

BLOODLINES, BOOK ONE
RUMORS OF WAR

SHANNON WEST



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Chapter One

On the planet of Loros

A storm was coming, just to make the day even *more* perfect.

The sun that had been shining down on Loros for most of the day, now hid itself in grief and shame behind bruised, bloodshot clouds. Lord Nerol stepped forward and raised his hands triumphantly over his head to make the crowd cheer and scream his name.

Prince Kalen of Loros, sitting on a small throne behind him, peered up as a cold rain began to drizzle down. How perfect was it that the entire sky was as inflamed and angry as Kalen's tumultuous feelings? The wind was picking up, doing its best to make sure the rain soaked the silken fabric of his dress uniform so the wind could lash it more securely to his body—altogether fitting, considering how neatly Nerol and his mother had managed to restrain and strangle Kalen's every move thus far.

Ironically, Nerol, his despised and murderous uncle, had been the one to insist Kalen wear this particular dress uniform. Perhaps Nerol thought the formal clothing might add

legitimacy to this farce of a ceremony. He was no doubt trying to reassure the soldiers of the former king's loyal army that nothing had really changed...which was a fucking lie.

But then Nerol *was* a liar, as well as a cold-blooded killer, because nothing could ever be the same again. Not with his beloved father newly laid in his grave.

There was great unease in the army ranks since the king's suspicious and untimely death, and Kalen's captains had given him reports that the soldiers was ready to revolt at a word from him. Lord Nerol was well aware of this and had taken steps to ensure that all Kalen's communications were closely monitored. He was watched every second of the day.

For now, no one had tried to restrict him yet from leaving the palace—dead bodies would be littering the Great Hall if they had. But his uncle had kept him busy by scheduling no less than three long, drawn-out funeral services for his father that Kalen felt obligated to attend. One was a private funeral for the family, another for the lords and ladies of the court and this final one for the general public to pay their last respects. Ironically, there was nothing his father had hated more than formal ceremonies, so he would have scorned all of this.

Now that the funeral itself was over, his uncle appeared to be ready to address the huge crowd below. Lord Nerol seemed uneasy about how the people of Loros would react to his news and rightly so. Prince Kalen was even more popular with his people than his father had been. Crowds had begun to gather outside the palace early that morning and grew more and more restless with each passing hour. Kalen's presence on the dais was meant to reassure them.

“We, who know Prince Kalen best...” Nerol began, standing on the edge of the steps leading up to the front of the huge stone edifice that had always housed the royal family. Kalen wondered what would happen if he suddenly leaped forward and kicked the bastard down the steps like he wanted to.

“We understand that Kalen needs a bit more time to develop the maturity it takes to be our world’s supreme leader. He’s very young and hotheaded,” His uncle paused at the loud sounds of disapproval and unrest emanating from the crowd, smiling reassuringly and holding up his hands for quiet.

He gave them that oily smile of his and continued. “Please don’t misunderstand my meaning. Prince Kalen is an intelligent, brave young man, a fine boy, who will make a glorious king *one day*... But sadly, he simply lacks the maturity to become our king as yet.”

The loud shouts and murmurings continued as he turned to Queen Brandalla and extended his hand. She rose regally to take his hand and stand by his side.

“His mother, the queen, and I—now his two closest relatives—both think that he needs something to settle him down first. His dear father, my beloved brother and your late king, Jarrem, spoke to me before his tragic passing about making a political marriage for Kalen, a strong alliance that would strengthen our planet and provide a strong partner to help him reach his full potential. Just before his tragic passing, your late king had decided to find the prince just such a consort. From an excellent family—a royal one—perhaps even more noble than our own. Someone who will help our young

lord grow and consolidate his power and provide strong steady guidance when he eventually does take the throne.”

What the fuck was his uncle blathering on about now? Part of what Nerol was saying was true. A small part. His father *had* spoken to Kalen about the possibility of arranging a marriage for him and building new alliances. Once—a few months ago. Nothing concrete had ever been discussed, however. Not with Kalen and probably not with Nerol. His uncle lied like he breathed air.

His uncle probably figured a dowry from some wealthy king or emperor’s daughter would help refill their reserves and keep the tax burden away a few years longer. It was always about money with Nerol. But Kalen had told his father that he had no wish to marry as yet. At least not for the foreseeable future. He was too young and had no desire to settle down with just one woman for the rest of his life. Women were high maintenance, and he simply didn’t have the time to devote to one. His father had understood that and had granted him his wish to wait a while longer. He told Kalen they would talk about it later. But tragically, there hadn’t been a *later*.

So, why was Nerol discussing betrothals and arranged marriages like this was all settled and Kalen was going to be betrothed? Especially at a time like this?

There was far too much unrest on Loros at the moment to bring in some completely unknown and ignorant young woman from another planet. Such a person would only be a pawn for his uncle to use against Kalen, and Nerol already had far too many of those.

Kalen knew what was really going on—Nerol and his mother had gone behind Kalen’s back to accommodate Nerol’s ambitious goals and put him in charge. And all this talk of consorts was just smoke and mirrors to distract the people from what was really happening. His uncle was staging a coup.

Perhaps Lord Nerol had begun making this move even before he murdered Kalen’s father. It seemed odd that immediately upon his father’s death, the council had declared Kalen “too young” to take his rightful place on the throne. They had taken the extraordinary measure of naming Nerol as his Lord Regent for the foreseeable future.

The bastards were no doubt well paid for their treachery and complete lack of moral conscience. They’d managed to divest Kalen of his title before his father’s body was even cold.

And after this ceremony ended, his uncle, the incestuous, disgusting pig, planned to make Kalen’s mother, the beautiful Queen Brandalla, *his* consort in a glittering, lavish spectacle inside the castle.

It was beyond unseemly; it was abhorrent. He would be forced to stand by and watch his uncle fawning over his mother, while Brandalla looked anywhere but directly at Kalen, refusing to meet his direct gaze. As well she should.

Kalen had no proof as yet that his uncle was a murderer. No concrete evidence that Nerol had anything to do with King Jarrem’s death—only his strong suspicions—but he would find what he needed. And when he did, he would rain down hell on his uncle and whoever else had conspired with him, up to and

including the entire King's Council if that turned out to be the case. He would show no mercy to anyone involved. Even if the queen herself were proven to be one of the co-conspirators.

A pain so sharp it seemed to draw blood struck his chest. Even thinking such a thing about his mother made him sick, but his fury had hardened against her, only a mere five days after the king was put in his tomb, she had declared herself ready for remarriage—to her late husband's brother.

It was an obscenely short amount of time to mourn his beloved father, and Kalen was sickened and horrified.

She had added crushing insult to injury by making one of her first acts, as the new widow of the king, the betrayal of Kalen, her own son, bringing a petition before the Council about "concerns" she had over Kalen taking the throne. Brandalla had joined his uncle in petitioning the King's Council to delay his ascension and name a Regent for Kalen, and in doing so, she had effectively thrown her own son aside in favor of her new husband.

How could she have done such a thing? Kalen's father, Jarrem, had been a good and loving husband, and a courageous king, and Brandalla knew he wanted Kalen to become king after him. Jarrem's people had loved and revered him. Kalen's mother always seemed to adore him too, and she had at first appeared to be devastated by his sudden, shocking death. Kalen had held her against his chest as she sobbed and wailed on the day of Jarrem's private funeral. Now he had to wonder if those tears had been for his father or for herself? His father had always pampered her and given her whatever she

desired, after all. She had enjoyed all the privileges and perks of being his beloved queen.

When Kalen had first heard the news about the marriage to his uncle, he'd been stunned. He thought she must have been coerced, but she had assured him that she desired the marriage.

“Your father is gone, Kalen, and he would have wanted me to be happy and not climb into the grave with him.”

For Kalen it was a hideous and hurtful betrayal and totally unforgiveable. His age had never been brought up as an issue before. Why was she making it one?

Yet Brandalla's “concerns” helped sway the council's decision to hesitate and hedge their bets by naming Nerol the Lord Regent “until Prince Kalen's twenty-first birthday.” For Kalen, it was insupportable, made more so by the fact it had been his own mother who had suggested it. Kalen didn't understand any of this, and it was causing him to be indecisive for the first time in his life.

As Prince and Warlord over all the Lorian armed forces, Kalen's could easily have called on his army, which was fiercely loyal to both him and his late father. They knew of Kalen's strength and bravery and were proud to have him as their Warlord. Had he but said the word, the Army would forcibly wrest the crown from his uncle's grasp and depose both him and the Council. Kalen wanted badly to do just that. But his planet was facing a new threat from a confederation of planets known as The Pton, and their planetary defense had to take priority over any internal disputes. This coming threat couldn't be happening at a worse time. The Axis had promised

aid, but Kalen, as the leader of the Planetary Forces of Loros, needed to prepare for a possible invasion, and not be distracted by his own issues, grave as they might be.

There still might be time. It would take The Pton another year or perhaps even longer to reach Loros, due to the extraordinary distances between them and the attacking forces. He was tempted to give his army the order for an immediate attack on his uncle, but Nerol had quietly been building a secretive compound on his country estate, on the western edges of the capitol city. There he had built up his own private forces over the long years, and in addition, he was known to be extremely wealthy. Kalen had no idea what it was that he had done to amass his great fortune. Kalen suspected his father had known something of what his uncle was doing but had downplayed it out of his love for his younger brother.

The ragtag “army” his uncle had amassed consisted mostly of mercenaries and thieves, as far as Kalen knew, but their numbers were large, and they were vicious, lawless men, many with a price on their head. His uncle even had a large landing dock on his estate, and many ships had been seen traveling in and out of his estate with alarming frequency—alarming to Kalen anyway.

Whatever his uncle was doing inside that fortress-like estate of his was no doubt larcenous, but he had never been able to convince his father to investigate. When Kalen finally killed the son-of-a-bitch, he would tear down the operation, whatever it was, along with the fortress walls—stone by stone.

Though he had no doubt he would eventually win, any kind of all-out war between his legitimate army and his uncle’s

forces would be long and bloody, with many casualties among his soldiers. Even worse, his uncle had warned Kalen just that morning that he wouldn't hesitate to attack civilian targets if there was a move against him. In great detail, he'd described how he would rip their world apart with the fight. Who needed the Pton, when there was an even greater threat from within?

Nerol had given Kalen a choice. Go along with the plan to name him Lord Regent and give him the "two years" it would take Kalen to reach his majority. Nerol said that after that time, he would retire back to his estate. Perhaps he would even leave the planet.

Kalen had his solemn vow.

Which, of course, wasn't worth a fucking thing.

"If you refuse to do the sensible thing and comply with what I want, then I'm afraid your poor mother might suffer," Nerol had told him. "You don't want to lose *both* your parents, do you, son?"

It was pure blackmail, but until Kalen had a plan, he had no choice but to go along. Though he was furious and broken-hearted about his mother—she was still his mother. He wasn't even sure if he believed his uncle's threats toward her. He had a sick feeling she was in on this thing up to her neck, but even though he was trying to harden his heart toward her, he wasn't quite there yet.

He had to find out exactly what Nerol's operation was and just what he was doing inside that fortress. Ideally, he could find a course of action that wouldn't involve all-out war, because his uncle was ruthless and would see their world burn to the ground before admitting defeat.

Meanwhile, the army was restless and spoiling for a fight. They knew of the looming threat from the Pton and they were edgy and already feeling the strain. Nerol couldn't afford another royal family death so soon, and he knew better than anyone that the people would take arms and rise up against him if anything happened to Kalen right away. So, Kalen thought he must be biding his time, promising him whatever he could and using vague threats against his mother to keep him in line. Kalen knew all of this, and he also knew that if he did nothing, he would meet some kind of tragic "accident" or be the victim of some ploy to get rid of him permanently.

But still, Kalen waited and worried and had no idea what action to take first.

He knew he had to act, but his father had warned him often about his hot temper and about not thinking things through before he took action. He had to find out more about what his uncle was up to on that "country estate," and how that had factored into his father's murder. And he needed to discover what plans his uncle had for *him* before it was too late.

Once he did, though, he would kill his uncle for his crimes against his father. Slowly and torturously—he would make Nerol regret being born before he was through with him.

Meanwhile, his uncle was still rambling on, subtly maligning Kalen's character. He had to clench his hands on the armrests of his chair to keep from jumping to his feet, slitting his uncle's throat and tossing his miserable carcass down the stone steps.

Quietly seething, he told himself firmly that now wasn't the right time.

It wasn't.

Really.

But soon, damn it—very soon.

Kalen continued watching the show his uncle was putting on with no expression, as a member of the King's Council, a smarmy little man named Herv Connell, came up to make more announcements praising the new Regent. He told the crowd below them about how much Nerol wanted to be "of service" and how he cared so much for the Lorian people. Herv darted a quick glance over at Kalen afterward, maybe to see how Kalen was receiving this load of shit, and the man's face paled as he saw the hard, cold expression on Kalen's face. Good. Connell should be afraid, as he was very near the top of Kalen's list and would be among the first to die when the time came.

The rain began to pelt down harder from the sullen skies, so as Herv wrapped it up, his uncle whispered something to Queen Brandalla. Pulling her cloak over her long, silky, dark hair, she took Nerol's arm and allowed him to escort her inside. She glanced at Kalen with an unreadable expression as she left the dais. It made something twist inside his chest.

Were there real threats to his mother? Kalen wasn't sure, yet when he'd questioned her, about Nerol, she simply shook her head and begged him to not cause any trouble.

Not cause any trouble?

He'd always known his mother was weak—she'd never had to be strong, because his father had taken care of her, seeing to it that she was never disturbed by anything more arduous than which dress she'd wear or what she might have for breakfast. Kalen would try his best to care for her now, but she should never have agreed to marry Nerol, no matter what his threats had been or how many jewels he flashed in front of her face. A part of him wondered if it had just been so much easier—if she had given in because she wanted an untroubled life. And a wealthy one. He hated the idea, and it felt disloyal, but it had taken root in his head and refused to be dislodged.

Still, he'd noticed the bruises on her arms that morning, and one faint one along her delicate throat. Was it a sign of abuse or was it from his uncle's rough and clumsy lovemaking?

Either idea was insupportable and disgusting, adding further fuel to Kalen's rage.

Though Kalen was expected to follow his mother and the Regent inside to the great hall, he remained brooding in his chair, mulling over various ways for his uncle to die, until Councilman Connell approached him and timidly asked him to please go inside so the other Council members could leave too and get out of the rain. None of them could leave until he did. The rain was really pelting down hard by this time and soaking everything on the dais.

Kalen peered up with dangerously narrowed eyes and contemplated several responses as he glared at the man. The Councilman literally quaked in his boots in front of him, but in the end, Kalen merely surged angrily to his feet, tossing his

hair from his face. His long, wet braids whipped around like the thin black creatures called *gyvats* in the Lorian hills and struck Connell in his fatuous face. Too bad they weren't as poisonous as the *gyvats*.

It was a custom for people in deep mourning on Loros to wear their long hair in long, loose braids across their shoulders, even though his uncle and his mother weren't doing that. But then again, seeing as how his uncle was fucking her, they were obviously done with observing mourning customs. After all, they were about to be married—*on the same day as his father's public funeral*.

One more strike against them in Kalen's book.

Kalen sauntered into the main hall and on to the ballroom at the end of it, pulling off his wet cape as he went and letting it fall onto the floor behind him. The thing was in his uncle's colors, so it was one more way to show his contempt for everything the man stood for. Kalen wanted a stiff drink and went directly to the bar his uncle had set up there for *after* the ceremony.

Fuck that. He needed a drink now to get through this thing.

He grabbed a bottle of his favorite liquor from behind the bar, a product of a plant used for making bread on Leeria. It was called *Cygnarral* and was so strong that it was usually served in small shot glasses. It was highly recommended that no one imbibe more than four of those shots, and there was even a warning label on the bottle.

Fuck that too.

The wedding ceremony played on like background noise in Kalen's head, but he refused to watch it, keeping his back turned to the proceedings. It was blessedly brief. He heard his mother's soft tones answering his uncle, and his stomach twisted, threatening to make him lose the liquor he'd so far managed to put away.

Kalen watched in the mirror over the bar as the Council members and people from court applauded and went to fawn over Nerol and his mother, congratulating them.

Kalen stayed as far from the "bride" and her despicable groom as he could manage. He was happily engaged in drinking the entire bottle of *Cygnarral* and consequences be damned, when his uncle rose again and held up his hands for quiet.

"I have one more important announcement to make—a surprise I have for my new son." He turned and looked directly at Kalen.

New son? Kalen almost choked on his drink—or was it on the bile rising in his throat?

"As my first act as the new Regent, I saved this last surprise to be announced privately in front of our dearest friends in court and our council members."

Kalen snorted and took another drink, wondering what his uncle was rattling on about now.

"It's my pleasure to announce," Nerol said, "that just this morning before the services for the late king began, I received a message from Crown Prince Mikos of Tygeria. Prince Mikos, as you know, is the son of King Davos, and acting

Leader of the entire Supreme Axis Forces. Prince Mikos has agreed...” He paused for effect. “...to the betrothal of his son, His Highness, Prince Mikol to *our son, Prince Kalen.*”

Gasps of surprise, along with “oohs and ahs” accompanied the announcement and only a few at the back of the Great Hall heard Kalen’s loud cry of shock and outrage. He spit out his drink before he choked on it, but the Regent blithely continued his speech.

“We are honored and blessed, as a marriage between our son and Prince Mikol will forge the strongest possible alliance with Tygeria and the Supreme Axis, in this time of Loros’s greatest need.”

Kalen managed to gasp out loud. His treacherous uncle wanted to marry him to a Tygerian? All of the royals were males—he did say “prince” right?

Had his uncle cooked up some devilish new scheme to ensnare Kalen by getting him off planet and mated to a damned Tygerian *male*? How? And even more to the point, why? Kalen was speechless with rage.

Meanwhile, Nerol was theatrically waiting for the gasps of surprise to die down. Then he raised his hands to quiet the crowd as he smiled and continued.

“This is a highly prestigious royal match that I’ve secured for our Prince Kalen. Prince Mikol is one of the Dysons, or Battle Commanders of Tygeria, and he is a powerful warrior, leading half of their massive armed forces. After the wedding to Kalen, Prince Mikol will, naturally, assume command of our own Forces as well. Our own prince, through Tygerian technology, will no doubt be breeding sons for the prince soon,

producing royal children who will one day take their rightful place in the Lorian and Tygerian line of ascension. We will at long last be in the closest of alliances with Tygeria, through this impressive and most advantageous marriage.”

Applause burst out and went on for a long time, as pleased and excited faces turned toward Kalen. Nerol saw him standing at the back of the hall and smiled broadly at him. “Congratulations, my boy. And felicitations on your betrothal. I’m happy to announce that plans have been made for Prince Mikol to meet you in only a few days’ time on one of their space stations in the neutral zone, where the two of you can finalize your marriage contract.”

He turned and held up his glass in a toast. “We all wish you many years of happiness, my boy, and many strong sons.”

Kalen, who had to admit he hadn’t seen this coming, waited until the excited applause died down before slowly turning to face his uncle. He might have swayed a bit, and maybe his hands were shaking too, but that could have been because of the shock as much as the liquor. He’d had no idea his uncle would make his move so fucking fast. But he’d be damned if he’d show how stunned he was.

Nerol had outmaneuvered him while he’d been so indecisive, and he had to admit, he wasn’t sure of a way out of this. *Yet* being the operative word—because by the gods, he would find one. He had no intention of becoming the docile, submissive mate of the son of the bloody fucking Prince of Tygeria. A fucking breeder—he’d kill the man first.

But he had to give it to his despised uncle—he had definitely outfoxed him. He had managed with this one act to

get Kalen off the planet and stuck on Tygeria, lightyears away, the mate of a fucking Tygerian, while his uncle remained Regent in his absence.

But first, Kalen had a few things to make clear to his uncle. He had to let him know the depth of his fury, because he'd never felt such anger. Anger and strength—enough to stand up to this murdering bastard and not let him get away with this.

He wasn't feeling sad or scared either. He wasn't. He didn't feel as if he'd been suddenly cut adrift from everything he'd ever known and utterly abandoned.

He wasn't hurt either. Definitely not hurt *or* scared at the prospect of marrying a fearsome Tygerian male.

“My dear *uncle-father*,” he said, holding his shot glass out in a toast and swaying badly, but somehow managing not to spill a drop as he swept a deep bow. “If you seriously think I'm going to do anything you say, now or ever, then you're sadly mistaken. And if you're deluded enough to think I'm going to marry some fucking, *male* Tygerian I've never even laid eyes on, and if you think I'm handing over my Army to this foreign Warlord...well, then you're an even bigger fool than I took you for.” Kalen held up his glass in a toast. “And that, my dear uncle-father, is saying a hell of a lot.”

Kalen quickly tossed back his drink and then slammed it to the floor in a spray of broken glass as the entire roomful of people seemed to hold their breath. Kalen gave everyone a big smile, turning to pour himself another drink in a new glass and then holding out his arm way too dramatically as he toasted the room.

Fuck it—he was making a point.

“I’ll see you dead and in hell first, Nerol, and I’ll take great pleasure in it.”

Chapter Two

Meanwhile, on the planet of Tygeria

Prince Mikol yawned as he walked toward his bedroom, along the wide corridors of the palace. It was late, past “midnight” as his omak, Ryan, would say, though the term, as his omak intended it, was something of a misnomer. Days were shorter on Tygeria than on Earth, so the time Ryan might think of as the literal middle of the night came at an earlier hour on this planet. It thus had none of the faintly sinister implications of the Earthan term, in Mikol’s opinion. He remembered Ryan reading him the “Fairy Tales” of his people when he was very young and being confused at the Fairy Godmother’s advice to Cinderella to be sure and get home before midnight. It hadn’t given the poor girl much time to have any fun at the ball.

Time seemed to be on his mind a lot recently, though, and largely because of what his father had just lectured him about. His father, Prince Mikos, seemed to think it was long past time Mikol should have “settled down,” mated someone and begun having heirs. Mikol was already much older than Mikos himself had been when he married.

Mikol got ready for bed as soon as he reached his room and lay down on his back, thinking about their conversation

earlier that day.

“I’d been married to your omak for perhaps six cycles by the time I was your age,” Mikos had told him, leaning back in his chair and regarding his son. “You were born only a short time after our marriage.”

“I’m still young, Father. I have plenty of time for all that.”

“Time to do what? Carouse around the galaxy and get drunk on that pleasure moon of Lycanus that you and your friends seem to enjoy so much? Fornicate with every attractive man you get drunk with? Because that’s becoming a prodigious number by now, Mikol. And I remind you that your uncle Derrick is married to a pirate, because *he* got drunk and fornicated with a man he didn’t know on that very same moon you seem to like so much. He wound up married to the disreputable man. A fucking pirate, Mikol. Surely you remember all the trouble that’s caused in this family.”

“Fornicate” was overstating it a bit—he liked to fool around with other men, of course, and he did so at every opportunity. But his omak, Ryan, not to mention his omak-ahn, Blake, had taught him well. If a Tygerian male fully penetrated another male, a bond could develop that was damn near unbreakable. So yes, he made love to other men, but he’d never “fornicated,” as he understood the way they were using the word.

As for the trouble his father had mentioned after Derrick married his pirate, there had been trouble indeed—his grandfather, King Davos had sought to put this pirate in prison. Derrick and the half-Lycan Drex ran away, and Davos was led by the two escapees on a wild chase that almost killed

them all. That included the King's Consort, Blake, his father's omak, who had involved himself by following his husband into a mysterious place called the *Never Never*. This area of space, which "came and went, depending on your need for it," sounded like a black hole, if such a thing hadn't been utterly impossible. But whatever it was, impossible or not, it had trapped Davos, Blake, Prince Derrick and his pirate for four long cycles, though to them, time had passed by much more quickly. Blake had returned pregnant with Rakkur, his seventh child. And another of his father's brothers, Prince Larz, who had gone missing during the time wasn't found until much later. When he was finally located, he was married to his own kidnapper, a fact that had infuriated Prince Mikos, and he and his brother Prince Larz still barely spoke even to this day.

Thus, marriage could be a sore subject to Mikos, and Mikol had to be careful how he navigated this issue.

"All of your sensible, sober friends are married now." Mikos told him. "And the kingdom needs you to produce heirs. I called you here to inform you that I'm actively looking to arrange a suitable marriage for you from several offers I've already received, and when I find one, I'll expect you to do your duty with no arguments."

Since this was his fierce father, not to mention Mikol's commander-in-chief, there was little to do but nod and agree. It was true, after all, that Mikol's friends who were his same age had been mated for a few cycles, and already had children. As the prince in the direct line for the throne, Mikol knew that children were important to his parents, not to mention his grandparents. His omak, Ryan, along with his grandfather,

Blake, never seemed to miss a chance to remind him it was high time he got on with it.

He'd thought he might have a little more time, even if his father managed to arrange a marriage right away. He was familiar with royal weddings, since a couple of his uncles—well, one of them anyway, Nicarr—who wasn't all that much older than he was, had a wedding that took a long time to negotiate. Contracts had to be drawn up and then there were more long meetings after that to decide where and when the nuptials would take place, along with complicated wedding customs of both worlds to be observed. He remembered it as being a long, drawn-out process. Then the bride had been murdered and Nicarr wound up married to her half-brother, the king, but that was another long story.

His uncles all seemed to have crazy stories of how they met and married their husbands. It was way too much drama in Mikol's opinion, and nothing he had time for. All the others, like Anarr and Vannos, not to mention Larz and Derrick, had rushed-up, more or less slightly scandalous weddings, and Mikol couldn't in good conscience join their ranks. His omak would kill him, not to mention what Blake would do.

No, it wasn't for him. He wanted a normal life and a normal husband. Someday—when the time came. Hopefully, that day was still a while in coming.

Mikol sighed and turned over to get some rest. He could worry about all this later—maybe, if he was really lucky, his father would forget all about it and become preoccupied with some other pressing business. After all, there was plenty of time left before he had to be tied down to marriage. Clinging

to that thought, he closed his eyes and drifted off into a peaceful, untroubled sleep.

By the next morning, Mikol had mostly forgotten about his father's threats to make him settle down and find a mate. Not that he really thought his father would forget about it entirely—no such luck. But Mikol felt sure it would be a few more weeks before this thing reared its ugly head again. That's why he was so surprised to receive a message late that afternoon that Mikos had agreed to marry him to a young prince from the planet Loros, which was in the eastern quadrant of the galaxy. To add insult to injury, Mikos had already signed a preliminary betrothal contract, so it was pretty much a done deal, and Mikol had never even laid eyes on this intended fiancé or knew anything at all about him.

Mikol immediately stormed upstairs to his father's office, managing to make himself calm down a bit along the way, as he valued his life. It wouldn't do to show his quick temper to his formidable father, who was not exactly known for keeping his own in check. The office was empty, with the door locked when he reached it, so he went along to his parents' private quarters instead. The corridor leading to the family home was quiet that afternoon, with only his parents and his youngest uncle, the still unmarried Prince Rakkur, currently in residence in the huge palace. King Davos had recently left on an extended "vacation" off planet, along with his consort, Blake. Davos had been wounded in a small skirmish with some pirates—thankfully none affiliated with his son-in-law Rhaegar Barbosa's Drex pirates—on Nevos 4, a Leerian moon, a few weeks earlier. A stray shot from a disrupter had

hit him in the chest. It had come perilously close to his heart, scaring the wits out of everybody involved.

The king had been treated in the field and immediately taken to the nearest medical facility for more treatment. He was expected to make a full recovery. But his doctors advised rest, and the Royal Consort Blake, badly shaken by the event, had begged him to take an extended vacation off planet. Blake had taken the position that if Davos stayed in the palace, he'd simply be tempted back to work again, which was undoubtedly true. Since they'd left, his grandparents had already visited Vannos and his husband King Stefan on Morovia, and now they were on the way to Xalia to see their next to youngest son, Nicarr and his mate, King Axel. Mikol smiled at the idea, knowing that Blake and his uncles were no doubt having a great time, but wondering how their spouses were taking it. Blake was known to be a bit "demanding," perhaps, with his sons-in-law, though Mikol adored him, and in his eyes, at least, he could do little wrong.

Humans were endlessly fascinating to Mikol, having grown up with two handsome, fine specimens in his own home. His bearer and omak, Ryan, had been a colonel in the Alliance army before he gave it up to marry Prince Mikos, who at that time was Ryan's most bitter enemy. He'd had to literally change everything about himself and leave all he knew behind him when he came to Tygeria. Mikol admired him for that, as well as for his courage and his ability to still influence his fierce father with only one look, when literally no one else could.

He tried to calm himself as he went to their door and knocked. He heard Ryan call out, "Come in," and stepped

inside.

Ryan was reading with his feet up on the too-soft sofa thing he had specially ordered years ago and sent to him all the way from Earth. Blake had one or two in his quarters too. Ryan looked up as Mikol came in and smiled broadly at him. “Hi kiddo, come in and sit down. Your father just got home and he’s changing clothes. Sit down and tell me what you’ve been doing all day.”

Mikol took a seat on one of the harder chairs he and his father both favored and returned the smile his omak had given him.

“Nothing too exciting. Meetings all day. First thing this morning with General Haggoz, and then more meetings all afternoon.”

“The new threats from the Pton.”

“Yes. General Haggoz and I are formulating plans.”

A new alien force, the Pton, had been threatening the eastern borders of their galaxy for the past few years, in some of the sparsely inhabited star systems there. The Pton, from a mysterious galaxy known as L87, was a pinwheel or spiral galaxy, far distant from theirs and billions of lightyears away, and had only recently begun attacking parts of their own galaxy along the border. A large force was headed their way, and Loros, one of the planets directly in the path of their current course, had been alerted by the Tygerians, leaders of the Supreme Axis, that recent scans had detected Pton ships, seeming to be locked in on a course headed toward Loros.

Little was known about The Pton, except for the fact that their armies were fierce, savage, and seemed to follow a military strategy aimed at not leaving behind anything that might be useful to the enemy. They destroyed everything in their wake. Any assets that could be used by the residents of the planets they attacked might be targeted, which usually included obvious weapons, transport vehicles, communication sites, and industrial resources on the planets they conquered. But softer targets like hospitals, bridges, and civilian cities were destroyed as well, leaving the planets they conquered little more than wastelands.

“How does Haggoz like his new position?” Ryan asked.

Since King Davos left on his extended vacation, Mikos had been acting as Prince Regent and his former duties as Dyson, or Battle Commander were being split between General Haggoz and Mikol. It was a huge job, with great responsibilities and required them to confer on a lot of issues. Working with Haggoz, though, had already taught Mikol a great deal.

“He likes it fine, I guess. You know the general—he doesn’t complain about much.”

“He’s been a wonderful help to your father over the years. He has a lot he can teach you.” Ryan tilted his head to regard him. “But that’s not what you’re here to talk about, is it? What’s wrong, honey? You look a little upset.”

“Not upset, exactly, but Father sent me this earlier today.” He pulled up the message on his communicator and passed it to Ryan. “Did you know about this?”

He glanced down at it and then smiled. “Yes, of course. Did you think I wouldn’t be involved in choosing your mate?”

“No, of course not, but...you didn’t say anything, and then Father sprang the idea of a mate on me only yesterday. And today, I get this, like it’s a done deal. Don’t I have some say in who I marry?”

“Of course, you do, within reason. You’ve known all your life that your high rank as heir to the throne of Tygeria would mean a political marriage someday. You may remember hearing about how your father was first betrothed to my sister, before she took off and left him at the altar, so to speak. That’s when I was more or less pressed into service.” He smiled again at his son. “Not that I regret it, though at the time it was far from what I thought I wanted out of life. Your father and I tried to find someone you’d like and be compatible with. However, if you meet him, and you feel the two of you are completely unsuited, then we can try and reassess the situation. He was the only one I thought you’d find attractive.”

“Why is that?”

“He’s Lorian, and they look a lot like humans. I know how much you like humans,” he said, shrugging up one shoulder. “Plus, he’s *very* nice looking.”

“What’s not to like about humans? Especially if they’re good looking,” Mikos said as he walked in the door on the tail end of Ryan’s little speech. He bent down to kiss his handsome consort, and Mikol rolled his eyes a little at the display. Not that he wasn’t used to this frequent affection between his parents. His grandparents too, for that matter.

Mikos was dressed casually, like Ryan, and sat down on the too soft sofa, gathering Ryan's small, bare feet into his lap. Mikol's fathers had never been shy about touching each other in front of him. In fact, it happened all the time, and he had always hoped he'd have just as close a bond with a mate one day. Now the day seemed to have arrived, and he was full of second thoughts.

"Is this about your betrothal?" Mikos asked, beginning to rub one of Ryan's small feet with his big hands. Actually, Ryan wasn't a small person by earth standards, but viewed in such close proximity to Mikos, he certainly seemed that way.

"Can you tell me about my future mate, at least?" Mikol had been careful not to have a sarcastic tone, knowing how Mikos would react to that, but maybe not careful enough, because his father immediately got a stubborn look on his face. He answered him in a reasonable tone of voice though.

"His name is Prince Kalen. He's young—only nineteen, but that's the same age I was when I got married. He's heir to the throne of the planet Loros, and he's quite handsome."

Mikol ignored the last part, focusing on the Loros part. "Loros? The planet we've been worried about—the one the Pton seem to be headed toward."

"Exactly. He's considered a Warlord Prince on his planet, and he's head of Loros's Planetary Defense Forces. His army is quite loyal to him, according to his uncle, the Lord Regent."

Mikol frowned. "Lord Regent? If he's nineteen, why would he need a Regent?"

“His uncle says his father, the late king, spoiled him badly. He says the boy is immature, drinks too much and has a horrible temper.”

Mikol frowned. “And you thought I had a lot in common with this person?”

“Mikol, he’s very military minded, like you are, and he loves his home. He’s also very bright, from what I can find out, and his army would follow him anywhere, so they apparently see something in him.”

“He sounds like trouble to me.”

Mikos shrugged. “He probably is. At any rate, here is the prince’s image, taken only a few days ago. His name is Kalen.”

Mikos handed over his communicator and Mikol found himself staring down at a somewhat blurry image of a really good-looking young man, who looked a lot like a human, as did all the Lorians. He was sitting on a throne with his chin resting on his hand. He looked supremely bored and bad tempered and maybe a little drunk. He was wearing a dark, tight-fitting uniform of some sort, and had long, dark hair, styled in intricate braids, hanging down around his face. The image was a bit blurry and in an uncertain light, but Mikol saw enough to know he looked sullen, petulant, and not at all happy to be wherever he was. He was also very beautiful.

“When and where was this taken?”

“At his uncle’s ceremony announcing him as Regent only a couple of days ago.”

“His uncle, who was taking his throne away from him? No wonder he looks so unhappy.”

“It’s because he’s a bit spoiled, according to the uncle. He needs to mature a year or so, until the king’s council feel he’s ready, and then he’ll be crowned king,” Mikos said. “His father has recently died. His mother has just been remarried to...uh...his uncle, the new Regent.”

“Good gods.”

Ryan made a soft sound, shaking his head. “That sounds almost incestuous to me, not to mention highly inappropriate when her husband hasn’t been dead for more than a few days. Poor kid. No wonder he looks so angry.”

Mikos nodded. “Yes, but I remind you we don’t know what customs prevail on Loros. This could be commonly done in their culture, for all we know. I have people looking into it, but whatever the woman’s reasons were for what seems to us like a hasty, even ill-advised remarriage, we shouldn’t jump to conclusions. There are far greater issues at stake. Loros is strategically of vital importance to us, and the last thing we need is unrest there. The Pton won’t reach the planet for a while, but when they do, they must be met with strong resistance and invincible force. We need to show them that the Supreme Axis is powerful and unbeatable. We want them to turn tail and run back to their own galaxy, understanding that Tygeria and the Supreme Axis planets are more than capable of repelling their attacks. I want you at the forefront of this thing, Mikol, and in charge of the resistance forces. As the mate of this Kalen, that can easily be accomplished.”

“But can’t that also be accomplished without a marriage between me and this prince?”

“Do you have some objection to this young man?”

“Well no. I haven’t met him yet.”

“Then perhaps you can stop bringing up issues that might not happen. Marriage between my son and their prince will make Loros our closest ally. Loros was an Alliance planet during the war, so there’s bound to be some mistrust among their people and our other allies. By becoming the mate of their extremely popular prince, you may be able to gain some of the trust and loyalty that the Lorianians feel for him. Likewise, our people will like it that he’s *your* nobyo, and not the other way around.”

“Wait a minute. What exactly are you saying?” Ryan objected.

“Ryan,” Mikos began in the patient tone he sometimes used on Ryan, “You know what I meant.”

“Yes, I’m afraid I do. And let me assure you, Mikos, that it takes a hell of a strong person to be the nobyo of a Tygerian man—not to mention having his baby. I can guarantee you that *you* wouldn’t be able to do it.”

Mikol had to bite down hard on the inside of his lips to stop his smile. Again, because he valued his life.

“I never said a man or a woman or anyone who bears a child wasn’t strong and extremely brave. You know I’ve always been in awe of you, nobyo. Not to mention Blake.”

“You better not mention him where he can hear it. Why don’t you just rephrase that whole comment or better yet,

retract it?”

Mikos took a deep breath. “There are still, unfortunately, some misguided and ill-informed people on Tygeria and some of our allied planets, who *mistakenly* believe that a person who has a child could conceivably be weaker than persons who don’t. Is that better?”

“No, not really. Those are stupid people, not just mistaken ones. Why don’t you just leave that out of your comments altogether?”

“Yes, nobyo, I will. Mikol, forget I mentioned that please. Though one day, you might want this young man to have a child of yours.” He shot a look over at Ryan. “*If* he agrees.”

