked around, hoping to find some sort of hint as to where he might find the Slànach Stones he'd come for, but there was nothing but plant life around the Eye. Maybe they were stored in one of the stone houses?

As he turned around and had almost reached the first house, there was a low moan. It came from the inside. Cináed stopped and listened. After a while there was another moan. It sounded as though a man was in considerable pain. How had he gotten here? Apparently the strange, invisible barrier had let someone else through.

Healer instincts awoken, he started moving again. He only had a very small and worn emergency Stone with him, but that was better than nothing. If someone needed his help, he was going to give it and ask questions later.

He entered the house and stopped, giving his eyes enough time to adjust to the semidarkness inside. The smell of blood attacked his senses, and when he saw the huge bear lying on the floor, he gripped his sword, ready to defend himself. A bear? It must have gotten really lost to be in the middle of this empty wilderness. The creature wasn't moving. It was unlikely to have been the source of the very human-sounding moans.

Another moan came from underneath the bear, and Cináed started moving. Someone must have been attacked by it and had miraculously survived. He couldn't wait to find out where that person had come from and what they were doing here.

He walked around to the other side. There was a man in very strange clothing half-buried under the dead animal. Cináed couldn't see his face under the beast's huge paw, but one of his legs and an arm stuck out. Both were extremely well-formed, muscles clearly visible under the strange fabric. Cináed shook his head at himself for letting his thoughts drift in that direction.

As he studied the situation, considering what to do, he noticed a large black hole with burnt flesh gaping where one of the bear's eyes should have been. The blood around part of it wasn't yet completely dry, so its death had been very recent. The hole looked like fire had caused it, traces of burnt flesh at its edge, but there was no torch hot or strong enough to have done that. There were no other marks on the beast, so that wound was likely what had killed it. But what could have caused something like that?

Cináed had hoped to be able to pull the man out from underneath the beast, but seeing how much of him was covered by the heavy weight, he realized that plan wouldn't work. And he was strong but not strong enough to lift a bear. He was going to have to get a branch to use as a lever.

That decided, he ran outside toward the trees growing in a half-circle around the Eye. He located a likely candidate within minutes—not too long but sturdy enough—and dragged it back to the house. He pushed his makeshift lever underneath the bear's body, and as soon as he'd lifted it far enough, he dragged the man's legs sideways and out of reach, wincing when he saw that his right leg bore the deep gouges only a bear's paw could leave behind.

Telling himself to focus on the most important thing first, he repeated the procedure of levering the bear up with its upper body. Seeing the man's heavily bleeding head and neck wounds, he decided that it wasn't a good idea to move him any more than necessary. So he kept pushing and shoving until the bear was completely off the man's body and had flopped onto its back with a heavy thump. The smell of blood and wild beast was almost overpowering, but Cináed took shallow breaths and managed not to faint.

Sweaty and exhausted from his exertions, he dropped the branch and went to his knees next to the stranger's still form.

Dia, but the man was gorgeous.

His rugged, almost square face fit his lean, strong body perfectly. The wavy black hair was cut too short, but the dark brown skin and full lips made up for that. Shit, but this stranger looked exactly like the man Cináed had seen in one of the flashing images when he'd touched the Eye. What was going on here?

There wasn't any time for wondering about those details. He had to focus on saving the man's life first. There would hopefully be enough time for questions later on.

TWO days later Cináed still didn't have any more information. He'd cleaned the man's wounds with water from the well next to the house, followed by short healing bursts from his almost depleted emergency Stone. That had enabled him to stop the bleeding and make sure there wouldn't be any infection. It didn't leave enough energy in the Stone to start closing the wounds, though, so he'd had to use makeshift bandages he'd woven from some of the softer *sùbh* vines he'd found.

He hadn't been too worried when the man didn't immediately wake up. From the look of it, the bear had hit him in the head with its paw, so he was likely to have a concussion. And even if the paw hadn't caused it, his head hitting the hard floor might very well have. But two days was a long time to remain unconscious.

He'd been busy cutting up the bear meat and roasting the most edible pieces. Some of the rest he set for drying so the meat wouldn't spoil. He was relieved that he wouldn't have to worry about their food supply for quite a while. He'd buried the majority of the bear's body as far from the circle as he could manage to drag it, regretting that he didn't have the ability to cure the skin. The pelt would have made a magnificent cover for his bed.

Some of the rest of his time had been spent searching the area for any clues about the Slànach Stones he was supposed to find. He'd come up completely empty-handed. Touching the Eye hadn't helped; all he got from that was more visions of strange people and places that he didn't understand.

He was quite clearly no more qualified to find more Stones than any of the warriors who'd been sent on previous missions. He was beginning to think that they hadn't returned because they were too embarrassed to admit their failure. He didn't particularly feel like facing High Priest Makolm or his father without some sort of result either.

Now he was sitting next to the makeshift bed he'd made in the house farthest removed from where he'd first found the man. He watched as the stranger slept. Why had he seen him in his brief visions? Where was he from? Had he come through the Eye? Was he a new fugitive from Earth? Nobody had come through for the last thousand

years, but that didn't mean nobody ever would. Who knew what was happening on Earth right now? Although nobody seemed to have threatened the inhabitants of Scotland for a long time, this could have changed.

The strange clothes the man had been wearing—before Cináed undressed him to make him rest easier while the fever took its course—indicated that the culture and habits of Earth, if that was indeed where he was from, had changed significantly. Much more than the culture and habits had changed on Dálriata during the same time period. Not an unreasonable assumption if the environment on their planet of origin was less restrictive than that created and controlled by the Council of Priests.

Cináed sighed. Why wouldn't this gorgeous man wake up?

He lifted his flask to the man's mouth, letting a little of the cold spring water flow past his lips. At least he'd been able to keep him hydrated. The full lips had turned a deep red, and his skin was now less dry.

A deep breath made the man's chest rise, and Cináed withdrew his hand. The stranger's eyes were still closed, but he could see the eyeballs moving behind the lids. Maybe he was finally trying to wake up.

"It's okay. You're safe." Cináed had no idea whether the stranger would be able to understand him. If the language had changed as much as the clothing, they might not even be able to communicate.

"Mmph." The man licked his lips and he took another deep breath but his eyes remained closed.

"That's right. You're okay. The bear didn't kill you after all." Cináed tried very hard to keep calm despite the almost unbearable need to finally see this man awake, to be able to talk to him. *Dia*, he hoped the man spoke some form of English.

The man stopped moving, as if listening to his words. A small frown preceded some heavy movement behind his eyelids. Cináed was distracted for a moment as he admired the long, thick eyelashes that had fascinated him over the last few days.

“Yes, keep trying to open your eyes. There isn’t too much light in here, so you should be okay. You won’t be blinded.” Cináed took the man’s hand that was closest to him, suddenly needing the contact. Wanting to make sure the stranger knew someone was there, someone who cared and wanted him to wake up.

After a few more moments of trying to open his eyes without success, the man growled his unhappiness and tightened his grip on Cináed’s hand. Not much, but he clearly felt it. Was the stranger trying to communicate?

“If you can hear and understand me, press my fingers once.” Cináed had used variations of this technique before with people who were unable to speak because they were too sick or too weak.

The man pressed Cináed’s fingers once, and Cináed’s heartbeat increased. This was real progress.

“We’re going to do one squeeze for yes and two squeezes for no.” Cináed waited for the man’s reaction and smiled when he got another tightening of his fingers.

“Are you in pain?” Cináed got the two squeezes he expected, and he grinned. This was the predictable male response he’d come across many times.

“I need you to be honest with me. Your wounds are quite serious, and I have no means of checking what’s wrong with you. If you don’t tell me the truth, I can’t help you.” Cináed paused for effect, watching the man’s eyes move restlessly behind the still-closed lids. “Now, let’s try this again. I’m a healer, and there’s nothing wrong with telling me what you feel.”

A careful press of his fingers was the only reaction.

“Does your head hurt?” Predictably, the man squeezed his fingers once.

“Does the outside of your throat hurt?” Another careful squeeze.

“Can you feel the wound on your right leg?” Two squeezes confirmed Cináed’s visual assessment. For some reason that wound had healed much more quickly than the others.

“Is there any other pain?” Two squeezes reassured him that there weren’t any undetected problems. So far, so good.

“Would you like some more water?” One squeeze prompted Cináed to pick up his flask and bring it close to the man’s lips. “I’m going to lift your head to help you drink. Is that okay?”

When the man had squeezed his hand once, Cináed let go and slid it behind the man’s head, lifting it slowly. The flask had barely made contact with his lips when the man started drinking in large gulps. But Cináed couldn’t let him have too much at once.

“That’s it for now.” Cináed took the flask away, and the man grimaced. “I’m sorry, but you have to be careful not to overdo it. Your body is still very weak. You can have more water in a little while.”

A soft sigh was his only response. The slow and even breathing indicated that the man had gone back to sleep. At least this time Cináed was fairly sure that it was a healing sleep.

TADEO was fed up with not being able to see where he was. He couldn’t move, his head hurt, the side of his throat throbbed, and everything smelled and sounded different. Wrong. He was tired enough to want to sleep all the time, and that just wasn’t right. He frowned. Wasn’t he supposed to be up and doing something?

“Hey, no frowning.” The man’s voice was deep and smooth and had been his constant companion every time he’d woken up since that first day, when he’d discovered he couldn’t open his eyes.

“I’m worried. I can frown.” Tadeo stopped breathing. His voice sounded rough and raw, but he’d spoken aloud.

“You can speak?” The man sounded elated and gripped his hand.

There was no real need for that touch anymore. He could speak now. But the hand on his was warm and familiar and very welcome, so he didn’t say anything. He didn’t move his hand away either. He didn’t want to lose that connection.

“Maybe you can open your eyes as well? Why don’t you try for me?” The man sounded so hopeful that Tadeo was willing to give it another go.

He focused on his eyes and made himself believe that he could do it. With an effort, he was able to open them a little bit, feeling an enormous sense of victory when a small sliver of light reached his eyes. Not wanting to stop there, he continued pushing his eyes open—and decided it had been well worth it.

The man sitting next to his bed was even more beautiful than his voice. Warm brown eyes returned his gaze. They were set in an elegant face with a high forehead, a strong, clean-shaven jaw, and a chin with a cleft. The man’s hair was light brown, short and wavy. Broad shoulders and a naked chest tempted Tadeo’s eyes further downward along the hairless chest with dark brown nipples. Was that a kilt around the narrow waist and strong-looking thighs?

“Who are you?” Tadeo looked back up at the man’s face, entranced by the small smile that played around his lips.

“My name is Cináed MacAlpin, and I’m a healer.” Cináed smiled. “And who are you?”

“I’m Tadeo Banderas and I’m—” *Fuck*, what was he? Visions of a spaceship appeared in his mind and he widened his eyes. He was in charge of that ship—well, he had been before he got stranded. And he didn’t think he was supposed to tell anyone about that. Why would that be?

“Don’t worry. It’ll come back to you.” Cináed squeezed his hand and blushed. Unfortunately, he then withdrew it. “Sorry, that’s just habit. It’s how we’ve been communicating.”

“No reason to apologize, please. I think you saved my life, didn’t you?” He didn’t want Cináed to stop touching him.

“I believe I did. Do you remember what happened?” Cináed leaned forward the tiniest bit, clearly interested in his answer.

“I don’t remember much. It’s all a little muddled.” He’d have to be careful how much he told Cináed. Until he got his full memory back, he couldn’t be sure what was safe for the other man to know. For some

reason he felt more confident talking about what had happened on the planet surface than about where he'd come from or what his job was. "But I think I was attacked by some animal?"

"That's right. I found you in one of the other houses, buried under a dead bear. I think you killed it, although I'm not sure how you did it. It must have fallen on you when it died, and I suspect it must have hit your head hard enough for you to have a concussion. That or you hit your head on the floor when you collapsed under its weight." Cináed tilted his head, waiting for a response.

"I remember waking up at night, seeing this huge animal walk into the room. I hadn't thought to take precautions. I managed to land one shot, but that didn't seem to stop it. So I tried to outrun it, to go around it so I could make it outside. But it was too fast and caught my leg." The rest was a little murky, but it sounded like the bear had died before doing even more damage. "You must have found me pretty quickly after that. Did you hear it attack?"

"You shot it?" Cináed's eyes were wide. "With what? I don't know any weapon that leaves the kind of mark I found on the animal."

Shit. He'd said too much. He was sure he wasn't supposed to be discussing advanced weapons with these—but Cináed looked human, didn't he? How could there be humans on a planet over 25,000 light-years from Earth? Humans who walked around bare-chested and wearing kilts and weren't familiar with lasers? He would have assumed that this was a forgotten colony, except that Fleet records had indicated no ship had ever been to this specific dwarf galaxy.

"Come on, you've got to tell me. If you have a weapon that's powerful enough to kill a bear with one shot like you did, you might be able to help me." Cináed looked hopeful.

"If you're looking for someone to help you fight some war, I can tell you right now that I'm not the right person." Tadeo would be disappointed if this amazing man turned out to be a bloodthirsty barbarian, but maybe that was what he should have expected.

“I’m not looking for someone to help me fight a war!” Anger made Cináed’s eyes sparkle. “Just because I look less advanced than you doesn’t mean I’m a barbarian.”

“I never said you were a barbarian.” But he’d thought it, hadn’t he? Was this man reading his mind?

“Look, let’s cut to the chase here. I’m on a mission to try and retrieve new Slànach Stones. Healers need them to cure the sick. There are only a few left, and according to our history books, the Eye of Scots is supposed to be their source. I’ve traveled here to find them, but have so far been unable to locate any.” Cináed took a deep breath. “If you have some sort of technology or an understanding of how the Eye works, I would really appreciate your help.”

“Whoa! You lost me after mentioning Slànach Stones. What are they and how can they help cure the sick?” Having some sort of ability to heal the sick that didn’t involve expensive machinery and invasive techniques would be a major benefit to bring back to Earth. Tadeo was going to spend weeks writing this report—if he ever made it back to his ship. His eyes widened as he remembered. The ship that had been sent back into space without him by this... this blue thing that lived in the stone circle. Nah. He’d been hit over the head; he was bound to be delusional. All of that couldn’t be true.

Cináed sighed and pulled a small, whitish stone from a pouch on his belt.

“This is a Slànach Stone. It’s an old one and almost used up, which is why I couldn’t heal you completely. Its energy works with my mental abilities, and with its help I can diagnose what’s wrong with somebody and then heal them.” Cináed quickly put it back where it belonged, carefully closing the pouch.

“Okay. So you’re some kind of psychic.” That sort of ability was extremely rare among humans, but it did exist. It fit well with the psychic energy they’d detected around the stone circle—Eye—as well. “And the Eye of Scots, as you called it, is this big stone circle outside, I assume?”

“It is.” Cináed nodded.

“And you think that it is the source of your Slànach Stones?” Anything was possible, he supposed, if the Eye had some sort of energy being living inside.

“That’s what the history books say.” Cináed frowned. “They also say that the Eye has been transporting people from Earth to Dálriata over the last few thousand years. Not constantly, and not for quite some time, but I find it strange that you’re not aware of this.”

“Why would that be strange?” The Eye had been taking people from Earth to this planet? Was it some sort of gateway? Would it work both ways?

“Well, you certainly look like you’re from Earth. Surely you must know about its existence?” Cináed’s eyes narrowed. “Unless you made it here by some other method?”

“You—you think I came through your Eye?” That did actually make sense from Cináed’s perspective; it just hadn’t even occurred to him until Cináed had mentioned it. “I don’t even know how to activate it.”

“Our forefathers used it to come here. So I assumed you did the same.” Cináed grinned. “But since that’s not the case, now you get to tell me how you actually did it.”

“Actually, we used a spaceship.” Tadeo wasn’t sure he was sticking to the letter of the rules here, but he didn’t care anymore. Fleet Command was far away, and Cináed was a human being who seemed pretty clever. He wasn’t going to lie to the man either.

“A spaceship? Wow, humans have figured out how to do that?” Cináed’s eyes had turned big and dreamy. “Here on Dálriata that’s considered science fiction. Oh, the Council of Priests is going to love this!”

CINÁED looked at Tadeo’s sleeping form, which was clearly outlined below his thin traveling blanket, and smiled. There were so many questions still left to answer, but at least they’d made a start. Tadeo had

been exhausted after their first discussion. Once he'd closed his eyes, he'd fallen asleep straight away.

Cináed got up from his fairly uncomfortable kneeling position next to the bed and stretched his tired muscles. With Tadeo sleeping for the next few hours, he'd have some time to make another attempt at figuring out how to find new Slánach Stones. When he hadn't been able to find any in the Eye's surroundings, he'd started to think they might have come from Earth. It worried him that Tadeo hadn't known anything about them or how they worked, because that made his newest theory less likely.

He went to the house he'd found Tadeo in and started a fire. It was far enough from where Tadeo slept that the smoke wouldn't disturb his sleep. Cináed put some water from the well in the copper cauldron from his travel supplies. While he waited for it to heat, he chopped some of the edible potato-like roots he'd found nearby and added some wild carrots and onions the ground had yielded to him.

When the water was hot enough, he put some of the dried bear meat in first, letting it simmer for a while. When he was happy with the consistency and scent, he added the diced vegetables, a few wild herbs, and salt from his supplies. He took everything off the flames when it was done. Fishing out the solid chunks for himself to have a quick meal, he left the nourishing broth for Tadeo. Hopefully his patient would be up to having a little of it when he woke up later. He needed food to help him regain his strength.

When he was done, Cináed started his usual tour around the island of vegetation that grew near the Eye. It provided him with some exercise while giving him time to think. There were a few questions he still needed answers for. Where was that mysterious weapon Tadeo had used to kill the bear? He frowned. He'd only given the house he'd found Tadeo in a cursory look; maybe he should go back and try to find it? Tadeo might want it back. It might come in handy if they encountered other big animals.

He was also curious about the idea of spaceships being used to travel from Earth to other planets. If Tadeo's ship had found them, would other humans follow? How was the Dálriatan culture going to

react to that? Would they be able to continue like they were, or would the larger culture swallow them up? He snorted as he passed the halfway mark of his circuit. Having the Councils, both of them, replaced by some other form of government might be a good thing. They were made up of old-fashioned traditionalists who stopped anything that resembled change. It was probably the reason the Dálriatans hadn't made any real progress over the centuries, scientific or otherwise. The humans on Earth had been able to develop technology that allowed them to explore space over the same time period.

Returning to the problem of why Tadeo didn't know anything about the Stones kept Cináed's thoughts occupied for the last part of his brief walk. If Earth wasn't aware of them, it meant they were most probably unique to Dálriata. Was the Eye even linked to them? The Eye was definitely linked to Earth, so anything connected to it should be known on both sides of the gateway, shouldn't it?

The historical records indicated that the Eye was the source of the Stones, but so far he'd found no proof that was true. Could those reports be wrong? Had he been looking in the wrong place?

He ended up in front of the mysterious Eye and stared at it as if he could force it to divulge its secrets. Smiling at his stupidity in pretending the Eye was somehow alive and could be "forced" to do anything, he decided to take a rest before returning to Tadeo's side for the night. He sat down on the small stone platform at the base of the circle and leaned against the stone, still deep in thought.

Moments later the hair on Cináed's neck stood on end, and there was a crackling noise in the air. He had the distinct impression that the circle was taking a deep breath, as if it was waking up. Ridiculous. But when the first tendrils of tickling energy started to flow into his fingers, he jumped up and took a few steps back just in case.

A strange blue light filled the circle, ripples traveling across it making it look like a pond stood up on its side.

"Your presence is not sufficient." The deep male voice came from the center of the circle and was loud enough to make Cináed cringe. He took a few more steps backward.

“Who—who are you?” Cináed stared at the rippling blue surface as if it was going to give him answers.

“All will be revealed when the time is right.” The voice was a little lower now, as though someone had adjusted the volume.

“And when might that be?” Cináed couldn’t stand people—beings—speaking in riddles. It was a technique many priests used to make themselves seem more important or wiser than they actually were. He hated that sort of behavior.

“That is for you to find out,” the voice chuckled. “It may take you a little while at the rate you are going, but I am hopeful that you will eventually figure it out.”

CHAPTER FOUR

TADEO opened his eyes with a lot less effort than the last time. Deep brown eyes looked down at him, and a small smile played around Cináed's lips. Damn, the man was gorgeous. And if he didn't put a shirt on pretty soon, Tadeo's interest would become visible. Not sure whether such attraction between two men was acceptable on this planet, Tadeo did his best to suppress his rising lust. He was only covered by a thin blanket—hold on, where had his clothes gone? Shit, it looked like Cináed had undressed him. Only to make him more comfortable, he was sure of that, but still....

“Don't you ever rest?” The scant light coming in from the door meant that it was probably late afternoon.

“I took a break while you slept.” Cináed held up a wooden bowl, and the scent of broth was overpowering. It made Tadeo realize how hungry he was. “I also made you something to eat so you can start getting your strength back.”

“That smells delicious!” Tadeo automatically tried to sit up, but the sharp, stabbing pain in his neck that shot up into his head stopped him before he could get very far.

“I should have told you not to move yet. I'm so sorry that I didn't do a better job with healing you, but the only Stone I have just isn't powerful enough to do much good.” Cináed's crestfallen expression made him cringe. He hadn't even thanked the man for all he'd done under very difficult circumstances.

“You’ve done an amazing job, Cináed. You’ve saved my life. And I’m the one who needs to apologize for not even thanking you for all that you’ve done.” Tadeo tried to relax enough for the stabbing pain in his neck and head to go away. “So, thank you.”

“You’re welcome. And I think you’re very lucky that I got here in time. Just a little longer and you might have bled to death.” Cináed grinned. “I’m really glad you didn’t.”

Was that a spark of interest in the brown eyes Tadeo was beginning to adore? Nah. Probably just a doctor’s relief at having saved another patient.

“Will you let me help you drink some of this broth?” Cináed held the bowl under his nose, as if he needed more encouragement.

“Yes, please.” Making an effort not to move, he waited for Cináed to slip a hand under his head and lift him up.

The warm liquid that touched his tongue was heavenly. Strongly flavored and wonderfully seasoned, it filled his mouth with welcome warmth. When he swallowed, he could feel the immediate relief of the nourishing substance hit his stomach. He drank greedily until Cináed pulled the bowl away.

“Hey, I haven’t finished yet.” At least half of the heavenly broth was still in the bowl, he was sure.

“I know.” Cináed nodded and carefully lowered Tadeo’s head back down onto the makeshift pillow. “But I can’t let you have too much at once, or your stomach might get upset. You haven’t eaten for almost five days, so you need to take it slow. Otherwise your body will be overloaded. You’re still trying to heal those serious wounds as well.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right.” The guy was a healer after all, so he probably knew what he was doing. “I’m just really hungry, and that broth tasted better than anything I’ve had in a long time.”

“That’s a good sign.” Cináed smiled at him. “I bet you want to be back on your feet as quickly as possible.”

“Yeah, I do. I’m not used to lying around and doing nothing. Being this helpless, not even able to lift my own head, is going to drive me crazy pretty quickly. I apologize in advance for any growling.” Tadeo smiled back, making sure Cináed knew that he’d been joking. Well, mostly.

“Okay, are you ready for some more broth?” Cináed’s eyes twinkled as he moved his hand back under Tadeo’s neck at the same time, correctly assuming his reply.

When the broth was finished and Tadeo’s head was safely back on its pillow, he couldn’t believe how tired he was. Cináed put the empty bowl onto the floor and sat back on his calves. He looked at Tadeo for a few moments before speaking again.

“I’d like to clean your wounds and change the bandage. If you’re up to it, I’d also like to clean the rest of your body. You will feel better once the sweat from your fever is gone.” Cináed lifted a hand when he tried to speak. “I know what you’re going to say, but you aren’t ready to get up and wash yourself. So for the next couple of days, I’m afraid I’m going to have to do it for you.”

Tadeo relaxed and issued a defeated sigh. He knew he wasn’t up to moving much, and he did feel rather dirty. The thought of Cináed touching him all over, even if it was only to get clean, was beginning to make him hard. He shook his head. He was clearly on the mend if he was able to react to another man like this.

“You don’t want me to clean you?” Cináed frowned.

“No, that wasn’t why I was shaking my head. Sorry. I was just...” Tadeo felt his cheeks heat. It was a good thing his skin was dark enough to show only the very worst of blushes.

“Oh, there’s no need to be embarrassed.” Cináed was blushing an adorable shade of pink. “I have done this before.”

“I’m sure you have.” The man was a healer; Tadeo would have to control himself. Just because he was beginning to have a crush on him didn’t mean Cináed felt the same way. Although, that blush just now was possibly telling a different story.

Without another word Cináed reached for a larger bowl and pulled it close. Taking a piece of cloth from what smelled like lemon-scented water, he wrung it out before cleaning Tadeo's face with it. His touch was soft and careful, and Tadeo closed his eyes in bliss. This wasn't bad at all.

Cleaning the wounds on his head was painful, but Tadeo gritted his teeth, knowing it had to be done. Having no painkillers at hand made him wish he was back on his spaceship. But Cináed was done quickly, re-bandaging everything efficiently and leaving him feeling much better already.

The cloth was dipped into water and wrung out again; Tadeo followed the sounds with his eyes still closed. He wasn't really exhausted, but he was tired enough to just lie back and let Cináed take care of him. When the other man pulled back the blanket to just over his waist, he was glad his eyes were closed. Being half naked like that was easier somehow when he couldn't see the other man's face.

Slow, even strokes along the heated skin of his chest and upper arms made him almost sigh with pleasure. The same strokes on his abdomen followed, then on his lower arms and hands. A soft dry piece of fabric was next, making sure there were no traces of wetness left.

"Are you okay? Not too cold?" Cináed's voice drew him back to reality, and he opened his eyes.

"I'm fine, thank you. I feel much better now." He hoped that was it for the cleaning. He was already half hard from all those soft touches, and he really didn't want to embarrass himself or cause the other man to turn away from him in disgust.

"I'm glad, but I'm not done yet." Cináed patted his hand and turned his attention to the wet cloth, which was once again lifted from the water and wrung almost dry. "I'm not going to leave you half clean and half dirty. You'd start itching."

That was what he'd been afraid of. When Cináed carefully lifted the blanket from his legs, Tadeo closed his eyes and hoped for the best. But as the other man cleaned first one leg and then the other from the

feet up to Tadeo's hips, he got more and more aroused until he was fully hard. Cináed didn't say anything, nor did he stop.

Tadeo's hope that everything was over had come too soon. Another soft splash of the cloth back into the water later, Tadeo almost spoke when he felt the cool cloth being wound around his throbbing cock. God, but that felt good. When the cloth slipped down, cool fingers moving his hard cock to the side so Cináed could reach his testicles in their soft sac, he couldn't stop a small moan from escaping.

Cináed moved the soft cloth around his balls, lifting them to clean underneath. Tadeo spread his legs a little to give the man room to work, and hissed when the cloth touched his perineum and slid a little farther down, stopping just before it reached his opening. The hand holding the cloth cupped his balls, the fabric that touched his skin different enough from skin to make it an amazing feeling.

"You want me to help you out?" Cináed's voice was low and husky.

Did he mean—oh, please. Tadeo nodded, not trusting his voice. He kept his eyes firmly closed in case this was a dream. He didn't want to wake up.

Thankfully the hand cupping his balls stayed where it was while the other encircled his hard cock and started slowly moving up and down. The contrast between the softer skin on his cock and the slightly rougher fabric around his balls was driving him wild. It took everything he had not to start thrusting into Cináed's hand.

Within moments he was ready to come. Cináed kept stroking his cock with a tight grip, making Tadeo moan with the pleasure. When Cináed carefully squeezed his balls, Tadeo lost it. Tingling pleasure shot along his spine as his hips jerked upwards a few times, the pressure on his balls exquisite. He shot his release into Cináed's hand in several spurts as the world went gray, and then everything sank into a blissful blackness.

CINÁED grinned, satisfied with his handiwork. Not a medical treatment, strictly speaking, he'd nevertheless quite clearly relieved Tadeo's tension. He hadn't been sure about the other man at first, but the hardening of his member when he cleaned him had made Cináed hope. He was surprised with the strength of his own reaction to Tadeo's arousal and spectacular relief. The scent of the man's sperm as it shot out of the perfectly formed penis had almost pushed Cináed over the edge as well. Unfortunately, dealing with that would have to wait until he'd finished taking care of his clearly exhausted patient.

Cináed carefully turned the sleeping man over onto his side so that he could clean his back before letting him settle in for the night. The sight of Tadeo's strong muscles didn't help him to calm down. His broad shoulders tapering into a narrow waist and slim hips, his well-shaped glutes and strong thighs made Cináed's mouth water. Closing his eyes for a moment to regain control, he continued washing and then drying Tadeo with as much detachment as he could muster. When he was done, he drew the blanket back over the other man, leaving him on his side for now.

Cleaning up the rest of his supplies and eating another quick meal didn't take very long. He soon joined Tadeo, lying down next to his bed so he'd be close if the other man needed anything during the night.

When he woke up it was still dark. At first he didn't know what had awoken him, so he lay still for a few moments to try to figure it out. He'd had a very strange dream, but he couldn't remember any details. He frowned. Tadeo had been in it; so had High Priest Makolm and Cináed's father. Something about challenges and a king? *Dia*, he had a much too active imagination. It would have been far more useful if he'd been able to dream about the Slánach Stones.

When several minutes had passed and he still wasn't sure what had woken him, he began to realize that he was very cold. As hot as it was during the day, especially now that it was summer, the nights were still rather cool. He was sleeping on the hard floor, and that didn't help either. Normally he'd have his blanket around him and he'd sleep in his traveling tent, which gave additional protection. But he'd wanted to be close to Tadeo and had given the other man his blanket because he

needed it more. He hadn't slept much the other nights because Tadeo was still too restless, so he hadn't noticed the blanket's absence.

He sighed and turned onto his side. He would just have to deal with it. As he turned, his hand touched Tadeo's outstretched arm, and before he was able to withdraw, the other man reached for him. Cináed held his breath, thinking he might have woken him. Tadeo's eyes were still closed, and his breath was deep and regular. Still, he didn't let go of Cináed's hand, and Cináed found he liked the touch.

He must have drifted off into sleep again, because the next time Cináed opened his eyes, the light of very early dawn shone through the door. He was lying on something much softer than the stone floor he'd fallen asleep on, and there was a warm body pressed against his back. He was covered with the thin but warm blanket he'd missed so much in the middle of the night. His eyes widened. He must have rolled into Tadeo's bed. Judging by the tight grip the other man had around his middle, he'd been welcome here.