Mikol, who was used to this kind of back and forth with his parents simply nodded, only waiting for them to stop arguing. He knew how strong his omak and Blake, his omak-ahn were, and what formidable opponents they would make in battle. Ryan was a proven warrior, and he would bet that Blake might even be daunting too, even now. They’d made sure he knew that as he was growing up. He’d gladly fight alongside either one of them.

“Anyway,” Mikos said, looking back over at his son. “What do you think?”

“I think the prince is very good looking, from what I can tell in this picture, but what kind of person is he?”

“Don’t make up your mind based on that picture. It was taken at his father’s funeral, and on his mother’s wedding day to his uncle, for God’s sake,” Ryan said, shaking his head. “Just meet him and judge for yourself.”

“I agree,” Mikos said. “We’ll need a presence on Loros for some time to come. One of our own choosing, and it’s my hope that the two of you will one day rule together.”

“You mean for me to live on Loros?”

“No, not all the time. Your omak and mine would kill me. But I imagined you might split your time between the two planets. I don’t think the boy’s uncle would expect that, actually. I think he might have the wrong idea. He thinks Tygerian males are overbearing and domineering and would insist on making their mates live here on Tygeria. I suspect he simply wants the young man off his planet, and he thought this would be a great way to do that.”

“You say he has the idea that Tygerian men are overbearing—that’s wrong *how*, exactly?” Ryan asked, smiling over at Mikos.

Mikos wisely ignored his nobyo, a slight frown the only sign he’d even heard him. “I think the Lord Regent wants to get rid of the boy, and he thinks if he marries him off to you, you’ll eventually get him pregnant and lock him down here on Tygeria.”

Ryan snorted. “I doubt this Kalen will agree to be gotten rid of so easily. Or to get married for that matter. He may not agree to have children.”

“No. You may have to convince him to do all those things, I think. But who better to help him govern his planet and run his army than his mate?”

Mikol quirked up one eyebrow. “What makes you think he’ll agree to any of this?”

Mikos smiled. "It's up to you to see that he does."

Mikol glanced over at Ryan, who shook his head. "No," Ryan said firmly. "I don't believe in forced pregnancy. Not ever. He doesn't have to. Not at all if he hates the idea. Your father talked me into it, and believe me, it wasn't easy to sell me on it either, but for us, things were different. He will always have the option of adoption or surrogacy, which is perfectly fine."

Mikol glanced down at the image again. "I think from looking at him, he would hate the idea of being forced to do anything. I'd never do that to him."

Ryan nodded. "Good. And I think so too. But in time, he might hate the idea of someone else having your child even more. That's what happened with Blake and Davos. Anyway, you'll have time to figure it out. There's no rush."

"Has he agreed to any of this?"

"His uncle has. Kalen's agreement is not required," Mikos replied.

"It is for me, Father. I won't force someone into marriage with me either."

"I agree," Ryan said softly.

Mikos huffed out a breath. "It won't come to that. The boy will certainly see the honor and the opportunity he's being offered. To become the consort of the heir to the Tygerian throne and the entire Supreme Axis Empire is not something most reasonable people would turn away from. He'll realize how much benefit such a thing will be to his people. If he

loves his army as much as he says he does, he'll see that training with our forces will only enhance their skills.”

“If you say so,” Mikol said, handing the communicator back to his father after glancing down at it one last time. “But he looks pretty damned stubborn to me.”

Chapter Three

Kalen, who had slept very little following the ceremonies of the previous day, lay in his bed suffering from the worst hangover he'd ever had the next morning. Worst of all—even worse than the spike someone had apparently hammered into the side of his head—he knew he probably could have handled things a lot better the night before.

A shocked silence had struck the great hall immediately after Kalen's little speech. All eyes turned toward him, and though most of those present were his uncle's followers, he saw some of his own most loyal friends looking a bit horrified as well, not to mention embarrassed for Kalen, which was maybe even worse.

Kalen's father had been a wise man, and he had told him many times that he should never let his temper get the better of him. He also should never, under any circumstances, have openly signaled his feelings and intentions to his enemies so clearly. Yet with that one insult to his uncle, Kalen had thrown down what amounted to a declaration of war. He had tipped his uncle off to the fact that he was ready and willing to fight him on every issue, including the leadership of the planet, and that he would never be controlled. Not by his uncle, not by the

King's Council, not by some Tygerian prince, not by anybody, damn it.

And by doing so, he might have just signed his own fucking death warrant.

Surprisingly, it had been Nerol who defused the tense situation the night before. He had immediately stood up and held out his hand to his new wife. Queen Brandalla had turned a dull red but rose quickly and allowed him to pull her with him as they came to stand beside Kalen. Nerol threw his arm around Kalen's shoulder and embraced him when they came close, even as Kalen tried his best to throw him off. Nerol quickly stepped away before it became too obviously embarrassing and addressed the crowd in a loud, booming voice.

“Our son has had too much to drink tonight, I think. And like all young men, he may be a little reluctant to commit to marriage, which has a way of calming boys down and curbing their more reckless impulses.” He paused for a few uneasy laughs. “Things I believe Kalen has just proven he has in abundance.” He removed his arm and stepped back, not flinching even a little at the murderous scowl on Kalen's face.

“Come now, friends, drink up. This is a celebration. We are done with mourning, and we have to move on for the good of Loros.”

“My mother is certainly doing her part,” Kalen said loudly enough that all those around him, heard him quite plainly. Queen Brandalla, turned her head away as ugly red splotches rose slowly again from her neck to stain her cheeks. Tears sprang to her eyes and trembled on her eyelashes. She

wouldn't look at Kalen. Just as well—the knot of pain in his chest grew bigger every time he met her gaze, and he hated the impulse he had to take her in his arms to comfort her. The problem was, he had an equal urge to throttle her, every time he envisioned her wedding night. He had to remember that she had betrayed his father and him. And saved herself, of course. She must not realize just how treacherous Nerol was, and how little he could be trusted. No matter what he'd promised her, it would be given only on his own terms.

His uncle had quickly signaled the musicians to begin playing, and once the music started, a few of the Council members got up to dance. His uncle tried to put an arm around him again, but this time Kalen was ready for him and shoved him away, taking a step back as he got closer. Nerol leaned in to grab his arm in a punishing grip and speak fiercely in his ear.

“The arrangements have already been made, Kalen, and the initial contracts signed. It's done, and you won't ruin this, do you understand?”

Kalen jerked his arm away from his uncle's grip. “Fuck you.”

His uncle's eyes darkened, but he kept right on talking. “Don't be so foolish. Your men are loyal to you, I believe. Especially your captain—or should I say your lover—Dartan Kajeer. You would do well to remember that for every one of your missteps, he and the rest of your guard will suffer. I can make their lives...quite difficult, if you understand me, and I believe you do.”

“Captain Kajeer is my friend, and he has *never* been my lover, you evil bastard. And you won’t dare harm him or any of my guard, damn you. For every mark you put on one of them, you’ll receive the same from me.”

Nerol straightened his cuffs and gazed out over the crowd, smiling and waving, pretending he and Kalen were just having a friendly chat. “If you behave yourself, do as you’re told, and stop your threats, there should be no problem. I’ll keep to my end of the bargain. But do keep in mind that there are a great many ways to make injuries or even deaths, appear to be accidental.” He glanced over at Kalen. “As you should be aware. And I assure you, I am quite skilled in all of them. Do I make myself clear?”

Kalen only glared back, not trusting himself to speak. Was the bastard actually bragging to him, to his face, that he’d killed Kalen’s father, his own brother?

Nerol glanced away. “I see that I have your attention. Your ship is being made ready, and you’ll leave in a few days for the space station near the moons of Lycanus, in the neutral zone, where you’ll meet with your betrothed, Prince Mikol, along with his representatives to sign the final contracts. Don’t fuck with me, boy. I mean it.” He smirked at him. “Or else others who may be close to you will suffer as well.” He turned to look pointedly at Kalen’s mother, then took her by the arm to lead her away. Neither of them looked back.

Kalen had come close to losing it then, and only by tamping rigidly down on his emotions was he able to keep himself from going after Nerol and plunging his knife into the murdering bastard’s heart.

He had already decided that he had little choice but to go and meet this fucking Tygerian. He may even have no choice except to marry him. But he would first explain to him in person how his treacherous uncle has set this up only as part of his plan to try and get rid of him.

Tygeria was far too big and powerful to offend in any way, so he had to be careful in how he approached these negotiations. The man in question was important indeed—the son of the Blood Prince himself. He would go and meet this prince, whom he had no desire to marry—and the journey might give him time to regroup and consider his options, away from his infuriating uncle.

Kalen figured the only reason his uncle hadn't killed him so far was because he knew a large portion of the army would rise up to avenge him should anything happen to him. Kalen suspected his uncle was biding his time, consolidating his base of supporters and waiting for the Tygerians to rid him of Kalen's interference. Marrying him off to a man who would be a high king, even an emperor one day, and who lived unimaginably far away from Loros was a smart move on his uncle's part, as much as Kalen hated to admit it.

It would not only get Kalen out of the way and off planet, but Nerol would be exacting a subtle revenge. The Tygerian would probably try to put him in one of their traditional long robes, call Kalen his “nobyo” and try to make him have his children.

Kalen's face burned at the idea.

No. Kalen would explain to this Tygerian why he couldn't marry him as diplomatically as possible, and then he'd return

to Loros to take back his throne and destroy his enemies. And if he died in the process, it would still be better than living under his uncle's thumb. Or living the life of an obedient pseudo-wife to some Tygerian prince.

He'd go meet this Tygerian, because he had little choice. But he'd made a vow to avenge his father's death on the day of his funeral, and he intended to keep his word, no matter the cost.

It was a few days later, as his uncle had threatened, that Kalen left for Lycanus on one of the fastest ships belonging to the Lorian Forces. Accompanying him were several of his most trusted guards and companions, as well as the "guards" his uncle insisted he take along. Kalen had insisted on his own guards and had assigned his uncle's men to quarters on the deck farthest from his own, while keeping his own men close by.

Kalen spent most of the journey in his stateroom or on the bridge of the ship, trying to devise a way out of his uncle's trap. He ate only the food he'd brought with him and drank only water from the taps, suspecting that his father might have been poisoned in some undetectable way. He'd advised his guard to do the same. He didn't think his uncle was so stupid as to arrange their deaths in the exact same manner as his father's, but anything was possible.

Time and again on the interminable journey, and to keep his mind off the coming interview with the Tygerian prince, Kalen discussed the idea of insurrection with Dartan, his captain of the guard and closest friend, as the quickest way to get rid of Nerol. His uncle had the King's Council in his pocket, so they were useless to him. The only problem was that if and when he tried a direct attack, his uncle's mercenaries would overwhelm his own small guard and kill all of them and Kalen too, before the rest of his army could even arrive to back them up.

The bulk of the army was still loyal to Kalen, but his uncle had moved them out of the capitol city, so they were useless to him. Kalen suspected the only reason he, himself, was still alive was probably because his uncle hadn't quite figured out a way to make his death look accidental. His idea then about getting him off-planet by marrying him to someone his people would be impressed by might just be genius, as much as he hated to admit it.

Lorians looked like humans, and the Tygerians were known to like humans. His uncle must have used that to help entice the Tygerians to consider Kalen as a mate for their prince. It was well known that both King Davos and Prince Mikos—hell, even one of the Battle Commanders, General Haggoz—were all married to handsome human males. His uncle probably surmised that if this young Tygerian prince took Kalen as a mate, he would lock him down on Tygeria, effectively getting rid of Kalen forever, with the added bonus of getting Tygeria's help in the coming attack by The Pton.

His uncle had sent him the correspondence with Prince Mikos about his son, Mikol, including a few images of the

man. Kalen thought he looked a great deal like his famous father, the Bloody Prince, though all the Tygerians greatly resembled each other. Tall, large-framed and muscular, Prince Mikol had red-gold hair and striking green eyes. His skin was a pale golden brown with black stripes running faintly under the skin. He looked exotic and though Kalen hated to admit it, he really was extremely good looking, though there was something cold and savage and predatory about his eyes.

Kalen had no experience with males at all, and didn't want any, but he assumed good looking males were as hard to get along with as beautiful females. They'd probably want constant admiration and attention. Especially someone like this Mikol, who had no doubt been fawned over all his life.

The person he one day married didn't need to be a beauty, and he'd always expected that person to be female. Ideally, his future wife would have a father and brothers who were soldiers and she'd be from a warrior class. She'd be someone who had been taught to be strong and brave; someone who knew how to take care of herself, so Kalen didn't have to worry about her. He already had enough people in his life that he had to protect.

He'd never dreamed of marrying a man, however—a warrior in his own right. And not just any warrior, but the Battle Commander of the entire Supreme Axis Forces. The idea of saying no to such a man was maybe a little daunting, though he could barely admit it, even to himself.

He had brought several members of his personal guard with him, including Dartan, who was his oldest friend. Too bad he wasn't sleeping with Dartan like his uncle had implied.

That would have perhaps been an ideal solution and made this current situation with the prince much easier. After all, princes who wanted heirs also wanted their intended spouses to be virgins, so they could be assured of who the child's father was. Kalen knew he would have expected that of any future wife he might have.

As for Dartan, Kalen and his captain of the guard had been best friends since boyhood, and Dartan had shown him great loyalty over the years, and especially since his father's murder. But Dartan had never had any interest in him romantically. Likewise, Kalen had only ever thought of Dartan as a friend and brother, and nothing more. He was glad Dartan had accompanied him on this journey, which promised to be tense and stressful. He knew the rest of the contingent, his despised uncle's men, were there to spy on him and report back on his every move. That's why he was planning on giving them the slip as soon as he could, leaving them behind so they couldn't attend him on the moon he was headed for.

Kalen and Dartan had come up with the idea during one of their talks on the long, tedious voyage to Lycanus 2. Admittedly, they'd been a little drunk at the time. As soon as they'd arrived at the main port on the big planet, they were supposed to transfer to a smaller shuttle that would take Kalen and his guards to a space station located not far away from the Lycan planet. Just inside the neutral zone, the station, called Arkaan 673, was often used as a meeting place or conference center by the Axis.

Lycanus 2 had three moons—two were small and uninhabited; the other was known as a wild and lawless pleasure moon. It was called Belline.

Years earlier, the Lycan government “cleaned up” the moon by stopping illegal sex trafficking and closing down a half dozen or more bars, brothels and cantinas that were known havens for all manner of illegal activity. Lycanus 2 itself had once been called the Sin Planet, because of the large number of such establishments located there. Belline had just taken it to a whole other level, and though Lycan officials had cracked down on it in recent years, there was still a neighborhood on the inhabited portion of the moon called the Plaza that was supposed to still be pretty wild and wooly. Most anything you wanted to buy could be obtained there, including paid sexual partners, drugs, bootleg liquor and all manner of other illegal substances. Lycan officials closed them down, only to have them spring up again days later in another location. Visitors were warned to enter the Plaza only at their own risk. It sounded to Kalen like the kind of place his uncle’s guards would fit in nicely.

His plan was to “mistakenly” take a shuttle to Belline, and then strand his uncle’s guards there in the Plaza in one of the many brothels or bars. Then Kalen and his own guards could take another shuttle over to the space station in the neutral zone, where he was supposed to meet with the Tygerians.

Of course, it was only a stunt, guaranteed to infuriate his uncle, but also to show the man he would not be spied upon or “managed” in any kind of way. He could meet the Tygerian prince as planned and then as diplomatically as possible explain to him that marriage between them just wouldn’t work. There would be no betrothal. No marriage.

He had no desire to be rude—after all, none of this was Prince Mikol’s or the Tygerians’ fault. He thought he might

even use a delaying tactic and offer some excuse or other about waiting until a later date to finalize this thing because of his recent bereavement. Perhaps he could use the unrest of the army after his father's death to further justify the delay. Then he could make one excuse after another until Prince Mikol got tired of waiting and ended the whole thing. He had no wish to make the fierce Tygerians angry, so he'd have to be extremely careful not to offend them.

He had no great love for the Tygerians, though he felt no real antipathy toward them either—he had been only a small child when hostilities ended and frankly didn't remember the war at all. He had no desire to get on the Tygerian's wrong side, because he'd need their help in the coming attack by the Pton. That threat loomed over the entire galaxy, and according to reports, the Axis forces would be the only ones able to take them on and have any hope of winning the fight.

When they arrived on Lycanus 2, he loaded everyone into a hired shuttlecraft to take them to Belline. The driver gave him what sounded like a standard warning and Kalen nodded, already knowing about the dangers there. His plan was to go inside one of the bars, buy the guards a few rounds of drinks and then wait for them to do whatever men like them did, so that he and the rest of *his* men could slip away and get another shuttle to the nearby space station. Meanwhile, he had his own guards around him to provide protection, if he needed it. It all seemed so easy.

What could possibly go wrong?

Chapter Four

Mikol would be arriving a day early for his meeting with the Lorian prince and his advisors. He had expected to be tied up a bit longer on nearby Nevos 4—“nearby” being a relative term when you were traveling among star systems. Nevos 4, one of the several small moons of Leeria, was where Davos had been wounded in the skirmish with pirates a few weeks earlier and the investigation there was still ongoing. Mikol had been in contact with Rhaegar, his uncle by marriage, to see if he had any information on the group responsible.

But all Rhaegar had been able to tell him was that it hadn't been any of his own people, nor had it been any Drex, so far as he could find out.

Drex pirates were almost all Nilaniums, but they were that segment of the population who had grown weary of traveling the universe in their ships like vagabonds, with no planet to call home. Many centuries before, Nilania, their home world had been destroyed when their sun, a white dwarf star, had been triggered into runaway nuclear fusion, completely disrupting the star and destroying it. They'd had plenty of warning of the coming apocalyptic event and the Nilaniums had made plans for almost a decade to leave the star system before the catastrophe, which was exactly what they did.

For the next centuries they roamed the galaxies, looking for a new home, but never finding one that fit all their needs. They became traders after a time, and that's how the majority of the Nilaniums still lived, but there was a small faction that broke away from that main group, and they called themselves Drex.

The Drex were also traders of a sort—though King Davos called them filthy pirates who were no better than cutthroats and thieves. They often engaged in illegal activities, and their ships were smaller, faster and more agile than the ones they “traded” with. Eventually, the group had settled on a planet they called Tresaria, and elected their own leader, who called himself the Pirate King. This man was none other than Rhaegar, Mikol's colorful and notorious uncle. Rhaegar was Drex only because he'd been adopted by one, his stepfather having been a Drex trader. His real father had been a Lycan, and his mother was Leerian. Really, if you thought about it, Rhaegar never stood much of a chance of being honest. Or so Mikol thought.

In his own way, Rhaegar was a gentleman though, and undeniably brave. Mikol couldn't help but like him. He had saved Blake, Derrick and Egan's lives during their adventures on Vokaria, and he'd heard the story many times. Mikos was unimpressed, however. He said they had only been in danger in the first place because of Rhaegar.

But if these new and vicious pirates weren't Rhaegar's Drex, then who were they? Who was backing them? Mikol had been charged by his father with finding out.

Rhaegar had been cooperative, seeing as how his mate was Prince Derrick, King Davos's fourth son. Derrick had been terribly distraught over almost losing his father, and Rhaegar would do a great deal to keep his handsome mate happy and worry free. When Mikol arrived on Nevos 4, Rhaegar had been there to meet him, telling him what he knew—which was very little actually. But he asked Mikol for more time to investigate a rumor he'd heard about a new group, known to the other pirates as the Rothafari, more commonly known as the Roth, operating out of some planet or obscure moon somewhere in the eastern quadrant. Mikol had agreed, asking only that he be kept informed. They'd had a few drinks and parted on good terms, with Mikol sending love to his uncle, and Rhaegar promising, with a roguish wink, to be sure to deliver the message.

Mikol left afterward for Arkaan 673, but on the way, the commander of the ship, Captain Florin, who was also Mikol's longtime friend, stepped up beside him on the bridge. "You know our course will take us very close to Belline."

Florin, who come to think of it was Mikol's only unmarried friend, turned and raised one eyebrow. "We've had a few good times on Belline over the years."

"You mean we've had a lot of fights there."

Florin lifted one shoulder and smiled. "Same thing."

"I was thinking... We do have a little time to kill before I have to be on Arkaan 673. An odd name, by the way. Why is the space station named such a thing? What the hell is an Arkaan? And why are there 672 others?"

Florin shook his head. “I don’t know, but Lycans named the station, I believe. Need I say more?”

“No, that’s all the answer I need. What do you say we swing by Belline on the way to the station for old times’ sake? Since I’m on my way to more than likely sign betrothal papers, this might be my last chance to...what is it Blake always calls it? *Cut loose*. I believe that’s what he says.”

“Ah yes, human slang. I’ve heard the phrase. Doesn’t that also mean to free yourself from some tie you don’t want? Could it be you’re having some second thoughts about this betrothal?”

“Second *and* third. But I’ve agreed to *meet* this Lorian prince, and that’s all.” He let out a long breath. “However, I’ve been reminded several times recently of my duty.”

“I’m sure you have. Well then, all the more reason to visit Belline—have a few drinks, or maybe more than a few. What was it your grandfather accused your uncle Derrick of doing in that bar on Belline years ago?”

“Fighting his way in and fucking his way out.”

Florin laughed softly. “Sounds like a damn good time to me. I’ve heard the authorities on Lycanus 2 have cleaned the place up in recent years, though. I wonder if such a thing is still possible?”

Mikol turned to look at him. “Only one way to find out.”

“Indeed,” Florin agreed, “Helmsman, set a course for Belline.”

From the time Kalen arrived on Belline, almost nothing had gone to plan. First of all, Kalen hadn't expected his uncle's guards to put up a fuss about the detour, and he'd had to assert his authority strongly on them to keep them in line. When one of them had the temerity to threaten to report it to his uncle, Dartan had threatened the man by holding a knife to his throat.

“How dare you speak to His Highness that way? One more word and I'll cut your throat. See how well you 'report this' to the Regent then, you bastard.”

The guard quickly backed off before Kalen had to intervene, but after they boarded, Kalen heard him muttering to his friends in the rear of the shuttle as it took off on the way to Belline. Fuck them all and fuck his murderous uncle too. With any luck, he'd be rid of them soon and back on his way to the space station.

Not that they wouldn't eventually follow, but it would take them a few days, with any luck.

Besides, he'd heard stories about this moon all his life. How Belline offered up all things desirable and illegal to those who sought them, and how one night on Belline could change a man's life and his fortune forever.

His initial plan was to stay for only an hour or so and then catch a shuttle out of there, but maybe it wouldn't hurt to stay a bit longer and see what all the stories were about.

Within an hour after arriving on Belline, they had wandered over to the docks and located the Plaza, complete with warning signs at the entrance to the square, put up by order of the Lycan police.

At first glance, the Plaza didn't look like much. It was almost dark outside, so a few people were beginning to appear on the patchy sidewalks and wander down the narrow, dingy streets. The sound of raucous music came from a number of different bars, all blending into one cacophonous sound. It was best to tune it out altogether, and that's what Kalen tried to do as he walked at the head of his own small group of four guards, his uncle's additional six men bringing up the rear.

At the end of street, they had to turn left, being hemmed in by a long row of shabby buildings. Since it made little difference to him which bar or brothel they settled on, Kalen chose the first he came to on that narrow passage. The faded sign by the doorway, leaning drunkenly to one side, proclaimed the place to be called the *Starlight*.

From the moment they walked inside, Kalen knew what this place was—a brothel first and foremost, but one that served cheap, rotgut liquor and dubious food as well. Kalen found a table for himself and his men, waving his uncle's men to a table in the far part of the room. However, in the spirit of getting the men drunk, he ordered a round of Cygnarral for their whole damn table, with another one to be delivered after that. Once they were drunk enough, Kalen thought he and his own men could slip out and ditch them there.

An hour or so later, when Kalen was working on the third round, he began to wonder why he was in such a hurry to

leave this congenial place. In fact, it might even help relieve his stress levels to stick around a while and perhaps find a companion for the evening. Like all the brothels on Belline, this one had a menu not only of food and beverages, but it also had available prostitutes for hire, both female and male. That menu advertising their “wares” looked better the more Cygnarral he drank.

There were only a few females available, with many more males, as that was often a Lycan preference, and this was a Lycan moon, after all. It was a preference on other planets in their galaxy too, up to and including the Tygerians and their well-known weakness for male lovers. Rumor had it that King Davos was boringly and oddly faithful to his human consort. Kalen found that strange, when the man could literally have had anyone he chose.

He’d seen pictures of the consort, however, and he was quite a handsome man, not to mention witty and charming, according to the stories they told about him. He wondered if his grandson, who had inherited his Tygerian father’s looks, had inherited any part of that much praised human charm.

If he were into men, he might have been intrigued by the possibility of a handsome, charming and witty Tygerian—if such a thing were possible. But he’d never been attracted to any men, though there was a distinguished and good-looking colonel in his army who had let him know in a number terribly subtle ways that if he were ever to be interested, he need look no further than his own officers.

Kalen picked up one of the “menus” from the table and spent a few minutes looking over his limited choices. He

finally settled on an exotic Jayronian girl, with long, navy blue hair down to the backs of her knees. He used his communicator to order her, along with a room and placed an additional order for a bottle of Cygnarral to be delivered to the room at the same time.

The woman had been listed as a love slave, which just meant prostitute really. Love slaves weren't slaves at all, though they had been back in the bad old days before the Axis took over. Ironic, considering the Tygerians were the most notorious of all the planets for collecting so many Alliance prisoners and turning them into love slaves. King Davos had even married one of them, and perhaps the king's consort had been one of the driving forces behind ending that practice.

Now love slaves were more like independent contractors. The good ones charged exorbitant prices and were supposed to be quite skilled at whatever anyone could want.

While he waited for a confirmation of his order, he enjoyed another of the strong drinks, tossing it back and trying not to wince at the burn. Beside him, Dartan and the others were doing the same. Kalen looked around the room and tried to remember why he'd thought this place was seedy and dirty when they'd first came in, because it was beginning to grow on him, with its dim lights and the perky, alien sounding music that seemed to involve a lot of horns.

A tall, vigorous looking woman with red hair came over to their table and asked him to dance by holding out her arms and pantomiming it, so he drained his glass and stood up to take her in his arms. The music began again, and she took off, wrapping her arms around his shoulders and dragging him

along with her. He was shocked at how strong she was as she manhandled him across the floor, but she was laughing joyously, and the music was loud and catchy, so he soon got in the spirit of the thing. He even began to enjoy himself.

When the music paused, she reached into her rather ample bosom and brought something out in her hand. She pressed something into his and said something in a language he totally didn't understand, while giving him a huge smile. He looked down at his palm and found a couple of small, white pills, damp with sweat. She popped one in her mouth and offered the other one to him, and his brain told him it was a very bad idea to put something like that in his mouth. The liquor he'd drunk, however, said, *Oh, why not? Go ahead. Live a little.*

And he wanted to dance the way she did, so uninhibited and unafraid of what anyone thought of her—to be taken over by the music and this forbidden night and forget obligations and other people's expectations. Just for a little while.

Nothing happened at first. Kalen didn't get dizzy or sick or feel particularly uninhibited. But as they twirled through the next song and then the next, he began to feel the little explosions of pleasure throughout his body. He knew she was flying, because he was pretty sure it hadn't been her only little white pill of the night, and he wanted to fly along beside her for a while. They danced and laughed and flung themselves around the room, daring anyone to get in their way. It helped that she was so large and flamboyant, because people saw the two of them hurtling their way and ducked for cover like they would have dodged out of the path of a runaway space shuttle.

The music finally ended, and just in time too, because Kalen thought if it had kept on much longer, there was a good chance he'd have been sick. The room was beginning to swirl with bright, jewel toned orbs. When he saw one of them splash onto a table and cover everyone in a shower of emerald, he managed to explain that he didn't want another dance and made his unsteady way back to the table, dodging the many orbs floating in the air along the way. Kalen fell into his chair, a little out of breath as the room swung drunkenly around him, and the orbs flew up to the ceiling like champagne bubbles in a glass.

"Are you all right?" Dartan asked, and he nodded and threw back another shot that was waiting for him on the table. It burned all the way down and made a few of the bubbles pop on the ceiling, releasing a shower of gold and blue.

Kalen was beginning to like this place more and more with each passing moment.

It was a while later that one of the barmen tapped his shoulder. "Your room is ready," he said, jerking his head toward the stairs. "Take the left staircase to the third floor. Turn right at the second stairwell. Then it's the fourth door on the left."

Kalen made an attempt to get to his feet and was surprised when his efforts failed. He doggedly tried again, and this time he made it out of his chair, although he had to hang onto the table for support. The orbs had diminished to the size of little colorful stars, shooting wildly around the room. He ducked down to miss one coming straight for his head, and Dartan peered up at him with squinty eyes.

“Wha-what are you doing? Are you dancing again?”

“No. I’m going up to a room. Second floor right, third left door. No, wait...second stairwell, first door on the left of the third floor.”

Dartan, swaying in his chair, blinked at him. “You better lay off that Cygnarral. I think you may be drunk.”

“I’m fine. I’ll only be a little while. Keep ordering drinks for them,” he said, trying to jerk his head toward his uncle’s guards and surprised by the fact that his whole body followed his head around. He managed to stop himself from twirling around by grabbing the table. He passed a hand over his face. “You know, Dartan...maybe I did have just a little bit too much to drink.”

“Lemme take you upstairs,” his friend said, but then looked confused as he seemed to be unable to stand up.

“No, no,” Kalen said, shaking his head vigorously. Maybe a bit too much as he may have pulled a muscle in his neck. “I’m fine. Really. Firth floor, second left, third right door. I *got this*,” he said with supreme confidence.

He turned then and began weaving his way through the tables toward what he thought were the back stairs. He almost immediately slammed into a table filled with big Lycans, knocking over one of their drinks, which spilled into the lap of its owner. At the same time, one of the stars spun into a Lycan’s head and exploded, covering him in red glitter. The huge man jumped to his feet with a menacing growl, as Kalen backed away from the mess, hitting one of the posts that held up the ceiling and reeling off that into the bar.

“Buy that man another drink,” he told the bartender, pulling out a wad of cash and waving vaguely toward the Lycans. “No, for the whole table. With my abject apologies.”

The bartender nodded eagerly, raking the entire pile of bills Kalen dropped on the bar swiftly toward him. “As you say, sir.”

“Good man,” Kalen said, and began feeling his way toward the stairs again, only trying to be more careful this time and still ducking to avoid the occasional, wayward star. He found the way up after a moment and started climbing, wondering as he got halfway, where it was he was going again. The memory of choosing the Jayronian woman from the menu was receding farther and farther away.

What was it the bar man had said? Oh yes, left on the firth floor, or was it the second left on the third? Firth right? Something about a stairwell... and what exactly was a *firth*, anyway? Anyway, he'd go to the second or third floor and try to find out. He wasn't sure, so he'd simply have to try them all. Having fixed his uncertain course, he kept climbing up the damned steps that seemed to stretch out above him to the crack of doom.

Then from behind him he heard a loud shout. He turned, halfway up the stairs, and saw the entire table of his uncle's guards jumping to their feet and pointing at him.

“Stop!” the one who seemed to be their leader yelled at him. “Wait right there and don't you move!”

Prince Mikol of Tygeria, the pride of his illustrious parents and heir to the throne of the Supreme Axis, rolled off the bed, hit the filthy floor and then rolled to his knees, looking around warily for whoever it was that had just attacked him and driven a spike through his head.

Realizing there was no actual spike and managing to climb back on the side of the bed, Mikol thought it likely he'd been this drunk a time or two before in his life, but he couldn't quite recall when that might have been. He sat up and glanced around the room to see if he'd disturbed any other occupants, but he found himself all alone. Staggering to his feet, he decided to rest a minute before making his way back downstairs, changed his mind after a couple of staggering steps back and fell down on the none too clean, tangled bedcover. He tried desperately to remember where he was.

It began to come back to him in a series of fuzzy, half-formed images. He and Florin at a bar, drinking visu punch as a huge fight broke out behind them. A very young Drex was being accosted by three Lycans, who seemed to think the young man had picked one of their pockets. One Lycan was holding the Drex's arms behind him as the other one drew back his fist and began punching him in the stomach.

Were the Lycans right about what the Drex had done? It seemed likely, but Mikol still didn't like what was happening. Three Lycans against one small Drex? It seemed a bit much. He turned and shouted at them.

“Let him go—he's had enough!”

One of the ugly bastards turned toward him and snarled. “Mind your own fucking business, Tygerian scum, or you can have a piece of this too!”

Mikol turned to look at Florin with his eyebrows raised, and then they smiled at each other.

“I think I’d like that,” Mikol said, sliding off his stool. “Why don’t you go ahead and give me some?”

He and Florin both leaped forward into the pile of Lycans, and the fight was on. A ferocious and barbarous brawl broke out and when the smoke cleared and the dust settled, and the many bouncers who had swarmed out of the woodwork like roaches had tossed everyone outside on the street, time seemed to click back into place. The Drex pirate was long gone; the Lycans were unconscious, and Mikol sat up beside Florin and slapped him on the back. “Good fight. But I never got to finish my drink.”

They got up and moved down the street to the Starlight bar, and after that, the sequence of events included lots of drinking and even some dancing. At least he was fairly sure he remembered dancing to wild music in the bar with a variety of partners including a cheerful, red-headed person wearing a dress. He didn’t recall much after that until he woke up here in this room. He wondered if he’d passed out at some point, and Florin had taken him upstairs to lie down a while. Since he was fully dressed and still had his money, that seemed the most likely scenario.

He felt better, but still dizzy as he stood up. He knew he was inebriated, though now it was more like a floaty feeling and a nice buzz in his head. Now that his headache was

receding a little, he was thinking he should head back downstairs to find Florin and get back to the ship. He had a big day ahead of him tomorrow. That's when a loud knocking started up on the door. Three big thumps as if from someone's fists and then there was frantic rattling of the doorknob.

“Hello?” came a panicked voice from outside the door. “Are you in there? *Hurry up and let me in!*”

Since the voice sounded a bit desperate, Mikol pulled it open to find a perfectly beautiful young humanoid person standing in the corridor. And when he said perfect, he meant exactly that, though he wasn't sure exactly who he was or where he came from. Judging from his extreme good looks, Mikol thought he probably worked here at the brothel. He looked like a slightly larger than a normal human male, though many humans worked as love slaves. They were among the most popular, especially with Lycans and Tygerians, though all the humanoids were sought after.

The man's body was especially nice—he was tall, though still a full head or more shorter than Mikol, and he had a lean, but muscular frame. Mikol thought he might like to run his hands over that sweet body. The man's hair was gorgeous too. Dark and wavy, it was tied behind his head, but little wisps had escaped the binding and were curling around his beautiful face. His lips were full and parted slightly and those eyes—they were blue, a color that was rare throughout the universe.

They reminded him of a sea he'd once seen on Earth. Blake had called it the Mediterranean, and he said the water there was such an unusual shade because the bottom of the sea was white sand. The light from the sky came down, hit the

bottom and then was reflected back up through the waves, but whatever the cause, it was strange and unique. Mikol had never in his life expected to see eyes the same shade of sapphire as his omak-ahn's. Blake had long been a celebrated beauty partially because of his gorgeous eyes. And then there was this human's face—high cheekbones, a straight little nose and full, passionate lips. Gods, he really was a fucking beauty.

Mikol blinked a few times to make sure this vision in front of him was real and not a figment of his fevered imagination. The young man standing at his door swayed a little, looking a little frantic. "Help me," he said. "They're after me."

"Who is?"

"Those men," he said, looking over his shoulder and then peering past Mikol's shoulder. "You wouldn't happen to have any Jayronian girls in here, would you?"

Mikol smiled, hoping this pretty man in front of him was real and not an illusion cooked up by his brain.

"No, just me."

"I have to admit I'm lost then, I think. I've been up and down every hall, and I believe I've knocked on every door. Maybe..." His eyes grew large, and he suddenly ducked. "Watch out!" he cried.

Mikol dropped down to a crouch instinctively, before he realized there was absolutely nothing there to dodge. The boy thought Mikol had been hit by something, however, and knelt beside him, brushing the thing only he could see off Mikol's shoulders.

“I’m so sorry,” he said, looking genuinely distressed. “I don’t think it will stain.”

The handsome boy stood back up, reeling only a little and his voice trailed off as he made a sweeping gesture toward the other end of the hallway. “Don’t worry, the other ones are gone now. They shot off down the hall.”

“Who did?”

“The orbs.”

He almost tipped over, grabbing the doorframe for support. A loud shout came up the stairs from the floor below and the young man heard it. It seemed to alarm him again, and his eyes got impossibly wide.

“Oh no, I-I’ve got to hide so they won’t find me.”

“Come inside then,” Mikol quickly told him, grabbing hold of his arm to steady him. This had to be one of the love slaves who worked here and who’d had a bit too much to drink. Or maybe he’d had one of the stimulant drugs so common on Belline, known as Rapture. They were relatively harmless in small doses, but they made the user disoriented, extremely uninhibited and provided vivid hallucinations as an extra added bonus attraction. Perhaps this man had taken one or more of them. He was definitely very drunk, and it really was unsafe for him to wander around a place like this in such a condition.

“Do you work here?”

“No, I-I came to...” He looked up like he’d find the answer written in the air above him. “I actually don’t quite

remember why I came up here.” He gave Mikol an adorable frown and a look of confusion. “Do *you* remember?”

“No, I’m sorry. Don’t you?”

“The young man shook his head sadly.

“You didn’t take any drugs, did you?”

“Do you think I did?”

Mikol smiled. “I don’t know, but it’s entirely possible for something like that to happen in a place like the Starlight.”

“Oh wait...I met a woman with red hair downstairs. She was a wonderful dancer, and she gave me one of her little pills. That could have been it.”

“I’d say it was highly likely,” Mikol felt a strong surge of protectiveness toward the beautiful little love slave. “Why don’t you rest in here until you feel better?”

A group of tall men all wearing the same kind of uniform suddenly came surging up the stairs toward them. It had been their shouts Mikol had been hearing for a while now, and their eyes lit up at the sight of the young man.

“You! Stop right there and don’t run! We’ve been looking for you!” one of them shouted and they all sped up with a determined looks on their faces. That is, until Mikol stepped fully out into the hallway, and they got a good look at who was standing there.

Mikol heard a growl coming up from deep inside his throat, almost impossible to hold back. It wasn’t even something he was fully aware of, as a partial shift had already come over him. A Tygerian growl was almost always

frightening to those who heard it. The sound was one that rattled and even paralyzed the listener because of its low frequency and the way it carried over long distances. It was called a click-growl and was a warning sound, made by forcing air through his vocal cords. It was essentially a miniature version of a roar, using an open mouth to allow the hearer to better see the canines that had descended from his gums.

The click-growl was designed to tell enemies they were too fucking close and that whatever stood between them belonged strictly to the Tyger.

The man in the lead reared back in great alarm as the click-growl registered, and he stopped so abruptly, it caused the others behind him in the narrow corridor to crash into him. They all fell backward like the games of dominos his omak played sometimes with his father.

Despite the fearsome growl, the young man took an instinctive step toward Mikol, who stepped backward and motioned for him to go inside, until he got himself sorted back out. He didn't want to inadvertently hurt him before the partial shift wore off. As the men in the hallway, began to get back to their feet and run, he stepped back inside, and concentrated on coming back to himself. When he felt mostly restored to normal, he turned to receive the human, and the next thing he knew, the man was in his arms, pulling him back into the room.

“Quick, get inside. They're after me, and I don't want them to get me.”

“Why not?” Mikol asked. “Who are they?”

“They’re...oh, never mind. It’s complicated, but I don’t want them to take me.”

“No one’s taking you anywhere,” Mikol said and closed the door firmly behind them, turning the lock. “You can stay here with me as long as you like.”

Suddenly, the young man looked up at him and their faces were only inches away. He drew in a quick, sharp breath. “You’re Tygerian, aren’t you? Oh, dear gods, you’re—you’re so beautiful.”

Chapter Five

Kalen was well aware that this whole disastrous attempt to outsmart his uncle's men and leave them stranded on a moon like Belline was all his fault, and now it was backfiring on him dramatically. He and Dartan had come up with the idea on the long, tedious journey from Loros and now it all seemed rather childish. It was the kind of thing that sounds good when you're tired, stressed and way too damned drunk to seriously be able to plan anything, but that never worked out in actual practice.

Kalen hadn't slept all that well on the entire journey—he never did in space. The constant hum of the engines, along with the knowledge that he was suspended in a relatively small metal tube, hurtling through nothingness, incredible distances from the safety of firm soil beneath his feet, didn't allow for deep, restful sleep, or at least not for him. Add to that his worries about his uncle and his mother and this betrothal contract, and he was far too nervous and far too stressed for sleep anyway.

As for his brilliant plan to get rid of the guards, before they'd even left on the shuttle for Belline, his uncle's guards had known something was up. And from the moment they'd reached the Plaza, they had been suspicious and on edge. This

had all seemed to Kalen like a harmless prank—a joke on the surly guards and his uncle and a way to show his contempt for both. The complete inappropriateness of it hadn't really occurred to him. Maybe his uncle was right, after all, about him being too immature.

Yet once they were actually there on Belline, he'd been determined to enjoy himself. After the strains and pressures of the past couple of weeks since his father's murder, Kalen threw himself into enjoying this little bit of freedom from his uncle's constant scrutiny, and maybe even his last chance of liberty before the coming betrothal.

Because on the way to Lycanus 2, he'd finally made himself face the awful truth. His uncle's plan to get rid of him had been rather brilliant. There wasn't any good way out of this betrothal. Not without insulting and angering the powerful Tygerians, whose help he would need if he wanted to get rid of his uncle and free his people from Nerol's tyranny. And that didn't even take the Pton into account. He had to put his own wishes aside for the good of Loros, be nice and accommodating to this Prince Mikol and hope like hell for a long, protracted betrothal period.

So, he proceeded to get gloriously drunk on Belline, and because of his antipathy toward the other guards, he'd isolated them at another table. Or he did until at least one of them had taken charge. They had *not* given in to the excesses of the pleasure moon, and they'd known he had some plan up his sleeve and watched him like birds of prey. When he stumbled up the stairs, he was fully aware on some level that the orbs and bubbles popping all over the stairway were all because he had incautiously taken that damn white pill. He still tried

desperately to ignore them and pretend he was fine. He was searching for the Jayronian girl he'd ordered, when his uncle's guards started chasing him, he'd found himself unable to shake them no matter how hard he tried.

Kalen hadn't realized just how fucked up he really was, until he stumbled from floor to floor, knocking on first one door and then another, being cursed at and shouted at until he forgot what he'd been seeking in the first place. Meanwhile, the hectoring guards followed him from hall to hall, like a small flock of annoying carrion birds, waiting to swoop in and feast once he finally faceplanted on the filthy carpet. The orbs and other flying objects followed him too—he left a wake of them behind him that must have been an easy trail to follow—and he was feeling hunted and a little desperate.

All he'd wanted that evening was some fun—a distraction from his life and maybe a dalliance with a companion for the evening. To have someone look at him with at least a semblance of affection, even if it was something he'd had to pay for. He wanted, for one night, to be more than someone who was standing in the way, his very existence an inconvenience to be bypassed and gotten rid of.

Then he'd knocked on this last door and perhaps the best-looking person he'd ever seen in his life had answered. He was thunderstruck when he saw him, and he was still at a loss for words.

He was a Tygerian and unlike anyone he'd ever seen before. He was massive for one thing—really tall, with the kind of hard muscles that came from constant training and fighting. He'd known that about Tygerians but hadn't seen one

in the flesh in years. And it was more than that. He was so undeniably *alien* and otherworldly.

Kalen was standing in the door, at a loss for words, when an orb shot past him and went straight for the handsome alien, flying directly into him and bursting over his head and shoulders in a bright splash of golden liquid. The Tygerian's long red hair, now covered in swaths of gold and his green eyes and exotically tanned skin, also dappled with splashes of gold were so beautiful after the strike that all he could do was stare. His skin was underlaid with black tiger stripes in a beautiful pattern that swooped across his cheeks. He was red and black and golden and perfect.

Then he'd growled at Kalen's guards who had been chasing him, and for a moment or two Kalen was literally stricken with amazement. Not fear, because he knew the growl wasn't meant for him. It had been meant to *protect* him, and that had meant...everything.

Kalen prided himself on being a man and a warrior, but he'd been so close to his father. He had thought of Jarrem not only as a parent, but as someone he could always, always count on to be in his corner and on his side. Someone who always had his back in a fight and who only wanted what was best for Kalen. Someone who wanted to see him not just succeed but thrive. And when that was ripped away so abruptly, so savagely, Kalen had felt...bereft. Cut off and deprived of the relationship that had been the most important one in his life. He was unmoored and drifting and scared and couldn't seem to even decide what to do next. His own mother and his uncle had stripped even his identity away from him.

For a moment, this big Tygerian warrior had made him feel as if his safety, at least, had been restored to him.

Kalen had never been attracted to men, though he could look at a man and objectively think him handsome. But this Tygerian's presence in the room was nothing short of glorious. It was a hypnotic, and undeniably sexual attraction he was feeling. There was a wildness about the man, and it called to Kalen like nothing ever had before. His scent was strong and masculine, yet spicy-sweet at the same time. Kalen leaned into it, and into the Tygerian, wanting to get closer if he could and figure out what this attraction could possibly mean.

That's when the Tygerian wrapped a hand around the back of his head and gently drew him in for a shocking kiss. Kalen was startled at first and froze in his arms immediately. The man looked down at him with one eyebrow arched, questioning him or perhaps wondering if Kalen were playing some kind of game. He wasn't forcing him or trying to hurt him, but this was Belline, and Kalen had banged on the man's door at an obscenely late hour and then insisted on coming inside. Gods, what must he think?

The alien looked down at him as if giving him a chance to object. But when no objections were forthcoming, he lowered his head again and took Kalen's mouth with his. When their lips touched, it was like an electric shock ran right through Kalen. Gods, this must be all the liquor he'd drunk, or maybe the white pill, because nothing else explained it or even came close. This was a man kissing him, and he wasn't attracted to men. Was he? *Was he?*

Strange and unfamiliar feelings were jolting through him, and he was in no shape to figure out what they meant. The Tygerian pulled away, caught him by the chin and gazed down into his eyes. “Are you all right?” he asked gently, a flush of arousal staining his flawless cheeks.

Kalen’s mouth had actually tingled under the Tygerian’s soft, lush lips, and being wrapped in this man’s arms had been frightening, but also thrilling and exhilarating. The Tygerian was taking charge, which wasn’t what Kalen would have ever imagined he’d ever want...but oh gods, it had thrilled him. Or at least some parts of him were still thrilled.

One part in particular. His cock was hard enough to pound nails.

He’d been so full of indecision for so long, trying to decide if he should act or not. If his mother was part of all this or not. If he should fight his uncle or if he should just give in, and if he did fight, was it right to risk his people’s lives that way? His uncle was ruthless, and Kalen had little doubt he would use those weapons he’d threatened against their own population. Innocent people would die. But if he didn’t fight, he was truly lost.

The truth was, Kalen felt trapped, and he didn’t know what to do. He hadn’t since the moment they’d told him his father was gone. It would be so good to just turn it all over to someone else for a little while and let them take charge and tell him what to do. This man would *make* him do whatever he wanted—he shuddered deliciously at the idea.

Kalen’s heart was racing as Mikol continued to look down at him. That would have been the time to tell him he didn’t

want these attentions—he had already had plenty of time to object, but he couldn't seem to say the words. He simply gazed back up at the Tygerian, feeling something like an epiphany.

How had he never known before what kissing a man was like? Or was this because of the drug he'd taken? He had heard of a drug that made you do and feel things you'd never felt before. It was supposed to release your inhibitions and free you, open you up to a world of possibilities. They called it Rapture, which was a perfect name, when you came to think of it.

“What are you doing?” Kalen asked softly.

“Don't you know? Isn't this what you want? Tell me quickly if you don't want this, because soon I may not be able to let you go.”

Kalen closed his eyes and sighed, “I don't think I want you to let me go,” he moaned, “Please hold me and don't stop kissing me.” And then he closed his eyes, threw his arms around the Tygerian's neck and gave himself up to the pleasure.

Kalen kissed him with a tangle of tongues and teeth-clashing firmness. He devoured the Tygerian's mouth until their lips were red and sore from too much kissing, too much desperation, too much *everything*.

Mikol didn't know where this handsome human had come from—maybe someone had ordered him from one of the menus that all these brothels seemed to have and then he got mixed up and turned around. But wherever it was, and whoever had been waiting for him, they were out of luck. This man was his for what was left of the night now. The idea, coming so suddenly strong in Mikol's head, surprised him with how right it was.

The visu punch that was still singing in Mikol's blood must have still been very much in charge to produce such a strange thought. He made himself push the human away, take a deep breath, steady himself and ask him a question instead.

“Is this something you truly want, sweetheart? Do you want to make love to me? Or do you want me to help you go downstairs?”

They were simple questions, but they seemed to completely confuse the man in his arms. He looked up at Mikol with those incredible eyes, a dazed expression on his face. How much had he had to drink anyway? Or was this actually due to a drug someone had given him?

“What's your name, honey?” Mikol asked him softly, still using the pet names his omak called him as a child—and still did sometimes.

“I-I can't...”

“Can't tell me? It's all right. You don't have to. You don't have to do anything you don't want to do.” He caressed the side of that pretty face, and the young man closed his eyes and leaned into the touch.

“Gods, how are you so fucking beautiful?” Mikol asked softly, touching his face and running his hand gently along his jaw. His hair had finally escaped its binding completely and fell across his shoulders in fat, black curls.

The boy suddenly shuddered, grabbed Mikol around his neck and pulled his head down toward his. He closed his eyes and angled his head up at the same time, puckering his lips. He was asking for another kiss, and Mikol was surprised but only too happy to oblige.

Charmed by him, Mikol wanted him in every way he could have him. He wanted the boy to cry out his name as he moaned and begged and lifted those pretty legs up in the air and begged Mikol to make love to him. But he was far too altered for that, and Mikol didn't want to take advantage of him. Instead, he walked him slowly backward to sit him on the bed. The boy rubbed himself against his body every step of the way, making no effort to get away, simply moaning and shivering.

Mikol took a step back to give him some space, but he jumped to his feet and began pulling off his clothes.

“Slow down, love, and make sure you know what's going on. Are you sure you want this?”

“Yes!” he cried with enthusiasm, down to nothing but his underclothes, pulling Mikol down on top of him.

Then the boy was somehow wearing nothing at all, having wriggled out of his tiny underpants, and his naked body was gorgeous and pale in the dim light of the cheap lamp. Mikol sat beside him for a moment to simply look at him, telling

himself sternly that he would *not* make love to this beautiful young man, no matter how much he was being tempted.

The young human, suddenly looking shocked, sat up, balled up his fist and took a half-hearted swing toward Mikol, a blow that Mikol easily dodged. He caught the human's fist and held it to his lips to kiss his knuckles.

"You can just say no, honey," Mikol said, smiling down at him. "No need for all this, because I'm not going to force you."

"No! It was one of the orbs—I saw it coming straight at you again, so I was going to knock it away. I just thought it was about to hit you."

Mikol shook his head. This boy must have been given some hallucinatory drug downstairs. He refused to take advantage of that. "Before anything else happens, I think you need to sober up, honey."

"What is this "honey" you call me? It sounds nice."

"It's just something my omak says. My omak is my bearer. It's a-a term of endearment."

His eyes wide, the young man shook his head. "Oh. I like it. But no, you're wrong. I feel fine, and I-I want to try this. I need to *see*, if you know what I mean. I have very *important* reasons to know."

"Know what?"

"If I'll like it. Making love to a man, that is. And I've only had a little to drink and one pill—well, maybe more than a little to drink, but I still know what I want."

“I can’t be sure of that,” Mikol told him, shaking his head.

“Then just let me kiss you again. Can I? Can we just kiss and nothing else?”

Mikol was tempted, and he was a bit too drunk himself to make really good decisions and he knew one thing often led to many other things. He *would not* fuck this beautiful boy. Both of them were too far gone for that. But kissing? Maybe a little touching? Surely that would be all right. The visu punch whispered in his ear that it thought just kissing him would be fine—more than fine. It would be perfect.

Perhaps sensing Mikol’s reservations, though, the young human persisted. “You can stop if I ask you to, right? I know you will.”

“Of course. I would always stop. But I still think we’ve both had too much to drink.”

“Please. Can’t we just try the kissing a while? I promise I won’t press for more.”

Mikol wasn’t sure if this was some kind of game or not, but he’d been thoroughly taught by his omak and by Blake that his large size and fierce nature brought along serious responsibilities when he was with a sexual partner. They’d taught him both could be intimidating and people who didn’t need or want to be intimidated but *could be anyway*. He had to make sure the boy wasn’t, and that he never felt as if he didn’t have a choice. Then there was the strong possibility this little love slave had been slipped drugs and had no idea what he was talking about. No, he wouldn’t take any chances.

The boy leaned up then and brushed his lips sweetly, chastely over Mikol's, making him groan.

Then again, maybe if he were really careful and stuck to just kisses... Mikol bent to each of the boy's tempting, plumped up nipples, biting gently down on one of them and making him shiver.

"Is that all right?"

The young man nodded. "Yes," he said, his eyes wide as he held onto Mikol's shoulders. Mikol kissed and licked his nipples, until he cried out and threw his head back, moaning. He suddenly clambered onto Mikol's lap, facing him and throwing his arms around Mikol's neck, so that his delectable ass was on Mikol's thighs and his cock was standing up hard and proud, rubbing against his stomach. Mikol, running his hands over the boy's body, kissed his cheeks, his nose and even his eyelids, trailing kisses down to his throat. Every move he made was gentle, as he tried to make sure the boy knew he was not threatening or forcing him in any way, that he would stop whenever he wanted him to. It was like a form of sweet torture.

The young man responded with whimpers that made Mikol gasp and strain as the young human pushed his rigid prick against him over and over. All the time the human's hands were all over Mikol too, moving up and down his back and sides. It was torturous and impossible not to respond. Mikol fastened his hands on that sweet ass as the boy wrapped his arms around Mikol's neck and groaned into his mouth. Mikol went back to kissing his luscious lips again, gently biting them and rubbing his jaw against the boy's. The young

man breathlessly slipped his fingers down into the waistband of Mikol's trousers and began trying to slide them down over his hips.

"I want to see you too," he groaned. "*Please* take these off."

"No. That's not a good idea."

"Please, *please*. I need to see you."

Mikol sighed, and then stood to take off his trousers. He sat back down on the bed and pulled the beautiful human back over into his arms. "Just kissing and no more," he told him sternly, and the boy nodded frantically.

"These muscles," the young man murmured, tracing a finger over them and talking softly as if to himself as Mikol got his shirt over his head. Mikol took his mouth again, kissing him slowly, languorously, enjoying all the appreciative sounds he was making. Those little gasps and whimpers spurred him on and ignited a little fire within him. The human pushed his cock up desperately into Mikol's hand, and he obligingly spit in his hand and stroked him.

He stroked the young man's pretty cock, rubbing and massaging him and then stroking him with real purpose. The boy cried out at the attention and fell back against the pillows. Mikol had to hand it to him. He really was getting into the spirit of this thing if this was a game he was playing. It was almost impossible to believe that a beautiful young love slave he'd met in a brothel could be so innocent. The human began babbling something soft and sweet. "P-please, please. Go slow. I-I haven't done this before, and I think I'm about to..."

Mikol smiled down at him. He really was good at this. But Mikol would play along, because of course, anything was possible. He supposed it was possible it could be his first time.

“I’ll go slow and be careful, love. Don’t worry. I’ll take care of you. I won’t penetrate you.”

The boy nodded, biting his puffy bottom lip. A nice touch, Mikol thought. He began stroking the young man’s pretty cock again, and then, all at once the boy stiffened, cried out and spurted helplessly in Mikol’s hand.

Mikol stroked him through it, but he was amazed, really. Perhaps he wasn’t a love slave after all, as they were known for their longevity. Love slaves had been known to make love to a man for hours and were supposed to be specially trained in lasting a long time. In fact, one of their cardinal rules was to never, ever come before the client did, and Mikol had barely begun touching him. He had to admit to being a bit puzzled by this one, though he tried not to show it and started to ease the boy from his lap, but that was when the handsome young man angled up his chin, closed his eyes, puckered up his sweet lips again, and pressed his lips frantically to Mikol’s.

It was so sweet, so innocent that Mikol couldn’t resist. Just a little more. He lowered his head and gave the boy a slow, dangerously captivating kiss that backfired a little, because it began to invade every corner of Mikol’s own body, making him want to stake claim to everything this young man was or ever would be. The idea of him in another man’s arms was oddly repellent. Mikol felt the heat and pressure building up to an almost unbearable level inside him until something had to give. His prick was hard as diamonds, so when the boy

gave him a wondering look and wrapped his hand around him, Mikol groaned and shoved up into his hand.

Both of them were excited and Mikol was gloriously hard. He remembered the game they were supposed to be (*may have been?*) playing, and he pushed the boy's hand away and tried to put some distance between them, but the boy surged back and plastered himself against Mikol again. Mikol leaned in to nuzzle his neck.

“We need to stop.”

“No, please. It's too perfect,” the boy said. “Don't make me stop. I want to pleasure you.”

He angled his head for another kiss and since all these kisses were having a drugging effect on Mikol, he obliged. The boy's mouth was so warm and soft and perfect. He was whimpering and saying something over and over that sounded like begging. It made a shudder go through Mikol.

“I want my hands on you. Please, sir.” The word made Mikol shudder. Then, with pink blushes spreading across his high cheekbones, the beautiful boy began to stroke Mikol harder and faster.

“Is it good?” he asked.

Mikol was beyond a reply, so he simply groaned, closing his eyes and letting his head fall back. He was so close that he knew it wouldn't take much longer. The man on his lap was blushing charmingly at his response, but he was stroking in earnest.

“Like this?” he said, looking up eagerly, trying to catch Mikol's eye.

“That’s it,” Mikol whispered in the boy’s ear. He groaned, feeling his orgasm gathering inside him like thunder. It had to break soon, and then the boy clenched his hand around him even harder and pushed a fingertip into his slit. That drove Mikol completely over the edge. His come spilled out all over the boy’s hand. He was coming so hard he feared he might pass out for a moment. He was trembling and these ragged breaths and frantic cries had never happened to him before. He’d pulled the boy instinctively closer so that his body was plastered against the boy’s as he soothed him and kissed him. His vision dimmed as the orgasm continued. and he spilled helplessly into the tight spaces between them.

When it was over, Mikol fell back against the headboard of the bed, panting hard for breath. Mikol reached for the boy’s hand and pulled him over to lie against him. Gods, his body felt so good against his. He sprawled in Mikol’s arms contentedly as Mikol slowly stroked his hand over his back. They were plastered together by copious amounts of semen, and although Mikol felt totally drained, he thought after a while that he should do probably do something about it. He eased the young man down to lie on the bed and went to find something to clean them off with.

He had just found an old cloth that seemed fairly clean by the sink and washed with it before rinsing it out thoroughly and bringing it back to the bed. Suddenly, a loud pounding started up at the door again, and a rough voice started yelling.

“I know you’re in there! I’m putting all of this in my report! Wait until they all find out what you did!”

The young man gasped and sat up, his eyes round with horror. “Oh gods! *Oh no!* I-I have to go!” he shouted.

He scrambled out of the bed, sliding into his pants and then pulling a boot on one foot as he hopped to the door with the other in his hand. He stopped at the door to slip on his shirt and fasten his pants. He cast one last, long look back at Mikol, threw open the door and raced out into the corridor. By the time Mikol got his own pants back on and made it to the door, the beautiful young human was long gone, and the hallway was empty.

Chapter Six

When Mikol reappeared downstairs, the young man and the ones chasing him were nowhere to be seen. Though he asked the bartenders and some of the other staff, no one seemed to know, or care really, about who the man had been, or where the four hells he'd disappeared to, and likewise, the ones who'd been chasing him through the halls earlier. They all claimed the human didn't work there, wasn't any of their love slaves, and they had no idea who he was, no matter how much gold Mikol flashed at them.

Florin was less than useless too, having been upstairs the whole time with the handsome young Drex they'd saved from the beating by the Lycans. The Drex had been enthusiastically expressing his gratitude for it all night, and Florin claimed he hadn't seen a thing. He did admit to being the one who had taken Mikol to a room to sleep it off after he'd passed out, but when he couldn't rouse him, he'd left and retired to his own room with the Drex.

Once Mikol was convinced the young man he'd been with was long gone, he agreed to get started back to their ship for the short trip to the space station. He took a badly needed shower along the way and stood under the hot water for a long time. It took only a few hours to reach the station, but Mikol

found he was preoccupied for most of the trip with thoughts of the young man who had stroked him off and who he couldn't seem to get off his mind. By the time they landed, he was determined to go back to Belline as soon as he possibly could and search for the boy. He needed to know he would be all right.

Tygerians bonded quickly, and Mikol had sense enough not to let himself get caught in that trap. He felt sure Florin had done the same with his Drex. It was preached to Tygerian boys from the time they were really young and first learned about sex to never allow yourself to become too involved and never, ever to have penetrative sex.

So he hadn't bonded to this young man, but he still wanted to find him and make sure he was all right. He'd seemed frightened and why had those men been chasing him in the first place? Mikol made himself a promise to investigate as soon as these betrothal talks were over—just to make sure nothing bad had happened to the boy and he'd either chosen to stay on Belline or left of his own free will.

As they drew closer to the station, Mikol could see that there were many docking facilities and most of them were filled. The space station where the betrothal would take place was an Axis outpost, deliberately placed not far from Leeria or Lycanus and its two nearby sister planets to help keep them all in line. Leeria had always operated as a lawless world before Tygeria and the Axis took over, and they were still struggling to find their way under Axis rule.

As for the planets of Lycanus, their inhabitants had been Earth's staunchest ally during the war. They still weren't

trusted much more than Earth itself, where the Axis maintained a full occupation force even after all these years. Davos had threatened to do so for a hundred years or more if they didn't change their ways and become more compliant, but there were almost constant small rebellions.

The planets in the Lycanus sector didn't cause any real trouble; they just didn't always go along with every edict passed down to them from King Davos and his son. Or at least, they took their own sweet time about doing so.

The space station they were traveling to was huge, as big as a small moon, and housed well over a thousand permanent staff, as well as many visitors. Yet it still managed to look small and unsubstantial in the vastness of space around it. Mikol knew it wasn't that way at all, and like all their stations, its outer hull was highly puncture resistant against any space debris.

The station had meeting rooms of all shapes and sizes and a number of administrative offices, along with a small auditorium, a well-staffed clinic, cantinas and restaurants on the second level and of course, many guest suites. There was also a large dining facility open all hours, and all of this was shared space in the station. Blake, who had visited there many times, had told Mikol it was arranged a little like a big hotel or convention center back on Earth, only on a much grander scale.

Like a typical Axis outpost, there was a huge Axis flag painted on the sides of the outer walls, along with fierce slogans and symbols written in Tygerian. It looked like a huge,

round, silver orb hanging in the sky, studded with twinkling stars...and covered in graffiti.

Somewhere in that glittering, decorated ball might be the man Mikol had come all this way to meet, or if not, he would soon be there. The man who, if things went well, might actually become his husband, his nobyo, one day. And if thoughts of the man the night before intruded a little on that idea, then Mikol had to put them firmly away. Enough of that—it would soon be time to do his duty and meet Prince Kalen. He'd still make inquiries about the beautiful young man on Belline, but he had responsibilities he needed to face, and his duty lay elsewhere.

Blake had given Mikol one more bit of important information before he left. “Just remember to never, *ever* be alone with this Prince Kalen until you're married. Never, do you hear me? Just in case you don't like him—or you like him too much. You don't want this prince to be able to say you ruined him and then be forced into a marriage you may not want. That's what happened with your uncles Anarr and Vannos. Derrick too, for that matter.”

“Ruined? What does that mean? What happened? I never heard that about my uncles not wanting to marry. Were either of them hurt in some way?”

“No. Never mind what happened.”

“But were they forced into marriage?”

Blake gave him an annoyed and exasperated look. “No. They leaped into marriage like demented toad frogs and never looked back. But *you*... You just mind what I said and don't be alone with Prince Kalen. The key word here is *Prince*. If you

ruin him, it would cause a huge scandal, and you'll have no choice but to marry him. I know you're big and strong and not afraid of anything, but this Kalen might say something happened when it didn't. I'm not saying he'd do anything like that, but you can't be too careful."

"But what would be the purpose? I'll already be there to get betrothed to him."

Blake shrugged. "Who knows? Maybe you'll decide you don't want him after you meet him? Maybe he'll want to negotiate more favorable terms. Maybe more gold or power? Just be careful, that's all."

Mikol grinned. "What do you think I might do to him if I got him alone?"

"Ravish him, if you find him attractive enough."

"What's that?"

"Something that happened to both your uncles. And to me, for that matter. And I won't have you accused of doing it too."

"Wait. Are you saying my grandfather *ravished* you? What is that exactly?"

"Never you mind, and yes, absolutely he did. Now be careful, darling. You're much too pretty for your own good, you know." Mikol was always amused at the word "pretty," which Blake said in Earthan. He knew that term usually referred to females or children, but his omak-ahn had used it on him all his life. And he still had no clear idea what "ravish" actually meant, though he didn't have much trouble figuring it out. He was pretty sure it was a type of seduction, and surely

not rape of any sort, but it still made him a little uncomfortable. He'd hate to be accused of such a thing, though he knew that back during the war and the years following it, a lot of crazy things had happened.

Mikol was a little shocked and definitely dismayed to see a large crowd there to greet him as he entered the space station. The Tygerian commandant of the station was on hand to welcome him formally, and people stood around to listen to the short speech the commandant gave afterward. The speech was all about building a stronger Axis of planets and how more such contracts as Mikol's and Prince Kalen's should and would soon be taking place to unite the far-flung planets of the galaxy. He praised King Davos and his consort for having so many sons and grandsons. The sons had all married outside their own cultures, as well. He said the subsequent generations would be able to join the entire galaxy before they were done. That was approximately what he said, anyway, but it was all a little boring, not to mention a wild exaggeration and no doubt meant to flatter King Davos—who wasn't even there to hear it.

Mikol, though used to this kind of thing, was feeling fidgety there on the small platform they'd erected by the time the commandant was finally done. Luckily all that seemed to be required of him was a smile and a wave to the crowd.

It seemed that a visit from any member of King Davos's family, especially one of the direct heirs, was a big deal, as his omak would say, and the officials here were treating it as such, making sure they gave Prince Mikol all the attention his illustrious father and grandfather might think he deserved. They even gave him gifts, which his guards took charge of.

Finally, when all was said and done, and the reception wound down, Mikol left to go find his suite.

The lifts to the upper levels were made of some clear material that fully exposed him to the large group of people still milling around below, and a crowd gathered to watch him and Florin and their guards ascend to the upper floors. He endured it until they reached the top, and then after they got off the lift, he stood at the balustrade to look down at the still busy scene below. He was far enough up that the people below looked like small insects scurrying around the atrium. And that was how he came to be still there when Prince Kalen of Loros arrived at the station with his entourage.

“I think Prince Kalen has arrived,” Florin said from beside him, looking with interest over the rail beside Mikol. He was much too far away to tell if the prince was as handsome as his pictures indicated. Mikol could see that he was dressed all in black and had long black hair. His personal guard surrounded him, all dressed the same as he, along with another group of guards wearing different, brighter colors. As he came in, he was taken directly over to the commandant’s little platform, but he spared the man only a nod and a quick word or two and then strode off toward the lifts, followed closely by his guards.

Mikol noticed right away that the guards who were not wearing black like Prince Kalen and seemed to be almost herding him. The ones wearing his own colors stood back a bit.

Florin snorted a little. “Rude little thing, isn’t he? He left the commandant standing there looking embarrassed.”

“He’s not little for a Lorian. Humans are even smaller.”

“Like your omak? He’s pretty small compared to you and your father.”

“Don’t let him hear you say that. I commented once on how short he was, and he explained to me that a height of three helarens, which in the way humans measure, is almost six “feet” tall, and a most respectable height for anyone, other than for the ‘overgrown apes’ of Tygeria and Lycanus.”

“Oh...ouch.”

Mikol laughed. “And you know how good looking he is, even at his age. I have a theory about that. Tygerians live much longer than humans, by at least a hundred years or more, so I suspect my father is dosing him with something to increase his lifespan. Tygerian medicines, as you know, are much advanced over Earthan ones. Whatever he’s taking, it has no doubt preserved his good looks too.”

“If your omak knew that, he wouldn’t like it.”

“Oh no. He’ll kill my father when he finally figures it out.” He sighed. “Or maybe not. I can’t imagine him leaving us too soon. It would break my father’s heart. And mine too, for that matter.”

Florin was using a pocket-sized spy glass to peer down at Kalen and passed it over to Mikol. “Here, take a look for yourself at your intended. Is he like his picture?”

Mikol took the little spy glass and put it to his eye. Below him, the prince’s group had reached the lifts and the prince suddenly looked up, right at Mikol, some thirty stories above, so that Mikol got a clear and unhampered view of his face.

He continued to gaze down at the prince for a long time until his lift arrived and then he stepped back and handed the glass to Florin. Quickly, Mikol motioned to his guards and began hurrying to his rooms so Prince Kalen wouldn't see him spying on him here on this upper level. He took off down the long corridor and didn't rest until he had closed the door to his room firmly behind him and Florin, who had noticed something was wrong, followed close behind him. He turned to Mikol with a questioning look.

“What is it?” Florin said, “Why do you look like that?”

Mikol laughed, though his hands were still shaking a little as he straightened his uniform and turned around to face his friend. “Let's see—what do you want first? The good news or the bad news?”

“What do you mean?”

“Do you remember that man I was looking for at Starlight on Belline? The one who disappeared from my room?”

“Of course.”

“I found him.”

“You did? Then what's the bad news?”

“He's Prince Kalen.

“What? Are you sure?”

“I'm sure. I got a good look at him through your little glass. It's definitely him.”

“But what could he have been doing there? Do you think it was deliberate on his part?”

“It would be a hell of a coincidence if it weren’t, don’t you agree? And I don’t believe in coincidences.”

“Yes, but...how would he have known? We made a kind of last-minute decision to go.”

“No idea, unless he has spies on your ship. Though that seems a little extreme.”

Florin looked affronted. “To say the least. I suppose it *could* just be one of those things. Belline is well known in this galaxy, and it’s not far from the station. Stranger things have happened, I suppose.”

“Hmm.”

“But what would be the purpose? What would he hope to accomplish?”

“Again, no idea.”

“What are you going to do about it?”

“Nothing tonight. He looks exhausted. Let him get a good night’s sleep and then in the morning, I’ll see what he has to say for himself. See if he comes up with some new demand, or if he wants to amend the terms of the original betrothal agreement.”

“And if he does?”

“I’ll cross that bridge when I come to it. But he still has some explaining to do. In fact, arrange a private meeting for just the two of us here in my chambers first thing in the morning. Before we discuss the contracts. Make sure we’re not disturbed.”

“What do you intend to do?”

“I’m not sure, but I need the truth out of him, one way or another, about what he was doing on Belline. And who he was doing it with. I want to know why those men were chasing him, and I mean to find out.”

“Be careful—this is still a prince we’re talking about.”

“Oh, I’m well aware of who he is.” Memories of the man’s almost handsome face and his almost unbearable sweetness came flooding back to him suddenly, along with the devastation he’d felt at the idea he’d probably never see him again. “But he’s *my* prince now. It’s too late for him to renegotiate that. He already belongs to me after last night.”

Florin grinned. “What would your parents say? More important, what would his say?”

“I think they’d say it’s probably only possible to ‘ravish’ a prince—or ruin him for that matter—one time. At least in the way my family members used the word. And I think I took care of that last night with his full cooperation.”

The past twelve hours or so had been among the worst of Kalen’s life, starting from the time he walked out of the heartbreakingly beautiful Tygerian’s room on Belline right up until now. As soon as he’d made it to the end of the hall, his uncle’s guards had surrounded him. The one who seemed to be in charge—he thought his name was Gareth—took his arm in a custodial grip.

“I’ve notified your uncle of your activities here tonight, and he’s given us orders to take you into immediate custody and deliver you to the space station.”

Kalen jerked his arm away, or tried to, though the man was like a four-armed Leerian monkey and kept grabbing onto him again.

“How dare you lay hands on me, you imbecile!”

Garet flushed at his tone—not out of embarrassment but sheer rage, Kalen thought—and pushed his ugly face down into Kalen’s. “Your uncle gave me permission, that’s how. Now come along with us, and you won’t get hurt.”

“I’d like to see you try to hurt me, you fool!” Kalen yelled and swung at his head.

Seconds later, he found himself at the bottom of a pile of his uncle’s guards, being crushed by their combined weight. When he cursed and threatened, they ignored him and tied his hands behind him. The final indignity was when he found himself gagged and frog marched down the stairs and into the main area of the bar. Dartan jumped to his feet from a table where all his men were gathered with weapons pointed at them by the other guards. But Dartan was shoved unceremoniously back down and one of the disruptors was held to his head.

“You’re all coming with us to Arkaan 673,” Garet barked at them. “We have our orders to shoot any of your personal guard who try to interfere.”

Kalen jerked his head at Dartan, trying to signal him to do as they said, sending him a silent, furious message that promised they’d take retribution for all of this. Dartan nodded,

though still angry and unhappy at seeing his prince treated with such disrespect.

“Take the fucking gag off him at least,” Dartan said, “or you’ll have to shoot all of us right here and now, and I think that might cause a stir even on Belline.”

Garet grimaced but nodded at one of the guards closest to Kalen, who pulled the cloth gag down, though he left the thing tied around Kalen’s neck. He gave another signal for them to move out and the entire group left the Starlight and made their way out of the plaza and then walked on to the port about a half mile away.

His despised uncle had a shuttle waiting for them there with orders to take them back to Lycanus 2 where a transport was supposed to be waiting.

It wasn’t.

“Looks like my uncle reached his usual level of competency,” Kalen commented with bitter satisfaction. “Now what do we do, geniuses?”

Garet ignored him and went inside the port office to figure out whether or not a transport to the station was coming. Eventually, someone told Gareth that there had been a miscommunication, but they could take the regularly scheduled transport...the one that would arrive in three hours.

What other choice did they have? They settled in the uncomfortable chairs to wait. At least they untied Kalen’s hands, though only because a Lycan police official gave them a suspicious, hostile look.

“I’m sorry I got us into this,” Kalen murmured to Dartan, who had taken a seat beside him. “It was a terrible idea to go to Belline.” His hangover was hitting him in earnest now, and his head ached horribly. His stomach too, and even his hair hurt.

“It’s over now,” Dartan was telling him softly in his ear. “Let’s just get through this and get to the space station. Perhaps you should inform your Tygerian prince what’s happened and let him handle Nerol and his guards.”

“I’ll take care of Nerol myself, don’t worry. And he has a long list of crimes to answer for.”

Despite the way his head was throbbing, Kalen managed to doze a little until the transport arrived. To his dismay, he dreamed of beautiful, exotic Tygerians.

They were served a meal onboard, consisting of heavy Lycan food, which turned his stomach even more after all the one from the night before, but the Lycan tea was excellent, and he was able to choke down a little of the nutty flavored bread. He fell into a deep, dreamless sleep that took up the rest of the journey and when they arrived at the space station, and Dartan shook his arm, he was barely able to keep his eyes open. He felt tired and achy and vaguely remembered meeting the commandant. Then he was whisked to his room on an upper floor. Thank the gods, Dartan was allowed to stay with him, because he was really beginning to feel unwell, and he didn’t want another argument with the fucking guards. He *would* deal with them, but maybe he’d wait until he was sure he could stay on his feet.