Cináed closed his eyes and enjoyed the feeling of being held and the warmth. He'd always dreamed about sharing his bed with another man, fearing that it would never happen. The Council of Priests was very clear in its disapproval of sodomy. The Warrior Council was far less restrictive, but that hadn't been of much use to him in the last twenty years. His first duty and allegiance was with the Council of Priests.

What was he going to do once he returned to the monastery? If he couldn't find the Stones, he wasn't even sure that he wanted to go back. The punishment was sure to be severe. He was pretty sure that the other unsuccessful warriors hadn't returned for that reason. He was beginning to realize that there was a bigger problem. How was he going to be able to leave Tadeo behind? He'd just found the other man and wanted to get to know him better—on all levels, not just the physical. But Tadeo was sure to want to return to his spaceship as soon as possible. Where did that leave Cináed?

"Stop thinking so hard." Tadeo chuckled behind him, his warm breath fanning along the sensitive skin of Cináed's neck. "I can almost hear you from here."

“I—I’m sorry.” Cináed closed his eyes, waiting for Tadeo to push him away.

“Don’t be sorry. It looks like it’s morning, so it was time for me to wake up. I’ve been doing far too much sleeping lately.” Tadeo tightened his grip, making it clear he didn’t want him to leave.

“There’s no such thing as too much sleeping when your body is trying to heal. Which reminds me, I shouldn’t be in your bed.” Even if he didn’t want to be anywhere else right now.

“Why not? You were freezing out there on the stone floor, and you didn’t even have your blanket to protect you against the cold because you gave it to me.” Tadeo stroked his stomach as if to reinforce his words.

“You pulled me in here?” All he could remember was holding hands.

“Of course I did. I woke up some time ago, and you were shivering. Thank God I was holding onto your hand or I wouldn’t have felt it. So I pulled you in. Feels better like this, doesn’t it?” Tadeo stopped moving his hand on Cináed’s skin.

“Thank you. It was very cold. But I’m worried about hurting you.” Although, if Tadeo had been strong enough to pull him into the bed, the man was probably going to be all right.

“It’s no problem. We were just sleeping.” Tadeo paused, moved his head. “And I think your presence must have made me better, because the pain is gone.”

“What? How is that possible?” Cináed turned toward Tadeo, needing to see for himself.

The bandages were still in place, but no new blood had seeped through, as it had the previous nights. He lifted his hand to check underneath the bandage and gasped.

“What? Does it look really bad?” Tadeo raised his eyebrows. “It doesn’t feel bad at all. In fact, it feels like nothing ever happened.”

“That’s what it looks like too.” Cináed shook his head in disbelief. He took off the bandage completely and stared at the

blemish-free skin on Tadeo's throat. "I can't believe it, not even a scar."

"I guess you're a brilliant healer." Tadeo grinned as he lifted his arm to let his hand slide across the skin where the wound had been no more than a few hours ago.

"But it shouldn't be this perfect or this quick without the help of the Stones. Not that I'm sorry that you are all better, but this isn't possible." Cináed kept staring at Tadeo's throat as if that would help him understand what had happened.

"So what you're saying is that you would have been able to heal me like this if you'd had the use of your Stones?" Tadeo dropped his hand to rest it on Cináed's. "That makes them a lot more powerful than any medical technology we have developed."

"It does?" Maybe Dálriata had something to offer to Earth and all the other planets out there. He'd have to find new Stones first, though. Without them, nothing would work.

"Yes, it does. It looks like those Stones are the most powerful healing device we've discovered so far. We've got some pretty sophisticated technology, but nothing matches this level of speed and thoroughness. I don't even feel any lingering pain. It's as if weeks of convalescence had already passed. No, that's not correct. It's as if the wound had never happened." Tadeo's black eyes were luminous. "Thank you so much."

"There's only one problem. There wasn't a single Stone in the vicinity last night. Well, there was, but that one was old and used up. So how is it possible that you're all healed now?" Cináed frowned. "Not that it's bad, but it is strange."

"Why don't you check your Stone? Maybe it's been recharged." Tadeo let go of his hand, but Cináed didn't understand how checking the Stone would help. Once it was used up, that was it. Wasn't it?

"What do you mean by 'recharge'?" Cináed frowned.

"Recharged means—given new power, I guess. Repaired or made like new." Tadeo smiled.

“Okay, I see what you mean. What I don’t understand is how this could apply to the Stones. I mean, once they’re depleted, they stop working. Or so we thought.” Only one way to find out.

Cináed reached into his pouch and pulled out his emergency Stone. His eyes widened in disbelief. It radiated the mostly white light laced with all the colors of the rainbow of a new Slànach Stone. The kind of light that had been the stuff of legends for at least a hundred years.

“It’s beautiful” Tadeo’s voice was soft and awed.

“It’s more amazing than I ever imagined.” Cináed had tears in his eyes, it was so stunning. It was as if it was touching his mind, waking up his mental abilities. “I have no idea what happened, but you’re right, something must have—what did you call it, ‘recharged’ it overnight. This is what the legends say the Stones are supposed to look like.”

“You’ve never seen one that looks like this?” Tadeo reached for the Stone, and before Cináed could stop him, he touched it.

The Stone began to vibrate softly, and its brightness increased as it started to hum. Tadeo withdrew his hand in shock, and the Stone returned to normal.

“What was that?” Tadeo’s eyes were big.

“I don’t know. It’s not supposed to do that.” Cináed frowned. “I don’t think two healthy people have ever touched a Stone at the same time. Maybe that’s what it was? Let’s try it again.”

Tadeo reached out and touched the Stone again, holding on longer this time.

“Are you two quite done playing around now?” The deep male voice of the obnoxious blue energy being startled them into a sitting position.

It sounded as if it was standing right next to them in the same room. But there was no one there. How did it know what was going on? Was it able to look through the walls? Cináed stared at Tadeo but the other man just stared back, as puzzled as he was.

“Well? Are you going to come out here and answer my question, or are you going to remain in hiding?” The voice sounded insulted.

“I guess we better go out there and see what it wants.” Cináed shrugged. “We can try to get it to answer a few questions for a change.”

“IT HAS spoken to you as well?” Tadeo slipped into his uniform coverall, zipping it up quickly. He didn’t want to get back into the soiled clothing, but he didn’t have a choice for now if he didn’t want to walk out there naked.

“Yes, it has. I think I activated it when I sat down on the stone platform to rest for a moment. Not that it was very helpful. I thought it was trying to annoy me because it spoke in riddles.” Cináed got up and held out his hand to help him stand.

“It did the same when I took a rest during our first night here.” Tadeo scratched his head as they started walking outside. He was still surprised his headache was completely gone. “The biggest difference versus your experience was that in my case it was rather hostile. It removed my four crew members from the surface, pushing them into the shuttle we had come in and lifting the shuttle back into space. It then told me I had to wait for some undefined event and that all would become clear in time.”

“I hope that this is the time.” Cináed grinned. “I think we’ve waited long enough. I don’t know about you, but I could certainly do with some answers.”

The Eye had apparently activated itself this time. The blue shimmering light was back in full force, giving the early morning light an interesting blue hue. Tadeo took Cináed’s hand when they stood in front of it, relieved when the other man didn’t pull back. He wanted that touch, that reassurance that there was another human being with him in this utterly bewildering situation.

“It looks as though you have finally unlocked the secret of the Slànach Stones.” The voice sounded smug.

“What do you mean, ‘unlocked their secrets’?” Cináed tilted his head.

“Is the Stone you carried here with you, the one that was almost dead, not back to its original strength?” The voice paused. “Do not tell me that you have still not understood why that happened.”

“Why don’t you stop speaking in riddles and tell us what the hell is going on?” Tadeo was ready to punch the thing.

“I am not speaking in riddles. You are refusing to understand the implications of what you have done.” Slight impatience made the voice sound almost childish.

“What we’ve done?” Cináed looked at Tadeo, then back at the being. “What exactly do you think that is?”

“Okay, let me explain it to you in terms that you can understand.” Now it was patronizing them as if *they* were the children. “The Slánach Stones were never supposed to stop working. In the old days, before the last wave of fugitives brought the Criosdaidh religion with them, the Stones served as receptacles and enhancers for the psychic powers of those born with the ability to work with them. As long as there were bonded pairs using and refueling them with new psychic energy, their power never ran out.”

“So—the new religion changed all that?” Cináed’s eyes were big as saucers.

“It did indeed. Because it suppressed some of the most basic concepts of how society and relationships worked, it created an obstacle to the Stones’ power supply. This caused the number of people with psychic abilities to decrease, which in turn caused the Stones to be less powerful. A downward spiral that was reinforced by the Council of Priests’ misguided attempts to control what was left of the Stones so they could hold onto power.” The voice sighed. “They kept sending warriors to retrieve more Stones when what they should have done was reinstate the old ways.”

“So, what are these old ways and can we reinstate them, or is it too late?” Cináed’s hand trembled slightly in his, and Tadeo squeezed it for reassurance.

“Is that not what you have just done?” The voice sounded amused.

“What we have just done?” Cináed frowned and looked at Tadeo, then back at the energy being.

“You have initiated a bonding between a healer and a warrior, have you not?” The voice chuckled. “I thought you knew what you were doing.”

“Well, we....” Cináed blushed and looked at the ground.

“All we did was touch. We didn’t know what sort of consequences that would have.” Tadeo was shocked. If touching and sharing a bed for sleeping had been enough to cause this sort of reaction in the Stone, what would happen if they took their relationship any further? Would they even be able to?

“Typical humans, never think things through to figure out the consequences of their actions. Yes, all you did so far was touch. But because you are compatible and your energies are just the right mix, that set two things in motion. One was the immediate recharging of the Stone. The charge will not last very long unless you make the bonding permanent, by the way. The second thing it did was set in motion the bonding process between two males that, once completed, provides a permanent source of psychic energy for any Stones you touch. There now, that should answer your question.” The blue circle became less bright, as if it was ready to switch itself off.

“Hold on, you can’t just leave now. You haven’t answered all our questions yet.” Cináed looked up. “What you’re telling us is that bonding between two men is going to restore the Stones’ energy?”

“Yes, that is exactly what I am telling you. All you have to do is create more such bonds, and you will no longer have any problems with the Stones.” The blue light turned another shade less bright, the being clearly determined to leave.

“Do you have any idea what sort of resistance the Council of Priests is going to put up against that sort of suggestion?” Cináed was pale and shaking now. “They’re going to publicly execute me for even suggesting the idea.”

“There are ancient laws to protect you from something like that happening. The Warrior Council has a copy of the records. All you need to do is find them and remind the Council of Priests of their original duties, which were to support the Warrior Council and the King. The strongest healer-warrior pairing in any generation is the one that rules all the clans.”

The voice giggled. *What the hell?*

“My calculations indicate that you and Tadeo will be that pairing for the foreseeable future. So, you see? There is nothing to worry about.”

“Calculations? What do you mean by calculations? Are you a computer or something?” Tadeo was curious. It would explain the strangely immature and sometimes seemingly childish way of reasoning this “being” had shown.

“Of course I am not a computer. I am a very sophisticated artificial intelligence, if I do say so myself. The creators of the Eye of Scotsa installed me many thousands of years ago to ensure that the flow of travelers was well regulated. Other tasks, like the storage of information and passing it on to subsequent, less informed generations, were also included in my programming.” It sounded as if the machine was proud of itself.

“Computer? Machine? What are you talking about?” Cináed looked back and forth between him and the Eye, clearly confused.

“I’ll explain it to you in a minute. I suspect this thing isn’t going to stay with us much longer. If you have any other questions, I suggest you ask now.” Tadeo could only hope that it would answer.

“All right, I will take one more question,” the voice sighed. The creators, whoever they were, had certainly done a good job at making this machine sound human.

“Well, there is one problem.” Cináed swallowed. “As the Stones seemed to lose their power over time, I suspect that some of them may have gotten lost. If we want to be able to help everyone who is sick, we need as many of those Stones back as possible. Alternatively, if you

could tell us where to find new ones, we could solve the problem that way.”

“Any piece of quartz will do. Other types of crystal will also work, once they are infused with the psychic energy a bonded couple creates. However, they do not retain the energy that well, which is why it is better to use quartz.” The blue light was definitely dimming now, and with a last flicker was finally gone.

Cináed gripped Tadeo’s hand more tightly and turned toward him, eyes big and luminous. Tadeo opened his arms and offered what support he could as Cináed stepped closer and put his forehead on Tadeo’s shoulder. Tadeo slid his arms around the other man’s shoulders and held him close. He couldn’t even imagine what it was like to have your whole belief system overturned within a few minutes. He suspected it might take Cináed a while to digest all the new information.

“Well, now we know.” Cináed lifted his head and looked into his eyes.

“Yes, we do. The real question becomes—what do you want to do with all that new knowledge?” Tadeo suspected that it might take them a while to figure that out.

Time was something they had in abundance, though. His shipmates weren’t going to return any time soon, if ever; he had no way of getting off the planet, and Cináed was on a mission of undeterminable length. Nobody knew when to expect him back. That definitely gave them something to work with.

CHAPTER FIVE

“WHICH part of the new knowledge?” Cináed may have lifted his head so he could see Tadeo, but he was careful to keep the rest of his body as close to him as possible when he slid his arms around the man’s middle and held on. The comfort he got from this simple touch was amazing. He never wanted to lose that. “We’ve learned quite a bit from this... artificial intelligence, whatever that is.”

“That’s not an easy concept to explain. What we talked to just now is actually not a living being, but a machine, a mechanical device that has been programmed to act like an intelligent being. In this case a being with an extremely temperamental personality, making it one of the quirkiest computers I’ve ever interacted with.” Tadeo smiled. “You probably have no clue what I’m talking about.”

“Not really, no. I don’t think that is the most important point for us to focus on anyway. It gave us some of the information we need, and I think that’s more important than understanding who or what is behind it all.” He swallowed. “On the one hand, I’m really relieved that the problem of getting more Stones no longer exists. On the other hand, I’m worried about what that means for us, the Council of Priests, and the rest of the population.”

“I agree. Having grown up with a fairly theoretical understanding of psychic powers, suddenly being confronted with the fact that I apparently have some myself is a bit of a shock.” Tadeo frowned. “Actually, I’m not sure whether that’s true. It didn’t say what *my* role in this was.”

“No, it didn’t. At the very least your psychic energy pattern must be pretty close to mine, because otherwise we wouldn’t be able to work together like that.” Cináed wanted that, if it involved more holding of hands and sleeping in the other man’s arms.

“So, let’s assume I have some sort of ability myself. Let’s also assume that the both of us are needed to make this work. Does that mean we have to stay together all the time? Are there certain things we need to do to make sure this Stone remains fully charged?” Tadeo smiled. “Not that I mind spending time with you, but I’m thinking about the future. I’m also thinking about the other paired couples that may be needed to make the Stones work on a larger scale.”

“That could be a major problem.” Cináed didn’t want to think about the fact that Tadeo was probably going to leave at some point, leaving him behind. “Unless the pairings are flexible and clearly Stone-related, we’ll definitely have the Council of Priests against us.”

“‘Bonding’ doesn’t sound very flexible though, does it?” Tadeo narrowed his eyes. “Didn’t you say that you’d be publicly executed for suggesting for men to become couples?”

“I did. The Council of Priests is violently anti-sodomite. I thought it was interesting that this is apparently a fairly new development, having started when the Criosdaidh religion came here. They’ve had a thousand years to influence people’s thinking and moral beliefs, though. I don’t think it’ll be easy to change, even if we can somehow get the Warrior Council to support us.” Cináed couldn’t imagine his father approving of him living with a man. It almost made him smile when he tried to imagine his brother’s reaction.

“So, now that we understand exactly what the problem is, how are we going to find a solution?” Tadeo looked at him as if he expected him to have a ready-made answer.

“I’m not sure. I think we need to understand whether this bonding between us is fixed or whether any healer-warrior combination will do.” Cináed cringed at the thought of someone else with Tadeo. He’d grown very fond of the man in a very short time.

“How are we going to do that?” Tadeo didn’t look too enthusiastic either.

“My best friend and a fellow healer stayed behind in a village about a week’s travel on foot from here. I think we need to go there and check whether the two of you working together gets the same effect as the two of us working together.” *Dia*, he hoped not. “That is, if you don’t have to get back to your spaceship.”

“I don’t think I *can* get back at this point.” Tadeo didn’t look very worried about this. Maybe an adventure like this was something he wanted more than to go back to his crew? “I don’t want to go back before we’ve solved this problem anyway.”

“That’s excellent.” Cináed couldn’t stop his smile from making it quite clear how wonderful he thought it was. “Once we’ve answered the question of whether the bonding is fixed or flexible, we can start making plans for our return to the capital city and how to handle the Council of Priests.”

“Makes sense.” Tadeo smiled back at him. “Now that we have that sorted out, I assume we’ll be on our way?”

“We do need to put my travel kit back together, gather some food to keep going until we find a campsite for tonight, and I suspect you’d want to find something other than your very uncomfortable looking clothing to wear.” Cináed quietly admitted to himself that he was looking forward to seeing Tadeo without his clothes again. The grin on the other man’s face told him that maybe his anticipation was more obvious than he thought.

“This suit is a little warm, yes. It’s also very dirty. I would like to wear something else, but don’t have any clothes to change into.” Tadeo’s eyes twinkled.

“That’s easily solved. I have an extra kilt in my pack, if you’re willing to wear that. It’ll also help make you stand out less.” Not to mention the fact that he’d get to see Tadeo’s bare chest all day. The thought alone made his member perk up a little.

“I would love to wear a kilt; I’m sure it’ll be much more comfortable. But I think I need a bath first.” Tadeo’s lips twitched.

Was the other man making fun of him? He didn't care; if he got to see Tadeo naked and get wet with him, it was well worth it.

"I think we could both do with some cleaning up. It won't be a bath, I'm afraid, since all we have is a basic well next to one of the houses. But I'm sure that we can get clean enough as long as we help each other out." That was a clear offer, right?

"Sounds like a plan. Lead the way." Tadeo chuckled and stepped back, taking away the comfort of his arms.

Surprised at how much he missed the contact, Cináed pulled himself together. The extra kilt was quickly located, as were a couple of washcloths and his trusted copper cauldron. No need to wash themselves with cold water.

When everything was ready, Tadeo started to take off his suit, and Cináed forgot to get undressed himself. The man was gorgeous. His dark brown skin almost glowed in the morning sunshine and his whole body was well formed. His muscles weren't as overdeveloped as many warriors', making him more attractive to Cináed.

"What about you?" Tadeo stood there in his full glory, hands by his sides and clearly comfortable with being naked.

Cináed was already half hard, but there was no reason for him to hold back, so he took off his kilt. Tadeo watched the whole time, clearly fascinated by what he saw. Both their members were fully erect when Cináed was done.

"Will you let me help you with that, like you helped me yesterday?" Tadeo stepped a little closer but gave Cináed enough space not to feel overwhelmed.

"Please." His voice was raw with desire. He was harder than he'd ever been in his life. Tadeo's heated glances at his member made him crave the man's touch.

"Come here." Tadeo opened his arms, and Cináed stepped into them without even thinking. "Can I kiss you?"

"K—kiss me?" He almost came just thinking about Tadeo's lips on his. Yeah, he wanted that. Cináed nodded, unable to speak.

Tadeo smiled and put one arm around his shoulders, letting the other move around his middle, with his warm hand resting in the small of Cináed's back. Cináed slid his arms around Tadeo's neck as the other man brought their lips together for the first time, pulled back to check if everything was okay, and then returned his soft, warm mouth to Cináed's again and again in little butterfly kisses along the seam of his lips.

It was as if a fire spread from his mouth across his whole body. His skin started tingling, and when Tadeo pulled their lower bodies together so their hard members touched, Cináed thought he'd died and gone to heaven.

When he opened his mouth to sigh, Tadeo darted his tongue across his upper lip, then his lower, and pulled back again to see if he liked it. Cináed's eyes widened and he nodded. Yeah, he wanted more of that.

Tadeo grinned and started licking his way around and into Cináed's mouth. When their tongues touched, it felt as if there was a direct line from his tongue to his cock. Their tongues started sliding against each other, dancing and playing to find out what felt best. Cináed closed his eyes and gave in to the feelings coursing through his body.

Grinding his hard shaft against Tadeo's, feeling his balls bump up against the other man's and hearing his soft sighs as they continued kissing as if their lives depended on it, brought him to the point of no return before he was ready. With a few last jerky movements against Tadeo's hard abdomen, Cináed started coming so hard that he saw stars. Spurt after spurt of heat poured out of him, making their bellies slide more easily.

When Tadeo followed him over the edge and added more heat, Cináed pulled back from their kiss and howled, he felt so good. He kept coming, the restless movements of his hips producing wonderful aftershocks. He held onto Tadeo for all he was worth and finally buried his face into the soft, sweaty place between the other man's neck and shoulder.

Tadeo didn't let go, and they stood like that for long minutes to try to regain some control over their bodies.

"Wow." Tadeo pulled back and smiled, raising a hand to caress the side of his face, placing a soft kiss on his lips. "That was something else."

"Yeah?" Cináed hadn't really thought about it before, but he'd never done anything like this while Tadeo probably had tons of experience. It was a good thing this hadn't occurred to him before, because he might never have found the courage to do anything about the inexplicable attraction he felt toward Tadeo.

"Yeah!" Tadeo slid his hand to the back of Cináed's head and pulled their heads together so that their foreheads touched. It was as if the other man was looking right into his soul. "It's never, ever felt as good as this before."

"DON'T you think this is a little tight for the two of us?"

Tadeo stared at the little tent Cináed had put up next to the stream they'd decided was a good place to spend their first night en route back to civilization. Well, it was going to be more civilized than this wilderness, but he still wasn't sure what stage of development these people were at. Wearing a kilt all day had been a constant reminder that he was in a very different place to what he was used to.

"I like...." Cináed shook his head and knelt next to the fire he'd started earlier to start unpacking the cauldron and some of their food supply.

"You like it to be tight?" Tadeo grinned. He was pretty sure that Cináed had never been intimate with anyone, but the man seemed to be taking to it like a fish to water.

"With you, yes, I do." Cináed managed to look very busy.

Tadeo knelt down next to him and put his hand on the kilt-covered thigh, making Cináed gasp and look up at him.

“I like it that you’re so honest about your reactions.” Tadeo smiled at the surprise in the other man’s face. “I look forward to sharing this tiny tent with you for the next few days. Sleeping with you in my arms last night was wonderful, and it can only be better the closer we get to each other.”

“Yeah. I’ve been thinking about that.” Cináed smiled back at him, a dimple appearing in one cheek.

“You have? Hot damn, you’re making me want to miss dinner and go straight to bed.” Tadeo started stroking Cináed’s thigh.

“Really? But—but aren’t you hungry?” Cináed’s eyes were wide, thick eyelashes framing the dark brown orbs perfectly.

“Of course I’m hungry. I’m not exactly used to walking all day, so I’m very tired as well. But don’t worry, I was actually joking.” Tadeo stopped tempting himself and pulled back his hand. “We do need to eat first.”

After they’d finished their meal, Cináed banked the fire, stowed their packs high up in the trees, and took off his kilt.

“Pillow.” As if he needed an excuse. Naked was fine with him

Following Cináed’s example, Tadeo took off his own kilt with some difficulty and followed Cináed into the tiny space. It took them a few minutes to figure out how to position themselves so their makeshift pillows were comfortably placed and they were both covered by the blanket. When they were settled, Cináed with his head on Tadeo’s chest and one leg between his thighs, it felt like heaven.

Tadeo put his arms around the other man and wanted to say good night, but the fatigue that had been with him since they’d stopped walking got the better of him and he yawned.

“It’s all right.” Cináed’s voice was low and a soft kiss was placed on his chest, right above his heart. “Let’s get some sleep first.”

“Mmmph.” Tadeo yawned again and closed his eyes.

When he woke up the next morning, Cináed was still curled up against his side and snoring softly. His hair was tousled, and he was so

relaxed that he looked even younger than when he was awake. Tadeo lay very quietly, just watching the other man sleep. When the first direct rays of the sun hit the tent, Cináed opened his eyes and blinked at him a few times. The smile that spread on his face was brighter than any sunshine.

“Morning.” He smiled back and kissed Cináed soundly on the mouth.

“M-morning.” Cináed blushed and kissed him back.

Tadeo turned onto his side to let their morning erections touch.

“Oh. Wow.” Cináed moaned and started rubbing their groins together without any hesitation.

He’d planned to ask if it was okay to go for a little playing, but it seemed like they were both on the same page already. Tadeo went with it, grinding into the other man while kissing him senseless. It was fast and furious this time. The friction was delicious, and they were both coming within minutes.

“Fuck, but you’re good at this.” Tadeo grabbed one of the cloths he’d put into the pouch of his kilt and cleaned them up.

“I am?” Cináed grinned. “I just do what feels good.”

“Keep doing it; I love it.” Tadeo had rarely been in a better mood. If Cináed was right, they had another five or six days like this, just the two of them. He didn’t look forward to having to deal with other people, so he was going to make the most of his time with Cináed while it lasted.

ALMOST a week later Tadeo got his first look at the small village Cináed had been talking about. It had been his last stop before crossing into the land of Bunádh, as he’d learned the deserted wilderness around the Eye of Scotá was called.

It looked like something from a history book. Small straw-covered huts and a few stone houses were grouped around a central

plaza with a draw well in the center. The plaza was covered in market stands, and people were trying to sell everything from live chickens to baked bread and clothing. The noise and stench were unbelievable.

“Good, there’s a market today.” Cináed had to scream to make himself understood above the din of people and animals competing for the “loudest noise” award. “We can get a few supplies, like shoes for you, and a couple of extra pairs of socks.”

Tadeo just nodded and continued to take it all in. An anthropologist or historian would have a field day with this. He watched as Cináed casually strolled between the stands, looking at a variety of wares Tadeo knew they weren’t interested in. He picked up a pair of leather moccasins as if just taking a look, but as he was about to put them down again, the older woman in a simple shift dress who was in charge of the stand stopped him.

“Please, if you’re interested, I’ll give you a good price. My daughter is very sick, and I need to buy food for her and the five children.” The old woman’s hands were shaking.

“Where is her husband?” Cináed was still holding the shoes.

“He died of the yellow fever last week.” The old woman looked down as if she was ashamed. Surely that wasn’t her fault? But then again, who knew what these people believed? He reminded himself that this was a very different culture.

“If I buy this pair of shoes from you, I will also need four pairs of socks.” Cináed paused and frowned. “You will also tell me where to find your daughter. A good friend of mine who is a healer is staying at the inn. I will ask him to help her.”

The old woman’s mouth dropped open and it took a few moments for her to find the ability to speak.

“A healer? In our village? You would ask him to help her?” She sat down for a moment, trying to compose herself.

“Of course.” Cináed looked over his shoulder as if to check that nobody had heard him speak.

It was a little late to take precautions, but at least he hadn't given himself away yet. Tadeo understood now, after several conversations, that the Council of Priests was very strict about who could be healed and who was not *worthy* of medical attention. Poor people like these villagers were probably not even on the list. Withholding medical care to parts of the population based on their economic situation was a barbaric way of rationing what healing powers these people still had.

The sale of shoes and socks was completed quickly, and the old woman described where to find her daughter's house in great detail. When she'd thanked Cináed about a thousand times, he finally tore himself away from the stand and motioned Tadeo to follow him. The inn was right on the plaza. Cináed checked that his friend Akir still had the same room, and they made their way up a set of rickety wooden stairs to find the other man, who had apparently withdrawn for a nap.

Cináed didn't seem too bothered about that and stormed right into the room without even knocking.

A slender man about five inches shorter than Cináed and Tadeo stood with his back to the door, staring out the only window in the room. He had dark red hair and wore the white robes that Cináed had told him all healer priests were required to wear. As soon as he heard the noise he turned around, panic clear on his face until he recognized Cináed.

"Hey, Akir." Cináed grinned but didn't move closer.

That was right—Tadeo would have to remember that no touching between men was allowed. It was going to be truly hard for him and Cináed after the week they'd just spent together, touching whenever they'd felt like it.

"Cináed! You almost gave me a heart attack! You're back! Did you get the Stones?" Akir had to take a breath, and that was probably the only reason he stopped asking more questions.

"Listen, I'll get to all those details as soon as I can, but we have a bit of an emergency first." Cináed quickly explained the situation with the old woman's daughter, asking for Akir's help so he wouldn't have to reveal his own healer status just yet. Being a warrior would allow

him to avoid notice from any of the local priests they'd run into. To Akir's credit, the man only nodded and followed Cináed's lead. They left the room before Tadeo could react, promising to be back as soon as possible to discuss everything.

THAT wasn't the last time Cináed took a risk to help someone who wouldn't normally have been considered *worthy*. They were careful to stay out of the priests' way so they wouldn't be noticed. That had been fairly easy in the outlying villages, but the closer they got to the capital city of Gael, the more difficult it became. The priests were more numerous, but they also seemed to become more vigilant, more controlling.

To Tadeo's great relief, their experiment at having him and Akir work together to see if any healer-warrior combination was able to recharge the Stone had turned out to be a major disaster. They'd tried having Akir and him touch the Stone at the same time to see if it would start to glow and hum like it did whenever he and Cináed did. Akir had held the Stone in his upturned palm, but Tadeo couldn't even come near it without the air starting to crackle with electricity and the most intense, stabbing pain shooting from his outstretched fingertips up through his arm and straight into his brain. The same thing happened to Akir when Tadeo held out the Stone. Akir and Cináed were able to touch it at the same time, but the Stone remained dormant when they did.

They'd managed to find him a horse, and Tadeo was grateful he'd learned to ride on his grandfather's horse ranch when he was a child. Their trip was much more comfortable and faster than walking, but he regretted that the little traveling tent was no longer needed. He missed being close to Cináed all day, and to not be sleeping in the same bed with him at night was killing him. He felt hollow and alone and was beginning to have stomach cramps and headaches that became worse every day.

They stayed in inns and shared a room with Akir to save money. Sleeping in a separate bed without Cináed in his arms even at night was

driving him crazy. On the evening of the third day, the agony had grown so intense for both of them that Cináed decided they needed to see if the Stone could help.

As soon as they were in their room, Cináed sank onto one of the beds. He was pale, and there were new stress lines around his eyes.

“Come here.” Cináed pointed to a spot next to him, and Tadeo sat down.

He’d been so dizzy that he’d miscalculated the distance and ended up with his thigh pressed against Cináed’s. The other man reached out to steady him, and as soon as their hands touched, a feeling of well-being spread all over his body. He gasped, hearing an echoing sound from Cináed.

“That feels....” Cináed’s eyes had widened and his hand closed more tightly around his, twining their fingers.