Dartan helped him undress and shoved him into a hot shower while he unpacked Kalen's bags. It certainly wasn't any of his captain of the guard duties, but he did it uncomplainingly and told Kalen he really needed to go to bed and rest, because he looked terrible.

"This has all been a lot for you to take. Why don't you try to sleep?"

Kalen nodded and didn't even remember falling asleep. The next thing he knew, he was opening his eyes to artificial light all around him, although thankfully, Dartan had it dimmed. He sat up, as he heard Dartan talking to someone. It turned out to be a server bringing breakfast, and Kalen realized it had to be the next morning, and he'd literally slept for hours.

His stomach growled in approval of the smells coming from the tray. Kalen laughed and rubbed a hand over it. "I think I'm starving."

"Then let's eat," Dartan replied, drawing a chair near the bed and settling in next to him. He began to dig through what room service had brought them.

Kalen got out of bed and stretched, surprised at how sore he was. "Wait, let me use the facilities first."

He scooted off the bed and went to the huge "bathing room," as the Tygerians called it.

A few minutes later, he walked slowly back into the room, his footsteps dragging.

"What is it? Still feeling hungover?"

"Yes. I can't seem to shake it. I wonder if that pill I took could have made me ill."

“More like that stew you ate after we started drinking and you said you were hungry. I didn’t like the looks of that. And it smelled really off. Come over here and eat some of this bread and maybe you’ll feel better.”

Kalen sat down on the bed with the big tray between him and Dartan. The menu hadn’t had much of any traditional Lorian food, apparently, but for breakfast, most Lorians ate sweet bread and pastries and drank a strong Lorian juice called *rocas*, or Lycan tea when they could get it, and of course, the station had plenty.

Kalen ate some of the bread as Dartan had suggested and drank cup after cup of tea. He felt no better afterward, though, and he still had body aches all over and his stomach was queasy. Dartan talked all through their first meal, teasingly explaining about how Kalen had done all the dancing with the tall person in the red dress and then ran up and down the stairs to find the long lost Jayronian prostitute.

“But listen, your Tygerian is here at the station.”

“*What?*” Kalen said in a shocked tone. “My Tygerian? Here?”

Dartan looked at him like he was puzzled. “Yes, the Tygerian Prince Mikol is here. What did you think I meant?”

“I-I...oh, nothing. Never mind. When did he arrive?”

“Before us, apparently, according to the server who brought the tray. So, yesterday, I guess. He sent a message that he wants to have a meeting with you this morning—alone. He’s requested it to happen before your meeting about the betrothal contract, in fact.”

Was it possible to feel the blood drain from your face? If so, his just had. Had that fucking guard actually told Nerol, who then notified the prince of his activities on Belline? But why would he? Surely he wanted this betrothal.

“Why? Do you think he’s changed his mind?”

Dartan looked up at him. “I doubt it, but would you care? You were going to tell him to wait anyway, weren’t you?”

“Yes. I think so. I don’t know. Probably.” He rubbed at an ache that had started up in his forehead. “I don’t know anymore, Dartan. The Tygerians are so powerful. I’ve been back and forth on this thing a hundred times. He could get me everything I want—all that I need. He’s in direct line to the Tygerian throne. I don’t even know how my uncle pulled this off, because it *is* kind of amazing, but I don’t think my uncle thought it through. I think he must have been angling for any of the available princes, and he probably never dreamed he’d get the crown prince himself. He was hoping I’d get locked down on Tygeria and never return, because he couldn’t afford another death so soon after my father’s. But this prince is the *heir*. This man is powerful and could see to it that I’m restored to the throne. I could get payback for my father’s death; my Army could be restored to the way they used to be, before my uncle murdered my father. I could kill my uncle with my bare hands in the capitol square. It’s a lot to consider.”

Dartan laughed softly. “Good goals to have, for sure. But you’d have to *marry* him to get all that. Not such a good deal if you’re not attracted to men.”

“No. And I wasn’t. That is, I never thought I would be. But then on Belline...I haven’t told you yet about what

happened on Belline.”

Dartan’s eyebrows rose quickly. “Tell me what? What are you talking about?”

“I was searching for that room upstairs, you know, the Jayronian’s. And, I was all mixed up—Nerol’s stupid guards were chasing me up and down the halls. And then I knocked on this one door and a man answered.” He glanced up at Dartan and felt heat rising in his face. “It was a Tygerian, and he brought me inside and...Dartan, he was so good looking. Maybe the best-looking man I’ve ever seen. He scared off all the guards. They were so frightened of him. Even as drunk as I was, I could tell they almost pissed themselves when he came out in the hallway and growled at them. He took me inside his room to hide out from them, and-and that’s when things happened.”

“What do you mean ‘things happened?’ What kind of things?”

He huffed out a long sigh and just came out with it. “I let him...you know...*be* with me.” He lowered his head. “Not just be with me. He kind of *directed* things, if you know what I mean. Oh hell, Dartan, he was totally in charge, and I-I liked it.”

Dartan made a choking sound and slammed his cup down on the tray so hard it tipped over. “*He raped you?*”

“What? No. God no. He made love to me.”

Kalen could feel his face flaming, but he needed to tell Dartan or somebody, because he had to talk about it.

“You let him have intercourse with you?”

“No, not exactly. Probably not. Not in the way you mean or that he would have thought. But we-we did enough.”

“Enough for what? What are you talking about?” His eyes widened. “Did you or did you not let him fuck you?”

“Would it make that much difference to you? If I did have sex with a man?”

“It makes no difference at all to *me*, Kalen. How can you even ask? People are attracted to whoever they’re attracted to. It’s just that you...you’re a prince. Held to a high standard. If this Prince Mikol found out you’d been with another man before him, I don’t think he would marry you.”

Kalen turned pink and groaned. “No, no, he can’t find out.”

As Kalen just sat there looking miserable, Dartan leaned closer to him. “Kalen? Why do you look like that? Talk to me.”

“It’s just that I wasn’t all that careful. I was making a lot of noise and running up and down the halls and then went in the Tygerian’s room with him. The guards saw me go. Then that guard of my uncle’s came and knocked on the door after a while, and he said he knew what I was doing and he would make a full report to my uncle.”

“What do you mean? That impertinent bastard!” Dartan asked, sounding angry.

“I know. We weren’t even doing that much, really. At least I don’t think we were.”

“Tell me what you did.”

“Well,” Kalen said, picking at the bedcovers. “I wanted to make him feel good, and he didn’t even actually...penetrate me. He probably thought we were mostly fooling around.”

“But you thought you weren’t?”

“I took my clothes off. So did he. I put my hands on him and stroked him, Kalen. Over and over on his...you know. Until he...completed.”

“Oh.”

“And we were both naked. So it wasn’t just nothing. Probably far from it.”

“Indeed.”

“Now I have to decide...do I tell the prince? Or do I keep my mouth shut?”

“If you tell him, he’ll call off the wedding.”

“I know. And I thought I wanted that. And then I thought I didn’t. And now I’m back to not knowing again.” He sighed. “I have no idea what to do, Dartan. I’m a warrior. I don’t want to wind up like those men in the blue robes I saw once.”

“Men in the blue robes? What are you talking about?”

“It was when I went to a conference with my father. You see, I saw these men with the Tygerians...”

A loud voice suddenly interrupted them so abruptly, Kalen spilled his cup of tea all over the bed.

Chapter Seven

In his short, but eventful life, Kalen had already learned one vital fact. No matter how bad you feel, fate can always arrange for you to feel even worse. An impersonal, robotic voice spoke to them from a small box on the wall.

“Message for His Highness, Prince Kalen of Loros from His Highness Prince Mikol of Tygeria.”

“What the hell?” Kalen said. “Is that a speaker of some kind? Is it a communicator?” His eyes grew wide. “Can people hear us talking on those things too?”

“No, calm down. I don’t think that’s how it works.” He turned toward the box on the wall. “Go ahead with the message.”

The box crackled and the impersonal voice said, “You are ten minutes late for a previously arranged appointment with Prince Mikol of Tygeria. Please come to Deck 35, Suite 489 at your earliest convenience.”

“Shit, I forgot all about that. Kalen, you have to get dressed and go down to Deck 35 for your meeting. I lost track of the time.”

“Now? But I’m not ready to face the prince yet.”

“You have to. Get dressed and let’s go see what your Tygerian prince wants to talk to you about.”

Kalen groaned, but he knew Dartan was right. He had to get moving, though it probably wasn’t accurate to call Prince Mikol *his* Tygerian. He got reluctantly to his feet while Dartan went to the bags he hadn’t even unpacked yet and began pulling clothes out. “I need to shower and shave,” Kalen protested as Dartan shoved an armful of clothing at him.

“No time. And you showered last night. Just go clean your teeth and comb your hair. We have to get moving. I’ll send back a message that we’re running late but on the way.”

“What kind of person sets a meeting for this damn early in the morning anyway?” Kalen grumbled as he pulled up his pants. He tried to hurry, because this man was important, after all, but he still resented it. This was not a great way to start, and maybe he’d tell the prince that too. His father used to say that it was a good idea to start out as you meant to go on, and Kalen didn’t consider himself to be at his best in the mornings. Even when Kalen was younger and had been in combat training, he used to be in trouble with his instructors all the time because of his reluctance to face early mornings. He thought he could totally have been a morning person if morning just started a little later in the day.

Not that Prince Mikol would want an ongoing relationship or anything else to do with him anyway, when he found out he had been running around having sex with random strangers on Belline. Gods, he couldn’t have screwed this up any better than if he’d been actively trying.

Despite his misgivings and all his worry, twenty minutes or so later, Kalen was ready to go. With Dartan's help, he had pulled himself together enough to go face the prince, though he still felt a long way from being presentable. At least his hair was neatly combed and tied back, and he'd insisted on a quick shave, despite what Dartan said. He still didn't look his best, he thought, but it would just have to do.

When Dartan opened the door, Garet, his despised uncle's despised guard, was there with another of the guards and Kalen tried not to bristle with irritation, but it was hard. They glared at each other and Garet insolently stepped up to Kalen, looking him over.

"Where are you supposed to be off to? I don't remember giving you permission to go anywhere."

"Who the fuck asked you?" Kalen shouted, pulling back his fist with a snarl, but Dartan jumped in front of him, putting a hand on his chest to hold him back.

"He's not worth your time, Your Highness." He whirled back to glare at the guard. "Get out of our way, Garet. *His Highness*," he said with heavy emphasis on the two words, "is on his way to a meeting with Prince Mikol of Tygeria. But wait, should I send the prince a quick message telling him that one of Prince Kalen's *guards* has an objection to that. I'm sure he'd understand."

Garet sneered at him but arrogantly stepped back out of the way long enough for Prince Kalen to sail past him. Then he and the other guard fell in behind. Kalen was seething, but since he was already running late, he kept on walking toward the lift. Deck 35 was just below theirs, so it was necessary to

step inside with the two hated guards and endure their proximity for a few seconds until they reached Prince Mikol's floor. The two followed Kalen and Dartan off the lift and right up to the Tygerian's door.

Dartan rapped on it and the door slid open after a moment, revealing a large, handsome Tygerian, looking down at the small group quizzically. "Prince Kalen?" he asked looking from Dartan back to Kalen.

"Yes. That's me," Kalen said from behind Dartan, relieved to see that the prince seemed to be quite handsome at least, and not much older than he was. He had no real idea of exactly how old the prince was come to think of it. He knew he was handsome, but all Tygerians favored each other a great deal anyway, to Kalen's mind at least.

Except for the one he'd met on Belline. He'd never expected Tygerians to look so exotic or be so big and powerful. That Tygerian had been extraordinarily good looking, and it made something in Kalen's chest flutter to remember just how much. He really wished he could see him just one more time. But he had to put all thoughts of the handsome Tygerian out of his mind and face this prince. He took a deep breath, steadying himself.

The man at the door took a step backward and gestured for them to come inside. "You can come in. but no guards." Kalen stepped forward with Dartan, and the other two tried to follow, but the Tygerian placed one big hand on Garet's chest and the other on Dartan's, stopping them both. "Perhaps you didn't hear me. I said, the guards stay outside."

Dartan had thought the big Tygerian couldn't possibly be talking to him. So he'd simply pushed past him.

Immediately, he was grabbed by his shirt collar and slammed back against the wall.

“Where *the fuck* do you think you're going?”

Dartan, who was still pretty hungover himself from the night before, because he'd been drinking right along with the prince—perhaps even more, as Kalen had never been able to hold his liquor—flew into a rage and reached down to pull out his weapon. He had been through quite a few stressful days on the way to this god forsaken outpost, far from his home and everything he knew, trying to keep his men calm and ignore the near constant insults and harassment of Nerol's men. All while trying to calm and protect his unpredictable and capricious prince. He was right at that precise tipping point where it was just as easy to fight as it was to do anything else. In fact, he was fucking spoiling for it.

Instinctively, he assessed the situation. This man must be simply another guard. Dartan didn't recognize the insignia on his uniform. He'd had it with trumped up assholes like this one who were always trying to start something. He'd had to endure it with Nerol's guards because he was under orders from his prince, but this man in front of him was no one he knew. And since he obviously wanted a quarrel, Dartan was inclined to give him one.

He made a fist with the hand not holding the weapon and slammed it in the side of the Tygerian's face, as the belligerent fool pushed it down into his. Dartan was tall, but this man had maybe six inches on him and a good deal more bulky muscle. Dartan still relished the brawl that was about to erupt.

The Tygerian soldier simply shook his head from the blow and then came even closer to growl at him. A chill swept down Dartan's spine. He had always heard that a Tygerian's growl when his blood was high was a frightening thing. This one was low and guttural and far from any sound Dartan had ever heard anyone make before. But fortunately, or perhaps unfortunately for them both, he'd made up his mind to take no more shit from anyone not in his direct command. The growl served only to fire his blood, so rather than strike fear into him, it simply made him good and pissed off.

"I'll show you where I'm going," he yelled and then leveled his weapon at the fool's head. He wouldn't have used it—probably. He only wanted the big man to back off, but before he could decide for sure, the Tygerian had knocked it from his hand with a move much faster than Dartan expected from a person the Tygerian's size. It only made Dartan angrier.

With a furious roar of his own, he managed to pull out the knife he always wore tucked inside his boot. He didn't want to stab anything vital, as he didn't intend to kill this soldier, but he wanted to make a believer out of him and let him know that Lorians in general and members of the prince's guard in particular weren't going to be intimidated or pushed around by any Tygerian who had ever been born.

With embarrassingly little effort, the Tygerian grabbed the wrist holding the blade and with some tricky, alien move a man that large shouldn't have been able to execute, he flipped Dartan to the floor. Applying enough pressure to snap his wrist if Dartan didn't drop the weapon, he smiled down at him as the blade dropped from Dartan's nerveless fingers, and the next thing he knew, his knife was in the other man's hands and pressed firmly against the tender flesh at Dartan's throat. Not deeply, but enough to get his full attention. He was on his back on the floor looking up in amazement as the huge man apparently changed his mind and flung the knife away, wrapping his hands around his throat instead. He didn't try to choke him, but simply *contained* him there on the floor, even collared him in a way, and it was infuriating to Dartan because he was helpless to move.

Gods, the bastard was so strong—Dartan pulled frantically at his hands but couldn't budge them. Kalen was shouting and beating on the big man's shoulder, obviously thinking he was hurting his captain. "Stop struggling and I'll let you up," the big man was saying. Dartan shook his head stubbornly and the hand tightened just a little, as if to let him know he still wasn't in charge of anything,

It was around then, just as he was growing really frustrated, that he noticed a young god had come into the room. A beautiful, young Tygerian god, with long, red-gold hair and green eyes suddenly appeared behind the big man and swung his fist directly at the big man's shoulder. "Stop playing with the soldiers," the god said.

That finally seemed to register on the man as he grunted and withdrew his strong hand from Dartan's throat. "Stay on

your knees until I say you can move,” he said, leaning in close to Dartan’s face.

“Yes,” Dartan tried to say through the anger clogging his throat. The big Tygerian smiled and leaned in even closer.

“That’s yes sir to you.”

Chapter Eight

“You’ve hurt him!” Kalen shouted, lunging for his friend on the floor.

“No such thing,” a deep, throaty and unbearably sexy voice replied, and Kalen turned to glance over at this new player who had just saved his friend’s life. And that’s when he froze...

A sudden wave of dizziness swept over Kalen as he gazed up at the handsome man standing in front of him with just a hint of a smirk on his face, so close Kalen was overwhelmed by his distinctive scent. It was the gorgeous Tygerian from the night on Belline, somehow unbelievably transported here to the space station. Kalen heard a soft, panicked sound that seemed to come from his own throat, though he wasn’t entirely sure if he was capable of producing such a noise.

“It’s-it’s you!” he cried out and swayed into the door frame, fighting off the waves of blackness that were threatening to swallow him whole. Then, to his everlasting shame, and perhaps because he felt so terrible and his best friend was still on his knees on the floor and everything was just so messed up, he burst into tears.

Tears! When he hadn't cried in years—not even when his father died. Not even when his own mother betrayed him and helped his uncle take the throne. Not even all those times recently when he'd felt so alone. But now all that unshed pain and misery came bursting out of him and he couldn't seem to stop.

“Take it easy—steady now,” came the deep, sexy, unbearably soothing voice again, only this time much closer. Kalen struggled to open his eyes and realized that he was somehow enfolded in the Tygerian's arms and being led over to a large piece of bench-like furniture. He was eased down onto it, and the handsome Tygerian prince knelt down beside him, looking up at him.

“What about this one?” the other Tygerian asked, putting a hand on Dartan's shoulder.

“You've attacked one of my guards!” Kalen managed to say, still feeling hysterical.

Kalen heard Gareth's voice chime in then, still mouthing off and causing trouble at the door.

“Do you two need help in there, Prince?”

“Be quiet,” the big man snapped at him with cold and heavy menace, even though he never even raised his voice. “And wait outside.” He pushed him out and shut the door firmly in his surprised, red face. A furious knocking started up, and Florin ended it abruptly by slamming one huge fist into the door as a warning that shook the door in its frame.

The big Tygerian took another look at Dartan, still kneeling dazedly in front of him and another at Prince Kalen,

who was swaying unsteadily on the bench.

“I think I may have overreacted a bit,” Dartan said.

“Oh, do you think so?” The other Tygerian, the one Kalen had last seen on Belline, looked down at him. He seemed amused, rather than angry, and Kalen bristled in Dartan’s defense.

“Are *you* Prince Mikol?” Kalen said, feeling incredulous and hardly daring to believe it.

“At your service. And you’re Prince Kalen, I believe. It seems we meet again,” Mikol said, gazing at him, looking stern now, with an unreadable expression in his eyes.

He was still speaking—Kalen could see his lips moving, but it had all become just meaningless noise. Nothing was registering inside Kalen’s brain. He could feel his eyelids fluttering, and he thought, *Oh gods, I’m going to faint*, though if he did, it would be the first time he’d ever done such a thing in his life, and what a sterling time it was to begin now.

He glanced back at the Tygerian prince and again at Dartan, who refused to look up at him and was staying there on his knees where the Tygerian had put him. Everything seemed fuzzy and surreal.

Then again, if ever there were a time to start swooning like some girl, now would probably be that time.

“What’s wrong with you?” the prince was asking, taking hold of Kalen’s shoulders and peering down at him. “You there, on the floor, has this ever happened to the prince before? Should I call for a doctor?”

“Huh? Uh, I-I don’t know, Your Highness. I think maybe he just needs a moment. He seems to be in shock.” Dartan started to get up, apparently decided against it after darting a look at Florin’s face and crawled on his knees over beside Kalen to touch his leg. “Speak to me, Kalen. Are you all right?”

Kalen shook himself and pushed Dartan’s hand away, feeling deeply embarrassed by his unmanly behavior. He tried to stand up but fell back down on the bench. All right, he’d just stay there a moment then and rest. It had been an eventful morning—to say the least.

Meanwhile, the big Tygerian was helping Dartan up and depositing him on the bench next to Kalen.

“You can sit next to the prince for now,” he told Dartan, who looked a little dazzled by all that had happened. “But behave yourself. I’m watching you.”

Both Tygerians were looking down on the two of them with something like interest tinged with deep suspicion. The prince gave Dartan a cold glare when he put his arm around Kalen protectively.

“Just who are you, sir?”

“I’m Captain Kajeer, Your Highness, of Prince Kalen’s personal guard,” he replied, trying to bow while still sitting down.

“I see. I don’t believe we’ll require your assistance at this meeting, Captain, but thank you. Kindly wait outside the door. You too, Florin, if you don’t mind. I have some things to talk

about with Prince Kalen in private.” He looked down into Kalen’s face. “If His Highness has recovered.”

“I’m fine,” Kalen snapped and jumped to his feet only to have to sit back down again quickly. He tried again and managed to make it over to stand by the porthole, his back to the room. He held tightly to the window frame to keep himself upright.

In the reflection of the glass, he could see Dartan flinching as the big Tygerian hauled him to his feet when he apparently didn’t get up quickly enough and manhandled him out the door. Dartan gave Kalen one last doubtful look over his shoulder but allowed himself to be more or less pushed out in the hallway by the Tygerian, who strong armed him in a custodial manner. Kalen kept gazing out the porthole as if there were something to see besides the endless blackness outside, feeling shaken and confused and trying to wrap his mind around this new development.

He’d thought he would never again see this man, but here he was, standing just behind him, waiting for him to collect his thoughts. How could that even be possible? How could the man he’d last seen in Belline be the actual prince of Tygeria? It was extraordinary, and he could see the reflection of the prince staring at him with a similarly odd expression as if he thought the same thing. Kalen straightened to his full height and turned around, hoping he was ready to face whatever was coming.

Prince Mikol didn’t seem surprised to see him here, which had to mean he already knew. But how? Had he observed him as he arrived and recognized him? Had he then been sent for to

explain himself? To be questioned like a...like a...common person, so that the betrothal could be called off? Not long ago, he wouldn't have minded—might even have welcomed that. Maybe he still did. He just didn't know anymore. But now that possibility sat like a cold lump of mush in his stomach—which, come to mention it, was a perfect description of that first-meal he'd eaten not long ago—and he felt sick with dread. How his uncle would laugh about this when he found out. The thought straightened his spine.

“I suppose you have questions for me,” he said, raising his chin mutinously in the air.

“A few, yes.”

“Well, I have nothing to say.”

“Really?” Mikol looked amused as he leaned back against the wall behind him. “Nothing at all? You don't think you owe me any explanations or want to explain to me how my soon-to-be betrothed came to be running around a notorious brothel in Belline?”

“You were there too, so explain yourself to me, sir.”

“Indeed, I was. I wasn't, however, running from large groups of men, or knocking on random doors in the brothel, begging to be let in.”

Kalen's only response was a cold, haughty glare. He honestly wasn't able to do much more.

“How did you get away from them in the end, by the way? After that man came to the door? Did you outrun them or find another room to duck into? Or were you just making

your way down the hall, fucking and fondling other men from one room to another?”

Kalen was too hot—his skin was burning, and he was sweating. All the liquor he’d drunk on Belline, along with whatever he’d eaten lay in his stomach like lead. He leaned back against the cold glass covering the porthole and closed his eyes for one blessed moment of relief, hoping this was all some kind of horrible nightmare. But when he opened his eyes again, the Tygerian prince was still there.

“Those men were my guards, if you must know. It was all a-an unfortunate misunderstanding. A mistake. I came to your room completely by accident.”

“I see. And making love to me? Was that an ‘accident’ too or was it all planned?”

“What do you mean?’ I have no idea what you’re talking about. Coming to your room was an accident. As for the rest, well.... I don’t even like men that way.”

“Is that right?”

“Yes—I mean, no I don’t. I-I’ve never ever been with a man before you.”

“And there was just something about me that changed your mind? Do you really expect me to believe that? Or were you hoping to change your luck? Maybe you’d like to get naked for me again now, and we can see if you feel the same way? Overpowered by my charms, that is. I won’t object. Maybe you’ll be a bit more truthful when you’re naked.”

Kalen felt bile and bitter repentance rising in his throat, and he felt suddenly so ill he didn’t think he could stay on his

feet. “I-I can’t talk about any of this now. And you know what? I don’t have to. I-I’m leaving now. The wedding is off and you never have to see me again.”

He tried to walk past the Tygerian prince to get to the door, but Mikol grabbed his arm as he passed and held on, looking down at him. His grip wasn’t harsh, but it was firm.

“I don’t remember telling you that you could leave. We still have things to talk about.”

Kalen wrenched his arm away and glared up at Mikol. “I didn’t ask for your permission.”

A wave of sudden dizziness came over him and he swayed dangerously toward Mikol, who put out a hand to steady him. “What’s the matter with you? Have you been drinking?”

“No. And I...I’m sorry, but I need to...I think I-I need to use the-the...oh gods,” he managed to choke out, and it was then that his body chose to register its disapproval of all the drinking and the jostling and greasy food and shouting and being generally humiliated. He felt wretchedly ill, in a helpless, hopeless way, his body shaking and heaving and sobbing as he bent over at the waist and spilled all of the poison and the bile onto the floor at Mikol’s feet. He fell to the floor himself, racked by painful, disgusting spasms of misery and regret.

Most of the excitement was thankfully over. The floor had been cleaned up and the physician called for. Prince Kalen was slumped in a chair across from Mikol, his head thrown back and his eyes tightly shut, with a cold cloth over his forehead. His face was flushed and miserable. His oddly solicitous captain of the guards was sitting in a chair beside him. He looked upset and worried, and Mikol had been forced to dismiss the other guards outside the door when the squat, swarthy one had tried to force his way inside Mikol's room again to check on the young prince, despite Florin's orders to stand down.

Or at least, he would dismiss the man as soon as he woke up. Florin had knocked him unconscious to the floor when he tried to come in, and he was currently stretched out where he'd fallen in the corridor, with the other guard in attendance. The presumptuous fool was lucky he got off so easily.

A knock came on the door and Florin let in the doctor, who came right over to the young prince and took out a small scanner, passing it over his forehead. After a few more moments, he turned back to Mikol.

"I need a place to examine him properly, Your Highness," the physician said, looking over at Mikol. "He'll need to disrobe."

"Of course." He went over to Kalen and bent to pick him up in his arms to carry him to his own bed in the far corner of the room.

"Oh, no," Kalen said, sounding alarmed and flailing a bit. "I'm sure this isn't necessary."

Mikol ignored him and took him to the bed, and then bent over the prince to begin taking off his shirt.

“No, wait!” Kalen cried out, pushing at Mikol’s hands. “I can undress myself if everyone will just give me some privacy.”

The doctor looked at Mikol like he wasn’t sure what that word meant, and Mikol’s lips twitched up slightly at the corners. “Wait outside a moment, sir, if you please. Florin, you and this friend of the prince’s too, please. I’ll come for you when the prince has been examined.”

The man bowed and left the room and Kalen sat up, looking at Mikol expectantly. “Well? You too, please. Leave and go out in the hallway. I don’t need you in here during an exam.”

Mikol lifted one eyebrow. “Think again. I’m not leaving you alone with a physician when you’re going to be disrobed.”

“But I don’t want you to see me disrobed either.”

“I’ve already seen you, as you well remember, and since the plan is supposed to be that we’ll be seeing much more of each other in the future, don’t be ridiculous. I’m staying. There is no need for false modesty at this point.”

“Maybe not for you, but I’d like to retain a little if I could! And it’s not false. Not exactly, anyway.”

Mikol gave a heavy sigh. Lorians were proving to be even more difficult to deal with than humans. He wouldn’t have thought that possible.

“All this is unnecessary but slide under the bedsheets if it will make you more comfortable. Get your clothes off so the

doctor can examine you, and I'll turn my back."

Mikol turned toward the wall and waited while he heard rustling noises behind him. Finally, Kalen huffed out a breath. "You can turn back around now. I'm ready, I guess, though I don't understand why I have to be naked in order to see a damn doctor."

Ignoring him, Mikol went to the door to let the doctor back in. The physician, a Tygerian and a member of Florin's staff, bowed to him and came over to the bed to pull back the sheet to Kalen's waist.

The doctor used his scanner again to check Kalen's heart and vital signs, and then used his hands to palpate his stomach.

"Does this hurt?" he asked, and Kalen impatiently shook his head.

"No, nothing hurts. I was just feeling nauseated. My first meal didn't agree with me, and I-I had way too much to drink a couple of nights ago."

"Have you been ill since then?"

"Just now. Didn't he tell you?"

"I meant this morning. Were you ill earlier this morning?"

"No."

"And what were you drinking a couple of nights ago that made you so ill?"

"Cygarral. It's a liquor made on Leerria. I drank rather a lot of it."

"I'm familiar with it." He glanced over at Mikol. "It contains a high percentage of alcohol by volume. Up to 96

percent.”

“That would definitely do the trick,” Mikol said, looking down at Kalen. “Not much body mass.”

“Yes.”

Kalen made another grab for the sheet, but the doctor pulled it back down again and pushed him down to his back to scan over his stomach again with his little handheld device. “No infection, and nothing to worry about. Everything’s perfectly normal. The nausea is undoubtedly due to the amount of liquor he consumed and whatever he ate.” He shook a finger in Kalen’s face, as Kalen blinked, drawing back slightly. Mikol tried to hide another smile. The finger shaking was a very human gesture, and Mikol had to wonder if this doctor had spent some time on Earth or perhaps had a human omak himself.

“You should feel better soon. If not, I can prescribe some pills.” He turned back to Mikol.

“Don’t let him drink so much in the future, Your Highness.”

“No, I won’t.”

Kalen bristled and shot them both a dirty look.

The doctor allowed Kalen to snatch the covers back up again and packed his scanner away in his small bag. “He should be fine, but no more drinking of Cygnarral or any alcoholic beverages for the next twenty hours or so. The nausea should go away soon. If it persists, call me again.”

He turned and left the room, and Mikol sat down beside Kalen. He regarded him closely, though Kalen wouldn’t meet Mikol’s eyes.

When the silence began to get uncomfortable, Mikol trailed a finger down his arm, making him shiver.

“I didn’t know if I’d see you again,” Mikol said. “I’m glad I did.”

Kalen clutched the sheet like a lifeline, unwilling, it seemed, to look directly at him. “I’d like to get dressed now, please.”

Mikol hesitated a moment before nodding. “All right. But we have a great deal to discuss, as I’m sure you’re aware. Why don’t you dress and come back to the other room? I can ask your captain to come in and help you, if you like.”

“No, I don’t need any help.”

“I wasn’t offering to allow him to help you dress. I can do that if you need help.”

“No. Thank you, but I-I’ll be out in a moment or two.” Mikol stood and walked toward the door, but Kalen’s voice made him turn back just as he reached it. “Prince Mikol... Your Highness...I would like for my captain to be present for our discussion, though, if it’s all right with you.”

Mikol nodded. “Whatever you like,” he said, “though I do have some questions. Do you and this captain of yours have an intimate relationship I should know about?”

“No!” the prince said in a shocked voice. “Dartan is my friend and nothing more.”

“I see. And are there any other men in your life that I should know about? Any other ‘friends’ to report?”

Prince Kalen's face flamed red, and he swung his feet over the side of the bed while still holding the sheet over him. "What are you implying, sir?"

With three long strides, Mikol was back beside him, taking his arm in a firm grip. "I'm not implying anything. I'm asking you a direct question. I last saw you in Belline at a brothel, approximately thirty hours ago, and I don't know what you were up to either then or now. You were extremely drunk the last time I saw you, so I'm asking you—as nicely as I can manage—was I the only man you had relations with on Belline *and have you been with anyone else?*"

Chapter Nine

“How dare you ask me that?” Kalen snarled back at the Tygerian, pulling his arm away.

“I dare a great many things, as you’ll soon find out, Prince Kalen, if you don’t start answering my questions. I need to know if there’s any possibility some other man has a claim on you. Tell me quickly so I can deal with this one way or the other. Now tell me; *are you involved with any other men?*”

“Of course not. No. You’re the only man I’ve *ever* been with. I swear it.”

There was a long, tense silence as Mikol stared down at him. “Is this true?”

“*Yes*, it’s true, damn it. I *swear* it. I’m not a liar!”

The prince straightened back up and took a step away. “All right. And the men chasing you at the brothel? Were they really your guards?”

“My uncle’s guards. Like the ones at the door, and you see how they are. I was going to try to ditch them and leave them on Belline, but they caught on to my plan.”

“I see. What did they do when they caught up with you?”

“Just took me downstairs. Tied my hands and gagged me.” He looked up at Mikol, full of the outrage he felt at their actions and putting it all into the look, and he thought Mikol’s lips may have twitched again. Apparently, he amused this Tygerian.

“They didn’t hurt you, or touch you in any other way?”

“No.”

Mikol nodded, seeming to come to a decision. “Then we can proceed as planned. We were both careless on Belline.” When Kalen looked up at Mikol, he brushed Kalen’s jaw with the back of his hand. “I regret my actions on Belline...but I have to ask you these questions. Tygerian society expects me to wed a virgin to ensure that if I have any children, they’ll be mine without question. Do you understand this word?”

Kalen looked up in surprise, and his mouth fell open. He sighed and his shoulders slumped. “Yes. I understand. But how could I have children? I’m a man.”

“Some humanoid species have that capability. We Tygerians have methods to make that happen.”

“I see. Lorians don’t have that capability, as you call it. And I have no intention of having my body altered.”

“Noted. And you’re sure you’re a virgin.”

“Yes.”

“Be sure.”

“I *am* sure. I’ve never been with any other men before. Not ever.”

He quickly looked away, not wanting to show how much the prince's words hurt his feelings. He wasn't used to being called a liar. Mikol's hand moved to his chin, and he pulled Kalen's face back around to look at him.

"My omak-ahn says there's no use crying over spilled milk." He shrugged at Kalen's confused glance. "He's human," he said, as if that alone should account for it. "But do you understand the meaning?"

Kalen nodded.

"Good. I'm not angry, because we both were in the wrong. I recognize that. But I'll be king one day. It wouldn't do for some man to show up later and provide proof of a prior claim. But I have other concerns I need to speak to you about too. Please get dressed and come out when you're ready. As I said, there's much for us to talk about."

After the prince left, Kalen scrambled back into his clothes, and pulled on his boots, then sat for a moment, trying to calm down. He felt jittery and he knew there probably would be many more questions coming his way. If Prince Mikol didn't ask more, then surely King Davos and Prince Mikos would later on, if Mikol told them how they met. Anyone would want him to give a full accounting of his actions on Belline, considering Mikol was directly in line to be King of the entire Axis Empire. He would face that when he came to it, though the idea filled him with dread and, it must be said, terror. These fierce men had been the scourge of the galaxy in the not-too-distant past, sometimes spoken of only in whispers, like the scary things that were supposed to dwell in dark places.

And he was so tired and didn't feel well at the moment. He felt out of sorts about everything. This whole situation had just complicated his already chaotic life a thousand-fold, and he had to find a way to get some control back or he'd go crazy.

He'd probably already acted like he was unstable, not wanting anyone to see him naked and putting up such a fuss about it. He was a man and a soldier, and he'd taken communal baths with his men on many occasions. All soldiers did. In training, they often had wrestling matches while they were naked. He'd never been embarrassed before. Why should he be now?

He stalked into the bathing room to splash cold water on his face. Afterward, he stood at the sink, staring into the mirror.

How had everything in his life so suddenly spiraled out of control?

The Tygerian prince hadn't seemed inclined to letting him go back home and put things off for some time in the distant future. His fate had been sealed. He was probably now the *noby* of a Tygerian.

Kalen was pretty sure *noby* was their word for spouse or mate, anyway. He had started to tell Dartan about seeing them—these spouses of the Tygerians at a conference he'd once attended with his father years ago. The royal spouses all wore long robes of some blue, flimsy material that clearly displayed the outlines of their bodies, and they were all handsome, well-built men. They were much smaller than their Tygerian mates, too, who guarded them jealously. His father had seen him looking at the men in their robes and advised him it wasn't

wise to look too long at the *noby* of a Tygerian. They might seem to be flaunting the bodies of their mates, but it was a tease and a challenge in a way—almost a dare. No one was expected to be so rude as to actually stare at the *nobyos* for long. Not unless they wanted a fight.

And now he would be one of those robed men. He was well and truly trapped.

Or was he? That kind of thinking was defeatist and futile. He wouldn't allow it and wouldn't allow his uncle to trick him and get the better of him in such a way. Nerol thought he had the perfect plan to get rid of Kalen, and Kalen had stupidly played right into the hands of fate by knocking on Prince Mikol's door, of all people in the universe. Fate had conspired against him, but he had done nothing but act like a spoiled, irresponsible child since his father was murdered, and that had only worked against him too.

It was time to grow up and face what he needed to do, facing it unflinchingly and doing his duty to his people. He would turn this betrothal that his uncle had intended to humiliate and entrap him to his own advantage, and he would marry this beyond handsome Tygerian prince. He would become his damned *noby*, and then he would work tirelessly to get the Tygerians to help him regain his throne and depose his hated uncle. He'd do whatever it took to convince them.

Then he would take his revenge on the ones who had betrayed and murdered his father. He wouldn't think any further ahead than that.

Even though his brain felt foggy and all he wanted to do was lie back down, curl up and take a long nap, he could, and

he would do this thing and negotiate this contract to gain the Tygerians' help. He would stop fighting Prince Mikol, and he would do whatever it took to convince this man that he would be the perfect spouse who could make him happy. He'd agree to whatever the prince wanted, damn it, and bide his time until he'd gained his confidence. Then he could get the Tygerians to help him, and he could go back home to deal with things.