“...right.” Tadeo smiled and took Cináed’s other hand for good measure.

“This was what we were missing?” Cináed looked so relieved it was almost funny.

“I can’t believe it’s as simple as that.” Tadeo grinned. “Well, simple and complicated at the same time, I guess. It’ll make the next few days hard to deal with because we have to be so careful about not touching in public. At the same time, I can’t say how glad I am that we’ve solved the problem. I was beginning to think I was seriously ill.”

“It was the same for me.” Cináed grinned back, then his expression turned thoughtful. “I guess we know that the bonding is not only limited to one healer-warrior pair, but that it’s about more than just working together.”

“You did say that the Eye had mentioned a permanent bonding between two men.” Akir’s voice pulled him from his hazed happiness at being able to touch Cináed. He looked up. Akir had taken a seat on one of the other beds and was watching them with curiosity in his eyes.

“Yes, it did. But we weren’t sure what that meant.” Tadeo frowned. He still wasn’t.

“Well, from the looks of it, it’s pretty simple.” Akir grinned, making him look a lot younger. “I suspected as much when you first talked about it, but it sounded too strange to be true. I’ve had some time to watch the two of you together, and even though you’re very careful to hide it, it’s clear to me that you are more than traveling companions. More than friends even.”

“It is?” He was shocked. *Shit*. That would place both their lives in danger once they reached Gael, if not before. “We’ll have to be more careful.”

Akir nodded. Cináed’s hands tightened on his and the other man made a sound suspiciously close to a sob.

“What are you saying?” Cináed looked at him, desperation radiating from his eyes.

“I’m saying that we can’t risk getting caught before we’re able to find these Old Laws that prove we’re not doing anything wrong. At the very least we’ll need the Warrior Council on our side so we don’t get executed.” Tadeo shuddered at the thought of having someone harm Cináed. He couldn’t let that happen. He was glad he’d retrieved his laser before they’d left the Eye. He was going to use that on anyone who threatened Cináed, regulations be damned.

“I agree.” Akir sounded certain. “But I also think you’ll need a separate room from now on. It’s quite clear that this ‘bonding’ involves physical contact. And if you can’t get it during the day...”

“Ungh.” Tadeo’s cock hardened at the thought of being alone with Cináed, sharing a bed as they had during the first part of their trip.

Cináed gave a little whimper and blushed.

“I guess you have no objections.” Akir laughed and got up. “There’s nothing we can do about tonight, since the inn is full, but I’ll go and... check if there are any sick people who need help. I’m sure it’ll take me at least two hours to be certain.”

Akir winked at them before he pulled the door closed behind him. Cináed’s mouth hung open when he turned back to Tadeo.

“Did I mention that I really like Akir?” Tadeo grinned and gently pushed Cináed’s chin up until his mouth was closed.

“I can’t believe he said that. Did that, whatever.” Cináed blinked, trying to adjust to their new situation.

“I’m glad he did. I don’t know about you, but I’m relieved that we found out what’s wrong with us.” He leaned over and brushed his lips along Cináed’s.

“Mmm-hm.” Cináed leaned into his touch and opened his mouth, inviting him to make their kiss more serious.

Tadeo gladly complied, and the next two hours were spent in a joyful rediscovery of Cináed’s body. The other man reciprocated, and both of them were languid and sated under the soft covers by the time someone knocked on the door. Akir made his way to the bed furthest removed from the one they had chosen without even blinking at the third, empty bed. They’d agreed not to do anything with the other man in the room, but Tadeo had insisted that he wasn’t going to sleep without Cináed in his arms. Not when they had a choice.

CINÁED wasn’t sure whether to feel relieved or scared as they finally approached the city of Gael on their seventh day of travel. Its jumble of houses with their red slate roofs, the spires of churches and communal buildings, and the city wall with its watchtowers all looked familiar and strange at the same time. The monastery up on the hill to the city’s west looked threatening. It had always looked intimidating, purposely so he now thought, but knowing what he did about the Council of Priests and its plans made him realize that he’d be facing a very powerful enemy.

“It’ll be fine.” Tadeo was riding next to him at a respectable distance but close enough so they could talk.

“You don’t know that.” He liked that Tadeo was tuned in to his moods to the extent that he knew when to offer support and when to back off.

“No, but we’re not going to let them scare us before we’ve even entered the city, are we?” Tadeo winked at him.

“No, I guess you’re right. We should hold off panicking until we hear the gates close behind us, locking us in.” He winked back, loving how Tadeo could make him feel better with just a few words. Their renewed physical closeness during the last part of their trip had made all the difference.

Akir cleared his throat, and Cináed flinched. *Dia*, but it was hard to remember not to show how much he was beginning to like and admire Tadeo. It was a good thing they had Akir with them. As annoying as his occasional little reprimands and reminders were, he’d helped them become more circumspect about their actions. In general.

“I’m sorry.” He looked at his childhood friend, seeing the regret in his eyes.

“You don’t have to apologize.” Akir shrugged. “I just don’t want to see the two of you in even more trouble than you’ll undoubtedly get yourselves into anyway.”

“I’m grateful for your help.” Cináed looked over at Tadeo, who looked equally crushed that they’d forgotten to behave themselves—again. “We both are. It’s just very hard to pretend that we’re no more than travel companions.”

“I know. But it won’t be much longer now. I’m sure that all hell is going to break loose as soon as you start revealing what you’ve learned.” Akir smiled. “And once everyone is up in arms, trying to figure out how to take advantage of the new situation, they won’t be watching you as closely as before.”

“I don’t know, Akir. I can’t help but think we’ve overlooked something. Even if we manage to get the support of the Warrior Council, I can’t imagine that the Council of Priests will accept the new world order just like that.” Cináed was sure they would fight it with all they had.

“There’s only one way to find out.” Tadeo sounded serious and very determined; his eyes were blazing with conviction. “Once we have the Warrior Council on our side, the Council of Priests will be hard-

pressed to ignore us. They'll have to come around or be faced with public disapproval. And if they don't see reason, we'll just keep attacking them until they have no choice but to give in."

Cináed nodded. It sounded like a good plan, but he was still afraid that executing it would turn out to be a lot more difficult than they thought.

CHAPTER SIX

CINÁED breathed more easily once they'd passed Gael's city gate without being challenged. He'd hoped that a healer priest traveling with two warriors wasn't going to get questioned when the guards had most likely been told to be on the lookout for two healers. High Priest Makolm was arrogant enough to *expect* him to be successful where everyone else had failed. He'd want Cináed brought to his chambers as soon as he arrived with the solution. No doubt with the intention of taking full credit himself.

He let Akir lead the way to his father's city residence. He didn't remember enough about the city's layout, having spent most of his time at the monastery after leaving home when he was five. Akir had been luckier. His parents cared about him. They were also rich merchants, so they'd been able to "donate" enough money to the Council of Priests to have Akir visit them a few times a year.

Memories of a big garden and playing in the sunshine, of large rooms with high ceilings and a huge kitchen that was always warm came flooding back when they arrived at his father's mansion. The outside hadn't changed. The family crest upon the gable with its two crossed swords and the MacAlpin colors looked as imposing as ever. The house was in good repair, the turrets and crenellations clean. Two uniformed guards stood on top of the steps leading to the main entrance, and the stable boy was already approaching them from the stables at the side of the house.

Once the horses were taken care of, they entered the house, following one of the guards to the back courtyard, where he'd told them

his father and brother were doing their afternoon training. As usual, his mother and sisters were nowhere to be seen. They were probably upstairs, doing whatever it was that women did all day.

“We don’t want to interrupt them.” Cináed held out his arm, stopping Tadeo and Akir from advancing into the courtyard. “We’ll need to wait until they’re done with this round.”

Not too much later his father and Gordan lowered their swords, took a brief bow, and turned toward them.

“Good afternoon, Father. Gordan.” Cináed watched their eyes widen with great satisfaction.

“You came back?” His father recovered first, handing his sword to the weapons master for safekeeping. “I mean, it’s not even been a month yet.”

“Yes, I came back.” He tried not to be insulted or hurt by the fact that his father obviously hadn’t thought him capable of fulfilling the mission.

“And who is the stranger wearing MacAlpin colors?” His father’s brow wrinkled as his eyes raked over Tadeo’s body, still adorned with Cináed’s extra kilt.

“Let me tell you what happened, and you will understand.” Not that he was going to reveal Tadeo’s true identity, but he had to tell his father something. He’d forgotten how strict the rules about wearing a clan’s colors or tartan were. Hopefully, by the time his father knew the whole story, he’d be more understanding.

His father glowered throughout his report, his barely held-back fury reminding Cináed of his temper, which had led to many a beating when he still lived at home. Gordan had usually caught the brunt of his father’s anger, being five years older. The fact that someone he hadn’t approved of had appropriated his family’s colors seemed to be of more interest to his father than the fact that the mystery of the Stones had been solved. Couldn’t the man see any further than his own castle walls?

“Are you even listening to anything I’m telling you?” Cináed was about to lose his own temper, despite the fact that he knew that wouldn’t change anything.

“Oh, I heard you.” His father finally looked away from Tadeo and focused his burning gaze on Cináed. “And I’m telling you right now that I want nothing whatsoever to do with your despicable scheme to undermine the moral fiber of our society.”

“Excuse me?” Cináed shook his head, trying to bring what he had just said into some sort of alignment with his father’s reaction. “I thought you’d be happy that we’d found a way to break the Council of Priests’ hold over the Warrior Council.”

“Happy?” His father’s face turned red as he fisted his hands. “I cannot believe that you’d even consider using such abhorrently sinful methods to solve the problem of the Stones. Two men bonding? I can’t even think about it without wanting to throw up. Any healing that would come from Stones refueled by such an *abomination* is bound to be tainted. I want no part of it. Neither does my clan. We’re better off dead.”

“But the Old Laws...” Cináed stepped back, shocked when his father raised his fist as if to hit him.

“I don’t give a shit about the Old Laws.” His father dropped his arm but didn’t look any less threatening. “There’s a reason that they’ve been discarded. Considerable progress has been made in the last thousand years, and we’re far better off now. Thank the heavens that the Council of Priests was able to instill a sense of right and wrong, of decency into our forefathers. The price of accepting this harebrained scheme of yours and losing the Priest’s much needed moral guidance is simply too high. Physical health isn’t worth losing our very souls over.”

“I guess I’m going to have to see the Warrior Council on my own then.” Cináed wasn’t going to be stopped by lack of support from his father.

“Don’t you dare even think that way! You know that you can’t go and see them without my approval or sponsorship. It’s not your place.

You're not head of a clan and can't demand that they see you. And let me be very clear. You. Do. Not. Have. My. Approval." His father had never looked this angry.

"But—" Cináed flinched when his father stepped closer.

"No buts. You have to accept my decision, since I'm the head of your clan." His father narrowed his eyes as he stepped closer still. "If you don't, I will officially disown you. Do you hear me?"

"I don't think that would make my situation very different from what it's been in the last twenty years." He'd had enough of this stupid, blustering behavior. The shortsightedness made him dizzy. The threat left him cold. "You didn't even visit me once while I was being trained in the monastery. Not once in twenty years. I didn't get to see you, my mother, or any of my siblings in all that time. So don't threaten me with disowning me. I already know what it's like to live without a family."

"What? But..." It was his father's turn to be lost for words.

"No buts for you either, Father." Cináed had made his decision. "Don't trouble yourself with initiating the procedure for officially disowning me. I can't wear the MacAlpin colors anymore if your attitude is representative of the clan's opinion. I won't. I'll obtain alternative clothing. I'll have these two kilts as well as my family sword sent to you by messenger as soon as possible."

"Are you sure you want to do this? It sounds pretty final to me." Tadeo's voice was low, pitched for only him to hear. The widening of his father's eyes told him that the man had heard anyway. Not that it mattered.

"I don't have a choice, Tadeo." He turned so he could look at the man he was beginning to care for more deeply than a friend. "As long as my father is head of the clan, his word is final. And I can't be part of a group that holds opinions that put people's lives at risk in favor of some elusive moral construct that suppresses their freedom of opinion as well as their chance at a better life."

"I understand that. I just wanted to make sure that you gave yourself at least a couple of seconds to reconsider a decision that sounds pretty final to me." Tadeo grinned.

“Consider it reconsidered, then.” Cináed grinned back. As long as he had Tadeo on his side, everything was eventually going to turn out okay.

“I CAN’T believe your father wouldn’t see reason.” Tadeo had expected some resistance but not based on religious principles. The brother had looked less upset but hadn’t spoken.

“What surprises me is that he isn’t willing to go up against the Council of Priests. They’re no friends of the Warriors and have taken a lot of power away from them over the years, so I would’ve thought that any warrior would jump at the chance to get their own back.” Cináed took their horses back from the stable boy.

“Do you think that the entire Warrior Council thinks that way?” That would make it so much more difficult to reach their goal.

“I don’t know. It doesn’t even matter what other clan heads think, since our only way in is via my father.” Cináed mounted his horse, clearly wanting to get away from his family’s house. Tadeo and Akir followed his example.

“Not quite.” Akir smiled. “There’s another group that has regular dealings with both Councils. If we could get one of their members to support us going to see the Warrior Council, we wouldn’t need Chief MacAlpin’s help at all.”

“Of course!” Cináed slapped his forehead with his palm.

“What? Which group? Not another Council, I hope?” Tadeo wasn’t too impressed with the two Councils he’d learned about. The SEF wasn’t exactly flexible, but they were far less restrictive than the Dálriatan bodies of government he’d been introduced to so far.

“No, not another Council. Maybe they should have their own official body as well, though.” Cináed grinned. “We may need to change that once we get hold of the Old Laws and find out how much power the king has.”

“You would do that?” Akir’s eyes widened.

“Of course, why not? The merchants play an important role in public life; why shouldn’t they have their own Council?” Cináed nodded as if to confirm his thought.

“So this other group consists of merchants?” An organization that ran on economic principles sounded a lot like the SEF. But if these merchants were able to help them gain the Warrior Council’s support, he was willing to give them the benefit of the doubt.

“Yes.” Akir nodded. “They’ve only become important in the last few hundred years. They control much of the money, without which neither the Council of Priests nor the Warrior Council can exist these days. That enables them to meet with the two official Councils.”

“Seems to make sense. But how are we going to get one of them to sponsor us?” Tadeo hoped they wouldn’t have to jump through too many hoops.

“That’s the easy part.” Akir smoothed his robes. “My parents just happen to be fairly influential members.”

“And you think they’d be willing to help us?” From the corner of his eye, Tadeo noticed a grin spread on Cináed’s face.

“I suspect they will. They’ve always said that they don’t agree with much of what the Council of Priests does. If we give them a chance to help reduce the power those priests have over the population, I suspect they’ll be more than happy to help.” Akir grinned. “In fact, I think they’ll jump at the chance.”

“In that case, I guess we better go and pay them a visit.” Tadeo followed Akir and Cináed, who rode ahead, their heads close together in discussion. He was glad that Cináed was being distracted. He’d taken his father’s rejection well, but it still must have hurt.

Tadeo was impressed with what he’d seen of this city so far. He was aware that neither Cináed’s family nor Akir’s were likely to live in the poor area of the city. There were bound to be slums somewhere, but he hadn’t seen any yet. The streets they passed through gradually widened until they resembled boulevards. Trees and well-tended flower beds lined the road and the houses became positively opulent.

They stopped in front of a palace. It was nothing like the MacAlpin residence, which had been a statement about power and solid defenses. This house was all about wealth and an unashamed joy in luxury. It looked a lot like a Baroque mansion from seventeenth-century Earth.

Tadeo stared at the curving façade, which included a central projection carrying what looked like a family crest. The exterior was painted a light green, and there were white columns everywhere. Oval windows, most of them made of wildly colorful stained glass, looked oddly at home on the building. It was surely about to collapse under the weight of all the towers and plaster ornaments decorating the roof and all available wall space.

“Impressive, huh?” Cináed had dismounted and was holding his horse’s reins.

“Um, yes?” He wasn’t quite sure what to think of it. He also didn’t want to insult his friends, especially Akir, who clearly loved his parents a lot.

“Don’t worry, it gets to me too. I think it’s a bit much, but Akir says it’s all about representation, projecting the right image to fellow merchants and clients alike. Just wait ’til you see the inside.” Cináed winked.

“I think I’ll have to close my eyes before they die of visual overload.” He shook his head to try to clear his brain from all the itty-bitty decorations swamping it.

“Why don’t you dismount and let the stable boys take our horses so we can go inside and say hello to Akir’s parents.” Cináed held out his hand to help him get down, and it was only now that Tadeo noticed the equally opulent stables next to the house. It was nothing like the very functional building that served Cináed’s parents.

As soon as he touched Cináed’s hand, all thoughts about stables and architectural details were gone. The exchange of energies was immediate, making their touch feel like a small electrical shock. God, he hoped they’d be given rooms in close proximity; he was desperate for Cináed’s touch already. It would get much worse by that night.

They walked up the few stone steps that led to the main entrance. The guard greeted Akir enthusiastically before he opened the door for them, announcing their presence to the servant seemingly waiting for them inside. This second servant led them to a large room on their left. He promised to get Akir's parents immediately, since they had just finished lunch.

"This is the official visitor room." Akir grinned and sat down on one of the six or seven silk-covered chaises that were distributed around the room. "I guess the majordomo decided you looked important enough to be in need of being impressed."

"Is that a good thing?" Tadeo took a seat opposite Akir and was relieved when Cináed sat down next to him. They weren't quite close enough to touch, but even having him within arm's reach was better than looking at him from the other end of the chaise.

"Most definitely. Remember—with merchants, public image is everything. If the majordomo decides you're worthy of being led to the official visitor room, it means that his employers will be more likely to respect you." Akir tilted his head, a mischievous grin on his face. "The fact that you came with their eldest son may have something to do with it."

"Who came with our eldest son?" A deep male voice came from the door, and Tadeo turned around to see a man who looked like an older version of Akir walk in.

His hair was almost white, but his eyes held a youthful sparkle, and his skin was a healthy, tanned tone. He wore an elaborate robe that looked a lot like a toga from Roman times, except that it was a deep burgundy instead of white. There was a woman in a deep blue dress next to him, eyes equally alight and wearing a big smile.

"Mom, Dad, you remember my best friend Cináed, right?" Akir walked up to his mother and embraced her, then exchanged a manly hug with his father before stepping back and motioning Cináed forward.

“Of course we do.” Akir’s mother held out her hand for Cináed to shake and he didn’t hesitate at all. “I’m so glad we finally get to see you again. It’s been much too long.”

“Welcome to our home, Cináed. We’ve missed you.” Akir’s father shook hands and then stepped back. “But I thought you’d become a healer at the same time as Akir—now I see you wearing the MacAlpin kilt?”

“Well, sir, you won’t see that on me for long. In fact, I’m in urgent need of a replacement. I was hoping you might be able to assist me.” Cináed looked at the floor.

“Of course I’ll help you, son. But you know what the price will be.” Akir’s father chuckled. “I’m nothing if not a glutton for a good story, and I suspect—looking at the three of you and knowing why Cináed and Akir left Gael—that this one will be legendary.”

“Thank you, sir. I appreciate your support more than I can say.” Cináed turned toward Tadeo and waved him over. “This is Tadeo Banderas, who has traveled back to the city with us all the way from Bunádh.”

“I take it that your mission was a success, then?” Akir’s father looked over at Cináed and waited for him to nod before he shook Tadeo’s hand, appraising him through narrowed eyes. “Makes me wonder what your role in all of this is. Especially since you seem to be wearing the same MacAlpin kilt that Cináed seems so anxious to get rid of.”

“I’m just as anxious, sir, let me assure you.” Tadeo stepped back and was greeted by Akir’s mother with a warm smile and another handshake before they all sat back down on various chaises.

This greeting was so different from the one they’d received at the MacAlpin’s and boded well for the rest of their plan. The biggest area of uncertainty was Akir’s parents’ reaction to the male bonding. He couldn’t help but be afraid of another rejection. It had taken more than two thousand years for two men living as a couple to start becoming acceptable on Earth after several Christian churches had taken it upon themselves to ban it as an *abomination*. Even now, five hundred years

after the official approval, there were some people left who hadn't accepted that same-sex couples had a right to live their lives just like anyone else. Could he really expect things to change that much more quickly on Dálriata?

The silence was beginning to become unnerving. Cináed had expected questions as the three of them told their story, but there hadn't been any. Akir's parents had listened attentively, nodded in the appropriate places, but they'd remained silent. At the very least he had expected some sort of reaction at the end, if not all the questions they must have held back.

"And you can really recharge the Stones?" Akir's father finally broke the silence.

"Yes, we can." Cináed frowned. *That* was the first question on the man's mind? It was the most important one, but he hadn't dared hope for this level of understanding. "Do you want to see?"

Akir's parents nodded, and he opened the special pouch and pulled out the Stone. It was a little duller than right after the initial recharge, but still the brightest anyone would have seen. The few that Makolm kept hidden inside the monastery weren't accessible to anyone but the Priests.

"That is so beautiful." Akir's mother had tears in her eyes when she looked back up. "That's what they're supposed to look like?"

"Not quite." He looked at Tadeo, and when the other man nodded he turned back to Akir's mother. "If you allow us, we'll show you?"

"Yes, please." Akir's mother nodded and so did Akir's father.

Cináed put the Stone onto his upturned hand and held it out. Tadeo took his free hand and entwined their fingers. The Stone *visibly* brightened, and the glittering rainbow effects started sparkling. Tadeo took his free hand and touched the Stone itself. The otherworldly humming that filled the room had everyone entranced.

After a while, Cináed quietly put the Stone back into the pouch. He didn't want to let go of Tadeo's hand, and he decided to risk it. Tadeo smiled at him with so much emotion in his eyes that it made his breath hitch.

"And all you needed to do was... find a partner whose psychic energy is compatible with yours?" Akir's father pulled him back into reality. "And Tadeo is that partner?"

"Yes, sir, he is." Where was this going?

"You need to stay closely together to make this work, don't you?" Akir's father frowned. "It looked like the Stone—I don't know—perked up when you both touched it."

"That's true. The Eye explained that until the bonding is permanent, we'd both have to touch it regularly to keep recharging it." Cináed still wasn't sure what a permanent bond meant and how they were supposed to make it happen. Maybe Tadeo had to make a promise to stay here on Dálriata with him? But how likely was that? He had a whole different life waiting for him out there in space. One that was much more adventurous than healing people on a somewhat backwater planet.

"Permanent bond? Is that right?" Akir's mother grinned. "We may have just the thing to help you out with that. If you give me a little time."

"You think you can help?" Cináed was willing to try anything to give him a chance at healing everyone. "That would be wonderful."

"Well, in that case, I think we'll want to give you the guestrooms with the connecting door. Give you a chance to stay close." Akir's father glanced at his wife. "No need to put the servants on alert yet, is there, dear?"

"No need at all." Akir's mother smiled at her husband and took his hands in hers. "There'll be some fundamental changes, but I'd like to give them a chance to get used to it slowly."

"Agreed." Akir's father turned back to him. "Okay, here's what I suggest we do. It's late, and I suspect that you're all tired from traveling. Why don't we have dinner together, start talking about a

more detailed strategy. I'll set up a meeting with the Warrior Council for tomorrow afternoon. That gives us time to agree to the final details tomorrow morning, after you've had some much needed rest. Does that sound acceptable?"

"Of course that's acceptable." Cináed sighed with relief. "We can't thank you enough for listening to us and agreeing to help."

"It's about time the Council of Priests is stopped from keeping our society in a stranglehold of outdated religious dogma. They've cost thousands of poor people their lives because they refused to treat the *unworthy*. They've stopped us from making any kind of significant technological process while our relatives on Earth have managed to travel to the stars. Enough is enough." Akir's father rose, pulling his wife up with him. "Come on, let's have dinner. I don't know about the rest of you, but I can't plan a revolution on an empty stomach."

TADEO was glad when they were finally guided up to their rooms. Akir's mother had insisted on doing this herself, much to the majordomo's dismay. Akir's mother had insisted that they were dear friends of her son's and deserved to be treated like family. The majordomo had listened carefully, nodded once, and withdrawn into the kitchen.

Dinner had thankfully turned out to be a fairly simple affair. Tadeo was used to elaborate state dinners and ambassadorial affairs, but he'd never liked them. He was glad the pompous look of the house hadn't translated to the food they'd been served.

When they reached the second floor, Akir veered off to the right, where his old room was. Tadeo and Cináed were given separate rooms at the end of the corridor. They thanked their hostess, said good night, and Tadeo stepped inside his room, closing and locking the door behind him before turning around.

His mouth fell open at the luxury of the room. His eyes were drawn by a huge four-poster bed, covered in dark blue and gold blankets. The walls were light blue and the ceiling had white stucco

ornaments depicting hunting scenes. A tall wardrobe was set against one wall, a fireplace dominated the other, and a chaise sat under the window. One door was ajar, showing a bathroom, but it was the second one that drew him most.

He walked toward it as if hypnotized. It had been incredibly good to hold Cináed's hand earlier, but it hadn't been enough. The door opened just before he reached it, and a smiling Cináed stepped through.

"Can you believe this place?" Cináed looked around and grinned. "I like your room a lot better than I like mine, by the way."

"You do? Why, what's wrong with yours?" Tadeo stepped closer and tried to peek into the other room.

"There's nothing wrong with it as such, it's just... I don't think they meant for two men to share these connecting rooms." Cináed stepped back so he could take a look.

The other room was made up in tones of red and pink that made Tadeo dizzy. There was frilly lace everywhere, and every available surface seemed to be covered in gold.

"Holy...." Tadeo closed his eyes for a moment to regain his mental equilibrium. "I guess we'll be staying in this room then?"

"I was hoping you'd suggest that." Cináed closed the connecting door behind him and stepped into Tadeo's personal space. "I've locked the outer door, messed up the bed to make it look as if someone has slept in it, and made some of the towels look used."

"It sounds like you came prepared." He smiled and took Cináed into his arms.

"I didn't want to waste any time tomorrow morning. I want to be able to stay with you as long as possible." Cináed leaned forward and brushed his lips against Tadeo's cheek, then his mouth. "I don't know what it is you did to me, or maybe it was the Stone, it just seems that I need to be close to you all the time now."

"That's good. I want exactly the same thing." He stepped back and pulled Cináed with him toward the bathroom. He wanted to clean up a little before they found out what it was like to have a real bed at

their disposal. Sleeping in the little traveling tent had been great, and some of the inns they'd stayed in had included good beds, but from the looks of it, this bed was going to be the most comfortable yet.

Cináed followed his example and started undressing, adding his clothes to the growing heap on the bathroom floor. He managed to get the bathwater running, and the whole room was soon filled with hot steam. Tadeo got into the tub first, encouraging Cináed to get in with him. While he looked skeptical at first, as soon as his back touched Tadeo's front, he relaxed and lay back against him with a sigh.

When they were clean, he motioned for Cináed to get out of the bathtub and followed him, wrapping the other man into a fluffy towel. "I'd like to try something new tonight, if you'll let me?"

Cináed nodded. Tadeo dried himself and took Cináed's hand to lead him toward the bed. The blankets were quickly pulled back, and they sank onto the clean sheets, sighing with pleasure at the softness beneath them. He turned toward Cináed and took him into his arms. They hadn't done more than give each other hand jobs, and they'd become very good at frottage, but he wanted more tonight.

Tadeo kissed and stroked and caressed as much skin as he could reach. Cináed was totally uninhibited in his responses, and he loved that. He gave a slight push so the other man was lying on his back and started licking and nibbling his way down along his neck, then across his pectorals to give each nipple proper attention. So far it was all pretty familiar. Cináed's little whimpers and gasps drove him wild as usual.

When he started kissing and licking his way toward Cináed's navel, the other man stayed very still for a few moments. Tadeo continued downward and suddenly there was a hand in his hair, pulling him up so he had to look at Cináed.

"What...?" Cináed's eyes were half-closed with arousal, and he was breathing hard.

"Just lie back and let me do all the work." Like this was work. "I promise you'll enjoy it."

Cináed nodded, closed his eyes, and let his head sink into the pillow.

Tadeo returned to nuzzling and licking Cináed's abdomen and slowly worked his way down toward the pubic area. He took a deep breath, getting his first whiff of Cináed's clean male musk as he kissed the soft ball sac. It made his own cock respond by getting even harder. Cináed's legs fell open as he arched up, moaning his pleasure.

Tadeo moved around so he was between the other man's legs. He bent down and started licking Cináed's balls, making his lover moan. Then he drew the tip of his tongue up along the underside of the stiff cock that lay on Cináed's abdomen. The other man groaned and came up to a sitting position, his eyes wide.

"What are you doing?" Cináed looked more curious than annoyed, though.

"Do you like it?" He kept giving the hard shaft little licks, letting Cináed see what he was doing. Cináed nodded and kept staring at him as he licked back up, then took the crown between his lips, starting to suck.

"Oh *Dia!*" Cináed fell back onto the bed. "I'm not going to survive this."

Tadeo grinned as best he could and took the thick cock further into his mouth. A steady flow of pre-cum ensured he got his fill of the salty flavor as he started moving his head up and down. His other hand stroked up along Cináed's inner thigh until he reached the top. Caressing the skin where thigh met groin made Cináed whimper and start to thrust into his mouth. He opened his throat and let Cináed take what he needed, swallowing around the thick cockhead every time it hit the back of his throat.

"Please. Fuck. Tadeo!" Cináed started shaking, his thrusts becoming frantic.

Tadeo slid his free hand around Cináed's balls and tugged. That was it. Cináed's back arched upward, his body stiffened, and he started spurting his release into Tadeo's mouth. The slightly bitter taste almost

drove him over the edge, but he held on until the last dribble of semen had been cleaned off Cináed's cock.

Lifting his mouth off the softening cock, he ground his nose into Cináed's balls from the side and let go. The friction of the sheets against his throbbing cock was just what he needed, and feeling Cináed's hand in his hair, just holding and caressing him, was enough. He moaned his ecstasy into Cináed's groin and let the spasms of his orgasm carry him into bliss.

"That was different, all right." Cináed still sounded a little out of breath when he moved to pull Tadeo up.

He could barely move, but he wanted to sleep in his lover's arms. So he made the effort, dragging the blankets over them as he went.

"Good different?" He yawned and snuggled in.

"Very good different." Cináed snuggled back.

He grinned. That sounded like there would be a repeat performance at some point. He couldn't wait.

CHAPTER SEVEN

TADEO followed Cináed into the dark and claustrophobic headquarters of the Warrior Council. The building was made of stone and dark wood, had no windows and only one visible entrance. The contrast with yesterday's opulence at a merchant's home couldn't have been bigger.

Their reception at the door had barely been civil. These people clearly weren't used to letting in strangers. Even though Cináed and he were wearing warrior kilts, the fact that they were neutral and not a specific family color made them suspicious. Akir accompanying them was probably the most difficult for them to swallow. Akir's father had told them that very few healer priests had ever been allowed inside.

It would be interesting to see them react to the news of a way to fight off the dominance of the Council of Priests. He hoped it would make them wake up to alternative ways of doing things. He was realistic enough to keep reminding himself that, in many ways, the entire planet was right in the middle of the Dark Ages. This stage was comparable to the period a thousand years after the introduction of Christianity on Earth.

They followed their guide through dark, dank corridors lit by gas torches until they arrived at a huge room with a dome-shaped ceiling. A long wooden table dominated the room. Nine warriors were seated at the table, Cináed's father at the very right the only one he recognized. Their guide brought the three of them up to the middle of the room, facing the heads of the Council. No place for "guests" to sit, of course. Tadeo almost grinned. Intimidation was a universal tactic to try to bully adversaries into submission.

“Welcome to the Warrior Council.” The oldest of the warriors sat in the middle, and he couldn’t have looked less welcoming if he’d tried.

“We are honored to be here.” Cináed’s voice was loud and clear in the almost empty chamber.

“It has been brought to our attention that your mission to retrieve more Slànach Stones has not been successful. We were told that you have brought back an alternative method of ensuring the health of the population. We find it hard to believe that such a thing is possible.” The old warrior scowled. “However, we have been ‘persuaded’ to listen to your story and proposal.”

“We appreciate your time.” Cináed took a deep breath. He gave a brief summary of the key points of his trip and what he’d learned. The mention of permanent bonding between two men made several eyebrows rise, but only two warriors other than Cináed’s father looked disgusted. The mention of the Old Laws shocked everyone—with the exception of the oldest warrior, who just nodded.

“Old Laws? I’ve never heard about such a thing.” The leftmost warrior frowned.

“Why don’t we know about them?” Cináed’s father looked ready to hit something.

“It is a secret that is passed on from one leader of the Warrior Council to the next.” The old warrior looked tired.

“You knew about their existence?” Cináed’s father was half out of his seat before a look from their leader made him sit back down.

“Yes, of course I knew about their existence. There is not much point in talking about them though, since the Council of Priests declared them contradictory to religious principles and forbade their application.” The old warrior stared at the table in front of him for a moment before looking back up. “According to what I have been told, they were a more balanced way to run society. However, unless we get the Council of Priests to agree to reinstate them, there is not much point in talking about them.”

“That’s partly why we’ve come to talk to you.” Cináed stepped forward. “We believe that the Old Laws reflect the way our society

should be run. We need your help to get them reinstated. In exchange, we offer full use of the Slànach Stones' healing abilities for anyone who needs them."

"Sounds like a fair offer to me." The warrior next to Cináed's father ignored the angry look he was getting.

"What? You don't even want to know the details of what we're getting ourselves into? Those Old Laws could be to our disadvantage." The leftmost warrior was obviously a skeptic through and through.

"Nothing could be worse than the situation we're faced with now." The oldest warrior had everyone's attention, most of the others nodding in agreement. "The Council of Priests has everything under their control. We have little or no say in any major decisions that are being made outside our direct sphere of influence—which is limited to military matters. Our way of life, which apparently included males being able to bond like in the old legends, has been completely suppressed. Even the merchants are more powerful than we are. Doing everything we can to get those Old Laws reinstated sounds like an excellent idea to me."

Tadeo looked along the table. Most warriors were still nodding. The only exceptions were Cináed's father and two others.

"But—but we don't even know if these people can actually recharge the Stones. What if they can't? We might risk everything only to find out that we've gained nothing." Cináed's father looked triumphant.

"We're ready to prove that everything we've said is true." Cináed reached into his special pouch. "I will show you my emergency Stone. It was given to me at the beginning of my trip, almost used up, like the majority of them are these days. Most of you are familiar with what they look like."

Several warriors nodded.

"This is what became of it." Cináed held up the recharged Stone for everyone to see.

The white light that poured from it was almost blinding in the half-lit chamber. The warriors' eyes widened, and silence reigned for a

few moments as they took in the beauty of the first Stone most of them had seen in its original condition.

“How do we know that this isn’t one of the perfect Stones that the priests are said to keep for themselves? This could all be a trap to lure us into acting against them, only to have us removed by the Inquisition.” Cináed’s father grinned, looking around as if expecting applause for his clever thinking.

“That’s exactly why we brought Akir with us.” Cináed didn’t lose a beat. Tadeo was very proud of the way he stood up to his father. “His Stone, as you will see in a moment, is still in its deplorable state. Tadeo and I will show you that we can indeed recharge it.”

Akir pulled his own Stone from a hidden pocket in the front of his robe and held it up for everyone’s inspection.

“Does everyone agree that this is what the majority of Stones look like today?” Cináed looked at every warrior in turn and waited until they had all nodded—including his father.

He carefully put his own Stone back into its pouch before he held out his hand toward his friend. Akir was about to hand him the used-up Stone when they were interrupted.

“Why can’t Tadeo work with Akir to recharge the Stone?” The old warrior frowned, clearly confused.

“Because the healer-warrior bond has to contain the right mix of energies. It doesn’t work between just any healer and any warrior. We’ve tried this with several more healer-warrior combinations this morning, and none of them worked. Apparently finding the right partners is not as easy as it looks. So far we have only made it work between myself and Tadeo.” Cináed smiled at Tadeo, and he felt his heart melt. “The bond is apparently exclusive.”

“Prove it.” Cináed’s father was relentless.

Cináed shrugged and stepped back. Tadeo had been afraid of this. He didn’t look forward to feeling the stabbing pain of the wrong energies mixing, but there was no choice. He stood next to Akir and reached for the Stone when the other man held up his hand.

The reaction was stronger than the first two times. Not only did he feel the crackling energy transforming into pain as it entered his fingertips, the Stone emitted an eerie green-yellow light and a high screeching sound that set everyone's teeth on edge. The pain he felt was unbelievable, and Akir started shaking with it. When he finally managed to pull back his hand, the relief was immediate.

Cináed looked pained but didn't lose his momentum.

"Is that proof enough?" Cináed again made eye contact with each of the nine warriors, waiting for them to agree.

"And this is what happened with every healer that you tried to pair Tadeo with?" Cináed's father looked incredulous. Maybe something was beginning to sink into his stubborn brain.

"Yes, it was." Cináed nodded. "It wasn't this extreme on the first try, just like it wasn't this bad with Akir when we tried it back in Bunádh. But by the second and third tries, the situation becomes unbearable for both participants. We didn't dare try a fourth time."

"I can see why." The oldest warrior nodded. "Please proceed."

Cináed held out his hand, and Akir passed him the Stone without any problems. Cináed held up his hand and Tadeo approached. When he touched the Stone, the relief was instant. A pleasant tingling sensation started in his fingertips and spread across his whole body. The Stone brightened, slowly taking on its natural white light until it looked like it was about to burst. The rainbow effects came into existence next. Only a few moments later, the soft, gentle hum that emanated from it seemed to signal that it was now fully charged.

The room was quiet enough for them to hear the proverbial pin drop. The feeling of peace and well-being was palpable. He smiled at Cináed, regretting that they couldn't touch other than through the Stone. He didn't think the Warrior Council was ready for that, so he withdrew his hand and stepped back.

"That was quite a powerful demonstration, young man." The oldest warrior stood and bowed, the highest honor a warrior could give to anyone. "I believe we are in your debt. You have my personal assurance that we will do everything in our power to help you restore the old balance on Dálriata."

One by one the other warriors rose and bowed, until even Cináed's father had to give in. He didn't look happy, but he gave his formal approval. That was all they could ask for.

"WHAT in *Dia*'s name is going on?" Cináed was exhausted from the afternoon's meeting. All he wanted was to lie down and sleep until the next morning.

"I have no idea." Tadeo was riding next to him, staring at the house that had become their home. "It looks like they're ready to celebrate something."

Akir's parents' house was decorated in greenery and flowers from top to bottom. All the windows were open, and a red carpet covered the steps that led up to the entrance. A large group of people dressed in elaborate gowns and tailored robes stood in front of the house, elegant crystal wine glasses in their hands. Was there a festival he had overlooked?

A stable boy appeared next to their horses, and since he was half-dazed from fatigue, Cináed dismounted and passed his reins to him without thinking. Tadeo and Akir followed suit. For a few moments they stood there, confused as to what they should do.

Luckily, Akir's parents chose that moment to appear at the top of the steps. They were both dressed in forest green robes adorned with gold jewelry. They waved at them, crooking their fingers in a signal to come closer.

"We realize that this may come as a bit of a surprise to you, but we have decided that you and Tadeo need a ceremony to make your bond official." Akir's father grinned from ear to ear. "As you know, appearances are important and can support the message about change we're trying to send. You are currently the only bonded pair, providing hope for a new way of life. We believe that it's essential to back this up with a more formal arrangement."

"We apologize if there's anything that isn't perfect, but it's the best we were able to come up with in so short a time." Akir's mother

looked embarrassed. She couldn't possibly think that decorating the huge house and getting a group of people together like this wasn't a major achievement? "If there's anything you don't like, please let me know and I'll do my best to change it. After all, this is your bonding ceremony."

"B-bonding ceremony?" Cináed felt the blood drain from his face.

"You mean—as in getting married?" Tadeo didn't look much better off.

"Oh dear. It doesn't look like they've discussed this." It was Akir's mother who went pale next.

"No, I don't think they've even thought about it." Akir's father chuckled. "I did mention to my wife that this might be a bit sudden. You don't need to worry; these people only know that there's going to be a party. We didn't tell them why. If you don't want to go through with it, we can do it another time. Whenever you're ready."

"Well, I don't know what to say. This is all a bit sudden." Cináed swallowed. He wasn't shocked by the idea of a permanent bond with Tadeo. He'd gotten used to the thought during their trip back to Gael and was looking forward to it. But what about Tadeo? Would he want to commit himself like this? He was used to traveling among the stars; could he be happy tied to one planet?

"Why don't you go inside?" Akir's father smiled. "You may need to take some time to talk. We'll entertain the guests, and you can let us know your decision when you're ready."

Cináed nodded and followed Akir inside, a very quiet Tadeo walking next to him. Akir led them to a small sitting room at the back of the house and left them with a promise to get the majordomo to bring refreshments. Cináed sank onto one of the brocade-covered couches, put his head back, and closed his eyes. He *almost* wished for his simple life as a priest to be magically returned to him.

When he opened his eyes, Tadeo was still standing, staring down at him with the most intense look in his eyes.

“They want us to get married?” Tadeo finally sat down, sinking into the sofa close enough for their thighs to touch. Thank *Dia* he wasn’t avoiding him.

“Bonded, if you want to be technical about it.” Cináed smiled when Tadeo’s eyebrows rose in the gesture that meant he wanted more information or an explanation. “Bonded is the word we used when two males were involved. Handfasted was the technical term for two females.”

“You have different words for—for different types of marriages?” Tadeo was very cute when he was confused.

“They’re no longer in active use, but I came across them when I researched our early history in the monastery’s library. The ancient legends used those words. I didn’t realize until recently that they’re probably based in reality. If that’s the case, yes, our language has words for different types of official pairings that are very precise in their meaning.” Cináed winked. “I don’t think my teachers necessarily knew or would have approved of me examining the manuscripts in that specific section... but I figured that knowledge is knowledge.”

“You, my future husband, are extremely sneaky.” Tadeo smiled and took his hand. “I’m going to have to watch that.”

Future husband? That made his stomach flutter. Was Tadeo willing to go ahead with the ceremony? Cináed looked at him, trying to figure out what was going on in the other man’s head.

“Yes, I *am* thinking about going through with this.” Tadeo smiled and lifted Cináed’s hand to press a hot kiss on it. “I don’t know how you feel about it, but as far as I’m concerned, we belong together. Helping to give your people the chance for a healthier existence sounds like a good mission to me.”

“So this is a mission for you?” Cináed didn’t know why he was so disappointed. He’d made it his life’s objective, so what was wrong with Tadeo doing the same? He’d begun to hope for more than a joint mission with this man. How stupid was that?

“That *is* a large part of it. It’s also a lot more interesting than hopping from planet to planet, writing endless reports and hoping to find something of interest for my superiors, which *they* end up getting

the credit for anyway.” Tadeo dropped their hands and leaned back into the couch, making himself comfortable.

Before Cináed could respond, there was a soft knock on the door. The majordomo had arrived with their refreshments. A tray laden with a variety of sandwiches, some delicious-looking cakes, and sliced fruit was placed on the table in front of their couch. A pot of what smelled like tea and a couple of glasses of fruit juice completed the snack.

“Thank you.” He hadn’t realized how hungry he was.

“Will there be anything else?” The majordomo waited for them to say no and quietly left the room, closing the door behind him.

When they’d eaten a few sandwiches and were starting to make inroads into the cakes, Cináed had recovered enough to continue their discussion.

“Were you really serious about what you said—you know, that staying here on Dálriata was more interesting than traveling amongst the stars?” That was hard to believe. Maybe because he would have loved to see other planets and discover what was out there.

“Yes, I really was serious. It’s not as glamorous as it sounds. And I’ve done it long enough to know that it’s not what I want to do for the rest of my life.” Tadeo finished his fruit juice and poured them each a cup of tea.

“And you’re not worried about getting bored on this backwater planet?” That would make Tadeo hate him for making him stay here. He didn’t think he could stand that.

“No, I’m not. I don’t think sharing my life with you, making sure your people have a chance to develop as they should have in the first place, could ever be boring.” Tadeo put down his cup, turned to face him, and frowned. “Are you trying to tell me that you don’t want to go through with this?”

“No, that’s not what I’m trying to tell you at all.” *Dia*, how was he going to say this without completely embarrassing himself?

“Okay, what *is* it you’re trying to say?” Tadeo moved closer and took Cináed’s hands in his. “Look, if you’re worried about tying yourself to me, Akir’s parents said we didn’t have to do it today.

There's no pressure on either of us to go through with this. So if you want to take your time, that's fine with me. We may not even have to do this officially anyway—the bond seems to work just fine. Making it permanent and official is a pretty big decision.”

“I just... I don't know, I can see all the logical reasons why this is the right thing to do. I know it's stupid, but I always thought marriage should be about more than just practical considerations. And I guess I automatically assumed that the same was the case for bonding. I've lived with heartless people since I was five, and I want something more now.” Cináed blushed with the depth of his emotions, his need.

“That's not stupid at all.” Tadeo's voice had gone soft, and his smile was more tender than Cináed had ever seen it. “I think we're on the right track already. It'll just take a little time. We haven't really known each other for that long, but I'm really fond of you and I think it can grow into more if we give it a chance.”

“You are?” That made him happier than he'd been in a long time.

Tadeo nodded and didn't stop smiling.

“Okay, that's good.” Cináed sighed. “Because I really care for you, and I don't want this to be an empty, meaningless formality that we go through because we have to.”

“So we wait with the ceremony?” Tadeo didn't look happy with the prospect.

“No, I don't think we have to wait. I just wanted to make sure that we do this for the right reasons and that there's hope for more. You're right, it might take some time, but that's no reason to postpone the ceremony, is it?” That had probably sounded a lot more pathetic than he'd hoped for.

Tadeo's grin told him he'd been wrong. The other man didn't look at him as though he thought he was pathetic. Tadeo looked at him as though he wanted to kiss him into oblivion. He could deal with that. Oh, *Dia*, could he deal with that.

THE ceremony had been brief and to the point. Cináed had expected people to be shocked when they found out this was a bonding ceremony. While they hadn't understood the word, when Tadeo and he walked up the aisle together, wearing the forest green ceremonial kilts Akir's father had given them, there was no escaping the fact that they weren't attending just another wedding. A few of them had walked out, looking disgusted; most of them had probably been too stunned to move and had stayed.

Cináed couldn't have cared less. This was between him and Tadeo. If someone didn't like it, everyone was better off if those people left. When all was said and done and they'd been declared husband and husband, nothing could have stopped him from kissing his groom. The silence was deafening. People were definitely going to need some time to adjust to this.

They'd finally made it back to their rooms after a lavish party, and it began to dawn on him that there was another part of being officially bonded that he hadn't thought about so far. Tadeo locked the door behind them and turned around, a definite gleam in his eyes. It looked like his new husband had figured it out as well.

Cináed took an involuntary step back, not sure how he was going to deal with having to consummate their bond. As soon as he'd almost stumbled trying to create some space between them, Tadeo stopped moving.

"Oh shit, I'm sorry." Tadeo's eyes widened, and he went as pale as his dark skin would allow. "I didn't mean to scare you."

"You—you didn't." It was more like surprise... and maybe a little fear of the unknown, never of Tadeo.

"But you look scared." Tadeo stood as if glued to the floor.

"It's just that I'm not sure how this is going to work." Well, he had some sort of idea, but he wasn't too sure about the details. "And I'm not scared of you. More of the things you may want me to do."

"Do you trust me?" Tadeo still hadn't moved.

"Of course I trust you." That had never been up for discussion.

“We’ll do nothing that you’re not ready for. I promise.” Finally some color returned to Tadeo’s ruggedly attractive face.

“It’s okay; don’t worry. It’s just all very sudden. And the way you just looked at me—I don’t know, I got a little scared of what you might want from me.” It had also made him really hard.

“Come here.” Tadeo opened his arms, and it was the most natural reaction in the world for him to walk into them. “We’ll just do what feels good, like we always do. You liked what we did yesterday, didn’t you?”

“Yes. More than liked. It was amazing.” Cináed couldn’t believe how wonderful Tadeo’s mouth had felt on his penis.

“Why don’t we start with that again, and we’ll see where it leads?” Tadeo winked. “It’s a great starting point for anything more we might want to do, and it’ll give you some time to think about it.”

Cináed nodded, Tadeo started kissing him, and that was the end of conscious thought for a long while. When they finally emerged to get some air, they were both panting. He was so hard from grinding his hips into Tadeo’s groin that he’d been about to come.

“Let’s take a bath first. I’d like to get all the sweat and dirt from today off our skin.” Tadeo pulled him into the bathroom. “It’ll also help us relax.”

When they were done with their bath, Cináed was almost melted. They fell onto the bed in a tumble of arms and legs. He was kissing and caressing every bit of Tadeo’s dark skin he could reach. This time he went onto his back without being prompted, spreading his legs so Tadeo could reach where he wanted him most.

Tadeo didn’t disappoint. He kissed, licked, and nibbled Cináed’s balls until he was ready to scream with the need to come. But instead of helping him over the edge, Tadeo pulled back, stroking his inner thighs until he’d calmed down a little. Then he lowered his head and did it all over again, this time focusing on his rock-hard penis. The sucking almost drove Cináed out of his mind with arousal, and he started fucking Tadeo’s mouth, unable to stop himself. Again, just before he was ready to come, Tadeo pulled back.

“Fuck!” He sat up, supporting himself on his elbows. “Why do you keep doing that?”

“I want to drive you out of your mind with lust. Want to get you ready to beg me to fuck you.” Tadeo’s full lips glistened with a mixture of his spit and Cináed’s pre-cum. *Dia*, that looked hot.

“All you’re doing so far is driving me out of my mind with frustration.” It had felt pretty good though.

“Good, that means I’m doing this right.” Tadeo grinned and lowered his head again.

“You are?” Fuck, but that tongue on his balls felt good.

Tadeo didn’t stop at licking his balls this time. He licked around and under and it felt so good that Cináed spread his legs a little wider, pulling his knees up, so his husband could reach better. Tadeo seemed to get the message, since he kept going until he’d reached his asshole. Cináed held his breath. Nobody had ever touched him there, but it felt so good that he wasn’t going to worry about it. Tadeo seemed to know what he was doing, so he lay back against the pillow and gave himself over to the incredible sensations Tadeo’s tongue was giving him.

When Tadeo’s hands spread his ass cheeks wider and his tongue started focusing on licking his hole, then pushed inside for the first time, Cináed screamed and lost it. He came all over his chest and abdomen, shaking with the pleasure of Tadeo’s tongue moving in and out steadily, drawing every last whimper of pleasure out of him.

“Tadeo!” He’d never been so relaxed in his life.

“Yes, baby?” Tadeo’s face appeared over his. His husband wore the biggest grin he’d ever seen on him.

“What are you doing to me?” He reached up to cup Tadeo’s face. “That was unbelievable.”

“You liked that, huh?” Tadeo bent down to kiss him on the mouth. Deep, long strokes of his tongue made Cináed harden again. Tadeo pulled back. “It gets better.”

“No way!” Cináed couldn’t imagine anything feeling better than that.

Tadeo just nodded and sat back on his heels, looking at him. He grabbed a little vial of oil from the bedside table and opened it. A slight scent of almonds and vanilla made him take a deep breath.

“Let me show you?” Tadeo waited for him to nod before pouring a small amount of oil onto two of his fingers.

Tadeo slid the oily fingers between Cináed’s ass cheeks and rubbed them along his crease, just teasing him until he couldn’t take it anymore. He was about to say something when Tadeo seemed to get the message, because he slowly and carefully inserted his middle finger into Cináed’s clenching hole.

“Yes!” *Dia*, that felt so good. Larger and more solid than Tadeo’s tongue, it didn’t hurt. On the contrary, it made him want more.

Tadeo soon gave it to him. A second and then a third finger followed, until even that wasn’t enough.

“Want you now.” Cináed was panting, hard as granite and needing to come like he hadn’t had an orgasm in a week. “Please. Need you.”

Tadeo nodded, pulled his fingers out, and Cináed had never felt so empty. Not for long, though, because as soon as Tadeo had put some more oil onto his gorgeous penis, he put its tip where Cináed wanted it most and started to push in.

“Fuck.” That felt a little weird. “Full.”

“Push out.” Tadeo waited, his face showing the strain of having to stop. “It’ll make it feel better.”

He followed Tadeo’s advice, and the relief was almost immediate. When he was ready for more, he nodded. Tadeo pushed, and suddenly Cináed could feel his muscles give, and his husband slid all the way inside.

Tadeo’s eyes widened, and he bent down to kiss Cináed with a passion he’d never felt before.

“Please, move.” Cináed had no idea how he knew, but it was what he needed.

Tadeo started pulling back, slow and easy. When he pushed back in, Cináed was ready to meet him, pushing up to get the sensation he wanted. His husband got the message. Eyes glazed with lust, he began to thrust in long, deep movements that made Cináed feel as if the top of his head was about to come off.

Heavy breathing and the slapping of skin against skin were the only noises as they both strove for completion. Within minutes Cináed was ready to come, and Tadeo looked like he was right behind him.

“Tadeo!” Cináed stiffened and shot his semen all over himself. Still shaking from the intensity, he watched as Tadeo followed him into bliss.

“Fuck! Cináed!” Tadeo closed his eyes, threw his head back, and came in jerking motions of his hips, filling him with his hot release before collapsing onto his chest.

It took them a while to gain their breath back. When they did, they cleaned up and settled into each other’s arms. Too tired to speak, all they did was exchange long, slow kisses until they both fell asleep.

The next thing he knew there was a loud crash from the direction of the outside door. He jerked upright. The silvery moonlight showed him several men in dark uniforms streaming into the room, taking up positions against the walls. What were monastery guards doing in their bedroom?

Four of the special guards, in black and gold, followed and took up positions on both sides of the bed. *Fuck!* Tadeo sat up next to him, hair tousled from sleep, trying to blink himself awake.

When High Priest Makolm himself walked in, Cináed closed his eyes. This couldn’t be happening!

“I am arresting you for the sin of sodomy.” There was an evil grin on the man’s face. “You will be tried and convicted by the Inquisition. Don’t expect any leniency. You knew what you were doing. We will not tolerate disobedience of one of the most basic commandments, no matter what guise is used to try and deceive us.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE thick wooden door to the cell Tadeo had been shoved into closed with a loud bang. It was pitch black, and he closed his eyes to try to center himself. From what he'd seen in the light from the gas torches in the corridor before they'd kicked him inside, the cell might be just large enough for him to lie down. The look he'd gotten at the floor had convinced him to try to stay on his feet as long as possible. Old straw wasn't the only thing that covered it. He wasn't too sure he wanted to know what the rest consisted of.

The guards hadn't let them put any clothes on once they'd been arrested. They'd pulled them out of their bed by the hair, shackled their wrists and ankles with heavy iron cuffs linked by very short chains, and dragged them out of the house. They'd left the merchant guards they'd killed behind without a second thought. It must have been about an hour before sunrise, because the sky had started to lighten, and the march through dark streets and past quiet houses had been cold and painful. Every time he or Cináed stumbled, the guards whipped and kicked them into moving forward more quickly.

Now Cináed was in the cell next door, and the next time he would see his husband, or so he'd been told by a triumphant Makolm, would be at their trial later that day. He snorted. Like there was going to be a real trial. The Inquisition hadn't been big on real trials on Earth, and from what Cináed had told him, their treatment of prisoners wasn't much different here. The accused were guilty until proven innocent. Nobody was ever innocent.

The need for something to do, even if it was only to explore his prison, became overwhelming, and he lifted his shackled hands in front of him, trying not to chafe his wrists any further. He reached for a wall, and the water trickling down explained why it was so damp. The smell of the whole place was atrocious. He hoped it was just years of accumulated dirt and decay, not something more recent. He carefully shuffled and felt his way around the cell. It was a square of about two by two meters; one of the walls was slightly drier than the others. From the feel of it, he suspected that the floor covering consisted of straw and whatever else previous occupants had left behind.

Now that his eyes had gotten used to the dark, Tadeo could see a tiny sliver of light under the door. He was exhausted, his back hurt where the whip had torn his skin, and he was desperate to be with Cináed again. The thought of losing his life now that he'd finally found a man he could easily fall in love with hurt worse than the physical abuse he'd been through. He didn't really want to sit down, but he couldn't stay upright for who knew how many hours either. He was sure he'd need his strength for whatever was yet to come.

Wearily, he eyed what he could see of the floor near the driest wall, trying to find the least disgusting spot to sit down. In the end, he decided to clear a small space with his feet. Sitting on cold stone would be better than having his skin touch the molding straw.

He must have fallen asleep, because the next thing he knew was the loud rattling of keys as they unlocked the door to his cell. The light streaming in from the corridor was almost blinding, but he was given no time to adjust.

"Open your mouth, sinner." One of the guards took his chin and pulled. A smelly piece of cloth was pushed inside before he could say anything, then a rope came across it and was tied behind his head. "Vermin like you don't have a right to speak. All you'd do is poison us with your sinful ideas. Now, get up! Don't even try to escape, or it'll get worse for you."

Tadeo didn't want it to become any worse, so he offered no resistance when rough hands pulled him up. He was half-shoved and

half-dragged out of the cell before being led along several corridors and finally into a large, brightly lit room.

His eyes zoomed in on the only person of interest to him. Cináed was already standing there, shackled to a wooden pole. He was gagged like Tadeo, and the helpless anger in his eyes almost broke Tadeo's heart. His husband's face was bruised from where they'd hit him. A thin trickle of blood seeped out from under the cloth they'd gagged him with, and his beautiful body showed the welts where the whips had found their mark on the march over here.

The relief of seeing that Cináed was still alive made Tadeo's knees buckle. As long as they were alive, there was hope. He knew that the trial wouldn't be fair. They'd been as good as convicted as soon as the High Priest had arrested them. Their only hope was help from the outside. They'd made a deal with the Warriors, so hopefully someone from Akir's household would be able to let them know what was going on and mount some sort of rescue operation.

A longing glance was all he was able to give Cináed before he was shackled to a second pole next to his husband's. He could only see him from the corner of one eye, but it was better than nothing.

"The accused will face the judge." The same loud voice that had awoken him from a deep sleep last night now shocked him back into reality.

He turned toward the front of the room to see High Priest Makolm seated on a gilded marble throne. Six more priests sat to his right and left along wooden tables with a few documents and several books on them. The three on the left wore the white robes of healers; the three on the right wore blue robes. Tadeo wasn't sure what they signified, but he suspected they might be scholars. Even the youngest of them must have been in his seventies. High Priest Makolm wore what looked like the equivalent of an admiral's dress uniform. The basic robe was white, but it was covered with colored lintels and gold embellishments. The man looked utterly ridiculous. Tadeo reminded himself that he shouldn't underestimate his power.

"You have been accused of sodomy, Cináed MacAlpin. How do you plead?" The High Priest grinned.

Cináed, still gagged, shook his head violently.

“Since the accused has not spoken, the court will take that as an admission of guilt.” The High Priest turned to Tadeo.

“You have also been accused of sodomy, Tadeo Banderas. How do you plead?” The High Priest’s grin grew wider.

Tadeo wasn’t going to give him the satisfaction of any reaction at all. He didn’t move a muscle, and when the High Priest narrowed his eyes, he felt as if he’d regained a small measure of control.

“The court acknowledges that the lack of any reaction on the part of the second accused is not only an admission of guilt, it indicates that he was also the party who instigated this treacherous disregard of our most sacred laws.” The High Priest’s sardonic smile returned. “Hence, his punishment will be doubly severe.”

Fuck. He had no idea what the basic punishment was, but doubling it couldn’t be good.

“Now that we have clarified that both accused plead guilty, the court is ready to pronounce judgment.” The High Priest folded his hands and lifted his eyes to the ceiling as if looking for divine inspiration.

“Your Holiness—if I may?” The blue-robed priest closest to the throne wore gold-rimmed glasses. He stood and bowed.

“What?” The High Priest’s eyes lowered and searched for the speaker. “Who dares interrupt me? Erskine? What is the meaning of this?”

“I’m sorry, Your Holiness, but there is the matter of the special petition.” Erskine flinched when the High Priest glared at him but stood his ground.

“I told you, special petitions cannot be brought in this type of trial. You will sit down and stop interfering with matters that you know nothing about.” The High Priest turned away and was ready to proceed when Erskine spoke up again.

“I’m very sorry, Your Holiness, but scriptural law clearly states that special petitions to speak before the court are to be granted

regardless of the severity of the crime.” Erskine took a deep breath. “If we ignore the petition, this trial might be declared invalid.”

“And who do you think would dare to make such a pronouncement?” The High Priest’s face was red with anger.

“The Council of Priests, of course, at our next meeting.” Erskine looked perplexed, as if he couldn’t understand why the question had been asked.

“I *am* the Council of Priests, and I can assure you that I will do no such thing.” The High Priest’s hands were white-knuckled on the armrests of his throne.

“I respectfully disagree. There are seven members of the Council of Priests, and all decisions have to be made by majority. Scriptural law clearly states this.” Erskine looked stubborn, and several of the other priests nodded their agreement.