Or no, better yet, he could use his marriage and status as a bargaining chip and a tool to help him achieve his goals. Later, he'd convince the prince to live separately from him, and then he could live the life he had been born to live on his home planet, as the king of the Lorian people. Mikol could be free to live any kind of life he wanted as well. And the Tygerians would remain Loros's ally. He could do this. He had to.

Besides, he'd insist on having Dartan there on Tygeria with him until he got used to things in order to help keep him sane. To keep him from doing or saying anything stupid or anything that would tip his hand. Dartan would be Kalen's moral support if nothing else, though the prince hadn't seemed too happy about Dartan being around. Fuck it, it was happening anyway. He would demand it. He'd insist.

Kalen didn't like admitting that the big Tygerian prince intimidated him a little—more than a little—so he wouldn't. It had to be nerves. But he could do this. One more deep breath and he turned toward the door—just as it opened.

Prince Mikol was standing in the doorway, so big and so handsome and looking at him intently. Maybe even a little suspiciously. “What are you doing in here?”

“I told you I'd be out in a minute.”

“So you did. But several of those minutes of yours have passed, and you never showed up. I came to check on you, in case you were ill again.”

“Oh. Well, no, thank you, I’m fine. I just...need a minute.”

He gave Kalen that intent stare again. “Another one? We have a good many things to discuss and you’re keeping everyone waiting, Kalen.”

“All right, all right, I’m coming.” He began to follow him and stopped short. “Wait...everyone? Who else will be involved in this meeting?”

“Other than ourselves, there will be your guard, Colonel Florin, and the commandant.”

“Well, what business is it of Florin’s or the commandant’s?”

Mikol stared down at him long and hard. “I could point out that my friend has the same business as your guard, but I understand you’re nervous. I have no intention of sharing any of our personal affairs, I assure you. They do neither of us any credit. But we need a witness to the negotiations and that will be the commandant.”

Kalen bit his lip nervously, then nodded and went to sail past Prince Mikol, but he grabbed his arm as he passed and held onto it.

When Kalen drew back and looked up at him in surprise, he looked steadily back at him. “Just in case you’re feeling faint again.”

“I’m not,” he replied, trying to tug away, but Mikol ignored him, and Kalen couldn’t budge his hand. Rather than get into an undignified tug of war, he stopped struggling and took a deep breath. Kalen reminded himself of the plan he’d just made. He needed to remember it and stop fighting Mikol. It didn’t matter how much he hated this display of Tygerian dominance. He was a nobyo now and he had to remember that. Nothing mattered except getting back his throne and getting rid of his uncle.

He pasted a smile on his face and allowed Mikol to escort him into the outer room, where Dartan was waiting, along with the other Tygerian who had first opened the door and the Commandant of the space station. One of the long bench-like seats was vacant and that’s where Mikol steered him. They both sat down, and Kalen glanced longingly at the empty chair beside Dartan, though he didn’t quite dare object to sitting next to the prince.

Mikol immediately took over the meeting. “Commandant Margoz, I believe you’ve met Prince Kalen.”

The man nodded distantly and produced some paperwork from a pocket in his long robe. The robe was traditional Tygerian wear, though not blue like the royals sometimes wore. This one was dark brown. Both Prince Mikol and the one Mikol had called Florin, were wearing some kind of uniforms in black, with sharp, bristling epaulets on the broad shoulders and intricately carved metallic armor pieces that only seemed to protect their throats and parts of their chests. It was probably ornamental, but it was fierce armor and unlike anything Kalen had seen before. The uniform creaked slightly

beside him as Mikol reached to take the papers from the commander.

He opened them up and read over them carefully, stopping occasionally to ask a question in the incomprehensible—to Kalen, at least—Tygerian language, full of growls and clicks. It was warm in the room, and Kalen found it harder and harder to keep his eyes open as the long minutes passed. He noticed Dartan giving him a sympathetic glance when he nodded off once, and then jerked himself awake. He steadied himself, readjusted his position, but had begun dozing off again when Mikol's deep, rumbling voice came in his ear.

“Do you agree?”

Kalen jerked awake and looked over at Mikol in confusion. “Uh, what?”

“I said, the terms and conditions of the contract seem standard. Only the details of our wedding and where we'll live afterward need to be discussed. Do you agree?”

“Oh...yes,” he said, nodding his head up and down. He only vaguely remembered reading the papers he mentioned on the trip over from Loros, but they were mostly about money, and he couldn't care less how much money was exchanging hands. He and his people wouldn't benefit from any of it.

“But wait—does the contract mention the leadership of my planet?”

“No, Kalen,” Mikol replied. He didn't sound impatient, but he was looking at him oddly. “This contract only sets out the terms of our marriage agreement.”

“Then I’d like it amended to include a timetable for our return to Loros, where I will no longer be in need of my uncle as Regent. I want that specified. Lord Nerol is out.”

A little silence fell in the room, as Prince Mikol looked over at him for a long moment, seeming to be considering him.

“You’re probably thinking that will require my uncle’s signature,” Kalen rushed on to say. “So I should warn you right now, he’ll never agree to it. The Tygerians will have to force him. Fight him in battle if it’s necessary and I can lead my army. You must back me in my return to the planet, so that I can take my throne away from him by force.”

The silence was even more pronounced this time. Mikol was the one to finally break it.

“This is all way beyond the scope of a betrothal agreement, Kalen.”

“But I wasn’t given a say before now. If I had been, I could have put all of that in there. And I won’t sign an agreement unless you meet my demands.” Kalen glared around at all of them. “I insist.”

Mikol stood up abruptly. “Excuse us for a moment, Commandant.”

He pulled Kalen up beside him and took him firmly by the elbow again to steer him back to the bedroom. As soon as the door closed behind them, he backed Kalen against the wall.

“What’s going on, Prince Kalen? Suddenly you have *demands*?”

“It-it’s not sudden. I was never given any say in the negotiations before this. If I’m to marry, then I need a say. My

uncle murdered my father and now he's taken control. Taken my throne away from me. I need your help to get it back!"

Mikol glared down at him. "Calm yourself and stop all this shouting." The prince regarded him sternly. "Is this the real reason you sought me out in Belline? To trick me into compromising you so I would help you launch a rebellion against your Council and your Regent?"

"*What?* No! No, I never sought you out, as you say. Not on purpose. And I didn't trick you, I swear it. Finding you in that place was a total coincidence."

"Uh huh. The thing is, I don't believe in coincidences, Kalen. And I don't like being used."

Kalen's temper, never far from the surface, came to his aid and he drew back a hand to strike Mikol. Instead, Mikol grabbed his wrist and twisted it around behind his back, bringing the long line of his muscular body to press against Kalen's. They struggled silently for a moment, but Kalen's strength rapidly began to wane, and bile surged to the back of his throat, choking him. Kalen made a noise that was half-gag and half-whimper and sagged in Mikol's arms, giving in.

Mikol wrapped an arm around his waist and spoke softly against his hair. "This is making you ill again. Stop all this and I'll take you back in the other room." He peered down into Kalen's face. "Or perhaps to the toilet?"

Kalen nodded frantically, clamping a hand over his mouth as Mikol released it. Mikol swept him off his feet and carried him quickly to the toilet where he emptied the contents of his stomach for the second time that morning. This time it felt as if his stomach was turning itself inside out. As he knelt on the

floor of that small room, Kalen thought he might be dying, but Mikol stayed with him, kneeling next to him and holding his hair behind him—even rubbing his back. When it was finally done, and he was left feeling drained and weak and totally mortified, he sagged onto the floor and pressed his face against the cool tile. Mikol picked him up as if he weighed nothing and took him to lie down, stripped his clothing off efficiently and covered him with a thick blanket.

“Rest now, and I’ll tell the commandant to draw up the standard contract and we’ll see him tomorrow. I’m sending for the doctor again to give you those pills he mentioned. You overestimate my power to make decisions about the leadership of Loros, *nobyo*. That’s for my father and grandfather to decide. I can tell you’re spoiling for a fight, though you won’t be allowed on a battlefield of any kind until I’ve seen you in training and know you’re a competent soldier.”

Kalen glared at him. He hated the word “allow” but what else could he do? Mikol turned to leave. Kalen grabbed for his hand to hold him back and gaze up at him miserably. “You think I’m a liar, don’t you? That I tricked you into all this.”

“I think you’re making yourself worse by arguing with me. And I think you should stop drinking so much. Sleep a while, and when you wake up, we’ll talk further.”

Kalen closed his eyes and let him go, already barely conscious by the time the door closed softly behind Mikol.

“Please prepare the papers for signing, Commandant, and we’ll see you in the morning to sign them,” Mikol said as he strode back into the room.

Margoz nodded and bowed his way out of the room.

“Is His Highness all right?” Dartan asked, looking worried and Mikol shrugged.

“He’s exhausted and feeling ill again. He’s sleeping now. Florin, please ask the physician to send those pills he talked about earlier. The ones to help with the nausea.”

Florin nodded and left as Mikol turned back to Dartan. “Captain, why don’t you go to your rooms to pack up, both for yourself and Prince Kalen. The prince needs to rest for the rest of today and then tomorrow we’ll be leaving for Tygeria as soon as we sign the contracts. I believe he’ll want you with him. Send the rest of your men back home to Loros, but tell them nothing, other than that we decided to skip the betrothal and marry right away on Tygeria. I’ll inform Lord Nerol that we’ll be traveling to Tygeria for an immediate wedding.”

Dartan’s mouth fell open. “I-immediate?”

“We don’t have the luxury of time, I’m afraid,” Mikol said softly. “Not once those guards get back to Loros. I won’t have the prince’s good name defamed. I’ll tell Nerol we met by accident and were immediately attracted and decided then and there to marry right away. Fortunately, Tygerians are known to do this kind of thing. My parents will make the plans and invite Nerol and his new queen to attend a reception as soon as we have the details. In the meantime, I expect you not to speak to anyone about the circumstances of our first meeting. It doesn’t honor either of us.”

“Of course. You have my word.”

Dartan bowed and he, too, left the room, leaving Mikol alone.

Mikol sat down in one of the soft chairs the station kept in each room, in case humans ever stayed in the room. Blake had stayed there with Davos on one memorable occasion a few cycles back and had suffered greatly from sleeping on the “slabs they called beds.” He insisted they prepare “human friendly” rooms, and apparently this room was one of them. He wondered what Blake would think about all this when he found out about it.

Hells, he wondered what *he* himself thought about it all.

Mikol closed his eyes and put his head back against the cushioned chair. He needed a bit of comfort right at the moment. He had hoped for a little time to get to know this young prince and make up his mind about him. From the moment he’d first seen him, he’d been beyond attracted to him. He was a beautiful man, but he was also young and highly emotional and dangerously reckless. He drank far too much too. Some of this wildness could be the circumstances, of course, and the fact he was feeling so ill, but probably not all of it.

One of the problems was that the out-of-control behavior he’d been displaying was calling to Mikol and making him feel—not exactly himself. Mikol remembered Davos telling him stories about how he and Blake had met years ago, when the war was still raging between the Axis and the Alliance, and Blake had been a captured lieutenant and a prisoner of war.

Back then, Alliance prisoners were dealt with harshly, and from the moment Davos saw Blake, he said he knew they were both in trouble. Blake, a young lieutenant in the Alliance army, had been spitting mad, blazing with defiance and hatred toward his enemies and utterly, absolutely beautiful and desirable. Even though at that time, Davos was the Battle Commander, and as the Dyson, he had immense power, he knew that Blake couldn't keep carrying on the way he was doing, or even Davos wouldn't be able to save him. Even worse, and just as dangerous, Blake's defiance called strongly to the beast inside Davos, the savage tyger that was always lying in wait inside him.

In the years of the vicious war between the Alliance and the Axis, his tyger was never far below the surface, and Blake's defiant, rebellious behavior called strongly to it. Davos had never told Blake how close he'd been at times to letting the tyger have his way with him. If Blake defied him too much, the tyger would emerge and make his fearful presence known. Not to kill him or injure him, because tygers didn't kill or maim their mates, but to force him to submit. It would have been far too harsh for Blake, who was so stubborn—and yet so breakable. Not just his body, but his spirit, and Davos couldn't stand the idea of dousing that bright spark inside him. It was in Davos's nature to do so, however, just as the defiance and rebellion was in Blake's.

But the beast inside him wasn't gentle or loving. They were in danger of destroying each other if they couldn't figure things out and find some way forward. They had eventually managed, but it had taken them months, or even cycles to accomplish it.

Mikol's father, Prince Mikos had that same savagery inside him, somewhat sublimated by his actions on the battlefield. When Mikos first married Ryan, then thought his mate had utterly betrayed him, he had wanted to kill him. Indeed, he had been fully prepared to destroy him and had brought him to his cabin on the ship so he could beat him and fuck him to death. Thankfully, his love for the beautiful human had been too strong—the bond too unbreakable—and he hadn't been able to go through with any of it.

The beast had also made its appearance known in Derrick's wild recklessness and in Larz's absolute defiance. It was something they didn't talk about with the humans in the family—not ever. The humans probably had no idea how close they sometimes came to unleashing the beast inside their husbands. It was one reason why Davos had left Blake after he helped Derrick and Rhaegar to elope. He had to stay away from him so he wouldn't do anything he'd later bitterly regret. And it was why his father Mikos refused to discuss his difficult relationship with his brother Larz and refused to reconcile. It even explained how upset Mikos was when Ryan once faced him in the Games.

The Tygerians might have done something unforgivable to bring their *nobyos* and loved ones back in line and following their orders. They weren't able to risk that. Blake and Ryan had never completely understood, but they were simply loved and valued far too much to take any chances with them.

The fierceness of that trait had been passed down to Mikol in full force. Davos and Mikos had recognized it inside him when he was only a boy in training and was fighting other

boys his age. They'd had to curb it back then and worked hard to teach him control. In fact, Florin was much the same, and they often had to watch out for each other and make sure their beasts were only released on the battlefield.

Mikol had to be careful because Kalen was already arousing those same dangerous feelings inside him, ones that Mikol was struggling to control. And he'd only just met Kalen.

They had little time to figure this out before they returned to Loros and Mikol took over the army there. That would be just one more thing they had to find their way around. He got up to go to the doorway to look in on the young prince, and a wave of unexpected tenderness swept over him. Kalen was lying on his back, one hand flung back behind his head, and he was deeply asleep, snoring softly in Mikol's bed. He looked impossibly young, and Mikol felt a rush of possessiveness over him. He liked having him in his bed. It was where he belonged.

One well-shaped bare leg and a small, pale foot was out from under the covers and curled up around them. This man was going to be difficult, but his omak often told him anything worth having was worth *fighting* for.

Mikol just didn't want to be the only one in the fight.

He walked closer to the bed, looking down at the long, dark eyelashes that swept to brush Kalen's cheeks. His pink, full lips that puffed out with each breath and that stubborn little nose that turned up ever so slightly on the tip. On second thought, perhaps he might be ready to go to war after all if this man would be the spoils of it.

But, if this had all been a ruse to entrap him...to make him comply with what he wanted, then it didn't bear thinking about. He was afraid of how harshly he might react. The bonding was settling in place already, and he could feel it, so he wouldn't hurt the young prince. But if he was untrustworthy or a liar, or if he had lied to him about having other men, then he'd have no choice but to rid him of all his bad habits. And Kalen should make no mistake...he *would*.

Mind made up, he tucked the little foot back under the covers and watched as Kalen restlessly tossed over onto his side. Mikol went back into the other room and flopped down in the too-soft chair again and continued to stare broodingly out the porthole at the empty space beyond.

He really had no idea how to plan for all this—it was almost too much to even think about. How could he marry this person that he barely knew? How could he tame the wildness he saw inside him without hurting him or ruining what was growing between them?

Florin came back in the room and sat down across from him, not saying anything, but just watching him. Mikol glanced up at him. “Is the doctor coming?”

“Yes, he's on his way. He should be here soon.”

Mikol blew out a long breath. “Am I making a mistake, Florin?”

Florin hesitated a moment before he answered. “Only you can know the answer to that. I'm afraid he's going to be a good deal of trouble.”

“Undoubtedly.”

“He’s willful. Imprudent. Thoughtless. Stubborn.”

“Yes, indeed.”

“He’s also extremely good-looking. His guard, Dartan is the same. The Lorians are a handsome people.”

Mikol smiled. “Yes. Remarkably so.”

“Irritating though,” Florin said, almost to himself. “I’m not sure they’re worth it.”

“Oh, I think you are.”

Florin chuckled, shaking his head. “Did you see how he stood up to me? He’s brave.”

Mikol, who knew he was no longer talking about Kalen smiled. “Yes, he is. Unmarried too. I believe. And he and Kalen have only ever been friends.”

“Good. Both of them lack discipline.”

Mikol sighed. “I know. And now on top of everything else, I need to plan a wedding.”

Florin regarded him quietly for a moment and then nodded. “I believe you happen to have a human grandfather,” he said, “who likes that kind of thing and who, I believe, would be really happy if you allowed him to make wedding arrangements for you and your prince. Blake is good at it too, as I recall. I’ll message him for you tomorrow, if you like and then you can talk to him when we get back home. He’s on his way back to Tygeria, you know.”

“I didn’t, actually. I thought they were going to see my uncle, Nicarr.”

“They did. But Davos was too anxious to get back home. He cut the visit short.”

Mikol laughed softly. “Then this may distract Blake and give him a task to perform more pressing than arguing with the king. He’s arranged several weddings before this, I believe. Perhaps you can ask Dartan to give us some menu requirements for the reception, and then we can simply leave all the rest up to Blake?”

“I can do that. He won’t want his uncle and his mother to come, from what Dartan told me.”

“We can’t possibly not invite them. I’ll make sure he understands.”

“Good. Probably need to begin laying some ground rules with him anyway.”

“Indeed.”

“Good,” Florin said, nodding. “I’ll take charge then, with your approval. If there’s anything you don’t like, we can change it, but Blake has very good taste in this kind of thing. I assume you’ll have the wedding at the Royal Palace?”

Mikol nodded. “Yes.”

“Soon?”

“As soon as I get him home.”

Florin laughed. “I can’t wait to see Blake’s face when I break that news to him.”

“Tell him the wedding should be small. Just immediate family and close friends. Then he can plan a big reception at his leisure. Kalen seems to be estranged from his uncle and his

mother, but they'll need to be invited to the reception, at least."

"I'll talk to the Royal Consort about it in the morning."

"My fathers would like it if I split my time between Loros and Tygeria after the wedding. Prince Mikos wants to go ahead with the plans for a new training facility on Loros. I'm going to have you reassigned to help me with that."

"I'm at your service."

"He believes, and I agree with him, that our armies need to begin training alongside the Lorians right away, because of the threat of war presented by the Pton. That will require my presence. Kalen's too, as Warlord of his own army."

"Is he up to that job?"

"It will be a strictly figurehead position until I see him in action. His men need to see him on Loros alongside me and know that we're together in our plans. After I satisfy myself that he's capable, he may be able to reassume command of his men."

"Do you mean that?" came a soft voice from the doorway and Mikol turned to see Kalen standing there, partially dressed again and swaying a little but holding tightly to the frame.

"I came in on the end of that. Just as you said I'd be able to reassume command of my men."

Both men stood up and Mikol immediately went to Kalen to put an arm around his waist to steady him.

"Did you mean that—about my army and me taking command?" Kalen persisted, looking up at Mikol, though

allowing Mikol to move him toward the chair he'd just vacated.

"I said, you may be able to. It depends on how you do during training," he said, depositing him gently in the chair. "How long have you been standing there listening?"

"Long enough to hear about a new training facility. And I *can* lead my men. I'm an excellent soldier."

"We'll see," Mikol replied. "It's not a matter of just ability. Training will be fierce and hard, and you're too young to have fought in any wars." He held up a hand to stop Kalen's protest. "Not up for discussion. I won't have you risking yourself. You can observe and help in planning, for now. Then we can reassess after I see you in action."

Kalen looked up at Mikol then quickly turned away, but not before Mikol had seen the flare of anger in his eyes. "The first thing we need to do is to move my army back to the capitol."

"No, they need to stay where they are in your southern region and continue their training. It doesn't matter where they train for now. We'll be building some living spaces for my men nearby. I'll be bringing a large company with me to train against the Pton. We can all stay in these units until more permanent structures are built."

"But...my uncle won't approve."

Florin made a snorting noise, and he and Mikol smiled at each other.

"What? Did you already discuss this with your father long before now and are only now presenting it to me as if I really

do have some say in things?”

Mikol shook his head. “You’re too suspicious, looking for conspiracies that don’t exist. I don’t need to discuss such matters with my father or anyone else. Your uncle’s construction is almost finished near your southern border, and it would be easier for us to simply continue building there. I want a fortress when we’re done, impervious to attack. In fact, I’d like to build a residence there as well within the training compound. It would be more convenient.”

Kalen shook his head, his cheeks pink. “My uncle won’t allow us to live away from the palace. And building ourselves a fortress? Nerol would be apoplectic with rage at the idea of such a thing. He could take that rage out on my mother. No, my uncle will insist we live in the old palace.”

“And I will insist that Lord Nerol leave me to make my own plans and accommodations. He won’t harm your mother knowing we’re close by. No, a residence by the training areas is better, and the cost is mine. It will serve as our primary residence after all, when we’re not on Tygeria.”

“My uncle won’t like these plans,” Kalen said softly, looking down at his boots. “He’ll object. He will more than likely refuse you the right to build anything on Loros. This is why you must depose him right away before he gets the upper hand.”

There was an abrupt silence and then the sound of a sharp laugh coming from Florin. When Kalen looked over at him in surprise, Florin held up a hand in apology. “I’m sorry, Your Highness, but you need to wrap your mind around the idea that this Regent of yours does not outrank a Prince of the Imperial

Axis, and the Dyson of all its armies. Only two others in the entire galaxy do—his father and his grandfather.” He shook his head. “Prince Mikol will do as he damn well pleases, wherever he pleases. Your uncle will then have two choices—take it or leave it. It makes little difference to us which choice he makes.”

Chapter Ten

After the doctor arrived and Kalen was put back to bed, Mikol decided it was time to call his parents and break the news to them, before there could be any leaks from the commandant's office that might get back to them. He had decided to tell them only that he was coming home with Prince Kalen and their marriage would be taking place immediately. He would tell them he met Kalen on Belline, but all the circumstances of how that came about would not be shared. That was personal and the business only of the two of them. He could easily assure Dartan and Florin's silence on the matter.

His parents might not even think it odd. Quick marriages were not necessarily unusual for Tygerians, who had a long history of falling in love at first sight. They felt superior to other species in that regard and saw no need in dithering around on long engagements when they found their mates. It seemed likely to him, in fact, that Florin may have decided on Kalen's young captain of the guard at first sight. Or first argument, seeing as how they'd done little else.

He broke the news of his coming wedding to his omak and his father, who didn't seem all that surprised at his decision.

“I’m happy for you, son,” Mikos said. “It seems I chose well for you.”

Mikol’s omak smiled indulgently and rolled his eyes. “Of course, you’re taking credit for it. Why am I not surprised? We *are* happy for you, though, darling. Did you have any trouble talking the prince into moving so fast?”

“No, he’s anxious to leave Loros for now, since his mother’s remarriage to his uncle. It will be good for him to get away from it for a while.”

“So that marriage isn’t following some common custom on Loros?”

“Not at all, according to Kalen. He despises his uncle, and claims he murdered his father.”

One of Prince Mikos’s eyebrows rose as he considered it. “Does he have any proof of such a serious charge?”

“I don’t believe so. Just circumstantial evidence and his own beliefs, but he’s thoroughly convinced of it.”

“We can talk about it when you get here.”

“One thing...I actually met the prince a few days early. On Belline.”

“*What?*”

Ryan interrupted, sitting forward in his chair. “Why in the world was he in Belline? Why were you, for that matter?”

Mikol smiled. “Just a little rest and recreation before the betrothal. Seems like Kalen had the same idea.”

Ryan looked taken aback at the news. “Oh, Mikol,” he said softly. “Tell me nothing happened.”

“Nothing happened. Don’t worry so much.”

“What if the uncle on Loros thinks he’s been compromised? He could ask for more favorable terms.”

“Then we’ll give him more. I’m marrying Kalen, no matter what.”

Mikos had been ominously quiet all through this, it seemed to Mikol, so he looked over at him. He seemed to be lost in thought.

“You’ve fallen in love with this boy?”

“I think I’m on the way there.”

“I don’t understand all this, Mikol. How could the Lorian prince just coincidentally meet you on Belline? Sounds odd to me.”

Mikol hesitated for a moment, since he tried not to lie to his parents, even by omission, he shrugged. “It’s a long story that I can’t share with you. It’s my personal business and Kalen’s.”

Mikos bristled. “And if I changed my mind about this betrothal?”

“I’d marry him anyway. With or without your consent.”

Ryan’s eyes widened and he clutched Mikos’s hand. “I-I guess there’s nothing else for us to say then. I hope you’ll be happy, and I can’t wait to meet him.”

Mikol grinned, “Thank you, omak.”

“Bring your prince home, darling,” Ryan said, “and we’ll make him welcome.”

“Wait,” Mikos said, “I have more to say about this.”

“No, sweetheart,” Ryan said, looking over at his husband. “You really don’t.”

Mikol sat in front of the porthole for a few more minutes after they signed off and before going into the guest quarters and going to bed. Kalen needed his sleep and between now and the wedding, it seemed better to Mikol that he observed the proprieties and they both slept alone. They had started this thing out on the wrong foot, perhaps, but it wasn’t too late to change course.

It was the final destination that determined the way ahead, after all, and the stars all changed accordingly as soon as you set your course. It followed, then, that if they were brave enough and if they could stay their course, it wasn’t too late to change his own stars and make the whole universe fall into alignment around them.

Besides, as an ancient human poet that his omak liked once said, “it’s not in the stars to hold a man’s destiny. It’s in the man, himself.”

The next morning, Dartan arrived early after taking his and the prince’s belongings to Florin’s ship. He came back into Prince Mikol’s rooms, just as Kalen was getting up.

“I came to help, if you need it,” he said, nodding at the small pile of clothing he put down on the bed.

“Thanks,” Kalen said, looking through the things he brought. “I feel much better this morning, so I guess those pills the Tygerian doctor gave me are working. I got some rest too. Did you see Prince Mikol when you came in?”

“No, one of the guards let me in. They said the prince had some business to attend to and for us to head down to the commandant’s office whenever we were ready.”

Kalen nodded, nervous at the idea of seeing Mikol again. It irritated him that the prince made him so nervous. He wasn’t even sure why he did. And because his feelings were all over the place, he had been hoping Mikol would go down with him, which would have helped *calm* his nerves. Did it mean anything that the prince had gone ahead?

“Do you think the prince will want you to wear the Tygerian robes? They look really comfortable, and I think it’s traditional.”

“No. I’ll just not fasten the waist of my trousers and pull my shirt out over them.”

“Up to you. It looks a little sloppy, though.”

“It will have to do!” Kalen snapped. “I’m never wearing those damn robes.”

“Suit yourself, but Prince Mikol may have something to say about that.”

Kalen glared at him, and stormed out headed for the lift, two of Prince Mikol’s guards falling in behind them. Kalen kept glancing around obsessively on the way down in the lift, hoping to see the prince and darted glances down the long corridor when they reached the commandant’s office,

wondering out loud where Mikol could be and if he had changed his mind overnight.

“No, Kalen, I’m sure he hasn’t,” Dartan said, trying to reassure him. His friend put a steadying hand on Kalen’s shoulder. “I believe it’s very common to be nervous before a wedding ceremony.”

“Is it? How would you even know? You’re not married.”

“Well, true. But I believe that’s what I’ve heard.”

“He’s changed his mind. I just know it.”

Dartan shook his head and stepped in closer. “He’d be a fool then,” he whispered fiercely in Kalen’s ear. “And he didn’t strike me as one. Besides, it’s still not even time for this office to be open yet. We’re a bit early.”

“I know. It’s just that...oh! Here he comes.”

A warm flush began creeping up from beneath his collar to reach his cheeks. Prince Mikol was walking down the corridor toward them, along with the other Tygerian, Florin. Both men were sleek and sharp and handsome in their black uniforms, the ones that bristled with razor-like edges. They looked impossibly large and muscular, too, and Kalen wondered for the hundredth time what he was getting himself into.

Prince Mikol walked right up to Kalen, who was suitably attired—for Lorians anyway—in a red shirt and the slightly tight pair of red trousers—red was for weddings, as everyone knew, even though this was only the betrothal part. Mikol nodded cordially but didn’t touch him. It would be a breach of decorum to touch each other before they were officially

betrothed, though considering what they'd already been up to, that probably wasn't much of a consideration anymore.

“I passed Commandant Margo in the hallway upstairs. He was in a conversation with some people, but he told me he'd be right down.”

Kalen nodded and touched his stomach again. “I feel so nervous suddenly. Little flutters in here.” He looked up at Mikol, who was listening closely to him. “Do you ever have them?”

Mikol looked down at him quizzically, and he wished for a moment he could take back his stupid comment. His father told him once that sometimes the things he said made Kalen sound very young. Had he really meant foolish?

The prince listened, though, like what Kalen was saying was of vital importance and then he gave him a slight smile.

“My omak-ahn, Blake, calls them ‘butterflies,’ but I never knew what that meant when I was a little boy. I asked my father about it, and he said it was better to never ask Blake about those kinds of things. He did once, as a small child himself, and found out they were little flying insects on Earth, with huge colorful wings. It made no sense, but he couldn't get it out of his mind and the idea of those things crawling around inside him made him feel so queasy that he threw up. Blake had said he was far too ‘literal minded,’ and blamed it on the Tygerians, like he always did. It caused a big fight between him and King Davos, I believe. The king was angry that he was filling my father's head full of what he called silly human stories.”

If the story about “butterflies” did happen to be true, then Kalen thought he must be full to the brim inside with the little insects.

“Are you feeling ill again? Tell me if you begin to feel that way and I’ll take you upstairs.” He took Kalen’s hand in his. “I don’t want you to be uncomfortable.”

Kalen began trembling the moment he touched him, and if his knees were suddenly weak from the intensity of that look, nobody needed to know that but him.

“You can still change your mind, you know,” Kalen blurted out. “About marrying me. My uncle could find me another husband.”

“Oh, could he?”

Kalen nodded, rushing on with his nervous chatter. “Or I could find one for myself. There are many of my officers who would no doubt oblige me. One of my colonels in particular always says...”

Prince Mikol suddenly pushed him back against the nearest wall, stretching him out and making him feel helpless. He seized Kalen’s wrists and pinned them by his sides as he stood in front of Kalen to block Dartan’s startled glance and his abortive move toward them.

“Stand down, Captain,” Mikol called to him over his shoulder. “I’m having a private word with my betrothed.” Dartan flushed and hesitated. Kalen knew he must be feeling torn between his duty to his own prince and the Tygerian’s forceful command.

Kalen heard Florin's soft growl. "Do as you're told, Captain, before I have to have a private word with you." Dartan looked up at him in alarm and quickly took a step back.

"Stop, please," Kalen said, feeling weak again as Mikol slid his knee between his, moving it slowly up one of Kalen's thighs. His nose nuzzled Kalen's throat.

"Don't do this," Kalen moaned. "Someone will see."

"Let them."

"You're bigger and stronger than I am. You've proven that. But I don't like being pushed around." He sounded breathless, though, even to his own ears, and he wondered how he had the courage to say that to this man, especially when need was zipping through him like shooting stars, dancing through his body.

"Then perhaps you shouldn't tease me with other men and try to make me jealous."

Kalen widened his eyes, looking startled. "I-I didn't mean to do that."

"Oh, I think you did." Mikol lowered his head and covered Kalen's mouth in a brutally claiming kiss. It wasn't harsh exactly—no teeth or anything messy—just desperate hunger. The kiss was thoroughly done, though, deep and seductive and merciless. His body was pinning Kalen's against the wall and though Kalen struggled at first, it took only a moment for him to surrender and moan softly against Mikol's mouth.

"Don't talk to me about other lovers," Mikol whispered fiercely to him, the slightest hint of a growl in his voice. "You

won't like me when I'm jealous. You're mine and make no mistake about that."

"But..."

"No buts. I'm telling you now that you're mine. Let me hear you say it."

"Yours," Kalen whispered a little breathlessly against his lips.

"That's right. And no one takes what's mine, Mikol said. "Do I need to take you back upstairs to my bed to explain that to you more thoroughly? I'll take pains to do that for you, if you need it. Don't doubt I will."

"N-no. Please. I won't. I mean, that won't be, you know, absolutely necessary."

"Then no more talk about other men and other matches your fucking uncle will make you. Don't mention this colonel of yours to me again either if you value his life. Do we understand each other?"

"Yes."

"Good."

Mikol bent his head to kiss him again, using his tongue to sweep inside his mouth. Mikol finally relented and pulled away as Kalen began whimpering, and still he reached down to cup Kalen's balls in his hand, making him groan out loud. "You're mine now, Kalen. Make no mistake."

He gasped and nodded, swaying against Mikol and tucking his head against his chest. “No. I mean, yes, all right,” he said, “I-I understand.”

Mikol caressed him a little more before letting him go and stepping back. He brushed Kalen’s hair from his eyes and straightened his shirt, tucking one side of it back inside his trousers. He stopped and caught Kalen’s eye.

“Why are you wearing red clothing?”

“It’s traditional for a wedding.”

“I’ll send for something for you to wear as soon as we get back upstairs.” He brushed one more kiss across his lips. “Something traditional for my *nobyo*. We should get this contract done pretty quickly now.”

Kalen nodded and that’s when the door in front of them suddenly opened. A young clerk motioned for them to come inside. He bowed to Prince Mikol. “Commandant Margož will be here in a moment, sir. In the meantime, I have some forms for you both to sign.”

They followed him inside to his desk, where the clerk presented a stylus to Prince Kalen with a flourish. He pointed down to a dotted line on the screen in front of him. “Please sign here, Your Highness.”

After Kalen signed, the clerk pushed the large communicator over to Mikol. “This line is for your signature, Prince Mikol.”

Both Dartan and Florin were asked to sign, too, as witnesses. When it was done, the clerk looked up and bowed obsequiously to them as Margož finally appeared in the

doorway. “Commandant. I’ve prepared the contract, as you directed, and both parties have signed it.”

Margoz came over to bow to Prince Mikol. “My apologies,” Margoz said, “for keeping you waiting. It was unavoidable, I assure you. There are reports of Rothafari pirates in the area near Lycanus. If you’re returning to Tygeria later today, watch out for them.”

Florin snorted. “They should watch out for us.”

The commandant smiled politely and nodded, then turned to the clerk and held out his hand for the contract and stylus. He signed it with a flourish and bowed deeply to Mikol again.

“That completes things, Your Highnesses. Everything is in order. Your signatures are recorded and my felicitations to you both. You’re now officially betrothed.”

“Come, *nobyō*,” Mikol said, taking Kalen by the arm, and they headed back toward the lifts. Once inside and on the way up, he spoke over his shoulder to Florin. “I’d like to be on the way within the hour, Florin,” he said as they stood waiting.

Florin had Dartan backed against the wall of the lift, not speaking to him, but looming over him. Dartan was red faced and looked a little stunned. “Of course,” Florin called back.

They rode up to Mikol’s floor silently, each lost in their own thoughts, perhaps. When they all went down to Mikol’s suite, he was finally able to release Kalen’s arm. Mikol had kept Kalen close to his side, not because Kalen necessarily wanted or needed it, but because of the feelings of possessiveness inside him that were increasingly becoming problematic. The talk of other men had filled him with fury.

Florin, who had Dartan's arm in the same grip, allowed him to go with Kalen so they could prepare their belongings. Once they'd disappeared inside the bedroom, he turned toward Florin.

"Can you find the prince a royal robe to wear, do you think? They'll be in short supply in his size. And the color is problematic, as it's only for royals. Any color will do until we arrive on Tygeria, I suppose. I'd like the men onboard to realize he's my nobyo."

"I'll do my best. Let me make a few calls," he said and pulled out his communicator. "It might be a good idea to find one for his captain too."

Mikol laughed. "In dark green, perhaps?" he asked, glancing at the same color on Florin's robe. On Tygeria, only noblemen and their families wore that color. "Does he know you're thinking of claiming him?"

"I haven't decided anything yet," Florin said with a shrug. "By the time we reach Tygeria, I should have a better handle on the situation."

"I thought you liked being unattached."

"I thought so. But I'm not as convinced as I was before."

"You tried to choke him when you first met."

He shrugged. "Not really."

"What would you call it then?"

"Foreplay," he said solemnly and left to go find the robes.

While he was gone, Mikol sat by the porthole, still concentrating on quieting his mind, a technique his father

taught him long ago, and one that still came in handy occasionally, though he hadn't had occasion to use it in a long time. He had described it to his omak once a while ago, saying he needed it for his battle rages, and Ryan had nodded and said that the principles were similar to an ancient religious philosophy on Earth that he'd heard about. He'd called it achieving a zen state, and he said it focused on meditation.

Whatever—Mikol supposed the meditation part was right, and the part that his omak could remember about its principles, especially the ones about believing attachment was the source of suffering. He hadn't exactly been “suffering” since Kalen came into his life, but he did already feel a strong attachment. Odd since it was usually sexual penetration that caused the bond to form.

The man tried his patience, which admittedly, had never been great to begin with. He needed to find a way to calm his passions about him and not let them take over—he despised a bully and refused to be one, though every part of his nature seemed to be intent on pushing him in that direction. Like Florin, he needed to curb his passions or risk scaring the pretty Lorian away.

Chapter Eleven

Kalen stood in front of a long mirror on the wall of his cabin on Mikol's ship. They had left for Tygeria the day before, and were in deep space, headed toward the western part of the galaxy. He sighed and shook his head at the sight of himself in the sapphire-colored silk robe. The material felt luxurious against his skin. It was lined with the softest fur he'd ever felt, so it was warm too, which was helpful since the Tygerian ship was as cold as a dwarf star.

But it was still something he'd never imagined himself wearing.

"Are you sure I don't look stupid?" he asked, pulling it up so he could walk back to flop down beside Dartan.

"You look good. But does it matter? Your betrothed has asked you to wear it on the ship and in the palace in Tygeria. He said it was traditional and the Tygerian way. You're marrying into their culture too."

"Why did Florin offer you one then? You're not getting married into their culture."

"He said it would stop the men on the ship from bothering me. He said I'd be 'safer.'" Dartan gave an inelegant snort. "I

told him I wasn't afraid of the stupid Tygerians on the ship, and I could take care of myself."

Kalen smiled. "What did he say to that?"

"He said *I* was stupid, and that all I ever do is argue and get on his nerves. I said, fuck off and then he said..." Dartan's face grew bright red and Kalen sat down on the lounge beside him

"He said what?"

"I don't know exactly. Something in Tygerian that sounded sarcastic and had the word 'fuck' in it. I recognized that much. He's an ass."

"Hmm. Does he know you like women?"

"I told him in the lift that day, but he made that dismissive sound like this." Dartan put his lips together and blew out, making a sound like "Pah!" He shook his head. "Then he said, 'Why are you telling me as if I would care?'"

"I can ask Prince Mikol to make him leave you alone."

"I can make him myself if I need to. He doesn't bother me."

The corners of a smile played at Kalen's mouth. Dartan protested a bit too much when it came to the big Tygerian, and he blushed whenever he came into a room. He thought maybe his friend wasn't quite as unaffected as he pretended. And he also suspected Dartan didn't only like women, like he said he did.

Not that he acted much differently than Kalen. Whenever Prince Mikol leaned close to him or bent solicitously closer to

ask him how he was, or just sat down next to him, he could feel his own heart beating faster than it should. Maybe if he were less handsome, or less kind and solicitous it would make this whole thing way less difficult. It wasn't that he didn't want to like the prince or be impressed by him. But he was doing this whole thing to get his throne back and get rid of his despicable uncle, and not to get a husband. He needed to remember that.

Of course, the ideas Mikol had told him about establishing a fortress along the southern borders were fucking delicious. Mainly because of how much Nerol would *hate* it, and the king's council would be alarmed and frantic, thinking Tygeria might decide to colonize their planet. Kalen supposed it could happen, but he'd be there to see it didn't. And in the meantime, it would be good to see the bastards on the council squirm. Everyone knew this whole betrothal thing had been Nerol's idea to begin with—hell, he'd announced it at his installation as Regent in front of thousands. So they were getting just what they asked for and good enough for them.

He knew that Nerol never guessed Prince Mikol would bring him back home, however, to take his rightful place. He thought he could talk his way around Mikol's objections to his being on the field with his men when he was actually back on the planet.

Now he simply had to make Mikol see that. Perhaps the humans his father and grandfather had married could help him in that regard, but he was going to insist, nonetheless. From the stories Mikol had told him, the humans seemed like strong, independent people, though he'd never actually met one before.

The door opened suddenly, and Florin sauntered in. He looked directly at Kalen, never so much as glancing in Dartan's direction. "Your Highness, Prince Mikol would like you to dine with him this evening. You and your useless guard can come to the main dining hall whenever you're ready. The Dyson will meet you there."

"Thank you. Please tell the uh, Dyson, that we'll be happy to come."

He bowed and turned away to leave, flicking an unreadable look over at Dartan as he went.

"Gods, I hate him," Dartan said as the door closed behind him. His face was flushed pink again. "Why did Prince Mikol send him anyway? I'm sure he has other servants."

"Florin isn't a servant. He's the captain of this ship, and a good friend of Mikol's, from what I understand. And I have no idea why he sent him. They have different ways of doing things, it seems."

"Obviously." He stood up restlessly. "Well, let's go and get this over with."

"Dartan, you don't have to go if you don't want to. I can make an excuse."

"No, I won't leave you while we're on this ship. Florin's men are animals. Some of them made kissing noises when I passed them in the passageway earlier. And one of them grabbed his crotch and leered at me."

"They've never done that to me—they won't look directly at me. In fact, if they see me coming, they go the other way."

“That’s because they know you’re going to marry Prince Mikol, and they wouldn’t dare.”

“Well, maybe you should have taken Florin up on his offer to find you a robe. They might have thought you belonged to Captain Florin and left you alone then.”

“I’d literally rather die.”

“Suit yourself,” Kalen replied, laughing only a little at his friend. “I’m ready to go, if you are.”

Dartan stood up with a sigh. “The food will be horrible, no doubt. Maybe I can eat some bread.”

Kalen took Dartan’s arm. “Come on. We’re too far in this thing to back out now.”

They went out in the ship’s passageway and made their way down the narrow opening. This was a battle cruiser, built for speed and maneuverability and not necessarily for luxury. They came to the small lifts next to the stairs, which were narrow and so steep they were nearly vertical. Kalen started to climb them anyway, but Dartan pulled on his arm.

“I’ll take the stairs and you ride up.” He shook his head. “No, please don’t argue, Kalen, because you know you’ll just make your prince angry if you don’t. You can’t climb in those long robes.”

Kalen made a face, but it was true. He’d started to descend the stairs the morning they arrived on the ship, and Mikol had pulled sharply on his arm. “Stairs on a battleship are called ladders for a reason. You’ll break your neck”

. He rolled his eyes, but he had to agree Dartan was probably right. But it was one more mark against the blue

robe, and it bitterly galled him as one more indignity he had to endure as the mate of this tyger prince.

He got in the damn tiny lift, though, and rode the short distance to the upper deck where the dining hall was located. It moved so slowly that Dartan arrived on the deck just seconds later. The dining halls were at the other end of the deck, so they went in that direction, with Kalen leading the way. As they reached it and stepped inside the crowded room, all conversation stopped and the Tygerian soldiers stared openly at them. Dartan stepped in front of his prince, which didn't help anything at all. A loud murmuring started up and even a few calls to them that they thankfully couldn't understand. Until, that is, Captain Florin stepped into the room behind them, and the noise cut off instantly. The men who'd been laughing and calling out suddenly started getting very interested in their plates as Florin glared around the hall. He stepped up beside them and took them both by their arms, one man on each side of him, and began walking toward a door on the side of the hall.

“His Highness is waiting for you,” he told them. “In his private dining room.” He steered them inside and the door slid closed behind them with a slight whooshing sound. Prince Mikol was standing by a large porthole in the intimate room, gazing out at the faint, faraway light of some distant galaxies, sprinkled over the blackness of space. He turned and smiled at them as they entered.

“Good evening. I hope you've had a nice day.”

“Yes, thank you.”

“Good,” he said, his gaze raking over his body so intensely Kalen felt the heat of a slight blush working its way up his neck. Mikol motioned to a seat beside him. “Come sit here by me, and Florin, you and Captain Dartan take these seats across from us, please.”

They all sat down at the table, which was already set with plates and utensils. The plates were large and bowl-like, with rounded upturned edges, but not as deep as the bowls he was used to. The utensils were shaped oddly, considering what he was used to as well, but they were certainly adequate. When the first course arrived, Kalen was shocked to see that it looked like Lorian food, though not quite. It was like the cooks had been given the recipes, but then decided to embellish them with strange sauces and unfamiliar spices. It was still quite recognizable though, and Kalen, who was starving suddenly, gave a little cry of welcome to some of his favorites, like honeyed rice and a spicy stew he enjoyed.

“I asked the cook to order some Lorian dishes before we left the station. Freeze-dried, I’m afraid, but he’s an excellent cook, so I think you’ll enjoy them.”

“I’m sure I will,” he said softly, a little touched by the idea that Mikol had thought of what he would like.

Mikol and Florin seemed a little less enthusiastic over the spiciness of the stew, and Florin’s face got dark red as he swallowed a heaping spoonful. He dropped his spoon and took a large gulp of his wine. Mikol called over a galley hand who was standing by the door and had a quick whispered conversation with him. He nodded and went back into the galley.

“You don’t like it?” Kalen asked.

“Tygerian food is bland, according to what my human relatives say. Perhaps they’re right, because this seems terribly spicy to me, but I’m glad you enjoyed it. I’ve asked the cook to send something different for me and Florin.”

A few minutes later, they brought out some big slabs of some kind of meat, very rare, and both Mikol and Florin began to eat heartily, washing it down with quantities of a dark red wine. They were both offered a glass of the stuff. But they decided to make do with Lycan tea.

“Is everything comfortable in your room?” the prince asked, and Kalen nodded.

“Yes, it’s fine. A little cold, though.”

“I’ll have them adjust the temperature for you then. Anything else?”

“Yes, now that you mention it. Some of your men onboard have been rude to Dartan.”

His friend dropped his spoon and glared at Kalen. “Please don’t,” he said softly.

“Rude in what way?” Mikol asked, ignoring Dartan and glancing over at Kalen.

“Making sounds as he passed them and grabbing their crotches as he walks by. I guess ‘crude’ might be a better word.”

“It’s fine,” Dartan said quickly, sending a look over at Kalen. “I can handle myself.”

“I’ll have a word with them,” Florin said. “Though Captain Kajeer wouldn’t be having this problem if he’d worn a robe like I asked. My men don’t like uniforms of other armies, particularly those they associate with the old Alliance.”

“The war is over, Captain,” Kalen interrupted. “And if these soldiers can’t respect our uniforms, then how can they be expected to come to our planet and fight alongside us?”

“It won’t be a problem,” Mikol cut in. “Because my men can follow orders.”

Kalen shrugged. “Except for now, on this ship?”

Mikol turned to look at him, his eyes a little fierce. “I said, my men follow orders. I’ll handle this.”

“Thank you.”

The silence that fell over the table was awkward, to say the least, so Kalen stood up, pushing back his chair. “I’m a little tired. Thank you for the lovely dinner. But I think I’ll be going back to my cabin now, if you’ll excuse me.” He gave a little bow and turned to leave as Dartan scooted back his chair too and stood up to accompany him. He half expected Mikol to stop them, but he made no move to do so, just stared at him broodingly as he swept out of the room.

They were almost back to Kalen’s cabin—had reached the steep stairs outside them, in fact—when the ship suddenly jolted, lurching to one side and knocking them both off their feet to the deck. A horribly loud scraping, grinding sound started up, sounding like the whole ship was coming apart. Kalen clutched Dartan’s arm as raucous sirens blared, combining with the shouts of the Tygerians and sounds of

running feet. It sounded like an all-out attack, like the end of the world.

Kalen's heart banged in his chest as the sounds pierced right through him. He sat up on the deck beside Dartan feeling panicked and disoriented. He had bitten down so hard on his tongue when they both fell that it brought blood to his lips, and he wiped his sleeve across his mouth.

Kalen scrambled back to his feet as best he could with Dartan pulling on his arm. Dartan had his disruptor out in his other hand as smoke began to swirl down the staircase from the upper decks. Dartan was yelling something about taking him to his cabin, but was that the right thing to do? Maybe they'd have to make it to a shuttle if the ship was exploding. He pulled back against Dartan's arm.

"No, we may have to evacuate! Let's move down to a lower deck."

"Not until we know for sure what's happening," Dartan shouted back over the noise coming down to them from the upper decks. It sounded like a fierce battle was going on above them, with sounds of disruptors firing and the acrid smell of smoke and the sharp cries of men in pain.

"I'm getting you off these stairs," Dartan yelled to him, and then seized him around the waist and picked him up bodily to haul him down. The bottom seemed a long way off, and all Kalen could do was cling to Dartan as he manhandled him to the lower deck.

They were both out of breath by the time they reached the bottom, but Kalen still managed to ball up his fist and punch Dartan in the arm. "Damn it, you could have killed us both!"

Then they were out of options as the fight raging on the upper decks suddenly spilled down onto the stairs where they'd been standing. Several tall, pale men with wild dark hair swarmed into the passageway, dressed in strange clothing, with strips of cloth wrapped around their heads. Were these pirates? They looked unlike any Nilaniums or Drex Kalen had ever seen.

Kalen pulled desperately on Dartan's arm to move him down the passageway, but Dartan shook him off and turned to face the intruders, blocking Kalen's body with his own.

One of the intruders shouted something that sounded oddly familiar, and for a moment, Kalen froze. The words had sounded vaguely Lorian. Then the pirate lifted his disruptor and fired it directly at Dartan's chest. His friend gave a soft cry, almost a sigh, like a tired child, and he reeled backward and fell at Kalen's feet.

The disruptor the pirate was holding was pointing directly at Kalen. It was an oddly shaped one and again, unlike anything Kalen had ever seen. Disruptors caused damage by exciting the molecular bonds of their targets, and they could maim or cause death instantly. Charges from a disruptor, even one set on stun, hit their victims with great force and had been known to break bones when they didn't kill outright. More frequently, the victims didn't live to complain about it.

All of this raced through Kalen's mind as he stared down the barrel of the disruptor, but he didn't have time to do anything but react. He dropped to the floor as the shot zinged over his head and saw that he was right next to Dartan's

alarmingly unmoving body, his disruptor still clutched in his hand.

Kalen lunged for it.

Chapter Twelve

The pirates, whose ships Mikol didn't recognize, attacked without warning, dropping their cloaking shields and showing themselves only as they were coming alongside, far too late for evasive action. The bastards had the gall to send messages threatening to blow them out of the sky if they didn't surrender, so Mikol had given the order to do so. And he waited for them to come alongside and board. The pirates stormed in, disruptors blazing and were met with...savage resistance. Obviously, Tygerian resistance was something they either hadn't expected or been prepared for, because they died quickly.

Few people knew about Tygerians in close combat, because there had been few left to tell the tale. Transformations into their tygers were so swift and terrifying that opponents were sometimes stunned into literal immobility—until it was far too late.

The first ones to come onto his ship had barely known what hit them and they had died in a red haze of blood, teeth and claws. It was most *satisfying* to Mikol to see their bodies heaped up on the bridge. He had to admit he hated the idea of pirates almost as much as King Davos did. All except for Rhaegar and his men, of course. He had a certain fondness for

Rhaegar's crew, unlike his father and Davos, especially now that they were trying hard to limit their activities to actual trading and not thievery. But not these bastards, who had dared to try to storm onboard his ship.

It was over almost too soon, in fact, giving him little time to enjoy the carnage. It wasn't that he was particularly bloodthirsty—well, he was, but that was beside the point. He knew only too well what those bastards would have done to him and his men if they'd succeeded in taking over his ship. Not to mention his *noby*. It made him feel—primitive and barbaric.

His *noby*—suddenly the realization hit him like an unexpected blow, and it was then that the cries coming from the lower decks finally broke through his blood rage to fully register on him. Some of the pirates had avoided being eviscerated by his men or blown away by their superior weapons and had managed to escape below—a few, at least. They had somehow slipped into the staircases, leaving in the same direction as Prince Kalen and his friend Dartan had, only minutes before.

It suddenly struck him with icy certainty that Kalen and Dartan wouldn't have had any chance at all to reach the safety of their cabins before the attack.

He couldn't breathe properly, and he never knew afterward how he managed to run so fast to get to Kalen, bitterly castigating himself for not going to him immediately, as he flung himself down the stairs. He was vaguely aware of Florin behind him, but little else, as he was still partially

shifted, his mind filled with savage images of ripping bodies apart.

He'd been angry and irritated with Kalen when he'd left so abruptly, after all the trouble he'd gone to with the food he'd had specially ordered to please him. When he got up to leave before they'd even had a chance to bring out the dessert he'd arranged—a cake that was one of Kalen's favorites, according to what he'd been able to find out from his captain—he'd had to remind himself sternly that it wouldn't be a good idea to pick the spoiled princeling up, throw him down on his back on the table, and toss up the hem of his robe to show him exactly who handled things onboard this ship. He would then remind him over and over again until he had it fixed firmly in his mind and until Mikol had him firmly in hand. Then Kalen would know not to trouble himself to second guess him again.

All of that faded to nothingness as he hurtled down the steep stairs, leaping down them until he finally reached Kalen's deck. What he saw stunned him.

Dartan's unmoving body was stretched out on the floor, facedown, with Kalen lying over him, guarding his friend with his own body. His face was fierce, as he snarled and shouted something in his own language at the pirate running down the passageway to get away from him, taking careful aim at him as he discharged his weapon and watched the man's head disintegrate in a spray of red. In his hand he held the still-smoking disruptor, and two more pirates were dead on the floor beside him.

Florin fell beside Dartan, turning him over to examine his wound. Kalen whirled around, still lost in battle lust and turned his weapon on Florin, but Mikol leaped for the disruptor, twisting it from Kalen's hand. He grabbed Kalen's shoulders and forced him to look directly at him.

"Kalen, stop. It's all right. It's over!"

Recognition finally blossomed in his eyes, and he shuddered as he glanced back over at Florin, who was gathering Dartan in his arms.

"He's alive," Florin said, his voice the only indication of his strong emotion. "But he's barely breathing. I have to get him to the infirmary."

Kalen cried out, reaching for his friend, but Florin was already on his feet and striding down the passageway with him in his arms.

"Where's he taking him? Is he still alive?"

"He is. You saved your friend and yourself. It was very brave." He pulled Kalen into his arms, feeling suddenly overcome by the idea of what he could have lost.

"I-I need to go see about him," Kalen said, though he was still clinging tightly to Mikol, his face buried in the hollow next to his throat.

"We will. Let the doctors check him—there were other men wounded as well, so the infirmary will be chaos for a few minutes, and we'll only be in the way." Mikol said against Kalen's hair. "I imagine Florin is already causing a great deal of turmoil in there already."

Kalen pulled away and looked up at him. “Will he make him a priority? I mean, not put him in front of the others who were hurt, but at least to get him into triage. Does he... do you think he has feelings for my friend?”

“I do, yes.”

Kalen only nodded and sighed, laying his head back on Mikol’s shoulder. “Then he’ll take care of him. I feel a little tired all of a sudden.”

Mikol got up quickly, sweeping Kalen into his arms and carrying him the few steps to his cabin. The door slid open, and he took him inside to lay him on his bed to peer down at him and pat all over his body.

“Are you sure you’re not hit? Does it hurt anywhere?”

“No, I’m all right, *carli*. I’m fine.”

“Are you sure?”

Kalen smiled up at him. “I’m sure.”

“Rest here for a few minutes and then we’ll go check on your friend when you’re feeling a little better.”

“Would Florin...would someone call and tell us if-if...”

“Yes, of course.”

Actually, he had no idea whether they would or not, as the doctors no doubt had their hands full and Florin would be too distraught, but it was only a little white lie, as his omak used to call them, and fairly harmless, he thought. He would go check on Kalen’s friend as soon as he felt able to leave Kalen, if he was unable to go with him. He was still too aware of how

easily everything could have gone so terribly wrong, and he couldn't bear to leave him quite yet.

Kalen reached out for his hand. "I'm glad you're all right too."

"I was worried about you," Mikol admitted, kissing the back of his hand and making him blush. "Tell me, nobyo... what is this word you called me? *Carli*, I think you said."

Kalen looked surprised and then turned pink as a flush came over his face. "I, uh...did I say that?"

"Yes."

He blew out soft breath. "It means, something like that name you called me on Belline. *Honey*, I think you said. It's a pet name among my people."

Mikol looked so surprised, Kalen wondered if he had been too harsh with Mikol since he'd renewed his acquaintance with him. He made up his mind to be nicer, because any distance between them wasn't good at all. Not for his plan to get in good and tight with the Tygerians, certainly. And then too, because so far, Mikol had been good to him.

"There was so much noise and smoke and yelling coming from the upper decks. I couldn't imagine who was attacking us. I'm glad you weren't hurt, Mikol," he said, taking his hand.

"Fucking pirates, or at least they were using pirate tactics. Not Nilaniums or Drex though. I actually didn't recognize them at all, and the ship disengaged fast and took off when their captain realized what was happening to the ones who

boarded us. I've sent word to the Lycanus High Command to intercept the ship if they can. Lycanus is the nearest planet."

"The pirates have cloaking devices though, don't they?"

"Yes," Mikol answered shortly, his eyes darkening. "It won't save them if the Lycans get close enough to blow them away though. They have equipment to see through the cloaking the pirates use. I hope they can find them."

"But who were they, do you think? Were they Roths?"

"Maybe. I never saw any so-called Roths before, though they're supposed to be in this area."

"But why would they be so stupid as to attack and try to board an *Axis* ship?"

"Pirates have done it before, and no doubt will again, unless we wipe them all out. But I would like to question that captain."

"The thing is..."

"Yes?"

"They looked different. Tall and thin, with pale skin. Like a species I haven't ever seen before. And I-I thought—I'm almost sure I heard one of them say something in Lorian."

Mikol glanced over sharply at him. "It may not mean anything—pirates come in all shapes, sizes and ethnicities."

"But I've heard rumors—and I know you must have heard them too—about the Roth. Some say they come from near our planet. Perhaps one of the outer moons. People say they're different."

“Rumors, like you said, or even myth. If we knew where they actually were, I’d have already gone after them. But it’s only a matter of time. We’ll find them. Now, forget those bastards. Tell me how you’re feeling. Do you feel well enough yet to go check on your friend?”

“Yes, please,” Kalen said, throwing back the cover and scrambling to get up.

“Take it easy. You were dizzy before, so I can’t have you passing out on me.”

Mikol noticed that Kalen gave him a pleased look, if a bit of an embarrassed one, as he helped him stand. He put an arm around Kalen and led him down to the infirmary on the lowest deck, refusing to let him take the steep staircases because of his robe and crowding in beside him in the small lift. He was acutely aware of Kalen’s closeness and every move he made in the tight space. It did nothing to lessen Mikol’s intense awareness, not to mention his appreciation, of this handsome—and it seemed *brave* young man—who now belonged to him.

Kalen was anxious to see his friend but frightened at the same time. If he found that Dartan had been killed in the attack, he’d be completely devastated. It didn’t even bear thinking about, so he decided he wouldn’t. If he could, he’d will Dartan to live and be all right, because he had to be.

The scene in and around the small infirmary wasn't exactly chaotic and was in fact, fairly orderly, considering all that had happened. The less wounded Tygerian soldiers were sitting all along the passageway, quietly awaiting their turn. Inside the infirmary, which Mikol entered with casual impunity, the scene wasn't quite as calm, however.

Three tables held men whose wounds were being treated by the doctors, quickly and it seemed to Kalen, efficiently. Bloody sponges and bandages littered the floor, but the wounded men didn't seem to be in any pain, having no doubt been given anesthesia. There was no sign of Florin at first, and then Mikol moved some curtained areas on the side of the large room. When he reached the third one, he looked inside and motioned for Kalen, who went eagerly to join him. Inside the curtain, he saw Dartan lying on his back, awake and clawing at his throat in great distress, as if he couldn't breathe. Florin was hunched over him, speaking urgently to him and trying to hold him down as the doctors worked on him, getting his oxygen requirements adjusted.

"You have to calm him down, Captain Florin, or we can't help him," one of the doctors was saying.

Florin shot the physician an evil look. "What the fuck do you think I'm trying to do?" he snarled.

Kalen surged closer, but Mikol pulled him back, murmuring to him. "His ribs are broken, so every breath is painful, and so he thinks he can't breathe. He's panicking. Let Florin calm him."

"But I'm his friend—he'll listen to me, and I can get him to settle down," Kalen said, straining to go to him.

“He doesn’t need kindness now. He’s a soldier and understands commands. Someone needs to be firm with him. Let Florin do this.”

Florin had taken Dartan’s face in his hand and was speaking right into it. He wasn’t even speaking Lorian or any other language Dartan could understand, but whatever he was saying was slowly working. It had to be the tone, Kalen thought, as Dartan began to nod, and his eyes widened and fixed desperately on Florin’s face. Both his hands clutched Florin’s wrist. The doctors were finally able to give him the oxygen mix he needed, mixed with pain relief and something to sedate him. Slowly, Dartan began to sag back onto the table, his eyes fluttering in relief. Florin lowered him down, amazingly brushing his lips against his forehead before he straightened up. Kalen stared at him in disbelief. He knew Florin teased and argued with Dartan too much not to fancy him a little, but he had no idea he felt that strongly for him.

Florin turned to Mikol, still looking slightly wrecked. “They can work on his ribs now, but it will take a while for them to heal. All the ribs on one side of his body were shattered. The doctors can repair them, but it will be a painful recovery. Meanwhile they’re giving him medicine for pain and keeping him sedated.”

Kalen nodded. “Thank you, Florin, for helping him. I’ll make sure he listens to what the doctors tell him.”

“As will I,” Florin said softly. Kalen gave him a little smile, which he returned with a slight nod and a glance at Mikol. “I’ll make sure Lycanus is notified and start the men on

cleanup. But I believe I'll stay with Dartan a while, in case he wakes up. He doesn't speak Tygerian."

"That's fine."

"Oh, but I can do that," Kalen said.

"No, you can't. You don't speak Tygerian either and you need to rest now, because of how you felt earlier. An adrenalin drop can be hard on your body. Your friend is in good hands. In fact, I'd like to have you checked as well."

"I don't think that's necessary."

"I do. Now sit over there please, and I'll inform the medics."

Though Kalen wanted to argue, he did still feel a bit drained, so he sat in the chair by Dartan and waited for Mikol to return. He wasn't sure if he liked being the so-called *noby* of this prince, if it meant he had to take his orders. He had never been good at taking orders, and he didn't fancy the idea of starting now. Still, when Mikol came back and lifted him into his arms *again* and took him to a curtained area next to Dartan's, being solicitous and making sure he was comfortable, he thought it might not be so bad to be a pampered *noby*.

Sometimes, anyway. Occasionally.

Mikol stood by him protectively as a doctor checked him over. The doctor agreed about the adrenalin but said everything seemed fine with his health. He suggested that Kalen rest for the evening and see how he felt the next day.

With one more check on Dartan, to find him still sleeping, they went back to Kalen's cabin. Once inside, Mikol placed a

hand on Kalen's waist and pushed him gently against the inside wall, cradling the back of his head with his other hand. He kissed Kalen ravenously for a while and rubbed his body against him. Kalen felt his leg hook around Mikol's strong thighs almost as if it had a mind of its own. Mikol began to pull at the robe, slipping it off his shoulders to pool around his waist, leaving his chest bare. Furiously aggressive kisses followed, and Mikol slipped a hand under his robes and up to his bare ass.

He looked down incredulously at Kalen, who smiled and shrugged. "Underclothes rub and chafe me. I've never liked it much, and this is more comfortable. You don't mind, do you?"

"Mind?" He groaned and caressed the naked skin. "I insist on it. Thinking of all this naked skin under your robes ... gods, you'll make me crazy before I ever get you to Tygeria."

Kalen looked up at him and smiled. He felt embarrassed but powerful when Mikol spoke to him like this. The idea that he had the power to affect a man like Mikol so strongly—it was something he hadn't felt in far too long.

Mikol lowered his lips to his again and kissed him, a kiss so deep and powerful, it made Kalen's toes curl. Gods, where had Mikol learned to kiss like that? The Tygerian was so much bigger than he was that he should have felt small and at his mercy. Instead, it was the other way around. Not that Mikol was at his mercy—but he did seem greatly affected by his body and his kisses.

For a while now, he'd felt ashamed of being so neatly duped by his hateful uncle. He felt like a fool at times, and like he should have called his Army up and fought the man when

he had the chance. But what if he were wrong in thinking that way? He was only powerless if he felt that way, wasn't he? And right now, he felt better about himself than he had in a long time. Just the thought that his naked body was driving someone like Prince Mikol insane—and he'd *said* so himself.

He could make this different, could make it more about choice if he wanted to. He'd been with the man on Belline and it had been—wonderful. Better than any sex he'd ever had. Maybe it was time to admit he was beyond attracted to this handsome Tygerian.

He was about to become the consort of the man in line for the throne of the entire Axis Empire. A man who was the Dyson of all Intergalactic Operations for the Axis. It was a powerful position and as his consort, he would have power too. It was time to reclaim that and refuse to look on this marriage as a dirty trick the universe had played on him. To admit that it might just be the best thing that had ever happened to him.

He lifted his face up for another kiss and Mikol moaned as he took his lips.

With Mikol he could have the ear of King Davos himself. And that would give him the chance to take his rightful place back on the throne of Loros. He only had to curb his impatience and keep that foremost in his mind.

Chapter Thirteen

They arrived at Mikol's home two days later. Traveling into the capitol city of Floven was fascinating to Kalen. It was so vast and had such a strange look to his eyes, all in colors of bright gold and black, with no buildings much higher than a few stories high. Every building had plenty of green space around it, and there were many parks and grassy areas. The buildings themselves were shaped so that they grew much smaller at the top, almost rising into a point. The air was crowded with shuttle craft. Their shuttle held only the driver, along with Mikol and himself. Florin had elected to come with Dartan on the shuttle that held the wounded.

Mikol's parents met them at the space dock on palace grounds, and Kalen could definitely see where Mikol got his good looks. He was so like his father, Prince Mikos, but there was something about his bearer—his omak, as Mikol called him—that reminded Kalen of Mikol too. Maybe it was Ryan's close and solemn regard or his quiet dignity. He was a bit shorter than Kalen but very handsome. He embraced Mikol as they disembarked and then he turned toward Kalen with a smile of welcome.

“It's nice to meet you, Prince Kalen. I hope you'll be happy here on Tygeria.”

“Thank you, sir. It’s very nice to meet you too.”

Prince Mikos was next to him, greeting Mikol with fist bumping, both his fists held up high over his chest. Then he turned to Kalen, who took a quick step backward at the intensity of his fierce regard. Mikol immediately stepped up to put an arm around Kalen’s waist.

“Father, I’d like to introduce my nobyo, Prince Kalen.”

Mikos bowed to him from the waist. “Prince Kalen, welcome to your new home. I hope you’ll be happy here.”

Kalen felt himself leaning backward into Mikol, so he straightened immediately. He would show no sign of weakness or dependency in front of this man. He stiffened his resolve too and bowed back to the prince. “Thank you, Your Highness. It’s very nice to be here.”

“We have a great deal to discuss, it seems,” Mikos said, glancing pointedly down at Kalen’s sapphire robe. “Come and let’s go inside and get you settled in. I believe your omak-ahn has a dinner planned tonight in your honor.”

Kalen murmured something intended to sound polite, though inside he was full again of those butterflies he’d talked about with Mikol at the commandant’s office. He’d hoped he might have a day or so to catch his breath, but it seemed as if he was going to be plunged into this thing right away. Mikol took his arm then and drew him closer to his warm body—he had to admit it helped.

Mikol leaned down to whisper in his ear. “Don’t be nervous. Let me do most of the talking and you follow my lead. Humans like my omak and omak-ahn can be very nosy,

and I'm afraid some of that has rubbed off on my father and the king over the years. The specifics of our first meeting is no one's business but our own."

Kalen shuddered—because of the whisper in his ear and definitely not because of Mikol's proximity, or the delicious way he smelled when he was so close to him like that. And maybe because he dreaded the upcoming interviews that he knew would happen despite what Mikol said. This was the bloody prince's only son. He would definitely want "specifics" and might even demand them. All he had to offer was the truth, but why did it seem so insubstantial? So downright shady?

He nodded at Mikol's words, but he was also trembling a little. Mikol tightened his hold on his waist, and they walked toward the palace. As they walked into the main entrance of the huge building they were calling "the palace," painted in garish colors of gold and black and about six stories high, Prince Mikos was met by several large Tygerians, who all seemed to want to have a word with him. The prince inclined his head, nodding occasionally and kept walking forward, the other men scrambling to keep up with him. Kalen could feel the interested stares of the king's court as their little entourage made its way through the crowded halls of the palace itself.

A few young Tygerian males called out a greeting to Mikol, who called back with a grin. They were speaking Tygerian, of course, so Kalen didn't understand a word, but he recognized the crude gestures directed toward him. Mikol stood even taller and assumed an arrogant, insufferable stance. He called out something in rapid Tygerian that made the young males laugh. Before they'd traveled far, Kalen was red

in the face and seething. How dare these people disrespect him in this way?

“Why are these men allowed to be so rude?” he asked, and Mikol bent to speak in his ear again.

“It’s tradition, and they’re not being rude. They’re simply expressing appreciation of my new nobyo. They won’t do it the next time they see you, but the more you act insulted, the worse they’ll be now.”

After that, Kalen kept his gaze firmly straight ahead as the young men called out to him, making smacking sounds and whistles and acting like they were about to grab him. He hated feeling intimidated by them, but they were all much taller and bigger than he was, and there were so many of them that it was difficult.

“I didn’t realize the palace was so public. At home, the public aren’t allowed inside.”

“These are the public areas, though we have our private quarters where the public isn’t allowed. The king allows his subjects to come inside the reception rooms on special occasions, like today. And by the way, *this* is your home now.”

That jolted Kalen a little and he stiffened. “This may be one of my homes. But I’m the king of Loros, by rights. I’ll never turn my back on my people.”

“No one is asking you to. But while you live on Tygeria, I expect your allegiance to it.”

“So long as you give your allegiance to Loros when we’re on my planet.”

The corners of Mikol's mouth turned up, and Kalen stopped talking, but he felt as if he'd made his point. He reminded himself of the real end game here—it was to one day return to Loros with the full might of the Tygerian army behind him and regain his throne. This arguing probably wasn't the best way to accomplish that.

“Of course, *carli*,” Mikol said softly.

Finally, the public areas were behind them, and they stepped through a door into a cool, massive corridor that led to the family's private chambers. They went down one hallway after another, it seemed, until Kalen was totally lost, arriving at last at a set of double doors. Prince Mikos went through them, and they all followed him inside.

This large, gracious room had to be Mikos and Ryan's private quarters—some of the furniture was most unlike the utilitarian style of the Tygerians. There were a few pieces of the big, dark furniture the Tygerians seemed to favor, but there were also more attractive pieces—to Kalen's eye at least. They were led over to a large sitting area, with long lounging pieces that Mikol had called “sofas.” They were plush and soft, and he sank down onto one, grateful to sit down after the long walk.

Ryan must have touched some unseen device, because a door opened and a Jayronian woman came in and bowed to him. “Can you bring us some tea, please, Malik? And some of those little cakes His Highness likes?”

The young woman nodded and left, so that Ryan turned his attention back to his son. “I know you must be tired and

want to get to your rooms, but I thought it would be nice if we got to know your betrothed a bit before the wedding.”

“Of course,” Mikol said, smiling at his omak. The affection between them was very apparent.

“I’ve taken the liberty of sending some sapphire robes to your room, Prince Kalen. I know the supply on the space station must have been quite low. I believe you’re too tall for mine to fit well, but we have others that were made for my husband’s brother, Rakkur. I believe they’ll fit you nicely.”

“You’re very kind.”

“Tell us, Prince Kalen,” Prince Mikos said, in regard to nothing at all. “How did you come to meet my son before the official meeting on the space station?”

“I’m sorry, Prince Kalen, but it seems my husband has forgotten his manners. He’s being nosy.”

“Don’t apologize for me, *nobyō*.”

“Then please do it for yourself. That’s none of our business.”

“I merely meant to say that it was odd that you were both there at the same time. And that you met at all. Quite the coincidence.”

“That’s right,” Mikol said, drawing his father’s attention. “It was. And it was love at first sight, I suppose. You’d know about that, wouldn’t you, Father?”

“Hmm. Indeed. Still, it’s perhaps a little too coincidental. Some might question it.”

“What is there to question? Kalen was nervous about our meeting and decided to stop by Belline. He’d heard a bit about it, it seems. And we happened to go to the same establishment. The Starlight. I noticed him right away and went over to him. We talked and realized who each other was. Things progressed from there.”

There was a silence as Mikos looked back and forth between them. “I see.”

“Now, about the ceremony. Has Blake managed to pull that together for us? We don’t expect anything elaborate.”

Ryan smiled at the Jayronian woman who had returned with a tray laden with cakes and teacups. The woman arranged everything on the small table in front of the sofa and everyone reached for a cup. Kalen noticed that no one expected Ryan to serve anybody.

“Where were we?” Ryan asked as everyone politely sipped their tea. “Oh yes, the wedding ceremony. It’s tomorrow morning. And it will be just the family and a few close friends. We had to keep it small, since your parents weren’t sent an invitation, Kalen.”

“Parent,” Kalen corrected, as he reached for a small, iced cake. “There’s only my mother left.”

“I heard about the tragic passing of your father. Please accept our condolences.”

“Thank you.”

They all sat quietly for a moment, enjoying the tea and cake. Then Ryan returned to the subject of the reception.

“We did plan a large reception for later, though. One that all of our big family can attend. You can give me the names of those you’d like to invite, Prince Kalen, and I’ll send them an invitation as well.”

“I-I suppose there isn’t any way to exclude my mother and her husband.”

“No,” Prince Mikos replied.

Kalen gave him a long look. “My uncle murdered my father, Your Highness. Then married my mother in a disgusting display only days later. Though I still have feelings for my mother, I don’t have cordial emotions about either of them, and I can’t pretend I do.”

Rather than show anger, as Kalen expected, Prince Mikos simply nodded. “The Tygerian religion teaches us to be calm in the face of those who hate us.”

Feeling rebuked, Kalen nodded miserably.

The prince continued. “And then to do to them whatever they would do to you. Only do it first.”

Surprised, Kalen laughed softly and nodded. “That sounds like a good plan, Your Highness.”

“We’ll invite them and keep a close eye on them. Your husband and I will ensure that nothing happens to you at your uncle’s hand again, Prince Kalen. You have our full protection now. As do your people. You can be sure of that.”

It was so much more than he’d ever hoped for that he sagged a little in his seat and traitorous tears sprang to his eyes. He didn’t want to appear weak in front of his new in-laws, but Ryan leaned over and stretched out a hand to him.

He took it and Ryan squeezed it warmly. “We’re your family now, Kalen. And you can count on us to have your back.”

Again, the relief that spread over him made itself manifest in tears, so when a soft sob escaped him, he turned his head into Mikol’s shoulder to hide his face. Mikol ducked his head to whisper soothingly in his ear.