Faced with this much open disagreement, there wasn’t much the High Priest could do. It only took him a moment to recover; then he relented.

“Very well, you may call in the petitioner.” The High Priest leaned back in his throne and sighed theatrically.

Tadeo craned his neck to try to see who this mysterious petitioner was. When guards brought in Akir’s father, he was relieved. They couldn’t have had a better spokesperson.

“You may speak.” There was nothing but disdain in the High Priest’s voice.

“My name is Rodric Stringer. I’m a merchant, and I’ve come here to petition for leniency for the two accused men, Cináed MacAlpin and Tadeo Banderas. Their courage and combined effort has restored our ability to recharge the Slánach Stones. This will provide limitless, free health care for the entire population, the way it was intended by our forefathers.” Akir’s father glared at the High Priest. “I do not believe men who have done this much for our entire population should be tried and convicted by the Inquisition.”

“Is that true? They solved the problem of the Slánach Stones?” One of the white-robed priests suddenly looked at lot less sleepy than a few moments ago. His two colleagues on either side also perked up a little.

“It hardly matters whether it is true or not. The way in which they were going to make it happen is sinful and against our most basic beliefs. I will not stand for it.” The High Priest slammed a fist down onto an armrest. “We have to maintain some sense of morality or else we are no better than the devil and his spawn.”

“I believe that we owe the people a thorough examination of the facts. We’ve been looking for a solution to the problem with the Stones for a very long time. If there is a solution, as problematic as it may be, we can’t afford to ignore it.” The white-robed healer ignored the angry glances from the High Priest and turned toward Akir’s father. Tadeo was silently cheering him on. “I suggest that we listen to Merchant Stringer’s story and then decide what to do. If there are any implications for scriptural law, I’m sure that Erskine will be more than willing to guide us in our decision making.”

CINÁED had been more relieved than he could say when Akir’s father came in, thinking their problems were finally over. Nothing could have been farther from the truth. Nobody freed him and Tadeo from their chafing shackles. They didn’t get any water against their burning thirst. No clothes were offered to protect them from the cold seeping into their bodies from the stone floor.

When Akir’s father had mentioned the barbaric treatment and had asked for some sort of relief for him and Tadeo, all seven priests had looked appalled. Erskine had recovered first and had lectured Akir’s father about the strictures of scriptural law, the general principles of the Inquisition, and their current situation in particular. Apparently it was against procedure to give those accused of a crime against religious law any sort of relief. Nothing had been proven, so there was no way the priests were going to agree to any sort of leniency.

High Priest Makolm had added his personal point of view, emphasizing how sodomy was the worst sin known to exist, and that anyone even accused of it wasn't worthy of being treated as a human any longer. He stated that he wasn't going to argue about it. The other six priests agreed—some more vigorously than others, but they all nodded.

The comfortably seated and well-clad group of priests proceeded to listen to Akir's father's story with polite attention that quickly turned into genuine interest. They asked more questions than a class of curious schoolchildren could have come up with, making the merchant repeat what he'd said several times.

High Priest Makolm didn't interfere but he looked pained, as if the story was truly disturbing his moral sensibilities.

Cináed closed his eyes for a moment. It was far more likely that the High Priest was annoyed with having been stopped from keeping their newfound ability a secret. He was pretty sure that the High Priest had planned on locking both of them away for the rest of their lives to keep them under his control. That way, he could have pretended to be the one with the ability to recharge the Stones. This clearly having failed, he was probably working on some other plan that would allow him to take control. It was high time they found the Old Laws so that the Council of Priests could be returned to its proper place as just one of the governing bodies of Dálriata. More like a group in charge of the spiritual aspects and without much power to influence people's daily lives.

"I must admit that all of this sounds rather unlikely. However, if you can prove that used-up Stones can be recharged, I would be the first to admit that we need to look at a new way of doing things." Erskine had taken the lead during High Priest Makolm's sullen silence. "Since you claim that Cináed and Tadeo recharged Cináed's emergency Stone, all we need to do is have a look at it."

"That will not be possible." High Priest Makolm smirked. "That Stone was taken as evidence when Cináed and Tadeo were arrested. It is now part of the official documentation for this trial and can therefore not be shared."

“There wouldn’t be any point in that anyway, since the Stone that was taken could have been replaced with another one in the meantime.” Akir’s father shook his head. “I see no other way but to free Cináed and Tadeo and give them another used-up Stone so that they can prove in front of everyone here that it can be done.”

“There is only one problem with that idea.” High Priest Makolm grinned. “We cannot free the accused before judgment is pronounced.”

Akir’s father looked at Erskine for help, but the old priest was shaking his head.

“In this case, scriptural law supports His Holiness’s statement. We can’t free the accused before judgment has been passed and we cannot pass judgment before the matter of the recharging of the Stones has been clarified.” Erskine threw his hands up in the air. “It seems that we’re caught in a trap of our own making, without a way out.”

“I doubt they’d be able to do much in their current weakened state anyway. Based on what you’ve just heard, can’t you reconsider treating them like human beings? Give them some clothes and water?” Akir’s father shook his head. “Isn’t there sufficient doubt in your minds to allow them some basic relief from their current humiliation?”

“That is not a matter of concern to you.” High Priest Makolm sat up straight on his throne. “This is a religious court, and we have our own rules. Your ridiculous mercantile law with all its provisions for pomp and circumstance doesn’t apply here.”

“Then more’s the pity!” Akir’s father didn’t look like he was going to back down.

“You will refrain from making disrespectful remarks, or you will be placed in contempt of court!” High Priest Makolm was about to say more, but he was interrupted.

With a loud bang, the door to the courtroom burst open.

Cináed couldn’t see from where he was standing, but the bellowing and sword-clanking made him hope that it might be a group of warriors come to free them. A few seconds later, the door behind High Priest Makolm’s throne was kicked in and five more warriors wearing kilts in a range of family colors prevented the priests from

taking that escape route. The warriors within Cináed's field of vision took up positions along the wall, swords drawn. They glared at the priests, and the few priests who tried to move away were told harshly to stay where they were or face the consequences.

It didn't take long for the noise to stop. Cináed was desperate to see what was going on, but there was no way he could turn his head that far.

"It's okay now. You're safe. We're going to get you out of here." Akir's voice behind him had never been so welcome.

Cináed leaned back as far as he could, soaking up the warmth of the other man's body. Soft hands touched his shoulders and the unmistakable tingling of healing energies from a Stone started spreading through his body. The tingling became a low buzz in his back and bleeding wrists. It took several minutes for everything to feel all right again.

"Somebody get me the keys to these shackles. Now!" Akir's voice had taken on a commanding tone that Cináed had never heard before.

Akir fumbled with the rope at the back of Cináed's head and finally got the gag removed. His friend held a flask of water to Cináed's mouth and tipped it carefully to help him wet his lips and tongue. He took a few careful sips and swirled them around his mouth before swallowing.

"It's okay, don't worry about my shackles. I can wait. Please go and take care of Tadeo first." Cináed couldn't stand the idea of his husband still suffering the biting pain of all those open wounds.

"Come on, Gordan, move. You know you can find those keys if you want to. One of those monastery guards must surely have them." Akir had started to move away from him and toward Tadeo while he was speaking.

Gordan was here? Did that mean his father had seen sense?

After a while he heard a triumphant grunt, and moments later his brother stood in front of him with a big grin on his face.

“Found them!” Gordan started unlocking the shackles on his wrists, taking care not to chafe the skin. It was freshly healed and would easily break again, but it didn’t matter because help was now close at hand.

“Thank you.” Cináed shook his arms and took a few careful steps when the chains around his ankles had been undone. “Did Father...?”

“No.” Gordan’s voice sounded gruff. “He still doesn’t see that his attitude is stupid, shortsighted, and plain wrong.”

“But you do?” He would’ve never believed that his brother had it in him to act against their father’s will. He’d always been the perfect son, the perfect heir to the MacAlpin clan leadership.

“Yeah.” Gordan nodded and stepped over toward where Tadeo was sighing with relief at having his wounds healed by Akir. Luckily the interference of energies between a non-compatible healer and warrior was limited to situations outside healing. “I mean, it was pretty clear when you returned and showed the Warrior Council what you can do with the Stones. I heard all about it in great detail when Father tried to make sure I understood why it was all “sinful” and an *abomination*. As far as I’m concerned, anything that enables that sort of healing energy to be renewed can’t be bad. And on top of that, it used to be fine until these religious zealots came along. *Our* Old Laws look quite different from the picture they painted for us over the last thousand years.”

“You’ve seen them?” Cináed gratefully took the blanket he was offered by one of the warriors and wrapped it around his shivering body. Being naked and shackled to a post had been humiliating, but what had really gotten to him was the cold.

“Oh, yes.” Gordan gave him his own flask of water, and Cináed drank thirstily, making sure there was enough left for Tadeo.

Akir had just finished the healing and had taken the gag out of Tadeo’s mouth, giving him some water. Gordan stepped over to unlock the other man’s shackles. Nothing was going to stop Cináed from taking his husband into his arms to make sure that he was really okay. Everything else could wait.

TADEO couldn't move for a moment, despite the fact that the shackles that had held him in place had now been unlocked. They'd made the most satisfying clunking sound when they dropped to the floor, now empty and powerless.

Before he knew what was happening, Cináed was right there, taking him into his arms. Wrapping a blanket around both of them, he created a warm cocoon that allowed them to lean into each other, touching skin to skin. He slid his arms around Cináed's waist, closed his eyes, and put his forehead onto his husband's shoulder. This was where he wanted to be. More than that, this was where he needed to be.

They stood there for the longest time, just breathing. Tadeo couldn't believe that he'd almost lost Cináed. If he ever found out who had told the Council of Priests that they'd gotten bonded and where to find them, that person was in deep shit.

"Are you okay?" Cináed stroked his back in slow, soothing movements.

"I am now." He lifted his head and looked into Cináed's deep brown eyes. He wanted to kiss him in the worst way, but he wasn't sure he'd be able to stop at just a kiss. His body had a deep craving for Cináed's that had gotten gradually worse while they'd been kept separated. There were too many people here, though, and he didn't want to give them a show. He'd have to wait until they were back at Akir's home or somewhere else with more privacy. He sighed. That might take a long time. There were still a lot of things to clarify and many decisions to make.

Someone cleared his throat, and Tadeo turned his head.

"I thought you might want to have something to wear other than a blanket." Akir held out two white robes.

"You want me to wear a priest's robe?" Tadeo raised his eyebrows.

“Sorry, there wasn’t anything else I could find on short notice.” Akir shrugged. “You could always keep the blanket; it does look good on you.”

“I can’t believe you just said that!” Cináed shook his head and Akir laughed.

“Never mind, you’re right—it is better than the blanket.” Tadeo winked at Akir and the other man blushed.

Tadeo managed to put on his robe with minimal fuss, as did Cináed. Meanwhile, the warriors cleared the courtroom of dead and wounded monastery guards. They’d found a major rope supply somewhere and were busy tying all the priests to their chairs. High Priest Makolm ended up at one of the poles, since they clearly didn’t want to leave him on his throne. Not even tied up. Makolm was protesting loudly and vehemently, but without effect on the stoic warriors.

“Can someone please gag that man?” Tadeo really didn’t want to listen to the priest’s ranting any longer than absolutely necessary.

Everyone looked shocked for a moment, as if gagging the High Priest hadn’t even occurred to them. He grinned. It probably hadn’t.

“That’s a great idea.” Cináed stood next to him as they watched the wide-eyed High Priest struggle against two warriors, who held him immobile. He lost the battle and was soon gagged. The other priests were so shocked that they stopped talking.

“That’s better.” He sighed. “Now I can hear myself think.”

“Right. Let’s start talking about what happened and what we should do next.” Cináed looked around the room, then took Tadeo’s hand and walked them over to one of the tables, since that was the only place for them to sit.

The group of warriors stood in one corner and along a wall, keeping close watch on the six priests in the other corner. Akir and his father sat on the other table, guarding a large, leather-bound book. Gordan leaned against the third wall, trying to look unmoved.

Everyone was looking at Cináed, waiting for him to take the lead. Even though he hadn't been declared king, it seemed that they were expecting him to act as their leader.

Tadeo was sure he'd be a great leader, but he still didn't understand how being officially bonded qualified them to be in charge. The Eye had said that "the strongest bonded pair" would lead, and that sounded right. Unfortunately, right now they were the *only* bonded pair, so there wasn't really an alternative. What would happen once more bonded pairs appeared? Would there be a challenge? A regular reassessment of who was strongest? He shook his head. It was far too early to worry about that.

"When we heard the noise from the monastery guards breaking into the house very early this morning, we knew that something was very wrong." Akir's father described how they'd decided to remain quiet, since they'd had no chance against that many men. "As soon as they were gone, though, I made my way to the head of the Warrior Council. He wasn't very helpful at first, but when I reminded him of his promise, he organized the twenty warriors from different clans who came with us. He also agreed to send another five warriors with Akir so they could go and find the location where the priests hid the records of the Old Law. Your brother volunteered to go with them."

That was interesting. Tadeo was going to ask Gordan about this as soon as possible. Could Akir have been the reason that Gordan had decided to go against their father? How had Cináed's friend managed to convince Gordan? If they could figure that out, they might be able to use the same line of reasoning with others who were less willing to accept the idea of male bonding. He forced himself to return his focus to the current situation.

"Is that what that leather-bound book is?" Cináed pointed.

"Yes, that's one of the copies we found in the hidden part of the library." Akir's father grinned. "We would've never found it as quickly without Akir's help. There was another one in High Priest's Makolm's private chambers. We sent that one to the headquarters of the Warrior Council for safekeeping."

“That’s excellent news.” Cináed sighed. “I guess it’ll take a while to work through all of the details. It’s great to know that we’re finally going to get a chance to have a look at the way our forefathers wanted to run this planet before a religious group took over and almost ruined us.”

“Yes, it will take a while to go through all of it. However, the basic principles and most important commandments are summarized on the first ten pages.” Akir’s father grinned. “Everything you’ve told us about the way the Stones work has been confirmed. The bonding of two males wasn’t just tolerated, it was encouraged. There is some mention of a higher number of men making it through the Eye during the earlier years, and that may have something to do with it. The most important part, and the part that is urgent right now, is the fact that there was a king to serve as ultimate arbiter between the various Councils.”

“Various Councils?” Cináed sounded as surprised as Tadeo felt.

“Yes, there were three at the time. The Warrior Council was the oldest, but there was also a Spiritual Council and a Council of Workers.” Akir’s father held up a hand when Cináed wanted to interrupt him. “There are also very clear provisions for further Councils should they be needed. It looks like our forefathers were a lot less restrictive about accommodating future developments than we’ve been led to believe.”

“That’s perfect!” Cináed grinned. “It means we can set up a new Merchant Council without having to change the law.”

Akir’s father beamed and nodded.

“So what else did the king do—and above all, how was he chosen?” Tadeo was all about being practical. They needed to get to the bottom of this so they could figure out what needed to be done.

“The king was the person everybody expected to lead in case of a crisis. He was like a neutral party between all the Councils’ various interests. Quite often he was the one who initiated changes and new ways of doing things. He had the right to propose laws, which the Councils voted on.” Akir’s father smiled. “He was also one of two

bonded males, his husband being called a co-regent, with his own complementary duties.”

“That doesn’t surprise me at all. What you just described is a huge job. I doubt one person alone would be able to do it.” Cináed looked grateful.

Tadeo felt the same way. If the Eye’s prediction came true and Cináed was going to be the next king, at least he’d be able to officially support him.

“I’m sure that you’ll make an excellent king.” Akir’s father looked around the room, ready to quell any resistance.

“Hold on; nothing has been decided yet.” Cináed didn’t look too enthusiastic about that prospect, and he squeezed his husband’s hand for support.

“I disagree. I think the fact that you and Tadeo are currently the only bonded pair means that you *should* be our first king. As soon as other bonded pairs are found, which might take a while, there will be an official challenge. According to the Old Law, if another pair turns out to be stronger, they will take over.” Akir’s father tilted his head and narrowed his eyes. “In any case, we have so many decisions to make that we can’t wait for however long it will take to find more bonded pairs. I agree that we’ll need some sort of official confirmation from the Council of Priests and the Warrior Council. But I think we can decide here and now that you will be our prime candidate for king.”

Cináed visibly swallowed. Every single person in this room—except High Priest Makolm—was nodding. It looked like their future had been decided without consulting them and without their agreement. Talk about having an adventure! Tadeo squeezed his husband’s hand for support again. It wouldn’t be so bad. As long as they had each other they’d find a way to deal with everything. He hoped.

CHAPTER NINE

CINÁED was finally warm again. Well-rested and warm and... in bed with Tadeo. He didn't need to think about who had his arms around him. Their legs were entangled, his groin was pressed against Tadeo's hip, and his head rested on his husband's chest. It felt right to be so close. He took a deep breath to inhale the sleep-warm scent of relaxed male. He smiled before opening his eyes to look up at Tadeo's face. All the bruises from their ordeal had vanished, thanks to Akir's work with the Stone. The man's skin was as dark and smooth as ever. He looked relaxed and happier than Cináed had ever seen him before.

With everything that lay ahead of them, Cináed wasn't sure how long this peace would last. The impromptu planning meeting in the monastery's courtroom earlier today had resulted in a whole list of things that needed to get done. At the top of the list was the organization of an official coronation ceremony to solidify the new state of affairs. Akir's father had suggested the merchants should lead this, particularly since Cináed wanted to make the announcement about the foundation of a Merchant Council at the same time.

Also on the list, even though he didn't think it was urgent at all, was the creation of an official palace for the king. Historically, one of the buildings at the central city plaza had served as a city residence. It was now a museum. Plans were set in motion to restore it to its former glory, but this would take a while. Until it was ready, Cináed and Tadeo would have been happy to stay with Akir's family, but that idea had met unanimous resistance. Gordan had volunteered to work with the Warrior Council to find an appropriate intermediate solution.

Heaven knew what that might look like. Cináed chuckled. They might end up in a fortress if they weren't careful.

The Council of Priests was busy reorganizing themselves. Three of the seven members of the Council were under arrest for participating in the Inquisition *trial*. The remaining four would need to be questioned before a decision about their continued Council membership could be made. The three under arrest needed to be tried and then either reinstated or replaced, depending on the outcome. The new Council also needed to elect a new High Priest. Cináed had asked Akir to see what he could do to help get this process going. His friend hadn't looked happy, but that couldn't be helped. Nobody had asked Cináed whether he wanted to be king either.

The point that was on his personal list was the one that was most important to him. He didn't want to be the only one to be crowned king. He obviously needed to discuss it with Tadeo and get him to agree, but he couldn't imagine his husband as anything but a fully equal partner.

"You're thinking too much." Tadeo's sleepy voice brought him back to reality. A very nice reality, in which hot kisses along his forehead, on his cheeks, and finally along his lips convinced him that his husband was awake and ready to play.

"I'm sure you're about to change that." Not that he was complaining.

"Oh, yes. There's been a definite lack of touching since last night. I believe that needs to be corrected." Tadeo slipped a hand behind Cináed's head. He held him in place while his lips touched Cináed's in a scorching kiss that went from wanting to needing in seconds.

Cináed's response was immediate. He hardened against Tadeo's thigh and moaned when the other man responded by moving against him to give him as much sensation as possible. He was almost ready to come from the sheer pleasure of the deep kisses and the increasing pressure between his legs when Tadeo pulled back.

“I want you.” Tadeo’s eyes were glazed with lust, his breath came in gasps. “I want you inside me this time. We never got around to that last night, and it doesn’t feel right. Like something is still missing.”

“I want you too.” *Dia*, did he ever want this man. “I think I need you. But I don’t know... I mean, I’ve never....”

“Shhh, that’s okay, you’ll figure it out.” Tadeo stroked the back of his head and grinned in that impish way he had when they were playing together. “You did last night, didn’t you?”

“But you did all the work.” Cináed blushed. It had been so unbelievably good.

“You’re a pretty quick learner.” Tadeo gave him one last kiss and turned to get the little flask of oil that had somehow maintained its place on the bedside table. “I trust you.”

“Okay then, but only if we get rid of the blankets first.” He wanted to see Tadeo’s amazing body, all those lean muscles.

Tadeo moved so fast the blankets were gone before Cináed could take his next breath. It looked like his husband was motivated. When he lay back and spread his legs, Cináed’s breath hitched. *Dia*, the man was beautiful. The rays of the setting sun came in through the open window and made his dark skin glisten. Everything from his wide shoulders to his well-muscled chest and ripped abdomen was perfectly in proportion. His penis was already hard and lay against a thick thigh.

Cináed moved between his legs and bent down to lick the large, shaved balls. Tadeo moaned, and Cináed settled in for a long, leisurely exploration. Licking and sucking the ball sac made Tadeo shift his hips. Cináed pulled one ball into his mouth and suckled, eliciting a small whimper from his husband’s mouth. He gave the same treatment to the other before licking his way up the stiff penis. That made Tadeo moan.

The taste of the copious pre-cum leaking from the tip was addictive. Salty and musky, it satisfied the deep need in Cináed’s belly. He closed his lips around the head and suckled, sliding the tip of his tongue into the slit to make sure he didn’t lose a single drop of the delicious substance.

“Stop.” Tadeo was breathing heavily.

Shit, had he done something wrong? He pulled off the trembling member and looked up at his shaking husband.

“Please. I want to come when you’re inside me.” Tadeo held out his hand. “Give me the oil, I’ll get myself ready. You make me so hot I don’t think I can wait.”

“Did I do something wrong?” He handed over the oil and watched as Tadeo coated his fingers before closing the vial and putting it back onto the bedside table.

“No. God, no. You did everything so right that I’m about to explode.” Tadeo’s eyes slitted when he breached himself with the first finger.

Cináed’s eyes widened and he could feel his penis get impossibly harder at the erotic sight of Tadeo fingering himself open. Tadeo moved much more quickly than Cináed thought he’d be comfortable with, but it didn’t seem to bother Tadeo. His swollen member kept leaking more pre-cum, and when Tadeo’s hips started moving so that he was fucking himself on his own fingers, Cináed had to squeeze the base of his penis to stop himself from coming.

“Now, baby. Please. Fuck me.” Tadeo withdrew his fingers and reached for Cináed. He coated Cináed’s length with the rest of the oil, pulled his knees up to his chest, and spread himself open in an unmistakable offer.

Cináed groaned with desire and moved to put his tip against the spasming opening. He started pushing in, and the tightness around his head almost made him come.

“Fuck! That feels good. Tight.” Cináed stopped so Tadeo would have time to adjust. Tadeo had done the same for him last night, and he’d needed it.

“Don’t stop.” Tadeo’s look was pleading. “Just push in. All the way. I want it.”

It was too tempting. Cináed put his hands next to Tadeo’s shoulders and pushed. The heat and tightness was heavenly. When he was all the way inside, Tadeo let go of his legs and grabbed Cináed’s ass cheeks.

“Move. Fuck me like you mean it.” Tadeo kneaded Cináed’s cheeks and circled his hips in a way that made Cináed whimper with pleasure.

It also made him move. He pulled out and then pushed back in with all his might, the friction making him need more. *Dia*, he was already so close just from watching Tadeo get himself ready. He started thrusting, making Tadeo moan and rock back against each of his inward movements. He went faster and faster, losing all control. Tadeo’s little pants of “yes, yes, yes” were more encouragement than he could deal with.

Tadeo’s hands on his ass—still kneading and pulling him in as far as he would go—combined with his hot gasps of “yes” and “harder” drove Cináed’s arousal higher and higher until he was dizzy with it. He was about to move one of his hands to grab Tadeo’s penis and help him over the edge when Tadeo pushed his head back into the pillow. His face contorted into a mask of ecstasy that almost looked painful, and he screamed with the orgasm shaking his entire body. Long spurts of white semen coated his chest and stomach, the scent mixing with that of his natural musk.

That was it. Tadeo’s clenching muscles pushed Cináed over the edge. His body stiffened, and he emptied his balls into Tadeo’s pulsing channel. He shook with the intensity of it and collapsed onto Tadeo’s chest, shuddering with the aftershocks. Tadeo brought his arms up and held onto him as they both focused on regaining their breath.

A soft, white light seemed to surround them, and for a moment it felt as if they were one person. They were so close that it brought tears to Cináed’s eyes. Was this what love felt like?

“Thank you.” Tadeo turned his head so they could kiss. “That was wonderful.”

“You were amazing.” Cináed looked into his husband’s eyes. “I’ve never felt this connected to anyone. Thank you for trusting me.”

“Any time. If this is what you make me feel when you do this the first time, I can’t wait for us to do it again.” Tadeo smiled up at him and kissed his lips.

“It’ll be your turn next time.” Cináed grinned and carefully pulled back so they could lie next to each other. “This was good, but it’s as good the other way around.”

“Yeah, it is.” Tadeo cuddled closer. “I was hoping we could share this both ways.”

That was an ideal opening for discussing what Cináed wanted to talk about.

“Just like I’m hoping that we’ll share being king both ways.” He took a deep breath. “I don’t want you to be some second-class regent. I want you to be an equal partner in everything. And that includes being king.”

“What are you saying?” Tadeo’s eyes widened, and he looked completely shocked.

“I mean it. I’m not going to sit there and pretend that I’m the only one in charge. It may have worked for our forefathers, and it may even work for other bonded pairs, but it wouldn’t work for me. I don’t think that’s what the two of us are about. We’ve shared everything equally so far, and I refuse to let that change because of some formality.” Cináed took another deep breath, trying to calm himself down. “We don’t know yet what the Old Laws say about this point, but I can’t bear the thought of you being seen as less than me. If we can’t resolve this somehow, I don’t want to be king at all.”

“You’re serious about this, aren’t you?” Tadeo moved his head back so they could make eye contact.

“I’ve never been more serious about anything in my life.” Cináed swallowed. “Please tell me you agree?”

“I don’t know what to say.” Tadeo closed his eyes for a moment, and when he opened them, they were bright with unshed tears. “I can’t believe that you would want to share your life’s purpose with me like that. But if it is what you want, of course I’ll agree.”

“Who else would I share it with? We clearly belong together, we’re bonded, and we have a huge task ahead of us. You’re just as important as I am, and I want everyone to know and accept that.”

Cináed smiled. “Thank you so much for agreeing. I don’t think I could do it on my own.”

“Oh darling, you wouldn’t be on your own. I’d help you whether I’m officially king or not. Like you said, we’re in this together.” Tadeo tightened his embrace.

They dozed for a while. Resting like that, just the two of them, was exactly what he needed after all that had happened. When the sun had set, Cináed’s stomach growled as if it had waited for darkness to fall.

“I guess we should go look for something to eat.” Tadeo grinned and placed a kiss on his forehead.

“That’s an excellent idea, Your Highness.” Cináed smiled when Tadeo grimaced, and he hugged his husband tightly.

TWO days later Tadeo was beginning to think that neither he nor Cináed were in control of their lives. Cináed’s father was still missing, they hadn’t been able to get a handle on how many warrior clans would side with him, and the Council of Priests was a constant concern, even though two of the participating priests had been cleared. The stress was beginning to get to both of them. To some degree the coronation would settle everyone, but that was still weeks away, and it was more of a symbolic act than a solution in and of itself.

One of their most urgent priorities was to recharge as many Stones as possible. But the stress was taking its toll on their abilities. It took them twice as long to recharge a Stone as it had in the beginning. They could only do two or three per day anyway, because it took a lot out of them every time they completed the process. No other healer-warrior pairs had come forward yet. It would probably take a while for people to get used to the idea of two men bonding, and even then, compatible partners had to find each other.

He’d been touched deeply when Cináed had asked him to be the second king rather than a co-regent. It showed the level of trust that was building between them. They’d asked the question about co-

kingship the same evening. It had raised a few eyebrows, but the scholars who were poring over the Old Laws came back the next day and pronounced it *acceptable*. Apparently there was a special provision put in by a previous king for exactly this purpose. One problem less to deal with.

With the search for Cináed's father and the assessment of the clans' loyalties safely in Gordan's hand, and the co-ordination of the priests more or less under Akir's control, Tadeo and Cináed focused on understanding their future role. Discussions with the scholars were as much a part of this as talking to various representatives from different groups of the population about what they expected and hoped for. It was exhausting.

Akir's parents were in their element. They'd put together a team of almost twenty men and women, and each of them was in charge of a different aspect of the preparations. They wanted to make sure that everything was perfect and in line with their future kings' expectations. Never having had "royals" to deal with, they were being overly careful about involving Tadeo and Cináed in every single decision that seemed important to them.

Tadeo honestly either didn't know the answer for most of them or else he didn't care. Did it matter what color their official ceremonial robes were going to be? Probably. Would people see hidden meanings in the colors of the flowers that were going to be used for decoration? Most definitely. Did he have a preferred flavor for the coronation cake? *Coronation cake*? He managed to squeeze out "chocolate" before he fled onto the balcony of the grand salon that had become their headquarters. He needed fresh air.

Running a starship was simple compared to this. At least everyone knew what to expect. Here they were feeling their way into uncharted territory. That brought him back to the core reason for his short temper. *Fuck!* He didn't want to leave. Not now that they'd just found each other and were beginning to build a life together. They were still trying to recover from the effects of being forcibly separated.

“Are you okay?” Cináed’s voice behind him warned him seconds before strong arms came around him. “I’m sorry this has become such a complicated affair.”

“You don’t have to apologize. It’s not like it’s your fault.” Tadeo leaned back into his husband’s strong embrace. God, how he would miss him. “And it’s not like you knew what was going to happen once we let Akir’s parents loose.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right. Add this to our other problems, and it explains why we’re so stressed. They mean well, but I think we need to talk to them about our priorities. I get the distinct impression they think we’ve solved everything and all that’s left to deal with is the coronation ceremony.” Cináed sighed and dropped his chin onto Tadeo’s shoulder.

“To be honest, that isn’t the only thing that’s becoming a problem.” Tadeo took a deep breath. It was now or never. “What’s really bothering me is that I need to get in touch with my spaceship. I need to resign my commission before I irrevocably commit my life to this planet by becoming king with you. Since I don’t have a long-distance communicator with me, the only way I can do that is to travel back to the Eye and ask for its help.”

“No!” Cináed stiffened. “No, you can’t go. We need each other.”

“I know.” Tadeo sighed. The thought of leaving hurt. He wasn’t sure how he was going to survive without Cináed. But with decent horses and proper provisions, he could make it to the Eye and back in ten days or less. Surely that was manageable?

“But you’re still going to go, aren’t you?” Cináed started shaking.

“It’s not as if I have a choice.” Tadeo turned around and took Cináed into his arms, slowly stroking his back to try and calm him down. “I’ve been ignoring the rules ever since I told you that I was from a different planet. Getting involved in a society’s internal affairs without being invited by another planet’s government is forbidden.”

“But I invited you.” Cináed looked confused. “Doesn’t that count?”

“Yes, it does.” Tadeo laughed. “When I first met you, we didn’t know that you were authorized to ask for my help though. We’re very

lucky that you are, because that makes my actions defensible. The problem is the next stage. My involvement in your planet's affairs will be much deeper once I'm king. I can't do that while I'm still a starship captain. So I need to find a way of letting them know that I'm no longer a member of the SEF."

"I don't want to let you go alone." Cináed frowned. "I'm sure they won't let me go with you, so I'll just have to sneak out and be gone before they notice anything."

"I'll be fine. And you're right; they won't let you go with me. It'll be bad enough that one of us leaves." Tadeo shrugged. "Unfortunately, I don't have a choice if I want to make sure that the SEF won't interfere later."

"You'll need a group of warriors with you to protect you. Not so many that they'll slow you down but enough to make sure that you're safe." Cináed still didn't look happy, but at least he was making plans.

"That sounds like a very sensible idea." He still didn't like it, but since he didn't have a choice, it was better to leave with Cináed's acceptance and support.

"I'll miss you." Cináed's big eyes almost made him reconsider.

"I'll miss you too. But you'll be too busy to notice. I'll be back before you know it." Tadeo only hoped the same was true for him. "The Warrior Council needs to be kept on the straight and narrow, which will take some doing even with your brother's help. And I imagine it'll take the Council of Priests at least until the coronation to sort themselves out. Erskine is a respectable new High Priest, but he's too old to do it all on his own. Thank God he made Akir his personal assistant. Since Akir is new at that, he'll need all the support you can give him as Makolm's trial comes up."

"Don't forget the work we need to do to set up the new Merchant Council." Cináed lifted his head. "What do you think about putting Akir's father in charge of that? He seems to be very well respected amongst the other merchants, and it would give him something to focus on other than the coronation ceremony."

“That is a brilliant idea!” Tadeo was impressed. “It should enable you to focus on what’s really important: building alliances across all the groups.”

“Okay, we’ll set that in motion before you leave.” Cináed sighed. “I still don’t know how I’m supposed to deal with everything without you to keep me grounded!”

“I’m sure you’ll manage.” He had to believe that, or he wouldn’t be able to leave. Cináed was the most important person in his life, and Tadeo was only just beginning to realize what that meant. Leaving on prolonged trips was apparently not something that would be easy on either of them. That made it doubly important that he resign from the SEF, observing all the necessary formalities, to ensure that they couldn’t ever make him go back.

WHY hadn’t he insisted on leaving with Tadeo? It had only been two days, and life was hell. He had trouble sleeping, he wasn’t hungry, there was a constant gnawing pain in his heart, and his temper was so short that few people still dared approach him.

“Hey, you need a break.” Gordan wasn’t intimidated easily.

“Yeah, I think I could do with one.” Cináed was glad that he was beginning to build a good relationship with his older brother. They’d been too far apart in age and temperament when they were younger, but now that they were both grown up, it was a different matter. The fact that they both disagreed and were at odds with their father gave them common ground they’d never had before.

“You want to go for a ride?” Gordan’s eyes twinkled.

“How am I supposed to say no to an offer like that?” Cináed grinned as he followed his brother back inside and through the grand salon. He successfully waved aside or ignored everyone who wanted to ask him something and made his way downstairs and out to the stables in record time.

“You’re not supposed to say no. That’s the whole point.” Gordan started saddling his horse, completely ignoring the stable boy. “You told me how much you missed riding while you were locked up in that monastery, so I figured this would be a good way to give you some time to yourself.”

“Here, Sim, you can saddle my horse for me if you want.” Cináed was ready to catch the boy if he fainted from shock, as he’d done the first time. Saddling a king’s horse, even if it was just the future king, was a big deal for this boy. But Sim only shook with nerves badly enough to need help lifting the saddle onto the black stallion’s back.

They were soon on their way. Gordan took the straight route out of the city, up the hill and into the forest behind the monastery. It was familiar territory for Cináed, even if it looked very different from horseback. The silence was relaxing, and gradually Cináed breathed easier. The ache in his chest would remain until Tadeo came back, but the rest of his body was beginning to relax.

“Better?” Gordan grinned over at him.

“Much.” Cináed grinned back. “I’m really beginning to like having a big brother.”

“What? You didn’t like me before?” Gordan pretended to be insulted, but the twitching of his lips gave him away.

“You know what I mean.” Cináed turned serious again. “Have you heard anything about our father’s whereabouts?”

“That’s one of the things I wanted to talk to you about. Apparently he’s back at home. I have no idea where he spent the last few days. He’s missed two Council sessions, which isn’t like him at all. If he misses a third, he’ll be kicked out.” Gordan frowned. “That doesn’t bother me, but I’m worried that we don’t know what he’s up to. He’s made his point of view perfectly clear, and I’m afraid he may be working on some plan to try and prevent you and Tadeo from becoming kings.”

“I know. I’m thinking the same thing. We’ve both spoken to enough clan leaders to know that his support isn’t massive.” Cináed

remembered the two other Council members who'd looked as disgusted as his father when they were talking about male bonding.

"I agree it doesn't look that way. The only confirmed allies are the Green and the Laren clans." Gordan snorted. "They're probably holed up somewhere together, trying to figure out how to make the good old times come back. We've tried to infiltrate them or to find clan members willing to talk but have had no luck so far."

"Thanks for helping with that." Official business over, Cináed realized he hadn't even asked about Gordan's personal situation. He obviously couldn't go back to their father's house and he was too proud to ask for help. "By the way, where are you staying? You know that you're always welcome to be with me and Tadeo, right?"

"Don't worry. I'm staying with Parlan Comgall and his family." Gordan smiled. "He's been my best friend since the first day of school and is very happy he gets to see more of me than he has in the last few years. He's been a great help in organizing the restoration of your new city residence."

"I'm glad you found a place to stay that you really like. You'll still always be welcome in whatever home I end up with." Cináed grimaced. He wasn't sure he'd ever get used to living in a palace and calling it a home.

"Don't worry, you'll figure it out." Gordan grinned.

"That's easy for you to say. You don't have to live with so many people interested in what you think and in helping you run your life. It's bad enough with everyone trying to organize the coronation ceremony. I'm afraid it'll only get worse once we have the 'appropriate' staff organized." Cináed sighed. "I know that they all mean well, but living in the monastery sure was a lot simpler."

Gordan laughed, and Cináed had to admit that the idea was rather ridiculous. It was still better to live a life free of all the religious rules and regulations than it was to have peace and quiet at all times. Just a little bit more peace and quiet occasionally would have been nice, but hopefully everything would settle down once the coronation ceremony was over.

When they returned from their ride, Gordan left to check the building site of the new palace. He promised to come back the next day to take Cináed out for another ride. Cináed was looking forward to it.

Akir was waiting for him in the grand salon, looking very serious.

“What’s wrong, Akir?” Cináed felt his stomach flutter.

“Not here, please.” Akir pointed to the door at the back of the salon. It led to a smaller room that Cináed used as an office for whenever he needed privacy for confidential discussions. “I’d rather not everyone hear this before we’ve had time to talk things through.”

Shit, that didn’t sound good. By the time the door was closed and they’d both taken a seat, Cináed’s nerves were shot. Something was very, very wrong.

“Spill it.” Cináed sat at the edge of his seat. He needed to know what had gotten his friend so worried.

“You’ve been wondering what your father’s been up to, right?” Akir didn’t wait for confirmation. “Apparently he returned to his home late last night and hasn’t been seen since.”

“I know. Gordan told me just now.” Cináed wanted to get on with it.

“What? How does he know?” Akir narrowed his eyes. “Did he go back to live in the same house as that despicable father of yours?”

“No. No, he didn’t. He’s staying with his friend Parlan.” Why was Akir so worried about Gordan’s whereabouts? “He’s heard about our father’s movements from the other members of the Warrior Council. Apparently they’re about to kick him out because he’s missed two Council meetings.”

“From what I was told, he’s not going to attend the next one either. He’s made it very clear to several of his friends and in discussions with others that he’s not willing to be a member of a Council that supports you or the new High Priest.” Akir sighed. “He’s been actively trying to recruit other clans to join his campaign for a return to scriptural law as the one and only accepted way of organizing society.”

“While that’s worrying, it doesn’t explain why you look so panicked. We expected that something like this would happen. We’ll have to see how many clans are willing to support him before we can understand the size of the problem.” Cináed hoped there wouldn’t be too many. This planet was ready to make some progress, and returning to scriptural law would stop that in its tracks.

“No, it doesn’t explain it. In fact, the one bit of good news I have for you is that—so far—only two clans have agreed to join him. And they were always very close to the MacAlpins anyway.” Akir sighed. “The reason I’m so worried is that last night somebody broke into the monastery prison and freed former High Priest Makolm.”

“Fuck!” Cináed knew how dangerous this man could be, and the fact that he had allies who’d got him out of prison made him an even bigger threat.

“We had him under heavy guard, as you know, and we’re trying to find out the details of what happened. It isn’t very clear right now because three of the four guards assigned to him have vanished, and the fourth was so heavily wounded that we needed three healing sessions to bring him out of his coma. When we asked him who had freed the former High Priest, he managed only one word: MacAlpin.” Akir rubbed his face with both hands.

“What?” Cináed thought the floor should open and swallow him. “You’re telling me that my father has freed our former suppressor and is now holed up with him in his fortress of a residence, planning a revolution?”

“That isn’t the worst of it, though.” Akir seemed to shrink in his seat.

“If that isn’t the worst of it, I don’t want to know.” How were they going to get all these warring factions to agree on anything?

“You’re not serious, right?” Akir dropped his hands from his face and frowned. “Because I can tell you, I have no idea what to do to make this better.”

“No, of course I’m not serious! Come on, out with it.” Cináed didn’t care how bad it was, he wanted this awful tension of not knowing gone.

“I wish there was an easy way to tell you this. But there isn’t, so I’ll come right out with it.” Akir took a deep breath. “When we were talking to people, trying to confirm our obvious suspicion that Makolm had been freed by your father, nobody had seen Makolm enter the MacAlpin premises. Instead, some had seen Tadeo being carried in earlier.”

Cináed stared at his friend. He opened his mouth to speak, but no words would come. The fear and emptiness that had threatened at the back of his mind since Tadeo had left returned with a vengeance and completely overwhelmed him.

“Tadeo never made it out of the city. He was taken by your father and hasn’t been seen since.” Akir collapsed, hands hiding his face and sobs shaking his body. “I’m sorry.”

Tadeo had been kidnapped and was in Makolm’s hands. The pain of what that might mean was too much. Cináed doubled over with the agony. His body began to shut down. Everything turned black, and he let unconsciousness take him to where it didn’t hurt anymore.

CHAPTER TEN

IT HAD been more than a day since Tadeo had seen any of his newest jailers. He couldn't be sure, since there was no daylight in his cell, but his gnawing hunger and burning thirst indicated that it had been at least that long.

The pain in his head where they must have hit him had faded to a throbbing presence in the back of his skull, his ankle was at least sprained if not broken, and his face felt swollen where they'd punched him. At least he wasn't shackled this time, and the floor was covered with fairly clean straw. They'd taken his clothes, though, so he had nothing to protect him from the cold seeping into him from the stone floor and walls.

The jangling of keys was followed by the door being pulled open. Bright light streamed into the darkness, and Tadeo had to close his eyes if he didn't want to be blinded.

"Are you ready to talk?" The voice didn't sound familiar.

He didn't reply, instead focusing on getting his eyes used to the light by forcing them open bit by bit.

"Hey, I'm talking to you." A sharp kick into his hip made him want to draw back, except there was nowhere to go.

"What do you want from me?" His eyes were beginning to make out a hulking shape leaning over him, backlit against the door.

"You don't get to ask the questions." Another kick, this one into his thigh, made him squirm. Heavy boots against unprotected skin wasn't a fair contest.

“I’m sorry.” He could see enough now to make out a second guard outside the cell.

“I bet you’ll be a lot sorrier by the time His Holiness has finished with you.” The guard closest to him grabbed him by the arms and pulled him up.

His Holiness? Wasn’t Makolm in prison awaiting trial? God, his head hurt, and he was dizzy from lack of food and probably from being pulled upright. When he put weight on his left leg, he almost buckled with the pain. Something was definitely wrong with the ankle.

“What’s wrong with you? Already too weak to walk? We haven’t even started torturing you yet.” The guard sniggered and pulled him along, leaving the cell behind.

He hobbled along the corridor, half-pushed and half-dragged between the two guards. Doors like the one to his cell lined the left and right walls, giving the impression of a prison or a basement. Definitely somewhere underground or well isolated. There wasn’t a single window anywhere, and the air was damp and stale. There was one open room at the end of the corridor, with a small table, some chairs, and two more guards inside. The stairs straight ahead were going to be a challenge with his foot, but the guards dragging him showed no mercy. He gritted his teeth and did his best not to slow them down too much.

He was covered in a cold sweat by the time they reached the top. A large hall with two sets of stairs leading to upper floors on the right, a double door in the wall to his left, and two more doors in the wall opposite and a door to their right made him think they were in someone’s house. A family crest with two crossed swords hung on the wall above the staircase landing. There were no windows to the outside, so it felt more like a fortress. Quite a large one at that.

“Come on, His Holiness is expecting you. He doesn’t have all day to wait for the likes of you.” The first guard started pulling him toward the other end of the hall.

“I’m surprised that he’s interested in talking to you at all,” the second guard sniggered, and he tightened his iron grip on Tadeo’s upper arm to make it even more painful.

When they reached their goal, the second guard opened the door and pushed him inside so quickly that he stumbled after only a few steps. He fell to his hands and knees. At least the floor was covered with a rug, so he didn't hurt himself too badly.

"Well, well, well. Look what we have here." A new voice, one clearly belonging to an old man, came from straight ahead and slightly above him. It sounded awfully familiar. "At least you seem to have some manners. I am flattered you are willing to prostrate yourself in front of me to show me respect. A simple bow would have sufficed, but I guess you felt you had something to make up to me, so I will accept your apology."

Apology? What was wrong with this man? Couldn't he see that Tadeo had stumbled and had barely been able to break his fall? The arrogance of that statement confirmed his suspicion about who this voice belonged to. He looked up and straight into the smirking face of former High Priest Makolm, seated on a heavy leather chair a couple of meters ahead.

"Surprised?" Makolm quirked an eyebrow.

Fuck!

The former religious leader must have escaped from his heavily guarded cell in the monastery. He couldn't have done that without help. Who was helping this idiot? He sighed. There was really only one suspect that he was aware of. He wished that he could remember the colors of the various clans better, but he was willing to bet that he was either in the MacAlpin main residence or in one of the castles in the countryside that Cináed said all the major clans owned.

"Not really." Who else would have been crazy enough to kidnap the future king? Not that he was about to share this thought with the crazy priest. He wasn't suicidal.

"Interesting." Makolm waved his hand at the guards. "You can go. I'll deal with him. Stay outside the door and be ready to take him back to his cell when I call you."

"Yes, Your Holiness." Booted steps retreated and the door was closed.

He was alone with the madman.

He tried to get up, to make himself more comfortable, but Makolm shook his head.

“You can kneel if you want, but you haven’t earned the right to stand yet.” Makolm raised his hand and pointed where he apparently wanted Tadeo to kneel.

What the hell? Makolm was making him sound like a slave. That was probably part of the man’s strategy to demoralize him though, so he would try not to let it bother him. As long as he was physically comfortable, or at least more comfortable than on his hands and knees while craning his neck to see Makolm’s facial expressions, it really only was a minor concern. So he went to his knees and sat back on one ankle, letting the injured leg stretch away from his body.

“Where am I?” He’d been unconscious for a while, so it was possible that they’d taken him out of Gael to somewhere else. Most of all, he was just curious. Even if he knew where he was, that wouldn’t help anyone to find him.

“It doesn’t matter, does it?” Makolm grinned. “Nobody is going to come look for you, are they?”

“You don’t know that.” Unfortunately the man was probably right. Everyone thought that he was on his way to the Eye. They didn’t expect him back for at least ten days after he’d left. Depending on how much time he’d spent unconscious, that was another eight or nine days before they even started to worry. He was totally on his own.

“Oh, but I do.” Makolm sat back in his chair, making himself comfortable. “I know everything about your planned trip back to the Eye. However, it doesn’t make any sense for you to want to go, since you can’t possibly have any legal business there. Moreover, it’s a mortal sin for you to even plan going to this holy place.”

Makolm sounded well-informed about the trip, even if Tadeo couldn’t understand his reasons for calling it a “sin” for him to go there. Clearly he didn’t know everything, focusing on what was generally known, not what Cináed’s and his closest friends were planning. The thought of spies amongst them made his stomach turn,

but it was still a possibility. Makolm might simply not have revealed everything at this point.

“The extent of my knowledge surprises you, doesn’t it?” Makolm stroked his chin. “Let me tell you that not everyone is interested in abandoning scriptural law and the moral principles that have guided us successfully for centuries. In fact, I suspect those in favor of keeping the old order are in the majority. They just need to be found and given the opportunity to rally behind me. After all, I’m the rightfully elected High Priest. The charade you organized to elect a new High Priest is illegal, ridiculous, and will cost you dearly once the old order is restored. I’ll personally make sure of that.”

Makolm sounded totally delusional. Most people they’d spoken to didn’t care very much for a scriptural law that interfered in their daily lives, made them pay church taxes that they didn’t see the benefit of, and above all prevented the vast majority of them from having access to basic health care. As for the moral implications, like anywhere else, that wasn’t a major concern for a majority of the population.

“Interesting as all that may be, those problems will be solved by my allies among the warriors. They’ll bring the old order back soon enough. That isn’t what I wish to talk to you about.” Makolm leaned forward. “*Dia* created this passageway so that righteous people could escape cruelty and injustice. Only those worthy of a better life are allowed through, because life on Dálriata is a reward for those suffering injustice on Earth. It’s been like that since the beginning of time. Do you understand this?”

Tadeo nodded. It was an unexpected but interesting take on the facts about fugitives using the Eye to get here. It also fit perfectly with the little he knew about scriptural law. He intended to keep Makolm talking as long as possible to try and learn something useful about who he was working with and what they were planning.

“Since you’re a sinner with some abominable ideas about how people should live their lives, it is very clear to me that you couldn’t have come through the Eye. It would simply not have let you through.” Makolm narrowed his eyes. “So, clearly there is another way to Dálriata, one that infidels and heathens are free to take. This is

dangerous and has to be stopped. Nobody has the right to come here unless they have been selected by *Dia* and pass through the Eye.”

“How do you know that the ‘infidels’ haven’t found a way to deceive the Eye?” Tadeo didn’t want to get into a discussion about space travel and the inevitability of more people coming here now that the planet had been discovered. The Stones and their healing ability would be of great interest to the SEF, once they found out about them. Moral scruples about interfering with a planet’s society didn’t exist once the greater economic good was involved.

“Blasphemy!” Makolm paled and pulled back from him, as if greater physical distance from the “infidel” would save his soul. “Didn’t I just tell you that this is not possible? The Eye would kill anyone who attempted to come here without the proper attitude and piousness. Besides, the Holy Messenger in my monastery chambers would have informed me if anyone had come through the Eye. After all, we need to be prepared if new fugitives are sent to us for safekeeping. So, I will ask you again, how did you come here?”

“The Holy Messenger would inform you?” That was the first bit of potentially useful information Makolm had given him. If there was some link to the Eye right here in Gael, he might be able to use it to communicate his request for help to the artificial intelligence inside the Eye without traveling there.

“Of course it would!” Makolm raised his eyebrows. “It isn’t any of your business, but part of my job as High Priest is to keep the link between us and the Eye alive. So of course *Dia* has provided a way for me to do this.”

Tadeo was glad that Makolm was given to bragging about his own importance. He might never have gotten this bit of critical information otherwise.

WHEN he came to and opened his eyes, Cináed wasn’t in his office anymore. He was in bed, alone. As his memory of what had happened returned, so did the pain. Knowing that Tadeo was in the hands of

Makolm and his father, both equally able and willing to hurt him, was almost too much to bear. A tear rolled down the side of his face, and he wanted nothing more than to return to unconsciousness.

“Thank *Dia* you’re awake.” Akir’s face appeared in his line of sight, eyes red-rimmed and skin white as a sheet. “I was beginning to think we’d lost you.”

“In a way you have. I’m no longer complete without Tadeo.” Cináed’s voice sounded scratchy and unreal. His throat was as dry as a desert.

“Here, have some water.” Akir passed him a glass, and he drank thirstily.

As he put his head back onto the pillow, he noticed Gordan standing next to the window. The sun was about to set, so he’d been out for a few hours.

“What are we going to do?” Whatever they did, getting Tadeo back needed to be their first priority.

“We haven’t confirmed the location where they’re keeping him.” Gordan turned around. With sunken eyes and stress lines around his mouth, he wasn’t looking much better than Akir. “We think he’s at the main MacAlpin residence here in town, but we’d need to be absolutely sure before mounting a rescue operation. If he isn’t there, and they find out we tried to free him, they might hurt him.”

“If they haven’t hurt him already.” Cináed didn’t want to think about it, but remembering how they’d been treated by the Inquisition didn’t give him much hope.

“We can only hope that they would give us a chance to fulfill their demands before they do anything serious.” Gordan looked at the floor. “The fact that they haven’t let us know what they want has me worried. It’s been almost three days since they took him, and I can’t come up with a reason why they would wait this long.”

“The former High Priest isn’t exactly known for his logic.” Akir shook his head and sighed. “He doesn’t think like a soldier. It may be a matter of gloating, or he may want to make us more nervous so that

we're more likely to do his bidding once he's ready to let us know what he wants."

"I agree, Akir." That meant they needed to act even more quickly. They couldn't allow Makolm to gain the upper hand. "He's unpredictable and dangerous. If we allow him to believe that he's won, he may become even more of a threat. Megalomaniacs like him tend to start believing their own propaganda if you let them."

"So, what do we do?" Akir looked helpless.

"We surprise him." Gordan had stopped his contemplation of the tiles on the floor and looked up. "Is that what you mean, Cináed?"

"Yes, that's exactly what I mean. We need to find a way to shake him up without endangering Tadeo's life or well-being." He would do anything to get his husband back. The first step was finding out what Makolm wanted. "He probably thinks we're too scared of him to want to risk making him angry. If he wants to make us wait, make us stew, he won't expect us to drop by and pay him a visit."

"You're not planning to go there yourself, are you?" Akir's eyes widened.

"Why not? I'm probably the last person he expects to see." Cináed wanted to be as close to Tadeo as possible. Finding out how he was doing was the first step to discovering how to rescue him.

"I'm with Akir on this one." Gordan frowned. "You shouldn't go, because if something goes wrong he'll have two valuable hostages."

"What's the difference between one and two in this case? As long as he has Tadeo, I'm completely useless. And I don't just mean in relation to the Stones. You don't seriously think I could get anything done with him missing?" Cináed felt empty and hollow without him. Like life wasn't worth living. This was about more than friendship and respect.

"What if Tadeo isn't at the MacAlpin residence?" Akir sat down on the bed, his shaking legs no longer able to support him.

"At least we'll know." They'd have to start searching all the MacAlpin country estates next. "As long as we make it look like a

social visit, not an attempt to overwhelm them, Makolm is more likely to feel flattered than to feel threatened.”

There was a knock on the door.

“Come in.” This was going to be important if they were knocking on his bedroom door.

The majordomo entered the room, looking only slightly surprised that Cináed was awake. He carried a silver tray with a letter on it. Cináed almost cringed at the formality.

“I am sorry for the interruption, but this letter was delivered by a messenger wearing the MacAlpin colors.” The majordomo offered the tray to Cináed with a polite bow, making it look like he was passing along a cake at a tea party. “He said it was extremely important that it was given to either you or Gordan immediately.”

“Thank you, Neill.” Cináed had made sure he knew the names of everyone he was in touch with on a daily basis.

“You are very welcome, sir.” The majordomo executed a perfect turn on one heel and walked back out the door, closing it quietly behind him.”

“Damn, I’ll never get used to that.” Gordan shook himself.

Akir glanced at him briefly, looking as if he was about to say something, then looked away. Cináed wondered what was going on between those two. It would have to wait. First there was the matter of the letter.

It was addressed to Gordan and him. He turned it around to find the MacAlpin seal on the back. He carefully opened it and pulled out the one sheet he found inside the envelope. After reading it, he passed it to Gordan.

“What does it say?” Akir looked frantic.

“It says that High Priest Makolm has taken refuge from the revolutionary forces in the MacAlpin main residence, which has apparently become the temporary seat of power for the true Council of Priests. The former High Priest expects me to surrender to him so that the Inquisition trial can be completed and justice can take its course. I

have until tomorrow at noon.” Cináed swallowed the bile rising in his throat. “If I refuse to obey, he’ll cut off one of Tadeo’s fingers for every hour I’m late, ending with his execution at midnight. If that happens, his army of loyal warriors will march the next morning to return order to this city by killing anyone who has allied themselves with me.”

“Th-that’s horrible.” Akir swayed but caught himself just before he keeled over.

“Yes, it is.” Gordan looked angry. “It’s barbaric. I would’ve expected something like this from the former High Priest. To have it come from my father is like a slap in the face. This sort of behavior is totally dishonorable. It makes me ashamed to be his son.”

“It’s not our fault he’s turned into an idiot. I never even knew that he was so fanatically religious. He took me by surprise that day when we went to see him to try and get his support for fighting the Council of Priests. He said then that he thought two men bonding was an *abomination*. When he said that he wouldn’t accept the healing power of the Stones if it came from *that*, it became clear to me that he’d lost his ability to think independently.” Cináed shrugged. “I refuse to feel guilty for being his son. It’s not something I had anything to do with, nor can I change it. You shouldn’t blame yourself either, Gordan.”

“You’re right. It still bothers me, but it will pass.” Gordan put the letter on the bedside table and sat down in one of the comfortable chairs at the foot of the bed. “The real question is what we do next.”

“There isn’t any question. I will go to the MacAlpin residence tomorrow morning and give myself up.” Cináed would do anything to save Tadeo from the kind of torture his father and Makolm had planned.

“You can’t do that!” Gordan’s eyebrows had risen all the way up his forehead.

“I can and I will. There’s no way I’m going to risk Tadeo’s life. I have to go.” Cináed allowed himself a small smile. “However, nobody said that I can’t fight Makolm once I’ve given myself up.”

“You’re planning to fight him? How?” Gordan leaned forward.

“Once we’ve made sure that Tadeo is alive and well, you’ll be in charge of keeping him that way. I’ll challenge Makolm to a duel of mental abilities, which I have an excellent chance of winning.” He’d won most of the tournaments they’d had in the monastery school once a year. Makolm was much older and probably weaker than he’d been a year ago during Cináed’s final exam. He was pretty sure he could win again.

This time, more than ever, it was crucial that he did.

TADEO had lost track of time. The guards had given him water and some dry bread before putting him back into his cell after his discussion with the former High Priest. He hadn’t seen or heard anyone since then.

The darkness had helped get rid of his headache, but it hadn’t done anything for his swollen ankle and the bruises he could feel throbbing on his face. They hadn’t returned his clothes, so he was cold, and the thirst was becoming almost unbearable.

Makolm hadn’t been satisfied with Tadeo’s answers about where he came from. Space travel, according to the old man, was a total and complete impossibility. He’d rather believe that Tadeo had found some way to deceive both the Eye and the Holy Messenger than wrap his mind around the possibility of space travel. He’d given him a day to reconsider his position and expected a better answer during their next *discussion*.

Tadeo snorted. A discussion was not what he expected to come next. The guards didn’t think so either. On their way back to his cell, they’d pointed out the interrogation chamber with various implements on its walls. Tadeo didn’t want to know what they were for, and he definitely didn’t want to find out by having them used on him.

The now-familiar jangling of keys told him that he was about to find out exactly how long Makolm was going to be patient with him. The door opened, and the bright light from the corridor made his eyes hurt.

“Come on, get up. We haven’t got all day.” The guard was new, but his attitude was the same as his colleague’s from yesterday.

With an effort and by using the wall for support, Tadeo got to his feet. He winced when he put weight on his left leg, but at least it wasn’t any worse than before. Maybe he’d gotten away with a sprain. It still hurt like hell on the long walk along the corridor, up the stairs, and all the way into the same room he’d been in yesterday. He registered that it was light outside, probably making this the next morning. Then he was roughly pushed to his knees. The guards left him facing Makolm and closed the door behind them with a loud bang.

“So have you had enough time to reconsider your position?” Makolm sat in the same chair as yesterday, sardonic smirk in place on his wrinkled face.

“There’s nothing to reconsider. I already told you the truth. I’m sorry you can’t accept it, but I can’t change the facts to fit your expectations.” Tadeo shrugged when Makolm’s smile faded. He couldn’t do anything about it.

“I’ll give you one last chance. If you don’t tell me the truth, you’ll join Cináed as soon as he gets here, or as soon as he’s brought here, depending on how willing he is to save your life.” Makolm pointed a finger at him. “You think you escaped the Inquisition, but there’s no such thing as evading divine justice. You can make your death less painful if you tell me the truth now, or you can face the Inquisition and suffer to the full extent of scriptural law.”

“What? Cináed is on his way here? How?” That was the last thing Tadeo wanted. It was bad enough that he was in the hands of this madman, there was no need for Cináed to risk his life as well.

“Of course he is.” Makolm’s face hardened further, beginning to show his true character in his facial expressions as well as his words. “I’m not about to let either of you escape justice. Since you rejected my offer to make it easier for you, you are now going to suffer alongside him.”

“But why would he come here?” Surely Cináed realized that there was no point in giving in to Makolm’s demands. Once they were both

in the former High Priest's power, there'd be no stopping him. One of them had to stay away and survive.

"Not that it's any of your business, but I issued a very effective threat." Makolm's smirk was truly evil now. "I informed him that I expected him here at noon. For every hour that he's late, I will have one of your fingers cut off. I'm sure that's sufficient motivation for him to be on time."

Oh God. Poor Cináed would be frantic. Not that Tadeo was looking forward to losing his fingers, but he knew that a threat like that would make it much more difficult, if not impossible, for Cináed to stay away.

"You look surprised. Did you think this was a game? Did you not think I was taking this seriously?" Makolm's superior smirk was back. "We'll see what he says when he finds out that I have no intention of letting this end with the trial. Obviously you'll both be convicted, that isn't up for debate. But the real beauty of my plan is that once Cináed is here, I'll be able to mentally subjugate him, making him a tool for me to use in regaining power over the rest of the population."