He rose to his feet, bringing Kalen with him. “This has been a long journey for my *nobyo* and he’s still grieving for his father. I know he’d like to express his gratitude, as I do, but he’s a little overcome at the kindness. I hope you understand.”

“Of course,” Ryan said.

“I believe we’ll go to our rooms now, if that’s all right. Maybe you can send some of these cakes down to us later?”

Ryan laughed softly. “I will.” He stepped forward and laid a hand on Kalen’s shoulder. “Make sure you get some rest, honey. Don’t forget the dinner later this evening.”

“Thank you again, omak. I’ll come by later to speak to you both, after Kalen gets settled.”

He guided Kalen out of the room quickly and once out in the corridor again, he stopped to peer down in his face. “Are you all right?”

“Yes. Thank you for the help in there. They’re both really nice.”

“I don’t believe anyone ever called my father nice before.” He leaned in. “Don’t tell anyone. We don’t want people thinking the Bloody Prince has gone soft.”

Kalen laughed and Mikol wrapped an arm around his waist to take him down the corridor.

Kalen woke up in the huge soft bed Mikol had left him in and rolled onto his back. Mikol told him this area had originally been his suite, but that he'd had this room redesigned as a separate bedroom for Kalen. He'd told him that as he gave him a brief, hard hug and told him to get some rest. He'd be back later.

Because he was so exhausted, both emotionally and physically, that was exactly what Kalen did. He fell onto the big bed with the big, soft, thick mattress, like the one he'd had on the space station, and tumbled almost instantly into sleep. Now he rolled to his back, staring up at the ceiling and taking stock. He felt much better, but vaguely uneasy.

First of all, why did he have his own separate bedroom? Tygerians were supposed to be overwhelmingly dominant and jealous lovers. Didn't Mikol *want* him in his bed?

Not that he objected, of course. He barely knew him. And he wasn't homosexual—more than likely. Yet could he deny his attraction to this Tygerian prince? He blamed it at first on the amount of Cygnarral he'd imbibed that night on Belline and maybe on that little white pill he'd taken. Obviously, he'd been out of his mind.

Then later, at the space station—well, it must have been the stress on that morning of the betrothal.

Nothing else really made any sense.

He had actually wondered for a while if he were asexual—up to this point in his life, he'd had little interest in sex. Of course, as the most eligible bachelor on Loros, he'd been introduced to all kinds of pretty women, but other than appreciating their grace and thinking them lovely, he really had little interest.

Not that it meant anything. He had no interest in men either, though he had plenty of good friends, and Dartan had always been like a brother to him. Anyway, he'd wondered, that's all. From time to time. He'd always been attracted to strong people and admired other warrior's skills. But that was probably all it was. Sometimes—he'd just *wondered*.

Like how he was puzzled now by the idea of Mikol parking him in this room and taking off, leaving him alone in this vast, strange palace.

But he was a man, damn it, so he sat up on the side of the bed, recognized that he was feeling much better than when he'd first stretched out there, and began to idly take inventory of the room. The furniture was nice but nothing ornate or covered in gold leaf, like the furniture in his father's palace. It looked well-made and expensive, but it was definitely no frills. There was a chest, probably to put his folded clothes in and a kind of taller piece that he got up to investigate.

When he opened one of the double doors, he found at least six or seven beautifully made robes, all in sapphire blue, the color of Tygerian royalty, according to what Mikol had told him. The material was luxurious and soft, and he knew it would probably cling to his body, like the ones he'd seen at the

conference he'd attended with his father. He took one out and placed it on the bed to change into, and then he went in search of a bathing room.

There was only one more door to investigate. When he opened it, he found what he was looking for. Inside was a large bathing pool—the water would probably come up to his chest when he sat down on one of the benches that stretched around it inside. The thing almost filled the whole room. He noticed a small, enclosed area that contained the other usual facilities. A cloud of steam floated over the top of the pool, and it looked so inviting, he immediately slipped off his robe and sat on the side, dangling his feet in the water. On all four sides, there were small racks, holding a variety of bottles. He slid on his ass along the glossy tile down to the nearest rack, looking through the bottles until he found the soap.

Then he just sat still for a while, luxuriating in the hot water, and the idea that he was so far away from his hated uncle, and nothing could touch him here in this beautiful, strange fortress of a palace.

He spent the next quarter of an hour bathing and shampooing his hair and just soaking. He was happy to discover that the floor of the pool wasn't slippery at all, so he could move around freely. It was definitely the warmest he'd felt since he joined Prince Mikol on his ship.

He heard a faint noise by the door and glanced over to see Mikol standing there, leaning against the frame. His eyes were smoldering, and it made something stir inside Kalen's stomach. Those stupid "butterflies" again.

"How long have you been watching me?"

“Long enough. I’m glad you’re enjoying the bathing pool.”

“It’s wonderful,” Kalen said, grinning up at him. “Are you going to get in?” He tried hard to make the question sound off-hand, like he didn’t much care one way or the other, but the little hesitation in his voice, not to mention how breathy it sounded made him think he didn’t quite pull it off.

“I believe I will,” Mikol said, beginning to strip off his clothes, and throwing the various pieces carelessly down on the floor. By the time he got to his underclothing, Kalen found his mouth was dry. The prince’s body was truly something to see. Tall and muscular, he had the perfect body, as far as Kalen could see. His gorgeous red-gold hair fell across his shoulders and those eyes—they gleamed from his handsome face from under thick, dark eyelashes. He walked slowly over to the pool, gloriously naked, with his heavy balls swinging a little between his legs and his big, strangely alien penis standing up proudly, with a slight curve back toward his body. The head of it was solid black, and he stroked his hand over it as he felt Kalen’s eyes on him. He was beautifully made, and he smiled slightly as lowered himself into the heated pool, seating himself on one of the ledges that went all the way around the circumference.

He held up a hand and made a motion to Kalen by curling his fingers toward his palm. “Come here, Kalen.”

The arrogance of the man—Kalen was shocked and surprised, but his cock stood up between his legs so quickly, he actually got a little lightheaded as all the blood in his body seemed to rush to it. It was like the time in the corridor outside

the commandant's office. The time when the prince backed him up against the wall, holding him there with his body and saying Kalen belonged to him. Then making him say it too.

He shuddered and his cheeks burned with the memory, but he couldn't seem to look away from that beckoning hand. Slowly he got up and began to move toward Mikol.

Mikol was pretty sure Kalen's little ass was perfect—and those round, plump globes would perfectly fit his hands.

Mikol had followed his mate into the shallow end of the pool and sank down on a marble bench across from him. He'd asked Kalen to come to him and he was moving that way, full of sweet blushes and shy glances that would do him no good whatsoever. Mikol meant to have him in every way possible in the time they had left before dinner that evening.

Mikol was still sitting on the ledge, and when Kalen got closer he pulled him to stand between his spread thighs. He lowered his eyelids a bit, so Kalen wouldn't see the leap of hot desire in them. He could see Kalen's body shaking, and he wondered what might be going through the boy's mind. Because for all his bravado and big talk about being a warrior, Kalen was barely twenty-one. He wasn't as tough as most of the men Mikol knew, though he tried hard to be. Being a Tygerian, it came natural to Mikol—and even as the thought occurred to him, he could hear his omak's voice in his head.

If you grow up to be as insufferably arrogant as your father, I'll beat it out of you, I swear!

Ryan was all talk, of course, and had never laid a hand on him. He'd always had the ability to make Mikol wish he had just taken a stick to him, though, instead of subjecting him to his terrible disapproval and even worse—his disappointment.

So Mikol checked himself, and made an attempt to adjust his thinking. It wasn't that Kalen wasn't strong—and tough minded. He was simply young and lacked experience. He had no doubt he'd get there one day. In the meantime, he had Mikol to take care of him.

His nobyo had no need to be tough—he was Mikol's *noby*. As he came up to Mikol, he smoothed his hand across his hip, watching him blush even harder. He whispered, "Don't be frightened."

As he'd known they would, the words inflamed him. "I'm not," he said, his eyes blazing. Mikol's tyger began to stir inside him at the defiant display.

Mikol tugged down on his arms. "Kneel, please." Kalen fell to his knees in front of him so quickly, he thought the boy's legs couldn't have held him up much longer anyway. The water came up to just below his chin. It soothed his beast a bit to have him on his knees, and Mikol put one finger under Kalen's chin and tipped his face up to gaze in his eyes. "I think you told me you've never been with a man before me. Isn't that right, love?"

Kalen nodded, as if not trusting himself to speak. Mikol nudged him. "Talk to me. Tell me what you want to do. We can do as much or as little as you want."

“I-I don’t know...maybe I could take you in my hand to pleasure you? I’d like to touch you. Would that be enough?”

“I’d like anything you want to do, but...what if I pleasure you instead?”

Kalen caught his breath sharply and then he nodded, not looking directly up at Mikol. Again, Mikol captured his chin and made him face him. “We don’t have to do anything, *nobyo*. It’s totally up to you.”

Kalen looked back at him with a red face, and Mikol smiled. “I mean it. I can bathe and leave you strictly alone, if that’s what you want. But if you do want me to pleasure you, I’m afraid you have to ask for it.”

His eyes widened and he drew in a sharp breath. “W-what?”

“Ask me for what you need, *nobyo*.”

A long silence ensued, and for a moment, Mikol thought he would be far too stubborn and wouldn’t have the courage. Then with a final bite to his bottom lip, he raised his eyes to Mikol’s.

Almost defiantly, he said, “I-I want you to pleasure me.”

“Why, Kalen?”

Kalen looked confused and he got even redder if such a thing were possible. “Why? What do you mean?”

“You told me you didn’t like men. You seemed quite sure of it back on the space station. I’m wondering if you’ve changed your mind? Is it because you realized you belong to me now? Is that it?”

He nodded, looking down, and this time Mikol allowed it. “Then say it, nobyo. I think I need to hear it.”

“I’ve changed my mind. I-I belong to you now.” The words were right, but spoken in a dull, voice as if something he’d learned by rote. It wasn’t good enough.

“Again, nobyo. And this time, make me believe you.”

He shot Mikol a filthy look and squirmed for a good thirty seconds or so. Just when Mikol thought he’d changed his mind entirely, he looked up with a pouty face and said, “No.”

“Say it, honey. Please.”

“Damn you,” he muttered not quite under his breath. He took a deep breath and Mikol knew this was hard for him. That was part of what made it so delicious.

“I *belong* to you.” The words were whispered, but no less fierce for all that. Mikol nodded.

“Yes, you do.”

Mikol had been given religious instruction since he was a little boy, and he firmly believed in the Tygerian gods, who always favored the royal family and rewarded them for their bravery and their military prowess. But never, in his wildest flights of imagination, did he ever contemplate how the gods could bless him with such a perfect *noby*.

His beautiful mate was on his knees wantonly before him, his head down as he gazed at the bottom of the pool. Mikol quickly changed positions with him, lifting him to his lap and then sitting him beside him against the side of the pool, his legs open wide, offering up his sweet, gorgeous cock to Mikol. Mikol got on his knees and stroked it reverently, enjoying

Kalen's helpless gasp of pleasure. His mate's cock was not as large as his own, but well-shaped with velvety skin. It was pointed arrogantly upward and rigid as steel. Mikol ran his hand gently over the length of the shaft, getting used to the sweet heft of it in his hands. He planned to get to know this cock very well in the future. As he ran his hand over the shaft and reached down to weigh each ball carefully in his hands, kneading and massaging them, Kalen put his head back and moaned softly.

He moved his hand down the shaft, slowly at first, while his other hand continued to knead Kalen's balls. He soon fell into a rhythm, enjoying watching Kalen's back slowly arching up as his head fell back. His hair spread out around him in the water, and his eyes were tightly closed. Mikol increased the pressure and the speed of his hand and now on each upward sweep, he ran his thumb over the sensitive head, dipping gently into his slit before continuing down. His mate began to gasp for breath and tried to thrust upward. Mikol took his hand off Kalen's balls and moved to his hip, holding him down with easy strength. Kalen opened his eyes in surprise and looked directly up at Mikol.

"Mikol..." he pleaded, groaning a little, and Mikol returned his gaze.

"Shhh, *nobyō*, relax and let me pleasure you."

Kalen nodded, his eyes glazing over, and his hands moved to Mikol's shoulders, holding on tightly, clenching and unclenching his hands. Mikol dipped his thumb gently into Kalen's slit, farther this time, and his hips came up off the bench as he made a loud gasping sound. Mikol slipped his free

hand under his hips and pushed one finger up inside him, crooking it, looking for the little bundle of nerves he knew would finish this. As he found it and swept his long finger over it, Kalen jerked his hips and gave a loud shout of pleasure and began to come uncontrollably, spurting out into the water surrounding them. Mikol milked him to his completion and then as Kalen's head fell back against the side of the pool, his eyes still tightly closed, Mikol leaned over him and kissed his lips, nudging them open with his tongue and boldly sweeping inside. His mate tried to jerk backward at first in surprise, but Mikol put a hand on the back of his neck to hold him in place. Kalen struggled a little, but as Mikol's other hand went back down to his balls, massaging them gently. Kalen relaxed into the tender assault and gave himself to the kiss with a soft sigh that again went straight to Mikol's cock, and met Mikol's tongue with his own.

When breathing finally became necessary again, Mikol reluctantly pulled away, biting gently at the prince's lower lip as he went, then giving his lips a lick. He sat back on his heels and lowered his head again, trying to catch his breath, his own cock aching for release. He began to fear he wouldn't have the strength to control himself with his mate. He wanted badly to turn him around and fuck him until he screamed, but if he did that, he was afraid Kalen would be in no shape to sit through dinner. He made a new plan, because there was always later on that night after dinner. His tyger was leaping inside him now, and he felt his claws extend a bit. He gripped his hands tightly into fists to hide them and kept them out of sight in the water of the pool, fighting desperately for control.

When he could manage, he sat back down on the ledge beside Kalen and pulled him onto his lap. He tucked Kalen's head down onto his shoulder and his tyger finally began to come back under control. "Tell me who I am to you, Kalen. Say the word I use for you."

He was still a bit breathless, but he tried to answer. "Is it...*noby*?"

"Yes," Miko replied with satisfaction. "Say it again."

"You're my *noby*. And-and I'm yours."

"And that, sweetheart, is everything both of us need to know."

Chapter Fourteen

On the way to eat dinner with Mikol's family a little later, Kalen was full of nerves. Mikol had his arm and drew him closer. "It's going to be fine. I think you'll like everyone, and I know they'll like you."

"How do you know?"

"I just do. Now stop worrying."

"Have you heard from Florin? How's Dartan doing?"

"I meant to tell you earlier. Dartan is better, though still in pain. The doctors are keeping him sedated for a few days. He's here in the palace, and I can take you to his room whenever you like."

Kalen squeezed his arm in thanks but didn't say anything more because they were now just outside the door of the royal dining room. A tall Tygerian, wearing a dark uniform of some sort opened the door for them as they approached, and Kalen got his first look at the king, sitting at the head of a long table.

His first impression was of how good looking he was, and how much Mikol looked like him. Seated to his right was a human male with blond hair, and only a little gray at his temples and laugh lines around his eyes. His eyes had swung

to the door as it opened and he got a big smile on his handsome face, his bright blue eyes lighting up with pleasure.

On the king's left was Prince Mikos, again almost a carbon copy of his father, the king. Seated next to Mikos was Ryan, Mikol's omak, who came to embrace them both.

"Come over here and sit down near me," he said, tucking his arm through Kalen's. Mikol, you can sit next to Blake."

"My pleasure," Mikol said, going over to give Blake a hug before he sat down. Kalen noticed that Blake took Mikol's hand tightly in his and didn't let go even after he sat down. He looked up at Kalen pleasantly, though and smiled at him.

"So nice to meet you, Prince Kalen. I thought we might be able to meet before the betrothal, but it seems my grandson is in a hurry. He's skipped right to the wedding."

"Can you blame me, omak-ahn? Look how gorgeous he is," Mikol said, as smooth as glass, making Blake give him an indulgent look.

"He is, indeed," Blake agreed.

"I never saw much good in putting things off myself," King Davos offered. "When you see something you want, you need to go after it."

"The Tygerian guide to love and marriage," Blake said, angling a look at his husband. "It's one way to look at things, I suppose. But my grandmother used to say, 'Marry in haste and repent at leisure.'"

Davos snorted. "Your grandmother said entirely too much, I think."

Blake laughed. "I always thought so too."

"Well, I, for one, am very excited about the wedding tomorrow," Ryan said. "Blake has done a wonderful job of pulling it all together so quickly."

Blake waved a languid hand in the air. "Thank you, but I did very little, really. Just directed the florists where to put the flowers and chairs. Don't worry, Mikol, it's nothing too extravagant. It is a kind of rushed-up affair, after all." Blake arched a look over at Kalen. "I was wondering, why is that exactly? What's the rush?"

"It's not a mystery or a secret," Mikol said. "Like you said, we're in a hurry to make it official."

Blake smiled indulgently, and Davos showed his surprise only by a raised eyebrow. "But you only just met each other a few days ago. Are you really sure? Both of you?"

"I'm sure," Kalen said, speaking up for the first time. He gave a little shrug as Blake turned his full attention on him. "From the moment I saw him a few days before the betrothal."

"Oh. I didn't realize you met before. But that would mean the two of you had to meet...where exactly?"

"On Belline" Mikol replied.

He turned to give Mikol a look. "*Really*, Mikol? I think I'm beginning to understand. Tell me, did you find a way to be alone with him the first time you saw him?"

Mikol turned to grin at Blake and slung an arm around his shoulders. "Maybe. Look, I know you warned me about all kinds of things, and I listened. No, I did," he said, laughing as

Blake made a scoffing sound and tried to pull away. Kalen noticed he didn't try very hard. "Mostly I did, anyway."

"Uh huh."

"You're so pretty when you're mad," Mikol said, and laughed again, hugging him as Blake managed to free himself from the gentle mauling and punched Mikol's arm.

"Stop it." Blake glanced over at Kalen. "You see how he is. Don't let him start this with you, Kalen, because it never stops." He managed to get away and straightened his robe. "But I'm actually very happy for you both," Blake said. "What about you, dear? Did he rush you into things?"

"No. I was probably the one who rushed him."

Blake eyes glowed with pleasure. He looked well satisfied with Kalen's answer and leaned back to take a sip of his wine. "Wonderful. And I'm so pleased you wanted me to help with the wedding and the reception later. You know, Kalen, I don't like to butt in where I'm not wanted."

Mikos and Davos both choked a little on their wine, and Blake shot them a resentful look. Mikol only grinned. "You could never do that." He gave Kalen a smile and mouthed, *Thank you*, to him.

After that, the tension seemed to be broken, and everyone relaxed. It was obvious to Kalen how close they all were, and he was struck again by how much he had missed in his own family life. He'd never known anything different, so he'd never noticed until now. But his parents never touched as much as Mikol's did, and he loved the way Davos leaned in to listen to whatever Blake had to say like every word was of

vital importance. He fed him little bites off his plate too, that he thought Blake would like. It all seemed so natural to them that they barely noticed they were doing it.

Kalen wondered if Mikol would do that for him, and then was horrified at the idea. He was a warrior and had no need of such things.

He looked up once and caught Mikol's eye on him and he gave him a shy smile. Immediately, Mikol stretched his hand across the table to him and when he took it, he gave it a squeeze. He saw Blake and Ryan smile and glance at each other.

The rest of the evening passed in a daze of laughter and a lot of wine. Kalen was offered a glass of visu punch, but he caught a look from Blake and a subtle shake of the head, so he declined. Ryan leaned over and whispered to him. "That stuff is nasty, but the Tygerians love it, for some reason."

Later, on the way back to their room, Mikol put his arm around him and kissed him on the cheek. "Thank you for letting Blake help with the wedding. He loves doing all that."

"I'm happy for the help. I really liked all of your family."

Mikol stopped and pulled him into a heated kiss that probably would have been better in their own room. He must have realized it, because he suddenly swept Kalen off his feet and carried him down the hall to his bedroom.

Once inside, he placed Kalen on the bed and stripped him of his robe, before starting on his own clothing. He lay down beside Kalen and began taking up where they'd left off in the hallway.

Kalen had never had actual sex with anyone before, but he'd heard enough about it to know what was coming, and he had no idea how he felt about it. He knew it might hurt the first time. And once he did this, there was no going back or saying he only *maybe* liked other men. Mikol smiled at him then, and it was so full of heat and need—need that was reflecting right back at him—that Kalen said to himself, *maybe I should just relax and enjoy it and stop worrying about everything*. His mind made up, he allowed Mikol to reposition him, spreading his legs out farther and pushing them up.

“This is your first time, nobyo, so it's going to be uncomfortable at first.”

Kalen nodded, not trusting himself to speak.

“We can stop if you need to. It's my first time too, in a way. We don't have penetrative sex with anyone but our nobyos. We'll figure this out together, all right?”

He nodded and Mikol smiled. “I'll be gentle, sweetheart. I promise. Just trust me and relax. If I do anything that hurts too much, let me know and I'll stop.”

Kalen nodded again and felt a finger slip inside him, while at the same time, Mikol finally took Kalen's aching shaft in his hand and began to stroke him. Kalen heard himself make a whimpering noise he'd never made before and relaxed into that sure grip. The finger was giving him a gentle massage and making him relax a tiny bit. Mikol increased the speed on his shaft and since the finger in his ass felt so good, he allowed himself to concentrate on his cock and the incredible things Mikol was doing to it. When the finger inside him began to move again, nerve endings Kalen didn't

know he had sprang into life. Kalen pulled his knees even farther apart, and the finger moved deep inside him, touching something that lit him up. He gasped at the sensation and buried his face in his arm. Gods, it made him see stars.

The fingers pulled out, and Kalen glanced up in disappointment, his hole clenching and unclenching at the loss. Almost immediately though, Mikol pressed against him, his cock taking the place of the finger. He eased himself inside, pushing past the strong ring of muscles. It hurt, but Kalen bit his lip, too proud to let his mate see it.

Chapter Fifteen

Mikol knew how Kalen was feeling, and he redoubled his efforts on Kalen's cock. Mikol looked down at Kalen, lying on his back with a forearm thrown over his eyes, flushed and lovely, his eyes tightly closed as he concentrated on his pleasure. Mikol pulled back and gathered some of Kalen's copious precum and stroked it across his entrance to help ease the way. He dropped a soft kiss on his knee, and he heard Kalen murmuring something to him.

Pleasure came flooding back to him—Mikol could see it in his handsome face, along with other emotions that thrilled him. Kalen was beginning to relax and just give in to the pleasure. He was recognizing exactly who was doing this to him and allowing himself to enjoy it. Kalen thrust up into the hand that held him, and then winced. “Oh, that burns,” he said, whimpering a little, so that Mikol had to lavish him with kisses. Rained them down on him until he laughed and pushed at his chest.

“I'm sorry, baby. Do you—do you want me to stop? I can try...”

“No, no. Please don't stop.”

Mikol wanted to soothe him and devour him at the same time. He'd never felt this way about anyone before, and it surprised and even alarmed him. This boy had suddenly become so important to him. More than his family or his kingdom or even his life. *How could that be?* It had to be a biological aberration, because it wasn't what he wanted—it gave too much of him away and might even put him and his family in danger. After all, he barely knew this person, no matter how beloved he was to him at this moment.

For so long, he'd been proud of the fact that he could put his position and his job first, above all other things. He *needed* distance from others—he craved it to give him perspective. To enable him to always keep a cool head when everyone around him was losing theirs, along with their courage.

Now the perspective was gone, wiped out in seconds by this wanting, this *needing*, this love that was too strong, too vital to his happiness and it scared him. It couldn't be good to feel this much for someone. It made him too vulnerable, too open to being hurt. There was *nothing* he wouldn't do for Kalen in this moment, and this man—this alien boy, really—now had immense power over him. He couldn't let him realize it.

Mikol moved now with slow thrusts, gently pulling out and pushing in. He wanted to take his time with him, and it was imperative that he brought these feelings back under control. Brought Kalen under control. But at the same time, he wanted to love him, to know his body intimately and relish every sound he made when he was being made love to. No one but Mikol would ever hear those sounds—he'd make sure of

it. He'd kill anyone who tried to separate or come between them.

“Relax, nobyo, and it'll hurt less. Push out a little.” That sweet spot inside Kalen was being caressed with each stoke and Kalen pushed backward into it, then forward again to meet Mikol's hand. He was perfect—Mikol's feelings for him soared, coming too fast for him to process them, and he gave himself over to just the pleasure.

Mikol moved the hand on Kalen's cock the way he'd done earlier, easing the tip of his finger inside Kalen's slit, and Kalen arched his back and climaxed. At the same time, Mikol felt himself coming in an explosion of all that pleasure, and he shouted Kalen's name as he strained against him. After a long moment when the shudders racked his body, he was finally able to pull away and fell over on the bed beside Kalen.

They remained lying quietly together, their limbs tangled for a long while. Mikol thought that neither of them wanted to move. Finally, he got up to get some wet cloths and cleaned them both, and then he nudged Kalen to turn on his side and came up behind him, spooning him and rubbing his hand over his groin gently and soothingly. Soon his handsome prince was breathing deeply beside him, his breath coming in little sighs, and Mikol was able to relax into sleep.

Mikol was amazed at how fast the wedding ceremony was. He'd thought that like all royal affairs, it would go on and

on, but soon the priests were pronouncing them married, and he turned to kiss Kalen's sweet lips. It wasn't a Tygerian custom, but kissing had become a tradition, in their family, due to Blake and Ryan's influence. His omak said that it was done on Earth, and so he and Blake wanted it here too, at least as far as their family was concerned. It was fine with Mikol. More than fine. He might even have held the kiss a bit too long, because one of the priests cleared his throat, and he heard one of his cousins—probably Rakkur—laughing softly behind him, only to be shushed by Blake. Mikol didn't care. His soul still blazed with love for this beautiful boy, and he didn't care who knew it.

He turned with Kalen still in his arms and all his family came up to congratulate them.

It had been a small wedding, but like Blake had promised, there were plenty of flowers, all native to Tygeria. Some included some blue and orange ones—Mikol had no idea of their names—the colors of the Lorian flag. They even had little Lorian flags stuck down in their pots. It was a nice touch.

But all he really cared to see was here beside him, in his arms. He looked handsome and adorable to Mikol, with his long, dark hair pulled up in a sort of bun on the back of his head, and the sapphire robes flowing down the line of his gorgeous body and displaying it nicely. He understood now why everyone said a Tygerian male shouldn't have full sex until after they were married. He could think of nothing else today but his *noby* and how soon he could get him back to bed. Every time he looked at him, he wanted to take him to bed and give him pleasure. Lavish it on him until neither of them could take any more. He wanted to make love to him in

every possible way, until they finally had to stop from sheer exhaustion.

He wondered idly if his omak would object to him blowing off this reception.

Or maybe it was more apparent than he thought because his father, Mikos, gave him a long look and whispered to him. “No.”

Mikol raised an eyebrow and looked over at his father who was smiling. “I know how you feel, son, but Blake has gone to a lot of trouble to set this up and make it nice for you. So no, you can’t leave early.”

So, he gave his father a rueful smile and prepared to endure.

Kalen was happily engaged in receiving everyone’s good wishes and congratulations, and he had his friend Dartan seated next to him on a cushioned chair. The guard had lost weight, in only the few days or so since Mikol had seen him last. He looked pale and drawn, and Mikol made a mental note to speak to the doctors about what they were giving him for pain.

Oddly, Florin, who was also in attendance, stood on the other side of the room, talking to some of their mutual friends and showing no interest at all in the Lorian guard, not even looking in his direction. He made a mental note to make inquiries about that situation later on too.

He felt so happy he wondered how long such happiness could last?

He thought later that he should never have challenged the gods in such a way. They had the power to give you great happiness—and then to snatch it back away, just to remind you they were in charge and could do as they liked.

For the next three weeks, everything was perfect. Well, almost everything. He'd spoken to Florin and found out that Florin had finally admitted his feelings to the Lorian guard, Dartan, but the young man had turned him down flat.

“He told me in no uncertain terms that he didn't like men ‘in that way,’ as he put it,” Florin had told him. “He asked me to leave him alone, and so I have. I haven't seen or spoken to him since, except for your wedding, and I have no plans to. I have nothing more to say to him.”

Mikol shook his head. “Florin, I understand how you feel, but you have to respect his wishes in this. Each of us has our own ideas about sexuality.”

“I know that. Of course, I do. I'm respecting his wishes to leave him alone. But I think he's only saying these things because he's frightened of his feelings.”

“And you know this how, exactly?”

“From the way he responded to me every time I touched him. From the long, soulful looks he gives me whenever we're in the same room together. But you don't have to worry. I'll never approach him again. Perhaps he'll return home to Loros soon. Then I won't have to see him again either.”

He sounded fierce and angry, but Mikol knew him well, and he knew a lot of this was just bluster and hurt feelings. Kalen confided in Mikol that Dartan was just as miserable as

Florin seemed to be. “I tried to talk to him, but he insists this is for the best. I don’t see how it can be, though, when he’s so miserable. I know he’s still in pain from the broken ribs, and he’s been fretting about returning home. I’ll have to let him go soon. I don’t want him to stay here and be so unhappy.”

“No, I don’t either. But would you be happy here with me if he leaves? You wanted him so you wouldn’t be so alone.”

“I’m not alone, though, am I?” Kalen asked, raising his face up to be kissed. Soon one thing led to another, and Mikol locked his door and spent the long afternoon in bed with his spouse. He used to wonder at how often his parents’ door stayed closed in the afternoons, especially on days they weren’t working. His father would say he was “taking his leisure,” and he was not to be disturbed. It all made perfect sense to him now.

And the days passed by in a blur of happiness for Mikol.

He found things to do on Tygeria that wouldn’t take him too far away from his mate. He even considered talking to Hagoz about a redistribution of responsibilities or perhaps even stepping away entirely since the king had returned. He was still thinking about what to do next and filling his days with Kalen.

Sharing a bedroom with him, because not being with him every second he could, just didn’t feel like a good option—sliding past him in the corridors when he was walking with Dartan, and Mikol was surrounded by his counselors and generals, touching his hand as they passed—pressing Kalen against the bedroom door as he came to greet him in the afternoons and taking long, sweet baths together in the

evenings. This was the new reality of his life, and he couldn't wait to wake up each morning with his nobyo in his arms. He would caress him and kiss him awake to go to breakfast with him before he had to start his day and leave him again.

It was far too good to last—and then one day, it didn't.

It all started when they got the news of a surprise and unprovoked attack on Loros by what officials there said were Pton forces.

It seemed impossible at first. All their intelligence pointed to the main force of the Pton still being lightyears away. Even if they'd managed to find passage through some previously unknown and massive black hole, it would take years for them to amass enough troops to pose a real threat in this galaxy.

Yet Lord Nerol had sent an urgent plea for help. "Lorian cities are being attacked," he said in his dispatch. "We are reporting massive casualties. We beg you to send immediate assistance."

Kalen was unbelievably distraught over the alarming message and wanted to go immediately to help his people.

"I need to go with you, Mikol," he pleaded, his eyes filled with tears. "Surely you can see that. My army needs to know I haven't abandoned them. I'm still able to fight, damn it, and you *promised* I could!"

"That's simply not true, Kalen," he had replied, as gently as he could. "I promised we would go to Loros to oversee the building of new barracks for my troops. I never agreed to allow my consort to go to war! I'm sorry, but it's out of the question."

Kalen had—predictably—exploded with rage. He argued with him every moment he wasn't pleading for him to reconsider or threatening him with anything he could think of. He vowed to divorce him and leave on his own. He told Mikol he hated him.

Mikol tried to be patient with him. He really did.

Yes, he understood how he would feel if he were being prevented from going to Tygeria's aid, if the situation had been reversed. No, he didn't think Kalen was weak or womanly, and he knew he was still capable and intelligent. He knew it. He understood all of it. But he hadn't yet seen his skills on the field. Until he did, he couldn't risk him. There was still no way in four hells he was allowing his nobyo to travel to a dangerous battle zone.

The fight was epic, rivaling even those that Blake and Davos used to get into when he'd been a child. It was probably his use of the word "allow" because that was screamed at in Mikol's face most often. Their last argument on the morning he left for Loros got so loud and so bad that Prince Mikos himself intervened, pulling Mikol out of the room and not allowing him to go back inside. He must have recognized how close Mikol was getting to losing control and laying down the law in the harshest way possible, which would have just been disastrous.

Mikol knew that too, but it was still what he wanted to do. What the beast inside him wanted him to do. Kalen's wild temper had awakened it deep inside him, and it was all he could do to force it down and control it.

Then Kalen did the unthinkable. He had turned to Mikol's father and begged Prince Mikos to help him. He actually asked him to go behind Mikol's back and send him and his captain on a separate ship since Mikol wouldn't allow him to come. When Mikos incredulously turned him down, he stormed out of the room and down the hall to go over *both* their heads. He had taken up his cause with King Davos directly, bursting into his office and interrupting a meeting he was in.

The king had been confused at first, not understanding why he was being consulted when both Prince Mikos and Kalen's husband Mikol had already explained to Kalen why it would be impossible for him to go along. To say Kalen's attitude didn't help would be to seriously understate the matter.

In the end, physicians were called to give Kalen some kind of mild sedative, and when they arrived to do that, there was yet another fight, and this one was physical, though short-lived. After the physicians had him sedated, they reported back to the king. Who then contacted Mikol, already on his ship.

Mikol was mortified by his behavior, not to mention half out of his mind with worry, but there was simply no time for him to stay and try to deal with Kalen and make him understand. Tygeria's aid had been requested urgently, so time was obviously of the essence. He had to go. And he resented Kalen strongly for making this so difficult. For the first time since the betrothal ceremony, he was wondering if he should have agreed to this marriage, and it was breaking his heart.

He wasn't able to speak to Kalen again, as protocol demanded silence on all channels once they'd left Tygerian air

space. Kalen was “unavailable,” according to his aides. Mikol knew that meant he was refusing to talk to him.

Mikol was in his warship, captained by Florin, along with a fleet of ships following, all carrying soldiers. It was not the full might of the Tygerian forces, but it was an impressive one, nonetheless. He’d left his heart behind, though, and he told himself that as long as that was safe, nothing else mattered.

The crazy situation he’d left had been nothing he’d been prepared for, and nothing he wanted. The treacherous feelings began to creep back as the distance between him and his nobyo grew wider. It wasn’t that he didn’t love him—he didn’t know how to stop doing that. But being in control was in his nature, and the questions he’d had the night before their betrothal came flooding back. The truth was, he would have liked nothing better than to be able to take Kalen with him—if Kalen had been a different kind of person.

What he had always wanted, on the few times he’d thought about it, was a partner who could stand by his side and fight right alongside him. Who could take an order and who could *understand* the concept of taking orders. Who knew that there was always someone higher up the chain who had more authority, more gravitas, more knowledge than you. Not some pampered little prince whose father had spoiled him so badly he thought he could storm around and bully the entire Tygerian royal family into giving into him. Bully King Davos himself!

He had a boy, who said he hated being “bossed around.” Who defied him when he gave orders—not orders as his spouse, but as the Dyson and Battle Commander—and who

fought him when fighting wasn't even necessary. A boy whose hair curled around his beautiful face like a doll's, and whose eyes were such a dark, bottomless blue a person could fall into their depths and not be able to find his way out of again.

Mikol had never been with anyone before who ever made him feel anything more deeply. No one who really made his heart beat faster or made him feel he couldn't breathe unless they were near. Not until Kalen. For the first time he wondered if maybe he wasn't cut out to feel love like that. If the love was too much and it made him too weak, and if it did, then he didn't want any part of it. Yet he feared it was far too late. There he was, in this thing up to his neck. He was drowning in love and he didn't really see any way out. Unfortunately, he didn't know if there was any way forward either.

Kalen paced up and down the length of his room, as Dartan watched him with a worried expression. "You're going to make yourself ill if you keep on this way."

Kalen shot him a vicious look but plopped himself down on a chair by the window.

"Happy now?"

Dartan shrugged, folding his arms across his chest. "None of this is helping, you know. Did you honestly believe that he'd let you go with him? That if you raised enough hell and pitched a big enough fit that any of them would let you go?"

“How dare you say something like that to me!”

“It’s true though, isn’t it?”

“*Yes!* So what if it is?”

Dartan shook his head. “Oh, be reasonable. He was never going to let you go to war with him.”

“Why not? I have courage. I have a brain, damn it. And a voice. I could stand up in front of my men and let them know I was there with them. That I haven’t abandoned them.”

“No one thinks you’ve done that, but what good would that do, really?”

Kalen shot Dartan a look of bitter betrayal. “What do you mean? I can lead them if I need to.”

“Why would you do that, when Prince Mikol is there and already the Dyson of the Axis? He has more knowledge and more experience.”

“My men don’t trust him though.”

“How do you know that?”

The question surprised Kalen and made him stop talking.

“I’m not trying to take his side, Your Highness. Or make you feel bad. But for a long time, you’ve not been in the forefront, but allowed your officers to take charge. First, because of your father and how grief-stricken and angry and frustrated you were. All very understandable,” he said quickly, holding up a hand. “But people have short memories. Your men are loyal to you, yes. And loyal to Loros. But maybe the reason Prince Mikol stated—that he needs to assess your readiness for battle—are exactly that. Any good commander

would do so, and it's not a reflection of what he thinks of you. You're still pretty young and you don't actually have battlefield experience."

"I can't do anything about my age, and I'm never likely to gain any experience by sitting on the sidelines."

"I understand, but Loros needs your husband's experience and expertise right now. It's under attack, and what good will it do your soldiers' morale if you're killed while leading them? How might such a tragedy affect Prince Mikol? Sometimes the best thing you can do is to get out of the way."