"How—how are you going to do that?" Tadeo needed more details and was hoping that Makolm's need to hear himself talk would override caution. Maybe he'd have a chance to warn Cináed before it was too late.

"Since you're harmless, I'm going to let you in on a little secret. Anyone with the mental abilities to use the Slànach Stones can use those same powers to influence someone else's mind. It's all about using the healing powers for a different purpose. Since I'm a very powerful High Priest with years of practice and Cináed is only a beginner, he doesn't stand a chance." Makolm leaned back in his chair and folded his hands over his nonexistent belly. "On top of that, I've found a way of using the power of one of the recharged Stones against him. He may think that he's strong enough to face me in a mental duel, since he's always been one of the stronger healers. However, with the recharged Stone assisting me, he doesn't even stand a chance."

Tadeo felt nauseated. The prospect of Cináed having to do Makolm's bidding was too horrible to contemplate. He stopped paying

attention to anything Makolm said. All he could think about was trying to find a way to warn Cináed.

When he was finally back in his cell, not even the beating he'd received from the guards stopped him from focusing his thoughts on Cináed. He could only think of one way to try to warn him. He had no idea whether it would work, but since their mental energies were compatible, maybe if he focused strongly enough he'd be able to send a mental message to tell Cináed to stay away.

No, that wasn't going to work. Cináed would need a reason to stay away. Better yet, he needed to know what kind of danger he was in if he did decide to come here. Tadeo searched his brain for a symbol of subjugation, because sending a picture would probably be easier than sending words. He finally came up with the idea of showing Makolm holding a glowing Stone with rays of light coming from it to form a collar around Cináed's throat.

He leaned back against the wall, closed his eyes, and focused on thinking a message at Cináed. He sank into a trance, reaching out to his husband. When he saw a glimmer of warm, rainbow-colored light in his mind, he concentrated on bringing it closer.

It felt like Cináed. A very surprised Cináed. There were no words at first, but he could feel the love and hope coming from the other man's essence and he smiled.

"Tadeo? *Is that you?*" Cináed's eyes were big in wonder.

"Yes, *m y love.*" Tadeo reached out, wanting to touch. Unfortunately that didn't work. "*We don't have much time. I have to warn you. Makolm is planning to hypnotize you into obeying him by using a recharged Stone.*"

"What?" Cináed looked confused.

Tadeo didn't reply in words--they were probably too complicated for this method of communication. Instead, he focused all his energy on thinking about the picture he'd come up with. Right next to them, in the darkness that was around them, he saw it appear like a hologram. At first it was vague and nebulous, but the more he focused on it the clearer it became. Finally Makolm stood there, holding Cináed via a

leash and collar that were made of light, coming from the Stone in his hand.

He maintained the image as long as he could, but he weakened quickly. Cináed was still frowning at the two imaginary figures when Tadeo collapsed with exhaustion. The connection broke and Tadeo lost consciousness. His only hope was that Cináed had understood his message.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

CINÁED opened his eyes. What the hell had just happened? He sat at the table in the dining room, a half-empty plate with breakfast in front of him. Akir to his left and Gordan to his right were both staring at him with open mouths.

“Are you all right?” Akir frowned and reached over to take his wrist. He looked less anxious once he’d taken Cináed’s pulse.

“Am I still alive?” He couldn’t stop himself from joking even though he was still a little dizzy from the dreamlike experience.

“Yes, you’re still alive.” Akir dropped his hand and leaned back in his chair. “But you didn’t look okay just a minute ago.”

“You almost looked like your mind wasn’t here.” Gordan was still frowning.

“You’re right. I think I just had an out-of-body experience.” He closed his eyes for a minute, trying to bring the picture back. “Except it felt more real than that.”

“What do you mean? How can an out-of-body experience feel real?” Gordan shook his head and raked his hair with both hands. “I can’t believe I’m sitting here discussing out-of-body experiences at all, real or not.”

“Well, what I mean is that it felt to me as if Tadeo was trying to make contact with me.” He lifted his hand to stop both of them from interrupting. “I know how that sounds, but I can promise you that I didn’t go off the deep end. There have already been a couple of

instances when Tadeo and I felt so close it was as if our minds were connected. Possibly this was just the next step.”

“Your minds were connected?” Gordan sat back on his chair and crossed his arms in front of his chest.

Cináed nodded. He was too embarrassed to mention that most of them had happened at moments of extreme passion. There’d been a few other instances when it had seemed as if they’d read each other’s thoughts. He’d thought it was strange because they hadn’t known each other all that long and shouldn’t have been able to guess what the other had been thinking. So it must have been something else.

“You know, it could have something to do with this bonding process.” Akir leaned forward and looked at him as if he was trying to read his mind to determine what was really going on.

“The bonding process?” They didn’t know much about it other than that it enabled Tadeo and him to recharge the Stones. “I guess anything is possible. If the bonding creates an energy link that enables two minds to work together to recharge a Stone, then maybe it can do other things as well.”

“But long-distance communication between two minds?” Gordan still had his arms crossed, looking as skeptical as ever.

“It may sound strange, but a duel of mental healing abilities is similar in that it involves two minds touching to determine which is the stronger. We just never took this one step further to try and see if this was also possible long-distance.” Akir sat back in his chair. “I, for one, am ready to believe it’s possible. Which begs the question of what Tadeo managed to tell you?”

Gordan snorted but didn’t say anything further. Cináed grinned. His brother would come around when he saw proof and not a second before. Once he’d told his brother and his friend what had happened during the connection, they both looked skeptical. Having gone through it again, he was more convinced than ever that he’d gotten the message correctly.

Makolm was going to use a Stone, one of the few fully charged ones, to try to control Cináed’s mind. Tadeo had been right to warn

him. Without outside help, Makolm would probably have been weaker than Cináed, as he had been in the past. Using the power of a Stone, which Cináed hadn't even thought possible in the context of a duel, he might very well be a lot stronger. All Cináed had to do now was take his own Stone with him and figure out how to use it to counter Makolm's deceit.

A FEW hours later they were ready. Gordan and he wore their new kilts. They'd been designed to Tadeo's and his specifications and represented the new colors of the royal house of Dálriata. When they entered the MacAlpin residence, a guard led them to the large visitors' room on the left of the entrance.

"You disobeyed me!" Makolm sat in a thronelike leather chair at the head of the big dining room table. Four other priests were lined up to his left and right, two on each side. Cináed's father stood right behind Makolm, clearly playing bodyguard. A few MacAlpin warriors stood along each wall, and the guard who'd led them here stayed near the door. It was a blatant attempt to try and recreate the Inquisition court.

"I did no such thing." Cináed stood opposite Makolm, Gordan to his left and eight of the ten loyal warriors they'd brought with them in a half-circle behind them. The other two stood with their back to the room and guarded the door. All of them wore the new royal colors. There would be no surprises.

"You weren't supposed to bring all these warriors with you." Makolm's face began to turn red as he slammed a fist on the armrest of his chair.

"You didn't specify that in your letter." It took a lot of effort not to grin. Makolm's arrogance had enabled Cináed to surprise him. That gave him all the momentary advantage he needed to issue the official ritual challenge. Makolm couldn't ignore that once it had been spoken, not without a major loss of face.

“All right, have it your way.” Makolm threw him a glance filled with so much venom that it took everything he had not to look away. “It doesn’t change the facts. The Inquisition will find you guilty whether you’ve got warriors standing around you or not.”

“That may well be, but if you intend to go on with the Inquisition trial, you should make sure that all the accused are present.” Cináed was so desperate to see if Tadeo was okay he’d use any excuse to get Makolm to have him brought here.

“Don’t tell me how to run my courtroom!” Makolm turned even redder in the face, reassuring Cináed that he was doing a good job of unbalancing him. That would hopefully weaken him enough to make a difference during the duel. His father had remained impassive throughout their exchange.

Cináed didn’t respond. He didn’t look away from Makolm either.

“All right, bring the prisoner!” Makolm bellowed his order and looked down, pretending to have a look at some paperwork. He’d broken eye contact first, and Cináed felt ridiculously happy about having out-stared his former superior.

A few minutes later, two guards dragged Tadeo into the room. Cináed’s heart almost stopped beating. Tadeo was naked, filthy, had clearly been beaten, and favored his left leg. The way Tadeo’s face lit up when he saw him almost made up for that. When Tadeo looked around and realized what situation they were in, he visibly deflated. The guards pushed him to stand next to Cináed, and it must have taken all his energy to remain standing on his own. He was shaking with the effort within seconds.

“Now that everyone is finally here, let’s begin.” Makolm had used the intervening time to calm down.

“There’s one small matter we need to clarify before we can proceed.” Cináed stepped forward, taking the formal stance of challenge with his right fist on his heart and his left arm stretched out, palm up, toward Makolm. “I challenge you, former High Priest Makolm, to a duel of healing powers. I do this in the name of *Dia*, for the good of the people and as specified in the book of *Aesculap*.”

The silence was deafening.

“You *what?*” Makolm was the first to recover. He rose from his seat and walked out from behind the table so he could face Cináed straight on.

Cináed remained quiet, knowing that he’d have to await the formal answer to the challenge before he could speak again. If he didn’t, as a junior member of the healing order he’d lose his right to the duel. From the corner of his eye he saw Tadeo take a deep breath and sway, as if he was about to keel over. His husband managed to catch himself at the last moment, but he obviously wasn’t in good shape. Cináed swallowed his anger. He had to focus on the duel first.

“I accept the challenge in the name of *Dia*, for the good of the people and as specified in the book of *Aesculap*.” Makolm stepped closer and narrowed his eyes. “Are you sure that is what you want?”

There wasn’t any way to withdraw from this—not that he wanted to—so Cináed didn’t say anything and moved to the center of the room. The rug there would serve well as a symbolic fighting arena.

A last look at Gordan confirmed that his brother had his back. He’d moved close enough to Tadeo to be able to protect him should that become necessary. He’d stationed his warriors around the room so they covered their father, Makolm’s men, and the other priests. The door was guarded as before. His father looked livid but hadn’t moved from his post behind Makolm’s chair. They’d have to deal with him once the mental duel was over.

Cináed stepped onto the rug, Makolm following right behind him. The man may have been in his eighties, but he didn’t stoop or tremble like many older people did. His mental capabilities were probably in equally good shape, and Cináed reminded himself not to underestimate his opponent.

Makolm stood and faced him, quiet concentration on his face. Cináed made sure his position was stable, feet shoulder-width apart and hands loosely at his side. The battle was one of willpower and self-control as much as mental capabilities.

When he was ready he lifted both hands, his right palm up, his left palm down. Makolm followed suit, mirroring him so their hands touched with the maximum possible area of skin.

He'd been facing his teachers like this on a regular basis. Working in this position gave healers the opportunity to check each other's abilities. It was part of the annual testing system to determine who the strongest healer was at the end of the school year. Sometimes his teachers had used this method to determine the progress he'd made in healing certain areas of the body. Before he'd entered full service, Makolm had personally tested him, so he was familiar with the man's way of working.

But duels were different. They were going to direct their psychic energy in an attempt to focus enough of it in one spot to make the other person draw back. He'd been in a few duels like this when he was younger. In a situation like that, it was as much about protecting yourself against the opponent's attacking energy as it was about attacking him in your turn. There wasn't any real danger, since the energies involved without amplification of a Stone were so low that no real damage could be done.

As soon as their hands had reached the prescribed position, Cináed knew that Makolm was cheating, just as Tadeo had warned him. The first bolt of energy that came from the other man was far too intense to have been generated by Makolm's mind alone. If Cináed hadn't been prepared, the duel would already have been lost.

Since he'd brought his own Stone, he was able to use its strength to reinforce his defenses. Makolm's blast of energy crackled between them, but wasn't able to touch him.

Makolm's eyes widened in surprise, and he opened his mouth to say something when he thought better of it. Accusing Cináed of cheating could only result in the same charge being made against him. He gnashed his teeth and tried again.

The second attempt was more like a blast of energy than a bolt. The man was obviously trying to overwhelm Cináed's defenses by using brute force while he was still fresh.

Cináed staggered under the attack but managed to keep up the shield he'd built around his hands. They were the most likely area to be attacked because they were also the most easily accessible and vulnerable.

It was time for a counterattack. Cináed built the energy inside him slowly, letting it out in waves of increasing force when he was ready. He was hoping to overload Makolm's defensive shields by coming at them over a longer time but with increasing strength.

Makolm's knees buckled and his eyes narrowed in anger, but he was able to withstand the attack. The former high priest now looked so angry that Cináed didn't know what to expect. He remembered Tadeo's mental image of slavery and was wondering, like he had before, what that meant.

Makolm's third attack made that abundantly clear. The energy he threw at Cináed was of a brutal intensity and black instead of white in his mind's eye. It sizzled along his fingertips, trying to burrow inside his body around the edges, under the fingernails, and through any other cracks it might be able to find. While the white healing energy they'd used before needed to be fed by the healer's mind, this black energy remained at a very high level without Makolm making any effort. He stood there, quite relaxed, and smirked while Cináed was fighting for his life.

The energy had a third devastatingly different effect. It was slowly draining Cináed's defenses while attacking them at the same time. The increasingly painful stabs that made it through his weakening shields were aggressive. Cináed was able to feel their deadly force. If his defenses collapsed before he found a way to get rid of this energy, he was going to die.

The second he realized this, he redoubled his efforts to try to keep his defenses up as long as possible. But he was weakening quickly, and since there was no way to launch a counterattack at the same time, it looked like he might lose the duel.

Tadeo would remain behind alone. An intense pain stabbed Cináed's heart at the thought of doing that to the man he was beginning to love. The realization of how deep his feelings were surprised him,

but there was no doubt in his mind. He wanted to let Tadeo know, and his mind rebelled against his need to protect himself from the pain by withdrawing inside himself as far as possible. He wasn't going to give up. At the very least he could try to send Tadeo a mental message to let him know how he felt.

He grit his teeth and fought his way back to full consciousness despite the pain. There was a rainbow-colored light headed toward him in the darkness, and he fought his way toward it with everything he had. When it came closer, it morphed into Tadeo's features, and he smiled at his husband.

"Thank God you figured it out." Tadeo's mental voice sounded exactly like it had during their last exchange.

"I didn't want to leave you without letting you know that I love you." Cináed smiled when he saw understanding dawn on Tadeo's face.

"You're not going to leave me." Tadeo sounded so sure.

"You don't understand. I don't know how long I have. Makolm is attacking me with some strange form of black energy that I have no way to fight." Cináed was surprised that his protective shields hadn't collapsed. He was going to take every second he could get.

"I know that you're not going to leave me because we can fight Makolm together through our bond." Tadeo smiled. *"Our communication yesterday was just the beginning. When you started fighting Makolm, I followed you every step of the way. All you needed to do was open the door at your end, and I was able to come through. Now we stand together."*

It was true. Cináed was still holding his own, Makolm visibly perplexed as to why he hadn't given up yet. With a surge of determination Cináed dug deep inside, and with Tadeo's help, put together a ball of white energy. When they flung it at Makolm, it sliced through the black energy as if it was butter, neutralizing it along the way.

Finally all the black energy was gone, but theirs kept going. It wrapped itself around Makolm and started spinning, looking like a mini tornado. It spun faster and faster until Cináed's eyes weren't able to

follow it anymore. He dropped his hands, letting Makolm go. With a final soft “plop” the white energy tornado vanished, leaving an empty spot on the rug behind.

Makolm was gone.

THIS time there was no pain when Tadeo started clawing his way back to consciousness. He was exhausted. For a brief moment he felt tempted to ignore his curiosity, forget about waking up, and return to the deeper sleep that must have helped him feel so much better. When he noticed that Cináed was close to him, both inside his mind and curled around his body, all thoughts of more sleep were gone in a flash.

“Please come back to me. I’ve missed you so much.” Cináed’s voice must have woken him.

He was on his back, Cináed draped half over him. One of Cináed’s legs was between his thighs, an arm was flung around his middle, and Cináed’s hot mouth was nuzzling the side of his throat. He opened his eyes with an effort, curious to find out where they were.

The white ceiling and light blue walls looked reassuringly familiar. A small turn of his head revealed that the dark blue curtains around their four-poster bed had been half drawn, leaving them in a cocoon of extra privacy.

“I’m so sorry I failed you.” Cináed sounded close to tears.

“You didn’t fail me. Why do you think that?” Tadeo brought up his right hand and stroked Cináed’s back. “The abduction wasn’t your fault, was it?”

“You’re awake!” Cináed lifted his head and stared at him. “Thank *Dia*, you’ve come back to me.”

“I was never really gone, was I?” Jumbled memories of a necessary trip to the Eye surfaced and he had to amend that statement. “Well, at the time we thought I had to travel back to the Eye so that I could contact my ship. But that didn’t mean I’d *left* you.”

“It felt like it, though.” Cináed bent his head and kissed him, very carefully but full on the lips.

“I know what you mean.” It was all coming back to him now. The emptiness in his heart even before the MacAlpin warriors had captured him had been hard to bear. “I don’t think we’re meant to be apart. I mean, at all.”

“It does seem to go better for us when we’re together.” Cináed kept looking at him, eyes slightly moist and hair completely mussed. He looked adorable. “The long-distance communication is great and we should work on it, just in case. But it’s like a physical pain when you’re not close to me. I guess we still have lots to learn about being bonded.”

“Isn’t that the truth.” Tadeo frowned. “So what happened once Makolm vanished? I can’t remember anything after that white energy tornado took him. He’s still gone, isn’t he?”

“Yes, he’s still gone. There was a layer of fine gray dust on the rug where he’d stood. That’s the only proof he ever existed.” Cináed grinned and propped his head up on an elbow. “The new Council of Priests has made it a priority to identify his followers and to make sure they don’t have positions of power or influence. Most of them have apologized for the error of their ways and have promised to do penance.”

“Good. That’s a major relief.” There was another concern at the back of his mind. “What about the clans he’d managed to convince that his way was right?”

“Without his spiritual leadership, they’ll find it more difficult to rally. I guess they’ll never be our staunchest supporters, but the three clan leaders who’re affected have sworn that they’ll act within the boundaries of the law from now on.” Cináed turned serious. “In fact, one of them now has a new leader because the old one was killed in a sword fight.”

“Your father?” There was no love lost between Cináed and his father, but losing him like that wouldn’t have been easy.

“Yeah.” Cináed closed his eyes for a moment before looking back at Tadeo. “It all happened very quickly once Makolm was gone and

you were unconscious from the effort of helping me defeat him. My father drew his sword and was moving toward me when Gordan stepped between us and challenged him for clan leadership. The fight was long and hard on both of them, but Gordan was the more determined one, I think.”

“He killed his own father?” He was more worried about how Gordan would deal with it than upset about the man’s death.

“He didn’t have a choice.” Cináed looked haunted for a moment. “Challenges for clan leadership have to end in the death of one of the participants. Well, historically at least. It’s one of the things we might want to consider changing.”

“Not before we’ve solved some of the more urgent problems.” Like the need for him to resign his commission so he could get on with his new life.

“Yeah, I agree. I think we should leave it to the Warrior Council to come up with a solution anyway. It’s their tradition, after all. With Gordan now a full member of the Council, there’ll be a voice of reason pushing them toward making progress.”

“Gordan made it into the Warrior Council?” That was a major relief. “It looks like our alliances are coming together.”

“Yes, they are. Finally!” Cináed smiled. “With Gordan in the Warrior Council, Akir as the personal assistant of the new High Priest, and Akir’s father most likely to be elected the head of the new Merchant Council, it looks like we may have some time to focus on recharging more Stones so that the rest of the population can benefit from this new era as well.”

“While I think that’s a great idea, I’m not so sure we should be attempting to do this by ourselves.” Tadeo was selfish enough to want some time to spend with his new husband. And since that usually involved using energy rather than resting, he wasn’t convinced that they should be spending the majority of their time recharging Stones.

“You mean we should try and find help?” Cináed tilted his head, looking thoughtful.

“We haven’t really talked about it.” He’d had time to think about it while sitting in his cell in the MacAlpin residence though. “I think we need to figure out how to find more bonded pairs. And find a way to encourage them to come forward and help us with the task of ensuring everyone has access to free health care, like they’re supposed to.”

“You’re right; it can’t be up to us to recharge all the thousands of Stones that probably exist throughout Dálriata. We’d be exhausted in no time. And we do have other things to do as well.” Cináed nodded. “Once everything has calmed down a little, it might be a good idea to discuss this with Gordan and Akir. Based on what we know from the Old Laws, the bonded pairs will come from the ranks of the healers and the warriors. So they should probably be involved, since they’re more likely to know which ideas are more likely to be acceptable to the two groups.”

Tadeo yawned, suddenly feeling exhausted from all the planning.

“I’m sorry, love. You still need your rest.” Cináed smiled and placed a kiss on his temple. “The Stones may have healed most of the damage, but your body still needs time to recover.”

“I’m sorry.” He’d wanted to make love, not fall asleep again.

“Don’t be. We’re warm and together, and we’re both safe.” Cináed kissed each of his drooping eyelids and tightened his arm around his middle. “Sleep for a little while, and when you wake up you’ll feel better.”

“Humph.” God, but he was tired all of a sudden. “Will you stay with me?”

“There isn’t anywhere else I’d rather be.” Cináed put his head on Tadeo’s chest. “I’ll still be here when you wake up.”

IT WAS almost a week before Tadeo had fully recovered. Cináed had made sure that he didn’t do anything more strenuous than take slow walks around the house’s courtyard. He’d been bored out of his skull the last two days and had decided that enough was enough. Things

were going to change. It was time they went back to normal, whatever that meant for them now.

“You look restless.” Cináed walked onto the balcony and took a seat next to him in the shade. When he’d made it clear that he was no longer willing to stay in their bedroom all day, Cináed had suggested that resting on the balcony in fresh air would be the next best thing. Since the sun was pretty fierce, the majordomo had provided a parasol for his comfort.

“I guess sitting around on my ass all day, doing nothing but ‘resting’ is getting to me.” He sounded harsher than he’d wanted to, but it was time to stop all this recuperation crap and get going on what he really needed to do.

“I’m sorry.” Cináed looked crestfallen. “I just want to make sure you’re okay.”

“I didn’t mean it like that, darling.” Shit, he didn’t want to hurt Cináed for anything. His husband had been so worried and only meant well. He reached out and took Cináed’s hand between his own. “But I assure you that I’m completely okay now. Can’t you use your healer talent to check? I’m ready to get on with our lives.”

“Okay.” Cináed had relaxed immediately once they touched. “I guess you’re right, I can feel it. I just wanted to make sure. So, what do you want to do?”

“I still need to contact my ship to resign my commission. That’s something I have to do before we can move on. It’s been bugging me that I still haven’t gotten around to it.” He was also afraid that something might go wrong, that his shipmates might remember him because the Eye’s posthypnotic suggestions became ineffective. Once they came looking for him, it would be awfully difficult to defend his actions. It was much better if he took the initiative.

“Okay, we can do that.” Cináed nodded. “I’ve searched the High Priest’s private chambers to try and locate the Holy Messenger. I couldn’t find anything and neither could Akir, who was helping me. But I suspect that both of us need to be there to activate it. Same as with the Eye, I guess.”

“Can we go now?” His need to do something became almost overpowering.

“Sure. Lunch isn’t for another few hours, so we should be safe.” Cináed smiled and got up, pulling Tadeo to a standing position since the other man was apparently just as unwilling to let go of Cináed’s hand as he was.

“That’s another thing we need to talk about.” Tadeo followed Cináed downstairs and to the stables.

“What? The timing for lunch?” Cináed greeted Sim, their favorite stable boy, who helped him saddle his favorite stallion while Tadeo selected another horse and accepted help from a new boy.

“No, not the timing. I’m more bothered by the fact that we keep having to adapt to the way this household runs.” He wanted his independence back. “Not that I’m not grateful to Akir’s parents, but I think it’s time that we moved out. We did talk about having our own house—sorry, residence is probably more accurate. I wonder what happened there.”

“Funny you should mention that.” Cináed mounted his horse and thanked Sim, who blushed deeply. “I just received a report on the developments at our city palace. Apparently they’ve put extra manpower onto the project, and the central part of the building will be completed tomorrow. The east and west wings still need work, but since most of the rooms there will become guest quarters, offices, and the ballroom, that doesn’t need to stop us from moving into our part of the building.”

“That’s brilliant.” He got onto his horse and suddenly hesitated. “If that is what you want too. I’m sorry, I just assumed you were as keen to be inside our own four walls as I was.”

“Oh, I’m keen to move within our own four walls, all right. Even if it’ll take some time to get used to living in a palace, I suspect it’ll feel better than being guests in someone else’s house.” Cináed led the way outside and turned them toward the monastery, which was clearly visible in the glaring morning sunshine. “Then the only thing we need to sort out is finding the appropriate staff to help us run everything.”

“I have no idea how to select household staff.” Tadeo chuckled. “I can tell you how to recruit a crew for a starship, but I suspect this will be quite different.”

“Not too different, if you think about it.” Cináed smiled as they approached the monastery. “We’ll be looking for people who know what they’re doing in their field, we’d want them to be hardworking and honest... the only thing that might be slightly different is that we need them to be discreet as well.”

“You’re probably right. It doesn’t sound that different at all.” He grinned. “If that’s the case, the first person we need to find is a good first officer. Um, I mean majordomo. He can help us with the rest.”

“Okay, problem solved.” Cináed laughed as he dismounted and handed his horse’s reins to the waiting stable boy.

Tadeo followed suit, glad they’d been able to get one thing decided. Compared to moving into a palace and sorting out staff to run it for them, surely finding the Holy Messenger would be child’s play.

As it turned out, he was right. Once they’d entered the High Priest’s private chambers and had completed their initial look around, they were both drawn to what looked like a sculpture on the mantelpiece of the marble fireplace. The translucent sphere sat on a black marble pedestal that looked like the base of the Eye.

Remembering the need to use their energies together, they reached out and touched it at the same time. It came to life immediately. Rainbow-colored swirls appeared in its center and spread outward until the whole sphere was glowing. After a few seconds, the colors shifted, adjusted themselves, and the dominant hue became the same blue they’d seen inside the Eye when it was activated.

“It took you long enough.” The voice was just as deep and annoying as it had been when it had spoken to them from inside the stone circle.

“Well, there were a few problems.” Cináed winked at Tadeo, sharing his pleasure about the well-formulated understatement.

“I trust you have sorted those out now?” The voice sounded amused.

“We have indeed. That is why we’re here.” He was about to continue when he was interrupted. Patience apparently wasn’t something the Eye’s creators had programmed into their construct.

“Of course it is. But you have nothing to worry about. Now that you have solved your problems and the Dálriatans are well on their way to progressing normally, I have lifted my posthypnotic suggestions from your crew’s minds. I have informed them that they will be hearing from you shortly. If you let me know what it is you wish to tell them, I will make sure they receive the message in whatever format you require.” The voice sounded proud of itself.

And this time it had every reason to be. For once its interference was going to work to Tadeo’s advantage. The message was composed quickly and he spoke it into the sphere without hesitation. When he was done, the relief he felt was immediate. Within a few minutes the confirmation came back in a somewhat unexpected form.

“Your order for a quarantine of this planet for the next ten years has been entered into the ship’s memory banks, sir.” His first officer’s voice came through the sphere as if it were a long-distance communicator. “As you know, it will be passed on to Fleet headquarters with the next communication buoy and should be registered there without a problem. Based on your request, I’ve made sure that our status as long-distance explorers is attached to it so that there will be no challenges to this order until our mission is over, approximately nine years from now.”

He went on to say that he was sorry to lose his captain but that he understood why he wanted to stay. He ended the communication by officially accepting the resignation and wishing Tadeo good luck.

Perfect. Cináed’s broad smile confirmed that his husband felt the same way. They left the monastery together, holding hands and feeling more optimistic about their future than they ever had before.

CHAPTER TWELVE

“THANKS for making the time to see us.” Cináed had been frustrated that it had taken them almost two weeks to find a time that all four of them were available for a meeting. He was beginning to consider setting aside a regular time to meet with his most important supporters and friends to avoid this sort of situation in the future. “We know you’re very busy, but Tadeo and I have something important to talk to you about.”

“Aren’t you nervous about the coronation tomorrow?” Akir sat across from them on one of the three leather couches in the meeting room off Tadeo’s and his brand-new offices, on the ground floor of the east wing of their city palace. “Wouldn’t you rather spend this time getting ready for it?”

“What’s to get ready for?” Cináed grinned. “It’s not like anything is going to go wrong, is it? Not with a master of ceremonies who’s as experienced as Boyd MacKeith taking care of everything and everyone.”

“I guess you’re right.” Gordan sat on the other couch, long legs stretched out and leaning back comfortably. “He ran the swearing-in of the new members of the Warrior Council, and there wasn’t a man in the room who wasn’t scared of doing something wrong and attracting his ire.”

“We figure we have more important things to do than worry about an event that is mostly ceremonial and has enough people working on it already.” Tadeo sat so close to him on their couch that he could feel his husband’s body heat through both of their kilts.

“Okay, you’ve got me interested.” Akir took a sip from his glass of fruit juice before sitting back to listen.

“Ditto.” Gordan didn’t move but his eyes said he was paying attention.

“We’ve solved a lot of problems in the last four weeks. In some cases we’ve only made a start, but almost everything looks like there’s going to be a solution sooner rather than later.” Cináed took a sip of water before he continued. “The one area we haven’t been able to make any headway in is the recharging of more Stones. Currently only Tadeo and I can do it, and because our energy is limited, this has necessarily slowed the process down.”

“We’re worried that large parts of the population will continue to go without health care if we don’t find a way to do this more quickly and efficiently.” Tadeo sighed. “The truth of the matter is that there are too many Stones for only the two of us. We need help.”

“But that would mean finding more bonded pairs.” Gordan frowned. “Aside from the fact that I’m not sure most unmarried warriors would be open to the idea of bonding with another man, how do we even start setting this in motion?”

“I don’t know how many warriors, or healers for that matter, would consider such an arrangement. I think the only way to find out is to give it a try.” Cináed had known that this would be an uphill battle, but he hadn’t counted on his brother being so skeptical. “I think we can get around the logistics of how to make them meet. That’s the easy part. The real problem is the motivation to try and the acceptance of the result.”

“I know that’s definitely true for the healers.” Akir had been suspiciously quiet and looked even more skeptical than Gordan. “They’ve been told that male bonding is one of the worst sins possible ever since they were five years old. It’s not going to be easy to convince them that it’s now suddenly okay.”