Kalen was angry at first and then shocked by what Dartan was saying. Had his uncle been right when he said Kalen was still too young, too heedless to make a good king? It was hard to believe the murdering bastard was right about anything. And Kalen thought his uncle still had his own agenda, which had nothing to do with what was best for Loros. But the questions Dartan posed still rocked him and all that he thought he knew up to now.

He did need more time and experience to become a good leader. Tygerians started when they were around twelve or fourteen, which meant Mikol, at twenty-seven, had anywhere from thirteen to fifteen years of training and experience. He was a proven leader and the best one to lead Kalen's army at the moment. Maybe in time, he could learn to be just as good, but he wasn't there yet. Only a fool would disagree.

"I've been making a fool of myself, haven't I?"

Dartan lifted one shoulder. "You've had better days than these last few. I'll have to say that."

“Oh, god,” Kalen said, sitting down suddenly, as he felt the blood draining from his face. “I told Mikol I wanted a divorce. I said I didn’t love him anymore and I wanted to leave him. I accused him of lying to me and then I ran to Prince Mikos and King Davos and told them the same thing. What must they think of me? What if they all hate me now and wish they’d never agreed to me as Mikol’s consort? I have to tell Mikol I’m sorry as soon as he gets back home.”

“Who told you that, sir?”

“What? What do you mean? Of course, I need to tell him.”

“No, sir. I mean, who told you he would come back home?” He raised his face to Kalen, and for the first time, he showed Kalen what he was feeling. He looked wrecked.

“Mikol...and Florin,” his voice broke on the name, “have both gone to war. And there are no assurances either of them will make it back. And all they have to remember us are the last words we spoke to them.”

Kalen blinked up at the ceiling, trying to hold back the tears that wanted to stream down his face. “Dartan, what have I done? Oh god, what have we both done?”

Chapter Sixteen

On the planet of Loros

Mikol was feeling jittery. It was almost too quiet, and something simply didn't feel right. He tried to shake it off as just his imagination, but he'd been in enough situations over the years to develop a sixth sense, as his omak would call it, and he'd learned to trust it. In a tense situation, especially at night, and especially when a commander had to worry about other men's safety, imagination could get the better of him. The fear factor could get multiplied, until things that really weren't there were manifested, and the things he imagined he heard were all in his mind. Squinting at the dark, he reassured himself there was nothing to see. A chill ran down his spine, but he told himself it had to be only nerves.

The words of his nobyo Kalen kept ringing in his ears, though. Words like *treachery*, and *murder*. Had those been only the ravings of an angry, arrogant young prince, who resented his uncle taking his place, or were there kernels of truth in them?

The Tygerian force had traveled to Loros in record time. Mikol left his ship in a small, fast cruiser, admonishing his

crew to be vigilant and stay cloaked. He took Florin and a small number of guards with him and landed at the city port nearest the palace. As expected, Lord Nerol and some of his council members met him there, and he ushered Mikol and his men to his private shuttlecraft to fly them over the scene of the latest attack.

The area was in a section of the city that Nerol called Milopov, some ten kilometers from the palace and most important government buildings. Sirens were still blaring across the area of the city that had been attacked as they flew overhead. There were still distant sounds of explosions filling the air as missiles were intercepted by Lorian defense systems and destroyed. Nerol explained that the missiles had come too quickly in the initial attack for all of them to be intercepted. The damage they'd caused was indeed massive. Nineteen high rise apartment buildings had been hit, killing over six hundred people, including many children and other noncombatants. The attacks had sparked many fires, which rapidly spread to an area hospital and some shopping areas in the city.

It was a vast, grim scene and Mikol was silent as they flew over the devastation below.

“The attack came without warning,” Nerol was saying. “We employed our defensive systems right away and managed to contain the damage to just this area, but we fear they’ll return.”

“What can you tell me about the attacking forces?”

“Not too much, I’m afraid. Their ships had cloaking devices, and they were on us before we realized anything was wrong. We think it was only a raid, carried out by an advance

force. Their technology is not like anything we've ever seen before."

"How so?"

"It was so odd. You'd need to see for yourself, and fortunately we were able to shoot down one of their smaller craft. I've had the wreckage removed and placed inside my private compound on the western outskirts of the city. I didn't want to alarm the populace any more than they already are, and I thought perhaps you might want to inspect them. They're quite strange—they have a new kind of weaponry, from what I could tell."

"Take us there."

"Of course," he replied, and moved forward to speak to his pilot. Florin, who had accompanied Mikol along with several guards, gave Mikol a long look and spoke to him in Tygerian. "What do you make of all this?" he asked.

Mikol answered him in the same language. "Remains to be seen. Our scans showed damage to the planet is not as extensive as Nerol indicated. The area we flew over was bad, but it's the only one we've seen so far. Why would the Pton suddenly break off a successful attack? It doesn't make sense. This is the first I've heard of any new weaponry and so far, our reports on the Pton and their capabilities have been extensive. We have no reason to believe they haven't been accurate. The Pton are formidable, but not more than we are."

"We need to see this wreckage, I think."

Mikol nodded, but he was wary of Lord Nerol after all Kalen had said about him. He didn't know if the man was a

reliable witness or not, and he couldn't shake the uneasy feeling he'd had since almost the moment they'd arrived.

“Stay on your guard. I don't have a good feeling about this. And send the ship a message about where we're going.”

Florin nodded as Mikol thought about the situation. He felt uneasy and he'd learned not to discount that feeling. It could just be that he was too reminded of Kalen here on what used to be his home. Kalen had never been far from his mind since the moment he'd left him behind on Tygeria, his recriminations still ringing in his ears. But this felt like something more, and he reminded himself to remain vigilant.

Nerol sat back down beside them. “The pilot has set a new course, Your Highness. We should be there just after dark.”

Thirty minutes later, they landed on the private compound, as Nerol called it, just after the last rays of the sun sank over the horizon. They made their way to the door of the shuttle and the guards exited first as protocol dictated. Then Mikol and Florin, following Lord Nerol stepped outside into the cool night air.

“The wreckage is over here,” Nerol called over his shoulder and set out leading the way to what looked like a storage barn. Moonlight sparkled on the wires of the fencing around the compound, and Mikol noticed a curious layering of shadows all over the compound yard. The darkness was absolute. As the guards began moving toward the barn, there was a light popping noise, then a sizzle. Then the night seemed to explode with light and sound. Flares went off all around them and there was instant daylight. Florin tried to step in front of Prince Mikol, but before any of them could shift or

run, men who looked like the pirates who had attacked them just a few weeks earlier were swarming toward them, at least twenty of them, first attacking the guards and then jumping on Mikol and bringing him down. They hit him over and over in the head and back of the neck with what felt like the butt of a disruptor, but he fought for consciousness.

He tried again to shift, but the darkness was overcoming him. He cried out as another blow came crashing down on his temple, and then he knew no more.

Tygeria

The first news Kalen received of the crisis taking place on Loros was when a sudden and insistent knock came on his door far too early in the morning to be anything good. He had scrambled from bed, thrown on his robe and gone to the door on shaky legs, only to see a tall, handsome Tygerian in uniform dripping with medals standing in the doorway. Two men Kalen recognized as palace guards were standing behind him.

“Your Highness,” he said, with a short bow. “My name is General Haggöz. We met at your wedding.”

“Yes, of course. Is something wrong, sir? Is it...Mikol?”

“Yes, Your Highness. We’ve had news concerning your husband. I’ve come to take you to King Davos’s office.”

“What kind of news? What’s this about?” Kalen grabbed the door frame as a sudden wave of weakness hit him in the knees. The general extended a hand to him, but he ignored it. “You can tell me—please tell me. Is he hurt? He is, isn’t he? How bad is it? Do you know?”

“King Davos has asked to speak to you, sir. He’ll tell you everything we know.”

“All right, all right. I’m coming. I-I just have to...I need some shoes, or... Or maybe I...”

He turned with a vague idea about finding his boots and another wave of weakness hit him at the same time the tears rushed up to clog his throat. Choking on them, he coughed and stumbled right into the wall. Instantly a steadying hand came to save him. and there was a kind voice in his ear.

“It’s all right,” the general said. “We don’t have all the details yet, but he’s alive, Your Highness. Listen to me. I would have told you right away if he wasn’t.”

Kalen closed his eyes and nodded, his heart pounding a little less violently. One of the physicians had found his boots, so Hagoz watched silently as he sat down and put them on. The general even helped him lace them up, when his hands were shaking too badly to do it himself. Then with the guards trailing behind, General Hagoz escorted Kalen down the long corridor to reach King Davos’s office.

Inside the huge room, lit up as if it were midday, there was a hotbed of activity, with several family members already summoned, in addition to the many clerks and counselors bustling around the room. Prince Mikos was there, of course, looking fierce and furious and upset. Ryan was beside him,

clutching his arm but looking determined. Kalen could see he was scared, though, and that frightened him again. Blake was there, near Davos and sitting beside Rakkur, who had an arm around his shoulders. He was blond and beautiful, and he looked so much like Blake when he was younger that Davos had hired a special guard to accompany Rakkur wherever he went. The guard was standing at the door now, as a matter of fact.

There were others in attendance, staff members he didn't know, and all of them—everyone in the big room—turned to look at him as the general led him into the room.

He was frozen for a moment, and then Ryan dropped Mikos's arm to come and embrace him. "Hello, Kalen. I'm sorry you had to wake up to this. I've only just arrived myself, and I know what you must be feeling. Come over here and sit down."

Blake nodded and scooted over to make room for him. "Yes, come over here and sit down by me, honey, before you fall. Mikol is all right, as far as we know. But he's been captured by that asshole uncle of yours."

"Blake," Davos admonished.

"What? I was just telling him what happened."

"Not until we know more about what's happened, and if..."

"Oh, for god's sake, look at his face. He's practically in shock and scared to death. You don't seriously think he knew anything about this, do you? That's insane. It's obvious the two of them are crazy about each other."

Davos frowned, but Kalen shook his head violently. *“I don’t know anything about any of this,”* he cried out. *“I swear it!”*

Blake sent Davos an irritated look. “Of course, you don’t. Now Davos, go ahead and brief us. Tell us what you know about Mikol.”

Davos scowled at his mate but waved a hand at Mikos to begin.

“All we know is what the officers and crew were able to glean from the scans on Mikol’s warship, which he left in orbit around Loros. From what little we know,” Mikos began, “Mikol and his landing party arrived on Loros late in the day and were taken onboard Lord Nerol’s private shuttle to survey the damage from the Pton attack. According to a message sent by Captain Florin, Mikol, along with his entourage, then travelled to a large fenced in compound of some kind, on the western outskirts of the capitol city. Scans confirmed this.”

“It must be my uncle’s private estate—he calls it a compound, and no one knows much about it. I think my father was suspicious of it not long before his death.”

“I see. Mikol and his men were taken captive there and then, we believe, as the ship has been unable to raise him on the private channels since that time. Shortly after they lost contact, they received a message from Lord Nerol, confirming the capture. The message said he’s being held as Nerol’s hostage.”

“Hostage? To what purpose?” Ryan asked sharply. “What do they want? How could he possibly think we won’t attack?”

“It’s unclear. As to what they want...he has asked for gold, of course. But outside of that, we have no idea. He says he’ll only negotiate with our representative when he arrives.”

Ryan leaned forward, looking tense and scared. “What are they threatening?”

“To kill Mikol and all the men with him if we don’t send someone. Or if we don’t deliver on their demands within the allotted time.”

“He’s insane,” Blake said quietly, his face a mask of anger. “What does he plan to do about the warship they came there on? If he dared harm Mikol, does he really think there would be anywhere he could run that we wouldn’t go after him?”

“Yes, he does,” Prince Mikos replied. “He’s been working with the Pton. They must have promised him sanctuary.”

Silence and shock met this announcement, until finally Kalen found his voice. “*What?* How is that possible? How do you know, sir? They haven’t even arrived in our galaxy yet, have they?”

Mikos nodded. “They’re on the edge, or at least the main force is. We’ve suspected for some time that they might have sent in some advance ships. Only a few, like scouts, in a way. I have a theory about them that I shared with my son before he left. Those new pirates who have been reported—these so-called Rothafari. I think they’re actually Pton, sent here to gauge our capabilities and find out more about the planets in this galaxy. The Nilaniums have been concerned about them for a while now, and they’ve been upset that they’ve copied some of their methods so that people have mistaken them for

Drex. However, they're unlike any Nilanium or Drex we know of, and from our forensic examinations of the bodies recovered after the attack on Mikol's ship when he was returning to Tygeria with Kalen, we've discovered they have genetic material that marks them as alien to any known humanoid in this galaxy."

"So they're actually these Pton scouts," Ryan said.

"I think it's very possible, even likely. Probably sent here to engage our ships and those of the Lycans, the Moravians, the Nilaniums and even what's left of Earthan forces. A few of our other allies as well. To gauge our power and assess our weapons and fighting styles. Our technicians have traced the emissions signals from the ship that attacked Mikol's back to..." he turned and looked directly at Kalen. "Your planet, Kalen. Loros. It seems to be their base of operations. Mikol wanted to be sure before we told you, but we suspect Nerol has been helping them, providing them aid. We believe this has been going on for some time. Even, I'm afraid, when your father was on the throne, Kalen."

For a moment Kalen was too stunned to reply and then he exploded to his feet. "My father would never have done such a thing. He may not have been a member of the Axis, but he was an honorable person and no pirate. He was no spy either. He wouldn't have cooperated with those murderers. Those planet-killers. If it was done while he was still alive, then it was still Neros. He simply believed in his own brother and was deceived. That might make him foolish, but he wasn't dishonorable."

“All right, Kalen. I’m not making any accusations until we know more,” Mikos said. “And, in your father’s favor, we’ve traced the signal to the same spot where Mikol was captured. This compound on Loros that belongs to your uncle.”

“M-my uncle is greedy and shameful,” Kalen said, “I think my father became suspicious of that compound of his and that may be why he was murdered.”

“We hope we can sort all that out. But first things first. Nerol has asked for a representative from Tygeria to meet with him and hand over a ransom.”

“Then get someone on the way!” Blake said. “What are you waiting for?”

Mikos turned to look at Kalen. “The representative he wants...is impossible. Besides that, he wants only to gain another hostage, not hand Mikol over. We suspect Mikol and the others are not so easy to contain in their prison. I think he wants the gold to take with him when the Pton help him make his escape.”

“I have no doubt of that,” Ryan said. “But what do you mean, the one they want is impossible?”

“He wants Kalen to deliver the gold.”

Shock hit Kalen like a hard wind, knocking him back off his feet and back down onto the couch beside Blake again.

“W-what?”

“Don’t worry,” Mikos said. “We have no intention of sending you. I’ll tell your uncle it’s impossible.”

“But-but why?” Kalen asked. “If I can help get Mikol back?”

“It would simply give them another hostage, one they can use to keep Mikol in line. It’s totally out of the question.”

“But what if I took precautions—took some armed guards with me. I might have an idea about how we could get the prisoners out.”

“Your uncle specified no Tygerians could accompany you. Again, I think they’ve seen what we Tygerians are capable of and want no part of any of us.”

His body language was the same as Kalen had seen on his husband a time or two since they’d met—that same way they straightened their shoulders and the way their chests seemed to actually puff out and expand. Despite his outrage and worry over his son, he was a little proud of how Mikol must be handling himself. Kalen also caught the little look that passed between Ryan and Blake.

“Well then,” Ryan said softly, looking up at his husband. “If he doesn’t want Tygerians, maybe it’s time he and the Pton see what armed species in this galaxy are capable of. Isn’t that right, Kevin?”

A tall, very handsome human, with blond hair that Kalen hadn’t noticed before straightened up from his place near the door and stepped forward. “A hundred percent,” he said.

Ryan grinned at him, even as Mikos was shaking his head. “No. You can’t be serious. It’s out of the question.”

“Don’t you tell me no, Mikos. That’s my son and I *will* go after him. Do you understand?”

Haggoz had come forward to try to take hold of the blond man's arm, but he shook him off, and they had soft, fierce words together for a moment, all in Tygerian, so Kalen had no idea what they were saying. Then Rakkur stood up, taking everyone's attention away from that little drama for a moment.

"I'm only half, but I look like my human father and have hardly any stripes. I believe I'll tag along too."

That's when a huge argument erupted in the room that was noisy and chaotic and out of control. Kalen sat where he was, looking back and forth between first one combatant and then another. And then Blake stood up and shouted, "Stop it! Be quiet, all of you!"

And everyone actually stopped. He glared around at each and every one of them and then turned to Mikos. "We don't have time for this, and you're not going to win this argument. Everyone who has ever borne a child knows that person really has only one mission in life, and it's to protect that child and their family. Don't mess with them when they're trying to do that, fellas. Because they don't care how big and bad you are."

He glared around at all of the Tygerians, who gave him back mutinous looks, but wisely kept their mouths shut. All except Davos, who opened his to say something but was cut off by Blake.

"Say one word, and I'll go along too."

Davos flinched and closed his mouth, but perhaps he'd learned some things over the years, because he didn't reply, even though his eyes were blazing.

Kalen was amazed. These humans were nothing like he'd thought—they weren't weak, or cowed down by their husbands, just because they wore the robes. Ryan and Blake were laying down the law. He watched in fascination as Blake finally nodded at everyone.

“Ryan, take Kevin and Rakkur and his guard and Kalen and his friend Dartan too. Make a plan and bring my grandson home to us.”

Chapter Seventeen

The Tygerian ships were only a few hours away from entering Lorian airspace when Ryan called for a meeting. All of them were included, and all of them were there. Kalen, Ryan, Kevin, who had turned out to be General Haggos's mate, and Rakkur and Dartan along with six other men, all humans, and all *nobyos*, who were members of a team that Ryan and Kevin played for in the Tygerian Games. Kalen had heard about these Games, but never witnessed them. All the men were in excellent shape and ranged in age from their twenties to perhaps fifty. Eleven of them in all. Rakkur's guard was outside the door, along with a few others, considering there were three royals included in this illustrious group.

Ryan started the meeting by looking around at each of them. "I was told to make a plan. And I think I have one. But first, I want everyone to wear body armor. We don't need casualties." The men all nodded. "Now, let's go over what we know. Mikol and his men are being held at the palace—his warship, which is still in orbit, of course, has located him on scans and verified that. He's on the lowest level of the building, but we don't know exactly where."

"It has to be in the dungeons," Kalen said, glancing over at Dartan. "Don't you agree?"

“Yes. Behind bars, definitely, if they’re afraid of them, as I’m sure they are. The dungeons are far enough underground that scans don’t work.”

“Let’s hear the rest of this plan,” Rakkur said, leaning forward. “Because we’re almost there.”

“I’m aware of that. It just took me a little while to come up with it, that’s all.”

“Go ahead, Ryan,” Kevin said encouragingly. “I’m sure none of us have found anything better.”

“Okay,” he said. “Kevin, I know you’ve heard of the Trojan Horse, from ancient mythology.”

“Sure.”

“That’s the basis of it.”

Rakkur shook his head. “For those of us who didn’t grow up on Earth and have no idea what you’re talking about, can you explain, please?”

“The Trojans were an ancient tribe on Earth, and they’d been fighting with another tribe of humans there called the Greeks. The war was going on and on until the Greeks hid inside a giant horse and had it brought inside the city gates and delivered to the Trojans. That night when the Trojans went to sleep, an entire army that was hiding inside came out and slaughtered everyone and took over Troy. That’s sort of what I’m proposing.”

Rakkur looked incredulous. “A horse? What kind of horse? What *is* a horse?”

“It’s an animal on Earth, but this wasn’t a real one. It was a giant wooden one.”

A silence fell and then Rakkur cleared his throat. “I think that’s a fantastic plan, except for the fact that we don’t have a giant horse—or any wood to make one, for that matter—and we don’t have city gates, and oh yeah, we don’t have an army to hide inside it either.”

Ryan rolled his eyes. “Don’t be so literal minded, Rakkur, honey. It’s a metaphor.”

“*Once again,*” Rakkur said, “not sure what that is.”

“Then hush up and listen. The story is a metaphor—which is a representation or symbol for something else—in this case, for any kind of trick to get into a place that’s guarded. It’s hiding our intent until it’s too late for them to fight it.”

“How do we do that, Ryan?”

“As you know, they have forbidden any Tygerians, but they want tribute or ransom to release Mikol. Not that we think they really will release him, but we’ll pretend as if we do. The ransom, the gold and diamonds Nerol wanted, will supposedly be in a large box that two of us will carry in. We’ll walk behind Kalen, looking meek, like Nerol thinks all *nobyos* are. I think Kevin and I can handle carrying the box.”

“And how will he know you’re *nobyos*?”

“By our robes, of course.”

“So, he won’t be scared of you?”

“He’ll underestimate us.”

“Where will the rest of us be?” one of the other men asked.

“I’m getting to that. First, I want Rakkur to be inside the box instead of the ransom. Then when Kalen gives it to Nerol, he or one of his lackeys will come over to check it out and see if it’s all there. Instead, as soon as he opens the box, you’ll jump out and start shooting.”

“Oh. I like the sound of that.”

Ryan grinned. “I thought you would. That will be the signal for the rest of you who will be hiding on the ship to come out with disruptors blazing.”

“We’ll get Nerol for sure. But what if there are too many of them for us to kill them all?” Rakkur asked.

Ryan frowned at him. “I didn’t say I thought of everything, Rakkur. Give me a break.”

Kalen laughed. “I like this idea, but Rakkur is right. He may have a company of men with him, because he’s a coward. This plan will give us the advantage of surprise, but we need more. I think I have an idea for that. But I’ll need the help of the ship orbiting Loros.”

Kalen passed over a piece of paper containing a couple of names and numbers. “These men can help us. They’re members of my personal guard, which was taken back to Loros after I met Mikol on Belline. With any luck, they’re still near or inside the palace. The ship can contact them using those numbers for their communicators. Send them a message telling them I need their help and use the code words ‘no mercy.’ It’s an old, long-standing code I’ve used with them in

the past. That way, they'll know it's really me. Tell them where and when and they'll be there to back us up."

"Can they be trusted?"

"They're extremely loyal to me, so yes. They'll come to help us escape and get back up to the ship once I have Mikol."

"You really think they'll help?" Ryan asked.

"Yes. My men despise my uncle as much as I do."

"Okay," Kevin said. "So then what happens? How do we get to Mikol and Florin and the others?"

"I'll go to the dungeons and find him."

"Alone? No," Ryan said, shaking his head. "Mikol will be in his tyger and may not recognize you. He could kill you, Kalen."

"I don't know that he won't. Not for sure. But he told me once that a tyger recognizes his mate."

"That's true," Kevin said. "But it's still a terrifying experience."

"Back to the plan," Ryan prompted. "What do you think of it?"

Kalen smiled. "I think it might work. If nothing else, we'll kill Nerol, I think."

"I don't like this plan at all," Dartan said, and Rakkur nodded.

"Yeah, Ryan. It's kind of a shit plan."

"No, it isn't. Well, maybe it is, but I think it could work."

“I think it has to,” Kalen said. “Because we don’t have anything else.

The gods must have been with them, because everything so far was going well. When they arrived in Lorian airspace, they took their own small shuttle to the surface. It was one of the royal shuttlecraft so it was impervious to scans. If the Pton or someone on Loros was trying to track them, they’d have no way of knowing how many people were really on board.

When they landed, Kalen got off the craft wearing his sapphire robe and doing his best to look as if he were frightened. Behind him was Ryan and Kevin, also wearing their robes and carrying the large box—one of the ammunition boxes onboard they had adapted for their purposes. All of them were wearing the black uniforms with the bristling armor under their robes. And Rakkur was hiding inside the box.

As they came slowly toward the palace, breathing hard, because Rakkur was surprisingly heavy, Kalen could see his uncle waiting for him at the top of the steps that led to the dais. He was surrounded by not only his guards, but some of the men who looked like the ones that attacked Mikol’s ship on the way home from the space station. Perhaps thirty men in all, all with weapons held ready.

When Kalen and the others had made it almost to the top step, Nerol held up a hand to stop them. Kalen knew it was so he could look down on them.

“Ah my son, how nice to see you. And you’re wearing the traditional *dress* of the Tygerian nobyo. How sweet.”

Kalen took a deep breath, promised himself he’d kill this man soon and tried to speak through the anger that was choking him. “Uncle-father. How glorious to see you too. Where’s my husband?”

“Is that all you have to say to me after so many weeks?”

“Bring him to me.”

“Don’t you want to see your mother, or rest a while before we have to conduct our business? Perhaps you could introduce me to your friends?”

“Bring Mikol to me.”

“Tedious, as ever. First, I have to see what tribute you brought me. I do hope it’s all there.”

“It’s all there. Check it for yourself.”

He waved a languid hand. “Bring it up to the dais then, and I’ll inspect it. Perhaps I’ll even have you get on your knees and count it for me.”

That time, Kalen couldn’t stop the growl that came out, but he motioned for Ryan and Kevin to come to the top of the steps, stepping aside for them to get by. All three of them were hiding their rapid-fire disruptors under their robes. He tensed as he waited for his uncle to open the lid.

It seemed to all unfold in slow motion. His uncle stepped forward and threw open the box. Rakkur erupted from it like the wrath of the gods, already shouting and shooting.

Everyone grabbed for their weapons as two things happened simultaneously. The doors of the shuttle flew open below them and their companions streamed out, firing at the men on the dais behind his uncle, who all began to duck and try to take cover. And from the palace, only steps away, a large group of soldiers wearing Lorian uniforms came pouring out, firing their own weapons as they came up behind them, boxing them in.

Kalen had no idea where they'd all come from, as he'd only given the word to about twenty of his personal guard. There must have been a couple of hundred of them, pouring in now from all directions—from the palace and from behind the shuttle, a steady stream of Lorian soldiers surging up the steps.

Ryan and Kevin were firing toward the Pton soldiers, who had turned tail and run, stepping over the bodies of the men Rakkur had already shot down, including Nerol himself. Kalen ran over to him and looked down at him, nudging him with the toe of his boot. He was already dead though, several smoking holes right through his forehead. Kalen added another one to make sure and then joined his army in routing Nerol's guards. The guards who were left alive, put their weapons on the ground and fell to their knees, surrendering to the Lorian soldiers.

One of Lorians cried out, "God save King Kalen!" Others took up the cheer and the next few minutes were chaotic as the soldiers all gathered around him still cheering. Though he was grateful, Kalen had no time for this.

When he was sure things were under control, he yelled for Ryan to follow him, and they ran toward the palace and to the

dungeons below. Meanwhile, both the ship they had arrived in and Mikol's warship were uncloaking directly overhead.

When Mikol had first awoken, shortly after the capture, he was in darkness. His head, neck and shoulders ached horribly from the beating he'd received, and he felt something warm and wet seeping from his scalp and moving like sludge down his neck. He tried to sit up, but a bright slash of pain knifed through his back. Taking a deep breath, he tried again, and managed to sit up in the darkness. He was still lying on a cold, damp floor, like he had been the last few times he struggled back to consciousness for a few moments.

The room was windowless and damn near airless, and the only bit of light was a small strip coming under a wooden door. He was still wearing his shirt, though he could feel it ripped into shreds around him. He tore another long strip from it to bind his head to try to stop the sluggish bleeding. He also wasn't sure how or why he was still alive. Tygerians didn't make good prisoners and mostly, they were simply killed. They didn't survive long in captivity anyway.

His mind went, as it always seemed to, to Kalen and his family and another, deeper pain slashed through his body. He was glad he hadn't allowed Kalen to come and get mixed up in all this, but he had hoped to be able to see him again. Perhaps in one of the four heavens his people believed in, though as a non-Tygerian, he wouldn't be allowed in the same one as Mikol. He would insist on seeing him though and offer to go

down to the lowest level where he'd no doubt be so they could be together in that life, if not in this one. His grandfather said Blake would probably be there too, so maybe he could keep him company until Kalen arrived.

Tygerians weren't afraid to die—it wasn't in their nature to be afraid. They believed strongly that their fate was already written and there was nothing they could do to change it, so why not just accept it? He did hate to leave his family, though, and his mate, who was difficult and prickly, but still someone he couldn't live without, no matter how angry he was with him at the moment.

As his eyes adjusted a bit to the light, he got unsteadily to his feet and by holding onto the wall, he managed to move slowly around the small room. By pacing it off, he found that it was probably about five meters square. As he thought, there were no windows, and only one heavy, wooden door locked and probably bolted from outside. He found a bucket in one corner and a large pan of water by the door. He smiled grimly. A pan of water for an animal. Perhaps the aliens weren't quite as humorless as he'd thought. He drank some of it because his mouth was so dry, even though he knew it was no doubt drugged. Then he lay back down on the floor and drifted back into his dreams. He figured someone would come soon to interrogate him or finish him off. Either way, he was impatient for something to happen.

Over the next days, his world became a series of waking up, drinking a bit of water and then drifting back to sleep. His head ached so badly, he knew he must be badly injured, and he hoped he'd die soon, rather than live in this captivity.

He had just awakened again for the gods only knew how many times and made his mind up not to drink the water in the pan again, when he heard shuffling outside the door and the sound of muffled voices. Something scraped in the lock, and he tensed, managing to get to his knees to crouch down low near the wall so he could leap on the first one through the door. He was already partially shifted into his tyger.

The door creaked open, and he sprang, taking the man in his arms and throwing him to the floor. That's when the scent of his mate hit him, and even through the haze, he knew this was Kalen in his arms. His rational mind fled in an instant and he was all beast, protective of his mate. He lay over him and growled loudly, so that anyone hearing him would know this man was his.

He heard more voices coming closer and getting louder. Doors were clanging open nearby and he must have been hallucinating because he thought he heard his omak's voice very nearby.

The door eased open, and Ryan stood in the opening, saying something soft and soothing to him. Mikol was a man enough then to wonder what his omak was doing on Loros, when underneath him, his mate stirred. Mikol licked him and settled himself across his body more comfortably.

“Mikol? Nobyo, it's me. Kalen. Can you get off of me, *carli*? You're crushing me a little.”

Mikol made a sound in reply that was not quite tyger and not quite anything else, but there was a sudden flurry of motion, and his omak actually came all the way inside the door and ran over to kneel beside him. He didn't touch Mikol,

but he talked to him in a low voice, reminding him of who he was. Finally, Mikol was able to reach up and embrace him. He crushed the sweet, smaller body to his, patting him all over to see if he was real.

“Omak? Are you really here? I don’t understand.”

“I’m here,” he said next to his ear as his arms wrapped around him. “But you have to get off Kalen so we can take you home, darling.”

Then before he could even react to that, another set of arms embraced Mikol from behind, and he peered through the gloom to see his cousin, Rakkur. Kevin was standing nearby too. Mikol shook his head. “I must be dreaming. What are you all doing here? Is Father outside? What are any of you doing here?”

“We came for you, of course,” Ryan said, in a very smug tone of voice. “But honey, you must be crushing Kalen. Please get off him.”

“Kalen?” He got to his knees and looked down at the man he’d been lying across and saw Kalen struggling to sit up.

“Ow, my ribs.”

Mikol threw his arms around Kalen and pulled him close, reveling in his scent.

“How are you here? How are any of you here?”

“It’s a long story,” Kalen said, his voice shaky as he clung to Mikol’s arms. “Let’s get you and your people out of here and then we can talk about what to do next.”

In the end, Mikol didn't have to talk at all, as he passed out when they were taking him out of the cell. He woke up onboard his ship, in the infirmary, and stayed conscious long enough for the physicians to tell him his captors had come close to fracturing his skull during the capture. He was in bad shape, and they were pumping him full of medicine and would keep him sedated.

He saw Kalen and Ryan hovering near the doorway, both of them with worried expressions, but he didn't stay conscious long once he saw they were both all right. It was two days later, as he later found out, when he finally woke up to find Kalen sitting by his bedside, holding tightly to his hand.

He tried to speak, but an attendant had to come over and give him a drink of water before he could manage it. He checked again to make sure his eyes weren't playing tricks on him.

“Kalen?”

“Yes, it's me. I'm here, *carli*.” he said, leaning over and kissing the hand he was holding. “I'm right here.”

“*Why* are you here? It's not that I'm not glad to see you. I am—but I believe we discussed why this mission was too dangerous for you to come.”

“Oh, don't fuss. I've just got you back. You gave me *orders*, Mikol, which I really don't respond well to.”

“I noticed.”

“I did reconsider after you left and realized, because I really don't have the experience you do, that you were right all along. And I realized that you were the best one to lead my

army. But Mikol, I won't stay behind again, do you understand? If that's a dealbreaker between us, then I-I guess this is the time to say so. I'm a man, and though I may not be as experienced as you are, I still am a leader in my own right. I'm king of Loros now, and I won't forsake my people. And I have every intention of living on Loros at least part time. If-if you'll come with me. The captain of your warship is taking over for now, and I'll agree to let you train me. For as long as it takes."

"Is that right?"

Kalen bit down on his lip, looking nervous. "I want to be with you. Like you said once about dividing our time between Tygeria and Loros. I'd really like that. If you would."

Mikos gazed back at him, and then took a deep breath for perhaps the first time since he'd left Kalen behind. "I think we could manage that, *nobyo*."

Kalen's face lit up in a huge smile. "You called me *nobyo*. Does that mean we're not fighting anymore?"

"It means I love you, and you're my mate. But something tells me we'll never stop fighting altogether. Not really. We're both princes and too used to having our own way. One of us in particular."

"You're talking about me, right? That's fair. I admit it and your omak says that the fighting we do is just the passion we feel for each other coming out. And that it meant you have a lot of strong feelings for me. Is that true? Do you, Mikol?"

Mikol patted the mattress beside him. "Climb up here. And I'll show you."

Epilogue

Three months later

Kalen was sitting in his old room, which he and Mikol had turned into a seating area, studying a training manual. They were returning to Loros in a week's time, now that Mikol was fully recovered, and he was hoping to impress his husband with how much he'd learned.

Dartan was still with them on Tygeria, and things seemed to be going much better with him and Florin. He had stayed by Florin's side while Florin was in the hospital, and now that he was back home, Florin had returned to trying to convince Dartan that he was the only one Dartan really wanted. Dartan had promised to try, and so far, things seemed to be coming along nicely.

Dartan had been worried sick about the Tygerian captain, though he barely admitted it, even to Kalen. Instead, he sat by his side on the ship and checked in at the hospital every morning after they returned to see what his condition was. He said it was because Florin had taken such good care of him when he'd been injured, and he was only returning the favor. But Kalen didn't believe that was all it was at all. The good

news was that Florin would go with them when they left for Loros, and Kalen remained hopeful that Dartan would get out of his own way.

Nerol was dead, of course, and Kalen wasn't the least bit sorry for his small role in it. As for Queen Brandalla, she had been unharmed and was now living at Lord Nerol's former compound—now completely cleaned out. It was far enough away from the palace that Kalen wouldn't have to see her for long periods of time, or ever again if he decided that. He still hadn't forgiven her and suspected she had something to do with his father's death. But he had decided not to pursue an investigation now that Nerol and his guards and the entire council were gone, all of them either dead or banished. It was enough that she was no longer in power and had no more power over him—she'd killed any feelings he once had for her. He didn't want revenge on her though. He didn't quite have the heart for that, and he'd leave it to her gods.

The Pton were long gone, and scans showed the remnants of their scouting mission on the way back to the main fleet, which was still lightyears away. The main group was still coming, but perhaps now that they'd seen what Tygerians could actually do and how powerful the Axis was, they would proceed with caution. If not, then any force would be met with equal or superior force. The Tygerians would wait and see, while remaining vigilant.

Davos had congratulated Rakkur and Kalen and all the others personally. He said the humans had proven their bravery and their worth, and he'd commissioned medals for all of them. He had also taken Kalen aside and suggested it might be time to start the injections if he and Mikol wanted to have a

child. He said he thought Kalen and Mikol would make strong, beautiful babies. Kalen had declined as nicely as he could.

“No babies for me,” he told Mikol privately afterward. “Not yet anyway.”

“I’m willing to negotiate the matter, nobyo. And offer very good terms for your consideration,” Mikol had told him, backing him up against a wall and kissing him breathless. “I do love your body the way it is now though, and you’re still quite young. We have plenty of time for heirs. When you get to Loros, perhaps you can still wear the blue robe for me sometimes? There was something about that robe...and what you wore underneath it.”

“I didn’t wear anything underneath it.”

“Oh, I’m very aware...” Mikol said, smiling.

“Perhaps I can wear it for you in the evenings, after I have a bath. So long as you wear one too.”

“I think that can definitely be arranged,” he said, trailing kisses down his throat.

Still smiling at the memory, Kalen got up to greet Mikol, who had come into the bedroom on the other side of the bathing room, and he hurried to join him. As he headed toward his husband, he thought about the coincidence that had brought them together in the first place on that crazy moon. What if they’d never met on Belline? What if he’d blundered into someone else’s room?

When he told Mikol, he said he didn’t believe in coincidences and neither did Kalen, really. They *had* met.

They had made love, and against all odds, even fell in love with each other afterward.

When he was a child, he used to love putting together puzzles, and finding just the right spot for all those pieces. When completing a puzzle, if some of the pieces seemed to fit together perfectly, no one called it a coincidence. Or luck. They just said the pieces fit, and that was good enough. That was good enough for Kalen too, and he thought maybe it always would be.

The End

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Shannon West lives in the southern United States, and is a lover and avid reader of M/M romances. Shannon began writing gay romance a few years ago, and now has over ninety short stories, novellas, and novels to her credit. Her stories have been translated into French, Italian, and even one Japanese Yaoi. Her favorite genre is paranormal and most of her characters don't get really interesting to her until they grow a tail. Shannon loves men and everything about them, and writes Romance (with a capital R) unashamedly and unabashedly. She believes, in the words of Helen Steiner Rice that "love is the answer that everyone seeks, love is the language that every heart speaks." Shannon mostly spends her days at the keyboard, ably assisted by her cats, and eluding housework, which stalks her relentlessly.

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