“We can’t just give up!” Cináed was beginning to have the feeling he was missing something. “Isn’t there anything we can do to encourage them? For the healers the benefit of having an unlimited

supply of healing energy should be obvious. I can see why the warriors might be more hesitant.”

“It’s not like they’re afraid!” Gordan sat up straight and raised his eyebrows.

“Prove it!” Akir’s eyes blazed with anger.

What the hell?

“What are you trying to imply?” Gordan’s hands were fisted, and he stared at Akir as if he was about to strangle him.

“I’m not trying to imply anything.” Akir raised a hand and pointed it at Gordan. “What I’m saying is that the likes of you are just as reluctant to change things as some of the more traditional healers.”

“The likes of me?” Gordan moved forward in his seat as if he was about to physically attack Akir.

“I think it’s time we get one of those used-up Stones in here.” Tadeo’s voice was so soft that Cináed had trouble understanding him.

“Huh? What would that accomplish?” Cináed was still trying to understand why his best friend and his brother were suddenly at each other’s throats.

“I have the distinct impression that there’s more going on between those two than is visible at the surface.” Tadeo winked at him.

“What? You can’t be serious.” Cináed looked from Akir to Gordan and back. They were still yelling at each other, barely restraining themselves from jumping up. “You really think so?”

Tadeo shrugged.

“Oh, *Dia*. You may be right.” Cináed got up, went to his office, and picked one of the used-up Stones from the bowl that always magically seemed to refill with more Stones that needed their attention.

When he came back, Akir and Gordan noticed him and stopped arguing.

“Where did you run off to?” Gordan’s voice was gruff.

“Tadeo has suggested something to me and I think it’s a good idea.” Cináed had hidden the used-up stone in a fist and now stretched

out his hand, palm up, to show it to the two squabblers. “If we’re going to ask healers and warriors all over Dálriata to come forward to test whether their energies are compatible, it’s essential that the two of you give a good example and go first.”

“What?” Gordan’s mouth fell open.

“No, please don’t.” Akir deflated and moved back on the sofa, trying to look small.

What the hell was going on?

“Look, this is not dangerous.” Tadeo was trying hard not to smile. “All we’re asking you to do is give it a try. That way you can tell your people that there’s nothing to it. You can say that you’ve tried, and will keep trying with other potential partners, just like everyone else will need to do. We don’t even know if anyone can ever find their bond partner that way, but it’s worth a try, right?”

Cináed remained where he was, hand outstretched, and waited.

Gordan looked incredulous but was slowly moving toward him. Akir was close to tears, but he also finally gave in. He got up and took the Stone from Cináed’s palm, placing it on his own and stretching out his arm toward Gordan. He lifted his chin in defiance and stared at Gordan, as if daring him to refuse.

Cináed stepped back and sat down next to Tadeo, taking his hand and linking their fingers. Tadeo squeezed, and it made him feel better to know that he wasn’t facing this suddenly explosive situation alone.

The air was crackling with electricity, and the tension became almost unbearable.

Gordan made eye contact with Akir, and the expression in his eyes softened. He lifted his hand and, without looking, touched the used-up Stone.

The reaction was immediate. The Stone started to get brighter, white light soon pouring from it until it was almost painful to look at. Soft rainbow colors started shimmering across its surface, making it look like it was alive. Then it started vibrating, and its brightness

increased until it was almost blinding. Finally it started to hum softly, and Cináed knew it had been fully recharged.

Nobody moved for almost a full minute.

When Gordan withdrew his hand, the Stone stopped humming but it retained its whiteness, shimmering and glowing like any other healthy Stone. Cináed held his breath. Akir and Gordan stood perfectly still, staring into each other's eyes, clearly transfixed.

Then Gordan took a step back. And another one. He didn't break eye contact with Akir, but he kept moving away until he'd reached the door.

"I need time to think about this." Gordan opened the door and, with a small nod at Akir, left the office and pulled the door closed behind him.

Akir stumbled back toward his spot on the couch. He collapsed onto it and buried his face in his hands. He didn't make a sound, but his shoulders were shaking.

Cináed looked at Tadeo, totally perplexed. Tadeo shrugged. He didn't seem to know what to do either. Cináed moved over to sit next to Akir, putting an arm around his shoulders for comfort.

After a while the shaking stopped and Akir rubbed his face dry with the sleeves of his robe before looking up. He looked younger than his twenty-five years and totally lost.

"What's going on?" Cináed was going to get to the bottom of this as soon as possible.

"I don't think he likes me very much." Akir shrugged. "It's just too bad that the two of us won't be able to help you recharge the Stones. I'm truly sorry about that."

"Never mind about the Stones. I'm sure we can find other bonded pairs if we try long enough. I'm more worried about the sudden animosity between the two of you." Cináed also worried about Akir, who seemed far more interested in Gordan than the other way around. He knew that he couldn't force his brother into anything he wasn't

willing to do, but he was beginning to think that beating some sense into him might be a good idea.

“It isn’t that sudden.” Akir sighed. “I have no idea why, but he’s always been very businesslike and abrupt with me. It hasn’t interfered with our duties so far, and I’m sure that’s not going to change. We both know what’s at stake here, and we’re mature enough to deal with it.”

“But...” Cináed couldn’t believe that his friend would give up so easily. There was clearly some history between the two that he hadn’t even noticed until now. Now that he knew about it, he wasn’t going to ignore it.

“No buts. Just drop it, okay?” Akir’s eyes were big and pleading. “Please?”

“All right, I’ll drop it for now. But we’re going to get back to this when both of you’ve had some time to cool down.” That was a promise Cináed was going to keep, one way or the other.

TADEO was relieved that the coronation ceremony had gone off without a hitch. They’d held it outside on the large central city plaza to give as many people as possible the opportunity to watch. It was a big event, and half the city had turned up to cheer them on.

The coronation ball was about to start in the newly finished grand ballroom of their palace. He stood at the window of their bedroom, looking into the large courtyard with its trees and beautiful, exotic flowers. The glass of refreshing *sùbh* juice had been just the right thing to quench his thirst after having taken a quick bath. He was waiting for Cináed to finish his bath so they could go downstairs together. They’d found that joint baths were not conducive to arriving on time. Being late for their coronation ball would be too embarrassing.

He chuckled. He still had moments when he wanted to pinch himself to check whether this was all real. He was now king of an entire planet, married to the most gorgeous man on the same planet, who was also a king. It was a more bizarre turn of events than he would have been able to come up with had he tried.

He was also happier than he'd ever thought possible. He'd never really looked for a life partner, preferring the adventurous and mostly lonely life of a starship captain. Now that he had found him though, he wouldn't trade being married for anything.

"So, how does it feel to be king, Your Majesty?" Cináed walked out of the bathroom, his wavy hair still damp from his bath, dripping onto his bare chest. The droplets were running down his flat abdomen into the top of the ceremonial kilt that was emphasizing his slim hips and muscular thighs.

"It would feel a lot better if we didn't have the stupid coronation ball to go to in a few minutes." Tadeo grinned and bent down to lick the water droplets from his husband's chest. He "accidentally" licked across a dark brown nipple and made Cináed groan.

"*Dia!* You just *had* to do that, didn't you?" Cináed retaliated by framing his face in both hands and pulling him close for a scorching kiss.

When they resurfaced for breath, they were both rock-hard under their kilts and grinning with the joy of being able to make each other so hot within seconds.

"And that, my darling, is a promise." Cináed took his hand and started walking toward the door. "As soon as this ball is over—or rather, as soon as we can leave without attracting too much attention—we're coming back here to have wild coronation sex."

"Coronation sex?" He burst out laughing. "How do you come up with this stuff?"

"It's your fault, you know?" Cináed winked at him. "You inspire me."

"Oh, well, that's okay then." He placed one last quick kiss on Cináed's lips before they had to put their official faces on again. "I like inspiring you. I've found that it leads to the most amazing orgasms."

"You just *had* to mention orgasms again just as we're about to leave the room, didn't you?" Cináed turned and took him into his arms, placed one hand on his ass, and pushed their lower bodies together. He ground his hard erection against Tadeo's equally hard cock in a teasing

little circular movement that made them both moan. “Do you want us to walk out there and face everyone while trying to figure out how to hide our erections?”

“No, I want to stay in here and have our coronation sex now.” Tadeo pretended to pout, but he wasn’t very good at it and only succeeded in making Cináed laugh.

“Right after the ball, darling, I promise.” Why did Cináed always have to be so sensible?

“It’s not like we can be too late.” One more try. There was nothing wrong with coming now *and* later, was there?

“Of course we can be too late. We’re dangerously close to it already.” Cináed frowned.

“Nope, we can’t be late.” Tadeo grinned, waiting a few seconds for maximum impact. “Kings are never late, everyone else is early.”

“Huh?” Cináed’s eyes widened as his words sank in, then he burst out laughing. “That is just priceless. *Dia*, I think that deserves a reward.”

“That sounds more like it.” Tadeo pulled his husband over to one of the couches before the man could change his mind. His kilt was up and Tadeo’s nose buried in his groin a few seconds later. He took a deep breath and moaned when the clean, musky scent went straight to his brain and made him even harder. “God, I love kilts.”

“What have kilts got to do with it?” Cináed lowered one leg to the floor to give him better access and moaned at Tadeo’s first swipe up his swollen shaft with just the tip of his tongue.

Tadeo lifted his head.

“Easy access, baby.” He bent back to his task, this time licking with a flat tongue but much more slowly.

Cináed chuckled but not for long. The man was panting by the time Tadeo’s tongue reached the head and slid around and around, bucking his hips to try and get a firmer touch.

“Come here.” Cináed slid a hand under his kilt, grabbed a buttock and squeezed. “I want easy access too.”

Without interrupting what he was doing, Tadeo lifted one leg over Cináed's head and put his knee next to the other man's shoulder. Leaving his other foot on the floor for stability, he continued teasing the tempting cock in front of him. Pre-cum was already leaking from it, and he reveled in the scent and taste of it.

Meanwhile Cináed had lifted his kilt and was burrowing his nose behind his balls and kissing, then licking his sensitive sac. Tadeo groaned, loving the sensations and regretting they didn't have time for more than a blow job. When Cináed gently encircled his cock with a hand to bring it toward his hot mouth, Tadeo stopped regretting anything. As soon as Cináed enclosed him with his lips, sucking him straight into the velvety softness of his mouth until he hit the back of his lover's throat, Tadeo stopped thinking.

As if by reflex he gave up the slow torture of Cináed's cock and swallowed it down all the way. They stayed like that for a few moments. Tadeo savored the penetration, the tension, and the expectant waiting for what was to come.

With an almost explosive suddenness, they broke the tranquility. Moving back slowly to take a deep breath through his nose, he swirled his tongue around the head of Cináed's cock before pushing his lips back down. Cináed mirrored his movements, making this a mutual attempt at trying to make the other come first.

He bobbed his head, sucking on the upstroke and pushing his nose into Cináed's tightening balls on each downstroke. His hips started thrusting when Cináed's suction drove his arousal even higher. His husband grabbed his hips to encourage him, making him moan at the back of his throat.

"Not long now." Tadeo was especially grateful for their ability to communicate without speaking at moments like this, his mouth occupied with devouring one of his favorite treats.

"Mhm." Cináed unable to think in words was a clear sign that they'd reached their limit, and Tadeo let go.

He sucked Cináed all the way down into his throat and started swallowing around the swollen head. Cináed stiffened, and his seed

started spurting from his throbbing cock straight down Tadeo's throat. That's what he needed to push him over the edge. Bucking his hips to fuck Cináed's mouth, to get the last bit of friction he needed, he felt his balls tighten as he started to come. The pleasure wrapped itself around his entire body as he emptied his balls, Cináed sucking until he had nothing more to give.

He lifted his head, gasping for air, and put his cheek on Cináed's trembling thigh. His own legs were in the same condition, but he locked his knee and managed to stop himself from collapsing onto his husband's face. Cináed was stroking his hips and ass in a tender caress while they both came back to reality.

"Wow." Tadeo lifted himself off Cináed's body and turned around for a kiss.

Tongues slipping and sliding lazily, he did his best to communicate his feelings to Cináed. They didn't often say the words, but ever since that day of the final battle with Makolm, he knew that his deep caring had grown into love.

"Yeah." Cináed smiled as he looked up into Tadeo's black eyes when his husband pulled back. Wow was right. And so was Tadeo when he'd said that they couldn't be late because it was everyone else who was early. He wouldn't have missed this quick but very satisfying release of tension for all the punctuality in the world. The ball and the coronation sex sure to follow afterwards would go much better, be more relaxed, now that they'd taken the edge off.

"Ready to go face the crowds, baby?" Tadeo righted himself, pulling him up and into his arms one last time.

Cináed nodded. They straightened their kilts and donned their ceremonial crowns, lighter replicas of the real jewels they'd had on their heads earlier. He took Tadeo's hand and they walked downstairs, stopping in front of the closed ballroom doors. The music was loud enough to be heard through the thick *darach* wood.

Farlan, their majordomo, was ready for them. He bowed deeply, then opened the doors and banged his staff on the floor. The silence

was immediate. Everyone in the room turned toward the door to watch their new kings make an entrance. Cináed still wasn't sure he liked all this pomp and circumstance, but it seemed to be something that people enjoyed, so he was willing to compromise.

"I have the honor to present to you His Majesty, King Cináed, and his royal husband, His Majesty, King Tadeo." Farlan bowed again and stepped back.

The applause was almost deafening. Everybody bowed or curtsied as they walked down the steps and made their way across the room toward their thrones, set on a small dais covered in red carpet. The crowd parted for them as if directed by invisible hands. It was a little scary, and Cináed was grateful that occasions like this would be limited. He'd make sure of that.

When they reached their seats, the music started up again. Boyd, their master of ceremonies, stood to Tadeo's left and slightly back, a happy smile on his face. He was clearly in his element.

Gordan stood to his right, also slightly back, and while he wasn't smiling, he was far more relaxed than he'd been yesterday afternoon. His brother had assured him that walking out of the office had been a knee-jerk reaction. He'd already apologized to Akir, and it looked like the two of them would at least be able to work together. It was a start and all Tadeo and he could ask for. Gordan and Akir wouldn't be the last pair that might have a slightly bumpy road ahead of them in adjusting to the fact that they were meant to be bonded.

At the end of the next piece of music, Boyd stepped forward and bowed in their direction before turning to the crowd and banging his ceremonial staff onto the floor of the dais.

"May I have your attention, please." Boyd's voice had a formal quality to it that made everyone listen almost automatically. "The coronation ball is about to be opened by their Majesties, King Cináed and King Tadeo. They have chosen a waltz composed especially for this momentous occasion. Please give them your undivided attention."

As they walked toward the dance floor, Cináed noticed that a few people looked quite uncomfortable. He barely suppressed his grin. Two

men dancing together was a first for everyone. Well, almost everyone. Boyd had been the one to teach Tadeo and him to waltz, and their master of ceremonies hadn't found this idea easy to deal with. He'd even suggested they each pick a female partner from amongst the dignitaries so they could open the ball in the more traditional manner of unmarried hosts.

As uncomfortable as he'd been with the idea of having to dance in public, picking some female had been out of the question. Tadeo had been equally adamant, and Boyd had eventually given in. Many lessons and much stepping on each other's feet later, they'd begun to enjoy moving to the music together.

It was going to be different this time, because everybody was watching them. Ignoring the crowds and focusing on Tadeo and the joy of holding him in his arms in public was his best bet for not embarrassing them.

Cináed opened his arms, and Tadeo stepped into them without hesitation. He lifted his right hand to take his husband's and slid his left around Tadeo's middle as Tadeo's right hand landed on his shoulder. The hauntingly beautiful notes of the waltz made it easy to forget where they were as soon as they started moving. He only saw Tadeo, felt his body move against his own, and admired the masculine grace of his movements.

Halfway through the piece, with an ease born of many practice sessions, they exchanged positions so that now Tadeo was in the traditional woman's stance, with his right arm lifted. When the music ended they stood for a few moments, their arms lowered and their hands grasping each other.

The applause was hesitant at first, but soon gained momentum, and they both grinned in relief. It seemed that society had been successfully introduced to a new form of recreational dancing. They hadn't planned on doing another dance together, but when the next piece of music started and everyone played up to join them, it was hard to resist.

"You want to go another round?" Tadeo looked so hopeful that he nodded.

“You really like this, don’t you?” Cináed lifted his right hand again and started swirling around the now-crowded dance floor.

“I do. I’ve always loved music and used to be the last one standing at every Fleet ball I had the opportunity to go to.” Tadeo grinned, leaning into the movements of the dance. “I’m going to teach you to tango. That will blow these people’s socks off!”

“Tango?” Cináed had been glad he’d mastered the waltz; he wasn’t sure that he was ready for another form of dancing.

“You’ll love that one.” Tadeo’s eyes twinkled. “We may have to get the Eye to help us obtain the music. It didn’t become popular on earth until the nineteenth century, so it’s not something your forefathers would have brought with them when they left a good five hundred years earlier. It can be a very masculine dance, and I think we should practice it so that we can surprise everyone at our first anniversary ball.”

“First anniversary... are you planning to make this a regular event?” As much fun as Tadeo was obviously having, Cináed wasn’t about to deny him. He wasn’t about to make it easy for him either. When they switched to him being in the lead, he took them into a series of counterclockwise turns that required all their attention, half-hoping that Tadeo would drop his idea of annual repeats.

“Well, I think it could be fun.” Tadeo’s cheeks were dark from the exertion and his breath was coming faster as they went back to the easier clockwise swirls. “I’m sure a lot of people would like it, looking at how much they’re enjoying themselves tonight. I know Boyd would love it, and as for Farlan—did you notice how much happier our majordomo looked when he had all those last-minute emergencies to fix during the last three days?”

“You can’t fool me.” Cináed grinned. He’d rarely seen Tadeo this animated outside the bedroom. “I’m touched by how concerned you are about everybody else’s needs and requirements, but deep down, it’s you who really, really likes this sort of event, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, I guess so.” Tadeo shrugged, his eyes downcast. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t be pushing you. I know you don’t like public events very much. Forget I said anything.”

“Oh, no. That’s not how I think this partnership should work.” Cináed hated seeing Tadeo give in like this. “We can’t talk about it right now, but I’d like to discuss it with you as soon as we can get away from here.”

“Okay.” Tadeo looked relieved and gave him a smile.

The music soon ended, and they went back to their thrones, where they accepted some water and slices of the much-discussed coronation cake. It was the best chocolate cake Cináed had ever tasted. If there was no other way to get their kitchen to produce cake like this, he would gladly accept an annual repeat of this ball. Tadeo’s quiet moans as he devoured his slice confirmed that his husband was equally enamored with this new treat.

Many dances and quite a few slices of cake later he suggested—and Tadeo immediately agreed—that their public appearance had been long enough. It was time to retire to the privacy of their bedroom. Boyd completed his final public act as master of ceremonies with as much flourish as he’d handled the entire planning and execution of this event and sent them off with a final round of thunderous applause.

They were upstairs, in their bathroom, and naked in record time. Eating all that chocolate, not to mention all the dancing they’d done, had apparently had an effect on both their libidos. Cináed went into the bathtub first and pulled Tadeo against him as soon as he followed. When he had the other man with his back to his chest and leaning his head back against his shoulder, Cináed soaped up a washcloth and started cleaning him with slow, easy strokes, admiring the effect of the white lather against his husband’s dark skin.

“So, about this ‘I shouldn’t be pushing you—forget I said anything’ statement you made earlier.” Cináed continued his soothing movements, hoping it would help them both to stay relaxed. He didn’t want to ruin the mood for what was to come once they made it into their bed. But this was too important to ignore. “To tell you the truth, your saying that has really got me worried.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to worry you.” Tadeo turned his head so he could look at him. “But I must admit that I don’t understand why it’s got you so upset.”

“Fair enough.” Cináed bent forward to slide the soapy cloth along Tadeo’s long legs. “We’ve been through a lot in a very short time, and we found a solution to the problem that’s closest to my heart. Providing health care to everyone, even if it’ll still take us some time to get there, is now within our reach. The recharging of the Stones is getting easier every time we do it. We’ve set in motion a way to find more bonded pairs to help us. We’ve even sorted out our ‘unconventional’ partnership and its public face without people rebelling.”

Tadeo took the cloth from Cináed when he was done cleaning him and turned around to return the favor.

“The one thing we’ve never really talked about is how we handle our decision-making just between the two of us.” There hadn’t been any issue so far, at least none that he was aware of. “I’m not even sure it’s a problem, but I was worried when you gave in so quickly, just assuming that what I wanted was going to be more important.”

“It hasn’t been a problem for me so far, you’re right.” Tadeo stopped his movements and tilted his head. “And honestly, if there’s something you really don’t want to do, I don’t want to force you into it. But I see your point. If I work on assumptions, I might miss the opportunity to find out more from you.”

“That’s exactly what I mean.” He was so relieved, he hugged Tadeo to him, enjoying the slippery slickness of his husband’s body pressed against his. “Unless we talk about it, we’ll never be able to find out if there’s a chance for a compromise.”

“So, about the annual ball. What’s the compromise there?” Tadeo’s eyes twinkled with mischief. “We have one every other year?”

“That would be one way of doing it.” Cináed laughed and pushed them both up and out of the tub. Drying off and getting into bed was the only thing he was truly concerned with at the moment. “The other way would be to promise me that I can have as much of that

scrumptious chocolate cake as I want every time we have a ball like that.”

“Aha, chocolate has just become my negotiation tool of choice.” Tadeo winked at him and took his hand to lead the way to their bed. “Good to know.”

Cináed grinned as they sank onto their soft mattress, their arms and legs entwined, groins moving in a sensuous rhythm that had them both hard and moaning within seconds. He gave himself over to the passionate kisses, lips and tongues playing with each other as they pushed their arousal higher and higher. Tadeo didn’t need chocolate to negotiate. All he needed to do was kiss him like this, and he was likely to forget his own name.

When he came back down from one of the best orgasms he’d ever had and was able to recall his name, Cináed sighed.

“What?” Tadeo lifted his head from its spot next to Cináed’s face and tried to push himself up from where he lay on top of him.

“I’m glad you came to Dálriata and found me.” He slid one arm around Tadeo’s shoulders and the other around his middle before turning them so they lay on their sides, bodies still entwined.

“So am I, baby.” Tadeo smiled and kissed him again before snuggling in for a nap. “The Eye of Scota has my gratitude for saving your forefathers from death. It’s made it possible for us to face life together from now on.”

Cináed smiled. He definitely liked this new way of looking at the Eye of Scota.

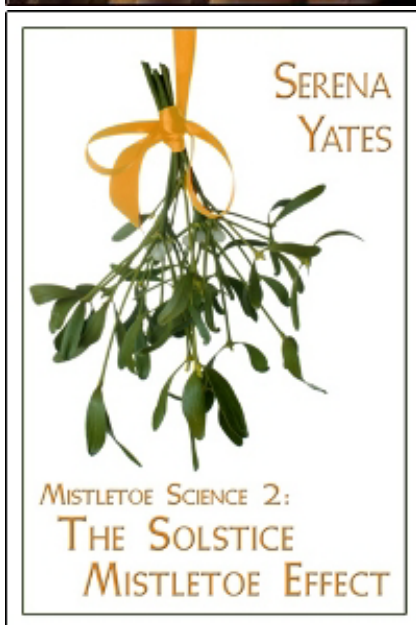
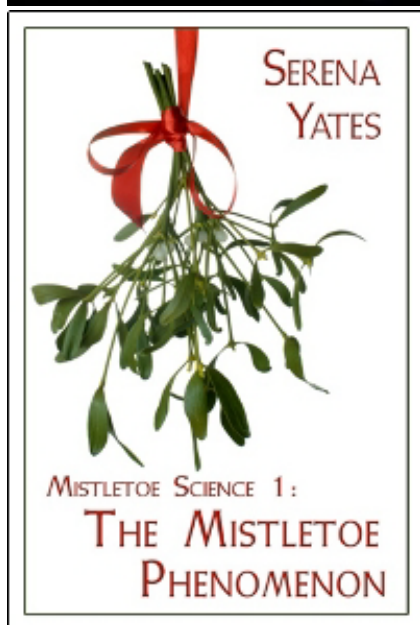
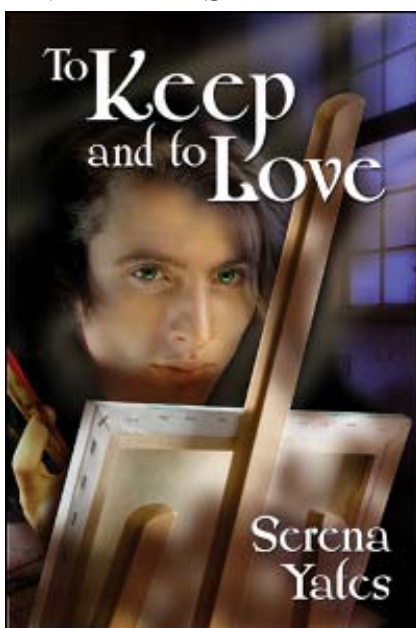
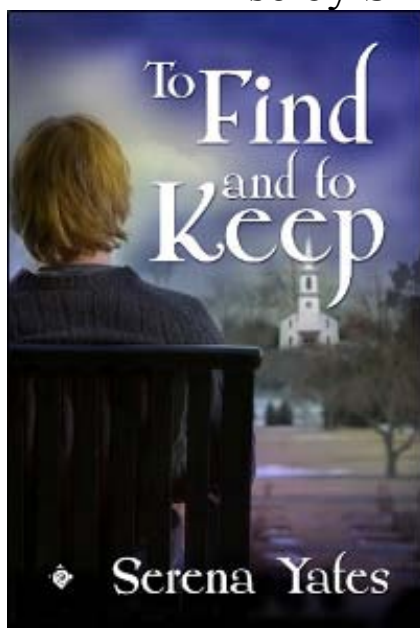
SERENA YATES is the pen name for a night owl who starts writing when everyone else in her time zone is asleep. She has loved reading all her life and spent most of her childhood with her nose buried in a book. Although she always wanted to be a writer, financial independence came first. Twenty-some years and a successful business career later she took some online writing classes and never looked back.

Living and working in seven countries has taught her that there is more than one way to get things done. It has instilled tremendous respect for the many different cultures, beliefs, attitudes and preferences that exist on our planet. Serena likes exploring those differences in her stories, most of which happen to be romances. Her characters have a tendency to want to do their own thing, so she often has to rein them back in. The one thing they all agree on is the desire for a happy ending.

She currently lives in the United Kingdom, sharing her house with her vast collection of books. She likes reading, traveling, spending time with her nieces, and listening to classical music. She has a passion for science and learning new languages.

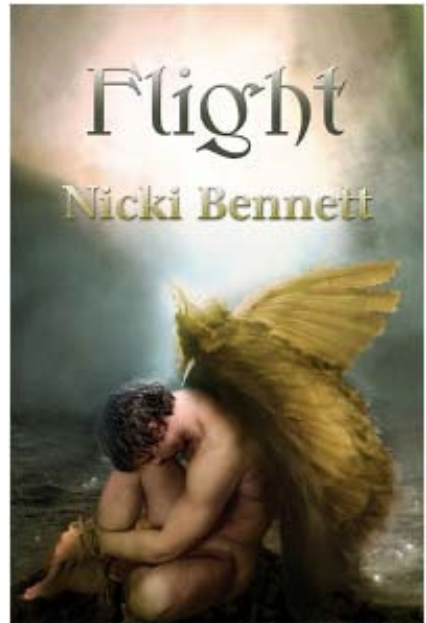
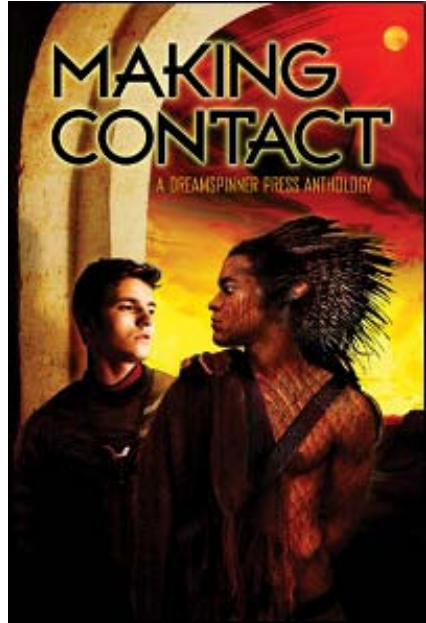
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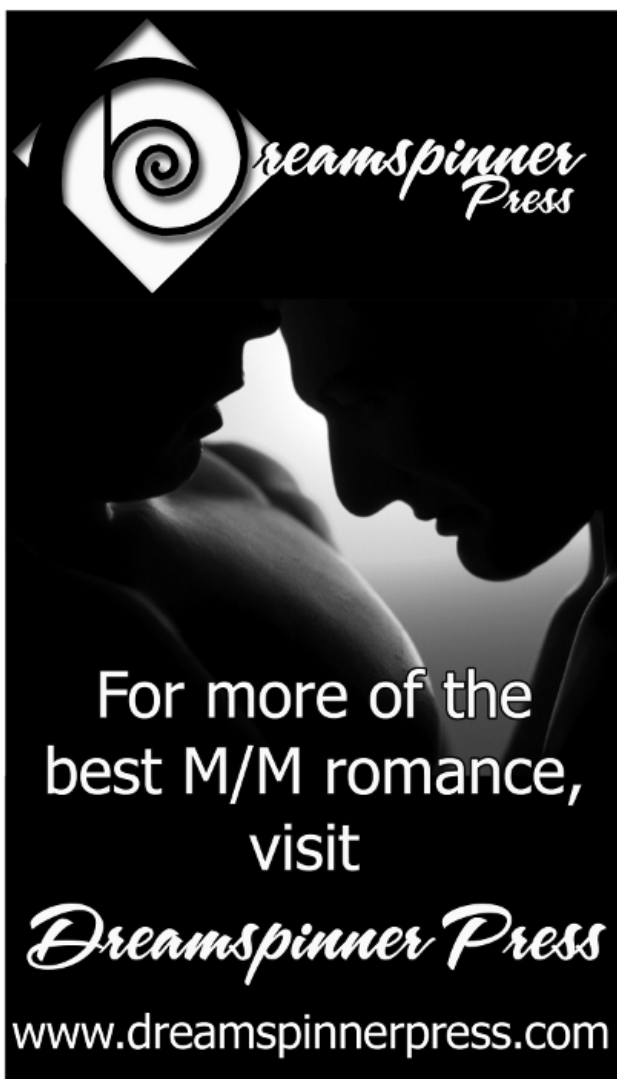


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